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SCIENCE FICTION AND
THE FUTURE

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In February of 1985 the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry invited me to participate on a panel, Science Fiction and the Future, and the following was my prepared statement for that discussion.

We know where the future is. It's in front of us. Right? It lies before us—a great future lies before us—we stride forward confidently into it, every commencement, every election year. And we know where the past is. Behind us, right? So that we have to turn around to see it, and that interrupts our progress ever forward into the future, so we don't really much like to do it.

It seems that the Quechua-speaking peoples of the Andes see all this rather differently. They figure that because the past is what you know, you can see it—it's in front of you, under your nose. This is a mode of perception rather than action, of awareness rather than progress. Since they're quite as logical as we are, they say that the future lies behind—behind your back, over your shoulder. The future is what you *can't* see, unless you turn around and kind of snatch a glimpse. And then sometimes you wish you hadn't, because you've glimpsed what's sneaking up on you from behind. . . . So, as we drag the Andean peoples into our world of progress, pollution, soap operas, and satellites, they are coming backwards—looking over their shoulders to find out where they're going.

I find this an intelligent and appropriate attitude. At least it reminds us that our talk about "going forward into the future" is a

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metaphor, a piece of mythic thinking taken literally, perhaps even a bluff, based on our macho fear of ever being inactive, receptive, open, quiet, still. Our unquiet clocks make us think that we make time, that we control it. We plug in the timer and make time happen. But in fact the future comes, or is there, whether we rush forward to meet it in supersonic jets with nuclear warheads, or sit on a peak and watch the llamas graze. Morning comes whether you set the alarm or not.

The future is not mere space. This is where I part company with a whole variety of science fiction, the imperialistic kind, as seen in all the Space Wars and Star Wars novels and films and the whole branch of sf that reduces technology to hi-tech. In such fictions, space and the future are synonymous: they are a place we are going to get to, invade, colonize, exploit, and suburbanize.

If we do "get to" space, it's not unlikely that that's how we'll behave there. It is possible that we will "conquer" space. But it is not possible that we will "conquer" the future, because there is no way we can get there. The future is the part of the spacetime continuum from which—in the body and in ordinary states of consciousness—we are excluded. We can't even see it. Except for little glimpses over the shoulder.

When we look at what we can't see, what we do see is the stuff inside our heads. Our thoughts and our dreams, the good ones and the bad ones. And it seems to me that when science fiction is really doing its job that's exactly what it's dealing with. Not "the future." It's when we confuse our dreams and ideas with the non-dream world that we're in trouble, when we think the future is a place we own. Then we succumb to wishful thinking and escapism, and our science fiction gets megalomania and thinks that instead of being fiction it's prediction, and the Pentagon and the White House begin to *believe* it, and we get True Believers conquering the future by means of SDI.

As a science-fiction writer I personally prefer to stand still for long periods, like the Quechua, and look at what is, in fact, in front of me: the earth; my fellow beings on it; and the stars.