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The Storytelling and Teaching of Science Fiction

From the TARDIS to Jedi, science fiction is well-known and well-loved the world over. Science fiction, or as it's colloquially known, 'sci-fi', is a genre of fiction that showcases fantastic and imaginative worlds. It is most commonly recognized by its futuristic stories with space travel or artificial intelligence, but it originally started as an author's way of speculating about what the impact of technology might be in the future. Science fiction is the simplest medium to explain heavy topics in an easily digestible manner.

Famed Director Steven Spielberg spoke about science fiction when asked about the plot of his film *Minority Report*:

Science fiction loves to warn. Remember, science fiction's always been the kind of first level alert to think about things to come. It's easier for an audience to take warnings from sci-fi without feeling that we're preaching to them. Every science fiction movie I have ever seen, any one that's worth its weight in celluloid, warns us about things that ultimately come true (Spielberg).

Spielberg implies here that science fiction is a way to warn of what may come in the future. Much of science fiction attempts to answer the question 'what if life continues in such a way?'

Science fiction is a broad genre, from the *Star Wars* franchise by George Lucas and its emphasis on biology, to *Dune* by Frank Herbert and its emphasis on ecology. From such

broadness, it is simple to form the stories into groups based on the story's topic, such as *Godzilla* and its emphasis on the terrors of war and bombs.

War is famously a heavy topic. Steven Spielberg directed *Saving Private Ryan*, a movie that takes place in the Second World War in 1944 France. When Spielberg was interviewed by Newsweek following the release of the movie, he explained, "Every war movie, good or bad, is an antiwar movie (Spielberg)." Spielberg is saying that war is such an awful act that if a movie portrays it accurately, war is not shown in a good light. War is a dark topic but one that needs to be understood and discussed more openly.

The original *Godzilla* movie was released in 1954. In the film a reptilian, almost dinosauric, creature is awoken from the depths of the sea following hydrogen bomb testing that was being done in the ocean. The original *Godzilla* movie was produced by Toho Co., Ltd., which is a Japanese entertainment company. *Godzilla* was made following World War II in which atomic bombs were dropped on two major cities in Japan, Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Honda).

In *Godzilla*, a creature believed to have evolved from ancient sea creatures is terrorizing a small island off the coast of Tokyo. It was theorized in the film that the creature was awakened due to the testing of hydrogen bombs beneath the water, this was supported by a character discovering a large radiation reading in the area. The movie ends with an attack on Godzilla using a weapon called the 'Oxygen Destroyer', a device that destroys oxygen atoms causing suffocation and decay. The creator of the device originally did not want to share the research, as he believed that the government would request him to make more. The movie ends with one of the characters stating that if the bombing continues, another creature like Godzilla may awaken (Honda).

Godzilla was a movie produced to show, in a metaphorical way, the horrors of war. It explores the unknown nature of the effect hydrogen bombs, and even atomic bombs, will have on humanity as a whole. Whether the effect is mass genocide or releasing a sleeping giant from the depths of the sea, the result is terrible. The creature Godzilla was made to show both the outcome of the bombing and a way to show the destruction caused by the bombing as well, with Godzilla representing the bomb (Honda).

Another movie that confronts the subject of war, and was even released in the same year, is *Them!*. *Them!* is a 1954 cult classic featuring giant ants as the antagonists and nuclear weapons as the driving force behind the plot. In the film, giant ants start to emerge from an area the U.S. Government used to test atomic bombs in the New Mexican desert. A myrmecologist believed the ant farm was mutated due to the radiation of the aforementioned bomb. After saving two boys who mistakenly went into the ants' nest, the group kills the remaining queen ants and eggs. One of the main characters questions if the sudden appearance of mutated creatures will happen again due to the nine years it had been since the first detonation of a nuclear weapon in America, codenamed Trinity (Douglas).

Them! is an American movie referencing the same war as *Godzilla*. *Them!* shows nature fighting back against the actions of mankind, in a way not unlike the Alfred Hitchcock film *The Birds*, wherein flocks of birds attack a small cape town because, as Hitchcock stated in an interview, humankind was taking nature for granted (Douglas).

Them!, in a manner very similar to *Godzilla*, shows a creature of undetermined power attacking people who have no way of stopping it. *Them!* focuses on the possibility of common life being changed by bombs while *Godzilla* focuses on the unknowns that may come to be, due to the bombs.

Both movies explained above touch on the repercussions of using bombs and nuclear weaponry. Both came out roughly nine years after the end of World War II, they focus on the effect of nuclear weapons on the planet. The movies showcase an – albeit unrealistic in modern times – portrayal of a possible effect of nuclear weapons as well as bringing to question what may become of the world as the consequences of actions are made obvious.

War and fighting are very common in science fiction stories, but another topic that is heavily referenced in science fiction is government. More specifically, a government that takes complete control. Such fear is often projected through stories that either feature a dystopian world with a totalitarian government that has taken control or show the bad that can come from following a ruling power's commands blindly. In 1837, the *United States Magazine* and *Democratic Review* penned a quote speaking out against a government having total power, "The best government is that which governs least." The quote explains how the 'best' government should run, and there are many stories that prove this rule, by showing an example of governments which governs most.

In *Ender's Game*, a 1985 novel written by Orson Scott Card, the story is both an example of war in science fiction, but it also shows trusting in a governmental power fully, with no doubts or questions in what they are doing. The story is about a boy nicknamed Ender joining Battle School to train to fight the alien species Formics that earth barely survived an initial attack from (Card).

During Ender's training in the Battle School, he is singled out by the commanders to be the one to lead the charge against the aliens. Ender is not told that the supposed 'simulations' that he thought he was playing with his friends/sub-commanders were actually true battles. This information is also revealed to Ender following the end of the genocide wherein Ender realizes

that he has been used to destroy an entire planet and species. Ender and his sister take the last surviving egg of the alien species and join a group of space colonists in search of a new planet for the egg to hatch on (Card).

Ender's Game shows the story of a child who is forced to participate in a war, later revealed to have been unnecessary, by the commanders of the fleet made to protect earth. The fleet makes all of the choices for Ender, including him even being born in the first place, and Ender is kept unaware of his actions until it is too late (Card).

In science fiction, many governments portrayed are shown taking total control during war time while keeping the populace ignorant in the name of the greater good, but there are also many stories that show a government taking complete control to the point that the citizens are trained to not disagree and follow ignorantly.

"Harrison Bergeron", a short story written by Kurt Vonnegut, is an example of this type of science fiction. In the story, the Constitution has been used to make everyone equal. Those who are 'better' than others have handicaps, such as a mask for the beautiful, weights for the athletic, and earpieces that distract the intelligent. Harrison Bergeron was considered to be a genius and an athlete, to the point that his handicaps were beyond the usual standard, and was arrested due to plotting to overthrow the government. The story is told from the perspective of Harrison Bergeron's parents, who, upon watching him be killed on TV due to his attempted rebellion, have so many handicaps in place that while the mother, Hazel, is crying upon seeing her son be killed, she doesn't remember why (Vonnegut).

"Harrison Bergeron" was written as a satirical dystopian short story that speaks to the extremes of forced equality. In the story, the woman who kills Harrison Bergeron after his attempted rebellion, is the United States Handicapper General, the woman in charge of keeping

everyone equal. The story states that this equality stemmed from the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution. Though heavily satirical, the story does point out the dangers of following blindly. The characters refer to the time before the equality as the 'dark ages', and obey despite the handicaps causing major discomfort (Vonnegut).

Another story that showcases a complete trust in authority and tradition is "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson. This short story features a town that participates in 'the lottery' every year as a practice to bring a good harvest. The story shows a town gathering for a lottery, and it is revealed that whoever's name is chosen in the lottery is sacrificed via stoning (Jackson).

It states multiple times in the story that no one knows how the lottery originally started. The story itself goes further into stating that much of the original practice has been lost, even stating that, "The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born." The box is not the same as it was when the tradition first started, but the townsfolk refuse to replace the *new* box due to wanting to keep the tradition, despite the 'original paraphernalia' having already been replaced at least once before (Jackson, 1).

The townsfolk have such a reliance and blind faith in the tradition that they believe that doing away with the lottery will cause them to be nothing more than simple cavemen. The only time a named character talks about doing away with the lottery, save for a character chastising those who want the practice to be abolished, is when the character is about to be stoned, having been chosen in the lottery. This long-established act shows the danger of blindly following orders. The townsfolk were sacrificing their own neighbors in exchange for a good harvest, but as seen by other towns that do not do the lottery anymore, it had no effect on the harvest, for or against (Jackson).

Following the rules and laws of a community isn't wrong, not attempting to understand the laws, and at a personal level deciding if they are fair or not, *is*. Blindly trusting what one is being told without thinking can often lead to ignorance and even *fear* if allowed to control thoughts. Fearing change and science due to it being new knowledge is common, but refusing to acknowledge and learn this new information is detrimental.

One example that displays such fear while blindly trusting the government is *Fahrenheit 451*, by Ray Bradbury. The novel tells of a world where the entire population has become addicted to and dependent on technology. The protagonist, Guy Montag, is a fireman who, instead of fighting fires, causes them by burning books. Guy soon becomes confused regarding the burning of books and quits his job, trying to become a protector of literature rather than a destroyer. In the story, the government, upon realizing that with the growth of technology and television, books have become upsetting to the common population, changed the jobs of firemen to burn books with fire rather than protect them (Bradbury).

Such a practice is very similar to the appendix of *1984* by George Orwell, wherein a new language, Newspeak, is being implemented into becoming the common dialect of the Oceania state. In the appendix, it mentions that due to how Newspeak showcases words, by removing any secondary or tertiary thoughts behind the meanings, books written before 1960 could not be translated into Newspeak. Books that fall into this category would be collected and destroyed, save for the important pieces of literature, such as Shakespeare, that were to be translated into Newspeak (Orwell).

The fear of science is commonly referenced in media, especially specifically in terms of change. Many stories warn of the consequences that may arise from the continuous growth of human understanding and scientific discoveries. Science fiction began as a way for writers to

express their apprehension concerning the evolving understanding of science and the world as it is known.

Of course, one cannot talk of science fiction without referencing *Frankenstein* or, *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley. The ‘moral’ of *Frankenstein* is to not play god through the growing study of sciences. Victor tries to create life, which had never been done before, and in doing so ruins his own life. If Mary Shelley wanted to preach to the masses against the idea of using science to try to ‘play god’ she could have written an essay, or a series of essays. Instead, she wrote a novel; she wrote a story that speaks of the fear of science, education, loss, and revenge (Shelley).

Mary Shelley, who is widely considered to be the ‘mother of science fiction’, writes of *Frankenstein*, telling the story of Victor Frankenstein who, by harnessing the power of electricity, can return life to non-living matter. The creature that Victor brings to life is abandoned by Victor once he realizes what he has created. The creature then destroys Victor’s life just as Victor never bothered to give the creature a chance at living as a normal person in the first place. (Shelley).

In the novel, Victor Frankenstein’s experiment as he attempts to create life is extraordinary science. Victor Frankenstein was able to develop a way to create life using electricity and a body that he had created from stealing body parts from human corpses and animals.

Shelley tells the story of Victor Frankenstein who uses scientific processes to play god, trying to create life with his own hands. *Frankenstein* was written starting in 1816, during this time there was a scientific boom of growth, but with the sudden growth of understanding and

new discoveries came the apprehension of what that science may bring and how the world may change because of it.

Frankenstein was written to show an extreme warning in story form. Victor Frankenstein played god and he and his family were hurt and killed because of it. Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in response to the possible actions that this new science might bring and the consequences that may follow.

Another media that touches on the fear of change and the unknown is in many of the episodes of the 1959 television show titled *The Twilight Zone* created by Rod Serling. Serling was a fan of science fiction his entire life, searching more specifically for stories concerning war, government, racism, etc. Most episodes of *The Twilight Zone* have a moral. In today's terms these morals would most likely be considered 'woke.' The show was one of very few on air that questioned the world and society without needing to be censored, due to the stories being fictional (Serling).

One such episode is titled "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street", and the plot follows different families in a neighborhood after a power outage. After a teenager mentions that what is happening is similar to the plot of a comic he had been reading about an alien takeover, the neighbors quickly turn on each other, causing mistrust and even death as the mob switches between who is to blame ("The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street").

The episode ends with the actual aliens, (or government agents in the rerelease), watching the chaos from atop a neighboring hill, talking about how easy it will be to convince the humans to turn on each other one neighborhood at a time, leading to an easy conquest. Rod Serling, the narrator, ends the episode with a message:

The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout.

There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can kill and suspicion can destroy and a thoughtless, frightened search for a scapegoat has a fallout all of its own—for the children and the children yet unborn. And the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to The Twilight Zone (“The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street”)!

What Serling is saying here is that harmful ideas and biases inside a person’s mind can be just as dangerous, if not even more so, as bombings. The effect of these ideas can affect people’s lives for generations.

Serling was able to explain sensitive subjects and topics due to the show being fictional, using these stories as metaphors for how life was at that point, showing racism, human nature, and government behind a fictional lens. The episodes of the show portrayed issues that would have gotten censored if not for the fact that the topics were hidden behind costumes and smokescreens.

Science fiction is a genre that commonly portrays the futuristic or scientific side of fiction, referencing ideas such as space travel or machines. But science fiction is also a very profound base on which to impart an idea. Death and change are commonly portrayed in science fiction but in an easily digestible manner. Stories like *Star Wars* or *Godzilla* portray war in a fantastical manner meant to be enjoyed by audiences but still show the horrors that stem from this fighting. By showing these topics in a futuristic setting, audiences can comprehend the ideas easier than if they were shown a war movie. By making the story behind the ideas portrayed as fantastical, one can connect with the story without being traumatized by the ‘realistic’ scenes as shown in realistic fiction.

Science fiction, as a genre, is the most common method of sharing a sensitive topic.

Science fiction is able to focus on the impact that technology and choices may have in the future.

Due to the fictional setting, heavier topics are able to be explained without the reader feeling as if they are being lectured or warned against. Science fiction is able to portray complex topics in a straightforward and comprehensible way, allowing for the topics to be understood by more people. The genre also allows for heavy topics to escape censorship by presenting the ideas behind the guise of 'fiction'. Science fiction is not only the best, and most common medium to teach a lesson in story form, but it also allows the specific topic to be heard and understood by many.

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