



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film

Author(s): Richard Hodgens

Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter, 1959), pp. 30-39

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1210020>

Accessed: 20/09/2011 22:27

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

cision, the fact that he is lucid enough to be aware of the faults—and, above all, the special merits—of his film, indicate that we have seen only the first act in this stupendous, one-man revolution. And though Marcel Hanoun probably would have made his film independently of any new wave, it is probable that his prestige

as a young director would not have been what it is without the present movement, and only too probable that he would not now be shooting a feature film with a 60,000,000-franc budget which, judging by the shooting-script, bids fair to be as exciting—if not as revolutionary—as *Une Simple Histoire*.

A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film

RICHARD HODGENS

*Cut is the branch that might have grown full
straight,
And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,
That sometime grew within this learned man.
Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise,
Only to wonder at unlawful things,
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
To practise more than heavenly power permits.*
—DOCTOR FAUSTUS, *Epilogue*

Some of the most original and thoughtful contemporary fiction has been science fiction, and this field may well prove to be of much greater literary importance than is generally admitted. In motion pictures, however, "science fiction" has so far been unoriginal and limited; and both the tone and the implications of these films suggest a strange throwback of taste to something moldier and more "Gothic" than the Gothic novel. But the genre is an interesting and potentially very fruitful one.

Science fiction publishing expanded spectacularly in the late '40's, and dwindled again in the early '50's. Science fiction filming as we know it today began in 1950 with *Destination Moon*, and has continued to the present, hideously transformed, as a minor category of production.

Earlier examples, like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and *Frau im Mond*, H. G. Wells' powerful essay on future history, *Things to Come*, and such nonsupernatural horror films as *The Invisible Ray*, have not been considered "science fiction," although they were. One of the many painful aspects of most of the recent films involving space travel, alien visitors, or earthly monsters which have followed *Destination Moon* is that they are considered "science fiction," although most of them are something peculiarly different from the literature of the same label.

Motion picture adaptations have ruined any number of good works of literature without casting a pall, in the public mind, over literature in general. The science fiction films, however, seem to have come close to ruining the reputation of the category of fiction from which they have malignantly sprouted. To the film audience, "science fiction" means "horror," distinguished from ordinary horror only by a relative lack of plausibility.

Science fiction involves extrapolated or fictitious science, or fictitious use of scientific possibilities, or it may be simply fiction that takes place in the future or introduces some radical assumption about the present or the past. For those who insist upon nothing but direct treatment of contemporary life, science fiction has

DESTINATION MOON:
Chesley Bonestell's
lunar landscape.



little or nothing to offer, of course. But there are issues that cannot be dealt with realistically in terms of the present, or even the past; and to confront such issues in fiction it is better to invent a future-tense society than to distort the present or the past. And in a broader sense there are few subjects that cannot be considered in science fiction, few styles in which it cannot be written, and few moods that it cannot convey. It is, to my mind, the only kind of writing today that offers much surprise—not merely the surprise of shock effects, but the surprise of new or unusual material handled rationally. And conscientious science fiction, more than any other type, offers the reader that shift of focus essential to the appeal of any literature. Often too it presents a puzzle analogous to that of the detective story, but with its central assumptions considerably less restricted.

Science fiction, as most science fiction readers define it and as most science fiction writers attempt to practice it, calls for a plausible or at least possible premise, logically developed. The most damning criticism one can make of a work

of science fiction is that it is flatly impossible in the first place, and inconsistent in the second. To say the least, many things are possible; and readers may accept a premise that they believe impossible anyway, so long as they do not consider it “supernatural.” Often, the distinction between science fiction and fantasy is simply one of attitude; but an impossible premise must at least not contradict itself, and it should be developed consistently in the story.

Science fiction films, with few exceptions, follow different conventions. The premise is always flatly impossible. Any explanations offered are either false analogy or entirely meaningless. The character who protests “But that’s *incredible*, Doctor!” is always right. The impossible, and often self-contradictory, premise is irrationally developed, if it is developed at all. There is less narrative logic than in the average Western.

Although antiscientific printed science fiction exists, most science fiction reflects at least an awareness and appreciation of science. Some science fiction, it is true, displays an uncomprehending faith in science, and implies that it will

solve all problems magically. But in the sf films there is rarely any sane middle ground. Now and then, science is white magic. But far more often, it is black, and if these films have any general implications about science, they are that science and scientists are dangerous, raising problems and provoking widespread disaster for the innocent, ignorant good folks, and that curiosity is a deadly sin.

The few exceptions to this bleak picture are the first three sf films produced by George Pal: *Destination Moon*, *When Worlds Collide*, and *War of the Worlds*. Perhaps there are one or two others. *Destination Moon* may be considered a good semi-documentary, educational film, although today its optimism is rather depressing. Despite its accuracy and consistency, and the extent to which the stereotyped characters were forced to go to explain it, most criticism indicated that the critics did not understand it. The special effects were the film's main attraction, and except for a few shots of the apparent size of the ship in space, and the appearance of the stars, were exact and superb. In a fascinating article about the technical problems of this film, Robert Heinlein credits its director, Irving Pichel, with saving it from an arbitrary addition of musical comedy and "pseudoscientific gimmicks which would have puzzled even Flash Gordon."*

Those who hoped that the financial success of *Destination Moon* would lead to equally convincing but more sophisticated science-fiction films were bitterly disappointed, for nearly everything since has been unconvincing and naive. There was a flood of "science fiction" on the screen, but it followed in the footsteps of *The Thing*, and it was unbelievably and progressively inane.

Pal's next two productions were satisfactory, however, and although they are not very impressive when compared with a film like *Things to Come*, in comparison with their contemporary science fiction competition they seemed masterpieces. In the '30's Paramount had considered

When Worlds Collide, a novel by Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie, for De Mille, and *War of the Worlds*, by H. G. Wells, for Eisenstein. Pal's films modernized the sources, but respected them. Unlike *Destination Moon*, however, both have themes of menace and catastrophe—the end of the world and interplanetary invasion. It appeared that even Pal had decided that sf films must be, somehow, *horrible*.

In *When Worlds Collide*, models were used extensively, and while many of them were not completely convincing, the only major disappointment to most people was the last shot of the lush, green new world, after the single escaping space ship had landed in impressively rugged territory. H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* is a good novel, and difficult to ruin. If *War of the Worlds* had been filmed as a period-piece, as Disney later treated Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, it would still have been effective. The story was carefully modernized, however, as Howard Koch had modernized it in 1938 for Orson Welles' Mercury Theater of the Air. One unnecessary modern addition, though, was an irrelevant boy-and-girl theme because, Pal apologized, "Audiences want it."†

The theme of Wells' memorable "assault on human self-satisfaction" is still valid, if less startling. No one today expects to be visited by intelligent Martians, but granting this premise the film was quite convincing. The Martians' fantastic weapons were acceptable as products of a superior technology; the Martians themselves, though more terrestrial in appearance than Wells' original conception, were probably the most convincing Things to come from Hollywood, and they were used with surprising restraint and effectiveness—one brief glimpse and, at the end, a lingering shot of the hand of the dying creature. About half the film was painstaking special effect, and the models were nearly perfect.

These three films were spectacular productions, and if the scripts contained moments

* "Shooting *Destination Moon*," *Astounding Science Fiction*, July 1950.

† Filming *War of the Worlds*," *Astounding Science Fiction*, October 1953.

rather similar to more traditional spectacles, they still contained powerful images that had never been seen before: after take-off, virtually every shot in *Destination Moon*; the red dwarf star nearing the doomed Earth; and the deadly Martian machines, like copper mantas and hooded cobras, gliding down empty streets.

I do not mean to imply that everyone was pleased by these films. Those who like plots with villains were bored by *Destination Moon*, and people who knew nothing about space travel, and did not care, were baffled. *When Worlds Collide* drew harsh words for its concluding shot and its models, and some people seem to have been irritated by the undemocratic survival of the interplanetary Ark. And of *War of the Worlds* I heard someone say, "That Orson Welles always was crazy, anyway."

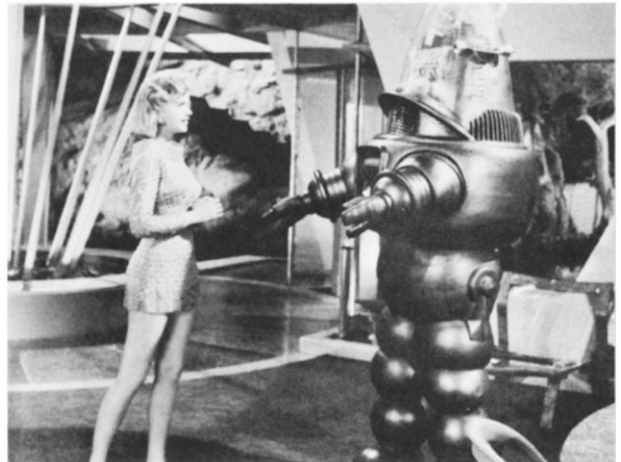
George Pal's last science fiction production, *The Conquest of Space*, was disappointing. Again there were some visually impressive shots, but unfortunately that was all. The script attempted to "enliven" a subject that called for serious treatment; the result was an inaccurate, misleading film ending with a miracle which, unlike the "miraculous" end of *War*, was impossible and pointless. It was an expensive production which could have contributed to the salvation of science fiction in motion pictures. But the monsters had taken the field, and the facile *Conquest of Space* merely seemed to prove that monsters are always necessary.

What the movies were likely to do with science fiction was already evident when *Rocketship X-M* was released in 1950 to compete with *Destination Moon*. An expedition sets out for the moon. The ship's course is altered by the close passage of some noisy meteors, however, and the explorers land on Mars, where they learn that atomic warfare has destroyed Martian civilization. The Martians appear to be entirely human—at least, if memory serves, one savage female was beautifully human—but radiation has bestialized them. The girl scientist and the boy scientist escape from Mars, but, lacking fuel to land on the frantically spinning Earth, they endure a stoic martyrdom. Though *Rocketship X-M* seemed ludicrous, it was level-

headed and superb compared with what followed.

The great villain was *The Thing From Another World*, which appeared in 1951. *The Thing* was based on a short novel by John W. Campbell, Jr., the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, where it appeared in 1938 with the title "Who Goes There?" The story is regarded as one of the most original and effective science fiction stories, *sub-species* "horror." Its premise is convincing, its development logical, its characterization intelligent, and its suspense considerable. Of these qualities the film retained one or two minutes of suspense. The story and the film are poles apart. Probably for timely interest, the Thing crashed in a Flying Saucer and was quick-frozen in the Arctic. In Campbell's story "it had lain in the ice for twenty million years" in the Antarctic. In film as in source, when the creature thaws out it is alive and dangerous. In "Who Goes There?" when it gets up and walks away, and later when it is torn to pieces by the dogs and still lives, the nature of the beast makes its invulnerability acceptable. But there is little plausibility about the Hollywood Thing's nine lives. Since this film, presumably dead creatures have been coming back to life with more and more alacrity and with less and less excuse. Instead of the nearly in-

FORBIDDEN PLANET: *Girl meets mechanical man in the first film to use electronic music (by Louis and Bebe Barron) on its sound track.*



soluble problem created in Campbell's story, this Thing is another monster entirely. He is a vegetable. He looks like Frankenstein's monster. He roars. He is radioactive. And he drinks blood.*

Probably Campbell's protean menace was reduced to this strange combination of familiar elements in the belief that the original idea—the idea which made the story make sense—was too complex. This was probably incorrect, because monsters since that *Thing* have imitated the special ability of Campbell's Alien, although with far less credibility (*It Came From Outer Space*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), and there is no indication that anyone found them difficult to understand.

Incidentally, the most stupid character in the film is the most important scientist. The script did its best to imply that his tolerant attitude toward the Thing was his worst idea. And the film ended with a warning to all mankind: "Watch the skies" for these abominably dangerous Flying Saucers.

The Thing is a most radical betrayal of its source, but since the source was generally unfamiliar, and since the idea of a monster from outer space seemed so original (though the monster itself had blood-brothers in Transylvania), the film earned both critical approval and a great deal of money.† In addition, it fixed the pattern for the majority of science fiction films that followed, for it proved that some money could be made by "science fiction" that preyed on current fears symbolized crudely by any preposterous monster, and the only special expense involved would be for one monster suit.

Not all sf films since *The Thing* have been about monsters, but the majority have. *The Day the World Stood Still*, also released in 1951, was almost, but not quite, a monster film. It was not a story of catastrophe as the title suggests, but of alien visitors. The screen-play deprived another popular science fiction story from As-

tounding, Harry Bates' "Farewell to the Master," of its good ideas, its conviction, and its point. *The Day* substituted a message: Earthlings, behave yourselves. Again, probably because like *The Thing* the story was novel but could be understood without much effort, *The Day* earned good reviews and good money. Whatever reservations one may have about the film, in comparison with *The Thing* and its spawn, *The Day* has a comparatively civilized air, at least.

It Came From Outer Space was another rare exception that appeared rather early in the cycle. One of the virtues of *It Came From Outer Space* is that It is here by accident, and wants to go home.

Following the precedent that *The Thing* set, *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* and *Them!* established major variations of the monster theme. *The Beast*, a foolish fancy of Ray Bradbury's to begin with, was an amphibious dinosaur. I cannot remember whether nuclear physics was responsible for its resuscitation or its final destruction, but probably it was both. *The Beast*, like *The Thing*, thaws to life, but it was a menace of terrestrial origin. This simplifies the filmmakers' problems. *The Beast* has been followed by several monsters revived, we are told, from the distant past, and all of them instinctively attack populous cities. (*King Kong*, unlike these "atom beasts," had some sort of motivation.) *Them!* were giant ants, also dangerous, in the sewers of Los Angeles. Impossibly large insects with a taste for human flesh have appeared in *The Deadly Mantis*, *The Spider*, and others. The milder *Creature from the Black Lagoon* proved so popular that he himself returned for *Revenge*, but of all the earthly monsters, only *The Magnetic Monster*, with a script by Curt Siodmak, displayed much originality and consistency.

The Incredible Shrinking Man created its

* It may be pointed out that Wells' Martians shared this improbable habit; but they were not vegetable bipeds, and that was about fifty years before.

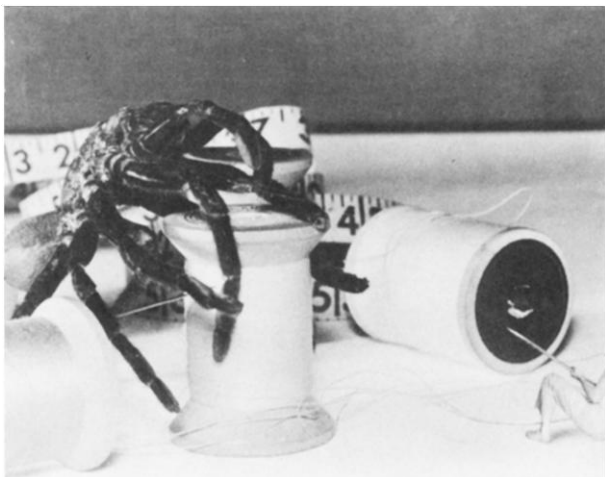
† Vague approval of this film is found even today, when its "novelty" is no excuse. For instance, Frank Hauser, although aware of the fiction of Bradbury and Heinlein, makes this wild understatement: "The film, unfortunately, was not entirely successful." (In his "Science Fiction Films," in William Whitebait's *International Film Annual*, No. 2, New York, Doubleday, 1958.)

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN

bloated-insect horror by shrinking the hero until an ordinary spider became typically perilous. The unfortunate young man of the title passes through a strange cloud while sunbathing on his cabin cruiser and begins to shrink—evenly, all over. The screen play, by Richard Matheson from his own novel, is a protracted and occasionally amusing agony. Soon the incredible shrinking man is too small to live an ordinary life. He finds brief happiness with a beautiful midget, but he breaks off their relationship when he discovers that he has become too short for her. He is plagued by reporters. When his wife walks downstairs, the doll house in which he lives shakes with unbearable violence. The cat chases him. He gets lost in the cellar. Then the spider chases him. Although the premise of the story is impossible, the end improves upon it, for the incredible shrinking man does not die because “in the mind of God there is no zero.” Even God, in the science fiction films, is a poor mathematician. *The Shrinking Man* began its own minor series of increasingly poor films about people who are too small or too big.

In a persuasive review of Matheson's novel and Frank M. Robinson's *The Power*, Damon Knight* argues that these works are popular successes precisely because they are irrational and antiscientific—considering, for instance, the inconsistent diminution of Matheson's hero, one of the novel's faults that is not repeated in the film, where one wouldn't notice it much. Knight goes too far, however, when he remarks that “Spiders don't scream, as even Matheson might know; but gutted scientists do.” *The Shrinking Man* is certainly unscientific, but this sinister implication Knight suggests in the impalement of the screaming, “symbolic” spider does not follow. In many of the sf films, though, such sinister implications are conventional.

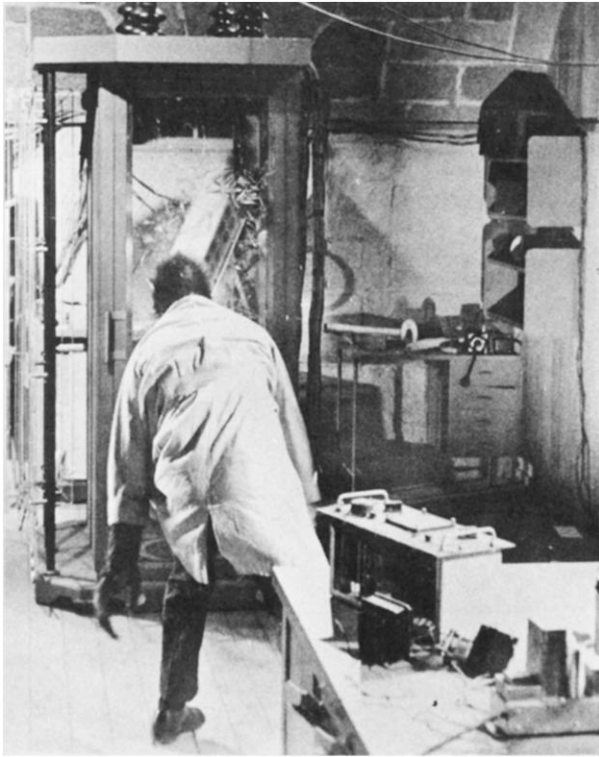
Invasions from space did not cease. *The Blob* came in color, and Martian Blood Rust sprouted in black and white in *Spacemaster X-7*. When Japan is invaded by *The Mysterians* the aggressors' one insupportable demand is intermarriage with human females “because there is so much



strontium-90 in our bones.” If one can safely judge by title and advertising, *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* involves a similar unlikely prospect, and takes the same attitude toward it. This is like expecting the Thing to pollinate Godzilla, but monstrous union is in line with this sort of film, and, considering the attitude they display toward almost every Thing in them, an intolerant view of mixed marriage is to be expected. The Mysterians, incidentally, look very much like human beings, except that they melt. Space travel is rare in sf films now, but we have discovered human beings native to Mars, Venus, and various nonexistent planets. Sometimes space travel and monsters are ingeniously combined, as when *The First Man into Space* returns a monster. *The Forbidden Planet* and *This Island Earth* were expensive color productions which involved space travel and managed to have their monsters too. In *Forbidden Planet* it had something to do with the Id, but it might as well have been Grendel. *This Island Earth*, an unbelievable adaptation of a somewhat less unbelievable novel by Raymond F. Jones, included a horrendous Thing called, of all things, a “Mutant.”

The most recent big sf film is *The Fly*, in CinemaScope and Horror-color, and popular enough to call for a *Return The Fly* is not from the short story of that title by Arthur Porges, originally in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, but from another story of the same title by George Langelaan, originally

* *In Search of Wonder: essays on modern science fiction*, Chicago, Advent, 1956.



The matter-transforming machine in THE FLY.

in *Playboy*. Porges' story presents an interesting situation which could not be filmed without expansion and, inevitably, ruination; and it would be called *Invasion of the Atom-Fly from Another World*. Since Langelaan's story is impossible to begin with, is inconsistent anyway, and is a horror story as horrifying as the most horrible sf films, one might expect that it could endure motion picture adaptation. The film, however, managed to be more impossible and less consistent, to add clichés and bright blood, and to contrive a happier ending with some morally repugnant implications.

Even if one accepts, for the sake of entertainment, the initial premise that Andre Delambre has built, in his basement, a working matter-transmitter, nothing else follows. The machine behaves differently each time it makes a mistake. The molecular structure of a dish is reversed. A cat, with a pitiable wail, disappears

entirely. Finally, Andre himself is somehow mixed up with a fly. The result is a handsome young scientist with ". . . the head of a fly" (and an arm, too) and "the fly with the head of a man!"* Of course, there is a certain ingenuity about the accident: it creates two "monsters" instead of one. But why is Andre with the head of the fly still Andre, and why does his fly-leg have (evidently) a fly's volition? Why was the part of the fly grafted to Andre enlarged to fit him so well? How does he eat? Breathe? Why does he gradually begin to think a bit like a fly, and why is he then tempted to maul his poor wife, Helene? Why destroy the lab? The series of physical impossibilities in the script is not helped by the psychology. After squashing the man with the head of the fly in a hydraulic press, Helene neither commits suicide nor is she confined, as in the story. Helene is saved from grief and inconvenience by Commissaire Charas who, at the last minute, notes the fly with the head of a man, and squashes it with a rock. What else, indeed, could be done with it? Although it is clear that Andre's death (i.e., Andre, in the press) was suicide in which Helene cooperated, the script chooses to ignore the moral problem presented by the suicide, or the mercy-killing, or whatever it was. Instead, the issue is that Helene killed a mere Thing. After all, it is not improper to kill a Thing, and one may safely kill a man if he is no longer entirely human. This follows repetitious dialogue about the Sacredness of Life, but apparently they meant natural, original life-forms only, and the cat is more sacred than Andre in either combination. In the last scene of the film, Andre's surviving brother delivers a little prosciency speech to Andre's son while Helene listens, smiling sweetly. Father, the boy's uncle tells him, was like Columbus. What will be remembered, of course, is that Father was like a fly.

The Fly, like most sf films, has a rather strange, very old moral. A search for knowledge or any worldly improvements may go too far; it

* In the story, Andre attempts to rectify this error and merely mixes himself with the vanished cat as well as the housefly; this explains why the author did away with the cat, if not how. No doubt the makers of the film considered this too complicated, but retained the cat's disappearance for the unique poignancy of the scene.

may be blasphemous; and one may be punished with an unnatural end.*

The premises of sf films are all antique, and carelessly handled. Twenty years ago, the matter-transmitter in the present-day cellar might have been almost convincing; but now one would expect it in a more credible context, and expect it to function with some consistency. Most sf films, however, do not take place in the future, where such an invention might be acceptable. 1984 is a rare, recent exception; but if Orwell's novel had not forced the date, it would have been 1960.

It is true that magazine science fiction developed and exploited the stereotyped mad scientist and the evil bug-eyed monster. But that, again, was about twenty years ago. Giant insects, shrinking men, and dinosaurs can be found in science fiction of the same period. It is true that some science fiction stories are as unoriginal, illogical, and monstrous as sf films; but you have to know where to look in order to find many of them.

Apart from such incidental lessons as the immorality of attempting to prolong life and the advisability of forgetting anything new that one happens to learn, there are two vague ideas that appear in sf films with some regularity. Sometimes, the menace or the Thing does not merely kill its victims, but deprives them of their identity, their free-will, or their individual rights and obligations as members of a free society. In *Attack of the Puppet People*, for instance, the combination doll-maker and mad superscientist who shrinks the people he likes is a sort of pathetic, benevolent dictator. Many sf films derive whatever emotional effect they have from their half-hearted allegorization of the conflict between individuality and conformity. Usually, the conflict remains undeveloped, and although the characters tend to resist such menaces, their reasons may often be that the menace is a slimy, repulsive Thing, or that they would resist any change, even one for the better. 1984 is the only sf film that took this conflict as its subject, although it is common in science fiction novels.

The other vague idea is that atomic power is dangerous. The point has been made again and again, ever since the Geiger counter reacted to the presence of the first Thing. The point is indisputable, but these films rarely show any awareness of the ways in which the atom is dangerous. The danger of atomic war is explicit in Arch Oboler's *Five*, the recent *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*, and the forthcoming *On the Beach*. These films are not only exceptional, they are not generally considered to be science fiction. In the ordinary science fiction film, atomic bombs raise dragons and shrink people. Even *The Fly*, which had nothing to do with the effects of radiation, real or imagined, was advertised as if its poor monsters were the realistic, possible outcome of fall-out on flesh. It may be argued that all the atomic monsters of sf films are symbols, and I suppose that they are, but they are inapt, inept, or both.

If the creators of monster films had intended any comment on the problems raised by the atomic bomb, or even on feelings about it, as some kindly critics have assumed, they would not have made their monster films at all. The most obvious advantage of science fiction, and the three films mentioned above, is that one can deal with such problems and feelings by extending the situation into the future and showing a possible effect or resolution. There is no need for indirect discussion or for a plot with a "symbol" as its mainspring. A twelve-ton, woman-eating cockroach does not say anything about the bomb simply because it, too, is radioactive, or crawls out of a test-site, and the film-makers have simply attempted to make their monster more frightening by associating it with something serious.

One should realize that, like them or not, the invaders in Wells' *War of the Worlds*, the stranded Alien in Campbell's "Who Goes There?," or the parasites in Heinlein's *Puppet Masters* (clumsily parodied by *The Brain Eaters*, who are complex parasitic animals that evolved when there were no hosts for them) are a different sort of monster from those of most sf films. They may be symbols too, but first

* In *The Return of the Fly*, the same thing happens, and the moral is the same.

they are beings. Campbell may invent a creature that evokes a complex of ancient fears—fear of the ancient itself, the fear that death may not be final, that evil is indestructible, and fear rising from the imitation motif, fear of possession, of loss of identity, all the fears that gave rise to tales of demons, ghosts, witches, vampires, shape-shifters. But in “Who Goes There?” it is a realistically conceived being that evokes these fears and creates the suspense, not an impossible symbol; and the story is not hysterical, but a study of man under stress.

The sf films abuse their borrowed props and offer nothing but hysteria. The films resemble unpleasant dreams, but rarely resemble them well. One cannot condemn an attempt to make a film suggesting nightmare illogic, of course. But surrealism is not what the makers of these films have in mind.

Fantasy and science fiction are not convincing if they are not consistent. Convincing the audience to accept the initial premise of the story may be difficult enough, without violating that premise in each scene. Expensive and careful treatment of a careless script cannot overcome the script's bad logic in science fiction or anything else. And while careful sf scripts are rare, careful treatment is even more rare. Most of the special effects in sf films, for instance, would not deceive a myopic child in the back of the theater—not even all the third-degree burns and running sores that have become so popular. The films convey the impression that everyone involved is aware that he is working on something which is not only beneath his talent but beneath the audience as well. It seems that even the make-up department, called upon by the pointless turns of a morbid plot to disintegrate a bored actor, has neither the time nor the heart to waste any effort, and produces something that looks like the unraveling of an old vacuum-cleaner bag. Perhaps this is a good thing. But it is strange that if you hire a group of talented people and ask for another science fiction—horror, you will get a film that is not merely abominable in conception and perverse in implication but half-hearted in execution.

Reginald Bretnor's symposium, *Modern Science Fiction* (New York, Coward-McCann), contains an interesting article by Don Fabun, “Science Fiction in Motion Pictures, Radio, and Television,” a detailed examination that concludes with this hope: “In time we may see the modern literary form called science fiction legitimately married to novel and exciting techniques of presentation, a combination which should bring us fresh and exciting entertainment superior to what we see and hear today.” That was in 1953. Today, there seems little cause for hope from the present level where “science fiction” is indistinguishable from “horror,” and “horror” from sadism. An audience for good science fiction films probably exists, but it is unlikely that producers will take that chance now. During the period when it seemed reasonable to expect some good sf films, the only chances that producers were willing to take with unfamiliar material were with material from contemporary life—“unfamiliar material” only in their previous films. With science fiction, everyone has followed the easy examples of a few successful horror films, in cheaper and cheaper productions that plagiarized their poverty of ideas and their antiscientific tone. Perhaps the problem of producing good sf films is more difficult than that of producing simply good films. Complex, individual, and intelligent films are rare, and films of this quality with unfamiliar, fantastic subjects are few indeed. *Things to Come*, *Caligari*, *Orpheus*, or *The Seventh Seal* are uncommon individual achievements; probably, good science fiction films will appear only in the form of such unusual achievements.* For the rest, if sf films continue to be produced, they will take the easy way of the scream instead of the statement, and continue to tell their increasingly irrational and vicious stories of impossible monsters, evil professors, and helpless victims. (“See a strip-teaser completely stripped — of flesh!” invites the latest poster.)

A possible explanation for the impossible, self-contradictory creatures and plots of these films is that their creators do not think it could matter to anyone: the monsters are unnatural—or un-

* Despite his success with *Beauty and the Beast*, Cocteau had trouble in obtaining backing for *Orpheus*.

naturalness—anyway, and the calculated response is “Quick! Kill it, before it reproduces!” (Poor Andre, poor Thing.) The assumption may be partially correct; and if many people like this sort of entertainment, the clear impossibility of creatures and plots may help ease the conscience. If the monsters are anything, they are evil conveniently objectified. But the “evils” that they represent, while sometimes pain and death, are just as often man’s power, knowledge, and intelligence. Their part used to be played by the Devil or his demons. The destruction of the Things and of the mad scientists, and the senseless martyrdoms of the more rare “good” (if not “sane”) scientists, resemble nothing so

much as exorcism and the burning of witches and heretics.

Unfortunately, science fiction films have associated science, the future, the different, and the unknown with nothing but irrational fear. There are enough dangers; in these films the dangers are not natural, but impossible and monstrous—of the same character as those that one was believed to risk when, in another time, one forsook the True Faith for the Black Arts. What the equivalent of the Black Arts is imagined to be is often all too clear in each film. But the True Faith is never plainly shown, perhaps because if it is anything at all it is simply an absence of any thinking.

Going Out to the Subject

COLIN YOUNG & A. MARTIN ZWEIBACK

This article discusses new films seen at the recent Flaherty Seminar—films that are going into hitherto little-explored territory with a new approach. Included are works by Jean Rouch, the Free Cinema film-makers, Michel Brault and M. Groulx, the Puerto Rican documentary group, John Chapman, John Marshall and Robert Gardner, and Aaejay Kardar. In our next issue we will discuss more films of this sort, notably The Savage Eye and Come Back Africa.

“Les yeux d’un étranger sont grands ouverts mais il ne voit que ce qu’il sait.” (A stranger’s eyes are wide open but he sees only what is in his mind.)
—GOLD COAST PROVERB.

Film criticism, generally, suffers from want of examples, and writers on the development and achievements of the cinema have often been forced by habits formed elsewhere into premature judgments and generalizations. Some of the younger directors charged last year with selecting the best film of all time from the Brussels twelve confessed that in many cases they were seeing the films for the first time. It is a continuing problem for film-makers, as it is for the writer on film, to gather together sufficient examples of the work of any one school or period

so that judgments can be made and lessons learned.

In the United States it has been difficult enough to keep abreast of the *contemporary* product from Europe—without attending distributors’ private previews in New York—and it is no better with films from Asia. Shiro Toyoda’s *The Mistress* (known in England as *Wild Geese*, from the novel *Gan*) was produced in 1953, De Sica’s and Zavattini’s *The Roof (Il Tetto)* was produced in 1955, and yet neither was shown in Los Angeles until November of this year. The situation is much the same within any European country since, despite the festivals, no one has the time or the energy to attend them all. Last year the San Francisco Festival received the official sanction of the International