



Book Review:
Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from Around the World

T. S. Miller

Knickerbocker, Dale, ed. *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from Around the World*.
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In *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from Around the World*, distinguished scholar of Spanish-language literature Dale Knickerbocker has assembled eleven chapters that introduce and critically assess some of the most notable creators of “global science fiction,” a category that the editor himself acknowledges as a necessarily imperfect descriptor for science fiction and fantasy produced beyond the dominant Anglo-American genre traditions. A handful of the authors covered in this volume will likely already be well known – at least by name and reputation – to many English-speaking SF scholars, including the Strugatsky brothers, Liu Cixin, Angélica Gorodischer, and Daína Chaviano. The remaining writers and single filmmaker, however, most readers will likely find much less familiar, and it is one of the primary aims of this essay collection to reduce their collective obscurity, even to the point of working towards constructing a kind of “international sf canon” (x). The editor and the contributors obviously do not intend such a canon to be exhaustive or even exclusive in any sense, and in fact *Lingua Cosmica* is often at its most compelling when contextualizing those authors singled out for “canonization” within the much more expansive SF traditions native to their own countries. This volume’s essays map out many diverse directions for further scholarship, and above all offer fascinating and often humbling glimpses into these simultaneously local and international other traditions – not into a *singular* global SF, but many. Indeed, SF scholars who consider themselves knowledgeable about “the field” will have to reconsider the scope and character of this field we have been talking about for so long, and all that we miss if we focus our attention only on works from what Knickerbocker – again, admittedly imperfectly – has dubbed the “Anglophone axis” (viii).

I would therefore highly recommend *Lingua Cosmica* to teachers designing a course on global SF or simply wishing to incorporate more international perspectives into their usual genre courses. The essays included should also provide useful starting points for interested researchers, even if only in providing a general overview of a given author's career; after all, Knickerbocker notes in his introduction that the authors covered "possess one thing in common: there is little or no English scholarship on their work" (xi). This statement is more true of some of the authors than others, and, relatedly, another of the book's most useful elements is simply its incidental assemblage of non-exhaustive but broad bibliographies ranging across the extant English and non-English scholarship on each author. Of course, one of the possibly frustrating contradictions of this generally excellent collection is that the constraints of space and other specifications requested by the editor for the benefit of a more generalist audience mean that most of the essays necessarily take the form of broad overviews of authors and works that clearly deserve much deeper study. The essays do vary in this respect: some of them read more like entries in an encyclopedia or other reference book (for example, Vibeke Rützou Petersen on Gorodischer or Hanna-Riikka Roine and Hanna Samola on "Finnish Weird" author Johanna Sinisalo), whereas others take a form closer to a typical journal article in advancing and supporting a narrower argumentative thesis (such as Amy J. Ransom's brilliant "Laurent McAllister: Rhizomatic Space and the Posthuman" or Alexis Brooks de Vita's contribution on Olatunde Osunsanmi). This is not a criticism of either type of essay but rather a simple observation. Most chapters do straddle this divide in some ways: by design, *Lingua Cosmica* seems to have been intended as midway between an introductory reference work and a more typical essay collection.

Another apparent contradiction of this English-language publication is that many of the authors covered in it have not (yet?) been widely translated into English and/or well served by existing translations. In other words, those SF scholars who can read the languages in which these authors write are probably already familiar with their work, whereas those who cannot will often find themselves unable to access much if any of their work in reliable English translations. For example, Paweł Frelik's essay on "Jacek Dukaj's Science Fiction as Philosophy" is one of the most stimulating in the collection and therefore one of the most frustrating: Frelik tantalizes those of us with no Polish by describing the spottily translated Dukaj as overshadowing even countryman Stanisław Lem – that already-canonized saint of international SF – "in terms of narrative complexity and intellectual density" (23). To read such praise from one of the leading scholars of SF studies, but also to find that only two of the author's many works have been translated into English, leaves me with nothing to do but wait on possible future translations. But, after all, perhaps *Lingua Cosmica* can indirectly spur additional translation by increasing international interest in the authors under consideration. In his essay, Frelik compellingly traces how "Dukaj often uses genre protocols and formulas as tools for thinking through philosophical and political issues, making science fiction a tool rather than an end" (24). As in many of the best pieces in this collection, Frelik manages a fine balance between demonstrating an author's relationship to SF beyond their own language or national borders and situating their work in the specific political (or otherwise local) contexts with which it engages and from which it emerged.

In general, the most useful essays in *Lingua Cosmica* succeed in telling a miniature history of SF in the respective countries and/or languages of the author or filmmaker under discussion. For example, although I have suggested that both the

Argentine fabulist Angélica Gorodischer and the Cuban émigré Daína Chaviano are likely known to English-speaking SF scholars because of their many accolades and translated works (stories by both already appear in the 2003 anthology *Cosmos Latinos* edited by Andrea L. Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán), Juan Carlos Toledano Redondo's essay on Chaviano and her distinctive "cosmovision" will provide an important window into the specifically *Cuban* context of her works. This particular reviewer knows much more about Spanish-language literature than French-language literature, and so – when reading Natacha Vas-Deyres on "Jean-Claude Dunyach, Poet of the Flesh" and the history of science fiction in France, or Ransom on the French-Canadian authors Yves Meynard and Jean-Louis Trudel and their "symbionym" Laurent McAllister in the context of "SFQ," the bilingual science fiction of Québec – I was powerfully struck by the panoply of fleeting glimpses afforded by this book into entire SF communities and histories that have yet to be written (in English, anyway). Readers interested in German or Japanese-language SF will be similarly well served by Vibeke Rützou Petersen's chapter on "Andreas Eschbach's Futures and Germany's Past" and Tatsumi Takayuki's contribution on Sakyo Komatsu, the author whose 1964 novel *The Day of Resurrection* became the 1980 film *Virus*. Tatsumi's essay ends with a poignant reflection on a recent allusion to *Virus* by Dominican-American novelist Junot Díaz and the enduring relevance of Komatsu's science fictional imagination in the wake of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster and the collision of "natural and artificial disasters" it represents (104).

Each of the chapters in *Lingua Cosmica* has something to offer to any SF scholar, but the two pieces that I suspect may hold the widest interest touch on Chinese and African(/American) science fiction, respectively. I would single out Mingwei Song's chapter on Liu Cixin as a particularly strong one and recommend it to any reader of *The Three-Body Problem* interested in learning more about the context and arc of Liu's already remarkable career. Song argues that the political unrest of 1989 marks a shift "when a new paradigm of science-fictional imagination began to complicate the utopianism that had dominated Chinese politics and intellectual culture for more than a century" (109), and teases out the complexity of Liu's various (and variously bleak) visions of a posthuman future both in his earliest writings and his most recent. Song's chapter is broadly informative and deeply insightful, an exemplary execution of the prescribed purpose of the chapters in *Lingua Cosmica*, whereas Alexis Brooks de Vita's essay on the American-born Nigerian film director Olatunde Osunsanmi may be the most unusual in the book. The author, for one, is rightly interested in questions about audience response, and she surveys the (generally negative) reception of Osunsanmi's work by established film critics.

In particular she seeks to reclaim the director's 2009 film *The Fourth Kind* as a major work of African/American SF that has gone underappreciated or entirely unnoticed. Osunsanmi may also seem an odd choice to be the single representative of African SF in this book, yet Brooks de Vita openly acknowledges this fact, and uses it strategically to develop a wide-ranging argument about Africanness, SF, and arguably SF-ness. She rightly pays great attention to Nnedi Okorafor's writing – an author who forcefully rejects the association of her work with the concept of "Afrofuturism," preferring the term "Africanfuturism" – and dramatically recontextualizes *The Fourth Kind*, what may on the surface seem to be a weak or even exploitative American found-footage horror film, within a wider tradition of Nigerian imaginative literature and other creative responses to the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. All of this makes for an unexpected but invaluable contribution to the collection, and I will definitely

need to rewatch *The Fourth Kind* as soon as possible. I saw the film a decade ago and quickly forgot about it, but Brooks de Vita has convinced me that I – we – watched it without crucial contexts for the understanding and appreciation of its achievement.

Lingua Cosmica concludes with a chapter on Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, and I admit that I was initially skeptical about the inclusion of a chapter on the Strugatskys in a book of this kind at all: much like Stanisław Lem, these two literary heavyweights should need no introduction to Anglophone SF scholars, having already been firmly canonized and rendered accessible in widely-available English translations and on film. Consider how, say, a chapter on Lem in place of Frelik's chapter on Dukaj would have made *Lingua Cosmica* a poorer and much less urgent critical intervention in the study of global SF: I wondered what newer voice(s) in Russian SF might have been drowned out by including further writing on the Strugatskys. As it turns out, however, Yvonne Howell's essay is so stunning that one can hardly find any grounds to complain: she not only demonstrates how the brothers' writing manages to "record the distinctive tensions in the Soviet cultural Zeitgeist of their times" (202), but she also makes a larger and largely persuasive claim that there was "something essentially 'science fictional' about the Soviet project, which superimposed a hyperrational, materialist, and stridently future-oriented official ideology onto deeply embedded premodern epistemologies" (201). Howell tells a sweeping story about science fiction in Russia and the Soviet Union with a remarkable economy of words, taking care to cover the entire trajectory of the Strugatskys' career, and even ending with a coda on Putinism, speaking to the continued interest and desire to claim their works across evolving political spectra at home and abroad. This is a more than fitting chapter with which to end the collection, affirming as it does the complexity of the relationship between the local and the global in SF and SF studies.

Lingua Cosmica represents an important step forward for the study of international science fiction, perhaps not so much for the individual scholarly achievements of its contributions, which vary a great deal in their chosen emphases, but because of its indisputable success at its major goal of better familiarizing an English-speaking audience with these authors and filmmakers. One can only hope that it will stimulate more scholarly work on the figures covered, even if additional translations may be necessary to fulfill its promise of overcoming the barriers that have impeded our better understanding of SF's wider story in the world.

Biography: Trained primarily as a medievalist, T. S. Miller (ts.tsmiller@gmail.com) has taught both early English literature and contemporary science fiction at Sarah Lawrence College and Mercy College. His current work explores representations of plants and modes of plant being in literature and culture.