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Science fiction & fantasy in contemporary cinema

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Abstracts

John Rieder: On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History

 This essay aims to clarify and strengthen the impact of an historical genre theory on sf studies. It advances and defends five propositions about sf, each of which could be recast as a thesis about genre per se: 1) sf is historical and mutable; 2) sf has no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin; 3) sf is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them; 4) sf's identity is a differentially articulated position in an historical and mutable field of genres; 5) attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception. The essay concludes by proposing an approach to the multiple and competing agencies of sf genre formation, using the concepts of communities of practice and boundary objects.

Vivian Sobchack: Sci-Why? On the Decline of a Film Genre in an Age of Wizardry.

This essay speculates about the generic ascendancy of fantasy in American popular movies and television series since the millennium – and the correspondent disenchantment and decline (although not disappearance) of science fiction. This shift to fantasy in American culture seems the result of a number of discrete but coincident cultural phenomena: major advances in CGI technology and changes in film industry economic strategies; the inappropriateness of postmodern irony after 9/11 and the ongoing (and highly visible) catastrophes to follow (wars, climate change and its disastrous consequences, global financial collapse, mass shootings, political gridlocks); the perceived failure of science and "rational" thought to solve major problems; and, most important, the impact of digital technology and consumer electronics in our daily lives – and in our modes of cognition. The essay argues that all of these phenomena have encouraged (and in the case of digital technology, enabled) the rise of a form of associational logic known as magical thinking – and fantasy film and television as its primary mode of expression. The development of this argument draws upon quantitative and qualitative data about the shifting popularity of sf and fantasy film and television from 2000 through 2013, as well as anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's 1925 essay "Magic, Science and Religion" and more contemporary social science research on magical thinking.

Anna Kérchy. The limits of fantasy and metaimaginative ways to explore children's imagination in Terry Gilliam's *Tideland*

The study interprets Terry Gilliam's poetic horrorfilm *Tideland* as an intertext to Lewis Carroll's Alice tales with the aim to tackle the following dilemmas: What kind of strategies of make-believing can be detected in an adult fantasy artwork's metaimaginings about children's imaginativeness? Whose dream does the "dreamchild" dream? Where do we set limits to our fantasies; are there scenarios we are reluctant to consider even in fictional terms? Why does one tend to believe that the Humean insight on "whatever is imaginable is possible" holds just as much promising as threatening potentials? Can the interpretive attitude coined "imaginative resistance" by Walton and Szabó Gendler be activated in the case of fantasy (image)texts which are primarily meant to stimulate spectators' imagination? How can the little heroine's focalizing perspective become both a transmitter and a subvertor of classic definitions of the fantastic genre? How does imaginative agency gain a variety of significations, alternatively interpreted as a socially controlled, ideologically disciplined political force, an evolutionary given and a means of survival, an ontological necessity and an epistemological tactic, a mode of empathic relationality to others and a self-healing, therapeutic, problem-solving mechanism; on the whole a dynamic process conjoining make-believe, disbelief and false memory, psychic automatism and intellectual creativity, dream and logic, solidarity and autonomy?

Annamária Hódosy: *Stargate* and the sexual politics of cultural colonization

In the terminology of David Martin-Jones „triumphalist" film narratives try to compensate for political and moral losses in the American national history via a fictive transformation of the historical memories of morally dubious military violence into acts of necessary and morally justified defense. Certain science fiction films undoubtedly belong to this category – like *Stargate* that uses the strategy of "inversion" to rework the recent memory of the Gulf War. This paper tries to demonstrate the rhetorical strategy by which the narrative of *Stargate* links the concept of the family, heteronormative sexuality and the modern nation to use them against a fictive military and economic threat which is represented as the subversion of all the concepts mentioned. The intertextual allusions that structure the narrative as a replay of the War of Independence in biblical terms serves not so much as a revision of the role of the United States in the Gulf War or the role of the West World in colonialization (which the film also strongly invokes). Rather, it serves to legitimize neocolonization and advertize globalization by offering kinship ties to people that are represented as being saved from a monster that is construed as the "other" of the Western

Order.

Ildikó Limpár: American Eve in the GMO Paradise: Representations of the Natural and the Unnatural in *The Hunger Games Movie*

The present paper focuses on various visual solutions of *The Hunger Games* movie (The Hunger Games. Gary Ross, 2012) and aims at analyzing how the selected images contribute to highlighting the contrast between the Capitol and the districts, and to helping us understand Katniss Everdeen as an *American Eve* character. The analysis explores how certain visual components strengthen various images of the Capitol, identifying it with dictatorship, freak show, presenting it as the controller of technology, as well as an empire built on the practices of imitation, mutation, and camouflage.

Jens Schröter The Holodeck: holography, virtual reality and society

The appearance of new media frequently entails exaggerated expectations regarding possibilities. These expectations may be called media utopias. The paper explores an almost historical example, which may seem obsolete in the age of augmented reality and mobile media: the discourse on virtual reality in the 1990s. The example is the more relevant since it allows us to examine the way in which technical utopias surface in certain historical periods, fulfilling specific functions. The focus of the examination is a popular representation of the utopia of virtual reality: the "holodeck" from the TV series *Star Trek – The Next Generation*. This fiction connects elements of the literary forerunners of perfect illusion with the medial utopias of the lesser known medium of holography. A detailed analysis of the "holodeck" reveals the instinctive drives in the center of virtual reality.

Zoltán Dragon: Extimacy: contemporary American science fiction and the spectator subject

The essay investigates a characteristic feature present in contemporary Hollywood science fiction film that, at the same time, has a peculiar effect on the spectator subject: the appearance and working mechanism of human intimacy as fantasy that is projected as something that can be analyzed, solved and technologized instead of tackling issues related to science and technological progress. The sci-fi films in question turn the position of the spectator inside out inasmuch as they radicalize the intimacy that constitutes the film event and push it into *extimacy* in Lacanian terms. As a consequence, there comes a need for an alternative critical inquiry instead of the traditional understanding of spectatorial identification processes based on the analogue of the mirror.

Tracing the problem of intimacy turning into extimacy back to the trends of 1970s sci-fi (*Logan's Run, Star Wars,* and *Alien*), the essay advocates the renewed relevance of psychoanalytic approach based on Jacques Lacan's work that, in turn, deconstructs itself to become a novel interpretative framework for spectatorial subjectivity through studying contemporary Hollywood examples (*Primer, Her, Gravity,* and *Edge of Tomorrow*).

János Fejes: Prometheus, or the postmodern Frankenstein. Parallels: myth, film, literature

In my paper I attempt an analysis of Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* in conjunction with the relevant Greek mythological narratives. Besides the works of Hesiod, Aeschylus and Ovid, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* is also brought into the examination, exploring the mythological context and the literary references gathering around the film, giving a more colorful picture about the movie.

Vera Benczik: Ruins of the City: the (post)apocalyptic view of New York after 9/11

Urban destruction has been an inherent feature of (post)apocalyptic spatial practices since the beginning of the genre, focusing on the demolition of the iconic structures which Kevin Lynch calls landmarks. The resulting intertextual, or rather interspatial discourse between present and future produces uncanny reverberations of memory within both the estranged locus of the text, and the familiar space of the reader. The present is transformed into myth, and mapped as both nostalgia and utopian desire onto a post-traumatic dystopian environment.

The events of 9/11 established an uncanny interface between reality and fiction: the toppling towers of the World Trade Center eerily echoed the visual iconography of films like *Godzilla, Deep Impact* or *Independence Day*, and several eye witnesses described their experiences as similar to being part of a disaster movie. As a result of this linkage the destruction of New York became a screen taboo after 2001 for some time, and those films which opted to nevertheless destroy New York in some way also opted for a reiteration of the national trauma. In my paper I would like to analyze how the (disaster) movies that place part of their action into the City (like *I Am Legend*, *Cloverfield*) address the attack on the WTC and incorporate the iconography of 9/11 into their script.

Lilla Erdei: Returning on Fury Road, or an emotional dystopia

The essay examines the Bahtinian chronotope of returning as it appears in *Mad Max – Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015). In my opinion, the motif of returning implies several existential or

ontological meanings besides the temporal and spatial coordinates usually embedded in chronotopes, and these existential questions refer to the actual topics of the socially conscious genre of science fiction.

Returning cannot only be interpreted in time or space, but also as the human desire for returning to an ontological state described with a clearer difference between the human and mechanical qualities and with a closer relationship between man and nature. This desire can appear as the need summoned by technological development for the revision of our self-image, and as a kind of nostalgia at the same time. It also manifests itself in ecologically conscious post-apocalyptic narratives about catharsis and restart like in *Mad Max – Fury Road* examined here.

The chronotope of returning is described with natural-geographical and personal-emotional "coordinates". The emotional aspects of returning to nature are associated with diverse ways of living. In this light, *Mad Max – Fury Road* continues a significant dialogue with its forerunners, especially with *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) that was the first one of the kind of post-apocalyptic films I examine here, but it did not emphasize the emotional motivations depicted in the 2015 film. Therefore these two films clearly show the tendency of the post-apocalyptic films – and the whole genre of science fiction – becoming more and more emotional.

This ecologically conscious aspect can be considered as the most "contemporary" feature of contemporary film and culture in the sense that the fact and effects of pollution, climate change, etc., although they have been known for a long time, have only become central today: not only significant but the objects of the mentioned, emotionally saturated way of description as well.

Norbert Gyuris: The Laws of (E)motion: Binaries and Unity in *Upside Down*

"What if love could overcome gravity?" The question is posed by the French-Canadian science fiction movie *Upside Down (*2012) directed by Juan Solanas. The movie's most characteristic problem is the binary logic of attraction and choice, action and reaction, matter and anti-matter etc. The film combines the themes of the separated lovers and all-conquering love with the double nature of gravity. *Upside Down* is basically founded on the allegory or, more precisely, the parallel representation of gravity, this undefinable but inevitably dual natural phenomenon and the similarly undeterminable feeling of love that all the arts have attempted to portray in either mimetic or diegetic form, practically since the beginning of human history. Representation is self-reflexive in the film: both the scope and the mode of representation are ordered by a binary logic only to dissolve in a unity in the end. *Upside Down* attempts to tear down and de(con)struct the upturned, double iconicity of the mirrored and inverted way of seeing the world; it seeks to subvert and eliminate the double nature of upside and downside, inside and outside, Self and

Other, and other countless, miniscule, superficial binaries sustained for merely practical purposes.

János Zoltán Tóth: Beyond the human. Shifting metaphysical centers in cyberpunk

The study argues that, as a result of technological changes, cyberpunk movies offer visions of the future in which fundamental values and notions of Western systems of metaphysics are lost. Cyberpunk movies focus specifically on the loss of the notion of the human being. Relying on Jacques Derrida's essay entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" as well as the idea of posthumanity, the paper explores philosophical problems raised by the subgenre.

Péter Kristóf Makai: Unfinished past: utopias of consumerism and entertainment and their spatial expression in Disney theme parks' Tomorrowland and beyond

The Disney media empire continues to enjoy phenomenal success despite its ripe old age of eighty years in the entertainment industry. It has produced a groundbreaking, new form of media in the 1950s: the first theme park. Disneyland was a milestone in mass entertainment, as it offered a high-quality, physical virtual reality, where guests are immersed into the world of live-action and animated Disney classics. Out of the four main regions, this paper singles out Tomorrowland to demonstrate how Walt Disney imagineered the spatial language of his technoutopia. Contrary to postmodernist thinkers, I situate Tomorrowland in a historical context, placing it squarely in a long tradition of world's fairs and international expositions on American soil. I argue that the optimism of Tomorrowland survived in Disney's original EPCOT project, the permanent world's fair of the Epcot Center park, as well as in the viral marketing strategies of the upcoming *Tomorrowland* movie and even in the digital realm in *Into the Future* expansion pack for *The Sims 3*. I intend to show how Walt Disney's sentimental modernism lived on, took shape, providing some examples of the visual elements that conjure the image of futuristic design and tracing the evolving tradition of contemporary appropriations of the iconic representational scheme of the ideology of industrial progress.

János Zoltán Tóth. The industry behind Hollywood cinema. Merchandising and distribution from *Star Wars* to the present

The study presents the way in which merchandising industry controls film production and

simultaneously defines the memory of film culture; it describes the development of the merchandising model and its effects on the Hollywood blockbuster from *Star Wars* up to the present, interpreting merchadising as a physiological phenomenon. Placed products are explained as products that supply physically what Christian Metz called "the Imaginary Signifier".

Krisztián Nyárfádi: What does Grace really believe?

Lars von Trier's *Manderlay* (2005) can be read as the story of Grace's (the main character's) misbeliefs. In the first part of this essay I try to demarcate various kinds of misbelief which lead to the tragic end. Most important of these are the ones that the contemporary philosophy of mind terms as self-deception. In the second part I will try to make it clear that even if we can identify certain states as self-deceptive, we still cannot clearly determinate the cognitive state of the self-deceiver. The everyday term of self-deception can lead to a paradox, the so called static puzzle. I will examine four strategies to solve the problem. 1. The sceptic and the partitioning strategy. 2. Other cognitive states strategy. 3. Doxastic strategy. 4. "In between states" strategy.

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