User-Experience and Science-Fiction in Chinese, Indian, and Japanese Films

Aaron Marcus

Aaron Marcus and Associates, Inc.,
1196 Euclid Avenue, Suite 1F, Berkeley, CA, 94708, USA
`Aaron.Marcus@AMandA.com`

Abstract. Chinese, Indian, and Japanese science-fiction films offer different and interesting views of user-experience that can inform user-experience researchers, designers, analysts, and evaluators. The author reviews Asian contributions to science-fiction media.

Keywords: China, culture, design, India, Japan, movies, science-fiction, user interface, user experience.

1 Introduction

The study of user-experience design in relation to science-fiction movies, television, comic books, animation, and other popular media is becoming more active worldwide. The popularity of science-fiction media, especially under the influence of Hollywood productions like *Avatar* and *Prometheus* unavoidably sets up a bias towards Western media. One should not forget Asian sci-fi film-makers who have been inspired by some of the classic Western novels/films as well as their own literature traditions. They have produced films that reflect their unique cultural heritages, such as Bollywood films that combine traditional storytelling with music and dance quite unlike most of the products of Hollywood.

The study of Chinese, Indian, and Japanese approaches to metaphors, mental models, navigation, interaction, and appearance, where it is not a derivative copy of Western approaches but more revealing creations based on different cultures, will be worth much further study. Research studies may reveal cross-cultural influences of one genre upon the other, e.g., the Hollywood influence on Indian sci-fi, a Bollywood influence on Hollywood sci-fi, or Hong Kong action-films' influence on Hollywood sci-fi. With the rise of multiple film production centers, for example, a new animation center being started in Shanghai under the auspices of Robin King, a Master of the De Tao Masters Academy of Beijing (King), it is possible that the influences may run in multiple directions in the decades ahead. Already, India has shown a desire to produce comic books featuring Hindu deities as super-heros and heroines instead of the classic Western Superman and other characters. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to locate examples of films that show UX interaction and appearance. At the very least, I cite some of the films (from Wikipedia) and urge readers to investigate further. The selections below are excerpted from my ebook: The Past 100 Years of the Future: HCI in Sci-Fi Movies and Television (Marcus).

2   Chinese Sci-Fi Films

Chinese sci-fi film making seems to have started earlier than Indian. Jules Verne stories were imported intoChina during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yueqiu Zhimindi Xiaoshuo (*Lunar Colony*), 1904, seems to be the earliest original Chinese Sci-Fi writing. Zheng Wenguang, father of modern Chinese science-fiction literature, wrote in 50s, 70s, e.g., Flying to the Centaur. Among other sci-fi films are the following (citations taken from Wikipedia, with apologies to academia):

Death Ray on Coral Island, 1980. Tong Enzheng wrote "Death Ray on a Coral Island," which was made into China's first sci-fi movie. A blogger comments on the film (Pickles): Death Ray: a good-hearted team of Chinese scientists, based in what appears to be San Francisco, finally succeed in completing their fabulous futuristic invention. That is, until the sinister back-stabbing Americans, played with Bond-villainous glee by Chinese actors in whiteface and prosthetic noses, decide to steal the invention for their evil plots. They use sabotage, death-ray guns, murder, and even cocktails, to get what they want. The head scientist, shortly after being gunned down with a …laser and left for dead, hands off the circuit board to his brave son-in-law. "Take this, and flee!" But those lousy Americans don't give up... they shoot down the kid's plane over shark-infested, death-ray-filled waters, and he ends up on a mysterious Dr Moreau island.

Tong authored a textbook about cultural anthropology and specialized in early southwest China. In science-fiction, he wrote the short story "Death Ray on a Coral Island", which won an award for China's best short story in 1978 and which was later adapted to film. He died in the US after fleeing China following the government's crackdown on protests at Tiananmen Square.

Figures: Scenes from *Death Ray on a Coral Island* (1980).

Fig. 1. Scene from Death Ray on a Coral Island (1980). Image source acknowledgment for this and other figures: `http://asiaobscura.com/2011/02/chinas-first-sci-fi-movie-death-ray-on-coral-island-1980.html`.

In this scene, modern-looking white-coated technicians use the latest current technology. The color scheme features the typical white, blue, gray, and black of modern high-tech interiors. Note the use of what seems to be a wall-chart of something like the Periodic Table of the Elements in the background to lend an authoritative scientifc aura to the scene.

Fig. 2. Scene from Death Ray on a Coral Island (1980)

Fig. 3. Scene *from Death Ray on a Coral Island (1980)*

The scientists/technologists stare intently at multiple screen displays in a scene similar to that depicted in many other Western sci-fi movies. The movie seemingly wishes to convey massive technology and massive data. Note the use of a conventional office desk phone on top of the control panel rather than individual head-sets. Perhaps in an emergency all might dive for the one phone to contact others. The use of a single phone was typical of corporate Japanese office groups in the 1980s.

As in other Western sci-fi films of the time, large-scale wall video displays help to convey advanced technology.

3   Indian Sci-Fi Films

Indian sci-fi films since 1952 are produced in many languages. India itself has about 22 national languages, which means production houses must translate films and/or provide subtitles in dozens of languages even for India's domestic market. Indian sci-fi film makers have even produced several Bollywood-style science-fiction movies like Robot (Enthiran), in Tamil, not Hindi (and thus what is called by some Kollywood, not Bollywood, based on an area near Chennai, not Mumbai), directed by S.Shankar in 2010. Such films feature music and dancing, unlike almost any sci-fi media in the West.

Action Replayy (sic, formerly *Action Replay*), Hindi, 2010. This Indian sci-fi romantic comedy film was based on the 1985 Hollywood blockbuster *Back to the Future.*

Aditya 369, Tulugu.
Bharathan, Malayam.

Dasavathaaram, Tamil. The third-highest-grossing Indian film. The story features a USA virus that threatens Earth.

Enthiran (*Robot*), Tamil, 2010. A scientist makes a robot, lives with it, and adds emotions. Alas, the robot falls in love with the scientist's girlfirend. The film was the most expensive India film made and the highest grossing film.

Kalai Arasi, c. 1960, Tamil. Aliens kidnap an Earth girl to teach them the arts; a hero rescues her.

Karutha Rathrikal, 1967, Malayam. A doctor takes revenge on his uncle's death with medicine he invented that creates a split personality. This is the first Malayam sci-fi film.

Koi... Mil Gaya, 2003, Bollywood, perhaps the most famous Bollywood sci-fi film. An alien visits the earth, similar to ET. The film is a kind of Indian Alien.

Krrish, Hindi. 2006. A super-hero film.

Love Story 2050. 2008. The setting is a future Mumbai.

Jaithra Yaathra, 1987, Malayalam. A scientist invents a locket to make himself invisible and battles a villain.

Kaadu (*The Jungle*), 1952, Tamil-American. The first sci-fi film in Tamil Nadu tells of expedition finding the cause of strange behavior of animals. The film features an invasion of woolly mammoths.

Mr. India, Hindi, 1987. A super-hero film, with super-hero Indian stars. *Patalghar*, Bengali. An alien visits India.

Rudraksh, 2004, Hindi. An action-adventure, the film was based on Ra-mayana classical literature

The Alien, late 1960s, canceled. Alien Mr. Ang visits a Bengali urbanite.

4   Japanese Science Fiction

The many movies Japanese film-makers created over decades are too numerous to mention in detail. Their relations with Japanese Manga and *animé* films has yet to be explored in detail. To give an idea of the content yet to be examined and published in the West, I list Japanese science-fiction films noted on the Internet:

1,778 Stories of Me and My Wife
20th Century Boys
964 Pinocchio
A.LI.CE
Akira (film)
Alien vs Ninja
Andromedia
Appleseed (film)
Appleseed Ex Machina
Arcadia of My Youth
Assault Girls
Avalon (2001 film)
Battle in Outer Space
Be Forever Yamato
Casshern (film)
Cowboy Bebop: The Movie
Cyclops (1987 film)
Daijōbu, My Friend
Darkside Blues
Dead Leaves
Dead or Alive: Final
Death Powder
Dirty Pair: Project Eden
Electric Dragon 80.000 V
The End of Evangelion

The 6 Ultra Brothers vs. the Monster Army
Godzilla vs. *Megalon*
Godzilla and Mothra: The Battle for Earth
Godzilla vs. SpaceGodzilla
Godzilla, Mothra and King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack
Godzilla: Tokyo S.O.S.
Goke, Body Snatcher from Hell
Gunhed (film)
Invasion of Astro-Monster
Meatball Machine
Memories (film)
Message from Space
Metropolis (animé)
Mirai Ninja
Neo Tokyo (film)
Paprika (2006 film)
Patlabor 2: The Movie
Patlabor: The Movie
Planzet
Prophecies of Nostradamus
Pyrokinesis (film)
Redline (2009 film)

Evangelion: 3.0 You Can (Not) Redo
The Face of Another (film)
Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato
Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children
Final Yamato
Full Metal Yakuza
G.I. Samurai
Gamera 2: Attack of Legion
Gamera 3: Awakening of Irys
Gamera vs. Zigra
Gamera: Guardian of the Universe
Gantz (live action films)
Ghost in the Shell (film)
Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence
Godzilla 2000
Godzilla Against Mechagodzilla
Godzilla vs. *Biollante*
Godzilla vs. *Destoroyah*
Godzilla vs. *Gigan*
Godzilla vs. *Hedorah*
Godzilla vs. *Mechagodzilla*
Godzilla vs. *Mechagodzilla II*
Teito Monogatari Gaiden
Terror of Mechagodzilla
Tetsuo II: Body Hammer
Tetsuo: The Bullet Man
Time Traveller: The Girl Who Leapt Through Time
Toki o Kakeru Shōjo (1997 film)
Toki o Kakeru Shōjo (1983 film)
Tokyo: The Last War
Venus Wars

The Return of Godzilla
Returner
RoboGeisha
Rubber's Lover
Sayonara Jupiter (film)
Screamers (1995 film)
Seth et Holth
The Sky Crawlers (film)
Solar Crisis (film)
Sonic the Hedgehog: The Movie
Space Amoeba
Space Battleship Yamato (2010 film)
Space Battleship Yamato: Resurrection
Space Brothers (manga)
Specter (film)
Starship Troopers: Invasion
Steamboy
StrayDog: Kerberos Panzer Cops
Summer Time Machine Blues
Taitei no Ken
Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space
Vexille
Virus (1980 film)
The War in Space
The War of the Gargantuas
Wicked City (film)
WXIII: Patlabor the Movie 3
Yakuza Weapon
Yamato: The New Voyage
Zeiram

5   Conclusion

This brief survey provides a place to start looking for cross-cultural similarities and differences, and innovation in approaches to UX design. What we find there may be quite valuable to UX researchers, designers, analysts, and evaluators. Already a colleague in India suggested several decades ago that the Microsoft Windows user interface was unsuited to India because its metaphors relied on assumptions that everyone in India knows about desktops. They didn't. In 1992, the Japanese Mininistry of International Trade and Industry released a report about the Friend 21 project, multiple-years of research into advanced concepts of future high-technology systems, which featured innovative metaphor-switching software and a distinctly Japanese approach

to usability: providing things before the user realizes that he/she needs them. About a decade ago, I reviewed a paper from Chinese authors proposing graphical user-interfaces based on the concept of Chinese gardens, which seemed to be at the time quite unusual. Two years ago, a colleague in China proposed that there might be unique Chinese solutions to user-interface deign that the West had not yet discovered.

In a multi-polar world of user-experience innovation, one may not be able to predict from where the next big change in UX design may arise. Looking at sci-fi movies (and videos) provides a unique perspective on future user personas and use scenarios, as well as details of context, functionality, and content. We should take a longer look at this largely unexplored territory. The investigation may inform our understanding about the future of UX design.

References

1. King: De Tao Masters Academy, Studio Description (2013),
   `http://107.22.197.5/studio/home/234` (accessed February 14, 2013)
2. Marcus, A.: The Past 100 Years of the Future: HCI in Science-Fiction Movies and Television. eBook published by Aaron Marcus and Associates, Inc. (2012),
   `http://www.amanda.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/AM+A.SciFI+`
   `HCI.eBook_.LM10Oct12.pdf` (accessed February 14, 2013)
3. Pickles, D.: Blog about Death Ray on Coral Island (2011),
   `http://outthereasia.blogspot.com/search/label/movies?`
   `max-results=20` (accessed February 14, 2013)