

Reflections on Fiction and the Future

by Justina Robson

Dear Reader,

At the end of this piece, I include a list of sources that I have consumed and consider choice for the purposes of creating SF and thinking about the future. They are heftily implicated in this cud-chewing exercise (see next paragraph).

I am not citing as if I were writing an academic paper. I was going to, but then I realised that my sources aren't the kind of things I hoped they were. They are not papers from respected journals or experiments with huge databases, all verified. They're not the cast-iron, proved-it, nailed-it kind of thing that hard science feels happy to rely on. I wanted to contemplate the nature of future-casting itself, so it's more of an experience and a philosophical deep-dive, as well as a bit of science and a bit of technology. I am listing what I've read, seen and listened to, so that you can see the fact that what I say is the chewed cud of other people's output. I'm not denigrating myself, or anyone, in stating that. I want to say it because it's the centre of my thinking on how to use fiction to think about the future. We chew over possibilities.

Future-casting is very much a bovine business (many sessions of digestion, some regurgitation, much cud, loads of potentially explosive gas and plenty of bullshit, and I am only slightly joking). However, I don't think that marketing (our self-regarding aspect) would find that an inspiring set of images, and so we should probably find gung-ho exciting cyberpunk visuals to inspire us instead, or whatever gets you going when you imagine the future. So, I'm going to say it's more like we're on Cybertron; Solus Prime is working the Forge, the tool she uses craft her innovations and the future of the Transformers. That's a lot more fun. And there are no steaming pats on

Cybertron, so instead of bullshit you can have Unverified Theoretical Blueprint Expansions. Which sounds way more saleable and convincingly appealing.¹

And now the Theoretical Blueprint Expansion (Verified by me) bit.

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TL;DR Version – these five points:

1. The future will be constructed by thought, before it is made, in every aspect where that future is determined by human behaviour. Thoughts loop with emotions so watch the feedback.
2. All human constructions exist as thoughts before they are actualized. This is as true for engineering within the individual, and the worlds of ideas circulating in the population, as it is for engineering performed to create physical change.
3. Conceptualization is a process of rearranging memory and (fictional bit) *playing it through in simulation* to come to a decision about whether to pursue actualization. Playing it through is not the same as thinking about it for a bit. Playing it through means fully realizing it as a living system working across a span of time within individuals and that takes process, and time.
4. An individual's capacity to create reasonably accurate simulations relies on the verifiability of their information; their capacity for connection-making and connection-breaking within their imagination; the depth and profundity of their emotional capability; and the sharpness of their mental faculties. And how conscious they are of the effects that their physical condition has on their faculties.²

Taking these into consideration: a good simulation of circumstances requires that all aspects of reality be taken into account and applied.

¹ This last point will seem frivolous to some serious minds. Why care about some daft fantasy about the project? It's all artistic flimflam. But I can assure you from long experience that the setting of the scene is the most important bit of any creative effort—the setting is the creator. Marketing, or how you feel about things, is the one thing you absolutely must not underestimate as a shaping power. Whether you feel responsible and caring, or that you are a superman astride the puny world, very much determines what you do and, after you've done that, how you tell yourself it was all a very good idea.

² This last bit so far massively underplayed as a feature in SF, and in life—see the recent articles on blaming men, specifically male humans, and the cultural and ideological situations they authored, for anthropic change in the environment, rather than taking it as a gender-neutral phenomenon.

But before all these things can be done a person must become aware that they too are a product of the same process: they are an accumulation of memory, curated in specific ways, to produce one or more personalities for different uses. A person able to see how they made themselves is a person able to understand how all people are made, and how they operate in a variety of conditions. And vice versa.

No matter how you want to deal with that in SF you must deal with it somehow. This is always going to be the question of where does human end and begin. How can we decide what's important if we're not able to give a good answer to that? Stretch it a bit further and you reach the living vs unliving binary, and have to think about how to deal with that, or whether it's relevant. What about including bits of unliving stuff as part of yourself, then what's what? Do you consider your data part of you? What about other people? What about the universe itself?

What about including bits of unliving stuff as part of yourself, then what's what? Do you consider your data part of you? What about other people? What about the universe itself?

When someone asks about future-casting they're often looking for answers, not just about what to do but about how to decide what to do. When I write I'm trying to figure out a situation from several points of view at once, some sympathetic to one another and some not. Stories tell you how people decided what to do and what happened as a result. They're not comprehensive in terms of covering all the exits, but they are interesting, hopefully useful, even if as guides of how not to do it.

I never think I'm writing about the future in any way other than perhaps in social and personal ways, incidentally. I assume the technological and physical reality won't be like I imagine, because I already lived from the 1970s to the present and...it isn't. I want the future to look like the shows I loved as a kid too, but that's just nostalgia. Also, I've always been an inward-turning person, trying to figure out how I work (how people work) on the inside. I don't mind what the future looks like nearly as much as I mind what it's going to feel like to live there, and not just for white guys or whoever is in the white-guy role. For everyone. Everything. This is why I find the Musk and Bezos Mars Disaster Tango upsetting. Not because reaching to expand to

other planets isn't a fun project. Because it ignores everything except the vision of a few specific humans.

Major Caveat in this Otherwise Great Project

Previous fictions by other writers make up the memories of many SF writers. One of the determining factors in becoming a professional SF writer lies in producing works which are accepted as fitting within the established continuum of SF writing. That familiarity, in all aspects of the works, can be an ossifying and anti-innovative feature. You were instructed by the past to cast your dreams in the form of going to Mars, for example. You can't think your way out of a box when your mind wants to see everything as a cube.

In addition to the storehouse of memory, there are the zeitgeist thoughtforms of the present age, which are passed from person to person through all the communications channels that we have, most employing some kind of narrative. All narratives are forms of direction.

So, the following are a person's natural resources for generating futures or possibilities:

- The mind is the lens where it focuses, there attention lends energy to whatever is being seen. This is the power/fuel. What you give attention to you will empower/tend to actualize.
- The imagination is the engine where ideas are combined into something fresh that can go somewhere, maybe a new direction. Imagination sees and offers possibilities. The imagination synthesizes.
- The intellect is the knife where analysis and dissection is performed. The intellect tests for rigor, for plausibility, for relevance, for all kinds of important features.

Fiction takes the materials that were gathered—memories—and insights from analysis

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(developed as the process of writing continues) and creates a particular experimental thoughtform in which a simulation of living as the author understands it, is run. Fiction is a testbed, reflective on lived experience (hopefully), bringing the richness of real human life into a place where it can be examined under particular circumstances.

Science Fiction and Fantasy, in addition, make use of possibilities beyond present limits. These may be external, such as possible technologies. These may be internal—where the social construction of identity and society is created as very different to any existing form. They can be revolutionary, where the nature of reality itself is re-conceptualised. (Mining Science Fiction texts for insights into possible futures is therefore a worthwhile pursuit. You might find some very interesting possibilities in there.)

Through reading stories, a person can expand their sense of potential. In addition, given the way that humans think, it is likely that their preferences or dislikes may be set by fiction. They become more or less likely to construct futures according to models they enjoy. We tend to make what we expect, not least because it already feels familiar. This feature must be treated warily. Whoever gets to create the stories creates the world.

The style of the future, its patterns of intellect, emotion and experience—as well as the aesthetics of its surroundings and technologies—will always struggle to escape the gravity well of the past (taking the present as the past here, as well). There are many features in culture which strive to preserve personal and collective power. This will be the biggest difficulty in large-scale futures engineering. Actual physical engineering developments are trivial by comparison to the human engineering required.

The real danger for future-casting lies in what is NOT examined or understood because it is invisible to us, locked in our assumptions and unexamined ideas. Not to mention the stuff churning around from the various bullshit merchants currently shoving their way about the infosphere. We should probably view them as a part of the information ecology, training us to get better at surviving incredible amounts of self-sabotage as a species.

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All our future possibilities are being made in someone's particular present, in the stories they believe and are giving their attention to. How we engineer ourselves, minute by minute, is what will determine the future for us. Take care of this minute, when you make your plans and visions, and you take care of eternity.³

³ You are an avatar, so choose your form wisely.

Some Chewed-Over Sources

Just because I ate it doesn't mean it agreed with me... 😊

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- Daniel Dennett, Douglas Hofstadter, *The Mind's I: Fantasies And Reflections On Self & Soul* (Basic Books, 2001)

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About the Author

[Justina Robson](#) is the author of many novels, novellas and short stories. The majority of her published work is Science Fiction, dealing in particular with transhumanism, genetic engineering, nanotech and human evolution. Her work concentrates on the adaptation of human beings to new ways of creating themselves and their environment with technology. She has been shortlisted for all the major awards in her field at one time or another since the start of her career in 1999, and was the winner of the 2000 Amazon.com Writers' Bursary award. She was a graduate of the commercial SF writers' workshop Clarion West in the USA in 1996 and has gone on to teach at the Arvon Foundation and as a writing mentor. In 2005 she was a judge for the Arthur C Clarke Award on behalf of the Science Fiction Foundation. In addition to her original works she also wrote *Transformers: The Covenant of Primus* in 2013. She continues to study and write at her home in Yorkshire where she lives with her husband, children and pets.