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*Book Reviews*

Sonja Fritzsche, ed., *The Liverpool Companion to World Science Fiction Film. (*Liverpool University Press, 2014, 256pp, £75.00)

Reviewed by Alison Tedman (Buckinghamshire New University)

This collection analyzes selected science fiction films from Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and South America, framing these within national or regional science fiction history. It makes a valuable contribution to recent work on world science fiction that seeks to address the previous marginalization of countries viewed as on the periphery of sf development.

In the introduction, Sonja Fritzsche draws on Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. to observe that unravelling world sf films’ ‘complex meaning-making practices’ has been difficult for those without contextualizing knowledge. To address this complexity, individual aesthetic and ideological analyses trace the meanings of sf tropes or themes, such as ecological sustainability, in precise geographical, political and cultural production contexts. Definitions by Brian Stableford, Darko Suvin, Vivian Sobchak and others are prevalent throughout, providing a grounding framework for study.

Fritzsche describes world sf filmmakers as ‘reinterpreting [...] contemporary understandings of the genre’. This phrase is certainly germane to Wanuri Kahiu’s stylish short, *Pumzi* (*Breath* 2009), set after a World Water War in a society based on self-generated power and fluid reclamation. In Ritch Calvin’s eco-cinecritical study, the film is related to female custodianship of resources in African ‘matrilineal societies’. An explanation of the significance of water to African environmentalism illuminates the influence of Kenyan ecofeminist Wangari Maathai. Contextualizing Kahiu’s choice of sf as a mode, Calvin points to her prior use of realism, in connection with Kenya’s Riverwood filmmakers. A technophobic theme in *Pumzi* is defined as bearing specific ideological import in an African context that also references ‘ecocatastrophic’ and environmentalist science fiction. In Calvin’s reading, the film is discussed both as African and as Kenyan, precluding an over-simplified categorization of African-related sf and directorial identity.

The interrelation of place, technology and nation is addressed in a divergent context in Jie Zhang’s analysis of *Death Ray on a Coral Island* (1980). The film arguably ‘provides a unique window into the political and cultural milieu’ in which sf was temporarily a permissible form in China. Zhang positions the film in terms of history, science, gender and family, and theorizes the emotion induced by ‘rendering China visually absent’ yet ‘narratively essential’.

In their overview of Indian sf cinema, Jessica Langer and Dominic Alessio situate the genre historically from 1882, before focusing on contemporary sf as ‘a major box-office draw in India and its diaspora’. Increased production from 2003 is exemplified by the popular *Krissh* franchise (2003- ), *Ra.One* (2011) and the high-budget, digital effects action hybrid *Endhiran* (2010). The latter’s spectacular sequence, featuring robot Chitti, accrued many YouTube views, and the authors examine western responses to this. They also consider ‘indigeneity, coproduction and international reception’ in Indian sf, positioning the powerful cultural specificity of musical numbers against and beyond transnational influences.

Takayuki Tatsumi focuses on *Gojira* (1954), locating its central figure’s adaptive meanings in relation to Japanese history, science fiction and folklore, as well as global historical and cultural contexts. Tatsumi traces the cultural resonances of Gojira to Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912), Ray Bradbury’s ‘The Fog Horn’ (1951), and its adaptation *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), among other texts.

European and North American films are included in the collection in order to avoid ‘reinforc[ing] a separate “foreign” canon’. In his chapter on British sf cinema of the 1950s, Derek Johnston constructs a transmedia reading of Hammer’s adaptations of fantasy television, including the *Quatermass* serials, and of related marketing. This is followed by analysis of the hybrid influence of sf tropes within Hammer’s gothic horror.

Moving to eastern Europe, the next two studies challenge assumptions about the subject within the frame, in relation to cinemas’ socio-political milieus. Firstly, Jason Merrill analyses, among others, the Czech films, *Daisies* (1966), persuasively read as sf, and the more speculative *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* (1966). The films’ metaphoric, nihilistic scenes of female violence and destruction are positioned, using Judith Butler’s work on gender as performance, against directives concerning gender roles under Communism. Merrill concludes that western film theory such as Laura Mulvey’s oft-cited work may be ‘successfully applied to non-Hollywood films’, but will prove rewarding if it is mediated by an understanding of context.

Next, Evan Torner interrogates an interplanetary quest narrative to illuminate an unintended bias in the representation of race in the East German/Polish film *Silent Star* (1960). The multicultural ambitions of this film, featuring a diverse cast, relate to a political and cultural context in which ‘“utopian realism” [...] encouraged an optimistic identification with the proletarian reality’. Through a discussion of pre-production, actors’ pay, and filmic strategies, Torner concludes that the film exemplifies a systemic, ‘ambivalent position on race’.

French sf films, as Fritzsche notes, have appeared individually within the canon of sf studies. The experimental and fragmented nature of France’s science fiction output is treated as integral to its history in Daniel Tron’s ‘Looking for French Science Fiction Cinema’. Tron cites Méliès, Truffaut, Godard, Resnais and Marker, the influence of the magazine *Métal Hurlant*, and the film work of three of its artists, notably Jean Girard (Moebius). Jeunet and Caro’s *Delicatessen* (1991) and *The City of Lost Children* (1992) are analysed, to reveal ‘post-apocalyptic, science fantasy hybridization’ and the continuation of earlier sf’s ‘experimental’, ‘surrealist’ and ‘noir-metafictional’ techniques.

The next two chapters consider the capacity of sf to draw on and transform national cultural themes. In examining Irish sf cinema, Katie Moylan draws on critical definitions of sf while placing films in their socio-economic context, to argue that the ‘intersections of science fiction conventions and recognizable Irish narrative themes [...] rework and challenge traditional onscreen representations of “Irishness”’. *Earthbound* (2013), a film about a character who believes himself to be an alien, ‘locates its critique in its focus on post-Celtic Tiger Ireland’.

Raffaella Baccolini’s chapter illuminates films that are unlikely to be widely known outside Italy. She classifies the limited output produced in what ‘is not considered an appropriate, native genre’ into films ‘for the domestic market, which are often comedies, farces and satires’ or ‘more serious, adventurous dramas’ for export. *Nirvana* (1997), a cyberpunk film about a ‘virtual reality game programmer’ and a sentient game avatar, ‘succeeds in combining authentic science fiction themes with characterizations that are typical of Italian comedy’. *Fascists on Mars* (2006) is closely discussed in relation to satire and to discourses of masculinity.

Although positioned under ‘North America’, Robyn Citizen’s chapter is among those in the book that cover several regions. Citizen first casts revealing new light on black female representation in sf films that include *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) and *Children of Men* (2006). The study examines the extent to which sf from American, British or other national contexts offers the potential ‘to recast black femininity in new terms’. The analysis moves from the mainstream to the ‘avant-garde science fiction film *Les Saignantes’* (Cameroon, 2005), a film that sets ‘female power’ at its narrative centre.

Opening the section on South America, Mariano Paz considers Argentina’s *Goodbye Dear Moon* (2005) as revealing ‘the tensions and dichotomies’ of national politics in the 1990s, and a critique of ‘the current postcolonial and globalized’ international context through its use of sf, comedy, ‘sarcasm and irony’. This study defines Argentinian sf as ‘intellectual or speculative’, and utilizes methodologies of ‘hybridity and hybridization’ from Homi Bhabha and Néstor García Canclini to interrogate the way in which *Goodbye Dear Moon* combines Hollywood conventions with indigenous ‘motifs’.

This is followed by Alfredo Suppia’s exploration of Brazilian sf, including ‘dystopian political allegories’ and ‘ecological speculations’ during the 1970s-80s. After a period of slump and recovery, digital sf children’s film *Cassiopéia* (1996) broke new ground, while *Our Home* (2010) linked science fiction to spiritualism, rendering sf ‘more familiar’ for a domestic audience. The study highlights ‘two central tendencies’ towards parodic and serious science fiction in Brazil.

References to accessible production tools and the convergent distribution properties of the internet are threaded throughout the collection. Fritzsche points to ‘a digital, neoliberal culture’ as a factor behind an international increase in sf, whilst Pawel Frelik highlights the impact of digitality on global sf, encompassing low-budget ‘paracinema’, ‘mockbusters’ in America, ‘the revitalization of sf cinemas’ in Spain, Mexico and India, ‘the resurgence of the short [sf] film’, and fan culture.

This collection contributes significantly to the growing body of work on world sf, extending the terms of reference for dialogue within this field. As a minor point, perhaps more studies on national cinemas that are less well-covered in other texts could have been incorporated, but that is not to detract from the strengths of the book. Instead, it represents a diverse, theoretically astute yet accessible selection. Its readers are likely to seek out the films under discussion and view them with newly informed understanding.