

Interview with Professor Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay

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ABSTRACT

As science fiction education gains prominence globally, foundational questions regarding whose futures and whose narratives are being prioritized remain critical. This interview with Professor Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay from the University of Oslo explores the intersection of contemporary speculative fiction, future literacy, and decolonial pedagogy. Professor Chattopadhyay discusses how interdisciplinary knowledge—spanning interactive media, game studies, climate content, and perspectives from the Global South—can break down Eurocentric technological utopias/dystopias. By emphasizing planetary interconnectedness and local storytelling traditions, this dialogue offers actionable insights for K-12 educators aiming to cultivate global citizenship, critical future-building capacities, and cross-cultural empathy among youth.

Keywords

Science Fiction Education; Futures Literacy; Interactive Media; Decolonization; Global South

1. PROFILE OF THE INTERVIEWEE

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay: Professor at the University of Oslo, specialist in contemporary speculative fiction and science fiction studies, Principal Investigator of European Research Council (ERC) projects, and founder of the Holodeck Games and New Media Lab in the Department of Culture, Religion, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. With decades of dedication to science fiction studies, he has led multiple projects funded by the European Union and the Norwegian Research Council, earning international accolades including the World Fantasy Award. His research spans science fiction, futures studies, climate fiction, film and television, visual arts, and game studies. Professor Chattopadhyay remains committed to bringing diverse visions of the future into public discourse and policy practice.

2. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

As science fiction education gains global prominence, we often focus on technological imagination and literary creation while overlooking a fundamental question: Whose future? Whose science fiction? Professor Chattopadhyay's research challenges the Western-centric discourse of science fiction from an anti-colonial perspective, opening new dimensions for science fiction education. In this issue, we invite Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, whose cross-media, global research perspective has deepened science fiction studies and popularization for years. Combining theoretical depth with practical experience, he actively puts the concept of diverse futures into practice. This interview will explore how science fiction education can cultivate teenagers' global vision, cross-cultural understanding, and future literacy, offering cutting-edge insights from Northern Europe for domestic educators.

3. INTERVIEW

3.1 Core Values: From “Whose Future?” to “A Shared Future”

MH: Your long-term research focuses on contemporary future fiction and science fiction from a technological perspective, while also delving into future studies and future literacy. Adolescents are at a critical stage in forming their values and thought patterns. How do you suggest guiding them to recognize that the “future” is not singular? How can we help them transcend the dominant technological utopian/dystopian frameworks prevalent in mainstream science fiction?

BC: First of all, thank you so much for inviting me to this discussion.

I think adolescents by and large are quite flexible thinkers, and inherently recognize plurality and multiplicity. The plurality of futures seems obvious when one says it, but futures are forced to be singular when societal infrastructures are conditioned towards singular visions, for instance, that there is a common standard of progress that we all must aspire to, that there is only one right way to organize society and so on. I think where the change needs to happen is in the mindsets of the adults who produce the materials (or as some like to call it, “content”) that younger people consume, and the technologies (whether digital or physical) through which they consume it.

I think the second part of your question is just as important. These are just my thoughts on the matter, but I think utopian and dystopian frameworks are not only too constricted, they are also, frankly speaking, quite boring. What the privileged and the elite think of as dystopic might be a luxury to the marginalized in many parts of the world. We have to turn such simple frameworks on their head, and focus instead on the possibilities that exist in the everyday lives of everyday people.

Other than artists and SF writers, I think a lot of highly creative content makers on platforms such as TikTok are already doing interesting, often brilliant, experiments splicing everyday low-tech lives with high-tech futuristic materials. But I think a further criticality – a space to question the futuristic - is needed to be able to think outside such narrow frameworks. We don't just need futures; we need better futures.

MH: Your multidisciplinary background spans literature, film, gaming, and climatology. How does this cross-disciplinary knowledge structure shape your understanding of science fiction? Beyond sparking imagination, what growth opportunities beyond mere “entertainment” and “knowledge supplementation” do you see for youth through exposure to sci-fi works (text, film, games, climate-related content)? How can sci-fi education help youth develop awareness and responsibility toward global issues like the climate crisis?

BC: SF is the ultimate multi- and interdisciplinary genre. I think my own background helps me feel the everyday relevance of SF across all domains, especially technology. But I grew up with SF, as a lot of people do, which means that we are lifelong fans of the genre.

Phenomena such as climate change are global, but felt quite differently in different parts of the world due to differences in their conditions. A country like the Netherlands, for instance, would be underwater if not for massive, costly infrastructure that keeps it protected from the North Sea. Other parts of the world may not have the wealth or resources to do the same, and climate change will irrevocably destroy such habitats. I think youth can develop sensitivity towards such issues on a global scale with their exposure to global science fiction, and come to a broader understanding of the planetary system. Then there is the question of learning: we can learn things – problems and solutions, both existing and not-yet – from other parts of the world that are experiencing such problems. A farmer in Germany suffering from the spectacle of sudden drought can learn water management techniques from a farmer in rural Indonesia who has suffered such problems numerous times before.

The CoFutures experiment was precisely to build creative platforms for such knowledge sharing. As we can see quite clearly in our current geopolitical reality, no part of the world can truly survive intact without another in an interconnected world system, and therefore, while we need to remain attuned and responsible to the local, our larger vision must be towards the global.

3.2 Media Expansion: From Textual Reading to Full-Sensory Experiences

MH: Beyond textual analysis, you delve into games, graphic novels, film, and visual arts, having founded Oslo University's Holodeck—a dedicated game studies lab. For youth, what unique advantages do interactive media like games offer in cultivating future-oriented thinking that traditional reading cannot replace? How should educators guide young people to engage critically with games?

BC: I think SF can be an easy way to help youth, and people generally, inhabit possible futures. Games, as well as mixed reality technologies, can help people sensorily experience or “feel” possible futures that reading or listening or watching movies cannot. I think each medium has its advantages, and I think as educators, we should absolutely be open to engaging with games and interactive media.

I think for educators, especially those not into gaming as such, an easy way would be to work with low-tech board games. There are plenty of games that develop facilities of storytelling with a climate slant, for instance “Fix the World”, that can be used to develop creative thinking in the classroom with a science fiction twist. Co-op games have their own pluses. For more serious engagements, for instance with climate, games such as ECO can be used to demonstrate resource management principles. Alenda Y. Chang's *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games* (2019) has a whole list of games one can try out for environmental themes. The Games for Change movement is also a good starting point if one is interested in educational games. The Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University has a series on games called *Skill Tree*, which focuses on many interesting games, including indie games, that can be used in classrooms. I think multiplayer co-op games are particularly useful in pedagogical settings. MMOs require a lot of coordination and cooperation, which are great to learn from. VR and XR games offer other possibilities altogether, for instance for transmedial thinking, everyday gamification, accessibility etc.

Altogether, I think most games these days have a lot of specific messaging that is useful in pedagogical contexts. Even older games, which do not require high-tech machines to run, can also be just as useful. Hideo Kojima's classic *Metal Gear* series is a stealth action game with very direct anti-war messaging. The *Bioshock* series mocks unhinged capitalism and individualism. *System Shock* (recently remade) and a bunch of 90s games focus on rogue AIs. All of these are concerns of the past as much as the future, and have much to teach us. I could go on. It might be more interesting to think of games as a tool rather than just a medium.

MH: The documentary you produced, *Kalpavigyan: A Speculative Journey*, is the world's first documentary focusing on Indian-Bangla science fiction, screened at multiple international film festivals. As an intuitive and vivid medium, documentaries are highly suited for young audiences. What role do you believe science fiction documentaries can play in youth science fiction education? Do you have future plans to create science fiction documentaries or related educational resources for young people?

BC: Most SF documentaries have focused on specific concepts and ideas, or focused on specific authors, but they have rarely focused on the production of such futures outside the Anglophone or European world. At CoFutures, we use documentaries to help people understand that futures are everywhere, and they have always been here, across different cultures and communities. I think we need to tell stories differently just as much as we need to tell different stories. Documentaries are a great way to do both. *Kalpavigyan* explores the history of Bangla language science fiction in India, showing a continuity over two centuries that revises the metanarratives of what we think we know of science fiction and its history generally, and challenges the singular view of SF. But it also shows how it is a history shared between cultures, and how different traditions of science fiction cross-pollinate each other. We need a broader understanding of the world than any one culture can provide.

At CoFutures, we are already working on several other documentaries: there is the sequel to *Kalpavigyan* focusing on contemporary Anglophone SF from India, a documentary on contemporary Chinese SF authors, and a documentary on contemporary Latin American authors, with a special focus on Brazil.

3.3 Global Perspective: From Local Experience to Global Citizenship

MH: As co-founder of “Theory from the Margins”—a research collective now boasting over 16,000 global members and followers—you champion integrating imaginations from the Global South and other marginalized regions into academic mainstreams. When cultivating youth's sci-fi literacy, how can we help them build cultural confidence that embraces local traditions while engaging with diverse global narratives of the future?

BC: Thank you for this question! I think the answer to this lies in developing the infrastructures of the imagination, which includes a wider exposure to the future-oriented traditions (SF is just one part of it) in one's own culture, including histories, literary and oral storytelling traditions, etc. On the one hand, and the development of local initiatives on the other, which includes dedicated coaching to develop the kinds of futures that resonate with the local context.

All cultures have interesting ways of thinking, inhabiting, and feeling “time.” The trick colonialism and American-European imperialism played on much of the world is burying such ways of thinking or making them less desirable, replacing them with the singularity of Euro-American progress as the gold standard to which all cultures must aspire to. Highlighting the work of scholars in building back these histories, or laying bare the structures that have sidelined these ways of thinking or made them less desirable, is part of what Theory from the Margins is about. You cannot be confident in your own cultural resources if you don't know they exist.

At the same time, one must acknowledge the risk of cultural chauvinism and isolationism, which is an insidious way in which cultural supremacy begins to piggyback on cultural rediscovery. One must be critical of cultural supremacy as well. There is no such thing as pure culture either, which does not borrow from things from elsewhere. We need to focus on the local, but without isolating the local from its embedding in global patterns and systems.

MH: You've held research positions in Norway, the US, the UK, and other countries, and taught global future workshops. Across diverse cultural contexts, what are the most common future imaginings among youth? Are there commonalities or stark differences in the fears and hopes about the future held by children from different nations?

BC: I think the common thread is that youth imagination is often colonized by the Hollywood spectacle of the future, whether that is the grand scale shiny techno-utopia or the dystopia. But as we just discussed, these are really quite narrow and constrictive. We need imagination that can fundamentally challenge and break apart such a spectacle.

I will give one example. We built an exhibition *Beyond Barcode* here in Oslo where we primarily worked with youth in developing scenarios for the future of Oslo. The whole process of exhibition design took two plus years. At the start of the process, the youth came with their latent images of the future, for instance, they wanted to build an underwater hotel in the near future in Oslo. Now this is a fantasy, a desire that many people might have. It is shiny and cozy. This is the Hollywood version, which takes a trope and just dumps it according to convenience.

We had to gently push back by showing that such hotels already exist, so there was nothing futuristic about it, and that such hotels were places where only the rich could afford to eat, the restaurants were booked for months etc. Slowly as the process evolved, the youth ended up designing not just a model for this hotel, but also everything around it—economic systems that supported everyone, food, energy, and transportation systems that could work with such an underwater setup. Ecologically sound design. From a simple desire, it became a revolutionary ideal of societal change and transformation.

We need to challenge what people already know, what they already think they know, and to turn a critical gaze towards that knowing. If we want a different world, a better world, then reproducing the spectacle (even where the spectacle is cozy or seems desirable) that brought us to the present horrors will simply not do.

3.4 Future Literacy: From Science Fiction Reading to Future Building

MH: You currently lead the “CoFutures Literacy” initiative, focusing on cultivating futures literacy. With rapid advancements in technologies like artificial intelligence profoundly shaping the growth environment for young people today, what do you consider the core components of “futures literacy” for 21st-century youth? How can science fiction education help young people not only ‘imagine’ the future but also develop the capability and courage to “actively participate in building” it?

BC: CoFutures Literacy is a different thing from futures literacy. CoFutures Literacy is a mindset. I began to develop CoFutures Literacy before I had heard of futures literacy. I think they can be combined in some contexts, but they are not reducible to each other.

Futures Literacy is something that can be taught in two-day workshops/labs, functioning as a top-down, vertical strategy for capacity building. UNESCO defines it as a skill/capacity that can be learned, and its programs can help people develop “capacities to anticipate, prepare for, and actively shape social transformations rather than just merely react to them.” I think futures literacy, as Riel Miller has developed it, is absolutely essential, and futures literacy and generally futures thinking should be made a broad part of the school curriculum. Students should be encouraged to consistently use futures thinking as part of their regular activities, including imagining the nature and impact of emerging technologies.

SF can also be called scenario fiction, and the scenarios that SF narratives build provide useful examples that can help teach people how to develop narrative competences in relation to what is not yet.

MH: With your extensive experience in curation, editing, and leading international projects, what is your most crucial practical advice for educators seeking to build a science fiction education ecosystem within schools or regions? Specifically, what insights can you share regarding resource integration and establishing sustainable mechanisms?

BC: I think relative financial stability, and general resource availability would be the first considerations. Our pathway to this has been through research grants, which are useful in a university context, but we are building resources that will be quite relevant for a long time to come. For schools, practical projects, or “learning by doing”, are perhaps the best way to go, and this is something I can already see happening, especially with generative AI, where students are developing their own sophisticated world models, storylines, and visions of possible futures. One problem with generative AI is that the training datasets already limit what one can do, and human imagination overall might be affected by the affordances of the medium, but humans are nothing if not creative. I think more structured courses on applied imagination offered at school levels will help, as will transdisciplinary competence.

A second, related consideration would be thinking more internationally, which is not always possible due to language constraints, and sometimes geopolitical constraints hinder such transnational collaborations as well.

China has a long history of SF, and as scholars such as Prof. Mingwei Song have shown, it is already far ahead of most countries in developing SF as an industry, and thus its presence in educational institutions is largely guaranteed due to the massive inflow of resources and a general cultural understanding of the value of SF. The focus is also already shifting from purely literary forms of SF to other media. At CoFutures, we commissioned and published the English translation of *The Wandering Earth Film Production Handbook* (co-edited by Regina Kanyu Wang, who is also a core CoFutures member), which offers non-Chinese-speaking communities a glimpse of the fascinating SF film industry developing in China. We also had a fantastic CoFutures workshop a couple of years ago with Chinese colleagues from different universities who visited our project in Oslo, including Prof. Wu Yan (who is also on your board). My understanding is that a lot is already being done to encourage SF thinking at all levels in China, which is really exciting.

MH: From the perspective of global science fiction research and education, what do you foresee as the future trends in youth science fiction education? What specific advice do you have for frontline science fiction educators (especially K - 12 teachers) to help them better implement science fiction education and spark young people's interest in science fiction and the future?

BC: I think, and I may be optimistic here, but science fiction and futures thinking will permeate every aspect of K-12 education in the next few years, especially with increasing global uncertainty around everything from the impact of emerging technologies to the spectre of climate change. Since I also foresee a steady erosion of the importance of universities within formalized teaching routines, at least degrees and research as we understand it now, I think it will be especially important to intensify earlier school-level education to give students the knowledge, tools, and the know-how to use those in the context of real-world challenges. Technology is progressing at a ridiculous rate, and what is true today will not be true tomorrow. Pretty much the only genre that is still at the edge of everything is science fiction, because it deals with more than technological change or societal change: science fiction even dreams of possibilities that are beyond the realm of science and physics as currently understood. I think futures thinking here, and science fiction, will be key in helping students not just deal with the scope and pace of change, but more importantly, imagine and work through alternative models for what is possible (economics, politics, and societies).

I think for teachers now the trick would be to educate themselves and inform themselves as much as possible, and then start introducing science fiction examples across the range of things that are taught, irrespective of discipline or subject. Human beings are generally good at using metaphors, and storytelling binds us all as a species. Since science fiction is also a method of thinking through things with storytelling and metaphor, it should be as normal and regular as education itself.