

Understanding Diversity of Science Fiction Genre Definitions through Rhetorical Genre Theory as Socially Symbolic Action

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Abstract: *The literary and cultural scholars have disagreed on what is science fiction and they have presented diverse definitions and assertions without any consensus regarding what makes science fiction a genre. This paper based on the method of genre as a social act by Carolyn Miller attempts which is a general theory of genre but used in this paper to interpret the multiplicity of definitions of Science Fiction and answer what science fiction is. Miller's method for understanding genre asserts that genre is not a classification, but a dynamic social activity practiced by individuals through language and symbols. Based on this approach, the diversity of the competing definitions that are attempting to grasp science fiction as a genre does not signify inconsistency or confusion, but their multiplicity as a socially symbolic activity of rhetorical participation is what Science Fiction Genre consists of, endures, and changes historically.*

Keywords: Science Fiction, SF, Genre Definition, Symbolic act, Genre theory, Rhetorical Genre

1. Introduction

In today's global melting pot world, science fiction or SF as a genre has an omnipresent existence but as Arthur B. Evans states "one fact is certain: SF exists, and it has a long tradition" [1]. Other than the existence of SF ubiquitously and the fact that everyone, to some extent, can identify some cultural products through codes such as dystopian future societies, Martian invading earth and time travel machines, the cultural and literary scholars have disagreed on both its definition and its historical origins, and they have answered diversely to the question of what SF is and when it came to existence. For historical origins, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or Modern Prometheus* in 1818 is the first science fiction [2]. Hugo Gernsback in 1920s has been argued as the one who launched the genre [3]. Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1500s is considered science fiction [4]. For definitions, Isaac Asimov, one of the stars of SF community, emphasized that there are hundreds of definitions and there is an intellectual satisfaction in defining SF genre despite knowing it is undefinable [5]. The entry of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* cited fifteen definitions chronologically from 1926 to 1990s attempting to grasp the identity of science fiction without any consensus [6]. The same way there is no single unified definition, there can be no single agreed upon historical origins of science fiction [7]. The focus of this paper is on the diversity of SF definitions that correspond to what is SF and argues that the multiplicity of definitions and assertions about science fiction can be grasped through rhetorical-based genre theory to answer what makes SF a genre.

While there are many short stories, novels, films, and TV series that carry the label science fiction or SF, there has been a discussion accompanied these cultural products attempting to explain what science fiction could possibly mean. The practice of definitions has been an essential part of labeling identity of cultural object or event and recognizing them. Descriptions are only attempting to grasp

what an event or a phenomenon is like through language. However, Definitions of SF entails prescriptions as well as descriptive stances which means definitions tell authors, readers or any average individual equally what SF habitually has been about and what it ought to be [8]. The definitions also include presuppositions of stability and timelessness of what science fiction is and what a genre is.

Three key terms for understanding the puzzle of science fiction genre definitions are the evolution of the term genre and the idea of definition. The methodology of understanding Genre in literary tradition presents the evolution of theories regarding what genre itself is as there used to be all kinds of theories of genre, but they gradually died out. In the next section, the method for understanding genre as a social act by Carolyn Miller is proposed to clarify what genre is. In the definitions' section, there are a lot of definitions that have very little in common, but they are interpreted rhetorical practices to persuade each other regarding science fiction and there is adequate explanation in fusing Miller's theory of genre as a social act with those definition to understand science fiction as genre.

2. Methodology for Understanding Genre In literary tradition

Genre is derived from the French language meaning kind, class, types or taxonomy, in many disciplines and areas of study it could be utilized and defined as "a classificatory tool, a way of sorting and organizing kinds of texts and other cultural objects" [9]. In literary tradition, genre used to be associated with classification of books to form the so-called canon of great books, while literary scholars have used different approaches to make class systems to organize the types, Bawarashi and Reiff identified five major approaches for traditional literary classifications: Neoclassical approaches to genre, Structuralist (or literary-historical) approaches to genre, Romantic and Post-romantic concerns

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about genre, Reader response approaches to genre, and Cultural studies approaches to genre [10]. The point of mentioning the idea of genre approaches to classification in succession is that each one of them abolished its previous classification conventions and at the coming section, the meaning of genre transforms from classification into a dynamic activity of communication since individuals are not only classifying objects, but they are performing socialization through using symbols and codes with each other.

Firstly, Neoclassical approach, Northrop Frye as an example of this approach in *Anatomy of Criticism*, he classifies texts based on a priori theory-based system that is he universalizes with pre-judgement. For instance, Frye believes there are major categories, broader than literary genres, which are comedy, romance tragedy and satire as the universal cyclical classification of the seasons such as spring, summer, winter and autumn.[11]. These types unfold within the plot of the narrative, for instance within the romance there is a young hero that conquers which has been critiqued for the way they universalize the ideology of characters [12]. For Structuralists such as literary critic, Fredric Jameson “Genres are essentially literary institutions or social contracts between the writer and a specific public, whose specific function is to specify the proper use of public use of particular cultural artifact” [13]. In this sense, comedy is a literary institution and functions to shape the literary texts and localizing them in the reality context between writers, publishers and readers. The Romantic and post-romantic approach is a denial of classifications arguing literary texts cannot be classified since they are products of intuition rather than rationality such as the infinitude proliferation of romantic poetry without restraints [14]. Genre and classifications, according to this approach, is a mistake or a contradiction of a modern reader and writers.

Reader-response approach, consider literary genre to function as conventions between texts and readers only. For this approach, genre is neither a property of (or located in texts) nor projection of (or located in) reader; it exists as a part of the relationship between the text and the reader [15]. Therefore, the reader is the one who recognizes and guesses where to classify the patterns, and the reader is the final act of interpretation and the one who decodes the pattern. The last approach, cultural studies, rely heavily on the argument that covers all the other approaches, and examines “the dynamic relationship between genres, literary texts, socio-culture. The way genres organize, generate normalize, and help reproduce literary as well as non-literary social actions in dynamic, ongoing, culturally defined and defining ways” [16]. These are the five major trajectories of the traditional approaches to classify literary tradition in succession which falsify and abolish each other.

Rhetorical-Based Genre theory and Socially Symbolic Act

While the traditional literary approaches had been focusing on classification of cultural/literary objects there is an additional relation that is missing since individuals do not classify texts or movies within the confines of genres. Moreover, scholars, critics and SF writers have always

attempted to define science fiction as a genre and to discover one shared essence in the stories, novels and movies, and there were always exceptions in those definitions. Sam. J. Lundwall wrote in 1971 attempting to define science fiction while understanding it how dispersed and pervasive it is said “the melancholy fact is that there does not exist a unitary definition of the genre. Or rather there exist about as many perfectly valid definitions as there are readers of what here for simplicity’s sake call science fiction” [17]. In contemporary scholarship, genre is not classification of books but an individual’s performance of socializing with other community-members as Barwarshi and Reiff state “genres are part of how individuals participate in a complex relation to one another” [18]. In this sense, the heterogeneity of these science fiction definitions over establishing a fixed generic boundary and relentless attempts to induce each other through eloquent arguments should not be seen as misunderstanding but rather as part and component of what the genre consists of and sustains. This act of definitions of genre is a rhetoric, not denoting anything called genre but it connotes itself through a distinct way of using language or manipulation of symbols to signal the interpretive community and other members.

Karolyn Miller has devised a genre-based rhetoric and symbol using in which she argues “the typified situation, including typification, underlies typification rhetoric” [19]. This idea of Miller implies whenever there is a genre, there is a process of rhetorical activity and symbol exchanging. According to Philosopher, Kenneth Burke, rhetoric is rooted in language as a symbolic act and the basic understanding of rhetorical practice is to persuade [20]. To Burke, language is a collective social act since “Man is a symbol-using animal” [21]. Karolyn Miller argues a “sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action, it is used to accomplish” [22]. In application of Miller’s genre theory, science fiction as genre is not a set of texts such as novels of H.G Wells or different movie versions of *The Matrix*, but rather a dynamic social activity which encompasses all the activities that is thrust into the production and distribution of cultural object as well as the individual activities such as discussing it and making meaningful experience out of that activity.

Miller’s theory genre as a social act is based on the idea that the communal practice and the act of recognition of the genre are running in parallel, thus they are in a body of continuum and constantly redefining each other as she pithily says that the genre model she suggests is “based in rhetorical practice, in the conventions of discourse that a society establishes as ways of ‘acting together’”. It does not lend itself to taxonomy, for genres change, evolve and decay; the number of genres current in any society is indeterminate and depends upon the complexity and diversity of the society” [23]. John Rider, also, has developed an exact model to explain the multiplicity of those assertions, he calls historical genre theory, of which he argues regarding SF “the identity of SF is constituted by this very web of sometimes inconsistent and competing assertions” [24]. Miller, however, has brought the implication about the notion of genre concisely that “a genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and sociological exigence, it motivates by connecting the private

and with the public, the singular with the recurrent” [25]. Individuals are practicing a mastery of language in a certain way that allows them to interact with the other members of the community and the recurrent symbolic pattern makes it distinctive. For SF there are typical and stereotypical symbolic uses such as in those definitions. When someone is asked about SF genre, they might point at certain movies, but or certain novels and talk about them, this very discussion is a rhetorical act combining objects, symbols and creating a mutable pattern.

There definitions in all shapes and sizes of science fiction, with different presuppositions, and generalizations, attempting to include and excluded classifications while they themselves as individual symbolic actions constitute and perform this social action of genre. This does not imply the definitions are quixotic attempts to grasp an essence but implies there is no actual essence, nor a centrality to genres and they are social constructs at the level of symbols. John Rieder also emphasized that “When we point to a story and say it is SF, therefore, that means not only that it ought to be read using protocols associated with SF but also that it can and should be read in conversation with other SF texts and rears” [26]. This meaningful act of telling others is what genre as a symbolic act is and the following definitions are a set of signals of using language for either solidarity or insisting on mastering the activity of their distinct way of using language.

The Competing Definitions of Science Fiction

The term Science Fiction was already general use by the 1930s with the sense of instruction in the contraction of *Scientifiction* from Hugo Gernsback’s editorial of *Amazing Stories* that began from 1926. Hugo Gernsback defined his term of scientifiction story is as a “a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision” [27]. Gernsback’s definition implies juxtaposing of a binary opposition between of sciences and arts within a story is the foundation of the genre. The second figure in the early definitions is John W. Campbell, the editor of *Astounding Stories* that began form 1930s, whose conception of SF stories functions like scientific methodology and intensely focused on the science rather than the fiction part. To Campbell in scientific theory has a proposition and “a well-constructed theory will not only explain away a known phenomenon but will also predicts new and still undiscovered phenomena. Science fiction tries to do much the same, and write up, in story form” [28]. This proposition of Campbell, from the process of extrapolation of observation to make possible futuristic prediction as a unifying operative principle, shows his adjacent relationship to the discourse of science per se and his eloquence in it. This scientific methodology was a rigid bond of recognizing credible stories, for instance in canonizing Superman’s story as SF, which means beyond human capacity, Campbell thought it is illogical and contradiction to give human philosophy and motives since superman is not really a human [29].

The first academician beyond SF Subcultures, Professor James Osler Baily in *Pilgrims through Space and Time* (1947) attempted to define SF against Fantasy writings with

the exclusion of the supernatural elements in SF stories since he thought SF stories cause wonder through science so he brought a similar definition on that SF “describes an imaginary intervention or discovery in science; the story then narrates the effects of this discovery [30]. One way to think of this early generic distinction is to consider the difference of a spaceship could be an imaginary spaceship invention or it is a displaced phallic symbol.

There are many attempts from SF writers and academician to generate a one-size-fits-all kind of definition in respect to sciences, especially to reduce the binary opposition of arts and sciences since the term science suggests knowledge and fiction might be understood as exact opposition especially with regards to the hard sciences and social sciences since the generic difference between fantasy and science fiction is a thin line. Kingsley Amis was particularly concerned about only sciences in SF included pseudoscience ,which is just another way of entering fantasy into science, and defined SF in *Maps of Hell: A Survey on Science Fiction* to be “that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology”[31].

The curious case in those definitions that made distinction between science fiction and fantasy and decided its origins, Brian Aldiss in 1973, a prominent figure, writer and editor in SF communities, radically questioned all those who previously discussed science fiction and dated back to either before or after *Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein* or modern *Prometheus* are all misleading. He denied the existence of the genre and that science fiction is a mutation of gothic fiction and born out of gothic fantasy, so he defined Science Fiction as “The search for the definition of man” [32]. This giant leap from Aldiss into a contradiction that science fiction and fantasy have no difference. However, the most popular of all those definitions based on theoretical approach to police the boundaries of science fiction with formal strategy belongs to Marxist Literary critic, Darko Suvin’s definition who calls science fiction “Literature of cognitive estrangement” [33]. Adam Roberts translated the phrase to mean Science Fiction as common-sense tautology [34]. He dated back the origins of SF to Lucian and More which is far more beyond what is expected than Aldiss’s history of 1818s and he defines it in this way “SF is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to author’s empirical environment” [35].

Suvin’s definition has been the most popular definition, it provides a significant step in forming a poetic unity for science fiction through formal features. The two basic component of cognition and estrangement are essential to call a particular narrative science fiction and includes them as science fiction. The estrangement is the transformation of the subject to recognize it as unfamiliar by the author. Regarding the cognitive, situating SF as the opposition to myths which see human relation in a static form and other fantasy’s SF is concerned with knowledge so the novel, the movie, the story, they tell a story about certain norms and making it estrange [36]. Critic Carl Freedman has noticed

incongruity and the short coming of Suvon's definition since SF is not immutable as such, and The Martian invader were yesterday's science fiction but today they are classified as fantasy. In this case, Freedman turned the cognitive estrangement into "cognitive effect" [37]. This modification although bases the whole foundation of science fiction on that effect, nonetheless, reduces the timelessness of the genre and assumes science fiction could be any story or any event in that case that has such effect with knowledge.

Beside Freedman, Literary Marxist critic who is far from simplification due to the difficulty of his curatorial composition, Fredric Jameson also followed Suvin's idea of estrangement of future images, that public might believe SF present future possibilities, Jameson says that SF representation is to "defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present" [38]. He maintains the magical boundary between the Dragons of fantasy and the Alien beings of science fiction reluctantly following Suvin but at the same time he suggests "the dragon can be seen as the equivalent of the spaceship and teleportation in SF [39]. To Jameson, the uniqueness of SF is not about future but the exact opposite our inability to imagine future instead by through those impoverished images of, in trying to reach the otherness, the imagination finds this future to represent the absolute horizon of our capacity [40]. Although Jameson is far from defining SF as genre, but this perspective is quite an explanation of Suvin's definition of formal features which he supports unwillingly.

There are arguments against all the historical origins and definitions, Gary Westfahl accused Aldiss and Suvin not to be studying history of SF, but invent history on their own and Westfahl himself excludes many activities when he redefines SF as "a prose narrative which describes or depicts some aspect of development which does not exist at the time of writing" [41]. Moreover, with respect to a debate in the late years of 1980s and 1990s, and the emergence of a cross-fertilization between SF and Avant-garde novels and certain novels regarding the so-called Cyberpunk movement such as William Gibson's *Sprawl Trilogy* (1984-1988), the idea of futuristic SF was becoming obsolete especially with the rise of the rhetoric of commercializing Cyberpunk novels. The so-called Cyberpunk's sui genre propaganda was through rhetoric of commercialization as most of Cyberpunk writers have acknowledged it [42]. If the rhetoric can produce a genre out of novels without any essence in the label, this proves that genres are without essence except rhetoric and persuasion. In one of the instances, Patrick Neilsin Hayden said regarding Cyberpunk's renewal of SF genre in the 1980s "We can discuss Cyberpunk or we can discuss the rhetoric which has promoted Cyberpunk. The latter is more interesting to me" [43]. This act of rhetorical within commercial activity for publishers and SF writers as well as readers is what theory of Genre as social act claims.

The integrations and disintegrations have been essential part of the cultural expansion of the collective symbolic action into public and daily life. The rhetorical-based genre theory challenges these claims of those definitions since what a genre might be about if definitions cannot grasp it and constantly changing. Moreover, the gradual change of these definitions and perspectives attests that science fiction, of

considered a genre endures through its indefinability or its state of fluidity within social community. Texts do not contain any essence unless there is an active community practicing rhetoric over it, sharing it, publishing it and distributing it and evolving pattern through the symbolic exchanges within social activities. The core idea of genres is they are expanding symbolically, and it would be perfect to see the commercials marketing through labels.

Smauel R. Delaney, a prominent novelist associated with SF, who seems to support that idea of community of interpretation and social activity as the entrance to understand SF, although he refers to a spiritual way in communal practice of SF, he brought this experiment that SF depending on who is reading and how the text is read SF genre is known, just as a modern reader who is not familiar with Elizabethan tradition might mistake the word *expense* in Shakespeare's 29 to mean *cost* which actually means *Pouring out* [44]. Delaney suggests immersing into the SF texts and community is the only familiar way to recognize the tradition and perform it. This community-based rhetoric is what consists of SF including the plethora of definitions on it. The idea of a time travel might not exactly determine SF to all fans and members of SF but rather what the community regards as SF in different times. There are those who define it purely only to endure the genre activity, and the implication of these definitions is clearly showing without prolonging definitions and renewing the genre might cease to exist such as pragmatic definitions.

The easiest way to define science fiction is a tautological definition from a pragmatic approach that Edward James', despite knowing it is the least definitive way to know science fiction as a category, recommends "Go into any bookshop or bookstore, and look at the section marked 'SF' or 'Sci-Fi'. Often, to confuse you, the section will actually be called 'SF and Fantasy', or even 'Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror' [45]. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction has mentioned other pragmatic definitions such as Damon Knight's idea of SF that "Science fiction is what we point to when we say it" and Norman Spinard who said "Science Fiction is anything published as science fiction" [46]. Although these pragmatic definitions endorse authority to the market to decide what is science fiction irrationally and consider the marketing strategy to the customers taste which is always right in choosing Superman story as science fiction, the definition has a circular reasoning that does not get far. The market does not recognize genres to be special but sells equally all labels, so the horror is whatever scares you and science fiction whatever is science fiction. This pragmatic assertion alludes to circulation of the symbolic pattern participation within, not only the market, but also the ultimate horizon of the community.

This tautology of genre definitions can be explained, only if one considers definitions a rhetorical means that is playing a role in expanding the activities, not policing any boundaries but rather sustaining the symbolic horizon and desire for social sharing. And this desire to persuade through symbolic activity is not to tell what the SF genre is but rather to exist within the web of assertions. For instance, there are all kinds of book labels associating themselves with a community through certain language and symbol uses, for instance,

there is a book by Mark Bould and China Meville labelled *Red Planets, Marxism and Science Fiction (2020)* which at one level it is about Marxist literary criticism on SF obviously but at the same time the *Red Planet* phrase might signify H.G Well's story of *War of The Worlds* (1898) or Kim Stanley Robinson's Trilogy of Mars especially *Red Mars* (1992) that a regular reader might not recognize such symbolic uses and therefore the genre is alien to him due to not being a part of their community. There are others throughout years on this symbolic interaction such as Larry McCaffery who labeled an interview book as *Across the wounded Galaxies: Interviews with contemporary American Science fiction writers* (1991). SF according to genre as a socially symbolic act is not exactly texts but rather a way of interacting through language and symbols with others and behaving in certain way and practicing textuality and rhetoric in certain way like their colleagues.

John Riders has made several assertions depending on these shapeshifting definitions that SF genre is historically mutable, it is way of practicing textuality rather than texts per se, the identity of SF is articulated within historical continuum, and "attribution of the identity of SF to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception" [48]. These definitions and assertions are characterized by all kinds of fluidity and dissent from one another, they are what Miller called "means for mediating private intentions and social exigence, it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with recurrent" [47]. The premise of definition of SF as genre, genre is not a classification, but a dynamic social interaction of through codes with other community members, and the definitions are symbolic performance of that interaction. Together, to perform SF as genre is to practice language, rhetoric, and symbol-using in a specific way with other community members who are familiar with certain evolutionary patterned and recognized as SF.

3. Conclusion

The rife number of definitions of science fiction that attempt to present a crystallized notion for Science Fiction as a static genre has always been a problem. Any definition to tell what SF is and what makes it a genre encounters heterogeneity of presuppositions generalizations and socio-cultural and reductor ad absurdum. While it is acknowledged the society has the activity of using symbols to practice socialization, the scholars, critics, fans belonging to science fiction community had constant debates regarding how SF genre is defined, but today genre is no longer looked at not as classification. In contemporary scholarship, genre has been redefined to participation of individuals in typification through rhetorical practices such as Carolyn's Miller's understanding of genres. Thus, science fiction genre definitions are regarded only as a symbolic action standing like pillars to sustain the tradition before extrapolation, defamiliarizing knowledge or a marketing device because science fiction has emerged within community and endures with rhetorical actions of individuals, and it has been constituted by the heterogeneity of those definitions and shapeshifting perspectives.

Lack of consensus within the definitions should not be misconstrued as disorder, but they are the dynamic particles of the genre and constituent of this evolutionary tradition. The assertion of the rhetorical-based genre theory proposed that the inconsistency of the definitions and their multiplicity of approaches demonstrates SF as a genre is an activity rather than an immutable pattern of formal features. In the assertions regarding SF, one might say that SF Genre is a rhetorical activity that changes throughout time, its historical origin is not fixed, it resists definition, since it is a dynamic process not a static one, SF as genre is not things such as books, movies or other cultural objects but a way of using symbols in accordance with the other community member who recognize that specific symbol using practice.

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