

BOOK REVIEW: John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), xi + 183 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-8195-6874-8 (PB) \$24.95 / ISBN-13: 978-0-8195-6873-1 (HB) \$70. [Keith Williams]

In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, John Rieder has produced a commendably readable and intellectually robust contribution to the emerging field of ‘postcolonial’ studies in science fiction. Rieder employs interdisciplinary theory (from Derrida, Jameson, Said, Žižek, etc.) to best advantage and with minimal jargonising. His book complements, but is also independent of Patricia Kerslake’s recent *Science Fiction and Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007). They represent an important growth area, which reassesses the role and value of SF in cultural history, particularly in its nineteenth-century proto-form as the scientific romance. Both these studies also understandably recognise Wells’s centrality to this genre of ‘cognitive estrangement’ (as Darko Suvin famously defined it), in this respect as in so many others.

Earlier studies such as Karl S. Guthke’s monumental, *Imagining Other Worlds* (1990) show that particularly in the form of Victorian space exploration fiction, you can literally witness the new genre budding off from the established ‘ripping’ colonial adventure yarn.¹ Wells’s *First Men in the Moon* (1901), with its tension between Cavor’s scientific interest in understanding the Selenites and Bedford’s jingoistic drive to exploit another new world by force, is a clear satirical extrapolation of such origins. However, Rieder’s book starts from the key premise that *all* SF from this period is, consciously or not, imbued with the colonial discourse of ‘Social Darwinism’ drawn from anthropology and evolutionary theory, though some texts may, consciously or unconsciously, challenge and critique its dehumanising assumptions more than others. This is not simply a case

¹ Karl S. Guthke, *Imagining Other Worlds From the Copernican Revolution to Modern Science Fiction*, trans. Helen Atkins (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

of colonialism being SF's 'hidden truth', but 'part of the genre's texture, a persistent, important component of its displaced references to history, its engagement in ideological production, and its construction of the possible and the imaginable.' (Rieder, 15) Paradoxically, the emergent genre's imagined worlds acted out and made critically visible the 'ideological fantasies' (Žižek) and duplicitous 'misrecognitions' which both drove and appeared to justify colonial practices by attaining the status of scientific 'truth'. Utopian and satirical depictions of encounters with other peoples form a major part of SF's prehistory, but colonialism's most fervid period in the 1890s also marks the emergence of its key tropes, predominantly in countries most involved in imperial projects such as France and Britain, then later Germany, Russia and the US, as Rieder points out. These constitute a crucial flipside to imperial nations' official narratives of progress and sense of 'otherness', not least because in the play of difference, 'The double-edged effect of the exotic – as a means of gratifying familiar appetites and as a challenge to one's sense of the proper or the natural – pervades early science fiction' (4). Hence the loose cluster of motifs which eventually coalesced into a recognisable genre represent 'ways of grasping the social consequences of colonialism, including the fantastic appropriation and rationalization of unevenly distributed colonial wealth...the racist ideologies that enabled colonial exploitation, and the cognitive impact of radical cultural differences on the home culture. These range from triumphal fantasies of appropriating land, power, sex, and treasure in tales of exploration and adventure, to nightmarish reversals of the position of colonizer and colonized in tales of invasion and apocalypse.' Similarly, the pervasive figures of the alien, 'beast man', or the hyper-evolved (post)human are all explicable in terms of the genre's 'proximity to colonial ideology' and its racialized pseudo-science (21).

In terms of literary material, Kerslake's study is less restricted to an Anglo-American focus. Compared to hers, perhaps the one major lost opportunity in Rieder's otherwise powerful account is his failure to consider German writer Kurd Lasswitz's take on Wilhelminian imperialism, *Auf zwei Planeten (Two Planets)* (1897) alongside Wells. Nevertheless, this symptomatic counterpart to his satire of its rival Great Power in *The War of the Worlds* fits so well into many aspects of Rieder's argument which complement his use of Wells.² For example his point that colonialism's fantasy of its missionary intent 'posits as a matter of faith that the goodness of this change is ultimately self-evident even to those who may appear to suffer from the process, and, keeping step with racist ideology, finds confirmation of their humanity itself in their recognition of the superiority of the colonizer's truth over their native falsehood.' (31) Lasswitz's novel appeared synchronically with the serialisation of *The War of the Worlds* in *Pearson's Magazine*. Wells's

² Kerslake's chapter comparing Wells and Lasswitz is expanded from her essay which appeared as 'Moments of Empire: Perceptions of Kurt[sic] Lasswitz and H.G. Wells', *The Wellsian*, 25 (2002), 25-38.

take is based on imperial domination in its most extreme form – i.e. extermination of humanity by advanced weaponry of mass destruction, except for those reserved as food supply; *Two Planets*, on a subtler critique of the complementary process of hegemony (to use Antonio Gramsci's political distinction). Hegemony operated alongside the use of force, but also sought to render violence routinely unnecessary by ideological control. In Lasswitz it is satirised as the notion of the 'little green man's burden', if you like. Hence his Martians 'come in peace' and seek to persuade Earthlings of the mutual benefits of economic collaboration and cultural assimilation. Their humanoid appearance also allows them to model a future utopian community, into which Earthlings might evolve on an accelerated basis precisely as subjects of colonial intervention. On the other hand, the Martians' continued recognition that their 'primitive' dependents deserve to be treated as human like themselves is contingent on the degree to which Earthlings show sufficient rationality to accede to Martian superiority in their own best interest; their 'perverse' failure to do so on the grounds of self-determination, then 'justifies' overwhelming Martian force and, ironically, the subsequent corruption of the aliens' ethically disinterested mission.

Nevertheless, Rieder recognises the Wellsian canon as instrumental in making visible many other ideological fantasies of terrestrial colonialism. In the nineteenth century, Rieder argues, 'anachronism is the mark of anthropological difference' (5), so that 'the relation of the colonizing societies to the colonized ones is that of the developed, modern present to its own undeveloped, primitive past' (30). As Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger puts it in *The Lost World* (1912), they were 'our contemporary ancestors'. Hence in colonial geography other cultures are often deemed to be at more primitive stages of evolution and naturally less fitted for survival, making time travel another key feature of colonial ideology, which coincides with Wells's 1895 mechanization of the topos. Hence: 'Stories of time travel often explore the abstract scientific question of the limits of human cultural malleability; and, even more than that, ideas about progress and its dark opposite, degeneration...the problems of interpretation that confront time-travellers are entangled with Western understanding of non-Western cultures, and constitute one more way that colonialism is woven into the texture of early science fiction' (76). This becomes critically clear when read back through echoes of time-machine imagery in texts such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Marlowe's voyage in space transmutes as a voyage back into the human past, but not in his case, one in which the missionary assumptions of the imperial present survive intact. Moreover, Rieder suggests the Time Traveller's conflicted position in relation to the bifurcated post-humanity he encounters – pitched uncertainly between parasitic Eloi and industrious Morlocks – can only be fully understood by placing the contradictions of the class-system of Wells's time into the ethical complex of Britain's colonial enterprise. Hence its proletariat at home are ironically poised between their upper-class exploiters and their own counterparts in subject nations abroad.

The War of the Worlds is also a prime example of the ‘double-edged’ potential of the ‘colonial gaze’, as Rieder calls it (7), which defined the exoticism and legitimated treatment of the imperial other. Famously, its narrator reverses its cognitive and ethical perspective, to upset the whole imperial paradigm of knowledge and control. His vision oscillates ambiguously between the extra-terrestrial gaze of the conquering Martians, which is both that of advanced telecommunications and puts human activity ruthlessly under the microscope, and that of their once globally supreme British victims. The latter now experience the same genocidal treatment terrestrial imperialists meted out to their own ‘inferior races’, through a mirror image of the same technological and military asymmetry. Hence *The War of the Worlds* also reflects the fact that if SF emerged in the context of industrial development in Western economies, ‘its corresponding international context was the imperial competition that gave birth to the first modern arms race’ (28). Texts such as *The War of the Worlds*, with their background in the invasion novel tradition, thus epitomise the colonial implications of SF’s fascination with technological innovation in a world of uneven material and cultural distribution:

Behind the anxieties of competition between capitalist corporations and imperialist governments in stories of marvellous invention, lurks the possibility of finding oneself reduced by someone else’s progress to the helplessness of those who are unable to inhabit the present fully, and whose continued existence on terms other than those of the conquerors has been rendered an archaism and anomaly...as in other contexts, the history, ideology, and discourses of colonialism dovetail with the crucial, double perspective that runs throughout the genre: on the one hand, the wondrous exploitation of the new and the marvellous encounter with the strange, but on the other, the post-apocalyptic vision of a world gone disastrously wrong.’ (32-3)

Rieder argues that there is no better example of SF embodying what Žižek calls ‘the *mise en scène*’ of ideological fantasy ‘*at work in the production of social reality itself*’ (Žižek’s emphasis quoted by Rieder, 30), than Wells’s investigation of racism in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), especially as revealed by naked stereotyping in the early drafts of the text. In his attempts to civilise his animal subjects by vivisection, what Rieder calls Moreau ‘scientific colony’ (104) parodies colonialists’ belief in their own god-given ability to bring up to evolutionary speed those they deemed less human or more savage than ourselves, but also articulates their own anxieties about the contradictions of their project. The ironic flipside of the animalisation of ‘inferior races’ in SF, according to

Rieder, is the ethical and bodily monstrosity of the hyper-evolved colonist, as prototyped again by Wells's Martians. Once humanoid, they have artificially transformed themselves into little more than gigantic brains, operating through 'cyborgian' interface with their repertoire of machines. In that sense SF's 'Aliens R Us', the image of the imperialising self reflected in the nightmare extra-terrestrial 'other'. Thus it destabilises both sides of colonialism's hierarchical opposition between civilisation and savagery, nature and culture, progress and degeneration.

The War of the Worlds is also a template for the anxieties colonial projects 'generated in the homelands', since SF's 'visions of catastrophe appear in large part to be the symmetrical opposites of colonial ideology's fantasies of appropriation' and national destiny (123). In effect, they invert relations between colonized margin and imperial centre. Hence their imaginary effects are not just 'morbid nightmares' peculiar to the genre, but reflect the historical record of '[e]nvironmental devastation, species extinction, enslavement, plague and genocide' transcribed from experience of contact with non-European peoples (124). However, Wellsians may take issue with Rieder's conclusion that *The War of the Worlds*'s apparently providential ending shows that Wells was ultimately unable to extricate himself from the matrix of national-imperial thinking which he otherwise critiques. Arguably, Rieder devalues the novel's imaginative prevision of a future 'postcolonial' modernity based on a genuine 'commonweal of mankind'?

Though most of his nineteenth-century examples are British, Rieder very properly recognises that US take-over of the global imperial baton in the twentieth century can already be seen in American responses to *The War of the Worlds* and their presumption of a kind of moral immunity to Wells's reflexively satirical subtext. Symptomatic in this respect is Garret P. Serviss's *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1898). This celebrated American scientific know-how in carrying the fight back to the invaders' home planet and, in the process, asserted the ascendant superpower's political hegemony over this one. Tracing the ironies of this line of descent from *The War of the Worlds*'s imaginative DNA, Rieder then strikes out boldly against the grain of traditional interpretations of US paranoid SF, with its insidious motif of invasion not by military force, but by infiltration such as John W. Campbell's 'Who Goes There?' (1938) and Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1955). The classic Cold War reading is of Communist indoctrination in which parasitic alien organisms, cultivated from *The War of the Worlds*'s metaphor of contagion, convert human individuals into totalitarian duplicates of themselves. Instead Rieder sees double-edged parables inextricable from the US's own post-WWII role in exporting an 'Empire of the Mind' (to borrow Churchill's phrase). Consequently, cultural identity and consumer choice are co-opted though new forms of multi-national capitalism and broadcast media with globalizing reach. As in Henry Kuttner and Katherine L. Moore's 'Vintage Season' (1946), 'This cultural mechanism ...comes to the foreground of the

postcolonial invasion plot, which consistently centers on the invaders' redefinition of the norm and their consequent pre-emption or usurpation of their victims' desire.' (152)

In conclusion, 'pioneering' may be too ethically contaminated as a term to employ in a postcolonial context for praising Rieder's achievement, but his outstanding book will undoubtedly serve as a key guide for future work in this area. One final regrettable note, however: like so many US academics, Rieder tends to elide differences between Britain and England, using the terms as if they were unproblematically interchangeable, but perhaps that is an unquiet aspect of 'pre-colonial' history best left unstirred here?