Babel Fish Urgently Needed: *Lingua Cosmica*, or the Difficulties of Accounting for the Transnational Traditions in Science Fiction Using English

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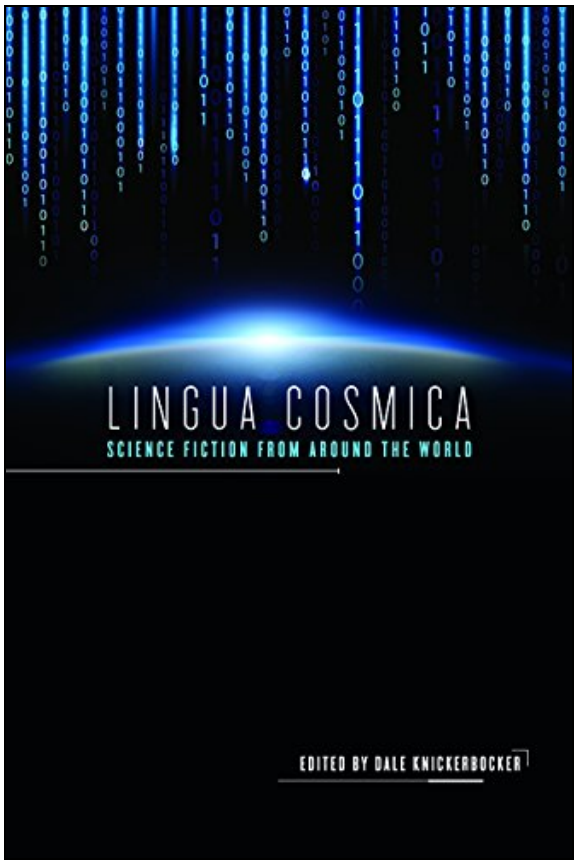

Dale Knickerbocker (ed.)
Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from around the World
Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018
236 p.

The title of Dale Knickerbocker's edited volume *Lingua Cosmica* most likely alludes to Lincos, an artificial language created in the late 1950s by Dr. Hans Freudenthal, a German-born Dutch mathematician, for the purpose of communication with any extraterrestrial species we might contact.[1] Dr. Freudenthal must have been a great optimist, for the likelihood of synthetizing all human languages into something an alien being might grasp is certainly low. L.L. Zamenhof, the Polish ophthalmologist who invented Esperanto in the 1880s,[2] expressed in the very name of his language —which translates roughly as 'the one who expects'— the slightly less ambitious hope that all humans might one day understand each other.

Neither Esperanto nor any other artificial language, as we know, has become widespread. Instead, English has become the world's *lingua franca* replacing French, which used to be the main language of international

[1] See *Lincos: Design of a Language for Cosmic Intercourse*. Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1960.

[2] See his volume *Dr. Esperanto's International Language* (original title *Международный язык*; first published in Warsaw, then part of the Russian Empire by Chaim Kelter, 1887). There in an English translation by Richard Henry Geoghegan (Seattle, WA: Biblioteko Culbert, 2009).

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diplomacy and of the upper-class European circles (in the 19th century and early 20th century). We tend to forget, however, that the dominance of the English language is a relatively recent phenomenon and far more limited than we assume. English started being spoken massively by effect of the British colonization of many areas of the Earth, mostly throughout the 19th century, but it only became almost compulsory to all humans because of the new Western leadership assumed by the United States after World War II. Still, as Umberto Eco is said to have observed, English is not the most spoken language all over the world: that honour falls to 'bad English'.[3]

Anglophone civilization, composed of individuals who are mostly monolingual speakers of English with little inclination (or need) to learn other languages, has given us two main solutions to the problem of interlinguistic communication: computers (Google's translator, a self-learning A.I., is nonetheless still far from being proficient) and Douglas Adams's Babel fish in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979). This alien creature, "small, yellow, leech-like — and probably the oddest thing in the universe" works by feeding on "brain wave energy"; "the practical upshot" of its habits is that if you insert a Babel fish in your ear, "you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language". The fish is, in short, a living universal translator which "by effectively removing all barriers to communication between different cultures and races, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation".[4] Adams's negative observation is supposed to be humorous but it hints at how much bloodshed could have been avoided with better interpersonal communication. Or not necessarily, since people also manage not to communicate with each other even when speaking the same language.

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In the absence, then, of a human-made digital device or alien organic creature that can help us overcome the formidable obstacle of language, *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from around the World* uses English to describe the beauties of science fiction written originally in other languages, but mostly still untranslated. "Not only does the translation river run only in one direction", editor Dale Knickerbocker writes in the Introduction, "it tends to drown local authors,

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[3] See Eco's fascinating *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea* (1993, translated by James Fentress as *The Search for the Perfect Language*, London: Fontana, 1997).

[4] The quotations are not from the novel but from the radio show that inspired it: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Fit the First*, BBC Radio 4, 8 March 1978 (broadcast date). See also http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/hitchhikers/guide/babelfish.shtml.

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who find it difficult to publish their work (much less have it translated into English), as local thirst has already been quenched by imports" (vii). The aim of his volume is, therefore, to elicit the curiosity of its Anglophone academic readers (for this is an academic volume) about foreign-language science fiction and thus increase the demand for translation into English, specially of the works by the eleven major authors celebrated by the international contributors. The problem is that although *Lingua Cosmica* is an admirable book as regards its purpose and execution it is also a frustrating volume: readers are unlikely to learn another language to enjoy the science fiction written in it, whereas the flow of translation into English remains a mere trickle rather than a 'river'.[5]

Knickerbocker expresses his own frustrations as editor, beginning with the difficulties to find expert scholars outside what he calls the 'Anglophone axis' (the USA, the UK, and Canada), who were "willing to write the essay in English" (xi). I myself faced a similar difficulty when editing the monographic issue on Spanish science fiction for *Science Fiction Studies*[6] whose Spanish version in offered in this issue of *Hélice*. I found three possible solutions: most authors wrote their article in English (and have self-translated now into Spanish), others used translation services, and one accepted my suggestion of accepting as co-author a scholar specialising in English Studies, who acted as translator at no cost. The worst option was using professional translators, which is very expensive and does not guarantee, as it happened, the use of the right academic register. Co-authorship worked much better. In Knickerbocker's volume all articles have been written originally in English; still, some contributors, though born elsewhere, work in the Anglophone axis, while others are American specialists in foreign sf. It is in any case important to note that the bibliographies incorporate many foreign-language sources (Frelik offers an impressive array of Polish sources). This is extremely important, for we all have the very bad habit of not quoting our peers outside the Anglophone axis, thus making our work invisible at an international level.

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Knickerbocker's task as editor is, thus, limited by the scholarly command of academic English around the world but also, he explains, by the impossibility of recruiting specialists in certain areas of expertise. He bemoans the absence from his volume of articles on Brazilian and Bengali-language Indian science fiction (seemingly commissioned but not delivered for whatever reasons) and the impossibility of covering areas such as the Middle East or sub-Saharan Africa, in any of its languages. This means that *Lingua Cosmica* is not the volume its editor set out to produce but the result of a series of inevitable linguistic limitations, which condition our collective academic work in science fiction and in any other area.

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[5] See Rachel Cordasco's wonderful resource, *Speculative Fiction in Translation* (https://www.sfintranslation.com/). For translations into Spanish check the equally excellent *Tercera Fundación* website (https://tercerafundacion.net/).

[6] See *Science Fiction Studies*, #132 (Volume 44, Part 2), July 2017, co-edited with Fernando Ángel Moreno, https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/covers/cov132.htm.

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Spanish-language science fiction is represented by Juan Carlos Toledano Redondo's article on Cuban writer Daína Chaviano and by Yolanda Molina-Gavilán's work on Argentinian author Angélica Gorodischer.

These limitations have direct consequences, logically, in the method used to articulate the volume. The chapters focus, as noted, each on a major author, rather than on the science fiction of a specific nation or language. In the end, though, the balance thus achieved is remarkably good but less than perfect. Spanish-language science fiction is represented by Juan Carlos Toledano Redondo's article on Cuban writer Daína Chaviano and by Yolanda Molina-Gavilán's work on Argentinian author Angélica Gorodischer. Both Toledano and Molina-Gavilán are scholars born in Spain, but Spanish science fiction (meaning that of Spain in Europe) is not represented in the volume. In contrast, Francophone science fiction is represented by Natacha Vas-Deyres's study of French author Jean-Claude Dunyach, and by Amy J. Ranson's reading of Laurent McAllister's fiction, written in Québécois French (McAllister is in fact the fusion of authors Yves Meynard and Jean-Louis Trudel). Québec is the only nation without a state present in the volume but, still, its science fiction is written in French, a major world language —a situation very different for instance from that of Catalan sf.

Knickerbocker, obviously, does not want to give language or nationality a prominent position, which is why the chapters are arranged following the alphabetical order of the author's surname. However, there are important political reasons which cause some languages to be placed above others and these should not be ignored. Liu Cixin's conquest of the Hugo Award for *The Three Body Problem* in 2015 is a significant instance of the power shifts: it makes sense for a Chinese novel to be welcome into the select club of the best sf since world leadership is fast moving into Chinese hands. What would have been truly surprising is that a novel written originally in the language of a less powerful state or stateless nation would have received that award. Despite this, national power is an issue overlooked in Mingwei Song's otherwise quite comprehensive chapter on Liu Cixin and Chinese sf.[7]

The other languages present in *Lingua Cosmica* are Polish (with Paweł Frelik's analysis of Jacek Dukaj), German (with Vibeke Rützou Petersen's essay on Andreas Eschbach), Japanese (Tatsumi Takayuki's passionate piece on Sakyo Komatsu), Finnish (with Hanna-Riikka Roine and Hanna Samola's joint chapter on Johanna Sinnisalo), Russian (with Yvonne Howell's text on Arkady and Boris Strugatsky), and... English.

If the presence of English is problematic enough in a volume about science fiction which can only be accessed through translation by Anglo-American readers, Alexis Brooks de Vita's focus on Olatunde Osunsanmi is unequivocally controversial.

[7] Song does not consider the linguistic diversity of China, calling the language which Cixin uses 'Chinese', rather than Mandarin. I am not suggesting, in any case, that *The Three Body Problem* won the Hugo *because* it is a Chinese novel; what I suggest is that this is an important factor.

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English-language science fiction outside the Anglophone axis need not be excluded, if we think of authors less known to UK and USA readers (or to Canadians). Australian sf writer Greg Egan, or South-African multi-genre novelist Lauren Beukes, come to mind immediately as good subjects for a possible chapter. They are both, however, white and, seemingly, Knickerbocker wished to include a black African author —or at least one that, though born in axis countries could claim African ancestry.

It might appear in this case that Nnedi Okorafor, the Nigerian-American writer of fantasy and science fiction, was the perfect choice. Instead, de Vita deals with "American-born, Nigerian-identified Olatunde Osunsanmi", a man who "has written and directed films that might be classified as traditional European/American sf" (151), among them *The Fourth Kind* (2009). De Vita's article is based on Mark Dery's well-known suggestion that Africa lacks a significant science-fiction tradition because of the horrors of slavery; as de Vita paraphrases, African-Americans "are, historically, and in reality, descendants of people who were abducted by aliens" (152).[8] This is a totally valid point, confirmed by the title of Sir Harry H. Johnston's *A History of the Colonization of Africa by Alien Races*, which is not at all science fiction, but a best-selling propagandistic essay published in 1899 by this prominent British racist explorer and colonizer.[9]

The problem is that de Vita bases her argumentation in defence of Osumsanmi's *The Fourth Kind* on two debateable premises. One is that critics of European descent have unfairly praised Neil Blomkamp's *District 9* but derided *The Fourth Kind* because whites support the work of other whites but misjudge the work of non-white directors. This is, implicitly, a racist comment, from my own white European point of view, as it supposes a general white inability to transcend race barriers which I'd like to challenge. The other premise is that Osumsanmi's film manages to create some form of syncretism in which alien abduction (of white people in Alaska!) metaphorically stands in for African abduction in Transatlantic Human Trade. "Traditionally", de Vita writes, "Nigerian metaphysical or supernatural metaphors, such as those attached to the filmic tropes of the owl, its coloring, and abducted victim's blindness, and the protagonist's imprisonment, may benefit from cross-cultural translation" (168). But how can average spectators catch cultural allusions of this kind to Nigerian culture? How, if at all, does the American-Nigerian director make sure his public grasp them? If I have stopped to consider this (overlong) chapter in more detail this is because it works as a counterexample of what *Lingua Cosmica* is trying to achieve. It would have been perhaps more desirable to include either a chapter on Okorafor, or deal with Ethiopian-Spanish post-apocalyptic sf film *Crumbs* (2015), which is set in Africa and spoken in Amharic and Afrikaans.

Other issues are worth raising. *Lingua Cosmica* addresses readers very much aware that science fiction is a cultural product born in their nations, mainly the United States and the United Kingdom. Often, the contributors use comparisons to convince their target readers that the foreign writer analysed is a first-rank sf author. The problem is how these comparisons are built. Frelik writes that "Like William Gibson, China Miéville, and Kim Stanley Robinson, Dukaj often uses genre protocols and formulas as tools for thinking through

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[8] Dery, a white scholar, also introduced the term Afrofuturism in the same volume, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

[9] See the book, published by Cambridge University Press originally, at https://archive.org/details/cu31924074488234/page/n8

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philosophical and political issues, making science fiction a tool rather than an ending" (24). However, writing that "William Gibson, China Miéville, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Jacek Dukaj often use (...)" etc., including the Polish author in a single list with his Anglo peers, would have worked better to diminish the distance between them. Likewise, Toledano's conclusion that "Far from becoming an obsolete YA novel", Daína Chaviano's still untranslated masterpiece *Fables of an Extraterrestrial Grandmother* (1988), "in the present atmosphere of bestsellers like *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* could be, with some editing, a major success" (16) is not really the kind of endorsement the Cuban author needs. It comes, besides, as a let-down after his totally deserved high praise of Chaviano, a quality author who stands much above the writers behind the US best-selling novels which Toledano names.

There is more to consider. Frelik informs us that Jacek Dukaj is not only the "most talented" living sf author in Poland but also "a true heir to Stanisław Lem, whom he, I would propose, overshadows in terms of narrative complexity and intellectual density, however blasphemous this may sound in certain circles" (23). Yet, Dujak "is certainly an almost complete enigma to Anglophone readership of the fantastic" (23), for the only two translations of his work are a very early short story ("hardly any measure of the author's talent") and a recent e-book novel which "conceptually does not compare favorably to his greatest novels" (23). As a reader, I feel envious that Frelik and his Polish fellow speakers can read Dukaj but also immensely frustrated that I never will (there are no translations in Spanish, either). The new knowledge I have gained from reading Frelik's article is thus undermined by the impossibility of reading Dukaj, which is (I think) the best way to fix a writer's name in our mind.

The case of German author Andreas Eschbach is slightly less frustrating, for there are translations of his work in English and Spanish, though not necessarily of the novels that attracted my attention (or that might attract the attention of other readers). One of his main titles, *The Jesus Video*, was made into a poorly received film, and this leads to another complication: sf writers are often unfairly judged on the basis of the lacklustre films that adapt their work, a regrettable situation which, in my view, affects even more negatively non-axis authors like Eschbach. Incidentally, Rützou Petersen calls Eschbach "one of continental Europe's biggest science fiction stars" (54), even though 'continental Europe' does not quite work as a label useful to separate European English-language sf from that in other languages (besides, it awkwardly mixes Irish and British fiction in a single unit). Eschbach, Petersen reports, "insists that European science fiction has its own distinct voice, and, as we have seen, he taps into his own cultural context. Still, no cultural context is only national; rather, it consists of an international, interwoven textum" (67). It certainly does, but whereas 350 million Americans speak English and have access to the same national background, our international European background is split into multiple realities shaped by different languages, and it includes the UK, regardless of Brexit. In which way is Eschbach's German-language sf, then, representative of what he calls 'European science fiction'? And what role is played by British sf in this unstable construction?

To say the obvious, it must be noted, besides, that there is nobody in charge of deciding who should get translated into which languages, either in the field of sf or in any other. Yolanda Molina-Gavilán asserts that Angélica Gorodischer is generally acknowledged to be in the same league as Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, and

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Julio Cortázar, but she "still remains relatively unknown in the Anglophone literary world" (73). Luckily for Gorodischer, whose style is "informed by Anglo-American 1960s feminist science fiction" (78), her friend Ursula le Guin (they met in 1988), translated her novel *Kalpa Imperial* (1983) as *Kalpa Imperial: The Greatest Empire that Never Was* (2003, published by Small Beer Press).

Even so, translation does not guarantee readers' awareness, no matter how prestigious the translator may be. Since the translation of foreign-language sf is subjected to personal interest —like that manifested by le Guin or by the few illustrated Anglophone publishers who read in other languages— the time lag is also inescapable, with major works being issued in translation into English even decades after their original publication, or never. Tatsumi Takayuki suggests that since Sakyo Komatsu's *The Day of Resurrection* (1964) was not translated into English, American author Michael Crichton could borrow its plot for his hit *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), supposedly from the screenplay for the film *Virus* (finally made in 1980). Whether this claim is true or false is an irrelevant issue: what truly matters is Takayuki's frustration at how Crichton conquered a colossal international fame, out of reach for Komatsu.

There is more to translation, many issues that hardly ever get considered. Take Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem*, translated into English by the American sf writer of Chinese parentage Ken Liu, himself a Hugo Award winner (twice, for his short fiction). I'm positively mystified by Song's comment that Liu "has fine-tuned Liu Cixin's novel with a smooth combination of the original Chinese text's dynamism and the stylish accuracy and neatness of American sf" (107). Does this mean, in any way, that Liu's version is very different from Cixin's original? My personal experience of Liu's translation is, I must confess, quite negative —this is, most obviously, a text in which Liu's authorial presence intersects badly with Cixin's voice. In contrast, the Spanish translation from Mandarin by Javier Altayó Fenestres, a professional translator, reads very smoothly and seems, from Song's comments, to be closer to the 'dynamism' of the original text. I did not, however, enjoy Cixin's focus on (his own words) "the worst of all possible universes" (in Song 120). "Compared with other Chinese science-fiction writers", Song sums up, "Liu Cixin is the most cold-minded about the limitations of humanity, a critic of humanism and a disbeliever in optimism" (122). I thank him for the warning. The question, though, is that after reading ultra-pessimist Liu Cixin I do not really feel inclined to continuing my exploration of Chinese sf, at least until I get better acquainted with it. If I go down that road, I will certainly avoid English translation whenever the Spanish version is available.

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The final issue I wish to raise is a combined issue. All the articles in *Lingua Cosmica* try to present to the reader not only the work of one author but also as much as they can manage of their national sf tradition. This can be overwhelming —I did feel certainly overwhelmed by the articles on French and Québécois science fiction, as

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much as I admired the skill of the authors to cram so much in so little space. There is something else at work, which I will call the 'gods-above' stance. The diverse attempts at explaining what is unique in each national/linguistic tradition are somehow undermined by a constant deference toward Anglo-American science fiction. Author Jean-Claude Dunyach himself points out that what makes French sf unique is its sensoriality: "We're a country of perfumers, of cooks, and it can be seen in our literature; therefore, in our science fiction, people work on that sensoriality" (43). Vas-Feyres, however, somehow spoils that uniqueness by declaring that "As a science-fiction writer, Dunyach has been influenced by Samuel Delany, Ray Bradbury, and more particularly by J.G. Ballard" (37), authors who, I'm sure, do not reciprocate the feeling of admiration for French authors.

Clearly, being grateful for the crumbs that fall off the table of the Anglophone gods is not the proper foundation to build a transnational literary history of sf.

This is a constant in most articles: the 'gods above' ignore the existence of their worshippers but each single foreign-language sf writer worships a chosen set of them. Most worryingly, Tatsumi Takayuki is infinitely grateful to Junot Díaz for mentioning *Virus* in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) as a favourite film of his nerdish protagonist: "Junot Díaz's emotional allusion to Komatsu's work in the twenty-first century in his highly praised novel might be preparing for the resurrection day of Sakyo Komatsu himself as a prophet not only of transnational literary history but also of planetary nuclear crisis" (104). Note that Díaz does not mention Komatsu, but the film adaptation. Clearly, being grateful for the crumbs that fall off the table of the Anglophone gods is not the proper foundation to build a transnational literary history of sf: we have to push them aside, and make room for all these other authors using other languages at the same imaginary round table.

Judging from what Yvonne Howell has to say about Russian brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, the key to international success is not looking up to the gods but paying close attention to one's own background (as all Anglo-American authors do...). The Strugatskys, Howell defends, "shaped their science fiction in a way that could record the distinctive tensions in the Soviet cultural Zeitgeist of their times" and beyond, into Putin's times (202). Of course, it was truly unfortunate that the USSR's harsh regime kept its citizens cut off from external influence but perhaps it is no accident that one of the Strugatskys most fascinating work is *Hard to Be a God* (1964), for this is what they are among foreign-language authors. Just don't forget this: the first English translation of this outstanding novel by Wendayne Ackerman (published in 1973) depended on an intermediate German translation from Russian. Only in 2014 did the Chicago Review Press offer a direct translation by Olena Bormashenko. Whatever Anglophone sf fans read between 1973 and 2014 was not at all close to the Strugatsky's original.

I would not like my reader to think that my opinion of *Lingua Cosmica* is negative, for it is *extremely positive*: it is a splendid eye opener. This is a volume that everyone calling themselves an avid sf reader should

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read, for it expands our narrow horizons, and this is what sf should always do. Dale Knickerbocker's task as editor is excellent and each single article offers solid, attractive interpretations of the authors and texts selected. I doubt very much that we see shortly human translators replaced by A.I. translators but reading *Lingua Cosmica* I have sorely missed access to fully automated quality translation, or to my own Babel fish, to read all that marvellous international sf. Each language is an irreplaceable beauty which must be preserved from loss but there are occasions when I wish we did have a real *lingua cosmica* beyond English as *lingua franca*. Knickerbocker and his contributors have taken a much welcome step in that direction.