Spectacular horizons: the birth of science fiction film, television, and radio, 1900-1959

Citation:

DOI: 10.1017/9781316694374.019

This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution or re-use.

©2019, Cambridge University Press

Reproduced with permission.

Downloaded from DRO:
http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30123236
Audio-visual SF is particularly hard to define; its codes, conventions, and repetitions are more fluid than (say) the expansive geography of the Western film, or the sharp stabs of Gothic horror sounding their way out of the radio. Vivian Sobchack suggests that there is a “plastic inconstancy” in the types of iconography found in SF film and television, which Barry Keith Grant suggests “is a necessary result of the genre’s extrapolative function, to project today’s technology into tomorrow.” While audio-visual SF is undoubtedly difficult to pin down in terms of what it may look and sound like, there is, nonetheless, a consistency in the themes it addresses, the kinds of stories it tells, and in the way its future predictions and possibilities connect it to the hopes and fears of the present. It is not then simply a question of what film, television, and radio SF looks and sounds like, but the way it materializes – in its world-building imaginings – the future, and how it critically grapples with the technological transformations of its era.

That said, media specificity does have a central role to play in the way these stories are told and the future is enacted. The durational canvas of film is different from the serial and series format of television, which is itself different from the radio play. This omnibus chapter will explore each form of media in turn and address its central structures and themes, highlighting the key features of SF film, radio, and television. This chapter will also take note of those boundaries where different media converge and enter into cross-media dialogue in the first half of the twentieth century.

Science Fiction Film

One can argue that SF was at the pulsating heart of the advent of cinema: not only is film a special effect but “trick films” and space operas took hold of its outputs from the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ If cinema was at first felt to be a form of SF, set in a sea of spectacular attractions,⁵ films soon emerged that dreamt the future and took its stories into outer space. One of the very first adventures into outer space was Georges Méliès’s *Le Voyage dans la lune* (1902). As Phil Hardy notes:

Méliès’s film marks the real beginnings of the Science Fiction cinema. Where other film-makers had been content to poke fun at the new and emerging technologies of the 20th Century – X-rays, air flight, electricity, the motorcar – Méliès created a Science Fiction story and, in the process, identified the theme of space travel which became one of the abiding themes of the genre. Other directors isolated other themes and began to elaborate upon them, thus molding the genre, but it was Méliès who laid its foundation.⁶

*Le Voyage dans la lune* is fourteen minutes long, cost a record 10,000 francs to make, and was based upon Jules Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and H. G. Wells’s *First Men in the Moon* (1901). With thirty scenes in total, the film tells the story of an expedition to the Moon where the scientists meet and defeat the Moon people. The film sets up a number of recurrent themes that are then carried into SF film more generally.

First, *Le Voyage dans la lune* brilliantly captures the relationship between modernity, subjectivity, and the difference “between the virtual and the real,” a difference that Jonathan Bignell argues mirrors the machinery of cinema and the spatial transformations that occurred with industrialization. In the age of modernity one can move across identity positions as they are re-imagined in the exploration and time travel narratives that special effects cinema so powerfully produces or elicits. In the 1960 film version of *The Time Machine* (dir. George Pal), for example, Bignell argues that “time travellers and cinema spectators are displaced from the reality of their own present and their own real location in order to be transported to an imaginary elsewhere and an imaginary elsewhen.”⁷ One might term this a special type

---

of “heterotopia of time” or, better still, a heterotopia of special effects, outside or beyond the ordinary through which a synthesis of “special” irregular moments of time and space, conjoined with the wonder of special effects, transports one to new and spectacular horizons. This type of experience we might define as that which “entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound.”

Second, the film privileges white male scientists and inventors, and prophesizes about the power of science to shape the future purposefully. The ability to travel is engineered out of the ingenuity and exceptionalism of white scientists, supported by white visionaries and explorers who feel it is their right to visit new lands, to discover what is out there and to bring the civilizing effects of earth-bound whiteness with them. This trope is played out repeatedly from this point on in Western SF film (and radio and television), reaching its height in the Space Age Whiteness films of the 1950s and 1960s. For example, in Rocketship X-M (dir. Kurt Nuemann, 1950), Dr. Karl Eckstrom (John Emery) is introduced as the “designer of the RXM, and as you all know one of the most brilliant physicists of the day.” Eckstrom has engineered the first “man”-made spaceship to the Moon and is given the position of explaining its flight path, which he does through chalk diagrams and science-inflected vocabulary. Surrounded by politicians, journalists, and military personnel, he is given the power to speak and enact the future. This scene, often repeated in SF films of this period, centers the white scientist as the creator or progenitor of a productive science that affords humanity progress, advances civilization, and creates the conditions out of which new worlds are discovered. Through white scientists outer space is mapped from a white-centric point of view, and such “representations unconsciously reflect or embody the colonial imagination.” The message is that outer space isn’t just to be visited and admired, but must be colonized by the white imagination.

 Nonetheless, different representations of the scientist do emerge. According to Mark Bould, the dominant form taken in the 1930s was the

---

“mad scientist” and “mad science” movie intent on giving everything to his experiment even if that means unleashing terror on the world.\textsuperscript{10} Often misunderstood, set on a plot of revenge, the mad scientist knows no reason and will do anything to get her or his invention into the world. Mexico’s first fully realized SF film, \textit{Los muertos hablan / The Dead Speak} (dir. Gabriel Soria, 1935), is centered on a scientist who steals corpses and uses them in experiments.

Third, \textit{Le Voyage dans la lune} offers viewers visions of awe and wonder from the position of a wide-eyed child,\textsuperscript{11} its visions and imaginings rendering one innocent before the fantasy, taking one’s breath away as it does so. \textit{Le Voyage dans la lune}’s space rocket scene that involves a spectacular crash landing on the Moon has become one of the iconic shots of film history, capturing the way space, time, and invention come together in new ways. SF film comes to tell its stories through these spectacular horizons: whether it be the futuristic constructionist sets of \textit{Aelita: Queen of Mars} (dir. Yakov Protazanov, 1924), the expressionistic brutal futurism of \textit{Metropolis} (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927), or the grand public optimism of public life in \textit{Things to Come} (dir. William Cameron Menzies, 1936). SF spectacle often creates the conditions for the sublime in which the limits of the embodied self are breached, and the material conditions of one’s existence liquefy.\textsuperscript{12} We are asked to meet spectacle through the senses, leaving reason, logic, and language behind us. Drawing on Kant,\textsuperscript{13} one can describe this type of awesomeness as the “dynamical sublime,” measured by its unboundedness and formlessness – something, of course, visual effects help create since they work out of narratives of expanded geographies and seemingly exponential vistas of wonder.\textsuperscript{14}

The importance of special effects can also be seen in industrial or commercial contexts: Lee Zavitz won the Academy Award for Visual Effects for \textit{Destination Moon} (dir. Irving Pichel, 1950), and as Ben Walker suggests, SF film can be seen as a “technological showcase for current image creation technologies – technologies that perhaps only a few years before were science


\textsuperscript{11} Grant, “Sensuous Elaboration,” p. 18.


\textsuperscript{14} Michele Pierson, “No Longer State-of-the-Art: Crafting a Future for CGI,” \textit{Wide Angle} 21, 1 (January 1999), pp. 29–47.
fictions in themselves.” In defining SF, Darko Suvin suggests that it readily employs a “novum” or “cognitive innovation” that is scientifically instigated or realized. The novum is the narrative and visual catalyst for the way inventions can be realized and the physical rules and laws of that world transformed and transgressed. The novum is crafted out of current, real-world science but extended outward, so that predictions become possibilities enacted. So, for example, 1950s SF film travelled to outer space before the technology had been developed to do so but while it was in development. These films drew on existing technologies and on scientific prediction to imagine what space travel would soon be like.

Fourth, Le Voyage dans la lune begins a cycle of “alien encounter” films that often involve conflict with (evil) aliens. For example, in It! The Terror from Beyond Outer Space (dir. Edward L. Cahn, 1958), a creature from Mars stows away on a spaceship escaping from its planet. The creature is intent on killing everyone on board, which it does through sucking all the moisture out of its victims. The creature – so antithetical to civilized life that it cannot be properly named – is driven by the logic of consumption, intent on harvesting human civilized life so that it thrives at the expense, or replacement, of everything human. This binary between good (humans) and evil (aliens), however, is often compromised in SF film as humanity is often shown to be less than the Other which it is pitched against. The Alien Other may be both technologically and intellectually superior, and our attempt to colonize outer space or to understand them may be shown to be destructive. In A Message from Mars (dir. Wallett Waller, 1913), the first full-length SF feature in the history of British cinema, Horace Parker (Charles Hawtrey), characterized as a selfish and arrogant man, is taught a series of valuable lessons by a visiting Martian. In The Day the Earth Stood Still (dir. Robert Wise, 1951) the alien Klaatu prophesizes that the security of Earth resides singularly in the hands of scientists. It is their rational approach to international affairs that will steer Earth away from the arms race and the slow creep to nuclear annihilation that Klaatu sees as happening through Cold War politics.

The 1950s must, of course, be read in the context of their particular historical juncture: in military terms this was also the age of atomic testing, with the first hydrogen bomb detonated at the Eniwetok atoll in the Marshall Islands on November 1, 1952. At the same time, the rhetoric of the Cold War

created the impression that the Soviet Union was a persistent “invasion” threat to American national security. The Soviet Union’s launch of the satellite Sputnik on October 4, 1957, followed by the 1959 launch of the spacecraft Luna I, which reached the vicinity of the Moon, intensified fears of Soviet technological power. A range of political and cultural tensions and contradictions took root in the 1950s, then, and SF film (television and radio) seemed best able to negotiate them.

First, the radioactive monster films of the period speak to the fear of nuclear proliferation and the human apocalypse it will create. The science–military nexus creates an alliance in the Cold War era that made tangible to the world the possibility of extinction through the arms race and the relentless testing of nuclear weaponry. The nuclear monsters, such as those found in Attack of the Giant Leeches! (dir. Bernard L. Kowalski, 1960) and Attack of the Crab Monsters! (dir. Roger Corman, 1957), are byproducts of the fallout from rocket tests or nuclear explosions. Similarly, nuclear testing awakes Godzilla (dir. Ishirō Honda, 1954), and the beginning of the film in which a fishing boat sinks in the water recalls directly the 1954 nuclear detonation at the Bikini atoll. The 1954 Bikini atoll bomb was then the biggest man-made explosion, until it was surpassed by the USSR’s 50-megaton test in 1961. Three weeks after the Bikini bomb it emerged that a Japanese fishing boat, called Lucky Dragon, was within 80 miles (129 km) of the test zone at the time. Its twenty-three crew were severely affected by radiation sickness. As Tomoyuki Tanaka, the producer of the film, explains: “The theme of Godzilla, from the beginning, was the terror of the bomb. Mankind had created the bomb, and now nature was going to take revenge on mankind.”

Second, the Invasion Narrative films of the period can be seen as vehicles for playing out the politics of the Cold War between the USSR and American and other Western nation-states, including Britain. The alien invasion narrative is seen as merely a code for Soviet aggression and the imagined threat of nuclear, territorial, and geographical domination. In Invasion of the Body Snatchers (dir. Don Siegel, 1956), for example, the aliens silently arrive and secretly take over and copy humans. These simulacra are cold, pathological, and demonstrate a crowd/herd instinct as they seek and destroy all human life in their wake. These murderous clones, without individual personal freedoms to speak of, are here seen to embody the Soviet political system, and it is this embodiment that gets narratively transposed onto

---

a vulnerable/weak Western society precisely because ordinary people fail to recognize or resist the alien threat – until it is nearly too late, that is. The message that ordinary people must be ever vigilant and ever conscious of the communist Other is ever present in these Invasion Narrative texts.\(^\text{18}\)

In Peter Hutchings’s examination of British invasion narratives from the 1950s and 1960s, paranoia is connected to a set of distinctly British fears and concerns that emerged postwar.\(^\text{19}\) Hutchings suggests that these films produce a rather despairing national mood, one which reflects the fragmented and unstable nature of British identity as it faced challenges to elements of tradition, and normative gender roles. As Hutchings argues:

> It seems from these films that Britain has lost its center and become fragmented, its population scattered in isolated groups and its institutions and hierarchies no longer as efficacious as they once were . . . It is as if Britain, displaced from an imperial history and the glories of the Second World War and caught up in a series of bewildering changes, is more open to self-doubts and an accompanying acknowledgement of its own limits.\(^\text{20}\)

Third, the Invasion Narrative can be understood to be an exploration of racial tension. As Eric Avila contends, one of the fears of 1950s American life was the movement of black Americans into the inner city areas, producing a “white flight” into the newly established suburbs: “The rise of Hollywood science fiction paralleled the acceleration of white flight in postwar America and not only recorded popular anxieties about political and sexual deviants, but also captured white preoccupations with the increasing visibility of the alien Other.”\(^\text{21}\) In Earth-centered invasion films of the 1950s, the alien is coded as a racial Other, threatening the sanctity of these new white, civilized suburbs. But white flight is also played out in outer space, with the same power-saturated binary oppositions, and the same spatial geometries. Whiteness is known and knowable space: expansive, clean, it sits at the core of all the good and true physics in the cosmos. By contrast, the Alien Other is the dark cosmos magnified: chaotic, frenzied, intent on harvesting the light for its diabolical ends.

---

\(^{18}\) Notably, the original by Jack Finney takes a much more ambiguous view of the invasion, imagining peaceful coexistence with the pod people once the invasion has been thwarted.

\(^{19}\) Peter Hutchings, “We’re the Martians Now: British Invasion Fantasies of the 1950s and 1960s,” in Redmond, ed., *Liquid Metal*, pp. 337–46.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 339.

Nonetheless, as noted above, space travel is positioned as a problematic activity, involving conquest and exploitation. These critical invasion narrative texts draw attention to the power struggles that occur in deep space, with the control and ownership of cargo, commodity, and people in open contestation. When these contests occur on alien planets, race and ethnicity are brought to the fore through the figure of the alien who very often comes to stand for the minoritarian Other, rendered grotesque next to the sublime power of whiteness. In these films there is often a necessary struggle over racial hegemony, but by the film’s closure whiteness is often positioned as ultimately salvific. In Rocketship X-M, as the crew descends on Mars they see evidence of an advanced civilization in ruins. When they check the radiation levels they find high readings that suggest a nuclear war has taken place there. When the remnants of the civilization blindly stumble out from behind rocks, embodying an aggressive primitivism, Dr. Eckstrom prophetically comments, “From Atomic Age to Stone Age.” What is being narratively constituted in these scenes is a commentary on the development and testing of nuclear weapons in the United States at the time: the film is a siren warning about what will happen if we continue down this road – the destruction of our cities and homes and a return to an age where the ostensibly civilizing frames of whiteness are not in place. However, it is also a critical commentary on the blindness of privileged whiteness that invests too heavily in the cold science of destruction at the expense of compassion and feeling. What is being transposed onto the people of Mars is the contention that the white techno-elite have brought about the means of their own annihilation. Nonetheless, the fact that it is white scientists who can bring this message back to Earth positions whiteness as ultimately redeemable, and able to free itself from its own dangerous extremes.

Finally, SF films of the 1950s can be said to address the growing postwar crisis in masculinity and femininity. Those monsters and aliens that are marked by rationality and linked to the purest of scientific forms are often encoded as hyper-masculine and it is this rationalized and hard masculinity that poses a threat to the natural order of things. Women, by contrast, often personify those values and actions which are under threat from such regulatory masculinity – they show emotion, demonstrate intuition, and are totally family centered. In short, in these 1950s invasion narratives an ideological battle takes place over what it means to be masculine and feminine in an increasingly rationalized and pluralized 1950s Western world. Biskind argues that Them! (dir. Gordon Douglas, 1954) “reflects the new prestige of science by placing male scientists at the center of world-shaking events,” and that the
ants in the film work as an “attack on women in a man’s world” because “the ant society is, after all, a matriarchy presided over by a despotic queen.”

In all of these 1950s films there emerges what Susan Sontag defines as SF’s “imagination of disaster.” Sontag argues that these films are about the “aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess. And it is in the imagery of destruction that the core of a good science fiction lies.” Sontag goes on to argue that these images and scenarios of destruction serve two complementary functions. First, they work to explore the “deepest anxieties about contemporary experience.” Second, they are “strongly moralistic” fables that in their representations and resolutions provide a “utopian fantasy” space where all problems are easily resolved. As a consequence, Sontag concludes, “there is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films” of the 1950s.

Michael Ryan and Doug Kellner, by contrast, suggest a more complex relationship between these films and their ideological content. They argue that there are two types of dystopian/technophobic SF film texts: there are those texts oriented toward a conservative and essentialist paradigm which often involve a terrifying anti-humanist technology counterposed against an idealistic “natural” environment or social structure; and there are those texts that project liberal-critical viewpoints around technology and nature and which, consequently, challenge the conservative binary oppositions that structure such relationships. Ryan and Kellner argue that from a conservative perspective, “Technology represents artifice as opposed to nature, the mechanical as opposed to the spontaneous, the regulated as opposed to the free, an equalizer as opposed to a promoter of individual distinction, equality triumphant as opposed to liberty, democratic leveling as opposed to hierarchy derived from individual superiority.” In *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox, 1956) the pathology of technoscience is

24 Ibid., p. 44.
27 Ibid., p. 58.
personified more directly through the figure of Dr. Edward Morbius (Walter Pidgeon). Morbius is one of only two survivors of an expedition that landed on the planet Altair IV. He warns the rescue mission that has been sent out that they will be in danger if they land on the planet, at risk from an invisible monster that stalks it. They land, nonetheless, and Morbius eventually shows the landing party the advanced technology of the Krell people, who had once lived on the planet only to suffer a “mysterious” genocide just as they were about to make their biggest scientific breakthrough. Morbius demonstrates the power of one of these technologies, the “plastic educator,” which increases human intelligence and allows him to build his robot, Robby, as well as the other advanced marvels at his home. However, the viewer subsequently learns that there is a price to pay for this increased brainpower; the machine is fueled by the subconscious mind, and the monster that has been let loose on Altair IV is actually Morbius’s unleashed Id. At the end of the film Morbius attacks the monster and is fatally wounded in the process – as he dies so does the monster he gave birth to. As one of his last acts, Morbius presses a self-destruct button and just as the rescue team escapes into space Altair IV is blown to smithereens. The film thus suggests that if we come to live only in and through technology, we lose our humanity, and our connection with nature.

Radio Science Fiction

On the radio, musical and auditory soundscapes emerged for deep space, futuristic weaponry, advanced warfare, apocalypse, robots, sentient machines, alien creatures and messiahs, time travel, future cities, and more. So powerful was the language of radio SF that when Orson Welles narrated War of the Worlds on the Mercury Theater on Air Show, on Halloween, October 30, 1938, viewers phoned in believing that the Martians were really invading America. The power of the broadcast lay not only in the way it drew upon “live” news and documentary traditions to blur the boundary between fact and fiction, but also in the impressionable and alienating sounding of the alien spacecrafts, lasers, and alien creatures set within an orchestral and solo piano arrangement that constantly hinted at unexplainable danger.

One of the sonic instruments used to create this sense of otherworld strangeness was the theremin, invented by Léon Theremin, and whose manufacturing rights were bought by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), naming the device the thereminvox. One of the first uses of the theremin was on The Green Hornet Radio Show (1936), which began its
broadcast with a hornet-like hum from a theremin and the dialogue, “He hunts the biggest of all game.” The theremin was used to amplify the superhuman qualities of its titular hero. Other notable sound effect inventions included using an air-conditioning vent to produce the sound of the rockets in *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*.

The centrality of the (super) hero to serial “adventure stories” at this time was clear. Aimed at children and young adults, radio shows such as *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* and *Flash Gordon* had a huge audience and broadcast four to five times per week. *Buck Rogers*, which aired for the first time in 1932, told the story of Anthony (Buck) Rogers who, while working in a mine, was exposed to a gas that left him in suspended animation until the twenty-fifth century. Life in the twenty-fifth century is mostly utopian with a great deal of the worries, ills, and pains of past life eradicated, as new technologies and inventions have changed life, leisure, and work patterns for the better. However, the future is still marked by alien villains and it is the guile and bravery of the twentieth-century hero Buck that often saves the day. The message the serial offers viewers is that the heroism of today has an important hand in shaping a positive future.

Alex Raymond’s *Flash Gordon* debuted in 1935 on the Mutual Broadcasting System and starred Gale Gordon as Flash. Set in a future in which Earth has been earmarked for destruction by the merciless Emperor Ming and the subjected people of Mongo, Flash – along with his “girlfriend” Dale Arden, Dr. Zarkov, and the rebellious Hawkmen – take on Ming in a Manichean battle between good and evil. Flash is American masculinity personified and the romantic coupling with Dale allows for the series to end with a perfect utopian marriage once Ming has been roundly defeated.

SF radio can be argued to have first developed its audience in the 1930s and lasted as a central conduit for future listening until the advent of television in the 1950s, when there was a migration away to the new magic box in the corner of the living room. However, there was a great deal of crossover between SF radio, film, television, and literature, so that shows developed, repeated, and adapted their formats depending on their media specificity. However, what began to emerge in the 1950s was a turn to serious, literate radio SF and a move away from these “juvenile” serial adventures. As M. Keith Booker argues,

It was not until the 1950s that science fiction radio really hit its stride, even as science fiction was beginning to appear on television as well. Radio programs such as Mutual’s *2000 Plus* and NBC’s *Dimension X* were anthology series that offered a variety of exciting tales of future technology, with a special focus on
space exploration (including alien invasion), though both series also often reflected contemporary anxieties about the dangers of technology.\textsuperscript{28}

One of the most significant literary serials was NBC’s \textit{Dimension X}, which ran between 1950 and 1951. \textit{Dimension X} adapted short stories by acknowledged masters of SF literature, including Isaac Asimov, Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, and Kurt Vonnegut. The first thirteen episodes of \textit{Dimension X} were broadcast live and Norman Rose was heard as both announcer and narrator, with his famous opening line, “Adventures in time and space \ldots told in future tense,” opening up the series to its own time-travel momentum.

This was in one sense darkly themed SF radio, full of the existential and melancholic fears of the age, and of future prediction built on a fear of what humankind had become and what outer space and future technologies might offer us. As with SF film of the 1950s, there was a foreboding sense of the future. For example, in the adaptation of Jack Williamson’s 1947 novelette, “With Folded Hands,” first published in an issue of \textit{Astounding Science Fiction}, it is suggested that “some of the technological creations we had developed with the best intentions might have disastrous consequences in the long run.”\textsuperscript{29} “With Folded Hands” is set in a near future or perhaps parallel present, where Humanoids, small black robots, begin to take over the small town of Two Rivers. Their prime directive is to make humans happy, or “to serve and obey and guard men from harm.” However, this becomes defined as total control, and results in the surveillance and maintenance of all human life, and when anyone fails to obey the prime directive, they are lobotomized and turned into passive humans happy to be slavishly led. The broadcast ends with Underhill, a seller of “Mechanicals” (unthinking robots that perform menial tasks), having failed in his mission to bring down the humanoids, being taken away to an uncertain if “happy” future. “With Folded Hands” prophesizes the dangers of letting too much technology into one’s life, and warns of the power of dictatorial governments to control their populations by any means necessary.

Science Fiction Television

The Golden Age of Television occurred in the 1950s and SF became one of its mainstay and occasionally primetime genres. The technology of television


\textsuperscript{29} Larry McCaffrey, “An Interview with Jack Williamson,” \textit{Science Fiction Studies} 18, 2 (July 1991), www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/williamson54interview.htm (last accessed August 1, 2017).
rapidly entered the home in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, to name but a small number of “early adopters,” and its output centered on live drama, game shows, soap operas, westerns, SF, and news bulletins. Golden Age television was indebted to both radio and theatre, and drew upon the codes and conventions of film genres to furnish its scheduling patterns. In a very real sense, Golden Age television was “transmedia” at birth, a fusion of other forms and traditions, and this was particularly true of anthology shows rooted in SF like *Tales of Tomorrow* (1951–3), and *Science Fiction Theatre* (1955–7).

One can divide the broad output of SF television into two related categories. First, there was SF documentary, either in animation form such as the Tomorrowland episodes within the Disneyland franchise (1955), or as science education programming such as the Bell Laboratory Science Series: *Our Mr. Sun* (1956). These offered both technophiliac and utopian promises of what science may bring the world, allowing invention and dreaming to imagine future worlds better than the present. For example, *Man in Space* (Tomorrowland, 1955) begins with Walt Disney opining, “many of the things that seem impossible today will become realities tomorrow,” followed by an exploration of how man will eventually space travel. The exposition is supported by animation, history, and drawings, voice-over and special effects, so that the episode not only teaches but also spectacularly imagines the then-fiction of space travel.

Second, there was the subgenre of the (super) hero space opera such as *Flash Gordon*, *Captain Video and His Video Rangers*, *The Secret Files of Captain Video*, *Tom Corbett: Space Cadet*, *Space Patrol*, and *Rocky Jones: Space Ranger*. These often-future set series were aimed at both children and adults and set their narratives in binary good and evil terms. The heroes and their sidekicks stood for democracy, exceptionalism, and the American way of life, while their alien, ethnically coded enemies represented an insidious threat to these red, white, and blue threads of manifest destiny. Such shows tapped into America’s fear of and wonder at the power of the atomic bomb, as well as the rapid technological developments ongoing in other fields, including television itself. Often produced on shoestring budgets, these series nevertheless excited the imagination of cold war viewers, who were increasingly uncertain about their future both at home and abroad. The message in

---

all these series was often the same: the universe was in peril, and only the forces of the United States could put matters right.\textsuperscript{31}

Set in the year 2254, \textit{Captain Video and His Video Rangers} follows the adventures of a group of heroic soldiers, fighting for truth and justice against enemies racially and politically coded as evil incarnate. With their uniforms resembling United States Army combat gear, emblazoned with lightning bolts, they stood for American values in the age of Cold War uncertainty and fear of the racial Other.

As the “Master of Science,” Captain Video was a scientific genius able to develop new technologies that would help win the relentless war against their diabolical enemies. Such inventions included a Cosmic Ray Vibrator, a static beam of electricity able to paralyze its target; the Electronic Strait Jacket; the Opticon Scillometer, a long-range, X-ray machine used to see through walls; the Discatron, a portable television screen which served as an intercom; and the Radio Scillograph, a palm-sized, two-way radio.

\textit{Captain Video and His Video Rangers} was also important in terms of being one of the first SF series to involve its fans in the development of the show, and in extending its merchandising possibilities – both forerunners of the modern commodity-driven media landscape. The audience was encouraged to write in, to propose plot developments or to suggest new inventions and characters. For example, Tobor (the show’s robot) and Dr. Pauli (an arch enemy) were killed when their diabolical schemes backfired, and yet they were brought back to life in later episodes because of outcries from the show’s fanbase.

In terms of transmedia and merchandise extension, young fans of the show were invited to join the Video Rangers Club and to buy Captain Video merchandise, including helmets, toy rockets, games, and records. The series was adapted as six issues of Captain Video comics in 1955 and a fifteen-chapter movie serial, \textit{Captain Video, Master of the Stratosphere} (released by Columbia Pictures in 1951, starring Judd Holdren and Larry Stewart). It was the first attempt by Hollywood to capitalize on a television program through deliberate merchandizing efforts and cross-pollination with other media to expand the audience and impact of the brand. DuMont, the show’s producers, also attempted to build on the popularity of the show by developing \textit{The Secret Files of Captain Video}, a thirty-minute, weekly adventure complete within itself.

which ran concurrently with the serial from September 1953 until May 1954. One can see shows such as *Captain Video, Space Patrol*, and *Rocky Jones* as 

reassuring influences in a world that subconsciously teetered on the brink of destruction; threats were well defined, relatively easily contained, and seldom did anyone really get hurt. The real world was a far more unsettled place. If one sees that space opera series of the early 1950s served, for the most part, as instructional media, then one might also argue that they presented, in necessarily simplistic terms, a microcosm of events that were then being played out on the world political stage. Whether shot on film for verisimilitude or broadcast live using the barest of sets and minimal special effects, the space operas and other science fiction series of the era served primarily as socializing agents for a new generation, coming of age in a world that even their parents often could barely comprehend themselves.32

This dialogue between utopian dreaming and near dystopian despair seems to underwrite almost all of SF television in the Golden Age of television. On the one hand, heroes and invention and ingenuity were everywhere to be seen – we not only could see the stars but also believed we could shortly reach them. On the other hand, the fear of war, of nuclear weaponry, and of radical transformations in everyday life brought on by new technologies, meant the world felt instable, in constant seismic movement.

**Conclusion**

While a great deal of early SF film, television, and radio is marked by its sense of wonder and utopian idealism, there is much SF that is haunted by dystopian sentiments and apocalyptic scenarios. Above any comparable genre, SF seems to be able to represent and reproduce the individual and collective fears, paranoia, and cultural and political transformations that exist in society. SF can do this because, by definition, it is delineated by the word fiction, and because its landscapes, narratives, and ideological centers are seemingly so far removed from the “realism” of the actual world by its time travel and future technology metaphors. SF exists in possible worlds and imaginable futures, but the myths that are (barely) buried in its fantastic belly are ones that speak to people in the signs and codes of their everyday lives. As Annette Kuhn summarizes: “There is the idea that science fiction films relate to the social order through the mediation of ideologies, society’s representation of itself in and for itself – that films speak, enact, even produce

32 Ibid., p. 95.
certain ideologies, which cannot always be read directly off films’ surface contents.” What we see in the period from 1900 to 1960 is a blossoming of the themes and concerns of the genre, and a growing inter-relationship between the different media. Commercial intertextual and extra-textual relations sometime drive these relations by branding and merchandising, but they are also shaped by the politics of the age – by the yearning for new beginnings and by the fears of what may come.

33 Kuhn, ed., Alien Zone, p. 10.