Film Genres

Science Fiction

How can you describe a SCIENCE FICTION film?

Science fiction films have themes that are not usually accepted by serious scientists such as aliens, extrasensory perception, and time and space travel. Many modern films however, through fiction, tackle political and social issues such as the use of machines, computers, governments or drugs used to control the population.

What is the history of Sci-Fi movies?

The genre has existed since the early years of silent cinema. In 1902, Georges Melies' A Trip to the Moon amazed audiences with its trick photography effects. The next major example in the genre was the 1927 film Metropolis by Fritz Lang. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the genre consisted mainly of what were called low-budget "B-movies".

In 1968, after Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, the science fiction film was taken more seriously and in the 1970s, big-budget science fiction films filled with special effects such as Star wars became popular and paved the way for a whole range of blockbuster hits such as E.T, the Terminator series, The Matrix, Alien and Avatar.

What elements are often included in Sci-Fi Films?

Genres such as westerns or war movies are bound to a particular area or time period. This is not true of the science fiction film. However there are elements or plots that regularly appear in Sci-Fi films. These include spaceships, alien worlds, robots and futuristic gadgets. The following is a list of just a few examples and how they are used in Sci-Fi.

ALIENS - Films often use aliens as a threat to Earth, wanting to invade or destroy our planet. However, some saw aliens as friendly and even wanting to help us e.g. E.T., Close Encounters. The large majority of intelligent aliens presented in films have human emotions and are often almost human in appearance e.g. eyes, mouth, arms, legs. However, a few films have tried to represent intelligent aliens as something different e.g. an unseen presence or a shapeless mass of energy.
DISASTER MOVIES - These often serve as a warning against a type of activity e.g. technological research - robots taking over the world, major climate changes. In the case of alien invasion films, the creatures provide a stand-in for a feared foreign power. Science fiction film also has a long tradition of movies featuring monster attacks. These differ from similar films in the horror or fantasy genres because science fiction films usually rely on scientific ideas for the monster's existence, rather than a supernatural or magical reason. Often, the science fiction film monster is "woken" by a nuclear accident, or a scientific experiment gone wrong.

ROBOTS - have been a part of science fiction since the Czech writer Karel Čapek created the word in 1921. In early films, robots were usually played by human actors in a metal suit. The first depiction of a sophisticated robot was in the film The Day the Earth Stood Still. Robots have been supporting characters, such as Robby the Robot in Forbidden Planet, C-3PO and R2-D2 from Star Wars as well having leading roles (in films such as Bladerunner, A.I.) as villains or monsters. One popular theme in is whether robots will someday replace humans, a question raised in films such as I, Robot or The Terminator.

TIME TRAVEL - has always been a popular theme. It usually involves the use of some type of machine or going through a time portal such as a black hole in space. It's a method that brings the past to life in the present time or looks forward to what will happen in the future. By travelling in time, events can be changed e.g. Back to the Future and Star Trek: First Contact.

SET IN THE FUTURE - often depict the future as either very controlled places to live e.g. in the film 1984 "Big Brother" watches everything that people do and have severe penalties for anyone breaking the rules. In Children of God rules are in place to control the number of children families can have. Several films have also been made that dictate people can only live up to a particular age e.g. Logan's Run.

Alternatively, the films are set in a bleak, violent era after either a global war (usually atomic bombs), major natural catastrophe (floods, global warming, hit by asteroids) or biological disaster (germ warfare, epidemic) has taken place. In such films, people either revert to savage behaviour or are mutants damaged by the radiation or illness.
How can you describe a HORROR film?

Horror Films are unsettling films designed to frighten and panic, cause dread and alarm, and awaken hidden fears, often concluding in a terrifying, shocking finale. Horror films concentrate on the dark side of life with strange and alarming events. They deal with our fears and nightmares, our terror of the unknown. The more scary a scenario, the more a horror film plays on it. Horror films are often combined with science fiction for example when technology creates a monster or when Earth is threatened by aliens. Horror films are also known as chillers, scary movies and the macabre. Even as children, we use our imaginations to see ghosts in shadowy shapes, are frightened of the dark or worry about unknown sounds. Watching a horror film opens up those scary worlds.

What is the history of Horror movies?

The earliest horror films were Gothic in style - meaning that they were usually set in spooky old mansions, castles, or fog-shrouded, dark and shadowy locales. Their main characters have included creatures you can see such as vampires, madmen, devils, monsters, mad scientists, "Frankensteins," "Jekyll/ Hyde", demons, zombies, mummies, werewolves and so on to the unseen such as ghosts, evil spirits, poltergeists.

Horror films developed out of a number of sources: folktales with devil characters, witchcraft, fables, myths, ghost stories etc. For example, vampire bats have always frightened people from cultures around the world. Many religions, myths, folk-tales and cults believed in life being taken from blood. Bram Stoker’s 1897 vampire novel Dracula has become the most popular source for many vampire films.

The first horror movie (1896), was only about two minutes long and was made by French filmmaker Georges Melies and included flying bats, a medieval castle, a cauldron, a demon, skeletons, ghosts, and witches.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Quasimodo, was the first horror figure in the 10-minute film Esmeralda (1905). The first genuine vampire picture
was Nosferatu. In the film's conclusion, the vampire was tricked by the heroine into remaining past daybreak and met his fate by disintegrating into smoke in the sunlight.

What elements are often included in Horror Films?

Blood; religious relics (including crucifixes); kitchen knives in a wooden block; creaking doors; screams; skulls; thunder and lightning. Often objects take on a different meaning. For example, in everyday life, a crucifix is associated with the church as a good symbol but in a horror film it has an added meaning and becomes a weapon against evil.

Characters:
Monsters; ghosts; vampires; werewolves; mad scientists; ignorant villagers; 'maidens in distress'; zombies; experts in 'supernatural science'.

Settings:
Castles; old dark houses; Transylvania; cellars; woods

Typical plots:
Vampires: 'creatures of the night' who need to drink blood to survive, death by wooden stake or sunlight.
Werewolves: death by a silver bullet, and altered by the full moon.)
Haunted house: restless spirits need exorcising from a building;
Possession: an evil spirit needs exorcising from a body.
Creation of monster: a 'mad' scientist tries to create a life form.
Slasher: a psychopath terrorises a small community or group of friends.

No single horror film will include all the above elements, although “spoofs” do include more than most. Films combine a number of the above elements which are scripted to make a unique tale. However, it is very likely that most horror movies have at least one scream in them somewhere.

While audiences know something horrible is going to happen in a horror film, they do not know when it will happen. This suspense is one of the key aspects of the horror genre. For example having the monster came back from the dead after it appears to have been killed at the end.

Music is also often used to add to a threat - a threat characters in the film are ignorant of. However, this also can be used to trick the audience.
For example, where the music makes you think someone is in the house, but it turns out that the person is a friend.
Film Genres
Thriller Films

How can you describe a Thriller?

The aim of thrillers is to keep the audience on the edge of their seats. The protagonist in the film is set a problem - an escape, a mission, or a mystery and the thriller film emphasises the danger that the protagonist faces. The tension with the main problem is built on throughout the film and leads to a highly stressful climax. The cover-up of important information from the viewer, and fight and chase scenes are common methods in all of the thriller subgenres or styles, although each has its own unique characteristics and methods.

What “styles” of Thrillers are there?

Common subgenres are psychological, crime, mystery and political thrillers. A usually action-packed subgenre of thriller is the spy genre, which are espionage films that could be fact-based stories or escapist films. Successful examples of thrillers are the films of Alfred Hitchcock. The horror and action genres often overlap with the thriller genre.

What can usually be found in Thrillers?

- The hero usually faces death, either their own or somebody else’s.
- The villain is usually clever and initially seems stronger than the hero.
- The main plot focuses on a mystery that must be solved.
- All action and characters are realistic.
- A major theme is the fight by the hero for justice.
- Characters include criminals, stalkers, assassins, innocent victims (often on the run), menaced women, characters with deep dark pasts, psychotic individuals, serial killers, agents, terrorists, police, escaped cons, private detectives etc.
- The heroes are often ordinary people unaccustomed to danger, although usually in crime thrillers, they may also be "hard men" accustomed to danger such as police officers and detectives.
- The hero is often faced with what seems to be impossible problems with time against him/her.
In a thriller, the hero stops the plans of an enemy rather than uncover a crime that has already happened. Crimes also occur on a grand scale such as serial killers, terrorism, assassination, or the overthrow of governments.

**Examples of older famous Thriller Films & their plots?**

The Riddle of the Sands (1903) "the first modern thriller" and is about two young men who stumble upon Germans preparing to invade England".

The Thirty-Nine Steps (1915) remade by Alfred Hitchcock in the 1930's - an innocent man finds on the run from both the police and enemy spies.

The Manchurian Candidate (1959) - American soldiers are kidnapped and brainwashed that turns them into assassins at a moment's notice.

Cape Fear (1962) - had a menacing ex-con seeking revenge on an attorney (Gregory Peck) and his family,

1962 -Dr No the first James Bond film. Inspired other spy films like the 'Harry Palmer' films featuring an unglamorous British secret serviceman

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (1963) based around professional spies and the battle of wits between rival spymasters.

A famous thriller was Wait Until Dark (1967) where a blind woman is stalked by an evil con man looking for drugs hidden in a doll.

1971 two famous director's make their first thrillers - Clint Eastwood (Play Misty for Me) - a disc jockey is stalked by a fan and Steven Spielberg (The Duel) - a car driver is attacked by a lorry.

The Bourne Identity (1980) A man with gunshot wounds is found floating unconscious he wakes up with amnesia.

Dead Calm (1989), a young woman fights for her life on a yacht against a crazy castaway.

Sleeping with the Enemy (1991) - a wife pretends to drown so she can escape her mad husband but he tracks her down.
The Silence of the Lambs (1991) a young FBI agent in a psychological war against a cannibalistic psychiatrist named Hannibal Lecter.

Mission: Impossible (1996) (and the other sequels) featured clever gadgets, exotic locations, great action sequences, double-crosses, etc.
Film Genres
Comedy Films

How can you describe a Comedy Film?

A Comedy film is a genre of film in which the main emphasis is to make people laugh. They are usually light-hearted dramas that often: exaggerate situations such as the way people speak, the adventures they get into or the characters involved.

Comedy Films usually have a happy ending but not if they are black comedies (see below). Comedies also usually come in two formats: comedian-led (with well-timed gags, jokes, or sketches) and situation-comedies that are told within a story. They often work together and can also be created with other genres as themes or styles.

What “styles” of Comedy Films are there?

A few examples of styles of Comedies:

Slapstick was popular in the earliest silent films as they were very simple to watch and were popular with non-English speaking audiences. The term slapstick comes from the wooden sticks that clowns slapped together to make an audience clap. Slapstick films involve a lot of visual action, including harmless violence. e.g. a custard pie in the face, collapsing houses, falling in the river, trousers falling down, runaway crashing cars, people chases. Because the actors had to be very physical, slapstick requires perfect timing.

“Fish out of water” comedy, the main character or character finds himself in an uncomfortable situation e.g. becoming a child, suddenly becoming rich or poor, finding yourself as a giant or very small.

Black comedy deals with topics that are usually treated very seriously e.g. murder, war, alcoholism. Often uses cruelty as the source of humour.
Satire or Parody - the simplest way to describe this is “taking the mick” and this is done by exaggerating the plots and people involved to give viewers a different perspective of the topic.

Almost all film genres can be turned into comedies, for example:

Romantic comedy usually follows a similar plot "boy-gets-girl", "boy-loses-girl", "boy gets girl back again".

Action comedy films became popular in the eighties and combine adventure with laughter e.g. detectives after villains, explorers after treasure, martial arts experts.

Horror Comedy use the themes and characters from conventional horror films but often turn the events into a series of slapstick scenes. Exaggerated violence is often used but the audience always know that this is a parody.

Fantasy comedy uses magic, supernatural and or mythical figures and often use satire such as the hero becoming a coward, an angel unable to fly.

What is the history of Comedy Films?

Comedy films first appeared during the early 1900s. Because early films were silent they concentrated on visual humour, especially the slapstick style made popular by Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton.

During the 1920s comedy was also used in cartoons. Popular characters included Felix the Cat, Mickey Mouse, Popeye and Betty Boop. Sound was developed in the 1920's and completely changed the movie industry. By the early 1930s, the silent film comedy was almost completely replaced by “talkies”. These could include jokes and more complex plots from film comedians such as the W. C. Fields and the Marx Brothers. Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, who had made a number of very popular short silent
films, went on to great success in talking films. The comedian Charlie Chaplin was one of the last silent film actors. During the 1930s his films had no dialogue and just used sound effects.

**Screwball comedies** created by actors such as The Three Stooges were usually short and very fast paced films - they made over 190 films before moving onto television shows.

In the United Kingdom, from 1947 to 1957 Ealing Studios achieved success with a series of films known as the "Ealing comedies". They usually included a degree of social comment and often worked with actors who had developed their skills in the theatre.

By the 1950s television became a serious competitor to movies and comedy films went into a decline. In 1947 one in five films had been comedies. By 1954 this was down to ten percent. This didn’t mean the quality of films went down. In fact some of the most popular films were created then - for example it was the start of the highly successful "Carry on" films.

1960s–1980s saw an increasing number of star-packed comedies and many stars made their names through film comedies e.g. Woody Allen, Peter Sellers, Mel Brooks, Steve Martin. The 80’s and 90’s became well known for gag-based films such as Airplane and saw new stars emerge such as Tom Hanks, Eddie Murphy, Dan Aykroyd, Dudley Moore, Bill Murray, Chevy Chase.

1990s–2010s One of the major developments of the 1990s was the re-emergence of the romantic comedy film such as When Harry Met Sally, Sleepless in Seattle, Clueless, You’ve Got Mail, Four Weddings and a Funeral, Sliding Doors and Notting Hill.
Film Genres
Musical Films

How can you describe a Musical?

A Musical film is a genre of film that mixes song, spoken dialogue and sometimes dance to convey a story.

We have had music in the live theatre for centuries - Operas, revues, cabaret, musical comedy, music hall and vaudeville. The format of Opera led to the development of the stage musical in the 19th century. It has been said that the difference between an opera and a musical is that in opera the drama is largely generated by the music while in a musical it is largely defined by the text with the music taking an illustrative and expressive supporting role. It was with the groundbreaking American stage musical showboat in 1927 (made into a musical film in 1951) that all the elements that we see in so many film musicals fully came into being. Musical theatre has a story-line which enables characters to break into song or dance at given moments.

Before film soundtrack was invented (the 'silent' era), films were shown accompanied by live music provided by a pianist/organist or other musicians. When technology had progressed enough and a soundtrack could be played alongside the visuals, the 'talkies' were invented. Now for the first time a cinema audience could hear their favourite stars speak and sing. The Jazz Singer in 1927 was the first feature length film to have dialogue and singing synchronized with the visuals.

The 1940 – 1950's were the height of film musicals. The Americans were embroiled in a World War. The financial depression of the 1930's was still remembered and audiences wanted 'feel good' escapist entertainment. Television was still to become a prominent media force so apart from radio there was the 'Movies'. Many thousands of people would regularly queue up to see their favourite stars in their local cinemas.

'Musicals' can have singing throughout e.g. 'The Umbrellas of Cherbourg', 'Les Miserables', or 'Evita'. They can also have dialogue with characters suddenly starting to sing at moments of great emotion e.g, 'The Wizard of Oz', 'On the town', or 'Paint your wagon'.

Not as many musical films are made today in the Western world, but in India they are still very popular and even have their own genre
'Bollywood', where extravagant musical and dance numbers are integrated into the drama.

What is interesting about film musicals is their relationship to other media. They can be adaptations of stage shows e.g. 'Jesus Christ Superstar', 'Oklahoma', or 'West side Story'. Alternatively, musicals created for the screen may then become stage shows e.g. 'The Lion King', 'Beauty and the Beast', or 'The Sound of Music'. They can be created from great literature e.g. 'Les Miserables' based on Victor Hugo's novel or 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' by Ian Fleming. Musicals may even start as Television programmes e.g. 'High School musical'.

**What “styles” of Musical Films are there?**

There are many styles of musical film. Here a few and their examples:

**Historical** - 'Oliver' (adaptation of Charles Dickens Oliver Twist), 'Moulin Rouge' set in Paris in the 1890's, 'Evita' (story of Eva Peron) set during the 1920's, Fiddler on the Roof (1930s), Man of La Mancha (set in 1600) and 'Chicago' set in the 1930s.

**Contemporary**: West Side story about gang warfare based on 'Romeo and Juliet'. 'Mama Mia' stage show turned into film using the music of Abba.

**Animation**: Many animated films use songs and dance numbers to enhance the film. Most Disney films have songs, Bambi, Aladdin, Snow White, or The Lion King.

**Musical comedy**: The muppet films, 'The Life of Brian', 'Little Shop of Horrors'.

**Fantasy**: 'The Wizard of Oz', 'Brigadoon', 'The Nightmare before Christmas'.

**Horror**: 'Sweeney Todd', 'Rocky Horror Show' or 'The Corpse Bride'.

In fact there's probably no genre or sub-genre from romance to action that could not be turned or has not already been turned into a musical.

To explore further, examples from all of the films mentioned can be seen on the internet.
Film Genres
Western Films
How can you describe a Western?

A western is generally a film about the American frontier. They tend to take place in the later half of the 19th century. Many immigrants from all around the world had sought to find hope and a new life in America. Starting at the ports along the East of the country, they quickly began expanding and settling further into the West of the country. The terrain was tough and uncivilised. At first there were no railways. The settlers had to overcome and displace the North American First Nations of which there were many tribes and cultures.

The real 'Wild West' did not last that long, but it took a hold on the reading populace and many pieces of fiction were created for publication and the stage for the people back in the East. The West represented adventure and a challenge to overcome. The press reported many stories some true and others untrue about real characters, Billy the Kid, Calamity Jane, Wild Bill Hickock, Geronimo, Annie Oakley, Jesse James, Wyatt Earp, Sitting Bull etc. These characters took on a mythology popular to the general public.

Westerns were first popularly known as 'Cowboy and Indian' films featuring great herds of cattle driven across the landscape by the 'cowboys' with the first nation tribes referred to as 'the Indians'. Western films were enormously popular and are still popular to this day.

What can usually be found in Westerns?

The films generally depict a struggle, settling a wild environment and bringing civilisation to it. They depict conflicts between the settlers and the Native Americans. Throughout the history of film Native Americans have been depicted in many ways depending on how culturally aware each generation of viewers have become. In the 1930-50's Indians were seen as the villains, 'Stagecoach' and 'the only good Indian was a dead one!' Today audiences are given a more enlightened interpretation with indigenous people represented as custodians of the land with their own valid belief systems and cultures usurped by the 'white-man' e.g. 'Dances with Wolves' and 'Jeremiah Johnson'.
The landscape often plays a pivotal part in the films. Whether it is a trek across the landscape with a wagon train, or exploring the mountain ranges and deserts. The type of music in westerns is often majestic reflecting the scale of the land e.g. 'The Big Country', 'The Magnificent Seven' or 'Dances with Wolves'. People are often depicted as small against a vast countryside. Man has set out to tame it with the use of his fists or his guns. With this taming of the west civilisation can be established towns, schools, church, stores, law officers, legal system, infrastructure, railways and sanitation.

The themes explored in "Westerns" are often transposed to other film genres like Science Fiction e.g. 'Star Wars' or 'Outland'.

To explore further, examples from all of the films mentioned can be seen on the internet.
Film Genres
Animation
How can you describe a Animation Film?

An animation film is made by a small change in something from one frame of film to another. When the frames are played back we see the illusion of movement.

From the 17th Century Magic Lanterns created simple projected images which had moving parts to give the impression of movement. In the Victorian age many optical toys were sold that gave the illusion of movement: the thaumatrope, the phenakistoscope the zoetrope, flip books and the praxinoscope (replicas can still be bought to this day).

Earliest examples of animation film can be found from the 1880s right at the beginning of film as we know it. The French pioneers of film discovered via their theatre stage magic shows that audience were shocked by the sudden appearance or disappearance of something. When they transferred this idea to film, they could stop the camera and replace or take something away and turn the camera on again and suddenly something has appeared or disappeared. The ability to stop and start the camera was essential to the early pioneers of animation. Something could be either drawn or moved photographed then a slight change in the drawing or moving of the object then photographed and so on.

In the UK film strips traditionally consist of 24 frames per second. That means in animation that you might need to create 24 separate pictures for each second of film.

Much of early animation film was in black and white with gray tonal washes, all without sound. Many early films were very ambitious in 1914 Windsor McCay, a famous American cartoonist, created Gertie the dinosaur and actually animated himself drawing Gertie and Gertie the drawing coming to life. These drawings were drawn first and then painted on cells, a celluloid sheet that was placed under the camera. Whole studios were created to produce 'shorts' (short films) for the cinema and created a factory line of departments that specialised in different parts of the process of creating the animations. Here are some examples of the studios and characters that they produced: Fleischer Studios
(Popeye, Ko-Ko the clown, Betty Boop), Lantz Studio (Woody Wood Pecker), Hanna-Barbera (Tom and Jerry, the Flintstones, TopCat), Warner Brothers (Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, The Roadrunner) and of course Disney Studios (Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy etc). Some of these studios still exist today, Warners and Disney being the prime ones.

Often the studios relied and still rely on great character actors to provide the voices for their animated characters. Throughout the 1960’s Mel Blanc played almost all of the Warner Brothers characters from Bugs Bunny to Foghorn Leghorn and Sylvester Cat.

The earliest surviving animation feature film is ‘The Adventures of Prince Achmed’ in 1926. Disney Studios created the first animation film with sound in 1928 with Mickey Mouse in 'Steamboat Willie'. ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’ was one of the first full colour animation films in 1937.

Animation can take many forms. Traditional animation is drawn and is called 2D (two dimensional) animation. It is a costly form of animation as a great deal of skill and time is required to create all the artwork. Examples are 'Pinocchio', '101 Dalmations' and 'Animal Farm'.

3D (three dimensional) animation consists of models or objects being animated. Modern examples of this form are 'Wallace and Gromit' and the films of Jan Svankmajer.

CGI animation is computer-generated animation. Using powerful 3D modelling software, characters, backgrounds and objects can be created digitally. Examples would be all the ‘Shrek films’, 'Toy Story', 'Final Fantasy' and the 'Polar Express'.

Other artists have found interesting ways to create animation from literally drawing on the film strip (Norman McLaren) to creating animation by painting on glass and moving the paint around (Aleksandr Petrov) to painting and creating animation on city walls (Muto by Blu).

Animation is recognised as a major art form with many awards from all over the world including the American Oscar for best animation film each year since 1932!

To explore further, examples from all of the films mentioned can be seen on the internet.
**Film Genres**

**Historical or costume drama Films**

How can you describe a Historical Film?

Any film that has to depict a particular time period from the year dot onwards. They can be dramas that depict real people in films like 'Winston Churchill', 'Cromwell' or 'Gandhi' to fictionalized stories that are based on a real character like 'Braveheart'.

They can be about empires and epic battles e.g. 'House of the Flying Daggers' or about more intimate issues, 'The Girl with the Pearl Earring'. The commonality between them all is getting the setting right (outdoors and indoors), the props (objects within the scenes) and the costumes. These all combine to create a real world that the characters inhabit.

Historical films can take us into another time and help us understand how people lived then. Historical films can teach us about different cultures and contrast the differences and commonality of our own lives now.

The type of costume a character wears will give the audience information. Traditionally in early films the villain wore black and the hero white. Today it is more subtle. e.g. 'The Matrix', where the heroes wear black costumes, but costume still depicts the characters standing. We can understand a lot from their clothes e.g. if they are wealthy or poor.

Historical films can help us to question how would we behave e.g. in the time that 'Schindler’s List' takes place. What would be our reaction to ‘Spartacus’ be if we met him?

A great deal of time is spent researching and designing the look of a historical film. From what kind of food did they eat, to what kind of eating implements they used, to how was the food served, what was the pecking order around the table, what was the tablecloth like, the wall paper, the view through the window, the layout of the street, what kind of transport is going down the street, the colours. (However, in practice you will notice that these are modified by the taste and fashions of when the film is made). All these elements draw us into the historical drama and convince us that we are watching a 'slice of life' from the past e.g. 'Ben Hur' or 'Shakespeare in Love'.


Each year at the Oscars there is an award for best costume design.

To explore further, examples from all of the films mentioned can be seen on the internet.