

History in the making

Nasa-consulting futurist and science-fiction writer Dr David Brin believes the secret to a brighter future lies in humanity's past successes, and that the accountability of those in power – the most important invocation of the Enlightenment – is now more crucial than ever.

BY PAUL KAY



16 Post Magazine // June 17, 2018

genres try to reassure the reader that everything will stay the same. There may be a murder, there may be a conflict, but the context of society will stay the same.

"Science fiction deals with the possibility that things might be different than they are, just as they are now different than they were. This is where you can go to find thoughtful thought experiments about how change might disrupt our assumptions. Now, a lot of people are scared by that, so science fiction has a warning label: 'Have courage if you're going to open this door.'"

While Brin acknowledges that, within the genre, "you have a wide range of quality, and some of the stories are just space opera: *Star Wars*, waving light swords around," he is steadfast in the belief that intelligent science fiction has a significant role to play in shaping our future – and saving us from dystopia.

"The most effective kind of science fiction is called the self-preventing prophecy," he says. "That is where you make a story that is so terrifying it gives millions of people to become determined to prevent that very same scenario. The movie *Soylent Green* [1973] recruited millions of environmentalists. *Dr Strangelove* [1964] and other fictions of the 1960s helped to prevent nuclear war. But the granddaddy of self-preventing prophecy was George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949]."

This leads us onto one of Brin's favourite topics – surveillance – and one of his most important books. Published in 1996, non-fiction work *The Transparent Society* asks whether technology will ultimately force us to choose between privacy and freedom, a topic that is surely more relevant today than it has ever been. In the book, Brin predicted that surveillance would become ever-more pervasive as technology advances, but also, perhaps surprisingly, contends that this is not necessarily a bad thing – as long as everyone is subject to the same scrutiny.

"People are right to worry that [increased surveillance] could empower Big Brother," says Brin. And he argues that privacy laws such as those recently passed in Europe and the US are exacerbating the problem as "the main result is to give privacy protection to elites" who "can afford the lawyers and the bribes to use them to keep their secrets".

Instead, contends Brin, we must pursue a path in which the elites are held accountable through "reciprocal transparency" if we are to continue to improve social structures and create more egalitarian societies.

"Almost all feudal systems had one flaw above all," he says. "It wasn't that they were oppressive. It wasn't that they were vicious. The worst problem of these hierarchies was that they were delusional and stupid. They delivered horribly dumb statements, because, being human beings, they made themselves insulated against criticism, and criticism is the only antidote to error."

"The trick of the Enlightenment [which began in the late 17th century] is not capitalism. The trick of the Enlightenment is not even freedom and democracy. The trick of the Enlightenment

is flat, reciprocal accountability. This is what gave us the ability to ensure that no one's delusion goes unquestioned."

Open exchange of criticism is "not comfortable for elites. It's not comfortable for you and me. None of us wants to be subjected to criticism. It's just that that is the lifeblood of an enlightenment. For everyone to be able to point out each other's mistakes, that's why we have been so successful."

"You ask how Big Brother controlled everybody in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; it's through surveillance. You ask how we became free; it's through 'sousveillance'. It means looking back from below."



"THE FRACTION WHO LIVE IN GRINDING POVERTY HAS BEEN PLUMMETING FOR THE LAST 60 YEARS. THE FRACTION WHO HAVE SEEN WAR WITH THEIR OWN EYES IS THE LOWEST THAT IT'S EVER BEEN IN THE HISTORY OF OUR SPECIES. WHEN YOU HAVE SO MUCH GOOD NEWS, WHY DO WE IGNORE IT?"



A scene from *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Picture: Alamy

18 Post Magazine // June 17, 2018

Brin may speak in high concept terms, but he is quick to point out that he is not talking broadly or theoretically, but about a specific clear and present danger to human progress.

"There is an attempted oligarchy push [under way] all over the world. It is highly coordinated," he says. "The reason why the world oligarchy is converging on us now, using every trick they can, is because they can tell. In 20 years, we'll be locked into [a new] enlightenment. That's my prediction. They have to act now. It's almost too late. The world's morality will be the enlightenment morality."

Brin stops short of naming names, but reading between the lines his targets are clear.

"When you have a movement that is waging war on every fact-using profession, from science to journalism, teaching to medicine, including the intelligence agencies, the FBI and the military officer corps, how can that be maintained? I didn't think it could be maintained two years ago. I was wrong."

A shard of optimism underpins even Brin's most bleak rhetoric, although he says "I don't personally feel that I'm optimistic. I know too much history." While he concedes that he is known for being "a bit of a grouch" and warns that we have much to be wary about, Brin maintains it is important that we also take the time to celebrate – and draw inspiration from – the achievements of humankind.

"We are developing technologies that won't just enable us to communicate better or to cure diseases, but to transform the characteristics of humanity," he says. "The fraction who live in grinding poverty has been plummeting for the last 60 years. The fraction who have seen war with their own eyes is the lowest that it's ever been in the history of our species. When you have so much good news, why do we ignore it?"

"Yes, we have terrible problems: climate change, some parts of the world have not joined in the benefits of eliminating poverty and war; there's always the danger that major war might break out and destroy everything. But there is no conflict between the good news and the bad news. The good news should give us confidence that we can solve problems, and therefore we can boldly move forward to solve the ones that aren't fixed yet."



Kevin Costner stars in *The Postman*, a 1997 film adapted from Brin's 1985 book of the same name. Picture: Alamy

"The most foolish thing in the world would be for us to think that good news makes us complacent. It does the opposite."

"And yet, we're using our hands and moon. And our politics are so short sighted, our political discourse is so dumb. We are simultaneously glorious. Look at the pictures we just brought back from Pluto, and gorgeous photos of Jupiter. Twenty years ago, we had no planets outside our solar system, now we know about 5,000. We are defeating diseases. We're raising children out of poverty. We are mighty beings. We're quivering and moaning and acting like shriveled old men." For a moment, Brin is the

and that have the fate of all generations and an entire planet in our hands?"

"And yet, we're using our hands and moon. And our politics are so short sighted, our political discourse is so dumb. We are simultaneously glorious. Look at the pictures we just brought back from Pluto, and gorgeous photos of Jupiter. Twenty years ago, we had no planets outside our solar system, now we know about 5,000. We are defeating diseases. We're raising children out of poverty. We are mighty beings. We're quivering and moaning and acting like shriveled old men." For a moment, Brin is the

living embodiment of an Old Testament prophet, his eyes wide, his hands raised skyward, his face etched with intensity, ferocity and righteous anger.

There's a long, breathless pause, the silence hanging in the air like a spaceship. Finally, the good doctor relaxes his pose and exhales deeply.

"If you read science fiction, then at least, you are out at the horizons that we are dealing with," he says. "We're about to be a multiplanetary species. We're about to build fantastic new cities. We may be able to destroy everything. "That's incredible. It deserves a literature."

Sino fiction

David Brin on flashes of enlightenment, including our own:

"This brief candle of enlightenment we've been living through, as deeply flawed as it has been for 200 years, has accomplished more than all other human civilisations combined, but it could easily be snuffed out, so the way the other brief experiments were, in Pericles Athens, in Florence and in another places. There are people around the world who are eager to

end the experiment. I won't call them enemies, because it is a totally understandable reflex. I prefer the natural human system called feudalism and hierarchy. After all, 99 per cent of our ancestors lived under such systems, but they were all very slow.

"In China, there were brief exceptions, the Tang dynasty, the Yongle Emperor of the Ming dynasty, who created not only the Forbidden City, but sent admiral Zheng He on his great expeditions through the South China Sea and around to India

June 17, 2018 // Post Magazine 19

When most people think of science fiction, they think of the future: of advanced technology, alien civilisations and intergalactic space travel. But for author Dr David Brin, sci-fi is a genre that deals with the past every bit as much as it tries to predict where humanity may be heading.

"You see, science fiction was badly named," says Brin, when we meet in Hong Kong following the author's appearance at a future-focused event in Shenzhen hosted by Chinese smartphone-maker Huawei. "Only 10 per cent or so of science-fiction authors are scientifically trained, as I am, but all of us study history."

"History is the great saga of where we were, how difficult things were for our ancestors, how hard they had to struggle, not only with nature and poverty but with their own well-intended mistakes, their own wrong-headed beliefs. To climb gradually forward, to the point where we could stand on their shoulders and launch ourselves to the planets and the stars? What a story. What an incredible story."

"All science fiction does is extend it a little bit further in what Einstein called the *gedankenexperiment*, or thought experiment. It should have been called 'speculative history'."

It is a typically erudite response from Brin, and one that, given his pedigree as both a scholar and an author, is hard to argue with.

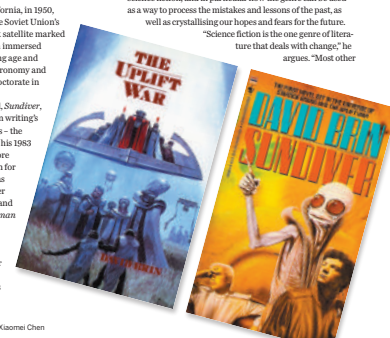
government agencies and a who's who of major tech and consumer companies.

If he is entertaining and thought-provoking in prose, in person he is nothing short of enthralling, being his eloquent, hyper-literate monologues with just the right dose of theatricality, grandiosity and conspiracy theory. When he speaks, it is not just in paragraphs, but in chapters, every pause and inflection so precise you can practically hear the punctuation.

And he is almost ludicrously well-read on a variety of subjects: in the course of an hour, he touches on everything from automation, artificial intelligence and technological surveillance to the American civil war, the Russian Revolution, 9/11, communism, capitalism, the Enlightenment, the highs and lows of Chinese and Western civilisation, and – inevitably – the future of humanity. In doing so, he references a wide range of historical, literary and mythological figures, ancient civilisations from Greece and Mesopotamia to Japan and China, as well as a host of science-fiction writers that includes Isaac Asimov ("I finished his universe for him, I tied together all of his loose ends"), Ray Bradbury ("I got some of my shtick from Ray Bradbury. He was a dear friend") and China's Lu Xun, author of the Hugo Award-winning epic novel *The Three-Body Problem* (2006; "I thought great credit to science fiction in China – and the Pulitzer suddenly decided they love science fiction"). A conversation with Brin is, in short, an education.

Most frequently, however, Brin returns to the topic of science fiction, and in particular how the genre can be used as a way to process the mistakes and lessons of the past, as well as crystallising our hopes and fears for the future.

"Science fiction is the one genre of literature that deals with change," he argues. "Most other



David Brin in Quarry Bay. Portrait: Xaomei Chen

Born in Glendale, California, in 1950, seven years before the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite marked the start of the space age, Brin immersed himself in science from a young age and went on to earn degrees in astronomy and applied physics, as well as a doctorate in space sciences.

He published his first novel, *Sundiver*, in 1980 and won science-fiction writing's two most prestigious accolades – the Hugo and Nebula awards – for his 1983 follow-up, *Starline Rising*, before winning the Hugo Award again for 1987's *The Uplift War*. As well as being a regular on the bestseller lists for the past four decades, and having his 1985 novel *The Postman* brought to the big screen by producer/director/starling actor Kevin Costner in 1997, Brin is a prolific public speaker and futurist, and also consults for Nasa, various United States

June 17, 2018 // Post Magazine 17