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GENRE VARIETY OF THE 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION



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Abstract

The article covers the issue of genre heterogeneity of the 20th century American science fiction (SF). It is argued that American SF of that period was represented mainly by three subgenres: hard SF, socio-philosophical SF, and adventurous SF, that differ from each other not only in structure/content, but also in terms of genre. The novelty of the research lies in the fact that genre approach has been applied to classify American science fiction of the 20th century.

Keywords: genre; science fiction; hard SF; socio-philosophical SF; adventurous SF.

XX АСР АМЕРИКА ИЛМИЙ ФАНТАСТИКАСИНИНГ ЖАНР ХИЛМА-ХИЛЛИГИ

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Аннотация

Мазкур мақолада АҚШ XX аср илмий фантастикасининг хилма-хиллиги ўрганилган. Ўша даврдаги Америка илмий фантастикасини асосан қуйидаги учта кичик жанрлар мужассам этади: барқарор илмий фантастика, ижтимоий-фалсафий илмий фантастика ва саргузашт илмий фантастика. Улар нафақат структура ва мазмун жиҳатидан, балки жанр аспектлари бўйича ҳам фарқланади. Мазкур тадқиқотнинг илмий янгилиги XX аср Америка илмий фантастикасини классификация қилишда жанрий ёндашувни қўллашдан иборат.

Калит сўзлар: жанр; илмий фантастика; барқарор ИФ; ижтимоий-фалсафий ИФ; саргузашт ИФ.

ЖАНРОВАЯ РАЗНОРОДНОСТЬ АМЕРИКАНСКОЙ НАУЧНОЙ ФАНТАСТИКИ XX ВЕКА

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Аннотация

В статье рассматривается вопрос разнородности американской научной фантастики (НФ) XX века. Американскую научную фантастику того периода в основном представляют три поджанра: твёрдая НФ, социально-философская НФ и приключенческая НФ, — которые различаются не только по структуре и содержанию, но и в жанровом аспекте. Новизна данного исследования заключается в применении жанрового подхода при классификации американской научной фантастики XX века.

Ключевые слова: жанр; научная фантастика; твёрдая НФ; социально-философская НФ; приключенческая НФ.

I. Introduction. Science fiction (SF) is a unique phenomenon. It represents one of human's most imaginative attempt to adopt himself to a rapidly changing world, being the only branch of fiction which attempts to speculate about the destiny of the humanity in light of the complex and complicate scientific achievement and rapid technological development, along with the fundamental changes in all spheres of human life. The concept expressed by the term *science fiction* is still not established with sufficient accuracy, therefore, most critics use it in quotes (hereinafter, denoting the boundaries of science fiction, we will use the term without quotes). In addition, the disparate nature of its constituent elements is one of the reasons why science fiction has proven so hard to label and so difficult to classify. It is argued that the first works of fantastic literature of new type began to appear in late 19th century. Science fiction as an independent and respectable literary genre is a phenomenon of the 20th century and mainly an American activity that was born, named, and flourished in the USA. American science fiction is now being researched in light of the great changes in the modern world and in the fictional worlds of the future which have the direct effect on the treatment of the genre. If observe the origin of American science fiction from the point of view of the theory of genre, it can be found that at that time there were as many as three subgenres of science fiction, so closely related to each other, that they are still considered as a single literary phenomenon. The research is an attempt to draw the genre boundaries between these three subgenres of science fiction in the realities of American literature and characterize them separately in details.

II. Methods and Research Approach. As the main purpose of the research is to trace the development of American science fiction of the 20th century and to reach clear conclusions about the nature and significance of each of its three subgenres, so, logically, pre-research analysis is based on fairly traditional literary

critical methods: narrative and interpretive analysis of a great number of the 20th century American science fiction stories and novels, which is found as a fruitful way of determining how the text reflect genre features, communicates its meaning and reveals its themes. However, the historical and contextual methods have also been used in the research as genre features and specifications become visible through theme, plot development and characters. In terms of analyzing the historical and philosophical-ideological parallels that come to light, the article combines the examination of chronological and qualitative levels of American science fiction and offers certain classification. In other words, the methods used in the research pin down the genre development in American science fiction of the 20th century in order to outline how its subgenres are products of their time, what themes are central and how characteristics of subgenres reflect the context.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1. Hard SF. The reason why exactly hard SF developed first among other subgenres is hidden in its origin. According to D. – T. Beata, the roots of American hard SF can be found in so-called literature of popular science, which “is characterized by the aim to explain different, scientific contents simply, with artless words to offer a practical and appealing image of a scientific thesis or idea (3, 18). Thus, a literary work includes scientific (or pseudoscientific) fragments into the plot; in this case, the work as a whole acquires a journalistic character. In early 20th century, because of extra-literary factors, this subgenre of science fiction becomes extremely popular. Its development is influenced by the rapid growth of scientific (mostly – technical) research, by the powerful introduction of technology in human life. American periodicals focusing on the use of technology in everyday life started to publish literary works of hard SF genre orientation that tried to predict future technical discoveries and devices. The main purpose of hard SF works that combined scientific, publicist and literary styles is to perform certain didactic functions: in a figurative form these works illustrate technical achievement and ways of its use in the human life. These amazing stories do not only provide an opportunity for extremely interesting reading; they are always instructive too. They give a reader knowledge that he could not have obtained in another way – and they give it in a very attractive form. Thus, American hard SF is considered to be a formation of a special type, consisting of 75% of literature and 25% of science, in which the idea of popularization of science prevails other ideas and authors’ intentions: Hugo Gernsback’s “Ralph 124 C41+”, Isaac Asimov’s early short stories, novels of T. Sturgeon, A. E. Van Vogt and J. Williamson.

Nevertheless, this kind of subgenre cannot be fully considered as literary: it is a hybrid with education. A group of Malaysian educators and literary critics, in the process of working out the course on hard SF, prepared special questionnaires for potential students, and results were that, “some of these students expressed the assumption that the course will be difficult to understand as the genre of science fiction is all about technology in a modern world and therefore will be more incomprehensible compared to other genres such as fantasy, mystery or realistic fiction” (9, 417). Moreover, A. E. Wedemeyer introduced a special term – *cyber-narrative* (13, 2) – to define the narrative of hard SF, which deals mostly with the matters of technology. Another term, *scientheuma*, was popular among the most prominent journal editors, such as Hugo Gernsback and John Campbell. Later, *scientheuma* took a form of scientific essay, examples of which – “Islands of Space” by John Campbell, “Galileo’s Dream” by Kim Stanley Robinson, and others – reveal high attention of essay authors to the problems of science.

However, the main purpose of science fiction is not just to popularize science, but to promote it by using artistic means, to influence feelings and imagination of a reader. The similarity of this purpose with the requirements of Hugo Gernsback for the works published in *Amazing Stories*, is obvious: the main purpose of science fiction, in its classic form, is to promote contemporary scientific knowledge and illustrations of the future development of science and technology. The same goals are mentioned by D. Fenech, Ch. Gradwohl and J. Westren-Doll in their research on ability of SF to predict the future: “science-fiction is all about predicting the future” (7, 4).

N. Aksenova and M. Khatyamova suggest that, “One feature of this new genre form... is that it serves as a conjunction, alloying of two elements in Wells’ novels: “element of social satire” and “element of science fiction” (1, 4) separated the scientific essays into scientific-artistic literature and science fiction. They are similar only in the subject of influence, because both of them influence not only the mind, but also – imagination. Difference between scientific essay and science fiction is that in the first – a person remains behind the scenes, while in the second – the image of a man is artistically highly developed. At the same time, I made a significant reservation, that sometimes it is very difficult to distinguish some science fiction stories from scientific essays, despite of their formal affiliation. As an example “A Storyteller in Zion” by O. S. Card can be mentioned. The story is really much closer to an essay than to a piece of fiction.

Having analyzed 26 stories of the 20th century American science fiction, we revealed the prevalence of the genre of *scienthema* and scientific essay and allocated their stereotypical structure: All stories were written on the similar scheme. One day, a scientist flies in the futuristic plane to faraway place to see a technological invention. He arrives at the place fast, examines the invention, asks questions. An engineer answers these questions. When question-answer session is over, the scientist thanks the engineer and flies back. Stereotypical structure allows to reveal basic templates of *scienthema* and scientific essay: uncomplicated literary plot, serving the function of justification of the nucleus of the genre – question-answer session. Since *scienthema* and scientific essay could not develop further, they reached a deadlock. But, it should be mentioned, that *scienthema*, as a hybrid genre, has not ceased to exist; and since one of its characteristics is didacticism, it is widely used for educational purposes, for example, in educational cartoons for children.

To conclude, the earliest subgenre of the 20th century American science fiction was hard SF, which took the forms of *scienthema* and scientific essay. In this point American science fiction differs from European one, as the second is originated on the basis of speculative fiction or socio-philosophical novels.

3.2. Socio-philosophical SF. By analogy to the term *scienthema* that defines hard SF, the term *philosophema* is used to define next – socio-philosophical – step in the evolution of American science fiction. To illustrate the essence and peculiar features of American socio-philosophical SF, it is purposeful to compare briefly its two representatives. Analyzing works of Hugo Gernsback and Clifford Simak, researchers still come to conclusion about their similarity. Clifford Simak and, in some sense – Hugo Gernsback, are not totally similar to each other, but there is one area in which both writers stand by – it is the field of science fiction. However, “standing by” does not mean functioning as a single source. Clifford Simak seems to have created a completely new kind of fiction, while Hugo Gernsback continued traditional “classical” canons of scientific literature. Dissimilarity of creative principles is noted by G. Canavan from Marquette University, who attempts to define science fiction as “a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision” (4, 380) and comments Hugo Gernsback’s novel “Ralph 124 C 41+” as following “contemporary science fiction criticism almost universally derides the novel as unreadable, reflecting the extent to which Gernsback's approach has fallen out of favor (and Gernsback himself is largely unremembered outside of scholarly circles). The novel embodies the worst of the science fiction

that is to follow it” (4, 380). I partially agree with the statement if approach Hugo Gernsback’s works from strictly literary perspective, but it should be underlined, that it was Hugo Gernsback who both invented the first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, and coined the term “science fiction” by using the word “scientification”. As for specific traits, the most important difference between Clifford Simak’s and Hugo Gernsback’s works lies in the plot situation, in the nature of the experiment and test. In Hugo Gernsback’s works, not protagonist or other characters (like in any adventurous work), but scientific idea itself (scientific or quasi-scientific experiment) is tested. In Clifford Simak’s works, not only scientific but social and philosophical ideas are also tested. The experiment in his fiction takes anthropological form. “Indeed, we can learn about our contemporary society from the worldview represented in science fiction texts” (10, 3). D. K. de Witt, a critic of distinction, assures that starting with I. Asimov, he can continue the long list of American science fiction authors whose works possess social-philosophical issues: “Isaac Asimov’s 1940s robot stories (collected in “I, Robot”) use the social conventions of a segregated America to project both the containment and potential of humanoid robots in relation to their human masters. I could go on with example after example, but I will resist the temptation to retrace familiar ground” (6, 16-22). Socio-philosophical SF is interested not so much in an individual, but in humanity as a whole; it is revealed in a tendency to globalize issues and then give them in details. For example, some critics name Isaac Asimov among the scientists whose “research on global catastrophic risk scenarios has focused mainly on tracing a causal pathway from a catastrophic event to global catastrophic loss of life” (2, 20). Isaac Asimov in his later works introduces a new plot situation, which does not exist in his previous hard science fiction short stories – contact with non-human beings (“Gods Themselves”). The experiment, thus, is built on the comparison of human norms that the hero demonstrates by his behavior and reflections, with non-human norms: norms of other creatures, representatives of other planets and worlds. After the fantastic hypothesis is expressed, the interest of the narrative focuses on observing the feelings and behavior of a person from a new angle of view, that is – from a non-human point of view. It seems that in this sense the concept of “exclusion”, introduced for the study of science fiction by Darko Suvin (11, 45), is very accurate, while such kind of experiment can be considered as socio-philosophical, because, as J. Gerhard from University of Colorado, states, “to set up its novum science fiction typically chooses either utopian or dystopian setting to be the framework of its imaginary

community” (8, 5). So, along with hard SF, in the USA of early 20th century, there was another subgenre of science fiction – socio-philosophical, combining adventurous plot with social and philosophical experimentation. The vast majority of the subsequent science fiction refers to this subgenre, so it should be described in detail. The world of a hero in socio-philosophical SF appears to the reader as unreal, and under the circumstances of that world the characters are tested for their belonging to the human race. The test is carried out in contact with superhuman strength that clearly highlights the features of the hero as a representative of humanity. Thus, there is a special author’s experiment — the test of “what makes us human” (12, 278). The adventurous plot puts the hero in exceptional threshold situations and is associated with a philosophical understanding of the problems raised in the work. Special compositional and structural forms serve to test the idea: it is in characters’ conversations (philosophical dialogues) where socio-philosophical ideas are tested, similar to a hero who is tested in the adventurous plot. And it is in the aspect of semantic boundaries separating the world of the hero and the world of the author/reader, where one of the most important features of this science fiction subgenre is hidden, and this feature is the absoluteness of the depicted world. The work is constructed in such a way that the reader perceives everything that happens not as a metaphor or allegorical story, but literally as what is happening in reality, although according to the laws of the empirical world it cannot be reality by that period of development of science and technology. Thus, socio-philosophical subgenre of American science fiction includes works originated from geographical adventurous novels (“Tunnel in the Sky” by R. Heinlein), historical adventurous novels (“Between Two Times” by J. Finney), and even detective novels (“The Caves of Steel” by I. Asimov).

3.3. Adventurous SF. Finally, we turn to the third subgenre of American science fiction of the 20th century. Its most striking features are manifested in a famous cycle of works about John Carter written by E. R. Burroughs. On the one hand, these novels, like novels of A. E. Van Vogt or C. Simak, are based on the idea of a human beings’ contact with non-human beings – the inhabitants of Mars. On the other hand, there are significant differences: Human contact with another creature (the Martian), although it involves the mutual evaluation of communicants of alien-natured civilizations, is not accompanied by philosophical speculations on the essence of humanity. It is a pure adventurous SF, built entirely on the traditions of adventurous literature. Such works are sometimes called “entourage science fiction”: its fantastic elements do not cause significant changes and do not

transform basic traits of adventurous literary genres. Sometimes, adventurous SF is limited within the frames of other genres that transforms its structure, for example – picaresque novel or crime fiction. As R. G. Wilson states, “The picaresque practices a unique kind of world building, for every aspect of the picaresque, ranging from shared tropes and motifs to unique plot developments serves to foreground the random disorder and uncontrollable chaos that comprise both fictional and real world” (14, 139).

Despite of being the literature of lower quality, adventurous SF is highly demanded by readers. D. D’Amassa, assessing the artistic value of the novels written by E. R. Burroughs, notes that, “his prose was almost always awkward, his characters are flat and interchangeable; plot structure is constructed linearly and non-figurative, but, at the same time, he was a wonderful storyteller, and despite of his stylistic shortcomings, his novels remain popular even after many of his more talented contemporaries dissolved into oblivion” (5, 65).

In the study of American adventurous SF, it should be mentioned that it has been strongly influenced by so-called literature about the supernatural, originated from the romanticism and Gothic fiction. For example, A. Merritt’s novel “The Metal Monster” is listed as a science fiction work about the supernatural. In addition, the beginning of the 20th century is characterized by the influence of a certain set of motives (enigma, mystery) on hard SF (some novels of C. Mieville and S. Henderson), adventurous SF (some novels of H. P. Lovecraft and F. Herbert) and socio-philosophical SF (some novels of A. E. Van Vogt and C. Simak). The issue of influence of literature about the supernatural on American science fiction deserves a separate consideration; in this article we only indicate its relevance for further study of the genre characteristics of science fiction.

IV. Conclusion. While the aforementioned critics offer various definitions of science fiction, focusing on different ways in which this genre can function as a thought-experiment or speculation about the future, their theories largely stem from or encompass ideas developed by Darko Suvin, who in his pioneering work “Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre” provided the main terminology to describe the peculiarity of the genre. My interpretation of the nature of science fiction in some way derives from Darko Suvin’s definition and it presumes “cognitive estrangement” and “fictional novum” to be the fundamental elements of any work of science fiction. Interpretation of science fiction in American literary criticism of the 20th century can be summarized as the following: science fiction is a literary genre in which the writer

shows awareness of the nature and significance of the human activity known as the scientific method, shows equal awareness of the great set of human knowledge already collected throughout the history, and in his stories and novels takes into consideration the impact and possible future effects of scientific method and scientific fact on human beings. Moreover, American science fiction of the 20th century includes not one, but three close literary varieties: hard SF, socio-philosophical SF and adventurous SF. The research reveals that from genre aspect: 1) hard SF borders on scientific essay and speculative fiction; 2) socio-philosophical SF primarily borders paradoxically on realistic genre, or historical novel, with the elements of adventurous literature; 3) adventurous SF borders on crime fiction or adventurous literature, but does not transform its basic characteristics. And the undifferentiated idea of these three varieties seems to have given rise to the famous *problem of definition* – the inability to give a satisfactory definition to the notion of science fiction, since the term now refers to fantastic literary works, which are completely different in nature.

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