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THE OTHER SIDE OF REALISM

A review of SF: The Other Side of Realism,
edited by Thomas D Clareson. (Bowling Green;
Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971)
xiv, 356p hardcover and paperback

by Bernard Kay

There is excitement in the title: SF beyond the name, beyond the concept, beyond the universal; the possibility of glimpsing it however briefly as an anti-reality ever present on a different but congruent space-time continuum.

Unfortunately, the title is misleading.

For "the other side of", the reader is asked to substitute "the reverse of", and is expected to accept "realism" as one of those convenient but essentially meaningless labels, like "fauve" or "atonal", used when dealing with a subject to which one does not want to give much thought (not necessarily synonymous with time and effort).

A patently honest attempt in the lead essay (by Dr Clareson) to define SF in familiar terms is invalidated by starting from a judgement rather than reaching one thru examination of all evidence. "Fantasy -- the other side of realism, of which science fiction is the latest expression -- has existed side by side with...the 'realistic', the representational -- throughout literature..." What follows is a support for this thesis, not a search for the nature of SF.

Perhaps this follows from Dr Clareson's stated purpose in compiling the anthology. "I have tried to bring together a sampling of essays and notes...from academic, popular, and specialist sources in order to indicate the diversity with which the genre may be approached." After the elimination of all philosophical content

from "realism", you wonder what meaning "approach" has: two quite different ones, I think. The specialists (read SF writers) are interested in providing access; the academicians only want to show you ways of approximating, of "coming near". They win, too, by sheer weight of numbers -- seventeen to nine.

And what a time they have in the process. Obviously they are all nominalists: on the slightest of pretexts they drag in such disparate figures as Ralph Ellison, Marcel Proust, Theodore Dreiser, James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Mark Twain, Emile Zola, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Hardy, Faulkner, Balzac, Norris, Scott, Thuxley, Gogol, Priestly, Conrad, Doyle, Milton, Forster, Margaret Mitchell, Shakespeare, etc. etc. This, together with the pages of notes punctuated with neatly italicised ibids., fair boggles the mind.

In their well-meaning attempt to make SF respectable, they display all the condescension of a White telling a Black he is equal. The end effect is depressing.

And the scene that is created is familiar: intentionally murky, with cunning spotlights highlighting improbable objects of veneration. The voices are suitably hushed and while their eulogies are sometimes in the present tense, you have the impression that it is a slip of the tongue. There are the usual stifling puffs from carelessly swung censers and the nauseous effluvia of burial set pieces.

What a relief to hear Judith Merrill's voice cutting thru the ritual mumbling to point out that there is no corpse, that somewhere far from these precincts there is something known as SF, so "new-born that we hardly know how to distinguish hunger from temper from lung exercise in its cries". How provocative to listen to Alexei Panshin's call to the child "to cut the line...to sing...to dance...to shout up the dawn...to hurl rainbows...to discover marvels and populate the darkness". How absorbing to watch Samuel R Delany synthesise one of the infant's life systems.

You may want the book for what the outnumbered specialists have to impart. Without resorting to parallels or other comparisons, without straining to show off their expertise or erudition, hewing to the line laid down, almost without exception they provide several approaches, means of access, to SF.

Altho James Blish's "On Science Fiction Criticism" is aimed at Michel Butor, it might well apply to the book of which it is a part. "It has two serious deficiencies: it gives a completely misleading impression of the present state of the genre, and it proposes a future course for it which would destroy everyone's interest in either writing or reading it." Certainly this statement answers Dr Claerson's conclusion that if SF stops being what it has been (pseudo-scientific and didactic) and what it now is (utopian and dystopian), it "may give new vitality to the dream of human experience".

The least that one expects from critics and/or apologists is some depth of understanding, some feeling for their subject matter.

Here, the reader is left with a sharp realisation of one of the sadder facts of life: to maintain achieved status or tenure, or even parking lot privileges, college professors must publish.

ONE HIGH SCHOOL COURSE IN SF

I just finished a "science fiction" course in high school. I wasn't expecting to really learn anything about SF, but I was hoping to help the teacher prepare and teach the course.

The class, as a whole, read 1984 and Brave New World. We were also able to choose from about one hundred miscellaneous SF books. Unfortunately, I realised by looking at the titles that whoever had bought them had simply swept a shelf of SF clear in a bookstore somewhere. Thank god, he had enough sense to pick up extra copies of some SF classics: Foundation, Stranger in a Strange Land.

The basic class structure was this: we had reading days and we had discussion days. Reading days were when everyone got to read whatever it was he had picked up as interesting to read. Discussion days consisted of talking about the marvels of science or some extrapolation or a light examination of 1984 and Brave New World. Some days the teacher let the class vote as to whether to read or discuss. The former invariably won.

The teacher had very little knowledge of the field -- no more than the average non-fan. In fact, the one thing we did not discuss was SF. Scientific advances, the space program, biological discoveries, ESP, the teacher's opinions, were all discussed...but never science fiction. Occasional mouthings were made about how SF predicted all sorts of wonderful stuff, and that was that.

Discussion was carried on by three people for the most part: the teacher, another student, and me. There were many days when I had promised myself that I would not be sucked into a conversation/argument, but then the teacher would tell the class that the planets revolved around the sun all lined up in one neat row (thus, every planet would take one year to complete one revolution). Or, perhaps, he would tell us his beliefs concerning free will. According to his definition it is impossible, but I didn't agree with his definition, and he never caught on that I was arguing his definition.

I am certain that no one came out of this waste with a better knowledge of science fiction. We were required to read books, but he never checked up on it in any way, so some people just put down titles when handing in their lists. Those that read SF for the class got an inkling of SF, but they didn't need this "course" to get that.

-- Frank Balazs
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PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

The View Over Atlantis, by John Michell. (London: Abacus Press, 1973). 221p paperback illus, 75p

Atlantis Rising, by "Brad Steiger" (Eugene Olson). (New York: Dell, 1973). 220p paperback, 95¢

Anyone who is interested in the perennial questions about Atlantis -- Was there really an Atlantis? If there was, where was it? When did it exist? What was it? Can we find it? Can we communicate, either by occult or natural means, with the Atlanteans? and the list could be almost endless! -- anyone who is interested in this most controversial topic will no doubt be interested in, perhaps amused by, and indeed stimulated into further thought about Atlantis by reading John Michell's The View Over Atlantis and Brad Steiger's Atlantis Rising.

Mr Michell's book is more concerned with the alignment of certain ancient British earthworks (such as Silbury Hill) and megalithic monuments (such as Stonehenge and Avebury) than with Atlantis per se. Mr Michell ranges far, and offers many interesting parallels between British monuments and the alignments of important shrines and ritual paths in other civilisations. He discusses, for instance, the positioning of the Great Pyramid of Khufu at Gizeh, and the alignments of ancient artificial hills in China according to "Dragon Paths". Mr Michell's theories are not wholly persuasive but they should prove stimulating, especially to those who are deeply interested in numerology.

Mr Steiger's book, which is described on the cover as being "even more fascinating and authentic than Chariots of the Gods", somewhat resembles in its scope Andrew Tomas's We Are Not the First: Riddles of Ancient Science (London: Souvenir Press, 1971; New York: Putnam, 1971; Bantam, 1973). Mr Steiger summarises some familiar scientific, pseudo-scientific, and occult theories about Atlantis (including the descriptions of Atlantean life given by the late Edgar Cayce), and ends on a rather gloomy note, with a chapter headed "Does the Rising of Atlantis Herald Armageddon?" According to one Orlon (sic), "a cosmic entity from a spaceship yet invisible to man, /who/ has relayed through Marianne Francis of the Solar Light Center in Oregon... 'the Cosmic clock stands poised at the hour of Midnight!'" (p 214) If we can believe Orlon, then the answer to Mr Steiger's question is most definitely YES!

These two books will surely provide entertaining reading for all lovers of fantasy in general and of Atlantean fantasy in particular.

-- Veronica M S Kennedy
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