

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

TEMPS PERDU

Recently I've received the first two volumes of what is intended as a history of science fiction, year by year, under the general title of *Futures Past*. The scholar responsible for this remarkable venture is Jim Emerson, and you can find out more about it at www.sfhistory.net.

The title of the series reminds me, in a way, of Marcel Proust's vast novel, which he called *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and which in its first English translation was given the title, coming by way of Shakespeare, of *Remembrance of Things Past*. That's an eloquent but inaccurate title: something like *The Recovery of Time Lost* would be closer to Proust's actual meaning. His book intends not merely to dwell on memories but to search actively for recollection of events that are vanishing in the past. And that's precisely what Jim Emerson is doing in these astonishing books.

The first volume deals with 1926, the year that *Amazing Stories*, the first magazine to publish only science fiction, was launched by the pioneer of the field, Hugo Gernsback. It's a handsome book of sixty-four large pages, filled with beautiful color photographs of the magazines of 1926, the science fiction books of that year, and much else. Emerson provides a month-by-month résumé of each issue of *Amazing* from its inception in April 1926, giving us the table of contents, summaries of each story, and reproductions of Frank R. Paul's wonderfully gaudy cover paintings. He does the same for *Weird Tales*, already three years old in 1926, which did dip into science fiction alongside its regular fare of fantasy and horror stories. Nor does he neglect the peripheral magazines that occasionally ventured into SF: Gernsback's *Science and Invention*, the general-fiction pulp *Argosy*, and others. (Gernsback's policy of paying authors as little as possible, and that often only upon lawsuit, comes in for discussion here. Emerson is no hero-worshipper.) Another remarkable section gives us the hardcover books of the year (paperbacks of the sort we now have did not yet exist), complete with excellent photographs of their dust jackets: such obscure titles as Max Henri Begouen's *Bison of Clay* and *The Orphan of Space*, by Reginald Glossop, along with the latest books by Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Haggard, and H.G. Wells. Emerson goes on to summarize the science fiction films and plays of 1926, and finally offers a profile of Murray Leinster, one of the greatest of the old-time writers. (I make a cameo appearance there myself, though the book is dealing with events of the decade before I was born—I figure in a little anecdote illustrating Leinster's skill as a writer.)

Impressive as the 1926 volume is, it pales beside its successor. Volume Two, 1927, is more than twice the size of the first one—144 pages—and, though it includes all the features of Volume One, the month-by-month summaries of the magazine contents, the listing of the year's books, the coverage of 1927's science fiction films and plays—we see that editor Emerson has a real passion for the history of the motion picture, and more than half the book is devoted to an extraordinarily detailed account of the silent science fiction films of that almost forgotten era.

The first of these cinema-oriented features covers the general history of science fiction in the days of silent films, opening with the still frequently reproduced image of the man in the moon with a spaceship sticking out of his right eye, from Georges Méliès' 1902 *A Voyage to the Moon*. Then, after a history of the cinema itself, we get summaries of dozens of early films, from *The Mechanical Butcher* of 1895 to the

great dinosaur movie of 1925, *The Lost World*. Many of these films can be found today on YouTube, a fact that would certainly surprise their creators of a century ago, and though they are crude stuff and often very silly, they make diverting entertainment even in these jaded days.

All of these ancient films still exist. But next comes an awesome four-page listing of lost science fiction films, and as we scan it we can only sigh for such unavailable gems as *The Electrified Pig* (1911), *The Mechanical Statue and the Ingenious Servant* (1907), and *The Mysterious Contragrav* (1915). That Jim Emerson, in his enthusiasm for early films, has wandered fairly far afield from his stated intention of giving us just a chronicle of 1927 in science fiction by covering the whole range of silent-movie SF from its inception, is obvious, but his discoveries are so fascinating that I think he can be forgiven.

And there is much more. Next up is a lengthy essay on the techniques of preserving and restoring old films, and then a biography of the French filmmaker Georges Méliès, the first great maker of science fiction movies. (It ends sadly, as so many stories of these pioneers do.) Then comes an account of the life and work of the first master of stop-motion animation, Willis O'Brien, remembered today by some for the dinosaur epic *The Lost World* and by everyone for his 1933 classic *King Kong*.

Emerson then moves along to his pièce de résistance, what amounts to a book-length essay on Fritz Lang's great movie *Metropolis*, which makes up the heart of this volume. It could stand by itself as a detailed study of the film. First we have the cast list, including not just the actors but the makeup staff, the set designer, and all the rest. Then a summary of the plot, five pages long, and then a little essay on the film's religious symbolism (the robot/heroine is a stand-in for the Virgin Mary; who knew?) From there we go to the tale of the first showing in Berlin, another surprise, for what is now regarded as a masterpiece, one of the greatest science fiction movies ever made, was a critical failure on its first night ("lifeless, dehumanizing, and unrealistic"). The next section deals with the progressive slaughter of the film from its original two hours and thirty-three minutes to a pathetic eighty minutes in various misguided attempts to make it commercially viable, and then the exciting tale of its reconstruction from scattered fragments, culminating in the discovery in Argentina of a previously unavailable segment that made possible the release in 2010 of what we have today, a virtually complete restoration.

Profiles of the cast follow—particularly poignant is the account of the movie's lead actress, Birgitte Helm, jammed into an ill-fitting robot costume that was a constant torment to her—and, finally, four pages of color reproductions of the original movie posters, glorious Art Deco designs. The *Metropolis* sequence alone would be enough to justify the existence of the book. But then we get the summary of that year's SF magazines, accompanied by Frank R. Paul's wondrously odd cover paintings for *Amazing* and an assortment of spooky items for *Weird Tales*. The book section, with marvelous color reproductions of the dust jackets, deals with such esoterica as Alfred Ollivant's *Tomorrow: A Romance of the Future* and Francis Beeding's *The Hidden Kingdom*, along with the latest titles from H. Rider Haggard, H.G. Wells, and S. Fowler Wright, books that are still in print today.

And there's still more—much more, riches indeed. Thank you, Jim Emerson. I am told that the 1928 volume will be available about the time this column appears. And, if I am patient and VERY long-lived, I might survive to see, a decade or two from now, the 1955 and 1956 volumes that will mark my own appearance on the science fiction scene. I don't seriously expect to be around that long, but how pleasant to imagine that I will.