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PORTLAND SCIENCE-FANTASY SOCIETY

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Title: Extrapolation

Date of first publication: 1948

Author: Henry Kuttner (1914-1958)

Date first posted: Jan. 17, 2021

Date last updated: Jan. 17, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210138

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Extrapolation

By
Henry Kuttner

Published in Fanscient No. 5, Fall 1948.

No one now alive knows the real reason behind the collapse of fantasy's two major magazines. This is not surprising, since the incident is not due to occur until 1958, and, in fact, these particular publications have not yet printed their first issues. But by a process of extrapolation, I have managed to chart certain probability lines, and the conclusion I've reached seems an inevitable one. Much to my regret, I must point out that after 1958 not a single science-fiction or weird fiction magazine will be published.

The nice thing about extrapolation is that when such factors as semantics, psychology and social dynamics are taken into consideration, you get a pretty vivid picture of what's going to happen. A wiggle on a graph may be significant, but I've been getting my meanings conveyed to me by means of words (and gestures) for some while now, and the impact of the tragedy was brought home more vividly by the nature of the composite picture, which looks less like a graph than a small-sized stage, with people moving around on it, rather nervously. Occasionally there's some blurring, but prognostication is still in its infancy, and my eyes were blurred with tears anyhow.

I don't know exactly what's going to happen next year, or the year after that, but, generally speaking, a certain trend is going to develop, one that's evident even now. The line of demarcation between fantasy and science-fiction is going to be more sharply drawn. Today some magazines lean toward fantasy, others toward technology, and if they vary too much from their policy, readers often write in complaining letters. As a matter of fact, I've had this happen myself, but I don't pretend to know what kind of stories I write. Maybe it depends on whether I feel fantastic or scientific at the time. It's out of my control, which doesn't seem quite fair. After all, when the readers pay for a magazine, they're entitled to get the sort of stories they want. But this isn't a discussion of my stuff, and, anyway, if anybody wants my opinion, I prefer Merritt.

However, by 1958 there weren't—won't be—any stories by me in any magazine, and I haven't the least idea what happened. Sometime I must extrapolate again and find out. I did notice a 1958 newstape that mentioned the death of Inri Cutna—that was in the Nu Yok Dali Nus broadcast—but it didn't go into details. This Cutna guy was a professional geek, anyhow, whatever that is. Probably some kind of scientist unknown to our present era.

However, by 1958, I gathered, there was only one publishing firm in the world. All others had been assimilated and the editors were hired too, or, if recalcitrant, shot. The writers were rounded up and confined in a cell-block in the basement of the building, in cells. (The ones who couldn't or wouldn't learn to use wire-tape recorders were also shot. Some of the others demanded pistols, but this request was denied.)

As I mentioned, there were only two magazines left which could be classified as imaginative in type, if you don't count TRUE CONFESSIONS. One was named GEARED TALES, and was edited by a guy named Thirkettle; this was science-fiction. The other was

FEARED TALES, edited by a Mr. Pilchard, and this specialized in weird fiction. Both editors were facing a crisis. The Circulation Department had spoken to the Front Office, and the Front Office had sent down a memo, chiseled on a stone tablet.

Thirkettle picked up the May 1958 GEARED TALES and looked at it unhappily.

“Complaints,” he said. “No matter what I do, complaints. I’ve tried to keep GEARED TALES strictly scientific. I’ve used symbolic covers till I’m black in the face—atoms and graphs and even the multiplication tables. And still we get kicks. Do you see any element of fantasy in this cover, Pilchard?”

Pilchard looked at it. “No,” he said.

“Neither do I. It’s a blueprint. Just a plain, simple blueprint. There isn’t anything fantastic about it. It’s a blueprint of an optical phenomenon on Mars, done in blue, white and black. I even save money by using a two-color process, and what happens? Complaints. Mars is the name of a mythical god, so it’s got fantastic connotations. Did I name Mars? And they complain about using blue on the cover. It’s got an emotional significance, and emotions are pure fantasy.”

“You’ve got troubles?” Pilchard said. He showed Thirkettle a copy of FEARED TALES. “Look at this cover. A pure abstraction. There isn’t a sine curve in it. All the colors we could put in and everything asymmetrical. And I’m flooded with complaints because the cover’s too scientific. The frame is rectangular, and that’s geometry, a science. How can I put out a magazine shaped like an inkblot?”

“Science-fiction has to be scientific,” Thirkettle said morosely. “No element of fantasy. And vice versa. I’ve already cut out all the illustrations so I can use logarithmic tables instead. Here’s something that slipped by me. A character in a yarn scratched his head, and the author didn’t explain the principles of leverage and energy involved.”

“You’re too easy on your writers,” Pilchard said. “You should have had him shot as an example.”

“Oh, we put out his eyes, of course, but the harm was done. Floods of letters kicking about the fantasy element. Once let a character scratch his head without determining the causation, and where’s science? Newton might never have lived.”

“That reminds me,” Pilchard said. “I had something similar happen. Your speaking of Newton reminded me of it. One of my authors referred to a newt in a yarn——”

“No!”

“Yes, it seems that the character, experimenting with forbidden arts, had become transformed into an emotional mood in the personality of a certain nameless god, and right in the middle of a good subjective sequence, where the guy felt as though he’d sunk into a morass of miasmatic morbidity, he brings in a newt! Of course you know what happened.”

“Of course. The frame of reference would have enabled every reader to associate newt with Newton. No wonder you got kicks.”

“He won’t do it again,” Pilchard said, rather gloatingly. “We’ve got a robot reading back all the guy’s old stories to him.”

“But... after all, authors are human. That’s going a little far, really. I don’t mind a humane discipline like disembowelment, but when it comes to downright——”

“We tried disembowelment,” Pilchard said. “The guy just started writing a novel about his guts. No, we’ve got to be firm, Thirkettle. Once let science-fiction and weird-fiction get together, and you get——” He glanced around and lowered his voice to a whisper, “—science-fantasy.”

“S-sh!” Pilchard said hastily. “There are humans present!”

It was, however, too late. Letters of fire appeared on the wall. They read as follows:

“Memo from the front office. We’ve been withholding the last batch of complaints, hoping the situation would improve, but such subversive talk leaves us no alternative. You will read the letters from readers, sent herewith, and do what is necessary. Mene Mene tekkel upharsin.”

A flood of letters cascaded from a chute. Pilchard and Thirkettle, with white faces, glanced at each other and then began to read. The conclusion was inescapable.

All the readers of GEARED TALES complained that the magazine was full of letters of the alphabet. Not only were the shapes of the letters asymmetrical and non-geometric (except Q), but the historical connotations traced back to hieroglyphs, based as they were on religious and emotional symbolism. “The alphabet is nothing but fantasy,” one reader wrote, or rather charted on a graph. “I shall never read GEARED TALES again.”

On the other hand, all the readers of FEARED TALES complained that the magazine was full of letters of the alphabet. Not only were the shapes of the letters an intellectual synthesis of logical ideation, but the historical connotations traced back to hieroglyphs, the result of a rational progression of association and mathematics in which the sum of the parts equalled the whole, which involved an ideation of the colloid mechanism of the brain. (Except Q.) “The alphabet is nothing but science,” one reader wrote, or rather finger-painted. “I shall never read FEARED TALES again.”

Pilchard and Thirkettle lifted their heads. They both spoke at the same time.

“The next issue must be printed on blank paper,” they said.

“If you print anything on blank paper, it won’t be blank,” Pilchard corrected both himself and his co-editor.

“Well, I mean we won’t print anything at all on the pages. While we’re at it, we might as well leave out the illustrations. And the cover must be blank too, of course.”

“It’s the only thing to do,” Pilchard agreed, reaching for a bottle of white ink. “The next issue of FEARED TALES won’t have a word in it.”

“Or the next issue of GEARED TALES. This should boost circulation tremendously. We won’t get a single kick.”

And this explains why the last issues of GEARED TALES and FEARED TALES, published in 1958, were absolutely and completely blank. Even the covers were plain, unadorned heavy coated white stock. A completely unexpected result of this slight change of policy, however, was that not a copy of either magazine sold. Not only were the readers quite unable to recognize their favorite publications, but no price was printed on the covers, so that the news-stand dealers were equally baffled and could offer no practical advice. Of course, when the Circulation Department found that all the copies of both GEARED TALES and FEARED TALES were returned, they spoke to the Front Office, and the Front Office spoke to Thirkettle and Pilchard, who killed themselves. It was decided to discontinue publication of both magazines, under the circumstances. The authors in the basement cell-block were liquidated. (They were made into wood-pulp, in fact.)

Somewhat later, an editor named Cotswold proposed a fantasy magazine which would combine both science-fiction and weird-fiction, but an army of science-fiction and weird-fiction fans straightway dragged him screaming out of his office and lynched him, after horrible tortures. I believe this is the first and last time the two groups ever united for a single purpose. I have been able to extrapolate as far as 1998, and in that year nothing at all will be published. In fact, the entire world will have been depopulated except for an army of science-

fiction readers and one of weird-fiction readers, and they will have exterminated each other completely by, at the latest, 2008.

It all seems rather a pity, but it's out of my hands. I just felt that since my extrapolation has succeeded so well, it would be unfair of me not to share my secret with the world. I have no strong convictions either way, myself, since all I ever read is Dick Tracy. Now there's something that's both scientific and weird. If I extrapolate any more, I'll pass the word along, but it won't be for a while, as the process takes several years, and I'll be tied up next summer, I hope. I'm trying to get a job with some circus. There's more dough in that than in writing. You eat better, too—chicken three times a day.

THE END

[The end of *Extrapolation* by Henry Kuttner]