

# Guest Editorial

Kelly Lagor

## FROM SF TO PHILOSOPHY IN THIRTEEN STEPS

One of my favorite bits of random internet trivia from the past decade comes from the 2011 “Extended Mind” *xkcd* comic. In the hover text, creator Randall Munroe explains if you click on the first non-italic, non-parenthetical link in any Wikipedia article, then repeat, you’ll always eventually wind up at philosophy.

Of course, as soon as I read that I tried it, repeatedly, and it worked every time. According to network analyses of the site, similarly inspired researchers determined this game worked for about 95 percent of all articles as of 2011, and 97 percent as of 2016. One theory for this phenomenon cites the tendency for Wikipedia articles to begin with a definition, which, by their nature, include the broader categories to which a subject belongs. But beyond this stylistic explanation, it also makes a kind of sense, right? If you think about anything deeply enough, its nature always eventually becomes a matter of philosophy.

When I sat down to figure out what I wanted to do with the Speculative Screencraft essay series, all I had was my first step: science fiction movies. I grew up in a media-saturated household. If the TV wasn’t on, the stereo was. We watched everything: all the new TV shows (or at least every pilot), and every new movie release. When Blockbuster started doing a “rent a new release, get an old release free” deal, our home library soon expanded to practically any movie you could think of. What this meant was when I sat down to take the second step and write out a list of science fiction movies I thought it’d be fun to write about, it quickly filled two notebook pages.

Looking back on it now, having mandatory family movie time before homework time every night seems like maybe my parents’ priorities were out of whack, but it never interfered with my or my brother’s schoolwork, and to this day I’m still fond of using the latest hours of the day for working. Nowadays, I like to look at the sheer amount of media I’ve consumed as one big exercise in context. What was Regency England like? Like the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries. What was it like to live through the Watergate scandal? Maybe watch 1976’s *All the President’s Men*. The Vietnam War? Would you prefer a comedy or a tragedy? But science fiction movies were always my favorite. How could they not be? *Alien*. *2001*. *T2*. *Jurassic Park*. *Fifth Element*. *The Thing*. By their nature they were always so far beyond any context I’d ever known, and for that, I adored them.

Science fiction movies, however, always have a context, regardless of if they’re set in the year 2049, or a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. A movie, like any story, is as much about its characters and plot as it is about the people who made it and the times it was made in. If we take that further, it’s also about its place in cinematic history, genre history, literary history, political and social history—what was happening, what were people talking about, what did everyone involved live through. All of it explains why any given movie is what it is at its heart.

My next step was then to learn about the contexts for all those movies on my list, and for that I needed to start reading. I enjoy writing all kinds of things, both fiction and non, but something really magical always seems to happen whenever I’m researching an essay. To get a feel for any topic, I’ll read about everything—a movie, its director, the book it was based on, the writer, the history of the genre, or even history in general. It’s honestly one of my favorite things to do and it results in one of my favorite writing moments, when, from that fog of ideas, an essay’s

theme suddenly condenses.

Take, for example, my process for my “Magic, Science, and the Moon in *Le Voyage dans la Lune*” essay appearing in this issue. At first, little facts I came across stood out: Méliès was both a stage magician and an early experimenter with cinematic technology. The hard SF of H.G. Wells and the soft SF of Jules Verne represented contrasting approaches to science fiction’s questions of *if we could* and *if we should*. How magic and science are both frameworks we use to explain the universe to ourselves.

Then the questions began. How did Georges Méliès get his idea for *A Trip to the Moon*? Why was the Moon such a popular topic during the Victorian Era? What kinds of beliefs did people have about the Moon before science was a thing? How has the Moon been portrayed in fiction over human history?

Suddenly, I had found the “philosophy” of the essay. This wasn’t just about an iconic short silent film’s portrayal of a trip to the Moon. It was about how magic and science have shaped how we tell ourselves stories over time, and how that’s reflected in the history of science fiction’s lunar voyage trope.

Every essay in this series will take this same path—to find the different Philosophy of each film, from showing and telling to Moons and monsters, and I hope you’ll enjoy reading the series as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it.

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Kelly Lagor is a scientist by day and a writer by night. She mostly writes science fiction and essays about science fiction, and her work has appeared in places like Tor.com, *Uncanny*, *Locus*, and *Analog*. Kelly lives in San Diego with an assortment of plants and musical instruments, and you can follow her at <https://kellylagor.com> or @klagor on Twitter for publishing announcements and other ephemera.