

11-1999

An Exercise in Creative Genealogy. [Review of Thomas C. Renzi's *Jules Verne on Film*, McFarland, 1998]

Arthur B. Evans
DePauw University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.depauw.edu/mlang_facpubs



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arthur B. Evans. "An Exercise in Creative Genealogy." [Review of Thomas C. Renzi's *Jules Verne on Film*, McFarland, 1998] *Science Fiction Studies* 26.3 (1999): 493-495.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. For more information, please contact bcox@depauw.edu.

Science Fiction Studies

#79 = Volume 26, Part 3 = November 1999

An Exercise in Creative Genealogy.

Thomas C. Renzi. *Jules Verne on Film: A Filmography of the Cinematic Adaptations of His Works, 1902 through 1997.* McFarland (fax: 910-246-5018), 1998. xiv + 230 pp. \$55 cloth.

The title of this book is somewhat misleading. It perhaps should have been called *Jules Verne on Film: A Very Selective Filmography of the Cinematic Adaptations--Including Movies Arguably Derived From, Influenced By, Associated With, Parallel To, or Somehow Conveying the Aura Of--His Works, 1902 through 1997.* What Thomas Renzi has done, in essence, is to lump together many (but far from all) of the straightforward cinematic adaptations of Verne's novels with a wide variety of other films that, in some way, appear to "echo" Verne's works. The result is often surprising and, at times, not a little incongruous. Movies such as *Thunderball* (1965) and *Barbarella* (1967), for example, find their supposed "origin" in Verne's *Face au drapeau* (For the Flag, 1896) because they feature mad scientists who threaten the world with doomsday devices. Films such as *The Warlords of Atlantis* (1978) and *The Abyss* (1989) are said to be spin-offs from Verne's *L'Île mystérieuse* (The Mysterious Island, 1875) because they have undersea cities--"submerged islands"--that, according to the author, "suggest an aftermath to *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, since they have a kind of 'after-the-*Nautilus*-what' premise where events seem an outgrowth of Nemo's advanced science" (134). And a host of such popular movie thrillers as *Meteor* (1979), *Asteroid* (1997), and--incredibly--Stephen King's *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) are seen as somehow deriving from Verne's *Hector Servadac* (Off on a Comet, 1877) because their plots are about an impending collision or near-miss between Earth and a wayward heavenly body.

This enthusiastic, freewheeling, but very naive exercise in what might be called "creative genealogy"--where virtually any film might be labelled as "influenced by" Jules Verne because it contains a theme, a stock character, or some storyline once used by Verne--is hardly convincing. And it is definitely not serious film scholarship. But it is fun. And, to the author's credit, his commentary often implies that these putative cause-effect "borrowings" are mostly in the eye of the beholder. Almost every page of the book is filled with *entre nous* caveats--e.g., for the texts cited above as descendants of Verne's *Face au drapeau*, Renzi acknowledges: "In most such films, the similarities to Verne are more coincidental than intentional" (55). Nevertheless, I found it quite delightful to see gathered in one place so many different films supposedly related in one way or another (thematically, symbolically, or structurally) to Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires*. Beyond the obvious and well-known adaptations--by Mè:liés, Disney, et al.--it is easy to see how certain movies like *Fantastic Voyage* (1966) might be construed as a "clever variation" (200) on Verne's *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea, 1870). But who among us would have ever thought of associating the television movie *Charlie and the Great Balloon Chase* (1982) with Verne's *Cinq semaines en ballon* (Five Weeks in a Balloon, 1863)? Or the Orson Welles film *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) with his *Les Tribulations d'un Chinois en Chine* (The Tribulations of a Chinese Gentleman, 1879)? Or movies such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Black Moon Rising* (1985) with his *Robur-le-conquér-ant* (The Clipper of the Clouds, 1886) and *Maître du monde* (Master of the World, 1904)? Renzi makes clever, if at times rather strained, efforts to cement these connections, although his inclination to rope in filmic adaptations of several other writers' works--e.g., *The People That Time Forgot* (1977) is "blatantly derivative" (15) of *Les Aventures du capitaine Hatteras* (The Adventures of Captain Hatteras, 1866) despite being based on an Edgar Rice Burroughs novel (itself, Renzi asserts, essentially a Vernian text)--tends at times towards the critically reductive, if not the monomaniacal.

Despite its wide-ranging coverage, let there be no mistake about this book's much-less-than-comprehensive treatment of both Verne and "Verne-like"

films. Although many of the straight cinematic adaptations of Verne's novels are represented, many are not. In particular, certain movies made for television--like the French ORTF broadcasts of the 1960s and 1970s--and animated Verne films in general are treated very sporadically if at all. Experts estimate that there have been over 300 cinema and television adaptations of Verne's works produced in the twentieth century, making him one of the most "translated" fictional authors (on celluloid, as on paper) in the world. In contrast, the total number of movies featured in *Jules Verne on Film*--including both straight adaptations and "derivational" titles--is a mere 167. There have been, for instance, no fewer than eight film adaptations of Verne's *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* (The Children of Captain Grant, 1867) alone--this book lists three, plus one "related" film. Verne's short story *Maître Zacharius* (Master Zacharius, 1854) has been filmed at least five times, in both Europe and the US and this book does not list it at all. A few other overlooked novels and short stories by Verne to have appeared on the large or small screen over the past few decades include *Un Drame en Livonie* (A Drama in Livonia, 1904) by Semione Aranovitch in 1972 in the USSR, *La Chasse au météore* (The Chase of the Meteor, 1908) by Roger Iglésis in 1966 in France, his country-man Jacques de Berne's 1982 adaptation of the short story *Fritt-Flacc* (Fritt-Flacc, 1885), the 1974 cinematic version of *Le Pilote du Danube* (The Danube Pilot, 1908) by Hungarian Miklós Markós, and a German animated version of *L'Île à hélice* (Propeller Island, 1895) by Armin Lang in 1978, among others. And I found it especially strange that Renzi's book virtually ignores those short films directed and produced by Jules Verne's own son Michel: e.g., his 1916-1919 cinematic productions of his father's *La Destinée de Jean Morénas* (The Destiny of Jean Morénas, 1910), *Les Indes noires* (The Black Indies, 1877), *L'Etoile du sud* (The Southern Star, 1884) and *Les Cinq cents millions de la Béguin* (The Begum's Fortune, 1879).

As for the overall structure of *Jules Verne on Film*, after the author's introduction and a brief--and unfortunately error-marred--biography of Verne, the book contains 23 chapters arranged alphabetically by title (in English), from *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* to *Voyage Across the Impossible* (an unpublished play by Verne and Adophe d'Ennery, 1882).

Each chapter begins with a thumbnail synopsis and some analysis of Verne's original story, and then goes on to offer detailed descriptions of those various films associated with/related to/derived from it. The plot resumés for the works listed seem generally quite reliable, despite occasional small errors like naming the central character of //I> "Cyrus Harding" (from the English translation) instead of "Cyrus Smith" (from the French), or describing the beginning of *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* as "The story begins with a message found floating in a bottle" (34) when, in fact, the bottle is found in the belly of a shark. Finally, the book is handsomely illustrated throughout, and it concludes with two appendices-- a chronological listing of Verne's novels and short stories and a (rather thin) bibliography of critical sources--and three indexes arranged by film director, by film title, and by general subject.

As a general reference tool, the value of this easily readable and sometimes insightful--yet often flawed and wholly idiosyncratic--book might be most aptly described as greater than the sum of its parts, principally because it is the only study currently available that discusses Jules Verne in the context of the international film industry. Brian Taves's excellent treatment of the cinematic adaptations of Verne's works in a chapter titled "Hollywood's Jules Verne" in his *The Jules Verne Encyclopedia* (Scarecrow, 1996: 205-48) is more rigorous and scholarly. But its coverage is restricted to "only Verne films either made or co-produced in the English language" (205). So until such time as either Taves or another Vernian researcher publishes the definitive study of Jules Verne in the cinema, Renzi's *Jules Verne on Film* will continue (alas) to stand as the best book on the subject

—**ABE**