

Blake, Matt. *Science Fiction Italian Style. Italian Science-Fiction Films from 1958-2000*. The WildEye Press, 2019.

Matt Blake works in data management/analysis and is neither a professional writer nor film critic/historian. However, he has been writing about films (primarily Italian and Spanish) since the 1990s, when he put together *The Cheese Plant*, a photocopied-and-stapled fanzine dealing with topics like spaghetti westerns and poliziotteschi. Blake published his first book in 2008 (*The EuroSpy Guide*, Midnight Marquee Press), and he has written five since then, including *Science Fiction Italian Style*, a catalog and discussion of a genre that is not traditionally associated with Italy's cinematic production. Over several years, tirelessly obtaining, watching, researching and reviewing films that are often quite obscure, Blake covered nearly *everything* Italian science fiction has to offer. The result is a great resource, especially for the general, English-speaking public.¹

Blake arranges the material in five categories, each one corresponding to a part: "Early steps," "Italians in Space," "The Aliens are Among Us," "Science Goes Mad!" and "Alternative Futures." These parts, however, are in fact macro-sections; each one is articulated into multiple, monographic segments. For instance, the second one separately covers early space comedies, the space films of Antonio Margheriti, "space fantasies" (including Mario Bava's *Planet of the Vampires*, 1965), the space operas of Alfonso Brescia, and other space operas derivative of *Star Wars* (most notably, Luigi Cozzi's *Starcrash*, 1978, and Aldo Lado's *The Humanoid*, 1979). Other noteworthy monographic sub-sections that read like standalone articles include one on *Frankenstein*-inspired movies and one on Elio Petri's films.

Blake discusses films that were co-produced between Italy and other countries (for instance multiple movies belonging to the *Three Supermen* series), as well as films whose categorization as science fiction is a bit of a stretch (for instance Petri's *Todo modo*, 1976). I feel that such choices, however, result in added value to the volume. Blake even delivers more than he promises, since *Science Fiction Italian Style*, whose subtitle reads *Italian Science-Fiction Films from 1958-2000*, covers multiple films released years after the timeframe. The last section of the book is a detailed filmography (chronologically ordered), including titles in English and Italian, as well as an overview of directors, producers, scriptwriters, cinematographers, camera operators, score composers, cast members, release dates, box office, and plots or commentaries. The book is complete with an index of titles, and one of names. Finally, its pages are splashed with artwork including film posters and screengrabs.

From the very introduction, Blake makes no secret that Italian science fiction tends to be derivative, often low-quality, and heterogeneous in terms of style and content, and that it never was held in high esteem by Italian critics, also due to widespread anti-Americanism among Italian intelligentsia. However, his opinionated discussion does justice to the genre and its multiple sub-genres, emphasizing that one can occasionally find decent movies in Italian science fiction, including classics such as Petri's *The 10th Victim* (1965), little cult favorites like Margheriti's *The Wild, Wild Planet* (1966), or films ripe for rediscovery like Emidio Greco's *L'invenzione di Morel* (1974) and Gabriele Salvatores' *Nirvana* (1997). Unlike other types of Italian movies, such as spaghetti westerns, which were churned out by the dozens, science fiction, points out Blake, tended "to generate a series of micro-booms, none of which were particularly weighty in themselves and all of which tackled the genre in a slightly different way" (p. 6). He is thus reluctant to use the expression *filone* to describe Italian cinematic science-fiction, conjuring up the image of a narrative stream breaking down into tributaries and off-shoots. He prefers seeing it as "a series of

self-contained lakes sharing a common underlying water table” (*Ibidem*). Blake identifies, however, a few repeated themes shared across Italian science-fiction films: the presence of a conspiracy element, the satirical tone, and the emphasis on the importance of family (*Ibidem*).

In sum, *Science Fiction Italian Style* is rich in information and illustration, brilliantly written, and punctuated by interesting critical observations. This book is delightful to read from cover to cover, from the plots to the cornucopia of facts and trivia offered by the author and, last but not least, his critical assessments, on point and enriched with a touch of irony. It’s easy, upon reading Blake’s pages, which cover films that are nearly impossible to find, to feel envious of his cinematic culture.

A review cannot be complete without some (constructive) criticism. On a final note, I cannot fail to point out that, while I appreciate Blake’s gargantuan effort (the book is self-edited, self-designed, as well as self-published), some challenges that this kind of one-man work inevitably faces do show throughout the text. In some cases, one spots inaccuracies, such as the remark according to which Christian De Sica’s character in *A spasso nel tempo* (1996) is Milanese (this may sound like a minutia, but anyone familiar with *cinepanettoni* and De Sica’s performances knows that he routinely plays the stereotypical Roman). Also, although Blake even experiments with Italian language, throwing in a pun like *tanto mutanto* (the title of a section in part four), multiple misspellings unfortunately show in Italian names and terms. While I emphasize my genuine and deep appreciation and admiration for Blake’s work, I wish he had had his pages checked by an Italian native speaker and relied on (some form of) peer-review. The author of the present review is available to assist with well-deserved further editions of *Science-Fiction Italian Style* or future, similar work.

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¹ All information about Matt Blake’s activities comes from an email exchange that took place between 14-15 February 2022.