

Introduction

Reality Unbound: New Departures in Science Fiction Cinema

Science fiction, Jean Baudrillard wrote, “is no longer anywhere, and it is everywhere.”¹ In formulating his conceptualization of simulacra, Baudrillard was struck by the inherent instability of referents, and by proxy the difficulties associated with discerning what is real in the modern world. As we move deeper into the new millennium, Baudrillard’s slippery formulation seems to solidify somehow, as near constant war, financial crises and rising political extremism cloud our assumptions about the contemporary world we have molded. In an age where the language employed by the media, as well as the events it describes, becomes ever more apocalyptic in tone, one might reasonably ponder the ramifications for sf, which has long held a looking glass up to society, revealing our foibles and reveling in our hunger for advancement and our competing appetite for destruction. The 21st century was not supposed to be like this, and yet though still in its infancy, who knows how it will turn out? If we accept that sf provides a shadowy reflection of the times that spawned it, then it is tempting to ask how we and by extension *our* times will look to future historians? Whilst our worldview has become increasingly unsettled—and a cursory glance at recent sf releases can give the impression that dystopia is the new normal—it would be foolhardy to divorce ourselves from historicity or fall prey to what the British sociologist John Urry described as “an epochal hubris that presumes that one’s own moment is somehow a special moment in transition.”²

Sf cinema has long been cognizant of such considerations of course, and in the midst of chaos it endures. If anything it is currently thriving. The commercial phenomenon that was *STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS* (J.J. Abrams, 2015), coupled with the more unexpected levels of success enjoyed by *JURASSIC WORLD* (Colin Trevorrow, 2015) means that at the time of writing, three of the top four highest grossing productions of all time are sf films (the other being James Cameron’s *AVATAR* [2009]), while beyond the delimited parameters of box office success, several films have emerged over the past two years alone that stand up well to the more jaundiced judgment of critical reception, chief amongst them *PRE-DESTINATION* (Michael and Peter Spierig, 2014), *SNOWPIERCER* (Bong Joon-ho, 2014), *UNDER THE SKIN* (Jonathan Glazer, 2014) and *EX MACHINA* (Alex Garland, 2015). It is

in this context that we elected to make the theme of the 20th Annual International Bremen Film Conference—an event that this collection stems in part from—an sf one, its full title “The Future is Now: Science Fiction Cinema as Audio-visual Blueprint of Histories, Spaces and Sounds” gesturing toward its focused yet simultaneously open aspirations. *Reality Unbound: New Departures in Science Fiction Cinema* then, aims to engage with some of the most pressing arguments in contemporary sf studies while clearing the pathway for discussions of the genre that may well inform sf scholarship of the future. Consisting of four distinct sections containing eleven original essays by some of the leading experts in sf studies, the collection seeks to grapple with a diffuse, yet interrelated cluster of topics, adjusting its scope to essay prominent themes and issues from early cinematic iterations to blockbusters and art-house releases of the present day.

Section one (“Moving Through the End Times”) analyzes how sf mediates history and provides us with vital snapshots of particular moments in time. That the collection begins with Vivian Sobchack’s investigation into post-millennial angst (“Abject Times: Temporality and the Science Fiction Film in Post-9/11 America”) seems entirely apropos then, for her efforts to fashion a pathway through the engulfing pessimism that afflicts our ability to envision positive futures cuts to the heart of crises in postmodernity itself, a pessimism that in real terms incubates the race to the bottom brand of reactionary politics so in vogue across Europe and the US right now. “Abject Times” shows keen awareness of the circuitous nature of such debates, however, and via a close examination of Bakhtinian chronotopes, asserts that their interrelations are not incidental, but “are a historical as well as narrative expression of cultural mutation.” One of many consequences of the fallout from 9/11 is a refugee crisis that will shape political discourses for years to come and yet its tragic human cost may itself only be a cruel rehearsal for the greatest necrofuturistic specter of all in the guise of the ticking time-bomb that is global warming. History, it would appear, is catching up and how the west deals with what Zygmunt Bauman has termed “the daunting task of consuming locally the surplus of planetary history”³ may ultimately be the defining issue of our times. Past precedent does not imbue confidence as Delia González de Reufels illustrates in “The End of the American Way of Life: Overpopulation and Its Consequences in *SOYLENT GREEN* and *LOGAN’S RUN*.” Identifying significant links between the neo-Malthusian population movement and two of the more popular 1970s Hollywood sf productions, González illustrates how Hollywood was complicit in exploiting anxieties centered on the proliferation in (other nations’) birth rates. In a decade where popular responses to the phenomenon of population growth became increasingly hysterical, her argument that these films’ fixation on a “loss of self-determination and personal freedom as a consequence

of overpopulation” is made in the wider (and chillingly contemporary) context of who should remain *ante portas*, and actively problematizes the authority of those who get to decide.

Section two (“Rethinking Science Fiction”) consists of three essays that push against the boundaries of traditional sf scholarship. Sherryl Vint and Karin Harrasser blur not just genre boundaries but the types of modes and spaces through which we consume films, while Marc Bonner instead literalizes conceptions of space from an outsider, architectural perspective. In “The Future as History: Science Fiction Counterfactuals,” Vint seeks to recalibrate the mechanics of genre itself to engage with distinctly unnerving alternate universes in what she terms the “counterfactual sf-documentary hybrid.” Tackling the convergence of sf and real life head on, she posits that counterfactual documentaries can offer a fresh perspective to think through the postmodern struggle to envision brighter futures, a problem flagged in Vivian Sobchack’s essay in section one. In pointing out that whether through sf or documentaries, “our understandings are always mediated through representational modes,” her essay provides a rallying cry that calls to mind John Connor’s assertion in *TERMINATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY* (James Cameron, 1991) that “there’s no fate but what we make for ourselves.” Untangling the lattices of soft power that shape our present is no easy task, however, and in “From Bio Adapter to Common Sense,” Karin Harrasser highlights sf’s prescience in articulating the outer parameters of societal control. In tones that are all too relevant in our interconnected social media driven age, Harrasser illustrates how a logical outcome of the sort of amorphous bio-political strategies identified by Michel Foucault in the 1960s is that “one can never say precisely whether one is governing or governed.” What once may have passed for a *reductio ad absurdum* sf spoof on the dangers implicit in panopticism has instead become a governing principle of our daily lives and with recourse to sf literature, Hollywood and avant-garde films, Harrasser questions whether it is possible to circumvent the assimilation of resistance strategies by nebulous governing bodies. Nostalgia is not what it used to be and in “Rethinking Retrofuturism: The Representation of the Future in City and Spaceship Settings Revisiting Established Styles of Architecture,” Marc Bonner shows us how in architecturally representing the future onscreen sf increasingly bypasses the present and looks to the past for inspiration. Where once films such as Fritz Lang’s *METROPOLIS* (1927), to give but the most striking example, provided conceptual blueprints for cities of the future by incorporating into their design contemporary architectural styles, Bonner notes that such strategies were eventually all but abandoned by Hollywood studios. Taking prominent Hollywood films from the 1970s to the present as examples, Bonner emphasizes a need to incorporate “reflective and restorative nostalgia” into conceptualizations of retrofuturism.

Shifting the terrain to a more historiographical approach, section three (“Science Fiction Histories”) seeks to provide chronologies of different types of science fictions, beginning with explorations of European iterations of the genre and finishing with historical depictions of Mars. Responding to the challenge of chronology, Winfried Pauleit calls into question the inherent indexicality of film itself. In “Traces of the Future: European Science Fiction Cinema as the Rhetoric of an Audiovisual Discourse on the Archive and the Museum,” Pauleit emphasizes the role played by technical film elements such as sound recording and editing in creating a retrospective film archive, one cannily illuminated by onscreen time travel. While scholarship on modernist European cinema has most commonly set itself in opposition to industry imperatives such as genre classification, Pauleit seeks to move beyond such arguments, by arguing that coded political aesthetics within key films can be seen as “part of an audiovisual discourse that questions the respective practices of archives and museums.” Aidan Power’s “Science Fiction Film and Europe: A Reappraisal” traces sf’s uneven yet sustained trajectory in a European sphere and argues that the scope for sustained transnational investigations into sf in this part of the world—of a kind that have recently emerged in other genres such as the road movie and the horror film—is considerable. Tracking a number of pre-existing studies, Power argues that putting such nationally and temporally specific investigations into European sf in dialogue with one another can allow for fresh fields of enquiry into a genre with strong ties to Europe’s literary and cinematic traditions. In “Visualizing our Martian Future from the 1890s to the 1950s”, David Seed tracks historical representations of Mars in both fiction and film, encompassing a time-frame that moves from the dying days of scientific romance to the golden age of sf cinema, an era that also happened to be the bloodiest half-century on record on our own planet. Seed’s meticulously detailed piece shows how humankind’s hopes and dreams were invariably projected onto its depictions of Mars, while even the most fantastical of imaginings were nevertheless anchored in political considerations that were unabashedly terrestrial.

“Sounds of Science Fiction,” the concluding section of this collection, gathers essays that focus on a topic that has been the subject of increased scholarly interest over the past decade and is likely to become more prominent still in the years ahead. Brian Willems opens the section with an investigation into “The Sounds of Space” that begins, perhaps unexpectedly, with silence. Moving from sf’s attempts to deal with the “absence” of sound in space (or at least sound that is detectable to the human ear) to the willful insertion of sound into space in sf films, Willems concludes with a synopsis of the “real-world capture of actual sound-like objects in outer space,” insightfully deducing that actual recordings from the European Space Agency’s Rosetta probe are science fictional in a

way that classics of the genre such as *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) can never hope to be. In “Striking the Right Tone: The Voice of Feeling in Spike Jonze’s *HER*,” Rüdiger Zill examines the philosophical implications posed by the operating system voiced by Scarlett Johansson in the eponymous 2013 film. *HER*, Zill reasons, through what he identifies as its potential “to be narrative philosophy *sui generis*,” allows for the possibility of moving beyond the imposition of philosophical discourses upon films from outside perspectives. Faced with discerning the gamut of “human” possibilities inherent in the operating system through nothing more than the modulations in Johansson’s voice, Zill asserts that the “experiencing of bodily words” can be achieved by engaging with the oft-neglected factor of resonance. The final essay of this collection, Rasmus Greiner’s “Radio Aesthetics: On the Historical Dimension of the Audio Track in *GRAVITY*,” is also concerned with a recent Hollywood release although this time the emphasis is upon the prominent role played by radio in both sending waves out into the cosmos and in relaying landmarks of space exploration to the general public. Technologically and culturally embedded in conceptions of space from the outset, Greiner argues that the presence of radio in sf films dealing with space can “be understood as an implicit inscription of film and media history enunciated in the aesthetics of the audio track”: a state of being that allows Alfonso Cuarón in *GRAVITY* (2013) to inflect his vision of the future with traces of scientific wonders from centuries past.

Aidan Power, Delia González de Reufels, Rasmus Greiner and Winfried Pauleit

Notes

- 1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* [1981], trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor 1994), 126.
- 2 John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge 2007), 277.
- 3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure* (Cambridge 2004), 14.

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