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| Title | Retrospective 2017: Future Imperfect. Science · Fiction · Film. 67th Berlin International Film Festival |
| Authors | Topp, Dominic |
| Publication date | 2017-06-01 |
| Original Citation | Topp, D. (2017) Retrospective 2017: Future Imperfect. Science · Fiction · Film. 67th Berlin International Film Festival. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 13, 189-194. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.13.15 |
| Type of publication | Article (peer-reviewed) |
| Link to publisher's version | 10.33178/alpha.13.15 |
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| Download date | 2026-11-17 06:33:29 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/6040 |



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JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

# Retrospective 2017: Future Imperfect. Science · Fiction · Film. 67th Berlin International Film Festival

Dominic Topp

Julian Stringer has noted that "[t]he international film festival circuit now plays a significant role in the recirculation and recommodification of 'old' and 'classic' movies" (82). The Berlin International Film Festival, one of the world's largest and most prestigious, is no exception to this trend. Each year, its Retrospective section, organised in collaboration with the Deutsche Kinemathek, is dedicated to a particular director or film-historical theme, with screenings of prints sourced from a variety of archives and distributors, plus a number of recent digital restorations, along with related panels and talks. This year's Retrospective, "Future Imperfect. Science · Fiction · Film", showcased the science fiction genre, bringing together twenty-seven feature films and two shorts made between 1918 and 1998. While some of these were acknowledged classics, section head Rainer Rother and his cocurators Connie Betz and Annika Schaefer made sure to include many lesser-known films, and to give the programme international scope by featuring not only English-language productions, but also films from Western Europe (Denmark, France, West Germany), Central and Eastern Europe (Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, the USSR) and Japan. This wide-ranging selection highlighted the genre's versatility and demonstrated its potential for visual and aural invention, while exploring some recurring subjects and themes.

The choice of films was premised on the idea that science fiction is "a continuation or accentuation of tendencies already present in our world", and can be used "to negotiate contemporary questions and situations" (Rother). With this in mind, the programme centred on two topics: "the society of the future" and "encounters with 'the Other'". As the Retrospective's title suggests, the future worlds on show tended toward the dystopian. Both *1984* (Michael Anderson, UK/US, 1956) and *THX 1138* (George Lucas, US, 1971) present totalitarian societies in which citizens are kept under surveillance, emotional attachments are banned, and conformity is maintained through propaganda. The pulpy *Kamikaze '89* (*Kamikaze 1989*, Wolf Gremm, West Germany, 1982) is set in a near-future version of West Germany in which a giant conglomerate controls all media. In Andrzej Żuławski's epic *On the Silver Globe* (*Na srebrnym globie*, Poland, 1978/1989), a group of astronauts starts a new society on a distant planet, only for it to develop into an authoritarian theocracy. Somewhat ironically, the Polish Ministry of Culture shut down production of the film before it was complete, and the version eventually released includes Żuławski's voiceover narration accompanying images of contemporary Poland to fill in the gaps of scenes that were never shot. I must confess, I found these sections more engaging than the rest of the film, in which the hysterical tone proved exhausting over an almost three-hour runtime (though perhaps this was also a symptom of "festival fatigue" after several days of binge-watching from morning to night).

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Films from both sides of the Iron Curtain depicted Cold War fears about the prospect of a nuclear holocaust. In *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, US, 1959), which takes place in the aftermath of an atomic war, an assortment of characters faces death by radiation poisoning. Despite its occasionally sentimental tone (particularly in the love story between Gregory Peck's submarine commander and a boozy Ava Gardner) and some bizarre casting choices (for example, Fred Astaire as an English nuclear scientist), the film is still surprisingly powerful—it's not often in a Hollywood production we see a couple contemplate killing their baby before committing suicide. *O-bi, O-ba: The End of Civilization* (*O-bi, o-ba: Koniec cywilizacji*, Piotr Szulkin, Poland, 1985) and *Letters from a Dead Man* (*Pisma myortvogo cheloveka*, Konstantin Lopushansky, USSR, 1986) both envisage bleak postapocalyptic worlds in which the remaining humans shelter from fallout amid relics of the past. In the first, hope is only maintained through the myth of an ark that will transport survivors to a new home. In the second, an ageing physicist contemplates scientists' responsibility for the destruction, and seeks spiritual solace by helping a group of orphaned children.

Other films expressed contemporary environmental concerns. *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, US, 1973) portrays a future of global warming, overpopulation, and food shortages. The film never really tops its brilliant opening sequence—an expository montage of photographs that moves from nostalgic, sepia-toned pictures of nineteenth-century rural America to rapid cut imagery of modern car-clogged city streets, and on to shots of factory chimneys pumping smog into the atmosphere, rubbish dumps, and contaminated rivers. Industrial pollution is the target of the satirical short *Oil Gobblers* (*Ropáci*, Jan Svěrák, Czechoslovakia, 1988). This wittily deadpan mockumentary follows a team of scientists as they search for the eponymous animals, which live on plastic and thrive in the toxic oilfields of Northern Bohemia. The scientists' plan to take one of the creatures back to Prague is shelved when they realise that it will not survive the journey through areas of the country that are still unpolluted, but they confidently predict that in just a few years' time no such restrictions will exist.

Only a few of the films selected offered a more optimistic vision of the future. In *Le Tunnel* (Kurt Bernhardt, France/Germany, 1933), despite sabotage and personal tragedy, Jean Gabin's heroic engineer successfully completes his project to build a tunnel beneath the Atlantic connecting Europe and the United States. As a French-German coproduction shot in two language versions with different casts, the film itself is an example of the international teamwork that its story depicts. And *Eolomea* (Herrmann Zschoche, East Germany, 1972) celebrates the spirit of space exploration, with its protagonist choosing to abandon Earth (and the female scientist who loves him) to join an unauthorised expedition in search of a mysterious planet. Watching this sample of East German genre filmmaking in an archive 70mm print at the Kino International, a prime example of socialist-era Berlin architecture, where it premiered in 1972, was a unique experience of "the future in the past".

The second topic that the programme explored was human encounters with the strange and Other. This could be a literal alien, as in the belligerent Martians of *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskins, US, 1953), or their more peaceful brethren in *A Trip to Mars* (*Himmelskibet*, Holger-Madsen, Denmark, 1918), one of the earliest science-fiction films, in which the aptly named Avanti Planetaros leads a mission to Mars that reveals its inhabitants to be nonviolent fruitarians preaching a doctrine of universal love. Or it could be some form of man-made technology, as in the charming B movie *Gog* (Herbert L. Stock, US, 1954), which sees two robots terrorise a group of government scientists when they are reprogrammed by a foreign power.

Narratives involving androids and cyborgs are often haunted by existential questions, most famously *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, US, 1982/2007), in which Harrison Ford's detective may or may not be one of the replicants that he is tasked with hunting, and his memories and dreams merely implants (this plot point is less ambiguous in the Final Cut version that was screened here, and may be clarified further in the upcoming sequel). The protagonist of *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku Kidōtai*, Mamoru Oshii, Japan/UK, 1995), a cybernetically modified being with a synthetic body and a human brain, ends the film merging her identity (or "ghost") with the Puppet Master, an artificial intelligence that can pass from one "shell" to another. In *Pilot Pirx's Inquest* (*Test Pilota Pirxa*, Poland/USSR, 1979), adapted from a short story by Stanisław Lem (whose novel *Solaris* was filmed by Andrei Tarkovsky), the commander of a flight to Saturn must work out which member of his spaceship's crew is an android masquerading as a man. In the end, it is his all-too-human capacity for self-doubt that helps him uncover the imposter. Despite intriguing themes, this last film suffers from some rather clumsy execution (especially a lengthy action sequence in which the hero's car is threatened by a robot-driven lorry on a winding mountain road), and director Marek Piestrak, who had been invited to introduce the screening, seemed slightly puzzled by the renewed interest in his work.

Issues of personal identity are also central to films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, US, 1956), in which the inhabitants of a small town are replaced by alien lookalikes, and *Seconds* (John Frankenheimer, US, 1966), in which a dissatisfied middle-aged banker is remade and remodelled as a younger man, only to find that he is just as unhappy in his new persona. In *World on a Wire* (*Welt am Draht*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, West Germany, 1973) reality itself is called into question when the characters are revealed to inhabit a vast simulacrum. This scenario became something of a cliché in the late 1990s, appearing in a number of films, including the messy *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, US/Australia 1998), which complicates things by inserting a bunch of dome-headed aliens into the mix.

The Retrospective's focus on science fiction as a vehicle for present-day anxieties and metaphysical enquiry did not detract from another aspect of the genre's appeal to both filmmakers and viewers: the opportunity it affords for stylistic experimentation. *A Trip to Mars* uses techniques such as aerial photography, superimpositions and chiaroscuro lighting for its depiction of an interplanetary flight. *Algol: Tragedy of Power* (*Algol: Tragödie der Macht*, Hans Werckmeister, Germany, 1920), in which an extraterrestrial visitor provides Earth with an alternative energy source, mixes Expressionist sets by Walter Reimann (production designer on *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, Germany 1920]) with documentary footage of coal mines and factories. 3D technology enhanced the impact of the low-budget *Gog*, screened here in a pristine new digital restoration. Both *O-bi, O-ba* and *Letters from a Dead Man* evoke a bleak nuclear winter through a minimalist colour design, with the former bathing its characters in cold blue light, and the latter tinting its images a grimy brown. Some films use pre-existing locales to represent fictional future worlds. For the ultramodern environment of *Pilot Pirx's Inquest* the Polish-Soviet filmmakers were given permission to travel to Paris to shoot in the recently opened Charles de Gaulle Airport. *On the Silver Globe* was filmed in locations ranging from the High Tatra Mountains in Central Europe to the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. The postmodern *Dark City* mixes a neo-noir aesthetic with early CGI effects, while in *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, US, 1995) the story device of first-person virtual reality recordings is the motivation for a series of virtuoso long takes.

Several films included creative contributions from visual artists, from the space paintings of Chesley Bonestell in the opening sequence of *The War of the Worlds* to H. R. Giger's creature designs for *Alien* (Ridley Scott, UK/US, 1979). *The Fifth Element* (*Le Cinquième Element*, Luc Besson, France, 1997) takes inspiration from the comics of Jean "Moebius" Giraud and Jean-Claude Mézières, and features costumes by Jean-Paul Gaultier. One of the most striking of such collaborations was *Warning from Space* (*Uchūjin Tōkyō ni Arawaru*, Kōji Shima, Japan, 1956), in which the aliens, designed by avant-garde artist Tarō Okamoto, resemble giant one-eyed starfish.

Science fiction cinema also encourages sonic innovation, and futuristic settings were the inspiration for electronic scores such as Zdeněk Liška's for *Ikarie XB 1* (Jindřich Polák, Czechoslovakia, 1963), Vangelis's for *Blade Runner*, and Edgar Froese's for *Kamikaze '89*. *THX 1138* includes a typically multilayered soundtrack by Walter Murch, combining radio chatter, music and manipulated noise with on- and off-screen dialogue. The two silent screenings featured impressive multi-instrumental accompaniment by Stephen Horne.

The Retrospective's screenings were supplemented by a number of related events at the Deutsche Kinemathek, including a panel discussion about the science-fiction films produced by the East German DEFA studios, a talk by production designer Alex McDowell on his "world building" conceptualisations for films such as *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, US, 2002), and the launch of the Retrospective's English-language catalogue. The Kinemathek also played host to the exhibition "Things to Come. Science. Fiction. Film", which included sets, stills, costumes and creature designs alongside clips from a range of feature films and television series. These events added value to the festival experience, and helped contextualise the films shown in the Retrospective.

Such a varied selection from across a range of national cinemas demonstrated the enormous diversity of science fiction filmmaking over the course of the twentieth century. From Méliès onward, cineastes have imagined the shape of things to come, and the genre has proved flexible enough to meet the needs of studio directors and art-house auteurs alike. This year's Retrospective was a welcome opportunity to travel "back to the future", and to attend mostly sold out screenings of familiar titles and new discoveries alongside a mix of local and international audience members. I look forward to next year's voyage through time—I can't wait to see what Berlin 2018 has in store.

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**Suggested Citation**

Topp, Dominic. "Retrospective 2017: Future Imperfect. Science · Fiction · Film. 67th Berlin International Film Festival." Festival Report. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 13 (Summer 2017): 189–194. Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

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