

In Praise of Sci-Fi

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Like many kids, I wanted to be an astronaut. Heavily influenced by the films *Space Camp* and *Explorers*, I became the proud owner of astronaut-themed Cabbage Patch and Barbie dolls.

Media and marketing aside, what was it about space travel that resonated so deeply with me?

I think the answer lies in the captivating power of the imagination.

My sense of adventure was piqued by the mysterious nature of "outer space" where the unknown realm was just waiting to be explored by my Cabbage Patch and me.

Scientific exploration, whether actual or imaginary, is spiritually and intellectually enriching. It satisfies our innate curiosity and our desire to "seek out and explore new worlds" -- as the captain of the starship *Enterprise* profoundly recites at the beginning of each episode of *Star Trek*.

We quest for answers as to where we came from and why we exist.

Science fiction isn't just about ray guns, Martians and space ships (although I must admit, in the geekiest way possible, that they are all way cool). The genre -- which includes film, television and literature -- provides a space (no pun intended) for exploring difficult social issues regarding gender, sexuality, power, ethics, reproduction, ecology and politics.

Expressing the possibilities of humanity through the medium of science fiction encourages our evolutionary journey while simultaneously critiquing it. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (often credited as the first science fiction novel) is an apt example of a speculative novel that encourages scientific progress while warning against irresponsible use of technological advances.

In her academic text *Sexual Generations: Star Trek the Next Generation and Gender*, author Robin Roberts writes that, "speculating from what exists to what might exist defines science fiction."

Citing extrapolation and defamiliarization as two of the most important qualities of the genre, Roberts writes, "extrapolation keeps science fiction located in issues and ethics that are a part of contemporary human culture ... extrapolation is the process by which an author builds upon what already exists and asks, 'What if this continues...or doesn't continue?'"

Defamiliarization allows for critical distance, making what is familiar seem new. Using an alien planet or a futuristic Earth as a backdrop for a story can help us to experience social issues in a cognitively new light. Through the use of metaphors, the science fiction imagination offers an alternative perspective on that which might otherwise be too close for us to see in an unbiased way.

The original *Star Trek* series often used the critical distance allowed by science fiction to push the boundaries of acceptable social norms, especially in the episode, "Plato's Children," which featured the first interracial kiss to appear on television.

The controversial lip-lock between Capt. Kirk and Lt. Uhura could probably not have taken place without the distance allowed by defamiliarization -- 1960s attitudes toward miscegenation were too volatile.

But since the kiss took place under forced mind control and far from Earth, the social taboo was moved into a safer ideological sphere. Such responsible use of the science fiction imagination

resulted in a brave television landmark, as well as a hopeful vision of the future.

As a child, I formed many of my initial ideas about morality through science fiction, especially from episodes of Star Trek. I learned that as a woman I could be just as valuable as a man and that people of all colors could work together as a team. I learned to love and respect diversity rather than fearing people for their sometimes shocking (and often trivial) differences.

As an academic and a feminist, I continue to use the medium of science fiction to further explore my values. As Roberts aptly puts it:

"It is science, after all, that provides legitimacy for many of our social decisions, from schooling to medical treatment. So it behooves feminists to examine popular science fiction texts for the ways in which gender roles are promulgated and also resisted."

I may not want to be an astronaut anymore, but my imagination still seeks. And boldly it goes.