From the otherworldly sounds of the theremin that accompany the alien Klaatu in The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951) to the five–note leitmotiv used by extra–terrestrials in Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977) to communicate with humans, science fiction (SF) film has always placed an emphasis on creating new and unique soundscapes. In Off the Planet: Music, Sound, and Science Fiction Cinema, editor Philip Hayward brings together eleven essays about music and sound in this genre, covering movies from a variety of time periods from the 1950s through the late 1990s. Many of the essays discuss both the musical scores for a particular film (or set of related films) and the ambient sounds used in the film. This holistic approach is appropriate for a number of films in which the two are not easily separated, a phenomenon not often found outside of the genre. Few scholars pay much attention to the foley effects in non–SF films—those small but necessary sounds that lend a film verisimilitude and depth, such as the sound of heels clicking down a hallway, a car door closing, the safety of a gun being released, a letter being opened, but because of its frequent close kinship with the score within SF conventions, studying both is often the best way to examine the full aural impact of a film. Foley sounds are especially important in sci–fi, offering aural understanding of new and unfamiliar phenomena: an alien spacecraft making a landing, a strange weapon firing, the music of a far–away culture.

One of the best essays in the collection, Shuhei Hosokawa’s analysis of composer Akira Ifukube’s work on the original Godzilla (1954) and several of its sequels, “Atomic Overtones and Primitive Undertones: Akira Ifukube’s Sound Design for Godzilla,” explores the power of “Godzilla’s aural triptych (music, stomping, and roaring)” (p. 43). This troika of aural features, Hosokawa argues, has become an icon for the twentieth–century conflict between primitivism (as represented by Godzilla) and modernity (represented by civilization and its effect on the world). Hosokawa shows that Ifukube’s work had numerous parallels with Bartók’s in creating a soundscape for this divide: Ifukube used local (in this case, Ainu) timbres and musical gestures, employed asymmetrical rhythms, and orchestrated the Godzilla scores with a full orchestra that also incorporated extended techniques or unusual instruments, and lastly, created a musical language that, like Bartók’s, “evokes the national” while refusing to exoticize it (p. 45). According to Hosokawa, Ifukube also drew heavily on several passages of The Rite of Spring as a way of developing upon Stravinsky’s constructed Russian primitivism.

Hosokawa’s description of the creation of sound for Godzilla also offers much to consider. Rather than using an animal or human voice or synthesized sound, Ifukube wanted Godzilla to have a musically created roar, something that corresponded to his belief that Godzilla “symbolically opposed science and technology” (p. 48). Sound engineers recorded hundreds of “ugly” musical sounds, combining them on tape. The ultimate effect is one of the breakthroughs in recorded sound, and was the first time tape was used in the creation of a musical performance in Japan (p. 49). Godzilla’s earth–shaking stomp was likewise manufactured by blending together audio clips from a sound library manipulated on tape. The end result of these musical and technological collaborations was a clear success for Godzilla, and the essay itself is an excellent example of combining analysis of sound and music in a single discussion.

Another essay that tackles the intersection of music and sound is Rebecca Coyle’s “Sound and Music on the Mad Max Trilogy.” Coyle provides an overview of the films and then diagrams their narrative, generic, and futurist aspects before delving into their soundscapes. Coyle’s primary thesis is that the scores and sounds “derive from the past and are recycled and functionally
transformed . . . to create new futures” (p. 115). She illustrates thoroughly, taking into consideration noise, music, and voice (three factors of the soundscapes), describing the ways in which the films’ composers (Brian May scored Mad Max and Road Warrior, released respectively in 1979 and 1981; Maurice Jarre, Beyond Thunderdome, released in 1985) overlapped and diverged in these arenas. Coyle’s “sound map” for the films provides a basic structure for her argument, which she then presents with solid examples and analysis. Featured sound elements of each film, including on-site dialogue recording, the noises of the vehicles and technology present, and vernacular instruments such as the didjeridu are all shown to appear in fragmentary forms introduced early in the films and then reused and developed to a new point by the denouements.

A third strong essay that uses this combined analysis is Michael Hannan and Melissa Carey’s “Ambient Soundscapes in Blade Runner.” Using the 1992 “Director’s Cut” edition as their source (the film was originally released with Harrison Ford’s voice—over narrative as protagonist “replicant”—or robot—hunter Rick Deckard in 1982), Hannan and Carey locate the uses of music and sound effects in the film, paying particular attention to the source music by Vangelis and the use of sound effects (examples include sirens like those used in the film as well as the synthesized ones used in the score; the latter appeared near the end of the “End Titles” and in “Love Theme” reissued in 1989 on the CD Vangelis: Themes, Polydor 839 518–2). The variety of ethnic musics heard in the street scenes sound simultaneously (and paradoxically) exotic and right at home. For example, the musical passages of the Egyptian snake seller and the Hare Krishna followers are convincingly interpreted as both a quick and easy method of establishing a culture and an ironic backdrop to Deckard’s actions during the scene in which it is heard. The authors also discuss the ways in which the score and sound track provide aural cues as to the relative power of individuals and entities in the film and their states of mind; the use of bells and chimes is one example. They are used throughout the film as hints to the audience: bells are heard during Deckard’s visit to the Tyrell Corporation’s top floor, evoking a gentle breeze and a life above the grit and turmoil below; bells are used again at the death of one of Deckard’s targets, Roy, suggesting, along with the release of the dove, church bells and rites. This particular essay is perfect for classroom use; it provides a solid synopsis of the film and lays out its arguments in a precise manner.

Although most of the essays in Off the Planet place emphasis on music and sound, there are several essays that deal with the scores alone. The best of these is Neil Lerner’s excellent reading of John Williams’ music for two SF classics, Star Wars (1977) and Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977). In “Nostalgia, Masculinist Discourse and Authoritarianism: John Williams’ Scores for Star Wars and Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” Lerner offers up new interpretations of the scores, arguing that Star Wars’ primary leitmotiv “reinforces the film’s overall masculinist imagery and focus,” and that careful consideration of Close Encounters’ music suggests that it “supports those critics who find the film’s rhetoric authoritarian or even fascist” (p. 97).

In his discussion of Star Wars, Lerner posits that the main theme of the score stands for Luke in all of his heroic, masculine glory. He quotes Williams to prove the composer’s intention in the matter. Lerner goes on to chronicle the use and development of Luke’s motif, which expands in instrumentation and scope as it follows the young whiny Luke on Tatooine (winds) to the daring Luke swinging Leia across a chasm (trumpets) to fully mature Luke leading the manly attack—which Lerner hilariously and very accurately describes as having “an odd resemblance to a sex education film”—on the Death Star (full orchestra). You’ll never watch the film quite the same way again, which is wonderful.

Lerner’s take on Close Encounters is equally perceptive and entertaining. Tracing complaints of fascism about the film to Susan Sontag, among others, he provides a detailed description of the film’s political reflections before discussing the score. By creating a less familiar (and therefore negative), pseudo–modernist musical landscape at the beginning which then facilely develops into “When You Wish Upon a Star” (a safe, positive, tonal musical experience), Williams—in Lerner’s view—helps pull the viewer along on a clichéd journey from fear and uncertainty to security and enlightenment granted by superior beings. Lerner also examines the religious aspects of the film, discussing the parallels between Roy’s leadership and Moses leading his chosen people to a promised place; between the Tower of Babel and the government, which cannot decipher the aliens’ messages; and between Christ’s disciples and the twelve red–suited figures who escort Roy onto the ship. Ultimately, for Lerner, Williams’ score affirms the superiority of the aliens by musically painting them as trustworthy and their ship as a safe retreat in which “the alien is next to the signifiers of epic religiosity.” This particular contribution to the collection is one that is—like Hannan and Carey’s about Blade
Despite a number of fine essays, *Off the Planet* suffers from a few poor chapter choices and several embarrassing errors, including Hayward’s re-naming of Edward Elgar “Edgar”; his description of “filk”—music written by fans—as just new words set to old tunes, when it encompasses original music as well; and omitting the date of *Mars Attacks!* (1996) in his own chapter about the film. While the introduction is otherwise generally sound in its overview of SF literature and film, it assumes fairly significant previous knowledge in both of those areas and—more importantly—lacks some crucial definition that the book needs: a discussion of what, exactly, the collection seeks to accomplish in considering music and sound together, and how those elements are delineated. What boundaries were agreed upon by the authors? How should the reader approach the overlap between music and sound in these essays? These critical questions go unanswered.

There are several essays that lack overall coherence, and considerably lower the quality of the book. Nabeel Zuberi contributes one of the few pieces that addresses the inclusion of minorities in SF in his essay on jazz composer, bandleader, and multitalented seventies figure Sun Ra, but the chapter is so poorly organized, and wandering that it is essentially unreadable. Unfortunately, the same applies to Paul Theberge’s chapter on David Cronenberg’s films. His inclusion of dialogue as a sound element could be promising, but it is never clearly defined and is used ambiguously, sometimes meaning music, other times sound, and at yet other times an unidentified vocality between the two.

Other essays suffer from the use of unexplained or unnecessary jargon. Music theorist and film music scholar Rebecca Leydon, writing about *Forbidden Planet* (1956), discusses the history of the film’s electronic score, composed by Bebe and Louis Barron. Much of Leydon’s material on the ways in which the Barrons’ “electronic tonalities” differed from the norm is fascinating: for example, their use of delay loops, layers of drums and other timbres, and the use of fugue form; however, the essay is often weighed down by technical recording jargon and industrial descriptions that lack translations for those unfamiliar with tape manipulation and technology of the 1950s. What does it mean for the composers or the audience that “escalating feedback altered the spectro-morphology in unpredictable ways” (p. 68)?

Yet other essays depend upon extreme audience intimacy with a film or assume that their audiences have had specific kinds of viewing experiences.