



# Where no European has gone before: Representations of Europe(an integration) in science fiction



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## ABSTRACT

This article is meant to begin an investigation into the role of Europe and European integration in science fiction. After a brief discussion of methodology, it reviews a number of key novels, films and *bandes dessinées* of science fiction and analyses their references to Europe and European integration. The references are placed into four categories: surveillance state, conspiracy theories, environmental disasters, and space exploration. References to European integration in this genre are rare and in the case of the first three categories they are dystopian. While this can partially be attributed to a general tendency within the genre towards dystopian storytelling, it is argued that the prevalence of dystopia can also be explained with reference to moral disorientation. A notable exception is made by references to European integration in space-based science fiction, where European integration is seen as contributing towards global collaboration. This representation of European integration provides an alternative outlook on the EU as a vision of global collaboration. Science fiction is arguably not only an important method to popularise space exploration, but also a method to rekindle the European project.

## 1. Introduction

Science fiction (SF) has historically played a critical role in the popularisation of space. Long before Apollo 11, Jules Verne had literarily shot humanity to the Moon. By imagining a human presence in the solar system and beyond, science fiction was able to expand the horizon of our endeavours to the infinite, thereby laying the foundation for the eventual realisation of space travel. SF's use of space as a palimpsest for story telling created a vast array of possible human futures. Arguably, this is precisely what makes the idea of humans in space so attractive – through space travel humanity is no longer constrained to the closed system that the earth provides. If humanity was an interplanetary species, it would no longer be confined to one particular historical path, but a new path could be opened under every new sky.

Nevertheless, despite SF's unique ability to imagine humanity's future, it is also able to make statements about the present. Indeed, some of the most well-known works of science fiction contain implicit references to contemporary political events, socioeconomic problems and cultural controversies. Frank Herbert's *Dune* for example can be seen as a critique of humanity's increasing dependency on petroleum oil for the purposes of energy production ([16]; [26, 9]). Similarly, *Star*

*Trek* is full of cultural, political and economic critique. The mixed-gender and multicultural crew of the Enterprise as well as the money-less economic order of the Federation of Planets continues to stir up controversy [32, 102]; [7,9].

Based on these observations of 20th and 21st century SF, one should expect the European Union to feature prominently in all forms of science fiction. European integration's utopian promise of peace, prosperity and democracy for the entire continent makes it one of humanity's most visionary contemporary political projects and therefore an ideal SF setting. The visionary nature of European integration is further accentuated by the neofunctionalist foundation of European integration being conceptually similar to one of the most important and well-known worlds of SF literature: Asimov's Foundation [6,20].<sup>1</sup> Like the Foundation, the EU is set up within the context of a civilisation in ruins. Furthermore, the EU's success is predicted by the quasi-prophetic abilities of Haasian neofunctionalism, with Ernst Haas becoming the incarnation of Asimov's Hari Seldon. The parallels are indeed striking, as neofunctionalism views crises as one of the primary catalysts of European integration, which is paralleled by Asimov's Seldon Crises, which continuously push the Foundation towards its goal of becoming the next galactic empire. Thus, one should expect the EU to become the setting of many a SF tale.

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<sup>1</sup> Asimov's *Foundation* features a galactic empire in decline. Using the speculative science of psychometrics, Hari Seldon has predicted this development, arguing that unless humanity intervenes, the downfall of the Empire will be followed by 10,000 years of anarchy. He thus secretly founds two 'Foundations' at opposite ends of the galaxy to shorten this time to 1000 years.

This is however not the case. The purpose of this article is to go the first step towards an investigation into the role of Europe and European integration in the science fiction genre. After a brief discussion of this article's methodology, it will be shown that references to Europe are rare, and that most references that do exist are within a dystopian context, where parts of Europe have turned into a surveillance state, where sinister government forces are controlling people's lives and where environmental disasters have left behind a society in decay. Nevertheless, a notable exception is made by space-based science fiction, where European integration is not only mentioned, but appears to have played a positive role in shaping humanity's future. A coherent European space strategy therefore not only possesses the potential to popularise space, but arguably also to rekindle the visionary power of European integration itself.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Defining science fiction

When choosing which films, novels and comics should be considered for a survey of references to the EU in SF, it is important to know what science fiction actually is. McCracken suggests that “at the root for all science fiction lies the fantasy of alien encounter” Ref. [25, 102]. Such an encounter is not necessarily with an alien species, but with a world that is fundamentally *different* from the one we commonly experience Ref. [32, 17]. This difference concerns not the trivial aspects of our everyday lives, but the availability of technologies, the location in space and time or the laws of nature. The emphasis on difference alludes to one of the major problems in relation to defining SF: it is often difficult to distinguish from the fantasy genre. One contrast between the two genres that has been advanced is that SF usually provides a plausible explanation for the extraordinariness of the worlds it portrays, while fantasy attributes extraordinariness to magical properties. Still, it is clear that the two genres tend to frequently overlap. In the *Star Wars* series for instance, space ships are able to instantaneously navigate an entire galaxy and a magical force is used to manipulate mind and matter [21]. Nevertheless, *Star Wars* is usually regarded as part of science fiction rather than of the fantasy genre. The dividing lines are blurry and hotly debated, which is why SF has been described as being “less a genre [...] than an ongoing discussion” Ref. [18, 1]. In the case of the works discussed in this article, this debate is however of secondary importance, as they are all set in the future, which is quite typical of SF.

Within the science fiction genre there are numerous subcategories, which are similarly difficult to tell apart. One of the most common divisions concerns the level of scientific plausibility. While some authors and screenwriters attempt to make sure that their stories contain very high levels of scientific accuracy, others make no attempt whatsoever to provide scientific explanations for fantastic events or technologies. The former group of work is often classified as hard SF, while the latter group is referred to as soft SF [37]. An example of hard SF is Andy Weir's *The Martian*, which attempts to realistically portray the survival of a single sheltered human being on the planet Mars [45]. *Star Wars* on the other hand, clearly belongs to the category of soft SF [21]. *Star Trek* lies somewhere in between, as it evokes the plausibility of some of its technologies, while simultaneously leaving the audience in the dark about others. One work which is discussed in this article and which does not depend on the use of fantastic technologies is Roberts' *Aachen Memorandum* [31]. It is nevertheless included here as SF because it is set 40 years in the future and because it deals with a world that is politically very different from our own.

### 2.2. Sample selection

The works examined in this study are not a comprehensive sample of all works containing references to Europe and the EU. As an avid

reader of science fiction and as an enthusiastic moviegoer the sample is, for the most part, composed of films, books and comic books that I have come across during my lifetime. In addition to this, several other methods were used to widen the sample. I have carried out a comprehensive online research to find more references to Europe in science fiction [3]. On the basis of that, an earlier version of this article was presented at the 7th ESSCA Space Policy Workshop. Additional references suggested by the reviewers were included. I have also consulted other researchers who are interested in this issue, adding their recommendations to the sample. While the sample can therefore not be claimed to be comprehensive, it is my hope that it does include the most important and well-known examples of references to Europe and European integration in science fiction. This sample finally came to include works from three types of science fiction: literature, film and *bandes dessinées*. All works discussed here were published after the EU was founded in 1992.

This sampling strategy may be criticised, for example because it fails to take into consideration other types of science fiction such as video games or short stories. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that this article is not meant to provide a comprehensive review of all references to Europe and European integration in science fiction. It is merely meant to provide directions for future research in this field. Therefore I chose the types of science fiction and the works that I am most familiar with. Furthermore, any article that claims to be comprehensive could too easily be criticised if one work was missing. Moreover, references to European integration in science fiction are certainly scarce, and a limitation to one particular type of science fiction or even one particular language would have prevented the construction of meaningful themes or conclusions.

## 3. Europe(an integration) in science fiction

This section ought to be prefaced by emphasising that references to the EU and Europe in SF are rare. This scarcity of references to the EU is highlighted when compared to the wide array of references to other political entities, particularly to the United States (cf. [8,39,46] and the Soviet Union (cf. [2]), which are primarily inspired by the Cold War, the Western frontier and the construction of communism. The majority of the works of science fiction that do deal with Europe and European integration and that were studied for this article is distinctly dystopian. Nevertheless there are significant nuances in what type of dystopia is depicted in each story. This being the core section of this article, three themes will now be discussed that distinguish different European dystopias: authoritarian Europe, Europe of conspiracies and Europe of environmental disaster. These visions of Europe's future will finally be juxtaposed against the utopian outlook of Europe as part of a global space-faring civilisation.

### 3.1. Europe under surveillance

During the 2000s a triad of SF films appeared that showed the continent being taken over by increasingly authoritarian governments. Given the current trend towards increasingly right-wing governments, these films are perhaps more relevant than ever. Nevertheless, in each film the takeover is caused by unique circumstances.

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* [40] is arguably one of the most famous science fiction films set in Europe. Set in 2027, the film tells the story of the breakdown of human society after two decades of total infertility. It depicts the UK as one of the last remaining functioning states on the planet. Millions have come from Europe and elsewhere seeking refuge in Britain, which as a result has become a highly militarised surveillance state. The images of refugees in the UK conjure up memories of World War II, especially as the majority of asylum seekers speak European languages. As a result of its references to 9/11 and subsequent fears of the establishment of a surveillance state, Amago calls it a “film ready-make for cultural studies analysis” [4,

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