
Papers

Explorations into Children's Literature



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The Machine at the Heart of the World: Technology, Violence and Futures in Young People's Media

Richard Slaughter

INTRODUCTION

As the title suggests, this essay takes a critical look at three themes in young people's media: technology, violence and futures. Such themes are embedded in texts and images which have been designed, constructed, packaged and broadcast to children and young people via books, comics, film and TV. But this is not a work of literary criticism. My concern is less with the literary qualities of the material than with some of their wider human and cultural implications. Chief among these is the penetration of technology into the symbolic and actual life-space of people in the present century. So over-arching is this process that it could be regarded as the greatest *fait accompli* of all time. It has overwhelmed the settled worlds of tradition and arguably brought the planet to the edge of catastrophe. Growing up in this context is far from easy. Children and young people are very vulnerable to the consequent threats to their well-being. The ways such threats are represented are therefore worthy of serious enquiry.

The focus on technology is complemented by two further themes: those of violence and futures. Both play powerful roles within post-modern youth cultures. But violence is perhaps more structural and more problematic than is usually admitted, whereas futures are either obscured or misidentified with power fantasies and developments in science and technology. The essay therefore looks carefully at a sample of contemporary material in an attempt to tease out hidden processes and to suggest appropriate responses. It is a notable

fact that the *surfaces* of media productions, i.e. the visual and auditory aspects, engage the senses. But very much else is also happening beneath the surface. For one thing, ideas, ideologies, commitments and particular ways of construing the world are also being communicated and legitimised. Such symbolic and epistemological processes take place at deeper levels and in a much less direct and open way. They may therefore be more influential than the overt content of media productions. For this reason alone they need to be considered carefully.

In part one I consider several futuristic fantasies which deploy images of violence, magic and machines. Two are books, three are comics, two are TV series and one of the books is a "spin-off" from a third. In part two I look at non-fictional printed materials which attempt to treat the future as a subject of serious (or at least not overtly fictional) enquiry. The conclusions to be drawn from both areas are surprisingly consistent.

Parts one and two highlight several major concerns about the ways technology, violence and futures are portrayed in children's media. However, part three provides a counterbalance to this critical approach. It considers several examples of "good practice", that is, materials which open up the possibilities for deeper engagement with the world, de-mystifying otherwise obscured phenomena and providing individuals with strategies for responding constructively to a world of uncertainty and turbulent structural change.

PART ONE

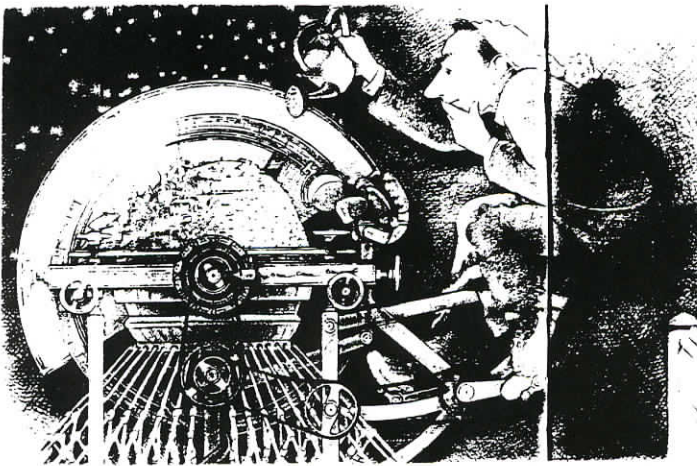
MACHINE FANTASIES

I. The Machine at the Heart of the World¹

Figure 1 shows the beginning of a gently ironic tale. Theobald is a kindly, absent-minded, middle-aged bachelor who happens to live under the ground tending his world machine. But the machine malfunctions and he cannot be bothered to fix it. The world above begins to notice that things are not right. But when the people discover the machine, they discover its power and think that they can have whatever they want. However, the world deteriorates rapidly and the scientists appear helpless. The small boy who first witnessed the early signs persuades Theobald to restart the machine. He agrees and everything returns to normal—except that Theobald's roof still leaks. He'll fix it one day.

There are a number of themes here. The dependence of a future world upon machines was beautifully satirised by E.M. Forster as long ago as 1909 in **The Machine Stops**. Here the picture is more benign and no real damage seems to have been done. Yet it is perhaps worrying to imagine that the world no longer functions autonomously and that a machine which could break down is holding it all together. A different order of things has emerged which can compromise nature. Further, the machine itself is dependent upon the whims of a single person who sometimes can't be bothered to maintain it. The anxiety

Figure 1
Theobald and His Machine



At the heart of the world
there was a machine.

Theobald looked after it.

From his machine he made the weather,
helped the plants grow, controlled the tides
and kept the stars in their places.

Theobald ran the world.

(Wagner & Fisher 1983)

In this gently ironic image the world machine is operated by Theobald. His relaxed posture and playful attitude are in marked contrast to the images which follow.

here is certainly muted, but it echoes our own anxieties about our dependence upon machines and those who control them. A related theme in the story is that while we may think we can have whatever we want through machines, they may not be reliable

and, moreover, the costs involved may turn out to be higher than we had expected.

It's of considerable interest that the scientists, the ones who we might assume to have the best chance of

restoring order, are here shown to be no more capable than anyone else. They just stand around and talk while the world falls apart. Could this be a reference to the incorporation of scientific expertise in systems of offence and defence which no one really controls? That's a possibility. They have their heads in the clouds and no longer know how to get things done. Perhaps they work for a multinational company.

The central puzzle of the story is the origin and nature of the machine itself and Theobald's special relationship to it. No explanation is given for this. He is very clearly not God, yet sometimes he seems to play a God-like role. Did Theobald build the machine? We are not told. He certainly seems to understand it. And why should he respond to the boy's request? Perhaps Theobald represents fallible humanity and the boy its conscience. Such questions cannot be answered because it is in the nature of stories to leave open questions.

The book takes a gentle dig at people's greed, their naivety and lack of understanding of how the world *really* works, their dependence upon machines and those who can fix them. Overall, the story raises some key questions with an enviable lightness of touch. It permits the young reader to reflect on these and, if it does not offer any simple solutions, neither does it foreclose options. The real world is indeed full of open-ended problems and the book successfully depicts this without being condescending and without forcing readers toward predetermined solutions.

2. Transformers: the Movie ²

The story is based on a sophisticated line of war toys which established a new segment in this market. The toys represent sophisticated machines which change shape ("transform") from robots to other machines or pseudo-beasts such as dinosaurs or sharks, and then back again. The main feature of the story is a compulsive and unexplained battle between the "heroic" autobots and the "evil" decepticons. Daniel is a small boy who assists the former.

Optimus Prime, leader of the autobots is "dying". He/it passes on the matrix of leadership (a crystal of pure energy) to the successor, Ultra Magnus. The decepticons are commanded by Unicron, an enormous robot with special powers. He/it orders the decepticons to destroy the matrix (though it is not clear why) and constructs a planet-sized space ship filled with decepticons. Galvatron destroys the second-in-command, again for no apparent reason, and the other robots accept his leadership (Figure 2). There follows a long sequence of battles on and in the space ship/planet. Galvatron steals the matrix from Ultra Magnus and destroys the latter. The autobots' leader is "dead" and Galvatron declares, "It's a pity you Autobots die so easily or I might have a sense of satisfaction now!"

The vast Unicron "punishes" Galvatron by swallowing him/it and the matrix whole. But Unicron is damaged by an autobot spaceship carrying humans and robots which crashes through its eye. The autobots and

Figure 2
Transformers

Sample text from **Transformers** by J. Grant, Ladybird Books, 1986:

"Who disrupts my coronation?" shouted Starscream. "It is I, Galvatron," came the answer, as Galvatron transformed to his cannon shape and blasted Starscream out of existence.

As he transformed back, Starscream's crown rolled down the steps to the throne. Galvatron crushed it to fragments underfoot.

After only a little hesitation, the assembled Decepticons cried together: "LONG LIVE GALVATRON!"

Hot Rod took a step forward, and saw that Galvatron had the matrix.

"It will do you no good, Autobot!" cried Galvatron. "It cannot be opened!"

"Not by a Decepticon," replied Hot Rod.

The voice of Unicron echoed in the darkness, "Destroy him . . . or feel yourself torn limb from limb!"

Galvatron aimed a shot at Hot Rod, who transformed and raced away. Then he hurtled back to the attack.

To and fro the fight raged. Then, Galvatron leapt on Hot Rod as he transformed back into his robot shape.

The Decepticon leader seized his enemy around the neck and squeezed. "First Prime. Then Ultra Magnus," he snarled. "And now you. It's a pity you Autobots die so easily or I might have a sense of satisfaction now!"

Images of violence and destruction have become commonplace in the world of the children's media. The frequent illegitimate transference of human capacities to machines is a serious and confusing misrepresentation which now, unfortunately, permeates the culture.

humans battle on inside the huge machine and find Galvatron with the matrix which he/it is unable to use. Hot Rod tells Galvatron that the matrix cannot be used by a Decepticon. The latter tries to “kill” Hot Rod, but the autobot draws on the power of the matrix to overpower Galvatron and eject it forcefully through the head of Unicron. The power of the unshielded matrix then unaccountably begins to destroy the mighty Unicron’s other eye and its enormous body explodes leaving a ruined head to orbit the metal planet it built. The autobots, now under the leadership of the elevated Rodimus Prime, leave the scene to rebuild their home.

There are clearly many features of this fictional universe which do not cohere, even within the world of the story. No rationale is given for the endless war between the two types of robot (who are largely indistinguishable in all respects but name). The source of Unicron’s power is not explained. He/it is capable of building a planet-sized space ship, yet remains so vulnerable as to be mechanically breached and deranged by the matrix of leadership. The power of the matrix is not accounted for either. So two nullities are set in confrontation and one unaccountably “wins”. This is a magical situation, but one without the principles, rules and procedures which structure traditional magic. This is magic without a source and without a foundation or rationale. This is a shallow fantasy.

The robots have the major roles in the story (Optimus Prime), but show no capacity for motivation. They some-

how display “anger”, “fear”, “aggression”. They can “die”. But they remain problematic. They are certainly not intelligent, even in the diminished sense of being artificially so. Their movements cannot really be accounted for or explained. The few humans in the story are not *involved*. They are simply onlookers. Since they are so physically puny, by comparison, there is little for them to do, even when equipped with exosuits. Daniel manages to save his father from being dropped into a bath of seething acid, but that is all. This symbolic act provides a very slender thread for reader identification. Humans are, in fact, residual categories in this context. They have nothing much to do except to witness the battle.

There is no lever, no means of intervention, for the human characters to effect any change in the conflict, nor anything resembling a solution. The war is endless. Though Unicron is destroyed, new threats to the autobots will emerge. The dynamic for the story does not arise within it. Rather, it appears to be a product of the conditions under which the story was constructed. Those conditions include the marketing imperative, which is arguably the basic reason for the production of the story in the first place. The real dynamic modelled here is not the manufactured conflict between machines. It is the real conflict engendered by compulsive consumption and the destruction of natural qualities and resources by techno-capitalist society.

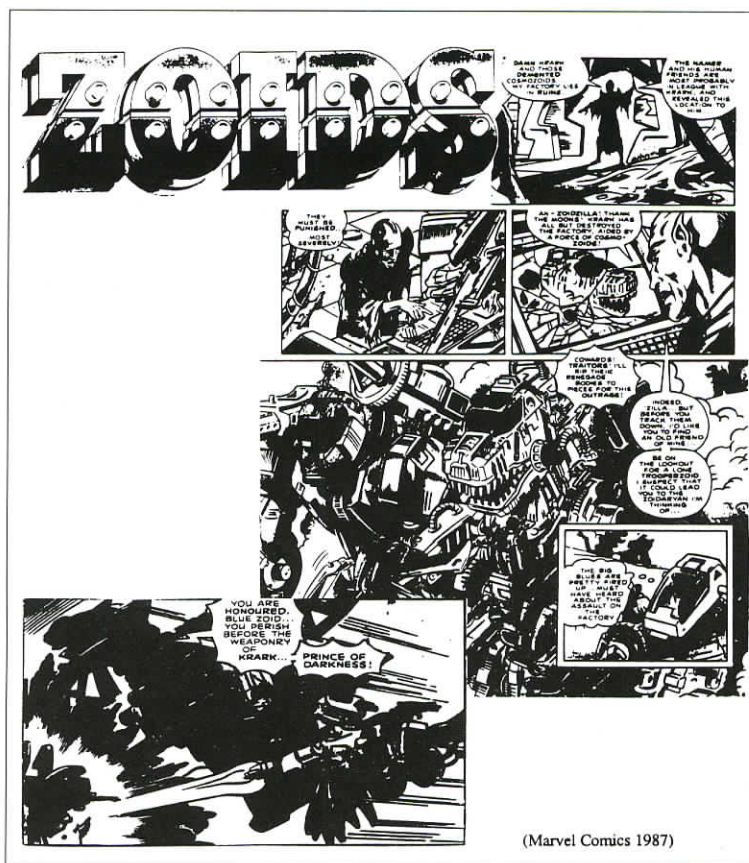
The underlying rationale for the story

and its many spin-offs is simply that of capital accumulation, since no needs can possibly be met here other than those of false identification with power symbols. A repetitious display of manufactured surfaces serves to engage the senses — indeed to overload them with fast cutting and intense action. But this colourful shadow-play cannot nourish the sense of significance because there is nothing to engage *with*. The cupboard is empty — but the till is full!

The child is drawn into this surrogate world by many promises: the experience of vicarious danger, spurious power fantasies, the appeal of machines which seem to possess capacities far beyond those of weak and vulnerable people. Yet here lies a hidden (and therefore subversive) reversal: that of creator and created, of means parading as ends. For the entire universe of machines is but a fragment of *human* expressiveness and symbolic power, not vice versa. Hence the display of destructive physical aggression and violence diverts attention from the thin and unlivable nature of this fictional universe; that is, from the real weaknesses and wholly *derivative* status of machines.

It is therefore hard to see how a child can deploy such material in any useful way. The fantasy does not suggest ways of dealing with the real world. With no characters, no society (with a past and future) and no hint of an ecological context, the story becomes a sequence of confusing, but structured, misdirections. As such, they occupy the attention but starve the

Figure 3
Zoids



Dehumanisation, dismemberment and violent punishment are some of the themes in these images. Note, however, the reference back to the biotic world in the way these machines are modelled upon pre-historic animals. Is this failure of imagination or an unconscious recognition of the primacy of natural process?

mind and spirit.

Transformers are basically a waste of time.

3. Zoids³

These are another example of the attempt by toy manufacturers to cash in on the boom in “futuristic” war toys. Many of the themes are similarly stereotyped. There is a battle without cause between red and blue

Zoids on a desert planet. The Zoids are mechanical war machines (they have no other function) piloted by androids (depersonalised people). Each side is commanded by a humanoid Zoidaryan, assisted by powerful mechanical beasts: Zoidzilla (a dinosaur) and Redhorn (a metallic rhino). Most fearsome of all is Krark, Prince of Darkness (a giant, pterodactyl, armed [literally] to the teeth).

All the machines are armed with a variety of powerful weapons. The commonest are multiple cannons which resemble crude phalluses and spray destruction wherever they are pointed. Yet the machines are also highly vulnerable. They often get blown to pieces. When the boy in the story (again!) takes one over, the Zoidaryan in charge is unable to stop him. He has become powerless other than through the machines. The latter have all but taken over. Yet they are outwitted by a mere boy.

It is significant that the shapes of the machines are derivative of Earth-type animals, past and present. They have no distinctive shape or identity of their own. They look fearsome, but must be very inadequate or they would not need such weapons; except that machines cannot be inadequate, brave, angry, hostile, . . . , etc. This persistent association of human capacities and powers with machines is evidently one of the standard tropes of this sub-genre. However, I suspect that it undermines the interpretive autonomy of the reader in ways that children could hardly be expected to understand or compensate for.⁴ The device of having the machines apparently

commanded by a humanoid is not a solution for it is the machines themselves which say things like, "You are honoured blue zoid . . . you perish before the weaponry of Krark . . . Prince of Darkness." (Figure 3) How a machine could be a prince of anything, least of all of darkness, is a wholly irresolvable question.

The language of these crude confrontations give cause for concern. Zoidzilla is given lines like: "Cowards! Traitors! I'll rip their renegade bodies to pieces for this outrage!" One does not need to be a bible-thumping moralist to question whether references to punishment, torture and dismemberment amount to a nourishing diet for young minds. Such references are neither isolated nor forced. Is it merely by chance that the symbolic associations of Zoid-aryan suggest "mechanical Nazi"? Figure 3 shows that this Zoidaryan certainly believes that "Namer and his friends . . . must be punished most severely." The combination of negative derived power, falsely transcribed emotions and capacities, exaggerated biological features (such as the weapon phallus) and sub-human cruelty creates a pattern of systematic distortion. Perhaps material of this kind should carry health warnings.

4. He-Man: The Siren Song⁵

One is hardly surprised to find that on Eternia a constant battle takes place between good and evil, between He-Man and Skeletor. The former is based at Castle Grayskull which possesses some sort of magic essential to Eternia. Skeletor, Lord of Destruc-

tion, is aided by assorted nasties while He-Man's companions include a sorceress who can change into a bird and Orco, a small flying humanoid with much magic but no lower body. Most of the time He-Man is the gentle and meek Adam. But when danger threatens, he is suddenly transformed (Figure 4).

In **Siren Song**, Skeletor has brought a new machine to attack Castle Grayskull. It emits a powerful noise (the "siren song") which causes the walls of the castle to crumble. He-Man and friends deal with Skeletor's monstrous associates but it is Orco who saves the day. He simply casts a spell and the machine falls to pieces. Problem solved!

The first thing to notice about the story is that it is not really a story at all. Very little happens: basically a threat and a rebuff. The profuse illustration barely conceals the extreme poverty of the plot. Consider the way that Adam becomes He-Man. He utters a wish: "By the power of Grayskull . . . I am the power" and is transformed. This is a complete inversion of the real-life process of human development which takes effort, application and work over a sustained period. Here it is attained instantaneously merely by speaking the magic words: basic wish-fulfilment. This inversion also disrupts the "Masters of the Universe" label given to the comics, toys and TV series. For *no real mastery can be seen in these slight tales*. The characters are insufficiently coherent to be taken as such. They "defeat" Skeletor (death) by invoking magic,

waving a weapon or deploying a crude *deus ex machina*.

The latter is deployed in **The Siren Song** through Orco's magic which, by being able to destroy machines, is more powerful than the rationality they represent. Yet this is not the supra-rationality of any authentic spiritual tradition. Instead it represents a regression to the crude (and cruel) power of the pre-rational. This is basically stone age consciousness clothed in garments borrowed from many cultures.

The term "siren song" refers, of course, to Greek myth; to the lure of the half-wild, half-human. But there is nothing whatever siren-like or song-like about Skeletor's machine or the noise it makes. Here is another transference of rich human associations which have been stripped of meaning, context and coherence. Similarly Castle Grayskull has an awkward and unsustainable role. It is a symbol of death which is used here as a source of power (life). This can be read as a further atavism: a reference back to the sub-human practice of ritual sacrifice.⁶ Furthermore, by identifying death in such a loose and incoherent way with evil *and* good, it deprives the child of the possibility of resolving its most basic anxieties.

It is safe to conclude that the Masters of the Universe are nothing of the sort. If they cannot handle basic categories such as good, evil, life, death, pre-rational, transrational, they cannot be masters of anything, and certainly not of their own under-dimensioned selves! The surface col-

Figure 4
He-Man



our, the bright images and the action-filled pace serve to conceal a radical poverty of insight and imagination. This material is not worthy of children for it is literally beneath them. It "knows" less than they do.

5. Thundercats ⁷

Much of the foregoing applies to this clone of *Masters* . . . so to avoid repetition I will just discuss one aspect of this example. Figure 5 shows five panels from the strip. The first shows Lynxana *before* confronting the hero, or more particularly, his sword. She is pictured as being strong, lithe, capable and determined (if somewhat improbably shaped). Her left hand rests aggressively on her hip and her right hand holds a weapon she is clearly prepared to use. She looks straight out of the picture: no submissiveness here!

Yet the second frame presents a complete contrast. Here she is falling back. Her weapon is pointed down and away. She is off-balance, no longer in control. Over her looms the mighty and dominant figure of Lion-O, legs apart and sword held threateningly overhead. Energy cascades from the raised weapon. Lynxana cries, "... the sword! It's disrupting the force-field!" She is very clearly overwhelmed by the symbol and expression of male dominance. Her own personal "force-field" has certainly been disrupted. She is pictured in complete submission to his, or rather the sword's, incontrovertible power. There can be few images anywhere which depict the primitive asymmetrical relationship of male

dominance and female submission with such stark and uncompromising clarity.

In the third and fourth panels Lynxana is shown standing behind Lion-O who is now using the sword to defend them both. She develops a sudden intense dislike of the creature attacking them: "this Mumm-Ra reeks of cruelty, of wickedness and pain! I've never encountered a being so vile!" Her thoughts turn back to her defender: "No-one deserves to fall to a monster like that! No-one!" Her conversion is complete. The last frame shows her clearly in her diminished and secondary place behind the hero who is still battling with his sword. From her stance of confident splendour at the beginning of the strip she now seems to cower behind the mighty-thewed hero who, with the monster, now dominates the frame, the story and the world. The sub-text is not hard to read. Women had better learn their place or be destroyed.

6. Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future

It is 2147 and the Earth has been laid waste by the metal wars: "when man fought machine and machines won." Lord Dread rules the Bio-Dread empire from Volcania, his stronghold and fortress. Bio-dreads are "monstrous creations that hunt down survivors and *digitise* them." But from the fires of conflict have arisen "a new breed of warrior, born and trained to bring down Lord Dread's empire. . . They are the Soldiers of the Future . . . Mankind's last hope."⁸

Figure 5
Thundercats



Captain Jonathon Power leads the team. He is "master of the incredible power suits which transform each soldier into a one-man attack force." The result is "the most powerful fighting force in Earth's history." This small group lives underground in a hidden base with other survivors of the metal wars. They are permanently under threat, but seem to live quite well between emergencies. They have access to a supporting infrastructure which mostly remains out of sight but clearly provides them with food, weapons, communications systems and the like.

Lord Dread is part man, part machine. He sits atop a high-tech console to direct his heartless empire. Yet, at times, he can move and even feel—just like any other human. But his *raison d'être* seems to be pitting his machines against the remnants of humanity in this ruined, post-catastrophe world. He has access to a machine intelligence which advises him, to countless android soldiers and to flying robots which obey his every command.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Captain Power and his associates do not use androids or robots. But they surely could. They have a "supercomputer" which contains the persona of a now-dead leader. So clearly the technical capacity exists to duplicate Dread's forces. Yet they rely instead on the power suits. Once the latter are donned and powered up a flare of electrical energy transforms these puny humans into powerful fighting machines which can fly, heft enormous weapons and withstand all but the most over-

whelming blast. If the suits are breached they "short out", leaving the wearer exhausted and nakedly vulnerable.

The conflicts in this ravaged earth seem interminable. Yet, curiously, neither side seems able to defeat the other. There is a permanent stalemate. Individual episodes seem to follow a common pattern: a problem or threat is experienced and some dangerous action follows (invariably causing the destruction of many of Dread's anonymous troops). Some sort of confrontation takes place between the principals, a resolution occurs . . . then it is back to routine survival.

The series shares many of the features of examples discussed above: endemic conflict, violent confrontation, destructive machines, easy transformations to augmented states of power. But there is also one major difference. In **Captain Power** . . . the line between persons and machines is decisively breached. Dread is the machine-like man, "heartless", yet capable of emotion. Both he and Power have access to disembodied "intelligences" which are embodied in machines but act *as if* they were still, in some sense, human. They seem to speak, reason, understand. But there are two other features which stamp the series with the cold imprimatur of depersonalisation. One is the ability of Dread's flying robot to "digitise" people; the other is constituted by the power suits themselves.

In this context, to "digitise" signifies the ability of machines to reduce a living person to constituent elements

which are "coded", stored and re-assembled at will. The device has been used in many contexts (e.g. **Star Trek**) to overcome the problems of transporting people across vast distances quickly enough so as not to strain the audience's patience. But here it is used as an instrument of domination. The opening sequence shows a woman screaming as she is torn apart by the disintegrating ray. She will later be reassembled for further abuse. The apotheosis of the machine is complete and its power is absolute. It is an awesome power for it incorporates both the ability to destroy life and to reconstitute it. As such it draws to itself all the mythic resonance of human history and culture which has sublimated the yearning of humankind to breach the bonds of death. Such machines, were they possible, would guard the gates of eternity and quite literally be God-like in their omnipotence.

There is another important feature of this process. It is the assumption that life can somehow be "coded" and, for a while, exist, or be conserved, in a different nonliving state. This view is similar to that adopted by proponents of "artificial intelligence" (AI) who see no difference in principle between the human brain/mind system and its synthetic analogues. However the assumption is a dangerous one. I do not know if we will ever see "machines that think." However, I am fairly sure that if AI ever becomes a reality that what we mean by "thinking" and what a machine might "mean" by it would be utterly different. For to be human and to have human qualities and needs, etc. re-

quires that one be born, possess a body and indeed a biography which yields memory, experience and identity. The "identity" of machines must, at this point, be considered wholly problematic. It is therefore a major error to attribute human qualities to machines which, so far as anyone can see, in fact remain derivative and dependent entities. Hence, the notion that the biological structures and processes which support life can be "copied", "reduced", "stored" or otherwise manipulated is revealed as an unsustainable conceit, a category error which should not be blindly accepted, even though it is repeatedly modelled on TV and film.

The power suits have a different role. They make palatable that which is wholly unacceptable. That is, depersonalisation—the rendering of human beings into machines or machine-like states of dependence. Here a technical process *seems* to convey power and near-complete invulnerability. Yet to attain these capacities, people must yield up their humanness: the warmth of their flesh, the grace of their movement, the autonomy of their being-in-the-world. They must become armoured, shielded, enclosed in a metal and plastic skin, separated from each other and the (residual) ecology upon which they still depend. In this process most of human life is marginalised or eliminated altogether. Here there is no room for gentleness, insight, caring. Similarly, the natural world has all but disappeared. Perhaps a machine will replace that too.

I conclude that the "power" which the

good captain, his colleagues and, indeed, Lord Dread, aspire to possess is of an inferior and derivative kind. It is a negative and destructive power which has become dissociated from its human and cultural sources and vested in sub-human forms (i.e. machines). As such, the struggle to survive on this or any world is irresolvable. The ultimate message of this particular fiction is that humans have lost control and, in so doing, they have also lost their souls.

Discussion

Three conclusions emerge at this point. First, much of the material is formulated and expressed via the display of surfaces which lack temporal context, humanity, society and ecological substance. The paucity of these under-dimensioned surrogate worlds may provide part of the motivation to scour all of human and natural history for symbols, references and meanings. But the use which is made of these resources cannot do them, or subsequent readers/viewers justice. For to be incorporated in these thin and motiveless worlds they must first be stripped of their rich human significance and assimilated into an otherwise featureless frame. Dinosaurs, siren songs, rituals and rules all become flattened and diminished. History softens, loses focus, and eventually disappears in the pale glow of these spurious futures.

A second conclusion concerns the chronic primitivism displayed in these productions. It takes many forms, e.g. language, sexism, violence and punishment. Conflicts are endemic

in these works because they provide the major inner dynamic for the story (there being no characters to provide their own). Yet there seem to be only two types of conflict resolution: one is by destruction; the other is by *deus ex machina* (which usually means magic). In other words, these are not true strategies for dealing with conflict at all. The implicit message is that conflicts cannot be solved. You must either destroy the "enemy" by frontal assault, by deploying machines or by waving your wand/sword/phallus in the hope that some higher power will rescue you.

Finally, there is a deeper issue to which I will return in the conclusion. It concerns the ways in which the Western world view incorporates particular modes of understanding, with their specific strengths and confusions. One of the latter is the confusion of ontological levels: the fact that plants have qualities rocks do not; that animals have qualities lacked by plants; that people have qualities which are simply unavailable to either animals or machines. Yet Western cultures have lost sight of these distinctions due to the homogenisation of the world through the scientific revolution. The Newtonian/Cartesian synthesis constructed a mode of understanding and of action which did, indeed, provide access to immense technical power. However, the dominance of its instrumental mode of rationality has blurred our vision. It has helped us lose sight of a qualitatively differentiated world and its pattern of emergent qualities.

This helps to explain why these fic-

tions are so confused. Here are machines which have had human qualities illegitimately "read upon" them. Here too there are humans, and humanoid monsters which exhibit sub-human and machine-like regressions: compulsive destructiveness, fear, narrow and reactive responses. Here death masquerades as life, and life as death. Even the magic has no coherence. It is both mightier than machines (rationality) and weaker than them (pre-rationality). It is basically a manifestation of simple wish-fulfilment.

Hence the cosmology of these stories is deranged. Their reality-principles are incoherent. Of the examples considered, only the gentle ironies of Theobald and his machine provide sufficient imaginative latitude for the construction of useful responses and meanings. As frameworks for deriving understandings about human dilemmas the others are worse than useless because they fail to bring atavisms to full consciousness where they could be worked through and transcended. Instead they drive the young back toward the dark and primitive past.

These "futuristic" fantasies are, in fact, archaic.

PART TWO

TECHNOTOPIA UNLIMITED

1. Living in the Future⁹

Living in the Future is the name of a book and a children's TV series aired in the UK in 1981. The main theme can be summarised as "how microcomputers will improve our lives." This proposition is repeated many times. Both the series and the book present a succession of bright and superficially attractive images: wrist TVs, a space shuttle (before the Challenger disaster), a futuristic house, a pleasure dome, and so on.

Perhaps the most useful image is that which compares 17th and 20th century landscapes. It usefully invites speculation about how processes of development might continue or change. However, the crucial theme of humankind's relations with nature are not explored, not seen as a possible future-shaping issue or concern.

The most unhelpful and biased image is that of the technologist doctor examining a patient with the aid of remotely controlled machines. To equate future health with technology in this way is to misrepresent both, particularly if one believes that the latter is at best marginally supportive of health. If a comparison had been made with convivial or decentralist alternatives, some useful contrasts could have been drawn. However, the emphasis throughout the series and the book is upon the external construction of the future through technology. There is no hint of the

personal and institutional changes which many others see as crucial to any livable future.¹⁰

These productions are overwhelmingly optimistic in tone and presentation. The future they portray is basically safe, affluent, northern, white and anthropocentric. Far from dealing with future alternatives in the plural, it represents an illustration of a high-tech energy and resource intensive scenario for Western societies.¹¹ Unconsciously biased material of this kind is unsuitable for general use since it conceals interests, assumptions and commitments and makes one particular view of futures seem "natural". It may therefore reduce options by reinforcing taken-for-granted understandings. The result may be educational in intent but it is mystificatory in effect.

2. The Usborne Book of the Future¹²

This book is comprised of three separately published segments. One features ROBOTS, and adds almost as an afterthought "Science and Medicine into the 21st Century". A second highlights FUTURE CITIES, while a third concentrates on STAR TRAVEL. The three segments are profusely illustrated and most of the illustrations are of bigger and better machines. Here are robot-controlled aircraft, nuclear powered asteroids, star probes, floating cities, fully mechanised farms and so on. The ostensible subject is "the future" but the real subject is technophilia, or love of machines.

The images in this production have