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Hope for Science Fiction

This manifesto centers around science fiction, but it must begin with fantasy. They are more closely related than most people imagine. They are both children of speculative fiction, dreaming what if¹ and tantalizing us with answers and mystery.

But we begin with fantasy. Not the fantasy the uninitiated imagine, with heroes slaying dragons to save princesses with some magic sprinkled in, but the more recent fantasy making waves: Grimdark. Fantasy has left the hands of Tolkien and been passed on to George R. R. Martin. *A Song of Ice and Fire* represents the pinnacle of modern fantasy, but just like *The Lord of the Rings*, it is representative of the genre today. Grimdark means and does a lot of things, but it is mostly self-explanatory. Antiheroes reign supreme in lands plagued by darkness, and stories cast in moral ambiguity. Rape and murder are typically ubiquitous. But ultimately, Grimdark means there is no real hope. This is the realization I came to as I grew ever increasingly depressed by the Grimdark tv show *The Magicians*. And Grimdark may belong to fantasy, but questions of hope are just as present when it comes to science fiction as well. Consider *Star Wars*. Beyond the Death Star, blasters, and Tie Fighters, *Star Wars* inspired a generation and more because it wove hope into the story. And weaving hope into sci-fi is powerful, meaningful, and inspirational.

¹ Saiber, Arielle "WSF 2020 class 2 definitions, wells, asimov, simak." World Science Fiction. Sills Hall, Brunswick. 27 Jan. 2020. Lecture.

This is my call to arms—we need hopeful science fiction.

But first, a disclaimer. I'm not calling for rainbows and unicorns. Or robots in utopias. Hopeful science fiction can be just as complicated and messy as Grimdark. A story needn't be drenched in hope either to incorporate hope well. Take *Pumzi*. *Pumzi* is an Afrofuturist short film that kills its protagonist at the end and suggests she was just one last push from survival. But no one would mistake it for Grimdark science fiction. *Pumzi* is ultimately hopeful science fiction, and it is all the better for it. The ending is bittersweet (which I'll come back to), but the story is laden with hope. It takes place in an apparent utopia that reeks of a dystopian 1984esque underside in a somewhat post-apocalyptic world. *Pumzi*'s story is of a young African woman who flees from this dystopic utopia into the desert to plant a tree. She has dreamed of finding a tree in the desert, but she finds only dead trees. Before reaching the foot of the mountains, she collapses, plants and waters the tree before seeming to sacrifice herself to provide the tree with shade and nutrients. As the camera zooms out, the tree grows up, and beyond on the other side of the mountains is shown to be a great forest. The ending is tragic, and powerful. But it does not feel like it is mocking hope. The protagonist may not have lived happily ever after, but the film displayed the power of hope and the significance of hope—in this case in inspiring a young woman to strive to create a better future, at least in the case of this one seed.² This marks the promise of hopeful science fiction.

Pumzi is not alone—lots of great science fiction weaves hope into complicated narratives to great effect. Butler's *Speech Sounds* does it well. One of my favorite shows, *Lost*, is another great example of this. No one would mistake *Lost* for a cheery show. Almost every single character it introduces is killed off over the course of the show. But it is also hopeful at times and

² Director Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi* (October 21 2009; Inspired Minority Pictures), Film.

in ways and doesn't simply use hope as a bait-and-switch to make it Grimdark. While the protagonist dies at the end, a "flash sideways" moves the audience with an alternate reality (or potential seen in the afterlife) in which the characters come together and remember the bonds they formed on the island. Their deaths hit the audience hard, but their lives hit the audience just as hard, especially in these final scenes, because the story is also one of hope for its characters.³ Similarly, Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* includes hope masterfully. Oppressed humanoid aliens on a forested planet violently liberate themselves from their human oppressors, and thus the story is both hopeful and dark.⁴ Hopeful science fiction really needn't be all robots in utopias, and it adds depth and significance to stories when it isn't.

Hopeful fantasy can also serve to critique society excellently. And I have never read a story that does this better than our own Willi Lempert's short story *Planeterra Nullius: A Post-Apocalyptic Parable*. In 2617, the protagonist reads his great grandfather's journal from 2388, when aliens conquered the earth. The story is more than a simple alien invasion though.

We learn that the Blues view us as lesser beings and call us *Egavas*. Their society runs on the very magma that runs through our planet. Since we do not harvest the liquid rock, they have claimed Earth as theirs through a distortion of intergalactic law, declaring it as *planeterra nullius*, or "nobody's planet."⁵

³ *Lost*. "The End." 121. Directed by Jack Bender. Written by Damon Lindelof & Carlton Cuse. ABC, Month Date, 23 May 2010.

⁴ Author Ursula Le Guin, *The Word for World is Forest* (New York City: Tom Doherty Associates, 1972)

⁵ Willi Lempert, "Planeterra Nullius: A Post-Apocalyptic Parable," William Lempert, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59b049d9a9db0934a50dbdfe/t/59b5f330d7bdce0ff52def2d/150509649644/Planeterra_Nullius_A_Post-Apocalyptic_Pa.pdf.

The story poignantly parallels colonization of indigenous people on many levels. And yet, the *Egavas* (a clever reversal of the word savages, which Lempert does throughout this piece) remain hopeful.

I read for hours moving from this journal to others, eager to hear my ancestors and absorb their knowledge. Endless pages of massacres, disease, and stolen children give way to myriad moments of courage and triumph. Against all odds, *planeterra nullius* was overturned in *Snaeporuen* court only a couple of decades ago, leading to the *Egavas* Title Act through which I, along with the other descendants, helped to secure rights in and around Sydney. Despite hundreds of years of struggle, we not only survived, but are growing in strength and numbers. No one can deny that we are actively fighting to determine our futures on Earth, and now even many Blues support our centuries-overdue treaty. My eyes move from screen to window as the sun edges over the horizon, bathing cavernous shadows in the light of dawn.⁶

Lempert isn't just pulling this out of a hat either. He is drawing inspiration from the resilience of indigenous people around the earth, for whom the apocalypse has already come. To all those who praise Grimdark for being realistic—why don't we get even more realistic. Hopeful science fiction has real stakes, and nowhere is that clearer than in the case of indigenous people who are living in a dystopia and yet may weave hope into their lives for the better. And Willi Lempert embodies these hopes all while pulling off a fantastic critique of colonization.

⁶ Willi Lempert, "Planeterra Nullius: A Post-Apocalyptic Parable," William Lempert, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59b049d9a9db0934a50dbdfe/t/59b5f330d7bdce0ff52def2d/1505096496444/Planeterra_Nullius_A_Post-Apocalyptic_Pa.pdf.

Hopeful science fiction needn't be robots in utopias, with particularly emphasis on the utopia in this case—hope, in fact, plays well off of radically reimagining our realities, as Lempert does masterfully here.

Hopeful science fiction also simply offers us opportunities to imagine better futures. We see this in the short film *6th world*, in which traditional ecological knowledge and Navajo corn save a mission to Mars.⁷ Possibly my favorite story we read in this class, Simak's *Desertion*, hints at this in its ending, where the protagonist and his dog turn into alien lifeforms and embark on a better life on Jupiter.⁸ One of my favorite movies, *Contact*, depicts aliens sending schematics of a spaceship to earth, which transports the protagonist Ellie Arroway on quite a trip—pretty psychedelic, might I add—across the galaxy that ultimately gives her this message:

I was given something that was wonderful, something that changed me forever, a vision of the universe that tells us undeniably how tiny and insignificant and how rare and precious we all are. A vision that tells us we belong to something that is greater than ourselves, that we are not, that none of us are alone.⁹

Hopeful visions can light up science fiction.

Even sprinkling in some hope into science fiction can do wonders. I don't imagine I would have loved *Zima Blue* nearly as much if Zima's ultimate metamorphosis was portrayed in a purely tragic or ambiguous light—the dash of hope gives it depth and makes it a better story. The same can be said of Asimov's *Reason*. As opposed to the protagonists being simply killed

⁷"The 6th World," video file, 15:07, YouTube, posted by FUTURESTATESTV, April 1, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7f4Jm0y_iLk.

⁸ Simak, Clifford. "Desertion." *Astounding Science Fiction* November (1944): 64-74.

⁹ Director Robert Zemeckis, *Contact* (1997; South Side Amusement Company, 11 July), Film.

by the robot in Grimdark fashion, everything works out fine in the end, adding hope, quite a lot of depth to the story, and ambiguity to the significance of the relatively ignorant robot taking control of the ship.¹⁰ Some hope might just belong in most science fiction stories.

Now, I have to get personal once more. In my sophomore English class, we read *Lord of the Flies*. *Lord of the Flies* may not be science fiction, but it will lead us there. *Lord of the Flies* may have the most widely known plot in any novel—young boys stranded on an island submit to violence and “savagery” without civilization to guide them. This message is anything but hopeful. I don’t dislike dark or dystopia science fiction off the bat. I especially enjoyed the young adult science fiction dystopian novel *House of the Scorpion* some years ago, the dystopic utopian sci-fi movie *Gattaca*, as well as *Frankenstein* and many others. But the issues with *Lord of the Flies* go deeper.¹¹ In response to *Lord of the Flies*, my class was tasked with designing a Martian utopia. I have to admit, I despised the task of designing a perfect utopia on Mars just as much as I despised *Lord of the Flies*. Rather than necessarily being an embodiment of hope, designing pure utopia can rather be mirroring hopeless dystopias such as *Lord of the Flies*.

In fact, hopeless *Lord of the Flies*-esque dystopias and some utopian thinking can represent two sides of the same coin, tied together by the common assumption that man is naturally sinful, human nature is evil, and society must correct for that. Any utopian hope based on this assumption is undermined by this hopelessness. And this is the same assumption at the heart of Grimdark and hopelessness in science fiction. In fact, I find it somewhat ironic that Grimdark often is cast as unique, innovative, and especially realistic when it plays so heavily off of the same tired old “human nature is evil” tropes that go back to original sin. In fact, Rutger Bregmen recently uncovered a real-world example of boys being stranded on an island in which

¹⁰ Asimov, Isaac. “Reason.” *I, Robot* (1941): 59-77.

¹¹ Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. Penguin, 1987.

they actually worked well together, which he titled “The real Lord of the Flies: what happened when six boys were shipwrecked for 15 months”.¹² Not to mention, racist anti-indigenous subtext is rife in the novel.¹³ Maybe then utopias don’t have to be built upon the assumptions Lord of the Flies makes about human nature being inherently evil. When this particular dystopian vs. utopian false dichotomy breaks down and the “man’s nature is evil” trope is swept aside, more room is left for honest hope and hopeful science fiction that I have already shown to be potentially nuanced, powerful, and inspirational.

There is a reason that hopeful science fiction speaks to people. There is a reason people love Star Wars films, ET, and WALL-E. Do we really need Grimdark in the time of climate change? Science fiction can counter this. As Marshall McLuhan said, “we live science fiction”.¹⁴ There is a reason Hopepunk has risen to meet Grimdark.¹⁵ Hopeful science fiction can offer nuance and critiques, avoid pitfalls of dystopias and utopias rooted in a cynical view of human nature, and be powerful, meaningful, and inspirational.

¹² Rutger Bregmen, " The real Lord of the Flies: what happened when six boys were shipwrecked for 15 months," May 2020, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/09/the-real-lord-of-the-flies-what-happened-when-six-boys-were-shipwrecked-for-15-months>.

¹³ Postcolonial Critique

¹⁴ Saiber, Arielle “WSF 2020 class 2 definitions, wells, asimov, simak.” World Science Fiction. Sills Hall, Brunswick. 27 Jan. 2020. Lecture.

¹⁵ Rebecca Diem, "Hopepunk and the new Science of Stress," March 2020, TOR.com, https://www.tor.com/2020/03/02/hopepunk-and-the-new-science-of-stress/?utm_source=exacttarget&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_term=tordotcom-tordotcomnewsletter&utm_content=na-readblog-blogpost&utm_campaign=tordotcom&e=602b723b262983cd7090ed2b1df149a19067cff6d655f91b42ea0cb0272882fa.