The mid- and late-1970s were important years for those interested in science fiction (sf), Marxist literary criticism and the intersection of the two. 1973 saw the launch of Science-Fiction Studies; now unhyphenated, it has consistently been one of the most critically sophisticated English-language academic journals, a trail-blazer in the study of sf, and deeply and critically engaged with post-New-Left developments in Marxist and post-Marxist theory. In 1977, one of its founding editors, Darko Suvin, published Pour une poétique de la science-fiction. Translated and expanded by the author, it reappeared in 1979 as Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre, significant portions of it having already appeared in Science-Fiction Studies and other journals. It remains, if not the most significant, then certainly the most influential critical and theoretical work on the genre to date,¹ and I will return to its key formulation below.

The last two decades have witnessed a massive growth in the academic study of sf, but relatively few analyses of the genre which attempt to match Suvin’s scope, ambition, erudition or rigour. Robert Scholes and Mark Rose have offered structuralist (broadly speaking) models of the genre in, respectively, Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future (1975) and Mark Rose’s Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction (1981), although neither attracted nearly as much attention as Suvin. Over the last thirty years, Samuel Delany, an academic as well as an sf writer, has developed a linguistically-oriented (and latterly, post-structuralist) analysis of the genre over several volumes, including The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction (1977), The American Shore: Meditations on a Tale of Science Fiction by Thomas Disch – Angouleme (1978), Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction (1984) and The Straits of Messina (1989).² Although Delany’s work has not produced a large following, its influence can be traced in recent debates about the postmodern turn in

¹ For a discussion of the importance and influence (and shortcomings) of Suvin’s work, see Parrinder 2000.
² For an anecdotal account of Delany’s encounters with Suvin and the grounds upon which he rejects Suvin’s theory of sf, see Delany 1999, especially pp. 260–3.
sf: Scott Bukatman’s enthralling *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (1993) explicitly draws on Delany, and Damien Broderick’s quirky and insightful *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction* (1995) is the work of a (not uncritical) disciple.

Although Freedman, himself an editorial consultant for *Science Fiction Studies*, freely acknowledges his indebtedness to Suvin, and although *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* can be seen as, in part, an expansion and refinement of and corrective to Suvin’s work, it would be unfair to label Freedman as his Broderick. Freedman has much bigger fish to fry.

Freedman contends that sf and critical theory are versions of each other, and that sf is a ‘privileged and paradigmatic genre for . . . not only Marxism but for critical theory in general’, and one that ‘bears the deepest and most interesting affinity with the rigors of dialectical thinking’ (p. xv). Consequently, he sets out to do for sf what Lukács’s *The Historical Novel* (1937) did for historical fiction. The result is a remarkable book.

Freedman commences with a necessarily detailed account of what he means by the terms in his title. His use of ‘critical theory’ is traced back to the radical eighteenth-century redefinition of criticism effected by Kant’s prioritisation of interpretation in his three *Critiques*. After Kant, any failure of theory to examine its own presuppositions and the ways in which it constructs its own objects of study renders it precritical. Freedman suggests that the two pre-eminent historical determinants of the critical moment represented by Kant are the growing hegemony of the natural sciences, with their emphasis on ‘interrogation and self-interrogation’ (p. 4), and the French Revolution’s ‘reduction of inherited sociopolitical categories from the noumenal to the phenomenal level’ on which the ‘status quo [could no longer function] as a self-legitimating mechanism’ (p. 5). The French Revolution, furthermore, can be seen as inventing history as a mass experience and as prompting in some way Hegel’s historicisation of dialectical critique. *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) is briefly discussed in this context, linking as it does the birth of sf with the origins of critical theory: although Mary Shelley’s novel is ‘ultimately conservative and hostile to science’ it is nonetheless characterised by an

epistemological radicalism . . . , its sense that the most fundamental of material and intellectual categories – condensed into the problem of life itself – can no longer be taken for granted but are now somehow up for grabs and can be challenged and rethought. (p. 4)

The nature of Freedman’s argument forestalls a more detailed discussion of Kant, Hegel and their successors, but not before enabling a provisional definition of critical