

In the final chapter of *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Csicsery-Ronay discusses the general romantic storytype that is unique to science fiction: the technologiade.

Science fiction is a form of adventure-romance fiction. The reader is always going somewhere or seeing something new in a science fiction story. The heroes of SF stories are usually proving—or failing to prove—their own in “anomalous spaces where normal laws do not apply.”

Romantic adventures are a very old kind of storytelling, predating the novel and rooted in ancient myth (indeed, we saw earlier how the SF mode of the grotesque aligns SF closely with mythic thought). There are many kinds of romantic adventures in the arts, from fantasy to westerns and spy thrillers. Indeed, you can take pretty much any kind of adventure and write it as science fiction: there are SF westerns, SF detective stories, SF quests, etc. As the New Wave SF writers showed, you can also write a modernist psychological story (in which very little actually happens plot-wise) as science fiction.

We know what a detective story is; we know the conflict that is going to shape such a story and we know the general arc of such a story’s plot. But what kind of story does SF uniquely tell that marks it, specifically, as a “science fiction” story?

The answer to that question is the “technologiade.” The technologiade is “the epic of the struggle surrounding the transformation of the cosmos into a technological regime.” That is the “myth or storytelling formula” that unites science fiction.

There are two interrelated kinds of stories within the technologiade, SF authors often hewing closer to one or the other: the expansive space opera and the intensive techno-Robinsonade. You have read both of these this term.

Space opera:

“Space opera employs many of the traditional devices that the adventure tale has retained since its earliest incarnations.” These are “spectacular romances set in vast, exotic outer spaces, where larger-than-life protagonists encounter a variety of alien species, planetary cultures, futuristic technologies (especially weapons, spaceships and space stations) and sublime phenomena.” We find all the qualities of SF on full display in space opera in “their most heightened form”: fictive neology, grand-scale novums, vast future histories, almost incomprehensible imaginary sciences, sublime and grotesque spectacles—it’s all there. Space operas take place on a big, science fictional stage.

The form of space opera “originated with the relatively simple two-worlds scheme, in which protagonists travel between two planets: first, the lunar voyage; later, the Martian romance.” This form was then elaborated into “the space odyssey, a journey away from Earth’s social gravity into the cosmos.” After WWII, the form developed further, evolving “the trope of the free-floating spaceship, increasingly on its own, unmoored from projects serving Earth’s interests.”

“In its most self-conscious form, space opera narratives strive to expand to match the expansiveness of the cosmos, keeping open the possibilities of emerging anomalies and cultural/racial/species differences, and holding onto the option that ‘anything can happen in space.’”

The techno-Robinsonade:

The techno-Robinsonade is based on one of the founding myths of modern bourgeoisie culture: *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, an old English novel by Daniel Defoe published in 1719. Crusoe is an English handy man who is marooned on an island and forced to survive on his own. Fortunately, Crusoe is a proper English gentleman of good quality: the model bourgeois citizen. He comes from an imperialist culture that has well trained him to conquer the world much as Britain itself at the time was starting to conquer the world. He is able to “manipulate tools, fashion new ones from a recognition of required functions, and, most importantly, to extend his power over the environment through technological control provided by understanding of its processes as rules of operation.”

The story of the castaway who re-builds his world is called the “Robinsonade.” It is the “bourgeois epic of technical world-construction” and it “establishes the rudimentary design of the modern adventure tale.” It provides us with many of the characters we expect to meet in an adventure story on the edge of known civilization, and it also operates under the assumption that modern technoscientific humanity can work with and transform whatever it finds through the skills and industry that mark our bourgeois culture. These stories often take the form of a “stranger in a strange land” tale, of which you have read many this summer. Their characters not only survive, but adapt, engineer, and prosper.

The Robinsonade becomes the Techno-Robinsonade when you start using the elements of science fiction to tell this tale: fictive neology, novums, future histories, imaginary sciences, sublime and grotesque effects. Unlike the space opera, whose orientation is outwards towards the spectacle of epic adventure in galaxies full of federations and civilizations, the techno-robinsonade focuses more on the individual’s encounter with and adaptation to a strange world. When Robinson Crusoe crashes in his rocket ship, pulls out his blaster, and has to fix his air tanks in order to survive, Defoe’s old story has become science fiction. (There is even an old SF movie called *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*.)

These are not mutually exclusive forms. The space opera and the techno-Robinsonade are, instead, two basic kinds of stories that SF authors tend to tell, most often intermingling the two to a degree. SF authors are conscious of these basic story blocks and often play with them, even inverting them, telling stories of people who don’t or can’t adapt to their strange lands, for instance.

For this final unit we are reading SF from Latin America and the Middle East. Consider how the authors of these tales put their cultures into either the mode of the space opera or the techno-Robinsonade.