**The Time that Binds:
Science Fiction Cinema and the Social Experience of Time**

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by

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the science fiction film genre from the perspective of its critical engagement with the social experience of time. Social changes resulting from the industrial revolution culminated in the need for an objective, consensual understanding of time to coexist alongside a more subjective and individual temporal experience. Science fiction cinema is ideally positioned to mediate the contradictions inherent in this dual social experience of time by virtue of its abilities to foreground the concept of time within the narrative and to visually represent temporality through its mise-en-scene and through the unique spatio-temporal qualities of the cinematic apparatus. In serving this mediating function science fiction cinema broadly separates itself into two divergent streams, each respectively exploring either an objective or subjective conception of the experience of time. These divergent streams develop in tandem throughout the history of science fiction film, forming the basis of the continuity that threads the entire genre together.

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Introduction

The Invasion of Time

This thesis undertakes a reconsideration of cinematic science fiction (SF) through a fundamental focus on the genre's preoccupation with the concept of time. While it is certainly the case that SF narratives often utilize the idea of time as a plot device or a central thematic concern, what is easily overlooked is the degree to which the genre itself is constructed around and principally addresses time both as a social and cultural concept and as a physically lived experience. In fact, I will argue that the engagement of SF film with the concept of time can be seen as a key feature of the genre, serving as the cornerstone around which an essentially cinematic conception of SF has developed for over a century.

Simply stated, the issue at hand in this study concerns how a particular conception of time works to shape and define visions of the future. An understanding of SF as a film genre and its operation within society, what Annette Kuhn would term its "cultural instrumentality,"¹ requires a deeper insight into how SF films deal with the concept of time both narratively and aesthetically. Also required is an understanding of how the genre itself is uniquely positioned to address these issues and adapt to changes with respect to the cultural experience of time as a socially constituted phenomenon that is both consensually understood and physically perceived.

¹ Annette Kuhn, *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (New York: Verso, 1990), p.1.

Such a conception of the SF genre necessitates a consideration not merely of narrative and stylistic elements but also of the foundations of the genre itself, as SF film tends to address issues of time very specifically through an awareness of its own generic history. This further requires an analysis of the operation of the cinematic apparatus within SF, since the genre's singular obsession with time appears to develop directly out of its interaction with a set of technical capabilities unique to motion picture technology, distinctly separating the film genre from its literary cousin.

The chapters to follow will trace the continuity of the SF genre and in so doing reveal as its fundamental driving force an essentially cinematic engagement with the concept of time. This overriding concern with time is always present in the majority of SF cinema at either the level of style, narrative, form or apparatus, and is often working to some degree on all levels at once.

The first chapter of this study will establish the fundamentally cinematic nature of the SF genre in film. Through a consideration of the differences that separate SF cinema from SF literature, I will emphasize the importance of generic continuity in the development of film genres. Within the SF genre this continuity is maintained and conveyed most strongly through a fascination with time and temporal experience that may be found operating to some degree in most films belonging to the genre. Most importantly, this temporal fascination connects and extends through the entirety of the genre and is not limited to specific periods or cultural moments. It thus represents the stable and connective core of the genre itself.

In fact, in Chapter Two, I will argue that a preoccupation with time is so prevalent within SF cinema that the genre can broadly be divided into two dominant streams, running parallel throughout the history of the genre and representing two divergent perspectives on the cultural experience of time. These divergent streams illustrate and chart a “crisis of consensus” that has existed since the industrial revolution first positioned the experience of time as a fundamentally social phenomenon.

This chapter will center on the culturally mediating function of the SF genre, focusing discussion in particular on the manner through which these SF streams have become unnecessarily entangled with the broad cultural theories of modernity and postmodernity. A strong effort will be made to disassociate SF film from these culturally loaded, excessively contradictory and oppressively periodizing terms. In addition, it will be shown that an emphasis on the temporal fascination of SF cinema addresses many of the issues and concerns broached by *both* modernity and postmodernity while avoiding much of the theoretical confusion and arbitrary classification that accompanies an understanding of the genre based within two *separate* doctrines. Examples will be drawn from very early SF cinema, including Méliès’ *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and Menzies’ *Things to Come* (1936), and from more contemporary works such as *The Fifth Element* (Besson, 1997) and *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), in an effort to emphasize the strong sense of continuity that runs through the history of the SF genre.

The next chapters will take the framework outlined in Chapters One and Two and apply it to the dominant thematic concerns of SF cinema. Dealing principally with aesthetics and style, Chapter Three divides the genre along utopic and dystopic lines.

Given the temporal focus of this study, this broad categorization presents a far better entry point into the genre than more traditional thematic groupings. Although SF engages with such concerns as the other (alien), the unknown (space), identity (robot/clone) and technology (progress/apocalypse), all of these more specific themes are always presented in either a predominantly positive or a predominantly negative manner.

In SF terms, particularly with respect to SF narratives set in the future, this positive/negative dichotomy translates into the representation of either a utopian or a dystopian diegetic space, carrying with it an attendant series of repercussions for a particular film's conception of time. Much of this utopian or dystopian element, along with its particular association with a certain conception of time, is conveyed through the *mise-en-scene*.

This chapter will explore the manner in which specific conceptions of time interact with and find expression through the aesthetic and stylistic elements of SF film. Each portion of this chapter will take up a discussion of a different element of the dominant forms of SF cinematic space and its implications in a temporally-based understanding of the genre. Urban depictions in SF film will be explored primarily through an analysis of both *Metropolis* (Lang, 1926) and *Blade Runner*. The apocalyptic landscape will be explored with reference to the *Mad Max* series. Finally, the exploration of interstellar space will be considered through case studies of the *Star Trek* and *Alien* series, two long-running SF franchises that each respectively epitomize the two divergent streams of SF cinema to be outlined in the opening chapters. Wherever possible, this work will attempt to consider as its primary examples long-running SF series, as this

represents a further means through which the issue of time and its changing conceptions might be addressed.

The fourth and final chapter will address specifically the operation of time travel as both a thematic and a narrative device in SF film. Although time-travel films can also be said to convey either a strong utopian or dystopian perspective, they demand more careful and direct attention and analysis by virtue of their foregrounding of the issue of time and the interrelations of past, present and future. These interrelations are further enhanced by a self-reflexive foregrounding of the temporal logic of cinema itself. Indeed, as far back as the earliest writings on cinema, many scholars have noted the unique abilities of the cinematic apparatus with respect to the manipulation of time. Ultimately, this chapter will explore the contention that time-travel films utilize the most essentially cinematic of all narrative forms, resulting in a reflexivity that comments on the operation of the apparatus itself. These properties of the apparatus were realized very early in the history of cinema, and SF film in particular has provided continuous and systematic commentary on their social consequences.

In accordance with the stated methodology of approaching these issues through reference to long-running series, this chapter will discuss in detail the use of time travel in the *Star Trek* films as compared to its narrative and thematic function within the *Terminator* series. Other films to receive some attention include the early *Paris Qui Dort* (Clair, 1923), *The Time Machine* (Pal, 1960), and Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* (1995). A discussion of these films will seek to offer an historical perspective on the implications of cinema itself in the changing cultural experience of time.

It should be noted, finally, that although the argument developed throughout this study may be thought of as generally applicable across a broad spectrum of SF films (particularly with regard to its categorization of SF's mise-en-scene), I have limited myself here primarily to discussion and analysis of films portraying "visions of the future." This provides not only a convenient method of containing the scope of this study but also a further means of emphasizing the temporal focus of my argument. Although I maintain that the majority of SF films display a fascination with the cultural experience of time on some level, films set specifically in some future date relative to their production directly foreground the temporal issues that interest me in a clear and unambiguous manner.

Still, whether they are set there or not, many SF films inevitably address the future. As Aaron Taylor observes in his examination of historicity in contemporary SF cinema, "above all, this is a cinema about *change*" (original emphasis).² That "change," however, should be regarded as a means of acknowledging the essential continuity of the genre rather than a justification for excessive and limiting periodization.

In some respects the work presented here could be considered a follow-up to Taylor's study. Just as Taylor's work seeks to position historicity and signifiers of the "past" as elements of thematic importance to SF film, my own argument initially developed out of a similar response to the over-emphasis of future-oriented criticism within the study of the genre. However, where Taylor sees a need for SF criticism to

² Aaron E. N. Taylor, "World Without End: Historicity and the Contemporary Science Fiction Film" (M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 2002), p.1.

actively engage with the genre's conceptions of the past, I perceive a need for SF criticism to acknowledge the fundamental and defining role played by a generic fascination with the cultural experience of time itself. Taylor suggests that "history plays a much more constructive role in contemporary SF than previous critics have allowed."³ I completely agree but would further add that most studies of the SF genre, including those that specifically address its temporal aspects, fail to acknowledge the degree to which the genre itself has been geared toward a direct engagement with a *lived* and socially constructed conception of time and all its interactions across consensual understandings of past, present *and* future. It is toward just such a perspective that this study will move, beginning, in Chapter One, by establishing an essentially cinematic understanding of the SF genre that is formulated around a sense of generic continuity and resists the sort of limiting periodization currently obscuring the genre's more constant and temporally centered nucleus.

³ Taylor, "World Without End," p.159.

Chapter One

Searching for Science Fiction: Issues of Genre and Definition

It is by now a staple of any genre study to begin with an attempt at definition. SF film, however, has remained remarkably resistant to this sort of categorization throughout its history. Rather than offering definitions, studies of the SF genre in film have tended to begin with discussions of the problems associated with definitions. This emphasis on uncovering a categorical label for the genre is where much work on SF cinema falters and also where troublesome issues of periodization begin to creep in, ascribing to the genre defining attributes that are far too broad, too limiting or too deterministic to be critically useful. Furthermore, such arbitrary periodization and classification distorts or denies the inherent continuity of SF cinema, which ultimately represents the very connective fabric that holds the genre together. As this chapter will discuss, that continuity is not only an experience of time in and of itself but it is also temporal by its nature and in its engagement with science fictional themes. A fascination with the experience of time represents the connective core of the SF genre.

Still, however, this temporal fascination does not approach the level of specificity and direct formal applicability required for a proper definition. Despite obvious evidence that a cinematic SF genre exists, it continues to defy attempts at formulating a strict and universally accepted definition. Some of this problem can be traced back to the complex concept of genre itself. How does one successfully define *a* genre if the very *idea* of genre resists attempts at straightforward definition? The key area of concern lies in the degree to which an understanding of the concept of genre is bound up with its use in

relation to a particular discourse. As a comparative example, consider that the word “cat” might have a different set of associative meanings for a veterinarian than it might for a person with severe allergies. As Errol Vieth explains:

A similar problem exists with the signifier *genre*, in that the discourse in which it appears and the participants in that discourse determine its meaning. For a teacher of English, genre might signify a unit of work focused on the production of business letters. For a Russian formalist, the word might involve similarities in textual form and structure that allow for classification: the genre of the folktale, for example, is a genre because of the common functions and structures within the narrative and the social functions of the narrative.¹

Unlike the word “cat,” however, which in its simplest form very definitely and specifically refers to an identifiable animal species, the term “genre” lacks a basic and concrete *signified* to which it might attach itself. This problem is further compounded within film studies by a need to disentangle the idea of genre theory from its literary origins and associations. Alan Williams recognizes this obstacle, writing:

Perhaps the biggest problem with genre theory or genre criticism in the field of cinema is the word *genre*. Borrowed, as a critical tool, from literary studies (or at least having resonances from that area – the word does have a life of its own in the film industry) the applicability of “genre” as a concept in film studies raises some fairly tough questions.²

One of those tough questions concerns the sovereignty of a uniquely cinematic generic space. After all, if the idea of genre has been “borrowed” from literary studies, might the genres themselves also have been appropriated? This is a debate with exceptionally strong consequences for an understanding of SF film.

¹ Errol Vieth, Screening Science: Contexts, Texts, and Science in Fifties Science Fiction Film (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2001), p.4.

² Alan Williams, “Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9: 2 (Spring, 1984), p.121.

Clone Wars: SF Literature vs. SF Film

It is an undeniable matter of fact that SF emerges as a solid and definable literary genre long before it achieves similar status in film. This certainty creates a temptation, following the logic of what Rick Altman terms neoclassical genre theory,³ to simply assume that the SF genre in film is essentially, or should ideally be, the visual counterpart to literary SF. Neoclassical genre theory is founded on an Aristotelian belief that genres exist in and of themselves. From such a perspective it is easy to assume that SF film merely appropriates a pre-existing genre and disseminates it unchanged through a different medium. This assumption is further encouraged through the obvious literary origins of some of the earliest SF imagery to be captured on film. Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), heavily influenced by the works of both H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, stands as the most obvious example. Later work by Méliès continues this trend, as *The Impossible Voyage* (1904) and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1907) are both clearly influenced once again by Verne's novels. Given these circumstances, assumptions concerning the literary roots of SF cinema are not surprising. Furthermore, following the temporal perspective put forward in this analysis, one could assume that the continuity of SF film develops through literature and into cinema in an unhindered and uninterrupted fashion.

This co-opting of a literary model for SF, however, has led critics to adopt a certain set of preconceptions regarding the proper role and function of SF in film that denies cinematic expressions of the genre their proper cultural legitimacy. The first

³ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p.4.

significant study of SF film, for example, John Baxter's *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (1970), is telling by its very title. The idea of SF *in* the cinema, as opposed to SF *of* the cinema or simply *SF cinema*, suggests the transference of a pre-existing genre into a new medium. It is assumed then that SF *in* cinema should operate in the same manner as SF *in* literature. This belief has led to a rift between literary and cinematic SF communities in which SF film, by virtue of its alleged secondary status, has suffered. Literary critics continually cast SF film as a debased form of the SF genre, obsessed with mindless spectacle and unable to approximate the visionary ideals that lie at the foundations of true SF. Certainly, a common litany in response to cinematic adaptations of revered works within the canon of SF literature (such as Frank Herbert's *Dune*), laments the inability of cinema to convey the subtleties and abstractions of the original work. Such a stance has led critics like Baxter to label SF film "an intellectual impossibility,"⁴ forever overshadowed by its far superior literary progenitor.

Obviously, many genre critics working in film would beg to differ. Placed in a defensive position, these critics understandably have attempted to disassociate SF film from SF literature by constructing a separate and positively conceived cultural space for SF cinema. Brooks Landon, for example, has argued that the SF ethos so prevalent in literature, a "belief in problem solving, belief in the possibility and virtues of change, and fascination with the new," is not present within the narratives of SF film but instead has

⁴ John Baxter, *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1970), p.8.

moved into its very mode of production.⁵ In Landon's estimation, literary critics who attack SF cinema for its over-dependence on spectacular special effects are unwittingly railing against the very ideals they hold sacred within SF literature. It is the special effects themselves that embody this "science fiction ethos." A desire to solve representational problems through the use of effects technology, a drive to continually push the limits of that technology and a constant showcasing of the most cutting-edge developments could be considered foundational elements of such contemporary films as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron, 1991) and *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (Lucas, 1999). This fascination with the continued progression and sophistication of effects technology links contemporary SF film to the positivist and visionary ideals cherished by SF literature. As well, it presents a new means through which we might trace the continuity of the genre, suggesting a temporal line of argument that charts the development of SF cinema through the evolution of special effects technology.

Such a conception does not so much disassociate SF film from SF literature as it does make allowances for the inherently visual nature of cinema. Landon suggests that both SF literature and SF film work to accomplish the same goals using diverging methods that are suited to their respective mediums. As a predominantly visual medium, SF cinema locates and conveys its ethos most forcefully in a visual manner. Thus, it is perfectly natural that SF cinema places a greater emphasis on its effects than it does on the complexity of its story ideas, as that is where the core of its generic identity resides.

⁵ Brooks Landon, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic (Re)Production* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), p.116.

Landon's thesis, however, demonstrates a certain lack of balance. While it may be the case that SF film relies heavily on special effects as an indicator of its generic specificity, narrative also has its proper place in this equation. Landon places a great deal of emphasis on the "science fictional" nature of cinematic modes of production, but largely ignores the extent to which "science fictional" narratives demand an effects-centered cinema by virtue of their own natures. The special effects industry has been practically mythologized around the axiom that necessity is the mother of invention. Near legendary are the tales of how George Lucas and Industrial Light and Magic revolutionized special effects in film to produce the *Star Wars* series. By now, confidence in the abilities of special effects departments, particularly in the digital era, has resulted in narrative ideas that challenge effects designers rather than merely exploit the most current technologies.

The point here is that this science fiction ethos of problem solving and fascination with the new that Landon locates in special effects is not entirely technologically determined but rather retains a narrative determination as well. The impetus for change does not derive solely from the desire to build bigger and better effects but also from the desire to tell bigger and better stories. George Lucas, for example, is rather famous for working in this manner. For Lucas, the story exists before the technology. Not only was he required to build new technology to fully render his ideas on screen for *Star Wars* in 1977, but also, when he returned to the series twenty-two years later to produce the prequels, he once again challenged his designers with narrative ideas beyond the scope of technology at the time. Ultimately, while special effects might occupy a space of

privilege within SF film, they cannot be said to represent its generic core, nor can they stand alone as the connective force that binds the genre together through time.

In her landmark study of American SF film, Vivian Sobchack considers this centrality of narrative when she addresses some of the literary criticisms that cast cinema as an inferior means of approaching many of the abstract ideas typically broached by the SF genre. In doing so, Sobchack makes the important link that although SF film and SF literature convey their material through different mediums, they are both fundamentally works of fiction and therefore approach abstractions in a variety of similar respects. She writes:

The SF writer or filmmaker may want to present intellectual thought, ideas, and concepts to his reader, but his primary goal is not to inform, nor to philosophize, but to create a narrative which dramatically - through its style and structure, its characterizations, its events and objects and places - provokes the reader to think, to observe, to draw his own abstract conclusions.⁶

Understanding that both literature and film operate through a fictive process, Sobchack points out that both SF film and literature convey abstract ideas through similar narrative devices. Once these abstractions are located narratively within characters, places, objects, etc., they cease to be abstract. Since film, and particularly American film, has evolved as a narrative medium, it is equally as capable as literature of conveying profound intellectual ideas through fiction. Sobchack uses what is arguably the most critically respected SF film ever produced to illustrate her point, writing:

⁶ Vivian Sobchack, Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p.25.

It is clearly evident since 1968 and the huge success of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (certainly an intellectually provocative film on a number of levels) that the film medium can accommodate 'adult' science fiction.⁷

In fact, such works as *2001* and *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) are examples of films with literary roots that have taken on purely cinematic value and underscore the point that cinema, through its own intrinsic mechanisms, is perfectly capable of conveying the evocative power of a genre without recourse to literature. Brooks Landon, for example, notes *Blade Runner*'s particular value as a cinematic artefact, writing:

Blade Runner offers perhaps the most striking example we have of an SF film whose impact and cultural meaning have very little to do with those of the written narrative from which it was adapted. It is *Blade Runner* the film, not the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* that has become such a focus of postmodern cultural theory, and it is the film rather than the novel that seems to have provided the paradigms for future worlds in so many cyberpunk and other recent works of fiction.⁸

This would suggest that *Blade Runner* has somehow managed to transcend its source material and create a space for itself as a separate cultural entity directed toward separate cultural ends. This generic gulf between SF literature and SF film is displayed even more concretely in the landmark achievement of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Much of the lasting power and majesty of *2001*, with its sparse dialogue and crawling narrative, is located within its images, resulting in a uniquely cinematic experience. *The Sentinel* (1951) and *Encounter in the Dawn* (1953), the short stories upon which *2001* is said to be based, provide only the barest plot structure for the film, and even Arthur C. Clarke's novel, written in conjunction with the screenplay, cannot reproduce the hallucinatory,

⁷ Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p.26.

⁸ Landon, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence*, p.46.

hypnotic and profoundly thought-provoking experience of viewing the film. The comparisons to Homer's *Odyssey* suggested by the film's title are instructive in this regard; for if reading Clarke's novel is like reading *The Odyssey* translated into prose, then watching Kubrick's film is akin to hearing *The Odyssey* performed in its proper poetic form. The unification of imagery and music, the visual effects and the very structure of the film in its editing all combine to inform and enhance the viewing experience. *2001* embodies SF as a distinctly cinematic genre.

The Trouble with Genres...

Despite its ability to distinguish itself from its literary cousin, however, SF film still finds itself very much caught up in problems of generic definition. While it may be appropriate to separate SF literature and film on the basis of their fundamentally different though discursively related modes of operation, the question of how SF film relates to other films is another matter entirely. This brings us around again to the problem of providing not just a suitable definition for a genre but also an appropriate understanding of the idea of genre itself. Rick Altman, who has provided the most recent and comprehensive study of film genre, has cast the practical elements of genre formation as largely following from an industrial process of product differentiation, while distinguishing the process of a genre's solidification as critical in nature. From this perspective, genres become "temporary by-products of an ongoing process,"⁹ whereby the semantic and syntactical elements of genres are combined and recombined in an

⁹ Altman, *Film/Genre*, p.54.

effort to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Thus, as Altman states, “Hollywood’s stock-in-trade is the romantic combination of genres, not the classical practice of generic purity.”¹⁰

While conceiving of genre formation as an on-going process accounts for generic changes and hybridization, and also importantly foregrounds the highly temporal and continuous nature of generic development, the apparent stability of some genres is seen to result from their retroactive critical reception. Altman argues:

Only when a film is subjected to critical reception is its generic potential concretized and stabilized by reviewers. In short, critics and not studios lie at the origin of most generic language.¹¹

This line of reasoning lends some credence to Vivian Sobchack’s argument that despite isolated occurrences prior to World War II, SF “only emerged as a *critically* recognized genre *after* Hiroshima.”¹² Errol Vieth agrees, but places the determining influence on the critical capacity of the general audience, writing:

For the sake of overview, it is useful to generalize for the time being and say that certain conventions are specific to science fiction films; it is in the fifties that the science fiction film genre became recognizable to an audience through these characteristics. The fifties marked the efflorescence of science fiction film into a genre that encompassed sub-genres of diverse characteristics united under the umbrella of science fiction.¹³

Sobchack’s agenda, however, is far more comprehensive than Vieth’s, as she seeks to disassociate SF as a proper film genre not only from SF literature and other films

¹⁰ Altman, Film/Genre, p.59.

¹¹ Ibid, p.127.

¹² Sobchack, Screening Space, p.21.

¹³ Vieth, Screening Science, p.xiv.

outside the genre but also from science fictional representations on film produced prior to World War II. In so doing, she ignores the retroactive nature of most genre criticism. If Altman's model is to be accepted, earlier appearances of SF in film can be seen as part of the "on-going process" leading to the genre's formation and eventual solidification through critical or audience recognition. It is therefore natural to retroactively label as SF such films as *A Trip to the Moon*, *Things to Come* (Menzies, 1936) and *Metropolis* (Lang, 1926). Certainly, much of the imagery and many of the thematic concerns evident in these early films have been preserved in contemporary SF, a strong indication of generic association. While the scope of Sobchack's argument is, admittedly, only concerned with American SF film, her refusal to consider the retroactively constructed boundaries of SF film ignores the extent to which these early films have impacted the style and structure of many of the films she studies, as well as shaped the development of the genre as a whole. This idea of a generic history, of a continuity both through time and concerning time, is crucial to the argument to be developed in the forthcoming chapters.

The Trouble with Definitions...

Of course, arriving at a definition of SF as a film genre requires a set of boundaries that mark it as distinct from other types of films. This has proven particularly difficult for cinematic SF. As Vieth suggests, much of the problem resides in the non-specific nature of science fictional themes. He writes:

In writing about other genres, the problem does not arise so intrusively, and discussions about other genres do not begin with a debate about contentious definitions. Rose suggests that those writing about other genres, 'are fairly confident of the boundaries of the genre in question,' and '[p]erhaps this is so because those genres seem to be defined by their

subject matter; detective stories are about crime, and westerns are about cowboys, Indians, and life on the old frontier. In what sense is science fiction about science?'¹⁴

With no specific generic core to point to, critics often attempt to define SF according to a unique and complex set of interchangeable semantic and syntactic elements. Once again, however, the SF genre stands apart from more readily identifiable generic models. As Vieth observes:

While other genres might have a more or less common formula containing elements that are present in all narratives of that genre to some extent, this is not the case for science fiction.¹⁵

Still more bothersome is the fact that different elements within the SF genre take on different determining roles depending upon their combination. Take, for example, *Back to the Future* (Zemekis, 1985), a film that carries a great many SF semantic elements that are ultimately overridden by the syntactical emphasis on comedy. Each successive entry in this series piles on further semantic and syntactic layers, the third film going so far as to appropriate elements of the Western genre, all subordinate to the overarching comedic and satirical thrust of the narrative. Where will these films be found at the local video store? Not on the Science Fiction shelf but on the Comedy shelf. Contrast this to *Outland* (Hyams, 1981); a virtual remake of *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952) that despite its clearly Western oriented syntactical nature is unfailingly considered an SF film due to the overwhelming presence of SF semantic elements.

¹⁴ Vieth, *Screening Science*, p.9.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.11.

Sobchack draws attention to the particular problems associated with the fluidity of generic indicators in her consideration of the overlap between SF and the horror genre, observing:

In numerous books and articles, the same films are claimed by both genres while others are rejected by both, each claiming they belong to the other. Critics of both genres have been anxious to differentiate science fiction from horror, to separate the two irrevocably. Those hybrid films which combine equal elements of both... are generally found to be “aesthetically” dissatisfying, one of the reasons being, perhaps, that they present problems of classification and create a gray area - a no-man’s land - linking the two genres more than purists in either camp would like.¹⁶

Where Sobchack seeks to negate this “gray area” by ascribing separate and distinct social functions to the SF and horror genres,¹⁷ J.P. Telotte, on the other hand, chooses to incorporate this uncertainty generated by the possibility of a generic “no-man’s land” as a defining characteristic of SF cinema. According to Telotte, a proper understanding of genre mechanisms requires one to think “both differentially and essentially,”¹⁸ recognizing that genres operate along a common thread while simultaneously displaying a range of differences. Toward this end, Telotte positions SF along a generic spectrum which he hopes will provide a useful set of critical boundaries while remaining broad enough to allow for generic combinations and a certain element of narrative blending. Interestingly, it is a literary model that Telotte uses to construct his framework. Drawing heavily from Todorov’s conception of the fantastic text, Telotte argues that the dominant thematics of SF exist along a sliding scale that closely mirrors

¹⁶ Sobchack, Screening Space, p.27.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp.31-32.

¹⁸ J.P. Telotte, Science Fiction Film (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.162.

the interplay of the three related fantastical narrative forms identified by Todorov: the marvelous, the fantastic and the uncanny. With the marvelous oriented around encounters with otherness, the uncanny centered around questioning conventional notions of self, and the fantastic operating as a “point of hesitation” between the two, SF films are positioned along this scale according to their dominant themes, potentially coming into close contact with other genres depending upon their placement within this spectrum.

In fact, Telotte agrees with Todorov’s conception of genres being “precisely those relay points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature - or for our purposes, the ‘universe’ of film narrative.”¹⁹ In this sense, the genre of SF itself becomes a “point of hesitation” within cinema, necessarily coming into contact with other genres, for according to Todorov’s model, a genre “exists *only* in relationship to other narrative types” (original emphasis).²⁰ Its borders, therefore, shift and change according to the genre’s relationships with other genres.

Given this model, Telotte is free to consider the frequent intermingling of horror and SF as unproblematic. Quite to the contrary, such hybrids are expected within a spectral conception of genre. Telotte views horror/SF hybrids such as David Cronenberg’s remake of *The Fly* (1986) as films that straddle multiple narrative forms, noting that “generic purity is something we can expect seldom if ever to encounter.”²¹

¹⁹ Telotte, Science Fiction Film, p.11.

²⁰ Ibid, p.11.

²¹ Ibid, p.195.

More to the point, Telotte would agree with Altman's argument that purity is antithetical to the very idea of genre itself.

Still, where Altman, given his very broad approach to genre in cinema, can be relatively secure in forwarding this argument, Telotte must be more careful due to his focus on a specific genre. Although his goal is to provide a generic model for SF that is both dynamic and essential in nature, his argument often runs the risk of broadening SF beyond the point where it is possible to distinguish the particularities of the genre.

Obviously, a great many other narrative forms broach the very general categories that make up the fantastical text. Genres ranging from horror, to family melodrama, to comedy may explore themes of encounters with otherness or questions of self, or even the borders of perception. Telotte's model certainly opens the door to interaction and blurring of generic boundaries but it does little to locate the specificity of SF. Even the SF films that he confidently associates with a specific narrative form slip and slide too easily along his proposed generic spectrum. For example, Telotte classifies *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956) as predominantly a marvelous text in its exploration of otherness. Yet, a case might also be made that the film is primarily an example of the uncanny by virtue of its confrontation with conventional notions of self. Likely the film can be read simultaneously as both, a point that once again speaks to the dynamism of Telotte's model yet underscores its limitations in providing an account of SF as a distinct film genre.

Vivian Sobchack, on the other hand, is very much interested in locating the specificity of SF film. In her attempt to do so she presents a definition of SF that is

inclusive of the obvious mysticism that permeates the supposedly empirical genre, concluding:

SF film is a genre which emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and the empirical method, interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, though still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion, in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown.²²

This definition represents an attempt at drawing together the three most common elements characterized as foundations of the SF genre: science/technology, social commentary, and the alien/unknown. For many critics these elements represent the specificity of the SF genre. Within the cinema these elements are conveyed in visual terms through the operation of spectacle and effects technology. For Sobchack, the particular specificity of SF film lies in a movement, transmitted through visual and aural cues from the realm of the “alien” to the realm of the “familiar.”²³ For the most part, critics have been satisfied with this conceptualization of SF as a genre that engages with a technologized exploration of the unknown.

Turning Toward Time

Such a definition, however useful in general description, remains rather surface oriented. While technology, society and the unknown are the predominant themes of SF, they fall short of accurately representing its generic core. To use an appropriately technological metaphor, they may be parts of the machine but they are not the engines.

²² Sobchack, Screening Space, p.63.

²³ Ibid, p.106.

To my mind, the watchword in the preceding discussion and indeed in the chapters to follow is continuity. Simply put, the specificity of a genre lies in its continuity over time. This is not to be confused with notions of stability or purity, for surely genres change and continuously evolve. Where the majority of SF studies have gone wrong, however, is in theorizing sudden and radical breaks in an effort to compartmentalize the genre neatly for analysis and study. As Altman observes:

The near invisibility of the genrification process while it is underway facilitates a too easy assumption that radical differences separate classical and contemporary generic practices.²⁴

The SF genre, for example, is most often separated into three distinct periods, the positivist modernism of early film in the machine age, the “Golden Age” of the 1950s, and the contemporary postmodern phase. Such categorizations tend to suggest that different times call for different SF when in fact the cultural instrumentality of SF film, its engagement with society on a cultural level, has remained remarkably constant since its first tentative appearances more than a century ago.

As mentioned, the SF genre is principally a mode of expression concerned with the idea of change. Almost paradoxically, it is this change that ultimately represents the constancy of the genre. A genre that places change at the core of its identity, however, stands as one particularly resistant to labels and classifications. Many critics have noted the difficulties inherent within this emphasis on change in their examinations of the genre. Errol Vieth, for example, writes:

²⁴ Altman, Film/Genre, p.41.

Science fiction films can be viewed as threads within a web and, at the same time, constituting the web. The metaphor is apt: texts and contexts and their relationship have a difficult accommodation with each other, an interdependent and dynamic relationship. The text is a thread in the web, as are elements of context, yet the threads are in a symbiotic and constantly changing relationship with each other, as the web is constantly in a state of renewal and change. At the same time, the text itself is a web, as are the various contexts. The threads are both ephemeral and fleeting, while incredibly strong.²⁵

Vieth's metaphor is indeed an apt one, for it is precisely that "ephemeral strength" we are seeking when we attempt to define the genre of science fiction. Despite the constant change within the genre there is still some common element that holds it together as an appropriate descriptive model for a specific though widely varied group of films. Locating the exact source of this cohesiveness has, however, as much of the material in this chapter has shown, been the topic of some contentious and as yet unresolved debates.

Perhaps then, in an analysis of the SF genre, it is best if our approach is as "ephemeral" as the answers we seek. If SF has proven strikingly resistant to concrete definition then the problem most likely lies not in the genre or even in the definition but rather in the rigidity of the definition's application. As Sobchack observes:

The tyrannical phrase *define your terms* can, however, if followed too slavishly, imprison the critic in an ontological construct which has little to do with cinematic reality. Definitions strive, after all, for exclusivity, for the setting of strict and precise limits which, when they become too narrow, seem glaringly and disappointingly arbitrary.²⁶

²⁵ Vieth, Screening Science, p.xi.

²⁶ Sobchack, Screening Space, p.17.

This danger, accompanied by the constantly changing nature of science fiction, has led some critics to forego the idea of definition altogether. John Brosnan's response to the issue of definition, for example, is "an sf film is any film I *say* is an sf film."²⁷ Stanislaw Lem, meanwhile, brings to light a very important point in his attempt to avoid definition. As Vieth recounts:

Stanislaw Lem, creator of the novel on which *Solyaris* (1972) is based, links scientific notions of progress to the difficulty of defining science fiction films. Progress in any field implies the abolition of previously valid definitions. Science fiction concerns itself with progress; therefore, definitions of science fiction will also change when notions of science are reconstituted.²⁸

As the next chapter of this analysis will discuss, SF film often finds itself at the forefront of cultural transition, as implied by Lem's emphasis on notions of progress. This positioning of SF at the cusp of change, as well as the continuously transforming nature of the genre itself, suggests a relationship with time and the experience of time that has thus far received too little critical attention within work on the SF genre.

This chapter has shown that although SF films may be viewed as distinctly cinematic forms of expression, that sovereignty has left SF cinema to define its own set of cultural motivations, completely separate from that of its literary cousin. If film genres, and the SF genre in particular, are to be seen as ongoing processes rather than sharply delineated categories, then the project of locating the cultural specificity of SF cinema is made all the more difficult. Still, amidst all this uncertainty there remains

²⁷ John Brosnan, The Primal Screen: A History of Science Fiction Film (Sydney: Macdonald, 1991), p.1.

²⁸ Vieth, Screening Science, p.12.

enough stability to reasonably argue that there does exist a genre called science fiction. That stability is precisely focused on maintaining a constant exploration of the consequences of change.

Thus, in the interest of working with rather than against this focus, no rigid definition of SF cinema will be offered here. Instead, the remainder of this analysis will concentrate on locating the specificity of the SF genre in its continuity over time. Such an emphasis on continuity presents the benefit of allowing for constant change while simultaneously tracking and charting an inherent stability through an historical course of development. As will be argued in the forthcoming chapters, this stability manifests itself within the SF genre as a central fascination with the social experience of time and its consequences for the individual. This fascination with temporal experience is the “ephemeral and fleeting,” though “incredibly strong” thread that weaves itself through the entire course of the genre’s history. While this does not stand as a rigid and conclusive definition of the genre, it does, as the next chapter will show, represent a solid core around which the continually swirling and transforming themes and iconography of SF can congregate and define themselves in relation to one another. Like the eye of a hurricane, this temporal fascination represents the genre’s steadfast and unwavering center.

Chapter Two

Panic in the Year Zero: SF Cinema and Cultural Mediation

While the emphasis placed upon change and progress within SF cinema has fostered a generic development that remains remarkably resistant to strictly constructed labels and classifications, it has also encouraged close associations between the genre and various progressive, even revolutionary, social and cultural movements. If SF cinema refuses to be defined by its formal properties it would seem that critics have instead opted to define the genre on the basis of its social and cultural interactions.

Emerging virtually alongside the technology of cinema itself, SF film is often thought to share uniquely in some of the moderating function attributed to the cinematic apparatus in the early twentieth century; that is the moderation of a deeply intensified, highly technologized, urban mode of living and its accompanying range of new and ever-present sensory experiences. This close relationship between SF and what is perceived as the social moderating function of cinema has, however, led to some conflicting associations with the broad cultural theories of modernity and postmodernity. These associations have in turn led to the imposition of a false and ultimately limiting doctrine of periodization that positions SF as a cultural marker displaying symptoms of either condition depending upon the particular point in time being discussed.

This chapter will explore some of the implications of this limiting perspective while working toward an approach that disassociates SF film from debates of modernity and postmodernity, so as to construct a more accessible, manageable and critically useful understanding of the SF genre within cinema. Such an understanding may be achieved

through a focus on the SF film's relationship with the social concept of time. After all, conceptions of modernity and postmodernity are ultimately theoretical frameworks designed to describe specific aspects of cultural *experience*. SF cinema engages best with issues of experience through an exploration of the conceptions of time that dominate our social reality. Such a temporal approach addresses many of the elements of the genre commonly associated with either a modernist or postmodernist perspective while simultaneously recognizing the continuity of those elements over time.

Rise of the Machines: Cinema, SF and Modernity

Cinema, modernity and the genre of SF are commonly thought to emerge from a shared set of cultural conditions prevalent in the late nineteenth century. In fact, cinema itself is often categorized as an inherently modernist technology. Such a perspective is linked most famously to the work of Walter Benjamin, who

related the shock of the rapidly changing experience of the urban environment and new technology to cinematic techniques, such as rapid montage, slow or fast motion, and huge close-ups.¹

With the invention of the cinema in the late nineteenth century, precisely at a time of rapid modernization and industrialization, the technology quickly came to be thought of as particularly suited toward conveying and mediating this intensification of lived experience. As Anne Friedberg has noted of Karl Marx's response to modernity:

¹ Tom Gunning, "Early American Film," American Cinema and Hollywood: Critical Approaches (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.40.¹

For Marx, the key aspects of modernity were the dramatic changes in consciousness brought about by industrialized space and time — the ‘annihilation of space by time’ as he famously put it.²

Although Marx was not addressing the cinema specifically, it is clear that film may be included among these new technologies that achieve the “annihilation of space by time.” The ability of the cinema to manipulate space through the manipulation of time was unprecedented in the history of representational technology. The implications of these new technologies prompted many scholars of the time to debate the emergence of a new spatio-temporal logic resulting from a new level of technologically assisted human perception. Dziga Vertov, for example, constructed in 1919 the model of Kino-eye, a bio-technological fusion of human perception and cinematic perception. He writes:

I am kino-eye, I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people in accordance with preliminary blueprints and diagrams of different kinds.

I am kino-eye.

From one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely; from a third, the most beautiful and expressive head - and through montage I create a new, perfect man.³

This benevolent approach to humanity’s new relationship with the technological can be deemed more or less characteristic of the modernist outlook. Although modernity generated a certain sense of anxiety by virtue of the rapidity of the changes taking place, the role of technology itself rarely encountered negative criticism. While the pace of change may have been unnerving, what lay at the root of modernity was a fundamental

² Anne Friedberg, Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.55.

³ Dziga Vertov, “Kinoks: A Revolution,” Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov, ed Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p.17.

belief in the idea of progress. Increased urbanization only further intensified this simultaneously cautious and ecstatic response. Writing in 1903, Georg Simmel summarized this prevailing attitude, arguing that “the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli”⁴ provoked new mental attitudes in the inhabitants of the new modern cities and that this intensification of emotional life was neither entirely positive nor unswervingly negative. Already, we can see an emphasis on both time and experience within this perspective. As Simmel suggests and as Vertov’s later testimony to the powerful potential of technology confirms, it is the pace of change and the overwhelming nature of new sensory experiences, not technology itself, that creates uncertainty and anxiety within modernity.

Still, the true force of this relationship between cinema and modernity and its apparent links to a radical shift in the nature of lived experience remains fiercely contested. David Bordwell, for example, doubts the ability of experiential conditions to so quickly and completely alter human physiology, concluding, “It is highly unlikely that visual perception has changed over recorded human history.”⁵

While this is certainly the case, Bordwell’s objection misses the point. Critics such as Tom Gunning, who have argued that early cinema expresses a shift in sensory experience, do not contend that human perception itself has changed but rather that human *response* to sensory perception has changed. Evidence of this claim abounds in

⁴ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” On Individuality and Social Forms, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p.325.

⁵ David Bordwell, Visions of Cinema: On the History of Film Style (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.23.

the scholarly writing of early modernity. The works of Georg Simmel and Dziga Vertov, as noted above, represent just two examples among many. Given the prevalence of such an attitude at the time, it is reasonable to assume that some of this cultural consciousness would find itself expressed through the emerging medium of film. The emphasis on spectacle in early cinema, particularly in the trick films of Méliès, would seem to support this argument.

In fact, it was the novelty of cinema as a technological spectacle in its own right that first drew a curious public to the fledgling medium. Tom Gunning has famously labeled this early period in cinema's history the "cinema of attractions."⁶ According to this model, the earliest cinematic productions emphasize the power and position of spectacle over narrative and highlight the technical possibilities of the cinematic apparatus. Thus the earliest films of the Lumière brothers, depicting such mundane subjects as *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895) and the *Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1895), were an attraction by their very existence, while later films, such as *The Marvelous Hair Restorer* (Williamson, 1901) and *How to Make Time Fly* (Paul, 1905), relied on camera tricks to attract an audience. This emphasis on spectacle, especially with respect to the early "trick" films, is a point of central relevance to the emergence of SF as a genre within cinema.

Indeed, it is most likely the potential for spectacle inherent in science fictional backdrops, and not a common grounding in positivism, that first linked SF to both cinema and modernity. Georges Méliès, for example, was only interested in the SF narrative of

⁶ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectators and the Avant-Garde," *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI Publishing, 1990.).

his most famous film up to the point where it was useful as a means of showcasing the various camera tricks he had devised. As Tom Gunning explains:

Many trick films are, in effect, plotless, a series of transformations strung together with little connection and certainly no characterization. But to approach even the plotted trick films, such as *Voyage dans la lune* (1902), simply as precursors of later narrative structures is to miss the point. The story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema.⁷

Brooks Landon applies Gunning's arguments more directly to SF, positioning the obvious and self-reflexive nature of special effects technology as the overriding and defining trait of SF film. In Landon's estimation, the apparent association between early SF film and Gunning's "cinema of attractions,"

has fascinating implications for the history of SF film, since it suggests the possibility that the genre has its roots in spectacle rather than in narrative, an essential difference from the history of science fiction writing. Accordingly, judged by the standard of attractions rather than by the prevailing conventions of written SF narrative, it might be argued that *no* primitive films can be rigorously thought of as SF. Or, more intriguingly, it might be argued that since primitive cinema used the spectacle of its production technology to elicit the same sense of wonder and discovery elicited by SF writing, *all* cinema of attraction films can be thought of as SF (original emphasis).⁸

Despite my objections to Landon's exclusion of the role of narrative in generic definition, his comments do suggest the degree to which spectacle, an important feature in conceptions of early cinema, early modernity and early SF, serves to link all three subjects in a closely tied relationship. It also further implies the ambiguity surrounding

⁷ Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," p. 65.

⁸ Brooks Landon, The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic (Re)Production (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), p.xiv.

SF's associations with modernism, suggesting that the genre need not be considered inherently modern by nature or design.

Bordwell, however, dismisses this emphasis on spectacle as the connective link between modernity and cinema by noting that the film industry and the modernist experience appear to develop along opposite trajectories. As Tom Gunning notes of Bordwell's argument:

Bordwell asks how one can relate the fragmentary, aggressive form of the cinema of attractions to abrasive modern experience in the street or to new modes of transportation, since these aspects of modernity continued, or even increased during the transitional period, which subordinated the more aggressive aspects of attractions to the coherence of narrative integration.⁹

Gunning counters this objection with the observation that relations between modernity and cinema extend beyond the cinema of attractions and into early narrative cinema as well, citing examples of thrill melodramas such as *The Lonedale Operator* (Griffith, 1911). The persistence of spectacle throughout the history of cinema lends credence to this argument. It may certainly be the case that after the initial and most intense wave of cultural anxiety brought on by the emergence of modernity, the pure spectacle embodied in the cinema of attractions found a niche within the now dominant narrative form of cinema. Ultimately, the cinema of attractions may have found its most comfortable narrative pairing within the genre of SF, a narrative form seemingly predisposed toward both spectacle and the mediation of technologically induced cultural anxiety. As Scott Bukatman observes:

⁹ Gunning, "Early American Film," p.41.

The genre has been an essential part of technological culture for over a century. Through the language, iconography and narration of science fiction, the shock of the new is aestheticized and examined. Science fiction constructs a space of accommodation to an intensely technological existence, and this has continued to the present electronic era.¹⁰

Bukatman's point is important as it clearly assigns to the genre of SF film many of the social and cultural mediating functions that Gunning identifies in the cinema of attractions. More important still, Bukatman's observation suggests an historical trajectory of the mediating function of SF that continues right up to the present day. Assuming one accepts Bukatman's reasoning, this point raises some interesting questions. Of particular interest here is the question: if contemporary SF continues to exhibit a mediating function traditionally associated with the cultural context of modernity, does this suggest the persistence of modernity in the present era or has the mediating function of SF shifted over time to reflect and mediate the anxieties generated by the emergence of the cultural logic of postmodernity? This is the question toward which this discussion will now turn.

Dawn of the Dead: Cinema, SF and Postmodernity

Whenever one begins to discuss SF film in terms of postmodernism the future inevitably starts to look bleak. Certainly, a particular attitude of negativity pervades much of postmodern theory. Concerning itself with such issues as the death of the subject, the death of the real, the collapse of master narratives and the disintegration of history, it is not surprising that Christopher Sharrett and many other critics have

¹⁰ Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), p.8.

identified a distinctly dystopian element in the majority of SF films that have been labeled postmodern. Sharrett writes:

It is interesting also that when the cinema is discoursing on certain postmodern theorizations (the impact of media and cybernetics, etc.) or merely playing out and exhausting tired genre conventions within a postindustrial topography, it does so with unbridled negativity. The most important “postmodern” movies of the last decade (*Blade Runner*, *Repo Man*, *Brazil*, etc.) when not viewing material conditions at the end of the century as catastrophic and unrecuperable, suggest that the sensibility of the postmodern moment, even when placed in a humorous context (*Something Wild*, *Insignificance*) advancing carnival with the fading of totalizing systems and patriarchal authority, nevertheless projects a profound nullity and bankruptcy.¹¹

If we are to follow Bukatman’s conception of the function of the SF genre then it is possible that the dystopian turn that much of SF takes in the 1970s and 1980s represents a cultural shift in focus. In other words, where SF once mediated the shock of the new by conveying a cautious optimism, it has now moved to the expression and mediation of a dreadful familiarity and resignation toward technology; a new cultural anxiety summarized in the words of P.B. and J.S. Medewar in their essay on the intersections of science and society. They argue:

It has come to be felt that there is some essential malefaction about the progress of science and technology: that they lurch forward like some great Behemoth trampling down in its pathway almost everything that makes for civilized life.¹²

¹¹ Christopher Sharrett, “Introduction: Crisis Cinema,” Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Washington D.C.: Maiseonneuve Press, 1993), p.4.

¹² P.B. and J.S. Medewar, “Some Reflections on the Theme of Science and Civilization,” Civilization and Science, In Conflict or Collaboration? (New York: Associated Scientific Publishers, 1973), p.9.

As with modernity, the discussion once again focuses on the notion of cultural experience. It is not cinema or the genre of SF that have changed but rather it is the experiences that they supposedly mediate that have been altered. From this perspective, SF and the cinema itself are not characterized as inherently modern either by design or coincidence. Their cultural relevance has outlived modernity and therefore they have transcended the circumstances of their origins.

Vivian Sobchack, on the other hand, argues that SF film in fact displays no ties to modernity and has always been inherently postmodern in nature. Much like the modernity argument, which posits that cinema, modernity and SF share a point of origin and are thus related in important cultural respects, Sobchack perceives the genre of SF film and postmodernity as existing in a similarly symbiotic relationship. Her claims for the emergence of a recognizable SF film genre after World War II bestow upon the genre a point of origin coincident with Fredric Jameson's identification of the origins of the cultural logic of late capitalism. According to Sobchack then, SF film has always been a postmodern cinema. She writes:

The first wave of the genre's popularity (in fact, its first mass articulation as a film genre) begins in the 1950s and emerges, we now might argue, as the first socially symbolic cinematic representation of late American capitalism's new expansion toward its "purest" state. Following Jameson, we could say that in its figuration and narration of American culture's "deep constitutive relationships" to the new nuclear and electronic technology, the genre was constituted as an attempted mapping of "the bewildering new world space of late multinational capital."¹³

¹³ Vivian Sobchack, Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p.21.

Sobchack's thesis presents similar reasoning to Bukatman's discussion of the role of SF in technological and social mediation as well as to other writings on early cinema that we have examined. In fact, the only significant change in the logic of Sobchack's argument as compared with those mentioned above is the substitution of postmodernity for modernity. Where her postmodern conception of SF cinema intersects interestingly with an extrapolation of Bukatman's model in particular, however, is in its consideration of the mediating function of SF as shifting from an expression of novelty to an expression of familiarity. Sobchack's model similarly relates the early manifestations of the fully established SF film genre to the conveyance of the fearsome and wondrous novelty and strangeness of the emerging postmodern logic and its new nuclear and electronic technology. Later SF, on the other hand, articulates a familiarity with that logic and its awesome and wondrous *lack* of novelty. The crucial difference with Sobchack, however, is that her model is contained completely within postmodernity. This suggests the interesting possibility that postmodernity itself has evolved into a form different from that of its original cultural logic.

Once again, this is a point best exemplified through a discussion of the role of spectacle in SF film. While the postmodern aesthetic in film has traditionally tended toward dystopian modes of expression (see, for example, *Blade Runner* [Scott, 1982] or *Brazil* [Gilliam, 1985]), the sheer aesthetic pleasure of spectacle presents a means through which postmodern experience may be mediated in a celebratory manner. *The Fifth Element* (Besson, 1997), for example, can be taken as a contemporary SF film that revels in the power and freedom of pure imagery and spectacle. The film's 225 effects

shots combine in the finished product to present to the audience a nearly overwhelming onslaught of vivid imagery.

Furthermore, much like *Blade Runner*, the narrative of *The Fifth Element* is concerned centrally with the issue of simulation. When compared with *Blade Runner*, however, *The Fifth Element* presents its view of simulation in a far more positive manner, depicting one of its main characters unproblematically and positively as a complete simulation. Having been copied from a few surviving cells recovered from a crashed spaceship, Leeloo (Milla Jovovich), is quite literally a copy without an original. Steven Shaviri points out that traditionally, “images are condemned because they are bodies without souls, or forms without bodies.”¹⁴ Yet, within *The Fifth Element*, Leeloo is celebrated, even worshiped by all characters as “perfect,” an “intensification of reality.”

Linking *Blade Runner* and *The Fifth Element* to the theories of Jean Baudrillard provides a further avenue of exploration into the possibility that the focus of postmodernity has shifted since its initial emergence. It can be argued, for instance, that the postmodern views presented in *Blade Runner* and *The Fifth Element* differ primarily due to the fact that each film is representative of a different type of postmodern audience. As Michael Camille observes:

Baudrillard’s pessimistic visions arrived at the moment of highest anxiety and nostalgia, stimulated not only by the shock of events like Watergate but also by new technologies that had totally transformed traditional ways of communication, not least in the field of vision.¹⁵

¹⁴ Steven Shaviri, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.38.

¹⁵ Michael Camille, “Simulacrum,” *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.38.

Made fifteen years after *Blade Runner*, *The Fifth Element* speaks to a society that has become quite familiar with these new modes of experience. While cynicism and pessimism remain, it has become evident that society has not succumbed completely to the direst forecasts of Baudrillard. In fact, as Camille points out:

While Baudrillard has pointed out some important ways in which strategies of simulation now control our everyday lives, he overlooks how many artists of the past decade have sought to dissect or criticize the media and ironically displace it in their work.¹⁶

Films such as *The Fifth Element* suggest that society has not become a slave to the image but rather revels in the ecstatic freedom and joy of pure spectacle. Comparisons between *Blade Runner* and *The Fifth Element* also suggest, however, that even a generic model of SF that avoids the issue of accounting for a transition from modernity to postmodernity by being contained completely within a single cultural logic finds itself subject to a limiting doctrine of periodization. Furthermore, a comparison of these films highlights the central relevance of spectacle within the theoretical framework of postmodernity. This persistence of spectacle as a central component of both postmodernity *and* modernity, raises a series of troubling questions concerning the accurate identification of a clear point of rupture between the two cultural logics, as well as some confusion concerning their obvious points of intersection. The remainder of this chapter devotes itself to an examination of these issues and their implications for a temporal understanding of SF film.

¹⁶ Camille, "Simulacrum," p.39.

Land of the Lost: Separating the Modern from the Postmodern in SF film

As we have seen, both modernity and postmodernity are fundamentally concerned with conveying and mediating an understanding of the dominant modes of cultural experience. One of the primary goals, therefore, in disentangling SF film from theories of modernity and postmodernity is an avoidance of the confusion generated by the frequent overlap of these two perspectives and the difficulties involved in identifying a distinct break between them. As discussed above, Vivian Sobchack attempts to avoid this issue altogether by positioning SF film as a distinctly postmodern genre. Yet even she identifies what can only be termed a strong positivist trend continuing throughout the genre's history. According to Sobchack, although it subtly and unconsciously reflects the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism, much mainstream SF continues to convey a positivist sense of optimism through its very structure and visual movement. This positive visual movement, Sobchack argues,

is informed by the somewhat smug and optimistic belief in infinite human and technological progress and by a view of the unknown as a beautiful undiscovered country (no neighbor to Hamlet's) which holds only minor terrors and creates minimal anxiety because it is, in fact, ultimately discoverable and conquerable.¹⁷

The endurance of this positivist strain of SF film underscores the difficulty in arriving at an understanding of the genre through the application of either modern or postmodern theory. If elements of modernity persist across the entire span of SF film's history then where can we position the cultural break between the modern and the postmodern? James Combs effectively summarizes the problem, observing:

¹⁷ Sobchack, Screening Space, p.110.

It is not all clear what post-modernity is “pre-,” since certain dominant aspects of modernity (corporate capitalism, the liberal democratic state, the practices of bourgeois life) seem remarkably persistent. Perhaps postmodernism is our new intellectual myth, putting us on the side of new gods as we witness the twilight of the old ones.¹⁸

Combs’ observation also raises yet another issue that complicates the relationship of both modernity and postmodernity to SF film, and that is the inconsistent and haphazard method through which these models have been applied. Anne Friedberg comments on this less than rigorous methodology, remarking, “as was the case with the term modern, post-modern seems to be invoked to simply refer to the ‘new’.”¹⁹ This unfortunate tendency has led to a serious devaluation of the terminology used in these debates. Hasty and unfounded conclusions regarding the nature of either modern or postmodern society have effectively reduced these terms to the status of popular buzzwords. This has been especially true of postmodernity. As Rick Altman states:

Today, pandering to postmodern taste, some critics have discovered the delights of intertextuality and multi-genericity, but we must not allow a change in critical paradigm to stand in for textual difference. Genre mixing has long been a standard Hollywood practice.²⁰

Altman’s arguments regarding genre in cinema carry a certain level of historical thinking that is sorely lacking in both modern and postmodern theory. As mentioned, much of this theory is centered on claims of sudden, rapid and all encompassing cultural

¹⁸ James Combs, “Pox-Eclipse Now: The Dystopian Imagination in Contemporary Popular Movies,” *Crisis Cinema*, p.18.

¹⁹ Friedberg, *Window Shopping*, p.10.

²⁰ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p.141.

ruptures or breaks. Such a perspective applied to SF film, however, ignores the degree to which continuity functions in the continued evolution of the genre.

Let us take, for example, *Blade Runner*, a film often thought of as quintessentially postmodern and thus regarded as a distinct departure from its generic predecessors. In a sense, *Blade Runner* is more a film *about* postmodernism than it is a postmodern film itself. While much of its subject matter relates to what is commonly perceived as postmodern experience, the formal structure of the film itself cannot be said to represent or reflect a postmodern perspective. Although *Blade Runner* is often cast as the embodiment of the “new” science fiction film, its debt to SF of the past throws this claim into serious question. In particular the film owes much of its iconography, ambiance and thematics to *Metropolis* (Lang, 1926), an SF classic often strongly associated with urban modernism, as we will see in the next chapter. Some critics would argue that this association to the generic past is precisely an example of a very clear postmodern trait; an intertextuality that suggests the use of what Fredric Jameson has termed pastiche. As noted above, however, intertextuality should not automatically be taken as indicative of a new relationship between texts. Genres have a long history of intertextuality. In fact, a close relationship between texts constitutes one of the defining features of genre itself. What is important here is the context of this relationship. As Caryn James argues:

Post-modern films rejuvenate old genres - westerns, adventure serials and musicals - by being them and mocking them at the same time.²¹

²¹ Caryn James, “Post-Modernism Edges into the Film Mainstream,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1990.

No such duality is evident within *Blade Runner*. Although the film combines the stylistic elements of SF and Film Noir, neither becomes subject to mockery or ironic displacement. Furthermore, with respect to the more specific relationship between *Blade Runner* and *Metropolis*, both films present straightforward and, in some respects, rather similar narratives. Both, for example, express similar cultural anxieties through the metaphoric portrayal of artificial life. Also, the layered urban structure of *Blade Runner* owes much to the similar structure of *Metropolis*. In fact, its presence as a tradition within SF spans the genre's entire history (*Metropolis*, *The Time Machine* [Pal, 1960], *The Fifth Element*, *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* [Lucas, 2002]). Thus, while the narrative of *Blade Runner* may superficially engage issues associated with postmodernism, it cannot be considered outside of its generic context, a position that clearly problematizes an understanding of SF film as it relates to the broader cultural concerns of modernity and postmodernity.

Crisis of Consensus: A Temporal Consideration of SF Film

It has been the aim of a large portion of this chapter to identify and examine the various intersections between SF film and the wide-ranging cultural debates of modernity and postmodernity. One would generally assume that the application of such cultural theories to SF cinema would serve to develop a clearer understanding of the genre, its cultural function and its relation to society. Instead, however, a deeper examination of SF's relationship to modernity and postmodernity reveals a confusing entanglement of theoretical overlaps, contradictions and hasty conclusions. An understanding of SF is often lost in a struggle to understand the analytical tools themselves.

Perhaps most difficult to reconcile is the degree to which conceptions of modernity and postmodernity overlap with respect to SF cinema. Both, for example, are fundamentally concerned with cultural experience. Both present the privileged place of spectacle within SF film as a key representation of the dominance of their respective cultural logics. Both also claim that the spectacular nature of SF film functions to mediate cultural anxieties that derive principally from the shock of adapting to a highly technologized social experience. Both, finally, seem to convey the fragmentary nature of this social experience. At times the only fundamental difference between modernity and postmodernity seems to be the new technologies at the root of these cultural anxieties. If SF film continues to serve the same function today as it did at the time of its emergence then can a shift in paradigm really be justified on the basis of a change in the type of technology generating cultural anxiety?

This question, obviously, is open to some debate. It is certainly possible that the cultural anxieties produced in response to new electronic technologies require fundamentally different modes of treatment than did the industrial technologies of modernity. This begs the question, however, why are modes of practice traditionally associated with modernism still plainly evident within SF film to this day? The very fact that this question needs to be asked illustrates the lack of attention given to continuity within debates of modernity and postmodernity. Although the idea of *post*-modernity itself implies a certain continuity following from the conditions of modernity, most of the critical work in this area instead focuses on claims of a sudden and distinct break separating these two cultural logics. Such a claim has been difficult to support with

relation to cinema due to its close associations with modernity, and doubly difficult to support within SF film due to similar associations linked to the genre itself. In fact, an examination of SF film presents far more evidence for the persistence of modes of practice over time than it does for the emergence of a new dominant cultural logic.

Perhaps then the proper consideration of the place and function of history within the genre of SF film provides a means of addressing many of the issues and problems traditionally associated with modern and postmodern theory while simultaneously avoiding much of the confusion, overlap and general intellectual baggage associated with these broader cultural debates. While I do not mean to suggest that these theories are invalid forms of analysis, there is ample evidence to infer that they are perhaps ill suited in their present states to provide a practical and critically useful perspective on SF film. In fact, Ihab Hassan himself, one of the primary proponents of a postmodern theory of literature, has expressed similar cautions, listing

a whole series of conceptual problems raised by the term Postmodernism: as a period term, it is unstable and shifting, with no clear boundaries; as a categorical term for a specific literary practice, it is approximative and ambiguous, hovering uncertainly between evaluation and description.²²

Although it has had more time to develop a theoretical, critical and analytical identity, I would argue that some of the same criticisms can be attached to modernism as well, particularly when it is considered in opposition to claims of an emerging postmodernism. I would like to propose, therefore, an alternative means of categorizing

²² Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Naming and Difference: Reflections on 'Modernism Versus Postmodernism' in Literature," Approaching Postmodernism: Papers Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism, 21-23 September 1984, University of Utrecht, eds. Douwe Fokkema, Hars Bertens (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986), p.260.

SF film that avoids the confusion and periodization associated with these terms while still addressing some of their primary concerns.

Whenever questions of modernity, postmodernity and SF arise, the emphasis is always inevitably placed on technology. This comes as no surprise given the dominant role technology plays within the thematics of SF film. A certain level of technology, however, is to be considered as a given within SF and a detailed study of the genre actually reveals not a fascination with the technological but rather a distinct ambivalence. In fact, the very term “ambivalence” appears so often within SF criticism (see, for example, Telotte’s *A Distant Technology* or Landon’s *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence*) that it has merited serious consideration as one of the defining features of the genre.

This ambivalence is most often conveyed through an attitude of neutrality toward technology within SF film. Technology itself is never condemned; instead, it is the *uses* to which technology is put that are evaluated and judged. More importantly, this is not a characteristic that is subject to periodization. There is little evidence to suggest that technology is put to primarily positive or negative uses in SF films of any specific era. In fact, SF films most often consider the positive and negative uses of technology together. This trend is evident throughout the course of SF film history, in the transition from apocalypse to utopia depicted in *Things to Come* (Menzies, 1936), through the atomic-themed films of the 1950s in which monsters were often both created and destroyed by nuclear technology, up to contemporary SF films such as those in the *Terminator* or *Matrix* series, which depict humans as enslaved by technology but also show them subverting and using that technology to fight for their freedom.

Consideration of this ambivalent treatment of technology in SF film leads one to doubt the technological emphasis placed by Bukatman and others on their suggestions of the mediating function of SF. Still, however, the associations between the emergence of SF and the emergence of urban industrial society are too numerous and closely intermingled to merely dismiss. How then does this relationship manifest itself?

As discussed, SF is a genre principally concerned with change. If cinema in general can be said to be a technology ideally suited to mediating and expressing the “rapid pace of change,” as examined above, then SF cinema must be situated as a genre targeted at a more specific area of that increased pace.

The most difficult and disruptive changes in a transition from rural to urban culture were certainly technologically influenced but ultimately predominantly social in nature. The largest adjustment came in the unprecedented degree of consensus required for the smooth operation of social systems and institutions. As Iain Chambers observes in his review of the origins of popular culture:

Central to the sheer physicality of change in the nineteenth-century city was a new sense of time. Time began to be accumulated in collective labour, in machinery and mechanical production, in the factory system. It escaped from the natural clock of day and night and the seasons and became a social construction. It was divided up into sequential units to be measured, defined, fought over, and consumed.²³

The construction of a social conception of time was necessitated by the expansion of commerce, facilitated by technologies such as the telegraph and rail transportation which made issues of space and distance irrelevant. No longer were towns “island

²³ Iain Chambers, Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience (New York: Routledge, 1986), p.21.

communities”²⁴ unhindered by conflicting perceptions of local time. A new consensus was required and applied through the construction of standard time zones. This attempt at widespread social control initially met with considerable resistance although today the completely arbitrary nature of this system goes virtually unnoticed, suggesting the degree to which a common conception of time structures our social reality.

The ultimate result of this shift in the perception of time from a micro-social, private and subjective scale to a macro-social, universal and objective scale was a physicalization of time. As noted above, time became an object that could be measured, divided, bought and sold. It also, however, became a space, as described by Carey:

When the ecological niche of space was filled, filled as an arena of commerce and control, attention was shifted to filling time, now defined as an aspect of space, a continuation of space in another dimension. As the spatial frontier was closed, time became the new frontier.²⁵

As will be discussed in forthcoming chapters, it is SF film that emerged as the genre best suited to exploring this new temporal frontier as well as mediating the crisis of consensus arising from a doubled conception of time as both objectively constructed and subjectively experienced. This suitability is founded principally on a formal and narrative structure capable of treating the new physicality of time as elastically as the apparatus that serves as its means of expression. SF film can then be conceived as continuing to fulfill a culturally mediating function in its concern with exploring the social phenomenon of time. Such a conception of the genre erases problems of

²⁴ James W. Carey, “Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph,” Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p.223.

²⁵ Ibid, p.227.

periodization, as the duality of temporal experience (private vs. social) and its attendant contradictions remain constant and exist to this day. SF film provides a means of engaging with these contradictions, providing metaphors through which to discuss them and exploring resolutions that are not possible within the realm of actual experience (e.g. time travel, fantasies of control).

This is primarily achieved through the separation of SF film into two dominant streams that explore divergent experiences of time as a social phenomenon. The first presents time as an essentially linear experience, moving ever forward and extending ever backward. Narratively, aesthetically and formally, this strain of SF positions progression as its central feature, and concerns itself with an exploration of the consensual, societal and arbitrarily imposed experience of time.

The second stream views time along a stratified model. Time in these films is experienced as a series of infinite layers. The primary feature of this strain is the unification of past and future in a perpetual present, exploring a subjective and highly individualized experience of time.

The next chapters will explore the particular formal, aesthetic and narrative intricacies of these categories but for the moment the striking similarities between these streams and modern and postmodern conceptions of SF film deserve some comment. It is true that the first stream represents a positivist outlook closely aligned with similar modernist views, while the second stream's emphasis on subjectivity and the denial of linear history resembles a postmodern perspective on SF. The crucial difference here is that both these streams exist simultaneously and along a parallel trajectory throughout the

history of the genre. Thus this model, through its emphasis on a constant fascination with the concept of time, possesses the benefit of being able to explore many of the same issues broached by modern and postmodern theories while avoiding the contradictions and confusions associated with these intellectually and culturally loaded terms.

Of particular value is the ability to examine issues raised by both theories at once rather than having to adopt one perspective over the other or having to resort to periodization, a tactic that is often more limiting than it is informative. Finally, this model erases much of the confusion generated by the apparently similar features of modern and postmodern forms of expression (e.g. narrative intransitivity, estrangement, fragmentation, multiple diegesis, inter-textuality and aperture). As elements of a common approach to a specific genre, rooted in a central concern with the concept of time, these strains quite naturally share similar expressive features. They are not broad cultural theories and therefore have no need to define themselves in terms of broad techniques. Their distinctiveness is located in more specific and subtly constructed areas. This study will now move precisely to a more specific consideration of those distinctions by applying this model of a time-based conception of SF film to a rigorous examination of the dominant thematics of the genre in an effort to position SF cinema as a vital and continuously relevant genre, expressing a very definite sense of history and continuity.

Chapter Three

Bright Futures and Dark Horizons: The Temporal Aesthetics of Utopian and Dystopian Cinema

In placing *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) among the top one hundred SF achievements of all time, *Entertainment Weekly* singled out the impact of the film's production design, stating, "It's hard to remember what we *used* to think the future looked like" (original emphasis).¹ This simple statement not only embodies the periodizing approaches to the genre discussed in the previous chapter but also rather effectively conveys the degree to which SF cinema relies on style and aesthetics as a principal means of expression. Although it is clear that the mise-en-scene of SF cinema operates on a number of evocative levels simultaneously, its construction is often founded in a very definite engagement with the concept and experience of time. In fact, as the discussion to follow will reveal, the aesthetics of SF are the primary and most clearly evident means through which the two previously outlined streams of SF film find expression. It is most often through a direct consideration of mise-en-scene that the majority of SF films might be divided into one stream or the other.

The aesthetics of the SF genre may be viewed, according to their grouping in any particular film, as either utopian or dystopian in nature. Many SF films admittedly consider both positive and negative possibilities but all ultimately leave the viewer with an overall interpretation that leans strongly in either one direction or the other. That interpretation is most often developed through the depiction of SF spaces. This chapter

¹ Albert Kim (ed.), "The Sci-Fi 100," *Entertainment Weekly*, #454 (Oct. 16, 1998), p.36.

will consider the most common SF spaces, the city, the apocalyptic wasteland, and outer space, and examine how these spaces engage with the temporal fascination of SF cinema directly through a visual aesthetic deriving from careful and specific attention to mise-en-scene.

Make Room! Make Room!: The Aesthetics of SF Urbanism

The utopian and dystopian possibilities of modern, industrialized cities have long been a recognized and well-considered component of urban culture. Paula E. Geyh characterizes this continuous debate as existing within two oppositional urban perspectives, writing:

Essentially, there are two competing visions of the city at present (and perhaps throughout time as well, though there have been many variations of these in the past): the city as fortress and ‘scanscape’, in which the spatial logics are those of control, containment, exclusion, and surveillance, and the city as polis, in which the logics are those of freedom, access, equality and interchange.²

Geyh’s distinctions quite clearly mirror the development of urban representations throughout the history of SF film. The diverging utopian and dystopian tracks of SF are quite evident very early in the history of the genre and their urban iconographies are encapsulated in two early SF films, *Metropolis* (Lang, 1926) and *Things to Come* (Menzies, 1936). Although both films consider some positive and negative aspects of urban experience, and although both films conclude on positive, albeit ambiguous notes, the overall tones conveyed through the set designs and other elements of the mise-en-scene are quite different. *Things to Come*, with its perfectly planned and completely

² Paula E. Geyh, “The Fortress and the Polis: From the postmodern city to cyberspace and back,” *Technospaces: Inside the New Media*, ed. Sally R. Munt (London: Continuum, 2001), p.104.

controlled environment of the future Everytown, represents an urban vision of safety, security and comfort. Such a utopian vision of the future city has a rich tradition within SF cinema, continuing to develop right through to contemporary representations. Direct descendants of Everytown can be seen in the brief glimpse of a 23rd Century San Francisco in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Wise, 1979) and the overwhelming though ordered city-planet of Coruscant in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (Lucas, 1999).

Metropolis on the other hand, presents a more threatening vision of the city. Although it is a city topped by wondrous towers and idyllic pleasure gardens, those bright spaces cast long shadows. The city, as presented from street level and below ground, is a labyrinth of dark alleys, corridors and forgotten caverns. This sense of threat, however, is not confined to the underworld of the oppressed workers but pervades the entire city. Although Rotwang (Rudolph Klein-Rogge) is the true villain of the story, the city's chief planner, Frederson (Alfred Abel), spends the majority of the film in collusion with this mad scientist figure, lending every corner of the city an ominous feel. This partnership ultimately results in the creation of the Robot Maria (Brigitte Helm), who incites all the most blatantly threatening sequences of the film, most notably the destructive riot that begins in the city's pleasure district.

Despite what appears to be a happy and naively moralistic ending, the tensions explored in *Metropolis* are never definitively resolved and continue to resonate in later SF representations of urban space. These later urban visions continue an association with the Expressionistic elements of *Metropolis* by adopting various stylistic elements of Film Noir. In fact, this style of urban representation has developed to such a degree within the

SF genre that it has led Janet Staiger to coin the term “Future Noir,” a style which she defines as mocking the failure of the rationalist perspective by locating traces of modernist architecture within a labyrinthine cityscape of darkness, entropy and abandonment.³

Of course, the most obvious example of the persistence of this “Future Noir” style is *Blade Runner*. As Scott Bukatman observes, the similarities

between *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner* are almost too numerous to mention, and the resemblance runs deep – *Blade Runner* doesn’t just refer back to the earlier film, but to the very issues that dominated it.⁴

It is important to note also that *Blade Runner* is not so diametrically opposed to the rationalist perspective as Staiger’s conception of “Future Noir” would lead one to suspect. Bukatman again notes:

It might be pertinent to regard *Blade Runner* as a more deeply *modernist* city film. Its citation of earlier urban forms does not seem to be the ahistorical pastiche that defined post-modern architecture and art, but represents, rather, a more deeply historicized restatement of fundamental modernist ideas of the city. Critics, myself included, have tended to see the film’s disparate buildings as the mark of a post-modern sensibility, but heterogeneity and urban chaos are nothing new, after all. Cities of the modern period were as heterogeneous as they could make themselves (it was also unavoidable unless the old city was razed, as in *Things to Come*).⁵

This “historicized restatement” of urban ideas in *Blade Runner* forges a very definite association with the socio-cultural perspective of earlier SF representations of

³ Janet Staiger, “Future Noir: Contemporary Representations of Visionary Cities,” *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1999), p.100.

⁴ Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), p.63.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.60.

urban space. In fact, Bukatman concludes that *Blade Runner* and earlier urban representations share a common experiential element, stating:

The rational, planned city of efficient circulation and an International Style, perhaps epitomized by the designs of LeCorbusier, belonged to another modernism entirely. *That* modernism is indeed rejected by *Blade Runner*, while the modernist experience of the city described by Simmel, Benjamin and Kracauer – disordered, heterogeneous, street level – is revisited and renewed.⁶

This distinction already begins to move us away from a strictly spatial consideration of urban representations and gradually toward a more temporal conceptualization of urban *experience*. *Dark City* (Proyas, 1998), for example, is a “Future Noir” film that takes this process to an extreme in its opening shots, where time is mysteriously stopped and the city’s citizens immediately fall asleep. The experiences of the citizens along with the physical constructs of the city itself are then altered in tandem by a race of aliens experimenting on humankind, highlighting the arbitrary and consensual nature of urban social experience

This emphasis on experience is reflected in the mise-en-scene of these “Future Noir” films through a technique famously referred to by Ridley Scott as “layering.”⁷ It is a technique that Scott employs to equal effect in both *Alien* (Scott, 1979) and *Blade Runner*, conveying a sense of a “used future” by continuously filling every corner of the frame with an accumulation of detail. The temporal nature of this accumulation of detail is enhanced by what production designer Syd Mead terms “retrofitting,” which “simply

⁶ Bukatman, *Blade Runner*, p.61.

⁷ Ibid, p.10.

means upgrading old machinery or structures by slapping new ad-ons to them.”⁸ These techniques lend a palpable sense of history and continuity to the narrative spaces of these films and reflect a cultural experience of time that is highly foregrounded and physically apparent as well as open to a certain degree of diversity and subjective interpretation.

Given the examples cited, it would seem at first glance that a multi-layered approach to SF is strongly associated with a dystopian perspective, while a more linear approach better conveys a utopian point of view. Such a conclusion, however, is an oversimplification at best. In fact, both approaches are equally capable of depicting either utopian or dystopian visions. Films such as the *Fifth Element* (Besson, 1997) and the more recent additions to the *Star Wars* series present multi-layered urban representations that are both spectacularly kinetic and celebratory, while at the opposite extreme films like *Logan’s Run* (Anderson, 1976) and *THX 1138* (Lucas, 1971) display sterile and stifling visions of progress.

It is important to note, however, that these techniques, although ideally suited to the representation of urban experience, extend beyond those boundaries, providing an essentially time-based focus to the mise-en-scene of most SF films. The remainder of this chapter will discuss that process.

Apocalypse Whenever: Filming the End of Time

Whether utopian or dystopian in their outlook, many apocalyptic films display a particularly science fictional fascination with the concept of time. In essence, apocalyptic films represent a realization of the ultimate extremes of the competing social conceptions

⁸ Bukatman, *Blade Runner*, p.21.

of time outlined earlier. As previously noted, a linear, progression-oriented conception of the social experience of time is founded principally on the systematic erasure of the past. This is accomplished within apocalyptic cinema largely through the setting of the post-holocaust wasteland, representing either an ultimate sterilization or an ultimate stagnation, depending upon the utopian or dystopian leanings of the film in question. As Kim Newman notes, the past is most often denied in the apocalyptic film by setting events in the far future. He writes:

The devastation is hundreds of years old by the time the stories start and we are shown alien societies that have sprung up in the ruins of our world.⁹

Within the utopian version of the linear-based apocalypse the world is typically cleansed of an opulent and over-indulgent society either through the direct actions of that corrupt society or the divine intervention of a natural disaster. The survivors are then left to pick up the pieces. In many cases, apocalyptic events are followed immediately by an apparent regression into primitive tribal cultures and barbarism, highlighting a particular anxiety of the linear model in which the social consensus that structures our experience of time dissolves and society reverts back to a disconnected scattering of “island communities.” This regression, however, is only temporary and may indeed be considered nothing more than a transitional phase, as within this model it is either implied or outright shown that the apocalypse is merely another stepping stone along the way to bigger and better things. This sort of process is depicted clearly in *Things to Come*, where a terrible war, followed by a plague, culls the population down to a level

⁹ Kim Newman, Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999), p.181.

that can be easily controlled and directed by the emerging technocratic elite, who eventually build a technological paradise, put an end to human suffering and begin taking the first steps toward exploring the solar system. This is a trend that is also upheld within the *Star Trek* franchise, which similarly considers fictitious apocalyptic events in humanity's past to be mere bumps along the road to the prosperity enjoyed in the 23rd and 24th centuries.

The dystopian viewpoint of linear-based apocalyptic cinema, on the other hand, perceives an ultimate end to the myth of infinite progress. *THX 1138*, for example, subverts typical apocalyptic expectations by depicting not a limitless void but rather a confining though somehow equally empty subterranean society. The film portrays the ultimate fascist State in which the capacity for observation is total and individuals are so completely dehumanized that they are referred to by number. Social development and personal growth are at an absolute standstill. No further progress is possible. The main character, finding this situation quite justifiably intolerable, seeks escape and eventually gains the long abandoned surface. Despite this cautious note of hope, however, the ending of the film remains ambiguous, as it is never made clear whether the irradiated surface is any more habitable than the stifling society below.

Dystopian views that set their apocalyptic visions within a stratified conception of time meanwhile, reject the barren visualizations of the linear model and place the end of the world atop a global compost heap. In contrast to films within the linear model these films are often not set in the distant future where society has once again established a foothold but rather in the immediate aftermath of a global holocaust in which a sense of

historical continuity is disturbingly apparent. The empty cities of *On the Beach* (Kramer, 1959), and *The World the Flesh and the Devil* (MacDougall, 1959), for example, evoke an intolerable nostalgia through their eerie and seemingly eternal presentness. Films such as these project a different sort of sensory overload than that which is normally associated with representations of urban space. In these scenes, the streets are too still, the silence is too much, the buildings are too high and too close. Everything is intensely and disturbingly present. The physicality of the city is too much to bear.

These scenes that rely on the unbearable presence of the city are structured primarily through the layering technique discussed above. The image of the empty city is, quite often, paradoxically full. Every frame is filled with the detritus of society: abandoned cars, abandoned homes, abandoned malls, and stockpiles of food, clothing and material goods. The material aspects of urban life become suddenly dominant and overtly apparent. They are markers of a present that is overburdened by both the past and a future that will never be.

Finally, more utopian expressions of the stratified apocalyptic model convey what might be regarded as an ultimate extension of freedom and subjectivity. These films place an emphasis on the continuation of the individual rather than the survival of the entire species. In fact, in most cases little hope exists for the human race in general and yet the films avoid the nostalgia that hangs like a cloud around the dystopic portrayals.

Ultimately, it is perhaps the *Mad Max* cycle that provides the benchmark when discussing highly subjective apocalyptic films of this type. In many ways, the *Mad Max* films might be viewed as ahistorical, a fact which problematizes their categorization into

either a linear or stratified SF model. On one hand, the films display an erasure of history that fits a linear conception, yet at the same time they reject a sense of progress that is the defining feature of the linear model.

In this case, the ahistorical nature of the series oddly fits a stratified conception of temporal experience. Although the films give no indication as to an historical time frame in which they might be set (apart from the vague notation in the first film that sets the scene as “a few years from now”), nor any clue as to the passage of years that separate their respective narratives, viewing the films in succession gives one a distinct, albeit ambiguous, sense of continuity. The first film, *Mad Max* (Miller, 1979), depicts a society on the brink of total collapse after the occurrence of some unrevealed catastrophic event. By the end of this film that collapse is complete, as witnessed through Max’s (Mel Gibson) transition from an official lawman to an unremorseful vigilante. The total dissolution of civilization is forcefully though subtly conveyed in the final scene of the film, where Max, seeking revenge for both the murder of his partner and his family, chains a member of the gang responsible for the deaths to a burning wreck and leaves him there to either cut his foot off or die in the inevitable explosion.

In the sequel, *The Road Warrior* (Miller, 1981), this total collapse of civilized society implied in the first film is blatantly apparent. Max wanders the post-apocalyptic deserts virtually alone and cares only for his own survival. The subjective nature of this lone hero structure, however, is severely undermined by the presence of a narrator who purports to be telling the tale of how the Road Warrior emerged from the devastated wastes in order to help humanity take its first steps toward rebuilding the civilized world.

Such a narration imposes a sense of progress and linearity on the narrative by implying that the events of the film are the past and the unseen world of the narrator represents a better and more prosperous present.

Despite this heavy-handed intrusion, the story of *The Road Warrior* remains highly subjective thanks to a solid reliance on the archetypes common to many films of the Western genre. As Newman notes, *The Road Warrior* casts Max

as the kind of doomed Western hero played by John Wayne in *The Searchers* (1956) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962), a man of action who is prevailed upon to help lesser mortals destroy the only world he is capable of living in.¹⁰

In the end, the subjectivity of the film is fully restored as Max, just like the Western outsiders before him, returns to the desert and his solitary existence, unable to integrate himself into the society he has helped to restore.

Finally, this emphasis within the series upon the subjective nature of experience continues and is highlighted in the best and most memorable scenes of *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (Miller/ Ogilvie, 1985). Within the walls of Bartertown and the Thunderdome Max is alone, facing off against an intolerable society and caring only for his individual survival. Bartertown and the Thunderdome are constructed quite consciously within the layered tradition of SF mise-en-scene, utilizing a wide range of reused and recycled materials. Far from suggesting what other production designers have described as a “used future,” the look of Bartertown suggests no future whatsoever; only a society that has stalled and fallen back upon all too human traits of savagery, brutality and barbarism.

¹⁰ Newman, *Apocalypse Movies*, p.185.

Furthermore, a sense of temporal subjectivity can be seen as a defining feature of the tribe of lost children Max encounters in the wasteland. These children have built their own mythology and understanding of time on the basis of their highly subjective experience of apocalyptic events. Within these tribal scenes the cinema's link to time and temporal experience is explicitly foregrounded through the performance of a mythic ritual for which the children have built an obviously cinematic frame to aid in the dramatic representation of the story. These children remember and "see" their history in an essentially cinematic manner.

Ultimately, what remains most prominent within each film in the *Mad Max* series is the unifying concept of the lone hero's highly subjective experience of a world in ruins. This is quite different from the much more consensual and socially focused experiences depicted in the post-apocalyptic visions of SF films based in a linear concept of temporal movement. It is also somewhat different from the experiences depicted in what might be considered "the final frontier" of utopian and dystopian discourse, the exploration of space.

Above and Beyond: The Social Experience of Outer Space

Of course the aesthetics of utopia and dystopia as well as their particular associations with temporal experience can easily be extended outward and set on different planets and within different cultures far from Earth. This model has been used most effectively within the *Star Trek* franchise, as predominantly human crews have come into contact with countless alien civilizations, each containing its own consciously directed comment upon some distinct aspect of contemporary society or human nature.

The Vulcans, for example, represent the emotionless extremes of scientific rationalism, while the Klingons represent the more primal and brutal passions of the human animal.

More interesting, however, than a mere change of settings or the transpositions of metaphors onto a new diegetic space are the means through which humans themselves are depicted as engaging with the *experience* of space exploration. This final discussion of the crucial importance of SF aesthetics will focus upon two case studies of popular contemporary SF franchises. The first is the *Star Trek* franchise, a series of films that are based soundly in a linear perspective and are overwhelmingly utopian in tone. The second is the *Alien* franchise, composed of films built within a fundamentally stratified perspective and conveying a vaguely dystopian vision of the future. Examination of these two franchises will reveal the dominant aesthetic and stylistic techniques that distinguish between the two conflicting though parallel conceptions of temporal experience that underscore the genre.

To Boldly Go: Star Trek and the Linear Conception of Temporal Experience

Of course, the common thread within all space travel narratives is the ship. Perhaps nowhere in SF is this particular piece of iconography more important than in the narrative space of *Star Trek*. Within the *Star Trek* universe the ship is more than merely a means of interstellar transportation. Through its representation within the mise-en-scene it comes to embody the progress-obsessed and temporally linear structure of the entire series. In fact, by the time the *Next Generation* crew takes command, the *Enterprise* has become the literal mascot of everything that the human race is supposed to stand for in the 24th century. It is the flagship of the entire fleet, a shining beacon of

rationality and human accomplishment. It is a place of safety and security to some 2000 humans and to a majority of the crew it is probably more of a home than Earth itself.

This literal and figurative distance from Earth is perhaps why H. Bruce Franklin denounces the utopian messages of *Star Trek* and similarly structured films, stating:

Their optimism can be maintained only by making the MARVELLOUS FLYING MACHINE become virtually the entire inhabited universe. The dazzling adventures of the spacers seem to have no relevance whatsoever to the economic and social life of the rest of our species.¹¹

While his observation regarding the social confinement of the starship is essentially correct it is that very feature that many other critics define as the primary element that serves to bridge the gap between the isolation of the ship and the society it is supposed to represent. Michèle and Duncan Barrett, for example, liken the *Enterprise* to a naval vessel, citing Paul Gilroy's assessment of the sea-faring ship as a "living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion."¹² Within such a perspective the social environment of the ship is not disconnected from its society of origin but rather forms a miniaturized carbon copy and outward extension of that society's power and influence.

This centrality of the ship as the ultimate symbol of progress and achievement manifests itself in an anthropomorphic tendency within *Star Trek* that serves to reinforce the emphasis on perpetual progression within the narrative. Accordingly, there are a great many shots throughout the *Star Trek* films that showcase the ship and its various

¹¹ H. Bruce Franklin, "Visions of the Future in Science Fiction Films from 1970 to 1982," *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1990), p.20.

¹² Michèle Barrett, Duncan Barrett, *Star Trek: The Human Frontier* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.19.

abilities. This tradition is established very early on within the first film, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. As the crew approach the newly retrofitted *Enterprise* in spacedock the narrative all but stops to allow for a long sequence that lavishly frames the *Enterprise* from every possible angle. There is no purpose to the sequence save for an appreciation of the ship's grandeur and its awe-inspiring status as an unparalleled technological accomplishment.

Throughout each film in the series this reverence of the ship remains central. In fact, the *Enterprise* has been destroyed at least twice (in *The Search for Spock* [Nimoy, 1984] and again in *Generations* [Carson, 1994]) during the ten films that make up the *Star Trek* franchise and has always risen again to take up its near mythological status within the minds of both fans and *Star Trek* characters alike. Significantly, the finale of *The Voyage Home* (Nimoy, 1986) presents the audience with an abbreviated repeat of the presentation scene from the original film, clearly emphasizing the revered status of the ship within the *Star Trek* mythology.

The most important element of this recurring pattern, however, is the unchanging attitude of the crew, which approaches the *Enterprise* in a manner that conflates time. In each instance of reconstruction, the ship's familiar crew is intact and all behave as though they are not aboard a completely new ship but a renovated update of the original, with a history dating back more than a century, despite the fact that at least five *separate* ships have borne the name *Enterprise* within that time period. This attitude enforces a false consensual continuity while simultaneously erasing true temporal experience. Such an attitude is further reinforced by the aesthetic design of the ship itself, which effectively

works to deny the past. Nothing on or within the ship ever looks anything other than completely new. Even the crew's quarters, which presumably represent subjective spaces where characters are permitted to aesthetically express their individual personalities, remain primarily austere and sterile environments.

This erasure, or at least conflation, of the past characterizes the temporal perspective of *Star Trek* and trickles down from the privileged position of the starships to run through the entire aesthetic composition of the series. This is seen in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* with the first view of Earth in the series, a brief establishing shot of San Francisco Bay. Within this shot the only familiar feature is the Golden Gate Bridge, itself a landmark inspired by the same rationalist ideals that function within the perspective of *Star Trek*. Clearly, the bridge is nothing more than a monument by this time, as it is evident from the shuttle traffic within the frame that the bridge is no longer used to cross the bay. It therefore has no function save to stand as a monument of human achievement, while the rest of San Francisco, the functional part, has been completely redeveloped to make way for a more efficient, more reasonable urban environment.

The overwhelming aesthetic principle within *Star Trek* revolves around the evocation of a sense of "newness." This emphasis on the new has the effect of establishing a conception of time that is quite linear in its perspective of an ever-receding past and an ever-approaching future. The fictional present (our imagined future) depicted in *Star Trek* distances itself quite consciously from its past while positioning itself, equally consciously, on the cusp of the future. Most importantly, everyone involved

shares this future-oriented perspective. It is a consensual assumption of the United Federation of Planets, a virtual precondition for membership.

This temporal perspective that lies at the root of virtually all of *Star Trek*'s dominant modes of visualization can perhaps be witnessed best in the transition from the original cast members to the *Next Generation* cast. Despite an obvious desire to project a sense of continuity and familiarity, virtually no aesthetic element of the original series survives the transition intact. Many names and technical phrases remain the same but if one were to place a sample of a phaser, a communicator or a tricorder from the original series next to its correlate from the new series it would be incredibly difficult to ascertain that they each performed essentially the same function. More importantly, no character from TNG ever uses, handles or even views any material utilized in the first six films.

The films are able to retain a sense of continuity, however, through strict adherence to the basic premise of the series; continual outward expansion. Just as the mandate of the *Enterprise* is to move continually forward, encountering “*new* life and *new* civilizations,” so too does the visualization of that ongoing narrative continue to expand. Every film sees the design elements tweaked slightly: the uniforms are changed, the phasers are sleeker and the transporter effect is just a little different each time. The continuity of *Star Trek* lies, paradoxically, in its perpetual “newness.” This in turn develops within the series a linear perspective on the social experience of time, as the collective gaze of the characters is directed ever forward, retaining only the most abstract links to an increasingly distant past. Much of this future-oriented perspective is expressed through a conscious absence of signifiers of the past within the mise-en-scene.

As will be shown in the next case study, however, a *mise-en-scene* that explicitly includes such signifiers, signifiers that force characters to actively confront the physical realities of their pasts, engages with a different conception of temporal experience altogether.

My Pet Monster: Alien and the Stratified Conception of Temporal Experience

Supplementary material on the recently released *Alien Quadrilogy* (2003) DVD boxed set, describes the design look of the first film in the series as follows:

In stark contrast to the uniformly clean and bright look of some science fiction sets, the *Nostromo* bridge has a used, functional and decidedly unglamorous appearance.¹³

Such a statement can be read as the expression of a very conscious desire to distinguish the *Alien* franchise quite clearly from other popular and enduring SF franchises, *Star Trek* being the most obvious target of the pointedly vague reference to “some science fiction sets.” Given this difference it stands to reason that the *Alien* films carry an entirely separate set of assumptions regarding the course of social and cultural development which ultimately translate into an entirely divergent conception of the social experience of time.

Alien (1979) screenwriter Dan O’Bannon and director Ridley Scott have both at times described the overall aesthetic design concept of *Alien* as a “used future” look. Within the context of the narrative this emphasis on functionality over aesthetics can be attributed to the dominance of an industrial theme. The characters in *Alien* are miners and freighters. Their ambitions and goals are diametrically opposed to those of the

¹³ Author unknown, “Set Design,” *Alien Quadrilogy Special Edition DVD Boxed Set* (Fox, 2003).

characters populating the ships of *Star Trek*. They are exploiters not explorers. This crucial difference is registered immediately through a comparison of the ships in question. As the opening shots of *Alien* reveal, the *Nostramo* is anything but the sleek and contoured symbol of progress represented by the *Enterprise*. With the massive refinery in tow, the *Nostramo* is a disorganized jumble of jagged points and rough bulges, resembling nothing so much as a disconnected mass of rock and metal drifting through space. This tone carries over to the interior of the ship, where shots of the bridge show monochromatic computer screens, wires hanging from the ceiling and a cramped design emphasizing efficiency over comfort. The corridors of the ship, particularly on the lower levels, maintain this design through an abundance of exposed wires and piping that line the walls and ceilings.

This fundamental absence of the progress conveyed through an emphasis on the new in *Star Trek* is a theme that threads itself throughout all the *Alien* films, forming one of the main avenues through which the franchise establishes a sense of continuity despite the pronounced aesthetic and stylistic fluctuations that are a hallmark of the series. For example, while the “used future” concept introduced by Ridley Scott in *Alien* never completely disappears from the series, its degree of emphasis does tend to fluctuate from film to film. James Cameron’s sequel, *Aliens* (1986), for instance, tends to emphasize a more militaristic vision of space travel, shifting the industrial aesthetic to a supporting role.

Still, despite the militaristic and almost fascist aesthetic that dominates the film, the industrial look of the “used future” design survives, particularly within the design for

the colony that is besieged by the alien menace. Press material for the film describes a conscious design choice that “emphasized its functional, industrial and decidedly unglamorous frontier-town appearance.”¹⁴ In accordance with this choice the sets and models for the colony were constructed using a wide range of recycled material from empty British beer cases to discarded television sets and jet cargo containers.

All of this very consciously positions the *Alien* series in opposition to the ideals and perspectives expressed through *Star Trek*. In fact, production designer Syd Mead very bluntly makes this point when describing the overall aesthetic tone of *Aliens*, matter of factly stating, “It’s not *Star Trek*, it’s all very real world industrial stuff.”¹⁵

What the series achieves in its opposition to the linear and progress-oriented trajectory of *Star Trek* is a depiction of a stratified and highly individualized approach to the experience of time. The four films that make up the series follow Ripley as she encounters the alien species over the course of some 260 years. There can be no question that this represents a highly subjective temporal experience, as Ripley is the only human within the narrative that is known to have endured such an existence. What remains even more central than the subjectivity of this experience, however, is the degree to which the events of Ripley’s life resist a linear pattern of movement. To begin, the interruptions and fast-forwards are uneven, the narrative gap in between the first and second film being 57 years, followed by an unspecified, though presumably shorter, jump into the third

¹⁴ Author unknown, “Set Design: Aliens,” *Alien Quadrilogy Special Edition DVD Boxed Set* (Fox: 2003).

¹⁵ Syd Mead, quoted in interviews for “Pre-Production: Aliens,” *Alien Quadrilogy Special Edition DVD Boxed Set* (Fox: 2003).

film, and the fourth film set more than 200 years later. Although these jumps are all forward in time, thereby displaying a certain sense of linearity, the events of each film, as subjectively experienced by Ripley (and thus the audience as well) in no way convey a sense of linear progression. Ripley consistently ends a film in one environment and wakes up in the next film in a completely different location and facing a completely different situation, possessing next to no understanding of how she came to be there.

This non-linear experience is further reinforced and intensified through the wildly fluctuating settings that confront Ripley. Much of this has to do with the franchise's practice of hiring directors possessed with strong and independent artistic visions. As Will Brooker remarks of this technique:

Ripley is therefore flung not just across massive gulfs in time and space but from one aesthetic and generic universe to another, with only her alien nemesis providing continuity.¹⁶

As Brooker implies, a great deal of the non-uniformity that Ripley encounters is caught up in the aesthetic designs of the films. One of the most dramatic shifts in this regard occurs with the transition from the second to the third film. David Fincher's *Alien3* (1992) is notable within the series for moving directly from Cameron's sleek and hi-tech military perspective to a narrative almost entirely devoid of technology. In so doing, Fincher completely severs any mild sense of progress the series might have retained to this point. If anything, his film depicts a nearly total regression.

¹⁶ Will Brooker, "Internet Fandom and the Continuing Narratives of *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* and *Alien*," *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1999), p.53.

Alien3 marks a return to the “used future” concept pioneered in the first film by Ridley Scott. This is reflected in what production designer Norman Reynolds admits was a very conscious choice to walk a line suggesting the future and incorporating the past. The consequences of this design choice echo throughout the mise-en-scene from the very obvious dirty and decayed look of the once well-maintained facility to the subtle touches such as the Art Nouveau inspired windows that adorn the mess hall set. What *Alien3* truly does is bring to the foreground the anachronistic nature of Ripley’s experience. Although all four films in the series engage effectively with the past, present and future all at once, it is *Alien3* in which the temporal issues surrounding Ripley’s journey are identified most concretely.

This anachronistic angle of the narrative is built upon further in what thus far stands as the last instalment in the *Alien* series, *Alien: Resurrection* (Jeunet, 1997), which catapults Ripley 200 years into the future and truly transforms her into a woman out of time. Directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, the film continues the familiar trend of presenting a cluttered and confined setting that suggests the future while acknowledging the past. Once again, no clear sense of progress can be detected. The ship upon which Ripley is revived does not appear any more technically advanced than the *Nostromo*, a ship that now lies more than 260 years in the past.

What is most notable about *Alien: Resurrection*, however, is that it is the first of the *Alien* films to give the audience a glimpse at the future Earth. That view comes at the finale of the film and presents a scorched world that is completely devastated and virtually uninhabitable. Despite such grim imagery, however, both the characters and the

audience greet this revelation with profound ambivalence. With Earth being completely absent from this series up until this point, its importance within the framework of this highly subjective narrative is severely diminished. The audience, having shared Ripley's perspective through four films is equally disconnected. Ripley's nonchalant statement that she is a stranger here is thus shared by the audience as well. The viewer feels as disconnected from this Earth of the future as the characters on screen. This Earth has no connection to anyone's experience.

This final scene drives home the fundamentally subjective nature of temporal experience as developed through a stratified conception of SF cinema. With a character like Ripley, who is completely shut off from any form of consensual understanding of the passage of time, the viewer is forced to follow the totally individual experience of the protagonist, arriving at the same conclusions and ultimately formulating a perspective that may differ radically from what would generally be considered the social norm. Such a framework both highlights and mediates the anxieties that face individuals within contemporary society who must negotiate between two radically different forms of temporal experience on a daily basis: the consensual and arbitrary temporal infrastructure that dominates our social system and the highly individual and uniquely perceived passage of time as lived experience.

It is important to remember, however, that just as these two divergent temporal experiences developed concurrently as social consequences of the industrial revolution, so too did the strains of SF that explore these often conflicting experiences develop along similar parallel trajectories. This continuous and coincidental development of

representational techniques that suggest both linear and non-linear conceptions of experience underscores the need to develop an understanding of SF cinema that is based fundamentally in the genre's continuity rather than forcing SF to fit the arbitrary and periodizing classifications of broad cultural theories such as those discussed in the previous chapter. As the arguments and examples in this chapter have shown, such an understanding can be developed through a focus on the genre's engagement with issues of temporal experience.

Still, up to this point I have only considered the aesthetic and stylistic means through which SF cinema manages to convey its fascination with the social experience of time. There remains a rather obvious narrative device through which the genre might more fully and explicitly engage with the concept of time. I am referring, naturally, to the long-standing SF tradition of time travel. In the next and final chapter I will explore the cinematic expression of this narrative device which is given all the more evocative power through its application to a technology that itself displays the seemingly fantastical ability to manipulate and control the temporal realm of experience.

Chapter Four

Battles Across Time: Time Travel and SF Cinema

The SF genre, by virtue of its somewhat fantastical nature, is often afforded a certain amount of creative license in its treatment of more generally sacrosanct and commonly held beliefs and assumptions. This has enabled SF to more explicitly direct its articulation and exploration of the concept of time by foregrounding the idea of the manipulation and control of time itself as a principal element of the narrative. Through the fanciful postulations permitted by SF, time may be made concrete rather than abstract, and given a physicality that positions it as a thing that both acts and, more importantly, may be acted upon. In essence, the dominant logistics of the SF genre display the unique ability to bestow upon the concept of time a sense of substance and form.

It is perhaps for this reason that cinema itself is often regarded as a distinctly science-fictional technology. Certainly, the unique temporal capabilities of the motion picture apparatus have been recognized and put to effective use since its very invention. I have already discussed, to some extent, the techniques of trick photography developed by Georges Méliès and their importance to both the history of cinema and the establishment of a cinematic SF genre. Those tricks and the spectacles they produced revolved centrally around the ability of the cinematic apparatus to manipulate and control the experience of time. Often, these tricks involved nothing more than simply stopping the camera and moving or replacing elements of the *mise-en-scene*, or running the film backwards or at different speeds. Nonetheless, their effects resulted in an elision,

compression or outright rejection of the chain of cause and effect so universally ingrained within everyday experience.

Although these simple techniques were used in a wide range of early films, from the fantastical depictions of imps and wizards in the work of Méliès to the slapstick and physical comedy of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, it was within the emerging SF film that they first took center stage as crucial elements of the narrative. *Paris Qui Dort* (Clair, 1923), for example, utilizes the abilities of the cinematic apparatus to depict the effects of a ray that halts the passage of time. In his discussion of Machine Age SF, J.P. Telotte emphasizes the technological in this film, arguing that it evokes both a fascination with manipulating reality through machines and with the ability of technology to manipulate humanity, rendering people powerless inhabitants of a technological world.¹ While I would agree that a major theme of the film is certainly the technological manipulation of reality, the dominant anxieties the film explores are not explicitly technological but rather temporal in nature. Those few individuals spared by the ray are first shown reveling in their freedom from the oppressive temporality of city life only to later be overcome by boredom and the ensuing realization that the frenetic pace of the urban lifestyle is a fundamental and vital component of the city itself. The city, in its arrested state, evokes the same sense of oppressiveness and claustrophobia as discussed in relation to the empty urban landscapes of later apocalyptic cinema. This lack of kinetic energy is anathema to the city, making it a completely inhospitable and uninhabitable space. Thus, by foregrounding the concept of time and utilizing the

¹ J.P. Telotte, *A Distant Technology: Science Fiction Film and the Machine Age* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), p.79.

technological properties of the cinematic apparatus to position the manipulation of time as a narrative device, *Paris Qui Dort* succeeds in addressing and mediating a core anxiety of industrial urban life relating to the social construction of temporal experience. SF's ability to conceive time as a physical force and the cinema's ability to lend such a conception a visual reality, combine to make the SF film a remarkably suitable means of expressing and exploring the abstract idea of time and its limits and boundaries with respect to social and personal experience.

The Birth of Time Travel

It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that cinema and the idea of technologically-assisted time travel enter the popular public consciousness together. Although not the first literary reference to the concept of traveling from one time to another (see, for example, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* [1889]), H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, published in 1895, certainly stands as the work that introduced the idea of a time *machine* to a mass audience, imprinting upon the public a representation of this narrative device that would influence writers for generations to come.

It is interesting in this regard that Wells' description of the experience of time travel is strikingly cinematic in nature. In fact, as detailed by Terry Ramsaye in 1926, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that Wells' inspiration for *The Time Machine* grew directly out of the experience of watching what was at that time the emerging technology of the motion-picture. Fixating on the descriptive passages in the novel that give an account of the narrator's sensations as he operates the time machine, Ramsaye

catalogues the similarities between those descriptions and the sensations presented to the viewer of the Kinetoscope. He is particularly convinced by a passage that describes the narrator's return to his present, in which he sees events outside his machine running in reverse. Ramsaye concludes:

It is hard to believe that Wells did not take his notion directly from the peep show film. One of the earliest novelty effects sought in the Kinetoscope in the days when it was enjoying scientific attention was in exactly this sort of reversal of commonplace bits of action.²

Even if these similarities are merely coincidental, Ramsaye is quite correct in pointing out the highly visual nature of Wells' description of the experience of time travel. Noting the silence that is stressed in Wells' descriptive passages, Ramsaye argues:

Wells seems to have been thinking in terms of the picture exclusively. He, for the moment, ignored the fact that his Time Traveler in recrossing a moment of time should have experienced the sounds as well as the sights of that moment, both reversed. Mrs. Wachett might have just as well also been heard backing up and closing the door. The thing had already been done in experimental reversals of the phonograph. It would seem pretty definite that the Time Traveler was all eyes and the story all motion-picture.³

Ramsaye's conclusions ultimately suggest the possibility that the very idea of the time machine, at least in the form in which it was popularized within the public consciousness, was born directly out of the cinema. Even if this is overstating the case slightly, others were quick to draw associations between Wells' machine and the technology of cinema. British inventor R.W. Paul even went so far as to write a letter to

² Terry Ramsaye, "From 'Paul and the Time Machine'," Focus on the Science Fiction Film, ed. William Johnson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), p.19.

³ Ibid, pp.19-20.

Wells proposing the development of a mode of exhibition that combined the author's ideas with motion-picture technology. This attraction was to operate in a similar fashion to that of the simulated train trips of the popular *Hale's Tours*. Thus, an audience in Paul's attraction would be presented scenes on film designed to give the impression of occurring either in the past or future while experiencing the sensation of voyaging on a machine. Wells and Paul worked together on this idea for a time, even submitting a patent application to the British government, although nothing ever came of the partnership. It is interesting to note, however, that this idea, first conceived in 1895, has become a contemporary reality with the *Back to the Future* rides at Universal Studios theme parks in Florida and California.

Although Paul was never to realize his ambitions, his proposed marriage of the narrative ideas of Wells and the properties of the cinematic apparatus would inevitably find expression in later SF films that would explore the theme of time travel. In fact, if one required any further proof of Wells' essentially cinematic conception of the experience of time travel it could be found in George Pal's 1960 film adaptation of *The Time Machine*. Within the film Wells' descriptions are faithfully visualized through the use of the simple camera tricks that Ramsaye had earlier associated with the passages.

In her discussion of the film, Anne Friedberg clearly identifies cinema's mastery over time as being built into the very formal structures of the apparatus itself. In the film, a slower recording speed is used simulate rapid motion at regular projection speeds. This footage is then edited to run either forward or backward to represent the movement of the time machine in its travels forward and backward through time. As Friedberg notes,

through the use of this simple gimmick, “the motion of the time machine is now clearly that of the cinema camera.”⁴ In essence, time travel is made possible only through obvious and reflexive use of the cinematic apparatus. It is not surprising, therefore, that SF cinema, and the time-travel narrative in particular, has been often described as the most purely cinematic of genres.

It's About Time: Issues of Temporal Experience in Time-Travel Narratives

The capacity of the cinematic apparatus for temporal manipulation, as showcased in such films as *Paris Qui Dort* and *The Time Machine*, represents only the most obvious means through which SF films might deal explicitly with the concept of time. These gimmicks and camera tricks provide a very visceral and sensory-oriented engagement with the experience of time, one that is by now taken for granted by the average film viewer. Individuals are now so familiar with the temporal effects of motion-picture technology, through video instant replay, slow motion, time-compressed video, and the pause, fast-forward and rewind functions on VCRs and DVD players, that use of these techniques barely even registers with the viewer. In fact, the abilities of the cinematic apparatus have become so integrated into the fabric of society that they are by now a fact of consensual temporality rather than an evocative means of comment on and mediation of unfamiliar modes of experience. Simply put, it is at this point in time a cultural assumption that everyone understands and accepts the temporal logistics of motion-

⁴ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.104.

picture technology. It is more strange and alienating to be unfamiliar with these techniques than to be on completely comfortable terms.

Take, for example, *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), a film that both deals explicitly with the concept of time and includes judicious use of slow motion filming. It is interesting that the use of slow motion techniques within the film is in no way connected with an expression of its temporal themes. Instead, the slow motion sequences are confined to scenes that showcase the predatory nature of the terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and used to heighten the mood of tension and suspense. In fact, the technique is used so subtly and specifically as a mood enhancement that it operates on much the same semi-subconscious level as a film score and it is unlikely that a viewer will even actively notice the effect on first viewing. It is perhaps due to such audience familiarity with these effects that *The Terminator*, its two sequels, and the majority of other SF films that have dealt with themes of time travel have largely left the visual expression of temporal experience to the mise-en-scene, as outlined in the previous chapter, and opted to approach their more explicit temporal themes in a largely narrative and expository fashion.

Here again we see the continuation of the parallel streams of SF cinema that have been identified up to this point only in terms aesthetics and style. Time-travel narratives within SF cinema can be divided up into the same linear or stratified models and are accompanied by the appropriate aesthetic and stylistic perspectives. When discussing time-travel narratives in relation to these models, however, it is important to recognize that their expression of a specific mode of temporal experience is both more explicitly

realized and more complex. In examining the aesthetics of SF film we were exploring a fascination with temporal experience that was suggestive and implied rather than openly stated. Films that consciously choose to address issues of temporality within their narratives are effectively formulating a specific philosophy of time. Their adherence to either a linear or stratified conception of temporal experience is not merely complementary but directly influences the actions that characters may take and the consequences of those actions through time. An examination of this active rather than passive engagement with issues of temporal experience will demonstrate how these time-travel narratives represent SF cinema's most direct and uncompromising expression of the conflicting temporalities that have developed within western industrialized culture.

Observing the Prime Directive: A Linear Conception of Time Travel

As has been shown in regard to aesthetics and style, a linear conception of time within SF cinema is based almost entirely on the notion of continual progress. Movement within linear SF is oriented in a completely forward direction, moving constantly toward the future and away from an increasingly irrelevant and noticeably absent past.

The notion of time travel complicates this linear conception to a certain degree. In fact, the very idea of time travel might at first seem completely antithetical to a linear model of temporal experience, relying as it does on decidedly non-linear jumps between the past, present and future. Still, it is not so much the non-linear actions of the narrative that count, as it is the strict adherence to the laws of continual progression. Thus, a linear

conception of time travel is possible and indeed an effective manner of conveying a linear philosophy of temporal experience.

Within linear time-travel narratives this adherence to notions of progress manifests itself in a strict set of assumptions and laws that separate the past from the future. These distinctions between past and future first and foremost have notable consequences within the mise-en-scene, as the future must always be shown to have developed beyond the capacities of the past. As has been discussed in previous chapters, that progression need not be entirely positive. It may take a predominantly utopian track, as in *Star Trek*, a narrative universe that has dealt many times with themes of time travel, or it may take a dystopian course as might be evidenced in *Demolition Man* (Brambilla, 1993), a narrative that transports characters from the past to the future via the device of cryogenic stasis.

Within the narrative world of *Demolition Man* the future society has managed to eliminate virtually all violent crime and lives in a technological paradise that at first seems idyllic but turns out to be oppressive, limiting and unstimulating. The dystopian elements of this society, however, are unimportant. What is essential from a linear perspective is the clearly obvious progression that has occurred from the time of the central character's incarceration to the time of his release. This is conveyed most forcefully through the futuristic sets and costumes but also through the social interactions that place the main character, John Spartan (Sylvester Stallone), at odds with many of the inhabitants of this future society and mark him very clearly as an anachronism.

These social interactions also serve to foreground a second assumption that functions to conserve the linearity of progress in time-travel narratives; that being the moral superiority of the future over the past. Although *Demolition Man* ultimately retreats somewhat from the absolute moral superiority of its future society, concluding that morality must not go so far as to limit basic human freedoms, it none the less clearly presents a society in which violence has all but disappeared, swearing, littering and vandalism have been stringently outlawed and the majority of people seem all the better for it.

Star Trek, a paragon of linear SF, similarly constructs its temporal distinctions along moral lines in its two films dealing with time travel, *The Voyage Home* (Nimoy, 1986) and *First Contact* (Frakes, 1996). In *The Voyage Home*, the future becomes threatened by the uncaring and wasteful attitudes of the past, as an advanced civilization that has been communicating with the now extinct humpback whale tears apart the planet in trying to reestablish contact. Although humanity takes responsibility for what a Federation representative terms “our own shortsightedness,” it is strongly implied that these are nevertheless mistakes of the past and of a moral system that has long since been surpassed. Once a pair of whales has been retrieved from the past and brought successfully to the future their safety is assured. Humanity now lives by a code of conduct that would never see an entire species hunted to extinction for personal gain. The fault for the near destruction of humanity clearly resides within the sins of a morally corrupt past and not within the morally superior actions of the future.

First Contact, meanwhile, finds the *Next Generation* crew traveling to a point in Earth's past marked by war, poverty and hardship, all problems virtually non-existent in the world of the 24th century familiar to *Star Trek* audiences. In this film, the main threat comes from the future (an important point to which I shall return) yet a good portion of the film concerns itself with the characters of the future coming to terms with the realities of a morally stunted society. In particular, the characters are confronted with the reality of a figure who, in their time, has been elevated to reverential status, Zephram Cochrane (James Cromwell), inventor of the warp drive. Contrary to their idealistic views, Cochrane is a drunken womanizer who is not conducting his work in the interest of all humanity but rather for very selfish reasons. It falls, therefore, to the morally advanced *Enterprise* crew to teach Cochrane the importance of his work and foster within him a selfless attitude that places the betterment of humankind above all else.

Of course, in doing so the crew must walk a very fine line, for in a linear conception of temporal experience the past is absolutely sacrosanct. Any alteration to past events is likely to have catastrophic consequences in the future. For this reason, travel backward in time is considered almost as an affront or an attack within the linear view. Certainly, the morally superior characters of *Star Trek* engage in travel to the past with extreme reluctance and only when absolutely necessary. Usually, this justification involves preventing a malevolent force from interfering with the sanctity of the past and endangering the future. As Michèle and Duncan Barrett observe:

Although people are not supposed to do it, in practice there always seems to be a compelling argument as to why it might be necessary to ‘clean up the timeline’ from previous ‘incursions’.⁵

In *First Contact*, this justification comes in the form of the Borg’s “incursion” into Earth’s past in an attempt to assimilate the human species hundreds of years before it has the capacity to defend itself. The crew of the *Enterprise* therefore travels back in time in an attempt to maintain the status quo, to stop the Borg from destroying their future. In essence, the crew seeks to accomplish the mission while affecting the past as little as possible. Their sole objective lies in preventing the interference of an outside force.

In *The Voyage Home*, the temporal situation is a little more complicated but the desire to alter the timeline as little as possible remains the same. Although the crew must retrieve two specimens from the past and transport them to the future, they attempt to do this without their presence being detected. Admittedly, this film’s approach to temporal themes is somewhat playful and humorous, containing several scenes where the main characters cannot help but alter events in miniscule ways. Scotty (James Doohan), for example, trades future plastics technology for the materials he needs to build a whale tank, while McCoy (DeForest Kelley) heals a sick old woman in the hospital with his futuristic medical tools. These inconsequential moments, however, are played as jokes and represent the rare exceptions that prove the rule, for the tone of the film overall remains very much in line with a linear conception that views any unnecessary and reckless alteration of the past as the most grave and dangerous of transgressions.

⁵ Michele and Duncan Barrett, *Star Trek: The Human Frontier* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.129.

Ultimately, it is this attitude of complete and inflexible sanctity that sections off the past as an area of inaction within the linear perspective. Although, certain conditions permit characters to travel to the past and take action, those actions are severely limited and always undertaken with a mind toward preserving rather than interfering with the sanctity of the past. These actions are most often geared toward preventing action as opposed to generating further action. In fact, characters that seek to interfere with the past within a linear perspective are almost without exception shown to fail. Typically, they are either thwarted by morally superior characters (as in the *Star Trek* series) or come to the realization that altering the past to suit one's needs is impossible.

The demarcation of the past as an area of inaction within a linear conception of time travel is perhaps best exemplified by the recent remake of *The Time Machine* (Wells, 2002). In the film, Alexander Hartdegen (Guy Pearce) is driven to construct his machine in order to attempt to save his fiancée from being murdered. He travels back in time to prevent the incident only to watch her die again. Realizing he is incapable of changing the past, he travels to the far future where the film takes on an entirely different course. Here, within the future, Alexander is not limited in his actions. In fact, he essentially becomes an action hero, saving the peaceful and timid Eloi from the monstrous Morlocks. Within this film's linear conception of time, action in the past is impermissible whereas action in the future is limitless, as it serves the needs of continual progress.

It is for this reason that films promoting a linear conception of temporal experience are more comfortable with future-oriented time-travel stories. Films such as

Demolition Man and *The Time Machine* have no trouble dealing with temporal themes, as they center on characters from the past that have traveled to the future and are free to act in any manner they see fit since their actions contribute to linear progress rather than interfere with it. In fact, even those films in the linear vein that do deal with travel to the past share a similar outlook. In these films, characters that travel to the future are unproblematic and allowed to remain in the future, while characters that travel to the past are never permitted to stay there. Consider, for example, *The Voyage Home*, in which the marine biologist who discovers the identities of Kirk (William Shatner) and Spock (Leonard Nimoy) is accepted and given a position of status when she travels to the 23rd century. On the other hand, Kirk endangers the success of the entire mission in order to retrieve Chekov (Walter Koenig) from police custody. This action is motivated not entirely by loyalty but also by a direct need to reacquire Chekov's advanced technology and ensure that his presence within the past does not adversely alter the timeline.

As can be seen, linear conceptions of time travel directly and consciously privilege the future through a constant and unwavering adherence to a philosophy of perpetual progress. The sanctity of the past is regarded as absolute and to be preserved at all costs. The future is reserved as the sole arena of limitless action, resulting in new experiences. Although travel through time is conceived as possible, time itself is perceived as being only able to move forward. Forcing time to double back on itself through the alteration of past experience inevitably ends in catastrophe.

The stratified model of SF cinema, however, provides a vastly different and equally valid treatment of time-travel themes in line with its more subjective approach to

temporal experience. Let us now move to a consideration of this alternative approach and its implications for the temporal focus of SF cinema.

Days of Futures Past: A Stratified Conception of Time Travel

Previous chapters have outlined how the stratified model of SF cinema situates the past, present and future in a closely associative and highly conscious relationship. Adding themes of time travel to this conception effectively closes the loop and moves representations of past, present and future from a position of association and coexistence into a more direct and mutually constitutive relationship.

This is, at first, a difficult concept to grasp, as everyday experience would seem to exclude the possibility that the future might have any sort of constitutive effect on the past. It is important to recall, however, the degree to which a social experience of the past is essentially developed through a process of consensual reconstruction. This process of reconstruction is retroactive and inevitably influenced by the social circumstances of the present day. As Barbara Adam writes in her consideration of the concept of time:

Thus, as Gosden insists with reference to the socio-natural relations of time, 'there has never been a period in the last 3.5 million years in which natural rhythms were human rhythms, and we have no evidence that Palaeolithic [sic] groups were in tune with, or at the mercy of the environment.' And yet, despite the strong evidence to the contrary, classical descriptions from anthropology, theology and history tend to make sharp distinctions between archaic and modern societies. Temporal relations and practices play a key role in the definition of those distinctions.⁶

⁶ Barbara Adam, *Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p.75.

Adam goes on to argue that the archaic sense of temporal understanding was at least as complex as that of modern society, yet her initial recognition of the standard distinctions that are drawn between ancient and modern conceptions of time speaks to a process of historical construction that is very much coloured by the assumptions and biases of the present.

This process of historical construction is one that seeks to impose upon the past a specific brand of consensual linearity in a decidedly non-linear fashion. Within SF that supports a linear perspective this contradiction is virtually ignored. Within non-linear SF, however, this contradiction is actively exposed and explored, particularly within non-linear time-travel narratives, through the development of temporal paradoxes.

The temporal paradox is a device utterly alien and hostile to a linear conception of temporal experience as it describes a past event that is made possible only through the prior occurrence of future events. Linear narratives such as those presented within the *Star Trek* franchise very pointedly and consciously avoid such paradoxes. A non-linear narrative such as the one developed throughout the *Terminator* series, however, is very purposely built upon them.

The first film in the series, *The Terminator*, presents Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn), a soldier sent back in time to protect the future mother of resistance leader John Connor from a killer robot seeking to alter past events and ensure the destruction of humanity. While in the past, Reese falls in love with Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) and spends one night with her in which John is conceived. Later Kyle is killed and the film ends with a candid photo of Sarah taken during a moment when she is thinking of Kyle. It has

already been established that this is the very photo given by John to Kyle in the future that begins his infatuation with her. In describing the photo to Sarah earlier, Kyle comments, “I used to wonder what you were thinking about in that picture.” The final scene of the film reveals that she was actually thinking about him, the father of her child and a man who will not even be born for another twenty years.

The narrative of the film is a closed loop, with no clear beginning and no end. The events of the future are determined by events of the past that themselves depend upon events in the future. In order to be born and save humanity John must send his own father into the past. In order for Kyle’s love for Sarah to begin to develop he must first have already loved her in the past.

The second film in the series, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron, 1991), adds further layers to this paradox by suggesting that this future is entirely self-determined. This film takes as its major premise the idea that the remains of the terminator from the first film form the technological basis from which Skynet, the sentient computer that sent the robot back in time in the first place, is developed. Thus, just as John ensures his own existence by sending Kyle back in time, so too does Skynet ensure its existence by sending the terminator.

Ultimately, by destroying those elements that have invaded the past, the characters in the second film hope to change the future and avert the apocalypse that is to come. The third film, *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Mostow, 2003), however, proves these attempts to have been unsuccessful. Although Judgment Day did not occur on the date prophesized in *Terminator 2*, as the terminator explains to an incredulous

John Connor (Nick Stahl) in *Terminator 3*, “You merely postponed it. Judgment Day is inevitable.” The future is inevitable because it has, in a sense, already happened. If John Connor exists in the past then some future in which John sends his father back in time must exist also. The theme that stretches through all three films, “There is no fate but what we make,” is therefore given an interesting non-linear twist. John does indeed make his own fate, but he does so in the future where his choices determine events that take place in the past. The principle of cause and effect in these films is fractured and fragmented. Events seem predestined only because they are the logical consequences of actions taken in the future.

The inevitability of this future in the *Terminator* series highlights another element that distinguishes the non-linear, or fragmented, perspective of SF in the stratified model from time-travel narratives in linear SF. As discussed above, linear SF treats the past as absolutely sacrosanct. The past is to be protected because it forms the very foundations of the future and to change the past would throw the future into chaos. Non-linear SF, however, is marked by a clear irreverence with respect to the past. Interestingly, this irreverence is often founded upon an inability to change the future through action in the past. While this might at first seem comparable to the conception of the past as an area of inaction within linear SF, the important distinction here is that within linear time-travel narratives changes to the past are regarded as threats to a natural order, whereas within fragmented narratives they are often either inconsequential or a complete impossibility, thereby freeing characters to act in any manner they desire. Rather than the future being built on the past, non-linear SF is more apt to view the past and the future as existing in

tandem. Thus, as opposed to the inactive space of the linear view, films operating within the non-linear tradition position the past and the future as equally legitimate spaces for action.

Admittedly, however, this freedom to act is subject to varying degrees of interpretation within such a fragmentary model. At the most extreme end of the spectrum is an interpretation of absolute freedom as exemplified by the narrative structure of the long-running BBC series, *Doctor Who*. Within *Doctor Who* time is treated as nothing more than another dimension of space and essentially as merely another medium through which it is possible to travel. Thus the Doctor is free to travel anywhere within both space and time with little regard as to how his actions effect the past, present or the future. He has participated in events occurring both at the dawn of civilization and within the furthest reaches of humanity's future, yet his actions have never been shown to adversely affect the course of human history in any way. The mutually constitutive roles of the future and the past are highlighted particularly when the Doctor and his companions find themselves in historically familiar situations and are incorporated seamlessly into these events without significant alteration to the historical facts. One episode, for example, explains the mysterious disappearance of the crew of the *Mary Celeste* as following from a brief appearance by the Doctor and his enemies the Daleks, while several other episodes in the early years of the program have the Doctor filling the role of a famous figure (e.g. Doc Holliday) or disguised as a minor player (a Roman dignitary or an Aztec shaman) during the course of noteworthy historical events.

Within such a conception the past can often be portrayed as a sort of temporal playground for visitors from the future. This is an idea that is picked up in Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* (1995), although in not so radical a fashion as that of *Doctor Who*. In *12 Monkeys*, James Cole (Bruce Willis) is sent back into the past to try and determine where a virus that decimated nearly all of mankind was first released. Interestingly, he is not sent back to stop the release. As Cole himself says, "How can I stop it? It's already happened." Initially, this seems like a rather linear perspective, yet this complete inability to alter the past opens up possibilities for action that cannot exist within a linear view. The linear model holds that any action occurring in the past has consequences for the future. This is not the case in *12 Monkeys*. In fact, actions taken within the past in *12 Monkeys* have no determining effect on the future. For this reason, Cole and others sent back on the same mission are easily seduced by this lack of consequence and spend their time in the past on idle pleasures such as drugs and prostitutes.

So alluring is this freedom from responsibility that Cole attempts to strand himself in the past. When he attempts to alter events, however, by stopping the spread of the virus, the inability to change the past is forcefully portrayed through his violent death. It is here where *12 Monkeys* demonstrates the mutually constitutive temporal element that marks it as belonging to a fragmented, non-linear tradition of SF, despite the seemingly inviolate curtain that separates the actions of the past from the actions of the future. This final scene reveals that Cole's recurring dream of a man gunned down in an airport is actually a childhood memory. As a child Cole is present in the crowd at the airport and witnesses his own death as an adult. Thus, just as in the *Terminator* series, the future and

the past are shown to determine each other, as Cole's dream cannot exist without him first being killed as an adult.

Beyond providing a means of constructing a mutually constitutive relationship between the future and the past, however, Cole's dream also rather interestingly engages with an exploration of memory, a theme of crucial importance to almost all time-travel narratives operating within a non-linear perspective. *12 Monkeys*, for example, actively examines the subjective nature of memory and its capacity to shape and construct the past in relation to the circumstances of the present or even the future. As Cole meets and interacts with various characters from the past, for instance, the faces in his dream begin to change accordingly. At one point Dr. Catherine Railey (Madeleine Stowe) explains to Cole that this is due to what is happening around him, explicitly foregrounding the power of memory to reshape perceptions of past events. The film pushes this concept one step further, however, suggesting that memory also has the power to shape perceptions in the future. With Cole and Catherine on the run and disguised, Catherine exclaims, "I remember you like this! I feel like I've always known you." Despite her insistent feelings to the contrary, Catherine has never before seen Cole dressed as he is. Her experience of the event, however, is strongly coloured by her (false) memory. The film suggests, through its various musings on the persistence of memory, be it Catherine's sense of déjà-vu or Cole's nostalgic reminiscences of his childhood, that memory itself operates as a distinctly non-linear form of time travel.

This foregrounding of the non-linear and highly fragmentary process of memory formation further serves to highlight a particularly subjective form of temporal

experience. This extreme subjectivity often manifests itself within time travel-narratives through a consideration of the theme of sanity. Although this theme is often broached within linear time-travel narratives, the subject never receives any true analysis, is usually only included for the sake of credibility and is always resolved quite quickly. For example, in *First Contact* Lily (Alfre Woodard), an incredulous resident of the past, dismisses Picard (Patrick Stewart) as insane, whereupon she is immediately transported to the *Enterprise* and shown physical evidence to support the captain's claims.

Non-linear SF, on the other hand, more effectively and concretely engages with a discussion of mental instability. It is interesting to note, for example, that in both *12 Monkeys* and *Terminator 2*, the central characters spend a large portion of time locked away in mental institutions. In both cases these characters find themselves institutionalized for their refusal to conform to a consensual linear perspective of reality and experience. In *Terminator 2*, Sarah Connor is resolute in her belief and faith in her own experiences. Years of institutionalization are unable to convince her otherwise. Eventually her subjective perspective is proven to be the only framework capable of dealing with the terminators that show up in the hospital. Contingents of security guards, along with the smug Dr. Silberman (Earl Boen), the highest symbol of the rational, consensual viewpoint, are shown to be completely unable to cope with this intrusion.

12 Monkeys, meanwhile, provides a more complex and intriguing exploration of this subjective temporal experience. Seduced by his own nostalgia for a way of life that no longer exists, Cole actually manages to convince himself that he is insane. Caught between a set of conflicting realities, Cole opts for the more comfortable choice and

begins to believe that it is the future and not the past that is the illusion. While in the future Cole manages to convince the scientists in charge to send him back to the past one more time. Taking this to be a sign that this future existence is all just a delusion and that his recognition of that delusion allows him to control it, Cole proudly and happily proclaims himself to be crazy, as this conclusion would allow him to remain in the past he so fondly remembers. Unfortunately, Cole's belief in his own insanity represents the true delusion and brings him to a tragic end.

Still, Cole's willingness to consider his own subjective interpretations of reality marks *12 Monkeys* as an SF film that approaches a philosophy of time and temporal experience from a decidedly non-linear perspective. Such a perspective stands in sharp contrast to a competing perspective that views time as a continuous progression extending from the past and ever-forward into the future. As has been shown, these two perspectives have developed side by side within the SF genre and represent an engagement with conflicting conceptions of the social experience of time arising from a contradiction inherent within the imposition of a consensual understanding of time upon the individual subject. Cinema itself is implicated within this contradiction, as it stands as a representational technology with the capacity to manipulate temporal experience to a certain degree. It is therefore cinema, and SF cinema in particular, that is ideally suited for the social mediation and exploration of these temporal contradictions. Cinema is, after all, the next best thing to time travel.

Conclusion

Charting the Space-Time Continuum: A Temporal Reconsideration of SF Cinema

This thesis has focused primarily on cinematic visions of the future in an attempt to map SF cinema's critical engagement with the social experience of time. In so doing I have argued that the genre separates itself broadly into two divergent streams, one based in a linear concept of continual progression and the other focusing on a non-linear understanding of subjective and individual experience. Each of these streams respectively engages with separate though coincidental conceptions of the experience of time. This dual conception of time stems from a set of contradictions that emerge from the imposition of a consensual and objective understanding of time over a framework of subjective, individual experience. Just as these two divergent temporal experiences developed concurrently as social consequences of the industrial revolution, so too did the strains of SF that explore these often conflicting experiences develop along parallel trajectories throughout the history of the genre. Despite a temptation to compartmentalize SF into neat and manageable morsels of critical and analytical categories, the genre did not develop from a simple consideration of the modern moment to a more complex engagement with history and social evolution. Rather, the two strains of thought have played off each other from the beginning, as can be seen, for example, through a comparison of *Things to Come* and *Metropolis*.

Ample evidence that these divergent streams continue to exist in tandem can be found in the many discussions of popular SF franchises throughout this study. In fact, the long-running series that serve as the cornerstones of analysis in this study, *Star Trek*,

Alien, and *Terminator*, have over the course of more than three decades remained remarkably constant amidst significant and tumultuous periods of cultural change, suggesting a clear resistance to the dominating influence of broad and periodizing cultural theories such as modernism and postmodernism. Both *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and *Alien*, for example, two films with wildly different perspectives, were released in the same year, 1979. Both found success and both continued to develop their respective social outlooks in later films throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the new millennium. Perhaps most significantly, both continue to be relevant to audiences, many of whom appreciate the merits of both films to this day. These series form a model for the genre itself by succeeding at conveying a clear sense of continuity while simultaneously undergoing constant change.

As I have suggested, the principal means through which SF cinema accomplishes this engagement with issues of time and the contradictions of its social experience is through its mise-en-scene or, in other words, through a direct and conscious construction of space. Like the Western, space has played a crucial role in both the development of the SF genre and the development of critical thinking on SF cinema. Annette Kuhn, for example, devotes her second collection of essays on SF film entirely to a consideration of the function of spaces within the genre (*Alien Zone II*). Meanwhile, Vivian Sobchack finds the flattening of space to be a defining feature of an emerging post-futurist SF cinema, citing an increasing emphasis on the spectacle of electronic simulation as the underlying cause of the presentation of “an excess of surface”¹ in SF film.

¹ Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p.258.

For Sobchack and other postmodern oriented critics, SF film is all about surfaces. Such an over-emphasis on surface imagery, however, fails to consider the manner through which an excessive visual surface effectively constructs a sense of history or at the very least a temporal trajectory that serves to convey an experience of the concept of time. The very best SF films use this excess visual surface to establish narrative spaces that take on the traits of fully realized alternate universes by inviting audiences to project a sense of history and continuity onto the narrative framework. *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, film franchises that have taken on a life outside of cinema, are both fine examples of this approach. The narrative spaces of such films are not contained within the opening and closing credits but extend outward in an infinite expansion of space, generating pseudo-histories that magnify and reflect the cultural experience of time. As Will Brooker observes:

This endurance is due partly to an extension of the ‘official’ narratives, most obviously through sequels, directors’ cuts and prequels, but also through secondary texts such as CD-ROMs, comics and novels, which often bear only a quasi-canonical status due to their sanctioning by a production company but lack the director’s ‘personal’ authorial stamp. Finally, a wealth of fan-based material, rich in detail and imagination, is left to fill in the gaps of these official plots, to suggest new directions, flesh out secondary characters and build on or knock down the framework imposed from ‘above’.²

Much of this agency is made possible by what Sobchack terms the “excess scenography”³ presented in SF film. As this visual excess carries with it an innate

² Will Brooker, “Internet Fandom and the Continuing Narratives of *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* and *Alien*,” *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1999), p.50.

³ Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p.262.

fascination with the social experience of time, it is not surprising to find that it is used in such a manner to construct an *experiential* understanding of these narrative universes, an understanding that conveys a sense of history and continuous experience through time.

It is also worth noting that this particular emphasis on agency, this desire to carry the experience of a narrative outside the traditional boundaries of the text, is in fact a somewhat unique characteristic of the SF fan. As a result of this sort of behaviour, critics with an unfavourable view of the genre have been quick to dismiss SF cinema as puerile and its fans as caught in a state of arrested juvenility. In fact, the phrase, “the golden age of science fiction is twelve,” has practically become a proverb within SF, as it is argued that preadolescence is the stage where most fans are first exposed to the genre and can most readily identify with its themes. The majority of SF fans and producers, however, choose to view this as a positive rather than negative statement of the values of SF. Brian Aldiss, for example, proclaims:

When you recall the derivation of the word “puerile,” it is not surprising that much that is condemned as puerile by adults may be just the thing for boys. Boyish imaginations have ferocious appetites – they will seize on the puerile and build from it if nothing better is to hand.⁴

It is therefore not surprising that we find in the adult fan a desire to build upon the narratives presented on screen in SF cinema and continue the scope of that experience beyond the confines of the theatre. It is also not surprising then to find a genre that has developed to suit the tastes of these fans by exploring the limits of experience and possibility. This focus on experience rather than abstraction and idealism is what

⁴ William Johnson, “Further Comment,” *Focus on the Science Fiction Film*, ed. William Johnson (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), p.149.

ultimately separates SF cinema from its literary cousin. Ado Kyrou is mindful of this difference when he writes:

True, the majority of SF filmmakers lack the insight of writers like Robert Sheckley, Fredric Brown, and Richard Matheson. Often the enthralling and liberating reaches of space are jarred by a reference to God or some other entrenched concept which is equally false and ridiculous. But the plain fact remains that SF even at its most naïve and puerile goes beyond ready-made ideas, reveals unsuspected possibilities, and opens up new vistas to even the most pedestrian mind. Clearly, what gives us so much hope in this (relatively) new mode of seeing and being, with its flights away from the familiar, its leaps into new lives, its thirst for richer experience, is that it is extraordinarily cinematic.⁵

Brooks Landon and others have maintained that this “extraordinarily cinematic” quality of the SF genre stems primarily from the science fictional nature of the cinematic apparatus itself. I have argued, on the other hand, that what remains essentially cinematic about the SF film genre is its consistent engagement with the realm of experience and the concept of time. From such a perspective the temporal fascination of SF can be seen to extend beyond its expression in individual films to shape the continuity that forms the connective foundations of the genre itself. Thus, the majority of SF films, whether set in the past, present or future, ultimately exhibit this temporal fascination in some form or another. While the particular properties of the apparatus aid in visually conveying these preoccupations, the apparatus itself is not responsible for their development or their continuous presence throughout the genre.

Such a perspective opens up new lines of analysis within SF cinema and ultimately allows for a temporal reconsideration of the entire genre. Much past criticism

⁵ Ado Kyrou, “Science and Fiction,” Focus on the Science Fiction Film, ed. William Johnson (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), p.92.

in the field has focused primarily on the role of technology within the SF film.

Technology, however, has proven somewhat inconsistent as a marker of generic specificity and continuity. Not all science fiction films deal with issues concerning the social functions of technology. Further work following a temporal conception of SF cinema may be able to reconceptualize and reposition critical arguments concerning the role of technology within the genre. In fact, all of the major themes of SF cinema, and in particular those not considered within the scope of this project, such as the alien/unknown and the robot/clone/identity crisis, might benefit from the fresh lines of inquiry opened through a temporal reconsideration of their functions within the genre.

Further still, it is abundantly clear that such a temporal reconsideration of the genre carries with it an undeniable historical element. Although there have been several historical accounts of the SF film genre over the years, for the most part those reviews have tended toward either negative and unfavourable comparisons with SF literature or have fallen back on the familiar practice of compartmentalizing the genre into limiting and arbitrary periods. An historical account of the genre from the perspective of its engagement with the concept of time, however, would stress continuity above all else and avoid the limiting doctrine of periodization. While this project has aimed at a somewhat historical trajectory by attempting to position a central fascination with time as an essential component of the continuity of the SF genre, it remains particularly limited in its scope and therefore cannot pretend to offer the kind of comprehensive treatment necessary for a truly historical reconsideration of the genre. It is hoped that such an ambitious project might one day be accomplished.

Ultimately, if anything, a temporal perspective on SF cinema allows the genre to keep pace with the “science” that forms half of its descriptive moniker. Einstein’s theories of relativity added a new physical dimension to the universe, that of time, and spurred fresh lines of thinking that have resulted in the work on quantum mechanics being done today and the quest for a unified theory of science. A temporal reconsideration of SF cinema similarly lends a new dimension of time to the genre while seeking to unify SF film through its threads of continuity. Although admittedly not as revolutionary or groundbreaking as the work of Einstein, it does seem fitting that a temporal perspective on SF so appropriately mirrors the temporal fixations of contemporary theoretical science. Theoretical science, after all, in many ways stands as a practical application of the dominant values of SF cinema. Both seek to push and explore the boundaries of possibility and experience. All science stems from a fundamentally science-fictional line of inquiry that begins with the question, “What if?” The answers to that question are first the subject of science fiction and then the subject of science fact.

What lies ahead for SF cinema? That is a question that itself might make good science fiction. As SF is and always has been a cinema of change, very few predictions can be made on the basis of current trends. With no end in sight to the genre’s current resurgence in popularity, the only certainty that can be offered is that SF film will continue to develop and change as it maintains its fundamental engagement with issues of temporal experience. Appropriately enough, answers concerning future directions for the SF genre will always come down to a matter of time.

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