



BOOK REVIEW:

*Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First
Century: Transnational Futures,
Cosmopolitan Concerns*

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Gómez-Muñoz, Pablo. *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Transnational Futures, Cosmopolitan Concerns*. Routledge, 2023. ISBN: 9780367759063.

Considering the intensification of a wide range of transnational social, economic, and environmental phenomena, such as climate change, migration, and the uneven distribution of natural resources, Pablo Gómez-Muñoz's *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* offers a timely and important analysis of the possibilities and limitations of science fiction cinema to interrogate transnational concerns. These concerns are studied specifically through the lens of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. Gómez-Muñoz defines the latter as “an ideal, desirable horizon characterized by sociocultural connectivity, sustainability, and respect for human rights on a global level” (4). Transnationalism, then, refers to a broader set of “social phenomena and relations including (but not limited to) migration, intimate relationships, kinship, informal unpaid labor, access to and exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation and protection, cultural connections, and violence” (4) – issues that, as the study establishes, are increasingly explored in contemporary science fiction cinema.

The introduction of the book convincingly guides readers into the themes of transnationality, cosmopolitanism, and science fiction cinema. In addition to cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, the chapter introduces interrelated concepts, such as globalization, international, and global. This makes the book easy to follow even for a reader not fully immersed in the theories and concepts related to the themes of the study. Gómez-Muñoz also

makes clear connections between transnationalism and/or cosmopolitanism and science fiction, arguing that due to its long-lasting fascination with borders – between “male/female, human/machine, virtual/real, rich/poor, powerful/helpless, human/monster, technology/nature, science/savagery, or inside/outside” – SF cinema is particularly well-suited to negotiating transnational and cosmopolitan concerns (11–12). That said, Gómez-Muñoz points out that previous studies tend to overlook the transnational aspects of SF cinema, or, when they are given attention, the focus is often on the figure of the alien other as an emblem of the foreign other. *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* thus seeks to fill in these gaps in previous research by its devotion to transnational and cosmopolitan themes which are examined beyond the figure of the alien other.

The chapters of the book move onto analyzing specific examples of SF cinema that “draw attention to both prominent and often-overlooked concerns” (14). While doing so, Gómez-Muñoz delivers not only engaging thematic readings of the films, but also places emphasis on their narrative construction. Through this focus on both form and content, they are able to offer rich analyses of the workings of SF cinema.

The first chapter of the book, “Systemic Dystopias Through a Cosmopolitan Lens: Contesting Global Neoliberalism,” focuses on the cinematic dystopias *Elysium* (2013) and *In Time* (2011) that “explore the form and role of physical and symbolic borders of global economic structures at multiple scales” (18). For a scholar such as myself, immersed in gender studies, the emphasis on borders as not only national or geographical, but also embodied and experienced is particularly interesting: in the end, borders regulate what embodied subjects can or cannot do in society. Some borders are, indeed, “transcribed” onto the skin, which is visible in the films’ portrayal of race. The problematics of whiteness are, indeed, returned to many times throughout the book. All in all, Gómez-Muñoz argues that while *Elysium* and *In Time* perpetuate certain racial boundaries, they bring to the fore “key aspects and phenomena which are often overlooked,” such as “the central role of global corporate actors ... and the erosion of public institutions and welfare” (53). For a reader living in a country where public institutions and welfare are currently being eroded by a right-wing government, the chapter offers a chilling read and evokes the question: how far are we really from these (transnational) dystopias? The fact that science fiction – or a careful scholarly analysis of it – can raise such questions is testament to the genre’s potential to negotiate sociocultural concerns.

The next chapter, “Greening Apocalypse: Eco-Conscious Disaster and the Biopolitics of Climate Change,” delves into timely ecological questions and the ways these are (re)imagined in SF cinema: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), *Godzilla* (2014), and *2012* (2009), in particular. While doing so, the chapter delivers important information on humanity’s role in current environmental crises and developments. What struck me as particularly interesting in the approach here is the focus on the possibilities of spectacle. As Gómez-Muñoz notes, films that rely on spectacular audiovisual effects are often regarded as less serious than those that rely on more subtle or “sophisticated” means of expression. In the analysis of the thematic and formal aspects of SF cinema, Gómez-Muñoz is nevertheless able to showcase the power of the spectacle, exploring “how over-

the-top, seemingly meaningless spectacle can develop a detailed portrayal of the socio-environmental dynamics and impacts of climate change” (85).

The third chapter of the book, “Love for the Alien Same: Interplanetary Romance and Kinship as Harbingers of Ambivalent Cosmopolitanism,” foregrounds transnational love as “One of the main ways in which early twenty-first century sf cinema is structuring its discourses around globalization” (88). The chapter showcases that while intimate relations might not be the first thing one associates with transnational concerns, movement of people and different legislation related to the human rights of, for example, LGBTQI+ people make these relationships transnational and deeply political. The chapter focuses on two aesthetically different films: the commercial Hollywood-produced *The Host* (2013) and the zero-budget, B-movie-style *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same* (2011). According to Gómez-Muñoz, “despite their different aesthetics, [these films] develop a similar ambivalent position towards cosmopolitanism ... presenting the formation of transnational couples as harbinger of cosmopolitan attitudes,” yet “casting only white American actors as members of the transnational couple” (89). Drawing on the work of Richard Dyer and Dale Hudson, Gómez-Muñoz argues that the films present a sort of “multi-cultural whiteness” (110) where questions of inclusion and exclusion are dealt with in a predominantly white context. As someone fond of popular culture, I especially appreciate how Gómez-Muñoz again places emphasis on so-called “low-brow” genres and modes of expression. As in the discussion of so-called spectacles, here they highlight the possibilities of another less-esteemed type of film, the B-movie. Referring to José Muñoz’s work on queer utopias, they argue that the campy elements of the film help to construct imaginations of “cosmoqueer utopianism,” inviting viewers to consider sexual practices beyond familiar cultural norms and conventions (117).

The fourth and final analysis chapter of the book, “The Cosmopolitan Potential of Connections Across Time and Space,” explores how a sense of a shared humanity is thematically and formally constructed in SF cinema with special attention to the film *Cloud Atlas* (2012). The multi-protagonist, multi-storyline film is perhaps the most intriguing example of how narrative choices are used to construct multiple transnational and cosmopolitan connections in SF cinema. Gómez-Muñoz argues that using multiple techniques, such as the montage, visual matches, and recurring motifs like music, *Cloud Atlas* ties together the lives of separate characters, placing emphasis on shared experiences. Thus, the film contributes to the ideal of a shared humanity. In this chapter, I find the discussion of “ordinary cosmopolitanism” – meaning that sometimes cosmopolitanism manifests in small, mundane actions – particularly interesting as it highlights the everyday actions and concerns of people in the context of broader transnational phenomena. The chapter also foregrounds timely questions of (de)coloniality, arguing that greed and (the denouncing of) coloniality are the main drivers in all the narrative strands of the film. Gómez-Muñoz posits that even though the film makes visible the struggles caused by colonialism, it tends to present an “easy cosmopolitanism,” doing away with “radical differences” (149). In addition to this, *Cloud Atlas* also includes a mainly white cast, thus downplaying questions of race in cosmopolitan connections.

Overall, in *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* Gómez-Muñoz showcases how SF cinema indeed is a suitable platform for discussing

transnational/cosmopolitan concerns. The tendency to discuss different kinds of borders, including radical imaginations of alien others, and the possibilities to offer breath-taking spectacles contribute to the ability of SF cinema to foreground these issues. However, as becomes evident from *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* as well as from many previous studies in science fiction, sometimes SF imaginaries also fail in their radical potential. Indeed, what connects Gómez-Muñoz's analyses throughout the book is the finding that cosmopolitanism in SF cinema includes a certain inherent ambivalence. As Gómez-Muñoz's puts it, "All the films ... celebrate the weakening of borders and the development of more open positions toward the other," but this is downplayed by the overwhelming whiteness of the characters, including the alien ones, that they represent (161).

One could consider it a shortcoming of the study that all the discussed films come from a predominantly Western cultural sphere. However, this is a choice that Gómez-Muñoz reflects upon themselves – indeed, one of the aims of the study has been to deal specifically with "the paradox that it is often US American movies, major productions, and films from other affluent countries that tend to address cosmopolitan conflicts" (14). At the same time, in the discussions on gender, sexuality, and the question of aliens passing as human, a bit more space could have been given to feminist (science fiction) research. That said, *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* delivers steadfast analyses on topical and increasingly prominent themes in SF cinema. The book can be recommended to anyone interested in SF cinema or transnational concerns as well as in questions of race, inclusion, gender, sexuality, and kinship. The clear and precise analyses could also prove useful for BA, MA, and doctoral students.

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