

There is a popular idea about Science Fiction, that it tells us more about the present than it does the future. Sci-fi in the 50s was overrun with stories about nuclear apocalypse; in the 80s, body horror provided a potent metaphor for the Aids epidemic. Nowadays, there are countless movies about alien invasion, humanity under threat from a malevolent otherworldly race, a thinly veiled exercise in paranoia about terrorism and immigration. So, what can sci-fi genuinely tell us about the future, and how are we to learn from it, as you suggest?

As well as giving insight into present concerns, Science fiction gives us an imaginary palette. From those present concerns, we leap into a speculative world where we can see their consequences play out. This speculative leap, and your impassioned defence of sci-fi as an instructive tool, splits in my mind into a three-pronged fork. In what remains of this brief answer to your paper, I want to pitch each of these three prongs to you, and ask what we might do with them.

1 Fictions are not self-contained, they leak out and entangle with real world problems. So, the real/imagined divide is not so clear.

2 Sci fi warns us about possible disaster. It has lessons to teach, even if they come in ironic, satirical, or fantastical passages

3 How do we make ethics properly futural?

From my disciplinary perspective, the first prong has to do with the status of philosophy in fictions. This again splits three ways. First, philosophies (ethical ones in our case), can occur within fictional worlds. Second, fictional worlds can themselves be types of philosophies (this is a subtler type of philosophical fiction). Thirdly, philosophical systems themselves have a kind of fictional existence. For philosophy too, imagines, speculative, invents.

If we want to learn from fictions, science fictions in particular, then we need to accept the radical proposal that fictions are not mere inventions. They do not exist “somewhere else”. They create worlds which thereby gain their own reality. And these realities bleed together. If sci-fi has been a cautionary tale up to now, perhaps it must develop into an instructional tale, one that can easily crossover into technological, ecological and political innovation. And yet, we could ask, is this the job of fictions? Haven’t the best fictions been those that lay it on the table, and force us to make our own estimations? Orwell’s *1984* has bite not because it gives

us explicit warnings or fables, but because it simply lets the world it creates play out. We must draw our own conclusions.

This is where sci-fi strikes a chord with me, and where we come to the second prong on the fork. I have long been fascinated with the sci-fi aesthetic, its capacity for imagining worlds and making us believe in them. What I find most compelling, is the way that sci fi movies constantly gesture to what is beyond the frame. *What happened between here and there? How did we arrive at this world?* I would watch Blade Runner and anime set in distant futures. And the films that fascinated me the most were those that had an air of decay about them. Some grand series of events had set the world into a decline. Things fall into disuse. Areas lie abandoned. Shiny neon towers accompanied by crumbling buildings, rusted robots and unidentifiable objects, now sitting still, obsolete. One example that rolls around my memory is an early scene in *The Fifth Element*, when Bruce Willis' character Korben Dallas reluctantly engages in a high-speed chase in his flying taxi cab. Milla Jovovich's Leeloo has just dropped into his cab from above, and in an attempt to lose the cops, Dallas swerves his cab downwards and flies into the mist that separates the high rises from the ground. Below the mist it is a grimmer scene than above. The ground is dark, strewn with rubble and detritus, a place the buzzing world of above no longer has a use for.



Figure 1 "*The Fifth Element*" (Luc Besson, 1997)

It is these half-forgotten worlds, the ones that are neglected through the years into an imagined future, that resonate with me most. And it is these forgotten spaces today, urban

sprawl, wastelands, rubbish dumps, slums. These are the places that will test our ethical mettle.



Figure 2 "The Fifth Element" (Luc Besson, 1997)

Now for the ethics. I want to let this question hang. How can we make ethics futural? The question hangs because it resists an easy answer. It is true that sci-fi addresses some very immediate concerns, ecological, as you mention, and also problems of inequality. As climate change gets worse, so too do the inequalities that it helps expose. The poorest will be hit hardest, as they usually are. So, how does one make an ethics properly futural? There is a sense in which ethical decision making always exists in the future. It is speculative in the quotidian sense. When making a decision about a course of action, the result cannot be known in advance. The most important decisions we make are often ones in which it is impossible to predict the outcome.

Children of Men is perhaps the most realistic rendition of near futures that I have seen. The film, made in 2006 but set in 2025, tells of a pandemic of mass sterility, perhaps caused by a virus, or by intentional biological warfare. As a result, no baby has been born in twenty years. It is not the narrative that makes such an impression – the “must-protect-the-only-baby-to-be-born-in-two-decades” plot is fairly naïve when it comes to human beings and our place in the world. But the atmosphere, the environment created by this problem, strikes deep. Borders are militarised zones, immigration and freedom of movement are more repressed than ever. Terror attacks are normal, and the 2025 London is one of destruction and near despair. It is not an uplifting film. And yet, the cautionary tales it tells seem to fall on deaf ears. In the midst, not just of a global pandemic, but a hugely mismanaged one, borders are becoming

harsher, terror attacks are normalised as part of modern life, and xenophobia often defeats understanding and empathy.



*Figure 3 'Children of Men' (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006)*

The appeal and power of science-fictions is that, for all the potential warning signs they present, they still remain wrapped in a comforting fictional distance. They can teach us without pressing upon us. They can teach without preaching. They can examine possible futures without necessarily bringing them into being. The saving of our ecology from collapse may be the domain of scientists, policy makers and business enterprises, but speculation on what might be to come, that is the domain of everyone. And it is a domain where all kinds of imagining, fictional or not, have worth.