Reading John Barnes' 'Reading for the undead'

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I - AIDENSFIELD

There used to be a popular Sunday evening programme on British television called Heartbeat. It ran for 20 years. It was a gentle crime drama series set in the fictitious rural village of Aidensfield. The show had a nucleus of characters surrounded by a slowly changing outer cast, with the same roles filled by different characters and actors over the years. The policeman who fell off a bridge at the end of one series was replaced by an identikit bobby at the start of the next series, and when one lovable rogue went off to seek his fortune outside the village, another lovable rogue, never seen before, would pop up in his place. The episodes were set at a variable period between 1963 and 1969, even though the core actors aged nearly 20 years in that period. One episode would feature the first moon landing in July 1969; a later episode would be set earlier that year. It was a timeless, otherworldly place, until the network axed it in 2010.

The show was so popular it created a mini tourist industry in the real village of Goathland where it was filmed. You can still get Heartbeat tours, Heartbeat bus trips and outings.[1] You can buy Heartbeat merchandise in the real shops that appeared as fictitious shops in the series. Even now, after the series has ended, the shops still have the signs for the fictitious ones above their doors. Heartbeat, embodied in this one fictional village of Aidensfield, has become a heritage industry, despite having little real heritage to it, no real link to the 1960s, at least not in the material that was presented on the television. It's a hyperreal heritage, in the sense that Umberto Eco used the word hyperreal, where those fake representations of the 1960s seem *more real,* just as important, as worthy of pilgrimage, as the real places of historical importance from the 1960s. People are as likely to visit the completely fictional village of Aidensfield as they are to visit the genuine Rievaulx Abbey just a few miles away. It's a strange place, Goathland. Or maybe I mean Aidensfield.

I'll come back to it at the end of this paper. Please bear with me.

II - READING FOR THE UNDEAD

A couple of years ago, science fiction author John Barnes had an essay in Helix SF called Reading for the Undead (Barnes 2007). Unfortunately this essay is no longer publicly available, but I want to use it as a jumping off point for an analysis of what the genre of SF is.[2] At the end, I will not be putting forward a new definition, as there are enough of them. Instead, I will be looking at the relationship between SF, however you define it, and the historical period in which it is written.

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[1] One example can be found at http://britmovietours.com/bookings/heartbeat-tour/

[2] Unfortunately, for the same reason I can't give page numbers.

In Barnes' essay he defined what a genre was, discussed the formation of, and the rationale for, the existence of a genre, and assessed the state of the genre we call science fiction. He concluded that SF is now an undead form of literature, having fulfilled its cultural goals, and that there will be little innovation in it from now on. SF is a sort of zombie now, according to Barnes. He says of SF that

> it is a genre that flourished among mostly English-speaking, mostly middle-class, mostly Caucasian readers from the late 20's to the early 90's of the last century — in other words, for about seventy years.
> There is nothing unusual about that figure; if you look at genres that have flourished in the past (and faded since), most of the good stuff, the stuff that is remembered long after the genre fades, falls within a span of about seventy years.
> …
> A genre may have a long afterlife — perhaps the genre term is that it may be undead for a long time? -- following its "live" period…
>
> Nonetheless, the basic cultural work of a genre tends to be done in about seventy years, and after that it is, for good or ill, a museum art, even if it's a crowded, popular museum for a long time.

To a certain extent, Barnes' argument about SF is an example of what Frelik (2009) has called the American Jeremiad:

> ...a tried-and-true American form, particularly so in the science fiction circles whose many prophets of doom have been announcing the death of the genre every other month since the late 1940s.

However, Barnes is a little more optimistic, or at least holds the door open for optimism.

> A genre is alive if new works can change the genre fundamentally...and not if the reaction instead is to say, "Well, that's not really in the genre." A genre is alive if it is consumed by people who passionately want to see what comes next...A genre is alive if innovations are debated, fought over, copied, and re-adapted, like Heinlein's tricks for smuggling in exposition, Ellison's use of free-form word storms, or Simak and Dick's adaptation of rendering the fictional world as a place mundane to its inhabitants). It is no longer alive if new tropes and strategies are nearly always treated as one-time stunts or experiments. If a genre has few or none of the signs of life, it is in a museum, no matter how lifelike its mounting or how many people still come to see it.

Elhefnawy (2015: unnumbered) found the essay's argument that genres grow, mature and change

> "intuitively compelling. I can very easily picture this process unfolding from the works of Hugo Gernsback and E.E. Smith (first generation), through those of Alfred Bester and Frank Herbert (second generation), to the technical dazzle and

propensity for homages and in-jokes of the cyberpunks and post-cyberpunks (third generation)."

Although I found that Barnes's essay contained a lot of material that was intriguing and interesting, and even insightful, unlike Elhefnawy, I found it also contained much that was perplexing and contradictory.

Why did I find this essay so perplexing, so contradictory? I felt that although he defined SF in an apparently sensible way, at the very least he left parts of his definition vague and did not follow up on the logical consequences of his definition. He also made the point that a genre, whether it's science fiction or musicals, lasts only for 70 years as a living genre before it fulfils its cultural purpose and becomes 'undead'. I felt that he didn't give enough evidence in support of this, and that his own definition of a genre constrained them to being 70 years long, rather than because the genres themselves ran out of steam, and no matter what the original cultural purpose of a genre might have been.

However, by inspecting his definition while bearing in mind his '70 years' thesis, I've come to some interesting conclusions about the genre. I didn't come up with my own definition of Science Fiction (there are enough of them out there, so pick your own) but I came to an interesting conclusion about the way we *frame* our definitions of science fiction.

For now I will mainly content myself with an analysis of the parts that deal with his definition of science fiction. Unfortunately, Reading for the undead is no longer available on the internet, so you'll have to rely on my summaries and quotations.

III - DEFINITIONS

One problem I have appears trivial at first sight, but as you read on you will hopefully see that it is an indicator of the confusion Barnes has with his terms. This problem is with the title itself: Reading for the undead. Throughout the article, Barnes has called the _genre_ undead, but if you inspect that title, it implies that there is a group of people who are undead, not the genre itself. The structure of the title is very much like that of 'Reading for the under fives' or 'Reading Shakespeare for Students'. In other words: Reading for a group of people. If he means that he is teaching us to read about something which is undead, a much clearer title would be just 'Reading the undead'. No 'for'.

Now this might seem a small point, but it shows that even before the essay has started, Barnes has already started to confuse the different elements within his argument – he's confused the genre itself for the readers of the genre, in this case. This is clearer if we consider his definition of a genre, which he gives in the second paragraph of his essay:

> By genre, I mean the historical combination of a group of identifiable artists and works, linked by a large body of shared tropes and strategies, working for an identifiable audience of their contemporaries.

We need to realise that the five components (artists, works, strategies, tropes, audience of contemporaries) are just parts of the definition of the genre. We cannot refer to the genre as a whole using just one of the components or to refer to the genre when we mean just one of the components. The whole entity (genre) is on a higher level than its components (artists, works, strategies, tropes, audience). The genre is a composite of these other entities. Mistaking one level for another like this is called either the fallacy of composition or the fallacy of division.

So, we can't legitimately refer to 'a work of science fiction' when we are really talking about the genre as a whole, nor can we refer to 'the genre of science fiction' if we really mean just one of the works. In this essay, Barnes confuses the elements (specifically the literature) with the genre itself. In the second paragraph, Barnes further states that SF is:

> 'the literature that starts approximately with Doc Smith and Hugo Gernsback (in my view, Shelley, Kipling, Verne, Wells, Conan Doyle, etc were all appropriated by science fiction retroactively)...'

This is an example of just where Barnes wobbles in his use of definitions. Look closely at that statement 'the literature that starts approximately with Doc Smith...' Why hasn't he used the term 'genre' here? After all, that's what this article is all about. What exactly does he mean by 'the literature'? Does he mean 'the genre' (authors, tropes, strategies, works, audience), in which case he might have a point if he can prove that the other bits did not exist before 1920. Or does he just mean 'stories' (IE the works themselves) in which case he is definitely wrong, as the stories of Wells and Verne existed outside of SF. We can see them on the page and in the historical record since the late 19th and early 20th centuries. So, this term 'literature' is vague and does not allow us to distinguish at which level Barnes is pitching his argument: the higher or lower level.

To go back to the body analogy, we must be clear that the body is not the same as the finger; the finger is not the whole body. With the use of the term 'literature' it's as if Barnes has introduced the new term 'body thing'. It is a halfway house term which only he understands but the rest of us don't. Does he mean the whole body, or does he mean just a part of it such as a foot?

Now I accept that there is something of a 'chicken and egg' situation with the creation of a genre, that it's hard to pinpoint the exact moment of creation. However, Brian Aldiss (later with David Wingrove) pinpointed the origin of SF literature with his discussion of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Aldiss and Wingrove (2001) said that

> *Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode.* [Emphasis in original.]

We could add this 'goal' - the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe - to the set of attributes of science fiction. 'Working for' one's contemporaries could be seen as another goal, a more socially oriented goal.

So, our expanded definition of SF would include the attributes: *authors, tropes, strategies, works, audience, goal 1 (philosophical), goal 2 (social)*.

And that illustrates the difference in definitions again - the 'fingers are not the whole body' confusion. Aldiss justified naming Frankenstein as the first identifiable piece of science fiction *literature* (a story), but that did not necessarily mean that the genre itself existed. Mary Shelley was writing in a milieu that perhaps encouraged her to write Frankenstein, the conditions were right and she was the right person, and she was perhaps expressing Aldiss and Wingrove's *goal*, (goal 1: the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe) but the genre itself did not actually exist until that point.

As Barnes states, and I agree with him here, a genre requires writers (plural), tropes, audience etc, not just one author, one implied goal, and one piece of work. So, there can be literature that is of interest to science fiction fans (EG Frankenstein) which existed outside of, or before, the genre itself (by Barnes' definition). But does that mean that Wells, Verne etc were working outside of the genre? Did the genre of science fiction exist before the 1920s? We could make the argument that these authors were writing within the genre, only it had a slightly different name - Scientific Romance.

Let's look at some of the tropes Barnes lists as being part of SF. Aliens and time machines? Both are seen in the works of Wells. Rockets? That sounds like the Cavorite spaceship by Wells, or the projectile spaceship of Jules Verne. What about the perspective that the universe is dangerous but can be dealt with by people who know the right stuff? That could describe Professor Challenger from the works of Conan Doyle or the Time Traveller from The Time Machine. And so on. What's more, these authors were writing at roughly the same time, for an audience of roughly the same people. That's 'an audience of their contemporaries'. Strategies? Well, they were all writers of thrilling adventure stories, if that's what Barnes means.

And here's another example of the vagueness in Barnes' definition. What exactly does he mean by strategies? It's one of the five elements in his definition of a genre. When it comes to written SF, are strategies really writing techniques ('Everything must be third person' 'You must always start in the middle of the action'), are they broader choices (realist, abstract stream of consciousness), choices of tropes (much as some authors have a particular interest, like Philip K Dick's interest in consensus reality) or are they something else altogether? He doesn't specify.

But why am I harping on about these issues? Because terminology is vital when discussing any issue. If one doctor is being holistic and discussing the whole body, but another doctor is only looking at the cut on the patient's finger, it is unlikely that they will be able to communicate with each other effectively and recommend a treatment.

IV - PROCRUSTES BARNES?

The other issue with Barnes' definition that I find problematic is his idea that genres last about 70 years before they become 'undead' – or rather, I find problematic not the idea of a 70 year limit

itself but the way that he justifies 70 years as his cut off point. Again, to use his definition, he states that SF is:

> 'the literature that starts approximately with Doc Smith and Hugo Gernsback (in my view, Shelley, Kipling, Verne, Wells, Conan Doyle, etc were all appropriated by science fiction retroactively)...And it is a genre that flourished among mostly English-speaking, mostly middle-class, mostly Caucasian readers from the late 20's to the early 90's of the last century - in other words, for about 70 years.'

Barnes here has selectively chosen his outliers, the items at the edges of the graph, and has discarded what does not fit. It is easy to prove any argument (EG 70 years) if you can discard anything that does not fit in with your thesis (or say it has been appropriated retroactively). I call what he is doing 'selective salami slicing'. Ask Barnes the Butcher for a piece of sausage and he'll cut it however big you want - as long as it's 7 decades long.

It's also worth noting that all of the writers that Barnes discards were European and were generally writing for something other than the US pulps. That's not just Procrustean; it's parochial. Barnes almost seems to be deliberately limiting his definition of SF as a genre to 'US pulp-magazine SF' and not 'SF' in its global sense. The pulps are one medium and not the genre itself, which is a limitation of this definition.

The author Richard Morgan has characterised "the death of SF concern, or variants thereof" as being "about slicing up speculative writing into tiny OCD pieces, and then making dire pronouncements about one such piece." (Morgan 2010). He appears to be right in his assessment when we look at Barnes' definition of SF.

V - NEVER MIND THE QUALITY, FEEL THE WIDTH

All of the above points I have made above are just preparation for the leap I want to make. After a lot of discussion, we are now about to go somewhere new. This is where we need to really consider one small part of Barnes' definition of the SF genre: 'an identifiable audience of their contemporaries'. Let's review his definition:

> By genre, I mean the historical combination of a group of identifiable artists and works, linked by a large body of shared tropes and strategies, working for an identifiable audience of their contemporaries.

Now this definition implicitly tells us that a genre will only span roughly three score years and ten, the normal lifespan for a human; it implies that if a piece of work was written for people now dead, well then, it wasn't written for me. I wasn't one of the audience of their contemporaries, so it doesn't count as genre SF today. If I write a piece of science fiction for the audience of *my* contemporaries, this means that I haven't written it for people who are around long after I'm dead, or for those who were around long before I was born, so it won't count as genre science fiction to them. A genre is historically situated. Add in Barnes' phrase 'the historical combination' at the start of his definition

of a genre, and there's no way to express any continuation beyond one lifespan using *his* definition of a genre.

To break free of this self-imposed limitation, to show that a genre reaches beyond one person's lifespan, Barnes' definition would have to include something like '*a continuing thread of work that is of interest to succeeding generations*'. However, including this sort of reference would make explicit the continuation of scientific romance into science fiction, and this would undermine his '70 years' thesis. In other words, Barnes' definition of a genre does not ALLOW anything beyond roughly 70 years to fit into it. It's not just that anyone using this definition finds it hard to fit supra-70 year work in; the definition inherently blocks it.

However, there is something to be said of Barnes' definition of SF (as a genre). If we consider that his definition implies a lifespan of roughly 70 years, one consequence is that any genre (SF in our case) might be more like a worm burrowing through the soil; it stays roughly the same length, but as it moves onto new ground, it leaves its excreta, no longer part of itself, behind it. It's always the same length (roughly one human lifespan), but its head is in a different position at each moment. If SF is the genre of change, then I see no reason why this couldn't be accepted as a useful metaphor for thinking of the genre itself - always changing, always leaving behind that which is no longer part of the body.

This idea has been in the air for a little time now. In a discussion on the possible exclusion of women from SF in the UK, Kincaid (2010) made the following point:

> My sense reading this discussion is not that sf has turned its back on women, or that women have turned their back on sf. But rather that what women have been writing is no longer looked upon as sf, that the definition is changing and that is what is proving exclusionary.

The author Tricia Sullivan said something similar.

> It seems to me that SF as a genre is [paradoxically] attached to its own history; it's a literature of the future that tends to be self-referential, which drags it into its own past.
>
> Sullivan (2010)

The point I am trying to make is that the definition has changed enough that when we are discussing 'old SF' do we need to call it science fiction at all, other than because of historical inertia? Perhaps old SF is now an outdated, archaic form of literature that has little relevance for today's writers and as such no longer deserves the initials. Perhaps modern SF is a new species, born from an old and long dead predecessor. We modern humans probably couldn't breed with our ancestors of a million years ago, and the skills they had all those years ago are irrelevant to us today. Who now needs to start a fire with pieces of flint? That's why we call our distant ancestors proto-humans, not humans. Likewise with modern science fiction and the old 'SF', that-which-is-no-longer-considered-SF.

If Wells, Verne, Shelley etc are not part of genre science fiction to us today (by Barnes's definition), then, looking forward, in twenty years time we won't consider Doc Smith or his contemporaries to be SF, if we even do so at the moment. In forty or fifty years' time we might not consider the works of Asimov, Heinlein and Campbell to be science fiction either, and so on. If we decide to stop calling old SF by the name science fiction, if we cut the cord, then we liberate ourselves from the problem that Tricia Sullivan identified of forever being self-referential and dragged into the past.

I'm not sure if labelling old SF as 'no longer SF' is a good idea or if it will just be used as a way of rewriting and dismissing the past - erasing history - rather than a tool for helping us understand the genre. That is something to guard against. I'm also not saying that the worm metaphor is the best way to think about science fiction, or that it's definitely right, but it's an interesting viewpoint to consider, an alternative way at looking at the genre. This is a new tool in the critical toolbox, perhaps one that hasn't been articulated in this way before. If so, despite having its many flaws, Barnes' essay has had merit in setting up the dialogue that has led to this idea.

And what if we consider this new method for defining SF as a valid one? What do we call SF that has been excreted by our ever-moving worm? Proto-SF? Pulp-SF? Either sounds good. If the starting point for this old style SF (say, the 1930s) is an outdated world and culture to start with, then the futures they present are more in the nature of alternate histories. The futures in those stories often had a clear line from the 1930s and 1940s to their futures, a line that did not pass through *our real* 1950s to 2000s. They diverged from our world a long time ago. Perhaps we could use the term Alternate Future Histories for these works, written in our past but which depict a potential future, works that no longer look like science fiction to our modern eyes. The futures that such stories depict couldn't exist very easily, if at all, in any extension of the social and cultural universe that we inhabit today. How could Heinlein's futures come from any society with the technology we have today?

The futures that such stories present are now less plausible than that 1960s world of Heartbeat. In fact, taking it to an extreme, much SF older than about twenty years, say, might not be considered SF. The cut-off point, the tail end of the worm, is where an old story has negligible relevance or connection to the current audience other than as a historical curiosity. For example, any story set in the near future which doesn't incorporate or at least handwave away the boom in mobile communications and the Internet probably doesn't count as SF anymore either. It would exist in an alternate history where mobile phones and the Internet didn't exist. What the cut-off point is, I cannot say for myself, as each story may have a different lifespan, and I leave it as a point of debate for the readers of this article.

Now, if instead of looking backwards at older fiction, we look around us today, there is fiction that looks like that old material. Think of the modern SF which is written in the style of this older work, or which addresses issues in a similar way to that of the old style SF. I'm thinking of those stories that use yesterday's ideas without updating them, where spaceships with the equivalent of Doc Smith's inertialess drives flit about the galaxy, carrying noble heroes who fight wars against malign alien species. What do we call that type of fiction, which is more fitting at the tail of the worm than

at the head? Perhaps 'Heartbeat SF' or 'Heritage SF', as these stories make me think of coal mines converted into museums, and preserved villages on the tourist trail.

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