You Just Need To Pull Yourself Up By Your Future Bootstraps

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Futurology is the "...study of postulating possible, probable, and preferable futures and the worldviews and myths that underlie them" (thanks again, Wikipedia). As you can imagine, an exercise in futurology can quickly delve into the realm of science fiction. What does the future hold for you? I think we can all agree that it (theories of civilization, technology, knowledge, and understandings) won't just cease progress, remaining stagnant for all years to come. Even the Dark Ages gave way to Enlightenment. So which direction will our future move? Some imagine a bleak devolution from intelligence while others hope for a rise to autonomous luxury communism (here, take a pamphlet). What does the future look like? A desert with piles of trash? Clean, white everything? We won't know until we get there, but in the meantime, we can dream up some interesting derivatives.

In 1876, the introduction of the telephone advanced our ability to communicate long distance. At that point, someone may have foreseen the future refinement of the profound, new technology and imagined a future of high-fidelity, miniaturized, bundled receivers/transmitters just as we have today. But before this technology was made known to the masses, without the seed idea serving as a basis, I would argue that it was less likely for someone to conceive of such a future scenario by which anyone can wirelessly stream audio to and from anywhere in the world. I would say it's an even further stretch for someone in pre-phone times to imagine a ubiquitous handheld device capable of connecting social networks, building virtual realities, providing tracked navigation, and assisting users through their daily schedules and routines. But what about the downsides that this magical device brings? Could a past daydreamer imagine those problems as well? Even with the magic in hand, it took us awhile to realize that the blue light from our phone screens disrupts our circadian rhythm, suppressing melatonin secretion, leading to poor sleep, which in turn can play a factor in cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and obesity! As you know, the problems don't stop there! Some of the most common "applications"

on our phones were designed to keep you, the user, continuously engaged with content, fiending for your next dopamine fix. You're left with a society that cant help but be glued to their helpful wonder-devices. Productivity, face-to-face relationships, and focus are helplessly hindered. It sure sounds like we are currently living in a dystopian future. Tack on the ever-invading presence of earbuds creating an additional barrier to the world around us. Was this invasion of the attention snatchers happening all along and we just never noticed, sitting idly by? The absolute, most sinister work of science fiction, WALL-E, takes this dystopian outlook one step further by plopping us in our own screen-centered hoverchair and handing us a big gulp. Dark. Take a second to Google the Segway S-Pod. The future is now, old man, and future endeavors bear future problems that we cannot yet fathom. It is this puzzle which makes futurology so entertaining.

As humanity fumbles through its next collective learning experience, will we make it out in one piece? Will we make it out alive? Will society divide into the prophesized proletariat vs bourgeoisie? Will the universe be swallowed whole, just as people feared with the ignition of the Large Hadron Collider particle accelerator? People fear change, possibly explained as a beneficial evolutionary advantage. However, this fear can often lead to negative thoughts projected directly onto the future. This becomes apparent when you take a look at futures portrayed in sci-fi which often take on a grim outlook. Let's take a look at some prime examples.

Flexibly based off the 1968 book, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the 1982 film, *Blade Runner*, provides an uncomfortable look at a future in which we attempt to play god. The film supposes that in 2019, the fictional Tyrell Corporation is producing, what I assume is its 6th generation, slave-labor android “replicants” with convincing human-like characteristics, only distinguishable by a “Voigt-Kampff” emotion test. After programming too much free-will into the latest line of “Nexus-6,” the replicants try to diverge from their human-prescribed path. Enter the Blade Runner: regular ole humans (until the sequel) employed to “retire” replicants via straight

up murder. Although the replicants have a built in 4 year lifespan, they pose a threat to their creator's existence for the time being so they gotta go.

Blade Runner hosts a handful of cool tech ideas that seemed appropriate back in 1982, when it first hit the big screen, but the movie truly missed the mark on a lot of stuff. There is a particularly cool scene that blew my mind. Deckard is analyzing a photograph he discovered in the hotel of a runaway android. He has the photo projected onto an old cathode-ray tube TV and speaks voice commands to navigate around and through the picture, as if the data/information held by the photo contained more than the 2D view we get by looking at it. He is able to lean his view around corners within the photograph to reveal a hidden android. Beyond the automatons and non-linear ray tracing photograph analysis, we see flying cars and hear about "offworld colonies," but it's 2019 and where are the iPhones? The future environment that *Blade Runner* captures is one where Steve Jobs never changed the world. That infectiously sleek design is found nowhere in this grim, cold, clammy, overpopulated cityscape. The bellow driven, servo ridden, briefcase bound Voight-Kampff diagnostic device, the outdated 4:3 aspect ratio VID-PHŌN, the rigid, truncated pyramid Tyrell Corp building, and the smoke filled, eternally damp city all bear a negative outlook that can only come out of the 80's. The sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*, doubles down on this vision but evolves slightly by introducing a new color: white; and a new shape: round (YouTube "Blade Runner 2049 Baseline Test," link below, which replaces the Voight-Kampff Test).

The movie (and book, to my understanding) paints a world in which synthetic animals have become more commonplace than real animals. The synthetic animals are microscopically labeled to indicate manufacturer (this ties into the plot). I could see a real-world future scenario where genetically optimized (modified) animals could provide a beneficially sustainable route to obtaining animal products, however, the setting found in *Blade Runner* holds an implication of unintentional mass extinction and endangerment of species, leading to the demand for such artificial animals. In the opening scene, the [soon-to-be-not-so-secretly-an-]android, Leon, is

questioned as part of a Voight-Kampff test. He is asked about what he would do if he came across a tortoise helpless on its back. He doesn't know what a tortoise is so the prompter exchanges the hypothetical animal for a turtle, to which he responds that he has never seen one. Later on, when Deckard is administering the Voight-Kampff test on Rachel, almost all questions are about reactions to animal endangerment. This is never quite addressed but the theme of humans-royally-fucked-everything-up-so-now-there-are-almost-no-animals-left-and-the-ones-that-are-left-are-precious is quietly tossed around throughout the film.

Produced in 1982, I was surprised to hear, to my knowledge, seemingly accurate geneticist lingo (biochem major here) used with such fluency and confidence when the top dog android, Roy, is discussing his impending biological fate with the head of Tyrell Corp himself, Mr. Corp. Correlating contemporary world fears, I wondered what biology experiments were on the public's mind when *Blade Runner* was released. Amongst less notable achievements accomplished through human intuition, I discovered that 1982 was the year of the first permanent artificial heart, although the recipient only lived an additional 112 days. I was expecting to find something like the first artificial genome (1995) or even Dolly the Sheep (1996), but alas, I only found a not-so-playing-god artificial heart. Peanuts.

Hell, to show how gritty the future will be, the movie opened with a view panning across a dark, unnatural Los Angeles that has seemingly pointless spires blasting out flames. That's just unhealthy. Rachel mentions flying the coop and going "North" where, presumably, sanctuary awaits for an android such as herself. Maybe sanctuary from the dense, smog filled cityscape, but we never get a glimpse of what lies beyond. Even the viewer is trapped in this rundown megalopolis. Through ads (produced by corporations), we learn that off-world colonies exist, yet only for the healthy. Once again, there is a silent power that is not only responsible for this mess but is complacent with the chasm of inequality it has created. Sounds familiar, but hasn't it always?

We encounter a similar power structure in the graphic novel, *Batman: Year 100*, where the Federal Police Corps (FPC) runs an oppressive police state over future Gotham. Taking place in 2039, just 20 years from now, we get, yet again, flying cars (but more pod shaped this time). Earlier this semester, my class conducted surveys, and conveniently enough, “What sci-fi tech is gonna be real in 20 years?” was one of my survey questions and “flying cars” was one of the most common answers! Check it out; I'm sure you have a copy of each one of my essays posted on your fridge because of how amazing they are! Anyway, when one of the Gotham Panthers (a group of power-abusing henchmen under the direction of the FPC) comes up dead after a group encounter with the Batman, an investigation is opened by the Gotham City Police Dept (GCPD; with OG Commissioner Gordon’s grandson, Gordon). The Panthers are one of the many divisions of henchmen bearing sports jerseys, and it is easy to lose track of who is the Panthers, Wolves, and/or Tigers, and the distinction doesn't really matter so I will refer to them as Goons from here on out.

In *Batman: Year 100*, the tech mostly takes a backseat. However, we do see some interesting items here and there. We get to see their hologram communication system, which isn't too flashy and, thus, seems somewhat realistic for it's predicted time. Considering that this was written 2 years before the release of the ever-comparable iPhone, we do get to see a flip phone, as well as Batman’s weird combo-lock-looking cell phone. I guess they just missed the mark, but hey, *mobile* communication devices! We do see pop-up hologram flat screens a couple times, and once again, it does not seem too unrealistic. Just as “the loops," "the holo,” or files being stored on colorful fidget spinners may sound foreign, we are reminded that new tech comes with new interactions, which, in turn, comes with new names and lingo. For example, “TPKs” (telepaths/telekinetics) are nonchalantly talked about in Batman, just as the profession of Blade Runner is known within its own world.

Even after the tussle that left the first Goon dead, Batman does not find any mention of the incident on the news. This coverup is orchestrated by the fat-cat FPC heads. Tibble, who is

sent by Agent Pravdzka to bully the GCPD into handing over all the files on Batman, displays his omnipotent power over Gordon by mention of a metaphorical colonoscopy. This gross pervasiveness, along with the FPC hover pods constantly surveying Gotham reinforces the idea of a police state. A key element of the Batman comics is that his identity is unknown, which is why when the Goons find some of B's blood with hopes of identifying him by DNA, he must destroy the evidence at the expense of the taxpayer's dollars by using explosives on a federal laboratory. Maybe he is the real villain here, which adds a whole genre of mystery to the graphic novel, akin to the question mark at the end of this sentence?

While investigating, Gordon discovers that the footage around the dead Goon incident is missing and that additional gunshots were omitted from the report, indicated by the bullet holes from multiple guns after the body was already on the ground. Upon discovery of this coverup, Gordon is beaten to a pulp by the Goons, really driving home the level of abuse that the corrupt FPC can get away with. We get a flashback to when Gordon used to be a warden at Arkham Asylum; intimidating hotshot Pravdzka shows up and says he has a solution to the prison's "supervillain problem." He had Gordon and his team leave for 12 hours and when they returned, the place was spotless: files, inmates, and all just up and vanished, another example of the corruption creeping into the system.

Upon inspection, it is revealed that the dead Goon is equipped with a porcelain tooth with gold filling that turns out to be an "S-TEK: sophisticated organic processor, homegrown from secondary human genetic tissue stock." This contains a picture with a hidden file baked within: a devious biochemical recipe dubbed the spooky "fleshkiller." In the final sequence, Gordon meets up with Tibble, Prav', and Mercer per their ~~request~~ demand. The bad guys are threatening Gordon's life since they can telepathically sense that Gordon is withholding info on the Batman. In the last second, our hero jumps out of the shadows to beat the shit out of each one of them, sans Gordon, and delivers justice by releasing the fleshkiller antidote along with an incomplete portion of the fleshkiller recipe with the badguys' names all over it for the world to

see. Through some classic Batman trickery, it also comes to light that some of the badguys had double crossed the others by way of their own selfish plans, which, as the old fable goes, you can help a scorpion, but still expect it to sting you. Gordon gives the remaining identity-revealing floppy disk to Batman and they part ways, having created a power vacuum in place of the head at the FPC. Shit.

So what are the overarching themes in these dystopian sci-fi examples? They both point to a future that holds a monstrous, dark, overruling power which constantly strong arms the little man. We see the FPC relocates Gordon, setting him up as an unsuspecting patsy to take the blame on the release of the fleshkiller, and we see the Tyrell Corp creates its own slave labor with a personal, state-run cleanup crew (Blade Runners) at its disposal. Common folk are stuck at the whim of these ruling powers that be. Is that the ever-lingering public fear which influenced each writer's outlook on the future to be a grim one?

Blade Runner and *Batman: Year 100* are not alone in their perceptions around an invasive, self-serving government. You might have heard Weber say "the state has a monopoly on violence." This sentiment seems to be popular among dystopian sci-fi. Is it a collective fear that we all see coming, still to this day? With Trump's latest budget proposal release, we see a increased (+5%) military spending and decreased (-12%) education and (-31%) environmental protection spending and it is difficult not to let the mind wander to where this can take us. Even George Orwell forebode this everwatching government in 1949 with his futuristic novel, *1984*. *The Hunger Games* trilogy tells the tale of an elite ruling class that pits the subservient against themselves just for the entertainment of the rulers. *Handmaid's Tale*, *District 9*, *Soylent Green*, *CHAPPiE*, *Brave New World*, *The Giver*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Moon*, *Mad Max*, *They Live*, *The Matrix*, *Children of Men*, the list goes on. So while there may be advanced, cool futuristic tech in the real world as well as these dystopian sci-fi futures, we can't let ourselves get distracted from the underlying reason for our deceptive and insidious surroundings. Each example shows a world where you, the reader/viewer/consumer, would have no say in your own life, where

someone higher up and out of your reach is making all the decisions for you, and they clearly don't have your best interest in mind. If only there was a hero who could save us. Enter autonomous luxury communism.

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