

disbelief and accept that angels fall from heaven and crash into chicken coops. Of course people turn into rhinoceroses. Sure, Billy Pilgrim slides forward and backward through time. The fabulous element is presented as a matter of fact, with no explanation. In this genre, we do not read how a radioactive bug nipped Gregor Samsa to create Roach Man.

*Speculative fiction.* While respecting Newtonian physics, authors writing speculative fiction extend scientific or social trends to extremes. Antiutopian novels by Atwood and George Orwell are obvious examples. Postapocalyptic visions such as the Mad Max films or Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* belong on this shelf, beside William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. It's breathtaking to read a work in which an imagined element becomes reality—Jules Verne's submarine or Arthur C. Clarke's system of communication satellites in stationary orbits. Criticism abounds with attempts to define a genre that asks, "What if . . . ?" This is it.

*Science fiction.* Like speculative fiction, this genre seeks to comment on contemporary mores and trends, but it presents a world explicable only with non-Newtonian physics. Typically—and too often clumsily—the author takes time to explain or at least suggest the cause-effect science that makes possible a future to be realized just the day after tomorrow. We'll all enjoy holodecks; we'll venture to other galaxies through wormholes where non-carbon-based life-forms will befriend or harass us; we'll travel through time on superstrings or through black holes; we'll escape the solar system as soon as we harness not-yet-discovered dilithium crystals, the stuff of *Star Trek's* warp drives. Writers in this genre explore social issues in worlds that might be, but are not necessarily, extensions of ours. Stories about shifting gender identity are plentiful enough to be considered a subgenre. The rebel defying monolithic galactic states is another subgenre, venerable space opera. Humanity warring with BEMs (bug-eyed monsters) is a third, whether the BEMs come from another planet or, like Godzilla, rise from the sea. Are such works metaphors about identity politics, politics systems, or the consequences of nuclear devastation? You betcha, but the essence is a metaphor of reality, not a speculation about what will happen if current conditions continue.

*Fantasy.* While unexplained science may look like magic to a barbarian, imaginative worlds allowing events irrespective of any kind of physics are

fantasy realms. In Middle Earth, Narnia, Oz, and at Hogwarts, incantations and spells are based on faith. Cars fly, swords glow blue in the presence of evil, and beasts that lack vocal chords nevertheless talk.

The source of textism is that newly minted sword-and-sorcery epics, science fiction, and speculative fiction compete for space on the same bookstore shelves. Some of the writing is beastly and some wonderful. Is it literature? The same conversation is ongoing in the mystery aisle, but as readers we ought to be aware that as a rule, after such literary niceties as characterization and prose style, we judge genre writers by how consistently or inventively they observe the tropes of a form. For critics, at issue should be whether work is accomplished, not its genre.

Genre is more complicated than the bookstores can tolerate, and since complexity is usually a good thing, along with Marleen S. Barr when it comes to critical conversation, I say, "Make it so."

Perry Glasser  
Salem State College

### Reply:

To Julia Douthwaite's call to "throw off the prejudice against the 'premodern,'" I reiterate what I said in "Introduction: Textism—An Emancipation Proclamation": "make it so." Who can argue against throwing off prejudice? I, for example, would like to throw off Douthwaite's phrase "science fiction critics portray *themselves* as angry outsiders" (*italics mine*). Are "themselves" science fiction critics and "ourselves" realistic literature critics? Us and them? Some of my best friends are science fiction critics.

Perry Glasser asks, "So why not a science fiction classification scheme free of commercial considerations?" His call for even more generic categories does not address the reality of publishing fiction: publishers' and agents' obsession with profit supersedes literary value. Or: if Faulkner were alive today, he would be advised to move to a southern Mississippi Gulf resort and clone *The South Beach Diet*. In a publishing climate that values money above all else, all fiction that agents and publishers view as unprofitable—regardless of its literary merit—is branded with the pervasive word many elitist, textist critics use to dismiss all science fiction: *crap*.

Glasser states, “We can also hope serious readers and scholars dip into the muck from time to time and bring to our attention neglected gems.” “Muck”? *Muck* is a synonym for *crap*. But, in the present fiction market, *muck* connotes an elite spa mud bath. Philip Roth, for example, is publishing an alternative-history novel, *The Plot against America*. When a new Roth novel is ensconced in science fiction subgeneric muck-crap, there is only one collective exclamation for elitist, textist critics: oy!

I say: enough already with the antiquated emphasis on genre. Enough already with dullness, textism, and elitism.

Marleen S. Barr  
Montclair State University

PS. Regarding Glasser’s remark that “Marleen S. Barr may want to turn her phaser down from kill to stun, or at least point it in the right direction”: as an extraterrestrial, I emphasize that the phaser setting and direction Marleen S. Barr chooses are right on target. At the last meeting of the Interplanetary Feminist Science Fiction Scholars Convention, Barr reported that a recent experience with the MLA Publications Committee suggests that textism is alive and well in some academic circles.phasers are still science-fictional on Earth; the force was with the MLA committee—and it killed a science fiction critical anthology dead. I told Barr that I could get her a phaser wholesale here on Mars. She declined. She says that she is a pacifist who, remaining unphased, wishes to fight fire with fire by speaking truth to textism.

Shulamyth Squidsky  
Mars Equatorial University  
Gusev Crater Underwater Branch

### Reply:

I appreciate the comments by Perry Glasser and by Julia Douthwaite.

Carl Freedman  
Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge

### Science in *Gattaca*

TO THE EDITOR:

The broader argument of Eric S. Rabkin’s “Science Fiction and the Future of Criticism” (119 [2004]:

457–73)—that science fiction partakes in, as well as activates, a larger cultural system—is helpful and persuasive. The photographs in his essay implicate the United States of the 1950s in the same industrial model that its popular culture exaggerated—through science fiction—and projected onto the communist, “mindless” other. Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, set in the years of the American Depression, had already satirized the mechanical worker-man a decade earlier, thereby participating, as Rabkin rightly suggests, “in the cultural system of science fiction” (465).

“Science fiction was born in part out of distrust of science,” writes Rabkin, “a distrust it continues to manifest in works like *Gattaca*, but it also bolsters a faith” (472). My point of contention lies in this proposition that *Gattaca* is a (genuine) manifestation of a distrust in science. Unlike Chaplin’s film, in which the machine “threaten[s] to turn us into generalized pulp” (465), *Gattaca* puts its trust (and ours) in the heroic efforts of its protagonist, whose personal ambition is to become an astronaut. The “paraplegic’s struggle to climb the double helix,” as Rabkin sees it, can be read as heroism only in a serious attempt to go against the film’s sly, ideological grain. For the movie aligns science with the kind of self-serving individualism that in the end leaves everything intact: the protagonist receives subversive help in fighting an unjust system (from the paraplegic and other supporting characters) but gives nothing in return, so that we may celebrate his final escape from the earthly eugenicist dystopia to a faraway planet as the achievement of his own (American) dream. And the paraplegic conveniently offs himself at the end of the film because once he has served his purpose—providing his genetically superior identity to the genetically inferior hero—there is no longer a place for him on earth. And yet he is the really physically handicapped character. The distrust of science that the narrative stipulates—in suggesting that genetic predisposition, in the wrong hands, constitutes a mismeasure of man, to use Stephen Jay Gould’s argument and phrasing—is effectively annihilated by the mythos of the individual that in the 1950s already clouded any widespread recognition of Levittown as a depressing ant farm. If there’s distrust here, it’s secret, voiceless, an insider joke. Science fiction, too, warrants a certain distrust, I think.

Angela Flury  
DePauw University