

Letters

Frederik Pohl's notions about the predictive and educational value of science fiction apply well to the work of Verne and Wells. However, three problems degrade the value of today's science fiction, all of which apply especially to the assorted *Star Trek* programs and films.

The first *Star Trek* pilot program centered around telepathy, the second around ESP. These themes set the tone for many stories in which plausible futuristic science (space flight, high-power computers, beam weapons, genetic engineering) combines with genetically compatible humans and aliens, who exhibit various exotic mental powers. This mix of pseudo and real science confuses people, legitimizes fantasies, and contributes to the high level of superstition running through our post-modern society.

The second problem is science fiction's general failure to accurately project the accelerating pace of change. Much of the seemingly distant technology of the original *Star Trek* series is already in use, including portable communicators, remote medical imaging, and voice-activated computers. More recent *Star Trek* programs portray people centuries from now clicking away at computers not much different from the one this was typed upon, projecting the



current pace of technology onto the future. As Arthur C. Clarke has explained, future technology will appear magical to the point that it will not be recognizable.

The third and perhaps worst problem is what I view as the mishandling of the human-robot question. Almost all future fiction has humans competing with robots indefinitely. (Pohl writes about

humans who are scanned and beamed to a distant star, which begs the question of why a transferable mind would want to remain stuck with the form of a derived ape.) If robots become conscious in a manner analogous to humans, there will be no robot-human interaction or competition. The former will swiftly boost mental and physical powers to levels far beyond mere mortals. Human minds will have two choices—go fishing or go robotic.

Science fiction is in a quandary that has forced it into stagnation. People want to write and read about people. Even works portraying the coming cyberspace are anthropocentric. And we humans want to feel superior or at least equal to everything else, so robots (and aliens) are portrayed as flawed. But the future is not likely to be anthropocentric. The result is a genre that has become more escapist than predictive.

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