

## Book Review

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Jeremy Withers, *Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles. Contesting the Road in American Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020); 253 pp., £95, ISBN 978-1789621754.

**Reviewed by:** Fabian Kröger, *Independent scholar*

Science Fiction (SF) is often associated with advanced transportation machines like spaceships and futuristic cars. But Jeremy Withers demonstrates in his study *Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles* that American SF novels and short stories were hostile towards automobiles and featured more sustainable technologies like bicycles. The second surprise of his study is that skateboards were also given important roles in SF.

Throughout six chronologically organised chapters, Withers confronts the imaginary of cars, bikes and skateboards with the historical situation of these devices in the twentieth century, reconnecting the history of transport with the history of its representations.

The first chapter focuses on the *pulp era of Science Fiction* (1926–1940). In the 1920s, the advent of mass motorisation with its shifting perception of cars, of walking and the complete transformation of roads influenced many authors. Drawing on Peter Norton book *Fighting Traffic*, Withers reminds that in this decade the road lost its status as commons – available to all members of society – and was now perceived as belonging to cars. This transformation was criticised in SF Magazines that aligned with anti-automobile voices during the 1920s (see esp. page 31). In many texts, cars were depicted as dangerous intrusive machines that colonised the streets (p. 64). But at the same time, the SF-literature of these years was dominated by the strong techno-optimism of Hugo Gernsback who promoted a technological fix for all problems of automobility. As bicycles disappeared from American Life in these years, many writers saw them as obsolete, and they were rarely mentioned.

This changed in the *Golden Age of SF* (1940–1960), presented in the second chapter. The increase in car ownership, suburban sprawl and the construction of the Interstate by President Eisenhower led to a glorification of the automobile in mainstream culture (p. 68). At the same time bike sales and use were kept in check as they were almost exclusively promoted for children and seen as a step on the inevitable path towards

automobility (p. 84). Withers shows that many SF authors responded to this situation with a resistance to “the values of automobility” (p. 95), demonising or ignoring the automobile. The techno-optimism of the pulp years was now rejected. For Ray Bradbury, author of *Fahrenheit 451* and in the 1950s one of the “harshest critics of the automobile” in SF literature, motor vehicles represented “only aggression, violence and alienation” (p. 74) cutting people off from their environment. His opinion was not more favourable on behalf of autonomous cars – he associated them with “imprisonment, paranoia, and surveillance” (71). A form of nostalgic retrofuturism started instead to glorify bicycles and walking as antithesis to the automobile. Bikes were described as “useful, elegant and efficient” (p. 78) low-tech devices, able to solve transportation problems.

The third chapter focuses on the *New Wave era (1960–75)*. SF writings were influenced by the annual rise of automobile fatalities and the environmentalist movement. Again, cars with an internal combustion engine were portrayed as murderous, monstrous, polluting machines. Electric vehicles and bicycles were given more favour. Human powered movement was taken to the foreground for its “versatility, sociability and spirituality” (p. 128).

The fourth chapter shows that the *1990s postcyberpunk literature* (Stevenson, Gibson) did not only celebrate bicycles but also skateboards. Especially bicycle and skateboard messengers were shown as socially useful communities (p. 154) while the dominant model of automobility was associated with aggression, selfishness, and environmental destruction.

The fifth chapter interrogates transportation devices in the collapsed environments of postapocalyptic *climate change fiction (cli-fi) of the 1990s*. In the middle of draughts, fires and floods, functional vehicles can indeed make the difference between life and death. As cars are too complex and too dependent on fuel, mechanical simple, low-tech forms of movement – cycling and walking – are shown as more effective to maintain a certain degree of everyday life normalcy.

Chapter six examines a contemporary form of nostalgic SF, *fascinated by the 1980s*. Motorised vehicles are shown as violent, polluting, invasive machines associated with human villainy (p. 208) while the bicycle, displaying openly its working parts (p. 203) is shown as an agile, friendly partner, representing a world of imagination, enchantment, adventure and innocence, an antidote to the online world of ubiquitous screens. Withers highlights that bike allow to encounter people, creatures and environments as strange as the deep sea, outer space or other planets (p. 220). Allowing an “experience of the extraordinary” they have a function similar to spaceships. But Withers criticises the “tight connection between children and bicycles” in SF. As adults are never shown on bicycles this prevents bikes to be considered as serious transportation devices.

Withers book gives for the first time important insights to the imaginaries of automobiles, bicycles and skateboards together. His argumentation, based on a great number of sources, is convincing. Only some minor critical remarks may be given. First, the summaries of the different SF novels and histories are often so detailed that the reader risks to get lost in the description. More abstraction would have been helpful to guide the reader faster to the essential findings. Second, at some occasions, it would have also been useful to push the analysis further. Contemporary changes in road transportation were not

simply “mirrored” in SF. SF also imagined non-polluting automobiles that would avoid accidents etc. These phantasies deserve also our attention even if a condemnation of the automobile dominated.

Another point concerns the methodological framing. While film and television are first excluded from the investigation, the last chapters suddenly discuss movies, TV-series and also comic sources, understanding them as “texts” as well. This should have been justified and explained further. A comparison of transport vehicles in SF-literature, comics and film is a fascinating topic – but as written, drawn and filmographic sources are very different artistic forms, leading to different content, this requires more methodological reflections.