

Nanomanifestos – Nanotech in the Imagination

Repeatedly, science inspires sci-fi with whole new technological phantasy frontiers. Through the nineties, for instance, a wave of sci-fi and cyber punk novels arrived proclaiming the arrival of the 'nan' revolution, and then, as quickly as it arrived the wave was gone. Here we revisit some of the 'nanofestoes' and ask how representative is this dynamic between techno-science and literary sub-cultures?

Books discussed in this essay: *Nanoculture: implications of the new technoscience*, edited by N. Katherine Hayles, Intellect; *The Diamond Age* by Neal Stephenson, Viking 1995; *Prey* by Michael Crichton, HarperCollins 2002; *The Nanotech Quartet* by Kathleen Goonan, published in a series of four books from 1994 up to 2002.

Across the border, among the technophilic believers the nan-scene has undoubtedly moved on. For a while nanotechnology – the science and technology of engineering at the molecular level – was the next big thing. But a new set of avant-tech options have moved in for the technophiliacs to choose from, and the nan-scene has gone quiet. Since the beginning of the decade, at a cultural level, the attention of science's futurists has been scattering elsewhere; synthetic biology, the newest iterations of GM technology, and human cloning, these seem today more ominously pressing, that it is possible to imagine that the previous unavoidable sense of nanotechnology's future dream is one whose day is already gone. Who, these days, stops to wonder if we are experiencing, as nanotechnology's most prodigious booster, Eric Drexler suggested in 1987 we would be, when he announced 'the coming era of nanotechnology.' Are we still interested, or do our wandering attentions now demote that era to one of yet another yesteryear dream?

Yet, of course, nanotechnology rolls on. A part of the biotech empire, businesses have integrated nanotechnology into a billion dollar global market. Heavily research dependent, universities, continue to open labs, departments and even whole institutes with research agendas dedicated to the nano level. While physics, chemistry and even mycology departments are at risk of closing due to lack of student take-up, in the nanosphere, research and development proliferates. In 2008 the Nobel Prize included its first nanotech section award.

For those engaged with science and technology's cultural dimension, the fact that this nascent technoscience of the invisible provided a landscape for sci-fi writers, as well as cropping up in general futurist commentary and entering early twenty-first lexicons in the shape of 'nanopods', ought to tell us something about



THE DIAMOND AGE

NEAL STEPHENSON

Author of Snow Crash