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Femmes Futures: 100 years of female representation in science fiction cinema

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[Sample Text]

State of the art

In *It Came From Outer Space* (Arnold US 1953), Kathleen Hughes appears as Jane in a single scene, delivering just a few lines; however, she features in most of the film's publicity material – including posters (Wright 104), the cover of the 2003 Universal Pictures DVD release and the studio shot of her in a tight sweater, by which the film is most often recognised. She even appears, somewhat incongruously, in a swimsuit in the film's closing credits. The fact that she features at all remains baffling, until one remembers that the film was originally released in 3-D, a fact highlighted by a number of the film's taglines, including 'Fantastic sights leap at you!' It then becomes clear that the beautiful, blonde, perkybreasted Hughes was intended to demonstrate and exploit this technology.

The axiom that a film says as much about the time of its production as about the time of its setting has particular relevance for sf, and nowhere is the genre's function as a barometer for contemporary attitudes better reflected than in the changing roles for women and representations of the female. Comparisons made between sf projects across the years add weight to this observation. When Yvette Mimieux appeared in *The Time Machine* (Pal US 1960), the most prominent female role was her innocent Eloi slave, Weena. By the time of *The Black Hole* (Nelson US 1979), space had been made for Mimieux as female astronaut and scientist, Dr Kate McCrae. Weena herself has disappeared from the remake of *The Time Machine* (Wells US 2002), replaced by the more feisty, mixedrace Mara (Samantha Mumba). In *Lost in Space* (Hopkins US 1998), Maureen Robinson (Mimi Rogers), the wife and mother of the original television series (US 1965–8), has acquired a PhD; Nurse Chapel (Majel Barrett) from the *Star Trek* television series (US 1966–9) has been promoted to MD by *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Wise US 1979); and secretary Helen Benson (Patricia Neal) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Wise US 1951) is transformed into Princeton professor Helen Benson (Jennifer Connelly) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Derrickson US/Canada 2008).

While female roles in sf cinema have developed considerably since the 1950s, the last decade or so has seen a fall in the number of major roles for women. They have remained visible – even prominent – but their importance to individual narratives has reverted to an earlier state. With the success of *Avatar* (Cameron US/UK 2009), 3-D is back on sf's agenda, and with characters such as Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) in mind, this essay aims to establish the extent to which the genre today relies on representations of the female gleaned from a century of sf cinema.

Mothers and queens: traditional imperatives

Given sf's allegorical potential, it is unsurprising that its earliest narrative films draw on pre-cinematic metaphoric uses of women. For example, the Queen of

the Polar Regions and the Fairy of the Oceans in, respectively, *The Adventurous Voyage of 'The Arctic'* (Booth UK 1903) and *Deux Cent Mille Lieues sous les mers* (*Under the Seas*; Méliès France 1907) make overt use of Mother Nature figures. Such characters rarely appear after the 1910s, although their influence can be discerned in later parthenogenetic aliens and occasional invocations of a Gaia-esque notion of a Mother Earth. The worldly queen, in contrast, survives to the present day. Evoking images of Cleopatra, especially as re-cast in H. Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure* (1886–7), and characters from fairy tales and fantasy, the queen often doubles as a glamorous temptress, articulated in various ways with the eponymous Queen of Mars played by Yuliya Solntseva in *Aelita* (Protazanov USSR 1924), Talleah (Zsa Zsa Gabor) in *Queen of Outer Space* (Bernds US 1958), the Great Tyrant (Anita Pallenberg) in *Barbarella* (Vadim France/Italy 1967) and Queen Amidala (Natalie Portman) in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (Lucas US 1999).

Much of the sf inspired by the commercial success of *Star Wars* (Lucas US 1977) relies on the conventions of fantasy storytelling. *Star Wars* itself presented Leia (Carrie Fisher) as a princess in a 'tower', awaiting rescue – a role influenced directly by Princess Yuki Akizuki (Misa Uehara) in Kurosawa's *Kakushi-toride no san-akunin* (*The Hidden Fortress*; Kurosawa Japan 1958) and indirectly by monster movies going back at least as far as *King Kong* (Cooper US 1933) and by the *Flash Gordon* (Stephani US 1936) movie serial and its sequels. Following *Star Wars*, damsels-in-distress were briefly back in fashion, in films such as *The Black Hole*, *Saturn 3* (Donen UK 1980) and *Flash Gordon* (Hodges UK 1980). The latter also contributed to the post-*Star Wars* trend for warring royal houses and feudal factions in *Battlestar Galactica* (Colla US 1978), *Buck Rogers in the*

25th Century (Haller US 1979), *Starcrash* (Coates US/Italy 1979) and others. In contrast to these character types, the mother has been a constant presence in the genre and, after 'love interest', is the most represented female role. She is there to indicate familiar social 'norms' in early narrative films; she serves as a more specific reference to the nobility of mothers in 1933's future-tale of women and the peace movement, *Men Must Fight* (Selwyn US); and she represents an American domestic idyll in 1950s films like *Invaders from Mars* (Menzies US 1953) and *The Beast with a Million Eyes* (Kramarsky US 1956). Helen Benson's key function, and position as a single mother, in both versions of *The Day The Earth Stood Still* allows her to challenge some entrenched stereotypes, but the role continues to reflect the 'special tie women have with children' that Shulamith Firestone describes as being 'no more than shared oppression' (73).

Indeed, motherhood delineates even the most celebrated of the genre's female figures, Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton), albeit through a more nuanced exploration of its forms. Ripley's biological motherhood, revealed in *Aliens* (Cameron US/UK 1986) when she discovers that she has outlived her only daughter, is substituted in *Alien* (Scott US/UK 1979), *Aliens* (Fincher US 1992) and *Alien Resurrection* (Jeunet US 1997) by various forms of surrogate motherhood: to the cat, Jonesey; the child, Newt (Carrie Henn); the alien itself; and to the gynoid, Call (Winona Ryder). Sarah Connor's motherhood swings between denial of her fate – 'Come on. Do I look like the mother of the future?' – through struggles with the responsibilities of motherhood to an acceptance of the role of mother-figure to the post-apocalyptic human race.

Despite seismic shifts in the representation of women, motherhood has remained a constant in sf film because it grounds the genre in social reality. Regardless of the new, imagined sciences, worlds, histories, environments, technologies and species, maternity lies tangibly at the heart of sf cinema's questions about who we are. However, it is by asking 'what if?' that sf arrives at one of its most seductive contortions of reality: the ability to offer motherhood to men.

Robots and gynoids: construction of artificial fantasies

Religion and myth had been creating gods to usurp the reproductive role of women long before Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) imagined man creating man, but whereas *Genesis* 'is a male declaration of independence from the ancient mother-cults' (Paglia 40), *Frankenstein* rationalises the process of male creation for an enlightened (scientific) age. Shelley is unclear about the nature of the force that animates her monster, but the iconography of James Whale's *Frankenstein* (US 1931) – bubbling flasks, lightning bolts and so on – roots the story firmly in sf. Whale's sequel, *The Bride of Frankenstein* (US 1935) goes even further, allowing man to create woman *scientifically*, building on an important genre strand that includes many versions of *Coppélia* derived from E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'Der Sandmann' (1816), about a mechanical doll that comes to life,¹ and the robots that began to populate sf after Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* (1921). Čapek describes an army of practical worker drones, but sf cinema's artificial females – robots, gynoids, cyborgs and even computers – seem to owe at least as much to the myth of Pygmalion. Central to many of these male creation-fantasies is a reduction in the cognitive capacity of artificial women. In *2010* (Hyams US 1984), the female-gendered SAL 9000, voiced by Candice Bergen, presents a more 'sensitive' side to computers than her 'older brother' HAL 9000, who had run amok in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick UK/US 1968). In *2010*, a joint Russian-American team travels back to Jupiter orbit to determine the reason for the earlier mission's failure. Onboard the derelict spaceship, *Discovery*, they learn that HAL's murderous actions had been a rational result of his programming.

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1. Early versions include *Coppélia ou la Poupée Animée* (Méliès France 1900), *The Doll Maker's Daughter* (Fitzhamon UK 1906), *The Mechanical Statue and the Ingenious Servant* (Blackton US 1907) and *Hoffmanns Erzählungen* (Neuman Austria 1923). ...