



Routledge Film Guidebooks

SCIENCE FICTION

Mark Bould

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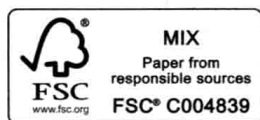
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SCIENCE FICTION

Science Fiction explores the genre from 1895 to the present day, drawing on examples from over forty countries. It raises questions about the relationship between science fiction, science and technology, and examines the interrelationships between spectacle, narrative and self-reflexivity, paying particular attention to the role of special effects in creating meaning and affect. It explores science fiction's evocations of the sublime, the grotesque, and the camp, and charts the ways in which the genre reproduces and articulates discourses of colonialism, imperialism and neo-liberal globalization. At the same time, *Science Fiction* provides a thorough analysis of the genre's representation of race, class, gender and sexuality, making this text an essential guide for students, academics and film fans alike.

Key films discussed include:

- *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902)
- *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1916)
- *L'Atlantide* (1921)
- *King Kong* (1933, 2005)
- *Gojira* (1954)
- *La Jetée* (1962)
- *The Abominable Dr Phibes* (1971)
- *Tetsuo* (1989)
- *Sleep Dealer* (2008)
- *Avatar* (2009)

Mark Bould is Reader in Film and Literature at the University of the West of England and co-editor of *Science Fiction Film and Television*. He is co-author of *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*, author of *The Cinema of John Sayles* and *Film Noir*, and co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, *Fifty Key Figures in Science Fiction*, *Red Planets*, *Neo-noir* and *Parietal Games*.

Routledge Film Guidebooks

The Routledge Film Guidebooks offer a clear introduction to and overview of the work of key filmmakers, movements or genres. Each guidebook contains an introduction, including a brief history; defining characteristics and major films; a chronology; key debates surrounding the filmmaker, movement or genre; and pivotal scenes, focusing on narrative structure, camera work and production quality.

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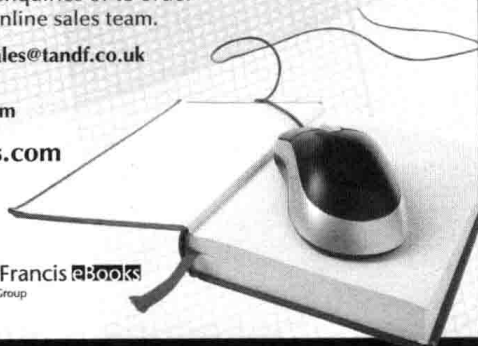
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INTRODUCTION

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau compares the urban planner's rational model of the city with the sprawling, chaotic reality of urban life. The former is an idealised virtual construct, free from the stubborn materiality of history, people and places, viewed from above as if by a transcendent, disembodied deity. The latter consists of unstable, constantly becoming entanglements of pathways 'below the thresholds [of] visibility', like 'intertwining, unrecognized poems' (93). Many discussions of genre and of specific genres display the planner-deity's desire for a neatly ordered totality, clamouring for – and often producing – definitions and origin points, inclusions and exclusions, borders and limits. Such discussions, and the discrepancies, anomalies and exceptions they inevitably throw up, reveal several contradictions. Genres are heterogeneous, but grouping diverse films under a single rubric tends to homogenise them, to emphasise similarities to such an extent that differences are not only marginalised but often made invisible. Genres are discursive phenomena, constantly defined and redefined by a host of different voices, with different degrees of influence, for many different reasons, but genres are frequently regarded as clearly defined objects, as boxes into which individual texts can be smoothly slotted. Genres are produced by the complexly determined, socially situated positions from

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which they are viewed, but are often treated as if they are pre-existing phenomena with fixed, essential forms.¹

Consequently, this book does not define or delineate science fiction (sf). Indeed, it rejects the 'god-trick' involved in claiming an objective position from which to impose order, offering instead a 'situated knowledge' that is conscious of at least some of its partialities and limitations (see Haraway 1991b). While engaging with the Film Studies sf canon, it embraces more than a century's worth of sf production worldwide. It refers to films from more than 40 countries, from 1895–2011, including shorts, animations, blockbusters and B-movies, and independent, art-house, avant-garde, cult, trash, sexploitation and pornographic sf films. The danger in such an encyclopaedic approach is losing sight of specificities and reducing films to examples of a homogenous genre. To avoid this, in addition to trying to remain sensitive to cultural contexts, this book eschews definitions and generalisations. Whenever it refers to 'sf', it envisions the genre not as a sleek Monolith, pristine, transcendent and unassailable, but as a shape-shifting Thing, constantly becoming and without fixed form. Furthermore, the clusters of titles interspersed throughout the chapters are concerned with variety, not repetition – they are invitations to dive deeper into the genre's heterogeneous possibilities.

This book is divided into three chapters, each one a street-level tour through the sf city, viewing the familiar sights and pausing at the tourist traps but also taking roads less well travelled and nipping up obscure alleyways. Chapter 1 addresses the often misunderstood relationship between sf and science. Instead of fruitlessly berating the genre for its scientific errors, it begins by examining the ways in which scientific-sounding language and technological artefacts are deployed in sf films, and the ways in which 'bad' science nonetheless creates meanings and affects. Drawing on material from science studies, it then considers the representation of the scientist in relation to public and professional discourses about the proper (and the actual) functioning of science. It explores the dilemmas posed for scientific practitioners by economic, industrial, political, cultural and social contexts, and finds in the mad scientist a figure representative of modern subjectivity. In closing, it

turns to the position of women in sf's labs, who are far less likely to be scientists than experimental subjects.

Chapter 2 begins with the tension between sf's spectacular and conceptual elements. It considers the relationship between sf and the cinema of attractions that emerged as part of capitalist modernity, dominated by the shock of the new and a proliferation of spectacular commodity forms. Building on theoretical material from 'the affective turn' in cultural studies, it rethinks cinematic spectacle as more than just a mind-numbing, overwhelming force, focusing in particular on the complexity of special effects sequences. It then considers three varieties of sf spectacle: the sublime, the grotesque and the camp. In conclusion, it examines sf's self-reflexive use of special effects and depictions of technologies of vision and representation.

Chapter 3 is more overtly concerned with the politics of sf. It begins with the colonialist and imperialist discourses prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when both cinema and sf emerged. It outlines sf films' reproduction of and complicity in colonialist and imperialist ideology, paying particular attention to the late silent and early sound period, but also finding numerous recent examples. It explores the post-imperial melancholy typical of British sf after anti-colonial revolutions tore European empires apart, and considers Vietnam-era US sf as a tentative, contradictory articulation of countercultural anti-imperialist sentiments, particularly as the genre attempts to address US racial politics. The chapter – and the book – concludes with a discussion of the ways in which Western hegemony has been maintained through globalisation, focusing on contemporary sf's figuration of neo-liberal capitalism and its transformations of the experience of time and space.

These three chapters, if not exactly the kinds of poems de Certeau describes, offer three journeys through global sf. They do not aspire to the omniscience of a planner deity, and are far from exhaustive. Hopefully, they provide some new ways to think about sf and suggest new possibilities to explore.

Writing a book is gnarly, recursive, surprising and, although it seems to happen in solitude, profoundly social. The University of the West of

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England funded some teaching remission in 2010–11, which freed up some time to write this book, but it was only ever feasible because of the generosity of friends and colleagues there, and the patience, sympathy and support of Aileen Storry and Eileen Srebernik at Routledge. I owe more than I can adequately express to the following for help, advice, guidance, tolerance, reading lists, obscure DVDs, meals and drinks, for answering idiotic questions (as well as hard ones), for sitting through films that they sometimes (and sometimes very clearly) found less interesting than I did, and for supporting my students during the 2010 occupation: Susan Alexander, Mark Barton, Pete Broks, Andrew M. Butler, Andy Channelle, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Mike Davis, Neil Easterbrook, Pawel Frelik (Soviet bloc and queer sf pimp *extraordinaire*), Carl Freedman, Ximena Gallardo C., Kathrina Glitre, Mike Hodges, Rehan Hyder, Gwyneth Jones, Jessica Langer, Rob Latham, Roger Luckhurst, China Miéville (*architeuthis cadre*), Aris Mousoutzanis, Kim Newman, Humberto Perez-Blanco, Kim Stanley Robinson, Steve Rosevear, Lee Salter, Steven Shaviro, C. Jason Smith, Vivian Sobchack, Jesse Soodalter, Greg Tuck, Sherryl Vint (science studies *sensei*), Peter Wright and my local UCU branch. But I'm sorry, Billy, this one's for the hardCore24, especially Steve Presence, Anthony Killick, Paddy Besiris and Matt Hollinshead. Throughout a very difficult year, they inspired even more than they distracted. This book, this year, would not have been possible without them. Love and respect.

1

THE SCIENCE IN SCIENCE FICTION

In February 2010, newspapers carried a pronouncement by Professor Sidney Perkowitz – a member of the US National Academy of Science’s programme to provide ‘entertainment industry professionals with access to top scientists and engineers to create a synergy between accurate science and engaging storylines’¹ – that sf films ‘should be allowed only one major transgression of the laws of physics’ (Sample online). Six weeks later, another physics professor, David Goldberg, posted an open letter to the writers and director of *Hot Tub Time Machine* (2010), complaining that the film was full of scientific errors and unresolved paradoxes. BootHillBossanova immediately responded: ‘No shit. That’s why physicists don’t write movies. I bet you were a joy to sit next to in the theater’. Unfortunately, he had not actually read Goldberg’s spoof letter, which praises the film for understanding ‘that time travel may only be undertaken while in the nude’, as in *The Terminator* (1984), but criticises the sequence in which Jacob (Clark Duke), cast back in time to the night of his conception, ‘interrupts his parents mid-coitus’ and thus ‘temporarily disappears from existence’. As Goldberg explains, ‘Mathematical models demonstrate ... conclusively that he would fade from existence a bit at a time, starting with images in photographs’, as in *Back to the Future* (1985).

Such incidents, organisations and outbursts reveal the extent to which different people and communities have different investments in sf, many of which are articulated around the genre's relationship to science. For some, science is more or less irrelevant, but for others this relationship is profoundly debased, in need of discipline and repair (see Landon: 3–58). However, because there is no necessary, fixed or consensus relationship between sf and science, and because the science in sf can only ever be 'figurative', 'an image of science' (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr 2008: 111),² attempts to police the genre in terms of scientific accuracy rather miss the point. This chapter will consider the representation and uses of science and scientists in sf. Drawing on material from science studies, it will argue that filmic scientists, caught between multiple and often irreconcilable ideological and material interpellations, exemplify the condition of the modern subject under capital. It will conclude by examining sf's tendency to depict women in the lab not as scientists but as experimental subjects.

THE SOUND (AND LOOK) OF SCIENCE

Mark C. Glassy contends that criticism of sf films must consider two factors specific to the genre: 'the verisimilitude or accuracy of the science (otherwise they would not be "science" fiction) and the success of the special effects', with 'the former generally tak[ing] a back seat to the latter' (2). This problematic position – why privilege the accuracy rather than the fictionality of the science in science fiction? What does it mean for special effects to be successful? Are special effects really that central to the genre? – has many precursors. For example, H.G. Wells's review of *Metropolis* (1927) berates the film for ignoring 'the question of [the] development of industrial control [and] the relation of [the] industrial to [the] political' in favour of 'furlong after furlong' of spectacular but 'ignorant old-fashioned balderdash' (2004: 12). Forty years later Susan Sontag likewise observed that sf 'movies are ... weak ... where science fiction novels ... are strong – on science', providing 'sensuous elaboration' rather than 'an

intellectual workout' (1994a: 212). Carl Freedman offers the most rigorous statement of this opposition between the conceptual and the spectacular. He understands sf cinema in terms of the dominance of special effects and sf literature in terms of 'cognitive estrangement' – that is, the depiction of rational, material but counterfactual worlds that prompt readers to see their own world anew and re-engage with it critically and politically (see Suvin).

Freedman describes special effects as 'filmic moments of a radically filmic character' that marshal the full resources of cinema and 'self-consciously foreground their own radicality' (1998: 305, 307). In sf, 'special effects are deliberate triumphs of cinematic technology' that 'enact, on one level, the technological marvels that the typical science-fiction film thematizes on a different level' (307). However, because the cinematic experience reduces the viewer 'to a passive, atomized spectator in a darkened room', 'forced to consume the proffered aesthetic experience strictly according to the temporality determined by the filmmaker', the 'tendency' of special effects 'to overwhelm the viewer' intensifies 'the authoritarian aspect of film' (306) by minimising the 'breathing room in which anything like a cognitive response might be formulated' (311). The sole exception Freedman recognises is *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which finds a specific solution to 'the all but hopeless contradiction between' critical cognition and authoritarian spectacle (315). Faced with films that are 'less radically cinematic (as with Ridley Scott) or less authentically science-fictional (as with Spielberg or Lucas)', he concludes that sf film 'may well be intrinsically impossible' (315).

There are numerous problems with Freedman's argument. It not only ignores sf's long history across media forms so as to privilege literature but also relies on Darko Suvin's definition of the genre, which is so prescriptive as to exclude most of what is actually published as sf.³ It also conflates such abstract notions as 'the purely cinematic' with a single mode of film production (big-budget Hollywood spectacle) and 'the authentically science-fictional' with a narrow range of exemplary (rather than typical) novels. The Marxist and film theory traditions upon which Freedman draws are profoundly anxious about affect and

embodiment, and tend to focus on the apparatuses of (economic, political, social or cinematic) power at the expense of individual and collective subjects positioned by and responding to them; but even with *Avatar* (2009), a film in which spectacle massively outweighs any cognitive–conceptual elements, viewers might as easily be moved, inspired or bored, have their thoughts provoked or their sensibilities offended, as be overwhelmed.

Freedman elsewhere points to the ways in which science tends to operate in sf, arguing that what is ‘at stake’ is not cognition itself but ‘the cognition effect’ (2000: 18), produced by the rhetorical move that ‘tricks’ one ‘into an unwary concession to some plausible assumption’ so as to ‘domesticate the impossible hypothesis’ (Wells 1980: 241). This effect is not generated by scientific accuracy so much as by the ‘appearance of command over the language of science’ (Jones: 16). For example, in *The Thing from Another World* (1951), Captain Hendry (Kenneth Tobey) is sent to investigate a mysterious crash landing 48 miles east of an arctic research station. Briefing him, Dr Carrington (Robert Cornthwaite) instructs Nikki (Margaret Sheridan) to read out his notes detailing how the object’s impact was picked up by sound and seismographic readings. When Hendry asks how they ‘determine[d] the point of impact’ in relation to the base, Carrington replies, ‘By computation’, and turns away to talk with someone else over the intercom. This diffident response, typical of Carrington’s self-absorption, is so perfunctory as to highlight both the generic expectation and frequent redundancy of expository dialogue. Indeed, when the friendlier Dr Stern (Eduard Franz) tries to give a fuller explanation, he quickly switches from explication to assertion: ‘It’s quite simple, captain. We have the time of arrival of the sound waves on the detectors and also the arrival time of the impact waves on the seismograph. By computing the difference it becomes quite obvious that they were caused by a travelling object, and the distance from here is approximately forty-eight miles’. Offering no real new information, Stern’s words – like the surrounding laboratory equipment – nonetheless lend the scene generic verisimilitude, just as the way in which they are partially overlapped by Carrington’s background

conversation offer the generic setting a more general verisimilitude. Stern's dialogue also indicates the extent to which sf's evocations of science express and address different kinds of interest and degrees of knowledge on the behalf of filmmakers and audiences. It partially explains the possibility of measuring the distance to the crashed saucer from the different speeds at which the shockwave travelled through air and ground but, having implied the scientifically derived certainty of this information, abandons exposition in order to reiterate Hendry's next goal.

There is a similar moment in *The Thing* (1982) when Childs (Keith David) asks whether Dr Blair (Wilford Brimley) believes that the Antarctic base is being attacked by a shapeshifting alien. The film cuts to Blair running a computer simulation that models an 'intruder' cell approaching and assimilating a dog cell, and the resulting 'imitation' cell assimilating another dog cell just as quickly, implying a geometric progression. The computer simulation, by making visible the invisible, pseudo-authenticates the biological process by which the alien takes over life-forms, while the ticking of Blair's pocket watch, audible beneath the haunting score, emphasises the relentlessness of these simulated events. The simulation is replaced on the computer screen with the following text: 'PROBABILITY THAT ONE OR MORE TEAM MEMBERS MAY BE INFECTED BY INTRUDER ORGANISM: 75%' and 'PROJECTION: IF INTRUDER ORGANISM REACHES CIVILIZED AREAS ... ENTIRE WORLD POPULATION INFECTED 27,000 HOURS FROM FIRST CONTACT'. By demonstrating a more-than-human mathematical ability – made to seem all the more rational and precise by measuring time in hours rather than more immediately comprehensible units – the computer pseudo-authenticates the pace of global infection.

Sf films often use scientific-sounding language to communicate things other than, or more than, scientific information. For example, in *Flash Gordon* (1936), Dr Zarkov (Frank Shannon), forced to serve Emperor Ming (Charles Middleton), informs his new sovereign, 'I've discovered a new ray which will be of great help in furthering your plans. ... The ray is a variation of the one you've been using but being of a higher