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| Science Fiction Film is a film genre in which the plot premise generally (1) depends on a scientific development or concept which has not already been actualized at the time of filming or at least not advanced to the degree depicted in the film, or (2) presents a vision of the future based on extrapolations of current trends in society. It dates back to the earliest days of the cinema and continues to flourish in the 21st century. Science Fiction Films valorise science but also distrust it. They raise basic philosophical issues: the meaning of being human, the way humans perceive reality, and humanity’s place in the universe, among others. |
| Science fiction (SF) films are generally set in the future, near or distant, or an alternate present slightly more advanced than the contemporary time. Occasionally, the setting may be an alternate past where the SF element consists of equipment or processes far in advance of the actual technology of the period depicted (and perhaps even of the actual time of the film production itself); thus, the Disney *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), based on the Jules Verne novel, takes place in the nineteenth century but with a sophisticated submarine and underwater equipment as its centrepiece and so would qualify as science fiction rather than simply as an adventure film.  Common story elements seen in SF films include space exploration, time travel, robots, extraterrestrials both hostile and benevolent, extrasensory perception, cyborgs, matter transmission, genetic engineering, cloning, creatures surviving from prehistoric times, mutation, computers and artificial intelligence, virtual reality, dystopias, natural global catastrophes, exploration of extremely hostile submarine or subterranean environments, biological warfare, zombie plagues, development of preternatural abilities in humans (superheroes), and life extension.  The SF genre dates back to the earliest days of the cinema. French film pioneer Georges Méliès’ *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*, 1902), borrowing from both Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, was the first science fiction film with a plot and multiple scenes of different special effects. Several SF films were made each year subsequently. The most ambitious for some years was *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the* Sea (1916), which used special cameras to shoot underwater. Europe once again provided the most significant SF films of the 1920s, though: Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) and *Frau im Mond* (*Woman in the Moon*,1929), and Jakov Protazanov’s *Aelita* (1924).  The genre’s first real surge, though, came in the 1930s in blends with horror featuring stereotypical mad scientists, most prominently in *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932), and *The Invisible Man* (1933), and in serials, most notably those based on comic strip heroes Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers.  Another wave came in the 1950s inspired by and responding to nuclear bomb tests, the Cold War, and an increase in reports of UFO sightings (itself perhaps a result of Cold War fears). This wave featured giant monsters, either caused by radiation such as the car-sized ants in *Them!* (1954), or aroused from dormancy by nuclear blasts like the dinosaur in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), or the arrival of extra-terrestrials to wage war as in *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956), or to urge peace as in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951).  Science fiction films continued to be produced on a regular basis, including classics of the genre such as *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and *2001: A Space Odyssey*  (1968). But it was in the late 1970s that a new surge began with major box office successes *Star Wars* (1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Superman* (1978), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), and *Alien* (1979). This trend experienced a significant reinforcement in the early 1980s with *The Road Warrior* (1981), *Blade Runner* (1982), *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Tron* (1982), *2010* (1984), and *The Terminator* (1984). These films benefitted greatly from new special effects houses—led by George Lucas’ creation, Industrial Light and Magic (ILM)—dedicated to producing and improving special visual effects. The mid-1980s ushered in computer-generated imagery (CGI) which made for even more realistic effects, leading to films such as *Jurassic Park* (1993) with its full inventory of credible dinosaurs.  Science Fiction Films valorise science but also distrust it. Science can save humanity in *When Worlds Collide* (1951), but it can also have disastrous and unintended consequences, such as the giant spider in *Tarantula* (1955), which are just as likely to be resolved by firepower as by further applications of science. In recent decades, such films end with the suggestion that the solution is only temporary, that some single representative of the threat has survived and will multiply once again to threaten humanity.  Similarly, SF films set in the future present both utopias and dystopias but lean more towards dystopias because they inherently provide more opportunity for drama and conflict whether civilization has totally collapsed as in the post-apocalyptic of *The Road Warrior* or has become more rigidly controlled as in *Gattaca* (1997). Dystopic SF films permit direct or indirect commentaries on contemporary society by simply extrapolating from current trends, such as overpopulation in *Soylent Green* (1973), or representing racism in *Alien Nation* (1988). Often, the utopia is revealed to be an actual dystopia, as in *The Island* (2005) where the idyllic title location turns out to be merely a clone farm for future organ harvesting. In 21st-century films, dystopias have become more frequent with adaptations of popular Young Adult fiction series such as the *Hunger Games* franchise. Even the utopian *Star Trek* universe where noble Star Fleet representatives were generally able to negotiate their way out of conflicts with other races has been rebooted in a darker version where the formerly altruistic Star Fleet turns out to have seriously questionable practices and motives in the aptly titled *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013).  Even SF films without planned messages pose basic philosophical questions. Clones, robots, cyborgs, and computers with artificial intelligence all raise the issue of just what it means to be human. Aliens and threats from earth creatures previously perceived as insignificant call into question humanity’s place in the universe. Virtual reality and mind control powers challenge our notions of reality itself and how much we can trust our senses. Time travel and alternate universes put causality to the test.  Due to the growing sophistication of CGI effects and the greater accessibility of computer software for independent filmmakers, the popularity of science fiction-themed computer games, and the participation of high-profile filmmaking talents and Oscar recognition for their work—as in the case of *Gravity* (2013) —all guarantee the continued viability of the genre. |
| Further reading:  Brosnan. J. (1978) *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction.* New York: St. Martin’s.  Desser, D. (2014) “Science Fiction” in *An Introduction to Film Genres*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.  Hardy, P., ed. (1995) *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction.* Woodstock: The Overlook Press. An exhaustive listing of science fiction films up to 1994.  Sobchak, V. (1993) *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film.* Second edition. New York: Ungar. |