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# Science Fiction Studies

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## BOOKS IN REVIEW

### A New SF Bibliography from Québec

**Norbert Spehner.** *Écrits sur la science-fiction: bibliographie analytique des études et essais sur la science-fiction publiés entre 1900 et 1987 (littérature/cinéma/ illustration)*. [Collection "Paralittératures."] Longueuil, Québec: Editions du Preamble, 1988. 535pp. \$35.00

This volume is the second publication in a bibliographic series by the Québec SF critic and former editor of *Solaris* Norbert Spehner--the first being his *Écrits sur le fantastique* (1986). Let me say from the outset that, as much as I find this book a very useful addition to current SF scholarship, a great deal of what Mary Ellen Ross said in her review of Spehner's former bibliography (in SFS no. 42) applies to this one as well.

*Écrits sur la science-fiction* catalogues, according to its preface, some 4000 critical references on SF in English, French, Italian, Spanish, and German. The book is divided into two main parts: general studies on SF in literature, cinema, and art, and those studies targeting specific SF authors. The first part (pp. 25-308) is subdivided into six sections: (1) special numbers of periodicals; (2) general reference works such as bibliographies and dictionaries; (3) articles and works dealing with SF history, themes, theory, and the publishing industry (classified in three parts: books, articles and prefaces, and unpublished dissertations and theses); (4) SF pedagogy and literature for youth; (5) SF in art; and (6) SF in cinema (classified into books, articles, and special numbers of periodicals). The second part (pp. 311-480) lists, initially, those studies which focus on selected groups of SF authors and then those studies devoted to individual SF writers and their works--alphabetically by name, from the French Edmond About to the Polish Jerzy Zulawski. Almost all the critical works listed in this sizeable bibliography

(as explained by Spehner in the Introduction) were written between 1900 and 1987, and a limited number of them are quite satisfyingly annotated.

On the positive side, this bibliography represents an impressive attempt to catalogue a vast array of multi-language SF criticism within a volume that is very "user-friendly." Although, as Spehner points out, it does not claim to be a totally exhaustive (and thus cannot be faulted--exclusively--on those grounds), *Écrits sur...SF* does succeed in citing an unparalleled number of studies on French SF: interesting articles that are sometimes difficult to locate, tucked away in lesser-known French fanzines. And, to my mind, this constitutes one of the greatest strengths of this publication--given the scarcity of other bibliographic listings on SF produced in France.

On the negative side, there are three fundamental areas of weakness in this new bibliography. The first is somewhat minor and simply annoying, but the second and third are of far greater concern and tend to undermine the book's authoritativeness and reliability.

First, the author's introduction is unnecessarily polemical and, at times, downright inflammatory. Before outlining the basic format of his book and offering a mode d'emploi for its use, Spehner launches into an extensive (and thickly sarcastic) diatribe against certain trends in contemporary "academic" SF criticism-- especially the work of certain SF theoreticians. Praising the simpler, more thematic SF criticism of the pre-structuralist era, Spehner demands: "Is SF a 'poetic of alterity,' a 'literature of cognitive estrangement,' or a 'rational novelistic speculation'? Who really cares except some university professors whose vocation and profession it is to seek out the impossible?" (p. 11). And he castigates certain "university" SF journals like *SFS* ("It's edited in Montréal but it seems to us to be completely colonized by the Americans" [p. 16]) and *Extrapolation* for "the almost systematic use of a jargon [at once] hermetic, pretentious, snobbish, and--let's say it--deathly boring...[for] entire pages of indigestible prose and terminology...a jargon of caste" (ibid.). Needless to say, such blatant outbursts of personal bias and critical intolerance--coupled with an overall tone of rampant anti-Americanism--appearing in the opening pages of a (supposedly objective) bibliographical study, does tend to raise in the

reader's mind some disturbing questions about how the various entries therein may have been judged for inclusion.

The second problem--perhaps an inadvertent result of the above bias and more serious for the SF researcher--concerns Spohner's choice of what to include. As I have said, he makes no claims to exhaustivity. However, when confronted by a large corpus of criticism from which certain representative selections must be made, the criteria used sometimes seem a bit perplexing. Take the works listed on Jules Verne, for example. Important (albeit rather "academic") milestone studies on Verne's works like those of Roland Barthes, Michel Butor, and Michel Carrouges are not mentioned, whereas several studies of much lesser significance are.

The third problem has to do with accuracy. *Écrits sur...SF* contains a disconcerting number of lacunae, misprints, inconsistencies, and just plain errors, typographical and other--to such an extent that, as Ross noted in reviewing his earlier bibliography, "they might very well tax the patience and test the ingenuity of a reader." In all fairness, I must add that most of these mistakes are fairly trivial: nonsensical page numbers ("pp. 361-163" [p. 164]); frequent run-on page numbers ("pp. 2526" or "pp. 6566" [p. 371]); persistent misspellings of words like "Apollo" (rendered as "Appolo" [p. 31]); contradictory chronology in serial periodicals (e.g., at one and the same point, *Espace-Temps* no. 6 is said to be the spring 1979 issue, while *E-T* no. 8 is identified as that for autumn 1978 [p. 200]); and even the strange alphabetization (as in this supposedly alphabetical sequence by title: "'La France...,' 'Science-fiction...,' 'Danger...,' 'Existe-t-il...,' 'Pourquoi...,' and 'Habite-t-on...'" [p. 167]).

But there are more serious errors in this book as well: Many references lack essential information like the year of publication, and many more lack volume and/or page numbers. In some cases, due to extremely careless editing, the name of the author and/or work is misspelled or the title itself is wrongly attributed, resulting in reference duplication and total confusion for the reader. Consider, for example, these two entries, which appear on facing pages (222-23): (a) "Cordon, Viviane C. Fantasmés et féminité: aspects du récit utopique et de SF féminin en France et aux USA de 1960 à

1976, [Thèse de Lettres], Paris VIII"; and (b) "Gordon, Viviane, *Fantasmes et féminitude: aspects du récit utopique et de science-fiction féminin en France et aux U.S.A. de 1966 à 1976* [Thèse d'État], Université de Paris VII, 1981." Or, for another example, on p. 477 there are two entries identical on every point except these: one offers page numbers and assigns the essay in question (on Stefan Wul) to "Andrevon, Jean-Pierre"; the other gives it to "Philippe, Denis."

As an SF scholar (admittedly--should I say apologetically?--at a US university), I can easily overlook the simpler typographical errors, like Paschal becoming "Pascal" Grousset (p. 391) or Martin Bridgstock becoming "Bridstock" (p. 163). But repeated mistakes in author attribution are indefensible in any bibliography and, as such, reflect a lack of basic documentational rigor. Such editing foul-ups could feasibly result in much wasted time for the SF researcher and, more importantly, they could promote the unintentional perpetuation of such misinformation in future bibliographies.

In summary, I have found Norbert Spehner's *Écrits sur...SF* to be, on the one hand, a surprisingly rich source of bibliographic information--particularly on non-English-language SF criticism--and as such, a highly useful contribution to contemporary SF scholarship. On the other hand, its frequent oversights, its slipshod editing, and its author's gratuitously offensive introductory comments all serve to mar an otherwise very valuable SF reference tool.

--Arthur B. Evans DePauw University