

History of science fiction films

The history of science fiction films parallels that of the movie-making industry as a whole, although it took several decades before the genre was taken seriously. Since the 1960s, major science fiction films have succeeded in pulling in large audience shares, and films in this genre have become a regular staple of the film industry. Science fiction films have led the way in special effects technology, and have been used as a vehicle for biting social commentary for which this genre is ideally suited.

Before 1930

Science fiction films began to make their appearance very early in the history of movie production, during the silent film era. The initial attempts were short films of typically 1 to 2 minutes in duration, and shot in the black and white, silent-film technology of the period. These usually had some type of technological theme and were often intended to be humorous.

In 1902, Georges Méliès released *Le Voyage dans La Lune*, the first major film of the science fiction genre. Inspired by the novels of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, it portrayed a journey to the Moon in a spacecraft launched by a powerful gun. This movie's space travel plot, formalist visuals, and innovative special effects, influenced future sci-fi films.

Metropolis was one of the most expensive silent films ever made.

In 1910, Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* was brought to the film medium, one of the early mergers of sci-fi and horror. Although only 16 minutes in length, this film succeeded in producing a suitably dark mood and would be remade several times in the future. Another such horror movie, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, was released in 1913.

An early epic film that introduced underwater filming was the production of the *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* in 1916, based on the novels of Jules Verne.

The 1920s saw distinctly different forms of science fiction films being produced in America and Europe. European film-makers employed the imaginative elements and the predictive aspects of science fiction, with films such as *Metropolis* (1926) and *Die Frau im Mond* (1929) — both from Germany. By contrast, Hollywood embraced action, melodramatic plots, and techno-gadgetry. These would blossom into the serials of the 1930s, and echoes of this trend can still be seen today in films such as the various James Bond movies.

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1930s

Movies during the 1930s provided an escape from the poverty of the Great Depression, and it was during this era that film-making experienced a golden age. Movies now possessed a sound-track, and the extreme physical expression of the silent era was replaced by dialogue. The films were focused on the actors, rather than the still-primitive special effects. An exception was the 1933 release of *King Kong*, including scenes of the giant ape battling biplanes atop the Empire State Building. Most sci-fi films focused on human drama, instead of aliens, space travel, or disasters.

Influenced by *Metropolis* the 1930 release *Just Imagine* was the first feature length science fiction film by a US studio but the film was an expensive flop and no studio would produce a feature length science fiction film until the 1950s. The British made *Things to Come* of 1936 along with *Metropolis* was one of the most influential films of the early period in using special effects to evoke 'spectacle' but it too was a failure at the box office.

This decade also saw the rise of the serial movies, most notably in the form of the various *Flash Gordon* films, as well as the quasi-sci-fi *Dick Tracy* and others. These were generally somewhat mediocre efforts employing soon-to-be-stock ideas such as the mad scientist, various super-tech gadgets, and plots for world domination. The decade also saw the release of *The Invisible Man* (1933), and new versions of *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

1940s

With World War II dominating events during the 1940s, few science fiction films were released and several of those were mere vehicles for war propaganda. Among the few notable examples was *Dr Cyclops* (1940), an early colour film, and Fleischer Studio's animated *Superman* short subjects, which often incorporated science-fiction themes.

1950s

During the 1950s the science fiction genre finally began to come into its own. The large increase in science fiction literature during this time was also reflected in the quantity of science fiction films being played. Unfortunately many of these movies were low-budget, "B" movies.

The atomic bomb caused a renewed interest in science, and in 1950, in the widely publicised *Destination Moon*, the American public got their first glimpse of space travel on a more sophisticated level than *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars*. With a script co-written by Robert A. Heinlein and astronomical sets by Chesley Bonestell, the movie was a commercial and artistic success. It was followed by *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, directed by Robert Wise, and Howard Hawks's *The Thing*, with their contrasting views of first contact.

A notable producer of this period was George Pál who was responsible for *Destination Moon*, *When Worlds Collide*, *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds*, and the pseudo-documentary of manned space exploration *Conquest of Space*. *Conquest of Space* had beautiful special effects, but lacked the intelligent script of Pál's earlier sf films, and flopped at the box office.

Beginning in this decade, Ray Harryhausen began to use stop-motion animation for both science fiction and fantasy films. His work appeared in such films as *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956), and *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957). However he never received an Academy Award nomination for his painstaking work.

Apocalyptic themes were popular in science fiction films during the Cold War era. The 1950s witnessed the emergence of the monster movie trend, driven by the anxieties and paranoia of the emerging cold war, beginning with Howard Hawks's *The Thing* and the success of *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*. Other major films in the sf/horror genre in this decade include *Them!*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and the coldly realistic *On the Beach*.

Several important movies, now considered classics, were released in the mid-1950s, notably *This Island Earth*, the first film to show interstellar travel, and *Forbidden Planet* (an inspiration for Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*).

The 1950s were also the dawn of the space age as humans began to venture into outer space, and a number of films from this period reflected a fear of the consequences. Among these were *The Angry Red Planet* (1959), *First Man Into Space* (1959), and *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* (1958). (This last film is also considered a precursor to the film *Alien*.) Another popular theme from this period was movies about flying saucers, reflecting the prevalence of UFO sightings. One of the best known of these was *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* (1956), with special effects by Ray Harryhausen.

In the later years of the 1950s, the major American studios limited themselves to adaptations of "classics" by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. In addition to *The War of the Worlds* mentioned above, these included *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.

1960s

After the rush of science fiction films in the 1950s, there were relatively few sf films in the 1960s, but these few transformed science fiction cinema.

2001: A Space Odyssey was a ground-breaking science fiction movie that brought new realism to the genre.

One of the most significant movies of the 1960s was *2001: A Space Odyssey*, directed by Stanley Kubrick and written by Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke. This movie was groundbreaking in the quality of its visual effects, in its realistic portrayal of space travel, and in the epic and transcendent scope of its story. Science fiction movies that followed this film would enjoy increasingly larger budgets and ever improving special effects. Clarke has told of screening earlier sf films for Kubrick, and Kubrick pronouncing them all awful, without exception, even the revered *Things to Come* from 1936, with a screenplay by H. G. Wells. And, by the standards of *2001*, Kubrick was right. Nothing that had gone before could compare with the depth and majesty of his much-misunderstood creation. Today, when *2001* is widely revered as one of the greatest films of all time, it is sobering to remember how many critics called it an incomprehensible mess when it first appeared.

2001 was not the only major sf film of the 1960's. The same year it was released, audiences also thrilled to *Planet of the Apes*, which spawned four sequels and a television series. Earlier in the 1960s, *Fahrenheit 451* was a social commentary on freedom of speech and government restrictions. Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* merged political satire and comedy, while the chilling *Lord of the Flies* portrayed the fragility of civilization. The adaptations of H. G. Wells kept coming, with films of *The Time Machine* and *First Men in the Moon*, but these seem like a continuation of the fifties.

Finally, the sf film boldly went where no man had gone before when Ursula Andress ventured inside a human body in *Fantastic Voyage* and Jane Fonda displayed her sleek physique in the very campy *Barbarella*. While not strictly-speaking science fiction, the James Bond movies included a variety of sci-fi-like gadgetry.

1970s

The era of manned trips to the Moon saw a resurgence of interest in the science fiction film. The genre had gone into a small decline with the availability of the television during the 1950s. *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, both released in 1977, contained a type of mystical element that had first appeared in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The space discoveries of the 1970s created a growing sense of marvel about the universe that was reflected in these films.

The dystopian movie *Silent Running* has gained a cult film following. In contrast, the early 1970s saw the continued theme of paranoia, with humanity under threat from ecological or technological adversaries of its own creation. Notable films of this period included *Silent Running* (ecology), the sequels to *Planet of the Apes* (man vs. evolution), *Westworld* (man vs. robot) and *THX1138* (man vs. the state), and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (man vs. brainwashing).

The conspiracy thriller film was a popular staple of this period, where the paranoia of plots by the national government or corporate entities had replaced the implied communist enemy of the 1950s. These films included such efforts as *Alien*, *Capricorn One*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Day of the Dolphin*, *Soylent Green* and *Futureworld*.

The slow-paced *Solaris* made by Andrei Tarkovsky and released in 1972 (and remade as a much shorter film by Steven Soderbergh in 2002) matches and in some assessments exceeds 2001 in its visuals and philosophic scope, while other critics find it ploding and pretentious.

The science fiction comedy had what may have been its finest hours in the 1970s, with Woody Allen's *Sleeper* and Dan O'Bannon's *Dark Star*. And in 1979 three memorable sf films appeared. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* brought the much loved television series to the big screen for the first time. *Alien* upped the ante on how scary a screen monster could be. And *Time After Time* pitted H. G. Wells against Jack the Ripper, with an excellent script by Nicholas Meyer.

1980s

The 1980s and later saw the growth of animation as a medium for science fiction films. This was particularly successful in Japan where the anime industry saw the production of such films as *Akira* (1988) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). Serious animation has not yet proven commercially successful in the U.S. and Western-made animated science fiction films such as *Light Years* (1988), *The Iron Giant* (1999) and *Titan A.E.* (2000) did not draw a significant viewing audience. However, anime has gradually gained a cult following and from mid-1990s its popularity has been steadily expanding worldwide.

In 1982 *Blade Runner* had disappointing box office sales, but the film later gained status as a cult classic.

Following the huge success of *Star Wars* science fiction became bankable and each major studio rushed into production their available projects. As a direct result *Star Trek* was reborn as a movie franchise that continued through the 1980s and 1990s. Ridley Scott's *Alien* was hugely significant in establishing a visual styling of the future that became dominate in science fiction film through its sequels and Scott's *Blade Runner*.

Steven Spielberg's *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* became one of the best loved films of all time, and also a box office champ.

Thanks to the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises escapism became the dominant form of science fiction film through the 1980s. The big budget adaptations of Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Arthur C. Clarke's sequel to 2001,

2010, were box office duds that dissuaded producers from investing in science fiction literary properties. The strongest contributors to the genre during the second half of the decade were James Cameron and Paul Verhoeven with the Terminator and Robocop entries.

Before 1980, the sf film was a distinct genre from the fantasy film, of which the most famous was *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939. There were very few non-horror fantasy films before 1980. But starting in 1980 there was less and less distinction between science fiction, fantasy, and superhero films, thanks in large part to the influence of Star Wars, which was set "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away". From 1980 on, every year saw at least one major sf or fantasy film, though they were usually looked down upon by the critics and ignored on Oscar night, except in the technical categories.

An influential film release was *Scanners* (1981), a film that would be imitated several times over the next two decades.

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1990s

The film *The Matrix* reflected the more introspective, dystopian world-view of the cyberpunk genre.

The emergence of the world wide web and the cyberpunk genre during the 1990s spawned several internet-themed movies. Both *The Lawnmower Man* (1992) and *Virtuosity* (1995) dealt with threats to the network from a human-computer interface. *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) and *Total Recall* (1990) had the memories of their main actors modified by a similar interface, and *The Matrix* (1999) created a machine-run virtual prison for humanity. The internet also provided a ready medium for movie fandom, who could more directly support (or criticize) such media franchise film series as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

Disaster movies remained popular, with themes updated to reflect recent influences. Both *Armageddon* (1998) and *Deep Impact* (1999) used the threat of a massive impact with the earth. *Independence Day* (1996 in film) recycled the 1950s alien invasion movie, with rapacious, all-consuming aliens. Advances in genetic science were also featured in *Jurassic Park* (1993) and the slow-paced *Gattaca* (1997).

As the decade progressed, computers played an increasingly important role in both the addition of special effects and the production of films. Large render farms made of many computers in a cluster were used to detail the images based on three-dimensional models. As the software developed in sophistication it was used to produce more complicated effects such as wave movement, explosions, and even fur-covered aliens. The improvements in special effects allowed the original *Star Wars* trilogy to be re-released in 1997 with many enhancements.

As in the 1980's, in every year of the 1990's one or more major sf or fantasy films were produced.

2000s

Star Wars episode III, released in 2005, completed the sextet begun in 1977. Oddly, in the first decade of the 21st Century, sf films seemed to turn away from space travel, and fantasy predominated. This may be due to the box office failure of *Star Trek: Nemesis*, or to the huge success of the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Except for Star Trek and Star Wars films, the only films set off Earth that appeared in the first half of the 2000s were the poorly received Mission to Mars and Serenity, a continuation of Joss Whedon's tv series Firefly. On the other hand, fantasy and Superhero films abounded, as did earthbound sf, and for the first time a fantasy film, *The Return of the King*, won an Oscar for best picture. By the middle of the decade, the theater audience had begun to decline and this was reflected in the numbers attending the science fiction movie releases of this period. Sophisticated home theater systems came close to matching the cinema experience, and avoided the expense and inconvenience. Film studios had begun placing product advertisements prior to the start of the movie, seeking another means to enhance their bottom line. However this only succeeded in alienating a segment of the theater-going audience. Making up for the losses in cinema revenue, however, were sales and rentals of the high-quality DVD releases. On the positive side, however, many of these DVD release included previously cut scenes and extra material, including science fiction DVD releases. [edit]

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