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Politics and Science Fiction Films

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The movie theatre may seem like an odd place for politics, but almost all movies could be considered "political." Even stranger is the notion that those spacemen, monsters and aliens we are so accustomed to seeing in science fiction films may be more than just entertaining us, they may be conveying a political message. In fact, most science fiction films make deeply political statements about the society from which they emerge.

Science fiction films provide a unique opportunity for movie makers to comment on the implications of both human and "non-human" behavior. Through science fiction, one can look ahead to the way the world "might" look if the right wing, left wing, scientific rationalists, corporations, etc., take over and create their own "Brave New World." It is an opportunity to play out the implications of various political philosophies for all to see and evaluate.

Based essentially on moral simplifications, sci-fi usually reduces ideas to caricatures. Through this, the science fiction films can serve as a warning, cautioning us to the potential dangers of certain courses of action. This type of film attempts to transform (in the viewers' mind) science fiction into science fact. "Here, this is what might happen, if. . . . "Political science fiction films work from the premises that man is rational, and, if given sufficient warning, can alter the course of civilization to avoid the catastrophic consequences of present trends.

Science fiction films have presented a number of recurring themes. Most prominent among these themes is Dehumanization. Man is losing his humanity to machines, political despots, drugs, etc. Usually this dehumanization is deplored (loss of feeling, emotion, and love — losing what makes our lives worthwhile), but occasionally this loss of humanity is applauded (where man leads a more "rational" and "scientific" life).

Loss of individuality to a computer or rising technology is a constant theme in post-World War II films. But much of the science fiction of the past is becoming science fact of the present or near future. In some respects, we have not heeded the warnings. Often these warnings take on an "anti-science" flavor. The root of this anti-science attitude may rest in the fear that machines will one day take over most human functions, but the real heart of anti-scientism comes from fears created by the rise of "the bomb." Nuclear disaster has made anti-scientism a legitimate science fiction topic. Living with the bomb for nearly four decades has soured our vision of a brighter future based on technological and scientific advancements. In fact, just the opposite has occurred. With President Reagan singing the glories of "Star Wars" weaponry, the future appears to be a nightmare of technological oppression.

Alien beings occasionally serve as a substitute for man-made invasions into the normal workings of society, and this allows for a wider range of possible consequences. Aliens from a "more advanced" civilization can bring future technological advancements and place them in the world of today. Science fiction provides the filmmaker with wide creative leadway.

A chronological review of some prominent political science fiction films provides insight into the political significance of this type of film.

Politics and Science Fiction Films

by Michael A. Genovese, Loyola Marymount College

Movies lend themselves to the fantasy and imagination of science fiction, and one of the early masters in this area was George Melies. Originally a cartoonist, Melies directed the creative, A Trip to the Moon (1902, Le Voyage dans la Lune). Filled with space journeys, monsters and bizarre landscapes, Melies provides a playful, popular new film genre.

In 1919, Robert Wiene directed one of the most important and discussed films in the science fiction category, the German classic, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Creatively, this film far surpassed any of its predecessors. One main character, Caligari, represented, in Siegfried Kracauer's words, "unlimited authority that idolizes powers as such, and, to satisfy its lust for domination, ruthlessly violates all human rights and values."[1] The character, Cesare, represented the common man who, through no real fault of his own, is used as the instrument for cruel deeds.

Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1926) is perhaps the most extraordinary science fiction movie ever made. One of the more powerful futuristic warnings on film, Metropolis presents a horrifying version of a dehumanized, machine-dominated totalitarian state in which individualism is secondary to the power of the machine. Set in the year 2000, Lang presents a mechanized society where technology has gone mad, and where human slaves revolt in an attempt to recapture their humanity. Lang called his film, "a horror tale of the future," and said that it shows "the desire to keep an individual an individual."[2]

Although love wins out, this is a prime example of science fiction presenting a dismal portrait for future generations.

In 1936, William Cameron Menzies directed the British Classic, Things to Come. As the title signifies, we are once again given a warning that the future is not bright. Based on H.G. Wells' screenplay, Things to Come was a warning to the world of the dangers of the impending World War. The film concerns the ravages of war, and opens with a vision of Britain after 30 years of war and destruction. The country is devastated, and by 1970, order is restored in "Everytown" (where much of the film takes place) — a town reduced to a near primitive state.

What develops is a conflict between a group called Wings Over the World, representing law and sanity and the totalitarian state.

The film leaves 1970 Britain with the conflict somewhat resolved, and proceeds to the world in 2036. "Progress" has been achieved, but the queston is "Has 'progress' made life better?" — there is still conflict in 2036. "Which shall it be?" Progress or stagnation? The future or the past? Remain satisfied or seek a better world? Indeed, the conflicts of today are quite similar to the con-

flicts in Things to Come. Be they environmental questions, conglomerate mergers, increased governmental control, etc., each day we are asked the question: Which shall it be?

Probably the most fertile period for science fiction films in the U.S. was the 1950s. In the early years of the Cold War, the United States was a nation captured by fear. The threat of the communist menace had so consumed the imagination of the public that civil liberties were severely threatened, and anti-communist hysteria consumed the land.

In the midst of this paranoia, a communist "witch-hunt" took place. Peoples' careers and reputations were ruined if someone suggested that they were communists or "fellow travelers." In Hollywood, a blacklist took shape, and writers, directors, actors, even composers who were linked to the left suddenly found themselves out of work. Artists such as Lucille Ball (who later cleared herself), Dalton Trumbo, Carl Foreman, Melvyn Douglas, Will Geer (Yes, America, Grandpa Walton), and over 300 others were blacklisted. The blacklist was, in effect, "The Monster That Ate Hollywood." It is interesting to note that Ronald Reagan, who was the head of the Screen Actors Guild in the 1950s, denies that a blacklist existed. Yet, Nancy Reagan, in an interview before the 1980 Republican convention, said that she met Ronnie when she was mistakenly put on the blacklist and went to him to seek help having her name removed from the list. Ronnie helped and the rest is history.

Due to the restricted climate of free speech in the 1950s, those wishing to make social and political statements not conforming to the narrow anti-communist dogma of the day had to make their feelings known through indirect channels. Explicitly political films critical of the status quo were not being made in Hollywood, so artists often spoke through the science-fiction genre. Two types of political science-fiction films emerged in the 1950s: the "get-the-Reds" films, and the "stop-this-madness" films. The get-the-Reds films presented an anti-communist message by using either aliens (Earth vs. the Flying Saucers) or monsters (giant ants in Them, or spiders in Tarantula) to represent the communist menace. These films took an "us vs. them" approach to problems wherein the U.S. was threatened by a force from without (Moscow), and the only way to beat these monsters was to band together and fight.

For the left, the best way to send a message through film was by hiding it behind the glitter of entertainment. The stop-this-madness films challenged the narrow consensus of the day, and warned the public that they need not succumb to the rightwing madness of the McCarthy era. Films of this category argued for toleration and understanding (The

Day the Earth Stood Still) and love and humaneness (Invasion of the Body Snatchers).

Two of the more pronounced anti-Communist science fiction films are The Red Planet (1952), and Invasion USA (1952). In Invasion USA, America is placed in a hypnotic trance. Once under this trance, the Russians begin a nuclear attack. This film calls for increased military strength and represents only a brief glimpse of the type of film which permeated America in the period of McCarthy hysteria.

The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951) represents a somewhat unusual approach to science fiction politics. In the post-World War II period, (a period introducing the realization that, with the advent of nuclear weapons, another war could destroy the entire world) there was a great interest in war and how to prevent it. The fear of nuclear annihilation was a growing concern among the public, and The Day the Earth Stood Still attempts to warn the public of its danger. This film is unusual in that the alien invader (Michael Rennie as Klaatu), rather than being the enemy, comes to earth to save mankind from itself, from nuclear madness and to show mankind how to limit their weapons and work for peace. Equipped with a robot called Gort, Klaatu threatens to destroy earth if earth does not learn to save itself.

A robot police force symbolizes that if man can not stop himself, and see the madness of the nuclear arms race, he may face either annihilation or fascist/totalitarian rule. Fascism may be in the form of a threat from without (Hitler) or as a threat from within (McCarthy). The robots represent the symbol of mindless power, yet if reason rules man, mindless power need not dominate him. But will reason rule? The choice, the film suggests, is ours. Fascism or reason?

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The Day The Earth Stood Still is a political film that offers many choices for the future. As Pierre Kast said, it challenged many of America's "sacred cows," and served as a powerful counter-offensive to another emerging science fiction film type — the right-wing, anti-Communist scare film.

One of the most clever of the cinematic responses to the extremist hysteria of the McCarthy era was Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956). A number of social influences coalesced in the 1950s to create the need for a film such as Invasion: the McCarthy witch-hunt, the blacklist, a pre-occupation with the "Red Menace," fear of nuclear annihilation, and a growing sense of dehumanization/dispersonalization. These forces produced alienation, demands for social conformity, fear of voicing one's opinions, paranoia, and a loss of individuality. Invasion spoke to these growing problems.

The film features alien pods that arrive in a small town and grow into the form of human beings. When the human sleeps, the pod takes over

Sci-Fi Films Can Present Competing Political Visions

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the body. These pod-people have no feelings, no emotions, no humanity. As Stuart Samuels has written:

> The motto of the pods was "no more love, no more beauty, no more pain." Emotionless, impersonal, regimented, they became technological monsters. But they were not the irrational creatures of blood lust and power— they were just nonhuman. They became tranquil and obedient. They spoke to the fear of the 1950s— not the fear of violence, but the fear of losing one's humanity.
> The attraction of being a pod in the 1950s was all too real. But although dangling the carrot of conformity, *Invasion* opts ultimately for the stick of painful, individuality. The possibility of moral uncertainty was the price we must pay for continued freedom. As Miles says: "Only when we have to fight to stay human do we realize how precious our humanity is."[3]

There were a number of political problems attached to the making of this film. After previewing the film, executives for Allied Artists forced a change. Director Don Siegel and screenwriter Daniel Mainwaring were required to add a prologue and epilogue to the film. The original version ended on a pessimistic note, with the protagonist running down a highway, unable to get any of the passing motorists to listen to his warning, and shouting into the camera, "you're next." But in the Hollywood world of happy endings, this was not tolerated. Thus, a prologue and epilogue were added which both simplified the plot, and gave the

story a happy ending: The protagonist's story is believed, and we suspect the world will be saved.

Prologues and epilogues aside, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is much more than a science fiction film. It is an attack on the dual dangers of McCarthyism (which was beginning to crumble by the time the film was released) and the mindless conformity on the rise in the 1950s. Siegel reveals these evils growing in America, and refers to podism as, "It's a malignant disease spreading through the whole country." Podism is merely a euphemism for the disease spreading through America. As director Siegel said, "I think that the world is populated by pods and I wanted to show them."[4] The "you're next" warning was aimed at America. The message is that we must fight for our humanity, or else we lose ourselves to podism.

A similar theme is presented in Jean Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1956). Here, Godard, the French filmmaker, presents a pessimistic view of man's future with robots controlling earth. These robots, in human form, like the pods in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, govern by "logic and reason" using a huge computer, Alpha 60. Alphaville is a politically repressed society where emotional conduct is punished by ritual murder. Man has turned his mind over to computers, and rather than podism dominating, in Alphaville, computerism rules. Once again, the future does not look very bright, and *Alphaville* is another futuristic warning.

After the 1950s, science fiction films declined in number and realism began to dominate films. But of course, science fiction did crop up again from time to time. In Francois Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), a film based on Ray Bradbury's book, we see once again the future as totalitarian nightmare. In this film, the people are tranquilized by drugs to the point that they become pod-like.

It is a society in which books are banned as dangerous because they tend to create an emotional response. Books, it is believed, lead to thought, reflection, emotion, criticism. This threatens a society based on totalitarian conformity. The protectors against the dangerous books are the Firemen, the book-burners. As Neil P. Hurler writes,

> Truffaut tries to convey the major psychological results of book-burning on this society: a loss of historical continuity, a passiveness in its citizens, and a dread of controversy (the chief of the book-burning squad sees the wide range of disagreement among authors on basic issues as a proof of their futility as sources of information).[5]

Fahrenheit 451 created a visual culture. The state, by controlling the channels of communications, controlled people. Since books were banned, the people had no sense of history and no reference points to evaluate society. Mindless, thoughtless pods once again permeated society.

More recently, science fiction films have had a renaissance. Led by *Star Wars* (1977), we are once again seeing science fiction films filling a need to express deep-felt feelings in society. While most would consider *Star Wars* an escapist or fantasy film, it was also a message film. In the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, the American public desperately needed a morality play which allowed the people to believe in something once again. The moral climate of the film, according to George Lucas, was an attempt to furnish primarily young audiences with "a moral anchor," to provide a "psychological tool that children can use to understand the world better and their place in it and how to adjust to that."[6]

Certainly not all of the other recent science fiction films are really message films in disguise, but it should be clear that science fiction films can be excellent vehicles for the presentation of competing political alternatives. Through futuristic visions, a filmmaker can present a view of what the future might look like *if. . .* The artist is warning the public

that society is becoming dehumanized. The dominant theme is usually a fear of becoming, in one form or another, a pod, or a non-feeling humanoid. As Carlos Clarens has written, "The ultimate horror in science fiction is neither death nor destruction but dehumanization, a state in which the individual is deprived of individual feelings, free will, and moral judgment."[7] These are the forces that modern man must fight against every day. Science fiction films, in the post-World War II period often paint the future in bleak colors, and rarely can one find a democratic or open political system. The choice is usually between hedonistic/sadomasochistic anarchy or fascist/totalitarian government.

Science fiction and horror films are especially popular in times of social anxiety and upheaval. During times of distress such as Weimar Germany, the Depression in America, the Cold War era, and post Vietnam-/Watergate America, there was a renewed interest in films dealing with science fiction or horror themes. When faced with seemingly unsolvable problems, such as unemployment, violence, economic elitism, revolutions, increased alienation, etc., we turn to films that—while not commenting directly on these problems—address the anxiety and feelings of impotence they cause.

If you still have any doubts that science fiction films present political messages, or could have an impact on the political climate, just imagine what it would be like if an actor ever became president. Frightening, isn't it?

NOTES

[1]Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945) p. 65.
[2]John Baxter, *Science Fiction in the Cinema,* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1969) p. 25.
[3]Stuart Samuels, "The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: Invasion of the Body Snatchers," in, John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, eds., *American History/American Film* (New York: Ungar, 1979) p.212.
[4]Baxter, op. cit., p. 141.
[5]Neil P. Harley, *Toward a Film Humanism* (New York: Delta, 1970) p. 161.
[6]See: Michael Wood, "The True Story of 'Star Wars': The Myths Strike Back," *Los Angeles Times,* August 17, 1980, Part V, p. 3.
[7]Carlos Clarens, *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film* (New York: Capricorn, 1968) p. 134.

What Should Undergraduate Internships Do?

by James S. Wunch, Creighton University

Internships are "in." During an era of lagging liberal arts enrollments, deans, Admission Office personnel, students, and their families, are demanding education they believe will help the undergraduate get a job on graduation. For the instructor however, usually trained in conventional academic roles, the off-campus internship program is a rather new challenge. Rather than mastering a definable body of knowledge, the student is expected to master an "experience." Rather than controlling student workload and specific tasks, the instructor only sets general parameters, which he must depend on others to follow. Rather than containing student personalities, styles and demeanors on campus, the instructor must send them off-campus to reflect well (or ill) on the college, their program and themselves. Finally, rather than controlling tempo, emphasis and content, as in a classroom experience, the instructor must depend upon a third party over whom there is little real leverage, to sustain and build a satisfying

experience for the student. Because of the relatively short time span of the semester or quarter, replacing a student or redefining an internship placement is not always possible. In most key respects, the instructor must take great pains not to become merely a bystander to any particular student's internship experience.

And yet, the instructor has an important role to fill: students must be socialized to the world of professional work; and intern supervisors (particularly when a placement is new) need to be guided in defining appropriate roles for their interns. Finally, the instructor is responsible for the academic integrity of the program and awarding some type of grade. The following article summarizes the author's experience in administering one internship program over an eleven-year time period, and some 300 interns in over thirty difference placements.

Creighton's Public Affairs Internship Program

The Public Affairs Internship Program of the Political Science Depart-

ment at Creighton University is a practicum intended to complement our majors' academic course with an introduction to the professional work of people in public affairs careers. The program is an important component of many political science majors' educations and gives them an opportunity to experience entry-level professional responsibilities, apply some of the analytical and communication skills they have developed, and experience a reality that may help sharpen their career plans.

We have placed our students in a wide variety of learning situations. These have included Omaha city government (Mayor's Office, City Council, Housing and Community Development, Planning, Personnel); United States congressional and senatorial (Washington D.C.) offices; political campaign organizations, and private corporations, organizations and lobbies (Nebraska Common Cause, Nebraska Catholic Conference, Peoples' Natural Gas Inc., Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce).

Internships vary immensely at Creighton, but they are generally unpaid, are scheduled during a student's junior or senior year, earn three credit hours, and take from ten to twelve hours a week. Our primary goal is to continue the educational experience outside the classroom. This requires regular attendance by a student intellectually and emotionally ready for the real world of work. The intern's office supervisor must be committed to help them find and perform interesting, educational tasks. Therefore, very few of our internships are paid positions: the payment for the student is knowledge and experience. For supervisors to make the effort to teach students about the organization, assign and instruct them in various duties, is, we feel, the most we can ask.

Just as the student reaps a reward in knowledge and experience, the supervisor and his/her organization should also benefit. We hope each supervisor feels some satisfac-