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PART ONE

Approaches

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Introduction: The World of the Science Fiction Film

Whenever students of film approach the science fiction genre, it appears they immediately find themselves facing a kind of paradox, one akin to the problematic logic built into the form's combinatory designation – that is, as *science* and *fiction*, as fact and fabrication. For a genre that would seem to be almost self-evidently *itself* tends to slip away, to evade its own evidence or facticity. It is, after all, particularly as its literary practitioners would argue, manifestly about science and scientific possibility – even probability. In fact, it commonly proposes the sort of “what if” game in which scientists are typically engaged as they set about designing experiments and conducting their research: extrapolating from the known in order to explain the unknown. Thus, the writer and legendary pulp editor John W. Campbell Jr. instructed that science fiction should be “an effort to predict the future on the basis of known facts, culled largely from present-day laboratories.”¹ Yet that prescription, which went far to shape the developing literature of science fiction in the United States, hardly accounts for the full appeal of the form – an appeal that some would pass off as due to its adolescent character, others would trace to its archetypal elements, and still others would explain as fundamental to its speculative nature, its expression of common human curiosity. It is an appeal, in any case, that has, over time, lured some of Western culture's most important fictionalists (Edgar Allan Poe, Jack London, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Walker Percy) to try their hands at its subject matter. Especially in its cinematic form, however, science fiction often seems to appeal precisely because it lends itself to the greatest imaginative capacities of the film medium: to its ability, through what we very broadly term “special effects,” to give shape and being to the imagination. It is a form, then, that often seems quite difficult to pin down satisfactorily.

Efforts at defining the literary form have often begun by wrestling precisely with this sense of difficulty. A self-professed “outsider's guide-

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book” to the world of science fiction, David Hartwell’s *Age of Wonders* suggests that science fiction is “so diverse” in its forms and subjects that it defies any simple definition. Rather, Hartwell argues that “science fiction has been an umbrella under which any kind of estrangement from reality is welcome” and indeed entirely suited to the genre with its emphasis on “wonder,”² so he sets about describing the genre by focusing on its audience, on the diverse community and interests of science fiction readers. An overview of science fiction aimed at those already familiar with the form, Edward James’s *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, from the start announces that it is “an attempt to define science fiction,” yet one which recognizes that “a proper definition can be achieved only by understanding what authors are trying to do or have tried to do” throughout the form’s existence. It thus charts a historical path, looking at “how definitions of sf [science fiction] changed as sf itself changed,” and how “the development of sf as a literary category is bound up with attempts to define it and with attempts by writers to live up to those definitions.”³ In marked contrast, Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, a theoretical work aimed mainly at a scholarly audience, assumes that science fiction is a readily recognizable form, “a full-fledged literary genre” having “its own repertory of functions, conventions, and devices,” all of which are fairly well known. Still, even as he begins laying out his own Brechtian-inspired and rather elegant definition of the form as a “literature of cognitive estrangement,” that is, a form intent on defamiliarizing reality through various generic strategies in order to reflect on it more effectively, Suvin eventually begins to pare away types of text that do not fit into his scheme, particularly various versions of fantasy and some utopian writing.⁴ In assuming a sort of fundamental coherence, he thus immediately begins to qualify what he is trying to define, limiting his scheme to “the genre as it is here conceived”⁵ as a way around a definitional dilemma.

That same sense of difficulty extends, and perhaps even more visibly so, to our sense of what constitutes cinematic science fiction; for although the genre certainly sports an iconography that immediately asserts a kind of identity and one with which the average filmgoer is usually quite familiar – rockets, robots, futuristic cities, alien encounters, fantastic technology, scientists (mad or otherwise) – these icons or generic conventions have, within the critical establishment and, to a lesser degree, even in the popular mind, never quite satisfactorily served to bracket it off as a discrete form, something we might easily

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Figure 1. Crossing genre boundaries – *Frankenstein* (1931).

categorize and thus set about systematically studying. Invariably, for example, the form seems to bulk into the realm of horror, as is evidenced by such varied films as *Frankenstein* (1931) [Fig. 1], *Dr. Cyclops* (1940), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and, more recently, the films in the *Alien* cycle (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997), thanks to their emphasis on physical confrontation and threat that occur within a context marked by those trappings we associate with science fiction. Similarly,

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Figure 2. *Starship Troopers* (1997) translates the World War II combat film into outer space.

a relatively minor form like the disaster film often seems to subsume both genres, as we see in works like *Dante's Peak* (1997), *Deep Impact* (1998), and *Armageddon* (1998). Additionally, the science fiction film very often shares characteristics with other popular genres, even borrows rather forthrightly from a broad range of them, as we find in the case of *Outland* (1981) and its echoes of the western, *Starship Troopers* (1997) [Fig. 2] and its imitation of a host of World War II films, *Blade Runner* (1982) [Fig. 3] and *Dark City* (1998) with their dependence on the conventions and look of the American film noir, and especially the *Star Wars* saga (1977, 1980, 1983, 1999), which borrows by turns from westerns, war films, Japanese samurai epics, and the serials. So when a pioneering genre critic such as Carlos Clarens set about surveying the history of the horror film, readers might only have expected that he would incorporate science fiction, as well as the disaster film, into his field of inquiry. Following this vein, we can discover many other surveys of the genre, as well as treatments of selected films, that have simply treated horror and science fiction as if they were essentially the same thing, and still others that view science fiction as if it were merely a pastiche form,⁶ lacking a secure identity of its own [Fig. 4].

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Figure 3. The film-noir look and detective protagonist of *Blade Runner* (1982).



Figure 4. Technology and thrills, the mixed payoff offered by *Forbidden Planet's* (1956) trailer.

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Despite these difficulties of identity – and, of course, partly because of them – it still seems that a first task of almost anyone who sets out to describe, explain, or analyze specific science fiction film texts has often become the same as that facing any student of genre, that is, one of differentiation. Every study of a film genre, either explicitly or implicitly, begins from similarly problematic issues: concerns with what to include and what to exclude, and on what basis we can begin to make those determinations. These issues constitute what is often referred to as the empirical dilemma, which poses the question of how we can ever determine what characteristics typify a genre without first determining what texts constitute the genre, even though that very decision about textual inclusiveness would logically seem to hinge upon prior decisions about the genre's identity or definition.⁷ One approach is to postulate an essential nature for the form, and then, as Suvin does, begin to pare away those works that violate its logic. This strategy usually produces a coherent if rather narrowly defined body of work. The more popular recourse is to work from a common consensus on the generic canon, to accept for purposes of initial analysis and argument all those works that have previously been included in various discussions of a certain genre.⁸ Such an approach allows for inclusiveness, absorbs differing critical vantages, and, perhaps most important, permits critical discussion to move forward.

Obviously, casting the generic net so widely has its drawbacks as well. For example, we inevitably pull in works that can blur the issue, that challenge the very possibilities of boundary, and that, at least initially, seem to frustrate any effort at focusing attention. A serial like *The Phantom Creeps* (1939), for example, has all the trappings of a crime/gangster film, a type quite popular in the 1930s; it stars an actor, Bela Lugosi, who was always iconographically linked to the horror genre; yet it also includes a mad scientist, an invisibility ray, and a menacing robot – clearly the stuff of science fiction. This sort of generic cross-over is far from uncommon, as we can see with the great number of comic-horror and comic-science fiction films – movies like the Bob Hope vehicle *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1946), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Spaceballs* (1987), *Mars Attacks!* (1996), *The Fifth Element* (1997) – and, more significant for our purposes, the horror-science fiction films that, after their heyday in the early 1930s, have once more become very popular, as the *Alien* series amply illustrates. Differentiation – or at least an attempt at it – has thus often become a first, yet always still rather problematic step in most

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genre analysis, and a point on which this study too must initially spend some time.

In what is one of the most often-reprinted essays on popular film genres, Bruce Kawin takes precisely this differentiating tack. Starting from the understanding that science fiction and horror films are typically linked and conflated, he has set about defining the forms by directly contrasting certain of their key and recurring elements. While he admits that the genres share many common features – especially mad scientists and monstrous “others” – and that they even “organize themselves” in similar ways – particularly through their depicted encounters with some unexpected and seemingly threatening “other” – he believes that their fundamental concerns are quite distinctive and that the two genres “promote growth in different ways.”⁹ Horror films, he argues, “address . . . the unconscious,” whereas science fiction deals with “the conscious – if not exactly the scientist in us, then certainly the part of the brain that enjoys speculating on technology, gimmicks, and the perfectible future.”¹⁰ Moreover, he suggests, the genres’ respective “attitudes” are different, particularly toward “curiosity and the openness of systems”;¹¹ that is, while horror, he argues, seeks to close the door on the unknown and to suggest how dangerous an unbridled curiosity can be, science fiction opens it and embraces that very openness as an opportunity for intellectual growth. In effect, Kawin believes that the horror and science fiction films offer audiences two quite different sorts of pleasure or satisfaction in the distinct ways they confirm or challenge our relationships to the world and to others.

If Kawin’s comparison seems a bit too pat, too easy – and often seems to force works into a category almost against their generic will, as in the case of films like *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and *Alien* – it can serve an important purpose, especially at the outset of this study. It reminds us that genres resist being easily pinned down, thanks to one of their key characteristics: their vitality, the fact that they are constantly changing in response to a variety of cultural and industrial influences, and thus pushing at the very outlines we would, it so often seems, like to set for them – and to maintain against all critical objection. The science fiction film – in part because it has been so very popular over the past thirty years, and because we have seen in that time so many variations on the form, so many efforts to keep it new and vital to our culture – may well prove more protean than most of our other popular genres, as well as more resistant to that pigeonholing impulse. For example, as scientific developments have increas-

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ingly begun to encroach on territory that we had traditionally ceded to religion and morality, as in the various concerns surrounding human origins, genetic manipulation, euthanasia, and gender reassignment, the science fiction film has more often begun to broach “supernatural” issues, as in the case of films like *Cocoon* (1985), *Stargate* (1994), *Event Horizon* (1997), and *Contact* (1997), to pursue that notion of “curiosity,” as Kawin would put it, in some rather unexpected, even theological directions, of a sort precisely linked to the horror film of past times. However, we should take it as a sign of the genre’s vitality that it is constantly changing, pushing its limits, bulking beyond the borders that we would, for our own intellectual contentment, conventionally assign to it. The science fiction film has simply proven to be one of our most flexible popular genres – and perhaps for that very reason, one of our most culturally useful. Consequently, we might begin our own consideration of the genre simply by thinking in terms of a “supertext” of the science fiction film, that is, what genre critic John Cawelti describes as the collection “of the most significant characteristics or family resemblances among many particular texts, which can accordingly be analyzed, evaluated, and otherwise related to each other by virtue of their connection with” this “consolidation of many texts created at different times.”¹² What constitutes the supertext of science fiction, then, is not any one film or even an ideal science fiction film, but rather that large body of all the films and their similar characteristics that we might reasonably or customarily link to the genre. Moreover, that supertext is always expanding, ever broadening the potential field for subsequent films in the genre, and constantly making the job of describing and analyzing this form a more complex, even daunting process – and yet for that very reason an instructive and valuable experience for the larger practice of genre thinking.

Science Fiction as Fantasy

One way in which this classification effort can prove especially useful is in the way it reminds us of the general limits that film studies often seem to set on how we conventionally think about genres. Tzvetan Todorov in his structuralist examination of “the fantastic” as a literary form – a work from which the present study draws heavily – offers an instructive example in this regard on several levels. Before beginning to describe his own field of inquiry, the fantastic text, he takes on what has become a canonical work of literary criticism, Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, a study that proposed a kind of “unified field the-

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ory” of literary genres based on what Frye termed *mythoi*. Todorov finds in that work a troubling focus on what he describes as “theoretical genres” at the expense of “historical genres,” a privileging of the ideal over the very real literary texts with which readers are most familiar and which, in Frye’s work, seem forced through various manipulations to “fit” into prescribed categories.¹³ His dissatisfaction with Frye’s approach forms the backdrop for his own study of fantasy, a literary form that seems closely allied to a number of film genres cited above. As in the case of horror, for example, the fantastic very often involves fear, although, as Todorov reminds us, “it is not a necessary condition of the genre”; and while it might, as science fiction often does, emphasize “laws which contemporary science does not acknowledge,” such an emphasis might constitute only a small dimension of the form.¹⁴ However, more to the point for this study – and for that pigeonholing tendency to which we are all prone – is Todorov’s argument that the fantastic exists *only* in relationship to other narrative types. It thus denotes a constantly shifting – and hence shifty – field of narrative experience that simply resists the sort of analytic that a Frye would offer. Thus he suggests that we can talk about it as a genre only insofar as we recognize the very blurred boundaries that mark its existence.

The *fantastic* – the relationship of which to science fiction we shall pursue shortly – exists on a kind of sliding scale with two other forms that Todorov terms the *uncanny* and the *marvelous*. While the uncanny narrative focuses on the unconscious or, more generally, the mind as a force producing seemingly inexplicable events, and the marvelous on the supernatural or spiritual realm as it intrudes into and challenges our everyday world, the fantastic occupies that point of “hesitation” between the two: the realm of what might or might not be, where reality itself seems a puzzle, waiting for us to reconstruct it. It is, in effect, a border form, one that can exist only in a liminal situation, as we try to sort out how the narrative relates to and challenges our normative view of reality. Extrapolating from his schematic for fantasy, then, Todorov formulates a simple yet elegant guideline for genre thinking, as he suggests that “genres are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature”¹⁵ – or for our purposes, with the “universe” of film narrative.

If, from this vantage, we come to accept, and even incorporate into our thinking about the science fiction film, a kind of inevitable ambiguity, a blurring of boundaries bound up in such “relay points” as mad scientists and unexplained monsters, we can also draw from it a useful element of structural thinking, a bit of local organization to super-