

## UPDATED PREVIOUS CASE STUDY FOR GENRES CHAPTER: SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction (hereafter SF) is and has been an important genre across several media. In English language literature it stretches from Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) to the work of Ursula Le Guin, J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick and others. But it has also been produced in cinema, television, computer games, comic books or 'graphic novels' and radio. Though film SF used to be dismissed as being 'just about bug-eyed monsters', since the mid-1970s it has deployed much higher budgets for hugely spectacular ends, often involving dark themes. It has the capacity to display dazzling special effects (hereafter SFX) in cinema—and TV in the case of recent series such as *Dr Who* (BBC 2005-), *Stargate* and *Star Trek*.

Another marketing advantage has been the lucrative computer games so often linked to such media products, and their attractions for youth audiences.

Key to the place of SF in contemporary cinema are the connections of George Lucas's SFX company Industrial Light and Magic [ILM], now devoted to the fantasy genre as well as SF, and indeed theme park FX.

This suggests an interesting *industrial* pathway between different genres. Indeed one critic has suggested that

'Sci-fi and special effects action films have become the dogs that wag Hollywood's tail... the danger is that an all-digital cinema might very well lead to an all-fantasy cinema.' (Belton 2004: 906)

Do you think there are any signs this is happening?

See [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) on ILM, and related entry on Douglas Trumbull.

SF's generic elements offer several possible pleasures:

- narratively and visually it can play out 'what if' speculations about future social or scientific developments, both around science (through the figure of the 'mad scientist', or perhaps the youthful and irresponsible hacker) and political order (through figures of malign and remote leaders)
- it often visualises or hints at the ways in which these speculative set-ups relate to contemporary hopes and fears
- it displays, almost for their own sake, expensive cutting-edge SFX in cinema, television and computer games (though graphic novels can also be spectacular)
- it easily mixes these with other generic elements, especially those of action adventure and fantasy, and more recently of the disaster movie.

### Applying 'repertoires of elements' to SF

'SF', like other genre labels, conjures up broad expectations in the areas of:

- ideological and cultural themes
- narrative patterns
- audiovisual signifiers (e.g. settings, costume, FX, objects, kinds of music, voices, editing, framing)

(In the case of SF these have an especially close connection to technological developments. For example, the digital technology of 'morphing' arguably encouraged

production of SF films where uncanny and ‘impossible’ changes take place, often related to ‘alien’ powers.)

In its cultural and **ideological** themes, the story will tend to pose ‘what if’ questions like:

- What if it were impossible to tell the difference between a human being and a cyborg or other life form? Or between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ androids/robots? (e.g. *2001* (US 1968); *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* (US 2001); *I, Robot* (US 2004))
- What if other planetary life forms were hostile in ways which humans could not combat? (e.g. *The War of the Worlds* (US 2005) and many earlier versions)
- What if time, as well as space travel were possible?
- What if science got ‘out of control’ in the ways it serves consumer capitalism (e.g. in *Minority Report* US 2002) or patriarchy (e.g. *The Handmaid’s Tale* US 1990; *The Stepford Wives* [US 1974; re-made 2005])?
- What if other planetary life forms were friendly and helpful, like ET?

This speculative play with scientific and related political themes may involve

- highly technological and class-stratified futures;
- or global disasters, such as those evident in the post-apocalyptic landscape of *Tank Girl* comics, *Blade Runner*, the *Mad Max* films (US 1979-1985);
- or ‘false’ utopias, in films such as *Logan’s Run* (US 1976) (*Minority Report* (US 2002) or *The Stepford Wives* (in the 1974 version, which though dated, is far superior to the 2004 version).

Sometimes such issues may be imaged through stories centred between the past and present, as with *Jurassic Park* (US 1993) and its treatment of genetic engineering issues via the ways that it is possible to reproduce the ‘dinosaurs’.

The re-made *King Kong* (US 2005) is a fantasy action film in which, arguably, Peter Jackson ‘answers’ Spielberg’s benevolent view of some dinosaurs (in the diplodocus herd). He also, of course, displays his ability to ‘do SFX’ as skilfully as the Spielberg/ILM team. The ‘contest’ between the two directors for the 2006 Oscars ‘visual effects’ award was an important part of publicity for that event.

Broadly **ideological** questions of good and bad leadership (also important in action films and Westerns) have a special weight in SF stories, exploring as they do future social orders. Examples include *Star Trek*’s Captain Picard’s ‘Make it so’, or the pleasure of, and limits to, Sarah/Linda Hamilton’s decisiveness in the *Terminator* and the ways in which other female heroes, such as Lara Croft or Tank Girl, handle themselves in relation to power and authority.

**Narrative and SF:** the genre’s escapist elements are often implied to lie simply in its **audiovisual qualities**, with FX, lavish costumes and sets evoking exotic future cityscapes and technologies (see above). But escapism could also be said to lie in the satisfactions of a genre whose narrative shapings can offer powerful, incomprehensible enemies and technologies, which are often understood and efficiently combatted.

SF has tended to work through narratives whose starting point, or initial disruption, is often broadly similar to that of action adventure or Westerns (e.g. ‘someone has been mysteriously or violently injured by an enemy’). It has then offered plenty of violent chases, puzzles, spectacles and cliffhangers along the way to the final efficient dispatch of the enemy (who/which is often associated with advanced technology or a malign future state). The **stars** of this genre, bringing key expectations to it, have often been those of action adventure or

thriller: e.g. Harrison Ford, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom Cruise, Keanu Reeves, Vin Diesel, Will Smith—and Sigorney Weaver, bringing slightly different expectations.

### ACTIVITY 1

Try applying the ideas of Propp, adapted here for SF, to a recent SF text in whatever medium.

1. The hero reports or discovers some destruction or threat to social order, which is confirmed.
2. Conferences between the military and scientists take place.
3. Further threats emerge.
4. After more conferences, ingenious attempts to discover the vulnerability of the threatening elements etc., they are repulsed.
5. But the question remains: ‘Have we seen the last of them?’, so closure is not completely achieved.

**Q:** Do such elements occur in all SF?

If not, is there an overall pattern, like this one, which newer SF tends to work with?

How would you apply this formula to the much darker SF of recent cinema—eg *The Matrix* series?

### ACTIVITY 2

List the last three fictions you have encountered, in any medium, which you would classify as SF.

- Why would you categorise them thus? Through which of the sets of generic elements—audio-visuality? narrative patterns? ideological or broadly cultural themes?
- Which elements of the narrative outline above apply to them?
- What was the initial ‘enigma’ of the narrative? How was it dealt with at closure?

### Mixes of elements

All genre films, including SF, are perceived to show ‘difference’ as well as ‘similarities’ to an imagined ‘true example’ of the genre. These variations depend on:

- the different combination of generic elements from within the genre
- mixes with elements of other genres
- changes to SF forms and the culture it is embedded in, over time
- which medium (print, film, radio, video game) is being used.

Genre films always involve some kind of ‘hybridity’ and are never ‘pure’ Westerns or horror films, etc. Hollywood, and earlier nineteenth-century cultural forms, have always tried to attract as many audience segments as possible. For example, one way of guaranteeing some female audience for ‘male’ genres, like action adventures and SF, was assumed to be a romance, or family strand in the plot.

SF, perhaps more than other genres, is neither one thing, nor always the same. Its very name suggests a hybrid: how can ‘science’ and ‘fiction’ work together?

### Hybridity and SF

- 1) Recent examples of SF display fascinating mixes.
- The Matrix* series mixed narrative and other allusions to
- *Alice in Wonderland*
  - modern and ancient philosophers
  - fantasy forms

- paranoid conspiracy thrillers  
- dark SF forms such as *Bladerunner*  
- Japanese anime, especially *Ghost in the Shell* (Japan 1995)  
as well as using a range of visual SFX, some from the kung fu genre, and an influential one called 'bullet time'. <http://www.imdb.com/title/ /photogallery-ss-0>

2) *Land of the Dead* (US 2005) or *28 Days Later* (US 2002) mix SF (via the post-apocalyptic landscapes) with horror—a dark twist to recent hybrid SF.

3) Finally, some recent 'fantasy' films which do not make huge use of SFX –  
*The Truman Show* (US 1998)  
*Donnie Darko* (US 2001)  
*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (US 2004)--  
might be said to deploy SF elements as *part* of the generic expectations they play with.

Do you agree?

If so, which are the SF elements in these films?

But while there is an 'openness' in the combination of elements, there are of course provisional boundaries and central elements – which, however can mutate, and are always open to parody (see [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) entry on the SFX 'bullet time').

### **Examples**

- The 'what if?' cannot involve magic (a dominant element in the fantasy genre, e.g. *The Corpse Bride* [US 2005]).
- The villains in the James Bond stories are usually connected to high technology, but this does not make them part of SF since the Bond series is so heavily marketed and constructed as contemporary thriller/spy genre.
- *The Birds* (UK 1963), though arguably dealing with ecological change, is set in 'the present' and marketed as 'thriller', in which there is no motive for the birds' malevolent behaviour. It's also seen as 'a Hitchcock film'. If it wasn't understood through these grids it might well exist on the supernatural/SF boundary.

Even the generic repertoire of 'stock elements' can be combined and re-combined.

- The chase or adventure **narrative** is well established, partly because it allows such luscious display of cutting-edge FX. But there are many SF films which don't work with such narrative shaping. The movie *2001* (US 1968), for example, though full of the audiovisual signifiers of SF, refused the chase, and became known for the languid movement of the spacecraft in time with the *Blue Danube* waltz: a play of difference within repetitions.
- Though futuristic machines, cityscapes, laboratories and so on are often thought of as a 'staple' 'stock element' of the genre, almost as soon as you've thought of such sets of **audiovisual signifiers** you will see a piece of SF which ignores or plays with them. *The Abyss* (US 1989) was set under water; *Gattaca* (US 1997) is mostly set in offices and corridors, though its theme is clearly SF: about a character, biologically conceived in the usual way, who is 'trying to pass' in a future society where elite human beings are genetically designed.

### **SF, horror and gender: Frankenstein and the Alien series**

*Frankenstein*, originally a novel by Mary Shelley (1818), introduces the central themes of SF: the limits of science in the gap between what Victor Frankenstein, the scientist, thinks he is

doing (assembling the perfect man from different bodies in the graveyard) and the horrific result of his labours.

Later SF often refers visually to the image in the 1931 film of *Frankenstein* when the bolt of electricity flashes at the moment of 'creation', in a kind of parody of Michelangelo's painting of God's creating Adam, which some would see as near-blasphemous. It has been used in the 'birthing' scene in *Alien* and in the *Terminator* films at the moment when the cyborgs land on Earth: part of the spectacle, and a resonance from a key SF moment. This is one of the strengths of popular or genre forms: the power and ease with which they can communicate to their audiences, often by the smallest generically charged intertextual details (like a spot of Ripley's blood silently sizzling on the floor in *Alien 4*).

In discussions, 'Frankenstein' is usually misremembered as the 'monster' rather than the scientist. This is perhaps because horror often results from the failure of science: the idealist-rationalist Victor leads to the 'mad scientist' figure in much SF and horror. Developments in genetic technologies are often given the name 'Frankenstein' by 'red top' newspapers. It has traditionally been in the horror film that anxieties about, and on the scale of, the body have been imagined, and the appropriate special FX developed to make that an exciting genre. But both genres embody deep anxieties about science and technology, called **technophobia**. Think about the similarities in the ways that the figure of 'the scientist' is constructed across these forms, as well as in contemporary news (see Frayling 2005).

You may well ask: is there any genre in which we can imagine the future with optimism? Why is there no environmental SF, which might look at a 'saved' world and its adventures, for example?

The *Alien* series was interesting in the ways it played with the visual and narrative links to technology and horror (the scary monster is 'inside the house' or space craft). The long time between each of the films also partly accounted for the ways it re-combined gender and other political positions with changing historical contexts.

**Narratively and audio-visually** it moved from an SF/horror *hybrid* in *Alien* (1979, slogan: 'In space no one can hear you scream') through a reliance on the war-movie genre in *Aliens* (1986, slogan: 'This time it's war') to the strange, almost medieval *mise-en-scene* and horror narrative of *Alien 3* (1993) and the extreme genetic-body horror of *Alien 4: Resurrection* (1997).

In these different contexts the *gender* relations of SF mutated through the decision to cast Sigourney Weaver in the role of Ripley (originally designed for a male actor). She plays a capable astronaut with maternal *narrative* motivations, towards the child Newt, and in her monstrous pregnancies. Precisely because the genre had previously tended to have men in leadership and hero roles, the charge of this strong, cool, intelligent female character was immensely refreshing.

In terms of the broader *cultural-ideological* debates which were the contexts for the series, with the long gaps between them, Amy Taubin (see Polihronis) has argued that *Alien* plays on 'anxieties set loose by a decade of feminist and gay activism'; *Aliens* works as 'a Pentagon-inspired family values picture for the Reagan 80s which pits the good mother against the bad; and *Alien 3* is an allegory of AIDS. Michael Eaton has suggested about *Alien 4* that the 'gruesome climax ... cannot but recall a Right to Life campaign [except] that here, abortion is seen as deliverance not for Ripley but for the whole human race' (Eaton 1998).

### ACTIVITY 3

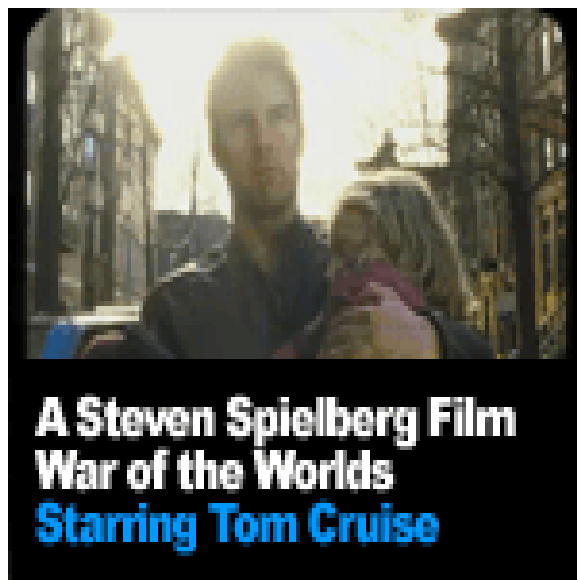
If you know the series, jot down your responses to these suggestions.

#### SF in different media

Because cinematic SF has tended to use SFX for visceral action adventure (thrill a minute; sound systems to make your chair vibrate; digital magic), many fans have argued that film SF simply uses the future as a spectacular setting for what are basically action adventures in costume. Comic strip SF and novels (e.g. those of Philip K. Dick) are said to be much better at exploring the scientific and political questions raised by possible futures.

Some texts have been through many incarnations, and you might like to compare these.

- *The War of the Worlds* was first a novel, by H.G. Wells (1898); then a notorious radio broadcast (1938); film versions were made, most recently in 2005; also comic books, and most recently a music version, a musical, and the new film *Jeff Wayne's War of the Worlds* (US 2007).



*The 2005 Spielberg film was located in a very near 'future, and for many was a comment on 'the war on terror' as much as a piece of SF. Publicity still from the official website.*

- A TV series like *Star Trek*, with its often comparatively static, dialogue intensive narratives, became something quite different when it was made as cinematic, big-screen, big budget movies, let alone computer games, or the parody *Galaxy Quest* (US 1999)
- The drive of blockbuster budgets to 'put the money on screen' in huge explosions etc, drives against other parts of SF's concerns—for example *T-2*'s anti-nuclear, almost pacifist message. Against this, we could argue that cinema, being an audiovisual medium, has often been able to make comments not so much in its dialogue but in sets, casting etc., and that the visceral horror of the nuclear blast in *T-2* more than justifies the ambiguities of the use of mega-SFX.
- Although *Blade Runner*, another example, spends a lot more time on its *film noir* love story, and not as much on political imaginings of a **dystopia** as the original novel (Philip K. Dick's wonderful *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), its spectacular sets do embody some unforgettably striking implications about that future.

Whereas the term **utopia** refers to a perfect, if impossible future society, **dystopia** is its opposite.

It is often associated with **technophobia** -- fear of technology or machines.

#### ACTIVITY 4

**Q:** If you can, look at the first scene of *Blade Runner*, and take notes on what kinds of political or scientific developments are implied by the settings.

**A:** Earth in 2019 is bathed in constant polluted rain, making the air so hellishly murky that the neon handles of umbrellas are a rare source of light. The buildings (echoing the sets of the 1926 German SF classic *Metropolis*) clearly embody a highly class-stratified social order, with the headquarters of the Tyrrell corporation at the top of pyramid-like skyscrapers. Though the flying cabs of the elite and the police speed through the skies, the streets are dark, dirty and confusing (unfortunately it is all too easy to read a distaste at the racial mix on the street as part of these scenes). One of the most striking things for audiences when it first came out was the use of contemporary advertising slogans and brands (e.g. Coca-Cola) on the sides of the buildings, which economically suggested that the future dystopia would be an extension of contemporary global capitalism.

#### ACTIVITY 5

Think of your own ‘what if?’ question and try to devise a simple story around it.

**Q:** Which medium would it best work in? Why?

**Q:** What would be the advantages of that medium, especially for your setting (radio’s low budget and ease of fantasy effects; cinema’s capacity for spectacle and dynamism; literature’s ability to argue and to accumulate effects)?

**Q:** What would be the disadvantages of that medium for your particular theme? For getting your piece of SF funded?

The television series *The X-Files* is an example of the interesting ways that SF elements can be combined with those of one of TV’s most popular genres, the detective thriller.

Not only did it reverse, or play with, the usual binary of female-irrational/male-rational, through the ways that Mulder and Scully were scripted and performed.

But narratively it had as its monster:

that father of all conspiracy theories, – the killer of Kennedy ... the constant concealer of UFOs and monsters – the Big Bad US Government itself.

(Pirie 1996: 22-3)

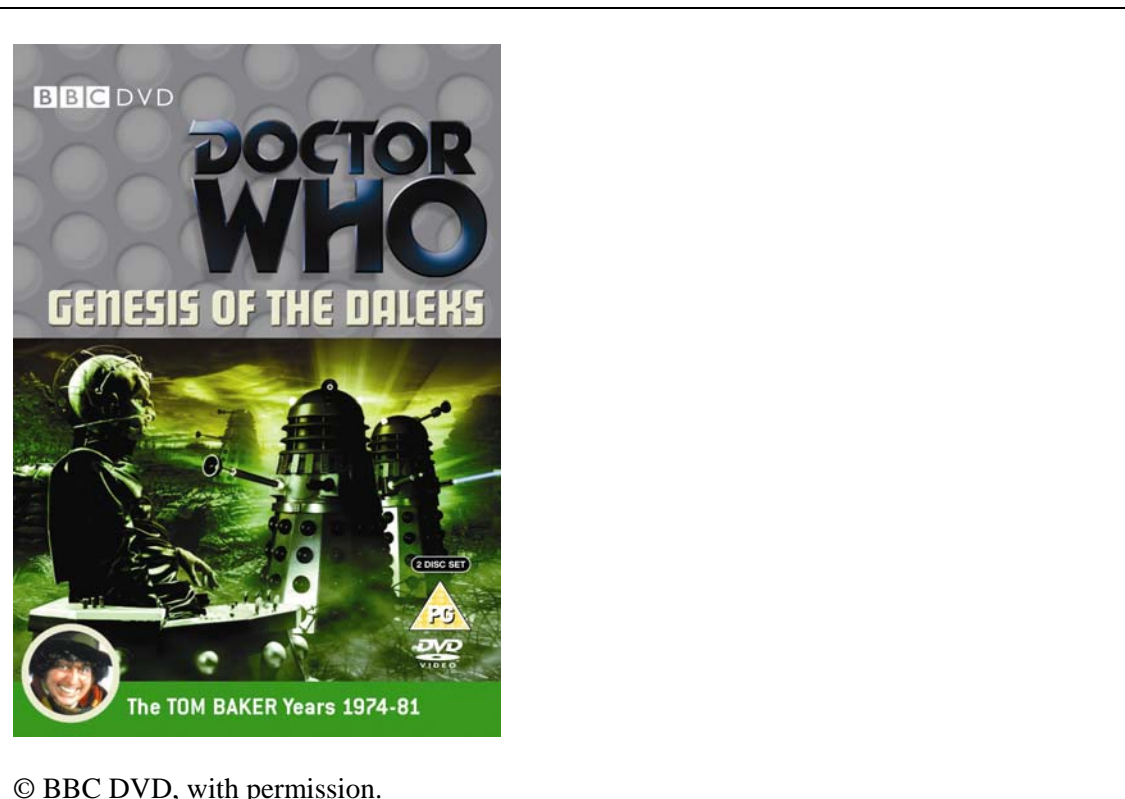
Take your own favourite SF novel or graphic novel and suggest what would be (or perhaps already has been) gained, and what lost by a transition to film, or television.

#### ACTIVITY 6

You might like to explore the changes to the *Dr Who* series (see 4<sup>th</sup> edition of MSB).

It began in 1963 as a serial that it was hoped would solve the scheduling gap between *Grandstand*, the afternoon sports programme, and *Juke Box Jury* in early evening BBC schedules.

Its most recent TV and games incarnations involve cutting edge TV SFX, hip casting, changed narratives and knowing scripts, which often make comments on contemporary politics and cultural phenomena, such as ‘spin’, ‘reality TV’ etc. See the BBC website.



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