

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Liverpool
Unit of Assessment: 29 - English Language and Literature
Title of case study: “ <i>Out of this World: Science Fiction But Not As You Know It</i> ”: British Library Exhibition 20 May-26 September 2011
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This study details the impact of the first British Library exhibition on science fiction, produced in partnership with the Discovery Channel. The exhibition attracted 114,878 visitors (target attendance was 100,000), far beyond any “core” readership, and featured over 200 books, films, recordings, manuscripts, magazines and objects. Exploring sometimes conflicting ideas of how science fiction developed over 2000 years, and what it does, the exhibition gave a cultural and historical context for science fiction as an international and historically rich form of speculative literature. It also generated new interest amongst diverse audiences - including in libraries, the media, and in schools - and transformed popular perceptions (of both core fans and literary disparagers) of science fiction as a genre, and the role of women in the genre.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The Department of English has a long-standing specialism in science fiction (Prof. David Seed; Mr. Andy Sawyer). The University of Liverpool is home to the UK’s major research library of science fiction (deposited 1993) and the largest English-language collection in Europe. Andy Sawyer is librarian of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection and has taught specialist science fiction modules within the Department of English from 2002-2012; he was director of the MA in Science Fiction Studies, established by Professor David Seed (1994). Sawyer has long established science fiction research interests/ publications and is particularly interested in how science fiction continually crystallises out of other speculative fields, such as the way the pastoral “otherworld” (a useful mode for satire and criticism in the 16th and 17th centuries) is echoed in the work of writers like Ursula K. Le Guin. He is currently researching 1950s science fiction and the early nineteenth century science fiction writer Jane Webb (Jane Loudon), whose <i>The Mummy</i> (1827) began to develop a recognisably modern rhetoric of science fiction.</p> <p>Research by Seed, by Sawyer and by completing postgraduate students (Gordon MacNeill, 2009; Clare Parody, 2012; A.P. Canavan, 2012; Chris Pak, 2013) under their supervision within the Department has been published in monographs, journals such as <i>Science Fiction Studies</i> and <i>Extrapolation</i>. Research has also been disseminated at international conferences such as the annual Science Fiction Research Association Conferences, The British Society for Literature and Science conferences, conferences organised or sponsored by the Science Fiction Foundation, and the “Current Research in Speculative Fiction” postgraduate conferences held in Liverpool from 2011. Nichols, a current part-time PGR student, publishes widely on Ray Bradbury and Science Fiction and has been appointed co-editor of the critical edition of Bradbury’s stories (Kent State UP). Among recently-qualified postgraduates, Chris Pak, winner of the Science Fiction Foundation essay prize (2011) and the Mary Kay Bray award (2013) for best essay in the Science Fiction Review Association’s <i>SFRA Review</i>, has organised two SF conferences in Liverpool (2011, 2012); the series continues in 2013 under the organisation of a current PGR, Glyn Morgan. Pak is taking part in the AHRC-funded collaborative skills project ‘Silent Spring’, in collaboration with the British Association for Literature and Science.</p> <p>Seed’s work has been central in developing the understanding of science fiction as a distinct and complex genre. This research has been also disseminated to a wider audience through “popular” books such as Seed’s <i>Science Fiction: A Very Short Introduction</i> (OUP, 2011), Seed’s Oxford University Press blog (7000 plus subscribers), talks and panel appearances at national and international science fiction conventions, such as the World Science Fiction Convention (held most recently in the UK in 2005) aimed at knowledgeable general readers and writers. Seed also edited the Blackwell Companion to Science Fiction and is General Editor of Liverpool University Press’s</p>

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“SF Texts and Studies” series which has published over 40 titles since 1994, adding to Liverpool’s status as a centre of study and research in the field.

In 2002 the AHRC awarded £177,000 to **Dr. Maureen Watry** (Head of Special Collections, University of Liverpool) and Sawyer to create a research gateway based on the University Library’s science fiction collections, including the Olaf Stapledon and John Wyndham archives. The three-year project resulted in a [web interface with sophisticated search tools](#) that give access to records of the collections’ resources and supports local, national and international research.

This platform provided seamless searching of records of all published materials in the collections and, uniquely, included records of individual articles within journals and fanzines. This released a large amount of critical material previously inaccessible to scholars and (through Sawyer’s links to national and international groups interested in the history, study and reading of science fiction and fantasy) made this material accessible to both academic scholars and amateur (fan) writers in the field.

In curating the exhibition Sawyer drew on his experience developing the study of science fiction at Liverpool over twenty years, and specifically on his research into the formation during the nineteenth century of what became called ‘science fiction’ in the 1920s and the way its themes and structures are taken up by writers who do not consider themselves “genre” writers. A discussion of the thinking behind this appears in an interview for the [“London Calling” website](#).

Sawyer also drew on current and yet unpublished research on the relationship between Jane Webb and Mary Shelley presented at the conference on Jane Webb in June 2011 (Trinity College, Leeds). He also drew more widely on the idea of the “story of the future” inspired by Professor I. F. Clarke whose work began in Liverpool in 1950 and whose papers are now in the University Library.

3. References to the research

Sawyer, Andy (2006) Ursula K. Le Guin and the pastoral mode. *Extrapolation* (vol 47 issue 3) pp. 396-416.

Sawyer Andy. (2011) ‘The Science Fiction Short Story’. In: Cox, Ailsa ed(s). *Teaching the Short Story*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan. pp 96-116.

Sawyer, Andy. (2011) ‘Kazuo Ishiguro’s ‘Never Let Me Go’ and “outsider science fiction”.’ In: Groes, Sebastian & Lewis, Barry. ed(s). *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan. pp 236-246.

Sawyer, Andy and Seed, David (eds.) (2001) *Speaking Science Fiction*. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press.

Seed, David, (1999) *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film*. Edinburgh. Edinburgh UP.

Pak, Chris (2011) ‘A Fantastic Reflex of Itself, An Echo, A Symbol, A Myth, A Crazy Dream’: Terraforming as Landscaping Nature’s Otherness in H. G. Wells’s *The Shape of Things to Come* and Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*. *Foundation: the International Review of Science Fiction*. Vol. 40 No. 111 p14-31
Winner of the 2011 Science Fiction Foundation essay prize

AHRC Resource Enhancement Award (English Language and Literature) April 2002 – October 2005, £177,441 to Watry and Sawyer

4. Details of the impact

Feedback and commentary indicate that *Out of This World* was successful in bringing new

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audiences into the British Library, by representing a view of science fiction that challenged the preconceptions of fans and non-fans through presenting searching questions about the origins and function of the genre. The exhibition highlighted significant but under-considered examples, and asked a diverse audience to reconsider “received wisdom” on matters such as the role of women writers (e.g. Margaret Cavendish, Mary Shelley, the Brontë Sisters, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Atwood) in creating science fiction. China Miéville (author) argued in his opening speech that, ‘Part of the point is to bring those to the British Library who would not necessarily otherwise come but to bring those who would otherwise come to the BL into the science fiction room and to point out to people who think that they have no interest in this field that actually they should be interested in science fiction but they have been interested in it all along, without necessarily knowing it.’

While the exhibition introduced the various interpretations of science fiction to a broad ‘cultural’ audience which tended to ignore the field or view it through the lens of popular television programmes, it also challenged the opinions of committed fans who might have previously found themselves suspicious of more “literary” interpretations. ([BBC report May 2011](#) Miéville). One science fiction fan wrote, typically, ‘[Really interesting, really informative. Made me want to go away and read more sci fi plus 'discover' different authors](#)’. Another wrote: ‘[The first display defied my expectations confronting me with work I'm either unfamiliar with or hadn't previously considered in the context of science fiction](#)’.

The scale and reach of the exhibition and associated school visits is described below and the feedback from audiences through media and social media is used to support the impact claimed.

Out of this World was presented in association with the Discovery Channel, which produced a series of four TV films on science fiction topics. It attracted a broad audience of readers, teachers, school and university students and academics (footfall 114,878; target attendance was 100,000), and extended far beyond the core “fan” audience. The audience for the talks and other events was ‘drawn from a wide variety of ages and backgrounds, with a relatively even gender balance.’ (BL report). [An associated blog](#) attracted about 800 views per week during the duration of the exhibition and was still attracting 200 a week in March 2012.

A programme of 27 talks and associated events attracted 5,615 (the second highest total for any events programme yet run in association with a BL exhibition and comfortably in excess of the target 4,500). Events included talks and panel discussions by writers such as China Miéville (20 May); Iain M Banks (6 June); David Lodge and Stephen Baxter (8 June); Audrey Niffenegger (10 June); Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss (21 June) and Alan Moore (4 July). Other talks included Brian Appleyard, Jack Cohen, Ian Stewart and others on “Aliens” (18 June); Richard Holmes on Mary Shelley (22 June); Niall Ferguson on Alternative History (29 June); a discussion on cloning (1 August) and a celebration of the work of Robert Holdstock (2 September). The “Worlds of Wonder” discussion of the future of speculative fiction included Rachel Armstrong, Neil Gaiman, Peter F. Hamilton and critic Kari Sperring (4 September); and there was a discussion of the work of J. G. Ballard (23 September).

Other events included a rehearsed reading of Karel Capek’s play *RUR: Rossum’s Universal Robots* (6 July) and the launch of *Lemistry*, a tribute volume to Polish writer Stanislaw Lem, (9 September). Musicians George Clinton and Nona Hendryx talked about science fiction influences on their lavish stage shows and albums, and a night of futuristic music on 17 June saw The Radio Science Orchestra and Global Communication perform live at the British Library.

A separate, aligned programme of *school visits and educational events* resulted in 3228 attendees taking part in workshops; 79 teachers attending CPD events, and 496 participants attending family events. Other events included: study days for ‘A’ level students; a young researchers’ project working with students at risk of exclusion; workshops for local Camden Primary and Secondary Schools as part of *Pop Up* (a Festival of Stories taking place in summer 2011 in the Kings Cross area).

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Out of this World attracted much national and international press, radio and TV coverage and interest, in particular from places which might have previously considered science fiction a minority interest, including: *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Mail* online, CCTV News (China Central Television 24-hour news service); BBC2 "Culture Show". The *Times Higher Education Supplement*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *New Scientist*, *New York Review of Science Fiction*; the *Huffington Post*. [The Daily Telegraph](#) wrote that 'Seeing the history of one genre in one room is extraordinary....*Out Of This World* redefines the sci-fi genre, showing the ways in which we think about ourselves in relation to others: aliens, humans or our future selves. It is a means of reflecting, prophesising and allegorising the world and the human condition.'

The exhibition's emphasis on the role of women in the genre was also significant. It triggered a BBC Radio 4 *Woman's Hour* discussion, on 25 May 2011, that asked 'Is Science Fiction Still A Male-Dominated Genre?' Sawyer advised the producer on possible speakers. Spin-off talks included events at Alfreton Library, Derbyshire and Toxteth Library, Liverpool connected with the *Lemistry* volume, talks at the Oxford Literary festival (19 March, 2012) in company with the author Gwyneth Jones, and the Frodsham Literary festival ("Weaver Words") September, 2012.

[A recent article in The Huffington Post](#) cites the exhibition as a key moment in garnering a significant interest by mainstream cultural institutions in science fiction.

As a direct result of *Out of this World*, The Science Fiction Foundation Collection has been invited to exhibit at the forthcoming World Science Fiction Convention (London, August 2014) which will attract 4-5,000 people including writers, publishers, general readers and academics.

Another significant outcome was the recognition of the exhibition by the British Science Fiction Association, who gave it a "Specially Commended" award for 'its success in encouraging the general reader to explore and enjoy science fiction' at the Easter SF Convention in 2012.

Out of this World has also altered the *British Library's* perception and expectation of its own reach and impact. A spokesperson for the British Library has stated that the 'SF exhibition helped convince them that there is an appetite for less traditional displays', which had a direct effect on their commissioning a new exhibition on comics called 'Anarchy Between the Lines'

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Exhibitions Officer at the British Library, can be contacted to corroborate the impact of the research on the planning and structuring of the exhibition, including the selection of objects and the reasons for their selection.
2. Chief Events Officer at the British Library, can be contacted to corroborate claims about the associated events that were planned to support the exhibition and the response to them from members of the public from British Library feedback.
3. Learning and Digital Programmes Manager at the British Library, can be contacted to verify claims regarding the [educational programme](#) associated with the exhibition and its response.
4. Numerous press/TV reports are still available on the web, including [CCTV News report](#) (China Central Television 24-hour news service), demonstrating the world-wide interest in the exhibition. This was previously available on CCTV website but is now hosted on the University of Liverpool's website for the purpose of this exercise.
5. [Article in the Mail Online](#), 20th May 2011, demonstrating the roots of the exhibition in popular fears of invasion.
6. Article by Roger Luckhurst, "[Other-worldly Wise](#)" in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* 12 May 2011, demonstrating how the exhibition shows science fiction questioning our idea of the future.
7. [Article in The Guardian](#) (24 March 2011) corroborating coverage of the relevance and range of the exhibition.
8. [British Science Fiction Association](#) has given a special award to the British Library for its *Out of This World* exhibition 'in recognition of the support it has received and its success in encouraging people to explore and enjoy science fiction'.