

Television

MAY 12-18

Morality Tales by the 2000s
Sci-Fi G... Serious Th...



Sci-Fi Gets Ready for the Millennium



Doug Curran/Showtime

Alexander Purvis, Helen Shaver and Derek de Lint in Showtime's series "Poltergeist: The Legacy."

By PETER M. NICHOLS

SCI-FI fans may have something of a philosophical problem with the movie "Doctor Who" (Fox, Tuesday at 8 P.M.). First, there's the look. "Pretty low-tech," comments the beleaguered heroine, Grace Holloway (Daphne Ashbrook), glancing around a lab lighted by candles and constructed of what look like old bridge girders. Most of all, though, it's the tone, which aficionados of current science fiction on television may find, well, slightly off.

To pick a scene, it is seconds before midnight on New Year's Eve, 1999, and odd events are in motion. For one thing, it's snowing in Hawaii; for another, unless Grace can untangle a spaghetti of wires and splice the right two, the entire planet will be sucked into a giant eye at the exact turn of the millennium.

It's a harried time for Grace, not to mention Doctor Who (Paul McGann),

that intrepid time traveler and do-gooder of sci-fi fame, who would give her a hand were he not flat on his back and trussed up by the evil Master (Eric Roberts). As instigator of Earth's predicament, the Master has worn a leather coat all movie long, but at his moment of triumph he suddenly appears decked out in a grand cape. "We have no time to lose!" he cries. "But time to change!" shouts the doctor.

Always with the jokes, this "Doctor Who." That's not exactly appreciated by many sci-fi buffs. In its usual series format, the show was a funny, low-budget staple of British television for 26 years before going off the air in 1989. In the United States, where it has been on some PBS stations since 1974, "Doctor Who" still has more than 100 fan clubs. The Fox movie, in fact, is a pilot for a new series proposed for this fall.

A revived "Doctor Who" would make a high-profile addition to a growing sci-fi presence on television. But in the view of many who produce and watch television science fiction, that doesn't allow the doctor to toss off one-liners, especially with the world hanging fire. Not that the makers of today's sci-fi are a dour lot, but they are uncomfortable

with shows that might be taken as frivolous.

More than ever, sci-fi wants to be taken seriously. "By serious we mean not comical, not treated in a farcical way," said Barry Schulman, vice president for programming of the USA Networks' Sci-Fi Channel, which was begun in 1992 and despite predictions of failure has become the source of a growing number of shows, ranging from sightings of the paranormal to excursions into the occult.

Long gone is the juvenilia of the 1950's, when kicking out a piece of 2 by 4 could collapse an entire set of "Captain Video." Today computer-generated images create worlds that almost seem real. "We hadn't been to the moon in the 50's," Mr. Schulman said. "Now science fact has changed our perception of science fiction."

In sci-fi's dim past, technology may have been futuristic but serfs ran around in gunnysacks in the year 3000. No longer. "We want the believable," he said. "Not the farfetched, but science fiction with roots in reality."

As perhaps the best example of this, producers cite "The X-Files," now in its

Continued on Page 20

On the cover: Eric Roberts, Paul McGann and Daphne Ashbrook in "Doctor Who," the Tuesday Night Movie on Fox at 8.

Sci-Fi For the Millennium

Continued From Page 20

ly concerned 70's. "All the way to the late 70's and into the 80's, there was really no science fiction at all," Mr. Brooks said.

By the 80's, though, sci-fi had scored a major comeback on the movie screen, if not on television. "Star Wars" and Steven Spielberg's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," both released in 1977, were the first of many mega-hits, including the seven "Star Trek" films. In 1982, another Spielberg film, "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial," became the biggest box-office hit of all time.

For "Star Trek" in particular, the success of the movies led to a rich new life on television. The show, which always stressed characters and relationships, had fared poorly during a three-



Sci-Fi Channel



Michael Grecco/Fox

A scene from the Sci-Fi Channel series "The Odyssey," left. Right, David Duchovny as the F.B.I. agent Fox Mulder in the Fox series "The X-Files."

year run on NBC in the unreceptive late 1960's. "It bounced all over the schedule and never got high in the ratings," Mr. Brooks said.

On television the sci-fi drought broke in 1987 with "Star Trek: The Next Generation." The series, a huge hit, took the television industry completely by sur-

prise. "It wasn't about laser battles but relationships, and that drew not just kids but women as well as men in the 18-to-49 age range," Mr. Brooks said.

That audience, the prime target of programmers, also gravitates to shows like "The Outer Limits," now in its second season, which is also about coping with the paranormal. "We have a chance to tell morality tales and parables set against the backdrop of science fiction," said Richard Lewis, the creator of "Poltergeist: The Legacy" and co-executive producer with Mr. Densham.

Mr. Lewis said that he sensed a curiosity but also an anxiety in viewers. "The year 2000 is a psychic waterfall for us. People are afraid of what's beyond. The Chinese aren't worried about it, but we are. Science fiction taps into that. People want to be reassured, but they also want to be exhilarated by these incredible situations."

He and other producers also sense that audiences want to be guided. "The Outer Limits," he said, puts a spin on "urban legends and old wives' tales that show people the right way to behave." The same is true of "Poltergeist," about a globe-hopping team of psychic and spiritual sleuths called the Legacy. The show dwells on the supernatural. "Science fiction is the technological way of getting to the fairy tale," Mr. Densham said. "'Poltergeist' is the superstitious way."

The supernatural can be tricky business on television. "It's the occult, which tends to be cerebral, which TV audiences aren't," said Mr. Densham. But for Mr. Lewis, his partner, the goal of good programming is the same for both genres. "It's scary, it's entertaining, and you learn something," he said. □

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