

N°6

EXCERPT

ABSTRACT

IDEAS, FACTS AND FICTIONS

WHAT REMAINS

A homage to the enduring



And other stories

*about light wave communication, clothing that
cleans up air pollution and the canine C.S.I.*

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OH, DISTANT MOON

A moan from the heart by Heinrich Steinfest

My nine-year-old son recently asked me to name my favourite science fiction film. Without hesitation I cited Stanley Kubrick's philosophical space epic 2001: A Space Odyssey – no surprises there. After I had explained the implications of the word Odyssey, and had told him about the space station sublimely rotating in its orbit to the beat of Strauss's The Blue Danube, and also about a luxurious base on the moon, and then about a ship on its way to – yes! – Jupiter, about scientists in hibernation and, above all, about an electronic brain that may have looked like a red light, but was characterised by intellectual self-will and a touching melancholy, yet nevertheless possessed a drive to survive, my son, who was born in the year 2002, asked me: “2001! Really? How is that possible?” Bearing in mind his own monumental Lego starship creations on the one hand, and on the other a space reality 2011 that seems to consist mainly of silting up said orbit with satellites. No Johann Strauss, but a lot of little Spice Girls. So I had to explain to him that in 1968, the year the Odyssey was filmed, people had a much more optimistic and dramatic picture of space opportunities three decades later, in 2001.

All right then, what picture does present-day reality show? What has become of those futuristic fantasies? After all, they weren't exactly conjured up from nothing, but extrapolated from the status quo of their time. Where

are they, the astronauts – male and female – who set out “to explore strange, new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before”? Heavens above, did they say “new worlds”? The moon seems as distant and unreachable for the people of the 21st century as for those of the 19th century and preceding decades. The artefacts that are supposed to have been left on the moon (i. e. US flags and stuff like that) symbolise failure rather than the staking of a claim. A golf course with no players, with a few balls lying around and the occasional trolley slowly rotting away.

Instead...

I well remember once, on a visit to Hong Kong more than twenty years ago, smiling a superior smile at the groups of Chinese city kids sitting in the pavement cafes with gigantic mobile phones – as if they had robot shoes nailed to their ears. Instead of talking to the people they had arranged to meet, they talked to people they hadn't planned to see. There was something amusing about it, but also something infantile and undignified, and above all rude. “Nonsensical,” I thought “a toy for a few idiot juveniles.” I never dreamed of the extent to which this “toy” would catch on – and thereby lead a triumphal procession of rudeness. We are now so used to this rudeness that critics of mobile telephony come across as petty bourgeois moaners brought up somewhere in the backwoods.

Please, though, just look at what has become of our “future.” All those people bellowing their distasteful intimate rubbish across public places and overfilled trains, while businesspeople keep others from their work for all to hear. What's more, this kind of telephony – like eating and

drinking on the street or on the underground – creates the visual effect of a person constantly blowing his nose without a handkerchief. Gobbing and spitting, spraying the world with bacteria.

With the mobile phone, “bad behaviour” has established itself throughout the world as if by infernal agency (the term “pocket devil” is more than appropriate). Yes, of course, the youth of today loves to play with this communication technology and we keep getting told that it’s just a sign of the times. But what kind of a sign?! An early Victorian sign – a petty-minded withdrawal into the private sphere, into gossip, peering into the man next door’s underpants and the woman next door’s brassiere. That’s what has become of the future: we wanted to conquer the moon, Mars, reach the margins of the solar system (and not just in the form of isolated little probes, either), we wanted to create noble androids that would be intellectually and optically and morally on an equal footing with mankind, if not superior, poetic, nimble, romantic. Instead, we tote around PCs that get smaller and slimmer by the day. We shrink the things, we degrade them to lapdogs that are hardly allowed out on their own, but crouch in pockets and peer out of handbags with big, round eyes and bows in their well-brushed doggy hair. We don’t realise how pitiful these gadgets look, how little they can do, however boastfully their creators proclaim their processing power. What is it for? Just so that we can digitally mutilate snapshots that are ugly enough already, collect videos and hits, and poison our systems with e-mails all the livelong day?

In 1982, Ridley Scott dreamed in his film *Blade Runner* of dignified androids like Roy Batty, embodied by Rutger Hauer as the flawless *Übermensch*, who at the mo-

ment of his death lends tragedy a tranquil beauty. Man as poem. And the fact that he would also have made the perfect advert for sports underwear – well, why not? At any rate, that was how we imagined “intelligent machines” at one time. Not as tablet computers, reflecting cushions that lie in our laps like living hot-water bottles, things we rub with our fingers to elicit the occasional cute or uncute burp or fart. Back then, we wanted to conquer the universe hand in hand with attractive robot humans, maybe even have sex with them, at least regain our true selves in heroic combat against them, instead of which we are now keeping robot pets, in a relationship of mutual dependency that has more funny sides to it than anything else.

No, taking that point of view is not a denial of progress. Quite the reverse, it is a realisation that one kind of progress has not happened. A focus on the computer and the mobile phone (whose dominance depends on the same laws and interests for which we have to thank the nonsensically wide range of yoghurts and soya products available) is intended to divert our attention from the fact that we have proved unable to realise even one of our Utopias: the future from our past really has remained a mere TV series. And the reality has remained a reflection. Nothing is sadder than the TV images of the ISS, floating around up close to the earth, like kids in a game of catch who will barely move two steps away from the safe haven of “home.”

Of course, you can say it made sense to minimise the vastly over-expensive space programmes when the world was faced with other concerns. Starvation, disease & co. Because you can't eat spaceships. It's just a shame that you can't eat mobile phones either (it would be an idea, after all, then we could send the old, run-down



Evil Android Series Roy Batty, Blade Runner (1982)
© Dave Murray; www.davemurrayillustration.com

phones to Africa). No, by sacrificing endeavours to make our dreams of the future come true – spaceships, androids, time machines, the search for intelligent life on other planets – we have created a gap that we try to fill with the immaterial and imaginary. In those days, in the past, it was normal to describe the future in fiction, but nowadays the present is fiction: our existence in and through the computer and showing signs of life in constant but unreal communication (basically, we don't really know whether the people we phone actually exist or are just part of the “toy,” in other words installed voices that imitate the real ones – the robot as copyist, so to speak).

Genuine progress consists of delivering on a promise: slimming aids that make you slim, schools that make you clever, tomatoes that may shine forth as brightly as an ultra-condensed red-light district but still taste of tomatoes (and not of the rainwater collecting in the local gutter, not to mention worse substances). And above all, of course, there was and is the promise of a united mankind, a brotherhood and sisterhood of nations and ethnicities. The Enterprise!

But what has become of our vision: a world full of ringing noises and artificial intelligence locked up in electronic casings, gasping for breath as if buried alive. Yes, of course, a half-Afro-Caribbean has become President of the USA, albeit of a hopelessly indebted colony. The future has been realised not as adventure, but bankruptcy.

Some people say the rain used to be wetter and the sky bluer and the winters wintrier and cars didn't look like hunkered-down cows. That last one is definitely true.

Heinrich Steinfest, born in Australia in 1961, is an Austrian author who has lived in Stuttgart, Germany for the past fourteen years. He is a multiple winner of the Deutscher Krimipreis for crime fiction and has also been honoured with the Stuttgarter Krimipreis for crime fiction and the Heimito von Doderer-Literaturpreis for outstanding fiction in the German language. He is the author of the “Cheng series” of detective novels and wrote “Gebrauchsanweisung für Österreich” (“Austria: Instructions for Use”). His most recently published novels are “Wo die Löwen weinen” (“Where the Lions Weep”) (Theiss) and “Die Haischwimmerin” (“The Shark Swimmer”) (Piper).

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