

Science fiction becomes science fact

Author: Alistair Duff

When one considers the popularity of shows such as Black Mirror it is clear that there is still very much of an audience for science fiction. Many of the ideas from the show have ended up as computer games and it seems that hardly any new idea can pop up before someone socially notes that “it is so Black Mirror”. However, something has changed, inventions created for entertainment were just that: fun and amazing ideas of what the future held. As more and more of these wonders of science fiction come into being, the future that contains them seems remarkably closer.

There is a solid basis for this logic when we look back at the impossible ideas contained in popular series of yesteryear. Some part of a story was often so fantastical that the aspects that are now part of our daily lives may have been missed. Head of the queue in those who know are the “Trekkies”, the long-standing, and at times long-suffering, fans of the series, Star Trek. Despite a good deal of questionable storylines and special effects, it is difficult to find a show that has more successfully imagined the technology we use today. Having a conversation from ship to planet has never been a problem for Captain Kirk; he would simply flip open his communicator. Needless to say, it was wireless. Not only was he using a mobile phone, the “clamshell” model he used was proudly launched by Motorola. It was called “StarTac”. His successor, Captain Picard, spent a lot of time deciding best case space scenarios on his Padd. The whole crew had them a significantly long time before any of us got the Apple version. Even the famous phrase, “phasers set to stun”, employed different science but had the same effect as tasers or stun guns today. To be fair, other television programmes have also pointed to the future. It is reasonably likely that Elon Musk was a big fan of the Knight Industries Two Thousand (or Kitt to its friends). Knight Rider showed without a shadow of a doubt that having a self-driving and sentient automobile could be extremely handy in a pinch. That is as much as I would like to discuss the work of David Hasselhoff, other than possibly that the show’s theme tune is a remarkably effective earworm.

Pictures on the silver screen would prove equally inspirational to those who made and watched them, dumbstruck. Certainly, a filmmaker of foresight was Jules Verne, who can be proud of his amazing tales coming true. While no actual cannon was used for Apollo, it did take three men to the moon as his 1902 film “Voyage to the Moon” predicts. The French author is very much seen as the father of science fiction, and with good reason. Captain Nemo certainly had the first submarine and his rotary-based contraption, “Albatross” in his 1886 film “Robur the Conqueror” is said to have inspired Sikorsky fifty years later in creating the helicopter. As inconceivable as using a cannon to fire a rocket at the moon may sound, it very much epitomises the role of the artist/writer who presents imaginative ideas with scarce detail on how to accomplish them – which is the designated role of the scientist.

One of our most ardent interests, and at times greatest fears, is computer sentience. Creating the machine that can think for itself. The basis for this interest dates all the way back to Dr. Frankenstein and his less than congenial monster, from the novel by Mary Shelley. Since then, we have witnessed the very best and worst our minds can conceive of, although it seems the latter gets quite a lot more attention. Part of this must be attributable to Stanley Kubrick’s Classic “2001: A Space Odyssey” in which he offers a ship run by an artificial intelligence called HAL (as an inside joke each of the letters is the one before I, B, and M). It all seems pretty rosy with HAL. While you may not want him at parties, he seems extremely efficient in running a ship and keeping the crew alive... until the crew decides to switch him off, which turns out to be a spectacularly bad idea. HAL responds by turning himself into an equally efficient onboard assassin. And so, the idea of the self-serving, human disposing artificial brain was born. Since then it has run amok as the central character in many space-bound shoot ‘em ups and occasionally wreaked havoc on our own planet. The Terminator certainly kept his word and has been back quite often, if you think about it.

Science fiction far extends the boundaries of man and machine, and can often make predictions about society itself. Many of the works mentioned are now included among classic literature undefined by genre. No greatest books of all time list can

hope to pass muster without the likes of “Nineteen Eighty-Four” by George Orwell or “Brave New World” by Aldous Huxley, each with a dystopian view of the world to come. The theme of a secretive state spying on its citizenry or multinational companies rising to rule and govern society seems far more realistic and worrisome in this reality than obeying our computer overlords. To give an example of this is exceptionally easy; Orwell’s “Nineteen Eighty-Four”, first published in 1949, became the bestselling book on Amazon after the last American election. Science fiction contains many ideas, inventions, and imaginings, but it also comes with its fair share of warnings.