

# Low Brow, High Brow, Sci Fi: From the Margins to the Heights

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**Abstract** .2021 heralds the publication by two prestigious organisations, of a series of strikingly illustrated artefacts celebrating Science Fiction writing by acclaimed authors. British institution The *Royal Mail* recently produced a set of six individually illustrated stamps commissioned by their design team in collaboration with design company *Webb and Webb*, packaged in an illustrated envelope created by design studio *Common Curiosity*. The commission marks the 75th anniversary of the death of highly regarded Science Fiction author H.G Wells. In addition to this *The Folio Society*, an exclusive U.K. based publishing house has recently produced a box set of the complete short stories of Philip K. Dick whose novel ‘*Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?*’ was adapted as the highly successful film *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott in 1982. 24 Illustrators were commissioned to interpret the stories. The set is available only on line and as a limited edition of 750 signed copies. That such prestigious institutions have further elevated the status of the Sci – Fi genre both through the association with such highly respected organisations and through the quality of the design and illustration of the products, marks an ongoing shift in the perception of the genre. The focus of this paper will explore the ongoing evolution of the genre with a focus on narratives, authors , illustration and design, tracing Science Fiction’s cultural transition from ‘Low Brow ‘to ‘High Brow ‘in which the former ‘pulp fiction’ magazine format and association with the genre has evolved into highly desirable , exclusive and collectible artefacts.

**Key Words:** Science Fiction, Philip K. Dick , Royal Mail , Folio Society, Pulp Fiction , High Brow, Low Brow, Hugo Gernsback, Ursula Le Guin , Amazing Stories, Sheri Gee , Raquel Leis Allion , Dave McKean.

## Introduction:

It has been asserted that Science Fiction gained much of its initial popularity courtesy of the American Pulp Fiction series *Amazing Stories*, founded by Hugo Gernsback in 1926, although authors including Mary Shelley, Aldous Huxley, Jules Verne and others had written novels now classified as existing within the parameters of the genre well in advance of that time. It was during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the genre originally emerged and in an attempt to categorise specific types of writing, some of these stories were also described as being related to the Gothic and Utopian genres. Science Fiction expert Brian Aldiss has claimed Jules Verne to be the first ‘*successful Science Fiction writer*’ [1] but without providing any definition of what is meant by the term ‘successful ‘. Gernsback is generally considered to be the first to have applied the description ‘*Science Fiction*’ to the collection of tales he edited in *Amazing Stories* in magazine format. The term ‘Pulp Fiction’ was attributed to the genre and alluded to the stock onto which the first magazines were printed ;that is ,unbleached wood pulp paper which was cheap to produce and that, over time came to be associated with the derogatory framing of the genre. In time, both became synonymous with the other ‘*..the pulps hold a special place in the history of science fiction because, more than any other genre, science fiction cohered and matured in the pulps.*’ [2].

## Pulp Fiction

*Amazing Stories* and *Wonder Stories*, both edited by Hugo Gernsback, were a series of Science Fiction magazines and the longest running collection of the genre published in the English language. They were printed on the distinctive off white pulp paper that came to be associated with the genre, each publication embellished with illustrated covers printed in garish colours and with images that in hindsight, appear gauche and could be considered unintentionally humorous with their clichéd representations of phallocentric space rockets, clunky robots and absurdist aliens. Commenting on the popularity of the magazines in an analysis, Jonathan M. Woodman described an exponential growth in the reading of Sci- Fi pulp fiction during the decade between 1931 and 1940. During that period Gernsback was a leader in the market and edited a plethora of magazines read by a mostly male audience ever hungry for new stories. ‘*The format and style of Gernback’s presentation did not resemble that of conventional literary history: ... in ‘Amazing Storie’s’ and other magazines ..implicitly classified other works as science fiction by reprinting them in those magazines.* ‘ [3].After a pause in pulp publishing during WW2 the genre enjoyed a resurgence in the 1950s. ‘*The new pulps that appeared through 1950 were for the most part amateurish in appearance and conten .*’ [4]

After the 1950s there was a general decline in pulps which eventually resulted in the death of the distinctive format. The illustrators who visualised the characters, environments and planetary landscapes were kept busy with regular commissions which stretched their imaginations. Woodman credits the celebrated Sci-Fi Illustrator Frank R. Paul, who enjoyed a prolific career illustrating for *Amazing Stories* and other magazines, with creating the streamlined vehicles and spacecraft often seen in pulp fiction which, he claims, were highly influential on vehicle designers, architecture and street furniture design of the time. *Amazing Stories* enjoyed periods of success but at times, struggled as the market became populated with new publications. As demand for the magazine fluctuated, new editors were brought in to replace Gernsback. 'Unable to compete for authors with Campbell's 'Astounding' or newer competitors, 'Amazing' again looked doomed – but recovered, this time under editor Cele Goldsmith. Goldsmith brought back in authors such as Azimov and Cordwainer – Smith, and also printed early stories from soon – to be - labelled New Wave, among them Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick and J.G. Ballard.' [5]

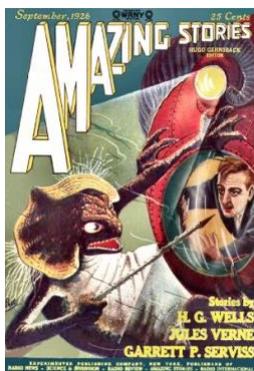


Fig I: (1926)

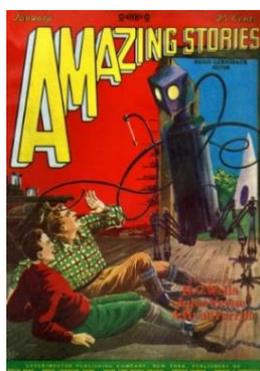


Fig II: Frank R Paul (1928)

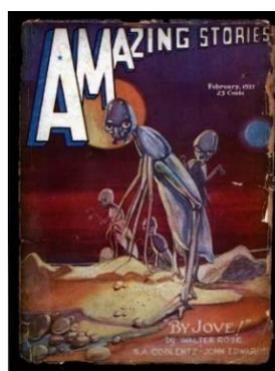


Fig III: (1937)

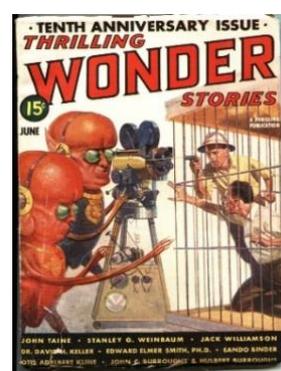


Fig IV: (1939)

### Science Fiction and Critical Theory

'SF is typically regarded as a very low literary form, often completely ignored or edged to the margin of literary study or intellectual history as rather juvenile. [6]. The previous comment by Roger Luckhurst summarizes the perception of Science Fiction within certain literary circles, whereby knowledge may have been limited to the pulp format in which the genre had its commercial roots. The criteria used to judge whether or not a novel is worthy of literary merit has often, throughout its sometimes chequered history, and certainly before academics and theorists began to analyse the subject in greater depth, been applied to Science Fiction writing. It has been argued by some critics that as it lacks psychological or philosophical depth, it cannot be considered worthy of the same status as other forms of 'literature'. The lack of character development, including the psychological understanding of the inner world of characters, (*theory of mind*) the lack of scientific fact and inclusion of fantastical imaginings and visions of the future had identified and aligned Sci-Fi writing with low brow culture and there it remained until authors such as Arthur C. Clarke (a trained scientist) began writing about proven science based facts and included these within their novels. During the so called 'New Wave' during the 60s and 70s, other highly regarded authors such as Ursula Le Guin, J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick raised the profile of the genre further. Debating whether or not a work of Science Fiction could be classified as a novel, Le Guin described the criteria needed for such classification and to illustrate her point, used the example of a fictional character 'Mrs Brown' who she placed in hypothetical settings to test her authenticity as a character. Le Guin proposed that a character should have both substance and depth and that the reader should be able to identify with her inner world.' *Should a book of science fiction be a novel? If it is possible, all the same is it advisable or desirable that the science-fiction writer be also a novelist of character? I have already said yes. I have already admitted that this, to me, is the whole point.* [7]

Le Guin identifies two main characters from two separate works as being worthy of such classification, these being Philip K. Dick's Mr. Nobusuke Tagomi in *Man in the High Castle* and Mrs. Thea Cadence in D.G. Compton's *Synthajoy*. She defines the characters as being fully rounded, human, flawed and authentic. For Le Guin, the authentic representation of the subjects of a novel should provide the reader with an understanding of their inner worlds with which the reader can identify and thus learn truths about themselves '...the work of people from *Zavyatin* to *Lem* has shown that when science fiction uses its limitless range of symbol and metaphor novelistically, with the subject at the center, it can show us who we are, and where we are, and what choices face us, with unsurpassed clarity, and with a great and troubling beauty' [8]. She suggests that the contexts and environments of the narratives are almost incidental and rather, it is the conditions, challenges and relationships with which characters grapple that can enable readers to develop deeper understanding through identification with them. The chasm that appeared to separate 'high-brow' literature from the 'low-brow' pulps was in the early days attributed to the poor quality of writing, lack of scientific understanding and fact, the format in which it was published and the images associated with the genre, 'and even though Gernsback may have been responsible for creating the ghetto separating science fiction from something else called "literature" he was also reprinting works by Poe, Verne, Wells, Twain, and others so as to create distinguished literary precursors for his new genre.' [9] As Joan Gordon points out, Gernsback had been held responsible for creating this low-brow form, but simultaneously had included the work of well-regarded authors within the pulp format.

Writing in defence of the lack of research into science and technologies associated with the genre, Mark Bould in his study *Science Fiction* challenges the widely held view that such narratives are riddled with scientific inaccuracies. He provides evidence of a counter perspective through the inclusion of Susan Sontag's statement that '*science fiction novels...are strong on science* 'providing 'sensual elaboration' rather than 'an intellectual workout.' [10] In support of Sontag he suggests that scientific facts are perhaps not the main purpose of the stories and other themes and devices embedded within the narratives should take precedence. Gerard Klein, however, takes another perspective that strongly contests the claims of both Sontag and Bould. '*The question of the relationship between science and science fiction has stayed relatively obscure despite the numerous works of critics and theoreticians interested in the genre. Many of them consider SF as a more or less parasitic literary extension of science, in the mode of speculation and extrapolation, audacious, perhaps irresponsible, often inexact, sometimes ignorant.*' [11]

A new wave of science fiction published in the 1960's reflected society's fears around new technologies including the omnipresent threat of Nuclear War, as alluded to in Ray Bradbury's *There Will Come Soft Rains*. Allegorical and metaphorical narratives are a recurring theme in many SF stories whether these relate to war, colonialization or technological developments, amongst others. During the decades following the pulps decline, respected authors including J.G. Ballard were also contributing to the field and further raising the profile of SF. Ursula Le Guin's novel *Nine Lives* explores the psychological, sociological and philosophical impact of cloning. Author Darko Suvin describes Science Fiction as '*a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment*' [12]. He has suggested that, in particular, prolific short story author Philip K. Dick demonstrated clairvoyance and prophecy with regards to his vision but that he simultaneously had major blind spots in terms of his representations of the future. He goes on to point out that a common trope in science fiction novels, including those by George Orwell, Ursula Le Guin and others is the embedding of warnings about scientific technologies and experimentation in the future. Such warnings were present in the writing of earlier authors associated with the genre – Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for example, highlights the fears and dangers of developments within medical technologies and the potential hubris and consequential nemesis of humans attempting to 'play God'.

One could question whether Science Fiction should be subjected to literary analysis or consigned to a category of its own as a form of populist fantasy writing (certainly in its original inception as Pulp Fiction) in which readers could purely enjoy the entertainment of the stories and illustrations without much consideration of accuracy or factual representation. Certainly, some authors associated with the genre, contested their work being subjected to such literary analysis: '*Twenty years earlier when Amis himself had written a critical study of science fiction, SF writer Ted Tubb accused him of trying to ruin the genre by bringing in 'highbrow values*'. [13]. Although theorist Darko Suvin was not the first to develop critical theory related to the genre, he is generally considered to be an important voice.

Others who were intent on the deeper analysis of the genre disagreed that Science Fiction should be categorised as existing outside of the literary canon. In his book 'Critical Theory and Science' Carl Freedman says: 'I maintain that science fiction, like critical theory, insists upon historical mutability, material reducibility and utopian possibility. Of all genres, science fiction is thus the one devoted to the historical concreteness and rigorous self-reflectiveness of critical theory.' [14]

### Colonialist and Feminist Perspectives

As with other literary forms, themes embedded within SF narratives are sometimes allegorical, metaphorical or satirical. In Freedman's analysis of Le Guin's novel *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) he suggests that it is 'in many ways a superb tale of interstellar imperialism and genocide clearly designed to figure the American invasion and occupation of Vietnam. [15] Here, the vehicle of allegorical storytelling is harnessed to enable Le Guin to allude to and question unpalatable themes of imperialism and genocide. John Rieder suggests that one cannot separate themes of colonialism from those embedded within early science fiction novels. He cites travel beyond one's immediate location as a gateway to considering the possibilities of other cultures and states that 'the Victorian vogue for adventure fiction in general seems to ride the rising tide of imperial expansion, particularly into Africa and the Pacific, the increasing popularity of journeys into outer space or under the ground in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries probably reflects the near exhaustion of the actual unexplored areas of the globe – the disappearance of the white spaces on the map, to invoke a famous anecdote of Conrad's'. [16]

Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin suggest a more positive perspective, claiming that although within the genre there was evidence of racist storylines and that supporting illustrations visually representing 'aliens' or 'others' that could be interpreted as metaphors for xenophobia, SF also began to challenge such views and address them: 'If science fiction has been a bit belated in according sexual relations their due, the form has been a bit advanced in its treatment of race and race relations. The xenophobia that created alien races in the image of Bug-Eyed monsters had already begun to yield in the thirties to more hospitable notions of foreignness'. [17] Darko Suvin also notes the allegorical nature of SF and makes associations between important political, social and environmental shifts that are alluded to within the context of various storylines; themes include the fear of invasion by other cultures and paranoia associated with the cold war. There are clear connections between the European colonisation of Africa and elsewhere that are alluded to within certain narratives - for example, the terrestrial explorer travelling to other parts of the solar system often with the goal of harvesting resources or colonizing other planets. H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* sees the alien and colonization trope reversed, in which earth is colonized by hostile aliens. '... as Peter Fitting reminds us in 'Estranged Invaders', Wells exemplifies the SF writer's ability to bring different areas of scientific and political discourse together in a single fable.' [18] Elsewhere, Brian Aldiss has drawn attention to the allegorical nature of Wells' classic novel commenting that 'H.G. Wells' *The War of The Worlds* (as a serial, 1897) features a colonisation war against the British not greatly different from the wars that Britain and other European powers were waging against Africans, Tasmanians and other breeds.' [19]

Rieder mentions Washington Irving's *A History of New York by Diedrich Knickerbocker* (1809) in which extra-terrestrials arrive on earth and proceed to colonise the 'savage' humans who are unhappily resistant to being 'civilized' by the visitors. He also mentions stories which he suggests are satirical, drawing parallels with the colonialization of places such as South America. 'The anachronistic structure of anthropological difference is one of the key features that links emergent science fiction to colonialism.' [20] Rieder mentions a term he calls the 'colonial gaze' (a reference to theorist Laura Mulvey's analysis of the cinematic gaze) with respect to *The War Of the Worlds* whereby the power is held by the one who looks at those subjected to the gaze, in the case of Wells' novel, the roles and thereby the power structures are reversed.

'As John Rieder makes clear ....SF was shaped as much by the concomitant rise of modern technoculture...Elizabeth Ginay's 'Brazilian Science Fiction' (2004) and Rachel Haywood Ferrira's 'The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction (2011)' reveal the ways that SF thinks differently about the nexus of science, technology, and the ideal of progress when the genre emerges in colonized nations. Such work challenges definitions of science and SF that makes them the exclusive property of the west.' [21]

Carl Freedman posits Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin as being two of the most important Science Fiction authors since Mary Shelley. Commenting upon Russ's novel *The Two of Them* Freedman says: 'I show how the novel radically recasts many of the masculine conventions of pulp science fiction in order to demonstrate the special compatibility of feminist critical thought with science fiction.' [22] He describes Russ as an author fusing both feminism and science fiction thematically in *The Two of Them*. He claims that Russ 'has suffered from the two distinct sets of ideological stumbling blocks that any feminist science fiction must confront: those presented by the internal sociocultural mores of the science-fiction establishment and those presented by American feminist criticism as well. The former with its spiritual roots in the pulps (and to some degree, its directly material roots there too), has never been able wholly to eradicate its traditional suspicion of even women and sexuality as such, let alone feminism so radical and uncompromising as Russ's.' [23] The two main protagonists (*The Two of Them*) are presented as equals in sharp contrast to the women living in the society of the Ka'abah, which is metaphorically a representation of Islamic culture in which women live extremely limited lives where oppression by the patriarchy is extreme, sexual ideology is repressive and male rule, totalitarian. Freedman suggests that the book was influential on the *Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. 'What Russ's work can help us to understand is that science fiction is an especially appropriate form for feminism.' [24] He also points out that much of traditional pulp science fiction was latently sexist.

Thomas M. Disch cites Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey and Vonda McIntyre as being at the forefront of the reinvention of SF and of introducing feminist themes into their narratives, challenging the often offensive and sexist storylines of the earlier iterations of the genre, in particular during the 'pulp era' 'just how achingly gauche the SF of that era could be is the "classic" status enjoyed by Lester del Rey's "Helen of Loy" "...first posited the equation, Housewife = Robot' [25] At that time, the authors and readers were mostly men and women were represented as slaves and victims who were often visually highly sexualised and represented as fantasy figures. Commenting on earlier iterations of Science Fiction pulps Jess Nevins has claimed that representations of women and black people as protagonists were rare and along with other commentators, noted that most of the narratives had male protagonists at their centre with women generally cast in extremely subservient or sexual fantasy – based roles. 'With their black – of skinned robots used as tools of a would be conqueror, Phillip Scrogg's two "Kosmac's" stories, published in 'Excitement' in 1930, had layers of racial commentary that would have been unthinkable in 'Astounding'.' [26]

### **The upgrading of Science Fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Celebrated Science Fiction author Philip K. Dick, born in Chicago in 1928, was an avid reader of Sci-Fi comics and consequently became inspired to write his own stories, exploring themes such as politics, philosophy and psychology. Carl Freedman states that Fredric Jameson has given Dick the accolade of the 'Shakespeare of Science Fiction' [27] and is in Freedman's opinion regarding authors 'the most interesting and important produced by any North American novelist since Faulkner' [28] Dick initially struggled to be published, however he is currently considered one of the finest minds related to the genre and the *Philip K. Dick Award* is now presented to authors annually as his reputation continues to grow. The recent collaboration between the *Folio Society* and the Philip K. Dick estate has elevated his status further. Dick's story, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was adapted as the now famous film 'Blade Runner' and when the author was invited onto the set by director Ridley Scott and, after watching the film, was quoted in his psychobiography that it 'was like having a mirror held up to his mind' [29] although the author complained to Scott that he had omitted many important spiritual themes underpinning the story. Dick saw himself as a prophet and seer and in hindsight, some of his stories could be described as prophetic. His writing has been described both as visionary and wildly imaginative. He was addicted to amphetamines and subsequently suffered from paranoia, at one point during an episode of mental illness, claiming that he was a machine. The author of Dick's psychobiography, Kyle Arnold, pointed out that the death of his twin sister and his own very poor health as a baby lead to the development of key themes he would revisit time and again in his stories, these being 'inhumane authority figures who want you dead, a deadly doubling, and a miraculous yet equivocal rescue.' [30] He claims that these motifs recur and appear as neglectful parents, android simulacra and benevolent Christ – Like figures. The trauma of the loss of his sister lead Dick to seek out spiritual practise later in life and such themes are notable in his work.

London based publishing house *The Folio Society*, founded by Charles Ede in 1947 has forged a reputation for publishing high quality illustrated books which are cloth bound and block printed on the covers, making them unique and highly collectible. Art Directors Sheri Gee and Raquel Leis Allion have built an impressive archive of illustrators and artists from whom they can draw upon when a suitable commission arises, they also visit the New Designers and New Blood shows in London annually, scouting for bright new talent amongst the graduates exhibiting work.

The design and packaging of the recently published box set of the complete short stories of Philip K .Dick (April 2021) elevated the design process further. The collaboration between the *Folio Society* and design studios *La Boca* focussed on the challenge of creating a visually striking, highly contemporary packaging aesthetic incorporating printed elements including the 'Vortex' design that pays homage to Op Art imagery created by 20<sup>th</sup> century artists such as Bridget Reilly. The use of neon colours on the cloth bindings, page edges and ribbon markers demands attention and creates an instantly contemporary and stand out visual impact. The box packaging designed by *La Boca* includes bold typographic choices and the inclusion of symbols using fonts which allude to Led displays, creates an overall aesthetic very fitting for the genre. An online video advertisement is backed by an electronic music soundtrack, having the effect of engaging the senses and enhancing the product as a futuristic, multi – sensory experience.



Fig V: The Folio Society edition of Philip K. Dick, *The Complete Short Stories*, Box and bindings designed by La Boca. Photography © The Folio Society 2021.

The graphic symbols embellishing the box are a visual reference to those found on 'Zener' cards which are used to test for psychic ability, relating to some of the connecting themes between Dick's stories, notably - telepathy and ESP. This detail ties in thematically with Dick's interest in unseen worlds and psychology and is also an example of the level of detail and conceptual sophistication the designers employed to create a product reflective of the complex worlds the author created. Gee and Leis Allion who art directed the project ,suggested that the process was challenging due to the complexities related to both the colours and materials used in the production of the edition. 24 illustrators were selected globally and commissioned to illustrate the four volume collection, each illustrator with their own unique style creating a rich and diverse series of images. The influence of film, television, poster design and comics and the familiarity of the illustrators with the visual history of the narratives has impacted upon many of the outcomes. Those commissioned to participate in the project included award - winning illustrator Dave McKean and others such as Hilary Clarcq and Corey Brickley.



Fig VI: Dave McKean/Folio Society



Fig VII: Hilary Clarcq /Folio Society



Fig VIII Corey Brickley/Folio Society

The interior illustrations are varied in style and carefully selected to reflect the particular ambience of each novel. The process of Art Direction was fairly hands off, with Sheri and Raquel requesting that Illustrators read the commissioned books, but simultaneously offering a certain level of freedom with the process, allowing for personal interpretation without overbearing direction and trusting the illustrators with the creative process, from initial concepts through to final artworks. As *Folio Society* books are only available for purchase from the online store, this creates a perception of scarcity, quality, exclusivity and desirability that elevates and sets them apart from main stream publishers. The cost of the box set is £495 and is a numbered, limited edition which also adds to its exclusivity as a product. In terms of design and layout, illustrations must be equally distributed throughout each book to balance the text. *We enjoy finding new and talented illustrators .....Most commissions are for adult fiction titles. We are looking for a good response to the text, conveying tension, mood, drama, period details, characterisation, repetition and interaction of characters, etc.* [31]

Each illustrator has been carefully selected to interpret the story they were matched with. Stylistically, the range is broad, from narrative to more conceptual responses. Images were rendered using a variety of techniques and media, from oil paint to photomontage and digital painting; there being no set house style. Hilary Clarcq's 'Film Noir' interpretation of Dick's story 'The Commuter' is an unsettling, competent monochromatic oil painting depicting a character who appears to hover above the ground. Dave McKean opts for a surrealistic approach in his response to the story 'Minority Report', employing a multi-layered process which enables the embedding of visual elements within shapes and forms in the composition and background using a range of tonal variations to ensure that these elements recede where necessary. The inclusion of multiple elements such as the masks and hands in the foreground and the figures in the background, suggest a fragmented sequential narrative which unfolds simultaneously and perhaps alludes to the precognitive powers of several characters in the story. When comparing the illustrations of McKean and others included in the set to those commissioned when the first 'Pulps' were being published, it is evident that the level of sophistication attributed to the contemporary interpretations is noticeable, both in terms of concept and quality of the images. Cliché is avoided perhaps by the illustrators' understanding of the deeper themes reflected within the narratives. Corey Brickley, represented by Debut Art, a UK and New York based illustration agency, created a striking photomontage for 'Chains of Air, Web of Aether' using limited colour palettes dominated by an eye popping neon pink balanced with subdued blues to create disquieting interior and exterior landscapes. The illustration effectively reflects the isolation experienced by one of the communications technicians in the story who is situated alone in an interior space, the sense of isolation reinforced by the unpopulated barren landscape beyond the dome in which he works.

2021 also heralded the publication of a set of 6 illustrated stamps for the *Royal Mail* which was released on April 15th, celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of H.G Wells and 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the *Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham and includes other British Sci Fi authors in the collection. The process of commissioning involved James Webb , Art Director of Webb and Webb, providing each illustrator with a sentence or set of words relating to key themes in a specific novel and then asking them to interpret this visually. They were asked to consider the image as a 'mini film poster and to aim for creating iconic images'. [32]



Fig IX: Sarah Jones



Fig X: Sabina Sinko

Stamp designs © Royal Mail Group Limited, 2021

Although clearly there are challenges when comparing the scale of a stamp with a poster sized image and considerations for any image to function in terms of legibility and dynamism within the context of such a format. In an email questionnaire I conducted with James, he added to this, saying 'The scale of the stamps combined with the amount of 'story' we usually have to convey within that format is usually the biggest challenge.' [33] I was also keen to understand the collaborative process between the Royal Mail and Webb and Webb and James elaborated further, 'We have to pitch an idea to Royal Mail before we even speak to an illustrator so we have to come up with designs, stories and routes using existing portfolio work or our own imagery. We share this with the illustrator after they are commissioned.' [34] UK magazine *Design Week* recently featured an article by Molly Long, promoting the collection before being released to the public in which she interviewed James about the design process. Each of the commissioned Illustrators were chosen for their unique ability to interpret a brief and the collection consists of a range of digital, analogue and sometimes a mix of both approaches. In terms of commissioning the illustrators James described the process of art direction as follows, 'As we knew from our original pitch what we wanted most of the illustrators to achieve there wasn't a huge risk that they would produce something completely wrong. We do also always say to the illustrators that they should do one of their own ideas to go up against ours, and for this we always say 'read the book, don't watch the film!' [35] As the design team were already familiar with most of the titles associated with the collection of stamps, a deeper understanding of themes and storyline aided with the commissioning process, James concluded 'Within the office one or all of us had read all the books except *Shikasta*. A-level study note books are also very useful.' [36]

The envelope packaging containing the stamps was also an important consideration in the design process and adds to the collectible nature of the product. Every image was uniquely created by an illustrator who had been selected to create an iconic image inspired by the narrative. Each of the stamp images summarises a Science Fiction story by a British author .In her dystopian novel '*Shikasta*' in which an alien comes to earth, Doris Lessing explores themes including concepts around free will and spirituality; having become interested in Sufism in the 1960's this was an influence on Lessing's works. In response to the novel, Illustrator Sarah Jones makes use of technologies to create a multi layered image suggestive of an impersonal, somewhat cold aesthetic with a figure appearing isolated from the group but perhaps also a target. The blurred photographic images, which are devoid of detail and identity renders the humans as almost generic in form .The use of half tone filters creates a quality of visual interference and the inclusion of muted colour palettes using cool tones creates a melancholic mood.

Explaining the process of commissioning Sabina Sinko to illustrate *Frankenstein*, James Webb commented 'The use of quotes was also helpful in creatively directing the look of Mary Shelley's monster from *Frankenstein*, Webb adds. "We've tried to depict

*monsters in the past and the problem is that monsters by nature are usually designed to be scary and we can't really have that on a stamp," he says.*

*"There were other versions of the monster we looked at, but they were just too scary – people would have been too afraid to lick the stamp.".....'Instead of trying to make the monster scary the team and painter Šinko referred to a quote from the novel, in which the beast refers to himself as "miserable beyond all living things". This resulted in a monster that is sad, anguished and lonely, rather than something more terrifying.'* [37] In light of the former statement by Webb, it is worth commenting that Slovenian artist Sabina Sinko has interpreted Mary Shelley's Frankenstein in a manner that humanises the monster. Many visual interpretations of Frankenstein have been influenced by one of the most memorable depictions of the monster as seen in the 1931 film adaptation of Shelley's novel in which Boris Karloff played the giant sized, lumbering man-made creation. By contrast, Sinko's monster has been humanised and therefore, perhaps, he appears more relatable. The rounded face and large eyes are suggestive of a more child-like character. The rendering with watercolour allows the artist to make use of the technique 'wet on wet' in which she harnesses the unique properties of the media to enable pools of paint to bleed into one another and in which she adds colours associated with bruising and trauma, whilst also controlling the process to enable the clear definition of the facial form and features. In response to an email questionnaire I conducted, Sabina commented on the media she used, *'it allows me to create an image, that consists the visible and invisible of an individual'*. [38] We can perhaps, identify with the inner pain and turmoil of the character which is conveyed through the media, colour and facial expression and in particular, the emotion that is communicated through the eyes, which suggest a tormented soul rather than an alien being with which we have no connection. Sabina commented: *'I studied the novel and I was very surprised, how much different from the most famous movie (a Hollywood version) is. It is full of hidden meanings and how very modern it is. A real masterpiece. And the Creature/Monster, like Mary Shelley created it, is just a very lonely "ugly" human with beautiful soul. So I really wanted to paint him like this and I wanted to stick with his description in the novel. At the same time, I would like to give the portrait a slightly romantic, gothic touch. As for the almost childish expression, the round head, the big eyes, yes, I wanted to portray him that way because he's actually a newborn, basically indecent creature who, because of his looks, later feels such cruelty of the human world.'* [39]

## **Conclusion:**

*'For the general public (as well as for the commercial marketing system employed by publishers, bookshops, and the vendors of newer electronic media), the name of science fiction has always suggested pulp fiction.'* [40] This statement by Carl Freedman alludes to the perception widely held by literary critics and the public alike, that Science Fiction remains forever consigned to the margins of respected literary convention, however Freedman provides a counter argument stating that this perception hailed from the standards set by the original pulps, but fails to acknowledge the quality and breadth of writing that is often shoehorned into the genre. From its humble origins, Science Fiction writing and illustration of the early 20th century has evolved into a sophisticated form that has been further elevated visually by the recently released box set of the entire collection of Philip K. Dick's short stories by the *Folio Society*, generally held in esteem as a 'High Brow' British publishing company. In addition to this accolade, the publication of a celebratory set of 6 stamps by an established institution such as the *Royal Mail*, perhaps confirms the profile of Science Fiction as being a literary form worthy of inclusion within the 'literary canon'.

In her study *'Phillip K. Dick, Canonical Writer of the Digital Age'* Lejla Kucukalic explores the shift in perceptions of mid twentieth century Pulp Fiction publications and its former negative associations with the subsequent evolution of the form. She examines a more rigorous academic analysis of the genre in recent decades and highlights, for example, the depth of themes explored in Dick's work, from capitalism and its growth and impact on humans, to questions about American Hyperreality, constructed realities, Buddhist teachings on the nature of reality, Dick's philosophical and psychological meanderings, his understanding and analysis of human empathy and the impact of trauma on one's emotions. The latter are all themes that had great personal relevance for the author, who through engagement with psychotherapy throughout the years was no stranger to self-examination and reflection. Kucukalic

also mentions Dick's understanding of digital culture and the use of technologies to repair, assist and improve biological function in humans.

She appraises associations with other highly regarded authors of Science Fiction including J.G. Ballard, Ursula Le Guin, Margaret Atwood and others who also had an important impact on the perception of the genre. Science Fiction authors in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond have received literary awards including The Hugo, Nebula and Pulitzer Prize which, by association, have elevated the genre to new heights and rendered it worthy of serious critical analysis by highly regarded theorists of the field.

Joan Gordon writing in an analysis of Science Fiction published in 2014 and alluding to the authors who, in recent decades have been awarded such highly regarded literary prizes comments *'The ghetto walls may have been dismantled, but that is only a preliminary step toward full acceptance of SF as a serious and powerful form of contemporary literature.'*[41] The debate relating to the literary credibility of the genre continues. However, through research undertaken for this paper, it is clear that many respected critical theorists have deemed the walls sufficiently dismantled to expand the theoretical discourse and investigation further. *'Carl Freedman traces the fundamental and mostly unexamined relationships between the discourses of science fiction and critical theory, arguing that science fiction is (or ought to be) a privileged genre for critical theory. He asserts that it is no accident that the upsurge of academic interest in science fiction since the 1970s coincides with the heyday of literary theory, and that likewise science fiction is one of the most theoretically informed of the literary profession.'* [42] Freedman explores the relationships between Science Fiction and critical theory, claiming that the genre is intertwined with theory. Through rigorous analysis of a number of authors and through a deep understanding of social, historical, political and philosophical contexts he goes on to say how *'it has also become possible to write a history of how certain forms come to be judged as high or low, civilized or primitive, canonical or marginal.'* [43]

This statement can be supported in light of the *Folio Society* and *Royal Mail's* recent contributions to the field. The overall production, quality of illustrations and design far supersede those associated with the original pulp magazines in which authors were first published and suggests that the reputations of authors including Dick, Shelley, Russ and Lessing, whose work has been classified as 'literary' have been further elevated both by association with these elite organisations and by the high quality of design and illustration commissioned to ensure these products have value and integrity. All are suggestive of a transition related to the genre and shift in perception which is also endorsed by the highly regarded actor and author, Stephen Fry: *'A Folio Society edition is, I reckon, as excellent an accolade as any author can achieve these days.'* [44]

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