100

Science Fiction Films

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BFI Screen Guides

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Introduction

Once upon a time, sometimes seeming as if in a galaxy far away, the science fiction film was a marginal rather than mainstream genre. Indeed, while the term 'Science-Fiction' was used as early as 1851,[1] it didn't enter common usage as a generic category until the 1930s, when editor Hugo Gernsback used it to describe the type of fiction that he was publishing in his pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Wonder Stories*. Then, with the end of World War II, seemingly all at once came the Atomic Age, the Cold War, waves of UFO sightings, accelerated social and technological change – and in the cinema, the science fiction genre burgeoned. Postwar anxieties translated well into science fiction's hypotheses, as films such as *The Thing from Another World*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Invaders from Mars*, *The War of the Worlds*, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, *Gojira* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, all discussed in this book, clearly attest. The 1950s provided, to borrow a phrase from H.G. Wells, a glimpse of things to come, for just two decades later, science fiction blockbusters such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Star Wars*, *Superman*, and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, also discussed in these pages, dramatically changed Hollywood.

Where Westerns once rode tall in the saddle across the movie landscape, now it is the speculative genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy that dominate popular cinema. Once the mainstay of Hollywood studio production, the Western declined dramatically after the revisionist and parody Westerns of the 1970s precipitated by changing social values. During the studio era, film series, which depend on the repetition of box-office success to continue, were about singing cowboys and talking mules, Oriental detectives and crusading doctors, Tarzan and the Bowery Boys; but apart from *Harry Potter*, the supernatural teens of *Twilight* and the seemingly unstoppable James Bond films, the big franchises of recent years have included the *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Alien* films, all science fiction. In his introduction to the volume on the Western in the *Screen Guides* series, Edward Buscombe has noted that 'For many decades the Western occupied a central position within the American film industry. From around 1910 until the beginning of the 1960s, films in the Western genre made up at least a fifth of all titles released'.[2] Yet the inversely changing fortunes of the Western and science fiction genres is no coincidence, for the more technological society becomes, the more science fiction cinema seems central to our collective experience.

Indeed, many science fiction movies are like Westerns, with space becoming, in the famous words of *Star Trek*'s opening voice-over, the 'final frontier'. James Cameron's hugely successful *Avatar* is just one example, albeit perhaps the best known. *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980) is a remake of *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), itself a remake of Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* (1954), while *Outland* (1981) is a version of *High Noon* (1952) set on a space mining station instead of a frontier town. In the vast wilderness of space, heroes and villains wield stun guns instead of six guns, space cowboys fly customised rockets instead of riding horses, and, as movies like *Enemy Mine* (1985), a remake of the pro-civil rights Western *Broken Arrow* (1950),

show, aliens easily serve as the swarthy Other in the place of Indians. In *Star Wars*, George Lucas designed the scene where Luke Skywalker finds his aunt and uncle killed and their homestead destroyed by storm troopers as an homage to the scene in John Ford's classic Western *The Searchers* (1956) in which Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) discovers the charred and defiled bodies of his brother's family after an Indian attack.

While the conventional appearance of the cavalry to save the day in, say, Ford's 1939 *Stagecoach* seems dated to many contemporary viewers, essentially the same convention has enthralled contemporary spectators watching Han Solo come back for the final showdown with the Death Star in *Star Wars*. In other words, some of the ideological myths that inform the Western carry on within a different genre, one with a technological iconography rather than a pastoral one, because it is more related to our daily experience. Originally Westerns developed just as the American frontier was disappearing; now, because we are more likely to be familiar with computers than horses, and more likely to visit the new frontier of cyberspace than what remains of the wilderness, the classic Western has been largely replaced by the science fiction film.

In retrospect, perhaps the ascendance to dominance of science fiction as a film genre was inevitable. For Christian Metz, the chronological development in early film history from the Lumière brothers, who held the first public film screening in 1895, to Georges Méliès (director of the earliest film discussed herein, *Le Voyage dans la lune*, from 1902) marks an evolution of 'cinematography to cinema' – that is, from a conception of film as a recording tool to an artistic medium.[3] But it is perhaps more accurate to say that cinema is simultaneously Lumière and Méliès – that is, science and fiction – for the film image is at once a concrete, scientific record of things in the real world (the Lumières' 'actualities') and a selected account of that world (Méliès's 'artificially arranged scenes'). Further, the motion picture camera, that unblinking machine, always open to showing that which is placed before it, suggests that the cinema is an ideal medium for conveying the 'sense of wonder' that science fiction critics have argued is central to the genre. Damon Knight defines this sense of wonder as 'some widening of the mind's horizons, no matter in what direction', an apt description of what Siegfried Kracauer has called the camera's 'affinities' with the real world.[4] It is also, accordingly, a phrase that turns up on several occasions in this book.

As a medium, cinema displays three such affinities that are also central to the genre of science fiction: space, time, and the machine. In cinema, narration proceeds by manipulating time and space, elongating and condensing them. Indeed, the techniques for achieving spatial and temporal distortions for dramatic and expressive purposes constitute the foundation of classic narrative cinema (although such manipulations are central to documentary and experimental cinema as well). The camera, the recording apparatus itself, seems capable of moving through both dimensions at once. Terry Ramsaye has noted how much the cinema resembles the description of travelling through time in H.G. Wells's first novel, *The Time Machine*.[5] Significantly, Wells's book was published in 1895, the same year in which film history is conventionally said to have begun with the Lumières' first screening. (After Wells's book was published, inventor Robert William Paul applied for a patent for a machine that would provide simulated voyages through time as described in Wells's novel. The machine was never built, and it would be decades before anyone truly understood that cinema was itself a time machine.)

The machinery of cinema, like the Constructors in Stanislaw Lem's novel *The Cyberiad* (1967), is capable of imagining and 'building' (through special effects) other machines infinitely more sophisticated

than itself. Thus science fiction film has relied heavily on special effects (a tendency itself symptomatic of the genre's concern with technology), and explains the attention given to them in this book in the discussion of films from *Le Voyage dans la lune* to *Avatar*. It is therefore understandable that for many viewers the value of (that is to say, the pleasure derived from) science fiction movies is determined by the quality (often synonymous with believability) of their special effects. To be sure, sometimes nothing destroys the pleasure of a science fiction movie for viewers more than seeing the 'seams' in a matte shot or glimpsing the zipper on an alien's bodysuit. Special effects are 'filmic moments of a *radically* filmic character',[6] seeking to depict the (as yet) unreal as realistically as possible – to engage 'our belief, not our suspension of disbelief', as Vivian Sobchack puts it.[7] We marvel at special effects images at once for their fantastic content and for the effort of their realisation. They announce the powers of cinema.

Special effects show us things that either do not exist in the real world or things which the camera cannot capture. In doing so, they mobilise what Darko Suvin has influentially called science fiction's 'cognitive estrangement', which for him is the genre's uniquely defining quality.[8] According to Suvin, with science fiction our attention is returned to reality because of its very distortion: that is to say, in order to appreciate the 'What if?' premises of science fiction tales, we must attend to, if not question, the physical, technological and possibly ideological givens of the real world. Numerous critics and scholars, following Suvin, have argued that the appeal of science fiction is for this reason primarily cognitive.

Yet at the same time, others have argued that in film the genre's primary appeal has been the kinetic excitement of action – that 'sensuous elaboration' which Susan Sontag famously describes as 'the aesthetics of destruction ... the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess'.[9] This pleasure is itself visualised in the 'bird's-eye view' shot in Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 (science fiction?) thriller *The Birds*, as the viewer is placed with the hovering birds looking down in seemingly satisfied contemplation of the avian apocalypse they have just wrought upon the town below. The conflation of the science fiction and action genres since the 1980s is proof of this aspect of science fiction's appeal, and at least one subgenre of the science fiction film, the apocalyptic film, is founded on the promise of scenes of mass destruction. In these films, from *When Worlds Collide* (1951) to *2012* (2009), we eagerly await the climactic scenes of mass destruction inevitably showing the collapse of the landmarks of western civilisation like the White House or London Bridge.

Of course, most science fiction movies offer the pleasures of both speculation and spectacle, and the best ones, including all one hundred discussed in this book, are, to use Jules Verne's phrase, *voyages extraordinaires* in one way or another. The range of science fiction films covered includes many of the most important examples of both aspects of the genre. They were also chosen to provide (allowing for the imbalance noted at the outset) a historical spread from the beginning of film history to the present. I have also endeavoured to include films representing the various types or subgenres of science fiction film – such as alien invasion, space opera, extrapolation, utopia and so on. And despite the overwhelming and inevitable dominance of Hollywood, I have sought to provide a wide geographical sampling, with films from Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, South Korea, South Africa, Germany, the Soviet Union and France among those discussed.

In order to be as inclusive as possible given the constraints of one hundred titles, I limited the number of films included by any one director to three (as with Steven Spielberg, John Carpenter and Paul Verhoeven).

Clearly directors such as Jack Arnold, Roger Corman, David Cronenberg, Byron Haskin and Stanley Kubrick are deserving of greater representation, and I particularly regret not being able to include discussions of such personal favourites as Arnold's *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), Corman's *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957) and *Not of This Earth* (1957), Haskin's *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964), Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), Carpenter's *Starman* (1984), Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999) and *Crash* (1996), as well as such other clearly worthy films as Saul Bass's *Phase IV* (1974), Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), Nicholas Meyer's *Time After Time* (1979), Robert Altman's *Quintet* (1979), Alex Cox's *Repo Man* (1984), Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) and Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* (1997), to name only a few. In most cases where science fiction films have been sufficiently popular to launch a series or sequels (*Alien, Back to the Future, Frankenstein, The Invisible Man, Jurassic Park, Mad Max, The Matrix, Planet of the Apes, RoboCop, Star Trek, Star Wars, Superman, The Terminator*), I have focused on the first film for being foundational.

Aelita (*Aelita: Queen of Mars*)
USSR, 1924 – 111 mins
Yakov Protazanov

One of the first Soviet movies, and the first feature film to depict space travel, *Aelita* was directed by Yakov Protazanov, one of the founding figures of Russian cinema. *Aelita* began a tradition of socialist space fiction from the Soviet Union and its satellites, with movies from *Cosmic Voyage* (1936) to *The Silent Star** (1960) to *In the Dust of the Stars* (1976) that embrace a Marxist worldview and critique the decadent West, while its imaginative design elements influenced the look of subsequent space operas including Fritz Lang's *Frau im Mond** (1929) and the *Flash Gordon** (1936) and *Buck Rogers* (1939) serials. However, *Aelita*'s significance comes not only from its science fiction elements – which are, ultimately, rather minimal, the rocket looking as though it was inspired by Jules Verne and the trip to Mars seeming to take no time at all – but also from how it contextualises those elements within its narrative of daily life in post-Revolutionary Russia.

The film's narrative shuttles between scenes in Moscow in 1921 and on Mars. Some of the former scenes, particularly the exteriors, have a documentary quality, while the Martian scenes are highly stylised. Los (Tseretelli), an engineer in Moscow, dreams of travelling to Mars. His marriage begins to break down, and his wife Natasha (Kuindzhi) finds herself beginning to succumb to the seductive blandishments of the opportunist Viktor Erlich (Pol'), a refugee who has been billeted in Los and Natasha's apartment. Meanwhile on Mars, Queen Aelita (Solntseva), who has been watching Earth through a powerful new telescope in the Radiant Tower of Energy, falls in love with him. Los is driven by jealousy to the point that, when he thinks that his wife has been unfaithful, he shoots Natasha. He then travels to Mars on a spaceship that has secretly been constructed, along with an aspiring detective, Kravtsov (Il'inskii) and Gusev (Batalov), a Bolshevik soldier, who quickly leads a proletarian revolution of slave workers against the ruling Elders. Aelita permits the revolution, on the assumption that the Elders will be overthrown and that she will assume power. Los kills Aelita, whom he imagines as his wife, to prevent her from realising her plan – and then wakes up, realises that his Martian adventure has been a dream or fantasy, and returns home to reconcile with Natasha. In almost Godardian fashion, the film suggests that the personal is also political.

On one level, the film seems obvious socialist propaganda, with the workers' revolution extending beyond Earth to elsewhere in the solar system. From this perspective, to become a good citizen, a comrade of the revolution, requires recognising and disowning fantasy for pragmatic action in the real world. Yet its implications are in fact more ambiguous. *Aelita* may be seen as a reminder of how the revolution may serve the interests of a few rather than the many – a possible comment about the Russian Provisional Government of 1917 or even about Lenin himself.

Moreover, the scenes of daily city life in the film – such as Natasha doing housework in the cramped apartment kitchen, the various peoples' committees doing their work, and especially the scene of the secret

party where the characters, with some food and drink as encouragement, wax nostalgic about the 'old days' – while presented with such loving detail, depict an existence of privation and hardship sufficiently difficult to drive Erlich to steal food rations, Los to imagine killing his wife, and Gusev, the restive proletarian revolutionary, to want to flee domestic life. In addition, the film's fantastic Martian sets, featuring deliriously Constructivist spaces with Escher-like stairways, and flamboyant costume designs, with astonishingly ornate headgear, plastic midriffs and umbrella slacks, offer a stark contrast to the drab realities of post-revolutionary Russian life in the terrestrial scenes and provide an imaginary excess that is itself an opposition to the growing sentiment toward Socialist Realism, which would become official state policy in 1932.

Alien
US/UK, 1979 – 117 mins
Ridley Scott

Essentially a haunted house story set in outer space – the promotional tagline for the film was 'In space no one can hear you scream' – *Alien* is, like such films as *Frankenstein** (1931) and *Videodrome** (1983), an especially effective combination of science fiction and horror elements, most notably because of the eponymous extraterrestrial, with its double set of jaws, designed by Swiss artist H.R. Giger. Directed by Ridley Scott (*Blade Runner** [1982]) and written by Dan O'Bannon (*Dark Star** [1974]), it generated three sequels – *Aliens* (1986, directed by James Cameron), *Alien*³ (1992, directed by David Fincher) and *Alien Resurrection* (1997, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet) – and two prequels, hybrids of two franchises – *Alien vs. Predator* (*AVP*, 2004) and *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007) – as well as a novelisation by Alan Dean Foster (who also novelised John Carpenter's *The Thing**, 1982), comic books, action figures and toys, video games and a board game. *Prometheus* (2012), also directed by Scott, was initially conceived as a prequel, but in the end also places the events of *Alien* in a much wider, but only minimally explained, cosmic narrative.

In the plot of *Alien*, a commercial mining vehicle with a crew of seven, the *Nostromo*, receives an emergency signal and travels toward a desolate planet to investigate. Exploring the planet's surface, they find an alien spaceship where an alien life form bursts from its eggshell and attaches itself to the face of one of the crew, Kane (Hurt). Following a debate about quarantine protocol, Kane is admitted to the ship. He awakens and initially seems unharmed, but shortly thereafter the alien, having sloughed off its initial body and burrowed within Kane's host body, bursts through his chest and escapes into the ship. The crew searches for the alien, whose acidic blood burns through metal, throughout the dank ship, a plot point inspired in part by the earlier *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* (Edward L. Kahn, 1958). One by one, the crew is killed by the alien, as in a slasher film, while science officer Ash (Holm) turns out to be a cyborg embedded with the crew and programmed to protect the unknown lifeform at their expense by the Company that runs the mining operations. In the climax, sole survivor Ripley (Weaver) battles the alien alone, programs the ship to self-destruct, and escapes in the shuttle only to find the alien in it. She manages to eject the alien from the craft, after which she enters a sleep pod for the journey home.

Alien established Sigourney Weaver as a star (she is also featured in *Galaxy Quest** [1999] and provides the voice of the computer in *WALL-E** [2008]), and her character Ripley became the connecting link between the films in the series. Ripley, like Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor in Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), was also the focus of debates about whether female action heroes are progressive representations of women or merely contain them within a masculine sensibility. The alien itself is ambiguously gendered, monstrous in part because it possesses both masculine and feminine qualities. As well as its concern with the representation of gender, *Alien* was also innovative for its depiction of space flight as blue-collar drudgery rather than noble scientific exploration with gleaming futuristic technology, a

DIRECTOR Ridley Scott
PRODUCER Gordon Carroll, David Giler, Walter Hill
SCREENPLAY Dan O'Bannon
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Derek Vanlint
EDITOR Terry Rawlings
MUSIC Jerry Goldsmith
PRODUCTION DESIGN Michael Seymour
MAIN CAST Sigourney Weaver, Tom Skerritt, Veronica Cartwright, Harry Dean Stanton, Ian Holm, John Hurt, Yaphet Kotto
PRODUCTION COMPANY Brandywine Productions, 20th Century Fox

visual representation that informs the film's critique of the capitalist exploitation of the working class crew, which is regarded as expendable.

In 2003, 20th Century Fox invited Scott to re-edit *Alien* for the DVD box set of the four films. Then, thinking it was too long, he recut it again, the resultant 'Director's Cut' eliminating about five minutes of original footage and adding approximately four minutes of deleted footage, making it about a minute shorter than the theatrical version. To complicate matters, the studio released the Director's Cut in cinemas that year. Scott claims not to consider one version more faithful to his 'vision' than another.

Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution
France, 1965 – 99 mins
Jean-Luc Godard

Even when working with genre conventions in his early films – the gangster film in *À bout de souffle* (1959), the musical in *Une femme est une femme* (1961), the war film in *Les Carabiniers* (1963) – Jean-Luc Godard had no interest in making conventional movies, and *Alphaville*, Godard's sole venture into science fiction (apart from the apocalypticism of *Weekend*, 1967) is no exception. While the narrative is formulaic, combining a series of conventions from several genres (science fiction, film noir, crime films), Godard's imagery is dense with references to history and cultural texts and often anti-illusionist. If Godard's *nouvelle vague* colleague, François Truffaut, failed to make a completely satisfying interpretation of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451** (1966) the following year, Godard succeeds in making a Brechtian science fiction film with social satire and critique.

Pulp-fiction secret agent Lemmy Caution (Constantine), a character originally created by British writer Peter Cheyney and which Constantine had already played in many films (he also reappears as Caution in Godard's later *Allemagne 90 neuf zéro* [*Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*, 1991]), travels to the dystopian, technocratic world of Alphaville – a night's drive through 'sidereal space' in his Ford Galaxy. He poses as a journalist from the 'Outlands' with a secret mission to neutralise the mastermind of Alphaville, Professor von Braun (Vernon), and destroy Alpha 60, the super-computer that controls the city and its people, imposing its logical orientation on all aspects of social organisation. Individualism has been all but eliminated in the logical world of Alphaville. Thus in Alphaville emotion is forbidden, and anyone who reveals emotional behaviour, such as weeping, is arrested and executed in public spectacles.

Von Braun's daughter, Natacha (Karina), is assigned as Caution's escort, and when Caution falls in love with her, his emotions introduce an element of the unpredictable into the equation, causing Alpha 60 to malfunction. Caution defeats the computer by providing poetic answers (several are quotations from the poetry of Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges) to its factual questions. Killing von Braun, he escapes with Natacha, who, as they are leaving the city, begins to rediscover words that have disappeared in Alphaville. The film concludes with the two driving away to the Outlands in Caution's Ford as Natacha haltingly learns to say the words '*Je vous aime*' ('I love you') – the same words that, beyond the grasp of totalitarian reason, are written on a furtive note which initiates Winston and Julia's forbidden relationship in *Nineteen Eighty-Four** (1984).

As is typical of Godard's early work, the story is merely a pretext for an investigation of a variety of artistic, philosophical and political issues, including the nature and function of art, the power of language and the relation of ideology and culture – issues that came increasingly to the fore as Godard's career grew more overtly political in the late 1960s. The film anticipates Godard's subsequent abandonment of narrative in favour of a more experimental approach, encouraging viewers to question how film images signify, thus positioning us in direct opposition to the citizens of Alphaville, who are outlawed from asking 'Why?' Because Alpha 60 is omnipresent and omniscient in Alphaville, the computer's voice periodically acts as a

DIRECTOR Jean-Luc Godard
PRODUCER André Michelin
SCREENPLAY Jean-Luc Godard
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Raoul Coutard
EDITOR Agnés Guillamot
MUSIC Paul Misraki
PRODUCTION DESIGN Pierre Guffroy (uncredited)
MAIN CAST Eddie Constantine, Anna Karina, Akim Tamiroff, Howard Vernon, Valérie Boisgel, Michel Delahaye, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean-André Fieschi, Christa Lang, Jean-Pierre Léaud
PRODUCTION COMPANY Athos Films
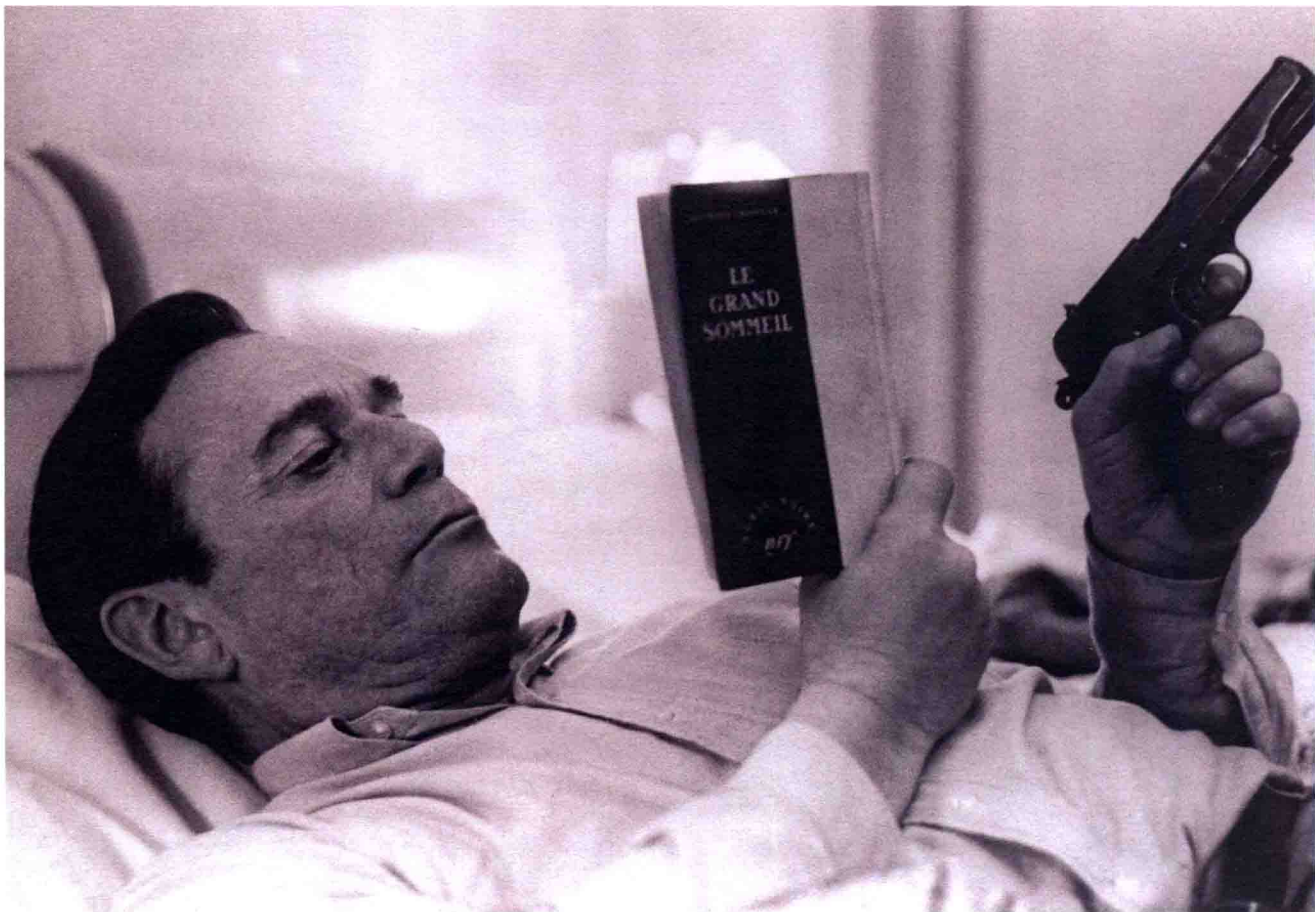
voice-of-God narrator. And despite the film's futuristic setting, Godard uses no special effects and no sets, but only actual locations in Paris, the city's modern (at the time) glass and concrete architecture convincingly signifying its dystopian vision. The seemingly endless corridors of office buildings through which Raoul Coutard's camera tracks indicates just how impersonal the world had already become.

Just as the brutally violent Lemmy Caution disturbs the rational regime of Alphaville (Godard had originally considered titling the film *Tarzan versus IBM*), so Godard disrupts the comfortable flow of classical narrative cinema. As Godard himself has remarked, he is interested not in the illusion of reality but in the reality of the illusion. In *Alphaville*, Godard, ironically, uses science fiction in an anti-illusionist way, anticipating Guillaume's clever argument in Godard's later *La Chinoise* (1967) that the Lumière brothers made fiction films and Georges Méliès (*Le Voyage dans la lune** [1902]) made documentaries.