

Taking Ballyhoo Seriously. J.P. Telotte. *Selling Science Fiction Cinema: Making and Marketing a Genre*. U of Texas P, 2023. vii+206 pp. \$45 hc.

A good deal of sf scholarship has looked at American sf films of the 1950s mainly as symptomatic texts expressing Cold War anxieties, and so they have often been left out of consideration in the generic question of “what is sf?” Or, if not left out, then they have been presented as something of a problem for sf scholars who want to take sf films “seriously” in a way that will not have colleagues in literature and film studies departments rolling their eyes. Films such as *The Thing* (1951), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), and *The Blob* (1958) are rarely featured in lists of canonical sf texts and certainly are not recommended in film studies courses as exemplars of either sf film or 1950s cinema, even if they have become cult texts among aficionados of bad films (*The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951] might be one of the few exceptions for this period). But the terrain of sf studies has shifted away from the pedigree-anxious theorizing of the 1970s and toward a more historical understanding of genre shaped by changes in genre theory that emerged in the 1990s. This is perhaps best exemplified today by John Rieder’s approach in “On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History” (*SFS* [July 2010]) and later in his *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (2017). These most stereotypical and derided “sci-fi” films need be reconsidered for their role in the history of sf genre-making.

Selling Science Fiction Cinema offers this much needed reconsideration by focusing on how the meaning-making strategies of 1950s film marketing worked to create a popular, broadly shared understanding of “science fiction” as a genre distinct from similar and often overlapping filmic categories—such as adventure, horror, and thriller—and in the process created an audience for this newly recognizable film genre by the end of the decade. Telotte is by now a familiar name to scholars of sf film and television, having published regularly in the field since the early 1980s. He is the author of monographs such as *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film* (1995), *A Distant Technology: Science Fiction Film and the Machine Age* (1999), *Animating the Science Fiction Imagination* (2017), and *Movies, Modernism, and the Science Fiction Pulps* (2019), as well as of several single-authored introductions to and edited collections on sf film and television for Cambridge, Routledge, Oxford, Wayne State, and other presses. Telotte’s work has never been solely about sf media, but is also about the larger cultural and industrial contexts of sf film and television.

Telotte’s new book situates marketing practices as key to sf film’s constitution as an emergent genre system mediated by the film

industry—including directors, writers, producers, distributors, trade publications—and its audiences. Central to this is the story of how over the course of a decade, sf film marketing campaigns created audiences who could understand what to expect from sf film and to seek it out. Telotte tells this story through chapters that focus on the marketing campaigns—what used to be called “ballyhoo” or “exploitation”—of several key films of this period produced not as B films but by major Hollywood studios such as Paramount, Warner Brothers, MGM, and Columbia. Telotte’s introduction establishes the need in genre studies to understand marketing as a constructive if not constitutive genre-making practice; he also demonstrates its relevance for film studies, where marketing has often been overlooked in favor of a focus on the films themselves, as if narrative alone were all that drove audience and market conceptions of genre. Telotte provides a brief history of sf film up to the 1950s and demonstrates how, for audiences and studios alike, what we now consider films in the sf genre were not understood as sf, but were either confusingly described as their own brand of fantasy adventure or otherwise labeled horror or thriller. The chapters that follow provide case studies in the history of sf filmmaking and marketing and cover films such as *Destination Moon* (1950), *The Thing from Another World* (also called *The Thing*, 1951), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *The Blob* (1958), and *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (also called *Godzilla*, 1956) and several sequels produced by Toho Studio in Japan and repackaged by US distributors for American audiences.

At stake in each of these chapters is not so much what was identifiably “sf” about a given film, since we recognize all of them, retrospectively, as part of the long history of sf film, just as we typically include Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), despite ongoing battles over genre periodization. More relevant here is how the genre of sf—already well-known to enthusiasts of the literary genre born in pulp magazines and, in the 1950s, crossing over into mass-market paperback publishing—became salient across the spectrum of cultural workers involved in making and consuming film. Telotte describes this process of making sf legible as the creation of a “thick relationship” among filmmakers, marketing executives, distributors, audiences, and the many narrative and aesthetic concepts that were being pulled into the orbit of this emergent filmic genre. Bringing sf film into view as its own thing in the 1950s, legible as such and different from genres such as horror or thriller (even if incorporating elements) necessitated a shift in how marketing campaigns handled films. As Telotte shows, studios learned quickly at the outset of the decade that sf was something different from other film genres and could be marketed as such, if only marketing campaigns could make the genre legible to potential viewers.

Major film studios’ marketing campaigns early in the decade suggested that marketing to sf readers through pulp magazines such as *Astounding Science Fiction* or *Thrilling Wonder Stories* could be marginally successful, mostly at convincing sf readers that the sf films could take the genre

seriously, as Eagle-Lion did with *Destination Moon* (adopted from a Robert A. Heinlein novella). Studios also tried the opposite, marketing an sf film with little reference to genre or narrative expectations, as RKO did with *The Thing*. This sort of “teaser” campaign was marginally successful if expensive. Both efforts, however, underscored the need for developing a stronger sense of the generic horizons of sf in order for such films to appeal broadly to filmgoers without much additional work, which in turn meant creating a targeted audience through improved marketing strategies that were experimented with throughout the decade. Major film studios also had to contend with the rising popularity of schlocky B films that lower-budget studios pumped out as the decade went on, and that not only helped to define the genre for audiences but also created a sense that this sort of film was a cheap and, increasingly, a humorous and unserious endeavor. This conception of the emergent film genre jibed with audiences’ experience of sf in TV serials such as *Flash Gordon* and pulp magazines, which many felt were children’s media or at the very least artistically bankrupt. Hollywood thus faced what Telotte calls the “pulp paradox” in efforts both to make high-budget, serious sf films and to convince audiences to see them as such. Paramount in particular took this challenge head on with marketing campaigns for *When Worlds Collide* (1951), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), and *Conquest of Space* (1955), all overseen by George Pal. Over the course of the first half of the decade, Paramount released these three high-budget films to decreasing critical acclaim and financial success, each seemingly the result of a failure to capture appropriately the meaning of the film for its audience through advertising that, by 1955, was trying to pull them in with scantily clad “space girls.” But the key failure was that these films’ exploitation efforts often emphasized the scientific accuracy and meticulous special effects behind the creation of the film “without expressing a consistent [generic] identity” that audiences could latch on to. Thus efforts to sell these films in a way that might appeal to sf readers largely failed with the public, especially as B films set an increasingly clear (and low) bar for what an sf film might be.

Telotte’s story of sf film and efforts to market it, and particularly to carve out an audience, continues into the second half of the 1950s with MGM’s efforts to sell *Forbidden Planet*, a movie now best remembered for its poster featuring a silly but menacing robot lumbering on a vibrantly colored planet’s surface, carrying an unconscious woman with a short dress and very large breasts. In some versions, this poster had big block letters touting the film as “AMAZING!” This sums up the challenges major studios faced in marketing big-budget sf films at a time when studios feared film-going was under threat from television and an increasingly uninterested audience, and at a time when viewer demographics seemed to be shifting from adults and their children toward a teenage audience with money to spend and time to kill. MGM thus tried to court multiple audiences, though it did so in a rather confusing manner. On the one hand it featured attractions such as a touring robot and sets from the film, as well as a

partnership with Quaker Oats that encouraged audiences to view the film as a children's movie. On the other hand, posters such as the one described above leaned into horror and titillation fit for an adult or teen audience. MGM thus confused things with its emphasis on "moppet" exploitation (i.e., using a sellable figure such as Robby the Robot to entice children) of a film that was very much for adults, both in its sexual undertones and its philosophical reflections on the failure of an advanced civilization. Telotte shows us, however, that by the end of the decade films such as *The Blob* and *Godzilla* were able to leverage earlier marketing failures, shifting social concerns about technology and atomic power, and a growing familiarity with sf no doubt bolstered by earlier high-budget and B film productions alike, to produce marketing campaigns that cleverly addressed a teen/adult audience of sf-aware filmgoers. The success of these films at the end of the decade demonstrated to studios and distributors that sf was not a cycle nearing its end, but "a multiply extensive narrative, one that was designed to reach beyond the filmic experience and to entangle audiences within a broad filmic and cultural discourse" about society now and in the future (6).

Selling Science Fiction Cinema might be read as a pre-history of the sf blockbuster: as the story of how major Hollywood studios marketed the sf genre and its audience into existence, paving the way for a recognizable type of film and a savvy audience that by the 1970s was able to turn out massive crowds and ultimately launch the transmedia phenomena that dominate media markets today. Telotte not only tells the story of sf's legibility as a film genre, but he also subtly examines the genre prestige economy, since the case studies Telotte turns to are major film studios' efforts to produce and exploit sf films as multimillion-dollar productions—even though these films were a minority of sf films produced in the period covered by Telotte's book. By focusing on how the genre became legible as a film genre, and in particular as a set of aesthetic and narrative expectations sold to an audience before they even see a film, Telotte offers a fresh perspective on one of sf film's most derided eras. Importantly, Telotte shows that studio marketing efforts to frame genre perceptions within the new postwar media ecology were also strategies of audience creation, of carving out a market that would want these films and that could be identified and targeted in future marketing efforts. Telotte's *Selling Science Fiction Cinema* raises important questions for the field at a time when we are increasingly interested in historicizing genre formation, and it should give us pause when considering whether arguments about genre can so easily cross media boundaries, prompting us perhaps to consider the medium-specific histories of genre in a period of transmedia dominance.—Sean Guynes, Michigan State University