

Douglas E. Cowan. *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010. 326 pages. \$24.95.

The extent of my exposure to science fiction is limited to one novel (*Stranger in a Strange Land*, Robert Heinlein) and *Star Trek* re-runs when I stay at a motel that has cable television. But clearly, based on the case made by author Cowan, science fiction film and television are mighty good places to look for and document our culture's "deepest questions about life, the universe, and everything – what many people call 'religion,' others 'the sacred,' and still others 'the quest for transcendence'" (ix). The artifacts are plentiful and offer a rich reward for those willing to enter its world and make contact with its inhabitants. In addition to analytic, pedagogic and invitational goals, Cowan hopes to demonstrate "how science fiction can open up some of the basic historical, sociological, and psychological theories of religious belief, practice, and evolution, as well as the ways in which these influence and are influenced by wider society" (26).

The book is made up of two parts, each containing several chapters. Part I, "Science fiction and the Quest for Transcendence" is an overview of the topic, sketches the author's interest and involvement with science fiction and looks at science fiction films. Chapter Two is particularly interested in the question of alternate lifeforms (several of whom I suspect I had as students some years back). Films examined include *Star Trek: First Contact*, and *Contact*. A student has recommended this movie to me as well. Chapter Three explores "the ramifications of first contact [with those alternate lifeforms] for human understanding of transcendence" (28). Chapter Four is a close and interesting look at the film *The War of the Worlds* (1953) and how the film dramatically differs from the novel (1898) in terms of its attitude toward religion, with the film offering a much more generous perspective than the novel.

Part II is a look at four science fiction television series: *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Stargate SG-1*, *Babylon 5*, and *Battlestar Galactica*. With reference to an episode of *Battlestar Galactica*, "Sinclair [a character in the show] demonstrates that if we value freedom of religion, then that value is most severely tested when we are called to stand for the rights of people whose beliefs and practices we find incomprehensible, even repugnant" (211). Perhaps we should be airing this episode 24/7.

The writing style is engaging; the interpretation and observation not heavy handed. The author is clearly a fan and provides some quite helpful and, from my perspective anyway, perceptive insights, which would presumably expand a fan's appreciation for these shows and might even entice someone to give them a first or second viewing. Judging by the bibliography there is a large fan base as well as some serious students of science fiction in its various formats.

Myths, including science fiction, are stories that both reflect and shape cultural meanings and their significance. If it is true, as those who talk about characteristics of postmodernity claim, that we have lost the structural meta-narratives that explain origins, how things got to be the way they are and how they ought to be, science fiction offers plenty of grist in the way of micro-narratives, which might give us pause to reflect. Suddenly it is no longer merely how I interpret the events and characters in a science fiction show. I must also ask, what do the shows say about me, my hopes, my fears, and my God?

It just goes to show that "when it comes to religion, to our understanding of the unseen order and the quest for transcendence it so often demands, perspective is everything" (217), which is to say, even in a cosmos inhabited by aliens, borgs and robots, wherever you go, there you are. I would have to conclude that the author is successful on all three of his goals:

analytical, pedagogical, and invitational. I was enticed to watch a couple of the films examined in the book and have plans to watch others as I come across them.

Rick Stern
Saint Meinrad School of Theology
Saint Meinrad, IN