Out of This World: Speculative Fiction in Translation from the Cold War to the New Millennium, by Rachel Cordasco

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Rachel S. Cordasco’s Out of This World: Speculative Fiction in Translation from the Cold War to the New Millennium is an exceptional volume that can be at the same time overwhelming even for readers with a sound knowledge of speculative fiction. Reading Cordasco’s volume is proof that not even the most committed reader has a good grasp of the vast international dimension of an already enormous field, even if we think only of its Anglophone version.

Cordasco, an experienced writer, editor, reviewer and translator, has been running the website Speculative Fiction in Translation (https://www.sfintranslation.com/) since 2016 because, as she writes in the “About” section, “Speculative fiction offers us a unique perspective on the different peoples who call this planet home, and translation is itself a way of turning the alien into the familiar.” Her website continues the work done by Israeli SF author Lavie Tidhar in the World SF blog (2009-2013, https://worldsf.wordpress.com/), which he started, as he explains in his final post (“A Last Word”) “partly as an excuse to promote my then-forthcoming anthology of international speculative fiction, The Apex Book of World SF—but mostly out of what can only be described as an ideological drive, a desire to highlight and promote voices seldom heard in genre fiction.” The impact of English-language original speculative fiction is massive (in this and in most genres), and both Cordasco and Tidhar set out to try to offer a more panoramic, truly cosmopolitan, vision. Cordasco’s website presents reviews, interviews, and, most interestingly the section SFT Source Language Lists (https://www.sfintranslation.com/?page_id=11605) which offers constantly updated bibliographies of SF translated into English from fifty-seven languages. This is a truly formidable task, and one must marvel that a single person can carry it out, even assuming she has many collaborators.

The website lists are the origin of Out of This World, which offers chapters for fourteen of these fifty-seven languages: Arabic, Chinese, Czech, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Swedish. These are the languages with a minimum of ten volume-length texts translated into English since the 1960s, the criteria Cordasco has followed,
as she explains. In the “Introduction” Cordasco presents Out of This World as a reference volume and a guide, and warns that she is extending the field covered in her website to speculative fiction (rather than only SF), fantasy, and horror. Each chapter has an introduction by a guest writer from the linguistic area presented, who briefly surveys the history of SF, fantasy, and horror in their language. This is followed by a second survey by Cordasco of the texts translated into English, briefly describing their contents. Finally, each chapter offers a bibliography of translated primary sources in chronological order by original publication date, notes, and a bibliography of secondary sources.

Cordasco’s volume is, no doubt, a gem, and it cannot be sufficiently praised. At the same time, it is, as noted, a daunting book since it requires a type of reader willing to take in a torrent of information, or to use the volume as a guide to a years-long (if not decades-long) process of becoming familiar with other traditions. There is, besides, the doubt of whether the SFT Source Language Lists already mentioned fulfil the same purpose in better ways. The online lists lack the very helpful introduction or the insightful comments on each of the translated texts that the book chapters offer, being pure bibliography. Yet, I remain personally mystified by our insistence to publish as print or digital volumes information that might work best as an online resource, perhaps a database, or even an app.

Cordasco stresses that her purpose is to guide Anglophone readers curious about how their favorite genres work in other languages; though, of course, she is also helping non-native readers of English to reach other speculative fiction traditions. Cordasco supposedly wants readers to check her volume whenever they wish to read foreign authors unknown to them rather than read the book from beginning to end, just as nobody (or almost nobody) reads dictionaries. Yet, perhaps what is missing is a basic beginner’s list with, for example, just one work from each of the fourteen languages selected. Or clearer instructions about how to use the volume. Reference books are not reader-friendly and, arguably, cannot be so because of their very nature. In that sense, it is interesting to see how the website Worlds without End has transformed David Pringle’s popular guide Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels into a user-friendly webpage (see https://www.worldswithoutend.com/novel.asp?id=8146).

Pringle’s selection, additionally, is based on a round figure, which is more or less manageable for a committed reader in small steps. In contrast, Cordasco’s volume mentions hundreds of books. It must be acknowledged, at any rate, that at least these books are mentioned because they are available in English. In contrast, Dale Knickerbocker’s equally excellent edited volume, Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from around the World (2018), also published by the University of Illinois Press, whets an appetite that often cannot be satisfied because of the lack of the corresponding translation into English. It is, in fact, advisable to read both volumes together to fully understand how much brilliant speculative fiction is still in need of translation into English and whether what is available is sufficiently representative.
To conclude, please give Rachel Cordasco’s *Out of This World* a warm welcome in your personal or college library, for it deserves it. Her invitation to enjoy the riches of many diverse speculative fiction traditions needs to be accepted, both regarding the fourteen languages dealt with in the volume or the fifty-seven of the website. It is actually very good news that her volume is so formidable, for this means that there are countless treasures in speculative fiction to be discovered by anyone who can read English. And if any publisher gets hold of the book, hopefully they will receive the message that the presence of the other traditions still underrepresented in English needs to be urgently increased.

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