SF and New Hollywood

Mark Bould

In this article I would like to continue the account given by Alfredo Suppia on the development of cinematic SF in the Virtual Science Fiction project. He has taken an international stance, which to my mind is good, since there is a tendency for people to equate SF cinema with Hollywood productions, perhaps unsurprising in the global media context that has developed since the neoliberal turn of the 1980s; or, indeed, since the silent period. Although Hollywood has not always produced more films than other national cinemas (for example, both India and Nigeria currently produce more films annually), it attained a kind of global dominance in the silent period that has never really been challenged. It was able to do so by having a domestic market (the US and Canada) large enough to break even on its films, then to sell them overseas more cheaply than other countries could produce their own movies; and it continues to dominate global cinema through its control of distribution. For example, if you are British and make a British film in Britain, to get it screened in a British multiplex, you need to sell it to an US distributor because US distributors pretty much control what is shown in British cinemas.

With this in mind, my article deals with the economic and industrial contexts for New Hollywood SF, as well as with the films themselves; and space permitting I hope to include some branching out into world SF cinema.

1. Classical Hollywood

So, what do we mean by New Hollywood? Sadly, there is no consensus on this, but there are two dominant meanings, which are either 'Hollywood between 1967 and 1975', or annoyingly contradictorily, 'Hollywood since 1975'. To understand these meanings, we need to have some sense of the nature of post-classical Hollywood, so let's instead begin by sketching in the meanings of classical and post-classical Hollywood.

Classical Hollywood refers to the Studio System that emerged in the 1920s and collapsed through the 1950s. Let us consider the difference between the various companies involved in the Studio System:

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- The Majors
    - *The Big Five*: Loews, Inc. (MGM), Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, RKO, Warner Bros.
    - *The Little Three*: Columbia, United Artists, Universal
- The Minors (or Poverty Row studios)
    - Grand National, Monograph, Producer's Releasing Corporation (PRC), Republic, Tiffany, etc.

The 'big five' were vertically integrated companies. That is, they were involved in all three branches of the film business: they produced, distributed and exhibited movies: they made films; they owned or controlled the companies that organized when, where and how films were released in cinemas; and they owned the most lucrative cinemas – indeed, ownership of just 15% percent of cinemas in the US (the big, metropolitan, first run cinemas where films were initially released) enabled the studios to take in 70% of all the box-office earned by their films; and because they controlled access to these films by the other 85% of cinemas, they also got a substantial cut of the other 30% of box-office.

The 'little three' were partially vertically integrated: they produced and distributed films, but did not own any cinemas so were not involved in exhibition. The 'minors' just made low-budget movies (B-movie westerns and crime movies, movie serials, etc.) that were distributed by the 'majors'.

This set-up meant that in order to sustain their business, each of the majors basically had to release a new film every week. This meant that production had to be rationalized, prompting some to talk of classical Hollywood as Fordist Hollywood. They utilized standardized production processes of various kinds, such as:

- standardized three-act narratives organized around one or two stars or protagonists
- shooting out of sequence, and shooting each scene in a particular order, using standardized lighting patterns, camera placements and sound recording, to be edited according to standard continuity editing patterns
- directors (and other personnel) often went straight from one project to another with little or no preparation time or creative input prior to arriving on the set to start shooting

Now, as is usually the case, a small number of vertically integrated companies, all pursuing the same business strategies, can between them dominate an industry. They tend to form an oligopoly – that is, they collaborate rather than compete with each other in order to exercise monopoly control. And this sort of oligopoly control is what enabled classical Hollywood to at least break even domestically, and thus to dominate cinema screens around the world. Such practices were, however, illegal under US anti-trust legislation, and in 1948, a court case culminated

in what is known as the Paramount decision, which ordered studios to sell off their cinemas. They could continue to make and distribute films, but not exhibit them. It took about a decade for them to comply in full, and for post-classical Hollywood to emerge.

Hollywood responded to the Paramount decision in a variety of ways. One of which was to massively reduce the number of films it produced. Between 1948 and 1952, Hollywood made about 450 films per year; between 1958 and 1964, less than 250 per year. The majors concentrated on movies with budgets of $1 million, and turned to more spectacular forms, including color and wide-screen formats (this was also, in part, to compete with television). Studios began to move towards a production system in which they did not actually make films themselves, but financed projects put together by independent production companies, to whom they would also often lease studio space, equipment, etc. These changes opened up the US market place to more independent productions, including low-budget movies for drive-ins and other less glamorous cinemas, and foreign films.

The studios' finances remained volatile throughout the 1960s. For example, Fox's *The Sound of Music* (1965) took nearly $80 million at the US box office, prompted the studio to turn out more big-budget musicals, losing $11 million on *Doctor Dolittle* (1967), $15 million on *Star!* (1968) and $16 million on *Hello, Dolly* (1969) – that's $42 million on three of its most expensive films in three years – but then two relatively low-budget films took nearly $83 million at the US box office: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) took $46 million and *M.A.S.H.* (1970) took $36.7 million.

In the second half of the 1960s, a first wave of conglomeration hit Hollywood, with the studios being bought up by horizontally integrated companies (that is, business that owned companies in an array of often completely unconnected industries). And in 1985, Reagan overturned anti-trust legislation, allowing studios to again become involved in exhibition. Horizontally integrated conglomerates could now become simultaneously vertically integrated, and such companies as Time Warner, Disney, General Electric, News Corp, Viacom and Sony became the new majors.

2. New Hollywood – The First

Within this broader context, let us return to our two version of New Hollywood, either between 1967 and 1975, or since 1975.

In the first of these periods, normally dated from *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) to *Jaws* (1975), a generation of directors who had learned their trade in television

and then a generation of younger directors who were film school graduates, and often under the influence of European art cinema and/or B-movie aesthetics, suddenly found themselves with opportunities and budgets, for a variety of reasons: because the studios were uncertain how to address young people in the newly fragmented marketplace; because the studios were now owned by people who knew little or nothing about filmmaking; because the absence of the relatively standardized and structured classical production system and the relative independence of the production company from its financing allowed more room for formal and narrative experimentation; because the loss of skills and expertise caused by the collapse of the studios also opened up spaces to do things 'the wrong way', with both positive and negative results. As long as it proved profitable. One of the things champions of the Hollywood Renaissance often forget is that the bottom line stayed the bottom line.

So what kind of SF films were being made in this period? I only have time for a partial answer, so I'll focus on just two things: the counterculture and formal experimentation.

The counterculture is a blanket term that covers a vast and amorphous phenomena, with many distinct strands, including protests against the war in Vietnam, the new left, student radicalism, civil rights becoming black power, the feminist movement, native rights, Mexican rights, gay rights, hippies, and so on. And we can get some sense of the formal experimentation being undertaken by thinking about how, for example, the innovations of Godard's *Breathless* (1960) – the aimless protagonists, loose causal connections, open-ended narrative, intertextual allusions, genre-blending, sex, violence – were taken up in Hollywood, alongside such techniques as zooms, slow-motion, split-screens, discontinuous editing, and so on.

The early 1960s see a number of anti-nuclear and anti-war films, such as *On the Beach* (1959), *Panic in Year Zero!* (1962), *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *Fail-Safe* (1964) and *The Bedford Incident* (1965). Sympathetic takes on countercultural youth can be found in *Wild in the Streets* (1968), *Gas-s-s-s! or It Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save It* (1970), *Glen and Randa* (1971) and *Dark Star* (1974). The dehumanizing consequences of urban life, consumerism and the faceless power of corporations, the media and other institutions, were explored in *Seconds* (1966), *THX 1138* (1971), *The Terminal Man* (1974), *Death Race 2000* (1975), *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Logan's Run* (1976), *Capricorn One* (1978), *Coma* (1978), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) and *The China Syndrome* (1979). Environmental concerns, including overpopulation, resource depletion, pollution, habitat destruction and species extinction were articulated in *No Blade of Grass* (1970), *Silent Running* (1972), *Soylent Green* (1973), *Chosen Survivors* (1974),

It's Alive (1974), *Phase IV* (1974), *Dogs* (1976), *Day of the Animals* (1977), *The Swarm* (1978) and *Alligator* (1980). We can even find a feminist SF of sorts in *The Stepford Wives*, *Coma*, *Alien* (1979) and *Born in Flames* (1983), while blaxploitation SF attempted to address issues of race in *Change of Mind* (1969), *The Watermelon Man* (1970), *The Thing with Two Heads* (1972), *Blackenstein* (1973), *The Spook who Sat by the Door* (1973), *Space is the Place* (1974), *Dr. Black Mr. Hyde* (1976) and *Abar, the First Black Superman* (1977).

I want to concern myself in a bit more detail about three films that combine the countercultural with formal experimentation. The first two are the major example of anti-imperialist SF by an American in this period and the major example of an anti-imperialist made in America in this period. Ironically, the former, Willam Klein's raucous superhero burlesque *Mr. Freedom* (1969), was not made in the US, and the latter, Peter Watkins pseudocumentary *Punishment Park* (1971), was not made by an American.

Mr. Freedom is a superhero, a none-too-bright, loudmouthed, bigoted bully, employed by Freedom, Inc. – an organization headquartered in the same building as Texaco, Shell, General Motors, Standard Oil, United Fruit, Unilever. He is sent to Paris because the supervillain Red Chinaman has murdered Captain Formidable and is infiltrating communist forces into France. As Dr. Freedom explains to his crass, swaggering protégé, 'The French are the White Man's Burden'. During Mr Freedom's visit to the American Embassy in Paris – which is, of course, a supermarket, the US ambassador explains that France could be a great nation if only the French understood democracy properly – but some of them have even been calling for free elections. Eventually Mr. Freedom destroys half of France in order to save it.

Punishment Park is ostensibly shot by a BBC team invited to observe the system introduced to address political dissent in a very-near future US. Under the 1950 McCarran Internal Security Act, the President has declared an 'internal security emergency', enabling the arrest and detention of people considered likely to conduct subversive acts and sabotage, and allowing the creation of Punishment Parks as a 'punitive deterrent'. Corrective Group 638 appear before a tribunal to be sentenced to either lengthy prison terms or a three-day period in the Bear Mountain Punishment Park – for writing anti-establishment songs, draft-dodging, and organizing movements against poverty, racism and the Vietnam War. Corrective Group 637, who have already opted for the Park, must make their way, without water or supplies, across 53 miles of desert, where night/day temperatures vary between 65º and 110º, while being pursued by National Guardsmen, riot police and federal marshals. When some of the group break away, killing a policeman and stealing his weapons, the pursuers turn murderously violent. Throughout, the film insists that military aggression overseas and domestic re-

pression of dissent are inextricably linked, parts of the same American tradition of violence that includes slavery and genocide.

Both the raucous burlesque of *Mr. Freedom* and the pseudodocumentary style of *Punishment Park* can be taking as forms of formal experimentalism – it is impossible to imagine either film being made within the studio system.

A much better known example, which also combines these traits, is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), produced by MGM/UA, but made in Britain, safely distant from the head offices. A mysterious black monolith appears on a prehistoric African plain and apparently teaches pre-human apes to use bones as tools. Four million years later humans unearth a similar monolith on the moon. When sunlight strikes its surface, it beams a powerful radio signal towards Jupiter. Eighteen months later, the *Discovery* is en route to the gas giant when its infallible computer, HAL 9000, suffers a psychological breakdown and murders all but one of the crew. Venturing out towards a giant monolith orbiting Jupiter, astronaut Dave Bowman falls into a tunnel of lights, races over alien landscapes, and eventually – it seems – dies and is reborn as hyper-evolved posthuman Starchild, who returns to Earth.

Kubrick's future extrapolates and satirizes corporate, bureaucratic America, its banal inhumanity emphasized by stilted conversations between depthless characters, many of whose exchanges are constrained by political agendas, checklists, and other pre-determined procedures. It is a future that is simultaneously awe-inspiring and remorselessly bland. Wide-angle cinematography makes the immaculate built environments even more unhomely: characters pass through such spaces, as emphasized by the astronauts' endless jogging around the *Discovery*, rather than inhabit them; and human characters never exchange conventional shot/reverse-shot sequences. Despite this element of social critique, *2001*'s countercultural status is usually attributed to its trippy, psychedelic 'Stargate' sequence.

2001's significance for the development of SF lies in its formal and technical achievements. For example, when Kubrick matched images of docking spacecraft to Strauss's *Blue Danube Waltz*, he reopened the possibility of sound doing more than merely underpinning the images. He sections the soundtrack so that music never accompanies dialogue scenes, refusing audiences the emotional cues we are used to getting.

Half of the shots in *2001* are effects shots. They cost over half the budget and involved the development or invention of new techniques and equipment. Indeed, Kubrick's greatest influence on the genre was, arguably, to fuel the desire to produce a spectacular cinema of attractions. This is certainly among the lessons filmmakers of the second New Hollywood seem to have taken form it.

3. New Hollywood – The Second

If *Jaws*, inaugurated the second New Hollywood, it was soon reinforced by films such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), in both of which we can discern the last remnants of the counterculture: the former about a youth who wants to go to university, join a rebellion, overthrow a military-bureaucratic state; the latter about the discontents of lower middle class suburban life. And both films reaching for magical solutions – the mystical force, the childlike aliens, which reduce the cosmic sublime of *2001* to pop psychology and infantile disengagement from the world. Both films are also quite consciously made up of endless cinematic allusions, quotations, reworkings, pioneering a kind of mainstream postmodernism through their remorseless regurgitation of popular culture fragments (accomplishments more commonly attributed to *Blade Runner* (1982)). They both also confirm the potential profitability of the new style of effects-driven, cross-marketed, heavily merchandized, saturation-booked blockbuster pioneered by *Jaws*, and the ability of such fundamentally juvenile narratives to appeal to a global audience.

One of the consequences of the success of such films is an increase in Hollywood's emphasis on big-budget spectacle, which typically produces a far more conservative cinema, reducing formal experimentation to technological innovation (for example, see James Cameron's films, from *The Abyss* (1989) to *Avatar* (2009)), and double-coding any liberal critique within more reactionary structures (see Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* (1987) and *Starship Troopers* (1997)).

Some of the industry trends of this New Hollywood include saturation advertising and saturation booking so as to front-load attendance, transforming a film into an event, and an accompanying focus on the importance of opening weekend grosses. Just as important are summer blockbusters, sequels and reissues, multimedia merchandising, multi-platform releases.

The importance of sequels/reissues is clear from the *Star Wars* timeline:

May 1977	*Star Wars* released
July 1978	*Star Wars* reissue 1
May 1979	*Star Wars* reissue 2
May 1980	*Star Wars* sequel 1, *The Empire Strikes Back*
April 1981	*Star Wars* reissue 3
May 1982	*Star Wars* released on video
August 1982	*Star Wars* reissue 4
February 1983	*Star Wars* on pay-cable

May 1983	*Star Wars* sequel 2, *Return of the Jedi*
February 1984	*Star Wars* on network TV
March 1985	*Star Wars* trilogy screened
January 1987	Disneyland *Star Tours*

In contrast, the relatively uninspired box-office of this year's 3D reissue of *Phantom Menace* (1999) the first of the *Star Wars* prequels, indicates the extent to which domestic media – DVD, Blu-ray, home cinema systems, etc. – have provided other points of revenue-generation so that the market for reissues is no longer that important. Although this has not halted plans to convert and reissue *Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005).

But sequels, ah, sequels, remakes, franchises, franchise reboots … just look at this summer's slate: *The Avengers*, *Total Recall*, *Men in Black III*, *Prometheus*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, *The Amazing Spiderman*, etc., etc., etc.

Let's also consider how important marketing movies as must-see events has also become, beginning with this comparison of *E.T. – The Extra-terrestrial* (1982) and *Batman* (1989) to see how much this emphasis changed within less than a decade:

Unadjusted US box-office gross in $US millions										
Weekend	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
E.T.	22	22	26	24	23	23	19	19	16	15
Batman	70	52	30	24	18	13	11	8	5	4

As you can see, *E.T.*'s totals grew as it was on release, rising above the opening weekend's takings and staying higher until the seventh week in distribution, and only dropping to about 68% of its opening weekend by its tenth week in distribution. In contrast, *Batman* had a massive opening weekend, earning more than three times as much as *E.T.*, but had dropped by almost a third in its second week, by more than half in its third week, and to about 6% by its tenth week.

During the 1990s, the new majors began to aim to gross $1 billion per year, while the number of films each of them produced dropped from about 30 to about 15 per, with a greater emphasis on star vehicles and blockbusters. Movies with budgets of less than $10 million were rarely profitable – not least because they would often open on less than 350 screens, whereas the $90 million *Men in Black* (1997) opened on 5400 US screens, taking over $250 million domestically.

In the last couple of years, a new wrinkle has emerged, which is the overseas release of big movies a week or more before their North American release: it happened with *The Avengers* – an attempt to generate positive and enthusiastic word of mouth prior to the US opening weekend (which now often begins with late-night Wednesday screenings). This is because the US trade press reports US box-office figures, and adds in overseas figures some way below the headlines,

hence the studios angle for the biggest numbers possible on the opening weekend. On the one hand, this makes little rational sense, since Hollywood movies generally make half to two thirds of their box-office overseas.

I want to return to the question of technological innovation, to consider some of impacts of digital technologies on more recent New Hollywood cinema. CGI is only the most readily visible aspect of digital filmmaking. Digital editing and camera technologies have also had a major impact on film narrative. Non-linear digital editing, done on a computer, differs from traditional analogue editing in several ways. No longer does the editor have to know, and make copious notes on, every inch of footage that has been shot; or physically handle the reels of developed film; or physically cut and splice the film together; or be restricted by the physical fragility of the film, or the need to undo the splices and reassemble the frames for re-editing. Editors typically talk of these things as advantages, or at the very least a release from mnemonic anxieties, irreversible decision-making and laborious physical processes. Producers like it, too: the automation of certain editing processes significantly reduces post-production schedules, and thus not only production costs but also interest payments (by the mid-1990s, over 90% of Hollywood movies were digitally edited; nowadays, in terms of cinematic releases, there is basically no such thing as a non-digital film). But, Michele Pierson argues, because the technology reduces the need for the editor to hold the entire film in his or her head/notebooks, editing decisions are more likely to be made in the context of a particular scene or sequence, rather than the film as a whole. One of the effects of this is to propel the protagonist not so much through a narrative as a runtime, often at the expense of character and thematic complexity. An example of this is *Minority Report* (2002), which also displays self-conscious images of digital editing. In it, John Anderton works for Washington's experimental Pre-Crime unit. Mutant children can predict murders, enabling perpetrators to be arrested before they have actually perpetrated. Inevitably, they predict Anderton will murder someone. The plot consists mostly of his flight from arrest – he runs, pauses, runs, pauses, runs, pauses – reducing the narrative to a neglible armature for set-piece displays of technological prowess.

The development of CGI alongside the growing importance of series and franchises, has also led to a form of filmmaking which is often about creating universes rather than stories – the *Star Wars* prequels are a good example of this, with each new environment and species throwing up opportunities to sell yet more merchandise. At the same time, special effects have lost something of their specialness since they are increasingly ubiquitous – is there any shot in *Avatar* or *John Carter* (2012) that does not contain digital effects? This totalization of the special effects as environment is, perhaps, what leads Michael Bay's *Trans-*

formers (2007) to slow down and display his Autobots and Decepticons in slow-motion in order to allow for his viewers to see the transformation taking place.

In closing, I just want to emphasize that although big budget releases are an important part of SF cinema, they are only a part of it, and the same is true of Hollywood SF. There is a very lively US indie SF scene, which in recent years has given us such films as *Pi* (1998), *Primer* (2004), *Special* (2006), *Mock Up on Mu* (2008) and *Stingray Sam* (2009). But also we need to look beyond the US, and in closing, although I do not have time to comment upon them, there are, for example, a number of recent international production cycles that demand the attention of serious critics of SF, including:

African SF: *Les saignantes* (Cameroon 2005), *Africa Paradis* (Benin 2006), *Kajola* (Nigeria 2009), *Pumzi* (Kenya 2009)

Indian SF: *Koi… Mil Gaya* (2003), *Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women* (2003), *Patalghar* (2003), *Rudraksh* (2004), *Krrish* (2006), *Love Story 2050* (2008), *Action Replayy* (2010), *Endhiran* (2010), *Ra.One* (2011)

Russian SF: *Night Watch* (2004), *Chetyre*/*4* (2005), *First on the Moon* (2005), *Dust* (2005), *Day Watch* (2006), *977* (2006)

South Korean SF: *Ditto* (2000), *Teenage Hooker Became Killing Machine in Daehakno* (2000), *2009: Lost Memories* (2002), *Save the Green Planet* (2003), *The Host (*2006), *D-War* (2007), *Tidal Wave* (2009)

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