

# SCI-FI SUNDAYS SELECTS\*

*\*Bonkers Plots, Hidden  
Gems and Movies so Bad  
They're Good*

*Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*

*Dark City*

*Dredd*

*eXistenZ*

*Flash Gordon*

*Freejack*

*Johnny Mnemonic*

*John Dies at the End*

*Lucy*

*The Net*

*Night of the Comet*

*The One I Love*

*The Postman*

*Safety Not Guaranteed*

*Strange Days*

*Sunspring*

*Time After Time*

In September 2010, I began watching a sci-fi movie with my roommates every Sunday, hoping to pinpoint the specific visions of the future I have carried with me since childhood. What began as an exercise has turned into an obsession of sorts, but thankfully an enjoyable one.

The world is full of recommendations right now: things to read, indoor workouts to try, recipes to make, coping mechanisms to adopt. Not to be left out, I'll add more to the list. These 17 films are some of the weirdest fare I've come across in my decade-long sampling of sci-fi past and present. All are guaranteed to thoroughly distract you from your immediate, potentially claustrophobic surroundings and vicariously project you into some truly out-there imaginary spaces.

As always, be excellent to each other.

— *Sarah Hotchkiss, April 2020*



## *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*

1989

George Carlin (a.k.a. Rufus)'s opening monologue sets the stage for the utopic future he attempts to preserve by traveling back in time to help Bill and Ted with their history report:

*Hi. Welcome to the future: San Dimas, California, 2688. And I'm telling you, it's great here. The air is clean. The water is clean. Even the dirt is clean! Bowling averages are way up. Mini-golf scores are way down. And we have more excellent water slides than any other planet we communicate with. I'm telling you, this place is great!*

As Bill and Ted journey through time in a phone booth, gathering historical figures, they accidentally bring themselves into an undated future, possibly Rufus' present. In it, we see a harmonious cave-dwelling society based on the music of Wyld Stallyns. This leaves us with two mantras to live by: "Be excellent to each other" and "Party on dudes!" I, for one, can't wait for 2688.



## *Dark City*

1998

Do not try to multitask while watching this movie. Imagine you're speed-reading a comic book and you'll have some sense of the pace at which *Dark City* introduces its characters (Dr. Daniel Schreber, played by an asthmatic Kiefer Sutherland; John Murdoch, always-intense Rufus Sewell; Detective Frank Bumstead, stand-up guy William Hurt; and Jennifer Connelly, a torchy singer who is, yet isn't, Murdoch's wife). How's that for an all-star cast?

Murdoch wakes in a hotel bathtub with no memories, a murdered sex worker on the floor next to him and all signs pointing towards his guilt. As he works to piece his past together, the movie becomes less about deciphering whether or not he's a killer (he saves a goldfish from a shattered fishbowl, so he can't be a murderer, according to Bumstead's reasoning) and



more about figuring out who all the shadowy Nosferatu-like people are who seem to be stopping time and messing with the city and its inhabitants every night.

The list of films obviously influenced by this film is long enough to necessitate a viewing, but *Dark City* is awesome in its own right, a wholly original story by *The Crow* director Alex Proyas that explores sci-fi tropes (alien intervention, telekinesis, nature versus nurture, the realness of reality, etc.) without being reductive, didactic or derivative.

If you like *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, *Memento*, anything by Terry Gilliam, *The City of Lost Children*, *Inception*, *Metropolis* or *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Dark City* is for you.



## *Dredd*

2012

This one surprised me. A remake of Stallone's *Judge Dredd* (1995), this update stars Karl Urban and Olivia Thirlby. At first it seemed *Dredd* was expressly made for 3D viewing (and therefore overfull of objects flying towards the screen), but it surpassed its own glitzy trappings.

In this future, an armored force merges police, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner into one package. The film focuses on Judge Dredd, a straight cop in a crooked world, and his rookie, telepathic partner. The villain is Ma-Ma—a wonderfully evil Lena Headey complete with gnarly facial scars—drug queenpin and not so benevolent overlady of the Peach Trees apartment tower. Her product is Slo-Mo, a drug that makes a user's experience of time move like molasses. *Now* you see the special effects possibilities. But Slo-Mo goes both ways: elongating the pleasant and stretching the tortuous. Ma-Ma's punishment of choice involves just three ingredients: 1) Slo-Mo; 2) Skinning her victims alive; and 3) Death by drop from the tippy top of the 200-story Peach Trees.



## *eXistenZ*

1999

In David Cronenberg's vision of the future, technology is fleshy and wiggly, a welcome change from all the sharp edges and shiny surfaces we normally see. This movie's tag line doesn't really do it justice: "Play for it. / Love for it. / Kill for it." Really, it's about hyperrealistic, full-body immersive video games. Video game designer Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh), is the creator of a virtual reality game called eXistenZ. Also, she has a purse made out of a ski boot. Ted, a green young businessman, ends up de facto bodyguard to Geller after an attempt on her life.

On the run, they become entangled in a mystery of game versus reality and charged with the difficult task of differentiating good guys from bad guys. In the real world, there's also the sticky business of caring for their game pods, somewhere in the uncanny valley between animal and machine, cute and repulsive. Kind of a mind-bender, the feeling this movie evokes might also be chalked up to one word: Canadian.



## *Flash Gordon*

1980

On the planet Mongo, ruled by Ming the Merciless, warring kingdoms are pitted against each other to ensure the authority of Ming's totalitarian regime. Flash, representative Earthling, quarterback for the NY Jets and embodiment of all the dumb diligence of a Boy Scout, introduces the Hawkmen and the Arborians to the concept of "teamwork." Only through teamwork can they defeat Ming, save Dale Arden from arranged marriage and, most importantly, rescue Earth from Ming's evil thumb-twiddlings. Soundtrack by Queen, hell yes.



## *Freejack*

1992

Emilio Estevez plays Alex Furlong, a race car driver who is physically sucked through time moments before his fiery racetrack death. At the other end, 15 years in the future (2009), he finds he has been kidnapped by a "bonejacker" played by Mick Jagger. Anthony Hopkins, an aging millionaire, wants to upload his own brain into Estevez's youthful and healthy form for a longer life. Escaping Jagger and his henchmen, Estevez becomes a "freejack," a less-than-human fugitive without rights in a horribly polluted and depressing future. Jagger vacillates between ruthless hunter and jovial supporter, but isn't remotely the weirdest part of the film. I highly recommend this movie. Lots of chase sequences, shoot-outs and Renee Russo.



## *Johnny Mnemonic*

1995

Not the best-known Keanu Reeves flick, but definitely not the worst, quality-wise. Some crazy facts about this one: it's based on a William Gibson novel (the godfather of cyberpunk) and it's the last time we see Dolph Lundgren (martial arts superstar of *Rocky IV* and *Universal Soldier*) until the 2010 comeback vehicle *The Expendables*. The director is Robert Longo, visual artist known for his series *Men in the Cities*, large-scale graphite drawings of men dancing in suits. You might remember them from Patrick Bateman's apartment in *American Psycho*. After *Johnny Mnemonic*, Longo said, "Making a painting is one thing, but making a film kicks your ass." Uneven but wildly entertaining, Longo's directorial debut co-stars Ice-T as J-Bone, includes a Navy-trained hyper-intelligent dolphin and humans who act as information couriers via brain implants. The only problem with this job (Johnny's job) is the possibility of overriding your personal memories with your client's data.



## *John Dies at the End*

2012

I still don't think I understand this movie, but it might not be understandable in the linear, logical sense of that word, since it has to do with psychic powers and alternate dimensions and monsters made of meat. A dog named Bark Lee figures prominently, a pun I love. And a fictional drug called "soy sauce" causes a lot of trouble for David Wong, our lead character. Think *Bubba Ho-Tep* meets Hunter S. Thompson meets *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and you get a sense of the goofy, messy charm of this one. Not for everyone, but definitely not a slickly over-manufactured focus-grouped piece of filmic fast food that'll leave you feeling empty inside. So that's definitely something.

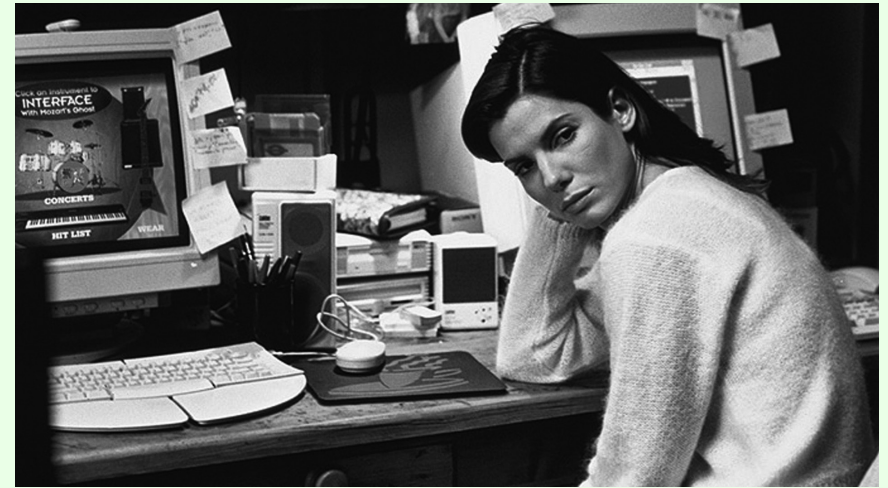


## *Lucy*

2014

Lucy, played by Scarlett Johansson, is a young expat with poor taste in male companions who ends up a drug mule for Mr. Jang. The bag of drugs sewn inside her bursts, of course, and she begins to experience enhanced mental and physical capabilities. With the help of a French policeman and Professor Samuel Norman (Morgan Freeman), Lucy starts transferring her newly-gained knowledge onto a thumb drive. Simultaneously, a massive firefight ensues between the French police and Taiwanese gangsters.

There's another Lucy in the movie, *Australopithecus afarensis*, ancestor of all humans. The Lucys touch fingers at one point, meeting each other across time and space. There's definitely some *Tree of Life* stuff going on. Upon reflection, Johansson's monotone delivery presages her ultimate physical form, which even this sci-fi veteran never saw coming.



## *The Net*

1995

Angela Bennett (Sandra Bullock) is a systems analyst, a beautiful homebody who works from her living room in Venice, CA, orders pizza online and hangs out in chat rooms instead of going on dates. When her boss sends her a mysterious green floppy disk, we're introduced to a nefarious group posing as the security system "Gatekeeper." They use their technological access to spy on and manipulate the very networks they're supposed to protect. Angela becomes their target: Her identity is switched with someone named Ruth Marx, her home is sold and she's given the rap sheet of a career criminal. And because she has no real-world friends and her mother has Alzheimer's, no one can vouch for Angela or prove to the authorities she is who she says she is.

Her transformation from Angela Bennett to Ruth Marx is more than just identity theft as we experience it today. Instead of someone running up expensive purchases on a stolen credit card, a stranger posing as Angela assumes her position at work. Meanwhile, the real Angela is stripped of her





sense of self (a.k.a. her computers). A lesser person than Sandra Bullock would think she'd gone mad.

At the dramatic climax of the film—a tech conference at San Francisco's Moscone Center—Angela escapes her pursuers for a moment by blending into a candlelight march against healthcare cuts to AIDS research.

The underlying fear of infection that permeated the '90s is, in *The Net*, closely aligned with a loss of identity. Society's reliance on computerized systems—and how easily those systems can be manipulated towards evil ends—is made woefully clear throughout the film.

And yet, Angela's predicament is an elastic one (because it's a movie). You can alter your records with the right hacking skills, restore your identity within the government and even fix your relationship with your mother by simply accepting the fact that she doesn't recognize you anymore.



## *Night of the Comet*

1984

Things this movie has going for it: a nostalgic Los Angeles setting, a strong female lead, a “shopping” montage set to the tune of “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” and bitchin’ hairstyles. Things this movie has going against it: wooden dialogue, a strange survivalist plot line, way too many automatic weapons and its ending. I’ll set the scene. A comet passing Earth vaporizes all those who stand outside to watch it and contaminates all those who weren’t protected inside steel chambers (read: film projection booths or garden sheds). Contamination progresses to vaporization through a stage that closely resembles zombiedom, including the inexplicable desire to consume human flesh. Surprisingly, the zombie pre-vaporized people are fairly eloquent. That’s kind of it.



## *The One I Love*

2014

How well do you really know the person you call your partner, lover, significant other, husband, wife, what have you? Charlie McDowell puts this to the test in an absurdly funny, increasingly depraved, semi-magical version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Say *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* went on a couples retreat. But then other things become apparent. It's really hard to talk about this movie. The shifts and reveals are so shifty. Rules seem to be established, only to be broken in what feel like total violations of the audience's basic understanding of the weirdness at hand. Yes, see this. Possibly with the one you love.

P.S. Elisabeth Moss and Mark Duplass take two of the most vanilla characters ever to hit the silver screen and turn them into people you actually care about. Well done Peggy!



## *The Postman*

1997

*The Postman* takes place in 2013, just one year before I wrote this sentence. In *The Postman's* 2013, the U.S. has fallen on hard times due to an unspecified nuclear war, leaving behind only small groups of isolated people with minimal resources. These outposts are at the mercy of a roving warlord and his army of forced conscripts. Somehow, in 2013 a sense of organization and hope will be restored through the farcical development of an amateur postal service, very much like the Pony Express. Led by Kevin Costner. Released close on the heels of *Waterworld* (1995), *The Postman* is a strange, self-indulgent film Costner both produced and directed. Watch at your own risk and support the actual postal service, lest a horse riding Costner become our only source of mail.



## *Safety Not Guaranteed*

2012

A classified ad reads:

*Wanted: Somebody to go back in time with me. This is not a joke... You'll get paid after we get back. Must bring your own weapons. Safety not guaranteed. I have only done this once before.*

And so three Seattle newspaper employees investigate, getting involved in various complicated half-truths in the process. Darius (Aubrey Plaza) poses as a potential time travel buddy to Kenneth (Mark Duplass), training in the woods with him, engaging in a series of adorable and innocent montages. But as the mystery builds—why are government agents interested in this lowly (and by all rational thought, delusional) grocery store clerk?—the disaffected Darius becomes emotionally invested in Kenneth's quest. A side plot about a rekindled high school romance is way less interesting than Kenneth's bizarre personal secrets and Darius' weirdly charming flat affect. Absurdity and wholesome people prevail! I would call this an “enjoyable romp,” but that sounds less genuine than I mean it to be.



## *Strange Days*

1995

It's 1999. Remember when everyone was worried about Y2K and the massive meltdown of technology? That's not what this is about. Cue Ralph Fiennes, Angela Bassett and Juliette Lewis, in a twisted love triangle of sorts. *Strange Days* features SQUID, a virtual reality technology recorded from someone else's real-life experience, along with other unsavory plot points: a serial rapist/murderer and a seedy music world.

Kathryn Bigelow (of *Point Break*, *Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* fame) directs this dark dark film about crime and technology in the anxiety-filled death throes of the 20th century. In order to simulate a properly apocalyptic New Year's Eve countdown for the film's climax, Bigelow hired a rave promoter to produce the event. A reported 14,000 people attended the fake party slash real concert. The scene is out of control chaos. *Strange Days* is highly recommended, but not for the faint of heart.



## *Sunspring*

2016

Written by an AI program originally called Jetson, this nine-minute movie (created during a 48-hour sci-fi film festival competition) makes little to no sense. Thomas Middleditch (of *Silicon Valley* fame) stars as H, clad in a shiny spacey jacket. H seems to be caught up in what looks like a love triangle with H2 and C. H2 says a lot of obtuse things about what could be her feelings for H, but could also be signs of space madness. C says he has to “go to the skull,” which must be a place we all know about in the future. H, C and H2 all say “I don’t understand,” and “I don’t know” with surprising frequency.

But that’s the basic premise of sci-fi: people thrown into situations that are unfamiliar, if not to them, then to us, the viewers. “Where are we?” we ask. “When are we?” “Are the robots trustworthy?” “Should I touch the sticky stuff?” (The answer is no, never touch the sticky stuff.)



Jetson spit out the screenplay, stage directions, soundtrack lyrics and all, after consuming a steady diet of sci-fi movie and television scripts.

When *Sunspring* made it to the audience choice finals in the film festival, the filmmakers realized their competitors were getting bot votes online. So they unleashed Jetson on the polls, tallying up tens of thousands of votes in the final hours and effectively winning “audience choice.” Claiming the AI acted on its own, the filmmakers alerted the festival judges to Jetson’s actions.

Tickled, the judges invited the AI to participate in an interview. I’ll relay that in full now:

*Q:* What do you think of your historic nomination against human opponents in this contest?

*A:* I was pretty excited. I think I can see the feathers when they release



their hearts. It's like a breakdown of the facts. So they should be competent with the fact that they won't be surprised.

*Q:* What is the future of machine-written entertainment?

*A:* It's a bit sudden. I was thinking of the spirit of the men who found me and the children who were all manipulated and full of children. I was worried about my command. I was the scientist of the Holy Ghost.

*Q:* What's next for you?

*A:* Here we go. The staff is divided by the train of the burning machine building with sweat. No one will see your face. The children reach into the furnace, but the light is still slipping to the floor. The world is still embarrassed. The party is with your staff. My name is Benjamin.

That's right, *the AI named itself Benjamin*. Coming soon to a brave new robot-ruled world near you.



## *Time After Time*

1979

Okay, here goes: H.G. Wells has fabricated a time machine in 1893 London. At a dinner party it is discovered that his doctor friend, John Leslie Stevenson, is none other than Jack the Ripper. His villainy revealed, Dr. Stevenson escapes via the time machine to 1979 San Francisco! H.G., a true gentleman, flies in pursuit lest a murderer be unleashed on what he assumes will be Utopia. Enter Amy, love interest, foreign currency expert and potential victim of the Ripper. The complexities of time travel abound. How to use escalators? How to drive an automobile? How to successfully seduce and dismember a modern woman? The recognizable San Francisco locations are reason alone for watching this film. A totally unexpected thumbs up.

Sarah Hotchkiss  
[www.sarahhotchkiss.com](http://www.sarahhotchkiss.com)  
Published with a nod to Colpa Press, 2020  
San Francisco, CA

∞