

Future Re-visions

The Construction of Generic Identity in the Italian Translated Titles of Anglo-American Science Fiction

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Abstract Science fiction is a foreign genre within the Italian literary tradition, to the extent that ever since it was ‘imported’ in Italy in the early 1950s, translations from English have been the main form through which SF has circulated in Italy in the following decades. Such translations were initially published in popular book series that highlighted the most escapist and colourful elements of the genre. In the 1970s, however, there was an attempt to ‘revise’ it, toning down science fiction’s popular roots and employing discursive strategies more typical of canonical literature. Paratexts played a key role in relation to this re-articulation of a popular genre. Titles, cover illustrations and advertising blurbs, all contributed to offering a new representation of science fiction, more sophisticated from a literary point of view but also with more generic constraints. This paper will analyse the presentational strategies employed in these new ‘revised’ versions of science fiction, focusing in particular on the translation of titles and the way in which they rebuilt different generic borders.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Titles in Popular Fiction. – 3 Introducing and Interpreting Science Fiction in the Italian Context: the Titles of the Urania Series. – 4 Re-visioning Science Fiction: the New 1970s SF Series. – 4.1 Reconstructing Science Fiction Generic Identity through Titles. – 5 Conclusions.

Keywords Science fiction. Translations from English to Italian. Presentation strategies.

1 Introduction

In recent years there have been many critical contributions exploring the role played by paratexts in translation. Mostly based on Gerard Genette’s seminal definition of paratexts as liminal elements with a presentational and interpretive function (1997), several studies have shown how paratextual features are fundamental in directing how a foreign author, text or even a whole genre is perceived within a new cultural environment. Paratexts may have many forms, verbal and non verbal, they may be attached to the core text or they may be external as in the case of reviews, and they may do many things: «Paratext primes, explains, contextualises,

justifies and through beautification, tempts» (Pellatt 2013, p. 3). Studies have sometimes focused on the whole of the paratextual apparatus but more often they have dealt with specific items. One of the elements that has received a good deal of attention is the role played by titles, which have been examined either with other paratextual features (see, for example, Tahir-Gürçaglar 2002) or as part of large collections aimed at detecting specific patterns of entitling in translation (Nord 1995, Viezzi 2004). One of the areas that has received less attention is the translation of titles in popular fiction, specifically what happens to the translation of titles in popular genres.¹ In this article I will address this question, focusing on the genre of science fiction, but before proceeding with my analysis I will briefly look at the relationship between titles and popular genres.

2 Titles in Popular Fiction

Unlike books published as general or mainstream literature whose paratextual features may sometimes hide rather than reveal their content,² the texts published as popular fiction³ are usually clearly marked as such. As Ken Gelder notes,

with popular fiction, generic identities are *always* visible [...]. Popular fiction announces those identities loudly and unambiguously: you know and need to know immediately that this is romance, or a work of crime fiction (and/or spy fiction), or science fiction, or fantasy, or horror, or a western, or an historical popular novel or an adventure novel. (2004, p. 42)

Although Gelder does not specifically mention paratexts, it is clear that when he speaks of genre visibility he can only be referring to those elements, both verbal and non-verbal, that specifically indicate genre identity, which are provided by a number of elements, especially on the cover. Apart from obvious items such as the title and the illustration, other elements may contribute to the construction of genre identity, such as the name of the book series, the author and the publisher whose names may sometimes stand for a whole genre (see Couégnas 1992, p. 39). This accumulation of

¹ Although some critical contributions do mention genres (for example Viezzi 2011), I did not find studies dealing with the translation of titles in the specific field of popular fiction.

² Slusser, for example, refers to the titles of the French new novels as instances of titles which are deliberately opaque in relation to their content (1989, p. 102).

³ Popular fiction is one of the many labels used in English to define a body of literature usually industrially produced for the aim of entertaining readers and organised into specific genres (see Gelder 2004 and Ricci 2013 for a description of the general characteristics of popular or genre fiction).

markers clearly has the function of making texts immediately recognisable for potential readers in the market place. Titles may be seen as being particularly important as, according to Laura Ricci, these are chosen in such a way as to orient readers quickly to their favourite genre (2013, p. 15), something that is done by way of specific keywords. For example, in relation to science fiction, Ricci states that «La fantascienza è subito evocata dai richiami spaziotemporali al futuro e all'universo incognito (era, spazio, pianeta) dove si agitano creature aliene e minacciose».⁴ While this remark may be true in a general way, it also raises some questions. Why, for example, given that genre fiction is characterised by other markers of generic identity, do titles also need to signal their relationship with a particular genre? And does this relationship change or is it stable in time? As recent studies about genre tend to see it not as a framework that pre-exist texts but rather as a fluid entity that is constructed by the texts themselves and which is based on the negotiations between different agents involved in the production and consumption of texts (see, for example, Frow 2014), it may be hypothesized that, with notions of generic identity changing in time and space, the relationship between the different genres and their titles also changes.

As popular genres develop, hybridise and are renovated, new grammatical and semantic patterns will emerge, bearing witness to different ideas of generic identity at different times and in different contexts in the cases when genres are transferred into another culture. Drawing on this concept of genre, in this study, I will explore this issue focusing on the case study of the translation of titles of science fiction novels from English into Italian. The study examines the translation of titles in two separate periods. First it looks at how the titles of Anglo-American science fiction novels were translated in the early 1950s when science fiction was imported into the Italian context. Then it looks at how the translation of science fiction titles changed in the 1970s when new SF book series appeared on the market and challenged current ideas about the genre.

⁴ «Science fiction is immediately evoked by space-time references to the future and the unknown universe (era, space, planet) where alien and threatening creatures move around» (Ricci 2013, p. 16, my translation).

3 Introducing and Interpreting Science Fiction in the Italian Context: the Titles of the *Urania* Series

Science fiction as a stand-alone genre was ‘officially’ born in Italy in the early 1950s when a significant number of mainly Anglo-American science fiction narratives were translated and published in newly created popular magazines and book series. Among these, the *Urania* series in particular, published by Arnoldo Mondadori, would become the most well-known and long-lived⁵ SF series in Italy, its name almost synonymous with science fiction and, as such, having a key role in projecting a certain idea of the genre in the country.

This idea seems to have been characterized, at least initially, by not having very clear genre borders as the *Urania*’s textual choices accommodated various types of narratives. As Giulia Iannuzzi has noted, one of the strongest threads was the one represented by the gothic tradition (2014, p. 26). Against a wide selection of texts with plots ranging from juvenile adventure to sociological issues, titles were often adapted to exploit the stock imagery of terror. This strategy can be observed in the first three examples given in Table One. While the adaptation may have been justified in relation to the second text, *Darker Than You*, which deals with the theme of lycanthropy, it is less so in relation to the other two novels (Example 1 and 3) whose plots deal respectively with the consequences of bioengineering (*L’orrenda invasione*) and the invasion of a race of parasitic aliens (*Il terrore della sesta luna*). This choice of titles may be explained by the fact that *Urania* was made on the already existing mould of other Mondadori book series, *I gialli* and *Il cerchio verde* (pp. 25-27). Another element that can be taken into consideration is the relative novelty of these texts⁶ for which a new name was coined: Fantascienza. As André Lefevere has argued, when new texts and genres are imported into a new cultural context by way of translation, they tend to be perceived through models that are already familiar in the target culture (Lefevere 1992). It may be noted that this particular interpretation does not find a correspondence in the US, from which most texts published by *Urania* came. In the source culture, science fiction was a well established genre in the 1950s, which had developed from the early twentieth century pulp narratives and had reached quite a sophisticated level by the time *Urania* started to import texts.

Looking at the books published in the *Urania* series in the following decades, it may be observed that the titles continued to be characterized by a wide spectrum of images in terms of generic identity. In particular,

5 The series, which started in 1952, is still in print at the time of writing.

6 Although texts with similar themes and plots had circulated in Italy in earlier times, their generic identity had been placed elsewhere, in the area of ‘adventure’ or ‘juvenile’ literature.

looking at the titles published in the 1970s, it is obvious that science fiction was perceived as a large container of different strands of the 'fantastic' and more generally of popular literature.

Table 1. Examples of *Urания* titles in the 1950s and 1970s. The 1950s translated titles show a preference for gothic images, while the 1970s titles show more 'generic' freedom

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation
1. <i>The Day of the Triffids</i> (1951)	<i>L'orrenda invasione</i> (1952)	The horrible invasion
2. <i>Darker Than You Think</i> (1952)	<i>Il figlio della notte</i> (1952)	The son of the night
3. <i>The Puppet Masters</i> (1951)	<i>Il terrore della sesta luna</i> (1952)	The terror of the sixth moon
4. <i>The Man who Saw Tomorrow</i> (1968)	<i>Sparate a vista su John Androki</i> (1970)	Shoot John Androki on sight
5. <i>The Peculiar Exploits of Brigadier Ffellowes</i> (1971)	<i>Le fantastorie del brigadiere</i> (1970)	The brigadier's fantasy tales
6. <i>Bleached Planet</i> (1970)	<i>Orrore alla miniera</i> (1971)	Horror at the mine
7. <i>Exiled from Earth</i> (1971)	<i>I condannati di Messina</i> (1972)	The condemned of Messina

We find, for example, the same penchant towards the gothic, with the recurring use of the word «orrore» (Example 6) or choices that echo the nineteenth-century popular novel as with *I condannati di Messina* (Example 7). There are also 'invasions' into other generic territories, such as the 'crime novel' evoked by the title *Sparate a vista su John Androki* (Example 4), or the fairytale-like quality of a title such as *Le fantastorie del brigadiere* (Example 5). It is interesting to note that in some cases a literal translation of the original title was not only possible but it would have kept the generic identity of science fiction more coherent with the widespread imagery associated with the genre.⁷

As so often happens with titles, it is not clear why such changes were made. One explanation may lie in the particular interpretation of science fiction of the *Urания* editors at this time, Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini, who succeeded Giorgio Monicelli in 1962 (and edited the series until 1986). As Giulia Iannuzzi has pointed out, Fruttero and Lucentini highlighted the connections between science fiction and other fantastic or popular genres such as horror, the supernatural and detective fiction (Iannuzzi 2014, p. 63), something that was reflected in their choice of

⁷ To refer to widespread science-fiction imagery is, to a certain extent, problematic, given the lack of agreement about the definition of science fiction (Roberts 2000) and the notion of genre as a fluid element at the core of this paper. On the other hand, it is also true that there exists a classic imagery related to science fiction which was well established by the 1970s.

titles. Another point that can be made is that, by the 1970s, *Urania's* paraliterary identity was so well-established in Italy, its connection with science fiction so well known, its visual paratextual markers so familiar, that these were sufficient to ensure genre recognition at the point of sale. In fact, the structural and semantic variety of the *Urania* titles was such that, in some cases, the editors chose titles with strong links to events of their time, establishing a sort of bridge between fantasy and reality: this is the case of *Watergate 2021* (1978) used to translate *The Panchronical Plot* (1977), or *L'immaginazione al potere* (1971), used to render *Out of Their Minds* (1969), a clear reference to the 1968 protest movement as the book blurb itself acknowledges. These references to what may be defined as current affairs and which seem almost a way of commenting on such events appear to be quite strange, given the well-known attitude of Fruttero and Lucentini towards science fiction as purely escapist literature. In any case, this image of science fiction was challenged in the 1970s by way of new SF specialised publishers who, as I will show in the next section, interpreted science fiction in a different way, narrowing its thematic boundaries and suggesting a different positioning of the genre in the Italian literary polysystem.

4 Re-visioning Science Fiction: the New 1970s SF Series

As some critics have noted (for example Curtoni and Lippi 1978, pp. 203-205), in the 1970s there was a major shift in the way in which science fiction was marketed and produced in Italy, with the launch of new mostly hardbound SF book series whose editorial policies were clearly aimed at distancing science fiction from its popular roots. The three main publishers to adopt this policy were the Bologna-based Libra, the Milan-based Nord and the Roman publisher Fanucci.⁸ Each of these publishers started new SF book series between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s which were remarkably different from series such as *Urania*. The outward appearance of the books was important in stating the intentions of publishers and editors to market the new series as legitimate literature, starting from the hardback format, which was not usually employed for popular literature (see Ricci 2013, p. 14), to the illustrations on the covers, which were generally more visually restrained and less colourful than the images found in the popular SF book series.⁹ The Libra covers,

⁸ Some of the elements presented by these publishers had appeared in previous periodicals and book series, such as the unabridged translations and the sophisticated covers.

⁹ It must be noted that this tendency towards a more visually abstract interpretation of science fiction had already been manifest in some publications, namely the SFBC, published by *La Tribuna*. Since one of its editors, Ugo Malaguti, would go on to create the Libra pub-

for example, had dust jackets with elegant, surrealist images on a white background, created by the artist Alison/Mariella Andreoli, while the Cosmo Oro series by Nord had illustrations with sober cosmological objects on a golden background.¹⁰ In addition, the books also had substantial informative and critical paratextual elements such as introductions to the author or work, bibliographical and biographic information, in some cases even short essays on a theme associated with the story, as in the series published by Fanucci. This general redesign of the SF book also involved the translation of titles as I will show in the next section, which deals with the results of an analysis of the translated titles published in SF book series by the above-mentioned publishers.

4.1 Reconstructing Science Fiction Generic Identity through Titles

The analysis was carried out on a corpus of 294 titles of books published between 1968 and 1979 by publishers Libra, Nord and Fanucci.¹¹ Of each publisher I considered what may be seen as the two main series, one dedicated to the classics of the genre such as Libra's *I classici della fantascienza* and Nord's *Cosmo Oro* and one for current, unpublished texts such as Libra's *Slan* and Nord's *Cosmo Argento*.¹² The two series I considered for Fanucci, *Orizzonti* and *Futuro*, started a bit later, in 1973, and the difference between them is not as neat, although *Orizzonti* can also be seen as a series dedicated to the books that the editors considered as the most significant ones, given that the complete title was *Orizzonti. Capolavori di fantasia e fantascienza* [Horizons. Masterpieces of Fantasy and Science Fiction].

lishing house, it is likely that he imported this style in the Libra's book series, *Slan* and *I classici della fantascienza*, whose appearance is similar to the SFBC series.

10 The Fanucci covers maintained a rather colourful appearance, possibly due to the blurred border between SF and fantasy that characterised their series and reflected the editors' policy.

11 Libra ceased to exist with this name in the early 1980s due to financial problems and was re-born as Perseo Libri in 1985, with the same editorial staff. Nord imposed itself as the most important SF publisher in Italy and is still active nowadays in the field of science fiction as well as Fanucci. Information taken from *Storia della fantascienza italiana* at: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storia_della_fantascienza_italiana. See also Ianuzzi, 2015.

12 Nord's series, *Cosmo Argento* and *Cosmo Oro*, started in 1970.

Table 2. SF book series published by Libra, Nord and Fanucci in the 1970s

Publisher	Series	Books published between 1968 and 1979 in each series	Literally translated titles	Adapted titles
Libra	I classici della fantascienza	41	13	18
Libra	Slan	53	22	13
Nord	Cosmo Oro	40	19	16
Nord	Cosmo Argento	94	27	30
Fanucci	Orizzonti. Capolavori di fantascienza	18	9	5
Fanucci	Futuro. Biblioteca di fantascienza	48	15	23

The titles have been divided into three groups on the basis of the distance of the translated titles from the surface structural and semantic elements of the original titles. In the first group there are the titles that can be defined as 'literally or quasi-literally' translated, i.e., translations which show adherence to the surface grammatical and semantic structure. In the second group I placed the titles whose semantic and grammatical structure were entirely changed in Italian, that is to say titles that have been 'adapted'. The third group contains 'mixed' titles that could not be placed in either category as they were neither literal translations nor adaptations. The most interesting cases are those with adapted titles as these indicate that some sort of constraint was at work, either linguistic, cultural or in conflict with the mediators' perception of genre identity. Compared with *Urania's* titles, the titles of these series show a lower percentage of adaptation. This was probably partly in order to be coherent with the overall translation strategy that favoured source-oriented translations.¹³ In particular, the two book series published by Libra showed a preference for close translations, which was particularly marked in the *Slan* book series. The book series *I Classici* contained a significant number of re-translations, often of novels previously published by *Urania*, whose original translated title was maintained, something that perhaps explains the higher number of adapted titles. The few adapted titles in the *Slan* are an indication of what was deemed as unacceptable. There was a clear preference for titles that strengthen genre identity, evoking typical SF tropes, words such as «pianeta» (planet), «stelle» (stars), «universo» (universe), sometimes also

13 All series examined report the information, often on the cover, that the texts were unabridged versions of the source texts.

rendered with the more literary «infinito», and a preference for poetic language and images: for example *La via delle stelle* (The road to the stars) used to render *Tunnel in the Sky* sounds better than the more literal *Il tunnel verso le stelle*, both phonetically and semantically. Conversely, there seems to be a dislike for titles that show proximity with the genre of horror, something that may be due to a re-definition of the generic borders of science fiction, so, for example, *The Birthgrave* was translated as *Nata dal Vulcano* (Born from a volcano), *Cemetery World* was rendered as *I giorni del silenzio* (The days of silence).

The trends I identified in the books published by Libra also appeared in the titles published by Nord. The Cosmo Oro series published forty books in the time span considered, with titles that were mostly close translations of the original source titles and only sixteen titles that were adapted. As in the case of Libra, the adaptations veer towards a stricter definition of science fiction, with semantic choices that exploit the typical SF repertoire and exclude words that may be seen as evoking other genres. Examples of this can be found in *The Deathworld Trilogy* and *The Mote in God's Eye* which were rendered respectively as *Pianeta impossibile* (Impossible Planet) and *La strada delle stelle* (The road to the stars). In other cases the changes are less clear, although it is possible to detect a preference for certain words which were perhaps perceived as evocative of SF themes, such as «infinito» (infinite) and «immortale» (immortal).

Table 3 - Examples of adapted SF titles in the new SF book series published by Libra, Nord and Fanucci.

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation
<i>The Green Odyssey</i> (1956)	<i>Pianeta in via di sviluppo</i> , Libra, Slan (1970)	Developing planet
<i>The Birthgrave</i> (1975)	<i>Nata dal vulcano</i> , Libra, Slan (1978)	Born from a volcano
<i>The Mote in God's Eye</i> (1974)	<i>La strada delle stelle</i> , Nord, Cosmo Oro (1975)	The road to the stars
<i>Time Enough for Love</i> (1973)	<i>Lazarus Long, l'immortale</i> , Nord, Cosmo Oro (1979)	Lazarus Long, the immortal
<i>Flesh</i> (1960)	<i>Il figlio del sole</i> , Nord, Cosmo Argento (1972)	The son of the sun
<i>The Still, Small Voices of Trumpets</i> (1968)	<i>Ai margini della galassia</i> , Nord, Cosmo Argento (1972)	At the margins of the galaxy
<i>Isle of Dead</i> (1967)	<i>Metamorfosi cosmica</i> , Nord, Cosmo Argento, (1974)	Cosmic metamorphosis
<i>Time Is the Simplest Thing</i> (1961)	<i>Pescatore di stelle</i> , Fanucci, Orizzonti (1973)	Fisherman of stars
Nerves	<i>Incidente nucleare</i> , Fanucci, Futuro (1974)	Nuclear accident

From a semantic point of view, i.e., the actual lexical items chosen to convey the content of the books, what is noticeable is a general tendency to avoid confusion and a preference for words that evoke the core imagery associated with science fiction. The Italian renderings generally tended to avoid genre ambiguity and respected what Roberts defines as the «stock themes and situations» of science fiction, i.e., references to spaceships and space travel, aliens, robots and genetic engineering, computers and virtual reality, time travel, alternative history, utopias and dystopias (Roberts 2000, p. 15).

Another common trait was a penchant towards a more poetic language. Titles often had a 'literary' connotation which was expressed in different ways, for example through particular stylistic choices, as in *Il lungo meriggio della Terra* to render *The Long Afternoon of Earth* where the literary «meriggio» was used instead of the standard «pomeriggio». ¹⁴ In other cases the 'literariness' was expressed through a particular poetic image as in *Pescatore di stelle* (Fisherman of Stars) which translates *Time is the Simplest Thing*. In other cases, the title evokes particular cultural themes, as in the apparently Luddite *Distruggete le macchine* (Destroy the machines) published by Nord and whose original title was *Piano Player*. The reasons for these adaptations may be manifold and certainly linguistic and cultural constraints played their part. What is interesting, however, is that the adapted titles always show a preference for a narrower set of science-fiction images while 'intrusions' from other genres tended to be rejected.

5 Conclusions

This article, which deals with a particular case study involving the translation of titles of science fiction novels in the Italian context, has demonstrated how different translation choices and resulting patterns within the same genre depend on a variety of factors. Apart from aspects that have already been pointed out in the literature on the subject, such as linguistic and cultural constraints in the source titles that require adaptation to make the target titles comprehensible for the potential readers, other elements may play a role. In particular, I showed how titles may be adapted because of the way in which a particular genre is interpreted at a point in time and of shifts of its position in the literary polysystem. It is worth noting that some of the titles I analysed here were further re-translated in later times, with changes that suggest that different, new interpretations of generic identity were involved.

¹⁴ It must be noted that words such as «meriggio» or «infinito», with echoes of Eugenio Montale's and Giacomo Leopardi's famous poems (*Meriggiare pallido e assorto* and *L'infinito*), can be seen as a deliberate choice on the part of the mediators to link science fiction with Italian canonical literature and perhaps increase the artistic 'legitimacy' of the genre.

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