

The Non-Alibi of Pragmatic Utopianism and Wild Variability; or, Optimistic Variations on a Science Fiction Theme

Patrick D. Murphy

ABSTRACT

Beginning with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "non-alibi" of ethical responsibility, this essay looks at the ways in which some contemporary science fiction portrays a cautiously optimistic view of the technological human future through the philosophical position of pragmatic utopianism based on wild variability. It includes discussion of fiction by Michael Crichton, Neal Stephenson, and Hiroya Miyazaki.

KEY WORDS

pragmatism

science fiction

Mikhail Bakhtin

variability

utopianism

non-alibi

nanotechnology



On Thursday April 24th, 2003, the *Orlando Sentinel* ran an Associated Press article, “Study Links Fat to Cancer Deaths.” It opens dramatically: “Losing weight could prevent one of every six cancer deaths in the United States—more than 90,000 each year” (A10). According to the article, lead researchers declared that “communities, workplaces, schools and transportation all need to change to make it easier to eat right and exercise,” because Americans are “kind of stacking the deck against ourselves.” Three aspects of this short article stand out. One, it begins by placing the emphasis on individual action toward one’s own lifestyle—choosing to be fat or to avoid being fat. Two, the article ends by emphasizing larger social responsibility in relation to hindering or facilitating an anti-cancer lifestyle in terms of public attitudes and actions. Three, it never addresses the causes of cancer. Hence the primary cause of cancer, environmental pollutants created by industries, is never mentioned. This kind of foregrounding of lifestyle choices and backgrounding of corporate responsibility and industrial causes represents a major tendency in popular news about cancer, one of the major causes of death in the United States.

Sandra Steingraber in *Living Downstream* points out the frequency with which average individuals like to believe that cancer runs in certain families, even though longitudinal and geographical studies tend to correlate rates of cancer primarily with the locations of a person’s workplace and habitat. Such behavior allows people to imagine that they are less at risk than their next door neighbor or their co-worker, who has developed some type of cancer. Other people like to treat cancer as some mystery, even though rates of skin cancer in relation to UV radiation exposure in such places as Florida are fairly predictable, or high rates of cancer among cigarette smokers. Such

positions as ascribing the causes of cancer to fate, mystery, and genetics allow people to avoid taking any personal action. If no one is responsible, then nothing need be done. Similarly, if only individual lifestyle choices can be blamed for the high incidence of cancer in the U.S. then only those individuals at obvious high risk need to take action to change their own circumstances or alter their own environments, and everyone else can continue on his or her excessive consumption way.

Exclusively blaming corporations as entities distinct from the human beings who incorporate them, manage them, and invest in them actually works in somewhat the same way. If it is only General Electric's fault, then nothing can be done until the corporation changes its practices or the government forces the corporation to change its practices. For instance, Lester Brown, while visiting the University of Central Florida on April 27th, 2003, suggested that energy efficiency could be vastly improved if the government banned incandescent light bulbs, thus preventing corporations from making them and consumers from buying them, thus precluding the practice of individual shortsightedness.

Just as the Associated Press article on the relationship of fat to cancer identifies a need for social responsibility to facilitate individual improvements in lifestyle behaviors, Brown is looking for a "wake up call" that will act as a catalyst to produce a profound shift in public awareness, government action, and corporate behavior that will result in a consensual sense of environmental social responsibility. It is important to note that both corporations and governments are actually comprised of human beings. So that, regardless of the sphere of action, any action in response to cancer and other perceived environmental problems will be performed by individuals, whether acting as social outcasts, members of society, government functionaries, or corporate officers and employees. Thus, one could argue that ascribing the problem of cancer to corporations, governments, or societies may very well reflect an act of bad faith by letting individuals off the hook who make decisions based only on the profitability and survival of their company or some concept of national security. Blaming a structure generates an "alibi" for a given individual to avoid taking action in his

or her own best environmental interests, which in turn will often, although not always, be in the environmental interests of others. In contrast, the “non-alibi” of being will place emphasis on an individual’s responsibility within the larger spheres of human relationships with other human beings, other environmental entities, and aggregate human constructs, such as societies, governments, and corporations. Such relative and differential positioning within various spheres does alter the degree of responsibility an individual can assume, but does not determine fundamentally whether or not an individual has or lacks any responsibility. For Mikhail Bakhtin, such a “non-alibi” refers to the notion of individual ethical responsibility for one’s own position and actions in the events of the world.

Serious science fiction invariably addresses the issue of the non-alibi through a variety of what-if scenarios (see Murphy). What interests me today are the scenarios that pertain particularly to near horizon technological developments, such as nanotechnology, but I want to also address some other settings for a philosophical position in literature that I will label *pragmatic utopianism based on wild variability*. Such a position seems widespread in recent science fiction and is distinctly optimistic, even as many environmentalist forecasts for the future become increasingly gloomy and pessimistic. Crises are, after all, the stuff of which novels are made. These crises may have galactic, planetary, national, or just local magnitude. Yet, when it comes to wild variability and pragmatic utopianism, the outcomes of the particular plots tend toward similar resolutions: common individuals act heroically and the human species muddles through. For instance, consider how this optimistic plot of planetary resiliency and human innovativeness has been represented in relation to nanotechnology.

Michael Crichton has addressed the dangers of nanotechnology in *Prey*. He prefaces the novel with a nonfiction Introduction: “Artificial Evolution in the Twenty-first Century,” clearly indicating his belief that the convergence of “nanotechnology, biotechnology, and computer technology” (x) will eventually occur. He places it in the context of the wild variability of the natural world:

If we were to grasp the true nature of nature—if we could comprehend the real meaning of evolution—then we would envision a world in which every living plant, insect, and animal species is changing at every instant, in response to every other living plant, insect, and animal. . . . This restless and perpetual change . . . implies a world in which all human actions necessarily have uncertain effects. The total system we call the biosphere is so complicated that we cannot know in advance the consequences of anything we do. (ix)

His main concern is that arrogance and ignorance of past human folly will prevent the implementation of adequate controls prior to the production of self-reproducing biotechnological entities. Interestingly enough, what makes these nanotech entities so dangerous is that they are developed using computer programs modeled on the wild variability of such living organisms as “termites, swarming bees, and stalking lions” (10; for an ecstatic review of this convergence, see Kaku). Computer programs are, of course, a kind of language and, as Gary Snyder has observed, “the structures of [language] have the quality of wild systems. Wild systems are highly complex, cannot be intellectually mastered—and they are self-managing and self-organizing” (329). The goal of nanotechnology is precisely to create self-organizing, self replicating systems that unavoidably will contain wildness and unpredictability as a result of their necessary complexity.

While Crichton casts doubt on human sensibility to prevail over human stupidity, his Introduction indicates that he believes in the benefit of cautionary tales. And, indeed, in the course of *Prey* we find that two grounded individuals, one an agent-based program design supervisor and the other a field biologist, are able to overcome two very different nanotechnology threats. Not only does having two threats lengthen the suspense of the plot, but it also lets Crichton demonstrate two very different ways that organically grown nanotechs can evolve. In one they develop into a predator that chases down and feeds on living animals, including people, in order to grow and mutate. In the other, they become parasites living within people. In both cases

they threaten long-term human survival if left unchecked. Now, key in Crichton's argument is that the initial nanotech entity appeared benign and designed to benefit human beings through advancing medical technology. So, in their original form these nanotechs were not necessarily a bad invention. But then, military contracts and corporate desperation to demonstrate a profitable working product get the best of the designers and technicians. Reckless experimentation produces the mutations, which are by the end of the novel most probably defeated, through an all-too-typical Hollywood-style cataclysmic explosion.

Is nanotechnology bad? Not necessarily. Is it highly dangerous and potentially apocalyptic? A person better believe it. What should people do today? Crichton leaves that question unanswered in his fiction. But clearly, through his own pragmatic utopianism he believes that his readers will become more aware and concerned about nanotechnology research and some will participate in decision making processes for generating or at least supporting stringent research guidelines.

Like many of the cyberpunk authors who preceded him, for Neal Stephenson nanotechnology represents a given in the world's near future economy and environment, neither malignant nor benign per se. In *The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*, Stephenson emphasizes the economic, technological, and social changes that grow out of the increasing ubiquity of nanotechnology engineering and production. Many aspects of this lengthy, neo-Victorian novel are worthy of comment. For one, Stephenson agrees with novelists like William Gibson and Kim Stanley Robinson, and economic futurists like J.F. Rischard, that the newly emerging technologies that Crichton identifies—nanotechnology, biotechnology, and computer technology—will initiate the veritable collapse of the nation state as a socio-economic regulating political structure. Social decentralization will take place, which in turn will facilitate the flourishing of cultural variation, which in turn will enable a tremendous expansion of social affiliation by means of intentional communities. Individuals will become more responsible for deciding their greater affiliations. For Stephenson, the technology will be

developed and will enter the world marketplace unevenly and asymmetrically. Some will benefit greatly, others will suffer greatly. Thus the technology itself will not fundamentally alter the human tendency toward hierarchical social organization and self/other exploitative distinctions. It will, however, significantly reduce the length of time during which any particular group, organization, or economic unit can dominate.

In Stephenson's vision of the relatively near future, Finkle-McGraw, a leader of one of the wealthiest and most elite controllers and purveyors of centralized nanotechnology production, the Victorian Revival, realizes that any social organization is doomed to decline and failure if it becomes stale, repetitive, and noninnovative. Knowing full well that he does not want the New Victorians to go the way of the old ones, he wants his granddaughter to have a book that will promote "subversive" thinking and behavior. Naturally, to be as complex as he needs it, this smart book must be produced by means of nanotechnology. Thus Finkle-McGraw seeks the quality of subversive intellectual curiosity for his own granddaughter by designing a unique book for her. But of course, in the world of nanotechnology, no more than in the current world of global fashion, nothing can be designed that will remain unique. The design for the book is stolen and reproduced and stolen again and reproduced. Through chance, the wild variability of lumpen social elements, and the cunning of intellectuals from an oppressed people, the book falls into the hands of thousands of orphaned Chinese girls, who begin not only to educate themselves in being "subversive" but also begin to remake their world.

As with Crichton's *Prey*, Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* does not base its plot on wicked, malevolent, or evil people. While Crichton keeps his circle of actors limited to designers and engineers, Stephenson expands his cast to include all types of people who are mainly trying to do one of two things: just get by in an incomprehensibly complex social world or make that world less incomprehensibly difficult. Human error, arrogance, and confusion represent the main threats to survival. Stephenson reveals his own penchant for pragmatic utopianism in his belief that educating young

lady's to be "subversive" will produce a series of positive variables in social conflict that will promote less inequitable economic relations among people and facilitate greater self-determination at individual and group levels. Further, while he demonstrates that nanotechnology will damage the environment and generate environmental injustice in the relative short run, it will in the long run lead to more decentralized material production and thus less nonegalitarian political relationships among intentional societies. Unpredictable and unregulatable human inventiveness will level the playing field.

Unpredictable and unregulatable, that is to say, nonteleological, noneugenic, nonsocial Darwinist approaches to creating better worlds sharply distinguish contemporary pragmatic utopianist writing from nineteenth-century European and American socialist utopian writing, as well as from fascist, dictatorial, and draconian conceptions of utopian social engineering. This distinction between teleological planning and organizing and wild variability is explicitly addressed in Hayao Miyazaki's graphic novel, *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*. As this novel develops, the reader is led more and more to believe that Nausicaä is the embodiment of an ancient prophecy that has foretold the long awaited arrival of a savior who will lead the people of a post-apocalyptic earth back to ecological balance, harmony, and peace. Yet her journey through the work's 1100 pages is filled with bloodshed, changing allegiances, and a growing recognition that all of the major sides in the military conflicts are wrongheaded and led by misguided people. Misguidedness becomes crucial for the plot, as even the most evil individuals are usually revealed either as having started out with the best intentions or as seizing the opportunity to atone for their evil ways through final generous actions.

As Nausicaä moves toward the Crypt of Shuwa, she experiences a series of revelations. One, "I've always felt that we blind ourselves by looking at the world simply in terms of 'purity' and corruption" (IV: 178). Two, "Every life-form, no matter how small, contains the outside universe within its internal universe" (IV: 181). Three, "No matter how wretched, every life-form lives by virtue of its own power. On this planet, life itself is its own miracle" (IV: 220). These recognitions

enable her to confront the last holdouts of a teleological, dictatorial social and environmental engineering caste guarding the Crypt. To them she announces, "To live is to change. . . . We will all go on changing. . . . But *you* cannot change. You only have the plan that was built into you. Because you deny death" (IV: 246). The denial of death is the denial of wild variability and the quest to end death and to end "corruption" in the name of "purity" invariably fails. Thus, Nausicaä triumphs by rejecting any master plan, any master narrative that tries to map the purification of her blighted world without leaving room for the positive effects of "various unexpected problems" (IV: 249). The ecologically hopeful pragmatic utopianism of Miyazaki's graphic novel is exemplified in these concluding words: "Let us live entrusting everything to this planet" (IV: 271). In the face of tremendous death and the prospect that things will get environmentally worse for the planet's inhabitants before they get better, Nausicaä calls for love for, and trust in, the unexpected outcomes of all types of nature, including the engineered, which will ceaselessly generate unexpected and unpredictable outcomes.

Gary Snyder makes a point worth repeating and one that supports the popularity of pragmatic utopianism in literature:

[T]he condition of our social and ecological life is so serious that we'd better have a sense of humor . . . the environmental movement has never done well when it threw out excessive doom scenarios. Doom scenarios, even though they might be true, are not politically or psychologically effective. The first step . . . is to make us love the world rather than to make us fear for the end of the world. (335–36)

Such is the major task that Nausicaä will have to undertake in the world beyond the novel's closure, turning people away from the fear of the deadly aspects of wild nature and toward a love of the world that engenders trust. Likewise, that message appears in the young adult fiction series *Animorphs*. While the four youthful heroes of this fifty-four volume series initially accept the alien-provided ability to morph

into other animal forms out of fear of an alien invasion of slugs that will destroy the planet and enslave human beings, over the course of the novels the need to love this world and appreciate its beauty as a cause for action is repeatedly raised. These kids are too young to have any serious plans for how to defeat the aliens, but they rely on their own unpredictability and spontaneity, wild variables of the human personality, to outwit their adversaries. Despite the crises of every volume, these novels mainly teach readers about the animal and plant life of the planet, portraying them from inside the minds of various creatures from whales to ants. In the process the series counters anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism, and romantic and sublime notions of nature as either for us or against us, continually reminding readers that such a dichotomy relies on a fixed and biased viewpoint. Time and again, the unexpected aspects of a wild nature barely understood and too little studied come to the rescue of these rescuers of the world.

We are continuing to live in a world filled with many strange and unforeseeable things, and an increasing number of them are of our own creation. While some writers present them as benign, some others as malignant, and others as intrinsically neutral, they contain the nature from which we and they arose. While we cannot exactly trust the wild variability upon which pragmatic utopianism is based to provide predetermined answers for every unanticipated occasion, we can assume responsibility for our actions moment to moment in relation to the results of those variables occurring in the world. Purveyors of pragmatic utopianism tend to believe that malignancy and benignity inhere not in objects but in humans, and often not as the result of calculated evil but of ignorance, desperation and miscalculation. These traits will remain with us as long as we are human and alive. Thus, we cannot look to technology to save us, or even to destroy us, but we can trust that wild variability, spontaneity, and unpredictability in life will open numerous avenues down which to walk into the future.

Works Cited

- Applegate, K. A. *Animorphs*. Vols. 1–54. New York: Scholastic, 1996–2001.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Trans. Vadim Liapunov. Ed. Liapunov and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1993.
- Crichton, Michael. *Prey*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.
- Gibson, William. *Idoru*. 1996. New York: Berkeley Books, 1997.
- _____. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace, 1984.
- Kaku, Michio. *Visions: How Science Will Revolutionize the 21st Century*. 1997. New York: Anchor Books, 1998.
- McConaughy, Janet. “Study Links Fat to Cancer Deaths.” *Orlando Sentinel* 24 April 2003. A10.
- Miyazaki, Hayao. *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*. Vols. 1–4. Trans. David Lewis and Toren Smith. San Francisco: Viz Communications, 1995–1997.
- Murphy, Patrick D. “The Non-Alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism.” *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2001. 263–78.
- Rischar, J.F. *High Noon: 20 Global Problems, 20 Years to Solve Them*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Mars Trilogy: Red Mars, Green Mars, Blue Mars*. New York: Bantam, 1993, 1995, 1997.
- Snyder, Gary. “The *Paris Review* Interview.” *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1999. 319–38.

