

# German Science Fiction

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German science fiction boasts one of the world's oldest science fiction traditions. This is no wonder given the strong influence of Enlightenment thought under Prussian King Frederick the Great (1712-1786) and writers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) as well as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) of Weimar Classicism. Science fiction is, after all, a type of literature of the fantastic that becomes believable as the narrator logically explains the new elements of a world. In his landmark study of fantastic literature, structuralist Tzvetan Todorov describes its ability to rupture the perceived limits of the real: "The fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it" (158). Todorov differentiates science fiction from other tales of fantasy by placing it in the category of the scientific wonderful. In this category, he presents the fantastic as an irrational element that is then logically explained. As a result, the progression from irrational to real creates a dialectic between the "moment of uncertainty" of the fantastic and the resulting "reality," which destabilizes an implied reader's notion of the real (33). It is this dialectic between the fantastic and the "real" that allows for a more precise analysis of science fiction's inherent potential to transgress existing notions of reality. Darko Suvin has told us something similar in his book *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction*. According to him, science fiction is a genre based on the novum, which leads to estrangement and then cognition on the part of the reader (8). The importance of rational thought is paramount. In the 19th and 20th centuries Germany too would become famous and then infamous for great accomplishments in the *Wissenschaften* (sciences), whether natural, social, or literary<sup>1</sup>. It is, therefore not surprising that it also boasts a strong and significant science fiction tradition. Unfortunately, not enough of German science fiction has been translated into English – only the tip of the iceberg. Since both this article and the Virtual Science Fiction project are in English, I will primarily focus on those works currently available in English translation, but would like to

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1 The general German term *Wissenschaften* does not differentiate between sciences and humanities, but simply designates an academic inquiry, be it Literary Studies, Biology or Sociology. The differentiation is then added by a prefix: *Geistes-* (literally: spiritual, ref. to the humanities), *Sozial-* (social), *Rechts-* (ref. to law), or *Natur-* (ref. to natural sciences).

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encourage students and scholars to further explore the German originals as well – may their interest spark more translations.<sup>2</sup>

While the presence of the rational is in distinguishing science fiction from fantasy, myth, and the fairy tale, the genre also still belongs to the category of fantastic literature. Its antecedents include the Gothic, the grotesque, and the uncanny.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising to find one of the first proto-science fiction stories among German Romantic literature. Simply put, one aspect of this movement warned against the overestimation of human reason in the modern era, a common preoccupation of the dystopias of the 20th and 21st centuries. Many of us know E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) from his famous fairy tale novella *The Nutcracker and the Mouseking* (*Nußknacker und Mäusekönig*, 1816), which is a favorite still among German children's tales. In addition though, he is also well known for his proto-science fictional, automaton story "The Sandmann" ("Der Sandmann", 1816). Estranged from his love interest Clara, Nathaniel becomes obsessed with the mysteriously mechanical Olympia. His failure to see her true automated nature leads to madness and death. The figure of Olympia is an early example of the association of male anxieties towards technology with those towards women. She is a precursor of the robot Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (D 1927) and of the femme fatale of *film noir* fame (cf. Huysen).

In Germany, the great popularity of Jules Verne's (1828-1905) *voyages extraordinaires* helped to create a readership interested in science fiction among the German public in the mid-to-late 19th century (Innenhofer 13). The first recognized German science fiction writer Kurd Laßwitz (1848-1910) came upon the scene with a collection of short stories in 1871. He is also often termed the "father of German science fiction."<sup>4</sup> As in other countries, it was not uncommon to write science fiction stories as a hobby or under a pseudonym. Laßwitz was not a full-time science fiction writer, but taught at a *Gymnasium*, the German equivalent of a college preparatory high school. Laßwitz, himself, was an expert in Physics and Mathematics and held a doctorate from the University of Berlin. He wrote academic articles and books on the history of science, and also wonderfully playful short stories. His science fiction, like H.G. Wells, intended to instruct and warn. In addition to his stories, he is known today for the Kurd Laßwitz Prize awarded each year to the best German science fiction author.

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2 Fictional titles that are listed first in English with the German in parenthesis have been translated into English. Those that are listed first in German with the English in parenthesis are not available in English.

3 Indeed many elements of such forms continue to be found in science fiction particularly in its post-modern and "slipstream" manifestations, where the category of genre itself seems to collapse.

4 Cf. for example the back cover of Franz Rottensteiner's anthology *The Black Mirror*.

Laßwitz wrote a number of short story anthologies including *Bis zum Nullpunkt des Seins* (*To the Absolute Zero of Existence: A Story from 2371*, 1871). His most famous novel is undoubtedly *Two Planets* (*Auf zwei Planeten*, 1897). This social utopian epic chronicles the first contact between a Martian civilization and humanity. During a hot air balloon expedition, explorers discover an alien colony at the North Pole. The colony turns out to be a research station manned by peaceful Martians, who hope to exploit the Earth's energy resources. Contact between the Terran and the Martian civilizations ensues, the latter having long since reached a social and technical level far beyond that of Earth. Yet, cracks appear in this apparently utopian society. The encounter ultimately reveals aspects of the Martian civilization that conflict with the aliens' universal code of ethics. The collision between the two cultures leads to a critique of the method in which the Martians 'enforce' their humanist model upon the inhabitants of Earth. *Two Planets* can also be read as a political critique of Germany's colonial and industrial aspirations at the end of the 19th century.

Ironically, another one of Germany's famous science fiction writers attended the school where Kurd Laßwitz taught. However, Hans Dominik (1872-1945) is best known for his science fictional spy and adventure thrillers. Born on November 15, 1872 in Zwickau, he spent the majority of his life in Berlin. In 1895, he spent a brief period of time as a student and then as an electrical engineer in the United States, before he found employment as a technical writer for Siemens. He began to write fictional stories as well, many of which were serialized at first and then later appeared in book form. In 1924, in Vernian fashion, Dominik dedicated himself entirely to writing and published almost one novel a year between 1922 and 1939 with the German publisher Scherl Verlag. He became Germany's most prolific science fiction writer. Some of his publications include *Die Macht der Drei: Ein Roman aus dem Jahre 1955* (*The Power of the Three: A Novel from the Year 1955*, 1921), *Die Spur des Dschingis-Khan: Ein Roman aus dem 21. Jahrhundert* (*The Trail of Genghis Khan: A Novel from the Twenty-first Century*, 1923) and *Der Wettflug der Nationen* (*The International Airplane Race*, 1933). However, very little of his science fiction has been translated into English. This is due to the conservative nature of his stories. Although not a National Socialist, his writing was politically conservative, nationalistic and often racist. It belonged to a type of writing that initially reflected Germany's imperial and colonialist ambitions before World War I, and then became more vehement and reactionary during the Weimar Republic. Scholars differ in their interpretations of Dominik. Some see him as complicit in shaping *völkisch* future fantasies of domination, while other scholars place him with an older form of Bismarckian

nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the broader German public associated science fiction with Hans Dominik for a long time, thus contributing to the country's general aversion to a genre perceived to be escapist and politically compromised.

However, the Weimar Republic produced yet another source of science fiction that has influenced global science fiction prose and filmmaking alike. Every cinema visitor has seen some film that pays homage to *Metropolis*, be it to the famous sets, the uncanny she-robot Maria, or Rotwang's gloved hand. This expressionist silent film classic was a product of a German film industry that led the world with its talent, creativity, and innovative design. When its director Fritz Lang (1890-1976) immigrated to the United States in 1933, his style would change the course of Hollywood cinema forever. Unfortunately, his incredibly talented screenwriter and wife Thea von Harbou (1888-1954), who worked on both *Metropolis* and *Woman in the Moon* (*Frau im Mond*, D 1929), chose to stay behind and made films for the National Socialists.

*Metropolis* is not only famous for its story, but also for its own history. The film is both love story and social critique. Freder, the son of an autocratic industrialist rebels against his father and seeks out the lowest class. There he meets Maria who is organizing a peaceful rebellion among the workers. The father conspires with mad-scientist Rotwang to create an evil robot double of Maria to thwart Freder's romantic interests and to turn Maria's plan into a violent revolt that collapses in upon the workers themselves. Yet, the film's final message is one of reconciliation and alluded-to reform: "The mediator between brain and muscle must be the Heart" (Harbou 2). While street fighting between the Communists and the Brown Shirts increased outside of Berlin's Ufa film studio as the film was made, *Metropolis* certainly made no call for revolution. According to Siegfried Krakauer's famous and controversial analysis, it represented a cultural affirmation of German absolutism (162f.). Yet, this amazingly rich film cannot be so summarily reduced and dismissed. It continues to be the focus of scholarly debate into the 21st century (cf. Minden and Bachmann).

Perhaps just as interesting as the film itself, is the film's continual resurrection. Due to an initially long running time, last minute budget limitations, and the censors, the film was cut substantially. Much of this footage was lost over the following several decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, the quest for the most complete version of *Metropolis* began. Various restorations appeared, including Giorgio Moroder's in 1984 with a soundtrack that featured Adam Ant and Freddy Mercury among others. The Friedrich Murnau Foundation re-restored the film for the 2001 Berlin Film Festival. Finally, the most definitive version to date was

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5 See for example William Fischer's *The Empire Strikes Out* and Jost Hermand's *Old Dreams of a New Reich*.

released in 2010 and contains 'new' footage from 16mm copies found in Argentina and New Zealand.

Before I continue to the post-war period, let me also mention Nobel prize-winning author Hermann Hesse's excellent dystopia *The Glass Bead Game* (*Das Glasperlenspiel* or *Magister Ludi*, 1943). His last full-length novel, this *Bildungsroman* tells the story of Joseph Knecht who attends a boarding school in Castalia. This is an austere society of intellectuals whose sole purpose is to run the school for boys and also to play the obscure glass bead game. Knecht aspires to become the *Magister Ludi*, i.e. the head administrator of the game. This book has largely been interpreted to have arisen as a direct result of Hesse's experiences during World War II.

After World War II, German science fiction was split into East and West German science fiction. Writers in the East were heavily influenced by the long-standing Russian (Tolstoi, Yefremov, Tarkovsky, Strugatsky Brothers), Polish (Stanislaw Lem), and Czech (Karel Čapek) science fiction traditions. East German writers also had access to many western titles, which remained in collections after the war or were smuggled in by western visitors and kept in private lending libraries. Although initially slow to appear due to very strict censorship laws, East German science fiction came into its own beginning in the late 1960s. With very little competition from foreign translations and government support for popular literature in the 1970s, many short stories anthologies and novels appeared from a wide range of mostly male authors. Writing within a socialist aesthetic, these writers employed the alternate worlds and times of the genre to both critique and improve the world around them. Via allegory and a purposeful ambivalence of meaning, knowing readers were able to 'read between the lines' and access viewpoints unavailable in state-sponsored media.

Unfortunately, the majority of science fiction by authors from the former East remains unavailable in English except for a few short stories. The best known of these stories is "Self-experiment" ("Selbstversuch", 1973) by Christa Wolf (1929-2011) who was not a science fiction author, but chose the genre for this particular plot idea. This story was part of a larger collection called *Blitz aus heiterem Himmel* (Lightning from a Clear Sky, 1975) that was devoted to the topic of gender reversal. Wolf's science fiction story reveals her vision of the incompatible socialization of men and women. A young, female scientist takes the experimental drug *Petersein masculinum 199*, which physically transforms her into a man named Anders. The experiment ultimately fails when Anders cannot reconcile his female memories with his new male life experience. He relates the impossibility of coming to terms with the existence of both male and female in the same physical and emotional body. The result is gender confusion and self-

alienation. The story itself is in the form of a supplementary protocol written as a personal narrative.

There is so much other science fiction from the former East. For instance, children's authors Johanna and Günter Braun (1929/1928-2008) began writing science fiction in the early 1970s. *Der Irrtum des Großen Zauberers* (*The Great Magician's Error*, 1972), displaced a parody of authoritarianism onto another planet. A satire of the Socialist Unity Party's (SED) interpretation of the Enlightenment, *Unheimliche Erscheinungsformen auf Omega XI* (*Uncanny Manifestations on Omega XI*, 1974) involves a rescue mission to the planet Omega XI. The novel *Conviva Ludibundus* (1978) further developed the Brauns' theory of play in literature. Highly critical of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the Brauns would eventually leave the German Writers' Union in 1978 and publish exclusively in the West with Suhrkamp.

Authors Angela (1941-) and Karlheinz Steinmüller (1950-) have contributed much to the German understanding of science fiction as well as to the fiction itself. Like other East German authors who began writing in the 1980s, they benefitted from having access to science fiction from the West and from the East. Consequently the Steinmüllers have engaged in world-building from a perspective that benefits from knowledge of both sides of the former Iron Curtain. As a result, their first novel, *Andymon* (1982), represents their search for the viability of coexistent political systems and the possibility for the realization of individual potential. This book searches for the more perfect system, yet points out deficiencies in all. Their text *Der Traummeister* (*The Dreammaster*, 1990) is an allegory of the slow decline of the GDR and of human civilization from the point of view of the individual. However, it leaves room for hope throughout its narrative. The Steinmüllers continue to write today and are very active in fostering the future of German science fiction. Members of the Berlin fan club Andymon, named after the book by the Steinmüllers, also continue to support fledgling German writers as well. Since the 1960s there has been a very active fan scene in Germany, many of whom also do very valuable work as professional editors and publishers of German-language science fiction (cf. Fritzsche, *Science Fiction Literature in East Germany*).

There was also much science fiction from West Germany, but, unlike its eastern counterpart, it had to continually compete on the West German and Austrian markets with the overwhelming number of Anglo-American science fiction publications translated into German. While most of the science fiction I have mentioned so far has come from German authors, Austrian Herbert W. Franke (1927-) has been the most influential post-war figure in the West. A physicist by training, he not only wrote science fiction, but also served as editor of the German Heyne science fiction series, which promoted German-language

titles. His more notable works include *The Orchid Cage* (*Der Orchideenkäfig*, 1961), which explores where human evolution might lead and includes references to virtual reality, and *The Mind Net* (*Das Gedankennetz*, 1961), where machines create human thoughts. Franke also has written a number of short stories that hold up very well today with refreshing humor and wit. These can be found in Austrian Franz Rottensteiner's excellent anthology of German science fiction in English entitled *The Black Mirror and Other Stories* (2008).

I mention Rottensteiner (1942-) here as well due his influence both in the East and West, reunified Germany, and into the 21st century as an editor and promoter of German, Austrian, and European science fiction. Rottensteiner's breadth of knowledge in this area is remarkable. He has edited some fifty different anthologies, most of them in German, and is the publisher of *Quarber Merkur*, a longstanding German academic journal devoted to the study of literature of the fantastic. The English-speaking reader curious about German language science fiction would do well to search out the multiple collections that Rottensteiner has put together, including the aforementioned *Black Mirror* collection and also *The Best of Austrian Science Fiction* (2001).

Yet another important name for western Germany is Wolfgang Jeschke (1936-). Like Franke, Jeschke has functioned both as science fiction author and editor. Although he has written a number of novels, Jeschke's *The Last Day of Creation* (*Der letzte Tag der Schöpfung*, 1981) is the most widely available in English. It is set on Earth five and a half million years ago just as a nuclear war takes place. His short story "The King and the Doll Maker" appeared in David Hartwell's *The Science Fiction Century* (1997). Jeschke also took over Franke's role as science fiction editor at Heyne in 1973, a job, which he held until 2002. Jeschke has edited roughly 100 anthologies, some of which include stories translated into English. His best known work is the series *Das Science Fiction Jahr* (*The Science Fiction Year*), a German language collection of the best science fiction short stories each year.

For those of you interested in the pulps, you already likely have heard of the extensive space opera saga *Perry Rhodan*. K.H. Scheer (1928-1991) and Clark Darlton (1920-2005) first started this series in 1961. Since then, it has spun off into many sub-series written by a variety of authors. It is the most successful science fiction series ever written, selling more than one billion copies worldwide in the form of the pulp booklet. It continues to evolve today.

There is very limited science fiction written by women, some of it excellent, and much of it goes untranslated. Austrian feminist writer Barbara Neuwirth (1958-) publishes dark fantasy stories and has been instrumental in the Viennese feminist press Wiener Frauenverlag. Her story "The Character of the Huntress" appears in Franz Rottensteiner's anthology *The Best of Austrian Science Fiction*

(2001). Austrian Marianne Gruber (1944-) wrote the anti-utopia *The Sphere of Glass* (*Die gläserne Kugel*, 1981), which portrays a dark image of the modern city. In the East, of course, I have already mentioned Christa Wolf, Johanna Braun, and Angela Steinmüller.

In early 21st century Germany, the most prominent and prolific writer is Andreas Eschbach (1959-). His science fiction-thrillers sell so well that he is able to write full-time, which is very unusual. Eschbach's Dune-inspired tale *The Carpet Makers* (*Die Haarteppichknüpfer*, 1995) is his best publication to date, and is a fascinating story of galactic colonialization and selective memory. Orson Scott Card was instrumental in bringing this book to the attention Tor Books so that it might be translated. Eschbach has written a number of other novels, none of which have been translated. These include *Jesus Video* (1997) a story of archeology and time travel, and *Ausgebrannt* (*Burned Out*, 2007), a tale of the end of oil. Yet, Eschbach is at his best when he is writing short stories. It is in this format that he is able to shake off all other influences and write fresh, sometimes humorous, and always poignant tales that often leave the reader feeling utterly alone.

Before coming to a conclusion, I wish to mention several other publications and films that will be of interest to the English speaker. First of all, I must mention Frank Schätzing (1957-). He is the author responsible for the science fiction/eco-thriller *The Swarm* (*Der Schwarm*, 2005), which was a run-away hit among German readers. Set primarily in Norway and Vancouver Island, Canada, sea creatures attack humanity for destroying the ecology of the world's oceans, i.e. their habitat.

Finally, for those interested in film beyond *Metropolis*, there are several other notable films with English subtitles. For instance, there is the East German science fiction film *The Silent Star* (*Der schweigende Stern*, Dir. Maetzig, GDR 1959). An international crew on the spaceship *Kosmokrator* travels to Venus to investigate the source of a mysterious signal received on Earth. Made just after Sputnik was launched, this film represents East Germany's contribution to 1950's campy science fiction cinema. It actually appeared first on the US market in 1962 under the title of *First Spaceship on Venus*, in a version partially rewritten and edited for the American market. In the West, German film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder made *World on a Wire* (*Welt am Draht*) in 16 mm for German television in 1973. It was digitally restored for the Berlin Film Festival in 2010. Visually, the film is stunning. It was based on the story "Simulacron-3" by American science fiction writer Daniel F. Galouye (1920-1976), which was also the inspiration for the film *The Thirteenth Floor* (D/US 1999, Dir. Josef Rusnak). Finally, the recent release *Transfer* (D 2010) by Croatian director Damir Lukačević is a German language film based on the brilliant short story by Spanish



author Elia Barceló. In the film, a man and a woman from different countries in Africa sell their bodies via the company Menzana to an elderly German couple. While the German couple continues to live during the day in their new youthful forms, the Africans regain the use of their bodies at night. A critique of globalization on a number of levels, the Germans and the Africans struggle with the challenges of their new situation. The film has screened at many festivals and won several awards.

In conclusion, I want to stress the small amount of German science fiction that has been translated into English. This is the case with science fiction from many other non-English speaking countries. Inevitably the small amount available in English leaves significant gaps. I hope that the recommendations I have made today will give you a place to start, and then you can start to learn German!

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I love the German science fiction novel series Perry Rhodan, maybe the longest running novel series in the world. It's fascinating because every German science fiction fan has read it, and may even have gotten into scifi because of it, but few people admit to liking it except as a guilty pleasure. How many people have read this series and decided to do something romantic with their lives, like becoming a scientist or wildlife photojournalist?