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Science Fiction

Amplifying Emotion, Story, and Environment in Science Fiction

In the entertainment world, Science Fiction is beginning to rise to the top as one of the major genres in human history. But like most science fiction films, video games, and television shows, there is another addition that must be taken into consideration. I’m not talking about the fancy shots, or the silly costumes, and special effects, but the musical score that accompanies it.

When it comes to music, it can change our mind’s perception when we look at a science fiction work of art. For example, say you’re watching Stanley Kubrik’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the volume is muted. You may get the feeling of one mood whereas if you unmute the volume of the television, the mood can change entirely because of the score. To clarify, the scene within *2001* where the shuttle is continuing on course to an orbital space station is nothing without the musical score blasting in your ears. If it were reversed and no audio was present, you wouldn’t feel that experience, the openness of what goes through a character’s mind and eyes when they go out into the beyond. John Scalzi said, on his blog on the AMC website, about the movie *Bride of Frankenstein*, “the 1931 version barely has music in it… the movie seems flat to modern viewers” (Scalzi). When we listen to the track “Also Sprach Zarathustra”, the theme for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, what we feel is the need to go out into the unknown, and to imagine a whole new world other than the one we live in now. That is at the core of what science fiction is.

Music in science fiction can also fortify and backup the story being told, not just feelings or moods. Take the episode “Gauntlet” from the television series, *Stargate: Universe*, for instance. The main story, or plot rather, is that a small group of humans are trapped on a ship several billion light-years away from Earth. In this episode, they have to escape an alien threat by freezing themselves in pods so they can power down and allow the ship to jump the gap between galaxies into the next one, to be sure they escape the threat. Three people are next to go into their separate pods, but only two of the pods are functioning properly. The only way is for one to stay out and try to fix the third pod in a two-week window before the ship loses too much power to maintain FTL travel. Bravely, Eli, a young character in the show, stays out and freezes the other two telling them, “I have never been more sure of anything in my life” (Wright, Cooper), but he himself knows that he is not going to fix the remaining pod, and that he is probably not going to make it. With the musical score aligned with this scene, it was fairly obvious that Eli wasn’t afraid of what comes next, but was happy and proud that he was allowed into the unknown, and saw sights that he never imagined he would see, or believe was real, had he not been stranded on the ship. In the final moments of the scene, there is no dialogue. It is just him, alone, looking out from a large window in the front of the ship, into the beyond, into what awaits him, with the score alongside, communicating to the audience without words.

The science fiction genre is all about imagining a world in any way, shape, or form, and is based upon scientific knowledge. When a composer scores something in this genre, he has to think the same way. That being said, composing a musical piece is not that much different from writing the story itself. Furthermore, the composer of the musical piece has to step inside the shoes of the main character, or whichever character is the main target of the entire scene, and just imagine, in his head, what would you be seeing through that character’s eyes? Are you floating around in space? Then perhaps you would produce a bit with organ and string instruments, maybe sustained violins, to provide an open and slow atmosphere. Or are you stepping through a portal that instantaneously takes you to another place? Then perhaps you would produce a bit with drums that get louder, faster, and suddenly stop as soon as you enter the event horizon to provide a sense of not knowing where you’ll end up. When scoring scenes in science fiction, we have to keep an open mind on this kind of stuff, or the order of the music is just going to be nonsense, and it’s not going to relate to anything that is being expressed to the audience.

Though this much is true, on paper it may seem that scoring science fiction entertainment seems easy enough. Just become the character and pull musical notes right out of your head, and done, you have a score. It’s always more easily said than done. In reality, it is probably more difficult than I care to admit. It can take close to one month or two to find something that fits in right and a lot of the time it’s trial and error. Joel Goldsmith, the composer for the score of *Stargate: Atlantis* says in an interview, “It could be like pulling teeth and can be a very tedious process.” It’s a ton of experimentation and sometimes when one direction is taking a turn for the worst, you’re forced to throw it away, and start from scratch. Doing this avoids frustration and it allows you to clear your head. Then, you begin the entire process over again by going in another direction, which may or may not lead you to other paths that you can take.

Sometimes, there can be exceptions to aligning music with a scene. For example, if the scene wants to express a sense of loss, there is nothing more heart-pounding than letting the environment take the form of the musical score. Take a scene from the hit SyFy show *Battlestar: Galactica* for instance. In the episode “Revelations”, the human survivors from the planet Caprica and the rebel cylons both finally find Earth, but they are only in orbit mind you. Seeing the planet from orbit, the human survivors are happy and merry, dancing around, ecstatic that they have finally reached their new home. As they made landfall, the only dialogue spoken is when Mary McDonnell says, “Earth,” and after that, the camera pans out to show a devastated wasteland, ravaged by nuclear weapons and war. All you can hear is the ocean, the wind, taking the place of the musical score, to give a sense of loss or betrayal that the Earth they were looking for does not exist anymore.

In science fiction entertainment, there are certain environmental settings that are widely used over the years. Deep space and the exploration of the universe for one, being the most used. For settings such as these, most films, shows, and games, have some sort of musical score attached to these scenes to again amplify the environment and to provide an open atmosphere to the audience. That is the whole point of the addition of a score. You want the audience to feel like they are in the character’s body and that they are in the moment. Otherwise, the scene is going to be “flat”. In this type of environment, scientifically, sound waves do not travel in a vacuum. That is just a fact. However, for example when you are in space, or just imagining you are in space, you don’t want to be listening to nothing the entire time. That is a heavy tragedy to carry along because audio and sound is a fundamental part of the human experience. That being said, that sense of loneliness in space isn’t something that should be carried along into the audience or to whoever is watching.

Of course, there are two sides of the same coin. Music has immensely shaped the science fiction entertainment genre in many ways, but what about the opposing side to that? How has music changed because of science fiction? Well, because most science fiction stories are unique and usually consists of a new world that is unknown to humans, those factors are also transferred over to those who score these movies, or even professional music producers who have a thing for the science fiction genre. A great example of a huge influence in music by the work of science fiction entertainment can be electronic music or rather, the electronic subgenre, Dubstep. Dubstep, having many tracks to its name, has a wide range of sounds and noises that sound really inhuman, almost alien, and the science fiction genre still has, to this day, a huge impact to the Dubstep subgenre. In a list of *The 15 Greatest Science Fiction-Based Pop/Rock Songs* by Sean T. Collins, he says in the description, “…sci-fi has become a startlingly strong musical subgenre over the past 40-plus years, influencing everything from the rise of electronic music…” (Collins).

Science fiction entertainment has risen as one of the dominant genres in the world. However, much of the work that came into moving this genre to the high point where it is today is because of the unique musical scores that are fixed along with the sci-fi movie, show, or video game. Nowadays, it would be difficult to watch a science fiction film that does not have some sort of score along with it. The film would not have that extra “oomph” that most people would expect to receive when watching it. Music just has a funny way of getting inside our heads, making us feel as if we were actually the character, or as if we were in the same situation as the character. It also has a funny way of assisting us in visualizing the environment of the fictional world, whether it be space, another planet, or going into the past or into the future. It has a way of making us imagine as if we are actually there. And the feeling of going into an unknown world is, and always will be, powerful.

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