

The Future Worlds of Science Fiction: Simmons' *Hyperion* Epic

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Science fiction is often narrowly and inaccurately seen as focusing primarily on the scientific and technological possibilities of the future. This mistaken perception is reinforced within popular science fiction movies, which due to the wonders of modern computer animation and special effects, highlight the razzle-dazzle, gee whiz images of space ships and space battles, robots, cyber-technologies, and colorful, imaginative, and often frightening aliens. Invariably, future technologies and fantastic special effects are also connected with “ultra-violence”, as planets, rocket ships, cities, human beings, and other living creatures are vaporized, eviscerated, or blown to smithereens by photon torpedoes, florescent green ray beams, and electro-magnetic matter disruption devices.

What I would propose instead is that good science fiction transcends such limiting boundaries, and in fact, frequently provides complex, rich, and multi-faceted scenarios of the future. Science fiction often delves into future culture, politics, and society; transformations in morals, psychology, and the mind; new and varied ecologies and biologies (human, earthbound, and otherwise); sexual and gender transformations; and philosophical, religious, and spiritual themes and issues about tomorrow. (God even sometimes makes an appearance in science fiction, such as in Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* and Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*.) Not only does science fiction address all the major dimensions of the future, it dramatically weaves these elements together into holistic visions.¹

An excellent example of the comprehensive and integrative qualities of science fiction is the highly regarded, epochal *Hyperion* series by Dan Simmons. This epic is a series of four novels, *Hyperion* (1989), *The Fall of Hyperion* (1990), *Endymion* (1995) and *The Rise of Endymion* (1997), set in the twenty-eighth through thirty-first centuries.² In Simmons' future universe, the earth has presumably been destroyed, but humanity has spread across myriad star systems and worlds, forming the Hegemony of Man. These worlds are all linked together by an intricate network of wormholes or “farcasters” through which humans can instantaneously travel between planets and star systems. The first novel *Hyperion*, winner of the Hugo Award for best science fiction novel of the year, is modeled on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and features seven archetypal pilgrims who set out on a “tree-ship” for the planet Hyperion, which lies outside of the farcaster network. The pilgrims, including a poet, a philosopher, a priest, and a warrior, tell their individual tales and their reasons for journeying to Hyperion. Although set in a high-tech reality, Simmons stylistically models this first novel on a great literary masterpiece, and creates vivid and psychologically compelling portraits of the seven pilgrims. One of the pilgrims, the poet, in fact, artistically and personally struggles, in this and later volumes in the series, with how to create a great work of art chronicling the ensuing events on the planet Hyperion – hence, the book itself becomes a self-reflective exercise in how one goes about writing a mythic drama of the future. *Hyperion* is immense in its scope and deals

with religion, good and evil, time travel, artificial intelligence, and a plethora of different planetary ecologies and human societies. Of special note, in this first novel, the issue of the meaning of life and the value of freedom is raised in the context of the promise of immortality – a question that will be further pondered and considered in later novels in the series. Again resonating with literary classics of the past, the novel ends with the seven pilgrims, marching hand-in-hand up a hill singing “We are off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz.”

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, the pilgrims must confront the enigmatic Shrike, a mysterious and frightening being from the future. While the pilgrims are drawn through a series of encounters with the Shrike, the Hegemony of Man is in a state of crisis presumably due to the imminent invasion of space-adapted humans, the “Ousters.” Characters and beings of the past, as well as the future, populate the story as well. The name “Hyperion” is inspired by the poem “Hyperion” by the nineteenth century poet John Keats. In *The Fall of Hyperion* the mind and persona of Keats is recreated by powerful artificial intelligences that control the farcasters and all of human technology. Keats is actualized in physical form and becomes a central character in the drama, eventually traveling back to a simulation of nineteenth century earth where he must go through his death all over again. Once more, Simmons explores the soul of the artist and juxtaposes romantic visions of the past with the mind-bending mysteries of the future. At the end of this novel, the Hegemony of Man crumbles, setting the stage for the next novels in the series.

The saga continues through *Endymion and The Rise of Endymion*, with new twists that delve into the ultimate nature of reality and the value of the human soul. In *Endymion*, Simmons continues in his ongoing and prolific invention of alternative human societies; the reader journeys through a multiplicity of different worlds, with different values, customs, ecologies, and human psychologies. (All four novels in fact provide a wealth of social thought experiments in how human societies could be organized in the future.) *Endymion* and *The Rise of Endymion* are set in the thirty-first century and the Catholic Church and its bureaucratic hierarchy have gained control over most of the human settled planets and the Church literally can bestow physical immortality (through technological means) on its followers if they become obedient to its will. The Church though is corrupt and has sold its soul to the Devil – the artificial intelligences first encountered in the earlier novels. This partnership makes for an interesting combination of religion and the past with technology and the forces of the future. Also, in these later two novels, a new Messiah appears – a child of Keats and one of the Hyperion pilgrims. She is though pursued by the forces of the Church – which include sinister time-accelerated robot/androids that battle the Shrike. (The Shrike who originally in *Hyperion* seemed to be the absolute incarnation of evil now becomes almost like a guardian angel protecting the new Messiah.) In *The Rise of Endymion* there is a fascinating spiritual debate between a futuristic Grand Inquisitor (sent by the Church) and a new Dalai Lama – a philosophical clash between Catholicism and Buddhism – and a time looping retelling of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Through time machines, one can

rise from the dead, and thus Simmons achieves a provocative synthesis or marriage of high technology and religious-spiritual archetypes.

The Rise of Endymion embodies the classic literary and historical theme of the fight for freedom and individuality against authoritarian forces intent on controlling humanity. The novel also addresses, as a continuing theme from the earlier books, the ongoing struggle between the forces of tradition and the past and the forces of change and the future. In particular, it delves into the question of human evolution – of what would constitute a significant transformation in the nature of our species? Although highly critical of traditional Western religion and religious institutions, its dramatic resolution invokes the archetypal image of sacrifice, death, and rebirth as pivotal to the future evolution of humanity. Although filled with technological speculations, the *Hyperion* series, especially within its finale, is primarily concerned with the future of the human soul and the human spirit. A complex and rich network of future human societies is created and a drama regarding the fate of humanity is told.

¹ Lombardo, Thomas "Science Fiction as the Mythology of the Future" in Lombardo, Thomas *Contemporary Futurist Thought*. Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2006.

² Dan Simmons Websites- <http://www.dansimmons.com/>; <http://www.sfsite.com/lists/dsim.htm>; <http://www.erinyes.org/simmons/>; Simmons, Dan *Hyperion*. New York: Bantam Books, 1989; Simmons, Dan *The Fall of Hyperion*. New York: Bantam Books, 1990; Simmons, Dan *Endymion*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995; Simmons, Dan *The Rise of Endymion* New York: Bantam Books, 1997.