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Predictive Fictions and Speculative Futures

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The future is all around us. We are constantly planning for it, making decisions based on our ideas of what it will look like, borrowing its imagined aesthetic. Often the future is so integrated into the mundanity of our lives that we forget we're dealing with the future at all: planting, ordering deliveries, putting aside savings, going to the gym, paying a mortgage. These implications of known future start to accumulate a sheen of certainty, even when we *know* they're not necessarily true.

Take meteorology. It is an inexact science, and we all know that; we joke about the weather report being wrong. But it's still treated like non-fiction: the weather forecast often appears on the news, and not just as percentages, but with statements like "Tomorrow will be sunny!" or "Bring your umbrella!" A little sociology, like the excellent article "Ground Truth" by Gary Alan Fine[1], shows just how fragile the scientific veneer is. Inexact measurements for one location are treated as precise data for an entire city; percentages are cannily used to reduce errors that can be tracked.

This sort of quantitative uncertainty masked as certainty is repeated throughout our society: economic forecasts, profit projections, election and policy polling, cost–benefit analyses for new construction projects, safety analyses. These predictions are reported with the news or presented as practically fact. We may, as savvy media consumers, take them with a grain of salt, but they are still considered an entirely different category from science fiction. Yet, that's exactly what they are: fictions with a greater or lesser degree of scientific basis.

The cumulative effect of so many futures that are assumed to be unassailably true is often a sense that the future is predictable, that science and

[1] Fine, Gary Alan. "Ground Truth: Verification Games in Operational Meteorology." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, vol.* 35, no. 1, 2006, pp. 3–23

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probability, big data and math, or ultimately authority and wealth, can tell us with a reasonable degree of certainty what's going to happen, and that we should trust them. It's easy to forget that nobody knows the future.

Most of these types of predictive fictions-masquerading-as-facts are quantitative. They use probabilities or careful data selection or any number of other tricks to make the results look the way we want. All of this works mainly because of our societal delusion that numbers are true.

Numbers are great: I'm particularly fond of minimum and maximum benchmarks, quantitative data visualizations like graphs, and that surprising number that is so much higher or lower than expected. Numbers can be a tool of liberation as easily as they can contribute to oppression or retrench existing power. But numbers, inevitably, are incomplete. Quantitative data, in the sense that it is usually used today, requires simplification and standardization. Estimates — since we have neither the observational nor the computational power to be exact about anything reasonably complex — are used to approximate some impersonal kind of truth or rationality.

In fact, even more so than the reliance on the quantitative, it's the impersonality of these predictions that seems to give them the aura of fact in our socially constructed evaluations. The weather forecast typically includes narrative as well as numbers, but it's always a narrative about an abstract, uniform "you" who prefers umbrellas to getting wet and enjoys going outside in the sunshine. If humans appear at all in these predictions, they appear as stick figures or stock photos, tiny placeholders in a maquette or B-clip videos of people walking through weather. In his book *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*[2], Lee Clarke documents the ridiculous, sense-defying contingency plans composed by dangerous industries — such as oil shipping or nuclear power plants — to justify the investment in such objectively risky enterprises. These are typically narratives, but narratives populated by categories rather than individuals: "City bus drivers will navigate into the fallout zone to evacuate residents"; "Parents will wait for their children at the meeting point".

People are weird and individual. They act in unexpected ways. This happens all the time and has frequently impacted history, from the flopping of products expected to be hits to wars started in a fit of pique or negotiations that concluded successfully because of sudden personal sympathy. People decide to migrate because of love or dreams, make economically irrational decisions because of family or affection for a municipality or affinity for a job or a group of friends. Leaving human idiosyncrasies out is always, *always* going to leave gaps and misapprehensions, sometimes crucial ones, in predictions of the future.

Narrative predictions like science fiction can, if they're done well (and this is an important caveat that I'll come back to), imagine futures that take into account humans as individuals. They may not predict the precise variety of weirdness correctly (although they can and have, sometimes with startling accuracy). But at the very least, such stories can remind us that the future will be weird, that it will be composed of many individuals interacting and, perhaps

[2] Clarke, Lee. Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster. U of Chicago P, 1999.

most importantly, that its unfolding will *affect* real humans (and other species), not only "consumers", "residents", or "the economy."

Of course, it's not always done well. Just as science fiction has varying degrees of rigor or understanding of the underlying science, it may be more or less plausible in its depiction of human beings, their actions, and relationships. We've all read or watched stories in which characters seem as empty of personality as mannequins, or in which a character is developed only to do something completely uncharacteristic for plot reasons, or in which the characters are only stereotypes. Sometimes this is obvious to anyone with a critical approach to media; other times it's more subtle, or requires specialized knowledge. There's a long-running trope of mass panic and violence in disaster movies (and many other disaster stories), even though all of the factual disaster literature as well as my own personal experience working in multiple disasters agrees that this does not happen. Taking fictional narratives seriously as futurist thinking also means we need to find ways to evaluate their rigor across a number of axes, just as we need to scrutinize the methodology of scientific papers.

Another advantage of science-fictional narratives is that, unlike many of the supposedly non-fictional predictions mentioned earlier, they rarely try to present themselves as certain. Science fiction is explicitly fiction, and such an explicit attitude of uncertainty is also important to maintain in our relationship with the future. Too many of the predictions we encounter pretend that the future is certain and, in its vastness and impersonality, *out of our hands*. According to projections, the economy will go up or down, consumers will or will not shop, likely voters are likely to vote, and the housing development will bring a profit for investors. Despite the fact that none of these things will happen without individual actions, the individuals are erased from the prediction as though the result was inevitable.

Uncertainty may be frightening, but it can also be hopeful. Most importantly, it brings agency. Science fiction narratives remind us, in the face of calculated corporate certainty, that the future is ours to make and make again.

Biography: Malka Older is a writer, aid worker, and sociologist. Her science fiction political thriller *Infomocracy* was named one of the best books of 2016 by Kirkus, Book Riot, and *Washington Post*. She created the serial *Ninth Step Station* on Realm, and her acclaimed short story collection *And Other Disasters* came out in November 2019. Her novella *The Mimicking of Known Successes*, a murder mystery set on a gas giant planet, will be published in March 2023. She is a Faculty Associate at Arizona State University, where she teaches on humanitarian aid and predictive fictions, and hosts the Science Fiction Sparkle Salon. Her opinions can be found in *The New York Times, The Nation, Foreign Policy,* and *NBC THINK*, among other places.