



Aurealis Magazine

SF is Dead Editorial — Aurealis #29

Okay, I know. Plainly it's not. But as this is my first editorial, I wanted to make sure I caught your attention. And, that said, I do believe SF — or at least that portion of SF that styles itself as 'predictive' — is in serious trouble. Approaching as we are the annual meeting of the SF community, *ConVergence 2002* in Melbourne, it seems timely that we examine this threat and consider its implications.

In 1997, Damien Broderick wrote a book about the coming 'Spike', the point where the convergence of rapidly evolving scientific advances would cause a sudden and prodigious acceleration in progress into a technological singularity. To quote Broderick:

'A variety of perfectly rational, well-informed and extremely smart scientists are anticipating a singularity, a barrier to confident anticipation of future technologies. I prefer the term 'Spike' to 'Singularity' because when you chart the phenomenon on a graph it looks like a Spike. Its exponential curve resembles a spike on a graph of progress against time. That is, the more it grows, the faster it grows.'

The Spike, it's held, can be expected some time after 2030 and before 2100, when history's slowly rising trajectory of progress, having taken a swift turn upward in recent centuries and decades, quickly soars straight up. When change moves off the scale of standard measurements; when it goes asymptotic.'

The Spike, Reed Books, p. 2 (1997)

Some time after 2030 and before 2100... This is familiar territory for SF writers. But if Broderick and others are right, our 'bold' visions of space travel (FTL or otherwise), planetary colonisation, even the existence of a recognisable humanity will be totally off the mark. If you understand SF to be a means of envisioning, anticipating and making sense of future trends in our society — a valid definition for anyone who's read Verne, Wells, Asimov or Clarke — then the dark and unknowable face of the singularity presents a major problem for writers in the field.

Simply put, how are we to imagine the unimaginable?

Of course, the problem isn't a new one. G Harry Stine, known to SF readers under his pen name Lee Correy, continually upbraided SF authors for their lack of imagination. Broderick's own portrayal of advances we can expect on the foothills of the Spike make interesting reading and bear further testament to this. Broderick postulates:

- diamondoid engines built molecule by molecule by infinitesimal nanobots
- an entirely different basis for an economy, where the means of production can self-replicate
- complete mastery of the genome and eternal life
- intelligence amplification through biotech augmentation or total uploading of self into a virtual world where your godhead is assured
- machine intelligence that surpasses our own.

Okay, some of these ideas have found their way into SF novels in some form or another — although not one set as early as 2030. Books like Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Bear's *Blood Music* show elements of advanced technology and their effect on our society to differing degrees. Vernor Vinge's *Marooned in Realtime* neatly sidesteps the moment when the singularity swallows humanity (or vice versa) and deals with



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those who 'missed the boat'. But I have yet to see a novel that attempts to tackle the whole thing head on, a book that exposes the world beyond the Spike.

Since reading *The Spike* I've looked at my own work with an increasingly critical eye and found it lacking in a true predictive quality. Admittedly, I'm not trying to synthesise a complete and real future — not yet, anyway — but when I'm writing about planetary survey teams in the twenty-second century, at the back of my mind is the posited reality that by then, humans will have transformed themselves into some post-Spike nano/AI gestalt where their 'humanity' will be something I can understand no better than — to paraphrase Douglas Adams — a tea-leaf knows the entire history of the Dutch East India Company.

And that's not the worst of it. The wilder predictions of Spike commentators are presented in Broderick's book as pale shadows of what will really be the case. The future will be far more 'rich text' and stranger than even they can comprehend.

Broderick sums it all up for us succinctly when he says, 'imagination simply fails when change is pushed at a thousand times the customary rate, let alone a million times.' As a chilling example of this, he asks: what does our newly aware artificial intelligence decide to build once it realises it's alive? That's the point when the future goes opaque.

'Imagination simply fails'! As an SF writer, that is a frightening prospect, but one for which I have no logical rebuttal. In fact, I believe the Spike is inevitable and within the timeframe described. Even so, I simply can't bring myself to agree with the implications of that statement. It's just not in my nature. It means that as SF writers we should simply roll over and play dead, or resign ourselves to retracing and embroidering the themes that were laid down in the 1930s and in effect become purveyors of technological fantasy, with little relevance to what the future will really be like. I don't know about you, but the thing that drew me to SF was that it described stuff that could really be the case one day. That, I believe, is its highest accomplishment — and, speaking as someone who yearned to live in the future, an exciting one. It would be a perverse end indeed if the genre was ultimately consigned to irrelevance by the pace of progress.

If the Spike is so wildly unimaginable, then it is up to SF writers to redouble their efforts in portraying it. Clearly a new set of conventions is needed, conventions that will be broken and reshaped again and again as we seek to ride the wave of the Spike: guiding, warning and delighting our readers in equal parts through an increasingly frightening and disorienting future. We need visionaries who will challenge the boundaries of storytelling and the elements of literature. SF grants you that freedom, and we need to grasp it with both hands, push ourselves to characterise the inhuman, create the alien within us, and know the unknowable. If we can achieve that, then SF will have gone far beyond even its most ardent supporter's expectations.

So if SF isn't dead, perhaps at the very least it's sleeping, lulled into believing it's living through some Golden Age of SF writing. The fact that there is no SF novel shortlisted for the 2001 Aurealis Awards would seem to indicate this. Books like *The Spike* can generate real discourse on the future nature of SF and provide it with a much needed wake-up call. Let's hope it's not already too late.

Keith

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