

Images, Patterns and Audio: A Search for an Identifier of Genre Inclusive of Science Fiction

Abel Johnson Thundil

Former student, Department of English, St. Aloysius College, Mangalore

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ABSTRACT

Genre is any style or form of communication in any mode (written, spoken, digital, artistic, etc.) with socially agreed-upon conventions developed over time. The need to understand what movie is for whom persists despite the blurring the genres in modern film. This paper analyses part of Susan Sontag's essay "The Imagination of Disaster", which deals with the structure of sci-fi movies, and Vivian Sobchack's "Images of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction", which deals with the iconography of science fiction, through three movies – Ridley Scott's *Alien*, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* and Howard Hawks' *El Dorado*. Beyond the structural elements revealed by Sontag, or the iconographic approach of Sobchack, audio is found to be a far reliable element that defines science fiction movies.

Keywords: Science fiction, Alien, Solaris, western, genre, audio

INTRODUCTION

Genre is any style or feature, mainly of an artistic work, with socially cemented standards which developed over time. Understanding genre is necessary, since it gives the audience an idea of what to expect, and lays down some guidelines for filmmakers on what all elements to include while making a film.

In her essay "The Imagination of Disaster", Susan Sontag attempts to depict patterns generalizable to all science fiction films. [1] She does provide separate lists of plot

structures for black and white and colored films as well. The later will be the focus of this paper, as all three of our films of interest are colored.

Vivian Sobchack on the other hand, has a different view. In his essay "Images of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction", he attempts to find a common language to the genre of science fiction by focusing on imagery. [2] He attempts to discover images unique to science fiction, but ultimately fails in his pursuit to discover such easily generalizable images.

Both essays focus on plot and imagery respectively. Both essays focus on the elements we could see. Sight is placed on a pedestal, at the ignorance of the only other sense involved in the movie viewing experience – hearing.

Music is to hearing, as movie is to sight. Modern film combines the two. Kurt London divulges that film music "began not as a result of any artistic urge, but from a dire need of something which would drown the noise made by the projector. For in those times there was as yet no sound-absorbent walls between the projection machine and the auditorium. This painful noise disturbed visual enjoyment to no small extent. Instinctively cinema proprietors had recourse to music, and it was the right way, using an agreeable sound to neutralize one less agreeable." [3] London however ignores the fact that many early films were presented at vaudeville theaters, where musicians were typically expected. [4] Hence, it became an inevitability that films be paired up with music.

This is to say that the initial function of a film score was not to have an artistic impact. It was purely accidental. It was purely for practical purposes, and to meet the expectations of the audience. Today, the later function is still embodied by film scores, not to meet the expectation that there will be music at a certain venue. But to satisfy the unconscious expectation of having certain sounds in certain genres of film. This could be the reason that it is not typically seen as an essential element that defines a genre.

DISCUSSION

Let's consider the five phases for colored science fiction movies that Sontag puts forward. We follow each phase is followed by an example from the science fiction movie *Alien*. Moreover, the phases are rewritten for the western, with an example each from the movie *El Dorado*.

- (1) "The arrival of the thing. (Emergence of the monsters, landing of the alien spaceship, etc.) This is usually witnessed, or suspected, by just one person, who is a young scientist on a field trip. Nobody, neither his neighbors nor his colleagues, will believe him for some time. The hero is not married, but has a sympathetic though also incredulous girlfriend."^[1]

Eg: *Alien*

Kane discovers a chamber with large, egg-like objects. As soon as he touches one of them, a creature springs out, penetrates his helmet, and gets attached to his face. Later, Kane dies when an alien creature bursts out from his chest. Here, "the thing" is the alien, but Kane cannot be the hero, since he dies in the beginning itself. Instead, Ellen Ridley, who is the only survivor, is the heroine. Ridley does not have an incredulous partner.^[5] In fact, we are not told of her personal relations anywhere in the film. Here, the arrival of the thing is a necessity, since conflict is necessary to drive the plot. But the associating details need not take place with such specificity.

One can rewrite this phase for the Western as thus:

The arrival of the enemy. There is guerilla shooting, and the hero is wounded. He would be talking to a girl, who is either his girlfriend, or would be so in course of the movie.

Eg: *El Dorado*

Thornton wounds Luke in the stomach. Luke commits suicide before Thornton kills him, believing his wound to be fatal. Just as Kane in *Alien* however, Luke isn't the hero, as he dies early into the movie.^[6]

In the case of science fiction, "the thing" could be anything. But in the western, there are only two possibilities: either the native Americans, or some vengeful enemy who has returned to the town after facing great hardship, who desires to take some kind of revenge. In *Eldorado*, it is the latter. Moreover, the word "western" is in itself a setting, leading to similarities in images, while science is a concept, not a place or object.

- (2) "Confirmation of the hero's report by a host of witnesses to a great act of destruction. (If the invaders are beings from another planet, a fruitless attempt to parley with them and get them to leave peacefully.) The local police are summoned to deal with the situation and massacred."^[1]

Eg: *Alien*

Here, it is not the hero's report that is confirmed. In the movie, the other six of the group watch Kane die. Ridley does not report this, as they have lost contact with the *Nostromo*. There is involvement by the police or any other upholders of the law.^[5] Here again, the witnessing is a necessary part to the development of the story. But who witnesses and how need not be specific.

This phase could be rewritten for the Western as thus:

The villain or villains (Usually native Americans) gun down a group of people. The sheriff and his force get involved.

Eg: *El Dorado*

Thornton, Bull, Mississippi and Sheriff Harrah hunt enemy troops in a church and gun them down. One of the men escape, and lead them straight to Jason, whom Harrah arrests to hold for trial. [6]

In the case of science fiction, the destruction could be of any kind. It could be the destruction of a city, or the destruction of the universe, or the destruction of a spacecraft, or the destruction and disruption of time itself. But in a western, there are only two possibilities: Guns or grenades. The buildings, if facing the destruction are finite in their variety. These usually involve taverns, motels, saloons, churches etc. The destruction is confined to the western desert setting, unlike science fiction where the setting could vary considerably. Unlike science fiction movies where the police involvement need not be necessary (As we saw in *Alien*), the Sheriff's involvement is an ironic fixture of the lawless outback.

(3) "In the capital of the country, conferences between scientists and the military take place, with the hero lecturing before a chart, map, or blackboard. A national emergency is declared. Reports of further atrocities. Authorities from other countries arrive in black limousines. All international tensions are suspended in view of the planetary emergency. This stage often includes a rapid montage of news broadcasts in various languages, a meeting at the UN, and more conferences between the military and the scientists. Plans are made for destroying the enemy." [1]

Eg: *Alien*

This phase is totally absent in *Alien*, since the entire action takes place in space. But panic of the crew is a constant element in the movie. It is helpful to view Sontag's phases as guidelines rather than absolute rules.

For a western, this phase would be:
The sheriff's force is unable to fully stop the enemy. Hence, the sheriff approaches the

hero and his gang of gunslingers, usually in a bar or tavern.

Eg: *El Dorado*

Sheriff Harrah seeks Thornton's help in a saloon to save Saul from Jason. [6]

Here, the science fiction setting goes all over the place: It crosses spatio-lingual boundaries. But the "conferences" in Westerns take place at a much smaller scale, usually restricted to an inn or saloon.

(4) "Further atrocities. At some point the hero's girlfriend is in grave danger. Massive counterattacks by international forces, with brilliant displays of rocketry, rays, and other advanced weapons, are all unsuccessful. Enormous military casualties, usually by incineration. Cities are destroyed and/or evacuated. There is an obligatory scene here of panicked crowds stampeding along a highway or a big bridge, being waved on by numerous policemen who, if the film is Japanese, are immaculately white-gloved, preternaturally calm, and call out in dubbed English, "Keep moving. There is no need to be alarmed." [1]

Eg: *Alien*

In *Alien*, there is no element of panicked crowds. But "brilliant displays of rocketry, rays, and other advanced weapons" [1] is evident throughout, as they attempt to kill off the aliens. Moreover, in the end, Ridley voluntarily sets the spaceship on fire before escaping, in the hope that the alien will burn to death. [5] Hence, the element of weapons and explosions may be necessary, but the surrounding details are open to change.

To rewrite this phase for the Western would be something like:

The hero's men fight with the enemy. There is a lot of damage. There are whips, and people falling from horses. There are shots fired in all the wrong directions, some even hitting barrels or houses of civilians. The hero's girlfriend is threatened by the enemy, verbally or physically. The hero and his men are captured. Civilians look out through their

windows and see their hero fail to save the town.

Eg: *El Dorado*

McLeod's men start harassing Maudie her and her patrons. Maudie is Thornton's love interest. Thornton rides a wagon to the front door of Jason's saloon. Sheriff Harrah, Bull and Mississippi sneak in through the back. Bull gives a signal, and Thornton opens fire, killing McLeod, while the rest free Saul. Joey shoots Jason, saving Thornton and making amends for a mistake on her part. [6]

Here, the similarities between the genres are astonishing. The only difference is in the choice of weapon used. In science fiction, the focus is on what weapon is used. It could be any complex tool from lasers to wormholes that lead to another region in space and time. In westerns, focus is on how the weapons are used. How does Thornton and gang save Saul? How do they open fire strategically? Because the Western does not have the luxury of endless possibilities in of weapons, the bravado in their implementation and strategy becomes a far useful element.

(5) "More conferences, whose motif is: "They must be vulnerable to something." Throughout, the hero has been experimenting in his lab on this. The final strategy, upon which all hopes depend, is drawn up; the ultimate weapon-often a super-powerful, as yet untested, nuclear device-is mounted. Countdown. Final repulse of the monster or invaders. Mutual congratulations, while the hero and girlfriend embrace cheek to cheek and scan the skies sturdily. "But have we seen the last of them?" [1]

Eg: *Alien*

This phase too isn't present in *Alien*. Ridley lets the spaceship explode, and escapes. We aren't told of her relationships and other affairs in order for such a complex ending to occur. The movie merely ends with Ridley returning to the earth. [5] We aren't even told if she reaches safely (Which she does, in later movies of the series).

For the Western, this could be as such:

The sheriff and his men hide away in some old barn or tavern and discuss further. A plan to save the captured men is made. The hero's girlfriend is somehow involved in the plan, usually with a seducing or manipulative role to trick the enemy. She is successful in the plan. The sheriff's men face the enemy troops. The hero is somehow freed (Sometimes, this is done by the girlfriend). The hero frees his other men, and they too join the fight. The enemy troops are shot, and bodies fall off horses left and right. All the troops are down, except for the enemy leader. The hero and his girl embrace. The sheriff congratulates the hero, and the hero thanks the sheriff. The enemy's handkerchief or something is left behind. Sometimes, the movie ends here, leaving the question whether the enemy will return. Other times, the enemy will look over from a hill in the distance, usually as a silhouette in front of the setting sun before going on his way. Will he come back?

Eg: *El Dorado*

In *El Dorado*, this stereotypical last phase is not followed. But unlike Ridley, Thornton loves Maudie and hints in the end that he wishes to settle in the town for her. [6]

Here, the structure of both genre of movies is quite similar. But the specific images vary more in science fiction rather than westerns. In science fiction, the hero, their weapons, tools everything differs vastly from movie to movie. But in the case of westerns, these things have a finite number of possibilities; usually two or three. But why, we may ask. The word "western" itself restricts the genre to a particular setting. This restriction of environment creates another kinds of restriction. For example, the setting is the desert. This means that the characters in these movies wear hats. Moreover, the western is a genre stuck in the American mid-west of the 1950's and 60's. It is a self-Orientalizing depiction. Science fiction on the other hand, is never stuck, in space or temporality. This is because it has to do with the future or a novel possibility. Moreover, the "science" in "science fiction" does not have any spatial

implication. The setting could be another planet, another dimension, a spaceship, or simply earth itself. This creates an infinite amount of possibilities. Hence, the structure of science fiction and western movies are similar. But the degree to which the images within each genre fluctuates differs. This could be explained by thinking of western not as a genre, but a sub-genre under the umbrella genre of American film. Science fiction has its own kinds of literature. There are aliens, time travel, mutations, monsters, and some combination of all these. American films constitute spy movies, romances, comedy, and of course, westerns. Saying western is a genre is akin to saying time travel literature is also a genre. Instead of merely applying the umbrella term of “science”, saying “time-travel” anchors the story with the element of time, just as westerns are anchored to the deserts of the Mississippi.

In his “Images of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction”, Vivian Sobchack attempts to arrive at an iconography for science fiction and fails in the attempt. He asserts that westerns and gangster movies have an established iconography. But in science fiction, the images vary disparately between movies. [2] Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Solaris* is a collage of such images. On one hand, there is a spaceship, a foreign planet, and an expedition towards it. On the other hand, there is a four-meter-tall child on the planet, the return of the hero’s dead wife, the switching from black and white to color depending on whether the characters are dreaming or not etc. [7] The film is as psychological as it is science fiction. It exists in a liminality of genres. Hence, the iconography of *Solaris* cannot be generalized as the iconography of science fiction. But there is a need for something that defines a genre. Otherwise, one is forced to remove all labels that indicate what the film is about. Without an identity, there is no audience, since people pick and choose to an extend what they choose to watch in terms of movies.

To define a genre, it seems best to focus on the audio rather than the visuals. There are certain sounds that are associated with every genre. These can overlap. But there is one genre where a certain sound is most common. This element of audio does not include vocals and dialogue. Such audio could be of two types: background music and fixed sounds. Of these, background music is the most memorable. This however, does not mean that the background holds up throughout the movie as a stereotypical representation of its genre. In Westerns, fiddles, guitars and harmonicas constitute the primary instruments. These can “adapt to various scenarios, from heroism and unlawfulness to more intimate and heartfelt themes. The brass instruments, for example, can be used in moments of grandeur due to their powerful timbre. The strings are typically the core of the orchestral force but are great for depicting tension and high drama. Percussion holds significant use in the American Western genre, ranging from the snare, tom toms and the classic bell sound, all of which drive the action forward, providing excitement to the scene.” [8]

In contrast, the background score of science fiction movies could be much more variant. It could be operatic, such as John William’s score for *Star Wars*, or playful such as by Ray Parker Jr. in *Ghostbusters*, or the rock pop style of *The Power of Love* in *Back to the Future*. In the case of *Solaris*, Cleff Martinez’ soundtrack has more resemblance to a background music for meditation, rather than that of a classic film of science fiction. It is not a reflection of genre. It is a reflection at the film’s relaxed nature. “We can spend as many wordless minutes gazing at a patch of water-weed gently waving under a stream, as watching a dead woman re-animate back to life.” [9] Background music only sets the tone for the film. It merely is an affective glimpse at the film, rather than the details in it. It makes the viewer feel something, not think. This results in the score oscillating according to the emotion the director wants the viewer to experience at a particular

moment in the film. But if such wide variations are prevalent, how does audio become a better representation of genre than the visual?

The answer lies in the second kind of audio in films: fixed sounds. These are sounds that are not a part of music, but those which arise from the world of the film itself. For westerns, it is usually the neigh of horses, the sound of bullets flying, a strong manly voice slightly huffed by a cigar etc. For science fiction, it could be the sound of lasers, spaceships, machine noises etc. There is however a difference in how these fixed sounds manifest in both genres. In westerns, the sounds are usually fixed to an object. For example, in *El Dorado*, all guns make the same sound; or at least, sounds similar enough for the audience to not suspect deviance. The manly voice may belong to any of the three major male characters. The church bells chime, and the saloon always has the sound of scissors vigorously acting on someone's hair. The same cannot be said for science fiction films. Sounds are not invariably fixed onto iconography. The sound of lasers could also be that of a spacecraft travelling at the speed of light, or that of aliens shooting lasers at the earth, or that of someone moving faster than light. This is due to the wide array of images that could constitute science fiction. The sound for a laser and a spacecraft need not be same, but they are stereotypically extreme in their similarity. Such technical sounds may not appear in a western, and nowhere in a science fiction film will one hear a lasso swing, and a horse neigh followed by a thud, indicating that the horse has fallen. In *Solaris*, there are the robotic sounds of the old space station, the blabber of switches flicking in the control panel, and the whooshing of X rays directed at the swirling surface of a planet. Despite the bizarre images and unsettling psychological realism, these fixed sounds help to ground the work within the genre of science fiction. The images in science fiction vary as much as the human race itself, with its many races and cultures. But there are genes present in

the body of every able-bodied human that codes for the existence of two hands, two legs and a head attached to the body. Fixed sounds are the genes that shape science fiction, providing it with the necessary limbs to stand on its own when iconography fails

The presence of "science" in "science fiction" is a sliding signifier. It leads to a whole lot of interpretations on what the genre is or should be. Science could constitute everything and anything. And anything could be viewed through the scientific method. This, along with the failure of science fiction to show consistent iconography disqualifies imagery as a metric to identify genre. Of the five senses, touch, taste, and smell cannot be applied to the direct experience of a film. Yes, they could be added onto the experience in a tangential fashion. One can watch a movie eating popcorn, smelling the cheese present in it. One can hold another's hand, and have some coziness. But those are external elements. It isn't possible to provide them, at least at the time of the writing of this paper, through the screen itself. They do not play a role in immersing one into the world of the movie and its characters. What remains then are the senses of sight and hearing. Sight, as we have seen through two essays and their analysis, has failed to anchor science fiction in any definite harbor. Music has failed as well. Hence, fixed sounds remain the last chain that holds genre in its place. We seem to move towards a future that erases and blends fixed rules and boundaries. The same could be said for fixed sound as a metric. It could be an iron chain. But it is one that is slowly rusting away due to the water of deconstruction that surrounds it.

CONCLUSION

Susan Sontag's essay "The Imagination of Disaster" could be rewritten for the western genre of film as well. Hence, they couldn't be considered as structures which define science fiction as a genre. An attempt at iconography works for the western, but fails for science fiction. Hence, what could give science fiction movies their identity is audio. Background music can vary widely. But

there are certain fixed sounds, such as the sound of lasers or spaceships, which are unique to the science fiction genre of film. Hence, audio, at least for the time being, is a better marker of genre than plot structure or iconography.

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