

Why Science Fiction Films are Popular in America

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It is universally accepted that science fiction is one of the most dominant genres of our time (Pflueger-Peters, n.d.). Throughout the past 50 years, it has undoubtedly been popular, but today it is even more prominent and has an even greater influence on American culture (Pflueger-Peters, n.d.). Americans can't get enough of science fiction films, as evidenced by the pronounced success of films like *Dune*, *Jurassic Park*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and *Robocop*, among many others. Science fiction films are popular in America because they help people cope with banality and terror, serve as a vehicle for controversial topics of the era, and possess vast amounts of "wishful thinking".

Science fiction films are popular in America because they help people cope with banality and terror. According to Susan Sontag, we live in "an age of extremity", under the threat of "two equally fearful destinies": "unremitting banality" and "inconceivable terror" (Sontag, 1965). It is the fantasy offered in science fiction films that allows us to cope with these "twin specters" (Sontag, 1965). After all, the fantasy in science fiction films can remove us from the "unbearably humdrum" and "distract us from terrors"; it accomplishes this by providing an escape into "exotic dangerous situations" which typically have "last-minute happy endings" (Sontag, 1965). So, the fantasy in science fiction films accomplishes two jobs: it "beautifies" and "neutralizes" the world (Sontag, 1965). Science fiction films showcase worldwide anxieties and help us relieve them (Sontag, 1965). For example, in "*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*", widespread anxieties in 1950s American culture are reflected: fear of the Communist threat

during the Cold War, McCarthyism, the alienating effects of capitalism, conformism, postwar radiation anxiety, the return of “brainwashed soldiers from the Korean War”, and “masculine fears of the potential social, political, and personal disenfranchisement of postwar America’s hegemonic white patriarchy” (Loock, 2012). These anxieties are reflected in the film’s alien paranoia theme - the fear that invisible invaders could replace individual human beings and convert them into “a collective of emotionless pod people” (Loock, 2012). And these anxieties are relieved when at the end of the film, Dr. Benbell’s story is believed and Dr. Hill calls the FBI. To help us cope with terror, science fiction films normalize what is “psychologically unbearable”, therefore desensitizing us to it (Sontag, 1965). For instance, science fiction films introduce the processes of contamination, radiation, and destruction with a “strange apathy” (Sontag, 1965). Or, in the case of “Invasion of the Body Snatchers”, the phenomenon of humans being taken over by aliens in their sleep is presented with strange apathy (Loock, 2012). Thus, science fiction films help us cope with banality by providing an “exotic” escape and help us cope with terror by desensitizing us to it. An example of the latter is how “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” reflected all the anxieties of the era and reduced them by providing a “last-minute happy ending”. Thus, in such a manner, science fiction films are popular in America because they help people cope with banality and terror.

Science fiction films also are popular in America because they serve as a means of expression for controversial topics of the era. According to NBC News, in many instances, science fiction films act as a vehicle for controversial topics of an era, from industrialization’s “dehumanization” and environmental impact in the 19th century to the fear of nuclear war in the

middle 20th century and the “war on terror” of the past two decades (Hadhazy, 2011). Science fiction writer Diane Duane asserts: “Putting things in sci-fi tropes can enable you to do exactly the same end run that Aesop did in fables. You can distance the more controversial material you might be trying to deal with by pushing it 300 years in the future or into the past via a time machine, and you are more free to examine the material closely, and the reader doesn’t feel as threatened” (Hadhazy, 2011). For example, in “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” and its remakes, two controversial topics relevant to the era that were touched upon were stimulant abuse and psychiatric treatment with anti-anxiety medication (Loock, 2012). In “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” and all its remakes, stimulants were readily available for the doctors in the movies and the protagonists all eventually turned to them (Loock, 2012). Though, in these films, stimulants are never a “permanent solution” and the protagonists’ “desperate overdoses” served as a way to raise awareness about stimulant abuse in our day-to-day lives (Loock, 2012). While the surviving humans in these films turned to stimulants, the “pod people” coming after them were equipped with sedatives to make them sleep (Loock, 2012). The sedatives matched the alien invaders’ “perverse messianic promise”: delivering them from anxiety by suppressing their emotions (Loock, 2012). The calm state of mind the “pod people” promote represents the result of psychiatric treatment with anxiety medication (Loock, 2012). Thus, Americans are drawn to science fiction films because they present controversial topics in a different way, allowing us to feel less threatened by them and examine them more closely. An example I gave was the presentation of the controversial topics of stimulant abuse and psychiatric use of sedatives in “Invasion of the Body Snatchers”. And so, in that way, science fiction films are popular in

America because they serve as a vehicle for controversial topics of the era.

Additionally, science fiction films are popular in America because they possess a vast amount of “wishful thinking”. According to Susan Sontag, there is a vast amount of “wishful thinking” in science fiction films, some of it “touching”, some of it “depressing” (Sontag, 1965). There are those who hunger for a “good war” - that is, one which “poses no moral problems” (Sontag, 1965). The imagery of science fiction films will satisfy “the most bellicose addict of war films” because a lot of the “satisfactions” of war films are found in science fiction films (Sontag, 1965). Though, at the same time, the “bellicosity” of science fiction films is channeled into the yearning for peace (Sontag, 1965). In science fiction film storylines, the protagonist (usually a scientist) becomes aware of the fact that it takes either a “planetary invasion” or a “cosmic disaster” to make the warring nations of the earth “come to their senses” and cease their wars/conflicts (Sontag, 1965). One of the main themes of several science fiction films is this “UN fantasy” of united warfare (Sontag, 1965). A calamity that’s great enough can cancel all enmities. Furthermore, science and technology are often conceived of as “a great unifier” and science fiction films also project a “utopian fantasy” (Sontag, 1965). After all, Susan Sontag points out that in classic models of utopian thinking, society had worked out a “perfect consensus” and reasonableness had achieved an “unbreakable supremacy” over emotions (Sontag, 1965). So, science fiction films embody “the hopeful fantasy of moral simplification and international unity” (Sontag, 1965). Thus, science fiction films appeal to Americans because of their “wishful thinking” - that is, our desires for “good war” and international peace can be manifested on the big screen. And so, in that way, science fiction

films are popular in America because they possess a vast amount of “wishful thinking”.

Hence, science fiction films are popular in America because they help us cope with banality and terror, serve as a vehicle for controversial topics of the era, and possess a vast amount of “wishful thinking”. Because science fiction films have become so prominent in America, it is crucial to understand why we are so drawn to them. Understanding why Americans are drawn to something can give us more insight into human behavior/preferences and help us with things like marketing, advertising, and creating engaging material. Because science fiction has possessed a stronghold in the box office for over seventy-five, it will likely continue to thrive in the generations to come. That is why science fiction films are now being analyzed in colleges and universities all over the world.

References

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