

Rogue Genre: A Science Fiction Study

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A long time ago in a country far, far away, a group of friends were stuck inside on a rainy vacation. After reading several boring German ghost stories, they decided to try their hand at creating their own. This led to a writing that would later morph into Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*. As Frankenstein's monster came to life, so did the "science fiction" genre. Or did it? Science fiction as a genre is problematic in that it exists and can easily be recognized, but fully defining it is a daunting task. Examining science fiction brings about questions pertaining to other genres, as well as the idea of "genre" in general.

Science fiction (sf) has grown to a point that its influence on our culture can no longer be denied. Some may write it off as nothing more than mere entertainment; its books may be shoved to the dark corners of book stores; but the genre goes much deeper than what lies on the surface. In a world where social change is becoming a priority, the sf genre provides literature we can look to in order to start the uncomfortable conversations. Just as classic science fiction works questioned the power of science and struggled with the growing understanding of our world, modern sf continues the tradition of "turning the mirror inward" on the reader.

The current popularity of science fiction is really not up for debate. You may think: *I don't like Star Trek or Star Wars; Sci-fi just isn't for me*. Chances are you would be wrong. In fact, it is very hard these days not to watch something that would fall into the sf genre. Four of the top five highest grossing movies of all-time (*Avatar*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Jurassic World*, and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*) are sf.¹ At the time I was working on this article, there had been a minimum of three, and often more, sf movies cracking the top ten in each year dating back to 2010. Fittingly for sf fans, that percent comes out to roughly 42%.² That may not seem like much, but that totals thirty-four films

over the last seven years. Needless to say, the genre is not going away anytime soon.

With an ever-growing genre, some are starting to wonder where the line is being drawn. How can we “draw a circle” around everything that is sf? This is where the problem lies. Like the idea of “genre” itself, the “sf genre” really doesn’t exist. How can that be when you and I can name multiple novels, movies, television shows, even video games that would fall into the sf genre? The issue lies not with sf, but with the idea of a “genre.” Through questioning sf, we can gain a greater understanding of the ideas behind genre and why the term exists.

Trying to Define the Sci-Fi Genre

When examining the sf genre and trying to make sense of it, it is important to note that the “rules” are nothing more than archetypes that are commonly used among the community. Whether it be settings, characters, or events, these archetypes have been established and have grown throughout the years. While some morphed from other concepts, others were created wholly from an author’s original ideas, which then, over time, became an accepted component of what people understand as a “genre.”

While many accept *Frankenstein* as the first sf novel, the genre can be traced back much further. Early sf goes all the way back to works of utopian fantasy by authors like Thomas More (*Utopia*) and Sir Francis Bacon (*New Atlantis*).³ These stories, while not necessarily being “science” fiction, did deal with politics, religions, and social reform in foreign lands. As more of the map was discovered, the available locations for utopias started to disappear and authors were forced to look to the heavens and beyond for future settings. Thus, the idea of “far off worlds” shifted from Earth to space, and the first sf “rule” was established (although, as we’ll see, rules seem to be made to be broken when it comes to genres).

With the rise of the novel came Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which established a baseline for what constituted “science fiction.” The use of scientific knowledge to recreate human life, although limited at the time, brought in another of the first “rules” of the genre: Science fiction stories use science and technology to explain the impossible.

If Shelley is the “mother” of the sf genre, consider Jules Verne and H.G. Wells the godfathers of sf. They popularized the genre and made it something worth reading. With classic works like *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Time Machine*, and *War of the Worlds*, the two authors brought a relatively

new concept to a growing audience. These early works helped to establish a few other archetypes that were quick to become sf “rules”: Science fiction stories have human characters interacting with aliens or something other than humans, involve travel through time or space, or contain robots or artificial intelligence.

This leaves us with five fairly simple rules. For something to fit into the sf genre it should include:

- Settings of far off worlds or planets
- The use of science or technology to explain the impossible
- Humans interacting with non-human characters
- Travel through time or space
- Robots or artificial intelligence

Now, these “rules” are my own creation, based on my reading about the evolution of this genre, but I think they are fairly accurate, and they seem simple enough. However, like the idea of “genre” itself, the sf genre is anything but simple.

“Certified” Examples of Science Fiction⁴

Using the “rules” of the sf genre you can analyze several pieces of literature to figure out whether or not it fits into the genre. The best example that comes to mind is *I, Robot*.⁵ The novel easily fits into the genre at first glance because it has robots and artificial intelligence. Further reading of the stories will include: traveling through space in a ship fully loaded with milk and baked beans, riding large subservient robots across the surface of Mercury, and a cult-leading robot responsible for directing the sun’s energy to Earth’s colonies. All of these scenarios make use of different established rules of the genre.

These rules aren’t specific to literature, though, as the sf genre, like every other genre, exists in other forms of media. Looking at a television series like *Stranger Things*, you see the same rules coming through.⁶ In this series we see Eleven who, because of various experiments, is able to hone her psychokinetic energy into a weapon. Will Byers is taken to an alternate dimension where he waits for rescue. The demogorgon lurks throughout the series killing anyone who is at the wrong place at the wrong time. Even though this series has very little in common with the content of *I, Robot* they are both considered to be parts of the same sf genre.

Problematic Examples of Science Fiction

My “rules” for the genre hit a few snags when you start to get into more modern additions, the biggest issues being superheroes and horror monsters like zombies and vampires. The simple answer is “sometimes.” Depending on the descriptions and origins of these characters, they can fall into the sf genre.

First, let’s examine superheroes. More times than not there will be enough parts in the story to argue that it could fall into the genre. Simple examples like Superman (he’s an alien), Spiderman (radioactive spider bite), Iron Man (technology), and The Hulk (super soldier serum) aren’t typically where the problems lie. Things that tend to cause problems are characters like Batman, Thor, or Doctor Strange. Batman doesn’t really have super powers.⁷ Instead he relies on inventions and fighting skills, most of which wouldn’t be hard to come across with a little research. When we start to get introduced to some of the villains, though, their origins bring the stories closer to the sf genre. Thor is technically a god, so his powers aren’t inherited from some crazy science experiment. This would make you think that Thor would traditionally fall into the fantasy genre, but then there are elements from his stories like portals through space that would push it more towards sf. Doctor Strange is an interesting case because he’s basically a magician, which is not sf at all, but again the world he interacts with usually pulls from the genre, especially through the inclusion of humans using non-magical technologies.

Zombies and vampires are also interesting characters to look at because, depending on their origins, they can be considered sf. In early works, vampires would have fallen into a fantasy because they rely heavily on their mystical powers, while zombies would have also fallen into fantasy because they typically originated from voodoo ceremonies. In recent years, these two horror monsters have shifted from fantasy to sf.⁸ Looking at something like *I Am Legend*⁹ is where vampires started to go off the beaten path, so to speak. Seeing vampirism as a disease with symptoms definitely changes it from fantasy to sf. The inherent “powers” that a vampire has would then come from scientific origins. The same is true for zombies. When the creation of the monster goes from voodoo to a viral outbreak, the story shifts to sf from fantasy. Typically, with the rise of zombies comes the apocalypse, which then makes the piece work even more in the sf genre.

Problems Defining the Genre

The thing about sf, and most other literary genres, is that almost as soon as you’ve laid out the “rules” and accounted for author’s personal definitions,

you can begin to find outliers. The genre is not a bucket that can or even will hold everything. The main reason behind this is that everything that is considered “science fiction” falls into other genres as well. The problem is that, although all genres are flexible and change over time, sf is perhaps one of the more flexible, and it often overlaps with other genres, so we can’t really count on “rules” to stay consistent.¹⁰ For example, in romances, it’s pretty consistent that two characters will fall for one another, there will be some conflict, and they will either end up together or separate by the end of the piece. In productions that fit within the “horror” genre, there will be something to be afraid of that the character(s) must deal with, ultimately killing it or dying in the process. With mysteries, there is problem that needs to be solved, and the character(s) gains knowledge about the problem over the course of the piece and ultimately figures out the problem or faces the consequences. The sf genre is a lot harder to pin down. Yes, it can be understood through “rules,” like the ones I’ve developed in this article, but we could also find examples of books or movies or manga that break some (or even all) of these rules.

The genre acts like a parasite at times, latching on to another genre and using its guidelines to construct a meaningful story. Yes, the sf parts are still there, but the story itself may be an adventure, suspense, or romance at its core. Does sf have its own narrative? That’s the question that needs to be answered when we struggle with its ability to be a genre. If I were to argue that it did, I’d think I’d say that the narrative is centered around a “sense of wonder.”¹¹ A sense of wonder isn’t necessarily an objective thing that can be seen, and that’s why the “rules” don’t really give us the whole picture.

What Is Genre Anyway?

The easy definition of a **literary genre** is, according to Wikipedia, “a category of literary composition. Genres may be determined by literary technique, tone, content, or even (as in the case of fiction) length. The distinctions between genres and categories are flexible and loosely defined, often with subgroups” (“Literary Genre”). So, my discussion of sf definitely fits into this definition. But there are other ways to think about the concept of genre. According to genre studies scholar Carolyn Miller, genres are “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159). This means that genres are more than just texts that fit into some kind of category. Instead, they are based not only on shared knowledge of how people understand categories, but are also based in the situations where people find and use them. And we need this more fluid way of thinking about genres because genres help us

to understand and create our human worlds. As we've grown as a society, the idea of genre has shifted to a typical response to a repeating situation.¹² Humans are complex, so we need complex ways to understand the texts we produce and use.¹³ Since this is the case, genre needs to be seen not as something that either is or isn't but as something that is flexible and changes over time and in different situations.

If genres aren't a simple yes/no checkbox, then why do we even have them? Why do things need to be complicated? People like order. The creators of M&Ms don't make the M&Ms different colors for any kind of reason, but every person has, at one time or another, sorted the candy by color.¹⁴ It's just something we do. Humans like to group things together. Things get more complicated as we get deeper into topics, and that is why it's frustrating when it can't simply be either "true" or "false." Genres are often simply an attempt to group like things together. Genres change over time. This is because they don't exist as static objects. People interact with them. Sometimes people get creative with them, and depending on success or failure, the genre is tweaked a bit. Sometimes there is conflict, where different people want to use the genres differently or make them mean different things, so genres are really in a constant state of change. The ability for genres to remain fluid and ever-changing is important to their existence. If a genre stops changing, that can be because people have stopped using it. Sf is flexible and changes over time, and that's one of the reasons it is still so powerful in our culture. It started off as something that could easily be understood, but as the world, and the amount of literature, grew more complicated, so did the idea of the genre. While literary genres are simple to understand, the fluidity of written genres is a little more complicated because it is the writer, whether it be a high school student or a tenured university professor, that is responsible for those changes. Being responsible and accountable can be scary.

The Future Trajectory of Science Fiction: Where the Hell We're Going

The future of the sf genre is not something easily predicted.¹⁵ The genre is currently in a boom period as far as I'm concerned. There are quality sf pieces being turned out in short spans of time. The genre is becoming more embedded into society, and it is becoming more widely accepted by new audiences. Since sf seems to be trending up, I don't see any reason to doubt its continued existence, as well as its continued change.

Based on recent successes in film and television. The sf genre seems to have recently made a connection to comedy. With series like *The Orville* and

films like *Guardians of the Galaxy*, the genre has seen positive receptions from audiences. I think that the genre will continue to seep into other areas as well. The blending of fantasy and sf is a relatively novel idea, so I predict that to be the next big thing. Be on the lookout for some sort of scientific explanation for magic.¹⁶ Basically, I think the future of the sf genre is not unlike the future of most genres: it will continue to be fluid and crossover between other genres finding minor successes and failures along the way.

Conclusion

We made it! Maybe the result of this article is that you aren't sure what genre means at all anymore, and that's okay. The whole point is that none of us do because they're always shifting. The sf genre has been on a long strange trip, and today it is starting to absorb elements of fantasy and horror, which isn't making things any easier. It has so many subgenres that even to begin to name them is an undertaking. Once you think you have it nailed down, you start to wonder about the pieces that were written to take place in 2015 as if it was this far off futuristic year, and you're right back to questioning the existence of the genre itself. In a world where choosing the polarizing option is the one that gets the attention, it's important to remember that everything isn't so simple. Nothing is as simple as checking a box.

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Endnotes

¹ “Box Office Mojo,” *IMDb.com*, Inc., last modified 6 Oct. 2017, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>.

² It actually comes out to 42.5%, but the reference to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* was too good to pass up. (In the novel, when a computer is asked the “Ultimate Question” of human life, it returns 42 as the answer.) Sometimes literature is weird.

³ Brian Stableford, “Science fiction before the genre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

⁴ Certified by me. Basically, it’s a classic “because I said so” situation.

⁵ Not the Will Smith movie; the book by Isaac Asimov. The film has very little connection to the novel outside of character names.

⁶ I could have talked about a Star Trek series or *The Orville*, my new personal favorite series, here, but that felt like low-hanging fruit, and I like a challenge.

⁷ Unless you count being super rich.

⁸ Arguments can be made for other monsters as well, but these two seem to be the most popular currently.

⁹ Again, not the Will Smith version; the novel. Man, that guy must be wild about science fiction.

¹⁰ Mendlesohn 2.

¹¹ Mendlesohn 3.

¹² “Genres part 1: Let’s typify that response,” YouTube video, 4:45, posted by “The Word Bird,” 27 Aug. 2014.

¹³ Or at the very least a complicated system of checkboxes where your box checking options are based upon the checking of previous boxes.

¹⁴ If you haven't, you're the weird one.

¹⁵ But here we go!

¹⁶ Midichlorians? Shit!



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