

Letter from the Editors

The relative ease of publishing in the Internet age is just one of many factors that has enabled SF to take off in the developing world. The comparative democratization of publishing only raises the supply. The Internet has also driven up demand for SF in the developing world, and not only because residents of regions hitherto less than well-known for SF production are able to access literature and film, whether carefully translated, inconsistently dubbed, or somewhere in between. While the original *Star Wars* trilogy is at least partially responsible for the blossoming of SF across the developing world, demand for works of local origin is also driven by political conditions—and with respect to the Arabic-speaking world, this continues to be the case.

A dominant theory of how SF works is Darko Suvin's notion of *cognitive estrangement*, where "cognitive" refers to the scientific plausibility of the outlandish elements of the story: usually, the question is whether those elements are plausible within the world depicted in the text or film, rather than whether they meet rigorous scientific standards in the real world. Faster-than-light travel, for example, is pure fantasy as far as our current understanding of physics is concerned, but in SF, it's generally assumed that the problem has been solved, so we can call it "cognitive." The estrangement originally derives from avant-garde theatre, notably that of Brecht: its effect is to defamiliarize the familiar—to hold up to society a distorting mirror so that we might see how very strange are the beliefs we consider customary. For example, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* depicts a planet where people are neuters 27 days per month and then become male or female the other three days, not only because it makes for a smashing story, but also in order to hold up that distorting mirror to the extent that people here on Earth associate gender with biological sex.

Estrangement can be a means of political as well as social critique. This is not unknown in Anglo-American SF: consider the long tradition of alternative political futures, from the militaristic neo-monarchy of David Weber's Honor *Harrington* series to the post-scarcity communo-hedonism of Iain M. Banks *Culture* novels.

These stories and so many others depict societies that pique our interest both because they're well-written and internally consistent, but furthermore, because they reflect on our own political systems. For the most part, however, people in developed nations have strong legal protections for direct reflections upon and critiques of their political systems. People in the developing world often do not have these protections—and in the case of the Arabic-speaking world, not only is their freedom of speech not protected, but there are ruinous, painful, or sometimes even fatal consequences for direct critiques.

SF in the Arabic-speaking world, then, in part grows steadily more popular precisely because estrangement enables critique to have plausible deniability. Write a social-realist novel with an incompetent, violent buffoon as dictatorial president, and the security forces might come to your door; write an SF novel about an alien society run by those same buffoons, and it becomes more difficult for the regime to accuse you of sedition without looking like fools. Modern Arabic literary fiction has a long tradition of this sort of estranged critique, so using the tropes of SF to accomplish their goals was an easy jump for Arabic-speaking writers.

This sort of serious political critique is not the only reason SF has grown in popularity in the Arabic-speaking world. A thousand years ago, scientific and technological development was centered in the Arabic-speaking world, whereas now, new developments are absorbed (or imposed) from without. This produces all manner of complex emotions; SF literature is one way to address these. Still more importantly, genre fiction has grown increasingly respectable in Arabic literature in recent decades: some Arabic SF is just... fun. In this issue of the journal, we present to you a number of different perspectives on SF from the Arabic-speaking and greater Muslim worlds: we hope that these articles provide you information on the genre and inspire you to take advantage of some of the increasingly numerous titles available in translation.

- Ian Campbell & Ibtisam Abujad
Guest Editors, *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction*