Don't stop (thinking about tomorrow)

An APF community discussion about the film Tomorrowland

Josh Calder: Brad Bird said this in *Wired*:

> "When I started talking about Tomorrowland I said I'd love to make a project that recaptured that idea of a positive and optimistic future, which has become completely and totally absent from the landscape of storytelling."

Tomorrowland was conceived with an explicit vision of foresight and how the future is conceived. Perhaps some of our ex-Disney members can tell us more?

Jennifer Jarratt: I read that interview. It's interesting that [co-writer] Lindelhof and Bird had apparently never heard of, or thought about, *2001*, *2010*, or indeed any of the *Star Trek* series. All of which show positive and optimistic futures.

Joe Tankersley: I spent my time at Disney in Imagineering, that part of the company the filmmakers describe as people who only make theme park attractions. When I was trying to promote foresight throughout Imagineering and other parts of the company I certainly used some of the same ideas abut Walt's role as an optimistic futurist as being a legacy that should prompt the company to return to its role as future visionary. It has a powerful emotional tug for many inside Disney, especially since it is a company that tends to attract fans as employees.

And inside Imagineering there were many long and heated arguments about why Tomorrowland became Yesterworld and why Epcot never lived up to its vision. At the end of the day those failures were much more about economics than any perceived lack of interest in optimistic visions on the part of the public.

Tomorrowland, which was released in May, is a Disney film about the future, or maybe the past. It produced a rich discussion on the APF listserv, albeit a fairly gendered one, on the relationship between science fiction, utopia, dystopia, and futures work. It was kicked off by Josh Calder with a quote in Wired from the film's director and co-writer, Brad Bird. Other discussion participants included Bryan Alexander, Marcus Barber, Stuart Candy, Christian Crews, Andrew Curry, Dennis Draeger, Jennifer Jarratt, Nick Price, Noah Raford, Paul Graham Raven, Karl Schroeder and Joe Tankersley. This version was edited from the listserv for length and continuity by Andrew Curry. No significant spoilers.

As for the movie itself, if I have any misgivings from seeing the trailers, this version of an optimistic future feels like another one where technology solves all our problems. That conceit, ultimately, was the weakness in Walt Disney's original visions of the future. It is a little disheartening that so many of our efforts to imagine a better tomorrow find us retreating to visions from the past as opposed to creating our own new ones.

Nick Price: Do you have any thoughts on the abundance of science fiction and fantasy? It not only seems to have moved into the mainstream (Disney now has Marvel, Star Trek and Star Wars franchises) but is almost saturating it. Will too many fantastical futures distract people from some of the serious challenges?

Joe Tankersley: I'm not a big fan of the argument that mass entertainment has somehow recently become an intellectual wasteland. Since the time of the penny arcades most audiences have looked to mass entertainment for escape and distraction. And since the very beginning there have been plenty of content producers ready to satisfy that desire. There have always been, and I suspect always will be, a small group that

sees the possibility of using the various media as a stage for deeper reflection and idea building. But they have always been in the minority and always will be. Complaints that the good old days without comic book heroes were somehow better is to me selective amnesia.

Josh Calder: I would echo Joe's comments about science fiction and mass entertainment, and go a little further: The feeder material, science fiction and especially "comics," have become much deeper and more serious in recent decades. The movies developed from them often deal with serious issues, though with a sci-fi veneer over them. Indeed, plenty of comics-derived movies are less escapist than, say, "Bottle Shock" or "Sideways."

Nick Price: I acknowledge that the edge of science fiction still pushes at our expectations of what might be ahead. I am though still interested in the effects of fantastical thinking on mainstream mass audiences. For example do post-apocalyptic tales create a sense of disempowerment and belief that success is a matter of chance than self-determination? Will overworn narratives in much popular science fiction today disempower or empower many for a massive challenge?

Paul Graham Raven:

This is an interesting thread more generally, because I mostly get to see these issues through the eyes of the SF criticism field. If you're curious about that critic's-eye-view: the tension between optimistic and pessimistic SF arguably goes back to the transition between Campbellian "hard" SF and the New Wave of the mid-70s, and it's still a significant bone of contention—though more so among authors, editors and critics than with readers, who vote with their wallets pretty consistently time after time: dystopia sells, utopia doesn't. This also has a lot to do with the evolution of the utopian impulse in SF, from the classical utopia (More, Butler) through the technological utopia (Campbell's stable of gadget-stories writers) and on to the critical utopia (Delany, le Guin, Russ etc); the classical is an all but dead form, the technological lives on in the discourse of Silicon Valley (and in the hard SF rump, which will survive as long as its demographic does), and the critical mode is powered by the same impulse that's at the heart of the most interesting design fiction work.

I'd argue that this is a pretty good indicator for the rise of postmodern attitudes in Western discourse; classical utopias are really hard to take seriously once a general suspicion of metanarratives has set in (nothing's more dubious than the promise of a perfected world), but the technological utopia still feeds off of the dominance of scientism in the culture (the notion of Better Living Through Technology is embedded in the economic system as well as the cultural, and will thus be hard to dislodge). The critical utopia, meanwhile, is thriving because it does useful work, and because it is self-negating, an inherently postmodern form: the entire point of the critical utopia is to

A poster for Tomorrowland. Source: The Walt Disney Corporation

critique not only the present reality, but also the very possibility of utopia itself.

Dennis Draeger: I'm glad you bring up postmodernism. Modernism was very unilateral: utopia. Postmodernism was bilateral: utopia vs. dystopia. However, many writers are looking for an emergence of a more multilateral framework, namely metamodernism.

I bring it up because the discussion and what I could read of the interview without wading into spoilers seem to be predicated on postmodernism's penchant for dichotomies. Whereas the younger generations seem to be pushing to reconcile the dichotomies more than previous generations, and even point to outliers beyond the dominant pairings.

Karl Schroeder: Unfortunately, Paul, I think you've already lost if you've perceived a dichotomy between utopian and dystopian fiction. It may be there, but it's at the very least a sign of a

categorization of the world, and the genre, that's already predetermining meanings.

I'm in New York trying to sell, among other things, an arguably utopian novel—in fact, an entire approach to SF that's related to the optimism we attempted in the Hieroglyph anthology. To say that the possibilities of optimism have been exhausted, however, or even that the undermining of monomythic visions somehow also undermines the possibility of optimistic discourse, is ridiculous.

My 2005 novel *Lady of Mazes* was explicitly an answer to that critique and is aggressively utopian while an attempt to "unreservedly support the notion of the emergence of multilateral thought." (At least, that was what I was aiming at.) I don't think the categories Paul mentioned exhaust the possibilities of optimistic future discourse, and this is important.

The notion that everything is a language game and even physical reality is a political construct has made our whole discourse into a nihilistic echo chamber where it's impossible to take a stand on anything— even what actions might build a better future. The alternative however is not to move back to a naïve realism or the monomyths. Lately a rich discussion around what some call the "Nonhuman turn" is happening in philosophy. I've been there since 2000 with my own work, which is why I refuse to see my SF through the light of the previous categories.

In pitching an optimistic vision of the future I do need to distance myself from the Randian superman category of naïve 20th century writing. But a mature optimism isn't just possible in SF, it's necessary in a way that no other discourse (critical, pessimistic, dystopian or

How can we have a positive vision of the future while not prescribing the future? Prescription would seem to be the problem of naïve optimism, particularly of the Campbellian version: "The world will become perfect if everybody just does exactly what I say!" Is there any alternative approach to shaping positive futures that is not prescriptive?

Arguably there is. If you've read Stuart Kauffman's recent preprint, "No entailing laws, but enablement in the evolution of the biosphere," he's basically saying that the creative direction of natural selection in biology does not, and cannot, come from a prescriptive set of laws (*entailing* laws) working through their causal implications. Briefly, all that natural selection does is designate failures—it doesn't pre-decide successes in any way. Failure is possible to predetermine in natural selection, but success (viability or fitness) is not.

It's possible to write SF that functions the same way: SF that doesn't prescribe the steps that must be taken to achieve a better future, but presents possibilities. By this argument you could achieve Utopia entirely by means of dystopian discourse.

View each dystopia as a "designation of failure" for a particular approach to improving the future, and let society do nothing but *avoid failures* and the natural selection of social changes will lead us in the other direction without anybody ever prescribing the specifics of that other way.

Or you can take the above approach and combine it with positive visions of the future that are not prescriptive but make visible the liminal possibilities outside of the dystopias and default futures.

Aspirational futures are important in foresight, as targets to shoot for even when we acknowledge that we'll miss them. Utopias can serve the same function: we agree that this or that future is not going to come to pass, but we allow ourselves to be inspired to work in a particular direction that is no longer that of our default future. This is foresight as strategic plannning, and arguably, a good approach for SF as well.

Which is not to say that science fiction stories in which things blow up will not always outsell stories with happy bunnies and flowers, ten to one.

(Karl Schroeder)

"objective") can be. Why? Because my daughter is 12 years old, and I have an obligation not to short-change her on her future.

Nick Price: I have a niggling problem with the utopia/dystopia idea. That problem is that there seems to be an assumption of a point of arrival. As long as there is some form of life there is potential for circumstances to change. A second problem is that what we perceive as utopia/dystopia is coloured by our values—individual or cultural—in the present. The viewpoint of future generations is based on their experience up to the point they find themselves rather than from our own.

I also appreciate you bringing up technological utopias. I like the writing of Kevin Kelly on technology and particularly his observation of the Amish. Kelly claims that the Amish do not reject technological innovation outright. They experiment with it by giving it to someone and seeing how it changes their lives.

In that way they can consider whether to adopt it or not or how to adopt it. This relates to part of my original question, the topic of distraction. Access to technological facilities is one thing but the decision to adopt them and the manner of embrace is another. Post-materialist values might not be the rejection of technology but more a thoughtful, or conscious, application of it.

So, I find myself questioning our drive for the sake of arriving at some state we may never reach, Instead, finding satisfaction in the manner and circumstances we engage with our present and future during our lives is important. Particularly if it makes us consider and take responsibility for our circumstances.

Stuart Candy: This interesting argument us much deeper than the original question of the *Tomorrowland* movie or indeed of scifi generally. Are explicitly normative visions needed in order for foresight to catalyse desirable

outcomes? The usual answer (read: assumption) seems to be "Yes, of course we need positive visions—if we don't imagine it how can we possibly pursue it?"

I'd like to wonder about that here. To paraphrase: is imagining in order to avoid pitfalls is sufficient to muddle towards preferred futures? Or, can we risk-manage our way to utopia? And are there different imaginal prerequisites, and so different answers, for systems of various scales or complexity levels? (e.g. fate-of-the-world, vs organisation, vs a person's life path).

Or is the analogy between imagination space and the phase space of biological evolution altogether misplaced, since imagination is a function of awareness, whereas evolution by natural selection is blind?

Christian Crews: We know that humans cannot predict, and we know that most of our clients do not have the agency to invent, the broader future which we will inhabit. As a result foresight is an ongoing process of thought, not a static statement of normative or dystopian visions.

I like the mention of Kauffman (see the panel)—*At Home in the Universe* was one of the books that prompted me to quit my job and go to UHCL to be a futurist. If you add in Neri Oxman, at the Material Ecology lab at MIT, who says that "nature offers not forms, but processes to think about forms," you could arrive at a autopoietic and autocatalytic (self-creating and self-regulating) way of looking at the future.

I've been working with my clients to embed action towards a better future (for them at least) through a process by which they develop points of view from emergent change in systems diagrams of the future, and then innovate platforms that have the ability to sense when the environment changes, and shift the unfolding of the platform to maximize fitness. There are amazing internal business barriers to doing this well over a long period of time, but there are glimpses of success.

I do think that a flexible process of sensing and adapting for the future will put pressure on organizational boundaries. Lastly from a storytelling perspective, utopias are boring. Like most important life lessons, this comes from the Matrix - when they built it the first time it was a utopia and it didn't work. Humans need conflict.

Noah Raford: Karl has reminded me why I love Peter Watts. Evolution gets to (what humans would think of) as very weird places. There was a passage in *Rifters*, I think, where he describes the way the neural network driven machines work. It was the best short description of evolution as a process I've ever read.

Tomorrowland, the theme park. Source: Wikipedia

The point was, it is totally amoral. It didn't matter what the adaptation is. If it worked, it survived. This produces deep pathways which most humans find alien and uncomfortable; a theme he elaborates on in *Blind Sight* as well.

Marcus Barber: But we're not talking about evolution, we are talking about humanity and to that end, our current biology seems to be future focused. We are attracted by the variations of today but our biology offers alternatives as to how we are motivated by those potential spaces. There's 'move towards' or 'move away from' as nodal operators—as a person will you be compelled to action by moving away from an image of dystopia. Will it compel you to act? For others they'll be driven by a move toward (utopia) visions that attract.

As for Darwin, he wasn't as fussed about evolving as he was about adapting. The best course of survival would be found in those that adapted themselves to the conditions in which they were embedded. In that light it was the failure of those that didn't adapt that created the space for those that did to survive.

In futures, I simply ask, will you adapt as needed?

Paul Graham Raven: I agree that the dichotomy between utopias and dystopias is essentially false, in the sense that they are value judgement labels attached to texts, whether by their authors or anyone else.

But the subjectivity of the dichotomy makes it a useful tool; I'm thinking here of the novel wherein someone rewrote *Lord of the Rings*, but from the perspective of Sauron and company. Same plot, same world, *totally* different story... and as such a great way to overturn assumptions. Among my massive list of projects-I'd-like-to-do-someday is a rewriting of some of the best known u/dystopias (*Brave New World*, *Handmaid's Tale*, etc) in the "opposite" mode to the original. Not because I think those futures deserve rehabilitation, but because I think screwing around with subjectivity in a way that foregrounds the phenomenon and causes the reader to reassess their position is fiction's highest duty.

I'm not anti-utopian, but the very subjectivity we're discussing makes it a tool

that can slip fatally in the craftsperson's hand. Or, to put it more bluntly: how can you ensure that your utopia-as-sandbox isn't parsed as a blueprint?

Jim Lee: One of the risks arising from the sparkly-clean visions of *Tomorrowland* (or at least the movie trailer!) is the sense that a utopian community is completely optimized and exists in a steady state. That would be dull.

The utopian communities that I've lived in or read about always seem to have a slightly "funky" unfinished quality to them. This makes utopia more of a "work in progress" than a "finished product." They seem to be in a constant state of flux—changing with their environments and the people that populate them.It's almost as evolution demands a certain level of inefficiency. Sometimes you need a few loose ends around to keep things interesting.

Joe Tankersley: I think there are some real differences between (1) Marketing the future (where shiny utopias are almost always the default); (2) Dramatic imaginings of the future (where even in utopia there is some evil power trying to bring down all that is good and right with the future, typically in the name of greed or power); (3) And actually creating the future, where the messiness is in many ways the real attraction to those most likely to be engaged.

Paul Graham Raven: This link featuring Jeff Jarvis being grumpy about *Tomorrowland*'s poor performance, and the

Jetpacks! Source: The Walt Disney Corporation

general lack of optimism, seems pertinent. I'd take his position more seriously if it didn't seem to boil down to "all these people clearly think they're smarter than me," though he's right when he says that "dystopia is about people rather than technology".

Andrew Curry: The comments of Hieroglyph contributor and OCAD grad Madeline Ashby also seem relevant here:

"America's problem is not that it needs more jetpacks. Jetpacks are not innovation. Jetpacks are a fetish object for retrofuturist otaku who jerked off to Judy Jetson, or maybe Jennifer Connelly's character in The Rocketeer."

Bryan Alexander: *Tomorrowland* is #1 in US box office today, at least according to IMDB. Two interesting columns: Jarvis is, unsurprisingly, very Silicon-Valley-centered. Ashby's is strikingly gendered, and hits a very different politics.

The discussion reminds me of *Interstellar*, with its paean to NASA and space exploration, and its sense of combined doom and betrayal.

Karl Schroeder: I finally got a chance to see the movie the other night, and had a variety of reactions, mostly that it serves as an excellent picture of Dorian Gray for its critics. Could it be that satirical aspects of this movie are being completely lost on people?

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More importantly, it's a Disney movie, not a deep work of philosophy. If you want a work of art on this subject to discuss, read Jo Walton's recent novel, *The Just City*. It's about the goddess Athena deciding to try an experiment: she pulls believers in Plato's vision of The Republic from all across space and time, to populate a version of his city, and sits back to see what will happen. Since many critics of *Tomorrowland* seem unaware that the idea of the perfect city made up of elite problem-solvers comes from Plato, not Ayn Rand, Jo's book might serve as a good refresher course.

The movie has been criticized for talking about a great new future but not presenting any new version of it. That, again, was part of the satire as far as I could tell; but it does speak to what the Hieroglyph project was about, which was the creation of some striking new image or symbol (the "hieroglyph") that could represent our current societal aspirations for the future.

If in the 1960s this was the jetpack, today it would have to be something else —a point that people clearly get when they say with heavy irony, "where's my flying car?" The problem is that we've moved on from that particular hieroglyph (as does the movie) but do not currently have a new one to replace it. When I hear the "where's my flying car?" complaint, what I am really hearing is, "where's my new hieroglyph?"

Christian Crews: I saw the movie this past weekend, and have two thoughts relevant to this conversation:

1. While the film certainly made fun of the dystopia culture, there was a serious bit where Governor Nix (the great Hugh Laurie, playing this role more toned down than I expected) goes on a rant about why people like dystopias better, the upshot being a dystopian future allows us to indulge because there's no hope of a better future, so fiddle while Rome burns. A better future requires work, which we are too lazy to do. This is similar to something I discovered doing community development foresight at Waitt— marginalized communities that have suffered generations of disempowerment often have residents who have an external locus of control.

They have decided, understandably through experience, that external forces of power and chance have far more impact on their future than their own agency. Therefore the logical path is to maximize short-term happiness. After scenario

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planning, especially with youth, community members start to shift that view to an internal locus of control—they can see levers in which their own agency determines their future. And the community can be more active at creating long-term sources of happiness.

2. I do think there's a new hieroglyph of the future in this movie, and it's subtle. To me it is Athena and Frank—the love of human and android. In Hollywood terms you could imagine this to be urging us to re-adopt our 1950s and '60s love affair with science and technology, but a sneaky message is that moving forward, AI and robots will have increasing roles and power in the human world, and both sides need to accommodate that.

Humans will need to find ways to exist with vastly superior physical and mental beings. And robots will need to invest and include human emotions to be able to successfully interact. I like this because it goes beyond the somewhat reactionary diversity techno-future of *Star Trek*, and lays out a much harder future challenge we should start thinking about.

Karl Schroeder: I'm currently reading *The Nonhuman Turn*, a collection of essays edited by Richard Grusin, which suggests that a significant number of people are starting to think about nonhuman actors as partners and equals— not just AI, but ecosystems, animals etc. A politics of the nonhuman could indeed be presented as a new hieroglyph. Athena and Frank make a good poster couple for it.

Christian Crews: The phrasing of the "politics of the nonhuman" is important because sentient robots are often portrayed monolithically—they are either all good help-mates of humans, or evil entities seeking domination. But there's no reason to think that robots will not have just as many factions as humans do. Since we humans have a hard enough time managing our own politics, think what will happen when we throw in a whole new set of actors, all with their own agendas.

Paul Graham Raven: If nothing else, this thread is proof of one of the great truisms of criticism; as Oscar Wilde put it, it's the sincerest form of autobiography. And *Tomorrowland* would appear to be an exemplar: there's no one canonical reading of the film, and it's interesting how amenable it is to reflecting the variety of different takes on the future on this list. ◀

> **A trailer for Tomorrowland can be seen here.**