

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

March-Russell, Paul (2017) Into the Unknown: Exhibition Review. Review of: Into the Unknown by UNSPECIFIED. Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction, 46 (2). pp. 84-88. ISSN 0306-4964258.

DOI

Link to record in KAR

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/62595/>

Document Version

Publisher pdf

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

Into the Unknown: A Journey through Science Fiction, The Barbican Centre, London, 3 June – 1 September 2017

Reviewed by Paul March-Russell (University of Kent)

In what is the largest exhibition devoted exclusively to sf to be held in the UK since the British Library's *Out of This World* in 2012, the Barbican Centre has created a stunning visual and aural experience. Following on from the design of the V&A's exhibitions dedicated to David Bowie and the Sixties counter-culture, curator Patrick Gyger and his team have not sought to create a dry chronological retread through the history of sf, but an experience that immerses the viewer within the cognitively estranged perspectives of the genre. As befits the Barbican's emphasis upon performance, the exhibition focuses primarily upon the visual culture of sf and, in particular, the iconographic themes of journeys to lost worlds, voyages into space, explorations into perfected and cataclysmic futures, and investigations into what might loosely be termed 'inner space'. The idea of journeying through the genre is therefore foregrounded as the viewer moves not only between the gallery spaces of the main exhibition but also up and down the Barbican Centre itself to view the other accompanying exhibits. Consequently, although largely pitched at a spectator who might not have a detailed knowledge of the genre (and so for whom much of it might be 'unknown'), the design of the exhibition is also of interest to a more knowledgeable viewer.

Upon entering the main exhibition space, the viewer is assaulted by multiple sights and sounds. Since one enters down a flight of stairs, the first object that grabs the attention is a large screen in the background, playing a series of extracts from such films as *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1959) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). Not only does this projection play upon an instinctive childhood fascination with dinosaurs (it is the same feeling that one has upon entering the Natural History Museum), it also plays upon more Oedipal desires; of seeing the adults cut down to size in comparison with the big lizards, reduced in stature to vulnerable infants, gaping and screaming at what they see, deprived of speech (*infans*). This simple but effective projection introduces us to the oft-stated 'sense of wonder' but it also implies its two-edged sensibility: childlike awe, on the one hand, and the vicarious thrill of destruction, on the other hand. Advancing further, and lowering our gaze, we see the exhibit in the foreground – a stand not only of Jules Verne's writing, including the annotated first page of *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), but also the work of his main illustrators and contemporary artists paying homage to Verne. The eye, however, is distracted, first, by a series of beautiful illustrations on the left by the model-makers, Ray Harryhausen and Willis O'Brien, and then to the right by a series of paintings

of 'Dinotopia' by James Gurney. Framed as if they were colourized versions of nineteenth-century illustrations, there is something ineluctably kitsch about these artworks, although the attention and deliberate anachronism with which they have been produced suggest a playfulness typically lacking in more ersatz forms. Doubling-back, we now spot the interactive map that introduces us to a host of extraordinary voyages from the classical to the Victorian periods.

Having passed the threshold into the exhibition, the viewer can now plunge this way or that. A tentative definition of sf is proffered, accompanying a large book display of lost world and early utopian narratives, which suggests that the genre is a speculative form of literature based upon rational explanation. Such a definition automatically has to be set against the futuristic content of adverts and cigarette cards from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, inspired by the work of book and magazine illustrators, let alone the intricate designs of such well-known dinosaurs as Godzilla and the *authentic* kitsch-ness of *One Million Years B.C.* (1966). What is apparent, though, from this gallery is, firstly, the extent to which the development of sf was contingent upon the imperial fascination and emergent consumerism of the late 19th century, and secondly, the rapid transition of early sf between languages, and between media, as embodied by Russian translations of Verne's work.

Soviet science fiction plays a significant part in the second gallery as we move from terrestrial journeys to projecting lost worlds into outer space. Whilst, on one side, we have the model of the rocket from George Pal's *Destination Moon* (1950), on the other side, we have a fascinating sequence of images from Soviet textbooks, collectively known as *Technology for the Youth*, permeated with the cosmic enthusiasm that the Science Museum's *Cosmonauts* exhibition did so well in describing (see *Foundation* 122). What is lost, however, in comparing these items is the cultural – let alone political – differences between them; the Soviet vision of space exploration is founded upon something more spiritually profound than US-style Manifest Destiny. Another large screen projects a series of extracts from Soviet classics such as *Aelita* (1924) and *Ikarie XB-1* (1963), alongside other classics of artistic and historical significance such as *Frau Im Mond* (1929) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), as well as Hollywood blockbusters such as *Interstellar* (2014), but again the emphasis upon 'look' reifies cultural differences between them. More successfully, in comparing *Technology for the Youth* with US industrial adverts, the curators emphasize the use of modernist design techniques within their illustrations.

After this, as Orson Welles' 1938 adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* competes with the film soundtracks over the loudspeakers, the gallery moves into what is an absolute treat for the sf cineaste. Particular attention is paid to the work of designers such as H.R. Giger, Patrick Tatopoulos and Douglas

Trumbull, including Giger's designs for Alejandro Jodorowsky's unrealized film version of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965). The influence of the French magazine, *Metal Hurlant*, is highlighted within the context of other space-themed comics. *Star Wars IV* and *V* are handsomely represented in the form of models, helmets, storyboards, and Martin Panchaud's pain-staking tribute to the films that the viewer can scroll through. Further interactivity comes in the mock-up of Mission Control from Ridley Scott's *The Martian* (2015), whilst a series of suits are on display, perhaps most notably Leonard Nimoy's from the first *Star Trek* film and Sir John Hurt's from *Alien* (both 1979). To what extent Tatopoulos' Egyptian-inspired masks from *Stargate* (1994) are intended to resonate with the appearance of the jazz musician, Sun Ra, in Soda_Jerk's video, *Astro Black* (2007-10), we can only hazard to guess.

In what may be the busiest of all the galleries, the development of sf as a literary form is further outlined alongside the emergence of a fan culture. These historical trends are also visualized in the growth of cover art from the pulp-era illustrators, most notably Frank R. Paul, to the airbrush techniques of Chris Foss and the work of contemporary digital artists. The fascination with postcards, this time from the USSR, and cigarette cards continues, most especially, in the complete run of *Mars Attacks!* that later became the basis for Tim Burton's 1996 film. But, there remains something uniquely special in seeing Olaf Stapledon's annotations for *Last Men in London* (1932) and the title page of Arthur C. Clarke's *Journey to the Stars*, hastily crossed-out and replaced by '2001: A Space Odyssey'.

The futurity of the second gallery carries over into the third's exploration of utopias, dystopias and apocalypses. The tentative chronology of the previous galleries here collapses as the exhibits zig-zag between postcards and cigarette cards from Britain, America, France and Russia, depicting 'the World of Tomorrow', to the opening pages of John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) and transparencies from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), and such recent cinematic nightmares as Ben Wheatley's *High-Rise* (2016). A broad thesis is made, however, between the descent from utopia into dystopia with the failed hopes of modernist architecture, a point made most effectively in a montage of sequences from such films as *THX-1138* (1971), *Brazil* (1985), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Dark City* (1998). The odd-one-out, though, is a sequence from *The Prisoner* (1967-68), since the series' real-life setting of Portmeirion, the dream folly of Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, owes nothing to the modernist formula of the International Style, although its pastiche of Italianate designs does contribute to the dislocation, in both time and space, of Patrick McGoochan's cynical hero. Instead, the resonance here is with the outsider art of Royal Robertson, a naïve mix of futuristic designs and spiritual/religious

allusions. The third gallery concentrates mostly upon utopias and dystopias, but a compilation of film extracts from blockbusters such as *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) to independent features such as *Embers* (2015), and international films such as *Crumbs* (2015) and *The End of the Lonely Island* (2016), add to the sense of global catastrophe.

The growing paranoia and schizophrenia of gallery three heralds the last gallery, and its examination of identity in relation to themes of time, mechanization and reality. We enter via Dara Birnbaum's video artwork, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-9), which effectively cuts-up an episode of the late 1970s TV series in order to expose the patriarchal constraints upon the character's representation. (The timing of this piece to coincide with the UK release of the new film version is, of course, serendipitous.) A large selection of comics, both from within and beyond the Anglo-American tradition, display the long-term fascination with mutations and superhuman powers. Three screens, devoted to film and TV extracts representing each of the main themes, are dotted around the gallery space whilst, at the heart, are the robots Twiki, from *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (1979-81), and Sonny from *I, Robot* (2004), surrounded by toy robots from across the world. However, despite welcome extracts from such rarely-seen films as *Gibel Sensatsil* (1935), *Sleep Dealer* (2008) and *Enthiran* (2010), the robots here have been overshadowed by the Science Museum's recent exhibition (see *Foundation* 126). More interesting are Brian Aldiss' typescript for 'Supertoys Last All Summer Long' (1969), later filmed as *A.I.* (2001), and Oscar Sharp's short film, *Sunspring* (2016), written by an artificial intelligence that had processed a series of sf films. (The result is gobbledegook yet strangely alluring all the same.) The theme of time is dealt with somewhat cursorily, although it's always good to see a clip from *La Jetée* (1962), and the theme of altered realities is at least enhanced by a series of props from films such as *eXistenZ* (1999) and *Inception* (2010). Most interesting is a display of six books from the library of Jorge Luis Borges, which emphasizes his enduring interest in science fiction from his favourite authors, such as Ray Bradbury and H.G. Wells, to new anthologies from the start of the 1970s.

Leaving the main exhibition, we pass on the right a series of games and music pods that can be played, and a large screen displaying three short films by Frances Bodomo (*Afronauts* [2014]), Pierre-Jean Giloux (*Invisible Cities #4* [2017]) and Wanuri Kahiu (*Pumzi* [2009]). The international, and especially African, elements of the exhibition are to be applauded along with the consultants, Yasmin Khan and Tade Thompson. Walking into the foyer is a screening of Isaac Julien's *Encore II (Radioactive)* (2004), in which a mysterious African woman, played by Vanessa Myrie, walks along an Icelandic coastline. Everyone and everything has been strangely irradiated whilst the sounds of the

sea, the wind, and the breaking ice have been sonically enhanced by Julien.

Going downstairs into the Pit we find a new sculpture by Conrad Shawcross, *In Light of the Machine* (2017). A series of curved, perforated sheets are stacked in a circle like a Neolithic henge. At the centre is a robotic arm perched on a large tripod. The arm extends, moves, retracts and grindingly re-positions itself. At the end of the arm is a bright light that casts shadows over the sheets as it moves. Loudspeakers emit guttural noises, like some prehistoric beast, which may – or may not – be synchronous with the arm's movements. I found the best way to experience this piece was to turn my back upon it, stare into the dark recesses of the Pit, and let the alien noises wash over me.

Returning to the foyer, Larissa Sansour and Soren Lind's film, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016), is screened in a separate room every half-hour. This enigmatic piece makes subtle use of CGI effects to tell the story of 'a narrative terrorist' who travels backwards in time to plant broken shards of modern-day porcelain in the ground. Her aim is not only to confuse the archaeologists of her own time but also to disrupt the approved history of the totalitarian regime that has murdered her sister. Whilst the film raises questions about the relationship of history to myth, and fact to fiction, it could also be an allegory for the central character's personal trauma.

Moving back towards the main exhibition, we pass by one of Trevor Paglen's 'non-functional satellites'. The *Orbital Reflector (Diamond Variation)* (2017) is, as the title suggests, diamond-shaped and constructed from aluminium, stainless steel and acrylic. Although it serves no practical purpose, it could, if launched into low orbit, be seen as a bright speck of light in the sky. Lastly, moving towards the Silk Street entrance, we encounter an edited montage of clips from the second episode of Charlie Brooker's dystopian TV series, *Black Mirror* (2011-). Entitled '15 Million Merits', the montage foregrounds the episode's obsession with screens and avatars at the expense of human value. It is a chastening warning to end an exhibition which so strongly celebrates the role of the visual at the heart of sf.