This anthology offers 18 essays on recent science fiction films and cultural theory. In general, the articles are broadly accessible and cogent. All but three have been previously published, primarily in periodical form dating from 1980 to the present. Four are shortened versions or are excerpted from larger articles. Kuhn’s selection of essays emphasizes works of the eighties such as Blade Runner, The Terminator, The Thing, and Videodrome, but it is Alien that comes in for the most discussion. The limitation in variety of texts considered seems to be related to the book’s overall feminist orientation.

Kuhn is more interested in what science fiction films do, in cultural terms—what she terms their cultural instrumentality—than in what these films are as isolated texts. The organization of the book into five sections, each preceded by an introduction (there is no index), is thus guided by different perspectives on cultural meaning. The essays in Part I consider science fiction cinema broadly as a form of sociological evidence. The last article in this section, Thomas Byers’s “Commodity Futures,” contrasts more progressive science fiction films such as Alien and Blade Runner with a more conservative one, Star Trek II. Byers observes that in the trekker film, “Kirk and all he stands for—patriarchal white America, the sex-role division that approves the father’s non-participation in the work of child-rearing, and the benign violence of proper authority—have been vindicated.” (48)

The four essays in Part II reveal how certain films “speak, enact, even produce certain ideologies,” while at the same time hiding these beliefs “under the cover of entertainment.” Kuhn recognizes how these articles “are influenced in varying degrees by Marxism, feminism, or Althusserianism.” (55) For example, James Kavanagh’s “Feminism, Humanism and Science in Alien” is said to reveal a split between science and humanism that “in the end asserts a triumphant rebirth of humanism.” (55) Kavanagh’s complaisant approach is then contrasted with the one taken by Judith Newton in the article that follows. Newton’s “Feminism and Anxiety in Alien” states that the main character Ripley is by the end of the film “not only disvested of coalition and reinvested with femininity, she is also reaffirmed as Company Woman.” (86) Thus Newton concludes that “Alien is another demonstration of how late capitalism, through its ‘dominant cultural forms and practices . . . strains to sever social experience from the formation of counter ideologies’ and to preempt the effects of association.” (87)

Part III, “Repressions,” is a particularly interesting collection of discussions on science fiction films as repositories of unconscious meanings. The tendency in films of this genre to bend traditional borders of space, time, and being encourages Vivian Sobchack, in her essay “The Virginity of Astronauts,” to note associations between science fiction narrative and preoedipal experience. Like the indefinite boundaries between the primal self and the mother, the strange new worlds of science fiction film tend to destabilize perspective, notions of scale, distinctions between inside and outside, etc. While remarking the often repressed sexual discourse in the technological exploration of space in these films, Sobchack also notes the foregrounding of anxieties about identity, and the way in which such fears become focused around the vulnerable body. Similarly, the infant in its pre-oedipal state “has a tendency to introject or project maternal power, to see itself as powerful and potent and autonomous like the mother or to fear the other as monstrous, destructive and all-powerful.” (114)

Barbara Creed’s challenging essay, “Alien and the Monstrous-Feminine,” shares in the view that the unconscious processes of the text work to repress and control the feminine. She explains that the traditional monstrous-feminine, like the creature in Alien, signifies only the oral-sadistic and the phallic mother. And this leads her to propose as a solution a consideration of the parthenogenetic, archaic mother, the mother-goddess, who gives birth to all living things. Creed criticizes Freud, Lacan, and Julia Kristeva for overlooking the archaic mother and mystifying the figure of woman. But in her effort to get around the oppressive, dyadic, patriarchal logic of the phallus, one wonders why Creed is so willing to accept its terms, to conflate the pre-oedipal with the oedipal mother, the oral with the sadistic, the sexually undifferentiated stage of infancy with the later sex-differentiated, and the
notion of fetishism only with the woman's "lack." Because Creed sees the pre-oedipal mother as already enclosed within the patriarchal family constellation, she denies the realm of the earthly maternal and the symbolic altogether. This closes off other possibilities—such as the importance of the pre-oedipal mother (not Freud's phallic mother supposedly imagined by the infant) and of the oral stage as a period of fluid, polymorphous sexuality—and shifts the discussion from the level of the family-social to the mythological. It is difficult to see how this otherworldly mother-goddess can be a solution to the repudiation of the maternal in the patriarchal ideology apparent in the films under consideration.

The book’s fourth section, on spectatorship, considers questions of narrative viewpoint, the film apparatus, and the role of the reader. Steve Neale’s essay on special effects focuses on the spectator’s suspension of disbelief and the process of learning and making judgements. J. P. Telotte’s “The Doubles of Fantasy and the Space of Desire” locates the pleasures of spectatorship in the mimetic quality of androids, cyborgs, and replicants, which also reflect on the issues of representation and fantasy in cinema generally.

The closing section addresses intertextuality, a very appropriate concern in genre film, especially if one considers the many cross-generic products of recent years. Science fiction films afford excellent opportunities to observe the “textualizing” of the social, the way in which Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the insistent simulacra overwhelm representation and displace or evacuate the real. As Kuhn explains, “Contemporary science fiction cinema has been hailed as a privileged cultural site for enactments of the postmodern condition—usually in its more nightmarish aspects.” (178) Kuhn distinguishes between film texts about postmodernism, such as Blade Runner (treated effectively by Giuliana Bruno), and texts of postmodernism, that actually produce rather than signify the postmodern condition.

Scott Bukatman’s energetic essay, “Who Programs You? The Science Fiction of the Spectacle,” takes up Videodrome (1982) as an example of a science fiction horror film that “provides no stable viewpoint from which to judge what is ‘really’ happening in the story,” where “the image itself constantly proves unreliable,” (179) and “distinctions between hallucination and reality break down.” (180) By quoting Alvin Toffler, Baudrillard, Arthur Kroker, McLaren, Marcuse, Guy Dubord, William S. Burroughs, Philip K. Dick, Eric Mottram, and Christopher Sharrett, and putting them all in a kind of conference call eventually focused on Bukatman’s analysis of David Cronenberg’s films and Videodrome in particular, he manages a compelling compression of postmodern theory and textual analysis.

Kuhn concludes her selection of essays with Anne Cranny-Francis’s feminist overview of the genre, “Feminist Futures: A Generic Study.” This article finds hope in the “collapse of the categories human and machine,” (226) and of phallocentrism, through an aesthetic of reception and a politics based in “affinity, not identity.” Cranny-Francis wants to believe “in a film practice which would be characterized by a play across a matrix of surfaces: pleasures and politics as interplay, the flip-flop of the integrated circuit constituting the transgressive communication of a diverse—and yet inclusive—feminist positioning.” (227)

This longed-for transgressive pervasion by “a diverse and yet inclusive feminist positioning” implies that basic power relations will be transformed for the better through a feminist displacement of patriarchy, through an awakening to those marginal “alien zones” of culture that have been oppressed and repressed. Meanwhile, the postmodernists’ concerns that the sign culture already has become a post-dialectical spectacle, which hides the absence of all subjectivity and meaning, remains an ultimate alien zone to which cultural practice and theory must finally address itself.

This clearly written anthology, while it doesn’t seek to be all-inclusive in its treatment of science fiction films of the eighties, helps to organize and in some cases advance pertinent theoretical and critical concerns with subjectivity, gender, and cultural positioning. However, such an increasingly significant genre still deserves and awaits a more comprehensive up-dating which would include more on issues of generic conflation, of the psychological-ideological interface (cognition theory with a greater concern for affect, for example), and of body subjectivity in hypermediated, dystopic environments of exhaustion and decline. Vivian Sobchack’s Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film remains the primary resource in this genre. Collections such as Alien Zone that focus on one generic decade need to be complemented by ad-
ditional work that goes to the essence of Western cultural history in relation to the changing imaginative worlds of science fiction cinema.

JACK BOOZER, JR.

- Jack Boozer, Jr., teaches at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

Miscellaneous

Altman, Mark A. Twin Peaks Behind-the-Scenes: An Unofficial Visitor’s Guide to Twin Peaks. This badly typeset but otherwise quite useful book is chock full of data about the David Lynch TV series, which will no doubt be the subject of not only Twin Peaks conventions, as the book suggests, but also a half a hundred doctoral these, for which this volume will provide much useful ballast. Cast and crew interviews, magazine covers, script extracts, cherry-pie recipes (just kidding, although they would not be alien to the book’s buffish tone). Most useful feature: detailed credits and plot synopses for every episode of the show through the resolution of the Laura Palmer mystery.

GREGG RICKMAN


Edwards, R. Scott, and Bob Stobener. Cel Magic: Collecting Animation Art. Emeryville, CA: Butterfield Associates, 1991. $29.95 cloth; $19.95 paper. There has long been a brisk market in old posters and other movie industry paraphernalia; now there’s one in old “cels,” the celluloid art sheets upon which battalions of artists created the Disney classics and their successors. A mint cel can sell for thousands of dollars, and this volume offers advice to the collector. However, the collecting life is not easy: “Examine your art regularly. Look for alterations in shape and coloration, traces of parasites and insects, spots of mold and mildew . . .” and on the whole, I’d rather see the movies.

E. C.

Ellsworth, Elizabeth and Marianne H. Whatley, eds., The Ideology of Images in Educational Media: Hidden Curriculums in the Classroom. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1990. $31.95 cloth; $15.95 paper. Analyzes the use and ideological implications of “trigger films” and other pedagogical films, which subtly (or not so subtly) try to inculcate classist, racist, or sexist attitudes.

E. C.


DON WILLIS

Larson, Randall D., ed. The Robert Bloch Companion: Collected Interviews: 1969–1986. Mercer Island, Washington: Starmont House, 1989. $11.95 paper, $21.95 hardcover. This anthology of some 34 interviews and other comments by the veteran pulp horror novelist and screenwriter is edited into chapters on horror, crime fiction, etc., including of course Psycho, for which Bloch wrote the original novel (not the film script, though). Bloch is a witty storyteller and there is much of interest here for not only buffs but also scholars of obscure horror films (who has seen The Couch?—adapted by Bloch from an original story by Blake Edwards and his uncle?) and television history: one gets a good sense of the true horrors of writing series TV on assignment.

GREGG RICKMAN


E. C.


- Contributors to this section: John Fell is on our editorial board. Gregg Rickman teaches at San Francisco State and is a frequent contributor. Don Willis is our resident expert on horror and sci-fi reference matters.