

## Introduction

*The future enters into us in order to transform itself in us long before it happens.*

*Rainer Maria Rilke, poet and writer*

When the novelist Iris Murdoch died in 1999, cognitive neuroscientists took a special interest in her last novel, *Jackson's Dilemma*. The book was about a mysterious disappearance, but for the scientists it told another much more interesting story. Following an analysis of word use in comparison with her earlier novels, they retrospectively established evidence of the onset of Alzheimer's disease. Unbeknown to her, at the time of writing, the author was in a so-called pre-symptomatic period which can precede the clinical onset of a disease by many years. It was a stage at which the disease had not yet manifested itself in her day-to-day behaviour, yet was still impacting on cognition.

The future, as Rilke pointed out, is rather like that too. It is in fact already here, buried somewhere in the past, and germinating in the present, there to be revealed by those with the desire or the talent to do so. Poets and neuroscientists are not the kind of profession that one would naturally associate with trying to predict the future, but futurism as it is generally known, has over centuries occupied everyone from historians and hack porno writers, to politicians and rocket scientists. The people who set themselves this magnificent and not immodest task are today generally known as futurists, but they were not always known as such; utopians, prophets, charlatans, magicians, or even liars are some of the more repeatable names that have been used over the years. After the term "futurology" was invented in the 1940s, they were, for a while known as futurologists, but this quickly and thankfully fell out of favour for being unpronounceable and sounding suspiciously similar to an unpleasant branch of medicine.

This book explores the lives, works and mindset of some of the most important futurists, who are united here not only by a deep desire to predict the future, but to prepare us for it, and in doing so, help shape the way we live. Some of them are unashamed, stubborn optimists, others miserable misanthropic pessimists, but they are all heralds, riding bravely out to see what is ahead, and galloping back with advice, ideas or warnings. Sometimes they are bearers of good news who want to altruistically push

progress and civilisation forward on a safe and stable path. Others are mischievous mavericks who have earned an outrageously good living pointing out all the nastiest pitfalls and playing on our deepest fears for the future.

Some of them mentioned here are real bona fide futurists with a proper paid job to predict the future, but many of the most interesting and influential ones were accidental futurists (never recognised as such but made monumental contributions to our perception and thinking about the future), frustrated futurists (those with the imagination but not the power) and closet futurists (don't know they are a futurist). As well as attracting a huge range of personalities and professions over two millennia, the methods of looking at the future have ranged from the use of drugged virgins to more conventional, systematic employment of computers and simple common sense. This book begins with the formative years of futurism, shows how it evolved into a respectable discipline, and how it later branched out to adapt to the changing needs and greeds of civilisation. In trying to predict how we would live, work and even love, some of these futurists were spectacularly right, some were embarrassingly and hilariously wrong, and some really gave the future a run for its money. There are of course plenty of diligent and hard working futurists out there who I have not mentioned, but I hope that in leaving some out I have left room for others that you may not have heard of or seen as such. All of them in this book have however had something interesting, poignant, if not controversial or unusual to say about what was and is to come, and in doing so many of them have risked their lives, reputations and sometimes even their marriages.

Futurism is often called the second oldest profession. Not for any affinity to the "oldest" but because it was the early astronomers who were the first to think systematically and scientifically about the future. Looking at the stars they could successfully predict the positions of the sun, moon, and planets, first for use for the calendar, and later for scientific and navigational purposes. What they could not however have predicted was the extent to which it would be appropriated by astrologers who claim they can predict human events and destinies by observing the sky. Astrology first originated in Mesopotamia around 3000 BC, and despite every scientific proof that has since appeared to the contrary, horoscopes are still the most popular method for the laywoman (and sometimes man) to predict their future. Astrology is not futurism, but the obstinate belief in such predictive methods provides us with a poignant warning. Scientist Richard Dawkins tells an apocryphal tale in *Unweaving the Rainbow*, of a modern day journalist who was ordered by his newspaper to write the day's horoscopes. Driven to boredom he wrote under one star

sign, "All the sorrows of yesteryear are as nothing compared to what will befall you today." Desperate readers phoned the newspaper offices in panic, and the poor journalist was promptly sacked. For the journalist who wrote that fateful line, it is a wonderful case of a self-fulfilling prophecy (which unfortunately only goes to affirm people's belief in such things).

My own first professionally paid "predictions" were made whilst working for at a well-known London weekly newspaper group. As one of several sub-editors, my job was check and rewrite copy, and the most fought over sections were the horoscopes, sent to the office in fat batches by one of Britain's best-loved and highest paid astrologers. You could usually tell who won the scramble to the drawer, by their star sign. Suddenly "Leo's" or "Pisces'" prospects were looking remarkably positive for next week – regardless also of the fact that the original un-tampered horoscope was actually meant for last month or the following week. The funny thing was that many of the journalists still believed in their horoscope having tailor-made it to suit themselves! I certainly would not want to claim that this practice is regularly repeated in newspaper and magazine offices throughout the world, but it is a sneaky suspicion that is worth bearing in mind next time you reach for that section.

One far more admirable attempt to influence the future with horoscopes was reported to have taken place during the Second World War, when the British Secret Service tried to destabilize Hitler with pessimistic predictions. Hitler was apparently a great believer in horoscopes and was terrified of dying before he had completed his life's work. The British tried to create a self-fulfilling prophesy by sending out astrological predictions that he would suffer a massive defeat and die in 1942. Unfortunately this did not work; later Hitler would even have his own personal astrologer sent off to a concentration camp when his prophecies proved wrong.

Michael Wood, author of *The Road to Delphi* points out, "It's not that the horoscope, for all its avuncular advice, can remedy our helplessness, or really tell us what to do – no oracle can do that. But there is a definite thrill in the chance that the words of a stranger will, once in a while, offer an echo or an image of one of our most intimate fears or hopes, as if we had lost it and coincidence had found it." The same sentiment can often be applied to futurism, as many people or companies will automatically seek out a future or a futurist that fits or simply reaffirms their beliefs, hopes or point of view. The danger of this is swiftly demonstrated by the legend of the Sultan and the soothsayer. When a soothsayer was once asked by a Sultan to predict his future he peered into the globe and declared,

"I have great news. All your relatives will die before you." The Sultan was horrified and ordered the man to be killed immediately. The next soothsayer was dragged in and declared, "I have great news for you. You will outlive all your relatives." The sultan rewarded him handsomely. The predictions were the same, just the delivery somewhat different.

Along with astrologers and soothsayers, religious prophets are also conspicuously absent here as I do not believe they played a significant role in the development of futurism as we know and use it today. Their case was not helped by a technique used to boost their reputation, *Vaticinium ex eventu* (prophecy from the event). This was the devious practice of writing down a prophecy after the event that it supposedly foretells in order to enhance their reputation. Along with prophets, weather forecasters also get short shrift. Despite many advances in short term forecasting, weather forecasting is a misnomer as far as many people are concerned. Even England's much-loved television weather forecaster Michael Fish never really recovered his reputation following that fateful morning in October 1987 when he confidently assured a woman viewer that there would be no hurricane, only for one to sweep the country some hours later, leaving the most catastrophic trail of damage on record. Luckily Fish was working for the BBC who forgave him; state meteorologists in Moscow were not so lucky. In 2005 they were warned by the mayor that they would have to compensate businesses that suffered financial losses due to any of their faulty forecasting.

Accountability is one of the biggest and most obvious hazards of predicting the future, but another compelling matter to bear in mind while reading this book is what writer Bruce Sterling terms the futurists' monkey puzzle. The classic monkey trap involves placing something tempting inside a jar with a narrow opening. When a monkey puts its hand in and grips the prize, its fist gets stuck and it is caught in a dilemma between letting go and hanging hopelessly on to the prize. "The lesson for the futurist here is simple," explains Sterling, "out in the wilderness of delightful trends, conjectures and happenstances is the one you can't resist. That is your Monkey Puzzle. It is the one futuristic curiosity that proves unbearable to your heart...It is the scheme that you champion against all odds... It is generally something rather trivial, silly, and goofy. You may find yourself longing to have your head frozen for millennia inside a tub of liquid nitrogen.... It might suddenly occur to you that UFOS might really and truly exist. The Monkey Puzzle is almost never based on a sober, rational analysis. Instead, it speaks to some underfed, sugar-starved part of the victim's personal psyche."

After ten years of a close working relationship with the trend and futures business, I now have an in-built radar for such traps, which functions pretty reliably when at conferences, meetings or talking to futurist friends and colleagues. While I am often alerted to a potential peccadillo or obsession that a particular colleague or futurist might be peddling, it doesn't unfortunately work so well myself. Hence in the section on the business of futurism today, I reluctantly look back and squirm in embarrassment at some of the trends I predicted for particular clients. Although it may just contribute a minor part to a major futurist's repertoire (or in my case to a major part of a very minor futurist's repertoire), the point is that the monkey puzzle is potentially very dangerous. As Sterling soberly says, "it doesn't feel like a trap. It feels heroic." Umberto Eco pointed out a similar truth when he warned: "Never fall in love with your own airship". What he was referring to was the fact that for fifty years nobody believed that airplanes would play a role in aviation. It seemed so obvious to people at the time that the Zeppelin, elegant and lighter than air, would be the way for travel in the future, and not ugly noisy airplanes! Even as recently as the 1960s a prominent futurist in Slovenia predicted that in the future everyone would travel about in small flying objects and therefore there was absolutely no need for the government to invest in motorways, garages, parking lots, tramways, trains and buses. Today the sorry state of the public transport and road system in the capital Ljubljana is a testament to his predictions, and to the suspicion that he read science fiction comics as a child.

When it comes to weird and wonderful promises for the future, science fiction has a lot to answer for. Novelist Kingsley Amis once amusingly pointed out that people do not read science fiction to discover scientific truths, any more than they read Westerns to learn about ranching. But do they read it to find out about the future? In *What Futurists Believe*, Joseph Coates and Jennifer Jarratt gloat that "Sci-fi is of little, or no, value... is usually so barren of plausible psychological, social, or institutional sophistication as to fall into one of three categories: entertainment, fantasy or cautionary tales." Even the renowned science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin recommends that the business of prediction is best left to futurists, since "a novelist's business is lying". The point these critics all choose to ignore is not only that it is frequently rather good prediction masquerading as fiction, but that much of it is actually written by proper respectable scientists and futurists (albeit sometimes shamefully under a pseudonym).

Because the future hasn't happened yet, when futurists they make a prediction, they are in the privileged position of not yet being proven wrong. This is the conceit of the

future (not always inseparable from the conceit of some futurists) that makes futurism both so fascinating and so potentially powerful. With all their privilege, futurists are also often considered to be in a unique position to create and control the future. One school of thought says that if you can really predict something, you are in effect helping to invent or create it. This is common in the field of technology where the forecasting of inventions is often indistinguishable from the invention process itself. Thinking about what the future will bring, is also however about learning and accepting how much control we do or do not have over it. As the brilliant quantum physicist Nils Bohr once admitted, "It's very difficult to predict – especially about the future". And that from a man who hung a horseshoe above the entrance to his house because as he famously explained to a friend, "they say it works even if you don't believe in it." Welcome to the future. Some of it, as they say, is already history.

Oona Strathern, Vienna, 2006