Film

Westerns and crime movies played a key role in the early development of film studies, but serious critical discussion of sf film – like them, also typically gendered as a masculine genre – was surprisingly belated, presumably because of sf's cultural associations with the fantastic rather than the realistic, and with juvenility. The first major monograph did not appear until Vivian Sobchack's *The Limits of Infinity: The American Science Fiction Film, 1950–75* (1980; expanded as *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* in 1987), the first major edited collection until Annette Kuhn's *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (1990), the first substantial retrospective collection until Sean Redmond's *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader* (2004), and the first dedicated journal until the 2008 launch of *Science Fiction Film and Television*. There are now a number of useful introductory volumes and critical treatments of specific periods, national cinemas, individual films, franchises, filmmakers, and technical/aesthetic issues, and sf films frequently provide extended examples for more overtly critical-theoretical matters. However, substantial monographs remain relatively rare and there is still no sustained critical treatment of non-Anglophone sf.

Sf studies also marginalizes film, with less than ten per cent of the articles published in such journals as *Science Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation* and *Foundation* being concerned with non-print media. Arguably, this neglect arises from the discipline's struggle for legitimacy: allying itself closely with literary studies and critical theory enabled it to disavow popular conceptions of sf as pulp fiction for socially-awkward adolescents. Similarly, sf fandom – with which many early figures in sf studies were affiliated – has often sought to legitimate prose sf by differentiating it sharply from fantasy and horror, and from sf in other media. For example, John Baxter's *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (1970) claims that "Throughout the history of science fiction it has been an article of faith among its readers that filmed sf was an abomination, that it degraded the field and provided nothing of interest to the serious mind" (7). Having claimed the spurious authority of dubious tradition (positive fan commentary on sf films appear as early as the 1930s; see Bould and Vint 44–5), Baxter contends that sf films are so debased – their plots "tawdry", their "visual conventions … crude and unformed" – that "in a sense" they "are neither science fiction nor films" (7). A decade later, James Gunn's essay on teaching sf film begins with the claim that "there are virtually no good films that are also good science fiction" (205). A decade after that, John Brosnan's history of sf film stated that "By reading the real stuff over the years, I became increasingly annoyed with sf movies because they seemed to ignore most of the potential offered by science fiction" (xii) and concluded that "intellectually satisfying and visually evocative" sf films "remain the occasional happy accident" (388). Confirming Pierre Bourdieu's observation that when tastes "have to be justified, they are asserted … by the refusal of other tastes" (49), Baxter, Gunn, and Brosnan each suppress their own cultural situatedness so as to purvey their own preferences as either more-or-less objective truths or as representative of a general consensus.

Their statements contain other problematic obfuscations. In a synecdochic spiral, they equate a favored part of the Americo-British magazine-and-paperback sf tradition with the whole of that tradition, which in turn they treat as the whole – and, contradictorily, the *telos* – of not only prose sf but of the genre in its entirety. Simultaneously, they homogenize a diverse body of films into an undifferentiated category from which they can extract an occasional exception. While they do effectively register a felt dissonance between sf cinema in general and the kinds of prose sf that they prefer, they do nothing with such insights beyond using them to perpetuate a quasi-Leavisite project of judgment, hierarchy, and canonization.

In contrast, Sobchack, having identified the unexamined premises of several similar statements, and unpicked their faulty logic, attempts to distinguish sf from horror without constructing a hierarchical opposition:

> The horror film is primarily concerned with the individual in conflict with society or with some extension of himself, the SF film with society and its institutions in conflict with each other or with some alien other. … Both genres deal with chaos, the disruption of order, but the horror film deals with moral chaos, the disruption of natural order (assumed to be God's order), and the threat to the harmony of hearth and home; the SF film … is concerned with social chaos, the disruption of social order (man-made), and the threat to the harmony of civilized society going about its business. (29–30)

Although this distinction might appear value-neutral, its recursivity – like all genre definitions, it "infer[s] the defining characteristics of" each genre "from films that are already deemed to belong to" them (Moine 60) – suggests a similar, underlying cultural politics. Not only is Sobchack's conclusion – "the horror film evokes fear, the SF film interest" (43) – also her premise, but it perpetuates a hierarchy of taste articulated through the mind/body split, with sf connoting the (sophisticated, white, bourgeois, masculine, rational) mind, and horror the (primitive, non-white, proletarian, feminine, irrational) body.

However, having made this distinction, Sobchack notes the frequency with which it is muddied by individual films. For example, "the Monster or Creature film," which some consider to "most typify … the 'miscegenation' of the two genres," "causes purist critics the most trouble when they try to make abrupt distinctions between" them (30). Sobchack's oscillation between her categorizing impulse and her awareness of genres' heterogeneity serves as a reminder that Jacques Derrida's proclamation that "Genres are not to be mixed" (55) is not an iron law but an ironic observation. Phenomena tend to exceed the classificatory structures imposed upon them; and any boundary that can be drawn can also be erased, relocated, reinscribed, ignored, penetrated, permeated, abandoned. As Bruno Latour observes, it is only the urge to separate phenomena into purified categories that enables the creation of hybrids; and it is only because the world is heterogeneous – that is, full of phenomena that will subsequently be rediscovered as hybrids – that the purifying, categorizing impulse exists. Taxonomies designed to order and manage phenomena simultaneously – inevitably – generate exceptions, excesses, and omissions for which they cannot account. The abject critical language of generic miscegenation and impurity – and more celebratory discourses of creolization, syncretism, transgression, abjection, liminality, interstitiality, teratology, and the grotesque – register the shortcomings of such conceptual contrivances, while also leaving them intact.

Furthermore, the very notion of generic hybridity is challenged by post-structuralist conceptualizations of the text as an "open ... structuration ... reworked by a boundless context," "feed[ing] on and … fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation," and as a tissue "of anonymous formulae, variations of those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and conflations and inversions of other texts" (Stam 57, 64; cf. Staiger, Bould). Genres are similarly heterogeneous and unstable. As Rick Altman demonstrates, they are not objects that already exist in the world but fluid and tenuous discursive constructions formed by the interactions of various claims made and practices undertaken by writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics, and other discursive and material agents.

An example of this kind of discursive struggle can be seen in the critical reception of *Jigureul jikyeora!*/*Save the Green Planet!* (2003), in which amphetamine-gulping ufologist

Lee Byung-Gu (Shin Ha-Kyun) abducts Kang Man-shik (Baek Yoon-Sik), Yuje Chemical's celebrity CEO, to torture him into confessing that he is an alien from Andromeda. Drawing on a range of national and transnational sources, it delights in foregrounding its open structuration and heterogeneous textuality. For example, when Kang, strapped into a chair like Alex (Macolm McDowell) in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), eventually admits to his extra-terrestrial origins, the history of Andromedan interventions in terrestrial life he recounts is accompanied by a montage of biblical, pop science, and pseudo-science illustrations, actuality footage of wars and atrocities, and pastiches of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). However, in an overt allusion to *The Usual Suspects* (1995), he has concocted this improbable narrative from words and images he found among the items littering his abductor's basement.

Unusually, *Sight and Sound* reviewed *Jigureul jikyeora!* twice. Kim Newman compared it unfavorably to the baroque revenge thriller *Oldeuboi*/*Oldboy* (2003). He complains that it is incoherent, "scattershot," "ramshackle," and "keeps changing its mind" as to what kind of film it is, and finds its conclusion, which "takes a definitive leap into science fiction" as the fleeing Andromedans destroy the Earth, "simply wayward for its own sake" and "wildly out of place" (66). Significantly, although Newman alludes to other East Asian films, the cinematic references he evokes in describing, and identifying the flaws of, *Jigureul jikyeora!* are prompted by generic connections: wish-fulfillment superhero comedies, such as *Hero at Large* (1980) and *Blankman* (1994), and crime movies involving abduction and/or torture and/or a surprise apocalypse, such as *Ôdishon*/*Audition* (1999), *Misery* (1990), *Calvaire*/*The Ordeal* (2004), and *Dead or Alive* (1999). In contrast, Tony Rayns' review decries *Oldeuboi* as having "little or no interest in social realities," and argues that *Jigureul jikyeora!*, "far from being uncertain where it is going," is "a complex but entirely coherent lament for the fate" of the director's generation, who were "born and raised in" South Korea's "military dictatorship," which institutionalized violence, crushed political opposition, and massacred civilians (84). Rayns identifies the influence of Hollywood and Hong Kong action movies on the film's "tone, colour and … narrative drive," but argues that it "is not itself a conventional genre movie," even evoking Hitchcock as an auteur *sui generis* to praise the director's skill at "maintaining [audience] empathy" with such a damaged, brutal protagonist (84). Broadly, then, Newman judges *Jigureul jikyeora!* and other East Asian films through the lens provided by his understanding of American-derived genres, while Rayns does so through the lens of Korean culture and cinema, treating "genre" as if it were synonymous with "formulaic" and thus incompatible with the authentically cinematic. Newman looks for genre but finds chaos and generic failure, whereas Rayns finds significance in the film's supposed "transcendence" of genre. In both cases, these conclusions are largely determined not so much by the film as by the cultural situatedness of the critic and his attitude towards genre filmmaking.

Complaints that sf film fails to live up to the potential of (prose) sf are often accompanied by the suggestion that filmmakers should turn to sf writers for assistance; but when such collaboration takes the form of adapting an sf novel, the resulting film is often immediately dismissed as inferior to its source (see Landon 45–58). Such instances of the fidelity fallacy – the notion that an adaptation should somehow perfectly reproduce its source text in another medium – typically cast any divergence from the source as a failure to adapt it "properly." But, drawing on broader cultural prejudices about the superiority of older and linguistic arts over newer and visual ones (Stam 58), and deployed to articulate a specific taste-hierarchy as neutral, consensual, or common-sense, the cumulative dismissals of sf adaptations function to maintain such hierarchies by rendering adaptations axiomatically inferior to their sources (and thus sf film to prose sf).

Rather than arguing that many sf adaptations are at least as "good" or "interesting" as their sources (albeit perhaps in different ways), it is more productive to engage with the points

of divergence between source and adaptation – these are likely to be the moments of greatest cinematic interest and, counterintuitively, of the greatest fidelity because, in negotiating between the capacities of the different media, the adaptation's choices often address the sources conscious and unconscious premises. For example, since contemporary blockbuster sf typically privileges spectacle and affect, adaptations commonly identify and extensively elaborate upon the source's more melodramatic, action-oriented, or spectacular elements. Therefore, while the stories collected in Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950) are little more than narrativized logic problems, a peculiarly limited form of story often popular in sf and detective fiction, the adaptation, *I, Robot* (2004), is little more than narrativized kinesis. However, while the film might minimize or ignore logic, it draws upon the full array of big-budget cinematic resources to depict futuristic places and spaces – something that consistently eludes Asimov's limited powers of description. These contrasts obscure certain of the adaptation's fidelities to its source, such as the cursory characterization (especially of women) and the uncanny replication of Asimov's slightly befuddled, liberal and well-meaning anti-racism, dependent on stereotypes and incapable of complexity (but not of creating contradictions). Some might dismiss such fidelities as merely coincidental or symptomatic rather than as representing the adaptation's critical understanding of its source, especially since doing so would enable the continued veneration of the author and prose sf over a director and a blockbuster movie which had the audacity to refuse more obvious similarities of plot and tone. So let us instead consider *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), which has frequently been decried in terms which pit its "auteur" director, François Truffaut, against beloved author Ray Bradbury.

Bradbury's relationship to the mid-century American magazine sf tradition was more vexed in the period in which he came to prominence than his subsequent canonization suggests. Unable to sell fiction to *Astounding*, generally considered the leading sf magazine of the 1940s, he was the first writer in the American pulp tradition to publish regularly, albeit not necessarily with sf, in such middlebrow venues as *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The Best American Short Stories of 1946*, and *O. Henry Prize Stories of 1947*. Consequently, the sf community simultaneously used Bradbury to demonstrate the genre's growing maturity and considered him an sf author "for those who do not like sf" (Aldiss 296). James Blish praised his "artistry" but considered him "a scientific blindworm": while Bradbury's privileging of style and character over the dully-written but "scientifically accurate story" associated with the decline of *Astounding* "did us good," he was nonetheless "in some respects … bad for the field" (100). Popular criticism of Truffaut's adaptation of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) generally prefers the novel to the film, but nonetheless betrays a similar ambivalence. John Brosnan and Peter Nicholls suggest that "The film is more ambiguous than the book and, so to speak, lacks its fire; Truffaut seems not altogether to accept Bradbury's moral simplicity" (401). Phil Hardy argues that "Truffaut's worst film … suffers from the director's commitment to character … at the expense of the novel's vision of life," but also praises the transformation of the Fire Captain into "a rounded, sympathetic character" (251, 252). Frederik Pohl and Frederik Pohl IV contradictorily bemoan the absence of both Kubrick's "attention to detail" and Bradbury's "disdain for plausibility" (193). David Wingrove argues, even more contradictorily, that, because film is a more "passive medium" than literature, the film could not retain the novel's "black-and-white argument" (90). Taken together, these criticisms indict the adaptation for being more nuanced and sophisticated than its source.

This peculiar inversion of critical norms stems from the default privileging of source over adaptation, of prose sf over sf film, and of American narrative cinema over European art-house cinema, and also from the tradition of bluff anti-intellectualism associated with such *Astounding* writers as Robert A. Heinlein, with its anti-modernist preference for unadorned

prose and transparent story-telling over character, mood, style, and ambiguity. Curiously, though, critiquing the film from within this framework requires a transvaluation of the qualities of Bradbury's fiction for which it had previously been criticized. For example, Damon Knight sarcastically attributed Bradbury's broader, popular success to his tendency to depict "radar and rocket ships and atomic power [as] big, frightening, meaningless things" and "to shrink all the[se] big frightening things to the compass of the familiar" (109, 110); but in dismissing Truffaut's film, Bradbury's simplistic jeremiad against non-literary media is reconstituted, and valorized, as "polemical sharpness" (Hardy 251), the fiery expression of moral clarity. Moreover, by distancing the novelist from the filmmaker, Bradbury is further recuperated by the US magazine sf tradition for which he had previously posed such a problem.

These ambivalences and transvaluations trouble the notion of adaptation if it is understood as "the process of adapting one original, culturally defined 'standard whole' in another medium" (Cardwell 19) by indicating the extent to which Bradbury's novel is not some fixed and pristine object but a heterogeneous, open, and fluid text whose meaning is the product of the discursive struggles around it. However, treating the novel as precisely this kind of "standard whole" leads John Baxter to locate the source of the film's supposed failure in its contamination by another source: apparently, Truffaut was "unfortunately … truer to his spiritual father Hitchcock than to Bradbury, and his *hommages* to the master – a fascination with the colour red, scenes directed more for tension than point, a black and cynical humour – leave little room for any but a vague retelling of the original story" (202). Baxter's suggestion that it is utterly inappropriate for the film to draw upon more than one source implies – yearns for – the possibility of an unmediated, ahistorical relationship between source and adaptation. Furthermore, Baxter's revulsion at this impurity causes him to overlook the role the Hitchcock allusions play in Truffaut's fidelity to, and critique of, Bradbury's novel.

In Bradbury's dystopian future, in which fireman are charged with burning books rather than putting out fires, Montag, a renegade fireman enamored of books, is forced to flee the city. He joins the book people, a band of hoboes dedicated to memorizing books. The novel ends on a euphoric note as, after a long foreshadowed nuclear war, the book people advance on the devastated city. In contrast, the film ends with a static shot of a wintry lake, the book people passing back and forth, muttering to themselves, memorizing. While Bradbury celebrates "the book people's transformation of themselves into a living library and arsenal for future revolutionaries," Truffaut "sees them as zombies" circling "in the snow endlessly intoning the world's literature," as "brainwashed in their commitment to that which they don't understand as [are] their book-burning persecutors" (Hardy 251). Such complaints about the film's divergence from the novel are premised on a failure to interrogate – as Truffaut does – the novel's peculiar fetishization of literature. Bradbury's book people have no engagement with the texts they memorize: they merely memorize them, destroy the hard copies, and seek to stay alive until someone else has fought the revolution, after which they will speak the texts aloud to be transcribed and published. While Bradbury imagines the book people as a friction-free conduit between original texts, discrete and pristine, and their later, magically unmediated reproduction, Truffaut engages with the textuality and texturality of texts and with the processes of mediation (indeed, while Bradbury's book people have photographic memories, Truffaut's must labor at their task of preservation).

In a key passage, Faber, one of Bradbury's mouthpiece characters, defines the literary text in terms of its informational density and depth, its accumulation of observed and recorded detail that expresses a genuine experience of life. While this might hint at a conceptualization of the novel as a *scriptible* text that invites the reader's active participation in a critical and creative dialogue, Bradbury's novel generally treats texts as *lisible*, locating agency with the

author, or perhaps the text, but not the reader – as can be seen, in exaggerated form, in the complete subordination of his book people to the books they memorize.

Despite the apparent wishes of his critics, Truffaut refuses to merely memorize and extrude Bradbury's novel on cue. For example, Truffaut's numerous allusions to Hitchcock's films, most explicitly to *Rope* (1948), *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), and *The Birds* (1960), not only function – like Truffaut's very fast cuts, long takes, reversed footage, superimpositions, slow motion, repetition, negative footage, jump cuts, irises, wipes, extreme close-ups, whip pans, and dissolves to colored frames between sequences – to bring a sense of artifice and texture to the film, but also, by foregrounding the friction involved in the process of reworking a text in another medium, to disrupt the calm flow of faithful, unmediated transcription. By opening out to admit intertexts, the film questions the putative purity of its major source (Bradbury's novel itself is a tissue of borrowings from the dystopian tradition of Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell, and from contemporary media discourses about tranquilizers, sleeping pills, psychiatry, juvenile delinquency, drag-racing, rock'n'roll, credit, consumer durables, comic books, lurid paperbacks, pornography, censorship, abstract art, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, civil rights, and so on). Furthermore, the Hitchcock allusions function as an active remembering, rather than a passive memorization, of their sources, and their presence enlivens the film's relationship to the novel in the same way. However, the ability to perceive and appreciate this depends upon cultural situatedness, not least generational differences and the transition from the new criticism of the 1920s–1950s, which treated texts as self-contained and self-referential, to a post-structuralist paradigm since the 1960s, which is concerned with contingency, relationality, textual instability, and the death of the author.

Truffaut's careful, critical adaptation of Bradbury's novel indicates some of sf film's potential to be every bit as thoughtful and intellectually-demanding as prose sf is purported, by many of its champions, to be. However, since the nature of the global media economy arguably confines such film-making to lower budget, independent, and non-Anglophone cinemas, both popular criticism and theoretical work on sf film tend to focus on contemporary Hollywood and its imitators. The apparent dominance of cinematic sf since *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) by the spectacular blockbuster has led to the common refrain that contemporary sf "relies too heavily on … expensive and essentially 'empty' special effects" (King and Krzywinska 63), rather than on narrative, characterization, mood, tone, ideas, and so on. For example, Sean Cubitt, describes films such as *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (2002) in terms of a "clothes-line model" of "perfunctory narrative" along which "effects sequences" are hung:

> Each set piece sequence acts to trigger a rush of emotions: putting a clock on the action, staging the spin-off computer game … The scream, the laugh, the tear, the white knuckles, the racing pulse: the stimuli are clichés because the emotions they elicit and that audiences seek are clichés. Market research ensures, as far as anything can, that expectations will be met. Of course, such expectations derive from the past, never from the future, and so the hectic overproduction of affects is only ever repetitive of old emotions. … each set-piece sequence miniaturizes the older classical plot into a few minutes of film, condensing as it simplifies the emotional content, delivering the intensified segment as an event in itself, and building, from the succession of events, a montage of affects. (238)

Steven Shaviro, discussing the frenetic *Gamer* (2009), argues that "contemporary film editing is oriented, not towards the production of meanings (or ideologies), but directly towards a moment-by-moment manipulation of the spectator's affective state … the frequent cuts and

jolting shifts of angle have less to do with orienting us towards action in space, than with setting off autonomic responses in the viewer" (118, 124). Such criticisms can be understood as manifestations of an older, Frankfurt School-inspired suspicion of the audience's susceptibility to spectacular media, that also underpins Carl Freedman's argument – logically flawless, but built on questionable premises – about the impossibility of sf cinema. Following Darko Suvin, Freedman conceptualizes prose sf as the literature of "cognitive estrangement," which, by depicting materially-rationalized counterfactual worlds prompts a Brechtian recognition of the constructedness, and thus radical reconstructability, of our own world; and he conceptualizes sf cinema in terms of the dominance of special effects. For him, special effects are "filmic moments of a *radically* filmic character," drawing on the full resources of cinema *and* "self-consciously *foreground*[ing] their own radicality" (305, 307). In sf, "special effects are deliberate triumphs of cinematic *technology*" that "*enact*, on one level, the technological marvels that the typical science-fiction film thematizes" on another (307). However, if the cinematic experience reduces the viewer "to a passive, atomized spectator in a darkened room," then special effects' tendency "to overwhelm the viewer" intensifies "the authoritarian aspect of film" (306) by minimizing the "breathing room in which anything like a cognitive response might be formulated" (311). Therefore, the contradiction between critical cognition and authoritarian spectacle is irresolvable, and the only options are films that are "less radically cinematic (as with Ridley Scott) or less authentically science-fictional (as with Spielberg or Lucas)" (315).

Following work by Tom Gunning, André Gaudreault and others on "the cinema of attractions" (see Strauven; cf Bukatman), it has become increasingly common to recognize the extent to which film has, since its origins, been as concerned with spectacle as with narrative. Consequently, there are a number of recent efforts to engage with sf spectacle in more nuanced ways. For example, Geoff King observes that denunciations of spectacular blockbusters are usually predicated upon an idealized classical narrative cinema that never actually existed, and also betray a specific "politics of taste":

> An appreciation of 'restraint', delayed gratification or the development of more complex, modulated narrative structures is the product of particular circumstances [and thus] built into the pleasures taken by those whose social, class or educational backgrounds provide a cultural capital that can be expended enjoyably in the celebration of such qualities. (166–7)

Despite their theoretical sophistication, Cubitt, Shaviro, and Freedman reiterate this hierarchy of taste and several associated oppositions – powerful apparatus/powerless subject, spectacle/narrative, affect/reason – and thus neglect the utopian sensations of abundance, energy, intensity, transparency, and community that entertainment spectacle can produce (see Dyer 1992). Indeed, one of the key challenges facing the study of sf cinema is how to overcome these hierarchical oppositions, and "the affective turn" in cultural studies can provide some useful tools. If, as Laura U. Marks contends, "Film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole" (145), the appeal of cinematic spectacle is not necessarily just an affective one. Furthermore, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that affect should be understood not just as a response to "distinct transitory physical or verbal events" but as a "complex interleaving of … causes, effects, feedbacks, motives, long-term states such as moods and theories" (104). Consequently, any serious discussion of sf film must allow for a greater complexity that reflects the synaesthesia of experience – we encounter the world through all our senses at once – rather than falling back unreflexively into thinking based on arbitrary analytical distinctions (e.g., cognition/affect, narrative/spectacle).

Some preliminary engagements with sf in related terms has emerged in recent work on special effects. Michele Pierson describes the spectator as constantly "combining, overlapping, and alternating between consciousness of the illusion of reality produced by the film and surrender to the aleatory play of fantasy and remembering that the film's illusionistic effects invite" (20–1). The sense of wonder that special effects can produce partially depends upon this spectatorial double-consciousness that entertains belief in the images they produce while simultaneously "speculating about how they were achieved or … identify[ing] their improvement on older methods" (Pierson 10). Dan North argues that "every film in which special effects play a significant part" is about "illusionism" – "*about* special effects," "techniques of visualisation," and "the real and its technological mediation" (2). Furthermore, the visibility of the special effect as a special effect – and they all become visible eventually – provides a point "of access for the spectator's critical engagement with the film" (5).

To explore the inseparability of cognition and affect in response to special effects, let us turn to *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007), the third entry in a popular but critically-maligned, ad hoc film series derived from a video game franchise. It was written and produced – like all of the series – by Paul W.S. Anderson, who is best-known and frequently derided for his financially successful video game adaptations, and directed by Russell Mulcahy, who was responsible for cult hits *Razorback* (1984) and *Highlander* (1986), but who has mostly worked in television or direct-to-video since such high-profile underperformers as *Highlander II: The Quickening* (1991) and *The Shadow* (1994). The film opens with series protagonist Alice (Milla Jovovich) waking, naked, in a shower. She puts on a red dress and boots (familiar from *Resident Evil* (2002)), wanders through a mansion's hallway (ditto) and into a glass-lined corridor (ditto), avoids its laser defenses (ditto), and finds herself in a Raccoon City hospital corridor (ditto). Making for the exit, she avoids one lethal booby-trap but is killed by another. Dr Isaacs (Iain Glenn), an Umbrella Corporation scientist, orders two environment-suited technicians to dispose of Alice's body. Cut to an isolated weather station shack in the Nevada desert. The floor slides open, the technicians emerge from the city-sized Umbrella Corporation facility hidden far underground, and throw Alice's corpse into a concrete-lined ditch. The (virtual) camera tracks back, revealing dozens and dozens of identical corpses digitally composited into a single shot, and climbs up past the compound's fence to reveal the zombie hordes massing beyond. This Alice is not the protagonist after all, but Isaacs' 86th unsuccessful attempt to clone her so as to synthesize the cure to the zombie virus carried in her blood. The moment is simultaneously shocking and banal, thought-provoking and a reminder of the film's medium-sized ($45 million) budget, and it raises questions on multiple levels: is Alice really dead? has Jovovich actually quit the franchise? who are all these other Alices? who is going to be the protagonist of this movie? why does Anderson take such delight in displaying multiple, mutilated corpses of his actress wife? how did they do that shot? are all the corpses played by Jovovich? are some of them body doubles? are some of them purely digital creations? how much more convincing would it have been if they could have spent more money on it? and would they have rendered it more convincing or just increased the number of dead Alices?

Many consider the *Resident Evil* films to be disposable commodities: the animated corpse-form of an utterly reified product, splicing together fragments from a subcultural episteme – characters, incidents, and images from elsewhere in the multimedia franchise, and, in this instance, *The Birds*, *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *Mad Max 2* (1981), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and, via Richard Stanley's *Hardware* (1990) and *Dust Devil* (1992), spaghetti westerns – to produce a soulless revenant, reproducing endlessly to no purpose beyond endless reproduction. But the revelation of dozens of dead Alices is the first of several complexly self-reflexive moments in the film that speak about the commodity form (including actresses and images of women) and its structuration of late-capitalist subjectivity. From the

outset, this clone-Alice questions her identity, pondering her scars and her reflection in mirrored surfaces. Later, the "real" Alice meets Claire Redfield (Ali Larter) – a character from the second game introduced into the films as a potential replacement protagonist, as was Jill Valentine (Sienna Guillory), a character from the first game, in *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) – who dresses like the Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), and is accompanied by K-Mart (Spencer Locke), a teenager who looks and dresses like her. Close-ups of Alice's face are sometimes digitally airbrushed, as if willing her to become a game avatar or animated character so as to be able to dispose of the actress playing her entirely (as happened to Claire in the feature-length motion-captured CG *Resident Evil: Degeneration* (2008)).

Amid the simulacral architecture protruding from the sands that have engulfed Las Vegas – now doubly a desert of the real – Alice, who has spent five years "off the grid," avoiding detection by sidestepping the Umbrella Corporation's surveillance satellites, is reacquired, and Isaacs takes over her motor co-ordination, freezing her in place. This intervention is signaled by CG images of the Corporation's global communications infrastructure – part of the series' self-conscious pattern of utilizing certain kinds of CGI, including wire-frame three-dimensional maps of Umbrella's facilities, to signal a crude auctorial intervention to redirect the narrative so as to meet the expectations of contemporary commercial narrative cinema (while also transforming a budgetary constraint into a house-style). Alice uses psychic powers to burn out the control chip and regain control of her body; but no matter how much affective freedom and agency Alice's actions (or the gameplayer's gameplay) might s(t)imulate, the film, like the games, is relentlessly goal-oriented. Alice eventually, inevitably, infiltrates the Corporation's facility and kills Isaacs. She broadcasts a threat to Umbrella's remaining board members that she and "a few of [her] friends" are coming for them. In the final shot of the film, Alice and the newly "born" 88th clone stand side by side in front of a window, and the (virtual) camera tracks back from them, revealing dozens more clones stirring into consciousness. Revising the earlier image of numerous Alice corpses, it offers the illusion of Alice(s) escaping the control of, and wreaking further revenge upon, the Corporation, and thus an upbeat ending to the film (and potentially the series), while also implying further installments if this one proves financially successful (it did, leading so far to *Resident Evil: Degeneration* (2008), *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010) and *Resident Evil: Retribution* (2012)).

As even such a brief account of *Resident Evil: Extinction* demonstrates, by engaging simultaneously with sf and medium specificity (even in an age – and product – of media convergence) one can move beyond the construction of taste-hierarchies to a richer, critical understanding of individual texts. Furthermore, the serious treatment of sf in film and other media has the potential to expose the extent to which the critical truisms and theoretical shibboleths of sf studies are as much about the prose medium as the genre, and to provide tools with which better to recognize and understand prose sf's own extensive fascination with spectacle and affect.

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