

# DISPOSITION TIME

JAMES BRIDLE

**P**orthcurno, Cornwall, 1870: a man emerges from the sea, dragging with him a thick bundle of copper cables, sheathed in gutta-percha and india rubber. With the cables come the words, and later: everything. It happens again and again; at Mombasa in Kenya, in 2009, another man emerges from the sea. This time the cables are made of glass, but it's still words, still concepts, connecting the dry land to the deep, the local to the network, the present to the future.

The mathematician Harry Reed, who worked on the ENIAC, one of the first computers, built at the University of Pennsylvania in 1942-6, recalled that "the ENIAC itself, strangely, was a very personal computer. Now we think of a personal computer as one which you carry around with you. The ENIAC was actually one that you kind of lived inside."

The first mainframe computers were vast, sprawling, three-dimensional things. Room-sized. The operators and technicians worked inside them. Of the later MANIAC computer, chief engineer Julian Bigelow wrote: "The design of an electronic calculating machine turns out to be a frustrating wrestling-match with problems of interconnectability and proximity in three dimensions of space and one dimension of time."

So is art. So is design. So is the business of wrangling the future. The network, the totality of us and our technologies, is all around us, and if we are to understand the possibilities of our visions and our technologies, we must understand what we have built, and how we move with them through time.

William Gibson said that "The Future is here, it's just not evenly distributed yet" and located his fictions in the other part, the wet, newly-minted, unpressed portion of the universe. He evoked the physical intensity of kids playing early video games: "it seemed to me that what they wanted was to be inside the games, within the notional space of the machine. The real world had disappeared for them—it had completely lost its importance. They were in that notional space, and the machine in front of them was the brave new world. ... Everyone is going to have one of these, I thought, and everyone is going to want to live inside them. And somehow I knew that the notional space behind all of the computer screens would be one single universe."

Twenty years earlier, William Burroughs had stated that "when you cut into the present the future leaks out." Adjacent dimensions, and to see between them, you just need to look at the right angle, apply pressure at the right moment. The future is not emergent from the present, but *immanent within it*, awaiting its moment to cross over.

Over the years we have expanded the machine, building it ever upwards and outwards. It is no longer in the room around us but it is the room itself: we inhabit it to the point where we are part of its environment. It is threaded in cables beneath the oceans and it radiates through the atmosphere in the tick-

ticking of the GPS system, a 3D-pointed star, a superstructure 25,000 miles across that we are all living inside.

So too the future, a structure we are already living inside, if only we could perceive it, if only we were not constantly domesticating it into the banal present: "The manufactured normalcy field", as Venkatesh Rao calls it. Rao notes that "Art occasionally rises to the challenge of actually cracking open a window onto the actual present, but mostly restricts itself to creating dissonance in the mainstream's view of the imagined present, a relative rather than absolute dialectic."

In *The City and The City*, a novel of seeing and unseeing, China Miéville posits twin cities, overlaid upon one another, the inhabitants of each acculturated from birth to be incognisant of the other. There are zones in the cities which Miéville calls cross-hatched: zones of intersections, where buildings from each city stand side by side, but the citizens know only the ones familiar to them. The etheric, digital, noumenal dimension of the network, which is also the future. Breaching—to perceive the other city, to see what lies alongside our own and interlaced with it, is a crime, as it is in all autocracies, cognitive or otherwise.

We see the angel in the ether, and we connect until we set it free. Dr Frankenstein clips the last cable to the neckbolt of the Monster, formed from parts of animals and men. Kent throws paint into the face of the Invisible Man, and Griffin is revealed, standing there, as he ever was. Animation and re-animation.

In our narratives of space, we reveal the outlines of time. Piotr Czerski, in his polemical manifesto *We, the Web Kids*, writes: "We grew up with the Internet and on the Internet. This is what makes us different; this is what makes the crucial, although surprising from your point of view, difference: we do not 'surf' and the internet to us is not a 'place' or 'virtual space'. The Internet to us is not something external to reality but a part of it: an invisible yet constantly present layer intertwined with the physical environment. We do not use the Internet, we live on the Internet and along it."

We do not predict the future, we live along and inside it. We have built the network from our desires and our memories, just as we have built the world. This is the meaning of within.

Twenty years after that qualifying "yet", Gibson revised his position: "For the past decade or so, the only critics of science fiction I pay any attention to, all three of them, have been slyly declaring that the Future is over. I wouldn't blame anyone for assuming that this is akin to the declaration that history was over, and just as silly. But really I think they're talking about the capital-F Future, which in my lifetime has been a cult, if not a religion. People my age are products of the culture of the capital-F Future. The younger you are, the less you are a product of that. If you're fifteen or so, today, I suspect that you inhabit a sort of endless digital Now, a state of atemporality enabled by our increasingly efficient communal prosthetic memory. I also suspect that you don't know it, because, as anthropologists tell us, one cannot know one's own culture."

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Or, as Marshall McLuhan put it in *The Medium is the Massage*: "We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future." We live in a post-McLuhan age, where not only do we shape our tools, and in turn are shaped by them, but then we reshape them once more, are reshaped, shape again, in an endless and ever-tighter feedback dance, because the tools are desirous extensions of ourselves.

McLuhan also said, in 1969: "Because of the invisibility of any environment during the period of its innovation, man is only consciously aware of the environment that has preceded it; in other words, an environment becomes fully visible only when it has been superseded by a new environment; thus we are always one step behind in our view of the world. The present is always invisible because it's environmental and saturates the whole field of attention so overwhelmingly; thus everyone is alive in an earlier day."

Warren Ellis calls this 'the science fiction condition': the fact that the future has already arrived, it is merely waiting to be perceived (this realisation is itself an immanence). In *How To See The Future*, Ellis says: "The Olympus Mons mountain on Mars is so tall and yet so gently sloped that, were you suited and supplied correctly, ascending it would allow you to walk most of the way to space. Mars has a big, puffy atmosphere, taller than ours, but there's barely anything to it at that level. 30 Pascals of pressure, which is what we get in an industrial vacuum furnace here on Earth. You may as well be in space. Imagine that. Imagine a world where you could quite literally walk to space." Imagine a world where you could quite literally walk into the future.

If we are capable of perceiving the future as it already exists in the present, what are we to do with it? How are we to act upon it? This, too, is an action, and an acknowledgement.

The architectural theorist Keller Easterling describes the world as "a soupy matrix of dispositions." The things we create in the world are not mere forms, but actions, having a relationship with their own dispositions: active positions and intentions. They relate one to another, matching their airspeed against other vehicles and crossing their vectors. Intersections occur in physical space and in the digital, in history and the notional future. The casual observer sees only the immediate manifestation of the form upon the hypersurface of the present, but the artist perceives the entire light cone, the trajectory of an apparent causality out of the past and into the future, warping and shaping it according to its disposition.

The business of designing the future is understanding this interplay between forms in the present, and the pressures that time places upon them, tilting them this way and that, dragging their immediate references through deep pools of emergent context. We are accustomed to making beautiful stones in the water, says Easterling, but the world is making the water.

One requirement of designing for future dispositions is that we must be comfortable with the fundamental uncertainty these dispositions produce. An accommodation with the true state of the world. The age of the manifesto is over; instead, we must formulate and test hypotheses.

'Steam-engine time' is what science fiction writers call it when this uncertainty occasionally coalesces into artefacts, when an idea suddenly becomes evident to everybody. Ptolemy described the mechanics of the steam engine, the Romans built little models of steam tractors, and could have built bigger ones. But steam engines happened when it was steam-engine time.

John Berger noted that the signal quality of the painting was that it had no unfolding time; it presented all time at once, as one moment. The primary characteristic of the network is that it reveals the world in the same plane. Berger also noted that the invention of the camera changed the nature of paintings made long before its invention. Suddenly the temporally-distant past and the spatially-distant present are more accessible to us than they have ever been, and are transformed by that revelation.

Technology and art shudder into reality like spaceships everting from an adjacent dimension, rising up into the present. Technology, art, and history are consubstantial; they are made from the same stuff, hyperobjects visible in different forms in different dimensions. What Reed and Bigelow, Gibson and Burroughs, McLuhan and Ellis, Easterling and Berger all articulate is that these dualities, the physical and the digital, the human and the technological, the present and the future, are coterminous frameworks, like Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes. Fuller coined the term "tensegrity" to describe these tightly integrated structures, each element conditional upon every other, describing and weighing upon it.

It is steam-engine time again. A man is walking out of the sea, carrying a cable. It leads into the deep; the deep past, the deep present, and the deep future; and through our art and our technology we can access them like never before.