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# A Future of Peace

A utopia in the real world,  
a possibility in the science fiction world?

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## Preliminary remarks

Talking about peace in the science fiction domain might seem bizarre, to some even ridiculous, but in reality, in the absence of specific studies, the attempt here is to find, both in books and films and so on television or even in comics, references to the theme of peaceful coexistence between individuals, peoples and civilizations in stories that, in this particular genre, deal with the way in which science or technology affect individuals (not necessarily belonging to the planet Earth) or society.

With the exception of a few sporadic cases, the references to the themes analysed here are never really explicit. It would be nice to have, in the field of entertainment, works that would openly show a commitment to promoting a culture of peace. Unfortunately, the difficulty in finding funds for projects of this type, the lack of courage of the authors, the geopolitical climate, the fact that some topics may not attract the general public and the purpose, however commercial, aimed at profit, at the basis of the production of these materials, definitely limit the presence of stories in which the protagonists are engaged in building peaceful relationships with their interlocutors, whether they are human beings or aliens.

This does not diminish, in my opinion, the importance of many productions that, while trying to capture the attention of the viewer with special effects or action scenes, still manage to introduce, even if sometimes in a very veiled way, reflections or considerations on the importance of building a peaceful relationship with our fellow human beings and with any creature from space or with which, the earthly explorers on duty, should come into contact.

Since this is not a scientific study, it will not show the results of a systematic research of this kind and it will not even pretend to quote every example pertinent to the purpose of this essay, since it is a vast field and therefore still largely unknown, at least for the writer.

I will therefore limit myself to giving just a few examples, those that I remember, those that most impressed my imagination and the most significant ones that can nevertheless create a solid basis for future organic studies on a subject to which so far little or no attention has been paid.

Padua, May 2019

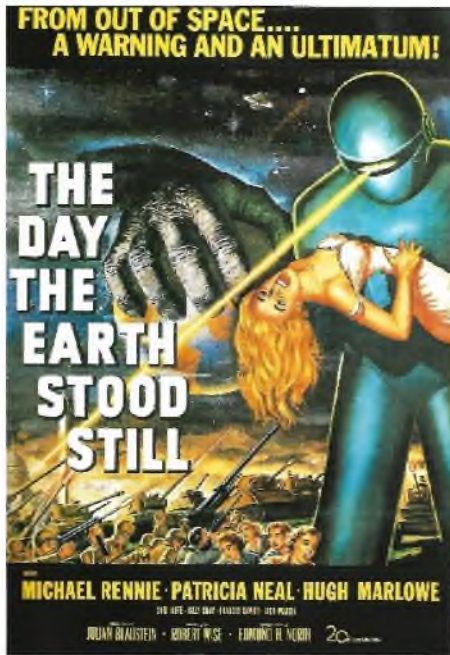
## From the beginning of the genre to the nightmare of a nuclear war

We can start this review by quoting a 1936 film "**Things to Come**" from a novel by H.G. Wells entitled "*The Shape of Things To Come*." As almost always happens, the Italian title is completely different from the original one, but this time it helps us to introduce this topic. "*Nel 2000 guerra o pace*" ("Year 2000, War or Peace") speaks of our world, now devastated by wars, and the beginning of a new technological society destined to give a new future to humanity. Wells seems to say that only science and the establishment of a technocracy can give men hope for a future of peace and prosperity.



The Second World War, of which the previous film, set in 1940, was a sinister omen, brings to humanity the fear of a tragic end by nuclear weapons. "**Godzilla**", produced in Japan in 1954 and directed by Honda Ishirō, the subject of a series of useless sequels and then, in recent years, of questionable *remakes* and *reboots* by Hollywood, is the monster that emerges from the sea to bring destruction and death. We are

talking here about a historical period of less than a decade after the nuclear explosions that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki and in fact our angry lizard is awakened by his hibernation from nuclear radiation and even enhanced by it. The original theme behind this seemingly naive film (and also behind two other Japanese films of the time, "**Rodan**" and "**The H-Man**") was nature's revenge on humanity for creating the atomic bomb. It is therefore an invitation to live in peace and not to develop destructive weapons, even if perhaps most of the initial consumers of this film genre remained unaware of this important message for years. Godzilla will eventually be killed by another powerful weapon (the "oxygen destroyer"), but the scientist who created that device will kill himself so that it can no longer be used by other men.



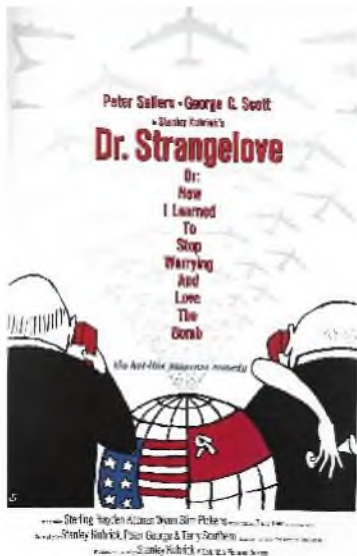
In the same years, precisely in 1951, in the United States, a true classic of the genre was produced: "**The Day the Earth Stood Still**" directed by Robert Wise.

The subject of another recent *remake*, this film directly addressed the danger that the human race, now equipped with a powerful weapon such as the atomic bomb, could use it to destroy the Earth itself or other worlds. Here then is the arrival of the alien Klaatu (according to some interpretations a messenger of the God of Christianity) to warn the inhabitants of the Earth to desist from any desire for armed conquest of other worlds, otherwise the destruction of our planet by an army of robots.

In another 1958 film, "**The Space Children**" by Jack Arnold, some kids, children of scientists who have made a satellite equipped with nuclear warheads, come into contact with an alien creature and with its help manage to cause the destruction of the satellite that would have put at risk world peace, while similar events occur simultaneously in the rest of the world.

Many other films then brought to the screen the apocalyptic scenario of destruction by nuclear weapons. In these films, sometimes explicitly, sometimes unintentionally, against the background of the main plot, was constant the warning to humanity about the risks it was facing due to the accumulation of nuclear arsenals.

These examples range from a 1951 film, "**Five**" by Arch Oboler to the 1959 film "**On the Beach**" by Stanley Kramer based on a novel by Nevil Shute. In this film, a scientist who survived the holocaust states about the war: "*The war started when people accepted the idiotic principle that peace could be maintained by arranging to defend themselves with weapons they couldn't possibly use without committing suicide*".



Still on this theme we can of course quote in 1964 "**Doctor Strangelove**" by Stanley Kubrick who deals with the matter in a sarcastic way, depicting the soldiers as dull and ridiculous characters.

In the same year Sidney Lumet's "**Fail Safe**", based on the novel of the same name by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, was shown on theatres around the world. In this film, due to a computer error, US bombers are sent to Moscow to strike it with nuclear weapons. Discovered the mistake the president of the United States tries until the last to avoid war.

In 1968, Franklin Schaffner's "**Planet of the Apes**", in which the protagonist discovers, in the last, memorable scene, that he is not on another planet, but still on Earth after a nuclear war.



Again set in a probably post-atomic future we can remember in 1971 the film "**THX 1138**" by George Lucas in which the protagonist escapes from a society that exercises control over all individuals and also prohibits the manifestation of feelings and, similar to the previous as a setting, "**Logan's Run**", directed by Michael Anderson in 1976.



## From cinema to television

Moving on to television, we must remember here some series broadcast by the Italian National Public Broadcasting Company (*RAI, Radiotelevisione Italiana*) in the early seventies, which can now offer various ideas and elements of study. Leaving aside "**The Prisoner**" interesting for its psychological and philosophical aspects related to the representation of a society under strict control and "**UFO**", compelling and suggestive, but depicting a continuous battle between the members of a secret organization and a hostile alien race, most interesting perhaps are "**Survivors**" and "**Doctor Who**", two series broadcast in Italy for the first time in 1976 and 1980 respectively.

In the first series, of which only the first season was noteworthy, humanity decimated by an epidemic (a theme that would later recur in numerous films and television productions in the following years) has to deal with a post-apocalyptic scenario and with all the difficulties linked to daily needs and with the inevitable ethical doubts regarding the use of violence to ensure its survival.

The second series, "**Doctor Who**", has a completely different mood and has been broadcast since the Sixties. At the beginning it was addressed to a very young audience, and we mention it here also because, at least in the first years and certainly in the season broadcast at the time in Italy, the use of violence was reduced to a minimum and the main character tried at least at the beginning to solve conflicts with robots and alien species through dialogue and mediation.

We cannot forget here, not only for their popularity, two more series "**Space 1999**" and especially "**Star Trek**".



In "**Space 1999**" (first broadcast in Italy in 1976) a group of Moon-based land explorers suddenly find themselves at the mercy of events when our satellite comes off orbit due to an explosion. Despite the fact that the protagonists in the various episodes are also grappling with hostile alien races, in reality they always try to take an attitude of openness towards other civilizations trying to establish dialogue when possible and also to start a collaboration. At a certain point an alien (Maya) joins the crew of the Alpha lunar base and becomes an active and important member of it as much as the others.

## Star Trek



We will only discuss here the first series of "**Star Trek**" (also known as "Star Trek T.O.S., The Original Series") broadcast in Italy for the first time in 1979, since the subsequent series have detached in part or largely from the spirit of the original one. Its creator, Gene Roddenberry, a fervent humanist, had an optimistic vision of a future in which mankind, united and at peace, would devote itself to exploration and research. His particular vision, truly innovative for a television program at the time the show was released in the United States (1966), was already clearly expressed by the composition of the crew in which stood out Cekhov (a Russian), Sulu (defined as pan-Asian), Spock (the result of a relationship between an alien and a terrestrial) and Uhura (a woman and moreover Afro-American). The popularity of the programme has undeniably influenced the 20 million viewers in terms of greater acceptance and openness to issues related to race, gender and in general everything related to different cultures<sup>1</sup>. The actress Nichelle Nichols playing Uhura, still unaware of this, at some point had decided to leave the show when she met Rev. M. L. King, a fan of the series, who convinced her not to leave. A really positive choice, the one to stay, because in the third season Nichols was the protagonist of one of the first interracial kisses of the U.S. TV with the actor William Shatner who played Captain Kirk. The spirit of the episodes in the series was not always linear and coherent, and it is undeniable that it was however influenced by the current world events and also by the American politics of the time. The episode "A Private Little War" has in fact been interpreted as an allegory of the Vietnam War and some have also seen implicit support for US foreign policy there<sup>2</sup>.

However, peace, tolerance and respect for diversity are fundamental elements of the ethics of the series and there are several examples to support this thesis. The protagonists of the various episodes sometimes use the weapons at their disposal, but only if they are forced to

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<sup>1</sup> See also: <https://www.participations.org/Volume%208/Issue%202/1d%20Smiths.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The following dialogue is present in this episode. Dr. McCoy: "And if the Klingons give their side even more?" Capt. Kirk: "Then we arm our side with exactly that much more. A balance of power..."



do so and in general always try to establish a dialogue with their interlocutors, even when circumstances seem to justify the use of force.

In the episode "A Taste of Armageddon" the crew of the *Enterprise* (the spaceship of our protagonists) encounters a planet whose inhabitants have been waging war for centuries with those of another world. To avoid destruction, the war is fought by computer that calculate the number of virtual deaths after each battle. The "I.T." deaths must then be followed by real deaths in corresponding numbers and the people of the two planets have twenty-four hours to go voluntarily to one of the disintegration station to be killed and then have their deaths recorded. Captain Kirk puts an end to this by destroying the computers and putting both sides in front of a choice. Or to resume the war, this time however witnessing first-hand the disastrous and bloody effects of a conflict or choose peace. We can quote a couple of lines of the Captain: "*Death, destruction, disease, horror. That's what war is all about, Anan. That's what makes it a thing to be avoided*".<sup>3</sup> and: "*Yes, Councilman, you have a real war on your hands. You can either wage it with real weapons, or you might consider an alternative. Put an end to it. Make peace.*"

Another episode worthy of mention is "The Corbomite Maneuver" in which the spaceship engages in a tough battle with a hostile aircraft and then discovers that the alien captain of the ship (looking like a very intelligent child) was just testing the *Enterprise* to understand its intentions. Both sides, during the open clash phases, make decisions based on fear of what the opponent might be able to do. Only by ignoring this fear can Captain Kirk establish contact and thus establish lasting peace with his opponent<sup>4</sup>

The last episode we'll mention here, but not because there aren't any others worthy of note, is the one called "Day of the Dove". Although the original title is more evocative, the Italian one "*La forza dell'odio*" (The Power of Hatred) reflects more the message of the episode, i.e. it is very easy to be carried away by hatred and much more difficult to restore peace. The episode also deals with the theme of racism and violence against women in a war scenario.

### Alien = Threat?

In a huge number of works in the field of science fiction the aliens try to conquer the Earth, kill its inhabitants or at least subdue them. If, especially during the Cold War years, the image of the alien was actually there to hide that of the Soviet enemy, in general the representation of the hostile alien is functional for other purposes. The threatening intentions of creatures coming from other planets obviously give rise to a conflict and therefore, especially in the movies, to the possibility of inserting action and spectacular scenes that can involve and entertain the spectators more. Without forgetting that often the alien threat leads to a sudden cohesion of mankind that, forgetting years of hatred and opposition between states, stands united against the invader in a representation, often quite Manichean, of the good (terrestrial being) against the bad (alien).

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<sup>3</sup> See for this and other quotes: [https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Star\\_Trek:\\_The\\_Original\\_Series](https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Star_Trek:_The_Original_Series)

<sup>4</sup> See for this and other examples: <https://tv.avclub.com/star-trek-brought-heat-to-the-cold-war-1798245608>

However, there are also examples of the opposite, in which the usual alien, peaceful or at least not openly hostile, is the object of armed aggression by paranoid, irrational or simply violent terrestrial beings. In the already mentioned "**The Day the Earth Stood Still**" the gentle Klaatu is hit by a bullet in the shoulder after about 1 minute and 20 seconds after his exit from the spaceship. A real record... Other films that we can remember in this regard are in 1976 "**The Man Who Fell to Earth**" by Nicolas Roeg (based on the novel of the same name by Walter Tevis) starring David Bowie; in 1982 "**E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial**" by Steven Spielberg; in 1984 "**Starman**" by John Carpenter and in 2016 "**Arrival**" by Denis Villeneuve based on a story by Ted Chiang.

The protagonist of "**A come Andromeda**" ("A, as in Andromeda"), just to mention an Italian production for once), a television screenplay aired in 1972 and directed by Vittorio Cottafavi, will also end up very badly.



A better fate is met in 1984 by the protagonist of "**The Brother from Another Planet**" by John Sayles, a movie that deals with issues such as racism (the alien looks like an Afro-American) and solidarity between the social misfits, and in 2001 by *Prot*, the alien protagonist of "**K-Pax**" by Iain Softley based on a novel by Gene Brewer.

Sometimes aliens are not killed, but forced to live in ghettos, as in "**Alien Nation**", a 1988 movie by Graham Baker or in "**District-9**" a 2009 work directed by Neill Blomkamp. Blomkamp will then write and direct in 2013 "**Elysium**" in which the misfits are humans in need, forced to live on Earth, now degraded and overpopulated, while the rich ones live on a space station.



Some other times things, fortunately, work better and even the terrestrial beings show a bit of reasonableness and open-mindedness trying to communicate right away with the messengers of other worlds. In fact, one cannot but remember "**Close Encounters of the Third Kind**" shot in 1977 by Steven Spielberg, in which music also plays an important role. A true universal language capable of connecting two civilizations so far apart from each other, not only in terms of space.

## Computers, robots and other close encounters

Thanks to the success of movies such as ""**E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial** " and the mass diffusion of the first personal computers, the early eighties saw the proliferation of more or less interesting science fiction works that dealt with stories about the relationship between human beings and technology and the encounter with alien races.

Of the first strand it is essential here to remember "**Wargames**", released in 1983 under the direction of John Badham. In this movie is pictured the risk that, entrusting only to computers the decision of the possible launch of nuclear missiles as a consequence of an alleged enemy attack, in case of error, having eliminated the human factor, was not possible to stop the escalation of mutual destruction between the superpowers of the time. The movie was very well made and had a great success and even today the issues addressed make us reflect and, indeed, are back dramatically topical, thanks to the debate on the studies on artificial intelligence and the use of drones and robots for military purposes.



Let's remember that the following year there was also the release of "**The Terminator**" which, despite being a movie of pure entertainment, took up the concept of the danger of entrusting military defence decisions to computer networks.

In 1985 Joe Dante's "**Explorers**" was released and we're just quoting it here because, in one scene of the film, aliens show to their terrestrial counterparts clips from movies, including the often mentioned "**The Day the Earth Stood Still**", in which extra-terrestrials are treated badly by humans.

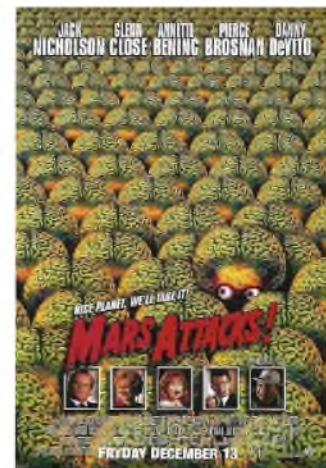
The man who should have directed "**Explorers**" later entrusted to Dante, was instead Wolfgang Petersen who, again in 1985, made a very important work in the context of this review: "**Enemy Mine**" The plot, based on a novel by Barry Longyear, tells the story of the evolution of the relationship between two enemies, a terrestrial and an alien, who, both stranded on a planet after a battle that saw their spaceships destroyed, first try to kill each other, but then slowly begin to know each other and develop a friendship. Although the film was a failure at the box office, it received much positive criticism for the credible and exciting staging of the evolution of the relationship between the two enemy races.

To play down a bit we also mention a comedy, "**My Stepmother Is an Alien**", released in 1988 and directed by Richard Benjamin in which the relationship between a terrestrial and an alien helps to prevent the destruction of the Earth by an alien race whose planet had been attacked, by mistake, by people coming from our planet.

### From the nineties to the third millennium

With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Hollywood needed to propose, in some of its productions, a new figure of enemy and decided that the aliens could pose a real threat as such, without hidden meanings. Hence a proliferation of films in which the extra-terrestrials were represented exclusively as monsters and therefore beings to be eliminated as soon as possible, better if in the most violent and destructive way possible. In 1996, "**Independence Day**" was perhaps the lowest point of this militaristic and nationalist vision, but fortunately there are exceptions, though very rare.

In 1996, in fact, made its appearance "**Mars Attacks!**" directed by Tim Burton. It is an odd satire of the science fiction genre in which some Martians, particularly vicious, invade the Earth and are driven back at the last moment only thanks to a brilliant invention and certainly not by the inept and mean politicians and servicepersons. Here we are reversing the nationalistic-military stereotypes that will characterize, as we will see, many subsequent films.



In 1997 "**Contact**" was released, a film directed by Robert Zemeckis and based on a novel by the great scientist and science populariser Carl Sagan. Compared to H.G. Wells and Gene Roddenberry visions, mentioned above, and which are evident in their respective works, in which the first hoped for the establishment of a technocracy and the second, defined as sceptical rationalist, avoided giving space in the episodes of "**Star Trek**" to religion, superstition and mysticism by putting them all on the same level, in "**Contact**" the purpose is try to find a balance between faith and science. Throughout the film, the scientist Ellie Arroway and the Christian philosopher Palmer Joss chase each other, trying, during every meeting, to convince the counterpart of the soundness of their thesis, but always maintaining an extreme respect for the opponent's ideas.

Also, in 1997 "**Starship Troopers**" directed by Paul Verhoeven and freely based on the novel by Robert A. Heinlein, came out. Apparently, only a banal, very violent action film, it actually represents a very emphasized anti-militarist satire. Moving further away from the novel, even the government in power on Earth is depicted as a dictatorship that uses propaganda, falsehoods and coercion to exert control over public opinion.

An entire new vein could be opened here by quoting the umpteenth film by Steven Spielberg, namely "**A.I. -Artificial Intelligence**", released in 2001. The theme of the intelligence of the machines and their gradual awareness had already been developed in a negative key since 1973 in "**Westworld**" directed by Michael Crichton, in "**Blade Runner**" (1982) and in the already mentioned "**Terminator**" and in a positive key with "**Short Circuit**" the 1986 film by John Badham who, after the good results of "**War Games**" still proved to be able to instil new content to the genre. The gradual awareness of one's self by a robot and therefore the ethical dilemma that derives from it, that is, whether this being should still be considered simply a machine, will constitute in the following years and until today, an inexhaustible source of ideas for new films, from "**I, Robot**" by Alex Proyas(2004) to "**Ex-Machina**" by Alex Garland in 2014. Furthermore, we would like to quote here also "**Wall-E**" (2008), a nice animated movie, directed by Andrew Stanton in which the protagonist, a robot, left alone on Earth, reduced to a landfill and made inhospitable by pollution, shows much more humanity than the beings who built it.

In 2009 "**Avatar**" is released. A blockbuster in every respect, also from the point of view of proceeds, which, directed by James Cameron, inserts vaguely anti-militarist and anti-capitalist ideas in a film dominated by special effects and action scenes. Any message, even if only remotely "pacifist", is completely watered down within ecological and new-age themes in pursuit of a philosophy easy to understand and very fashionable.

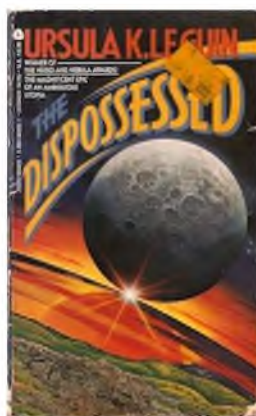


## Tales and novels

In addition to the works already mentioned above and which served as inspiration for the screenplay of film productions, I want to mention here other books, actually not many, that I have read or of which I have become aware and which are certainly significant in the context of this review.



I think it's appropriate to talk about the novel "The Great Explosion" by Erik Frank Russel because in it, even if the author don't explicitly talk about nonviolence, the story deal with issues such as civil disobedience, passive resistance, the right to property. The colonists of the planet, where a great part of the story takes place, are in fact descendants of some followers of Gandhi and have created a peaceful society which is also able to defend themselves from external threats through non-cooperation techniques.



Another noteworthy book is "The Dispossessed" by Ursula K. Le Guin, probably the greatest writer of science fiction and certainly the only one who has dealt in many of her works with subjects such as respect for the environment, antimilitarism, anarchy, feminism. In this novel (initially the book had the subtitle "An ambiguous utopia") Le Guin presents two opposing worlds, one, Urras, technologically advanced, rich in resources and dominated by capitalism, the other Anarres, arid and not very hospitable, in which a libertarian and anarchist society has been created, but characterized by an immobility that prevents its development.

Another famous book by Le Guin is "The Left Hand of Darkness" in which we are carried into a planet inhabited by a population of creatures who, as a result of genetic manipulation, have become hermaphrodites and, once a month, become males or females. The author wants us to reflect on the gender differences that are the basis of many conflicts and in general on the relationship with those who are judged different and that arouses fear and distrust.



We conclude this overview of books by this important writer with "The Lathe of Heaven" and "The Word for World Is Forest". In the first one (from which two television movies with the same title have been produces), the attempts of the psychiatrist protagonist to exploit the powers of his patient, able to make his dreams come true, to find alternative solutions to the problems of war, racism, overpopulation have tragic outcomes. In the second book, the inhabitants of the planet Athshe, hospitable and peaceful, are forced, after the arrival of some terrestrial beings who begin to plunder the planet's resources and enslave the Athshians, to resort to violence and learn to kill.



H.G. Wells, whose novel "The Shape of Things To Come" was mentioned at the beginning as the subject of a film, is also the author of "Men like Gods", a book which tells us about a world in which property has been abolished, violence banned and social assistance guaranteed for all. A seemingly perfect world, called Utopia, in which the protagonist, who asks what he can do to improve that world, is told that the most effective way would be to return to Earth.

Moving on to more recent books, there is the 2016 novel "Too Like the Lightning " by Ada Palmer, which is part of a series of 4 books in a saga called "Unknown Land". All 4 volumes are set on Earth in the year 2454 in which, after three hundred years of peace, but reached after banning religions, gender distinctions and instituted censorship, a war breaks out again.

## The universe of comics

Talking about the universe in this case is definitely appropriate, not only because the publishing house Marvel Comics has invented a parallel world in order to bring together all the characters of its comics, but also for the vastness of the publications available from 1895 (date of the release of Yellow Kid) to date.

Even though I read thousands of comics as a boy, and even if over the following years I had managed to keep my passion for this form of storytelling intact, I still couldn't keep up with the amount of releases. I will therefore limit myself here to just a few examples of material I know, aware that there could be many more comics, with science fiction as main subject, worth to be mentioned, albeit with all the limitations related to the issues addressed by this study.



The first example that comes to mind is a real masterpiece, published for the first time in the 1957, i.e. "**El Eternauta**" (The Eternaut), written by Héctor Oesterheld and originally featuring the artwork of Francisco Solano López. The story, apparently trivial for the genre, that of an invasion of the Earth by aliens, actually hides explicit references to the geopolitical situation of South America in the second half of the last century. The Argentinean writer seems to prefigure on his pages the events that tragically, after a few years, will take place in his country with the coup in 1976 of which he too would have been a victim, as he was kidnapped, and probably killed, by the military in 1977.

The world of science fiction comic books is, however, "dominated", it is precisely the case to say so, especially by heroes and superheroes. In the first type we can insert, in its own right, "**Jeff Hawke**", a character created in 1954 by Sydney Jordan. Hawke, who dies in an airplane crash with a flying saucer, is brought back to life by the aliens and appointed by them to become the ambassador of humanity, a role he would play by gradually showing moral rectitude and the ability to dialogue and diplomacy towards the alien civilizations with which he would come into contact.

The second type is populated by a much greater number of characters that we can divide into two further categories, those that are born with superpowers and those that acquire them later. Let's clarify, for the avoidance of misunderstandings, that the nature of superheroes, as outlined in the first comics that portray them, often differs from what appears in subsequent re-editions or reincarnations, both on paper and in films taken from the comics themselves, because, in these new versions, the characters, for reasons of marketing, screenplay or because of the changed geopolitical conditions, often assume traits and aspects of the personality very different from the original ones. Our superheroes are often faced, at a certain point of their existence, with a moral dilemma, namely the

choice of whether to use the new powers in the service of "good" or "evil". Emblematic in this regard are the **X-Men**, created in 1963, which, endowed since the birth with powers different from those of humans, are seen by them as different and therefore feared and persecuted. Clear metaphor of racism and fear of the "different one" the history of the **X-Men** sees them lined up in two factions, those who seek to establish a peaceful coexistence with humans and those who would like to destroy and subjugate the human race as an inferior one and still unwilling to them.



When superheroes try to impose peace, they sometimes achieve completely opposite results. **Ant-Man**, a scientist, but also a superhero, creates an android, **Ultron** (a character who first appeared in 1968). The android is programmed to bring peace but, from its point of view, the only way to accomplish its task is to kill all human beings.

Other superheroes, and among them many of those who acquire their powers as a result of accidents or traumatic events and who choose to use them in the service of humanity, are often plagued by insecurities and fragility and live their condition as a burden and an obstacle to a normal life. Over the years, stories with superheroes have seen an increase not only in the level of violence in which they find themselves involved, but also in the level of violence expressed graphically. As we will also see, the justification put forward by our "champions" for the use of violence for the protection of mankind from all kinds of threats, whether by other human beings with superpowers, but "evil", or by extra-terrestrials, becomes a thin screen to mask attitudes "deviated" or purposes not so noble.



The figure of **Captain America**, a hero created in 1941, is peculiar for propaganda purposes to exalt the idea of a "democratic" country, the United States, in struggle against the ferocity and fanaticism of the Nazis. This idea of the continuous defence of democratic values, those obviously advocated by the United States, has transformed this iconic figure (his costume features all the colours of the flag of his country) in the instrument of American nationalism and its endless crusade against evil. Someone has indeed defined this attitude as "*Captain America Complex*" for which essentially undemocratic means are used to achieve democratic goals.

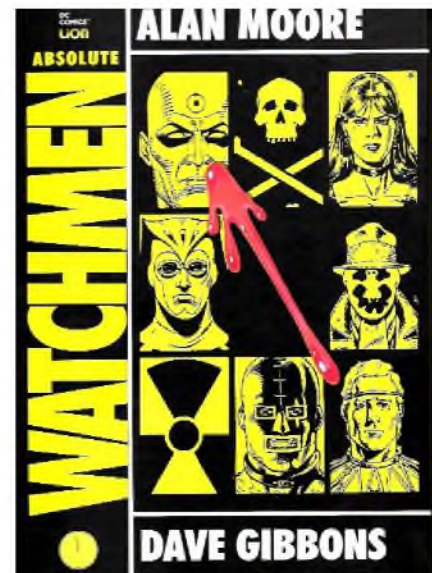


According to other scholars, two comics, published for the first time in 1986 and 1987, put an end to the sweetened portrayal of superheroes as beings willing to give up, albeit reluctantly, a normal existence and even to sacrifice their lives, in the struggle for good against evil.



In the first, "**Batman. The Dark Knight Returns**", the bat-like hero is seen as a moralist, politically identifiable as right-wing supporter, aggressive and out of control and therefore no longer admired by either the establishment or public opinion. His actions barely detach themselves from those of the people he fights, as they are both outside the law.

In the second comic book, "**Watchmen**", the protagonists, real *vigilantes*, aged and unable to play their role by a law that banned them, prove to be unsociable, disturbed or even exhibit sociopathic traits. Two of them adjusted themselves to serve the State, one as a scientist and one as a government agent, in charge of "dirty" work, an activity that allows him to freely express his fascist and violent personality. The only one of group who gained success is the one that will implement the conspiracy that will lead to the death of millions of people, extreme representation of that concept of "justified violence", so often evoked both in this type of comics and by many politicians in real life, and that in this case is brought into play to save humanity from a hypothetical catastrophe.



Are superheroes all like that? Maybe we can find some more "human" traits in two non-human ones. The first is nothing more than "**Superman**", which in fact is also the first superhero, having been created in 1933. Coming from another planet and adopted by a family of humans, he decides to stay on Earth and always shows an attachment to our race despite his superpowers make him almost a god on our planet and even though he is aware of the vile acts and pettiness that its inhabitants can show.



Superman is certainly a more complex character than he seems - so much so that Umberto Eco, the famous Italian writer and semiotician, dedicated an essay to him<sup>5</sup> - and, by way of example, I will quote here some stories in which he is the protagonist. The first is a story released in 1961, "Superman's Greatest Feats", in which Superman travels back in time and, among other things, prevents the murder of Abraham Lincoln. Superman's attempt to rewrite history and prevent certain acts of violence committed by men is, however, impossible because of the laws of quantum mechanics to which he too must submit. In another story, "Superman: Peace on Earth", published in 1998, our hero in costume decides to commit himself to give an answer to poverty and then tries to bring food to the needy persons. He soon, during his mission, faces not only gratitude, but distrust, fear and even hostility, attitudes that will make him desist from the huge task. As a last example, we can mention here a story released in 1962, "The Last Days of Superman", in which the protagonist, believing to be about to die, leaves on the Moon a message to humanity: "Every man who does good to others is a Superman."

The second non-terrestrial creature worth mentioning is **Silver Surfer**, a character created in 1966. Messenger of a much more powerful being, who come to Earth to absorb the energy, Silver Surfer, after having met men and been impressed by their sensitivity and the emotions they feel, decides to rebel against his master and to defend humanity, but by his choice is confined to Earth and then loses the freedom and opportunity to roam around the outer space.



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<sup>5</sup> Umberto Eco, "Il mito di Superman" (The Myth of Superman), in "Apocalittici e Integrati", Bompiani, 1964

## Conclusion

At the end of this long exhibition of stories and characters, or rather of this exploration of new worlds and possibilities, it is a must to make an evaluation in the perspective of this research. Does it make sense to talk about nonviolence, peace, reconciliation in the field of science fiction? If we have to rely only on the examples given above, the answer could only be negative.

As many examples have shown here, on a general level violence is almost always the first, and sometimes the only, type of response that mankind is ready to use in the face of an external threat, even if this is not even explicit or is even the result of the imagination and atavistic fears of the terrestrial beings.

Talking about nonviolence seems rather out of place, even if Russell's novel openly quoting Gandhi and his doctrines, speaks of a society in which the use of violence is extremely limited. Even situations of apparent peace, or at least absence of conflict, described by many writers, Ursula K. Le Guin in the lead, are reached at a high price and often prove to be fragile and unsatisfactory.

Peace, as other examples here have shown, is something that has been hard won, sometimes almost by mistake or by mere luck. Even in science fiction the concept of peace is often distorted, used for its own purposes or seen as abstract or subject to various interpretations. Finally, peace is often something to which humanity aspires only after having survived a war or even a near-apocalypse and therefore seen simply as a situation of non-belligerence and not as a bearer of positive universal values.

In science fiction we have seen a long list of "peacemakers" appear, in the sense, however, also attributed in the Far West to a famous revolver<sup>6</sup>... Among these we find many heroes and superheroes who in fact place themselves above the law to restore order and the status quo, justifying all their violent actions as necessary. The violence exerted by these characters is, from their point of view, used for a noble cause as opposed to that exercised by the "bad guys" seen as gratuitous and ignoble.

The times have passed when, as Umberto Eco recalls in his essay, Superman defeated his enemies using words<sup>7</sup>, while in today's comics, and also in films and television series which feature superheroes as protagonists, the level of violence exerted by both sides is so high and constant as to create almost addiction in readers-viewers, so much so that, despite the presence of positive messages, although increasingly rare and difficult to identify, we can safely say that the vision of these stories by young people is often detrimental.

What remains of the myth of heroes and superheroes as paladins of justice and characterized by noble and crystalline virtues? The advantage of science fiction over the other genres is guaranteed by the imagination. In the world of science fiction "almost"

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<sup>6</sup> A famous Colt revolver model, the "Buntline Special", was in fact nicknamed the "Peacemaker".

<sup>7</sup> One of Superman's first enemies was called *Mxyzptlk* and he could only be defeated if Superman had him pronounce his name backwards.

everything is possible and there is therefore certainly room for stories that can show humanity redeem itself from centuries of wars and struggles and build peaceful relationships with their fellow beings or beings from other worlds.

We have already seen that subjects of this type have already been brought to the screen, albeit rarely, with more or less success. I'm also convinced that a lot of science fiction books have been written from which scripts for the big and small screens could be drawn. The important thing would be to find them and to give rise to productions entrusted to sensitive directors and able to match the presence of important messages, such as reconciliation and the need for dialogue and the exchange of ideas between individuals and civilizations, with the needs of the *box office*. I am thinking not only of directors who have already shown that they can achieve great results, like Spielberg, but also to somewhat younger directors, such as the aforementioned Neill Blomkamp, or Alfonso Cuarón, director of "Gravity", or Christopher Nolan, who shot, among other things, the complex, but suggestive, "Interstellar".

Other interesting productions could be made in the field of television series. In them, a smaller budget, which therefore eliminates or reduces the risk of reduced revenues that often leads production companies to opt for remakes and reboots that offer greater guarantees of success, and greater freedom of expression, which can enjoy directors perhaps with less experience, can give rise to remarkable results.

Think, for example, of the series "Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams", of which ten episodes were made in 2017 by different directors. The stories, taken from short novels by the visionary writer Philip Dick, deal with different themes. In one of these "Human Is" the author talks about what can define a human being, whether its appearance or its values.

Ultimately, in my opinion, the science fiction genre has not yet been able to express its potential in terms of stories that can not only entertain, but also to make readers and viewers reflect on complex issues and with which we should all confront.

Highly evocative images and impressions certainly remain in the memory of fans of the genre. Let's think of the meeting of Ellie, the protagonist of Contact with an alien who, in order not to scare the scientist, takes on the appearance of her dead father<sup>8</sup> or even the sentence pronounced by the computer in "**Wargames**", when interrupting the countdown to the launch of missiles declares about nuclear war: "*A strange game. The only winning move is not to play. How about a nice game of chess?*". A line that demonstrates a strict and, after all, banal logic, but that, apparently, men cannot understand.

Is it all not so much after almost 100 years of history, considering that, by convention, the birth of science fiction dates back to 1926? I hope anyway that this short study of mine can serve as a basis for a more detailed discussion on this matter and this can in essence allow us to understand the educational potentialities of a genre that, based on fantasy and imagination, can really attract the attention of both young people and adults.

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<sup>8</sup> An expedient also used in **Starman** by the alien who introduces herself to the protagonist with the appearance of her deceased husband.

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