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

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Preface: Invisible Man 1

Introduction: Captive Women 5

I Science Fiction—Silents and the Establishment of Female Roles 15

II Science Fantasy—Sound, Technology and the Service of Male Desires 40

III Science Fact—Peace and the Emergence of Female Professionals 69

IV Intermission—Watershed Years, or, Destination Unknown and an Annus Mirabilis 95

V Golden Era—Blockbusters and the Development of Female Heroes 124

VI Dangerous Times—Identity Crises and a Millennial Mélange 152

VII 21st Century—Computers, Corporations and Consumers 181

Conclusion: Invisible Woman 213

Epilogue 227

Appendix: Female Representation in Science Fiction Cinema—A Selection 231

Chapter Notes 257

Bibliography and Filmography 268

Index 303
INTRODUCTION

Captive Women

Why, I guess you don’t know everything
about women yet.—Princess Leia

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 fran-
chise 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 the present work 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
Introduction

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 sidelined 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. What follows 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 its 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 Filmography 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 percent of feature releases during that period. 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,
Introduction

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 II 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.

The present work 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
Introduction

cinema. Navigating a path through the insights 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 Boulle’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. This book is the result of an attempt to navigate that history.

**Definitions**

Vexed questions concerning the nature of science fiction have been debated for some time and will continue to be for some time to come. There is not enough space here to do justice to a subject that could fill an entire separate book. Despite the likelihood that arguments will never be settled to the satisfaction of all,² there is still an expectation that a survey such as this will offer a definition of the genre; however, in *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction*, Lucie Armit argues that “to define something before one starts is immediately to constrain it, to imprison it within a label in relation to which all innovation becomes deviation.”³

That sounds reasonable, but it also opens up the potential for all cinema to be science fiction. Indeed, it could be argued that this was true for its earliest days: medium and genre were interchangeable. People on screen in 1895 did not need to perform the impossible; the mere fact of their performance seemed impossible. To the spectator, this artistic revolution brought a kind of magic. The magic was, of course, underpinned by science and technology, but if, as Arthur C. Clarke once noted, “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” then this particular revolution was a science fiction one—or at least a fantasy one. When film critic and historian David Robinson describes the pioneers of cinema as a “collection of scholars and showmen, instrument makers and conjurors, adventurers and impresarios, charlatans and
visionaries," he might equally be referring to any number of science fiction filmmakers, from Georges Méliès through Eugen Schüfftan and John Dykstra to James Cameron. Whether it is the mute, monochrome tricks of early nitrate pioneers or the 3-D, VR conjuring of the current CGI wizards, science fiction is part of the DNA of cinema.

Of course, to say that all cinema today is science fiction—when most audiences are sophisticated enough to see through the magic—would, perhaps, be pushing the point; besides, it is not entirely helpful to the reader. John Brosnan offers one possible solution to this conundrum in his entertaining 1991 history, *The Primal Screen*. Answering potential complaints about his omission of the 1933 classic *King Kong*, he states: "it's definitely fantasy, not sf (well, it is in my book)." This comment is allied to Norman Spinrad's witty conclusion that "science fiction is anything published as science fiction." These responses are not entirely helpful either; nor are they entirely serious, but they do lead to a serious point, highlighted by Andrew Tudor: "We are caught in a circle which first requires that the films are isolated, for which purposes a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films."

Science fiction will always be a matter for argument. For some, there will be no essential difference between the giant gorilla King Kong and the various oversized creatures who rampaged through the 1950s in films such as *Them!* and *Gojira* (both 1954). To others, the crucial difference is that the latter become monstrous as a result of nuclear activity; they are metaphors for the dangers of an atomic age. King Kong's size is not explained, which may be why Brosnan has confined that film to fantasy. He may be applying one of the most useful descriptions of science fiction—and the one that underpins the majority of inclusions in this volume—the "explicable novum":

...some new element, something that distinguishes the fiction from reality as presently constituted. A novum could be a vampire or a colonised planet. The sub-set that is sf insists that the novum be explicable in terms that adhere to conventionally formulated natural law; the remainder, fantasy, has no such requirement.

Peter Nicholls' simple approach provides limits, but it also liberates the genre from the oppressive dictates of those who would seek to confine it too much; however, it is not perfect. Time travel is a potential problem because, according to Einstein, it is impossible. If it is accepted as possible for the purposes of the narrative, is it enough that *Back to the Future* (1985) explains it using the Flux Capacitor? Is that device enough of an "explicable novum"? And what of *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) and *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2009), which offer no McGuffin gadget at all? When *Star Trek* technical expert, Michael Okuda, came to explain the science behind the transporter technology
in Star Trek: The Next Generation, he diligently took account of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle by inventing “Heisenberg compensators.”9 When asked by a fan at a conference how they work, Okuda replied “very well, thanks.” It is all he could do for his particular “explicable novum.”

A one-minute film in which a pig is turned instantaneously into sausages by means of a wooden box (see: La Charcuterie mécanique, 1895) might not be considered as part of the genre today; however, to discard a fiction once the science has caught up is dangerous. That would eliminate a good number of space travel films, along with some computer narratives and every attempt to exploit X-rays during cinema’s silent period. Very quickly, attempts to delineate the genre get bogged down. This is perhaps why Edward James prefers to describe science fiction as a “bundle of perceptions.”10

In order to make sense of the genre’s scope for his 1977 Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, Brian Ash divides it into a series of “thematics”—genre subcategories that begin to interrogate James’ bundle. His list is worth reproducing here:

Space and Star Drives, Exploration and Colonies, Biologies and Environments, Warfare and Weaponry, Galactic Empires, Future and Alternative Histories, Utopias and Nightmares, Cataclysms and Dooms, Lost and Parallel Worlds, Time and Nth Dimensions, Technologies and Artefacts, Cities and Cultures, Robots and Androids, Computers and Cybernetics, Mutants and Symbiotes, Telepathy, Psionics and ESP, Sex and Taboos, Religion and Myths, Inner Space.11

As James suggests, perception is key. Coupled with Ash’s comprehensive list, it is a reminder that each facet of the genre carries a different significance, and one that changes according to who or what it is applied to—and who does the applying. This, rather than a neat definition, is crucial to an understanding of female representation in science fiction cinema.

Language

For the most part, “female representation” in this book means “women’s roles and characters,” but not always. The aim has been to cast the net as wide as possible, which means taking account of gendered examples of: animated dolls (Coppélia: la poupée animée, 1900), goddesses (Le Voyage dans la Lune, 1902), robots (The Perfect Woman, 1949), apes (Planet of the Apes, 1968), furniture (A Clockwork Orange, 1971), monsters (Alien, 1979), spaceships (Battle Beyond the Stars, 1980), computers (2010, 1984), Klingons (Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country, 1991), personifications of love (The Fifth Element, 1997), children (War for the Planet of the Apes, 2017), and any other category that fits into what Denis Gifford calls the genre’s “things, its and aliens.”12
Introduction

The use of language presents many further potential pitfalls, which could also be the subject of a whole other book. Qualitative terms like “progressive” and “regressive” have been avoided as far as possible, because they are too loaded, not least by the question “from whose perspective?” Helen Benson in the 1951 film The Day the Earth Stood Still saves the world, but her social and professional roles as mother and secretary tie her to a traditional representation that was actively used to hold women back in the 1950s. In the movie’s 2008 remake, Benson is a Princeton professor, but she does not get to save the world. Is this “progressive” or “regressive”?

“Feminist” and “feminism” are also loaded terms whose meaning alters with perspective. This study cannot be a feminist reading of science fiction film for many reasons, not least because it could never do justice to the fractured and multi-faceted nature of feminisms over time. This text draws attention to specific standpoints as they become relevant to the discussion (for example, Lizzie Borden’s 1983 Marxist Feminist experiment, Born in Flames, discussed in Chapter V); however, an attempt to encompass multiple feminist perspectives would inevitably take the focus off the history. That book is left to others. In the meantime, for feminist readings of Alien, for example, the reader is directed to James H. Kavanagh’s and Judith Newton’s essays in Annette Kuhn’s invaluable 1990 collection, Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema; and for a wide range of other materials, begin with Femspec, the feminist journal dedicated to science fiction and fantasy genres across multiple disciplines.

Finally, the term “actress” is increasingly regarded as diminutive, pejorative and unnecessarily discriminatory, so the word has not been used outside quoted material. The terms “female actor” and “male actor” feel a little clumsy, so the intention was to use just “actor” and to add “male” only when that alternative identification became necessary. As it transpires, neither has been required throughout the text. The focus has remained firmly on the historical survey.

Chapters

The obvious way to approach an historical survey is to present the facts in chronological order; however, as Brian Ash shows above, the themes of science fiction are so iconic and evocative that it is tempting instead to let them guide the framework. The problem with this approach is that it can soon become confusing. A chapter on “robots” (from An Animated Doll, 1900 to Ex Machina, 2015), followed by a return to the beginning for a chapter on “mothers” (from An Over-Incubated Baby, 1901 to Arrival, 2016), would illuminate
those themes, but it could well also obscure the general development of female representation across the genre over time. A compromise is necessary. This work runs in chronological order, era-by-era, picking up themes as they become prominent with respect to women within the genre. The text then refers backwards to earlier films and forwards to later films in order to add context and to support any argument being made. For example, the discussion about cognition in Chapter VI comes at a time when artificial intelligences were increasingly being presented as female. This does not suggest that women did no thinking before 1980; it means that their new roles as robots, computers and computer users shaped their development in the genre going forward.

Chapters are not divided rigidly by decade. This is partly because some decades, such as the 1930s, would yield very short chapters. It is mainly to give a sense of where the important watershed points occur: the beginning of the sound era; the end of World War II; the upheavals of the sixties; the impact of George Lucas; the end of Ripley; and start of the new millennium.

Chapter I examines the foundations of the genre as they emerged during the silent period, 1895–1929. Many recognizable female roles—robots, mothers, mediators—appeared during this time, but emphasis is placed for now on the basic female functions within the narrative, along with her relationship with male characters. Absence, token presence and support for men (especially during World War I) are representations that will follow female characters through the entire history of science fiction cinema.

Chapter II picks up the baton at the beginning of the sound era, when women were largely confined to convention again—losing the gains made after World War I and through the 1920s. Female roles were fairly static during the 1930s and ‘40s, as the genre consolidated its audience and its aesthetics. Therefore, the opportunity is taken here to discuss central elements of female representation: sex and sexuality, along with some of the theory that underpins their use in the genre. Science fiction's unique ability to enable men to portray their fantasies remains crucial to the way women are presented in these films, so theories and observations discussed in this chapter create a foundation for the rest of the book.

Chapter III recognizes the effect that emerging post–World War II sciences and technologies had on the genre—and their impact on female representation. The Atomic Age, the Space Race and the Cold War would each play a part in women's development as professionals, especially within the sciences. It was a period of oscillating fortunes though, as female characters bumped against the “glass ceiling” that protected roles reserved for men. In the 1950s’ battles for identity there was an expectation that women would return to traditional domestic roles in support of “us” against “them.”
Chapter IV bridges the gap between the period of exponential growth experienced by American science fiction cinema in the 1950s and the worldwide genre explosion that came in the wake of *Star Wars*. This is a period of two halves: the shifting Sixties are characterized by sexual and social revolutions and the move to color film; the Seventies witnessed a retreat towards serious tales about “men and machines.” Between these two decades sits a watershed year for the genre: 1968.

Chapter V begins with the release of *Star Wars* in 1977 and charts its impact on the genre’s female roles. This period would develop into the “golden era” for female representation, as characters not only took the lead, but, crucially, drove the narratives and made decisions in their own heroes’ journeys. Through the second half of the 1980s and most of the ‘90s, some female characters developed a “masculinity” and robustness that continue to affect the genre today. The machismo has largely disappeared, leaving the tough “femininity” that had underpinned the role of Princess Leia back in 1977.

Chapter VI begins by returning to the 1980s to examine the familiar elements of female representation that had continued to run alongside the radical female character revolution. These were the elements of tradition and stereotype that would begin to return once the genre became tired of its “masculinized” women. But female representation had come too far to allow a return entirely to convention. The result was a mixed-bag of characters, as the genre reached a postmodern phase—and the world approached the new millennium.

Chapter VII brings this history up-to-date with a reflection on cinema’s widespread adoption of digital technologies. The millennium began uneasily for women, as the genre reverted again to telling stories about “men and machines”; however, enough influence from the Golden Era had trickled down to keep female roles ticking over. The huge success of *Avatar* in 2009 placed women close to the center of commercial science fiction narratives once again and kick-started a new revolution. It was one that has now brought female characters to prominence in some of the biggest genre franchises of all.

Finally, an appendix provides short commentaries on fifty or so films that may prove useful to anyone interested in the history of female representation in science fiction cinema.
I

SCIENCE FICTION

Silents and the Establishment of Female Roles

At the beginning of 1895, projected moving pictures had yet to be unveiled to the public. By the turn of the 20th century, the clamor for this quirky, novel entertainment had become so great that an entire new industry had blossomed, with individuals and companies making and distributing thousands of movies around the world. These typically 1- to 3-minute silent pieces offer a window onto the societies of that world: their fashions, what made them laugh, what made them return to the cinema for more, their grasp of new science and technology, and, central to this history, their treatment of women. It is easy for the modern viewer to scoff at early examples of an emerging genre: a bucket of liquid-electricity thrown over a mother-in-law to stop her nagging is, after all, both silly science and moderate misogyny. However, these are the roots of science fiction cinema, and the genre’s fruits have never really fallen far from that tree.

Stereotypical Foundations

It was suggested in the Introduction that all cinema in the earliest years of the medium was essentially science fiction. That is, the creation and consumption of the moving image was a scientific marvel—a wonder in and of itself. Indeed, those very early movies barely even concern themselves with a story; instead, their "Brilliant and interesting Scenes absolutely true to life in PRECISION, PROPORTION AND MOTION" seem to exist merely to document the arrival and fidelity of the technology. Arguments about the first story