

Evolution of Science Fiction Films: From *A Trip to the Moon* to *Things to Come*

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ABSTRACT

In Films and Science Fiction share a similar historical and cultural milieu. Some of the first films to be made were science fiction films. They evolved from 'shorts' to 'feature films'. Fantastic trips to the moon, mars and Jupiter, adaptation of literary classics, spectacular special effects and transformation in narrative techniques made science fiction films a complex genre. This paper primarily focuses on the early science fictions films to the films that were made during 30's.

Keywords: *mise-en-scène, narration, first world war, allegory*

From the times of classical antiquity, renaissance period, industrial, economic and political revolutions to early twentieth century when the term *science fiction* was coined the literary form of science fiction has been evolving. Defining such an expansive, discursive genre, putting a scholarly framework and specifying its range and extent is an uphill task. The same level of difficulty extends to the definition and classification of science fiction films as well. If science fiction as a literary genre evolved

“as a part of and a reaction to industrial society... appealed to a literate audience, one that was open to and even enthusiastic about inventions, science, and the changes... engaged in a sense of wonder..., it did so privately, conjuring in the individual imagination the images to satisfy that wonder. Film, on the other hand, was practically from the start a mass art intended for the broadest audience, offering them a series of common visual appeals... As a commercial medium it involved a kind of assembly-line production churning out a predictable product with highly formulaic texts, aimed not specifically at advancing interest in the world of science or even catering to such an interest, but at providing expected and proven narrative satisfactions, geared to the strengths and resources of a particular movie studio. The chief figure leading to the development of such a cinema is also one of the founding fathers of cinematic science fiction, Georges Méliès” (Telotte 78-79).

Christine Cornea, Friedman and others affirm Telotte's argument and cite *Le Voyage dans la lune (A Trip to the Moon)* released in 1902, directed by a French magician turned illusionist Georges Méliès as the first 'science fiction' film. “Méliès claimed to have been influenced by both Verne's *De la Terre à la lune* and by Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*” (Roberts 186). “He created well over 500 short films between 1896 and 1914, many of which have come to be regarded as early science fiction films” (Cornea 12) which include, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), *The Impossible Voyage* (1904), and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1907). These films rely on imaginative sets and groundbreaking special effects like multiple exposures, substitution, dissolves, stop-motion, reverse motion photography, animation, colour tinting etc., but rudimentary as narratives since the basic emphasis was on spectacle, on giving audiences striking visual novelties. Méliès himself admitted:

“For twenty years I made fantasy films of all sorts, and my chief preoccupation was, for each film, to find original tricks, a sensational main effect and a grand finale. After which, I used to try and find which era would be most suitable in terms of costuming my characters (often the costumes were required by the tricks, even), and once all this was well established, I got down, last of all, to designing the sets, so as to frame the action in accordance with the chosen period and costumes. As for the script, the “fable,” the “tale” in itself, I worked this out at the very end; and I can therefore state that, done thus, the script was without any importance, since my only aim was to use it as an “excuse for *mise-en-scène*,” for tricks or for tableaux with a pleasing effect” (243).

In spite of the limitations of Méliès in not tapping the full narrative potential of the medium David A Cook considers him

“cinema’s first narrative artist ... who discovered, if did not exploit, the enormous potential inherent” in film being a narrative rather than a documentary (*actuality*) medium,...” he had stumbled into the narrative dimensions of the cinema very much as cinema had stumbled into being-arbitrary, almost by accident” (18).

Méliès films may be dominated by visual spectacle and trickery but “the story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema”(Strauven 383). Tom Gunning prefers to address these films as “The Cinema of Attractions” which intended to “directly solicit spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle” in which special effects dominated over the narration(384).

Although Méliès “never saw himself as a creator of science fiction” (Telotte 44) his contribution in establishing some of science fiction’s important iconography

“and many of its primary plot concerns, including rockets, submarines (even flying submarines), automata, aliens, scientists and slightly mad inventors, interplanetary travel, monsters both terrestrial and extraterrestrial, and the technologically aided conquest of various physical and intellectual challenges” is immense” (ibid).

Popularity of these proto science fiction films inspired filmmakers in Europe and the United States to come up with their own science fictions *shorts*. In France, Gaston Velie(*Voyage autour d'une étoile 1906*), Segundo de Chômons (*Voyage à la planète Jupiter, 1907*), Walter Booth (*The '?' Motorist (1906)* and *The Airship Destroyer (1909)* etc. During this period *shorts* also expressed their deep concern over human evolution and the biological sciences under the influence of Darwin’s treatise. British-Gaumont’s *The Doctor’s Experiment* or, *Reversing Darwin’s Theory (1908)*, and a Danish film *Den Skaebnesvangre (1910)*, Searle Dawley’s *Frankenstein (1910)* moved themselves closer to horror films.

Many similar shorts from this period employ amazing special effects and astounding tricks but did not really blossom into science fiction films until in 1916, Universal Studios released *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (directed by Stuart Paton) often credited as one of the first significant full-length science fiction films. The film was closer to modern films in its screen time running over a hundred minutes long. “This was the first film to be filmed underwater, using techniques pioneered by the Williamson Brothers” (Scheib).

Production of early ‘Science Fiction’ films declined during the impending years of First World War. However, the interwar years did see the release of a number of landmark, feature length films from Europe. The most significant ones are Soviet Union’s, *Aelita* (dir. Yacov Protazanov, 1924), Germany’s *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927), and Britain’s *Things to Come* (dir. William Cameron Menzies, 1936). All of these films are epic in their construction of detailed and futuristic urban settings as well as in their narrative scope and ideals (Cornea 16). “These films appeared in the late silent and early sound period and provided definitive break with the pattern, insisted on a specific identity, epic in scope, resources, and intentions”(Telotte45).

Aelita, is “generally considered to be the first feature-length film about space travel” (Booker 30). It was based on the eponymous novel by Alexei Tolstoy. “It was an ambitious experiment in its constructivist set design and costumes which worked to communicate the socialist ideological system of Russia” (Cornea 16). “Through its narrative the film follows the protagonist’s psychological and political shift from individualist to socialist activist” (ibid). Using “scientific and technological fantasies of spaceflight and Martian culture, *Aelita* offers a sober view of the power of the reason–science–technology triad increasingly central to the genre... results in a kind of allegorical commentary on the nature of capitalist cinema”(Telotte, *Film* 46). Lang’s *Metropolis* is often credited as “a genre-defining movie” and the “first big budget Science Fiction movie ever to be made” (Mann 396). Cornea observes German Expressionism, Modernism, Art Deco and gothic styles in its production design (17). It is set in a futuristic society that reflects the frustrations of the working classes and the “dehumanized urban population which is enslaved both by the tyrants who rule them and by the machines they tend” (Booker 190). *Things to Come* is the “first major feature-length science fiction film of the sound era”(Booker 272), scripted by H G Wells based on his novel *The Shape of Things to Come*. The film accurately predicts a possibility of World War, dreams of Well’s idea for a “world state”, argues that “a utopian future was attainable, but only after the current order of civilization had been destroyed, clearing the way for a new era of technological progress and global government” (ibid 272). On the one hand the all three films unmistakably reflect their times of political and social unrest and on the other they establish the major iconography of science fiction i.e., city, mad scientist, interplanetary planet etc.

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