

Westerns

'From roughly 1900 to 1975 a significant portion of the adolescent male population spent every Saturday afternoon at the movies. What they saw there were westerns. In one way or another, westerns have touched the lives of virtually everyone who lived in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century.'

Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything*

Until 1970 Hollywood produced more westerns than any other genre of film. Almost one quarter of all American films of this period were westerns.

What is a western?

A western is a film set in the American west. Sometimes jokingly called 'horse-operas', westerns are violent, action-oriented films set in harsh and rugged landscapes.

Westerns of the early period of filmmaking are mostly set in the country west of the Mississippi River during a narrow, 30-year time period of the late nineteenth century. This is the last of the American frontier period between the end of the Civil War (1861–65) and the declaration of the closure of the frontier in 1890.

Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s are sometimes set in the period after the closing of the frontier but before World War I (1914–18). Mexico is sometimes included as a setting in these later films.

Today a film may be classed as a western even though it is set in contemporary times — so long as it deals with the traditional themes of ranching, gold mining or battles for territory.

The main theme of the western film genre is the conquest of nature and the staking out of territory to create civilisation through law and order. Battles over territory typically fall into two categories. They can be between Europeans and Indians. Or they can be between cattlemen (who were often a law unto themselves) and settler farmers or homesteaders.

Types of westerns

Classic westerns

The classic western was the most common style of film made by the big studios in the first half of the twentieth century. John Ford was one of the most famous directors of the classic western, and his star actor was John Wayne. In *Six Guns and Society*, Will

Wright isolates three main story types within the classic western.

- The *classic heroic* western is the story of a stranger who rides alone into a lawless town and single-handedly cleans it up. *Shane* (1953) is an example of this type of film.
- The *vengeance* western is the story of a man seeking revenge for past wrongs. He defeats the villains and in so doing is also persuaded to give up his desire for revenge and rejoin society. *Stagecoach* (1939) is an example of a vengeance western.
- The *professional gunfighter* western is about a character who is hired to defend a town plagued by lawlessness. Often the villains are skilled fighters as well and the movie then becomes a contest of ability. *High Noon* (1952) and *The Magnificent Seven* (1950) are examples of professional gunfighter westerns.

Spaghetti westerns

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the censorship restrictions of the Hays Code (see page 258) were relaxed, westerns became more violent and less heroic. European studios began to produce westerns, and to cut costs, many of these were shot in arid southern Italy or sometimes in Spain. Clint Eastwood's first films were low-budget 'spaghetti westerns'. Perhaps the most famous of these was *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966).

Revisionist westerns

In the years after the anti-Vietnam War protests and the rise of feminism and the civil rights movement, stories that glorified the violence of the frontier era lost their general appeal. Audiences could no longer accept massacres of native peoples as a topic for entertainment. They were also more likely to question the nature of heroism. Revisionist westerns often reversed the point of view of the classic western. For example, *Posse* (1993) uses African-American cowboys who defeat the Ku Klux Klan. *Dances with Wolves* (1990) focuses on Native American environmental spirituality. Battle scenes are shown from the point of view of the Indians.

Modern westerns

A number of films have used the traditional stories of the classic westerns but transferred the action to a modern setting, in either the United States or Mexico. Examples include *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003).

Technology and society | Genre developments

1860–1910

America evolves from a rural society to an industrialised society. In urbanised audiences this will create a longing for an earlier, simpler era.

1917–1964

The career span of John Ford, the essential director of the genre

1930–1979

The career span of John Wayne, the essential actor of the genre

1940s

During and after World War II the western is used to reinforce American values, notably the righteous use of violence to gain justice for the underdog.

1950s

McCarthy era prompts many Hollywood directors to use western settings to critique the politics of the time [e.g. *High Noon*].

1960s–1970s

Civil rights and feminist movements reshape society and change western portrayals of both women and Native Americans.

1980s–present

Audiences move to other genres such as gangster and science fiction. The influence of the western genre declines.

Genre developments

1903–1960

Classic period of westerns was a product of the Hollywood studio system. Experienced, often mature-aged heroes portrayed virtues of honour, self-sacrifice and integrity. Yet the portrayal of Indians was crude and racist — ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian.’ The genre peaked in the 1940s and 1950s.

1950–1970

Signs of a more sympathetic portrayal of Indians, with a reconciliation message — an assimilationist approach to Indian culture

1965–1970

Spaghetti westerns, including many Clint Eastwood movies, shot in Italy or Spain. Younger males take leading roles as desperado anti-heroes, marginalised and alienated. Decline of genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s

1990s–present

Postmodern western revival. Indian and other perspectives incorporated into narrative. Genre is now largely superseded.

Western timeline

Prehistory

American folk myths (e.g. Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickok, Davy Crockett, Calamity Jane, Wyatt Earp). Novels by Zane Grey

- 1861** — **1861–1865 American Civil War and abolition of slavery**
- 1890** — **Closing of the American frontier**
- 1903** — *The Great Train Robbery*
- 1914** — **1914–1918 World War I**
- 1917** — *The Tornado* (first film directed by John Ford)
- 1925** — *The Vanishing American* (first film made in Monument Valley)
- 1939** — **1939–1945 World War II**
- Stagecoach*
- 1946** — *My Darling Clementine*
- 1948** — *Fort Apache*
- 1950** — *Broken Arrow* (signals a change in Indian portrayal), *Rio Grande*
- 1952** — *High Noon*
- 1953** — *Shane*
- 1956** — *The Searchers*
- 1960** — *The Alamo*
- The Magnificent Seven* (based on Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*)
- 1962** — *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*
- 1964** — *A Fistful of Dollars, Cheyenne Autumn* (John Ford's last film)
- 1965** — *For a Few Dollars More*
- 1966** — *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*
- 1969** — *The Wild Bunch* (turning point for increased violence and savagery), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*
- 1970** — *Little Big Man* (hippie view of Indians)
- 1973** — *High Plains Drifter*
- 1976** — *Buffalo Bill and the Indians or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (satirises racist attitudes in westerns)
- 1985** — *Pale Rider*
- 1990** — *Dances with Wolves*
- 1992** — *Unforgiven*
- 2005** — *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*

Context

Although it is one of the oldest genres in cinema, the western has quite a short history. It has its beginnings in two sources.

In the late 1880s William Cody set up a travelling entertainment show called Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. His show toured the United States (and later the world) until the late 1930s. It featured horse-riding and sharpshooting displays. It also presented 'historical' recreations of battle scenes from the 'wild west' in which Indians were employed to attack white settlers before Buffalo Bill rode in to save the day.



Figure 12.49: Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show toured the United States and featured displays of horse riding and sharpshooting. His show is regarded as the forerunner of the western movie.

From the early nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, cheap novels told stories about outlaws, cowboys and Indians. The most famous of these is James Fenimore Cooper's story *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Later the novels of Zane Grey, such

as *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1918), would also inspire western movies.

The first film western is generally agreed to be *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Countless films followed until the 1930s. The coming of sound meant that the films could be shot on location away from the studio. In the 1940s and 1950s there was a huge resurgence in the genre. Many critics attribute this to the work of the director John Ford. His film *Stagecoach* (1939) is seen as an early example of the western as art form.

Another Ford film, *The Searchers* (1956), marked the end of the classic era of westerns. The old conventions were changing, just as society was changing. The portrayal of Indians was also undergoing a transformation. The 1950 film *Broken Arrow* showed Indians sympathetically and seemed to suggest there could be a reconciliation between settlers and Indians.

The relaxation of the Hays Code introduced significantly more violence to the genre. However, the western seemed to be in decline throughout the 1960s. The genre was saved by the westerns starring Clint Eastwood shot cheaply in Italy and Spain — the so-called spaghetti westerns.

There was a revival of the genre in the 1990s, when a number of movies seemed to reverse all of the old conventions. These include *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Unforgiven* (1992).

Features of westerns

Audiences around the world are familiar with a number of the symbolic elements of classic westerns — horses, steam trains, Stetson hats, stagecoaches, ghost towns and so on. Not all of these are essential. The following elements appear in most westerns and help to define the genre.

The frontier landscape

A *frontier* refers to a borderline or limit. In the United States the word frontier was used to refer to the edge of European settlement as it pushed westwards. In classic westerns, the myth of the frontier takes two forms, says Melinda Szaloky. First, the films depict territory beyond the frontier as free and abundant. Second, they portray the taming of the west as a necessity. Therefore the films show a violent yet heroic war against Indians for territory.

Violence

To some, the western is simply a vehicle for justified violence. In westerns, violence seems to solve all the problems posed by the frontier. Violence also provides a resolution to all of the genre's oppositions.

Clear oppositions

A number of oppositions are posed in westerns.

- The most basic opposition is between good and evil. In westerns this is often very clear-cut. Early westerns even used black hats and white hats to distinguish for the audience which character was the villain.
- Wild, untamed nature versus civilisation gives the hero a justification for using violence — to subdue nature by force. Associated with this is the opposition between what critics have called *the desert and the garden*. Wild Indian lands represent the desert, while spreading farms and ranches represent its transformation into a garden. The garden idea can be extended to include the religious idea of the 'garden of Eden'.
- Morality and law and order versus lawlessness and disorder provide another justification for heroic violence. The cowboy's code of honour is often favoured in westerns over the weak legal regulation of townfolk.
- Interior versus exterior, according to Will Wright, contrasts the civilised indoor world of society and female characters with the wild, male-dominated outdoors.
- Strong versus weak, says Wright, is another opposition that allows filmmakers to separate the heroes from the villains. The villain is shown to be weak and is ultimately defeated. Westerns also portray women, old men and society as a whole as weak and in need of protection. Oddly, audiences never seem to question the principle that the fastest draw and the strongest fist fighter should without fail be the good man. This association of physical strength with virtue is an ancient idea in literature, going back to *Beowulf*.
- Society versus the hero provides a contrast between insiders and outsiders, says Wright. The hero is an outsider. He is antisocial when he arrives in town, and often returns to being an outsider when his responsible use of violence has achieved the right result. In *Shane*, the hero rides off alone into the sunset, having rejected the temptation to join society.

Plot

'Films about horses for horses', sniffed the Hollywood scriptwriter Ben Hecht. The basic plot for most westerns has the lone hero riding into town to right the wrongs perpetrated by the villain. They are simple tales of law and order with plenty of fast-paced action.

In a study of hundreds of westerns, Will Wright has identified the plot structure of the classic western as follows:

1. A stranger enters town. He is later revealed to have exceptional ability, usually in the justified use of violence. While town society does not completely accept the hero, he is given special status.
2. In the next stage, a conflict of interest occurs between the villains and the town. The villains are much stronger than society. They treat society with contempt, seeing the people as weak. But the villains do have respect for the hero.
3. The villains threaten society, but the hero attempts to avoid any involvement in the conflict until a friend of the hero is endangered.
4. The hero fights the villains and defeats them. Society praises the hero and accepts him, but he turns his back on this admiration and rides off into the sunset. (Alternatively, the hero may marry and settle down in the newly law-abiding community.)

Character

The following character types appear in many western movies:

- **The hero.** 'To be a man in the western is to seem to grow out of the environment,' says western specialist Jane Tompkins. 'It means to be hard, to be tough and to be unforgiving.' Whether they are lawmen, cowboys or just wanderers, western heroes must live or die by their physical skills. Naturally they are superb gunfighters, horse riders and bare-knuckle fighters. They can take a beating that would kill other men. Heroes must obey a strict code of honour. This moral code is the chief difference between the hero and the villain.
- **The villain.** He is usually as skilful as the hero, but is motivated by the lowest of human emotions — greed or ambition for power. Often the villain's plans fall just within the law, but they break the moral code and exploit the weak.
- **The Indians.** Early westerns used the Indians as a failsafe plot device to create climaxes. Indian tribes in full battle dress provided spectacular massed enemies. They are portrayed as cunning and brutal menaces — scalping innocent cowboys. But, especially after the film *Broken Arrow* (1950), Indians are also portrayed as 'noble savages'. The idea of a noble savage is common in industrial societies feeling a sense of loss. It is a romantic and idealistic view of native people as being similar to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the fall. In modern revisionist westerns, the Indians are environmental guardians as well as noble savages.

- **Female characters.** Schoolmarms or barmaids are two of the most common roles for women in classic westerns. Virtuous women such as the rancher's daughter, the pioneer's wife or the school teacher bring gentle civilisation to the wild and masculine west. These women are traditionally carriers of Christianity, of learning and of family values. In contrast to them are the easygoing saloon girls and dancers. Both types of women need the hero's protection.

Setting

Many westerns begin with a landscape shot because the landscape is so central to the genre. The western is about the conquest of nature. The filmmaker needs to show that the struggle is worth it. Magnificent and dramatic landscapes also suggest a sense of space and abundance.

Directors use the landscape to suggest mood and distance from civilisation. In the classic western era, it was common for particular directors to be associated with particular locations. John Ford, for instance, set most of his westerns in Monument Valley. These buttes, mesas and canyons eventually came to represent the stereotypical western setting.

Representations and discourses

As one of the oldest genres in the cinema, the western has a history of representation that parallels the history of movies. Common issues include:

- **Gender.** A stereotyped division between the genders has sparked much critical comment. For example, Jane Tompkins says the western is a masculine retreat into a world where emotions are repressed. 'The western struggles to cast out everything feminine. Heroes strive to be the opposite of women.

They can't read or dance or look at pictures. They can't look at flowers ... or carry on a conversation.'

- **The frontier.** Rather than being speared by Indians or shot by outlaws, most pioneers died from accidents or disease. For instance, in one study historian John Unruh shows that of 10 000 deaths over 20 years on the frontier, only 362 were caused by Indians.
- **Political and social discourses.** The western is emphatically in favour of capital punishment. It favours private property and puts the rights of the individual first and foremost. It shows that might is right and that violence is justified. It suggests that culture is 'women's business'. Nature and indigenous peoples are to be conquered in the name of progress. In many respects, it is a genre of its times.



Figure 12.50: In Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the Sioux Indians adopt a cavalry officer as an honorary member of their tribe. He comes to see the virtues of the Indian way of life — a reversal of the attitude of earlier westerns.

Activities

1. View a classic western and then a revisionist western. Discuss the differences between them. Can they be explained as a reversal or are there more important differences?
2. Find examples in specific westerns to support or contradict the critics' view that there is a narrow representation of political and social beliefs or attitudes towards women.

PRODUCTION TASK

3. An American film corporation has advertised worldwide for filmmakers interested in

submitting a concept for a western. Prepare a 'pitch' for a western that follows many of the conventions of the genre. Outline the narrative and give an indication of some of the climactic scenes. Explain how you will use some of the great oppositions of the western. Develop a profile of your hero character and explain how he operates according to a code of honour. Profile some of the other characters. Describe the opening and closing use of violence. Give an idea of the setting and how it supports the development of the story.

Science fiction (by Darren Sinclair)

Many film genres explore the extremes of human emotion and experience. These narratives often focus on the internal conflicts people face. Science fiction takes these extreme possibilities out into the real world and makes them visible. It allows a religious audience to explore the monstrous, such as in *Alien* (1979), without the taint of the occult that horror often brings. And it allows the non-religious to contemplate the grand scale of the universe without necessarily getting spiritual, as in Carl Sagan's *Contact* (1997).

Science fiction allows the young to explore a larger universe. At its best, it has the potential to provide the most abstract of modern human parables, like the retelling of the journey of Moses in the sci-fi origins of *Superman* (film 1978, serial 1948).

What is science fiction?

'Science fiction reflects scientific thought; [it is] a fiction of things-to-come based on things-at-hand,' according to novelist Benjamin Appel. It involves an experience of humanity that has not actually occurred yet is told with scientific credibility.

The visual deceptions of special effects have been a feature of the genre since George Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). It is 'fiction' because the narrative usually features an extrapolation of our scientific knowledge. The roots of the genre extend back to the common ancestor shared by both science fiction and horror movies — Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* and the 1931 movie made of her book.

The difference between science fiction and the other two speculative genres of horror and fantasy is that where they offer imaginative impossibilities, sci-fi is more thoughtful. Rather than show what is clearly *impossible*, it 'works to entertain alternative *possibilities*', suggests Barry Keith Grant, professor of film studies at Brock University in Canada.

Types of science fiction

There are four main subgenres or types of science fiction film. These are:

- **Order disturbed (horror).** This subgenre, a cross between horror and science fiction, serves to warn the human race against upsetting the natural order of the universe. It can be set in the past, present or future. When set in the present it invites us to evaluate the way we do things now. When set in the future, it can warn us about damage we may cause to the natural universe, which is ultimately

measured as damage to ourselves. Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) explores the disastrous potential consequences of the commercialisation of science.

- **The invasion (political).** The invasion subgenre of science fiction works on deep-seated human fears of being overwhelmed by an external aggressor. The antagonist (see page 142) in the narrative is often a metaphor for the enemy of the country of production. Fear of the 'other' is reflected in the level of aggression. During times of attack, the enemy must be completely exterminated. They usually arrive as a result of an accidental invitation. Sometimes they are allowed in by a stupidly optimistic do-gooder or a negligent 'border patrol'. The box office success of 1996, *Independence Day*, portrays American patriots with no empathy for the alien adversary.
- **The fantastic future (glorification).** The science fiction of glorification presents a view of an inspirational future that is worth striving for. Settings can include elements of fantasy and propose colonial conquests of new scientific frontiers. Awe-inspiring ingenuity solves problems and provides a backdrop for human interactions. The distant future setting and futuristic travel supply the exotic. *Armageddon* (1998) and numerous *Star Trek* (1966–69) scenarios are examples of this subgenre.
- **The post-apocalyptic future (dependence).** Set after an apocalyptic event, these films show the potential for the future to see a return to the primitive past. Overdependence on technology leads to collapse and then calamity. Technological advancement is usually accompanied by human enlightenment, but over-reliance on it is a danger. *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Omega Man* (1971), *Mad Max* (1979) and its reworking as *Waterworld* (1995) warn of overdependence on systems that could collapse.

Context

Time travel was popularised in the science fiction novels of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells around the same time that Arthur Conan Doyle wrote *The Lost World*, says Jonathan Bignell. This coincided with the discovery of Roman relics in Britain and a fascination with ancient Egypt. Such themes can be seen in *King Kong* (1933), which features a lost island that harbours live dinosaurs, and *Battlestar Gallactica* (1979), in which 'Viper' pilots wear Egyptian-style combat helmets.

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* at a time when experiments on frogs had shown that electricity could fire muscles. She built on the latest scientific understanding that (contrary to previous ideas about its flowing through the blood or residing in the heart) the essence of life was a spark of energy.

Pioneering filmmaker Georges Méliès brought the art of illusion to the screen in 1902. Special effects such as back projection and miniatures, along with claymation, were used in *King Kong*. While early science fiction shares its roots with horror, it was the futuristic city of *Metropolis* (1926) and vehicles from comic strips that defined the genre.

Germany's defeat in World War II created a technological race between the Soviet Union and the US. Both could see the military value of the rocket technology that had delivered remote-controlled destruction to London during the Blitz. The threat of atomic annihilation that grew out of the arms race would drive the science fiction genre for decades to come. The monster movies of the fifties called for a team response to the threat of invaders, who often appeared from outer space. Critics see these invaders as a metaphor for Soviet communism. It was terrifying for America to hear the radio bip of the first Russian satellite passing overhead.

With the Korean War fuelling the cold war fear that communism would spread, films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) struck a chord. Apparently normal citizens were turned to 'pod people' as they slept. A flying saucer invasion was one thing, but

even greater terror lay in the idea that 'one of them' could look like 'one of us'. The 'enemy within' was the new threat, and anti-communist hysteria — often directed against supposed left-wing sympathisers in Hollywood and the media — reached its peak with the 'witch-hunts' led by Senator Joe McCarthy (see page 196).

As special effects budgets began to play a larger role in science fiction, Hollywood became the natural home for the genre. Television sci-fi, such as *Thunderbirds* (1965–66), maintained a trans-Atlantic cooperation theme. However, British sci-fi tended to focus increasingly on the quirky, such as *Doctor Who* (1965), or the comical, such as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005).

As cold war tensions subsided, the invasion threat theme was toned down. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) suggested aliens were just misunderstood. Aliens on exchange visits to Earth became part of the family on television in *Mork and Mindy* (1978–82) and *ALF* (1986–90). The mountain-sized *Close Encounters* spaceship of 1977 was a far bigger threat than the lone invader of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The arms race had moved concerns on from 'Reds under the bed' to a nuclear standoff between superpowers.

Disturbingly, watching some scenes from *Independence Day* was not unlike watching film of the World Trade Center attacks of 2001. Aliens target the architectural symbols of western power and by interfering with satellites 'use our own technology against us'.

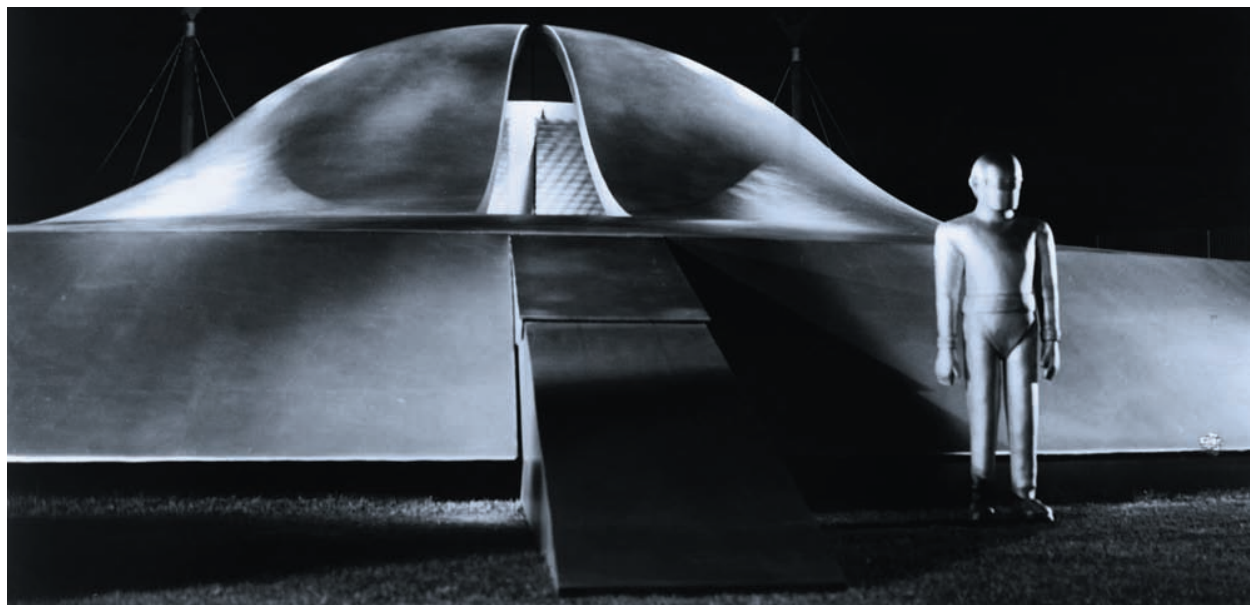


Figure 12.51: Texts reflect their context (see page 186). The full-sized, plywood half spaceship in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) reflects the streamlined cars and chromed kitchen appliances of the era. The alien character is able to hide among normal people while he reports home secretly at night. He behaves like a spy, and is brought down by the military. But the character that disturbed us at the start of the film is actually here to selflessly warn us of the dangers of our nuclear future.

Since September 11, 2001, the 'enemy within' theme has been revived. The remake of *War of the Worlds* (2005) makes some changes to author H. G. Wells' original attack from Mars to fit in with new scientific understandings. Changes are also made in the symbolism. Rather than spaceships simply descending onto cities, long-buried craft planted below the suburbs erupt on cue to join the battle, like a general call to terrorist sleeper cells. Citizens are astounded to find the real threat has been hiding right under their noses.

Other themes punctuate science fiction in line with current scientific advances or issues. Concerns about genetic manipulation are evident in *Jurassic Park* (1993), about global warming and environmental damage in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and about infectious diseases in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in *Outbreak* (1995).

Features of science fiction

Common features of science fiction movies include:

- **Borrowed features.** Science fiction has been able to assimilate elements of many other genres. For instance, *Star Wars* (1977) combines many elements from the fantasy genre, such as strange creatures with special powers, a princess in need of rescue, and the 'magic' of the Force. Aspects such as bar-room brawls, frontier towns and gunslingers come from the western, as in *Outland* (1981). Many sci-fi films, such as *Blade Runner* (1982), draw on *film noir* (see page 254). Others, such as *Alien* (1979), use devices straight from horror.
- **Visual effects.** The success of the special effects is usually measured in terms of realism and can justify the remaking of previous releases.
- **Scientific principles.** Current theory is explored and credibility is maintained by justifying elements within established scientific knowledge. Often an explanation of how something works will be contrived.
- **Rich soundscape.** Unusual sound effects, grand-scale orchestral music and distinctive instruments such as the theremin (an early electronic instrument) used by Bernard Hermann in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, have become important features of the genre.
- **Ethical dilemmas.** As science claims to be emotionally impartial, it needs to have a social brake applied occasionally. As the west has substituted technology rituals and its related consumption for traditional religion, sci-fi has functioned not only as a temple for the glorification of technology, but also as a confessional for those responsible for scientific risk.

- **Grand implications.** The appeal of the science fiction film is that it represents the reunification of science, art and religion in a single package. Where our species came from, what the future holds, our rightful place in the universe, the very purpose for our existence are the fundamental questions addressed by the church. Sci-fi also asks those questions of science.

Plot

Narrative structure will depend on the type of sci-fi and which genre it has borrowed features from. Some examples are listed in table 12.3.

Alien is an example of a sci-fi horror story with horror-style visuals and plot structure, while *Blade Runner* could be considered horror/*film noir*. In both films the natural order is disturbed by monsters on the loose. But the resolution of each is quite different.

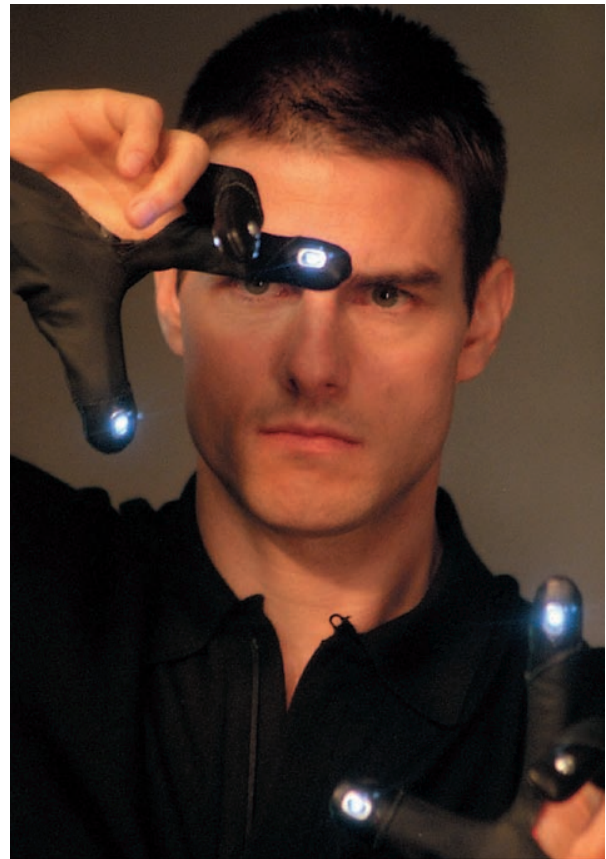


Figure 12.52: Being able to see the end of someone's life on a premonition screen in the tech-noir film *Minority Report* (2002) is reminiscent of the traditional circular plot structure of *film noir*. The action of scrolling through disconnected pictures to find a narrative evokes the actions of film editors themselves.

Independence Day is a political or invasion story, but the response is western-like as the townspeople unite to protect their land from attack. The invasion

in *Signs* (2002), on the other hand, demands a personal response, so the film borrows from the devices of the haunted house genre.

Plot progress

The progress of the plot in science fiction films depends on the way the elements of other genres are used.

The horror subgenre usually begins with normality, disrupted by the violence of a monster escaping or something that foreshadows that event. The monster must be subdued by violence to return order to the universe. Often the creation will turn on the creator — a warning that humanity should not play God.

The political or invasion subgenre will often start with low-key but ominous mistakes or negligence. Most characters misunderstand the nature of the threat, but once they face a common threat they can eventually be united across boundaries such as ethnicity.

The glorification types of sci-fi can begin with goal setting, such as the *Star Trek* (1966) voice-over. A holy grail is attained through a journey or pursuit of knowledge. Human enlightenment is increased and barbarism defeated. Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1968) is an example of this pattern with the addition of a significant horror element.

Films that warn of overdependence on technology usually begin with a lament for what is lost, or sometimes blissful ignorance of impending doom. They feature images of desolation, and a decline in standards of human behaviour tends to parallel a technological decline.

Character

As with plot, certain character types may be borrowed from other genres, and several attributes may be combined.

These types include:

- **The messianic one.** In any other genre the heroic character may lay down his or her life for chosen others. However, on the grand scale of sci-fi, the messianic character may literally 'save the world'. Self-sacrifice is offered by Ripley in *Alien 3* (1992) and Neo in *The Matrix* (1999). In *Armageddon* (1998) the Earth faces complete destruction and an 'ordinary' man has the power to save all of humanity through the sacrifice of his own life.
- **The anointed one.** This character or another may be chosen for a special task. As in the fantasy genre, they often have special parentage. Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (1999) is an example of this character type.
- **The professor.** The learned, brilliant but eccentric professor is traditionally based on a wild-haired Einstein. The mad scientist, the incompetent inventor and the visionary are variants.
- **The freelancer.** A mercenary straight from the western may be a gunslinger or smuggler. They see their role as the hired help. They usually lack a moral commitment beyond earning their pay.
- **The princess.** The princess may be a damsel in distress direct from the fantasy genre or a woman facing a peril that she does not recognise.
- **The automatons.** These may be people or robots who do not question orders and can function as drone characters.
- **The community representative.** The spokesperson for the community may serve as a 'mouthpiece' to convey an attitude shift from a divided and gullible public to a united community. They can also be the 'nay-sayer' — the last doubter on board used to highlight the shift from earlier public opinion.

Table 12.3: This matrix shows possible combinations that will shape the way the sci-fi plot unfolds. While the scenario is set by the story type, the progress to a resolution is shaped by the stylistic features borrowed from other genres.

Science fiction story	Type	Film example	Genre influence	Borrowed features
Natural order disturbed	Horror	<i>Aliens</i>	Horror	superhuman adversary fight to the death lone defender
Invasion	Political	<i>Independence Day</i>	Western	population rallied town damaged in brawl dispute over territory
Fantastic future	Glorification	<i>Star Wars</i>	Fantasy	mystical predestination damsels in need of rescue mythical creatures
Post-apocalyptic future	Dependence	<i>Total Recall</i>	<i>Film noir</i>	non-linear/circular plot complexity of deception betrayal/ <i>femme fatale</i>

Technology and society | Genre developments

1890s–1930s

Archaeological discoveries channel the public imagination towards exotic times and places, while new scientific knowledge propels engineering and medical advances.

Advances in aerodynamic design ahead of the jet age

Circus-style illusions make the jump to the screen.

1920s–1930s

Horror/sci-fi roots intertwine.

1930s

Comic book characters are brought to the screen.

Mid 1940s–mid 1960s

In the wake of the atomic bombs, sci-fi embraces warnings about nuclear technology. The cold war raises fears of 'Mutually Assured Destruction'.

1960s

Early success for Russia marks the first milestone of the space race. US President Kennedy announces a manned mission to the moon by the end of the decade.

Late 1960s–late 1970s

Fear of outsider in film gives way to insecurity about internal system collapse.

Late 1970s–1980s

Governments, corporations and technology are viewed with suspicion. The 'other' becomes a visitor to be understood; parallels the thawing of cold war tensions.

1990s–2000s

Questions of reality and predestination with spiritual overtones emerge, along with millennial paranoia about the Earth in peril.

1950s

Invasion stories feed on the political paranoia of the time and fears of the 'enemy within'. Creature features require citizens to unite in defence from alien invasion.

1960s

Many sci-fi productions on TV (e.g. *Star Trek*) generally view technology positively. *Stingray*, *Fireball XL-5*, *Thunderbirds* and *Captain Scarlet* bring marionette animation to futuristic spacecraft.

Special effects as spectacle become entrenched in the genre. Sophisticated motion capture techniques are used in *Star Wars* miniatures.

Computers are used for image manipulation. Processing power increases exponentially. 'Realism' dominates special effects.

2000s

Video game creation builds on special effects technology, often combining sci-fi and fantasy scenarios.

Post-9/11 return to the idea of the 'enemy within'.

Science fiction timeline

Prehistory

Novels of H. G. Wells, Jules Verne and Mary Shelley

- 1902 *A Trip to the Moon*
- 1914 **1914–1918 World War I**
- 1926 *Metropolis*
- 1931 *Frankenstein*
- 1933 *King Kong*
- 1936 *Flash Gordon*
- 1939 **1939–1945 World War II**
Buck Rogers
- 1945 **German rocket technology captured by US and Russia. Atomic bombs dropped on Japanese cities.**
- 1950 **1950–1953 Korean War**
1950–1954 McCarthy trials in US
- 1951 *The Day the Earth Stood Still*
- 1953 *War of the Worlds*
DNA/double helix unveiled by Watson and Crick.
- 1954 *Creature from the Black Lagoon*
- 1955 *Godzilla, Invasion of the Body Snatchers*
- 1957 **Sputnik, the first satellite, launched by the USSR.**
- 1960 *The Time Machine*
- 1961 **Russian Yuri Gagarin is the first man in space.**
- 1962 *The Day of the Triffids*
Cuban missile crisis threatens nuclear war.
- 1963 *Dr Strangelove*
- 1965 *Dr Who and the Daleks*
- 1968 *Planet of the Apes, 2001 A Space Odyssey*
- 1969 **Neil Armstrong is the first man to walk on the moon.**
The Forbin Project
- 1971 *Silent Running, Omega Man*
- 1973 *Soylent Green*
- 1977 *Star Wars, Close Encounters of the Third Kind*
- 1979 *Alien*
- 1982 *E.T., Blade Runner*
- 1984 *The Terminator*
- 1986 *Aliens*
- 1990 *Total Recall*
- 1991 *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*
- 1996 *Independence Day*
Dolly the sheep is cloned.
- 1998 *Armageddon, Deep Impact*
- 1999 *The Matrix*
- 2001 **September 11 terrorist attacks on World Trade Center, New York**
- 2002 *Minority Report*
- 2003 **International project to sequence the human genome on databases**
- 2004 *The Day after Tomorrow; I, Robot*
- 2005 *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, War of the Worlds*
- 2006 *Children of Men*

Setting

Science fiction cities are settings that show the best and worst of modern life, observes Eric Avila. While cities have been a repeated theme since *Metropolis*, sci-fi events can take place under the sea, beneath the Earth or even inside your brain. From the micro to the macro worlds, there are no real boundaries to sci-fi settings.

Space isn't the 'final frontier'; it is just the American frontier with special effects. The genre will happily borrow settings from other genres, such as a spaceship that functions as the haunted house, as in *Alien*.

Seamless special effects are essential to presenting a self-contained world. Travel to forgotten portals and undiscovered frontiers requires a significant suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience. They must immerse themselves in extraordinary settings foreign to their actual experiences.

Representations and discourses

Science fiction participates in many of the discourses of contemporary society. Some have become long-term preoccupations, including:

- **Fear of 'the other'.** The 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* brings out one of the recurring themes in science fiction, writes professor of literature J. P. Tolette. 'It is largely about a fear of the other, about what is out there ...'
- **Fear of technology.** Paranoia about machines grew with computer capabilities. This tradition links the computer of *The Forbin Project* (1969) with the rebellious replicants of *Blade Runner*. In *The Matrix* (1999) artificial intelligence (AI) is the great deceiver, maintaining a reality that enslaves and blinds humanity.
- **Faith.** The *Star Trek* TV series (1966–69) arrived at a time when God was disappearing from science fiction. Typically, backward planets would have religion while developed civilisations had technology, although traditional religion is restored in later films such as *Signs* and *Independence Day*. Often belief in a dream or a nightmare scenario is critical for survival. Whether or not God is directly involved, science fiction requires a leap of faith. The Force in the *Star Wars* films is an example.
- **Individualism.** People are trapped by societal systems. Often punishment is associated with being different. However, in sci-fi the brilliant and persistent can eventually escape their bondage.
- **Slavery.** Explored through the thankless, servile life of robots, issues concerning the morality of slavery merge with a debate about what constitutes life and consciousness. In *I, Robot* (2004) freedom from slavery becomes the solution as well as the problem.
- **Predestination.** Genetic discoveries reopen the nature versus nurture debate. In *Minority Report*, our specific actions are predetermined, so people who are capable of murder are just as guilty as those who actually commit it.

Activities

1. Search current news sources and science texts for an existing or emerging technology. List the pros and cons of the particular technology taken to its extreme conclusions. Identify the impacts this technology may have on individuals and script a scene with a minimal number of characters to demonstrate some implications of the technology.
2. Choose a problematic social issue and invent a fictional technology that solves the problem in some way. Construct a public relations list of ways to promote acceptance of this invention in the public arena. Consider the representation you are trying to construct and effective delivery of that message to the desired market.
3. Refer to the section on plot with regard to a number of science fiction films you are familiar with. Identify the science fiction story type, and

the borrowed stylistic elements used in the plot. Look for evidence of other genre influences in your examples.

PRODUCTION TASK

4. A production house has research showing there is a market opportunity for science fiction productions. They intend to rework an existing script from another genre to suit the conventions of sci-fi. Several of the scenes had already been shot in the other genre by the second filming unit ahead of the main production. You need to use this footage.

Use the video footage that is not science fiction to accompany a sci-fi soundtrack. Plan a soundtrack redub that may include prerecorded library effects or revoicing to create the appropriate atmosphere. Record and/or arrange the tracks to replace the original soundtrack.