

Science Fiction: What does the Future Hold? Casey McCormick

I would like to posit that the future of science fiction (SF) television will be defined by four essential elements: mainstream popularity, generic hybridity, non-alien antagonists, and temporal immediacy. I will discuss each of these elements as they relate to my interpretation of the commercial and thematic evolution of the genre, as well as provide some examples of series that I understand as representative of this shift.

The recent SF invasion on network television is indicative of an expanding viewership for the genre, and the SF aesthetic is becoming increasingly prominent in our techno-culture. “SyFy” Channel’s rebranding (which is decidedly less SF) may have compromised the genre’s hub, but it also permitted contemporary SF narratives to flourish elsewhere, intermingling with other genres on various major networks. Fox’s *Fringe*, for example, uses a crime drama narrative framework, but its content is undeniably SF. NBC’s *Heroes* consistently invokes the comic book tradition while telling an inherently SF story, and ABC’s *Lost* begins as a *Survivor*-influenced soap opera, but takes massively SF turns as the narrative progresses across six seasons. These instances of generic hybridity demonstrate the ability of networks to mass-market SF television by presenting its narratives in familiar packaging. Meanwhile, in contrast to these more “successful” series, some potentially great SF shows have faced early cancellation due to lack of mass appeal and network neglect (e.g. Joss Whedon’s woes with Fox). Luckily, overflow media outlets like Hulu, TiVo, and Netflix allow shows to gain fans after cancellation, amplifying the message to networks that the SF audience is a viable demographic and that these shows are in high demand, regardless of ratings.

In order to compete on the mainstream television scene, the SF narrative model evolved, creating a contemporary speculative fiction that is both more complex and more specifically socially relevant than traditional SF. The new SF narrative is not about heroes in outer space exploring distant worlds and fighting evil alien Others; instead, it confronts the realities of technological progress and subverts humanist idealism. Of course, SF has historically been a venue social commentary, but it usually relied on metaphor. Now, the cultural relevance of SF is more direct, the ethical quandaries are real, and the villains come from within our own world. SF narratives have always favored non-linear timelines, depicted alternate universes, and questioned dominant historical narratives, but these metaphysical underpinnings have never been more relevant than in our postsecular, postmodern culture. As the old SF tropes fade to the wayside, the genre now holds the potential to be the most socially incisive presence in popular media—as long as we take the time to give it the serious critical attention it deserves.

As I indicated earlier, the key features in the thematic evolution of SF involve the abandonment of two formerly integral generic requirements: aliens and the future. To illustrate this shift, look at the *Battlestar Galactica* franchise: the original series takes place circa the year 7322, and the Cylons are a malevolent alien race that builds robot soldiers. In the re-imagined series, the mechanical antagonists called Cylons are instead products of their human creators, thus positioning the narrative as a story of unchecked technology gone awry. We also learn in the series finale that the narrative action takes place millions of years in the past, highlighting the relative and cyclical nature of time and civilization. The prequel series *Caprica* will address this theme more specifically,

while offering a more identifiable setting and placing technological progress as the ethical centerpiece of the story. Overall, the changes that occurred within the narrative of this franchise reflect a broader thematic transition in SF that can be seen in numerous contemporary series (e.g. *Fringe*, *Dollhouse*, *Heroes*, *Lost*, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, *Flash Forward*, *Eureka* etc.).

There are other thematic trends emerging in contemporary SF: artificial life, biotechnology, genetic mutation, virtual reality, corrupt megacorporations, ethically-conflicted scientists, government conspiracy, cosmic phenomena, and extended life...to name a few. These recurring tropes mirror global concerns over the unavoidable repercussions of rapid technological progress. Therefore, the role of contemporary SF becomes not predicting the future, but instead, confronting the present. While these themes permeate all SF media, they garner particularly high visibility in the most popular cultural medium—television. The topical significance of the SF project is all the more reason to celebrate the infiltration of SF narrative into mainstream network television. If the mass audience can begin to identify with and consider the implications of contemporary SF, it will spawn the beginning of a new popular discourse on the ethics of our unfolding technological revolution. Television narrative has clearly already established its presence in the social dialogue, and I imagine that its significance and critical respectability will only increase in the coming years.