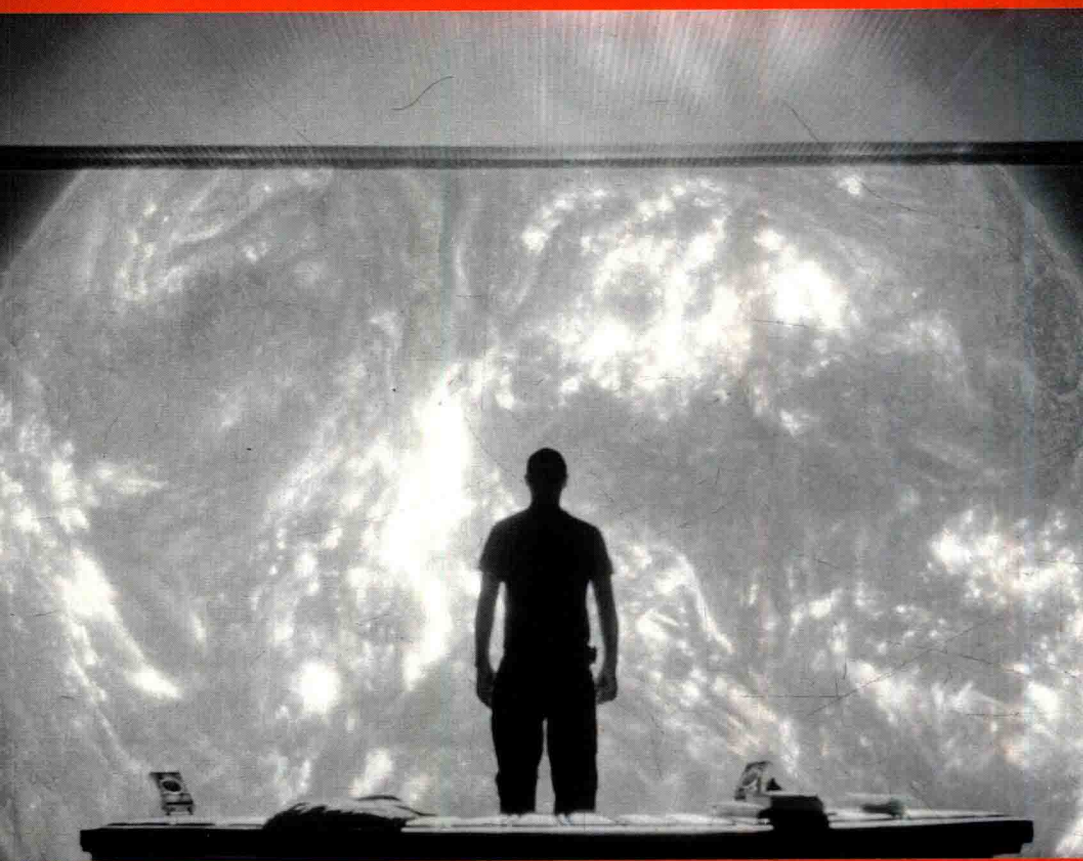# ENDANGERING SCIENCE FICTION FILM

EDITED BY

SEAN REDMOND & LEON MARVELL

ROUTLEDGE

ENDANGERING
SCIENCE FICTION FILM

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Endangering Science Fiction Film explores the ways in which science fiction film is a dangerous and endangering genre. The collection argues that science fiction's cinematic power rests in its ability to imagine 'Other' worlds that challenge and disturb the lived conditions of the 'real' world, as it is presently known to us. From classic films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Solaris* to modern blockbusters including *World War Z* and *Gravity*, and directors from David Cronenberg to Alfonso Cuarón, contributors comment on the way science fiction film engages with dangerous encounters, liminal experiences and sublime aesthetics, and untethers space and time to question the very nature of human existence. With the analysis of a diverse range of films from Europe, Asia, North and South America, *Endangering Science Fiction Film* offers a uniquely interdisciplinary view of the evolving and dangerous sentiments and sensibility of this genre.

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Leon: For Buster & Lucy, Miranda & Bram

Sean: 'The surface of the Earth is the shore of the cosmic ocean. On this
        shore, we've learned most of what we know. Recently, we've waded
        a little way out, maybe ankle-deep, and the water seems inviting.
        Some part of our being knows this is where we came from. We long
        to return, and we can, because the cosmos is also within us. We're
        made of star stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.'

                                            Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*

        For Cael, Dylan, Erin, Caitlin and Joshua—we stand together on
        the shore of the great cosmic ocean—this is the sea we seek. Let's
        journey.

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we are in danger

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Genre films are constructed out of narrative patterns and plot points that involve or are predicated on crisis, on danger. This is the logic of much if not all mainstream genre cinema: drama has to take place for there to be a story to be told, and for pleasure and identification to be arrested and enthused. Forms of threatening disequilibrium can be personal, domestic, familial, local, external, supernatural, and murderous; a way of life can be threatened as well as life itself. There are ideological dimensions at play; the crisis threatens to destabilize patriarchy, heterosexuality, social norms, and expectations. Feelings and modes of affect are set in dangerous motion as the crisis unfolds. Trouble may emerge from a wayward or transgressive family member, or it may arrive in town on horses, stagecoaches, trains, cars, spaceships, as well as on the wind or in the water. The main (and minor) characters in the film are at the center of this storm, and that places viewers at the epicenter of the danger also. *The genre film places us all in danger*. The genre film, then, has phenomenal, phenomenological, and bio-political potential as a site of cognitive, ideological, and carnal endangerment.

When it comes to science fiction film, endangerment is nearly always connected to and imbricated with an 'end of days' portentousness, thickening the crisis as a consequence. As Ziauddin Sardar argues,

> Science fiction in all its guises has never shed the essential characteristic of an air of menace. In some senses the essence of the science and the futures such fiction imagines is pervasive, potential doom. Science fiction, from the outset, has been the narrative of doomsday scenarios.
>
> (Sardar and Cubitt 2002, 2)

Wherever and whenever the threat emerges, the future of all civilization is put at stake. However, the stakes are doubly loaded in science fiction film: Armageddon is always about the extinction of particular lives, those whom we have come to know, over the duration of the film, as well as the billions of lives in the wider diegesis, whose screams we never quite hear. The America-centric focus of the genre often means it is American lives we get to identify with while the rest of the world looks on.

Endangerment is also calibrated metaphorically in science fiction film since these are texts not about the future but about the present that is being lived in the 'real' world. The end of days scenario actually endangers the present since it is the *now* of the film that is under threat, and *our now* which causes or leads to the catastrophe of the future being enacted. As H.L. Gold writes,

> Few things reveal so sharply as science fiction the wishes, hopes, fears, inner stresses and tensions of an era, or define its limitations with such exactness.
>
> (quoted in Amis 1961, 64)

In *Edge of Tomorrow* (Liman, 2014), an alien race has nearly vanquished Earth's armies and its weaponry. In a last ditch effort to defeat the aliens, an all-out assault is planned. However, the aliens lie in wait, and Earth's last armies are heavily defeated, leaving the aliens to conquer and destroy the planet. Well, not quite: the initially cowardly Major William Cage (Tom Cruise) is killed in this battle but finds himself in a time loop where he gets to *live die repeat* until the enemy is finally defeated. *Edge of Tomorrow* draws upon the double jeopardy model: it is through Cage, as a messianic hero, that the film imagines its burning fires and diabolic scenarios, and through him that the world can be rescued. The film's liberalism, its neoliberal individualism speaks to the concerns of the liquid modern age, and yet imagines the eradication of danger through the (American) empowered self.

Endangering science fiction film operates along a number of critical conjunctions and positions, a fact that we argue further imbues it with import and power. First, science fiction film often imagines and establishes the existence of *Other Worlds* that can and do challenge, unsettle, and undermine the known logic of the human world. In these Otherworld kingdoms, ethics, morality, physics, environment, and social and cultural organization can be radically alternate. The planets visited on *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014) recalibrate time and the way the seasons function; and the lifeworld of *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) reconnects its people to nature and the spiritual and mystical. Both are examples of Othering environments that create the sense of alienation and of experiencing other possible ways of being, and of being-in-time. Science fiction film has the power to threaten the established order of things and open up gaps in the way the viewer conceptualizes the contemporary world and their nomadic wanderings within it.

Second, and related, in these endangering zones, science fiction film can annihilate linear time, and simultaneously create the liminal conditions for sublime encounters. Through its special effects, and scenes of spectacle, often mobilized through time contraction and expansion, science fiction film creates the conditions for affecting contemplation: viewers feel overwhelmed by what they are watching, untethered from both the world they are viewing and the world they are seeing from.

In particular, the special visual effects of the science fiction blockbuster wrap up time and space in pockets of liquid light that zoom across and through the lens. The impressive, often repeated shot of a spaceship accelerating into/through warp speed is the epitome of these delirious affects. Vivian Sobchack suggests that contemporary special effects 'symbolize the "irrational warmth of intense (and usually positive) emotions"' (1987, 282), imagining speed and liquidity as sensorial transmission actants. The 'liquid' qualities of a great deal of contemporary special effects—starting with *Terminator 2* (Cameron, 1991)—suggest the transmutability of existence and the terror that it produces. Similarly, post-production visual effects (such as universal capture) create the impression of reality being dissolved in breathtaking moments of electrified speed, but also of liquid trace—of something watery always being left on or of the image. For example, the use of bullet-time in *The Matrix* is

> the result of 120 cameras taking a cascade of shots of the organized scene along a 360 degree arc. The effect is a slight freezing of time as the character delivers a kick or dodges bullets in full panoramic turn.
>
> (Keane 2007, 122)

For Keane, 'the time freeze aspect of bullet-time works in simultaneously increasing the "wow factor" and allowing more prolonged observation' (2007, 123).

Third, science fiction film can destabilize the ontological integrity of the body, critically redrawing the lines of what it is to be human, and how identities such as race, class, and gender are performed and embodied. The figure of both the cyborg and the alien establish that the body and the flesh can be reimagined, rematerialized, and reconstituted. Further, it suggests that the body can be both undone and over-taken, controlled by forces outside of its agency and control. This deconstruction and reconstruction of the body is thus endangering in two opposite ways: it creates the conditions for new forms of identity to emerge; and it prophesizes the loss of freedoms in a new age of virtual and bionic augmentation. Katherine Hayles addresses these polar possibilities when she writes,

> If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival
>
> (1999, 5)

In *Tetsuo: Body Hammer* (Tsukamoto, 1982), we witness this deconstruction and reconstruction of the human body in an orgy of twisted metal, open flesh, sexual violence, and abjection. The body becomes a monstrous fusion, a confusion of liberating tendencies and corrupting desires and taboos. It is both posthuman dream and nightmare, and maybe, as a consequence, even more culturally endangering as a consequence.

Finally, and in relation, science fiction film explicitly explores dangerous and taboo ideas, engages in political critique, and opens up affecting psychic ruptures as a consequence. On the one hand, it challenges scientific-rationalist thought and neoliberal dreaming. Science fiction films that endanger beliefs and complacency through clearly pursuing political critique can range from the quietly polemical to those pursuing more strident political allegories. In the former category we find John Sayles' *Brother from Another Planet* (1984), in which an alien who closely resembles a contemporary African-American, escaping from a planet wherein he is a slave, crash lands in Harlem and is pursued by two alien Men In Black, who happen to be white. In the latter category we may immediately think of Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) and his later *Elysium* (2013). Looking back farther, we recognize Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green* (1973) and François Truffaut's adaptation of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) as quintessential political allegories.

On the other hand, the endangering power of science fiction film lays in its ability to be a mouthpiece for dominant ideology and for the processes, regulations, and practices of late, liquid capitalism. Western civilization is its creation myth, and it fetishizes the white masculine individual who colonizes space. Richard Dyer observes in relation to *Blade Runner* (1982) that,

> The whitest of hue are the replicants, especially the two most formidable in resisting Deckard, Roy (Rutger Hauer) and Pris (Daryl Hannah) who both have pale faces and bleached blonde hair. The casting of Hauer, unmistakably Teutonic, and thus at the top of the Caucasian tree, is especially suggestive.
>
> (Dyer 1997, 214)

As a genre, science fiction film is very often a commodity intertext, the epitome of mega-corporate and corporatized spectacle, and is in consort with the military, government, and big business nexus. Very often, in fact, science fiction film is a form of militainment, fetishizing war and weaponry in scenarios where military might is both successful and necessary.

When we write of endangering science fiction film, then, we do so with these oppositional if dialogical positions in play. The danger of science fiction film is to be both celebrated and challenged. This is one of the key narrative threads of this edited book—to critically understand and explore how science fiction film engages with, produces, and is a product of endangerment. To this end, *Endangering Science Fiction Film* has included those voices that recognize the power that science fiction has to threaten the established order of things, and to open up critical spaces for the viewer to make new sense of everyday life and the ideological flows that operate there.

For the viewer of science fiction cinema, such an opening up of a critical intelligence is vital. After all, this is what the genre continually is asking us to do, what it was *designed* to do. This is the search for 'cognitive value,' as Darko Suvin (2014) would have it. Yet to a certain extent the viewer of science fiction film has a difficult job, more difficult, in many respects, than the viewer of other types of genre cinema. The strategies of endangerment that science fiction films pursue have to be disentangled from the codes and conventions that have accrued to the genre, and when this is accomplished, a very particular kind of spectator, with particular skills, is produced by science fiction cinema. As Damien Broderick concisely observes,

> Science fiction is written in a kind of code, a difficult vernacular learned through an apprenticeship. Its decoding depends importantly on access to a megatext—the huge body of established moves or reading protocols that the reader learns through immersion in many hundreds of sf

short stories and novels (and, with significantly less sophistication, from movies, television episodes, and games). The sf megatext comprises a virtual encyclopedia and specialized dictionary. For a story to be effective sf, it is insufficient that it invokes futuristic or extraterrestrial locales in ignorance of those narrative constraints or opportunities that already exist. These are embodied in science fiction's century and more of imagined worlds and their inhabitants, created via specific rhetorical moves, tools and lexicons.

(1995, xiii)

Perhaps counterintuitively (and certainly so if we take into account the rather small clique with which science fiction fandom was formerly identified), the rhetorical moves, tools, and lexicon of science fiction have become all but ubiquitous within media of the early 21st century: witness Homer Simpson (of *The Simpsons* television show) lying on a stretcher and crying out, 'Soylent Green is people!' or Santa's Little Helper strapped to a chair, his eyelids held back by metal clamps, being forced to watch projected scenes of violence and atomic destruction. The danger here lies in endless reproduction where the 'aura' of the original vanishes in a choppy sea of emptying allusions.

Without doubt the greater number of chapters in this book are devoted to films that have been produced in and by the Hollywood production system. In this the films examined reflect the best and the worst aspects of Hollywood's transglobal reach. For a long time Hollywood studio heads, writers, and directors regarded science fiction stories and ideas as pulp era artifacts, cheap and occasionally very nasty, and certainly hovering far beneath the critical horizon with which most literate film critics normally concerned themselves. Only occasionally did science fiction films warrant any degree of critical regard. Certainly *Destination Moon* (Pichel, 1950), the screenplay of which was co-written by the acknowledged science fiction master Robert A. Heinlein, after his own story, and *Forbidden Planet* (Wilcox, 1956), an imaginative re-envisioning of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, received begrudgingly favorable reviews, but on the whole the genre was as much despised as its small coterie of devotees.

The problem of the critical status of science fiction film is arguably exacerbated by the fact that, as Nicholls and Lowe (2014) note, 'Few influential sf filmmakers are literate in contemporary sf; at best, they draw groundwater from their adolescent reading a generation behind the calendar date.' Not that long ago, one of the editors of this volume was told by a key production figure associated with the 1990 version of *Total Recall* (Verhoeven, 1990) that the director who was originally employed to direct the film before Verhoeven took on the role opined that P.K. Dick was 'a terrible writer'—and this after only having read the short

story upon which the screenplay was based. This would not be an unusual occurrence in Hollywood.

Yet there was something within the imaginative possibilities offered by the genre that even the greatest snob among Hollywood studio heads could never sensibly deny: the occasion for wonder.

> The ability of sf cinema to evoke wonders, for which it is often criticized as being a modern equivalent of a carnival freak show, is also its strength. Wonders themselves may pall, or be dismissed as childish, but nevertheless they are at the heart of sf; sf, no matter how sophisticated, by definition must feature something new . . . Film, from this viewpoint, is sf's ideal medium.
>
> (Nicholls and Lowe 2014)

Despite the necessary reduction in narrative complexity that much of science fiction cinema exhibits in comparison to its literary sister, the possibilities for visual and aural wonderment seem almost limitless. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, the rise of CGI special effects and the virtual establishment of the contemporary digital cinema ensure that the difference between the pro-filmic event as staged in a real space with real actors and the post-production insertion of digital effects, both visual and aural, has to all intents and purposes been erased. The cognitive gap whereby the viewer used to be able to distinguish between 'reality' and clumsy 'special effect' has disappeared. This disappearance ensures that the ideological dangers inherent in the form have necessarily become more acute while at the same time the aesthetic potentialities of the medium far outrun its genre rivals.

Despite the differences in critical opinion as exhibited within this volume, there is one thing of which we can all be sure: science fiction films are becoming ever more dangerous.

The book has been divided into four thematic sections, each focusing on a particular facet of endangerment. Section One serves as both a critical and a philosophical introduction to the way endangerment can be defined and analyzed, and as an exploration of the way danger works its way into seminal science fiction films. Authors draw upon a number of philosophical positions to explore this idea of futuristic danger.

Section Two focuses on the issue of radical aesthetics and engages in both close textual analysis and contextual framing. Authors consider the role of the senses, memory, narrative, and spectacle in terms of the way science fiction films offer viewers dangerous encounters and liminal experiences.

Section Three explores the complex and diverse ways in which science fiction film endangers time and space. Through processes of contraction