Simultaneous Worlds: Global Science Fiction Cinema

Edited by Jennifer L. Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells.

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Review by Sarah Artt

This book is a welcome addition to existing scholarship on Science Fiction cinema and provides a much needed examination of sf as a global genre[[1]](#endnote-1). While work on global sf print culture has been appearing for some time, work on global sf cinema has tended to be confined to isolated articles, chapters, and special issues[[2]](#endnote-2). This collection takes the opportunity to examine sf work in languages other than English, as well as a variety of formats including shorts, animation, and artists film and video. It should also be noted that many of the works examined here are not easy to see, and therefore I am particularly grateful to the intrepid scholars represented here for bringing a range of underseen works to wider critical attention. The lack of ease in accessing some of the films under discussion here underscores a need for more diverse distribution methods.

Part I, “Intermediality and New Media Economies” takes up the ever-ubiquitous image of the cyborg, and Oshii Mamoru’s *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) appears as a key text in both Thomas Lamarre’s “Scan Lines: How Cyborgs Feel” and Istvan Scicsery-Ronay Jr’s “What is Estranged in Science Fiction Animation?” Both these chapters approach the question of representation and the screen, but from radically different angles. Lamarre identifies the motif of the scan line as a way of signalling when the cyborg gaze is present on screen and how this motif links the cyborg to older forms of technology, such as television. Scicsery-Ronay Jr examines the history of sf animation, noting the format’s potential to “travel from one culture to another” (38) and the ways in which digital tools have transformed animation.

Part II examines how sf traverses the globe in terms of physical and cultural locations. Of particular interest here is Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai’s examination of the Tamil film *Enthiran, the Robot* (2010) and the role of its writer Sujatha. *Enthiran* presents an important opportunity for scholars of sf in that the film has been widely distributed (it can be streamed via Amazon Prime in the UK), and can therefore be more easily accessed by audiences who may be less familiar with Tamil cinema. Pillai notes that the film “simultaneously draws from Asimov’s ideas on robotics and the ubiquitous convention of the double role in Tamil cinema.” (119) Pillai indicates that while Sujatha is a popular Tamil writer, science fiction is not a common genre for Tamil cinema, and therefore its genre hybridity draws on a variety of influences that include the *Ramayana*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, as well as the conventions of film melodrama.

Part III deals with spatial and temporal modernity. Joanna Page writes about Argentine sf through the example of the low-budget feature *Estrellas* (2007), a film that differs considerably from art-house darlings such as *La Antena* (2007), embracing an openly DIY aesthetic that evokes the Third Cinema of Solanas and Gettino. Page examines how *Estrellas* embraces the amateur aesthetic in its effort to “challenge…the linear notion of temporality that underpins accounts of a modernity rolled out from Europe to the colonies.” (140)

Evert Hamner’s chapter entitled “Virtual Migrants” is a timely examination of Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer* (2008), a film that received a good deal of critical attention on the festival circuit a decade ago. Hamner asserts that films like *Sleep Dealer* are emblematic of how “filmmakers are now thematising unsanctioned immigration and other crossings of political boundaries as a rebellion against techno-scientific imperialism, so that early twenty-first century SF film explicitly connects national identity and emerging forms of bio-technology in ways only incipient in earlier works.” (157) Drawing comparisons with *District 9* (2009) and *Bladerunner* (1982), Hamner argues that *Sleep Dealer* offers a critique of both “north *and* south” (163) and therefore offers challenges to a range of audiences in terms of its story. In a similar vein, Emily A. Maguire’s chapter discusses the humorous and politicised Cuban zombie feature *Juan of the Dead* (2011), which “uses the zombies’ disruptive conformity to poke fun at *both* old revolutionary socialist fervor and the new opportunistic capitalist ethos [in Cuba]” (179) contributing to the wealth of scholarship on the zombie as a political metaphor.

Part IV returns to the notion of the cyborg. Of particular note here is Sharalyn Orbaugh’s fascinating chapter on the legacy of Donna Haraway’s conception of the cyborg and how we might view this in relation to Oshii Mamoru’s *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004). Orbaugh asserts that “SF cinema can itself function as theory” (192) and this is an appealing idea for those of us teaching SF screen culture. Orbaugh suggests an absorbing range of ideas that connect Haraway and *Innocence,* such as: “how can we have affect and connection when our bodies are increasingly hybridized with inorganic matter (or are entirely artificial), and the feelings/memories that have always been stored in the body are now archived externally in computers?” (194) This is an idea clearly explored by both Haraway and Oshii, but this is also something we are all increasingly asking ourselves.

The final section of the collection encompasses sf cinema from Soviet Russia, North Korea and China. Jillian Porter’s chapter discusses both *Aelita, Queen of Mars* (1924) and *Solaris* (1972) in relation to the depiction of commodity goods. Porter contrasts these two iconic examples of Soviet SF with the 1986 film *Kin-dza-dza*, which depicts “the disintegration of dominant Soviet discourses of value on the eve of perestroika and glastnost” (252) via the story of two ordinary Soviet workers suddenly transplanted to an alien planet who must use matches as currency “to make illegal deals in black-market bunkers and a state-run supermarket”. (252)

Travis Workman writes about the North Korean *Pulgasari* (1985) in comparison to the more recent South Korean *Save the Green Planet* (2003). As with the earlier discussion of Tamil cinema, Workman notes that SF is not a frequently evoked genre in South Korean cinema, and it is often combined with other genres. Workman argues that in both *Pulgasari* and *Save the Green Planet*, SF functions as a critical tool for estrangement, emphasising and drawing attention to the conventions of established realist styles in relation to national cinemas.

Nathaniel Isaacson’s chapter discusses *Death Ray on a Coral Island* (Zhang Hongmei, 1980) mainland China’s first SF film. Based on an award-winning 1978 short story by Tong Enzheng, Isaacson examines the story’s various iterations and its depiction of science, scientists, and overseas Chinese. Tong and his work are clearly significant for having survived the Cultural Revolution, and the discussion of changes to the story that took place in relation to the shifting political landscape, and how these are depicted on film and in the story’s illustrated book adaptation (*lianhuanhua*) are of particular interest. Isaacson notes that “all versions of the narrative share a vexatious ambiguity about the world” (280) in terms of national identity, race, geographical location, and the purpose of science.

*Simultaneous Worlds* is a fascinating and illuminating addition to SF scholarship. The title of the collection evokes and reinforces the idea that SF as a genre appears concurrently across a range of global locations, and that the critical focus on English-language, Hollywood outputs limits our understanding of the uses of this important critical genre.

1. See for example Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*. (London: Continuum, 2012); Jessica Langer, *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (London: PalgraveMacmillan: 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Mariano Paz ‘South of the Future: An overview of Latin American Science Fiction Cinema’, *Science Fiction Film and Television,* vol 1, no. 1 (2008); John Bera, ‘The sf cinema of mainland China’, *Science Fiction Film and Television,* vol .6 no. 2 (2013). See also the following special issues: *Science Fiction Film and Television* vol. 7 no. 3 (2014) on Science Fiction Anime and *Science Fiction Film and Television* vol. 8 no. 2 June 2015 on Filming the Strugatskiis [↑](#endnote-ref-2)