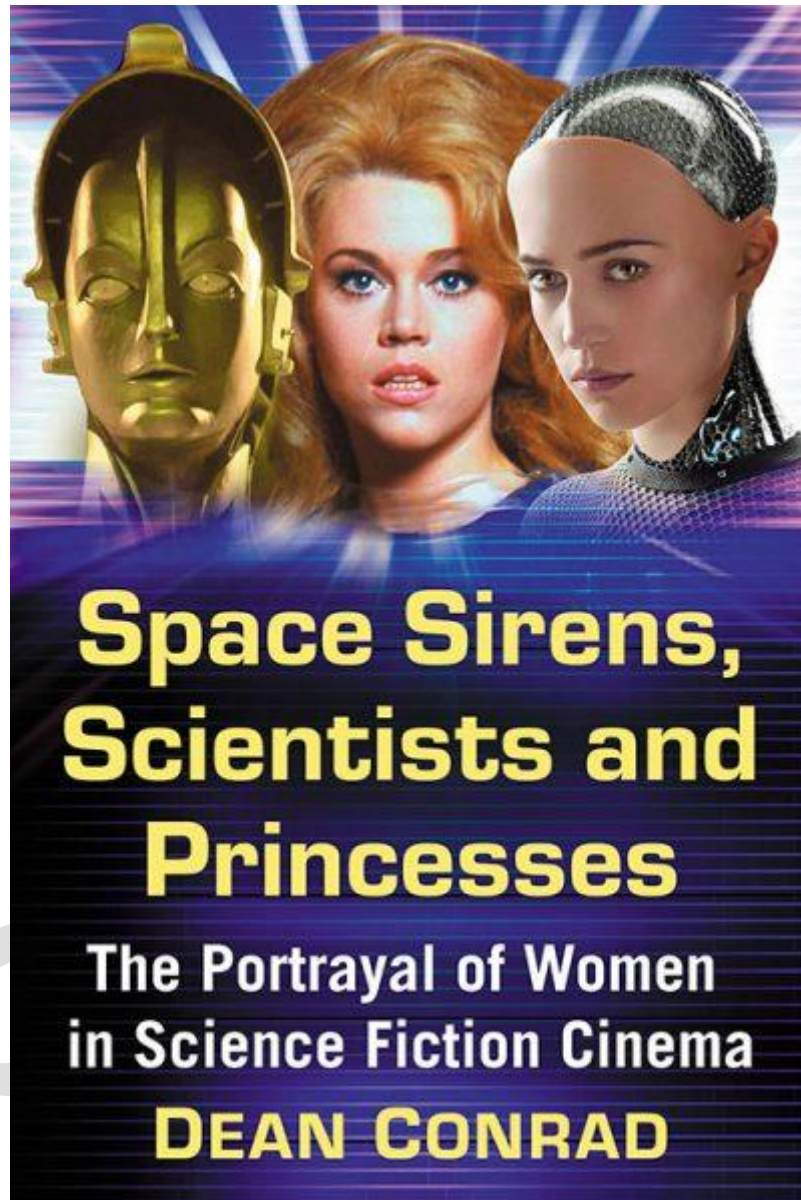


# Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses: The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Cinema

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[sample text]



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# Introduction

## CAPTIVE WOMEN

PRINCESS LEIA

Why, I guess you don't know  
everything about women yet.

We seem to be living through a golden era for women in science fiction cinema. Some of the genre's most acclaimed recent hits – *Gravity* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2015), *Arrival* (2016) – focus on female characters; the huge success of the fantasy film *Wonder Woman* (2017) appears to have encouraged DC franchise producers to develop a *Batgirl* project; *Star Trek Beyond* (2016) has finally given that franchise a *bona fide* female action character; the biggest industry property of them all has replaced Luke and Han with Rey and Jyn; and even the mainstay of machismo, *Mad Max*, relinquished his spot to a woman in *Fury Road* (2015). For now, that is. After all, we have been here before.

One of the recurring themes of this book is the oscillating fortunes of female characters in the genre. Evolution and revolution across one hundred and twenty or so years of science fiction cinema have brought golden ages and dark phases. The practical, resourceful protagonist roles taken by women before the First World War reverted largely to male roles when peace returned, leaving women to tend their professional husbands and fathers as they had before. In 1929, Gerda Maurus played the impressive Friede Velten in *Frau im Mond*, just before the widespread adoption of sound-on-film made this stunning, silent classic obsolete overnight. Voiceless Friede was stranded, but she was not alone: female characters stagnated for the next twenty years. Tradition, convention and stereotype took charge until the intervention of another war gave women a chance to show what they could do once again. And so the cycles continued. The female scientists who emerged after the Second World War were held back by 1950s' notions of domesticity and motherhood; feminist advances in the 1960s were stifled by a technological backlash in the '70s; the strong women of the 1980s were becoming monstrous and side-lined by the middle of the '90s; and into the new millennium, an uncertain future eased female representation back towards the past once again.

No film genre takes more time, effort and money to produce than science fiction, especially in the 21st century with the increasing reliance on dense digital spectacle. Add to this an industry that has always tried to take as few risks as possible with its expensive product and the result is the “imaginative conservatism” to which the genre will always return at times of stress. When war, recession, industry upheaval, government legislation and new technologies threaten, science fiction retreats – and female roles suffer. *Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses* attempts to make sense of a genre that can present women as sexy robots, killer queens, feisty princesses, naked aliens, omnipotent computers, warriors, astronauts, scientists, mothers, lovers, stewardesses and so much more. It explores and exposes the many and varied female roles in what has become the most popular, visually arresting and commercially lucrative cinema genre.

### Histories

This is a cinema history. It is not a work of cultural, critical, film or feminist theory – although it does drift into all of those fields in places. The aim of this book is to present a full-length survey of female representation across the entire history of science fiction cinema. It tries to place as many relevant movies as possible in chronological order, and then to find connections between characters, narratives and themes across time. The objective has been to observe patterns and trends, not to propose über-theory. The *Media Cited* section spans the

period 1895 to 2018 and lists more than 650 science fiction films; that seems a lot, but, some sources suggests that this accounts for around 6% of feature releases during that period<sup>1</sup>. All that this book can ever hope to do, then, is offer a broad-brush overview of a vast and expanding subject; however, given that this is the first book-length survey of its type, perhaps that is all it needs to do.

Of course, there are numerous other contributions to this field and associated subjects, many of which have been leaned on by this one. Early general histories of science fiction cinema, such as John Baxter's 1970 study *Science Fiction in the Cinema*, tend not to isolate men and women; their job was one of introduction to the subject, the films and the themes. Phil Hardy's *Aurum Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction* (incorporating the work of Walt Lee, Denis Gifford, Anthony Masters, Paul Taylor, Paul Willerman and Kim Newman) has been an invaluable reference volume, setting films from 1895 to 1995 in context – and often, helpfully, commenting on their female characters. It has become more common now for surveys of film to include sections that are dedicated to gender representation. For example, Christine Cornea's 2007 book *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* offers many perceptive insights into “the masculine subject” and “the feminine subject”, especially in the films of the 1980s and '90s. Bonnie Noonan appears to be working through the eras book-by-book, using her personal recollections as a starting point for *Women Scientists in Fifties Science Fiction Films*, before moving on to a critical study of *Gender in Science Fiction Films, 1964-1979*. In *Space Oddities: Women in Outer Space in Popular Film and Culture, 1960-2000*, Marie Lathers makes some valuable connections between modes and methods of female representation across media. Space and the stories that are told about it are, of course, central to the study of science fiction cinema.

Books that focus on specific movies can offer useful insights, although one leader in this field, the *BFI Classics* series, does seem to have concentrated more on the “men and machines” end of the genre. Elsewhere, Ximena Gallardo C. and C. Jason Smith's examination of Sigourney Weaver's journey through the first four *Alien* films, *Alien Woman: The Making of Lt. Ellen Ripley*, is a good example of a book-length single character study, but these are relatively rare. A little more common are book chapters focusing on specific aspects of female representation, such as Steve Chibnall's *Alien Women: The Politics of Sexual Difference in British SF Pulp Cinema*. More common still are journal papers and magazine articles. In recent years, the British Film Institute's monthly magazine *Sight & Sound* has included features on female directors and women in silents, Westerns and World War Two movies, but its best barometer for the plight of women in science fiction films remains, for now, Kim Newman's film reviews. It is no surprise that the internet is now the easiest place to find information about female characters; however, it can also be the hardest place to find reliable information. Simone Odino's website devoted to *2001: A Space Odyssey* – *2001Italia.it* – includes the fascinating research piece, *Who's that girl? (actress-spotting in '2001: a space odyssey')*, but it sits amid countless online lists that are often entertaining, but add very little to the serious study of women in the genre. Wise words from film and science fiction specialist J.P. Telotte arrived by e-mail during the preparation of this book: “...the problem, as you've probably already encountered, is where/how to stop”. Indeed.

This volume offers more detail than some of these commentaries, but it cannot hope to penetrate the depths reached by others. Instead, it goes long, encompassing thirteen decades of female representation in science fiction cinema. Navigating a path through the insights

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Hardy's authoritative encyclopedia (see: Hardy 1991/1995) lists around 1,500 science fiction films, shorts and chapter-plays between 1895 and 1995. The *Internet Movie Database* offers 3,000 titles for the same period. Bringing the *IMDb.com* search up to date yields around 10,000 titles, tagged as “Released Sci-Fi / Feature Film / Short Film”; this figure does not include TV movies and straight-to-video releases, which take the tally much higher. These statistics alone indicate the difficulties inherent to attempting an historical survey. It cannot cover every title. Nor can it hope to propose a theory without the real danger of the reader coming up with a counter example supporting an opposing theory.

already out there, as well as the films themselves, has contributed to the fun and frustrations of writing this book.

### Herstories

Many film fans, critics and commentators point to Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien* as a significant movie in the development of women in science fiction cinema, and so it is. Some regard it as the most significant movie, with respect to female roles, in the genre's history. This is harder to quantify. At the time of *Alien*'s release, reviewers seemed more interested in its art direction and creature design than in Sigourney Weaver's lone female survivor, Ripley. It was a similar situation for Linda Hamilton's portrayal of Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (1984) – another popular candidate for “most significant movie”. She attracted less contemporary critical interest than the appearance of Arnold Schwarzenegger in what was his breakthrough genre film. The significance of *Alien* and *The Terminator* has been bolstered by retrospective projection, which began to occur in earnest after their first sequels: *Aliens* (1986) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). This is not to say that those first films were not important, of course they were. Without *Alien*, there would have been no *Aliens*, but the second film is where Ripley's character really begins to develop. Without *The Terminator*, James Cameron and Gale Anne Hurd might not have brought their talents to bear on *Aliens* and Ripley may not then have had the impact that she did. What is more, this director and producer team would not have had the budget to make *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* in the way that they did – and this is where Connor's character has most impact. Ripley and Connor undoubtedly went on to influence the roles that followed, through the warrior women of the late 1980s and into the '90s, past the kick-boxing babes of the early 2000s and onto the competent female characters of the current decade. But this chain of events did not begin in 1979.

*Alien* might not have been made if *Star Wars* had not been such a massive success in 1977. Princess Leia has the fight of the feminists, but her feet are firmly in feminine, fairytale traditions and the Saturday morning serial *Flash Gordon* (1936). George Lucas was also inspired by the grand vision of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the merchandizing of *Planet of the Apes*, two 1968 films that offer very different roles for women. The female ape, Dr. Zira, can be linked back via Pierre Boullé's 1963 novel to the women of science who emerged on screen during the Space Age of the 1950s; the most accomplished of these also went into space in films like *Rocketship X-M* (1950). They were not the first; the influences go further back. In 1929, Fritz Lang had included a female astronaut in the title of his silent film, *Frau im Mond*, a high-water mark in the genre's focus on female protagonists. Eponymous women had been pioneered by the 1912 film *Freezing Auntie*, and, as so often, Georges Méliès had got in early with active females in *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). There is little doubt that he will have seen potential in the attractive young women who feature in the single-scene science ditties made at the end of the 19th century – films like *X-Rays* (1897), in which an X-ray machine is used to spy on a courting couple (albeit as skeletons!).

If an historical overview has any value, it is in showing that nothing exists in isolation. It is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify precisely the influence of any single movie or role, but if an attempt is to be made, films and characters need first to be placed in context – in relation to each other, to the wider cinema industry and to the world in which they all sit. Only when the history is charted is it possible even to suggest connections and propose theories. *Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses* is the result of an attempt to navigate that history.

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