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"solutions/fixations"

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As our everyday lives become increasingly science fictional -- as the stuff of fiction becomes the stuff of mundane reality, and the exceptional in everyday life (the Segway) strikes consumers as not science fictional enough -- what are the dangers we face? Beyond technological apathy, James John Bell, in the following, arguing along the lines of award-winning SF author Vernor Vinge, posits a "singularity" of apocalyptic proportions. Whether this "singularity" is simply another fixation or a complex solution is for the reader to decide.



The End of Science Fiction: When Technological Extrapolation Hits A Wall Across the Future

James John Bell

"Okay," Bobby said "then what's the matrix? what's cyberspace?"

"The world," Lucas said.

William Gibson, *Count Zero* (1986)

<1> Science fiction, as a genre of popular fiction, can trace its roots as far back as the 2nd century AD, where fantastical worlds were conjured up in order to comment on current beliefs. *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1996) outlines a very specific ancestry:

[Science Fiction] is a descendant of the type of prose fiction sometimes referred to as Lucianic Satire (after Lucian of Samosata, a Greek writer of the 2nd century AD). Lucianic Satire -- also commonly known as "Menippean Satire" after an earlier writer, Menippus, whose works are now lost -- is a kind of fiction which tends to the fantastic but also puts considerable emphasis on the discussion and dramatization of ideas. In Lucian's fictions, the ideas discussed, and frequently lampooned, were those of Classical Greek philosophers, many of whom were exponents of early "science". (13)

In the 17th century, such tales were slugged with many different names, like "utopian fiction," and dealt with the technologies spawned by the discovery of science (formerly known as the "mechanical philosophy"). It was in the 18th century that realist authors discovered the future. Scholars point to *L'An 2440* (translated as *Memoirs of the Year 2500*) written by Louis Sebastien Mercier in 1771 as the first popular "future novel." The truly "first" science fiction novel noted by scholars is Mary Shelley's Gothic horror tale, *Frankenstein, Or The Modern Prometheus* (1818). The term "science fiction" didn't come along until pulp magazine editor Hugo Gernsback used the word "scientifiction" in April 1926 to describe a "Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe kind of story." The somewhat derogatory "sci-fi" was coined in the 1950s, by analogy with hi-fi. It was at this time that science fiction (SF) split with the pulps and blended science, technology, politics and the future into its own genre.

<2> Then something happened. While some SF authors extrapolated the future far into outer space with their unrealistic space operas, others became interested in a realistic technological future and developed the hard SF and cyberpunk genres. Here technology, and later computers, would dominate their landscapes.

<3> The future began to look pretty grim. SF authors like John Brunner, Norman Spinrad and J. G. Ballard took notice of the impacts of technology on people and the environment. In the '60s and '70s Brunner penned four seminal novels

detailing the end of the world -- *The Sheep Look Up*, *Jagged Orbit*, *Stand on Zanzibar*, and *Shockwave Rider*. All of these have recently been brought back into print, with his 1972 pollution ridden apocalypse *The Sheep Look Up* being re-released this summer. These catastrophic visions of the future began to be echoed by society and science. Now it appears that many gifted SF authors, scientists, and philosophers who can see beyond the dust of impending apocalypse have hit a wall -- and it is of their own making.

<4> Last year's Hugo award winning science fiction author (and San Diego Professor of Computer Science) Vernor Vinge argues that SF has been the first to sense that something gigantic is looming on humanity's horizon. He writes, "hard sci-fi writers are the ones who try to write specific stories about all that technology may do for us. More and more these writers felt an opaque wall across the future. Now they saw that their most diligent extrapolations resulted in the unknowableÖsoon" (Vinge 1993, 11-12).

<5> Audiences can actually "see" this wall across the future in the plots of today's popular science fiction films, like *The Matrix*, *Terminator* and *AI*, where a dystopian technological event occurs allowing machines to take over. That part of the story becomes a gap in the plot and the viewer, along with the characters, is left guessing how it actually happened. This "omega dilemma" becomes a part of Vernor Vinge's 1986 SF classic *Marooned in Realtime* where Vinge's characters try to figure out what happened to the billions of Earth's inhabitants after returning from a century-long stay in suspended animation:

"Something happened, but we have only circumstantial evidence as to what it was."

"Yes, but that 'something' killed every human outside of stasis." He could not disguise his sarcasm.

She shrugged. "I don't think so. Let me give you my interpretation of the circumstantial evidence:

"During the last two thousand years of civilization, almost every measure of progress showed exponential growth. From the nineteenth century on, this was obvious. People began extrapolating the trends. The results were absurd: vehicles traveling faster than sound by the mid-twentieth century, men on the moon a bit later. All this was achieved yet progress continued. Simpleminded extrapolations of energy production and computer power and vehicle speeds gave meaninglessly large answers for the late twenty-first century. The more sophisticated forecasters pointed out that real growth eventually saturates; the numbers coming out of the extrapolations were just too big to be believedÖ To call that time 'the Extinction' is absurd. It was a Singularity, a place where extrapolation breaks down and new models must be applied. And those new models are beyond our intelligenceÖ There was no Extinction, Wil. Mankind simply graduated, and you and I and the rest missed graduation night." (126-129)

If his SF writing is any hint of his prophetic accuracy, Vinge also penned a novella in the summer of 1979 entitled *True Names* that detailed life on a computerized "Other Plane" a few years before William Gibson launched the cyberpunk craze with *Neuromancer*. At the time Vinge's early hackers, called "vandals," inspired many researchers in computer science who were building the foundation of today's Internet. In the story a cadre of characters, all disguising their true names with colorful aliases, use "fifty thousand baud" connections from their home machines to jack into a highly feasible worldwide virtual reality network. The novella has recently been brought back into print accompanied by a number of essays in the collection , *True Names and the Opening of the Cyberspace Frontier*.

<6> Some of these essays deal with Vinge's "wall across the future," what he and scientists are calling the coming technological Singularity. Vinge was the first to use the mathematical term "Singularity" to describe the point in history where accelerating technological progress becomes near infinite and thus unknowable. Mark Pesce, the co-creator of Virtual Reality Markup Language (VRML), and the author of *The Playful World: How Technology Transforms Our Imagination*, suggests that Vinge is correct and that the tomorrow being quickly approached is as unclear as a brick wall:

As an idea, the Singularity can be approached from any number of directions; in reality, as every day passes we find new paths opening into this ultimate event. It could be the perfection of artificial intelligence -- emergent, hyperintelligent, possibly malevolent, or the complete mastery of the physical world through nanotechnology -- which could melt us all into a puddle of the fabled gray goo, or the radical augmentation of innate human abilities into a final trans-human form. Most likely these events would be connected, synchronous and fundamentally inseparable -- but no science fiction author has risen to speak that vision. (227)

Singularity is technically a mathematical term, perhaps best described as akin to what happens on world maps in a standard atlas. Everything appears correct until one looks at regions very close to the poles. In the standard Mercator projection, the poles appear not as points but as a straight line. Each line is a singularity: Everywhere along the top line contains the exact point of the North Pole, and the bottom line is the entire South Pole.

<7> The singularity on the edge of the map is nothing compared to the singularity at the center of a black hole. Here one finds the astrophysicist's singularity, a rift in the continuum of space and time where Einstein's rules no longer function. The approaching technological Singularity, like the singularities of black holes, marks a point of departure from reality. Explorers once wrote "Beyond here be dragons" on the edges of old maps of the known world, and the image of life as scientists approach these edges of change are proving to be just as mysterious, dangerous, controversial, and unknown.

<8> There is no concise definition for the Singularity. Author and inventor Ray Kurzweil defines this phenomenon as "technological change so rapid and profound it could create a rupture in the very fabric of human history." Kurzweil and many transhumanists define it as "a future time when societal, scientific, and economic change is so fast we cannot even imagine what will happen from our present perspective." A range of dates is given for the advent of the Singularity. "I'd be surprised if it happened before 2004 or after 2030," writes Vernor Vinge. A distinctive feature will be that machine intelligence will have exceeded and even merged with human intelligence. Another definition is used by extropians, who say it denotes "the singular time when technological development will be at its fastest." From an environmental perspective, the Singularity can be thought of as the point at which technology and nature become one. Whatever perspective one takes, at this juncture the world as scientists have described it becomes "extinct," and new definitions of life, nature, and human will be required.

<9> Many leading technology industries have been aware of the possibility of a Singularity for almost a decade. There are concerns that, if the public understood its ramifications, they might panic over accepting new and untested technologies that bring us closer to the Singularity, like cloning and genetically engineered foods. For now, the debate about the consequences of the Singularity has stayed within the halls of business and technology; the kinks are being worked out, avoiding "doomsday" hysteria.

<10> From the perspective of technological civilization at the dawn of the 21st century the "Singularity story" is a prophecy of corporate globalization --

representing the utopian vision of a technological dream world -- propaganda for advanced capitalism. This is the "diamond age" of civilization that is written about in cyberpunk futures. The Singularity, navigated by the elite hands of global corporations, is the title of the final chapter in the story of human progress -- beyond which technology reigns supreme in a post-human world. The mythic implications of the Singularity are that it signals an "era transition" -- when a new assumptive base is created to replace the increasing abstraction for people who exist in an increasingly interconnected technological world. This then forms the basis for the creation of a new consensual world-view -- a New Story.

<11> There are times in history when the meanings behind certain myths or symbols will "flip" -- mean the opposite of what they once represented. A class of people, a style of clothes, a word -- all can have their meanings shift over the course of time. For example, in the sixties and seventies computer literate professionals were known as "geeks" and "nerds". A shift was underway in the eighties and nineties in how computer professionals were perceived, they are now called "hackers", "webmasters", "architects" and "techies". The new language reflects both the respect given to expert computer users and the power of information technology in our society. Recognizing these kinds of shifts in culture as they're happening are key to understanding the future.

<12> The scientific community is undergoing such a "flip" regarding their role in society. Scientists for over the last four hundred years have served as stable guides for establishing the path of progress. A few decades ago the scientist's position as "championing the future" began to shift towards "warning about the future". A landmark moment was Rachel Carson's publishing of *Silent Spring* in 1962. Over the years more and more scientists (and scientist science fiction authors) have joined the ranks of those "warning about the future" -- thousands of scientists are currently busy warning the world about global climate change. Even scientists optimistic about the future have hedged their predictions with warnings. Kurzweil's book title, *The Singularity is Near*, reminds one of the city street corner's prophets of doom and gloom wearing placards that read -- The End is Near. Some scientists, like Bill Joy, the chief scientist at Sun Microsystems, are even warning that we could lose control of this accelerating technological convergence. They believe that this exponentially expanding technological utopia, or "technotopia," could cause the total extinction of life as we know it, others say the direction we're headed smacks of eugenics -- the creation of an elite super-humanity. The Singularity story is thus becoming defined as both technological savior and the secular story of apocalypse.

<13> Today, our popular culture is awestruck with this kind of apocalypse, from the rise of machines in this spring and summer's films *Matrix Reloaded* and *Terminator 3* to Michael Crichton's mini-machine takeover in his new novel, *Prey*. A machine apocalypse is becoming almost as popular as the Christian apocalypse. Witness the sales of the fundamentalist Christian-bent Left Behind science fiction book series on the apocalypse, which has sold over 55,000,000 copies. Moreover, Left Behind's *Armageddon* came out in April and is perfect reading while watching the evolution of war action on Iraq. It continues the story of those left behind after the Christian rapture and tells of the "battle of the ages" when the armies of the world are drawn inexorably toward the Middle East for total war. The number of Americans who believe such things are staggering. A Time/cnn poll recently showed that "59 percent of Americans believe that the prophecies in the Book of Revelation will come true." One-quarter of people

polled "believe that the Bible predicted the September 11 attack," and 17 percent of Americans "believe the end of the world will happen in their lifetime." The die-hard religious Americans are planning their escape from the present world into rapture, while the scientists and hackers construct their own popular techno-version of the end times.

<14> The two sequels to the blockbuster film *The Matrix* promise to delve further into the philosophy and origins of Earth's machine-controlled apocalyptic future. Cast members were required to read *Wired* editor Kevin Kelly's book *Out of Control -- The Rise of Neo-biological Civilization* before they could read the first script. Page one reads, "The realm of the born -- all that is nature and the realm of the made -- all that is humanly constructed -- are becoming one." A few other books on the Singularity are out now -- others are in the works and due out over the next couple of years. *Taking the Red Pill*, edited by Glenn Yeffeth, features scientific and philosophical essays that explore both the technological speed-up toward the Singularity and *The Matrix*'s portrayal of a post-Singularity world. Ray Kurzweil's essay, "The Human Machine Merger: Are We Heading for The Matrix," goes head to head with Bill Joy's essay, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us." He contends that circa 2030, the technology of *The Matrix* will be within our grasp and humanity will be teetering on the edge of the Singularity.

<15> Whatever the form the "wall across the future" takes, Singularity or Christian rapture -- it reveals something about how technological society views the present world. I believe these cultures' obsessions with apocalypse is really just an amplified desire for change -- a longing for a different tomorrow, one that they can't fully articulate, but that they know is out there. Be it *Independence Day*, *The Matrix*, or *Terminator*, people the world over continue to pay top dollar to watch the icons of consumer society get wiped off the map.

<16> When people are fixated to web sites, movies, TV, and books that focus on an apocalypse, like the Singularity, what they're really doing is withdrawing from a present (and a future) that they find unacceptable. Vinge indicates that fixation on the Singularity by technological society will become more prevalent. As the 2002 Guest of Honor at the 60th World Science Fiction Convention in San Jose California, Vinge echoed his earlier 1993 speech to NASA and the military, when he first warned them about a coming Singularity. "The dilemma felt by science fiction writers will be perceived in other creative endeavors. As we move closer to this point, it will loom vaster and vaster over human affairs till the notion becomes a commonplace. Yet when it finally happens it may still be a great surprise and a great unknown."

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Resources

Ray Kurzweil's website Kurzweil AI (www.kurzweilai.net) where articles by the world's scientific community discuss the Singularity and related technological advances.

James John Bell's website The Last Wizards (www.lastwizards.com) where science and popular culture, from *The Singularity* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is dissected for its political and cultural impacts.

The End of Science Fiction

[David Louis Edelman](#) July 13th, 2007

I've seen various theories put forward as to when the first science fiction stories were written. Depending on your definition of science fiction — and that exact definition can be quite contentious, especially on this blog — the first proper science fiction tale might be Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c. 1610) or maybe Lucian of Samosata's *A True Story* (c. the 2nd century AD). Personally, I'd argue that you need to have the scientific method before you have science fiction, which disqualifies Lucian of Samosata and Shakespeare (depending on your definition of the scientific method).

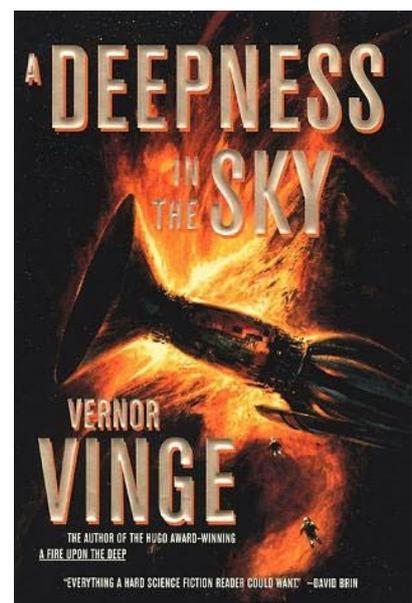
But the question I'm interested in at the moment is **when will science fiction end?** I'm not asking this from a commercial standpoint so much as from an epistemological standpoint. Will there *always* be new science fiction? Or will the genre just wither up at some point and go away?

Here's something I've noticed about futuristic science fiction stories: the characters in them never tell futuristic science fiction stories. Think about it. Can you think of a single example of a character in a futuristic science fiction story reading (or watching) a story that's science fiction from *their* point of view?

Of course, you could argue that few characters in stories are actually shown telling stories at all, which is true. We tried that kind of metafiction in the '60s, and that gave us John Barth and Robert Coover and writers of that ilk. Still, I can think of plenty of examples of SF characters reading nonfiction or history or contemporary literature (by which I mean contemporary from the characters' point of view).

It seems to me that **most of the counterexamples I can think of involve some primitive civilization telling stories about something that's already proven to be true in the scope of the story.** The spider creatures of Vernor Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky* speculate about space travel and life on other planets, while we the humans watch them from orbit. The people in Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* discuss the possibility of a three-dimensional world. And of course, there's the old trope of the cut-off space colony that reverts back to its primitive roots while its SFnal history becomes the stuff of legends.

Then you've got the case of futuristic characters reaching for some even-more-futuristic contraption that simply extrapolates their current technology to the next level. We've got the Mega Giga Ultra Hyperdrive that allows us to travel at six times the speed of light! Wouldn't it be great if we could invent the *Super* Mega Giga Ultra Hyperdrive that would let us travel *sixty* times the speed of light? (Impossible! say the doubting scientists. And then, of course, at some point in the story somebody goes and invents the damn thing.)



But where are the examples of people in a futuristic story *themselves* looking off into a fictional and theoretical future of wonder? I can't really think of any. Maybe I'm not framing the question right, or disqualifying things out of hand.

Fantastic literature, you'll note, doesn't have this problem. (This is assuming you buy the argument that fantasy and science fiction are separate if related animals, which I know others on this blog don't.) People in fantasy stories are always hauling out the old books and reciting myths and legends from the distant past. Many of these stories turn out to be true in the end, but just as often they're recognized as fantastical within the context of the story. Tolkien's characters have no hesitation to pull out the old chestnuts about Beren and Luthien; the folks in George R. R. Martin's Westeros tell each other all kinds of fantastical tales about dragons and the undead, and I'm willing to bet some of them will turn out to be true and some of them will turn out to be just bedtime stories.

Perhaps the issue with science fiction is simply a question of narrative economy. As one author put it to me when I posed this question to them at Readercon, if you've got a science fiction story inside a science fiction story, that makes two entirely different universes you have to keep track of. Not an easy thing to do.

Yet I think there's a deeper answer here, and it's relevant to our business as writers and readers. We have a hard time envisioning futuristic science fiction characters envisioning a future of wonder because they're *living* in one themselves. They're inhabiting this theoretical future, and so they no longer need to extrapolate. In other words, **there's no need to look off to some far-off feat of scientific progress because there are feats of scientific progress all around them.**



You might see where I'm going with this. The first time the world saw actual live music being captured onto a vinyl disc, it was *incredibly, unbelievably amazing*. Whole new vistas opened up for us. When we saw live music being captured in high fidelity on a little metal CD, it was still awe-inspiring. The iPod is really, really cool. But the wonder's starting to wear off, isn't it? Soon we'll have tiny iPods that can fit all of our music in a chip the size of a postage stamp, and then chips that can fit *everyone's* music in the size of a postage stamp. The wonder can't continue forever, can it? Eventually you reach a saturation point where you

just shrug your shoulders and assume that the future is a given.

So maybe that's the problem with science fiction these days. **We're losing market share because we're losing our capacity for wonderment at the future.**

Example: When I went off to college in 1989, I ran an 8086 computer with 4Mhz of power, a 10 MB hard disk, and an orange monitor. Today I'm running a Core 2 Duo with 1.8GHz of power (per chip) and a 200 GB hard disk, with a monitor light as a feather that shows images in absolute crystal clarity. I *assume* that in another 20 years the technology will be that much further ahead. Forty years

ago, someone could have written a science fiction story about the Wonderful Calculating Machine That Connects the World. It would be difficult today to write about the Core 8 Quadro with 4TB of power in a way that's not just mundane prediction like the stuff you read in *Business Week*. The technology I wrote about in [Infoquake](#) and the forthcoming [MultiReal](#) — nanotechnology, unlimited computing power, biologic software — will one day be somebody else's ho-hum existence, though probably not in the forms I've envisioned them.

So what's left after that? Will science fiction truly be dead at that point?

You never look back at the Romans or the medieval Europeans and wonder why they didn't write science fiction. It's simple. The Romans assumed that if you rolled the clock forward two thousand years, the world would look pretty much the same. Perhaps there would be different people or different political entities around, but the idea of a steady slope of scientific progress wasn't part of their mindset. Same with Church-dominated Europe. In a few hundred years, Jesus will have come back and ushered us into a neverending paradise, so why bother speculating? If he doesn't come, we'll just be sitting around in our feudal societies waiting.

Perhaps the same thing awaits us from a different angle. **Perhaps the universe will one day become predictable enough — perhaps scientific change and progress will be so *much* a part of us — that looking into the future will just be an exercise of more-of-the-same.** I'm not saying we're there yet, but we might be approaching it. Maybe we'll have so much of an understanding of the workings of the world that we can't write anything but what we term the fantastic. In other words, the impossible, the fanciful, the mythic that has no pretension to reality other than a metaphoric one.

Arthur C. Clarke once said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. But will that always be true? If we've got the technology safely mapped out as far as we can see, and beyond that lies magic — what's left for science fiction?

Kommentare:

The Future of Science Fiction

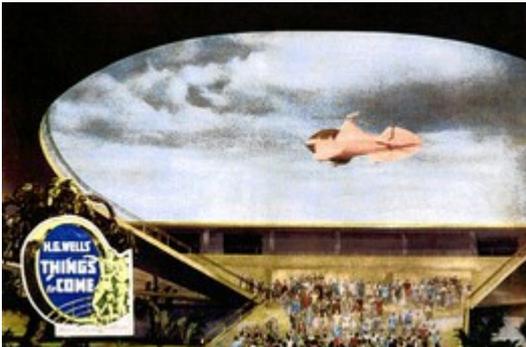
By Tom Shippey

October 15, 2011

Are we in a bull market for science fiction or a bear market? The bear market looks quite likely. Some think mainstream sci-fi is having a crisis of confidence as fantasy fiction overflowing with elves and dragons is crowding it out of the bookstores and replacing it in popular culture. Meanwhile, literary authors have started "slipstreaming"—to borrow Bruce Sterling's term—writing books with sci-fi scenarios. Writers like Iain Banks ("Surface Detail," 2010) divide their output 50/50. Cormac McCarthy set "The Road" (2006) in a post-apocalypse time. Up-and-coming novelists like Jonathan Trigell write books like "Genus" (2011), which imagines a right-wing gene-engineered dystopia. Even Kazuo Ishiguro created characters raised for spare parts in "Never Let Me Go" (2005). What potentials do these authors see in sci-fi?

One woman who might have the answer is Margaret Atwood, whose "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985) was an early example of such slipstreaming, set in a repulsive patriarchal theocracy. More recently, "Oryx and Crake" (2003) and "The Year of the Flood" (2009) returned to dystopian themes, imagining gene-engineered designer people living in gated communities and a hardscrabble existence everywhere else.

[Enlarge Image](#)



'H.G. Wells' Things to Come,' a 1936 film, imagined society rebuilt after a speculative second world war. Mary Evans/Ronald Grant/Everett Collection

"In Other Worlds" (Doubleday, 255 pages, \$24.95) is Ms. Atwood's engaging account of a lifetime's reactions to what she calls "wonder tales," from the "flying rabbits" of her childhood imagination to discovering H. Rider Haggard's "She" and Jules Verne. She recalls reading John Wyndham's "Day of the Triffids" (1951) shortly after its publication and Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" (1953) and "Martian Chronicles" (1950) hot off the press. She reprints old reviews of Ursula K. Le Guin, Mr. Ishiguro and Marge Piercy, as well as responses to classics by Wells, Orwell, Huxley, Swift.

Like most slipstreamers, however, Ms. Atwood remains defensive about the classification of her own writings, as if expecting assault from the snob-world of literary criticism. Sci-fi is not just bug-eyed monsters and brass brassieres, she insists. Quite so: That sort of imagery was made popular in *Weird Tales* in the 1930s, a magazine whose covers—Ms. Atwood points out—were often produced by a female artist, Margaret Brundage. Real sci-fi has poked fun at it for decades.

Upbeat Sci-Fi

The Nebula Awards Showcase 2011

Edited by Kevin J. Anderson

TOR, 412 pages, \$17.99

Nearly all fantasy—an Arabian Nights story, a couple of ghost stories, a nostalgic retrospective on dying visions of the future. The longest story is the late Kage Baker's "The Women of Nell Gwynne's," and it's steampunk, set in an imaginary Victorian England. The Gentlemen's Speculative Society sends escort-service female operatives to find out what is going on at a mysterious auction of strange devices. Sci-fi, but in a world we know can't be real.

Year's Best SF 16

Edited by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer

Harper Voyager, 500 pages, \$7.99

The most traditional, optimistic, hard sci-fi collection of the bunch. Michael Swanwick's "Steadfast Castle" has a loyal house with artificial intelligence defending its owner to the death. Greg Benford's "Penumbra" imagines a near wipe-out by a gamma-ray burst—a scenario we know could happen. Such steampunk as there is, Sean McMullen's "Eight Miles," is tech-problem oriented: how high could a Victorian balloon go?

The Year's Best Science Fiction

Edited by Gardner Dozois

St. Martin's Griffin, 662 pages, \$21.99

Reading this collection one marvels at the variety of approaches, and (nowadays) the sheer literary skill of sci-fi writers. Ian MacLeod's "Recrossing the Styx" blends a kind of rich-zombie world with hints of classical myth to create a fearful irony. Alastair Reynolds's "Sleepover" revisits the old theme of the Sleeper waking to a new world, but it's a grim one, where our Artificial Intelligences have attracted the attention of hostile alien AIs, and Earth can afford only a human caretaker crew. Hannu Rajaniemi's "Elegy for a Young Elk" mixes his native Finland with quantum-tech, nano-seeds, smartguns and a talking-bear buddy.

—*Tom Shippey*

Let's try redefining our terms. Ms. Atwood traces a heritage for sci-fi broad enough to include the "traveler's tales" of Herodotus, "scientific romances" like Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward" and what she calls the "metaphysical romance" of Aldous Huxley. Yet the term sci-fi, for Ms. Atwood, properly applies only to "things that could not possibly happen," like H.G. Wells's invasions from Mars in "War of the Worlds" (1898). Speculative fiction is the tradition of Jules Verne, what we used to call "extrapolation" of what is already happening. Much more respectable, this is what Ms. Atwood writes.

Such a distinction is harsh on Wells. In 1898, scientific civilizations on Mars seemed like plausible science, though of course ideas get overtaken by events: We're now sure that there aren't any lost cities or dinosaur-enclaves in the jungle, but Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle (in the Professor Challenger tales) still had unexplored African and Amazonian hinterlands to play with. And as "Jurassic

Park" showed, with a little tinkering "lost worlds" can come back.

Most people here would follow a distinction made by Ms. Le Guin. Things we think are impossible, magic and dragons, that's fantasy. Things we're not sure about yet, that's sci-fi. So we might challenge Ms. Atwood's insistence that her books are "speculative" and not sci-fi. All the same, she may well be right, but for a deeper reason.

What slipstreamers seem to like in sci-fi is the scenarios, usually utopian or dystopian. Yet what's missing in Ms. Atwood's own speculative fictions is what sci-fi fans really like: explanation and analysis. Sci-fi futures need to show not just when and what but also how.

[Enlarge Image](#)



Margaret Atwood is fond of sci-fi's scenarios but not its usual blue-sky optimism. Daniel Hertzberg for The Wall Street Journal

What event could trigger the rise of a patriarchal theocracy? Robert Heinlein would have thought of something political. How do the patriarchs keep the young males obedient and suppressed? Jack Vance would have thought of something anthropological. Both George Orwell, in "1984," and Huxley, in "Brave New World," described the precise origins of their dystopias with a thoroughness that Ms. Atwood never attempts. That's sci-fi. Scenario on its own—that is, what we get in "The Handmaid's Tale"? That's not sci-fi, that's (just) speculative.

Ms. Atwood is hardly alone among slipstreaming authors in her downbeat vision of the future. One obvious reason may be a string of disappointments in the real world—most obviously, space. In 1969 my local pub, The Man in the Moon, was renamed The Man on the Moon, to general elation. At the time it seemed obvious what would happen next: space station, permanent moon station, on to Mars, mine the asteroids, conquer "the High Frontier." The technology didn't quite exist, but then atom bombs and rocket ships had been "just science fiction" only a few years before.

A.E. van Vogt's 1944 story "Far Centaurus" said it all. Bold pioneers set off to the nearest star with 20th-

century technology. By the time they get there, decades later, they've been overtaken by faster-than-light spaceships and Far Centaurus has long been settled. "How could we have forgotten human progress?" the pioneers ask. In 1944, that remark sounded convincing; not so now. Arthur Clarke's vision of interplanetary travel in "2001" (1968) looks ironic in 2011.

As science-fiction approached the millennium, it began to trade the future for the past and real worlds for fantasy or virtual realities. We've had "cyberpunk," with "biopunk" coming along a little uneasily behind. But cyberpunk is already turning introspective—all those game-player stories set conveniently in virtual reality. Other popular sci-fi scenarios include alternate history ("looking backward," as if to wonder where things went wrong) and its nostalgic spin-off, "steampunk" (fantasy with a history-of-science additive). The popularity of post-apocalyptic novels suggests that no convincing techno-future can be imagined.

So where is sci-fi now? One way to tell is to read the best-seller lists. A different and more complex answer comes from the genre's well-established annual anthologies of short stories.

If you looked at only the "**Nebula Awards Showcase 2011**" (TOR, 412 pages, \$17.99), edited by Kevin J. Anderson, you might think that sci-fi was on its last legs: It is almost all fantasy, and such sci-fi as it contains is, again, dystopian. In Will McIntosh's "Bridesicle," cryogenic corpses are revived to be looked over by buyers, but if a corpse doesn't appeal, back in the freezer it goes. Fortunately, the other two anthologies present a very different picture.

The authors in "**Year's Best SF 16**" (HarperVoyager, 500 pages, \$7.99), edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, often imagine high-tech solutions for present problems. Desperate poverty in Nigeria? An artificial-intelligence pet, escaped from rich owners, shows the way out in Benjamin Crowell's "Petopia." In Kay Kenyon's "Castoff Word," we encounter the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, where millions of tons of plastic detritus swirl around in an ocean gyre. What can be done about it? Leave it to Nora, a floating-island nano-tech refuse processor who is home to a little girl and her grandpa.

There is a post-apocalypse story in "Year's Best SF"—Cat Sparks's "All the Love in the World," set in Australia—but it's an upbeat one. The heroine comes out of her defended enclave and finds that people aren't eating each other; they're adapting pretty well. Steven Popkes's "Jackie's Boy," included in both "Year's Best SF" and "**Year's Best Science Fiction**" (St. Martin's Griffin, 662 pages, \$21.99), edited by Gardner Dozois, is a buddy story following a boy and his elephant through a post-apocalypse landscape.

Mr. Dozois frames his collection, perhaps deliberately, with two long stories by Robert Reed, exemplifying two directions for sci-fi. The ambitious, character-driven opening story, "A History of Terraforming," has the old sweep of possibility across Mars and Venus and the Saturn and Jupiter moons. The final story, "Dead Man's Run," is set in a familiar but run-down future America, where there is no hot water and joggers run in packs because the streets aren't safe.

It's good to see so many authors, so many ideas, so little repetition and so much of this fiction with its feet "planted in the hard vacuum of reality" (to borrow Vernor Vinge's phrase from his story in "Year's Best SF"). Science-fiction authors—like scientists, politicians and most of the rest of us—understandably find it difficult to imagine a way past our planet's immediate problems. Books like "Year's Best SF" and "Year's Best Science Fiction"—and recent novels like Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Windup Girl" (2009) and Ian McDonald's "The Dervish House" (2010)—show that there are writers still willing to contemplate not just the dangers but the opportunities of the future, and to imagine how we

get from here to there.

Science fiction has fought its way even into literary culture now, and it's old enough for people like Ms. Atwood to have grown up with it. That's what makes it possible for mainstream authors to "slipstream." But true sci-fi still has an engaging open-ended, blue-sky anything's possible irreverence about it, which leaves most slipstreamers a bit out of synch. Ms. Atwood ends her review of environmentalist Bill McKibben's nonfiction polemic "Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age" with: "Perhaps we should leave well enough alone." No. The sci-fi attitude, for good or ill, is "Let's give it a try." Lord knows our official politics are coming up short on ideas, let alone solutions.

—Mr. Shippey reviews science fiction regularly for the Journal.

The Future of Science Fiction and Fantasy

by Michele Acker

What is the future of Science Fiction and Fantasy? Are the genres fading? Are writers running out of ideas? Have audiences grown tired of the same old thing? Not at all. In fact, according to several prominent agents, whether written for middle grade, young adult or adult audiences, the genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy are going strong and will be for a long time to come. There's more crossover now too. While teenagers have always read adult fiction, with the popularity of books like Harry Potter, The Hunger Games and Percy Jackson, adults are reading more middle grade and young adult fiction now than ever before.

Although some agents may disagree on which of the two genres is strongest, Science Fiction or Fantasy, they all agree that we'll be seeing much more of both in the future.

I interviewed seven agents -- Eddie Schneider with JABberwocky, Sandy Lu with the L. Perkins Agency, Lucienne Diver with the Knight Agency, Miriam Kriss with the Irene Goodman Literary Agency, Jean Nagggar with the Jean V. Nagggar Literary Agency, Nancy Gallt with the Nancy Gallt Literary Agency (she is also the agent for Rick Riordan, author of the Percy Jackson series), and Jessica Faust with Bookends -- and asked each of them four questions regarding Science Fiction and Fantasy.

This is what they had to say.

1. What do you see as the future of Science Fiction& Fantasy?

Eddie Schneider: I think that SF/F is one of the healthiest genres in literature right now, so I'd say more growth and diversification. With the latter, I think we're going to see greater diversity both in the variety of subgenres (helped along by the e-book industry, which is able to prove to publishers that things they think won't work, do), and in terms of subject matter and authorial background. I think we're finally going to start to see good SF/F novels that should've been translated into English years ago get their due, and the chorus of voices will be more nuanced than it's historically been.

Sandy Lu: Science fiction, which has been overshadowed by fantasy in recent years, will be in demand again. Urban fantasy, one of the fastest growing genres in the past few years, is on the decline. The market is saturated with vampires, werewolves, zombies, and psychics, the readers are quickly growing tired of them. They will want something with a basis in scientific theories, such as cyberpunk, alternate worlds, or space opera.

Lucienne Diver: It's always difficult to predict the future. Trends come and go, sometimes nearly overnight, like mash-ups, and sometimes lingering, like urban/contemporary fantasy. What I can say is that sf and fantasy are eternal. Epics are eternal. Anything that deals with the human condition and high stakes, whether they be espionage, magically or murderously induced, will be perpetually popular.

Miriam Kriss: We're definitely seeing a return to more traditional high and epic forms of fantasy,

with a modern feel, and a hunger for near future stories, rather than space opera. We've also been seeing steampunk crop up in both YA and adult SF/F -- even in romance!

Jean Naggar: There will always be a future for science fiction and fantasy, and I include futuristic as well as dystopian novels. We all love peering into weird fantastical worlds, seeing wonderful alternate universes developed by others, playing with the "what if..." and taking a break from the harsh realities of the international political spectrum in our real world. Since science fiction and fantasy are among the most creative genres, I cannot speculate where the next talented imaginative writers will take us, but I am sure that the journeys will be worth the trip!

Nancy Gallt: I think readers will always enjoy the genres, as they have for generations.

2. Do You Feel YA is dominating the genre?

With the success of books/series like *The Hunger Games* and Percy Jackson, do you feel YA is dominating the genre?

Eddie Schneider: No. Fantasy for adult readers, in particular, is proliferating, and there's a whole class of excellent authors that's cropped up in the last few years, including but not limited to JABberwocky clients Brandon Sanderson, Peter V. Brett, Jon Sprunk, Myke Cole...

Sandy Lu: It's actually the other way around. SF & Fantasy is dominating the YA genre.

Lucienne Diver: I think that partly the recent domination of YA is because it's not so divided into genres. YA is its own category, and to an extent that gives authors more freedom to cross boundaries and pull in whatever elements they'd like. However, I wouldn't say that YA is dominating the genre. Look at the Game of Thrones series by George R.R. Martin or the Sookie Stackhouse books by Charlaine Harris. There's a lot of great and bestselling adult sf/f as well.

Miriam Kriss: It might be more appropriate to say that the genre is dominating YA. There are still plenty of big name SF/F adult series that are doing wonderfully, including the tremendous success of Game of Thrones. In YA the trends right now are Horror and SF, which a great way for readers to be exposed to the genre and grow up hungry for more.

Jean Naggar: The YA market is particularly strong at the moment, but rather than dominating the genre, I think it is opening up the connections between readers of all ages, making crossover books and movies more and more frequent, and making intergenerational book conversations once again the norm, rather than young readers only finding age-based material.

Nancy Gallt: Percy Jackson is technically middle grade as Percy was only 12 when the series began, but I think SF/F have always been YA genres, it's the age when that kind of imagination and speculation are at their peak.

Jessica Faust: I feel like YA is hot right now, but I don't know that YA is dominating any genre other than it's own. YA books should be sold in the YA section and SF/F will remain a primarily adult market and sold to adults. I do think there's a lot of SF/F or paranormal in YA right now however.

3. Are Adult SF & F Authors Jumping on the YA bandwagon?

Eddie Schneider: I think there are quite a few authors who are excited about the idea of writing for

a teen audience. While there are a few who've done it for commercial reasons, there are so many more who've done it for the artistic challenge of telling a really tight story with great characters. Teens have strong crap filters, and will skip over something that tries too hard or feels inauthentic, hence the challenge.

Sandy Lu: Yes, definitely. YA is a quickly-growing market, and some adult authors, not just SF & Fantasy ones, such as Gail Carriger and Philippa Gregory, are also writing YA now.

Lucienne Diver: Yes, but when urban fantasy became hot, I saw a lot of authors jumping on that bandwagon as well. I think a lot of authors simply have more ideas floating around than they possibly have time to write and when something skyrockets like YA has, they may choose to focus on those ideas that previously might not have had the best chance for breaking out.

Miriam Kriss: There are definitely authors who are doing both and doing it well. My own authors Lilith Saintcrow and Kate Locke, who write YA as Lili St. Crow and Kady Cross respectively, have found their YA and adult audiences to have a great deal of crossover and the pen names they've chosen are meant to be deliberately obvious so that readers know which they're getting but at the same time can find them easily. Other authors, like Jenna Black, write both YA and adult fantasy under the same name.

Nancy Gallt: I think a lot of adult authors are jumping on the boom in children's books in general-- look at James Patterson.

Jessica Faust: I can't say for sure about SF/F, but we're definitely seeing it in other genres. I'm not sure if people feel it's going to be easier, they'll sell more books, or they've just always had a desire to write YA, but we're seeing a lot of adult authors switching over.

4. What are the current trends in SF & F?

First it was dragons, then kick-ass females in some state of undeadness. Now with all the vampires and werewolves out there, what are the trends? What sorts of characters are in demand now, or will be in the near future?

Eddie Schneider: I shy away from this sort of thing personally; I'm much more interested in books that have a strong and distinctive authorial voice, than books that deliberately aim for the zeitgeist (trends) -- in the long run, I think authors of the former stick around and are able to make better careers out of it than authors of the latter. They also write more interesting books, at least in my opinion. That said, there IS a trend toward darker and more realistic SF/F, and I'm happy to see this.

Sandy Lu: Hard science fiction may be returning, and the boom in fantasy may be on the wane. Robots and aliens may be the next big thing. As for characters, the demand will always be the same: multi-dimensional characters with deeply human stories, who the readers can identify with, fall in love with, or love to hate.

Lucienne Diver: It's very difficult, but not impossible, to find a new angle on vampires. I think the way we'll expand and diversify is by bringing in other cultural traditions. For example, the mythology and superstitions surrounding vampires or shape shifters or zombies or what have you differ vastly from one culture to another. I'd love to see more non-European influences.

Miriam Kriss: Well as I said, there's a big push to find the next George R. R. Martin or Brent

Weeks on the fantasy side and a lot of interest in both near future stories and steampunk.

Jean Naggart: Hard to say. The imagination is a wide-open playground, and the next trend is as close as the next writer with a wacky take on creatures and our world.

Nancy Gallt: A good story and a fresh approach will always be in demand.

But perhaps the best summary came from Agent Jessica Faust. When asked what the next big thing is, what agents are looking for, she replied, "I think most editors, and probably readers, are looking for the next thing, but no one knows what it will be quite yet."

So, for those of us who write Science Fiction or Fantasy, it's good to know there will always be a market for our work and an audience who appreciates it.

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Michele Acker is passionate about writing. She has had two stories, "Blood Debt" and "The Price of Magic," released in the new anthology *The Stygian Soul*. She is also a contributing author to *The Complete Guide to Writing Science Fiction*, due to be released in 2013 by Dragon Moon Press. For more information on Michele and her books, check out her website: <http://www.micheleacker.com/>

Zukunft war gestern

Im Kino und den Bestsellerlisten findet man kaum mehr Science-Fiction, dafür umso mehr Fantasy-Stoffe. Im Zentrum stehen nicht mehr Androiden und Weltraumstädte, sondern eine archaische Welt des Wunderbaren voller Trolle, Elfen und Vampire. Was verrät das über unsere Zeit? Und vor allem: unsere Ängste?

Von Andreas Bernard



Was die Gegenwart und was die Zukunft ausmacht, wo von vertrauten und wo von imaginären Ereignissen die Rede ist, darüber konnten die Leser der Zeitungen und Nachrichtenportale in diesen Wochen leicht in Ungewissheit geraten. In den Sparten, die für die Abbildung der täglichen Wirklichkeit zuständig sind, wird von Brillen berichtet, die einen Bildschirm vor das Auge des Trägers projizieren und ihm akustische Signale direkt über den Schädelknochen ins Ohr leiten; man liest von der erfolgreichen Herstellung menschlicher Embryonen durch eine Haut- und eine entkernte Eizelle und von einem Schönheitsidol, das sich nach einer Genomanalyse vorsorglich die Brüste hat entfernen lassen.

Im Kulturteil hingegen, dem Schauplatz der künstlerischen Weltentwürfe, konstatieren die Kritiker des neuen *Star Trek*-Films, dass die immergleichen Kulissen des Futuristischen fünfzig Jahre nach Beginn der Serie endgültig ihre Faszinationskraft verloren haben und das Abenteuer um Captain Kirk und Mr. Spock nur noch als Kammerspiel einer Männerfreundschaft inszeniert wird. »Abgesehen von den Dekors und der gelegentlichen Fortbewegung mit Raumschiffhilfe«, schreibt ein Rezensent, »handelt es sich nicht um einen Science-Fiction-Film«.

Was lässt sich im Jahr 2013 also über den Status unserer Imaginationen sagen? In welchem Verhältnis stehen sie zur medientechnischen, biologischen und sozialen Realität der Gegenwart? Nirgendwo offenbart ein Zeitalter ja mehr von sich selbst als in seinen Fantasien und Zukunftsvisionen. H. G. Wells' berühmter Roman *Die Zeitmaschine* von 1895 mag im Jahr 802 701 spielen, ist aber ein treues Abbild spätviktorianischer Wissenschaftszirkel und ihrer Debatten über Fragen des Sozialdarwinismus. Und auch jene Filme, die in den vergangenen Jahrzehnten die Ästhetik der Science-Fiction geprägt haben, weisen inzwischen eher auf ihr Entstehungsdatum: Ridley Scotts *Blade Runner* etwa ist heute vor allem ein Dokument des Post-Punk und der Endzeit-Ängste der frühen Achtzigerjahre.

Was erzählt die aktuelle literarische und filmische Fantastik aber über unsere Zeit? An den populärsten Werken der letzten zehn, 15 Jahre lassen sich zwei Grundtendenzen erkennen: Zum einen weisen die Imaginationen größtenteils nicht mehr in die Zukunft, sondern in eine weit entfernte Vergangenheit. Die technizistische Science-Fiction mit ihren utopischen oder apokalyptischen Visionen ist in den Hintergrund getreten (eine Entwicklung, die in den Fan-Foren und Spezialverlagen seit Längerem beklagt wird); anhaltende Konjunktur hat dagegen das Archaisch-Wunderbare, also Fantasy und seine Untergattungen.

Damit verbunden ist eine auffällige Juvenilisierung des Genres: Die fantastische Literatur, an der Grenze zur Schauer- oder Horrorgeschichte, hat sich wie das klassische Science-Fiction-Kino auch vor allem an ein erwachsenes Publikum gerichtet. Die größten Erfolge der Gegenwart – *Harry Potter*, die *Twilight-Serie*, *Die Tribute von Panem*, *Die Chroniken von Narnia* sind für Jugendliche gedacht oder erreichen wie die Tolkien-Verfilmungen ein generationenübergreifendes Publikum. Adoleszenzfragen sind offenbar zu einem bestimmenden Thema des Genres geworden.

Eines der interessantesten Fantastik-Projekte derzeit ist sicher die Buchreihe *Die Tribute von Panem* von Suzanne Collins, deren erster Teil auch verfilmt und zu einem der Kinoereignisse des vergangenen Jahres wurde. Der Rahmen der Geschichte trägt eine Reihe von klassischen Science-Fiction-Merkmalen: Panem ist ein totalitärer Staat, errichtet nach einem verheerenden Bürgerkrieg. Die Regierung kontrolliert ihre Untertanen akribisch: Bildschirme zur Überwachung sind allgegenwärtig, die Identität der Menschen wird mit Bluttests nachgewiesen, ihr Standort durch Injektionen lokalisierbar gemacht.



Aber das Bemerkenswerte ist, dass diese Elemente nur beiläufige Kulisse bleiben und beliebig mit archaischen Versatzstücken kombiniert werden, der Selbstversorgung im Wald etwa oder der Jagd mit Pfeil und Bogen. Es geht nicht mehr wie bei Orwell um die Schrecken des modernen Überwachungsstaates – all das wird vorausgesetzt und als selbstverständlich hingenommen. Gegenstand der Handlung sind vielmehr die sogenannten »Hungerspiele«, die jedes Jahr als Mahnung an den Bürgerkrieg zwischen den verschiedenen Verwaltungsbezirken des Staates abgehalten und in einer Fernsehshow übertragen werden. Alle zwölf Bezirke lösen jeweils einen Jungen und ein Mädchen zwischen zwölf und 18 Jahren aus, und die Jugendlichen müssen in einer von Kameras gesäumten Wildnis so lange gegeneinander kämpfen, bis sämtliche Teilnehmer außer dem Sieger tot sind.

Im Zentrum der *Tribute von Panem* steht also das Schicksal des Gewähltwerdens, und die Geschichte lässt keinen Zweifel aufkommen, auf welche zeitgenössischen Phänomene sie sich dabei bezieht. Es ist die Kultur des Castings, die hier im Sinne eines Wettbewerbs auf Leben und Tod radikalisiert wird. Die ausgewählten Kandidaten bekommen ehemalige Sieger als Coaches zur Seite gestellt, die sie bei der Selbstpräsentation vor der Jury unterstützen, und je nachdem, wie die Jugendlichen öffentlich beurteilt werden, verbessern sich ihre Konditionen während der Schlacht. Der Titel der Buchreihe zitiert zwar das »Brot und Spiele«-Motto des alten Roms, aber verhandelt wird eine hochaktuelle gesellschaftliche Entwicklung – der unentrinnbare Wettbewerbs- und Konkurrenzgedanke unserer Zeit.

Suzanne Collins' Romane zeigen, wie sich der Impuls für die Erzählung fantastischer Geschichten verschoben hat. In den maßgeblichen Theorien zur Science-Fiction wird ja immer wieder darauf hingewiesen, dass kollektive Ängste als wichtigster Motor für die Gestaltung des Fantastischen zu begreifen sind. Wenn man sich die berühmtesten Dystopien des 20. Jahrhunderts ansieht, von Huxleys *Brave New World* und Orwells 1984 bis hin zu William Gibsons Cyberspace-Trilogie *Neuromancer* und den durch diese Romane inspirierten Matrix-Filmen, dann könnte man vielleicht drei solcher wiederkehrenden Ängste benennen: das Unbehagen angesichts einer vollständigen Erfassung der Menschen durch eine politische Macht; die Sorge um die Vernichtung der Welt; und schließlich der Zweifel, was der Mensch sei und wodurch er sich von künstlich oder maschinell hervorgebrachten Wesen unterscheidet.

Es hat den Anschein, als seien gerade diese für das Science-Fiction-Genre produktivsten Kollektivängste durch die politischen und wissenschaftlichen Entwicklungen des letzten Vierteljahrhunderts abgemildert und sogar verblasst. Die Paranoia des Erfasstwerdens, die noch in den Achtzigerjahren unter Berufung auf Orwell Hunderttausende auf die Straßen trieb, zum Protest gegen Volkszählung und maschinenlesbaren Personalausweis, hat sich in den sozialen Netzwerken bekanntlich zu einem spielerischen und lustvollen Umgang mit persönlichen Daten gewandelt. Das Schreckensbild einer nuklearen Auslöschung der Welt, zwischen den Fünfziger- und Achtzigerjahren in Dutzenden von Romanen und Filmen imaginiert, ist mit dem Ende des Kalten Krieges weitgehend verschwunden. Die Angst vor dem künstlich gezüchteten Menschen wiederum, für die Huxley 1932 die kritische Blaupause lieferte, hat sich durch die Etablierung von Methoden wie der In-vitro-Fertilisation und neuerdings der Präimplantationsdiagnostik in Alltagsrealität verwandelt. Kaum jemand käme noch auf die Idee, die biomedizinische Gewährleistung gesunder Nachkommen für alle als eugenische Normierung zu betrachten. Was früher einmal »Menschenzüchtung« hieß, wird heute mit dem Persönlichkeitsrecht auf unversehrte Kinder erklärt.

Die Zukunft hat also in vielfacher Hinsicht jenes Imaginationspotenzial eingebüßt, das in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts euphorische oder apokalyptische Prognosen und Bilder produzierte. Die Schwelle der Jahrtausendwende, die futuristisch anmutende Zahl »2000«, hatte an dieser Sogkraft der Science-Fiction zweifellos Anteil – aber ebenso eine Mentalität, die viele Fragen des Lebens, die heute als freie, private Entscheidung gelten, als soziale Debatte verhandelten. Wenn sich Angelina Jolie nach einem Genscreening einer präventiven Brustamputation unterzieht, wird das nicht mehr, wie in dem Film *Gattaca* von 1997, als schreckhafte Vision einer Gesellschaft betrachtet, die den Lebensweg der Menschen nach der Qualität ihres genetischen Materials bestimmt, sondern allortorten als Vernunftentscheidung eines mutigen Individuums begrüßt.

Und genau diese Verschiebung von gesellschaftlichen zu biografischen Fragen, von der paranoiden Angst des 20. Jahrhunderts, dass eine äußere Instanz, ein Staat, ein »System« den Menschen bedrohen könnte, hin zu privaten Ängsten, die falschen Lebensentscheidungen zu treffen, kennzeichnet auch die populärsten künstlerischen Imaginationen der Gegenwart. »Du musst Sponsoren auftreiben«, sagt etwa der Coach zur Heldin in den *Tributen von Panem* vor der Begutachtung durch die Juroren. – »Ja, aber ich bin nicht gut genug darin, Freunde zu finden«, antwortet sie und fragt ihn: »Wie bringt man Leute dazu, einen zu mögen?« Darauf der Coach: »Sei

einfach du selbst!«

Das ist vielleicht der Kerndialog unserer Zeit, die sich Tag für Tag um den Abgleich von Freunden und Followern sorgt, um Aufmerksamkeit und Wettbewerb, um die Evaluation vor Casting-Jurys, um Fernsehduelle und die Wahl zum »Mitarbeiter des Monats«. In dieser Hinsicht ist es konsequent, dass sogar das Urbild einer filmischen Science-Fiction-Welt, die Star Trek-Reihe, sich im neuesten Film vordringlich mit der Konkurrenz zweier Freunde beschäftigt.



Was bedeutet es also, dass Geschichten aus dem Weltall, mit ihren glänzenden Raumschiffen und Robotern, nur noch routiniert abgespult zu werden scheinen, die prägenden Fantasien der Zeit aber von Mädchen handeln, die ihre Mitbewerber mit Pfeil und Bogen bekämpfen, von einsamen Vampirgestalten im Highschool-Milieu oder von der archaischen Fantasy-Welt Tolkiens, die seit Jahren ein überwältigendes Revival erlebt und den schmalen Roman *Der Hobbit* gerade auf drei Kinofilme in Überlänge ausdehnt?

Die drohende Erschöpfung in einer kompetitiven Gesellschaft scheint das bestimmende Antriebselement dieser Fantasien zu sein. In den Tolkien-Verfilmungen oder der inzwischen genauso bekannten, unter dem Namen *Game of Thrones* fürs Fernsehen adaptierten Buchreihe *Das Lied von Eis und Feuer*, geht es ja gerade nicht um die verstörende Grenze zwischen Rationalität und Übernatürlichem, die in der Science-Fiction so oft am Anfang der Geschichten steht. Das Wunderbare ist vielmehr von Anfang an als Gegenwelt akzeptiert, und die Ambition besteht in einer möglichst umfassenden und akribischen Ausstaffierung dieser Sphäre. Daher die Dickleibigkeit der Werke, daher die unerlässlichen Landkarten in den Buchumschlägen und Filmvorspännern, die eigens angefertigten Schriften, Chroniken und Stammbäume. Fantasy strebt eine Totalität des Weltentwurfs an, die dem Leser Identifikation verschaffen soll, nicht schauernde Desorientierung.

Es ist ein Effekt dieser Totalität, dass die Welt der Fantasy mehr als in jedem anderen literarischen Genre über die Ränder der Buchseiten wandert und im realen Leben der Leser Einzug hält, in Gestalt von Rollenspielen, Messen, Fan-Veranstaltungen. Der Gedanke der »Gemeinschaft« ist auf zwei Ebenen zentral – einmal im archaisch-mythischen Personal der Bücher, den Zwergen, Elfen, Rittern, die so gut wie nie als Einzelpersonen auftauchen, sondern als Stamm, als Spezies. Und dann auch auf der Ebene der Rezeption, die rituell im Sinne einer *community* begangen wird.

Der gewaltige Erfolg von Fantasy in den letzten Jahren könnte also genau mit jener Angst vor Vereinzelung zu tun haben. Das archaische Leben in Mittelerde oder in den sieben Königreichen von Westeros wird als übersichtlicher und solidarischer wahrgenommen. »Dies ist eine Geschichte aus alter Zeit«, heißt der erste Satz in Tolkiens *Hobbit*, und zivilisationskritisch wird ergänzt, die Abenteuer spielten in »der Frühe der Zeiten, als es noch mehr Grün und weniger Lärm auf der Welt gab«. Passend dazu ist der Fluchtpunkt der berühmtesten Fantasy-Zyklen stets die Wiederherstellung einer Heimat: Bilbo Beutlin hilft den Zwergen dabei, ihren Berg Erebor zu erobern; die Familie Targaryen im *Lied von Eis und Feuer* möchte den Thron von Westeros zurückgewinnen.

In der Geschichte der literarischen Fantasien haben sich Phasen der Vorwärts- und Rückwärtsbewegung immer wieder abgelöst. Das 21. Jahrhundert scheint bislang eher der zweiten Kategorie anzugehören. Der Mond ist betreten. Die Apokalypse droht allenfalls in Gestalt der Klimaerwärmung, einem weit entfernten, abstrakten Prozess. Der Mensch-Maschinen-Hybrid wird durch die Google-Brille vielleicht ganz beiläufig und ohne Schreckensvisionen Wirklichkeit. Bis auf Weiteres müssen wir uns mit Adoleszenzproblemen und behäbigen Fabelwesen mit Fellfüßen begnügen.

2084! Warum die Science Fiction gerettet werden muss

Die Menschheit eingelegt im eigenen Big Data-Saft. Kann uns da ausgerechnet die Science Fiction die Zukunft retten? Der Zündfunk Generator entwirft eine offene Zukunft für Science Fiction und Wirklichkeit.

Von: Markus Metz & Georg Seeßlen

Stand: 05.11.2014



Offene Zukunft: Warum die Science Fiction gerettet werden muss

"Die Zukunft war früher auch besser."

Karl Valentin

Diesen Stoßseufzer von Karl Valentin können wir heute - also in der Zukunft Valentins, die exakt so gekommen ist, wie er gesagt hat, nämlich ganz genau so wie irgend etwas anderes - nur bestätigen. Entweder stellen wir uns vor, dass demnächst alles mit einem großen Knall endet. Das haben wir dann davon, von Umweltzerstörung, Fernsehglotzen und Turbokapitalismus. Oder aber wir stellen uns vor, dass alles immer so weiter geht, alternativlos, sachgezwungen, vorhersehbar, berechenbar. Die Menschheit eingelegt im eigenen Big Data-Saft. Man weiß gar nicht, was von beidem schlimmer ist.

Warum die Science Fiction gerettet werden muss, um der offenen Zukunft eine Chance zu lassen

Kann uns da ausgerechnet die Science Fiction die Zukunft retten? Sie hat jedenfalls einmal die Aufgabe übernommen, aus der Gegenwart heraus die Denkbare, die Vorstellbarkeit der Zukunft zu verhandeln. Die Vorhersage technischer oder sozialer Zukunftsbedingungen war dabei nicht das eigentliche Erzählziel, sondern allenfalls ein Mittel für eine literarische Konstruktion nach dem Prinzip des "Was wäre wenn...". Wenn sie sich nicht totläuft in der immer gleichen Abfolge von Utopie und Dystopie, kann die Science Fiction dazu beitragen, die Zukunft als Vorstellungsraum zu erhalten. Das versucht der Schriftsteller und Essayist Dietmar Dath unermüdlich.



"Ich schreibe nicht davon, wie es ist, sondern davon, wie es sein sollte, wie es hoffentlich nicht sein wird oder wie es ganz neutral sein könnte."

Dietmar Dath

Mit Dietmar Dath und Sascha Mamczak, Science Fiction-Lektor bei Heyne, entwirft der Generator

eine offene Zukunft für Science Fiction und Wirklichkeit.

Der Zündfunk Generator am 9. November um 22.05 Uhr auf Bayern 2.

MP3 ...

When Science Fiction Stopped Caring About the Future

The *Star Wars* reboot looks like another example of how the genre's most popular works have given up on imagining new worlds.

[Noah Berlatsky](#) Dec 5 2014, 7:31 AM ET



Daniel Munoz/Reuters

Most people think of science-fiction as being about the future; it's a genre that explores possibilities, from Dr. Frankenstein's invention of artificial life to Ursula K. Le Guin's world populated by humans who have all evolved into single-gendered hermaphrodites. What might happen *if*? What could happen *when*? Sci-fi thinks about new technologies, new societies, and new ways of being, good or bad.

And then science-fiction fans turn to the new [Star Wars trailer](#), and find, not the future, but a reshuffling of 30-year-old detritus. There are the storm troopers, there's the Millennium Falcon, there's Tatooine, there's one of those cute droids we're always looking for. There's nary a pretense that we're actually supposed to be imagining a different world. Instead, the pleasure is in reshuffling the old, worn-out bits. Nostalgia is so paramount that even minor tweaks become the grounds for think pieces and extended canon questioning. Are there [black stormtroopers](#)? What's up with the [new crossguard lightsaber](#)? Explain why these new toys are not exactly the same as the old toys, and be quick about it!

Admittedly, Star Wars never billed itself as a forward-looking endeavor. It's not even supposed to be set in the future, but rather "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away." The cobbled-together,

backwards-looking aesthetic of the franchise is part of its charm (as I've written [before](#).) Still, if you watch the Star Wars trailer and then immediately afterwards watch Ursula K. Le Guin's speech at the National Book Awards, where she won a medal for Distinguished Contribution to Letters, you're likely to get ideological whiplash.

[Over here](#) is Le Guin, taking a stand for science fiction on the grounds that "we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine some real grounds for hope." And over here is *Star Wars*, showing you more pictures of the Millennium Falcon. So much for Le Guin's call to elevate creators who know "the difference between the production of a market commodity and the practice of an art."

It's not just *Star Wars* either. Science fiction is everywhere in popular culture, and it seems like it's managed to be everywhere in the present by largely jettisoning the future. The massive, major franchises are all decades-old; the triumphal rhythmic successes of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* and *Dr. Who* vie with sporadic reboots of *Robocop* or *Planet of the Apes*. Even newer stories, like *The Hunger Games* or *Divergence* feel less like fresh visions than like re-toolings of stagnant dystopias. Poor George Orwell wants his panopticon back.

It's no accident that the most ubiquitous, overwhelming sci-fi sub-genre around is the one that has the least to do with the future: superheroes. Much of the superhero genre, in fact, is devoted to the fantasy that we don't need to wait for technological marvels, but can experience them right here, right now. More, we can do so, magically, without the comfy old familiar world we know changing that much at all.

Tony Stark invents new magical energy sources three times before breakfast, but he uses them mostly to punch Thunder-Gods in the head, rather than, say, to completely transform the world's technology and economy. Aliens land on earth, and rather than conquering England with H. G. Wells or forming an utterly new human race through tentacle-sex gene splicing a la Octavia Butler, they perform minor acts of altruism while taking their shirts off to reveal the pecs of Henry Cavill. Superheroes are sci-fi wonders without consequences, the future resolutely flattened by today.

Iron Man and Superman and most of the other superheroes with film deals are even older than *Star Wars*; compared to Batman, Han Solo is a fresh-faced whippersnapper who has not yet been turned into a commodity. Still, whatever the exact age of the antihero, the takeaway is the same: progress presented in timeless vacuum. American capitalism is dedicated to the cult of growth, expansion, and the new boss ever bigger, better, and cooler than the old. It's an ideology of eternal improvement, and pop sci-fi fits that presumption neatly. Technology advances and humans mutate into X-Men without ever prompting a consideration of "alternatives to how we live now." The future, outside of time, brings empowerment but no change.

Some fans argue that *Star Wars* is not sci-fi but fantasy, complete with force-wielding wizards. I don't think that's quite right, though. Fantasy has its own tropes and its own timelessness, but a changeless dream of the past is different than a changeless dream of the future. Harry Potter is nostalgic for a world of quills and noblesse oblige, where magic takes the place of modern technology and the folks with the power are clearly separated from the folks without. *Star Wars* is nostalgic too, but, like with superheroes, that nostalgia is directed not toward the past, but toward an

ongoing future of awesome gadgets and self-actualized New Age ninjas.

Tomorrow isn't a potential where things might be better, or even different; it's just a place to rearrange the robots on a Titanic that never sinks. Progress has conquered the present so thoroughly it doesn't even need to push forward anymore. In pop sci-fi, we're all always already picking up the shiny new old lightsaber; there is no other future, and no other dream.