

Olaf Stapledon: Personal Reflections on Cosmic Inspiration from a Pioneering Visionary

Oliver Markley
University of Houston-Clear Lake
USA

Introduction

When I heard of the plans for a special issue of the *Journal of Futures Studies* on the interplay between science fiction and futures work, I immediately knew that I wanted to contribute an essay about Olaf Stapledon—why his writing is of such relevance to what I will describe as the central evolutionary challenge of the human race; and how his work suggests that human consciousness can be enhanced for this challenge to be resolved successfully in the very long-term future.

This essay begins with an exposition of Stapledon’s cosmically futures-oriented science fiction and ends with a visionary illustration of how his work points to a promising “new paradigm” direction of development for futures studies involving what are currently called non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSC). Thus, a number of concepts are introduced that are well beyond what is considered credible from the standpoint of the currently dominant paradigm of social reality. A preliminary version of this essay includes evidence of their credibility, as well as promising directions of exploration for both FS and SF—but alas, due to length limitations they had to be abandoned along with a number of informative footnotes. They are available, however, in an online expanded preprint [www.imaginalvisioning.com/Stapledon-Expanded-Preprint].

Stapledon as a Pioneering Visionary

W. Olaf Stapledon (1886-1950) was a visionary author who occupies a uniquely foundational position in the genres of both futures studies (FS) and science fiction (SF). This is somewhat paradoxical in that he didn’t consider himself to be either a futurist or a science fiction author. By his own admission, he thought of his principal writings as being a specific type of fiction for “myth making.” In this regard, the mythologist, Joseph Campbell called Stapledon “the dean of visionary science fiction writers;” and about Stapledon’s two principal SF/FS works, Arthur C. Clarke said of *Last and First Men* that “No book before or since has

ever had such an effect on my imagination;” and of *Starmaker* that it is “the finest work of SF ever written” (Clarke, 1983). Of necessity, this essay focuses on only these two works, and does not treat Stapledon’s other writings having recognized literary importance and are adequately treated in works such as Moskowitz (1979), Fiedler (1983) and Kinnaird (1986).

As many authors attest in various ways, Stapledon’s writings have provided an imaginative feedstock for both FS and SF writers so huge that it can never be fully mined. For example,

“Stapledon extended the boundaries of science fiction to the infinite, in terms of physical distance, time, evolution, philosophy, religion, “human” relationships, sex and virtually every area which our present civilization considers important, not excluding the arts. There are few of the outstanding modern authors who do not directly or indirectly owe him a great debt: Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Clifford D. Simak, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Eric Frank Russell and Murray Leinster, to name a very few.

“His splendid saga of the entire history of the human race from the year 1930 to its end two billion years later in *Last and First Man* (1930), to be followed by the entire history of the universe in *Star Maker* (1937), are possibly the greatest feats of controlled imagination exhibited by any human to date in fiction or scientific speculation” (Moskowitz, 1979, p.10).

A strongly opposing view is put forward by the eminent historians of SF, Alexei and Cory Panshin (1989, pp.199-202), who assert that “For all its broad horizons and sense of evolutionary possibility, we must reckon *Last and First Men* at least a failed myth, if not false one.” Their reasons are several, but can be summarized as: 1) Stapledon was unable to overcome the fate-controlled limitations of typical of thinking by authors in his historical period; and 2) his treatment of the human possibility [in both *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*] was essentially fatalistic, rather than pointing to a transcendently open-ended future for humanity.

Stapledon can also be criticized for the absence of women in these texts. Although he was following the rhetorical custom of his time in which “man” was meant to stand for women as well as men, it is important in an essay such as this to highlight this omission, so as to discourage the continuation of this sexist practice by contemporary futurists and science fiction writers.

In light of such criticisms, it should be noted that Stapledon himself explicitly placed such rhetorical limitations on his writing. As he said in his Preface to *Last and First Men*:

“If [the] imaginative construction of possible futures is to be at all potent, our imagination must be strictly disciplined. We must endeavour not to go beyond the bounds of possibility set by the particular state of culture in which we live” (p.9).

“Some readers, taking my story to be an attempt at prophecy, may deem it unwarrantably pessimistic. But it is not prophecy; it is myth, or an essay in myth. We all desire the future to turn out more happily than I have figured it. In particular we desire our present civilization to advance

steadily toward some kind of Utopia. The thought that it may decay and collapse, and that all its spiritual treasure maybe lost your irrevocably, is repugnant to us. Yet this must be faced as a least a possibility. And this kind of tragedy, the tragedy of a race, must, I think, be admitted in any adequate myth” (p.10).

Last and First Men (L&FM)

Last and First Men: A Story of the Near and Far Future is a future history spanning some two billion years during which some eighteen distinct and highly varied human species and their cultures come and go due to all manner of different influences. Stapledon is able to cover such a grand scale in a single book by having each chapter cover 10X the amount of time covered in the previous chapter.

The scope and range of these different species, and the reasons for their emergence, ascendance, decline and transformation into a new species are too great to be detailed here but can be found online (e.g., Wikipedia). Some highlights, however, are:

- Repeated near annihilation of the whole human community, with a recovery across millions of years leading to a new species of human-kind, each with a differing set of dominant characteristics that vary cyclically along various polar oppositions.
- Contact and genocidal warfare with Martians, Venusians, and Neptunians in successive eras of future history
- Development of psychotechnological capabilities that include telepathy, remote viewing, and remote mind-control
- Confrontation with the foreseeable demise of life in the solar system, and setting up of a technology to spread the genetic seed of humanity throughout the cosmos.

It is worth noting that in a story written in 1930, Stapledon managed to describe with reasonable accuracy nuclear energy, mainframe computers, computer-based artificial intelligence (Ai), Ai domination of humanity, genetic engineering, and “Dyson Spheres.” But also, as authors such as Bertonneau (2013) take pleasure in pointing out, he got a lot of science just plain wrong as well.

The pretext of L&FM is that the Last Men, living on a terraformed Neptune, two billion years in the future, telekinetically influence the author to be their amanuensis, so that they can lay out the future history of the human race for the benefit of First Men (contemporary humanity), in ways they say will lead to improved futures for the grand sweep of future species of humanity. And although what they communicated forms a most complex and detailed narrative, the central gist, as summarized by Stapledon (1930, pp.240-241) is as follows:

“But what is it, you may ask, that we seek to contribute to the past? We seek to afford intuitions of truth and of value, which, though easy to us from our vantage point, would be impossible to the unaided past. We seek to help the past make the best of it itself, just as one man may help another. We seek to direct the attention of past individuals and past races to truths and beauties, which, though implicit in their experience, would

otherwise be overlooked.

“We seek to do this for two reasons. Entering into past minds, we become perfectly acquainted with them, and cannot but love them; and so we desire to help them. By influencing selected individuals, we seek to influence indirectly great multitudes. But our second motive is very different. We see the career of Man in his successive planetary homes as a process of great beauty. It is far indeed from the perfect; but it is very beautiful, with the beauty of tragic art. Now it turns out that this beautiful thing entails our operation at various points in the past. Therefore we will to operate. ...

“There is another matter in which we are concerned with the human past. We need its help. ... We, who have now learned so thoroughly the supreme part of ecstatic fatalism, go humbly to the past to learn over again that other supreme achievement of the spirit, *loyalty to the forces of life embattled against the forces of death.*” <Emphasis added.>

In other words, as in the oft repeated ideal of living the “self-examined life,” the Last Men, having examined the whole of human history and finding that it involves their temporal interposition, choose to proclaim the virtues of self-examination of human community across time, including that of appreciative “ecstatic fatalism” about the ultimate physical destiny of all—human, planetary, and solar—which is death.

Star Maker (SM)

In contrast to *Last and First Men* – whose narrative was set up by the fictional author being the amanuensis of a Neptunian telepathic “mind controller” from the far distant future – in SM, the narrative instead based on the direct psychic experience of the fictional author himself as he describes his exploration of what turns out to include:

- the entire cosmos of multiple universes across time;
- a visitation with the “Star Maker” who makes some surprisingly candid reflections on the worth of “his” creation
- a culminating reflection of the meaning of all this from a human perspective.

The general plot of SM is based on a spontaneous out-of-body cosmic trip by the fictional author in which he first reviews all manner of different stars and their planets in a search for a planet with an alien culture sufficiently similar to our own to understand it. When he finds an “Other Earth” he learns how to read the minds of the inhabitants, finding a hospitable native who welcomed his telepathic mental contact. After the two of them do a lengthy study of the history and culture of this “Other Earth” - which the author compares to that of our own home planet - the author and his host decide to embark on a search for still other intelligent civilizations inhabiting planets of other star-systems. In so doing, they learn to master a method of intentional navigation they called “psychical attraction,” about which the author (pp.299-301) says:

“This method depended on the imaginative reach of our own minds. At first, when our imaginative power was strictly limited by experience of our own worlds, we could make contact only with worlds closely akin to our own. Moreover, in this novitiate stage of our work we invariably came upon these worlds when they were passing through the same spiritual crisis as that which underlies the plight of Homo sapiens today...

“As we passed on from world to world we greatly increase our understanding of the principles underlying our venture, and our powers of applying them. Further, in each world that we visited we sought out a new collaborator, to give us insights into his world and to extend our imaginative reach for further exploration of the galaxy. This ‘snowball’ method by which our company was increased was of great importance, since it is magnified our powers. In the final stages of the expedition we made discoveries, which might well be regarded as infinitely beyond the range of any single and unaided human mind...

“Along with the freedom of space we had freedom of time. Some of the worlds that we explored in this early phase of our adventure ceased to exist long before my native planet was formed; others were its contemporaries; others were not born till the old age of our galaxy, when the earth had been destroyed, and a large number of the stars had already been extinguished...”

The remainder of SM involves a truly mind stretching series of adventures involving an exploration of not only the evolving consciousness of stars and galaxies, but of the Star Maker as well. As commented on by Matloff (2012):

“Stapledon track[ed] the conscious development of the cosmos as surviving planetary and stellar elements [that] reach an accord and unite to ultimately produce a universal mentality. At the climax of the tale, this mentality is gently but firmly judged by the Creator, who is designing universes in the manner of a terrestrial artist, learning the ropes as he/she/it proceeds. Our universe, and its collective mentality is imperfect simply because the Star Maker must fiddle with a few more parameters to get it right!”

Stapledon’s Significance from the Perspective of Futures Studies

In addition to being brilliant fiction, Stapledon’s writings in L&FM and SM conceptualize systemic change and transformation at all levels of reality in ways that have proved to be foundational for the development of futures studies. The roots of many methodological concepts used by contemporary futurists can be found in L&FM and SM, and are thus an early example of the interplay of science fiction and futures studies. For example:

- **Trend projection**—the grouping of multiple trends and driving forces (societal, technological, economic, ecological, political) into patterns of change and systemic transformation

- **Historical repetition**—patterns that happened in the past (e.g., revolutionary wars) that are likely to happen again in the future
- **Historical cycles**—systemic dynamics (e.g., toward war and peace; civilizational rise and fall) that show oscillating tendencies
- **Evolution/devolution**—ways in which individual/cultural development and maturity may increase and/or decrease in the very long term
- The importance of **intentional aspiration and visioning** of preferred futures (e.g., for cultural maturity)
- **Alternative futures**—plausible, probable and preferable ways in which the future may unfold—now often called **scenarios** (e.g., the whole idea of positing alternative species of humankind unfolding along different, but very, very, long-term, future histories)
- **Wildcard** developments—future possibilities that from a conventional perspective seem wildly improbable (e.g., a human species designed by a global mainframe computer, a species that could fly like birds, etc.; “remote viewing” both temporal and spatial; non-human extraterrestrial races; technological “mega-engineering” to directly influence stellar evolution, etc.).

Stapledon as an Inspired Visionary

How it is that Stapledon was able to produce such a prodigiously innovative and far-reaching oeuvre? In light of Stapledon’s acknowledgement that he had a vision of the whole of L&FM before writing it, and the fact that after his inspiration of the detailed whole, each page was written with little editing from the first to the last draft,¹ it seems quite reasonable to conjecture that Stapledon was an inspired visionary with a strongly developed capacity for intuitive inspiration balancing his equally strong rational/analytic side.

In *Last and First Men*, Stapledon takes great pains to describe how its author was an intentionally guided *amanuensis*. The details of how this “contact” was developed by the Last Men through a long-term process of experimentally laborious trial and error, is detailed in a third book, *Last Men in London* (1932), where Stapledon makes clear how the author is an inadequate vehicle for this sort of inspired guidance.

A provocative question that discriminative readers must answer for themselves is: To what degree was Stapledon, himself, intuitively guided in his writing of these two books? I know of no mentions in the literature of Stapledon himself saying anything about his own personal muse for creative writing. Later in this essay, however, I will briefly describe an intuition-based research process that brought a direct answer to this question, suggesting the likelihood that Stapledon actually was being so influenced—even if only unconsciously.

The Relevance of Diverse Zones of Consciousness for Futures Studies

Stapledon’s writing imaginatively explores a wide range of diverse zones of

consciousness, and portrays an equally wide range of edgy phenomena such as remote viewing, telepathic communication and out-of-body (OOB) exploration in so doing.

Did Stapledon himself actually consider such things to be experientially plausible — as opposed to being astute literary devices for his wide-ranging project in myth construction? Given the relatively conservative philosophical positions he identified himself as favoring in his learned (1939) text, *Philosophy and Living*, I think it unlikely. But as a practitioner of these arts, I can say that Stapledon's description of them rings true regarding what they feel like when actually used in the practice of intuition-based futures visioning. Might it be possible to get a more direct answer to this question?

If Stapledon were alive and writing today...

What if Olaf Stapledon were alive and writing today, but not constrained by the two rhetorical limitations stated in the Preface to L&FM and reviewed above? What would Stapledon focus on?

There is a provocative creativity process tool attributed to the Russian hypnotist, Vladimir Leonidovich Raikov, M.D., called the Raikov Effect (a.k.a. “Borrowed Genius” (described at <http://w3bin.com/websites/raikov-effect> and <http://www.livingyourgenius.com/2011/01/borrowed-genius.html>), in which the user does a role playing enactment — preferably in a trance state — of psychically taking on the persona of an eminent historical figure as a way to gain insights about some puzzling or problematic current situation. Although I have known of this process for years, I remembered it in the context of this essay only when it came to mind as a possible solution to a writer's block I was experiencing about how to handle the prior section in ways that would satisfy a peer reviewer's critique of an early draft of this essay.

To experientially follow up on the claims of the previous section, as a last step in the writing of this essay, I decided to ask myself: “What if I used the “Borrowed Genius” strategy with regard to Olaf Stapledon's views vis-à-vis the current era?”

To do this, I put on a recorded drone sound I have frequently used to help sustain a deep focus without intruding thoughts. Then, with digital recorder in hand to capture impressions without disturbing the flow, I used deeply focused relaxation to put myself into an appropriate type of supra-egoic trance (Markley, 2007, 2012). When ready, the specific question that intuitively surfaced for me to ask was: “*What might Olaf Stapledon wish to call our attention to in this essay about his work?*”

Once I felt I had made “contact,” the sequence of what I became most distinctly aware of is as follows:

- What I am tuning into is not my projection of Stapledon's persona as it was when he lived it as a visionary author on Earth, but rather the Spirit of one once known as Olaf Stapledon as “he” now exists in “otherwhere” [a generic term used by Leland (2002) for non-physical dimensions of existence that transcend physicality].
- His prior agnostic position about the divine and of rejection of hope for conscious survival of physical death have given way to appreciation of “direct perception” of multiple zones of consciousness, more or less in keeping with what some writers call the “Perennial Philosophy.”
- The range and diversity of phenomena he is now aware of dwarfs what he

now considers the relatively trivial things he focused on in *Star Maker*. [!] It is as if the cosmos is not only more different than humans imagine, it is more different than we can imagine.

- He still considers the rhetorical limitations he placed on the writing of L&FM to be appropriate, and he would not change them if rewriting it today. Specifically, *the type of optimism needing to be held by humanity is not about evolutionary achievement, but about realizing our true nature as co-creators of reality.*

This last thought had a greater sense of importance than all else, and ended the session. But immediately thereafter, when I had come out of deep trance and beginning to transcribe these answers directly into the manuscript for this article, it was as if I heard a knocking at my psychic door, and there was the Spirit of Stapledon, wanting to add that:

“There are those like me where I now am, who were signally involved in helping inspire me to write the works you are reviewing. It is important for both futurists and science fiction writers to know that we and others like us are available as muses for similar inspiration in what you call “real time.” Although better to develop the capacity for direct perception, it is enough to simply hold the intentional desire to be so inspired. There are many channels of communication through which such inspiration is manifested.”

A Concluding Take Away

A bottom line conclusion of this essay—hopefully for not only futurists, but for all manner of people interested in the future—is that Olaf Stapledon was a visionary of the first magnitude, whose writings support the intentional use of non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSC) as an avenue for a much enlarged perspective about emerging global problems and opportunities not readily available from ordinary states of consciousness. This is a theme advanced in my own writings (Markley, 2007, 2012, 2015, forthcoming) as well as by many other authors—of which some of my favorites are Willis Harman (1998; Harman & Rheingold, 1984), Barbara Marx Hubbard (1998), Ervin Laszlo (2004, 2009), Otto Scharmer (2009), and Thomas Roberts (2013, 2014).

Notes

1. This information comes from personal conversation with Dr. Curtis Smith, a former faculty colleague at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, who, as a Stapledon scholar, visited the Stapledon home in the U.K., where Mrs. Stapledon allowed him to personally inspect Olaf’s archive of manuscripts which showed little editing between the 1st and 2nd drafts of L&FM.

Correspondence

Oliver Markley
Professor Emeritus
University of Houston-Clear Lake
USA
8100 N. Mopac Expy. #176, Austin TX 78759
E-mail: oliver@olivermarkley.com

References

- Bertonneau, Thomas. (2013). Contact, Communion, and the Marriage of Minds: Olaf Stapledon in Context. *The New Review of Science Fiction*. Retrieved on January 16, 2015, from <http://www.nyrsf.com/2013/11/thomas-f-bertonneau-contact-communion-and-the-marriage-of-minds-olaf-stapledon-in-context.html>.
- Clarke, Arthur. (1983). In the Beginning was Jupiter. Retrieved on March 2, 2015, from <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/09/reviews/clarke-jupiter.html>
- Fiedler, Leslie. (1983). *Olaf Stapledon: Man Divided*. New York, NY: Oxford.
- Kinnaird, John. (1986). *Olaf Stapledon*. Mercer Island, WA: Starmont.
- Harman, Willis. (1998). *Global Mind Change: The Promise of the 21st Century*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Harman, Willis., & Howard Rheingold. (1984). *Higher Creativity: Liberating the Unconscious for Breakthrough Insights*. Los Angeles, CA: Tarcher.
- Hubbard, B. M. (1998). *Conscious Evolution: Awakening Our Social Potential*. Navato, CA: New World Library.
- Laszlo, Ervin. (2004). *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
- Laszlo, Ervin. (2009). *The Akashic Experience: Science and the Cosmic Memory Field*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
- Leland, Kurt. (2002). *Otherwhere: A Field Guide to Nonphysical Reality for the Out-of-Body Traveler*. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads. [Note: Although this book is out of print, a revised and enlarged 2nd edition is expected to be published by Spiritual Orienteering Press before the end of 2015.]
- Matloff, Greg. (2012). Stars That Wander, Are You Bright: Are Stars Conscious? Retrieved on March 15, 2015, from <http://www.baen.com/starsconscious.asp>
- Markley, Oliver. (2007). Mental time travel: A practical business and personal research tool for looking ahead. *Futures*, 40(1), 17-24. [doi: 10.1016/j.futures.2007.06.006]. Retrieved on September 5, 2013, from <http://www.inwardboundvisioning.com/Docs/MentalTimeTravel.htm>
- Markley, Oliver. (2012). Imaginal Visioning for Prophetic Foresight. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 17(1), 5-24. Retrieved on September 1, 2013, from: <http://www.jfs.tku.edu.tw/17-1/A01.pdf>. Expanded preprint available at <http://www.imaginalvisioning.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Imaginal-Visioning-for-Prophetic-Foresight-Preprint.pdf>, Please note that this expanded preprint has much contextual material not able to include in the published journal article that supports the credibility of claims made in the published version.

- Markley, Oliver. (2015). Aspirational Visioning for Wiser Futures. *Foresight*, 17(1), 1-34. Expanded online version available from: <http://www.olivermarkley.com/expandedaspirationalguidance/>.
- Markley, Oliver. (2015). Learning to Use Intuition in Futures Studies: A bibliographic essay on personal sources, processes and concerns. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 20(1), 119-130.
- Moskowitz, Sam. (1979). *Far Future Calling / Olaf Stapledon*. Philadelphia, PA: Oswald Train.
- Panshin, A., & Cory Panshin. (1989). *The World Beyond the Hill: Science Fiction and the Quest for Transcendence*. Los Angeles, CA: Tarcher.
- Roberts, Thomas. (2013). *The Psychedelic Future of the Mind: How Entheogens are Enhancing Cognition, Boosting Intelligence, and Raising Values*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.
- Roberts, Thomas. (2014). Mindapps and the Neurosingularity Project. *h+ Magazine*. Retrieved on March 31, 2015, from <http://hplusmagazine.com/2014/03/31/mindapps-and-the-neurosingularity-project/>
- Scharmer, Otto. (2009). *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Stapledon, Olaf. (1930). *Last and First Men: A Story of Near and Far Future*. New York, NY: Dover.
- Stapledon, Olaf. (1932). *Last Men in London*. New York, NY: Dover.
- Stapledon, Olaf. (1937). *Star Maker*. New York, NY: Dover.
- Stapledon, Olaf. (1939). *Philosophy and Living*, Vol I and II. Gretna, LA: Pelican Books. The citation is from an unpaginated version of Vol. 1 available online from <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/stapledon/olaf/philosophy/complete.html#chapter12.1>