

Articles

Science Fiction in the Brazilian Cinema: A Brief Overview

By Alfredo Luiz Suppia

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'Science Fiction in Brazil: a sparsely inhabited planet' (Cunha 1976: 5–20) is the title of Fausto Cunha's essay on Brazilian science-fiction literature, and the starting point for this article, as this approach could also be applied to the study of science fiction in the Brazilian cinema. The idea of science fiction herein will be essentially the one proposed by Darko Suvin. According to this author,

Science fiction is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation), validated by cognitive logic. ... A novum or cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality. ... Quantitatively, the postulated innovation can be of quite different degrees of magnitude, running from the minimum of one discrete new 'invention' (gadget, technique, phenomenon, relationship) to the maximum of a setting (spatiotemporal locus), agent (main character or characters) and/or relations basically new and unknown in the author's environment. (Suvin 1979: 63–64)

It is also necessary to note that the films mentioned in this study are often hybrid works,

thereby capable of being classified in genres other than science fiction. Thus, the idea of genre herein considered is not that of pure genre (classical), but that of levels, combinations and/or blend of genres (romantic).¹

Contrary to the United States of America and Europe, Brazil lacks tradition in science-fiction research and critique. Our few and short-lived film studios invested much more in comedies or realist dramas than in monster movies or space operas, for example. Furthermore, the Brazilian cinema has been author-centred, and therefore genre films are often considered misplaced. Lacking the industrial cinematographic context, science fiction in Brazilian cinema has been based on single, sporadic and disconnected efforts, which draw a chaotic line full of gaps, ups and downs.

It is very difficult to define the timing of the first manifestation of science fiction in the Brazilian cinema. Nevertheless, although rare, Brazilian fantasy films did exist, as one can see in Antonio Campo's *The Devil* (*O Diabo*) (1908), *Chefs' Duel* (*Duelo de Cozinheiras*) (1908) or Antonio Serra's *The Election Matchstick* (*O Fósforo Eleitoral*) (1909). When released, both *Chefs' Duel* and *The Election Matchstick* were referred to as 'comic-fantastic' movies. But only with the coming of the talkies are there clearer manifestations of science fiction in the Brazilian cinema.

Silveira Sampaio's *An Adventure at 40* (*Uma Aventura aos 40*) (1947) is one of the first films in which a science-fiction element stands out, which is a futuristic fully interactive TV. A comedy framed by science fiction, this film was released in 1947, but its story starts in 1975, when Professor Carlos de Miranda's 70th birthday is celebrated by a TV channel. The

Master of Ceremonies begins to give Miranda's biography, but is soon interrupted by the professor, who wants to clear up some facts. Here is the novum: in this future, the spectator can interact directly with the TV.

From the end of the 1950s onwards, science fiction was widely exploited by Brazilian cinema as raw material for comedies, parodies or *chanchadas*.² A comedy with SF elements is Alberto Cavalcanti's *Simon, the One-Eyed* (*Simão, o Caolho*) (1952), in which an artificial eye gives his owner the gift of invisibility. Examples of *chanchadas* are Watson Macedo's *Carnival on Mars* (*Carnaval em Marte*) (1954) or Victor Lima's *The Cosmonauts* (*Os Cosmonautas*) (1962). The former is about a lady who dreams of being the Martian queen, leads a Martian female expedition to Earth and decides to take Brazilian carnival to the Red Planet. In the latter, a Brazilian visionary scientist sends Brazilian explorers to the Moon. Contemporary to the Cuban Missile Crisis, *The Cosmonauts* delivered a pacifist speech and, like other *chanchadas*, could bring a rather interesting view of the social and geopolitical situation.

Among parodies that mock themselves, taking advantage of profitable blockbusters (such as George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), or Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975)), are films usually targeted at children or juvenile audiences.³ Good examples are J.B. Tanko's *The Bunglers at the Ape's Plateau* (*Os Trapalhães no Planalto dos Macacos*) (1976) and Adriano Stuart's *The Bunglers in the War of the Planets* (*Os Trapalhães na Guerra dos Planetas*) (1978), *The Incredible Bungler Monster* (*O Incrível Monstro Trapalhão*) (1981) and *Cuddly and the Lost Spaceship* (*Fofão e a espaçonave perdida*) (1989), among other titles. Another example could be Roberto Farias's *Roberto Carlos at an Adventure Rhythm* (*Roberto Carlos em Ritmo de Aventura*) (1968), a parody of James Bond films starring the famous Brazilian singer. In this film, villains want to reproduce Roberto Carlos's mind and musical talent in an 'electronic brain'. Science fiction was also appropriated by the erotic comedy in films such as Fauzi Mansur's *The Love Insect* (*O Inseto do Amor*) (1980), or by the terrir film⁴ in Ivan Cardoso's *The Mummy's Secret* (*O Segredo da Múmi*) (1982) and *The Seven Vampires* (*As Sete Vampiras*) (1986). In general, these films clearly denounce the penetration of American science-fiction cinema into the minds of some Brazilian film-makers.



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Some clever ‘grey’ (not to say ‘black’) comedies were also based on science-fiction iconography, such as Uberto Molo's *Por Incrível que Pareça* (*As Weird as It Seems*) (1986), about a nuclear power plant employee who, after an accident, survives with his head cut away from his body. This metaphoric film might be considered as a step further in terms of parody, developing from the gags or even the slapstick comedy to interesting comments on human relationships.

But we can find more serious manifestations of science fiction, such as Alberto Pieralisi's *The Fifth Power* (*O Quinto Poder*) (1962),





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about an international plot, when infiltrated foreign secret agents are planning to rule Brazil through subliminal messages. The villains start irradiating the subliminal signal via TV and radio aerials. The Brazilians run amok and a civil war begins. *The Fifth Power* presents some remarkable scenes set in famous spots of Rio de Janeiro and, seen today, seems to sinisterly forecast the Brazilian military coup d'état in 1964.

Science fiction was also instrumental to Brazilian New Cinema in its allegorical and critical approach. This can be seen in Walter Lima Jr.'s *Brazil Year 2000* (*Brasil Ano 2000*), a 1969 film about a future nation, still ruled by the army after the '1989 Great Nuclear War' that ruined the north of the globe.

More experimental or even bizarre movies with references to the science-fiction iconography could also be mentioned, such as Rogério Sganzerla's *The Red Light Bandit* (*O Bandido da Luz Vermelha*) (1968), which presents a parody of Orson Welles's famous 1938 radio-phonetic emission based on H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*. Another example of rather unconventional film is Paulo Martins' *The Messenger: The Man of the Storms* (*O Anunciador: O Homem das Tormentas*) (1970), regarded as 'a science-fiction attempt through a rural point of view' (Miranda 1990: 213). This story begins when an unknown wanderer gets to a small city in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. Shot in Cataguases,⁵ this film has at least five science-fiction elements: (1) the 'Modern Multiplicator Factory', a clone industry; (2) the allusion

to a 'Space General Confederation'; (3) the first question of an interview: 'Who will be the first space-born creature?'; (4) 'the woman who walks, runs and dies chased by invisible men'; and, eventually, (5) the very 'Messenger' character, perhaps an extraterrestrial. Finally, Raul Calhado and Rosalvo Caçador's *The Sinister Dr. Scivano* (*O Sinistro Dr. Scivano*) (1971) is released as 'the first Brazilian psycho-science-fiction film'. In this movie, Dr Edmundo Scivano turns out to be a vampire, attacks women and ends up disintegrated in front of the Holy Cross. In the end, the doctor is considered paranoid. According to the synopsis, this film seems to be much more aligned with fantasy or the supernatural than true science fiction.

Although maybe not very proud of it, celebrated Brazilian author Nelson Pereira dos Santos tried science fiction in the French-Brazilian production *Who is Beta?* (*Quem é Beta?*) (1972–73). Set in a hippie-apocalyptic future, this film is about the relationship between a visitor and a couple of survivors who live shooting 'contaminated' people. According to this film, in the future mankind will be divided into healthy and sick people, the latter condemned to wander like zombies until their death – something that resembles the 'wanderer sickness' in William Cameron Menzies' *Things to Come* (1936). *Who is Beta?* also presents a gadget that is able to materialize memories, projecting them onto a curtain of smoke – a device similar to the one presented by Wim Wenders's *Until the End of the World* (1991).



Shot in Paraty, Recreio dos Bandeirantes and Angra dos Reis,⁶ and cinematographed by Dib Lufti, *Who is Beta?* takes advantage of rural and coastal landscapes, mixing languages and idiolects, references to *candomblé* (an Afro-Brazilian religion) and the hippie's way of life.

Good examples of ecological speculations are José de Anchieta's *Stop 88: Alert Limit* (*Parada 88: O Limite de Alerta*) (1978), and Roberto Pires's *Nuclear Shelter* (*Abrigo Nuclear*) (1981). *Stop 88* is set in December 1999, six years after the explosion at a factory that spread out tons of toxic waste in the atmosphere. The city dwellers have to live isolated, paying for breathable air and walking through plastic tunnels that connect the buildings. With a creative set design and interesting photography, *Stop 88* presents one of the few cyborgs in the Brazilian cinema. Furthermore, its dark mood and dusty atmosphere seems to forecast the cyberpunk tendency or even films such as George Miller's *Mad Max* (1979) and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982).

In Pires's *Nuclear Shelter*, people live in a subterranean city, ruled by technocracy and ignoring the fact that once mankind had lived on the surface. Pires's feature reminds us of movies such as George Lucas's *THX-1138* (1971), in the tradition of stories about an individual fighting against a totalitarian technocracy, as seen in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *1984* (1948). *Nuclear Shelter*'s screenplay, written by Pires and Orlando Senna, was probably inspired by the ideas of César Lattes, an important Brazilian physicist (cf. Rocha 2004: 464). The main character joins a subversive group that plans to disable the nuclear power plants, develop clean energy methods and conquer the surface once again. With the backdrop of anti-ecological development practised by the Brazilian military

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government, *Nuclear Shelter* joins *Stop 88* as film alerts regarding catastrophes such as the one that would later happen in Chernobyl in 1986. Ecological dystopia is such a recurrent topic that it can be found even in non-commercial short films like Marcos Bertoni's *Armadillo Blood* (*Sangue de Tatu*) (1986) and C. Perina C.'s [sic] *Ninety Three Degree Tunnel* (*Túnel 93o*) (1972).

In the 1980s, Levy Salgado's *Punks, Sons of the Nights* (*Punks, Os Filhos da Noite*) (1983), set in an apocalyptic near future, found inspiration in Walter Hill's *The Warriors* (1979). And Brazilian cinema was also visited by extraterrestrials. Walter Hugo Khouri's *Voracious Love* (*Amor Voraz*) (1984) is a subtle and poetic science-fiction film with no impressive special effects, about the relationship between a woman and an extraterrestrial man. While recovering from a nervous breakdown in her family's countryside house, Ana (Vera Fischer) meets a mysterious sick man (Marcelo Picchi), with whom she falls in love and talks telepathically. This man is an alien who travelled through space as a light beam,

with the aim of finding a new home for his people, a highly advanced civilization whose planet is condemned. In this film, Einstein's Theory of Relativity is invoked by some dialogues. According to Brazilian critic Jairo Ferreira (1986: 236), 'A science-fiction movie with no special or visual effects, *Voracious Love* is a rare example of cinema's inexhaustive power of poetic suggestions.'

Not commercially released, Francisco de Paula's *Atlantis Ocean* (*Oceano Atlantis*) (1993) joins the disaster-movie tradition to the Atlantis legend, presenting a partially flooded Rio de Janeiro. Another grey comedy, Luiz Alberto Pereira's *The Island Effect* (*O Efeito Ilha*) (1994) is about a TV technician who, after an accident, has his image on every TV channel, 24 hours a day, in a kind of non-stop reality show. *The Island Effect* is an interesting satire about the television industry, forecasting the *Big Brother* fever that would later affect audiences all over the world. Working on the traditional myth of the stolen soul, *The Island Effect* parallels another 1994 film made in the Czech Republic, Jan Sverak's *Akumulator 1*. *The Island Effect* could join *As Weird As It Seems* as examples of comedies that overcame the limit of trivial parody, bringing ingenious speculations through science-fiction creative sparks.

The first Brazilian 100 per cent digital science-fiction movie was released in 1996, after four years of work and with a 1.2 million dollar budget. Targeted at children and completely developed on PCs, Clóvis Vieira's *Cassiopeia* tells the story of the pacific planet Atenéia, whose solar energy has been drained by an evil alien spaceship. This feature represented an important achievement in terms of technological experimentation. Different from John Lasseter's *Toy Story* (1995), it had no model in the real world, being digitally developed since the first step. Badly distributed and advertised, *Cassiopeia* was strongly overwhelmed by *Toy Story* even in Brazil.

The ecological issue returns in Flávia Moraes's *Acquaria* (2004), a film focusing on its stars' musical career that takes great advantage of digital effects. Cinematographed by Lauro Escorel, *Acquaria* is about a distant future, when the Earth becomes a desert and water is the most precious good. It mixes ingredients selected from several sources such as the Atlantis legend, *Star Wars*, George Miller's *Mad Max 2* (1981) and David Lynch's *Dune* (1984), delivering a kind of



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'pasteurized' and 'insipid' ecological science fiction. Although subordinated to the aesthetics and purpose of the video-clip, *Acquaria*'s science fiction portion proposes some interesting 'nova' (yet not unprecedented ones), such as the fish swimming under the sand or the hologram-dog, product of a 'memory crystal'. *Terrir* rises again with Ivan Cardoso's *A Werewolf in the Amazon* (*Um Lobisomem na Amazônia*) (2005), an adaptation of Gastão Cruls's novel *Mysterious Amazon*, shot miles away from the Amazon, in studios in Barra da Tijuca and the Tijuca Forest, Rio de Janeiro. According to Brazilian critic José Geraldo Couto (2005: E6), 'In *A Werewolf*, we find again Ivan Cardoso's trademarks: beautiful naked women, delicious mediocre actors, references to the 'scientific' horror (Dr Moreau, Frankenstein), and the subversion of bourgeois good taste.'

Science-fiction elements or icons could also be detected in some other Brazilian films such as Eliana Caffé's *Kenoma* (1998), set in

the arid Brazilian inland, about an idealistic inlander obsessed by the creation of a perpetual motor, or Júlio Falcão's *The Machine* (*A Máquina*) (2005), a time-travel love story. These films, in addition to *The Messenger* and some others, evoke a very particular kind of typically Brazilian science fiction, where one can find a mixture of modernity and archaism, technology and countryside, a blend also recognizable in Brazilian fantastic literature, specially through works like Guimarães Rosa's 'A Very White Man' ('Um moço muito branco'), where a strange man, with special gifts, suddenly appears in a rural town (Rosa 2005).

It is known that a great part of international science-fiction cinema is based on or at least inspired on science-fiction literature. Following this tradition, Júlio Silveira's *Someone* (*Alguém*) (1980), an adaptation of André Carneiro's short story 'The Mute' ('O Mudo'), is about a mysterious mute man who has a curious gift: the vegetables he touches give abnormally large fruit. Carneiro is a Brazilian writer, author of science-fiction novels, short stories, poems and a pioneering study of the genre. Another example of literary adaptation is Elie Politi's *The End* (*O Fim*) (1972), based on Fredric Brown's short story about time travel. Politi's short film, his final work at the cinema graduation course at the University of São Paulo (USP), reproduces the original story's palindrome, adding an insightful new end.

In the universe of short movies, several examples deserve attention, such as José Mojica Marins's *Evolution – Man vs. Machine* (*Evolução – Homem Vs. Máquina: A luta do século no planeta dos botões*) (1979); Jorge Furtado's *Barbosa* (1988), a time-travel tale about alternative history that mixes science fiction and documentary film, about a man obsessed by Brazil's defeat in the 1950 World Cup; Carlos Gregório's *Loop* (2002), another time-travel tale, about a time paradox, a man stuck in time because of pursuing the revival of his past; Paulo Miranda's *Nº 19*, about sinister telepathic experiments with children, Tadao Mitsuoka's *The Pulex Project* (*Projeto Pulex*) (1991), an animation about the extermination of poor people engendered by a Brazilian futuristic technocracy, and finally *Skies of Soot* (*Céus de Fuligem*) (2005), a digital film that mixes live action and computer-generated scenes, mirrored in American SF blockbusters.



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After this quick trip through science fiction in the Brazilian cinema, we can recognize basically two main currents. One is the parody: a predominant, hybrid and anthropophagical tradition, in which different science-fiction themes are taken over in order to be worked in a comic or ironic tone. The other current is a more serious, rarer and purer manifestation of science fiction, where films that focus on ecological issues stand out.

While in Hollywood science-fiction cinema is a big budget enterprise, being almost synonymous with special effects, in Brazil this genre is scarcely exploited. The most common answer to this situation is based on the lack of money, as the genre would require elaborate sets and special effects. According to Adam Roberts (2000: 152–53), science-fiction cinema is a synonym of special effects. But is it true

that the genre depends so heavily on special effects and, thereby, to make science-fiction cinema requires much more money than other genres do? And what about films that do not make use of sophisticated special effects, exploring other kinds of creativity? Could there be cultural factors capable of blocking the development of Brazilian science fiction?

If I partially disagree with Adam Roberts when he states that science fiction is special effects, on the other hand I agree when he proposes that not only had the Industrial Revolution, but also the imperialist ideology prepared the ground for the development of science fiction (Roberts 2000: 63–67). Therefore, I would suggest that cultural obstacles reinforce the economic ones intervening against Brazilian science-fiction cinema, something already commented on by Elizabeth Ginway in her book *Brazilian Science Fiction* (2005).

As one can see, the increasing accessibility to digital technology has been favouring Brazilian fantasy film. But in terms of science fiction, it also reveals a narrow conception of the genre. The model or paradigm for a great part of Brazilian film-makers still is the American blockbuster. And what about movies such as Jack Arnold's *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), Andrei Tarkovski's *Stalker* (1979), Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* (1997) or even Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46* (2003)? Are not they also SF, in spite of the fact that, altogether, maybe they cannot equal the same number of special effects present in just one episode of George Lucas's *Star Wars*? I believe there is room for science fiction in Brazilian cinema, but maybe in a broader sense, a SF less dependant on fireworks but more creative and questioning, based especially on Brazilian SF authors and capable of walking on its own path.⁷

Compared to other Latin American filmographies, it is possible to say that science fiction entered into the Brazilian cinematographic context through the comedy door around the 1940s, and remained in the comedy room for a long time, if not still there today. The same can be seen in Mexico. One year before *An Adventure at 40* in Brazil, Mexican cinema opened its arms to science fiction in films such as Jaime Salvador's *A Modern Bluebeard* (aka *Boom in the Moon*, originally *El Moderno Barba Azul*) (1946), starring Buster Keaton. Then came Miguel Delgado's *The Superwise*

(*El Supersábio*) (1948), starring Mario Moreno, aka Cantinflas, and Gilberto Solares's *The Beautiful Dreamer* (*El Bello Durmiente*) (1952), starring Germán Valdés. These films made room for a good number of Mexican science-fiction films, most of them keeping an ironic or rather funny tone, as well as the local or typical approach. Examples are Rogelio González's *The Ship of Monsters* (*La Nave de los Monstruos*) (1960), Alfredo Crevenna's *The Planet of the Invader Women* (*El Planeta de las Mujeres Invasoras*) (1966) and the several films starring Santo, the wrestler, among many other productions.

If Brazilian science-fiction cinema seems to have interesting similarities with Mexican productions, Argentinian cinema tried to follow other paths. Beginning with C.Z. Soprani's weird *The Beast Man* (*El Hombre Bestia*) (1934), there soon came an adaptation of R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Mario Soffici's *The Strange Case of the Man and the Beast* (*El Extraño Caso del Hombre y la Bestia*) (1951). The third Argentinian SF film was probably Hugo Santiago's *Invasion* (*Invasión*) (1969), based on Adolfo Bioy Casares and Jorge Luis Borges's story. *Invasion* brings a rather interesting science-fiction approach, a style and atmosphere apparently closer to the European than the American cinema. More recently, insightful, intriguing and impressive Argentinian science-fiction experimentations continued to be produced, such as Eliseo Subiela's *Man Facing Southeast* (*Hombre Mirando al Sudeste*) (1986), Gustavo Mosquera's *Moebius* (1996) or Fernando Spiner's *Sleepwalker* (*La Sonámbula*) (1998). Even in a poetic, surrealist and enigmatic environment, Argentinian SF film had room for clever comedies such as Fernando Spiner's *Goodbye Dear Moon* (*Adiós Querida Luna*) (2004). Compared to Brazil, science fiction in Argentina seems to sprout from a much more familiar ground.

Anyhow, I believe that the brief panorama presented here proves the existence of science fiction in Brazilian cinema, even though it is rather different from the most notorious manifestation of the genre. So, if there is no Brazilian science-fiction cinema, surely there is science fiction in Brazilian cinema. Sporadic, anthropophagical, contingent, creative, self-ironical, hybrid, burlesque and carnivalesque, science fiction insists on surviving in the rarefied Brazilian cinematographic atmosphere, like the strange life-form of a distant world, and whose timid and scarce signs are seldom detected by our artistic radio telescopes. •

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Endnotes

1 On this issue, see Altman (1999: 59 et passim), to whom the classical idea of pure genre is far from the Hollywood studios' practice, where one can find a romantic orientation and the frequent mixture of genres.

2 The *chanchada* is a very popular genre in Brazilian cinema, basically consisting of a mixture of musical and comedy. Famous for its *chanchadas*, Brazilian studio Atlântida released some of the most successful films of the genre, such as Carlos Manga's *To Kill or to Run (Matar ou Correr)* (1954), a parody of the famous Fred Zinnemann western *High Noon* (1952), *Neither Samson nor Delilah (Nem Sansão nem Dalila)* (1955), a parody of Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949) or *The Sputnik Man (O Homem do Sputnik)* (1959). The Brazilian actors Grande Otelo and Oscarito were stars of remarkable *chanchadas*, usually responsible for the comic situations in these films. But there were other recurrent types, such as the villain, remarkably played by José Lewgoy or Wilson Grey, or romantic couples, played by actors such as Cyl Farney, Fada Santoro, Neide Aparecida, John Herbert or Anselmo Duarte. The *chanchada*'s peak of glory was in the 1950s. Usually highly criticized at its time, nowadays the *chanchada* has been rescued by film scholars and critics as one of the most popular, successful and interesting manifestations of Brazilian cinema.

3 To know more about Brazilian parodies that ridicule Brazilian cinema see Vieira (1995).

4 *Terrir* is a genre developed by Brazilian film-maker Ivan Cardoso. Highly ironic and satirical, it basically consists of an ingenious mixture of the American B movie, science fiction, film noir, horror movie and comedy.

5 The Brazilian celebrated film-maker Humberto Mauro (1897–1983) was born in Cataguases, a city located in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, famous for its film production in the 1920s.

6 Locations in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

7 Needless to say that there is room even for the film-makers who just want to mirror Hollywood films, benefited by the popularization of digital technology.

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