



BOOK REVIEW:

*Space Sirens, Scientists, and Princesses:  
The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction  
Cinema*

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Space aliens, terminators, avengers, oh my. Mother, sex object, bystander, oh no. Dean Conrad covers all these tropes and many more in his survey *Space Sirens, Scientists, and Princesses: The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Cinema*, looking at nearly 120 years of female representation in SF cinematic history. In his introduction, Conrad makes it clear that this book is a cinema history, not a “work of cultural, critical, film or feminist theory – although its does drift into all of those fields in places” (6). Throughout this cinematic history, Conrad makes apparent that the predominant roles of women in 120 years were and remain women who watch “men doing things” and women who “revolve around men” (17, 223); in addition, “men run around; women run after them” (225). In examining this subject, Conrad contributes to conversations on cinematic history, SF history, and feminist theory. This text can sit on the shelf next to macro surveys, such as Brian Aldiss’s *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* and Robert Adam’s *The History of Science Fiction*. It can also sit snugly with more micro surveys, such as *Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema, 1896-Present* by Ally Acker and *A History of Science Fiction Film* by John Brosnan. In order to accomplish his goal of writing a cinematic history of women in SF, Conrad engages with scholars of many fields including such notable feminist theorists as Simone De Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone. He

also digs through the extensive vault that is film and TV. He looks at some of the earliest films ever made featuring women and includes an epilogue that examines films up to the point of publication, including *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Since his focus is female representation, Conrad spends very little time on females who make the films but instead focuses on the representation of women in the movie industry, which is inherently patriarchal, and how that representation interacts with male representation and domination of SF film.

Conrad separates his book into seven chapters, each following cinematic or historical changes. Chapter 1, “Science Fiction – Silents and the Establishment of Female Roles” examines the advent of cinema with the silent film period. Conrad makes a somewhat dubious argument early on when he suggests that all early films are science fiction. They are indeed a scientific marvel, but hardly science fiction (15). However, he quickly moves into silent films that are unquestioningly SF, such as *Dog Factory* and *Chapellerie et charcuterie mécanique*. Through these films, he notes that the women appear as little more than “onlookers, watching men doing things” (17). This is a theme that runs throughout this history.

As he moves through the history of science fiction cinema, he notes that women’s representation changes – for better or for worse – with the changes in cinematic technology. Perhaps the most enduring point that Conrad makes through each technological change is that the history of female representation is a “give-with-one-hand-take-with-the-other mentality” (146). For example, during the age of sound, women begin to take on more prominent roles, yet they are of traditional representation: the evil queen, the princess in distress, or the female aid; and such representation reflects increasing sexualisation (46).

As Conrad moves into chapter 2, “Science Fantasy – Sound, Technology and the Service of Male Desires”, he explores how the role of women became increasingly sexualised as silent films became talkies: sexualised aliens, sexualised monsters, and sexualised robots. If women were not overtly sexualised, they were often depicted as a mother-figure. As the survey continues, we learn that the sexualisation of the female and the presence of the mother-figure are continual themes that run throughout the history of SF cinema, which is not surprising as two of the four major female archetypes are the whore and the mother.

It is in chapter 3, “Peace and the Emergence of Female Professionals”, where Conrad shows his first grudging respect for the cinematic industry and their attempts of granting female agency. Though women are still sidekick characters to men’s narratives, they begin to have more overt agency. His prime example, and one to which he keeps returning throughout the survey, is the 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as female secretary Helen Benson stands beside the male alien and helps prevent an alien invasion and the annihilation of the human race. Despite women’s having more agency, Conrad notes that though they are being presented as professionals, including scientists, the sciences they specialise in are “soft sciences” or “life sciences” while the “hard sciences” remain firmly in the hands of men (82-83). This trend continues well into the present. An example he often alludes to is Amy Adams’s linguist in *Arrival*.

Unfortunately, the progress seen in chapter 3 seems to be short-lived. As women made progress during the second-wave feminist revolution, their screen representations did not progress accordingly. During this time, cinema made

another technological advancement: colour. As Conrad often shows, as cinema takes a step forward, female representation takes two steps backward. Chapter 4, “Intermission – Watershed Years, or, Destination Unknown and an *Annus Mirabilis*” presents some notable female figures such as Dr. Zira from the 1968 *Planet of the Apes* and Barbarella from *Barbarella*. However, these roles are quickly diminished by their patriarchal setup. Dr. Zira, though showing great promise for female representation as a scientist, loses stature in the sequel and gets axed in the third movie. And Barbarella shows fierce female agency as well as being a “proficient female astronaut”; however, “This is a movie in which feminist attitudes are approached from a patriarchal perspective, turning a promising treatise into ... ‘elucubrated, anemic pornography’” (110). Not only is Barbarella highly sexualised, she is then shamed for her sexual appetite.

The first half of Conrad’s book follows the first six decades of SF cinema, showing a constant shift forward followed by a corresponding setback. Unfortunately, this rings true for the following six decades as well. As Conrad gets into chapter 5, “Golden Era – Blockbusters and the Development of Female Heroes”, there is finally some hope that women will break out of their stereotyped representations or their position as a bystander in the man’s narrative. This seems to hold true for a little while with women like Princess Leia, Ellen Ripley, and Sarah Connor (*Star Wars*, *Aliens*, and *Terminator* respectively): women who are “strong, opinionated and resourceful” (138). Yet, even with this stunning trio, stereotypes resound, such as Ripley and Connor being represented as mother figures. Another turn is the masculinised female, as represented by Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. As Conrad remarks, “To appropriate Laura Mulvey here, it might seem that creators of female characters in the 1980s and ‘90s were ‘torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity’” (145). As Conrad moves into chapter 6, “Dangerous Times – Identity Crises and a Millennial Mélange”, we are reminded that in the end tradition rules the cinematic industry. Despite certain achievements, SF cinema returns to monstrous, sexualised females in films about men.

Finally, as Conrad reaches the twenty-first century and the computer/CGI age, women are once again presented as sex symbols despite being competent warriors. Twenty-first-century SF has become “Look-at-my-ass SF” (203), which he illustrates with no less than a half-dozen images of movie posters in which the women’s backside is facing the audience while the men are in more natural frontal poses (204). Though Conrad gives a succinct and complete concluding chapter, I believe the whole text is best summarised by the following quote: “On the one hand, it [cinematic female representation] promised – and delivered – so much; on the other, it showed that, however complete the revolution may appear, convention and stereotype always seem to retain a degree of influence” (180). With every gain women attained in SF cinematic history, they were also held to stereotypes and industry tradition which had them acting as bystanders in stories about men.

In *Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses*, Conrad offers a concise and remarkably complete history of female representation in SF cinema. Unfortunately, at points the text seems rather redundant; however, I believe that the fault lies more with the consistent one-step-forward-two-steps-backward mentality in cinematic history than with Conrad himself. Conrad can hardly be blamed for an industry whose attitude remains “give-with-one-hand-

take-with-the-other” (146). Conrad, though, can also sometimes be too tentative in his assertions. At times, it feels as though he is hesitant to offer firm critique of an industry that has consistently been reluctant to show women taking control of the narrative. Yet, overall, this is a solid book on the history of female representation in SF cinema. Conrad gives a concise, chronological view of this history, making solid connections between ideas and film examples. He engages with scholars from many fields of study. Furthermore, he has a wonderful appendix that contains an extensive list (including summaries) of the films discussed in his text. Additionally, he provides a thorough bibliography and filmography. Finally, if one feels so inclined, they can visit his website to get a more complete contents of the text and updates on more recent examples. I highly recommend this text for SF and film scholars, and, as it is an easily understandable read, I would recommend it to any layperson interested in these topics.

*Biography:* Sarah M. Gawronski is a PhD candidate at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her primary area of study is SF/dystopian/post-apocalyptic fiction. Her dissertation is on women in post-apocalyptic literature by women from 1954-2018. She is the mother of three feline boys, and in her rare free time she reads, plays table-top games, and is an avid knitter.