



THE SCIENCE FICTION FILM IN THE 20th CENTURY:

A SHORT CHRONOLOGY DECADE BY DECADE

By

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What follows is a short, decade by decade chronology of the science fiction film in the Twentieth Century:

1901-1910 – Marie-Georges-Jean Melies, an early pioneer in the development of motion pictures, made “**A Trip to the Moon**” in 1902, the first science fiction film. While the French film owes much to Jules Verne’s From the Earth to the Moon (1862) and H.G. Wells’s The First Men in the Moon (1901), it was also a whimsical comedy that found the first astronauts who have traveled to the moon in a cannon-shell cavorting with Selenite dancers, who look like they’ve just stepped out of the Foiles-Bergere. Melies

made nearly 800 short films in his career, including two other science fiction films, “An Impossible Voyage” in 1905 and “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, or a Fisherman’s Nightmare” in 1907, relying heavily on trick photography to take us to other worlds and other places. Thomas Edison and his Edison Studios made “A Trip to Mars,” a pirated version of Melies’s film, and the first of many versions of “Frankenstein,” both in 1910. In England, Robert W. Paul tried to create a thrill ride out of H.G. Wells’s “time machine,” by using cinematic projections as a way to convey the passage of time. When he failed, Paul turned to filmmaking, and produced a handful of science fiction shorts, including “The ? Motorist” in 1905. Other films from the period included “The Dog Factory” (1904), “The Electric Hotel” (1906), “Voyage around a Star” (1906), and “The Aerial Submarine” (1910).

1911-1919 – Filmmakers continued to experiment with trick photography, resulting in more fanciful flights into the unknown. Most of the films of the period, including “One Hundred Years After’ (1911), “The Aerial Anarchists” (1911), “The Pirates of 1920” (1911), “Man’s Genesis” (1912), “The Black Box” (1915), and “The Master Mystery” (1918), were one-reel wonders that treated science fiction as a kind of joke or novelty. But two motion pictures pointed out the real possibilities of combining trick photography with an interesting story. Germany’s “Homunculus the Leader” (1916), yet another retelling of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus (1818), anticipated the rise of a master race that would control the world with the birth of an artificial human created by one of the cinema’s first mad scientists, and “The End of the World” (1916), a Danish film, was an epic production that featured an all-star cast and the destruction of the world by a rogue comet. Other films from the period included “Conquest of the Pole”

(1912), “In the Year 2014” (1914), “A Zeppelin Attack on New York” (1917), “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea” (1916), “The Fall of a Nation” (1916), “The Flying Torpedo” (1916), and “The Diamond from the Sky” (1915).

1920-1929 – Following World War I, filmmakers in Germany took center stage with a handful of remarkable motion pictures that characterized the German Expressionist Movement. Films like “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” (1919), “Algol” (1920), “**Metropolis**” (1925), “Alraune” (1928), and “The Girl in the Moon” (1929) featured extravagant sets, elegant costumes, and thought-provoking stories that demonstrated a genuine respect for the genre of science fiction. Fritz Lang (with his wife Thea von Harbou) emerged as a huge talent, and later brought his filmmaking skills to America where he influenced a whole new generation of directors. In the United States, Willis O’Brien made his first stop-motion monsters come to life in Harry Hoyt’s “The Lost World” (1925), and the Soviet Union sent its first cosmonauts into space with the first Russian science fiction film “Aelita” in 1924. Other films from the period included “A Message from Mars” (1921), “The Man Who Stole the Moon” (1921), “L’Atlantide” (1922), and “The Last Man on Earth” (1924).

1930-1939 – Universal Pictures produced the first of its monster films based on the classic works of Mary Shelley and H.G. Wells with “**Frankenstein**” (1931), “The Bride of Frankenstein” (1935), “The Island of Lost Souls” (1932), and “The Invisible Man” (1933), and made cinematic history by turning B-movies into A-list productions, thanks in large part to the superior talent of James Whale. Willis O’Brien continued to bring monsters of his own to life with stop-motion animation in Merian C. Cooper’s production of “King Kong” (1933), what some acknowledge as the greatest monster film ever made.

After years of disappointments in watching others handle his works, H.G. Wells teamed with Alexander Korda, and produced “**Things to Come**” (1936), an epic motion picture that follows the fall of man after a decades-long world war and the rise of a new kind of man who takes to the stars. At the time when it was produced, it was the largest, most expensive project of its kind, and while it failed at the box office, “Things to Come” is considered a brilliant milestone in the history of the science fiction film. The decade also saw the rise of Saturday matinee serials, including ones based on the comic book exploits of “Flash Gordon” (1936) and “Buck Rogers” (1939). Other films from the period included “Just Imagine” (1930), “Six Hours to Live” (1932), “Deluge” (1933), “The Transatlantic Tunnel” (1935), “Modern Times” (1936), “The Devil Doll” (1936), “The Son of Frankenstein” (1939), “F.P. 1 Does Not Respond” (1932), “The Phantom Empire” (1935), “The Undersea Kingdom” (1936), “The Walking Dead” (1936), and “The Invisible Man Returns” (1939).

1940-1949 – During the years of World War II, there were few notable science fiction films produced. Most audience members demanded light entertainment, and comedies and musicals were plentiful. With concerns about a master race and its stockpile of super weapons, the more realistic horrors of war supplanted the cinematic thrills and chills of the science fiction film. “Dr. Cyclops” (1940), a throwback to the monster films of the 1930’s, was the first science fiction film released in technicolor; regrettably, it featured yet another mad doctor who had invented a device to terrorize his victims; in this case he had created a shrinking ray. Merian C. Cooper gathered his team from “King Kong” together, including newcomer Ray Harryhausen, and produced a somewhat gentler version of the Beauty and the Beast story with “Mighty Joe Young” (1949), while “White

Pongo” (1945), the prototype of Bigfoot and the Abominable Snowman in later films, debuted as a white gorilla with superior intelligence. Other films from the period included “One Million B.C.” (1940), “The Invisible Woman” (1940), “The Invisible Agent” (1942), “The Invisible Man’s Revenge” (1945), “The Lady and the Monster” (1944), and “Unknown Island” (1948).

1950-1959 – The decade of the 1950’s produced more science fiction films than any other decade of the Twentieth Century, beginning and just about concluding with the pioneering efforts of one filmmaker, George Pal. Pal produced some of the finest and enormously successful motion pictures of the decade, including “Destination Moon” (1950), “When Worlds Collide” (1951), “War of the Worlds” (1953), “Conquest of Space” (1953), and “The Time Machine” (1960); his success was based, in large part, on the fact that he treated his subject matter with a great deal of respect, and approached each project like it was an A-list production. Almost single-handedly, Pal was responsible for making science fiction films a respectable and entertainment moneymaker. Other studios produced A-list projects, including Twentieth Century-Fox’s **“The Day the Earth Stood Still”** (1951), Universal’s “It Came from Outer Space” (1953), Disney’s “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea” (1954), and M-G-M’s **“Forbidden Planet”** (1956). Allegories about the misuse of atomic power and metaphors about the Red scare reflected the fears and anxieties of audiences of the 1950’s, and filled the theaters for showings of “The Thing” (1951), “Invaders from Mars” (1953), Ray Harryhausen’s “Beast from 20,000 Fathoms” (1953), “Them!” (1954), “Godzilla” (1956), and “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” (1956). The decade concluded on a note of dark pessimism with Stanley Kramer’s “On the Beach” (1959). In the motion picture, the

remaining survivors of a nuclear war gather together in Australia to await death as the radioactive dust clouds from the final war between the superpowers in the North make their way to the Southern Hemisphere; they know that it is only a matter of weeks before the end, and they try to seize whatever happiness they can; in the final moments of the film, the camera pans through the empty streets, looking for some sign of humanity, but everyone is dead; all that remains is a sign that reads: "There is still time, brother!" The message was clear, and it was trumpeted by a science fiction film. Other films from the period included "Rocketship X-M" (1950), "Flying Disc Men of Mars" (1951), "Five" (1951), "Invasion of the Saucer Men" (1953), "The Creature from the Black Lagoon" (1954), "This Island Earth" (1955), "The Creeping Unknown" (1955), "Earth Versus the Flying Saucers" (1955), "1984" (1956), "The Incredible Shrinking Man" (1957), "20 Million Miles to Earth" (1957), "The Fly" (1958), "The Blob" (1958), and "Journey to the Center of the Earth" (1959).

1960-1969 – Two science fiction films represent the 1960's more than any others produced during the decade, "**2001: A Space Odyssey**" (1968) and "**Planet of the Apes**" (1968). Both productions were thoughtful and thought-provoking explorations of what it means to be human in our highly technological and dangerous world, and both relied on topnotch special effects and make-up to tell two vastly different kinds of stories. One used a metaphor to invoke a world in which outside alien forces have been manipulating the destiny of man, and the other created an allegory in which intelligent simians rule over primitive man. Profound images from both films are burned into our collective consciousness: Who can forget that image of primitive man flinging the bone, which he has just used to kill his enemy, into the air and it becoming an orbital platform

of nuclear weapons? Or, that image of Charlton Heston riding up to the shattered Statue of Liberty in the sand and realizing that he has been on earth the whole time? But “2001” and “Planet of the Apes” were not the only distinguished films of the decade. The fear of nuclear annihilation provided the subtext for “Village of the Damned” (1960), “La Jetee” (1962), “The Damned” (1963), “Fail Safe” (1963), and “Dr. Strangelove, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb” (1963). Filmmakers trained in the French New Wave school of cinema, including Jean-Luc Goddard, Francois Truffaut, and Roger Vadim, respectively contributed “Alphaville” (1965), “Fahrenheit 451” (1966), and “Barbarella” (1968). Big budget prestige films, like “Robinson Crusoe on Mars” (1964), “Fantastic Voyage” (1966), George Pal’s “The Power” (1967), and “Charley” (1968), and low budget quickies, like “Planet of the Vampires” (1965), “Queen of Blood” (1966), and “Night of the Living Dead” (1968) advanced the popularity of science fiction films, each in its own unique way. Of course, the single most defining moment of the decade was not found in science fiction but science fact, the Lunar landing of Apollo 11 on July 20, 1969—the fantasy of so many science fiction films had become front page news on every newspaper in the world. Other films from the period included “The Day the Earth Caught Fire” (1961), “Mothra” (1961), “First Spaceship on Venus” (1963), “Women of the Prehistoric Planet” (1966), “Five Million Years to Earth” (1968), “The Green Slime” (1968), “The Illustrated Man” (1968), “Mission Mars” (1968), “Wild in the Streets” (1968), “Marooned” (1969), “Moon Zero Two” (1969), and “Journey to the Far Side of the Sun” (1969).

1970-1979 – The decade of the 1970’s can best be described as schizophrenic; prior to the release of “Star Wars” in 1977, numerous motion pictures, many of them low budget

in nature, attempted to continue the thoughtful and sometimes provocative exploration of man and his place in the cosmos that was started with “2001: A Space Odyssey” and “Planet of the Apes”; after the release of “Star Wars,” that contemplative style of filmmaking was abandoned in favor of the “wild ride” that the new breakthrough in special effects seemed to offer audience members. George Lucas produced not one, but two science fiction films during this period, one that favored a thoughtful approach and one that debuted the wild ride; of the two, “THX-1138” (1971) was a serious, thought-provoking film that looked at the effects of mind control in a computer-directed, dystopian future, while “Star Wars” was a throwback to the “Flash Gordon” and “Buck Rogers” serials of the 1930’s. Other serious films that tried to look at man through the prism of allegory and metaphor were “A Clockwork Orange” (1972), “Slaughterhouse Five” (1972), “Solaris” (1972), “Silent Running” (1973), “Soylent Green” (1973), “The Stepford Wives” (1975), and “Logan’s Run” (1976). Comic films, like “Sleeper” (1973) and “Young Frankenstein” (1974), also relied on satire to wring an element of truth about the world in which we lived. Unfortunately, the debut of “Star Wars,” followed closely by Steven Spielberg’s “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (1977), changed all of that. The ideas in science fiction film were relegated to the back seat so there was plenty of room up front for the audience looking for its next thrill ride. Not all of the efforts that followed were mindless copies of “Star Wars,” but many of them were, including “Starship Invasions” (1977), “Message from Space” (1977), “Battlestar Galactica” (1978), and “The Black Hole” (1979). A few key prestige projects did manage to get made, despite the insistence by many film studios insistence to create yet another rollercoaster ride like “Star Wars,” and they were “Superman” (1978), “Star Trek-The

Motion Picture” (1979), and “**Alien**” (1979). Other films from the period included “Colossus: The Forbin Project” (1970), “Beneath the Planet of the Apes” (1970), “The Andromeda Strain” (1971), “The Omega Man” (1971), “The Terminal Man” (1972), “Death Race 2000” (1973), “Westworld” (1973), “A Boy and His Dog” (1975), “Rollerball” (1975), “The Man Who Fell to Earth” (1976), “At the Earth’s Core” (1976), “Wizards” (1976), “Demon Seed” (1977), “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” (1978), “The Island of Dr. Moreau” (1978), and “Time After Time” (1979).

1980-1989 – The rollercoaster ride that George Lucas first started with “Star Wars” in 1977 continued in its sequels “The Empire Strikes Back” (1980) and “Return of the Jedi” (1983), and in a handful of other lesser efforts that showcased Industrial Light and Magic’s superior skills at special effects, including “Dragonslayer” (1981), “Poltergeist” (1983), “Explorers” (1985), and “Willow” (1987). Fellow filmmaker and compatriot Steven Spielberg, who was actually a better director and storyteller than Lucas, made his own prestige pictures, including “Raiders of the Lost Ark” (1981), a throwback to the serials of the 1930’s, and “E.T.-The Extraterrestrial” (1982), a reworking of “The Day the Earth Stood Still.” Other mavericks like John Carpenter and James Cameron pushed the envelope, and produced a number of noteworthy efforts, including “Escape from New York” (1981), “The Thing” (1982), “Starman” (1985), “**Terminator**” (1984), “**Aliens**” (1986), and “The Abyss” (1989), that challenged the studio system mentality with brand new ideas about kinetic, fast-paced filmmaking. Regrettably, while the technical skills in filmmaking improved, the overall quality of the stories and acting declined. One of the few standouts of the period was Ridley Scott’s “**Blade Runner**,” a film that combined effective storytelling skills with superior special effects. Other films from the period

included “Altered States” (1980), “Battle Beyond the Stars” (1980), “Somewhere in Time” (1980), “Mad Max” (1980), “Outland” (1981), “Saturn 3” (1981), “The Road Warrior” (1982), “Tron” (1983), “The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai” (1984), “Back to the Future” (1985), “Cocoon” (1985), “2010: The Year We Make Contact” (1984), “Dune” (1984), “Brazil” (1985), “Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome” (1985), “Weird Science” (1985), “The Fly” (1986), “Robocop” (1987), “Spaceballs” (1987), “Predator” (1987), and “The Running Man” (1987).

1990-1999 – The final decade of the Twentieth Century concluded on a high note as filmmakers began to realize the importance of telling a good story rather than relying solely on special effects. Some of the best efforts of the decade, including “Terminator Two: Judgment Day” (1991), “Jurassic Park” (1993), and “Contact” (1997), did in fact feature some extraordinary advancements in the field of special visual effects, but they also told thought-provoking stories as well. Others, like “Independence Day” (1996), “Mars Attacks” (1996), “Starship Troopers” (1997), “Deep Impact” (1998), and “Armageddon” (1998), became blockbusters by exploiting our old fears of alien invasion, nuclear war, and the end of the world. As computers and technology continued to change the way in which we lived our lives, certain key filmmakers explored the nature of that reality and found deep, black holes into which we had fallen, including “**Total Recall**” (1990), “The Truman Show” (1997), “Dark City” (1998), “eXistence” (1999), “**The Matrix**” (1999), “The 13th Floor” (1999), and “Being John Malkovich” (1999). Other films from the period included “Freejack” (1992), “Stargate” (1994), “Twelve Monkeys” (1995), “Escape from L.A.” (1996), “Men in Black” (1997), “Gattaca” (1998),

“Godzilla” (1998), “The X-Files Movie” (1998), “Galaxy Quest” (1999), and “Star Wars:
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