American Science Fiction Film – A Bird's Eye View

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Abstract
This work approaches the themes and trends, many of which have fundamental social, political and philosophical significance, that have marked the evolution of American science fiction film, and it points out how the genre has influenced and been affected by the culture in which it has been produced, often in a context that makes it more real than reality - problems such as environmental degradation; overpopulation and pressure on space and goods, friction between the sexes, races, and nations; and the difficulties caused by computers, robots, clones, and aliens. The versatility of American science fiction film has allowed it to address a wide variety of audiences, from filmgoers looking for simple, escapist entertainment, to those eager to have their minds challenged. American science fiction film has also moved to the forefront of filmmaking technology, particularly in the field of special effects.

Key words: *science and technology, visions of the future, alien invasion, nuclear apocalypse, space travel*

1. The Beginnings

The "roots" of the American science fiction film can be traced back to a variety of sources. After the popular and inexpensive "dime novels" of the nineteenth century, came the "pulps," then the science fiction comic strips and comic books of the first half of the twentieth century. It was comic strip heroes and superheroes such as Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon that crossed over into science fiction radio serials and later into the cinema serials. The cinema serials were low-budget films aimed at a young audience, with 12-15 episodes which were 15-20 minutes long. Cinema serials like *The Shadow of the Eagle* (1932), *The Phantom of the Air* (1933), and *The Lost City* (1935) featured robust heroes battling with evil opponents.

Technological innovation was also a central feature of these serials, but it was not until *Flash Gordon: Space Soldiers* (1936) that the science fiction genre really came into its own. *Flash* was followed by *Buck Rogers Conquers the Universe* (1939) and the later superhero serials, *The Batman* (1943) and *The Adventures of Superman* (1948). There were very few science fiction feature films produced in the US during the 1930s and 1940s, so in terms of numbers the serials remain the most prominent example of the American film genre before the 1950s. The serial was plotted to a set formula that required a fast pace, colourful characters, and regular "cliff hangers" to tempt children back to the cinemas to see the next episode. (Booker 2010: 238) Many of these characteristics found their way into later feature

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films and so the genre became inextricably linked with sensation, commercialism and a juvenile market.

2. The First Golden Age (1950-1960)

The science fiction feature film emerged in the 1950s as a response to an America transformed by public recognition of the power and socio-political consequences of advanced science and technology, by a new consciousness of the relativity of spatial and temporal distance, and by a sense of political enmity and geophysical vulnerability. The Cold War period was marked both by the threat of nuclear annihilation and the promise of new technologies such as television and the computer.

The two key films that initiated the genre's first "Golden Age" were exemplary in figuring the positive and negative attitudes about the technologized future. *Destination Moon* (1950), with its narrative of a manned space mission, was optimistic about an expansionist future enabled by the cooperation of hard science, high technology, and corporate capitalism. In images filled with glittering futuristic technology, a sleek spaceship, the beauty of limitless outer space, and "special effects," the film "merits special mention for its relatively accurate and convincing depiction of a moon expedition." (Telotte 2004: 100)

The Thing (1951), however, was pessimistic about both rational science and the future. The film's narrative about a murderous alien creature on an Arctic military outpost was xenophobic and anti-science, privileging technology only for the weapons it provided against alien attack. Indeed, with its dark *mise-en-scène* and caution against obsessive scientific curiosity, *The Thing* envisioned the future in terms of merely staying alive and safe. Its paranoid last warning was: "Watch the skies; keep watching." (Telotte 2004: 181)

This negative vision of the future developed in several directions: "creature features," alien invasion fantasies, and films about the fear of radiation and nuclear apocalypse. "Creature features" foregrounded atomically awakened or mutated creatures that embodied the present threat of nuclear annihilation in "prehistoric" figures. Primal beasts and giant insects caused mass urban chaos and, through special effects, brought to the screen the imagination of disaster and the aesthetics of destruction. *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *Them!* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955), *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), and *The Black Scorpion* (1957) showed creatures that held in their gigantic size and acts of destruction the suggestion of humanity's post-apocalyptic future as a regression to prehistory.

At the same time, however, these primitive creatures drew attention away from the advanced science and technology that gave rise to them, thus allowing scientists and the military to use that science and technology to "save" humanity. Hardly regarded as works of art or social commentary, these films were nonetheless culturally significant. Ritualistic in their simple plotting and repetitive structure, they were mythic in function, resolving intense and contradictory

feelings about scientific rationalism and advanced technology, and their historically new destructive applications.

The alien invasion films dramatized another cultural anxiety: the popular fear of Communism as a dehumanizing political system bent on destroying individual subjectivity, committed to world conquest, and using new forms of "invasive" and "invisible" domination like "brainwashing." These films disguised Cold War nightmares about being "taken over" by powerful, inhumanly cold and rational others, who would radically flatten human emotion and transform consciousness into a collectivity, and they did so in two quite different forms.

Like the "creature features," one type of invasion film developed the aesthetics of destruction in an urban America under attack – but here from aliens, whose superior weapons blast such distinctly American landmarks as the Washington Monument. At the same time the invasion was seen through newspaper and television montage as global in scope. *War of the Worlds* (1953) and *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956) dramatized radical xenophobia, fear of planetary annihilation through high-tech weaponry, and a contradictory yearning for both a peaceful global coalition and another morally clear-cut world war. Only *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) took a critical view of the period's xenophobia, its extra-terrestrial protagonist speaking out against irrational fear and militarism, and emphasizing the "follies of the nuclear arms race." (Booker, 2010: 28)

The second type of alien invasion film dramatized cultural anxieties about the more "invisible" threats of Communism: infiltration of the US by a subversive "fifth column" and ideological "brainwashing." *Invaders from Mars* (1953), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958), and *The Day Mars Invaded the Earth* (1963) located themselves in the ordinary and familiar worlds of small-town and suburban America where aliens "took over" the bodies of family members, police officers, doctors, workmen, and lovers. These films created a paranoid style in which alien "difference" was marked not by special effects but by the stiff demeanour and small failures of the human-looking aliens to respond appropriately in ordinary human situations: not blinking at the sun, not responding maternally to a child, or passionately to a kiss.

Science fiction post-apocalyptic fantasies played out anxieties of yet another kind. Fear of radiation's effects on the human body were poeticized in extreme dramas like *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and *The Amazing Colossal Man* (both 1957), while visions of life after nuclear apocalypse were set in recognizable urban contexts, now ghost towns emptied of people but for a few survivors. Structured around loss and absence, *On the Beach* and *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (both 1959) starred significant Hollywood actors and were received less as science fiction than as serious adult drama. Other films like *Five* (1951) or the later *Panic in the Year Zero* (1962) also foregrounded moral questions of the period about what "survival of the fittest" might mean in actual post-apocalyptic practice.

3. The Decline (1960s – 1977)

At the end of the 1950s, science fiction film went into major decline, the reasons being linked to dramatic changes in both the motion picture industry and American society. The 1960s saw the economic collapse of the monopolistic Hollywood studio system and major changes in production and exhibition. Television was also providing audiences with a major entertainment alternative, offering science fiction in well-written series such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959–64), *The Outer Limits* (1963–69), and *Star Trek* (1966–68). Although, in response, the film industry introduced wide-screen and experimented with 3-D films such as *It Came from Outer Space*, there was now little theatrical place for the "low" genre of science fiction.

The cultural taste for science fiction clearly changed in the 1960s. Life in the nuclear shadow became normalized and "new" technologies were no longer quite so exciting. Most Americans were less concerned with nuclear annihilation than with domestic problems, "alien threat" coming not from the USSR or outer space but from black Americans demanding their civil rights; flower children rejecting parental values and "spacing out" on drugs; angry feminists; and protesters against the war in Vietnam.

Although the science fiction film did not disappear between the 1960s and 1977, it did recede in popular consciousness. Exceptions were Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), a black comedy about the onset of nuclear war, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a critically acclaimed epic that set new standards for cinematic effects and ironically foregrounded the increasing banality of technologized human being against the grandeur and possibilities of an unknown universe, "using a classical music soundtrack and special visual effects of unprecedented sophistication to help produce a film that was self-consciously intended to be a genuine work of art, rather than mere entertainment." (Booker, 2010: 44) 1968 also saw release of the very popular *Planet of the Apes*, which combined a post-apocalyptic theme with space and time travel to displace and explore American race relations.

Indeed, it may well have been science fiction's narrative inability to sufficiently transform and displace contemporaneous mundane concerns in post-1968 American culture that kept viewers away. More adult, socially relevant, and mainstream than it had been previously, science fiction was hardly escapist, dealing with overpopulation, food shortages, urban blight, and aging in films like *Soylent Green* (1973), or with the consequences of corporate capitalism and media violence in films like *Rollerball* (1975). Certainly, between 1969 and 1974, the years of Richard Nixon's presidency, space travel and extra-terrestrials seemed irrelevant to a future threatened more by domestic political corruption, reckless consumption, and corporate greed than by the possibilities of alien attack.

4. The Second Golden Age (1977-)

Yet, in 1977, it was precisely space travel and extra-terrestrials that marked the inauguration of science fiction's second "Golden Age." The statement that began Gerald Ford's short presidency (1974–1977) – "Our long nightmare is over" – seemed fulfilled by its end in two extremely popular, visionary and benign science fantasies: George Lucas's *Star Wars* and Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, both of them "a refreshing change to the nihilism of the period […] and critical of the national condition in their respective depictions of faceless, bureaucratic, and fascistic governments." (Geraghty 2009: 15) Radically different from their more baleful predecessors, *Star Wars* was an epic space adventure and coming-of-age film set in a mythic past "long, long ago," but realized futuristically in a galaxy "far, far away"; while *Close Encounters* was an epic domestic adventure about an ordinary man's search for "something important" and "wonder-full" that culminated in a spectacular and joyful encounter and communication with child-like yet technologically advanced extra-terrestrials.

Both films were positive and enthusiastic about the future of human beings and envisioned alien life forms as potentially friendly allies in adventure. Both were also playful, often comic, and reflexive about their own generic existence and history. And, more radically, both films transformed science fiction's "objective" and rational vision of a high technology promoted through special "effects" into a "subjective" and emotional expression of new technological "highs" and special "affects."

What accounted for this sudden change in popular attitudes towards the genre – not just these two inaugural blockbusters but the large number of mainstream science fiction films that followed through the 1990s - were the first two years of Jimmy Carter's presidency (1977–81), a time of national "healing" and middle-ground compromise. As "losers" in Vietnam, popular culture reinvented Americans as valiant "underdogs" and, in a paradoxical turn, identified with the "little guys" against big "Evil Empires." American culture began to sentimentalize the recent past, seeking alternatives in escapist science fantasies that promised something better "far, far away." First wave feminism's interrogation of gender roles as well as military defeat also prompted popular reappraisal of "masculinity." Thus, it was no accident that in *Alien* (1979), Ripley was a fiercely intelligent and independent female protagonist embraced by women not only in the audience but also in the academic community. In sum, for the first time since the 1950s, the genre began to recognize and reflect the somewhat changed position of women in American society.

In 1981, an increasingly bad economy ceded the Carter presidency to Ronald Reagan. Promoting big business and America as a world power, Reagan served until 1989, rearticulating the historically regressive terms of the Cold War in science fictional rhetoric. Indeed, in 1985, he explicitly connected his plans for a satellite defence system to *Star Wars* and told America, "The force is with us." It was a decade of corporate expansion, high technology, and media fiction – and the height of the science fiction film's renaissance. But massive deregulation of greedy

corporations and an enhanced military budget led to an increasing national deficit; furthermore, AIDS became epidemic and, connected to homosexuality, was popularly conceived as an "alien" disease. Thus, parallel to (and eventually overtaking) the more sanguine science fiction of the decade were films from the "dark side" of the "force."

The early 1980s were dominated by a sort of cultural longing for a simpler and more innocent world, one in which technology is generally benign and often emotionalized, in which "alien" others are sentimentalized, spiritual mentors who are kinder, gentler, and more enlightened than humans. Films such as *Star Man* (1984) and *Cocoon* (1985), in which aliens were figured as innocent lovers and spiritual friends, seemed to fulfil the culture's need to escape a complex and heterogeneous world that refused both moral and ideological simplification.

This cultural desire for a return to the innocence and simplicity of childhood found its apotheosis in Spielberg's hugely popular *E.T.* (1982), "the first commercially and critically successful science fiction film to be made primarily for children." (Booker, 2006: 158) The story of a suburban boy's friendship with a small and cuddly alien was science fiction with a "heart light," and had an emotional appeal more to do with resolving family problems than with the rational science and high technology previously associated with the genre.

Like the aliens, technology had also become increasingly domesticated, both in – and out of – the new science fiction film. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, consumer electronics were a part of everyday American life, and science fictional items such as digital watches, microwave ovens, and VCRs were commonplace. The large computers initially associated with the secretive military-industrial complex became small, affordable, "user-friendly," and "personal." In the early 1980s, the teen hero of *Wargames* (1983) "hacked" his way into a computer game called "Global Thermonuclear War," only to find out it was not a game at all; and the protagonist of *The Last Starfighter* (1984) was a teen video game champ whose skill enabled him to save the universe. Those "family" science fiction films ended happily and figured not only the proliferation of electronic gamesmanship, but also the rhetoric that zapped Americans into and out of real space and game space.

In the mid-1980s, this "domestication" of science fiction led also to a second category, quite different in tone and terrain from the first. A significant number of independent, "quasi-science fiction" films emerged on the margins of the genre as a counter-cultural critique. Using visibly cheesy special effects, *Liquid Sky* (1984), *Strange Invaders, Brother from Another Planet, Repo Man, Night of the Comet* (all 1984), and *Uforia* (1986) dramatized American culture as pervasively "science fictionalized" and "alienated" – indeed, more anthropologically bizarre than anything mainstream science fiction could dream up. In those films, extra-terrestrial aliens were easily "integrated" into black Harlem, run up against the drug subculture and punk scene, and confronted with their image in the newspapers and magazines. Their science fiction "plots" were also played out in the familiar yet estranged spaces of convenience stores, suburban shopping malls,

and supermarkets. Often called "postmodern" because of their use of irony and pastiche, those films played up their own "B" film status and many went quickly to video stores and cult status.

From its beginnings, however, the second "Golden Age" of science fiction film also had a dark side. Thus, the third category of the genre ignored benign suburban landscapes and starry spacescapes, while paranoia, schizophrenia, and anxiety outweighed parody. Urban clutter and blight or confined and claustrophobic spaces set the *mise-en-scène* not only for remakes of several 1950s films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1979), *Body Snatchers* (1994), and *The Thing* (1982), but also for historically particular cinematic responses to consumerism, economic crisis, the immense power of multinational corporations, and the increasing surveillance in every sector of society.

Much more troubling, perhaps, than predatory creatures, alien or terrestrial, like in *Predator* (1987), and *Predator 2* (1990), were more domestic and intimate threats to the human being and the quality of contemporary existence. Thus, this third, and darkest, science fiction category traced a unique – and "postmodern" – ambivalence about what was perceived as a degraded future. Perhaps best characterized by *Blade Runner* (1982), "a seminal postmodern film, not only in terms of the cluttered and 'retrofitted' dystopian cityscape it offered the spectator, but also in the ways that it dealt with emerging questions of human subjectivity within a postmodern, post-industrial environment" (Cornea, 2007: 154), these films both criticized and eroticized the urban blight in which they were set, finding peculiar beauty in garbage, decay, industrial exhaustion, and a cityscape saturated both by acid rain and advertising. In these films, "new" technology and "modern" architecture looked "recycled" and shabby. Dark in tone, filled with highly atmospheric pollution, *Escape from New York* (1981), *Blue Thunder* (1983), the extremely popular *Terminator* films, *Robocop* (1987), and *Total Recall* (1990) stood as celebratory monuments to the consumer culture of late capitalism even as they ironically lamented it.

Although inaugurated in the 1980s, this paranoid strain of science fiction became particularly dominant in the late 1990s and has continued into the first decade of the twenty-first century. 1999 saw the release of *The Thirteenth Floor*, which figured "ordinary" reality as a manufactured illusion; *EXistenZ*, which blurred the boundaries for both characters and spectators between "real" life and virtual game life; the extraordinarily popular *The Matrix*, which posited "real" life the creation of a computer program and real "real life" as a passive and unconscious existence; and, *Fight Club*, in which male passivity and consumerism met in ambiguous space. These critical thematics and confusions continued not only in the *Matrix* sequels (both *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, 2003), but also in *Solaris* and *Minority Report* (both 2002), and *Paycheck* (2003).

The fact that special effects technology is no longer linked to rationalism or science, explains to a great extent the slippage of science fiction "proper" into quasi-science fiction/fantasy comic book films or its subsumption by fantasy. Thus, in the present period, the science fiction genre is matched by "superhero"

films such as *X-Men* (2000) and *X2: X-Men United* (2003); *Spider-Man* (2002) and *Spider-Man 2* (2004); and *Hulk* (2003) – and countered by fantasy films such as the *Harry Potter* series (2001-11) and the extraordinary *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-03).

Conclusions

Nonetheless, science fiction continues as a popular American film genre, paradoxically no longer confined to the cinema-hall. Video games, CD-ROMs, and DVDs; interactive films and television; and science fiction adventures in the perceived depth and motion of virtual space in arcades and theme parks – all promise the film genre a future that exceeds the very mechanisms and industry that gave it birth. In sum, from 1950 to the present day, the science fiction film continues to give concrete narrative shape and visible form to America's changing historical imagination of technological progress and disaster, and to the ambiguities of being human in a world in which advanced technology has altered both the morphology and meaning of personal and social existence.

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