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PHILIP K. DICK, ARTHUR CLARKE, ISAAC ASIMOV:

WHOSE PREDICTIONS WERE MORE ACCURATE?

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Philip K. Dick, Arthur Clarke, Isaac Asimov: Whose Predictions Were More Accurate?

Since ancient times, human beings have always been curious about the way the world will look like in the future. In this regard, two perspectives can be designated. The first one is represented by scientists and scholars who apply rational thinking and empirical evidence to make their predictions. In contrast, the second perspective involves forecasts and predictions based primarily on one's imagination and creative thinking rather than empirical evidence. Science fiction writers represent the most notable group of voices within the second perspective. Interestingly, the futuristic visions of literary authors often turn out to be substantially more accurate compared to the ones proposed by scientists and professional futurists. In this regard, the forecasts made by Philip K. Dick, Arthur Clarke, and Isaac Asimov may serve as an explicit illustration.

Philip K. Dick is one of the most recognized US science fiction writers who explored the dark side of technology. The author's most popular stories depict a rather dark image of the future being dominated by monopolistic corporations, authoritarian tech-based regimes, and artificial intelligence threatening human civilization. The most acknowledged stories by Philip K. Dick are *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* (1974). Each of these works contain more or less explicit futuristic predictions. Eventually, in 1981, Philip K. Dick collected his most significant predictions for the next thirty years and issued *The Book of Predictions*. Subsequently, to understand how accurate Philip K. Dick's forecasts were, it is necessary to discuss the predictions more thoroughly.

Speaking of the year 1984, Philip K. Dick forecasted that "the United States will perfect a

system by which hydrogen will serve as a fuel source, eliminating the need for oil.”¹

Interestingly, hydrogen has become a fuel source, yet it has not replaced oil. The other predictions by Philip K. Dick appear to be more precise. For example, the writer believed that, by 1985, a dramatic nuclear accident would occur in one of the Cold War superpowers. The forecast was almost true: in 1986, the catastrophic accident at the Chernobyl (USSR) nuclear station happened. The writer was also convinced that nuclear power plants would all be shut down after the accident, yet hundreds of nuclear plants continue to work. Another interesting prediction refers to the use of computers. Philip K. Dick believed that, by 1995, average citizens would become information-processing experts due to the advanced use of computers. Undoubtedly, the forecast can be considered as an accurate one.

To comprehensively understand the relevance of Philip K. Dick's forecasts, comparing them with the ones by Arthur Clarke might be helpful. Arthur Clarke was a British science fiction author working mainly with the themes of space and human contact with extraterrestrial beings. Most people associate him primarily with his cooperation with Stanley Kubrick while producing *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Arthur Clarke was among the first to propose the idea of using geostationary orbits to operate communication satellites. The concept was brought to life in 1964 when the first satellite was set out in orbit. Today, the life of modern civilization cannot be imagined without the use of meteorological, communication, and ground observation satellites. This notion may serve as an explicit illustration showing the way science fiction writing can impact the development of science.

Undoubtedly, not all of Clarke's predictions have become a reality. For instance, the writer believed that in the near future it would be possible to use the human brain as a backup

¹Philip K. Dick and Lawrence Sutin, *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

computer. Until recently, the idea has become far from practical realization. If to compare Clarke's predictions with the ones by Philip K. Dick, it might appear that the latter were more accurate, as the number of Dick's true predictions is higher. At the same time, it could also be argued that Clarke's predictions were bolder, as they related mostly to human activities in space. In other words, Clarke made less accurate predictions, yet those that were brought to life, from the very beginning, seemed to be substantially less 'realistic' compared to the ones by Philip K. Dick.

Isaac Asimov's biography is only partially similar to Philip K. Dick's and Arthur Clarke's. The major difference stems from the fact that Asimov was also a professional scientist. In 1964, the World Fair took place in New York, inspiring Isaac Asimov to write his *Visit to the World's Fair of 2014*, in which he outlined predictions regarding the world's appearance in fifty years. Some of Asimov's forecasts have turned out to be remarkably realistic, while others still appear to be rather fantastic. For example, Asimov argued that, by 2014, "electroluminescent panels will be in common use."² Until recently, the mass use of such panels remains limited. At the same time, the vast majority of other Asimov's forecasts have turned out to be substantially more realistic. For example, modern-day kitchens can prepare "automeals" under the specifications set by users.

Asimov has also predicted the application of 3D technology in cinema along with the emergence of large solar-power plants. Interestingly, Asimov was also close in predicting the global challenges that humanity would face by 2014. For instance, the writer was right in stating that overpopulation would become a serious problem for the international community. Asimov has also nearly predicted the overall number of the world's population at the beginning of the

²Isaac Asimov, "Visit to the World's Fair of 2014," *The New York Times* August 16, 1964, accessed August 13, 2018, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/23/lifetimes/asi-v-fair.html>.

twenty-first century. The author's presumption that the human race will continue to withdraw from nature also turned out to be true. Subsequently, comparing Asimov's predictions with the ones by Philip K. Dick and Arthur Clarke, it might be concluded that, in general, they were more accurate. It appears that Asimov's background as a scientist should be considered as the major factor underlying the accuracy of his predictions.

To sum up, these are often the ideas expressed by science fiction authors that have become a reality rather than empirically justified reports by scientists. A large number of futuristic ideas initially expressed by Philip K. Dick, Arthur Clarke, and Isaac Asimov have eventually become a part of modern life. Interestingly, a more thorough look at the authors' predictions indicates that Isaac Asimov was, in many cases, more accurate compared to his colleagues. Having an academic background, Asimov managed to combine the principles of science with a purely artistic imagination.

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