

"It's OK, I Have an Adapter"

Future Societies in Science Fiction

In this introduction to the discussion, I shall look at how Science Fiction describes societies of the future, and try to give a few of the themes connected with this topic that we can discuss later. As I describe particular books, you may get the impression that they are simply expositions of the author's ideas about a future society. This is far from the truth. All the books I shall mention also tell a good story. I am simply emphasising the society described, whether it is the major point of the book or, more commonly, just background.

It is in the description of future societies, particularly those of the near-future, that SF seems to come closest to prediction. I say *seems*, because prediction is rarely what the author is attempting. More commonly he is attempting to create a self-consistent, plausible, and above all *interesting* view of the future. While futurologists extrapolate from present trends, the SF author may well exaggerate one small aspect of the present to create an interesting or satirical effect. To give one of the first and most famous examples, *The Space Merchants* by Fred Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth features a world run by advertising agencies.

Nevertheless, since the SF writer has a greater range of possibilities to play with, she often comes up with something that does happen. Examples are the prediction of nuclear power long before any mechanism was suggested, let alone a practical power station being built. In addition, the prophesies of SF can sometimes become self-fulfilling, as for example that of space travel, since so many of the scientists that worked on the space program were inspired by the pulp SF they read as children. A nice quote given in the *Encyclopaedia of SF* is from Donald Wollheim: "Ever since the day that I first heard that an atomic bomb had been exploded over Japan I have had the disturbing conviction that we are all living in a science fiction story." Anyway, one thing we can be sure of is that we won't be able to accurately predict the future of society until psychohistory is discovered in 1996!

If the author of a SF story has any purpose other than to create an interesting society as a background to his plot, it is to show a *possible* future either as a goal or a warning, or to satirize the present.

Among the most dreadful warnings for the future are John Brunner's Dystopian trilogy: *Stand on Zanzibar*, *The Jagged Orbit*, and *The Sheep Look Up*. The latter two are simple and particularly horrific extrapolations of one evil of the present: inter-racial violence in *The Jagged Orbit*, and pollution in *The Sheep Look Up*. However *Stand on Zanzibar* is not just an extrapolation of the population explosion into the 21st Century. It contains many more themes. To give you an idea of this, here is an excerpt from a scene set at a party. Each paragraph is from a separate conversation.

Read from page 212.

You may have noticed some of the slang: *shiggy* for woman, or *prodgie* for child. Brunner has some very convincing slang - rather than slang for new technology, such as *viddy*, as in much SF - Brunner has invented a slang that could well have evolved from present-day English.

Another example is Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which was actually a reply to some of J.B.S. Haldane's Utopian ideas. The *Brave New World* is a society controlled by the use of Pavlovian conditioning, supposedly modelled after the production line, with Henry Ford revered as their inspiration. The population is chemically adjusted into five castes of differing intelligence. While this is clearly intended as a Dystopia, since the idea of reducing our own intelligence is abhorrent to us, each caste is nevertheless content with its lot. Is this not the ideal of many Utopias? You can all violently disagree with me later.

Other notable examples are Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, and Robert Heinlein's "If This Goes On...". There are countless others. Do I even have to mention *Nineteen Eighty Four*?

There are fewer Utopias in modern SF, and of the serious ones that I have read none is as optimistic as any of the Dystopias I have just mentioned are pessimistic. None? Well, there is one exception, and it shows that a Utopia cannot go too far and remain credible. *The Probability Broach* by L. Neil Smith contains an alternate world in which all forms of government (including the courts, police, and money supply) have been replaced by private competing companies. A visitor from a world similar to ours observes the difference this makes to the people.

Read from page 48.

Other less impossibly optimistic futures include many of the societies in Arthur C. Clarke's work, such as *Imperial Earth*. While many of today's problems have been eliminated, for example war and racism, many remain - economic crises and drug abuse - and some new problems have been added, such as cloning.

Another well-known Utopia (particularly in OUSFG given the number of enthusiasts for her work) is Ursula K. Penguin's *The Dispossessed*. It contrasts an anarchist society against a regimented capitalist or *propertarian* society by following a Physicist who has become dissatisfied with his own world (the anarchist one) and escapes to the other. There he sees the poverty of a non-egalitarian society and begins to speak for his own world. Le Guin has advanced her ideal society in the most effective way: by showing all its problems herself before others point them out. The anarchist society is emotionally regimented and blinkered (with the willing collaboration of its people) with social rather than legal pressure to conform placed upon dissenters, but nevertheless it has many attractions: in particular a fair degree of equality in conjunction with greater personal freedom.

Among the themes explored by SF are female dominated societies, as in *5 to 12* by Edmund Cooper, and *All the Stars a Stage* by James Blish, in the first of which this state of affairs comes through a lack of men and in the second through a lack of women!

Computer run societies are also common in SF. An example is Isaac Asimov's "The Life and Times of Multivac" which tells of the destruction of a global computer that looks after humanity, in order to re-stimulate initiative. At the end the protagonist is left wondering whether he has done the right thing.

The *conapt* or self-contained building is another feature of science fiction societies. One of my favorite examples is *Oath of Fealty* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. This describes the setting up of a huge building within Los Angeles. The building contains everything that is necessary for the well-being of its inhabitants, including an all-pervasive security system.

Read from page 123.

Of all the societies I have read of in SF that are significantly different to our own, this one seems the most likely to me to come to pass in some part of the world.

"The Marching Morons" by C.M. Kornbluth tells of an overpopulated society in which the intelligent, who have prudently practiced birth control, are outbred by the proletariat who have not. Added to the three horsemen of the apocalypse - war, famine, and plague - which keep populations in check, SF adds a fourth: deliberate population culling, as described in Fred Pohl's "The Census Takers".

The vast majority of detailed descriptions of society in SF are of the near-future (that is in the next few hundred years). Some might purport to be of the far future, but would be equally at home in the past or near-future. For example Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, set countless millenia in the future, contains a clash between the Roman Empire and New York City. Needless to say, New York wins.

One exception is Clarke's *The City and the Stars*, which contains two societies, both stable, possibly stagnant, Utopias. The first is an enclosed city, *Diaspar*, whose inhabitants are, in a way immortal. After a thousand years' life their bodies are destroyed by the city. They are recreated at a later time and eventually recover a subset of the memories of their previous lives. Since few people are likely to be contemporaries of the same person more than once, a continually shifting population that is immortal but not subject to boredom is possible. The protagonist, Alvin, has no memories of his previous lives. He visits the other society, *Lys*, whose inhabitants, while as advanced as those of Diaspar, live closer to nature and are mortal. Eventually he finds a spaceship and goes out into the Universe to find out what it is that has kept Man on Earth. The huge time-scales involved are well described by Clarke, as in this excerpt from the introduction.

Read from page 7.

In my opinion, *The City and the Stars*, probably more than any other Science Fiction novel, contains the `sense of wonder' that distinguishes SF from other forms of literature.

Finally I would like to mention my favorite future society, *The Ophiuchi Hotline* by John Varley. Mankind has been forced off the Earth by vastly superior alien invaders, and at the time of the novel is scattered over the planets and moons of the solar system. With the help of information beamed into the solar system down the hotline of the title, man has developed cloning and memory recording, which effectively eliminates accidental death, since a memory recording taken before the accident can be played into a clone of the victim. The protagonist, Lilo, after being condemned to permanent death for modifying human DNA, has many illegal clones made. Each clone's story is followed. Frequent sex-changes, neutersex, radical body alterations, human-plant symbiosis, alien contact, cloned armies, and gene-napping are just a few of the ideas thrown up. Two short excerpts.

Read from page 7.

The second, I'm including, because it might go some way to explaining the quote in the title of this talk. The credit goes to Neal for thinking of it for me.

Read from page 154.

Tim Adye
Introduction to the OUSFG discussion meeting of 15th October 1986.

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Arthur C. Clarke also makes some nice semi-utopias, such as that in