



## **WHAT MAKES A GOOD SCIENCE FICTION FILM?**

By

John L. Flynn, Ph.D.

What makes a good science fiction film?

For decades, filmmakers, science fiction writers, critics and fans have been debating that very question, trying to define an ever-changing genre that really defies definition. While most agree that science fiction is the literature of ideas, of possibilities and of alternatives, the elements that make a good science fiction film still remain a matter of speculation and debate. Often, as a critic and science fiction author, I am asked that question. A fan will approach me after I've spoken on a panel about science fiction films at the World Science Fiction Convention, or a caller will telephone the radio show that I've just done, or the host of a television show will ask me after I've just appeared as a guest—they all want to know I think. And I try to give them a thoughtful answer, by

saying that I look for a good story or interesting characters or a unique idea. But the fact of the matter is that I know what I like, and my response cannot be expressed in a simple declarative statement or two in much the same way that another person might fumble to express his enjoyment of a Philly cheese steak or a glass of Merlot or a baseball game at Wrigley Field. The response tends to be a very subjective one, and since it is subjective, my enjoyment or condemnation of a particular film does not necessarily endorse or negate another person's reaction to the same film. In recognizing and accepting that, I also recognize and accept that everyone is a critic; they may not be able to articulate why they like or dislike something, but they have the right to their own opinion. I try to listen and learn from those opinions whether I agree or disagree with them because that is what makes film criticism interesting. In looking back over the last twenty-five years of reviews that I've written, I'd formed certain opinions of my own. Those opinions were in the form of a handful of notable insights that kept emerging from each of my essays and critical commentaries, for without realizing it, I had established my own criteria for what makes a good science fiction film. So, for what it's worth, whenever I sit down to watch a science fiction film at a multiplex or in my home theater, I look for the following points of interest and wait to be surprised.

A good science fiction film must have a speculative element that is integral to the narrative; if the speculative element can be lifted out of the plot without affecting the overall story, then all the filmmakers have done is taken an existing storyline and dressed it up with a science fiction setting or prop. Taking the plot of Nora Ephron's "When Harry Met Sally" and setting it on Mars does not make a good science fiction film; however, making one of the characters a Martian with completely different views on

sexuality and mating rituals might make an interesting motion picture. The speculative element must be an integral part of the story; without it, a good science fiction story would collapse. For example, in “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968) by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke, the alien intelligences that created the monolith work behind the scenes of human evolution and development to advance man from primate to starchild. Without the mysterious aliens and their equally mysterious agenda for man, there would be no first contact story, and no real plot behind the film. Time travel, interstellar flight, genetic engineering, first contact with an alien civilization, robots and artificial intelligence, nuclear holocaust and other end-of-the-world nightmares, alien invasion, telepathy and other forms of extrasensory perception, utopias and dystopias, space colonization, and immortality are all elements that might be considered speculative. They form the vast sandbox in which many successful science fiction directors, producers, and screenwriters play.

With an entire universe, including all of the events past, present and future, at their disposal, filmmakers like Stanley Kubrick, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and James Cameron have produced science fiction films with a sense of wonder and awe. Good motion pictures take us to places we’ve never been, introduce us to people we’ve never met, and show us things we’ve never dreamed. By penetrating the known world of the here-and-now and going beyond all barriers and boundaries, science fiction challenges us with new realities and high levels of consciousness and being. Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey” takes us light years away from the earth to the very edge of known space and reveals that the vast cosmos is still within our grasp, while George Pal’s “The Time Machine” (1960) propels us millions of years into the future and

introduces us to a form of man quite different from ourselves. By contrast, Steven Spielberg's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" (1977) and "E.T.-The Extraterrestrial" (1982) remain firmly grounded in the reality of our world today, but still manage to induce a sense of wonder and awe by embracing visitors from the beyond. The very best of science fiction probes the outer limits of our imagination and challenges the human spirit to reach beyond the conventional to new and fabulous worlds with equally new and fabulous ideas. No other cinematic genre, from mysteries or romances to tragedies or comedies, does that.

Good science fiction movies may well transport us to the outer reaches of the universe or to the end of time, but they also remain well grounded in science or that reasonable extrapolation of present-day knowledge. Cinematic science fiction should rarely violate the laws of physics, and then only for purposes of literary license. For instance, we know that faster-than-light travel is a scientific impossibility with today's current technology, but many films have relied on warp drive, wormholes, and other scientific theories to move their starships from one end of the galaxy to the other. The U.S.S. Enterprise in Robert Wise's highly underrated "Star Trek: The Motion Picture" (1979) warps space around it in order to penetrate a separate space-time continuum and move swiftly between star systems. In David Lynch's "Dune" (1984), spaceships break the speed of light barrier by curving or folding space. Alien engineers lend a hand in "2001: A Space Odyssey" and "Contact" (1997), and help transport the astronaut protagonists through a kind of "star gate" or interstellar "switching station" to the other side of the galaxy. The science in science fiction is quite often what separates a fair story from a really good one, and what separates science fiction from sci-fi, that Hollywood

fast-food version of SF that often violates or outright contradicts the laws of physics for the sake of gee-whiz special effects. While we may marvel as the X-Wing fighters attack the Death Star and blow it to smithereens in George Lucas's "Star Wars" (1977), we must also acknowledge that it's light years away from good science fiction; it's really sci-fi, more specifically space opera, clearly pulp fiction at its finest. Starships don't need wings, particularly crossed wings, to fly in outer space; there's no up-or-down in space, and since there's no atmosphere in space to carry sound waves, explosions—no matter how spectacular in nature--would be entirely silent. Science fiction films, no matter how hard-core, must always be science-based, or they become an entirely kind of film, like sci-fi, or fantasy, or action-adventure.

The writing in good science fiction movies must always be exemplary, with memorable characters, consistent point-of-view, interesting plotting and style, believable dialogue, and all of the other hallmarks of literary science fiction. Naturally, a filmmaker's first aim is to tell an interesting, exciting and entertaining story. The story may well involve events and settings and ideas that are not commonplace, and perhaps that are not even possible, but a good filmmaker knows that, if he or she has created memorable characters, maintained a consistent point-of-view, and done all of the other things necessary to tell a good story, his or her audience will be much more open and accepting of the extraordinary events and settings and ideas. Science fiction is, with one notable exception, no different from other forms of contemporary moviemaking. Science fiction films must tell a clear and articulate story, even if they are about an alien creature who takes up residence in a child's closet or intelligent simians who live on a world

where man is a mindless primitive. The one notable exception, which makes science fiction different from all other motion pictures, is that each story must have one splendid, staggering, shuddering, speculative element that induces awe and wonder. It could be a new device or invention as in “Colossus: The Forbin Project” (1971) or “A.I.-Artificial Intelligence” (2001). It could be extraterrestrial contact with another society or civilization as in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” or “Planet of the Apes” (1968). It could be a breakthrough in technology as in “Jurassic Park” (1993), or an aberration in human behavior as in “Charley” (1968). At the heart of all good science fiction films is a good story that is then followed by speculation about man and how the changes in science or technology or the universe will affect the mystery of what makes us human.

Robots and spaceships, aliens and time machines as well as the dozens of other conventions that draw science fiction fans into the theatre are meant to provide verisimilitude in good science fiction films. The props, the make-up and the special effects that make these conventions a reality on screen are merely the tools that a filmmaker employs to create the other worlds and other places of his story, and should never take the place of a well-crafted narrative. The most common misconception that I often hear, especially around a university, is that science fiction is an adolescent art-form because it deals with the fancies and fantasies of children. Many academics and mainstream critics quickly dismiss science fiction as somehow less than “meaningful” because the films are mainly about showcasing the latest in technology and special effects. Regrettably, that’s true in many cases, especially when filmmakers rely on the “gee-whiz” factor of unique or groundbreaking special effects to hide a weak story. How many science fiction fans remember the dozens of truly dreadful films that came out in

the wake of “Star Wars”? “Starship Invasions” (1977), “Message from Space” (1978), “Battlestar Galactica” (1978), “Battle Beyond the Stars” (1980), “Saturn Three” (1980), and a host of others came and went, and for each one of them, we paid our money at the box office, bought our popcorn at the concession stand, and sat in the theater and waited for something magical to happen to us that never did. “Star Wars,” which had employed the latest innovations in special effects, first and foremost, told a profound and moving story that affected us on an almost mythical level. The others were devoid of any ideas at all, and simply relied on special effects to tell the same story again and again that we had already seen.

Academics and critics disparage science fiction as a whole because they’ve seen far too many space cowboys, ray guns, weird aliens, and cute robots, and they are simply clueless about the vast difference between Hollywood’s fast-food notion of sci-fi and the much more refined work of science fiction. When the gadgets of science and technology, like special effects, are employed by a masterful filmmaker to create texture and background for a story, the spaceships and ray guns and robots help us to suspend our disbelief. The Victorian traveler in George Pal’s superior “The Time Machine” relies on a time machine to visit the world of the gentle Eloi and the bestial Morlocks eight hundred thousand years in the future, but the motion picture is really about his visit, not the gadget itself. The time machine, brought to life by some Academy Award-winning special effects, merely provides the means by which the traveler makes his journey, and is not the focus of the movie. When the gadgets of science and technology become the focus of the movie, or are employed to hide a weak story, then science fiction has failed as a form of cinema; it has instead become sci-fi.

Good science fiction is all about creating meaningful metaphors and allegories that are reflections and revelations of the world in which we live. Not only must a science fiction filmmaker have a mastery of science and technology, but he or she should also know something about the world, including politics, sociology, history, and human behavior, and how to suggest analogies between them. For example, Franklin Schaffner's "Planet of the Apes," which was written by Rod Serling and Michael Wilson, was the first motion picture in any genre that dealt with the war in Vietnam, the Watts riots of 1965, the McCarthy hearings, the counterculture revolution, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. At the time, no one wanted to talk about those issues, much less put up \$5 million to produce a movie that depicted those events. Groundbreaking films like "Apocalypse Now" (1979), "Platoon" (1986), "The Front" (1982) and "The Color Purple" (1986) were still years away from being made. So, Serling and Wilson created an allegory set in a futuristic world where apes had evolved into an intelligent species and man was the mindless primitive. The story offered a timely commentary about politics, religion, science, the nuclear arms race, ecology, racism and prejudice, but because the screenwriters had created a meaningful metaphor, no one attacked the film as being controversial. "Planet of the Apes" became a runaway success at the box office, and is remembered as one of the great films of the 1960's.

Science fiction is prophetic vision and extrapolation...told in the form of speculative filmmaking...that searches to define man and his place in the cosmos...by considering the impact of future ideas and inventions, new sociological, psychological or political changes and their consequences...and the larger mysteries of what it means to be human...through splendid, staggering metaphors that induce awe and wonder. Good

science fiction films not only make us think, but also become part of cultural identity and soul. “2001: A Space Odyssey,” “Planet of the Apes,” “Blade Runner” (1982), “The Day the Earth Stood Still” (1951), “Alien” (1979) and many other motion pictures like them defined an entire generation, and continue to influence us today with their far-reaching, thought-provoking metaphors about what it means to be human.

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