



GENRE BENDER?

The German expressionist classic *Metropolis* is a sci-fi masterpiece, says Kimmel.

What's Alien About Science Fiction?

Less than many people think, says movie critic Dan Kimmel '77.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

MOVIE CRITIC **DAN KIMMEL '77** HAS GOT A yellow jacket in his bonnet. The former president of the Boston Society of Film Critics, cochair of the Boston Online Film Critics Association, and media professor at Suffolk University says there's one movie genre that's never gotten its due: science fiction.

In 2011, he made his case in a polemic, *Jar Jar Binks Must Die . . . and other Observations about Science Fiction Movies* (Fantastic Books). It was nominated for a 2012 Hugo Award, among the most prestigious honors in science fiction writing.

The one-time *Logos* humor columnist returns to Rochester every five years to speak at the Class of 1977 dinner. His first novel, *Shh! It's a Secret: A Novel about Aliens*,

Hollywood, and the Bartender's Guide (Fantastic Books), is set to come out early in 2013.

Why do science fiction films need an advocate?

Whenever there is a serious television show or movie with science fiction elements, you will inevitably read a review with a director or one of the stars or the writer, "It's not really science fiction. Yes, we use time travel and spaceships and killer robots. But it's not really science fiction. It's really about people." Oh really? One of my favorite films of the last 15 years is *Gattaca*. It's set in a near-future society, where basically all babies are born with designer genes. The protagonist was born the old-fashioned way. There's a chilling scene: He's born and they draw his blood. They



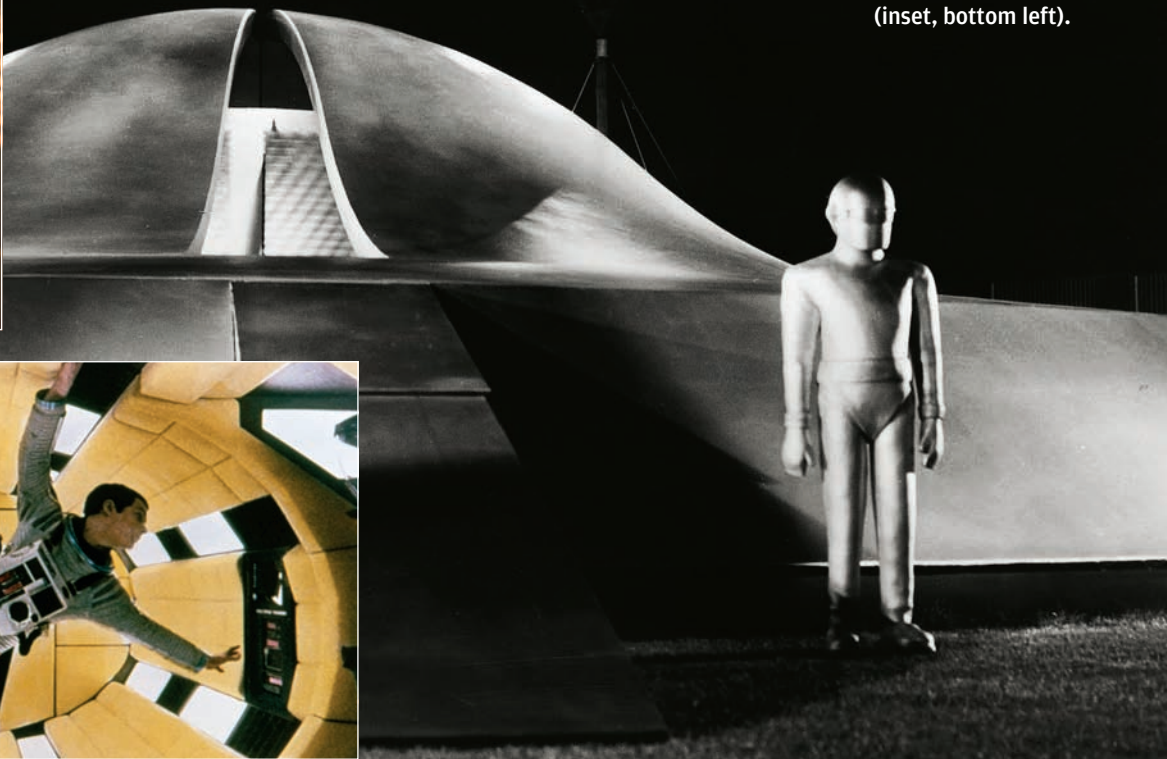
CRITIC: Sci-fi addresses serious themes, says Kimmel.

say he's going to have bad vision and he might have a heart defect. His whole life is written for him, just from his DNA. And we're so much more than our DNA. I show that movie to my students and they love it. I had one come up to me and say, "I never thought I would cry at a science fiction movie."

You've had a lot to say, in this same vein, about *Metropolis*.

Yes. When *Metropolis*, by the great Fritz Lang, generally acknowledged to be one of the greatest filmmakers of all time, was restored to its original length about three years ago, one of the German film archivists who was working on restoring the film gave an interview to the *New York Times* and he said, "Well, now that we can see the complete film, we can

RECOMMENDED: Kimmel's favorites include *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Blade Runner* (inset, top left), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (inset, bottom left).



see that the science fiction trappings are really very thin." This is a movie with a mad scientist, a killer robot, and a dystopian future! A more recent example is *The Time Traveler's Wife*. It's a romantic film and it's also science fiction. You can read the interviews—"Oh no, it's not really science fiction. It's really about the relationship between the characters." That would be like Clint Eastwood saying, "*Unforgiven* isn't really a western, it's about the characters."

So why the dismissive appraisals?

Even in fandom, somebody famously noted that the golden age of science fiction is when you're 12. Which is true, because that's when a lot of us get into it. But science fiction is really by adults, a lot of it is written for adults, and when it comes to junky sci-fi movies, I point to a quote by the great science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon. An interviewer said to him, "Isn't it true that 90 percent of science fiction is just crud?" And Sturgeon said, "Yes. Ninety percent of anything is crud."

Why does it matter what genre critics and others assign—or don't—to a film?

First, let's talk about what genre does. Genre offers a set of tools to tell stories about us and our lives. It allows us to talk about things in code. And so for westerns, that means that *High Noon* could talk about the Hollywood blacklist without ever mentioning communism. And for science fiction, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* could do the same thing. So you see a movie like that—a critic now might say, "Oh it's about pods from space"—but I'm sitting there saying, "Wow, this is about some really interesting ideas that they really couldn't talk about directly in 1956 because somebody would have yelled, 'Commie!'" There would have been pickets in front of the theater. But it's pod people, so we can get away with it.

You just completed a science fiction novel—Shh! It's a Secret: A Novel about Aliens, Hollywood, and the Bartender's Guide?

It's due out in January. The premise is first contact between Earth and this other planet. And now it's a year later. They've been exchanging scientists, exchanging ambassadors. And the son of an alien ambassador comes out to Hollywood and wants to be

Kimmel's 'Baker's Dozen'

So what are the must-see science fiction films? Kimmel provides a "baker's dozen." One note: "Where there are multiple versions, I go with the earlier one. Except for *The Fly*," Kimmel says. "In that case, I favor the 1986 remake."

- *Metropolis* (1927)
- *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935)
- *Things to Come* (1936)
- *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951)
- *The Thing* (1951)
- *Forbidden Planet* (1956)
- *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)
- *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)
- *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970)
- *Sleeper* (1973)
- *Blade Runner* (1982)
- *The Fly* (1986 remake of the 1958 original)
- *Gattaca* (1997)

in the movies. It's about the friendship between the movie executive and the alien as they're working on what turns out to be a top secret movie project. So, yes, it's about people. But it's also science fiction. **R**