

Race/Racism in Current Sci-Fi TV Series

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Part 1

The plots of science-fiction movies and television series are often set in the future. As such, the creators of the experience—the authors, directors, and actors amongst others—participate in providing an outlook on humanity's prospects. In addition to the genuinely new ideas they weave in current social, technological, economical, political, ecological and other trends and extrapolate them. Because this process magnifies the issues we have today, science fiction is a good source to examine race related issues today. The way race and interethnic relations are depicted in a hypothetical future tells us what the people manufacturing that vision of the future think about it. Inspecting this message allows us to unearth their assumptions, attitudes, and hopes. Even if it is set in the future the consequence appears today, because "the media also play a central role in creating a sense of psychosocial distance among people insofar as they establish distinctions about who is "us" and who is "them"." (Geliga Vargas 114) On the positive side they may communicate with us potential solutions for current problems. In depicting the future they inform us about the present, and help us to understand it.

A qualifier to the above is that, working in the capitalist marketplace, film makers also have to create something that sells. This aspect also informs us about their values. They will attempt to make non-racist films if they believe there is a market for it. The same applies to the other direction, if there is a demand then they will depict a segregated future world or one with even more radical interracial positions. We have to consider though that whether and how a movie or television series is produced rarely has to do with race. The main selling points are usually how engaging the plot is, how well-established the actors are and how well the production is designed. The aforementioned desire to serve the needs of the audience is balanced with the artists' original creative ideas and intentions. They seldom produce movies purely based

on the results of market research. They almost always wish to entertain but sometimes also to educate, or communicate a message to their audience.

The issue of race/racism appears in three ways in television and film: 1, in casting, 2, implicitly produced through writing, directing, and acting and 3, sometimes explicitly written as part of the story. If we substitute the American Indians for any other, non-white race, Bird's assessment that "mass images of American Indians are created by white culture" (Bird 92) is applicable to science fiction television. I will show below how it plays out for all three aspects.

The most visible aspect is casting. Who gets what kind of roll is something the audience is confronted with right away. By "who" I refer not only to the actors' race and ethnicity, but also their gender, nationality, accent, and background. This last category includes their past roles, because the image they created for the audience through their past works and public persona will have an influence on how they will be seen in a new role. I believe there is a person or agency responsible for selecting/recommending actors and the directors make the decision based on the actors' availability, willingness, and the available resources.

I assume that the casting agent's and the director's decisions in selecting the performers are influenced by four factors: their own race/ethnicity, their assumptions and attitudes, the available pool of talents and the role to be filled. Different people are comfortable to different degrees working with people of races other than their own. The Directors Guild of America's report shows that "86 percent of the [prime time TV series'] episodes were directed by Caucasian males." (Directors 1) To what extent they are willing and interested in working with people of color is a subjective personal factor. Their attitudes are shaped by their background and social milieu, both of them potentially white dominated. This is balanced by legal anti-discrimination and affirmative action laws, hence the appearance of the "token black" person. Casting selects the actors from the available pool, but if that pool is limited in diversity they have limited

options. If minorities do not have the same opportunities as white people to become actors, to get in the pool, then they have less chance to be visible and appear in movies.

The range and type of available roles are one of the implicit ways race issues play out in television. If the bad guys have dark colored skins, if the authority figures and leading characters are white, if the emphasis of black characters is on body and not mind, if women of color are objectified, if characters of color have strange accents, if their roles are simple, not multilayered then "these portrayals reflect a white gaze." (Bird 96) In case of science fiction it suggests the extension of the white hegemony into the future.

In science fiction the role of the "other" as defined by the whites point of view, i.e. people of color, is often projected to the alien, to the quintessentially different. The vast majority of films in the genre are about fighting the evil aliens who threaten our very existence. This is a prime example of what Bird mentioned: "The Western genre was hard on American Indians, imprisoning them in their roles as marauding savages and later as noble doomed braves." (Bird 95) Thus when the—almost always dark skinned—alien finally gets defeated at the end of the movie the white men can feel good about himself again that he conquered and often destroyed the "other" enemy.

Sometimes this is followed by "terraforming" a planet, making it habitable for humans. This is a direct extension of the colonial framework. The goal of both systems is to force into submission a territory not belonging to us: to exploit the indigenous people and land for our own economic gain.

I have to agree with Geliga Vargas when she writes, "Hollywood [...] as an ideological state apparatus, as a hegemonic producer of multiple discourses that intervene in, affirm, and/or contest the socioideological struggles that are being fought in culture." (Geliga Vargas 115) Hollywood made science fiction is a prime example of this white hegemony with its controlling

images. Fortunately there is science fiction produced outside the Hollywood system (e.g. *Battlestar Galactica* from Canada) that is less biased. Furthermore even Hollywood occasionally develops an episode of a series that attempts to inspire for the future, not by killing or forcing the alien enemy into submission but by cooperating with them. I believe if less stereotypical and more positive and complex images of minority characters are shown, and more shows are created by non-whites (and females), then science fiction can be an effective tool in dismantling racism.

Part 2

I mentioned above that most science-fiction films take place in the future. It would be more suitable to categorize them according to their location (Earth or not) and time (present or future.) Here are the examples for each category I will examine.

	Present	Future
Earth	The 4400	?
Not Earth	Stargate SG-1/Atlantis	Battlestar Galactica

USA Network is currently running the second season of *The 4400*. According to the story 4400 people were abducted at various points in the last 60 years and then returned together in a fictional present without having aged a single day. They were taken by people from Earth's future, changed and sent back with special abilities in order to ensure the human race's survival through their actions.

Out of the 13 main characters there is only one African-American, the others are all white. This character disappeared in 1951 before the civil rights movement got into gear. His story is explicitly written to point to issues of racism. He is struggling to find his place in a world where racism is not as explicit as it was in the time he got transported from. For example we learn that back in the 1940s he was framed and arrested by the police for being with a white

woman. In contrast in the timeline set in the present he is together with a white woman and almost everybody around them is very supportive of their relationship and shows no differentiation for his race. This is supposed to show how much more tolerant the US is today regarding interracial relationships.

I applaud the script writers for their inclusion of this story showing the depth of our racist history, but there are three problems. First of all his main function in the series is to be black. The other characters are more multifaceted, his character is not as developed. This decries of the secondary attention the authors gave to him. Thus he cannot be a "normal" individualistic person; he is forced to represent his whole race. Second, his girlfriend gave birth to a biracial baby girl. As far as we know, however, he is not the girl's father. We do not know who the father is because the mother reappeared from her abduction unexpectedly expectant. The authors were not brave enough to include a fully interracial couple in their script. I suspect they believed it would be more shocking for the mainstream audience, who may not fully approve of miscegenation. Finally he is a social underdog. Sometimes he is a fugitive, other times a security guard. This means that the only non-white character is not a figure of authority. This confirms and strengthens the image that African Americans as lower level citizens. If there were other minority characters in higher positions, my point would be not valid. But there is none.

Stargate SG-1 is currently in its ninth season, while its spin-off *Stargate Atlantis* just started its second, both on the Sci-Fi TV channel. *SG-1's* theme is organized around the Stargates, built by an ancient race (called the "Ancients"), allowing instant travel to distant planets, where adventure awaits the team. The arch-enemy is the Gou'ald, a race that is linked with the Egyptians through their language, culture, and even skin color. This is a good example of racism projected, mentioned in the first part. I believe that in our current, post 9/11 climate to cast Arabic looking people as the enemy may feed the subconscious feeling against them.

An important member of the team and the only non-white main character is Teal'c played by an African American actor. He is, however, not human. He is of the Jaffa race. Again, the only non-white person is shown as different from the rest of the crew. He is also big and strong fitting the white's stereotype of animalistic blacks. He is the powerman of the team, while the other three members all represent some kind of intelligence, smartness. Emphasizing the bodily attributes of non-whites is one way racism permeates whites' attitudes.

The current series of *Battlestar Galactica* is in its second season on the Sci-Fi channel. (The classic series ran between 1979 and 1981.) The premise is that the human race almost entirely wiped out by the machine race of Cyclons that evolved from human made robots. The survivors are fleeing them on a fleet towards the mythical, long-forgotten planet Earth. From all the series I reviewed this show is the most progressive in its casting, most free from implicit racism and it does not have any explicit themes about interracial relationships either. Altogether it assumes that in the distant future race will not be an issue. The show is produced in Canada and not in the USA. I believe this reflects the unwillingness of US producers to stand behind a progressive production. It also shows that the pool of actors is racially more diverse in Canada, than in the US.

The cast is truly multi-racial. The commander is played by famed Latino actor Edward James Olmos. The president of the human race is a (white) woman. The positive and negative roles are almost evenly divided in terms of gender and proportionately in terms of race, which includes more than black and white people. The two most oft shown enemy figures are a white, hyper-sexualized woman and a mixed race (Korean-Canadian) woman pilot. In this future there are more mixed race people in any other show. This development assumes that interracial marriages, relationships increased significantly. Race does not play an issue in the multi-layered relationships with each other. Gender, age, class/hierarchical positions still do though.

I struggled to come up with a good example for the fourth category of series (set in the future, on Earth) but failed to find one. I recalled only three series, but all of them are discontinued by now so I could not fully consider them. The lack of current series about an Earthly future shows that the audience and the filmmakers are more comfortable building alternative scenarios for the present or placing their theme to the distant future and foreign locale. I fear that the current ecological, political and social trends are too frightening to sustain and generate interest in an extrapolated vision for the here and near future.

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