**IB Film 2: Week 55.1**

**Science of Fiction**

Fantasy or Science Fiction

In the lesson on fantasy, there was a brief discussion of the difference between fantasy and science fiction.

To differentiate, remember fantasy films can include an exploration of the unknown, with strange creatures, as well as mythological elements, supernatural events / beings, and even angels and fairies.

Pure science fiction has been described as

*"a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovations in science or technology...whether human or extraterrestrial in origin." ~Novelist Kingsley Amis*

So while fantasy and science fiction can (and often do) share elements, this lesson will examine the films and themes that have come to define science fiction throughout cinematic history.

Science fictions films often involve the discovery of new knowledge, life forms, or worlds.

They can be set on far planets or on earth in the near future.

A sci-fi film might feature bug-eyed monsters, giant mutant earth creatures, robots, super computers, and all different kinds of scientists

*A Trip to the Moon* ( *Le voyage dans la lune*) (1902).

No discussion of science fiction film history can begin without mention of George Méliès and *A Trip to the Moon* ( *Le voyage dans la lune*) (1902).

As noted in previously, Méliès was an accomplished magician who recognized the potential of film as a medium for imagination and, in the case of *A Trip to the Moon*, futuristic speculation.

Based on moon travel novels by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, *A Trip to the Moon* shows what might be thought of as pseudo technology used to send 'scientists' to the moon.

Sub-plot

The term pseudo technology is appropriate in this instance.

The Méliès' scientists ride to the moon in a shell shot from a cannon.

The cannon as a mode of space travel was popular with science fiction writers right up to the 1930's.

The problem with actually being fired from a cannon into space is the g forces would turn any passengers into - well, jelly.

Metropolis

In *Metropolis* (1927), the great German film director Fritz Lang creates a visually stunning story of a future utopia / dystopia, where humans are divided into two distinct classes.

*Metropolis* is a film that reflects the technological anxieties of its time.

World War I graphically demonstrated the awful potential of new technologies, and Lang's film showed what might happen if science and technology were left unrestrained. This is a theme that is explored in countless science fiction films.

As discussed in previously, *Metropolis* is considered by many (though not all) critics to be a tour de force of lighting, design, and special effects used to create a vision of colossal buildings, subterranean factories, and robot goddesses.

Sub-plot

Science fiction writer H. G. Wells hated *Metropolis*.

He wrote an extended critique condemning the film. He thought the film contained

*"...almost every possible foolishness, cliché, platitude, and muddlement about mechanical progress and progress in general."*

It was partly in response to *Metropolis* that Wells wrote the screenplay for *Things to Come* in 1936.

Soviet Science Fiction

The Soviet Union produced a number of significant science fiction films during the 1930's including *Kosmicheskii Reis* in 1936.

This version of a journey to the moon foreshadows the American / Soviet space race of the 1960's and featured realistic special effects.

Post World War II

1950's

The 1950s was when science fiction film met the nuclear age and the Cold War.

In much the same way technological anxiety influenced films like *Metropolis* and *Things to Come*, the sociopolitical tensions of the 1950s inspired an extraordinary number of science fiction films.

While many of these films were what could be considered 'B' movies, there were a number that have had a lasting influence.

Some of the most important 1950s sci-fi include

* *Destination Moon*(1950)
* *Forbidden Planet* (1951)
* *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951)
* Byron Haskin's version of *War of the Worlds* (1953)
* and from Japan, *Gojira*(1954).

The subtext of many of these films dealt with a fear of invasion by Cold War enemies or, in the case of *Gojira*, the threat (and repercussions) of nuclear war.

1960's

One could probably point to 1968 as the most significant year of the decade for English-speaking science fiction film.

That year saw the release of both *Planet of the Apes* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the latter being one of the 'purest' science fiction films of all time - ultra-realistic technology based on available science and educated speculation about possible developments and events.

1970's

The 1970s saw the development of the blockbuster science fiction film -

* *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977)
* *Mad Max* (1979)
* *Alien* (1979)

Though perhaps more fantasy than science fiction, *Star Wars* created a whole new audience appreciation for science fiction and special effects films.

The franchise would go on to be one of the most successful in film history and paved the way for the *Star Trek*and *Alien* series.

Other significant and influential science fiction films of the 1970s include

* *Silent Running* (1972)
* *A Boy and His Dog* (1975) starring a young Don Johnson
* *Black Moon* directed by Louis Malle in 1975
* Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)*
* 1978 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

1980's

Computer generated imagery, or CGI, began to be used in science fictions films in the 1980s.

We will explore this important advance in filmmaking technology in the lesson on special effects.

It is interesting to note early examples of CGI elements can be found in *Tron* (1982) and Michael Crichton's *Looker*(1981).

Mel Gibson reprised his Australian post-apocalyptic hero in *Mad Max 2* (1981).

Director John Carpenter used state of the art practical special effects (stop motion, puppetry, makeup, etc.) in a remake of *The Thing* (1982).

*Blade Runner* (1982) showcased Ridley Scott's sci-fi, neo-noir dystopian version of the future (and included a nod to *Metropolis*).

Canadian David Cronenberg directed *Videodrome* in 1983. This film has been called both science fiction and horror because it portrays technology run amuck in a very graphic manner.

Cronenberg would go on to direct another fascinating science fiction horror flick in 1986 - a remake of *The Fly*.

The Fly (1986)

*The Fly* is noteworthy as it is the 'biological' version of tapping into audience anxiety.

Like the 1950s alien invasion films (think *War of the Worlds* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*),*The Fly* addressed a prominent sociocultural fear of the day - the AIDS epidemic.

Jeff Goldblum plays scientist Seth Brundle. Brundle makes the classic mistake of experimenting on himself - in this case, transporting himself across the room.

The experiment goes horribly wrong, as Brundle realizes he has inadvertently mixed a fly's DNA with his own. His biological transformation becomes a kind of metaphor for the devastation of AIDS and, in the more classic sense, a warning about playing God and manipulating nature.

Just for fun, have a look at the trailer for Cronenberg's *The Fly* at IMDb.

**Review -**[The Fly](http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi3631351577/)

The Modern Era

Science fiction has remained one of the world's most popular genres. Films that reflect both our fears and hopes for the future are produced every year.

Some themes examined in more recent films include -

* law and order - *Timecop* (1994) and *Strange Days* (1995)
* genetic engineering - *Gattaca* (1997)
* alien invasions - *Independence Day* (1996)
* religion - *Contact* (1997)

Japanese director Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) is an animated science fiction film that deals with cyborgs and spirituality. The film was one of the first to blend cel animation and computer generated imagery (CGI).

In 1999, Larry and Andy Wachowski wrote and directed *The Matrix*.

This 'techno-thriller' is a groundbreaking work of CGI and action. The basic premise is one that has been seen before - *The Terminator* (1984) for example - where the machines rebel against their human masters. It is the stylish use of the latest CGI and the mishmash of genres under the sci-fi umbrella that make the film so fun to watch.

Other films along the same techno-thriller vein would include Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) and his remake of *War of the Worlds* (2005).

Science fiction and psychological drama combine in Steven Sodorbergh's *Solaris* (2002), a remake (have you noticed there seem to be a lot of remakes in the science fiction genre?) of a well-crafted Soviet Union film from 1972.

Similar ideas / themes are explored in the Michel Gondry film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*(2004).

Science fiction and comedy might not be the most common genre mash, but there have been a few attempts including

* *Spaceballs* (1987)
* *Mars Attacks!* (1996)
* the *Men in Black* series
* *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (2005)
* *Paul* (2011).

Aliens invading the earth is one of the most popular plot lines in science fiction films and more recent examples would include

* *Independence Day*
* *Transformers* (2007)
* *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (another remake) (2008)
* *The Thing* (the third remake) (2011)
* the South African thriller *District 9* (2009)
* *Avatar* (where the humans are the alien invaders) (2009)
* *Super 8* (2011)

The science fiction genre has been around as long as films themselves.

As George Méliès proved, film is a medium well-suited for exploring the unknown, imagining the future, and facing our fears.

# **Metropolis - Anime version**

One of the prescribed films is the anime version of Metropolis (2001) directed by Rintaro.

View the prescribed film and answer the following prompt -

* What is one issue that touches upon the past or the future?
* How is this expressed by the cinematic language of Metropolis?
* What is the filmmaker trying to express to the audience?

Contribute your responses into the Discussion.