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Converging Technologies in Science Fiction and Science Writing: M.A. Research Seminar

Abstract

Since the late 1980s, the public perception of the risks that accompany great scientific inventions and human actions in general, has changed significantly. One decade into the twenty-first century, the anticipation of catastrophic events increasingly shapes human decision-making processes. Many scholars, among them the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, have only recently contributed to the developing discourse on risk and its shaping power on humans. Beck envisions the whole world as ‘at risk’ and coins the term “risk society” in order to characterize the attitude towards risk in modern societies.

In an age of converging technologies, the most prominent risks are technological risks. They have consequently also been a highly attractive topic for contemporary science fiction authors. In their works, risks are turned into narratives, and thereby, become more concrete to the audience. Science fiction always deals with risk in the context of an individual experience, which makes risk in general more tangible for the reader. The question is now: how exactly is risk narrativized in a (literary) text?

Michael Crichton’s Prey (2002), for example, explores the negative effects of converging technologies by ‘documenting’ Jack Foreman’s fight against self-improving nano particles which threaten to destroy mankind. The protagonist’s perception of risk is mainly established through his visual perception, which is mediated by content, language and focalization. The central question of this research project is: how do the changes of focalization in Michael Crichton’s Prey contribute to the (visual) perception of converging technologies as risk technologies?

Theory & Method

“[R]isk does not mean catastrophe. Risk means the anticipation of catastrophe” (Beck 2006, 323)

As Ulrich Beck further claims, the anticipation of threatening events can only be mediated through visualization. Based on that, the aim is to show how a science fiction novel like Michael Crichton’s Prey is able to ‘visualize’ the risks of converging technologies. In order to do that, the project identifies “acts of looking” and illustrates the narrative situation in the novel. Concisely said, the project demonstrates how the shift in the “narrated perception” is done and which influence it has on the (implied reader’s) perception of risk.

Theories and concepts used for analysis:

• Understanding of risk by Ulrich Beck
• Model of focalization by Gérard Genette
• Concept of nanovision by Colin Milburn

Analysis

Shift of Focalization

Michael Crichton uses an autodiegetic narrator who tells the story ‘through the eyes’ of a story-internal focalizer, namely Jack Foreman. This “internal focalization” limits the information to the focalizer’s “perception, cognition, and thought” (Jahn 86), which are presented here through explicit perception indicators, such as “I saw” or “I watched”. Additionally, however, the point of perceptual origin in Prey hovers between the “experiencing I” (the current, remembering self) and the “narrating I” (the past self), which are separated in time and space but linked through identity (see figure 2). The shift of focalization in Crichton’s Prey occurs only in the prologue, in the “Desert” section, and in the last chapter (see text passages above). The prologue and the last chapter already function as a framing of the story since they are the only chapters written in present tense. Both, this framing and the shifts of focalization, create an atmosphere of risk by anticipating future catastrophes yet to happen in the course of the novel. Therefore, it can be said that Prey follows a temporal structure of anticipation.

Visual Perception

Moreover, Michael Crichton’s narrative strategy can be linked to Colin Milburn’s concept of nanovision. Milburn defines ‘nanovision’ as "a way of seeing that lyzes the membrane between the technological present and the nanotechnological future" (Milburn 13). In Prey, Crichton tries to look beyond Singularity (see figure 1) and exposes the reader to the possible (catastrophic) outcomes of a Posthuman future. The author further plays with the dichotomy of “seeing” and “not-seeing” when, for example, the protagonist is blinded by the wild nanoworm. Based on Milburn’s findings, Michael Crichton’s vision of nanotechnology can be identified as the vision of such technology as a self-imposed threat to humankind with a possible catastrophic outcome.

Conclusion

“There are many people, including myself, who are quite queasy about the consequences of this technology for the future. We are talking about changing so many things that the risk of society handling it poorly through the lack of preparation is very large.” (K. Eric Dresler, qtd. in Crichton xv)

The analysis of the narrative structure in Michael Crichton’s Prey illustrates how the perception of risk can be greatly influenced by means of who sees and perceives. The interplay of the two perspectives of the “narrating I” and the “experiencing I” visualizes risk in the text by anticipating catastrophic outcomes. This negative vision of converging technologies in the future is Michael Crichton’s contribution to ‘nanovision’ and a possible insight into what comes after Singularity.

As the author already establishes in his introduction to Prey, the novel is exactly about this difficulty of anticipating consequences. Staging nano-technology as a risk technology, in turn, influences the public opinion about these technologies and further contributes to a risk society’ in Beck’s terms.

References

Primary Text

Secondary Texts

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