



What does Tomorrowland's flop tell us about the appliance of science fiction?



AT least measured by the gross revenues of the film industry, what the planet loves to watch most is science fiction and fantasy. If you look at the top 20 all-time worldwide list of movie bestsellers, seven are what I'd called strict SF. There's no magic or mysticism – it's science and technology that makes wonders happen: Iron Man, Transformers, Batman, Jurassic Park, Star Wars, with James Cameron's *Avatar* the most successful movie of all time.

The other seven are a combination of kids-oriented animation (*Toy Story*, *Frozen*) and classic fantasy (*Alice in Wonderland*, *Harry Potter*, the Tolkien and *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies). The Avengers are hard to place, playing fast and loose with both genres (*Thor* and *Loki* fighting killer robots, etc). The rest of the list is James Bond, *Titanic*, and one movie about some very fast driving.

I will confess to being an SF purist. I can be dragged along to fire-breathing epics, where smaller people swing swords at bigger people (and even bigger monsters), for custody of glowing rings or stones. But to be honest, I'm only tolerating it.

It doesn't matter how bristling the aliens, or how grandiose the spaceships, or how weirdly powerful the gizmos in the protagonists' hands. A proper SF movie holds out the promise that all this is at least possible, if not probable, according to how well we are able to wield matter, energy and information.



Fantasy films let us indulge in the belief that we can submit to "powers" and "forces" that we don't need to explain, forces so mysteriously and unpredictably powerful that they subject us to fate and magic. For me (and it's fighting talk, I know), fantasy subverts our confidence in our ability to plan and shape our lives.

By contrast, I find science-fiction basically humanist and empowering. We can do this now, and if we are determined and rigorous and brilliant enough, we might be able to do that in the future. Deep down, SF asks us to commit to the necessary labour of understanding this complex material world, in order to act with focus and precision in it.

So did you think were just choosing la-la-escapism with a box of popcorn in your lap? No chance. "Any sufficiently advanced technology begins to look like magic," said Arthur C. Clarke – and I think that's the right way round.

You can visualise a talking dragon all you want – but you won't ever come up with a real one. However, if you think up the all-purpose tricorder that featured in any sixties' *Star Trek* episode, you will eventually get to an app-filled iPad in the early 21st century. Science fiction's tech possibilities often inspire generations of engineers and designer to eventually make them a tech reality.

Given my SF purism, then, I am worried at the news that the new Disney movie *Tomorrowland* – starring George Clooney as a grouchy scientist, and with Brad Pitt directing – has been such a resounding flop at the multiplexes.

No spoilers beyond what you'd get in the

trailer, of course (I thoroughly recommend you see it). And to be fair, *Tomorrowland's* plot invokes the same apocalyptic threats as its movie-theatre rival at the moment, the new *Mad Max* film – a world coming to pieces under global warming, warring regions and social division.

But rather than wallow in end-of-days misery like many SF blockbusters do (the movie features its own parody of these, with billboards advertising "ToxiCosmos 3"), *Tomorrowland* at least holds out a vision of a fully-functioning utopia.

Of course, you get to it via that old quantum-physics canard, the parallel universe. But once the protagonists make it through their glowing portal, they find that the best and the brightest are hover-boarding and space-porting like there's no tomorrow (or perhaps, like there's only tomorrow).

The critics have already pointed out the commercial interest behind this movie's gleamingly positive vision of future. *Tomorrowland* is modelled on Disney's original Epcot (experimental community of the future). The MouseCorp is always keen to have its blockbuster movies establish an audience for yet another attraction in its global theme park empire.

This jetpack looks like it's crunched into the ground after a few yards. However, I'm guessing it's more to do with *Tomorrowland's* thoughtful approach, and maybe its slightly preachy tone, than its lack of eye-popping digital effects.



There's a great scene in *Tomorrowland* where the young geek girl hero, Casey, is listening to her science teacher intone about how her generation must bear the burden for the coming climate disaster. Casey leans forward brightly: "But can we fix it?"

Well, can we fix it? I hope that the relative failure (so far) of *Tomorrowland* at the box-office doesn't discourage the movie industry: surely the insatiable appetite for SF blockbusters can bear a little subtlety and diversity. The appeal of Hulks thrashing Norse gods wearing spandex will pall eventually. Won't it?

There is a new movement in science-fiction writing they could tap into. SF giants Cory Doctorow and Neal Stephenson want to (occasionally) harness their fellow writers to a useful task. How can their fictional talents make plausible and human a future we might want to live in or bring about, rather than luxuriate in the despair of the "toxi-cosmos"?

The website of Stephenson's Hieroglyph Project currently features an item which tells of "a global network of activists coordinating drones, tracking poachers smuggling ivory during on a transnational voyage, bringing the criminals to justice". HG Wells, Jules Verne and Arthur C Clarke would have approved.

As with so many other aspects of modern Scotland, we've covered all the bases on this. With writers like Mark Millar and Grant Morrison, we have enough superheroic imagination to generate a score of movie franchises. But with the work of the late Iain M. Banks, we also have a big-concept science-fictional universe to match anything, anywhere.

Banks's *The Culture* is as conflict-strewn and crisis-torn as any film-maker would need.

But the tensions occur in a galaxy where humans (and their AI companions) are way beyond the struggle for scarce resources; have to make decisions about what pleasures to pursue (rather than what pains to avoid); and commit themselves to exploring the wonders of the universe.

GIVEN that it's Iain M Banks, there are always pratfalls, perverse outcomes, and blackly humorous moments. But if the shiny, jump-suited optimism of *Tomorrowland* can't deliver a hit for the studio system, would the louche, super-intelligent hedonists of *The Player of Games* or *Consider Phlebas* deliver any better result? I'll leave that to the producers and moguls (while hoping dearly that someone could make it happen).

In any case, stand back a little, and it's quite a realisation. You can take yourself out on this Saturday night, step into a hall with the town's dust on your shoes, and in a few minutes make the choice to occupy five or six possible future worlds – scary, stylish or sublime.

"He canna Scotland see wha' yet/Canna see the infinite/And Scotland in true scale to it", Hugh MacDiarmid once wrote. We may be unsure of where our national future is headed. But in the meantime, let's keep our imaginations roaring – for the price of a weekly cinema ticket.

Pat Kane (www.patkane.today) is a musician and writer.

Swinney launches move to increase protection from cyber-criminals

BY GREG RUSSELL

THE Scottish Government has launched a consultation aimed at making our online experience safer and more secure.

"A Cyber Resilience Strategy for Scotland: Safe, Secure and Prosperous Online" was formally launched by Deputy First Minister John Swinney, seeking views from individuals and organisations on how Scotland can become even more resilient to cyber-attacks and crime online.

Swinney said the internet was part of all our lives and offered incredible opportunities for Scottish businesses. However, he added that no one was immune to cyber risks.

"Being digitally connected brings increased opportunities for those who seek to exploit the very same technology for criminal purposes such as threats of fraud and abuse," he said.

"In using the internet in our everyday lives, we must accept this is now the norm and we all must become more resilient to such attacks.

"Last year, we gave a commitment in Programme for Government to develop and bring forward a cyber-resilience strategy that will take a positive approach to developing cyber resilience in Scotland, for the benefit of our people and our economy.

"We want people to feel confident online and safely use the internet, where businesses can prosper, where our children are not exploited, and where online public services are resilient as well as simple to use."

Mandy Haeburn-Little, director of the Scottish Business Resilience Centre, added: "This is such an important issue for any size of business. Scotland has a proud history of innovation and we are committed to ensuring that this continues to be the case and that Scotland is a safe and secure place to trade, work and live."

The launch came as it emerged that hackers broke into US government computers in one of the country's biggest security breaches, possible compromising data involving at least four million current and former federal workers.

The data was held by a personnel office that handles American government security clearances and employee records.

Investigators linked the breach to earlier thefts of healthcare records from Anthem Inc, the second largest US health insurer, and Premera Blue Cross, a health services provider.

Officials said the breach was first de-

tected in April but it appeared to have started late last year.

Social security numbers and other personal identifying information appeared to be the targets.

Federal officials were in little doubt that this attack had been launched from China.

However, a spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry said such accusations were irresponsible, adding that hacking attacks were often cross-border and hard to trace.

This was the third major foreign intrusion into an important federal computer system in the past year.

Last year, the White House and State Department found that their email systems had been compromised in an attack that was attributed to Russian hackers.

In that case, some of President Obama's unclassified emails were apparently obtained by the intruders.

And last summer, the personnel office announced an intrusion in which hackers appeared to have targeted the files of tens of thousands of workers who had applied for top-secret security clearances.

The objective in that case seemed clear – the data could help identify covert agents, scientists and others of interest to foreign governments. That breach also appeared to have involved Chinese hackers.

But because the breadth of the new attack was so much greater, the objective appeared less clear.

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