

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Science Fiction and Futures Studies

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My book, *Contemporary Futurist Thought* (2006), presents reviews of well over one hundred different theories, paradigms, and approaches to the future, ranging from the scientific, materialistic, and rationalistic to the spiritual, metaphysical, and humanistic. Reflecting the great contemporary diversity in mindsets and perspectives regarding the future, the book also includes a key chapter on science fiction. I see in science fiction a literary and narrative approach to the future, and have described it as nothing less than a new “mythology of the future.” Why “mythology”? Myth, which emerged in ancient human history, provided many visions, narratives, and prophecies of the future that still influence the minds of countless millions across the globe. Having a deep fascination with science fiction since my youth, I see the genre in its contemporary form as offering modern myths about the future, and significantly contributing into the great wealth and diversity of contemporary paradigms and approaches to the future.

Roughly a year ago, in talks with Jose Ramos, the idea emerged that perhaps it would be stimulating and worthwhile to do a special issue for the *Journal of Futures Studies* on the connections and relationships between science fiction, as a mindset and approach to the future, and non-fictional “futures studies.” I should quickly note that, first, within both science fiction and futures studies, there is a great diversity of perspectives and methods; and second, in considering how science fiction and futures studies connect with each other, there are numerous angles to take: What can science fiction teach futures studies? What can futures studies teach science fiction? Historically, what have been the types of connections and influences between the two modes of inquiry? Clearly, both science fiction and futures studies have evolved through many different forms or stages over the last hundred years—during which time the relationship between science fiction and futures studies has varied from mutual positive influence, if not indistinguishability, to apparent indifference, if not antagonism. Additionally, Jose has had a particular interest in science fiction cinema and what futures studies concepts and principles could reveal about this multimedia form of the genre.

Given all these possible perspectives and modes of inquiry, the papers included in this special issue cover a wide variety of angles on the relationship between futures studies and science fiction. Jose’s essay critically examines science fiction cinema through the eyes of

futures studies, while my article describes the mythic qualities of science fiction and how science fiction engages holistic future consciousness. Other papers deal with far-ranging themes: Comparing predictions of the future derived from science fiction versus those from futures studies; examining the value of utopian thought and experimentation in futures studies and science fiction; applying the concepts of “storyworlds” and “worldbuilding” to both science fiction and futures studies; and delving into the cosmic long term future histories of Olaf Stapledon, who along with H. G. Wells was one of the key intellectual figures of the last century, one who clearly bridged the divide between science fiction and futures studies.

We live in an era in which the critical importance, both theoretical and practical, of interdisciplinary studies is becoming increasingly apparent. In the world, everything is connected, inclusive of all the major world problems and challenges; in the mind, all the disciplinary domains of study, having existed to a great degree in mutual isolation, reach out toward each other, ripe for reciprocal enlightenment. Indeed, futures studies is an example, *par excellence*, of an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry, drawing upon the physical, social, environmental, and psychological sciences as well as the humanities, art, and spiritual inquiries. This wide breath of contributing disciplines accounts to a great degree for the great diversity of perspectives in theories and paradigms of the future. Likewise, science fiction, which can involve complex and rich scenario building about the future, draws in physical, biological, social, psychological, and cosmic themes in creating “realistic” future worlds. In this issue, we take two strongly interdisciplinary approaches to the future, and attempt to weave them together—an interdisciplinary integration of interdisciplinary domains—at least along some dimensions.

Jose asked me to include at the end of my introduction some thoughts on “where do we go from here?” Well, I’m working on a book on the historical evolution of science fiction as the mythology of the future, attempting to demonstrate, among other points, that as science fiction grew, it not only reflected ongoing developments in philosophical, social, and scientific thinking on the future, but reciprocally influenced culture (at least in the West) in the visions and values we developed regarding the future. That is to say, in creating a special issue on futures studies and science fiction, we are dipping into a very deep and expansive territory with a long history. The fiction we write on the future and the theories and methods we have developed for thinking about and studying the future have always had a strong and multi-varied influence on each other. Where we go from here, among other endeavors, is to raise our consciousness on what has been going on all along.

Tom Lombardo

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As an advocate for futures studies, its ideas, theories and methods, I have looked at science fiction with a bit of envy over the years. It gets eyeballs. It gets widely read. In cinema it is an eminently popular genre that shapes the public imagination. It is powerful. Everyone knows science fiction, few people know futures studies. And yet, in terms of its interpretive and explanatory power, futures studies is formidable, and I would argue an “untapped resource” in understanding ourselves and world. Thus my initial presumption was of futures studies finally getting its day in the sun, the key that helps unlock the hidden meanings within our collective unconscious – futures studies used to analyse and interpret science fiction. When I approached Tom Lombardo about this idea he was interested but not convinced it was about “futures studies on science fiction”. As per his introduction, he saw both on a continuum, intersecting, co-learning and believed that science fiction has as much to teach futures studies as the other way around. He even questioned the degree to which they are distinct. Nevertheless, the initial call for papers made it clear:

*“Contributors are expected to apply futures studies approaches and concepts to the subject of science fiction, as a form of critical and interpretive knowledge rather than a mere celebration or exposition of science fiction works.”*

And yet as the abstracts and contributions began to roll in, it became increasingly clear that people were fundamentally interested in science fiction’s contribution to futures studies, futures thinking and futures practice. Lombardo’s lead article “*Science Fiction: The Evolutionary Mythology of the Future*” initiates this by showing science fiction as an “evolutionary mythology of the future,” which supports “purposeful evolution” and “holistic future consciousness”. In “*Chasing Black Swans through Science Fiction: Surprising Future Events in the Stories of a Finnish Writing Competition*” Toni Ahlqvist, Tuomo Uotila, and Olli Hietanen show how the use of science fiction writing can enhance our awareness of potential Black Swans, events or occurrences that by definition cannot be forecast. In the paper “*Forcing the Design of Fictional Futures: From Theory to Cases Implementation*” Patrick Corsi uses science fiction as a leverage for conceptual design breakthroughs. Ruth-Ellen L Miller in her essay “*Impact Assessment and Science Fiction: Complementary Ways to Ask “What happens if...?” and the Delineation of a New Sub-genre*” shows the effectiveness of science fiction in supporting Environmental Impact Assessments, which she calls “Extrapolative Fiction”. Oliver Markley’s essay “*Olaf Stapledon: Personal Reflections on Cosmic Inspiration from a Pioneering Visionary*” also provides an example where the science fiction writer’s work provides a “new direction of development for futures studies involving what are currently called non-ordinary states of consciousness.” Paul Graham Raven in his essay “*Imagining the impossible: the shifting role of utopian thought in civic planning, science fiction, and futures studies*” show how planning and futurism are embedded in the much older narrative context of utopian fiction that predates futures studies by centuries, and which he argues needs to be recovered as a resources for imagining preferred futures. In the article by Peter von Stackelberg and Alex McDowell “*What in the World? Storyworlds, Science Fiction, and Futures Studies*” they show how transmedia storytelling and the use of storyworlds can “address

some of the challenges the field faces”. Thus, if we define deep learning as having our assumptions overturned, I learned something.

Nevertheless, a critical futures “FS on SF” was still represented by Rocío Carrasco, Mercedes García Ordaz, and Francisco José Martínez López in their article “*Science Fiction and Bodies of the Future: Alternative Gender Realities in Hollywood Cinema*” where they look at the transformation of gender, and gender hegemony, through contemporary cinema. I round out the critical futures analysis with “*The Wrath of Gaia vs. the Second Coming of Science: Beyond Interstellar’s Dualistic Narrative*”.

A welcome addition was *Lynda Sampson’s review of “Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future”*, the acclaimed collection and collaboration between well known science fiction author Neal Stephenson and Arizona State University’s Center for Science and the Imagination.

Overall this special issue represents a robust, diverse and practically useful collection of articles and essays, that I’m confident will make a positive contribution to the evolving knowledge base of futures studies. My deep gratitude goes to the authors who embarked on the journey with us, and a very special thank you to Tom Lombardo for partnering on this excellent project.

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