



STUDIES IN GLOBAL SCIENCE FICTION

Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction

Edited by Zachary Kendal · Aisling Smith
Giulia Champion · Andrew Milner



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Studies in Global Science Fiction

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PREFACE

In a time of global political and economic uncertainty, with countries around the world facing environmental, social and financial crises, the question of what kind of future we want to create is more relevant than ever. Central to this speculation lies the question of ethics—the kinds of values this future will reflect and how it will shape our engagement with others, whether human, animal or the environment. This book explores the ethical dimensions of the reconfigurations of our future found in global science fiction (SF) literatures, where authors have worked through the kinds of utopian futures we want to embrace and the dystopian alternatives we must strive to avoid. The studies collected here also show the influence of various strands of ethical criticism, from rhetorical and narratological studies, to poststructuralist and deconstructionist approaches, to a host of social and cultural theories, including ecocritical, postcolonial, Marxist, feminist and intersectional studies.

Early fan histories of SF tended to trace the genre back only so far as the inter-war American “pulp” fiction magazines, especially Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing* and John W. Campbell’s *Astounding*. More recently, more scholarly and more European accounts have tended to range across the entire Western literary heritage, preferred starting points including both Lucian’s *Alēthēs Historia* (second century CE) and Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). If fan histories were too parochially American, scholarly histories tended to occlude what was actually most distinctive about modern SF, its preoccupation with science as a practical activity productive of new technologies. This preoccupation was part of the Romantic reaction against the effects of the Industrial Revolution, which registered in the first place

in Britain. Hence, Brian Aldiss's famous decision to trace the "origins of the species" to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Whatever the starting point, however, the focus tended to fall disproportionately on British, French and American variants of the genre. This collection also starts in the Anglosphere with Zachary Kendal's close reading of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy and Joshua Bulleid's detailed account of vegetarianism in nineteenth-century British and American utopianism. And subsequent chapters by Rachel Fetherston and Jacqueline Dutton do indeed pay due credit to the rich tradition of French SF. But we have sought to achieve a more fully global range, so that the collection also addresses texts from Algeria, Australia, Canada, China, Egypt, Germany, Haiti, India, Jamaica, Macedonia, Mexico, Russia and South Africa. In keeping with common practice in the discipline of Comparative Literature, we have wherever possible included original-language quotations for all non-Anglophone primary texts, followed by English translations in parentheses.

The book opens with three diverse essays on "Ethics and the Other," with each examining the approaches to ethics and alterity in different SF traditions, while also providing a historical introduction to the collection. Zachary Kendal's chapter draws on Emmanuel Levinas's writing on ethics to contrast the approaches to totality and infinity in Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy (1951–1953) and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Mbl* (*We*) (1921). Kendal suggests that Asimov's commitment to the knowability of all things, including the other person, ultimately left the trilogy open to accusations of both vulgar Marxism and outright fascism, whereas Zamyatin's focus on the irrational and the unknowability of the other person reflects a more ethical approach to the other. Sreejata Paul then explores Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's early-twentieth-century utopias *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *পদ্মরাগ* (*Padmarag*) (1924), finding that these texts advocate for radical feminist ethics and a feminine ethics of care, respectively. In doing so, Paul finds that the texts explore the issues facing women in colonial Bengal and how Hossain worked through ethical issues around feminism and femininity. Finally, Joshua Bulleid's chapter turns the reader's attention to animal ethics and the treatment of the animal other, as he traces the theme of vegetarianism through English and American utopian traditions. Bulleid finds a firmly established trend of vegetarian utopians grounded in concerns over the ethical treatment of animals.

In Part II the collection moves to consider humankind's treatment of the environmental other. The rise of climate fiction, or what Daniel Bloom terms "cli-fi," and of science-fictional representations of the consequences of climate

change, along with the growth of ecocriticism and scholarly discourse on ecology, now define this as a central ethical theme in its own right. Part II begins with Andrew Milner's chapter surveying global trends in cli-fi, establishing climate change as an issue of ethical significance and examining the different responses to it in SF from Australia, Britain, Canada, China, France, Germany, the United States and South Africa. Rachel Fetherston's chapter follows, a comparative study of Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–2013), which develops the notion of "ecological posthumanism." Thomas Moran then turns to Chinese SF in his examination of environmental activism and willed human extinction in Liu Cixin's Hugo Award-winning *三体* (*The Three-Body Problem*) (2006). Finally, Giulia Champion examines the ecological and social deteriorations in Haitian and Mexican visions of ecopocalypse developed, respectively, in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944) and Homero Aridjis's *La Leyenda de los soles* (1993) and *¿En quién piensas cuando haces el amor?* (1995).

The chapters in Part III explore the evolution of the relation between SF as a literary genre and colonialism, beginning with Bill Ashcroft's investigation of the legacy of imperialism in SF and closing on Lara Choksey's exploration of African futurism and decolonial praxis. This shows the crucial tension existing between the postcolonial SF literatures found throughout this section and their inextricable nexus with historical (re)visions, since futuristic narratives from the Global South must often address the social and environmental destruction and uneven development created by imperial practices. The chapters in this section tackle critical ethical issues in reconstructing postcolonial social and political spaces as well as in reclaiming SF as a literary genre. Ashcroft examines the ethics of power and empire in his exploration of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* (or *Lilith's Brood*) trilogy (1987–1989), looking at the novel's inversion of colonial dominance and tackling discussions surrounding postcolonial SF. Challenging colonial pasts is also crucial in Nudrat Kamal's chapter, which examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995). Kamal focuses on Ghosh's conceptualisation of the posthuman, postcolonial cyborg and its ramifications for postcolonial ethics. Finally, Choksey closes this section by exploring Assia Djebar's *Ombre sultane* (1987), Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000) and the intersection between political participation and gender, bringing forth women's role in decolonial praxis and Pan-Africanism, focusing on care and feminist ethics.

Finally, Part IV of the collection considers the political dimensions of SF, with four chapters further extending the themes broached in earlier essays. Jacqueline Dutton's chapter examines the failure of French secular state ethics to offer utopian visions of the future of the "City of Light." Dutton compares the futures imagined by Louis-Sébastien Mercier in *L'An 2440: Rêve s'il en fut jamais* (1771) and Michel Houellebecq in *Soumission* (2015), discussing how these texts conceptualise the relationships between ethics, religion and the state. Kalina Maleska then considers the emergence of dystopian literature in contemporary Macedonia through recent SF novels. Maleska evaluates how Sanja Mihajlović Kostadinovska's *517* (2015) and Tomislav Osmanli's *Бродот. Конзархија* (The Ship. Consarchy) (2016) respond directly to Macedonian politics and the ethics of nationalist policies, treating Vlada Urošević's *Дворскиот поет во апарат за летање* (The Court Poet in a Flying Machine) (1996) as a precursor to this nascent genre. Next, Anna Madoeuf and Delphine Pagès-El Karoui compare two visions of future Cairo, exploring the state's role in economic, spatial and social inequality in Jamil Nasir's *Tower of Dreams* (1999) and Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (2008). This matter of economic inequality is central to the book's closing chapter by Nick Lawrence, who explores the dearth of utopian visions of ethical post-capitalist futures, despite the pressure of ongoing global economic crisis and political tension. Lawrence reflects on the Western utopian tradition in earlier literature and ultimately affirms the necessity of utopian thought for negotiating the problems of the contemporary world.

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Praise for *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction*

“A brilliantly curated, critically-rigorous, and discerning book. It stands apart among even the best of the emerging canon of global sf studies in the range of national literatures, historical periods, and subject areas covered, and in the reach and depth of its transdisciplinary approach. This is a collection to which students and scholars in the field will return again and again.”

—Terry Harpold, Associate Professor, *University of Florida, USA*

“This volume makes an important contribution to the theoretical debates on the question of ethics for a sustainable future. Contributors investigate global science fiction literature, explore alterity and climate change and analyse the political dimensions of utopian and dystopian narratives in different geographical and cultural contexts. It is a valuable collection for both established and new scholars from different disciplines, providing original and up to date interdisciplinary perspectives on the intrinsically global qualities of science fiction.”

—Raffaella Baccolini, *Professor of English Literature at the University of Bologna, Italy, and co-author of Utopia Method Vision (2007) and Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination (2003)*

“This book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how science fiction responds to contemporary ethical and political dilemmas. Four well-chosen sections frame insights into SF narratives on encounters with the other, environmental ethics, post-colonial challenges and socio-political inequality. These concerns speak directly to the felt problems of the present moment. At the same time, the collection is rooted in a rich understanding of SF’s long history of engagement with social, political and ethical issues. The global and especially postcolonial focus of this collection is a particularly welcome to SF criticism which has only recently turned to fully address the US and Eurocentric history of the genre and its histories. We need to listen much more closely to indigenous and postcolonial stories and theories in the face of Western modernity’s impasses. *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction* puts these issues and positions into a complex and subtle conversation with reflections on the spectre of climate crisis and the persistence of global capitalism and its inequities. The collection reiterates the importance of speculative fiction to necessary thinking about probable, possible and desirable futures, and brings important new texts and voices to our attention.”

—Lisa Garforth, *Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Newcastle University, UK, and author of Green Utopias: Environmental Hope Before and After Nature (2017)*

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PART I

Ethics and the Other



CHAPTER 1

Science Fiction's Ethical Modes: Totality and Infinity in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* Trilogy and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Мы* (We)

Zachary Kendal

INTRODUCTION

Can genres have an intrinsic predisposition to a particular politics? Critics who ask this question of science fiction (SF) often arrive at different answers. Carl Freedman, for example, posits that SF is a “privileged and paradigmatic genre” for Marxism and critical theory, having “the deepest ... affinity with the rigors of dialectical thinking,” which would explain the genre’s attraction to Marxist critics such as Darko Suvin, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson.¹ By contrast, Aaron Santesso claims the genre leans in a more regressive direction, replete with “fascist energies and ideas.”² In this chapter, I ask whether SF has a predisposition to a particular ethical outlook, exploring the dominant ethical modes of the SF genre. As with the question of politics, which resurfaces throughout this essay, how this question of ethics is answered depends on how SF is defined and, centrally, the significance given to the American SF pulp magazines, which are central to Santesso’s

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study but excised from Freedman's. However, establishing a systematic definition of SF today—one that would include works generally considered SF, exclude (if desired) those of other genres, and navigate a growing body of “post-genre” or “slipstream” works that blend different conventions—would be impossible. It is thus more accurate to speak of SF's multitude of literary traditions, which provide it with what Samuel R. Delany called SF's “historical, theoretical, stylistic, and valuative plurality.”³ Rather than seek a single answer to this question of SF's ethics, I will examine two classic SF works and the traditions they represent: Isaac Asimov's original *Foundation* trilogy (1951–1953; serialised 1942–1950), one of the most iconic and well-loved series of the American pulps and SF's “golden age,” and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Mbl* (*We*, 1921), a highly influential dystopian novel from an Eastern European SF tradition. I argue that the genre SF that developed in the American pulps was dominated by themes and modes of representation best described as *totalising*, but that works such as *Mbl* demonstrate the potential for SF to engage with a more ethical discourse.⁴

I thus begin by exploring Emmanuel Levinas's critique of totalisation, which he finds violent and reductive in its attempts to reduce the world and its inhabitants to finite and knowable concepts. I then turn to Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, focusing primarily on the series' representation of “psychohistory,” for an example of this totalising project finding a utopian expression in pulp SF. Returning to Levinas, I then consider his writings on the idea of infinity and the disruption of totality in the face-to-face encounter, concepts integral to his understanding of ethics and responsibility. This leads into a Levinasian reading of Zamyatin's *Mbl*, which demonstrates a philosophical orientation contrary of that of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, focusing on the power of the encounter with the unknowable other to break apart totalising ideologies. Finally, I will argue that the literary form of each text underpins their different ethical orientations, with Asimov's straightforwardly “pulpish” mode supporting his series' totalising approach, and Zamyatin's disruptive modernist form allowing him to present singular and unknowable characters.

TOTALITY AND ETHICS

Writing in the decades following World War II, Levinas saw the need to drastically rethink the foundations of a philosophical tradition that had been complicit in the rise of fascism. This resulted in his blistering critique of the concept of totality, which he associates with Western philosophy as a whole. He describes this philosophy as “une tentative de synthèse universelle, une

réduction de toute l'expérience, de tout ce qui est sense, à une totalité où la conscience embrasse le monde, ne laisse rien d'autre hors d'elle" ("an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experiences, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaving nothing other outside of itself").⁵ Through integration into a comprehensible totality, what is *other* is stripped of its infinite alterity (its difference) in order to become *finite* and *known*—to be conquered, cognitively. Such an approach finds no resistance in objects, which can be integrated into the totality "sans jamais mettre en question la liberté du moi" ("without ever putting into question the freedom of the I").⁶ It is when this approach is extended to the other person, singular and unknowable, that its unethical orientation is revealed. The totalisation of the Other necessitates the erasure of their alterity, dissolving them into a concept and subsuming them into a totality, making it an act of violence against the other's very otherness. Levinas thus identifies totalisation as a kind of imperialism, associating it with "toute la civilisation occidentale de propriété, d'exploitation, de tyrannie politique et de guerre" ("the whole Western civilization of property, exploitation, political tyranny, and war").⁷ It is also foundational to fascism, which depends on reductive totalisation to create the neat and all-encompassing narratives and identities that would separate "us" from "them."

John Clute has argued that genre SF is governed by "two essential assumptions": first, that the world and its people "can be seen as wholly as required, and described accurately, in words"; and second, "that the 'world' ... does in the end have a story which can be told."⁸ This two-fold belief that the world is knowable and representable reflects genre SF's often dogmatic scientific positivism, which validates only empirical and conclusive scientific knowledge and would extend "hard" science approaches into areas of social science and philosophy. The result is a generic disposition to totalising themes, narratives, and literary forms. Recasting this in Levinasian terms, genre SF is committed to the idea that the universe, and the others who inhabit it, are ultimately totalisable, and that this totality can be adequately communicated in writing.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S *FOUNDATION* TRILOGY

The totalising tendency that dominated genre SF finds powerful expression in Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy. Originally published as a series of short stories and novellas in *Astounding Science-Fiction* between 1942 and 1950, then re-worked into the novels *Foundation* (1951), *Foundation and Empire*

(1952), and *Second Foundation* (1953), the *Foundation* trilogy remains one of the most influential series of the pulp SF era. Although it was awarded a one-off special Hugo Award for Best All-Time Series in 1966, critics have often questioned the reasons behind its enormous success.⁹ This question frames studies by James Gunn and Charles Elkins, but even Asimov asked the question when re-reading the original trilogy in preparation for *Foundation's Edge* (1982):

I read [the stories] with mounting uneasiness. I kept waiting for something to happen, and nothing ever did. All three volumes, all the nearly quarter of a million words, consisted of thoughts and of conversations. No action. No physical suspense.

What was all the fuss about, then? Why did everyone want more of that stuff?¹⁰

Gunn posits that the series' success lies in its commitment to "rationalism," as evidenced in its posing, then solving, different problems.¹¹ Elkins attributes it to the deterministic "concept of history" that gives the stories an unstoppable momentum towards an apparently utopian future.¹² Although there is an element of truth in each of these conclusions, I wish to propose another, not unrelated, answer: the trilogy's success lies in its readers' attraction to the series' utopian vision of absolute totalisation—a vision of total cognitive domination over the Other and the systematic elimination of difference.

Set in the distant future, the *Foundation* trilogy chronicles the decline and fall of a galaxy-wide empire and the struggles for power and survival that follow. It focuses primarily on a Foundation of scientists, established on the galaxy's periphery by Hari Seldon, intended to survive the Galactic Empire's collapse and minimise the duration of the ensuing "dark ages." According to Seldon's plan, this First Foundation would eventually work with a Second Foundation—the nature and location of which is shrouded in mystery—to establish an even more powerful and far-reaching Second Empire. Seldon can predict and manipulate events on a galactic scale through his mastery of *psychohistory*, a discipline that transforms psychology and the social sciences into empirical sciences governed by mathematical laws. "The future isn't nebulous," we are told, "it's been calculated out by Seldon and charted."¹³ The *Foundation* stories are at pains to emphasise the concreteness and objectivity of psychohistory, "*that branch of mathematics which deals with the reactions of human conglomerates to fixed social*

and economic stimuli."¹⁴ The powers of psychohistory are demonstrated in the series' earlier stories: each time the Foundation faces a crisis, such as invasion by neighbouring kingdoms, we find that the threat was anticipated by Seldon, who orchestrated events such that the Foundation would be victorious. An apparent caveat to the powers of psychohistory is that it "cannot predict the future of a single man with any accuracy," but even this is undermined throughout the series, as Seldon and, later, the psychohistorians of the Second Foundation, prove capable of using psychohistory to manipulate specific individuals.¹⁵

In "The Mule," however, Seldon's plan seems to unravel when a mutant with psionic powers begins a campaign of galactic domination, eventually seizing control of the Foundation. A holographic recording of Seldon, played during the invasion, reveals that he had not predicted this turn of events. The nature of this tyrant—the Mule—is significant: as his powers are the result of a random genetic mutation, he is apparently "beyond calculation" in ways that ordinary people are not.¹⁶ In the trilogy's final volume, however, the Mule is undone by the Second Foundation, which we find consists of psychohistorians operating in secret to re-work Seldon's equations when new data comes to light. Even the most unique and unexpected individual, then, appears powerless against Seldon's plan.

The deterministic nature of psychohistory has seen it likened to a vulgar form of Marxism. Early Marxism sought to expose the immutable laws governing socioeconomic development, often maintaining that the totality of social relations could be understood in terms of class relations. Georg Lukács articulated the importance of totalisation for Marxism thus: "Die Kategorie der Totalität, die allseitige, bestimmende Herrschaft des Ganzen über die Teile ist das Wesen der Methode, die Marx von Hegel übernommen und originell zur Grundlage einer ganz neuen Wissenschaft umgestaltet hat." ("The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science.")¹⁷ Whereas totalisation has unavoidably negative implications for Levinas and many poststructuralist thinkers, for certain strains of Marxism it is a utopian ambition, as it is throughout Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy. Donald Wollheim thus posits that "psychohistory is the science that Marxism never became," while Andrew Milner and Robert Savage note that "Marx's scientific socialism, yet another model for psychohistory, seems merely amateurish by comparison."¹⁸ Although Marxists of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor Adorno, tended to be more critical of

the notion of totality and the reductive aspects of “scientific socialism,” the Marxism that most widely circulated 1930s and 1940s America followed a more totalising and deterministic strain—what Elkins calls “the vulgar, mechanical, debased version of Marxism.”¹⁹ Elkins argues that Asimov “takes this brand of Marxism to its logical end,” resulting in both a “pervading fatalism” and a cynical resentment of the proletarian masses, who must always remain ignorant of Seldon’s plan.²⁰ This is demonstrated in the early story “The Encyclopedists,” where it is revealed that although Seldon established the First Foundation with the ostensible goal of creating a galactic encyclopedia that would record all human knowledge, this was only a ruse to facilitate his manipulation of multiple generations of scientists.²¹ This impulse—setting down in words all human knowledge—can in turn be recognised as another totalising endeavour, and one that eventually gets realised, as we know from reading excerpts from the *Encyclopedia Galactica* throughout the novels. If some form of Marxism is at play here, it would appear to be one that detests the working class and is resolutely authoritarian. And whereas the pre-determined end-point of history from certain Marxist perspectives is global communism, Seldon’s anticipated utopia is a new galaxy-wide empire.²²

Another strand of criticism sees a very different politics at work in the *Foundation* trilogy, finding within many of the tropes and dispositions of fascism and the far-right. Donald M. Hassler, for example, suggests that Asimov’s early work may have been unwittingly influenced by “fascist propaganda with its colorful art deco and its grand notions of the heroic and the large futurism of Empire and dominance.”²³ Likewise, when reviewing *Foundation’s Edge*, David Langford finds Asimov struggling with “certain implications of his original trilogy being slightly distasteful” and sounding “rather like fascism.”²⁴ Far from being intentional on Asimov’s part, I suggest that this underlying fascistic inflection is the result of a work philosophically committed to totalisation and written within the politically and socially regressive traditions of American pulp SF. Santesso argues that fascist politics underlie much genre SF, as “certain foundational tropes and traditions of the genre carry the DNA of fascism ... to the extent that even liberal, progressive authors working within the genre’s more refined strains often (inadvertently) employ fascistic tropes and strategies.”²⁵ Among the tropes identified are the fear of alien invasion, which thinly veils nationalism and fear of the other; a militaristic inflection, coming through preoccupation with advanced weaponry and war; the presence of a heroic “strongman” leader, reflecting Nietzsche’s “Übermensch”; and a

utopian technological optimism that suggests scientific progress will solve all our problems, rendering social change unnecessary.

A critical reading of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy reveals the extent to which these tropes permeate the stories. The fear of the other, for example, is embodied in the Mule, who is dangerous *because* of his difference—his mutation. This theme of genetic purity is connected to the fascist trope of the master race, which also pervades the trilogy. Seldon is said to have selected the “youngest” and “strongest” individuals to populate his Foundations, and this rhetoric is intensified when the Second Foundation's psychohistorians are introduced as “a higher subdivision of Man” that is “inherently able” to master complex mathematics.²⁶ Although they are also referred to as “supermen,” there is a greater and more powerful scientific “superman” at work throughout the series: the infallible Hari Seldon.²⁷ As the founder of the Foundations and perfecter of psychohistory, Seldon is worshipped across the galaxy, his name even coming to stand in for “God”—“for Seldon's sake,” characters awkwardly proclaim.²⁸ Then there is the ultimate, utopian goal of Seldon and his Foundations: the establishment of a Second Empire that would achieve total galactic domination, with Second Foundation psychohistorians destined to rule as “a ready-made ruling class,” and the leaders of the First Foundation providing a political infrastructure.²⁹ With the centrality of imperialism, authoritarianism, master races, and supermen, it is unsurprising that critics have long pointed to the trilogy's fascist overtones.

No doubt Asimov would be horrified by the suggestion that his work shares ideas and philosophical orientations with fascism, and I am certainly not suggesting that Asimov was himself fascist. He was, in fact, an ardent liberal, born into a Russian Jewish family that emigrated to the US when he was a boy, and his memoirs demonstrate his disdain for fascism. As a teenager in Brooklyn, he joined the New York Futurians, an anti-fascist fan organisation that wanted to recruit SF for a broader political movement. Counting among their members several high-profile SF authors, including Wollheim, Frederik Pohl, and Cyril Kornbluth, the Futurians wanted to rid pulp SF of its fascist dispositions, including its militarism, nationalism, heroic strongmen, and uncritical technological utopianism.³⁰ Asimov's early work was, however, heavily influenced by the editorial oversight of John W. Campbell Jr. and the genre SF conventions that crystallised in Campbell's *Astounding*. Asimov conceived of *Foundation* as a science-fictional retelling of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789), but Campbell played a major role in shaping the finished product. As Asimov noted in a 1979 interview:

psychohistory originated in a discussion between myself and Campbell, as so many of the things in my early science-fiction stories did. ... There is some reference to symbolic logic in the first story and that was more or less forced on me by John Campbell ... [who felt] that symbolic logic, further developed, would so clear up the mysteries of the human mind as to leave human actions predictable.³¹

The idea of psychohistory was consistent with what Wollheim identified as Campbell's "mechanistic approach to psychology, sociology, and history," which contributed to his preoccupation with psionics and attraction to L. Ron Hubbard's dianetics.³² In Levinasian terms, this can be recognised as an overriding desire to overcome the other's unknowability. Campbell also influenced the *Foundation* stories in other ways—for example, his insistence that any representation of aliens establish human beings as superior was distasteful to Asimov, who avoided the issue by writing an all-human galaxy.³³ Asimov described Campbell as "an idiosyncratic conservative ... somewhere to the right of Attila the Hun in politics," but remained one of his most outspoken apologists.³⁴ Campbell's far-right politics and racist tendencies were well known,³⁵ with Michael Moorcock calling him "an out-and-out fascist," under whose reign *Astounding* became "a crypto-fascist deeply philistine magazine."³⁶ Asimov acknowledged that his relationship with Campbell and eagerness to be published in *Astounding* meant he "caught the Campbell flavor," but failed to realise that this flavour, which infused much pulp SF, was often fascist in its orientation, and violent and totalising in its approach to the Other.³⁷

Becoming preoccupied with the trilogy's politics, however, can distract from the underlying philosophy that gives rise to its pseudo-Marxist determinism and fascist strains: commitment to the project of totalisation. Asimov did not set out to write communist or fascist propaganda, but he was writing strictly and unquestioningly within the West's totalising philosophical framework. This goes deeper than politics, right to the core of ethics—to the encounter with, and representation of, the Other. Seldon's psychohistory is totalisation *par excellence*. No human individual can stand in the way of this mathematical system in which "all is taken into account."³⁸ Thus Damien Broderick identifies Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy as "the most explicit instance" of genre SF's tendency towards "the bleakest mechanical determinism and ... the obliteration of the volitional subject."³⁹ This obliteration is presented in utopian terms, as the reader is invited to celebrate every success of Seldon's plan and behold the incredible power of

psychohistory. But the ethical implications of a society based on totalisation are apparent: the individual's alterity is erased and they become only subservient proletarian workers; oppressive social hierarchies assert themselves; authoritarian control is handed to "strongman" leaders and master races; and imperialism and colonisation are glorified. Although such totalising themes dominated pulp SF, and indeed continued to influence the genre SF that followed, SF nonetheless has enormous potential to disrupt totalising approaches and explore ethical encounters with others—a potential that I will explore in relation to Zamyatin's *Mbl*.

INFINITY AND THE FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER

Let us briefly return to Levinas to consider how totalisation can be disrupted by infinity and the face-to-face encounter. In *Totalité et Infini* (*Totality and Infinity*) (1961), Levinas posits that the idea of infinity is engendered in me by the face of the other person, which "détruit à tout moment, et déborde l'image plastique qu'il me laisse" ("at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me").⁴⁰ The face, here, is not reducible to what one can see and touch, but is every aspect the other's countenance and speech, their very presence. In its expression, the face can break apart any image formed of it: "Le visage est présent dans son refus d'être contenu. Dans ce sens il ne saurait être compris, c'est-à-dire englobé." ("The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed.")⁴¹ The face-to-face encounter attests to the other's radical separation from the self and their "dimension de l'intériorité" ("dimension of interiority"), which "refuse au concept et résiste à la totalisation" ("declines the concept and withstands totalization").⁴² This refusal to be contained, wherein the Other always exceeds the idea I hold of them, gives rise to the idea of infinity—that which cannot be subsumed into the finite totality.

For Levinas, ethics originates in this calling into question of my totalising powers. The face-to-face encounter demands that we consider the Other in their irreducibility, acknowledging their "singularité absolue" ("absolute singularity") as "irreprésentable" ("unrepresentable").⁴³ As Diane Perpich notes, the face is beyond all representation: "*there is simply no way to do justice to the singularity of a face in a description.*"⁴⁴ This presents a problem for literature, for how can we write something that is necessarily beyond representation? For SF, which often deals with truly alien and out-of-this-world others, the problem is even greater. Too often, genre SF

allowed its totalising orientation to extend to these unrepresentable Others, which were described in clear and unambiguous prose. Ursula K. Le Guin took pulp SF to task for its failure to develop complex characters, finding the genre replete with “captains and troopers, and aliens and maidens and scientists, and emperors and robots and monsters—all signs, all symbols, statements, effigies, allegories, everything between the Stereotype and the Archetype”—but never singular, unknowable characters.⁴⁵ Thus, we find Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy filled with character types, but devoid of fully formed characters.

Other SF traditions, however, found ways to utilise the intellectual and theoretical resources of SF to undertake more ethical explorations of otherness. When examining the “unknowability thesis” in SF, Fredric Jameson points to the Polish author Stanisław Lem, whose *Solaris* (1961) offers a compelling study in “the impossibility of understanding the Other”—a position Jameson finds “implacably negative and skeptical,” albeit with a “concomitant ethical imperative.”⁴⁶ *Solaris* focuses on the unknowability of the alien other—the living ocean of Solaris, which scientists try and fail to comprehend—and reveals something of the radical alterity of the human other in the process. Zamyatin’s *MbI*, however, foregrounds the face-to-face encounter and its power to disrupt totalising philosophies and instil a sense of ethics and responsibility. So I turn now to Zamyatin, whose unknowable characters in *MbI* led Le Guin to proclaimed him “the author of the first science fiction *novel*.”⁴⁷

YEVGENY ZAMYATIN’S *MbI*

Whereas Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy envisages a utopian potential for the mathematically rigorous totalisation of all things, Zamyatin’s *MbI* offers a dire assessment of a society governed by reductive mathematical formulae and the erasure of otherness. Written in Russia between 1919 and 1921, *MbI* did not see publication in the Soviet Union until 1988, well after the author’s death in Paris in 1937. The novel was first published in English translation in 1924, with a full Russian-language version not appearing in print until 1952.⁴⁸ It now stands alongside Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as one of the most influential dystopian novels of the twentieth century. Although Huxley’s and Orwell’s novels each contain themes present in *MbI*—the question of happiness versus freedom, for example, and wariness of authoritarian politics—Zamyatin’s text offers a more concerted attack on

scientific positivism and the totalising impulse. Indeed, Daniel Walker identifies *Mbl* as one of the earliest SF novels to clearly oppose scientific positivism, as it presents “a dramatization of what happens when an entire population becomes ruled by scientism, when a state practises scientism as its religion, creed, and political philosophy.”⁴⁹ The rationalism that, according to Gunn, provided *Foundation* with its sense of wonder, here takes on purely negative connotations, with wonder instead being found in the *irrational*.

Mbl is set in the One State, a totalitarian metropolis that formed after a devastating Two-Hundred Year War. The One State is separated from the outside world, including all plants and animals, by the Green Wall, a massive glass wall encompassing the city. Everything about life in the One State is strictly regulated and reduced to comprehensible formulae. Workers are referred to as “ciphers” (“нумера,” or “numbers”), having alphanumeric designators instead of proper names. The Table of Hours governs each cipher’s movements and activities, with every minute of the day accounted for, from eating, working, and resting to their mandatory physical regimen at the Taylor Exercise Hall—only two Personal Hours each day remain. Even love, we are told, has been “побеждена, то есть организована, математизирована” (“conquered, i.e., organized and mathematicized”) as ciphers can acquire tickets for sexual encounters with any other cipher they choose.⁵⁰ Everything in the One State is designed to erase individuality. Even personal accommodations are not only uniform but made entirely of glass, ensuring full transparency into others’ lives and aiming at the eradication of interiority.

Mbl follows D-503, a senior mathematician and engineer for the One State, who sees his rigid, mechanised society as a utopia of efficiency and rationality. D-503 is the designer of the Integral, a spaceship intended to bring “математически безошибочное счастье” (“mathematically infallible happiness”) (One State ideology) to the universe.⁵¹ The novel begins with D-503 in loyal service to the One State, subscribing wholeheartedly to its ideals and looking forward to the day that Personal Hours are eradicated from the Table of Hours. He finds value in his work as a mathematician specifically for its totalising objectives, declaring that

работа высшего, что есть в человеке,—рассудка—сводится именно к непрерывному ограничению бесконечности, к раздроблению бесконечности на удобные, легко переваримые порции—дифференциалы. В этом именно божественная красота моей стихии—математики.