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Review by Llew Watkins

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## **SCIENCE FICTION CIRCUITS OF THE SOUTH AND EAST (2018) EDITED BY ANINDITA BANERJEE AND SONIA FRITZSCHE**

Review by Llew Watkins

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Banerjee, Anindita and Fritzsche, Sonia, editors. *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East*. Peter Lang, 2018. 247 pp.

The introduction to *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East* (2018) opens quietly with a Bengali children's rhyme from the 1960s:

*"Did you know there were three moons in the sky?  
The first is the old one, the other two are Russian,  
Look up and you'll see all three speeding by" (1).*

The rhyme refers to *Sputnik 1* and *2*, the first satellites sent into outer space, launched a month apart by the Soviet Union in 1957. *Sputnik 1*, a tiny silver spherical object, twenty-three inches in diameter and weighing just eighty-four kilograms, is marked out in the introduction to this exceptional compilation of essays as one of the principal epicentres of Science Fictional distribution, causing later waves and aftershocks that would ripple out for decades to come.

It is an apt image, not just because *Sputnik* literally spun around the globe many times, but because in doing so it could be seen, or picked up on amateur radios, or caught in the imaginations of countless people at such a geographical remove. The Bengali rhyme encapsulates this, highlighting the many unexpected connections, lines of communication, and indeed the 'circuits' that Science Fiction sharing operates through. These evanescent routes of communication are what Anindita Banerjee and Sonia Fritzsche carefully suggest are vital to re-contextualising Science Fiction (SF) as a global phenomenon, and not one neatly divided into nations and states. The power of this study lies in the sensitive re-examining of history as a shifting nexus of pathways, rather than other approaches that more commonly reify a global understanding into something more bounded or solid.

Although this might seem like a fairly simple shift of focus, I cannot overemphasise how much it affects and resonates through the eight texts that follow the introduction and how with hindsight, having read the collection, I am convinced of the importance of this perspective adjustment. This is a study that is timely and needed. And one that could perhaps only happen at this strange juncture in history, as we begin to process the many threads of the twentieth century moving into the twenty-first. In general, my experience reading these texts was one of an uncanny relief: the sense that a problem – which I had not before been so consciously aware of – was being so skilfully addressed.

As might be expected, certain pivotal SF texts recur throughout the compilation. To name just three: Evgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Ivan Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula* (1957), and Stanisław Lem's *Solaris* (1961). The continued references to these and other key works, gave me a deeper and more multivalent appreciation of these books as they become different objects in differing contexts. It also meant that, in my exploration through the collection, where the sheer weight of new material might otherwise have become overwhelming, I was able to return to reference points that had become familiar, which as a reader I found comforting.

Some of the textual analysis I found particularly impressive. For example, Banerjee's investigation of the character R-13 in *We*, which is the primary focus of the first essay, "T/Racing Revolution between Red October and the Black Atlantic." I initially felt uncertain at the connection that Banerjee proposes between *We*, completed in 1921 in the Soviet Union, and the contemporaneous Harlem Renaissance movement in New York as well as Afrofuturism more generally. However, Banerjee's argument is unexpected and profound, concerning itself both with the mathematical symbolism implicit in the novel, as well as correspondences between the Latin and Cyrillic characters in the original Russian text which are less explicit in the early and much more widely distributed English translation.

The collection covers a range of countries which become key focal points along the routes of exchange and transference, such as Mexico, India, Cuba, East Germany, and China. Part of me wished to expand even beyond this, to other unmentioned parts of the globe, however that is beyond the scope of one volume without the content becoming diluted, and this is rather the mission statement of the wider series – *World Science Fiction Studies* – of which this is the second volume. Not only am I looking forward to future volumes in the series, but I also have renewed inspiration to track down a copy of the first book – *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction* (2017) by Iva Polak.

Mexico and in particular the Yucatán provide the landscape for the second essay, "Eugenia: Engineering New Citizens in Mexico's Laboratory of Socialism," by Miguel Garcia, which is a fascinating and terrifying look at eugenics in Eduardo Urzaiz's novel, *Eugenia: A Fictional Sketch of Future Customs* (1919). Although set in 2218, *Eugenia* is a book written in 1919, and Garcia thoroughly excavates the historical context of the global eugenics movement as well as its relationship to socialism in Mexico which are causes of Urzaiz's strange future projection. This essay clearly demonstrates the racism implicit in eugenics strategies, while also arguing that Urzaiz's intentions were not necessarily nationalistic. Garcia achieves this by contrasting Urzaiz's ideas with the Mexican politician and intellectual Jose Vasconcelos' concept of the "Cosmic Race," proposed just a few years after *Eugenia* was originally published.

The third essay, 'Between Moscow and Santa Clara: The Soviet-Cuban Imaginary in Agustín de Rojas' *Espiral*,' by Antonio Cordoba looks at the wealth of Soviet SF texts that "flowed from Moscow to Santa Clara," and in turn influenced the Cuban writer Agustín de Rojas (76). Cordoba focuses on Rojas' first novel *Espiral* (1980), which to date has not been translated into English. He

situates it at the intriguing confluence of two streams: the aforementioned Soviet SF, and the politics of Cuba at the time specifically expressed by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's call for a 'new man' to take on American Imperialism.

Working through an academic collection with various contributors one is faced with the challenge – but also the richness – of readjusting to a variety of voices and styles. The scholarship is always rigorous, each contributor bringing their own specialised research area to bare on the texts they are studying. For example, Sibelan Forrester's excellent and entertaining article on translating names in SF, or Carl Gelderloos' exposition of biological evolution and dialectical materialism. This meant that, because of my personal predispositions, sometimes I was more at ease with the content, and at other times I had to work harder to keep up. However, because the writing was always well thought through and carefully constructed, it was worth me persevering and doing any extra reading that was required.

The fourth essay by Gelderloos, "Alien Evolution and Dialectical Materialism in Eastern European Science Fiction," was one where, at times, I lamented my inability regarding the subject matter. Gelderloos investigates the relationship between biological evolution and dialectical materialism by looking at alien life in three texts: Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula*, Lem's *Solaris*, and Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller's *Andymon* (1982). Explicating representations of the alien, Gelderloos draws out the political implications of alien representation as well as the understanding of the biological evolutionary processes upon which these are based. Demonstrating how the non-human is always experienced in relationship to the human, Gelderloos claims the alterity of the alien as being two-fold: firstly, embedded in the strangeness of our own evolutionary history, and secondly, as a physical entity contrasted to ourselves.

As pointed out in the introduction by Banerjee and Fritzsche, translation is a recurrent and crucial theme throughout the book, and in Forrester's essay, "Naming the Future in Translations of Russian and East European Science Fiction," (the sixth essay, forgive me for slipping slightly out of order here) it takes centre stage. Forrester considers works mostly "written during the great boom in Soviet and East European SF that began a few years after Stalin's death" (165). Therefore, unlike others in the collection, her writing narrows its focus not to one or three texts but to the convention of translating names in a range. Forrester divides these in terms of the epoch with which the various novels are concerned: alternate present, near future, and distant future. Her study begins by revealing the ways in which the connotations of a multi-ethnic cosmopolitanism inherent in many of the works from this period can be lost when names are altered or else transferred from their original context. She continues by dissecting more inventive approaches that authors have devised when naming characters, especially regarding stories set in the far future, before concluding with a discussion of how gender is conveyed through names and again how this can be missed in translations.

Part of the remit of the *World Science Fiction Studies* series is to encourage study of the genre in both print and digital forms. The fifth essay in the collection, "A Natural and Artificial

Homeland: East German Science Fiction Film Responds to Kubrick and Tarkovsky” by Fritzsche, looks at two films produced in East Germany – Gottfried Kolditz’s *Signale - Ein Weltraumabenteuer* (1970), and Hermann Zschoche’s *Eolomea* (1972) – and their connection with Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1971) and Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Fritzsche’s discourse is built upon an investigation of the complex concept *Heimat* – or homeland – and the bearing this has on these two films made in the German Democratic Republic. With reference to *Solaris* and *2001*, Fritzsche points out: “the continuing academic discourse on these films helps us better to understand the United States and the Soviet Union at the time of release” (135). This is true of any SF text: that it has the potential to help us better understand the milieu in which it was created. Certainly, as I moved through *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East*, I felt a newly challenged sense of interconnecting world events throughout the twentieth century, which – perhaps my oversight – is not something I was expecting to gain!

Often there are deeper nuances and contradictory understandings to be gained by such an approach and I found this certainly to be the case in the seventh essay in the collection, “Ghana-da in Bandung: Race, Science, and Non-Alignment in Premendra Mitra’s Fiction” by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee. Mukherjee begins with a discussion of the 1955 Bandung Conference, in particular exploring the less remarked upon undercurrents of racist anti-colonialism that were present at the otherwise utopic intended meeting between leaders of African and Asian countries. Mukherjee proposes that the “contradictions of this racialized Bandung spirit” had been anticipated by the Indian writer Premendra Mitra in the Ghana-da stories, the first of which was written two years before India gained independence in 1945 (195). What stood out for me most was the complex discussion of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his relationship to science and scientific development. Mukherjee positions the first wave of modern Indian SF – including the Ghana-da stories – in critical dialogue with Nehru’s policy.

The eighth and final essay, “The Afterlife of the Post-Apocalypse: Dmitry Glukhovsky in China” by Jinyi Chu, seeks to trace the reception of Dmitry Glukhovsky’s *Metro 2033* (2005) in China. Beginning with personal reflections of Beijing in 2016, and incorporating research gathered from online forums, this is an essay refreshingly rooted in the twenty-first century, while simultaneously drawing on the complex history between China and Russia in order to contextualise the Chinese reception of Glukhovsky’s work. To the overall collection, which is roughly grouped according to geography into three sections, and which began with discussion of texts from the early twentieth century, this adds a sense of chronology and simultaneously completes that chronology. Banerjee and Fritzsche observe in their introduction that, “[w]hile we refer to the Internet as a global system, in many ways there are many Internets (Spanish, English, Chinese, Bengali, etc.)” (18). Global and many, the internet is obviously a technology that has utterly changed the lines and circuits of SF communication, therefore the decision to finish with Chu’s essay is a crucial one and without it the collection would have felt strangely disconnected from our present age.

Banerjee and Fritzsche have done a remarkable job in bringing these various strands into a cohesive and yet simultaneously pluralistic whole. The collection is colourful, polyphonic, and

sensory. I feel breathless and sated by exposure to so many different writers, cultures, and ideas, both from the real world as well as the fantastical. I am grateful to both the editors and the contributing authors.

#### **BIONOTE**

**Llew Watkins** is a sculptor and writer based in Limehouse, London, UK. He is currently undertaking a creative writing MA at Royal Holloway, University of London. A practicing Buddhist for many years, he has a particular interest in the relationship between Buddhist thought and Science Fiction.