

American Science Fiction Literature and Serbian Science Fiction Film: When Worlds Don't Even Collide

Aleksandar B. Nedeljković (Kragujevac)

Recently, at a conference¹, my colleague Dr. Savica (pronounced Savitza) Toma, a professor of German literature here at the University of Kragujevac, Serbia, made a remark which I now find very useful. The polemic was about basic categories into which all literature could be divided, such as realistic and fantastic. He said, essentially, this: If we are to be able to work at all, in literary studies, we must have some basic categories, as tools, and for orientation; and so, even if they are not perfect and absolute, they are needed and useful. In that spirit, I proceed.

On this planet, science fiction genre began in the year 1818, with the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. That was the first SF novel in the history of the world. Everything with SF elements, before, was proto-SF.

Interestingly, the first SF drama on this planet could have been a Serbian one: *A Million Years from Now* (in the original, in the Serbian language, *Kroz milion godina*), written and published in the magazine “Kolo” in 1889, but largely ignored, even by the Serbs, back then; put on stage in Beograd (Belgrade) only in 1995, which is a 106 years delay; and still, to this day, not translated into English. So, for the world, it still does not exist, it *is not* – priority goes to Karel Čapek.

The first Serbian SF novel was *One Extinguished Star* (in Serbian: *Jedna ugašena zvezda*) (1902) by Lazar Komarčić, but it barely qualifies as SF be-

¹ Conference of young scientific researchers, but we, the older professors, also attended; 14 February 2009, in Kragujevac, Serbia.

cause it is mainly the protagonist's astral journey (in sleep, his body does not travel, only his spirit; in the company of the spirit of Laplace; they fly through astronomical realities). Komarčić was a journalist and an established writer, but this, his SF attempt, did not advance his writing career in Serbia at all; quite the contrary.

After this the Serbs turned their backs on the future, almost absolutely, and, for some 60 years, apparently wanted to believe that there will never be any future, that the future will never come – but it did come and wrecked them and ruined them and massacred them most horribly, most dreadfully and brutally. After the Second World War, now in Tito's communist dictatorship, there was an early bird, in 1960, a pulp novel *Calling Jupiter... Take Notes* (*Zovem Jupiter... beležite*) by Milan Nikolić. Early in the 1970s, SF really came alive amongst Serbs, they began to read it in great quantities, and to write it, then there was the monthly magazine "Galaksija" and I hope our English readers may guess what the word means; by 1981 (one year after Tito's death; he was absolute chief of Army, Party and State till the very moment he died) there was already a strong, organized, very enthusiastic fandom, the First Serbian Fandom, which lasted in strength for some 15 years or so; in the peak years, this fandom had more than one hundred organized, intense, active fans at the same time, but it began to stagnate, only to decline drastically by the end of the millennium, when it collapsed. Now there is the Second Serbian Fandom, but it is mainly oriented to the two other genres of the fantastic (horror, primarily, and some fantasy), with SF only marginally, barely-surviving, in distant, remote, Pluto-far-away third place. Unloved, and abandoned again.

The sixty years after *One Extinguished Star* are a huge gap, a vacuum, a nothing-time for Serbian science fiction. There *was* no Serbian science fiction then – with a minor exception or two: one tiny short story, a mix of surrealism and SF, barely qualifying as SF, titled "The Lightning-Rod of the Universe" ("Gromobran svemira") by Stanislav Vinaver in 1921; and one almost-illiterate novel in 1938 by a certain Stanko Kukić, *The World under a Gas-Mask* (*Svet pod maskom*) which predicted that World War Two would soon break out, etc.

But during these 60 vacuum years, Serbian boys were reading Jules Verne, many of them; and H. G. Wells; then, they avidly read strip cartoons about Flash Gordon, and later Dan Dare; in 1933 they heard of the movie *King Kong* and began to hope to see it in a cinema, somehow, in their town, if they could. But SF was stoutly rejected by the adults and definitely by the Serbian academic critics and professors as boyish fantasy, not for an instant to be

accepted as serious, important, or worthy; there were two phrases in the Serbian language, two expressions, for this. One is “Crazy imagination blabs all sorts of things” (“luda mašta lupava svašta”) and the other was the even more skeptical “300 wonders!” (“trista čuda!”). So in these vacuum years, SF was dismissed as childish fancy, for boys; dismissed, brushed off, not hatefully, and not maliciously, but dismissed totally and condescendingly. With a smile and a wave of the hand.

Was there any Serbian SF film in those 60 years? – Ridiculous even to ask. Of course there was not.

The first half of the 20th century did not really end with the year 1950, which would seem logical. Well, it did, mathematically and in the calendar, but in this planet’s cultural history, as relevant to SF, it ended in 1945, with the two atom bombs (“Einstein’s monsters”, as Martin Amis, son of Kingsley Amis, so aptly and wonderfully calls them) thrown on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These two nuclear explosions proved that Einstein is right and that the formula $E = mc^2$ is true. Even the most jaded and most authoritative skeptics had now to admit; truth was rammed right through their stagnant brains with the fierce force of ultra-heated atomic blasts. These two bombs saved the lives of some ten million Japanese civilians who would have died if the war had continued to be dragged fanatically across the largest, most populous Japanese islands; plus the lives of perhaps a million American soldiers. Science fiction, too, was proved, with this same tragic but necessary event, to be right. And, the logical sequence of thought, after August 1945, was: if the SF people were so right about the atom bomb, what else did they predict accurately: telepathy? aliens? colonization of the Moon and planets? – nuclear holocaust?

Besides, science in Victorian times was basically clear and comprehensible to practically every gentleman if he cared to devote sufficient time to it; Einstein’s theory of relativity is not such. It is an essentially different *kind* of thing. It is written basically in the language of mathematics. You have to be a genius of mathematics to really follow and understand relativity. But even the university professors of theoretical physics find theory of relativity very hard to believe because it is so full of paradoxes and so contrary to human, intuitive, common sense. It is unbelievable. So is much of quantum physics. And so is what the astronomer Edwin Hubble did with cosmology. Together, the relativity, the quantum physics, and the Big Bang theory produced a fundamental re-mystification of science: these teachings are one connected land of many marvels, a vast field of *incredible* but many-times-proven truths about

Nature. Well, if some scientific truths are so fantastic, but true nevertheless, then which other fantastic, SF things might soon prove to be true?

In Yugoslavia, in the first few years after 1945, SF was effectively prohibited because it was seen as something mainly American and capitalist: capitalist war-mongering anti-communist propaganda. But Soviet, communist SF, especially by Aleksandar Belyayev, was allowed: oh, the grand scientific advances of communism. *Aelita* was already obsolete, though, it was already for the Kinoteka (film museum). But, around 1955 perhaps, when I was a young boy, the ideological barrier thinned, there was a liberalization, Yugoslavia became “a little America” of the communist world, and the communists, the Party, allowed us to watch, in cinema (and on black-and-white TV, as soon as it was introduced; and it was introduced, quickly, catching up with the world) various SF movies. This was not forbidden. So, we watched, in amazement and delight, *Forbidden Planet* in 1957 I think, and we were absolutely taken by it, entranced. *This Island Earth*, a little earlier, was seen as kitsch, but very interesting and attractive kitsch with scary moments. Then, *Time Machine*, arriving in Serbia perhaps in 1961, and becoming a smashing hit, vastly popular among some categories of population. With Rod Steiger as the adventurous but reasonable and composed, very decent and normal Victorian gentleman (as Time Traveler), and with the young, pretty Ivette Mimieux, who did not talk much (as Weena). Crucially, the Yugoslav communists allowed us to hear the original dialogues, in English, although it was the language of their political enemies (capitalism, free elections). So we could *hear* the true sound, not moribund falsifications by local speakers; and we had the translation titled in; dubbing a movie into a local language, which is still done in some countries today, is a vast crime against culture and art, a disgusting and essentially Nazi stupidity, chauvinistic and paranoid, except in one case – when kids who watch cartoons are so small that they simply *cannot read* the titled translation. Or when the entire population is illiterate, but, then, keeping your entire population (or, your women) in illiteracy is Nazi indeed. In Yugoslavia (and Serbia was the main part of it), we saw and *heard* the world’s best science fiction movies soon after they were premiered in Hollywood. And we loved them, and America seemed the bastion of our future liberty and prosperity, and we learned English, and we developed our own SF fandom. The German films about Doctor Mabuse, though with all the pre-war respectability of Fritz Lang, were sort of noticed but seen as murky and kitschy, and irrelevant and unconvincing.

(There was a something that could be, remotely, called science fiction: a political-propagandic film, full-length, expensive, and fully supported by the

regime; a communist anti-West pamphlet, the film *War*, which is *Rat* in Serbian, directed in 1960 by Veljko Bulajić; I was ten years old then, and I watched, one evening, at Tašmajdan park in the center of Beograd, the filming, the column of trucks loaded with wooden nuclear rockets pointing up into the sky, etc. In the film, evil capitalists prepare the nuclear missiles, which we see, and fire them, and there is the nuclear holocaust, and the explosions ruin the capitalists also. But it was never promoted as SF, nor did the SF people in Yugoslavia notice it as such, and, in any case, it was so vastly unsuccessful and simply bad that it flopped instantly and was never again heard of; I think the regime was embarrassed with it, and placed it into an oblivion “bunker” somewhere.)

Then, a fantastic supernova in movie history, surely one of the ten best and greatest films ever made, 2001: A Space Odyssey! Definitely the most serious film ever made about God (the real, scientifically real, true God, if he exists). We were so carried away by it, and for good reason, too. I know a fan who admits that he watched it a dozen times; today he is, like me, a professor at a university. But, a big mistake: we had a vague feeling that there would be many more SF triumphs of that magnitude, a steady succession of films of such quality – there could not be, of course. *Star Wars* came, about the year 1978, to us, I seem to recollect, and it was enormously “filmic”, as the Serbs say (which means, “possessing the characteristic, specific movie qualities, in great quantity; suitable and appropriate to be a *film*, not a novel etc.; qualities of visual appearance, motion, etc.), but after a while it was diagnosed, in fandom, to be a fantasy, a fairy tale, with strong SF elements, but not predominantly SF. And the *Star Trek*! On TV, five nights a week. Millions loved it, in Yugoslavia.

In the second generation of *Star Trek*, we saw Tasha Yar, the Russian girl (played by Denise Crosby) as practically our own, almost a Serbian girl.

In the episode “The Skin of Evil”, Tasha was killed in the line of duty on a far planet. At that time, when this was shown in Serbia, I was a professor of English in the Tenth Belgrade Gymnasium (Deseta beogradska gimnazija), where I worked for 25 years continually. And, one morning, maybe five different students approached me, at one class or another, or in the corridors, saying, in a dismayed and sad tone, “Teacher! Teacher! Have you heard? Tasha Yar got killed!” (“Poginula Taša Jar!”) Yes, *Star Trek* was *that* popular. It was offering to us Serbs a positive, morally clean and sane, rational future, in which there was a place for us, too. Years passed, and we do not see America in such a positive light now. Nevertheless, today there are still, somewhere in Serbia, about twelve or fifteen lieutenants of the Star Fleet of the 24th centu-

ry, elevated into this rank by Tasha Yar herself. Fans, of course. Only fans. But in their hearts they are centuries in the future and up in space. So, the popularity of *Star Trek* is not entirely dead. Not yet.

Serbs translated and read, after 1960, hundreds of best American and a few British and French etc., SF novels, and thousands of best SF stories, and they have read many other stories in English directly, without translation, but, despite all this avalanche of high-quality SF literature, Serbs never wrote a truly good SF novel.² Not one. But they did write some one hundred SF stories (short, medium, and novellas) of top quality, really excellent, by highest world standards. And they wrote some hundreds of other SF stories, of more modest quality. You would, hence, expect that they would make at least some graceful efforts in SF films, but no, it never happened. No SF film worthy of mention was ever made in Serbia (But there were perhaps two or three SF films, but really parodies, unsuccessful, miserable, and unattractive spoofs of SF, in Croatia, which was then part of Yugoslavia.). Serbian non-achievement in the SF film area was total, and remains total, except for the animated (cartoon) film, but not for children really, about the future Belgrade, titled “Technotise: Edith and Me”, made by the artist Aleksa Gajić in the autumn of 2009.

That SF films are not made today, when science fiction has (worldwide) cooled so much and lost perhaps 90% of the popularity and urgency that it once had, may be understandable. These our first years of the 21st century are definitely not a great time for science fiction, not in Serbia and not in America either, because there have been so many disappointments. Aliens and UFOs did not come. We did not discover them in the cosmos either, and signals did not arrive. Nuclear holocaust did not happen, and is not likely now; the only likely thing is that Iran will drop a nuke or two on Israel some years from now and then the Americans will destroy Iran, but that will be a strictly local nuclear exchange, limited, not a global holocaust (goodbye, *Dr. Strangelove*.) Telepathy and other forms of ESP do not work: another dud. We have not concreted and asphalted the entire 310 million square kilometers of land on this planet, and the rivers and oceans are not half-acid and half-poison (as in the story “The Wind and the Rain” by Robert Silverberg, in 1973); quite the contrary: all decent countries today have strict ecological

² And, be it mentioned, the Serbian author Dr. Zoran A. Živković (Živković) has distanced himself from the SF genre, resolutely, repeatedly, categorically, and completely. For now. But “you never forget your first love” (“prva ljubav zaborava nema”) and who knows how his feelings might turn some distant day in the future.

laws, and some even respect them. Yet another dud then. Most of the engines of science fiction have shut themselves down. Space environment is *not* healthy (goodbye, story “Death and the Senator” by Arthur C. Clarke), nor industrially productive (goodbye, asteroid mining), and space travel with these chemical rockets is so expensive, difficult, and risky, that we are *not* going to export millions of people into space. Not until we discover anti-gravity; then we *will* go, actually, but that’s not soon, that’s in some distant future. On the other hand, some amazing things did happen in the real world, although we in science fiction have not expected and not foreseen them: mobile phones (“cell phones”) happened, a billion of them now on the planet, so, almost anybody can talk to anybody any time at any place, almost an equivalent of telepathy; and, a flat amazement, home computers happened, the PCs and others, and laptops etc., very powerful and sophisticated, in at least a billion homes and offices and travel bags today, and most of them connected by Internet (goodbye, the one-and-only HAL, whose bugs no one could foresee, in *2001: A Space Odyssey*). Real life bypassed us, us SF people, and left us to stare, shocked, at the things we failed to predict. Of course, some of those disappointments are not *ethically* disappointments at all, they are major tragedies avoided, and avoided partly because SF was one of the loud voices in the chorus *warning* the world about such dangers, but – ethics or no – those big events *did not happen*, and probably will not happen, and, in consequence, those big engines of SF are, in fact, shut down now (though not quite completely).

But why were SF films not made in Serbia when the genre was at its peak?

We cannot be sure, but there could be several possible important reasons. One reason was the communist method of financing and producing films, by companies State-owned, Party-controlled, and utterly intrigue- and corruption- and nepotism-riddled. Another reason was the huge superiority of the American film industry, the notorious giant sometimes called “Hollywood”: who could compete with the Yankees? Could the West Germans? Yet another reason was the obvious likelihood that advanced-science things would happen in advanced-science countries, in America (that means: USA) first of all, with maybe Japan as distant second possibility, but surely not in Albania and not in Serbia either. There is even a law, here, formulated by Dr. Zoran A. Živković, and known in fandom as “the Živković law” or “Zoran’s law” (“Zoranov zakon”), which says: “Flying saucers do not land in Lajkovac”. This refers to a small Serbian village, that actually exists, called Lajkovac (pronounced La-y-ko-vatz), symbolically and with a benevolent smile taken

by Zoran to mean “a place of totally traditional, totally Serbian folklore-dressed peasants”.³

The Albanian version, if I were to formulate it for the Albanian SF fans (with all due respect to them), would have to be something like: “Flying saucers do not land in Pishkopeya”.

You get the idea.

A deep, hidden reason might be that Serbs never did see themselves as residents of the future centuries; it is not clear what a specifically *Serbian* future might consist of (as distinct from Bulgarian, Croatian, etc.); somehow, it seems that all of the ethnic essence of *srpstvo* (a word probably very hard to pronounce in English because of 6 consonants pressed next to each other; it translates as “Serb-ness”, “Serbianity”, or “Serb-dom”) is entirely in the past, with *šajkača* cap and *opanak* shoes, and not in the future. This may indeed be the fundamental reason for the 60 vacuum years in the history of Serbian SF literature: even then, in 1902, Serbs knew this, and did not want to have eyes forward, they wanted to have eyes only on their back.

I do not know about the German fans, or French, etc., but to a modern young Serb today, in the year 2009, it probably is pretty clear that a Serbian astronaut would have to dress modern and speak English. Our immigration into the future would be basically something like our immigration into the United States of America. Into assimilation. Loss of identity. And who is much keen on or delighted about that?

Besides, many Serbs do not see America, now, as friendly at all, or a bastion of liberty, or honesty, or normalcy. Perhaps we have merely matured. Or perhaps America has changed. Work seems to be in full swing now, with American involvement, on the disuniting and abolishing Serbia as a State. Future is not smiling at Serbs. If Serbia is abolished by NATO one day, the survivors will be assimilated and their great-grandchildren will be citizens of the world, and who is so delighted about that? Again, loss of identity and heritage. And much loss of life, again.

What future do we have?

³ Why did he choose Lajkovac and not some other among hundreds of villages here? Well, ask him, but my guess would be he did so because of a particular folk humorous song, quite popular, “Mile goes along the Lajkovac railway tracks” (“Ide Mile lajkovačkom prugom”) ... and his cigar is burning, etc., which is by many felt to be an extra-ultra-folkish silly kind of thing, the folksiest and smileyest you can get in Serbian farmers’ music.

What do you expect of Serbian science fiction? A film about *American* astronauts? Why would we make that? But, interestingly, special effects in *Superman 1* were created by a Serb, Zoran Perišić, and he even got an Oscar for that, in 1979. But he worked there, not here; across the pond, for them.

But in practical terms, the obvious main reason is the dismal failure of those who were supposed to write the scenarios. There, the debacle was complete. Several fantasy films were made in Serbia since 1945, with some few elements of science fiction; mainly, the films involved ghosts in the secret passages under the main location of medieval and ancient heritage in Beograd (Belgrade), and that is the 9-hectare fortress Kalemegdan, of course; but most of these films were not good, and in any case they were not SF. The one bright exception is the fantasy film (definitely not SF!) *The Get-together Center* (*Sabirni centar*, pronounced tz-entar) (1989) written by Dušan Kovačević, directed by Goran Marković, with its unforgettable lamenting song of the dead, the elegy, the dirge, at the end, with which they say goodbye to life and to their country, Serbia; a vast desperate cry from the collective Id of an unlucky nation. *Sabirni centar* has been re-played on various TV channels here so many times that it has practically worn a rut in the air by now. It is probably the best Serbian film of all times. And, so appropriate.

There was an attempt at making a TV SF series in Novi Sad, and one episode of it was actually aired on 27 November 1994, touted in the press as “*Twilight Zone* in the Yu-way” (meaning, Yugoslav way); written and directed by Milorad Milinković, but it mainly consisted of young people, camera on the shoulder, tottering randomly amongst the multi-story apartment buildings (*soliteri* buildings) in modern new suburbs of Novi Sad, and his scenario was so drastically unsuccessful, so about nothing, that the thing was discontinued and no new attempt was ever made.

These last few years, since 2000, the students of the various film academies in Serbia sometimes do take their own electronic camera on the shoulder, for practice, and similarly totter through some cellar, then from a dark corner somebody jumps at the camera exclaiming “Booo!”, we see a body splashed with ketchup, and so a horror film (not SF), lasting maybe 3 minutes, is completed; wow; at zero cost, except for the bottle of ketchup; entire *festivals* of such attempts (or not much better) have been made, here, but the results are almost nothing.

Nor do we see anything of much higher quality on the horizon, at this moment. (Except the above-mentioned cartoon.)

So the great historical torrent of American science fiction arose, and roared past us, and reached such enormous world fame, we watched, then it

subsided, and now it is down to remakes of *Time Machine*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *War of the Worlds*, definitely an American SF ebb, and one whole era is over, and the Serbian film-makers were not defeated, no, no... they never even stepped into the arena. They never competed.