



**BABES-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY**  
FACULTY OF POLITICAL, ADMINISTRATIVE AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

**VISUAL COMMUNICATION**

**The title of the thesis:**

*The analysis of science-fiction films from the perspective of visual effects and that of the narrative*

**ABSTRACT**

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Keywords:

Anthology, sci-fi, film, movie, Anthology movie, cinematography, cameraman, visual communication, CGI, special effects, visual techniques, digital techniques, camera movements, image composition, film technology.

# **I. Introduction**

## **1. Thesis motivation**

No analysis of the Hollywood series has been made from the perspective of the special visual effects and that of the production techniques.

My opinion is that all the new elements that enrich the visual effects of the film have the role to attract the audience in the movie theaters.

Most of the critics analyze the movies from the perspective of the screenplay and from that of the narrative. They try to discover new trends and styles. Technological development involves technological exigency. The aim of my research is to present the way how technological exigency invades the world of science fiction movies. The concept "*initiated spectator*" plays an important role in the elaboration of the present research. The objects of my research are two film anthologies. The anthologies had been produced by the same studio and distributor. When I chose the anthologies I also took in consideration the reception of the movies according to the Hungarian media.

## **2. The movies of my generation**

My generation became more receptive to movies presented in cinemas at the beginning of the 80s, when the communist censorship started to be so severe that all the nude and erotic scenes were cut off the movies.

No film or film excerpt with the slightest allusion against communist ideology could be broadcast. But, there existed a genre that couldn't have been censored: science fiction movies.

The most important movie of this type for our generation was the famous Star Wars directed by George Lucas. In those times this movie (and the following series as well) was defined as a science-fiction film, as its story took place in the future in a remote galaxy. In the 90s George Lucas created for the audience (already grown up people at that time) three more episodes. Star Wars was the movie that made me fall in love with science-fiction films, the fan of which genre I remained till the present day.

## **3. Hungarian filmmakers in Hollywood**

As a student of the Faculty of Theater and Film of Budapest, I realized that the Hungarian filmmakers had been present in the American film industry from the very early days of film history.

The last part of the anthology entitled Predator was directed by a Hungarian director, Nimrod Antal, who was as well the student of the Faculty of Theater and Film of Budapest. This fact also influenced me when we chose the topic for my thesis.

As a conclusion we may state that Hungarian filmmakers have been always represented in the American Sci-fi film industry collaborating with the most famous directors and working with celebrities.

## II. Science-fiction movies – theory of the genre

### 1. Scientific and visual communication

Visual<sup>1</sup> communication has a very long history. We may state that it appeared in the same time rationality did. Visual communication<sup>2</sup> is one of the most important forms of human communication. This type of communication gave birth to the basic formula of the science of communication: “I am relating you an event that happened in the present and that you will find out only later in the future.”

The speaker tells something to the listener (transmitter – receiver). Between the transmitter and the receiver there is the content (the information). Visual communication in arts is based on personal experience both from the perspective of the transmitter and from that of the receiver.

The artist creates a work of art that will be interpreted by the audience according to the personality of each receiver.

Visual communication in television has two forms: TV-shows and movies. Signs, capturing attention, manipulation – space, time, movements, colors, representing space, gestures, body language, compositions, camera movements, montage, dimensions, spatial feeling. Synthesizing all these concepts one may state – reinterpreting the definition of illusion – that the world created in movies exists only on the screen and in the imagination of the audience.

It is not tangible, it becomes distinguishable only through the visual and audio receivers.

### 2. The basis of scientific and Sci-fi approaches

Michio Kaku<sup>3</sup> in his book *Physics of the Impossible* states that since scientists understand the basic laws of physics, today they are able to perceive or imagine a basic outline of future technologies that might work.

He goes on to say that physicists can discern between future technologies that are merely improbable and those technologies that are truly impossible. Teleportation is a class of impossibility, as it does not violate the laws of physics, and could possibly exist on the time scale of a century.

Yet, there are things that are impossible because they violate basic laws of physics.

***A possible definition of science-fiction:*** "Science fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-

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1 visual lat. 1. Of or relating to the sense of sight In. n. BAKOS Ferenc, *Idegen szavak és kifejezések kézis�ótára*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Bp., 1994. 828.

2 communication lat. 1. announcement, 2. the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium: television is an effective means of communication, 2. means of sending or receiving information, such as telephone lines or computers, 4. Bounds

3 KAKU, Michio: *Physics of the Impossible*. [translated in Hungarian by BOTH Előd] Akkord Kiadó, Bp., 2012.

4.

*terrestrial in origin.*" Another feature of this genre is that speculations must be represented in a way that they make continuous references to the actual scientific paradigm. Fantasy movie is a genre that incorporates imaginative and fantastic themes and its limits are defined by human imagination. This genre became an imaginary gate towards the future, by the means of which the creators may present to the audience their surrealistic fantasies. It presents scientific and technical results giving a flight to the imagination of the audience and showing new inventions, demonstrating the fragile character of the terrestrial world (Aliens, Walle). After the movie is over the audience may dream on.

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### **3. The role of Sci-fi in the visual communication**

Due to the fact that the target audience of this genre is very limited (only the fans of this kind of fiction watch such movies) the role of Sci-fi movies in visual communication is not a very accentuated one. Cinematographic art has created a special language for the communication with the audience. Elements of this special language: change of plans (premier plan – foreground: shows the emotions of the character), body language, flash-back (all that happened in the past is black and white, and the audience immediately knows that the memories of the character are presented).

Sci-fi<sup>4</sup> as a genre is in concordance with the formal language of movies. Due to the fact that there are no directors who would direct only such films, the development of this genre is connected to the development of other genres both technically and from the perspective of the screenplay.

### **4. Modern visual effects in the Sci-fi movies**

The development of modern visual effects is influenced by three factors: the emergence of a new generation of directors and cameramen, the development of visual technology and the modification of the sensory threshold of the spectators.

Tricking techniques must be implemented in cinematographic art as sound was introduced once. Nowadays the audience hears the sound without being aware of this. Virtual tricks developed in a very significant measure.

Due to the capacity of the microprocessors it became possible to combine real characters and objects with those designed by computer.

A very important feature of the images designed by computer is that they are very meticulous. The designers are able to draw the smallest details as well. The audience expects new and surprising elements.

The typology of science fiction movies cannot be elaborated easily because this genre is connected with several genres such as horror, melodramas, thrillers and comedies. Hard Sci-fi, soft Sci-fi, Cyberpunk, travelling in time (there are several such movies - it must be included in a different category), galactic epic, utopias and dystopias.

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4 sci-fi, abbreviation, Eng. (science fiction) In. BAKOS Ferenc, Idegen szavakés kifejezések kézikönyvtára, Akadémiai Kiadó, Bp., 1994. 689.

## 5. The role of these genre in our days

Palpitating pictures, apocalyptic sounds – the cinematographic adventure of our days differs from that of the early era of film history.

The adventure has become more intense. Today, movies are different. Movie theaters are different as well: multiplex movie theaters appeared changing the film watching customs of the spectators.

Smaller halls – the importance of the common adventure diminishes, there are several movies projected simultaneously in the same time in different halls, the audience may choose from many genres. In most of the cases the spectators go to the cinema without a certain aim: they choose the movie at the cinema.

In the parlor there can be bought crunchies and soft-drinks.

Maybe all these goods are meant to muffle the fear of the spectators. The sound is so loud that it is almost apocalyptic, but this is a key element to increase the impact of the movie.

Another key element is to create the sensation of spatial feeling. The stereo effects of the 80s belong to the past. Today in the movie theaters the audience hears the sound from every part of the hall: from the right, from the left, from upstairs and from backwards.

Audio elements are combined with visual effects, only thus may the impact become perfect.

The most important element is yet the perfecting of the visual content. 40% of human mind's capacity is occupied by the sense of sight, this is very well harnessed with success in the film industry.

## 6. The tradition of the genre

We may state that nowadays in the entertainment industry there are distributed more movies than books representing this genre.

Yet it would be an error to state that science fiction was invented by cinematographic art.

The creators of characters like Captain Nemo or dr. Chris Kelvin and of societies like that of Jefremov's, were Sci-fi authors in the real sense of the word. Cinematographic art is different as it offers a new but ready world to the audience.

Thus the movie makers play the role of the divine creator, who creates the world, the beings, the stars, planets and humans in their own image. Sometimes this is enough to make a good science fiction movie.

## 7. The profit-interestedness of the typical American horror<sup>5</sup> movies

The thesis presents the box-office data of the analyzed films through a table.

For a better understanding the order is the following: the analyzed anthologies, popular series, movies with no further episodes – in alphabetical order.

A fact is that the budget of the analyzed episodes grows from year to year, the Hollywood dream factory spending more and more money to make these films, the income being influenced by the audience and the reception of the movie.

Even movies that were considered failures by the critics or the spectators, later on became profitable (the invested sums were recovered).

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5        horror lat. 1. painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay, astonishment giving place to horror on the faces of the people, 2. intense aversion or repugnance, the quality of inspiring horror: repulsive. Ibid. BAKOS Ferenc, *Idegen szavak és kifejezések kéziszótára*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Bp., 1994. 325.

### **III. THE METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH**

When choosing the topic we knew that I will have to watch several SF movies.

I was aware that the alphabetical presentation of the movies wouldn't be an appropriate method, so I decided to analyze not only those nine movies that later became the object of my research, but I also watched and analyzed the movies produced in the same period in order to have a reference system of the analyzed genre.

Watching the film was a subjective experience. During the elaboration of the research I focused mainly on the reviews published in the Hungarian press after the films were brought out.

#### **1. The problems of the research**

1. In the American films the hero is always American and fights not only for survival but also for the rescuing of the whole world.

I wondered whether in these films there will be any attempt for the salvation of the world, as we got used to in other science fiction and catastrophe movies.

2. Is there a continuity between the different episodes from the point of view of the action?

3. The nine different movies have nine directors and camera-men. Another question was that the directors of the new episodes tried to create something new, or not? Another question was that the directors of the new episode introduced new visual effects integrating them in the global image of the first part, or not?

4. The next question was that the final success or failure of a certain part was the result of the visual content, or not?

5. Are there any references made to the action of the first part or to the solutions applied by the cameramen?

6. The following issue to discuss was whether the two anthologies can be typologically integrated in the category of the SF thriller?

7. Another interesting research topic was the analysis of the development of the visual effects from the perspective of camera movements and frames.

8. I also searched for reviews published in the Hungarian press in those times.

#### **Other perspectives of the content analysis**

##### *Intelligibility*

Though it might seem a banality, intelligibility is the most important factor for the success of a film. The entire film depends on this aspect.

If the audience doesn't like the first part, it won't want to see the following episodes either.



For years back the audience decided based on the opinion of film critics present at the test projection, but nowadays things function differently.

### *Esthetic criteria*

The esthetic impact of the image, the details and the verisimilitude of the setting, the implementation of the aliens: how versatile do the characters appear, can it be observed that the background is a projected scene, how refined and elaborated are the models?

Another important topic of my research was the development of the technologies that occurred in the years between the production of the different parts. The development can be observed in the elaboration of visual effects and in the solutions chosen by the camera-men.

### *Narrative criteria*

The problem of continuity from the perspective of the action. Discussing this theme is difficult due to the fact that among the directors of the nine movies there were debutante directors as well.

The connection between the two parts is ensured by the presence of the alien creatures, while in *Aliens* this role is fulfilled by Ripley.

Sometimes the director makes references to the older parts as well. I grouped the continuity of the action in two main categories:

Primary continuity: in the case when the action of the second part is the direct continuation of the first part. Secondary continuity: in the case when the same characters, customs, attitudes, tools and values are used in the service of a different screenplay.

### *Analysis from the perspective of camera-men*

Panning systems have developed significantly in the last decades.

The role of the camera has changed radically, thus the language of cinema was totally redefined.

The thesis wants to present how these changes occur in the development of the visual effects, due to the camera movement and to the tools and accessories of cameras.

My research was an interdisciplinary one. The target audience belongs to categories with different scientific background and varied domains of interest.

Certain themes are reviewed only to become guide marks for the main objective of the research.

The character of my thesis is informative and it presents the personal experiences from the perspective of a person who has a practical approach to the topic.

## **2. Choosing the series**

As a cameraman I considered that the visual world of a movie represents quintessence of the movie.

I selected movies having several episodes, but the episodes were not shot consecutively. An other condition for the selection was that every episode be directed by a different director (among the directors there are famous and debutante directors as well) and that the films be produced by the same studio.

The next condition for the selection was that the movies be produced in the period between 1970 and

2000, as this was the era in which computer visual effects became very popular (due to the development of IT tools).

In the first part of both series, trick and visual effects were made without computer aided tools, but the last two parts were rich in scenes produced on computer, that wouldn't have been possible without computer tricks.

The shooting techniques and the visual effects developed a lot during the filming process, especially the manipulation techniques of the cameras and the raw materials (the used films).

Analyzing, comparing and following these developments was a very interesting topic. Both series had parts with significant financial success (Alien, Aliens, Predator 1 and Predator 3) and with financial failures as well (Aliens vs. Predator, Aliens vs. Predator Requiem, Predator 2).

### **3. The structure of the chapters**

After the introduction follows the theme motivation, that is very important as it helps the reader towards a better understanding of the topic and of the perspectives.

Afterwards there follow the case studies. In this chapter I analyzed the two major themes in two separate categories, but I created a third category as well (that of the "crossover" episodes) that will be treated in the same place with the first major category. The last part of the thesis presents the conclusion, the bibliography, the digital bibliography and the list of the pictures/illustrations and images.

## **IV. Content analysis**

### **1. Aliens - four variations for a dystopia**

The anthology having four episodes was filmed between 1979 and 1997. Each episode was directed by different directors. This is a very important issue.

The comparative analysis of the visual worlds of the four different parts is a provocation, as computer sciences began to develop at the beginning of the 80s, the development reaching its culmination at the beginning of the 2000's.

This process had an impact on the creation of the four movies.

*1.1. Alien - (1979) Directed by: Ridley Scott*

*1.2. Aliens (1986) Directed by: James Cameron*

*1.3. Alien 3 - XXX (1992) Directed by: David Fincher.*

*1.4. Alien Resurrection (1997) Directed by: Jean Pierre Jeunet.*

The anthology is revolutionary for the history of the genre. The main character is a woman: a heroine. An emancipated character. The heroine of the anthology Aliens is the first in a long series of powerful women, ambitious and aggressive that in the 80s and 90s invade the cinema. Another attraction - the

main one – of the anthology is the alien itself, the creature (that in the following parts is called dragon). Another important aspect is that in the movie humans having limited physical capacity try to win over a powerful creature with immense physical and psychical force.

The Anthology makes the imagination of the audience work and in the same time it puts to a touch the nerves of the spectators as well.

## **2. The Anthology Predators**

Like many other SF movies that take place on the Earth, this movie also begins with a scene in which an alien space shuttle comes near the Planet.

The spectators are aware that it is an alien shuttle, because humans do not build intergalactic shuttle, yet.

In the anthology – that has a slightly propagandist character – the heroes fight against humanoid aliens. In most of the cases the heroes win.

2.1. *Predator (1987) - Directed by - John McTiernan*

2.2. *Predator 2 (1990) - Directed by - Stephen Hopkins*

2.3. *Alien vs. Predator (2004) - Screenplay and directed by - Paul WS Anderson*

2.4. *Alien vs. Predator - Requiem (2007) - Directed by - Strause brothers*

2.5. *Predator (2010) - Directed by - Nimrod Antal*

## **V. Conclusion and summarizing**

The results of the analysis confirmed the hypotheses:

1. In both anthologies the American heroes try to save the humanity, as many of their ancestors did before.
2. There exists continuity between the different episodes from the point of view of the action.
3. The producers of the anthology entitled Predators wanted that their films be different from that produced earlier, thus they introduced new visual effects (especially in Predator 3) that would suit the general worldview of the first episode.
4. We couldn't find results that would suggest that the financial success or failure of the movies was the result of the visual content.
5. In the analyzed anthologies we could find many references to the previous parts (both from the perspective of the visual effects and from that of the action).
6. The two anthologies can be typologically integrated in the category of the SF thriller.
7. In the case of the analyzed movies the visual representation can be examined from the perspective of the visual effects, camera movement and camera tools that influence the movement of the camera.
8. In the Hungarian press of those days we could find some reviews about these movies, but their

number was insignificant.

## **VI. Interdisciplinary character of the research**

Dealing with the varied and complex world of the art of cinema (in which different genres, styles and trends influence each other and intermingle in the same time), the research was limited by difficulties that we couldn't be foreseen at the beginning of the research.

In the analyzed category we can find hundreds of movies, but only nine movies constituted the object of the research.

Though in order to have a correct attitude towards the genre I watched over 100 SF movies, we hadn't introduced them in the research, we only made reference to them in order to present the details of the chosen theme.

We completed some interdisciplinary research as well, the most important approach of this kind being the psychological one, as we tried to follow the attitude of the spectators. Yet, we hadn't completed concrete research regarding the degree of tolerance or sensory threshold of the spectators.

Though we had been dealing with SF movies, our scope was not to redefine the genre of SF or that of thriller.

Our main objective was to make a synthesis regarding the characteristics of the genre. The thesis makes references to genetics and anthropology, too.

The interdisciplinary approach makes it possible to create a new perspective for the specialists of the different domains of research.

## **VII. Further research perspectives**

What kind of further researches can be done after the completion of this thesis?

The permanent actualization of the theme might be an interesting topic of research. In the world of movies oriented towards financial success, one may never say that a series reached its end, as it can be continued any time. As an epilogue of the anthology Alien, it is already prepared the filming of the new episode entitled Prometheus the producer of which is also Brandy-Wine. This is the first occasion when a director who worked earlier in the anthology Alien, will have the possibility to continue his work.

The director of the new episode will be Ridley Scott (the first one being directed also by him), and the movie will be a prologue of the series, so it will become the predecessor of his own movie. This is not a unique case, for instance George Lucas – after the Star Wars trilogy ended - created the first three episodes, the action of which took place prior to the action of the series.

Further anthologies that could be analyzed: Star Wars (6 episodes), Star Trek, Terminator (4 episodes), trilogy Matrix, Solaris (Russian and American versions), Robocop (3 episodes), The Cube (2 episodes).

Another possible topic of research could be the analysis of Hungarian spectator's movie watching habits, thus one could find out what does SF mean for the Hungarian society.

What are the preferences of those who love this genre?

SF cartoons could become an interesting topic of research. It would be interesting to categorize these cartoons, especially because the role of the nanny is often taken by the TV-set in our days.

SF cartoons are just as violent as SF movies.

The cartoons with superheroes such as Batman, Superman, Spider-man are very popular.

Toy industry makes a profit of this, manufacturing puppets, toy guns and other toys, building thematic entertainment parks where children can meet these heroes.

Such an entertainment park is Disneyland as well. Another interesting research topic could be the comparative analysis of SF movies and PC games having the same character.

There had been created a PC game out of the anthology Alien. Tron Legacy seems more like a PC game. The action of the movie takes place in a virtual world.

In the case of the series Alien, an interesting object of study would be the analysis of the names, the connection of the names with the action of the message of the movie.

Through this thesis we want to show to our colleagues the existing possibilities, and we want to try make them continue exploring this topic, accomplish new researches and write more articles, books and manuals for the students learning in this domain in Transylvania and Hungary, make scientific research thus contributing to the improvement of the quality of the educational process in the domain of cinematography. Thus the professional attitude of the young generation would be improved and this would lead towards a more conscious consume of movies.

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The illustrations had been chosen in accordance to the necessities of the theme and were extracted from the movies with a software created for film editing.

## **IX. Annexes: DVD**