

Science Fiction: What does the future hold? Kit Hughes

If televisual Science Fiction is indeed at a crossroads, the current moment offers a worthwhile opportunity for a close look at the terms of our argument. After all, the boundaries of science fiction's categorical definition have often been up for debate—an unsurprising fact given the genre's preoccupations with the exploration and disruption of borders and limits. More specifically, I believe it is useful to determine precisely what we mean by science fiction—not only *what* we're looking for, but *where* we're looking for it—especially when pondering its relationship with the franchise or lamenting its possible collapse.

With this in mind, my response attempts to expand the current conversation to include programming that exists beyond the traditional definitions and sites for science fiction television. While I believe there are a number of successful dramas that employ sf conventions outside of sf marketing and the SyFy context, including *LOST*, *CSI*, and *House*, my response focuses on Discovery Communications' popular brand of science entertainment programming in order to question the boundaries of what we might consider contemporary science fiction.

Discovery Communications is comprised of about a dozen cable channels, including TLC, Discovery Health, OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network, and Discovery Kids, however most of its science entertainment programming can be found on Discovery, Science Channel, and to a lesser extent on Animal Planet and Green Planet. Though the shows on these channels often claim non-fiction status, they are neither hard science films nor filmed experiments. Rather, many offer narrativized investigations of certain subjects within and related to science topics with the aim of entertaining an audience. Though these shows might be more comfortably classified as “fictionalized science,” many ask questions and perform functions traditionally found within science fiction. In my attempt to zero in on the question, “Is there a future for science fiction outside of the franchise?”, I offer that science fiction, in this more inclusive sense, is quite pervasive in the contemporary television landscape and that the science fiction franchise may extend beyond the series with which it is most often associated.

A brief overview of only two loosely drawn programming categories that air on these channels provides a framework for considering how these shows might perform similar functions, ask similar questions and offer similar pleasures and insights to audiences of science fiction. It should also be noted that these shows exist in addition to a number of programs that explicitly link their subject to science fiction, including *Prophets of Science Fiction*, *Sci Fi Science: Physics of the Impossible*, *Fringe Science*, and *Science of the Movies*. (While my purpose is not to shoehorn a new taxonomy of fictionalized science into existing science fiction frameworks, it is useful to see how approaches to this type programming draw upon and converse directly with traditional subgenres of sf).

- **Speculative Fiction:** A host of Discovery Communications shows explore futuristic and alternative present scenarios, with a special preoccupation with the consequences of an apocalypse. Included in this category are programs like *What If?*, a series that focuses weekly on a single historical moment—the Three Mile Island meltdown, for example—and maps out an alternative present had the historical situation resolved differently. *The Colony* is a reality program marketed as a filmed experiment in which 10 volunteers participate in a futuristic scenario in which they struggle to meet their basic food, shelter, and safety needs in a hostile, post-apocalyptic environment.

Similar shows include *Mars Rising*, a series about the possible colonization of Mars, *Popular Science: The Future of...*, which speculates on the future of rising technologies, *Through the Wormhole*, which attempts to expand viewers' conceptions of the universe and humans' place within it, and *Future Earth*, a program linked to the critically and commercially successful series *Planet Earth* and *Life* that examines earth's imagined future in 25, 50, and 100 years.

- **Monsters and Men:** The shows in this category investigate the limits of what it means to be human. In conversation with programs in the above category are those programs that explore survival scenarios that test the limits of human existence in various "alien" environments (*Man vs. Wild*, *Survivorman*, *Dual Survival*, and *Man, Woman, Wild*). Other series such as *Super Humans* and *Dean of Invention* challenge conceptions of the human body, its limitations, and its ongoing relationship with technology. Among shows that focus on the monstrous other are *Monsters Inside Me*, which investigates mysterious alien organisms' invasion of the human body, and various other programs that investigate "bizarre" life forms in remote earth locations (*River Monsters*, *Life*).

Although further research is needed, I hope that by bringing this type of programming into our conversation, we can take a wider view of the pervasiveness of fictionalized science on television today. Doing so will enable us to consider science-affiliated shows like ratings powerhouse *Deadliest Catch* and other types of popular event programming, such as Discovery's annual Shark Week, that do not fit the current franchise structure associated with science television. Rather than fully aligning fictionalized science with science fiction and risking oversimplification, however, we might also take advantage of the particularities of each in order to locate productive differences between the two. Additional questions we might consider include the progressive and eco-activist potential of fictionalized science programming, the implications of Discovery Communications' children's programming designed for the White House's STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) education initiative, and Discovery Communications' brand identity.