"Mixed Media: Science Fiction and the Social Force
of Genre"

Brian White

MIXED MEDIA:
SCIENCE FICTION AND THE SOCIAL FORCE OF GENRE

Brian White[1]
Kalamazoo College

In February 1967 the Japanese science fiction film industry was, in the eyes of the major sci-fi periodical *SF Magazine*, in mortal peril. In that month's issue, the magazine published a special roundtable discussion between its editor, Fukushima Masami, and frequent magazine contributors Oka Toshio, Ishikawa Takashi, Yano Tetsu, and Ōtomo Shōji, in which the participants discussed the dire state of the industry and (the article's title) "What to do about Japanese SF Film."[2] The general consensus among participants in the roundtable was that Japanese SF films were sorely deficient in comparison with those being imported from abroad, and that this deficiency may soon lead to the failure of domestic SF film production. The panelists agreed that, taken in the context of the international SF market, Japanese SF films were artistically stunted and in need of rescue.

Yet just seven months before, Ōtomo had declared in the same magazine that *tokusatsu* (special effects) television programs were in no less than a golden age (*hanjōki*).[3] How can we account for such a drastic difference in *SF Magazine*'s evaluation of SF image media in so short a time? To be sure, larger media-historical shifts may have been part of it: Ōtomo's article mainly concerned *tokusatsu* TV programs like the wildly successful *Ultra Q*, which had debuted that year, whereas the roundtable focused on theatrical films, of which Ōtomo makes little mention. Television had become the visual medium of choice in Japan in the preceding years, especially in the lead-up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics; its newfound prominence, coupled with financial mismanagement in the major film studios, left the latter industry under considerable financial strain. Circumstances had become so desperate for the studios that they lobbied the Japanese government to intervene and subsidize the industry. We might therefore assume that the difference in tenor between Ōtomo's article and the later roundtable in which he participated might simply be due to their understanding of the different financial states of production for the big and small screens.

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[1] ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0098-5335
[2] "Nihon SF eiga o dō suru ka."
[3] Ōtomo, "Tokusatsu terebi eiga hanjōki."

And yet, in both Ōtomo's 1966 article and the 1967 roundtable, little mention is made of economic woes or national media trends. Instead, Ōtomo's article on *tokusatsu* television programs spends much of its time detailing the special effects techniques that were being developed at TV studios by the likes of Tsuburaya Eiji. He frames *tokusatsu* TV as a cutting-edge art form spearheading development of new techniques and technologies of composite photography, scale model sets and props, and so on. While he does make note of the unusually high budgets allocated to *tokusatsu* TV programs, he frames them as evidence not of the financial success of the industry but of the impressive emphasis being given to technical research and development. The "golden age" of *tokusatsu* TV, in other words, is due to technical superiority, not economic success. The roundtable discussion, meanwhile, remains focused on matters of aesthetics. What concerns the panelists is that the narrative conceits of many recent Japanese SF films were too simplistic and shallow, leading Fukushima in particular to fret that they might doom SF film, and the genre more generally, to a reputation of artistic immaturity and puerility. Again, it is not SF's financial state that concerns the discussants, but rather its artistic state.

What is at stake in the discrepancy between the 1966 and 1967 articles in *SF Magazine*, then, is a larger question of, "What makes a good SF film?" Wrapped up in this question is a broader set of debates within the SF community during this period to the effect of, "What is SF?" The term "SF" was made to hold together a wide variety of disparate aesthetic, industrial, ideological, and social elements: elements that constantly threatened to fly apart unless continuously reinscribed in discursive venues like *SF Magazine*. I argue that setting the boundaries of what was to be included within "good SF," as the magazine's articles aimed to do, was a means of directing what I call the genre's social force. Beyond denoting a certain set of aesthetic textual elements, in other words, the term "science fiction" served as the discursive center of gravity for a range of affective and ideological commitments, imagined lifestyle communities, media ecologies, and more. In order to understand 1960s Japanese science fiction, we must attend to the competing values SF was made to represent and the divergent models of sociality that arose out of that ambivalence.

Of course, it is not that the content of the texts themselves was irrelevant to the consumers who came together around them; the texts served as the creative material by which SF fans could express in-group solidarity and belonging with specialized jargon and shared experiences of consuming the text. SF texts are a charged medium existing between individuals, affecting and inflecting those individuals' communications.

Texts afford SF fans the space of their becoming. Such a relationship between popular cultural texts and constructions of identity—personal and national—would become much more visible some 20 to 30 years later as the volume of Japanese popular cultural production exports continued to increase.

Indeed, Japanese popular culture as we know it today might not have existed were it not for the influence of science fiction.[4] Facing financial crisis in the mid-1960s, the Japanese film industry turned to the government for support. Out of this arrangement came the Program to Encourage the Export of Films (Yushutsu eiga shinkō sochi), administered by the Bureau to Encourage Japanese Film Exports (Nihon eiga yushutsu shinkō kyōkai), which would disburse a total of nine billion yen over five years between 1966 and 1970 to support the production of films deemed "suitable for export" (*yushutsu tekikaku*). As Tanikawa Takeshi notes, with the fairly recent success abroad of *Gojira* (*Godzilla*, 1954, Honda Ishiro dir.) freshly in mind, a significant proportion of the films supported by the Program were science fiction monster movies (*kaijū eiga*). These films were judged to be suitably "modern," as well as easy to understand for foreign audiences with short attention spans, and thus received substantial subsidization from the government. This led to a glut of science fiction films produced in the mid- to late 1960s as studios sought funding through the Program: 35 were produced between the spring of 1966 and the end of 1968. As a result, Japan became one of the leading producers of science fiction films in the world, and science fiction became one vessel of the government's hopes for the success of Japanese cultural production globally.

Even before the national government got involved in subsidizing the movie industry, SF film and literature were already creatively interdependent industries. In 1961, for instance, publishing house Hayakawa Shobō announced its first "Science Fiction Contest" (*kūsō kagaku shōsetsu kontesuto*) in *SF Magazine*. The contest served two functions: on the one hand, it was meant to encourage more Japanese writers to pen SF stories for an audience hungry for works by domestic authors.[5] On the other, it served as a means for personnel from Tōhō Studios to scout for a work that could be adapted into a new screenplay; the contest's top prize was the opportunity to work with studio

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[4] Here and throughout this paragraph, I draw from Tanikawa, "Nihon eiga yushutsu shinkō kyōkai."

[5] This desire is reflected in letters sent to the editors of *SF Magazine* and printed in its monthly fan letters column. See, for example, "Terepōto."

representatives on an adaptation of the winning story for the big screen. Science fiction and film, in other words, existed in a mutually constitutive feedback loop, with literary works meant to serve as the inspiration for new films, and the flashy special effects of the latest SF films shown off in sci-fi magazines to serve as imaginative fuel for their readers and (perhaps more importantly) their writers. Thus, when we speak of science fiction in Japan, it makes more sense to think of it in fundamentally transmedia terms, rather than as a genre that gives primacy to literature, film, or any other single media form.

If we read 1960s science fiction as a whole through the lens of what Marc Steinberg calls the media mix, it gives us a useful way to approach the relationships between the literary and visual facets of the SF media ecology of the decade, one that turns us toward the social force exerted by SF media products. Steinberg uses this term to describe the transmedia marketing strategies surrounding the SF franchise *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astro Boy*) in the shift to a post-Fordist economy.[6] While his analysis centers on franchise properties, tied together through the unifying element of the character image, in the case of SF as a genre, the media mix is more expansive. For fans and authors, a transmedia identity arises in the fields of overlap between SF literature and audiovisual media. In the fanzine *Uchūjin*, for instance, announcements of new SF-related radio and television programs and movies regularly occupied the news columns by which SF fans had kept themselves up to date on the genre since the magazine's founding in 1957. Consuming SF film, television, and radio alongside fiction was seen as the default for SF fans like those reading *Uchūjin*.

Recalling the two articles from *SF Magazine* described above, we can see how the media ecology of SF accrued contested discursive values. What Ōtomo praised in his earlier article on *tokusatsu* TV was its status as a televisual "cinema of attractions." Like the visually attuned otaku consumers of later decades, Ōtomo's article assumes an audience of viewers who understand how SF film and television images are assembled and composited piece by piece out of multiple image layers. These viewers are not expected to receive the televisual SF image as depicting a diegetically complete, richly literary world. They are expected instead to appreciate *tokusatsu* television's capacity for "making images seen."[7]

A richly literary world, however, was precisely the standard of quality through which the 1967 roundtable evaluated the SF image. Key to

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[6] Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix*, 135–69.
[7] Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions."

Fukushima's critique of SF film was the idea that Japanese sci-fi cinema was suffering from narratives that had become hackneyed and shallow. Along with the other panelists, he bemoans the fact that film treatments of works by acclaimed SF writers like Abe Kōbō, Komatsu Sakyō, and Mitsuse Ryū (all of whom had been published in *SF Magazine*) had been mothballed while monster-of-the-week popcorn entertainment was churned out. The roundtable constructs a system of values for SF film based on high-literary criteria of intellectual narratives and rich characterization, criteria under which actual films were painfully deficient.

Ōtomo's technically sophisticated, visual approach to SF film was much more in line with the actual state of the industry in the latter half of the 1960s. The demands of international distribution and government sponsorship under which the film industry was creating SF films—that is, the industrial conditions brought about by the Program to Encourage the Export of Films—did not lend themselves to the literary sensibility of Fukushima Masami. Instead, they prioritized visual spectacle and immediate visual comprehensibility due to their status as products explicitly intended for export. The modern literary aesthetic ideology that the roundtable promoted, tied up as it was in linguistically marked formations of the nation-state, might pose a threat to SF image media products' ability to circulate smoothly outside of Japan.

These two rhetorical positions represent two different ways of literally seeing the SF image and, by extension, the aesthetic politics of SF as a genre. On the one hand, there is the literary sensibility of the fretful roundtable participants, and on the other, there is the appreciative technical eye of Ōtomo Shōji. Attending each of these perspectives were different ideas on how the SF image should be in the world, how it should gather and direct the viewer's attention.[8] Whether viewers are watching SF films for their deep narratives or spectacular special effects is a question that hinges on different ways of being in relation to the image, different subjective orientations elicited by the mutable stuff of SF film. When I refer to science fiction's social force, it is this subjective element to which I refer. The genre's transmedia nature was mirrored by its multiple models of social being, folding media and identity alike into itself.

Scholarly theories of media mix and frameworks from otaku studies are useful here precisely because they take up the intersection of media ecologies and the subcultural forms of subjectivity that accrue to them. However, whereas "media mix" is often understood to mean a force of convergent, transmedia marketing in the service of a particular franchise

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[8] I draw these ideas from LaMarre, *The Anime Machine*.

media property, the case of SF complicates this model insofar as there is no single franchise or author that serves to organize the value-laden discourses surrounding the genre. Fukushima and the other roundtable participants are not concerned about the future of any one SF literary or film franchise; instead, their anxiety is attached to the definition and ideological associations of the genre as a whole. Rather than a diegetic figure like Atomu, the "character" around which the SF media mix coheres is SF itself. If the media mix failed to gain suitable popularity with audiences, then, the consequences could affect the entire SF industry, *SF Magazine* included.

Success for the SF media mix, however, seemed to hold promise of a central place in national culture. Beyond incorporating a diverse media ecology, SF had also begun to make contact with mainstream literature, crossing the conventional divide between the center and periphery of literary genres. We see this best embodied by Abe Kōbō and Mishima Yukio, two major figures in the national literary scene who were also active members of the science fiction community. Abe's breakout novel *Dai-yon kanpyōki* (*Inter-Ice Age 4*) was one that drew heavily on science fiction's narrative tropes such as a genocidal supercomputer, a scientist protagonist, and genetic engineering. Beyond this, Abe was closely involved with the nascent discursive sphere around SF in the 1960s, penning multiple critical articles theorizing the genre's characteristics and significance, and serializing his novel *Ningen sokkuri* (*Just Like A Human*) in *SF Magazine* in 1966. Meanwhile, a letter to the editors of *Uchūjin* from Mishima Yukio was published in September of 1963, in which the author detailed his hopes for SF. The letter came a year after he published his novel *Utsukushii hoshi* (*A Beautiful Planet*, 1962), which drew on Mishima's interests in UFOs and other paranormal phenomena.[9] Properly guided, the social force of SF might expand the genre's horizons until it was a prime mover in Japanese culture.

The implications of the social force of SF were not limited solely to modes of engagement with SF texts. They also included broader political ideologies—namely liberal humanism—that were deemed consistent with the genre's poetics. Being properly committed to the principles of SF was understood to signify a more general model of political subjectivity that went beyond an individual's consumption of SF. By way of example, let us return to the *SF Magazine* roundtable. When discussing the state of the SF film industry, the panelists specifically lay the blame at the feet of

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[9] Mishima was an early member of the Japan Flying Saucer Association (Nihon soratobu enban kenkyūkai).

studio executives. Ōtomo and Fukushima link the production-side emphasis on popcorn special effects entertainment to a more general crisis of creativity under commercialism. They first analyze film production as a process that blinkers creativity, with producers chasing safe profits with minor variations on proven concepts rather than taking financially precarious creative risks. Top executives in studios like Tōhō are not "idea men," in other words, and prefer concretely profitable bases for their films. Ōtomo singles out what he sees as an exploitative contract system in the major film and TV studios. Fukushima concurs that the lack of agency and latitude afforded to creatives in the studios has deleterious effects on the quality of SF visual media; even with a veteran screenwriter composing the scripts, he says, once the studio buys the script from them, it's out of their hands and is often badly mishandled by executives with no interest in or commitment to SF as a serious art form, ending up as schlocky children's entertainment. [10] The intrusion of commercial interests, represented by the archetypically shortsighted studio executive, robs SF films of their creative potential for innovative story concepts and the kinds of narratives that Fukushima values. While never systematized into a focused critique of capitalism, an abstract ideology of anti-consumerism and liberal humanism nevertheless flows beneath the surface of the genre for Fukushima.

Social engagement with the "character" of SF was thus wide-ranging and transmedially distributed. We have already seen some of the ways that Hayakawa Shobō, via *SF Magazine*, attempted to educate readers away from the idea of SF as juvenile media and create an Andersonian "imagined community" of readers who all shared a similar conception of SF's (literary) values through measures like the Hayakawa SF Contest. Similar contests have been used in the manga and newspaper industries in Japan throughout the twentieth century. [11] What is notable about Hayakawa's SF Contest is that the top prize is not (only) publication in *SF Magazine*, but adaptation of the winning story into a film by Tōhō Studios. SF's community was expected to move flexibly back and forth between media forms without any friction, much like later otaku consumers of media mix products. The values attending SF fans, as well, were expected to be translatable throughout the media ecology. To change the discursive positioning of SF, then, was to change both the political ideology of SF fans and their engagement with the SF media ecology.

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[10] "Nihon SF eiga o dō suru ka," 174.

[11] Prough, *Straight from the Heart*, 57–88; Bourdaghs, *The Linguistic Turn in Contemporary Japanese Literary Studies*, 211–20.

What thus begins to emerge in our observation of midcentury Japanese science fiction is a model of identity that is intimately linked with media production and consumption. "Identity" is here understood as a performed quality of subjectivity, communicated to others through signs of in-group belonging including jargon, event attendance, conspicuous consumption, and especially composition of texts. With sufficient activity within the social sphere of SF—either through staging fan events or publishing SF stories or articles—one might become recognized enough to be able to influence the discursive boundaries of SF and push its aesthetic, political, or ideological values in a certain direction. As such characteristics of science fiction fandom make evident, the SF media mix was as much a force of social relations as it was one of commodity relations. Just as much as it was a genre, SF in the 1960s became a kind of lifestyle.

As we have seen, the boundaries of SF's "canonical universe" were quite flexible, a fact brought to the fore by the extremely active discourse community surrounding it. Each roundtable, op-ed, and critical article that adapted the genre's definition served an additive function, expanding the definition of sci-fi while simultaneously adding weight, density, and gravity to those core aesthetic, ideological, and social elements at its center.[12] For interested parties like Fukushima Masami, this inclusivity posed a problem that was in need of a solution; for him, SF was a genre in need of high aesthetic standards and a critical eye. While the expansion of SF's reach and influence was obviously a positive development for Fukushima as the editor of the biggest professional science fiction publication outlet, the danger of the media mix's failure was also particularly keen.

The transmedia nature of SF, particularly the diverse values associated with different parts of its media ecology, also created a unique aesthetic dilemma for the genre. SF of the 1960s was caught in an ambivalent stance: technologically accelerationist on the one hand thanks both to its thematic tropes and cinematographic advancements, and conservatively human-scaled on the other thanks to its monster suits and gadget playthings. It might (as Fukushima hoped) point the way toward an enlightened futuristic social order equipped with techno-scientific expertise, or it might simply model the latest designs for toys for child consumers to enjoy. Ishikawa Takashi sums up this impasse at the close of the *SF Magazine* roundtable:

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[12] For a helpful comparison with modern Japanese literature as a whole, see Kawana, *The Uses of Literature in Modern Japan*, 150.

> It's the old problem of whether SF is an instrument or a weapon (*gakki ka buki ka*). In other words, the idea that SF is an instrument meant to soothe and entertain people, as opposed to the notion that it must be a mighty weapon to bend society, a powerful hammer that crushes humanity's stereotypes. When I think about SF's connection with film from that point of view, its instrument-like qualities win out for me. Its effect as a weapon has to accompany that [quality], rather than be the driving goal from the start, or else it won't succeed very well in my mind.[13]

And yet, we can also see how SF could do both simultaneously. Just as anime has been analyzed as producing multiple "lines of sight"[14] with attendant modes of identification, the multiple aesthetic registers of SF similarly invite us to ask: are we the scientists, the government brass, the military, or the monster? Do we live in the future that SF film depicts, or do we just play with it? What appears as an ambivalence in SF's aesthetics is in fact simply a range of values that SF embodies and that it invites its audiences to imagine for themselves. We could align ourselves with the high-literary narrative world of SF films just as easily as with the technical pioneers of *tokusatsu* TV.

These multiple paths of identification rely on a highly sensitive capacity for looking. Visual and literary texts alike were meant to be opened up and examined with an appreciative eye for detail.[15] In order to grasp SF television as a technical marvel, one first needs to understand the difference between 35-millimeter film and 16-millimeter, for instance, or to have a basic knowledge of image compositing and chroma key. They are expected to dissect it and look at it as a body of evidence in support of the technical marvels of SF. In literature, as well, *SF Magazine* encouraged its readers to bring an educated eye to the stories printed each month, appreciating them not just for their value as literary entertainment, but also for the ways they skillfully deployed scientifically based speculation in

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[13] "Nihon SF eiga o dō suru ka," 176.

[14] LaMarre, *The Anime Machine*, 108.

[15] While 1960s SF was unique in its relation to a newly televisual media ecology, it drew on a longer genealogy of popular media products emphasizing multi-modal engagement. Yonezawa Yoshihiro, for instance, places the historical origins of SF as co-constitutive with those of manga. Each arose out of late-Meiji shifts in popular media, especially the rise of mass market magazines like *Shōnen kurabu*, which devoted a great deal of space to high-quality illustrations that would supplement and sometimes even enfold narrative. See Yonezawa, *Sengo SF manga-shi*, 28–29.

their narratives. Popular science articles included in the magazine each month gave readers the techno-scientific knowledge they would need to see where fiction and reality converged in each story. The possession of specialized knowledge was key to accessing the different modes of looking that SF afforded.

Thus, science fiction was capable of enfolding a transmedia assemblage at the same time that it delineated diverse models of subjectivity. The media-ecological character of the genre in this period was a key component that allowed these subjectivities to unfold. SF's version of transmedia inclusivity is not simply a matter of cinematic adaptation of a literary antecedent, nor of novelization of an ontologically prior film. It instead involves a re-thinking of the status of the text itself as a transmedia entity and thus a re-thinking of the individual's own relation to the text. Individual sci-fi texts, while important as semi-independent entities, also served to catalyze discourse about the genre of SF itself and what values it embodied. "SF" became a value-laden term for fans of the genre, at once the object of their fannish attachment and the means by which they could perform their own status as SF fans through textual and discursive production.

Japanese science fiction in the 1960s served as an omnivorous force of inclusion, tying together many disparate aesthetic, political, and ideological values. Yet, as the case of the SF image has shown us, the inclusion of any given element within the genre was never a given; discursive values were contested, and contradictory values were often ambivalently held together under the genre's umbrella. The genre's identity was—and is—continuously re-negotiated and re-inscribed, giving shape in the process to a community of actors with agendas as diverse as the genre itself. The media mix of SF was both object and venue of debate as participants asserted what media-aesthetic elements ought to be "properly" included in the genre and what should be excluded as heterodoxy potentially harmful to its long-term survival. More than a simple descriptive label, genre was the ever-evolving product of a transmedia discourse.

All the while, SF's transmedia form encouraged movement throughout its media ecology, which simultaneously represented movement through a wide range of different possible subject positions.[16]

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[16] Lamarre has analyzed similar subjective movements encouraged by anime through the term "subjectile." The specificities of anime's visual field, especially its emphasis on "lines of sight" through flattened and distributed depth across the image plane, distinguish it enough that I avoid using "subjectile" to describe the fluidity of SF subjectivity here, but the phenomena certainly bear similarities.

The stakes of what was to be included under the heading of "SF" went beyond the aesthetic norms of production and reception of science fiction and came to enfold models of contemporary subjectivity and what it meant to live an SF life. These subjectivities entailed everything from scientism to liberal humanism to a simple fascination with technical spectacle and blockbuster entertainment, and they existed in the interstices of media and text, tied together by the discursive social force that delineated the textual universe of the genre and its community. Understanding SF in this period thus demands that we include both the media conditions of genre as well as the values espoused in texts as we consider the ways that it might construct identity. Indeed, it demands that we treat media and identity as co-constituting forces, with media habits being a way to both define and express identity.

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