

# The Surprising Connection Between Science Fiction and Economic History – Part 2

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*A continuation of the article by Sebastian Buckup (see [HERE](#)), authored by Waldo Russo (text and figures)*

## ***A decade later: when the future stopped being flat***

If in 2016 Buckup already suspected that we were living through a new "Nixon moment," the following decade confirmed and deepened the diagnosis. Productivity in advanced economies remained stubbornly low, stuck at around 1% per year, even amid the explosion of new technologies. The flat world celebrated by Thomas Friedman began to fold back onto itself: globalization, once treated as an inevitable destiny, began to be dismantled piece by piece. Tariffs, trade wars, the 2020 pandemic, the reconfiguration of production chains, the return of borders and nationalist policies, combined with the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, placed fear back at the center of the collective imagination. The confidence that had already been low since 2008 was not rebuilt — it merely migrated into new forms of distrust.

It is precisely this climate that cinema has once again set out to "dissect," to borrow the expression from Buckup's article.

## ***From Star Wars to Dune: two dark futures***

It is no coincidence that the two great science fiction epics of the past decade have been equally dark visions of tomorrow — and, curiously, antagonistic to each other in form, just as Star Trek and Star Wars once were. On one side, Hollywood's reunion with Dune (Denis Villeneuve, 2021 and 2024). Frank Herbert's universe is the perfect antithesis of Star Trek's antiseptic idealism: a feudal future, marked by scarcity, by dynastic houses at war over control of a single strategic resource — the "spice," a transparent metaphor for oil and, today, for rare earths and semiconductors. Even more revealing: in Dune's cosmology, thinking machines were banned centuries earlier, after a human revolt against artificial intelligence. It is hard to imagine a more eloquent symbol of our current ambivalence: we dream of AI and, at the same time, we fantasize about a world that had to ban it in order to survive.

On the other side, the solar, feudal aridity of Dune finds its exact reverse in the noir, rainy melancholy of Blade Runner 2049 (Denis Villeneuve, 2017). Where one fears the machine to the point of banning it, the other plunges into a world in which humans and replicants already blur together, and the very definition of humanity has become manufacturable. Together, these two futures — the desert without machines and the city saturated with artifice — delineate the field of our contemporary anxieties. Where Star Trek saw a classless federation governed by the rule of law, today we see empires, scarcity, and identities in dissolution. The distance between that vision and these is the measure of how much our expectations have shrunk.



***Dune and Blade Runner 2049 - two dark and antagonistic futures: the feudal aridity of the desert, where thinking machines were banned, and the noir melancholy of the artificial city, where human and replicant blur together***

### ***ChatGPT and the mirror of Frankenstein***



***M3gan: Chucky da nova geração troca susto fácil por alfinetada social***



***Ethan Hunt e a equipe da IMF correm contra o tempo para impedir uma IA de dominar o mundo.***

The launch of ChatGPT, at the end of 2022, brought artificial intelligence out of fiction and into the office, the school, and the factory. For the first time since the Luddite era<sup>1</sup>, the "proverbial struggle between man and machine" mentioned at the close of the original text ceased to be a distant allegory and became a matter of layoffs, unions, and public policy. And cinema responded with Mary Shelley's old grammar: the creature that acquires a will of its own. M3GAN (2022) updated Frankenstein for the era of household assistants; Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning (2023) turned an autonomous AI – "the Entity" – into the ultimate villain, more dangerous than any nuclear power; The Creator (2023, released in Brazil under the title Resistência) directly staged the war between humans and sentient machines. Mary Shelley's creature, two centuries later, returned to the screen with the face of an algorithm – and this time no longer as a distant nightmare, but as the week's news.

<sup>1</sup> Luddism was a radical Workers' movement that took place in England between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the context of the First Industrial Revolution. Dissatisfied with the terrible working conditions and low wages, the workers protested by invading factories and destroying machines, which they considered most to blame for their hardships.

## ***The screen for the new nightmares: inequality, the periphery, and new centers***

Curiously, the sharpest portraits of our recent economic anxiety have come neither from robots nor from Hollywood studios, but from the margins and the new centers of the world. South Korea provided the most eloquent global phenomena: *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019) and *Squid Game* (TV series, 2021-2025) translated, in a register of horror and satire, the exhaustion of the promise of social mobility — the shared feeling that the game is rigged and that debt, not merit, governs lives. It is not trivial that the most talked-about work of the decade about capitalism and inequality was spoken in Korean, coming from an economy that only a few decades earlier was peripheral and today exports to the world not only semiconductors, but also the imagery of its own malaise.

***Parasite* - South Korean film about the explosive coexistence between a poor family and a rich family, a portrait of the exhaustion of the promise of social mobility.**



China, in turn, offered the most revealing counterpoint to Western pessimism. ***The Wandering Earth*** (2019 and 2023), the highest-grossing film of Chinese science fiction, proposes a vision radically distinct from Hollywood's: in the face of planetary catastrophe, there is no individual savior hero, but rather a collective, state-led, and multinational effort to literally move the Earth to a new place in the cosmos. It is ***Star Trek's*** technological idealism resurfacing — only under a different political grammar, collectivist and state-centered. While the West films the collapse, the emerging power films the engineering of survival. The very geopolitical fracture that is dismantling globalization thus appears mirrored in two opposite ways of dreaming the future.



***The Wandering Earth - Chinese science fiction in which humanity, through a collective, state-led effort, literally moves the Earth in order to survive planetary catastrophe***

Brazil, finally, gave the genre some of its most powerful allegories about social fragmentation and the threat to autonomy. Bacurau (Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, 2019) imagined a village in the sertão literally erased from the map and turned into a hunting ground for foreigners — a ferocious synthesis of the abandonment of the peripheries, of violence, and of global inequality. The series 3% (2016-2020), the first original Brazilian production by Netflix to reach a worldwide audience, pushed meritocratic logic to its limit: a world divided between a destitute majority and a tiny elite, selected by a "process" that promises progress to very few. And Executive Order (Lázaro Ramos, 2020) used dystopia to address racism, authoritarianism, and the suppression of rights — reminding us that, before the machine, what many societies fear is politics itself.



***Bacurau - Brazilian film in which a village in the backlands (sertão) is erased from the map and turned into a hunting ground for foreigners, an allegory of the abandonment of the peripheries and of global inequality***

Series such as Severance (2022) dramatized the loss of autonomy of the worker reduced to a function, while Civil War (2024) projected political polarization to its darkest outcome. Here the fear is not technological, it is institutional: the collapse of confidence in markets and governments that the article already pointed to in 2007-09, now taken to a paroxysm on a truly global scale.

***"We believe in innovation, but we keep giving up on progress"***

Buckup's thesis survives intact — and perhaps truer than ever. We are living through a dizzying technological acceleration, possibly the greatest since electricity, and yet our stories of the future are increasingly dark. We believe in innovation with almost religious fervor, but we have almost entirely lost faith in progress as shared moral and social improvement. The Concorde of 1969 promised a faster tomorrow for everyone; today's artificial intelligence promises, above all, productivity gains that few can say to whom they will belong.

The challenge that the author set out at the close remains ours: to surrender neither to the cynicism of those who have given up on the future, nor to the dazzlement of the prophets who promise that technology will solve everything. Between the utopianism of Star Trek and the feudalism of Dune, between the collapse filmed in the West and the engineering of survival dreamed up in the East, the task of citizens and leaders remains to refuse the role of passive

subjects — and to remember that the future, as always, will be whatever we dare to imagine and build.