

## SF – Philosophical Investigations into the Contemporary World

Science fiction (SF) is a ghetto genre that, in Britain at least, is often treated with intellectual disdain. In this opinion, SF films are either fantasy or simply fantastical views of the future. There are indeed examples of films that use the trappings of the genre for action adventure (the ‘space opera’ of George Lucas’s Star Wars movies, 1977- ) or rather as a vehicle for state-of-the-art special effects (Independence Day, Roland Emmerich, 1996). Entertaining as some of these films may be, to aficionados they are ‘soft SF’ and are nowhere near as interesting as their ‘hard SF’ counterparts.

### **What does it mean to be human?**

The central question of ‘hard SF’ is ‘what does it mean to be human?’. This is the theme of AI: Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg, 2001). . David seeks love from his ‘mother’ in order to distinguish himself from other androids, such as Gigolo Joe. As in many recent films that depict dystopia, the look of A.I. is indebted to Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982, director’s cut 1992). Scott’s film ‘doubled’ humans with replicants, and Deckard (possibly a replicant himself) has to distinguish between real and unreal humans. He discovers, when the villain Batty saves him, that humanity is not defined by physical attributes but by its ability to empathise. Blade Runner was based upon Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep?, which was written in response to the Vietnam War. He suggests that the lack of empathy shown toward the North Vietnamese dehumanised the Americans; a view that has considerable contemporary resonance.

When investigating the ‘meaning of life’, a concern which is concomitant to the defining of human beings, SF often raises the issues of love and memory. Memory is crucial in Blade Runner: ‘memories’ are implanted into the replicants to offer an emotional cushion to help them to come to terms with their ontological state. Dark City (1998), whose postmodernist design also has its roots in Scott’s film, shows a dying alien race, the ‘Strangers’. trying to find what gives humans their capacity to survive. They use memories to transform the subjects of their experiment and find out what remains constant in a human in spite of these psychological intrusions. But they soon discover that the answer does not lie in the mind.

### **SF is always about now**

It is inevitable that whatever a film has to say about the human condition it will be determined by the society in which it is produced. To this effect, all ‘hard SF’ is essentially about the contemporary world; these films can only ever be about the *now*. In Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927) (an influence on the design of, amongst many others, Blade Runner) the then burgeoning conflict between capitalism and communism was played out, albeit with a conclusion that Lang found most dissatisfying. Similarly, Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956) can be seen as a satire on McCarthyism *or* as a Cold War warning against the dangers of communism.

The threat of nuclear annihilation occupied the minds of SF writers post-Hiroshima and was tackled in The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise, 1951). The dangers of the fall-out from nuclear testing manifested itself unforgettably as giant ants in Them! (Gordon Douglas, 1954). Meanwhile the influence of Sigmund Freud’s ideas

regarding post-war North America is evident in the battle with the id in Forbidden Planet (Fred Wilcox, 1956). The Incredible Shrinking Man (Jack Arnold, 1957), for its part, warned that science could not account for everything (and contemplates, with frightening conviction, what could happen if you ask your wife to get you a beer).

It is often easier to see contemporary concerns in these older SF movies because the vantage point of history offers their narratives (a degree of) sense and meaning.

However Gattaca (Andrew Niccol, 1997) is undeniably about the contemporary world in its depiction of a Brave New World-like society, wherein eugenics has replaced social class. In Tim Burton's Planet of the Apes (2001) animal rights and racism are central issues, whereas in the original (Franklin J Shaffner, 1968) the looming threat of nuclear war structures the narrative. Racism also featured in X-Men (Bryan Singer, 2000), while pre-Millennial paranoia is evident in both The Truman Show (Peter Weir, 1998) and The X-Files (Rob Bowman, 1998).

### **Radical SF**

SF can, like most genres, be politically reactionary or radical. Since films are so expensive to make, and the *raison d'être* of mainstream films is to provide entertainment, movies that are critical of the capitalist world are thin on the ground, particularly in Hollywood. However, because SF is not, allegedly, about the contemporary world it is easier for it to make critiques than for the realist genres (horror can also do this). As such, The Matrix (Wachowski brothers, 1999) can be a box office smash, a special effects extravaganza, *and* suggest that the world of 1999 is a dystopia. Robocop (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) satirised corporate capitalism; the

criminally neglected Strange Days (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), an exciting action thriller, exposes a powerful critique of America in the light of Rodney King's beating.

### **SF Hybrids**

SF does not always consider metaphysical questions as part of its investigation into human beings. The Terminator movies (1984 and 1991), much like The Stepford Wives (Bryan Forbes, 1975), offer an exploration of gender roles through Sarah Connor's transformation from inept waitress to muscular war machine. Sigourney Weaver's Ripley, of the Alien franchise (1979, 1986, 1992 and 1997), has become an iconic figure because of her action hero credentials, but it is also a study into the role of the mother. The Alien films merged SF with other genres: horror in the original (Ridley Scott), war movie in the sequel (James Cameron), (almost) art movie in the third (David Fincher) and action (Jean-Pierre Jeunet) in the (to date) final instalment. SF and horror are natural bedfellows, simply interchanging the monster with an alien. Nevertheless they are distinct genres insofar as horror draws upon the metaphysical, rather than science, and offers visceral shock, rather than spectacle. These categories can obviously overlap: while Alien is a 'pure' hybrid something like The Astronaut's Wife (Rand Ravich, 1999) is primarily horror.

### **A genre of ideas**

SF is often, incorrectly, thought to be synonymous with special effects, making it Hollywood's genre of choice during the mid to late 1990s to show off its new digital technology. Open Your Eyes (Alejandro Amenábar, Spain, 1997), and its remake

Vanilla Sky, (Cameron Crowe, 2001), are, however, both examples of how this genre may focus on the cerebral rather than spectacle. While many critics lauded the original, to the detriment of Crowe's film, the remake does offer an investigation into celebrity, and the role of popular culture in our lives, that is distinctly absent from the earlier film. Vanilla Sky was not marketed as an SF movie, partly because that would have given a clue to the film's conceit, but also because 'hard SF' is not popular with audiences. Furthermore, the film producers have always tried to market their films as multi-generic in order to appeal to a wider audience. The Fifth Element (Luc Besson, 1997), for example, was publicised as action-comedy.

Solaris (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR, 1972), like Open Your Eyes, investigates what would happen if dreams were to come true; it represents a pinnacle of 'art house SF', notwithstanding Jean-Luc Godard's Alphaville (1965). . Stalker (Tarkovsky, 1979) also investigates a dream world, albeith this time set on earth, where scavengers trawl 'alien' zones.

Solaris was sold as the Soviet Union's answer to 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). Kubrick's earlier film had offered a quick history of humankind's evolution, complete with a 'trip to blow your mind' that suggests the film should be considered a classic of the 'Swinging Sixties'.

Fans of the genre already know that the SF ghetto holds many fascinating films and, in what is likely to be the 'Biotech century', it will probably have a more vital role than ever in helping us to come to terms with the impact of science on our lives.

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