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Arthur B. Evans

Charting the Unknown World of French SF and Fantastique

Jean-Marc Lofficier and Randy Lofficier. *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction: A Guide to Cinema, Television, Radio, Animation, Comic Books and Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present.* 787 pp. + xi, McFarland, 2000. illus. \$95.

The publication of this massive "guide" must, by any standard, be viewed as a significant event: it is the first heroic attempt to provide, in English, a comprehensive overview of the history of francophone speculative fiction appearing both in print and in the media from the Middle Ages to the end of the twentieth century.

But before discussing the strengths and weakness of this ambitious book, I should first say a few words about definitions. As we all know, different cultures tend to define genres differently, and the specific labels used also tend to evolve over time. For example, in France and in most francophone countries, *la science-fiction* is a relatively new term replacing *le roman d'anticipation*;¹ *le fantastique* most often designates horror fiction (or "dark fantasy," as it seems to be sometimes called in anglophone markets lately); *le merveilleux* generally refers to fantasy; and the *le polar* or *le roman policier* is the preferred name given to most varieties of detective fiction. Of course, in each culture, these generic appellations will vary according to many factors: e.g., local institutions and traditions, socio-historical developments, certain influential critics, and classification practices in the publishing and film industry. As a result, the potential for intercultural misunderstandings is often unavoidable.²

The reason why this question of terminology seems pertinent is because the title of this impressive compendium—no doubt selected by its American publisher for commercial reasons—does not precisely correlate to its contents. The volume is divided into two "Books" of unequal size. Book 1 (289 pages) focuses on media and includes chapters on "Cinema," "Television," "Radio," "Animation," "Comic Books and Graphic Novels" (no "Graphic Novels" in the title³), and ends with a selected bibliography. Each of these chapters contains an "Historical Overview" followed by an alphabetical listing of entries. In contrast, Book 2 (498 pages) focuses on literature:

its twelve chapters are organized chronologically: "The Middle Ages," "The Renaissance," "The Enlightenment," "19th Century *Fantastique*," "19th Century Science Fiction," "The *Fantastique* Entre-Deux Guerres (Between the Wars)," "Science Fiction Entre-Deux Guerres (Between the Wars)," "Modern *Fantastique* (After World War II)," "Modern Science Fiction (After 1950)." It concludes with a special chapter on "French-Canadian Science Fiction and *Fantastique*" as well as with a "Dictionary of Authors" and a listing of "Major Awards." In Book 2, from the nineteenth century onwards, the Lofficiers have chosen to categorize all literature of this type into two distinct genres: science fiction and the *fantastique*. The *fantastique* (though, curiously, not sf) is then broken down into two additional sub-categories: "*Fantastique Littéraire*" and "*Fantastique Populaire*." Nowhere in this book does one find mention of "pulp fiction," and there is no discussion of detective fiction. And the terms "horror" and "fantasy" appear only in one chapter, "Modern *Fantastique* (After World War II)," under the sub-category of "*Fantastique Populaire*."

To their credit, the authors do offer a brief explanation of what they mean by *fantastique*:

A note about the French word *fantastique* which crops up in this book. It carries with it a much larger semantic field than its approximate English equivalent, fantasy. As a label, the *fantastique* can encompass fantasy, horror, fairy tales, gothic tales, surrealism, and anything in between. Ultimately, we found it preferable to subscribe to French writer Pierre Gripari's straightforward definition: "The *fantastique* is everything that is not rational." (9)

But, for the average Anglo-American sf scholar who consults this book, the different organizing principles used in Book 1 and Book 2 (the former a kind of encyclopedia; the latter a detailed historical survey) and the unexpected and somewhat unorthodox use of *fantastique* as a catchall term for "fantasy, horror, fairy tales, gothic tales, surrealism, and anything in between" may initially seem quite perplexing.

But these are mere "surface" estrangements, easily rationalized. Perhaps more difficult for most readers to come to grips with will be the jarring schism between the richness and scope of the volume's contents and the poverty of its scholarly apparatus.

To date, the reviews of this book have been invariably mixed. Neil Barron, while appreciating its effort "to offset the parochialism that has long weakened monolingual scholarship," castigates its "severe organizational problems" and its general lack of selectivity (17-18). Gary Wolfe, although praising it as being "worthy

of its lofty goals" and "solidly researched, informative, and clearly written," also points out that it has a "sometimes confusing pattern of organization" (47). Brian Stableford characterizes the book as "a truly epic enterprise" and an "awesome achievement" but then goes on to say that its "irritating deficiencies" make it fall "seriously short of what needed to be done" (110). And finally, Mike Ashley calls it "fascinating" and "remarkable and laudable" but also cautions that its "multi-segment approach and idiosyncratic index" is "difficult to use" and is "not as helpful as it could be" (57-58).

The congratulate-and-condemn tone of these reviews is noteworthy. While applauding the "monumental" scope of this hefty volume and hailing it as an important and long-needed bridge to our appreciation of French-language sf, they denounce its organizational and documentational structure as illogical, incomplete, and wholly insufficient. In this, I must regrettably concur. The short "Index" is far from comprehensive: in fact, rather inexplicably, the only entries listed seem to be those appearing within the first third of the volume (i.e., Book 1). The lengthy "Dictionary of Authors" (280 pages) is also problematic: it lists only the titles published by each author—somewhat like the French bibliographical catalogue *Le Rayon SF* (reviewed in *SFS* #33, 11:2 [July 1984]: 217-18); it does not provide accurate page references to the historical discussions of these authors appearing throughout Book 2; and the English translations included are partial at best.

Of course, most of these criticisms (and frustrations) derive from attempting to access the content of Book 2 as if it were an encyclopedia. It is not. It is first and foremost a *historical survey* describing 900 years of evolution in French speculative fiction. It is meant to be *read*, not randomly consulted like Versins's mammoth but still untranslated *Encyclopédie de l'utopie, des voyages extraordinaires, et de la science-fiction* (1972). Further, the volume's inherent weaknesses—similar to the inconsistencies between its title and its contents, as discussed above—are, at least in part, the fault of the McFarland copy-editors who helped to prepare this volume for publication. If they had been a bit more conscientious, not only could its faulty documentational structure have been improved but also a variety of other errors and infelicities would not have been allowed to creep into this book: e.g., the unforgivable typo of "Barbat" in the title of the interview with Pierre Barbet (295), the redundancy of material in the two "Preambles" for Book I and Book II, the lack of consistency in chapter headings and sub-headings such as "(After World War II)" versus "(After 1950)," "Women Writers" versus "Female Writers," "Other Lands" versus "Other Lands and Mad Science," etc., or the inappropriateness of Stephen R. Bissette's essay—an enthusiastic panegyric to the *fantastique* in French cinema and comics—as the Foreword to the entire volume, two-thirds of which is devoted to

literature.

Viewed in the larger context, however, such reproaches—although they are undeniably valid—strike me as rather petty when contemplating the incredibly huge amount of valuable information contained within this book, information which has heretofore been totally unavailable to English-language readers and, in truth, often extremely difficult to find in French. To my knowledge, the only comparable reference works published in French—targeting both francophone sf and *fantastique*—are the Versins *Encyclopédie* and Roger Bozzetto's *L'Obscur objet d'un savoir* (1992, reviewed in *SFS* 19.3 [Nov. 1992]: 430). But Versins does not offer an in-depth historical analysis of how these genres metamorphosed over time, and Bozzetto tends to focus as much on anglophone authors as French ones. As for prior studies of francophone sf alone, Jacques Sadoul's *Histoire de la science-fiction moderne: domaine français* (Albin Michel, 1973) and Jacques van Herp's *Panorama de la science-fiction* (Marabout, 1975) are now both terribly dated; Jean-Marc Gouanvic's *La science-fiction française au XXe siècle* (Rodopi, 1994), though excellent on some early twentieth-century French sf authors, stops its coverage at 1968; and Anita Torres's *La science-fiction française: auteurs et amateurs d'un genre littéraire* (Harmattan, 1997) is a sociological study of the genre in France rather than a literary one. Moreover, unlike the volume under consideration, none of these French-language critical works offers an important overview of sf/*fantastique* in the media or in the popular French *bandes dessinées*.

Book 1 of *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction* begins with a few brief excerpts from a 1984 interview with director Luc Besson (*Le Dernier Combat*, *The Fifth Element*, among others) about making sf films in France and America. Its survey of French sf in the media is then structured into the following chapters:

I - Cinema

1. Historical Overview
2. Feature Films
3. Selected Short Features

II - Television

1. Historical Overview

2. Series

3. Telefilms

4. Nonfiction

III - Radio

1. Historical Overview

2. Series

3. Plays

4. Nonfiction

IV - Animation

1. Historical Overview

2. Feature Films

3. Television

4. Selected Short Features

5. Interview with René Laloux

V - Comic Books and Graphic Novels

1. Historical Overview

2. Graphic Novels

3. Selected Magazines

4. Interview with Moebius

VI - Selected Bibliographies

1. Filmmakers

2. Comic Book Writers and Artists

The "Historical Overview" of each section, although quite short (from a few paragraphs [Radio] to three pages [Cinema]), nevertheless does provide an interesting and insightful context for understanding the development of these genres in France. For example, in the wake of a number of early pioneers of experimental and avant-garde film such as Georges Méliès, Abel Gance, and Jean Cocteau, the comparative absence—until quite recently—of sf and fantasy in French cinema is explained as follows:

Unfortunately, after this auspicious beginning, fantasy and science fiction became marginalized in French cinema until the late 1970s, when the imports of big budget American productions such as *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* made them "respectable" in the eyes of producers. Also, the dominance of French realism in French cinema, as in French literature, if not totally excluding the *fantastique*, as long as it remained within tasteful boundaries and juvenile forms, practically ruled out any serious science fiction films.

In this review of French genre cinema, we will, therefore, find no series of films comparable to the Universal monster movies of the 1930s, or the giant monster movies of the 1950s, or the Hammer horror films of the 1960s. No recurring commercial "conventions," no classic monsters, no school of B movies. It is worth noting that a large number of these types of foreign-made films were either not distributed in France, or distributed in cheap, exploitation houses and could not, therefore, lift the genre from its commercial ghetto.

French filmmakers who did make incursions, no matter how timid, into the *fantastique* were consequently motivated more by literary pretensions than by the mere desire to terrify their audiences. Overwhelmingly, the themes of early genre films revolved around the three "D"s: Death, Dream, and the Devil, or traditional folk legends. (13)

The content of the individual entries themselves, presented in alphabetical order, is extremely concise and fact-driven. For instance, in each of the nearly five hundred "Cinema—Feature Films" listings, only the credits, the cast, and a brief plot description are provided. Occasionally, as in the entry for *La Guerre du Feu* (*Quest for Fire*) below, a supplemental note is also added:

La Guerre du Feu [*The War for Fire*, trans. as *Quest for Fire*]

(Col., 96 min., 1981)

DIR: Jean-Jacques Annaud; **WRI:** Gérard Brach, based on the novel by J.-H. Rosny Aîné.

CAST: Everett McGill, Rae Dawn Chong, Ron Perlman, Gari Schwartz, Brian Gill.

STORY: Three cavemen go looking for fire. One of them finds love and eventually learns the secret of making fire.

NOTE: J.-H. Rosny Aîné is, with Jules Verne, one of the major science fiction writers of the 19th century (see Book 2). Gérard Brach wrote several films for Roman Polanski, and numerous telefilms such as *L'Etrange Château du Dr. Lerne* and *La Nuit des Fantômes* for director Jean-Daniel Verhaeghe (see Chapter II).

Within each listing, the names and works appearing in bold are discussed in subsequent sections (most often in Book 2), but the specific page references where they can be found are unfortunately lacking.

As an encyclopedia of French sf and *fantastique* in cinema, television, radio, animation, comic books, and *bandes dessinées*, Book 1 is informative and very easy to consult. Its double-column published format (used throughout the entire volume) maximizes the amount of per-page information presented, and the many black and white illustrations of film posters, movie stills, comic book covers, directors, writers, and artists enhances its visual appeal.

As a scholar of French sf literature, however, it is Book 2 that I found to be the most impressive. Comprising about two-thirds of the volume, this section begins with some excerpts from a 1977 interview with well-known French sf author Pierre Barbet (1925-1995) called "On Writing and Publishing Science Fiction in France and the United States." Now quite dated, most of Barbet's observations are of historical interest only; a more recent interview with a contemporary French sf author—even (especially?) one whose works have not yet penetrated the English-language marketplace—might have been a bit more enlightening. Book 2 ends with an excellent overview of French-Canadian sf and *fantastique* contributed by Jean-Louis Trudel, a lengthy "Dictionary of Authors" (which, as mentioned above, features only the authors' bibliographies and—in contrast to the "Selected Biographies" at the end of Book 1—includes no biographical information about them) and a description of the major sf awards and their recipients through 1998 in both France and Québec. But the true *pièce de résistance* of this entire volume, in terms of originality and its

ultimate value to sf scholarship, are the nine chapters in between: i.e., the historical survey of how sf and the *fantastique* evolved in France throughout the centuries. The principal chronological divisions of this section are as follows:

I - The Middle Ages (1100-1500)

1. The *Chansons de Geste* (Songs of Deeds)
2. The *Fabliaux* (Fables)
3. Poetry
4. Religious Dramas

II - The Renaissance (1500-1650)

1. The Utopias
2. The *Merveilleux* (Marvelous)
3. The *Romans Esotériques* (Esoteric Novels)

III - The Enlightenment (1650-1800)

1. The *Voyages Imaginaires* (Imaginary Journeys)
2. The *Contes de Fées and Féeries* (Fairy Tales)
3. The *Romans Philosophiques* (Philosophical Novels)

IV - 19th Century *Fantastique* (1800-1914)

1. The *Romans Noirs and Romans Frénétiques* (Gothic Novels)
2. The *Fantastique Populaire*
3. The *Fantastique Littéraire*

V - 19th Century Science Fiction (1800-1914)

1. From Imaginary Journeys to *Voyages Extraordinaires*

2. Jules Verne

3. The Golden Age

VI - The *Fantastique* Entre-Deux Guerres (Between the Wars) (1918-1945)

1. *Fantastique Littéraire*

2. *Fantastique Populaire*

3. Belgian *Fantastique*

VII - Science Fiction Entre-Deux Guerres (Between the Wars) (1918-1950)

1. The End of the Golden Age

2. A Period of Transition

VIII - Modern *Fantastique* (After World War II)

1. The 1950s and 1960s

2. The 1970s

3. The 1980s and 1990s

XI - Modern Science Fiction (After 1950)

1. The 1950s and 1960s (The Silver Age)

2. The 1970s

3. The 1980s

4. The 1990s

These major chronological periods are subdivided first into the various non-mimetic literary forms that were popular from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, then into the two opposing genres of *fantastique* and science fiction during the 19th and 20th centuries, and then into specific decades of more recent *fantastique* and sf published since World War II.

This tripartite structure may strike some readers as odd, but it is nevertheless quite effective as a narrative frame for describing the progressive emergence of sf as a rationally speculative genre from its many "proto-sf" forebears. Like most "inclusive" European sf historians (Versins, Aldiss, Stableford, et al.), the Lofficiers take the view that the genre's ancestry dates from the pre-modern era, and they identify the 19th century as the watershed period when it became recognized (if not yet labeled) as science fiction. Interestingly—and perhaps predictably given the authors' unique focus on France—no mention is made of Shelley's *Frankenstein*; it is Jules Verne alone who is dubbed the true inventor of modern sf.

The distinction between the *fantastique* ... and science fiction became clearly apparent during the 19th century. In spite of all its excesses, the French Revolution succeeded in imposing the values of scientific progress and so-called Cartesian thinking on French society, thus setting the stage for the Industrial Revolution....

During the early part of the 19th century, the subset of the *fantastique* which has previously been devoted to proto-science fiction, such as utopias and imaginary voyages, evolved into the *voyages extraordinaires* and, from 1864 onward, thanks to the incomparable Jules Verne, the first, true works of modern science fiction.

From the onset, what distinguished science fiction from the *fantastique* was that it was a literature of ideas rather than style, of concepts rather than characters. This dichotomy was a direct result of the conflict present in French society between the past and the future, conservative and radical ideas, literature and science, classicism and progress. The concerns of science fiction—"what if" scenarios, considerations of the impact of technology and scientific anticipation of the future—were, by their very nature, deemed by the guardians of French culture to be inferior to the nobler concerns of true literature. (333)

This French account of the early history of sf is especially fascinating in how it reiterates and yet gives a completely different cultural twist to some of the more well-known and canonical Anglo-American versions of the same story. It was the growing pro-science positivism of the Enlightenment, culminating in the ideological *tabula rasa* of the French Revolution, that set the stage for the initial emergence and popularity of science fiction in France. Quickly ghettoized, however, by the French literary establishment (the Académie française, the Catholic educational system, the publishing industry, etc.), it was never allowed to enter the nation's cultural mainstream. Although the parallels here with the later anglophone pulp "ghetto" of the 1920s and 1930s are obvious, there is one significant difference: the sf genre in France—with the possible exception of Jules Verne—remains radically marginalized even today. Rarely exported in translation and rarely taught in schools or

universities, French sf continues to struggle against a "mainstream literary, scientific, and economic environment [that is] generally dismissive, if not hostile" to it (459).

One explicit purpose, therefore, of *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction* is to publicize and proselytize French sf and *fantastique* to the English-speaking world—and perhaps, as a result of this increased exposure, to facilitate the literary acceptance of these genres in France itself. To accomplish such an ambitious goal, the Lofficiers have surveyed probably the greatest number of authors and works of francophone sf and *fantastique* ever assembled into one volume. As the authors say, "Hundreds of writers. Thousands of novels" (459). In contrast to the bibliographical "Dictionary of Authors"—where an unknown but highly prolific hack writer may consume several pages of text—throughout the historical section of this book, the length of the entries is generally proportional to the author's greater or lesser importance to the genre in France (e.g., up to several paragraphs for the former, one brief sentence for the latter). The following entry, for example, is rather typical:

Pierre Bordage was, without a doubt, the other major new French science fiction author of the 1990s. In his trilogy of *Les Guerriers du Silence* (*The Warriors of Silence*), comprised of three 500-page volumes—*Les Guerriers du Silence* (*The Warriors of Silence*, 1993), *Terra Mater* (1994), and *La Citadelle Hypénéros* (1995), published by L'Atalante—Bordage recaptured most of the strengths of Dan Simmons' *Hyperion*. *Les Guerriers du Silence* was a rich and strongly structured space opera, with numerous characters and subplots, telling the story of a Galactic Empire in chaos, threatened by the mysterious alien Scaythes of Hypeoneros, tools of a power which wished to uncreate the universe. Against them stood the "Warriors of Silence," a band of reluctant heroes with unique abilities, selected by the forces of Life to save the cosmos. Bordage also wrote the science fantasy series, *Rohel Le Conquérant* (*Rohel the Conqueror*; see Chapter VIII). In 1996-97, Bordage wrote *Wang*, a two-volume series taking place in the year 2211 on a planet divided into two worlds separated by a mysterious "curtain." Wealth and technological comfort existed on the Western side, savagery and poverty reigned on its Eastern side. The hero, Wang, broke the law of Assol the Mongol, an Eastern clan leader, and was condemned to exile in the West. He crossed the Curtain at Most, a town located in Bohemia, unaware of what existed on the other side, for no one had ever before returned from the West. *Wang* won the 1997 Best Novel Eiffel Tower Grand Prize award. (456)

The modus operandi here is quite clear: identify the authors' "place" in French sf history, list their major works, provide a brief description of their plots, and then mention any awards they might have won. Moskowitzian rather than Suvinian in its approach, it is obvious that *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction* is

unabashedly fan-based and seeks only to provide a cursory mapping of the territory. As such, it shuns all pretense of scholarly depth, preferring instead the broad brush-strokes of historical breadth. A brief look at its "Bibliography and Sources" tells the tale. In its English-language section, only 12 books are listed: *Chronicle of the Cinema*, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, *The Film Encyclopedia*, *The Great French Films*, *Horror and Science Fiction Films* (3 vols.), *Immoral Tales: European Sex and Horror Movies (1956-1984)*, *Reference Guide to Fantastic Films* (3 vols.), *Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia*, *TV Movies & Video Guide* (1995), *The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons*, and *The World Encyclopedia of Comics*—nothing but general reference works. Only two English-language magazines are listed: *Cinéfantastique* and *Starlog*. In its French-language section, a slightly larger number of titles are listed, but a similar bibliographical shallowness is apparent: 50 books (although Versins, van Herp, and Sadoul are included) and 10 magazines. Throughout this entire "Bibliography and Sources," there are no monographs, no articles, no critical anthologies, no scholarly journals, and obviously no serious attempt to survey existing works of French and English scholarship on these French genres. Why? Because, quite simply, the purpose of this volume is *not* to provide a concise and systematic overview of the criticism done to date in the field and then to add to it (the implicit assumption of most academic scholars); its purpose is the *discovery and identification of primary materials* pertaining to that field. It makes no attempt to analyze them; it wishes only to enumerate them. Similar to eighteenth and early-nineteenth century taxonomists (and, I might add, highly reminiscent of the ideological underpinnings of many of Jules Verne's novels), the first and only task of the explorer/scientist/researcher/encyclopedist is the methodical *accumulation of data*. As such, it is significant that this book identifies itself as a "guide" and that, according to the authors, it should be viewed primarily as a "database of information" (9).

In today's progressively more theoretical English-language sf research, such a simplistic approach may appear incredibly "retro" and naive. But wait. Was it really so long ago that the scholarly study of science fiction first began, in similar fashion, to chart out its own critical territory? Was it not just a few short decades ago that pioneers such as Thomas Clareson, Everett Bleiler, and I.F. Clarke were piecing together those first seminal bibliographies of sf and fantastic literature that the first general histories of the genre were being written by sf authors and academics such as J.O. Bailey, H. Bruce Franklin, and Brian Aldiss that Dale Mullen was toying with the idea of founding a scholarly journal devoted to sf studies that sf theorists such as Darko Suvin were "determining and delimiting" the genre? We sometimes forget how close our roots are.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the academic study of sf in English has grown exponentially—maturing and diversifying into an often bewildering array of heterogeneous critical discourses.⁴ It is therefore highly ironic that, in terms of our scholarly awareness of the sf traditions in other languages and cultures, we continue to be mired in the Dark Ages. For this reason alone, despite its evident shortcomings, the Lofficier's *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction* should be considered an important milestone in today's sf criticism. Giving us a bird's-eye view of the vast, rich, and yet generally unknown world of French sf and *fantastique*, it constitutes an unusually bright light at the end of our long ethnocentric tunnel.

NOTES

1. The beginnings of this change in France occurred as a result of the post-World War II popularity of translated anglophone sf in the French marketplace. See the review of Jean-Marc Gouanvic's *Sociologie de la traduction: la science-fiction américaine dans l'espace culturel français des années 1950* later in this issue.

2. For example, last year I asked a friend in France to consider presenting a paper at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, held each spring in Florida. He immediately replied, "But I study science fiction, not *le fantastique*!"

3. American publishers (and academic critics) have never known quite how to deal with the popular French genre of *BD*, or *bandes dessinées*.

4. See Hollinger, 232.

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