

Fantasy Females – Ladies First, Please!

Starburst Summer Special



The existence of powerful female characters in Science Fiction is no longer a fantasy. But is the genre itself evolving or merely looking back to the Future? We examine the gap between gender and imagination.

If the evolution of Mankind can be mapped by the development from ape to *Homo sapiens*, then the portrayal of women in Science Fiction perhaps represents the shift from the coffee wielding Maureen Robinson in **Lost in Space** to Sarah Connor of **Terminator 2**. This shift corresponds with the slow but sure changes in society's perception of women.

However, Science Fiction has traditionally enjoyed a predominantly male following, while the female stereotype, particularly in the media, has for some time been either

unchallenged or even encouraged.

Before this decade, there were a few brave attempts to redress the balance. **The Day the Earth Stood Still** (1951) depicted a woman as being one of the more intelligent and resourceful characters, an unusual step for that period. Gene Roddenberry's 'ambitious' ideas for the role of women in the pilot **Star Trek** episode were allegedly conceived as inappropriate. Sadly, the status of Majel Barrett's character was greatly reduced (from First Officer to nurse) for the rest of the series, even if the size of her hair wasn't!

Bust, Bum and Bimbo

Female characters in SF appear to be able to be broken down into three loose categories: 'Victim': **B**eautiful, **U**nderdressed and **S**pasmodically **T**errified (BUST); 'Witch': **B**eautiful **U**nderdressed, **M**enacing (BUM) and 'Warrior': **B**eautiful, **I**ndependent, **M**uscular, **B**elligerent and (eventually) **O**bliterated (BIMBO).

'Victims' have always been abundant in Science Fiction. Examples include the entire female crew in **Lost in Space** (bacofoil replacing bikinis), many of the assistants in **Doctor Who** (Bonnie Langford demonstrating remarkable laryngeal agility), and Jenny Agutter (BUST as usual) in **Logan's Run**. Even would-be 'Witches' have been diluted to victim types. The female characters in **Dune** should have presented a golden opportunity to exploit the magnetism and strength of our finest actresses. The stately Francesca Annis may have looked every inch the part of Jessica, but the powers attributed to her and to Princess Irulan in the novel were reduced to a frustrating example of the chance that got away in David Lynch's film. The only person to come

out this muddled film well was Sian Philips, perhaps because she is terrifying in every role she plays.

The deliciously wicked Servalan in **Blake's Seven** was perhaps a unique exception to the norm in the world of television. Her gloating ruthlessness was particularly fascinating because she deviated from expected female behaviour patterns (we have become well accustomed to the impact of such conduct in men), whilst her obsession with feminine style supported the attractive image which is the prerequisite of female casting in the industry.

Star Wars produced Princess Leia, an intriguing composite of damsel in distress and tough cookie. She was a sarcastic and spunky idea, which unfortunately got hopelessly lost as the trilogy unfolded. However, if her character suffered from erosion, her image remained rock solid, inspiring a number of successful glossy advertisements in the better women's magazines.

Warrior Women

A conspicuous alteration in the more traditional female image appeared during the Eighties when the new 'Warrior' woman proliferated. Her clothes sense was not necessarily well developed, but in lieu of the shoulder pad, her muscles were. Brigitte Neilson flexed her biceps in the comic-book-style **Red Sonja** and Sharon Stone followed her basic instincts and attacked Arnold Schwarzenegger in **Total Recall**.

Ridley Scott and James Cameron introduced us to the 'nearly victims' who fought back: Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in **Alien** (1979) and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in **The Terminator** (1984). At this point, they were in prototype Warrior phase, although Ripley held the undoubted honour of being one of the first female protagonists to appear in a SF film. However, their respective reappearances in **Aliens** and **Terminator 2** bear more than a passing resemblance to each other, due not entirely coincidentally to the fact that James Cameron wrote both scripts. He decided to take the Warrior a step further and give her strong maternal instincts.

So is the Mother/Warrior a triumph for feminism or a male fantasy? The dichotomy between the dominant, tough woman and the protective mother is very attractive - the fan letters pouring in to *Starburst* for Linda Hamilton testify to that. On the other hand, it could be cynically perceived as the age-old compromise which has ensured that tough women retain some semblance of femininity, except that in this case children substitute clothes.

We have not yet seen a viable female alternative to the Terminator character - **Eve of Destruction** was hardly a runaway success - a woman so removed from humanity that the very definition of woman is inadequate. Sharon Stone and Linda Hamilton made conscious decisions to develop their bodies in accordance with their own perception of the characters they were playing, so that they could compete with men on an equal physical level. A woman can now be muscular, greasy, swear a lot and still retain our sympathy. Do we really need a female Terminator as an experiment in breaking down the last bastions of male superiority, or would such a move be retrogressive for SF itself?

In the respect, writer Sarah Lefanu would suggest that SF is letting itself down. In her excellent analysis of feminism and science fiction, *In the Chinks of the World Machine*, she argues that SF is a unique opportunity to stretch the imagination beyond social constraints. Technology may be

a commercial winner, but a genre which exploits the science at the expense of the fiction will never be the trailblazing, satirical, allegorical art form it is supposed to be.

Science Fiction in its written form has slowly broken down the social barriers to which Lefanu refers. Early examples of literature, such as Heinlein's **Stranger in a Strange Land**, retained their own prejudices and phobias (despite trumpeting radicalism), but writers like Philip K Dick and Philip Mann (read **The Eye of the Queen**) made serious attempts to dissect the human condition and expand the very definition of Science Fiction. Feminist writers such as Ursula Le Guin, Fay Weldon, Joanna Russ and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (who remarkably wrote **Herland** in 1915) have put women's issues on the SF agenda while producing extraordinary testaments to the imagination.

Words and Pictures

The difference between the development of the written story and film is marked. James Cameron's enviable position as scriptwriter and director is unusual. If an actress is lucky, the ideas developed on paper can be expanded by such a director who may be open to her contributions. An ongoing TV series offers even greater scope for character development through the symbiotic relationship between actress and scriptwriter. Sophie Aldred's personal input as Ace in **Doctor Who** – and her popularity with the writers – directly affected the quality of writing for her role.

But all too often this form of working is restricted by the rigid adherence to the storyboard. In addition, many films which once astounded us with their sophisticated effects (**Terminator**, **Dune**, **Bladerunner**, **Total Recall**) have simply been adapted from or inspired by SF literature, some of which was written more than three decades ago. So why is film lagging behind?

For a start, the audience relationship differs for the novel and the film, the novel being more reliant upon personal interpretation and imagination. Film has generally already made those decisions. In addition, film has technical and, more importantly, economic restrictions which will always force it to subvert new ideas for the sake of the tried and trusted formula.

Commercially successful films are fun to watch and nobody would deny their entertainment value. However, Science Fiction cinema and TV have always been denigrated for their paucity of intellect and if SF is to break free of such accusations, writers, directors and actors must be allowed to produce their art without commercial interference, such as that suffered by **Brazil** or **Bladerunner**.

Many critics too are now conditioned to believe that a good film should contain a lot of action and little else, and for those film-makers who do choose to experiment, the response is often luke-warm. The subject matter in the **The Handmaid's Tale** almost defied classification, and it does not seem conceivable that a film adaptation of, say, Marge Piercy's book **Woman on the Edge of Time** – where the protagonist is black, poor and female – could ever be mooted. Wim Wenders' **Until The End of the World** – with its quirky female lead – has been accused of being 'dramatically lifeless' perhaps because, like literature, the audience is being asked to invest a little effort in order to achieve results. In years to come, it will probably be revered as a mould-breaker, but until that time, such films will be assigned short-term residencies at fringe cinemas.

Where film companies are expected to guarantee huge profits, artistic bankruptcy is inevitable, allowing formula women - and men - to proliferate. And the logistics behind the inadequate percentage of female casting continue to allow men to proliferate more than women. The infuriatingly ubiquitous critics' phrase 'the obligatory female interest' was used to describe Daryl Hannah in **Memoirs of an Invisible Man**. We know that this attitude to women applies in all areas of the Arts, but if we cannot even portray on screen the myriad of personalities and accurate gender ratios relating to our own world, then how can we even begin to explore strange new ones?