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Dystopian Science Fiction: New Index to the Human Situation

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An often noted characteristic of the modern temper is the flight from the past, a growing lack of concern for earlier times and what they might have to say relevant to human life today. Humanists observe a drift in enthusiasm from great masterpieces of the past to contemporary literature, professors of fine arts find their students unable to see the relevance of old traditions, and so on through many other instances in the arts of a shift in orientation from the past to the present or future, a shift magnificently symbolized by the great, gleaming structures of modern architecture, buildings unlike anything the world has ever seen before. In the physical, biological, and medical sciences and, of course, in the technologies, researchers and inventors have long since found it unprofitable to refer to the early history of work in their fields. More recently, a somewhat similar change has taken place in the social sciences: political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have to a great extent rejected the historical approach for analysis, survey, and description, and even historians are now beginning to turn to case-study procedures. Over and over again we see men confident that their investigations and analyses, not inherited wisdom, will provide the solutions to all problems, and over and over again we see men forging new forms of expression for the human spirit. Perhaps there exists no more typical manifestation of this flight from the past and its corollary, the flight to the future, than the development of science fiction in the twentieth century.

Science fiction has indeed become a major cultural manifestation since the publication in 1926 of the first science-fiction pulp magazine, Hugo Gernsback's Amazing Stories. The popularity of science fiction grew steadily during the nineteen thirties, and, by 1937, when John W. Campbell, Jr., assumed editorship of Astounding Stories, the science-fiction magazine had become
firmly established. World War II brought a temporary decline, but its end saw a renaissance of interest in science fiction, and since then literally hundreds of paperback and hardcover books have appeared, while during the peak years of the middle nineteen fifties the combined circulation of some thirty science-fiction magazines probably exceeded one million. Although never, except for a few years in the fifties, as widely read as bestsellers, science fiction has exerted an influence which extends far beyond its readership, a good indication of this being the way serious observers of the passing scene now refer to it when writing about such subjects as the affluent society or the future of the teaching of the humanities; or the way it has penetrated drama, movies, radio, television, even opera, as well as, of course, comic strips and comic books.

The chief criterion in assessing this manifestation of the flight from the past is the extent to which it has provided insight into the human situation. In general, science fiction has had very little to say about human life since Jules Verne’s *Five Weeks in a Balloon* inaugurated the modern form of the genre in 1863, although there have been many important exceptions throughout this nearly one-hundred-year-period, exceptions which have become extremely numerous since 1949. But until recently science fiction has seldom provided a very valuable index to human problems in the age of science and technology, because science fiction as a cultural phenomenon has been obsessed with the idea first stated by Francis Bacon, which is that science, by extending man’s power to the performance of all things possible, will inevitably improve the human condition. That is to say, science fiction has been dominated by the vision of what George Orwell calls the future of “glass and steel and snow-white concrete,” a vision still very popular in spite of the world cataclysms of the twentieth century—see *Life’s* November 28, 1959, prophecy of the future as a consumer’s utopia filled with family helicopters and automated highways. Stated or implied, this unthinking optimism about the effects of science and technology on human life has been the animating spirit of most science fiction. It is even implicit in the poorest class of science fiction—space opera—works which are descended from Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *A Princess of Mars* and which are little more than Rider Haggard adventure transferred to space, works in which science is simply equated with magic. It is also implicit in more sophisticated stories which, characterized by exuberance of imagination, improvise on the mainly physical consequences of
real or imagined inventions or scientific discoveries, stories like A. J. Deutsch’s “A Subway Named Moebius” (1950), which plays with the idea of a subway system constructed in the form of a Moebius band, whose passengers disappear for ten weeks into the fourth dimension, or novels like Hal Clement’s Mission of Gravity (1953), which carefully pieces together the ecology of the dense planet circling 61 Cygni. Writers of this class of science fiction have clearly in mind the assumptions that man can master the principles of this cause-and-effect universe and that such mastery will necessarily better the human lot. On the other hand, the bright vision of the future has been directly stated in science fiction concerned with projecting ideal societies—science fiction, of course, is related, if sometimes distantly, to that utopian literature optimistic about science, literature whose period of greatest vigor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward and H. G. Wells’s A Modern Utopia. In Arthur Clarke’s Childhood’s End (1953), though written after the present flood of dystopias began, we can see the bright vision of science fiction clearly defined.

Childhood’s End—apparently indebted to Kurd Lasswitz’s utopian romance, Auf Zwei Planeten (1897), and also to Wells’s histories of the future, especially The World Set Free (1914) and The Shape of Things to Come (1933)—describes the bloodless conquest of earth by the Overlords, vastly superior creatures who come to our world in order to prepare the human race for its next stage of development, an eventual merging with the composite mind of the universe. Arriving just in time to stop men from turning their planet into a radioactive wasteland, the Overlords unite earth into one world, in which justice, order, and benevolence prevail and ignorance, poverty, and fear have ceased to exist. Under their rule, earth becomes a technological utopia. Both abolition of war and new techniques of production, particularly robot factories, greatly increase the world’s wealth, a situation described in the following passage, which has the true utopian ring: “Everything was so cheap that the necessities of life were free, provided as a public service by the community, as roads, water, street lighting and drainage had once been. A man could travel anywhere he pleased, eat whatever he fancied—without handing over any money.” With destructive tensions and pressures removed, men have the vigor and energy to construct a new human life—rebuilding entire cities, expanding facilities for entertainment, providing unlimited opportunities for education—indeed, for the first time giving everyone the
chance to employ his talents to the fullest. Mankind, as a result, attains previ­
ously undreamed of levels of civilization and culture, a golden age which the
Overlords, a very evident symbol of science, have helped produce by intro­
ducing reason and the scientific method into human activities. Thus science
is the savior of mankind, and in this respect Childhood’s End only blueprints
in greater detail the vision of the future which, though not always so directly
stated, has nevertheless been present in the minds of most science-fiction
writers.

Considering then the optimism which has permeated science fiction for
so long, what is really remarkable is that during the last twelve years many
science-fiction writers have turned about and attacked their own cherished
vision of the future, have attacked the Childhood’s End kind of faith that
science and technology will inevitably better the human condition. And they
have done this on a very large scale, with a veritable flood of novels and stories
which are either dystopias or narratives of adventure with dystopian elements.
Because of the means of publication—science-fiction magazines and cheap
paperbacks—and because dystopian science fiction is still appearing in quan­
tity, the full range and extent of this phenomenon can hardly be known,
though one fact is evident: the science-fiction imagination has been immensely
fertile in its extrapolations. Among the dystopias, for example, Isaac Asimov’s
The Caves of Steel (1954) portrays the deadly effects on human life of the
super-city of the future; James Blish’s A Case of Conscience (1958) describes
a world hiding from its own weapons of destruction in underground shelters;
Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1954) presents a book-burning society in
which wall television and hearing-aid radios enslave men’s minds; Walter M.
Miller, Jr.’s, A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959) finds men, after the great atomic
disaster, stumbling back to their previous level of civilization and another
catastrophe; Frederick Pohl’s “The Midas Touch” (1954) predicts an econ­
omy of abundance which, in order to remain prosperous, must set its robots
to consuming surplus production; Clifford D. Simak’s “How-2” (1954) tells
of a future when robots have taken over, leaving men nothing to do; and
Robert Sheckley’s The Status Civilization (1960) describes a world which,
frightened by the powers of destruction science has given it, becomes static
and conformist. A more complete list would also include Bradbury’s “The
Pedestrian” (1951), Philip K. Dick’s Solar Lottery (1955), David Karp’s One
(1953), Wilson Tucker’s The Long Loud Silence (1952), Jack Vance’s To
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Live Forever (1956), Gore Vidal’s Messiah (1954), and Bernard Wolfe’s Limbo (1952), as well as the three perhaps most outstanding dystopias, Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth’s The Space Merchants (1953), Kurt Vonnegut’s Player Piano (1952), and John Wyndham’s Re-Birth (1953), works which we will later examine in detail. The novels and stories like Pohl’s Drunkard’s Walk (1960), with the focus on adventure and with the dystopian elements only a dim background—in this case an uneasy, overpopulated world in which the mass of people do uninteresting routine jobs while a carefully selected, university-trained elite runs everything—are in all likelihood as numerous as dystopias.

There is, of course, nothing new about dystopias, for they belong to a literary tradition which, including also the closely related satiric utopias, stretches from at least as far back as the eighteenth century and Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels to the twentieth century and Zamiatin’s We, Čapek’s War with the Newts, Huxley’s Brave New World, E. M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops,” C. S. Lewis’s That Hideous Strength, and Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four; and which in science fiction is represented before the present deluge as early as Wells’s trilogy, The Time Machine, “A Story of the Days to Come,” and When the Sleeper Wakes, and as recently as Jack Williamson’s “With Folded Hands” (1947), the classic story of men replaced by their own robots. What makes the current phenomenon unique is that so many science-fiction writers have reversed a trend and turned to writing works critical of the impact of science and technology on human life. Since the great flood of these dystopias has appeared only in the last twelve years, it seems fairly reasonable to assume that the chief impetus was the 1949 publication of Nineteen Eighty-Four, an assumption which is supported by the frequent echoes of such details as Room 101, along with education by conditioning from Brave New World, a book to which science-fiction writers may well have returned with new interest after reading the more powerful Orwell dystopia.

Not all recent science fiction, however, is dystopian, for the optimistic strain is still very much alive in Mission of Gravity and Childhood’s End, as we have seen, as well as in many other recent popular novels and stories like Fred Hoyle’s The Black Cloud (1957); and among works of dystopian science fiction, not all provide intelligent criticism and very few have much merit as literature—but then real quality has always been scarce in science fiction. In addition, there are many areas of the human situation besides the impact of
science and technology which are examined, for science-fiction dystopias often extrapolate political, social, economic tendencies only indirectly related to science and technology. Nevertheless, with all these qualifications and exceptions, the current dystopian phenomenon remains impressive for its criticism that science and technology, instead of bringing utopia, may well enslave, dehumanize, and even destroy men. How effectively these warnings can be presented is seen in Pohl and Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants*, Vonnegut's *Player Piano* and Wyndham's *Re-Birth*.

Easily the best known of these three novels is *The Space Merchants*, a good example of a science-fiction dystopia which extrapolates much more than the impact of science on human life, though its most important warning is in this area, namely as to the use to which discoveries in the behavioral sciences may be put. The novel, which is not merely dystopian but also brilliantly satiric, describes a future America where one-sixteenth of the population, the men who run advertising agencies and big corporations, control the rest of the people, the submerged fifteen-sixteenths who are the workers and consumers, with the government being no more than "a clearing house for pressures." Like ours, the economy of the space merchants must constantly expand in order to survive, and, like ours, it is based on the principle of "ever increasing everybody's work and profits in the circle of consumption." The consequences, of course, have been dreadful: reckless expansion has led to overpopulation, pollution of the earth and depletion of its natural resources. For example, even the most successful executive lives in a two-room apartment while ordinary people rent space in the stairwells of office buildings in which to sleep at night; soyaburgers have replaced meat, and wood has become so precious that it is saved for expensive jewelry; and the atmosphere is so fouled that no one dares walk in the open without respirators or soot plugs.

While *The Space Merchants* indicates, as Kingsley Amis has correctly observed, some of the "impending consequences of the growth of industrial and commercial power" and satirizes "existing habits in the advertising profession," its warning and analysis penetrate much deeper. What is wrong with advertising is not only that it is an "outrage, an assault on people's mental privacy" or that it is a major cause for a wasteful economy of abundance or that it contains a coercive tendency (which is closer to the point). Rather what Kornbluth and Pohl are really doing is warning against the dangers inherent in perfecting "a science of man and his motives." *The Space Merchants*, like

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such humanist documents as Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Measure of Man* and C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, considers what may result from the scientific study of human nature. If man is actually the product of his environment and if science can discover the laws of human nature and the ways in which environment determines what people do, then someone—a someone probably standing outside traditional systems of values—can turn around and develop completely efficient means for controlling people. Thus we will have a society consisting of the planners or conditioners, and the controlled. And this, of course, is exactly what Madison Avenue has been accused of doing, albeit in a primitive way, with its "hidden persuaders" and what the space merchants accomplish with much greater sophistication and precision.

Pohl and Kornbluth's ad men have long since thrown out appeals to reason and developed techniques of advertising which tie in with "every basic trauma and neurosis in American life," which work on the libido of consumers, which are linked to the "great prime motivations of the human spirit." As the hero, Mitchell Courtenay, explains before his conversion, the job of advertising is "to convince people without letting them know that they're being convinced." And to do this requires first of all the kind of information about people which is provided by the scientists in industrial anthropology and consumer research, who, for example, tell Courtenay that three days is the "optimum priming period for a closed social circuit to be triggered with a catalytic cue-phrase"—which means that an effective propaganda technique is to send an idea into circulation and then three days later reinforce or undermine it. And the second requirement for convincing people without their knowledge is artistic talent to prepare the words and pictures which persuade by using the principles which the scientists have discovered. Thus the copywriter in the world of the space merchants is the person who in earlier ages might have been a lyric poet, the person "capable of putting together words that stir and move and sing." As Courtenay explains, "Here in this profession we reach into the souls of men and women. And we do it by taking talent—and redirecting it."

Now the basic question to be asked in this situation is what motivates the manipulators, that is, what are their values?—since, as Courtenay says, "Nobody should play with lives the way we do unless he's motivated by the highest ideals." But the only ideal he can think of is "Sales!" Indeed, again and again, the space merchants confirm the prediction of the humanists that
the conditioners and behavioral scientists, once they have seen through human nature, will have nothing except their impulses and desires to guide them. Thus the space merchants have absolutely no scruples about projecting advertisements in a way which constitutes a safety hazard or pushing a product, even among children, which is harmful or habit forming. Perhaps the greatest evidence of the lack of values among the space merchants is Courtenay's reaction to statistics in *Biometrika* (the handbook of the copy-smith) about such things as changes in population and intelligence. "Almost every issue had good news for us," he remarks. "Increase of population was always good news to us. More people, more sales. Decrease of IQ was always good news to us. Less brains, more sales." The kind of concern shown in *The Space Merchants* about the effect on man of research in the behavioral sciences, which doubtless could be traced back to *Brave New World*, is also implicit at least in many other science-fiction dystopias, most notably Bradbury's excellent *Fahrenheit 451*.

Another frequent warning in science-fiction dystopias is that men may be dehumanized and enslaved by subordination to machines. To this class, of course, belong all the novels and stories like Williamson's "With Folded Hands" and Simak's "How-2," which picture a future when the robots do everything and there are neither dangers nor challenges left for men; and to this class also belong novels like Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, novels which are much broader in their treatment of the problems of replacing men by machines.

Vonnegut sets his witty and satiric novel in the not-too-distant future, after World War III, when America has solved the problems of production and distribution and all people, even the lowest of citizens, have complete security and abundance of physical comforts: cradle-to-the-grave medical care and guaranteed annual wage; twenty-seven-inch television sets, ultrasonic dishwashers, glass and steel houses. All this, of course, has come about because of a Second Industrial Revolution, a revolution which is the ultimate expression of the American gadgeteer mentality. Indeed, America has become one stupendous machine: automation has replaced human workers; managers and engineers run the economy and government with the help of *EPICAC XIV*, a giant electronic brain; and people are rigidly assigned jobs and opportunities for advanced education on the basis of their marks on nationally administered, machine-scored aptitude tests. To the ruling managers and engineers,
who naively believe that material goods alone make happiness and who fail to recognize that so many of their fellow men are leading lives of quiet desperation; "Civilization has reached the dizziest of heights," but to the great mass of people, life has never been duller and more meaningless—the people, that is, who, because their test scores do not qualify them for any important position in society, are sent, to keep them busy, into either the Army for twenty-five years or into the Reclamation and Reconstruction Corps, an organization devoted to jobs not profitably performed by machines, such as filling in the holes in the streets. Perhaps the most depressing sections of the book are those which describe the monotonous life of the mass of people, who are packed away in standardized houses and whose chief source of entertainment is television. The life of the managers and engineers is also shallow, though they generally lack the self-perception necessary to realize this and they also have the satisfaction of their work, which at least challenges them and gives some meaning to existence. In time, however, the tension between the elite and the masses leads to the rebellion traditional in dystopia, organized by a secret society and using one of the leading engineers as a figurehead. Although successful for awhile and resulting in the riotous destruction of most of the machines in a few cities, the rebellion fails, but not before the rebels have started tinkering with the machines and putting them together again—an event which underscores Vonnegut's pessimism about the American character.

Vonnegut sees two ways in which machines are replacing men. One is, of course, that production of goods by automated machines has not only taken away from human beings the pleasure of working with their hands, but, even more important, it has led to the situation in which for many men there is nothing that they can contribute, nothing useful that they can do. The other way in which machines have replaced human beings is in the making of decisions, a process which began when the thinking machines became smarter than men. \textsc{epicac xiv}, the electronic brain which really governs, is always completely free of emotion and so immensely intelligent that it can solve problems which it would take the most brilliant core of American genius, with boundless resources and the most highly inspired leadership, thousands of years. It is, therefore, not surprising that \textsc{epicac xiv} is always deferred to, and naturally enough, since the machine is never bothered by

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reason-clouding emotion, it is also not surprising that its decisions often result in the non-human use of human beings, in the quantification of human problems.

It is not, however, science itself which is the villain in Player Piano but the development of technology which has proceeded lawlessly without consideration of its effect on human life and human values. The irony of the whole thing is that man, because of automated production and thinking machines, has finally achieved the long-awaited utopia, has entered the Eden of eternal peace, but "everything he had looked forward to enjoying there, pride, dignity, self-respect, work worth doing, has been condemned as unfit for human consumption."

In addition to the many dystopias like The Space Merchants and Player Piano which predict that the development of science and technology will enslave and dehumanize men, there are other dystopias even more pessimistic, dystopias which warn that man has "outrun his intelligence," that man is not good enough to survive in the world created by his science and technology and which embody their warnings in a description of the effects on human life and civilization of war conducted by such instruments of total destruction as nuclear bombs, poison gas, and bacteriological warfare. Several of these novels about world disaster have, of course, been written by men who are not science-fiction writers by profession—Nevil Shute's On the Beach and Aldous Huxley's Ape and Essence, to cite two important examples—and usually these novels, whether by science-fiction writers or not, develop another, related, and very old science-fiction theme, "our primitive descendants," a theme which has also received significant expression from "mainstream" writers, particularly in the case of Jack London's "The Scarlet Plague" and Stephen Vincent Benét's "By the Waters of Babylon." Three excellent science-fiction examples of the "post-catastrophe" dystopia are Tucker's The Long Loud Silence, Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz, and Wyndham's Re-Birth, of which Re-Birth is the best.

Wyndham takes us into the future a thousand years after Tribulation, the atomic disaster of the twentieth century, to a district of now temperate Labrador, where the inhabitants, who seem to be at the level of civilization of perhaps seventeenth-century America, are fanatically carrying out God's command to preserve the purity of living things. Offenses, mutations among

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animals and plants, are destroyed, while Blasphemies, deviations among people, are driven into the Fringes, a bordering area with a higher deviation rate, where the refugees become savages, making periodic raids on nearby settlements. The process of preserving original forms is blindly and ruthlessly carried out, without regard either for principles of humanity or for common sense, as in the case of harmless mutations, so that even otherwise normal children are forced to flee when they are discovered to be endowed with six toes. In spite of the stupidity and inhumanity of so many of their actions, the people of Labrador believe that they are in the process of climbing back into Grace, of attaining the peaks from which mankind had fallen because of Tribulation; and the reward of God's forgiveness will be restoration of the Golden Age of the Old People. Wyndham makes abundantly clear through the activities of the people of Labrador that, once they have achieved the level of civilization of the Old People, they will likewise destroy themselves.

In *Re-Birth* we see the science-fiction vision of the future at its darkest, though Wyndham's pessimism is not unique and differs only in degree from that of writers like Kornbluth, Pohl, and Vonnegut. But the importance of *The Space Merchants, Player Piano, Re-Birth*, and other recent, good science-fiction dystopias is the result not only of their rejection of the easy optimism characterizing most previous science fiction; it is also the result of the relevance of the problems which they examine to human life in an age when the human situation is changing beyond recognition, problems such as those which may occur if automation divorces production from human activity and provides many new and possibly uneasy hours of leisure; if thinking machines replace men in the making of decisions which affect men; if political control is strengthened and made more efficient by the use of new psychological techniques and new devices for surveillance; if traditional systems of values are destroyed by a new science of man. In examining these and other related problems, science-fiction dystopias furnish a valuable index to the new human situation, perhaps nowhere offering greater insight than in the case of the problems which cluster around life in the technologically and scientifically complex world of the near future, a world which may have little need for the half of the population incapable of becoming technicians, engineers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, scientists, executives, even ad men; a world which may be regimented, overcrowded, rigidly stratified, and immensely competitive; a
world which may isolate men from nature and may substitute the artificial and synthetic for the natural in daily existence—and a world which at the same time will still possibly be teetering on the brink of nuclear disaster. Because of the vigor and intelligence with which these problems are often presented, dystopian science fiction is a significant manifestation of the flight from the past. And because dystopian science fiction is popular literature, it could conceivably produce sufficient mass awareness of the dangers to human life in the space age as to help avert the realization of at least some of its own predictions.

Five Signs of Winter at Pojoaque

The imageless wind is moving again.
I see the grass bending southward.

The birds without song are restless
In their November moods.

The world without extension
Hovers in the darkened arroyo.

The colorless moon, once again
Peers into my midnight window.

In the early morning before Sangre de Cristo sunlight
One can hear the sky creaking overhead.

—Howard Smith, Jr.