

Where have all the Ripleys gone?

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[Sample Text]

When French magician-turned-filmmaker, Georges Méliès, sent men into space for his 1902 film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* the women's roles were simple: glamorous earthbound assistants and beautiful moon-dwelling Selenites - played by the *Corps de Ballet du Châtelet*.¹ No female scientists or astronauts here, and perhaps no surprise either. Things have moved on since then - but maybe not as far as we might like to think.

Gender through genre

There have of course been many developments in female representation since those days when science fiction film merely held a mirror up to society: a backdrop for flimsy plots showcasing fantastical new 'inventions' and 'discoveries'. Women came through their assistant-to-scientist and love-interest stages of the 1920s and 30s; through the monster-fodder days of the 1940s and the domestic drudgery of the 50s; their sexual objectification or virtual anonymity in the late 60s and early 70s, and onto Sigourney Weaver's landmark role as Ellen Ripley in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). But where are the Ripleys now? What is her legacy for the new century? The post-*Alien* period inevitably saw Ripley's direct influence on a number of films - from *The Terminator* (1984) through *A.P.E.X.* (1994) and back again for three *Alien* sequels (1986, 1992, 1997). Indirect influence can be detected through prominent female roles in films like *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), *Total Recall* (1990), and *Tank Girl* (1995); however, with the possible exception of Trinity in *The Matrix* series (1999, 2003, 2003), female representation in the genre appears to have gone through a period of decline, with women's roles drifting into the background again. It seems to have settled into what the late feminist writer, Marilyn French, might have described as a 'don't-rock-the-boat' mode.

For some, then, the high profile return of one of science fiction film's iconic female characters might have held more promise than most. Fifty seven years after Patricia Neal's Helen Benson saved the world in Robert Wise's 1951 genre classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Scott Derrickson 'reimagined' the film for the new century - with Jennifer Connelly in the seminal role. David Scarpa's

2008 screenplay places Benson front and centre in a big-budget Hollywood film² presenting her as a successful career scientist. So, is this where we should be looking for Ripley's 21st century legacy?

Professional role

Connelly's Helen Benson is an astrobiologist. A professor at Princeton, she seems to have moved on from her role as secretary in 1951. However, despite Germaine Greer noting that "[t]he most overt kind of handmaidenship is practised by secretaries",³ the astrobiologist role does reflect its own genre restrictions. It betrays, albeit more subtly, a persistent notion that there are things that women can and can not be in science fiction film.

As female characters of the first half of the 20th century graduated from being assistants to their scientist fathers or husbands, to become scientists themselves, they tended to specialise in what genre critics Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin describe as the 'soft sciences': disciplines taking animals, plants or people as subjects.⁴ The female scientist in science fiction film does not generally crunch numbers or blast atoms using computers or physics ('hard sciences'); instead she consorts with Mother Nature using biology and psychology. We see her early on as a psychologist in *Invaders from Mars* (1953), and later as a psychiatrist in *Shirley Thompson Versus the Aliens* (1968) and *The Invasion* (2007).⁵ She's an anthropologist in *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1992), a palaeontologist in *Jurassic Park* (1993) and an archaeologist in *Stargate* (1994). Closer to Connelly's astrobiologist are the biologist in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) and a hydroponics expert in *Sunshine* (2008). Closer still is the marine-biologist, seen in *2010* (1984), *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986) and *Sphere* (1998). And she's another astrobiologist in *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), a film directed by Robert Wise twenty years after his genre debut with *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.⁶

But is it really so unreasonable for screenwriter Scarpa to present Helen Benson, the central human character in a 2008 tale about extra-terrestrial visitors, as an astrobiologist? Perhaps not, but consider Nicholas Cage's character in *Knowing*, a 2009 tale about extra-terrestrial visitors. He is an *astrophysicist*. Jeff Goldblum's character in *Independence Day*, the 1996 blockbuster about extra-terrestrial visitors, is a computer specialist and in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), Richard Dreyfuss plays an engineer. All 'hard' scientists. Back in the 1950s, Professor Quatermass was a rocket scientist, and the only scientist to meet the extra-terrestrial visitor in the original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was Sam Jaffe's Einstein-styled theoretical physicist.

Petty as this distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences may seem, it points to an implicit expectation about female scientists in the genre. In *Feminism Confronts Technology*, Judy Wajcman observes that "the traditional conception

of technology is heavily weighted against women”,⁷ which she later links with computer science and “the obsession with control”.⁸ This theme drives Peter Biskind’s suggestion that Dr Patricia Medford, Joan Weldon’s strong, independent entomologist (working with her scientist father) in *Them!* (1954), is not there to celebrate women, but rather to underscore “a paranoid fantasy of a world dominated by predatory females”.⁹ But times had changed and a pragmatic approach was required: “[b]etter give an inch than lose a mile, better let Pat Medford assert herself, or face a far more serious challenge to male power in the future”.¹⁰

Connelly’s astrobiologist role may appear to be a step forward for Benson, but, by continuing the practice of restricting the scope of female science, Derrickson’s *The Day the Earth Stood Still* gives with one hand and takes with the other. It appears that a glass ceiling still governs the roles that women can play. The ceiling may have been raised over the years (and penetrated on occasion), but it’s still there: a remnant of the perennial concern that genre film needs to underpin or balance its unfamiliar fictional elements with a familiar or ‘acceptable’ reality. It needs what film theorist Christian Metz identified as a “...set of ground rules... ..laid down at the outset...”.¹¹ This is largely how science fiction film has worked since Méliès and others were writing the rules back in 1902. Crudely put, the more aberrant the fiction (a trip to the moon), the more demands on the *mise en scène* to present a familiar, traditional, even magnified, version of social reality. Enter the *Corps de Ballet*. They help towards what Annette Kuhn calls “...limiting the risk, of the new, the unexpected: a kind of contract between the film industry and the cinema audiences...”.¹²

Of course, as the science fiction genre and its themes became more familiar, film makers could afford to loosen their conservative grip a little; couple this with changes in society itself, and development in female representation was inevitable. But science fiction films cost a lot to make, tempting their producers to retreat more readily into the safety of traditional - even conservative - representation. If there is a danger that audiences will reject a female physicist, then stick to biology. If promotion to professional scientist pulls the female role away from an ethos in which “working class women remain[ed] symbols of an idea of motherhood, nurture, suffering, labour, strength and earthiness”,¹³ then pull her back with a reference to nature, Mother Nature. Let the women be biologists - or astrobiologists.

Exceptions to this hard/soft, male/female scientist convention exist in science fiction film, but they are few and they generally avoid risk. Alfre Woodward’s rocket engineer in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) is supported by perhaps Hollywood’s strongest franchise. Jodie Foster’s SETI radio astronomer in *Contact* (1997) is supported by the success of Carl Sagan’s original novel¹⁴ - and perhaps bolstered by a perception that a scientist searching for extra-terrestrial intelligence is really just looking for little green men.¹⁵ By and large, as science fiction films become more expensive to make, the retreat to ‘safe’,

tested ground is more pronounced.

Back in 1979, Ripley rocked the boat, but women's roles were clearly never going to drive inexorably towards leaner, meaner, stronger, faster, tougher, more independent women. That might have endangered the ship entirely. Instead, we have seen a reversion towards a safe zone: a 'happy' medium between Georges Méliès and Ridley Scott. The resultant 'soft' scientist, personified in Helen Benson's astrobiologist, has itself become a genre stereotype: a shorthand compromise for 'acceptable' female representation which may ironically become as restrictive as the secretaries it seeks to replace.

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¹ David Robinson, *George Melies: Father of Film Fantasy* (London: MoMI/BFI, 1993), p. 40.

² Estimated budget: US\$80million. Source: *The Internet Movie Database*, <imdb.com/title/tt0970416/business>. Accessed: 8th October 2009.

³ Germain Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1972), p. 123 (original edition MacGibbon and Kee Ltd, 1970).

⁴ Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin. *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 136. Examples of 'hard' sciences proposed by Scholes and Rabkin include: 'physics and astronomy', 'computers', and 'thermodynamics'; the 'soft' sciences include 'biology' and 'psychology'.

⁵ A remake of the classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

⁶ For a feminist reading of female scientists in ten science fiction films of the 1950s, see Bonnie Noonan, *Women Scientists in Fifties Science Fiction Films* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005).

⁷ Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 137 (original edition, 1991). In her text, Wajcman examines many of the relationships between "hard" sciences and gender.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁹ Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us To Stop Worrying About the Fifties* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 133. This patriarchal paranoia can be seen clearly in the 1958 film *Queen of Outer Space*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹¹ Christian Metz, 'The Fiction Film and its Spectator: A Metapsychological Study' Translated by Alfred Guzzetti, in Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and the Cinema: The*

Imaginary Signifier (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 99-147 at p. 120. Also published in *New Literary History* VIII, no. 1 (1976): 75-105.

¹² Annette Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 2. Original edition, 1990.

¹³ Linda Grant, *Sexing The Millennium: A Political History of the Sexual Revolution*. London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 33.

¹⁴ Carl Sagan, *Contact* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1985).

¹⁵ It should also be noted that one of the inspirations for the Jodie Foster character is reputed to be the American astronomer, Dr Jill Cornell Tarter, director of the SETI research centre.

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