

7-2016

## Surrealism and Science Fiction

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### Recommended Citation

Evans, Arthur B. "Surrealism and Science Fiction." Rev. of *Futures of Surrealism: Myth, Science Fiction and Fantastic Art in France 1936-1969*, by Gavin Parkinson and *Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comics*, ed. Gavin Parkinson. *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 43, no. 2, #129 (July 2016), pp. 351-58. Print.

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## REVIEW-ESSAYS

**Arthur B. Evans**

### Surrealism and Science Fiction

Gavin Parkinson. *Futures of Surrealism: Myth, Science Fiction and Fantastic Art in France 1936-1969*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2015. x + 282 pp., \$75 hc.

Gavin Parkinson, ed. *Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comics*. LIVERPOOL SCIENCE FICTION TEXTS AND STUDIES #50. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool UP, 2015. xii + 268 pp. £75 hc.

As one who has an abiding interest in both science fiction and Surrealism, I was remiss for not calling these two titles to the attention of *SFS* readers when they first appeared last year. To put them into context, it is useful to recall David Ketterer's observation in 1976, in his *SFS* article "Science Fiction and Allied Literature," where he says that he found it "rather surprising that the considerable affinity which exists between Surrealism and SF has not attracted more attention" (71). Two decades later, Roger Bozzetto and I published another article in *SFS* on "The Surrealistic Science Fiction of Serge Brussolo," where we too remarked that "[t]o our knowledge, there currently exists no in-depth study of sf and Surrealism" (438). Gavin Parkinson's two new books on the subject go a long way toward helping to fill this particular scholarly void.

Despite the similarity of their subject matter, however, these two volumes could not be more different in terms of their scope, organization, publication format, and cost. *Futures of Surrealism: Myth, Science Fiction and Fantastic Art in France 1936-1969* is a slightly oversized (8"x10") monograph that is beautifully illustrated in color as well as black and white; it resembles an expensive coffee-table book and fully warrants its \$75 price. As the book's subtitle indicates, it focuses exclusively on the evolution of the Surrealist movement in France during the pre- and especially post-WWII period. As Yale UP's press release elaborates further: "This important book offers the first detailed account in English of the trajectory of the French Surrealists in the 1950s and 1960s, giving particular emphasis to the significance of myth for the group in its reception of science fiction and its engagement with fantastic art." The book is printed in China, and its red-and-black dust jacket reproduces the powerful 1965 Surrealist painting *War* by Konrad Klapheck.

In contrast, *Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comics* is a more standardized (6"x9") critical anthology that offers ten articles by eight different scholars (plus two by Parkinson, who edited the volume), supplemented with many black-and-white illustrations. Published by Liverpool University Press, it carries a rather inflated price tag of £75 (\$116.40 on Amazon). The book's focus is both broader and more eclectic than that of *Futures of Surrealism*, discussing not only those recognized icons of French Surrealism such as André Breton, Max Ernst, René Magritte, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Salvador

Dalí but also other writers and artists such as Jules Verne, Rodolphe Töpffer, J.G. Ballard, Alan Burns, and Franklin Rosemont. The intentionally ludic cover art reproduces a page from the 1948 *Captain Marvel* (#84) comic book where the eponymous crimson-clad superhero fights for his life against an animated microphone, typewriter, waste basket, and various other items of studio/office furniture that have suddenly come alive thanks to the telekinetic powers of a pointy-headed little green creature called the “Surrealist Imp.” (In spite of what this—in my view, unfortunate choice of—cover may seem to imply, the book actually contains no articles about Surrealism and superhero comics.)

In his introduction to the first volume, Parkinson explains the meaning of “futures” in his title:

The period I am writing about demands consideration of the futural. Because of the technological marvels brought by the 1950s and 1960s and the promises they made ... of accelerated advancement or progress of a material nature, that era came to emblemise the future in the sense of “futurity” (here meaning cultural speculation about the future as in SF) and the narrower sense of “futurology” (technical and theoretical study concerning the future, usually the province of science and rarely that of SF)... [T]he 1950s and 1960s continue to be viewed as a prolific period of scientific, technological and sociological speculation about the future, and of cultural manifestations of futurity in film, advertising and design. This is another reason for my title *Futures of Surrealism* then, beyond its insistence on a future for Surrealism itself after its supposedly high period of the 1920s and 1930s... (2)

The ensuing six chapters, while ostensibly fleshing out the different “futures” of Surrealism described above, chart the fascinating and complex evolution of the movement’s intersections with various mythologies about the alien “other” (Lovecraft’s “Old Ones,” Breton’s “Great Invisibles,” etc.), popular sf metatexts from the 1950s (flying saucers, mutants, alien worlds, etc.), as well as different dimensions of the fantastic (paranormal phenomena, parapsychology, “réalisme fantastique,” etc.) during those turbulent postwar years in France. The chapter titles provide a fairly explicit roadmap of these many critical peregrinations:

- Chapter 1 - Future Present: Prehistoric Astronauts, Earth Owners and “The Great Invisibles”
- Chapter 2 - No Time Like the Future: Surrealism, the Nouveau Roman and the Arrival of Anglo-American Science Fiction in France
- Chapter 3 - Myths of the Near Future: Science Fiction and UFOs, Prehistoric Civilisations and Lost Worlds
- Chapter 4 - Surrealism and Everyday Magic in the 1950s: Between the Paranormal and Fantastic Realism
- Chapter 5 - Contemporaries of the Future: Protesting the Politics and “Poetics” of *The Morning of the Magicians* and *Planète*
- Chapter 6 - Jailers of the Future: Contesting the “Poetics” of Nouveau Réalisme and *Planète*

The discursive content of these chapters is scrupulously documented with hundreds of notes appearing in the back of the book, and the many discussions are interspersed with an impressive array of artwork (Surrealist paintings, sf book jackets, pulp covers, etc.), many of which are in full color. A 20-page bibliography completes the book, along with illustration credits and a highly useful index.

The target audiences for *Futures of Surrealism* include sf enthusiasts, which might be viewed as a kind of preaching to the choir. After all, for most sf aficionados, the many correlations between sf and Surrealism seem obvious. Sf's sense of wonder, estranging novums, and space-time manipulations closely recall Surrealism's iconic dreamscapes, non-mimetic referentialities, and speculations on the "inner beyond." These parallels with sf can be clearly seen, for example, in the melting timepieces of Salvador Dalí's paintings, the "convulsive" humor of Max Ernst's ready-mades, the mind-bending sculptures of Marcel Duchamp, or the catachrestic images in the "automatic writing" of Robert Desnos. Both sf and Surrealism seem at times to be cut from the same "questing" cloth. In the words of Ian Watson: "The surrealists were pursuing a magical, myth-creating quest to evoke the alien, the other, the elsewhere, the different.... And what else are the alien worlds of science fiction, and the aliens invented by science fiction, but a kind of fulfillment of the surrealist quest for imaginary, nonhuman worlds?" (8-9).

But it is important to realize that Parkinson's approach in this book is based less on comparative aesthetics than on social history. Crucial to his detailed explanations of the interplay between the post-war Surrealists and the influential literary/art theorists of the time is an understanding of the historical context in which these interactions took place, the most defining feature of which was the flood of translated American sf that inundated France during this postwar period. As I have explained elsewhere:

Then, between 1950-55, a second ... invasion of France occurred: hordes of translated "Golden Age" Anglo-American SF novels from the 1930s and 1940s—authors such as Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Heinlein, Sturgeon, Simak, and van Vogt—began to find immediate success in the French SF marketplace....<sup>1</sup> And, spearheaded by the efforts of a few forward-looking authors and critics like Boris Vian (musician, translator, critic, and writer of a few highly surrealist SF novels), Raymond Queneau, Stephen Spriel, Michel Carrouges, and Michel Butor, the SF genre was once again very much *à la mode* in French popular and literary circles—along with American gadgetry, Hollywood movies, and American jazz. (260-61)

Parkinson is careful to point out that the relationship between the (mostly young) French enthusiasts of these new imported works of "*la science-fiction*" and the (mostly older) French Surrealists was largely one-directional. Whereas the former probably felt themselves to be the spiritual brothers of André Breton and his coterie, the latter dismissed their work as "inconsequential" (123), "arguing, again from a longstanding Surrealist perspective, that science in art and literature is most successful when it undercuts itself, performing as 'a subtle negation of science' rather than as a technological dream of the

future” (83). The same one-way impact seems to have also been the norm in the visual arts: “Although both SF and Surrealist art might be said to share a source late in the nineteenth-century visual culture of Symbolism ... inspiration from one to the other seems to travel in one direction only, from Surrealism towards SF” (75). This is demonstrated, for example, by the clear influence of artist Yves Tanguy’s ethereal, other-worldly paintings on the sf cover art portraying alien landscapes created by noted sf illustrator Richard M. Powers (for the US publisher Ballantine Books) during the 1950s.

The final two chapters of *Futures of Surrealism* focus on the 1960s in France and chart certain politico-cultural developments such as the rise of the Nouveau Roman, Surrealism’s flirtation with the writings of Charles Fort, and especially the spat between the Surrealists and the idea of “fantastic realism” propagated by sf devotees Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier in their bestselling 1960 book *Le Matin des magiciens* [The Morning of the Magicians] as well as in their new sf magazine *Planète* (1961-68). Parkinson describes their book as “a jumble of freely connected ideas drawn from ... alchemy, esotericism, parapsychology and the paranormal, and speculative history and science” (122) and “an implausibly popular compendium of strange facts and outlandish theories” (125) that, among its other goals, sought to popularize the “ancient astronaut hypothesis” (a notion made famous a few years later by Erich Von Däniken in *The Chariots of the Gods* [1968]). The magazine served as a bimonthly publishing outlet for articles and essays about “fantastic realism” and other sf-related topics as well as a springboard for Pierre Restany’s new avant-garde but short-lived neo-Dada movement called “Nouveau Réalisme.” Personally, I found the prolonged analysis of Surrealist Robert Benayoun’s continual warfare with the pro-sf supporters of Pauwels-Bergier and *Planète* to be less interesting in itself than as a historical backdrop to the emergence during this period of two important proponents of French sf, Jacques Sternberg and Gérard Klein.

The other Parkinson book under review here, *Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comics*, features ten scholarly essays that together offer a broader view of the topic (chronologically, thematically, and internationally) than the exclusively post-war and French-only focus of *Futures of Surrealism*. Despite what might be inferred from the book’s title and (as mentioned) from its cover art, the dominant subject matter is Surrealism itself, not science fiction or comics. As explained by editor Parkinson in his introduction:

The essential object of study of this book is Surrealism. It examines the ways in which individual Surrealists, groups or the movement as a whole received and informed SF on the one hand, and comics or *bande dessinée* on the other, often though not always triangulating all three. Because its three components are mostly intertwined and certain themes are shared ... chronology has been allowed to organize the essays. (4-5)

The first article, by Abigail Susik, called “Surrealism and Jules Verne: Depth of Subtext in a Collage by Max Ernst,” is a veritable *tour de force* and one of the best studies of the many affiliations (thematic, semiotic, mythic) between Verne and Surrealism that I have encountered since Terry Hale and

Andrew Hugill's excellent 2000 article "The Science is Fiction: Jules Verne, Raymond Roussel, and Surrealism." Susik opens her discussion with a broad assertion: "If there is a quintessential point of connection between Surrealism and science fiction understood in its deepest historical sense, such a rapport surely lies in the copious writings of French author Jules Verne" (16). Her ensuing analysis, both rigorous and sensitive, walks gingerly through the mine-field of several decades of often contentious debate about how to define the sf genre as well as whether Verne can/should be considered an sf author. She then examines one specific image, "Fantômas, Dante, and Jules Verne" by Max Ernst from his 1929 collage-novel *La Femme 100 Têtes* [The Hundred Headless Woman or The Woman Without—*sans*, pronounced the same as *cent* (100)—Heads], arguing that it "synchronically situates Verne as a literary, visual, and popular culture icon" (21) for the Surrealists who "had as much of a visual cultural association with Verne as they did a textual one" (24).

Although the editor suggests that the tenth and final article of the volume can be seen as "felicitously bookending" the volume's contents since it also discusses Verne, Elliott King's essay "*Ten Recipes for Immortality: A Study in Dalian Science and Paranoiac Fictions*" actually says very little about Verne beyond the fact that Salvador Dalí disliked him intensely. In contrast, the eighth and ninth articles just preceding King's—both of which also focus in whole or in part on Dalí—have substantially more to say about the connections between Surrealism and sf.

The eighth, "Surrealist Painting as Science Fiction: Considering J.G. Ballard's 'Innate Releasing Mechanism'" by Parkinson, chronicles the sf writer's enduring interest in Surrealism from his teenage years to his old age. He declared, for instance, in his 2008 autobiography *Miracles of Life*: "I felt strongly, and still do, that psychoanalysis and Surrealism were a key to the truth about existence and the human personality, and also a key to myself" (133). Arguing that Fredric Jameson's narrow treatment of Ballard as a postmodernist smacks of a "theoretical opportunism" (179) that ignores the author's huge debt to Surrealist art, Parkinson seeks to show "the importance of Surrealist painting as generative for his fiction" (179): e.g., Ernst and Paul Delvaux for *The Drowned World* (1962), Dalí for *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), Yves Tanguy for *The Drought* (1965), and so forth. He frames the discussion around the notion of "innate releasing mechanisms" (IRMs), a term borrowed from animal behaviorists and Jungian mythologist Joseph Campbell to designate "the inherited structure in the nervous system that enables an animal to respond to a circumstance never experienced before" (Campbell 30). According to Parkinson,

Ballard's interest in the functioning of IRMs, bringing about an amalgamation of Freudian and Jungian theories of the mind in his fiction, associated in the novels with his understanding of the language of archetypes and the collective unconscious, is mapped across his attraction to Surrealist art and writing. (188)

The ninth article, authored by Julia Pine, is titled "A Fantastic Voyage: Mapping Salvador Dalí's Science Fiction World of Tomorrow." It studies "the

history and nature of Dalí's involvement with SF and technological fantasy ... [and] proposes that Dalí used these as a locus for engaging with and critiquing mass culture" (195). The essay discusses Dalí's interest in and appropriation of various American icons of futurism in fashion, industrial design, and space-age technology during the 1960s and especially the "flamboyant promotional programme" (195) he was hired to create for Richard Fleischer's sf film *Fantastic Voyage* (1966).

Jeannette Baxter's contribution, "Accident and Apocalypse in Alan Burns's *Europe After the Rain*," offers a close reading of Burns's 1965 experimental novel (whose title evokes Max Ernst's painting of the same name) identifying it as "a formidable exercise in post-war Surrealist historiography, provoking as it does a line of associative questioning that, in turn, might just generate different ways of thinking about the relation between history and literature after the Holocaust" (173).

Four articles in the volume deal with comics, broadly defined. "André Breton, Rodolphe Töpffer and the Automatic Message" by Barnaby Dicker describes "the strong resonances between Rodolphe Töpffer's founding conception of the comic strip, developed in the first half of the nineteenth century, and André Breton's conception of Surrealist automatism, developed by and large in the first half of the twentieth" (40). Joanna Pawlik's "The Comic Book Conditions of Chicago Surrealism" documents the movement's political and counter-cultural activities begun in the 1960s under the leadership of Franklin and Penelope Rosemont. It details how "the Chicago group pressed comics into active service in their quest for the Surrealist transformation of America" (131). Gilda Axelroud's "Reassessing René Magritte's *Période Vache*: From Louis Forton's *Pieds Nickelés* to Georges Bataille" examines the Surrealist painter's so-called *Vache* paintings, first exhibited in 1948, as being inspired by the popular French *bande dessinée* called *Les Pieds Nickelés*, "which had been written about twenty years prior to the exhibition ... by George [sic] Bataille in a little-known text from his periodical *Documents*" (82). And, lastly, Jonathan P. Eburne's "Approximate Life: The Cybernetic Adventures of Monsieur Wzz..." is a two-part article that first investigates the Surrealists' negative attitudes toward the developing science of cybernetics and how their "discourse on complex systems and bio-mechanical life sought to disrupt the homeostatic calibration of docile subjects in favour of exploded, exceptionally dys-functioning systems" (68) and then goes on to review one of the "light-hearted Surrealist experiments in proto-cybernetic discourse" (69), the delightfully tongue-in-cheek photographic *cinéroman* called *Les Surprenants voyages de Monsieur Wzz...* [The Surprising Journeys of Mister Wzz...], created by Man Ray, Max Morise, and Marcel Duhamel and published in the back pages of the tourism magazine *Voyage en France* in October 1929. Monsieur Wzz is a robot figure "composed of twisted wire with no observable organs or mechanisms, [who] accompanies human actors on a series of adventures throughout the streets and industrial byways of Paris." Among its other attributes, *Monsieur Wzz...* "suggests the

extent to which the technophilic machine-bodies of Dada had become assimilated into the photorealism of contemporary Paris” (70).

Finally, there is Parkinson’s second contribution to this volume: “Surrealism, Science Fiction and UFOs in the 1950s: ‘Myth’ in France Before Roland Barthes.” Although some of the content of this article appears to be recycled from *Futures of Surrealism* (or vice-versa), it does effectively highlight the role initially played by André Breton and his theory of “Great Invisibles” described in the 1942 article “Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else” and later articulated in more detail by the well known French writer/critic Michel Carrouges—specifically in his *Les Machines célibataires* [The Bachelor Machines, 1954] and *Les Apparitions des Martiens* [The Appearances of Martians, 1963]—in popularizing the notion, “well before Jung and Barthes ... that flying saucers were a modern myth for the secular age” (123).

As evident from the above, the thematic scope of *Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comics* is much broader than that of *Futures of Surrealism*, but the scholarly quality of its essays is no less satisfying. Lastly, a very helpful set of “back-of-the-book” materials are provided, including an impressive 25-page bibliography (arranged by chapter) and an extensive topical index.

I recommend both of these titles by Gavin Parkinson for graduate and undergraduate university libraries, sf research collections, and individuals who wish to expand their knowledge of Surrealism beyond the 1920s and 1930s. The rarity of existing studies on sf and Surrealism as well as the meticulous documentational apparatus undergirding both books also add, in my opinion, significantly to their value.

#### NOTES

1. An interesting case is the sf works of A.E. van Vogt, whose translations (masterfully done by Boris Vian) enjoyed great success in France and whose autobiography emphasized the role of dreams in generating many of his stories. As Fredric Jameson observes in his article “The Space of Science Fiction: Narrative in Van Vogt,” “the parallel to surrealist procedures is inescapable” (317). But Jameson also goes on to caution that “we must not read Van Vogt as a surrealist writer, despite the extraordinary fantasy logic of his tales”:

The stunning and depressing historical irony of the surrealist movement was that this preeminent anti-aesthetic vanguard movement, which despised Literature and aimed at the radical transformation of daily life itself, became the very paradigm of Literature and literary production to the Western mainstream high-cultural tradition. To grasp the movement of a Van Vogt narrative as virtual dream, as the logic of fantasy, as unconscious free association and projection, as sheer subjectivity, is in other words to “contain” those narratives and reduce them to a manageable literary operation already classified and catalogued in advance. (317)

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