

## Science Fiction: What Does the Future Hold?

Karen Hellekson

SF TV, harnessed to the franchise model so well understood as a monetizer and site of comprehensible content, has extended (as SF so often does) metaphors of today onto a reality not contiguous with ours. Yet SF TV franchises ought to be perceived not as limiting but as generative, with the familiar providing scaffolding that permits access to complex ideas and sophisticated critique of current events. It does seem that SF TV has taken franchises to heart, especially when one widens the net past U.S. productions to include British ones too. *The Day of the Triffids* reboot explores Big Oil versus the environment, *Torchwood: Children of Earth* drops humanity into a high-stakes dilemma, *V* distances immigration-takeover concerns, *Spooks Code 9* pushes spying into a youth-driven postapocalyptic urban landscape, *Caprica* provides nuanced symbolic analyses of a cyborg retrofuture, and the rebooted *Prisoner* begs for comparison with the original, with cold war politics transformed into individualistic generative reality.

Part of the enjoyment of franchises is the reboot factor: casting women and people of color in roles previously held by white men (Starbuck and Boomer in BSG), altering the time or setting (*Sherlock* set in present-day London), creating a new reason for a condition (*Doctor Who's* Time War), freshening the sociopolitical message (terrorism in *V*), seeking a different audience or demographic (*Sarah Jane Adventures*). Franchises don't meaninglessly replicate content but add to it in ways that reflect our society's current needs, and this is particularly true in SF, a genre well suited to metaphorical and allegorical analysis of current concerns.

The franchise is currently acting like genre: as a way to limit and organize content. However, the franchise works at a more finely granular level. I thus argue that franchise ought to be thought of as acting like genre by providing ready-made reading strategies that can be deployed to access content. The genre of science fiction provides an arsenal of these reading strategies: if something is SF, then we know how to "read" it. It permits readers/consumers to open up a toolbox of strategies related to, for example, literality versus metaphor. Other genres behave similarly: at the heart of the genre of the western is the struggle of good versus evil. The police procedural provides comforting routine (and now, increasingly scientific) procedures that, if followed, will result in the punishment of evil. The romance ensures that true love will triumph. The detective caper shows us that extralegal forms of analysis can result in justice when legal forms cannot. These are all a shorthand way to present and essentialize complicated content. Franchise can be added atop these symbol systems, where they provide immediate context for story, situation, and character.

An example: *Caprica* works on the level of SF genre in that it is set in the future and features robots, permitting it to discuss notions of intelligence, humanity, and hybridity. But as a spin-off prequel of the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica*, it provides us with familiar characters and a backstory. It sets the terms of our engagement (which it may then turn on its head). Watchers of *Caprica* know that they will learn something about the Cylons and about the Adama family-- something that will in turn also likely meaningfully illuminate the BSG franchise. The evil Cylons created by a man mourning his brilliant, dead daughter? Who saw that one coming? Yet the impetus for the Cylons' creation could inform a meaningful rereading of BSG, just as it could inform analysis of *Caprica*. Franchise permits this sophisticated double or even triple reading.

Linking together the familiar (genre, franchise) with the SFnal makes content explicable, but familiarity also permits analysis of transformation. *Caprica*, by moving backward instead of forward, promises to be a nuanced analysis of the underpinnings of an already articulated posthuman hybridity. Franchise acts on the level of text and story, whereas genre works on the level of symbols and tropes. Yet both work to organize reading by working within reader expectations, permitting comprehensible content. Franchise may be used to illuminate aspects of genre, and vice versa. The two work together to create layered meaning: genre and franchise work together generatively.