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Sad and Rabid Puppies: Politicization of the Hugo Award Nomination Procedure

Abstract. Originally a conservative genre, in the second half of the twentieth century, science fiction (sf) became a discourse whose progressive presentation of virtually all controversial political issues and critical questioning of the political status quo have remained unmatched in the so-called popular culture, among others. There is no other literary convention that so boldly challenges such issues as racism, sexism, social justice, and ecological devastation. However, the progressive stance of many science fiction writers, editors, and readers has been, in recent years, challenged by loose coalitions of groups calling themselves Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies, who have acted against what they perceive as the repression of more traditional voices in science fiction communities.

The paper will seek to explore recent political shifts within the science fiction fandom, with regard to oppression involving gender, class, race, and ethnicity. I will provide an account of the fandom's political tensions, disentangle some of the convoluted discussions that have taken place across blogs, Twitter accounts, and Facebook pages of those involved in these debates, and specifically address the controversies related to the 2014 and 2015 Hugo Awards. I will also attempt to illuminate the violent conservative backlash that the aforementioned groups launched against the perceived political correctness and repression of certain viewpoints within sf communities.

Keywords: science fiction, popular culture, repression, fandoms, sf communities, Puppygate

Originally a conservative genre (Slusser 2008), science fiction has now become a discourse whose progressive representation of virtually all controversial political issues and critical questioning of the political status quo have remained unmatched in the so-called popular culture, among others. As Jenny Wolmark (2008, 156) points out, "SF is increasingly recognized for its ability to articulate complex and multifaceted responses to contemporary uncertainties and anxieties, and metaphors drawn from SF have ac-

quired considerable cultural resonance.” Among the uncertainties and anxieties that are challenged by the genre one can find racism, sexism, social justice, and ecological devastation. The progressive stance of many sf readers, editors, and writers has been reflected, in the last few years, in the nominations for one of the genre’s top awards, the Hugo Awards. The winners of this prestigious trophy – nominated and voted on by the attendees of the World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon) – now include authors of color, various ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations with their stories focusing on something other than the same old futures and spaceships.

However, in 2014 and 2015 these changes were challenged by the loose coalitions of groups calling themselves Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies, who have acted against what they perceive as the repression of more traditional voices in science fiction communities. Using the most influential tools of the twenty-first century – blogs, Twitter accounts, and Facebook pages – they “organized a successful nomination campaign to undo these gains in diversity, creating an unprecedented party-line slate which has led to the stacking of this year’s [2015] Hugo ballot largely with white man” (Heer 2015). The groups launched a violent conservative backlash against the perceived political correctness and repression of certain viewpoints within sf communities.

Sad Puppies, the older of the two groups, was created in 2013 by Larry Correia in order to get his novel, *Monster Hunter Legion*, nominated for that year’s Hugo Award for Best Novel. Sad Puppies 1 was not controversial and did not try force Correia’s choices onto the ballot. Correia used the tag mainly to promote himself, mention some works he liked, and write about literary critics’ alleged hatred towards pulp novelists. He was clear about his disappointment in changing taste of the voting audience for the Hugo Awards:

It really doesn’t take that many votes to get nominated, and if *Monster Hunter Legion* were to become a Hugo finalist, elitist literary snobs around the world would have a complete come apart that something which was unabashed pulp, had an actual plot, had characters who actually did stuff, and wasn’t heavy handed message fiction dared tread into their sacred halls. (<https://larrycorreia.wordpress.com/2013/01/23/how-to-get-correia-nominated-for-a-hugo-part-3-wont-somebody-please-think-of-the-children/>)

Even though the initiative was unsuccessful, some of his recommendations got nominated, which is when he started to call it a “stacking campaign” (<http://monster-hunternation.com/2013/04/01/the-sad-puppies-hugo-campaign-sorta-successful-for-everybody-but-me/>).

In 2014, Correia resumed his campaign with Sad Puppies 2, describing his recommendations as a slate. He declared himself a spokesman for the repressed right-wing authors and fans and revealed some of his political motivations:

I said a chunk of the Hugo voters are biased toward the left, and put the author’s politics far ahead of the quality of the work. Those openly on the right are sabotaged. This was denied.

[. . .] So I got some right wingers on the ballot. [. . .] The biased voters immediately got all outraged and mobilized to do exactly what I said they'd do. (<http://monsterhunternation.com/2014/04/24/an-explanation-about-the-hugo-awards-controversy/>)

The Sad Puppies 2 ideas for the nominations included a short story by Vox Day, a Gamergate agitator known for his opposition to suffrage, homosexuality, and racial diversity. This inspired Vox Day to create a more militant group, Rabid Puppies, a year later. Sad Puppies 2 prepared a slate of 12 works (one work per category) they approved of, seven of which were nominated, including Correia's own book. None of these won.

In January 2015, Correia announced that the Sad Puppies 3 campaign would be run by Brad Torgersen, who declared on his blog that the 2015 Hugos were going to be based on slate voting:

Thus, I am going to slowly compile a slate. Of books and stories (and other things, and people) for the different categories. So that hopefully deserving works and artists — who tend to be snubbed at awards season — get a chance on the ballot. It doesn't take a massive number of nominating votes to secure a final spot for a specific work or person. All it takes are a few dozen interested people (with Worldcon memberships) to list a given work when they nominate. <https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/01/07/announcing-sad-puppies-3/>

On February 1, 2015, Torgersen published the 2015 Hugo slate with up to 5 nominees in every category. How the slate was assembled was never explained, but the analysis of Torgersen's blog posts and comments of his supporters reveals that the majority of the Sad Puppies 3 (SP3) choices were never mentioned before the publication. This suggests that the candidates were selected by the leaders of the campaign only, though Torgersen implied that the list was based on comments and e-mails from the SP3 fans. He emphasized that the slate was just a recommendation and did not have to be followed to the letter.

A day after the Sad Puppies 3 slate was published, Vox Day (real name Theodore Beale) announced the creation of a splinter group, Rabid Puppies, and presented his own list of nominations. He asked his followers to "nominate them precisely as they are" (<http://voxday.blogspot.com/2015/02/rabid-puppies-2015.html>). Even though the two slates were not identical, they largely overlapped, which made it easier for Sad and Rabid Puppies to dominate the actual nomination slate. While the fairly moderate conservative views of the leaders of the SP3 campaign centered around the idea that the Hugos were unfairly promoting works that were "niche, academic, overtly to the Left in ideology and flavor, and ultimately lacking what might best be called visceral, gut-level, swashbuckling fun" (<https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/01/16/why-sad-puppies-3-is-going-to-destroy-science-fiction/>), Vox Day claimed simply that he "wanted to leave a big smoking hole where the Hugo Awards were" (<https://www.wired.com/2015/08/won-science-fictions-hugo-awards-matters/>) using a group of "390 sworn and numbered vile faceless minions – the hardcore shock troops –

who are sworn to mindless and perfect obedience” (Ibid.) that he gathered during the GamerGate.

Despite Day’s provocative approach and vile rhetoric, Torgersen did not dissociate himself from the leader of the Rabid Puppies:

I don’t mind being linked to Vox, because I don’t hate and fear Vox like a little schoolgirl who’s been stung by a wasp. Vox has made some statements that make me raise an eyebrow, but I don’t run screaming from him. (<https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/03/29/nail-house/>)

Originally, Torgersen claimed that his goal was to reform (though he did not specify if he was referring to the fandom or the Hugos). He wrote on his blog that the SP3 was “not a same-minded collective” (<https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/02/07/sad-puppies-some-responses-to-the-fallout/>) and mentioned a “tremendous amount of internal debate about how to proceed” (Ibid.) in regard to the slate, never naming other creators of the slate. However, his rhetoric soon transformed from talk about recognizing more worthy works, writers, and editors into name-calling and conspiracy theories. He coined a new term – “Cliquish, Holier-than-thou Obnoxious, Reactionary, Fanatics” (<https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/03/31/chorf-its-a-word-now/>) or CHORF – to describe opponents of the Sad Puppies campaign, previously referred to collectively in a derogatory manner as the Social Justice Warriors. He nominated Teresa Nielsen Hayden as a CHORF queen after she pointed out that the Hugos legally belong to the WorldCon and spiritually to all those who love sf. Soon, he started calling the SP3 campaign “an overdue peasant revolt” (<https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/04/05/peasants/>) and announced that “100% of the opposition to SP3 can be distilled down to that single concept: snobbery” (Ibid.).

On April 4, 2015 the nominees for the 2015 Hugo Awards were announced. Puppy movements managed to dominate the ballot with 71 percent of the nominations consisting of candidates promoted by Sad Puppies 3 and/or Rabid Puppies. This prompted a heated debate across social media and led to a backlash against what the large part of the fandom perceived to be an abuse of the Hugo’s nomination system. Many of the prominent figures in the sf community responded with alarm and dissociated themselves from both movements.

Furthermore, for the first time in the history of the Hugo Awards, finalists withdrew their works after the announcement of the final shortlist. Marko Kloos (nominated in the Best Novel category) and Annie Bellet (nominated in the Best Short Story category) declined their nominations as they did not want to be involved with the Puppies. Kloos (2015) expressed his disappointment at the politicization of the award:

To put it bluntly: if this nomination gives even the appearance that Vox Day or anyone else had a hand in giving it to me because of my perceived political leanings, I don’t want it. I want to be nominated for awards because of the work, not because of the “right” or “wrong” politics.

Author Connie Willis (2015), originally invited to be an award presenter at the ceremony, also declined her participation, stating that her presence and silence would “lend cover and credibility to winners who got the award through bullying and extortion.” Many other sf writers and editors spoke against the campaign on Twitter, Facebook, and their own sites. Some of them were against the general idea of voting slates influencing the Hugos while others could not agree with political views of the Puppies. All agreed that what Sad Puppies started and Rabid Puppies reinforced would change the future of Hugo Awards. As George R.R. Martin, himself a multiple Hugo winner and a WorldCon member, pointed out, campaigning for awards and recommending reading lists happened before:

Sad Puppies did not invent Hugo campaigning, by any means. But they escalated it . . . They turned it up to eleven. Their slate was more effective than anyone could ever have dreamed, so effective that they drowned out pretty much all the other voices. They ran the best organized, most focused, and most effective awards campaign in the history of our genre, and showed everyone else how it’s done. (<http://grmm.livejournal.com/417812.html?thread=20658452>)

Growing tensions within the fandoms and a sense of helplessness of the opponents of the Puppies movements led to the development of the proposed countermeasure: No Award strategy. Some fans called for a total boycott of the 2015 Hugo Awards and voting “no award” in all categories. Other claimed that only “all Puppy” categories should be voted “no award,” regardless of the quality of works in these categories. The third option, one that seemed to be endorsed by the majority of the non-Puppy voters, was choosing “no award” only if the submitted works were unworthy of the Hugos.

The opponents of the Puppies did not organize a uniform campaign though the consensus was that the Puppies can and should be defeated by voting. While the movements “broke no rules, many sci-fi writers and fans felt they had played dirty, taking advantage of a loophole in an arcane voting process that enables a relatively few numbers of voters to dominate” (Wallace 2015). Thus, the Puppygate motivated significantly more people than ever to buy WorldCon membership (at least \$40) to be allowed to vote for the 2015 Hugo Awards. 5,950 valid final ballots were cast before voting closed on the 31st of July – 65% more than ever before. Voters selected “no award” in all five “Puppy” categories. Not even one Puppy-endorsed candidate won. This was perceived as a heavy loss of the Puppies and a proof that sf community valued the integrity of the award and was not afraid to take action. Adam Troy-Castro wrote on his site that the results were like a declaration of the entire fandom:

We don’t want this system gamed with block voting. You want to win a Hugo, win it the way you’re supposed to: by blowing away the readership with such brilliance that people can’t abide the idea of NOT giving you a Hugo . . . Not spewing racism and homophobia and threats of violence all over the internet, and not smiling indulgently when your fans do the same, would also be a plus. (Rapoport 2015)

However, what Martin described as “a victory for worldcon, fandom, and the Hugos themselves” (<http://grrm.livejournal.com/417812.html?thread=20658452>), Day called on his Twitter page a victory for the Puppies: “[t]he scorched earth tactics of the SF SJWs /social justice warriors/ proves that we are winning. This is a battle, it’s not the war” (<https://twitter.com/voxday/status/635386066812465153>) and Torgersen described as giving Day “his pretext for further assaults on the Hugos in future years, while also radicalizing and alienating many people who wanted nothing to do with Vox, but who did want to see justice done at the Hugo awards proper” (<https://bradr-torgersen.wordpress.com/2015/12/27/sad-puppies-and-the-future/>) after dissociating himself and Sad Puppies from Rabid Puppies in the midst of the controversy.

Soon it turned out that the results of the 2015 Hugo Awards did not deter block voters as both groups announced their willingness to participate in the 2016 Hugos. Day published a list of recommendations for the 2016 Hugo Awards after announcing that Rabid Puppies intend to “continue to liberate a literary genre from the small collection of creepy left-wing monsters, rape enthusiasts, and social justice warriors who have made it their home for decades” (<http://voxday.blogspot.com/2015/12/do-we-want-to-reconcile.html?commentPage=2>). Sad Puppies rallied around new leaders, Sarah Hoyt, Amanda Green, and Kate Paulk (all of whom officially recused themselves from the list), and moved from a recommended slate to a crowd-sourced list. It seems that the group is still “motivated by a nostalgia for an imaginary past” (Heer 2015) but this time Sad Puppies decided against claiming that “ideology and entertainment are at odds in science fiction” (Ibid.) as they describe their mission:

We want at least ten thousand nomination ballots . . . More voters. More votes. More people. We want to make the Hugos bigger and more representative of fandom as a whole, to bring people in rather than give them an asterisk that looks kind of wrong (especially beside the rocket) to try to drive the “interlopers” out. SF is a big tent: we don’t want to kick out anyone, even writers of bad message fiction [...] (Paulk 2015)

It is impossible to predict if these new, reinvented Sad Puppies will escape the political baggage of the previous SP campaigns and manage to broaden participation in the Hugo nominations in a politically neutral and inclusive way without wallowing in self-pity and grudges. Sticking to a name associated with an attempt to break the Hugos and diminish value of countless fans and writers, might suggest that supporters of the campaign from previous years still constitute a core of the group and SP4 will reflect the same sort of political and ideological leanings as before without actually deliberately mocking and attacking those they perceive as their opponents.

Ultimately, the Puppygate may serve as another proof of a fragmentation of sf communities that has been progressing slowly over the last 30 years. As Maroney (2017) points out, “[r]eaders are in communication with each other, but contact among those communities is sporadic when it isn’t outright hostile. There is no science fiction readership; there are a bunch of readerships, balkanized across a dozen or more descrip-

tions.” Completely different visions of the purpose of the genre lead to the creation of gated groups. Similar things happen within other fandoms. With GamerGate¹ targeting women in the video game industry and the transphobic *Baldur’s Gate* controversy², Sad and Rabid Puppies are only one of many expressions of a negative backlash in the popular culture.

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¹ Gamergate is a blanket term for “online (and offline) activities [centered] around ‘#gamergate’, which have included death and rape threats against various women employed within, or connected to, the video games industry” Longhurst et al. 2016, 155.

² Introduction of a supporting transgender character in *Baldur’s Gate: Siege of Dragonspear* expansion pack has been received with much controversy. A significant number of gamers were offended by the inclusion of what they perceived to be gender politics and responded by posting negative user reviews and giving the game a score of “zero.”

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