

# The Rise and Commonalities of Eastern and Western Science Fiction Film and Television

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**Abstract:** *This essay explores the rise and commonalities of Eastern and Western science fiction films and television series. It examines the significance of these works in the literary, media, and social contexts, focusing on their exploration of humanities, society, and human nature. It also discusses the influence of Western science fiction on the development of the genre in the East, highlighting the themes of non-human entities, dystopia, superpowers, and interstellar civilizations. It analyzes specific works to illustrate the profound ethical, social, and environmental issues addressed in science fiction. It also concludes that science fiction films and television series serve as a platform for discussing and reflecting on the complexities of human nature and the challenges faced by society, while also providing a temporary escape from reality and stimulating critical thinking.*

**Keywords:** *Science Fiction, Film and Television, Eastern and Western, Media, Culture*

## 1. Introduction

Science fiction film and television are narrative works that use science fiction elements as their themes and add reasonable fantasy to science (Cornea, 2007)<sup>[1]</sup>. Science fiction works are a fusion of science and media, including discussions on sociology, philosophy, literature, ethics, psychology, and other disciplines. Its scenes are usually possible future worlds, with themes of alien planets, artificial intelligence, superpowers, robots, and bionic humans. Many science fiction film and television works are adapted from science fiction novels and are comprehensive works that connect technology and humanities. This kind of work is undoubtedly one of the most thought-provoking works, showing inner, interpersonal, and social conflicts while exploring the future of human and science.

There are gaps in development and history between Eastern and Western science fiction film and television works. There is no doubt that Western science fiction films and television works have played an international, historical enlightenment role in the development of this industry. George Riet's *A Trip to the Moon* is the earliest science fiction film. It is inspired by Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and H.G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*. With the continuous distribution and innovation of Western science fiction film and television works, Eastern ones have also emerged and developed rapidly in recent years (Geraghty, 2009)<sup>[2]</sup>. Various countries have begun to create science fiction works with exquisite graphics, novel science fiction themes, and profound ideas. Although there are differences in time and themes between works from different countries, there are many similarities in the discussion of humanities, society, human nature, and other fields.

This article will take several classic science fiction film and television works and several latest ones as examples to analyze the literary, media, and social significance of the industry of science fiction film and television, and explore their commonalities.

## 2. The rise of Eastern and Western science fiction film and television

Science fiction films emerged in Europe in the 1940s (Booker, 2001)<sup>[3]</sup>. Subsequently, science fiction film and television in the United States developed rapidly and ushered in a stage of rise. The early European-centered science fiction film and television were then dominated by the United States, reflecting outstanding narrative, cultural exposure, and ideological innovation. Western science fiction film and television were decades ahead of the East. When Eastern science fiction film and television

began to include industry, space, and literature in works, the West had already developed a complete and mature system.

Early science fiction films did not receive independent classification or clear recognition. Whether European or American science fiction films, such as *Frankenstein* (1931), were often classified as horror films and marginalized (Smith, 2012)<sup>[4]</sup>. As filmmakers produced movies and TV series adapted from literary works, elements of technological anxiety, social culture, religious redemption, and future time and space got amplified and visualized, creating iconic innovations for science fiction movies and TV series (Bukatman, 1993)<sup>[5]</sup>. It also offered science fiction films as an independent genre to enter global cinemas.

However, the rise of Eastern and Western science fiction films also experienced the stage of twists and turns. Although the Paramount lawsuit in 1948 ended Hollywood's vertical monopoly on films and gave science fiction films much space to develop in the United States, science fiction films created in the political context of the United States and the Soviet Union's struggle for hegemony focused on war and civil rights (Porst, 2014)<sup>[6]</sup>. They were classified as sensitive films, which were not suitable for exploring global science fiction issues. Eastern science fiction movies, such as Japan's *Godzilla*, encountered the same situation as they only reflected unique political and environmental issues.

To break the bottleneck that the audience of works is only the people of a specific country, Western science fiction films were far ahead as they applied the principle of universalism, which could be reflected in transcending the unique and special culture of each country and exploring the common emotions and international focus. At present, science fiction film and television industries of different countries are catching up with American film and television technology while exploring cultural individuality and commonality, and mastering the balance between technology and ethics.

### **3. Several common reasons for the popularity of Eastern and Western science fiction films and TV series**

#### **3.1 *A rational, scientific vision of the future***

The American *Westworld* was released in 1973. It reasonably depicts a future with intelligent robots when there are no robots. At that time, people's door to the world of science and technology was opened by new things like computers, and they all imagined how future computer technology would bring changes to their lives. The emergence of science fiction movies not only satisfies their curiosity but also provides a perspective on scientific future possibilities. When the possibility gets realized in the future, it is one of the charms of science fiction movies.

*Blade Runner*, also from the United States, imagined the scene in Los Angeles in 2019: the rich at the top of society left the uninhabitable Earth due to environmental pollution, and only the poor still lived on the dirty, dark planet. The Chinese science fiction film *The Wandering Earth* offers the setting of a crisis in 2075, depicting a scene in which humans flee the solar system with the Earth because the sun is about to explode. A snow-covered surface and people living in underground cities are the environmental predictions of this movie.

The overexploitation of the environment, the exploration of the universe, and the gap between rich and poor are heatedly discussed topics. People can't help but imagine and question what the future of humans will be like if environmental and social issues remain unresolved. These science fiction movies not only answer the above questions about the future but also deepen people's and relevant departments' cognition and consideration of existing problems.

#### **3.2 *The freshness of a new world or new things***

The sense of immersion brought by science fiction movies and television is unparalleled. The freshness of the world it constructs allows the audience to briefly escape reality. The fictional world on the screen can often make the audience lose themselves. Since the setting of science fiction allows the work to be as far away from reality as possible, viewers obsessed with different locations and impossible concepts can escape reality without losing the value of thinking.

Unlike predicting the future, American science fiction movies such as *Avatar*, *Jurassic Park*, and *The Matrix* directly create a brand new world. The alien planet Pandora, alien life Avatar, a world where dinosaurs and humans coexist, and a world where computer civilization rules humans have all proposed

new settings and concepts, giving the viewers a sense of freshness while bringing the film and television industry great scientific value. Although it takes more time to clarify the rules of the new world in the early stage of watching than watching other types of movies, viewers are more likely to get shocked by the novel plots and spur more innovative thinking.

Although China's *CJ7* and the America's *Tron* did not build a new science fiction world, they also introduce alien and digital life. Adding new elements to the original world creates a conflict between old and new things and multiculturalism when offering the audience a sense of freshness in their familiar lives. Although *CJ7* is mainly made for children, it has also triggered thoughts about "whether alien life exists" and "whether alien life can coexist with humans on Earth." *Tron* is based on computers, hackers, copyrights, and programming that people are familiar with, giving concrete life to various elements of computers. Not only is a brand-new electronic world created, but a reflection on the computer industry due to its freshness is also brought.

### 3.3 The epic stories of superheroes

Superheroes in science fiction films and television are not only characters that conform to science fiction settings but are also the key to condensing plots and values. Science fiction's broadest sense is essentially fictional settings explained scientifically. Introducing superheroes, the combination of scientific human nature and fictional superpowers can make the science fiction model more lively and vivid.

The 21st century is a period of high-frequency birth of superheroes. Superheroes in this period meet society's need for saviors and provide a sense of security, emotional value, and encouragement with a sense of justice. The complex identities and characters of superheroes also allow the audience to find spiritual and identity recognition. *Iron Man* and *Spider-Man*, for example, have defined a part of popular culture globally and are sought after by people who hope to see the continuation of creating miracles and delivering inspiration on the screen.

Knowing the world when seeing a hero or watching a work is the sense of scale and pattern that science fiction films and TV series stand out from. These epic world concepts built around superheroes are also one of the reasons for the popularity of science fiction films and television. The dystopian Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* and the adventure epic of *Lawrence of Arabia* both built worlds full of superhero emotions from a small perspective. *Avengers: Endgame* and *Interstellar* have also proven that epic superhero stories can achieve greater levels of popularity and financial success.

## 4. Several common themes of Eastern and Western science fiction film and television

### 4.1 Non-human entities and humanity

Mary Shelley's novel and film *Frankenstein* pioneered the theme of non-human entities in science fiction film and television. Although *Frankenstein* is viewed as a monster, the work depicts the possibility of non-human entities existing and trying to obtain humanity. Since then, science fiction films and television works have continued to discuss artificial humans, bionic humans, and replicants, triggering the exploration of non-human entities and human nature.

*Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) then challenges the moral constraints of *Frankenstein*, questioning the distinction between humans and non-human entities. Whether and how humans and replicants can coexist is its focus. *Bionic*, released in China in 2023, is an Eastern science fiction TV series that pays homage to *Blade Runner*. Both works focus on whether replicants can have humanity, whether replicants with humanity should be treated as humans, and the contradiction of making replicants with human images and behaviors but not allowing them to have human rights, questioning what makes a human.

Subsequent Eastern and Western science fiction films and television inspired by *Blade Runner* have elaborated on non-human entities and humanity in more complicated ways. The American film *AI*, the Chinese TV series *Hello, Anyi* and the Japanese movie *Cyborg Girl* raise the issue of the coexistence and contradiction between artificial intelligence and humans after technological development have reached a certain stage.

### 4.2 Dystopia

Films and TV series with dystopian themes often show reflections on people's sense of urgency in

their living environment. *Metropolis* is the earliest dystopian science fiction film, telling the story of a human world ruled by machines in a future society. The doomsday scene, endless night, and filled smoke depicted in *Blade Runner* embodies the dystopian theme, interpreting the ideas of cyberpunk. Many other disaster-themed science fiction films and TV shows, such as *Sweet Home* and *The Wandering Earth*, reflect the possible environmental problems that people are worried about. It can be seen that dystopian-themed science fiction films and TV series implicitly disclose environmental issues and worry about the future of human existence.

In addition to exploring environmental issues, dystopian-themed science fiction films also focus on authority, rule, and power. *A Clockwork Orange* exposes the satire of science and government that are full of violent elements and accuses the government of the harm caused to society by its inhumane experiments. The Korean movie *Memories of Murder* covers ethical issues such as police corruption and collusion between officials and conducts in-depth reflections on moral and ethical issues under the theme of dystopia. The American TV series *Silo* and the movie *Strange Days* both made the audience feel the government's deception, violence, and chaos against the people in a seemingly peaceful society.

Dystopian-themed science fiction films and television use fictional settings to tell real environmental concerns and social governance issues, leading audiences to think about profound ethical issues.

### **4.3 Superpowers and society**

Sci-fi movies and TV series with superpower themes are different from non-human entities in that the protagonist maintains the essence of human beings from beginning to end but acquires special abilities beyond human beings either innately or acquired. The protagonists in *Push* have unique superpowers, gradually realizing that the future is controlled by individuals and can be changed. *Lucy* combines the theory of evolution and the theme of biological genetic empowerment, telling the story of the protagonist who gained superpowers by accidentally eating CPH4.

In recent decades, science fiction films and TV shows with superpower themes have gradually evolved from visual works focusing solely on showing superpowers and fighting scenes to social and ethical works that use superpowers as an entry point to discuss the worldview. Every human protagonist in the Marvel series has unique superpowers and faces their social problems. The protagonist's decision under conflict not only reveals the controversy over the existence of superpowers in society but also gives superpowers a more complex understanding and discussion.

Among Eastern science fiction films and television works with superpowers as the theme, Korean ones occupy a significant position. Every year, South Korea releases a large number of works with the theme of superpowers. These works include the battle between good and evil, superpowers saving the world, abuse of superpowers, and policies on superpowers issued by the authorities. *Moving* is a science fiction drama that aired on Disney+ in 2023. It tells the story of children living in the present who hide their superpowers, and parents who hide the painful secrets of the past together to face huge dangers that span generations. It uses a multi-line narrative technique to elaborate on the complex ethical relationship between superpowers, the government, and the military and tells the tragedy of superpowers who could have lived freely but were forced into conflicts.

### **4.4 Interstellar civilization**

Interstellar civilization can somehow be understood as transferring the stories of the rise and fall of dynasties, such as conquest and expansion in human history, to the interstellar background of the future and reinterpreting them. There are alien creatures, spacecraft, new weapons, and grand war scenes. The two most famous fantasy film series in the United States, *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, are representatives of this theme. *Mission to Mars* tells an outline of the civilizational history of Mars and Earth through the mouth of a Martian. The work puts forward the speculation that in addition to the earth's civilization, there are more advanced civilizations on other planets, expressing concerns about the earth's civilization in a science fiction way.

The novel "Three-Body Problem", which serves as the basis for the Chinese science fiction TV series *Three-Body*, is a seminal and groundbreaking work on the subject of Eastern interstellar civilization. It expresses the aforementioned conjectures and concerns in addition to giving a clear description of the actual game environment and the conflict between humans and Trisolarans. In contrast to science fiction movies and series set in the Western world that explore extraterrestrial civilization, *Three-Body* splits people into two groups: those who encourage the invasion of alien civilization and those who do not.

Additionally, it employs multi-line narrative techniques and knowledge from computer science, biology, philosophy, and other fields to describe extraterrestrial civilizations in a more sophisticated way.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, science fiction films and television series from both Eastern and Western cultures have risen in popularity due to their ability to explore profound ethical, social, and environmental issues. These works provide a rational and scientific vision of the future, allowing audiences to imagine and question the potential outcomes of unresolved problems in our world. They also offer a sense of immersion in new worlds and concepts, providing viewers with a temporary escape from reality while stimulating their thinking.

Whether it is the depiction of non-human entities, dystopian themes, superpowers and society, or interstellar civilizations, science fiction films and television series serve as a platform for discussing and reflecting on the complexities of human nature and the challenges we face as a society. The rise of Eastern science fiction industries, influenced by Western works, has brought cultural individuality and commonality to the genre, striking a balance between technology and ethics.

Overall, science fiction films and television series have become a powerful medium for exploring and expanding our understanding of the world and our place in it. Also, the science fiction film and television works of the East and the West not only put forward higher requirements for the production and digital media of the film and television industry, offer inspiration to literature works, but also have a positive reflection and prediction effect on the relevant social status quo.

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