

Fears in 21st Century Through Sci-Fi Movies

Qingyue Peng, Ajou University, South Korea

The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

How does culture replicate itself in the film? How does our fear for future reflect in the film? People express themselves through both documentary films and sci-fi movies. This paper will focus mainly on sci-fi movies. In the last century, we can see people worried about outer space, through sci-fi films *Things to Come* (1936), *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and etc. Then people worried that the robots would exceed human intelligence and finally destroyed our race. Those worries were shown in lots of science fiction movies, such as *Westworld* (1973), *The Terminator* (1984), and *Screamers* (1995). We can tell that people usually worries about something out of our comprehension and mastery. In the new century, we worry something about social media, infertility, and environment. We can co-live with robots, we can better and better understand of social media problems, but we have not found a way of solving the environment problem on our planet. More movies are talking about the change of living environment, such as *I'm The Legend* (2007), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Snow Piercer* (2013). In this article, it will focus mainly on two sci-fi films, *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). We have not yet grasped the knowledge of finding a life-friendly extra solar planet to live. At least, what we can do is to protect the environment of our planet we live now. While we have every right to fear the future, we also have agency in creating that future.

Keywords: Environment; Sci-fi films; Blade Runner; Blade Runner 2049

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

After the birth of film in 1895, from D. W. Griffith to Hitchcock, from Woody Allen to James Cameron, all the film workers are working on developing film techniques, using artificial lighting, fire effects, sound effects, digital techniques. Although being invented in Paris, France, film industry is developed quickly in America. Film has a uniquely powerful ubiquity within human culture. Film is also a reflection of society, both present and past. The innovation of film sometimes has to catch up to society but sometimes it leads society too. Films are a form of communication and that communication come from societies, not just where society is presently and what it is doing now, but where society will go. The author will talk about what people should fear most in the new century mainly through sci-fi films. In the first part of the thesis, the author list out some environment data. Even all of those data are not new, they are not widely known, and at least as many as sci-fi films do.

In the second part of this paper, related with the main science and technology and humanities and society in the current social period, the relevant sci-fi films are listed. Through these sci-fi films, the author could let us clearly see the social issues people are concerned about during those times, which are mainly divided into three periods, the period before 1970s, the late 20th century, and the 21st century.

Through the analysis of the contents of the sci-fi films of these three periods, the author puts forward the most important issue that should be concerned in the 21st world in the third part of the paper. That is the environment problem. Although a few years ago, there were also sci-fi films about a certain issue in the environment problem, such as the sci-fi film *Silent Running* (1972), which mainly focuses on the deforestation issue. However, we can find more and more movies are talking about the change of living environment in the new century, such as *I'm The Legend* (2007), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Snow Piercer* (2013). In those movies, they are discussing the survival issues facing the whole humanity. In this article, it will focus mainly on comparing the two sci-fi films, *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). It would be clear that what *Blade Runner* (1982) mainly talks about and how it is related with the background of that time. And what is the main story background of *Blade Runner 2049* (2017).

This thesis is based on data analysis and film case analysis. It aims to arouse people's attention to environmental issues. In the conclusion part, it gives suggestions on how to protect our planet through the small acts of daily life. And most interesting thing is that those suggestions are based on related certain sci-fi films, which are even hard to understand for the author before she learned the relative environmental theory. And at the same time, through the introduction of the documentary film, *Tomorrow* (2017), it hopes to give sci-fi films a certain opinions and suggestions on environmental topics.

1. The Status of Environmental Problems

The main point of this essay is that the thing we must fear in the 21st century is environment issue. Environment issue is not a new topic. From the middle time of last century, people around the world are beginning to establish some environmental organizations, such as International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 1948, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1972, Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia (PEMSEA) in 1994, European Environment Agency (EEA) in 1994, Earth System Governance Project (ESGP) in 2009, and Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) in 2010.

We can read lots of articles and newspapers about environment issue. We can hear and watch lots of visual speeches on environment issue on internet. Back to 1970s, there were already scholars concerning about environmental problems, such as global warming. James Hansen is Adjunct Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at Columbia University's Earth Institute. Since the late 1970s, he has focused his research on Earth's climate, especially human-made climate change. He worked with other scientists to analyze Earth climate observations. And in 1982, they published an article in Science magazine concluding that observed warming of 0.4 degrees Celsius in the prior century was consistent with the greenhouse effect of increasing CO₂. That Earth would likely warm in the 1980's, and warming would exceed the noise level of random weather by the end of the century. They also said that the 21st century would see shifting climate zones, creation of drought-prone regions in North America and Asia, erosion of ice sheets, rising sea levels and opening of the fabled Northwest Passage. All of these impacts have since either happened or are now well under way. And that paper was reported on the front page of the New York Times. And if you search environment topic on TED, there are lots of speeches related, which are given by man and woman, children and old man.

According to another statistics, there is a growing population of displaced men, women, and children whose homes have been rendered unlivable thanks to a wide spectrum of environmental disasters. The United Nations (UN) estimates that 20 million people were displaced by climate change in 2008. Experts at last year's American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) estimated their numbers would reach 50 million by 2020, due to factors such as agricultural disruption, deforestation, coastal flooding, shoreline erosion, industrial accidents and pollution. Others say the figure will triple to 150 million by 2050. In 1999 the International Red Cross reported some 25 million people displaced by environmental disasters. In 2009 the UNHCR estimated that number to be 36 million, 20 million of whom were listed as victims of climate change-related issues.

Some scientists point out that the following decades are crucial important for the change of the global environment. It is indeed time for each of us on earth to take practical actions.

2. Hot Topics in Sci-fi Films during Times

Although Paramount Pictures once announced that the science fiction film cycle was dead, burned out, and that audiences were no longer interested in 1955. With the development of technology, the truth is the sci-fi films are most welcomed ones. There are 7 of the top 10 most successful movies are sci-fi films according to global box office revenue of the most successful movies of all time as of March 2018. They are *Avatar*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Jurassic World*, *Marvel's The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows (Part II)*, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. According to another data, which ranks the most popular movie genres in North America by box office revenue, the most top 10 film genres that

people like are adventure, action, drama, comedy, thriller, horror, romantic comedy, musical, documentary, and black comedy in order. Films within the drama, adventure, action and drama movie genres generated the most box office revenue in the years between 1995 and 2018. Adventure films topped the list, with total ticket sales of 59.4 billion U.S. dollars, followed by action films, with total ticket sales of 39.45 billion U.S. dollars.

So, what is sci-fi film? Science fiction film is a genre that uses speculative, fictional science-based depictions of phenomena that are not fully accepted by mainstream science, such as extraterrestrial lifeforms, alien worlds, extrasensory perception and time travel, along with futuristic elements such as spacecraft, robots, cyborgs, interstellar travel or other technologies. In the sci-fi film, science is always related to society, and its positive and negative aspects are seen in light of their social effect. Let us see what the main sci-fi film topics are during times, which can be divided mainly into three parts, the period before 1970s, the late 20th century, and the 21st century.

2.1 The Period before 1970s

Scientific romance. Thriller. Trick film. Comic short. Fantasy. Scientific melodrama. Horror. These are some of the most common terms applied by industry, critics and trade press to films produced between 1895 and 1950, many of which have been retrospectively labeled as science fiction.

In 1902 French launched the film, *A Trip to The Moon* (1902), and it is accepted as the first real sense of science fiction movie appear. Its idea comes also from a novel, written by Verne in 1865. And we know the human being is curious about OutSpace, stars, earth, moon, sun. So, during that time, the main sci-fi movies are about out space or out space lives. *A Trip to Mars* (1918) is a Danish film about a trip to Mars. *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (1924) is about a trip to Mars. *Things to Come* (1936) is a British movie, about a launch on Moon. And invading aliens from another planet have been regarded as a staple narrative of the sci-fi genre since the 1950s. More and more sci-fi films are even titled with moon, mars, outer space or other planets. Let me take those as examples, *Destination Moon* (1950), *Radar Men From The Moon* (1952), *Red Planet Mars* (1952), *Abbott and Costello Go to Mars* (1953), *Cat-Women of the Moon* (1953), *Invaders from Mars* (1953), which now enjoys a large cult following and is regarded by many psychologists and social historians as a mirror of the cultural anxieties of this time. Other examples are *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *The Lost Planet* (1953), *Project Moonbase* (1953), *Crash of Moons* (1954), *Devil Girl from Mars*(1954), *Killers from Space* (1954), *Stranger From Venus* (1954), *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*(1956), *Orbitten Planet* (1956), *The Brain from Planet Arous* (1957), *Missile to the Moon*(1958), *First Man into Space* (1959).

And we know the first physical exploration of the Moon launched by the Soviet Union, in 1959. And the first landing humans on the Moon took place in 1969 by NASA's Apollo program. Those were the big science stories of this time. It certainly seems plausible that the 1960s was a time when science fiction and science fact became remarkably intertwined.

2.2 The Late 20th Century

In 1970s, lots of aspects of science and technology have achieved important breakthroughs. Scientists do more exploration to several of the outer planets in the solar system. The 1970s witnessed an explosion in the understanding of solid-state physics, analogue recording technology had reached its peak. The elucidation of molecular biology, bacteriology, virology and genetics achieved their modern forms in this decade. In 1970s, we can also see the birth of modern computing, the start of fiber optics, the integration of computer and robot.

Thus besides topics on outer space, we can see lots of sci-fi movies are about topics on robots or computer technology. *THX 1138* (1971) is an American film in which there is android police. *Westworld* (1973) firstly simulate an android point of view. *Futureworld* (1976) gives a story on robots. In woody Allen's film, *Sleeper* (1973), we learned the idea of biometric identity. *Logan's Run* (1976) based on biology and computer science. In 1982, *Blade Runner* describes a world of bio-engineered synthetic humans. *Tron* (1982) is a story about a computer programmer. *The Terminator* (1984) is a story about cyborg assassin. *Back to the Future* (1985) talks about a time travelling story. And ideologically, some film criticism said that conservative fear of technology surfaced powerfully in sci-fi films of the 1970s and 1980s.

And 1970s and 1980s featured a new focus on the process of robotic or artificial creation, with technology remaining a key element of the sci-fi narrative. And because of television technology, family adventure sci-fi films boomed during that time, taking the most successful one, *E.T.* (1982), as an example.

From the 1990s, because of the emergence of the World Wide Web and the cyberpunk, we can watch more sci-fi movies on the theme of the computer-human interface. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Total Recall* (1990), *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), and *The Matrix* (1999) There are also themes about disaster, such as *Deep Impact* (1998), alien invasion, such as *Independence Day* (1996), genetic experimentation, such as *Gattaca* (1997).

It is clear that sci-fi movies are about what science and technology can achieve and what people are worried about.

2.3 The 21st Century

After we step into 21st century, there are mainly sci-fi movies about social-media problem, AI problem and environment problem.

About social-media problem, we can see that people are worried about social-media caused the safety problems especially among teenagers in the movie *Hard Candy* (2005), and then communication obstacle between even adults in the movie *Her* (2014) , and I can see people realized those problems caused by social-media and finally post the positive attitude towards social-media in the movie *Ready Player One* (2018).

AI topic is still a hot topic. There are *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *I, Robot* (2004), *Robot & Frank* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2015), etc.

However, among those I think the most thing people should worry about is environment problem. We can watch more sci-fi movies on topic of environmental disaster. *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) is about a world wracked by severe weather due to climate change. *The Happening* (2008) is about the revenge of nature after too much environmental destruction at human hands. *WALL-E* (2008) is about the accumulation of trash and the excesses of consumer culture. *Children of Men* (2006) is about the collapse of the world once people all go sterile. It is suggested that this happened due to environmental damage to the Earth.

There are another data. According to statistics, there are 163 films about environment issues in film history. And among those 163 films, there are 129 films produced after the year 2000, in the 21st century. Those 129 films include documentary films and sci-fi movies. And the data is until 2015. Among 2016, there are 14 sci-fi films from which we can see the problems somehow caused by environment issue. And in 2017, there are at least 11 sci-fi films about environment problems. And until the June in 2018, there are at least already 4 sci-fi films about the topic. *Annihilation* (2018), *Ready Player One* (2018), and *The Titan* (2018).

Even there is Environmental Film Festival in Washington, DC. founded in 1993. In 2007 the first year of the festival there are only 1,200 people attended. In 2011 the festival had grown to 30,000 participants.

3 Film Case Analysis

There are so many sci-fi films talking about environment issues. Compared with those early environment issue related sci-fi films, *Day the World Ended* (1950), *No Blade of Grass* (1970), *Silent Running* (1972), *The Quiet Earth* (1985), from which we can only see a certain aspect of the environment problems. In this part of the thesis, it will focus on two sci-fi films with the same title produced almost by the same group of people. They are *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049*. From those two films, it is clearly to understand the relationship between sci-fi film and the time background which has been discussed in above part. And it is very easy to see the reason why the author claims that the most fear in 21st is environment problem.

3.1 Blade Runner (1982)

Blade Runner is an American-Hong Kong science fiction film directed by Ridley Scott in 1982.

The film is set in a dystopian future Los Angeles in 2019. In this film, synthetic humans known as replicants are bio-engineered by a powerful corporation. This film is regarded as one of the all-time best science fiction movies as culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.

The film is in fact defeated by the overwhelming legacy of classical narrative. It succumbs to one of its most firmly traditional and ideologically reactionary formulas: the elimination of the bad couple (Roy, Paris) in order to construct the good couple (Deckard, Rachael). And how it concerned with technology and social issue at that time?

Firstly, we can still see the contemporaneous interesting in high technology mainly through Spinners, Voigt-Kampff machines and voice-controlled computers. When the Spinners flying among the huge buildings, we can feel that the power of the buildings are over human beings. And we noticed that is a kind of job genetic design in the film. If we take a look at the history of technology in 1970s and 1980s, we get to know the outbreak development on computer and biology. Just like what we can read from the beginning subtitle word appear in the screen, "*early in the 21st century the Tyrell Corporation advanced Robot evolution in the NEXUS phase*", the 1982 *Blade Runner* maintain interesting on robot or computer technology. "*Replicants were used off-world as slave labor, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets*", this words indicate that the film still hold the passing-down interesting on topics on out space.

Secondly and most obviously thing that can be seen from those film is the social philosophy at that time. *Blade Runner* is a good example of cyberpunk at that time, which is associated with a dark vision of the near future on Earth, where humans are under the influence of electronic, informational, genetic, and other technologies. Scott Bukatman, the author, wants to ask himself the question of whether Deckard is human or replicant. Citing *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the novel by Philip K. Dick on which the film is based, Bukatman writes, " Deckard confidently locates the difference between humans and their imitators: 'An android doesn't care what happens to another android.' To which someone logically replies, 'Then you must be an android.'" But this is not logically right.

Maybe this philosophy was too advanced. And we know *Blade Runner* and *E.T.* were released in the United States simultaneously, but *E.T.* soared while *Blade Runner* dropped disastrously. Years later, *Blade Runner* is considered to be one of the best sci-fi films in history. If we look into the world wide situation at that time, it is easier to understand it. In that time, the United States experienced the deepest recession and largest stock market lost. Americans suffered a lot from drug problems in 1980s, crime and violence. So we know that 1980s were marked by several notable assassinations world widely, which can be seen based on the subtitle in the film, "*after a bloody mutiny by a Nexus 6 combat team in an off-world colony, replicants were declared illegal*".

And in the period, lots of countries are independent from UK in 1980s. Significant political reforms occurred in a number of communist countries in Eastern Europe. As economic deconstruction increased in the developed world, multiple multinational corporations associated with the manufacturing industry relocated in some Asian countries. Especially Japan saw large economic growth during this decade. So we can see lots of multinational markets in the film. But obviously, the director, Ridley Scott, did not take an optimistic view towards the western and eastern culture fusion. Just like some American scholars indicate that the "Clash of Civilizations" will replace national conflicts.

Thus, we can mainly see the social problems mainly in the 1982 film. And we can find the historical technology development of computer technology and biology theory in the 1982 film. We can also find that this movie has the same attention topic as other contemporary movies, such as robots and outer space. And the 1982 *Blade Runner* worries more about civilizations conflicts more than environment.

Then, let us see *Blade Runner 2049* produced in 2017.

3.2 *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

Blade Runner 2049 is directed by Denis Villeneuve in 2017. And this time, Scott is the executive producer. It is set thirty years after the first film, a blade runner who uncovers a secret that threatens to instigate a war between humans and replicants.

In this film, the director and the producer maintain the same style as the first one, so we can still see the same high buildings and Spinners, even the neon style in the city where it is full of signs in different languages, Russian, Japanese, Hindi, Korean. In both films, it's impossible to tell one kind of mechanical human being, replicant, from another kind, and equally impossible to tell a replicant from a human being. However, in the 2017 version, it is harder to distinguish. Or it can be said that there is no difference between replicants and human being, it is only related with humanity. And this brings up a philosophical question: Is there really much of a difference, after all? Maybe replicants are like humans and have a soul. Or maybe humans are like replicants, and everything is mechanistic. This is also because of the context of our current era. We are no longer fear the fusion of the cultures of the various ethnic groups as we have done in the past. We are not as fearful of alien creatures as we were before. On the contrary, we are more concerned with how to communicate with alien civilizations.

However, what is more concerned in the 2017 *Blade Runner 2049* is about social problem and environment problem. Firstly, we can hear from social commentary that fertility is the perfect theme for the *Blade Runner 2049*, because of the western elite anxiety that over-educated, over-liberated women are having fewer children, or choosing to opt out of childbearing altogether. It is true that we can see from the film that the replicants are capable of giving birth, but are forbidden to do so. If we dig deeper, we have to relate with the fertility issue. And the reality in society is one in five women is now childless by the age of 45; the rates are higher among women who have been to university. It is true that the feminism, especially fertility, is a hot topic in recent years. We can find those films about the topic, such as *Children of Men* (2006), *The Space between Us* (2017). What is more obvious is the environment problem in the film. Even before the story begins, we can read from the subtitle words appear on the screen, "*the collapse of ecosystems in the mid 2020s led to the rise of industrialist Niander Wallace, whose mastery of synthetic farming averted famine*". There is no doubt that the 2017 *Blade Runner* set a background on collapse of ecosystems. In the very beginning of the film, we can get such an impression, the water is polluted, the traditional farming has gone, the only tree left on earth is a dead tree trunk, there are storms on the planet. This time, the story would again take place in Los Angeles, but this time the Earth's atmosphere would be totally different from that of 1982 *Blade Runner*. The climate has gone berserk. The ocean, the rain, the snow is all toxic. Even a very old wooden horse can make people think that you are very very rich.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, it is very obviously that the environment problems account for the main concern. Even though, in this film humans will continue to create whatever they need, not affected by the destruction and chaos along the way. This situation is

just like the consciousness of the people we have now. From this perspective, the film is really a very successful sci-fi film with profound significance.

Conclusion

A great science fiction novelist in last century once said that the science fiction is the branch of literature which deals with the response of human beings to changes in science and technology. Science fiction novelist can write exciting science fiction to make science understandable and interesting for average readers. We know that in the last 200 years, science and technology have done a great impact on society. This impact is not only about environment but also other aspect of life. Thus, the views in this essay might have limitations. The author just thinks that if there is no condition for survival on the planet, how we can worry about and solve on the other things. Based on what has been analyzed in this article, it is possible to take environment friendly protective actions through sci-fi movies.

Although lots of sci-fi films aroused our concern to our global environment concern, such as *Avatar* (2009), the beautifully imagined ode to our deepest connections with the natural world. *The Space Between Us* (2017) keeps asking us a simple question through the main character, what do you like most about Earth? It is very good. And because the sci-fi films sometimes play a role in inspiring people's imagination. When scientists are asked what led them into their profession, many cite sci-fi films as a key inspiration in their youth and beyond. That is to say, maybe scientists can look forward to some inspiration of developing eco-friendly materials or equipment by sci-fi films. Just like the documentary film, *Tomorrow* (2017), instead of showing all the worst that can happen, focuses on the people suggesting solutions and their actions.

As an audience or ordinary people, we can do more to protect our global. We can participate in beach or river cleanup, plant native trees and shrubs, through which we can contribute in preventing sand storm which is terrible to be seen in the film, *Interstellar* (2014). We can catch rainwater like what we can see in the film, *Snow Piercer* (2013). Saving rainwater helps protect nature by preventing stormwater runoff from carrying trash, nutrients, and other pollution to your local lakes and streams. We can plant flowers that bees will like with a reason what we learn from the film, *The Happening* (2007). There are so many reasons that bees are vital to your local ecosystem, including pollination of fruit trees and food crops. We can eat food from the lower on the food chain and look for food that is grown locally with a reason what we learn from the documentary film, *Tomorrow* (2017). Shifting to a more plant-based style of eating will slow the deforestation that domestic meat production requires. To eat food grown locally, we will avoid the energy required to transport products from far away. And we should also consider the transportation options. Choosing a train or public transportation can reduce the unnecessary fossil fuels usage and negatively impacting the environment. As we know the increasing of CO₂ can be responsible for the ice age theory, which can be seen in those films, *100 Degrees Below Zero* (2013) and *Snow Piercer* (2013).

All in all, while we have every right to fear the future, we also have agency in creating that future. At least, what we can do is to protect the environment of our planet we live now.

References

Andrew Lam. (2012). Number of Environmental Refugees to Grow to 50 Million by 2020. *Earth Island Journal*.

Christine Cornea. (2007). *Science Fiction Cinema*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, (Chapter 3).

David J. Hogan. (2006). *Science Fiction America Essays on SF Cinema*. London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, (Chapter 6).

Gregg Rickman. (2004). *The Science Fiction Film Reader*. New York: Limelight Editions, (Part 9).

J.P. Telotte. (2001). *Science Fiction Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (Part 1).

Keith M. Johnston. (2011). *Science Fiction Film A Critical Introduction*. New York: Oxford, (Part I § II).

Steven M. Sanders. (2008). *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, (Part 1).

Vivian Sobchack. (2004). *Screening Space*. (2nd ed.). London: Rutgers University Press, (Chapter 1).

Contact email: qingyuebasin@foxmail.com