Science Fiction Films are usually scientific, visionary, comic-strip-like, and imaginative, and usually visualized through fanciful, imaginative settings, expert film production design, advanced technology gadgets (i.e., robots and spaceships), scientific developments, or by fantastic special effects. Sci-fi films are complete with heroes, distant planets, impossible quests, improbable settings, fantastic places, great dark and shadowy villains, futuristic technology and gizmos, and unknown and inexplicable forces. Many other SF films feature time travels or fantastic journeys, and are set either on Earth, into outer space, or (most often) into the future time. Quite a few examples of science-fiction cinema owe their origins to writers Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

They often portray the dangerous and sinister nature of knowledge, and vital issues about the nature of mankind and our place in the whole scheme of things, including the threatening, existential loss of personal individuality.

Strange and extraordinary microscopic organisms or giant, mutant monsters may be unleashed, either created by misguided mad scientists or by nuclear havoc. Sci-fi tales have a prophetic nature (they often attempt to figure out or depict the future) and are often set in a speculative future time. They may provide a grim outlook, portraying a dystopic view of the world that appears grim, decayed and un-nerving with its underground slave population and view of the effects of industrialization, the portrayal of 'Big Brother' society in 1984 (1956 and 1984), nuclear annihilation in a post-apocalyptic. Commonly, sci-fi films express society's anxiety about technology and how to forecast and control the impact of technological and environmental change on contemporary society.

Science fiction often expresses the potential of technology to destroy humankind through Armageddon-like events, wars between worlds, Earth-imperiling encounters or disasters. In many science-fiction tales, aliens, creatures, or beings (sometimes from our deep subconscious, sometimes in space or in other dimensions) are unearthed and take the mythical fight to new metaphoric dimensions or planes, depicting an eternal struggle or battle (good vs. evil) that is played out by recognizable archetypes and warriors (Star Wars (1977) with knights and a princess with her galaxy's kingdom to save, The Fifth Element (1997), and the metaphysical Solaris (1972 and 2002)). Beginning in the 80s, science fiction began to be feverishly populated by noirish, cyberpunk films, with characters including cyber-warriors, hackers, virtual reality dreamers and druggies, and underworld low-lifers in nightmarish, un-real worlds (i.e., Blade Runner (1982), Strange Days (1995), Johnny Mnemonic (1995), and The Matrix (1999)).

The Earliest Science Fiction Films:

Many early films in this genre featured similar fanciful special effects and thrilled early audiences. The pioneering science fiction film, a 14-minute ground-breaking masterpiece with 30 separate tableaus (scenes), Le Voyage Dans La Lune (A Trip to the Moon) (1902), was made by imaginative, turn-of-the-century French filmmaker/magician Georges Melies, approximating the contents of the novels by Jules Verne (From the Earth to the Moon) and H.G. Wells (First Men in the Moon). With innovative, illusionary cinematic techniques (trick photography with superimposed images, dissolves and cuts), he depicted many memorable, whimsical old-fashioned images:

- a modern-looking, projectile-style rocket ship blasting off into space from a rocket-launching cannon (gunpowder powered?)
- a crash landing into the eye of the winking 'man in the moon'
- the appearance of fantastic moon inhabitants (Selenites, acrobats from the Folies Bergere) on the lunar surface
 Alien Invader Films in the Cold War Era:

Many other sci-fi films of the 1950s portrayed the human race as victimized and at the mercy of mysterious, hostile, and unfriendly forces. Cold War politics undoubtedly contributed to suspicion, anxiety, and paranoia of anything "other" - or "un-American." Allegorical science fiction films reflected the collective unconscious and often cynically commented upon political powers, threats and evils that surrounded us (alien forces were often a metaphor for Communism), and the dangers of aliens taking over our minds and territory. UFO sightings and reports of flying saucers or strange visitors from outer space found their way into Hollywood features as allegories of the Cold War. Director Robert Wise's classic *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951), was a counter-revolutionary film about the madness of Cold War politics; it had an anti-nuclear war message and ultimatum ("Klaatu barada nikto") brought to Washington D.C. by a gentle, benevolent, and philanthropic Christ-like alien/emissary named Klaatu (Michael Rennie), backed up by a giant, eight-foot tall metallic robot named Gort (a prototypical Terminator character and similar to the Tin Woodsman in *The Wizard of Oz*); the entire film was a precursor to Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982); it was remade in 2008 by director Scott Derrickson, starring Keanu Reeves as Klaatu.

Kubrick's Science-Fiction Classic:

But the most celebrated, religious, and transcendent of all space films up to that time, visualized space travel with incredible magnificence and seriousness. Kubrick's respectable, influential film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) (with only 40 minutes of dialogue), based on Arthur C. Clarke's novel, restored legitimacy to the science-fiction genre.

Other 70s-80s Science Fiction Films:

Other futuristic films were produced in the 1970s and 1980s, many with the effects of technology run amok - whether it was faults in human-tinkering technology or social engineering, or robot theme parks with aberrant androids.


Disney's sci-fi adventure *Tron* (1982) was set inside a computerized videogame, where the designer/creator battled his own computer games. It was one of the first films to use extensive computer-generated graphics.

Similar films featured cyborgs as crime-fighting cops of the future in industrial wastelands, such as in Paul Verhoeven's first film *RoboCop* (1987) (a variation of the classic *Frankenstein* (1931)) and its lesser, imitative sequels in 1990 and 1991. A year earlier, an endearing, adorable, sophisticated robot named 'Number Five' (Johnny Five) appeared in director John Badham's *Short Circuit* (1986). Paul Michael Glaser's *The Running Man* (1987), set in the year 2017 in a world run by an evil government, found Arnold Schwarzenegger as a framed cop (Ben "Butcher of Bakersfield" Richards) condemned to participate in a violent TV game show (hosted by actual game show host Richard Dawson) that mocked pro-wrestling, celebrity competitions, game shows, and other forms of reality programming.

Late in the 1970s, *Star Trek - The Motion Picture* (1979) (and its many film sequels about the starship USS Enterprise and its crew) rode the popular wave of the cult television series of the 60s. Another slick, epic-sized adventure film with many sequels was *Superman* (1978), starring a handsome and romantic Christopher Reeve as the film counterpart of TV super-human George Reeves. Futuristic cartoon, comic-book superhero characters

Japan's Giant Monster Films:

Japan's Toho Studios (and director Inoshiro Honda, known as "The Father of Godzilla") contributed to the "creature feature" output after noticing the influence of Ray Harryhausen's The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms (1953) with stop-motion animation. They released a trilogy of films about a similar monster (and an additional feature film), inevitably followed by numerous other schlocky, dubbed sequels. This and subsequent Japanese monster movies would feature actors in giant, rubber monster costumes, fake-looking miniatures, and double-exposure photography. Godzilla, King of the Monsters (1956, US), d. Terrell O. Morse, was the US remake of Honda's original 1954 film, released by producer Joseph E. Levine and his Transworld Pictures. It was a very different, butchered and Americanized film for US audiences (without most of the anti-nuclear political statements and references to the dangers of the H-bomb), with 40 minutes excised and 20 minutes of new footage. The poorly-dubbed film featured American actor Raymond Burr as an American reporter who pleads with a scientist named Dr. Kyohei Yamane (Takashi Shimura) to challenge the monstrous dinosaur with his invention - an 'oxygen destroyer.' This film was remade as a Hollywood blockbuster by Roland Emmerich, titled Godzilla (1998), starring Matthew Broderick and featuring a computer-generated monster.

Inoshiro Honda's trilogy of monster films spawned new giant monsters, such as Majin (a monster of terror), Gamera (a jet-propelled flying turtle), Barugon (a gigantic lizard), Ghidrah (a three-headed dragon), Dagora (flying jellyfish) as well as Godzilla clones named Agon and Gappa. The sequels were often battles of elimination, including King Kong vs. Godzilla (1962), Godzilla vs. Mothra (1964) (aka Godzilla vs. The Thing), Ghidrah: The Three-Headed Monster (1964), Godzilla vs. Monster Zero (1965) (aka Monster Zero), Destroy All Monsters (1968) and Godzilla's Revenge (1969) (aka All Monsters Attack). The Japanese Godzilla monster would later return in the mid-80s as Gojira (1984) (aka Godzilla 1985: The Legend is Reborn) - a remake of the 1956 classic, in the mid-90s as Godzilla vs. Destoroyah (1995), and at the turn of the century with Godzilla 2000 (1999) (the first Japanese Godzilla movie since the 1985 installment to receive a US theatrical release). Toho's franchise of Godzilla films totaled almost 30 films in all. The ultimate films in the US series were Roland Emmerich's big-budget Godzilla (1998), and the 50th Anniversary film Godzilla: Final Wars (2004) - reprising the giant monster's battles with many of its old foes.

Ray Harryhausen's Mythological Science-Fiction/Fantasy Films - One of the Fathers of Modern-Day Special Effects:

After admiring and being inspired by the ground-breaking work of Willis H. O'Brien in Kong Kong (1933) and the work of special-effects animator George Pal in the 1940s, Ray Harryhausen was able to work on Mighty Joe Young (1949), one of O'Brien's final projects (for which O'Brien won a Best Visual Effects Oscar) although Harryhausen wasn't really credited for most of the work. Besides the films already mentioned in the 1950s, master of stop-motion animation Ray Harryhausen (often teamed with long-time producer Charles Schneer) turned to mythologically-tainted science-fiction films (including three Sinbad films) to display his painstaking, classic craft of special effects - animated frame-by-frame, until the special effects revolution ushered in by Star Wars (1977) swept through the industry. Harryhausen, who never received an Oscar nomination, did receive the Gordon E. Sawyer Honorary Academy Award in 1992. [Pixar's Monsters, Inc. (2001) paid tribute to Harryhausen by having Monstropolis' chic night spot restaurant named after him. Also, the octopus behind the bar in Harryhausen's Sushi restaurant has only six legs, another clever in-reference.]

'Sci-Fi' Films with Revolutionary Visual Effects and Set Design:

Seven films revolutionized film set design and visual effects, and have become some of the most influential science-fiction/supernatural films in recent film history:
TRON (1982) - a pioneering film in computer graphics
Blade Runner (1982) - the model for all futuristic tech-noir dystopias with bleak, night-time LA cityscapes (influencing films such as Batman (1989), Strange Days (1995), and Dark City (1998))
Pink Floyd the Wall (1982) - an expressionistic musical, the first feature-length music video (or "MTV" film before MTV's popularity surged)
Poltergeist (1982) - a seminal supernatural thriller with a possessed young child

Lucas' and Spielberg's Contributions:

George Lucas' first feature film was the dystopic thriller THX 1138 (1971), an atmospheric film about a repressive Orwellian futuristic, dehumanized, subterranean society that forbade love and sexual intercourse. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, films by Lucas and Spielberg consciously paid tribute to serials of the 1930s, with hero Luke Skywalker, swooping space battles, imaginative bar creatures in Mos Eisley's Cantina, revolutionary special effects, Harrison Ford at the controls of the Millennium Falcon spacecraft, and a vast universe. Aliens could be friendlier and benevolent, evidenced by loveable robots (R2D2 and CP-30) and Chewbacca in the popular Star Wars fantasy space epic "trilogy" - all modern blockbusters. The first in this space opera trilogy set another standard for action-propelled, special-effects science-fiction:

The 90s: A Mix of Action and/or Sophisticated Story-Telling

By the 90s, sophisticated digital effects were overtaking science fiction films, and creating spectacular and monstrous creatures such as the living dinosaurs in Spielberg's Jurassic Park (1993), The Lost World: Jurassic Park (1997), and Jurassic Park III (2001); the female alien invader in Species (1995), the giant marauding bugs in Starship Troopers (1997), and the bulbous-headed aliens in Tim Burton's alien-invasion spoof Mars Attacks! (1996). The sci-fi alien invasion comedies Men in Black (1997) and Men in Black II (2002) were remarkably successful films that combined both special effects and great acting from its two leads Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones.

Demolition Man (1993) pitted 1990s cyrogenically-defrosted LA cop-hero John Spartan (Sylvester Stallone), after release in the year 2032 from cyro-prison in the megapolis of San Angeles, to combat another defrosted individual -- violent psychopath Simon Phoenix (Wesley Snipes - with blonde hair). Wolfgang Petersen's Outbreak (1995), released at the height of the AIDS crisis with additional fears of bioterrorism, was a traditional disaster thriller about the pervasive spread of a killer African virus. The ultra-patriotic sci-fi epic Independence Day (1996) by director Roland Emmerich told of the extra-terrestrial invasion of the world with the destruction of the White House as an opener. The roller-coaster action film, a summer blockbuster with stunning, thrill-ride, Oscar-winning special effects, was a return to the themes of disaster epics of the 1970s and the alien-invasion content of 50s science fiction.

Two blockbuster Hollywood films released in the summer of 1998 portrayed the threat of Earth-threatening asteroids: Mimi Leder's character-driven sci-fi action film Deep Impact (1998) (Tagline: Heaven and Earth are about to collide), with Robert Duvall as an astronaut heading up a government mission in outer space to destroy the comet; and Michael Bay's Armageddon (1998) (Tagline: It's Closer Than You Think), with Bruce Willis and his core drilling team called to thwart the space rock by the use of nuclear weapons.