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Good News from France

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REVIEW-ESSAY**Arthur B. Evans****Good News from France**

Natacha Vas-Deyres. *Ces Français qui ont écrit demain: Utopie, anticipation et science-fiction au XXe siècle*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012. 535 pp. €110 hc.

Simon Bréan. *La Science-Fiction en France: Théorie et histoire d'une littérature*. Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2012. 502 pp. €22 pbk.

Daniel Fondanèche. *La Littérature d'imagination scientifique*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. 398 pp. €84 pbk.

Several years ago, I published a review about a collection of essays on science fiction written mostly by French academics. The book, edited by Stéphane Nicot, was titled *Les Univers de la Science-Fiction: Essais* [The Universe of Science Fiction: Essays, 1998].¹ I felt the collection was noteworthy in part because of the surprising lack of sf criticism in France and the genre's ongoing difficulties in being accepted there as a legitimate object of literary study. In his preface to the book, Nicot explained how

Contrary to its status in Anglo-Saxon countries, where science fiction now enjoys a growing international recognition, France still remains "open territory" for this genre.... The French university today voluntarily embraces the study of those various forms of literature descending from *Dracula*, but the study of sf still remains essentially suspect.... Given these conditions, one can understand why serious study of sf has been slow to develop here, especially in comparison to other countries such as the United States or Canada. (qtd. Evans "Review," 150)

I concluded my review by pointing out that the final essay in the book, "Science-Fiction Literature: Desperately Seeking Criticism" by veteran sf scholar Roger Bozzetto, seemed especially appropriate given the rather bleak status of French sf scholarship at the time.

Thankfully, times have changed. The year 2012 will one day be remembered as a major turning point in French sf scholarship, with the publication of *three* noteworthy studies (two of which were spun off from doctoral dissertations), along with the launch of an outstanding new website devoted to science fiction, *ReS Futurae: Revue d'études sur la science-fiction* [ReS Futurae: Journal of Studies on Science Fiction], a peer-reviewed online academic journal that is a "sister" publication to *SFS*. Founder and managing editor of the website, Professor Irène Langlet of the Université de Limoges, is also the author of a pioneering 2006 study called *La Science-fiction: Lecture et poétique d'un genre littéraire* [Science Fiction: Readings and Poetics of a

Literary Genre], on which see Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.'s review in *SFS* (39.3 [Nov. 2012]: 500-511).

Vas-Deyres's book (loosely translated as *Those French Writers who Wrote Tomorrow*) is the most resolutely academic and sociological of the three volumes under review here. Although all three might be labeled literary histories, Vas-Deyres's goal is not to write a history of science fiction *per se* but rather to explore the social dimension of what she calls "'utopian literature,' novels of science fiction, hypothesis novels, works of scientific marvelous fiction, philosophical tales, and utopian or dystopian novels" (22)—in other words, "works of anticipation or science fiction that foreground visions of a [future] society" (23) and that "nourish sociological or historical reflection" (24). (A side note: in French, the exact meaning of the term "anticipation" can change from user to user, but it is roughly equivalent to "about the future." Until recently, most works of science fiction in France were collectively called "anticipation" (as in *roman d'anticipation*). Vas-Deyres uses the term in a more historically specific way, to refer to sf works about the future that appeared prior to Gernsback, the American pulps, and the popularization of the terms "scientifiction" and "science fiction.")

The book's chronological sweep is relatively broad, from the 1890s to 2004. Its contents are divided into three major parts, with each part containing two to three chapters. Part one is called "Ideological Representations of Scientific and Social Progress (1890-1910)"; it examines the rise of technological utopianism in France during la Belle Époque as expressed in the works of Jules Verne, Émile Souvestre, Léon Daudet, Camille Flammarion, J-H. Rosny Aîné, Emile Zola, Jean Grave, Louise Michel, and Daniel Halévy. Part two is called "Representations of the Horrors of Social and Industrial Massification (1920-1970)"; it analyzes the pervasive attitudes of fear, anti-scientism, and global catastrophism that followed World War I and persisted into the atomic era, as seen in the anti-utopian fictions of Ernest Pérochon, José Moselli, Claude Farrère, B.R. Bruss, Régis Messac, Jacques Spitz, Maurice Renard, André Maurois, René Barjavel, Francis Carsac, Stéfan Wul, Jean-Pierre Andrevon, Pierre Boulle, and Gérard Klein. Part three is called "Utopian Literature Meets the Contemporary World and the Future (1970-2004)"; it covers the period since May 1968 and focuses on the renewal of utopian hope in the light of the many social transformations brought about by the rise of feminism, information technology, and posthumanism, as evident in the sf of Ayerdhal, Serge Lehman, Robert Merle, Joëlle Wintrebert, Pierre Bordage, Philippe Curval, Michel Jeury, Serge Brussolo, Jean-Christophe Ruffin, Joël Houssin, G.J. Arnaud, and Jean-Claude Dunyach, among others.

Ces Français qui ont écrit demain is the best study I know on the subject of the evolution of futurist, sociopolitical French sf from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. It is a veritable treasure trove of sociological and literary references for this period. And it has recently been honored with the prestigious Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire for 2013 (a French award similar to the Hugo). On the negative side, the book is often less about science fiction and more about ideology, political power, and social

transformation. Although many French sf writers are discussed, only a narrow slice of their oeuvre is targeted. The book's prose can at times be a tough slog—even for someone who is fluent in French—because of its jargon-laden style. And when Vas-Deyres occasionally ventures into unfamiliar territory and makes pronouncements about sf outside France, her statements can be jarringly off the mark. Consider the following generalization, for example: “For Americans, science fiction was born with the novel *Ralph 124C41* [sic] by Hugo Gernsback, published in 1911 in *Modern Electrics*” (126 n.1). Finally, the book is expensive—over 100 euros—which puts it well beyond the budget of most sf fans and scholars, and even many university libraries. It seems a shame that such an important study would price itself out of the very market that would be most likely to buy it, read it, and learn from it.

Another excellent study of French sf published last year is Simon Bréan's *La Science-Fiction en France* [Science Fiction in France]. In contrast to Vas-Deyres's book, its field of inquiry is limited to the three post-WW II decades of 1950-1980. It was during this crucial period, according to Bréan, that French sf was born and slowly established itself as a national genre. During those postwar years of reconstruction, France was awash with all things American: Hollywood movies, New Orleans jazz, and translations of “Golden Age” sf stories by Asimov, Heinlein, van Vogt, and others. I once described the consequences of this American invasion on the local sf culture in France as follows:

The effects of this virtual tidal wave of Anglo-American SF into post-war France proved to be both positive and negative. On the one hand, it served to suddenly reawaken French interest in SF and to infuse “new blood” into the French SF genre—new visions of the future, new narrative techniques, and new publishing outlets for aspiring novelists. On the other hand, it encouraged kneejerk imitation of these successful foreign authors, temporarily suppressed the development in France of a more identifiably indigenous SF, and created a publishing market strongly prejudiced toward translated imports. (“Science Fiction” 261)

Bréan would no doubt take issue with my phrase “reawaken French interest in SF and to infuse ‘new blood’ into the French SF genre” because he does not recognize that indigenous science fiction ever existed in France until circa 1950. Before that date, there were only works of *imagination scientifique* [scientific imagination] and of *merveilleux scientifique* [scientific marvelous]. Similarly, in his opinion, before Hugo Gernsback and the American pulp magazines invented the genre of science fiction in the 1920s and 1930s, in the United States and Great Britain there existed only works of *scientific romance*. Although I strongly disagree with these notions, Bréan is not alone in his position concerning the genre's “origins”; a growing number of contemporary sf scholars tend to feel this way (see my “Histories”).

La Science-Fiction en France is divided into two distinct parts: history and theory. The history part is composed of four chapters. The first surveys a number of sf precursors in France (e.g., Verne, Rosny Aîné, Renard, Spitz, Groc, Barjavel, Bruss, et al.) as well as the “American sf model” that became

dominant in France around 1950. Each of the three succeeding chapters focuses on a single decade: 1950-59 (“A New French Literature”), 1960-69 (“French SF in Crisis”), and 1970-1980 (“A Publishing Expansion Without Precedent”). Much to the author’s credit, the discussion includes both the many French sf novelists of these periods and also their respective editorial, publishing, and marketing environments. He investigates not only the works of authors such as Richard-Bessière, Jimmy Guieu, René Barjavel, Gérard Klein, Philippe Curval, and Michel Jeury but also the French sf magazines *Fiction* and *Galaxie*, the publisher Fleuve Noir’s “Anticipation” book series, Hachette-Gallimard’s “Le Rayon fantastique,” Denoël’s “Présence du Futur,” and Laffont’s “Ailleurs et Demain” collections, among others. The theory part of *La Science-Fiction en France* takes up the final three chapters of the book. Together, they seek to establish a “poetics” for the genre, with passing nods to the cognitive estrangement of Darko Suvin, the absent paradigms of Marc Angenot, Umberto Eco’s encyclopedic open texts, and the sf megatext of Christine (not Françoise, as she is repeatedly misnamed) Brooke-Rose and Damien Broderick, as well as the narratological analyses of their Francophone successors Richard Saint-Gelais and Irène Langlet. For the Anglophone sf scholar who has closely followed the genre’s many theoretical debates over the past few decades, this section of Bréan’s study may seem like very familiar territory. But, to me, the most interesting discussions are the application of these theories to the French sf works themselves—i.e., the author’s close readings of certain passages from novels by Stéfan Wul, Daniel Drode, Kurt Steiner (a.k.a. André Ruellan), Gérard Klein, and Pierre Pelot (a.k.a. Pierre Grosdemange).

Different from but complementary to Vas-Deyres’s study, Bréan’s is the reference of choice if one is looking for an in-depth review of French science fiction during the years following World War II. Jean-Marc Gouanvic’s Bourdieu-influenced study *Sociologie de la traduction: la science-fiction américaine dans l’espace culturel français des années 1950* [Sociology of Translation: American Science Fiction in the French Cultural Space of the 1950s, 1999], which I reviewed in these pages a dozen years ago (28.2 [Jul. 2001]: 303-304), may provide more insight into the nature of the French translations of US sf during this period, their ideological impact, and the editorial role of the avant-garde luminaries Boris Vian and Raymond Queneau. And Gouanvic’s even earlier 1994 study *La Science-fiction française au XXe siècle (1900-1968)* [French Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century (1900-1968)], on which see George Slusser’s *SFS* review (23.2 [Jul. 1996]: 276-84), may be better in its coverage of French sf writers from the first half of the twentieth century. But Bréan’s *La Science-fiction en France* offers the best—i.e., the most cogently written and incisive—literary analysis of French sf of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. A couple of small quibbles: the book focuses almost exclusively on sf novels; one finds very little mention of the short fiction published during this period. And the book pays very little attention to the huge influence of Philip K. Dick on the French sf writers of the time (see Bozzetto).

Daniel Fondanèche's *La Littérature d'imagination scientifique* [The Literature of the Scientific Imagination], compared with the two volumes by Vas-Deyres and Bréan, seems less formally academic in its approach. It includes much less sociological/semiotic jargon and more closely resembles a traditional literary history intended for non-specialists. Its chronological focus has very little overlap with the other books: it concentrates on what all three authors would identify as the genre's "prehistory," from Lucian to Rosny Aîné. Lastly, it does not limit its literary corpus exclusively to proto-sf writers who are French (although they do comprise the vast majority of the book's contents); it also includes some British authors such as Godwin, Swift, Bulwer-Lytton, and H.G. Wells (but not Shelley, Poe, or Haggard or any writers of the utopian tradition such as More, Butler, or Bellamy).

Following in the footsteps of Jean-Jacques Bridenne's short but pioneering *La Littérature française d'imagination scientifique* (1950), Fondanèche traces the emergence and evolution of this "literature of scientific imagination" whose long history (supposedly) preceded and prepared the way for the subsequent birth of "science fiction" in the twentieth century. And he does so mostly through expansive discussions of the science and technologies embedded in these narratives. Fondanèche's most frequent *modus operandi* is to take the reader on a walking tour through the plot of a novel, pointing out interesting scientific or technological tidbits along the way, providing wide-ranging background information about them, explaining the author's adaptation and/or extrapolation of them, and then linking these references to the works of other proto-sf writers. Such readings are invariably rich and informative, and the breadth of Fondanèche's historical and scientific erudition seems impressively encyclopedic.

Fondanèche's book contains four main chapters (of unequal length), plus an introduction, a conclusion, and several appendices at the end. The latter includes a brief chronology of the nineteenth century (from Napoleon to World War I) and several pages listing "The Principal Inventions of the Nineteenth Century" in physics and chemistry, electricity, astronomy, engineering, medicine, communications, etc.—a clear indication of the book's heavy focus on science and technology. The first chapter, "The Conditions of Emergence of the Literature of Scientific Imagination" (mostly about the Industrial Revolution) and the second chapter, "Precursors to the Literature of Scientific Imagination" (from Lucian to Restif de la Bretonne), together comprise fewer than 70 pages. The exegetical heart of the book is located in chapters three and four, which together take up nearly 300 pages. Chapter three is called "The Emergence of the Literature of Scientific Imagination" and discusses the works of Émile Souvestre, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Louis Bousсенard, Georges Le Faure and Henri de Graffigny, Camille Flammarion, Paul D'Ivoi, and Charles Cros (I especially liked the essays on Le Faure/Graffigny and Flammarion). Chapter four, titled "The Masters of the Genre," talks about the scientific fiction of Verne, Robida, Wells, and Rosny Aîné (with the Verne essay being the most disappointing—see below).

Although there is much to like in Fondanèche's *La Littérature d'imagination scientifique*, there are also a number of things to dislike. First, the organization of the book leaves much to be desired. For example, it is confusing to categorize an author who was publishing in the 1890s or even the early 1900s (such as Flammarion, D'Ivoi, or Cros) as being part of an "emerging" genre that had already been thoroughly popularized by Jules Verne in the 1860s and 1870s. Second, within each chapter, the continual "info dumps" of scientific and technological information tend to overwhelm and smother the literary discussions. Third, Fondanèche is sometimes less than reliable in his selection of texts. For example, of the 40-plus pages devoted to Verne, more than half of them focus on just two stories: the short novel *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (written in 1863 but not published until 1994, almost a century after the author's death) and the 1889 story "In the Year 2889" (which was actually written by Verne's son Michel). Why did Fondanèche choose these two relatively minor texts by Verne? Because they contain an unusually large number of scientific and technological *predictions*—something that, despite his reputation, is quite uncharacteristic of Verne in most of his *Voyages Extraordinaires*. One final nitpick: the cost. Like Vas-Deyres's, Fondanèche's book is priced at over 80 euros (more than \$100); unlike hers, his is a paperback.

These three new books from France—along with the new academic website *Res Futurae*—signal a significant and exciting change in today's French sf scholarship. After decades of efforts by Francophone writers and critics, *la science-fiction* seems finally on its way to becoming accepted in France as a legitimate literary genre worthy of advanced study. Let us hope that, as the next step in this evolution, more academic courses on science fiction will be offered in the halls of French academe, alongside those on Balzac, Baudelaire, and Barthes.

NOTES

1. In this review, all translations from the French are my own unless otherwise attributed.

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