Philosophers Recommend Science Fiction Films
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The philosophical thought experiment has a long history – back at least to Plato's allegory of the cave in the West and Mozi's speculations about a society built on impartial concern in the East. Some of the most interesting philosophical thought experiments in recent times have been in the form of television shows and feature films.

Below is a list of philosophically interesting films and shows. The list was composed by asking 41 professional philosophers (or professional science fiction writers who have done graduate work in philosophy) each to recommend ten personal favorite works of science fiction or "speculative fiction" more broadly, and then to write brief "pitches" pointing toward what's interesting in their selections.

The original list was not confined to film media. In fact, the majority of selections were written texts. But film media were well represented. Here I have collected the film and television recommendations along with selected pitches, edited mostly for brevity. The selections are ranked based on how many different contributors recommended that particular show or that particular director. For example, at least one episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was selected by seven of the 41 contributors (three recommended "The Measure of a Man" in particular, the other four episodes were recommended once each). Five different recommenders selected at least one Christopher Nolan film. Etc. *The Twilight Zone*, original series, was recommended by only one pair of contributors (working collaboratively), and thus appears low on the list despite having ten entries.

Film engages the emotions, the senses, and the imagination in a way that expository philosophical prose does not. A person might have one reaction to a thought experiment about being in a deceptive simulated environment, when that thought experiment is presented in passing in a single paragraph in a journal article, and possibly quite a different reaction when a similar thought experiment is presented in a film that engages the emotions and imagination more fully. It is not obvious that the disengaged paragraph-of-prose reaction is more to be valued in philosophical thinking that the emotionally engaged reaction to a vivid narrative film.

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Recommended by Seven Different Contributors

Star Trek: The Next Generation

- **"The Measure of a Man"** (1989) An android is forced to go on trial to prove that he has the right to self-determination and is not merely property.

- **"Who Watches the Watchers" / "First Contact" / "Thine Own Self"** (1989, 1991, 1994) The ethics of non-interference in alien civilizations, including the withholding of beneficial advances.

- **"Sarek"** (1990) Dementia, social role, telepathy, telempathy, Stoicism, pietas, duty, honor.

- **"The Inner Light"** (1992) An alien probe causes a starship captain to experience life in a long-dead civilization. Identity, memory, survival, and the representation of time.

- **"Ship in a Bottle"** (1993) A sentient holodeck creature demands to be free to live outside of the holodeck and cleverly generates computer simulations within simulations.

Recommended by Five

Christopher Nolan

- *Memento* (2000) The protagonist attempts to overcome drastic amnesia through notes, photos, and tattoos.

- *The Prestige* (2006) Two different ways of performing the same magic trick raise very different worries about personal identity and one's moral obligations to oneself.

- *Batman: The Dark Knight* (2008) Classic puzzles from decision theory and ethics are given the twist of unreliability.

- *Inception* (2010) A con-man transverses through layers of shared dreams in this mind-bending "heist" movie.

Recommended by Four:

Ridley Scott

- *Blade Runner* (1982) Biologically engineered artificial intelligence "replicants" are indistinguishable from humans in almost every way. But they are not seen as "persons". Humans fear them, and use them as off-world slave labor. Loosely based on Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Recommended by Three

Futurama

- **"Mars University"** (1999) A monkey becomes super-intelligent but can then no longer fit in with his monkey community.

- **"Hell is Other Robots"** (1999) Is religion a human creation and if so what purpose does it serve?

- **"Why Must I be a Crustacean in Love?"** (2000) What's the relationship between ethics and sociobiology?

- **"Roswell That Ends Well"** (2001) The grandfather paradox of time travel, with shades of Robert A. Heinlein's "–All You Zombies–"

Duncan Jones

- *Moon* (2009) A solitary moon worker discovers that he is merely a token of a person-type. Or is he the type?

- *Source Code* (2011) A soldier repeatedly awakens on a train, as another man who has mere minutes to find and defuse a time-bomb that will kill them all.

Andrew Niccol

- *Gattaca* (1997) A future society infused with pre-birth genetic engineering stratifies into genetically unlucky and genetically lucky. Bioethics, free will.

Paul Verhoeven

- *Total Recall* (1990) The protagonist might be a spy who had had his memory erased, mistakenly believing he is an ordinary guy; or is the whole thing taking place in a virtual vacation? Loosely based on Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale"

- *Starship Troopers* (1997) The fascistic tropes of American military narratives spoofed too well to be appreciated by American critics or audiences.

Andy & Lana Wachowski

- *The Matrix* **and sequels** (1999-2003) The classic brain-in-vat and virtual reality movie, raising almost every issue in philosophy.

Recommended by Two

Battlestar Galactica

- Over six seasons (2003-2009), an increasingly complicated dialectic about the original metallic Cylons, the Cylon "skin jobs", and by implication, the nature of humanity and personhood, reincarnating concurrent clones; also, forays into shared virtual reality.

David Cronenberg

- *eXistenZ* (1999) A virtual reality game in which you play a part in a story about a plot to murder the designer of a virtual reality game.

Alfonso Cuarón

- *The Children of Men* (2006) Investigates reactions to an existential threat to humanity arising from the total infertility of the human species. Based on a 1992 novel by P.D. James.

Terry Gilliam

- *Brazil* (1985) A dark, funny dystopian film that explores the individual vs. the state.

- *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) An example of the no-change view of time travel, where people travel to the past but there are no alterations of past events.

Michael Gondry

  o *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) Clementine erases the memories of her relationship with Joel, so Joel tries to have the same procedure. But as his memories begin to disappear, he has a change of heart.

Spike Jonze

- *Being John Malkovich* (1999) The protagonist discovers a portal that lets you experience the world from the perspective of actor John Malkovich.

- *Her* (2013) The single most believable cinematic portrayal of the quotidian consequences of Artificial General Intelligence.

Andrei Tarkovsky

- *Stalker* (1979) People are led to a place in which wishful thinking is successful, guided by the "stalker".

- *Sacrifice* (1986) A man makes an irrational personal sacrifice in order to prevent a nuclear war.

Joss Whedon

- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, **Season 5** (2000-2001) Characters grapple with what to do when duty seems to pull you in one direction and acting according to your nature another.

- *Serenity* (2005) How far can a government go to enforce its ideals upon its citizens?

Recommended by One

Black Mirror, **"Be Right Back"** (TV show, 2013) Digital simulacra of the recently departed may be exactly what the grief-stricken don't want but can't help but seek.

Mike Cahill, *Another Earth* (movie, 2011) The appearance of a duplicate Earth brings hope to a promising young student that a tragic accident she's caused may have been averted on the other Earth.

James Cameron, *Avatar* (movie, 2009) A wheelchair-bound marine finds new freedom and identity as a bio-engineered alien.

Cameron Crowe, *Vanilla Sky* (movie, 2001) A wealthy playboy faces a horrible accident and arranges to be placed in a cryonic sleep for 150 years, where he lives in virtual reality, including a visit from a tech support representative in virtual reality.

Doctor Who, **"The Aztecs"** (TV serial, 4 episodes, 1964) The Doctor, a time-traveler, takes his companions Barbara, Ian, and Susan to the Aztec Empire in the 15th Century. Barbara is mistaken for the goddess Yetaxa, and immediately put in charge of the empire. She tries to use her power to stop the Aztecs' human sacrifice, despite the suspicion that this policy creates

among her subjects, and the Doctor's warnings that her inconsistent approach to time travel could endanger the universe.

Jonathan Glazer, *Under the Skin* (movie, 2013) Terrifying meditation on different kinds of meat, alien and human, inhabiting different kinds of skin.

Rian Johnson, *Looper* (movie, 2012) A hit-man for the mob "terminates" other contract-killers, who are sent back in time when their contract is up.

Richard Kelly, *Donnie Darko* (movie, 2001) An example of the many-worlds interpretation of time travel, where time travel to the past requires travel to a different possible world that branches from the actual world.

Nigel Kneale, *The Year of the Sex Olympics* (TV play, 1968) Depicts a future in which an elite pacify and control the rest of the population through sensationalist reality television. Themes of hedonism, populism, and the role of the mass media. Parallels with Plato's case against the poets.

Stanley Kubrick, *A Clockwork Orange* (movie, 1971) Free will, moral responsibility, and punishment. One of the few films that asks the question: Can you be praiseworthy if you could not have done otherwise?

The Leftovers (TV series, 2014-present) All of a sudden, at a point about three years before the story starts, about 2% of the world's population just… vanished. What if the universe did just throw us a massive, inexplicable, curve ball? How would we conduct our lives?

Jocelyn Moorhouse, *Proof* (movie, 1991) A curmudgeonly blind person takes photographs, has sighted people tell him what's in the images, then checks those descriptions against what other sighted people report.

Terry Nation et al., *Survivors* (TV series, 1975-7) A plague wipes out most of humanity and the few survivors try to rebuild society. The relation between the individual and the collective, the trade-off between freedom and security, and gender politics. Highlights include the episodes "Law and Order", "Lights of London", and "Over the Hills".

Red Dwarf, **"Justice"** (TV show, 1991) The Justice Field makes it physically impossible for injustice to be committed!

Alain Resnais, *Je t'aime, Je t'aime* (movie, 1968) A man time travels through the last year of a tragic relationship, re-experiencing events in random order. Time travel as a metaphor for the way we construct our identities through narrative.

Jac Schaeffer, *Timer* (movie, 2009) Almost every person is outfitted with a device that counts down to the minute the wearer will meet his or her soulmate. Some choose not to have timers, where others rebel and have relationships with people known to contradict their timers. Fatalism, free will, utilitarianism.

Tom Scott, "Welcome to Life: The Singularity, Ruined by Lawyers" (YouTube video, 2012) Everyone can have digital immortality, but not everyone can afford a version unsullied by direct brain advertising.

Stephen Spielberg, *Minority Report* (movie, 2002) Covers the topic of pre-punishment: Can we punish people, or hold them morally responsible, for acts that they (arguably) will commit yet have not yet committed?

Star Trek **original series, "The Mark of Gideon,"** (TV episode, 1969) Wonderful example of the way manipulating frames of epistemological reference can drive human behaviour.

Twilight Zone, **original series**

- **"The Lonely"** (1959) How can we know whether others have minds? What would an android need to do (or to be) in order to be a member of the moral community?

- **"The Sixteen Millimeter Shrine"** (1959) What is the ontological status of fictional worlds? Is it logically possible for an individual to move from the actual world to a fictional world?

- **"The Eye of the Beholder"** (1960) Is beauty a matter of stance-independent fact, or a social construction, or merely an illusion, or something else altogether? If a person is regarded as ugly by everyone in her society (including herself), does this mean that she really isn't beautiful?

- **"Long Live Walter Jameson"** (1960) Is immortality worth having? What moral obligations come with being an immortal who has to interact with mortals?

- **"Shadowplay"** (1961) What would I have to do to convince you that I am dreaming and that you're a figment of my imagination?

- **"Four O'Clock"** (1962) Is it evil to obsess about others' evils?

- **"Nothing in the Dark"** (1962) Why fear death? What would death personified look like?

- **"Person or Persons Unknown"** (1962) Is your identity in part constituted by others' knowledge of your life? If everyone forgets who you are, can you continue to be the same person?

- **"The Old Man in the Cave"** (1963) Do humans need to have a religion (whether that religion is true or not) in order to rein in our self-destructive impulses?

- **"Number 12 Looks Just Like You"** (1964) Is homogeneity an aesthetic defect? Would a hedonistic utopia, in which pleasure levels are high and pain levels are low, really be all that great?

The Walking Dead (TV series, 2010-present) Survivors of zombie apocalypse live out central questions of political philosophy in a Hobbesian state of nature: from whence does authority originate? Is it better to band together for protection and subject ourselves to a ruling power? Is remaining on one's own a fundamental right?

Robert Zemeckis, *Back to the Future 2* (movie, 1989) A complex model of metatime – try to figure out the model of time travel here!

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Mandik, Ryan Nichols, Paul Oppenheimer, Adriano Palma, Lewis Powell, Ina Roy-Faderman, Susan Schneider, Mark Silcox, Meghan Sullivan, Christy Mag Uidhir, Jonathan Weinberg, Dylan Wittkower, and Audrey Yap.

The full lists, including the novel and short story recommendations, are available at: http://www.faculty.ucr.edu/~eschwitz/SchwitzAbs/PhilosophicalSF.htm