



Projecting Technophobia: Science Fiction Disaster Film and Posthuman Technology

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“I hate machines.”

- Catherine Brewster (*Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*)

Science fiction films with technological themes appeared in the second decade of previous century as short humorous films. Most of these films were adoptions of popular science fiction literary works of art. Several early films like *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* merged science fiction and horror genres during the 1930s. With the advent of space travel and new scientific discoveries in the mid 20th century, there were many SF films with big budgets and spectacular visual effects. These films include *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1954), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1959) and others. Often the SF and Monster-movie were fused together to produce horror effect in some of the movies like *Them* (1954), *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *The Blob* (1958) and *Godzilla* (1954).

Man's trip to the Moon in 1969 saw a revival of interest in the SF film. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979) are the two widely commended instances of the renewed interests in SF. Especially SF films in the 1970s explored the theme of obsession in which humanity is depicted as under threat from sociological, ecological or technological adversaries of its own creation. Films like George Lucas's *THX1138* (1971), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *Silent Running* (1972), *Westworld* (1973) and its sequel *Futureworld* (1976) are cases in the point. It is from here that the theme of technophobia gathered real momentum in the succeeding SF films which will be the focal issue of this study. Films like *Star Wars* (1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) along with James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) projected dark, dirty and chaotic future with deadly aliens and hostile androids. To quote Daniel Dinello, “In its obsession with mad scientists, rampaging robots, killer clones, cutthroat cyborgs, human hating androids, satanic supercomputers, flesh-eating viruses, and genetically mutated monsters, science fiction expresses a technophobic fear of losing our human identity, our freedom, our emotions, our values, and our lives to machines.” (*Technophobia*, 2)

Science is a major factor in an SF film as it is in its printed form. It may be then the use of space travel and an encounter with aliens, or it may be the fatal laboratory experiments that go awry, or rampaging robots that turn against their creators, or time travel back into the past or the future. However, an SF film is always about disaster as much as it is about



science. According to Susan Sontag, Science Fiction movies are not so much about science as, “they are about disaster.” (*The Imagination of Disaster*, 122) This is why probably the labs in SF films are spectacular unlike the actual labs where the real scientists work. This may be because the directors of these films want to show the *modus operandi* of the fatal research which is chiefly responsible for the final disaster. Consider, for instance, the huge laboratory in Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993) where the genetically engineered dinosaurs create havoc, or the lab in Paul Verhoeven’s 2000 film *Hallow Man*. All disaster SF films try to preach the gospel that scientific hubris leads to disaster. This is how technomania gradually gives way to technophobia. An analysis of some of these films is necessary to bring the worst nightmares of techno-hells projected onscreen by some of the Hollywood directors.

A host of some early SF films like *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* paved the way for later SF disaster films that project the nightmarish vision of scientific hubris. Especially, two events at the end of World War II significantly influenced science fiction film – the development of an atom bomb and its apocalyptic effects and the beginning of the Cold War. These events led to increase a number of SF films in the middle of the 20th century. One of the important films of this time is *Destination Moon* (1950). The film is about a nuclear-powered rocket with four men travelling to the moon. One can easily sense America’s competition with Russia as a background to the film. Alien films also witnessed a huge popularity during the 1950s. Films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) directed by Robert Wise, *The Thing from Another World* (1951) directed by Christian Nyby, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) directed by Don Siegal and *Forbidden Planet* (1956) directed by Fred M. Wilcox are some of the important UFO films which shaped the future SF films.

There were relatively few SF films in the 1960s as compared to the 1950s. Most of these films were aimed at children with adaptations of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), based on the novel of the same name by Ray Bradbury, was set in an oppressive future. In the 1960s, Satyajit Ray decided to make a film about a Bengali boy who befriends an alien. Unfortunately, the film could not see the light of the day, but the plot was released and was available to the rest of the world. This film entitled *Alien* was later made by Steven Spielberg in the 1980s without acknowledging the original script writer. The most significant SF film of the 1960s is *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) directed by Stanley Kubrick. This film is based on the novel of the same name by Arthur C. Clarke. Steven Spielberg rightly termed this film as a big bang of science fiction. This film is unanimously considered as a first art film in the science fiction category having philosophical significance.



The 1970s is of supreme importance from our research's point of view as it projects humanity under threat from ecological and technological adversaries of its own creation. This technophobia is especially evident in films like Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Silent Running* (1972), *Planet of the Apes* and *Westworld* (1973). This Luddite attitude is further carried in films like *Alien* (1979) directed by Ridley Scott, *Capricorn One* (1977), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers Futureworld* (1976), *Solaris* (1972), *Star Wars* (1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1978) and *Star Trek* (1979). These films portray the struggle between man and the scientific entities like ecology, Psychology, mechanical apparatus like robots and aliens in a fearful manner. According to Sidney Perkowitz, "If you were a regular viewer of science fiction films anytime from 1950s to the 1990s, you might have felt vulnerable just standing on Earth's surface....It would raise havoc, causing earthquakes and tsunamis, wiping out cities, and threatening to destroy all earthly life." (*Hollywood Science*, 49)

Thanks to the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, SF film in the 80s took a new departure featuring a dystopian vision of a new kind from Hollywood directors like James Cameron, Paul Verhoeven and Steven Spielberg and Ridley Scott. Films like *Terminator* (1984), *Aliens* (1986) and *Abyss* (1989) by Cameron, *Robocop* (1987) by Verhoeven and *Extra Terrestrial* (1982) by Spielberg set the tone of negative science in Hollywood SF films. However, *ET* is an exception as it deals with the friendly alien without any hostility towards humans. But *Terminator* features rampaging cyborgs in the most chilling manner. The film *Aliens* figures hostile aliens in the outer space endangering the lives of the crew members in the space ship, including a small girl child. *The Abyss* portrays a submarine that sinks in the Caribbean and the crew encountering something unexpected in the most frightful manner. *Robocop* is set in a crime-ridden Detroit featuring a cyborg. Scott's *The Blade Runner* is loosely based on Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Ship?* The film is set in a dystopian future of 2019 in which synthetic humans known as replicants that have been bioengineered in labs. In all these cases, we find science portrayed in a negative manner which pose a dire threat to the humans.

Disaster film remains popular in the 1990s with technophobia imbued explicitly. This decade saw the rise of the internet the influence of which is evident on a host of films like *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), *Virtuosity* (1995) and *The Matrix* (1999) dealing with threats to the network through human-computer interface. Films like *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Independence Day* (1996) used the older themes of alien invasion of the 1950s. Similarly, *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Gattaca* (1997) explored genetic engineering advancement and cloning. One more important film worth discussing here is *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), directed by Renny Harlin. This film evokes technophobia by establishing a religious background. It meticulously surmises through some of its characters that playing a God can



be hazardous. A team of scientists who works on a medicine to cure a brain disease is involved in a scientific experiment that involves deadly sharks. One by one, the scientists are killed by the sharks in a series of abominable events. This film is explicitly an embodiment of the doctrine that science is a boon as it is a bane if not used cautiously. These later films show the scientific experiments that go awry and cause havoc for the humans. So far, it appears that these films use negative science not only to evoke a sense of wonder, but to preach the gospel that science can be hazardous if carried to an extreme as well. To put it in Daniel Dinello's words, "In its devotion to technophobia, science fiction paints a repulsive picture of a future world where technology runs out of control and dominates all aspects of human behavior." (*Technophobia*, 273)

In the 2000s, we find that fantasy is chiefly predominated in SF films. But the dark science and its negative impact on human life is still evident in the SF films of this decade. *The 6th Day* (2000), directed by Roger Spottiswoode, is about a family man of the future illegally cloned by accident as a part of conspiracy involving a rich businessman. *Battlefield Earth* (2000) directed by Roger Christian follows a rebellion against the alien Psychlos who have ruled Earth for a thousand years. *Hollow Man* (2000) directed by Paul Verhoeven is perhaps the most important film of the year that underlines Hollywood's obsession with the fear of science and technology. It reminds of H.G. Well's *The Invisible Man* as it is about a formula of invisibility worked out by the scientists. But here also the experiment fails miserably and is chiefly responsible for the catastrophe that follows. *The Cell* (2000), directed by Tarsem Singh, uses Psychology along with technology to produce horror effects in an unusual way. It portrays scientists who use experimental technology to enter the mind of a serial killer in order to locate the kidnapped victim. *Mission to Mars* (2000) by Brian De Palma is an adventure SF that depicts man's Mars Mission exploration going awry.

The directors in the new millennium experimented a lot in the SF genre on screen to bring home new fears of technology. Most of them used Superheroes to do this task. In this connection, it is wise to take into consideration the Spiderman trilogy (directed by Sam Raimi). The first Spiderman movie loosely employs SF apparatus as the focus is on the adventures of the superhero. A genetically engineered super spider accidentally bites a university student Peter Parker which gives him the power of spinning the web due to changes in his genes. However, *Spiderman II* (2004) employs hard science to attribute powers to a scientist Dr. Octopus who changes into a monster on account of the mechanical device attached to his brain. Like the prequel in which Norman Osborne attains superhuman powers due to his scientific experiments which brings out a monster out of him called as Goblin, same happens with Dr. Octopus in the sequel. The ultimate message these films seem to offer is that power needs to be used responsibly. As Uncle Ben tells Peter Parker in one of



the early scenes, “With great power comes great responsibility.” Here, this preaching is very much relevant to the Luddite attitude of Hollywood SF directors. In connection with the power of knowledge, Sidney Perkowitz puts it, “...there will be dire consequences if humanity probes nature too deeply – perhaps because some areas are the province only of God or, in secular terms, perhaps because technology can and will rampage out of control.” (*Hollywood Science*, 178)

To sum up, Hollywood SF seems to adhere to the notion that posthuman technology threatens to reengineer humanity into a new mechanic species and extinguish the old one. Science fiction shows that this process will subvert human values like love, empathy, sympathy revealing that, “the intrinsic principles of these technologies fortify genetic discrimination, social fragmentation, totalitarianism, surveillance, environmental degradation, addiction, mind control, infection, and destruction.” (*Technophobia*, 273) While cuddling technophobia submissively, Hollywood SF paints a repulsive picture of a gloomy future where technology runs out of control and takes over all areas of human life. The succeeding chapters would meticulously look into these matters while maintaining that Hollywood filmmakers are Luddites *per se*.

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