

BRUCE STERLING INTERVIEW

In *Tomorrow Now*, you travel through Shakespeare's "seven stages of man" – from *As You Like It* – as a way of navigating the next fifty years. Why?

Tomorrow Now is a book about nearly everything. But you can't simply write a book about every aspect of the future because it's like writing a book about every aspect of the present. So the framework I decided to use was the human body. This book is very body-centric and I try to make human flesh and a human sensorium into a sort of key that opens the future. That's our real encounter with the future; it's not these abstract notions of drivers or changes, but the fact that time flows through your body and you can't really live unless you're moving into the future at the rate of one second per second.

You say genetic engineering is in its infancy. How is this new baby, so to speak, shaking up our global household?

Genetic engineering is barely getting anywhere and it's already subject to a great deal of controversy. If you look at what genetic engineering really does, as opposed to the things that it gets headlines for, it seems likely that it's going to get as close to the DNA as it can and as far away from the products of DNA as it can. The sorts of images we have of genetic engineering are the Frankenstein baby, Dolly the clone, and weird, monstrous, animals. But when you look at what DNA is good for, it doesn't make sense to put it into humans or animals. It takes too long. DNA moves fast and the best way to carry it is in a microorganism. Let's say you decide to create a super-baby next month

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using whatever techniques you found in Craig Venter's DNA lab. By the time this super-baby is an adult in the year 2024, there will have been another 20 years of further advancement in the field. So why would you make a baby with today's technology knowing it's going to be twenty years out of date when it's grown up and can actually vote?

Moving on to The Soldier now, can you explain the stylistic differences between the military and the paramilitary?

It's taking people a surprising amount of time to get their head around the idea that the bipolar world of communist/capitalist confrontation is over and we now have a confrontation between New World Order and New World Disorder. In other words, people don't get it that lawless narco-terrorism actually makes a lot of money and is a newfangled kind of mountain banditry. I mean, terrorism is not terror. When you're talking about a war on terror, that's like a war on technique. It's like having a war on Blitzkrieg when the Germans would suddenly come over the Belgian border in tanks. What we really have is a serious disorder problem. We've got breakdowns in the Westphalian nation-state system because governments just can't control these huge living streams of illicit revenue from narcotics, arms smuggling, human smuggling and so forth. It's not too hard for the U.S. to bomb anything from orbit. We can send over a B1 bomber from the heartland of the United States and have it literally circumnavigate the planet and drop munitions with absolute precision anywhere. But it turns out to be extremely difficult for the U.S. to walk block to block with military police trying to enforce order on people who really don't want any aliens around. So if you're in Serbia you're in big trouble – sort of – if the U.S. decides to take it upon itself to smash your government. They can smash all the government buildings and knock down the bridges and telecom centers, and so you

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have a hard time getting around. But if you're Somalia and there's nothing left to smash, the U.S. has got a problem. The secret of the struggle between the New World Order and the New World Disorder is that they feed on one another. It's our own appetite for destruction that underwrites this warlord activity.

Do you see us rising out of a constant state of global warfare?

If I had my druthers between two paranoid superpowers with vast numbers of missiles pointing at one another prepared for a nuclear Armageddon at the drop of a hat and the warlord stuff, it is absolutely a much better military scenario. You know, only 3,000 people died in 9/11. Compare that to WWI or WWII, where it was a nothing deal to have that many people die in a morning, month after month, year after year. Trench warfare of WWI was enormous mechanized slaughter. 9/11 was bad, let's not kid around, but it was about as bad as Srebrenica. In the longer term, how many people could even spell Srebrenica? I mean, the political implications of it might be horrible, but we're doing that to ourselves. There's really not that much reason to flinch over the loss of two buildings in a large city when you compare it to what happened to Moscow or Stalingrad or the siege of Berlin or the occupation of Paris. Those were bad scenes! A spectacular terrorist theatre event like 9/11 is, quite frankly, mostly media hype. That's what it was for. It was there to look spectacular.

In the context of recent events and Turkey's longstanding desire to join the EU, what do you predict?

The whole Moslem world is in really deep trouble in the 21st century; they're just having a real hard time getting a grip. You can see it from satellite photos. Compare a picture of

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India at night to Pakistan at night and you can see who took the baton and ran with it. But if there's a solution for the problems of the Moslem world, I think it'll probably come out of a place like Turkey. And it may not look like anything we expect. But they're a surprisingly resilient and inventive and really cheerful people and I have high hopes for them. I've spent a lot of time looking at what they're doing and I think they're great trendsetters.

You say oil is the most dangerous contraband in the world. How will things change as we work towards solving our energy challenge and grow out of our oil dependency?

This remains to be seen. Oil people are running the United States right now and they don't particularly want to grow out of this energy challenge. They make noises about a hydrogen economy, but if you look at the fine print they want to make hydrogen from coal. The fossil fuel industry is the biggest industry in the world and it really doesn't want to give up its revenue stream anymore than, say, the recording industry of America wants to give up its revenue stream just because people have invented a new way to copy music.

The difficulty with oil is that it's fungible. You can dig it out of the ground and you can transport it. Practically everywhere there's oil there is massive human suffering now. The curse of oil is severe. Venezuela has problems. Nigeria has problems. Saudi Arabia, Central Asia, Iran, Iraq. Pretty much anywhere there's a wellhead there's a bad scene economically and politically. The Chechnyan war would have been over a long time ago if it weren't for the oil. The Iraqi war would not have lasted as long as it had if the U.S. wasn't paying for oil with one hand while it blew stuff up with the other. People have been mining this stuff for a long time and the process of corruption has become

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very intense.

When you look back on what you wrote about the next fifty years, are you optimistic?

I think the best attitude for a serious futurist to have is not pessimism or optimism, but just a deep sense of engagement. It has to mean something to you. You have to find aspects of it that can really compel you. And you shouldn't get hung up on whether it's "good" or "bad" because those qualities can change their coloration quite rapidly as time continues to pass.

Bruce Sterling is a futurist, journalist, critic and prolific author. His most recent book is *Tomorrow Now: Imagining the Next Fifty Years*. (www.well.com/conf/mirrorshades)