

# Science, Lies and Videotape

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In 1959 the scientist and novelist C.P. Snow gave a lecture in which he stated that, in the Britain of the time, two cultures existed. One culture was that of the scientists and technologists, the other was that of the 'literary' establishment. His point was that these two cultures did not communicate with each other. His concern was that a snobbish attitude towards science and scientists downgraded science and technology and might affect Britain's industrial and economic prospects.

C.P. Snow's short essay '*On the Two Cultures*' sparked a debate that has been grumbling on ever since. Whether or not what Snow said was correct, it must be remembered that he was talking about 'high' culture. He was concerned with the feelings of professors of English Literature. He wasn't talking about how science had affected everyday culture.

## Science in popular culture

It is very easy to find examples of science in books, art, film, and music in all forms. Mary Shelley's '*Frankenstein*' wouldn't have been much of a story without the idealistic Viktor Frankenstein's use (or misuse) of science to re-animate the dead. The film '*The Matrix*' would be pretty dull were it not for the possibility that technology could be used to give us the vision of life when, in 'reality', we are human batteries suspended in vats full of slimy stuff with implanted leads tangling out of our bodies. And then, of course, there is science fiction. Can there ever be the Galactic Federation that the '*Star Wars*' films describe? A little simple physics would suggest not – because it would take aeons to move from one star system to the next. Simple logic supports this view – if such a federation exists why has Earth not been overrun by Jedi Knights and strange-looking beings with three heads? '*Star Trek*' throws up the same problems. How does the 'Enterprise' communicate instantaneously with her sister ships across light years of space? It can't be done.

Of course, an aficionado of Star Trek will simply state that just because humanity lacks the technology doesn't mean that 'it can't be done' but simply that '*we* can't do it'. Most physicists would answer 'no really, it cannot be achieved – it breaks the laws of nature'.

## Singing about science

Closer to home, and back in the twenty-first century, science pops up in songs all the time. There are, thankfully, very few songs about Science, and most of those are deeply ironic like Monty Python's '*Amazing and Expanding Universe*' from '*Life of Brian*'. It is much more common to find writers using ideas from science as metaphors or just using the jargon of science because it fits in with the feel of the song. So the song '*Stars*' from Simply Red is unlikely to tell you much about how stars work and '*Einstein-A-Go-Go*' by Landscape will not inform you about the life of the great physicist. But the lyrics still use science. Why writers sometimes choose to use scientific ideas as metaphors is an interesting question. Sometimes this can be ironic, sometimes they are just used because the words sound nice.



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## Science causing change

Artists and writers have worried about new technologies and scientific theories since the time of Homer. Science has been the cause of many changes in human history and change is frightening. It would be catastrophic if changes ever outstrip society's ability to adapt the consequences. This concern is expressed in many fictions in print and on film. Any novel that describes a nightmare future, a dystopia, has a misuse of science and technology at its core. This is true of *'The Matrix'* and *'Gattaca'* and *'1984'* and *'Brave New World'* and *'The Time Machine'*. The list goes on. It is a little harder to find fiction that suggests scientific advance may benefit humanity. Why is this?

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## What you need to do:

Choose an area of the Arts that most interests you and tease out areas where ideas from science are used.

A few examples:

- Science as metaphor in songs.
- Science as represented in films (or a film).
- Science in plays.
- Science in novels that are not 'science fiction'.
- Science in serious music.

There are many, many more.

To produce an interesting piece of work you will need to tackle the science head-on. This may mean talking to friends who are studying science or asking teachers or lecturers. Once you have an idea of what the science is you can see how it has been used in the creative process.

You can present your findings in a number of ways. If you are a musician you could compose a piece of music that represents some aspect of the scientific endeavour. This could be a nuclear chain reaction or the moment an egg is fertilised *in vitro*. If you are interested in creative writing you could use this as an opportunity to base a work around a technological development.

Alternatively, you could present your findings as a poster, website or powerpoint presentation.

So, here is a possible structure to the work:

- Decide on the area you are most interested in – the theme is Science and Popular Culture so you have a pretty wide choice. The first decision is whether to create something original or be a 'critic' of the works of others. Having sorted that out you need to research the science and the medium. For instance, if you choose film you must get to know the films you choose pretty intimately as well as trying to understand the science they use. If you choose to create something yourself then the need to understand the science becomes more pressing. You can't expect others to understand how science has affected the area of culture you are considering if you don't understand the science yourself!
- Research the subject (and take detailed notes). Bookmark interesting websites and photocopy useful articles.
- Work through your research so your ideas come out clearly.
- Produce a rough draft of your ideas.
- Ask your friends/parents/teachers what they think of your draft (and this can be a piece of music or an artwork, remember).
- Produce the final version.

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## **Resources which might help you:**

Much of the resource material will come from the students themselves, as the choice of subject matter will be influenced by their own interests.