The Making of Science Fiction: Futurians and The Importance of Readers
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With the creation of Amazing Stories, a magazine pulp dedicated exclusively to science fiction, in 1926, more people started to read and get interested in this type of narrative. In addition to the stories, Hugo Gernsback – founder and editor of Amazing – started to also publish also the readers' comments, and soon this emerging literary genre came to count on the participation of its readers. After all, the authors could read and take these opinions into account, and of course the editor would select texts that would please their audience more – and thus ensure a greater number of sales. In this way, science fiction in the United States has grown alongside its readers.

The Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, in an essay regarding the crime fiction, wrote:

Literary genres depend, perhaps, less on the texts themselves than on the manner in which they are read. The aesthetic fact requires the conjunction of the reader with the text, only then does it exist. It is absurd to suppose that a volume is much more than a volume. It begins to exist when a reader opens it (Borges, 1999, p. 221 my translation).

Borges' rather singular notion attaches great importance to the reader who is often left out of literary studies, assumed to be playing a purely passive role. In this article, I intend to show how Borges' idea helps us understand the science fiction developed by the Futurians in the 1940s. To do so, I use as a research source the science fiction pulps of the 1940s available in the Eaton Collection at University of California, Riverside.

The Futurian Society of New York

Another important development of the publication of the readers' letters was that readers began to communicate with each other. First by letters, since their addresses were published alongside their letters, and then in face-to-face meetings. These groups, called fandoms, became popular in the 1930s and 1940s (Cheng, 2012).

In 1938, after disagreements in early sf fandom, some members broke away and created The Futurian Society of New York. The members, known as Futurians, believed that science fiction should be engaged with the political, economic, and social issues of their time. The group was known for being left-wing, although not all Futurians necessarily shared that view.

In addition to their interest in science fiction, and perhaps politics, these enthusiasts shared other points in common: they were all young people (late teens and early twenties), many were descendants of immigrants, several were Jewish, and most were lower middle class.

In the beginning, The Futurian Society organized regular meetings, as did the other groups. Over time, however, it lost that rigidity. When Damon Knight joined the group, he perceived it as follows: “The Futurian Society as I found it was more like an extended family than like an organization in the usual sense; it had very little formal
structure, but it had a tradition, folklore, and a strong sense of us-against-them” (Knight, 2013, l. 1360).

The notion of an extended family was bolstered by the fact that several Futurians lived together. These houses ended up being the meeting place of the group. There they talked, discussed, and wrote science fiction. The partnership and reciprocation between them took place intensely during the years of coexistence of the group, especially in the early 1940s. Futurians saw in science fiction a world of possibilities and that they set out to explore. According to Futurian Frederik Pohl:

The Futurians was not exactly a club, it was a description: The Futurians were us. The Futurians was the air we breathed and the world we moved around in. It was home base. We were all growing and adventuring into new areas of experience. The Futurians was what we came back to (Pohl, 1978, p. 70)

Brian Attebery highlights the group’s importance to American science fiction:

One group, the Futurians, included many of the most important writers in the next generation: Frederik Pohl, Damon Knight, Judith Merril, Cyril Kornbluth, Isaac Asimov and James Blish. Three of those, Blish, Knight and Merril, also became important critics, pointing out logical flaws in sf stories and praising those writers who embodied scientific ideas in compelling narratives. Their efforts, and the willingness of fans to explore new fictional directions, helped transform the genre into something more sophisticated than its pulp beginnings (Attebery, 2003, p. 38).

As laid out by Attebery, several Futurians excelled in writing and critical science fiction. In addition, the Futurians also edited and illustrated science fiction pulps in the period in which the group was active. In this way, science fiction was something constantly built by the Futurians in their roles as readers, writers, editors, critics and illustrators.

**Readers, writers, and editors**

Like other fans, Futurians also sent letters to science fiction pulps. In them, they expressed their opinions regarding the stories, illustrations, editorials and letters of other readers. It is interesting to note how even when the comments were addressed to other Futurians, they chose to do this through public letters, rather than just discussing the matter in person. In this way, their debates became public and inspired more people to take part, thus building the science fiction community.

One interesting example occurred in 1941. In the August issue of *Future Fiction*, Robert A. W. Lowndes, who was editor of the pulp, wrote the essay Science Fiction Classics under the pseudonym of Wilfred Owen Morley. In it, he wondered about what would make a science fiction text become a classic. After disregarding the scientific accuracy and prophecy aspects of science fiction, he concludes:

And if, in the 21st, 22d and 23d century, any of the science fiction stories you read today will be read with interest and enthusiasm.
then, it will be because the readers of that distant future think, as they peruse the stories in question: “This person had a remarkably modern viewpoint. Why, I can’t believe that he really lived in those terrible days of the 20th century” (Lowndes, 1941, p. 95)

In the December issue of Future Combined with Science Fiction (the new name of Future Fiction), a letter from J. S. Klimaris (pseudonym of Walter Kubilius) was published, disagreeing with Lowndes’ essay:

Science fiction can become classic only when it becomes living literature. All literature, dear Morley, is alive when it is an emotional expression of human experience or human aspiration. Science fiction can become living literature when it fulfills that requirement. What true science fiction reader has not wept with Mary Shelley’s monster that tried to win the love and understanding of Dr. Frankenstein? Who has not felt a lump in his throat as Nemo’s Nautilus finally sank beneath the waves after defying mankind and twenty thousand leagues under the sea? Who has not looked uneasily up at the strange stars after the War of Worlds ended? Who has been able to sail calmly over a quiet sea after Poe’s “Descent into a Maelstrom”? Who among us is not a Faust or a Manfred?

In the light of such living literature, and they are also science fiction classics, Morley’s words about “modern outlook” fade away into nothingness (Kubilius, 1941, p. 67).

Lowndes, signing as Morley, responded just below the letter, saying that maybe he used the wrong term, and that “universal,” “timeless” or “progressive” would have been better. He continues:

These stories which you mention in your last paragraph all have the “timeless” quality to which I refer. They are not bound up in the very local and limited concepts of any given period, even though the writing may, in some cases, be archaic. What I meant by “modern outlook” was this: read any of these examples of “living literature” and you do not get the feeling of being cramped into the obsolete concepts, superstitions, conceits, etc., of a long-dead age. There is something in them that will be new and “modern” so long as homo sap remains as he is, essentially (Lowndes, 1941, p. 68).

These letters demonstrate that the Futurians were constantly reflecting on their favorite genre, debating the works they considered the classics and generally trying to build the science fiction genre together. The way they thought that the genre should – or should not – be has to do with what kind of literature they wanted to construct, although the result was not necessarily the one they sought: the intention of the author and his/her work are rarely the same.

The beginning of the group was marked by their rupture with another fandom and their belief that science fiction should be politically engaged. This could lead one to believe that all – or at least a good part – of the Futurians’ stories would
have a socio-political background. Although many stories approach these issues, one cannot reduce Futurians’ production to this. Additionally, their political views as well as their ideas about science fiction changed over time, as they read, discussed, and wrote SF.

An interesting example of change of perspective can be found in their engagement with technocracy. In the 1930s, the would-be Futurian John B. Michel flirted with the movement and afterwards rejected it: “Michel both became obsessed with and also openly distanced himself from any direct connection with the Technocracy Movement” (Winter, 2013, p. 04).

A speech written by Michel and read by Donald A. Wollheim at a science fiction convention in 1937 was one of the reasons for the split between the science fiction fandom and the later creation of the Futurians. This speech, which became known as the Michelist Manifesto, ended as follows:

Be it moved that this, the Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention, shall place itself on record as opposing all forces leading to barbarism, the advancement of pseudo-sciences and militaristic ideologies, and shall further resolve that science fiction should by nature stand for all forces working for a more unified world, a more Utopian existence, the application of science to human happiness, and a saner outlook on life.

As pointed out by Winter in his article, Michel and a few other Futurians openly advocated in the 1930s a democratized technoculture, unlike the Technocratic Movement, which was decidedly conservative. In the following years Michel would try to disassociate his image from the Technocracy.

In the story The Year of Uniting, published in the Science Fiction Quarterly, Winter 1941-1942 under the pseudonym Hugh Raymond, a scientific, anti-democratic society is presented. The pulp editor, fellow Futurian Robert Lowndes, says that the idea of the story came from a conversation between the two of them:

There have been a good many stories in stf books past and present dealing with social upheavals of tomorrow, with the rise and fall of dictatorships, with utopias, scientific and otherwise. There have been tales dealing with strictly “scientific” societies. Well, Hugh Raymond and your editor got to discussing the matter one day and the following subject came up: what might a strictly “scientific” society which discarded the idea of democracy be like? Suppose a setup were made in which there actually was enough for everyone, a society wherein there was no poverty, no unequal distribution of goods and services, no insecurity. Everything you wanted, only without democracy, without the man in the street having any say in the way things were run? We think Raymond has done a good job on this problem in “The year of uniting” and we’d like to hear your comments (Lowndes, 1941, p. 144).
Again, science fiction was built on the interaction between editor-author-reader. The reader Bill Stoyr responded to Lowndes' call and his commentary on the story was published in the following issue, *Science Fiction Quarterly*, Spring 1942:

> Raymond develops the idea of a scientific society quite logically. Even today, there is a large portion of people having an almost fetish-like belief in science (...). Didja (sic) ever read 'The first to awaken' by Hicks and Bennett? (Stoyr, 1942, p. 146).

I want to highlight two things that I find interesting about Stoyr's letter. The first is a critical view of science and how science can be used in a harmful way. The second is the reading suggestion given by Stoyr to the author. The science fiction community was close, and it was common for readers to approach the authors frankly, speaking what they liked or disliked in their stories, what they would have done differently, etc. As a result, science fiction was being made in this constant interaction and exchange.

Regarding the first point, the editor (Lowndes), responding to the letter of Stoyr, advocated for science:

> The thing that struck us most about the "scientific government" in "The Year of Uniting" was that it was decidedly unscientific. After all, human relationships are as much a province of science as anything else, and the experience of many centuries has shown that the most scientific way for humanity as its "best" is through use of the democratic method in all parts of society (Lowndes, 1942, p. 146).

This hope placed in science (and only in it) as a way to understand and improve the world is interesting. In the realm of American science fiction of the 1940s there were many who considered science as a necessarily positive force without seeing its possible ambivalences. In his commentary, Lowndes also advocates for democracy in all spheres of society. Perhaps that is why he sought, as editor, to bring the readers' opinion of the pulp into the pulp, even if he did not agree with them. Following the commentary, he says:

> We'd like to add, at the risk of repetition, that whatever we say in our comments is to be regarded as our opinion, and not the last word on any subject. We recall a number of editors, back in the days when we were fans, who declined to enter into readers' discussion because they didn't want to have the last word, didn't want to squelch debate. We have a higher opinion of our readers and are confident that they won't be squelched by our remarks if they disagree with them. So, let's hear your ideas on any subject brought up here if you dissent – or even if you agree, but have more, and interesting, data do add (Lowndes, 1942, p. 147).

As a way to encourage readers' letters, Lowndes, in his role as editor, promoted awards for the best letters, which should be chosen by the readers
themselves. The winners could choose as prize the original illustrations that had come out in that issue of the pulp.

The Futurian Donald A. Wollheim also became an editor of science fiction pulps in the 1940s. Wollheim began in science fiction as a reader and wrote several letters to the science fiction pulps. In the first edition as editor of *Cosmic Stories, March 1941*, he wrote:

> No matter how much theory or how much past experience one may think he has, it will never suffice to keep any magazine on the plane of quality and quantity its readers demand. That can only be done when readers do their part; when they write in their candid opinions of stories, articles, departments, art work and the editors, their suggestions as to what they would do if they were editor, their ideas (Wollheim, 1941, p. 125).

Wollheim realizes and demonstrates the importance that readers have in science fiction. The exchange between readers, authors and editors shaped the genre and helped to build the science fiction in the 1940's, with the Futurians being part and collaborating in this movement. According to Futurian Judith Merril:

> Everybody who was involved in science fiction read everything – it didn't matter whether the writers were people you agreed with ideologically. In those days the fans were also much more participatory than in other literary genres, and writers were much closer to the fans. There was less inherent hierarchy (Merril, 2002, p. 67).

Another interesting example of how Futurians perceived the importance of readers in the construction of science fiction is also present in the *Future Fiction’s August 1941* edition. In the story “A Million Years and a Day,” by Lawrence Woods (pseudonym of Donald A. Wollheim), two astronauts – a man and a woman – return to Earth and find all humans in a kind of coma. A war between old and new world was responsible for this state. Both sides have developed a weapon that, when triggered, leaves half of the world asleep. Thus, the astronauts find themselves in a dilemma: if they press the buttons for renewal, everyone who is sleeping will die. It is also possible to press the buttons to wake the humanity again, that will return to the war. David wants humanity to die and start a new civilization with Janice. Janice is not sure, but it is she who pushes the buttons and the story ends without telling what she did. The pulp then asks for suggestions from readers: did Janice press the buttons for renewal, killing all of humanity? Or did she wake up the world so the war could go on? As an incentive for readers to submit their responses, it was announced that the top three letters would win the original illustrations of that issue.

The contest reveals what issues the Futurians felt science fiction should address. In addition to scientific extrapolations, escapist literature or space opera, there are other possible reflections. In the case of “A million years and a day,” a moral dilemma. It was up to the reader to put himself or herself in the author’s role and to think about an end to the story. The exercise of imagination proposed by both the author and the editor of the pulp offered an active role for the readers in the
elaboration of the story. As a result, science fiction was thought together, done experimentally and constantly built in its own elaboration.

Each of the three winning responses chosen by Wollheim and Lowndes proposed a different solution: the first place suggested that Janice killed only half the world, the old world. The second winner said Janice killed all of humanity. The third, as well as the first, proposed that Janice killed half of the population, but this time the one of the new world. While the second and third places were taken by traditional letters justifying their choices, the first-place winner put himself in the role of writer and sent what would be the continuation of the story.

In addition to Robert A. W. Lowndes, the Futurians Frederik Pohl and Donald A. Wollheim also edited science fiction pulps in the 1940s. Pohl edited Astounding Stories and Super Science Stories between 1940 and 1941. Wollheim edited Cosmic Stories and Stirring Science Stories in 1941 and 1942. Lowndes, in addition to Future Fiction, also edited the Science Fiction Quarterly. According to Damon Knight:

By the end of 1942 the Futurians had written and published a hundred and twenty-nine science fiction stories, nearly all in Futurian magazines. Most of these were collaborations, and nearly all were published under pseudonyms. By the end of 1943 the Futurians had lost all their s.f. magazines; but at their zenith they had controlled more than half the magazines in the field (Knight, 2013, l. 1663).

With a low budget, the editors counted on the collaboration of the other Futurians for the pulps. The pulps edited by Wollheim, according to Asimov, did not have the budget to pay the authors in their first editions:

Toward the end of 1940, however, a pair of sister magazines, Cosmic Stories and Stirring Science Stories, were being planned, with Don Wollheim, a fellow Futurian, selected as editor. The magazines were starting on a micro budget, however, and the only way they could come into being was to get stories for nothing – at least for the initial issues. For the purpose, Wollheim appealed to the Futurians and they came through. The first issues consisted entirely (I think) of stories by Futurians, under their own names or pseudonyms (Asimov, 1972, p. 181).

The two pulps edited by Wollheim – Cosmic Stories and Stirring Science Stories – lasted only three and four editions each, respectively. Most of the stories published in the issues were written by the Futurians, although Wollheim got a few other writers who donated their texts, too. For those who wrote, although not receiving, it was an opportunity to explore themes and test stories that would not be accepted in other pulps - including in the form of poems. In addition, it was a chance to be published in a "professional magazine" and thus start a career as a writer.

An important feature of the stories of this period, raised by Knight, is collaborative writing. This practice was used many times by several Futurians, including Richard Wilson, Robert A. W. Lowndes, John B. Michel, Joseph H. Docweiler, Donald A. Wollheim, James Blish and Damon Knight. The most important
and substantial collaboration, though, was probably that between Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth. In an interview, Pohl recalled this collaboration with his friend:

Well, Cyril Kornbluth and I grew up together. We began writing together when I was about 18 or 19 and Cyril maybe 15. We belonged to a thing called the Futurians; it was a science-fiction fan club in New York in the late ’30s and early ’40s (...). But we all belonged to this club and we all wanted to write and we all tried. Cyril and I began working together and as we were just beginning to write we developed a lot of each other’s writing habits. We started much the same way, we were used to each other. Then the war came along. He went one way and I went another. And then we got together again on *The Space Merchants*. And with Cyril, because we had this background of common experience and common attitudes, writing was almost painless on most of what we wrote. We published altogether I think, seven novels and maybe 30 or 40 short stories (Pohl, 1978).

Writing together, according to Pohl, made them both influence each other, using the influence of their mutually developed ideas and approaches in this narrative exercise to shape science fiction. This characterization stands in contrast to a recent biography of Kornbluth, where biographer Mark Rich presents a different version of their partnership. For Rich, the relationship would be business-like and Kornbluth would have been harmed by unfair agreements between the two. Either way, this collaboration produced some of the most influential science fiction of the era.

In addition to collaborative writing, the Futurians also read the unpublished texts of each other and made comments to improve them. Judith Merril, who joined The Futurian Society in 1944, recalled:

I had never written fiction. I told them [Futurians] I didn’t know how to write a story. They said, write one and we’ll tell you what’s wrong with it. I said I didn’t want to write westerns. They said, okay, try a detective. I did. They tore it apart. I rewrote. They suggested a few more changes. I did them and Doc bought it for *Crack Detective Magazine* (Merril, 2002, p. 65).

Later, Merril began to write science fiction and became an editor, too. According to Damon Knight, “This Futurian pattern of mutual help and criticism was part of a counterculture, opposed to the dominant culture of professional science fiction writers centering around John Campbell” (Knight, 2013, l.1465).

Another example of this pattern of mutual help and criticism is recounted in Mark Rich’s biography of Kornbluth, about a rather curious episode:

A new magazine was being launched that winter by H-K Publications. Its name was to be *Comet Stories*, and its editor was no less than the former editor of *Astounding*, F. Orlin Tremaine. That it would be paying the standard rate of a penny per word came as music to writers’ ears. One such hopeful, Don Wollheim, submitted a story...
entitled “The Psychological Regulator” in hopes of finding his place within the new pulp title. It came back from Tremaine, however. In a round-robin process unlikely to have occurred in any group besides The Futurians, Doc Lowndes then rewrote it, submitted it to Comet, and received his rejection. Michel tried his hand, to the same result, after which Elsie Balter then took her turn (Rich, 2009, p. 72).

Cyril Kornbluth decided to try it too and his iteration of the story was accepted by Tremaine. Apparently the two Futurians divided the profits of the story in half. The episode shows how the production of science fiction was not seen by the Futurians as an isolated, individual act, but rather could be done collectively. Every reader in Wollheim’s story has become an author; each author builds a new version of what he has read.

**Final considerations**
Before becoming authors, editors, and science fiction critics, the Futurians were readers. It was by reading the science fiction pulps that they had the first contact with this literary genre and they began to think about it. As Asimov recalls:

> I have sometimes heard science fiction writers speak of the influence upon their style of such high-prestige literary figures as Kafka, Proust and Joyce. This may be pose or it may be reality, but, for myself, I make no such claim. I learned how to write science fiction by the attentive reading of science fiction (Asimov, 1972, p. 90).

Even later, when they started working professionally as science fiction authors, the Futurians never stopped reading it. In this way, they knew better than anyone else the importance that the readers have for a literary genre. Like Borges, they knew that without a reader, a volume is no more than a volume, waiting to be read.

The Futurian Society of New York began as a normal fandom of science fiction, with its regular encounters, but gradually it became something else:

> By the end of its first winter, the Futurians were already beginning to change from science fiction fan organization to a loose social grouping of like-minded souls. While meetings would remain a part of its existence, increasingly they would be of less importance than the group’s sense of camaraderie, or of its being more akin to a professional support group than a fan organization (Rich, 2009, p. 38).

Thus, the Futurians built an experimental science fiction together. Many stories written by them at that time are considered today "classics" by fans of the genre. Reading, thinking, discussing, writing, and testing new paths certainly contributed to the later career of those who remained professionally involved in science fiction. And just as Asimov described learning to write science fiction by reading science fiction, other writers have since read the Futurians’ stories and, from them, produced their own literature of this literary genre that is constantly reinvented.
Works Cited
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