

H-France Review Vol. 20 (January 2020), No. 38

Claire Barel-Moisan et Jean-François Chassay, eds. *Le roman des possibles: l'anticipation dans l'espace médiatique francophone (1860-1940)*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2019. 483 pp. Notes. 36.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-7606-4017-7.

Review by William Cloonan, Florida State University.

The essays in this collection originated in a conference held at L'Université du Québec à Montréal in 2017. While the expression *roman d'anticipation*, often cited with slight variations in this volume, may appear to be an academic rendering of “science fiction,” this is not the case. The term includes what traditionally may be considered science fiction, but it has a broader scope, and refers as well to adventure stories which indulge fantasies without any reference to real or imagined science, but which do feature a rational, coherent development. A salient feature of this collection is that, with the exception of authors such as Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe, and to a lesser degree Maurice Leblanc, almost all of the writers and their works are largely forgotten today. As a result, the essays are never simply close readings of individual texts, but constitute an effort to use selected novels and stories as springboards from which to focus on large social and/or aesthetic issues. The parameters of the collection, 1860 to 1940, refer to the ways the popularization of science in the *roman d'anticipation* came to serve the educational projects of the Third Republic (1870-1940) which was destroyed shortly after the outbreak of World War II.

In the volume's introduction, the editors remark that “[c]es romans d'anticipation se déploient à une époque de tension entre la continuation du mouvement de vulgarisation scientifique porté par le courant positiviste et une atmosphère ‘fin-de-siècle’ remettant radicalement en question le progrès apporté par les sciences” (p.15). This tension accounts in large measure for the somber tone of many of the literary works discussed. Even when fantasy plays a large role in a story, there is never a sense that the works are primarily escapist. In the majority of these texts, science is a source of admiration and wonder, but also kindles not so latent sentiments of dread.

The collection consists of twenty-three essays and an introduction. Interested readers will find a list of titles and authors at the end of this essay. In what follows, I will concentrate on several essays which display some of the varieties of themes and approaches one finds in *Le roman des possibles*.

The collection opens with a piece by Marc Angenot, “L'Émergence du genre de l'anti-utopie en France: Souvestre, Giraudeau, Richter. Le socialisme en tant qu'utopie.” The often frenzied political and social theorizing one finds in the work of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Marx was regularly dismissed by their various detractors as utopic, but as the century wore on and political

dissent took increasingly concrete forms, blithe dismissal turned into verbally violent opposition whose literary expression emerged in a *genre littéraire nouveau*, the dystopia.

Angenot dates its birth from the appearance of Emile Souvestre's *Monde tel qu'il sera* (1846). Largely forgotten today, it was a great success when it first appeared, “deux ans avant la vague de révolutions démocratiques et socialisantes qui allaient déferler sur l'Europe” (p. 26). For Angenot, this novel presented a series of *topoï* which, with variations, would characterize the new literary genre. An idealistic young couple would eventually witness their socialist dreams morph into nightmares. The city, the symbol of the brave new world and in this text located on the island of Tahiti, has become a melting pot of inhumanity and urban ugliness. Industrial production has become the social ideal and human beings are molded as if they were products of the omnipresent machines: “Fabriquer l'homme à l'instar du calicot” (p. 28). Yet by far the worst aspect of this dystopia model, from a conservative perspective, is that it is a place where women triumph: “Dieu sera désormais du genre féminin” (p. 28). Other writers, working very much in Souvestre's shadow, would later identify this awful new society as essentially American in nature. For some it would resemble a “caserne” (p. 36), while for others, obsessed with the power of women in this new dispensation, it would take the form of a “couvent” (p. 36), yet one lacking in moral values. Angenot concludes with the chastening suggestion that various forms of totalitarianism that emerged in the 1930s have been prefigured in dystopic literature written almost a century earlier.

The opening passage of Claire Barel-Moisan's “Le *Who's who* des scientifiques dans l'anticipation” quotes J.-H. Rosny aîné: “La science est chez moi un passion *poétique*” (p. 45, emphasis in text). This simple sentence would seem to summarize an attitude of many writers associated with *la littérature d'anticipation*. Scientific progress is real and admirable, the product of hard, even tedious work, and one of the nineteenth century's glories. It is also the source of great inspiration to the literary imagination. So the works of Rosny and his colleagues often display considerable scientific knowledge or at least create the illusion of such, but essentially they are works of the imagination that explore the implications of theories and achievements which might otherwise never expand beyond the circles of the scientific community.

Barel-Moisan is interested in a particular aspect of this “passion *poétique*,” the fictional representation of scientists in *la littérature d'anticipation*: “je m'intéresserai aux caractéristiques des savants, qui dévoilent une multiplicité de postures idéologiques, depuis la célébration des héros du progrès, jusqu'à une interrogation de l'éthique de l'expérimentateur ou une mise en crise des valeurs portées par la recherche” (p. 46). Her ambitious approach is to distinguish between the real and imagined scientists and then create a valuable research tool by compiling a variety of their characteristics and the frequency of their appearances. To this end, she employs a statistical approach. She carefully lays out the parameters of her research (concentration on fictional representations in a rational narrative, as opposed to a fairy tale). Among the statistical categories she creates are time sequences (present, past, future), the appearances of real scientists, the numbers of times a scientist is cited in fictions from different historical periods, and the evaluations, both positive and negative, of scientists. At the end of this study, the author briefly mentions the possibility of her work being combined with research in other fields in an effort to create cultural paradigms emerging from *romans d'anticipation*.

Jean-François Chassay notes in “De la normalité à l'anomalie. Penser le monstre dans les textes d'anticipation” that the figure of the monster is often “une véritable perception culturelle” (p.

102), a creation of the viewer and not necessarily an innate quality of the viewed. Returning to this issue at the end of the essay he concludes that “le monstre est l’autre...ce qui nuit à la norme” (p. 117). Between these two somber reflections on difference, he treats three examples of monstrosities which address the theme from very diverse perspectives.

In a section entitled “Le vélo, c’est l’avenir,” Chassay discusses a short story by Alfred Capus, “L’homme-bicycle” (1893), wherein a young man’s love of his bike is such that eventually it becomes part of his body. Written at a time when the *vélo* was extremely popular, Marius, the *homme-bicycle*, seems destined for a sad, freakish existence. Yet just the opposite occurs. Women find his unusual appearance quite sexy. He marries and eventually the happy couple produces a *bébé-bicycle*, the first of what is destined to become a superior race. The *vélo* may indeed be a symbol of mechanical progress gone wild, but even if that is the case, Capus seems more bemused than frightened.

Maurice Renaud’s *L’homme traqué* (1921) propounds the thesis that electricity is the future. A man blinded and declared dead in World War I returns with a strange power. Through the ministrations of possibly insane German doctors working with electrical currents, he can see a future which is not what others envision. Or more precisely he has visions of what the future holds, and the strong implication is that it will contain things we do not wish to see.

For contemporary readers, the part of the essay that will probably prove most compelling is discussed under the subset “L’hermaphrodite, c’est l’avenir.” It focuses on Edmond About’s satiric novel, *Le cas de M. Guérin* (1862). M. Guérin is an ordinary, rather boring fellow whom others find interesting only after his death when it is discovered he is a hermaphrodite, a being in this novel capable of functioning both as mother and father to a child. People are amazed, appalled, fascinated, but mostly just unable to deal with the phenomenon. Chassay reads this story as a metaphor for a swiftly changing nineteenth-century society where once immutable values no longer are. In this very interesting essay, the monster does more than challenge the norm; it calls into question the very notion of normality.

Although Simon Bréan’s title “La science face à l’opinion publique. Le traitement médiatique des figures scientifiques chez Jacques Spitz” certainly delivers the subject it proposes, its broader ramifications involve literature’s role in diffusing popularized versions of the delights and dangers of scientific progress, as well as supplying portraits of scientists whose groundbreaking work often pushes them to the edge of moral precipices. Literature in this context is an educational tool capable, by the space it accords itself, of providing greater, more encompassing explanations of scientific methodology and goals than newspapers can. It can depict scientists as both heroes and victims and defend truly original research against muckraking journalists and stodgy academics, thus protecting scientists unable to explain their work to the general public. Bréan’s essay pays homage to the mostly forgotten Jacques Spitz, who recognized in the 1930s that science was becoming more arcane, more incomprehensible to the average citizen and that literature must do what it can to correct this imbalance.

Edgar Allan Poe was probably the major influence on the *récit d’anticipation* in the nineteenth century and beyond. In “Edgar Poe comme modèle. Le récit d’anticipation entre fantastique, policier et imaginaire scientifique,” Émile Pézard assumes the rather daunting task of assessing the influence of a man admired by numerous French intellectuals and artists, including Jules Verne. Pézard notes that it has been common to say that Poe was the model for the genre of the

récit d'anticipation, and then goes on to flesh out the extent of this assertion: “Loin d’assurer l’unité du corpus, les références à Poe révèlent l’intergénéricité fréquente du récit d’anticipation: l’écrivain américain est...cité pour ses textes policiers et ses contes fantastiques” (p. 162). Pézard stresses the important role *l’extraordinaire* plays in Poe’s work. Yet what provides so much power to the American’s stories is the writer’s ability to couple the extraordinary with the rational which is also typical of the *récit d’anticipation* when it mixes together “le rêve et le chiffre” (p. 171).

Sébastien Roldan’s “Un naturalisme d’anticipation est-il possible? L’étrange cas de ‘L’autopsie du docteur Z***’ d’Édouard Rod” offers another seemingly odd coupling. How can one possibly associate *le roman d’anticipation* with naturalism, a literary movement which claimed to reflect actual scientific discoveries and display scientific rigor in its texts? Roldan answers the question by pointing to several writers who began their careers in the naturalist camp, later evolved into authors of *romans d’anticipation*: Paul Bonnetaïn, J.-H. Rosny jeune, Lucien Descaves, et al. A salient feature of the naturalist school was clear writing which aimed at providing an objective image of the real. As Roldan points out, this is precisely what the creators of the *roman d’anticipation* sought to achieve, albeit in the process of telling a story suffused with the fantastic. Also, some naturalist writers moved into the realm of the *extraordinaire*. The most bizarre example is *Le rêve* (1888), written by Émile Zola, the chief of the naturalist movement. Roldan’s essay confirms that both groups were aspiring to a scientific sounding prose; the difference being that the *romanciers d’anticipation* seemed to know what the naturalists did not: that the theories propounded in each literary movement’s texts would almost always turn out to be pseudoscience.

Thomas Carrier-Lafleur takes the *roman d’anticipation* to the movies. In “De Vénus au Far West. Mythe et imaginaire du cinéma dans les romans d’anticipation de Maurice Leblanc,” he discusses Leblanc’s initial hesitation about the aesthetic value of cinema. The success and the burden of Leblanc’s career up to this point had been his invention of Arsène Lupin, and he was anxious to get out from under the shadow of his gentleman burglar. The need for something new led him to the *roman d’anticipation* at a time when his respect for film was growing. He became one of the first writers to sense the potential of cinematic treatments for the *roman d’anticipation*. *Les trois yeux* (1919) is the story of a film seemingly without a projector (it turns out that the film is beamed from a projector on Venus), but the interest of the novel lies in its detailed descriptions of film techniques and how the illusion of reality is created on a screen. *Le formidable événement* (1920) is a modern version of *un roman de chevalerie* where love is won, lost, then won again in the midst of a gigantic earthquake which places France within walking distance of England. It is a work which “sonde l’être du cinéma, par l’exploration de son imaginaire, de ses archétypes et de la mécanique de ses fictions” (p. 275). These two novels, however bizarre their narratives, represent serious meditations on the possible rapports between literature and film.

As Marie-Ève Thrénty makes clear in “Des *time-machines* narratives. Les journaux dans les romans d’anticipation des années 1930,” it was more than merely curious that during this period a high frequency of newspapers and reporters appeared in the *romans d’anticipation*. In this era which witnessed the rapid rise of fascism in Europe, news came fast and often in partial installments; it was the task of newspapers and their reporters to try to render coherently and accurately what was happening. As she notes, under the rubric of *anticipation*, what was being discussed was the present. Thrénty also points to the tendency to judge these novels on the basis of their ability to predict events leading up to World War II, and in this respect the *romans d’anticipation* did a rather good job. Yet one might add that it is equally important that these

works captured the volatile climate of nervousness and fear, as well as the pressure this put on those who sought to convey the truth in an era of widespread distortion. If people were nervous, they could also be numb, and this latter sense is conveyed in a story H.G. Wells published in *Marianne* where the name of a newspaper changes without anyone noticing.

Le roman des possibles demonstrates that the *roman d'anticipation* lends itself to a variety of useful critical approaches that can illuminate the historical and social contexts of the eras in which they appeared. After reading this collection, the “possibles” which appears in the title may also be also understood as a subtle allusion to what intelligent scholarly analyses can do with works often dismissed as middlebrow.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Claire Barel-Moisan et Jean-François Chassay, “Introduction”

Marc Angenot, “L’Émergence du genre de l’anti-utopie en France: Souvestre, Giraudeau, Richter. Le socialisme en tant qu’utopie”

Claire Barel-Moisan, “Le Who’s who des scientifiques dans l’anticipation”

Hugues Chabot, “Images de la science en action dans quelques récits martiens (1865-1925)”

Christèle Couleau, “Angere et docere. Savoirs et catastrophes dans le roman d’anticipation scientifique”

Jean-François Chassay, “De la normalité à l’anomalie. Penser le monstre dans les textes d’anticipation”

Simon Bréan, “La science face à l’opinion publique. Le traitement médiatique des figures scientifiques chez Jacques Spitz”

Marc Ross Gaudreault, “Anticiper le Premier Contact. La posture de l’exobiologiste chez J.-H. Rosny aîné”

Émile Pézard, “Edgar Poe comme modèle. Le récit d’anticipation entre fantastique, policier et imaginaire scientifique”

Sébastien Roldan, “Un naturalisme d’anticipation est-il possible? L’étrange cas de ‘L’autopsie du docteur Z***’ d’Édouard Rod”

Stéphanie Dord-Crouslé, “La réception des ‘Secrets de M. Synthèse’ par Louis Broussenard à l’aulne du roman d’anticipation, un genre en formation”

Laurent Bazin, “Le regard s’allonge ou la vision à distance. Enjeux de l’image dans l’anticipation scientifique”

Délphine Gleizes, “Le rôle de l’illustration dans la construction d’une identité du roman d’anticipation (1860-1890)”

Thomas Carrier-Lafleur, "De Vénus au Far West. Mythes et imaginaire du cinéma dans les romans d'anticipation scientifique de Maurice Leblanc"

Matthieu Letourneux, "Le roman d'anticipation dans le jeu des sérialités textuelles et marchandes. 'Corsaire Triplex' de Paul d'Ivoi"

Valérie Stiénon, "Penser l'anticipation par le discours social. Variations sur le radium"

Sarah Mombert, "L'actualité de l'avenir. L'invention du phonographe dans la presse et la fiction"

Marie-Ève Thérenty, "Des *time-machines* narratives. Les journaux dans les romans d'anticipation des années 1930"

Nicholas Gauthier, "Avancer à reculons dans l'espace. 1865 et le roman d'anticipation scientifique"

Maxime Prost, "Le sociogramme de la richesse dans 'L'île à hélice' de Jules Verne"

David Bélanger, "Le futur universel. Anticiper chez Jean-Charles Harvey et François Hertel"

Rachel Bouvet et Joseph Dorion, "'Le Psautier de Mayence' de Jean Ray. Un fantastique de l'anticipation"

Laurence Perron, "Le fantasme de la conquête et ses narrations problématiques dans les romans d'exploration scientifique du XIXe siècle"

Elaine Després, "Ère glaciaire cosmique et crise sémiotique chez Octave Béliard"

William Cloonan
Florida State University
bcloonan@fsu.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.