



PROGRAMME BOOK

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competition winner **=====**

WHAT DO WE DO NOW THE FUTURE IS HERE ?

===== Richard A. Slaughter

During research at the interface between futures study and education I have often been surprised at how people tend to associate the former with prediction. I suspect this indicates a need for reassurance, a search for security, a response to the disintegration of contemporary structures and meanings. But neither futures study nor speculative literature are concerned to predict the future, or even to forecast it. Rather, they utilise a range of views of the future as a means of elaborating the present.

The future is radically uncertain and the images and meanings read onto it at one time serve the needs of that time but tend to be falsified by later developments¹. One generation dreams of multi-level mega-cities, personal helicopters and tourist trips to the moon while a later one dismantles its high-rise accommodation, speaks to the world from an armchair at home and cultivates the eastern arts. In other words, the future which becomes the present is always different from what was feared or expected. Only fragments of yesterday's tomorrows become our now, and in this sense the future is never "here". Forecasts are nearly always wrong and futuristic images cover a far wider imaginative range (or, in some cases, a much narrower one) than the subsequent course of history.

The wearing-out of genre materials and the rise of fantasy may be a disaster for SF but it need not be a permanent one. It does indicate that a new stage of development is due. The apparent exhaustion of images and ideas may well signal a temporary loss of confidence and creative insight, but not the decline of the speculative capacity itself. To account for this we need to look outside the genre at changing conditions in the wider culture.

As we near the end of the 20th century, we are witnessing a series of fundamental shifts in our perceptual categories, values, social and economic structures. While many of our leaders and leading institutions assert a "business-as-usual" approach, millions of ordinary people, particularly those without work and without prospect of work, know that we are near the end of an era, the so-called "industrial era". Even the well-heeled cannot insulate themselves from the changes taking place. The uncertainty, the feeling that the world is "shifting on its hinges", is unavoidable. Many of the core assumptions which underlay the social landscape have now run their course and no longer appear self-evident and compelling. One observer writes that

the structures of this civilisation, interdependent work, bargaining, mutual adjustment of individual ends, are beginning to be felt not as normal and best suited to man, but as hateful and empty.²

Much the same could be said of the assumed beneficence of science and technology, the ideology of continuous economic growth, patriarchy, the autonomy of the nation state, the earth viewed as a collection of inert resources to be exploited³. Where once a measure of consensus prevailed, albeit one imposed from above, there is now conflict and an unfolding series of seemingly irresolvable dilemmas⁴.

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During this period, a hiatus between more settled times, the speculative imagination experiences all the stresses of contemporary life, yet finds the common reality-avoidance devices of the time largely unavailable because they represent the false solutions of yesterday. In such conditions fantasy has a certain attraction. It is a vital part of our imaginative repertoire and has a subdued radical potential⁵. Yet, like adultery, it is usually disappointing, drawing us away from an engagement with our world, our deepest needs and our highest selves. As Scholes has noted,

we require a fiction which satisfies our cognitive and sublimative needs together, just as we want food which tastes good and provides some nourishment. We need suspense with intellectual consequences, in which questions are raised as well as solved, and in which our minds are expanded even while focussed on the complications of a fictional plot.⁶

Not that SF is, or need be, merely an intellectual resource. I suspect that much of the heart-searching by those who have transcended the banalities of formula fiction is, at heart, a search for significance. One is bound, in such a search, to turn towards SF since it deals most centrally with those features of the 20th century commonly ignored by so-called "mainstream" fiction: the subversive realities and potentials of science and technology. But innovations in SF quickly turn into cliché, harden into orthodoxy, when writers retreat from the "leading edge" of social consciousness. In the context noted above, of breakdowns in meaning and purpose, writers who seek to retrieve the past, to re-animate the galactic empire, the mad scientist, the WWII space dogfights, the one-dimensional supermen and so on, are missing the chance to participate in the renewal of meanings which underlies our sense of significance in the present and our hopes for a livable future. In other words, SF which embodies dated world-views and assumptions, and which fails to deal with perennial human concerns as they appear to us at this historical moment, will remain moribund. We can therefore distinguish between our widely shared needs for fictional futures which reveal aspects of our particular present, and the narrower, basically critical and academic, task of re-assessing earlier work.

Our present reality necessarily incorporates aspects of yesterday, fragments of past aspirations and imaginings; and there are, of course, works which transcend their time and period. To some we accord the accolade that they were "ahead of their time" and hence a valued part of ours. But in the mid-80s our main interest is in the world we inhabit and construct. Thus, fiction which seeks to nourish our sense of significance must grow from this present world and reflect the nascent potentials and problems inherent within it.

False dawns have occurred before in the history of the genre and, no doubt, they will happen again⁷. All I would venture at this time is to say that the potential exists for SF writers to participate in negotiating our transition between cultural eras. While it is death for the writer of fiction to descend into overt didacticism, there are, within our own multiplex reality, more issues, images, dangers and possibilities to explore than ever before. We can hardly doubt that regressive elements will persist and even appear dominant. The primitive power fantasies, escapist hackwork, literary wet dreams will be churned out as long as there is an audience so out of touch with itself as to demand them. But those who are alert to the newness in and around them will write, and read, books which expand the boundaries of SF, and hence of contemporary awareness.

It is significant that in the Helliconia Trilogy, Brian Aldiss, ever the innovator, draws on recent debates about the "Gaia Hypothesis" and the possibility of a "nuclear winter"⁸. The standard props of SF largely occupy the background. In the foreground we witness the rise and fall of cultures upon Helliconia. Here we have a framework to speculate on the nature of cultural

change, a mirror in which to view our own anxieties and fears and a metaphor of mortality itself. Nor is the work simply a re-telling of Gibbon's well-known theme⁹. Work of this kind permits an imaginative grasp on our contemporary world which can be gained from few other sources.

Much of the best contemporary speculative fiction would hardly be called "SF" by those addicted to the norms of Van Vogt and E. E. Smith, though I hardly think this matters. The speculative imagination is not merely the wellspring of science but of social movements and philosophy too. One example of the former case is the feminist critique of culture, and books such as Sally Gaerhart Miller's **The Wanderground**¹⁰ or Marge Piercy's **Woman at the Edge of Time**¹¹ reveal radical new sensibilities at work re-shaping the world, revising our notions about ourselves as social beings. The metafiction of Borges, D. M. Thomas and John Crowley function on even deeper levels not simply to comment on the external world but rather to interrogate the categories by which it is known. Crowley's novel **Little, Big** is, in my view, a masterpiece which tells a story to be sure, but discourses without preaching on time, causality, memory, reality itself. For me the focus of the book is the unlimited recursiveness of human identity and meaning. It therefore deals with issues of major importance in a period of gross technological overkill. Much SF writing and criticism has tended to overlook the power and insight of metafictional approaches preferring instead naturalistic narratives of worlds which never were, twice removed from reality (i.e. fictions of fictions).¹²

Many of the most interesting questions are, indeed, philosophical and metaphysical in nature, a fact understood best of all, perhaps, by James Blish¹³. But this does not mean that they have to be heavy or boring. Some of the finest SF classics are set in alternative worlds¹⁴. This device permits almost unlimited opportunities for speculation about time, identity, causation, and only a very rash critic could believe that its potential is exhausted. We may even be due for another look at the much-maligned utopia -- not in its classical, stifling, form perhaps, but as an imaginative rehearsal of plausible, even sustainable, futures. Callenbach's **Ectopia** gives some indication of what may be attempted but there must be a whole range of "solar-age futures" to be explored and falsified¹⁵. Some of the latter could involve plausible reactions against the new orthodoxies of wind, wave, solar power, methane digesters and the eastern arts. Others might look seriously at the kind of psycho/spiritual developments which could foreshadow entirely different cultural forms. Olaf Stapledon and C. S. Lewis, among others, may have passed this way briefly, but the territory is indeed vast and our world has moved on as well.

A significant proportion of future SF will probably continue to act as a kind of informal technology assessment literature. I've always enjoyed this "widget SF", particularly in the hands of a master like Philip K. Dick. But the genre as a whole has had very little to say about the realities of scientific and technological development, the social relations of innovation and R & D. With a very few exceptions, such as Benford's **Timescape**¹⁶, few have attempted to look seriously at how scientists actually function. An entire literature and field of study, often called "Science, Technology and Society, or STS, has developed in recent years and this could be used to inform and substantiate work¹⁷.

A literature of speculation is at its strongest when it draws on living cultural sources, is keenly alert to the changing concerns of the times and is focussed on human qualities and needs. Such a literature, one which looks below the surface to the deepest strivings of the human spirit for meaning and significance, is in no danger of dying out. Writers who will avoid the seductive simplicities of ennui and escapism can participate in a wider renewal of meaning and purpose by generating images of futures worth inhabiting. Such images are deeply involved in the processes of cultural continuity and change, and we will continue to need dystopian visions to depict what we may wish to

avoid. But the major creative task is to move away from the celebration of disaster to the exploration of that spectacular plateau of achievement where human capacities and purposes on the one hand, and technical skills on the other, achieve harmony with each other and with the natural world in which they are located. Such a balancing of incommensurable forces is bound to be only temporary and beset with numerous conflicts and practical difficulties. It therefore provides fertile ground for the imaginative writer.

My central proposition is that SF only has an identity crisis insofar as it is identified with a set of obsolete images, meanings and purposes. The disintegration of industrial-era belief systems and ways of life help to account for the crass, unhelpful nature of some SF, though clearly a public taste for reality-avoidance and other commercial factors to do with publishing itself are involved. Perhaps writers will acquire more creative freedom as the new information technologies begin to break publishers' monopolies over what is bought and sold. Again, as Michael Soper has argued, non-linear fictions mediated by computers open out new creative options¹⁸. In any event, it is not so much that space fiction or fantasy *per se* no longer provides appropriate forms within SF, but rather that the all-too-common preoccupations with conquest, domination and reality-avoidance have been superseded¹⁹. Nor are shifts toward the subjective, as exemplified within the "new wave", necessarily to be dismissed as mere narcissistic indulgence. It is not yet widely understood in the West that subjectivity conceals a universal objectivism in which conflicts, dichotomies and opposites can be re-interpreted, transcended or dissolved²⁰. The tensions between Eastern and Western modes of perception (and indeed between "Northern" and "Southern") can inform radical new developments in fiction as in the wider culture which it models.

Within such a culture may lie many unexplored potentials. We remain a very long way from understanding novel interactions: computer networking, gene splicing, higher states of consciousness, tropical de-forestation, expert systems, the near-universal pollution of land, sea and air, disarmament, "green" politics, monetarism, and so on. Clearly, we are living within an unprecedented, global, experiment which requires our serious and sustained attention, and which implies unpredictable outcomes. Far from attempting to escape into the past or into spurious futures, it seems likely that the only real escape is by way of a deeper engagement in the present, a commitment to each other and to future generations to achieve this dangerous transition toward a more sustainable way of life.

This is not to suggest that SF should limit itself to present concerns. One of its notable features is the way it can transcend the latter, leaving a trail of awkward questions to nibble away at the conventional wisdom of the day. But it can draw more deeply on new sources of inspiration, on newly-available forms of knowledge which once were esoteric, the "property" of mystics and closed social groups, and on notions of personhood which recognise no upper limit to human capacities²¹. If, as seems likely, we are approaching a time when supra-human powers become much more widely available, we may see a steady decline of interest in technical feats as such and further sustained interest in human evolution. Thus, I would not be at all surprised if much of the gaudy hardware of early SF, along with the relatively primitive world views it sometimes represented, were superseded by some little practised use of the human mind and spirit. This process is already visible in the feminist critique of patriarchal culture and other radical perspectives²².

SF, finally, is less about galactic empires and external machine technologies than about the human spirit exploring its present boundaries from the vantage point of a particular place in space and time. As that viewpoint has shifted during the mid-1980s, as we move more rapidly from the known to the unknown, so the world in which the bulk of SF as a distinct genre was produced becomes increasingly remote. Hence, the present exhaustion of ideas signals the decline

of speculation within a particular cultural matrix, not the end of the speculative capacity itself. The latter is a permanent attribute of civilised life, and one that interrogates the new era even as it is shaped by what it perceives.

Notes

1. See Clarke, I. F. **The Pattern of Expectation** Cape 1979.
2. Taylor, C. "Hermeneutics and Politics" in Connerton, P. (ed) **Critical Sociology** Penguin 1976 pp 189-190.
3. A useful synthesis is provided by Capra, F. **The Turning Point** Fontana 1983
4. Henderson, H. provides a concise interpretation in "The Entropy State" **Creating Alternative Futures** Berkley 1978.
5. So argues Jackson, R. in **Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion** Methuen 1981.
6. Scholes, R. **Structural Fabulation** Notre Dame, Indiana 1975 p 41
7. See Panshin, A. & C. **Farewell to Yesterday's Tomorrow** Berkley 1976 pp 207-212
8. Interview with the author, March 3rd 1984.
9. Aldiss believes that SF should not merely recapitulate past history.
10. Persephone Press, Massachusetts, U.S.A. 1979.
11. Women's Press, London 1979.
12. This may help explain why story-telling in a "straight" SF mode presents particular problems for both author and reader. Also see Waugh, P. **Metafiction** Methuen 1984.
13. This is implicit in novels like **Dr. Mirabilis** Faber 1964. Ketterer, D. makes the point explicit in "The Last Inspirational Gasp of James Blish: The Breath of Brahma" **Science-Fiction Studies** 11, 1, March 1984 pp 45-49.
14. See Nicholls, P. **The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction** pp 26-27 for outlines of some of the better-known stories.
15. Banyan Tree Books, California 1975.
16. Gollancz 1980.
17. A useful introduction is provided by Mulkay, M. in **Science and the Sociology of Knowledge** Allen & Unwin 1979.
18. Soper, M. "The Liberation of Fiction" **Vector** 116 1983 pp 27-28.
19. See Daly, M. **Gyn-Ecology** 1979 and **Pure Lust** 1984, both Women's Press, for hard-hitting criticism of such tendencies.
20. Wilbur, K. **No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth** Shambhala 1979 provides a very clear exposition of this, and related, themes.
21. Sinclair, Sir J. provides an accessible example in **The Alice Bailey Inheritance** Thorsons 1984.
22. See examples quoted in notes 10, 11 and 19. Also Caldicott, L. & Leland, S. (eds) **Reclaim the Earth** Women's Press 1979.

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