

Book Reviews

Katina Michael

Films from the Future

Films from the Future: The Technology and Morality of Sci-Fi Movies
By Andrew Maynard. Mango Press, 2018, 293 pp.

Films from the Future is an ambitious collection of well-organized reflections that attempts to explore the technology and morality of twelve science fiction movies. It is intriguing that author Andrew Maynard has chosen to take away significant positive learnings from cult classics such as *Minority Report* that would otherwise be considered as backdrops for a dystopian future.

I was once told by Brian Cantrell of the World Building Media Lab at USC that “dystopia was easy and utopia was really hard” (1). Cantrell’s lab director is *Minority Report*’s Production Designer, Alex McDowell (2) who has given many a talk about how stories can shape the future (3). So I questioned from the outset how Maynard’s book might well make us stop and think and ask questions like: “how can we learn from science fiction scenarios, and how can we do better without making the same mistakes in the real world”? In essence, what is the takeaway message for society from dystopian stories?

To an extent, some of the visions presented by films like *Minority Report* have come true, despite that the movie completely missed the role that smartphones and social media would play. In “Can we predict

when and where a crime will take place?” BBC reporter Mark Smith, takes us on a brief introduction of the capabilities of software like PredPol, Palantir, and CrimeScan (4) but cautions we are not there yet in terms of AI-based predictive policing. But we can already contrast this retrospective hot spot analysis capability with new forms of facial recognition software detecting persons in mass crowds, as has been demonstrated in China (5), and even the hope to create a crime time machine (6).

Maynard’s book, which is written in a very accessible manner, in almost a conversational tone one might say, comes with excellent sources, providing evidence to content that would otherwise be challenged by some who would claim that they are distant futures. Maynard uses peer-reviewed papers to support assertions as one would expect from an academic and former columnist for *Nature Nanotechnology*, but unashamedly intermingles this with references to mainstream media. There is something to be said about this methodology by an expert communicator of science in general. The further one gets into the book, the more one trusts the insights of this author implicitly asking the same questions preemptively: “where is all this leading us, as a global conscious community?”

What all of the science fiction movies that Maynard has purposely hand-picked for us to engage with have in common is conflict. It is not only that these movies are couched in suspense, and are thrillers, but that their contents challenge our personal values: plainly, what is important to every one of us. They take us out of our comfort zone and somehow reinforce all that is healthy about our world, and help us to see more clearly those things that are unhealthy. In the endless possibility of technological and scientific trajectories, the reader knows instinctively which are destructive. Death is the ultimate harm, the ultimate toll

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humans may have to face for their discoveries; only extinction of the species can be worse. But how can we make things better for our present and generations to come? If we can detect those things that are obviously not good for us, might we be able to prevent falling into the purported “inevitable” (8).

In some way, we attempt to resolve the conflicts presented to us by analyzing what are the real threats as opposed to perceived threats, and we consider suitable strategies to prevent or resolve the conflict. Science fiction also has a way of challenging government-industrial complex “group think.” In *That Hideous Strength*, C.S. Lewis masterfully presents a new government-funded research facility at the fictional University of Edgestow, aptly named the “National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments” (N.I.C.E.) with questions surrounding the natural limits of innovation. It

interim — are restored to useful practice and people marshal toward hopeful and sustainable futures.

The deeper one gets into *Films from the Future*, the more one questions why *these* twelve movies. What is so special about them? What unfolds is a narrative that builds one layer on top of the other, and a chronological thematic inquiry that reaches its climax in chapter 13 dedicated to *Contact*. Maynard takes us on a fantastical ride through time — from what looks to be about the beginning and the presence of dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*, to the potential for human cloning in *Never Let Me Go*, to artificial intelligence, the advent of bioprinting, human augmentation and genetic engineering, to an age of singularity in *Transcendence*, climate change, and finally considering the vast expanse that is space. It is as if the Creation story plays out, and then a doomsday Apocalypse threatens, only for humans to search beyond earth and into the stars for their ultimate glory.

Some readers would have watched perhaps a few of the sci-fi films selected by Maynard like *Ex Machina*, but *Films from the Future* is also set to encourage a whole new following of lesser known movies like *The Man in the White Suit* that depicts the struggle between an innovator and the unintended consequences his innovation causes.

About the only thing I can be critical of Mango Press about is the absence of a few images that might well have been able to bring the book to life in a different way; and perhaps some select quotations from the featured films that may have been interweaved into May-

nard’s narrative or noted in the margins. I admit I love direct quotes!

One thing for certain, Maynard presents an excellent summation of the topics that will invariably always preoccupy humankind. Inherent in this book are issues of control and risk. Students in particular will be served well in interdisciplinary courses that interrogate the subject matter from a variety of lenses — social, technical, ethical, and legal. And the book provides a starting point for the study of the future. It is one of the best summaries I’ve come across.

Reviewer Information

Katina Michael is a Professor in the School of Computing, Informatics, and Decision Systems Engineering at Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ. Email: katina.michael@asu.edu.

References

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Some topics will invariably preoccupy humankind: inherent in this book are issues of control and risk.

takes the youthful new recruit, Mark Studdock, an ambitious sociologist, to save the world from the establishment, and François Alcasan whose head was recovered by the N.I.C.E. after the French scientist was murdered, and has been kept alive by technology seemingly communicating with Macrobes (7).

Somehow at the heart of sci-fi is returning power to the people who almost always regain control before things get completely out of hand. But we learn that our freedom comes at a cost. The reassuring aspect of Maynard’s work is that justice prevails, despite the ominous lurking of some technological beast that is waiting to be unleashed, beckoning for a movie sequel. Technology and its application — at least in the