



Science Fiction, The Future, and Now: Some Mid-Life Reflections from a Life- Long Fan

Susan Mandala

It all started with *Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope*. That was the first one, back in 1977. I was nine. I don't remember the theatre, or who I went with, or if I had popcorn. But the film – that has stayed with me ever since. I walked in a child, just going to see a movie. I walked out transformed, newly aware of the power of narrative. Stories were not just for fun: they *meant* something. Mythic understanding dawned in my soul that day as the unending battle between good and evil played out before me. Intuitively, I knew that “a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away” is always here and now. The first stirrings of what it might mean to live wisely, or at least to try, began that day.

All this I owe to *Star Wars*. In the eighties when I was coming of age, “serious” fiction was still the canonical fare – Dickens, Jane Austen, Hardy, Faulkner, and so on. This did me no harm, and certainly a great deal of good. But always, when I had the choice, I returned to science fiction and fantasy, and somewhere in the early 2000s, I never left. Thankfully, these genres have now (mostly) taken their rightful place as valued literatures, and readers familiar with my work will know my arguments about the power of language in these texts. What I want to do in this piece is reflect more widely on how the formative science fiction of my youth relates to the world we find ourselves in today. I shall consider my reflections in three categories: predictions that have not come to pass, predictions that have, and predictions where we seem to be teetering on the edge.

Some predictions in our science fiction remain fiction and seem whimsical. We do not, for instance, whizz around on *hoverboards* (*Back to the Future II*), *landspeeders* (*Star Wars*) have not replaced cars, and we do not have individual flying craft to access our stratospherically high apartment blocks or floating schools (*The Jetsons*). Other unfulfilled predictions seem to

serve more serious narrative purposes. While it might be tempting to put *Star Trek's transporter* with the whimsical examples, I think it has more to say to us. I have great affection for Reg Barclay, the character in *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)* who travelled by shuttle as often as he could because he feared the transporter. If I were in the same future as Reg, I too would be in the shuttle – it seems to me very rational to fear a form of travel where you are turned into energy, shot through space in some sort of “beam,” and then turned back into matter at the other end.¹ What could go wrong? Multiple *Star Trek* episodes ponder this very question, and yet Reg's fear of the transporter was deemed a phobia in his character arc. I think his story explores at least two significant issues that remain with us. One is the question of how we decide what is and is not a diagnosable mental illness. Reg is presented as a brilliant but neurotic and somewhat troublesome character who does not fit comfortably with the rest of the ennobled *TNG* crew. He is the one that needs treatment, the one who is “broken” and needs to be “fixed” to be brought in line with what is “normal.” And yet, he often turns out to be right. The second issue enters deeper territory still. Are we matter or energy? I will leave that one for individuals to ponder as they will.

Other predictions that started as science fiction are now reality – the mobile phone, voice-activated computers, satellite navigation. Such predictions frequently appear on lists of things science fiction got right, but I find them interesting for another reason. When textually introduced, these yet-to-come innovations can be rhetorically presented as already come to pass, part of the unremarkable norm (Stockwell 34). This makes sense in terms of fictional world-building but it cuts out the journey to that norm, which is often messy. Tad Williams shows us some of this in his futuristic quartet *Otherland*. Here, virtual reality is the norm, but there are allusions to a hopelessly naïve past (our near present) when people accidentally starved to death in their then-new virtual worlds, forgetting that the food their minds thought they were eating didn't nourish their physical bodies.

Clearly, technological innovations do not reach all of society evenly at once. Early adopters rush forward to embrace the new, others grudgingly come on board only after it can no longer be avoided, some just never buy in at all. All of these people co-exist for a time, in workplaces, families, friendship groups, neighbourhoods, and cities, their relationships to each other and the world recalibrated and mediated by the new thing. Having lived through several transitions from science fiction idea to real thing, I find I am one of the grudging resisters. While many welcome the convenience of internet banking as a seamless part of their everyday lives, I find myself traveling further and further to the dwindling number of physical branches, where even the bank staff seem to wonder why I don't want internet banking. I switched from a landline to a mobile only when I had to – after discovering that people with mobiles were beating me to properties I wanted when I was buying my first flat. I do a great deal of walking, and to this day, I prefer printed A-to-Z maps. Not that long ago, I was amazed to meet someone who had never seen one. How long before A-to-Z maps are no longer sold and exist only as museum items or curios? The

¹ I am indebted here to the website <https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Transporter>. I had wrongly assumed that transporter technology broke us down into our molecules and then reassembled them upon arrival at our destination. Also a bad way to travel.

physical printed map, centuries old, might disappear in my lifetime. What will go with it? Our ability to navigate? Another one of our increasingly tenuous connections to the physical landscape? As we move into a future where our science fictional ideas may overtake us, I think it wise to give thought to what we might be losing as we bring to life what was once only imagined.

And that brings me to the most interesting category of predictions – those we seem to be just on the cusp of adopting. Extended space travel is one example. While this is still in its infancy and may or may not happen, it is taken more seriously now than when I was growing up. But amongst the many conversations that are had about it, there is one thing I seldom hear discussed. As M. Night Shyamalan warned us in *The Village*, escaping to a new environment does you no good if you take the same old sins (greed, violence, fear) with you. We cannot run from ourselves.

And neither, it seems, can we run from robots and AI. Of all the imagined worlds in the science fiction of my youth, it was dystopic futures run by intelligent machines that seemed to obsess us the most. The *Terminator* films and *The Matrix* still loom large in my imagination, and *The Matrix* especially has become a common reference point in our public discourse as we grapple with the algorithms to which we are increasingly subjected. Computer automation, of the kind that makes cash machines possible, is one thing. Computer automated telephone menus are quite another – talking to a machine when I want to talk to a person has always seemed to me an uncomfortable concession. But ChatGPT and similar AI chatbots? Now I am alarmed. I accept that AI is here now, to stay, and that it can be useful in many ways. But some of those uses are, in my view, concerning, particularly when it comes to writing.

Writing is hard. It takes time. And we are all busy. So an AI that can help with this and save time may at first look like a good thing. I want, however, to sound a note of caution as both a writer and someone who believes we are empowered by our own writing. If you get an AI to give you some ideas for something you need to write – a post, your web text, a proposal – and then edit those ideas, you are running surface operations on ideas that an AI served up to you. Generating our own ideas and choosing from a pre-selected list strike me as two very different things. And if you say “Oh, but I only get the AI to help with structuring my ideas,” then you are not grappling with that structure yourself. Why does this matter? In my view, it matters because *writing is thinking*. If we are not doing our own writing, we are not doing our own thinking. The structure of your work is not an optional extra, but an articulation of *your* argument – *your* assessment of how the ideas *you* have come up with logically fit together. If you get an AI to do that, you are not making that logical assessment. Every time we grapple with our own ideas and use our own minds to think through and solve problems, we are thinking. Whether this is restructuring our argument, or doing more research to enrich it, or innovating in some way, we get better at it. We learn more and more and become more skilled, more creative, and more effective. Every time we ask an AI to do these things for us, it seems to me that we deny ourselves these opportunities to grow and learn. Where might that end? Several classic *Trek* episodes have asked that same question (“Return of the Archons,” “The Apple”). In these episodes, the *Enterprise* crew land on a planet and discover the inhabitants are, unbeknownst to them, being controlled in all aspects of their lives by an AI.

Captain Kirk and Co. inevitably discover this and destroy the AI to save the people from its tyranny.

People will engage with AI in their own way and make their own choices about how to use it and embed it in their day-to-day lives – I am not here to tell anyone what to do. But as we make these choices, I ask only that we do so carefully and consider what we might over time be putting at risk – our capacity to think and learn independently. Is using AI to outsource our thinking a convenience too far? We should at least ask the question.

By way of conclusion, allow me to quote the “rules” Douglas Adams, widely known for *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, devised to explain our relationship with technology (reprinted in *The Salmon of Doubt* from an original article in *The Sunday Times*).²

1. Anything that is in the world when you are born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works.
2. Anything that’s invented between when you’re fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it.
3. Anything invented after you’re thirty-five is against the natural order of things.

Now in mid-life, maybe I fall into the final category of those prone to complaining when things change. Or maybe we need to pay more attention to our science fiction.

Biography: Dr Susan Mandala is the founder of Writing Works Consulting, a writing and language consultancy dedicated to helping people in a diverse range of professions achieve their highest level of achievement and professional fulfilment through more effective writing and critical thinking. A specialist in stylistics, the study of choice in language, Susan concentrates on the way language works in writing. She has a PhD from the University of Cambridge and was for many years an academic at the University of Sunderland. She has published two books (*Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy: The Question of Style* and *Twentieth Century Drama as Ordinary Talk: Speaking Between the Lines*) and numerous scholarly essays and journal articles. Now an independent author and freelance writing and language consultant, Susan designs and delivers bespoke workshops on diverse aspects of language and decision-making in writing.

Works Cited

Stockwell, Peter. *The Poetics of Science Fiction*. Longman, 2000.

² Here, I quote the “rules” and the publication details from Becher, Jonathan. “Douglas Adams’ Technology Rules.” 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2014/07/07/douglas-adams-technology-rules/>. Accessed 14 November 2024.