This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30024840

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright: 2009, Science Fiction Research Association
The Black Mirror and Other Stories

Leon Marvell


In an article in the German journal Alien Contact 36 (1999), Erik Simon, a former GDR science fiction editor, author, and translator described the field of German science fiction publications as moribund and dying a "lingering death." The collection, The Black Mirror and Other Stories: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Germany and Austria, edited by Franz Rottensteiner and translated by Mike Mitchell is in many ways an effort to document the rise (and fall) of science fiction in a country where authors in the genre have never seen their work appear in hardback form: in Germany science fiction, it seems, is considered second-class literature doomed only to ever appear in mass market paperback.

In his comprehensive introduction to the collection Rottensteiner rightly notes that if asked to expound upon their knowledge of German SF, most people would undoubtedly think of the handful of films produced by the UFA film company in the 1920s, and especially Lang's Metropolis. Perhaps others would think of the seemingly interminable Perry Rhodan series of pulp novels, published in Germany since 1961 (this reviewer had no idea the series was originally German, and I have not seen an English edition since I was young...which was a long time ago).

Rottensteiner has organized the collection in chronological order, starting at the beginning, as it were, of German SF with Kurd Lasswitz's To the Absolute Zero of Existence (1871). His introduction similarly follows a chronological order, but he begins his discussion much earlier, noting that Kepler's Somnium (Dream) of 1634 may be considered the very first German SF story with its description of a dream journey and encountering life forms on the moon. He proceeds to note the contributions of a handful of proto-SF works before discussing the central importance of Lasswitz—"mathematician, philosopher, poet"—to the story of German SF. His extended discussion of Lasswitz and the influence of his massive novel Auf zwei Planeten (Of Two Planets, 1897), in which the author describes a space station connecting planets as well as the political and social structures of Martian society, becomes a handy connecting link between German works which might arguably be called contes philosophique rather than SF and the "future war" novels and stories that appeared at the beginning of the 20th century, stories which convincingly herald the love/hate affair with the technological that properly characterizes SF as a literary form.

Whereas the pre-World War I stories and novels Rottensteiner associates with the "future war" genre were thinly disguised calls for an escalation of German military technology, those produced after World War I, in an era characterized by unemployment, inflation and despair over the Treaty of Versailles, "increased the popularity of certain forms of war-mongering fiction whose main purpose was to correct the "shameful" peace forced upon Germany." Often portraying Germany prevailing over its enemies through the deployment of some secret "super weapon", these works were often written by "hacks and amateur writers" and the "literary quality was generally very low." Rottensteiner then perspicaciously notes,

"These novels offered fantasies of wish-fulfilment, were openly authoritarian and racist, and usually postulated the deliverance of Germany by a strong undemocratic leader (for example, often a gifted engineer turns out to be the nation's savior).

The novels of Hans Dominik are a case in point: the hero is usually an engineer fighting against unsavory foreign types bent on espionage and sabotage. The key to the eventual triumph of the hero is the development of some new kind of power (such as electricity drawn from the atmosphere in his Himmelskraft (Power from the Air, 1939). Rottensteiner adds that Dominik's new technology is also sometimes supplemented by " occult" wisdom drawn from the East, or else the new form of power is realized through the help of "Asiatic forces." The Austrian Otto Soyka wrote novels in which human beings are manipulated by mysterious psychic powers in Der Seelenschmied (The Soul Smith, 1921) and Die Traumepitescbe (The Dream Whip, 1921). Thus we are led to see the institution, at the level of popular culture, of a fantastic mythology that would eventually find its reification in the ideology of National Socialism.

At this point Rottensteiner's introduction turns to a discussion of the relative merits of SF in its written and cinematographic forms, with Lang's Metropolis and his wife's novel (upon which the film was based) providing the test case. According to Rottensteiner, the film is a widely acknowledged work of genius, while the novel by Thea von Harbou is a "mediocre, sentimental" work. Various dubbed the "mistress of kitsch" and a "Nazi Darling" (she did indeed become one of the favorite screenwriters of the Nazi-controlled film industry after Lang fled Germany for the USA), von Harbou is grudgingly acknowledged by Rottensteiner as having also written the screenplay from which Lang worked. In seeming contradiction to his initial assessment of von Harbou, he then praises her screenplay for Metropolis noting that "all the ideas that make the film a great one" are already there in her screenplay and that the collaborations between von Harbou and Lang produced Lang's most significant films. Rottensteiner concludes his discussion of Metropolis by noting that the film should be seen as an example of Germany's interest in the fantastic and the surreal (and indeed, expressionistic, one should suppose) in literature and the cinema rather than as an example of German SF; written SF was deemed of little importance in the 1920s, evidently.

A brief discussion of German SF stories translated for the Gernsbach magazines follows ("the German contribution is insignificant") as well as a discussion of the few German SF novels in translation that appeared in the American market. Here we find another of Rottensteiner's odd assessments. Curt Siodmak's novel, F.P.I Does Not Reply, originally written in German, qualifies as SF, while his later (and certainly more famous) novel, Donovan's Brain, "seems more like...horror literature than...science fiction." Considering the foregoing, presumably Rottensteiner includes Siodmak's City in the Sky in this category as well—and one would thus have to conclude that his categorization of Siodmak's work is rather arbitrary.

Perhaps the most interesting section of the introduction is devoted to the history of the dime novel in Germany. Beginning before WWI and continuing up until this day, the hefte (dime novels) have been, and evidently continue to be, the main publishing form...
for Germany’s contribution to SF. Rottensteiner’s in-depth discussion of the hefte culminates in a short history of the Perry Rhodan series, a series that has sold literally—and almost unbelievably—billions of copies.

Of interest to many readers will be Rottensteiner’s discussion of the history of SF in the German Democratic Republic, and the problems writers within the genre faced when having to write “within the rules,” as it were, of the socialist republic. Stories of the far future, for example, necessarily had a foregone conclusion as determined by the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin: the future was inevitably a happy, genuine socialist republic! Rottensteiner highlights particularly the writings of collaborating couples Joanna und Günter Braun and Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller as examples of writers whose work is subtly subversive, often satirical and of high literary merit.

Turning to the anthology itself, Rottensteiner states that the book is intended to be an historical sampling of German and Austrian SF rather than a selection of the “best” stories within the genre. One of his most interesting observations is that “German writers were stronger in the GDR” and consequently the reader is presented with a very good selection of representative stories from the “other” side of Germany. Rottensteiner asserts that many of the best stories are “remarkably free of any ideological indoctrination”—quite a challenging contention given that anyone familiar with the critical tradition within the humanities would find it difficult to assert that anyone was free of ideological indoctrination, whether of a socialist or capitalist stripe. He further notes that it would be difficult to find anything specifically “German” about the stories he has collected together (the flattening of any “Germanisms” into a U.S. English idiom by the American translator might have something to do with this), and that might well be true if one pursued an uncritical reading of many of the stories, but surely the very point of reading many of the GDR stories collected in this anthology is to discover the “hidden” political, psychological and social subtexts?

Looking at the stories themselves, the early pioneers of German SF are represented by Lasswitz’s highly influential To the Absolute Zero of Existence of 1871 and his Apokilis of 1882, the latter an utopian story concerning a society with powerful psychic abilities similar to those of the underground race in Bulwer-Lytton’s (and not Bulwer-Lytton, as my copy of the anthology has it!) The Coming Race. Paul Scheerbart’s Malvu the Helmsman (1912) is one of his “astral” novelettes, a marvelous, poetic conte philosophique from a turn-of-the-century bohemian mystic who has more in common with the writings of the French Symbolists than the Vernèlike Lasswitz.

Stories from between the two world wars include Otto Willi Gail’s The Missing Clock Hands: An Implausible Happening (1929), a clumsy story about an inadvertent time traveler who recounts his sorry history before an incredulous judge, and which no doubt represents an example of a story included as part of the “survey” nature of the anthology: its literary merit is decidedly minimal (the editor admits that Gail “was not greatly talented”—somewhat of an understatement if this story is representative of his work). The following story, Austrian Egon Friedell’s Is the Earth Inhabited? (1931), is far more entertaining fare however: a series of seven postulates by intergalactic professors demonstrating that it is impossible for life to exist on planet Earth. The story is a good example of the sort of mocking irony that was encouraged by editor Karl Krauss and the writers associated with his famous journal Die Fackel (The Torch). And it is representative of the sort of anomic that impelled Friedell (one among too many) to commit suicide in the face of the rise of Nazism.

The three stories from the GDR are all excellent examples of SF from the Other Side of the Wall. Erik Simon will be known to many readers of NYRSF as an occasional contributor of critical essays to Science Fiction Studies. In his own country he is the coeditor of an important volume on GDR SF, Die Science-Fiction der DDR, 1988, and is well known as a writer of short fiction. The Black Mirror concerns the arrival of alien visitors who possess an “ideal mirror”, a reflector of all forms of energy. The story itself is darkly ironic (no pun intended) and represents a kind of literary experiment for Simon, as it is in part a riff on a story by the German satirist and occultist Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932). Johanna and Günter Braun’s A Visit to Parsimony: A Scientific Report (1981) is a sly dig at homo economicus/bureaucraticus (of the GDR variety) in the form of a fragmentary report on the strange parsimonious attitudes of the inhabitants of—you guessed it—Parsimony. Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller’s The Eye that Never Weeps is a beautiful, lyrical story set in a fictional Latin American country blighted by a “plutonicriocy” where the inhabitants and visitors to the province have embedded within their foreheads the device referred to in the title of the story: a radiation detector hardwired to the light-sensing part of the brain. This is one of the stand out stories in the anthology.

Of note also are the three stories by Herbert W. Franke from the early 1960s, excerpted from a collection of extremely short stories, Der grüne Komet (The Green Comet, 1960). Each of the three stories in this anthology is a precise, spare example of literary gedankenexperiment where a single notion is pushed to its logical and surprising extreme.

The most recent story in the anthology is Andreas Eschbach’s Mothers Flowers, 2008, a previously unpublished story by one of Germany’s most prolific young writers of SF, winner of every SF literary award in Germany and of the French equivalent of the Hugo Award, the Grand Prix de l’imaginaire.

Rottensteiner prefaches each entry in the anthology with an exhaustive précis of the writer’s works and evaluates their contributions to the life and health of SF in Germany and/or Austria. His notes to each story are often both enlightening and fascinating, drawing connections between obscure authors, artists and thinkers, their thematic concerns and the era within which they wrote. His bibliography comes to twenty-one pages of tightly spaced entries, certainly enough to keep the scholar of German and Austrian SF busy for many years to come.

For both the scholar and the casual reader, The Black Mirror and Other Stories represents an obsidian mine of little-known treasures.

SFRA Review 289 Summer 2009 15