We find the main character of the Robert Heinlein story, "They", in an insane asylum, convinced that his whole environment is a gigantic delusion perpetrated by a shadowy organisation which has enormous powers to manipulate and control. His wife, friends, and psychiatrist try to argue him out of this strange idea. It turns out, however, that he is right. What we never find out is who They are, and why They should go to all that trouble.

"They" is a science fiction short story of the early 50s. It contains the preoccupations of hundreds of science fiction works of that period pared down to the essential skeleton. The protagonist, a rather colourless everyman (the representative human in these stories is almost always a male), becomes a victim of technological powers which threaten to destroy his life, or worse, his identity, his personality, his memory, his autonomy. Sometimes the threat comes from non-human invaders who have abilities or technology which earth people can't cope with. But more often the technological power is a human creation, used by an elite to dominate the rest of humankind. Star Wars, which systematically appropriated the traditional themes and devices of science fiction, finds Them in another galaxy in the form of a military dictatorship which aims to wipe out rebellion by using a planet destroying space station.

In most stories, as in Heinlein's "They", the identity of the controllers is unclear and their motivation uncomplicated: controllers want to control. There is, in fact, no clear distinction between the controllers and the devices they wield. The manipulatory They may indeed be a machine.

In Star Wars the human status of those who seek control is, at least, in doubt. The insectlike army of the dictatorship could just as well consist of robots. If there are human faces behind the exo-skeletons, we never see them. The same doubt applies to the mastermind, Darth Vader. The forces of evil are an appendage of their technology.

There is a dreadful logic to technological development, these stories are saying. It
increases human powers, and at the same
time subverts, destroys, makes people over
into its own image, enslaves them in one way
or another. With this as one of its main
themes, science fiction is a naturally
pessimistic literature. The individual is
swallowed up by the machine; there is no
escape but in escapism. Improbably, some of
the characters do escape their fate. Battling
their way through long odds, against
overwhelming forces, the heroes triumph, as
in Star Wars. These heroes have their
technology too, but it is a technology with a
human face, or at least, human sentiments.
The scarecrow and the tinman of
Hollywood's Wizard of Oz have been
reincarnated as friendly robots. The heroes
win, not because of good planning or a
superior social organisation, but because of
pluck, cunning, individual initiative and a
considerable amount of luck. By these
means, the human spirit, as this is
understood in Western capitalist societies,
vanquishes the technological Leviathan.

Star Wars celebrates the victory of
humanity, but paradoxically it is the
technology it portrays or uses which is the
centre of attention. The humans are far less
interesting than the special effects. Though
individual initiative triumphs, the
individuals themselves are impoverished
creatures. The story makes do with
conventional stereotypes for characters and
the relations between these people are
equally stunted. It is not that the social
relations of middle America have been
projected into another galaxy. Nobody's
social relations have ever been that simple.
As for political structures, the inhabitants of
Star Wars seem to make do with institutions
derived from a period before the industrial
revolution.

Star Wars isn't responsible for the
paradoxes it contains. It takes them over
from the traditional themes of the science
fiction written in the decades after the War.
This science fiction is about technological
change and its effect on people. Technology
is the variable, human nature the constant.
Few writers of this period seriously consider
human relations themselves as subject to
change, or take social relations and political
organisations as a subject for speculation.
Even less does traditional science fiction see
technological change as a result of changing
human needs and relations. Technological
change simply happens and humans must
either cope or go under.

The Stars are Ours — But Who are We?

Histories of science fiction generally begin
with Mary Shelly, H. G. Wells or Jules Verne.
But it was during the 30s and 40s,
particularly in the US, that science fiction
became a self-conscious, ghetto literature,
that is, a literature firmly walled away from
mainstream fiction, with its own magazines,
publishers, fans, writers, and conventions.
Its readers (especially in the 40s and 50s)
were mainly in the upper levels of the
working class or the lower rungs of the
bourgeoisie. They were tradesmen,
technicians, mechanics, people who had
some scientific or technical training.
Readers included a few academics, some
students. But intellectuals in general,
regarded it with contempt, and if they read it,
they wouldn't have admitted it.

Early science fiction was preoccupied by
bug-eyed monsters and improbable
adventures on worlds light years away from
the grim reality of the Depression. But at the
beginning of a more optimistic decade, the
mainstream was directed into a channel
which was to become well worn and
thoroughly explored in the next 20 years. The
emphasis was more and more on
developments in science and technology.
Readers began to expect plausible sounding
explanations for devices and unusual events
in the stories, and writers and editors of
science fiction magazines took pride in
successful predictions of future
developments.

The optimism and energy of a rising
technocracy in an increasingly powerful
nation is evident in many of the US stories of
the 40s and 50s. In the early Heinlein stories
(eg, those in the collection Green Hills of
Earth, 1951) humans build orbiting space
stations, build colonies on the moon and
journey to the planets. There are tragedies
amid the triumphs, but Heinlein obviously
thinks that these add zest to the March of
Progress. The vanguard of this march
consists almost entirely of white American
males. As far as the science fiction of the
West was concerned, America was the
imperial country. It was the US which was
furthest along on the road it was assumed
everyone else would follow. So writers in Australia, even in Britain, tended to see the US as their future, and launched their tales of speculation from American shores.

Heinlein himself has always had definite ideas about who qualifies for a membership in the technological vanguard. In the notorious Farnham’s Freehold, he imagines a post-atomic society ruled by black people. Incapable of maintaining a civilised state, they lapse into barbarism, turn white men into slaves, and do unspeakable things to white women. Farnham manages to free himself and his women, and sets them up on a property which he defends with a gun.

As for the women of traditional science fiction, they are man-made copies of the pulp fiction stereotype: sexy, stupid, emotional, dependent. By comparison, Heinlein’s saucy, rebellious women are something of a relief, but he insures that they are always firmly put in their place by their men, who use physical force if necessary. Heinlein is probably more insistent on his chauvinism than are most science fiction writers. For the most part they picked up their prejudices and ideas about human relationships from their own social background. They didn’t examine these conventions or consider the possibility that they could be changed because they regarded technological change as being the dynamo of history and the key to the future.

But if technology is the force which sweeps us irresistibly forward, then there is no good reason to believe that the March of Progress will take up where we want to go. Optimistic enthusiasm about the technological conquest of nature easily converts itself into pessimistic contemplation of the technological destruction of humanity. The atomic bomb did its share to shake everyone’s confidence in the future. Not surprisingly, nuclear disasters and post-atomic was survival stories were common in the late 40s and the 50s. Science fiction writers were quick to think up other ways in which humanity could end in a bang or a whimper: mplaques, ice ages, floods, insect swarms, earthquakes, as well as the old standby, invaders from Mars, the stars, the depths of the sea. Long before Ehrlich or Commoner, science fiction was foreseeing a world drowned in its own population or buried in its own junk. Alongside these “twilight of humanity” stories come tales about more subtle forms of annihilation: the destruction of individuality, freedom, will; the triumph of order, conformity, control — the dehumanisation of humanity. This was clearly a theme which preoccupied writers and their readers — the technicians and skilled workers who were finding themselves, not at the heady heights of technological ascent, but in a system increasingly beyond their comprehension and control.

The visions of the future, even those which are basically optimistic (as is Star Wars) are almost universally of an autocracy in which technocrats and their machines — the two bering virtually inseparable — dominate humans and the natural environment for better or for worse. Freedom, democracy, the sanctity of the individual — these liberal ideals — are incompatible with our technological future; this is the message of these stories. They magnify the reader’s worries, and sometimes cater to a natural desire for an escape route. Thus heroes manage to singlehandedly topple the system, or escape their oppressive world and find liberty, equality, fraternity in the stars.

Science fiction is a radical literature insofar as it is a protest against technocratic
domination. However, the protest inevitably has its limits: it ends in improbable escape or a hopeless shrug, or turns in a reactionary direction. The complaint about technocracy turns into a paranoia about Them; and They can easily be converted into the bogey of the times: The Communists, the Nazis, the Yellow Peril. Most of the older generation of science fiction writers served their time as cold warriors. Even without this reactionary turn, the protest against technological manipulation and technological manipulators is doomed. The human characters of science fiction are, after all, insubstantial creations, abstract individuals. The pace is set, and the future is made by the machines; the result is bound to be a triumph of mechanisation.

Dangerous Visions

In Ursula LeGuin’s The Word for the World if Forest (1973), Heinlein’s white American vanguard is about to engulf another world. The invaders have the weapons and the arrogance of a technological elite. The natives appear to be natural victims of the March of Progress: weak, stupid and ‘uncivilised’. But they do turn out to have methods of co-operation and a relationship with their environment which prove to be more than a match for technological might.

In Squares of the City (1965), John Brunner’s main character is a planner, a technological trouble-shooter. He comes to a model city, newly built by a South American dictator, to solve a traffic problem for the government. Like most technical experts, he sees his work as non-political and had no intention of becoming involved in the political unrest that unaccountably disturbs the harmony of this ‘perfectly administered’ society. Eventually he comes to realise the role he has been assigned in the political game played by the rulers, and goes over to the side of the popular uprising.

Anyone familiar with science fiction knows that in the last decade or so, there has been a kind of revolution in the ghetto — a development commonly referred to as the New Wave. At the same time science fiction has found new readers among university students, teachers, and people from the counter-culture, who have made their way from Middle Earth, over the bridge provided by Dune. The New Wave has breached the old laws of science fiction. Anything goes.

In the new science fiction, sex roles, political systems, the human mind and the human body become objects of speculation and subject to alteration. In Samuel Delany’s Triton (1977), men nurse babies, women prospectors seek male prostitutes in brothels, and even sexual identity itself becomes confused: the main character, at the outset a male, turns into a woman. The subversiveness inherent in such freedom to speculate is deliberately suggested in the title Harlan Ellison gave to the most well-known anthology of the period: Dangerous Visions (1967).

Those who wanted to make use of the subversive potential of science fiction found it an excellent vehicle for working out and presenting social critique. The ideals and ideas which are usually stated only in speeches, can be realised in another time or world — and vicariously lived by the readers. Social conventions and practices, taken from their usual context, are turned inside out, reversed, and metamorphosis into exotic forms.

Joanna Russ, in her feminist vision of the future, simply takes sexist assumptions and conventions and turns them inside out. In Picnic on Paradise (1968), the competent, cool leader who gets a group of weaker folk out of a jam, is a woman. Russ gets her revenge on the all-male technological fraternities with the exclusively female society of Whileaway in the Female Man (1975), and long-suffering women readers of science fiction, even those of us who don’t go along with the Final Solution to the male problem, will get their revenge through Jael Reasoner, a woman specially equipped for ‘man-slaughter’.

Ursula LeGuin’s Left Hand of Darkness (1969) puts across a basically feminist message in a more subtle way. Genly Ai, the narrator, is the representative of a galactic United Nations on Winter, a planet where sex roles as we know them do not exist. For the purposes of reproduction, people temporarily assume the biology of a male or a female (though not always of the same sex). In the words of Genly Ai: “Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are
incalculable....There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive....One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience." The novel is a presentation of this experience.

LeGuin wants to point out something about the way in which sex roles limit people in their actions and in their perception of others by contrasting our arrangements with those of the inhabitants of Winter. In the Dispossessed (1975), the ways of life she is contrasting both appear in the novel. Annares is an anarchist world; Urras is capitalist, very much like our own society. Annares has its faults, but Urras is clearly much worse. Shevek, who moves from Annares to Urras so that he can do the scientific work that he values, gains more possessions than he ever had before, but he is dispossessed, not only of his wife and child, but of the kinds of relationships with people which he regards as valuable. These relationships aren't possible in a society founded on competition, dominance, and egotism.

Whether intentionally political or not, the new science fiction has avoided the traditional preoccupation with the inexorable march of a non-human technology. When characters are presented as social beings rather than as abstract individuals, technology loses the character of an overwhelming, independent force. Frank Herbert's Dune novels (1965-76) stress the interaction between the natural environment, a way of life and a technology. This relationship is especially visible because of the harshness of the desert world, Arrakis.

In a world without Them, we can, like LeGuin or Herbert, have an optimistic view of human possibilities. However, the dogged pessimism of science fiction has managed to translate itself into the new era. In Sheep Look Up (1972) and Stand on Zanzibar (1968) John Brunner rubs our faces in the consequences of our society's propensity to populate and pollute. In these books it is the institutions and practices of a capitalist society, not technology, which are running amok. Brunner is obviously trying to warn us, but never does tell us how we should act on his message. None of his multitude of characters have the slightest idea how to avoid their fate. Some become angry, some make futile rebellious gestures, some opt out, but they all remain isolated and ineffective, and all become victims sooner or later. Revolution is not on Brunner's horizon, and he has no idea how the future he foresees can be prevented. So American capitalism goes down under the weight of its own garbage, taking everyone with it.

Brunner's books are powerful because he cares about the fate of his characters and he makes us see their plight as our plight. But the hopelessness which, in the end, the books convey, easily turns into detached cynicism about humans and their prospects. Behind the crest of the New Wave has come science fiction which expresses the point of view of the Nixon and the post-Nixon years. In the novels of Ron Goulart (eg, After Things Fall Apart, 1970) and John Sladek (eg, Muller-Fokker Effect, 1972) the old theme returns: humans are once again destroyed by the System. But this time the logic of technological development has become the illogic of the operation of multi-national companies, defense industries and intelligence agencies. The technocratic elite are no longer motivated by anything as clean as a desire for power; the bureaucrats, managers, agents, etc. are driven by grubby little desires for wealth, revenge or status, and are generally too stupid or narrow-minded to pursue even these goals effectively. There are virtually no sympathetic characters in Sladek's or Goulart's novels. All of them are portrayed as children playing with dangerous technological gadgets, and they often talk and think in the manner made familiar by the officials of the Nixon period.

Another direction science fiction is taking in the harsher world of the 70s is an escape into fantasy. The dragonrider stories of Anne McCaffrey, the Barjarum of Beaujolais, the Klaau, the False Giambol, and other well-named but ill-mannered creations of Jack Vance show, among other things, that children don't have a monopoly on imaginative life. But the people who have come to see in science fiction an expression of their own doubts about conventional roles and existing social institutions will also have their say in determining the direction of the future, in science fiction, as in the real world.