



THE ROUGH GUIDE TO

sci-fi movies

JOHN SCALZI

Spaceships, Scientists, Solaris, Robots, Rodan, and Rockets to the Moon

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The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies is a comprehensive companion to the 'final frontier' of film. It explores cinema's fascination with space exploration, time travel and fantastical worlds, and tells the stories behind the movies that have been expanding our universe since film began.

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THE ROUGH GUIDE TO

Sci-Fi Movies

by
John Scalzi

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Introduction

Like most people of a certain age, I became enraptured with science fiction film one summer day in 1977 when, as an eight year old boy, I flopped myself down at the local movie theatre, saw the words “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...” fade onto the screen, and felt the blast of John Williams’ Wagnerian score to *Star Wars* blow me back into my seat. Then I saw the space ship – which I would soon learn was a Corellian blockade runner – followed by another space ship. A *much larger* space ship. A space ship which just wouldn’t stop scrolling across the screen. An Imperial cruiser.

Just imagine how I felt about the Death Star. Dazzled, I was, at *Star Wars*, and the new sort of movie it introduced my eight-year-old self to: The Science Fiction Film. Little did I know that what seemed so new, fresh and amazing to me was actually a summation of decades of previous work in the genre. *Star Wars* was built like a Flash Gordon movie serial from the 1930s, which in its time borrowed from the science fiction films of its own era (literally, in the case of some of its sets, borrowed liberally from more expensive films). It stole design notes from Fritz Lang’s 1927 classic *Metropolis*, whose look and feel would be mined by other science fiction films as well: *Blade Runner*, *Dark City* and *The Matrix*, each of which would be cannibalized by other science fiction films. Its sound and visual design was influenced by director George Lucas’s own earlier *THX-*

1138, a dystopian tale whose 1971 release coincided with a run of dystopic science fiction films like *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Omega Man*.

Star Wars, in short, was state-of-the-art science fiction film history – and through its immense success an entire new chapter in science fiction film would be written.

This is the grand secret of science fiction film: the films of the genre almost always take place in the future, but the films themselves are in constant conversation with each other, looking to the past for inspiration and laying the groundwork for the science fiction films to come. Few film genres have sustained their own narrative as well as science fiction has, from the first silent moon-traveling fantasies of Georges Méliès in the early 1900s to the lushly designed and computer-animated space operas of George Lucas, which finally came to a close with *The Revenge of the Sith* in 2005, more than 100 years on. It’s a narrative that’s still going on – and given the financial clout of science fiction at the global box office, it’s a narrative that shows no sign of stopping.

The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies is designed to help you get a grip on the century-long, world-wide narrative of science fiction film. It’ll also take you back to Ancient Greece to find the fantastic roots of science fiction literature, rocket you forward through time to see how science fiction blossomed in the mind of men (and women) through to the early 20th century, when it found

its first expression in film. You'll go decade by decade through the history of science fiction cinema, and you'll see film trends and fads rise and fall and rise again. You'll see how every decade of science fiction film feeds into the ones that follow, and how each decade adds something new, from mad scientists to "bullet-time".

This book will take you around the world, to discover how science fiction films are made not only in Hollywood and the UK, but in France, Spain, Japan, Italy, even Bollywood and South Korea. You'll explore favourite science fiction film locations here on Earth and on other planets. You'll come face to face with the icons of science fiction film – both moviemakers and their creations – and meet some of the people who could very well shape science fiction film into the 21st century. And, to round it all off, this book presented the best of science fiction culture beyond the movies: TV, video games, literature and fandom.

And at the heart of this book, you'll discover the Canon – 50 science fiction films you have to see, that is, if you want to understand the full scope of the science fiction film genre over the last century. We fully expect The Canon to be a

source of controversy among devotees of science fiction film, many of whom may look at this list of 50 and be incredulous that their favourite science fiction film – whatever it may be – was *somehow* left out of our list, in favour of some film they find utterly ridiculous. This is fine with us. The Canon is not the end of the discussion for science film: we hope it is just the beginning. And to that end, we've packed in a couple hundred shorter reviews of other science fiction films from the last century. See them all, and mix and match until you find the formula that suits you the best.

Indeed, the goal of this book is to give you enough grounding in science fiction film that when you're done with it, you'll realize just how much there is to see in the genre, and that you will – to borrow from a certain successful science fiction film series – boldly go and explore the strange new worlds that are briefly touched upon in this book. There is much to discover. We're happy to be your travel guide for this journey.

John Scalzi
2005

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Science Fiction, Sci-Fi or SF?

Just as the citizens of San Francisco cringe when an out-of-towner calls the city "Frisco", so do many longtime fans of the science fiction genre become annoyed when someone outside of their circle refers to science fiction as "sci-fi". To many longtime fans, "sci-fi" has the taint of being a "lite" version of the genre they know and love; therefore, many longtime fans use "SF" as their preferred shorter version. This antipathy is not universal – many science fiction genre professionals don't care about it one way or another; indeed, the US cable network devoted to science fiction and fantasy is the "Sci-Fi Channel" – but inasmuch as the bias is there, we'd be remiss not to acknowledge it.

For the purposes of this title, we make no value judgments about the desirability of "SF", "sci-fi" or "science fiction" as labels – we use them more or less interchangeably for the sake of variety. This book's author, a published science fiction novelist, does suggest that if you fall in with a group of longtime SF fans, that you use the term "SF" rather than "sci-fi" as an abbreviation, simply to avoid the potential of being humorously ribbed by them about it (most long-time SF fans are actually pretty tolerant if you're showing genuine interest in the genre).

Also, should it come up, use "trekker" rather than "trekkie."



The Origins: science fiction literature





An illustration from the classic novel *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift

The Origins: science fiction literature

Before there were science fiction movies, there was science fiction literature – a genre that filmmakers could draw upon (or outright steal from). And it was by no means a new phenomena – within the history of Western literature, recognizable science fiction themes have existed for centuries.

But it would help things to know, first of all, what science fiction is. Ask a dozen different science fiction scholars and you will get a dozen different answers. However, for the purposes of this book, we'll say that something qualifies as science fiction if at least one of the following rules apply:

It takes place in the future Or, more specifically, what was the future, at the time when the work was produced. Or the story resides in an “alternate” timeline in which certain historical events took a very different course (for example, Nazi Germany wins World War II).

It uses technology that does not exist Or did not exist when the work was created – such as faster-than-light travel, time machines, etc.

Events are, by and large, rationally based Though important events, situations and characters may in themselves be fantastical, science fiction assumes an explanation based on a logical universe. This is opposed to fantasy works, and some horror, in which such ideas are described through magic or whims of the gods.

Greek science fiction ... and beyond

Whatever one wants to call it, science fiction has been around very nearly as long as science itself and, indeed, some of the first science fiction writers were the philosophers and natural philosophers (as scientists used to be called) who dabbled in the logical mysteries of the world.



PLATON tres excellent Philofophe, et Prince de l'Academie, estoit de la Sous-Socrate. il alla en Italie pour entendre les Pythagoriciens, et de la il passa en Egypte, ou il leut les livres de Moyses. il enseigna la Philofophie a Athene, a Anaxagete. il fut le premier auteur du Dialogue, et de plusieurs autres. Volumer. il mourut Aage de 80 ans.

Plato ... perhaps the first sci-fi writer

One of the very first examples of speculative literature, if not directly of science fiction, can be found in ancient Greece, where **Plato** produced *The Republic*, a treatise on the nature of society. In it, he imagined a society whose rulers (the “aristocracy”) lived communally and in poverty, used planned breeding to improve the quality of the ruling class, featured equality between the sexes (at least for the ruling class) and proposed universal education.

Forward a few hundred years to the second century AD, and we meet the Greek satirist **Lucian of Samosata**, who wrote two tales involving space travel. In the first, the classical hero Ulysses and his ship are shot to the moon in a waterspout; there he finds a war raging between the kings of the moon and the sun over rights to the planet Jupiter. The second, *Icaromenippus*, has the hero travelling to the moon by way of wings made from birds. These tales remained popular through the ages; no less a figure than 17th-century astronomer **Johannes Kepler** translated the first tale from Greek to Latin in order to popularize it.

Kepler, More and others

This wasn't Kepler's only involvement in science fiction. Inspired by Lucian of Samosata, Kepler wrote his own science fiction novel: *Somnium*, in which a man is launched to the moon, assisted by his mother, a witch (echoing an element in Kepler's own life – his mother was tried, but not convicted, of witchcraft). Kepler used scien-

tific reasoning to imagine story elements such as the crush of gravity during launch and also the weightlessness that would follow between moon and earth. Although the tale was written in the first decade of the 17th century, it wasn't until after Kepler's death that it was published, in 1634.

Kepler was not the only Renaissance thinker attracted to speculative writing. The most famous example is **Sir Thomas More**, whose 1516 treatise on the ideal society, *Utopia*, gave such societies their name (the word literally means “no place”). More's *Utopia* included religious tolerance – ironic since he who would lose his head for refusing to acknowledge King Henry VIII as the head of the Church of England.

One hundred years later, in 1638, two English writers speculated on who lived on the moon and how one might get there. The first was **Francis Godwin**, Bishop of Hereford, whose posthumously-published *The Man In The Moone* had its hero visiting the moon (quite unintentionally) by goose-pulled chariot only to discover that it was inhabited. This is generally regarded as the first science fiction tale written in English. The second writer was **John Wilkins**, brother-in-law of Oliver Cromwell, who wrote the exhaustively-titled *The Discovery Of A World In The Moone, Or, A Discourse Tending To Prove That 'Tis Probable There May Be Another Habitable World In That Planet*. The third edition of this book also featured Wilkins' thoughts on space travel, inspired by his reading of Godwin's work.

In 1668, women joined the ranks of speculative writers when **Margaret Cavendish**, Duchess of Newcastle, published *The Blazing World*, a utopian work which included the idea of out-of-body travel, and in which Cavendish herself makes an appearance traveling to the moon and beyond. In addition to being the first female sci-

Speculative fiction

Along with science fiction, **fantasy** and **horror** come under this title. Fantasy differs from science fiction primarily in its use of magic and created theology rather than science and technology (although there is considerable overlap between the genres). Horror, which as a genre seeks to terrify, uses fantasy or science fiction elements to suit its own needs – one work will imagine vampires as mystical creatures, for example, while another will posit them as suffering from a virus that causes them to crave fresh blood.

Although science fiction films are immensely popular (as are fantasy and horror movies), science fiction, as literature, is often taken less than seriously by mainstream writers and critics. Some “serious” writers of science fiction attempt to raise their status by giving their work the more acceptable label of speculative fiction.

An example of this would be Canadian novelist **Margaret Atwood**, who frequently writes science fiction (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx And Crake*), but says “Science fiction is when you have rockets and chemicals. Speculative fiction is when you have all the materials to actually do it. We've taken a path that is already visible to us.” The argument goes that if something is set in a believably near future, rather than a far-flung one, it's not actually science fiction. This is, at best, an exercise in the art of hair-splitting.

ence fiction writer, Cavendish may also be the genre's first “Mary Sue” – a derisive term science fiction writers use for newbie writers who project an idealized version of themselves into their stories.

Elsewhere in the seventeenth century, other writers and thinkers penning tales of future societies and interplanetary travel included



Gulliver meets the giants of Brobdingnag

Dominican friar **Tommaso Campanella** who in 1602 penned the utopian *The City Of The Sun* which detailed a society best described as “theocratic communism”, and the legendary **Cyrano de Bergerac**, whose *A Comical History Of The States And Empires Of The Sun And The Moon* was influenced by Godwin and posthumously published in 1656. The latter not only inspired Jonathan Swift and Voltaire to try their hand at speculative fiction, but is also credited by Arthur C. Clarke as the first appearance of the idea of rockets (the hero uses fireworks to travel) and also the “ramjet”, a type of jet that works in a thin atmosphere.

In the eighteenth century, two of Europe’s finest satirists dipped their pens into science fiction: **Jonathan Swift** with *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and **Voltaire** with *Micromegas* (1756). *Gulliver’s Travels* is science fiction purely by way of being a speculative endeavour but is widely acknowledged as a major influence upon science fiction writers to this day. It is also celebrated for the fact that it describes the then-unknown two moons of Mars almost precisely (see box). *Micromegas* is less well-known (in English, anyway) but it’s

Jonathan Swift and the moons of Mars

Science fiction often imagines inventions or ideas that subsequently come true, but in *Gulliver’s Travels*, **Jonathan Swift** did this postulation one better by describing the then-undiscovered moons of Mars in eerily accurate detail. In the novel, Swift described two moons of Mars, lying in orbits 13,600 km and 27,000 km distant from the planet, and orbiting Mars every ten hours and 21.5 hours. And indeed, Mars has two moons, discovered 150 years after the publication of *Gulliver’s Travels* by American astronomer **Asaph Hall**. The moons (Deimos and Phobos) orbit at 6000 km and 21,000 km, and circle the planet every 7.7 hours and 30.3 hours, respectively.

How could Swift have known about the moons? He didn’t – but it’s been suggested that he postulated them from an anagrammed note from **Galileo** about the rings of Saturn, which astronomer **Johannes Kepler** had mistranslated, believing it discussed the moons of Mars. Swift is not the only science fiction writer to postulate a moon – **Arthur C. Clarke** imagined Pluto having a moon in 1973’s *Rendezvous With Rama*; five years later, Pluto’s moon Charon was discovered.

both science fiction and satire; in the tale two enormous creatures from Saturn and the star Sirius engage a boatful of human philosophers in conversation (needless to say, the aliens find the humans more amusing than anything else).



Gulliver's Travels

dir Dave Fleischer, 1939, US, 75m

There are several film versions of this story, but this 1939 animated tale from the Fleischer brothers is the best known. While it takes enormous liberties with the novel (concentrating on the Lilliput section, where Gulliver appears as a giant among men), the film has some great moments – not least some beautiful lighting effects. Nevertheless it lacks the story-telling magic that made Disney the undisputed master of the animated feature.

Shelley, Verne and Wells

The early nineteenth century found both science and ideas of personal liberty on the rise in Europe and further afield – perfect conditions for the appearance of a novel that was a cautionary tale about the abuses of both. That novel was *Frankenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus*, which many scholars and writers believe was the first true science fiction as we understand the term today, both for its fantastic elements – a living, thinking creature raised from dead tissue – and for its portrayal of scientist Victor Frankenstein (the monster itself has no name), his arrogance, and the terrible consequences of his actions.

The story of the creation of *Frankenstein* is very nearly as famous as the novel itself: its author was **Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley**, wife of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who thought up the story while the two of them were visiting Lord Byron in Switzerland in the summer of 1816. Byron challenged his guests to come up with ghost

stories; Mary Shelley then had a terrible dream which would become the basis of *Frankenstein*. She was 19 when she thought up the work, which was eventually written and published in 1819.

Much is made of the fact that what is arguably the first science fiction novel was written by a woman. What is more, it is not Shelley's only foray into the genre: in 1826 she published *The Last Man*, an apocalyptic tale set in the 21st century, which served as an influence on H.G. Wells.

Next in the timeline is **Jules Verne**, whose 1863 debut novel *Five Weeks In A Balloon* caused a sensation with its tale of a voyage to Africa in a hot air balloon. It was the ultimate in speculative fiction, largely because he knew nothing about either balloons or Africa. From that speculative beginning, the highly prolific Verne churned out novel after novel brimming with adventure and science fiction ideas – an irony, since initially his work was rejected by publishers for being “too scientific”.

Verne is famous for predicting many scientific events and advances. For example, his 1865 novel *From The Earth To The Moon* seemingly foresaw the Apollo missions with three men being fired to the moon from a launch site in Florida, near where the Kennedy Space Center would be built. He also suggested that the astronauts would return to Earth by splashing into the Pacific. Other predictions include fantastical inventions that resemble helicopters, picture phones and electrical engines, and he is sometimes erroneously credited with imagining submarines, which already existed by the time *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* was published in 1870. The final work of Verne's to be published was *Paris In The 20th Century* (shelved by his publisher in 1863, finally printed in 1989), in which Verne imagined a Paris

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ADRESSER LES ABONNEMENTS ET RECLAMATIONS À L'ADMINISTRATEUR DU JOURNAL

M. JULES VERNE, PAR GILL.



Jules Verne

with skyscrapers, gas-powered cars and a worldwide communication network.

Verne is well-loved by film producers not only for his rich combination of adventure and scientific ideas but also because of the fact that since his work is now in the public domain, they don't have to pay to use it. Nearly one hundred different film and TV versions of Verne's writings have been produced, with at least a half dozen adaptations each of 20,000 *Leagues Beneath The Sea* (see Canon), *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth* and *Mysterious Island*.

In turn, H.G. Wells' immensely popular "scientific romances" were directly influenced by Verne and served as a link between earlier eras of science fiction and the twentieth century. Wells' first popular novel, *Anticipations* (1901), imagined how cars would create the rise of suburbs, and increasing sexual equality between men and women. Later, in 1936's *The Shape Of Things To Come*, Wells would rather chillingly predict the start of World War II, being only a year off, although he was thankfully wrong about it lasting for decades.

But along with his prognostications (and a progressive social agenda which became more pronounced as he got older) Wells also laid down in his stories the basic blueprint of much of the science fiction that was to come: *The War Of The Worlds* is the grandfather of all alien-invasion stories, *The Food Of The Gods* sees the popular introduction of giant animals (not to mention humans) mutated by science, and *The Time Machine* clearly

presents the genesis of the time-travel tale.

Film adaptations of Wells' stories have been a staple of science fiction cinema from the start. 1902's *La voyage dans la lune* was partially inspired by Wells' 1901 novel *The First Men In The Moon*. And as with Verne, Wells' work is now in the public domain in the United States, although not in Europe. His earliest novels are the most popular with filmmakers, in particular *The Time Machine*, *The Island Of Dr Moreau* and *The War Of The Worlds*.

In addition to being adventurous tales, Wells' work frequently contains social subtexts to make points that – as a committed socialist – he felt were important. *The Time Machine*, for example, saw the future fragmentation of the human race into two as a result of capitalism; while *The War Of The Worlds* is often seen as a criticism of European colonialism. Needless to say, these themes were minimized or simply expunged by filmmakers, the notable exception being 1936's *Things To Come*, which Wells was directly involved with.

Wells' interest in social themes became more prominent in his later work, which also strayed from the science fiction themes that established him in his early years. These two factors are probably why films from his later work are few and far between.

So, Wells' work is not only the bridge between nineteenth- and twentieth-century science fiction literature, but also between science fiction literature and the cinema. It's at this point the latter begins to branch off and follow its own path, which is detailed in Chapter 2.



The First Men In The Moon

dir J.L.V. Leigh, 1919, UK, b/w

It wouldn't do for Georges Méliès, a Frenchman, to make the only filmed version of H.G. Wells' 1901 novel, so in 1919 British Gaumont produced its very own version. If

you find it, you'll be rich, as no copies are thought to exist. There is also a 1964 version – now best appreciated for its Ray Harryhausen-directed effects.



Journey To The Centre Of The Earth

dir Henry Levin, 1959, US, 132m

If you can get past the wordy script, unnecessary length and the fact that Pat Boone periodically breaks into song, this is a pretty decent version of Verne's great novel. As Professor Lindenbrook, James Mason is always excellent, but the film really takes off in the underground sequences – where the art department clearly had a field day.



Mysterious Island

dir Cy Endfield, 1961, US, 101m

A somewhat free, adaptation of Verne's novel, has a group of Unionist soldiers escaping by balloon from a Confederate jail and finishing up on an island populated by giant animals. There are some great performances – Herbert Lom as Captain Nemo and the kittenish Joan Greenwood – plus a tense score from Bernard Herrmann, but it's Ray Harryhausen's monstrous animals that stick in the memory.



The Island Of Dr Moreau

dir John Frankenheimer, 1996, US, 96m

This ill-fated version of the H.G. Wells story is a big mess from start to finish, especially in the bizarre performance of Marlon Brando as the mad scientist Moreau, who wanders about wearing what looks like mime make-up. The creature effects are well done, but that's about the only reason to recommend this version against earlier ones.



War Of The Worlds

dir Steven Spielberg, 2005, US

The latest adaptation of Wells' masterpiece takes a ground-eye view of the Martian invasion, following Tom Cruise's character as he and his two kids try to make it through the invasion carnage. While the special effects are stupendous, in particular the destruction of Cruise's home town, the script too often lapses into cheesy sentimentality (while buildings crumble and close friends get vapourized around him, Cruise finds time to learn how to be a good dad).

Other icons of early science fiction

Edgar Allan Poe The American poet and short-story writer published *Hans Pfaal* (1835), one of the first attempts to scientifically imagine space flight, and an early time-travel piece called *A Tale Of The Ragged Mountains*, among several other stories with science fiction elements.

Robert Louis Stevenson Published *The Strange Case Of Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde* in 1886, which has of course been the basis for a number of direct (and even more indirect) science fiction film adaptations.

Edward Bellamy American journalist whose Utopian novel, *Looking Backwards*, was published in 1888. Set in the year 2000, it predicts shopping malls, credit cards, electric lighting and much else.

Edgar Rice Burroughs The famed *Tarzan* writer was equally famed for his series of tales set on Mars (also known as “Barsoom”), beginning with *A Princess Of Mars* in 1914. He also imagined a land under the crust of the earth in 1914’s *At The Earth’s Core*.

H.P. Lovecraft This American author, active in the 1920s and 30s, grafted a science fiction spine to the noisome body of horror with his *Cthulhu Mythos*, which imagined terrifying gods from other dimensions.

Olaf Stapledon British philosopher and author who in two vast epics, *Last And First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937), imagines the future history of mankind over a period of two billion years, encompassing eighteen different human species.

The rise of modern science fiction

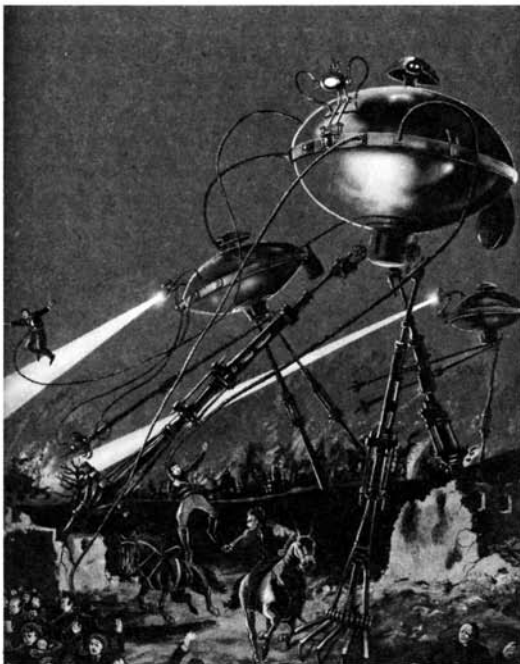
Prior to the 1920s, science fiction was homeless; certain magazines and publishers would occasionally welcome individual stories or books, especially cheap, adventure-fiction-oriented “pulp” magazines such as *The Argosy*, which debuted in the 1890s. But the genre lacked magazines specifically devoted to fantastic tales of science and aliens. This changed with the 1926 debut of the US magazine *Amazing Stories*, edited by Hugo Gernsback.

A man of considerable technical imagination (he would eventually hold 80 patents) but rather more modest writing skills, Gernsback serialized his own science fiction novel *Ralph 124c 41+* in another of his magazines. While this 1911 novel was rich with ideas (it postulated everything

from fax machines to aluminum foil), it is not remembered by scholars for its great writing.

Nor is Gernsback known for being a particularly good editor; the stories he published in *Amazing Stories* – which he labeled as “scientification”, then as “science fiction” – focused more on gadgets and technology than on prose style. This suited his own literary tastes but also inadvertently hung an albatross around the genre’s neck that is still present today – the criticism that it has a lower standard of literary quality relative to other forms of fiction.

Nevertheless, in addition to reprints of science fiction stories from Verne, Wells and Poe, and some SF hack work best forgotten, *Amazing Stories* featured works from early science fic-



An illustration from *Amazing Stories*

tion masters such as Jack Williamson, Edmund Hamilton and E.E. “Doc” Smith, who is regarded as the father of the film-friendly SF sub-genre known as “Space Opera” – basically adventure stories in space.

As well as to publishing the world’s first science fiction magazine, Gernsback proved influential in creating something else: **Science Fiction fandom** – the community of enthusiasts who exert a significant influence on the creators of science fiction in its various media. Gernsback helped create fandom simply by publishing fan letters in *Amazing Stories* and including the fan’s address – allowing them to contact each other individually and create a community.

Astounding writers

Campbell bought works from, and promoted the writing of, some of the best-known names in science fiction literature, including:

Robert Heinlein – who sold his first short story *Life-Line* to Campbell in 1939 and who would go on to become science fiction’s most respected and influential author with Hugo-winning novels *Double Star*, *Starship Troopers*, *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress* and 1962’s *Stranger In A Strange Land*.

Issac Asimov – An immensely prolific writer (he wrote or edited over five hundred books, fiction and non-fiction both) and the author of the *Foundation* series of novels (regarded by many as the best science fiction series ever). He also penned immensely influential robot novels and short stories, including *I, Robot*. In 1941, Campbell encouraged Asimov to write his most famous short story, *Nightfall*, in which a civilization in a star system with six suns deals with the first “night” in over 2000 years (and does so quite poorly). Asimov’s name would eventually appear on the cover of several science fiction magazines, most notably *Asimov’s Science Fiction*.

A.E. van Vogt – This Canadian writer had a career in pulp magazines outside of science fiction before switching over; Campbell bought his first science fiction story, 1939’s *Black Destroyer*, which featured a menacing alien stalking and killing the crew members of a spaceship – sound familiar? *Astrounding* also serialized van Vogt’s most famous work, *Slan*, about a mutant, superior form of humanity (a form that resonated with SF fandom, who have among their various catch phrases “fans are slans”).

Other writers Campbell championed include **Theodore Sturgeon**, **L. Sprague de Camp** and **L. Ron Hubbard** – Campbell published Hubbard’s first articles on Dianetics, the self-help regimen, which would be the unrefined foundation of the Hubbard-founded Church of Scientology.

Campbell's bomb

Astounding Stories would get Campbell questioned by the FBI during World War II, when the magazine published **Cleve Cartmill's** *Deadline*, a speculative tale about a nuclear bomb.

The story appeared in 1944 – in other words, while the US was secretly building its own bomb with the Manhattan Project. The story goes that Campbell was forcefully asked to stop printing atomic-bomb tales. He responded by pointing out that if such stories vanished from his magazine then thousands of SF fans would deduce that H-bomb research was taking place. It was eventually decided that the author was not getting inside information.

An acknowledgement of Gernsback's contribution to fandom is the **Hugo** – the annual literary award given out at the fan-run **Worldcon** science fiction convention.

The Golden Age of Science Fiction

In the USA modern literary science fiction began with Gernsback and *Amazing Stories*, but it was another editor and magazine that refined the genre into what we now recognize as science fiction. The magazine was *Astounding Stories*, founded in 1930 but only becoming a focus of science fiction literature when **John W. Campbell** became editor in 1937. Campbell was a writer himself, whose best-known story, *Who Goes There?*, would become the basis for the 1951 film *The Thing From Another World* (see Canon) and *The Thing* (1982). Campbell's editorial philosophy was heavy

on optimism and hard science.

Under Campbell, the quality of science fiction writing and fantasy (he also edited the fantasy magazine *Unknown Stories*) got a significant if not uniform boost. The popularity of the genre began to grow, creating what's now commonly known as **The Golden Age of Science Fiction**, lasting roughly until the early 1950s.

In reality this was a “Golden Age” for one type of science fiction: namely, the scientifically rigorous version (“Hard SF”) that Campbell favoured in *Astounding Stories*. Other sub-genres of sci-fi existed and were published in lesser-known magazines at the same time. *Planet Stories*, for example, published the sort of space opera Campbell chose to ignore, and was a home to writers such as **Leigh Brackett**, **Poul Anderson** and most notably **Ray Bradbury**, who used some of the short stories published there as part of one of his most famous works, *The Martian Chronicles*. The success of *Astounding* helped create a larger market of science fiction in the 1950s, which included the birth of several influential magazines (most notably *The Magazine Of Science Fiction And Fantasy* and *Galaxy Science Fiction* in 1950). The advent of book publishers who specialized in science fiction, beginning with **Ace Books**, founded in 1953.

Beyond the Golden Age

Since the Golden Age, science fiction has expanded its definition and styles to encompass a number of extremely fluid **sub-genres** – science fiction authors are not shy about mixing and matching established literary elements to create new forms, or ignoring the past entirely to try something new. Some of the most significant literary and

historical sub-genres over the last five decades include:

Hard science fiction Celebrated by Campbell, this sub-genre is scientifically rigorous and often technically-oriented, sometimes at the expense of character development. Much of Robert Heinlein's earlier work falls into this bin, as does Asimov and **Arthur C. Clarke** and **Larry Niven**. Contemporary practitioners include **Allen Steele**, **John Varley**, **Vernor Vinge**, **Stephen Baxter** and **Alastair Reynolds**.

Military science fiction Usually but not always a variant of Hard SF focused, as the name implies, on military battles in space or on alien worlds. Heinlein's 1961 novel *Starship Troopers* is a keystone of the genre. Other notable exponents include **Joe Haldeman**, whose novel *The Forever War* (1975) is often considered an allegory for the Vietnam War and a response to Heinlein's *Troopers*, and **Orson Scott Card**, whose *Ender's Game* (1985) features precocious child warriors. Current popular authors within this field are **David Drake** and **David Weber**.

Dystopian science fiction This sub-genre focuses on depressing futures – often very close in time to our own – in which the setting is often post-apocalyptic, totalitarian, or some combination of the two. Classic dystopian novels include **Yevgeny Zamyatin's** *We* (1920), which in turn influenced Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and **George Orwell's** *1984* (1949); Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and *A Canticle For Leibowitz* (1959) by **Walter M. Miller**. **David Brin's** 1986 novel *The Postman* (a cinematic flop for Kevin Costner in 1997) is a more recent example.

Alternate history stories Based on alternate outcomes of major historical events; this sub-

genre more or less fills the niche dystopian science fiction used to fill. The most industrious practitioner is **Harry Turtledove**, whose popular novels have imagined a world in which the Confederacy won the US Civil War, and a World War II during which the earth is invaded by lizard-like aliens. Other writers who have tried their hand at alternate histories include **S.M. Stirling** (*The Peshawar Lancers*, *The Domination*), **Robert Charles Wilson** (*Darwinia*) and **Kim Stanley Robinson** (*Years Of Rice And Salt*).

Steampunk This is a very popular variant of the alternate history genre, in which modern technologies are incorporated into past settings, most typically Victorian England or the American Old West. The seminal novel is *The Difference Engine* (1992) by **William Gibson** and **Bruce Sterling**.

New wave Less of an actual genre than a 1960s movement that rebelled against what was perceived as the increasing strait-jacketing of science fiction. It began in 1964 when English author **Michael Moorcock** took over the British SF magazine *New Worlds*, until then a staid knock-off of Campbell's *Astounding*. Moorcock championed writers and stories that celebrated literary experimentation, contemporary social relevance and – something largely missing from SF at the time – sex. His editorial line was deeply controversial and led to the magazine being condemned by British MPs and suffering distribution problems because of the content.

The “new wave” helped to launch the careers of a number of science fiction upstarts in Britain and the US, including **Brian Aldiss**, **Roger Zelazny**, **Harry Harrison**, **J.G. Ballard**, **Philip K. Dick** and **Harlan Ellison**. Several of these writers, particularly Ballard and Dick, have had their work turned into seminal science fiction films.

Cyberpunk A mash of the Hard SF, Dystopian and New Wave sub-genres, in which technology plays a central role, but much of the action takes place in the virtual space of near-future computer networks, and in the societies transformed by rapidly-changing technologies. The phrase “cyberpunk” was coined in 1980 by **Bruce Bethke** for his short story of the same name, but it was popularized with reference to 1984’s *Neuromancer* by **William Gibson**, who is regarded as the father of the genre. Other significant first wave cyberpunk authors are **Bruce Sterling**, **John Shirley** and **Rudy**

Rucker. **Neal Stephenson** ended the first wave of Cyberpunk with 1992’s *Snow Crash*.

Post-cyberpunk Neal Stephenson is also considered an author in the second wave of cyberpunk which, while as tech-oriented as the first, is generally considered to be more optimistic in tone and features a willingness to extrapolate technology forward to a far-reaching “singularity” event. In addition to Stephenson (*Cryptonomicon*), other second-wave c-punks include **Cory Doctorow** (*Down And Out In The Magic Kingdom*), **Ken MacLeod** (*The Star Fraction*) and **Charlie Stross** (*Singularity Sky*).

The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming

Though little known in the West, Russia has a long tradition of science-fiction literature. Among the key figures are:

Alexander Bogdanov A Bolshevik activist, scientist and philosopher who was the founder of Russian science fiction. His novel *Red Star* (1908) is an account of an earthling’s visit to the more advanced planet of Mars. Though a socialist utopia, the newcomer is unable to adjust to life there.

Konstantin Tsiolkovsky A pioneer of rocket science, who theorized about space flight and inter-planetary travel as early as 1883. His fantasy novel *Beyond The Planet Earth* (1920) describes a large cylindrical space station manned by an international crew.

Yevgeny Zamyatin A naval engineer as well as a writer, his dystopian novel *We* is a nightmare vision of a super-rationalist city-state and the attempts by dissidents to undermine it. Written in 1920, it was banned in the Soviet Union but published abroad.

Alexei Tolstoy A distance relative of his more famous namesake, his novel *Aelita* (1923) was another journey

to Mars story but this time the planet is a backward totalitarian dictatorship, where the visiting earthlings successfully foment a communist revolution. It was made into an outstanding film in 1926 (see p.276).

Alexander Belyaev The leading science-fiction author of the 1920s and 30s, whose work often contains humour. His prolific output includes *Professor Dowell’s Head* (1926) and *The Amphibian* (1928), both of which were made into films.

Ivan Efremov A leading Soviet palaeontologist who also wrote science fiction. His best work is *Andromeda Nebula* (1957), a ground-breaking novel in which the Earth is part of an organization of planets that exchanges scientific ideas. Despite its utopian vision, it was attacked by Communist hardliners.

Boris and Arkady Strugatsky Writing as a team, the brothers were the most significant Russian science-fiction writers of modern times. Much of their work can be read as coded critiques of the Soviet state, and many of their novels were filmed, including *Roadside Picnic* (1972) and *Definitely Maybe* (1976).

Feminism and alternative sexuality in science fiction literature



Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Science fiction literature is still largely seen as a boys' club, but it's worth noting that women have constantly engaged with the genre, from Mary Shelley onward. Other early female pioneers include Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who wrote the 1915 utopian novel *Herland*, and German writer Thea Von Harbou, whose 1926 novel *Metropolis* was turned into the immensely significant Fritz Lang film (see Canon). During the 1940s and 50s Leigh Brackett and Judith Merril made names for themselves, Brackett with space opera and Merril with pioneering female-centred stories and novels (*Shadow On The Hearth*, *Daughters Of Earth*).

Other notable women moved into the field in the 1960s including Marion Zimmer Bradley (*The Planet Savers*, 1962), Ursula Le Guin (*Rocannon's World*, 1962; *The Lathe Of Heaven*, 1971), and James Tiptree, Jr., a pseudonym for Alice Sheldon, who kept her gender under wraps for a decade. The late 60s and early 70s brought novels with overt feminist and gender-centred themes, such as Le Guin's *Left Hand Of Darkness* (which features a race of humans who can be both genders, although only one gender at a time) and Joanna Russ's 1975 novel *The Female Man*, which features the stories of four women, each on an earth with differing gender politics. The 70s also saw the publishing of anthologies of feminist science fiction, including 1974's *Women Of Wonder: Science Fiction Stories By Women About Women* and 1976's *Aurora: Beyond Equality*, and the founding of WisCon, an annual feminist-centred science fiction convention. Science fiction literature has also attracted authors better-known

for their work in other genres, notably **Doris Lessing**, whose ambitious, if turgid, five-novel series *Canopus In Argos* appeared in the 1980s, and **Margaret Atwood** (see p.5) whose has written two science fiction works – *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) and *Oryx And Crake* (2003). In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood imagines a US of the near-future as a rigid theocracy where women are either child-bearers (Handmaids) or houseworkers (Marthas). More compelling is Marge Piercy’s *Woman On The Edge Of Time* (1976), which contrasts the grimly oppressive existence of mental patient Connie with the non-technological, utopian future-world that she is able to visit.

While science fiction literature today is not completely sexually integrated, a wide range of women writers and a broad spectrum of feminist and gender-focused work now exists. Other notable science fiction writers who employ feminist themes include **Octavia Butler** (*Kindred*, 1979; *Dawn*, 1986), **Pat Murphy** (*The Falling Woman*, 1986), **Sheri Tepper** (*The Gate To Women’s Country*, 1993) and **Nalo Hopkinson** (*Brown Girl In The Ring*, 1998).



The Empire Strikes Back
dir Irvin Kershner, 1980, US, 124m

Leigh Brackett’s involvement in science fiction led her to pen the first draft of the script for *The Empire Strikes Back*, Episode V of the *Star Wars* films, before her death from cancer in 1980. Lucas later revised the script and then employed Lawrence Kasdan to finish the screenplay.



The Lathe Of Heaven
dir Fred Barzyk, 1980, US, 105m

This made-for-TV movie, based on the 1971 novel by Ursula Le Guin, tells the tale of a man, George Orr, whose dreams can unpredictably spill over into reality. He tries

to suppress his powers with drugs. Le Guin worked as a consultant on the making of the movie; the film was remade in 2002, again for TV, by director Phillip Haas. Neither version offers anything much to write home about.



The Handmaid’s Tale
dir Volker Schlöndorff, 1990, US/Ger, 108m

With its strong cast (including Natasha Richardson, Faye Dunaway, and Robert Duvall) this looks promising, but the targets of Atwood’s indignation – fundamentalist religion, the restrictions on women – are a little too obvious, and despite some grimly effective moments the film never lifts off.

Gay and lesbian sci-fi

Given the genre’s twitchiness about any sort of sexuality in its “Golden Age,” it’s unsurprising that early examples of gay-themed science fiction are hard to find. **Olaf Stapledon’s** 1936 novel *Odd John* suggests a same-sex seduction by the story’s mutant main character, and the 1948 tale *New Year’s Day* is often touted as the first modern gay sci-fi story (it was written by one “**Lisa Ben**,” an anagram for “lesbian”). It wasn’t until the 1970s that gay and lesbian themes were directly addressed in science fiction; a watershed book is 1975’s *Dhalgren*, by **Samuel Delaney**, which features characters of unapologetically alternate (and exotic) sexualities.

Gay and lesbian science fiction is currently thriving – if still not in the mainstream of science fiction literature – with regular anthologies (beginning with 1984’s *Kindred Spirits* anthology), and specialist publishers like **Circlet Press**. Fans even have their own annual convention: **Gaylaxicon**.

From the book to the film

Given the great depth of science fiction as a literary tradition, it's not surprising that so many movie directors have chosen to adapt novels rather than devise original screenplays. But science fiction is also known as a genre that attracts obsessive fans (not to mention authors) and, as such, any adaptation will invariably be criticized, even if the original author is long since dead or – as occasionally happens – happy with the results.

But a novelist's happiness is not indicative of a film's overall success. *The Postman* author David Brin, for example, states that he is reasonably happy with his book's adaptation, but the film was a failure with critics and audiences alike. In the end, what matters to filmmakers is not whether the author approves, but whether the audience buys the story – in whatever form it's presented. Here's a closer look at a few notable writers who have had their work adapted for the silver screen, though not always in a form comparable to that found on the printed page.

Isaac Asimov

A good example of a film successfully ignoring most of its source material occurred in 2004 with *I, Robot*. The film shares its title with writer Isaac Asimov's famous tome of short stories about robots, and uses Asimov's similarly famous "Three Laws of Robotics" as a plot point. But as the film credits note,

the film's story is merely "suggested by" Asimov's work – *I, Robot* co-writer **Jeff Vintar's** original script was not based on Asimov's stories at all, but when the rights to Asimov's work became available, the production company that owned Vintar's script grabbed them and lightly incorporated elements from Asimov's work. Asimov purists grumbled, but the film racked up \$300 million worldwide.



I, Robot

dir Alex Proyas, 2004, US, 115m

This movie stars Will Smith as a Chicago cop who in the near future believes that the hard-working robots around him are trouble – even though they're hardcoded not to hurt humans. Of course, there wouldn't be a story if the robots didn't start acting screwy. Asimov partisans will be horrified; everyone else should find it enjoyable if slight.

Will Smith in the movie version of *I, Robot*



Heinlein's Starship Troopers

Another fine example of how a movie can change dramatically from its source material can be found in *Starship Troopers* (1997), the film based on the 1959 novel by Robert Heinlein.

While the novel has plenty of action (it begins with high-school graduate Johnny Rico and other soliders attacking the enemy, a breed of semi-intelligent insect warriors), the book's main thrust is to chart Johnny's development from a spoiled rich kid to a citizen who through military service understands the value of working for the good of humanity. The book was, and is, controversial for its militaristic and perceived fascist bent, but is nevertheless regarded as one of the great science fiction novels.

Starship Troopers director **Paul Verhoeven** and screenwriter **Ed Neumeier** (who had previously teamed up for *Robocop*) kept the basic outline of Heinlein's novel, but from this skeleton they hung an entirely different animal. Rico's moral character is largely disposed of: other than two minor scenes there's not much that suggests Johnny has learned much of anything during his adventure.

Verhoeven and Neumeier instead amp up the trappings of a fascist human future. As for Johnny, he's given a more standard story – boy meets girl, boy loses girl to enlistment, boy enlists, boy loses girl to other boy, boy gets other girl, etc. This romance was not in the book; fans of the novel were outraged.

Aside from the wrenching amendment to the plot's outlook, the filmmakers made a number of other changes:

- **The powered battle suits**, integral to the novel, are gone.
- **Sexually segregated military is replaced** with an integrated one, right down to the communal showers.
- **Characters are combined**, notably influential school teacher Mr Dubois and squad leader Lt Raszczak.

- **The film's sub-plot**, in which Johnny's girlfriend goes to naval academy, is entirely new.
- **One of the alien species** in the novel is discarded; the film concentrates purely on the Arachnids.
- **Far more emphasis** is placed in the movie on battle and action sequences.
- **The film's military tactics** are based on the needs of special effects: for example, the film has space cruisers tightly grouped for no other reason than to allow them to crash into each other explosively.
- **The aliens perform dubious actions:** one "bug" has evolved the ability to launch glowing projectiles into space. As critic Roger Ebert noted: "To say they severely test the theory of evolution is putting it mildly." Ultimately, while the film is related to the novel, the two have different goals. Heinlein wrote his book to make an entertaining lesson out of the idea of **moral responsibility**; Verhoeven and Neumeier made their movie to be **loud and violent**, with only tangential and easily ignored commentary on fascism and power.



Tie-in novels

One of the established staples of the science fiction genre is the **media tie-in novel**, in which a writer is handed a version of the film script and given a surprisingly short amount of time (sometimes as little as six weeks) to churn out a full-length novel based on the script. Some writers have near-full-time careers adapting movies into books; writer **Alan Dean Foster**, for example, has enjoyed such a career for thirty years, beginning with John Carpenter's debut film, *Dark Star*. He's since novelized films both classic (*Star Wars*, the first three *Alien* films) and not-so-classic (*Krull*, *The Last Starfighter*, *The Chronicles Of Riddick*).

Given the time constraints of working on a novelization, most aren't particularly good. On occasion, however, a novelization will be worth seeking out on its own literary merits. A good example is *The Abyss*, by **Orson Scott Card**, who agreed to do the novelization on the condition he could flesh out the film characters' backgrounds; writer/director James Cameron agreed and was reportedly so pleased with Card's inventions that he gave them to his actors so they could learn about their characters. Another is the novelization of *The Adventures Of Buckaroo Banzai Across The Eighth Dimension!*. Adapted by screenwriter **Earl Mac Rauch**, the novel is written as if it were part of a continuing serial of Banzai adventures and is even more unhinged than the movie. A final recommendation is the novelization of *ET* by **William Kotzwinkle**, which is full of gentle humor and lets us into ET's head, which is an odd place to be (especially when he's drunk).

The strangest movie novelization has to be that of 2002's remake of *Planet Of The Apes*. Written by **William T. Quick**, it ended up on the same book shelves as the original **Pierre Boulle** novel, on which the classic *Ape* films were based.

Michael Crichton

In 1993, during the press junket for *Jurassic Park*, Michael Crichton, the author whose novel was the source material for the film, noted the fundamental problem in adapting any novel into a movie. "A novel is often four hundred pages long," Crichton said, "but a movie script, if it were put into the same format, would be about forty pages long. **Ninety percent of your source material won't make it into the film.**"

When Crichton (whose directorial credits include *Westworld*) was making his comment, he could afford to be sanguine about the reductive nature of adaptation as he also co-wrote the screenplay for *Jurassic Park*, with David Koepp. But most novelists are not afforded such luxuries; when they sign over the rights to their novels, they often find themselves on the outside looking in.



The Andromeda Strain

dir Robert Wise, 1971, US, 131m

The first film to be based on the work of the prolific Crichton sees scientists racing against time to isolate a virus that has come from space. Filmed in a flat, near-documentary style, the movie is now dated in its details but still gripping in the way the scientists deal with their battle against the microscopic invader – a blueprint for similar "virus" movies, including 1995's *Outbreak*.



Twister

dir Jan de Bont, 1996, US, 113m

The director of *Speed* offers more accelerating action here as we follow a bunch of scientists chasing storms across America's "tornado alley". The story is nothing special and little happens to make you care that the plot's estranged couple are managing to sort things out amid all the wind. The action, and especially the audio effects, are breathtakingly good. Best seen with a very loud surround-sound system.



Philip K. Dick and friend

Philip K. Dick

Philip K. Dick has been one of the hottest names in science fiction film over the last two decades; Hollywood has adapted several of his books, beginning with *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* (1968) which became the vastly influential *Blade Runner* (see Canon). Dick's own life reads like one of his tales, in which the nature of humanity and reality are called into question. Dick was highly regarded critically (he won a Hugo award in 1963 for his novel *The Man In The High Castle*) but was barely viable commercially, once commenting that he was so poor he couldn't afford to return a late library book.

In 1974, he believed he was contacted by some sort of higher being (which he called VALIS – “Vast Active Living Intelligence System”) and also that he was simultaneously living in modern times and in the Roman Empire of the first century AD. Dick began keeping a journal at this time, which eventually flowed to over a million words; he also used the experience for a trilogy of novels that featured himself as a primary character. Reasonable explanations for these visions include Dick's well-documented drug use and also possibly a series of epileptic seizures.

Despite the popularity of Dick's work as source material, it is often dramatically overhauled before getting onto the screen. There is some suggestion that Dick himself may not have minded this: in 1981, before the release of *Blade Runner*, Dick wrote to an executive at the film's production company and said, “The impact of *Blade Runner* is simply going to be overwhelming”. He was correct.

Though Ridley Scott and screenwriters Hampton Fancher and David Peoples gutted *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* to produce the source material for *Blade Runner*, the novel and the film share one thing in common: Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter who takes out unwanted androids. But where the book's Deckard is married, obsessed with procuring a

real animal (as part and parcel of a religion that fetishizes living creatures) and lives in a post-nuclear world where most people are hooked into a TV-like emotion simulator known as an Empathy Box, the film's Deckard is single, unconcerned with animals real or manufactured (except as evidence) and lives in a world that is deeply polluted (but presumably not nuked) and



Philip K. Dick's Deckard character, played by Harrison Ford in *Blade Runner*

whose citizens live without the benefit of the Empathy Box. What ties the two works together is the theme of what it means to be human.

Other recent adaptations of Dick's work are *Screamers* (1996), *Minority Report* (2002), *Paycheck* (2003) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2005). Sadly for Dick, each of these adaptations (and the fame they bring) has come posthumously, as Dick himself died shortly before the premiere of *Blade Runner*.



Screamers

dir Christian Duguay, 1996, Canada, 108m

A group of rebelling miners use man-slashing machines called "screamers" to fight off their enemy – a fine idea until the other side wants to make peace, and the screamers turn out to have plans of their own. One of the lesser adaptations of Dick's work, which is mildly ironic because it's one of the more faithful retellings of his stories. Having said that, it's got a grimy, B-movie appeal.



Minority Report

dir Steven Spielberg, 2002, US, 145m

An extremely handsome tale of fascism brought on through technology – in this case people being arrested for murders they haven't committed yet. Tom Cruise is the federal agent who chases them down, only to discover he himself is supposed to murder someone ... soon.



Paycheck

dir John Woo, 2003, US, 119m

A man reverse-engineers technology for companies and then erases his memory of the work in exchange for big bucks. Then he wakes up after a multi-year job to find that he's exchanged his paycheck for a series of weird clues, and that piecing them together puts his life at risk. Interesting idea, but less-than-great execution, which is strange because director John Woo is usually excellent.

Comics and science fiction movie

Comic books are a fertile ground for adaptation. They have long been a staple of Hollywood, of course, but the cross-pollination has been largely confined to the superhero genre, with stalwarts such as Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and the X-Men. But more recently, non-superheroes are making their way from comic book ink to screen.

- **Men In Black** This comedy-SF franchise about government agents dealing with truculent aliens living on Earth is adapted from the comic book series by writer Lowell Cunningham and artist Sandy Carruthers; the first edition of the comic book was published by off-brand publisher Aircel in 1990.
- **The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen** The 2003 fantasy/retro-sci-fi film starring Sean Connery

was a confusing, messy disappointment, but the graphic novel on which it was based is a classic of the genre, written by industry legend Alan Moore, who also wrote *From Hell* and *Watchmen*.

- **Alien Vs Predator** Here's an interesting story of movies influencing comics, which in turn influence movies. Dark Horse published the first *Aliens Vs Predator* comic book series – in which the predator species kidnapped an Alien queen to produce hunt-able offspring – in 1989, and followed it up with several other popular iterations during the 1990s. These, in addition to a popular series of *Aliens Vs Predator* videogames, helped build a fan base for a cinematic collision between alien, predator and human, which came to the silver screen in 2004.

Frank Herbert

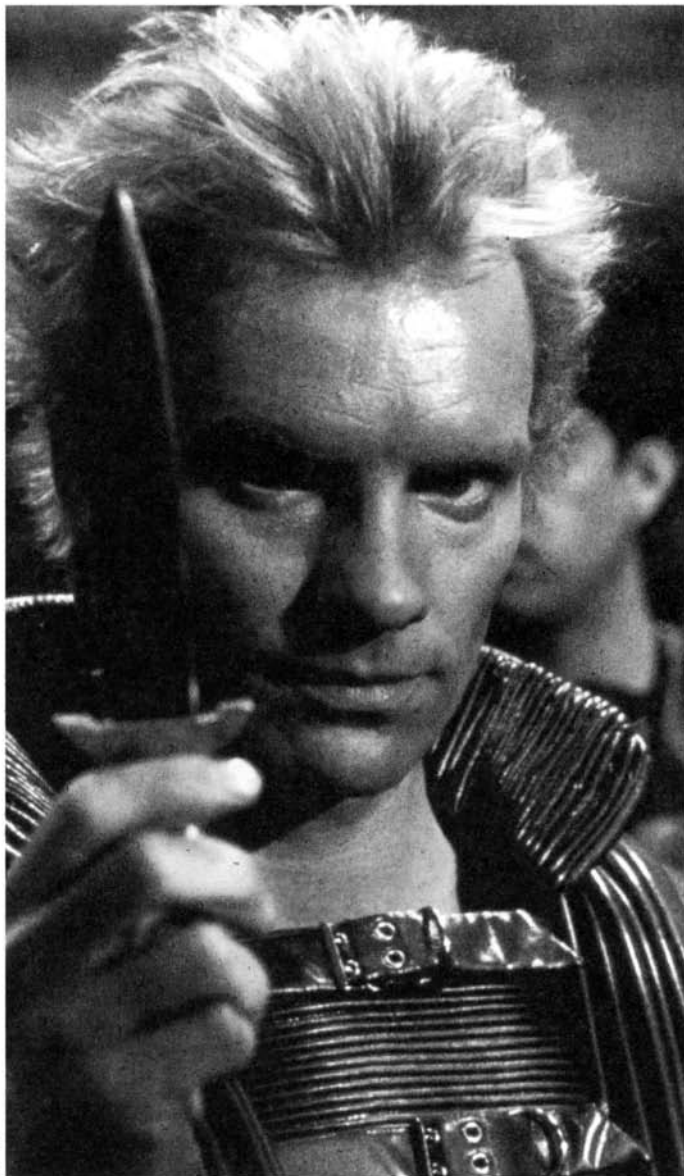
In 1984, director David Lynch freely adapted *Dune*, Frank Herbert's classic science fiction novel, into a baroque and somewhat grotesque film, starring, among others, **Sting**. The movie did only modest business, thanks in part to its aggressive weirdness. In 2000, American cable station SciFi Channel produced a mini-series based on the novel, which hewed closer to the book's storyline but lacked the film's unhinged visual inventiveness. The mini-series is certainly easier to follow, but it's not necessarily better than the film, whose critical stock has grown over the years as it's become viewed as a work unto itself rather than purely as an adaptation of Herbert's written work.



Dune

dir David Lynch, 1984, US, 137m

Lynch's version of Herbert's gargantuan ecological SF classic is best approached as an estimation of what it would be like to hallucinate visually while hearing an audio version of the book: lots of colour and fury and incomprehensible disjointedness. But if you don't like hallucinating, you're well and truly out of luck.



Sting, in David Lynch's adaptation of *Dune*

Stanislaw Lem

Polish author Stanislaw Lem stands as a reminder that although English is the primary language of both science fiction literature and film, it is by no means the only one. His work has sold millions of copies in forty languages worldwide and has been adapted into over a dozen cinematic and television works since 1960, when his novel *The Astronauts* (1951) was made into a film, *Der Schweigende Stern* (*The Silent Star*), by the East Germans (see p.258). But it wasn't until the 21st century that Lem's work made it into an English-language film: 2002's *Solaris*, which was itself a remake of Andrei Tarkovsky's seminal 1972 Soviet film. After *Der Schweigende Stern* and the two versions of *Solaris*, the best Lem cinematic adaptation is probably *Test Pilota Pirksa* (1979), a Polish-Russian co-production directed by **Marek Piestrak** about a space mission whose crew is made up of humans and robots, but whose commander is unable to tell them apart.

The original Russian film version of *Solaris* (see Canon) is now regarded as one of the best science fiction films in history, but Lem has publicly trashed the adaptation, saying "Tarkovsky and I differed deeply in our perception of the novel." (He thinks even less of the 2002 Steven Soderbergh-directed remake.)

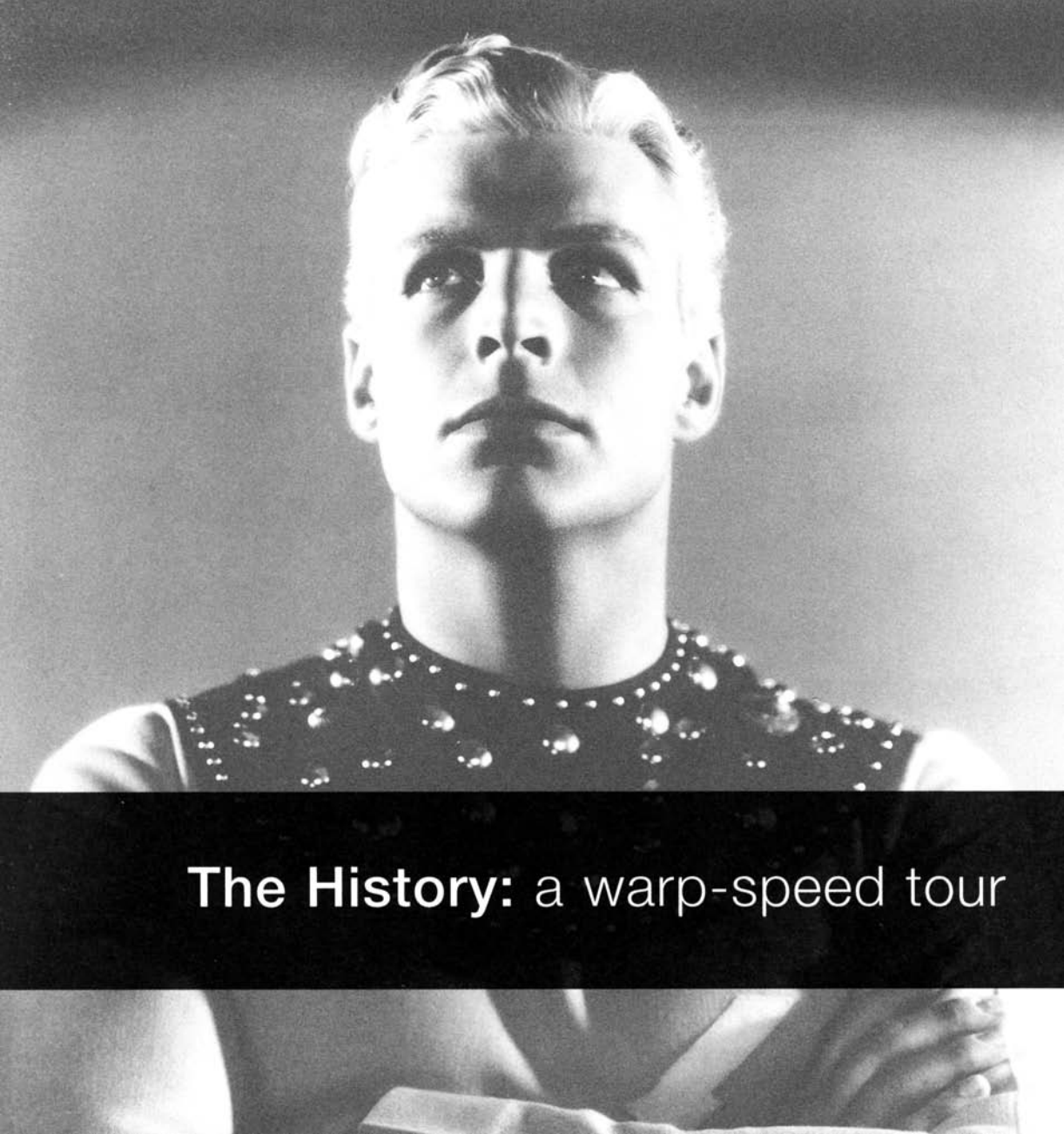
But that's par for the course for Lem, whose prickly nature caused the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America to rescind his honorary membership of the organization in 1976 after he made disparaging remarks on the quality of Western science fiction. Lem's own science fiction, heavy on social and technological themes (and the intersection between them) was written in isolation from the main thrust of the literary genre – a result of Lem's country being securely cordoned off from the West by the ideological

"Iron Curtain" of the era. Lem's dismay at discovering the pulpy nature of Western science fiction caused him to launch a one-man crusade against it in literary journals, which eventually led to his SFWA expulsion and prompted Philip K. Dick in 1974 to write a letter to the FBI denouncing Lem as a fictional front for Marxists, which was ironic since Lem's earliest novels were initially denied publication by the Communist Party.

Coming soon...

There are some fairly significant writers in the science fiction field who are either breaking into – or coming back to – the world of film. Here are just a couple of them:

- **Alan Moore** This immensely influential graphic-novel writer has seen a number of his works adapted for film. His most celebrated work, *Watchmen*, about a group of washed-up superheroes living in an alternate timeline, is likely to get to film in 2006, under the direction of Paul Greengrass (*The Bourne Supremacy*). Moore's graphic novel *V*, which features a freedom fighter in a dystopic Britain, is also moving toward production under the guidance of the Wachowski Brothers (*The Matrix*).
- **Joss Whedon** Though the writer of several science fiction films (most notably *Alien Resurrection*), Whedon's greatest fame comes from television, where he was the creator of the very popular *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* series as well as the short-lived cult sci-fi favourite *Firefly*. Although *Firefly* failed to thrive on television, Whedon managed to take it to the big screen with a spin-off movie, *Serenity*, released in 2005.



The History: a warp-speed tour



Buster Crabbe as the heroic Flash Gordon in the origin 1930s serial

The History:

a warp-speed tour of sci-fi film

Film is sensational by its very nature – it seeks to engage the senses as few other media can. Science fiction, likewise, indulges in spectacle – wild ideas, fantastic visions, amazing concepts – all designed to transport its audience into another realm. It's no surprise then that film and science fiction wasted very little time in finding each other and working together to thrill their audiences, and in the process creating a tradition of boundary-breaking film innovations.

1902–29: The silent era

The earliest motion pictures, dating from the 1890s and moving forward through the turn of the 20th century, were fundamentally different from what we think of as films today. The first films were very short – no more than a few minutes long – and tended to focus on one event or

action. A representative example would be *The Kiss*, an 1896 film (from the studios of American inventor and early film pioneer **Thomas Edison**) which showed a rather dowdy man and woman smooching it up for eighteen seconds. Audiences loved it; it was one of the most popular films of its day, and even inspired a 1900 sequel, which showed a man and a woman kissing for 44 seconds (just in case you thought sequels were a recent invention). Other popular films showed

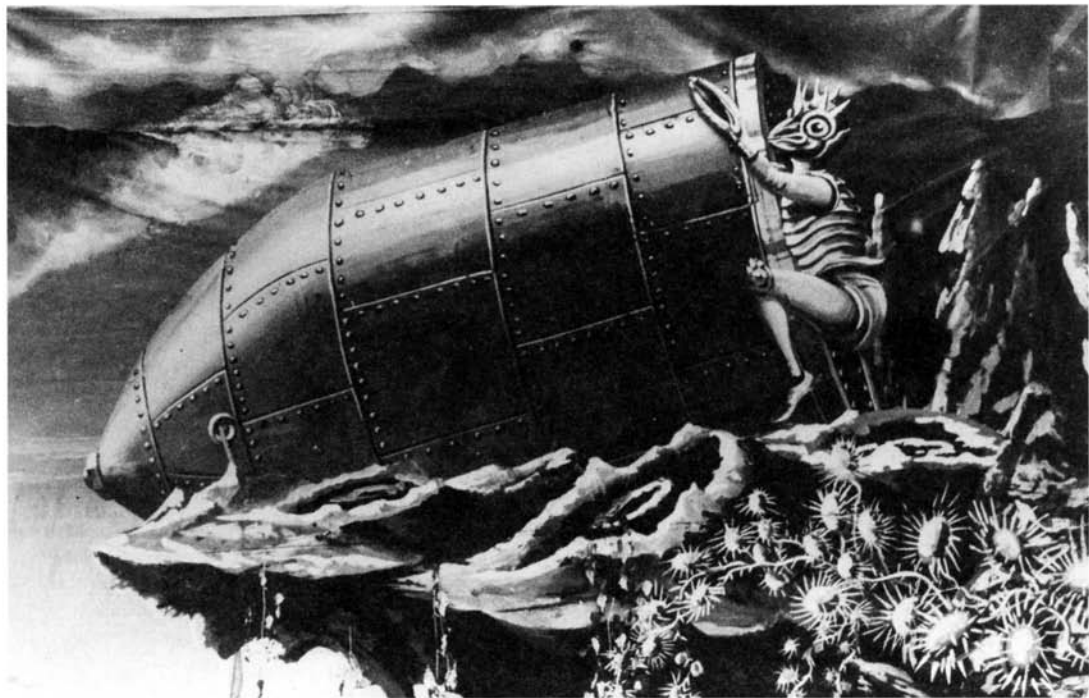
THE HISTORY: A WARP-SPEED TOUR

men sneezing and trains zooming toward the camera – which sometimes prompted inexperienced audiences to try to get out of the way.

The film widely acknowledged as the first science fiction film was created not in America by Thomas Edison, but in France, in 1902 by French filmmaker **Georges Méliès**: *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip To The Moon*). Méliès, who had been a magician before becoming a filmmaker in 1899, had started his new career with the same short “event” films as other filmmakers, but quickly began to utilize his background in magic to create innovative “trick” films which relied on

early special effects. Méliès also began stringing together plot elements within films to create genuine story telling in his movies (for example, he made an early version of *Cinderella*, which was a whole seven minutes long, which was very long by 1899 standards).

By 1902, Méliès had developed an unmatched bag of cinematic tricks, and he used most of them for *Le Voyage*, which clocked in at an astounding 14 minutes in length (and cost 10,000 francs – an immense amount for a film of its era). It featured a fully fleshed-out plot involving a moon trip (a very unrealistic moon trip, since among other



Le voyage dans la lune

Where to find early science fiction films

If you want to see the *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* films, you'll have no problems locating them at your local video store. But try to find the 1924 version of *The Lost World* or Fritz Lang's *The Woman In The Moon* at your neighbourhood **Blockbuster** and you may be in for a bit of a challenge. For many years, many significant early science fiction films were either available only in shoddy video transfers or not available for home video at all.

Fortunately, two innovations have taken notice of this niche market and are getting interested science fiction film buffs closer to the classic movies. The first is DVD, which has embraced a new wave of restored classic films. The previously mentioned *The Woman In The Moon*, for example, was released on DVD in 2004, nicely restored and available both alone and as part

of a Fritz Lang boxed set that includes *Metropolis*. Earlier classic science fiction shorts are often bundled together on DVD: Georges Méliès' groundbreaking shorts, for example, are available on *Landmarks Of Early Film, Vol. 2: The Magic Of Méliès*, as well as other DVD collections.

The other innovation is Internet video rental, where you go online to have classic DVDs sent to you in the mail (when you're done, they are returned in the same fashion). In the US, market leader **Netflix** (www.netflix.com) carries an extensive collection of classic science fiction DVDs including silent films, shorts and serials; in the UK, **ScreenSelect** (www.screensselect.co.uk) and **LoveFilm** (www.lovefilm.co.uk) also have several of the earliest science fiction films available for viewing.

things it features astronauts in street clothes) and has numerous then-dazzling special effects, including the iconic shot of the moon capsule, launched from earth, jammed into the eye of the man in the moon. Méliès wrote, directed, produced and – yes – starred in the film, making him one of the earliest film-hyphenates.

Le voyage dans la lune was immensely popular but Méliès did not receive as much financial gain from it as he should have, because it was also one of the most widely pirated movies in film history (film piracy is by no means a new invention). One of the most flagrant pirates of the film,, was **Thomas Edison**, who had his engineers secretly make a copy of the film and then distributed his own copies throughout America. Edison made a bundle; Méliès got nothing from the American distribution of his film. Nevertheless Méliès continued making innovative films, including 1904's *Voyage a travers l'impossible* (*An Impossible voyage*),

which was even longer than *Le voyage dans la lune* (coming in at 24 minutes!) and was another special-effects extravaganza, this time featuring adventurers travelling under the sea and to the sun by various modes of transportation.

The popular (if not financial) success of Méliès inspired filmmakers in Europe and the United States to try their hands at science fiction films: In France, **Gaston Velle's** 1906. *Voyage autour d'une étoile* (*A Trip To A Star*) featured interstellar travel by way of soap bubbles, while **Segundo de Chomón's** *Voyage à la planète Jupiter* (*Voyage To The Planet Jupiter*, 1907) featured a king climbing a ladder to the largest planet. In the UK, **Walter Booth** directed two significant early science fiction films: 1906's *The '?' Motorist*, a farcical comedy which featured a couple cruising Saturn's rings in their car, and 1909's rather more serious *The Airship Destroyer* (1909), which featured blimps being used for aerial warfare. Back

in the United States, **J. Searle Dawley** directed a 1910 version of *Frankenstein* for Thomas Edison; at sixteen minutes, it was considerably shorter than the more famous 1931 version.

By the teens, science fiction began to branch out in several rapidly-developing cinematic forms. In 1914 science fiction was introduced to **serials** (generally shorter-length features whose storylines were continue over several episodes, usually released weekly) with the arrival of *The Exploits Of Elaine*, starring popular silent-film star Pearl White (better known as the star of *The Perils Of Pauline*) as the eponymous Elaine, a detective laden with various futuristic gadgets ranging from a portable lie-detector to a machine that can raise the dead ... as long as they've been dead very briefly. A more significant and longer-form serial emerged in Germany in 1916: *Homunculus*. This was a variation of the Frankenstein story in which scientists create a living creature, only to have it turn on them. The serial featured six episodes of one hour each (in other words, it was really long for the time), and is also notable, not for its director **Otto Rippert**, but for Rippert's assistant **Fritz Lang**, who would go on to create two immensely influential science fiction films of his own in the 1920s.

1916 also featured the debut of one of the first significant full-length science fiction films from a US film studio: *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*, from Universal Studios, who would later release some of the most significant science fiction films of the 1930s. This movie was over a hundred minutes long (which is to say, as long as today's films) and featured the innovation of underwater photography provided by George and Ernest Williamson, who shot their footage in the Bahamas.

Movies of the 1920s began to exhibit most of the elements familiar to modern filmmakers.

They were now “feature” length, and filmmakers had the expertise to create science fiction films that would be genuine landmarks for their artistry, not merely because they represented a “first”. Nowhere was this better represented than in *Metropolis*, the epochal 1927 science fiction drama by Austrian/German director **Fritz Lang** (see Canon). Lang's tale of a futuristic society torn apart by the frustration of the working class and the scheming of the ruling class featured a production design that simultaneously looked back to the cinematic feel of German Expressionism (most familiar to modern audiences in 1919's *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari* and 1922's *Nosferatu*) and forward with the architectural designs of modernism. Lang would also make another science fiction film of note: 1929's *Frau im Mond* (*The Woman In The Moon*), which featured a semi-realistic rocket trip to the moon, complete with zero-gravity (Lang even hired an actual rocket engineer to design the film's rocket). Interestingly, this film was eventually withdrawn from release when the German government decided that the film's fictional rocket was too close in detail to the rockets they were actually creating.

Metropolis and *Frau im Mond* were not the only landmark science fiction films of the 1920s. In the US, *The Lost World* (1925) utilized the new special-effects technology of “stop-motion animation”, pioneered by filmmaker **Willis O'Brien**, to create a film landscape inhabited by realistic roaming dinosaurs. The 20s also saw the arrival of Russian science fiction cinema with the beautifully realised *Aelita: Queen Of Mars* (1924, see p.273), in which an engineer and a revolutionary from Soviet Russia travel to a capitalist Mars and foment a workers' revolution there. This film remains a masterpiece and was popular enough in the USSR that parents named their newborns after the film's title character.



Aelita: Queen Of Mars

By the end of the 1920s, sound was working its way into science fiction films as well as in other genres. Two of the earliest sound pictures in the SF genre were the 1928 UK film *High Treason*, a futuristic anti-war film (released in both sound and silent versions), and 1929's *The Mysterious Island*, starring Lionel Barrymore. This film not only featured sound in two film sequences, but also colour (although reportedly no colour prints of the film now exist). *Mysterious Island* also deserves note as one of the first major science fiction films to go drastically over budget: the film cost over one million dollars, took three years to complete and went through three directors (it was eventually credited to Lucien Hubbard, who also wrote the screenplay).



The Lost World

dir Harry O. Hoyt, 1925, US, 64m, b/w

This film and *King Kong* stand as the greatest work of Willis O'Brien, the animation pioneer who taught Ray Harryhausen. Wallace Beery plays a professor obsessed with finding dinosaurs in the modern world. Surprise! He finds them. The title of this film was rather shamelessly (and consciously) nicked for the *Jurassic Park* sequel.



High Treason

dir Maurice Elvey, 1928, UK, b/w

Billed as "The Peace Picture", this film tells of the attempt to avert a second world war – in 1940, no less – between "United Europe" and the "Atlantic States". As the "Atlantic States" are read to be the US and the UK, and "Europe" is everyone else, there is a certain *frisson* for modern audiences. This film was one of the first "talkies," although silent versions were also produced.

The 1930s & 40s: Mad scientists and serials

By the 1930s movies were an unparalleled mass medium with, worldwide, 250 million people heading to the cinemas every week. This was the time when science fiction went Hollywood, as American studios looked to thrill and chill moviegoers – and to suck quarters from their pockets – with movies that combined elements of science fiction and horror.

Many of these hybrids were churned out at **Universal Studios**, which had, during the teens and 20s, been a low-budget studio, with only the occasional ambitious project, such as *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*. In 1929, however, producer **Carl Laemmle Jr.** took control of the studio his father had founded in 1912, and moved to create higher-quality and more stylish films. The climax of his efforts was a now-classic series of horror and science fiction films, including 1931's celebrated *Frankenstein*, the film which propelled actor **Boris Karloff** to worldwide fame as “The Monster”.

The “mad scientist” theme at the centre of the story, tinkering with the forces of nature and paying for it, resonated with 1930s audiences, who had lately been confronted with a number of world-changing scientific ideas, from relativity to evolution. This audience also craved a spooky escape from the realities of Depression-era life (the 1930s also being the golden era of screwball comedies, another favourite way to forget the unfunny realities of this period).

After the success of *Frankenstein*, Universal would revisit the concept of the mad scientist numerous times in the 1930s. *The Invisible Man* (1933) featured **Claude Rains** (in his major film debut) as a scientist who creates a potion that

makes him invisible – and insane. 1935 provided *Bride Of Frankenstein* (see Canon), the superior Universal sequel, which featured not one, but two mad scientists. 1936 saw Universal pair up horror stars Karloff and **Bela Lugosi** for *The Invisible Ray*, with Karloff getting a chance to play the mad scientist, contaminated and then driven insane by radioactive “Radium X” (and presupposing many of the atomic terror films of the 1950s).

Universal was the acknowledged leader of the horror/sci-fi pack in the 1930s, but other studios made their share as well. One of the most successful was Adolph Zukor's **Paramount Pictures**, which produced two classic mad scientist flicks: 1931's excellent *Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde* and 1933's *The Island Of Lost Souls*, the latter being the first major film production of H.G. Wells' novel *The Island Of Dr Moreau*, in which the story's mad scientist melds humans and animals to not exactly good effect.

Yet Hollywood was not the only film industry to serve audience hunger for mad, bad scientists. The German film industry delivered *Alraune* (1930), a film which somewhat ickily postulated the moral repercussions of artificial insemination (the mad doctor in this film inseminates a prostitute with the sperm of a criminal); then came Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse* series of films; though more police thrillers than sci-fi, they featured a hypnotically persuasive evil doctor doing a series of dastardly deeds. The half-Jewish Lang completed the last of the *Mabuse* series in 1933, then decamped to Hollywood to avoid Nazi scrutiny.

Universal Pictures was also at this time catering to the Saturday-morning-matinee crowd of youngsters with serials in the traditional “science fiction” vein, complete with rocket ships and ray guns. The most memorable of these were the three *Flash Gordon* serials of 1936, 1937 and 1940 (see Canon), each starring former Olympic



Buster Crabbe looks to the skies as Flash Gordon

swimmer **Buster Crabbe** as the famous cartoon hero turned morning-matinee idol. He weekly saved the helpless planet Earth (and the equally helpless heroine **Dale Arden**) from the machinations of the evil **Ming the Merciless** (see Icons). By any objective standard, these serials weren't very good – they featured slapdash scripts, laughable special effects, and terrible acting. But then as now, a roomful of 6- to- 10-year-olds is not the most critically demanding audience, and the *Flash Gordon* serial was tremendously popular. The series would also have an immense effect on the young mind of one George Lucas.

Crabbe also fronted another Universal science fiction serial: *Buck Rogers* (1939). But, other studios were also competing for the kids' eyeballs.

Low-rent Republic Studios, best known for their Westerns, also pulled off a couple of science fiction serials in the 1930s, including 1936's *Undersea Kingdom*, in which star Ray "Crash" Corrigan – playing a character named "Crash Corrigan" – travels under the sea to find the cause of massive earthquakes; along the way, he discovers Atlantis (ruled by Hun descendants, of course!) and an undersea civil war. *Undersea Kingdom* was codirected by longtime Western specialist **B. Reeves Eason**, who the year before codirected one of the strangest science fiction movie serials ever: *The Phantom Empire*, starring cowboy icon **Gene Autry** as himself; the serial finds Autry in the interesting position of having a lost empire of technologically advanced humans hidden beneath his ranch. It's the first and, probably thankfully, only, Western-sci-fi-musical serial.

In contrast to the 1930s, the 1940s was a fallow decade for science fiction. The American film studios, having hit upon a science fiction/horror formula that worked more or less on autopilot, proceeded to grind the genre into the ground with a host of B-films and half-hearted rehashes of popular 30s films and themes. *Frankenstein* and *Bride Of Frankenstein* gave way to money grabs like *Frankenstein Meets The Wolf Man* (1943), *House Of Frankenstein* (1944) and *Abbot & Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). *The Invisible Man* began the inferior *The Invisible Man Returns* (1940), albeit that film benefited from one of Vincent Price's earliest appearances in the movies.

There was also the small matter of World War II. Europe's film industry was on hold, and outside of a few minor films, Hollywood didn't see fit to mix feature-film science fiction with patriotic war themes. One of the exceptions was 1942's *Invisible Agent*, in which the grandson of the original Invisible Man goes transparent to steal secrets from the Nazis. But by and large

Flying saucer attack

Despite science fiction's long lineage, little green men have not always traversed the cosmos in disk-like vessels; the classic icon of science fiction, the flying saucer, didn't make its debut until 1949 when one appeared in the Columbia serial *Bruce Gentry – Daredevil Of The Skies*.

the public's taste drifted away from science fiction fantasies, both during and immediately after WWII. The only arguably significant science fiction film of the 1940s was Hal Roach's *One Million BC* (1940), a special-effects extravaganza that was particularly hard on the animals used as stand-ins for dinosaurs; their treatment – which included fins being glued onto their body parts – prompted protests from the ASPCA. Despite these accusations of cruelty, the film's effects were later mined for stock photography and showed up in films as late as 1961.

One area in which science fiction themes remained relatively strong during the 1940s was serials, which continued to cater to a younger and less discriminating audience. Republic Studios in particular kept science fiction going with serials such as *The Adventures Of Captain Marvel* (1941), which popularized the off-brand Fawcett Comics superhero (the serial had been developed for the more popular Superman, but Superman's then-owner, National Comics, chose not to have the Man of Steel participate). Republic also churned out 1948's *The Purple Shadow Strikes*, in which a former secret-service agent hunts down a nefarious invader from Mars, and 1949's *King Of The Rocket Men*, where the series' hero dons a back-mounted rocket pack to fight the evil Dr. Vulcan.

Despite science fiction's persistence with serials, it was in a rut as a film genre by the close of the 1940s.



Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde

dir Rouben Mamoulian, 1931, US, 98m, b/w

In this classic tale the mild-mannered doctor quaffs a concoction that turns him into a homicidal maniac. The film garnered star Fredric March the first of his two Oscars – and in doing so March became one of the very few actors to win an Academy Award for a performance in either the science fiction or horror genre.



The Invisible Ray

dir Lambert Hillyer, 1936, US, 80m, b/w

Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, together again in a standard-issue tale of a scientist, exposed to a radioactive meteorite, who stalks colleagues when the antidote (fashioned by Lugosi) drives him mad. This is why you should always carry a Geiger counter. Worth catching late at night.



One Million BC

dir Hal Roach, 1940, US, 80m, b/w

An exiled tribesman (Victor Mature) meets up with a more peaceful tribe and then helps protect it from dinosaurs that look suspiciously like lizards shot in close-up. What can you say, it was another time, and the effects were nominated for an Oscar (as was its musical score). Goofy but enjoyable.

The 1950s: The Golden Age of sci-fi film

But there was good news ahead. As the 1950s dawned, three factors made science fiction cinema ripe for reinvention.

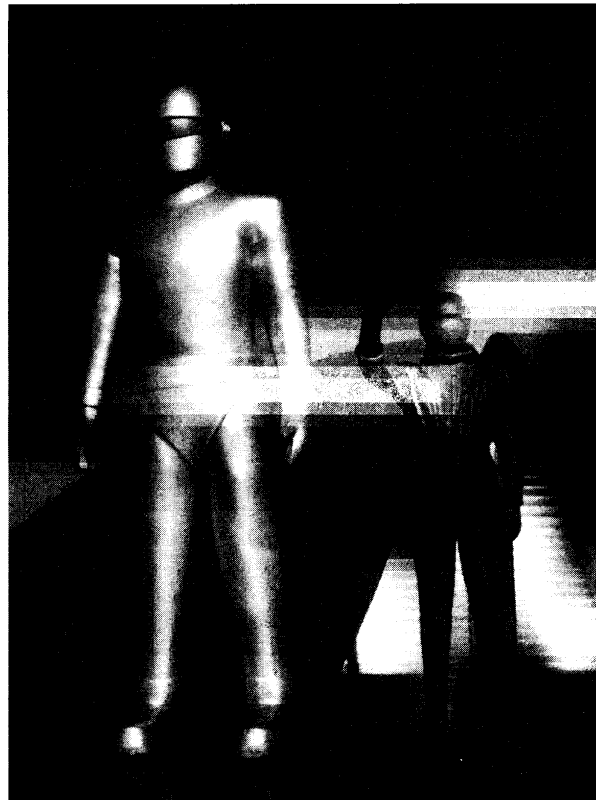
First, atomic weapons of WWII had dramatically shown both the potential and dangers of science and technology; the promise of cheap atomic energy to power the home of the future had an optimistic appeal, while the spectre of

the mushroom cloud simultaneously hung heavy in the public's mind and spurred the imagination of science fiction writers and screenwriters. Second, the United States and the Soviet Union began their long Cold War, providing the US and Western Europe with a paranoid edge to their generally optimistic view of the future. Third, in the 1940s, while science fiction films had lain fallow, science fiction literature had its "golden age", in which writers such as **Robert Heinlein** imagined legions of competent, can-do scientists and adventurers leading the way toward a better (or at least, more interesting) future.

Each of these factors spurred the creation of new variations on the fiction film theme. The golden age of science fiction literature directly fueled the first significant science fiction film of the 1950s – *Destination Moon* (1950; see Canon), based on a story by Robert Heinlein, featuring the designs of space illustrator **Chesley Bonestell** and produced by **George Pal** (sci-fi's first truly important producer). After years of mostly fantastical science fiction, the "realistic" edge of *Destination Moon* made an impact with audiences, and allowed Pal to produce (and sometimes direct) some of the 1950s' most memorable science fiction films, including *When Worlds Collide* (1951) and *War Of The Worlds* (1953; see Canon).

The Cold War and the long shadow of paranoia it cast made themselves felt in a new generation of science fiction thrillers – humanity was threatened time and again by incomprehensible creatures from outer space. Depending on your outlook, these creatures were metaphorical proxies for either the Soviets or for the anti-communists – particularly in the government of the United States – who engaged in witch hunts of former communists in Hollywood and other creative circles and who seemingly demanded lock-step conformity in thought from all citizens.

The bitter fruit of these two conjoined in *The Thing From Another World* (1951; see Canon), in which a crash-landed alien threatens an ice-bound military outpost; *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), in which aliens crash-land and slowly take over the bodies of the citizens in a small town (in 3D!); and *Invaders From Mars* (1953), another invasion tale, this time told from the point of view of a kid, who sees the menace all around him yet – as a child – is seemingly powerless to



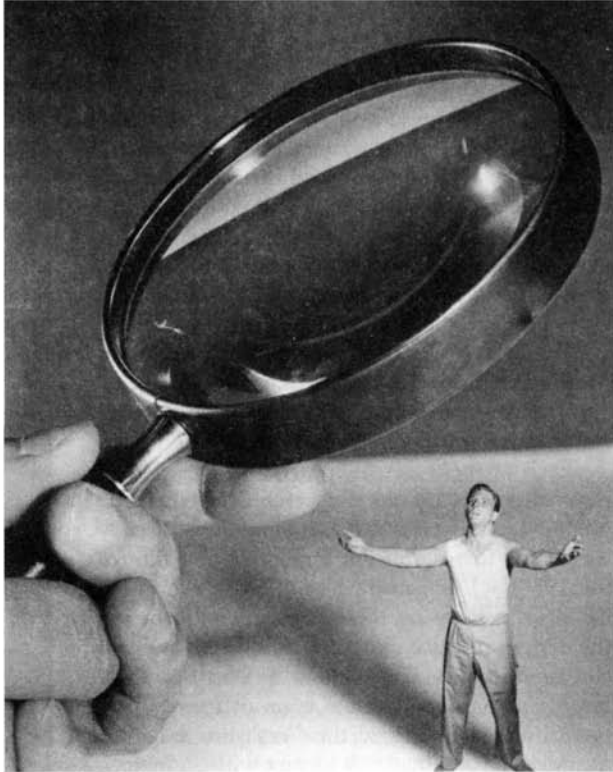
A 50s classic – *The Day The Earth Stood Still*

stop it. The acknowledged high point of the paranoid science fiction thriller came with *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* (1956; see Canon), directed by Don Siegel; again, stealthy aliens are replacing townspeople one by one. This is the film generally muted as a parable about the anti-Communist witch hunts that plagued Hollywood (and much of its creative class) during the 1950s.

An interesting counterpoint to the general vein of paranoid thrillers came in the form of Robert Wise's 1951 classic *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (see Canon), in which an alien lands on the Mall in Washington, DC (with his pet robot) and appears to come in peace – at least until someone opens fire on him. It's the *humans* who behave poorly throughout this film (and the alien who appears noble).

But it was in the glow of the atomic bomb that 1950s science fiction found its greatest stereotype: the “atomic monster”. In atomic monster movies, scientists fiddling around with radiation or detonating an atomic bomb end up irradiating some poor creature (or swarm of creatures), who then grow to immense size – in violation of all physical laws – and attack the metropolitan area most congenial to the film's plot. The viewer, to the extent that he or she is encouraged to think at all, is left to associate the monster's devastation with the devastation of nuclear attack (sometimes for plot variety, a chemical incident is the proximate cause of the mutation, but the basic idea is the same).

This plot surfaced, as it were, in 1953's *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (a dinosaur awakened by an atomic blast wreaks havoc on New York);



The Incredible Shrinking Man

in its wake followed monster features *Them!* (1954), *It Came From Beneath The Sea* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955), *The Monster That Challenged The World* (1957) and many, many others. Nor did humans escape the wrath of radiation, which both shrunk them (*The Incredible Shrinking Man*, 1957) and caused them to grow to immense size (*The Amazing Colossal Man*, 1957, and – a classic – *Attack Of The 50 Foot Woman*, 1958).

The most famous of all atomic monsters, **Gojira** (aka Godzilla; see Canon), fittingly hails from Japan, the only country to have had nuclear weapons used upon it. The creature first rose

from the waters of Japan to squash Tokyo and other Japanese cities in 1954. While filmmakers of other nationalities may have thought they were being clever with their atomic allusions and warnings, Godzilla was the real thing, a zeitgeist-worthy personification of the absolutely justifiable Japanese national obsession with things atomic.

Needless to say, the movie *Gojira* (aka *Godzilla*) was immensely successful in Japan and immediately spawned numerous sequels; Japanese film studio **Toho** also quickly rushed into production a slate of other creature features, including *Rodan* (a giant flying reptile creature), which appeared in 1956. The director **Ishiro Honda** (responsible for *Godzilla*) and producer **Tomoyuki Tanaka** (who shaped the Japanese monster movie genre), also created the Japanese alien invasion genre in 1957 with *The Mysterians* (in which aliens come to earth – to breed!). Both genres would thrive in Japan and intermingle throughout the Sixties, and eventually make Japan second only to Hollywood in terms of setting the agenda for the science fiction film genre.



Destination Moon

dir **Irving Pichel, 1950, US, 92m**

This George Pal–produced film features American businessmen banding together to create a rocket capable of sending men to the moon – in order to keep space free from the bad guys (there’s your Cold War and atomic fear covered).



It Came From Outer Space

dir **Jack Arnold, 1953, US, 81m, b/w**

One of several invasion flicks in 1953 (including *War Of The Worlds*), this one establishes the sort of sneaky invasion that would be carried to a paranoid high in *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, and features a small town where a man suspects the citizens are being duplicated by aliens for their own nefarious reasons. The source material is a Ray Bradbury story, and the quality of that source material comes through.



Tarantula

dir **Jack Arnold, 1955, US, 80m, b/w**

A mad scientist creates a monster spider, not through the cheap and easy process of atomic radiation, as was the fashion in the 50s, but through pure old-school mad scientist know-how. Naturally the spider eventually develops a taste for humans. Efficiently done and if you’ve got a thing against spiders it’ll definitely give you the creeps.



The Monster That Challenged The World

dir **Arnold Laven, 1957, US, 83m, b/w**

Should you be terrified of giant, radioactive molluscs? This film would argue you should. However, as this film has pedestrian writing, acting, direction and effects, you are not likely to be convinced.



The Amazing Colossal Man

dir **Bert I. Gordon, 1957, US, 80m**

Radioactivity is at it again, this time causing a hapless military man to grow incredibly large, go mad and attack Las Vegas. Very cheesy but with serious camp appeal: you’ll enjoy the very, very large hypodermic needle prop, and what the Amazing Colossal Man does with it.



The Mysterians (Chikyu Boeigun)

dir **Ishiro Honda, 1957, Jap, 88m**

Godzilla’s director takes on this tale of aliens who come to earth asking only for a little place of their own, and also to mate with our women! This of course inspires massive xenophobia, which in turn inspires lots of choice Japanese special effects and battle scenes. Not to be confused with “good”, or even “mediocre”, but almost endearingly watchable for its mid-50s-Japanese-monster-movie-ness.



Attack Of The 50 Foot Woman

dir **Nathan Juran, 1958, US, 65m, b/w**

A film whose notoriety and value exist entirely within its title. Our heroine grows to immense size (thanks to aliens) and uses her bigness to get even with all those who have bugged her, including her husband, who is scheming to get her money. It’s bad – the sort of bad which almost (but not quite) comes around the other end and becomes entertaining. A 1990s remake with Daryl Hannah is marginally more amusing, and at least has better effects.

1960–1976: Sci-fi film grows up

The first few years of the 1960s saw science fiction continuing themes established in the 1950s. There were **George Pal** spectacles (*The Time Machine*, 1960), a few paranoid SF thrillers (UK's *Village Of The Damned*, with creepy and possibly alien children, 1960), a few atomic mutants (*The Beast Of Yucca Flats*, 1961, which featured wrestler **Tor Johnson** turning into a mutant creature) and lots of Godzilla movies. But as with the 1940s, the overall quality of the genre films were slipping (admittedly, with the monster movies, there was not too far to slip).

However, by the mid-60s, edgy and avant-garde directors had begun to play with the genre. A trio of French “new wave” directors took on sci-fi in the 1960s: **Jean-Luc Godard** satirized both science fiction and detective *noir* with 1965's *Alphaville* (whose hero Lemmy Caution travels through space in a banged-up Ford; see Canon), while **François Truffaut** essayed author Ray Bradbury's dystopic story *Fahrenheit 451* in 1966. And in 1968 **Roger Vadim** introduced the concept of soft-core camp to science fiction with the outrageous *Barbarella*, starring the sexy (then Vadim's-spouse) **Jane Fonda** as the buxom title character. Each of these films gave the increasingly staid world of science fiction film a much-needed shake-up, and hinted that more was to come.

As it happened, 1968 turned out to be an epochal year for science fiction, not just for Vadim's *Barbarella* (though that didn't hurt) but because of two other films: *Planet Of The Apes* (see Canon), starring **Charlton Heston** as an astronaut who lands on a planet filled with talking apes, and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (see Canon).

2001 was, and remains, *sui generis* in science fiction; no English-language sci-fi film comes even remotely close to it in terms of inspired strangeness (1973's Russian film *Solaris* – see Canon – is the one film in any language that gives Kubrick's classic a run for its money). What its production suggested – and its commercial and artistic success bore out – was that science fiction themes could be applied in artful and cinematically brilliant ways; no science fiction film since Lang's *Metropolis* had used such a stunning visual vocabulary. Here was a science fiction film that even the snootiest of film snobs could love.

As for *Planet Of The Apes*, the film's story and action played out superficially as standard-issue science fiction, but the downbeat and surprising



Jane Fonda as *Barbarella*

ending was also ineffably elegant. It was more than just a *Twilight Zone*-esque punch to the plot, it suggested that science fiction film was at the cusp of an era where happy endings couldn't be taken for granted, and audience expectations could be jolted by writers and directors.

Indeed, as the 70s dawned, the recurring themes in science fiction were dark ones: technology running amuck, and the future of humanity spinning out of control. The technological fears that spurred mad scientist films in the 1930s and monster films in the 1950s were now expanded to envision the decline and fall of human civilization. Charlton Heston, who a decade earlier had been the icon of the historical Hollywood epic, became the avatar of this darker new era of science fiction. After *Planet Of The Apes* he starred in *The Omega Man* (1971), which found him battling mutants after a world-circling plague; in *Soylent Green* (1973) he was a cop in a world where food had run scarce and overpopulation was rampant.

Beyond Heston's contributions was a raft of films with depressing themes. *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), based on author **Michael Crichton's** first best-selling novel, featured a space-borne virus strain that could wipe out the human race (a clever reversal of *The War Of The Worlds*). Crichton would figure again as writer and director of 1973's *Westworld*, in which a **Yul Brynner**-shaped robot at a futuristic theme park starts killing the guests. Visions of an overtaxed and overpolluted Earth would figure in films such as *Silent Running* (1971), which transported the forests of Earth to spacecraft parked above Saturn. Even lighter fare, such as *Logan's Run* (1976), featured a distinctly sinister edge – the film describes a paradise built on the bones of a failed civilization (ours), but in which everyone is publicly executed when they reach the end of their third decade. It was the final reduction of the hippie slogan "Never Trust Anyone Over 30". Dystopian futures would also find their



Woody Allen in *Sleeper*

way to the screen in Stanley Kubrick's second science fiction masterpiece, *A Clockwork Orange* (1970; see Canon), and in **George Lucas's** icy feature film debut, *THX 1138* (1971). Science fiction films of the late 60s and early 70s were enough of a downer that **Woody Allen's** satire of the genre, 1973's *Sleeper* (see Canon), was welcomed by audiences with something akin to a small, delighted sigh of relief.



Fahrenheit 451

dir François Truffaut, 1966, GB, 112m

Ray Bradbury's paean to the power of literacy gets an interesting treatment by Truffaut, who seems marginally less interested in the tragedy of the totalitarian society than he does in showing the emptiness of a bourgeois lifestyle, which is not necessarily the same thing. No matter; there are great, evocative images here that make it worth seeing. Director Frank Darabont (*The Shawshank Redemption*) is soon to make a new version.



Barbarella

dir Roger Vadim, 1968, US, 98m

Before she was infamous as "Hanoi Jane", Jane Fonda was famous as a sex kitten, a reputation based largely on this silly, sex-science-fiction farce, in which Fonda emerges from a fur-lined spacecraft to confront the evil scientist Durand-Durand. Though notable for actually celebrating sex, which had not been a strong theme in the genre, sci-fi doesn't get much more ridiculous than this.



THX 1138

dir George Lucas, 1971, US, 88m

This debut was a film of such obtuseness and textual opacity that it's a miracle Lucas was allowed to ever direct again. Robert Duvall is the title character in a sterile and drugged-out future. The plot isn't much and it's clear early on that people are not Lucas's directorial forte; the much-lauded design is indeed intriguing, but it's not enough to base a film on. In 2004, Lucas released a DVD edition which fiddles with the original and adds prettier effects. The story remains as obtuse as ever.



The Omega Man

dir Boris Segal, 1971, US, 98m

It's Charlton Heston against the post-bacteriological warfare zombies in the hollowed-out husk of Los Angeles. Bet on Charlie. This is the least engaging of Heston's late 60s-early 70s science fiction trio of films, largely due to pacing and story issues, but when it kicks into gear it's diverting enough.



Logan's Run

dir Michael Anderson, 1976, US, 120m

In the future everyone is sexy, wears diaphanous tunics and lives idle lives. But you also die at 30, and if you try to run, you're hunted down and shot. Ironically, all this film's stars (Michael York, Richard Jordan and Jenny Agutter) were over 30 when they made it, which is only the first of many issues with this silly and oh-so-very-70s flick, which has emphatically not aged well; like its characters, it should probably be put down at the age of 30.

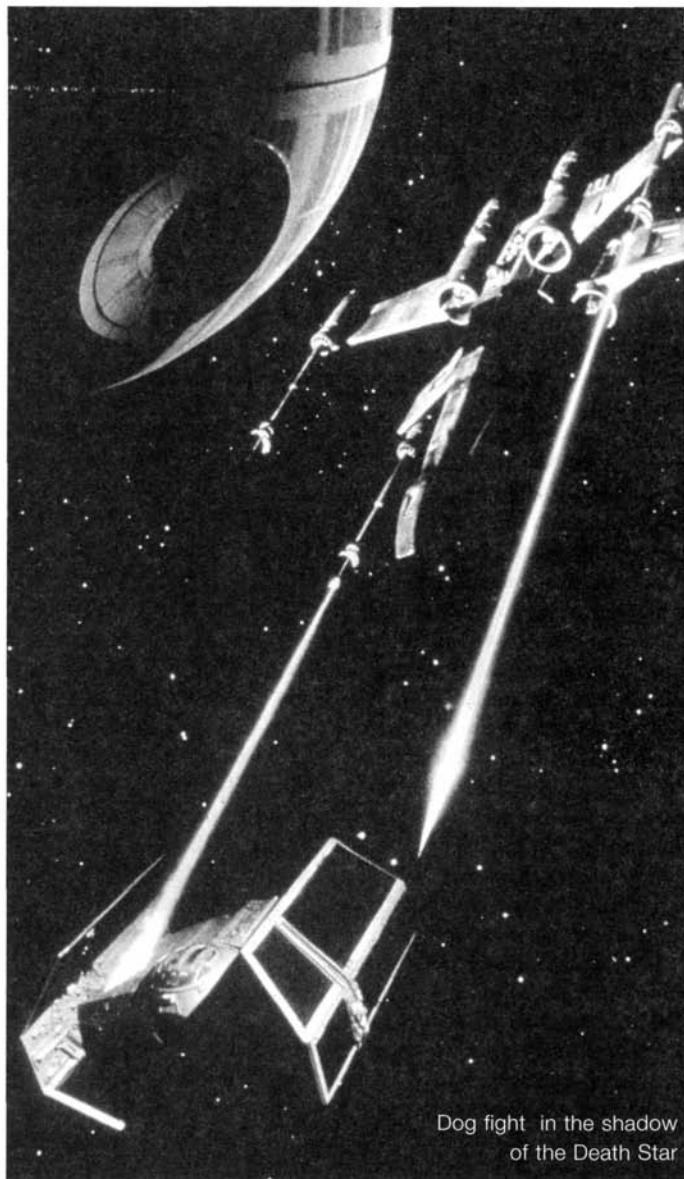
1977: Star Wars and the new era of spectacle

Given *THX 1138*, director George Lucas's own arty and inaccessible contribution to early 70s science fiction, it's puzzling to imagine that he would be the one to single-handedly overhaul the entire genre with 1977's *Star Wars* (see Canon). However, in addition to being a forward-thinking director, Lucas's storytelling also looked back. His sole non-science fiction film, *American Graffiti* (1973), was steeped in his own experiences as a youth during the early 60s; for *Star Wars*, Lucas went back even further, looking to the fun, but not at all deep, *Flash Gordon* serials of the 1930s (which he had watched on TV during the 1950s) for inspiration. To this Lucas added 1920s Fritz Lang-inspired visual design, and state-of-the-art 1970s effects technology so

new it was being created as *Star Wars* was being filmed.

Nearly thirty years on, it's difficult to overstate the significance of *Star Wars*. Its massive popular success and breathtaking look killed the previous era of depressing science fiction film stone dead and had studios and filmmakers around the world scrambling to capitalize on the globe's pent-up hunger for flashy science fiction escapism. Post-*Star Wars*, even the depressing science fiction films would have to have action and be beautiful to look at. And it left no doubt in the minds of studio heads that science fiction had jumped out of B-movie and supporting status it had occupied for so long in the hierarchy of film, and would now become a star player in its own right.

Needless to say, this rush to the special-effects jackpot produced more than its share of clunkers. The most significant of these was a film that by all rights should have been a whole lot better – 1979's *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. Based on the immensely popular US television series, the film looked beautiful (some of the special-effects people who worked on *Star Wars* also worked on it), but few other than the most die-hard Trekkers would have said that the film was either good or fun (the film's sequels would eventually correct this). Another inspired faux-epic, the deliriously campy *Flash Gordon* (1980), intentionally went retro on the special effects, but also unfortunately inherited its source material's inability to plot. One spectacle did get the balance right: 1978's *Superman* (see Canon), which deftly mixed humour



Dog fight in the shadow of the Death Star

with amazing flying sequences.

Aside from Lucas (who would stop directing the *Star Wars* films and turn the reins over to hired guns), two film directors in particular extended and enriched the idea of science fiction as spectacle. The first was Lucas's friend **Steven Spielberg**, whose *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* (see Canon) hit theatres in 1977 – the same year as *Star Wars* – and offered a contemplative counterpoint to Lucas's boy's-own adventure. The second was British tyro **Ridley Scott**, who landed a one-two punch of science fiction classics with 1979's very successful *Alien* (see Canon) and 1982's *Blade Runner* (see Canon), which was not an immediate financial hit but quickly became regarded as one of the most significant science fiction films of all time, creating as it did a genuine science fiction *noir*. Both films offered spectacle of a distinctly darker and grittier kind, with *Blade Runner* in particular fusing the dystopic sensibility of early-70s sci-fi with a look and feel that could only have evolved post-*Star Wars*.

Lucas, Spielberg and Scott made the case for science fiction as spectacle, to the delight of audiences and to the horror of film snobs, who felt that the blockbuster effect drove studios to make ever-flashier films with ever-thinner stories. So it was with no small irony that in 1982 Spielberg tossed spectacle aside to make *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (see Canon). *E.T.* did not lack for special effects, but its scale was almost absurdly tiny – much of the film taking place in and around a boy's suburban home. *E.T.* was intensely character-driven, focused on relationships and was a classic tear-jerker. The film became the largest money-grosser of Hollywood's history for a decade and a half, until the 1997 re-release of *Star Wars* reclaimed the title.

As with *Star Wars*, *E.T.*'s immense success had a direct effect on the tone of science fiction



Alien – "In space no one can hear you scream"

Before and after *Star Wars*

Prior to *Star Wars*, there was only ever one science fiction film that was the top-grossing movie of its year: *Frankenstein*, in 1931 (which can equally be considered a horror film). Occasionally a science fiction film would make it into the top five or ten highest-grossing films of a year (*Planet Of The Apes*, 1968; *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*, 1955), but by and large they were not the big moneymakers: that distinction was held by musicals, historical epics and comedies. Excluding *Frankenstein*, no sci-fi film was in the top ten highest-grossing flicks of any decade from the 1920s through the 60s.

Star Wars changed everything. Of the top ten biggest films of the 1970s, four were science fiction: *Star Wars*, and then *Close Encounters*, *Superman* and *Moonraker*. The three latter titles were all released in the wake of *Star Wars*.

During the 1980s, four more science fiction films were among the decade's boxoffice smashes (*E.T.*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return Of The Jedi* and *Back To The Future*); in the 1990s, six of the top ten

were sci-fi (*The Phantom Menace*, *Jurassic Park*, *Independence Day*, *The Lost World*, *Men In Black* and *Armageddon*).

Now, even as it becomes clear that science fiction gained cultural and economic legitimacy, we need to be careful not to overstress its influence. While science fiction became a far more popular genre after *Star Wars*, it was by no means the most popular genre of all since 1977.

In 1980, for example, *The Empire Strikes Back* was far and away the most financially successful film of the year – but also the only science fiction film to land in the top twenty list. Comedy was the most popular genre of the year, with eleven of the top twenty films. Further, in 1988 and 1992 there were no science fiction films in the top twenty.

Since the turn of the century, however, science fiction has been on a hot streak; year on, sci-fi is holding its own in the big bucks chart. It's a fine time to be either a science fiction film fan or investor.

films that were made in its wake. As a producer, Spielberg helped to create a family-friendly variation of sci-fi in the 1980s that included popular comedies such as *Back To The Future* (1985), its two sequels, and other, slighter fare.

These films were a stark contrast to the sci-fi/horror releases of the day; other than those of the *Alien* series, a couple worth catching include the Ken Russell-directed *Altered States* (1980) and from Jack Sholder, *The Hidden* (1987).

At the same time, a harder-edged, action-based variant of science fiction was clawing its way out of the B-movie studios. The first shot was fired from Australia, with 1979's *Mad Max* and in 1982

its sequel, *The Road Warrior* (see Canon), which received far better distribution than its predecessor and made a star out of a young Mel Gibson. *The Road Warrior* was hailed by critics for its savage, nonstop action and imaginative, if depressing view of a post-holocaust future.

Another surprise from the B-movie world arose in 1984 when action director James Cameron rescued former weightlifter and future California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger from a life of *Conan The Barbarian* sequels and turned him into a science fiction icon with *The Terminator* (see Canon). In this film action and ingenuity triumphed over a miniscule budget. Cameron

The highest-grossing sci-fi films of all time...

Here are the science fiction films that have busted open box offices across the world (figures in parenthesis indicate the film's North American grosses). Numbers are as of December 31, 2004.

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| 1. Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999) | \$924.5 million |
| 2. Jurassic Park (1993) | \$914.7 million |
| 3. Spider-Man (2002) | \$821.7 million |
| 4. Independence Day (1996) | \$817.0 million |
| 5. E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial (1982) | \$792.9 million |
| 6. Spider-Man 2 (2004) | \$784.0 million |
| 7. Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977) | \$775.4 million |
| 8. The Matrix Reloaded (2003) | \$738.6 million |
| 9. Star Wars Episode II: Attack Of The Clones (2002) | \$649.5 million |
| 10. The Lost World: Jurassic Park (1997) | \$618.6 million |

Box office information: Boxoffice Mojo.com

would parlay the success of *The Terminator* into a gig directing the sequel to Ridley Scott's *Alien*, reimagining the series as pure action in *Aliens* (1986; see Canon). Schwarzenegger in turn became a mini-genre in himself with sci-fi action films such as *Predator* (1986) and *The Running Man* (1987). Science fiction action also saw the debut of one its most successful proponents, as Dutch director **Paul Verhoeven** came seemingly out of nowhere to direct *Robocop* (1987; see Canon), one the most splatter-filled and savagely satirical science fiction films ever released.



Altered States

dir **Ken Russell, 1980, US, 102m**

William Hurt ingests mushrooms, lies in an isolation tank and communes with the cosmos – and discovers that in the process he's stepped over some weird de-evolutionary line. This film started a craze for isolation tanks, which seems to indicate people were really missing the point. The original novel and the screen rewrite were done by Paddy Chayefsky, although he clashed with director Russell and had his name changed for the screenplay credit.



Predator

dir **John McTiernan, 1986, US, 107m**

A terrific flick which starts off like a commando action movie (Schwarzenegger and a team of badasses wreak havoc on some Central American rebels) but then veers wildly into sci-fi territory as an even more badass alien starts taking their skulls as souvenirs. Not the smartest movie ever, but it never takes a wrong step with the action and, alongside *The Terminator* and the second *Alien* film, is one of the genuine classic science fiction action films to be produced during the 1980s.



The Hidden

dir **Jack Sholder, 1987, US, 96m**

A space slug that is mad, bad and dangerous to know slips into the bodies of humans to make a mess of Los Angeles, and it's down to an LA detective and a really weird FBI agent to stop it. There's lots of fun, non-stop action and an appealingly grungy feel to this flick. Underrated, and worth catching.

1990s: The digital era

While the science fiction action formula was predominant as the 1990s broke, another special-effects development defined the 90s era of science fiction film – “computer-generated images”, or CGI for short, perhaps the most striking examples of which came in the *Matrix* series of philosophy-tinged action films (see Canon).

Computer graphics were nothing new (they were first used in the early 70s, while in 1982 *Tron* (see Canon) made a name for itself with its

extensive use of computer-generated environments). But in the early 1990s CGI achieved the level of realism required to allow computer effects to play out seamlessly with live action characters and events. In short, they had become “photorealistic”.

The first extensive use of photorealistic computer effects came courtesy of James Cameron, who in 1991’s *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* used the computer graphics to allow the “T-1000 model Terminator” (played by actor Robert Patrick) to turn his arms into blades and “morph” into the



Boys and their toys in *The Matrix*

shape of anyone he touched. It was an expensive effect in an expensive film (*T2* cost around 100 million dollars) but audiences loved it. Just two years later, however, Steven Spielberg topped *T2* when his computer graphics brought to life the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* (1993).

Computer graphics quickly became an effects standard in both sci-fi and other films, so much so that by 1996's *Jurassic Park* sequel *The Lost World*, moviegoers had fully come to expect totally realistic CGI dinosaurs, and by 1999's *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, the technological miracle of the wholly computer-generated Jar-Jar Binks interacting with human characters as if he was actually a flesh-and-blood character took a back seat to the fact that almost no one over the age of eight could stand the character.

With computers so faithfully re-creating the real world it was just a matter of time before filmmakers used computer effects to break the physical model of the “real” world and rebuild it in the computer's own image. “Cyberpunk” films had appeared as far back as the early 90s with 1994's interesting failure *Johnny Mnemonic* (starring **Keanu Reeves** as a cyberspace hacker) and Japan's 1995 anime mind-bender *Ghost In The Shell*, which featured a cybernetic heroine chasing an intelligent computer programme through both computer space and “meatspace”. In 1999, the directors **Andy** and **Larry Wachowski** spliced Western cyberpunk and Eastern anime style to create *The Matrix*, in which Keanu Reeves revisited the cyberspace hacker concept with far more positive results. *The Matrix's* effects (particularly the quickly overused “bullet time” slow-motion effect) set the standard for the next wave of effects films and carried home Oscars in several effects categories – no small statement when the film was up against (and slam-dunked) the revived *Star Wars* franchise.



Johnny Mnemonic

dir **Robert Longo**, 1994, US, 96m

A sort of dry run for the cyberspace extravaganza that was *The Matrix* (complete with Keanu Reeves), which is ironic, as this film was written by William Gibson, the acknowledged father of the “cyberpunk”. His vision didn't translate very well, hampered by a neophyte director (Longo, better known as a traditional artist) who let more cheese than cool creep into this flick. This could have been much more.

2000s: Sci-fi film, here and now

As the 21st century kicks into gear, there is no dominant theme to the biggest science fiction films emerging in the US – save they feature cutting-edge effects, big budgets, and the understanding that they're meant to perform as well internationally as they do in Hollywood's backyard. International box-office receipts had, prior to the 1990s, accounted for 25 to 30 percent of a US film's overall gross, but in the past 15 years this share has grown to more like 50 percent – sometimes even higher for sci-fi films. In response, Hollywood now makes more of an effort to design science fiction that travels well, in many languages and across numerous cultures.

Film snobs argue that science fiction's new commercial mandate has led to a dumbing down of the genre. This is perhaps evidenced by the patchy glut of movies that continue to get released, ranging from the highly polished mish-mash of sequels (*The Star Wars* films, the *Matrix* films), computer-animated adventures ranging from the delightful (2001's *Monsters, Inc.*; 2004's *The Incredibles*, see Canon) to the leaden (2001's *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*), and the new



X-Men (2000)

welter of superhero adventures (the *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* films, as well as the less successful *Hulk*, 2003).

This period has also witnessed a deviation between US- and UK-filmed science fiction caused by the way Hollywood's rapidly expanding budgets have outpaced UK filmmakers' ability to match pounds for dollars in the special-effects arena. Instead, UK filmmakers are cornering the market on smaller and more intelligent sci-fi fare, with a greater dependence on story than special effects. Two obvious recent examples of this are

2003's zombie-virus flick *28 Days Later* (see Canon) and 2004's genetically scrubbed technopia movie *Code 46*. Both were made with bare-bones budgets of around eight million dollars (less than half what star **Will Smith** got paid to appear in the 2004 US sci-fi extravaganza *I, Robot*) and both were undeniably brainier than nearly every mainstream US science fiction film released in the same time period.

Science fiction horror has also gotten a new lease of life, again thanks to *28 Days Later...* (2003), as well as the shlocky *Resident Evil* series,

and the nostalgic *Van Helsing* (2004) – which was specifically designed by Universal Studios to breathe new life into its franchise ghoulies, including Frankenstein’s Monster. In previous eras, one or two sub-genres of science fiction pulled the entire genre forward; here and now, science fiction (and its close cousin, fantasy) are so integral to the whole filmmaking industry that several different kinds of sci-fi are now always in play. This makes it an exciting time to be a science fiction film fan – possibly the most exciting time in the history of the film genre.

Bizarrely, the biggest influence on science fiction in the new century so far has not been a flowering sub-genre or an effects process, but a delivery system – the DVD. This medium has reinvigorated the home-viewing market and allowed fans to get a peek inside the film process with filmmaker commentary tracks, documentaries, alternate and deleted scenes, and other previously inaccessible content. These features have given sci-fi films – even the old ones – entirely new lives, and filmmakers have not been shy to exploit our willingness to shell out for each new DVD iteration of our favourite films. A fine example of this would be the *Matrix* movies, which were released first as “bare-bones” DVD packages with just a few extra features, and then rereleased in the final months of 2004 as a feature-packed, 10-DVD box set. The film industry has finally discovered a way to get audiences to pay for the same film multiple times (expanding

their profits thereby). The rich technical depth of science fiction film, and the enthusiastic audience it draws, has made it a perfect genre for the DVD generation.

As was the case at the beginning of movie history, the technology of film and the spectacle of science fiction are proving to be perfect partners.



X-Men

dir Bryan Singer, 2000, US, 104m

A successful but sterile and sombre take on the popular mutant comic book superheroes, who battle to keep Magneto (Ian McKellen) from turning a UN delegation into mutants. The film takes itself a smidgen too seriously, and the action, while plentiful, seems off its own beat. Director Singer does a rather better job with the 2003 sequel, so it’s worth watching this one to get to that one.



Hulk

dir Ang Lee, 2003, US, 138m

Director Ang Lee was not the intuitive choice to interpret a comic book movie, and this flick shows why: it’s overlong, over-serious and, despite Lee’s almost jazzy use of comic-book-like frames to bracket the images of his big green hero, the overall feel of the film is best described as lugubrious. A disappointment.



Van Helsing

dir Stephen Sommers, 2004, US, 132m

A blatant and cynical attempt by Universal to milk some coin from its famous monster properties, including Frankenstein, Dracula and the Wolf Man. Jackman plays the famous title character, who now acts as a sort of supernatural Dirty Harry. It’s bad, and yet – like other Stephen Sommers films – enjoyably watchable anyway.



The Canon: 50 sci-fi classics



Robbie The Robot – far and away the most famous robot prior to C-3PO and R2D2 – in 1956's *Forbidden Planet*

The Canon:

50 sci-fi classics

A Clockwork Orange

dir Stanley Kubrick, 1971, UK, 137m

cast Malcolm McDowell, Patrick Magee, Michael Bates,

Warren Clarke, John Clive, Adrienne Corri, Carl Duering

cin John Alcott *m* Ludwig van Beethoven, Wendy Carlos

It's an interesting side-note to the filmed version of *A Clockwork Orange* that **Anthony Burgess**, the writer whose book it is based upon, hated it so much that when he created a stage adaptation, a character made to look like *Orange* film director Stanley Kubrick is brutally assaulted. Kubrick's revenge, if he needed or wanted any, is simply that his filmed version is the culturally definitive version of the work.

A Clockwork Orange has a cinematic immediacy that never dates; it was shocking enough for its own time. (With its rape scenes and other episodes of "ultra-violence" it was rated "X" in the US. In the UK Kubrick had the film withdrawn after he and his family received death threats.) Three and a half decades later it's still as aggressively confrontational. In fact, it's hard to imagine that if the same film was made in today's more conservative climate, that any major film studio would touch it.

What makes it particularly unsettling is that of all the various

science fiction film dystopias – future societies that have simply gone mad – this one is the most realistic and imaginable. The future time in this film, while unspecified, is clearly only a few years on (and of course in some ways outdated today: check out the LPs in the music store), while the primary character of Alex (Malcolm McDowell in his most famous role) conforms to the established modes of teenage threat in any age. He's the leader of a gang (his "droogs") who sport uniforms of white jumpers and bowler hats; they've got their favourite music (Beethoven), and they simply don't see the point in thinking about tomorrow when the thug lifestyle is so much fun today.

Alex is a violent youth (although not a stupid one, as a thug who can reply that something is "as clear as an azure sky of deepest summer" is not without mental powers) but he has become one of his own free will, and where *Orange* swings into science fiction is in the aversion therapy that the captured Alex undergoes to "cure" him of his violent urges (in the famous "eyelids" scene, which reportedly, and ironically, left McDowell with a lifelong aversion to eyedrops), and which coincidentally and critically deprives the character of the joy that Beethoven provided him.

The film asks whether the price of free will is having people like Alex hanging around, ready to jump you in the dark, and whether the price of social order is the neutering of free will. It also drops you into a world that clearly needs to be blown up a bit, and also suggests that left to his own free will, Alex will cheerfully do more of the "ol' ultra-violence". You can feel Kubrick taking a perverse delight in forcing his audience into trying to decide which of these entirely negative outcomes is the lesser of two evils.

Beyond the twisty moral conundrums of the story, Kubrick creates a visual and aural feast, jammed to the gills with cinematic iconography (note the kids dressed up like droogs for Halloween) and adds Wendy Carlos's groundbreaking synthesizer score to the mix. It's all very impressive and as such is one of the few science fiction films (and one of only two X-rated films) to get a Best Picture Academy Award nomination, as well as Best Director and Best Screenplay nominations for Kubrick (it would lose all of them to *The French Connection*). Burgess might have hated this film, but he's in the minority.



Malcolm McDowell as the violent Alex

The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension!

dir W.D. Richter, 1984, US, 103m

cast Peter Weller, John Lithgow, Ellen Barkin, Jeff

Goldblum cin Fred J. Koenkamp *m* Michael Boddicker

Buckaroo Banzai is arguably the greatest science fiction geek film ever made – to the point that it's not merely a movie but a personality detection device. If you watch this film and find it unbearably amusing, you are a geek, in a deep and profound way. If it strikes you as dorkish nonsense, you are a normal human being. Either way, you'll undoubtedly feel fortunate that you feel the way you do about the film. It's the science fiction film equivalent of the classic faux-rockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984): a comedy that plays to a subculture so well that it becomes its own reference point.

Buckaroo is beloved by geeks for two reasons. The first is that Buckaroo Banzai (played by **Peter Weller**) is who every geek secretly imagines himself to be; he is someone so geeky that he shoots out the other side and becomes cool. Buckaroo Banzai is a rocket scientist, neurosurgeon and rock'n'roll star (his band comprises himself and several other scientists who are handy with musical instruments), and he sits astride a vast scientific/entertainment empire which encompasses both esoteric research (with watermelons) and comic books. And he gets to save the earth from destruction at the hands of an unhinged scientist (**John Lithgow**) possessed by aliens from the 8th dimension.

The second reason geeks love this film is that it's filled with geek humour – a sort of breathlessly smart, overcompensatingly clever scattershot approach to funny that for non-geeks feels like it's coming from the guy in your science class who never quite got



Peter Weller as the multi-talented
Buckaroo Banzai

the concept of “personal space”. The film is jammed with one-liners that crack up the dorks (“Lithium is no longer available on credit”, “Laugh while you can, monkey boy!”, “No matter where you go, there you are”), and while the film doesn’t ever quite gel as a story, that’s a small price to pay for moment after moment of pure geek pleasure. The scene where the President of the United States is presented with “The Declaration of War: The Short Form” alone makes the film worth viewing.

Don’t be ashamed to laugh at this movie; just be aware of what that laugh says about you.

Akira

dir Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988, Jap, 124m

cast Mitsuo Iwata (voice), Nozomu Sasaki (voice), Mami Koyama (voice), Tetsusho Genda (voice)

cin Katsuji Misawa m Shoji Yamashiro

One of the great joys of *Akira* is showing it to someone whose only contact with animation has been through Disney and Saturday morning cartoons – they are utterly unprepared for what comes next. *Akira* is a loosely organized, impressively violent and ultimately absolutely ravishing work of anime that is to that genre what *2001: A Space Odyssey* is to science fiction in general. On its release, the film announced that anime was capable of more than entertainment; it was capable of genuine art.

That is, if you can handle the violence. The movie opens with two motorcycle gangs bashing the hell out of each other on the highways of Neo-Tokyo of 2019 (the original Tokyo having been obliterated in what appears to be a nuclear exchange, precipitating World War III). These scenes are lovingly detailed and viscerally exciting in ways that live-action can never be; the pile-on action is maintained at this pace throughout the film. It's during this motorbike adventure that the punk Tetsuo comes face to face with a weirdly pale and withered child with telekinetic powers – these abilities accidentally trigger latent powers in Tetsuo as well.

As this young punk's telekinetic strength grows, he becomes the subject of a tug-of-war between the military powers of Neo-Tokyo, the cadre of anarchic revolutionaries – a trio of creepy kids with psychic powers. These forces fight and fight again, trying to get to Tetsuo, who after years of being set-upon has his own plans for the magnificent powers he's suddenly been given.

As with many other landmark science fiction films, from *Metropolis* to *Star Wars* to *Blade Runner*, story is not *Akira*'s strong point, particularly in the final 20 minutes of the film, when all hell breaks loose in an Olympic stadium. *Akira* is more interested in the moorings of its own environment: the presentation of a slip in reality which turns the world upside down. Pivotal to this idea is a sense of the downtrodden rising and (perhaps unwisely) making up for



Motorbikes and mayhem on the streets of Neo Tokyo in *Akira*

years of oppression, of the powerful becoming powerless, and of the material world being all too permeable to a weirder and yet more real universe. Creator **Katsuhiro Otomo**, who began the story as a manga, or Japanese comic book, has an assured sense of what it takes to yank reality out from under the viewer: you really haven't lived until you see scenes with ten-foot teddy bears that bleed milk.

There were rumours during the 1990s that Sony had considered remaking *Akira* as a live action film, but then balked when cost estimates for the film rose past \$300 million. Whether this is true or not, this is one film which should not be remade in any form; it is, simply, the pinnacle of anime to date, which is, again, why it's so much fun to show to people who don't know what anime is. Sadly – or not, depending on your point of view – this is becoming more difficult to do as anime becomes more popular in Western cultures. But there are still a few out there yet to discover the wonders of anime. There is still fun to be had with this one.

Alien

dir Ridley Scott, 1979, US, 117m

cast Sigourney Weaver, Tom Skerritt, John Hurt, Ian Holm, Harrey Dean Stanton, Veronica Cartwright

cin Derek Vanlint *m* Jerry Goldsmith

The *Alien* films boast a strong slate of directors. Each of the first four movies' directors brought a unique and distinctive look and feel to their installment, and while each shared common threads, each spun those threads into distinctively different films. Each still recognizable, and each still good.

With *Alien* (which had the original working title of *Star Beast*) Ridley Scott set the bar high, establishing several elements that would repeat throughout the series. The first, of course, is the alien creature itself, created by Swiss surrealist painter **H.R. Giger**. Giger's highly stylized creature fused the biological and the mechanical as well as a strong sexual element (a recurring fusion in Giger's work

outside of the *Alien* films) and made the alien a perfectly believable predatory killing machine. *Alien* extended this stylized theme, placing the film's small, biological heroes in the vast industrial setting of the *Nostromo*, a massive cargo ship, and also in the wreckage of the alien ship – humans in large industrial spaces being the second element played across the first four films.

The third major element introduced in *Alien* is the idea that the human beings in the film are, basically, the stella equivalent of blue-collar workers. The *Nostromo*'s crew is not searching for life in space; it's trying to get home so its crew can pick up their pay checks (one of the scenes in the film has two characters arguing that the half-share they get in the profits "won't cover a search and rescue mission"). This theme, and its variations in the other films (the grunts of *Aliens*, the grubby convicts of *Alien 3* and the freebooter crew of *Alien Resurrection*) demystify space and make it closer to everyday life; this works because it's more terrifying if a guy in a baseball cap gets eaten by aliens than a guy in a shiny space toga, and also ties in with the movies' exploration of the idea of "the little people" being expendable in the eyes of the corporate powers that be. The final element is, in two words: **Sigourney Weaver**. For the first time in major studio science fiction history, it's a woman – **Ellen Ripley** – who is the resourceful, realistic hero of a film.

None of these themes would matter in the slightest if Scott hadn't also scared the hell out of his audience; fortunately Scott didn't skimp on that detail. *Alien* is packed full of jolts, including one of the great screamers in film history – the birth of the alien, through actor John Hurt's chest (Scott added a dose of realism to the shot by not telling his actors how it was going to happen; their shocked expressions are real). Scott was here developing the showy atmospheric that would become his directorial calling card, to be fully expressed in *Blade Runner*, but he also knew he was making a meat-and-potatoes horror film, in which more than half the scare lay in what was not seen. Giger's terrifyingly beautiful alien hid in Scott's masterful shadows for most of the film, popping out only to take another victim from the *Nostromo* crew. It was a mix of high, near-modernist art and low horror thrills, with explicit sexual undertones ever present in the creature's phallic incarnations and penetrating means of excruciation (just listen as **Veronica Cartwright** comes to a sticky end out of shot). These themes would be replaced by ideas of nurture and motherhood in the movie's sequel ... read on.

Jones

An often overlooked character in the first *Alien* movie is **Jones**, ship's cat aboard *The Nostromo*. Not only do his disappearing acts and general stropy feline foibles provide the film with essential plot twists and a couple of hide-behind-the-sofa moments, but he also offers a clue to Ripley's maternal undercurrent, a theme not fully explored until the movie's sequel. And then there's the beautifully realised close-up shot of the cat's face accompanied by the screams of a human shipmate being butchered – the look on Jones's face is seemingly indifferent, almost accepting of the fellow hunter now onboard.

Luckily for Jones he gets to stay at home on earth at the start of *Aliens*.

The Conrad connection

In 1977 Ridley Scott made *The Duellists*, a film based on a story by author Joseph Conrad (born 1857). Throughout the *Alien* series references to Conrad have popped up, perhaps simply as directorial tributes or perhaps as a means of amplifying themes that the films share with Conrad's works. If you want to make your own mind up, read his novels yourself.

- The freighter in *Alien* was named *The Nostromo*; *Nostromo* is also the title of a novel by Conrad.
- At the end of *Alien*, Ripley escapes in a shuttle called *Narcissus*, a reference to Conrad's novel *The Nigger Of The Narcissus*.
- This one is a little tenuous, but the name of the cat in *Alien*, Jones, is perhaps a reference to Mr Jones in Conrad's novel *Victory*.
- In Conrad's *Nostromo* there is a town named *Sulaco*, a name shared by the marines battle ship in *Aliens*.
- A ship named *The Patna* appears in Conrad's story *Lord Jim*; this is also the moniker of the space ship which is sent to retrieve Ripley at the end of the novelizations of *Alien*?

Aliens

dir James Cameron, 1986, US, 137m

cast Sigourney Weaver, Carrie Henn, Michael Biehn, Lance Henriksen *cin* Adrian Biddle *m* James Horner

Scott so well essayed the horror aspects of *Alien* that it was a palpable relief that James Cameron's sequel, *Aliens*, didn't make a stab in the direction of horror or atmospheric artifice. Instead, Cameron went in the other direction, into pure action. *Alien* had one creature, hiding in the shadows; *Aliens* had dozens, coming at the film's colonial marines from every possible angle (cinematically, at least; the film's budget was a small 18 million dollars, so there were only six alien suits made, and that's the most you'll see on screen at any one time). *Alien*'s art direction could at times be otherworldly; *Aliens*' was aggressively practical and mundane. *Alien*'s artistic metaphors were birth and death; *Aliens*' were war (Cameron has said he used Vietnam as a metaphorical element in the film) and motherhood.

The latter was Cameron's big surprise. In an action film with marines killing aliens (and vice-versa), he carved out a story that took his heroine and accentuated her maternal side through an attachment to a young girl, **Newt (Carrie Henn)**, the only survivor of a human colony overrun by aliens. This maternal side of Ripley is further explained in the extended cut of the film, available on DVD, in which we learn Ripley had a daughter who grew up, grew old and died while the hibernating Ripley spent decades floating in space between the first and second films). Cameron's triumph is that motherhood isn't an aside to the story, it's a critical element; the film's primary alien is also a mother (a hive queen, grotesquely laying eggs, being one of the film's most visually compelling images).

Weaver got a Best Actress Academy Award nomination for her role – an unheard of accolade for a science fiction film. Fans of the *Alien* films often agonize over which of the first two movies is actually better. *Alien* is better – but it's very, very close.

Alien: the saga continued



Alien³

dir David Fincher, 1992, US, 115m

After the triumphs of the first two *Alien* films, there was a significant bump down to *Alien³*, which was batted back and forth by several directors, including **Renny Harlin** (*Die Hard 2*) and **Vincent Ward** (*The Navigator*), who developed a story about aliens infesting a small forested planet inhabited by monks (this would mutate into a prison filled with violent offenders in the final film). 20th Century Fox replaced Ward at the last minute with music video director David Fincher, who was dropped in with less than total control, an incomplete script and a twitchy studio. Fincher has since declined to have anything to do with the film, including its DVD releases. The film was not cheerfully received by critics or fans (although financially did much the same business as *Aliens*). Time has improved its fortunes, in no small part because Fincher went on to make other, more popular films – notably *Seven* and *Fight Club* – which expand on the gritty, grubby look and feel he established in *Alien³*. In contrast to the cool blues and metallic surfaces of *Alien* and *Aliens*, *Alien³* is filled with raw, hot yellows, reds and oranges (particularly as the action heats up). The script is wobbly, but does feature interesting characters: **Clemens (Charles Dance)**, the disgraced doctor with whom Ripley has her first sex in decades; **Dillion (Charles Dutton)**, the scary yet charismatic leader of the convicts; and Weaver's Ripley, head famously shaved, projecting the existential weariness that her character has to have had by this point. *Alien³* ultimately falls apart, but it's one of the most interesting failed films in sci-fi.



Alien Resurrection

dir Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997, US, 109m

For *Alien Resurrection* Fox hired **Jean-Pierre Jeunet**, the French director who had co-directed the fabulous *Delicatessen* and *City Of Lost Children* with Marc Caro. Jeunet's take on the *Alien* universe was dank, moody

and featured just a hint of cartoon surreality. On a visual level, the film is OK, but then there's the script, by *Buffy The Vampire Slayer's* **Joss Whedon**. It's the weakest script of the series and effectively has to resort to magic to get the long-dead Ripley back on scene: she's cloned from a drop of blood two centuries after her fiery demise. Apparently her blood carries not only the Alien genes but also a robust set of Ripley's memories, and if you buy that you'll buy anything. The half-alien nature of the cloned Ripley is interesting, and Weaver does a good job with it, but the rest of the script doesn't give you much to care about. The film also makes a fatal error in casting **Winona Ryder** in a critical role; she does little more than wander around in a huff. It's a swing and a miss by Jeunet, but at least it's a mighty swing. And it gave him the exposure to go on and make *Amelie*, so it was good for something. And how about this for a future spinoff ... *Alien Vs Amelie*?



AVP: Alien Vs Predator

dir Paul W.S. Anderson, 2004, US, 101m

Apparently for this one Fox got tired of finding interesting directors for the *Alien* franchise and handed the keys to unregenerate hack **Paul W.S. Anderson** (*Mortal Kombat*, *Resident Evil*) whose moderate-but-derivative flair for visuals is negated by his complete inability to write a decent story or direct people in a believable way. Rightfully critically reviled, *AVP* is a complete waste of space, from its dumb as rocks story, which has predators and aliens squabbling on Earth and strangely responsible for ancient pyramid building all over the planet (which may be a nod to the original script of *Alien*, in which the aliens were housed not in a crashed ship but a pyramid), to its incoherent action scenes and dull humans (Sigourney Weaver went nowhere near this one). Interestingly, there are two PC video games named *Aliens Vs Predator*, and both of them have a better plot than this film. It's best to pretend this one never happened.

Alphaville

(une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution)

dir Jean-Luc Godard, 1965, Fr, 99m, b/w
cast Eddie Constantine, Anna Karina, Akim Tamiroff
cin Raoul Coutard *m* Paul Misraki

There's a scene in *Alphaville* in which two thugs are standing by while a woman is telling the hero, **Lemmy Caution** (**Eddie Constantine**), a joke. Once Eddie gets the joke, they pummel him. That's *Alphaville* in a nutshell – it's only after you get the joke that the film can knock you for six.

The joke (part of it, at least) is that director **Jean-Luc Godard's** science fiction film isn't really a science fiction film at all. The story posits the "perfect" city of Alphaville, controlled by the superintelligent computer **Alpha-60**, which deprives the citizens of choice and thought through medication, and selectively assassinates creative types. Into this milieu comes hero Lemmy Caution, to find or kill a top scientist. All of which sounds like the perfect set of ingredients for a science fiction story. But the city of Alphaville is clearly mid-20th century Paris; the vehicle Lemmy Caution uses to travel through space to Alphaville is a non-descript Ford Galaxie; the one piece of technology that Caution carries with him is a cheap camera that even other people in the film make fun of. And Alpha-60 is little more than Blinking lights, a whirring fan, and a croaking voice. Godard probably spent more on lunch than on special effects.

It's not just that Godard was making a cheap movie. The sci-fi of the film is ultimately a simple convenience. As a matter of plot, Godard could have easily set the film on Earth and been done with it. But the plot's not the point – the point is that Godard brilliantly satirizes cinematic expectations. This is a science fiction film without the special effects, an action film with exquisitely stylized action sequences (one which is entirely comprised of faked still and slow motion poses; another in which the only action you see is Caution



Eddie Constantine and Anna
Karina in *Alphaville*

shoved from one thug to another between offscreen pummellings). And *Alphaville* is a spy film in which the spy is a well-known media creation (the Lemmy Caution character was popularized by actor Constantine in other, more conventional films), and a *film noir* in which the poetic expression of love defeats cynicism. Godard recycles pop culture and revels in the transparency of artiness – note the scene where Caution and love-interest **Natacha Von Braun** (**Anna Karina**) make poses in a mirror. Godard shamelessly grafts visual and plot elements from other films, and delights in the fact that the viewer can see the stitches.

This film expects you to have done your homework; you can't get the joke of *Alphaville* if you lack the context in film and in (then-) contemporary culture. Therein lies its significance: in effect, it's the first movie in the genre that knows it's a movie. Films since, from *Sleeper* to *The Matrix*, have fed off the idea of re-evaluating and satirizing the medium and its conventions, but this is the one that showed them how to do it, and for that reason it remains a classic and will not date.

Back To The Future

dir Robert Zemeckis, 1985, US, 111m

cast Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson,

Crispin Glover, Thomas F. Wilson, Claudia Wells

cin Dean Cundey m Alan Silvestri

These days *Back To The Future* works on two levels of nostalgia: first and intentionally for the America of the 1950s, to which teenage hero **Marty McFly** (**Michael J. Fox**) travels by way of a souped-up DeLorean automobile, and secondly (and unintentionally) for the mid-1980s Reagan-era America in which the film was made and which serves as the film's "present". Indeed, from star Michael J. Fox down to the soundtrack tunes from mega-bar band **Huey Lewis And The News** to the shiny, happy veneer of the film (masking, or distracting from, some oddly perverse themes), this movie is about as 80s as it gets.

This included, of course, the presence of the film's 1950s doppel-

gänger. Back in the 80s, then—US President Ronald Reagan promised “Morning in America” during his election campaigns – a return to a simpler time, which everyone consciously or unconsciously equated with the postwar prosperity and optimism of the 1950s. But the 1950s in the US also had vicious race-relations problems, paranoid Communist witch hunts and Cold War hysteria – but no one on the campaign trail seemed to remember that.

As for the film, *Back To The Future*’s return to the 50s was practical (Marty McFly needed to meet his parents, who were teenagers during that period, and help shepherd them to their first kiss at the high-school dance), and on the surface the film’s depiction of the 50s is bright, sunny and optimistic. But scratch the surface and you see McFly’s geek father (**Crispin Glover**) tormented mercilessly by series villain **Biff Tannen** (**Thomas Wilson**) just for being alive, and McFly’s mother (**Lea Thompson**) developing an unintentionally incestuous crush on her son, and thereafter seeking him out with an intensity that’s frankly a bit stalkerish and creepy. Interestingly, Disney were offered the film, but turned it down because of the incest angle, while other film studios – looking for the next *Porky*’s – balked because the film wasn’t racy enough. One can argue about how intentional this overtly sunny/covertly dark take on the 50s was on the part of the film’s co-writers **Robert Zemeckis** and **Bob Gale** (Zemeckis also directed), but intentional or not, the movie’s got the era nailed.

The 80s portion of the film shows that the ordinariness of Marty’s 80s life is less than happy, as a result of events in his parents’ lives during the 1950s. The film’s best bit of acting – and also its saddest – has Marty’s mother recounting how she met Marty’s father and concluding that she knew then they were going to spend the rest of their lives together. The words come out as nothing more than fatigued resignation. The lesson to be learnt is that we all pay for our decisions, even when they’re made in some presumably halcyon time.

Despite all this, it’s probably a bit much to categorize the film as a subversive political tract. What social and political allusions the film makes work because, first and foremost, it’s a damned entertaining movie. It’s sharp but not cutting, smart but not intellectual (the mad scientist in the *Back To The Future* films, played by **Christopher Lloyd**, owes more to Harold Lloyd than Albert Einstein), fun but not entirely brainless. No surprise that this was the film that made Michael J. Fox a major star – his TV-honed telegenic every-teen

Back again...



Back To The Future II

dir R. Zemeckis, 1989, US, 108m

Future II features Marty McFly going forward in time to 2015 before returning again to the 1950s (taking care not to interact with himself in his earlier travels); there are loads more gags and the action just keeps rolling.



Back To The Future III

dir R. Zemeckis, 1990, US, 118m

Future III has Marty going even further back, to Wild West days. Overall, both of these films are perfectly serviceable sequels but simply don’t register as strongly as the original; ironically, it seems, for some things there is no going back.

qualities were themselves a microcosm of the film itself.

This is a film that doesn't care if you love it, but it really really wants to be liked. The film is so entertaining and safe that not only did audiences swallow the incest sub-plot, they giggled at it; they knew the film would rein it in before things got too weird. This is also the film that served notice (along with *Ghostbusters*) that science fiction, comedy and action could happily coexist in film as long as everything kept bopping along. There's a direct line from this film to 1997's *Men In Black*, and it's a line which, not entirely coincidentally, includes **Steven Spielberg** as an executive producer on both.

The wild success of the movie naturally spawned sequels, which were filmed back to back and released within a few months of each other in 1989 and 1990 (see box), prefiguring the same release pattern as the *Matrix* sequels.

Blade Runner

dir Ridley Scott, 1982, US, 117m

cast Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, M. Emmet Walsh, Daryl Hannah cin Jordan Cronenweth m Vangelis

Here is the difference between a studio executive and a filmmaker: a studio executive wants to make the next *Star Wars*. A filmmaker wants to make the next *Blade Runner*. *Star Wars* is the pinnacle of science fiction commercialism: a high-grossing film that spawned high-grossing sequels and billions of dollars worth of tie-in product. *Blade Runner*, on the other hand, did none of this. It wasn't even a hit when it originally came out. All it did was become arguably the most cinematically significant science fiction film since *Metropolis* in 1927.

Indeed, as with Fritz Lang's classic, it's difficult to overestimate the impact of *Blade Runner*, particularly its dense yet chilly urban landscapes, on the imaginations of future science fiction filmmakers and writers. Writer William Gibson, whose seminal 1984 book *Neuromancer* pushed the "cyberpunk" literary movement into high gear, confessed to being depressed when *Blade Runner* came out, since what he saw on the screen came achingly close to what Gibson

had been imagining in his own head. One even dares to suggest that *Blade Runner's* look has been lifted by the *Star Wars* series itself – refer to *Attack Of The Clones'* night-time chase through Coruscant and ask yourself whether the style of that scene owes more to George Lucas or *Blade Runner* director **Ridley Scott**.

Somewhat more trivially, *Blade Runner* – in perhaps a classic example of the filmmaker (eventually) triumphing over the studio executives – became one of the first modern films to benefit from a substantial revision of the film after its initial release. In 1982, Warner Bros. studio execs were worried that the film's story was too downbeat and too complicated for audiences to follow, so director Scott reluctantly tacked on voiceover narration from star **Harrison Ford** (whose famously bored tone in the narration is said to be intentional to express his displeasure at having to do them, although Ford himself strongly denies this) and added a happy ending, with scenery nicked from – of all films – Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. This was the version that was released (and underperformed) into the theatres. A decade later, Scott stripped out the happy ending and the narration and incorporated a few additional scenes to add more complexity to Ford's character and finagled a limited release of the film. This new edition was so widely hailed as an improvement to the original that it is now considered the definitive edition by fans and students of film alike.

The gist of the story remains the same in both versions, however. In a near future, human-looking “replicants” with super strength and four-year lifespans land on Earth (led by **Rutger Hauer** in his best English-language role), looking for a way to get to the head of the company that created them, hopefully to force an injection of sand to the hour glass of their life span. Ford's **Rick Deckard**, a “blade runner” with the expertise (if not the desire) to kill the replicants, is called in to take them out. Thrown in for moral ambiguity is **Rachael (Sean Young)**, a replicant who doesn't know she's one, and for whom Deckard develops feelings. The subtext for everyone, from the replicants who desire more life to the humans who question their own motives, is what it means to be human.

This is a question that the film and director Scott wisely evoke more than they try to answer directly. The script offers up snatches of dialogue to address the issue, often as the replicants are battling with Deckard for their lives (and vice versa), but these snippets of dialogue hardly rise to the level of actual discussion. Rather, the

The unicorn riddle

The director's cut of *Blade Runner* posited a further interesting twist to the film's story – the idea that Rick Deckard may himself be a replicant.

The strongest evidence for this idea is the inclusion of Deckard's own dream of a unicorn, and then later in the movie when Gaff, one of Deckard's blade-running colleagues, constructs an origami unicorn, perhaps signifying his knowledge of Deckard's implanted memories and innermost thoughts.

In recent years Scott has tentatively answered this question in public, though if you are new to the movie you should make your own mind up before tracking down the truth from the horse's mouth.



Harrison Ford as Rick Deckard
in *Blade Runner*

film's *noir* look and feel conspire to isolate everyone in the movie, on one level or another, from everyone else; from the sad human technician who lives with toys to keep him company; to the replicant who keeps pictures of a fake family; and to Deckard himself, whose final battle with Hauer's **Roy Batty** ends, not with the proverbial bang of an action film, but a far more subtle and satisfying whisper. The film is sometimes criticized for being thin on story, but it is there. Perhaps the people who think that have simply been distracted by the visuals.

Indeed, if there's anything wrong with *Blade Runner*, it's that it's become too successful a template for science fiction – the cyberpunk movement has mutated beyond its bounds, but *Blade Runner*'s visual look haunts science fiction cinema, diluting some of the impact of the original film. It is still possible to look at *Blade Runner* with fresh eyes, and filmmakers do, to this day, use it as reference for their own art. The question is – for how much longer?

Brazil

dir Terry Gilliam, 1985, UK, 131m

cast Jonathan Pryce, Robert De Niro, Katherine Helmond,
Ian Holm, Bob Hoskins, Michael Palin

cin Roger Pratt *m* Michael Kamen

The story of how *Brazil* director Terry Gilliam grappled with Universal Pictures to get the film released in the United States is so interesting one could write a book about it (and someone did: *The Battle Of Brazil*, by film critic Jack Mathews) and is worth repeating here simply as an example of how movie studios often simply don't know what to do with movies that also happen to be art. The short version is that Gilliam's dystopian satire (originally meant to be called *1984½* – a tribute to both Orwell and Fellini) was deemed both too long and too depressing by Universal head Sidney Sheinberg, who ordered the 140-minute edit to be recut into a 94-minute picture, which among other things lopped off the original film's bleak ending (this version is known in cinefile circles as the "Love Conquers All" version, and is available as part of Criterion's magnificent 3-DVD edition of the film).

Gilliam was naturally outraged and, after a tug of war over the release of the film, side-stepped Sheinberg by screening the longer version to the Los Angeles Film Critics Association himself, which promptly gave the film its Best Picture, Best Director and Best Screenplay awards. Universal, backed into a corner by the critical accolades, relented and released the film in the US almost as Gilliam had intended (almost, because Gilliam was contractually obligated to turn in a film no longer than 132 minutes, and so that's how long the American version is). The film was also eventually nominated for Best Screenplay and Best Art Direction Oscars, which probably rubbed salt into Sheinberg's wounds. Sticking to his guns paid off for Gilliam – he has since released two other films in the US through Universal, including the equally bleak *12 Monkeys* (see p.136).

Was it worth the effort on Gilliam's part? It certainly was. All dystopias are absurd, but some are more absurd than others, and *Brazil's* is the most absurd of all – and naturally the more chilling

for it. It's standard issue to have a totalitarian government accidentally take one of its citizens into "questioning" due to error — it's another to see it happen literally because of a bug in the system: a fly falling into a printer, causing it to misprint a name. The totalitarian love for complexity is not only shown by mountains of paper and busy work but also by the secret police's insistence on entering houses via a firepole, no matter how difficult or impractical, and by the spasms a government plumber experiences at the mere mention of "Form 27b/6".

In this absurd universe exists minor government apparatchik Sam Lowry (Jonathan Pryce) who enjoys lush daydreams (in



The extreme plastic surgery
of *Brazil* (1985)

which he has wings) and muddles through life by trying to maintain as low a profile as possible. This changes when he sees Jill (Kim Greist), the spitting image of the woman in his dreams, who is trying to find out what happened to her neighbour (the one taken thanks to the ill-fated bug). Sam's attempts to learn more inevitably raises his profile, and once that happens, it's just a matter of time before the boot comes down, and no amount of farce makes that any less devastating.

Gilliam is famously known as the sole American member of the Monty Python team – he co-directed their films and was also responsible for their baroque animated interstitials. His artful eye is never more impressive than it is here; Gilliam's *Brazil* world is made of crumbling cement and obsolete computers with magnifying-glass monitors; the rich mask their anxieties with absurd fashions (including boots for hats) and progressively extreme plastic surgery. Everything in this film reeks of overengineered poverty. It's fascinating to watch.

The overarching irony of this film, however, lives outside of it – that when Gilliam was confronted by the totalitarian regime of his own life (Universal Pictures), he was able to engineer the happy ending his film couldn't provide its hero.

Bride Of Frankenstein

dir James Whale, 1935, US, 75m, b/w

cast Boris Karloff, Colin Clive, Elsa Lanchester, Ernest

Thesiger cin John J. Mescall *m* Franz Waxman

Although generally associated with horror, both the classic *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride Of Frankenstein* certainly qualify as science fiction, in that Frankenstein's monster is reanimated not by magic, but by the (admittedly vaguely portrayed) scientific efforts of *Dr Frankenstein*. More than that, the films (and also the novel on which the films are based, by *Mary Shelley*) are the origin of a theme which recurs in science fiction films across the history of cinema – that the hubris of science leaves us open to retribution at the hands of its creations.

In all of science fiction, however, there is no creature more pathetic than the **Frankenstein monster**. Modern cultural shorthand has compressed the creature into a shuffling, grunting idiot, but that's not the creature in Shelley's novel (it is intelligent and articulate), nor on close examination is it the creature in the *Frankenstein* films, immortally portrayed by **Boris Karloff**.

Karloff's portrayal leaves no doubt that the creature is intelligent enough to know the indignities that are heaped upon it, from the moment it is shocked into life by **Dr. Frankenstein (Colin Clive)**. In the first film, the monster knows no moments of joy – he's threatened by fire as soon as he lumbers on screen (to which he reacts violently), and is clearly misunderstood and despised by his creator.

In the second film, he is briefly allowed a friend in the shape of a blind hermit, and is so overjoyed at the first kindness shown to him in his brief, awful life that he cries, which is certainly not something one would expect of the monster we now know from parodies and commercials. The monster will cry again, when it realizes that the bride made for it (**Elsa Lanchester**, whose fame in the role belies the fact her performance lasts for only a few minutes) can see nothing but terror when she looks at him. It would take science fiction cinema forty years to create another manufactured creature with a similar level of pathos (the equally self-aware and violent Roy Batty of *Blade Runner*).

Aside from the stories they tell, the two *Frankenstein* films are also fine examples of how the craft of filmmaking advanced dramatically over a few short years during the 1930s. *Frankenstein* was made in 1931, near the beginning of the "talkie" era, and to modern eyes it's archaic and feels "stagey", a testament to the film's theatrical roots (the script was adapted from a stage play of Shelley's novel). The photography work is prosaic and the film has very little music (it was felt at the time that a score would distract the viewers). *Bride Of Frankenstein* was made just four years later, but feels remarkably more modern: director Whale has freed up his camera, and experiments with striking angles and the deep-contrast potential of black-and-white film; the movie's score expertly punches the emotions onto the screen. Most of all, the script is filled with innuendo, asides and subtext – and also a great amount of humour, both broad and subtle.

It's been fashionable of late to see *Bride Of Frankenstein* as a veiled parable for director Whale's homosexuality – itself the subject of a film, 1998's *Gods And Monsters* – but while *Bride's* production

certainly bespeaks of a certain fabulousness of vision (and features a delightfully queeny performance by **Ernest Thesiger** as the black-mailing **Dr. Pretorius**), adding an underlay of gay subtext is probably a bit much. There's enough going on as it is. However, there's no doubt that *Bride Of Frankenstein* is better in nearly every way than its predecessor. Film historians will tell you that *Bride* is one of the best horror films ever, if not *the* best; they're right.

Aside from these two films, dozens of others have been made with the word "Frankenstein" somewhere in the title. Aside from **Mel Brooks'** brilliant spoof *Young Frankenstein* (which is so in love with the James Whale originals that it uses pieces of the earlier films' laboratory sets), you need not concern yourself with any of them, and that includes 1994's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, which despite the presence of **Kenneth Branagh** as Dr. Frankenstein and **Robert De Niro** as the monster, and being far more faithful an adaptation of the original novel, is nevertheless deadlier than the pre-electrified monster.

The Brother From Another Planet

dir John Sayles, 1984, US, 108m

cast Joe Morton, Daryl Edwards, Bill Cobbs, Steve

James, Leonard Jackson, Maggie Renzi, Rosetta LeNoire

cin Ernest R. Dickerson **m** Martin Brody

Here's the first science fiction film that arty types have felt comfortable watching since *2001* (or, possibly, *A Clockwork Orange*): an independent science fiction film from socially conscious and Oscar-nominated writer and director **John Sayles** (*Matewan*, *Passion Fish*, *Silver City*), in which the alien is a black man who crash-lands on Ellis Island and quickly finds his way uptown to Harlem. The movie has almost no special effects (it had a budget of a mere (\$400,000) and excepting the intentionally cheesy 1950s-like spacecraft crash-landing in the first few minutes and the fact that the main character



Battle Beyond The Stars

dir J.T. Murakami, 1980, US, 104m

Appearing in 1980 amid a wash of kid-friendly, “laser-brained” *Star Wars* knock-offs came this small glimmer of hope. Directed by **Jimmy T. Murakami**, and also featuring a young **James Cameron** on the effects crew, the movie was basically a remodel of *The Magnificent Seven* tale. There are loads of reasonably satisfying aliens and space battles, and the goodies’ space ship, which looks like a pompous slug, is alone worth the price of admission. Also check out the performance from **Richard Thomas**, who arguably does a better job than Mark Hamill did in *Star Wars*, as the wet-behind-the-ears farm boy turned hero (Thomas is of course better known as John-Boy in *The Waltons*).

has three toes on each foot and can detach an eyeball at will, it would hardly seem like sci-fi at all.

Or would it? Though Sayles has been an indie film darling for three decades, he cut at least some of his filmmaking teeth in the service of B-movie king **Roger Corman**, in the process co-writing one of the least obviously stupid *Star Wars* rip-offs – *Battle Beyond The Stars* (see box), as well as penning schlock classics *Piranha* (1978) and *Alligator* (1980). With this solid grounding he went on to make his debut directorial effort, *The Return Of The Secaucus Seven* (1980), though it wasn’t sci-fi and wasn’t good. It would be a few more years before the Corman influence came through with *The Brother*.

In the film Sayles’ unnamed main character (who everyone simply calls “The Brother”, and is played by a mute **Joe Morton**) is a stock holy-innocent and forms a line with other holy innocents from Klaatu (*The Day The Earth Stood Still*) to E.T. – the outside observer through whom we the audience get to observe the foibles of humanity, and whose simple essential goodness causes him to do minor miracles for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others. The bad guys of the film comically incorporate elements of both the blank, near-human automatons from *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* and the generic sci-fi *Men In Black*-style government agents.

What sets this film apart, and what makes it an indie lover’s dream, is the quality of its dialogue, even though the main character doesn’t speak. Morton’s character, however, provides a placid and apparently interested listener, to whom other characters confide, be they Harlem barflies, New York cops, or even lost Indiana tourists. In addition to being the window through which the audience sees the story, he’s also a mirror in which the characters see themselves.

The film, however, missteps when Sayles wraps everything up with a rather hackneyed ending. On balance, however, the movie is smart, creative, has its own distinctive voice, and is ancestral to the new wave of smart and relatively cheap science fiction films coming from Britain and elsewhere – *28 Days Later...* (2002) and *Code 46* (2003) being two more recent examples. This movie showed that intelligent science fiction can be done cheaply.

Close Encounters Of The Third Kind

dir Steven Spielberg, 1977, US, 132m

cast Richard Dreyfuss, François Truffaut, Teri Garr,
Melinda Dillon, Bob Balaban, J. Patrick McNamara
cin Vilmos Zsigmond *m* John Williams

Close Encounters exists in several versions. There's the 1977 original, as well as the Special Edition, released a couple of years later, to which Steven Spielberg added several scenes (including a new ending which takes audiences inside the spacecraft – an addition which Spielberg would later say he regretted). Yet another version has made it to DVD. The good news is that this DVD version of the film is in fact the best version – better edited, better explained and generally a better experience. The bad news is that even improved, *Close Encounters* remains one of the most overrated science fiction films in history.

To be clear: it's not an awful film. It's a very good film – Steven Spielberg, even here in his younger years, was clearly a director who could wrench an audience into whatever shape he chose. The film features some truly astonishing visual moments; you can't look at the alien mothership even now without a sense of wonder. And yet the movie's narrative is a fuzzy-headed New Age mess; you can watch it a number of times and still not figure out what the hell is supposed to be going on, or why the aliens have chosen such a hopelessly contrived way to greet humanity, by effectively giving humans a compulsion to travel to an out-of-the-way but picturesque corner of America to meet them. Say what you will about the aliens of 1950s sci-fi, once they travelled trillions of miles to meet (or eat) humanity, they would go straight to the capital.

In other words, by any objective standard, this is to Spielberg what *THX-1138* is to George Lucas, which is to say the overly ambitious science fiction film he attempted before he got the formula right (with, of course *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*, see p.84). This film's fame comes basically as a matter of the halo effect of its



*Close Encounters Of The
Third Kind*

director's reputation after *Jaws*, and the film's extreme good fortune to act as counterprogramming to that other big science fiction film of 1977: *Star Wars*. *Close Encounters*' strange, ethereal and meditative slant was the contemplative yin to the wham-bam adventure-seeking yang of *Star Wars*. Both Spielberg and Lucas ended up with Best Director nominations in 1977, marking the first and only time two directors of science fiction films were on the ballot at the same time (both lost to the rather more deserving **Woody Allen**).

Star Wars and *Close Encounters* make nice bookends for each other, but their relationship is not one of equals; *Star Wars* would have gotten along just fine without *Close Encounters*, but had *Star*

Wars not existed, *Close Encounters* would have been a moderately popular curiosity, and Spielberg's career probably would have been very different – his CV would arguably not contain such triumphs as *E.T.*, *Jurassic Park* or *Minority Report*. For these reasons alone, one should be glad that *Close Encounters* exists. And as an expansive dry run for the more intimate and affecting *E.T.* (for which Spielberg should have won a Best Director Oscar) it has value, but for itself, it's something of a gaudy bauble: pretty to look at, nicely crafted, but insubstantial.

Contact

dir Robert Zemeckis, 1997, US, 153m

cast Jodie Foster, Geoffrey Blake, William Fichtner, Sami Chester, Timothy McNeil cin Don Burgess m Alan Silvestri

Contact is a genuine curiosity in the annals, not only of science fiction, but of film in general: a 100 million-dollar box-office hit, filled with dazzling special effects and big stars, which is also as scientifically rigorous a feature as Hollywood has ever released. When heroine **Ellie Arroway** (**Jodie Foster**) goes looking for “little green men”, as she puts it, she does it by methodically analyzing radio sources in the sky – just like the real astronomers do.

The apparent attention to scientific detail is not a coincidence; the film is the adaptation of a novel by famed astronomer **Carl Sagan**, who prior to his passing, before the film's release, was passionate about explaining real-world science to a wider audience. So even when the film eventually hurtles off the rails of scientific accuracy (as it does in the final third, with a galaxy-spanning trip through a wormhole in space), it does so in a way which is at the very least vaguely related to physics as we understand it today.

So it is equally surprising – and curious – that while *Contact* uses science more or less correctly, at heart it's a film about faith, and one of the few mainstream films of any sort within the last couple of decades that explicitly confronts the challenges of faith in the modern world. Ironically, the greatest journey of faith is taken by Arroway, who is an atheist throughout the film, but is confronted

over and over by the need for faith – faith in her task, in her senses, in friendships, but most importantly in herself. Faith is a concept that comes hard to Arroway, so her journey toward it is as important as the effects-filled journey she ultimately takes to meet the aliens she's been looking for.

A popular film that treats science *or* faith with respect is hard enough to come by; one that honours both is nearly miraculous. It's one of the subtle victories of *Contact* that in the end it shows that science and faith are not necessarily in opposition and in fact can be complementary to each other. It's an idea that's worth considering as science and faith are typically seen as occupying hostile camps.

The Damned (aka These Are the Damned)

dir Joseph Losey, 1961, UK, 87m

cast Macdonald Carey, Shirley Anne Field, Oliver Reed, Alexander Knox, Walter Gotell, Viveca Lindfors

cin Arthur Grant **m** James Bernard

Hammer Films studio is best known for churning out horror flicks – most notably all those *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* films with **Christopher Lee** and **Peter Cushing**, but from time to time it tried its hand at science fiction, most notably with the various *Quatermass* films and this film, which slipped out in the wake of the success of the movie *Village Of The Damned* (1960) – and like that film featured a story of strange mutant children. But where Hammer's famous horror movies were almost inevitably lurid cheese, this science fiction film is something else entirely – cool, studied and thoughtful.

The film features a hapless American, **Simon** (**Macdonald Carey**), who is being set up by a thug named **King** (**Oliver Reed**) who sends out his comely sister **Joan** (**Shirley Ann Field**) to lure the American to where he can be conveniently nudged; later she

switches sides and hightails it with Simon, which enrages King, his feelings toward his sister being somewhat more than brotherly.

As Simon and Joan escape, they wander into a military base, in which, through contrivance, they meet a group of children who have been tucked away at the base. The children are mutants – designed to survive a nuclear holocaust, but at the cost of being radioactive themselves. Simon and Joan take pity on the children and attempt to



Shirley Anne Field being harassed by Oliver Reed (right) in *The Damned*

engineer their escape. But with a title like *The Damned*, don't expect a happy ending.

Viewers of *The Damned* tend to be split between the camps who admire the film's willingness to keep to its bleak vision and those who simply find it depressing beyond words. But with its relatively unvarnished look and direct yet complex storyline, *The Damned* was one of several sci-fi and sci-fi/horror hybrid movies (most notably *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*) that presaged other bleak science fiction views that would appear in the 1960s and 1970s, among them *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and even the popular *Planet Of The Apes* series (especially the later films). These bleak tales became the dominant form of science fiction film until *Star Wars* rekindled the adventure story and punted them aside. But *The Damned* was more than bleak; it featured a generous dollop of nihilism, which was, at the time, a distinctly new and unsettling additional element.

But being ahead of one's time is rarely a virtue in cinema land: although this film was completed in 1961, its release in the UK was held up until 1963, and it wasn't until 1965 that an edited and retitled version of the film showed up on American shores. To this day it remains a cult selection, one more influential through its impact on other filmmakers than on audiences. But for its own merits it is well worth seeking out.

The Day The Earth Stood Still

dir Robert Wise, 1951, US, 92m, b/w

cast Michael Rennie, Patricia Neal, Hugh Marlowe, Sam Jaffe, Billy Gray **cin** Leo Tover **m** Bernard Herrmann

A hit in its day, this film now seems charmingly quaint: the idea that a space saucer could park on the Mall in Washington, DC, and all the US military would do is put a lightweight fence around it is almost unfathomably naive, as is the idea that a man from space, shot by an overanxious soldier, would be taken to the wing of a hospital

where he could simply walk out – all the better to anonymously find accommodations in a DC boarding house. There’s no way this film could be remade today, at least not without rewrites so substantial as to make it utterly alien to the original. The closest thing that has come to a remake of this movie – in story and in spirit – would be *E.T.*

In this movie’s defense, it was trying something unusual: positing the idea that creatures from other planets might not necessarily be interested in taking over the planet and/or turning humans into ash, and also the idea that it was the humans, not the aliens, who exhibited the biggest threat to the universe. In the movie, the aliens send an emissary, named **Klaatu**, to make contact with us earthlings, and we respond by grievously wounding Klaatu at seemingly every convenient moment. This all points to a blatant Klaatu/Christ analogy, which, incidentally, went right over the head of director **Robert Wise**, who has professed surprise that people read religious subtexts into the film. And yet the Christ-like qualities are richly in evidence – including Klaatu’s idea to go by the name of “Carpenter” while wandering among the humans.

The film seems to present the potential for mass carnage, mostly at the hands (or laser-beaming eye visor) of **Gort**, the film’s iconic robot. But aside from the occasional vaporized soldier, whose annihilations are best filed under simple misunderstandings (and are without witness in any event), the film chooses to engage the thinking part of the brain rather than the part that pleasures in explosions.

The drawback to the film is that by the end one feels lectured to by a stern and humourless Uncle Klaatu, whose message is, basically, to stop making a mess or the aliens will be compelled to come down and clean up our messes for us, and we wouldn’t like that (although, speaking strictly as audience members, maybe we would). That said, the film makes a compelling case that science fiction cinema could be about more than shlock – that indeed, it might conceivably be able to carry a message or two and still be viewed as entertainment.

The Day The Earth Stood Still is also notable for its famous score, in which composer **Bernard Herrmann** availed himself of the Theremin – the eerie-sounding electrical instrument commonly associated with flying saucers and little green men (see p.170).

Delicatessen

dir Marc Caro/Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1991, Fr, 99m

cast Pascal Benezech, Dominique Pinon, Marie-Laure

Dougnac, Jean-Claude Dreyfus, Karin Viard

cin Darius Khondji **m** Carlos D'Alessio

Much notable French science fiction cinema has been reactive to what's been happening in science fiction elsewhere, from the anti-science fiction stance of *Alphaville* to *The Fifth Element*, Luc Besson's send-up and tribute to flashy, expensive and pointless science fiction extravaganzas. Gallic science fiction builds its own world and then inhabits it brilliantly, which brings us to the work of tandem directors **Marc Caro** and **Jean-Pierre Jeunet**. Caro-Jeunet's style might be best described as "delightful surrealism", in which the ridiculous is inevitable, but also allows for emotional resonance – in other words, absurdity with tragic depths.

Delicatessen serves as the entryway to the Caro-Jeunet universe. Most easily described as a post-apocalyptic tale of cannibalism and apartment dwelling, the film gets by initially on the joy of its own

The City Of Lost Children

Caro's and Jeunet's *Delicatessen* was just a warm-up for *La cité des enfants perdus* (*The City Of Lost Children*, 1995), an almost indescribably weird film that genuinely achieves the dreamlike state so many weird films attempt and fail to produce – fitting, then, that a mad scientist in the film feeds off the dreams of small children to survive (causing a slow but persistent circus strongman to attempt a rescue of one of the children, who is his adopted little brother).

Dream logic rules in this film, and everything in it, from the conjoined-twin orphanage administrators to the drug-injecting fleas (from whose perspective segments of the film proceed from) is magnificently odd. This film had the largest budget ever for a French production (that is, until *The Fifth Element* outspent it by more than a factor of four), and nearly every franc is on the screen.

cleverness – including Rube Goldberg–esque suicide contraptions, delicately choreographed events involving both roof paintings and orgasms, and underground revolutionaries who truly are underground. But dropped into all the absurdity is an actual love story that holds up surprisingly well in the chaos. One comes to this film for the visual and production inventiveness, but one comes away from it with a satisfying emotional element as well.

With the critical success of both *Delicatessen* and *The City Of Lost Children* (see box), Jean-Pierre Jeunet was handed the directorial reins of *Alien Resurrection* (Caro is listed deep in the credits of that film as “design supervisor”), which sadly was a bad fit for his style.

Destination Moon

dir Irving Pichel, 1950, US, 92m

cast John Archer, Warner Anderson, Tom Powers, Dick Wesson *cin* Lionel Lindon *m* Leith Stevens

Destination Moon isn't much to look at now. It's your standard-issue gee-whiz space-exploration movie from the 1950s. It's a story about the first trip to the moon, not by NASA (which hadn't been invented yet), but by a team of patriotic industrialists. What makes this movie special is that it was the opening shot of the “Golden Age” of 50s science fiction film. This movie's critical and commercial success served notice to Hollywood that there was an audience with an appetite for science fiction that went beyond the cut-rate *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* serials.

It's significant for other reasons as well: it was the first big-budget science fiction film to be packed with top-name talent, from co-screenwriter **Robert A. Heinlein** (who loosely adapted the film from his novel *Rocket Ship Galileo*) to noted astronomical artist **Chesley Bonestell** and special-effects master **Lee Zavitz** (who won an Oscar for his efforts). It's also the first science fiction film produced by **George Pal**, arguably the most influential science fiction producer of the 1950s, who went on to forge *War Of The Worlds*, *The Time Machine* and many others.

The film's most significant contribution to the genre, however,

is that it was the first American science fiction film that actually attempted to be scientifically accurate. The film worked hard to present a realistic version of space flight, based on the knowledge the world had to hand at the time. Looking back, however, it's easy to pick apart the details the filmmakers got wrong, but in 1950, it would have been tantalizingly probable. And the film did get many details right, from the effects of freefall (quaintly called "free orbit") to the dangers that astronauts might face in space.

Over the span of years what stands up least well are the non-technical aspects of the plot and the lack of character development. That said, it may turn out that *Destination Moon* was simply several decades too early with some of its ideas, such as the notion that a group of American industrialists would band together to build a moonship just because it was a "swell" idea: in 2004, a private commercial spacecraft won the "X Prize". This award (worth 10,000,000 dollars) was set up to kick-start the space-tourism industry and has potentially opened a door to the private exploration of space.

Escape From New York

dir John Carpenter, 1981, UK/US, 99m

cast Kurt Russell, Lee Van Cleef, Bob Hauk, Donald Pleasence, Isaac Hayes **cin** Dean Cundey/Jim Lucas
m John Carpenter/Alan Howarth

There had been other dystopian science fiction films before *Escape From New York*, but *Escape* added something new to the mix: punk. Armed with antihero **Snake Plisskin** (former Disney teen star **Kurt Russell**, in a career-revising role), director and co-writer **John Carpenter** gave his audience a character who sees the worst the world has to offer, and is sincerely not impressed.

The plot is simple and to the point: the island of Manhattan has been turned into a prison where the prisoners are generally running riot and knocking each other off *Lord Of The Flies* style; into this unholy stew drops the President of the United States after Air Force

One is hijacked. To get him out, convicted criminal (and war hero) Plisskin is dredged up and given a 24-hour deadline to retrieve the president – a deadline enforced by a bomb injected into his neck. Plisskin submerges into the chaotic mess of Manhattan and does more damage to it than it could possibly do to him. The trashed Manhattan of the film is a production masterpiece (especially considering the film's relatively spare 7million-dollar budget) and anyone living in the New York of the late 70s and early 80s would have had no trouble believing that this indeed was the direction New York was heading.

The film is awash in bad attitude and grim, violent catharsis, which made it perfect for the early 80s, and like its soul mate *The Road Warrior* (which was made in the same year), it signalled to science fiction fans that there was more to the genre than the space-opera overflow of the *Star Wars* films and its many imitators. Naturally, this meant the film spawned its own raft of imitators, including its own inevitably but strangely delayed 1996 sequel *Escape From LA*, which while not horrible, nevertheless suggested that Carpenter and Russell said all that needed be said in the first film.

Promotional artwork for
Escape From New York



E.T. The Extraterrestrial

dir Steven Spielberg, 1982, US, 115m

cast Henry Thomas, Dee Wallace-Stone, Robert MacNaughton, Drew Barrymore, Peter Coyote

cin Allen Daviau *m* John Williams

Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* is an absolutely wonderful film that has much to answer for. Specifically, it has to answer for the sappy science fiction films that infested the 1980s, in which friendly aliens pop up to transform life for some child/family/group of old people, and eventually you've got the shot where everyone is staring in wonder at a bunch of klieg lights while ersatz Williams-esque music swells thuddingly in the background (except for the times when it *is* actually John Williams music). Occasionally these were decent (*Cocoon*, *Starman*), but more frequently they were mawkishly mediocre (**Batteries Not Included*, *Short Circuit*), and sometimes they were horrifying bad (*Mac And Me*). And it's all *E.T.*'s fault.

None of which matters when you watch the film, which is deceptively simple (boy meets lost alien, boy loses lost alien, boy gets lost alien back and takes it to the mothership), but covers a tremendous amount of ground. The film is most obviously about relationships, between the *E.T.* creature (voiced, in a weird bit of trivia, by actress **Debra Winger**), Elliot (**Henry Thomas** in one of the great child performances) and Elliot's broken suburban family. But it's also about the gulf between the adult world and the world of children. This is shown implicitly – it's no coincidence that *E.T.* is child-sized, or that much of the film is filmed from a low, child-height perspective – and explicitly, most obviously in the difference between how Elliot approaches the alien with a bag of Reese's Pieces (see box) and an offer to share his room, and how the adults approach him, with a cold, sterile and frightening laboratory.

It's also, simply, about emotion – the great secret to this film and what sets it apart from nearly every other science fiction film before it. Science fiction films specialize in awe, from the thrill of

E.T. sweetie

The original script of *E.T.* had **M&Ms** written in as the treats Elliot would use to entice his new friend out of the shadows. But when it came to the crunch, **Mars** (who manufacture the aforementioned chocs) were not comfortable about associating M&Ms with a film that may have turned out to be a flop. **Hershey** then stepped into the arena with **Reese's Pieces**, the confectionary used in the film.

special effects to the abstract wonder of *2001* or Spielberg's own *Close Encounters*. But no other popular science fiction film so powerfully expressed common, familial emotions like this one did: love, companionship, the desire to protect those you care for, and the heartbreak of letting go of someone who is part of you. The film had audiences sobbing cathartically into their popcorn not only because of Spielberg's skillful direction (and a great script by **Melissa Matheson**), but because audiences were simply bowled over by the emotional content.

E.T.'s emotional breakthrough was a gift and a curse to science fiction film. A gift because since *E.T.*, science fiction filmmakers have leave to work with the full palette of human emotions, and sometimes they even do; a curse because most filmmakers in the genre aren't nearly as good at it as Spielberg – a reason why the adjective “Spielbergian”, trotted out when filmmakers ape his emotional style, is not generally regarded as a compliment.

When one spends time away from *E.T.*, it gets easier to mock its sentimentality. The cure for this is to watch it again, and remember that when “Spielbergian” is done right, it is a wonderful thing.

Flash Gordon: Space Soldiers

dir Frederick Stephani, 1936, US,
245m, 13 episodes, b/w

cast Buster Crabbe, Jean Rogers, Charles Middleton,
Priscilla Lawson, Frank Shannon *cin* Jerry Ash/Richard
Fryer *m* Clifford Vaughan

The Earth is under attack! The rogue planet Mongo is hurtling toward our world, and its evil **Emperor Ming** plans to conquer! Only **Flash Gordon**, aided by **Dale Arden** and mad genius **Dr. Zarkov** can save us!

Flash Gordon was an expensive movie serial for 1936 – Universal Pictures sunk something like one million dollars in the thirteen

episodes, at a time when most serials were being churned out for a couple of hundred thousand dollars. One is tempted to wonder where the money went. The sets? Probably not: a temple scene in the serial used props from *The Mummy*; bits and pieces from other movies (including musical scores) were also popped in whenever they came to hand. Special effects? When giant lizards of Mongo are obviously iguanas filmed in slow motion and the spaceships tiny models with sparklers for engines, one hopes not. The script? It reads like it was written by the children the serial entertained. And if it went to the actors – **Buster Crabbe** as the earnest, muscular Flash, **Jean Rogers** as the feisty yet prone-to-fainting Dale Arden, and **Charles Middleton** as the dastardly Emperor Ming – Universal should have asked for its money back.

But forget about all that – *Flash Gordon* is a bona fide sci-fi classic because it's just such a ridiculous amount of fun – and it was perfectly pitched to wide-eyed kids who didn't care that during the big Octosac/Shark battle in Chapter Three ("Captured by Shark Men") you could see the aquarium in which the animals were housed. At least one of those kids would remember that scene well; check out *The Phantom Menace*, in which Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan and Jar-Jar travel through the Naboo seas, trying to keep their little ship from being digested, and you'll realize that the major difference between that scene and the scene in *Flash* is six decades' worth of special-effects development. Lucas would ape the series in other ways, down to the film wipes and the expository cards that open the *Star Wars* movies.

The question is really whether it's wise to have the archetype of the modern science fiction epic based on a serial whose main concern is not creating believable characters or realistic stories, but going from one cliffhanger to the next to get butts into the theatre. It's wise for one overriding reason: the sense of breathless adventure the serial has – and the excitement the audience gets in waiting to find out what happens next.

And it still works. My 5-year-old daughter, used to computerized effects that put *Flash Gordon* to shame, wandered in while I was viewing this and not only got sucked in but asked to watch more. Her verdict: "I liked it so much, I didn't even mind that it was in black and white."

The Fly

dir David Cronenberg, 1986, US, 95m

cast Jeff Goldblum, Geena Davis, John Getz, Joy

Boushel, Leslie Carlson **cin** Mark Irwin **m** Howard Shore

The 1958 version of *The Fly* is great fun, but here's why the 1986 remake is the version you have to see: both films feature the oft-parodied line "Help me!" from the film's protagonist, the human scientist-turned-insect. In the 1958 version, it's a creepy, campy little moment, and the audience has a nice, fun shriek. In the 1986 version, it's heartbreaking, and the audience gasps came not because of a cheesy special effect, but because the scientist/fly's girlfriend reached out to him in his fear to hold him. One of these "help me" lines is utterly terrifying, and it's the one that involves human contact.

In one sense this shouldn't come as a surprise: the director of the remake being **David Cronenberg**, one of the most carnal directors in film, using "carnal" not in a sexual sense (although Cronenberg has no problem with that) but in relation to flesh. Cronenberg is obsessed with flesh and how technology can warp, corrupt and destroy it; this theme is most obviously explored in his films *Videodrome* (1983) and *eXistenZ* (1999), in which technology and flesh literally morph into one another.

It's a factor in this film too: both in the plot (scientist develops transporter technology and accidentally splices his genes with those of a fly when he transports himself), and in the dialogue, when the scientist (**Jeff Goldblum**) solves his difficulty with transporting living creatures only after his girlfriend (**Geena Davis**) talks about being "crazy for the flesh" after the two have a cathartic bout of sex.

Cronenberg's obsession with flesh – and the putrescence thereof as the scientist morphs into the fly creature – gives the film lots of opportunities for some remarkable stomach-churning moments (ranging from body parts falling off to a horrific birth scene which simply should never, ever be seen by pregnant women – the film won an Oscar for its make-up effects). But it's also the wellspring of the film's genuine pathos, as the body of the hero decays into a less than human form, betrayed by the innovations and technology that he created. The decay metaphor was extended to *The Fly* in other



The Fly (1986)

ways too: it's been bandied about that the scientist's deterioration is a metaphor for AIDS, although Cronenberg has denied any intentional parallels, suggesting rather that it was a metaphor for aging.

Cronenberg's themes are helped by the fact that Goldblum and Davis are both excellent; it takes real acting to walk around in decaying flesh make-up and still make people sympathize with you – and likewise real acting to make it seem like you're in love with a man who's turning into a bug. They manage very well (it may have helped that the two were an actual couple at the time). They and Cronenberg provide science fiction horror with one of its most emotionally engaging films, in which the terror comes from deeper places than mere spooks and special effects.

So, all this is not to say that the 1958 version is bad: it is a lot of fun. But “fun” isn't the same as “great”.

Forbidden Planet

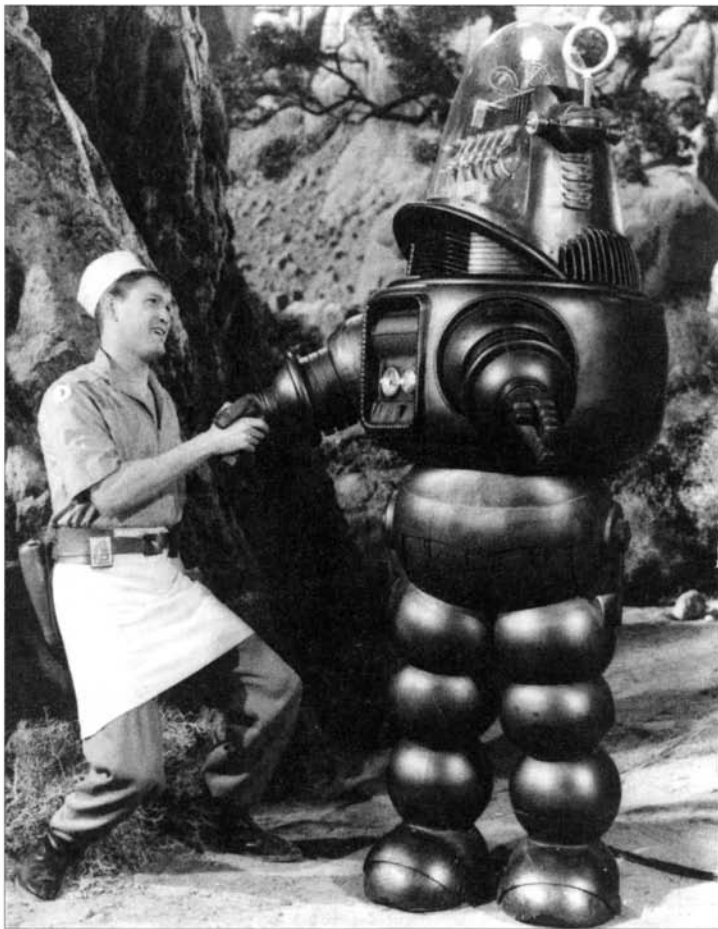
dir Fred M. Wilcox, 1956, US, 98m

cast Walter Pidgeon, Anne Francis, Leslie Nielsen, Warren Stevens, Jack Kelly *cin* George J. Folsey *m* Bebe Barron/
Louis Barron

Simply put, this is the quintessential 1950s science fiction film – or more accurately, the film everyone pictures in their heads when they think of 1950s science fiction film, regardless of whether they've seen the film or not. It has everything: a stalwart band of space explorers (headed up by **Leslie Nielsen**), a scientist whose explorations have gone too far (**Walter Pidgeon** as **Dr. Morbius**), a fetching young woman in danger, a mysterious alien civilization and, of course, **Robbie the Robot**, far and away the most famous robot prior to C-3PO and R2D2. And to top it all, the story is loosely based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, proving that when science fiction steals, it steals from the best. It would likewise be pilfered from by numerous sources, including *Star Trek*, whose creator, **Gene Roddenberry**, noted it as a primary influence.

And while *Forbidden Planet* certainly has its cheese value, this being the 50s (much of the cheese nested within Robbie the Robot,

who was popular enough to show up in another, unrelated film called *The Invisible Boy*, 1957). This movie's secret is that it's surprisingly strong – the Shakespearean underpinnings to the story are sturdy without being overbearingly obvious, and the story posits a worthy mystery as an overlay: what killed the Krell civilization of the planet Altair IV? Does it have something to do with what killed the members of the *Bellerophon* expedition to the planet, leaving only Dr.



Robbie the Robot tries to get a grip in 1956's *Forbidden Planet*

Morbius and his infant daughter alive? And are the crew members of space cruiser *C-57-D*, sent to find survivors of that expedition, also in danger? The film lays out the plot points efficiently, stopping here and there for comic relief and a bit of boy-girl interplay between Dr. Morbius's nubile daughter and the all-male rescue crew, and leaves the viewer with a decent amount to chew on.

The film also offered an interesting innovation in its score, by then-spouses **Louis and Bebe Barron**: it was the first film score to be performed on all electronic-instruments. The story of the Barrons' struggles concerning the score (which caused a tussle with the American Federation of Musicians and eventually had the pair credited only for "Sound Tonalties") would make a movie in itself. Whatever you wish to call it, the score is haunting and groundbreaking.

Ghost In The Shell

dir Mamoru Oshii, 1995, Jap, 82m

cast Atsuko Tanaka, Akio Otsuka, Tamio Oki, Iemasa

Kayumi, Koichi Yamadera cin Hisao Shirai m Kenji Kawai

Western audiences who are unfamiliar with anime may watch *Ghost In The Shell* and wonder if they haven't seen this all somewhere before. They have – in *The Matrix*. However, it's *The Matrix* that heavily borrows from **Mamoru Oshii's** *Ghost In The Shell*, not the other way around. *Ghost In The Shell* was such an influence on that film that certain sequences in *The Matrix* – a chase through a crowded marketplace, spectacular shoot-outs with armour-garbed police, a dramatic penultimate action scene involving lots of bullets and lots of pillars – are direct steals from the anime (although the Wachowski brothers might prefer to refer to these as homages).

The two films part company on their plots – although interestingly, they are mirror images of one another: in *The Matrix*, humans trapped in an artificial reality struggle to get out before agents of the computer system kill them; in *Ghost*, it's an artificial intelligence that is struggling to escape into the real world before the humans do it in. In both films, there is considerable debate as to what is "real";

Ghost compounds this discussion by having a heroine who is more machine than human, and who while working alongside humans is also uniquely susceptible to the charms of the rogue A.I. trying to avoid annihilation. The “ghost” of the title refers to consciousness, which inhabits the “shell” of the body, and which was, prior to the movie’s events, exclusive to humans; the arrival of an artificially created “ghost” unlocks a whole new level of speculation as to what it means to be alive. *Ghost* doesn’t skimp on action, but it also takes long passages in which the characters do nothing but sit around, drink beer, and indulge in existential conversations on the nature of being (something which, alas, the *Matrix* series also attempted – minus the beer – to less productive effect).

By now, anime purists will be irritated that *Ghost* is being discussed primarily as an influence rather than for its own merits, but

Ghost In The Shell



in the West, at least, that is where its primary significance lies, and it's no little thing; not every anime film is a direct antecedent to one of the most popular (if flawed) film trilogies of recent times – and by transitive property an influence on the many other films which aped *The Matrix* in its wake.

Visually and thematically speaking, *Ghost* is the undiluted well-spring for much of the look and feel of early 21st-century science fiction film. There are worse things to be.

Gojira (aka Godzilla)

dir Ishiro Honda, 1954, Jap, 98m, b/w

cast Akira Takarada, Momoko Kochi, Akihiko Hirata,
Takashi Shimura, Fuyuki Murakami

cin Masao Tamai *m* Akira Ifukube

Gojira (henceforth to be referred to by its English title, *Godzilla*) is, in fact, an awful film: badly acted, poorly scripted (in either the original Japanese version or the chopped-up American version) and featuring special effects that consist of some poor Japanese fellow swallowed up in a 200-pound rubber suit, stomping around a miniature set made of cardboard. It is so bad that any objective observer would have to note that the justly maligned 1998 American reinvention of the monster (directed by **Roland Emmerich**) is actually better in almost every way – better effects (of course), better story, and even with **Matthew Broderick** in stunned-cat mode, better acting.

And of course, it doesn't matter in the slightest. *Godzilla* is a bad film, but **Godzilla** the monster is a symbol loaded with immense psychological import for Japan: he's a rubbery, 150-foot-tall metaphor for a literally shell-shocked nation creatively coming to terms with being the only country to have a nuclear weapon used against it, and its fears of subsequent US nuclear testing in the Pacific.

Godzilla is unleashed as a result of nuclear testing, and, just as conventional methods of warfare quail before the unfathomable devastation nuclear war can unleash, so too is Godzilla impervious to bullets, missiles and anything else the Japanese can throw at it – save for the risky technology of the “oxygen destroyer”, a dooms-

day device of last resort. Along the way there are also plot points involving the humans in the story, but then as now, cinema-goers are hard-pressed to care about the humans when there's a gigantic lizard/nuclear metaphor kicking the hell out of Tokyo. For the Japanese this wasn't just a movie, it was catharsis.

Naturally, the Western world didn't see the same film as the Japanese, and not simply because when it was exported in 1956, it was extensively edited (some of the more obvious nuclear messages were toned down) and had American actor **Raymond Burr** shoehorned in to make it palatable in the US, a country who a mere decade before had been bayonet to bayonet with Japan. And even if the film had been shown unedited in the US (as it finally was for its 50th anniversary in 2004), America had no need of the catharsis, having been on the other side of the nuclear equation. For Americans, *Godzilla* was a fun movie to make out to at the drive-in. Rarely has there been a film, science fiction or otherwise, whose cultural subtext was so wildly different between two countries.

There is some irony that as the years went on, *Godzilla's* atomic metaphor became more apparent to an increasingly anti-nuclear US, even on the occasions that *Godzilla* morphed into a protector of Japan against other freakishly large monsters in the original film's many sequels. None of these films can be classified as good, either. But when your main character is a culturally significant metaphor, and arguably the most significant metaphor in science fiction cinema, your movies don't have to be good; they simply have to be there.

Gojira – aka the mighty Godzilla



The Incredibles

dir Brad Bird, 2004, US, 121m

cast Craig T. Nelson, Holly Hunter, Samuel L. Jackson, Jason Lee, Dominique Louis *cin* Andrew Jimenez, Patrick Lin, Janet Lucroy *m* Michael Giacchin

The most impressive scene in Pixar's superhero computer-animated adventure is not one in which Mr. Incredible (voiced by Craig T. Nelson) battles ridiculously-named villains like Bomb Voyage or hot-air-balloon-sized robots of mass destruction. It's the scene where Mr. Incredible – humbled by being outlawed and spending 15 years as a normal person – has a living-room argument with his wife, the former Elastigirl (Holly Hunter) while she's in a bathrobe and he's in clothes dusty from extracurricular world-saving (the cause of their fight). After the fight he goes off to the bedroom, and she slumps slightly, looking around the room bleakly before turning off the light. No special effects in this scene except the most important one: genuine – and genuinely affecting – human emotion.

Verifiable human emotion is hard enough to come by in superhero science fiction movies as it is, where the action is fast and the heroes are in tights or sculpted leather and latex. It's even more difficult in computer animation, where human representations so often end up looking like animated corpses (see: *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*). *The Incredibles* conquers the realism problem by using a cartoon style instead – freeing the animators to go for the essence of an emotion rather than an exact replica.

There is no “original story” here, the often interminable set-up required to establish the superhero in his world; this movie assumes you already know enough about the superhero milieu. Besides, this movie isn't the story of a man or woman on the journey to being a superhero – it's the story of a superhero realizing there's more to life than being a superhero. For Mr. Incredible, this is a hard transition: even 15 years after superheroes are outlawed, and he and Elastigirl have become Bob and Helen Parr, he still can't fit in. He has a hard time relating to the mundane people he works with but also with his family, which aside from Helen includes Dash and Violet, two kids with superpowers but the inability to

use them. When a mysterious government agency calls him out of retirement, Bob takes the job and feels alive again, even as he hides what he's doing from Helen and his family. Naturally, not everything is as it seems, and Mr. Incredible's need to feel special again will put his family (and, this being a superhero flick, the world) in grave danger.

The Incredibles remarkably has its cake and eats it: it fulfills and even cheerfully satirizes all the superhero standard-issue plot points (much is made of villains' need to monologue before they dispatch a hero, thus giving the hero time to get out of the jam), and fills the screen with gorgeous colour and action, but it also never loses focus of the emotional side of the story. And not just Bob's story, but also the rest of the family: Helen, whose apparently successful integration into the mundane world has come at some cost to her own identity; Violet, whose confidence in her own abilities is about exactly where you would think a withdrawn 14-year-old girl's confidence would be; and Dash, whose relationship with his superpower (incredible speed, naturally enough) is one of fascination and joy. Watch his reaction when he learns he's fast enough to race on water, and you realise just how perfectly this film gets the reaction right, and just how rare such emotional accuracy is in any film, much less a film in which the good guys wear their underwear on the outside.

Invasion Of The Body Snatchers

dir Don Siegel, 1956, US, 80m, b/w

cast Kevin McCarthy, Dana Wynter, Larry Gates, King

Donovan, Carolyn Jones *cin* Ellsworth Fredericks

m Carmen Dragon

Invasion Of The Body Snatchers: science fiction B-movie or a taut parable of the dangers of unthinking conformity? It depends who you ask. Director **Don Siegel**, for one, scoffed at the idea that there was any deeper message in the film, and maintained that he was simply making an effective alien-invasion film (Siegel would go on

to make *Dirty Harry*, 1971, another supposedly subtext-heavy film). But films are more than just what their creators intend, and in this case, this sharp, effective science fiction spooker just happened to come along at the same time the United States was emerging out of the anti-Communist hysteria provoked by Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy in the first half of the 1950s.

And so this film became a symbol of rebellion against conformity – conformity which in this particular situation comes through the not-so-good graces of large, space-borne seed pods which crack open and drop out a perfect imitation of whatever human happens to be nearby. At the end of this process, it's as if everyone was the same, just a lot calmer, and without much desire for personal choice. As is explained to film star **Kevin McCarthy** by one of the pod people, there's no need for extreme emotions like love in this bland

Invasion Of The Body Snatchers



new world order. And of course, the irony being that the America of the 1950s famously put a premium on bland conformity and looked with suspicion upon those who rocked the boat.

Invasion certainly wasn't the only alien-invasion film of the era, and not the only first-rate one (1951's *The Thing From Another World* is a fine example), but it's *Invasion* that stands out. Part of that is simply due to the resolutely apolitical Siegel, who directs the film with far more assurance than most directors of science fiction. He managed more than a few breathtaking shots (the shot of the pod people stampeding, with the camera looking up at their feet through slated floorboards, is startlingly effective), and provides a contrast between the normality of day, when everything has a rational explanation, and the woozy paranoia of night, when rational explanations don't quite satisfy.

The film's unsettling nature sneaks up on the audience, and Siegel was effective enough at creating this atmosphere that he was made by the producers to bracket his film with additional scenes to give audiences the sense of hope. (Interestingly, in a 1979 rerelease of the film, the bracketing scenes were removed to give the film the bleaker ending that the filmmakers originally intended; this says as much about 1979 as the original film said about 1956.)

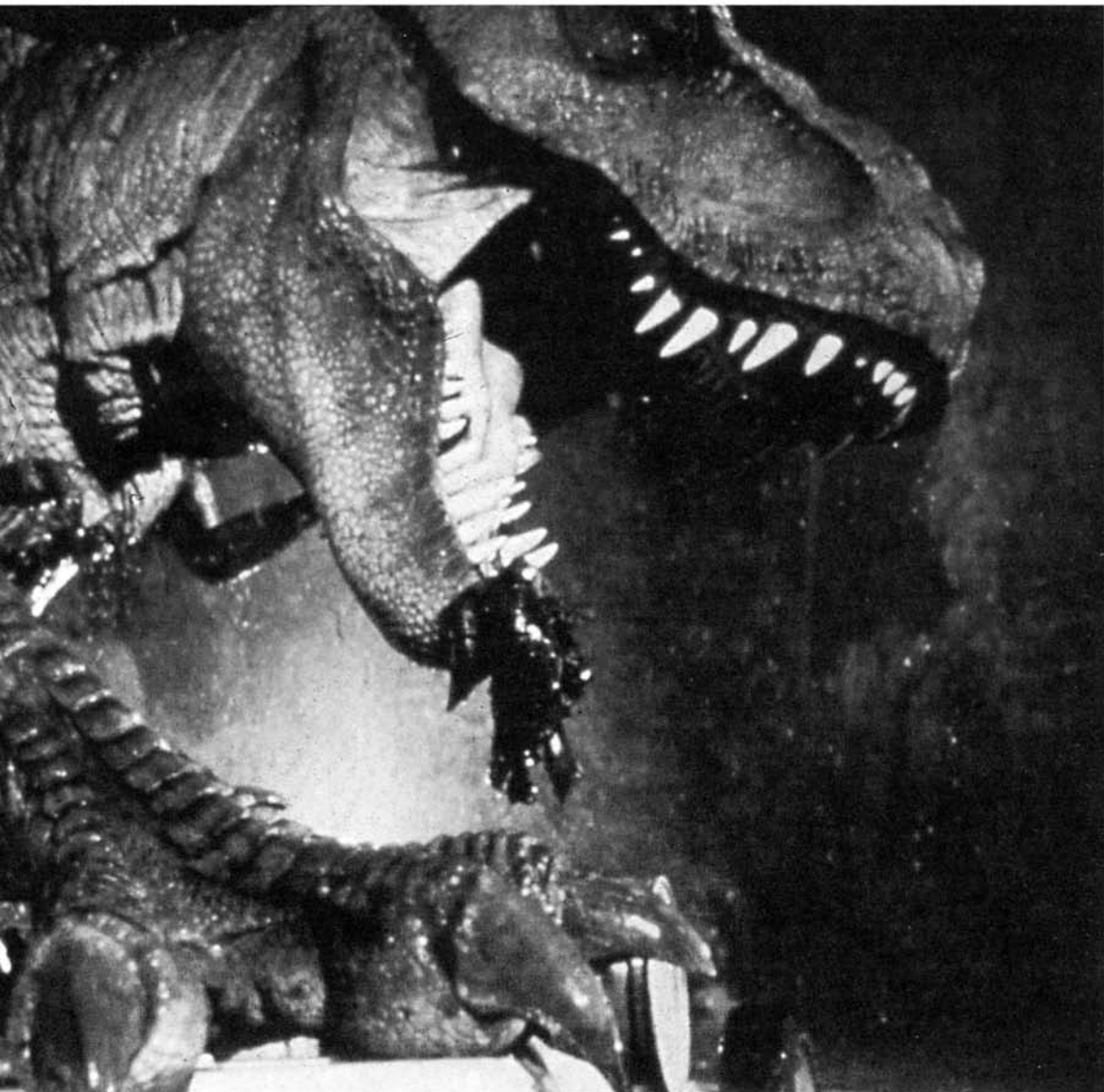
Jurassic Park

dir Steven Spielberg, 1993, US, 127m

cast Sam Neill, Laura Dern, Jeff Goldblum, Richard

Attenborough cin Dean Cundey m John Williams

Jurassic Park came as part of Steven Spielberg's *annus mirabilis* of 1993, in which he cranked out the most financially successful film of the year (this one) and also the most critically lauded – *Schindler's List*, which took Best Picture honours at the Academy Awards, and garnered Spielberg his first (and long-awaited) Best Director Oscar. It's fashionable to hold up these films as the two sides of the coin of Spielberg's movies, which are either inveterate crowd-pleasers with great effects but light on emotional resonance, or genuine and immensely emotional films that can ruthlessly break your heart.



The T-Rex munches a car in *Jurassic Park*

Naturally, *Jurassic Park*, with its computer-animated dinosaur herds, belongs in the first category and *Schindler's List* in the second.

That said, it takes nothing away from *Schindler's List* to say that *Jurassic Park* is underappreciated for its emotional qualities. The film isn't deep, but what Spielberg does, he does in such a facile way that it's easy to underestimate the work involved. Simply put, no other filmmaker has the ability to invest effects technology with as much emotional impact on the audience as Spielberg. Any director competent to give notes to an effects crew can give you a "wow" feeling. What Spielberg does is not only give you the "wow" but also the "Shit! That T-Rex is coming right for me."

Spielberg has always been a master of this, from his very first made-for-TV movie *Duel* (1971), in which poor **Dennis Weaver** is tormented by a large truck (presumably there's a driver, but he's not seen, giving the impression that it's the truck itself that's stalking him), and also in *Jaws* (1975), where he turned a balky mechanical shark into an object of terror so complete that it kept people out of the oceans for years afterward. *Jurassic Park's* objects of fear are not sharks or trucks, they're dinosaurs – ie, things that you know can't come and get you. Nevertheless Spielberg and his crew invested their creatures with such a degree of realism – aided by a combination of then-cutting-edge computer graphics and "realistic" practical effects – that the suspension of disbelief was total.

Spielberg milked the dazzling effects across the emotional palette, from the wonderment of the massive apatosaurus feeding on the top branches of a tree to the relentless funhouse shock of the raptors working in concert to feed on the humans who had stupidly thought they could control their predatory intelligence. Again, not a bit of it is emotionally deep, but the film is emotionally wide, with Spielberg using the effects to make the audience feel happily wrung out at the end of the ride.

This is not to say that Spielberg always has great emotional control; he is guilty of letting his more sadistic entertainment urges overwhelm him. The sequel, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997) is a case study of this side of Spielberg; deprived of the audience's initial surprise and curiosity concerning the dinosaurs, Spielberg falls back on using them simply as scare machines, which makes for a mean-spirited and unpleasant time at the movies (Spielberg messed up the sequel to *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* in the same way, suggesting that he is one director who should avoid returning to the scene of his

successes – happily he has so far avoided making a sequel to *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*).

The third film in the *Jurassic Park* series (*Jurassic Park III*, 2001) saw the directorial reins handed over to **Joe Johnston**, a student of the Spielberg form, who turned in a competent, enjoyable, but not particularly memorable film. A fourth film in the series is apparently on the way, and one can reasonably expect the law of diminishing returns will kick in from here. As impressive as the first film is, the elements that make it so – particularly Spielberg’s emotional gift with effects technology – don’t hold up to repeated recycling.

Mad Max 2 (aka The Road Warrior)

dir George Miller, 1981, Aus, 91m

cast Mel Gibson, Bruce Spence, Michael Preston, Max Phipps, Vernon Wells **cin** Dean Semler **m** Brian May

This is one of the few – perhaps only – film series in which it is advisable to see the second film first, track back to the first, and then go on to the third. The reason is simple: the second (*The Road Warrior*) is one of the best pure action films ever and doesn’t require the first film to be enjoyed. Indeed, outside of Australia, it is the film in the series most moviegoers saw first. It’s only after seeing the taciturn “Mad” Max Rockatansky (Mel Gibson, in his iconic role) go to work that you’ll be interested to know how he became the man he is. At that point you can turn to *Mad Max* (1979). Then, if you’re still curious, you can view his further adventures in *Beyond Thunderdome* (1985).

The Road Warrior (as it was titled outside Australia to assure filmgoers that they weren’t dropping in mid-story) is as stripped-down as the battle vehicles in it, designed for the purpose of high-octane thrills. A Western on wheels, the film’s plot is a set-up for masterful chase scenes. A ragtag group has commandeered an oil refinery in a near-future where civilization has ground to a halt and fuel is the only thing worth fighting for. The refinery’s inhabitants need

to decamp before they're wiped out by the leather-clad gang in dune buggies circling like vultures. To accomplish this, they recruit the initially unwilling Max to drive a tanker full of gas across the Australian desert. Delicious vehicular carnage ensues.

The film succeeds because of the masterful staging of the car chase sequences (particularly the film's long final tanker sequence, regarded as one of the best chase sequences in film history) and because director and co-writer **George Miller** doesn't stray from the task at hand – with the exception of brief, bare-bones expository scenes, it's all about the action. For early-80s America, still in the grip of the Cold War and recovering from the gasoline crunches of the 70s, the theme of post-nuclear fuel hoarding hit a nerve, guaranteeing a box-office smash.



Mad Max

dir **George Miller**, 1979, Aus, 93m

The exposition of our hero's tale, which *Road Warrior* lacks, is available in *Mad Max*. This is the film about the man: his motivation, his love and his anger. We learn that Max was a cop in a world that seems to be only barely clinging on to civilization.

Mad Max was Gibson's first starring role in a film, although for the American release of the movie, the distributors decided his Aussie accent was too impenetrable and had him redubbed (the DVD version of the film resurrected Gibson's voice). *Mad Max* is interesting for the evocation of an everyday world tipping into anarchy, and its exploration of the way anger and revenge can shape a man's character (themes also addressed in movies such as *Straw Dogs* and *The Godfather*). The film has a few good chase sequences and an intriguingly claustrophobic edge, but it's clearly a warm-up exercise for *Road Warrior*.



Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome

dir **George Miller/George Ogilvy**, 1985, US, 107m

Beyond Thunderdome is the most complete movie experience in the series: it has an actual plot which fills in the details of the apocalyptic tragedy that befell the human race, Miller's exciting chase scenes (the non-action sequences were handed over to another director, George Ogilvy, in the wake of Miller's film partner dying during the film's pre-production), and – a first for the series – a production budget that let Miller and his compatriots fill in the blanks for their dusty, run-down future world. And it's got Tina Turner as Max's nemesis Aunty Entity, the despotic ruler of what passes for civilization in the film.

Ironically, for all its production values it's generally the least regarded of the series. It may have something to do with the film being packed with children; the audience for *Thunderdome* didn't seem to appreciate the *Lord Of The Flies*-like situation. While definitely not a match for *Road Warrior*, it's rather better than *Mad Max*, and worth a second look.

The Matrix

dir Andy Wachowski/Larry Wachowski, 1999,
US, 136m

cast Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne
 Moss, Hugo Weaving, Gloria Foster

cin Bill Pope **m** Don Davis

The Matrix is a great science fiction action film that got confused and tried to grow a brain. Not content with enjoying the groundbreaking special effects, anime-informed multiculti cyberpunk aesthetic and familiar dystopian messianic plotline (unsuspecting normal **Joe** – **Keanu Reeves** – discovers he and everyone else is trapped in a machine-designed virtual reality, and he is “The One” who can save humanity from it), *Matrix* fans insisted on bolting deeper meanings to the evocative but evasive teleological stylings that writers and directors **Andy and Larry Wachowski** tossed into the film, usually through the lips of **Morpheus** (**Laurence Fishburne**, playing the biggest, baddest, blackest Yoda ever). Academics and theologians, delighted at this apparent interest in knotty philosophical concepts, grafting their own agendas to the film, and thus we ended up with pseudo-deep tomes such as *The Matrix And Philosophy: Welcome To The Desert Of The Real* and *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality And Faith In The Matrix* loitering on the pop philosophy shelves of bookstores.

Well, the film isn’t dumb. But it’s also not all that smart. The Wachowskis’ philosophical meanderings boil down to Plato’s *Parable Of The Cave* with virtual-reality avatars replacing the flickering shadows on the wall. All this with a dash of the “predestination vs free will” argument thrown in for spice – the Matrix-controlling computers, personified by the glowering **Agent Smith** (**Hugo Weaving**), taking the part of the dour Calvinists. *The Matrix* had just enough philosophy to make it through the film, and no more. Indeed, that was the secret to its success: like *Star Wars* before it, whose free-form animist Force fascinated 70s audiences, *The Matrix* lightly sketched the outlines of a world view which fans then built out in their own image. This was good for *The Matrix*: it assured

a continuing fascination with the film even after its special-effects innovations – particularly the spectacular 3D rethinking of slow motion known as “Bullet Time” – and its Hong Kong-inspired fight scenes saturated the science fiction and action film markets.

However, it was bad for the *Matrix* sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), since it meant these films had to somehow justify *The Matrix*’s philosophical conceits. This meant scene after flabby, plodding scene of Keanu Reeves’ slow-on-the-uptake Neo asking obvious questions to minor characters designed purely for the purpose of mouthing solipsisms. It also meant the films ultimately making a very poor argument for “choice”, provided as it is by a character – Neo – whose entire existence both as a prophesized messiah for humans, and as a literally integral element of the Matrix, reeks of predestination. No matter what path Neo takes, he fulfills someone’s preordained role for him. This philosophical statement was not thoroughly debugged.

But aside from all this academic pancake-tossing, the real genius of the *Matrix* sequels is that they represent the world’s first live-action anime films. This dazzling anime aspect is best shown in two scenes: the first is *Reloaded*, when Neo fights one hundred iterations of Agent Smith. The second is *Revolutions*’ extended and absolutely riveting battle sequences between the machine soldiers known as “squiddies” and the humans in their huge Transformers-esque battle gear. It was also, alas, shown in *Revolutions*’ dialogue, which at times sounded like Japanese dialogue poorly translated into English.

A talented film editor needs to go back into *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* and pare them down into one tight, entertaining film, long on the action and short on the philosophy.

Interestingly, arguably the single most successful element of the *Matrix* film universe is the one many fans haven’t seen: *The Animatrix* (2003), a DVD collection of nine short anime and CG films that are not only inspired by the *Matrix* films but serve as connecting tissue. The events of the *The Final Flight of the Osiris* are referred to in *Reloaded*, while the animated star of *Kid’s Story* shows up as a significant character in *Revolutions*. The short films explore some of the nooks and crannies of the *Matrix* universe and philosophy (such as it is) and makes explicit the visual and story debt the Wachowskis owe to the anime art form. Watch *The Animatrix* and then rewatch *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* – you’ll get the connection, on more than one level.

Metropolis

dir Fritz Lang, 1927, Ger, 153m, b/w

cast Alfred Abel, Gustav Fröhlich, Brigitte Helm, Rudolf Klein-Rogge, Fritz Rasp *cin* Karl Freund/Günther Rittau
m Gottfried Huppertz

It's impossible to overstate the influence of **Fritz Lang's** 1927 masterpiece on the science fiction genre of film. Ironically, the film was not particularly well-received at its debut: H.G. Wells called it "the silliest film ever made", and the film has been subsequently cut and recut so many times that the original version has been trimmed out of existence.

Save for the original *Star Wars*, no other science fiction film has had such an impact and it's well worth noting that *Metropolis* is a key influence on that film; for one minor example, golden droid C-3PO was specifically designed to be a male counterpart of *Metropolis's* robot, the female-portrayed **Maschinen-Mensch**.

Most of the time, however, the influences are far more obvious. Lang's vision of a glittering modern city of technology where the idle sons of industry play (and its counterpart subterranean depths where workers are treated like drones) have been recycled in science fiction to the point of near absurdity. Visually, the city of *Metropolis* is the blueprint for the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner*, the New York of *The Fifth Element*, the Coruscant of the *Star Wars* films, the city spaceship of *Dark City* and the Gotham of the *Batman* series, to name but a few of the usual suspects. Even the bad science fiction films know to rip off this movie: check out the city in the perfectly awful *Judge Dredd*, and you'll see a third-hand version of *Metropolis*, right down to the floor plan.

Why has this nearly 80-year-old vision of the future remained current? Simply put, it's one of cinema's most beautiful films, and its beauty is influenced by both the stark lines of the Bauhaus architectural movement and the moody shadow and weight of German Expressionism – both of which lend themselves in a near-perfect fashion to the concerns of science fiction, and more specifically of science fiction film production designers. In a real world where architectural and design styles fight each other for dominance, cre-

ating a single, elegant and beautiful “style” (at least to represent the upper reaches of civilization) will always look like the future.

As influential as the design elements are, the themes of *Metropolis* are also a rich vein for science fiction filmmakers. To highlight just one, this is the film that began science fiction’s fascination with mechanical people (whether one calls them robots, droids or replicants) and the idea that technology is a dehumanizing, controlling force for the many, even as it is a liberating force for the elite few. In *Metropolis*, the Machinen-Mensch is given the face and appearance of *Maria*, a chaste young woman who is rallying the workers to stave off class violence; the machine Maria, on the other hand, is sent to whip the population into a sensual, thoughtless frenzy so that the elite have an excuse to crack down. The Maschinen-Mensch is not only inhuman in itself but dehumanizing in its effect on others: technology at the expense of humanity.

Science fiction films since have used this template for their own purposes. The replicants of *Blade Runner* are artificial and search for the humanity denied them by humans, while the machines of *I, Robot* attempt to enslave humanity for humanity’s own good; the machines of *The Matrix* do the same, but for their own benefit, not humanity’s.

Metropolis pegged technology’s dark side unsettlingly well. Expect it to continue to cast its shadow on science fiction for years to come.

On The Beach

dir Stanley Kramer, 1959, US, 134m, b/w

cast Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire, Anthony

Perkins, cin Giuseppe Rotunno m Ernest Gold

The Fifties were positively filled with science fiction films in which nuclear radiation turned insects into monsters, but aside from a few B-movies, no film bothered to posit what would really happen if the bombs flew and mankind was down to its last. So when director **Stanley Kramer** cranked up *On The Beach* in 1959, it was effectively a first: a serious, speculative major-motion-picture look at what the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse would be like.

The answer was strangely polite. The last humans – Australians, with a US submarine crew thrown in as the only survivors from the Northern Hemisphere – go about their daily lives while they wait for the winds to blow a world-wrapping cloud of lethal radiation their way. Underneath the day-to-day life, however, cracks are beginning to appear: horses and carts reappear as gas dries up, people snap in strange ways as they pause to realise doom is on the way, and rumours of government-supplied suicide pills (“for when the time comes”) are rampant. Also – this being a 50s Hollywood production – submarine commander **Gregory Peck** has to decide whether to let go of the memory of his wife and children in Connecticut to find last-chance love with a saucy Australian woman (**Ava Gardner**).

The idea that the Aussies (or anyone) might meet their doom with such bland equanimity is probably the thing that will strike modern viewers as off-base (in contrast, a 2000 TV update of the film features riots). When it comes to the melodrama of romance



Gregory Peck and Fred Astaire in *On The Beach* (1959)

during disaster, however, it still plays with audiences just fine. In any event, melodramatic as it is, it's hard not to be genuinely affected in the film's final moments, as the end of the world – and the end of the characters' personal worlds – comes to pass.

The film opened with a big splash, with simultaneous premieres in cities around the world, a rarity for the time. Opinions on the film were decidedly mixed: scientist and peace activist Linus Pauling declared, "It may be that some years from now we can look back and say that *On The Beach* is the movie that saved the world," leading film critic Pauline Kael to snark that the film's greatest achievement was to generate "fatuous endorsements from eminent people".

Actually, the film's greatest achievement was to legitimize science fiction (or a speculative, very-near-future variant of it) as an A-list, serious-film concern for the Hollywood film industry; in its wake came films such as *Fail Safe* (1964) and particularly *Dr Strangelove* (1964), both of which are worth some melodrama to get to.

Planet Of The Apes

dir Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968, US, 112m

cast **Charlton Heston, Roddy McDowall, Kim Hunter,**

Maurice Evans, James Whitmore

cin **Leon Shamroy m Jerry Goldsmith**

There is a surprising amount of innovation in *Planet Of The Apes* that typically goes undernoticed today: the film's still-amazing ape make-up, which was impressive enough to earn a special Oscar award (there was no official Makeup Oscar until the 1980s) and **Jerry Goldsmith's** atonal score – a first in a Hollywood film – which nabbed him one of his many Oscar nominations (legend has it that Goldsmith wore a gorilla mask while composing, to feel closer to his subjects). But the biggest innovation was quite simply having **Charlton Heston**, who had essayed Moses and Ben-Hur, as the star. Nothing in Heston's career to that date suggested that the chisel-faced, craggy-voiced box-office draw would play in a science fiction film. In 1968 science fiction was not a genre that attracted



Charlton Heston and friends
in *Planet Of The Apes*

“respectable” stars – you could play in science fiction if you were on your way up, or on your way back down, or you could be a star in the genre and only in the genre – note **Bela Lugosi** and **Boris Karloff**.

In retrospect, Heston’s move was genius. Heston was a man who despite his mainstream appeal was known to make and fight for artistic choices – supporting **Orson Welles** as the director for *Touch Of Evil*, for example, and **Sam Peckinpah** as the director of *Major Dundee* when the studio began to give Peckinpah some grief. He also apparently had a sharp sense of what he needed to do to maintain his status as an icon (as he would show in later years with his willingness to send up his own reputation, including a cameo in the 2001 remake of this film, in which he played an ape warning of the danger of guns). Heston lent *Planet Of The Apes* (and by extension, the genre of science fiction) his star credibility. In return, *Planet Of The Apes* gave Heston a smash hit, and the science fiction genre helped him extend his box-office appeal into the 1970s with the apocalyptic hit *The Omega Man*, and the overpopulation drama *Soylent Green* (see box). Everyone was happy.

The widely-praised script for *Planet Of The Apes* (by **Michael Wilson** and *Twilight Zone* creator **Rod Serling**), on the other hand, is a little overplayed, in particular the middle parts of the film in which the movie is steered into social commentary, showing the absurdities of human society by having the apes mirror the same beliefs, for comic effect. The result is just another

Twilight Zone episode, albeit with a much larger budget. This is why one of the most interesting social commentaries involving *Planet Of The Apes* comes not from the film itself, but from one of its well-known backstage tales: that during the lunch breaks, the costumed actors would eat with other actors in the same costumes – the gorillas with other gorillas, chimps with chimps, and so on.

Be that as it may, this movie acts as a dividing line for science fiction film. After *Planet Of The Apes*, serious stars could play in sci-fi films and sci-fi films, could be taken seriously (this latter point was amplified by the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the same year). In terms of credibility, science fiction owes much to Charlton Heston and a bunch of monkeys.

It's ironic, then, that the credibility of the *Planet Of The Apes* series of films (which includes *Beneath The Planet Of The Apes*, *Escape From the Planet Of The Apes*, *Conquest Of The Planet Of The Apes*, and *Battle For The Planet Of The Apes*, all made between 1970 and 1973) eroded fairly quickly after the first film, possibly because outside of a glorified cameo in *Beneath*, Heston kept himself away, leaving them to his simian co-stars **Roddy McDowell** and **Kim Hunter**. Nevertheless, with the exception of *Battle*, the final film in the series, they're worth the viewing.

The 2001 remake, however, directed by fabulist director **Tim Burton**, was met with high hopes which were quickly dashed by this tame and bland piece of work (among other problems, star **Mark Wahlberg** is no Charlton Heston). It's the original that's worth seeking out.

Robocop

dir Paul Verhoeven, 1987, US, 102m

cast Peter Weller, Nancy Allen, Dan O'Herlihy, Ronny Cox
cin Sol Negrin/Jost Vacano m Basil Poledouris

No one saw *Robocop* coming, least of all the audiences who made it a hit. The film was positioned in ads and trailers as a violent, B-movie science fiction experience, in which a human cop (**Peter Weller**) becomes a robot and fights crime with a big robotic gun. Well, it *was*



Soylent Green

dir R Fleischer, 1973, US, 97m

You don't need to be told what Soylent Green is made out of, do you? Of course not. The final installment of **Charlton Heston's** informal Science Fiction Trilogy (Along with *Planet Of The Apes* and *Omega Man*) seems dated, aggressively pessimistic and not entirely logically consistent, but Heston's stolid performance carries the film through right to its famous and now oft-parodied line. And the exit of **Edward G. Robinson** is surprisingly poignant.

that. But socked in with the over-the-top gore was a film that was shockingly funny, unexpectedly satirical and surprisingly evocative. It was the rarest of all film breeds: intelligent trash.

This tag is also useful when summing up the film career of *Robocop* director **Paul Verhoeven**, whose best Hollywood film this is. Verhoeven came to Hollywood by way of the Netherlands, where he was a celebrated but controversial director whose films regularly combined graphic sex and/or violence with surprisingly strong character studies – his final Dutch-language film, *The Forth Man* (1983), for example, featured gay and straight sex, mutilations, head trauma, and enough religious imagery to outrage preachers everywhere (it’s also disturbingly funny and would serve as an obvious template for his 1992 hit *Basic Instinct*).

When Verhoeven was initially given the *Robocop* script, he dismissed it as “silly”; his wife urged him to reconsider, and he did. *Robocop* suited Verhoeven’s predilections precisely. Screenwriter **Ed Neumier**’s take on a near-fascist defense company conspiring to remake the city of Detroit while its corrupt executives cut deals with criminals (based very loosely on Neumier’s own experiences as a film executive, and his thoughts on the Vietnam war) gave Verhoeven a wide arena in which to drop in wry social commentary, while the genuinely tragic character of *Robocop* offered the opportunity to essay the dehumanizing nature of technology. And of course the violence allowed Verhoeven to spatter the screen with blood, explosions and (in one horrifyingly funny scene) a disintegrating bad guy who’s been bathed in toxic waste. Verhoeven and this script were a match made in sci-fi heaven.

Bouyed by this film’s success, Verhoeven would follow his formula with diminishing levels of effectiveness in other science fiction films like *Total Recall* (1990), *Starship Troopers* (1997) and *Hollow Man* (2000), effectively cornering the market on over-the-top violence garnished by increasingly limp amounts of intelligence, and showing that even a smart and resourceful director like Verhoeven can get trapped in a downward spiral of market expectations. Intelligent trash is harder to do than it looks.

Robocop itself was followed up by two film sequels in 1990 and 1993 (neither directed by Verhoeven). Despite the presence of comic-book legend **Frank Miller** (*The Dark Knight Returns*) as a screenwriter, there was rather more “trash” than “intelligent”. You don’t miss much by ignoring them entirely.

Sleeper

dir Woody Allen, 1973, US, 89m

cast Woody Allen, Diane Keaton, John Beck, Mary

Gregory, Don Keefer cin David M. Walsh *m* Woody Allen

Over thirty years after it was released, *Sleeper* remains the definitive science fiction comedy, but the clock is ticking. The reason is simple: the movie isn't aging well, and much of the comedy is either being overtaken by technology or just plain going out of date.

It's still funny: **Woody Allen** plays a health-food-store owner who goes into a New York hospital in 1973 for a minor operation and wakes up two-hundred years later into a future that is best described as the kind of dictatorship you would get if the dictator were a New Age guru from Northern California. Having no registered identity, he's recruited as a mole by a band of resisters; along the way he kidnaps an airhead poet (**Diane Keaton**) who eventually becomes his partner in overthrowing the government. Allen mugs his way through with his usual blend of neurotic, brainy humour, and lots of slapstick.

It's the slapstick that holds up best, which is not entirely surprising, since Allen has cribbed from Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin – both of who still tickle what modern audiences bother to watch them. In any event an extended scene of Allen trying to steal oversized fruit only to slip on a banana peel the size of a sleeping bag is its own reward (Allen's cheerful indulgence in slapstick is what people meant when they say they liked his earlier films better, although since it's been thirty years since those early films, there are ever fewer people who say that). *Sleeper's* verbal humour is no less amusing, as long as you get the references. But there's an ever-growing number of adults who won't know (and don't care) about the tortuous aspects of Rod McKuen, Howard Cosell and Tiger's Milk; hence, many of the one-liners in *Sleeper* are well past their sell-by date.

As for technology catching up with *Sleeper*: in an age where cable television offers hundreds of stations, you can buy a robot pet from Sony and sign up for the Atkins Diet, some gags in this film are just not as funny as they should be, such as a future doctor's shock that Allen's character doesn't know about the benefits of fat intake.

That said, Allen and co-writer **Marshall Brickman** get major points for getting so many of their comical predictions right.

At the end of the day, this is one science fiction classic that might benefit from an update; however, the worry is that here in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, the person a movie studio might hire to play the Woody Allen part would be Will Smith.

Solaris (aka Solyaris)

dir Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972, USSR, 165m

cast Natalya Bondarchuk, Donatas Banionis, Jüri Järvet, Vladislav Dvorzhetsky, Nikolai Grinko, Anatoli Solonitsyn
cin Vadim Yusov **m** Eduard Artemyev

Serious film scholars will tell you that the 1972 version of *Solaris*, based on the novel by **Stanislaw Lem** and directed by the great Russian director **Andrei Tarkovsky**, is the finest non-English-language science fiction film (*Metropolis*, a silent film, loses out on this technicality), and with *2001* and *Metropolis*, one of the few science fiction films that students of the art of film really need to have seen.

Less serious filmgoers, confronted with the same film, might find its two hours forty-five minutes unfathomably slow and boring, and may suspect that the reason the film scholars rave about the work so much is that any film with so many significant pauses, inexplicably drawn-out scenes and cryptic philosophical utterances has got to mean something. But none of this detracts from the fact that the film is, like *2001*, highly intriguing and extremely beautiful.

Tarkovsky's use of long, largely static takes and seemingly empty passages in *Solaris* forces the viewer to contemplate the larger significance of what's on the screen and what's come before – and yet his choices were sometimes dictated by more pragmatic concerns. For example: a drawn-out montage of freeway shots in the movie represents the long psychological journey we must take to understand ourselves and our actions; it may also be in the film because Tarkovsky had to struggle with the Soviet film industry of the time to get permission to fly to Japan to film the scenes – he therefore had to have a lot of them in the film to justify the trip.

Tarkovsky's *Solaris*

A sense of Tarkovsky's difficult relationship with the Soviet film industry can also be gleaned from his diaries, in which he wrote, "Tomorrow I shall give *Solaris* in to Sizov. Then of course they're all going to come running, from the Committee, from the board, probably from the Central Committee. I'm sure there'll be a row."

Solaris is often thematically paired with *2001*, not only because they were made within a few years of each other and share a certain austere visual sensibility, but because they are both concerned with how humans interact with an awesome and unknowable alien

intelligence: *2001* with the monolith makers, and *Solaris* with an “ocean brain” on the distant planet of “Solaris”, which plagues the human residents of a space station by presenting them with doppelgängers of people from their pasts, causing the humans to confront the choices made in their own lives. What *Solaris* has that *2001* lacks is pathos – ironically not from the humans in *Solaris*, most of whom, including the protagonist **Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis)**, are largely emotionally opaque, but from one of the doppelgängers: **Hari (Natalya Bondarchuk)**, Kelvin’s long-dead wife. Having been re-created by the “ocean brain” with the emotional reality of the woman from Kelvin’s past (but none of her memories), this character is left with a dreadful absence of purpose to her life, which even Kelvin’s regret-tinged devotion cannot erase.

Hari is the emotional counterpoint to the various existential crises of the movie, and viewers can hardly be blamed for hungrily attaching themselves to her character; her presence amplifies the psychological message of the film, even when that message is conveyed by Kelvin, not by Hari, in the final scene (smartly saluted by Steven Spielberg, incidentally, in *Minority Report*). Or as Tarkovsky has described it: “...the story of Hari’s relationship with Kelvin is the story of the relationship between man and his own conscience... with his own spirit, when he has no possibility of doing anything about it, when he is constantly drawn into the exploration and development of technology.”

So where *2001* uses time and space to describe the smallness of the human mind in relation to the evolutionary leap at the end of the film, *Solaris* uses the same palette to describe the vast emptiness and loneliness of the human condition and particularly the way memories can create such emotional deserts for us to inhabit.

In comparison to Tarkovsky’s film, director **Steven Soderbergh’s** 2002 version (starring **George Clooney** as **Chris Kelvin**) is a pale imitation, in which the psychological concerns of the 1972 film are compressed down to a simple and banal love story between a man and his dead wife’s photocopy. This version may be more accessible than the Russian film – for one thing, it’s 70 minutes shorter, yet with nearly all the plot of Lem’s original – but accessibility isn’t everything, and Clooney’s plodding performance strips the film of the emotional weight and intensity of the original.

Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan

dir Nicholas Meyer, 1982, US, 113m

cast William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelley,
James Doohan, Walter Koenig, George Takei

cin Gayne Rescher *m* James Horner

Probably the best metaphor for *Star Trek* is that it's like a large, established religion whose early evangelical vigour has been slowly replaced by a comfortable status quo that is dragging the church into irrelevancy. This religion is historically important but presently rather less so. In this metaphor, watching the various television iterations of *Trek* is like attending the regular weekly services, while the films are like the major religious festival days (ie, the light show's better and everyone who hasn't been all year turns up at the altar). In both cases, however, you know the rituals, you know the hierarchy of the saints and angels, and you know when to sit, when to kneel and when to say "amen". But this is a church in desperate need of revival.

Ironically, the filmed versions of *Star Trek* have their roots in a revival attempt. The original *Star Trek* TV series had struggled from its beginning in 1966 through to 1969 but became immensely popular when repeated, prompting Paramount to consider a "Star Trek Mark II" series in the mid-70s. The test footage of this proposed show, which you can see in the special edition of the *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* DVD, looks absolutely dreadful; the TV series idea was scrapped (*Star Trek* would eventually be revived on TV in 1987 with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which would outpace the original series both in longevity and overall quality). Paramount instead opted to go the flashier film route, recruited veteran director **Robert Wise** to take the helm and hastily pushed the film into production. The result was *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, which was not a good film and puzzled the *Star Trek* faithful (see p.116).

As it turned out, the flabbiness of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* was a screw-up that paid off. For the second film, the budgets were

The sequels...



Star Trek: The Motion Picture

dir Robert Wise, 1979, US, 132m

It had all the hallmarks of the television series (Captain Kirk and crew zip across the universe in the *Enterprise* to save Earth from a mysterious threat) and a new coat of expensive special effects. And yet, it stank. This was because while the film *did* replicate elements of the TV show, it replicated the *worst* aspects, including a plodding, obvious script, a boring "villain" (a *Voyager* probe upgraded into consciousness by mischievous aliens and then sent home to find mummy), and overwrought acting – particularly (and needless to say) by William Shatner as Kirk. In short, a real mess, but at least there was a lot of it.



Star Trek III: The Search For Spock

dir Leonard Nimoy, 1984, US, 105m

The Search For Spock is not the worst of the films with the original cast – it's perfectly serviceable – but it is the *least* of the films. Its existence is entirely as a continuation of the storyline from *Khan*, and after the dramatic sacrifice of Spock in that film, the sacrifices Kirk suffers in this film (including his son and his ship) are muted second thoughts. You could extract this film from the series and you wouldn't notice it was missing.



Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home

dir Leonard Nimoy, 1986, US, 119m

The same could not be said for *The Voyage Home* (also directed by Nimoy, with Meyer back in for some co-writing duties), the most financially successful of the *Star Trek* films and the one film in the series for which the word "delightful" is not inappropriate. The crew travels back in time to 1980s San Francisco to find a humpback whale, and the result is we get to enjoy some comedy as the *Trek* crew fumble around; the interplay between Kirk and Spock is particularly good, and deftly handled by Nimoy as director (he'd go on to have a huge comedy hit

with *Three Men And A Baby*). *The Voyage Home* is the film that most explicitly trades on the audience's affection for the crew (and the characters' affection for each other), but it's also the film most accessible to outsiders. That's a neat trick if you can manage it – and indeed it's the film *Trek* fans use to proselytize. It's also the film that established the *Trek* fan rule of thumb that the best *Trek* films are the even-numbered ones.



Star Trek V: The Final Frontier

dir William Shatner, 1989, US, 107m

As if to prove the even number rule, the less said about *The Final Frontier* the better. What you need to know is that Bill Shatner wanted to direct a film and apparently everyone decided that five films in, it was unlikely he could actually destroy the series, so why not let his ego have its moment of glory. And in fact Shatner did not destroy the series, but if you watch the film, you'll realize it was a close thing indeed.



Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered

Country dir Nicholas Meyer, 1991, US, 113m

Now we're into the 1990s, the original crew is long in the dentures and *Next Generation's* crew is ramping up for their films. It's time for the original crew's swan song, *The Undiscovered Country*. Nicholas Meyer is once again brought in to direct and co-write the tale in which the long-antagonistic Klingons start their path toward friendship with the Federation. Meyer, by now well familiar with *Trek*, lightly lampoons some of the more ridiculous elements of the original series (Kirk's smooching of a shape-changing alien in the film not only sets up a brilliant aggravated line from Bones (DeForest Kelly) – "What is it with you?" – but a very amusing fight scene with the alien later) and ushers the original crew off the stage while setting the scene for the *Next Generation* films. It's a funny and welcome payoff for the *Trek* faithful.

trimmed and the producers looked outside the *Star Trek* universe to bring in someone who is inarguably the most important person to *Star Trek* as a film series: **Nicholas Meyer**, whose film forays to that point (*The Seven Percent Solution*, 1976; *Time After Time*, 1979) had dabbled in the past, not the future. But the critical factor was that Meyer was not of *Star Trek*; he hadn't drunk from the spring that threatened to drag the *Trek* film series down. But what Meyer did inherit was a bit of behind-the-scenes drama: **Leonard Nimoy**, the logical **Mr. Spock**, wanted out.

So arrived *The Wrath Of Khan*, which, simply put, did everything right: it incorporated elements from the original series (its story was a continuation of the popular *Star Trek* episode "Space Seed") and provided the series with its best villain (**Ricardo Montalban's** vaguely Lear-esque **Khan**) while introducing a story arc for the series that would continue over a number of films. The script was witty and relevant, with an actual message (the passage of time and cost of friendship and duty, typified by Spock's heroic demise). Most of all, the film worked with the weakest points of the *Trek* universe – and here we're talking about **William Shatner's** acting, among other things – and made them virtues. The ham-filled interaction between **Captain Kirk** and Khan is, very simply, a thrill. The film had *Trek* fans sobbing at Spock's death, but otherwise cheering the movie's triumph. The real *Star Trek* revival had arrived.

Spock didn't stay dead, of course, but Nimoy managed to extract the cost of the resurrection at a price: he stepped in as director of *The Search For Spock* (in which Nimoy himself did not appear until very near the end).

Several more films followed (see boxes), featuring both the original Shatner-led crew and also the *Next Generation* crew (the latter rabble featuring their own member of the Kirk-school-of-intergalactic-womanizing-and-ham-acting in the form of **Jonathan Frakes** as **William T. Riker**).

It's inevitable that *Trek* will be resurrected into film form again: the movies are part of a media empire that has brought in billions to Paramount. Cash cows don't stay un milked. But if it's going to succeed rather than merely continue to burn through the thinning, Vulcan-eared ranks of the faithful, it'll take an intervention, a reinvention and possibly a heretic or two to overturn the *Trek* altar. The series did it once with Meyer. It'll need to do it again if it intends to survive.

Picard and co.

The film series' slide into irrelevance well and truly begins at the point the *Next Generation Trek* crew comes to the big screen in 1994's *Star Trek: Generations*. The elements that made *The Next Generation* TV series so good – a certain thoughtfulness and the character depth the original series lacked – became deadly boring when translated onto the big screen. Of the four films featuring the *Next Generation* cast, the only one successful as a film was the second, *First Contact* (1996), and then only half the time, when the crew is fighting to defend its ship from the relentlessly assimilating Borg species – the remainder of the flick is an overgrown TV episode.

The "overgrown TV episode" syndrome also infected *Generations* (1994, which ill-advisedly brought back Kirk to fight alongside *Next Gen's* captain **Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart)** and also *Insurrection* (1998): its "fountain of youth" plot might have worked over 48 minutes, but not over 103. By the time the series got to *Nemesis* (2002) not even the death of **Data (Brent Spiner)**, *Next Generation's* Spock equivalent, could save the film and the series from ignominious blandness and the entropic heat death of a fun idea dragged far past its expiration point. Even the church faithful realized it was time to turn off the warp coil and limp into the nearest starbase.

Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope

dir George Lucas, 1977, US, 121m

cast Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, Peter Cushing, Alec Guinness, Anthony Daniels, Kenny Baker
cin Gilbert Taylor *m* John Williams

There are two indisputable facts about the *Star Wars* series of films. The first is that it is without a doubt the most significant and influential series in science fiction film history, and arguably in the history of film in general. This is the series that defines the modern blockbuster so completely that every special-effects and marketing extravaganza of the last three decades owes its existence to these films. The second is that with one shining exception, the *Star Wars* films aren't actually good. Praise and blame both fall upon **George Lucas**, whose love of technology – and facility for marketing – is exceeded only by his monumental incompetence in dealing with actual human beings in a film setting.

The original 1977 movie, originally monickered as simply *Star Wars*, itself serves as a microcosm for the entire series. The film – created on a budget of just ten million dollars – is a technological masterpiece so advanced for its time that Lucas's special-effects teams (led by **John Dykstra**) had to develop the equipment that allowed them to create the film's dazzling visual and sound effects (these technologies and the teams that created them would form the heart of **Industrial Light and Magic** and **Skywalker Sound**, two of the film industry's leading effects houses). The effort paid off from the film's first frames – few movie openings before or since have had as visually or sonically breathtaking a sight as the small rebel cruiser valiantly (and futilely) fighting off the unimaginably large Imperial Destroyer over the limb of the desert planet Tatooine. And that was just the start – the film hauled out droids, landspeeders, lightsabers, dogfights in space and the iconic image from the films of the terrible Death Star. It was a strange and exciting visual feast, unprecedented in cinema history.

But as for the script – well, as **Luke Skywalker** (**Mark Hamill**) says of the Millennium Falcon, “what a piece of junk”. The story is well known: young Luke Skywalker is unexpectedly thrown into a galactic conflict by wise mentor **Obi-Wan Kenobi** (**Alec Guinness**), and with the help of **Han Solo** (**Harrison Ford**) and **Princess Leia** (**Carrie Fisher**), defeats the oppressive Galactic Empire by destroying the Death Star. To create this tale, Lucas took a pot, and jammed in elements of 30s adventure serials (he’s noted *Flash Gordon* as an influence), 40s war films, 50s **Akira Kurosawa** films (specifically 1958’s *The Hidden Fortress*) and 60s mystical Eastern philosophy (reprocessed as “The Force”), added a bit of Joseph Campbell (notably his book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, which examines the archetypical “hero’s journey”) for spice. What came out was a barely serviceable script that’s dry and unpalatable without the sauce of the film’s special effects. As Harrison Ford said to Lucas, “You can type this shit, George, but you sure can’t say it.”

Lucas’s primary flaw as a director is also flatly evident in *Star Wars* – Lucas simply has no idea what to do with actors. Carrie Fisher said of Lucas in 2004 that “I think he was frustrated that we weren’t animated clay. We used to call ourselves trick talking meat.”

The film’s best performances come from villain **Peter Cushing**, who is basically importing what plummy skills he developed in all those Hammer horrors, and **James Earl Jones**, who as the voice of Darth Vader did not have to suffer Lucas on the set.

To be fair to Lucas, it wasn’t a given that he’d be so bad with actors. Lucas’s first film, the sterile *THX-1138* (1971), was an acting mess, but with his nostalgic second film, 1973’s *American Graffiti* (the huge success of which allowed him to make *Star Wars*) he seemed to have that problem solved; his characters were warm and alive, and Lucas picked up Academy Award nominations for direction and screenplay. But the *Star Wars* films eventually showed that *Graffiti* was an aberration, not an indication.

Still, technology conquered all; critics, dazzled by the film’s look, made virtues of the film’s flaws and praised its simplicity and innocence. And the kids of the 70s (aka “Generation Star Wars”) had no experience of 30s serials or 50s Kurosawa films, so it was all new to them. And it didn’t hurt that the film was also just plain

Adventures Of The Starkiller...

The original script of the 1977 movie carried the saga title *Adventures Of The Starkiller*, though this moniker soon disappeared. Six films in total complete the story; in plot order they are:



Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace

dir George Lucas, 1999, US, 132m



Star Wars: Episode II – The Attack Of The Clones

dir George Lucas, 2002, US, 142m



Star Wars: Episode III – The Revenge Of The Sith

dir George Lucas, 2005, US, 140m



Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope

dir George Lucas, 1977, US, 121m



Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back

dir Irvin Kershner, 1980, US, 124m



Star Wars: Episode VI – The Return Of The Jedi

dir Richard Marquand, 1983, US, 134m

fun and optimistic – a refreshing change in the 70s, in which many of the significant science fiction films – *Silent Running*, *Soylent Green*, *A Clockwork Orange*, Lucas’s own *THX-1138* – were depressing slogs through dystopian worlds. And to his detractors, Lucas can legitimately point out that for all the beatings he takes, *Star Wars* did get him nominated once again for directing and screenplay (both deservedly lost to Woody Allen and *Annie Hall*).

In hindsight, it’s all too easy to be a Lucas detractor; and though all the jabs that are made at this film are justified, it is undeniably a movie that defined so much of the late twentieth century’s cultural landscape. It is also a movie that captured the imagination of a generation, and broadened the horizons of movie-making (for better and for worse). And it’s a film which is today both loved nostalgically by thirty- and forty-somethings and enjoyed by their kids, coming to it with fresh eyes.

Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back

dir Irvin Kershner, 1980, US, 124m

cast Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, Billy Dee Williams, Anthony Daniels, Kenny Baker, David Prowse

cin Peter Suschitzky *m* John Williams

The fun and simplicity of *Star Wars* took a darker turn in its sequel, 1980’s *The Empire Strikes Back*, the single film in the entire series which is genuinely good on all levels. Not coincidentally, it’s also the film in the series with the least amount of **George Lucas** in it. The film’s story comes from Lucas, but the first draft of the script came from science fiction author and frequent Howard Hawks screenwriter **Leigh Brackett** (who died of cancer after turning in the script); the script was then handed over to **Lawrence Kasdan** to complete.



Brackett and Kasdan knew how to write characters, and in their hands the inhabitants of Lucas's universe developed depth. **Luke Skywalker** grew a personality, **Han Solo** and **Princess Leia** were offered the closest thing to a real romantic arc in popular science fiction film, and the tragedy of **Darth Vader** was first exposed in science fiction's most memorable Oedipal moment. And then there's **Yoda**, an initially comic character who becomes the heart of the series. This script and its suddenly fascinating characters were then handed over not to George Lucas but to journeyman director **Irvin Kershner**, who performed out of his league, or at the very least let his actors act.

The result was a film with all the *Star Wars* visuals, but where you don't have to willfully ignore the obvious flaws on the human side of the equation. However, the darkness and moral ambiguity of the movie didn't initially sit well with all the fans of the first film; while still a big hit, this was the *Star Wars* film that made the least amount of money the first time around in the theatres. But it

One of many moments of genuine script and acting triumph in *Empire*: Solo finally comes close to stealing a kiss before C-3PO interrupts with some fascinating news about reverse power flux couplings

opened up the possibility that the series (then believed to be a trilogy) would end on an inspiring note for both lovers of story and of spectacle. Alas, we come to 1983's *Return Of The Jedi*.

Jedi did not skimp on spectacle – the long sequences of pitched space battle around the resurrected Death Star are still some of the most thrilling special-effects extravaganzas ever put to film. But the story fell flat on its face, as did the acting. Lucas once again put himself on script detail (with Kasdan), but once more chose not to direct, instead handing the reins to **Richard Marquand** – whose directorial style was far closer to Lucas's than Kershner's. *Jedi* was a financial success, outgrossing *Empire*, but had the trilogy limping to its completion when it should have soared.

The film also gave the first real indication that Lucas saw the films from the standpoint of a merchandiser as much as – and possibly more than – from the point of a filmmaker and storyteller. At the beginning of the *Star Wars* cycle, Lucas had offered to direct the first film for a cut rate in exchange for retaining the merchandising rights for the films, and the rights for all future films. From a financial point of view, this was an absolutely brilliant move on his part, and Lucas exploited it to its fullest by extending the *Star Wars* universe in all directions – now in addition to the films there's a vast, profitable line of books, video games, comic adventures, and all manner of toys and merchandising. It also meant that Lucas now looked to maximize related merchandising revenues.

Thus: **Ewoks**, furry, pint-sized warriors, shaped like teddy bears, improbably battled laser-gun-wielding Imperial storm troopers with rocks, and soon after appeared in plush form in toy stores all across the world. Grown-up *Star Wars* fans (and most critics) were rightfully horrified. This may have led to the *Star Wars* fan concept of the “Endorian Holocaust”, in which the debris of the second Death Star (blown up at the end of *Jedi*) rained down on the Ewoks' home of Endor, causing an environmental disaster and thereby wiping out the furry revenue-generators. Naturally, this vindictive fantasy is not supported in the official *Star Wars* universe.

After *Jedi*, the *Star Wars* movies went into a period of hibernation, during which Lucas focused on non-*Star Wars* film projects and developing various filmmaking technologies. In the mid-1990s Lucas re-released the first trilogy with added scenes and significantly upgraded effects, and also announced the imminent production of a second trilogy (see box).

Star Wars: the second trilogy...

The second trilogy aimed to cover the events prior to the first trilogy, and kicked off with 1999's *The Phantom Menace*, which will go down as one of the most anticlimactic events in film history. Indisputably, *Phantom* was gorgeous to look at: the special effects that **George Lucas** had pioneered a quarter-century before had matured to the point where Lucas could – and did – put any spectacular vision he chose on the screen, unhindered by mere practicality. But Lucas, who had not directed nor written a script alone since the original *Star Wars*, opted to do both with *Phantom*, and the results were disastrous. Despite a far more capable cast of actors than appeared in the first trilogy, the performances were grindingly flat, with the actors forced to mouth lines that sound imported from ponderous costume dramas.

Lucas's inability to direct live people was compounded by the fact that one of his stars was an 8-year-old boy (**Jake Lloyd**, playing a young **Anakin Skywalker**, who would become **Darth Vader**); perhaps Lucas collaborator Steven Spielberg could have got a creditable performance out of Lloyd, but Lucas certainly could not. Worst of all was the appearance of the widely reviled **Jar-Jar Binks** – Lucas has since had to deny assertions that this nonhuman alien was a racial stereotype. The fact that Binks was the first (visually) believable computer-generated character to exist alongside human characters was all but overlooked.

In the end, only two things in *Phantom* worked unreservedly: the centre-piece pod racing sequence, and the film's climactic lightsaber duel involving Jedi **Qui-Gon Jinn** (**Liam Neeson**) and **Obi-Wan Kenobi** (**Ewan McGregor**), and vastly underwritten bad guy **Darth Maul**. Neither of these scenes involved much acting. *Phantom* was a hit – it hardly couldn't have been since it benefited from the release of two decades of pent-up fan desire – but it presented Lucas with a problem in that for the first time, *Star Wars* fans were genuinely

disappointed, and rightly so, with a *Star Wars* film.

Phantom was bad enough that 2002's *Attack Of The Clones* was hailed as a significant step forward for the new trilogy – more action, more fun, and there was no one who didn't love **Yoda's** wild lightsaber duel with **Count Dooku** (**Christopher Lee**, on hand for more scene-chewing from a Hammer Studios alum). But Lucas's primary problem continued to be Lucas: despite the presence of a co-writer, **Jonathan Hales**, *Clones'* script was chock-a-block with embarrassingly bad dialogue, which was exacerbated by the fact that Lucas was trying to sell a romance between **Anakin Skywalker** (now played by **Hayden Christiansen**) and **Senator Amidala** (**Natalie Portman**). Christiansen's reading of the line in which Anakin tries to romance the senator by explaining how she is not like sand is one of the genuine low points of the series, and the expression on Christiansen's face shows that he knows it.

Lucas wrapped up the prequel trilogy – and the entire *Star Wars* series – with 2005's *Revenge Of The Sith*, which while it suffered the same indignities as the other two films of the prequel trilogy, namely dead-flat line readings and Lucas's difficulty creating credible dialogue, suffered somewhat fewer of them, and also offered the best action and visual sequences of the three films. This made *Sith* easily the best of the trilogy, and a decent bridge between the events in the original trilogy. Still, in all, one wonders how much better this entire prequel trilogy would have been if Lucas had handed off the writing and directing duties to more competent hands; if the films' emotional impact could have equalled their undeniable technical skill and beauty, they could have been among the greatest films ever made. But in the end, it's Lucas's universe; we just watch it. He made the films his way, for better or worse, which is something filmmakers today get to do all too rarely.

Star Wars fans generally enjoyed the re-release, though a significant minority noted Lucas was using the opportunity to revise *Star Wars* history: a scene in which Han Solo shoots a bounty hunter named **Greedo** was altered to show the bounty hunter shooting first. It was evidence that Lucas's allegiances in the *Star Wars* universe lay in the tech and in the marketing, not in the storytelling (the scene would be changed yet again in the 2004 DVD release of the trilogy – now they both shoot simultaneously).

The Stepford Wives

dir Bryan Forbes, 1975, US, 115m

cast Katharine Ross, Paula Prentiss, Peter Masterson, Nanette Newman, Tina Louise

cin Enrique Bravo/Owen Roizman **m** Michael Small

The Stepford Wives is better known as a condition than a film: the idea of women (or children, or accountants, or any class of human to whom the phrase “The Stepford” can be attached to) whose conformity to a bland social norm is so extreme that their own personalities are leached away to achieve the ideal. In the film (and the **Ira Levin** book which inspired it), this state of being – in which the women of the Connecticut town of Stepford are sexy and pliant helpmates to their successful and busy husbands – is not actually humanly possible to achieve. So the men of Stepford cheerfully exchange their flesh-and blood wives for something a little more science fictiony, and if you think this exchange sounds pretty ominous for the women involved, you’re right.

The film merits inclusion in the science fiction canon on two fronts. First, as an all-too-rare example of science fiction film as social satire – this film dropped into the theatres during the full bloom of the feminist movement, and you can’t see it without noting the commentary on the role of women in the world. Satire pops up in other science fiction films as well (notably *A Clockwork Orange*, with its meditation on free will versus the will of society), but here it was the right satire at the right time, which has given the movie “cultural touchstone” status.

Second, it's an example of a science fiction film trapped in amber: speculative though the film remains (we have yet to replace wives, husbands or other family members in the technological manner outlined here), culturally it couldn't have been made – nor could it work – in any era other than the 1970s. Rather grim proof of this was provided by the 2004 remake, which despite being funnier (that is to say more “satirical” in the generally understood sense of the term), updated with current cultural references (one of the “Stepford Wives” of this film is a gay man) and having **Nicole Kidman** as its heroine, was a big fat flop. The 21st Century isn't 1975, and in the age of “desperate housewives” the idea of Stepford wives seem more quaint than anything else. Science fiction film can age – badly – and not simply because special-effects technology is so much better now. Science fiction film speculates on the future, but the audience at which a movie is aimed will inevitably become part of history as time goes by.

1975's *Stepford Wives*



Superman

dir Richard Donner, 1978, UK, 143m

cast Marlon Brando, Gene Hackman, Christopher Reeve, Ned Beatty, Jackie Cooper

cin Geoffrey Unsworth *m* John Williams

The cardinal rule of *Superman* is that he is almost insufferably square: you can't say you stand for "truth, justice and the American way" and say it with an ironic smirk, or you'll be sunk. The minor miracle of *Superman* is that it lets Superman be as square as he has to be – and yet surrounds the square-jawed, square-muscled superhero with a film that subtly jabs at the Superman mythos. This is a movie that lets Superman look for a phone booth in which to change his clothes at the first sign he'll be needed – but makes sure the phone booth is just a cubbyhole on a metal pole.

Now, admittedly, this film does have its flab – for example, an extended opening scene in which the grossly overpaid **Marlon Brando** mumbles his way through the destruction of the planet Krypton (and the narrow escape by his son to the planet Earth, to become Superman) – and then the schmalz, as **Clark Kent** grows up in Smallville. But once Superman hits the big city of Metropolis, the film strikes all the right notes.

The movie had the good fortune to be made at exactly the right time: blue screen technology (which allowed Superman to look realistically airborne) had developed far enough that, as the film tagline went, "you will believe a man can fly". And it was the moment that **Christopher Reeve** was ripe to be discovered. Rarely has a film character been so well cast: Reeve was tall, impossibly good-looking in a squarish sort of way, and projected just the right amount of moral

More Superman...



Superman II

dir Richard Lester, 1980, UK, 127m

This film hits the spot, in part because it was smart enough to bring Superman down to earth, by having him forsake his powers to be with Lois Lane, the woman he loves. Of course, he does it at exactly the wrong time: three criminals from his home planet arrive on Earth with plans to take over (aided by Lex Luthor, naturally). The idea of a superhero suffering the loss of his powers over a woman would be revisited again many years later to much acclaim in another superhero sequel, *Spider-Man 2*.



Superman III

dir Richard Lester, 1983, US, 125m

This was puzzlingly bland, despite the presence of Richard Pryor as a sort-of bad guy, and the intriguing idea of having Superman go bad thanks to some almost-Kryptonite.



Superman IV: The Quest For Peace

dir Sidney J. Furie, 1987, US, 93m

This sequel, with its mawkish nuclear-disarmament theme (from a story idea by Reeve) is simply bad. Skip this one.

rectitude for the role. Reeve was irrevocably typecast, a fact he would rue for the rest of his film career, and which would take on tragically ironic shadings when Reeve was thrown from a horse and paralyzed from the neck down in the 1990s.

But for the film, it was an immense stroke of good luck. The story capitalized on Reeve's all-Americanness by giving every other role a humourous twist, from the go-go ace reporter **Lois Lane** (**Margot Kidder**), whose penthouse apartment (on a reporter's salary!) is the most unbelievable thing in the movie, to a great performance by **Gene Hackman** as the genially sinister **Lex Luther**, the man with a plan to nuke California for real-estate opportunities.

Given how well *Superman* honoured and yet sent up the Superman mythos, it would be a bit much to expect the sequel (*Superman II*, 1980) to match it – especially when the director (**Richard Donner**, who had directed the first film) was canned midway through filming and replaced by **Richard Lester**, who received the director credit. And yet *Superman II* is nearly as good as the original (see box); the other two sequels ain't so hot, but keep your eyes peeled for the new *Superman Returns* movie, scheduled to be released in 2006.

Terminator 2: Judgement Day

dir James Cameron, 1991, US, 137m

cast Arnold Schwarzenegger, Robert Patrick, Linda Hamilton, Edward Furlong

cin Adam Greenberg *m* Brad Fiedel

If you want a film series whose progression through its films matches the progression of the science fiction genre in Hollywood, the *Terminator* series is as good as you're going to get. Its ranks feature a scrappy B-movie, a massive technology and budget-busting extravaganza, and an overly calculated, major studio franchise flick. It's all here.

The scrappy B-movie is the first film, *The Terminator*, written and directed by then-unknown **James Cameron**, whose only previous



Robert Patrick as the
T-1000 in *Terminator 2* ...

directorial effort was the low-budget *Piranha 2: The Spawning* (1981) – a film which was taken from him and re-edited when the producer decided he wasn't pleased with Cameron's efforts. For *The Terminator*, Cameron had a miniscule budget of six and a half million dollars, his own imagination and **Arnold Schwarzenegger** – not so much an actor as a presence – in the role of the **Terminator**.

Most people would peg Schwarzenegger as the key ingredient in that equation, but it's Cameron who made it work. His smartest move was to get around Schwarzenegger's inability to act by making the Terminator an emotionless killer who rarely spoke more than three words in sequence ("I'll be back", "Fuck off, asshole", etc), booting the character into iconic territory. That solved, Cameron kept the script lean, tight, smart and fast – if there was exposition to be delivered, Cameron had it delivered while action was exploding around the characters, mirroring for the audience the frantic confusion **Sarah Connor** (**Linda Hamilton**) feels when she's told a killing machine has been sent from the future to kill her and her unborn (and then unconceived) son, **John Connor**.

The film moved so fast audiences didn't have time to focus on how cheap it was; Cameron would quickly become famous (or infamous) for the amount of money he'd sink into a film, but *The Terminator* (and *Aliens*, which was made for a surprisingly cheap 18 million dollars) showed that Cameron had both the wit and ingenuity to work with whatever he was given, both in terms of budget and materials (including actors).

Of course, if you let Cameron have more, he'll spend it, and spend he did with *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, a film whose 102 million dollar budget was not to be sniffed at. Cameron went to town with the dough, offering up amazing visuals, such as the city of Los Angeles obliterated in a nuclear blast, chase scenes with trucks, motorbikes and helicopters, and of course the **T-1000**, the new improved shapeshifting Terminator (played by **Robert Patrick**) whom the old Terminator, now programmed to protect John Connor, had to defeat. The T-1000 featured the first extensive use of "morphing" in cinema. This changing computer effect would quickly show up everywhere, including kiddie TV commercials and Michael Jackson videos.

If all Cameron had done with *Terminator 2* was give audiences a

thrill ride, it would probably have been enough, but the surprise of *T2* was its script, the drama of which focused on the touchy relationship between Sarah Connor (changed from the mousy waitress of the first film to a paranoid urban gorilla) and her son John, and the relationship between John and Schwarzenegger's Terminator, a relentless protector whom Sarah ironically notes is the first stable male role model her son has ever had.

It's one of the ironies of Cameron's career that a director so well associated with such a testosterone-laden genre as science fiction action has had a number of strong female characters at the heart of his films (in addition to Sarah Connor, there's Ellen Ripley of *Aliens* and Lindsey Brigman of *The Abyss*), and that in the case of Connor and Ripley, the maternal aspect of their personalities is critical to his story.

It's this aspect that makes *T2* not just a great action film, but one of the best films of its year, and one of the best science fiction films ever made. And it's worth noting that all of Cameron's films so far mentioned featured the active involvement of sometime-wife **Gale Ann Hurd** (see Icons) – as one of the few top-line science fiction/action producers who is also a woman, she undoubtedly had a significant influence on these films as well.

Cameron and Sarah Connor are both absent from **Terminator 3: The Rise Of The Machines**, which suffers both their losses. In the place of Cameron is director **Jonathan Mostow**, a competent but not especially interesting director; in the place of Sarah Connor is the **T-X Terminator (Kristanna Loken)**, which takes the form of a hot supermodel that can sprout weaponry when required, and which the now-obsolete Schwarzenegger Terminator must again wearily battle to protect the now-grown John Connor. The film is a perfectly reasonable action flick, but pales after the first two entries of the series; it's pretty clear everyone involved was in for the money. That is except for Schwarzenegger, who was in it for the money – 30 million dollars – and to make sure that his increasingly lackluster film career, soon to be abandoned for California politics, ended with an assured hit.

"In it for the money" is where the series now stands – a *Terminator 4* was announced in September 2004. The series that started as an inventive drive-in flick has become a dependable cash cow – just another of several science fiction cash cows in recent film history. And as long as it performs, it'll be back.

The Thing From Another World

dir Christian Nyby, 1951, US, 87m, b/w
cast Margaret Sheridan, Kenneth Tobey, Robert
 Cornthwaite, Douglas Spencer, James Young
cin Russell Harlan *m* Dimitri Tiomkin

“Science Fiction Golden Age” writer and editor **John W. Campbell Jr.** wrote the short story *Who Goes There?* in 1938, in which a shapeshifting alien on its way to world domination threatens an arctic base. It’s been adapted into two science fiction movies, both of which are mirror images of each other, and both of which find the filmmakers capably showing up – and then dealing with – the deficiencies of the science fiction genre in each of their films’ eras.

The first of these is 1951’s *The Thing From Another World*, a standard B-movie experience – or it would have been, if not for the presence of some interesting A-list filmmakers. Start with **Howard Hawks** (*His Girl Friday*, 1940; *Sergeant York*, 1941), who was officially the producer but whom everyone from film historians to cast members acknowledge was in charge on set (the director on record, **Christian Nyby**, was frequently Hawks’ film editor). Also present were Hawks’ regular screenwriter, **Charles Lederer** (*His Girl Friday*; *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, 1953), and two-time Oscar-winner **Ben Hecht** (who made an uncredited stab at the script). The screenplay extensively reworked Campbell’s original story, and added both a thread of understated humour (there are dozens of amusing throw-away lines) and a romance of sorts between the hero and the secretary of an untrustworthy scientist.

What comes of this is a film with all the trappings of a science fiction B-movie, from the less-than-memorable cast and cheap sets down to the cheesy alien in a jumpsuit (**James Arness**, who would go onto fame in *Gunsmoke*), but a film that’s undeniably smarter. Characters aren’t cardboard alien snacks who do stupid things for the convenience of the plot, but actually appear to have functioning brains. The conflict between the straight-laced military heroes

who want to kill the alien, and the scientists who don't, has more complexity than you'd expect. This is a film whose filmmakers knew they were working within B-movie constraints and expectations; they overcome them not by playing against audience expectations, but by giving the audience exactly what they expect, on the filmmakers' terms. It's a B-movie, for sure, but it's a B+ movie.

Fast-forward 31 years to *The Thing* (1982), where the movie-making elements are in an inverse proportion. This was an A-list feature, but at the helm was **John Carpenter**, who shot to fame with that quintessential horror B-movie, *Halloween* (1978). No longer was the alien some poor soul in a jumpsuit – now the alien was a shapeshifting special-effects extravaganza, awash in blood and gore (all the death in the 50s film took place offstage). The amusing asides and romance exited the script, with screenwriter **Bill Lancaster** veering back toward the original Campbell story, adding lots of swearing, and making it heavy on paranoia and fear. After all, what good is amusing patter when you have to deal with an alien that sprouts legs out of a severed human head and has a sideline in turning huskies into a vision of hell.

The characters are utilitarian; there's no great concern if they die, outside of the curiosity of how messy the death will be. Unlike Howard Hawks and his crew, who were science fiction and horror novices, Carpenter cut his teeth on horror and science fiction (the aforementioned *Halloween*, and also *Escape From New York*), and was happy to work with the era's genre expectations. Like Hawks, Carpenter succeeded by giving his audience what they expected, just on his (probably grosser than expected) terms.

What's interesting about both films is how the filmmakers chose to divert attention from the flaws of their respective movies. The 50s film hid its effects and budget deficiencies in its characters and story; the 80s version hid its character and story deficiencies in its budget and its effects. In the end, both versions work very well. But even



The Thing From Another World (1951)

though they share the same basic Campbell story, they couldn't be more different in how they make it all work. It's the difference that thirty years makes on both film technology and science fiction film audience expectations.

Things To Come

dir William Cameron Menzies,
1936, UK, 113m, b/w

cast Raymond Massey, Edward Chapman, Ralph Richardson, Margaretta Scott, Cedric Hardwicke, Maurice Braddell, Sophie Stewart

cin Georges Périnal *m* Arthur Bliss

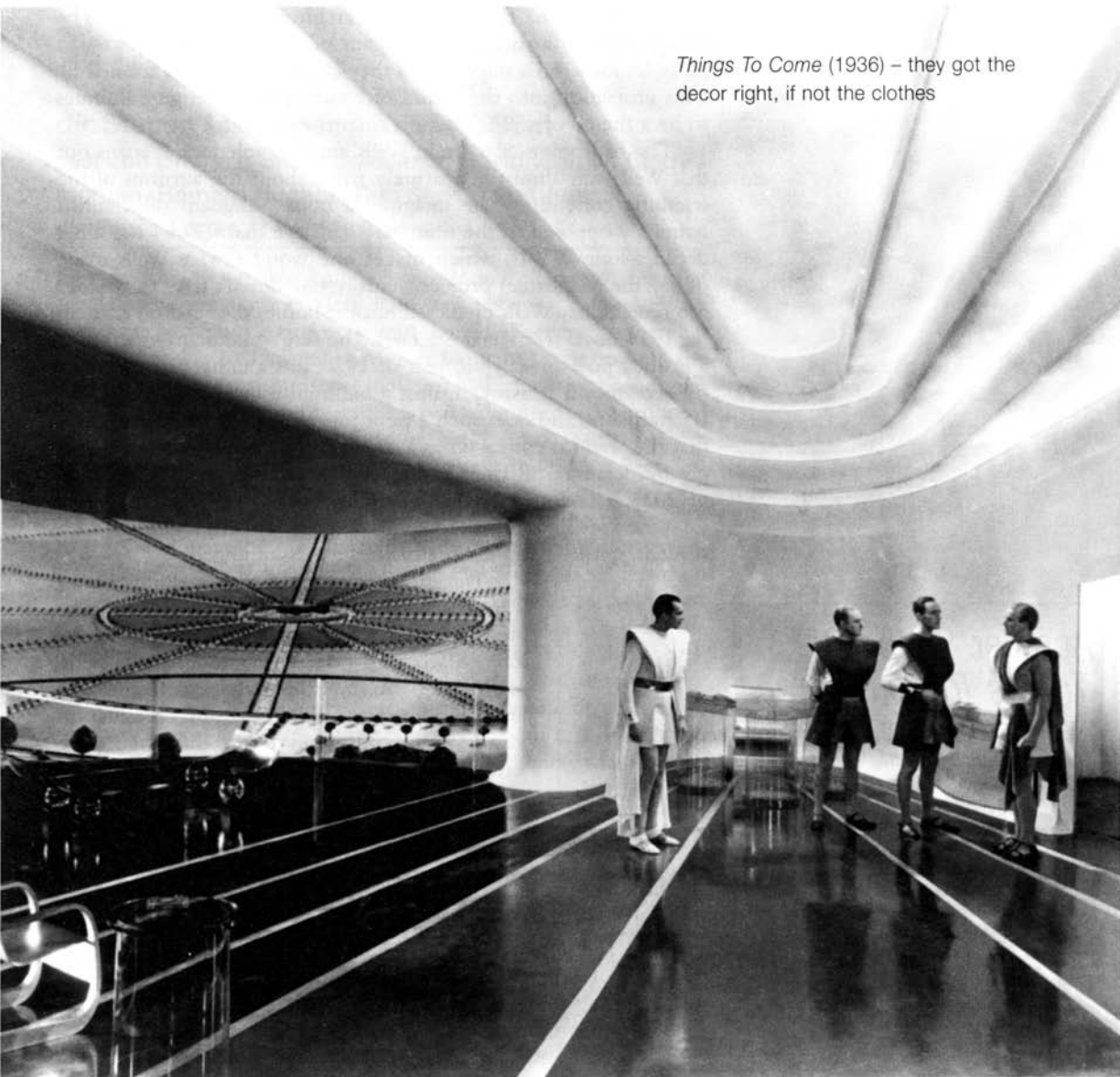
H.G. Wells is inarguably one of the names to have had the most influence on science fiction film (as over sixty films based on his work shows), but *Things To Come* deserves special note because it's one of the very few films of his work in which Wells himself was directly involved – he wrote the screenplay (based on his novel *The Shape Of Things To Come*) and was an active participant in the overall production of the movie.

It's also a film which best captures the essence of Wells the man: not only the science fiction fabulist but also the enthusiastic social thinker who spent his later years touting the benefits of scientific progress for the good of the common man.

This has its good points and its bad points for the film. The good points are that the author's uncanny ability to imagine future events pays off in spades; the film, made in 1936, features scenes that rather eerily presage the London Blitz, but also foretells moonshots, and the ability of demagogues to use televised images to rouse the rabble. (It also imagines that in the future everyone will wear ridiculously flared tunics, which alas, would become a science fiction film cliché.)

The futuristic settings are, still, stunningly beautiful, particularly that of the future-city Everytown, designed by Vincent Korda and Wells' own son Frank Wells (but they were only used after Wells first unsuccessfully approached ex-Bauhaus allrounder László

Things To Come (1936) – they got the decor right, if not the clothes



Mohly-Nagy and famed modern architect **Le Corbusier**). The final result was a successful amalgam of various modernist design ideas, let loose on a stage where they could be indulged to the full. This projection into the future of contemporary design continues to be a theme of science fiction cinema even today.

The bad points, alas, lie in Wells' futurist polemics. It turns out that Wells was almost endearingly naive about the altruism of the scientific community; he imagines a noble vanguard of scientists staunchly opposed to the miniature dark age that follows the film's decades-long WWII, which makes one wonder what Wells made of, say, the Manhattan Project (actually, one doesn't have to wonder too much, since Wells predicted nuclear bombs dropped on cities in his 1914 novel *The World Set Free*). The film's middle passage, set in a grubby post-apocalyptic year of 1970, pits a rather ascetic scientist (**Raymond Massey**) against a buffoonish local warlord (**Ralph Richardson**), and does such a poor job of humanizing the scientist that the warlord comes off as a strangely sympathetic creature simply by default. Still later, in the film's gleaming, modernist future of 2036, a technocrat (also played by Massey) delivers the film's capstone speech about the inevitability of human progress in such strident, spittle-flying terms that he appears unhinged.

Things To Come is also something of an "answer" to **Fritz Lang's** *Metropolis*, which posited technology in opposition to the interests of the working class – and indeed, enslaving them. Wells, on the other hand, saw technology freeing humanity, and told the film's production teams in no uncertain terms that they were creating a motion picture that was opposing *Metropolis's* technophobic tendencies (not to mention the general technophobic trends in other science fiction cinema of the time, most notably the *Frankenstein* films).

While there's little doubt that *Things To Come* stands as an important film in the science fiction genre, both for its predictions and presentation of the future, and its technological optimism, ultimately it would have been a better answer to *Metropolis* and its ilk if its scientists – the film's heroes – weren't so cold.

Another Shape Of Things To Come...

Another adaptation of the H.G. Wells story *The Shape Of Things To Come* was made in Canada in 1979 by director George McCowan. Released under the tagline "Beyond the earth ... Beyond the moon ... Beyond your wildest imagination!", this movie is in no way any of these things, unless you happen to have the imagination of a badger.

This film trickled out amid the post-*Star Wars* boom of second-rate science fiction releases, and although it hides behind the title of the classic Wells tale, it has little else to do with that story. The plot is appalling, the acting dire and even the presence of the sometimes-wonderful Jack Palance can't save it. Avoid at all costs.

Tron

dir Steven Lisberger, 1982, US, 96m

cast Jeff Bridges, Bruce Boxleitner, David Warner, Cindy

Morgan, Barnard Hughes, Dan Shor, Peter Jurasik

cin Bruce Logan *m* Wendy Carlos

Plotwise, *Tron* is terrible stuff, a painfully juvenile story about an arcade-game programmer (Jeff Bridges) who gets zapped into a computer by a plagiarizing colleague (David Warner); he then has to battle his way to a villainous **Master Control Program** with the help of computer programs that look just like friends and colleagues of his – as if he was Dorothy and this was a digitized, 80s version of Oz (he even gets a pet, in the form of “Bit”). It was seen as rubbish when it debuted in 1982, and time, to put it mildly, has been less than kind in the intervening decades.

Fortunately for *Tron*, its inclusion here has nothing to do with its story and everything to do with its stunning, computer-generated special effects. While science fiction movies had been featuring computerized effects since *Westworld* in 1973, *Tron* was the first to use computerized visuals on such a grand scale – and to hitch the existence of the film to the special-effects process (the film also featured significant hand animation as well, designed to complement and enhance the computerized effects). Audiences didn’t come for the story – most audiences simply didn’t care about it. They came to see the lightcycles: computerized motorcycles zipping along at high speed and turning at 90-degree angles.

To this end, *Tron* did not disappoint – not only did the effects dazzle, so did the film’s aesthetic, a cool neon shout-out to modernism, in which simple, clean lines defined shape and volume. How much of this was an intentional design choice and how much was a matter of the filmmakers constructing virtue from necessity (given the limited amount of processing power available to 1982’s computers) is beside the point; the filmmakers made an entirely alien and visually coherent universe. It was a shame to have to put people in it (and in unimpressive processor-chip-patterned uniforms to boot); they were simply too fleshy for the world they inhabited.

Computer graphics have vastly improved since *Tron*, and more

and more effects are made through them, but the question is: have they been used to better effect? This film is still beautiful to look at. Watch it with the volume turned all the way down, and you can convince yourself you're viewing a classic.

12 Monkeys

dir Terry Gilliam, 1995, US, 129m

cast Joseph Melito, Bruce Willis, Brad Pitt, Jon Seda, Michael Chance, Vernon Campbell, H. Michael Walls

cin Roger Pratt *m* Paul Buckmaster

Once upon a time there was a short experimental French film from 1962 named *La Jetée* (see box); its story was kidnapped by director Terry Gilliam, put on the rack and stretched out into the hit time-travel film *12 Monkeys*.

This is not an unreasonable nor indefensible choice, since *12 Monkeys*, while certainly more conventional than *La Jetée*, skates on the bare edge of commercial acceptability, sunk as it is in a future that looks like a trash heap imported from Gilliam's earlier film *Brazil* (see p.67), and a present that doesn't look all that much better. The movie was a hit, but any studio executive would have shuddered to think what would have happened to the film had it not starred both the A-list star Bruce Willis and then-rising star Brad Pitt (whose eccentric and Oscar-nominated performance in the film was reportedly aided by Gilliam's taking away his cigarettes).

Willis, too, offers an unexpected performance, playing his shaky, edgy, time-travelling James Cole with a vulnerability that few would have assumed the snarky hero of the *Die Hard* action films could pull off (although ironically it was just those films – and specifically a scene in which Willis's character had to pull shards of glass out of his feet – that convinced Gilliam to use him in the role). Gilliam surrounds Willis with chaos, both in a future where the vast majority of humanity is dead from a plague and in a present where his time-travelling character is quite understandably taken as being mad. Uniquely among filmmakers who can be described as even vaguely commercial, Gilliam gets away with genuinely picturing

madness and making mass audiences eat it up (note *Time Bandits*, 1981, and particularly *The Fisher King*, 1991). Here he pokes holes in reality, and the perception of reality, as if both were tissue. There are other time-travel films, but few that offer the same level of pure disorientation and (as a side effect) such a connection with the poor disoriented bastard sent back in time. It's the end of the world as we know it, and it definitely doesn't feel fine.

28 Days Later...

dir Danny Boyle, 2002, UK, 113m

cast Alex Palmer, Bindu De Stoppani, Jukka Hiltunen,

David Schneider, Cillian Murphy, Toby Sedgwick

cin Anthony Dod Mantle, Naomie Harris

m Danny Boyle/God Speed You Black Emperor

The zombie movie is enjoying something of a renaissance in the early 21st century, but the bad news is that most of these movies are either remakes of earlier, superior films (*Dawn Of The Dead*, 1978), or simply stink up a room like, well, a zombie – *Resident Evil* (2002) and its sequel *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004).

28 Days Later... is a notable exception to this trend and also represents something else entirely: a roadmap for how science fiction films without the vast monetary resources of a Hollywood studio can still crank out smart, gripping movies that not only work, but make tons of money.

28 Days Later... earns its sci-fi pedigree by the manner in which the zombies are created: by a genetically engineered virus called “Rage” that doesn't turn people into the undead, but does turn them into vicious, unthinking berzerkers who kill anyone and anything they see. The incubation period of this virus is an astounding (and scientifically shaky) 10 to 20 seconds – fast enough that there's no hope for a cure, or hope for an escape. The virus is transmitted to the outside world after some animal-rights vigilantes invade a genetics lab and try to free the chimps there: for their pains (and for not listening to the lab worker), they are the first victims.

In the 28 days of the title, the whole of the British Isles is swept



La Jetée

dir Chris Marker, 1962, Fr, 28m

La Jetée (which means “The Jetty”) is a 28-minute avant-garde short, from French director **Chris Marker**. Constructed almost completely from still images, it tells the story of a man sent pinballing through time in the vain hope of helping the world avoid annihilation. For most of its life it was known to art house cinema buffs as one of the more oddball elements of the French New Wave cinema.

Thanks to *12 Monkeys*, this obscure gem has had a new lease of life, and is now actually available on a DVD entitled *Short 2 – Dream* DVD from Warner (which features commentary by **Terry Gilliam**).

The naturally curious should seek it out and bask in the exquisite beauty of Marker's post-apocalyptic vision, the less adventurous may decide instead simply to watch *12 Monkeys* and call it a day.

by the disease, leaving only small numbers of uninfected. To survive they have to be nearly as vicious as the infected, particularly to those of their number who find they've newly caught the disease. This includes our hero, **Jim** (**Cillian Murphy**), whose last name is never revealed, and who was in a coma when the virus hit and missed out on being infected (and whose initial disorientation matches our own in the audience). Jim starts off soft and confused but hardens up pretty quick, particularly when the survival party he is with is threatened by another group.

28 Days Later...



Aside from the questionable science of the virus, *28 Days Later...* never manages to insult the viewer's intelligence, which is always a positive thing in a zombie flick. It also makes the very smart move of portraying its zombies as fast, and though not intelligent in the classical sense, at least cunning in a predatory sense. These are zombies you can't outrun and from whom it doesn't make sense simply to hide in one spot. The script and filmmakers knowingly reference previous zombie and monster movies, but this is the evolution of the genre, not a rehash. Zombies are once again genuinely terrifying.

28 Days Later... also proves that quality small-budget science fiction can compete with modern big-budget spectacles through a combination of ingenuity, technology, and talent. This film, modestly budgeted at eight million dollars, was recorded on digital video cameras, which allowed director **Danny Boyle** to quickly set up shots, execute them, and get out. This enabled him, for example, to make London appear deserted on the cheap: the filmmakers simply shot early in the morning on weekdays when the streets were deserted, and politely asked what strollers were about to hold up for a minute or two while they got the shot.

As American science fiction productions get bigger, faster, louder and more expensive, making it rather more difficult for other film industries to compete on the same production level, it makes sense for filmmakers to offer what big-budget science fiction film can't or won't: smarter, smaller stories done with style. *28 Days Later...* shows it can be done to great success. And that's good for the diversity of the science fiction genre.

20,000 Leagues Under The Sea

dir Richard Fleischer, 1954, US, 127m

cast Kirk Douglas, James Mason, Paul Lukas, Peter

Lorre, Robert J. Wilke, Ted de Corsia

cin Franz Planer *m* Paul Smith

In the early 50s **Walt Disney** gave thought to diversifying his film production, which until that time had been primarily focused on animation – he wanted to go into live action with a bang. *20,000 Leagues* certainly managed that: with a massive budget for the time (five million dollars) Disney bought itself a raft of big stars, including **Kirk Douglas** and **James Mason**, who essayed the taciturn **Captain Nemo**. On the other side of the camera, the money was spent on a sharp director (**Richard Fleischer**, ironically the son of Disney's primary animation competitor **Max Fleischer**) and all the Oscar-winning special effects money could buy. Of these effects, most memorable was the centrepiece struggle between the atomic-powered submarine *Nautilus* and a giant squid during a massive storm (an immensely impressive shot made even more expensive by the fact that it had to be shot twice – the first version showing too many of the squid's wires and gears). It was a huge gamble for Disney, both for the fact it was the company's first substantial foray into live action and also because of the cost involved – but it paid off handsomely and the movie was a big hit.

Despite the film's provenance as a **Jules Verne** adaptation, the film is rarely considered science fiction, primarily because by the

time Disney made this film, submarines were certainly not speculative technology, and the film was set in the 19th century (Disney added a bit of speculative flavour by making a Victorian-era submarine atomic powered). The Disney studio chose to market the film as an adventure story and a Kirk Douglas vehicle. Nevertheless it's one of the most successful Verne adaptations, both creatively and financially, and for its own dramatic and speculative elements deserves inclusion in this canon. That is, as long as you can get over Kirk Douglas singing the ear-grindingly inane song *Whale Of A Tale*, the horror of which will follow every listener to his or her grave.

2001: A Space Odyssey

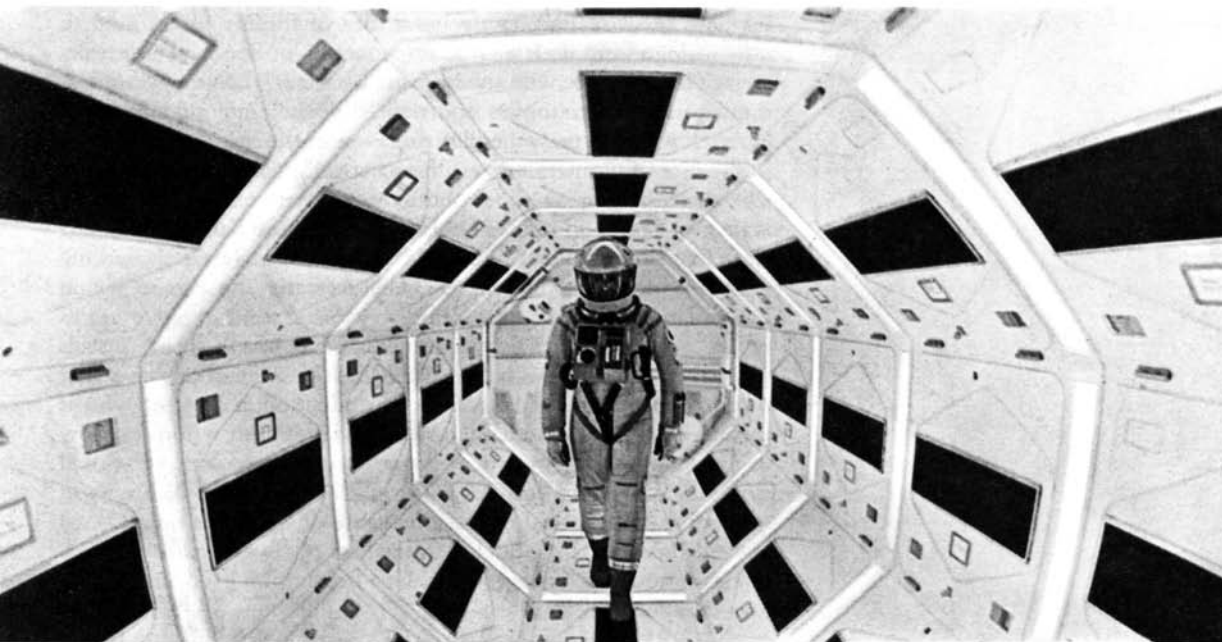
dir Stanley Kubrick, 1968, UK, 141m

cast Keir Dullea, Gary Lockwood, William Sylvester, Daniel Richter, Leonard Rossiter, Margaret Tyzack, Robert Beatty, Sean Sullivan, Douglas Rain

cin Geoffrey Unsworth *m* Aram Khachaturyan, György Ligeti, Richard Strauss, Johann Strauss II

A Hollywood legend about *2001: A Space Odyssey* has movie star **Rock Hudson** coming out of the premiere of the film and asking “Will someone tell me what the hell this is about?” Well, after nearly four decades and the attendant commentary of that time, it's today a little more clear what *2001* is about: it's about evolution and it's about God (or some intelligence so far advanced from our own as to appear to be a god).

One of the most celebrated jump-cuts in the entire history of cinema occurs in this film when a desiccated thighbone, thrown skyward by an Australopithecine human ancestor is replaced by a spaceship headed to the moon. This instantaneous cut encompasses several million years of life on earth in no more than the blink of an eye. The staggering irony of *2001* is that by the end of the film we are led to know (if not to entirely understand) that the film posits



2001: A Space Odyssey

the evolutionary distance between the thighbone and the spaceship to be far less than the distance between the astronaut **Dave Bowman** (Keir Dullea), and the being he becomes by the film's end – no wonder Rock Hudson had a problem wrapping his brain around it.

But let it be said that director **Stanley Kubrick** had no intention of making it easy for poor Mr. Hudson, or indeed for anyone else. This film is relentlessly difficult: it goes for nearly a half-hour without dialogue at the start, during the context-defying opening sequence in which the proto-humans stumble upon the featureless and inexplicable **Monolith**, which appears to prod them forward into tool-using and then it continues, dialogue free, for another twenty minutes or so at the film's close, with the trippy, eye-and-brain-busting “Jupiter & Beyond the Infinite” segment, which famously inspired hippies to lie down in front of movie screens and drop acid for the full psychedelic effect.

In between these great human silences are other deliciously

wordless slices of film; rarely has a film of the sound era used so little dialogue and with such artistic intent. Nor does Kubrick really engage his audience with the human characters when they do speak; the actors are emotionless and their dialogue tinny and flat, as if Kubrick wants to press the idea that even in the space age, and even in the face of ultimate mystery, humans are largely boring creatures. The most “human” member of the cast, in terms of audience appeal, is the murderous computer **HAL 9000**, to whom Kubrick gives the appealing (if homicidal) initiative that he seems to have denied the flesh-and-blood cast members. HAL’s character also gets to star in one of cinema’s great death scenes.

In the place of dialogue and human drama Kubrick installs painterly detail and a “big idea”. Kubrick’s near-obsessive attention to cinematic detail needs no introduction; a director who is capable of providing actual (and long) written instructions on how to use a fictional zero-g toilet is one who you can be assured will get every other tiny detail exactly right. These touches, along with groundbreaking special effects (the cause of Kubrick’s only Oscar) and an almost pedantic fidelity to the laws of physics, make *2001*, to this day, the most “believable” science fiction film even after nearly four decades.

As for the big idea, well, Kubrick doesn’t bother making that at all transparent for the audience; Dave Bowman’s moment of literal enlightenment comes without commentary (the famous line “My God, it’s full of stars!” is in the concurrent book version of the story, not Kubrick’s *2001*, and it isn’t much help in any event). This makes the film’s big idea even more compelling, of course, because it forces the viewer, alone, to contemplate the philosophical scaffolding behind the visuals.

2001 is today an acknowledged classic, but critical opinions at the time were mixed and some were outright negative: critic Stanley Kauffmann opined *2001* to be “a film that is so dull, it even dulls our interest in the technical ingenuity for the sake of which Kubrick has allowed it to become dull.” Kauffmann’s argument is not without its merits; *2001* is dull in long stretches, and intentionally so because Kubrick wanted to make a point about the banality of the human experience as preparation for the idea of man moving up the evolutionary ladder.

In short, this film could not be made today; one imagines the script notes coming back suggesting to Kubrick that he needs more

explosions and possibly a love interest for Dave Bowman. Indeed, watch the pedestrian, and far more conventional, 1984 sequel *2010: The Year We Make Contact* for an idea of what a modern-day variation would be like (though it's worth noting that *2010* does feature the "My God, it's full of stars!" line in a recording made by HAL of Dave Bowman's final approach to the monolith).

The fact is, it takes courage of conviction to make a movie like this; it also takes some effort on the part of the audience to watch it. This isn't a film that meets you halfway: it's a film that demands that you venture out, far from home and past the understanding you have of the world to meet it on its own terms. In effect, it dares the audience to take the same journey that the humans in the film must make. Is it worth the trip? The film doesn't say. It's up to you to decide.

Le voyage dans la lune (A Trip To The Moon)

dir Georges Méliès, 1902, Fr, 14m, b/w

cast Victor André, Bleuette Bernon, Brunnet, Jeanne d'Alcy, Henri Delannoy, Depierre, Farjaut

cin Michaut/Lucien Tainguy

Ironically, *Le voyage dans la lune* might seem rather more familiar to younger science fiction film fans than older ones, thanks to an unlikely source: the rock band **Smashing Pumpkins**. For its 1995 video for the song *Tonight, Tonight*, the band gleefully nicked much of the imagery of this, the very first science fiction film, including a face in the moon and bizarre-looking moon men (the band acknowledged the debt by having a ship in the video named the SS *Méliès*). The video won Video of the Year at the MTV Music Video Awards the following year, proving that, if nothing else, classic sci-fi film travels far and wide, and shows up in the most unexpected places.

The "lady in the moon" (played by Bleuette Bernon) gets a rocket in the eye in *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902)



Clearly, a short film made more than a century ago is likely to be viewed more as a curiosity these days as anything else – that is, if one can find it (you can find *Le voyage dans la lune* on the *Landmarks Of Early Film, Vol.1* DVD from Image Entertainment, in case you were wondering). But after you're done enjoying its quaintness, mark well the innovations it brought to early cinema, particularly in special effects, in which its director, **George Méliès**, who had previously been a stage magician, specialized. The effects you see here were either brand new or only recently developed (mostly by Méliès himself) and many of them survive in some form or another today. This film is to 1902 what *2001: A Space Odyssey* was to 1968, *Star Wars* was to 1977 ... the absolute state of the art. And, just as in 1968 and 1977, the audiences of 1902 ate up the amazing effects, making the film one of the biggest hits of its day.

Somewhat regrettably, the film also began another tradition of science fiction, which was to make the story an afterthought – or alternately, an excuse to show off the effects. The film is clearly meant as a fantasy; it presents astronauts (led by Méliès in the role of **Professor Barbenfouillis**) travelling to the moon wearing street clothes, using umbrellas to do battle with moon men (named **Selenites**), and shows the “lady in the moon” with a rocket capsule in his eye) and as such is free to do what it likes. But even at a compact 14 minutes, and allowing for differences between the silent film era and today, the story doesn’t track particularly well. With 30 lush scenes in 14 minutes, however, its possible that no one cared; there was so much to look at!

This is a strategy that carries forward to the modern day – the most recent *Star Wars* trilogy is the most obvious example of special effects eye-candy in the service of distracting from the lack of plot. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

War Of The Worlds

dir Byron Haskin, 1953, US, 85m, col & b/w

cast Gene Barry, Ann Robinson, Les Tremayne, Robert Cornthwaite, Sandro Giglio, Lewis Martin

cin George Barnes *m* Leith Stevens

War Of The Worlds is your “go-to” choice for alien-invasion films, which makes perfect sense, as its source material, **H.G. Wells’s** classic 1898 book of the same name, is the original alien-invasion story, and prone to infinite adaptation. The most famous of these was **Orson Welles’** classic 1938 radio broadcast, which spooked a gullible nation into thinking an alien invasion was actually taking place (an event which itself was a touchstone for another science fiction film: 1984’s *Adventures Of Buckaroo Banzai*).

Wells originally wrote his story as an allegory for Victorian-era Britain, whose might and empire were unsurpassed at the closing of the 19th century, but for whom storm clouds were gathering.

When the film was made, 1950s America was, of course, markedly different – the US was ascendant, for one thing – but *War Of*

Independence Day

Directed by Roland Emmerich and starring Will Smith, this movie has a stab at what is basically *The War Of The Worlds* story, though the aliens aren't Martians, and the viruses involved are of the computer variety; but other than that, this is a big, loud, silly version of the Wells tale, full of sound and fury, signifying lots of special effects. What makes it work is an amiable sort of forward motion; it's too much effort to be annoyed, so you end up being entertained. And it's always fun to see the White House blasted by a space laser.

The Worlds still proved allegorical; it was a reminder that even a newly minted superpower had better be prepared for challenges it might not be able to just wave away.

But it's also a film that knew which side its bread was buttered on; roughly seventy percent of the movie's two million dollar budget went into the Oscar-winning special effects, which have the aliens wreaking spectacular havoc all over the world (scenes that were aped – along with much of the story – in the ersatz 1996 *War Of The Worlds* remake, *Independence Day*; see box).

In its way, *War Of The Worlds* is the flip side of 1951's *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (see p.78): where the 1951 movie featured an intimate and benevolent "invasion", this one offered extravagance and explosions. Needless to say, over time, the latter has been more influential at the science fiction box office.

This film also shows 1950s science fiction producer **George Pal** at the height of his production powers; the film's direction is credited to **Byron Haskin**, but there's no doubt that Pal's is the vision that's on the screen, combining special-effects spectacle with an overly generous slice of religious subtext – note where the alien attack craft are halted, and what the humans do afterward.

If nothing else, it's a fine film to show anyone who believes that religion and science (or at least science fiction) are diametrically opposed. One does wonder what H.G. Wells, a committed atheist, would have thought about that. And what's more, what he would have made of Spielberg's 2005 retelling of his story (see p.9).



The Icons: faces of sci-fi film



Everyone's favourite alien, *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (1982)

The Icons: faces of sci-fi film

There are science fiction names, and then there are the icons: the directors, producers, actors and crew who have changed the face of science fiction film. Equally iconic are the characters, props and visuals they created, many of which stand out not just for science fiction fans, but moviegoers of all stripes. This alphabetically arranged chapter digs down to tell you about the true science fiction film icons – some you may know and some you may not – who have shaped the history of science fiction film.

Rick Baker

Effects, 1950–

A six-time winner of the Academy Award for Make-up, Baker worked as a teen for Hollywood make-up legend **Dick Smith** (*The Godfather*, *The Exorcist*) and made his film debut inauspiciously enough, by creating an ape suit for friend John Landis's low-budget 1971 horror comedy *Schlock* (in 1976, he'd don a gorilla suit for a slightly higher-budget affair, namely, the remake of *King Kong*, while also turning up as a monkey in the

2001 *Planet Of The Apes* remake). Baker was one of the make-up artists for *Star Wars*, and since then has been the make-up master on a number of hit science fiction films, including *Men In Black* (1997), the 2001 *Planet Of The Apes* remake, and 2004's *Hellboy*.

Werewolves have also been very good to Baker over his time in the business: in addition to the award-winning *An American Werewolf In London* (1981), Baker's had a hand in werewolf features *The Howling* (1981), *Wolf* (1994) and *Cursed* (2004).

Roy Batty

Villain, *Blade Runner*, 1982

Though Darth Vader is the most iconic science fiction villain, *Blade Runner's* Roy Batty is arguably the best. He's a dark, brooding, genetically-engineered bad man with both an intentionally shortened lifespan and a strong drive to live. He's also one of the most complicated villains in sci-fi. We see him feel pain, love, anger and, in the end, both pity and mercy. One could go as far as to say he's less of a villain and more of an anti-hero – although that would be cold comfort to his victims.

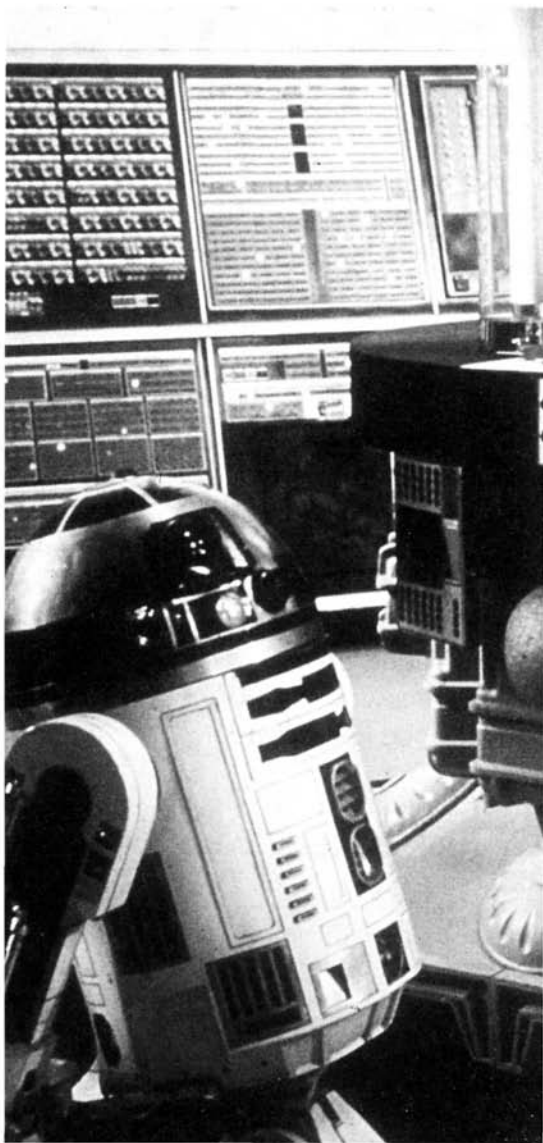
Chesley Bonestell

Artist, 1888–1986

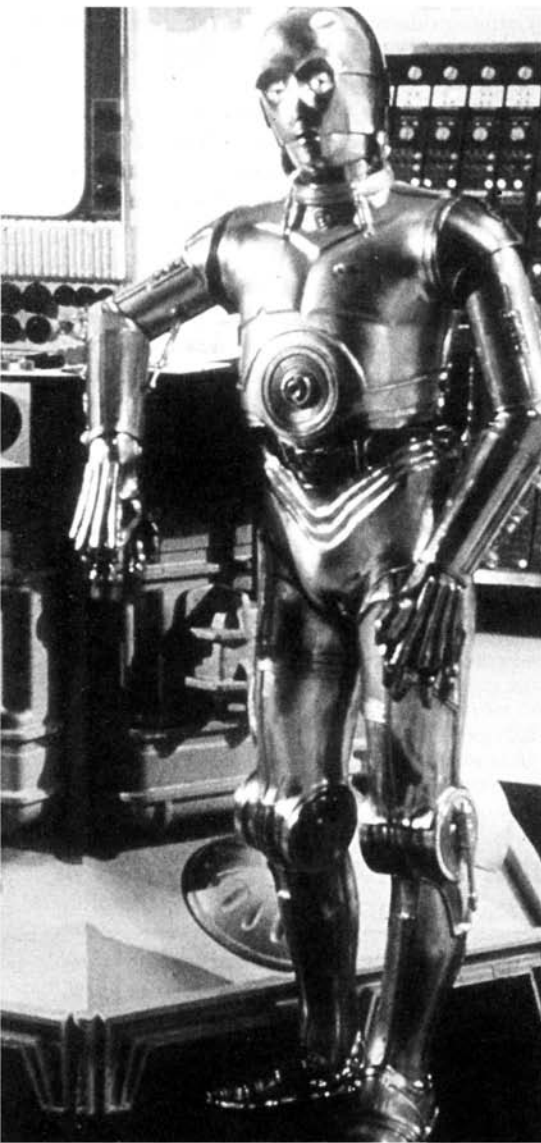
The visual look of 1950s science fiction film can be traced back to this California native, whose astronomical paintings were so influential that several he created in the 1950s (with scientist **Werner Von Braun**) are frequently credited with helping to inspire the US space programme.

In the early 30s, Bonestell worked for architectural firms and helped design the facade of the Chrysler building; he then moved west to document the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge and, after a stint in England, moved to Hollywood and began creating matte paintings (paintings designed to look like real sets) for films such as *Citizen Kane* and *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame*.

In the 1940s Bonestell created realistic space art that would feature in *Life* magazine and eventually turn up in a book, *The Conquest Of Space* (1949). The book inspired producer George Pal to hire Bonestell for a series of science fiction movies, starting with *Destination Moon* (1950) and including an adaptation of Bonestell's *The Conquest Of Space*.



R2D2 and C-3PO



The Conquest Of Space

dir Byron Haskin, 1955, US, 81m

Producer George Pal tried to reproduce the success he had with *Destination Moon*, this time by having his astronauts head to Mars. The design is handsome, but the flick has a clunkier than usual plot – a poor showing by Pal.

C-3PO & R2D2

Robots, *Star Wars*, 1977

These “droid” characters are the comedy duo of the *Star Wars* films – one is small and sassy, the other tall and fussy – and their relationship is so clearly one of snippy yet devoted companionship that one of the ongoing assumptions about the two droids is that they are a gay couple. This says more about the utter dearth of anything approaching positive portrayals (or even *any* portrayals) of gays and lesbians in sci-fi film than it does about the “gayness” of the two machines in question. Nevertheless, as the two droids are among the few characters to appear in all the *Star Wars* films, there’s no doubt that whatever relationship the characters have, they’re in it for the long haul.

Wendy Carlos

Composer, 1939–

By the time director **Stanley Kubrick** had selected Wendy Carlos to score 1971’s *A Clockwork Orange*, Carlos had already electrified the classical world when her 1968 album *Switched-On Bach* melded the classical composer’s works with the Moog synthesizer. Carlos’s *Clockwork* work, likewise, used synthesized versions of Henry Purcell’s music and Beethoven’s Ninth symphony (complete with the first recorded use of a “vocoder”) as a counterpoint to the horrific violence Kubrick placed on the screen. Kubrick would team up with Carlos again for *The Shining*

(1980). Carlos also fittingly provided the music for *Tron* (1982). One interesting bit of trivia about Wendy Carlos is that, prior to gender reassignment surgery in 1972, she was a man; the credits of *Clockwork* list Walter Carlos, but *Tron*'s credit Wendy Carlos.

Doug Chiang

Artist, 1962–

One of the brightest stars of the post-*Star Wars* generation of sci-fi artists and visual designers, Chiang made the leap to film as a concept designer on *Back To The Future II* (1989) before moving on to effects house Industrial Light and Magic, where he nabbed an Oscar for the visual effects of *Death Becomes Her* (1992).

In the mid-90s, Chiang became director of concept design for the second trilogy of *Star Wars* films, and had the interesting task of reimagining the *Star Wars* universe while at the same time making sure the look and feel would refer back (or, since the second trilogy is supposed to take place before the first, lead into) the original films. The result is a more ornate, style-centred design. Chiang left the series before the final installment to work on *Robotica* – a “film book” project – but also worked as production designer for family film *The Polar Express* (2004).

Buster Crabbe

Actor, 1908–1983

Science fiction's first big star was also the king of the Hollywood serials in the 1930s. He was the lead in both the successful *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* serials, and was also Tarzan (following Johnny Weissmuller, who originated the serial

role), among others. In all, he'd star in nine serials between 1936 and 1957, including three separate turns as Flash.

Like Weissmuller, Crabbe got into acting after an Olympic swimming career and, again like Weissmuller, he'd be remembered more for his physicality as an actor than his actual ability to emote – Crabbe's performances rarely rose above the level of declaiming lines before being required to wrestle a stunt man in an ape suit. Crabbe was aware of his limited acting skills, noting in the book *Trail Talk*, “Some say my acting rose to the level of incompetence and then levelled off.”

Crabbe would eventually leave Hollywood to concentrate on other business interests, but surfaced in the late 70s for a cameo on the Buck Rogers television series as “Brigadier Gordon” – an obvious reference to his most famous role.



Buck Rogers

dir Ford Beebe, 1939, US, serial, b/w

Buck and his sidekick wake up after five hundred years in suspended animation to discover the world is run by a criminal; naturally, they join forces with the good guys to correct the problem. This serial was not as well done as the *Flash* serials (which is saying something) and it's much less fun to watch. Come in with low expectations indeed, and if you're new to serials, get *Flash* first.

Darth Vader

Villain, *Star Wars*, 1977

The iconic science fiction villain, period. First it's the look – all black, the shiny, angular hood, the bug-like mask, the height and the cape. But secondly and as memorably, it's the sound – the immediately recognizable rhythmic rasp of Vader's respirator when he's not speaking, and the just-as-recognizable bass of James Earl Jones when he is. And as visually appealing as Vader is,

he's also (for the first two films, at least), delightfully psychopathic – the sort of person who is more than happy to telepathically crush your larynx for making a snide remark about some ancient religion that you happen to be a big fan of. Vader's pure badness, however, was compromised by his slightly wet turn to the good side in *Return Of The Jedi* and the unsavoury spectacle of seeing the dark Sith Lord as a plucky 8-year-old in *The Phantom Menace*; to top it all, his minor tantrum at the end of *Revenge Of The Sith* was just plain embarrassing and ruined what could have been a classic “Frankenstein's monster awakens” moment. But even these diversions can't topple him from the top of the villainous heap.

John Dykstra

Effects, 1947–

Dykstra worked for **Douglas Trumbull** on *The Andromeda Strain* and *Silent Running*, but when Trumbull was unavailable to work on *Star Wars*, Dykstra took the reins and introduced the first computerized motion-control camera (dubbed “The Dykstraflex”). Instead of moving the detailed spacecraft models in front of the camera, the camera could now smoothly swoop around the stationary models, which allowed *Star Wars* to incorporate mind-blowing tracking shots of huge spacecraft.

Dykstra was part of the initial Lucas effects crew that would later become Industrial Light and Magic, the leading effects house of the US film-making industry, but would leave shortly thereafter to found his own effects house (Apogee), where he racked up major award nominations for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) and *Stuart Little* (1999). He was also the effects supervisor for both *Spider-Man* films (2002 and 2004).



Spider-Man

dir Sam Raimi, 2002, US, 121m

A solid superhero flick, enlivened by Raimi's vivid directorial style and grounded in Maguire's average-guy charm. The only weak link is the villain Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), who is ironically a little more cartoony than he should be.

Danny Elfman

Composer, 1953–

Elfman's sci-fi film scores are instantly recognizable, with chanting voices, exotic and enthusiastic percussion, and dark, modernist themes. Elfman has cited both Stravinsky and film composer Bernard Herrmann as direct influences; Elfman, with frequent collaborator **Steve Barktek**, would adapt Herrmann's famous *Psycho* score for director **Gas Van Sant**'s 1998 remake.

Quirky director **Tim Burton** considers Elfman his default composer, and has had him work on nearly all of his films, among them science fiction films *Edward Scissorhands*, *Mars Attacks*, *Planet Of The Apes* and *Batman* (their most famous collaboration). Elfman also worked on *Men In Black* and frequently collaborates with director **Sam Raimi**, for whom he scored the campy *Darkman* as well as the rather less campy (and rather more financially successful) *Spider-Man* films. Elfman is capable of delicate and even surprising scores outside of the sci-fi genre, but inside it, the stranger seems to be the better.



Edward Scissorhands

dir Tim Burton, 1990, US, 105m

This suburban take on *Frankenstein* is probably director Tim Burton's best film, and certainly has the best performance in a Burton film from Johnny Depp, whose semi-mute mad-scientist creation has the hair of The Cure's Robert Smith, the fingers of Freddy Krueger and the soul of a Romantic poet. Off-kilter and unexpectedly touching.



Darkman

dir Sam Raimi, 1990, US, 96m

Part mad scientist film, part superhero film, part crime thriller, all shaken up by Sam Raimi's cartoon-like direction. Liam Neeson is a horribly burned scientist who gets revenge on those who hurt him with the use of an artificial skin he's created to mask his identity. Not brilliant stuff, but it's a real hoot at times.

Harrison Ford

Actor, 1942–

It's indicative of the importance of acting in science fiction that the role which helped to make Harrison Ford one of the highest-grossing Hollywood stars in history – the wisecracking adventurer **Han Solo** – is also among his least memorable performances, neither on a par either with his Oscar-nominated performance in *Witness* (1984) nor even his stint as the archeologist **Indiana Jones**, whose persona could be Solo's slightly more reputable twin brother. Ford's other major science fiction role – **Rick Deckard** in *Blade Runner* – was better, but sabotaged (in the original theatrical release of the film) by the deadpan voiceovers the studio required Ford to provide.

Ford provides his characters (particularly Solo) with depth. Like nearly every other character in *Star Wars*, Han Solo was an archetype and a stereotype (the scruffy daredevil who finds his conscience at a moment of critical plot contrivance), but Ford's laconic drawl and con artist's charm puffed



Harrison Ford as Han Solo in *The Empire Strikes Back*

genuine dimensionality into the act. Likewise, with Deckard, Ford delivered a level of weariness that fits *Blade Runner's* noir setting. He's science fiction's everyman – or at least the everyman most science fiction fans would want to be.

H.R. Giger

Artist, 1940–

Arguably the most distinctive artist to work in sci-fi film, Giger pioneered a creepy-yet-erotic genre of airbrushed painting he called “biomechanical”, featuring largely monochromatic human forms trailing off into baroque machine-like appendages. Two of these creepy works, “Necronom IV” and “Necronom V”, were featured in Giger’s 1975 art book *Necronomicon* and so thrilled Ridley Scott, director of the then-upcoming movie *Alien*, that he hired Giger to develop an alien based on those paintings. The resulting monster is a direct visual descendant from those original paintings, and was so effectively scary that Giger took home an Oscar for his work.

Giger’s relationship with the rest of the *Alien* series has been fragile; he was passed over by James Cameron on *Aliens*, had a falling out with the producer of *Alien³*, and originally received no credit for creature designs on *Alien Resurrection*. And his work in movies since has been limited to the middling hit *Species* (and its sequel *Species II*), and obscure European films. Nevertheless, his visual influence persists, most recently in the *Matrix* series, where the machine warriors ooze Giger’s biomechanical blend.

Jerry Goldsmith

Composer, 1929–2004

As a composer Goldsmith was awesomely prolific – he had a hand in scoring nearly three hundred film, television and radio projects – but what differentiates Goldsmith from other memorable composers in the science fiction genre is his range of styles. For *Planet Of The Apes* (1968) it was Stravinskian per-

cussion and pizzicato; for *Alien* (1979) it was unsettling dissonance; for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), and many of its sequels, it was a brassy fanfare and comforting symphonic strings.

Goldsmith studied under Oscar-winning film composer Miklós Rózsa, who inspired him to write music for film. Goldsmith’s first film score was *Lonely Are The Brave* (1962); his score for *Freud*, also in 1962, scored him his first Oscar nomination. Sixteen more would follow, including nominations for *Planet Of The Apes*, *The Boys From Brazil* and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (he’d win just one, in 1975, for *The Omen*).

Goldsmith has worked with many directors, the sci-fi films he has scored ranging from the very good (*Alien*, *Planet Of The Apes*) to the very bad (*Congo*, *Mom And Dad Save The World*), and quite a lot of stuff in-between (*Total Recall*, *The Secret Of NIMH*). Goldsmith fans contend his scores made even the bad films bearable.



The Boys From Brazil

dir Franklin J. Schaffner, 1978, US, 123m

Hated Nazi Doctor Josef Mengele is in Paraguay, playing with clones and planning to resurrect the Third Reich. This is a silly movie, but with a top flight cast, including Laurence Olivier as a Nazi hunter and Gregory Peck in the mind-shatteringly incongruous role of Mengele. Viewable these days primarily as a curiosity.

Gort

Robot, *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, 1951

The robot as black box, an inscrutable but dangerous object. It’s a robot that can vaporize your gun, or tank (or you) if it decides you’re a threat. Gort acts largely as a manifestation of the message his master Klaatu has come to deliver – that the rest of the universe can kick the Earth around if it has to – but it would prefer if it didn’t have to.

HAL

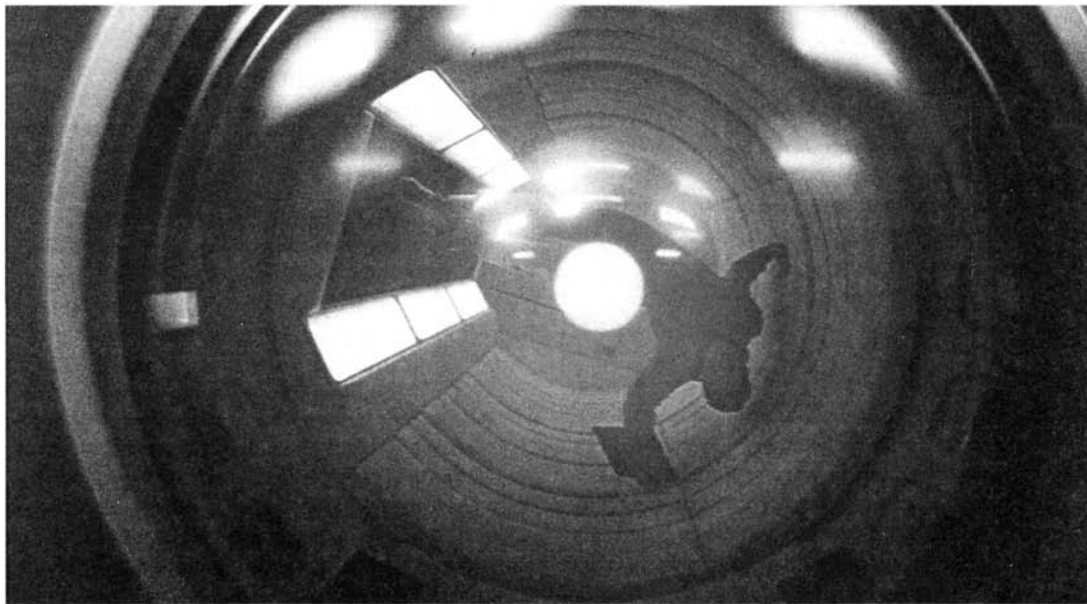
Computer, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968

HAL (whose acronym is, as legend has it, the IBM acronym, shifted back one letter for each position, although writer **Arthur C. Clarke** maintains this is just a coincidence) is a tricky problem; he is what passes for a villain in *2001* (he kills the astronauts who he perceives to be jeopardizing his mission and whom are incidentally a threat to his existence), and yet his intelligence, faulty though it may be, makes him piteous to behold as he sings a child's song while he's being deactivated. It's no small irony that in many ways he's the most "human" character in the film, a caricature that continues to resonate with audiences – and A.I. researchers – to this day.

Ray Harryhausen

Effects, 1920–

Arguably the most beloved special-effects artist ever, Harryhausen was a protégé of Willis O'Brien, and worked with him on *Mighty Joe Young*, handling most of the stop-motion animation grunt work. However, Harryhausen came into his own with his work for 1953's *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, in which he combined stop-motion animation with split-screen technology to bring to life a prehistoric beast with a grudge against the Big Apple. The movie itself wasn't much, but nearly everyone was impressed with Harryhausen's ingenuity (no less because he created the effects on a tiny budget, spending less than \$200,000).



Staring into the eye of HAL ... "Good morning, Dave"

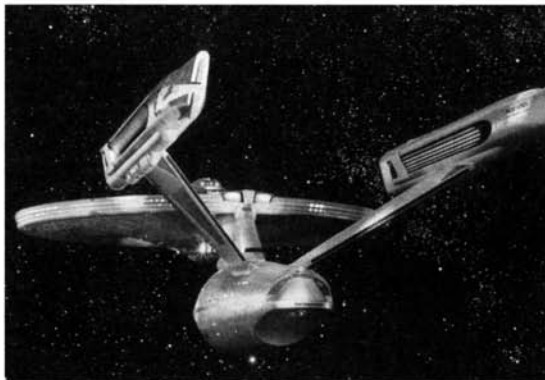
Iconic spacecraft

- **The Martian War Machines** (*War Of The Worlds*, 1953). H.G. Wells's original novel had the Martian War Machines as interplanetary tanks on tripods, but the original film's effects crews did away with the physical legs, choosing instead to reimagine them along the lines of the "classic" flying saucers (with a stalk-like eye to shoot their deadly beams). The result was elegant and still surprisingly effective.

- **The Discovery** (2001: *A Space Odyssey*, 1968). *The Discovery* is probably the most realistic fictional spacecraft that's made it to the big screen, as Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke designed it with the real world in mind – it takes the ship a significantly long time to travel to Jupiter, and its design is constructed to deal with the problems of weightlessness (and passenger boredom). And as par for the course for director Kubrick, the ship is painstakingly detailed: sharp eyes will note the instructions on how to replace the explosive bolts on the escape pods – which would be necessary in the real world but which other directors and set designers might just as easily skip. It's also – thanks to the still stunning special effects – the first movie spaceship which gives the impression of genuine mass; *The Discovery* looked like more than a plastic model on a wire.

- **The Death Star** (*Star Wars*, 1977). The *Star Wars* films are so jammed with iconic spacecraft, from the TIE fighters to the *Millennium Falcon*, that it's hard to choose just one to represent the film series. But if you're going to pick, go for volume – and the Death Star (famously confused by Han Solo for a small moon) has got volume, and then some. It can also destroy entire planets, which is not to be ignored lightly. And for the being the mightiest spacecraft ever, it's got the most ridiculous Achilles heel (would it have killed some Imperial bean counter to shell out for a photon torpedo-resistant grate on that exhaust vent?).

- **The Enterprise** (*Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, 1979). Probably the single most recognizable spaceship in science fiction film, recognition that was aided immensely by its constant presence on television. It's also probably the most-abused spacecraft in science fiction film history; in the ten *Star Trek* films (spanning both eras of the television show), the *Enterprise* is partially or completely destroyed several times, which does make one wonder why captains Kirk and Picard are so easily given the keys to new versions after wrecking the previous ones.



- **The Close Encounters Spacecraft** (*Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, 1977). A spiky wedding-cake of lights which was inspired, in part, by a brightly-lit oil refinery that director Steven Spielberg saw while filming in India. The actual model of the spacecraft was given over to that ultimate repository of iconography – the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. In an interesting salute to another iconographic science fiction entity, a small R2D2 can be seen as part of the ship model.

Over the next three decades, Harryhausen would provide stop-motion effects for a number of science fiction epics, including *20 Million Miles To Earth* (1957), *Mysterious Island* (1961), *First Men In The Moon* (1964) and *One Million Years, BC* (1966; although in that film, perhaps the most memorable effect was Raquel Welch in her bikini), as well as the famous *Sinbad* fantasy swashbucklers and *Jason And The Argonauts* (1963), the rattling armoured skeletons arguably being Harryhausen's best-known work. Harryhausen's last picture was 1981's *Clash Of The Titans*, and in 1992 he was given an honorary Academy Award, while sly tributes to the man and his work pop up in movies from time to time, most memorably in Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), in which the poshest restaurant in Monstropolis is named after him (and in true tribute geekery, the octopus

in the restaurant has only six tentacles – like the octopus Harryhausen created for 1955's *It Came From Beneath The Sea*).



The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms

dir Eugène Lourie, 1953, US, 80m, b/w

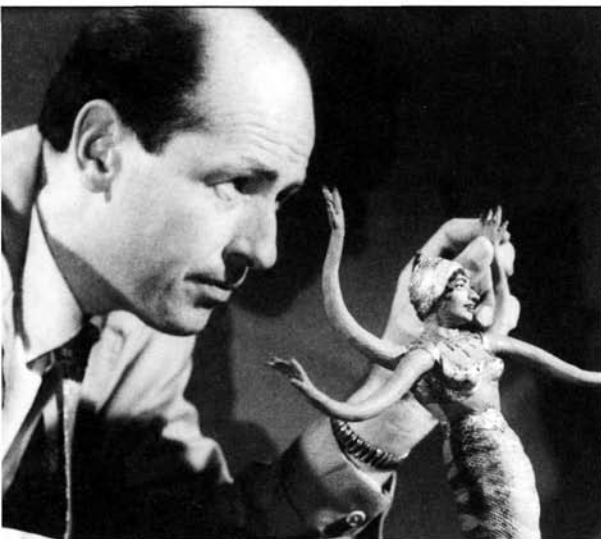
It's that old "nuclear bomb awakens that which should not be awakened" plot line, and this time it's Coney Island that suffers the creature's wrath. You won't be watching this for the story or the acting, which are leaden and wooden, respectively, but to be amazed at how much effects man Ray Harryhausen got out of so little.

Charlton Heston

Actor, 1924–

Unlike every other acting icon listed here, Charlton Heston was already a huge star before he came to science fiction; he was (and is) most famous for his historical and Biblical epics, including *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur*. He was still immensely popular in 1968, the year *Planet Of The Apes* came out, and because of that he gave the film and the still largely low-rent genre of sci-fi something it only rarely had to that point – genuine credibility. *Planet Of The Apes* has several A-list talents in it, to be sure, but Heston's participation made the film a genuine mass-culture event, and gave science fiction its first genuinely bankable star since Buster Crabbe in the 1930s.

Heston would use his box-office clout in two other science fiction epics of the early 70s – 1971's *The Omega Man*, in which the stalwart Heston battles post-apocalyptic hippies, and 1973's *Soylent Green*, where Heston is a private investigator in a shabby, overpopulated future who stumbles upon the truth about a popular foodstuff (see Canon). Heston would also make a brief appearance in *Beneath The Planet Of The*



Harryhausen at work on a model for *The Seventh Voyage Of Sinbad* (1958)

Apes, the first film's immediate sequel. All of Heston's science fiction films were popular to varying degrees; all were also part of a particularly depressing stretch of filmed science fiction which opened the door for the success of the escapist *Star Wars* films and the lighter (and less intellectual) science fiction films which followed in its wake.

Gale Ann Hurd

Producer, 1955–

Although female producers are not a rarity in Hollywood, female producers with significant science fiction and action films on their résumés are. There are two who rate a mention: **Kathleen Kennedy**, a long-time executive producer on many Steven Spielberg-produced projects, and Gale Ann Hurd. Hurd joined B-movie maestro **Roger Corman**'s New World Pictures as Corman's executive assistant; a few years later she and another Corman alumnus, **James Cameron**, would collaborate on *The Terminator* – Hurd producing, Cameron directing, and both co-writing. The two worked in tandem as director and producer for *Aliens*, *The Abyss* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (they also married in 1985, but divorced in 1989).

Hurd's association with Cameron would earn her a place as one of the top science fiction producers, but outside of this association she's also produced several hit sci-fi flicks, including *Alien Nation* (1988), *Armageddon* (1998) and *Hulk* (2003). In 2005, Hurd produced *Aeon Flux*, which is the first major science fiction film to feature women as star (**Charlize Theron**), director (**Karyn Kusama**), and producer.



Alien Nation

dir Graham Baker, 1988, US, 91m

Two mismatched cops are on the trail of a drug dealer, and the twist is that the drug dealer and one of the cops are alien refugees who came to Earth with 100,000 of their friends. An interesting premise, and the film has a lot of details about the aliens, but ultimately the story adds up to a whole lot of not much. A wasted opportunity, and a waste of James Caan as the snarly human cop and Mandy Patinkin as his gentler alien partner.



Producer Gale Ann Hurd

Directors: the next generation

Which directors are likely to shake up the science fiction film industry in the next decade? Some we don't know yet – they're still in film school or hustling a script. But here are some who are around now, who may go down in history as this generation's science fiction film icons:

- **Brad Bird** Bird's created two animated films with a distinct science fiction bent. The first, 1999's *The Iron Giant*, about a boy and his robot from space, was beloved by critics but largely ignored by theatre audiences. The second was 2004's computer-animated superhero story *The Incredibles*.
- **Alex Proyas** His American film debut was *The Crow*, the ill-fated fantasy that nearly derailed after an on-set accident killed its star, Brandon Lee. Nevertheless, the film was a hit, and introduced Proyas's dark and distinctive directorial style – a style he'd bring to maturation

in 1998's visually stunning *Dark City*, a noirish science fiction story which featured a man framed for murder in a city where sinister aliens controlled the lives of the citizens. The film received some rave reviews (including from influential critic Roger Ebert, who called it the best film of its year), but a tepid response from audiences. Proyas bounced back in 2004 with the stylish and more audience friendly *I, Robot*.

- **Bryan Singer** Having first appeared as a blip of some interest on the radar with his dark thriller *The Usual Suspects* (1995), Singer also directed both *X-Men* (2000) and *X-Men 2* (2003), the popular superhero movies. Singer has recently stepped forward to revive the long-dormant *Superman* franchise, with *Superman Returns* having been slated for release in 2006. He is also writing a script for a remake of *Logan's Run*.

Ishiro Honda

Director, 1911–1993

As director and co-writer of (and bit player in) 1954's *Gojira* (aka *Godzilla*), Honda is not only the father of the towering radioactive sea lizard we all know and love, but also the entire genre of Japanese monster films that the movie spawned – *kaiju eiga*. Previous to *Gojira*, Honda had directed dramas and war films, but many of these movies involved complex special-effects shots (masterminded by Honda's frequent effects collaborator **Eiji Tsuburaya**), which positioned the director to sell the effects-intensive *Gojira* to the Japanese public.

After *Gojira*'s immense success, Honda found himself working on several *Gojira* sequels and

other monster hits, shepherding the debuts of other familiar Japanese monsters such as *Rodan* (1956) and *Mothra* (1961), and working frequently with the same collaborators, including Tsuburaya, composer **Akira Ifukube** and producer **Tomoyuki Tanaka**. Unlike a number of earlier significant sci-fi directors, who chafed at being known for their genre work, Honda was happy to be associated with the genre he helped to create.

Ironically, however, Honda's final works found him both out of the director's seat and far away from *Godzilla* and his ilk. Honda came out of retirement at the behest of his friend **Akira Kurosawa** to be an assistant director on Kurosawa's later works, including *Kagemusha* (1980) and *Ran* (1985).

**Rodan (Sora no daikaijū Radon)**dir **Ishiro Honda/Kenji Sawara, 1956, Jap, 82m**

The Japanese disturb a prehistoric flying beast; beast retaliates by crushing towns. You know the drill. This was Toho Studio's first monster film in colour, so it has that distinction going for it, and as far as the Japanese monster films go, it's slightly better than average (which is to say, not good, but still fun to watch).

Stanley Kubrick

Director, 1928–1999

Kubrick deserves mention as an iconic science fiction film director not only for his immensely significant sci-fi films – *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1961) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), with a special mention for both *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) and the Steven Spielberg-directed *AI* (2001) – but also for the idiosyncratic manner in which he made his films, without substantial studio interference; a situation he engineered after a contentious experience directing the historical epic *Spartacus* (1960).

Kubrick also jumped into the technical end of his films to a greater degree than most directors; it's worth noting that while he was nominated for an Academy Award 13 times (including four times for Best Director), his sole Oscar win was for *2001's* visual effects.

Kubrick's studio independence and technical curiosity served as a template for other significant science fiction directors and producers, most notably George Lucas, who cannily took control of the *Star Wars* series (and thus his own film future) from 20th Century-Fox, and who has pioneered many significant technical advances in film; equally, James Cameron, whose technical craft and obsessiveness for detail are reportedly of Kubrick-esque proportions.

Fritz Lang

Director, 1890–1976

Science fiction's first significant director created only two films in the genre, but one of them is *Metropolis* (1927), which is – from a production design point of view – arguably the most influential film ever. Lang's other film in the genre, 1929's *The Woman In The Moon*, is less influential but still well-regarded.

In addition to science fiction, Lang was an innovator in other genres as well, particularly crime drama: his film *M* (1931), about a child-murderer hunted by both the police and the crime underworld, is credited with creating both the serial-killer film (think *Silence Of The Lambs*) and the police procedural. His *Dr. Mabuse* films of the 1920s and 30s – featuring a nefarious criminal mastermind intent on destroying the world – combined police drama with enough social commentary to cause the Nazi party to ban one of the films, *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*, in 1933. Lang (who was half Jewish) would leave Germany shortly thereafter for Hollywood, this despite being offered the position of head of the German film industry by the Nazi minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels.

Any account of Lang's influence as a science fiction director must include a mention of **Thea von Harbou**, Lang's wife and screenwriter, who wrote the novels (and screenplays) for both *Metropolis* and *The Woman In The Moon*. Lang and von Harbou's personal and working relationship came to an end when Lang fled Germany; von Harbou (who had joined the Nazi party in 1932) stayed behind and enjoyed prominence in the Nazi-controlled German film industry. Once the Nazis were crushed, so was von Harbou's film career.

There is some measure of irony in the fact that while *Metropolis* influenced an entire generation of Hollywood sci-fi filmmakers, once Lang arrived in Hollywood in the early 30s he never made another science fiction film. Yet *Metropolis*, which melded expressionist cinema with modernist visual design, was more than enough to make his mark.

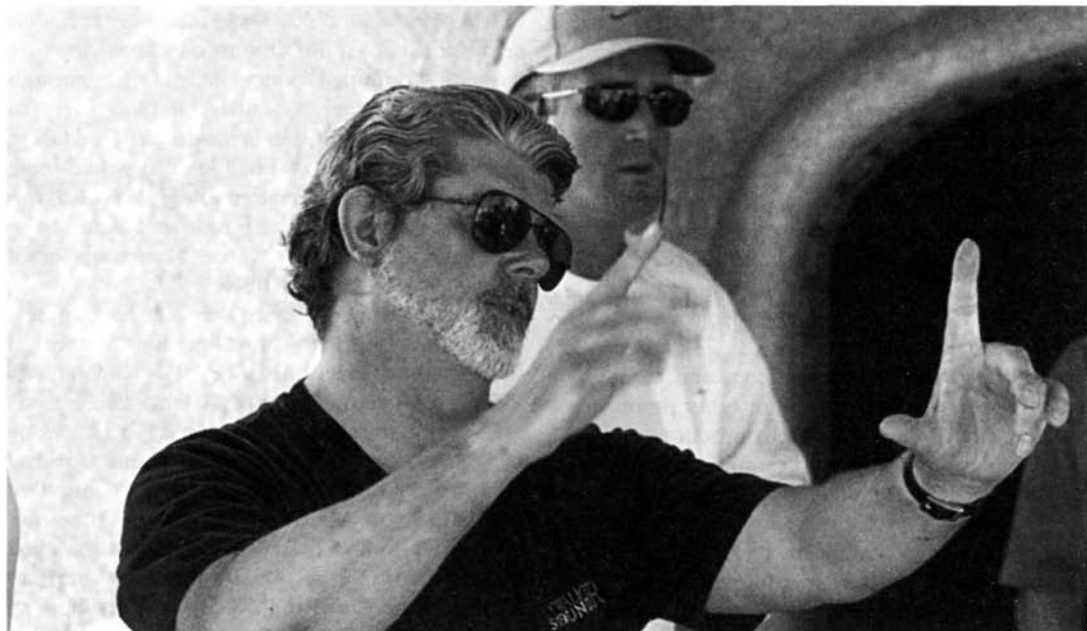
George Lucas

Producer and Director, 1944–

You could make a very strong case for George Lucas being one of – if not *the* – most influential film producer of the last half-century, even

though he's produced only a handful of films which, aside from the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* series, have tended to be mediocre performers at the box office (*Labyrinth* in 1986, *Willow* in 1988) or outright flops (*Howard The Duck* in 1986, *Radioland Murders* in 1994). Lucas's true influence as a producer is in the technical arena of filmmaking, where the advances he pioneered are now part and parcel of the Hollywood film-making landscape.

The special-effects house he created for *Star Wars* became **Industrial Light and Magic**, which has masterminded countless movie effects over the years and is the pre-eminent effects house of the industry. Lucas is also the father of **Skywalker Sound**, another leader in technical



George Lucas lines up a shot

films services, and the **THX sound certification system**, which theatres and DVD-makers use to assure audiences of high sound quality. In 1984, Lucas created a computer-special-effects group which he would later sell to Apple co-founder **Steve Jobs**; that group would become computer-animation powerhouse **Pixar**.

In short, if you've watched a special effect, heard a cool noise, or enjoyed some bit of computer animation at any time in the last 25 years, there is a good chance that it can be traced back to George Lucas in some way or another. If it was a sci-fi movie you were watching, that chance becomes a near certainty. No other film producer in the last half-century can even come close to claiming such a dominance in the film industry's technical back end.

The flipside of this is that Lucas's unparalleled technical wizardry can overshadow the human element of his films. The *Star Wars* movies are famously gorgeous to look at but often lacking on the dramatic level. But even smaller films suffer this fate. 1994's *Radioland Murders*, for example, is more of a test reel for computer-generated sets than a stand-alone film; it was a financial flop, but its technical success was one of the reasons Lucas went forward with the second *Star Wars* trilogy.

Another significant aspect of Lucas's career is that most of the technical achievements he's created have been on his own dime, thanks to an extremely savvy deal with 20th Century Fox during the negotiations for *Star Wars*. Lucas dropped his directing fee in favour of 40 percent of the gross, the merchandising and sequel rights. Lucas's fortune is now estimated in billions – enough that he was able to pay for the production cost of the latest *Star Wars* films on his own (20th Century Fox gets only a percentage of the box office for their distribution efforts). For bet-

ter or for worse, he's the only major producer in the film industry who does everything he wants, on his own terms.



Howard The Duck

dir Willard Hyuck, 1986, US, 110m

This story of a cranky, sentient duck sent through a wormhole to 1980s Cleveland is synonymous in the movie industry with the term "big fat painful overproduced flop". And rightly so; this alleged comedy is horribly unfunny, the action and effects are that of a B-grade *Ghostbusters*, and the duck of the title looks like a midget stuffed into a cheap duck suit. Not a shining moment for producer George Lucas.

Der Maschinen-Mensch

Robot, *Metropolis*, 1927

Overtly machine and yet also overtly feminine (and sexy), *Der Maschinen-Mensch* was the physical embodiment of one of the major themes of *Metropolis* – the seductive but alienating power of technology, which in this film is used to whip *Metropolis*'s various mobs into a frenzy. She (or it) also begins a recurring theme in science fiction of treacherous machines in human form, which was brought to its current high point in the *Terminator* films.

Ralph McQuarrie

Artist, 1929–

Ralph McQuarrie won an Oscar for his visual work on *Cocoon* (1985), but with the exception of *Cocoon* director **Ron Howard** and possibly McQuarrie himself, no one really cares much about that. What they do care about is McQuarrie's conceptual designs for *Star Wars*. In 1975 McQuarrie, a former illustrator who

moved to the Los Angeles area a decade earlier, created some paintings based on a *Star Wars* script provided him by **George Lucas** and his producer **Gary Kurtz**. The two then used those paintings to help convince 20th Century-Fox to fund the production of the movie. McQuarrie would eventually visually develop some of the most recognizable characters and objects in science fiction film history, including droids C-3PO and R2D2, the Death Star, the *Millennium Falcon* and Darth Vader, whose famous face mask was created because McQuarrie figured the evil lord would need a breathing mask in hard vacuum.

McQuarrie would reprise his role as conceptual artist on the remaining two films of the first trilogy, and would also work on *E.T.*, *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, the aforementioned *Cocoon*, and the undeniably minor **batteries not included*. He would also work in television (most notably as an artist for *Star Wars* TV knock-off

Battlestar Galactica). McQuarrie was invited to participate in the second *Star Wars* trilogy but declined after a brief visit, saying that the team in place was doing fine without him.



Cocoon

dir **Ron Howard**, 1986, US, 117m

It's *E.T.* meets the old folks, as a group of geriatrics sneak into a nearby abandoned pool and get accidentally rejuvenated by aliens hibernating in the water. The film was very popular when it came out and won sentimental favourite Don Ameche an Oscar, but now it looks amusing but ultimately pretty thin.

Ming the Merciless

Villain, *Flash Gordon*, 1936

This sci-fi villain had a great look – bald head, Fu Manchu moustache, high collar. Character actor **Charles Middleton** played him with the appropriate louche glee, which made Ming such hissable fun; he approached destroying the Earth and dragooning Dale Arden into his harem with the same sort of lip-smacking enthusiasm (in the 1980 remake, **Max Von Sydow**, despite having a rather wider acting range, wisely chose to replicate Middleton's nefarious character traits). As far as villains go, Ming was eventually fairly harmless (he never did destroy the Earth nor get Dale into his harem), but he set a standard for campy science fiction villainy which has yet to be topped.



McQuarrie's painting of a duel between Luke and Vader

Willis H. O'Brien

Effects, 1886–1962

Willis O'Brien, one of the earliest effects pioneers, gets credit for creating stop-motion animation, in which creature models are photographed one frame at a time. O'Brien's early stop-motion animation experiments, featuring dinosaurs and cavemen in humorous vignettes, caught the attention of **Thomas Edison**, who hired him to create a number of shorts.

This led to a longer-length effort, *The Ghost Of Slumber Mountain* (1918), for another producer, which was a huge hit, bringing in over \$100,000 from a \$3000 investment. This in turn led to O'Brien creating the special effects for the full-length motion picture *The Lost World* (1925), an extravaganza which featured entire herds of stop-motion dinosaurs. O'Brien's greatest animation triumph, however, would be in 1933, when he created what continues to be one of the most memorable special effects in film history – the great ape from *King Kong*.

Despite O'Brien's technical wizardry (which would ultimately be recognized with a special Academy Award for his work on the 1949 ape film *Mighty Joe Young* – the first Academy Award given for special effects), his professional career was marked by creative frustration, as he vainly tried to get several special-effects-laden movies off the ground, only to have them collapse underneath him. One of the most ambitious, 1931's *Creation* (which featured an island full of prehistoric creatures), was shelved due to the Depression. O'Brien also tried in vain to create a stop-motion version of the *Frankenstein* story during the 1920s.

O'Brien continued working in special effects until his death in 1962.



King Kong

dir Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933, US, 100m, b/w

Technically, this isn't sci-fi (it's fantasy), but as the acknowledged daddy of the monster genre, you can't not give it a moment in the spotlight. It's also an early triumph of special effects and stop-motion technology, with the credit going to Willis O'Brien. And, as a bonus, the movie's a pretty exciting tale to boot. The 1976 remake was something of a travesty, but hopes are high for the 2005 Peter Jackson-directed version.

George Pal

Producer, 1908–1980

Like many filmmakers of his era, Pal made his way to Hollywood through a circuitous route, working at film studios in Hungary, Germany (which he left as the Nazis came to power) and Belgium before landing in the US in 1939 to create "Puppetoons" – as the name suggests, a meld of puppets and cartoons – for the Paramount studios. These animated shorts earned Pal a special Academy Award in 1943 (among his staff was fellow icon Ray Harryhausen). Pal then landed himself a producer credit on a live-action film, *The Great Rupert* (1950), which featured an animated dancing squirrel so realistic that Pal was asked how he'd trained the rodent.

Pal's experience with effects was integral to his next film, 1950's *Destination Moon*, a movie generally regarded as the start of the 50s "Golden Age" of sci-fi film. The film won an Academy Award for special effects and launched Pal's career as producer (and sometimes director) of some of the most popular and influential science fiction films of the 1950s and early 1960s, including *When Worlds Collide* (1951), *War Of The Worlds* (1953) and *The Time Machine* (1960), many of which (including these three) won special-effects

awards. Pal's run as a top-line producer ended with the lacklustre returns of his sci-fi action film *The Power* (1968), which arrived as the next generation of science fiction films, represented by *2001* and *The Planet Of The Apes*, were taking off.



When Worlds Collide

dir Rudolf Maté, 1951, US, 83m

A runaway star is heading straight for Earth, which is bad, but a group builds a rocket to escape, and that's good – for them at least. Like most films produced by Pal in the 50s, this hasn't aged particularly well, but it's still well-paced and exciting, in a planetary extinction kinda way.

The Pod People

Villains, *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, 1956

The pod people – the alien vegetables that replaced humans when no one was looking – are iconic villains because they're so damn subtle. Their path to world domination doesn't require explosions and obvious strength; it requires silence and stealth. They are a walking advertisement for the cost of not being vigilant to the world around you, which has made them a vehicle to make political and cultural statements about the creeping danger of [enter your political or cultural demon here]. Like close cousins *The Stepford Wives*, they're an object lesson in the horror of conformity.

Robbie The Robot

Robot, *Forbidden Planet*, 1956

Probably the most famous pre-*Star Wars* robot, Robbie is the good side of the robotic equation – a helpmate with a dry sense of humour (when he's late, he explains he was off giving himself an

“oil job”) who can make anything from a dress to a barrelful of liquor; in short, a useful thing to have around for plot purposes. Robbie was popular enough that he was brought back in 1957's *The Invisible Boy*, which is otherwise almost entirely unrelated to *Forbidden Planet*, and has had cameos in numerous films and TV shows.

Arnold Schwarzenegger

Actor, 1947–

Schwarzenegger is the definition of a movie icon, in that he never played anything but Arnold Schwarzenegger – a rippling mass of iconography dumped into whatever story he was in. Indeed, the films that had him playing “everyday” people, such as *Total Recall*, work only to the extent that it's eventually revealed he's something far from ordinary (in the case of *Total Recall*, a brutish enforcer for a technocratic dictatorship on Mars). The closest Schwarzenegger ever came to genuinely acting in his entire career, ironically enough, came in one of his flops, *Last Action Hero* (1993), in which an action hero played by Schwarzenegger is sent into the real world, meets the real Schwarzenegger and recoils from him, appalled to meet the actor whose fictional performances cause the character genuine pain.

It's also ironic that Schwarzenegger's iconic appeal is also what gives him permission to humanize himself by playing with his iconic image. This was at the heart of Schwarzenegger's performance in *Terminator 2*, in which the murderous Terminator of the first film is sent back to protect young John Connor, and is lightly mocked by his charge for being “such a stiff”. The Terminator's humourless reaction shots are played to perfection by Schwarzenegger.

The problem with being only an icon – even

a self-parodying one – is that age catches up with you. Schwarzenegger has solved this problem (at least temporarily) by going into politics and becoming governor of California.



Total Recall

dir Paul Verhoeven, 1990, US, 113m

Director Paul Verhoeven, having wowed audiences with *Robocop*, was largely content simply to gross them out in this flick. It's ostensibly about Schwarzenegger as an average Joe who discovers he had a secret past life as a double agent on Mars, but what it's really about is Verhoeven seeing how many blood splatters he can fire off in the shortest amount of time (with Arnold providing his patented one-liners here and there). Rather too excessive to actually be much fun.



Schwarzenegger as *The Terminator*

Ridley Scott

Director, 1937–

Like George Lucas, Scott is an iconic science fiction director whose reputation rests on a relatively small number of works in his case, three: *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982) and the “1984” Super Bowl commercial Scott directed for Apple Computers, which despite being shown only twice as a commercial, is considered the most influential television commercial in history. All three of these works share the common look and feel of Scott’s directorial style – heavy on the atmospheric and industrial design, a look that can be hypnotically dreamlike and workaday grubby at the same time. Scott is one of the few science fiction film directors who has successfully made his films stylish (particularly the *noirish* *Blade Runner*), which has led him to be admired by sci-fi fans out of proportion to his output in the genre.

Agent Smith

Villain, *The Matrix*, 1999

Another one of those villains with a soul, mechanical though it may have been, Agent Smith – a sort of advanced virus programme tasked with hunting down renegade humans inside the Matrix – was a perfect counterpoint to the radical freedom-lovers personified by Morpheus, to whom Smith rattles off a number of increasingly deranged monologues on the nature of humanity while the two of them are alone in a torture chamber. Smith’s contempt for humanity, and his glee at stomping on Morpheus and Neo, makes him even more human. But like Darth Vader, his near-perfect villain turn is com-

promised in later films which muddy his motivations, though for the first *Matrix* film at least, he's as good as it gets.

Will Smith

Actor, 1968–

Smith is not only an icon of science fiction, he's an icon, period – the most successful and consistent draw in science fiction film during the last decade. All five of his sci-fi-themed films – *Independence Day* (1996), *Men In Black* (1997), *Men In Black II* (2002), *Wild Wild West* (1999) and *I, Robot* (2004) – have grossed more than 200 million dollars worldwide; the average gross being over 480 million dollars per film. No other science fiction star comes close. Smith gets across by playing a cocky everyday guy (usually a cop) thrown into extraordinary situations; in other words, someone everyone can relate to.



Men In Black

dir Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997, US, 98m

Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones ride herd over thousands of aliens on Earth, and occasionally keep them from blowing the place up. One of the funniest science fiction films – and intentionally so, which is always refreshing. It was a shame the sequel didn't come close.

Steven Spielberg

Director, 1946–

Spielberg is far and away the most financially successful science fiction film director in the history of cinema, with nearly three and a quarter billion dollars in box-office takings for his science fiction films alone. He is also, despite a reputation of squishy family-hugging optimism, the science fic-

tion director with the broadest palette within the genre, ranging from the aforementioned domestic softness (*E.T.*, 1982) to icy modernism (*Minority Report*, 2002), to inscrutable cosmic drama (*Close Encounters*, 1977) and thudding, crass commercialism (*The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, 1997).

By and large, however, Spielberg's quality in the genre is very high; even *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) – Spielberg's quixotic attempt to channel Stanley Kubrick, who developed the material – is more interesting as a failure than many top-line sci-fi films are as successes. Despite his financial success in the genre (or perhaps, because of it), Spielberg is curiously underrated as a science fiction director, a problem which probably won't stand the test of time.

But Spielberg is also an important producer. Since 1978, he's produced over a hundred films and television series, including several significant science fiction movies (aside from his own) including the *Back To The Future* series, the *Men In Black* series and *Deep Impact* (1998), one of the first films from **Dreamworks**, the studio Spielberg founded with **Jeffrey Katzenberg** and **David Geffen**. His most notable television sci-fi productions include *SeaQuest DSV* (which lasted one season in the mid-90s) and the well-regarded cable miniseries *Taken* (2002).

But it was the science fiction films that Spielberg produced in the 1980s that are most responsible for the negative connotation of "Spielbergian" – the shallow, effects-filled nonsense passing as "family entertainment" which infected films such as *Innerspace* (1987) and **batteries not included* (also 1987). More recent Spielberg productions have reflected a far maturer taste though, having said that, he is executive producer of a film based on *The Transformers* series of science fiction toys, slated for 2006.



Spielberg's E.T. makes a tentative entrance



AI: Artificial Intelligence

dir Steven Spielberg, 2001, US, 146m

The child star Haley Joel Osment plays a machine boy who just wants to be loved, no matter how heartbreakingly impossible it seems to achieve. This collaboration between Steven Spielberg and Stanley Kubrick (who died before it went into production) shows the influence of both men, but eventually doesn't quite gel (the last twenty minutes of the film in particular don't work). It has its moments though – so, worth seeing, even as a miss.



Innerspace

dir Joe Dante, 1987, US, 120m

Dennis Quaid stars as a hotshot pilot who is shrunk to the size of a single cell and accidentally gets injected into Martin Short's bum; that alone should scare off most viewers. Those who remain will witness a frantic and slightly amusing comedy with more twists and turns than it needs, as well as some interesting special effects. Save this film for when you don't want to think too hard.

Tomoyuki Tanaka

Producer, 1910–1997

Director **Ishiro Honda** is arguably the man most associated with *Godzilla* (or *Gojira*), but it was Toho Studios' producer Tanaka who thought the creature up whilst peering at the Pacific Ocean from a plane, imagining an immense creature living beneath the surface. The 1954 film was a worldwide hit, and Tanaka would produce a total of 22 films featuring *Godzilla*, the last being 1995's *Godzilla Vs Destroyer* (*Gojira VS Desutoroia*), many of which were created with the same core production crew, as well as dozens of other monster and science fiction films.

Tanaka also produced numerous films outside the science fiction genre, including films by Akira Kurosawa, whose Tanaka-produced *Kagemusha* (1980), which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes

as well as an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Film. Tanaka also moved into the executive suite and became the president of Toho Studios in the 1970s – recognition in part of the critical importance Tanaka's creation had to the studio's bottom line over the years.



Godzilla Vs Destroyer (Gojira VS Desutoroia) dir T. Okawara, 1995, Jap, 103m, b/w

Godzilla – and his son – battle a creature that was created in the wake of the original film's Oxygen Destroyer (which, of course, was created to kill Godzilla). And for extra added fun, in the film Godzilla is in danger of having his radioactive core melt down and destroy the entire Earth.

Osamu Tezuka

Artist, 1928–1989

As a working artist, Tezuka is far more entrenched in the fields of manga (Japanese comic books) and in television than he is in the world of film. As an influence, however, he is absolutely critical to the world of science fiction film, as Tezuka is generally regarded as the father of anime, the distinctive Japanese style of animation, which has become a significant wellspring for science fiction in recent years, most prominently with the *Matrix* films.

Tezuka's fame began as a writer and illustrator of manga, with the creation of *Tetsuan Atom* (*Astro Boy*) in 1952. Manga became immensely popular, and eventually Tezuka was hired by the Toei movie studio to direct animated films, beginning with *Saiyu-ki* (*Alakazam The Great* in the US) in 1960. Tezuka founded his own animation studio in 1961, which focused its efforts on TV (its first effort being a TV version of *Tetsuan Atom*). Tezuka kept costs down through “limited animation” and the use of camera techniques,

such as panning and zooming on still frames, to suggest motion without the need for additional animation. The result was the anime style, which would become a standard in Japanese animation, and which, with variations, continues as the standard today.

One interesting bit of trivia about Tezuka is that in the 1960s, he was supposed to have joined the art staff of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but had to withdraw due to scheduling conflicts. In 2002, the anime film *Metropolis* was released, based on a Tezuka manga that explicitly referenced the film design of Fritz Lang's 1927 classic of the same name.



Metropolis dir Rintaro, 2002, Jap, 104m

This 2002 anime film is not a remake of the 1927 Lang film but is clearly inspired by it in important ways in both visual design and story, down to a female machine who may or may not be the ruin of the city. One of the best recent anime films – even simply just to look at – and well worth seeing.



Leon Theremin

Composer, 1896–1993

Leon Theremin (born Lev Sergeivitch Termen) is not technically a composer, he's an inventor. What he invented was the eponymous electronic instrument, the Theremin, which gave 1950s science fiction soundtracks their signature sound – that spooky, sliding electronic whine that inevitably signals the arrival of UFOs. The Theremin had been used in movie soundtracks as early as the 1930s (in 1935's *Bride Of Frankenstein*

for example), and was most prominently used to great effect in **Miklós Rózsa's** Oscar-winning score for *Spellbound* (1945). But once the great film composer Bernard Herrmann stuck it into his memorable soundtrack for *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951), it became indelibly associated with the science fiction genre, and was used in *The Thing From Another World* (1951), *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), *Project Moon Base* (1953) and *Earth Vs The Spider* (1958), among many, many others.

The Theremin is strangely suited for science fiction in that it creates its music through an eerie technological process in which the human body interferes with radio waves broadcast from the device's two antennae. The original instrument

was extremely difficult to play and as a result, most of the Theremin performances on movie soundtracks of the 1950 are the work of a single player – **Samuel Hoffman**.

Theremin's life itself was deeply unusual. The inventor created his instrument in 1919, just in time for the Bolshevik Revolution. Lenin was so impressed with the instrument that he ordered hundreds distributed around the Soviet Union and had Theremin tour the world, showing the instrument as a model of Soviet inventiveness. Theremin would eventually settle in the US in the 1920s, but in 1938 was kidnapped by Soviet secret agents and hauled back to the USSR, where he toiled in a labour camp for seven years until he was “rehabilitated” (primarily by building one of the earliest “bugs”, which was used in the office of the US Ambassador. He remained in the USSR and outlived it, dying in Russia in 1993.

Overrated icons

Not every iconic entity in science fiction film deserves the distinction. Here are a few that deserve to be taken down a peg or two:

- **Atomic bombs** They've served as the cheap and easy plot excuse for everything from mutant insects to rag-tag post-apocalyptic societies. Way too easy. The good news is that this icon has faded with the Cold War. The bad news is that now filmmakers use genetic engineering as their cheap and easy plot device instead.
- **Godzilla** Honestly – has there ever been a genuinely *good* Godzilla film? No. There have been Godzilla films that were *good* for a Godzilla film. But they have never been good compared to other films.
- **Yoda** Like wisdom everything sounds, when speak you it in broken English. Although that light-saber battle in *Attack Of The Clones* was a kick, this icon isn't going to help our children pass their literacy exams.



Earth Vs The Spider

dir Bert I. Gordon, 1958, US, 73m, b/w

Here's a handy tip – if you're going to kill a giant mutant spider and display the corpse in the local high school, make sure it's dead. This is your basic 50s monster bug story, and it's as bad as you would imagine it would be.

Douglas Trumbull

Effects, 1942–

Trumbull came to special-effects prominence in 1968 with the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for which Trumbull created the dazzling “slit-scan” effect (it's what makes Dave Bowman's monolithic encounter so far-out). Although it was **Stanley Kubrick** who walked away with a special effects Academy Award award for *2001*, Trumbull would be nominated three times – for

Close Encounters Of The Third Kind (1977), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982).

Trumbull is also one of the few top-line effects people who has successfully crossed over to major motion picture directing. Trumbull's first directorial effort was the pretty and earnest ecological science fiction film *Silent Running* (1971), which gathered some acclaim. His next directing assignment, *Brainstorm* (1983), was, however, something of a disaster – the film was nearly shelved after star **Natalie Wood** died prior to shooting her final scenes. A rewrite allowed the film to finish, but the movie was not generally

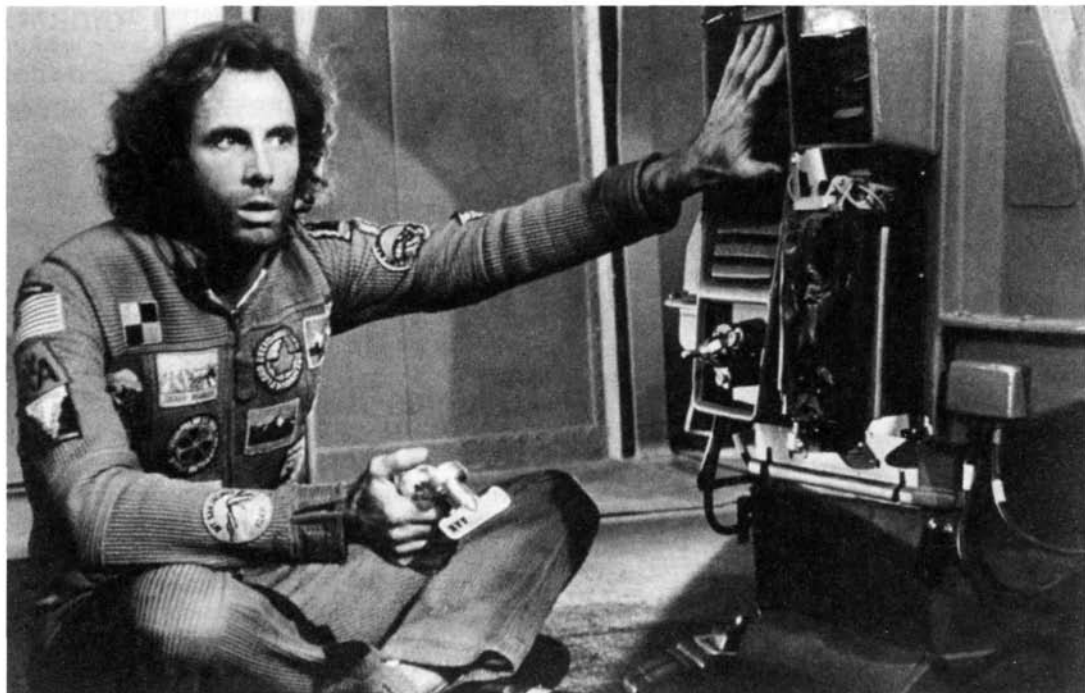
well received by critics or audiences. Trumbull has since moved back into effects works and has developed a number of special-effects-laden theme-park “movie rides”, most prominently Universal Studios’ *Back To The Future* ride.



Silent Running

dir **Douglas Trumbull**, 1971, US, 89m

The last of Earth forests are in spaceships orbiting Saturn, and one man (Dern) decides that's where they should stay, despite orders to blow them up and come home. The film is very handsome and features some marvellous effects, and its ecological message is nice, but none of that masks the fact that if you're not an ecowarrior the flick is a bore.



Bruce Dern and robot pal in *Silent Running*

Sigourney Weaver

Actor, 1949–

Science fiction was (and sadly, to a great extent remains) a dramatically barren place for women, so it's no small thing that one of the most enduring – and dramatically successful – characters in science fiction is the *Alien* series' **Ellen Ripley**, played by Sigourney Weaver. Ripley was (and is) one of the few female science fiction lead roles in which the woman is not a damsel in distress nor



Sigourney Weaver, cropped in *Alien*³

Female icons of sci-fi

- **Jean Rodgers** Early science fiction film wasn't particularly rich in women's roles, and what roles did exist were not particularly gratifying. Jean Rodgers' time as Dale Arden in the 1930s *Flash Gordon* serials is pretty much a case in point. As Rodgers said in an interview, "All I had to say was 'Flash, where are you going?' and 'Ooohh, Flash!'".
- **Jane Fonda** Before she took on more serious roles (and became a political hot potato for her position on the Vietnam war), Fonda titillated sci-fi geeks of all ages with her scantily-clad performance in *Barbarella* (1968) – a reminder that whatever science fiction films' qualities were in the 1960s, gender objectification was not one of them.
- **Carrie Fisher** Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia in the *Star Wars* films offered an interesting intermediary between what women's roles had been in sci-fi and what they would become. Leia was both a damsel who needed saving and a leader of the Rebel Alliance; someone who could be putty in the hands of a scoundrel (as she was with Han in *Empire*) but also who saves the scoundrel, several times; someone who is made to wear a slave's metal bikini and earth-mother garb in the same film.
- **Linda Hamilton** Hamilton's Sarah Connor was something of a damsel in distress in the original *Terminator* film, but by *T2* she's become a super-tough, super-competent and super-obsessed icon of extreme femininity.
- **Carrie Anne Moss** Moss's Trinity of the *Matrix* series is a variation of the Sarah Connor breed – supersmart, supertough, and a little cold. But she also has the time and inclination to make a connection with hero Neo. Over the course of the series (and to varying levels of effectiveness) the two characters are equally involved in the events of the films and in looking out for each other – a genuine relationship of equals, which, if not a first in science fiction film, is certainly rare enough to note.

a scantily-clad teenage boy's fantasy (recall that Princess Leia, one of the other few truly significant female roles in science fiction, was both at one time or another in the *Star Wars* series – see box); instead Ripley is competent, driven and complicated, even in the face of numerous acid-spewing aliens over the course of four films.

Weavers' relationship with the Ripley character, however, has not always been an easy one; as early as *Aliens* (1986) – the second film in the series – she registered a wish to kill off the character. This was accomplished in *Alien³* (1992), only to have her cloned back to life in *Alien Resurrection* (1997). It's also worth noting that Weaver's only other foray into science fiction is in the delightful parody *Galaxy Quest* (1999), in which she sends up a more typical science fiction female character – one best appreciated for a tight uniform and the ability to repeat what the computer is saying. Weaver's understanding of how to play this part underscores how exceptional Ripley really is, and how lucky the character was to have Weaver play the role.

James Whale

Director, 1896–1957

In the early sound era of Hollywood, science fiction films cross-dressed as horror films (a tradition that continues to this day, especially in recent zombie films, such as 2002's *28 Days Later...*), and the man who was most apt at delivering the goods was British-born director James Whale, who directed three classic “mad scientist” films: *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *Bride Of Frankenstein* (1935), all for Universal Pictures in Hollywood.

Whale, an admirer of German expressionism and the work of **Fritz Lang**, incorporated much of that style into his films, most notably with the

first *Frankenstein* film. Combined with the work of Universal's art director **Charles Hall**, Whale established the gothic, moody blueprint that would become the hallmarks of “classic” science fiction horror; when you see a mad scientist's laboratory filled with arcing electricity, thank James Whale.

Whale was not above doing the little touches himself: film historians report that script pages were often filled with drawings that were then handed over to the art department to work on. In addition to giving science fiction horror its look, in *Bride Whale* introduced a second iconic element – a campy sense of humour (best expressed in the scenes where Dr. Praetorius unveils his homunculi). This humour still pops up today in both horror films (the *Scream* series) and in sci-fi (*Men In Black*).

Whale took on *Frankenstein* because his previous films had been war dramas and he was concerned about being typecast in the genre; after the success of *Frankenstein*, of course, he fought to avoid being known as a horror director. After *Bride Of Frankenstein*, Whale made no more films that could be classified either as horror or science fiction, finding success in musicals (1936's well-regarded *Showboat*) and in adventure (1939's *The Man In The Iron Mask*). In recent times, Whale, who was an open if discreet gay man, has become something of an icon in the gay community, with his notoriety getting a boost from 1998's arthouse biopic hit *Gods And Monsters*, which saw Ian McKellen cast as Whale.



The Invisible Man

dir James Whale, 1933, US, 71m, b/w

Whale has a good time with H.G. Wells's story about a scientist who first goes invisible and then goes mad. Wells wasn't pleased about Whale's tinkering, but it's fun to see (or not see) Claude Rains get loose and have fun when no one's looking.



John Williams conducting

John Williams

Composer, 1932–

There's barely a human alive who has seen the inside of a cinema who cannot hum to you a few bars of John Williams' famous science fiction themes; the *Star Wars* main title may indeed be the most recognizable piece of film music ever (save, possibly, Williams' theme from *Jaws*), and possibly also the most recognizable piece of classically orchestrated music of the last half-century. Add to this Williams' other immediately recognizable themes, for *E.T.*, *Jurassic Park* and *Superman* (not to mention *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, the *Harry Potter* films and, of course, *Jaws*), and you realize that Williams' 42 Oscar nominations and five wins weren't an accident.

Although Williams' non-sci-fi musical work shows a fair amount of stylistic range, his major mode in science fiction (and fantasy) is dense, romantic and heavy on the leitmotifs (recurring musical passages associated with particular characters). Williams' sci-fi work is often compared to the work of composer Richard Wagner (to whose *Ring* cycle the *Star Wars* film shares a number of themes, both musically and in the story). The flip side of this is that several of his science fiction themes sound alike – slow down the flying theme from *E.T.* slightly, for example, and you've got the theme from *Jurassic Park*; tone down the sinister brass and pacing of the infamous *Imperial March* from *The Empire Strikes Back*, and the passage is strikingly similar to the theme of the *Harry Potter* films. The point is no one cares – this is what you come to Williams for.

Iconic bad acting

- **Zsa Zsa Gabor** (*Queen Of Outer Space*, 1958). This movie, which recycles costumes and sets from earlier films such as *Forbidden Planet*, was never destined for greatness. But what takes it over the top is Gabor, playing a scientist (!) and a freedom fighter (!!) who rescues some Earthling men who have accidentally landed on Venus, arousing the wrath of the man-hating queen. It's beloved by enthusiasts of camp, but not many others.

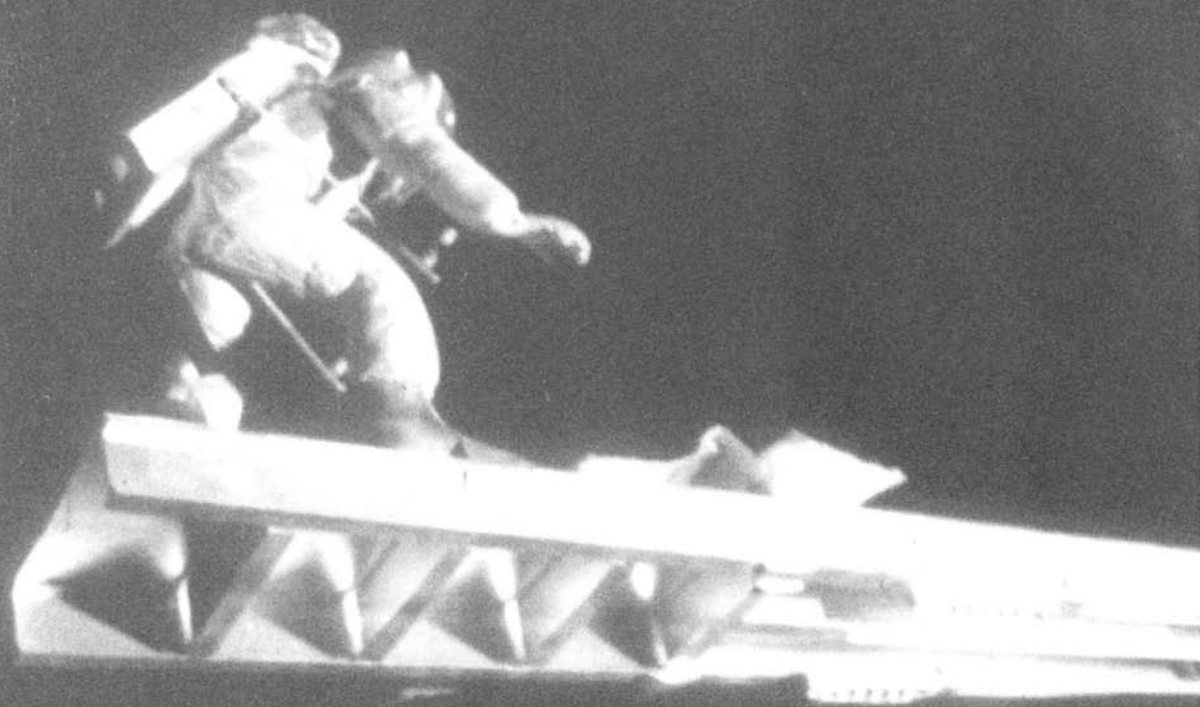
- **Tor Johnson** (*Plan 9 From Outer Space*, 1959). This massive former wrestler, who went by the stage name of "Super Swedish Angel", made several terrible movies with Z-grade director Ed Wood, including this one. Wood had a knack for bringing out the least in Johnson. His performance in *Plan 9* is a case in point: he plays a police investigator who eventually meets a sticky end at the hands of alien-resurrected zombies. Johnson recites his lines in a way that makes early-era Arnold Schwarzenegger sound like a master of elocution.

- **Mark Hamill** (*Star Wars*, 1977). It was easy to ignore the first time one saw *Star Wars*, but repeated viewings make it obvious and progressively painful – Luke Skywalker was a whiny little twit, and Mark Hamill's

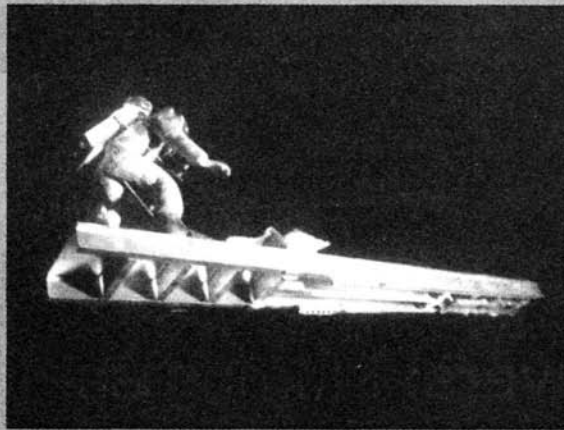
performance doesn't do either him or the character any favours. Just listen to the whimpering, wheedling tone of "But I was going to go to Toshi Station to pick up some power converters!" To be fair to Hamill, some of the blame lays at the feet of George Lucas, who doesn't direct humans well and Hamill's performance picks up significantly in *Empire*.

- **William Shatner** (*Star Trek: The Wrath Of Khan*, 1982). The gold standard of sci-fi bad acting. Shatner is an actor whose "emote" function goes to 11 when a 5 or 6 would have done nicely. Graft on Shatner's inexplicable choices for word emphasis, and the inescapable fact the he's that irreplaceable star of the series, and what you have is a ham with tenure, confident in his role. *Star Trek* fans have calibrated their expectations accordingly, and it doesn't hurt that over the years Shatner appears to have developed a sense of humour about his acting reputation.

- **Jar-Jar Binks** (*Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, 1999). The absolute nadir. George Lucas had a chance to do something really special with the first photorealistic computerized character to share the screen with live actors, and instead he created a prattling moron – a genuine disappointment.



The Crossovers: blurring sci-fi



Surfing on space junk in the brilliantly odd sci-fi comedy *Dark Star*

The Crossovers: blurring sci-fi

Science Fiction does not contain itself to neat categories, and science fiction fans do not content themselves with one genre of film. Thus, elements of science fiction film have found their way into movies that don't conveniently fit into the science fiction genre, and fans find themselves crunching down popcorn to movies that on the surface have little to do with space, lasers or little green men. In this chapter, we'll look at some film genres closely related to science fiction, and also see how science fiction has found its way into film genres from animation to Westerns.

Fantasy

Fantasy is often thought of these days as a subdivision of science fiction – when the two genres are described together it's fantasy that gets the second billing (“science fiction and fantasy”).

But while the two genres have a number of facets in common, including a fantastical nature

and (especially recently) loads of special effects, it's important to realize that fantasy has a far more distinguished pedigree in film than sci-fi. Indeed, prior to *Star Wars*, fantasy was far and away more popular and more acclaimed in the movie world than science fiction. As an example,

in 1939, science fiction was represented in movie theatres by the *Flash Gordon* serials, while fantasy was represented by *The Wizard Of Oz* (1939). Even in the current day, fantasy is slightly more respectable: in 2004 *The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King* swept the Oscars and even won Best Picture; science fiction has yet to produce a Best Picture winner.

Fantasy's wider success in film is in large part due to the fact that the genre has history on its side – which is to say, millennia of source material, spanning from as far back as ancient Egypt and Greece (whose mythologies have been plundered on a regular basis) to the present day. Thus tall tales (*The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen*, 1988), ghost stories (*Ghost*, 1990), mythological adventures (*Jason And The Argonauts*, 1963), fairy tales (*Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs*, 1937) and pre-industrial imagined worlds (*The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy) all slip comfortably into the category.

Boys against girls

Perhaps led by audience demographics, fantasy films are far more likely to feature women in lead roles, in everything from *Oz* to *Mary Poppins* (1964; for which **Julie Andrews** won an Oscar) to *Labyrinth* (1985) and *Spirited Away* (2002).

And where female leads in science fiction films are often defined as action heroines (the *Alien* films, and in 2005, *Aeon Flux*) or bimbos (*Galaxina*, 1980; featuring Playboy Playmate of the Year **Dorothy Stratten**) or some combination thereof (*Barb Wire*, 1996; with **Pamela Anderson**, also a Playmate of the Year), roles for women in fantasy are more generously arrayed.

Sci-fi's raw deal

Science fiction, in contrast, largely concerns itself with the future – it has had to make itself up as it goes along, rather than rely on the comfort of a huge common cultural bank of fantasy subjects and themes (and thus, commercial appeal). One of the great ironies of science fiction film is that it's possible to argue that sci-fi only became widely popular in theatres after it had generated its own cinematic history – just look at the way *Star Wars* and George Lucas reached back to the *Flash Gordon*-era serials for inspiration. Fantasy didn't require that same cinematic “ramping up” period.

Cinematic fantasy has a few other advantages over the science fiction genre. The fantastic elements of fantasy fundamentally don't have to make sense, while science fiction has to at least nod in the direction of rationality. Fantasy can employ magic and divine intervention, while science fiction has to make do with physics – even the magical “Force” of the *Star Wars* movies was scientifically grounded in *The Phantom Menace* (see box). This desire to explain the putative science in science fiction has led to a small industry of books purporting to explain the science behind objects and ships in popular science fiction series such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. Fans of the *Harry Potter* films, on the other hand, have little need of such tomes (even if they do exist). Magic is its own excuse.

The overlap

Despite these fairly substantial differences in the two genres, there is a significant overlap between science fiction and fantasy in their audiences and in their very story lines. Some significant fantasy

May The Force be with you

The *Star Wars* films existed quite happily for more than two decades with “The Force” regarded as a mystical power of nature that combined psychic abilities such as mind-reading and telekinesis with a form of afterlife (represented by the ghostly glowing form of Obi-Wan Kenobi, who would visit Luke Skywalker long after he had been sliced up by Darth Vader). This was, all in all, fine; so when an attempt was made to scientifically explain The Force via symbiotic microbes at the beginning of the series’ second trilogy, it left many fans cold.

films simply feel like science fiction films, while other fantasy films cheerfully incorporate sci-fi elements in service of their fantasy plots.

For fantasy films that feel like science fiction, one needs go no further than one of the biggest monster movies of all time: *King Kong* (1933, remade in both 1976 and 2005). More than two decades before Godzilla, King Kong didn’t need a nuclear blast to explain his size; he just was. But the stop-motion special effects of Kong and his climb up the Empire State Building presaged the look and feel of countless science fiction monster movies of the 1950s and 60s.

As science fiction matured and audiences developed a taste for “scientific” elements, fantasy movies adapted. One excellent example is 1984’s *Ghostbusters*, in which the film’s stars track ghostly appearances with scientific apparatus and trap them with particle beams. *Ghostbusters* is undoubtedly a fantasy – ghosts are not scientific, not to mention Mesopotamian gods who plan to destroy New York by invoking a 200-foot-high marshmallow man (again, shades of *King Kong*). The science fiction trappings helped sell the modern-day setting to audiences.

Fantasy also makes a strong appearance in science fiction; indeed such science fiction film series are sometimes compromised when the temptation to rationally explain the fantasy gets the better of the filmmakers (see box).

Psychic power is without doubt the most prolific fantastical element to be used in science fiction film. The *Star Trek* films feature **Vulgans** and **Betazeds**, two telepathic races; *Starship Troopers* (1997) has an entire branch of the military dedicated to psychic powers. *Minority Report* (2002) used psychics to track down would-be murderers; Alex Proyas’s *Dark City* (1998) had its hero duel his enemies with blasts from his brain, and then of course there is everyone’s favourite – the “Jedi mind tricks” of *Star Wars*. Comic-book psychic powers are also rampant, from the “Spidey Sense” of the *Spider-Man* films, to nearly all the powers of the mutants in the *X-Men* movies.

But fantasy is not the only genre with which science fiction will happily interbreed. Nearly every film genre features films that lean on science fiction elements to sell their stories.



Dark City

dir Alex Proyas, 1998, US, 100m

Reality takes a header in this *noirish* film, which starts off like a gritty murder mystery but quickly becomes something far stranger. Clearly a direct-line descendant of Lang’s *Metropolis*, this film is dazzling to look at.



Spirited Away

dir Hayao Miyazaki, 2001, Jap, 125m

Arguably the film for which master animator Hayao Miyazaki will be remembered, because this one won the animated film Oscar. This epic follows a 10-year-old girl as she travels to a witch-ruled alternate universe with her family and encounters the strange and mystical creatures there. A delight to behold and a thoughtful alternative to Hollywood’s generally frenetic animated movies.



Elijah Wood as Frodo Baggins in *The Lord Of The Rings: The Fellowship Of The Ring*



The Lord Of The Rings: The Fellowship Of The Ring dir Peter Jackson, 2001, US/NZ, 208m

The first of Jackson's three fantastical *Lord Of The Rings* films, and arguably the tightest and scariest. Elijah Woods' constant look of a startled bunny perfectly expresses the fear of a little hobbit who has been thrown into an unimaginable adventure. The visuals and the battles are breathtaking, while the CGI creatures slip effortlessly in alongside the stellar cast.



Ghostbusters dir Ivan Reitman, 1984, US, 107m

Ghosts and demons and EPA martinets, oh my! Ghosts act up in Manhattan; the somewhat sketchy scientists strap on portable particle accelerators to stop them. And then there's the end of the world. This was the most commercially successful comedy ever for nearly a decade, and deservedly so – it's funny, it's not aggressively stupid, and it knows just what to do with itself.

Action-adventure

Many – if not most – science fiction films could also be cross-categorized as action-adventure films. But there are also a wide number of action films that aren't primarily regarded as science fiction, even though they incorporate either science fiction themes or futuristic elements.

One wide action-film genre that is awash with science fiction elements is the spy thriller, in which heroes use various high-tech gadgets to get themselves out of scrapes and the clutches of the film villains. No one does it better than 007.

James Bond

Every Bond film comes with a scene in which 007 is outfitted by weaponsmaster Q; invariably the items Q gives Bond are the stuff of near-future science fiction. In the most recent Bond film, *Die Another Day* (2002), these included an invisible car and a ring with window-shattering sonic action. Other high-tech (and currently unavailable) Bond gadgets have included X-ray specs (from 1999's *The World Is Not Enough*) and a laser-equipped wristwatch (1995's *Goldeneye*).

Bond's villains are similarly equipped with futuristic weapons and seem to be particularly fond of orbiting satellites – *Die Another Day* featured a satellite which fired an immense energy beam, while *Goldeneye* had a satellite that would detonate an electromagnetic pulse to wipe out western civilization's banking records. One Bond film was straight-up science fiction: *Moonraker* (1979), which boasted space stations and laser infantry attacks as well as the usual menu of Bond action and quips.



Moonraker

dir Lewis Gilbert, 1979, UK, 126m

Someone's stolen a space shuttle, and it's up to 007 to find out why. This Bond film was clearly designed to cash in on the *Star Wars* craze, which is an ill fit for the Bond suaveness (even the Roger Moore Bond suaveness, denatured as it is). It's aged even more poorly than most of the Moore Bond films. At least it has a second helping of "Jaws" (Richard Kiel) as the undercard villain.

Techno-thrillers

Another action genre offering thinly disguised science fiction themes is the techno-thriller, in which the science fiction elements masquerade as current technology.

In *Face/Off* (1997), face-switching plastic surgery allows the good guy and the bad guy (played by Nicolas Cage and John Travolta, respectively, and vice versa) to change identities, engendering lots of violence. *Face/Off*'s director **John Woo** was also at the helm of *Mission: Impossible 2* (2000), which featured a deadly genetically engineered virus, and the race to capture it, as its central plot point. High-tech surveillance becomes the bane of actor **Will Smith**'s life in the chase thriller *Enemy Of The State* (1998), while *The Hunt For Red October* (1991) features an entire science fiction submarine, built by the Soviets and powered by a "caterpillar drive" which allows the sub to move through the water almost undetected. In *Firefox* (1982), the sci-fi military vehicle is a Soviet fighter plane, which **Clint Eastwood** aims to steal.



Firefox

dir **Clint Eastwood**, 1982, US, 136m

The Russians have developed a brain-operated stealth fighter plane, and who better to steal it than a shell-shocked Vietnam vet? The logic here is not crystal clear, but as director and star, Eastwood keeps things humming, and the special-effects-laden flight and battle sequences are still gripping.



Face/Off

dir **John Woo**, 1997, US, 138m

Nicolas Cage is a bad guy and John Travolta is a good guy – that is, until they switch faces, and then it's Cage as the good guy, and so on. Preposterous, frankly, but presented with so much panache by the stars and especially director John Woo (who does violence like no one else), that it's hard not to smile and enjoy. A must for action fans.



Mission: Impossible 2

dir **John Woo**, 2000, US, 123m

The bad guys are planning to hold the world hostage with a super-virulent virus, and only Tom Cruise can stop them. John Woo does his patented *über*-action thing, and fetchingly photographs Cruise in various moments of action-packed hair-tossing – it's like a styling-mousse commercial with guns. Good action but otherwise brainless.

Sci-fi sport

An important subset of the action genre for science fiction is sport, primarily because future sports are portrayed as immensely violent and stupid. Probably the most memorable mash-up of sport, action and science fiction is 1975's *Rollerball*, in which a peaceable 21st-century civilization's only outlet for violence is a bloody game based on roller derby. The 2002 remake sets the action in the present, and is not worth the price of admission. Then there is 1990's *The Blood Of Heroes*, which brings a mutated and padless form of American football into a post-apocalyptic setting, making it the *Mad Max* of science fiction sports films. Probably one of the more reprehensible science fiction films (and sports films) made in the 70s was *Death Race 2000* (1975), another dystopian movie that this time describes a car race in which the competitors score points by running down pedestrians.



Rollerball

dir **Norman Jewison**, 1975, US, 129m

Not to be confused with the abysmal 2002 remake, the 1975 original posits a corporatized world where a hyper-violent sport is the only cathartic (but controlled) release for the mob. Naturally, one of the players in the sport eventually has to make a stand for the sake of himself and humanity. Better than just about every other "future sport" movie ever made, and makes its remake look like a puddle of puke.



The Blood Of Heroes

dir David Webb Peoples, 1990, US, 90m

This is a cheesy but surprisingly effective B-movie in which the grubby survivors of a devastated future amuse themselves playing a violent game somewhere between rugby and a knife fight. Rutger Hauer is the crusty leader of a ragtag team that eventually challenges the leading franchises; Joan Chen improbably plays an up-and-coming rookie.



Death Race 2000

dir Paul Bartel, 1975, US, 79m

The most popular sport in the year 2000? Running down pedestrians! We should all be pretty glad this was not an accurate prediction of driving habits at the dawn of the millennium. This is a loud and stupid futuristic action movie, but it shows occasional flashes of satire, and a young David Carradine and Sylvester Stallone are fun to watch.



Death Race 2000

Comedy

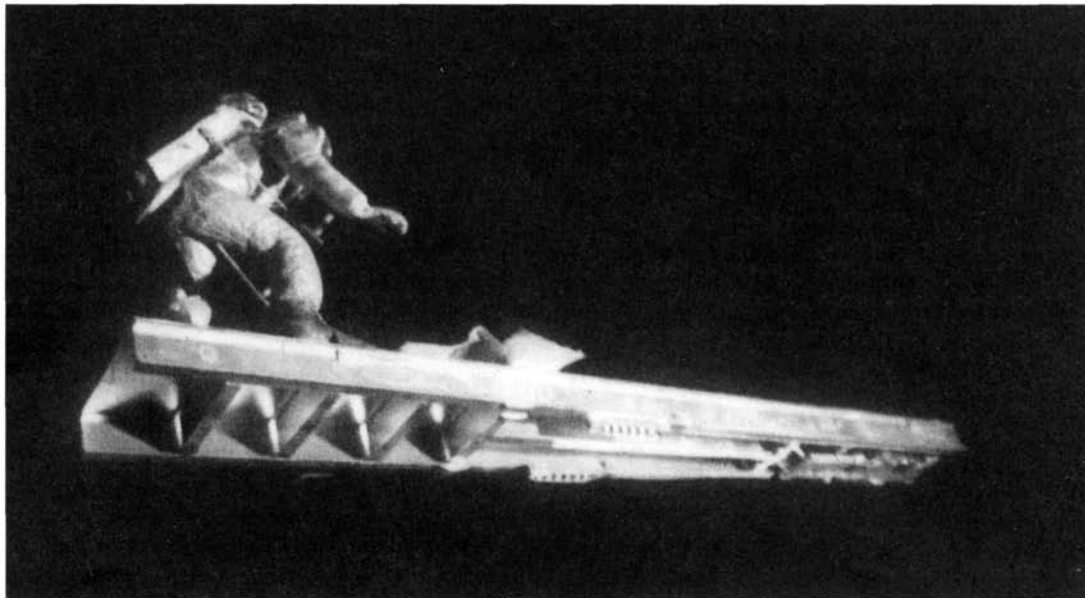
Comedy and science fiction have a shaky relationship. For every science fiction comedy hit like *Sleeper* (1973; see p.111), there's a *Heartbeeps* (1980) or *Abbot And Costello Go To Mars* (1953). And even when sci-fi comedy does strike it is by no means an indication of future success: the immensely amusing *Men In Black* (1997), birthed the rather less amusing *Men In Black II* (2002), while the cult comedy *The Adventures Of Buckaroo Banzai Across The 8th Dimension* (1984; see p.53) promised a sequel that has yet to be produced.

Even more worrying for the sci-fi/comedy hybrid were 1986's *Howard The Duck* and 2002's

The Adventures Of Pluto Nash, which stand among the worst major studio films ever made (and in the case of *Pluto*, also one of the least successful, costing well over 100 million dollars to make but grossing only 7 million dollars worldwide).

What's the problem with science fiction comedy? Part of it has to do with the nature of filmed science fiction, which tends toward the spectacular. For years the accepted wisdom in cinema was that spectacle had to be serious (or at least adventurous), while comedy was best played small.

Science fiction was allowed some comedy relief, often in the form of a robot (**Robbie the Robot** in *Forbidden Planet*, or **C-3PO** and



The surfing-on-space-debris shot from *Dark Star*

R2D2 in *Star Wars*), but for the most part it took itself seriously. While *Repo Man* (1984) offered moments of oddball comedy, the release of *Ghostbusters* in 1984 grandly wrecked the shibboleth that comedies couldn't be "big". But it wouldn't be until the release of *Men In Black* that science fiction had its first "spectacular comedy".

But that's not to say that sci-fi comedy hasn't had its moments. Other than the aforementioned *Sleeper*, perhaps the most memorable was 1974's *Dark Star*, directed by a still-wet-behind-the-ears John Carpenter. The movie follows the misadventures of four "spaced out" astronauts as they cruise around the cosmos demolishing unstable planets. The film is often known for its iconic and ridiculous surfing-on-space-debris shot.



Dark Star

dir John Carpenter, 1974, US, 83m

John Carpenter's little-seen debut film, cobbled together for just 60,000 dollars, is a favourite among hardcore geeks, and it's easy to see why: it's a stoned send-up of the science fiction film genre up to 1974, complete with slacker space explorers, alien beachballs, and talking bombs who like to debate the meaning of life, the universe and anything before going boom. In terms of fun to production-dollar ratio, this science fiction film can't be beat.



Heartbeeps

dir Allan Arkush, 1981, US, 79m

Two robots (Andy Kaufman and Bernadette Peters) escape from their factory and decide to start a family. This doesn't begin to sufficiently explain the oddness of the film. Be that as it may, it's the most important work in the film canon of doomed comedian Andy Kaufman, if for no other reason than it's his only actual starring film role.



Repo Man

dir Alex Cox, 1984, US, 92m

This whacked-out comedy follows a young punk as he becomes a repo man (the guys who steal cars back when their owners miss their payment); along the way a Chevy Malibu that may or may not be involved with alien visitations becomes the target for every repo man in the flick. Jam-packed with witty verbal and visual tics, it's one of those films you can enjoy over and over again, and for slightly different reasons each time.



The Adventures of Pluto Nash

dir Ron Underwood, 2002, US, 95m

This unspeakably bad comedy, which is now the gold standard of flopdom, stars Eddie Murphy as a hustling nightclub owner on the moon who runs afoul of the mafia. Warner Bros. sat on the film for two years before releasing it; the only thing that this achieved was to allow the film to ferment. Avoid.

Satire

Since comedy and science fiction have a hard time working together, it's perhaps not entirely surprising that many of the most memorable science fiction comedies are spoofs of other science fiction films and film traditions – making fun of the medium rather than having fun within the subject matter itself. *Sleeper* satirizes the clean white tunic-wearing futures of films such as *Things To Come* (1936); Mel Brooks' *Spaceballs* (1987) is a note-for-note riff of the *Star Wars* films. The infamous *Attack Of The Killer Tomatoes!* (1978) takes off on the “mutated monster” genre of the 1950s; while *Mars Attacks!* (1996) parodies the science fiction invasion films of the same era and *Galaxy Quest* (1999) is an accurate skewering of the *Star Trek* television phenomenon.

A twist of sci-fi

There have been numerous comedies that have used a twist of sci-fi to secure a giggle or two (check out Brian's alien encounter in **Monty Python's *Life Of Brian***, 1979) or even to anchor some ludicrous plot device that would otherwise be unexplainable.

Consider 1957's *Desk Set*, which stars **Spencer Tracy** and **Katharine Hepburn** as two professionals brought together by (among other things) a malfunctioning super-computer called the **EMMARAC**, which is designed to take over the network television department Hepburn runs.

More recently, **Arnold Schwarzenegger** was the star of two comedies with solid science fiction plot devices: 1988's *Twins*, in which the massive star and diminutive co-star **Danny DeVito** were allegedly twins by way of a eugenics experiment, and *Junior* (1994) in which Arnold plays the mad(ish) scientist and impregnates himself. The film is moderately amusing, while co-star Emma Thompson is largely wasted as Arnie's clumsy fellow scientist.

Mystery Science Theatre 3000: The Movie (1996), based on the popular US cable show of the same name, takes the satirizing to an extreme, since it's merely three characters in a movie theatre mocking the 1950s science fiction hit *This Island Earth*. Even mad scientists have had their satire with *Young Frankenstein* (1974), arguably the best sci-fi satire of all time.

There are even science fiction satires that are send-ups of other genres: 1988's *Earth Girls Are Easy* is a weird mash-up of 60 musical surf film and musical comedy, with aliens. And there are at least two comedies are about film directors making bad science fiction films: 1993's *The Pickle*, in which the film and director in question are

fictional, and 1994's *Ed Wood*, about a real film director directing some of the worst science fiction films of all time, including the memorably bad *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959). The junket for a bad science fiction film is the setting for otherwise entirely non-science-fiction-related comedy *America's Sweethearts* (1991).



Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!

dir John De Bello, 1978, US, 87m

Better remembered for its title than for the actual movie, this 70s parody of the mutant monster films of the 50s is not actually better than any of those movies, just more recent. It gets most of its humour from the fact that it's inherently amusing to be attacked by large rolling vegetables. The film spawned a 1988 sequel, best known for having George Clooney in a bit part.



Spaceballs

dir Mel Brooks, 1987, US, 96m

Lots of people seem to enjoy the obvious swipes that writer-director Brooks makes at *Star Wars* and other latter-day science fiction movies, but largely the humour comes across as being clueless – odd coming from Brooks, who not only wrote the best sci-fi parody ever (*Young Frankenstein*) but also produced 1986's version of *The Fly*.



Mystery Science Theatre 3000: The Movie

dir Jim Mallon, 1996, US, 73m

A move based on a TV show about a man and two robots watching and sarcastically tearing apart bad movies in space. How meta can you get? Ironically, the film is less funny than the TV series that spawned it (the number of jokes were reduced on the assumption that with more people in the theatres, folks would laugh longer).

Horror

Horror and science fiction have been cuddled up close since the earliest days of cinema, and many of science fiction's best films are horror hybrids, *Alien* (1979), *The Fly* (1986) and *Frankenstein* (1931) chief among them. And let's not forget both monster movies and mad scientist flicks, which are to be found scattered throughout the genre, and this book.

The function of science fiction in horror films – particularly modern era horror – is the same as its function in fantasy: to give a plausible reason for implausible horror events. Zombies, for example. Historically simply assumed to be animated by magical means, zombies are now as often as not created by the spread of viruses, such as in 2003's

EVP

Some horror movies use sci-fi-esque technical means to track and monitor the afterlife, notably the pseudo-scientific/science fiction process known as "Electronic Voice Phenomena", which purports to capture the voices of the dead on recording media.

This was a minor plot point in *The Sixth Sense* (1999); an expanded version of the idea takes place in *The Ring* (2002, based on the 1998 Japanese horror film *Ringu*), in which a spooky videotape heralds death to anyone who views it. 2005's *White Noise* took EVP front and centre, as the film's hero uses it to receive messages from his murdered wife.

28 *Days Later...* (see p.137), 2002's horror/action hybrid *Resident Evil*, and the virus-laden teen splatter film *Cabin Fever* (2002). Vampirism also gets the virus treatment in the Wesley Snipes-hosted *Blade* series of films (particularly *Blade II*, 2002).

Some horror films use science fiction simply for variety and to hook in fans of the genre. A fine example of this was 2001's *Jason X*, the tenth installment of the interminable *Friday The 13th* horror film series, in which unstoppable serial killer Jason Voorhees is thawed out in the 25th century for no particularly good reason except to kill the teens of the future. Director **Paul W.S. Anderson's** *Event Horizon* (1997), on the other hand, is a haunted house story, except in this case the haunted house is a derelict and extremely creepy spaceship.

Other horror films use a science fiction format to dabble in surrealism, particularly involving meldings man and machine: horror director **David Cronenberg** returns to this theme again

and again (see below) but others have dabbled with it as well, most memorably Japanese director **Shinya Tsukamoto**, whose disturbing *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1998) features a man who inserts metal chunks into his body, undergoing a bizarre metamorphosis after a car accident.

Another trip into science-fictiony surrealism comes with **David Lynch's** mesmerizing debut *Eraserhead* (1976), whose closed-off reality (complete with disturbing mutant child) is often described as science fiction (there really isn't any other tag that fits the bill).



Eraserhead

dir **David Lynch**, 1977, US, 89m, b/w

There may be stranger debut films than Lynch's surreal paean to fatherhood, but if there are, they're stuffed in a box somewhere. Jack Nance plays a man whose hideously mutated child becomes the centre of his world, and it's not clear whether his "world" is real or some untold stepping-stone between reality and psychosis. As unsettling today as it was nearly thirty years ago.

David Cronenberg: master of horror science fiction

Horror and science fiction are often thrown together, and often to the advantage of neither. However, some horror/sci-fi hybrids deserve special note, most significantly the works of Canadian director **David Cronenberg**, who has been mixing the two over three decades of film, in the service of the "New Flesh" – a juncture where flesh is corrupted by technology or science and transforms into something else, often with an unhealthy dollop of sexuality thrown in.

Cronenberg's first widely seen film, *Shivers* (1975), features parasites – designed to replace organs – that are transmitted sexually. *Rabid* (1976) features another medical procedure, a vampiric skin graft, that causes star **Marilyn Chambers** (better known for her work in porn) to infect her victims. *The Brood* (1989) has psy-

chotherapy creating mutant (and violent) children. And in *Scanners* (1980), which memorably featured a psychically-exploded head, a generation of psychic misfits. All these films led the way to Cronenberg's two most famous and influential: *The Fly* (1986 see Canon) and *Videodrome* (1983), whose explicit meldings of human and machine would prefigure films as wide-ranging as *The Terminator* and *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*.

The success of Cronenberg's horror films allowed him to branch out into making psychological thrillers (1988's *Dead Ringers* and 2002's *Spider*) and historical epics (*M. Butterfly*, 1993), but he returns to his fascination with technology and flesh on a regular basis, most recently with 1999's *eXistenZ*, which could be seen as *Videodrome* updated for the video-game era.



Jason X

dir James Issac, 2001, US, 93m

Friday The 13th evildoer Jason Voorhees is defrosted in a 25th-century spaceship, which is (naturally) filled with giggly teens. Needless to say, much space-age slashing ensues. Worth watching if the only alternative is to be dipped in red-hot searing lava until your flesh falls off the bone – and then only just barely.



Resident Evil

dir Paul W.S. Anderson, 2002, UK/Ger/Fr, 100m

An evil pharmaceutical company creates a compound that turns people into zombies; Milla Jovovich is part of a military group that goes in to deal with them. Director Anderson has some visual style, but the script here is more than stupid, and ultimately makes less sense than the video game which inspired it – play that instead.

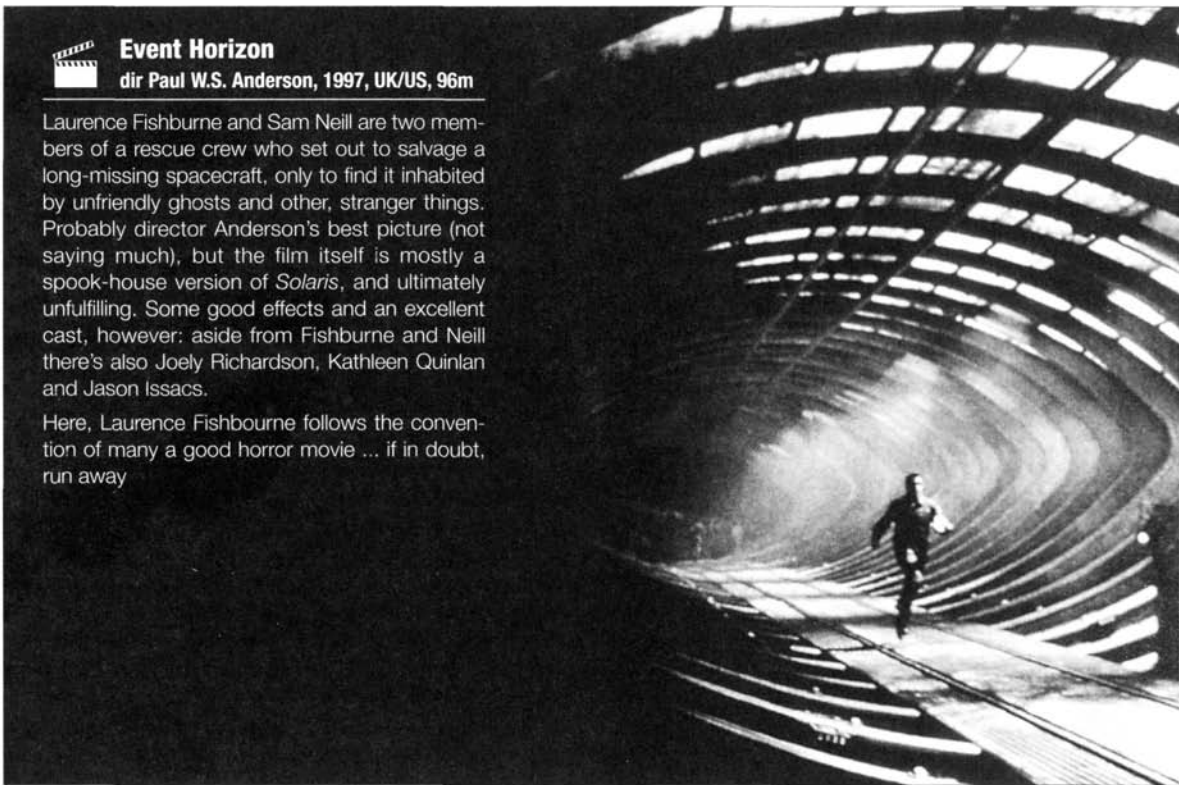


Event Horizon

dir Paul W.S. Anderson, 1997, UK/US, 96m

Laurence Fishburne and Sam Neill are two members of a rescue crew who set out to salvage a long-missing spacecraft, only to find it inhabited by unfriendly ghosts and other, stranger things. Probably director Anderson's best picture (not saying much), but the film itself is mostly a spook-house version of *Solaris*, and ultimately unfulfilling. Some good effects and an excellent cast, however: aside from Fishburne and Neill there's also Joely Richardson, Kathleen Quinlan and Jason Issacs.

Here, Laurence Fishbourne follows the convention of many a good horror movie ... if in doubt, run away



Drama

Drama and science fiction are not complete strangers – indeed, the melding of the two resulted in an Oscar-winning performance in *Charly* (1968), in which Cliff Robertson portrayed a mentally retarded janitor whose IQ jumps as the result of an operation on his brain.

A rather more traditional science fiction take on the same theme occurs in 1996's *Phenomenon*, in which an average guy (John Travolta) finds himself in the possession of super-intelligence and eventually psychic powers after exposure to an alien light source (or so it seems). The idea of super-intelligence also pops up in 2001's *K-Pax*, in which a psychiatric patient (Kevin Spacey) claims to be an interstellar traveller. Nor is super-intelligence confined to humans: 1973's *Day Of The Dolphin* was a political thriller that featured language-capable dolphins in a plot to assassinate the President.

Science fiction is also home to unconventional dramas set in the near future. Two recent sci-fi dramas featured plots involving genetics: 2003's *Code 46* and 1997's *Gattaca*. Unlike science fiction adventure and action films, these quieter science fiction dramas are applauded by critics, but often entirely ignored by audiences; sadly, mass audiences prefer their science fiction films to have big explosions rather than big ideas.

Not all near-future drama/science fiction hybrids, however, are fated for box-office ignominy, especially when a tremendously popular star is attached. Jim Carrey provided the star material in two light-hearted but still essentially dramatic films with science fiction themes: 1998's *The Truman Show* (see box, overleaf) and 2004's *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*.



Charly

dir Ralph Nelson, 1968, US, 103m

One of science fiction's only acting Oscars comes from this film, in which Cliff Robertson convincingly goes from having an IQ of 70 to being super-genius – and then starts back down again. Underseen by the current generation of science fiction fans, and well worth revisiting.



Gattaca

dir Andrew Niccol, 1997, US, 101m

In the future people will live in a world with cool retro design and also be classified by genetic fitness. Ethan Hawke's genetically-compromised character conspires to get off-planet for a new life. This film was only moderately well-received at its release but its deserved reputation as a thoughtful and compelling film has grown over time.



K-Pax

dir Iain Softly, 2001, US, 120m

A man admitted to a New York psychiatric hospital says he's an alien. Spacey is the would-be alien; Jeff Bridges is an initially detached but ultimately curious psychiatrist. This movie works better for its moments than as a whole.



Code 46

dir Michael Winterbottom, 2003, UK, 92m

An investigator in the near future falls in love with the very woman he's investigating. This ambitious but low-key drama takes place in a future where genetics determine your destiny (you can't breed with someone if your DNA have conflicts). An unexpectedly moving film.



Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind

dir Michel Gondry, 2004, US, 108m

Former lovers (Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet) take advantage of new technology that lets a person wipe memories from their mind – only to find they want to keep those memories, for good or ill. This film is willfully weird, disjointed, romantic and compelling. Dazzlingly inventive, with a satisfying emotional core.

The Truman Show

Aside from its own qualities as a film and a drama, *The Truman Show* (1998) had the great fortune to presage the American “reality show” phenomenon by a couple of years, when *Survivor* sent its first batch of contestants off to an island to scratch and claw over each other on their way to a million dollars, much to the utter delight of a huge and devoted audience. Suddenly this film about a man whose entire life, from birth to adulthood, has been one long television show didn’t seem nearly as implausible. Fortunately, we have not gotten to that point – yet – and so *The Truman Show* remains, for now, speculative.

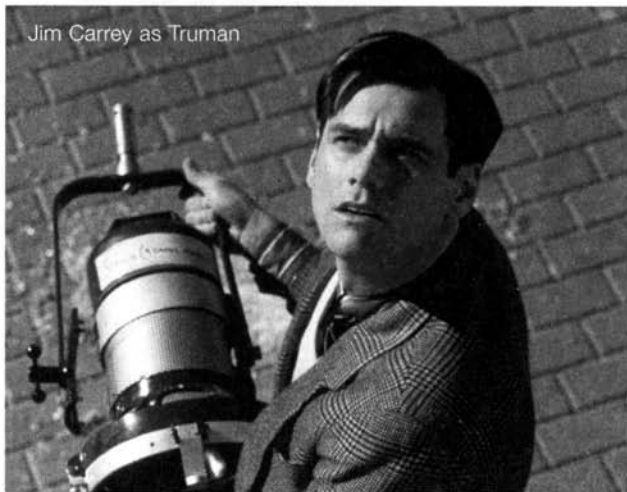
The Truman Show also had the great fortune to land **Jim Carrey** as **Truman**, here in his first role as an actual human being, rather than a live-action cartoon. Carrey’s previous roles – confections like *Ace Ventura* or *The Mask* (in which he really was a live-action cartoon) – were predicated on the notion that his character was all about being watched, and craved the attention, from characters in the film and (implicitly) the audience. In *Truman*, his character was watched constantly – but the audience’s interest is predicated on his not knowing the truth. Here is a man without a single private moment to his name.

To make such a movie work, the character has to be unbelievably winning, and Carrey revealed a warm, wounded intelligence in the role, as a man who slowly and inexorably confronts the fact that everything in his life – his parents, his marriage, his friends – is nothing but the entertainment of strangers.

Set in the role of Carrey’s nemesis is **Ed Harris**, who plays a smug, beret-wearing director named **Christof**, but Christof is a false nemesis (even if Harris was Oscar-nominated for it), the symptom but not the cause of Truman’s

woes. The true nemesis is an audience who craves to be entertained regardless of the cost – an idea that has been visited in movies before, most notably in the black comedy *Network* (1976), which culminated in a TV personality being assassinated for having low ratings. *Truman* is not as mean-spirited or in-your-face as *Network* (it gives its protagonist an ending which, if not verifiably happy, is at least encouragingly optimistic), but there’s no doubt that it’s the audience who is to blame for Truman’s situation, even as it seemingly cheers his self-discovery and flight from the fantasy of his world to the reality of ours.

The final words in the film, in fact, sum up the entire problem, and why in a world in which a *Truman Show* could exist, the obvious thing to do, should the star escape, is to keep the set and plant another baby under the spotlights. When you consider how close that world is to our own, this is not a particularly encouraging thought.



Jim Carrey as Truman

Animation

Animation has been a fundamental part of science fiction since the earliest stop-motion animation efforts showed up as part of larger science fiction films.

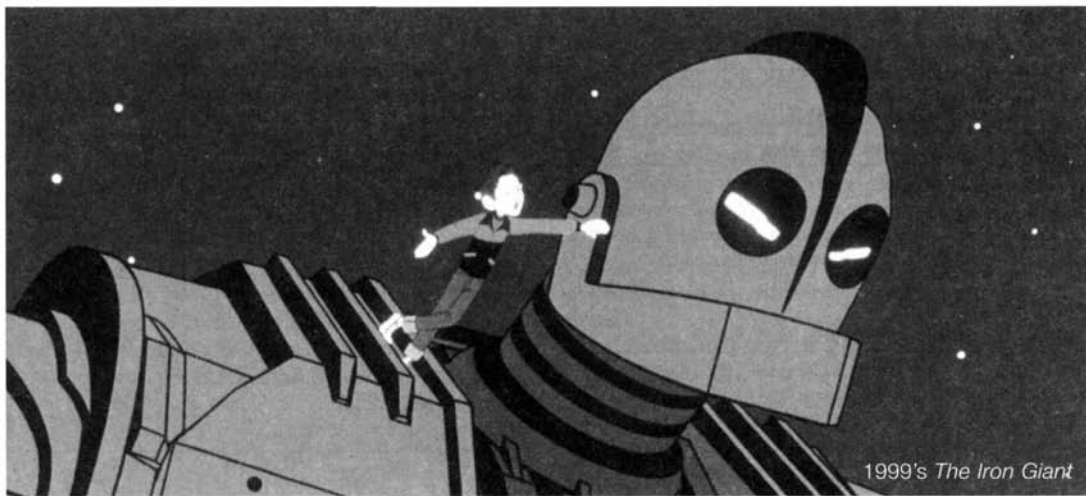
Silent classics such as 1902's *Le voyage dans la lune* (see Canon) utilized animation, while the animated work of avant-garde artists in the 1910s and 20s did much to set the visual tone of science fiction for decades to come.

Hollywood toons

But aside from the occasional shorts, most notably from the Warner Bros. Looney Tunes series (1953's *Duck Dodgers In The 24 ½ Century* being the big example), Hollywood has had a fitful

relationship with science fiction. Walt Disney, the largest animation studio in the world, didn't even release its first science-fiction-themed animated film until 2001, when it debuted the somewhat disappointing *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*.

In the modern era of animation, in fact, it took an apostate Disney animator to bring science fiction to American animation: **Don Bluth**, who left Disney to make 1982's *The Secret Of NIMH*. The film was not particularly successful however, and it took another 13 years for the next significant American animated film with a hint of science fiction in it to appear. That film was the groundbreaking, computer-generated classic *Toy Story* (1995), the first movie to appear from **Pixar**. *Toy Story* was immensely popular, as were Pixar's *Toy Story 2* (1999), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) and *The Incredibles* (2004; see Canon).



1999's *The Iron Giant*

Other “traditional” sci-fi animations have had a difficult time replicating Pixar’s success. The live-action/animation hybrid *Space Jam* (1996), which featured basketball icon **Michael Jordan** shooting hoops with **Bugs Bunny** and a bunch of aliens, was only a moderate hit, while 1999’s space-themed *The Iron Giant* did poorly, despite critical acclaim. 2001’s *Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius* did decent business but served largely as a feature-length advertisement for the already-in-production cable cartoon show of the same name.

Disney, however, hit space gold with 2002’s *Lilo & Stitch*, featuring an anarchic space creature who befriends a lonely girl, but the film was bracketed by the disappointing *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* and 2002’s disastrously expensive *Treasure Planet* (based on Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*). Fox’s *Titan A.E.* (2000) was also a financial disaster and was partly responsible for the studio shutting down in-house animation production. The lesson Hollywood has learned from this is apparently not to release science fiction-themed films unless they are computer animated, which explains Fox’s *Robots* (2005), in which Art Deco-inspired robots live in a city that would make Fritz Lang weep.



The Secret Of NIMH

dir Don Bluth, 1982, US, 82m

An ordinary mouse enlists the help of superintelligent rats (made that way courtesy of government labs) to save her sick child. This is the best mainstream animated film of its era, if only through lack of substantial competition.



Toy Story

dir John Lasseter, 1995, US, 81m

This features “cool toy” Buzz Lightyear, who goes through most of the film under the impression he’s a space hero. Not only was it the first of its kind, but the story is warm and well-crafted, and each character gives a sterling animated performance – it’s all in the eyes.

Video game crossovers

One very recently emerging sub-genre of science fiction crossover are the films based on popular video games. This genre kicked off in the early 1990s with the big-budget spectacular *Super Mario Brothers* (1993), in which **Bob Hoskins** played the famous plumber Mario; this was followed by the rather more modestly budgeted *Double Dragon* (1994) and *Street Fighter* (1994), both based on punch-and-kick fighting games. These three films established an early trend in video-game movies which remains to this day: all movies based on video games have been really bad movies.

Some are worse than others, the best of the lot being the *Tomb Raider* series (featuring **Angelina Jolie** as Lara Croft) and the computer-animated *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), a science fiction movie based extremely loosely on the fantasy video-game series of the same name. Among the very worst are the horror/sf hybrids, including *Resident Evil* (2002) and its sequel, and *Alone In The Dark* (2005). One science fiction movie based on a video game, *Wing Commander* (1999), was notable primarily for being the film that carried the movie trailer for *Star Wars Episode I* in front of it. *Star Wars* fans bought tickets to the film, watched the trailer and left before *Wing Commander* could unspool.

With the exception of the first *Tomb Raider* film, films based on video games have not been notably financially successful, but that has not stopped Hollywood from keeping at it. In 2005, they tried again with *Doom*, based on the immensely popular shoot ‘em up game and featuring wrestling-star-turned-actor **The Rock**.

Far more entertaining are the video games that have crossed over from science fiction films; for more on these, see p.286.

**The Iron Giant**

dir Brad Bird, 1999, US, 86m

A boy finds a 100-foot metal robot and decides to keep him; not surprisingly, this turns out to be more difficult than he expects. Received poorly by audiences on its release, this film has since had its reputation grow immeasurably, partly because its director, Brad Bird, went on to make *The Incredibles*. This is probably the smartest and best non-Japanese science fiction animated film out there.

**Titan A.E.**

dir Don Bluth/Gary Goldman, 2000, US, 95m

The Earth is trashed by aliens and one of the few human survivors needs to find a hidden spaceship in order to keep humanity from being wiped out forever. A bad script hobbles this animated adventure, but being no fun at all is what kills it. Some nice computerized animation, but not enough to make this worth seeking out.

**Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius**

dir John A. Davis, 2001, US, 82m

A genius boy with an immensely large head and a soft-serve ice-cream hairdo has to save all the adults of his hometown after they're kidnapped as sacrifices to a large space chicken. Yes, it's very silly, and meant for kids, but it moves along pleasantly enough for everyone in the family. The characters in the film then segued into a cable TV cartoon series which is also fairly imaginative.

**Lilo & Stitch**

dir Dean DeBlois, 2002, US, 85m

By far the most successful of Disney's science fiction animation efforts, probably because it steals a page (or two, or three) from the zany anarchic spirit of Warner Bros.' Looney Tunes, right down to a cuddly space creature who is chaos defined (he's landed in Hawaii after escaping from space prison). It's a whole lot of fun to watch for kids, and almost as much fun to watch for grown-up science fiction fans as well.

Global toons

American animated science fiction has been aimed primarily at family audiences but other nations have not restricted themselves so. 1973's French/Czechoslovakian *La planète sauvage* (*The Savage Planet*) features human-like creatures kept as pets by giant blue humanoids, while Canada's *Heavy Metal* (1981), based on the saucy French comic book *Metal Hurlant*, features sex, violence and alien drugs.

The country with the richest animation tradition when it comes to science fiction is Japan, which has decades of science fiction anime under its belt. 1988's *Akira* (see Canon) and 1996's *Ghost In The Shell* (see Canon) are by far the best known, but the recent Academy Award for Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001), coupled with a healthy stream of TV anime shows, have cracked open the door for the form in the West. New fans are finding a wide range of films with science fiction themes, from the fantasy-tinged (Miyazaki's *Nausicaä Of The Valley Of Wind*, 1984) to those describing alternate histories (2004's *Steamboy*) to grungy action adventures (2001's *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie*).

**Nausicaä Of The Valley Of Wind**

dir Hayao Miyazaki, 1984, Jap, 116m

In an ecologically devastated future, one young woman tries to keep warring nations from messing up the world any further. Director Hayao Miyazaki based this on his own popular and ecologically-minded manga, and for fans of Miyazaki's later works (*Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*) it's a chance to catch the anime master in one of his earliest feature attempts.

Time travel – it's everywhere

Time travel is a natural for the science fiction genre, which is possibly why there is so much of it in sci-fi films. And there are so many ways to achieve it, whether it be through machines (1960's *The Time Machine*, obviously) or a gravitational slingshot around the sun (*Star Trek IV: The Journey Home*, 1986).

Aside from the obvious sci-fi time-benders there are a host of other films that mess with time. People travel through time to rescue passengers on planes that are about to crash in *Millennium* (1989), or to retrieve the US Constitution (*The Spirit Of '76*, 1990). And then there's Richard Kelly's wonderful *Donnie Darko* (2002), which is just plain strange, and the time-freezing family flick, *Clockstoppers* (2002).

From the early days of cinema, seek out the 1910 version of **Mark Twain's** *A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court*, which was essayed in film again in 1931 (with **Will Rogers**) and 1949 (with **Bing Crosby**). Another early time-travel flick was **Harold Lloyd's** *Berkeley Square* (1933), which merely required the time travellers to be in the right place at the right moment. In *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) time travel is accomplished by fainting, while *Somewhere In Time* (1980) saw **Christopher Reeve** travel to the past by self-hypnosis to find **Jane Seymour**. In **Terry Gilliam's** *Time Bandits* (1980), thieving dwarfs traverse time by way of a map showing time holes – a map stolen from God. The French hit comedy *Les Visiteurs* (1993, remade into the American flop *Just Visiting* in 2001) has a French knight propelled from the 12th century into modern times by a senile sorcerer.

Some of the best time-travel stories don't bother to explain the time travel at all; in the classic *Groundhog Day* (1993), an obnoxious weatherman (**Bill Murray**) repeats *Groundhog Day* over and over and over again; no explanation is given other than a not-so-vague hint that his karma has something to do with it.

An interesting subset of time-travel films involves putting someone in suspended animation (freezing is gen-

erally the accepted way to do this), and then allowing them to experience the culture shock. Woody Allen's *Sleeper* (see Canon) is the classic example of this, while the 1939 *Buck Rogers* serial features a hero gassed into slumber, only to awake in the 25th century, and *Late For Dinner* (1991) tries to reawaken love post-slumber. One of the more amusing of this type of film, 1999's *Blast From The Past*, doesn't even bother to freeze the characters – it merely traps them in a bomb shelter and decants them 35 years later.



The Spirit Of '76

dir Lucas Reiner, 1990, US, 82m

Americans from the future decide to go back to 1776 to discuss things with the Founding Fathers but end up in 1976 instead. The fact that this film stars 70s heart-throb David Cassidy should be your first clue not to take this flick even remotely seriously.



Late For Dinner

dir W.D. Richter, 1991, US, 93m

Two guys on the lam for a shooting fall into the clutches of an evil scientist who freezes them for three decades. Isn't that always the way? Now the question is, can one of them rekindle the flame with his wife, who has gone on for 30 years without him? You probably can guess the answer, but this unassuming film makes finding out the details a small, quiet pleasure.



Donnie Darko

dir Richard Kelly, 2001, US, 133m

A teenager is plagued by psychotic visions, including one of a skull-faced rabbit who foretells the end of the world. He ain't no Harvey, that's for sure. Is it mere teenage nuttery or something entirely more fantastic? The movie keeps you guessing, even when the credits roll. This film has quickly become a cult favourite, and more than one version exists on DVD; the extended director's cut is now considered the definitive edit of the film.



Donnie Darko's
bunny pal

Superheroes and comic books

Most superhero films are at least nominally science fiction films, due to the fact that a superhero's powers are often given to him or her through science fiction means, whether it's because they're from another planet (*Superman*, 1978), or have been bombarded by radiation (*Hulk*, 2003; *The Fantastic Four*, 2005) or bitten by a genetically-engineered spider (*Spider-Man*, 2002), or they are just plain old genetic mutants (*X-Men*, 1999).

But occasionally you'll encounter a superhero without science fiction superpowers – most notably *Batman* (1989), whose primary superpower is having enough money to pay for his various “bat gadgets”. *Batman* himself is not a science fiction creation, but the *Batman* films do owe a debt to sci-fi, mostly due to the creation and/or machinations of their villains. This is particularly the case in the later, campier films *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997). In the former, villain *The Riddler* plans to take over Gotham through the use of an intelligence-sucking entertainment device; in the latter, *Mr. Freeze* plans to encase the city in ice. 2005's *Batman Begins* tones down the science fiction, but the genre's influence is still there: director *Chris Nolan* reportedly showed *Blade Runner* (1982) to the cast and crew and said: “This is how we're going to make *Batman*.”

Aside from the *Batman* series, *The Punisher* (2004) features a superhero who is simply mean, tough, and carries a big gun, with enemies who are ruthless but not superpowered; 1991's *The Rocketeer* boasts a 1940s-era aviator with a personal rocket pack that flits him from adventure to adventure.

Not every film based on a comic book is a superhero flick however. *Men In Black* (1997),

which is straight-ahead science fiction, originated as a comic book, as did *Judge Dredd* (1995) and 1986's oft-maligned *Howard The Duck*; 2004's *Alien Vs Predator*, while based on the respective film series of its title creatures, also benefited from the presence of a long-running comic book series, published by *Dark Horse* comics. The campy 1982 *Swamp Thing* (directed by horror master *Wes Craven*) features a moss-covered former scientist who can be considered an anti-hero rather than superhero.

As an aside, although films derived from comic books are generally categorized as action-adventures, comics (and their grown-up counterparts, graphic novels) have served as source material for some surprising pictures. For example, the high-toned *Road To Perdition*, starring *Tom Hanks* and *Paul Newman*, is based on a graphic novel, as is 2001's Jack the Ripper thriller *From Hell*, and indie favourites *American Splendor* (2003) and *Ghost World* (2000).



The Rocketeer

dir Joe Johnston, 1991, US, 108m

Based on a comic book that was in turn inspired by the 1940s serial *King Of The Rocket Men*, so it's not entirely surprising that this film has a serial-era adventure feel to it. Enjoyable but slight, and best when Timothy Dalton is chewing scenery as the Errol Flynn-like villain.



Batman Forever

dir Joel Schumacher, 1995, US, 122m

One of the two Joel Schumacher-directed *Batman* films (the other being 1997's terrible *Batman & Robin*). In this one, *Batman* goes up against the Riddler (*Jim Carrey*). It's over-the-top nonsense, but with style, and sports the best-looking cast of the series, including *Val Kilmer* as the *Dark Knight* and *Nicole Kidman* as his sultry love interest.

Westerns and musicals

No genre of film is immune to science fiction, even two that seem entirely opposed to the science fiction timeframe and geek ethos: **Westerns and musicals**, respectively.

Sci-fi gunslingers

Three examples come to mind: 1999's *Wild Wild West*, in which an alternate-history Western-era America features giant, steam-powered spiders; *Back To The Future: Part III* (1990), which has **Marty McFly** travelling to the Wild West to save his friend **Doc Brown**; and 1973's *Westworld*, which creates a Western-era theme park, complete with android gunslingers, one of which goes haywire and starts shooting the guests. And we'd be remiss not to mention 1935's *The Phantom Empire* serial, which has an entire hidden civilization on **Gene Autry's** ranch.



Wild Wild West

dir **Barry Sonnenfeld**, 1999, US, 107m

Loud and obnoxious "comedy" in which Will Smith stars as a US federal agent in the 1870s who squares off against a mad scientist. Proof that Smith, one of the most charismatic of modern movie stars, has his off films.



Westworld

dir **Michael Crichton**, 1973, US, 89m

This is the story of entertainment turning on the punters. *Westworld* is one of three parks (alongside *Romanworld* and *Medievalworld*) where guests are entertained by androids who offer sex and violent showdowns that only the tourists are supposed to win. But then the robots go loopy, with Yul Brynner putting in a memorable role as the mechanoid gunslinger turned tourist-killer.

Sci-fi songs

Lovers of musicals, don't think your genre has escaped, either: there was a science fiction musical as far back as 1930 entitled *Just Imagine*, in which personal planes have replaced cars, food is in pill form, and everyone has names like **LN-18** and **J-21** (and for extra credit, it features a man hit by lightning in 1930 waking up fifty years later to a world of wonders – so it's a time-travel movie as well). Another science fiction musical of the 1930s, *It's Great To Be Alive!* (1933), featured an aviator who crashes on an isolated island – and thus becomes the only man on the planet not affected by a disease that renders every other male sterile. It falls to our hero to repopulate the earth. It's amazing he has the energy for a musical number as well.

And before *Grease*, **Olivia Newton John** made a futuristic rock opera, *Tomorrow* (1970), in which she's abducted by aliens who like a good tune. A decade later came the 1980 rock opera *The Apple*, set in the then-future of 1994, in which everyone wears silver and puts fins on prams. This film was so bad that movie screens were damaged when audiences began flinging giveaway souvenir LPs and 45s at them. More musically successful but even less seen was 1980s *Forbidden Zone*, which featured music by **Danny Elfman**, who would go on to score many other, far more successful science fiction films and even another musical: **Tim Burton's** wonderful *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993).

Most musicals that dabble in science fiction rate from bad to vilely atrocious. In the latter category: 1984's *Strangers In Paradise*, in which

a man frozen in order to escape the Nazis is reheated by Californian fascists; naturally, a musical breaks out.



Just Imagine

dir David Butler, 1930, US, 102m, b/w

Welcome to the fabulous world of 1980, where people have numbers rather than names, your food is in pill form, and you have your own airplane. This was one of the first sci-fi films made with sound; that it's a musical too, complete with Busby Berkeley dance numbers, is just a bonus. You won't recall the music, or the dancing (or the plot) after you've seen it, but it's fun simply for the retro-futuristic look of a future that's now in our past.



1930's *Just Imagine*

Family

Aside from the obviously kid-oriented science fiction serials of the 1930s through 50s, The most significant era of science fiction family film came in the wake of the worldwide success of *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* in the 1980s.

All manner of science fiction movies were pitched at family audiences, and many were constructed around the *E.T.* formula – a child (usually a boy) has an experience with some sort of alien intelligence.

Thus, such as *Flight Of The Navigator* (1986) appeared, in which an alien ship transports a boy forward in time, and *Explorers* (1985), in which three boys build a spaceship and then meet the aliens. Nearly all of these flicks were less clever and less emotionally affective than Spielberg's original, while some were offensively bad (notably 1988's kid-meets-alien tale *Mac And Me*, which was funded in part by MacDonald's and Coca-Cola and is plastered with their products).



Explorers

dir Joe Dante, 1985, US, 109m

Three kids build a spaceship in their backyard, but unlike all the other kids who have done this, theirs really works, and off they go to meet aliens, whose experience with humanity is mostly of the televised sort. This film is very funny and has more than its share of media-aware camp. It also sports nice performances from the then-young Ethan Hawke, and the forever young River Phoenix. The film also boasts a great score by Jerry Goldsmith.



Flight of the Navigator

dir Randal Kleiser, 1986, US, 90m

A kid (Joey Cramer) who disappeared in 1978 mysteriously shows up eight years later and hasn't aged a day. Could he have something to do with the mysterious flying saucer that's just showed up too? Possibly! This story runs on *E.T.* lines, down to the vaguely nefarious government types, but is smarter than most of the other *E.T.* knockoffs of the time and features Paul Reuben (aka "Pee-Wee Herman") in the role of the spaceship's voice. Any kid who who has dreamed of having his very own spaceship will love this film.

Disney

Prior to *E.T.*, one of the most successful purveyors of family-friendly science fiction was Disney. Though the animation branch of the studio didn't come around to science fiction until the 21st century, Disney produced big budget science fiction in the 1950s with *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* (1954, see Canon) and during the 1960s and 70s the studio's live action arm cranked out genial comedies in which professors and/or college students used various "scientific" discoveries to do usually silly things. Fred MacMurry starred in the most famous of these, *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961), in which he invents "flubber," a superbouncy substance; this spawned 1963's *Son Of Flubber* as well as a 1997 remake (named *Flubber*).

Dean Jones took over the professor schtick with 1965's *The Million Dollar Duck*, in which X-rays make a duck lay golden ages; he'd also star in the studio's series of "Love Bug" films, in which a Herbie the race car (well, VW Beetle) has a mind of his own.

Even a young Kurt Russell turned up playing college student Dexter Riley in a series of Disney films: *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes* (1969, in which he turns super-smart), *Now You See Him, Now You Don't* (1972, here he turns invisible), and *The Strongest Man In The World* (1975, and here – well, the title gives it away).



The Absent-Minded Professor

dir Robert Stevenson, 1961, US, 97m

This genial Disney comedy features MacMurry as a professor who develops a goo that defies gravity; he then has to fend of an industrialist who wants to get his hands on it (nefarious industrialists are a staple of the family SF genre). A fine family film for its time and still watchable today. Remade in 1997 as *Flubber*, starring Robin Williams. This 1997 version is OK, but nothing more.



The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes

dir Robert Butler, 1969, US, 91m

A oh-so-very-young Kurt Russell plays college student Dexter Riley, whose mind gets a superboost when an electric shock from a computer causes his brain to exhibit computer-like tendencies, and also causes him to learn about shady deals stored on the computer. One of three similar films, all starring Russell as Dexter. These films are definite period pieces.

More family fun

During this era, other studios also made small stabs toward family-oriented sci-fi: among the series of Don Knotts films Universal distributed in the 1960s was *The Reluctant Astronaut* (1967), in which the googly-eyed comedian gets launched into space; while Jerry Lewis's family-friendly *The Nutty Professor* (1963), sees the comedian transformed from geeky academic to the suave Buddy Love via a potion (the Eddie Murphy-starring 1996 remake and its 2000 sequel, on the other hand, are both solidly not-for-young-kids). By and large, however, non-Disney family-oriented science fiction of the 1960s was a bad proposition. One of the most infamous science fiction films of all time is a case in point: 1964's *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians*, in which the jolly red-suited elf wins over the little green men.

In the modern era, non-animated family-oriented science fiction films have not been incredibly successful, as mostly non-offensive action/sci-fi films like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), or comedy/sci-fi hybrids like the *Men In Black* series have siphoned off the family audience. In their wake have been modestly-budgeted and marketed films such as *Clockstoppers* (2002) and

Thunderbirds (2004), which are marketed to the “tween” audience of 8-to-12-year-olds. This market has been itself swamped recently by more fantastical (and successful) fantasy films, such as *Lemony Snicket's A Series Of Unfortunate Events* (2004) and the *Harry Potter* series – one of the stars of which was featured in the unusual science fiction family film *Thunderpants* (2002), in which a small boy's uncontrolled flatulence propels him (so to speak) into a series of adventures ... sounds hilarious, doesn't it?

Of course, this section would not be complete without those fun family favourites *Honey I Shrunk The Kids* (1989) and *Inspector Gadget* (1999), the latter being a kind of child-friendly version of *Robocop*.



The Nutty Professor

dir Jerry Lewis, 1963, US, 107m

A nerdish professor, tired of the single nerd life, concocts a potion that will turn him into a ladies' man. It does – but it also turns him into a jerk. Funny that. This is regarded by Lewis fans as his best movie, and it is, although as with any Lewis film, how much one enjoys it is predicated on one's tolerance for Lewis's sometimes grating persona. Remade in 2000 by Eddie Murphy, whose professor is both nerdy and fat, and whose film has rather more fart jokes.



The Reluctant Astronaut

dir Edward Montagne, 1967, US, 101m

TV star Don Knotts made a run at moderate film stardom in the 60s with a series of likable but forgettable flicks; this is one of them, in which he plays an amusement-park ride operator who unexpectedly finds himself being blasted into space as part of a space programme public relations stunt. In the end this movie offers little more than dated cheese, but it's hard to hate its goofy spirit.



Honey I Shrunk the Kids

dir Joe Johnston, 1989, US, 93m

This updating of the Disney's “absent-minded scientist” genre of films has an inventor coming up with a shrink ray and accidentally zapping his kids with it, allowing them to have lots of miniature family-friendly adventures. A surprise hit, and an inoffensive enough time at the movies. Naturally, for the next film in the series, a kid was puffed up to monster size.



Inspector Gadget

dir David Kellogg, 1999, US, 78m

Gadget (Matthew Broderick) is a cop and a Swiss army knife! This is the live-action version of the popular kids' cartoon show, in which a part-human, part-machine investigator solves crimes by creating any gadget he needs to do it out of his own body. The implications are terrifying to think about (talk about your *deus ex machina*), but the result here is eminently kid-friendly and loads of fun, and Broderick is probably the most appealing Swiss army knife ever.



Clockstoppers

dir Jonathan Frakes, 2002, US, 94m

A teen fools around with his scientist father's invention that stops time, but eventually has to rescue dad from the clutches of an industrialist who wants the invention. (The industrialist is named Gates. Subtle.) A perfectly serviceable action film for kids and pre-teens, with some cool stop-time effects, although anyone from the teenage years up will probably find something better to do with their time than this.



The Science: theories that fuel sci-fi



Jodie Foster in 1997's refreshing and scientifically accurate *Contact*

The Science: theories that fuel sci-fi

Yes, it's called science "fiction", but the real hardcore sci-fi fans are often up in arms about the misrepresentation of science on the movie screen. Though it may seem a little nerdy to labour the point, there is something to be said for their stance. And in terms of your own movie-going experience (and state of mind), it's worth knowing which apocalyptic terrors should have you questioning the amount of time you have left on Earth, and which should simply be dismissed as "bad science". The idea isn't to turn you into a cynical sci-fi geek; rather to give you a useful insight into the science of the big screen, which for many of us is bizarrely our primary point of contact with scientists and physicists of any sort.

In this chapter we will take a closer look at the relationship between real science in the laboratory of the real world and the science that we experience on the big screen. We will find out which films get things right and which films get things painfully wrong, and along the way discov-

er a little more about such subjects as time travel, space flight, the speed of light and aliens – basically, all those concepts the filmmakers would like us just to accept so that they can concentrate on wowing us with explosions and killer monsters from Mars.

Bad science

There are several legitimate reasons why science in the movies is often way off the mark. And why not; these films exist to entertain us rather than educate us.

The first point worth making is that science fiction films are inherently speculative. This is the

genre that gets to ask: what if aliens decided they wanted the planet (*The Arrival*, 1996)? What if robots walked among us (*I, Robot*, 2004)? What if you could travel back in time (*Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, 1989)? Expecting too much realism is bound to leave you disappointed.

A second point worth making is that science fiction films are rarely written by scientists. An exception to this rule, and it shows, is scientist **Arthur C. Clarke**, who co-wrote *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968; see Canon); another would be astronomer **Carl Sagan** who was actively involved in the film adaptation of his novel *Contact* (1997; see Canon). After these two, however, the scientists become thin on the ground. And screenwriters in general are more concerned with moving their stories forward than worrying if the science is plausible.

Thirdly, scientific accuracy is boring. Or rather, is mostly boring. The average moviegoer shelling out cash for his or her ticket would rather see six-foot-tall mutant spiders seek out and devour unsuspecting human victims than watch someone get a nasty rash because he stuck his finger into a hole where a tiny brown arachnid was living.

Even if one is perfectly willing to accept a certain amount of sloppy science for the sake of entertainment, it doesn't hurt to know when you're being reeled in by a flashy filmmaker who is banking on your lack of scientific knowledge to make his or her premise plausible. It's one thing to enjoy an intense laser duel on the silver screen; it's quite another thing to believe that in real life



Time travel by phone box in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* – what would The Doctor say?

The Core: magnetic mayhem

The Core (2003) is a brilliant case study of a film that doesn't let something as piddling as scientific accuracy get in the way of things like plot or special effects. Here's what happens: For reasons unknown (but probably related to a super-secret government science project), the core of the Earth has stopped spinning. Since it's the spinning of the core that creates the Earth's magnetic field, the field will totally collapse within a year – exposing the Earth to searing solar microwaves and ending life as we know it. And just so we know exactly how bad this would be the filmmakers present us with such ludicrous spectacles as the Colosseum in Rome being destroyed by intense lightning strikes

To combat this, a team of scientists (played by, among others, **Aaron Eckhart** and **Hilary Swank**) travel to the centre of the Earth in a ship made of an unbelievably strong alloy to withstand the immense pressure of the journey. Their goal is to kickstart the core using strategically placed nuclear bombs. Along the way the crew encounters challenges, which include crashing into a geode (a hollow chunk of rock with a crystalline inner surface) the size of a football stadium and being sideswiped by immense diamonds. Do they restart the Earth's core? Well, you're still here, aren't you? The major scientific problems in *The Core* (in no particular order) are:

- Much is made of keeping the problem with the Earth's core a secret, though anyone with a compass would be able to tell something was wrong.
- A change in the Earth's magnetic field isn't terribly scary; it's happened before – the Earth's magnetic field has decreased and even “flipped” its poles, most recently about 780,000 years ago.
- The film makes a big deal of the Earth's magnetic field protecting us from microwave radiation from the sun, which simply isn't true. The sun does emit microwaves, but not very much (most of the sun's electromagnetic radiation is thrown off in the form of visible

light), and certainly not enough to melt the Golden Gate Bridge, as happens in the movie.

- In the film, pigeons start smashing into things because their sense of direction (keyed to the earth's magnetic field) is out; one asks, is something wrong with their eyes too?
- Leaving aside the issue of a ship constructed of a super-useful, uncrushable alloy that doesn't exist (the filmmakers, in a nod to the ridiculousness of the alloy, call it “unobtanium”), when the ship crashes against and then falls into a massive geode, we have to ask: How does this geode exist? The pressures inside the Earth are hundreds of thousands of pounds per square inch. Anything made of rock and crystal should be crushed into as compact a space as possible.
- The core of the earth is a solid mass of iron only 30 percent smaller than the moon. The heroes of the movie intend to get that sort of mass spinning through the use of five nuclear bombs. Even five of the very largest nuclear bombs ever created would not impart nearly the sort of energy required to jump-start the Earth's core.



Spotting “bad science”

Here’s a good rule of thumb when you’re wondering if the “science” you’re seeing in a movie is real. Ask yourself “is it really pretty and/or really loud?” If the answer is “yes”, it’s probably bad science.

you can dodge a beam of light. Likewise, it’s fun to imagine that the Earth’s magnetic core might stop rotating, as in the recent shlock science fiction thriller *The Core* (see p.207), but if you’re actually staying up at night wondering if the centre of the Earth is going to affect your pacemaker (as it does in the film), you’re better off knowing a little bit of science.

Could that happen?

We’ve already taken a look at *The Core*, which was all over the shop when it comes to science, but there are several other scientific improbabilities and impossibilities that have become staples of science fiction; a whole host of movies just wouldn’t be the same without them.

Sound in space

This is one is simple to explain: sound is vibration. Vibration needs a medium in which to propagate, usually air. However, most space is a



The Arrival

dir David Twohy, 1996, US, 115m

A paranoid radio astronomer (Charlie Sheen) discovers a nefarious plan by heat-loving aliens to make Earth more comfortable for colonization by raising its temperature. Finally a logical explanation for global warming. Silly but competent, and it is one of those films that tries hard to deal in scientific realities.



Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure

dir Stephen Herek, 1989, US, 89m

Two dim but likable teenagers trip through time to finish a school project and end up bringing Socrates, Joan of Arc and Abraham Lincoln to modern-day San Dimas, California. Features many one-liners that were the favourites of slacker teen boys everywhere until Bill and Ted were superceded by Wayne and Garth in the early 90s. Don’t expect anything but stupidity and you’ll be entertained.

vacuum; in any random cubic metre of space you’ll find a few atoms of hydrogen or helium, but that’s not nearly enough to transmit sound. Once you’re above the atmosphere of a planet, the universe is silent.

All the noises you hear in science fiction movies, from the destruction of the Death Star in *Star Wars* to the sound of the USS *Enterprise* zooming into warp, are lies, plain and simple. The original *Alien* (see Canon) correctly noted in its posters that “In space, no one can hear you scream,” but even that film didn’t go so far as to mute the sound of Ripley’s ship, *The Nostromo*, detonating in the far regions of space. At least the

sound that is heard aboard the ship does much to amplify the isolation and disorientation of the characters' plight.

The convention is so widespread, in fact, that it's easier to note which films *don't* feature sound in space than it is to criticize all those that do. The most notable is *2001: A Space Odyssey* (see Canon), which is perhaps the gold standard for scientific authenticity. The spacecraft in this film glide through space silently (albeit accompanied by the strains of Strauss, which is one of the reasons director Stanley Kubrick could get away with it). It's worth noting, however, that its sequel, *2010*, did feature sound in space (just one of the ways in which it was inferior to the original).

Humanoid aliens

The universe is filled with aliens who – as luck would have it – are so close to humans in form that they look and act just like us, or have a genetic make-up close enough to ours that from time to time they'll happily procreate with humans, be they willing (say, in the various *Star Trek* films) or unwitting (*Species*, in which a genetically-designed half-breed quests for a mate). The “human” aliens are a staple right from the beginning of science fiction film: **Ming the Merciless** of the *Flash Gordon* serials is one early example, going through to the courtly **Klaatu** of *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, and the various humanoid creatures of the contemporary *Trek* and



A Klingon from *Star Trek*

Star Wars films, who have only a few cosmetic changes (usually head ridges or ears) to differentiate them from us Earthlings.

Even with the same body plan, no one confuses a human with a tiger or even with our closest genetic relations – apes. And that’s just here on Earth. Even if alien life evolved around the same vertebrate body plan, it would no more be likely to look like us than do our genetic cousins here at home.

The reasons films feature humanoid aliens are obvious. Firstly, for stories to work, these characters need to portray feelings and gestures that further the plot – not so easy when you look like a slice of lasagna. Also consider human history’s traditions of myth and fairy tale and the conventions that exist for the representation of demons and devils – such signifiers are often exploited in the creation of “good alien” and “bad alien” characters. And of course, for most of the history of cinema, it’s been easier to dress up a human actor in a head ridge than it’s been to create a truly convincing nonhuman alien. This is changing thanks to the advent of photorealistic computer-generated effects, which have opened up substantial visual possibilities for films. All that said, some filmmakers have on occasions made the effort to craft truly outlandish life-forms, a good example being 1958’s *The Crawling Eye*, with its creature that resembled, well, a crawling eye.



The Crawling Eye (aka The Trollenberg Terror) dir Quentin Lawrence, 1958, UK, 82m, b/w

Mountain climbers leave from the Swiss hamlet of Trollenberg but never return. Could it have something to do with the weird radioactive cloud slowly descending from the summit? This being a science fiction monster movie, that’s a good bet. This British production stands up fairly well over time, and has one of the most visually entertaining 50s science fiction monsters, given the American title of the film (which was adapted from a British TV series).



Species

dir Roger Donaldson, 1995, US, 108m

Just because aliens send you directions on how to splice their DNA with that of humans, doesn’t mean you have to do it. Alas, the scientists in this movie don’t think that far ahead, and end up with a seductive, half-human, half-evil alien “woman” out in the world, looking to mate. It was clearly meant to be scary, but it ends up being unintentionally funny.

Slow light

Fact: light and other electromagnetic radiation travels (in a vacuum) at 186,000 miles per second/300,000 km per second. It doesn’t go any faster, it doesn’t go any slower and, according to Einstein, it can’t.

And yet in space battles and shootouts, we regularly see our heroes dodging colorful laser bolts and shooting back slow-moving laser bolts of their own. The lasers of *Star Wars* and the phasers of *Star Trek* (as two obvious examples of a widespread problem) are not only slower than light, they’re slower than most conventional bullets. A more accurate way of showing a beam from a laser weapon would be a straight, constant line from the barrel of the weapon to the target; light moves so fast that if your target is within about a thousand miles, the beam is effectively on the goal instantaneously.

But would you even see the beam? The scientific answer is *no*. To illustrate the point, get a cheap laser pointer and aim it at a wall. You’ll see a dot on the wall, but you won’t see the actual beam unless the air around you has a lot of stuff in it – dust, fog, etc. This dust gives photons in the laser beam something to bounce off of (and into the path of your eye, allowing you to see).

Large movie monsters

Godzilla did it. The spiders in *Eight-Legged Freaks* (2002) did it. Even the toddler in *Honey, I Blew Up The Kid* (1992) did it: they all grew immensely big. But the fact is that physics keeps most creatures from getting too large.

One of the most overlooked details in growing animals large is what's known as the "Square-Cube Law", which states that squaring the size of an animal means the volume of the animal is cubed. This huge increase in volume presents a number of issues.

For example, let's say we made giant, elephant-sized grasshoppers, just like the ones that appeared in the 1957 not-so-classic *Beginning Of The End*, starring Peter Graves. In the film, the grasshoppers threaten to eat Chicago and most of its citizens. In real life, however, the poor grasshoppers would simply suffocate within minutes – grasshoppers, like all insects, breathe through a simple system of air tubes. These tubes work

fine when you're a couple of inches long but are incredibly inefficient for anything larger. And even if the grasshoppers could somehow breathe, they wouldn't be able to move; the grasshopper's spindly legs simply could not generate the force needed to propel the jumbo-sized bug. Immobile and suffocating, the grasshoppers would expire before ingesting anyone who did not willingly stuff themselves into the bug's mouth.

There would be no *Attack Of The 50 Foot Woman* (1958), because her muscles and bones simply could not support the weight. As for Godzilla, he'd be foolish to leave the water to attack Tokyo: water may be dense enough to support his immense mass (this is why whales are the largest creatures that ever existed), but the moment he lurched out of the liquid, he'd topple over, his bulk squeezing his lungs toward asphyxiation. It works in the other direction as well: shrinking a human to the size of a mouse would increase his risk of hypothermia, even on a sunny day.

Virtual worlds

You may think that as audiences got more sophisticated science fiction films would become smarter. But, thanks to special effects, filmmakers are merely getting better at explaining away the junk science.

The greatest example of this is the genre of virtual worlds – films whose bad science can be explained away because the action takes place within a computer (ie a fantasy world where the normal rules don't apply). The clear and obvious example of this, of course, is *The Matrix*, in which all manner of physical nonsense, from bullet-dodging to people morphing into evil agents, is genially explained away by the fact that the action happens in a computer system, whose rules

can be hacked to allow low-gravity and high-altitude kung-fu battles.

Other films play fast and loose with physics and logic thanks to computer simulations: *The Cell* (2000), in which **Jennifer Lopez** travels into the mind of a serial killer, with Hieronymous Bosch like results; *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), which posits an ersatz 1930s Los Angeles as a setting for a murder mystery; and **David Cronenberg's** *eXistenZ* (1999), released shortly after the first *Matrix* film, and whose weirdly biological video-game systems offer a slightly more humanist (and definitely more gooey) counterpart to the sterile confines of *The Matrix*.

**Them!**

dir Gordon Douglas, 1954, US, 94m, b/w

The film that answers the question: What do you get when you cross an A-bomb with a colony of ants? The answer: Large, radioactive man-eating ants. As ridiculous in the 1950s as today, but the script is refreshingly not stupid (at least as not stupid as a movie script about big ants can be), and in the end it's a classic of the "large radioactive insects from the 50s" genre.

**Eight-Legged Freaks**

dir Ellory Elkayem, 2002, US, 99m

Toxic waste turns the spiders of the dying town of Prosperity, Arizona, into behemoths the size of cars; naturally humans look like a tasty, high-protein snack. This film doesn't even pretend to take itself seriously, and it's this good-natured sense of humour that makes it more watchable than it should be. Also, cool spider effects.

Instant evolution

A staple of science fiction is the mutant, who gains special powers through a mutation, usually brought on by radiation or by some other form of toxicity. The mutation may occur to the individual directly (for example, in *Spider-Man*, 2002, in which **Peter Parker** takes on the qualities of a genetically-engineered spider), or it may be passed on from parents, who were exposed to the required toxins (see 1980's *Scanners*, in which mothers take a thalidomide-like drug that generates telekinetic abilities in their kids). Of course, some movies choose simply to assert that the process of evolution itself is responsible – the *X-Men* films blandly suggest that the multiple incidents of psychic-powered mutants can be attributed to the evolutionary process having "speeded up".

This is an example of science fiction makers using a plausible "scientific" explanation to cover up implausible plot elements. But like many

"scientific" explanations in movies, it relies on a misunderstanding of the theories it uses. Life on earth does indeed evolve through mutation, in which small errors or changes crop up in the DNA, and these can create a mutation in subsequent generations. What's sometimes left on the table is that most mutations *aren't* beneficial to their recipients, particularly as mutations occur in nature – randomly. A random fiddle with one's DNA is far more likely to hurt you than help you. Beneficial random mutation occurs far less frequently in the real world than in the cinematic one, and in the real world it doesn't happen *en masse*.

In any event, messing with your own DNA through radioactive or chemical means is likely

Jeff Goldblum and friend in *The Fly* (1986)

to end badly. Radiation in particular is known to create changes in DNA replication; unfortunately for most people who are exposed to this sort of thing, these changes exhibit themselves as cancers and/or a quick death. On occasion science fiction will show this end of genetic fiddling (memorably in the 1986 version of *The Fly*; see Canon) or playing with radiation (*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, 1982; see Canon). But, it's more often than not shown as an overall positive.



Scanners

dir David Cronenberg, 1980, Can, 103m

Scanners are mutant humans with the ability to read minds (and explode them); here they square off against each other, with one group planning to take over the world, and the other group hoping to stop them. The film features one of the most famous opening sequences in horror/SF history, with someone thinking so hard they pop! The rest of the movie doesn't quite reach those gory heights, but it's still a fine effort from director Cronenberg.



Spider-Man

dir Sam Raimi, 2002, US, 121m

Bitten by a radioactive spider, Peter Parker develops spider-like powers! And battles the evil Green Goblin! This film was both hugely successful and praised for balancing Spider-Man's super powers with Peter Parker's utter nerdishness; but repeated viewings show it's a little flat, drama-wise. Still, one of the best comic-book-based science fiction films out there.



X2: X-Men United

dir Bryan Singer, 2003, US, 133m

A mutant-hating general frames the mutants for a presidential assassination attempt as part of a plan to rid the planet entirely of their kind, causing the good and bad mutants to team together (at least momentarily) to stop him. This is one of the sequels that's better than the original – faster, tighter, and with more flair, even though it still has the residue of the original film's dour edge. Maybe for the next film they should bring back the colourful costumes.

Artificial intelligence

When sci-fi films aren't showing robots and computers as cold and logical machines, they're showing them as struggling to understand – and experience – human emotions. From the **Maschinen-Mensch** whipping men into a frenzy in *Metropolis* to **Robbie the Robot** wisecracking in *Forbidden Planet* to **C-3PO**, to the child-like androids of *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* and *D.A.R.Y.L.*, “emotional” robots and androids fascinate us.

But how close are we to this fiction becoming a reality? Not very. Modern-day computer systems can be trained to a limited extent to recognize human emotions – for example, a program designed at the Speech Analysis and Interpretation Laboratory in California recognizes when callers to an automated phone help line get angry and switches them from automated answers to a live person – and certainly one can program a computer or a robot to simulate particular emotions in certain defined situations. But a genuine emotional response from a computer or robot would hinge on self-awareness, and to date there have been no self-aware, truly “intelligent” machines.

Ironically, it is film's thirst for vast armies of clones or orcs (or whatever) that has led to the creation of some of the most advanced behaviour programs, which predicate an automatic response for each and every warrior depending on its situation. The most famous example of this is the “Massive” behaviour program employed by the animators at WETA Digital, who created the *Lord Of The Rings* fantasy series.

One of the great stories from the programmers about their virtual warrior seeming to show genuine intelligence came when some of these warriors, surveying the virtual carnage around them, turned tail and ran away from the battlefield! However, the programmers later discovered that this behaviour was actually the result of a programming glitch.

Faster than light travel

The universe is unimaginably vast, so huge that the nearest star system to our own is over 25 trillion miles away; even a beam of light (the fastest thing there is) takes more than four years to get from there to here. Science fiction gets around this issue by positing the idea of travelling faster than light. With this in mind, movie spacecraft are usually described as having “warp drives” that allow the ships to travel through “hyperspace” or “subspace” – two imaginary dimensions. Thus great interstellar distances are swallowed in days or even hours instead of years or even decades.

Faster than light travel makes the writer’s job a breeze, but physicists will tell you that going faster than light is easier said than done. In our current understanding of the universe, even getting to the speed of light within our universe is impossible – no matter how much energy you put into your engines, the “Theory of Relativity” says you’ll never reach it. Time will simply slow down so that the speed of light will always be impressively faster than you are. However, it is *theoretically* possible to get around this: in 1994 theoretical physicist **Miguel Alcubierre** suggested that it might be possible to create a space-time “wave” that compresses time and space in front of it and expands it behind; so by “surfing” ahead of this wave, a spacecraft might be able to travel great distances without running afoul of relativity. The catch is that no one knows how to generate such a space-time wave, and even if someone did, no one knows how to stop riding it once the destination is reached.

Another frequent cheat is the use of “wormholes” – tunnels in space-time which connect unimaginably distant portions of the galaxy by warping space by way of an intense amount of gravity. These sorts of wormholes were used in

Contact (1997) when heroine **Ellie Arroway** travelled to Vega, 25 light years away.

But for wormholes to exist they require the presence of “exotic matter” with “negative energy”, and none of that has been found. There’s also the problem that if wormholes really exist, they are rotating black holes, which is to say, collapsed stars with a gravity field so intense not even light can escape – unlike the black hole of Disney’s 1979 movie of the same name, which seemed to have only a fraction more sucking power than a plug hole clogged with hair.

Since real black holes would voraciously devour anything that gets too close to them, using one to zip around the universe is inherently fraught with danger.



The Black Hole

dir David Cronenberg, 1979, US, 98m

This was Disney’s first PG-rated film; it features a mad Captain Nemo-esque bad guy in a starship at the edge of a black hole. It’s gorgeous to look at, but deeply flawed in the story department, and is all too clearly an attempt to cash in on the *Star Wars* phenomenon. Watch it with the sound down; it’s better that way.

Time travel

Time travel is the central plot device in dozens of science fiction films. Sometimes it is achieved through technology, as in the *Terminator* movies, the *Back To The Future* series and, well, *The Time Machine* (1960). At other times it happens by accident, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* (1972).

And time travel does happen – we’re all doing it now, since we’re moving forward in time every second of the day. Moreover, time travel into the far future is easy to do, at least in theory: just put yourself on a spaceship that is moving close to



Dr. Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd) trying to get
Back To The Future

the speed of light. The closer you get to the speed of light, the slower time moves for you (relative to where you started). Depending on how fast you go, you could return to Earth and while you've hardly aged, decades or centuries will have passed back home.

It's travelling *back* in time that causes problems. Just as time slows down the closer you get to the speed of light, if you could exceed the speed of light, in theory you'd be moving backwards in time – of course, as we've already said, you can't go faster than the speed of light.

A possible loophole to this problem exists with an object we've already met: the wormhole. Some wormhole theorists believe time travel could be possible through wormholes thanks to a process known as "relativistic time dilation". Aside from the already discussed problems involving wormholes, however, other theorists believe pulling this sort of time-travel stunt would cause a wormhole to collapse in a feedback loop of virtual particles.



Slaughterhouse Five

dir George Roy Hill, 1972, US, 104m

An illustrative example of how an acknowledged classic – in this case the Kurt Vonnegut novel – won't necessarily translate entirely successfully to film. The story features a man who becomes "unglued" in time and moves back and forth in it. It's this "unglued" aspect that makes the film hard to follow, and as a result the emotional resonance of the novel falls flat.



Time After Time

dir Nicholas Meyer, 1979, US, 112m

This clever time-travel film has H.G. Wells (Malcolm McDowell) in possession of a time machine, and using it to travel to (then) modern-day San Francisco to track down a temporally unleashed Jack the Ripper. He also gets sidetracked into a romance with a curious banker (Mary Steenburgen). A fun revision on the standard time-tripping tale, with moments of menace from Jack (David Warner).

**The Time Machine**

dir George Pal, 1960, US, 103m

One of the rare films that stays reasonably close to its source material (in this case, the 1895 novel by H.G. Wells). Taylor travels forward 800,000 years to a time when humans have broken off into innocent Eloi and brutish Morlocks. The effects are dated but the film still excites. The 2002 version (directed by Wells's distant relation Simon Wells) offers better special effects and Eloi that aren't such wimps, but is otherwise not nearly as good.

**Timeline**

dir Richard Donner, 2003, US, 116m

A Michael Crichton based time-travelling pot-boiler, in which archeology students travel back to 14th-century France to retrieve their lost professor. Donner, normally a reliable action director, makes a mess of things here; the action is as muddy as the peasants.

Teleportation

Teleportation, as it usually works in science fiction, breaks down an object in one place, turns it into a stream of energy, and reassembles it somewhere else. The refrain “Beam me up, Scotty” is known all through science fiction (although never actually spoken in any of the *Star Trek* films), and teleportation plays a critical role in both versions of *The Fly* (1958 and 1986). Its close cousin, digitization, is what sucks a computer programmer (Jeff Bridges) into a mainframe in *Tron* (1982; see Canon) to battle an evil operating system. On a lighter note, the consequences of poor teleportation offer a comic highlight in the sci-fi parody *Galaxy Quest* (1999).

Believe it or not, teleportation has already been recorded in the form of “quantum teleportation”, where the quantum state of

one atom was transferred to another atom some distance away, utilizing a weird facet of quantum physics known as “entanglement”, which allows two atoms to affect each other no matter how far apart they are (**Einstein** hated this; he called it “spooky action at a distance”). The first of these experiments occurred at the University of Innsbruck in 1997, with others following. The amounts of matter involved were infinitesimally small – a few atoms – so don't expect to get beamed up any time soon.

**Galaxy Quest**

dir Dean Parisot, 1999, US, 102m

This clever parody of the *Star Trek* phenomenon has Tim Allen as the Shatner-like star of a cancelled sci-fi show who is transported into space with his fellow actors by aliens who crave their help and don't realise they're just actors. Every SF fan who's rolled his or her eyes at the bad physics of science fiction gets their retributive chuckles here as the actors deal with the “real-world” effects of plot inconsistencies.



Better science

On occasion science fiction films will make scientific accuracy integral to the plot. Two fine examples of this we've already mentioned in this chapter: *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Contact*, both of which nailed the “mundane” science of their stories.

2001's famous “Blue Danube” scene (in which a commercial spacecraft docks with a space station) is a masterpiece in real-world physics, as the passengers and crew deal with the little details of weightlessness; the later trip to Jupiter by the astronauts of *The Discovery* is shown not as a quick jaunt to a nearby planet but as an arduous and tedious journey. In *Contact* (1997; see Canon), the search for extraterrestrial intelligence is shown as real scientists do it: in nondescript rooms, using off-the-shelf computers hooked into radio telescopes, methodically checking off radio sources.

Films can also somewhat responsibly posit near-future technology based on the technology that existed at the time the film was made. While making his 1988 underwater adventure *The Abyss* (1988), director James Cameron worked with engineering firm **Western Space & Marine** to build the “next-generation” underwater dive helmets featured in the film, all of which had to be fully functional, since much of the movie was filmed underwater and Cameron himself would be using the helmet to direct underwater. The film also features a “fluid breathing system” – an oxygenated liquid replaces air to keep divers from suffering from compression in the crushing depths of the ocean. The technology for this existed before the movie, although it hadn't been tested on humans. But you can see it in action in



Jodie Foster in *Contact*

the film itself: in one scene a rat is dumped into a container of oxygenated fluid and starts breathing the stuff. It's not a special effect (although maybe it should have been; Cameron was criticized by animal-rights activists for traumatizing the rat).



The Abyss

dir James Cameron, 1988, US, 146m

Ed Harris plays the leader of an underwater oil-rig crew who help the Navy find a sunken sub; along the way they see aliens, and complications ensue. The original theatrical version had great effects and technology but a less than great story; an expanded DVD release of the film clears things up quite a bit. Aside from the great tech, one of Cameron's lesser efforts.

What the movies missed

It's also fun to look at the things we have that most science fiction films completely missed: the Internet, most prominently. Before the rise of the Net in the mid- and late 90s, most worldwide computer networks in movies were the province of the computers themselves, and the few military technicians that serviced them. And they were prone to attempt destroying humanity, either in simulation (*War Games*, 1983) or through methodical intent (the *Terminator* films).

The irony here is that the Internet was originally a military computer system with a decentralized structure that would allow it to continue working after a nuclear attack – its original intent was much more in line with the science fiction movies than the reality of the Net as it exists today. It's proof that despite science fiction's fantastic attempts to view the future, some innovations will still sneak up on us.



War Games

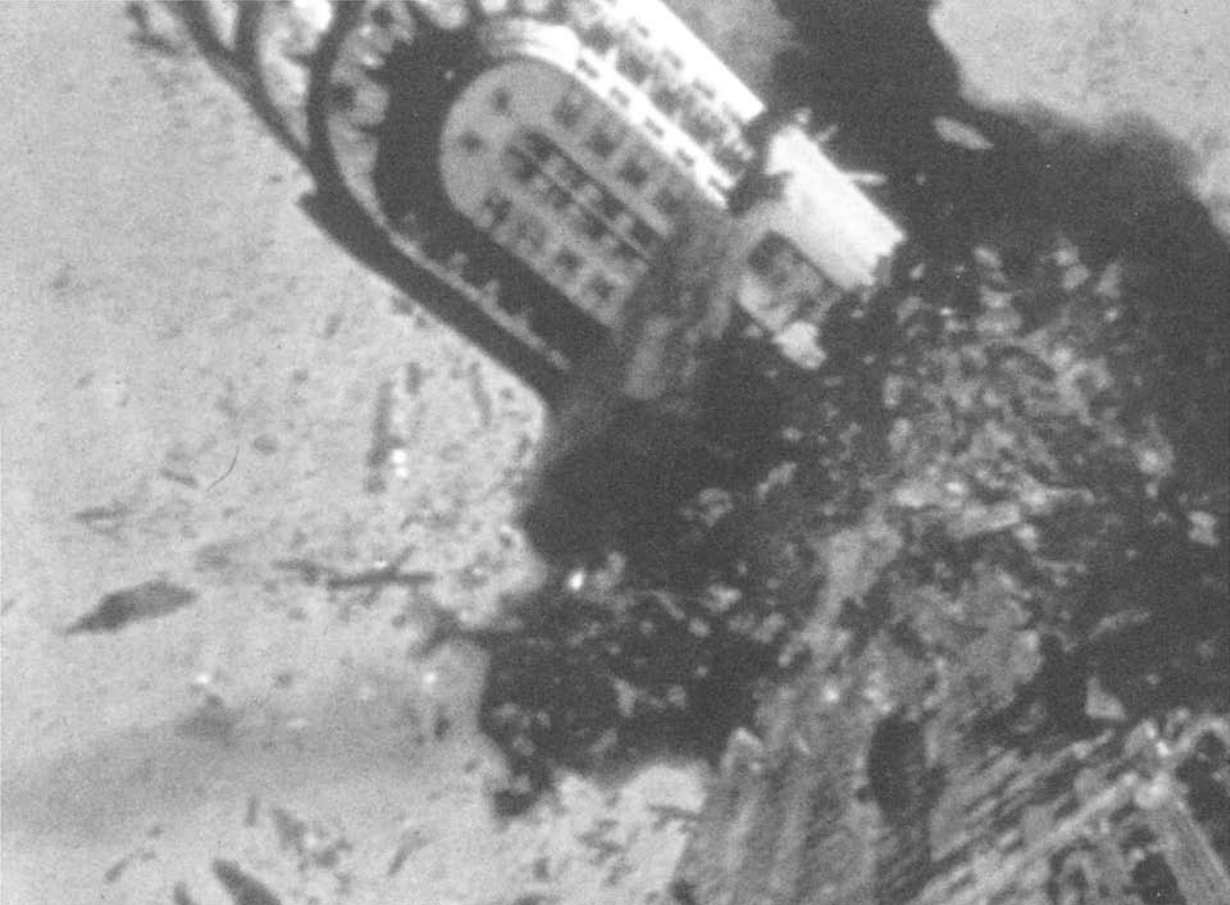
dir John Badham, 1983, US, 114m

The film's hero (played by Matthew Broderick) is a hacking school-kid trying to play online games. When he stumbles across a game named "global thermonuclear war" and America's computerized defenses respond to what looks like a Russian attack, all hell breaks loose. Both the story and the hardware now seem dated, but Broderick does OK and there are plenty of worse ways to spend 114 minutes.

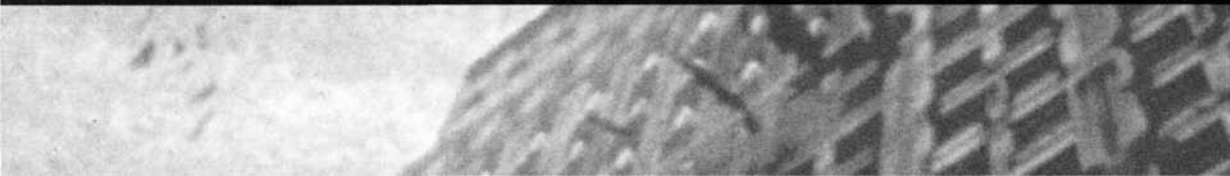
From fiction to science

Beyond intentional stabs at scientific and technical accuracy, science fiction filmmakers frequently imagine technologies and advancements that inexorably come true:

- **Videophones** (see *2001*, *Blade Runner*, and too many others to count)
- **Moon landings** (*Destination Moon*)
- **Genetic engineering** (*The Island Of Dr. Moreau*)
- **Robot pets** (*Sleeper*)
- **Rocket launch countdowns** (*Frau im Mond*, aka *The Woman In The Moon*)
- **Hand-held computers** (*Star Trek*)
- **Injectable birth control** (a throwaway line in *Robocop* presaged Depo-Provera)
- **Reality television** (*The Running Man* is only a slightly amped-up version of *Gladiators*)



The Locations: star tours





New York's Chrysler Building toppled by an asteroid in *Armageddon* (1998)

The Locations: star tours

Science fiction stories have to happen somewhere – whether that place is a real location here on Earth, or some planet in a galaxy far, far away. Equally, films have to get made somewhere. In this chapter, we look at where science fiction films are physically made here on Earth, when the director starts the cameras rolling. Then we'll look at how some well-known places have been portrayed in science fiction: which cities you'd want to hang out in if you were an alien visitor, for example, and which cities to avoid if you're not fond of monster attacks. We'll also look at some of the most notable worlds of science fiction – from the tourist's point of view.

Where the sci-fi films get made

Science fiction is an important part of a movie studio's film production slate – but it's not so special that its production is handled substantially differently from the productions of other film genres. Science fiction films share the same studios and largely the same filmmaking talent pools as other films.

There are some genre-specific adjustments though: for example, science fiction films tend to rely on special-effects filmmakers more than most drama productions. Despite these minor differences, sci-fi films are largely made in the same places that other films get made. Over the next few pages we'll take a look at some of the

established locations for major-studio science fiction film production – as well as some emerging production centres.

California

One relatively little-known fact about the United States film industry is that the first major centre of American filmmaking was in New York and New Jersey – in no small part due to the fact that **Thomas Edison**, who had developed a practical motion-picture camera in the late 1880s, was stationed in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

But from around 1910, filmmakers started moving west, in part to take advantage of southern California's more temperate climate (which



Thomas Edison posing for the moving camera

Hollywood's home town

it's also worth noting that while the United States film industry is known collectively as "Hollywood", very little of the industry is currently located in that Los Angeles-area town. The Walt Disney Studios, for example, are in Burbank; Universal Studios is located in Universal City; Paramount Pictures is in Los Angeles proper.

allowed for year-round outdoor filmmaking) but also to get out from under the eye of "The Trust" – more accurately known as the **Motion Picture Patents Company** – which consisted of Edison and other early film patent-holders who were trying to keep a monopoly on the emerging (and profitable) art form. In a very real sense, Hollywood was founded by "outlaws" – former film exhibitors who became film producers when they felt The Trust was putting a squeeze on the availability of films to show in their theatres and nickelodeons.

These mavericks included **Carl Laemmle**, whose Independent Motion Picture Company would eventually morph into Universal Pictures, and **Adolph Zukor**, whose Famous Players Studio would become Paramount Pictures. In 1915, the US courts ruled that The Trust was illegally monopolizing the film industry – the Hollywood "studio system" was soon on the rise. And so, there is some irony that today's

movie studios are obsessed with piracy, considering that a number of these studios were founded by entrepreneurs who could have been considered the “pirates” of their time.

Today’s movie studios are dramatically different from the movie studios when they were at their height in the 1930s and 1940s: most are now part of a larger corporate structure (Universal, for example, is owned by conglomerate **General Electric**, while Paramount is an arm of entertainment giant **Viacom**), and the studio system of placing actors and directors under exclusive contract to one studio has been replaced by a set-up in which actors, directors and other filmmakers offer their services from film project to film project. What has remained, however, is California’s filmmaking infrastructure, including the actual studios in which individual films are made, and the critical mass of “under the line” filmmaking professionals – camera operators, gaffers, editors, wardrobe designers and so on – who are critical to the filmmaking process.

Most early and “golden age” Hollywood science fiction films were filmed in the same Los Angeles–area studios as other films. Indeed, in the case of the *Flash Gordon* serials (see Canon), they shared actual *sets* with other films as well – the set designers “borrowed” set pieces from more famous Universal pictures as a cost-saving measure.

A large chunk of science fiction film production continues in the Los Angeles area to this day, even when the films themselves are set in other locations: the *Spider-Man* and *Men In Black* films, for example, are set in New York City, but much of the filming took place on the Sony Pictures Studio lot in Culver City.

While much of the film industry continues to be located in California, not all of it is confined to the Los Angeles area. The spiritual home of modern-day special effects is in San

Rafael, near San Francisco, where ground-breaking special-effects house **Industrial Light and Magic** is based, along with the other divisions of **Lucasfilm**, science fiction master George Lucas’s personal film studio. Likewise, San Francisco suburb Emeryville is home to computer-animation giant **Pixar** (which was once part of the Lucas empire, until it was bought by Apple Computer founder **Steve Jobs**), whose films *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) and *The Incredibles* (2004; see Canon) are both solidly in the science fiction film camp.



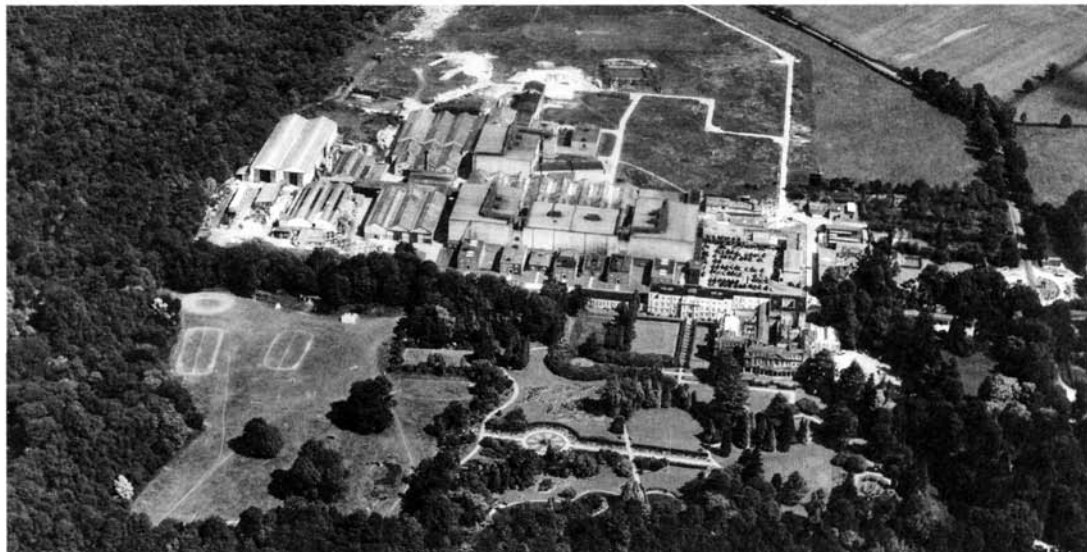
Monsters, Inc.

dir Peter Doctor, 2001, US, 92m

Remember the monsters that lived under your bed when you were a kid? Well, this film is all about them – just doing their job, gathering screams to fuel their hometown’s energy needs. This typically wonderful Pixar film imagines the everyday life of the monsters in their world, and the havoc it wreaks when a child gets loose in it; the film throws in references to everyone from animation legend Chuck Jones to Ray Harryhausen. Definitely the funniest monster film ever, and simply one of the best.

The UK

The UK remains important in terms of the quality and quantity of significant science fiction films produced within its borders. Most emerge from two studios on the outskirts of London: **Pinewood** and **Shepperton**. These two studios have been in continuous operation since the 1930s (except during WWII, when no movies were produced at Shepperton, and Pinewood was used to make military films). Between them they have been home to more than 1700 films and television shows since the two studios opened their doors in the 1930s; aside from such UK classics as *Fahrenheit 451* (1966). Most famously,



Pinewood Studios

the *James Bond* films have historically been produced at Pinewood, whose largest studio is known as the “007 Stage”.

These studios have also been a favourite location for the big US names, due to the depth of UK filmmaking experience and also the relative inexpensiveness of filming in the UK.

At Pinewood, significant science fiction pictures have included the *Superman* films (1978 onward), *Aliens* (1986) and *Alien³* (1992), the 2001 remake of *Planet Of The Apes*, and 2004’s *The Chronicles Of Riddick*. Shepperton’s roster of films is no less memorable, having included *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976), *Alien* (1979), *The Bride* (1985), *Lost In Space* (1998), and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy* (2005).

Another UK studio vital to science fiction is **Elstree**, where George Lucas filmed the majority of

the first *Star Wars* trilogy (see Canon), films whose UK roots are amply in evidence with the presence of UK actors such as **Anthony Daniels** (C-3PO), **David Prowse** (Darth Vader), **Peter Mayhew** (Chewbacca), and of course **Peter Cushing** and **Alec Guinness**. Portions of the second *Star Wars* trilogy were also filmed there.



The Man Who Fell To Earth

dir **Nicholas Roeg**, 1976, UK, 138m

David Bowie in one of his best roles, plays an alien who comes to Earth with a plan to save his parched home planet, but then gets tripped up by our planet’s special brand of temptations. Though at times incoherent, this is in many ways a very sad film – here’s a guy with literally the weight of a world on his shoulders, confounded by simple things. As you might expect, the soundtrack is great, though the music penned by Bowie for the flick was never used.

**Lost In Space**

dir Stephen Hopkins, 1998, US, 130m

The cheesy 60s sci-fi show about a family lost – as advertised – in space, is recycled into an equally cheesy 90s film which attempts seriousness by having everyone wear darker clothes and wander around better-produced special effects. This film isn't offensively bad, but it's not good.

**The Chronicles Of Riddick**

dir David Twohy, 2004, US, 119m

Director David Twohy apparently feared he'd never get to direct another film, because he stuffed this poor film with enough plot points for three films, assuring that none of it would actually make sense. All you get out of this bloated sequel to the much leaner and enjoyable *Pitch Black* is the idea that hunky Vin Diesel sure does love posing and looking cool. Too bad the story doesn't justify the strut.

Bowie as *The Man Who Fell To Earth*

Canada

During the 80s and 90s, US film studios sent a substantial number of major productions north of the border, to take advantage of the relative weakness of the Canadian dollar as well as the tax breaks the Canadian government gave to filmmakers for working in Canada.

Canada's major cities also make for convenient substitutions for American cities, Toronto in particular substituting for every American city from Pittsburgh to New York.

Recent science fiction films made partially or completely in Canada include the *Fantastic Four* (2005), *I, Robot* (2004), the *X-Men* films (2000 and 2003), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), *The Core* (2002), *Frequency* (2000) and *The Adventures Of Pluto Nash* (2002). Director **David Cronenberg**, a Canadian, also frequently films in his home country, where he made, for example, *eXistenZ* (1999).

**Frequency**

dir Gregory Hoblit, 2000, US, 118m

Sunspots and Northern Lights conspire to allow a man in 1999 to talk to his dad on a ham radio – despite the fact that his dad has been dead for thirty years. This naturally sets the stage for an intriguing look at time-travel paradoxes, combined with the additional family drama of what goes on between a father and son. Surprisingly effective in places, this is one science fiction film that slipped in under the radar.

**Resident Evil: Apocalypse**

dir Alexander Witt, 2004, US, 94m

Science fiction movies based on video games are generally terrible; movies based on movies based on video games qualify as torture – at least this one does anyway. It's loud and there's loads of zombie-shootin' action, and if you can follow what passes for the plot, you're doing better than the screenwriter. Avoid.



Fantastic Four

dir Tim Story, 2005, US, 123m

Another superhero film featuring characters from the Marvel stable. Four astronauts are exposed to cosmic radiation and before you know it they have superpowers and find themselves battling the evil Doctor Doom. As you might expect there are loads of effects, explosions and wow moments.

Australia

Australia's home-grown science fiction made an impact in the 1980s with the *Mad Max* trilogy of films, but science fiction production down under got a serious boost with the creation of Fox Studios Australia (the film company the studio is associated with, 20th Century-Fox, is owned by the News Corporation, owned by Australian native Rupert Murdoch). Since its founding in 1998, some of the most financially successful science fiction films of the last decade have been made there, including all three *Matrix* films and the last two films of the second *Star Wars* trilogy.

Reaching back further in time, portions of 1959's *On The Beach* (see Canon) were filmed in Melbourne. Two other science fiction films of recent vintage shot in Australia were Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998), a tribute to Fritz Lang and *film noir*, and *Pitch Black* (1999).



Pitch Black

dir David Twohy, 1999, US, 110m

This cheap and gritty science fiction actioner has a group of space travellers stranded on a planet filled with nasty, human-eating alien critters, and a whacked-out, goggle-wearing serial killer (Diesel, in his star-making role). Fast, effective and fun, it's watchable enough that you forgive it for spawning the totally forgettable and lame sequel *The Chronicles Of Riddick*.

Eastern Europe

In recent times, production sites such as Canada, the UK and Australia have become incrementally more expensive places to film; as a result, many of the big-name science fiction film producers from the States are looking further east. The former communist bloc features a talented filmmaking community at near rock-bottom prices, although that will no doubt change as time goes by.

Science fiction films completely or partially filmed there include *Blade 2* (2002), *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), *Hellboy* (2004), *Alien Vs Predator* (2004) and *Doom* (2005).



League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen

dir Stephen Norrington, 2003, US, 110m

A film that combines the extraordinary talents of several adventurous 19th-century literary characters, from Allan Quatermain to Tom Sawyer (and all in the public domain) to fight a bad guy aiming to start a world war. Would that they had spent the money they saved by using these characters on the script. As it is, this movie makes no sense, but at least it looks nice, and you get the feeling by the end you should read one of the books the characters featured in to see what they are supposed to be like.



Hellboy

dir Guillermo del Toro, 2004, US, 122m

Those damn Nazis – aided by Rasputin, of all people – are trying to open a portal to another dimension where the demons are kept, and its up to a 7-foot, red hellspawn to keep that from happening. This flick is skewed rather more toward fantasy than straight-ahead science fiction, but there are some great sci-fi moments (such as a clockwork enemy) that qualify it for recommendation in this book.



Doom

dir Andrzej Bartkowiak, 2005, US

Yet another science fiction movie based on a video game of the same name. The plot basically involves soldiers and mutants beating the hell out of each other on a far-flung planet (Olduvai). Don't expect this to be the next *2001*.

Sci-fi's favourite settings

Science fiction films have stories that can take place anywhere in the universe, but as a practical matter, quite a few science fiction films take place here on planet Earth. As with any film, filmmakers set a premium on locations that can give a true sense of place to their audience – and that often means placing the action in some of the world's best-known cities. Here are some frequent settings for science fiction films.

Arctic/Antarctic

Underneath the ice seems to be a perfect place for aliens to bide their time. Defrosted aliens appear in *The Thing From Another World* (1951, see Canon) and *The Thing* (1982) and both times threaten the residents of an isolated base. Arctic ice is also good for keeping humans chilled out

– 1984's *Iceman* features a prehistoric man frozen alive for thousands of years, then defrosted into the bewildering 20th century. Frozen wastes also make excellent hiding places for circumspect aliens: in *Alien Vs Predator* (2004) an archeological team heads to Antarctica and unearths a battle-ground filled with alien species from better films. TV spin-off film *X-Files: Fight The Future* (1998), meanwhile, required Agent Mulder (David Duchovny) to trek to the southernmost continent to rescue his partner Scully (Gillian Anderson) from an alien menace.



X-Files: Fight The Future

dir Rob Bowman, 1998, US, 121m

The alien-hunting FBI agents of the cult 90s TV series do more of the same in their first (and currently only) full-length movie. This is not a film for *X-File* novices – it's steeped in the show's lore and without it, frankly, the movie is a bit of an incomprehensible bore.



Scientists unearth a frozen flying saucer in *The Thing From Another World*

Australia/New Zealand

Australia's outlaw spirit is amply played up in the three *Mad Max* films, the third of which, 1995's *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, features a long visual passage in which the crumbling remains of Sydney are shown (the city having long fallen after a nuclear war). Ironically, however, it could be argued that Australia's most successful science fiction export was not *Mad Max* but *Young Einstein* (1989), the alternate-reality comedy in which **Albert Einstein** was born in Australia, conducted experiments with beer and invented the electric guitar – the film was written, directed and starred **Yahoo Serious**, and grossed over 100 million dollars worldwide.

The wide-open spaces of Australia's outback have served as backdrop to a number of more obscure science fiction films, including *The Time Guardian* (1987; notable for featuring *Star Wars* actress **Carrie Fisher**) and the ecologically-minded *Epsilon* (aka *Alien Visitor*, 1997). Australia's antipodean neighbour New Zealand is best represented in science fiction by director **Peter Jackson**'s memorably messy debut film, *Bad Taste* (1987), in which aliens happily turn Kiwis into fast food.



Bad Taste

dir **Peter Jackson**, 1987, NZ, 91m

Aliens turn the citizens of a small town into chum for their intergalactic fast-food concern. Blood and gore and comedy abound. Not the usual first film from a future Oscar-winning director, but then nothing about *Lord Of The Rings* director Peter Jackson seems remotely normal anyway, and as a pure, homegrown, gross-out sci-fi splatter fest (Jackson made it over five years, working weekends, with basically whatever loose change he had around the house), it can't be beat.

London

For those poor souls who live in the London of science fiction film, life holds two fates: dystopian and usually dysfunctionally totalitarian regimes, or the risk of being utterly wiped out. One way or the other, it's not particularly cheerful.

On the dystopian London front, there is most memorably *A Clockwork Orange* (1971; see Canon), **Stanley Kubrick**'s scathing interpretation of the **Anthony Burgess** novel, with **Malcolm McDowell** terrorizing people with his white jump-suited droogs.

Brazil (1986; see Canon) is almost equally memorable, with its view of future British totalitarianism aided and abetted by numbing bureaucratic tedium, and the mind-crushing implications for anyone – including the bureaucrats – who try to get around the process. And not forgetting the all-too-frequently overlooked *1984*, released in its eponymous year, which chillingly and accurately re-creates **George Orwell**'s



Quatermass finds more than he bargains for on the London Underground

depressing vision of Britain (aka “Airstrip One”) locked in eternal, ideologically motivated warfare against outside enemies and its own people.

On the other side of the coin is *Day Of The Triffids* (1962), in which not only is London burning, but most of its population is blind from a radioactive meteor shower and prey for ambulatory, carnivorous plants. Two decades later, *Lifeforce* (1985) would find London under siege from space vampires(!) and quarantined off from the rest of England – even the Prime Minister is stuck in town.

More recently, the nominally sci-fi-tinged adventure *Reign Of Fire* (2002) features dragons awakened by construction on the London Underground, while 1967’s *Quatermass And The Pit* also features The Tube in a key plot role. Most recently and most vividly *28 Days Later...* (2002; see Canon) imagines London and the rest of the UK hollowed out by a fast-moving virus that turns people into crazed killing machines – a real problem for the folk who have managed to avoid catching the disease.

Outside of the limits of London, things aren’t notably cheerier. 1936’s *Things To Come* (see Canon), with a screenplay by H.G. Wells from his own novel, has an English “everytown” under siege of war in the first third of the film, living in post-apocalyptic squalor in the second third, and threatened by Luddite masses in the final third.

1960’s *Village Of The Damned* has the tidy town of Midwich thrown into turmoil when every breeding-age woman mysteriously becomes pregnant; the blonde-haired, creepy offspring that result are not exactly full of sweetness. And in 2005’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy* a few early moments of amusement in a West Country village are spoilt by the complete destruction of the planet Earth.



The Day Of The Triffids

dir Steve Sekely, 1962, UK, 93m

A radioactive meteor shower has blinded most of Britain, making them helpless snackin’ for the triffids. This is a silly film which played rather fast and loose with its source material and is best seen these days as a historical document of when filmmakers believed people would be frightened of plants – the 1981 BBC-TV series is far better, and stays much closer to the original John Wyndham story.



Quatermass And The Pit

dir Ward Baker, 1967, UK, 97m

The Quatermass films (from the Hammer film studios, and based on a set of British TV shows), have long been hardcore SF fan cult favourites, and this flick, in which Martian insects may or may not be the key to human consciousness, is arguably the best of the four. It has a smart and intricate plot and satisfyingly creepy moments.



1984

dir Michael Radford, 1984, UK, 113m

It would have been a “thoughtcrime” had the year 1984 managed to get by without a film adaptation of Orwell’s epochal dystopian novel, so this film gets points simply for being in the right place at the right time. As a side benefit, it’s actually an excellent movie version of Orwell’s tale, with John Hurt perfectly cast as the reluctant rebel, Winston Smith, and Richard Burton, in his last film role, as the mournful O’Brien. There are better dystopian films (*A Clockwork Orange* and *Brazil* spring to mind), but this film has absolutely nothing to be ashamed of.



Lifeforce

dir Tobe Hooper, 1985, UK, 116m

Best known today as the film in which actress Mathilda May walks through completely naked, thereby obviating the need for the mostly male, mostly young, audience to pay any sort of attention to the plot, which was some nonsensical thing involving space vampires attempting to devour most of the population of London. Two decades later, the naked May remains the best thing about the film, although it does have some creepy visual style.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles's self-image as a sun-kissed paradise of happy people and cars makes it fertile ground for science fiction films to throw things into reverse. The most indelible future image of Los Angeles was provided by *Blade Runner* (1982; see Canon), in which the sun-kissed city was reimagined, sealed in rainy darkness. It's so unlike present-day Los Angeles that it is quite simply a shock to contemplate. Since *Blade Runner*, other filmmakers have provided variations of a future Los Angeles to varying levels of effectiveness: **John Carpenter's** *Escape From LA* (1996) made it a West Coast outlaw counterpart to the New York he imagined in *Escape From New York* (1981), the difference being that in LA, the citizen still found time to surf. Director **Kathryn Bigelow's** near-future (now past, since it was set in 1999) *Strange Days* (1995) did not dramatically overhaul LA, but put it in a distinctly sinister light, down to the muted blues and grays of its colour scheme.

Los Angeles also frequently finds itself cast as a magnet for unsavoury aliens: the 1953 *War Of The Worlds* movie has the Martian invaders paying LA a visit; while the sublimely bad *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959), directed by famed bad-movie director **Ed Wood**, has aliens planning to take over the world by raising the dead from a graveyard in Hollywood. Aliens drop in on LA for a little urban-jungle hunting in *Predator 2* (1990), while in *The Hidden* (1987) an alien criminal borrows human bodies to go on a series of terrifying crime sprees – and eventually announces he'd like to run for President (as they say, only in LA). In *Species* (1995), a half-alien woman comes to LA to breed – a natural destination, because she looks like your typical blonde starlet. And we can't neglect the *Terminator* series, in which time-travelling robots repeatedly bang up LA.

A few films, however, do play up LA's reputation for fun and sun. In *Earth Girls Are Easy* (1988), three furry, day-glo aliens crash-land in a Valley girl's pool; once shaved, they set out on a series of dizzy-headed adventures that are right at home in Southern California. *Galaxy Quest* (1999), meanwhile, features aliens disguised as fans at an LA sci-fi convention, where their odd social tics don't stand out. And one of the best parodies of the LA outlook has to be from the otherwise not very good *Demolition Man* (1993), in which a future Southern California is posited as a relaxing, violence-free New Age totalitarian state, in which all the restaurants are *Taco Bells*, and **Arnold Schwarzenegger** becomes President after the Constitution is amended to allow him to run. Not that that could ever happen.



Plan 9 From Outer Space

dir **Ed Wood**, 1959, US, 79m, b/w

This movie is widely regarded as the worst film ever made, which makes it perfect for campy enjoyment. "Plan 9" is a scheme by aliens to take over the Earth by resurrecting the dead. Unbelievably bad. This is also the last film to feature **Bela Lugosi**, who died while the film was in production; his part was taken over by a chiropractor who simply held a cape up to his face.



Earth Girls Are Easy

dir **Julien Temple**, 1988, US, 100m

This is a very silly movie, but it knows it, and it's hard not to be carried along. The film is notable for a pre-stardom role for **Jim Carrey**, whose character's foot-long tongue makes him a smash with the girls.



Demolition Man

dir **Marco Brambilla**, 1993, US, 110m

Weird combination of stupid Stallone action film and reasonably clever sci-fi satire. It shouldn't work and yet it does, mostly, as Stallone is game for his own comedic humiliation. **Wesley Snipes** as his homicidal nemesis is fun, too. And check out **Sandra Bullock** in an early role.



Strange Days

dir Kathryn Bigelow, 1995, US, 145m

Ralph Fiennes is a former LA cop, addicted to a virtual reality set-up, who accidentally uncovers a cop cover-up in the days before the turn of the millennium. At two and a half hours, this movie is a bit too long and unfocused, but nevertheless fascinating.

New York City

With the exception of Tokyo – a special case, to which we'll come in a moment – science fiction's favourite big-city destination is The Big Apple. Its attractions are many: it's perhaps the world's most polygot city, with citizens who come from all over the world. Thus, it's a natural place for the hard-working alien who just wants to blend in, as they do in *Men In Black* (1997) and *Men In Black 2* (2002); or for one who is on the run, as

in *Brother From Another Planet* (1984; see Canon). And the city's extensive subterranean warren of tunnels and subways is perfect for breeding mutants, whether they are humans twisted by toxic waste (*C.H.U.D.*, 1984) or genetically engineered insects (*Mimic*, 1997).

And when you need a city to stand in as a representative of urban decay, class stratification and overpopulation, NYC has got you covered, as *Judge Dredd* (1995) and *Soylent Green* (1973) were happy to remind us. And should the urban decay go too far, remember: Manhattan is an island, and will make a fabulous prison (*Escape From New York*, 1981; see Canon).

New York – specifically Manhattan – has also been favoured by science fiction films for its architecture, and its density of skyscrapers. New York's urban character makes it a perfect vertical playground for *Spider-Man* (2002) to swing from building to building in his quest to catch bad guys (although astute Manhattanites will note that the

The best apocalypses

It may be a little depressing to contemplate the end of the world as we know it, but if you're going to go, you might as well go out with a bang.

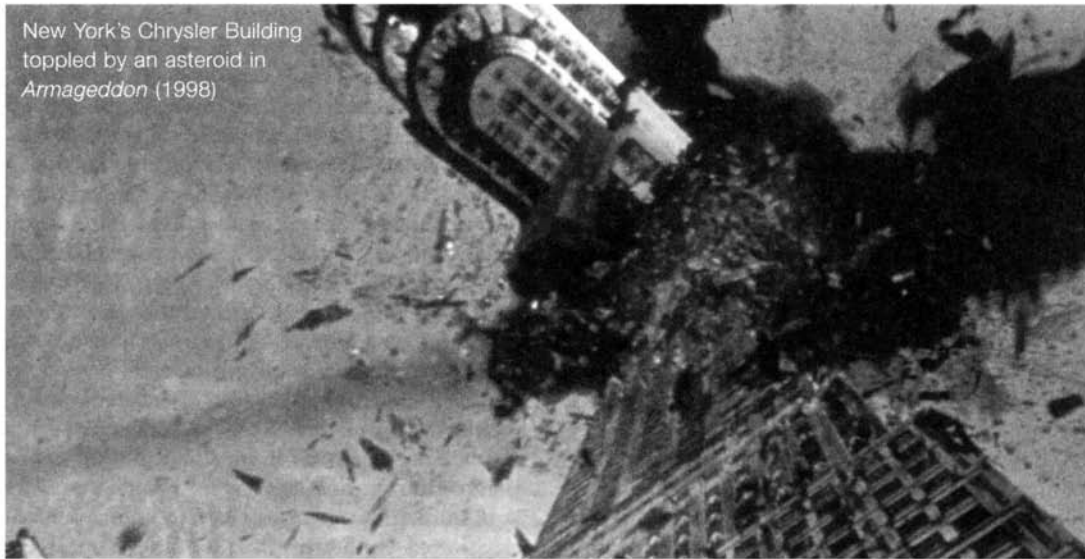
• **When Worlds Collide** (1951). The planet Earth gets whacked by a rouge star, with its own orbiting planet (called Zyra) that just happens to be right for human life – it's the getting there that's the tough part. The film follows an industrious group of humans racing to build an "ark" to get off the planet before it goes. And it does indeed go – no last-minute reprieve from the screenwriter.

• **When The Wind Blows** (1986). This animated film features a genial middle-aged British couple who just happen to manage to live through a nuclear exchange – but then have to make it through the aftermath,

armed only with knowledge from civil-defense pamphlets and their own expectations of what life should be like. The film shows both of these failing the couple enormously; the final resolution of their troubles is almost shocking (considering this is a cartoon), and makes this unexpectedly one of the more successful anti-nuke films out there.

• **Last Night** (1998). The end of the world is just six hours away. How is the world ending? The film doesn't say – and thus freed of having to deal with that, the film delves into this issue of how its characters deal with the situation. They do in some of the ways you expect, but also in some ways you don't. This Canadian movie is smart, funny and surprisingly poignant right up until the end – which is, after all, The End.

New York's Chrysler Building
toppled by an asteroid in
Armageddon (1998)



films take liberties with the island's actual layout), and make it a compelling ruin, as in *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), when it's been submerged by the rising tide of global warming.

New York's skyscrapers have long been favoured for spectacular destruction by science fiction filmmakers, whether by invading spaceships (*Independence Day*, 1996), thousand-foot waves (*Deep Impact*, 1998), meteors (*Armageddon*, 1998), or marauding, misplaced Japanese monsters (the American version of *Godzilla*, 1997). However, the actual destruction of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre by terrorists on September 11, 2001, took all the entertainment value out of destroying tall New York City landmarks. In the wake of 9/11, the worst that science filmmakers have done to New York is flood it and freeze it (*The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004) – not bring down its buildings.



C.H.U.D.

dir Douglas Cheek, 1984, US, 88m

In this movie we learn that toxic waste and the New York homeless shouldn't mix. This is a bad film – there's something karmically mean about turning homeless people into toxic-waste-mutated cannibals, as if they didn't already have enough strikes against them – but it's enjoyable tripe, something to watch on a night of intentionally bad movie rentals and feel like you've gotten your money's worth.



Mimic

dir Guillermo del Toro, 1997, US, 98m

The good news is that the mutant insects that were bred to kill the disease-carrying New York cockroaches did their job perfectly. The bad news is that they didn't bother to stop mutating. Now there are man-sized mutant insects in the subways, feeding on humans. A vibrant example of the law of unintended consequences. Sadly, the film isn't nearly as scary as its premise; it's competently done, but that's it.

**Deep Impact**

dir Mimi Leder, 1998, US, 120m

This is the smartest of 1998's meteor films (the other being the largely awful *Armageddon*, despite its breathtaking Chrysler Building vs meteor shot). Both have basically the same plot: astronauts head into space to stop the destruction of human life. This version of the tale is ever so slightly too bland, considering the end of the world is nigh. The water-wall of destruction that smashes into New York City, however, is a keeper of an image.

The oceans

Science fiction has been going under the waves since near the very beginning of film, starting with *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*, which had its first full-length treatment in 1916, and its most famous in 1954 (see Canon). Closer to the modern day, the ocean depths were home to powerful aliens in 1989's *The Abyss* (directed by James Cameron, who would memorably return to the water in 1997 for *Titanic*); while star Kevin Costner found himself bobbing around in one of the 1990s most expensive and troubled productions, *Waterworld*, which posited a flooded world without land. Although the film is widely regarded as a flop, in fact it made over 260 million dollars worldwide – more than enough to cover its then-record 175 million-dollar budget.

Science fiction fans even have their own *Jaws*-like shark tale to enjoy – *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), in which scientists make the fatal but very entertaining mistake of giving giant sharks super-smart brains.

**Waterworld**

dir Kevin Reynolds, 1995, US, 136m

Costner is a grumpy loner in a world where all the land has been submerged; he eventually feels attachment to a young girl because that's what the script requires. Not the flop people assume it is, and on its own merits it's moderately diverting. But taken as a whole, it's hard to believe the experience of watching the movie required a 175 million-dollar investment on someone's part. On the other hand, Dennis Hopper is delightful as the bad guy.

**Deep Blue Sea**

dir Renny Harlin, 1999, US, 105m

If you give a shark a brain, it's going to think of creative ways to eat you. And so the sharks in this film do, given extra gray matter by unscrupulous scientists trying to cure Alzheimer's with shark-brain extract. It's fun to watch the sharks match wits with the humans, and the humans' dismaying discovery that they're not as smart as they thought they were. Also, the end of Samuel L. Jackson here is one of the great science fiction screen deaths.



Other US cities

Other large cities in the US are used less frequently for science fiction films than the big three of New York, LA and Washington, DC, in small part because other US cities are less familiar worldwide and lack the same audience cachet as this trio. Nevertheless, some have made their way into science fiction films over the years. Here's a small sampling:

- **Chicago** America's "Second City" was most recently home to 2004's *I, Robot*, the Will Smith action film very loosely based on Issac Asimov's classic book of robot-focused short stories. Its skyline also served as a playground for giant mutant grasshoppers in the silly 1957 creature feature *Beginning Of The End*. Portions of the famed South Side of Chicago were flattened in *Chain Reaction* (1996).

- **San Francisco** The City by the Bay appears in several of the *Star Trek* films (it's the administrative home of the United Federation of Planets, no less); the city is most prominent in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, in which the 23rd-century crew travel to 1980s San Francisco to borrow a pair of humpback whales. The city is used in a far more sinister fashion in director Philip Kaufman's 1977 remake of *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*.

- **Boston** America's favourite colonial city has briefly appeared in two recent science fiction thrillers. In *The Core* (2003), the first sign that the Earth's magnetic core has stopped spinning is that people in Boston with pacemakers drop dead. In *Dreamcatcher* (2003), based on a Stephen King novel, Boston's water supply is threatened by a creepy alien bent on breeding its way to world domination.

- **Philadelphia** The City of Brotherly Love is the host to the end of the world in *12 Monkeys* (1995, see Canon), in which Bruce Willis travels back in time from a very depressing future to find the secret of a virus that has wiped out five billion people. Also see 1984's *The Philadelphia Experiment*, in which WWII sailors are thrown forward forty years.

- **San Diego** Southern California's other major city received a surprise in 1996's *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* when a Tyrannosaurus Rex escaped from captivity on a ship and then wandered about the city, devouring pets and San Diegans. One interesting bit of trivia about the scenes in which the T-Rex stampedes through San Diego is that some of the fleeing humans, who are Japanese, are shouting "I left Japan to get away from this!" in their native tongue.

- **Detroit** Motor City is home to the *RoboCop* films, which doesn't paint a very flattering picture of the town, particularly in the first, where "Old Detroit," riddled with crime, violence and unemployment, will be replaced by a huge rebuilding project. Ironically, much of the first *RoboCop*, particularly the dingy parts, was filmed near Dallas, Texas.

- **Cleveland** This Ohio city has long had a negative reputation (dating back to the days when the Cuyahoga River was so polluted it caught fire), but no city deserved to be the home of *Howard The Duck* (1986), the unspeakably bad film produced by George Lucas about a humanoid duck unexpectedly transported to Earth.

- **Suburbia/Small town** If you really want trouble, you have to go to the suburbs and the small towns, which have been the favourite places for giant and/or alien creatures to snack on humans or possess their bodies prior to global takeover. 1956's *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* (see Canon) set the tone, choosing tiny Santa Mira, California, as its setting, but other films both before and after that one, have followed suit – including *Invaders From Mars* (both the 1953 and 1986 versions), *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), *The Brain Eaters* (1958) and, more recently, *The Puppet Masters* (1994) and *Signs* (2002).

Films in which small towns are beset by hungry man-eating creatures include *The Blob* (space goo, made in two versions, 1958 and 1988 – the 1958 version notable for an early starring role by Steve McQueen),

Tarantula (a giant tarantula, obviously, 1955), *Them!* (giant ants, 1954), 1977's *Empire Of The Ants* (giant ants again, and representative of early-to-mid-70s bad monster films), *Eight-Legged Freaks* (spiders again, 2002) and *Evolution* (rapidly evolving space bacteria, 2001).



Invaders From Mars

dir William Cameron Menzies, 1953, US, 78m

What's a kid to do when he sees strange lights ... and then all the adults in the town start acting weird? This being the 50s, he naturally suspects alien invasion. This 1953 film is a minor classic of the alien-invasion genre and was remade in 1986, in a somewhat lesser version.



The Blob

dir Irvin S. Yeaworth, 1958, US, 86m

A glob of space goo falls out of a meteorite and is soon merrily eating its way through a tiny town; it's up to a teenage Steve McQueen to rally other teens to stop it. *The Blob* is considered a classic of the monster genre, though it may have more to do with a retroactive appreciation of McQueen rather than the actual qualities of the movie. Modern audiences are more likely to get into the gorier 1988 remake.



The Philadelphia Experiment

dir Stewart Raffill, 1984, US, 102m

An anti-radar experiment on a US Navy ship goes wrong in 1943, and two sailors find themselves sucked forward in time to 1984. This is mid-grade 80s science fiction – not bad, not great, mostly just there – but it's fun to watch star Michael Pare go through the motions of culture shock.



The Puppet Masters

dir Stuart Orme, 1994, US, 109m

Author Robert Heinlein's take on the alien-invasion genre is not very well served by this lacklustre movie adaptation, which is staged and shot like a too-well-lit

made-for-TV movie, and features bland performances from stars Eric Thal and Julie Warner, and also Donald Sutherland, who gives the impression of stoically sleepwalking toward a paycheck. Heinlein deserves better and so do we.



Chain Reaction

dir Andrew Davis, 1996, US, 106m

Someone leaves Keanu Reeves in charge of a highly explosive new source of energy. Whoops. Soon Chicago is flattened and Keanu is on the run, having been framed for a murder (to be fair, the explosion wasn't his fault, either). Aside from the initial science fictiony overtones, this is a standard-issue chase thriller, done competently but without flair.



Signs

dir M. Night Shyamalan, 2002, US, 106m

A reverend who has lost his faith after the apparently random death of his wife has to confront that lack of faith when aliens mysteriously arrive with less than benign intentions. Shyamalan is a master at stoking tension and dread, and Gibson is really very strong in his portrayal of a man wrestling with God. The film's ending underscores what a rickety edifice Shyamalan's built with this film, but you can't have everything.



Dreamcatcher

dir Lawrence Kasdan, 2003, US, 136m

The film's got a reasonable pedigree – director Kasdan, screenwriter William Goldman, the source material is from a reasonably good Stephen King book (about nasty invading aliens who can mess with your head), and a rare bad guy turn by Morgan Freeman. But everybody underperforms this film (particularly Freeman, who turns in probably his worst performance), and it's hard to care about any of it.



Paris

Paris was rather rudely treated in 1998's *Armageddon*, in which the total destruction of the City of Lights by a falling chunk of asteroid was given twenty seconds of screen time at best. In the immensely influential short film *La Jetée* (which would serve as the inspiration for *12 Monkeys*), Paris has likewise been obliterated – not by a falling rock, but by nuclear war. Paris landmark the Eiffel Tower has also made its way into films otherwise unrelated to France, memorably in *Superman 2* (1980), when **Superman** foils a terrorist bombing on the tower – and in doing so unleashes the criminal **General Zod** from Krypton; most of the rest of the action takes place in “Metropolis.”

Two of the most interesting science fiction visions of France come from the same two directors: Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, whose 1991 *Delicatessen* (see Canon) features a French post-apocalyptic apartment complex that descends (or ascends, depending on your point of view) into slapstick surrealism. For the duo's second masterpiece, 1995's *The City Of Lost Children*, they envision a fantastical city that is nowhere in particular and yet inescapably Gallic all the same.

Tokyo

Japan, and in particular Tokyo, are famously under siege by giant monsters and have been for over half a century, since the release of *Gojira* (aka *Godzilla*; see Canon) in 1954; in this sense Tokyo and the Japanese island can be considered the most science fiction-oriented chunks of land on the planet. In December of 2004 *Godzilla Final Wars* was touted

as the final installment in the *Godzilla* saga (for now, at least), which is not a bad thing for Tokyo, as a large portion of it is turned into a crater in this “final” film, which had *Godzilla* fighting other large mutated creatures from all around the world. Tokyo also plays a dominant role in anime, most memorably for international science fiction audiences in 1987's *Akira* (where it is represented by “Neo-Tokyo”) and in 1985's *Ghost In The Shell* (see entries for both in the Canon). We'll be taking a closer look at Japanese science fiction cinema in Chapter Six.

Washington, DC

The seat of government for the United States was recently prominently featured in *Minority Report* (2002) as a formerly lawless city turned into the safest place to live in the United States thanks to the effort of the “Pre-Crime” Division, which stops murders before they happen. It's also the setting for *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951; see Canon).

But these immersions in the environs of the city are unusual for science fiction; more often Washington, DC, is used largely as a prop to be destroyed. The same aliens who whacked New York in *Independence Day* (1996) also memorably blew up the White House; the destruction of the White House was in fact featured in the film's previews, and was known to elicit cheers from the crowds. This scene was supposedly inspired by the wholesale alien attack on Washington, DC, in 1956's invasion flick *Earth Vs The Flying Saucers*, in which the saucers blow up the Washington Monument and crash into the Capitol Building.

Earth Vs The Flying Saucers was undoubtedly an influence on the Martians of *Mars*



The White House gets zapped in *Independence Day*

Attacks! (1996), who also do grievous damage to the White House and other DC landmarks (memorably playing catch with the Washington Monument), and gleefully crisping a joint session of Congress.

Human mutants go after DC politicians in the *X-Men* series; in the first (2000), an anti-mutant US senator is kidnapped and turned into a mutant; in the second, the US President is attacked in the White House.

But Washington doesn't always get the short end of the stick. In *Contact* (1997; see Canon), the city remains intact, but acts as the crucible in which heroine Ellie Arroway has her faith tested, both times in front of committees full of politicians.



Earth Vs The Flying Saucers

dir Fred F. Sears, 1956, US, 83m, b/w

The aliens come, like they do, and say, "Our planet is out of resources ... We're here to take yours ... Surrender or be obliterated". This is rote 50s invasion stuff, but its ace-in-the-hole is Ray Harryhausen (see *Icons*), who sets the flying saucers to work making a mess of Washington, DC.



Mars Attacks!

dir Tim Burton, 1996, US, 106m

Tim Burton directing a campy Martian invasion story? What could possibly go wrong? A lot, actually, starting with the fact that the movie is more creepy than funny; it's got a streak of cruelty that's not well-covered by humour, as it was in *Beetlejuice*. It's got its moments, and there's something refreshing about the Martians' enthusiastic need to destroy. But ultimately, this attack falls short.

Sci-fi in the solar system

The moon

Off of the planet Earth, the moon is one of the two most common destinations for science fiction films – understandable because it is our closest neighbour in space and has long been an object of fascination for storytellers. The first film considered to be in the science fiction genre travelled there, albeit not very realistically: 1902's *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip To The Moon*), followed by 1919's *The First Men In The Moon* and 1929's *Frau im Mond* (*The Woman In The Moon*), from Fritz Lang.

The 50s brought some moon-based films that were reasonably realistic (1950's *Destination Moon*, see Canon), and some that were, well, not – 1953's *Cat Women Of The Moon* being an example, in which hot-looking women on the

moon try to hijack a rocket back to Earth. This film was rather unnecessarily remade a mere six years later as *Missile To The Moon* (1959). This particular line of moon films would reach their terminal end in 1962's soft-core extravaganza *Nude On The Moon* (in which the moon is inhabited by – you guessed it – nude women), and satirized in 1987's skit film *Amazon Women On The Moon*. The moon's most famous appearance in science fiction film would be in 1968's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (see Canon), when the discovery of a Monolith on the moon necessitates a trip to Jupiter.

The moon was naturally more intriguing to science fiction filmmakers before men actually landed on its surface in 1969, and the idea of going there passed from the realm of science fiction into reality. The most prominent film in



The Monolith on the moon, in
2001: A Space Odyssey

The newest location: inside the computer

In 2004, director Kerry Conran's *Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow* featured immense, fantastic sets that imagined locations from a 1930s New York to a frozen Nepal, as well as huge jungles, a fully stocked airbase, underwater grottoes and a rocket hangar – none of which ever existed. In a first for film production, the entire movie was shot on a “blue screen” stage, where the actors performed; their performances were added to richly detailed computerized backgrounds.

Physical production of the film took a mere 26 days, as opposed to the many months that would have been required to construct sets and move the film crew to

various locations. And the film was made for seventy million dollars, rather less than the cost of a comparable film built with practical sets.

While it's unlikely that blue screen technology will ever fully replace location shooting and physical sets, *Sky Captain* is proof of the concept that computer imagining is now at the point where it can replace both if need be. In science fiction, where many of the locations are not meant to be in the “real world” to begin with, we may begin to see more examples of location shots inside the computer.

recent times to feature the moon was *Apollo 13* (1995), which was a historical film, not science fiction. *The Adventures Of Pluto Nash* (2002) also took place on the moon, but the less said about that, the better.



Cat Women Of The Moon

dir Arthur Hilton, 1953, US, 64m, b/w

Sure, when you meet those mysterious black-clad women in the equally mysterious moon cave, just go ahead and relax! They couldn't possibly mean you any harm ... or want to steal your ship to get to Earth. One goes in to a film like this aware of its ridiculousness, so complaining about it won't help. Just enjoy the moon cheese.

Mars

The red planet is popularly believed to be the planet both closest to Earth and most like it (incorrect in both cases, as Venus is usually closer in distance and is much closer in size, but, alas, has a surface temperature hot enough to melt lead), and so Mars has held a special fascina-

tion for science fiction that continues unabated to this day – as evidenced by the 2005 **Steven Spielberg/Tom Cruise** remake of *War Of The Worlds*, and the upcoming *John Carter Of Mars*, slated for 2006.

Most films involving Mars branch into two categories: humans heading to Mars – sometimes inhabited, and sometimes not – and Martians heading to Earth, usually with bad intentions. Examples of the latter include both *Invaders From Mars* films (1953 and 1986), *Devil Girl From Mars* (1954; Martians invade Scotland), *Flash Gordon's Trip To Mars* (1938; Emperor Ming joins forces with the Queen of Mars), the campy 1996 flick *Mars Attacks!* and, of course, the 1953 movie version of *War Of The Worlds* (see Canon).

Flash Gordon and others made it to Mars prior to 1950, but with the appearance of 1950's *Rocketship X-M* (quickly thrown together to beat the more widely anticipated *Destination Moon* to theatres) the race to Mars was wide open. *Destination Moon* producer **George Pal** would film his own version of a Mars journey with 1955's *Conquest Of Space*, in which, among other

Mission To Mars (2000)

things, the crew is marooned on the red planet. The idea of being marooned on Mars would recur more than once: 1964's *Robinson Crusoe On Mars* has an American astronaut stranded on the

surface, with only a monkey to keep him company; in 2000's *Mission To Mars*, another stranded US astronaut (played by **Don Cheadle**) doesn't even have a monkey to keep him company.

Other planetary visits

Aside from the moon and Mars, the most commonly visited planet is Jupiter, the largest planet in the system and one with several moons of impressive size. **Jupiter** (or more precisely, its moons) are the destination of the spaceship *Discovery* in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, although it turns out that astronaut Dave Bowman's ultimate destination is somewhere else entirely.

Jupiter is also the destination for *2001*'s sequel, *2010*, while its volcanic moon **Io** is the setting for 1981's *Outland*, featuring **Sean Connery** as a Western-style sheriff.

Given **Venus**'s blisteringly hot nature, it's not surprising that very few science fiction films go there, and those that do are rather less than scientifically accurate. Two that made the trip were *Queen Of Outer Space* (1958), starring Zsa Zsa Gabor as a freedom fighter on a planet without men, and the badly named 1953 *Abbot And Costello Go To Mars*, since they never get to the red planet, winding up on Venus instead, which is populated by women who haven't seen men in thousands of years. Saturn and its magnificent rings were used as a backdrop for the eco-friendly film *Silent Running* (1971), as well as the robot-stalking thriller *Saturn 3*.

One consistent theme – regardless of whether humans are coming to Mars or Martians are coming to Earth – is that Mars is either currently inhabited by some form of life (which is normally humanoid-ish) or was, at some point in its past.

The previously mentioned *Mission To Mars* has Mars as the home of a long-lost civilization; another film in which long-dead Martians leave an inheritance of interesting artefacts is *Total Recall* (1990) – in this flick, they leave behind huge atmosphere-creating machines.

2000's other Mars film, *Red Planet*, features non-intelligent creatures who mysteriously pump oxygen into the Mars atmosphere, much

The other planets in the solar system are generally neglected by the science fiction film industry, with one or two mentions at best. A lost spaceship is found nestled in the clouds of **Neptune** in the supernatural thriller *Event Horizon*, while the 1962 *Journey To The Seventh Planet* has **Uranus** ruled by a giant brain that can manipulate the human mind. At either end of the solar system, neither **Mercury** nor **Pluto** have yet made a significant appearance on film, which just means there are some more places for filmmakers to go.



Saturn 3

dir Stanley Donen, 1980, UK, 88m

One of the worst major science fiction films ever, and that takes effort. Kirk Douglas and Farrah Fawcett are a couple living blissfully around Saturn when their bliss is intruded on by a crazy pilot (Harvey Keitel) and the pilot's creepy android Hector. The pilot takes a shine to Farrah, and the robot is mentally tuned in to the pilot, and things just get uncomfortably weird from there. Aside from the obvious Biblical allegory of the Garden of Eden (Douglas's character is even named Adam), this is low-grade stuff.

to the surprise of the human explorers who reach its surface. And naturally, when humans do reach Mars and discover intelligent life there, the locals are not generally happy to see them. A case in point is 1960's *Angry Red Planet*, in which a Mars expedition returns (missing half its crew) with a message warning to keep off the fourth rock from the sun. **John Carpenter**'s *Ghosts Of Mars* (2001) doesn't even require the angry Martians to be alive – they just turn humans into zombies.

One of the most interesting films about a Mars landing doesn't feature a touchdown at all: 1978's *Capricorn One*, in which the Mars landing is a hoax.

**Rocketship X-M****dir Kurt Neumann, 1950, US, 77m, b/w**

A rocket's on the way to the moon when catastrophe strikes ... fortunately the rocket is able to land safely on Mars. At this point anyone who knows the slightest thing about the astronomical distances involved has already let go of any hope that things are going to make sense.

**Mission To Mars****dir Brian De Palma, 2000, US, 113m**

Fitfully talented director De Palma is in cheque-cashing mode with this film that, despite a promising opening (which includes an astronaut dismembered in a Martian tornado), quickly collapses into a heavily-paced melodrama. The long-debunked "Martian Face" has a key role here, which is not a good thing story-wise. Great effects, though.

**Red Planet****dir Antony Hoffman, 2000, US, 106m**

The second of 2000's disappointing Mars movies, this one features a major plot point which requires not only ignorance on the part of the crew, but also on the part of every planetary astronomer on Earth. Aside from this, the acting is particularly wooden, even from the normally dependable Val Kilmer, who plays the somewhat bewildered hero.

**Angry Red Planet****dir Ib Melchior, 1959, US, 83m**

This film is a real pleasure, in which humans reach out hopefully toward Mars ... and Mars then takes out a very big stick and swats the humans off its porch. It is kind of fun seeing humanity get the brush back, even as stolidly and routinely as it's done here.

**Ghosts Of Mars****dir John Carpenter, 2001, US, 98m**

A perfectly serviceable zombie flick – the twist being that the zombies are on Mars, and they're not dead, just possessed by vengeful Martian ghosts. The difference is trivial and from the point of view of the audience, the action is pretty much the same as any good zombie flick – just with a set coloured red.

**Capricorn One****dir Peter Hyams, 1978, US, 123m**

A conspiracists' dream movie – a much-heralded Mars mission is hoaxed (for initially altruistic reasons: faulty equipment that would have killed the astronauts), and complications arise when the spacecraft burns up on re-entry. Now what does one do with live astronauts that are supposed to be dead? An entertaining bit of vintage post-Watergate paranoia.



How to fake a Mars landing:
Capricorn One

Memorable sci-fi planets

Science fiction being what it is, it's not tied down to real planets and destinations: it can create entire planets and solar systems from the filmmakers' imaginations. Here are some of the best known and most significant imaginary locations in science fiction, and what you would find there if you were a tourist.

- **LV-426** (*Alien*, 1979; *Aliens*, 1986). This harsh windy planet was devoid of life (almost) in the first *Alien* film, when the *Nostromo* crew landed to find the crashed spaceship full of alien eggs. In *Aliens*, the planet is still unforgiving, but home to hundreds of terraforming colonists. Naturally, they didn't get very far. Don't visit without an environmental suit with a very strong faceplate, and a gun.

- **Planet P** (*Starship Troopers*, 1997). High points: beautifully rugged scenery. Low points: large insectoid creatures who will tear you limb from limb and/or suck out your brains. Another planet where guns are recommended.

- **Solaris** (*Solaris*, 1973). This planet is covered with a featureless, phosphorescent intelligent ocean, which will read your mind and have you visited by some unsettling person from your past. Not recommended for people with skeletons in their closets.

- **Vega** (*Contact*, 1997). Not a planet but a construct aliens use to zip around the universe. The aliens you meet there will be friendly but inscrutable, and may decide to appear as a loved one to put you at ease.

The *Star Wars* package tour

- **Tatooine** The home planet of Luke Skywalker, it's a hot, desert planet thanks to the presence of two suns. Generally lawless and run by gangsters, its major cities are best described as "wretched hives of scum and villainy" – but they're safer than the open desert, where the Tuskan Raiders (aka Sand People) rule.

- **Hoth** It's cold, with no amenities of any sort – the perfect place for a secret rebel base. But beware the Wampas – eight-foot-tall snow creatures.

- **Dagoba** Swampy planet, filled with reptilian creatures that would eat you and your droid given half a chance. Very sparsely populated; you wouldn't go there unless you were looking for someone in particular.

- **Endor** This moon is covered with scenic forests and boasts a considerable industry building large space stations. The natives are short, furry and friendly.

- **Coruscant** The cosmopolitan seat of government, first for the Republic, then the Empire. The entire planet is one big city, which makes for constant traffic. Be sure to visit the Jedi Temple, which features lovely views. Don't bother with reservations: they'll sense you coming.

- **Naboo** A temperate world where the natives enjoy a Mediterranean lifestyle and architecture, except for the ones that look like dreadlocked otters and live in glass bowls under the water. Some racial tensions between cultures but these seem to have been largely resolved.

- **Alderaan** A beautiful, peace-loving planet – the perfect place to secretly raise a child as royalty. Hasn't been so popular since being disintegrated by the Death Star – but if you are into rubble, you'll have a whale of a time.

Tatooine, the famed childhood home of both Luke and Anakin Skywalker in the *Star Wars* movies, is not as far, far away as all that – Lucas has returned to southern Tunisia again and again to take advantage of the country's rugged landscape and primitive architecture when filming scenes of Tatooine.



The *Star Trek* package tour

- **Vulcan** This hot, red world is home to an ascetic, intellectual culture that prizes contemplation – a great place to find yourself, but not the place to go if you're looking for a good night out.
 - **Klingon Home World** A murky, industrialized and generally unattractive place; the locals are often surly and argumentative and prone to distrust strangers and other cultures, although they do approve highly of Shakespeare. Unless you can tolerate eating food that's still alive, bring your own edibles.
 - **Genesis Planet** A new planet, created in *Star Trek II*. Lush and full of life, but inherently unstable (it will blow up in *Star Trek III*). Rent, don't buy.
 - **The "Briar Patch"** A nebula-filled area of space that includes a planet with rejuvenating qualities. One of the Federation's best-kept secrets. Reservations are very much required.
- **Krypton** (*Superman*, 1978). This planet is home to an advanced civilization, but is, alas, close to a star on the verge of exploding. Any trip here should be short. However, the planet's green, glowing rocks make fine souvenirs for most.
- **Alphaville** (*Alphaville*, 1965). This planet shares many features with some of the more industrial areas of 20th-century Paris, France, and features a lovely arts festival. Shooting at people in your hotel room does not appear to raise any alarms.
- **Mongo** (*Flash Gordon* serials, 1936-40; *Flash Gordon*, 1980). This planet has many varied attractions, ranging from floating cities to cities under the sea, but a capricious local despot makes visiting uncomfortable and often dangerous. Young women travelling alone are warned that said despot may attempt to abduct them into his harem.

- **Arrakis** (*Dune*, 1984). A desert planet whose immensely profitable chief export – a psychotropic drug – makes its possession a hotly contested topic. This makes the planet a dangerous place for a casual visit. Also be aware that ostentatious displays of water consumption are frowned upon.
- **Unnamed Planet** (*Pitch Black*, 2000). Sun worshippers will love this world, with multiple stars that promise total sunshine all day long – except for one long night every 22 years, in which subterranean creatures burst to the surface to breed, not unlike cicadas, if they were the size of velociraptors. Bring sunscreen and try not to be on the planet when night falls.
- **The Black Hole** (*The Black Hole*, 1979). The black hole itself is a featureless singularity of infinite density, but surrounding it is a rather attractive accretion disc of gas and dust that is best appreciated from a safe distance. Some speculate that travelling into a black hole will transport one to another dimension or (if one is spiritually minded) to planes of redemption or damnation. As there is no known way to return from a black hole, such speculation is at best unfounded.



Global: sc-fi film around the world





Tarkovsky's original version of *Solaris*,
based on the novel by Stanislaw Lem

Global: sci-fi film around the world

Hollywood is without a doubt the most commercially successful purveyor of science fiction: among the dozens of sci-fi films in the 250 top-grossing movies worldwide, only 2004's animated science fiction/fantasy film *Howl's Moving Castle* hails from outside the US studio system. But while Hollywood's commercial dominance of the field is unquestioned, many other film industries can and do create science fiction films – and when these are successful, Hollywood has no qualms about cherry-picking what works and refashioning it for its own purposes.

In this chapter we'll go around the world to learn both the history and current state of science fiction cinema, and whether the world's sci-fi filmmakers can compete, and beat, Hollywood at its own game.

Although the countries listed are those that have produced the most sci-fi over the years, science fiction occurs nearly everywhere people

make movies. So don't take this as being the definitive list. If you want to go out there and search you may well discover, if your lucky, some future-cult classic; and at worst you'll come across one of this planet's many, entertainingly hilarious *Star Wars* knock offs ... there's a particularly fine example to be found in Turkey.

Australia

Australia had a science fiction film history before the *Mad Max* series of films came along – just not much of one. Setting aside 1959's *On The Beach*, which although filmed in Australia was an American production, the first Australian science fiction film could very well be the 1968 musical *Shirley Thompson Versus The Aliens* (directed by Jim Sharman, who would go on to direct *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*).

The 1975 cult movie, *The Cars That Ate Paris*, almost qualifies as sci-fi. The first feature of celebrated director Peter Weir, its barren location and wasted post-industrial visuals would later exert a strong influence on the look and feel of the *Mad Max* movies, the first of which appeared in 1979. This was also the year of *Thirst*, a vampire film that makes one of the first attempts to suggest a scientific explanation for bloodsucking.

Between 1979 and 1985 – the span between the first *Mad Max* film and the last – Australia would add other science fiction films to its stable, including 1980's *Harlequin* (an allegorical retelling of the Rasputin story), the superhero spoof *The Return Of Captain Invincible*, (1983), and *Starship* (1985), a painful movie that sees teenagers battling androids on a far flung planet.

It's worth noting that several of the directors of these films – Simon Wincer, Roger Christian and Rod Hardy and, most famously, George Miller – would eventually find their way to Hollywood to direct both feature films and science fiction TV.

If Australia can be said to have an identifiable science fiction tradition, it would be that of scrappy and usually post-apocalyptic action, epitomized by the *Mad Max* films and continued

in the prison-break movies *Turkey Shoot* (1983) and *Dead-End Drive-In* (1986) – both directed by Brian Trenchard-Smith. Other films that plow the same barren furrow include the time-traveling yarns *The Time Guardian* (1987) and *Sons Of Steel* (1989), in which a heavy metal singer goes back in time to keep the Sydney Opera House from being nuked out of existence. And then there's the feature debut of *I, Robot* director Alex Proyas, *Spirits Of The Air, Gremlins Of The Clouds* (1989), which sets the action in a fantastical post-apocalyptic desert wasteland punctuated by car wrecks. This scrappy, desolate feel has rubbed off even on American films produced down under, such as 1999's *Pitch Black*. It's a sub-genre of science fiction that plays well in the US (and around the world), which is probably why so many Aussie sci-fi filmmakers make their way east to Hollywood.



Thirst

dir Rod Hardy, 1979, Aus, 93m

A global network of vampires, the Hyma Cult, comes up with an interesting solution to their blood procurement problems: start a farm – with kidnapped teenagers providing a permanent supply of gore. Intriguing premise and a great performance from David Hemmings as the cult leader, but ultimately it's really pretty cheesy.



Dead-End Drive-In

dir Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1986, Aus, 88m

When life in Sydney becomes a little riotous, the government decides to pen up the juvenile delinquents at drive-in movies. Given the usual fare at the drive-in, this constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. This bad Aussie camp is clearly cashing in on the *Mad Max* gravy train, but for all that it's kind of fun and has moments of genuine satire.

Canada

Canada has many science fiction films in its national library, some of which are original and some of which are good – alas for Canada, most of the films that are good are not original (which is to say, they are financed elsewhere – usually the US), and most if its original films are not good. Indeed, most Canadian science fiction is terrible. There are a number of excellent Canadian filmmakers, but with the notable exception of David Cronenberg, few of them seem to have chosen to work within the science fiction genre.

There are some clear and obvious reasons for this, not least of which is that given the generally friendly relationship between Canada and the US, it's easy for talented Canadian filmmakers to work in the US film industry rather than stay in Canada. From the days of Mack Sennett,

the “king of comedy” who made his first screen appearance in 1908, many Canadian filmmakers have chosen to do just that; lured by abundant money and a native film industry that was largely moribund for much of the 20th century. The US film and TV industry has returned the favour by frequently filming in Canada, taking advantage of its pool of “below-the-line” talent and its cheaper production costs. But in terms of the production of science fiction films, this has been an unequal trade.

Exacerbating the problem for many years was the Canadian tax system, which in 1971 offered tax shelters to investors in Canadian films. This generated an explosion of cheaply made flicks (affectionately labeled “Canuxploitation”) for which quality was not always a primary goal.

Dominance and dependence

The US is by far the largest producer of science fiction film and TV, having produced four times as many titles as the world's second largest producer, Japan. And yet this dominance is in no small part thanks to the US industries reliance on the global movie audience.

Hollywood's lavish SF film production values, both relatively in the early years of science fiction and objectively today, and the immense production and distribution system the US film industry possesses, have allowed Hollywood both to stoke the desire for its eye-popping science fiction films and also to service it – particularly since the 1980s, with the growth of overseas distribution now accounting for between half to two-thirds of a film's total theatrical take. US

science fiction films in particular (along with fantasy and action films) are increasingly dependent on global grosses.

The increasing importance of the global market to Hollywood means that while the world is fed the Hollywood view of science fiction, the US film industry now also designs its films to “travel” well into other languages. Critics suggests these new considerations include the simplification of plots and dialogue and an over-dependence on action and special effects, although over the history of US cinema there is ample evidence that North American audiences are just as receptive to simplified plots and lots of action as any other audience.

This led to a number of appalling Canadian science fiction (and other) films during the 1970s and early 80s before the tax shelter was shut down because of widespread abuse. While some good came out of this – the first films of **David Cronenberg** (see p.189) were tax shelter productions – by and large it meant that Canadian films were drive-in-style B-movies or their later equivalent, the “straight-to-video” release.

Ironically, one of the most prolific directors of Canadian science fiction in the tax shelter era was an American, **Ed Hunt**, who directed a bad science fiction movie a year from 1976 to 1979. Arguably the best of these was 1977’s *Starship Invasions*, which featured actual movie stars (**Robert Vaughn** and **Christopher Lee**) and a relatively large budget of over 2 million Canadian dollars. Lee would later peg this the worst film he ever appeared in, giving you an indication of the level of quality of which we are dealing.

But it would be unfair to dismiss all Canadian science fiction as low-quality. David Cronenberg’s work offers an excellent amalgam of science fiction and horror – arguably some of the best there is of that hybrid genre, no mat-

ter what the budget. Director **Don McKellar**’s *Last Night* (1998), about the end of the world, is an unusual and defiantly non-special-effects laden take on a usually “spectacular” science fiction opportunity. The *Cube* series of films, *Cube* (1997), *Cube 2: Hypercube* (2002) and *Cube Zero* (2004), offer a tense, *Twilight Zone*-esque take on the genre. *Heavy Metal* (1981) was long a high point in science fiction animation (although this is again a relative thing). More recently 2004’s *Final Cut* offered the UK-style approach to science fiction, featuring story and substance (and also **Robin Williams**) in place of a huge production budget.

In general, Canadian science fiction still suffers a reputation for being second-rate; films such as *Last Night* and *Final Cut*, and the continuing excellence of Cronenberg’s output, however, all point to the potential that Canadian sci-fi has to compete with Hollywood in the story department, if not in terms of production values.



Starship Invasions

dir Ed Hunt, 1977, Can, 89m

Arguably the best film of American/Canadian schlock director Ed Hunt, and trust us, that’s really not saying much. Robert Vaughn and Christopher Lee try to keep afloat in a UFO-abduction plot with very little sense and even less entertainment value. The costumes in the movie have a certain camp charm, but, overall, only see this if you’ve been bad and need to punish yourself.



Heavy Metal

dir Gerald Potterton, 1981, Can, 86m

An adult animation anthology that attempted to reproduce the deliriously overblown space-freak comic book *Heavy Metal*, with decidedly mixed results. This is best seen when one is thirteen, a boy, and a budding antisocial; the further one gets from this demographic, the more ridiculous the overall film appears to be. Nice soundtrack, however. In 2000 a sequel was released that is, likewise, best seen under the influence of puberty.



**Last Night**

dir Don McKellar, 1998, Can, 95m

After so many science fiction spectaculars imagining the end of the world as we know it, here's one that focuses on that least-used of science fiction special effects: acting, as the people in this film prepare themselves for the end of the world, just a few hours away. A really effective character study, and moving in the way so many special effects extravaganzas are not.

**Final Cut**

dir Omar Naim, 2004, Can, 105m

Robin Williams in his sombre, creepy mode (as opposed to his antic, creepy mode) as a "Cutter" – a guy who edits your recorded memories after your death to give to family and friends as a final memento. The film has something of a plot, but it's mostly about Williams' character, and what it takes to be the sort of guy who sees every single thing, good and bad, that someone else has done.

France

France can lay claim to the first science fiction film: 1902's undisputed classic *Le Voyage Dans la Lune*, by George Méliès; since that time science fiction has remained on the French cinematic menu, and a number of significant science fiction films have come from its shores – most marked by a certain irreverence to the conventions of film and science fiction. The French take on science fiction is delightfully perverse, especially in relation to the approaches of the English-speaking film industries.

There are no end to the examples for this. The most notable is Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), which willfully subverts the cinematic expectations of science fiction by filming in what is obviously mid-1960s Paris and making no attempt to hide its gleeful disdain for sci-fi conventions (see Canon for more). Then came *Barbarella* in 1968, which was directed by Roger Vadim and based on a French comic book by Jean-Claude Forest that was first published back in 1962. The character, portrayed on screen by Jane Fonda, injected sex into science fiction,

something it had been sorely lacking up to that point. In 1973, the Czech-French co-production of *La Planète Sauvage* (*The Savage Planet*) used animation to tell a striking tale of an enslaved race rising up against its masters; it was the first time science fiction had met animation in an extended setting.

In 1983, Luc Besson subverted the *Mad Max* post-apocalyptic action paradigm with *Le Dernier Combat* (*The Final Combat*), in which there is almost no dialogue, and where one of the most striking moments in the film is not an action sequence, but a shot of a woman's hand reaching out; Besson would fiddle with science fiction cinematic expectations again with the overtly over-the-top *The Fifth Element* (1997), only this time with a Hollywood-style budget and effects that would make it difficult to figure whether he was parodying American science fiction films, or was simply stealing from them. Also in the 1990s, co-directors Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet would create two ineffably Gallic, comic and twisted science fiction tales: *Delicatessen* (1991),



Dominique Pinon as Louison in *Delicatessen*

Dominique Pinon

Though **Dominique Pinon** has proved to be an accomplished performer in many cinematic genres, he frequently pops up in science fiction flicks.

As well as appearing in both *Delicatessen* (famously seen with his head on a plate) and *The City Of Lost Children*, he can also be seen as one of the gritty rabble in *Alien Resurrection* (1997) and, bizarrely, as the pilot of a squash ball, of all things, in the pseudo sci-fi German short *Der Pilot* (2000).

featuring life in a post-apocalyptic apartment building, and the wondrous *The City Of Lost Children* (1995), which features a mad scientist stealing the dreams of children.

All this is not simply to say that every French attempt at science fiction is a jewel box of delight; the French film industry is just as capable of a cheesy science fiction film as any other nation's, as viewers of movies such as *Diesel* (1985) or *Cartes sur Table* (1966, and featuring *Alphaville* star **Eddie Constantine**) will tell you. Be that as it may, the classics of French science fiction set the bar high for any other nation to top, reflected by the fact that several of these movies are to be found in this book's Canon chapter.



La Planète Sauvage (The Savage Planet) dir René Laloux, 1973, Fr, 71m

Gorgeous animated film which overcomes some of its technical limitations with a liberated sense of visual style, and a surprisingly evocative story in which tiny human-like creatures named Oms struggle against the much larger Draags, who see the Oms as pets, and later as a nuisance to be eradicated. Until the wave of science fiction-oriented popular animation arrived in the early 2000s, this was arguably the best non-anime SF animated film out there.



Le Dernier Combat (The Final Combat) dir Luc Besson, 1983, Fr, 92m, b/w

Besson's debut film, set in your standard-issue apocalyptic future, moves beyond "standard issue" territory by being nearly dialogue free, and then by filling those blank spaces with some visually lyrical moments. An impressive debut from one of France's most internationally successful directors.



The Fifth Element dir Luc Besson, 1997, Fr, 126m

Besson's deliriously over-the-top space adventure tries to have it both ways: it makes fun of expensive space adventure movies while at the same time being exactly the sort of film it's mocking. It's best not to try and think about the film too deeply and instead watch the various overblown characters (particularly bad guy Gary Oldman and comedy relief Chris Tucker), and star Bruce Willis's delightfully deadpan opinion of all the nonsense happening around him.



The Fifth Element: director Luc Besson on set

Germany

Germany's science fiction cinema divides into eras before and after World War II. The Pre-WWII era is easily the most culturally significant – during this period filmmakers working in Germany produced some of the most significant early science fiction films, most notably *Metropolis* (1927) and *Frau im Mond* (1929), both by Fritz Lang.

Another significant director working in German science fiction at the time was **Karl Hartl** (who stayed on in the German film industry after the Nazis came to power and would use his position to delay and foil the production of propaganda films), who produced the German-UK co-production *EP1 Antwortet Nicht* (1932,



Hildegard Knef (Alraune) and Karlheinz Böhm (Frank Braun) in *Alraune* (1952)

F.P.1 Fails To Reply) and *Gold* (1934), which features *Metropolis* star **Brigitte Helm**. Helm also appeared in two separate film versions of *Alraune* (aka *Daughter Of Evil*), first in a 1928 version directed by **Henrik Galeen**, and again in **Richard Oswald's** 1930 version. The movies were based on a classic story by writer **Hanns Heinz Ewers** about a mad scientist and his genetic experiments; the tale had already been filmed (twice) back in 1918.

Der Tunnel (1933), directed by **Kurt Bernhardt**, was a striking and futuristic movie based on a popular 1913 novel by **Bernhard Kellermann**, that described the construction of a tunnel under the Atlantic. The movie emerged from what would become a highly prolific Nazi cinema industry, which frequently looked to the future and the development of the atomic bomb.

The end of World War II naturally halted film making in Nazi Germany. German movie production would not resume until the country had been split in two by the former allies. The first science fiction film of note from West Germany would be another remake of *Alraune* (1952 – the fifth and last time the story would be filmed); this time actress **Hildegard Knef** would play the title role.

East Germany waited until 1960 to release its first science fiction film, *Der Schweigende Stern* (*The Silent Star*), which featured a story penned by noted Polish science fiction author **Stanislaw Lem** (whose book *Solaris* would be made into a rather more famous Russian film in the 1970s). Interestingly for the Cold War era, *Der Schweigende Stern* was released in the United States, albeit drastically recut and retitled *First Spaceship On Venus*.

East Germany produced relatively few science fiction films of note; aside from *Der Schweigende Stern*, 1972's *Eolomea* and 1976's *Im Staub der*

Sterne (*In The Dust Of The Stars*) are standouts of the East German science fiction output. West Germany's film industry, on the other hand, churned out dozens of science fiction films, from classic mad scientist movies – *Die Nackte und der Satan* (1960, aka *The Head*) with its penchant for heads in jars – to sex comedies, such as 1974's *Ach Jodel Mir Noch Einen* (aka *2069: A Sex Odyssey*) in which beauties from Venus come to Earth looking for men).

There have also been Spielberg knock-offs, such as 1985's *Joey*, the feature debut of *Independence Day* director **Roland Emmerich**. And even some arty films, such as 1991's era-closing *Until The End Of The World*, from director **Wim Wenders**. Few of these films have been significant outside of Germany – whatever science fiction greatness Germany's film industry had was gone by the mid 30s.

In more recent times, some of the most successful science fiction from Germany has also been comedy: 2004's spoof (*T*)*Raumschiff Surprise – Periode 1*, based on a science fiction/comedy skit from the popular *Bullyparade* TV show, racked up one of the highest grossing opening weekends ever in Germany cinema.



F.P.1 Antwortet Nicht (F.P.1 Fails To Reply) dir **Karl Hartl, 1932, Ger, 114m, b/w**

This big budget spectacular places a floating platform in the Atlantic to make long-distance air travel possible. Nice effects for its time, and movie buffs will note an early appearance by Peter Lorre, here in the sidekick role.



Gold dir **Karl Hartl, 1934, Ger, 120m, b/w**

Two scientists discover how to turn lead into gold, but are sabotaged by a conniving industrialist. More advanced effects from director Hartl, and a pretty good story to boot. Fans of *Metropolis* will recognize Brigitte Helm, in one of her final roles prior to her retirement from film.



Der Schweigende Stern (aka First Spaceship On Venus)

dir Kurt Maetzig, 1960, 130m

A multicultural crew goes to Venus after finding a Venusian artifact here on Earth. This East German film serves as an interesting compare-and-contrast to Western science fiction of the same period; the English language version of this film has been edited to near-incomprehensibility.



Im Staub der Sterne (In The Dust Of The Stars) dir Gottfried Kolditz, 1976, Ger, 102m

Human astronauts explore a planet from which they received a distress signal, they meet the natives and they seem to be friendly and content; it's only after a suspicious crew member starts poking around that one sees the violence inherent in the system. This East German film's political message is a bit heavy handed, and the script ends up being unintentionally amusing in places.



Joey

dir Roland Emmerich, 1985, Ger, 98m

A lonely nine-year-old kid discovers he has psychic powers, and rather unintentionally unleashes some very bad things. This is one of the first films by director Roland Emmerich, who shows off his propensity for "borrowing" from classic science fictions. A heavily-edited version of this movie appeared in English as *Making Contact*.



Until The End Of The World

dir Wim Wenders, 1991, Ger, 158m

Wenders projects to the world of 1999, seeing it as a dingy and sombre sort of place in which to drop his two main characters. This film ends up being both culturally off in terms of its vision and irritatingly disjointed, despite a number of haunting moments. Fascinating for what it could have been rather than for what it is.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong cinema is best known for its intense action and martial arts films (and the fantasy and ghost story films that combine action and martial arts elements). And equally, it would be fair to say that the success in the West of fantastical martial arts films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *House Of Flying Daggers* (2004) is in part thanks to the fact that mass audiences have been primed in the basics of mystical combat by two decades of *Star Wars* films (a series that itself owes much to a generation of martial arts films that came before it).

Given these relations, it should come as no surprise that science fiction has made an appearance or two over the years, given its ability as a

genre to combine with both horror and action adventure movies. Good examples of Hong Kong sci-fi/superhero crossover movies include *The Heroic Trio* (1993) and *Black Mask* (1996), while *Mighty Peking Man* (1977) was a reworking of the *King Kong* story (made at the same time that Dino DeLaurentiis was also remaking *Kong* in the US).

More sci-fi oriented was 1991's Jamie Luk-directed *Robotrix* – an all action *Robocop* inspired blood bath – which should be avoided if you have a weak stomach or are averse to a little nudity.

Most recently, well-respected Hong Kong director **Wong Kar Wai** even allowed science fiction to slip into *2046* (2004), his sprawling and

compelling sequel to *In The Mood For Love* (2000). This controversial film was widely anticipated at 2004's Cannes film festival and ended up being so late in completion that it was delivered to the cinema literally minutes before it was shown. The movie's sci-fi scenes offer a soft focus amalgam of everything from *Barbarella* to *2001* and *Blade Runner*, while even the non-SF segments of the movie have an almost *Blade Runner*-esque edge to them.

Wong Kar Wai's 2046



Mighty Peking Man

dir Meng-Hwa Ho, 1977, HK, 86m

This quickie HK take on *Kong* has become something of a cult item (in no small part due to its 2000 re-release, sponsored by Hong Kong film fan Quentin Tarantino). It's silly but fun. Pair it with *Infra-Man*, another cheesy 70s Hong Kong science fiction, for a true double feature experience.



The Heroic Trio

dir Johnny To, 1993, HK, 88m

This fantasy action film has science fiction elements and follows the adventures of three superheros (played by now international stars Michelle Yeoh, Maggie Cheung and Anita Mui) as they fight a sorcerer who is stealing babies. This very popular film was followed by a rather disappointing (but more sci-fi-oriented) sequel in the same year.





Black Mask

dir Daniel Lee, 1996, HK, 89m

Another superhero film, with Jet Li as a genetically engineered soldier-turned-librarian who reluctantly goes back into action after a series of suspicious murders. A 2002 sequel (without Li) pumps up the science fiction elements.



2046

dir Wong Kar Wai, 2004, HK, 129m

The film's lead character is writing his own sci-fi story about an android who develops emotions; scenes from his tale run in parallel with the main action and narrative of the movie, which delves deeply into one man's relationship with human relationships. A difficult, maddening but also strangely beautiful film. The cinematography, care of Australian Wong Kar Wai-collaborator Chris Doyle, is breathtaking.

India

Despite having the largest and arguably the most vibrant film industry in the world (“Bollywood”), India creates few science fiction films, and even fewer make it out of the subcontinent.



The Jungle

dir William A. Berke, 1952, Ind, 73m

A US/Indian co-production that featured American stars (Rod Cameron and Caesar Romero) hunting woolly mammoth in the jungles of India (those mammoth must have been very warm). Arguably the earliest Indian sci-fi.



Mr India

dir Shekhar Kapur, 1987, Ind, 179m

This popular Indian film featured a hero who uses an invisibility potion to make life better for a bunch of orphans, and along the way runs afoul of the evil Mugambo, who is naturally planning world domination. This endearing slice of Bollywood was directed by Shekhar Kapur, who would find rather more success with 1998's regal biopic *Elizabeth*.



Koi... Mil Gaya

dir xxxxx, 2003, Ind, xxm

A mentally challenged boy meets aliens and finds true love (although not with the aliens, which probably would have been a bit much for the notoriously conservative Indian film industry). This film shamelessly calls up elements of science fiction films such as *E.T.* and *Cocoon*, and then sets it all to song and dance, Bollywood style; it doesn't make much sense, but it sure is fun to look at.



Matrubhoomi – A Nation Without

Women dir Rakesh Roshan, 2003, Ind, 171m

And now for a change of pace, this film rather starkly imagines a time when India – where families often show a marked preference for boy children, to the point of sex-selection abortion – is left almost completely without women at all. It's an outlandish situation but the film plays it out dramatically, and focuses on the lot of the one woman left in a single small village. Shocking, depressing and compelling.

Italy

Watching an Italian sci-fi movie is the cinematic equivalent of buying a Rolex off a street hustler. Almost without fail, Italian science fiction films are obvious and cheap knock-offs of a superior (or at least, popular) brand, in this case, science fiction films from the English-speaking world.

The eagerness of Italian science fiction to emulate English-speaking science fiction film is obvious in the little things. Firstly, much Italian science fiction features moonlighting English-speaking actors, from the notable (Michael York, Christopher Lee and Claude Rains) to the obscure (Italian movie favourite Reb Brown being an LA-born former boxer). Secondly, many lead characters in Italian science fiction movies have generic “American” names (“Bart Fargo”, “Captain Alex Hamilton”, “Commander Rod Jackson”, etc). Thirdly, many Italian actors and filmmakers cheerfully Anglicize their names for broader appeal: actor Giacomo Rossi-Stuart became “Jack Stuart”, actress Ombretta Colli became “Amber Collins” and directors Antonio Margheriti, Alfonso Brescia and Mario Bava became “Anthony Dawson”, “Al Bradley” and “John Foam”, respectively.

The cost of such slavish imitation, however, is a lack of any national identity within Italian science fiction films. When you watch an Italian science fiction film, you’ve seen it all before in films that are generally better produced and acted. While the Italian science fiction film genre has its fans, and its notable directors, there are very few people who would call Italian science fiction films good. A note-worthy exception to this rule would be *La decima vittima* (1965, *The Tenth Victim*), a blackly sardonic exercise in 60s style directed by

Elio Petri. The film’s cult status owes not a little to its two stars: the always cool Marcello Mastroianni and the lovely Ursula Andress – in a bra that doubles as a machine gun.

A more representative example of an Italian science fiction movie would be 1977’s *Battaglie Negli Spazi Stellari* (which translates as *War Of The Planets*), cranked out by director Brescia and starring UK actor and one-time James Bond nominee John Richardson. He plays the character of Mike Leighton, who takes a spacecraft

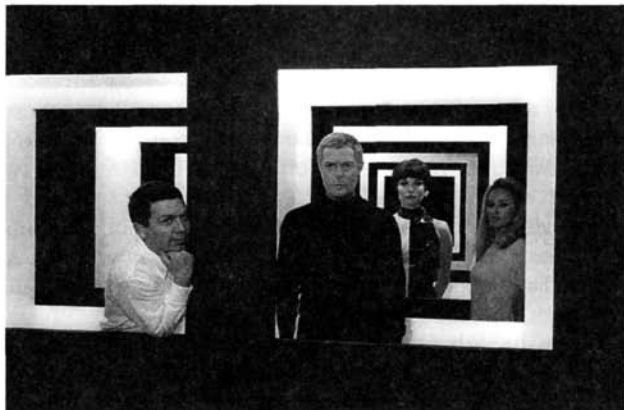
Budgeting science fiction

When it comes to science fiction spectacle, the American film industry can afford to throw immense amounts of money around to pay for the biggest stars and the shiniest effects. That’s not to say that expensive films are better: as we all know, often, less is more. And in the sci-fi world, less explosions can often make room for more script. Simply to illustrate the discrepancy, here’s a rough rundown of some recent science fiction film budgets from various countries (all figures are estimates):

- *I, Robot* (US, 2004) – \$105,000,000
- *Casshern* (Jap, 2004) – \$5,000,000
- *28 Days Later* (UK, 2003) – \$8,000,000
- *Cube Zero* (Can, 2004) – \$1,000,000
- *City Of Lost Children* (Fr, 1995) – \$18,000,000
- *Dagon* (Sp, 2001) – \$4,800,000
- *Nochnoy Dozor* (Rus, 2004) – \$4,200,000
- *Sky Blue* (SK, 2003) – \$10,000,000

to a mysterious planet and pits his wits against a tyrannical robot. The story is incoherent, the acting bad and the special effects laughable – especially in light of *Star Wars*, released in the same year, and the success of which this film was clearly meant to capitalize upon. As bad as this movie is, some of the shots and cast were quickly recycled by Brescia for the similarly bad *La guerra dei robot (War Of The Robots)* the following year. Full capitalization on the success of *Star Wars*, however, would not be achieved until 1979 when *Starcrash* (aka *Female Space Invaders*) was released. Director **Luigi Cozzi** (aka “Lewis Coats”) notes has commented in interview that he was encouraged to make the film as much like *Star Wars* as possible, and to that end the film stole most of its plot from *Star Wars*, not to mention its opening shot and its lightsabers. It also has the distinction of being one of the very first films to feature **David Hasselhoff**.

If any one person can be held up as the icon of Italian science fiction cinema, it would probably be director **Antonio Margheriti**, whose science fiction career lasted nearly 30 years (from 1960’s *Space Men* (aka *Assignment: Outer Space*) to 1989’s *Alien degli abissi (Alien From The Deep)*). His work was consistently derivative – in the case of the two films mentioned above, of George Pal’s 1950s output and of the *Alien* series, respectively. Margheriti’s largest international successes came in 1971, when he co-directed *Flesh For Frankenstein*, which was rebadged for arty audiences as *Andy Warhol’s Frankenstein* (although Warhol himself had nothing to do with the production), and in 1983 with *Yor: Hunter From The Future* (which was nominated for three “Razzies,” including one for star).



Marcello Mastroiani (centre) in *La decima vittima*



La decima vittima (The Tenth Victim)

dir **Elio Petri**, 1965, It, 90m, b/w

This bizarre movie, set in a near future (that now looks very retro) murder has become a game, and with your tenth kill, you get a prize. Marcello Mastroiani and Ursula Andress are assigned to assassinate each other, but instead they fall in love. In terms of the film’s camp cult status, the crowning glory has to be Andress’s bullet-spraying breasts.



Starcrash

dir **Luigi Cozzi**, 1979, It, 91m

The main attraction of the unabashed *Star Wars* ripoff is the appearance of a dewey fresh David Hasselhoff as Simon, son of the emperor, who gets his very own lightsaber scene.



Yor: Hunter From The Future

dir **Antonio Margheriti**, 1983, It, 88m

One of the few Italian science fiction films to get a high-profile release in the English-speaking world (it was made in English for just this purpose), *Yor* nevertheless lives down to the standards of Italian sci-fi, with its mishmash *Conan-meets-Star Wars* story, and acting that to describe as wooden is an insult to forests everywhere.

Japan

Japan is the second largest producer of science fiction film and TV, and a significant influence on US science fiction through its two primary sci-fi genres: Anime (Japanese animation, sometimes called “Japanamation”, particularly in reference to anime of the 60s and 70s) and *kaiju eiga*, the genre otherwise known as Japanese monster flicks.

Kaiju eiga began with the huge success of director **Ishiro Honda**’s *Gojira* (1954), better known, globally, as *Godzilla*. The movie was released in the United States and elsewhere in 1956 in a dubbed and substantially recut version, featuring US actor **Raymond Burr** (the uncut version was only unleashed on the West in 2004). *Gojira* owed quite a bit to *King Kong* (1933) and

the US science fiction monster films of the 1950s (notably *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*), but in general Japanese monster films followed their own path with little reference to the monster films being cranked out elsewhere in the world. One exception is the self-explanatory *King Kong Vs Godzilla* (*Kingukongu tai Gojira*) from 1962.

Godzilla himself would become a cottage industry, featuring in nearly 30 sequels through to 2004’s *Godzilla: Final Wars* (*Gojira: Fainaru uozu*), which marked the 50th anniversary of the *Godzilla* films. With the exception of the **Roland Emmerich**-directed US version (1998), the *Godzilla* films were produced by Toho Studio, which also created other popular film monsters

Directors Hollywood has stolen

What is a successful sci-fi director in a foreign market to do when they’ve gone as far as they can in their local film industry? Head to California and try his (or her) luck. Hollywood has shown remarkably little compunction in stealing away the best and brightest directors to make science fiction films in (or at least financed by) the United States film industry – the obvious example being Brit **Ridley Scott**. Here are some more of the prominent directors of science fiction film who went to Hollywood:

- Fritz Lang, Germany
(*Metropolis* – but no sci-fi in Hollywood).
- John Woo, Hong Kong
(*Face/Off*, *Mission: Impossible 2*)
- Guillermo del Toro, Mexico
(*Blade II*, *Hellboy*)

- Paul Verhoeven, Denmark
(*Robocop*, *Starship Troopers*, *Total Recall*)
- Roland Emmerich, Germany
(*Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow*)

Despite the nation’s tremendous influence on science fiction cinema, no significant Japanese director of science fiction has gone east to work in Hollywood; **Ishiro Honda**, the most famous, worked exclusively in Japanese film for his entire career. This situation may change, however, as Hollywood’s current fascination with remaking Japanese horror films has encouraged Japanese directors to remake their own work (see the work of **Hideo Nakata** and **Takashi Shimizu**, who directed American derivatives of their films *The Ring* and *The Grudge*). Hollywood studios are no doubt to further their exploration of Japanese source material.



1962's *King Kong Vs Godzilla* (*Kingukongu tai Gojira*)

such as **Mothra** and **Rodan**. Other Japanese film studio created their own monsters of varying popularity; the most successful one was probably **Gamera**, a rocket-propelled giant turtle used in films by the Daiei film studio. The Nikkatsu film studio, Japan's oldest, contributed **Gappa** (a winged, beaked dinosaur), while **Guilala** (a mutant space monster) emerged from the Shochiku studios.

Many of the *kaiju* films of the 1950s and 60s (and later) were released outside of Japan, although most were substantially edited prior to foreign release, not always to the advantage of the film – including 1984's *The Return Of Godzilla*, known as *Godzilla 1985* in the US, and recut with new scenes featuring Raymond Burr, just like the original. More recent *Godzilla* films, however, have been released to the wider world (theatrically or on DVD) in largely unmolested form.

While monster films were Japan's greatest sci-fi export in the 50s and 60s, it's **anime** that has been the country's most successful contribution to science fiction cinema in the 21st century.

Anime got its start on TV, as animator **Osamu Tezuka** created a limited, stylized version of animation for his 1963 TV series *Astro Boy*. The anime style, which features fewer animation frames and more camera tricks to give still pictures the illusion of movement (such as panning the camera across a drawing) was born out of necessity – animation was and remains expensive and Tezuka had inexperienced staff – but over time these tricks became hallmarks of the anime style and can still be seen today, even though increased production values in both TV and film anime obviate the need for them.

Anime was largely a TV export in the 60s and 70s, with shows such as *Speed Racer*, *Kimba The White Lion*, *Star Blazers* and of course *Astro Boy*, but in 1988 the full-length anime film *Akira*

The languages of science fiction film

Watch enough science fiction films, and you'll hear English, Japanese, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, German, Cantonese and Korean. But listen (and look) closely and you'll find science fiction in languages you didn't expect, like:

- **Welsh** The 1994 comedy *Ymadawiad Arthur* features time-traveling Welshmen hoping to retrieve the mythical king, but ending up with a rugby hero instead.
- **Esperanto** This language was created in the 19th century as a way to help bring the world together. It didn't work, but the language pops up in 1997's *Gattaca*, where it can be heard over the public address system.

Sign Language 1987's *Project X* uses sign language in order to have the humans speak to the chimpanzees who are being used in a secret military project.

- **Hawaiian** 2002's animated *Lilo And Stitch* takes place on the Hawaiian islands and uses the Hawaiian language to communicate important plot concepts as well as exasperation.
- **Tibetan** The spiritual land of Tibet may seem far removed from sci-fi, but it and its language show up in 2004's *Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow*.
- **Icelandic** This Nordic language appears when science fiction films have cause to go arctic, as they do in *The Island At The Top Of The World* (1974) and *Journey To The Center Of The Earth* (1959).
- **Klingon** Don't laugh – this "created" language is indeed an actual language, with grammar, vocabulary and entire works translated into it (notably the Bible and the works of Shakespeare). It appears, naturally enough, in the *Star Trek* series of films.

(see Canon), set in a future Tokyo and featuring a puzzling, mind-blowing plot, was released worldwide to great acclaim; it would serve as a stylistic template to an upcoming generation of US filmmakers, including the **Wachowski** brothers, who would make *The Matrix*, and in turn honour the debt with *The Animatrix*, featuring segments created by numerous anime directors and writers.

Although anime is usually associated with science fiction outside of Japan, in Japan (and among hardcore anime fans worldwide) anime is understood to encompass a huge range of subjects. The most acclaimed non-sci-fi anime movies have been director **Hayao Miyazaki's** fantasy films, most notably *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, 2001), which won an Academy Award for best animated feature. Other sub-genres include sprightly anime aimed at young girls (known as *Shojo*, or *Maho Shojo* if involving magical themes), romantic anime (*Moë*) and even erotic anime (*Hentai* or *Echi*).

Nevertheless, these are halcyon days for SF-flavored theatrical animes. Miyazaki's critical success in the English speaking world (and an agreement between Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli and animation giant Disney to have Disney release his work globally) have opened the door to wider theatrical releases of anime and anime-style film: Globally released sci-fi anime films in 2004 and 2005 included Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* (*Hauru no ugoku shiro*), director **Shinji Aramaki's** *Appleseed*, the retro-SF *Steamboy*, directed by **Katsuhiro Otomo**, who also directed *Akira*, and the Korean anime-style release *Sky Blue* (see p.269).

Beyond monster movies and anime, Japan also creates and releases a significant number of other science fiction films, though many are openly derivative of Hollywood sci-fi releases. These are mostly for domestic consumption, although some are treated to wider releases in theatres and

on home video. Some recent examples are 2002's *Returner*, whose time-travel themes and "bullet time"-esque effects borrow generously from the *Terminator* and *Matrix* films. There was also 2004's *Casshern*, a live-action remake of a 1970s anime, which employed many of the "green screen" special effects of *Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow*. One non-anime, non-monster Japanese science fiction film whose reputation has expanded beyond Japan is the surrealistic and disturbing *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1988), directed by **Shinya Tsukamoto**, which is considered by aficionados to be the Japanese equivalent of David Lynch's *Eraserhead*.



King Kong Vs Godzilla

dir **Ishiro Honda**, 1962, Jap, 91m

Interestingly enough, this film marks the first appearance in colour film of either Godzilla or King Kong. In this movie Godzilla is the bad guy, and King Kong the good guy – but does it really matter? In terms of sheer cardboard city smashing spectacle, no, not really. King Kong looks particularly shabby here, but overall it's a whole lot of fun.



Tetsuo: The Iron Man

dir **Shinya Tsukamoto**, 1988, Jap, 67m

This film will satisfy your need for disturbing surrealistic science fiction horror, as you watch with fascination a Japanese salaryman start sprouting metal appendages, including a rotating drill from his nether regions (which makes for one of the most disturbing sex scenes, ever).



Returner

dir **Takashi Yamazaki**, 2002, Jap, 116m

A girl from the future teams up with a guy from the present to fend off an upcoming war. The plot isn't the only thing that's recycled here: *Returner* stylishly but rather obviously steals from both the *Terminator* and *Matrix* films as well as many other science fiction flicks; in this sense the title of the film is all too apt.

**Casshern**

dir Kazuaki Kiriya, 2004, Jap, 141m

Here Kazuaki has a stab at updating cartoon heroes: This is a live-action remake of a 1973 anime, done primarily in front of a green screen, not unlike *Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow*. And like that film, the visuals are rather more impressive than the story, which flails around looking for a point. Concentrate on the pretty effects.

**Howl's Moving Castle**

dir Hayao Miyazaki, 2004, Jap, 119m

Miyazaki's followup to *Spirited Away* has the animator's patented sense of visual beauty and wonder (including the immensely impressive moving castle of the film title), but the film's story, involving a girl who falls for a doomed and selfish sorcerer, isn't all it could be. A (very) slight disappointment by Miyazaki standards, which means it's still rather more interesting than most animated films.

Mexico

What the English-speaking world knows of Mexico's science fiction films comes primarily from two men: Florida Z-grade movie impresario K. Gordon Murray, and the equally hackworthy director-producer Jerry Warren.

During the 1960s these two men came up with the "wonderful" idea of purchasing Mexican-made science fiction/horror films, and then re-editing them – sometimes with new scenes featuring horror film stalwarts such as **Boris Karloff** and **Lon Chaney Jr.** – to create "new" films that were then served up hot to drive-ins and matinees around the United States. Sometimes the films were dramatically different than their source material; for example, a 1960 spooky Mexican comedy named *La Casa del Terror*

**Godzilla: Final Wars**

dir Ryuhei Kitamura, 2004, Jap, 87m

The *Godzilla* franchise went quiet after this film, but he certainly went out swinging, doing battle with all sorts of very large, city destroying monsters. On a video game-like level it's fun to watch these creatures hammer it out, but on another it's clear Godzilla really does need time off.



Kaliman in comic book action

(*The House of Terror*) was hacked up by Warren and released as 1964's *Face Of The Screaming Terror*, minus the original star (Mexican comedian **Tin-Tan**) and recast as a straight – if bad – horror flick. Unless you're a native Mexican, the chances of having seen any of the Mexican science fiction/horror films of the 1950s and 60s in their unmolested state is fairly slim.

Be that as it may, the science fiction films of Mexico are nothing less than fascinating; one way to understand them would be to imagine the “creature feature” science fiction and horror films that came from Universal Studios in the 1930s, in Spanish and – this is the uniquely Mexican part – frequently featuring wrestlers. Mexico’s wrestling tradition is alive and well in these films. The immensely popular wrestler **Santo**, whose mask was so much part of his popular identity that it was buried along with him, starred in a series of films that pitted him against evil scientists and/or monsters and/or aliens. These flicks included 1966’s *Santo Contra la Invasión de los Marcianos* (*Santo Vs The Martian Invasion*) and 1971’s *Santo Contra la Hija de Frankenstein* (*Santo Vs Frankenstein’s Daughter*).

Another popular wrestler/movie star was **Blue Demon**, who in his time dealt with space spiders (*Arañas Infernales*, 1966) and mad doctors (*Blue Demon Contra los Cerebros Infernales*, 1968), among other terrors. Santo and Blue Demon even teamed up from time to time, to battle, for example, the likes of Dr Frankenstein in the memorable *Santo y Blue Demon Contra el Doctor Frankenstein* (1974). There were even female wrestlers in on the act: 1963’s *Las Luchadoras Contra el Médico Asesino* (*Female Wrestlers Vs the Killer Doctor*) featured both **Gloria Venus** and **Golden Rubi** squaring off against a mad scientist and his ape-man (this film was naturally recut by Murray, who released it in the US under the titles *Doctor Of Doom And Rock 'N Roll Wrestling Women Vs. The Aztec Ape*).

Science fiction and wrestling have managed to co-exist in Mexico even in the modern era, with films such as 1992’s *Luchadores de las Estrellas*, and 2001’s *Santo: Infraterrestre*, featuring the “Hijo del Santo” (“The Son of Santo”) filling in for the original Santo, who passed away in 1984.

Mexican science fiction has also called upon comic books for source material: 1972’s *Kaliman* (featuring Canadian **Jeff Cooper** in the lead role) was based on the immensely popular comic book of the same name. For a Mexican movie it was something of a superproduction and did well enough to spawn a 1974 sequel.



Face Of The Screaming Werewolf

dir **Gilberto Martínez Solares**, 1964, Mex, 60m

Lon Chaney Jr. slums it in this cheapo horror film in which a resuscitated mummy turns out to be the mummy of a werewolf. What are the odds? Stitched together from the remains of a 1960 comedy/horror film, this version has most of the (intentional) comedy expunged.



Santo Contra la Invasión de los Marcianos (Santo Vs The Martian Invasion)

dir **Alfredo B. Crevenna**, 1966, Mex, 85m

Martians invade Mexico and plan to vapourize the inhabitants of earth as punishment for our nuclear madness! Only masked wrestler Santo can save us! If you’ve ever wanted to see a beefy Mexican cultural icon wrestle silver-caped would-be invaders from another planet, then brother, your ship has truly come in. Bad? Yes. But also nearly too much fun for words.



Arañas Infernales

dir **Federico Curie**, 1966, Mex, 85m

Sure, the alien invaders look like humans. But they’re actually spiders from outer space! And of course the natural enemy of human-looking spiders from space is a Mexican wrestler, in this case Blue Demon. Not the best “Luchador battling space aliens” film you can see.



Kaliman

dir **Alberto Mariscal**, 1972, Mex, 94m

One of Mexico’s favourite comic book heroes appears in a lavish (by Mexican standards) production that has the hero searching for evidence of extraterrestrial visits in Egypt and meeting up with his trusty sidekick Solin. Passably entertaining for what is fundamentally a cheesy 70s movie.

South Korea

South Korea's homegrown cinema is beginning to make waves in the worldwide SF community; as in Japan there is a tradition for making monster movies, while a more recent trend has been films that combine time travel and romance.

Notable examples of this hybrid genre include *Eunhaengnamoo Chindae* (1996), in which a bed reunites a reincarnated lover with an earlier girlfriend and *Siworae* (2000), in which a mailbox allows two would-be lovers to communicate across time. The most successful of this type of film is *Donggam* (2000) a poetic allegory that confronts issues about life in contemporary South Korea via a dialogue between two students from different eras.

South Korea's film industry can also boast one of cinema's weirdest "truth-is-stranger-than-fiction" stories. In 1978 leading director **Shin Sang-ok** and his actress wife were kidnapped on the instructions of North Korea's hard-line Communist dictator Kim Jong-il.

This was a case of fan-worship carried to extreme lengths. Kim – a movie buff and a great admirer of Shin Sang-ok's work – wanted the South Korean director to make films specifically for him. These included a big-budget movie entitled *Pulgasari* about a monster that starts small but who grows bigger and bigger on a diet of weapons and farm implements. Eventually Pulgasari joins forces with the people to overcome the evil king (one can only assume that Kim identified with the former rather than the latter). Shin Sang-ok and his wife eventually escaped from North Korea in 1986.



Sky Blue (aka *Wonderful Days*)



Taekoesu Yonggary

dir **Ki-duk Kim, 1967, SK, 79m**

A Korean spin on the monster movie of Japan, with Yonggary, a large lizard from the sea, substituting the role of Godzilla. It's largely derivative but has some camp value for the strange dance Yonggary performs during the film. Yonggary's existence as a rider of Godzilla's coattails was confirmed with 1999's remake (renamed *Reptilian* for the US release) timed to take maximum advantage of the US version of *Godzilla*.



Donggam

dir **Jeong-kwon Kim, 2000, SK, 110m**

A popular example of South Korea's recent time-travel/romance craze, in which two lovers are separated by the gulf of time. In this case, two college students, one from 1979 and one from 2000, communicate by use of ham radio (not unlike the US movie *Frequency*), and learn about each other and the differences in South Korea across two decades.

**2009: Lost Memories**

dir Si-myung Lee, 2002, SK, 136m

Another time travel film, in which policemen in a world where Japan won WWII suspect they're living in the wrong alternate timeline. Action-packed.

**Sky Blue (aka Wonderful Days)**

dir Moon-saeng Kim, 2003, SK, 90m

Post-ecopocalyptic anime, with a dash of class struggle thrown in for good measure. Budgeted at 10 million US dollars, it was the most expensive animated film in South Korean history, and you can see the budget onscreen. It's really nice to look at but there's not much in the story department; nevertheless it serves to announce that Korean sci-fi cinema was on the move.

Spain

As an interesting bit of trivia, the first Spanish science fiction film of consequence was 1925's *Madrid en el Año 2000*, which, among other things, posited a canal from Madrid to the sea, and was directed by Manuel Noriega, who was no relation to the famous Panamanian strongman. It would also be the last significant Spanish science fiction film until the 1960s, when the country began generating mad scientist and killer robot flicks.

Many of these were cranked out by the remarkably prolific director **Jesus Franco**, who has over 180 films to his credit (two in the categories mentioned above would be 1966's *Miss Muerte* and *Cartas boca arriba*). The quality of these films may be surmised by Franco's complete disdain for his own work.

Much of the rest of Spanish science fiction cinema inhabits an area similar to that occupied by Italy's sci-fi canon, in which much of the work is openly derivative of popular English language films – sometimes unreservedly so. 1983's *El E.T.E. y el Oto*, a parody of *E.T.*, was

rushed through production in order to be in theatres at the same time as Spielberg's film. This movie is infamously bad and should be avoided. Other obvious attempts to cash in include 1979's *Supersonic Man* (a *Superman* rip-off) and 1983's *Los nuevos extraterrestres (E.T., again)*.

Nevertheless, Spanish science fiction has its moments. Arguably the best Spanish science fiction movie was 1997's science fiction/psychological thriller *Abre los ojos (Open Your Eyes)* *Ojos* which aside from launching **Penelope Cruz** toward international stardom was also remade as *Vanilla Sky* by American director **Cameron Crowe**, starring **Tom Cruise** (and Penelope Cruz, again).

Other recent films of interest to appear from Spain include 1999's surreal comedy *La mujer más fea del mundo (The Ugliest Woman In The World)*, which garnered director **Miguel Bardem** a Goya (the Spanish Oscar) for best new director, and 2001's **H.P. Lovecraft**-based flick *Dagon*, financed and filmed in Spain but directed by American **Stuart Gordon**.



Penelope Cruz in *Abre los ojos*



Madrid en el Año 2000

dir Manuel Noreiga, 1925, Sp, b/w

This look ahead to 21st century Madrid is reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (which actually came out after this film). Its scope is staggering – it takes vision to imagine canals connecting Madrid to the sea. Good luck finding this on either VHS or DVD.



Miss Muerte

dir Jesus Franco, 1966, Sp, 86m, b/w

When Doctor Zimmer's mind control experiments are mocked by the medical establishment, causing his death, his mad daughter Irma swears she will avenge his death – making her one of the few female mad scientists in the movies. The film is well over-the-top and enjoyable on that level. Also released under the title *The Diabolical Doctor Z.*



Cartas boca arriba (Attack Of The

Robots) dir Jesus Franco, 1966, Sp, 92m, b/w

A bunch of assassins are found to have something in common: a rare blood type. What could it possibly mean? Eddie Constantine is on the case to find out. The production is sloppy but it has its moments and also a sly sense of humour.



Abre los ojos

dir Alejandro Amenábar, 1997, Sp, 117m

The guy who has everything loses everything and then tries to get a grip before reality is yanked out from under him like a rug. Very trippy indeed, and it boasts Penelope Cruz to boot. This was remade into *Vanilla Sky*, starring Tom Cruise, but the original is better.

USSR/Russia

Even before the Revolution of 1917, Russia boasted a thriving tradition of science fiction writing (see p.14); this continued throughout the Soviet years when science and technology were revered as the great catalysts of revolutionary progress. At least some of these writers were known in the West, which is more than can be said for Russian sci-fi movies.

From the time that Stalin came to power (1924) to the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), the Communist regime carefully controlled both the kind of films that were made, and which of these films were allowed to reach the rest of the world. The only science fiction film to make a truly global impact was Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972, see Canon), which came out around the

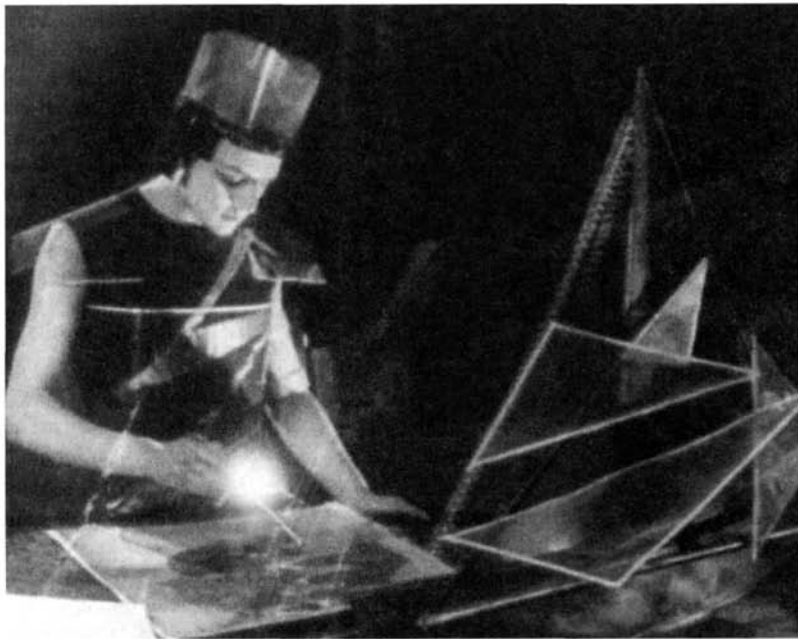


Tarkovsky's original version of *Solaris*, based on the novel by Stanislaw Lem

same time as Kubrick's *2001* with which it was frequently compared. But there are plenty of others: some blithely toeing the ideological line, but others that are slyly subversive. Where Russian science fiction differs from its US equivalent – apart, of course, from its ideology – is the way it tends to avoid rapid fire macho heroics in favour of a slower-paced and more thoughtful approach. Many of the films discussed below raise, and attempt to debate probing philosophical and ethical issues.

The first significant science fiction movie to be made in the Soviet Union was the highly innovative and striking *Aelita*, directed by **Iakov Protazanov**. Completed in 1924, its essentially pro-Communist story features a Soviet citizen who falls in love with the Martian queen Aelita and inadvertently brings revolution to Mars (and you thought it was called the red planet because of its landscape). Though much of the film is set in Moscow, it is most memorable for its fabulous Martian scenes which were designed by avant-garde artists **Alexandra Ekster** (costumes) and **Isaak Rabinovich** (sets).

1935 saw the appearance of *Novy Gulliver* (*New Gulliver*, 1935), a full-length animation film by **Alexander Ptushko** about a young Soviet citizen who drops off to sleep while reading *Gulliver's Travels*. When he awakes he finds himself in a futuristic Lilliput peopled by revolutionary workers and bright new technology. The same



Aelita: Queen Of Mars

year also produced *Kosmichesky Reys* (*The Space Ship*) directed by **Vasili Zhuralev**, a simple tale of a frustrated scientist who builds his own spaceship and heads for the moon accompanied by his beautiful (female) assistant.

Thereafter things go a little quiet, at least in terms of Western knowledge of Soviet sci-fi films. The exception to this are two movies from the 1960s, the rights of which were bought by **Roger Corman** who then had them re-assembled as schlocky drive-in fodder for the US market. The first of these was *Nebo Zovoyot* (1960), originally a story of a space race to Mars between the USSR and the USA, with the former portrayed as heroic and the latter as pretty abject. Corman hired a young **Francis Ford Coppola** to make it suit-



Stalker

able for a US audience, which he did by optically disguising the tell-tale marks on the rocket ships, making the competing missions occupants of the northern and southern hemispheres of Earth, and introducing some fairly risible alien creatures (with more than a passing resemblance to human genitalia). The resulting *Battle Beyond The Sun* (1962) has a high curiosity quotient and plenty of laughs but not much else.

Corman's next butchering job was on *Planeta Bur* (*Planet Of Storms*, 1962). Ironically the original movie, directed by sci-fi specialist **Pavel Klushantsev**, has recently become available on DVD and turns out to be a pretty superior effort with some – for the time – high quality special effects, including a remarkably classy robot named John. The plot involves an intrepid party

of cosmonauts and their adventures on the planet Venus. Its “Cormanized” version was put together by Curtis Harrington in 1966 as *Planet Of Blood* (aka *Queen Of Blood*), with extra footage featuring **Florence Marley** as a vampiric alien and the extremely unlikely combination of **Basil Rathbone** and **Dennis Hopper** as a pair of astronauts. Two years later the same footage was worked over by **Peter Bogdanovich** to become *Voyage To The Planet Of Prehistoric Women* (1968). The prehistoric women in question – a bevy of scantily-dressed, nubile young Venusian women led by **Mamie Van Doren** – raise (or lower) the enterprise to a whole new level of camp eccentricity.

One remarkable 1960s film managed to escape the Corman net; this was *Chelovek Amphibia* (*Amphibian Man*, 1961), a delightful movie with a story that falls somewhere between *Creature From The Black Lagoon* and *The Little Mermaid*. Based on the novel by cult sci-fi writer **Alexander Belyaev**, it tells of the inhabitants of a South American fishing village who live in fear of a strange sea creature that seems to be part man and part fish. Combining pretty corny special effects with some truly stunning underwater sequence, its lead actor, **Vladimir Korenev** was doubled in the marine sections by the Soviet underwater swimming champion **Rem Stukalov**.

In the 1970s **Andrei Tarkovsky** – the most talented and visionary of post-war Soviet directors – made two extraordinary science fiction films, the first of which, *Solaris* (1972), is discussed in detail on p.112. The second, *Stalker* (1979), based on the novel *Roadside Picnic* by the **Boris**

and **Arkady Strugatsky**, is both utterly compelling and deeply mystifying. The action takes place in a forbidden landscape (the “zone”) that has been blighted by some unspecified disaster, through which the stalker of the title guides an elderly scientist and a cynical author. Like *Solaris*, the film is about inner, rather than outer, space: the journey is a metaphysical one, with the men searching for an elusive and largely unexplained philosophical goal. Filmed in a contaminated site in Estonia (which may have contributed to the early death of Tarkovsky and several of the crew), *Stalker* is disturbingly prophetic of the Chernobyl explosion which occurred seven years later.

A more mainstream approach during the 1970s and 80s was provided by veteran sci-fi director **Richard Viktorov** who in *Moskva-Kassiopeya* (1973), and its sequel *Otroki V Vselennoy* (*Teenagers In Space*, 1974), provided Soviet youth with lively – if simplistic – adventure yarns about space travel. His 1981 *Cherez Ternii K Zvyozdam* (*The Hard Way To The Stars*) is more teen fodder, involving a beautiful alien woman (rescued by cosmonauts) who after a brief introduction to the joys of Earth, persuades her hosts to mount a mission to her planet to help out with its pollution problems. The film surfaced in the US in an appallingly dubbed version as *Humanoid Woman*.

Professor Dowell's Testament (1984) is another adaptation of an Alexander Belyaev novel, somewhat in the tradition of *Frankenstein*. As well as being a whizz at head transplants, Professor Dowell has developed a life-sustaining liquid by which he plans to preserve the world's greatest brains for the benefit of mankind. However, it is currently being used to preserve his own life – or rather his head – following a suspicious-looking car crash. Administered by his dastardly assistant, Dr Korn, the liquid is fast running out; but if Professor Dowell reveals the formula, Korn

plans to claim it as his own and sell it to a sinister pharmaceutical firm. Directed by **Leonid Menaker**, the film is overtly populist (in a way that Tarkovsky's films certainly aren't) but still has room for the sort of philosophical and ethical debate that is such a characteristic of Russian science fiction.

Georgi Daneliya's *Kin-Dza-Dza* (1986) is that rarity – a Soviet sci-fi comedy. Two Russians are accidentally transported to the planet Plyuk in the galaxy Kin-Dza-Dza where language is limited because the inhabitants are able to read thoughts. They maybe more advanced technologically, but socially they are pretty barbaric and the two earthlings long to return home. Despite its low-tech effects, this surreal satire is a visual *tour de force* of unlikely landscapes and bizarre contraptions. Something of a cult movie, it even seems to have spawned a rock band of the same name.

1986 also saw the appearance of **Pisma Myortvogo Cheloveka** (*Letters From A Dead Man*, 1986), directed by Tarkovsky protégé **Konstantin Lopushansky**. Like *Stalker* (which Lopushansky worked on) *Pisma Myortvogo Cheloveka* is a vision of post-nuclear catastrophe, in which the few survivors wander through a landscape that has been destroyed by an accidental war. Inside a museum, a scientist writes a series of letters to his dead son as a way of expiating his sense of responsibility for what has happened. The bleakness of vision and implicit pessimism about the failure of the communist ideal is shared by **Alexander Sokurov's** *Dni Zatmeniya* (*Days Of The Eclipse*, 1988) which, like *Stalker*, is based on a story (*A Million Years Before The End Of The World*) by the Strugatsky brothers. It tells the story of a Russian doctor working, rather aimlessly, in an out of the way part of an impoverished Central Asian country. Sokurov almost entirely removes the science fiction (apart from some oddly ambiguous super-

natural elements) creating instead a hallucinatory picture of a disintegrating environment and the doctor's failure to make sense of the weirdness that surrounds him.

Post-Soviet Russia has begun to produce science fiction and fantasy that travels beyond its own border, most notably 2004's stylish *Nochnoy Dozor* (*Night Watch*), the highest-grossing movie in Russian screen history. More fantasy than sci-fi, it's an apocalyptic tale, derived from the hugely popular trilogy by *Sergei Lukyanenko*, about the struggle between the forces of Light and Dark. For the last thousand years an uneasy truce has existed between the two, but an ancient prophecy predicts the appearance of a third force that could upset the balance and unleash global catastrophe. The film's huge success attracted the attention of Century Fox who now own the foreign distribution rights and plan to finance the completion of the trilogy.



Aelita

dir Iakov Protazanov, 1924, USSR, 111m, b/w

Aelita's charmingly bizarre plot involves a Soviet engineer named Los who apparently murders his wife in order to launch his rocket towards Aelita – the Martian of his dreams. But Mars is a totalitarian state and Queen Aelita aims to keep it that way. With the help of his revolutionary crew member Gusev, Los eventually sees the error of his ways and is brought down to earth in more ways than one.



Chelovek Ampfibia (Amphibian Man)

dir Gennady Kazansky & Vladimir Chebotaryov,

1961, USSR, 97m

A film that apparently reflects genuine scientific research into increasing underwater lung capacity, *Amphibian Man* tells of an underwater "monster" created by a scientist experimenting on his own son. Despite some fairly cheesy plotting (the creature rescues and falls in love with Gutiere, the betrothed of a cowardly fisherman), the underwater scenes are never less than stunning.



Planeta Bur (Planet Of Storms)

dir Pavel Klushantsev, 1962, USSR, 78m

Klushantsev has a strong record as a director of science fiction films and this is one of his best with surprisingly little ideological tub-thumping. A mission to Venus (to rescue stranded colleagues) leads to the surprising discovery of lakes, vegetation, an ancient civilization and even dinosaurs. Among the highpoints is the moment the robot gets rained on and starts spouting gobbledegook.



Stalker

dir Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979, USSR, 161m, b/w & col

If you can take the film's dripping tap-like pace, this is a deeply rewarding experience. With its switches between colour, sepia, and black and white plus slow tracking shots of discarded fragments of civilization lying underwater, Tarkovsky manages to conjure a strange beauty out of the desolation and decay. Brilliant performances from the three central characters make the obscure philosophizing seem intriguing rather than ponderous.



Pisma Myortvogo Cheloveka (Letters From A Dead Man)

dir Konstantin Lopushansky, 1966, USSR, 88m

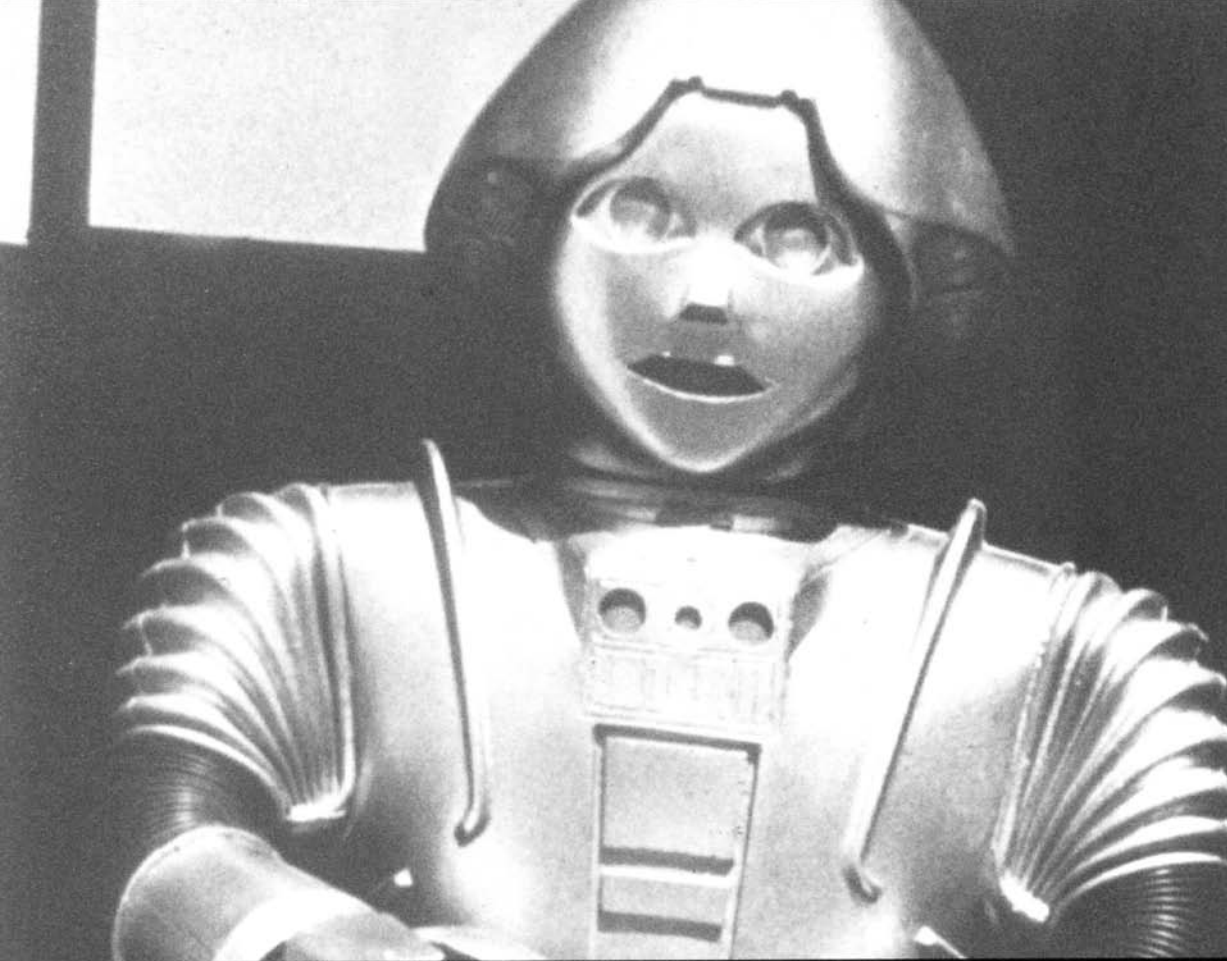
With a strong visual style, clearly inspired by the work of his mentor Tarkovsky, Lopushansky's first feature makes a powerful impact and is one of the finest anti-war films ever made. The dying professor's attempts to shepherd a group of surviving children across the post-nuclear wasteland is poignant, while the movie's final moments are deeply chilling.



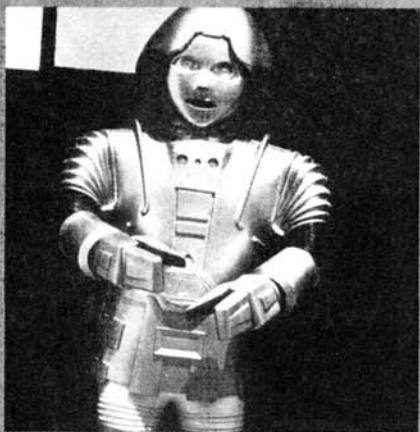
Nochnoy Dozor (Night Watch)

dir Timur Bekmambetov, 2004, Russia, 115m

Produced by a government-funded TV channel and set in Moscow, it's not hard to see this multi-million rouble blockbuster as representing contemporary fears about the threat of global terrorism. Bekmambetov is a former ad director and the imagery is both slickly produced and highly imaginative.



Information: the wider picture



Twiki from the TV series and motion picture of *Buck Rogers In The 25th Century* (1979-1981)

Information: the wider picture

While sci-fi film is arguably the highest-profile example of popular science fiction, the genre also finds expression in television, in video games, on the Internet and, of course, in writing and other aspects of popular culture. This chapter – while by no stretch of the imagination exhaustive – will give you some starting points to discover science fiction in these other media.

Audiovisual

Sci-fi on TV

As in film, science fiction has gone through its ups and downs in the television medium, as even the most popular of science fiction TV series – *Star Trek* among them – have struggled to find a niche, frequently appearing to be pale cousins of what appears on our cinema screens.

Nevertheless, there are many undisputed clas-

sics within the genre and, in recent times, sci-fi on TV has undergone something of a rebirth – one of the most popular cable networks in the US is the SciFi Channel, which is creating cutting-edge television science fiction, and in the UK the BBC's *Doctor Who* has returned from a long hiatus. Here's a short list of the science fiction shows that have made an impression over the years, in alphabetical order.

Babylon 5

1994–1998, US

Babylon 5 is a five-mile-long space station in a neutral zone between several star-going races; it's a place where these races can get together to solve their myriad differences – theoretically. The reality, of course, is rather more complicated. *Babylon 5* was classified early as a *Star Trek* knock-off, but it became apparent reasonably quickly that series creator **J. Michael Straczynski** had planned out his universe rather more methodically than *Star*

Trek had been plotted. The Byzantine twists of the series' plot could be confusing for casual visitors, but for science fiction fans who love pure space opera, *Babylon 5* ranks as one of the best.

Battlestar Galactica

1978–1980, 2003–, US

The 12 human colonies are destroyed by the machine **Cylons**, with only a small group of human spacecraft escaping, led by the massive *Galactica*. *Battlestar Galactica* first existed as an expensive but bad 1978 show, designed to capitalize on the *Star Wars* craze. It lasted for two seasons and became a cult favourite afterwards, which says more about the paucity of good TV sci-fi than any inherent quality of the show.

The more recent iteration, which includes a miniseries and an ongoing series, incorporates a number of elements from the original show but so dramatically improves the writing, acting and overall episode quality that some television critics have suggested it is the best science fiction series ever. At this moment in time it's a little early to hand over the crown, but without a doubt this show has had one of the best first seasons of any science fiction series, ever.

Blake's 7

1978–1981, UK

Created by **Terry Nation** for the BBC, this wobbly-setted tale of a band of outlaws making their way through space, pursued by a totalitarian government (The Federation), has become a cult classic.

Title character **Blake (Gareth Thomas)** was a former resistance leader and played the Robin Hood role in the story, against chief bad-girl



Buck Rogers' pal Twiki

TV anime

In addition to being an expanding film genre, anime is all over television – which makes sense, as television was the birthplace of the first anime, 1963's *Astro Boy*, created by anime giant **Osamu Tezuka**. While a dominant form in Japan, anime did not compete brilliantly on television away from home. Only a handful of series made it through: examples from the 60s and 70s include *Speed Racer* (with its memorable if grating theme song), and the classic kid-oriented *Battle Of The Planets* and *Star Blazers*.

In the late 1990s and early 21st century, however, anime has taken off worldwide. One primary factor was the runaway success of *Pokémon*, the game-inspired anime that was less of a cartoon phenomenon than a full-out multi-platform assault on parents' wallets: *Pokémon* infested everything from TV to cinema

to video games to card games and even breakfast cereals. Another factor was the form's adoption by the Cartoon Network, the US cable station, which introduced viewers to more adult science fiction iterations of anime, such as *Cowboy Bebop*, *The Big O* and *Ghost In The Machine: Stand Alone Complex*.

For most true fans of anime outside of Japan, however, the way to see anime is not on TV but on DVD, where the shows are shown uncut (many anime are re-edited to tone down violence before they are aired in the English-speaking world) and subtitled rather than dubbed. DVDs also offer up a wider range – not just the action and science fiction anime, but also the comedy and girl-oriented anime (like the soap opera–esque *Please, Teacher!* and *Fancy Lala*) that doesn't make it onto the air elsewhere.

Servalan (Jacqueline Pearce), while the brains of the operation was a computer named **Orac**, who looked a little like a fish tank.

Considering that the series appeared in the years after *Star Wars*, it maintained a gritty edge, consistently showing the gloomier sides of the characters, while not thinking twice about killing off good guys left, right and centre. The show still gets the occasional rerun, and is well worth catching.

Buck Rogers In The 25th Century

1979–1981, UK

The hero of comics and the original 1930s serial, which starred **Buster Crabbe**, is found here in a very much of-its-time blow-out of camp and special effects. The story goes something like this: **Buck** (Gil Gerard), an astronaut, is trapped in

suspended animation for five centuries by a space anomaly and returns to Earth in the year 2491, where he makes new friends in **Wilma Deering** (Erin Gray) and a pint-sized robot with a bit of a mouth on him named **Twiki** (pictured), who was by far the biggest star of the show. It lasted two seasons and featured one of the greatest sci-fi theme tunes ever.

Doctor Who

1963–1989, 2005–, UK

The longest-running science fiction series in history had a remarkably inauspicious start: it debuted the day after the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy and as a result was seen by so few people that the BBC felt obliged to rebroadcast the first episode. A bad beginning but a fine follow-through, as the series contin-

ued for a quarter-century afterwards, augmented by the occasional theatrical film and television special, with **The Doctor** (who is not actually named “Doctor Who”) and his various companions travelling through time and space via the **TARDIS**.

The one constant in the series has been change: in the 26 seasons between 1963 and 1989 seven actors essayed the role of The Doctor (pretty much everyone’s favourite being **Tom Baker**, replete with impractically long scarf), with each change explained by The Doctor’s ability to “regenerate” from time to time.

As with other low-budget classics such as *Blake’s 7*, what the *Doctor Who* series lacked in production values it made up for in kid-inspiring imagination and quirky Doctors, right down to the 2005 revival starring **Christopher Eccleston**, which has received mixed reviews.



Daleks – Invasion Earth 2150 A.D.

dir **Gordon Flemyng, 1966, UK, 81m**

Two mid-60s *Dr Who* films were produced, the other being *Dr Who And The Daleks*. They both featured Peter Cushing as The Doctor (he was not part of the television series continuity, but did a fine job with the role), and those old stalwarts of the *Doctor Who* universe, The Daleks. Both films have aged slightly better than many of the TV seasons, while *Invasion Earth* stands out for the appearance of the wonderful Bernard Cribbins.

Futurama

1999–2003, US

A pizza delivery dude is accidentally frozen in 1999 and defrosts a thousand years later in a universe designed expressly to mock 20th-century culture and its ideas about science fiction. *Futurama* will always be known as “that *other* animated series from **Matt Groening**” (and rightly

so, as Groening is the mind behind *The Simpsons*, arguably the greatest television series ever). Yet *Futurama* stands out for being both funny and for being delirious eye-candy; the DVD “pause” button was designed for this series, so true fans can take in all the little background details that zip by at normal speed. This is a show by science fiction geeks, for science fiction geeks, and as such it’s something of a miracle it lasted as long as it did.

The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy

1981, UK

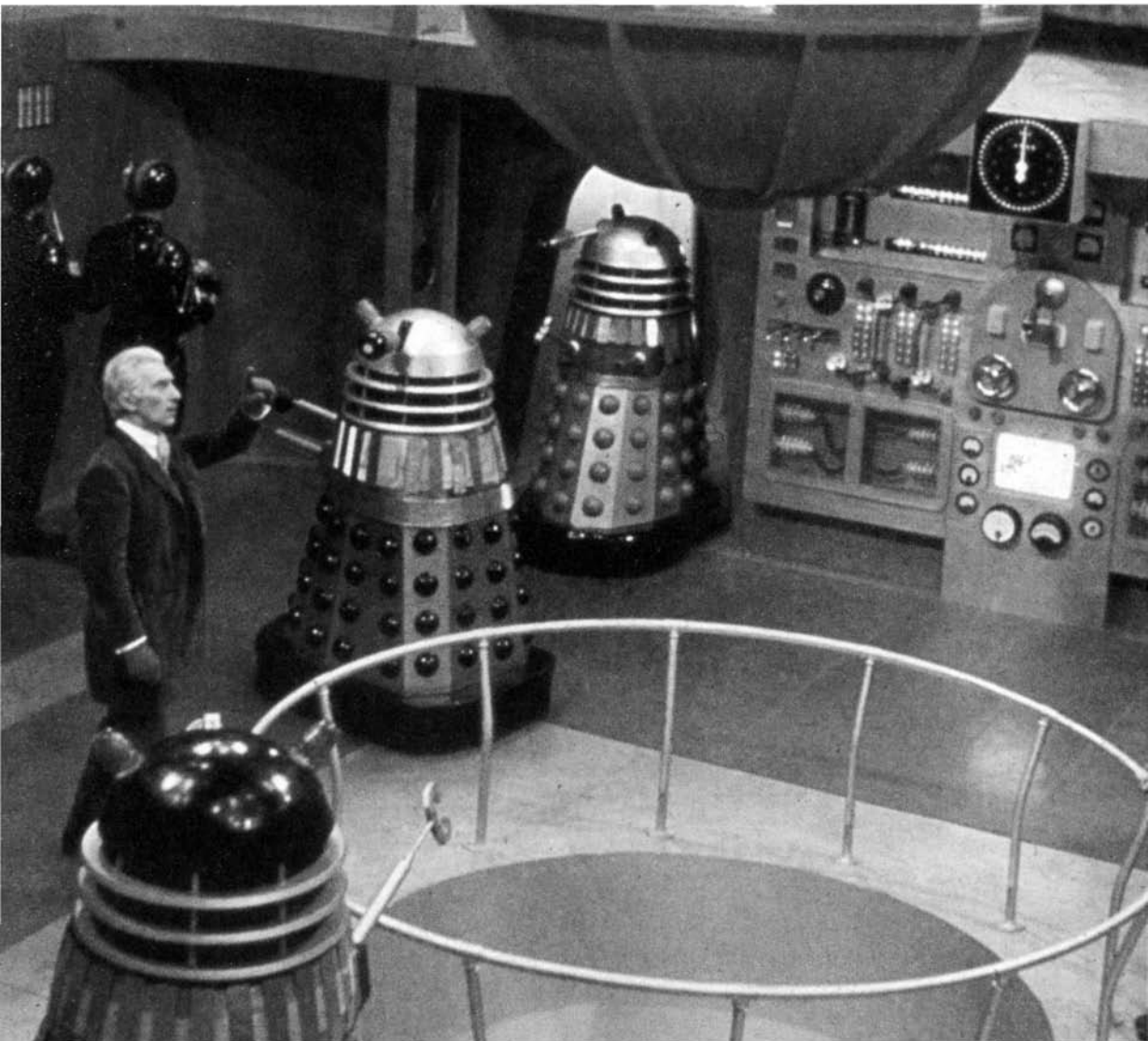
The original TV series, based on the books of **Douglas Adams**, was first shown in 1981, but had already been a hit on BBC radio (a new radio version was aired in 2005). The TV series was a triumph of humour, a wonderful script, and special effects that were at the time a real television treat (with seemingly computer-generated graphics, which weren’t computer generated at all, provided by **Rod Lord**). The story is far too complicated to even go into here, but needless to say, Adams tale has in each of its iterations been a delight – even the 2005 big-budget movie version is worth seeing (see below).



The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy

dir **Garth Jennings, 2005, UK, 109m**

This movie version was based on a screenplay started by Adams prior to his death. The story is tinkered with quite a lot, but works well within the scope of a movie. There are some good performances, and even a couple of cameo appearances from members of the original TV series – look out for Marvin in the queue on the Vogon homeworld of Vogosphere.



Dr Who (Peter Cushing) tries to reason with the Daleks in the 1966 movie *Daleks – Invasion Earth 2150 A.D.*

Mystery Science Theater 3000

1988–1999, US

The idea is deceptively simple – a man and two robots are trapped in a space station and forced to watch bad science fiction and other cut-rate movies – they criticize what they see at every opportunity. It's deceptively simple because writing good dialogue to beat down bad dialogue into submission is harder than you think. These guys did it for eleven seasons. It's also a special joy for long-time science fiction fans because it owns up to the simple fact that many science fiction films were simply awful, and science fiction fans watched them anyway.

The Prisoner

1967–1968, UK

A secret agent tries to resign his post and wakes up in a resort/prison where the warden tries to figure out why the agent (now known as **No. 6**) tried to resign, while **No. 6** does his best to escape his increasingly surreal surroundings. This series lasted just one season (and some would suggest that even that was too long to support the story), but that was long enough for series star and mastermind **Patrick McGoohan** to fiddle with the accepted ideas of what it was permissible to do on TV, just as David Lynch would do more than twenty years later with *Twin Peaks*. Well worth tracking down.

Red Dwarf

1988–1999, UK

Dave (Craig Charles), a lowly soup-machine repairman on a spaceship, is sentenced to suspended animation for bringing a cat on board

– a lucky break for him, as a radiation leak kills everyone else on the vessel. Dave defrosts three million years later to find that the ship's crew now consists of a hologram named **Rimmer**, a senile computer (**Holly**), and **Cat** (a mutated cat-like creature that evolved from his original cat and now struts around like James Brown). This long-running science fiction show is prized for its comedy. The middle years are better than the early years, while the two most recent seasons lost the plot.

Star Trek

1966–69, 1987–, US

Indisputably the most influential television series ever, spawning a science fiction industry eclipsed only by the *Star Wars* franchise, this series of television shows has also become an object example of the folly of milking a franchise too much for too long. By now, only the most sheltered people are unaware of the original series, with its “five-year mission” to explore the universe (which actually lasted but three, even with an unprecedented fan intervention to save the show at the end of the second season). The allegedly under-performing series then thrived on reruns and set the stage for a number of successful films and also 1987's *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which outclassed the original in writing, acting, effects and longevity, lasting seven seasons before voluntarily closing up shop.

A spin-off series, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (featuring a grungy space station, much to the consternation of fans of the concurrent *Babylon 5* series) also lasted seven seasons and is often acclaimed by *Star Trek* fans to be the most complex and satisfying *Trek* series. However, by the appearance of *Star Trek: Voyager* (which features a

starship blown across the galaxy trying to make its way home), the formula was getting stale; *Voyager* also lasted seven seasons but without much fan enthusiasm. An attempt to shake up the *Star Trek* universe with a “prequel” series yielded *Star Trek: Enterprise*, which failed to generate much excitement and became the first *Trek* series since the original to fail to make it through seven seasons (it managed only five). Viacom, which owns the *Trek* universe, now intends to let Federation space lie fallow for a few years (in television and film, at least – it’s still cheerfully milking the property in the home-video market and other arenas). It remains to be seen whether the next iteration of *Trek* can recharge the franchise.

The X-Files

1993–2002, US

The most popular science fiction show of the 1990s was two shows in one: in the first thread, the show’s FBI agents **Mulder** (**David Duchovny**) and **Scully** (**Gillian Anderson**) tracked down spooks, goblins and horror-related creepies; in the other, more celebrated, thread, Mulder and Scully doggedly pursued “the truth” about an encroaching alien invasion of the Earth. The horror aspect was for people who liked to have a story wrapped up tightly in an hour, while the alien invasion aspect was for those who loved conspiracies week after week. Creator **Chris Carter** managed to balance both strands adeptly through the run, and even spun off two similarly themed (though short-lived) shows: *Millennium* and *The Lone Gunmen*, and birthed a spate of mysterious (and also short-lived) imitators. The new realities of the post-9/11 world knocked the wind out of the show and its ilk – who has time for alien conspiracies when there’s enough going on down here?

Video games

Computers and video-game consoles are nearly as common as television sets, and video games have science fiction in their DNA: The very first video game, in fact, was a battle game called *Space War* (*Pong* came later), and when *Space Invaders* debuted in Japan in the mid-1970s, it caused a shortage of the coins that fitted into the game’s coin slot.

Compared to those first crude games, today’s lavishly decked-out computer and console games provide even more of a contrast than the one that exists between the first science fiction films and the special-effects extravaganzas of today – indeed, today’s top science fiction video games have more in common with films than they do with the simple arcade shoot-ups of the 70s and 80s. Here are some of the most dazzling of the recent science fiction video games, many of which take their cue from cinematic traditions.

Doom 3

PC, Mac, Xbox

The original *Doom* game, in 1994 (so far back in computing terms that it qualifies as “lost in the mists of time”), was the original true “first person shooter” and showed game players that the computer could be as much of an action game machine as then-current video-game consoles like Nintendo. A decade later, *Doom 3* was a remake, not a sequel, of that original game (including its “one man fighting demons on Mars” plot), and by design strained the processing abilities of even the most advanced personal computers to create a graphic and aural experience that (if you had a top-of-the-line computer) had previously been available only in movie

Star Wars: the video-game empire

Video games based on science fiction movies are no rarity – nearly all big science fiction films have games associated with them, most of mediocre quality (due to the need to get the game out in stores to feed off the film's first week-grosses). Nearly all of these games are made when the movie title is licensed by a game maker.

In the case of the *Star Wars* games, however, all the games are created and produced by **LucasArts**, the video-game arm of George Lucas's media empire. This means that the games are extraordinarily well-integrated into the overall *Star Wars* universe, and not only feed off the movies but in some cases are used to fill gaps in the story line of the overall *Star Wars* epic. For example, the strategy game *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* and its sequel *The Sith Lords* take place millennia before any of the films and offer up previously unknown backstory, whereas the events of *Star Wars*

Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy take place after the events of the movies and explains what happened to the remnants of the Empire.

This close integration offers advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, the continuity with the films and books is staggering, but on the other hand the game play of *Star Wars* games often relies on the good will of *Star Wars* fans (the games are sometimes half-baked and only the fact you get to be a Jedi gets you through). The latter problem was more pronounced in the mid-to-late 1990s, when a number of *Star Wars* titles, particularly ones associated with *The Phantom Menace* were less than overwhelming; recent games, such as *Knights Of The Old Republic* and the multi-player *Star Wars: Battlefront*, however, have done well critically and commercially, guaranteeing the continuation of this industry within an industry.

theatres. The plot, while thin, is no worse than many B-rate movies (which may be why a film adaptation of the game is in the works), and for sheer “things jumping out at you” spookiness, it beats Hollywood.

Half-Life

PC, Xbox, PlayStation

When *Half-Life* came out in 1998, there had been other “first-person shooters” and there had been (many) computer games with a science fiction look and feel. What *Half-Life* did was to seamlessly integrate the plot into the game itself: previous games told the story through “cut scenes”, or scripted scenes that played independently of the game itself. *Half-Life* programmed these events into the game itself, never breaking

the action's spell. *Half-Life*'s plot was a familiar one (scientists working on an experiment accidentally open a portal to another dimension; aliens pour out), but the details of the story, scripted by science fiction author **Mark Laidlaw**, were fresh and fun. Its 2004 sequel, *Half-Life 2*, employed the same immersive tactics with rather more advanced technology for a near-cinematic game experience.

Halo

PC, Mac, Xbox

Like *Half-Life*, *Halo* is a first-person shooter, and one of the first to really capture the adrenaline rush of this type of gaming experience on a console (Xbox) rather than a computer. The events of this 2001 game take place on an arti-

ficial, ring-like planet, and from the perspective of a cybernetic warrior called the **Master Chief**, who must run and gun his way through this world to uncover its secrets before he is overwhelmed by alien forces. Even on advanced consoles such as the Xbox, games have to be optimized to compensate for processing and storage limits, and *Halo* hides these limits with a streamlined, cinematic game presentation that allows that play to flow from plot point to plot point without the game player noticing the constraints. The sequel, 2004's *Halo 2*, was similarly acclaimed by game players.



The lone starship of *Homeworld 2* battles for survival

Homeworld

PC, Mac

1999's *Homeworld* is an example of a “real-time strategy” game, in which players control a large number of objects and must operate them as the game plays out (as opposed to “turn-based” games, in which time stops as the players make moves). Added to this is a strangely poignant story of a star-faring race whose homeworld, a former colony of a long-lost empire, is wiped out by an aggressive invader, leaving only one large starship to find its ancestral home while on the run from the aggressors. The gameplay is complicated but engaging, and the game's graphics, stunning for their time, still hold up today. A 2004 sequel upped the graphics power, made the game easier to control and continued the story line.

War Of The Monsters

PlayStation 2

If you've ever wanted to be in a 50s monster movie – as the monster – this is for you: the game features ten different monsters, varying just enough from classic movie monsters like Godzilla and King Kong to keep the game makers out of copyright court, and they fight and rampage across cities just like they do in the movies. There's as little plot as in the movies that inspired the game, but it's one thing to watch a giant gorilla slam a giant lizard into a skyscraper, and entirely a different thing to be the gorilla (or the lizard, for that matter). More fun than it should be. People with Nintendo's GameCube system will find a similar experience in the *Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee* game.

Film soundtracks

Science fiction isn't just about sights, it's also about sounds, and many of the most memorable movie themes and soundtracks of the last forty years spring directly from science fiction. Composers have clearly enjoyed dreaming up some strange and unusual sounds to convey a sense of otherworldliness, often using the latest innovations in electronic music.

A Clockwork Orange

Walter Carlos; Warner Bros

A classic electronic score by Walter (later Wendy) Carlos. The energetic arrangements of music by Beethoven and Henry Purcell stand in stark contrast to the savagery of the violence depicted on screen. Get the complete original-score edition – it costs more but it's worth it.

Blade Runner Official Soundtrack

Vangelis; East West Records

Greek composer Vangelis – riding high after his Oscar triumph with *Chariots Of Fire* – combines his trademark synthesizer sounds with some moody saxophone and piano. The resulting score is the perfect counterpart to Ridley Scott's *noirish* visuals. The album contains unused musical material as well as some dialogue.

The Day The Earth Stood Still

Bernard Herrmann; Century Fox

Herrmann was one of the finest composers ever to work in Hollywood. Nearly all his scores have a disconcertingly edgy feel to them, and *The Day The Earth Stood Still* is no exception. There's no question that the much of the spookiness is conveyed by Herrmann's great use of the Theremin, an early electronic instrument that would eventually become something of a sci-fi movie cliché.

Donnie Darko Original Soundtrack and Score

Various Artists; Enjoy

Get the two-CD edition of this, which puts together composer Michael Andrews' dark electronic score alongside the film's great mix of 80s-era songs from the likes of Duran Duran, INXS, Joy Division, and Echo And The Bunnymen. Includes the Gary Jules version of the Tears For Fears hit "Mad World".

The Empire Strikes Back

John Williams; RCA

Composer John Williams has penned the scores to so many science fiction films that it's almost criminal to limit him to just one appearance here. But, if you have to go with one, *Empire* is it – it features both the stirring main *Star Wars* theme and "The Imperial March" (Darth Vader's theme), and overall is the best of the *Star Wars* scores – and, arguably, Williams' finest moment to date.

Forbidden Planet

Louis and Bebe Barron; Small Planet

The wonderful but often creepy electronic sounds of Louis and Bebe Barron's score (in which different sounds are associated with different characters) is unlike any film music that came before – harsh, non-melodic and utterly fascinating. It all adds up to an amazingly atmospheric soundtrack that you would expect to have been created in 1975 rather than 1956.

The Matrix: Music From the Motion Picture

Various artists; Warner Bros

Like *Donnie Darko*, this is another compilation rock soundtrack (featuring industrial and hard rock bands such as Ministry, Rage Against The Machine and Rammstein). The carefully selected, and predominantly aggressive, tracks, helped to give the action of this movie the raw and exciting edge that it needed.

The Nightmare Before Christmas Original Motion Picture Soundtrack

Danny Elfman; Disney

A science fiction score only by courtesy (the movie features a mad scientist), but easily the best score by frequent science fiction film composer Danny Elfman. This music is not only delightful but is from one of the few recent films where the story is largely told through music.

Planet Of The Apes Original Motion Picture Soundtrack

Jerry Goldsmith; Varese Records

This is arguably Goldsmith's most challenging and groundbreaking score. Influenced by tribal music, as well as by the work of classical composer Stravinsky, it's percussive clashes and clangs make a powerful impact. This is one of the acknowledged classic scores of film history – not just science fiction.

Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan Original Motion Picture Soundtrack

James Horner; Gnp Crescendo

The best of the *Star Trek* films also has the best score, wrung into shape by a young James Horner (who would also score *Aliens* and receive an Oscar for *Titanic*). Extremely rousing and with a decidedly maritime feel to it.

2001: A Space Odyssey Original Motion Picture Soundtrack

Various artists; Rhino Records

Allegedly the classical soundtrack of *2001* derives from the temporary tracks that Kubrick used as he edited the film. He liked these so much that he decided to leave them in (abandoning Alex North's score). Kubrick's selections are brilliantly eclectic: from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and *The Blue Danube* all the way to Ligeti's *Lux Aeterna*, it's hard to imagine any music but this being appropriate for the film.

Websites

General

Classicscifi.com

<http://classicscifi.com>

Hundreds of reviews and capsule descriptions of classic science fiction films dating back to 1915 and going through to the present day, including movie poster artwork.

Filmsite.org

www.filmsite.org/sci-fifilms.html

This site offers a good, quick overview of the history of science fiction film.

The Internet Movie Database

www.imdb.com

An essential tool for anyone interested in film, IMDB offers detailed information on tens of thousands of films from all around the world. Information varies but almost always includes titles, year produced, and major cast and crew. If you can't find a film here, it may not exist.

The Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review

<http://www.moria.co.nz>

A labour-of-love site for a New Zealand filmgoer who has reviewed hundreds of genre films and offers intelligent, enjoyable reviews of each, including a number of hard-to-find and otherwise obscure SF, horror and fantasy flicks.

Scifilm.org

<http://scifilm.org>

A decent reader-driven site that features reviews of science fiction films as well as forums and discussions on both film and science fiction in general.

The Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame

www.sfhomeworld.org

The online adjunct of Seattle's Science Fiction Museum offers online samples of its exhibits, educational information, and an online encyclopedia of the members of the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

SciFi.com

<http://scifi.com>

The online site of the US-based SciFi Channel quite understandably promotes the wares of that network, but also offers a fair amount of other material including a feed that tracks science fiction news, bulletin boards and original fiction.

SFCrownsnest.com

www.sfcrownsnest.com

The proprietor claims this site to be "Europe's most popular science fiction and fantasy site", and it's chock full of news, reviews and commentary relating to science fiction and fantasy.

Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science_fiction_film

Wikipedia is a user-created encyclopedia with over half a million articles in English, featuring hundreds on science fiction and science fiction film (many cross-referenced). As the site is user created, some information may be sketchy or possibly erroneous; however, the peer-editing system is pretty robust and the quality of the information is generally excellent.

Global sci-fi...**The Anime Review**

www.theanimereview.com

For those of you with a taste for Japanese animation, this site parses it out across its several genres, including science fiction and fantasy, with dozens of reviews of classics as well as recent releases.

BeyondHollywood.com

www.beyondhollywood.com

This site reviews Asian films of all sorts, but with a special emphasis on action and science fiction titles. A good place to start if you are unfamiliar with Asian film but willing to learn.

The Ultimate SF Web Guide

<http://www.magicdragon.com/UltimateSF>

Not the prettiest site in the world, but it features an extensive list of sci-fi links and resources arranged by country, as well as more general sci-fi movie info.

Movies**The Matrix Trilogy**

www.whatisthematrix.com

This is a very glossy site loaded with flashing buttons and page after page of information about the cast and crew of the three films, as well as comic books, anime off-shoots, online gaming and much more. There is also an active community area where you can share your thoughts with fellow *Matrix* obsessives.

StarWars.com

www.starwars.com

This long-running site covers every facet of the *Star Wars* universe: the movies, of course, but also the games, books, merchandising and other bits of official *Star Wars* detritus that one might care to know about. The site is media rich, so bring a broadband connection.

StarTrek.com

www.startrek.com

As the *Star Wars* site is for *Star Wars* fans, so is the *Star Trek* site for Trekkers: an official source for all your *Star Trek* needs, including information about the various series, movies, books and video games.

Tron

www.tron-sector.com

A dense site of *Tron*-related information, links, forums and more. As well as movie information you can find out about related comics and games. As you might expect, the site is awash with electric blue.

2001: A Space Odyssey

www.kubrick2001.com

This slightly peculiar, Flash-heavy site attempts to explain Kubrick's classic film through animation – it's a lot of fun and at times just plain daft.

Events

Conventions

Science fiction fans are a gregarious lot and pioneered the idea of fan conventions, in which enthusiasts meet to celebrate their fandom. There are literally hundreds of science fiction conventions around the world every year, ranging from small local get-togethers to global conventions. The ones listed below are representative samples from these levels.

Creation Entertainment

www.creationent.com

While many science fiction conventions are created and run by fans and encompass a wide range of science fiction, other conventions are for-profit enterprises designed around particular television

shows or films. Creation Entertainment is the largest packager of these media conventions, and has created conventions for *Star Trek*, *Farscape*, *Battlestar Galactica* and other SF shows, as well as the *Lord Of The Rings* fantasy films and fantasy and horror television shows.

Eastercon

www.eastercon2006.org

The British National Science Fiction Convention. Like Worldcon, this convention moves from year to year; the 2006 convention will be held in Glasgow, Scotland. As well as special guests from the world of science fiction literature, there will be lectures and an art show.

Lunaconwww.lunacon.org

Lunacon is an example of a major regional convention that draws sci-fi fans from its general area (in this case, New York City and its metropolitan area). Other regional conventions include **Windycon** (Chicago), **Westercon** (the western United States and Canada) and **Ad Astra** (Toronto, Canada).

Wisconwww.sf3.org/wiscon

Wiscon bills itself as the “World’s Only Feminist Science Fiction Convention” and features events and programming with a feminist slant. It’s an example of a specialized convention which caters to a specific interest or group within science fiction (although most conventions are open to everyone who wishes to attend). Other examples of a specialized-interest convention are **Gaylaxicon**, which is an annual convention for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender science fiction fans, and **Penguicon**, which caters to both fans of science fiction and fans of “open source” computing.

Worldcon<http://worldcon.org>

Worldcon is the largest science fiction convention on the planet, with thousands of fans converging each year to catch up, meet their favourite science fiction celebrities and to vote on the Hugos – the highest award within the science fiction genre. Worldcons are held in different places every year; the 2005 Worldcon was in Glasgow, Scotland, while the 2006 convention will be in California and the 2007 event in Yokohama, Japan.

Film festivals

If you’re not content to watch science fiction films at the local cinema or at home on DVD, these annual film festivals are great places to get your fill of science fiction film.

The Boston Science Fiction Film Festivalwww.bostonsci-fi.com

This festival has just begun its fourth decade of existence and has shown movies ranging from *The Abyss* to *Zombies Of Mora Tau*. The festival includes a 24-hour film marathon, so be prepared. It’s traditionally held in February (on Presidents’ Day Weekend) in or around the city of Boston. The most recent festival (2005) screened *Primer*, *The Apple*, *THX 1138* and *Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow* among others.

The Festival of Fantastic Films<http://fantastic-films.com/festival>

This Manchester, UK-based film festival (in its 16th year as of 2005) is a three-day affair and, in addition to screening new and classic genre films, also offers guest interviews, discussions, panels, special events, presentations, auctions and more. This event is usually held in late summer.

Lund International Fantastisk Filmfestivalwww.fff.se/english

If you should find yourself in southern Sweden in September, you can check out this annual festival, which has screened over five hundred science fiction and fantasy films since its inception in 1995 – most of these films having their formal Swedish release at the event. The festival also

promotes European fantastic cinema through the Méliès competition for feature and short films, named after the early, influential French science fiction filmmaker.

Sci-Fi London

www.sci-fi-london.com

Also known as the **London International Festival of Science Fiction and Fantastic Film** this event claims to be “the UK’s only film festival dedicated to the science fiction and fantasy genres”, which may come as a surprise to The Festival Of Fantastic Films. Nevertheless, this newish get-together has offered a number of UK premieres of genre films, and as of 2005 has started touring the festival to other UK

towns, such as Edinburgh, Liverpool, York and Exeter.

Shriekfest

www.shriekfest.com

This festival is more formally known as the **Annual Los Angeles International Horror/Thriller/SciFi/Fantasy Film Festival & Screenplay Competition**. It’s relatively new and proclaims to be “dedicated to getting horror/thriller/sci-fi filmmakers and screenwriters the recognition they deserve”, and offers awards in several categories of genre for both features and short film.

In print

Science fiction magazines

Just as science fiction film is only part of the sci-fi picture, SF novels aren’t the only way to read the best science fiction being published today: many of the brightest stars of science fiction publish their short fiction and other writing in the following science fiction magazines.

Asimov’s Science Fiction

www.asimovs.com

Arguably the current leading science fiction magazine in the world, this publication’s stories regularly rack up Hugo and Nebula nominations

in all the short story categories, and has published everyone from **Isaac Asimov** (no surprise there) to current SF tyros like **Charles Stross**. The magazine’s website features selections from the magazine as well as recent Hugo-and Nebula-nominated stories.

Analog Science Fiction And Fact

www.analogsf.com

Analog started out as *Astounding*, which was the hothouse for the “Golden Age of Science Fiction” during the 1940s and 50s under the leadership of editor **John W. Campbell**. *Analog*’s focus leans toward the “science” aspects of science fiction,

and like *Asimov's*, *Astounding's* stories regularly collect Hugos and Nebulas. Both *Asimov's* and *Analog* are published by Dell Magazines, which also sponsors the annual Campbell Award for best new science fiction writer.

The Magazine Of Fantasy & Science Fiction

www.sfsite.com/fsf

As the name suggests, the magazine publishes both science fiction and fantasy, as well as book and movie reviews, and commentary. The non-fiction components are also available on the website. In addition to their physical publication *F&SF*, *Asimov's* and *Analog* are all available in electronic form to be read on PDAs from www.fictionwise.com

Interzone

www.ttapress.com/IZ.html

The UK's leading science fiction magazine prints bimonthly, publishes authors from all over the world and also features book reviews, interviews and commentary. Its cover art is uniformly excellent and the magazine's overall aesthetic is rather more advanced than its stodgy US sci-fi magazine counterparts.

Locus

www.locusmag.com

Science fiction publishing's "industry bible", this influential magazine keeps track of the latest news and happenings in the SF field and also publishes extensive reviews of the latest books and magazines. The website features some content from the magazine as well as a wealth of original material.

Books

This book is meant as an introduction to the various aspects of science fiction film and as such covers a lot of topics in a small space. If you're looking to drill down and learn more about science fiction film cinema, here are some recent books to chew on:

Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema

Annette Kuhn, ed (Verso, 1990)

Alien Zone 2: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema

Annette Kuhn, ed (Verso, 1999)

These two anthologies, edited by Lancaster University Professor of Film Studies **Kuhn**, delve into the academic detail of science fiction films with essays such as "Gynesis, Postmodernism and the Science Fiction Horror Film" and "Alien and the Monstrous-Feminine". The two anthologies are separated by a decade and, as such, offer historically contrasting insights. They are a bit heavy on the academic jargon at times, but still interesting reads.

BFI Classics/Modern Classics series

Various authors (BFI)

As a rule, BFI Classics/Modern Classics are indispensable guides to landmark films. Though each book is different in its treatment, a successful formula has begun to emerge: a film is broken down scene by scene, which brings together analysis, interviews, biography, on-set reports, critical reactions and the cultural forces that may have informed the filmmaker's decisions. Films covered

in the series include *Blade Runner*, *Metropolis*, *The Matrix*, *The Terminator* and *Things To Come*.

The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction

Edward James, ed (Cambridge University Press, 2003)

For a more holistic view of science fiction – which includes SF literature as well as cinema – this 2003 tome offers a general overview of the entire genre, boasting contributions from science fiction thinkers such as **Brian Stableford**, **Ken MacLeod**, **Kathryn Cramer** and **Gwyneth Jones**. It features a chapter specifically devoted to film and television (written by **Mark Bould**) but largely focuses on the history and recurring themes of science fiction as a genre.

From Alien To The Matrix: Reading Science Fiction Film

Roz Kaveney (I.B. Tauris, 2005)

This books grabs onto particular films in science fiction to illuminate certain ideas and points about the genre and how it functions, both independently and as a part of a larger society. Some of the films examined in depth include *Starship Troopers*, *Galaxy Quest* (for a discussion of comedy in the genre) and a wide-ranging examination of the *Alien* films. This title is pointed and opinionated, but also knowledgeable and readable.

Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader

Sean Redmond, ed (Wallflower Press, 2004)

A 2004 collection of previously published essays on science fiction film that includes contributions from writers from outside the regular science fiction critique circle, including **Susan Sontag** and film writer **Peter Biskind**. Eight sections cover different topics, ranging from time travel to science fiction fandom. A decent, wide-ranging take on science fiction film.

Taking The Red Pill: Science, Philosophy And Religion In The Matrix

Glenn Yeffeth, ed (Benbella Books, 2003)

Newish genre publisher Benbella Books has created a series of titles devoted to the critical appreciation of popular culture (logically entitled the “Smart Pop” series), and this 2003 book is one of the most popular in the series. It’s a collection of essays about *The Matrix* by science fiction and technology celebrities such as **Bill Joy**, **James Gunn** and Hugo-winning science fiction author **Robert Sawyer**. One of the more accessible of the many “scholarly” books on *The Matrix*, although like most books about that particular film, it loads rather more meaning onto the story than is actually there.

Picture credits

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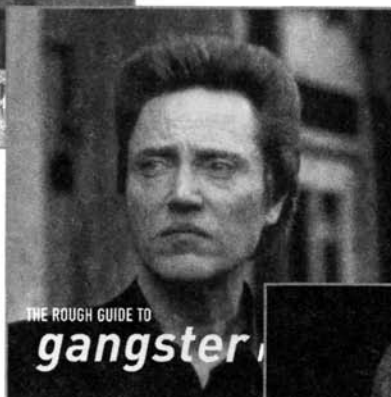
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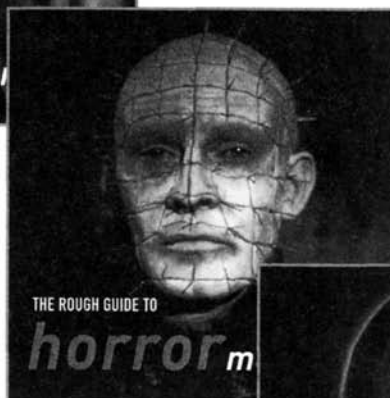
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