

Review: Interplanetary Soundclash

Reviewed Work(s): *Off the Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema* by Philip Hayward

Review by: I. C. R.

Source: *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Jul., 2005), pp. 368-373

Published by: SF-TH Inc

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241365>

Accessed: 14-06-2017 00:23 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*SF-TH Inc* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science Fiction Studies*

collection serves a purpose by reprinting quite a bit of material that has been unavailable or available only with great difficulty. There are two novels, *The Nightmare* (anticipatory in some ways of H.G. Wells's *Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* [1928]) and *The Labyrinth* (1918; not fantastic), that have not been reprinted before; two novelettes, "Serapion" (1920) and "Sunfire" (1923); and four shorter works. The book should be supplemented, though, with her finest work, the strange, satirical *The Heads of Cerberus* (1952).—Everett F. Bleiler, author of *The Guide to Supernatural Fiction*

**Interplanetary Soundclash.** Philip Hayward, ed. *Off the Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema*. London: John Libbey/Perfect Beat, 2004. (Distributed in North America by Indiana UP) vii+214 pp. \$24.95 pbk.

Theorists of sf film—Vivian Sobchack, Brooks Landon, and Scott Bukatman among them—have argued that the genre has a special place in contemporary technoculture. Sf movies combine two compelling types of narrative: a diegetic, dramatic one about the social consequences of fantastic transformations brought about by a technological innovation or discovery; and a tacit, embodied one about the mechanical mediation of consciousness, whose agents are special effects. The tacit story may even contradict the foregrounded narrative, thereby embodying the contradictions within technoscientific culture's legitimation myths. Sf films construct narratives about their own conditions of possibility. More than any other genre of film, they draw attention to the notion of cinema as a constellation of special effects—and that a culture's conceptions of the familiar, the possible, and the strange are functions of their technologies of representation.

VR and computer-game designers are quick to tell you that sound is the key element in creating an immersive environment. Audiences process sonic cues to construct a physical sense of space in which visual cues can be deployed. Without accompanying sounds, even high-definition images may seem like shadows on a wall. Conversely, even stick figures can take on virtual life if they sound as if they are navigating something resembling familiar space. As technologies of recording, creating, and playing back sounds become increasingly sophisticated, artists and thinkers become more and more aware of the role sound plays in the manipulation of awareness. Sound becomes interesting in its own right, and the line between music and noise becomes more and more porous, as does the line between a world-view and a global soundscape. The intensive development of new digital media has—perhaps surprisingly—brought sound to the foreground, and new developments in musical composition, performance, and cinematic and game-based sound design compel us to talk about sound as a defining aspect of high-tech art.

*Off the Planet* is a collection of twelve essays on the sound-designs and musical scores of some of the most important films in the sf-cinema canon. With only one or two exceptions, the essays are all excellent contributions, original in conception, and theoretically adventurous. Taken together, they help lay a foundation for the study of sf in music and sonic art, raising the

problems that future scholars and artists will address, and initiating the arduous process of defining the role of sound in creating the sense of science fictionality. Many of the iconic films and directors are represented—there are essays on Bernard Hermann’s theremin-based score for *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951), Bebe and Louis Barron’s avant-garde electronic soundtrack for *Forbidden Planet* (1956), Akira Ifukube’s groundbreaking score for *Godzilla* (1954), Sun Ra’s Afrofuturism, the neo-conservatism of John Williams’s scores for *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters* (1977), the evolving sound designs of the *MAD MAX* trilogy (1979, 1982, 1985), Howard Shore’s close collaboration with David Cronenberg, ambient soundscapes in *Blade Runner* (1982), acoustic dystopianism in Cameron’s *Terminator* films (1984, 1991), the wild sonic pastiche of Tim Burton’s *Mars Attacks* (1996), and the complex perceptual geography of *The Matrix* (1999). While some important sf films with sonic hearts are not discussed (*2001* [1968], *Strange Days* [1995], *The Fifth Element* [1997], *Gattaca* [1997], and Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* [1995] and *Avalon* [2001] come immediately to mind), the essays in *Off the Planet* set up inviting parameters for future work.

In a foundational essay on sound in cinema, “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space” (*Film Sound*, ed. Weis and Belton [Columbia UP, 1985]), Mary Ann Doane describes how cinematic sound constructs the subjectivity of the viewer, making him or her the kinaesthetic focus of a film’s distinctive layered solicitations. In most films, this process remains entirely unmarked. In technologically-themed films, however, sound gains a certain autonomy, both from the diegetic characters and the audience. In technothrillers like *The Hunt for Red October* (1990) or *Air Force One* (1997), sonic-communication technologies seem like the tools that hold reality together against hostile forces that assault primarily through noise and silence. (In postmodern avatars such as *24*, the forces of destruction can also command the electronic soundscape; only caller ID can save us.) It is in sf that this autonomy is the greatest. In electronic sf, the task of artists is to construct aural signs of realities too new or too alien to be fully accommodated by the audience. The soundscape (which, according to Rebecca Coyle, involves the music, sound effects, and overall sound-design of a film) constructs an image of a science-fictional world, in which we perceive aspects of reality that are either inaudible to us, or which do not yet exist to be heard.

There are inevitably two approaches to making sf sound and music: finding sonic/musical analogues to visual and narrative sf signifiers, or constructing original sonic/musical signs of sf—not analogues of a pre-existing text, but embodiments of a tacit conception of the rational unknown. In the first case, the sonic links may be to decorative details with iconic qualities, which are assimilated into a larger pastiche (such as *Star Wars*’s space bar, or R2D2’s computer-game sounds). In the second case, sf is not a repository of motifs, but a source of premises and contextual constraints, and these establish the contours of a science-fictional design.

Philip Hayward's introductory essay in *Off the Planet*, "Sci Fidelity—Music, Sound and Genre History," provides a solid overview of the history of sf-cinema soundtracks, from the silent era to the present new media-age. Hayward deftly knits together the gradual transformations of conventions of film scoring with technical changes in sound production and popular musical styles. In the first phases—the 1902-27 period of pre-synchronous sound through the 1927-45 period dominated by European concert styles—composers and directors did not try to find musical/sonic signifiers that could evoke science-fictional alterity. Instead, reflecting the dominant attitude of Hollywood, they assimilated sf into the conventions of conservative heroic adventure. After the War, invasion and infiltration anxieties gave rise to "alien," more or less threatening, soundscapes—most prominent of which was the widespread use of the theremin, but also including experimental processing of magnetic tape. Hayward glances also at sf-soundtrack styles in Europe and Japan, and concludes by focusing on the close links between the Industrial-Entertainment Complex's innovations in sound technology and the blockbuster sf films that showcase them.

Rebecca Leydon's "Hooked on Aerophonics: *The Day the Earth Stood Still*," is a brilliant, precise examination of Bernard Hermann's score, which remains one of the enduring attractions of the classic 1950 film. Leydon views the score as a musically daring artifact, in which Hermann foregrounded the theremin (two of them, in fact)—an "aetherophonic" instrument that had come to be associated with "unseen forces" in filmscores. Employing a number of unconventional instruments, inventive sonorities, and Ivesian harmonies, Hermann was particularly successful in establishing the atmosphere of alterity through musical cues. Via Hermann's score, Leydon establishes the definitive purposes of a science-fictional sound: to create an "alienising fiction," to epitomize the sound of science, and to mark off the space of numinosity. The article includes an exemplary close reading of one musical sequence, Klaatu's first return to his spaceship, in which Leydon demonstrates with concrete reference to the musical text the subtlety with which Hermann establishes a musical development to parallel and suffuse the action.

Shuhei Hosokawa's essay on Akira Ifukube's *Godzilla* score, "Atomic Overtones and Primitive Undertones: Akira Ifukube's Sound Design for *Godzilla*," matches Leydon's in its close attention to the musical atmosphere of the film. Hosokawa goes even further by providing a rich historical essay on the development of Ifukube's career in the context of Japanese concert music, the liberating atmosphere of the film studios, and the seriousness with which *Godzilla* was approached by the creative team as an expression of Japanese national consciousness. Hosokawa traces the development of Ifukube's primitivist aesthetic, through influences of Stravinsky and Bartok, his ambivalence about making his living from Honda film scores (noting that the simplicity of monster plots allows the music to maintain some autonomy), and the rich nurturing milieu of the Japanese film studios, which gave most Japanese composers the opportunity to experiment with new sound

technologies. Recounting Ifukube's complex construction of Godzilla's screams and stomps, Hosokawa credibly claims that "*Godzilla's* sound effects were ... among the vanguard of experiments in tape music/sound in the mid-1950s" (50).

Rebecca Leydon's second essay, "*Forbidden Planet: Effects and Affects in the Electro Avant-Garde*," on Bebe and Louis Barron's famous electronic score for *Forbidden Planet*, is yet another excellent essay on the highly inventive and musically progressive association of film scores with sf cinema. *Forbidden Planet's* score is known for being the first—and perhaps the last—major film entirely to involve electronic music generated by analogue synthesizers, with no additional musical elements or sound-effects. Coyle not only provides a close reading of the score itself, she contextualizes the Barrons's electronic-music project within the tradition of American home-made instruments and spontaneous composition (the Barrons were associates of Cage and Feldman, and students of Henry Cowell), in sharp contrast to the contemporaneous Köln-centered approach of tightly constrained parameters that established the institutional norm of electronic music until the advent of the keyboard synthesizer.

With "The Transmolecularization of [Black] Folk: *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra, and Afrofuturism," Nabeel Zuberi completes a quartet of fine pieces on the association of progressive musical experimentation with post-World War II sf film scores. At first glance, *Space Is The Place* seems like an anomaly among the studio-artifacts. It is a wildly aberrant film text, with none of the qualities one would usually associate with a popular genre film. The first part of Zuberi's essay leans heavily on John Szwed's acclaimed biography, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (Da Capo, 1998), on oft retreaded ideas about Afrofuturism, and the now-canonical story of Sun Ra's role in bringing electronic instruments into jazz; and so the piece at first seems derivative of others' work. About halfway through, however, Zuberi goes into fascinating new territory, discussing both the film and Sun Ra's music in terms of the "productive imperfect" and "disintegration of the musical," as acts of African-Americans' cultural resistance to white standards. Zuberi urges us to approach the aberrant in Sun Ra's opus as a critique of film and genre studies. Raising the question of Sun Ra's "refusal of semantics," the rejection of culturally validated principles of design and musical order in favor of response to qualities of sound, Zuberi offers tools for exploring the central question of sonic science fiction: how are sf sounds and their power to affect audiences to be assessed, independent of the narrative frames that folks expect them to illustrate and serve? Arguably, sonic sf that does not establish analogies with visual or narrative sf must operate relatively "asemantically"—an oxymoron no more extreme than "science fiction" itself.

The first four, ground-breaking essays are followed by a tamer group devoted to the major sf films of the 1970s and 80s. Neil Lerner's "Nostalgia, Masculinist Discourse and Authoritarianism in John Williams' Scores for *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*" is a solid, although not

particularly imaginative, critique of Williams's "Wagnerian" *Star Wars* score, based on a single observation: that Luke's personal leitmotif, which is identified with the heroic theme-music, is developed throughout the film, in contrast to Leia's, which is not developed at all. Lerner is somewhat more interested and exercised by the *Close Encounters* score. Like many of the film's critics, Lerner views it and its music as authoritarian, preventing the audience from entertaining divergent readings. Williams uses atonality only to create an atmosphere of threat, to be relieved in the infantile Disneyesque nostalgia at the film's conclusion. The argument is easy to make, and Lerner's article suffers from some of the same authoritarianism that he perceives in the Williams scores. Although it was clearly a reaction to the progressive experimentation of the great sf scores of the 1950s, the music for *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters* nonetheless has had great popular resonance, as any study of reggae, dub, disco, techno, and ambient music will show. The uses to which the street has put these scores is part of their text, too.

Paul Theberge's "These Are My Nightmares: Music and Sound in the Films of David Cronenberg" discusses the long and close collaboration between Howard Shore and Cronenberg, as well as the way the conventions of the horror genre have inspired Cronenberg's approach to both narrative and sound. The article includes a close reading of *Scanners*'s (1981) sound-design, and an acute description of the way Cronenberg elides technological and organic sounds to create his characteristic sense of sf horror. "Ambient Soundscapes in *Blade Runner*" by Michael Haman and Melissa Carey, while pedestrian, is nonetheless a useful catalogue of the film's sonic f/x. And there is much to catalogue, since the pastiche soundscape is as cluttered as the visual cityscape. However, nothing in the authors' description explains what makes *Blade Runner*'s soundtrack a distinctive contribution worth special reflection. We could use a courageous assessment of Vangelis's over-rated score. Karen Collins's "'I'll Be Back': Recurrent Motifs in James Cameron's *Terminator* films," is a serviceable analysis of the first two *Terminator* films' minimalist scores, as examples of sonic/musical dystopias. Collins makes easy identifications of certain devices with certain unambiguous signifieds: Aeolian mode=feelings of death, despair, and fatefulness; metallic percussion=propulsive repetition of the industrial dystopia, etc. The score does not gain much from being explained as a system of clichés.

Rebecca Coyle's "Sound and Music in the MAD MAX Films" is an exception among discussions of films of the 70s and 80s, in that it tries for more than a cataloguing of obvious effects. Coyle is aware that "film soundtracks, apart from serving the visual and narrative elements, significantly construct their own narratives, refer to their own generic conventions, and have their own production stories" (109)—as succinct a description of *Off the Planet*'s premises as one could want. Coyle invokes (alone of the volume's authors) R. Murray Schafer's concept of global soundscapes as a model for looking at artifactual soundspaces such as those

of sf movies. For her, the fictive soundscape involves not only a form of setting for the narrative, but an embedded speculative history of the representation of sound. She traces director George Miller's evolving ideas about the role of sound in film, from the brute futurism of the first *Mad Max* (1979) to the subtler contests of industrial, urban, natural sounds, and human voices in *Beyond Thunderdome* (1985).

By far the oddest and most entertaining of the essays is editor Philip Hayward's "Interplanetary Soundclash: Music, Technology and Territorialization in *Mars Attacks*." Tim Burton's film is a true original: obviously a zany send-up of B-sci-fi of both the 1950s and the 1960s, its affectionate satire constantly tips over into grotesque phantasmagorical excess. Music not only weighs heavily on the action—as it does in most Danny Elfman scores—it becomes the diegetic weapon for saving the Earth, in the form of a hyper-strange song by the hillbilly singer Slim Whitman. Hayward takes this strange brew and mixes it with some Deleuzian de/re-territorialization theory, the concept of "soundclash" (taken from the competition of boomboxes and bands in street-festivals, an inspiration that goes back at least to Charles Ives), and a meticulous account of Slim Whitman's technique and place in the spectrum of American popular music. Hayward persuades me that Whitman's song represents music that remains fully outside and other, even (especially?) in an aggressively poly-cultural, globally hip age. "In terms of the dominant tastes (even in the eclectically pluralist early 2000s) the track and tradition are so ultra-'trashy' that they represent the 'wickedest,' 'deadliest' sound on offer" (183). "Interplanetary Soundclash" is a superb example of theory as rock and roll. But there's a eerie feel to an exegesis of *Mars Attacks* that doesn't once mention the laughs.

In the concluding essay, "Mapping the Matrix: Virtual Spatiality and the Realm of the Perceptual," Mark Evans makes a powerfully suggestive (but all too brief) case for the revolutionary artistry of *The Matrix* on cognitive grounds. Building on Doane's notion of three cinematic spaces (the diegetic, the space of the screen, and the acoustical space of cinema), Evans employs the concept of a fourth domain, the viewer's "perceptual geography," where "the actual world of the cinema meets the abstract world of the film" (190), to demonstrate *The Matrix*'s virtuoso juggling of four distinct diegetic spaces (the matrix, the simulated matrix of the construct, the free real world, and the enslaved real world). Each of these spaces is established with characteristic soundscapes, which are often the only anchors to help viewers orient themselves.

*Off the Planet* is not perfect. Too many sources named in the text never make it to the bibliography. And then there's the cover: a garish kindergarten cartoon of a knock-off Robbie the Robot thumping on a Gibson Flying V, as a Shambleau chanteuse, medusa-coifed with green snakes getting happy, croons into an old school ribbon-mike of radio station VEN, all against a day-glo crayola Martian landscape. *Off the Planet* is a book not to be judged by its cover.—ICR