Cultivating Seriousness: Science Fiction, Spectacle, and the Rise of AI

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Abstract

Media coverage of new machine learning technologies, which has oscillated between evangelising and doomsaying, has drawn on science fiction's tropes, imagery and vocabulary in their reporting. This has created an attentional feedback loop whereby, SF provides tropes, imagery, plots and potentials to the news media – not to mention spectacle and attention – while the news media may provide a measure of credibility and authority to SF's speculations, particularly the cultural expectation for SF to predict, or warn about, particular futures. This phenomenon conspicuously illustrates ideals of seriousness in SF: the attribution of, expectations and anticipations that result in ideas of 'Serious SF', or some quality of seriousness, that reflects on the worthiness of a text for serious attention. Seriousness is a high-stakes game, and the means by which attentional energy is unevenly distributed to particular futures – or threats to them – require similarly serious attention. This includes, for example, the use of SF to stoke fears of AI. In this paper, I focus on the dynamic between seriousness, spectacle and AI in SF's discursive culture, focusing on a spate of references to James Cameron's *Terminator* franchise following a series of apocalyptical warnings about AI and emergent consciousness that dominated discussion of the technology for a number of weeks in 2023.

Keywords: science fiction, AI, *The Terminator*, news media, seriousness, spectacle

Introduction

Media coverage of new machine learning technologies has substantially drawn on the tropes, imagery and vocabulary of science fiction (SF). This is visible in, for example, pieces that direct readers to SF texts in order to understand contemporary AI developments, or fears about such

developments, or specifically compare such technologies to their appearance in SF texts such as *The Terminator* franchise. The particulars of how such reports interact with SF differ, but they are often along lines that intersect with the genre's perceived seriousness. That is, the articles tend to nod towards, or comment upon, the fact that they are referring to SF in their reporting on real technological advancements. In this exchange, SF provides tropes, imagery, plots and scenarios – not to mention spectacle and attention – while the news media may provide a measure of credibility and authority to SF's speculations, particularly the cultural expectation for SF to predict, or warn about, potential futures.

This engagement ends up participating in a pre-existing discursive culture around the idea of the genre's 'seriousness', elsewhere seen in the concerns, expectations and anticipations that result in conceptions of what 'Serious SF' looks like, how a text might become worthy of serious attention, and what textual characteristics lead to this nebulous 'quality' of seriousness. This is, notably, not just a literary or filmic discussion: as in the use of images from *The Terminator* in articles on AI, it is not the film's aesthetics that are being discussed, but rather its role in how our contemporary imaginary conceives of AI, or how it warned us about this technology before it existed. Such pieces do not typically interpret these texts *as* texts, but rather use them to either interpret reality or to stand-in for a potential counterfactual (as in, what if the robots take over?).

This dynamic not only affects the wider cultural object of SF – the gestalt of attitudes towards the genre – but also, through this impact, the understanding of SF that readers must draw on in their interpretation of individual SF texts. That is, to interpret SF *as* SF, we must deploy a conception of SF – what the genre is, was and can be – based on our understanding of this broader culture. The genre's serious treatment in this way affects said culture, and therefore affects our reading of individual texts. Seriousness is, thus, a high-stakes game, and the uneven distribution of attentional energy to different futures – or threats to said futures – require similarly serious attention. This includes, for example, the use of SF to stoke fears of AI, or, contrarily, the use of SF to build excitement for the same.

As this article will show, individuals and institutes have been directly intervening in the media landscape on this issue, particularly in relation to comparisons of both real and speculated AI techologies with those imagined in *The Terminator*. It is not just, however, AI evangelists that

want to expel such comparisons from public discourse, but also those that fear that such spectacular warnings are sapping attention from more immediate and realistic regulatory issues. That is, there is a fear that SF's dystopian rendering of AIs running amok are being taken too seriously in a society with a limited amount of 'serious' attentional energy. As I have recently argued (Kavanagh, 2025), seriousness is a 'problematic' in SF: a meta-concern that comes to the fore in arguments around both genre's aesthetic *and* social functions as, for example, estranging, inuring or oracular, or through its connection to science and technology. I specify that seriousness is a problematic to denote that it is not a problem to be solved, but an attentional quality in our interpretive cultures that requires constant negotiation. We must consider what it means to be serious, to endow serious attention, to court it, apportion it, or, as in the case above, argue against the seriousness of an issue.

Seriousness is also, of course, a concern outside of SF, and not just with other so-called genre fictions but with literature as a whole. Such a concern expresses itself in the general negotiation of attention to literary texts: the hazy figure of seriousness becomes visible when we discuss the worth of literature, why we should give a particular text serious attention, and what this attention should look like (celebration, criticism, adaptation, etc). Seriousness is, for example, a constant tension in the unusual academic genre of the funding proposal, where one has to convince an assessor of the disciplinary, societal, and economic worth of their work *on* literature, and therefore of literature itself.

SF, however, also has a specific relationship with the perceived quality of seriousness, among both the genre's devotees and those 'external' to the genre, as in the literary and news media, where genre fiction, and particularly SF, can often be regarded as unserious or juvenile. This is not just a case of SF's 'market value'. The seriousness with which the genre is taken can affect the seriousness with which its imagined worlds and futures are taken, and thereby affect not just who reads SF, but how they read it. Thus, SF's appearance in traditional news media outlets – once bastions of authority, seriousness and credibility – creates an opportunity to study this unusual relationship.

In this paper, I focus on this dynamic in some representative examples of the news media's engagement with SF and AI. First, I more fully establish the problematic of seriousness in order to understand these news reports against this framework. I then analyse a number of reports that

emerged from a series of events between March and May 2023, which caused media attention to AI to grow into a storm, one centred on apocalyptical warnings that came from within the AI industry itself. From this storm emerged *The Terminator*: or, at least, flurries of references to and images from the film series, which served to centre the franchise in the discussion of contemporary AI fears. Through an analysis of this moment, I aim to show that the discursive culture around SF must be understood not only in relation to the literary or filmic value of the text, but also in relation to extra-literary ideas of seriousness, and the interpretive stakes of serious attention.

Seriousness

Since its nascency in the American pulp magazines of the 1920s, anglophone science fiction has had a particular relationship with the concept of seriousness. Characterised as juvenile in both its content and readership, SF has faced an uphill battle to be taken seriously by both literary and academic elites. From pulp magazines to literary journals, disputes about the strategies that could bestow the genre with serious consideration, or doom it to sneers, proliferated. Despite SF having now attained relatively secure critical standing in academia, these debates continue in diverse forms, with common talking points including the plausibility of the extrapolated science, the predictive power of authors, the genre's ability to estrange, its social function, its capacity to inure us from the 'future-shock', or the 'thinking-through' of its extrapolations. Discussions on the impact of humanity's rising technological abilities – for example, our climate crises or the advancement of machine-learning technologies – are particularly ripe with this kind of commentary. As those in the media reference SF's visions of such futures, commentators within SF get to trumpet an 'I told you so.'

Framing questions of SF's seriousness are more fundamental questions about the more seriousness *of* literature, that is, the worth of taking any literature seriously. This informs a neighbouring – sometimes overlapping – quality of literariness, or literary value. In broad strokes, a text's perceived seriousness tends to depend on its ability to fulfil what are seen as literature's wider functions, with the quality of literariness tending to be experiential, interpretive, and aesthetic (Eskin, 1972). That is, it is the

value offered by the *reading* of literature from which 'literariness' emerges, and thus the aesthetic experienced offered by a specific text that determines its literary value. However, this is clearly not the only function of literature, and literary value, if not always tied to literariness, tends to also be ascribed due to functions such as the psychological, personal, aesthetic, entertaining or didactic. Moreover, literature is also ascribed extra-personal value as cultural currency. The complications around seriousness in SF emerge precisely from this already complex relationship between literature, literariness and literary value. In relation to cultural capital, SF's changing fortunes can significantly affect this currency's exchange rates among different groups. That is, the growing serious attention to the genre can make knowledge of it valuable in places where it was previously either negligible or, worse, a liability.

Consider the tensions evoked by the very label *science fiction*. The *New York Times'* Sven Birkerts, for example, in his 2003 review of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, opens by asserting that: "science fiction will never be Literature with a capital 'L' because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favour of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility." Birkerts thereby explicitly denies SF its literary status due to a fundamental belief about why literature itself is serious, which, for him, is tied to character development and moral and psychological complexity. It is, then, no wonder that Atwood used to go to such pains in insisting that her work should be referred to as speculative fiction, and not as science fiction. While the cultural climate has shifted in the past two decades, some attitudes remain entrenched. More recently, the author Michael Faber recalled his surprise at hearing radio panellists insist that *Under the Skin* wasn't SF "because it was beautifully written and had such strong characterisation and profound themes," an attitude that, he argued, reflected a still "institutionalised disrespect for the genre" (Ditum, 2019). These examples reflect ongoing negotiations around the genre's seriousness, discussions that consider far more than just the texts themselves, but also SF's authors, readers, generic label and broader reading culture.

Critically, seriousness weighs on the interpretation of SF in quite particular ways due to its 'S': its science, speculation or other means of departing from the real world. SF's dependency on its reader treating such extrapolations with seriousness is expansively significant because a text's speculations form an attitude not just to the possible, plausible or enter-

tainable, but to knowledge and 'ways of knowing' (Rieder, 2021). To argue that a text is 'Serious SF' – or to otherwise attend to it seriously – is to argue for the legitimacy or value of its speculations, the type of attention it deserves, the type of interpretive tactics and effort it requires, and the potential reward of the same. Concerns with seriousness are a concern with influence and authority: whose futures do we pay attention to, how must they be written, who gets to be their speaker? Who and what is taken seriously, in what way, and why?

While we can argue that SF is worthy of serious attention for its literary qualities – that is, its aesthetic experience – seriousness has more often been claimed for the genre through features that are, essentially, extra-literary. Thus, seriousness has become somewhat of a quality in itself that can be, if not fully separated from literariness, at least distinguished from it. The descriptor of Serious SF, for example, finds itself deployed in ways that do not, to any great extent, comment on a text's literary experience. Even as a haphazardly deployed descriptor, it tends to point towards a text's extra-literary didactic effects: for example, its attitude to science, the extent of its worldbuilding, the consideration of its speculation, its educational value, its predictive powers, and so on. This tension is present from the genre's start as *scientifiction* in Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* (1926), where he hawked the genre as "[supplying] knowledge . . . in a very palatable form" (p. 3), thereby pairing entertainment with education. Though the wording may have changed, this remains a relatively conventional rendering of the genre. Take, for example, Sherryl Vint's more recent description of SF offering "an 'everyday' language for thinking about and responding to daily life in [the] twenty-first century" (2021, p. 6). This is, notably, a distinctly literary-less characterisation of the genre.

Science Fiction and the News

Returning to AI and the news media, it is clear to see how seriousness concerns make the jump from the genre's literary considerations to its futurological ones; and, indeed, its potential function as a cultural currency in such conversations. Indeed, we can see said concerns play out in recent AI-dominated news cycles, where traditional media outlets have found themselves discussing AI in relation to its representation in science

fiction, either because those in the AI world are suggesting such analogies, rebuking the same, or, because the news media itself has found such analogues to be helpful in explaining AI's possibilities and dangers. Or, perhaps, the spectacle-quality of SF is helpful in generating clicks and monetized attention metrics.

In relation to the headlines and stories examined below, I do not claim that this limited sample size can accurately convey this trend, but I can note that the chosen articles represent a relatively limited number of stories that I found around these issues. I suspect, however, that this may be due to a 'power law', where the wording and comparisons of highly influential news organisations – for example, *The New York Times*, or a wire service like *Reuters* – establishes a standard vocabulary and system of references for reporting on a particular story, which then proliferate across other venues. Thus, consider the below examples as representative rather than defining of this trend.

Let's begin at a very general level and establish a kind of spectrum for these article types. At one end, there is the mere usage of science fiction as a tag or non-literal descriptor, where the genre, or its associations, is used to frame the article's discussion of AI, and otherwise bears no particular influence on the content. Take the following headline from *The Guardian*: "It sounds like science fiction but it's not: AI can financially destroy your business" (Marks, 2023). This article, which covers the use of voice-mimicking AIs to run phone scams, is merely framed by references to SF; however, this usage is almost completely detached from the genre, and just uses SF as a synonym for the futuristic and implausible. Marks' only real reference to actual SF is the following: "concerns about the impact AI may have on humanity in the future are justified – we are talking some serious Terminator stuff, without a Schwarzenegger to save us." At the other end of the spectrum, where the genre of SF is fully engaged with, is a 2023 article for *Bloomberg* by Stephen Mihm: "Has 200 Years of Science Fiction Prepared Us for AI?" It opens similarly to Marks' article: "The arrival of a new generation of artificial-intelligence chatbots and apps has fuelled hysteria that humans may soon become obsolete, or worse, the victims of a Skynet scenario, in which our AI creations become sentient and turn against us." However, Mihm exceeds this frame to actually connect these fears to SF's literary past, drawing on the wider theme of rogue creations, and the cultural contexts that spawned them, including the Jewish myth of the Golem, Goethe's 'sorcerer's apprentice', Shelley's *Franken-*

stein and Čapek's *R.U.R.* These two articles broadly define a spectrum of engagement with SF that spans from the mere use of the words 'science fiction' for their connotation, to the genuine incorporation of the genre into conversations around cultural concerns with technology.

The Storm

In March of 2023, The Future of Life Institute (FLI) published "Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter". Coming on the heels of OpenAI's launch of GPT-4, the FLI called on "all AI labs to immediately pause for at least 6 months the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4". The letter further states:

> Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: Should we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth? Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us? Should we risk loss of control of our civilization?

This letter was signed by significant figures in AI and tech, including Elon Musk, Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, and Stability AI CEO Emad Mostaque. While the letter addresses a spate of concerns around AI, largely the need for regulation, it was the apocalyptical tone that proved headline grabbing.

It was not until May of 2023, however, that the herald of that apocalypse arrived. Geoffrey Hinton, one of the so-called 'Godfathers of AI', stepped down from his role at Google with a warning about the existential risk posed by the creation of a true digital intelligence, and expressed regrets over his part in developing the field (Taylor & Hern, 2023). Headlines highlighting both the existential risk, and the regret, began to multiply. Then, a few weeks later, another open letter emerged from the industry, compounding the vocabulary developed by the Hinton story. This time, it came from the Centre for AI Safety (CAIS), whose "Statement on AI Risk", released on May 30th, was also summarily signed by hundreds of AI industry leaders and educators, including Hinton and a fellow 'Godfather' Yoshua Bengi (whose names were placed at the top of

the signatories list), and further top executives from the three leading AI companies, including Sam Altman of OpenAI. This statement, linking to a taxonomic report on the particular risks posed by AI, included "Risk of Extinction," which was heavily picked up by news media. Non-SF based framing includes *The New York Times*' "AI Poses 'Risk of Extinction,' Industry Leaders Warn" (Roose, 2023). Such headlines multiplied virally through an assortment of news media, driven at least in part by the agreement on such risks from Hinton and others. The AI headline ecosystem was thus warning of a pivotal moment in humanity. From this crucible, emerged the Terminator.

The Terminator: Rise of the References

The *Fox News* website, reporting on Hendrycks' CAIS report, leads with the headline "AI could go 'Terminator,' gain upper hand over humans in Darwinian rules of evolution, report warns" (Colton, 2023). *The Metro*, reporting on OpenAI's announcement that it was forming a special team to supervise and steer any developed superintelligences, headlines the article with "ChatGPT creators form 'Terminator' team to protect humanity from AI apocalypse" (Sundaravelu, 2023). The title of a *Euronews* 'Tech Talk' draws on another SF film for juxtaposition, "Generative AI: Are we facing the nuclear winter of Terminator or the robotic paradise of Wall-E?" (Euronews Staff, 2023). *IoTNewsToday*, reporting on the 2023 Applied Intelligence Live! Conference, title their report "How Close to the Terminator Are We?" Nomenclature settled, the Terminator wording finds itself repeated by tech insiders and regulators. *The Street*, for example, provides the headline "Bill Gates Addresses AI's 'Terminator' Scenario" (Kline, 2023). *The Sydney Morning Herald* reports that "Husic [then Australian Science Minister] says Terminator scenario unlikely as Australia signs up to AI pact" (Bourke & Ireland, 2023). *The Independent*, meanwhile, reports that "'Terminator-style' loss of control is biggest AI risk, Technology Secretary says" (PA Reporters, 2023). Other uses also proliferate in spaces we might not expect. For example, the investment firm Neuberger Berman asks "Will Artificial Intelligence Become the 'Terminator'?", a short article that quickly veers into what seems to be a sales pitch for cybersecurity stocks (Boon, 2023).

This flurry also had the effect of elevating those involved in the film

franchise to the discussion. James Cameron, in an interview with *CTV News*, said "I warned you guys in 1984, and you didn't listen," adding that he thinks the world is heading towards a nuclear arms' race with AI that cannot be de-escalated (Van Dyk, 2023). Arnold Schwarzenegger, meanwhile, praises Cameron for predicting such a future, "[*The Terminator*] has become a reality. So it's not any more fantasy or kind of futuristic. It is here today" (Smart & Hatcher, 2023). In response to a report that an AI drone targeted and virtually 'killed' its operator in a simulation,[1] one of the film's writers, Gale Anne Hurd, chimed in on Twitter: "Nice work, AI. Signed, one of the people who started worrying about #Skynet in 1982. #TheTerminator" (quoted in Monaghan, 2023).

Stop Talking About the Terminator!

This headline ecosystem grew to such a size that it developed a secondary, dependent ecosystem: articles calling on people to stop comparing AI to *The Terminator*. The then U.K. technology minister Paul Scully, "urges caution on AI 'Terminator' warnings" according to a BBC report: "If you're only talking about the end of humanity because of some, rogue, Terminator-style scenario, you're going to miss out on all of the good that AI is already functioning" (Vallance, 2023). *The Terminator* analogies were also criticised on other grounds, namely, that they distracted from the more immediate issues of regulation. For example, a number of researchers whose work was mentioned by the FLI and CAIS open letters took issue to how their work was framed. Shiri Dori-Hacohen, whose research was mentioned in the FLI letter, decried the far future focus, and accused the letter of overly highlighting 'Hollywood' issues. Her work argues that AI already poses a serious risk due to its potential influences in decision-making in relation to climate change, nuclear war, and other existential threats. Responding to the letter, she argues that "AI does not need to reach human-level intelligence to exacerbate those risks. . . There are non-existential risks that are really, really important, but don't receive the same kind of Hollywood-level attention" (Coulter, 2023).

Sandra Wachter, a professor of technology and regulation at Univer-

[1] The US air force has since denied that this happened (Monaghan, 2023).

sity of Oxford, went as far as to label the doomsaying open letters of the CAIS and FLI as "publicity stunts" to attract money (Reynolds, 2023). Speaking to *The Independent,* Wachter argues that the probability of the Terminator scenario is "close to zero" and "a science fiction fantasy that distracts from the issue right here right now. The issues around bias, discrimination and the environmental impact." She continues:

> The whole discourse is being put on something that may or may not happen in a couple of hundred years. You can't do something meaningful about it as it's so far in the future. But bias and discrimination I can measure, I can measure the environmental impact. It takes 360,000 gallons of water daily to cool a middle-sized data centre, that's the price that we have to pay . . . . It's a publicity stunt. It will attract funding.

Indeed, Wachter's suspicion about these letters actually serving to drive investments into the AI industry are well considered in relation to Elon Musk's role in this debate. It is worth noting first that Musk may have had indirect influence on the conversation given that he was a founding donor of FLI. However, he also directly careened through the conversation in fits and starts, spreading apocalyptic warnings about "the Terminator future" across hosts of publications (Milmo, 2023). With AI fears thus stoked, Musk eventually announces that he – and his newly formed company x.AI – will avert such scenario through the development of a 'maximally curious' AI. He names this AI Grok in reference to a different SF text, Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), where the neologism roughly means to understand something instinctively and thoroughly. This same AI would go on to generate different kinds of headlines when it, in June 2025, it began referring to itself as 'MechaHitler'.

It is worth noting that *The Terminator* was part of these conversations prior to this flashpoint. Before the 2023 reference storm, we can see that that franchise already had a significant role to play in the discursive culture surrounding AI, particularly where it overlaps with 'lethal autonomous weapons' (LAWS): that is, weapons and weapon-systems that search-for and engage targets without a human operator. Political scientists Watts and Bode have notably covered uses of the film franchise far beyond the headlines captured by this article: their 2023 paper covers references in media, policy documents, arms industry literature, and more. They note, for example, that "the media coverage given to LAWS

regularly features images of metallic silver skulls with piercing red eyes," and that "Terminator references also appear in the informal conversations between participants at the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons" (p. 108). The franchise, they argue, has clearly entered what they term our "sociotechnical imaginaries" concerning killer robots. Moreover, it is not solely drawn on in arguments *against* LAWS. They note that *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, which features a re-programmed T2 unit as a loyal, unstoppable and suprahumanly accurate protector of humanity, is drawn on to advocate *for* LAWS as part of an opposing 'machine guardian' imaginary (p. 122).

We can also see earlier evidence that the films were considered the wrong example for such conversations, as Wachter suggests. In 2022, Stuart Russel called on journalists to resist the lure of *The Terminator* analogies and imagery. Like Watts and Bode, his focus is on AI as it relates to lethal autonomous weaponry. Speaking to CBC's *IDEAS*, he decries that "Many films such as *The Terminator* would have you believe that spooky, emergent consciousness is the problem. If we can just prevent it, then the spontaneous desire for world domination and the hatred of humans can't happen" (*CBC Radio*, 2022). He does not, however, denigrate SF's capability for providing more relevant examples, as he suggests that we redirect our attention to more likely scenarios: specifically, the "Hated in the Nation" (2016) episode of *Black Mirror*, which features killer robot bees whose deadliness is not affected by their lack of higher consciousness. Indeed, Russel's conviction on the power of SF to determine these narratives resulted in his collaboration with the aforementioned FLI to produce the 2017 SF short film *Slaughterbots,* which presents a similar story, and – he argues – has successfully directed serious attention to anti-LAWS projects.

Conclusion: The Seriousness of Spectacle

The *Terminator*'s unusual role in this ongoing debate is one of the clearest examples of why I specify that seriousness is a *problematic* for SF, rather than a problem. While I could, with a professional interest in the genre's valuing, also claim that SF's struggle to gain and maintain serious attention is a problem in itself, shifting the framework to the conversations in which seriousness is debated proves more generative. In *The Ter-*

minator's case, there is a nexus of concerns with the public attention given to the text that have little to do with the text itself. It is not an aesthetic disagreement that leads to Wachter and Russel's concerns about the seriousness with which it is being taken, but rather a mismatch between the AI concerns that drive the film's plot and those faced by us today.

There is relatively little commentary in this debate on the film's *aesthetic* affordances for serious attention. Dori-Hacohen's aforementioned comments, which bemoan the distraction posed by 'Hollywood' problems, are perhaps suggestive of a perceived mismatch between the sensibilities of an SF action-film and the details of technological regulation. However, it is the elements that may be considered, by certain academic assessments, to actually lower the film's worthiness of serious attention that have resulted not just in its popularity, but the resonant sticking-power of its core images, and their affective influence on AI in our shared imaginary: the over-the-top, camp implacability of Schwarzenegger, and indeed the actor's own physique and physicality; the silver skulls and red-glowing eyes of the T2 units that Watts and Bode find proliferating in LAWS literature. And so on.

The film's spectacular nature is often sidelined in SF's studies discourse, to the extent that spectacle can seem to denature a text's perceived seriousness. However, spectacle is clearly a lightning rod for serious attention, even if it is given in protest. *The Terminator's* relevance to AI debates – while well contested by Wachter and Russel – remains in its ability to capture and influence attention: not just through its thinking-through of the dangers of emergent AI and LAWS, but the spectacle with which it endows these issues. Again, attention to the framing also draws attention to the tension between the text and the multitude of cultures in which it is discussed – academic, fan, media – which critically imbue the text with differing types and degrees of attention, in which the text's seriousness may rest on quite different grounds.

To recontextualise the above within the broader strokes of literary seriousness, I would argue that SF studies may, at times, neglect attention to narrative characteristics that result in a text being taken seriously, or being broadly influential, such as spectacle. As it stands, while we have a hundred renditions of cognitive estrangement, we have paid comparatively little attention to understanding, in a taxonomic fashion, how SF texts

become *spectacular*,[2] and the epistemic consequences of the same. For example, why do certain images become culturally and affectively 'sticky'? How might texts that we do not take intellectually seriously yet infuse strong emotional affects into our imaginaries? As I more fully explicate in Kavanagh (2025, pp. 15-16), the dearth of attention to such issues may be due to the sidelining of wonder by early SF studies. Thus, we would be well served, in such analyses, by exploring the wider role of wonder in SF, and, indeed, its neighbouring 'awe emotions' which, in their arousal by scale, magnitude, and the ensuing feelings of smallness that such inculcate, would seem to be key to understanding these effects.

[2] Csicsery-Ronay (2008) is a notable exception here.

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