

Adapting to the future – using science-fiction movie plots

By Alex Fergnani

IN the 2017 movie *Downsizing*, people are shrunk to a height of about 15cm in order to reduce over-population and global warming. Such drastic scenarios envisioned in science-fiction movies can actually form part of an organisation's toolkit in adapting to the future.

The reason why organisations are every so often caught unprepared by crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic is not just because they did not prepare for contingencies.

More profoundly, it is because they have difficulty thinking about how crises of the future may look like. Luckily, "un-thinkable, yet plausible" are distinct traits of science fiction, making this genre a source of entertainment, and also a useful instrument for organisational planning.

Companies such as Microsoft, Nike and Boeing have already been using science fiction to prepare for, and possibly shape the future. Microsoft even produced its own visionary stories on quantum computing and machine learning, written by science-fiction authors who visited its research labs.

Delving further into the science-fiction genre, my co-author, Associate Professor Song Zhaoli and I, at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School, studied a sample of 140 science-fiction films. We looked for recurring patterns of change in all the major science-fiction movies through the history of cinema, such as *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner* and *Mad Max*.

From these "raw materials", we developed six macro-scenarios of the future (or "scenario archetypes"), ranging from a decadent society, as often portrayed by the cyberpunk genre in cinema, to a tightly controlled world following a global catastrophe, and even to a world where human beings are dominated by other species.

SIX ARCHETYPES

The common feature of these archetypes is that they all present, in six different forms, crises of our society. As they portray conditions for the future of mankind at large, organisations can adapt them as "ready-to-use tokens" to particular industrial contexts. For example, in an ongoing collaboration with the University of Notre Dame in Indiana in the United States, the archetypes have been used to imagine disruptive futures of work in South Bend, the city where the university is located.

The archetypes were moulded after local concerns, which are how manufacturing and workers' skill sets could pan out in the future. Local grassroots leaders, practitioners and change agents in the private sector and academia are testing their strategies in the scenarios, to arrive at a strategic direction that is robust under all critical stress points. Projects like this can connect with the exigencies of local communities to develop capabilities for critical, disruptive events.

Organisations can use science fiction more systematically to find a flexible yet robust strategic direction to face an increasingly disruptive future, and thus reconfigure their capabilities accordingly. But this is only if science fiction starts to be considered as part of the common organisational planning toolkit.

The movie credits are rolling. It is time for work to be done.

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