The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film

Edited by Steven M. Sanders
The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film
The Philosophy of Popular Culture

The books published in the Philosophy of Popular Culture series will illuminate and explore philosophical themes and ideas that occur in popular culture. The goal of this series is to demonstrate how philosophical inquiry has been reinvigorated by increased scholarly interest in the intersection of popular culture and philosophy, as well as to explore through philosophical analysis beloved modes of entertainment, such as movies, TV shows, and music. Philosophical concepts will be made accessible to the general reader through examples in popular culture. This series seeks to publish both established and emerging scholars who will engage a major area of popular culture for philosophical interpretation and examine the philosophical underpinnings of its themes. Eschewing ephemeral trends of philosophical and cultural theory, authors will establish and elaborate on connections between traditional philosophical ideas from important thinkers and the ever-expanding world of popular culture.

Series Editor

Mark T. Conard, Marymount Manhattan College, NY

Books in the Series

*The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick*, edited by Jerold J. Abrams
*The Philosophy of Film Noir*, edited by Mark T. Conard
*The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, edited by Mark T. Conard
*The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, edited by Mark T. Conard
*The Philosophy of The X-Files*, edited by Dean A. Kowalski
*The Philosophy of TV Noir*, edited by Steven M. Sanders and Aeon J. Skoble
*Basketball and Philosophy*, edited by Jerry L. Walls and Gregory Bassham
CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments    vii
An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science Fiction Film    1
  Steven M. Sanders

Part 1: Enigmas of Identity and Agency

What Is It to Be Human? Blade Runner and Dark City    21
  Deborah Knight and George McKnight
Recalling the Self: Personal Identity in Total Recall    39
  Shai Biderman
Picturing Paranoia: Interpreting Invasion of the Body Snatchers    55
  Steven M. Sanders
The Existential Frankenstein    73
  Jennifer L. McMahon

Part 2: Extraterrestrial Visitation, Time Travel, and Artificial Intelligence

Technology and Ethics in The Day the Earth Stood Still    91
  Aeon J. Skoble
Some Paradoxes of Time Travel in The Terminator and 12 Monkeys    103
  William J. Devlin
2001: A Philosophical Odyssey    119
  Kevin L. Stoehr
Terminator-Fear and the Paradox of Fiction    135
  Jason Holt

Part 3: Brave Newer World: Science Fiction Futurism

The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Metropolis    153
  Jerold J. Abrams
Imagining the Future, Contemplating the Past: The Screen Versions of 1984  171
   R. Barton Palmer

Disenchantment and Rebellion in Alphaville  191
   Alan Woolfolk

The Matrix, the Cave, and the Cogito  207
   Mark T. Conard

List of Contributors  223

Index  227
Preface and Acknowledgments

The essays in this volume explore some of the ideas and possibilities that science fiction films take as their starting points. Since the essays are philosophical, they aim to increase readers’ understanding and appreciation by identifying the philosophical implications and assumptions of *The Day the Earth Stood Still, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, The Terminator,* and a dozen other science fiction film classics. The questions these films raise are addressed by philosophers, film theorists, and other scholars who take a variety of approaches and perspectives. No single method or school of thought predominates. Of course, there is a consensus among the contributors that intelligent and well-informed discussion of films can lead to greater appreciation and understanding of them. And each contributor would no doubt agree that it is desirable for readers to have a firsthand acquaintance with the film he or she has chosen to write about.

Aside from being asked to confine their choices to a “short list,” described in the introductory essay, contributors were free to treat science fiction films in any way that struck them as illuminating. Some contributors deployed a group of philosophical ideas around their choice of film. Others first selected a philosophical problem or theme, such as time travel, personal identity, or artificial intelligence, and then found a film that was particularly effective at dramatizing and developing the problem or theme in question. Although the essays implicate many areas of philosophy, including ethics, metaphysics, theory of knowledge, political philosophy, and aesthetics, readers who have had no previous exposure to philosophy will almost always be able to pick up the gist of the discussion, if not the finer points of detail. In addition, the introductory essay is designed to clarify the basic line of argument and point of view in each essay. All of the essays involve interpretive “readings” of the films, which means that they invite disagreement and reflection on the basis of that disagreement.

I am fortunate to have worked with colleagues who write about science fiction film so well. I thank them for their patience, hard work, and willingness
to share their expertise. I am grateful to Mark T. Conard for developing the series that brings philosophy into such harmonious relationships with popular culture, to Eric Bronson and Michael L. Stephans for their helpful comments during the submission process, and to Christeen Clemens for our discussions of the book from its inception. Finally, I want to thank my editing supervisor, David L. Cobb, and my copyeditor, Anna Laura Bennett, for their valuable suggestions and meticulous correction of the manuscript.
Over the last decade there has been a significant shift in the attitudes of philosophers as they have become increasingly receptive to the opportunity to apply methods of philosophical inquiry to film, television, and other areas of popular culture. In fact, *receptive* is far too mild a word to describe the enthusiasm with which many philosophers now embrace popular culture. The authors of the essays included in this volume have genuine affection for science fiction feature films and the expertise to describe, explain, analyze, and evaluate the story lines, conflicts, and philosophically salient themes in them. Their contributions are designed to promote an understanding of the very considerable extent to which philosophy and science fiction are thematically interdependent insofar as science fiction provides materials for philosophical thinking about the logical possibility and paradoxes of time travel, the concept of personal identity and what it means to be human, the nature of consciousness and artificial intelligence, the moral implications of encounters with extraterrestrials, and the transformations of the future that will be brought about by science and technology. Of course, many science fiction films emphasize gadgets and special effects to the neglect of conceptual complexity, but the films discussed here engage viewers on the plane of ideas and provide occasions for historical, political, literary, and cultural commentary as well as philosophical analysis.

This volume includes a dozen philosophically accessible essays on some of the best science fiction films from seven decades. The essays discuss science fiction film classics, and they are classics precisely because they were alive to their own times and are alive to ours as well. In this sense, *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), *The Day the Earth