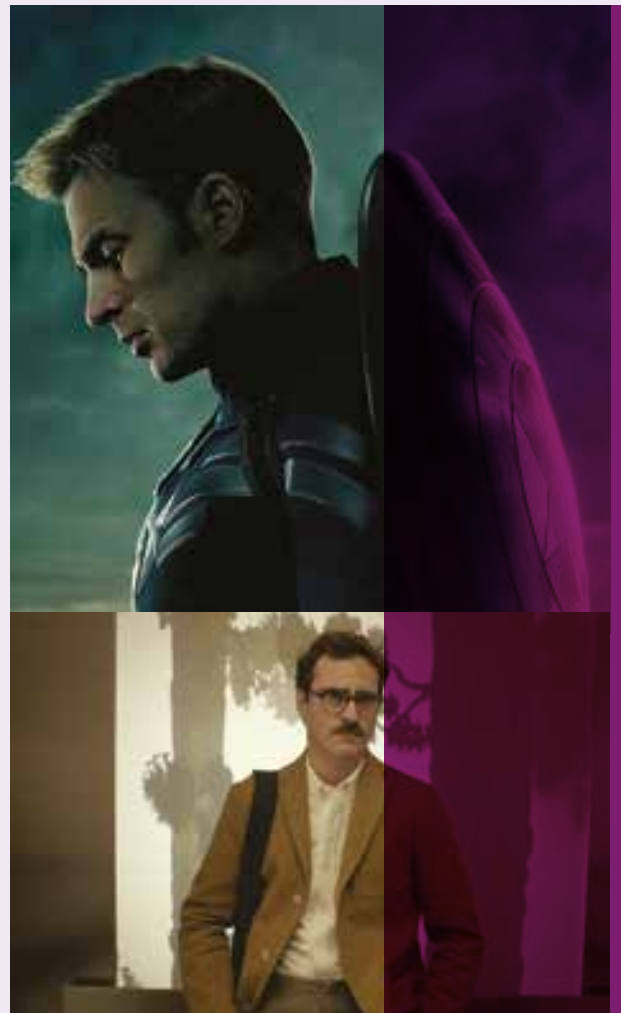


'Sci-fi', SF and science fiction

– what's the
difference?



In tribute to the British Film Institute's current Science Fiction season (and *MediaMag's* free online Science Fiction supplement!) Roy Stafford introduces four recent films starring Scarlett Johansson to raise some of the big questions about the history, range and diversity of the science fiction genre.



The British Film Institute announced 'Sci-fi: Days of Wonder' as a celebration of 'film and TV's original blockbuster genre'. It's a catchy title for a season of films, but it raises several problems for Film and Media Studies students hoping to gain knowledge and understanding about film and television culture. Not least of these problems are the assumptions underpinning the use of the terms 'sci-fi', 'blockbuster' and 'genre' – all terms indiscriminately used in popular discourse, but all contentious and in need of explication.

In the last twelve months UK cinema audiences have been offered four different films featuring the Hollywood star Scarlett Johansson. Each of the four has been tagged 'sci-fi' or 'science fiction' by at least one source, and together they form an interesting case study.



The case study films are *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (US, 2014), *Her* (US, 2013), *Under the Skin* (UK, 2013) and *Lucy* (France, 2014). Although all four have been described as science-fiction, there are major differences between them, and certainly disputes about how they should be classified. Let's begin with the 'blockbuster' tag.

The Power of the Blockbuster

It's been claimed that the term 'blockbuster' derives from descriptions of the largest Second World War bombs, which could literally destroy whole 'blocks' of housing or offices – hence its application to 'killer movies' which effectively destroy their competition. Arguably the concept dates from the 1975 release of *Jaws* in North America, which attracted huge audiences through innovative distribution and exhibition strategies, including simultaneous screenings North America-wide during the summer vacation – a new strategy at the time. *Jaws* is a 'monster movie', a 'creature feature', which under some definitions *might* be categorised as science fiction. Perhaps the BFI marketing team was referring to the *Star Wars* films (1977, onwards) as key 'sci-fi' blockbuster films. Yet the trailer

produced for the BFI season includes several films that were released before 1975, and several later films that were not given a blockbuster release.

You can watch the trailer here: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sci-fi-days-fear-wonder>

The term 'blockbuster' describes a highly successful or popular production. It refers to the size and scale of productions, budgets, forms of audience appeal and distribution patterns. Blockbuster films are generally released to at least 3,000 screens in North America. They must therefore appeal to as many different audiences as possible – to the 'four quadrants' of young and old, male and female. And to draw in these audiences, they must usually encompass more than one genre – for example, action, romance, adventure, comedy – and appeal to fans of specific stars, CGI and effects, and so on. It is highly unusual for a blockbuster movie to relate to a single 'pure' genre.

According to this definition, only one of our case study films, *Captain America*, is actually a blockbuster. The 'Marvel Cinematic Universe' has been described as a 'mega-franchise' of film titles based on Marvel's comic book characters. These are made independently by



Marvel Studios, and then distributed by one of the Hollywood studio majors (Paramount in the case of *Captain America*).

Lucy represents a different challenge to the Hollywood 'majors', the six studios which comprise the membership of the MPAA (the Motion Pictures Association of America). Produced by Luc Besson's EuropaCorp (in English) in France, *Lucy* was distributed in North America and the UK by Universal. It had a blockbuster-style release with success that was to some extent unexpected, but it has not been seen as a potential franchise with sequels/prequels etc.

Neither *Her* nor *Under the Skin* were marketed as blockbusters. *Her* received a 'wide' release on over 1,000 screens in North America, but not the 3,000+ required for a blockbuster; and *Under the Skin* opened on only a handful of screens in the US, and in the UK was mainly screened in arthouse cinemas.

So What Exactly is this Science Fiction Genre?

If we turn now to questions of 'genre', it's worth remembering that film genres are defined by film scholars in order to be useful as tools for critical analysis. As suggested above, audiences are attracted by different aspects of a film's appeal, which might include references to its genre – but not always using the terms or definitions used by scholars. Film reviewers and film journalists in the popular press may define it differently again. Film industry professionals use only the broadest definitions of genre; in fact 'science fiction' or 'sci-fi' is a term that the industry itself is reluctant to use, because it implies a narrow audience appeal. If you check the promotional materials for the four films in our case study, you will see a wide range of genres mentioned. To take just one example: the website Box Office Mojo



(used as a reference source here for North American distribution) refers to *Captain America* as 'Action/Adventure', *Under the Skin* as 'Sci-fi', *Lucy* as 'Sci-fi Action' and *Her* as 'Comedy/Drama'. So what exactly might 'sci-fi' mean – and is it the same as 'science fiction'? And perhaps we also ought to reconsider whether these concepts are actually useful critical tools for film scholarship.

Some Sci-fi History

The earliest film title in the BFI's marketing of 'sci-fi' is *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang Germany 1927). In his 1947 book on German cinema, critic Siegfried Kracauer refers to the three films made by Lang for the German studio Ufa between 1927 and 1929 as dealing with 'thrilling adventures and technical fantasies' – the other two were *Spies* (1928) and *The Girl in the Moon* (1929). He doesn't mention the term 'science fiction'.

Some scholars have argued that recognisable elements of what we now know as science fiction can be found in literature thousands of years ago; but the first generally agreed science fiction novel is usually taken to be Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from 1818. When *Frankenstein* was successfully adapted for the cinema in 1931, it was perceived as part of a cycle of Gothic horror films produced by Universal in Hollywood (following *Dracula* and preceding *The Mummy*). From Kracauer's description of 'adventures' and 'fantasies', the range of imaginative narratives featuring, for example, scientists able to build a robot (*Metropolis*) or to 're-animate' humans (*Frankenstein*), were increasingly associated with the 'horror' genre.

Steve Neale is one of the best-known theorists of film genre. He suggests that the term 'science fiction' to describe stories using scientific advances wasn't really established until the late 1920s, when it was associated with American pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories*



and *Science Wonder Stories*. But he also notes that by that time, films featuring trick photography and set designs to represent future or alien worlds, for example the films of George Méliès such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) had made a link between science and cinema as spectacle. So up to the early 1930s, science fiction was not a film genre as such, but a type of narrative that lent itself to adventure, fantasy, horror or spectacle. These popular literary genres had little cultural status; and this was also true of science fiction in print form, which was usually circulated as cheap novels or short stories. However, books written by a 'serious author' such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty Four* (1948), were rarely described as science fiction; they were 'literary' rather than 'genre' novels.

Sci-fi

'Sci-fi' is a shortened version of 'science fiction', first used in the 1950s. Why was it shortened? Possibly to make the writing – and the films – sound more 'modern', much as 'hi-fi' was used during the same period to describe 'high fidelity' music. A few years later, in the 1960s, a New Wave of science fiction writing began to appear in the UK and US, with authors such as Robert Heinlen, Kurt Vonnegut, Philip K. Dick, Arthur C. Clarke, and



Thomas Pynchon. Some of these new writers – and their readers – favoured writing which was more experimental in imagining what would happen if science changed society through new technologies, or if social and political changes were made to contemporary society. They wanted to keep the full term ‘science fiction’, or to abbreviate it to ‘SF’. But most of all, they wanted to distinguish themselves from ‘sci-fi’, and to promote SF as a ‘proper’ literary genre. When their new stories were adapted for the cinema, they were marketed as SF, not sci-fi. One of the first big successes of the new science fiction cinema was Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: a Space Odyssey* (UK/US 1968) – an iconic movie, based on an Arthur C. Clarke story, still regarded as one of the greatest films ever made, and re-released this winter.

Star Wars – Soap in Space?

During the 1960s and 1970s SF cinema flourished. But then, in 1977, a film drawing on a Western (*The Searchers*, 1956) a Japanese historical film (*The Hidden Fortress*, 1958) and various Second World War films about aerial

combat, swept all before it as a genuine ‘sci-fi blockbuster’. That film was of course *Star Wars*. George Lucas and Steven Spielberg (with the *Indiana Jones* films) set out to re-create the adventure serials shown in cinemas in the 1930s-1950s, among them *Flash Gordon* (1936). The early serials had been called ‘space operas’, and the same term was applied to *Star Wars*. This was a pejorative term, like ‘soap opera’, implying that these films were merely the same old dramas, but this time set in space. Despite this implied criticism, the overwhelming success of *Star Wars* then brought sci-fi back into the mainstream, with Lucas’s continuing epic as its most popular incarnation.

The Story of Blade Runner

The shifting cultural attitudes towards different forms of science fiction can perhaps best be seen in what happened to *Blade Runner*. When first released in 1982 as a sci-fi blockbuster following *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* disappointed at the box office, apparently because it lacked a clear enough narrative or sufficient action.

But when it was re-released in 1993 in a re-edited form, the film became a cult success. Now associated with postmodernism, and with the growing reputation of Philip K. Dick, author of the original SF classic novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the film is acknowledged as a masterpiece for its ‘neo-noir’ visuals and profoundly dystopian vision.

Blade Runner focuses on the question ‘What does it mean to be human?’ This arises from a classic ‘What if?’ scenario: what if replica humans could be constructed which could not be distinguished from ‘real people’? It is the force and complexity of these ‘what if?’ scenarios that defines an SF film; ‘SF’ might also stand for ‘speculative fiction’, perhaps a larger generic category that includes forms of fantasy writing, and stories without scientific or ‘futuristic’ elements. It could be argued that a sci-fi film is likely to put spectacle (special effects) and action/adventure ahead of this kind of speculation, whereas for genre purists, science fiction is defined by that ‘what if?’ question. The inference is always that whatever fictional world is shown (‘alternative’ or future), the narrative speculates about what we can learn about our world today.

Scarlett’s Four Case Study Films

Let’s return to our four case study films, to see where they stand generically. *Captain America* is a superhero action film. Its ‘alternative universe’ scenario hints at SF, but its emphasis on action, special effects and the spectacular suggests that sci-fi is its main focus, even though Johansson’s role as an ‘action woman’ raises questions about gender roles in contemporary society.

Lucy is in some ways very similar, and the titular central character played by Johansson also develops ‘superpowers’. But these are associated with some form of scientific research recognisable from our perspective (even if it is exaggerated, distorted and perhaps fantastic) that becomes the central point of the narrative – there is a ‘what if?’ idea about human brain power that is as important as the resolution of the action genre narrative. Writer-director

relationship with his OS – something which can be compared to, and can perhaps have an impact on, his ‘real’ relationships with other people. Here is a familiar SF scenario which is containable within other classifications – romance, drama, comedy as well as ‘independent cinema’, ‘Hollywood art cinema’ and others which refer to specific audience segments.

Thus Scarlett Johansson, one of the most adventurous of Hollywood stars, has appeared in four very diverse films from four different categories of cinema, linked only by their connections to ideas about ‘science fiction’. Those links are useful in reading the films – but they don’t in any simple way refer to conventional ideas about genre. There is no clear distinction between ‘SF’ and ‘sci-fi’, both of which derive from ‘science fiction’; but there is a dynamic relationship between the shifting definitions of all three – definitions contested by different audience groups – and understanding this is essential for participation in debates about contemporary cinema.

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Follow it Up

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Besson makes this explicit by referring directly to *2001: a Space Odyssey* and by naming his character ‘Lucy’, which was the name given to the earliest human discovered by archaeologists. Clearly sci-fi in terms of action and spectacle, *Lucy* may also be genuine SF.

Under the Skin is based on an SF novel (Michel Faber, 2000) and presents an (almost) social-realist account of a woman who seduces men she finds on the streets. There is no ‘spectacle’ as such, but instead a series of seduction scenes using music and simple effects to represent how these men are ‘used’ by an alien. *Under the Skin* is defiantly SF in its questions about humans and aliens, and defiantly avant-garde in its presentation (see the SF supplement on the *MediaMagazine* website).

Finally, in *Her*, Johansson appears only as the disembodied voice of a computer operating system. The fictional world is set only marginally in the future – where a lonely man finds that he can buy an Operating System (OS) for his digital devices which acts as if it works only for him. In other words he can have a