

THE SCIENCE FICTION ADDICTION

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WHY SCI-FI MOVIES AREN'T AS FAR FROM REALITY AS YOU THINK

It seems preposterous in the whimsical, wireless world of today, but in 1977 cinema's greatest visioners came together and decided the pinnacle of robotic technology in the future would be a motorized trash can.

Boy that sure feels like a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, doesn't it?

To be fair, R2-D2 has lingered on steadfastly through the decades as one of pop culture's greatest creations, but on a purely technological standpoint the loveable little hunk of junk is starting to look a little dated.

Check the specs:

Short, portly body frame; cruising speed like it's perpetually slogged down in bantha fodder; complete lack of peripheral vision or angular mobility; spunky, borderline reckless demeanor that often gets it into troublesome situations it's not equipped to get out of.

It's less a groundbreaking scientific achievement and more a mechanical version of Danny DeVito after an all-night binge at Paddy's Pub.

When "Star Wars" creator George Lucas dreamt up Artoo, it was meant to exist in an impossible world full of space magic and swords of blinding, colored light. But, incredibly, just over three decades later, the rough draft of his famed astromech droid actually exists in reality — at least in the most rudimentary sense. They're called Roombas and they clean the lint from under your couch. Not exactly what old Georgie boy had in mind.

It just goes to show you how fast times can change. Like a streamlined vessel hurtling through the stars (the *Millennium Falcon*, perhaps?) we constantly push forward, not by small increments, but by leaps and bounds.

One of the easiest barometers of technological growth is, of course, the cell phone. We've gone from brick-sized behemoths to razor-thin flips to all-in-one smart phones in the time it took for pastels and crotch-sagging parachute pants to go out of fashion and then (tragically) come back in again.

Now that's progress.

But if you want another example of how far we've come, then why not look at the silver screen? Movies, oftentimes, are the litmus test for mankind's imagination, anyways. They show us what *might* be possible one day, if we just think hard enough.

Go back and look at some of the great sci-fi flicks of yesteryear — "Star Wars," "2001: A Space Odyssey," "Metropolis" — and you'll see "futuristic" technologies and ideologies that are rampantly available in present culture.

Dig a bit deeper into cinematic history (to the two-colored time of 1902, to be precise) and you'll find a quaint, little French film called "Le Voyage dans la Lune" about a band of astronomers who fly a rocket-propelled capsule to the Moon. The plot of the film was deemed sensationalized nonsense back then, but just over 50 years later two lads named Neil

and Buzz proved the "cosmic fantasy" to be wholly prophetic.

A much more recent film called "Serenity" (the move adaptation of FOX's cult hit "Firefly" series, directed by Joss Whedon of "Avengers" fame, for those of you who have never heard of the marginally released 2005 flick) had one of the most hilariously obvious gadgetry precog-

nitions. In it, the main character watches video footage in perfect clarity on a handheld, square-shaped waif. Five years later — yup, you guessed it — Apple gave us the iPad.

So while it took half a century for technology to catch up to the boundless genius of George Méliès, it took only *half a decade* to outpace the man who once gave stage directions to the Incredible Hulk.

The summation of these remarkable findings is thusly: We live in a world where imagination has crashed head on into practicality and exploded into thousands of remarkable technological achievements. The 1970s dreamt of a tech savvy time of fully automated robotic interfaces and near-sentient A.I.

Folks, we're living in it.

Over in the land of gears — where "PTE" has a permanent timeshare — there is a recent technology called random bin picking in which robots can scoop and sort loosely placed objects within a container. These robots are not remote-controlled by a human, mind you; the robots actually *see* the items with advanced sensors and adjust to their locations on the fly.

Decades ago, movie critics would have scoffed at such a fanciful idea and plunged both their thumbs to the ground in a seething act of disapproval. Today, such robots are living, breathing pieces of society's everyday operations.

And if cinema really is a blueprint for the world of tomorrow, just think about the marvelous muses our future selves have access to: "Avatar," "Inception," "District 9" — heck, if we get even *one* outrageous gizmo from the Marvel franchise we can all die with Thor-sized smiles on our faces.

We have caught up to the movies of yesteryear, make no bones about it. The only question is: When will we catch up to the movies of today? **PTE**

