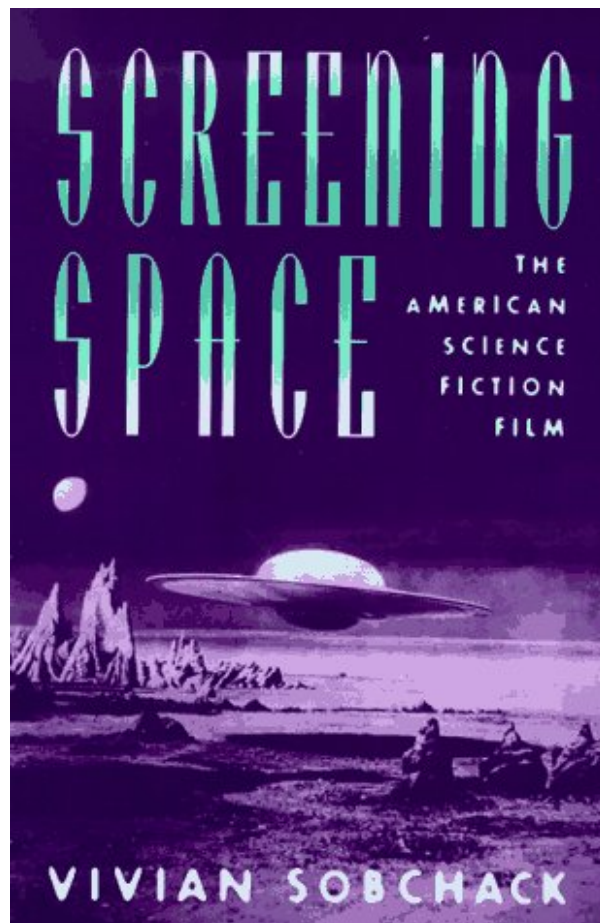
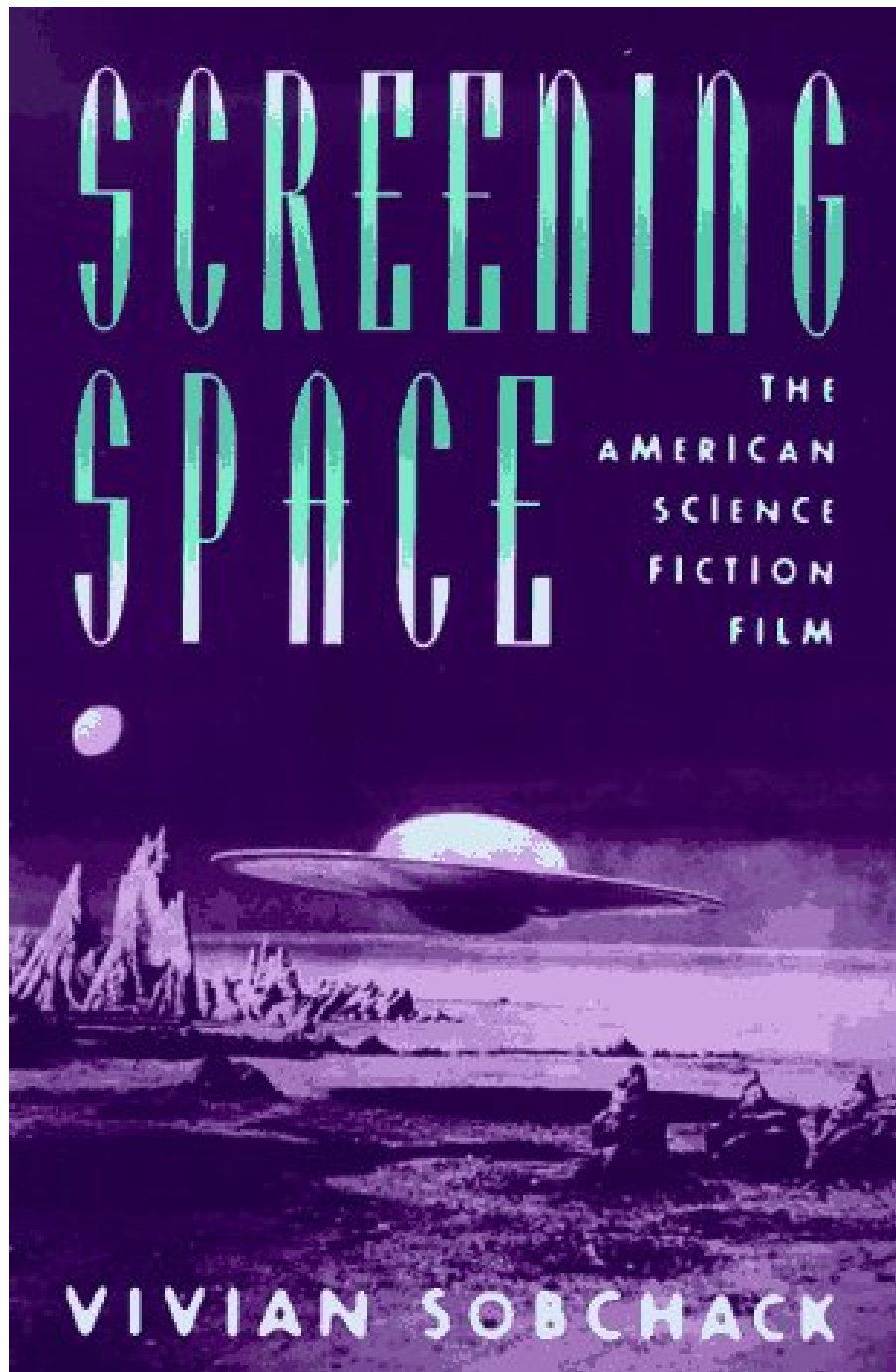


# **SCREENING SPACE: THE AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION FILM BY VIVIAN SOBCHACK**



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Screening Space, the reprint classic from Rutgers University Press, has been significantly enlarged to update the science fiction film since the early 1980s, examining classic and contemporary sci-fi films as a significant genre. Winner of the 1995 Pilgrim Award, the book examines the differences between the religious themes of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the clinical random evil depicted in *Event Horizon*. Vivian Sobchack's detailed analysis of a wide range of films and inclusion of black-and-white movie stills allows a better understanding of science fiction films as an art form that can often present its characters, a la *Blade Runner*, as "more human than human."

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# SCREENING SPACE: THE AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION FILM BY VIVIAN SOBCHACK PDF

This text attempts to shape definitions of the American science fiction film, studying the connection between the films and social preconceptions. It covers many classic films and discusses their import, seeking to rescue the genre from the neglect of film theorists. The book should appeal to both film buff and fans of science fiction.

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## Most helpful customer reviews

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

A standard listing on Sci-fi bibliographies, but an odd hybrid of a book

By Robert Moore

Vivian Sobchack's survey of the Sci-fi film from its beginnings in the silent era through the 1970s remains a standard reference work on the genre. It was originally published in 1980 though later revised and expanded in 1987. Unfortunately, rather than attempt to rewrite the book, she left the 1980 text largely unchanged and instead added a long, new chapter that was different both in methodology and orientation than the three original chapters. The result is a book in which the new chapter has the feel of a not completely successful graft. The final chapter has a "stuck on" feel to it and doesn't really feel compatible with what went on before.

When the original edition of this book was published, it was important for two reasons. First, the genre studies approach to film, which is far more appropriate the evaluation of many films than the auteur criticism that had dominated from the 1950s even to the present, was still in its relative infancy. My own take on matters is that for certain directors with strong personalities, auteur criticism carries a great deal of validity, but that the weaker the director or the less predominant the director, the less help it is. Many film genres

require less on the vision of a particular director than the dependence of the director and writer and producer on the history of that genre. Other films in the genre shape and mold and limit what can happen in other examples of the genre. Whether one considers the Western, the Mafia film, film noir, or Sci-fi, a discussion of the genre as a whole can provide considerable insight into any individual example of the genre. This was one of the first academic discussions of Sci-fi within that context. Second, the book was important for being one of the first academic studies that took the Sci-fi film seriously. In the late 1970s, when the original edition of the book was being prepared, Sci-fi was among the least respected genres in the movies. Though *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY*, *STAR WARS*, and *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND* was beginning to change things, Sci-fi was neither critically nor economically successful. Today we are used to the box office dominance of Sci-fi films, but with only two or three major exceptions in the late seventies, this was not the case then. Sobchack's book played a small but definite role in making the Sci-fi film more relevant to film studies.

The first three chapters of the book remain exceptionally helpful in analyzing the crucial nature of Sci-fi films before their emergence as big box office in the eighties and beyond. Many of the films she discusses were staples of Saturday afternoon TV movie slots, which is where I first saw many of them. *THE THING*, *THEM!*, *THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL*, *IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE*, *DESTINATION MOON*, *WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE*, *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*, and a host of other classics get extensive coverage in the book and she spends a great deal of time not only analyzing their essential characteristics but contrasting them with and comparing them to the creature films that were showing at the same time. In doing this Sobchack did her part in helping to establish a canon of Sci-fi films. The discussion takes her in the three original chapters through other classics such as *WESTWORLD*, *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE*, *PLANET OF THE APES*, *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY*, *SILENT RUNNING*, and *THX 1138*. I had only one quibble with these original three chapters: an artificial decision to discuss only American made films. A number of significant and influential (and their influentiality along made their exclusion arbitrary) British films were left out, including the Quatermass films, *VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED*, *THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS*, *THE DAY THE EARTH CAUGHT FIRE*, and others, as well as Jean Luc Goddard's *ALPHAVILLE*. It also meant that Andrei Tarkovsky's great 1972 Soviet masterpiece, *SOLARIS*, received no discussion. It also left the very low quality but exceptionally large body of Japanese films out of consideration.

The chapter added in the late 1980s is simply odd. For one thing, she seems to have read and not completely digested the work of Fredric Jameson. I have no complaints with her interest in Jameson, who is perhaps the most important academic of the past thirty years to have shown a sustained interest in Sci-fi. Both *THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS* and *POSTMODERNISM OR, THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF LATE CAPITALISM* are well-thumbed volumes on my bookshelf. The problem is how dissonant this chapter is with the earlier chapters. It almost feels like the work of an entirely different author. Marxist ideas were completely absent from the first chapter, but predominant in the final one. Moreover, it is as if she hadn't completely interiorized Jameson and Mandel's ideas, but was instead almost parroting Jameson. Another problem here is that the first three chapters were models of clarity. Jameson is not an especially easy to read writer, and is very much a product of the European tradition of writing in which authors tend to encrust their ideas in difficult to decode jargon (a tradition opposed to other writers who strove for clarity of expression and lack of academic jargon and included writers such as David Hume, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, as opposed to Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Marx [who could write beautifully and simply when he wanted to], and Derrida who cannot be read so much as interpreted). This seems to have infected Sobchack and the final chapter is a chore to read. A number of additional films are discussed, including the *STAR WAR* films, *E.T.*, *BLADE RUNNER*, and *REPO MAN*. I do not, however, believe that this was a successful chapter. It attempts to apply Jameson to the most recent changes in Sci-fi film in an effort to capture the movement of history. As a whole, I felt that this chapter significantly weakened the book

as a whole.

Nonetheless, this is a must read book for anyone wishing to study the Sci-fi film. It definitely has its weaknesses, but it just as surely has its strengths. I would perhaps caution readers to focus mainly on the first three chapters and to consider skipping the last one.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Film criticism the way that it should be done.

By frumiousb

Would-be film critics could take lessons in readability from Sobchack. She makes her point clearly, without excessively convoluted text. In addition to being thought-inspiring, it is genuinely well-written and often a pleasure to read.

Sobchack divides the books into chapters that address issues of definition, image, dialogue and sound in the science fiction film. It is the definitive book on the subject, and students of the genre should definitely begin here.

Note: I read the second edition of the book, rather than the third that is for sale at the time of writing this review. If the book has a serious flaw, it is simply that any take on futurism in science fiction goes out of date astoundingly quickly.

5 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Worth reading if you enjoy Science Fiction and its phyche.

By Jonathan Raimer

I recommend anyone who is interested in Science Fiction to at least glance at this book. Yes, glance. What I enjoy most from this book is how it provides pictures of movie scenes, corresponding them with the points and theories presented. It does it in a way to make what may seem overbearing (to some people mind you) rather interesting and insightful. The visualizations help things 'click' so well. The reading becomes more and more bareable as you read on once you get used to the structure. It's great. Even if you don't like reading, buy it for the pictures it presents; just by looking at them and the small, bold explanations below will help you gain a whole new outlook on Science Fiction. Besides the visuals, I would say it is the best critical response of the Science Fiction film I have read. Other books I checked out seemed boring and unattractive. This book caught me when I looked at it. In fact, I was doing a paper in college for a History through Film class and my Instructor asked for the Catalog information. So I guess I'm not the only one. Other then that, the seriousness of the book gives the genre what it deserves while retaining your interest to read on. Most importantly, though, it helps clear up thoughts I've had for years and makes it presentable in words. Very gratifying. Check it out.

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