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Science Fiction in France: A Brief History*

Paralleling similar socio-literary trends in both America and England, France has witnessed a continual rise in the popularity and the academic study of SF during this latter half of the 20th century. Heavily eclectic during the '50s and the early '60s (reflecting the dominance of Anglo-American SF in the French marketplace), SF writers in France have nevertheless succeeded, during the '70s and '80s, in carving out a special niche for *la science-fiction française* in world literary circles. Described by one critic as "a demanding cocktail of Verne, selective American and British genre influences (the paranoia of Dick and Ballard, Herbert's global galactic politics), and French pragmatism and popular romance, with an added zest of structuralism, existentialism, political commentary, and absurdist preoccupations"¹ and by another as "a special combination of acute political awareness, psychological insight, surrealistic whimsy, imaginative fertility, and sheer metaphysical brain power,"² contemporary French SF is an intellectually spicy dish that offers a variety of new and unusual tastes to those with a palate for modern speculative fiction.

Although the French neologism *science-fiction* has only quite recently gained critical acceptance in France as a generic label for this brand of writing—as opposed to *roman d'anticipation*, for instance—its tradition in the history of French literature is both long and rich. The earliest works of French SF (to the extent that utopian fantasy and imaginary voyages qualify as such) are undoubtedly Rabelais' *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* along with his *Le Tiers Livre*, *Le Quart Livre*, *Le Cinquième Livre*, and *L'Isle sonnante* (1532-64).[†] From their creation of the idyllic Abbey of Thélème to their adventure-filled travels to distant lands of wonder, Rabelais' Renaissance giants exemplify an unabashed nonconformism, a penchant for encyclopedic erudition, and a passion for exploration beyond the limits of the known. These traits will characterize much of French SF throughout the centuries.

*A somewhat different version of this essay will appear in *The Handbook of French Popular Culture*, ed. Pierre Horn, forthcoming from Greenwood Press sometime in 1990.

[†]English equivalents of these and other original French titles can be found in the "Works Cited" listing at the end of this essay—which also records available English versions of the texts in question.

More identifiably scientific (although just as fantastic) in nature are Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des états et empires de la lune* (1657) and *Histoire comique des états et empires du soleil* (1662). In these comically satirical works, the author journeys to the "States and Empires of the Moon and Sun" in order to discuss issues ranging from physics to metaphysics with the indigenous life-forms located there. In so doing, Cyrano portrays varying methods of interplanetary travel—bottles of dew attached to the body, spring-and-rocket machines, a lotion of beef marrow (!), lodestones and iron chariots, and even a solar-powered vessel containing an "icosahedron crystal"—as well as an astonishing number of other wonders like phonograph-books, mobile cities, molecular shape-shifters, and so on. As fast-paced yarns combining cosmic travel, *libertin* philosophizing, and a host of technological marvels, Cyrano's works are perhaps France's first true SF novels.

In a less risqué and more pragmatically didactic mode (a variant followed by a good deal of early French SF), Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) sought both to teach the rudiments of astronomy and to speculate rationally on the possibility of human life elsewhere in the universe. The fictional format used—that of a series of instructive dialogues between a learned scientist/mentor and a curious young noblewoman/acolyte—established a particular SF narrative recipe that would become highly conventional in France from the late 17th century through the end of the 19th century.

French SF during the Enlightenment generally continues to oscillate between the dual poles of overt didacticism *à la* Fontenelle (either scientific or moral) and polemical "alien encounters" *à la* Cyrano. With the growing popularity of the *conte philosophique* and the reports of faraway exotic cultures brought back by explorers like Bougainville and Cook, French writers increasingly chose the "imaginary voyage" narrative to frame their utopian hypothesizing, their pedagogical (and ethical) demonstrations, and their social satires. Such works as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), Marivaux's *L'Île des esclaves* (1723), Voltaire's *Micromégas* (1752), and Diderot's *Rêve de d'Alembert* (1769) and *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1772)—not to mention the futuristic *L'An 2440* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1771), Casanova's subterranean *Isocaméron* (1788), and Restif de la Bretonne's highly imaginative *La Découverte australe* (1781) and *Les Posthumes* (1796, 1802)—all reflect this passionate interest in distant locales and radically different social perspectives.

Under the dual impulses of a new freedom of expression in subjects and narrative form (Romanticism) and the revolutionary social—and ideological—impact of unprecedented technological growth (the Industrial Revolution, Positivism), the SF genre flourished in 19th-century France as never before. During the first half of the century, many new SF variants were born (although most, unfortunately, failed to gain widespread recognition until

late-20th-century SF scholarship succeeded in resurrecting their memory). Among these were Cousin de Grainville's realistically apocalyptic *Le Dernier homme* (1805), Nodier's futuristic short stories called "Hurlubieu" and "Léviathan-le-Long" (1833), the first great uchronia in Louis Geoffroy's *Napoléon apocryphe* (1836), Jean Gérard *alias* Grandville's Robida-like illustrations in *Un Autre monde* (1844), the first anti-industrial dystopia in Emile Souvestre's *Le Monde tel qu'il sera* (1846), the sociology of an entire alien civilization in Charles Defontenay's *Star, ou psi de Cassiopée* (1854), and even the first SF literary-theoretical work in Félix Bodin's *Le Roman de l'avenir* (1834).

But it was especially during the latter half of the century that French SF was heralded into what might be called its "golden age" by the *Voyages Extraordinaires* of Jules Verne. Verne's huge influence on the historical evolution of the SF genre—not only in France but worldwide—was both pervasive and long-lasting. Although generally conservative in his speculations (there are no alien life-forms or warp drives in Verne's novels) and heavily didactic in his narrative recipes, Verne's *romans scientifiques* nevertheless succeeded in firing the Industrial-Age imaginations of several generations of readers. His fictional journeys target very real but highly exotic and/or then-inaccessible regions of earth, sea, and space; his heroic protagonists—often via extraordinary travel machines and invariably armed with encyclopedic scientific knowledge—methodically explore these regions, brave untold numbers of dangers, faithfully recount their observations and discoveries, and then return (unscathed and triumphant) to their original place of departure. From his first "scientific fiction," *Cinq Semaines en ballon* (1863), through his early pro-science works of *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (1864), *De la Terre à la Lune* (1865), *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1870), and *L'Île mystérieuse* (1874), through his later somewhat anti-science novels of *Sans dessus dessous* (1889), *Face au drapeau* (1896), and *Maître du monde* (1904), to the posthumous (and much revamped, by his son Michel) *L'Etonnante aventure de la mission Barsac* (1919), Jules Verne's 64-volume output of exciting and educational "arm-chair voyages" gained him fame, fortune, and the reputation of being (along with H.G. Wells) one of the "founding fathers of modern SF."

Although "modern" is not entirely accurate (narratologically speaking), Verne did accomplish something vital for the life of the SF genre: he was the first to firmly establish a large readership for this type of writing—i.e., the first to succeed in popularizing the narrative juxtaposition of science with adventure fiction. Of course, the term "popular" (at least during Verne's lifetime) precluded recognition of the *Voyages Extraordinaires* as being sufficiently "literary." Indeed, it has only been during the last few decades that Verne's œuvre has achieved, in the words of one contemporary critic, "a first-rank position in the history of French literature."³

The imprint of Jules Verne's *romans scientifiques* on the developing SF

genre was deep; and during the latter years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, a veritable host of French novelists imitated his style (some with commercial success, others without). Included in this sudden influx of "Verne School" didactic narratives into the French marketplace were Paul d'Ivoi's series of novels (very suggestively titled) *Voyages Excentriques* (1894-1914), Louis Boussonard's *Les Secrets de monsieur Synthèse* (1888) and *Le Tour du monde d'un gamin de Paris* (1890), Henry de Graffigny's *Voyages fantastiques* (1887) and—with Georges Le Faure—his serial *Aventures extraordinaires d'un savant russe* (1889-96), and Maurice Champagne's *Les Reclus de la mer* (1907) and *Les Sondeurs d'abîmes* (1911).

Also inspired by Verne's example during this *fin de siècle* period, but refusing to follow in his exact narratological footsteps, were the astronomer Camille Flammarion, the illustrator Albert Robida, the literary *décadent* Villiers de l'Île-Adam, and two SF authors who would carry the genre well into the 20th century and leave a permanent mark on its narrative identity: Gustave Le Rouge and J.-H. Rosny the Elder.

Scientific popularizer and enthusiastic zealot of a kind of cosmic spiritualism, Flammarion was an accomplished astronomer who sought both to teach the rudiments of astronomy and to proselytize his own scientifico-religious beliefs through such works as the Académie-recognized series called *Astronomie Populaire* (1880) and his *La Pluralité des mondes habités* (1873—perhaps an adaptation of Fontenelle's title?) as well as through a number of unusual fictional romances in which his protagonists broach the mysteries of both the physical and the metaphysical universe. This latter group of texts includes *Les Récits de l'infini* (1872; this contains three narratives: *Lumen*, *Histoire d'une comète*, and *Dans l'infini*), *Rêves étoilés* (1888), *Uranie* (1889), *La Fin du monde* (1893), and *Stella* (1897).

Robida, satirist *par excellence* and the best-known SF illustrator and caricaturist of this era, also penned a considerable number of futuristic novels where technological conjecture was interlaced with (mostly humorous) social commentary. Beginning with a serial parody of Verne's works in *Les Aventures très extraordinaires de Saturin Farandoul dans les 5 ou 6 parties du monde et dans tous les pays connus et même inconnus de Monsieur Jules Verne* (1879-82), Robida's most characteristic SF works of futuristic speculation include *Le Vingtième siècle* (1883), *La Vie électrique* (1893), and the more pessimistic *L'Ingénieur Von Satan* (1919).

Villiers de l'Île-Adam, in his very Faustian *L'Eve future* (1886), initiated yet another modern SF variant with his wondrous android named Hadaly: a self-aware Asimovian robot who, invented by Thomas Alva Edison as the "perfect" female and the ideal companion, serves to trigger a variety of ontological and aesthetic questions about the fundamental nature of reality and artistic creation in a progressively synthetic world where things are not always what they seem.

But it was in the works of Le Rouge and (especially) of Rosny the Elder that “modern” French SF was truly born. Partially in the former and more fully in the latter, the SF *novum* reaches a more polysemic configuration and the diagetive structure of the narratives themselves ventures well beyond the traditional French patterns of utopian postulation, scientific didacticism, social satire, or pseudo-gothic fantastic. In these two more speculative brands of SF, the reader’s cognition is increasingly challenged by what one critic has labelled “absent paradigms”⁴ in the reading process itself. And the many “alien encounters” within these fictions tend to be just as often narratological as they are extra-terrestrial.

In Le Rouge’s *Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars* (1908) and *La Guerre des vampires* (1909), for example, the functional role of science and technology in the narrative shifts from principal subject to plot accessory—i.e., from a means of explaining and “de-alienating” the unknown to becoming a verisimilitude-builder for the plot and a purveyor of obscurantist “special effects”—in order to enhance the interplanetary and telepathic adventures of its young scientist-hero. Instead of conveying science via fiction, these texts convey fiction via science. And the science itself is most often invented, imaginary, and/or wholly fictional. Writing in the “pulp” vein of *Amazing Stories* and Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Martian tales, Le Rouge’s novels thus exemplify the growing paradigm of space opera-cum-heroic fantasy—an SF variant very popular in France during the late 19th century and early 20th (predating the era of Hugo Gernsback) and, ironically, one whose popularity would make a strong comeback in France in the form of a massive influx of translated Anglo-American SF during the 1950s.

The place of Rosny the Elder in the evolution of French SF (and of the genre as a whole) is a curiously underestimated one. In many respects, Rosny could—and should—be considered the true “father” of modern French SF, both chronologically and narratologically. Remembered far more for his exotic prehistoric novels like *Vamireh* (1892), *La Guerre du feu* (1909, Hollywood’s version: *Quest for Fire*, 1982) and *Le Félin géant* (1918), Rosny also left an indelible mark on French SF with an astonishing variety of narratives featuring inscrutably alien life-forms, parallel worlds, and unexplained natural phenomena—fictions that are highly visionary in nature but, at the same time, firmly anchored in scientific plausibility. Rosny’s *Les Xipéhuz* (1887) was the first realistically-portrayed tale of humanity’s encounter with intelligent (yet totally impenetrable) alien organisms constructed wholly of energy. This basic theme was transposed to an end-of-the-world scenario in *La Mort de la Terre* (1910), where the human species is finally superseded by a higher (albeit mineral) life-form called the *ferromagnétaux*. In the same line, *Les Navigateurs de l’infini* (1925) and its posthumous sequel posit a highly-evolved Martian race whose physical configuration is based on a ternary symmetry, who reproduce by parthenogenesis, and with a female specimen of whom (for the

first time in SF, to my knowledge) a visiting Earthling has a very “alien” love affair. Examples of Rosny’s SF narratives developing alternate-world and/or parallel-dimension motifs range from *Un Autre monde* (1895) to *Dans le monde des Variants* (1939) and include *Nymphée* (1893), *Les Profondeurs de Kyamo* (1896), *Le Voyage* (1900) *Le Trésor dans la neige* (1922), and *Les Hommes-sangliers* (1929). And those dealing with strange (though not supernatural) unexplained phenomena include *Le Cataclysme* (1888), *La Force mystérieuse* (1913—and most likely the source for Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Poison Belt*, which appeared later the same year), and *L’Etonnant voyage de Hareton Ironcastle* (1922). Expanding the frontiers of SF into previously unexplored thematic domains and hermeneutic patterns, Rosny the Elder brought a new level of sophistication and vision to the genre (similar, in some respects, to that of Campbell’s *Astounding Stories*) and set the stage for much of what was to follow during the late 20th century.

Other French SF writers and works of this very rich period from 1880 to 1940 include André Laurie’s (Paschal Grousset’s) *Les Exilés de la Terre* (1887), the militaristic Capitaine Danrit’s multi-volume *La Guerre de demain* (1889-96), Jules Lermina’s *A Brûler, conte astral* (1889), John-Antoine Nau’s unusual but Goncourt-winning *Force ennemie* (1903), the incredibly prolific Jean de la Hire’s *La Roue fulgurante* (1908), André Couvreur’s *Une Invasion de macrobes* (1909), Léon Groc’s *L’Autobus évanoui* (1914), Gaston de Pawlowski’s highly imaginative *Voyage au pays de la quatrième dimension* (1923), Claude Farrère’s pessimistically Darwinian *Les Condamnés à mort* (1920), Théo Varlet and Octave Jonquel’s Martian epic *Les Titans du ciel* (1921) and *L’Agonie de la Terre* (1922), José Moselli’s surprisingly prophetic *La Fin d’Illa* (1925), Ernest Pérochon’s *Les Hommes frénétiques* (1925), Octave Béliard’s *Les Petits hommes de la Pinède* (1927), H.-J. Magog’s super-brainy *Trois ombres sur Paris* (1928), René Thévenin’s tale of mutants *Les Chasseurs d’hommes* (1930), André Mad’s (Max André Dazergues’) *L’Île de Satan* (1931), Régis Messac’s devolutionary *Quinzinzinzili* (1935), Jean d’Aigraves’ (Frédéric Causse’s) two-volume *L’Empire des algues* (1935), and René-Marcel de Nizerolles’ more conventional Verne-like sagas *Les Voyages aériens d’un petit Parisien* (1933-38). During this “golden era” of French SF, even a number of mainstream literary authors successfully dabbled in the genre: Léon Daudet with his *Les Morticoles* (1894) and *Le Napus, fléau de l’an 2227* (1927), Anatole France’s *L’Île des pingouins* (1908), Maurice Leblanc’s *Les Trois yeux* (1919) and *Le Formidable événement* (1920), and André Maurois with his *Le Peseur d’âmes* (1931) and *La Machine à lire les pensées* (1937). But two French SF authors of this period deserve special attention: Maurice Renard and Jacques Spitz. Maurice Renard succeeded in fusing together a kind of speculative Wellsian SF with Hoffmannesque horror in works such as the very Moreau-like *Le Docteur Lerne, sous-dieu* (1908), along with *Le Péril bleu* (1911), *Les Mains d’Orlac* (1920;

Hollywood's version: *Mad Love*, 1934), *L'Homme truqué* (1921), and *Un Homme chez les microbes* (1927). Jacques Spitz, writing during the socially turbulent pre-World War II years of the '30s, perpetuated Renard's hybrid SF/fantastic narrative recipe—but added a pinch of cynical black humor and a dash of political overtones—with such darkly symbolic works as *L'Agonie du globe* (1935), *Les Evadés de l'an 4000* (1936), *La Guerre des mouches* (1938), *L'Homme élastique* (1938), and the very existential *L'Oeil du purgatoire* (1945).

This "golden age" of French SF came to an abrupt halt, however, with the advent of World War II and, among other factors, the disappearance of an until-then booming "pulp" industry of SF journals and magazines like *Lectures pour Tous*, *Sciences et Voyages*, *Je Sais Tout*, *La Petite Illustration*, and—the flagship of such periodicals—the popular *Journal des Voyages* (which, shortly after the war, was briefly resurrected but soon went the way of its companion publications). A small number of SF veterans from the '20s and '30s continued to publish an occasional work—Groc with *Une Invasion de Sélénites* (1941) and *La Planète de cristal* (1944), Spitz with *L'Expérience du docteur Mops* (1939) and *La Parcelle "Z"* (1942), and the Belgian writer Jean Ray with *Malpertuis* (1943)—but the once-voluminous flow of SF production in France suddenly dwindled to a mere trickle.

The only new French SF writers to emerge from the chaos of war-torn France during this period were René Barjavel, with *Ravage* (1943) and *Le Voyageur imprudent* (1944), and the playwright Jacques Audiberti, with his *Carnage* (1942). Both in tone and narrative subject—pessimistic anti-machinism, escapist time-travel, etc.—these few SF works largely reflect the troubled tenor of their times.

In SF, as in many other aspects of French society, the late '40s in France was a period of slow regrowth and reevaluation. A few seasoned war-horses of the genre continued to produce: like Groc with *Le Maître du soleil* (1946) and *L'Univers vagabond* (1950), Paul Alpérine with *La Citadelle des glaces* (1946) and *Demain dans le soleil* (1950), and the prolific Maurice Lionel (Maurice Limat) with *Un Drame en astronef* (1947) and *La Comète écarlate* (1948). A few authors who had begun their SF careers during the previous decade persisted in their craft: like Barjavel with the apocalyptic *Le Diable l'emporte* (1948) and Audiberti with *L'Opéra du monde* (1947). And a few younger writers tried their hand at SF for the first time: like B.R. Bruss (Roger Blondel) with his anti-nuclear Hiroshima-inspired *Et la planète sauta* (1946) and Pierre Devaux (editor of the newly launched SF collection "Science et Aventure," oriented toward adolescents) with his *X.P. 15 en feu!* (1946) and *L'Exilé de l'espace* (1947). But, despite these isolated efforts, the SF tradition in France during these years immediately following World War II could be generally described as weak and weary, sputtering back to life but lacking the vigor of its old pre-war self.

Then, between 1950-55, a second (ultimately more salutary, but just as

jarring) invasion of France occurred: hordes of translated "golden age" Anglo-American SF novels from the '30s and '40s—authors such as Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Heinlein, Sturgeon, Simak, van Vogt, *et al.*—began to find immediate success in the French SF marketplace. Sensitive to their public's desire for more of the same, a number of French publishing firms quickly responded with imprints: the "Anticipation" series by Fleuve Noir and the "Rayon fantastique" collection by Hachette and Gallimard in 1951, the French reprints of the American SF magazines *Galaxy* and *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (called *Galaxie* and *Fiction* respectively) in 1953, and the "Présence du Futur" series by Denoël in 1954—all of which served as major conduits to this growing Anglo-American SF presence on French soil. 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 surrealistic SF novels), Raymond Queneau, Stephen Spriell, Michel Carrouges, and Michel Butor, the SF genre was (once again) very *à la mode* in French popular and literary circles—along with American gadgetry, Hollywood movies, and American jazz.⁵

The effects of this virtual tidal wave of Anglo-American SF into post-war France proved to be both positive and negative. On the one hand, it served to suddenly reawaken French interest in SF and to infuse "new blood" into the French SF genre—new visions of the future, new narrative techniques, and new publishing outlets for aspiring novelists. On the other hand, it encouraged knee-jerk imitation of these successful foreign authors, temporarily suppressed the development in France of a more identifiably indigenous SF, and created a publishing market strongly prejudiced toward translated imports.

But during the '50s and early '60s, a number of French SF authors did manage to rise above the tide. They can generally be divided into two overlapping groups: those who specialized in eclectic space operas (most often publishing in the "Anticipation" collection of Fleuve Noir) and those somewhat more original authors (most often first published in *Fiction* and in the "Présence du Futur" series) who would ultimately lead French SF into its sudden renaissance of the '70s and '80s.

In the former "space opera" group: the two pulpy but highly productive writers using the pseudonym F. Richard-Bessière (François Richard and Henri Bessière) with such works as *Les Conquérants de l'univers* (1951), *Sauvetage sidéral* (1954), *Fléau de l'univers* (1957), and *Les 7 anneaux de Rhéa* (1962); the equally pulpy but no less prolific Jimmy Guieu with *Pionnier de l'atome* (1951), the award-winning *L'Homme de l'espace* (1954), *Terre...siècle 24* (1959), and *La Guerre des robots* (1966); and the sometimes quite innovative duo writing as J.G. Vandel (Jean Libert and Gaston Van Denpahuysse) with *Les Chevaliers de l'espace* (1952), *Naufragés des galaxies* (1954), and *Le Troisième bocal* (1956).

In the latter more "original" group: Francis Carsac (François Bordes)

with his metallic descendants of Rosny the Elder's *ferromagnétaux* in *Ceux de nulle part* (1954), his "Spaceship Earth" voyages in *Terre en fuite* (1960), and his alien ethnography in *Ce Monde est nôtre* (1962); the incomparable Stefan Wul (Pierre Pairault) with his award-winning *Retour à "0"* (1956), his post-World War III portrait of New York in *Niourk* (1957), the astonishing and evolutionary *Le Temple du passé* (1958), the SF/spy novel *Piège sur Zarkass* (1958), and the apocalyptic *La Mort vivante* (1959); Charles and Nathalie Henneberg with their award-winning mythological epic *La Naissance des dieux* (1954), their exotic Leiberesque *La Rosée du soleil* (1959), and their Triffid-like *Les Dieux verts* (1961); Kurt Steiner (André Ruellan) with his *Menace d'Outre-Terre* (1958) and especially his future-medieval *Aux Armes d'Ortog* (1960); Gilles d'Argyre (Gérard Klein) with his Stapledon-like galactic voyages in *Le Gambit des étoiles* (1958) and *Les Voiliers du soleil* (1961) as well as his *Les Tueurs de temps* (1965) and *Le Temps n'a pas d'odeur* (1967); the prolific pharmacist Pierre Barbet (Claude Avice) with his nova-induced mutants in *Babel 3805* (1962); Daniel Drode with his award-winning but controversial *nouveau roman* SF tale called *Surface de la planète* (1959); Philippe Curval (Philippe Tronche) with his highly imaginative alien life-forms in *L'Odeur de la bête* (1957), *Les Fleurs de Vénus* (1960), and his award-winning *Le Ressac de l'espace* (1962); Jacques Sternberg with his absurdist short-story collections like *La Géométrie dans l'impossible* (1953) and *Entre deux mondes incertains* (1957); and, of course, the mainstream writer Pierre Boulle, whose futuristic satire on the human species in *La Planète des singes* (1963) inspired the popular—and loosely adapted—Hollywood movie and a seemingly interminable number of cinematic sequels.

Following a brief slump during the early and mid-'60s (and the demise of the "Rayon Fantastique" collection in 1964), French SF truly began to come into its own during the late '60s and especially throughout the '70s and early '80s. No longer imitating the imported "space-opera" models prevalent during the post-war decade, an explosion of new French SF narratives surged into the marketplace. And they increasingly ventured into previously uncharted cognitive and narrative realms. The reasons for this sudden and unexpected renaissance in French SF—which reached its height during the late '70s—are very complex and undoubtedly the result of many different factors. But among them, one must note the following: the social upheaval in France begun by the May 1968 revolutionary protests (and its accompanying anti-Americanism); the pervasive influence of certain anti-establishment Anglo-American "New Wave" SF writers like J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick; the advent of structuralism and post-structuralism in university literary studies; the rediscovery and republication of a variety of French SF "ancestors" such as Verne, Rosny the Elder, and Le Rouge; the rising popularity of adult SF comic magazines like *Métal hurlant*; and finally, the sudden proliferation of SF collections among French publishing houses

(like Gérard Klein's "Ailleurs et Demain" series begun by Laffont in 1969) as well as the establishment of several yearly SF conventions and annual awards (like the *Prix Apollo* in 1972 and the *Grand Prix de la Science-Fiction Française* in 1974).

A small number of seasoned French SF writers—survivors of the difficult '50s and '60s—became the recognized standard-bearers of this new SF boom in France. In general, their works reflected the new ideological preoccupations of the times—authors whose fictional goals were more political and social in nature and whose narratives foregrounded psychology and experimental hermeneutic structures more often than star cruisers and laser weapons. Riding the crest of this "new golden age" in French SF was Philippe Curval, who was awarded the *Grand Prix* in 1975 for his obsessively Freudian *L'Homme à rebours*, who two years later won the coveted *Prix Apollo* for his prophetic utopia/dystopia *Cette chère humanité*—the first French author to receive the award—and whose popularity has extended into the early '80s with the erotic *La Face cachée du désir* (1980), *En Souvenir du futur* (1983), and *Comment jouer à l'homme invisible en trois leçons* (1986). Michel Jeury, whose first SF novels (published under the pseudonym of Albert Higon) *La Machine du pouvoir* (1960) and *Aux étoiles du destin* (1960) were successful space operas, expanded and matured his SF repertoire with a series of imaginative psychosocio-political time-travel tales in *Le Temps incertain* (winner of the *Grand Prix* of 1974), *Soleil chaud poisson des profondeurs* (1976), *Le Territoire humain* (1979), and other multidimensional and somewhat mystical works like *Les Ecumeurs du silence* (1980), *Les Yeux géants* (1980), *L'Orbe et la roue* (1982, *Prix Apollo* for 1983), *L'Anaphase du diable* (1984), and *Le Jeu du monde* (1985). Other French SF stalwarts enjoying this new prosperity included Barjavel, with his *La Nuit des temps* (1968); the ever-popular Pierre Barbet, whose translations of *A quoi songent les Psyborgs?* (1971) and *L'Empire de Baphomet* (1973) won him immediate recognition among American SF fans; two writers doubling as editors of SF collections and/or journals during this period: Michel Demuth, with his "Foundation"-like epic cycle of future history titled *Les Galaxiales* (collected edition, 1979; *Grand Prix* in 1977), and Gérard Klein with his "stochasticratic" *Le Sceptre du hasard* (1968) and his narrative mixture of metaphysical musings and space-opera techniques in *Les Seigneurs de la guerre* (1971); Jean-Pierre Andrevon, with his purposely *engagé* political and ecological short story collections such as *Aujourd'hui, demain, et après* (1970), *Cela se produira bientôt* (1971), *Paysages de mort* (1978), and *Dans les décors truqués* (1979); and finally, the Joycean-cum-Kafkaesque journalist Daniel Walther, with his very poetic *Mais l'espace...mais le temps* (1972), his SF/fantastic *L'Epouvante* (1979; *Grand Prix* of 1980), his many Renard-like short stories in *Requiem pour demain* (1976) and *Les Quatre saisons de la nuit* (1980), his space operas *Le Livre de Swa* and *Le Destin de Swa* (both

1982), and his intellectually erotic *Sept femmes de mes autres vies* (1985).

But an entirely new generation of young French SF writers also began to make their presence felt during the late '70s and early '80s. This very politicized "New Wave" of SF writers was led by the militant Bernard Blanc, who both as a writer, with his polemical *Pourquoi j'ai tué Jules Verne* (1978), and as an editor, with his short-lived but provocative "Ici et Maintenant" collection (Kesselring), used SF as a vehicle for proselytizing the need for political confrontation and social reform. One venerable French SF critic in 1977 characterized this "New Wave SF" phenomenon as follows: "The younger SF has become more radical....The themes remain more or less the same...social criticism...sexual liberation....But what is really new is this appearance of a militant SF which seeks not only to analyze a society but also to actively transform it."⁶ Despite its ephemeral existence (sinking from view within a few years), this spontaneous movement within the French SF community helped to breed a new generation of young SF writers. Most were only marginally affiliated with the aggressively political "New SF," but all were, in one way or another, affected by it. Some attempted to orient their SF works to the prescribed goals; others reacted violently against them and staked out ideological positions that were diametrically opposite. Out of this ideological civil war within the French SF rank and file would emerge a number of highly imaginative young SF writers who would carry the genre through the current decade: Serge Brussolo, Jean-Pierre Hubert, Jean-Marc Ligny, Dominique Douay, Pierre Pelot, Philip Goy, Joëlle Wintrebert, and Pierre Giuliani, among others.

During the '80s, this decade-long boom of French SF has (perhaps predictably) begun to slowly wind down. Current SF production in France is still relatively high and the overall economic health of the genre is not in danger. But especially in comparison with the market conditions of the late '70s, SF readership has tended to taper off, new fanzines and SF journals disappear one after another, and serious critical works on French SF have declined.⁷ In the words of one contemporary French SF critic:

As could be expected, the 'New French SF'—which never really had an audience—was the first victim of the current crisis; an ill-fated movement which has resulted in a certain distrust of SF among publishers, readers, and individual SF writers themselves who, in reaction, have now adopted a more formalist approach....[The latter are] unconcerned with readability, disconnected from socio-techno-political realities, anti-novelistic (don't even ask about characters, plots, or emotions), and...have submerged themselves...in the elitist delights of experimental literature.⁸

Despite what some have labelled as this "morose atmosphere" (Guiot: 98) in the current French SF community, a number of talented young SF authors have continued to reinvigorate the genre. Foremost among them is the controversial Serge Brussolo who burst onto the French SF scene with

his short story "Funnyway" in 1978 (winning the *Grand Prix*). Brussolo's wildly imaginative and surrealist SF novels throughout the early '80s—*Vue en coupe d'une ville malade* (1980; *Grand Prix* of 1981), *Sommeil de sang* (1982), *Carnaval de fer* (1983), and *Les Semeurs d'abîmes* (1983; *Prix Apollo*, the third French writer after Curval and Jeury to receive this honor)—are a kind of modern SF cross-pollination of the "convulsive beauty" aesthetics of Breton, the hallucinatory dreamscapes of Dali, and the richly obsessive phantasms of Ballard. Alongside Brussolo we can put the style-conscious and allegorically socio-political Jean-Pierre Hubert, with his somber *Le Champ du rêveur* (1983; *Grand Prix* of 1984), his *Les Faiseurs d'orages* (1984), and his *Ombromanies* (1985); the multi-talented and highly prolific Pierre Pelot, with his *Delirium Circus* (1977; *Grand Prix* of 1978), *La Guerre olympique* (1980), *Les Iles du vacarme* (1981), *Mourir au hasard* (1982), and a series of evolutionary end-of-the-world novels like *Les Mangeurs d'argile* (1981), *Soleils hurlants* (1983), and *Ce Chasseur-là* (1985); the *nouveau roman*-inspired work of Emmanuel Jouanne with *Damiers imaginaires* (1982) and *Nuage* (1983); the most successful woman French SF writer of the '80s, Joëlle Wintrebert, with her *Les Olympiades truquées* (1980), *Les Maîtres-feu* (1983), and *Chromoville* (1984); and a variety of other young French SF authors like Bruno Lecigne, Sylviane Corgiat, Pierre Billon (*Grand Prix* of 1983 for his *L'Enfant du cinquième nord*), Daniel Martinange, Jean-Pierre Vernay, Joël Houssin (*Grand Prix* of 1986 for his *Les Vautours*), G.-J. Arnaud, Jacques Boireau, Charles Dobzynski, René Sussan, Antoine Volodine (*Grand Prix* of 1987 for his *Rituel du mépris*), Michel Grimaud, Francis Berthelot, Lorris Murail, Jacques Mondoloni, Jacques Barbéri, Jean-Claude Dunyach, Roland Wagner, and Richard Canal—all of whom constitute the future of the SF genre in France as it approaches the 21st century.

NOTES

1. Maxim Jakubowski, "French SF," in *Anatomy of Wonder: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction*, ed. Neil Barron (3rd ed.—NY, 1987), p. 405. Jakubowski's 26-page study of French SF (with an extensive historical outline of the genre's evolution and an alphabetized and annotated listing of authors and works) is by far the best critical English-language overview of French SF to date—at least insofar as the 20th century is concerned. His treatment of earlier periods is more cursory and occasionally marred by errors in the names of SF authors and works which remain uncorrected in the 3rd edition (e.g., Fontenelle's 1686 *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* is mistakenly attributed to Fénelon and cited as *Entretiens sur...mondes habités*, evidently by confusing it with Camille Flammarion's 1862 *La Pluralité des mondes habités*; and Cyrano de Bergerac's 1662 *Histoire comique des états et empires du soleil* is cited as, and confused with, Cyrano's previous publication: *Histoire comique des états et empires de la lune*). It should be noted that Jakubowski, in addition to his

critical work on French SF, is also responsible for one of the very few English-language anthologies of modern French SF: *Travelling Toward Epsilon* (NY: New English Library, 1977)—along with Damon Knight's earlier collection, *Thirteen French Science Fiction Stories* (NY: Bantam, 1965).

2. John Dean, "French Science Fiction: The Intergalactic European Connection," *Stanford French Review*, 3.3 (1979):404-09. Dean's brief but interesting six-page synopsis of French SF, interspersed with useful quotations from interviews with some of the foremost French SF writers of today, is intended less as a diachronic study of the genre (he discusses only the post-World War II period and contemporary writers and works) than as a plea to the anglophone world to become more familiar with French SF. Implicitly addressing the American publishing industry, he contends: "If only more French SF were translated and published in the States, it thus would provide American readers with that kind of intelligent SF which has reached such heights with Huxley, Orwell, and, more recently, with Stanislaw Lem" (p. 409).

3. Marc Angenot, "Jules Verne and French Literary Criticism," *SFS*, 1 (1973):37.

4. Marc Angenot, "Le Paradigme absent: Eléments d'un sémiotique de la science-fiction," *Poétique*, no. 33 (1978), pp.74-89; rpt. in English as "The Absent Paradigm: An Introduction to the Semiotics of Science Fiction," *SFS*, 6 (1979):9-19.

5. Cf. "France," in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. Peter Nicholls (London, 1979), pp. 230-32. This thumb-nail but very lucid discussion of French SF (despite one or two minor errors in titles) is now somewhat dated insofar as contemporary developments are concerned. But it does a very creditable job of treating pre-1970s' French SF and, further, passes on some valuable insights into the social fabric of post-World War II France. For example: "At the end of the War, two factors were to bear heavily on the future of SF in France. The first was the growing separation, at school, in the universities and in all thinking circles, between *les littéraires* and *les scientifiques*, which made for a lack of curiosity about science and its possible effects on the shapes of our lives on the part of aspiring novelists....Secondly, whatever interest in these matters existed was satisfied from another source, the USA" (p. 231). See Gérard Klein, "Pourquoi y a-t-il une crise de science-fiction française?" *Fiction*, no. 116 (1967), pp. 122-28.

6. Jacques Goimard, "Prologue dans le logos," *Europe*, nos. 580-81 (1977), p. 11. This special issue of *Europe*, devoted to SF, was titled "La Science-fiction par le menu: problématique d'un genre."

7. The most important (and illustrative) was the disappearance of the *Année de la Science-Fiction et du Fantastique* yearbook. Edited by Jacques Goimard and published yearly by Julliard from 1977 to 1982 (and by Daniel Riche and Temps Futurs for one last time in 1983), this extraordinarily rich annual compendium of French SF info will be sorely missed by SF scholars and researchers.

8. Denis Guiot, "La S-F française après 1970," in *La Science-fiction*, ed. Guiot, J.P. Andrevon, & G.W. Barlow (Paris: MA Editions, 1987), pp. 98-99.

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RÉSUMÉ

Arthur B. Evans. *La science-fiction en France: un résumé.*—Comme une des littératures la plus vieille et la plus variée dans le genre, la SF française a une histoire qui est richement hétérogène en thématique et structure narrative. Des utopies et voyages imaginaires de Rabelais et de Cyrano de Bergerac, à travers les dialogues didactiques et scientifiques de Fontenelle et les contes philosophiques tranchants de Voltaire et de Diderot, à travers son "âge d'or" de la fin du dix-neuvième et du début du vingtième siècle dans les nombreux "romans scientifiques" de Jules Verne, les caricatures futuristes de Robida, le spiritualisme cosmique de Flammarion, les contes hybrides fantastiques SF de Renard, et les rencontres extraterrestres de Rosny Aîné, à travers sa période imitative et "space-opera" du Fleuve Noir de l'après-guerre, jusque dans ses formules plus contemporaines avec les récits socio-psychologiques de Curval et les visions quasi-surréalistes de Brussolo, la SF française acquiert depuis une trentaine d'années une popularité et une légitimité académique de plus en plus étendues. Quoiqu'en grande mesure inconnue dans les pays anglophones, la SF française a de quoi offrir à ceux possédant le goût pour la fiction spéculative toute une gamme de récits qui sont à la fois stimulants pour l'esprit, importants pour une compréhension de l'histoire du genre, et relativement inexplorés par la critique littéraire moderne. (ABE)

Abstract.—As one of the world's oldest and most varied literatures within the genre, the SF of France has a history that is richly heterogeneous in both theme and narrative format. From the utopian fantasy and imaginary voyages of Rabelais and Cyrano de Bergerac, through the scientifically didactic dialogues of Fontenelle and the incisive contes philosophiques of Voltaire and Diderot, through its late 19th and early 20th century "golden age" in the many romans scientifiques of Jules Verne, the futuristic caricatures of Robida, the cosmic spiritualism of Flammarion, the hybrid fantastic-SF tales of Renard, and the alien encounters of Rosny the Elder, through its derivative and pulpy post-war "space opera" phase of Fleuve Noir romans d'anticipation, to its more modern configurations of socio-psychological allegory à la Curval or post-modern surrealism à la Brussolo, French SF has witnessed considerable growth in its popularity and academic study during this latter half of the 20th century. Although largely unknown in English-language countries, French SF offers to those with a palate for speculative fiction an unusually wide assortment of narratives that are intellectually stimulating, historically important to the genre as a whole, and still relatively unexplored in literary studies. (ABE)