

Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary



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Timberlake, John. *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary*. Intellect, 2018. Paperback. 250 pp. \$28.50. ISBN 9781783208609.

IF readers were to judge John Timberlake's *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary* by its title before cracking the book open, they would be in for a pleasant surprise. One may anticipate accounts of environments and settings in various works of science fiction, and although Timberlake does take such elements into consideration, his primary argument concerns neither environment, setting, nor landscape per se, but vision. More specifically, he examines the ways that both sf and non-sf works construct visual relationships with their diegetic environments, or landscapes. Timberlake refers to this relationship as "ocularity," which connotes a historical dimension as much as a physical, or spatial, one: "it is shaped by a futurism based on the extrapolation of emergent technological tropes, grounded in historically extant forms" (4-5). This ocular relationship emerges, according to Timberlake, by way of what W. J. T. Mitchell calls "landscaping," or the assimilation of anachronistic or futuristic images into one's historical perspective, and Timberlake effectively connects Mitchell's term to William Gibson's famous, quasi-apocryphal suggestion that the "future is already here, it is just not evenly distributed" (qtd. in Timberlake 4). One almost wishes Timberlake's book was titled *Landscaping the Science Fiction Imaginary*, if such phrasing didn't give the impression of a how-to book about maintaining lawns on alien planets.

Indeed, Timberlake's chapters focus less on the particulars of landscape aesthetics than on perceptual discrepancies of scale, as in the first chapter, "Land of the Giants." Moving easily from ancient mythology to postmodern cinema, Timberlake examines how fluctuations in physical size influence social relations, yielding a tragic framework in which physical environments exhibit an "elemental indifference" to human presence (47). He performs a similar temporal leap in chapter two, building a conceptual bridge between Francisco Goya's *The Game of Pelota* (1779) and contemporary digital gaming. Timberlake makes the compelling claim that Goya's decision to place modern players within ancient ruins "can be read as a form of virtual projection," effectively anticipating the contained temporalities of late-twentieth-century gaming media (58). Such moves reveal the nuanced, and occasionally understated, methodology of *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary*. Less a study of sf per se, it rather illuminates in sf a visual imperative that Timberlake argues is at work "across the centuries," connecting works as diverse as Goya's painting and video

games such as *Metal Gear Solid* (73).

The remaining chapters examine ocularity in post-1945 visual media: specifically, the drawings of Chris Foss, photographs by Yosuke Yamahata, and Pavel Klushantzev's and Chesley Bonestell's "fictions of science" (123). It's in these chapters that the book's methodology shines, as Timberlake explores the science-fictional dynamics of artistic impressions, photography, and film sets. Of the figures listed above, the one closest to science fiction is Foss, whose drawings and book jacket designs draw explicitly on sf iconography. Timberlake argues that Foss's work exhibits an accelerationist vision of the technological present, depicting vaguely familiar objects as though they occupy a decrepit, decaying future. In his treatment of Foss's drawings and Yamahata's horrific photographs of post-detonation Nagasaki, Timberlake uncovers a key strategy of uncanny futurity: "all the commonplaces of science fiction," he writes, "but rendered with a curious familiarity" (80). The estranging experience of the Japanese survivors photographed by Yamahata derives from "the destruction and horror visited upon them in their regular haunts and domiciles" (104). For Timberlake, the import of such ocular extrapolation lies in its capacity for unfolding present material conditions into potential realities.

In this respect, images act as a way for these artists to schematize cultural attitudes about history and the world, and the recurring attitude that Timberlake returns to is the one we experience toward our place in the cosmos, culminating in his final chapter's discussion of spatial expanse in works ranging from Frederick Sommer's *Arizona Landscape, 1943* to Sebastian Cordero's film *Europa Report* (2013). According to Timberlake, the ocularity of such works allows spectators to experience the scale variance that occurs between, for example, human political conflicts and the awareness of our insignificance in the cosmos, embodied in the juxtaposition of human subjects against desert vistas and interstellar gulfs. He elucidates this science-fictional dimension through discussions of numerous examples, from the fiction of Philip K. Dick to works of contemporary sf cinema. The structure of Timberlake's approach may be a caveat for readers seeking an in-depth and focused study of sf as a genre, whether in literature or film. It certainly attends to numerous sf texts, yet *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary* is more interested in what might be called the science-fictional dynamic of visual media, and although its approach can be (and often is) directed toward works of sf, they aren't the author's central focus.

Perhaps understandably, given Timberlake's frequent pinballing between various works, it can sometimes feel as though certain examples are treated too briefly, or abandoned too hastily. Yet the connections between sf and non-sf texts feel justified and often prove illuminating when considering the author's emphasis on landscaping and ocularity. They would be even more effective, however, with a bit more attention to the critical discourse

surrounding visuality and its relationship to science and observational media. One noticeable omission is Martin Willis's *Vision, Science, and Literature, 1870-1920: Ocular Horizons* (2011). Although focused on literature, Willis's discussions of ocular media and their impressions of scale are certainly relevant for Timberlake's ambitious study. Also noticeable are the book's many unfortunate typographical errors, some of which interfere with sentence-level meaning. These errors range from missing or incorrect words (*of* in place of *as*, for example) to long sentence fragments that inevitably draw the reader's pace to a halt. Admittedly, these can't be blamed entirely on the author, but one wishes that a bit more time had been spent proofreading the manuscript.

These small quibbles notwithstanding, the conceptual gravity of Timberlake's study is undeniable, and his compelling readings make *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary* a valuable contribution to the field of sf criticism and visual media theory.