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Notable Book of SF Criticism in France. [Review of
Les Univers de la Science-Fiction: Essais, ed. Stéphane
Nicot, Galaxies, 1998]

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Science Fiction Studies

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Stéphane Nicot, ed. *Les Univers de la Science-Fiction: Essais* (supplement to the sf magazine *Galaxies* #8 [March 1998]). April 1998. 222 pp. 70 French francs/10.7 euros, paper.

This collection of twelve essays on science fiction by several well-known French sf scholars is noteworthy because it provides a glimpse into the current "institutional" status of the sf genre in France. According to its editor, this publication represents a concerted effort to establish a venue for learned sf criticism within the francophone university system—where sf has traditionally had difficulty in being accepted as a legitimate object of literary study. As he explains (my translation):

Contrary to its status in Anglo-Saxon countries, where science fiction now enjoys a growing institutional recognition, France still remains "open territory" for this genre which could well become—as Dan Simmons recently described it in an interview for *Galaxies*—one of the possible futures for modern literature.

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.... A strong polarization has developed between the specialists of sf—who, in the face of this disdain by the "establishment," exhibit an invigorating if sometimes undisciplined passion—and this institution of cultural legitimation called Academe. The former enclose themselves in a kind of ghetto logic; the latter hide behind their outdated notion of "paraliterature." Given these conditions, one can understand why serious study of sf has been slow to develop, especially in comparison to other countries like the United States or Canada.

It is to begin to remedy this regrettable situation that, starting in the spring of 1999 and every other year thereafter, an international university conference will take place in Nancy under the direction of Jean-Marc Gouanvic (professor at Concordia University in Montréal and founder of the sf journal *imagine...*). The proceedings of this conference will be published regularly.

In the interim, we felt it necessary to begin the debate: such is the goal of this publication. Both university scholars and specialists of sf have agreed to confront each other in this public arena. And we thank them both warmly. (3)

The volume is divided into three roughly chronological sections: "Great Ancestors," "Sf and Modernity," and "Confrontations." And the critical essays appearing within each part—inevitably of uneven value but, surprisingly, about half of them recycled from earlier publications—include the following (my translations): Michel Meurger, "The Peril Comes from the Moon: A War of the Worlds in 1809" (on Washington Irving's *A History of New York* and the theme of lunar invasion); Dominique Warfa, "The Adventure Novel and the Origins of Science Fiction"; Dominique Kucharzewski, "Abraham Merritt: The Memory of Worlds"; Stéphane Nicot and Eric Vial, "The Lords of History: Notes on the Uchronia" (reprint of a 1986 article); Christine Renard-Cheinisse, "Religious Problems in this Literature Called Science Fiction" (reprint of a 1968 article); Jean Marigny, "Desert Initiation in Frank Herbert's *Dune*" (reprint of a 1988 article); Michel Lamart, "1984-2050: A Defense of Language—Notes to Accompany George Orwell's *1984*"; Gérard Klein, "A Petition by Agents of the Dominant Culture for the Dismissal of Science Fiction" (reprint of his 1977 article, available in English in *SFS* 7:2 [July 1980]: 115-123); Jean-Marc Gouanvic, "The Social Stakes of Translating American Science Fiction During the 1950s: The Case of *Rayon Fantastique*" (reprint of a 1995 article); Jacques Goimard, "The Science-Fiction Generation" (reprint of a 1985 article); and Pierre Stolze, "Science Fiction: A Literature of Images, Not Ideas."

And the title of the final essay appearing in this collection, by Roger Bozzetto, struck me as especially *à propos* given the obvious lack of recent scholarship on sf by French university professors: "Science-Fiction Literature: Desperately Seeking Criticism."

— Arthur B. Evans