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From the SelectedWorks of Arthur Bruce Evans

November 2015

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

Hidden Gods Revealed. Natacha Vas-Deyres, Patrick Bergeron, Patrick Guay, Florence Plet-Nicolas, and Danièle André, eds. *Les Dieux cachés de la science-fiction française et francophone (1950-2010)* [The Hidden Gods of French and Francophone SF, 1950-2010]. Bordeaux: Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, coll. Eidolon, 2014. 315 pp. 23€ pbk.

As I previously pointed out in a book review called “Good News from France” (*SFS* 40.3 [Nov. 2013]: 534-39), since 2012 there has been a growing corpus of top-notch criticism about sf generally—and Francophone sf in particular—being published in France and Québec. And what is especially notable about this development is *where* this scholarship is being published and *who* is producing it. Challenging a very long tradition of resistance to the study of sf in the academy, professors and graduate students at a number of universities in France and Québec are now leading the charge. And their university presses are joining the ranks. This book gathers together the papers given at an academic conference on sf—one of the first of its kind—that took place at the Université de Bordeaux in November 2012. A companion volume, called *C’était demain* [It Was Tomorrow] and focusing on Francophone sf from 1890 to 1950, is scheduled to appear in 2016; it will collect the papers from another academic conference on sf that took place at the Université du Québec in Chicoutimi in October 2013. Both conferences and the resulting publications were organized by the CLARE group of the Université de Bordeaux Montaigne, the University of New Brunswick, and the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC).

The title of the present volume refers to the famous book *Le Dieu caché: étude sur la vision tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine* [The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the *Pensées* of Pascal and the Theater of Racine, 1955] by the Marxist-humanist Lucien Goldmann. In it he explores the “hidden” world-views that shaped the creative work of these two iconic writers of the French literary tradition. Further clarifying this intertextual reference, in a preface called “Au commencement étaient la religion, la métaphysique et la politique” [In the beginning was religion, metaphysics, and politics], the two editors Vas-Deyres and Bergeron identify these three ideological aspects as “hidden gods” embedded in Francophone sf from 1950 to 2010, themes around which both the 2012 conference and this book were organized.

But for those sf scholars unfamiliar with French-language sf, the title of *Les Dieux cachés* might also just as easily be understood as referring to the many important but “hidden gods” of French sf from the post-WWII years to today—writers such as Gérard Klein, Nathalie Henneberg, Jean-Pierre Andrevon, Pierre Pelot, Serge Brussolo, and Pierre Bordage, among many others—who deeply influenced the thematic and stylistic paths that Francophone sf would take throughout this period.

The book is divided into five sections, with three to six articles per section. The first is called “Politique-fiction dans la science-fiction française et

francophone” [Politics-fiction in French and Francophone sf]. It contains articles by Hervé Lagoguey on Andrevon and especially the latter’s ecological sf; by Alexandre Marcinkowski on French cyberpunk; and by Pierre-Gilles Pélissier on the dystopian worlds of Pelot.

The second section is titled “Singularités et marges de la science-fiction [Singularities and margins of sf]. It features articles by Isabelle Limousin on the sf exposition at the Musée des arts décoratifs [Museum of the decorative arts and design] in Paris in 1967-68; by Thierry Jandrok on Brussolo’s “hybrid” sf; by Cédric Cauvin on the representations of humanity in the works of Bordage; by Marc Atallah on the genre-bending and postmodernist work of Michel Houellebecq; and by Gilles Menegaldo on time and memory in two films—Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* [The Jetty, 1962] and Alain Resnais’s *Je t’aime, je t’aime* [I Love You, I Love You, 1968].

The third section, “Disharmonie des sphères dans la science-fiction” [Disharmony of the spheres in sf] offers essays by Jean-Loup Héraud on the future of humanity in the novels of Philippe Curval, Pierre Boulle, and Alain Damasio; by Danièle André on the sf cinema of Luc Besson; by Alain Sebbah on the treatment of time in several sf films such as *Babylon AD* (2008), *Immortel* (2004), and *L’Origine du XXI^e siècle* [Origins of the 21st Century, 2000]; and by Patrick Bergeron on a variety of post-apocalyptic sf tales such as Stefan Wul’s *Niourk* (1957), Robert Merle’s *Malevil* (1972), Yves Thériault’s *Si la bombe m’était contée* [If the Bomb Were Told to Me, 1962], as well as the Québécois tv series *Temps mort* [Time Out, 2008-11].

The fourth section, “Dieux, spiritualité et religion: paradoxes de la science-fiction?” [Gods, spirituality and religion: paradoxes of sf?], as its title suggests, is explicitly focused on religious concerns. It also contains the largest number of articles—including some by well-known French and Québécois sf scholars and writers—such as the one by Simon Bréan on the “thousand deaths of god” in Francophone sf; by Roger Bozzetto on three short stories by Élisabeth Vonarburg; by Vonarburg herself, in response to Bozzetto, on world-building in her sf; by Laurent Bazin and Philippe Clermont on churches and religious belief in several modern sf uchronias by Alain Bergeron, Corberan and Eric Chabbert, Pelot, Alain Grousset and Dominique Martinigol, Vonarburg, and Ugo Bellagamba; by Claire Cornillon on spirituality in the sf works of Bordage; and by Samuel Minne on human mutation in two sf novels by Henneberg, *La Plaie* [The Plague, 1964] and *Le Dieu foudroyé* [The Thunderstruck God, 1976].

The fifth and final section of *Les Dieux cachés*, called “Planches hexagones et francophones: l’au-delà de la science-fiction” [French and Francophone drawing boards: the afterlife of sf], focuses on sf comics. It includes articles by Julien Baudry on sf *bandes dessinées* for the young created during the late 1940s and 1950s; by Jérôme Goffette on the French comic book creator and film director Enki Bilal; by Charles Combette on the Belgian comic series *Les Aventures de Blake et Mortimer* [The Adventures of Blake and Mortimer, 1946-present]; and by Florence Plet-Nicolas on the place of God in the celebrated sf comics series *Valérien* (1970-2010).

In addition to these very interesting articles, the critical usefulness of *Les Dieux cachés* is enhanced by three items appearing in its appendix: a primary and secondary bibliography of the many references made in the articles, an index *nominum* (of proper names), and an index *rerum* (of things). Further, the book opens, right after its brief editorial preface, with an excellent introduction by legendary French sf author, editor, and publisher (and SFRA Pilgrim Award winner) Gérard Klein. Titled “La Science-fiction française des années 1950: Rupture ou hybridation? Non, retrouvailles” [French SF of the 1950s: a Break or a Hybridization? No, a Reunion], Klein’s essay refutes what he sees as a misguided trend in some contemporary French sf criticism:

Un mythe imprègne certaines recherches plus ou moins récentes concernant la science-fiction française de l’après-Seconde Guerre mondiale, celui de la rupture, ou de l’apparition inattendue d’un genre nouveau, venu d’Amérique, la science-fiction, ou exprimé de façon plus acceptable, celui de l’hybridation. Mais ce dernier lui-même impliquerait l’existence d’espèces quasiment différentes. Ce mythe, on le retrouve plus ou moins affirmé dans quelques thèses récentes ... et dans nombre d’articles et de déclarations. Ces auteurs attachent sans doute trop d’importance à leur propre découverte du domaine et aux canaux de leur découverte, collections et revues postérieures à 1950.

Ce mythe ne repose sur rien, mais sur des légendes.... (15)

[A myth permeates some of the relatively recent research on French science fiction of the post-World-War-II period: that of a break and the unexpected appearance of a new genre arriving from America called science fiction or, expressed in a more acceptable manner, that of a hybridization. But this latter term implies the existence of two essentially different species. This myth is more or less asserted in some recent dissertations ... and in a number of articles and other writings. These authors are no doubt attaching too much importance to their own discovery of this field and to the means by which they made their discovery—criticism and journals published after 1950.

This myth is built on nothing more than legends....]

Klein then goes on to argue that the young university researchers of today who claim that French sf dates from (and partially derives from) the postwar “American sf invasion” of the late 1940s and 1950s are simply ignorant of the long and rich tradition of French sf dating from before that period, as chronicled by Jean-Jacques Bridenne, Pierre Versins, Jacques Van Herp, and Brian Stableford, among others. Whether it was labeled “science-fiction” or *anticipation* mattered little—its content was the same. I must add that such historical short-sightedness in contemporary sf scholarship is not limited to certain members of the new generation of Francophone sf scholars. As I have described elsewhere (see “Histories” in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham [NY: Oxford UP, 2014]: 47-58), there is also a growing tendency among young Anglophone sf researchers to attribute the origins of the entire sf genre not to Wells, Verne, Shelley, or the *voyages imaginaires* of the seventeenth or eighteenth century but rather to the American pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s—in other words, when the term “science fiction” was adopted as the genre’s official name. But this is another discussion....

Here is my bottom-line assessment: *Les Dieux cachés de la science-fiction française et francophone (1950-2010)* is a fine collection of stimulating and intelligent essays on modern French and Francophone science fiction. The quality of the scholarship is high; the price of the volume is low; and the material covered includes not only sf literature but also sf cinema, television, comics, and museum exhibits. I strongly recommend it for all university libraries. And I look forward to the publication of its sister volume, *C'était demain: anticiper la science-fiction en France et au Québec (1890-1950)*, with much anticipation.—**Arthur B. Evans, DePauw University**