Sánchez Rubio, David

Science Fiction and Human Rights. Identities and Social Fabric

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Before developing the theme of this essay I should clarify the basic premise. What has science fiction got to do with human rights? For those who are initially surprised at the juxtaposition, I have to say that if we look at what is actually *happening* in today's world, compared to what is being *said* in today's world on the subject of human rights, we have to admit that we are operating in a zone of pure fiction, given the gulf that exists between these two realities. The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano has commented that the worlds of theory and practice are generally so far apart that if they met on a street corner they would pass by without a greeting, not recognizing each other. Human rights violations are so consistent and so systematic in every sector of social life that however fine and frequent the words we use to discuss the issue are, reality shows us that human rights are essentially non-existent. It is pure "science fiction" to maintain that the societies in which we live allow humans to arrive at a full and effective recognition of these rights. Beyond that irony, human rights can be described as ideas of plenitude which are intended to merge with reality, which connects directly with the speculative dimension of science fiction.

To approach the theme and at the same time to move into the speculative theoretical-conceptual dimension, I would like to a) explain the notion of "science-fiction" I am taking as a starting point and thereby justify my treatment of it, and b) explain a little the concept of "human rights" as I understand it. I will put both these points into the context of the theme that has brought us together: the treatment of the Other, Difference, the foreigner, the immigrant. Nevertheless, I must also make clear that I am not presenting a dogmatic and absolute viewpoint, and that, following the line of authors such as Donna Haraway, I reject political positions and essentialist philosophers and I defend the idea that all visions are partial.

Which science fiction?

I share the theoretical belief that states that we should not automatically conform to what is empirically handed down to us. In fact, one of the most interesting things about science fiction is that it is concerned with opening up new horizons, playing with the limits of empirical reality. In this way, it permits daring speculation, encouraging us to meditate on our world and our social organizations, and therefore should be considered as a literature of specifically speculative ideas. With science fiction one has the feeling that one is conquering, discovering or constructing new territories; it allows us to think about possible evolutions, transformations and deviations from nature and human society.

Science fiction, i.e. the use of imagination to think of new subjectivities, identities and epistemic borders, should be taken seriously as a very valuable practice. As J. P. Telotte stated, science fiction as a genre can help us live in a world which tends to overstep its own present limits, and can help to push these limits outwards.

For many reasons, we have arrived at a level of such excesses and deficits in science, in the marketplace, in the question of rights, that we find ourselves in an era of crisis and paradigmatic transition. We need to find new forms of thinking, new ways of confronting reality, in which reciprocity, solidarity and the recognition of "difference" are its referents and its objectives. Bonaventura de Sousa notes that western culture and rationality, through the continuous exercise

of the wasting of experience, has limited itself to extending its spatial-temporal and symbolic horizons throughout the globe, rendering invisible, silencing and eliminating countless practices, experiences and expectations of its own as well as those of other cultures and forms of life.

In fact, its principal characteristic has been to contract the present and simultaneously expand the future, under the banner of progress and totality. To combat this "unidimensionalization" and homogenization of worlds, he stakes his hopes on processes that are emancipatory and plural. Specifically, he speaks of two necessary measures which must be adopted. One is to avoid monolithic and uniform visions of reality. For this, one has to elaborate a theory of translation, permitting the establishment of the kind of dialogue and communication, both cultural and identitarian, which is always incomplete and open to confront reality. The other measure aims to recuperate various dimensions of solidarity, expectations, claims and practices which existed in the past and which still exist in the present but which for diverse reasons have become invisible, have been excluded, destroyed or made marginal through hegemonic thought. He calls them "sociologies of absence and emergence". With such activities one could reverse the process of contraction of the present and expansion of the future, allowing an expansion of the present and a contraction of the future which would reclaim the diverse and varied social and epistemological practices which exist, but which are not taken into account.

In one sense the science fiction genre has fulfilled, and fulfils, both functions. On the one hand, as we will see shortly, it has fallen into the same traps as the culture which christened it. Susan Sontag, in her work *The imagination of disaster*, considers that in the realm of cinema, the genre of science fiction is an inadequate response to contemporary subjects and problems. It simplifies the morals, empowers social apathy and encourages in the public a visual fascination for the catastrophes of our civilization. On the other hand, I believe that science fiction is one of the genres which best articulates the aesthetic-expressive rationalities of art and literature, and the technical-instrumental ones of science and technology. In a certain aspect it unites that which scientific rationality separates (cause and intention) and legitimates quality and the importance of rhetorical knowledge as opposed to the dogmatic.

Until now, science has demonstrated a complete absence of control of the consequences, reflected by our own human experiences and not simply in the genres of speculative fiction. Despite this, out of the world of the imagination, and recognizing the wide range of expressions and types of this kind of fiction, ranging from an excessively scientific point of view to an overly 'irreal', creative, non-scientific one, science fiction has made many contributions in the form of speculation and anticipation, and provoked reflections on the human condition that spring from the re-creation and construction of new frontiers of space, time, and epistemology.

What is meant by human rights?

The concept of "human rights" which we have inherited from capitalist modernity clearly reproduces liberal logic. On the one hand, it is based on a substantialist and closed vision of dignity and human nature (which is conceived of as something fixed and homogeneous). On the other hand, it contains a series of tricks and derivations, both in their enunciation and their development. Thus it consciously separates the fields of the private and the public, allowing for the fact that there exist spaces in life (the domestic sphere, the economy...) in which human rights can not be recognised. Besides, it limits its spheres of influence to the political arena (which is understood in a very restrictive sense). Opposing this essentialist and rigid notion, I opt for a much more open, flexible and fluid concept, which allows human rights to be applied to all spheres of social life.

Some links between science fiction and human rights

Homing in now on the connection between science fiction and human rights, I could take the approach of analyzing how human rights are understood and treated, explicitly or implicitly, in novels of speculative science fiction, according to the national, international, interplanetary or intergalactic norms which regulate human, interracial and inter-species relations, and which can be deduced from any novel.

In sagas like *Star Trek*, *The war of the galaxies*, or that of *The Foundation Trilogy* of Isaac Asimov and its sequels, or even in works such as *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *1984* by Orwell or *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin, one can study the political and institutional systems, and the sense of the exercise of power and government that we get a glimpse of in each work or film.

On another level, we could also focus on the categorical framework which determines western thought (and which is expressed through science, science fiction and the dominant discourse on human rights); and more concretely, examine the effect that scientific and technological advances have on the human condition, seeing how these categories arise and what consequences they have on the existence of contemporary mankind.

Both science and human rights are concerned with ideals of perfection and the principles of real impossibility (which is connected with the limits of knowledge and human behaviour), which western thought continuously attempts to overcome.
This set of beliefs and abstract ideas has an influence on human beings and their conditions of existence. Technology and science play a key role in this issue. Books of science fiction help us to discover new possibilities in our analysis.

However, one of the great perils and problems of using abstractions and idealizations appears when we fail to take into account the elements that have been eliminated; similar problems arise when we overemphasize elements that have been added. With abstractions, one or several elements can be omitted which, although they may be important and decisive, come to be considered as secondary, and therefore are being ignored. When we speak of idealizations, however, the element introduced is so considerable and demanding that it is impossible to reach such a degree of perfection in reality.

In both cases the problem appears when there is no awareness of the repercussions that these mechanisms have on human life and the relational processes that constitute it. The reality and rationality of the life of a real, corporal, concrete and plural human being disappears. Science, just like science fiction, falls into routine practices and erroneous assumptions, with the difference that science has a real impact on our daily life, whereas science fiction demonstrates a broader re-creation of those mechanisms; even though it is clear that the reason they find an echo in us is because they reinforce and encourage that wonderment at technology, coupled with an ignorance of its effects.

Borges's story about the Emperor's map demonstrates this very well. From a certain viewpoint, the only perfect "map" is one which reproduces, in exactly the same dimensions, what it represents. In the story the Emperor, by forcing all the peasants to work on constructing this map to perfection, brings down the kingdom and causes the death of his people due to the fact that they can no longer attend to their own lives and their survival. The challenge was to make an easy-to-use, realistic map, which would serve as a guide. But behind that was the social tissue which reflected the relationship between the Emperor and his subjects. He made sure they were sheltered and fed, but he did it through dynamics of exclusion, marginalization and exploitation, and by not recognizing them as subjects in their own right, with their own profound reciprocal fields.

In this way (among other reasons) the West with its tendency to view things from a scientific point of view, sacrifices reality for ideals of abstraction and perfection. And it does it while projecting on all kind of institutions and interventions those same devices of fetishism and idolatry that Borges uses. (Not just where science is concerned, but also in the case of democracy, the state, the marketplace, freedom, and those same human rights…). In the end, we end up letting our creations take over and we lose the ability to control them and to maintain a balance based on the real relationship between things and people. Along these lines, we can project the outline or schema of the Borges story onto the field of science fiction. There are many examples; in some of them we can also detect the perversity of scientific and technological rationality.

In *Blade Runner*, for instance, we have the humanization of Roy in the last scene of the movie. From avenging angel searching for his origin and expiry date, he turns into a human facing his

appointment with death. And there he finds the importance of living. He grants Dick Deckard's life in the last minute, because he values it in its whole dimension. His mortality humanizes him and humanizes Deckard at the same time. But if we analyze the movie's decadent world, we see how the replicants are discriminated against to the extreme situation that they must be eliminated. And they aren't the only marginalized people. Other human beings (Asiatic, Latin) who are, among other things, not completely healthy, are not allowed to leave Earth. Social relations are damaged through the absence of respect and acknowledgement that every human and non-human being needs to make sense of his reality; to be able to make and unmake worlds, through his own libidinous, ethical, political, cultural and social condition.

Ridley Scott's film places itself among those in which humanity, and our identity, are based on the skill we have of kissing, of saying and living; on feelings, passion and desire, not exclusively based on reason and science.

On a different level, in the film *Metrópolis*, by Rintaro and Otomo, we can perceive this effect in the Zigurat, which incorporates the ideals of perfection and omniscience represented by science. Red Duke represents the ambition for absolute scientific knowledge, used by a selfish, despotic and murderous power, which sacrifices lives at the expense of searching for eternal power over everything. Society, which appears divided into three levels, is broken in its relations, because of the inequality established both between human beings and the robots. Moreover, in *Metrópolis* just as in *Blade Runner*, we find the reversible dimension both in the process of humanization and in the process of human rights: robots, replicants and human beings, depending on the moment, can humanize themselves and construct rights, or de-humanize themselves, destroying them.

We also have the whole speculative literature of an apocalyptic, post-nuclear future which I won't talk about here, and which reproduces the rift in human coexistence in societies which existed before the event that led to their destruction (an obvious example is the *Mad Max* films). What attracts me the most to these is the depiction of the effects of destruction and fragmentation of human relations in the sci-fi genre, and the recreation of worlds in which there is no socialization between people as far as spaces for the constitution of subjects are concerned. Talking about living conditions implies referring to the stuff that articulates these same conditions: the social schemes, the whole of human relations.

Isaac Asimov, in *Naked Sun*, describes a hypothetical world in which there is no physical contact between humans. Thanks to the colonization of other planets, each person lives isolated from the rest, but surrounded by robots and technology. The main means of communication is through screens. Each human being lives as a hermit in vast private properties. Each of them possesses a certain fear of bodily, physical and direct relations. Robots take care of all domestic work. The reader has the sensation of leaping towards a technological future of plenty as described in the novel, bringing about a contraction of a present in which there is a lot of isolation and lack of human contact. The fabric of relationship 'disappears' in spite of the fact that one can live "one's rights" thanks to the advances of science. There is something lacking in such an existence.

Under an underlying Newtonism and Cartesianism, we end up building worlds in which we believe that it's abstractly possible to live without the necessity of a social-historical construction, and without establishing any kind of social relations with fellow human beings. However, human relations never disappear. Instead, they head towards conceptual excuses that are speculative and anti-factual. Robots, cyborgs, aliens and/or new worlds, impossibility principles, are used to reduce human relations almost to non-existence, or to pass beyond them, ignoring the sociological and historical process that lead us day by day to articulate our concrete existence, enabling us to know ourselves, to identify ourselves, to communicate with ourselves, to respect ourselves, to argue without eliminating ourselves, but pluralizing ourselves.

The sci-fi genre can suggest several alternatives in this direction. Starting with an idea of human rights which aims to encompass the social, historic, relational, rational and multidirectional dimension of the "human condition", that moves between this margin of finite and infinite, I try in this speculative literature not to lose sight of the human referent, how it is articulated, how it is built, how it is destroyed and why. It seems that although there is a lot of sci-fi literature that

exaggerates the future or the past, contracting the present to the point of forgetting about it, there is another kind that expands the present with imagined worlds from other space-and-time sequences. There are recreations of worlds in which human and non-human relations are articulated from hierarchies, but also from horizontals, from processes of both inclusion and exclusion.

From a human rights point of view, it is very interesting to analyze how actions, activities and human relations are articulated from these anti-factual conditions and from the transcendental images in the works of science fiction. Humans, robots, cyborgs and aliens represent human enrichment or impoverishment possibilities where we make ourselves or we undo ourselves as subjects; they enable us to see whether the articulation of our relations is restrictive to the few (through rank and selective, exploitative and discriminative dynamics) or extensive to many (with horizontal dialogue and solidarity dynamics), or open in a complex way (under mutual recognition dynamics, starting with equalities in differences and as subjects); as a static starting point (out of contexts, abstracting rational matter, space and time) or as an open condition, unfinished, contingent and processual (always taking into account human creations and their ever partial and incomplete dimensions, and also their plural, heterogeneous and multidimensional aspect).

In science fiction, this problem is usually reflected in two different ways. On the one hand, a future is imagined in which human relationships are articulated in social schemes or exclusional regulation, with no regard or needed for the affective, the material or the corporal. Thus, in *The Naked Sun* (Isaac Asimov, 1957), there is no physical contact between humans who only relate to each other through technological media. On the other hand, the possibility that science and technology can progress without forgetting the human referent is also established. Social schemes of solidarity and emancipation (as occurs in many novels by Sturgeon, Octavia Butler or Juan Miguel Aguilera) are also developed. In any case, the main challenge that humanity has to face in the future is not its relationship with machines (as seen in *The Matrix Trilogy*), but rather the cohabitation of humans themselves. Only if man can learn to respect himself, to understand his possibilities and accept his limitations, will he be able to live in harmony with what surrounds him (both the natural and the artificial world).

Our daily life is articulated within a social web of emancipation or regulation: relations can be established by genre, by ethnicity, by racial, symbolic, cultural, technological determinants…all of which are constantly being constructed every moment and in every social sphere. Science fiction usually speculates about our present in order to denounce, question, warn, claim and/or propose a world of exclusive or inclusive relations, of human and/or non-human sacrifices, or of acknowledging, or not acknowledging, pluralities and difference. This is why I believe we must not restrict ourselves to the fiction and the work in itself, but use its ideas, suggestions, situations and realities as guidelines for our own social and daily experience, as well as in all aspects related to power (political power, which is expressed on every level of society) and the articulation of dynamics of domination or emancipation (in the fields of genre, sexuality, ethnicity, etc).

To bring these thoughts to a conclusion, we will look at some other science fiction works through the threads of their social fabric. The description of a torn world in John Calvin Batchelor's *The People's Republic of Antarctica* is also interesting. The author, intentionally, shows us the total destruction of all human relations because of a culture of consolidated charity and paternalism, and also ruled by a (Benthamian) utilitarianism. In *The Matrix Trilogy* and in Rintaro and Otomo's *Metropolis*, human beings and robots are opposed, forgetting that the key does not reside in the problem the human being has in coexisting with other beings who are in revolt against him, but in the responsibility he has to enable human beings to respect each other. Only in this way can systems of inclusive relationships and recognition of other species be built. In short, if we don't respect ourselves, how are we going to respect any other being, entity or type?

Finally, science fiction gives us new outlooks, avenues and patterns of human and non-human relationships. Many sci-fi books note our social decline, but at the same time they open up new ways to encourage human and non-human relationships. The Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, said: "The eye that you see is not an eye thanks to you, but it is an eye, because it sees you". Human Rights, equally, can only exist as a relation between two or more people.

DAVID SANCHEZ RUBIO is a lecturer in Legal Philosophy at Seville University and Co-Director of the Doctorate Programme on Human Rights and Development organised by Seville's Pablo de Olavide University. He is a specialist in human rights, democracy, and thought in Latin–American liberation. He has written and co-published several books such as Filosofía, derecho and liberación en América Latina (1999), Globalizaçao e direitos humanos (2004) and Esferas de democracia (2004).

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