Science Fiction on Film

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I've been reading science fiction since I was a kid. It's my leisure reading of choice. But it wasn't until three years ago that I finally got a chance to teach the genre, and since then, I have been having the time of my life selecting novels, short stories, and films.

I took over teaching science fiction at a particularly good time—about three years ago, the first video rental store opened for business in Davis, and I discovered to my delight that films which used to be utterly out of my price range ($225 for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, $375 for *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) were available for as little as $3.00 a day.

Suddenly, money became less a problem than how best to use precious class time. For example, having finished reading Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, my students discovered that one of the local video stores had the entire six-hour mini-series on cassette. Faced with potential insurrection, I bargained with the class, offering to show the first third of the series in class if they would agree to meet in a private home for parts two and three. To my surprise, the plan met with approval, and we had a terrific party, complete with $75 worth of pizza and gallons of soft drinks. The evening was so successful that my students have been demanding a repeat ever since.

One of the best things about watching *The Martian Chronicles* is that the adaptation is, by turns, utterly faithful to the original and then totally different. At least one story was lifted bodily from another Bradbury collection while others were changed significantly to provide character continuity. As often happens when working with a film adaptation, the discussion was rich because students could focus on differences between film and novel. Generally, though, I avoid showing adaptations when I can, or at least avoid reading the book and showing the movie. I prefer to select complementary films to provide diversity.

I try to show a feature film for each unit, but I don't always stick with the same film semester after semester. For example, I've used *Soylent Green, Bladerunner,* and *Escape from New York* during my unit on the city of the future. *The Time Machine* is appropriate for the time travel unit, but I prefer *Time After Time,* an exciting chase film featuring H. G. Wells as its unlikely hero. Older films are good, too; I like to alternate *2001* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* when we get to the section on alien contact, and I've yet to find an end-of-the-world film more fun than George Pal's *When Worlds Collide.* In a more serious vein, *On the Beach* is a well-received treatment of the nuclear holocaust as is the thoughtful and provocative *Testament* or the considerably more up-beat *Wargames.*

Honestly though, I've found that this new embarrassment of cinematic riches has not really had a huge effect on teaching. I find short films are still easier to use and often promote richer discussion than do features. In recent years, a number of good short science fiction films have been released, some short story adaptations, some original science fiction pieces, and even a few factual science films which enrich literature.

"Quest" (Pyramid) is brand new, a collaboration of directors Saul and Elaine Bass and writer Ray Bradbury. The kernel of the idea comes from Bradbury's wonderful story, "Frost and Fire," but

the film is nothing like the story beyond its basic premise. The film tells of a race of people trapped on a strange planet where the lack of sunlight has shortened the life span to just eight days. The film begins with the birth of a child who is trained and sent on a quest which will result in restoring sunlight and bringing back normal life expectancy. Special effects are first-rate, equal to most science fiction features, and while the story is a bit short on substance, it's a surefire winner in the classroom.

Two adaptations I like to use together are "The Veldt" (Barr) and "The Electric Grandmother" (Learning Corporation of America). Taken from two very different Bradbury stories, they present contrasting views of automation and robotics. Of the two, I prefer the latter, a glowing affirmative statement of what technology could do for (instead of to) people. For longer reviews of these films, see this column for February 1984.

Undoubtedly, Ray Bradbury's stories have been adapted to the screen more frequently than those of any other science fiction writer. "All Summer in a Day" is one of my favorite Bradbury stories, and the film adaptation (LCA) is as gripping as the original. On a planet where the sun shines only once every nine years, a group of children await the sun's predicted reappearance but are unwilling to believe that the event will happen. One girl, however, has lived on Earth and makes the mistake of openly disagreeing with her peers. As a prank, the children lock her in a closet and then forget about her in their wonder as the sun breaks through the clouds briefly and they run to play in its warmth. The story is somewhat crueler than the film, but though I found the sunlight scenes unconvincing by contrast to those depicting the planet's normal gloomy weather, the adaptation compares well to the Bradbury original.

"Zero Hour" (Barr) is not quite as good as "All Summer in a Day" but still worth a look. Bradbury's neat little horror story about a seven-year-old girl who assists an alien invasion of Earth, thinking that she's part of a game, would work well in a unit about alien contact. I've used it as a contrast to some of Bradbury's elegiac tales of the Martians.

In Isaac Asimov's "The Ugly Little Boy" (LCA), the Stasis Project has been established to bring scientific specimens forward in time for study. Nurse Edith Fellowes takes care of the first human brought forward, a Neanderthal boy. Hired because she is capable of keeping her feelings out of her work, Nurse Fellowes soon finds that she is becoming emotionally attached to her patient in an environment where the human factor is scrupulously avoided. Asimov's story is more fully developed than is the film, but the two together provide a terrific opportunity for cross-media study. "All the Troubles of the World," (Barr), Asimov's fascinating story about Multivac, a vast computer coordinating all phases of human activity, tells what might happen when a computer finds it can no longer stand to shoulder all the world's problems.

Another short story adaptation I like is "The Portable Phonograph" (Encyclopaedia Britannica) based on Walter Van Tilburg Clark's classic science fiction suspense story. This gripping story of four men living on the edge of starvation after the Third World War was reviewed here in February 1984.

Several older original science fiction films deserve notice. Donald Fox's "Omega" (Pyramid) is made up almost exclusively of special effects (one of the earliest films to use such opticals). "Omega" is the story of the end of the human race on Earth and its rebirth at a higher stage of evolution, strikingly similar in theme to much work by Arthur C. Clarke, notably *Childhood's End, 2001,* and "The Sentinel."

My personal favorite is Chris Marker's "La Jetee" (Audio Brandon). A very difficult film, "La Jetee" tells its story almost exclusively with stilled frames (only one three-second segment is moving footage), a technique appropriate to the theme of time travel to a long-dead past. World War III has left the world devastated. Both victors and vanquished live in tunnels beneath the cities. Their world an apparent dead end, the survivors turn to time travel experiments, hoping to find help in the future. The hero, a prisoner of war, is sent into the past in an attempt to perfect time travel techniques, and there he falls in love with a woman he once saw as a child. "La Jetee" complements most time travel stories ("The Third Level," "A Sound of Thunder," "By His Bootstraps") and especially Jack Finney's novel, *Time and Again.*

Humor is a good change of pace, and two funny shorts that appeal to students are "Hardware Wars" and "Bambi Meets Godzilla" (both from Pyramid). The former is a silly parody of *Star Wars* featuring such characters as Ham Salad,

Augie "Ben" Doggie, and the Wookie Monster. The latter is simply a ninety-second gag sending up Walt Disney, Japanese monster movies, and film titles, absolutely guaranteed to break up any audience above the age of twelve.

Bruno Bozzetto is a talented Italian animator whose films are both sharply satirical and supremely goofy. A few years back, Bozzetto made *Allegro Non Troppo,* a feature-length homage to (or perhaps a parody of) Disney's *Fantasia.* Each of the six segments (available from Films, Inc.) is set to a selection from the classical repertoire. "Evolutionary Fantasy" is Bozzetto's interpretation of Ravel's "Bolero." Reminiscent of Fantasia's "Rite of Spring" sequence, "Evolutionary Fantasy" begins when a passenger on the last space ship departing a ruined Earth tosses away a coke bottle in an insult-to-injury gesture. To the compelling pulse of "Bolero," life begins anew in the bottle, eventually emerging to begin an inexorable march of rapidly metamorphosing creatures which finally bring life back to some semblance of sentience. Done with great good humor but with the underlying prong of Bozzetto's wit, "Evolutionary Fantasy" is an absolute delight.

I've also used factual films and some not considered science fiction. "Organism" (Phoenix Films) uses incredible time-lapsed photography to suggest that a city is an organism analogous to the human body. The analogy works beautifully, and though the film is a bit long at twenty minutes, it is brilliantly realized. Students respond well to some of the remarkable sequences, particularly one which depicts the passage of an entire day and night telescoped into a few minutes. "Ballet Robotique" (Pyramid) is a non-narration film using footage of huge manufacturing robots performing their computerized tasks to classical music. These giants seem graceful and almost human as they go about the business of manufacturing the world's commodities.

"Cosmic Zoom" (National Film Board of Canada) and "Powers of Ten" (Pyramid) were made indepedently about the same time but are remarkably similar in concept and content. Each shows a journey out from Earth to the edges of the known universe, then reverses the direction and journeys inward to explore the universe of the human body at the micro level through cells and DNA molecules and eventually to the nucleus of the carbon atom. Both are exciting, but I prefer "Powers of Ten," a film made by the team of Charles and Ray Eames at the height of their creative powers.

Finally, I am inordinately fond of two films called "Universe." The first is a black and white wonder made by the National Film Board of Canada in 1960 and has always seemed to me to be the ultimate mind-trip, a science film for poets. Unfortunately, two and a half decades have made this animated voyage through our solar system and galaxy seem a bit creaky. After all, since the film was made, we have seen live television transmissions from deep space. We *know* what our home planet really looks like. Astronauts have played golf on the moon. About seven years ago, NASA undertook the task of updating "Universe." This version (available from Screenscope, Inc.) is in magnificent color and every bit the visual mindblower its predecessor was. Spectacular live photography of the sun, moon, and Earth complement outstanding animation and special effects. Much of the new information about quasars, pulsars, and black holes is presented in lay terms and supported by excellent visual effects.

Unfortunately, though, this new "Universe," which is technically superior and much more current, lacks some special qualities of the original. As is so often the sad case, the American version traded poetry and mystery for splashy production values. Look at both films if you get the chance. Maybe your students can forget about scientific "truth" and remember their first brushes with science fiction in the works of Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. Poetry and imagination are also parts of the universe.

The Distributors:

Audio Brandon Films, 35 West 45th St., New York, NY 10036.

Barr Films, 3590 East Foothill Rd., Pasadena, CA 91107.

Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, 425 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611.

Films Incorporated, 1144 Wilmette Ave., Wilmette, IL 60091.

Learning Corporation of America, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019.

National Film Board of Canada, 1251 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019.

Phoenix Films, 470 Park Ave., New York, NY 10016.

Pyramid Film and Video, Box 1048, Santa Monica, CA 90406.