

Psi and Science Fiction¹

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Psience Fiction focuses on the way in which, for a time—especially in the 1950s—ESP was the hottest trope in the broad fields of science fiction (sf) (Broderick, 2018). What most readers of these thrilling tales in the mid 20th century did not realize was that such uncanny phenomena might, after all, be genuine, unlike Superman’s ability to fly or Wonder Woman’s to bounce bullets off her bracelets. Yet the capacity of science fiction to render strange mental abilities believable very likely played a significant role in persuading some Enlightenment-trained skeptics to wonder. Might these vividly imagined phenomena possibly be real after all, once the exaggeration due to wishful thinking was peeled away from the fantastic tales? If so, perhaps they were worth investigating with government funding. The answer, it turned out, just like the once-science fictional reality of orbital spacecraft and Moon landings, and nuclear explosives or power reactors, was Yes.

Regarded by many as entirely bogus or the domain of 19th century mediums and swamis and spiritists, such alleged phenomena rose up like a narrative tsunami in the science fiction magazines of the 1940s and 1950s, then diminished from the fiction of strange science without ever going away. The result, in its heyday, was a quite new and startling variety of science fantasy: an imaginative literary exploration (and thematic exploitation) of psi. For example, H. L. Gold, the editor of *Galaxy* magazine, made paranormal-fiction history with two dazzling, baroque, tectonic serials by Alfred Bester: *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination* (known also as *Tiger! Tiger!*, from the poet William Blake’s brightly burning verse). The latter was reviewed by *New World’s* Leslie Flood (1956, p. 156) as “packing into the story practically every device known to ‘psience-fiction,’ plus a few original twists of his own.” I found Flood’s coinage so wryly apt that I borrowed it for the title of my book.

Even as the trope lost its first feverish appeal to increasingly jaded fans, certain anomalous abilities were being developed for real under top secret security cover for twenty years in the USA and the Soviet Union. This was the true world of ESP, and in some ways it had been foreseen by some sf writers, while in many other respects there was barely any recognizable affinity. Of course, hardly anybody gave these parapsychologists any credence, except for those in the military (as we know now that the programs have ostensibly been shut down and their documents declassified), and by Japanese companies and Chinese research teams, and probably by other nations as well, and all the hundreds of millions or maybe billions who believed that the paranormal was actually normal and everyday, however spooky it seemed.

The strangest narrative element of all, for a readership largely of engineers and young men, was

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the hunger for transcendence, sometimes fused with what is now called the transhuman or even the posthuman. Mutants with mindboggling psychic powers. Mutants with telepathic tendrils. Levitators, and men and women who could move things by the force of their personality, and people with the rare gift of shifting from our tiresome reality into alternative universes (this before the Many Worlds Theory was on the lips of every cosmologist). It wasn't fantasy, because it had to operate under some kind of lawful constraints. It was the paranormal treated as a kind of science. It was ESP and future-telling and more, and then more again; it surged through the sf world like a contagion, driven in part by *Astounding Science Fiction's* editor John W. Campbell Jr.'s urging and endless teasing editorials, and then by those other editors working adjacent streets of the scientific imagination.

Despite Campbell's crucial role in spurring his contributors' interest in psi phenomena, it is important to understand that earlier writers had already been influenced by the possibilities of unusual mental abilities. One of the greatest prognosticators and explorers in early sf, before it was widely known as such (let alone as "sci-fi"), was the British philosopher and Marxist Olaf Stapledon. His magisterial novels, most notably *Last and First Men* (1930), *Odd John* (1935) and *Starmaker* (1937), invoke telepathy as an evolutionary advance to be expected already and, more elaborately, in the deep future. Consider the following account of the mind sciences of artificial human beings and Martians in *Last and First Men*:

The culture of the Fifth Men was influenced in many respects by their "telepathic" communication with one another. The obvious advantages of this capacity were now secured without its dangers. Each individual could isolate himself at will from the radiation of his fellows, either wholly or in respect of particular elements of his mental process; and thus he was in no danger of losing his individuality. But, on the other hand, he was immeasurably more able to participate in the experience of others than were beings for whom the only possible communication was symbolic. The result was that, though conflict of wills was still possible, it was far more easily resolved by mutual understanding than had ever been the case in earlier species. Thus there were no lasting and no radical conflicts, either of thought or desire. It was universally recognized that every discrepancy of opinion and of aim could be abolished by telepathic discussion. Sometimes the process would be easy and rapid; sometimes it could not be achieved without a patient and detailed "laying of mind to mind," so as to bring to light the point where the difference originated (Stapledon, 1966, p. 228).

And so on, for a number of pages. This kind of indigestible "expository lump" was already superannuated when these novels appeared in the 1930s, increasingly replaced by energetic if not always nuanced dramatization. Indeed, it is often said that Campbell's ascension to the editorship of *Astounding* is just what forced a paradigm change in the way sf was conceived and written. Of course other editors were not without skill, and by the end of the 1950s would create in their own magazines a kind of aesthetic advance that simply did not interest Campbell even when some of his favored writers (Theodore Sturgeon, husband-and-wife team Henry Kuttner and Catherine Moore, a few others) proved just as capable. It is not that he went out of his way to purchase crudely composed fiction, or to reject poetic or character-sensitive work if it came his way. Rather, his goal was ideational and increasingly quirky, with a marked taste for engineering-based ingenuity powering a ripping yarn.

Behind, or alongside, this pragmatics of publishing a magazine devoted to wholly imaginary lives and worlds, Campbell grew increasingly devoted to the study of psi phenomena. At the start of the 1950s he was intensely involved with L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics, but within a few years his ardor cooled, and his concerns began to center on psi. He was not much interested in the tedious card-guessing experiments of Rhine and his colleagues, nor their attempts to control the fall of tossed dice. Campbell was after something closer to the practical: what he came to call *psionics*. He hoped to chase down the working principles of those anomalies pursued by Charles Fort (1874-1932), whose books dealt with reports of fish falling from the sky, strange figures menacing the quotidian or ignoring it, lights in the heavens that would later be dubbed UFOs, poltergeists, apports, teleportation, and telepathy. These books had resonant titles, appealing to the eccentric: *The Book of the Damned*, *Lo!*, *Wild Talents*, and *New Lands*. The key notion of *Wild Talents*, preferably once they were harnessed by scientific method and no longer wild, is what galvanized Campbell's enthusiasm.

With his second wife, Peg, he spent a considerable amount of time and effort in this quest. In a long letter to British sf author and Fortean Eric Frank Russell, dated October 1, 1952, he deplored weaknesses in the approaches of both Hubbard and Fort. "[Fort's] data was valid. It contained important understandings, and important clues. In that, he was right. But why didn't *he* do some of the hard work of integrating it and finding the pattern..." (in Chapdelaine, Chapdelaine, & Hay, 1985, p. 70).

This was not just the irritation of a born editor reading work that trailed off without a denouement. His intention, expressed repeatedly in numerous editorials about psi and stories he drew from his stable of writers, was to get this weirdness under control. He explained to Russell:

Peg and I have done it. We have the basic understanding of what the psi functions are, and how they work. It took us over two years of damned hard work. The reason why I'm now starting it in the magazine [*Astounding*] is that I do have some integrated understanding of what we're dealing with. I'm not yet ready to say a damned thing about it, either, because I recognize that Fort was wrong, and what the right answer is. Until I can demonstrate the phenomena myself, and communicate the exact nature of the mechanisms involved, with demonstrations of each step, I'm not ready to talk. When I've done that, though, by God the physical scientists *will* gladly pitch in and help. I know the general concept of teleportation, levitation, and a few other spontaneous psi phenomena—also telekinesis, etc. In addition, I know the general basic laws which can permit precognition, and an absolute barrier of pure force that will block passage of *any* force now known to physical science (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, pp. 70-71).

This might seem like the ravings of a psychiatric patient off his medication, but Campbell set Eric Frank Russell's mind at rest:

"I am not kidding.

"I am not cracked either" (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, p. 71).

Well, but if this were so, why didn't Campbell reveal at least some of this advanced knowledge to the world? (As far as I know, they still remain undisclosed.) Because:

These forces are real, and I have a theory of their structure. I haven't developed methods of setting up an experiment however, and until I can demonstrate it at an experimental level, it simply doesn't count.... So, the first step toward getting interest in psionics started is to establish *that there is a reward to be earned*.... Reward for considering that psionic forces are real, and actually constitute a level of force below the sub-nucleonic; amusement, plus a hint of satisfying, yet intriguing, possibility (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, pp. 71-72).

The kinds of rewards Campbell was suggesting were threefold: intellectual fun of the bull session kind; eventual glory and profit from the application of this new psionic framework to technology and science; and most immediately, the reward of having a story incorporating these ideas accepted by *As-tounding Science Fiction*. Intriguingly, Campbell actually specified his embrace of psience fiction in a long 1953 letter to J. B. Rhine. First, he reminded Rhine that he had studied at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina and indeed had contributed his guesses to a set of ESP tests run in Rhine's department:

I attended Duke, quite some years ago; somewhere in your records must be some of the runs on the ESP cards that I made. Later, for some years I lived across the street from the brother of your experiment designer, Dr. Charles Stewart. I had a good many discussions with Charlie about your work (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, p. 222).

Most of Campbell's letter is a wandering discussion of logic versus empiricism, arguing that Rhine's emphasis on psychology as the prime discipline for studying psi was misplaced. Physics, this former physicist asserted, was the relevant domain. "Physicists in the 25 to 35 year age bracket are looking for new projects to study. They are, probably, most apt to be willing and competent to search out the new basic laws of the Universe which underlie the psi functions. Getting them to do so, however, is something of a trick." (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, p. 225). Campbell explained candidly to Rhine the approach he'd earlier proposed to Eric Frank Russell:

The psycho-socio power of fiction as a medium of communication has been somewhat overlooked and underrated, I believe. Jesus used fiction as one of his most powerful teaching tools. I am trying to use fiction to induce competent thinkers to attack just such problems as the psi effects; my magazine is widely read by creative, speculative, physical scientists. The students at major universities read it—and so do their instructors. Currently, I am seeking, through the fiction, to nudge interest in psionic powers as an engineering value... Why engineers in particular? Because they were interested in results, not the approval of those narrow-minded theoreticians...The theoretician feels satisfied when he has proven to his satisfaction that "What you want to be can't be done. I have proven it is impossible."

The horny handed engineer can be a great trial to such a theoretician. He's apt to go out and do that impossible, forcing the unhappy theoretician to revise all his theories.

In our fiction, therefore, our major attack on the Society's block against the psionic functions is at the level of engineering applications of the psi functions — and acknowledging that they work only statistically. The engineer is quite happy with statistical success, because he can simply use a factor of safety (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, pp. 226-228).

And here was his science fiction method of reaching and fertilizing the imagination of those practical engineers:

The Christian doctrine of “By their fruits ye shall know them” is solidly valid. “Make it work!” is the equivalent statement. In fiction, I can make it work. Since human entertainment and relaxation is a very important aspect of living—why, I can make the psionic forces work very nicely, right now, at an engineering level. But there’s a sly trick here. If the reader is to enjoy the entertainment of the story, *he must temporarily accept the validity of psionic powers*. Never again can he be *wholly* opposed to the idea, for he has already accepted it in a certain degree. Accepting the idea is already associated with pleasure-satisfaction; that association makes it psychologically difficult for him to reject the idea flatly (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, p. 229).

Campbell (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, p. 229) closed with a call for solidarity between the science fiction writers and the parapsychologists: “Give me time, Sir! I’m in your business too!”

What was Rhine’s response to this offer of a propaganda wing of the psi explorers and advocates? There is no known record of any reply.

Campbell’s lure would be psionics, a merging of paranormal phenomena with mechanisms capable of detecting and perhaps amplifying such effects. But he was at pains to point out that any such an investigation, at that point, was necessarily strictly *unscientific*. (He did not mean *antiscientific*, but rather *prescientific*.) It lacked theory, and however honest its explorers might be, they could not obtain the kinds of repeatable results available to scientists working in established disciplines. This was a frank and rather disarming admission. He went on:

But I must state clearly beforehand that the statements made in such articles will be claims of having accomplished things that any intelligent modern man knows are clear, pure nonsense—impossibilities. Precisely; that is the necessary condition for proof of discovery... It is not *demonstration* that is lacking, but *explanation* (in Chapdelaine et al., 1985, p. 158).

So his approach would differ from that of parapsychologists such as Dr. Rhine. As the editor of the leading magazine filled with speculative fiction, written and read for the enjoyment of testing the limits of the known, he was under no obligation to provide a new theory of the universe capable of including the bizarre phenomena of psi. In a subsequent editorial in June 1956, “The Problem of Psionics,” he was even more explicit:

The only sane thing we can do is say, mentally, “O.K.—so we’re fumbling amateurs, and we don’t know what we’re talking about. But if it works, if it is useful to all, in any way, it’s a worthwhile gimmick. And if it never does a darned thing of any practical value—fine. I’ve had fun trying” (Campbell, 1956, p. 5).

He did not really mean that, of course. In January 1959 (six years after his letter to Rhine), Campbell, in another quite serious editorial, “We Must Study Psi” (Campbell, 1959), noted the already long history of psi in science fiction:

During the last four years, I've been investigating psi: I started the investigation largely because it has been a background element in science fiction, almost from the start. Telepathy has been stock business. E.E. Smith's Lensmen series was based primarily on psi—for the Lens itself is, essentially, a psi machine.

With the development of science into engineering proceeding at the pace it has, by 1950 the major developments that science fiction had been forecasting were definitely under engineering—not theoretical—study. It was time for us to move on, if we were to fulfill a function as a frontier literature. To some extent, science fiction moved on into the social sciences—sociology, anthropology and psychology... I was forced back toward psi, even when science fiction started toward the social sciences (Campbell, 1959, pp. 4-5).

In a candid declaration, he wrote: "Since I published the editorial in the February 1956 issue, suggesting running material on psi machines, I have been receiving quantities of information, from hundreds of sources" (Campbell, 1959, p. 5). But aside from this hint to keep publishing fiction and non-fiction on the topic in order to sell more copies, can it really be true that we *must* study psi? This was still the heyday of behaviorism, which had apparently trounced psychologists of the unconscious such as Freud and Jung, certain that minds were simple if enormously elaborate machines. Noam Chomsky's devastating review of B.F. Skinner's magnum opus, demolishing that entire research program in a single blow (or so it seemed), would not appear for another year: "In 1959 Noam Chomsky wrote a scathingly negative review of B. F. Skinner's attempt to account for language in behaviorist terms, and he was successful in convincing the scientific community that adult language use cannot be adequately described in terms of sequences of behaviors or responses" (Hoff, 2005, p. 231).

So it was somewhat scandalous, like a confession of metaphysical conversion, for Campbell to write:

Psi phenomena exist at the same level that emotion, desire, and want do, as far as I can make out. If that's the case, then in studying the psi phenomena, you're studying the level which men, today, hold to be the ultimate level of privacy—Subjective Reality. An understanding of the laws of this level would make it possible to manipulate desire, change attitudes, control emotions.... I suggest that Subjective Reality bears the same relationship to Objective reality that field-forces do to matter. Field forces are not material; they obey wildly different laws—but they do obey laws. I suggest that Subjective Reality is a true, inherent level of reality in the Universe (Campbell, 1959, pp. 159-160).

If this is the case, perhaps it makes sense that "*we must study psi, because it is the only objectively observable set of phenomena stemming from subjective forces*" (Campbell, 1959, p. 161). In later issues, Campbell spent time promoting a mysterious gadget he called the Hieronymus machine, patented by one T. G. Hieronymus, a box containing a prism and amplifier tubes and resistors, and yielding curious subjective tinglings at certain dial settings, mostly idiosyncratic to each user. To the inventor's dismay, Campbell let his ad hoc theorizing lead him to a startling extension: a symbolic version of the machine with no internal parts, just a circuit diagram. Apparently it worked just as well as the original.

Exploration of fascinating ideas and possibilities, formulated as propaganda! Science fiction had

seen this already, to a degree, in Campbell's unfortunate backing for Hubbard's Dianetics, before he lost faith in that alleged "modern science of mental health." His advocacy of psionics was more fruitful and persistent, although it never managed to convince the world that psychic forces were on the verge of being understood and applied.

As we now know, when that did finally happen (for instance in the Star Gate program of operational military remote viewing), the news was heavily classified for nearly two decades at the TOP SECRET level, before finally being released to the public in 1995 when the program was closed by the CIA with a clear and misleading implication that psi did not exist, bad luck, so sad. Close reading of the public dismissal of psi shows that no such implication was justified. In the fourth and final volume of *The Star Gate Archives* (May & Marwaha, 2019, p. 72), the quite limited assessment by the American Institutes for Research, leading to closure, noted that "the laboratory research conducted... has identified a statistically significant 'anomaly.'" Yet they concluded "There is no evidence that the phenomenon would prove useful in intelligence gathering." Psi was deemed not reliable enough to *stand by itself* as a crucial military information source. But that is true of every highly secured data source. Something else was going on. Even today, nobody outside the highest levels has any certain idea what that might have been.

By then, indeed even before that program was funded and launched, Campbell was dead at the shockingly early age of 61, in 1971. But Campbell's influence continued—sometimes at second and third hand, from protégés who were too young to know where these notions had been propounded most forcefully in fiction. In psience fiction, in fact.

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