

# BLIND FAITH IN SCIENCE

**AS THE GAP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND SCI-FI NARROWS, YANNICK THORAVAL EXPLORES THE WIDENING CHASM BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND PEOPLE'S HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.**

THE FLYING CAR is the most familiar example of a future that has never materialised. On film it can work fine: *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* featured a flying car way back in the 1960s. But as an invention the flying car is simply impractical. A working model has proved prohibitively expensive to produce, despite some 80 flying car design patents being on file with the US Patent and Trademark Office alone.

So the flying car remains a fantasy; the perennial disappointment of dreamers and science-fiction fans, who have been waiting...and waiting...for this transport revolution.

Who cares? Well, this would-be invention tells us something about our relationship with technological development. High hopes for a flying car reveal our tendency to conceive an optimistic future.

It's worth remembering that, in its various incarnations, futurists typically presented the flying car as part of a utopian urban landscape, a metropolis freed from the smog and congestion of earthbound motorways. And so, used as a harbinger of social progress, the flying car has become emblematic of our faith in the virtue of science and technology. An airborne vehicle represents our belief that the world of tomorrow will be better than today's.

There are, of course, notable exceptions to that utopian perspective. British authors Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) and George Orwell (1903–50) presented us with the most obvious counterpoint to this optimistic view. However, in both *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949), science and technology were not themselves to



blame for the bleak worlds depicted. The authors appreciated that it was people, and their appetite for power and control, who perverted the benefits of science and technology for political or ideological gain.

But, even armed with Huxley's and Orwell's cautionary tales, we still have a tendency to present science and scientists (geeks in lab coats) as representing notions of progress, truth and discovery. We often fail to be critical of science, and sometimes forget that most scientific discovery depends on the social forces that develop and shape it: economics, political will and the law.

We often treat science and scientists as something operating in the background of society, a somewhat

mysterious subculture we only hear about when a useful invention is promised or some practical discovery is made.

Perhaps the scope of inquiry of cutting-edge science is responsible for our collective inattention. Maybe the idea of theoreticians struggling to reconcile Newtonian mechanics with quantum physics is too esoteric to draw public interest. For example, while its findings may yet prove vitally significant to expanding our understanding of the universe, the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland doesn't quite capture the public imagination in the same way the 1969 moon landing did.

There is a PR gap between the science and its possible social application that wedges a distance between scientists and the general public. Even the beautiful images of outer space taken by the Hubble Space Telescope couldn't ignite intrigue in the imaginations of the general public. In fact, the images seemed to reinforce a profound sense of loneliness, as if these discoveries only confirmed to humans that we are even less significant than we previously believed.

And so, as scientific projects become more esoteric, we loosely ponder the possible applications of science and technology to our personal lives. Where's our nuclear fusion? Our personal jet pack? If a meteor should ever threaten to obliterate Earth, we hope that someone has advanced our knowledge enough to destroy the incoming danger. If our lives are ever threatened by some fatal disease, we hope that science will have caught up with our affliction and offer some hope of survival.



In this way, science plays out its familiar role as saviour. It is a discipline uniquely invested with our expectations of discovery and success. For us, science offers a hope that borders on faith.

And why not? There is little disputing the discipline's track record for improving the quality of our lives. Think no further back than life before the discovery of penicillin, anaesthetics or the practice of modern dentistry to be convinced of the enormous personal and social value of scientific progress.

But the point is that our cultural relationship with science is typically not very...scientific. We talk little about the limitations of science, about what we would do if science failed us or, more likely, we failed it. Many of us are unconcerned with where scientific funding goes. In the main, we are out of touch enough with the rigours of scientific thought that alarming

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numbers of us fall victim to the pseudo science of modern snake-oil salesmen, of which Scientologists and intelligent design advocates are only the most conspicuous examples.

It's important for us to be familiar with the discipline of science. After all, it is the framework we use to navigate and make sense of our lives. But it's also important for us to consider the limitations of science. For instance, is there a ceiling to our accumulation of knowledge? Does the particular neurochemistry of our brains limit the scope of our inquiries?

We need to question the potential applications of scientific discovery and consider their moral implications. We should be conservative, cautious and, above all, realistic about the new horizons that science may yet reveal. Otherwise, we cheapen the discipline and reduce science to some kind of

'X' factor; civilisation's lucky charm. Take climate change, for example. A solution to its dangers may yet prove to be social or technological (probably a bit of both). But we should be conscious about our expectations. When we shorten our showers and compost our kitchen scraps, do we secretly hope that some yet-to-be-invented technology will one day save us the hassle? If so, well, therein lies the problem. It's irresponsible for us to imagine science as providing a cure-all solution. Climate change may just be the biggest example of us relying on science and technology, which may not actually deliver. At the very least, we have to consider the possibility that we will find no solution to climate change at all.

Runaway faith in the remedial potential of science is stained by the hope that it will exonerate us from personal responsibility. A belief

that technology not yet conceived will somehow deliver us from the uncertainty of our present is an act of faith, like believing a flying car will one day lift us from the gridlock of the morning commute. Change, however, requires personal commitment.

Perhaps it's a chicken-and-egg scenario. Perhaps we are biologically programmed to look towards the future with hope, expectation and promise. Perhaps it's our evolutionary advantage to live for tomorrow.

But it seems the rational approach to scientific discovery is not to expect it and, if it does come, adopt it with caution, heeding the words of Socrates that "true knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing".

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## FLIGHTS OF FANCY



### AEROCAR

CREATOR MOLT TAYLOR, USA DATE 1949  
CRUISED AT ABOUT 190KM/H IN THE AIR.  
SIX EXAMPLES WERE BUILT BUT IT NEVER  
ENTERED MAINSTREAM PRODUCTION.



### CONVAIRCAR

CREATOR HENRY DREYFUSS, USA DATE 1947  
A CRASH THREE WEEKS AFTER ITS FIRST  
FLIGHT RESULTED IN NEGATIVE MEDIA,  
PUTTING OFF POTENTIAL INVESTORS.



### AVROCAR

CREATOR AVRO AIRCRAFT LTD, CANADA  
DATE 1949. DEVELOPED AS PART OF A  
SECRET US MILITARY PROJECT. ABORTED  
IN 1961 DUE TO STABILITY PROBLEMS.



### SKYCAR

CREATOR PAUL MOLLER, USA DATE NOW  
IN DEVELOPMENT SINCE THE 1960s, THE  
M400 SKYCAR IS SLATED FOR RELEASE  
WITHIN THE NEXT THREE YEARS.



### PAL-V

CREATOR PAL-V EUROPE BV, NETHERLANDS  
DATE NOW. STARTED IN 1999, PERSONAL  
AIR AND LAND VEHICLE PROTOTYPES ARE  
BEING BUILT FOR THE US/EUROPE MARKET.