

UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA IN FUTURISTIC NONFICTION TELEVISION

by

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ABSTRACT

Fiction often represents the future in either a utopian or dystopian light. Utopian fiction presents worlds where life is perfection. Dystopian fiction's conflict comes directly from the characters' interactions with the problems in their world. When nonfiction television enters into speculation by making programs about the future, they also enter into these two categories of fiction. Some programs show a world returning to a perfect Eden, but they begin with the dystopian ending of the human race on earth. Other shows promise technological utopias, but avoid obvious problems with their technologically dependent tomorrows. These shows all take tropes from dystopian science fiction, but use their status as science documentaries to deny that any of the critiques of fiction belong in their programs.

INTRODUCTION

When Thomas More coined the term “utopia” in his 1516 novel of the same name, he intentionally created a word whose literal translation is “no-place”; somewhere that does not exist (More 8). At that point in history European explorers were coming into contact with people and societies they had never seen before. Columbus had landed in the New World only 24 years earlier and the possibilities for undiscovered lands seemed endless. There existed no better way to add the ring of possibility to a fantastic society than to place it on a newly discovered or undiscovered island (e.g., Shakespeare’s The Tempest and Bacon’s New Atlantis). When More points out, in the title of the novel (and in the names of many of its characters), that the location is “no-place” he says that the perfect society he created does not exist, but he does not say that it cannot exist. In the years that followed, the idea of a utopia persisted as a perfect, heavenly place that did not currently exist, but could in some undiscovered land.¹

With the end of the age of exploration, some novelists turned to the stars for their undiscovered lands, but others chose a place where the possibilities were just as endless: the future (More 20). A futuristic setting allows for just as much fantasy as one set currently on a distant world, but has the added advantage of direct link with the present. While it is not difficult to see Utopia as More’s condemnation of the corruption of 14th century England (especially with the discussion of the treatment of thieves before the story begins), setting the story years in the future would have established a more causal

¹ More did not write in a vacuum. Plato, Milton, and others also explored ideas of fictional perfect societies. What makes Utopia interesting is the idea of “no-place” and its use as the setting for most science and natural history programs.

relationship between the problems of his day and the imagined world of the book. This link often sets the stage for the negative side of a futuristic society: the dystopia. Where a utopian novel points out problems in current life by illustrating how they should work, the dystopian novel takes present issues and extrapolates them out to their extremes. They imagine the worst possible outcomes often by rejecting the progressive belief of unquestioning faith in science (Haynes 2006). The root in real locations gives dystopian novels their bite. This holds true for films and television as well. Without the Statue of Liberty in the sand at the end of Planet of The Apes, the movie would just be about a man stranded on an alien world. Only once the audience realizes future New York is ruled by apes do the questions of, “What went wrong?” and, “How can we avoid our own destruction?” arise. The power of a dystopia lies in the notion that it could happen and it could happen here.

Nonfiction occasionally takes speculative steps into hypothetical futures. In literature these normally take the form of essays on how a perfect society could work or current problems that could potentially become much larger troubles (e.g., H. G. Wells’ late nonfiction work such as The New World Order). Nonfiction television and newsreels began looking at potential future technologies with coverage of the world’s fairs and industrial films for prototypes of new technologies that could one day be ubiquitous. These programs continue today on science and technology networks where they discuss the new and potential inventions that could bring society closer to a utopian tomorrow.

With the advances of computer graphics and the more recent fears of the apocalypse (starting with the Y2K scare and continuing with the 2012 phenomenon)

another breed of speculative nonfiction programming appeared. These programs specifically wonder what would happen if human beings no longer controlled the earth. What is interesting about these programs is that the initial dystopian idea of a planet devoid of humans eventually leads to an Edenic utopia where animals live in harmony with one another. The earth becomes a virgin land seemingly untouched by history, the “no-place” of nature films.

These programs all claim to be speculative nonfiction, yet they each borrow heavily from fiction, and not just any works, but specifically critical dystopian science fiction of the twentieth century. No matter what outlook they are trying to portray, these programs have more in common in subject matter and look with George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World than they do with the utopian science fiction of Star Trek or The Jetsons. In utopian science fiction, the conflicts in the story come from the interactions between the characters, not from the fact that they live in the future. These nonfiction shows focus on how our lives will be different in the future simply because it is the future, rather than focusing on how people will continue to have normal interactions.

These television shows must be looked at through the lens of dystopian science fiction because of the great difference in purpose between the two. When the highly critical novels such as Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four were written, the authors “... regarded with horror the devices and systems that had been hailed so optimistically as the hope of the future, because they saw efficiency and individuality as mutually exclusive” (Haynes 184). These authors wrote in opposition to the majority of

society who saw modernity and technology as only positive and helpful. Novels like Fahrenheit 451, A Clockwork Orange, and Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? and films like Soylent Green, Brazil, and Omega Man all followed in this tradition. The stories are about places and societies removed from our own with a metaphorical jump. The audience is expected to relate what they watch and read to the life they live now and think critically about that relation.

Despite the different motivations for the creation of all of these works, the comparisons cannot be avoided. The speculative nonfiction shows take the look and setting of a dystopian science fiction work and deny the critique. They are not written by the minority to take a critical look at the views of dominant culture; they are produced by the majority to make money. Dystopian science fiction hopes to raise questions about the current uncertainties we feel for new technologies and uncertainties about our future with these products and procedures. These nonfiction shows use experts, facts, and science to proclaim a preordained tomorrow and imply that current scientific knowledge is infallible and cannot be questioned.

This paper will look at television programs that show a future devoid of people: one with imagined animals, one with the horrifying destruction of our history, and one that places the viewer in this empty world. All of these avoid the question of how and why people have left and each ends with the planet in perfect harmony with itself. This paper will also examine three programs that explore future technologies: one that gushes over commodities, one that explores our mastery of science, and one that glorifies machineries of war and the destruction they cause. Each assumes all of their

advancements will produce only benefits and they end with ideas of utopian tomorrows.

The last three programs glorify the construction and destruction that could lead to the scenarios in the first three shows, and the first group never asks how their situations occurred. Their timelines combine to create a strange cycle of utopias and dystopias.

ANIMALS RULE AFTER HUMANS: A DYSTOPIA?

As humans it is difficult to think of something more horrific than the end of human life on earth, yet terrifying thoughts like these make up a significant percentage of nonfiction television (along with other gruesome subjects like true crime stories, near death experiences, and animal attacks). Networks like The Discovery Channel, The History Channel, The National Geographic Channel, and their affiliates each produce a surprisingly high number of programs about the end of the world. The History Channel alone recently aired at least five specials on end times and produces a show called The Nostradamus Effect, where each episode looks at a different apocalyptic belief (History.com). From these programs and the continued fascination with the apocalypse in popular culture, evidenced by recent films such as Legion, 28 Days Later, 2012, The Day After Tomorrow, and the remake of The Day The Earth Stood Still, it comes as no surprise that the next step was taken to see what would happen after The End (if any life on earth still exists). It is in this climate that the speculative nonfiction television shows The Future is Wild, Life After People, and Aftermath: Population Zero exist.

These three programs are subjunctive documentaries: nonfiction programs about what could be or what might have been. Shows of this type became viable with the advancement of CGI technology (Wolf 274). Eyewitnesses and experts can describe events and object that cannot be photographed, but documentary film is a visual medium that needs images. Computer graphics stand in place of footage that does not exist or is not up to the standards of the documentary (Adelmann 49). Although it could seem strange to find a cartoon appearing in a nonfiction piece, these images are now acceptable

to viewers without explanation (Aldemann 52). CGI has become real enough for most viewers even in a medium where realism is expected (Nichols 5).

The Future is Wild: Imaginary Animals

Ever since the wildly popular Walking With Dinosaurs first aired on the BBC and then The Discovery Channel in 1999, television has found it can be both convenient and lucrative to make otherwise standard natural history programs with animals that cannot be filmed in natural history settings. The dinosaurs that began the trend proved that the natural history model established by years of programming is so ingrained in the audience psyche that any creature living or dead, filmed or animated, can fit into it without viewers batting an eye. The backing of a network like the BBC or Discovery plus voice over narration, expert interviews, and blue chip cinematography meant that this was a documentary, not a children's cartoon. The CGI used to create the creatures further ensured the program's veracity since "a simulation can give the hypothetical an appearance of feasibility, by virtue of its visualization" (Wolf 281). It was not long before these ideas were put to a further test: Could a television special be made in the Walking With Dinosaurs style (CGI animals on real backgrounds) with entirely imagined animals and still be called a documentary? The answer was, "Yes," and the result was Image Entertainment's The Future is Wild.

This program's setup seems like science fiction. In the opening the narration tells the audience that in the future the earth will become "too hostile" for human life and that people hopefully will find somewhere safe to live elsewhere. From this safe place five

million years in the future, they send a probe back “to discover the fate of the earth.”² Over a spinning CGI earth, a metal contraption (the probe) whizzes into view and the audience is told, “The future world you are about to see is not fantasy, it was devised by scientists based on the laws of evolution.”³ The image then zooms into Paris five million years from now in the grips of an ice age. A graphic then appears to represent the probe-gathered data that looks like a character read-out in a video game. The statistics about temperature, place, time, wind chill, and thickness of the ice fill in a box on the screen accompanied by little electronic sound effects while video plays in a smaller box in the corner. Back on the ice, the audience meets its first creature and the narration gives the reason why its life story seems so familiar. In the future, “the shape of life has changed dramatically, but the rules of survival have not.” As the CGI creature (a fluffy white wolverine with teeth like a saber-toothed tiger) runs and attacks the camera, the narration lets us know that this is a “perfectly designed killing machine.” Probe vision returns giving the audience a 360-degree look at the animal and all of its important statistics (“bone crunching” jaws, weight, color, etc.). The animal, a “snowstalker,” then returns to its den and two cubs that she must hunt for alone. She goes out to get food for them and happens upon two other future animals that also get statistical read-outs (“shagrats” and

² The Future is Wild spawned a television series that lasted 13 episodes. Less than half of it was material not in the original special, which is why it is not being discussed it here. The series does not say what had happened to people or mention any probes coming back to earth. The show also includes expert interviews, which are absent from the original special.

³ In 2007 a children’s cartoon series based on The Future is Wild began airing on Discovery Kids in the US. This cartoon is science fiction and involves children traveling to the future in a time machine.

“gannet whales”). She manages to kill another animal, feeds her cubs and, her story over, the probe moves to the next area of the globe.

Each section of “The Future is Wild” works in the same way. A new time or location is introduced with data on the screen and footage of that location (live action footage of current locations that look similar), animals receive the same treatment, predation and life cycles happen, the story ends, and the probe moves to a new location and/or time.

Throughout the program the narration endeavors to keep the excitement up by making sure we know how bizarre this future is while at the same time reminding us that these creatures are not only based on scientific data, but also on current animals and their behaviors. This is extraordinarily contradictory and arises from the distance the animals have from the creatures on which they are based. The distance between a “spink” (a tunnel dwelling bird which could exist five million years from now in the future Midwestern America) and a modern quail is not only temporal but also indexical. The creators of the show started with real images and information about quails, to this they added evolutionary theory, facts about naked mole rats, and artistic interpretations. All of this information was then given to computer programmers who turned it into miles of code that produced animated images of an imagined animal that crawls and squeaks through a future desert. This distance between the real animal and this new hypothetical creature leads to the question, how far can an indexical link be stretched and still be believable (Wolf 287)? The Future is Wild avoids this question by frequently relating back to the scientific facts and even showing a CGI morph of the original animal (a quail)

into the new creature (a spink). But the restraints that keep the program believable do not interfere with the decisions that determine what type of animals appear in the show. Here endless possibilities exist and the show's creators take the opportunity to create monsters. The top predator in nearly every section of the show is remarkably similar to creatures in monster movies. Giant bats prowl the future American Midwest (Bats 1999), giant spiders eat the last mammals in the far distant Australia (Tarantula 1955), and in the future Amazon, birds called "carakillers" terrorize the last primates on earth while looking very much like dinosaurs with feathers (Jurassic Park III 2001). The imaginary nature of the animals in The Future is Wild requires constant validation but otherwise allows the creators to invent monsters without repercussions.

The Future is Wild is not the only show about imagined animals that has played on The Discovery Channel. Dragon's World: A Fantasy Made Real and Alien Planet followed a few years later. Like The Future is Wild each of these programs uses scientific testimony and CGI images to validate their claims and avoid critique (Metz 340 and 342). Although they allege that they have some relation to science, they differ from The Future is Wild by completely removing themselves from real life. Dragon's World sets itself in a parallel fantasy past where dragons were real animals and Alien Planet exists on an imagined world in a science fiction universe. The Future is Wild puts itself on the earth we currently live on and wants us to believe that this will be our future. This becomes problematic in The Future is Wild because we are not allowed to question why humans are gone or why the future is full of monsters. If the show proclaimed it was science

fiction these questions would be central to the piece, but as “nonfiction” it successfully avoids these critiques.

Life After People: Natural Horrors Destroy History

In a startling ironic turn, The History Channel received its highest ratings to date (for any type of program) from a show about the future. Life After People debuted in January 2008 to an audience of 5.4 million Americans excited to see what the future would look like if they suddenly ceased to exist (Crupi). The two-hour special begins with multiple shots of lights going out and “voice of God” narration asking,

What would happen if every human being on earth disappeared? At some point in the future this could be the fate of our planet. This isn't the story of how we might vanish. It is the story of what happens to the world we leave behind. The disappearance of humans may seem like science fiction but eventually there will come a day like this. A day when people no longer walk the earth.

Under these hypothetical musings and assurances that this is not fiction, the images range from lights going out to phones off hooks (with appropriate shutting-down drones and dial tones), with a few sneak peaks of the computer-generated destruction to come. The program assures us that it is “the most natural question in the world” to wonder what life will be like after you are gone. The intro ends with enormous scratchy white letters on a black background: “1 DAY AFTER PEOPLE.” As the show goes on it jumps ahead letting us know what might happen through voice-over exposition, interviews with various scientists (mostly engineers), and both stock footage and computer generated images of the world without us. Time skips forward at random intervals until it reaches “10,000 YEARS AFTER PEOPLE,” where the only hints that we existed at all are the

pyramids at Giza, Mount Rushmore, and the Hoover Dam. A television series followed the initial special in 2009. Each episode follows the same basic plot of the original, but normally focuses on one topic or city (topics include invasive species, dead bodies, bridges, etc.).

In this future great modern cities do not look like the sun-kissed ruins of Greece or the moss and vine-covered fairytale castles of Europe. Here, as one reviewer points out, our ruins look like cutscenes from an apocalyptic video game (Slarek). This future is unstable and looks ready to produce untold numbers of ghosts and monsters. Life After People frequently visits real abandoned towns to prove that their predictions are based on reality, but the program cannot resist turning many of these into moody horror segments. Every abandoned classroom or amusement park is filled with ghostly children's laughter, and one dance hall in Pripyat, Ukraine (a town evacuated after the Chernobyl disaster) has distant party sounds reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's The Shining. Each transition has unnerving glitches and jarring static, making each leap forward more and more foreboding. Animals will populate the future, but only the most skin-crawling kind. Rats and roaches scurry through the empty world along with hissing cats, rabid dogs, and wolves that always seem to be covered in blood. Life After People will be a jungle nightmare.

The History Channel's Life After People wants to make sure you know that it is not just difficult to keep the forces of nature from damaging man-made objects, it is a war. When "nature" is not "reclaim(ing) her old turf," it is, "spreading like a cancer," "battling back," and "devouring," because, "...those who kept the forces of nature under

control have vanished. Nature, long contained, is poised for an outbreak of violence, chaos, disease, and disaster.” In the first episode of the television series, we are assured that only human intervention has prevented the loss of thousands of years of history. Without modern temperature and humidity controls, we watch CGI Tutankhamun crumble to dust and the Sistine Chapel collapse in on itself. Although it is pointed out that tourism is part of the reason the Sistine Chapel needs its current level of maintenance, the overall message is that culture and history only persist because of our vigilance and control. Historians and engineers are of the utmost importance and anything that has survived by itself without outside help (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls) is a fluke. If we want our history to survive into the future, we need to be there to actively protect it. This is not a very surprising conclusion from a History Channel show about the future.

This show looks like a horrifying science fiction program. Films and television often use horror to villainize something they, or society as a whole, find problematic. In Life After People the audience could conclude that the filmmakers villainize the natural world because without historical artifacts they would be out of a job. The show’s creators fear the destruction of the archive explored in Jacques Derrida’s No Apocalypse, Not Now. With the deterioration of architecture and artifacts, no one in the future could construct the histories of civilization, determine their importance, and continue the work of historians (never mind there would be no person left to do this). Unfortunately the show, being nonfiction, does not invite any of these critiques. The narration assures the audience that, “... there will come a day like this,” a day where people no longer exist

and that eventuality should not be questioned. The real footage of abandoned places also calls for viewers to think of this as something happening not in a hypothetical space, but on the Earth we know. The large amount of conjecture that makes up the show is ignored and all predictions are taken as fact. Life After People proclaims it is objective and real and should be seen as such.

Science fiction films invite audiences to engage critically with their subject matter by existing in metaphoric space and not reality. Sharona Ben-Tov's book The Artificial Paradise argues that the films Alien and Aliens put feminine nature and technology at odds and villainize all things female, especially pregnancy and motherhood (43). Throughout both films humans are destroyed (sometimes with pregnancy) by uncontrolled nature and only with the help of technology can a woman stop the monsters. Since the aliens do not actually exist, the audience is free to imagine what the filmmaker is saying and draw their own conclusions. The multiple levels of meaning gained by criticism exist in both the fiction films and nonfiction television shows, but the creators of Life After People deny this by insisting that their speculative program is completely real and not up for discussion.

Aftermath: Population Zero: First Person Perspective

Not even two full months after the original broadcast of Life After People, The National Geographic Channel put out its surprisingly similar Aftermath: Population Zero. The program follows the same basic formula of jumps through time after people have disappeared, but with a few differences.

The first and most obvious change is that people do not vanish before the program begins; they all disappear at one time from all locations on earth on screen. The program seems as if it exists in a parallel universe that looks like our own but has some fantastic elements. The narration tells us, “One minute from now every single person on earth will disappear. It does not matter how or that it’s far fetched. What’s important is, what will happen when we’re gone?” We soon see the immediate result. Crowded city streets are suddenly empty. A CGI double-decker bus crashes into a fountain. Kettles boil over. We are told that planes that were landing would crash and that ones in the air will stay up for a few hours before crashing. Although this conjures up ideas of the Christian Rapture, it is never mentioned, let alone explored.

The program Aftermath: Population Zero jumps forward in time, but not with jarring noises and text (as in Life After People). The narration announces the leap and then small text appears at the bottom of the screen. This is consistent with the overall tone of the series, which is much less terrifying than the History Channel show. The future here is less of a nightmare and more of a dream. CGI destruction is kept to a minimum and scenes of life without humans are high contrast and nearly sepia toned. Aftermath: Population Zero needs to be less terrifying because, while Life After People is closer in form to an expository documentary, it has more in common in its overall design with The Future is Wild (Nichols 34). Throughout the program we are never told how we know events will progress this way and no experts are interviewed. When we go to a location, we must believe that we are there not only in place but in time. This is footage of the future. A terrifying program set in the future would be harder to follow and see as

educational. Life After People gets away with this by having an abundance of experts and examples from the real locations it visits. They want you to know that their horror story is actually full of facts and not made just to scare you. Since Aftermath: Population Zero does not rely on expert interviews, it must make different stylistic choices to establish its documentary authority. When it puts a hawk in a set and tells you it is sixty years after people, you are more likely to believe you are watching a trustworthy documentary if you are not also wondering if the building is haunted.

Aftermath: Population Zero focuses more on the environment than Life After People does. A large part of the first half of the original special centers on the disaster that would occur if humans were no longer around to staff the many nuclear power plants across the globe. Real and CGI fog drift around animals and plants and we are told that each meltdown would be twenty times worse than Chernobyl. Yet, somehow, even though many animals die, soon nature bounces back. This is the overall message of Aftermath: Population Zero: no matter what we do to the planet, if we leave it alone it will fix itself. Wolves will come back and breed with dogs. Herds of horses will roam where they did before people existed. Not even cataclysmic nuclear meltdown can stop the natural world. At one point the program does tell us that things like a stainless steel sink may be around two-hundred-thirty years after people leave, if not longer, but it would most likely be buried only to reappear in spring rains. National Geographic wants us to know that everything will turn out just fine if we just leave the natural world alone.

The idea that the earth will clean itself if we let it assumes that everything we are currently doing has no lasting effects. The audience is assured of this by the voice of God

narration in the same way the audience is assured that it does not matter how people will disappear. These assurances do not leave room for even the simplest questions asked by b-movies like the 1954 film Them!: Should we really have so much radioactive material?

The Dystopian Eden

All of these programs look like dystopias. The Future is Wild, Life After People, and Aftermath: Population Zero each clearly state in their openings that people no longer exist on the planet. Whether it was voluntary or not, human beings abandon the earth and leave it to its own devices. As humans it is hard to think of a bleaker tomorrow than one where people do not or cannot exist. Apart from the lack of a protagonist, these nonfiction shows are similar to fictional apocalyptic narratives. In films like Omega Man and 28 Days Later the audience follows protagonists around decaying, abandoned cities, towns, and countryside occasionally stumbling upon monsters, much in the same way the camera explores the future each of the nonfiction shows. The only real difference is that the monsters of the nonfiction future are creatures humans left behind and not ones they created.⁴

Another parallel exists between these programs and one dystopian novel in particular. Each show involves massive leaps in time reminiscent of H. G. Wells' The Time Machine, one of the first works to look at a world without people. In the novel a man builds a device to take him to any time he wishes and with it he journeys to the end result of humanity. The same time jumps are present in each program, even accompanied

⁴ Both the mutants in Omega Man and the zombies 28 Days Later were created by man made chemicals.

by a mechanical device in The Future is Wild, but the most direct allusion lies in Aftermath: Population Zero. This show uses an effect to mark when the story travels forwards or backwards in time (when it talks about the present, it will “go there” and show footage of cities with people and life in them). For the time traveling, the program speeds up its video and makes a sound like it is fast-forwarding a VHS tape. This silly transition makes much more sense when looked at in the context of The Time Machine. The time traveler describes going to the future in a way quite reminiscent of fast-forwarding. “To-morrow night came black, then day again, night again, day again, faster and faster still” (Wells 21). Also at this time he says that he watched his laboratory “fall away” from him and decay, as the buildings do in both Aftermath: Population Zero and Life After People. At the end of the novel, the time traveler goes far forward to a future where, “All the sounds of Man... (are) over” (105). In his first stop he encounters butterfly-like creatures that scream with a “dismal” voice and giant crabs who wish to eat him (102). Here the sun is huge and red and a “sense of abominable desolation” hangs over the world (103). The novel describes a dying future where life seems to slow down to an agonizing crawl. This is the bleak world of the dystopian earth without humans; but it is in this that the similarities with the nonfiction programs end. At the end of each program, the earth is not in its death throes, it is thriving. Although entire classes of animals die out completely in The Future is Wild, the earth simply replaces them with new, vibrant creatures. In the other two programs, the ultimate images are of worlds finally in balance. Where The Time Machine shows us a far future of Hell, red and dying, the nonfiction programs take us to a new Eden.

Nonfiction films have shown the natural world as a type of perfect Eden since the invention of the blue chip wildlife film.⁵ These programs made sure to only show the beauty and glory of a natural world where humans have no place and seem to not exist. This leaves the animals in balance with themselves and with the ahistoric world they inhabit. Their lives may still be fraught with danger, but only from other creatures that are still “natural,” unlike the humans that would destroy these balances with their mechanized lives and cultures. Here we see every one of these nonfiction films about the future grow into human-less nature films. In a world without humans, *The Garden* is renewed and while the lion may not lie down with the lamb, their roles in life are set only by the most natural laws of instinct and evolution. But in these utopian futures someone is missing. These programs say that the humans were tossed from Eden and cannot enjoy its reinvention on earth. That reinvention only comes with their second expulsion. What starts as a dystopia can only become a utopia without humans.

The idea of a completely empty planet is one that strictly separates these nonfiction shows and the fiction dystopias they resemble. The need for a protagonist in dystopian science fiction and for omniscient objectivity in speculative nonfiction is the primary reasons for this difference. Looking at a fiction story without human protagonists makes an interesting comparison.

The short story “There Will Come Soft Rains” by Ray Bradbury, documents the last day of a fully automated house after all of its occupants die from a nuclear disaster. The house coos and clucks through its day, attempting to make comfortable the people

⁵ Recent examples of blue chip wild life films and television programs include [Planet Earth](#), [Life](#), [March of The Penguins](#), and [The Blue Planet](#).

that no longer exist. At the end of the story, a fire breaks out and destroys the house because, just like in Life After People, human-made creations need the constant upkeep and control of the people that made them (Bradbury 170). The moral of the story comes from the poem with which it shares its title. “Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree, if mankind perished utterly” (Teasdale 143). The same idea comes out of The Future is Wild, Life After People, and Aftermath: Population Zero: the earth will not miss human beings. In two out of the three shows, the audience sees the Statue of Liberty fall, but Charlton Heston is not there to comprehend what this means. In these works a dystopia for people is ultimately a utopia for the planet. However, they find no reason to address the cause or causes of the dystopia, which are so clear in the Bradbury story, Planet of The Apes, and other dystopian fiction. The construction of objects and the destruction of humanity are the events that begin each of these programs, but the questions surrounding these significant acts are never interrogated. The next three programs celebrate these two acts and leave out the unavoidable eventualities documented in of The Future is Wild, Life After People, and Aftermath: Population Zero.

WONDERFUL TECHNOLOGY: A UTOPIA?

Ever since the world's fairs and the futurist shorts of the 1940s and 1950s (e.g., General Motors' To New Horizons) nonfiction futuristic programming has strived to convince the populace that tomorrow is not only bright, but more convenient and exciting than today. During the Cold War, the goal of these programs was primarily to interest Americans in the sciences and encourage students to go into fields like engineering so that the West could keep one step ahead of the Russians. These programs continue to be produced and act as commercials for products about to come out and devices newly put to use. In a world so driven by technology, programs that link continuing technological dependence with utopias bring comfort.

According to Robert Rydell's book Fair America, nations use world's fairs to increase popular opinion of their policies or projects and to unite their citizens. In the 1930s American world's fairs began looking to the future to take the public's mind off of the current depression. These fairs contained the shift that opened the door for the technology-driven, futuristic nonfiction television shows of today. "Progress, in addition to its other definitions, now meant increased consumer spending as world's fair sponsors tried to persuade Americans that they had to set aside older values such as thrift and restraint and become consumers of America's factory and farm products" (11). The government and the sponsors of the fairs hoped that this would hasten the nation's economic recovery by rebuilding America's domestic market. These fairs "also encouraged Americans to place their faith in the ability of scientists and engineers to

design the world of tomorrow” (12). These ideas outlived the depression that gave birth to them and continue on in the television shows of today.

These futuristic nonfiction shows run into problems when they claim to be about an unchangeable future. Some programs avoid this by frequently stating that everything they examine is only speculation. If each program were only an infomercial about new technologies, they also would evade this problem. When a nonfiction show about new technologies asserts it can really predict the future, it instantly invites comparisons with another genre that also looks at the effects future products and procedures will have on humanity: dystopian science fiction. Unfortunately, because of the absolute faith nonfiction science programs place in their science and facts, they continue to insist that they cannot be critiqued in the same way as dystopian works. Beyond Tomorrow, Visions of The Future, and Future Weapons all continue the traditions of “progress” from world’s fairs while also maintaining that they are authoritative science documentaries. Beyond Tomorrow celebrates consumerism, Visions of The Future proclaims our mastery of science will solve all our problems, and Future Weapons revels in the power and the force of tomorrow’s killing machines. These shows glorify the construction of goods and the destruction of people, while ignoring that these acts set the stage for dystopias in literature.

Beyond Tomorrow: The Science of Consuming

The Australian television program Beyond Tomorrow currently airs on The Science Channel (a spin-off station of The Discovery Channel) in the United States. The

program follows a handful of young presenters as they look for the newest innovations in technology. In a representative episode hosts follow police in the United States using portable scanners to take fingerprints, test drive a new Lamborghini, see forensic doctors performing virtual autopsies, learn that a man was able to swap a red paper clip for many different things on the internet, see that high resolution photographs can find real Rembrandts, and play with a new type of touch screen. Each episode works this way, jumping from story to story without connecting any of the segments.⁶

Within each small segment a host normally meets the maker of the product or someone whose life it affects. These people then either demonstrate the workings of the product or let the host play with it. For example, the section with the Lamborghini is basically a long form commercial for the car. The host spends much of the segment driving the machine while telling the audience about the smooth ride and how fast the car can go. After about four minutes of this the presenter finally mentions that the car consists of primarily carbon fiber, to reinforce that this show actually focuses on the future and not just selling products. In fact, not once in the Lamborghini section did anyone claim that anything about the car is “innovative” or “new”; the closest they came was “exclusive” when explaining that Lamborghini will only make a few of them. Television is so inundated with commercials that this program can effectively pass one off as “science.”

The show is interested in new technologies, but not overly so. This program presents interesting new high-tech gadgets and rarely goes into any detail as to how they

⁶ Clips from the Discovery Channel show Mythbusters occasionally end up as segments in Beyond Tomorrow.

work. It profiles new products that will be available in the near future, but most are toys for the rich or made specifically for specialized segments of society (e.g., doctors). The products and innovations of Beyond Tomorrow will make life fun and exciting in the future, or at least that is what they would like the audience to believe. The young, excited presenters reinforce that the future will be a utopia where the gadgets are fun to play with even without any knowledge of their inner workings or how they are made. This depiction of commodities further reinforces the current, ever-widening gap between consumer goods and the ways they are produced. In the future we will have even less of an idea of why something works or where it came from. These inventions always seem very innocent and no thought is given to any negative impact they could potentially have in the future world. There is no talk of the pollution produced by the Lamborghini or what sort of factory creates the touch screens they are so excited about. This program wants an audience ready to buy the latest things when they come out without worrying whether or not they need them or what sort of future those products might create.

The idea of progress through consumerism, so vital to world's fairs from the 1930s onward, lives on in Beyond Tomorrow. The excitement shown by the hosts stems primarily from the newness of each product and that these are objects that can be purchased. The film Brazil is also set in a world in love with progress and consumption, but, unlike Beyond Tomorrow, it explores what happens when these trends go unchecked. Early in the film we see the busy office where the main character works. The perfectly choreographed workplace runs like a well-oiled machine and the promise of an efficient, perfect tomorrow appears to have been achieved. However, immediately

following this we find out that the main character is not at work because his futuristic alarm clock did not go off. He attempts to get his breakfast from his automated kitchen (much like the one pictured in the futuristic General Motor's film Design for Dreaming), only to end up with wet toast and a whole container of sugar in his coffee. Here progress has happened, but it has not improved lives. The idea of progress is later mocked when he meets his mother at a restaurant. The waiter brings around menus that light up with pictures of the dish and the meal comes out almost immediately after it is ordered. Speed and neatness of presentation (no words are needed to order, just the number of the picture, which the waiter insists upon) are central to ideas of progress, but the result is unexpected. Each person receives not steak or chicken, but three scoops of strangely colored mush with a picture of the "normal" food they ordered stuck in it. Since none of the characters immediately complain about the state of the food, the audience must assume that this was what they were expecting. Later we see his mother getting plastic surgery that involves stretching her face out and covering it in plastic wrap. The procedure works (and much more successfully than the woman who was using acid to do the same thing), but the image is disturbing. At another point in the film we see a skyline of blue skies, fluffy clouds, and nuclear smoke stacks. The scene looks idyllic until a toothless bum leans over the clouds and the audience learns it was only a model. The real world has the smoke stacks, but the sky is gray and sooty. In this future, progress has moved into a grotesque reality.

Brazil is set at Christmas and there are constant reminders of the importance of consuming and progressive gifts that do not bring happiness. Most of the extras in the

film are pushing full shopping carts around the city and at one point we see groups of people carrying signs that read “Consumers For Christ.” The main character is given the opportunity to move up in his job where identical presents are given to everyone. These turn out to be decision-making devices (a little weight will decide “yes” or “no” if you let it drop). Again, this would make life easier, but not necessarily better. These are the ideas that are missing from Beyond Tomorrow. Although we know we will be able to buy these things in the future and that they will be more advanced than the things we have now, there is no discussion of what our lives will really be like if we continue to move forward without questioning where we are going.

Visions of The Future: Mastery of Science

In 2007, the BBC produced Visions of The Future, a three-part documentary about the future of technology. This show also aired on The Science Channel in the United States. Each episode follows particle physicist and author Dr. Michio Kaku as he explores the very cutting edge of technology and imagines where these products, procedures, and ways of thinking could take us in the future and how they may affect our lives. The core idea of the show is that human beings are moving from scientific discovery into an era of scientific mastery, specifically in the areas of computer intelligence, biotechnology, and quantum mechanics.

In the first installment, “The Intelligence Revolution,” Dr. Kaku shows the audience a top of the line computer from the 1960s. He then holds up a cell phone and points out that we now use computers hundreds of times smaller and three-hundred

thousand times faster than the machines of forty years ago. Visions of The Future uses that rate of progress to project the state of computers and microchips in the next few years, twenty years, and farther. We may not own flying cars a couple decades down the road, but we will have cars that can drive themselves and thus eliminate traffic jams and accidents. We will live in a world of “ubiquitous computing,” when computers become so integrated into everything in life, from clothing to pills to magazines, they become invisible. Robots with artificial intelligence exist now and in the very near future will become much more prevalent. The program also looks at current fringe computer based social communities, like Second Life and World of Warcraft, which are slowly leaking into the mainstream and what that could mean for society at large in years to come. The episode ends with a look at a new procedure to fix severe depression with a “brain pacemaker.” This story leads to a discussion of other methods that may soon modify the human mind and what that would mean for how we define what is “human.” The other two hours of Visions of The Future structure themselves much like the first. Each program starts with the description of a huge advancement in the field, in these cases either biotechnology with The Human Genome Project or quantum mechanics with the development of quantum theory (which gives us the ability to understand and use everything from DNA to nuclear power). The show then references how rapidly these advances happened to propose what could happen in the not-so-distant future.

Dr. Kaku describes how new advancements will change lives. He tells the audience, “We are becoming masters of intelligence,” or biology or matter itself. Where Beyond Tomorrow only shows the audience new things that they might one day get to

play with, Visions of The Future strives to make each of its predictions not only interesting but significant to the future of every person watching. The show does, however, make reference to some people to whom these advancements will not touch immediately (the "have-nots," the people who will not have the most advanced computers, chips in their brains, designer children, space travel, etc.) but it assures its audience (presumably the "haves") that those "have-nots" will be the minority. It will be society's choice whether to keep these people out of our future (keeping the advancements only for the rich) and hopefully people will choose the right option. Considering the current state of "have-nots" in our society and that the show presents no future social advancement, it looks a little bleak. The program does not come right out and say we could end up like the Morlocks and the Eloi from The Time Machine, but it does make sure the implications exist. These vague hints to the consequences are sprinkled throughout the program. In the episode about biotechnology the host wonders how far the human race could change itself and still be considered to be human. Questions are raised about the end of personal interactions with the flourishing of online communities but are not pursued in any depth.

Visions of the Future takes a small amount of time to look at hypothetical questions, but in each instance after it has raised the issue and spoken to an expert about it, the show moves to another topic. It is as if the program is saying, "We have explored the potential problems and now they are settled." No problems are actually solved or even sufficiently interrogated because the show is only speculative, but the sheer number of experts lends an authority to this program that suggests that the actual future will fall

into lock step with whatever they predict. These ideas deny the obvious comparisons to Brave New World in the episode about genetic engineering or those to The Matrix in their talks about online communities. At one point the show mentions the “have-nots” that one-day will not receive all of the advancements granted to the rest of society. The film GATTACA also broaches this problem. In that film the genetic engineering of children puts the earth in a near Brave New World state. In this case, science does not create the underclass specifically for their menial jobs (as in Huxley's novel), but the people end up there because science did not create them. The elite of this society possess perfect genes picked out for them by their parents and a scientist. The rest of the population lives as “de-generates” or “God-children,” imperfect because of their natural births. These people would be the “have-nots” mentioned in Visions of The Future, but that program never extrapolates out what this would truly mean.

Overall Visions of The Future is still very utopian. The show only questions the future it presents a small handful of times and then never goes into much detail about possibly problems. The show gives lip service to the fears of dystopian science fiction, but insists it has all the answers and the audience does not need to worry.

Future Weapons: The Joys of Destruction

While Visions of The Future looks at a wide variety of innovations, the Discovery Channel show Future Weapons: Technologically Advanced Weaponry focuses only on new advancements in military technology. The program premiered in 2006 and airs on both The Discovery Channel and its spin-off, The Military Channel. Each week the

audience follows Richard “Mack” Machowicz, a former Navy Seal, as he travels around the globe looking at and testing out the newest killing machines. In the episode “Stealth” (first aired April 26, 2006), Mack points out that it is dangerous to go up against snipers that hide behind walls and wear reinforced armor, such as those the American military currently fights in Iraq. Luckily the United States government invented a new futuristic sniper rifle that can “cut a man in half at 1400 meters” and can take out “a light truck at more than a mile away.” In the program we see multiple times, often in slow motion, the M107 Long Range Sniper Rifle in action while the host gets very excited and tells us how many things the machine can destroy. Every episode contains four sections each of which fits a set pattern: Mack presents a problem, he introduces a new weapon solves that problem, and then everything devolves into free-for-all as the host and others display the firepower of the machine. Each weapon is either newly in use, in development, or proposed for the next few years.

Interestingly, for a show that claims even in its title to focus on weaponry of the future, Future Weapons is firmly grounded in today and not tomorrow. Not only does the show rarely look at anything that cannot explode something today, but it also makes a few assumptions that tether it to the here and now. Future Weapons not only showcases already-existing weaponry, it also assumes that every machine it profiles will always be necessary, at least until something bigger comes along. The program never gives any real thought to the idea that peace could break out and cease the need for all these weapons. This all relates to the program’s viewers who like nothing better than to blow things up all day.

According to PRWeb (a website that publicizes news releases), Future Weapons' target audience consists of "technologically savvy men ages 18 to 45," and by "technologically savvy" they mean video gamers. When launching its second season, the show used tie-ins with the video game console the Xbox 360 and a website where "visitors discovered a 30-second flash video, on par with today's video games, which blasted them through a steel door to find host Richard 'Mack' Machowicz armed with a futuristic grenade launcher as well as a video screen providing details on the host's weapon and ammo" (McLean). Although it would make Future Weapons more relevant to our day-to-day lives, we do not live in a video game and should not expect to live in a video game future. A world where we anticipate an endless array of new and exciting killing machines may be cool, but shouldn't we question whether arms races and wars should exist as constants and goals? Although it gives us a peek into what the U. S. government's scientists are working on, the future of Future Weapons is not sustainable or something to aspire to.

In the novel Nineteen Eighty-Four the protagonist's country of Oceania is in a perpetual war. After reading a book he learns that the reason for the war is only "to use up the products of the machine without raising the general standard of living" (155). A goal without a set end lets the war go on forever and gives the war free reign to use up whatever "products of the machine" it wants, be they materials or human. One can easily imagine Future Weapons playing on a telescreen in that world. Oceania has frequent rallies to excite the citizens about the war and often to change the name of the enemy

when alliances shift (148).⁷ Future Weapons' strives to get the audience excited about war machines and it frequently refers to any opposition simply as interchangeable "bad guys."⁸ The program demonstrates its weaponry in deserts, the same setting as the current American war with Iraq. Since the show is about the future, the audience (who is most likely male and at the age to be in the military) now has the impression that the current war will continue into the foreseeable future. With no end to the war in sight, the show justifies itself. We must really need so many types of guns and sizes of tanks if the war will go on forever. Future Weapons acts in the same way as the propaganda does in Nineteen Eighty-Four by giving the audience reason to believe they are in a war that is both fun to fight and never ending, and herein lies the central problem of the show.

Future Weapons does not invite dystopian comparisons willingly. Instead of looking at how the building of war machines fuels our economy, the audience sees only scientists explaining how innovative and important the scientific work is. The audience is not asked to question why we will continue to need these machines, but they do hear all about how important it is to keep building them to protect the people fighting in the war. The audience cannot ask what it means to live in a world where the machinery of death is being perfected by science. There is an obvious question in a show about future wars: why are we having wars in the future? Should we assume we need the constant war to use up our goods and population like in Orwell's novel? Future Weapons uses its status as a

⁷ In Nineteen Eighty-Four the people are never allowed to acknowledge that their country was ever at war with any other country than their current enemy, no matter who the enemy was the week before.

⁸ "Bad guys" are also not normally shown on the show. Sometimes dummies are shot at, but the show does not give them a nationality.

science program to evade questioning. It expects its facts and fun explosions to wash over an audience without giving them pause.

Technology Without Consequences: A Utopia

With each of these programs the future looks bright. Everyone will someday soon be able to purchase the coolest toys, design their own children, and keep safe in the knowledge that all enemies of this way of life can be vaporized. The fact that these shows only project the most glowing utopias is not surprising. Utopias based on scientific advancement have existed since Sir Francis Bacon's 1626 novel New Atlantis, where scientists rule the perfect island of Bensalem (Haynes 25). The book champions research and shows the scientists as "future-oriented" and working constantly to improve the lot of humankind (26). This path to utopia also relates to the idea that scientific advancements lead potentially to "Perfect" or "Ademic Knowledge" (Nobel 45). Many Europeans in the mid-1600s believed that the Fall of Man could be reversed and that regaining perfection could achieve this. Labor was said to be easy for Adam in the Garden of Eden because he had perfect knowledge of all arts and sciences. The idea arose that increasing scientific knowledge and making toil easier could bring the world closer to the lost Paradise and the Second Coming (46). This differed greatly from the previous links between science and the Fall of Man that suggested that the pursuit of knowledge (the eating of the apple) lead to the expulsion from the Garden (51). Since that time, the idea that science could improve lives has taken hold and society continues to champion that it led to the

advancements of today and will still lead to those of tomorrow (these are the ideas expressed in world's fairs). The precedents exist for expecting a scientific utopia.

According to most science fiction literature, however, these scientific utopias only tell half the story. Most dystopian novels and films begin with the protagonists believing that the future they live in is wonderful. In the recent film Minority Report (based on the short story by Philip K. Dick, author of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?), the lead starts off working for the very police force whose technological advancements soon turn against him (which point out the flaws in that society's trust in them). In the 1924 novel We the protagonist believes his mathematically driven world's only problems are the two "Personal Hours" a day where nothing is scheduled. "But I firmly believe – let them call me idealist and dreamer – but I firmly believe that, sooner or later, one day, we'll find a place for even these hours in the general formula" (Zamyatin 13)⁹. Whether the main character is ignorant or blind of the troubles in their world, it remains that looks can be deceiving. Fiction's love for pointing out these flaws may come from the distrust the arts show to the mechanization of life. This is shown to the greatest effect in Brave New World where machines control every aspect of a child's development (Haynes 147).

Throughout history, literature has not looked kindly on science. Stories about scientists dating back hundreds of years show alchemists consorting with demons or people so removed from their emotions that they can no longer interact with any other members of society. When a scientist went bad, he often became truly evil, but his moral

⁹ The protagonist of this novel never really sees what a terrible world he lives in. Even after joining a group of rebels fighting against the system, at the end of the book he repents and submits to a state mandated lobotomy to get rid of his imagination.

failings dwelt at the root of these problems, not science. This all changed in the 1940s. After World War II, where science fully realized its potential to destroy life (in the efficiency of the concentration camps and the atomic bomb), society could no longer see technology as a passive tool – especially in literature. In day-to-day life, science sometimes gets away with amorality because society says that only the applications of research can be “good” or “bad.” A belief exists that discoveries are inevitable and unstoppable, no matter what the implications (237). Here literature steps in to point out the horrors technology may set up for society. Dystopian fiction exists to point out the true possibilities of the future utopia the scientific community promises.

Each of these nonfiction programs celebrates a form of consumption or destruction that could potentially lead to a disastrous tomorrow, but the audience is never invited to question that future. The overall veneer of “science” gives each program the authority to predict what it wants and have the audience take it as gospel. The viewers might as well turn off Minority Report after they catch the first potential murderer, believing that preventing future crime would not have any larger ramifications. They could stop Jurassic Park before the rainstorm and think that the film is only about an amazing zoo park that has an anti-climatic first day. They would also never understand that there are consequences to creating monsters. The nonfiction shows referenced above all stop short before the negative speculation can begin and justify this with their science. The young presenters of Beyond Tomorrow do not want the audience to wonder who in the future would want these fun toys or why they need them. Visions of The Future speculates a little about what could happen and then assures us it has solved the

problems. The host never makes predictions about the endless wars that need the killing machines shown on Future Weapons. The programs present utopias but dystopian eventualities are the elephants in the room.

CONCLUSIONS

The nonfiction television shows about the future present a problem: which future should be trusted, the dystopia that leads to a glorious paradise for animals or the technological utopia that has the potential to lead to the horrible societies common in fiction? More confusion comes from the fact that while the dystopian worlds of Aftermath: Population Zero, The Future is Wild, and Life After People rely on mostly CGI, their futures take on the bleakest possibilities. The other programs that use mostly real footage of their hosts with the products of the future ignore even the most obvious problems that could arise from their predictions (especially Future Weapons).

These programs produce a pattern when combined. If a world without humans is a utopia, then the time before the existence of humans was also a utopia. When humans are added to this world, they eventually create a dystopia with their control of nature. This dystopia leads to their destruction, which leaves room for a new utopia to form. This cyclical pattern is explored in the more dystopian nonfiction programs. The Future is Wild and Aftermath: Population Zero suggest that intelligent animals will one day replace humanity as the rulers of the earth. In Aftermath: Population Zero the creatures are chimps that learn to farm pigeons and in The Future is Wild land dwelling squids swing from the trees, use tools, and ready themselves to control the world. The programs would like to suggest that humans make a vacuum that will be filled by some other being. The cycle would then begin again.

These programs, in both their cyclical nature and the sheer number of them, imply that their plot is inevitable: humans will die out. When three “documentary” programs

say that humans will soon expire, who can question their prediction? When other “documentaries” say that humans will cease to be humans, replaced by either human-machine hybrids, numbers on some sort of “kill log,” or become too dependent on conveniences to be recognizable, how could they be wrong? All of these shows use the documentary form and subvert it by taking their hypothetical situations and making them appear true. Although everything is completely conjecture, “documentaries” are hard to dismiss out of hand. Nonfiction should have some relationship to reality, thus humans are on the way out (Nichols 5). These programs represent a deep fear that has existed since the Industrial Revolution and the predictions of Darwin: humans are no more than the sum of their parts and all are interchangeable and easily replaced, if not by more humans, then by other intelligent creatures.

These programs are only vaguely about humans to begin with. If they do not concern themselves with the destruction of the objects we made, they look only at the objects people might create. In the opening of Aftermath: Population Zero the narration clearly states that it does not matter why humans disappear, only the objects left behind are important. This is the outlook of every one of these programs. Why people disappear should be the most important thing and not to be explained as something that, “doesn’t matter.” The shows about future technologies also avoid dealing with individuals. In the future you must buy this thing that everyone else will have or you can be one of thousands killing or being killed with some other device. There are no nonfiction shows about the future of social issues or individual people. Dystopian fiction is about people rising against societies that oppress their individuality. These shows only present futures

devoid of individuality. Humans will either die out or no longer be individuals. There is no glowing utopia in nonfiction television about the future, only dehumanization and destruction.

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