Asimov says sci-fi predicts reality, doesn't prove it

By David Koretz

Dr. Isaac Asimov, the scientist, wit, and author whose works include science fiction, limericks and medical texts, spoke Monday night to an enthusiastic full house at Krenge Auditorium.

Asimov, in his fourth appearance at MIT, attempted to demonstrate the ability of this century's science fiction writers to predict the future. "Science fiction is escape literature," he admitted, but he emphasized that "at its best, it's an escape to reality."

The former professor of biochemistry at Boston University detailed three examples of accurate prediction:

—The Man Who Awoke, by Lawrence Manning (1933), is the story of a man who, after three thousand years in suspended animation, awakens to find a primitive society. The reason: depletion of the world's natural resources by wasteful ancient generations. This work, Asimov asserted, was the first prediction of the energy crisis which surfaced in 1973.

—Asimov's first published story, "Trends!", which appeared in Astounding Science Fiction in 1939, was the first story which imagined public opposition to space flight and the only such story written before that opposition actually appeared in the late 1950's. His explanation of the failure of any other writer to suggest such a development was concise: "People are afraid of flying."

—A number of "atomic dooms" stories of the late 1930's such as Robert Heinlein's "Solution Unavailable" (1941), accurately anticipated the nuclear stalemate of the Cold War as a natural result of the then hypothetical construction of the then theoretical atomic bomb.

Unfortunately, Asimov's argument ignored the hundreds of outlandish and inaccurate predictions made in over four decades of science fiction writing. Nor did it address the question of whether the purpose of science fiction lies in the field of art or in social science.

Certainly the best writers use their imaginations to describe a variety of future worlds. Whether or not it is important that a few turn out to approximate future reality is one of the questions left unaddressed by Asimov's lecture.

In its essence, though, the lecture was much less an attempt to advance arguments than one to entertain students devoted to science and science fiction, and this is what Asimov does best.

For example, in commenting that nuclear weapons were a further illustration that "all history is a record of the conflict between competing stupidities," he paused to exclaim, "Good Lord, won't they go through an election, haven't they?" He noted the realization by American intelligence agencies that their classified research strongly resembled the content of science fiction pulp magazines; "Intelligence," he scoffed, "that's just a name given to spies to confuse the enemy."

Asimov, dividing the genre into gadget science fiction, adventure science fiction, and "science fiction," carefully admitted that writers are often more interested in their work if it brings in more money.

He quipped, "That's what's called artistic integrity."

Asimov discussed a wide range of topics, including electronic calculators ("To this day I don't know what's inside — maybe a very clever bug."), a well-known science writer ("The reason he never went to college was to keep his brain pure.") and women ("Some people have this notion that I treat women as sexual objects. Well, if I do, I'm willing to even it up. I'll allow women to treat me as a sexual object.")

Whether or not Asimov's arguments are convincing, or even plausible, he accomplished what he came to do. He entertained twelve hundred loyal fans for ninety minutes with nostalgic recollections, wry humor and an overall presence that is anything but dull. As much as the audience enjoyed his appearance, however, one can't help but feel that he enjoyed it most of all.

Commentary

Critic suggests students don't value art

By Peter Coffee

In its ongoing effort to persuade MIT's undergraduates that the random scrap of grounds is, in fact, art, the MIT News Office seized upon an article by Robert Garrett, Art Critic for the Boston Herald American, which was reprinted in November's Tech Talk.

Garrett, in his article, expresses reverence to the "prosaic mind" of the "frisbee-playing student," "immaterialized by [art]," who lacks the "vision" needed to see the "fabulously blooming" sculpture on MIT's campus. 

Whether or not Garrett's article was intended to leave it where it stood, Garrett is perceptive enough to note that "the art student, although he is obviously in no position to appreciate how much nicer it used to be."

Garrett, for example, "would like to think of chemical engineers intrigued and charmed by daily splendor" of Louise Nevelson's "Transparent Horizon." That monochromatic, Wattsian tribute has been condemned by nearly everyone but Wayne Andersen, whom Garrett describes as "the Segall of this touch of humanism." It is about as "charming" as the work of the late, great Carl Moore, whose Maynasseque sign of Vance Street, and lost any measure of "intrigue" it might once have possessed when the residents of East Campus finally realized that Physical Plant intended to leave it where it stood.

Garrett is preceptive enough to note that "the novel student of one of the most pleasant spaces on campus." But he is obviously in no position to appreciate how much nicer it used to be. He applies the Great Sail as an "assemblage of halting shards of metals," but somehow sees McDermott Court's wrought iron as an expression of "power of wind and motes." The added emphasis is the only possible comment.

Garrett is most effective in reference to Henry Moore's "Three-Point Reclining Figure, Draped," better known as the bronze bunny in DuPont Court. He describes the "green carpet of lawn," the "closet MET gets to pasture [sic]," as an "apparently" chosen site. This conclusion is unsupported and far from obvious.

Garrett classifies "Figure" as "one of a large family of [Moore's] figures which bridge traditional notions of classical beauty with a formalism based on volumes." Whatever that means, Garrett's tone is one of scholarly approval which defies belief. The Herald American's critic is more accurate than he intends when he describes Moore as "cutting, carving and transmuting... like a curious child... with a scalpel."

The universal scorn with which I have heard Garrett's reprinted article discussed makes me wonder whom the News Office thinks is being fooled, let alone persuaded. A campus on which concerts and theatre draw full houses and involve active participation by many students can not be dismissed out of hand as a cultural void in which art is doomed to starve for want of informed attention.

A campus on which the administration has resorted to the questioning of the students' appreciation of art in an undignified effort to generate approval of meritless work can be, and should be, a target of serious concern on the part of arts and audience alike.