

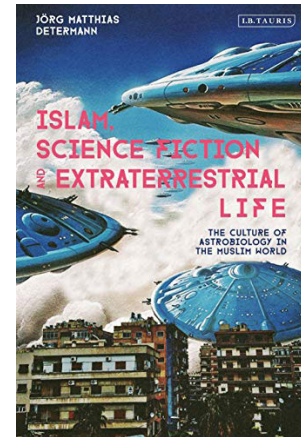
Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life, by Jörg Matthias Determann



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Jörg Matthias Determann. *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World*. Bloomsbury, I.B. Tauris Publishing, 2021. Hardcover. 288 pg. \$115.00. ISBN 978-0-7556-0127-1.

Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World (2021) follows Jörg Matthias Determann's earlier books on the subjects of space science (2015) and evolutionary biology (2018) in the Arab world and the Gulf states respectively. However, in place of a specific regional focus, his latest book adopts a transnational and transregional approach as it explores a religio-cultural context of the works that he identifies and analyzes in the book. This work is a very welcome addition to the field of science fiction studies and, broadly speaking, speculative literature which, in recent years, has been looking further afield to afford critical attention to non-Anglo-European authors and texts and include them within its frameworks of analyses.



The book's particular focus on Islam is significant for at least two reasons. First, it aims to bridge the chasm between fundamentally divergent realms of faith and science (in spite of what may be conveyed by the first part of the title, the book is not just about science fiction - it also includes science and to a large extent, the scientific imagination of individual scientists). Secondly, it also counters views such as the "Muslim world is still not commonly associated with science fiction" as the book points out that "even authoritarian countries have produced highly imaginative accounts on one of the frontiers of knowledge: astrobiology, or the study of life in the universe" (x) and that "scientists in and from Muslim-majority countries have been at the forefront of the exciting search for extraterrestrial life, the ultimate Other" (xi). The perceived incompatibility between Islam and science fiction, and in fact, scientific imagination, certainly has a long political and cultural pre-history, its genesis being in orientalism, or the West's perception of the orient as essentially "aberrant, undeveloped, inferior" which postcolonial critics such as Edward Said have pointed out, was most rigorously directed against the Islamic orient, since Islam, as "the very epitome of an outsider" of the West, was deliberately conceptualised and projected as "uncreative, unscientific, and authoritarian" (Said 296). Determann's book triumphantly upends such orientalist and colonial notions. As he points out, not only is Islam not against science fiction or extra-terrestrial life and multiple worlds, the Qur'an itself refers to the God as the 'lord of the world' forty-two times, and as the Syrian artist Ayhem Jbr claims, one might even consider the Qur'an as "the first work of SF" (10).

What adds to the richness and variety of the material is the fact that the book moves beyond the literary corpus and includes films as well as scientific and journalistic research, and as the author states, the “protagonists of this book therefore comprise professional scientists and journalists alongside writers and visual artists” (30). Besides an Introduction (Chapter 1) and a Conclusion (Chapter 6), the book has four chapters which are broadly chronological with each focusing on a specific medium, beginning with scientific journals and popular magazines in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries in Chapter 2. The third chapter, titled “Trips to the Moon,” focuses on the depiction of extraterrestrial lives in films from primarily Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan during the cold war period, while Chapter 4, “Islamic UFO Religions,” analyses a series of UFO-logical texts written in Urdu, Turkish, and Arabic from the 1960s onwards. Chapter 5, “Building Nations and Worlds,” studies science fiction novels and short stories by authors from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Indonesia and includes the works of Ibne Safi, Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Nehad Sherif and Eliza Handayani. The conclusion (Chapter 6) revisits the myriad forms and expressions of scientific imagination, adding in visual arts and video games, with particular attention to the body of research on exoplanets. As evident from the range and breadth of the corpus, Determann does not confine his focus to the Muslim-majority countries of the Arabian Peninsula (and to texts only in Arabic) as he includes a multi-lingual corpus from countries in North Africa and South and South-East Asia including Egypt, Tunisia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and others, thereby adding to the existing scholarship such as Ian Campbell’s *Arabic Science Fiction* (2018).

In the diverse and wide-ranging collection of texts that are referred to, there are fascinating and often startling references to head-scarf wearing robots, modestly dressed Martian swimmers, endorsement of a young girl’s marriage to an alien as long as he is a Muslim, as well as deliberations on the location of the Kaaba and the direction of daily prayers from outer space, some of which may lead the reader to ask: What use is the future when it is not imagined as a radical and rupturous departure from the past? The book also, however, underscores the political potential of science fiction since many of the authors conceive their writing as a form of resistance against colonial and neo-colonial forces, often through alternative histories and deliberately hyperbolic inversions. In the Malaysian author Faisal Tehrani’s novel *1515* (2011), for example, the Malays liberate Goa and capture Lisbon in 1515; in Abdelaziz Belkhdja’s (Tunisia) novel *The Return of the Elephant* (2003), it is the West that is on the brink of economic collapse while North Africa witnesses growth buoyed by technological advancements.

Determann’s book, thus, through meticulous research, presents a remarkable history of dialogue and cross-pollination between nations and cultures in the fields of science and science fiction, and points out how, in spite of Islamic opposition to science fiction in many places and its complex relationship with the state, SF has not only thrived, but it continues to be reimagined by Muslim authors from across the world. While the rich corpus of texts, by virtue of its sheer geographical and temporal breadth, might at times seem overwhelming, and the analysis, in

places, a little hurried, this book presents a repository of hitherto unknown or lesser-known texts that would be invaluable to future researchers in the field.

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