

## Science Fiction Films: The History of Societal Anxieties

Science fiction films have been a gateway into the future for several generations and showcase worlds from the most vivid of imaginations. However, while these movies might seem distant and displaced from reality, they are almost exact replicas of society's current social anxieties and fears. Science fiction movies, while disguised under special effects and out-of-this-world plots, can be a distinct reflection of a society's social woes and what they are most scared or worried about at that moment. By exploring science fiction movies from different eras and comparing them to historical research of that period, one can see an eerie relationship of what is being depicted in the movies with those contemporary anxieties.

Since the end of World War II, the social movements of the seventies, and up until modern-day, science fiction movies have been a tool for audiences to escape into the unknown and explore the curiosities of their dreams or their real-life anxieties. Science fiction movies create new worlds and futures through various techniques, including dramatic lighting, special effects, and futuristic contemporary settings. By exploring three distinct films, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977), and *Interstellar* (2014), and the way they use the long shot, one can see how science fiction has evolved in congruence with contemporary anxieties and social issues of the times.

### **The Paranoia of The Cold War**

During the Second World War, many aspects of American life changed in drastic ways. A large number of people entered the workforce, including women, and gender roles and familial

values shifted.<sup>1</sup> While the United States was one of the few global superpowers left after the Second World War, they were still competing with the communist Soviet Union. This led to the eruption of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> The Cold War brought intense nuclear anxiety to the United States and caused many citizens to have acute paranoia of undercover communists, known as the Red Scare, and fear of nuclear attack from the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> During this period, many people were terrified that their friends, neighbors, or family members might be undercover spies for the Soviet Union or ‘aliens’ from Eastern Europe. This led the way for a period of extreme distrust in America and suspicion of every citizen, especially immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

These fears were reflected in the movies and films of this period, especially in Robert Wise’s *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). This movie is about an alien from another planet visiting Earth and trying to get Earth to join them in peace, “or pursue your present course and face obliteration.”<sup>5</sup> This movie accurately shows the fear Americans have for communism with the representation of an “alien” that looks just like a human but is not. While Communism preached peace and seemed like a good thing for humanity, the U.S. was terrified that they would lose their democracy and freedoms.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Post War United States, 1945-1968.” Library of Congress. The United States Legislation Information. Accessed November 11, 2021. [Link](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Cold War Hysteria.” American Experience. PBS. Accessed November 11, 2021. [Link](#)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Wise, Robert, dir. *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. 1951; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox.



In this scene from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), the flying saucer had just landed in Washington D.C. and the military, as well as a large number of onlookers, had surrounded it. This scene is shot in a long shot, the people and weapons appearing small and insignificant in comparison to the large spaceship. In the background, the Washington Monument can be seen, signaling that they are at the heart of the U.S. capitol. Long shots are typically used to establish the setting of the movie and the characters' relationship to where they are. This type of shot can also exaggerate the size of an object, making it appear more ominous or larger-than-life.

By using a long shot in this scene, the director is making sure the viewer is aware of the significance of this flying saucer landing in the U.S. capitol. Not only is Earth being invaded at this point by an alien from far away, but they are at the very home of the U.S. government. This is a direct reflection of the societal anxieties of this time. Americans, at this time, were extremely paranoid that someone in the government was a secret communist. This movie is giving a visual representation of that fear by showing an alien, seemingly normal and peaceful, infiltrating the heart of the U.S. and changing its very structure.

## Movements for a Better Future

The 1960s and 70s were the decades that saw the most social movements and social unrest when it came to the governments of the world. This was especially prominent in America, as this decade saw the establishment of several prominent movements including anti-war, feminist, LGBTQ+, and environmental movements.<sup>6</sup> This period was characterized by several groups of individuals united together under common identities to fight against the oppression they experienced under the U.S. government. All of these people were fighting for the hope of a better future, whether for themselves or later generations.<sup>7</sup>

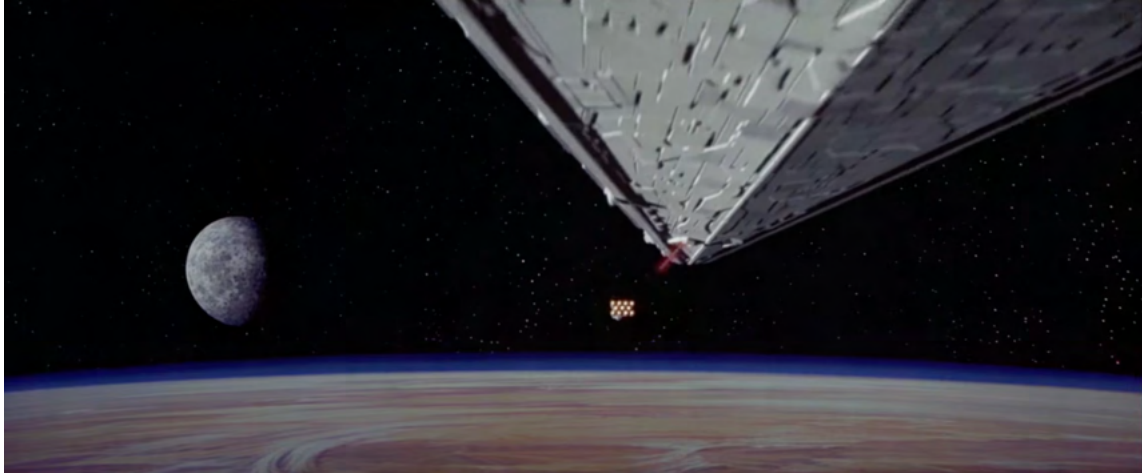
These ideas were strongly reflected in the movie *Star Wars: A New Hope (1977)*. This movie is about a young man, Luke Skywalker, joining forces with a group of rebels and fighting the tyranny of the Imperial Forces in hopes of a freer galaxy.<sup>8</sup> This movie shows the hope people had during this period for a way to defeat their oppressive governments and come out with a better, more accepting country. Luke Skywalker, by joining the rebels and using his power for good, was able to take down the oppressive government that held everyone under their thumb. This is a direct reflection of the hopes of several social movements of this period and how they believed that if they rebelled enough, they could make a huge difference in their lives and the lives of others who are being repressed.

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<sup>6</sup> "Liberation Movements of the 1970s." 1970s America. Khan Academy. Accessed November 11, 2021. [Link](#)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Lucas, George, dir. *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*. 1977; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox.



In this opening scene from *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977), the Imperial Forces are chasing down a rebel spacecraft. This scene is shot in a long shot, which in this instance, helps exaggerate and exemplify the size of the Imperial spacecraft in comparison to the rebel's spacecraft. This gives a physical representation of the Imperial Force's tyranny and control over others and their power. While the Imperial Forces are powerful and widespread, the rebel forces, while small and unorganized, are determined to have a better life and future. It is this idea that many of the movements of this period also had in their struggle against the government.

By using a long shot in this opening scene, the viewer is immediately confronted with the might of the Imperial Forces and the feeling of impossibility when it comes to taking them down. This, in comparison, is probably how many of those in these grassroots movements felt as well when trying to establish a change in their respective societies. Many, while striving for this change, realized that they were going against political and corporate giants and that they might not succeed. However, like the rebels in Star Wars, they were determined to do all they could to change the world they lived in for the better.

### **Modern Dilemmas**

The twenty-first century brings many of the problems of the 70s to a critical point and society is severely divided on what the solutions should be. Global issues, like global warming, climate change, and world hunger, are on everyone's mind as these problems start to add up and become highly damaging. This idea of saving the world and fixing these global environmental problems is something that has slowly eased itself onto the movie screen. However, unlike the 70s where people were optimistic that everything will get better, modern society is a bit more realistic and rightfully concerned about how the Earth's environment and climate are on a downhill spiral.

These ideas are reflected in the movie *Interstellar* (2014) as the society in this futuristic Earth is trying to solve world hunger and climate change as it tears apart the Earth and kills millions. To save everyone, a group of scientists and astronauts travel the dark reaches of space to find the answer to Earth's problems or even find a new home.<sup>9</sup> This movie shows the challenges that modern Americans are facing today with the climate crisis and other environmental issues. The movie, while in the end giving a solution to these problems, is overall showing the infeasibility of solving these global problems and how difficult it is going to be if the world keeps on stalling.

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<sup>9</sup> Nolan, Christopher, dir. *Interstellar*. 2014; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures.



In this scene from *Interstellar* (2014), the space crew has just reached the black hole that they must enter to try and save humanity. This moment is frightening because it is shot in a long shot and the black hole is still being cut off, suggesting its immense size. The space crew has no idea at this point what might happen, however, they are willing to take this risk to save humanity from itself. In response to this being shot in a long shot, it exemplifies the fear that the characters are experiencing and the unknown that waits for them inside the black hole. Without the long shot in this scene showing the dark vastness of space and the size of the black hole, the viewer would be unable to visualize and experience the fear that the characters are feeling in that moment.

This scene accurately portrays modern-day fears and anxieties concerning the global environmental crisis and how people are willing to do anything to fix it or change the world for the better. As in this movie, some people genuinely care about the environment and are aware of the damage humanity is causing to the Earth as a whole. This scares a lot of people and causes severe anxiety for many. As represented in this shot, the fear of the unknown is limitless, however, if there is a chance to save the Earth and protect those living on it, then no risk should

be too great. This movie shows the lengths that a select group of people is willing to take to protect and save everyone, which is truly what is needed in the modern-day world.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, science fiction movies have been a gateway into the modern consciousness and into the anxieties of the times. By exploring movies from several eras, one can see the reflection of society during that time and what they were most scared of or hopeful for. Science fiction has always been a tool for many to explore their wildest dreams or deepest hopes. It allows many to see what they could only imagine on the big screen and experience it in new ways. In a lot of ways, science fiction movies allow viewers to confront their fears of the future and show potential solutions to these problems. Overall, movies have been an outlet for many to advocate and educate on current world issues and problems and the ones mentioned in this essay are no different.



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