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Arthur B. Evans
DePauw University

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Current Trends in Global SF

Roger Bozzetto. Science Fiction in France: The Comeback

Science fiction in France seems to oscillate between lush times and lean. Modern sf in France has always comprised two distinct traditions: those sf books and films translated from English (mostly from the United States), and those originally published or produced in French (mostly from France). These two domains are not necessarily antagonistic: it might even be argued that the periods of prosperity for French sf have been marked by its openness to the Anglo-American sf world. Such was the case, for example, in the postwar 1950s when the sudden influx of anglophone sf books into the French marketplace gave rise to a proliferation of francophone sf authors who imitated them. And such was the case in the early 1970s, in the wake of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, when homegrown French sf flourished (despite a certain undercurrent of aggressive anti-Americanism) and appeared alongside translated Anglo-American titles in a variety of sf collections created by French publishers. In contrast, in the 1980s and the popularity of Serge Brussolo's works notwithstanding, the situation for French sf as a whole suddenly worsened: its sales began to drop off rapidly—the victim of intrusive political agendas by French sf writers and their misguided attempts at “literary legitimization” via stylistic experimentation. During this decade, one might say that French sf retreated into a kind of self-imposed elitist “ghetto,” alienating its own readership and distancing itself from the continuing and abundant Anglo-American sf of the period. Opportunities for young French sf writers shriveled, sf magazines and journals disappeared, and many French publishers discontinued their once-profitable sf lines. After the best of times, it was the worst of times.

Fortunately, the late 1990s have once again witnessed a sudden renaissance in the popularity of science fiction in France. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of this recent upsurge of interest in sf among French readers. Might it be due to the pervasive influence of today's media industry—i.e., the success of sf cinema, the availability of cable television and pay-per-view programming, and the proliferation of videocassettes? Is it perhaps because of a change in publishers' attitudes? Is it the result of a young public who, in opposition to what they perceive (wrongly) as the traditional “dead” culture taught in schools, have adopted sf as a kind of generational “counterculture,” one that seems more relevant to their lives in this high-tech world? Or, conversely, is it a byproduct of the efforts of their teachers who, in trying to instill in their students a taste for reading literature (a challenging task nowadays), have turned to sf as a means to initially “hook” them in the hopes of subsequently repatriating them to mainstream literary texts? Or finally, could it simply be due to the new wave of French sf writers who are now finally “in sync” with their public's expectations for the genre?

Whatever the reason(s), science fiction in this country is now on a roll.

And it is becoming acceptable even to those who had previously been labelled members of the dominant culture “establishment”: for instance, the ex-president of the French Senate chose to invite Jack Vance and several European sf authors to the recent government-sponsored exposition called Futuroscope, held in Poitiers in 1998. Furthermore, large cash prizes have now been attached to certain annual awards such as the “Eiffel Tower Award for Science Fiction” in order to encourage young sf writers, both domestic and foreign. Last year, this award was won by French author Pierre Bordage for his two-volume sf novel *Wang*; and this year both the categories and purse were doubled, with the best novel going to Valerio Evangelista of Italy and the best short story to Roland W. Wagner of France. Sf conventions are also beginning to catch on here. In particular, for the past three years in Nancy, an sf convention called “Les Galaxiales” has been held in early April, gathering together a wide variety of French and non-French sf authors, fans, critics, and editors (*Galaxies*, BP 3687, Nancy 54097 cedex, France). Last year several well-known Anglo-American writers including Mike Resnick, Poppy Z. Brite, and Brian Stableford were invited; on next year’s schedule are Robert Silverberg, Karen Haber, and Norman Spinrad, as well as the French-Canadian Jean-Louis Trudel and the above-mentioned award-winner Evangelista. Finally, a group called “Association 42” has recently developed a new Internet website devoted exclusively to sf (<http://www.integra.fr/XLII/SF42.html>). It features many links to other sf-related sites and contains a very rich databank of French online texts—short stories, book reviews, and sf criticism. It includes, for example, all of Michel Jeury’s published short stories as well as Gérard Klein’s editorial prefaces to several French sf paperback editions.

This rebirth of interest in sf in France—where (to the great frustration of some purists) the reading public seems to make no distinction between the genres of sf and fantasy—has been accompanied by the appearance of several new sf journals and fanzines. Following the unfortunate disappearance of *Nous les Martiens* (one of the better sources for sf criticism) and of *Cyberdreams* after thirteen theme-based issues (devoted mostly to presenting the translated works of such anglophone sf authors as Greg Egan), the venerable French sf fanzine *Yellow Submarine* has taken on a new life and, in addition to its customary sf fiction, now publishes many critical articles à la *SFS*. Another sf fanzine, *Ozone*, has transformed itself into a professional magazine and now carries the name *SF Magazine*. Its print-run is 30,000 copies, and it is now in its third issue. Similar in some ways to *Locus*, it is a good source of information on the sf genre as a whole—books, films, publishers’ data, interviews with authors, advertisements, etc. And, serving as it does to unite French sf readers around a common corpus, it is the type of sf publication (lacking since the demise of *Fiction*) that is capable of providing them with a shared cultural identity. The journal *Galaxies* was begun by the “Galaxiales” group of Nancy, but it is distributed only by subscription. It publishes sf short stories by both French and foreign authors, and it often includes substantial editorial pieces. *Bifrost*, run by a doubtlessly younger team of enthusiastic

editors, is more oriented toward the ideas and images of this fin-de-siècle and doesn't hesitate to publish a special issue on fantasy as well as sf. But it too publishes the works of authors of different nationalities and has served as the springboard for young sf writers including Thierry Di Rollo and Jean-Jacques Nguyen, who are beginning to make a name for themselves in the field.

A number of new publishers specializing in sf have also sprung up in the past few years—Destination Crépuscule, with its book on space opera entitled *Le Feu aux étoiles* (Fire in the Stars, 1996), L'Atalante with its best-selling novels by Pierre Bordage, etc.—and have offered new opportunities to fledgling sf writers. Although not seriously threatened in their business, the traditional French sf publishers of Le Fleuve Noir, Denoël, "Présence du Future," Laffont's "Ailleurs et Demain," Presses Pocket, or J'ai Lu Science-Fiction have nonetheless taken notice and have begun to respond to the changing tastes of their readerships. Le Fleuve Noir and Presses Pocket, for example, have added new fantasy series to their lists. And it must be noted that these larger publishing houses have also not hesitated to steal young, successful sf authors away from the smaller houses whenever possible (to the great indignation of the latter).

In contrast, there is almost a sense of camaraderie and reciprocal emulation among the participants of the various French sf journals and fanzines. For instance, at a Cyberfiction convention in Cannes at the end of 1998, the publishers of the sf journals *Galaxies*, *Bifrost*, and *SF Magazine* were amicably rubbing shoulders and sharing their space with the publishers of the horror journal *Ténèbres*, the more "generalist" *Parallèles*, and a veritable plethora of fanzines of every type (see, for example, Jean-Pierre Queille's website at: <http://www.integra.fr/XLII/PGEFF/Guide.html>).

It seems reasonable to assert that this new fan activity is at least partly the result of a "changing of the guard" in the ranks of French sf writers themselves over the past few years. Michel Jeury, Gérard Klein, André Ruellen, Jean-Pierre Andrevon, and an entire generation of sf authors born before 1940 have now more or less retired from the field. The next group—such authors as Emmanuel Jouanne, Pierre Paul Durastanti, Francis Berthelot, et al.—have all but ceased writing sf and now pursue careers in translation or research. And Serge Brussolo seems, at least for the moment, to have abandoned the sf genre. Accordingly, the field is now open sf authors in their 30s or even younger—for example, Laurent Genefort, Serge Lehman, Roland C. Wagner, Ayerdahl, Pierre Bordage, Jean-Jacques Nguyen, and Thierry Di Rollo—along with a handful of veterans in their 40s such as Jean-Marc Ligny, Jean-Claude Dunyach, and Richard Canal.

What characteristics does this new generation of French sf authors have in common? First, they have learned to write sf stories that hold the attention of their readers. Even if, for some, this has meant reverting to "popular" themes and styles, their works have been much better received by French sf readers—in contrast to the pretentious "literary" sf produced by certain members of the preceding generation. Their stories often present visions of alternative worlds that are near-future extrapolations of our present (where the

original model is often difficult to perceive) but where the reader is projected into new dimensions of dream or nightmare. Such is the case, for example, in Genefort's *Les Chasseurs de sève* (Sap Hunters, 1994), the works of Bordage, or the *F.A.U.S.T.* series by Lehman (1996-97). Sometimes, in the manner of Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* (1989) or Greg Bear's *Eon* (1985), they also portray more elaborate far-future speculations where the plausibility of their imagined universes is enhanced by the cogent efficiency of their plots and the concrete vividness of their descriptions. Such is the case, for instance, in the sf works of Ayerdahl, where social concerns are occasionally present but remain tightly integrated into the fictional story itself.

Other distinguishing traits shared by the French sf writers of the 1990s are their views concerning the politics and the sf of the United States. Long past are those years of the Vietnam War when angry French sf authors and readers systematically promoted sf texts that denounced America's paternalism and hypocrisy, and where most American sf was viewed with suspicion and often dismissed as the product of mercantilism, militarism, and cultural imperialism. In contrast, France's sf community of today is greatly interested in all English-language sf: French authors analyze the models used therein, and often emulate them. The works of Philip K. Dick are no longer their exclusive focus, and they now devote their attention more to the works of such writers as Kim Stanley Robinson, Greg Bear, Dan Simmons, and (curiously) Cordwainer Smith. These contemporary French sf writers no longer wish to create a national "sf à la française" in response to some ideologically-conceived "hegemony" of American sf. They are more interested in discovering new and innovative sf themes to develop in their own works, and in cultivating a loyal public that reads both French and translated sf.

It is perhaps partly a result of this dramatic change in attitude among French sf writers that the frequently formulaic near-future dystopias and catastrophe novels of the past have given way to extrapolative dreamscape novels or works depicting far-future universes totally detached from the present. Writers have rediscovered the imaginative power of "space opera" without its escapist tendencies—"new look" space opera, one might say, where the issues and problems of today are not ignored but are, rather, embedded in a richly inventive narrative coupled with strong psychological overtones.

For readers wishing to taste a representative sample of this "new French sf," an excellent place to start is the recently-published anthology *Escales sur l'Horizon* (Stops on the Horizon, 1998), edited and very intelligently prefaced by Serge Lehman. This anthology includes a variety of sf works by sixteen promising francophone authors of this new generation (including two Québécois, Jean-Louis Trudel and Yves Meynard). In these stories, one can witness the wide spectrum of creativity, originality, and narrative talent that these new writers now offer to the French sf public. In their ingenious treatments of both subject and theme—the lucidity of their descriptions, the depth of their portrayals, the polished professionalism of their narration—these sf works are worthy rivals to the best Anglo-American efforts of the last few years.

Another recent French anthology worth consulting is *Musées, des mondes énigmatiques* (Museums, Enigmatic Worlds, 1999), published by Denoël in its “Présence du futur” line. This collection features short stories by young and relatively unknown francophone sf writers who were invited to submit contributions on this specific theme. It follows in the footsteps of a similar publishing venture by Denoël in 1980 with its *Futurs au présent* (Futures in the Present) anthology—a gamble that was very successful and ultimately launched the writing career of Serge Brussolo, among others. Let us hope that this latest publication by Denoël will prove to be just as effective as its predecessor in bringing widespread public recognition to these young sf talents. In my opinion, several of them have special promise: I was particularly impressed, for example, with the narrational originality of Xavier Plathéy’s “Casse au musée” (Museum Scrap) and Cécile Voin’s “Silence d’outre tombe” (Silence from Beyond the Tomb).

Therefore, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of French sf are decidedly premature. During the past decade, it has attracted a host of vibrant “new blood” writers with fresh ideas, has succeeded in reestablishing contact with its readership base, has developed a kind of *esprit de corps* among its francophone aficionados, and has even begun to draw the attention of the French university system (see <http://www.up.univ-mrs.fr/~wcaruli>). Times have changed. As it enters the new millenium, French science fiction is now poised on the threshold of what may yet become its Golden Age. (Trans. ABE)