



## keith stevenson

That Fantasy Fiction has had a demonstrably greater impact on world culture than Science Fiction

Speech for the negative – Conflux 2005

Well, so we're looking at impact on world culture. That's a pretty broad canvas and when you think about all the things competing for our attention in the world today — everything from MacDonalds' ads of the archetypal happy family type to CNN's live coverage of operation 'Shock and Awe' its hard to imagine that something as relatively small as our combined genres could really have much of an impact at all. But we'll persist with the idea that it has. My colleagues will show that Science Fiction is indeed the victor if we are to compare impacts on our cultural development, wiping the floor with the elven-eared ravings of our esteemed opposition. My proposal is that while you may measure magnitude of impact as a qualitative yardstick, surely the greater measure is that of the quality of the impact — that is, what that impact has in fact achieved.

A very dear friend of mine said that I was bound to lose this debate because as fantasy came first, beginning as it did with the fables, myths and legends of old, science fiction is in fact a sub-genre of fantasy! I nearly dropped my beer when she laid that one on me. But conversely, if we take Arthur C Clarke's axiom that any sufficiently advanced technology will be indistinguishable from magic to a less advanced race, I could happily state that all fantasy is just incredibly technologically advanced science fiction!

SF has achieved a great deal. It's prepared us in the best way possible for future contact with alien cultures, aliens indeed that can't wait to embrace us warmly, insert their young into our body cavity and then burst from our chests in the worst possible after dinner faux-pas. It's also showed us the great benefits to mankind to be derived from enabling technology driven by artificial intelligence — 'open the pod bay door, Hal... Hal?' Probably, however, its crowning achievement is in social engineering, ensuring that those socially adept, warm, and emotionally well-balanced human beings known as trekkies, keep themselves to themselves in perennial Star Trek conventions where they can't pollute the wider gene pool.

But let me concede here and now, ladies and gentlemen, that Fantasy has indeed had a greater impact on our culture and society. Yes indeed — an impact that is both pernicious and damaging. Look if you will at the panel for the affirmative. Look closely, and see — if you will — the wickedness that lurks within. I think we can all agree that it is at Fantasy's door that the blame heavily rests for the creation of the Society of Creative Anachronisms, yes the SCA, surely the most historically confused bunch of pseudo-knights who ever raised a rattan cane in a fit of pique. But Fantasy is blameworthy of a worse evil in our society than this.

Fantasy my friends has but one real purpose. To obfuscate, confuse and frighten — to bend our collective wills to fallacious arguments and make us agree to the worst excesses possible perpetrated on innocents. Hitler knew the value of fantasy, yes indeed. And John Howard knows it too. Politicians, after all, deal in fantasy continuously.

Fantasy has as its foundation the myths and legends of old, the 'received wisdom' of the ancients. Surely the most pernicious tenet of these legends and, as a result of Fantasy, is that there is such a thing as pure evil. Pure evil. Think about that for a moment. And because there is pure evil, there is also pure good. There is 'us' and there is 'them'. There is the pure, good, strong and brave knight and the perfidious, lying, skulking dark mage. The good 'coalition of the willing' and the wicked 'axis of evil'. How simple the world is. How good we are: how bad they are. How easily the brave knight will smite the dark lord and undo all his works. Yes, it's fantasy, but fantasy is dangerous when applied to the real world. It's laid the groundwork for the worst tabloid journalism, the gutter press lean on the archetypes Fantasy propounds to prove their argument without the need for proof at all: the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11 leads by fantastic logic to a war against



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Saddam Hussein based on what we now know to be LIES. The panel for the affirmative should hang there heads in shame. Shame, shame, shame.

And is it coincidence that Science Fiction has fallen out of favour with the modern reading public? Real life is very complicated. It's scary. There's no black and white, no absolute good and absolute evil, only shades of grey. How much more comfortable it is to believe in the old folk tales, but as Leonardo Da Vinci and his ilk, helped drag Europe out of the dark ages into the Age of Reason, the age of scientific discovery and the banishment of scaremongering half truths, fables and superstitions, so Science Fiction in its purest form also seeks to interrogate reality and bring out the truth.

*1984* showed us what damage a government run media machine can do to the human spirit, and made us forever wary of that fiction becoming a reality. And as counterpoint, Pohl and Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* is a cautionary tale of marketing and over-servicing gone wild – sound familiar? Or *Fahrenheit 451* where society is television-oriented, individualism is banned and scholars are regarded as criminals. *Brave New World* warned us of the dangers of eugenics, well before World War II. *Dr Strangelove*, based on Peter George's novel *Red Alert*, showed up the idiocy or mutually assured destruction between the superpowers. And *The Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy* proved once and for all how important it really is to hang on to your towel.

Science Fiction continues to serve a purpose in the here and now, by opening up the debate in a truly accessible way on the cutting edge scientific discoveries which threaten us greatly or promise us much, depending on your individual viewpoint. As a genre, it is constantly shifting as the pace of human invention and it tackles the big issues head on — gene therapy and engineering, cloning, artificial intelligence, the nature of humanity in an increasingly dehumanising world. Look at Arthur C Clarke, George Orwell, Phillip K Dick, Isaac Asimov. They all strove to imagine the future, to show us the benefits and to warn us of the pitfalls. That's a quality impact which has done much to strengthen our present humanity, our culture and our social structure than that.

So I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, when the time comes to cast your vote for truth and enlightenment, not darkness, deceit and confusion — cast your vote in the negative. Thank you.

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