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Fantastic Mimesis: A Diamond in the Rough, Not the Philosopher's Stone

Seo-Young Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. 306 pp. $39.95.

In the past fifty years, theoretical reflection about science fiction, both as a kind of art and as a way of perceiving modern life, has produced a rich, sophisticated body of work. Seo-Young Chu's *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation* might be a significant, if problematic, contribution to that corpus. As stunning in its originality and chutzpah as in the shakiness of its reasoning, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* strives for nothing less than a reversal of the main currents of science-fiction theory. Chu argues that science fiction (SF) should be considered a literary mode, rather than a historical genre, and as such is the main cultural vehicle for representing inchoate and complex new realities (which is not a wholly new proposal) because it relies on the devices of lyric poetry (which is). The book's ambitions go further. Chu also proposes to reverse our traditional understanding of literary mimesis as the preserve of realistic fiction, replacing it with SF. *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* contains acute readings of a great range of texts and offers fresh ways of conceiving science fiction's relationship to modern experience. It also pushes excessively ambitious claims based on willfully naive assumptions about fiction and theory that may prevent it

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from being the game-changer it could be. Chu has discovered a rough diamond but claims it is the philosopher's stone.

The thesis of *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* comes in two strengths, moderate and strong. In the moderate version, SF plays a central role in contemporary culture because its poetic qualities, most notably the literalization of poetic figures, give it the power to make new, difficult-to-conceive phenomena—which Chu calls "cognitively estranging objects"—imaginable and intelligible, "available for representation." In other words, SF's repertoire of narratives and images is particularly well suited for representing the extreme and anomalous experiences and complex concepts associated with twentieth-century historical developments for which the devices of realism are inadequate. The strong version of the thesis extends this observation to the claim that SF is our only true form of mimesis. Because the important objects of our world resist representation, SF's power to coax elusive referents into articulation demonstrates that all forms of literary representation are essentially science fiction, regardless of their specific generic contexts. Science fiction is *essentially* lyric; *all* representations of complex, elusive phenomena are science fictional; and the representation of these cognitively estranging objects is what mimesis is all about.

The moderate thesis fits well among recent arguments that SF is less a specific genre than a way of thinking about a world that is continually saturated, shocked, upgraded, and deleted by technoscientific innovations. In this view—associated with writers as various as Bruce Sterling, Scott Bukatman, Brooks Landon, Veronica Hollinger, and Sherryl Vint[1]—SF has become a mode of awareness about life conditions that traditional institutions and ideologies cannot fathom. Many of the innovations with the

1. See, for example, Bruce Sterling, "Preface," *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, ed. Bruce Sterling (New York: Ace, 1988) ix-xvi; Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993); Brooks Landon, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic (Re)production* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992); Veronica Hollinger, "Science Fiction and Postmodernism," *A Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. David Seed (London: Blackwell, 2005) 232–47, and "(Re)reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender," *Science Fiction Studies* 26.1 (1999): 23–40; and Sherryl Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007).

greatest impact on contemporary life were imaginatively tested and shaped by science fiction, while conventional, "mundane" art treated them as marginal. More and more thinkers have included allusions to works of SF to make their points, or even—in the case of philosophers like Jean Baudrillard, Donna Haraway, Daniel Dennett, Slavoj Žižek, and Franco Berardi—used concepts explicitly drawn from SF to ground their thought experiments. Many research programs in cognitive science and related fields are attempting to materialize phenomena that were once purely science fictional fantasies. Chu's important contribution to this project is to focus on the way SF's vocabulary of tropes has made new thinking possible and communicable. In particular, she has identified a core strategy of science fictional writing and explained how the use of this strategy inflects a great variety of works not strictly linked to the genre with science fictional meaning.

Chu maintains that SF has been misunderstood because it has been considered fundamentally "non-mimetic." The counterfactual elements that distinguish it from realistic fiction have led critics to treat SF as exclusively a form of fantasy. For Chu, exactly the opposite is the case.[2] While realistic fiction is adequate for representing the familiar, inert objects of everyday experience, the great conceptual objects that dominate our collective experiences without our being fully aware of them can be represented only by language that pushes articulation to its limits. This is the language of lyric poetry. The intensity and density of poetic tropes are required to make the elusive referents take form. In this sense, SF is unarguably mimetic, since its real purpose is to represent these reality-shaping, "cognitively estranged" objects.

SF's main tool in the lyric toolbox is, for Chu, the literalization of figures. The notion that SF works by means of the literalization of metaphor was floated many years ago by Samuel R. Delany,

2. Chu's claims of originality are overstated, however. The idea that SF is mimetic of social conditions in its very indirection is a core concept in the work of Fredric Jameson, Bruce Sterling, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Darko Suvin, among others.

and his formulation has been repeated many times.[3] Before *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, however, there was almost no elaboration of this intriguing idea. Chu carefully redescribes certain favored SF motifs as literalized representations of poetic figures. Apostrophe becomes telepathy, personification the animation of humanoid artifacts, synesthesia the paranormal sensorium, and the genre as a whole the literalization of catachresis on every level, from theme to setting to action. More specifically, SF artists take the metaphors that a culture uses to approach elusive conceptual objects (her examples are the globalized world, cyberspace, war trauma, the potential personhood of artificial intelligence, and the mysterious diasporic afterlife of culturally specific malaises, such as what she terms the "postmemory han" experienced by Korean Americans) and turn them into material objects and events in their narratives. Literalization is a core strategy of most kinds of fantasy and satire, where objects and practices take on lives of their own as material metonymies of moral and psychological states. Apuleius, Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens, Nikolai Gogol, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and Salman Rushdie would be nowhere without such literalizations. Chu is so single-minded about raising SF into a metacategory, however, that she mentions none of these writers and no other genres of the fantastic. On her terms, they all should be considered science fictional.

The "cognitively estranging" referents Chu chooses as her examples are a varied group. Some have to do with new objective spatial categories (the globalized world, cyberspace), some with subjective psychological conditions (war trauma, postmemory han), and one with new ethical dilemmas (robot rights). Two-thirds of *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* is devoted to identifying the literalized metaphors and motifs that act as what Chu calls "science-fictionemes," atoms of science fictional discourse that make these complex conceptual objects "available for representation." In a fine reading of globalization as an elusive referent, Chu demonstrates how much the concept is shaped by

3. Samuel R. Delany, "On *Triton* and Other Matters: An Interview with Samuel R. Delany," *Science Fiction Studies* 17.3 (1990): 295–324.

SF tropes. Explicating Richard Powers's *Plowing the Dark*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, and the television series *Heroes*, Chu shows that it is through images of radically new affective dimensions (the planetary soul), new spaces (spaceship earth, global village, ecumenopolis, displaced terraforming), and new bodies (global mutagenesis, "the globalization chromosome," X-men, Octavia Butler's aliens) that globalization becomes concrete in the public imagination. Chu's discussion of SF's role in articulating globalization is an important contribution to work on SF's role in making the political dimensions of globalization, such as planetarity and cosmopolitics, imaginable.

The chapter "Cyberspace in the 1990s" is more organically linked to SF. Rather than focusing on cyberspace as it is treated in today's culture, where it is imagined as a familiar place, Chu looks instead at its precursor, the first fictions of cyberspace, which gave the public a vocabulary and image-store to begin grappling with a new communications regime. In the process, Chu skillfully demonstrates the way the carnivalized San Francisco Bay Bridge of William Gibson's Bridge trilogy materializes the many metaphors that were being used to characterize virtual cyberspace at the time (centrally in Gibson's own Sprawl Trilogy). The chapter "War Trauma" is another matter altogether. Through careful readings of some SF works (Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*, Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*) and of Tim O'Brien's non-SF *The Things They Carried* that are generally treated as expressions of war trauma, Chu demonstrates how naturally the SF motifs of time travel, self-cloning, and alien abduction have lent themselves to depicting the feelings of dissociation characteristic of war trauma (first named as such in the technological horror of World War I).

Chu's fourth cognitively estranged object, "postmemory han," is at first glance anomalous. "Han" is a psychic malaise widely recognized as a culture-specific medical condition experienced by Koreans. As Chu describes it, han is a complex of shame, resentment, and helplessness intimately but opaquely connected to the Korean historical experience of oppression and occupa-

tion. The elusive referent in play for Chu is not han itself but the experience of han by many diasporic Koreans who have had little contact with Korea or information about it, including children adopted at an early age into non-Korean households. Chu names this phenomenon "postmemory han." She again identifies the recurrence of the SF motif of telepathy in the work of Korean American artists seeking to articulate the condition. Chu's concept of postmemory han stands out both because the referent is so culturally precise and limited and because it is clearly the most personal of her categories. Chu is herself a Korean American; thus the chapter can be read as a working-out of her thesis at the most personal level. At the same time, it is perhaps the least persuasive example of the specifically science fictional tropes used to represent an elusive referent, since telepathy is by no means exclusively an SF motif and has enjoyed a rich and varied presence in supernatural, horror, hermetic, and weird fiction.

The final category, "robot rights," is the most overtly science fictional of Chu's elusive referents. In her view, the question of whether and how to cope with the claims for robot rights in the future is inconceivable without SF tropes. It is not a difficult argument to make, since the intelligent robot had a lush life as a trope in SF well before any true robots were constructed, and their allegorical position in the master-slave hierarchy already carried with it assumptions about the rights and freedom of sentient beings. Unlike the preceding categories, "robot rights" exists only as science fiction at the moment, so all speculative legal arguments in the present have a natural reservoir of images preestablished for them in the science fictional megatext. The chapter is nonetheless a superb excursion through the problem of the "uncanny valley" of robot/human proximity proposed by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori, E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," the replicants of *Blade Runner*, and a brave (but in my view still unsuccessful) defense of the Kubrick-Spielberg film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*.

The five chapters that make up the bulk of *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* are as original and compelling as any recent critical writing on SF. They help lay the groundwork for studying

the cultural metabolism between new social phenomena and the science fictional "megatext," the vast, evolving body of images and motifs that SF artists consider to be the shared treasury of the genre.[4] If Chu had been content with this, *Do Metaphors Dream?* would be an unambiguously important contribution to the study of science fictionality. But her ambition to redefine the genre and then to make it account for the whole of literary mimesis, forces readers to sift through dubious assumptions, imprecise language, and circular arguments to isolate the gem. This is particularly evident in her categorical conceptions of mimesis, cognitively estranging objects, and science fiction itself.

Given that Chu is proposing a radically new approach to mimesis, her definitions of it are surprisingly feckless:

> By "mimesis," I simply mean "the representation or imitation of the real world in (a work of) art" (*OED*), and in using this definition I accept as a postulate the capacity of language to reflect a reality ontologically prior to representation. . . . My use of so uncomplicated a definition of "mimesis" in this book is deliberate.
>
> (2)

Chu name-checks some of the foundational thinkers about mimesis in an alphabetical list ("Adorno, Aristotle, Erich Auerbach, Barthes"), but only to dismiss them: "Although this history has informed my own thinking on mimesis, it is ultimately incommensurate with the theoretical project of this book" (2). In a later footnote, she posts a credo of realist fundamentalism: "I subscribe to the realistic faith. I believe that reality can be recorded and that realism is alive. I believe in the possibility of mimesis. I have faith in the transcribability of things" (252n3). After a century of the most concerted questioning of the ability of language and imagery to represent a real world existing outside the human mind, no serious literary scholar can see a claim like this as anything but an evasion and a dismissal of what

4. Brian Attebery, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2002); Damien Broderick, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995) 57–60; Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP), 275–76n4.

contemporary literary scholars spend most of their time thinking about.

For Chu, what has been historically termed "literary realism" is the unproblematic depiction of objects that are ready-to-hand and easily accessible for representation, objects whose names are literal stand-ins for them—such as "softball" and "handkerchief." Mimesis occurs along a spectrum of objects, with simple, unproblematically "available" ones at one end, those impossible to represent ("the infinitely remote future, the infinitely remote past, and whatever lies on the other side of death" [7]) at the other, and "cognitively estranging" ones in the middle. Since the furthest extremes are either utterly inaccessible (what exactly does it mean to be entirely unavailable to representation?) or easy to name, it is the "cognitively estranging" objects that are the most interesting and important to represent. Because "cognitively estranging" objects cannot yet be named in an immediate way, they must be wrestled into articulation through the figuration characteristic of lyric poetry.

Though lyric poetry, in Chu's view, is itself a kind of mimetic art, to make the elusive (but "absolutely real") referents visible, its figures must be "literalized"—that is, given material, cause-and-effect-bound forms like objects that are always already literal. In this way, science fiction transcends the gap between literal and figural discourse. As a strategy for reading SF, this linking of narrative fiction with literalization has interesting possibilities, as Chu's readings in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* demonstrate. But her formulation of it betrays a shaky understanding of the figurative/literal relationship in fiction. For starters, there is more than one sense of the word *literal* even in nonfictive discourse, and it is easy to slip from one meaning to another, especially since the term is almost always used *figuratively*.[5] When supposedly literally real objects are presented in a fictive context (and these are, of course, not restricted to self-avowed artworks), they are clearly not objects existing in ordi-

5. See, for example, Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. et al., "Literal Meaning and Figurative Language," *Discourse Processes* 16.4 (1993): 387–403.

nary life but elements in a design. A "real object" in Chu's narrow sense may have (for the sake of argument) an unambiguous ontology, but when the ontology of the world in which the object plays a role is fictive—a softball in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, a handkerchief in *Othello* (a "literally" real one on the stage, as it happens)—it is clearly a quite complex one. It is not "available" for naming; it is a sign in a semiotic environment that simultaneously creates and is created by the fictive context. In fictive discourse, there are no naive objects; nothing is "ready-to-hand." Moving a phrase from everyday discourse to fiction changes its ontology immediately. It is already a figure of speech, namely paranomasia, a pun with two meanings, one real and one fictive.

Chu's idea of realism as the easy depiction of simple objects has very little to do with what most readers consider literary realism. Needing to distinguish dramatically between realism and SF/lyric, Chu ignores the inherent figural dimensions of narrative, or for that matter, how much realist fiction requires tropes to construct its stories, its plots, and the ethical dramas of its object-worlds. One of the main resources for realism, moreover, is precisely the literalization of metaphor: life is a road, existence is war and peace in equal measure, all men are jackasses. Nor does Chu reflect on the degree to which most actually existing SF relies on the tropes of realism. In contrast with other kinds of fantasy, SF places a premium on constructing imaginary worlds that seem sufficiently familiar to their audiences that they can imagine inhabiting them; the changes occurring in them are usually made to seem plausible in a world that is in significant ways like the audience's. SF that radically breaks from the conventions of realistic narration, like Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* or Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe," are rare. SF thrives on the dialectical contrast between new and familiar contexts; it is often precisely the realism of SF tales that distinguishes them from other kinds of fantastic fiction.

Ultimately, Chu's theory depends on the fitness of intense lyric language for representing the extralinguistic reality of the difficult objects that literature is called upon to represent. The idea of elusive referents is important in diverse theoretical dis-

courses—in psychoanalysis, and in the study of religion, the sublime, pain, and trauma. Chu implicitly generalizes this idea into a category of constantly emerging, inchoate new conceptual realities that challenge human language. These objects Chu variously calls "resistant," "unavailable," or "elusive" (and sometimes they are not objects but "referents"), although her preferred term is "cognitively estranging." The phrase is taken from the work of Darko Suvin,—or rather *wrested* from it in a way that fundamentally changes Suvin's original meaning. Suvin argued in his seminal *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) that SF's defining quality is "cognitive estrangement," a process through which publics are made to see their own social worlds, which are concealed from view by habit and ideology, with fresh eyes. Through the introduction of fictional new discoveries, inventions, or social phenomena—which Suvin calls *novums*—science fictional tales construct quasi-realistic alternative worlds that present the real world from an oblique, "estranged" perspective. Because, according to Suvin, SF requires that the changes in alternative worlds fit together in a historically plausible way, readers are given indirect images of the historical and material order of their own worlds. Suvin's model of reading links SF with satire and the utopia, two literary modes that rely on the estrangement and critique of existing social conditions and ideas. Because this estrangement is based on realistic premises drawn from material history, its effect is, for Suvin, "cognitive"—the critical vision produces *real knowledge* in the reader's mind. By creating visions of alternative worlds that work somewhat like our own but are changed by plausible innovations, SF inspires us to imagine critical alternatives to our actual worlds.

Whereas Suvin applies the term to the clarifying *effects* of a narrative on the reader's consciousness during the reading process, Chu applies it instead to conceptual *objects*. And where Suvin uses the term "estrangement" to mean what Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*—a kind of political consciousness-raising through disillusionment—Chu's meaning is much less clear. It might mean "making aware of strangeness"—that is, making one aware that something is difficult to conceive—or

alternatively, it might signify the object's effect of making one's normal cognition seem inadequate for understanding it. For Suvin, the thing that is estranged is the ideological formation, which can be clearly analyzed in Marxian terms. For Chu, it appears to be any concept that is too complex, emergent, or comprehensive to be understood clearly:

> The objects of science-fictional representation, while impossible to represent in a straightforward manner, are absolutely real. My reconceptualization of science fiction can be understood, more specifically, as Suvin's definition turned inside out. Instead of conceptualizing science fiction as a nonmimetic discourse that achieves the effect of cognitive estrangement through "an imaginative framework," I conceptualize science fiction as a mimetic discourse whose objects of representation are nonimaginary yet cognitively estranging.
>
> (3)

Suvin's rigorous theory has had great influence in academic SF criticism, even though it leads to a very restrictive sense of what can count as true SF. Most of the cultural studies approaches that currently dominate SF studies are based on some version of the cognitive-estrangement theory. Turning Suvinian theory "inside out," Chu argues that it is the elusive objects that create the conditions of their reception, not the artistic displacement that most readers would consider to be SF:

> [O]bjects of wonder (objects that produce in us "a horizon-effect of the known, the unknown, and the unknowable") are cognitively estranging. . . . A successful work of SF is one whose wondrous effect on its reader/viewer/listener reproduces the wondrous qualities of the object or phenomenon that the work of science fiction mimetically represents.
>
> (5)

Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement is problematic, first in that it implies that the social reality being estranged would be comprehensible seen from a correct, Marxian perspective, were it not systematically distorted by capitalist cultural jamming, and further in that SF audiences are assumed to be more or less enlightened by SF. SF that does not achieve this goal is not truly SF but part of a mystification industry. Converting *estrangement*

from a noun to an adjective, as Chu does, frees it from this rather rigid paradigm, but at the cost of any referential precision. It is never clear in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* exactly what is being estranged. It cannot be the unavailable objects, since they are by definition already strange, if not entirely illegible. It may be conventional discourse, common sense, consensus knowledge about the world, human thought, or the world itself. Chu does not specify. The long-accepted uses of the term *estrangement* in Russian formalist and Brechtian theory assume that aspects of reality have become so automatic and habitual that they must be seen with fresh eyes.[6] Chu does not invoke these ideas. She sometimes implies that it is the objects/concepts that resist human discourse because of their own *sui generis* "wondrous qualities," and elsewhere that these objects are not even perceived until they have been forced into manifestation by SF's tropes.

Nor is it easy to infer the nature of these objects from examples. Cognitively estranging objects come in many forms:

> Neither totally knowable nor totally unknowable, such cognitively estranging referents encompass the sublime (e.g., outer space), virtual entities (cyberspace), realities imperceptible to the human brain (the fourth dimension), phenomena whose historical contexts have not yet been fully realized (robot rights), and events so overwhelming that they escape immediate experience (shell shock). Although impossible to assess empirically—cyberspace cannot be weighed on a scale; a traumatic experience cannot be quantified in units of time—these referents can, have, and do become available for representation in SF.
>
> (7)

They are distinct enough to generate their own literary genres:

> Genres often classified as both nonmimetic and non-SF are actually varieties of science fiction that correspond mimetically to specific types of cognitively estranging referents. *Surrealism*, for example, is a type of science-fictional mimesis whose cognitively estranging referent is the phenomenon of dreaming.
>
> (9)

6. See Simon Spiegel, "Things Made Strange: On the Concept of 'Estrangement' in Science Fiction Theory," *Science Fiction Studies* 35.3 (2008): 369–85.

Utopianism has as its cognitively estranging referent the ideal polity; detective fiction, "the mystery of ratiocination"; Gothic/horror, "the occulted-yet-irrepressible unconscious"; slipstream, "the partially virtual reality of living in a mainstream hypermediated and rendered half-surreal by technology"; fantasy, "the prodigious working of the human imagination"; magical realism, "the hybrid nature of realities lived in postcolonial spaces such as modern India and Latin America"; while young adult supernatural fiction "is a type of science-fictional mimesis whose cognitively estranging referent is adolescent subjectivity." Not only genres but individual works are generated by the need to make such objects available for representation: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* has as its cognitively estranging object "the trauma of American slavery" (8); the resistant referent of the television show *Lost* is "the afterlife of 9/11 in America" (80).

Most readers will probably balk at the counterintuitive notion that supernatural fiction and the detective tale are varieties of SF; they probably will have doubts about the other genres as well; and the reduction of complex tales to near-allegorical thematic referents may also seem overstated. That would not mean much by itself, since Chu's entire iconoclastic project is to change conventional attitudes toward genre. The high degree of abstraction of the objects, however, makes them suspect. Does it really say something useful about a genre to identify such vague referents and to lump them all together at such a level of generality? It is hard to resist the feeling that at least some of the relevant elusive referents were formulated *ad hoc*. Chu provides no theoretical guidelines to ensure that any two interpreters will come up with the same reductions.

Do these objects, in fact, have anything in common other than their elusiveness? The ones Chu identifies are general mental states or activities: dreaming, an ideal, ratiocination, the unconscious, imagination, subjectivity, and divergent perceptions of reality. However, in her conclusion, she adds that she might have chosen others from an "infinite number of cognitively estranging objects" (245): Los Angeles, the moral claims of animals, global climate change, racial double-consciousness, spiritual doubt, infinity, the fourth dimension, debt, digital gold currency, futures

contracts, homoerotic desire, and World War II. At such a pitch of abstraction, would not "the heroic historical Russian struggle against Western rationalism," "disillusionment and spiritual confusion at the collapse of the old regime," and "the tragic irony of bourgeois desire" qualify as cognitively estranging objects, and the classical realist novels that make them available for thought works of SF? Chu does not make clear what qualifies as an object to be included among the "infinite number" of cognitively estranging ones. Would "identity," "self," "money," "cultural revolution," or "freedom" qualify? They have certainly proved to be elusive and to inspire prodigious supplementary figuration. Does it make sense to claim that all of the writing that has made them "available for representation" is *science fiction*? And if so, why not go old school and rename SF "literature"?

Chu does not anchor her intuitions about the exquisite fit of lyrical language to difficult-to-conceive objects, because *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* lacks both a theory of literary history and a theory of figuration. Most of the items on Chu's list are contemporary or of recent provenance. Though she avoids historical explanations, she considers the volume of cognitively estranging objects to be increasing in our time:

> "Mundane" reality has never been an uncomplicated matter, but the case could be made that everyday reality for people all over the world has grown less and less concretely accessible over the past several centuries and will continue to evolve in that direction for decades (if not centuries) to come. In other words, cognitively estranging referents are growing more and more prevalent. At the same time, the referents that constitute our everyday reality are growing progressively estranging. Financial derivatives are more cognitively estranging than pennies. Global climate change is more cognitively estranging than yesterday's local weather. Multinational conglomerates are more cognitively estranging than independent retail shops. Korean American identity is more cognitively estranging than Korean identity. Science fiction, then, is an increasingly appropriate and convenient language for handling questions about so-called mundane reality.
>
> (80–81)

Chu suggests no specific historical factors or mechanisms for this acceleration of strangeness. For her, SF is not a historical genre

but a poetic strategy that in principle is available to all cultures that have lyric poetry and cognitively estranging objects.

For materialist and cultural studies approaches to SF, SF is part of a large social process. Whether or not one agrees with its Hegelian or Marxist premises, this dominant line of SF scholarship carefully traces the relationship between technological and social changes and the evolution of not only SF but all literary forms. If we place Chu's ahistorical category of cognitively estranging objects into the context of social history, it looks very much like Suvin's concept of the *novum*—eruptions of newness in material social existence that elicit imaginative responses to accommodate them. For reasons that are not entirely clear in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, Chu does not address why the emergence of these strange objects is on the increase and with it the prominence—indeed, the dominance—of science fictional mimesis. Compelling explanations are readily available in SF studies, most of them linking SF with the evolution of modernity and the saturation of social life in the developed world by technology and technoscientific organization. One can infer from passages like the one quoted above that Chu might agree, but in striving for originality and independence from dominant theories, she ends up with no explanatory model of historical change at all—not in the real world, and not in literature.

In the same way, Chu does not account for why the linguistic intensity of lyric figuration is adequate for making difficult objects available. The objects themselves, as we have seen, seem to be mainly aspects of the cultural imaginary. As mental events, they are at least partly constituted by the language we use to refer to them. Yet Chu refers to them again and again as if they had independent existences before they were represented, just as simple objects do. Most contemporary literary theory argues that complex conceptual objects are at least partly constructed by language at every step of their emergence. Chu's readings could easily have demonstrated that technosocience and SF have been part of that language from the beginning, and that figural literalization has been a central mechanism in the process, a linguistic development happening in tandem with the increasing drive for the technoscientific materialization of imaginary or

ideal concepts. Yet this close association of modern social life and SF remains not only implicit in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* but tacitly disavowed. To acknowledge it would weaken Chu's claim that SF makes available any and every kind of strange conceptual object.

Much recent SF theory is concerned with how SF has become a discourse in the real world that participates in shaping new concepts and making new experiences intelligible. Rather than drawing on this rich vein of scholarship, Chu instead relies on an implicitly Romantic and ahistorical notion of poetic discourse. The language of lyric is appropriate because of its intensity and energy (which Chu frequently describes in terms of electrical voltage and shock)—that is, in the amount of cognitive work necessary to make the object intelligible. Lyric language, unlike prose, can make raids on the ineffable. The difficulty of the concept meets its match in the difficulty of the representational language. Chu assumes that there is a fit across the gap, an affinity between the way that lyric works and the objects that it "makes available." She does not explain what this affinity is or what there is specifically in how science fictional/lyric language works that allows it to make manifest such new phenomena. If the language system assumed at work here is poetry, or even "literature," as a system of meaning specific to representing near-ineffable realities, how does it differ from other signifying systems? Rather than drawing on a vast literature on metaphor and figuration and their role in cognition, Chu decides to go it alone. The result is a set of apodictic Romantic claims about the power of the lyric.

To ignore the historical and discursive constructedness of these objects of representation and how such science fictional concepts take form in contrast with other complex concepts denies SF its specificity—as well as that of all other narrative modes and genres. Had Chu not ignored other kinds of fantastic art, her theory of representation might have acknowledged that fantastic (that is, "nonmimetic") art is mimetic in the same way that SF is—indeed, that all arts can be seen as mimetic in some ways and nonmimetic in others. It is obviously important in any theory of mimesis to make a distinction between mimetic and nonmimetic

kinds of art. But in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, almost every kind of fiction is mimetic. If supernatural fiction, magical realism, surrealism, and fantasy are subgenres of SF, and SF is the main mode of the mimetic, what remains? Chu argues that the only nonmimetic mode is *allegory*:

> A narrative in the allegorical mode need not be *about* something. The purpose of allegory is not to refer to a specific object but to incite the reader's mind to exegesis. Meanwhile, the purpose of science fiction is not to instigate exegetical activity in the reader's mind but to represent a cognitively estranging referent.
>
> (76)

Unsurprisingly, this distinction is just as idiosyncratic as the hypostatization of SF. Chu notes that texts often have both allegorical and mimetic dimensions; in effect, narrative and indicative aspects count as mimetic, and the hermeneutic aspects as allegorical. In practice, however, there is not much difference between Chu's approach to SF and most readers' approach to allegory. Allegory is generally treated as a sustained reference to an absent signified through extended, systematic analogy—and literalized metaphor is its favored figure. While allegories may concentrate readers' energy unconsciously on interpretive decoding, Chu's readings of texts like Gibson's Bridge trilogy and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as systematic deployments of poetic figures are different only in degree from allegorical figuration. The absent object of allegories may be more remote than those of SF, and the method of signification more rigid, but the interpretive reductions involved in defining "cognitively estranging referents" bring the two modes very close together. In fact, by emphasizing the process of "making available for representation" great elusive conceptual objects through poetic figures, *Do Metaphors Dream?* emphasizes precisely the reading operations characteristic of allegory.

The problem, I believe, lies in the fact that Chu tries to distinguish SF from allegory—and mimetic from nonmimetic literature—because she cannot on her terms distinguish SF as a genre from other genres. If we entertain Chu's premise that most genres strive to make available for representation certain concepts or structures of feeling specific to them, then surely SF's is also

specific. And indeed most theoretical writing on SF has explored precisely this relationship between the artistic strategies of SF and the historical referents of technoscientific modernity. This is not to say that one should reduce the genre to one "purpose." Rather, one should look for a legitimate specific difference between SF and other kinds of fiction. That path almost inevitably leads writers to examine SF's difference not from realistic fiction, where the use of counterfactuals is held to a minimum, but from other forms of the fantastic. *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* contains no discussion of the various fantastic genres that coexist with SF, which John Clute has gathered under the covering term of *fantastika*.[7] This silence is all the more puzzling since the category of the fantastic—including supernatural fiction, uncanny tales, surrealism, high fantasy, weird tales, alternative histories, urban fantasy, tall tales, and many others, hybrid and pure, that make central use of counterfactual "objects"—would serve Chu's purposes far better than SF does. The slippage of the term SF from a specific genre with a specific set of concerns to an inclusive metacategory conceals the fact that most fantastic genres make use of the figural moves that Chu finds in so many works of SF.

Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? is riddled with circular arguments, undeveloped claims, and tortured reasoning that would be fatal in other works. Question: If lyric and SF have such an affinity, why aren't there more SF poems? Answer: Because SF's use of lyric figuration obviates the need for lyric (65). Question: Why is there a need for SF to do the work of making elusive objects available for representation if lyric already exists? Answer: Because lyrics are too short. (Indeed, the lack of science fictional poems is one of Chu's main proofs of the lyric nature of SF.) Question: Why does SF as the genre that most readers would recognize as SF not appear among Chu's list of SF subgenres? Answer: With a sleight-of-hand, Chu elevates SF into a metagenre by erasing it as a genre.

7. John Clute, "Fantastika in the World Storm: A Talk" *Stuff*. 28 Sept. 2007. Web. 12 Feb. 2012.

Because of its readings, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* survives these flaws. With supplementation—by specifying SF's generic work and subordinating it to fantastic literature in general, by acknowledging the figural character of realistic fiction, by grounding the notion of literalization in cognitive linguistics and poetics, by entering into dialogue with social-historical theories of genre and representation, by thinking through the philosophical disputes about representation instead of stubbornly discarding them—in short, by abandoning both pretensions to total originality and the go-it-alone attitude—Chu's interpretive readings can be grounded in a literary-philosophical framework appropriate for them. *Do Metaphors Dream?* is a diamond very much in need of cut and polish.

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