Existential Science Fiction, by Ryan Lizardi

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Ryan Lizardi’s *Existential Science Fiction* is an ambitious book with a misleading title, as the focus is on recent science fiction cinema with a brief two chapters on video games. A better title might be *21st Century Existential Science Fiction*, and Lizardi inserts a self-critique in the introduction pointing out this discrepancy:

> It is a weighting of sorts, as the two historical chapters each cover roughly fifty years of science fiction media content and the lion’s share of the rest of the book covers ten years, from 2010 to present. Any researcher who was so inclined could write an exploration of existential science fiction media and flip this imbalanced script... I embrace that criticism... (xii).

This book represents a single constellation of existential fiction when there’s a whole night sky to explore, but it could still be useful for those focusing on the major works covered: *Solaris* (1972, 2002), *Gravity* (2013), *Ad Astra* (2019), *Interstellar* (2014), *Arrival* (2016), *Annihilation* (2018), *Legion* (2017–19), *Westworld* (1973 movie and 2016–present tv series), and the video games *Assassin's Creed* (2007–2020), *BioShock* (2007 –2013), *SOMA* (2015), and *Death Stranding* (2019). There is a logical underpinning to these selections, though a weakness inherent in existentialism is that it can be perceived in anything, as best evidenced by the dark hilarity of the comic strip *Garfield Minus Garfield*. Another issue with Lizardi’s approach is that he is applying a philosophy historically dominated by white men to a group of narratives largely by and about white men; even in places that lead to obviously more feminist interpretations, such as in *Gravity* and *Annihilation*, Lizardi ignores questions related to gender, as well as race, to focus on aspects of “human” responses. Intersectionalism has taught us that we need to be careful with such a universal flattening of experiences, as too often they are skewed towardness maleness and whiteness.

The book’s first chapter fast forwards past any mention of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche and gets immediately to the heart of Lizardi’s primary focus, film theory, starting with the existential themes in 1902’s *A Trip to the Moon* and 1927’s *Metropolis*. He quotes heavily from Bradley Schauer’s *Escape Velocity: American Science Fiction Film 1950 - 1982* (2017) throughout this section, using Schauer’s arguments to highlight the 1951 film *Destination Moon* as the progenitor
of modern science fiction movies, as he states it is “important to examine for its semantic genre elements and its syntactic existential characteristics,” and it has a “heavy reliance on verisimilitude and science over action and otherworldly antagonists” (8) which he proposes is a critical element of existentialist science fiction. After a brisk whirl through the cinema of the 1950’s, the second chapter posits 1968’s 2001: A Space Odyssey as the next major film in the existential megatext, as well as both versions of Solaris (1972, 2002) and Blade Runner (1982, 2017), while discussing how other forms of non-human (alien, AI) intelligences create an existential crisis for humans. Lizardi is well-researched throughout this chapter; he balances direct evidence from the films, statements from their directors, and academic essays, in order to draw comparisons across decades of Hollywood cinema.

Jean-Paul Sartre finally makes his appearance in the third chapter on Gravity and Ad Astra, where Lizardi asserts one of his main theses: “I would also argue that this contrast [between the harsh reality of outer space and the precarity of life] is sometimes the most crucial element of existential science fiction, as it allows audiences to focus more intently on the philosophical elements without the distracting sensational and implausible action so prevalent in early science fiction media” (37). He uses Sartre to posit that the environment of outer space puts the human subject in an atheistic state of crisis, considering they are literally beyond the Earth but not in any kind of heaven or afterlife, and Lizardi convincingly claims that the astronaut symbolizes humanity at the edge of the technological sublime. However, it should be noted that he does not use time-stamp notations for any of his references throughout the entire book, so those looking to pinpoint specific moments in the films will have to look them up themselves.

The following chapter analyzes Arrival and Interstellar as the recent “smart” science fiction films; Lizardi theorizes their existentialist themes could not coexist with more traditional movie plots. He writes, “Their emphasis, however, is not on the antagonism present in so many other science fiction media that encounters other planets and aliens, but instead is on a deep dive into science” (49). Lizardi then compares Arrival to the film Contact (1997) while contrasting it to Independence Day (1996), and he has many useful observations relating to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in how these films approach communication with aliens. He also uses evidence from the original source material, Ted Chiang’s novella “Story of Your Life” (1998), something he doesn’t do with the earlier chapters, pointing out the existentialist themes related to the awareness of death in both mediums. He continues this approach in the next chapter on Annihilation, using sections from Jeff VanderMeer’s Southern Reach trilogy (2014) along with personal interviews from director Alex Garland, who used a unique method of adapting the book into the movie by purposefully incorporating ambiguity throughout the entire process.

The next chapter on the tv series Legion feels out of place compared to the previous ones, as the show is sourced from the X-Men comics and employs a much more slippery type of “comic book logic” than even mainstream sci-fi, yet it doesn’t really fit with his later video game chapters, either. The streaming revolution has launched dozens of science fiction tv series with notable existentialist themes in the past decade—several different shows from the same time period would

The final two chapters are on video games; the chapter on *SOMA* and *Death Stranding* is much more compelling and thematically appropriate than the one on *Assassin’s Creed* and *BioShock*. The latter two games are types of Alternative History, and Lizardi focuses on these games while ignoring related media and novels, such as the *The Man in the High Castle* (1962, 2015-2019), making the chapter feel like it belongs in a different book altogether. Also, while the earlier *BioShock* games are very atmospherically existentialist because of the post-apocalyptic, claustrophobia-inducing underwater setting, Lizardi’s arguments begin to break down into long sequences where he is doing little more than summarizing the game’s plot and providing casual observations. An example of this is from pages 116-121, where he goes into extensive detail surrounding the final installment of *BioShock Infinite* (2013) and the related downloadable (DLC) content, but he does not directly quote from the game or bring in the works of other scholars. This lack of rigor unfortunately causes the book to end in a wandering state of confusion rather than in a satisfying, Nietzschean cosmic apotheosis, but perhaps this makes it even more existential, after all? It is up to the reader to construct their own “bad faith” argument here.

In summation, *Existential Science Fiction* will be useful for anyone interested in tracing the genealogy of some modern existential science fiction films, but the inclusion of the tv series and videogames makes the latter half feel disjointed.

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