



SCIENCE FICTION FILMS VERSUS SCI-FI FILMS

By Dr. John L. Flynn

What is the difference between Science Fiction films and Sci-Fi Films?

The Science Fiction film insists that the speculative element is integral to the plot of the motion picture. The **science** in a science fiction film is correct, or represents a reasonable extrapolation of present-day knowledge. The writing is exemplary, and has memorable characters, a consistent point-of-view, interesting plotting and style, and believable dialogue. The special effects in a science fiction film provide verisimilitude (or the willing suspension of disbelief) and enhance the overall production. “Metropolis” (1925), “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968), “Contact” (1997), “Gattaca” (1997), “The Matrix” (1999), and “A.I.-Artificial Intelligence” (2001) are examples of a good science fiction film, and fulfill the definition.

The Sci-Fi film tends to borrow from science fiction's pulp origins rather than current speculative fiction. The laws of physics (science) are violated or outright contradicted for the sake of the plot in a sci-fi film. Characters in a sci-fi film are familiar, even stereotypic, and often include the young boyish hero, the rogue sidekick, the smart-alec robot, the mad scientist, and the plucky, liberated female fill-in-the-blank (princess, rebel leader, pilot, etc.). The special effects tend to overshadow the sci-fi movie's plot, or are employed to hide a weak story, or exist solely for the "gee-whiz" factor. "Star Wars" (1977) (or any of its many sequels and prequels), "Forbidden Planet" (1956), "Fantastic Voyage" (1966), "Dune" (1984), "Independence Day" (1994), "Starship Troopers" (1997), and "Men in Black" (1997) are all examples of good sci-fi films, and fulfill the definition.

Which is the more valid art form--science fiction films or sci-fi films? That is really a matter of personal taste. For me, there are times when I want to have my mind challenged by extraordinary ideas and outstanding filmmaking; then there are times when I want to sit back, eat popcorn, and have a hoot-and-holler. I do believe that science fiction films (as opposed to sci-fi films) come the closest to capturing the awe and wonder that I experience when reading a science fiction novel; similarly, I believe that certain sci-fi films capture the essence of space opera from the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s. To rely on an overworked metaphor...sometimes I like a good steak, baked potato, and salad at a five-star restaurant (and that's science fiction); other times I prefer a hamburger and fries from Wendy's (and that's sci-fi).

Just a few years ago, my dear friend and colleague Dr. Bob Blackwood assembled a list of the Top Ten SF films of the 20th Century from a survey he took of fans, science

fiction writers, and artists. His list (In Order of Votes) included “The Day the Earth Stood Still” (1951), “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968), “Blade Runner” (1982), “Forbidden Planet” (1956), “Aliens” (1986), “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (1977), “The War of the Worlds” (1953), “Dark City” (1998), “Gattaca” (1997) and “The Thing” (1951). Some of the top films are science fiction films, and some of the top films are sci-fi. I disagreed with a number of choices on Dr. Bob’s list, and would have included “Planet of the Apes” (1968) or “The Matrix” (1999) in place of “The Thing.” But generally speaking, the list provides a good starting ground for a discussion about science fiction/sci-fi films. If you are one of those fans who has spent most of his/her free time reading books, or playing video games, or composing folk songs, or watching television, and haven’t seen many movies, start with these (including my additions to the list)! And when you are finished watching them, perhaps, consider “Alphaville” (1965), “Metropolis” (1925), “La Jetee” (1962), “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” (1957), “Logan’s Run” (1976), “The Abyss” (1989), “The Terminator” (1984), “Alien” (1979), “A.I.-Artificial Intelligence” (2001), and “Twelve Monkeys” (1995). If you need more, email me for a more extensive list.

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