

THE TOMORROW PEOPLE

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Tomorrow Never Knows' is a perfect title for a symposium on the subject of the future and what happened to it. Made in 1966, it's a truly prophetic piece of music, arguably the first track in rock to break totally with the idea of recording as a document of live performance. Instead, The Beatles, George Martin, and the engineers at Abbey Road constructed a phantasmagoric pseudo-event, built up through layering and sluiced through effects. *Tomorrow Never Knows* played games with time itself.

It was immediately inspirational in terms of psychedelia, informing what groups like Pink Floyd and The Jimi Hendrix Experience would do when they went into the studio. But it is also an origin point for the studio-as-instrument approach of artists like Brian Eno, who would much later cover *Tomorrow Never Knows* while a member of 801 (a supergroup formed with fellow Roxy Musician Phil Manzanera). In the Beatles original, you can also hear pre-echoes and advance glimpses of the sampladelic music of the Nineties, genres like drum & bass and big beat, artists like Goldie, 4 Hero, and The Chemical Brothers. The latter's 1996 number one hit *Setting Sun* is audibly inspired by *Tomorrow Never Knows*, but managed to reactivate its spirit and feel in the context of drug-fuelled Nineties electronic dance music rather than merely pay nostalgic homage.

The title *Tomorrow Never Knows* is actually not a futurist rallying cry at all; if anything, it proposes a Zen Buddhist style abolition of linear time. 'Tomorrow Never Knows' was a saying of Ringo Starr's and although it's not entirely clear what he meant by it, it seems to have functioned as an earthy, mischievous, Liverpoolian version of the Sixties maxim 'be here now'. In other words, 'don't worry about the consequences, do it now': the classic youth culture, pop imperative to forget the past, don't worry about the future, live in the present tense.

In his classic book *Revolt Into Style*, written at the end of the Sixties, George Melly described pop culture as "the country of 'Now'." He argued that youth – a sort of international nation that cuts across barriers of race and class as well as geography – "denies having any history. The words 'Do you remember?' are the filthiest in its language." Melly made this claim specifically in the context of trad jazz, that British 1950s revival of hot 1920s New Orleans jazz. In *Revolt Into Style*, Melly argued that trad jazz (a movement he was involved in) was exuberant and informal but it wasn't a true pop phenomenon because it wasn't exclusively the property of youth (the musicians, especially, were usually middle-aged and not particularly sexy). But above all trad jazz failed to be pop precisely because it was a revival. Pop music, by Melly's definition, cannot be nostalgic. Looking backwards goes against its deepest nature.

But by the time *Revolt Into Style* reached the bookshops, Melly's contention here was disproved. Pop was deep into its first major outbreak of retrospection, the rock 'n' roll 1950s revival. That started at the end of 1968, picked up speed in 1969 and carried through most of the Seventies. Back-to-the-Fifties was the first of many revivals in rock history. In *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, I argue that as pop culture builds

up a history and assembles its own archive, it increasingly becomes torn between two impulses: the drive to keep pushing forward is countered by an impulse to repeat and to re-enact, to hark back wistfully to an earlier golden age. Paradoxically it is drawn to the era of its own emergence, mesmerised precisely by those phases of acceleration, when the culture had its eyes and ears focused on the now and the future. Revivalism depends on the non-revivalistic, the anti-nostalgic, the once-was-new. But equally, all breakthrough phases will eventually become subject to capture by retro logic.

As a writer and a fan I've always aligned myself strongly with the 'let's push things forward' impulse in pop, while often succumbing guiltily to the charms of nostalgia and retro. I like to believe that pop's true essence, its better self, involves the emphasis on the now and the next. That outlook is shaped by the era in which I grew up – a cultural background that included not just pop but science fiction books as well as SF films and TV, along with various forms of modernist art and 20th century avant-gardes that filtered down to me one way or another. There was also a generalised backdrop of the post-war ideology of progress, manifested in things like urban redevelopment, Brutalist architecture, the space race, and so forth. I'm a child of the Sixties, in other words: born in 1963, the year that decade really kicked off. Most of the things I cherish in the history of music after the Sixties – Krautrock and Miles Davis-style jazz rock fusion of the Seventies, postpunk, 90s rave – can all be seen as continuations or re-efflorescences of Sixties ideas and principles.

What characterises all this music – psychedelia, postpunk, rave – is this twin emphasis on the present and the future. Both at once: a kind of 'future-now'. In *Energy Flash*, my history of rave, I talk about techno and house as a 'now machine', where each loop or bar is like a super-intensified present moment. But crucially it's a 'now' that is tilted forward, towards the next now. This makes it different from drone music or ambient music, which are much less rhythmically dynamic, in some cases completely non-propulsive, and so create a sensation of timeless suspension. Electronic dance music's future-now effect is related to the music's reliance on vamps: riffs that in earlier forms of music served as a brief introductory figure that was repeated several times before a solo or verse, to whip up anticipation. In techno and house, vamps often make up the greater part of the music's fabric.

But in some ways, electronic dance music is an extension, an intensification of what's going on in all beat-driven pop and rock: the combination of a sensation-saturated now with a surging-forward motion. You get that feeling in the Krautrock group Neu! – that exclamation mark expressing the music's feeling of exultant newness, the onrush of stimuli. But you also get it in less hip, more mainstream rock as well: an example being the American classic rock radio staple *Fly Like An Eagle*, by the Steve Miller Band, whose chorus goes 'fly like an eagle/into the future'.

Rock music, pop music, dance music – for me they are all fundamentally about this libidinal economy of anticipation, propulsion, restless desire.

In the 'classic' eras of pop music – which is to say, precisely those eras devoid of a sense of classicism, of veneration of ancestors, eras that feel like they are brand new, without precedent (and it's worth bearing in mind that what we think of today as 'classic', including 'classic rock', almost invariably was in its own time innovative, the opposite of classic, even opposed to 'the classics' and the 'classical' way of doing things) – in those classic eras of pop, what is going on in terms of the libidinal-rhythmic-motor microcosm of any given song is mirroring what is going on in the macrocosm of music culture as an entire cultural formation. The movement is moving forward. There's a homology at work, across levels.

But in a contemporary retro-rock song by The Black Keys or Jack White's various outfits, the microcosmic effect of rock'n'roll urgency is instantiated, but the homological extension doesn't exist, because the larger music culture to which those groups contribute is not moving forward, it's going backwards. There's a cruel paradox: you can feel the music pulling at your body in the same way a once timely (and hence, timeless: another crucial paradox) tune like *Satisfaction*, or *Whole Lotta Love*, or *Marquee Moon*, or *What Do I Get?* pulled at your body. But you know it's a trick. Indeed to submit to this enjoyment would be a betrayal of the larger project of what music should be. You have to steel yourself against the seductions of this pseudo-now. You honour whatever *Satisfaction* or those other songs meant in their moment (and for all time) by resisting the appeal of contemporary songs modelled on them.

The three main books I'm known for – *Energy Flash*, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, *Retromania* – form a sort of unintended trilogy. At base they're all about a particular relationship with time, and they're rooted, emotionally and ideologically, but also libidinally and perhaps even neurologically, in my formative experience of that temporality from the late Seventies onwards. The first two books – on postpunk and the techno-rave Nineties – are about periods of cultural acceleration. *Retromania*, the third book, is about a sense of temporal malaise, or as I term it, hyperstasis: a stagnant frenzy, a lived sensation of restlessness and stuckness, like the wheels of a car churning desperately to get out of a swamp. That is what I believe the phenomenology of digital life comprises as a daily experience.

This unintended trilogy is also a disguised three-volume autobiography – the memoir of a metabolism, a nervous system and perceptual system wired in a particular way. I'm not alone, not at all, in feeling this way and seeing the world this way. It's common to many people of my generation, and even some of those in subsequent generations feel it enough to have found some resonance in *Retromania*, although generally speaking it's a sense of time (by which I mean culture-time as opposed to chronological, calendric time) that is dwindling with the millennials.

This is not an isolated, eccentric viewpoint and *Retromania* is not the only book to address the sense that something's gone awry with time. Indeed 2011, the same year *Retromania* was published, also saw *After the Future*, a polemic written by the Italian theorist Franco Berardi, or as he's fondly nicknamed, Bifo. Berardi addresses the passing of what he calls 'the century that trusted in the future', i.e. the 20th century. Although, as the book unfolds, it becomes clear that he really means the first six decades of the 20th century: by the 1970s, confidence in the future is starting to fade; you have the publication of the Club of Rome's book *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, the oil crisis in 1973, ecological anxieties and the rise of the Green movement, punk's 'no future' in 1977. There are numerous examples that

faith in the notion of progress was collapsing.

Back in the early 2000s, the architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas touched on this idea of time-out-of-joint in his famous text *Junkspace*, wondering "When did time stop moving forward... begin to spool in every direction, like a tape spinning out of control? ... Change has been divorced from the idea of improvement. There is no progress; like a crab on LSD, culture wobbles endlessly sideways." The music critic Paul Morley has written evocatively about 21st century music culture as 'The Aftermath': the junk heap or flea market of pop history, a rising pile of detritus left behind by the fast moving 20th century through which today's artists sift and salvage and recombine. In a memorable phrase, Morley wrote, outwardly impassive but with an implicit disquiet, about 'the directionless direction' of today's pop culture.

There have also been numerous attempts at a positive reading of the situation, trying to reconceive this culture-time not as a disorientating and paralysing predicament but as potentially fertile landscape of possibilities. These range from the curator and art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's concepts of 'altermodernism' and 'postproduction', to William Gibson's notion of atemporality. Gibson contrasts his own generation (more or less the same as mine) who made a cult of the 'the capital-F Future', with millennial youth, who 'inhabit a sort of endless digital Now'. Atemporality is a byproduct of network culture, 'our increasingly efficient communal prosthetic memory': the ever-expanding, instantly accessible archives of the Internet, in which the distinction between past and present gets ever more blurry.

Cyberpunk novelist Bruce Sterling finds atemporality more insidious and alarming than his friend and occasional collaborator Gibson. But he nonetheless concurs that the concept of 'the future' is an obsolete paradigm, imagining that the word itself 'will go out of use' eventually.

This is just a fraction of the amount of writing on this subject in books and periodicals as well as online, with other notable contributions coming from Mark Fisher, Jaron Lanier, and Douglas Rushkoff. And it has increasingly figured as theme and preoccupation in a huge range of cultural production, from art and fiction to music itself.

Probably the most high-profile example of this is one of 2013's biggest pop music events. One of the few that could honestly be described as an 'event' in the old sense of the word. But if Daft Punk's 'Random Access Memories' comes to define 2013, it'll be through rejecting 2013.

It's an album that is full of references to time, transience, the notion of a lost future, and memory. The song *Fragments of Time*, for instance, is about instant nostalgia, that sort of future anterior syndrome in which we experience rapture or epiphany, then immediately project ahead to looking back at it. The title 'Random Access Memories' itself is a pun on computer memory (RAM) versus human memory.

Musically, the whole project was informed by a paradox specific to Daft Punk's own dilemma as artists who had done sample-based dance music in the late Nineties and early 2000s, and taken that as far as they could. How to go forward? Daft Punk decided the only way was to go back. Partly because the sounds they'd helped to pioneer in the Nineties as prominent figures in techno-house culture had become the norm. Daft Punk-like sounds make up so much of what you hear on Top 40 radio in America today. Mark Fisher has written about how we can no longer 'hear technology': the future-rush

that those kind of electronic and digitally processed sounds transmitted to listeners in the 90s and which felt like a preview of the 21st Century, that's necessarily now gone. What we hear is a now-ness that's banalised, mundane. In digital culture, Fisher says, we don't get great leap forwards or giant steps, we just get upgrades: increments in higher definition audio and video, faster computer speeds, more dazzling CGI effects.

In reaction to digital overdrive and the burnout it induces, Daft Punk decided to go analogue. 'Random Access Memories' is a wholesale reversion to the late 70s and early eighties: slick disco-funk in the vein of Michael Jackson's 'Off The Wall', Chic, The Whispers and Earth Wind and Fire; Fleetwood Mac and Eagles-style soft rock; late-period progressive rock and New Wave at its most radio-friendly (The Cars, for instance). The cut-off point for this time travel exercise is that point in the early-to-mid Eighties when Fairlight samplers, sequenced rhythms, and MIDI become the state of the art in recording studios. All that, along with the kind of computer software that came later and that Daft Punk once used, is rejected, in favour of high-calibre musicianship and live drumming from the session sticksman who worked for Michael Jackson.

Two of the hallmark impulses in modernism are the terror of repeating yourself, and terror of doing something that another artist has already done. For Daft Punk those two impulses became at loggerheads: they didn't want to repeat what they had done before (because in a context where their influence is legion, they would no longer stand out), so they were impelled to repeat and to remake styles of music that were superseded over thirty years ago.

Geeta Dayal described Daft Punk's approach as sampling taken to the next level: they reconstructed the sort of teams of skilled musicians and sound engineers that made the kind of music that Daft Punk in the 90s liked to sample and rework into contemporary dance floor anthems. But I think they go even further than that: it's as though they're 'sampling' the zeitgeist of the late Seventies and early Eighties. They're trying to reconstruct the episteme, the larger cultural matrix that produced albums like Fleetwood Mac's 'Rumours' and 'Tusk', or 'Off the Wall'. Not just the analogue means of production, but the analogue sense of temporality. In particular, the Event, the mass-synchronised experience of 'the whole world' tuning into some kind of cultural artefact: movies like *Star Wars* and *Saturday Night Fever*, records like 'Sgt Pepper's' and 'Thriller.' Hence the much-discussed promotional campaign with its teasing hints and initial reliance on analogue-era techniques like billboards and television ads. There's a nostalgia here not just for the monoculture ('pop culture is the monoculture', Thomas Bangalter insisted, when I interviewed Daft Punk) but for monotemporality, for a shared experience of time.

This feeling of mass synchrony is inseparable, I believe, from concepts like progress and the future. That is made clear on 'Random Access Memories' with the two key tracks, *Giorgio By Moroder* and *Contact*.

Giorgio By Moroder involves a towering figure of 20th century popular music looking back on his own looking forward. Producer of Donna Summer amongst many others, and pioneer of the electronic disco style known as Eurodisco, Moroder was interviewed at length by Daft Punk. Two small snippets appear on the track. The key segment concerns the making of *I Feel Love*, an international number one hit in 1977, and notable for being the first all-electronic dance track. *I Feel Love* is the song that made Brian Eno

rush over to Bowie's house and say: "David, I have heard the future!". It's the song that inspired a band of Sheffield Tangerine Dream fans who then called themselves The Future, to make future pop under their better-known name the Human League.

Moroder speaks of the Donna Summer album on which *I Feel Love* appeared, 'I Remember Yesterday', a sort of disco concept album about time and memory: "I wanted to do an album with the sounds of the 50s, the sound of the 60s, of the 70s – and then have a sound of the future – and I thought, 'wait a second, I know the synthesiser, why don't I use a synthesiser, which is the sound of the future?' I knew that could be a sound of the future, but I didn't realise how much the impact would be."

And the rest, as they say, was history. The history of future pop: Eighties synthpop and Hi-NRG and house, Nineties techno and trance, these and so many other things can be sourced back to this breakthrough, *I Feel Love*.

It's totally charming that Daft Punk pay tribute to their ancestor-hero with *Giorgio By Moroder*, which may well invent a new genre, autobiographical disco. Interestingly, however, Daft Punk and Moroder don't collaborate musically. Instead they use his voice, the one thing he's not particularly famous for. And the melancholy implication of the collaboration is that neither Daft Punk nor Moroder felt capable of making any kind of future music together or separately. What Daft Punk do instead is to make an accurate reproduction of the synth and drum machine driven Eurodisco sound.

Fredric Jameson described the modernist artwork as a monument to the future. With *Giorgio By Moroder*, we have a monument to a past future. Nobody is going to rush out of the front door, like Eno did, and tell their friends, 'I have heard the future of pop'. Rather, listening to *Giorgio By Moroder*, you might say, wistfully, 'Do you remember when music sounded like the future?'

Contact is the finale to 'Random Access Memories', and it aspires to be a grand one. It starts with a sampled voice from a NASA transmission, the Apollo 17 mission, from December 1972. It's Eugene Cernan, the last astronaut to stand on the Moon's surface. He's talking about "a bright object, it's obviously rotating because it's flashing; it's way out in the distance". After describing it in some detail, Cernan says "there's something out there." Right there, you have encapsulated all the romance of the space race, the final frontier. There's that mystical inkling of something being out there that is our destiny as a species to find and make contact with. We must boldly go; it's our nature, our calling. An echo of Spengler's notion that the Faustian and Promethean essence of Western civilisation is "a spiritual reaching out into boundless space."

What Cernan actually said when he climbed the ladder back into the lunar module and bid adieu to the Moon was this: "as I take man's last step from the surface, back home for some time to come – but we believe not too long into the future – I'd like to just (say) what I believe history will record. That America's challenge of today has forged man's destiny of tomorrow."

Contact itself is a thrilling track, the least dated-sounding (it could almost be a Chemical Brothers tune from the rocktronica golden age of 1997). A whooshing rush of sound is sustained, modulated, and intensified for quite a long stretch of time. But then it sputters out anticlimactically, like the Space Race did.

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In accordance with the commemorative logic that governs so much of our popular culture, this symposium, 'Tomorrow Never Knows', is in part based around the notion of 1993 as a key transitional year, a highpoint of renewed futurism in pop culture, technology and discourse. Twenty years ago, Daft Punk were just forming their identity; their debut release, the 1994 single *The New Wave* was pounding acid techno, somewhat generic but definitely part of the forward surge of the early Nineties dance culture.

More striking though, for listeners like myself at that time, were the early jungle and drum & bass singles on labels like Reinforced and Moving Shadow, from producers like 4Hero and Goldie a/k/a Rufie Cru. The imagery at that time was apocalyptic and accelerationist: 4Hero's Nostradamus-inspired *Students of the Future*, Noise Factory's *Futuraid*, 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse's *We Are the Future*, group names like Phuture Assassins or The Future Sound of London. Particularly epochal was the late 1992 single *Terminator* by Metalheads, another of Goldie's alter egos. By early 1993 it seemed like it was playing once an hour on London's pirate radio stations. The track is named, obviously, after the movie *Terminator*. The concept, the conceit, is that this record comes to us from the future, just like Schwarzenegger's android assassin. The tense is future anterior, as in the sample used by Goldie of the heroine Sarah Connor: "you're talking about things I haven't done yet." Goldie and his partners in Metalheads used a technique called 'timestretching' to change the pitch of the drums so that at the breakdown they seem to simultaneously speed up and stay in tempo. This jagged time lapse effect, which was soon heard on scores of darkcore and jungle records, helped me to understand that the innovations with looped, edited, sped-up and processed breakbeats being made by these young producers constituted a form of rhythmic psychedelia. They represented a quantum leap for music, as significant as *Tomorrow Never Knows* had been. And jungle was literally a new psychedelia, a music totally wedded to drug culture. Goldie took Ecstasy when doing the final mixdown of *Terminator*, in order to expand his sonic perceptions. As he told one interviewer, when you're on E, "you hear things that aren't there."

Fuelled by excessive consumption of Ecstasy, which in its effects could be characterised as a 'psychedelic amphetamine', this was an era of speed. Future Sound of London's album was called 'Accelerator'; one of the leading drum & bass clubs was called Speed, with an extra 'e'. Listening to *Terminator* and other Goldie productions of that time like *Darkrider* and *Menace*, the feeling is propulsive linearity: the music is all vamps. And what's happening in the microcosm of each individual track and DJ set and pirate session is what's happening to rave at the macro level of a genre, a scene, a movement. All the post-rave scenes of the early-to-mid Nineties – techno, trance, gabba, jungle – are hurtling along an extensional axis of intensification—escalating increments of speed, hardness, darkness, sickness, abstraction.

Each track, each bar of the music, is not just tilted to the next 'now', it is racing after it. That may in fact be how the Future functions as a cultural ideal: through the intensity it creates in the now. The Future is the unattainable

object, the horizon you chase but never reach. That chase creates the sensation of propulsion in the present.

1993 is a particular fast year in a longer period from approximately 1990 to 1997 when everything is moving, mutating, branching off into different directions and escalating to new extremes.

1993 was the year of gabba, a strain of ultrafast, über-hard techno from Northern Europe. The counterpart to Goldie and 4Hero was Marc Acardipane, also known as The Mover (along with another dozen or so aliases). This Frankfurt producer made hundreds and hundreds of tracks, including classics like *We Have Arrived*, *Nite Flight (nonstop to Kaos)*, *Final Sickness*, *Symphonies of Steel*, and *Apocalypse Never*. Acardipane developed a personal mythos about the year 2017 as his own version of the Singularity. The point of the date, which in 1993 felt a long way off, is that it creates a remote destination towards which you look and which the music seems to both hasten towards and to conjure like a prophetic apparition, a future-ghost. 2017 is the target and you become the bullet hurtling towards it.

Jungle and gabba are the most extreme examples of accelerationist music, but you get a similar sensation of rapid, even out-of-control development in other genres like trance and minimal techno, and outside dance music proper with My Bloody Valentine and post-rock outfits such as Seefeel. The mid-Nineties feels fast, limitless; constantly expanding outward into unknown zones. Living through this period, teleology becomes a sensation: you can feel something unfolding through the music. Each phase of the music supersedes the preceding one, like the stages of a rocket being jettisoned as it escapes the Earth's atmosphere.

For critics writing about this music then, like myself or Kodwo Eshun or Philip Sherburne, or the young Mark Fisher, you rarely found yourself using reference points. You wouldn't resort to coordinates based on existing earlier music because the new music was going off the map. As a writer you were scrambling, joyously, to keep up with the music, and that demanded the forging of new concepts, fresh language. Hence the proliferation of neologisms and invented genre terms.

This sort of euphoric, hyped-up evangelism wasn't limited to writing about electronic dance music, you could find similar tones in the discourse around information technology, especially the new magazines emerging from the West Coast, such as *Wired* and *Mando 2000*. The latter's vibe lay somewhere between cyberpunk and zippy (a briefly trendy word for hippie-like types who weren't into pastoralism but loved technology; cats like RU Sirius and Jaron Lanier). 1993 was the year that *Wired* was founded. In those days it was a much more interesting publication than the current Condé Nast-owned title, but it always preached a libertarian capitalist version of technophilia, in which innovations figured as heroic 'disruptors' and you had to get with the evolutionary programme or resign yourself to extinction.

In academia around this time, Sadie Plant was forming the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at Warwick University alongside partner Nick

Land. The CCRU was one of the major formulators of the strand of philosophy now known as accelerationism. The attitude to capitalism espoused by the CCRU was a more chiliastic version of *Wired's*: Plant and particularly Land celebrated capital's virulence, the way it dissolved communities and traditions, disregarded social and human values. The CCRU was a hotbed of intellectual energy, hatching figures like Mark Fisher and Steve Goodman, who is still an academic and theorist but is better known as Kode9, the DJ/producer and boss of Hyperdub records. Elsewhere there was the journal *C-Theory*, based around the husband-and-wife team of Arthur and Marilouise Kroger. Here too you found cyber-theory that drew heavily on the insights of Baudrillard and Virilio's dromology (the study of speed's social and cultural effects) and which shared the CCRU's aura of dysphoria, although deep beneath the metallic cyborg surface of the prose a more traditional left-wing humanist heartbeat was just about discernible.

Certainly from my memory of the time, 1993-1994 seems like a threshold year for the Internet. Kurt Cobain's death in 1994 was what alerted me to the potential of the World Wide Web. My wife had dabbled with it for a while, but when Cobain killed himself, in the absence of information in British newspapers we plunged into the roiling maw of the Internet, where communities of grief, commemoration, news-gathering and speculation sprung up instantly.

Yet, chiming with my notion earlier of pop culture being divided between forward and backward impulses, 1993 was also the year in which the forces of reaction were gathering strength. That year witnessed the first real stirrings of Britpop, from Blur's 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' to the fateful occasion when Alan McGee stepped into King Tut's Wah Wah and saw Oasis playing. Other retromaniacal portents included the rise of Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs* came out in 1992, *Pulp Fiction* came out in 1994), a sign that just as record store clerks had begun to ruin alternative rock through excessive geeky knowledge, so too would video-store-clerks-turned-auteur-directors blight our screens with movies-about-movies. The BritArt moment was gathering, resulting in the 'Sensation' exhibition of 1997 with its bonanza of refried Duchamp and Warhol.

1997 was also the year of the first Harry Potter book. Although it's not considered part of the steampunk movement, which had been growing steadily since the early Nineties publication of *The Difference Engine*, by Bruce Sterling and William Gibson, I think there's a connection there. Both steampunk and Potter-ism (the J.K. Rowling books but also the whole burgeoning industry of young adult fantasy fiction involving magic and the supernatural, vampires and zombies) represent a renaissance of the literature of the marvellous. It's a genre that retains some of the appeal of science fiction (gizmo gadgetry, access to special powers, heroic adventures, good versus evil) but which is formally retrogressive, stepping back from the innovations of the New Wave of SF in the Sixties and Seventies and reverting to 19th century and early 20th century modes of popular storytelling.

You can see this all across popular fiction and its related cinematic and television spin-offs and variants: the return to long narrative forms, populous with characters and teeming with subplots, often old-fashioned and shallow

in terms of conception of psychology and motivation. Some seem to hark back to the winding, cellular narratives of Medieval sagas; others to the sprawling Dickensian novel, or the yarns of Kipling and Rider Haggard.

In his book *Digimodernism*, Alan Kirby argues that this kind of fiction and cinema, which he dismissively dubs 'children's entertainment', defines our era because it has a digiculture quality of 'onwardness and endlessness'. Endlessness here doesn't mean 'infinity' in the cosmic-mystical or utopian sense, but rather interminability, the potential for protraction and proliferation. The prime example of this is the videogame, with its countless levels, but you can see this streaming interminability in everything from blogs to social media.

Kirby asserts that Tolkien has proven to be the most influential writer of the 20th century. One place where Tolkien, videogames, the new sword and sorcery and supernatural entertainment converge is the extremely popular series of novels, and now TV show, *Game of Thrones*.

As someone who grew up on science fiction, which is based on the twin concepts of the Future and of Space, what's striking is how *Game of Thrones* displaces and supersedes those twinned desires. Its world is fantastical but terrestrial, earth-bound, and it is set not in the future but in a sort of postmodern scrambled pseudo-past. Author George R. R. Martin did tons of historical research, but as David Benioff (the writer who adapted *Thrones* for TV) observes: "It's built on a vaguely Western medieval skeleton, but he's pulling from the Mongols, Native Americans, India, all these elements get woven together into this new tapestry." Benioff might have also mentioned the War of the Roses, zombies, Caligula, Hadrian's Wall, and much more.

So the books and the TV show demonstrate that people, particularly young people, still have this impulse to escape the here-and-now and go into a world of adventure and strangeness. But in the absence of a cultural image of the future, and the fading of space as any real likelihood, the stories take place in a world that doesn't correspond to any actually occurring historical past. As with steampunk, there is a visually fetishistic love of all the details of the 'olden days' – the costumes, the complicated-yet-antiquated appliances and machinery, the weapons and games – but no concern with historical accuracy.

The other notable characteristic of *Game of Thrones* is Kirby's onwardness and endlessness. It's a series of novels, each one very long in itself, the series potentially extendable forever, like a movie franchise. And there's a scrofulous profusion and convolution of narratives. I call this syndrome Plot-itis: not the end of narrative but its metastasis. I also call it Lost-itis in (dis)honour of the interminably twisty *Lost*, a series that was fallaciously described as science fiction by many commentators, something that outraged the former science fiction fan in me, since it was verily the worst kind of make-it-up-as-you-go-along nonsense. I do enjoy *Game of Thrones*, but in a curious way. There's too much going on, too many characters, but rather than attempt to keep up I just surrender to the onwardness and endlessness. I relax and enjoy it as a sequence of near-discontinuous scenes. Torture and tits; tits and torture.

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OF ANXIETY.**

I did like Tolkien a great deal as a child but by the time I was adolescent I'd graduated to science fiction, and not just that but the genre's serious sector: the New Wave writers and later exponents of speculative fiction, generally based around inner space and near-future scenarios, rather than alien civilisations and interstellar goings-on. If you were a fan of the serious mind-expanding SF, you despised sword 'n' sorcery: that was fantasy, completely implausible and irrational. Sword 'n' sorcery was the opposite of what the serious SF fan believed in, because it suspended causal logic or extrapolation altogether. Proper SF was the historical method projected forwards, as opposed to pseudo-Medieval fantasy.

The rise of all this post-Tolkien children's literature and entertainment feels disconcerting and regressive to me. It's another sign of the delibidinisation of Tomorrow. The future is no longer sexy. Partly that's because it's become trapped in a set of visual and sonic clichés that seem corny and played out. But mainly it's because the actual future – the immediate years ahead of us – is a source of anxiety. With only a few exceptions, the SF movies still getting made in recent years have all been cataclysmic, end-of-the-world or aftermath scenarios, or dystopias like *The Hunger Games*. Apparently there is a genre of speculative near-future fiction emerging, but it's climate fiction, or cli-fi: novels based around calamitous changes to the earth's ecology and meteorology, with titles like *Odds Against Tomorrow*.

On the macro level, we have governments seemingly unable to plan for the kind of impressive long-term projects they once did, such that it seems inconceivable that the world's nations will ever cooperate to fix the species-level threat of global warming. On the micro level of communities, families and individuals, it's increasingly difficult to formulate positive mental images of the future. This is especially so for the young, who leave college burdened with debt to face a jobs market with few promising career options, just an endless series of internships most likely leading to nothing, and the prospect of still living with your parents extending indefinitely. For those in such a precarious predicament, it must be like the pause button is pressed on your life; you can't even press 'play' let alone 'fwd'.

Along with the delibidinisation of the future, outer space as a public concept, a source of excitement, has faded almost completely away. From the mid-Seventies onwards, the projects got less and less impressive. The Shuttle never captured the public imagination, and recently the program was discontinued, with the shuttles carted around on a final tour of the USA before being shunted into museums. In terms of popular culture, the success of *Gravity*, a Hollywood blockbuster set on a space station orbiting the Earth, suggests an uptick in popular interest in outer space. But the overall impression conveyed by the movie is the sheer difficulty

of space exploration, the constant proximity of disaster. It's notable also that *Gravity's* locus is *just outside* the Earth's atmosphere, implying that the immediate future for space travel will involve not giant steps further forward but *the repetition of achievements of the 1970s* (see also China's recent lunar rover mission).

You can also track the delibidinisation of outer space in the decline of UFOlogy, the cult research into flying saucers. As James Gray of *The Humanist* magazine noted, UFO magazine closed in 2004, the Ministry of Defence shut down its UFO hotline. Fewer and fewer sightings are reported. Fascinatingly, UFOlogists these days mostly re-analyse much earlier sightings. Like music, like art, UFOlogy has become archival. Gray argues that this reflects the syndrome known as 'cultural tracking': basically, UFO sightings were at their height when popular culture was full of movies and stories about aliens and outer space. These have been replaced by post-apocalyptic movies and films about zombies, vampires, werewolves, witches. So there's less sighting. But that begs the question: why have zombie vampire witch movies eclipsed science fiction and space fiction as popular fare? (It also begs another question: have sightings of zombies, vampires, werewolves and other supernatural beings gone up?!).

The Future and Space both signify the unknown. In *Retromania*, I observe that the dominant model for artists and musicians in the Sixties was the astronaut, the explorer of new frontiers; today most musicians, and many artists and designers, are closer to archaeologists. In the Sixties, 'inner space' was also an important concept. J.G. Ballard and others derived this from surrealism and Freudian psychoanalysis: the discovery of the unconscious, the dream world. That is another set of ideas that seem to have become passé. I recall a vogue for books about the symbolism of dreams, guides on how to interpret your nighttime movies, when I was growing up in the Seventies. I kept a dream diary for a while. It's hard to imagine any youngsters doing that today. 'Dream' as a word seems to me to be almost completely de-spiritualised, stripped of mystery, let alone oracular power. In popular parlance, 'dream' means aspirations to fame or wealth, as in the rapper Drake talking about how his dream was to have 25 million dollars by the age of 25, and that now he's achieved that, his new dream is 250 million by the age of 30. The idea of a strangeness within the psyche that is the wellspring of art is another 20th Century relic/casualty.

Space, in both the outer and inner senses, has been displaced by what we once called, back in 1993, cyberspace. It's a quaint term now, almost kitsch. But more important, it's an inaccurate term. Online isn't how Gibson imagined it in *Neuromancer*; it isn't spacious, there aren't distances you traverse on journeys of exploration. It's a zone of absolute proximity, where

everything that is and ever was is crammed right next to everything else, separated only by a few taps and clicks. Nonetheless, you could still say that our desire to 'go' and to go fast has imploded into the Internet.

It's a generational shift of some enormity and to bring out that generational aspect I'm going to make it personal and contrast myself and my son: in terms of what we have in common, and what we don't. He is 14, the age I would have been when I was discovering Ballard and Philip K. Dick and Fredrick Pohl and John Brunner. I grew up with science fiction, with *Doctor Who* and its Radiophonic Workshop electronic sound effects, with the hangover of Sixties rock and the birth of glam, while in the background was the still pretty exciting wake of the Moon landings (Soyuz, the Viking unmanned mission to Mars in 1976, etc) and a lot of articles and popular science books about astrophysics and black holes and so forth.

I have a strong sense that these things – outer space, the possibility of alien life, the mysteries of space-time – have the weakest grip on my son's imagination. When he reads, it's multi-volume mega-narratives like *Game of Thrones* or, a few years ago, Harry Potter. Mostly, though, he's all about games, social media, YouTube, apps. Everything computerised and internetty.

I navigate that realm with sufficient proficiency, but I have embedded cultural and neurological memories of analogue life. My son is a complete digital native, that's the real world to him, whereas IRL, I sense, feels flat and humdrum to him. He can't wait to get back to his laptop.

As well as a non-cathexis with the notion and the reality of space, my son doesn't really live with an idea of the future. By that I mean a cultural idea of the future. Obviously time is unfolding in a linear direction; he looks forward to things, he has vague thoughts about college and what he'll do when he's a grown up. But there is no special excitement about the future with a capital F, no sense that it'll be better or even drastically different from the present. I would imagine that this partly stems from not having a specific date to project towards, like 1999 or 2000 or 2001. Those were dates that if you grew up in the 20th century, at least up until the Eighties, sent reverberations through you: just the sight of those numerals, the difference between '19' and '20'. Once you crossed the threshold between centuries, between millennia, you'd be in some totally transformed world, or so it felt. But as yet we don't have a set of mental pictures or even vague expectations about 2050 or 2100. Deep in our bones, we know that in 2050 businessmen will still wear ties and suits. That the top speed for vehicular transport will be within the current range. And the same goes for air travel too. There is an awful dawning suspicion that popular music might actually be rather similar in 2050 to how it is now.

The non-cathexis with Space that I see in my son and I suspect is shared by his generation is something that particularly fascinates and perplexes me. It seems that everything that is happening, *all the action*, is inside – literally indoors, but also inside the non-space or post-space in which things like *Minecraft* take place.

Minecraft is the centre of my son's existence. And it's about a new perception of space in a number of ways. It's about building worlds, but it also involves complete transcendence of space in the geographical sense. My son plays *Minecraft* with distant friends who live in our old hometown of New York, simultaneously with playing it with his new friends in Los Angeles, who are sitting right beside him. But they might also play with people they've never met and don't even know where they are geographically situated.

So there's a huge difference between father and son. But there's still a chip-off-the-old-block aspect at work, in so far as he's caught up in that same psychology of obsession, inseparably coupled with obsolescence. He burns through all the latest jumps-forward in digital technology. He's all about the latest game, the newest app. His computer can never be fast enough for him. On the level of metabolism, then, we're pretty close. We're wired for the chase. My son lives within his own version of propulsive linearity, based around racing towards tomorrow while jettisoning the passé. That lends his life an impatient speediness; he's often in a state of irritable excitation.

The 'new' as a category does seem, however, to be uncoupled from any sense of 'progress' in the cultural-artistic-political sense.

'Future' and 'Space' correspond to what Fredric Jameson called – in *The Archaeology of the Future*, his book on science fiction – 'the desire called utopia'.

But perhaps, for my son and his generation, *Minecraft* and similar digital activities, aren't about the desire called utopia. Instead, they constitute a fully achieved utopia, here and now.