Salon XXV: Technology and the Creation of SciFi Societies
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Within our lifetimes, we have all seen technology change society and our interactions with society. A synergistic relationship exists between technology and society where society integrates technological advancements and technology is developed to address wants and needs from society. Therefore, technology and society can be considered reflections of each other or even indivisibly connected.

Technology has addressed many needs within society. For example, biomedical advances have led to increases in lifespan and a higher quality of life for many people. However, there is also concern that technological advances could alter society and human behavior detrimentally. As Tim Wu of *The New Yorker* writes, "Technological evolution has a different motive force [than biological evolution]. It is self-evolution, and it is therefore driven by what we want as opposed to what is adaptive."

Science Fiction is a literary genre which takes advantage of hypothetical technological advancements to create fictional worlds. The characters' interactions with these technologically advanced societies as well as the societies themselves are often used to explore the human condition and used as a vehicle for social critique and satire. In addition, science fiction can explore anxieties about specific technologies and their effects on society.

Technology and Society - Two Sides of a Mirror or Parts of an Indivisible Whole?

Do you believe that technology changes society and behavior? Can technology change what it means to be human and the human condition? Or does technology merely reflect aspects of human nature, which is fundamentally unchanged by technological advancement? In your opinion, are society and technology indivisible or do they reflect each other? How does science fiction address these questions?

Technology and Progress - Dystopias and Utopias

Before the Industrial Revolution, most societies believed in the cyclical theory of social movement; however, perhaps in part due to the rapid technological advancements made since the Industrial Revolution, the idea of social progress - the belief that societies can or do improve - has gained popularity. Rapid technological advancement is often believed to be connected to beneficial changes within society. This idea is presented in *Star Trek*'s utopian vision of the future. Can technology be used to "improve" society? What does it mean for society to improve?

Both utopias and dystopias can be used to explore different directions that humanity can take, but dystopias are more commonly featured in science fiction. Why are dystopias more common? How can dystopias be used to criticize the idea of social progress? Can you think of an example of a technology that is used in science fiction to criticize or exaggerate a current facet of society?

Group Discussions - Are certain technologies inevitably bad?

Choose one of the discussion topics below. We have provided specific science fiction stories to facilitate the discussion questions, but feel free to incorporate other sources. In these discussions, please explore how the same technology is used in different science fiction worlds to provide differing commentaries on society, the human condition, and the technology itself. Many of these technologies are becoming a reality for our society and may have significant impacts on our lives. Can technologies alter the human condition by opening us up to new experiences? Or does the human condition remain the same independent of technological advancement?

Differences in Application - Artificial Realities

Black Mirror ("San Junipero"), *Star Trek*, & *the Matrix*

In "San Junipero," humans can pass over their consciousness to an alternate reality before they die, providing an artificial heaven.

In *Star Trek*, artificial reality is used in the holodeck. Crewmembers use the technology recreationally and as a research tool. In the holodeck experiments can be simulated and it provides an alternative way to interact with computational resources.

In *The Matrix*, artificial reality is used to enslave humanity as a resource for robot overlords. Humans live meaningless lives trapped within an artificial world.

Each of these stories use the same technology to explore different facets of society and potential paths humanity could take. How do these choices reflect how the creators view this technology, humanity, and society?

Comparing Totalitarian Societies - Surveillance Technologies

Brave New World & *1984*

Both *1984* and *Brave New World* describe possible dystopian futures where citizens are tightly controlled by totalitarian governments. These rigorously structured societies with firm hierarchies control their citizens through highly advanced surveillance technologies and distorted media. However, these dystopian societies do differ from each other. Huxley's society exploits consumerism to control the populace while Orwell's society relies on terror. Compare and contrast these societies and how they both utilize the same technologies to create different dystopias. How do these differences alter the messages of these works?

Genetic Engineering

Star Trek & *Gattaca*

Unlike many other science fictions, *Star Trek* embraces technology and its role in social progress. *Star Trek* presents a stable utopia made possible through technological advancements and their proper application by humans. However, one technology that is not embraced is genetic engineering. After a Eugenics War, humanity has sworn off genetic engineering and believes that the ethical risks are too high to permit its use in the Federation. Other dystopian science fiction works, such as *Gattaca*, also caution against it.. Please explore the criticisms of this technology in science fiction. Is it commonly targeted in science fiction due to the direct implications it has for altering the human condition? Human genomic engineering is an emerging technology, are there ways to envision a positive society shaped by it?

Further Reading:

These readings are focused on Utopian societies.
Imagining the future: why society needs science fiction
    http://www.thestargarden.co.uk/Why-society-needs-science-fiction.html
Utopia and Science Fiction, Raymond Williams, 1978
    http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/16/williams16art.htm
Why so few utopias in science fiction cinema?
    http://technopolis.blogspot.com/2013/01/why-so-few-utopias-in-science-fiction.html
Project Hieroglyph, an initiative to encourage optimistic thinking in science fiction
    http://hieroglyph.asu.edu/
The Social Construction of Technological Systems, Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987
    http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/students/envs_5110/bijker2.pdf