

## Forms Open to Life

Darko Suvin<sup>1</sup> and Federico Piazola<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>McGill University and <sup>2</sup>ICI Berlin

---

### Abstract

This is the revised transcript of a conversation between Darko Suvin [DS] and Federico Piazola [FP]. The topics discussed are many and the focus keeps zooming back and forth from the historical context of humanities vs. resurgent fascism to formal remarks on literature, theatre, utopia, narrative, and other themes. Particular emphasis is given to a reflection on the dialectical and constructivist approach deployed by Suvin in his works.

---

### Keywords

Dialectics, Marxism, power, humanities, epistemology

---

### Contacts

dsuvin@gmail.com

f.piazola@gmail.com

---

[FP] In this conversation I would like to move from the general to the particular and although I am aware that you have implicitly or explicitly dealt with this topics over the years, I would like to raise these questions anew, asking them with regard to the present time and looking to the future.

In your career you have contributed to discussions in many fields of human knowledge, proposing interpretations and models in performance and literary studies, political theory, social theory, linguistics, and cognitive studies. I think your transdisciplinary work is thought-provoking and really valuable in each of the fields you entered but, following your example of constant awareness and critical attitude, I would like to ask you: on what ground and on the strength of what knowledge can humanists intervene in social and political issues? I am alluding to your claim: «No valid epistemology (perceiving, understanding, culture) without politics – and viceversa» (“Utopianism from Orientation to Agency” 260).

[DS] Well, we are living, in my opinion, in apocalyptic times: you see fascism rising in the whole Europe and beyond, you see a savage kind of capitalism making for exasperated conditions everywhere, especially among the intellectuals. So I am not sure I see a special role for humanists here, except if it were to bring to bear their specialist knowledge, insofar as they have it, on the huge problems happening already and growing at the speed of computer communication every day. As different from the 1930s or 40s there are no countervailing forces on the horizon that I can see at any rate, so we have to get enthusiastic about Bolivia or Venezuela because there is nothing to get enthusiastic about nearer to us... maybe about Iceland that voted for control of banks? What I am saying as gently as I can is that the background of your question is somewhat naïve: what can humanists do? Be antifascist, I guess.

That said, as a humanist I still believe we have some potential contribution to make, which is basically what Marx did and which I call «demystification», or «demythologization», if you wish. If a myth is in force, once you examine it in terms of historical seman-

tics, semiotics, narratology and all the other tools we have acquired in the last three hundred years, it is possible to see not only where it comes from, but who is using it, for what purposes, and to what profit. In that sense, if we ever find a movement that is willing to listen to us, we could do something, or if we could contribute to found such a movement – I mean a political oppositional movement. Otherwise, for example, Derrida in his book on Marx (*Specters of Marx*) – which I think is in some ways very important, not least for him, it is a change for the better in Derrida – talks about a «New International», and so far as I can understand the New International is Derrida and his disciples around the world holding lectures. Obviously this will not change too much, it will make for interesting readings for some hundreds of us...

What I am trying to say is that where I come from and with the experiences that I have had, having seen fascism at first hand, the real one, I now see that we have again fascism, a somewhat less open but not too much less, not in Hungary and in Ukraine, and certainly not in Croatia where war criminals are blessed by bishops, and so on. We have fascism, and in fact clerico-fascism, a syntagm people once thought was a product of propaganda but now you see they are holding up the world. Therefore, my answer would be: we can act as humanists only if we can contribute with our specialist knowledge to some kind of anti-capitalist movement, which will have to be also an anti-fascist movement, otherwise it is nothing.

[FP] You are thinking more about a militant attitude of humanists but I was also thinking about the role that humanist knowledge can have in debates in different fields. How can humanists have something to say, for instance, about the policies of scientific research, about bioethics? How can they intervene in debates about human rights?

[DS] To talk about human rights or bioethics when a sixth or more of the world population is starving is just hypocrisy. I do not want to participate in such dialogues. First you have to say: let's nationalise the banks and feed the people! Only then we can have real debates. I do not see the point of all these intra-humanist dialogues, which possibly help our careers but otherwise help nobody.

[FP] So humanities are something like a closed system, in your opinion?

[DS] By definition every discipline is up to a point a closed system, and I have spent my all life talking against closed systems, first of all in politics, which I saw at first hand, and in teaching or research disciplines. This is why I went to Comparative Literature, because it is so ill-defined that it is practically an open system: you can do whatever you want, if you can get away with it. I am not thinking about what is called «*letteratura comparata*» in Italy, which is a purely bureaucratic dodge, I mean the 'real' comparative literature like it is done in France, the USA and a little bit in central Europe or Latin America. It was a way to talk about stuff which was not canonical, that is to say literature of other continents, plebeian literary forms like science fiction, movies – which are not literature at all but another sign system. And it was also very easy to have a cross dialogue with theory, which began in linguistics and then burgeoned into whatever we have seen in the last sixty, seventy years, beginning with structuralism and semiotics and so on. In that sense, if there were a use for such knowledge then there would be a possibility to gain knowledge through professional interests and achievements of the so called 'human sciences'.

[FP] You mentioned your defence of open systems, with respect to this I would like to refer to your work “On the Horizons and Epistemology of Science”, where you claim that ‘good science’ must be based on holistic understanding. I think this is precisely what you are pursuing in your work...

[DS] Well, «holistic» is a kind of stenography and abbreviation. It means going beyond what is considered canonical in your own discipline, looking for inspiration and knowledge at the meeting points of disciplines. I still believe Marxian thinking can and must be an open system. I have just written a book about the ex-, so-called ‘socialist’, Yugoslavia which I think is at the meeting point of politics and epistemology. In that sense you can use the tools of political science, the tables of statistics, the identification of social classes, debates about political parties, and so on. And you can say: has this anything to do with the alienation of people, with the dispossession of people? And how do people justify such a system: Yugoslav rulers, the so-called Communist Party or League? You can have an immanent critique of their discourse, which can use historical semantics *à la* Raymond Williams, or semiotics *à la* Umberto Eco, and everything that we have learned in these last years. To talk about «socialist capital», for example, should have alerted somebody of some contradictions, which are possibly fertile and can be defended, but then you have to defend them, you cannot just presuppose them because you are in power, saying that if *you* dispose of the capital, then it is *ipso facto* socialist capital. This is an old Stalin trick. So, I do not say I am in favour of knowledge, I am in favour of *using* knowledge, I am in favour of people *having* and *teaching* knowledge. But I do think that we should very soon find our horizons closing down, first economically and then politically. Finally, if you wish in a police way, where what you want to say is called «terrorism» and then you get into jail. Therefore, if you want to go on talking as a humanist then you better find some allies, who will try to get you out of jail, or to get you published.

You might think I am exaggerating about jail, this happens only in poor countries – we shall see that in the near future, but certainly I am not exaggerating about getting published and *distributed*: who can get new stuff distributed today above three hundred copies? Yes, you can do an examination of Leopardi or Shelley and you can have that published, or you can publish your own book on demand (I have done it and sold thirty copies): but anything that would be usable for mass understanding and leading to action is strictly controlled. Furthermore, in our de-schooled world, the rulers have understood what, for example, Stalin never understood: that written words per se (without, say, images) are not so important. Stalin had the tradition of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, where the written word was important, but if you have the television, and the videos and the movies, then you can say whatever you want by means of written word, you will be read by three hundred people, and who cares? I am much more attuned today to the whole process of communication – which is: who says what, to whom, why, and for what effect – not simply to the central link in the chain, which is «what is being said». Because what is being said cannot be understood to any degree of precision without knowing who says it, in what situation and for what reason. This is very clear when you talk about a novel: it is always told by somebody. If Uriah Heep in Dickens (*David Copperfield*) tells you something, you know you should not believe that. But it is not always clear outside literary fiction. For instance, in the movies it gets to be much less clear, and in everyday discourse it gets to be even less clear. I am not sure we have enough tools for that, because the tools would have to be largely bastardized with politico-epistemological tools. And

then of course you would be accused of doing politics and not humanistic work, of being ‘unprofessional’ – a very convenient bourgeois shibboleth.

[FP] This brings me to ask you about your epistemological approach: I think you have been coherent throughout your career, since the '60s you adopted a constructivist approach, considering the context and the whole process of communication in understanding plays, novels, short stories, but also other communicative and social phenomena that you studied. You also argued for the necessity of abandoning the idea of an «All-Encompassing Truth», of «Monoaletheia» (“On the Horizons and Epistemology of Science”). Your models and theories, as well as your interpretations, reflect this urge. Drawing from one of your models (“On Cognitive Emotions and Topological Imagination”): it seems to me that your activity of rational conceptualization is done in close connection with the conscious use of topological and analogical thinking.

[DS] I have always been fascinated by the concept of «model». For example, a «type» in literature is a model, a very particular kind of model (“Levels of Narrative Agents”). In some way all our theorization proposes models, whether it knows it or not, which are abstract figures that can explain a lot of concrete things. They are not simply abstractions, as Platonic ideas, they retain some features of the particular that they propose to explain, they set up relationships and so on. A «type» should not have more than three or four traits. You retain the traits that you can see in everyday life: for example, Pantalone is a type from the «Commedia dell'arte», which is nice because it is so clear cut. He has three or four traits: he is «avaricious», he is «old» and he is «amorous». This leads one, more or less clearly, to epistemology, in the broader sense of a theory of cognition, not only as a theory of science. I have done nothing nearly as systematic as, for example, Merir Sternberg did (“Telling in time (II)”). Einstein said that all his life he thought about two things: a man running on a train in the direction opposite to the train, and a man falling in an elevator and trying to go up. If you think about it, they are one and the same thing, not two – they differ in presence or absence of gravity.

A fragment from the old poet Archilochus runs: «The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing». I have always liked more the fox. In a way I have always admired, for example, Roland Barthes, who started out as a “depth reader” in his wonderful *Michelet* and advanced from there to his perhaps most important work, *Mythologies*, and then became a structuralist, then became a semiotician, then improvised as a nipponologist, and in the end became something for which there is no name, I mean his work on photography with the topology of the *punctum* (*Camera Lucida*). Not that I would dare compare myself, in terms of importance, breadth or understanding, to Barthes, but I always admired him because you can see how he was forced by the political situation in France – the ideological situation between Gaullism and a very stupid form of Marxism – to invent for himself various ways to understand things. You could not believe the orthodox bourgeois stuff, which was the Gaullists, you could not believe the stupid Stalin stuff, which was the Communist Party, so what would you do? Well, you are on your own. Possibly with a very important background of predecessors.

My background is Marx and some people in that tradition – Brecht, Bloch, Benjamin and on – usually the kind of heretics considered at the margin of that tradition, but not really there. Well, I think Benjamin was really on the margin, but Brecht and Bloch to me are orthodox marxists, they are what I would like to see Marxism be. In that time there was a very important tradition that various of us had, and we also had a very favourable

climate, that of the «Welfare State» – roughly from 1945 to 1973 – which is a direct consequence of the October revolution. The terrible fright the Western capitalists took led them to say: let us introduce some *panem et circenses*. Before the masses turn to communism, the real one, let us give them a watered down kind of social stability, good salaries and the possibility of talking, as long as we have the army and television, and we will outmanoeuvre them. This has worked very well: until the capitalist rulers decided they were safe because the Soviet Union was failing, and so they did not need it anymore.

But in that period – in 1945 I was fifteen years old and beginning to think – everything was open, everything was questionable. The horizons were open. Fascism had been defeated. All of us tried to understand things in a context which was economically favourable, even in poor Yugoslavia – you did not have to pay to go to university, you received some financial help, it was not difficult to get published – in fact in socialism you got paid for it, because when you write you are working and so you got paid. On the other hand, we had the experience of two world wars. That is to say, you must think holistically to understand. Even the American Republican Party understood it: a famous book when I was young was *One World* by the Republican Party's candidate Willkie, who ran against Roosevelt in 1944. That is: there is one world... and we have to dominate it. Everybody understood that we are in a holistic system, which became photographable when the first picture from the Moon was taken. This little blue planet in an infinity of darkness, blackness... this is holistic! Of course, it depends on what you mean by «holistic»: if it is just a mishmash of everything it does not mean anything. I take it to mean: relating it to other matters of importance to human destiny – what the Greeks called *anankē*, the fate. Which today is roughly the stock market or the killing drones.

What I am trying to explain is the context in which I was working: an extremely favourable context as opposed to the context beginning in the '80s which became very unfavourable, both materially and morally. Whereas the one from, say, 1940s to mid '70s was favourable both materially and morally. The rest is a matter of happy instances and personal preferences: I was always fascinated by theatre, also by movies but it seemed to me that the skeleton of what happens in movies could be found in dramaturgy, which is the way of writing drama and could be applicable to all performance genres. I wanted to make a theory of performance genres but I never managed to do it. I was fascinated by drama in theatre because there was potentially an intrinsically utopian element in theatre, where communication – I do not like the word «communication» but still – interaction, feedback happens between two groups of people. Those giving the message and those receiving or refusing the message and sending it back, subliminally but quite clearly for anybody who knows anything of theatre. For example, when an audience starts coughing too much, your message is not coming across. There is this direct face-to-face relationship, which has something utopian to my mind, in the positive sense.

My major conclusion from the history of my childhood is that we live between the horizons of *utopia* and *dystopia*, the 'very good place' and the 'very bad place'. These are horizons which will never be achieved, and you should not pretend ever that you live in utopia, nor do we live today in a total dystopia, there are always possibilities and openings (this is called «dialectics»). I was always very interested in this business of «utopia» and «horizon» and in what you could relate it to, where you could find it. For example, you could find it in theatre. I was a participant in the student theatre movement in Zagreb and Yugoslavia, and Europe, from the early 1950s to 1964. It was a very important movement, whose guiding stars were people like Brecht, Mayakovsky and Hikmet, and I have been trying for years to get people to write about it. It fed directly into the 1968

youth revolt. It was important in France, in Germany – East and West – in Italy... It was done and written by young people, with little money, expressing themselves. With a lot of chaotic nonsense mixed in between, of course, because you were at the borders of possibility, you did not know, you were advancing into no man's land. That is why I went into theatre.

I also began to be interested in theorizing this: first of all, what is drama? I participated for a long time in European student theatre, I became a theatre critic. Later I was hired by universities – first in Zagreb, then in the USA and then at McGill, where I stayed for a third of a century – but it was a little bit difficult to talk about theatre institutionally, except if you were in the theatre academy, but then you had to talk about how to help the actors – who were the students of the theatre academy – and I was not prepared to do that. I was thinking about what Aristotle writes in the *Poetics*, where there is not a single word about the actors. So I had to decide: do I want to be primarily a theoretician or a theatre critic? Moreover, the situation in North America was not really favourable to theatre criticism, as different from Europe. There were two or three theatre critics who dominated everything, in *The New York Times* and two or three other newspapers, and later on TV. There I started to write about drama and at some point, when I thought I had said some things historically about drama, I began writing about ‘topological’ matters, say, the interaction between theatre and audience, and how could this be explained by some depth psychological theories on aphasia and similar. Because theatre lives in a very strange situation: it is a kind of *pharmakon*, as Derrida would say (“Plato's Pharmacy”), it is a poison. The audience is prevented from acting and this is poisonous, the normal impulse is to move. If you see the famous Lumière Brothers’ movie of the locomotive coming towards you, you want to get up. You are trained not to get up because this is a movie, but the first audiences did not know it and they screeched and fled – at least, we are told so, *se non è vero è ben trovato*. So, it is extremely unhealthy and poisonous to be shown the killing of Hamlet or the humiliation of Shylock and not to intervene. There are many anecdotes about Jews in the audience getting up and screeching: «anti-Semite!» to Shylock’s tormentors – the happenings were unbearable for them. But this is a breach of the basic contract the audience has with the theatre: we are not going to intervene on the stage. This poison can be turned, as a *pharmakon*, into a very valuable type of cognition, which is «we are showing you a story you would not have so clearly understood without us». For example, in *King Lear* the ruler is stupid, as usual, but he is more sinned against than sinful, as people around him are even worse. This would not be without interest today! This is based on fairy tales: the three daughters, and the two brothers in the Manichaean dialectics, and so on. It is a very potent brew and you would not have got it in any other way except by means of dramaturgy. I am very sorry that the many things I did did not allow me to write a theory of theatre, or a full theory of narrative agents, except a few sketches (“Levels of Narrative Agents”; “On Fiction as Anthropology”).

I did write a theory of science fiction because people wanted it. Yale University Press wanted the book: how do you refuse that? People had written about science fiction before me but no one had ever written a book at a big university press. I may have had the first graduate course about science fiction or I may not, I do not remember. Science fiction was directly about other possible worlds – which is a kind of definition of «utopia», and which is why I tried to argue that science fiction has intrinsically something to do about being or not being a utopia. When I wrote this it was thought of as total nonsense. Utopia is something in the 16th-17th century and science fiction begins with Jules Verne,

as we all know. So, how do you relate this two? I have always thought – and that was a thing I learned from Braudel (“Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée”) – that «long duration» is a historical relationship, just as «short duration» is. Why? Braudel does not say why but I have got a hypothesis: because it is all happening in class society. This is the famous question by Marx: how can the sun of Homer shine on us? Why does Greek tragedy still talk to us? He has some fancy answers, which I do not share – because it was the youth of humanity and so on (Marx started as a bad romantic poet) – but the question is a very interesting one: how come we can read Homer? After all, the Greeks were a bunch of savage tribes, much before modern civilization, if you take history seriously. If you say there is a ‘human nature’, which is the same in all the ages, and Caesar is the same as Eisenhower except that the dress codes were different, then there is no problem. But this is liberal nonsense saying that people have a fixed stamp, which is basically a theological idea: where would this fixed stamp come from? If it came from nature then it is dynamic, because it came – as Darwin told us – from primates, and if it has changed from the Australopithecus to man then it can change again. And it changes in little increments, not all at once, so it can change all the time. Unless you share the liberal idea, which is a kind of watered down version of monotheistic theology, then your only answer is that there are long duration class constants, such as «war». How do you understand Troy? That is no problem: they have had a war. Of course you must understand the differences too: the type of armament is different, and the emotions going with it are different too, but there is a value – as I say in my schematic system (“Levels of Narrative Agents”) – about which the protagonist and the antagonist fight. And that is a long duration system.

[FP] What I find very interesting is that in every discourse that you make, in every model that you sketch, I see that the focus is on processes and relations, and not on objects or fixed categories...

[DS] Well, I have been like this for a long time. Let me just give you the political situation. I was born in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was a dictatorship of one nation and class over the others. I then lived under the fascist Ustaše Croatian government for a few months, who wanted to kill me and did not manage. I then lived under the occupation of the Italian army, who were much nicer because except for the fascist *camicie nere* (black shirts) they did not go around killing people, unless they were met in a battle. I then lived in Bari from '43 to '45 under the Anglo-American occupation of the supposedly ‘democratized’ South Italy. I then came back to democratic Federative Yugoslavia, which was a kind of proto-socialist State and became proclaimed as Socialist Republic led by the Communist Party, with various contradictions inside the State, which I call «the plebeian search from below and the rule from above». I studied in the West: in Yugoslavia but also in Paris, in England and at Yale. I saw that at first hand. Then I had a fight in Yugoslavia and had to leave, first to the USA and then to Canada, which is a much more peaceful place. Well, how many systems are those? Seven, eight? Is it a constant? This is all *in process!* Some of them coexisted, some of them followed each other... so how do you believe in ‘fixity’? Only if you are very nostalgic or mentally retarded.

I am not even so sure that I like this dynamics so much. Dynamics has historically been introduced by the bourgeoisie – capitalism – and one great socialist, William Morris, wrote a book, *News from Nowhere*, whose subtitle is *An Epoch of Rest*. Let us have a little rest from all this progress and dynamics! «Rest» on a ‘high’ level, when nobody is

hungry, nobody kills nobody, etc. So, philosophically speaking I am not sure I believe dynamics are the only model and the end of our modelling, however we do live in such an epoch and this has to be explained. Obviously not everything is like that: dynamics can only exist if certain things remain static, and other things change. Germany rules Europe, there is a war, then America and Soviet Union rule Europe. You have «ruling», you have «Europe»: these things remain. In other words, as theatre theory would say, the roles remain, the actors change. How do you explain these changes? Why was dialectics first invented in the Ionian cities when democratic tyrants fought the aristocracy? And why was it then reinvented by Hegel at the time of the French revolution? Because you have to explain contradictions. They cannot be explained by theology. Monotheistic theology has God and the Devil: that is fixity. Some other theologies are better in this regard, the Buddhist theology is better. That was another great lesson that I think my generation learned: something like dialectics (Hegel or Marx, or the new versions, whatever) has to be used in order to understand how the core of the Communist Party became a capitalist oligarchy in one month, as it happened in all Eastern Europe. This is a quality change, accruing from small quantities, but it seems totally possible. Officially there are fixed categories – Communism, Capitalism – however there are contradictions. Contradictions are always two things which have a relationship, and the pulls of the relationship can shift. It is a kind of seesaw, as Brecht once said (*Saint Joan of the Slaughterhouses*): some are up because some are down.

Basically I tried to put into some forms the relationships which were assailing me, and my whole generation – as pertaining to literature and theatre and some questions of modelling in culture. Probably each generation in history could be explained that way. As Althusser says, you are «interpellated» by certain things (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”) – I am not a great fan of Althusser but two or three things are quite nice. The idea of «interpellation» is one of the few fertile theological ideas – Althusser came to Communism from Christian youth and he has this background. There is a lot of stuff in Medieval philosophy which is collectivist and is quite usable today, I think. So you are interpellated, and my definition of the «intellectual» is: somebody who answers, who is answerable to some things, to some groups maybe but certainly to some matters. Some groups insofar as they are bearers of some things: ideals, values, whatever.

[FP] I am not surprised that you correlate this way of thinking, of creating models and explanations, to your historical background but I am very positively struck by the fact that your theories of utopia and science fiction became so popular. I dare say that nowadays in science fiction studies your model is the main stream.

[DS] Yes. It is also shot at, but at least it is there to be shot at. Yes, I have not seen anybody who went beyond that. One or two people thought they could fix it by little changes, but I doubt this. You either take it or you leave it. However, I think it is increasingly unpopular insofar as science fiction studies *per se* are increasingly downgraded in favour of Fantasy. And the Fantasy people dislike my theory, as well they should. Some of them are on the Left, to my surprise! There is a famous English Trotskyist who is one of the best Fantasy writers I know of: China Miéville. We are in a new game. I still have some basic doubts about the potential of Fantasy. Let me put it this way: if you have two thermometers, the one of Fantasy going to 40 degrees and the one of science fiction going to 100 degrees, that does not mean that there cannot be bad science fictions, which is

at 30, and good Fantasy which is at 35. Do you see what I mean? But I think the potential to go over 40 is not there.

[FP] Does it mean that you do not see a horizon of utopia in Fantasy?

[DS] It is a very watered down wishy-washy utopia. Of course the horizon of utopia always exists, just as the horizon of dystopia always exists.

So the challenge to my theory does not come from theory, it comes from practice, which is that people read more Fantasy today. Television is full of *Game of Thrones* stuff – which is very well done. I look at it with some interest as long as I can stand it, which is about one or two hours (it is basically about sex and killing). The practice has moved on because the social bearer of science fiction, the readership, is no longer there or is there in a smaller relict way. It was the young people – students, high school kids and continuing when they grow up – of the middle class who believed the system of the Welfare State could be changed for the better, onwards and upwards. Like in *Star Trek*. Well, the present generation of *precarariato* [precariousness] does not believe it any more, quite rightly. Why should they? So what do they believe in? Vampires, lycanthropes... stuff which is obviously impossible, because their own life is impossible. So why should they believe in the possible? But then they are in a dead end (literally, with zombies).

[FP] And these are all ‘monsters’...

[DS] That is a nice part that I like. How do you dialecticize a monster? I have never understood this. Of course there can be a lycanthrope in love with you, so when he turns into a wolf he will have a tough time not trying to eat you up. There is a certain amount of sympathy there: can he contain himself and think of himself as a young man who loves this girl, or as a wolf who wants some fresh meat? It would be very interesting for me to see, for example, how the young man remembers that he is a wolf and sees the girl as fresh meat, that is roughly as a slaveholder. But then you have to understand the economics and the politics of slaveholding, and you are in science fiction, you are not in Fantasy any more. Otherwise it is worth nothing, it is psychological dribbles: he is sorry but he has to do it anyway because it is his instinct and so on. It is also a de-schooled generation: what the '68 has wanted has come back to haunt us. They know nothing about science, they know nothing about history, they know only the momentary impact on you now. It is now. That is a very unhealthy psychological frame. Of course, we live *now*, but *now* comes from *then* and goes *there*. And it is of great help to the rulers, because if you live in now you cannot imagine anything else, except a monstrous form of now. You can tell me that Marx wrote a lot about vampires – for him capitalists suck the blood of workers, I wrote about this (“Transubstantiation of Production and Creation”) – there is a whole strand of Gothic imagery in Marx. However, I think Fantasy is a good servant but a very bad master, and it has now become the master. So I have strong doubts.

Can there be very good Fantasy? I would love to write a big essay on Kafka, which is the most superior form of Fantasy that I can imagine. What are Kafka’s writings as a genre? It is not realistic, it is not science fiction... it is a kind of philosophical Fantasy. In the same room or *topos* with Borges and a number of other people. Very idiosyncratic in his own way because he is a great writer, he is the Dostoevsky of Fantasy, so to speak. I deeply love Kafka. Perhaps I do not like the most famous story, the *Metamorphosis*. I

think it is secondary. It is very vivid, it could be filmed, but the relationship with the family, which is the *raison d'être* of the story, is not clear. But I would really like to write about some other things in Kafka, including his novels but even better his short stories. Yet now I have just finished the book on Yugoslavia (*Samo jednom se ljubi*) and I have to finish my memoirs.

In sum, on my theory of science fiction: yes, you are right, there is no better theory on the horizon, though, on the other hand, science fiction is declining beyond the horizon, so to speak. It is very ambiguous.

[FP] With my question I also meant that it was surprising for me that a theory focusing on dynamics and processes was so widely accepted and used in a whole field of study. I mean, a constructivist epistemology is not easier to accept and deploy in scientific inquiry than «Objectivism», for which reason means the analysis of a permanently delimited object within a single neutral – value-free and simultaneously eternally valuable – framework for inquiry» (“On Cognitive Emotions” 171).

[DS] Well, first of all there was no establishment in science fiction studies before my generation. We created it, people like Bruce Franklin and me, and ten others, usually in the journal *Science Fiction Studies* which I co-edited. So there was nobody to stop you. On the other hand, there was an interested and intelligent readership. Of course, they were intelligent young Americans mostly. Young Americans are badly educated, they have always been, though in the '50s much better than today. In the 19th century and up to the 1930s you had to have German to have a university degree in the USA, because science was in German. Well, that went by the boards when science started developing in the USA: what do we need that for? «History is bunk», as Henry Ford said, what do I need German or history, or whatever, for? And Ford was the ‘prophet’ of the age.

Still, it was a favourable conjunction. There was a large amount of people ready to buy books of science fiction. Certainly half a million, possibly one million or more. In fact, Yale University Press sold almost three thousand copies of my book (*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*). There were debates, conferences, symposia and even prizes. And the English departments thought: maybe we should recognize this. I was hired at McGill for two reasons: because they needed someone in drama, and because the students were demonstrating – that was in '67-'68 – and they also wanted science fiction, among other things. So at McGill they said: this guy can teach drama and he can also teach science fiction. We do not give power to students but we can give them science fiction. And the students were extremely disappointed when I came the first day in a suit and tie. I came from Europe where a university lecturer comes in a suit and tie. Then we got to be friends but they told me they thought: what kind of a marxist is that in a suit and tie? I was a kind of Berlinguerian marxist – there is this movie about Berlinguer now in Italy (*Quando c'era Berlinguer*) – even though I was a little in advance of Berlinguer: I would not have gone in for the *compromesso storico* [historical compromise]. Let us renew this approach that we have! Which is historical, materialistic and dialectical. It is the only approach that we have. Maybe someone will invent something better than Marxism but it has not been done in two hundred years, so let us use it while it lasts.

There was no establishment in science fiction to overthrow, there was *tabula rasa*. There were some fans and writers – like James Blish, Damon Knight... and I read them all – who were writing about science fiction, most of it valuable stuff. But there was no systematic, it was a kind of positivistic approach, which is ok because you have to begin

with the positivistic «this is here and that is there» and then you can go on and do relationships. We were on virgin land, a kind of crew of Columbus. You think it is China but it is not China, it is something else but at least you have discovered something. Later people found out what I think it really is, which will turn out to be false in a hundred years again, and so on.

[FP] With respect to these comments about your epistemological approach, I would like to ask you about your work on narrative. Reading your articles and books I have found two different definitions of «narrative»: on the one hand, you conceive narrative as «a finite and coherent sequence of actions, located in the space-time of a possible world and proceeding from an initial to a final state of affairs. Its minimal requirements would be an agent, an initial state changing to a commensurate final state, and a series of changes consubstantial to varying chronotopes» (“On Metaphoricity and Narrativity in Fiction” 63). On the other hand, you interestingly claim that «in its long history, the *szuzhet* has at different times managed to do without many elements or aspects: overt action, individuality of narrative agents, linear causality, etc. Yet I cannot imagine any narrative – epic or dramatic, to use familiar terms – that would not have some form of chronotope» (64). Moreover, in the later “On Cognitive Emotions and Topological Imagination” you slightly modify the first definition adding a coda: «unified by a plot with metaphoric tenor» (190).

[DS] Well, the first one is a formalist definition of narrative. As I said, I do think that we have to start with formalism, there is no other way to start. What would you like to start with? Simple ideology? Content? Re-telling? If you want to talk valuably about art, fiction, etc. you have to start with forms. In the book *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK*: in the second part I tried to apply the method of my great friend Raymond Williams, who was in favour of a social theory of literature. A social theory of literature means: who talks to whom and why? And *how*, of course. If the *how* is not interesting we would not talk about this matter at all. All the artists have told us that *why* and *how* are two sides of the same hand. This is my most advanced approach to literature, in my opinion: a non-formalist approach. This was possible because Victorians were extremely self-conscious. In England you find tons of handbooks with data, biographies of all the writers, where they studied, their families, where they came from... the data are there. And I found out that out of two or three hundred writers, three or four were from working class or artisan families. A few dozens were from upper class but the rest was middle class. I do not believe in automatic relations between your class and the type of thing that you write, nonetheless obviously there is a relationship. I tried to apply the social theory to a corpus of 450 books I found in the basement of the British Library museum. It took me eighteen months of my life to write that book: to find the bibliography, to read it all, to write about it. Eleven months of a sabbatical year, plus three summers of two-plus months: it is too expensive. To do the same with two or three thousand books you would need an academy of science, a group of people well financed, roughly of the same ideological horizon – the one we are talking about here: things happening in processes, etc. – but we do not have this. We do not have a well funded, independent, progressive, cognitive organization. We have a lot of totally non-independent and reactionary cognitive organizations, they are called «think tanks». We have very few of them which are anti-capitalist. It is one of the reasons for which the great experiment of the October revolution – including its consequences (Yugoslavia, China, etc.) – has failed. Because they did not have

think tanks. They did not give the intellectuals independence and they did not give them a cognitive orientation.

I admire – by contraries – people like Meir Sternberg, Thomas Pavel or Lubomir Doležel, who dedicate their whole life to one thing, doing it well, and in the best cases, such that of Sternberg, they insist that it is *relational*. Although in order to make his point he may downplay the formalism a little too much, for my taste, but of course every pioneer has to make his point, he cannot be just. My relational horizon is not the same as Sternberg's. When I wrote about science fiction theory, about ten years ago, I supplemented my old definition of utopia – «The semiotic construction of a particular community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, & relationships between people are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community; this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis» – with a codicil: «the 'perfection' is judged from the point of view or within the value-system of a discontented social class or congerie of classes, of people who suffer of the existing system and think how to change it» (“Theses on Dystopia 2001” 188). Sternberg speaks with great effect and to great results about a kind of general reader, like in the case of unreliable narration conceived as an effect on the reader (“Reconceptualizing Narratology” 47). But where do the different readers that will believe or not the narrator come from? Have their response anything to do with social class, profession, age, gender? This is a too abstract model for my taste. I would like to see this correlated to actual readers. How do you read Dostoevsky today, is the Russian people really the incarnation of Christ? In the 17th century, how would monarchists and republican have read Andrew Marvell's great ode on the beheading of king Charles (*An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return From Ireland*)? Obviously very differently. Marvell was a puritan speaking about his enemy as magnanimously as Aeschylus spoke about the Persians (*The Persians*). This is the humanizing trait of poetry. I am sure that Marvell as a politician would have voted for the beheading of the king, but he could also appreciate his chivalrous qualities. What I am saying is that, if I would have time to write a theory of literature, I would focus on the behaviours of such and such groups – which do not have to be social classes. I tried to write a little about this when I wrote about «types» (“Levels of Narrative Agents”; “On Fiction as Anthropology”). In that sense I would totally agree with a relational, as against a static, formalist approach. Relations cannot exist unless you have a *form* that relates to something. If you have chaos, inconsistency, relations occur only in unaccountable ways. Chaos relates in chaotic ways. It is one of my great regrets that I have not managed to do a theory of theatre, or a theory of narrative agents. We are all traversed by history, and shaped by it, and there is a price to pay for everything you do. The price is your time, the supreme price. The human body pays in its energy, its possibilities in time.

I guess I also had a very bad trait in terms of influence and power. I do not like being a boss, even in the research field. I have had relatively few PhD students, because usually your PhDs are in your research team. I did this once in my lifetime, I started but I immediately repented: too much paperwork. I want to sit down and think, and teach and talk. I do not want to organize things and fill forms, which were bad even then and today are horrible, I gather. I resigned from *Science Fiction Studies* after seven years because I was tired, it was an awful lot of work. Sternberg knows it very well but he remained stuck to *Poetics Today* much longer, he said 40% of his life was devoted to it (“Reconceptualizing Narratology” 44). 40% of my life between 1973 and 1981 was devoted to *Science Fiction Studies*, so when does one write? Never mind what some laughingly called «private life».

If you look at my biography, I have been vice-president of fifteen things, I have never been the president of one of them. Perhaps it is not a good trait, it is anti-collectivistic, but when you start writing and thinking you realize that *ars longa vita brevis* (Hippocrates): «The life so short, the craft so long to learn» (Chaucer).

## Bibliography

- Aeschylus. *The Persians*. Trans. Janet Lembke and C. J. Herington. New York: Oxford UP, 1981. Print.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York–London: Monthly Review Press, 1971. 127–86. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.
- . *Michelet*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1987. Print.
- . *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Vintage, 2009. Print.
- Braudel, Fernand. "Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée." *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 13.4 (1958): 725–53. Print.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* [Slaughterhouses]. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969. Print.
- Chaucer. "The Parliament of Fowles." *Wikisource* 22 Apr. 2011. Web. 14 Jul. 2014.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Plato's Pharmacy." *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. London: Athlone, 1981. 61–172. Print.
- . *Specters of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Hippocrates. "The Genuine Works of Hippocrates." Ed. Charles D. Adams. *Perseus Digital Library*. Web. 14 Jul. 2014.
- Marvell, Andrew. "An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return From Ireland." *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*. Ed. by Nigel Smith. Edinburgh: Pearson, 2003. 267–79. Print.
- Quando c'era Berlinguer*. Dir. Walter Veltroni. BIM, 2014. Film.
- Sternberg, Meir. "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity." *Poetics Today* 13.3 (1992): 463–541. Print.
- . "Reconceptualizing Narratology. Arguments for a Functionalist and Constructivist Approach to Narrative." *Enthymema* 4 (2011): 35–50. Web. 14 Jul. 2014.
- Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven-London: Yale UP, 1979. Print.
- . "Transubstantiation of Production and Creation: Metaphoric Imagery in the Grundrisse." *Minnesota Review* 18 (1982): 102–15. Print.

- . "Levels of Narrative Agents." *Theory of Poetic Form: Proceedings of the X Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*. Ed. Claudio Guillén. New York: Garland, 1985. 227–32. Print.
- . "On Fiction as Anthropology: Agential Analysis, Types, and the Classical Chinese Novel." *Literature and Anthropology*. Ed. by Jonathan Hall and Ackbar Abbas. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1986. 116–46. Print.
- . "On Metaphoricity and Narrativity in Fiction." *SubStance* 48 (1986): 51–67. Print.
- . *Victorian Science Fiction in the U. K.: The Discourses of Knowledge and of Power*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983. Print.
- . "On Cognitive Emotions and Topological Imagination." *Versus* 68-69 (1994): 165–201. Print.
- . "Theses on Dystopia 2001." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Eds. R. Baccolini and T. Moylan. New York-London: Routledge, 2003. 187–201. Print.
- . "On the Horizons of Epistemology and Science." *Critical Quarterly* 52.1 (2010): 68–101. Print.
- . *Samo jednom se ljubi: radiografija SFR Jugoslavije*. Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung,