I am concerned with a set of representational strategies which, by constructing the present as the future, seem to position us as living in the future. In a previous paper I argued that this construction is quite widespread, and that it has repressive possibilities — that projecting a familiar future, one that is in fact the same as the present, evokes false promises and possibilities. In this paper, I want to continue my attempt to elaborate how this reaffirming of the future works, how it is taking us away from a manifold of expansive mysterious possibilities, positive and negative, and toward a future that is old news.

A gentleman promoting airships responded in this way when he was questioned about the Hindenburg disaster:

"That happened then. It's history. This is the future now." [The New York Times, 7 May 1987, p.14]

On its own, of course, this is not necessarily an especially telling remark; it has long been the imperative of advertisers and promoters to place what they have to offer in the future, in order to associate it, as part of a depoliticizing rationale (Britton, p.12), with the inevitable outcome of progress. The ahistorical sense that this allusion to history betrays is, furthermore, hardly a novelty in our culture. What I want to suggest, however, is that this association now consists with, and is perhaps being displaced by, a closed sense of the future. There is, in other words not so much an inevitability of progress, but the attribution to future progress of inevitability that properly belongs to progress that has already happened. After all if we are in the future now, if it looks just like today, who cares about tomorrow? Is it in this sense that I believe the repressive possibilities of this construction lie, and why it is important to understand the loss of a sense of future possibilities — what Fredric Jameson has called a "reverse millenarianism," a sense of endings — and to try to recuperate a refreshed and broadened sense of them. At least a part of the effect of cultural texts is ideologi-
cal — they attempt to redefine the real: I take my brief from film critic Andrew Britton (1986, p.8), who says that

"To challenge the definition of the real is to challenge a definition of what it is possible to desire and what it is possible to do..."

It seems to me important to pose a challenge to a construction of reality that suggests that the future is stored somewhere, fixed, immobile and immutable.

In order to draw more clearly the distinction between the former sense of time revealed in science fiction films, and the current "repressive and circu-
lar" sense, it is informative to look at films in which time-travel is a central concern. Chris Marker's film La Jetee (1963) is an especially useful example. From the diachronic present of a devastated post-nuclear world in which life is carried out in miserable catacombs, the time traveller goes both backward and forward in time — the former as training for the latter. Already, the resistance to such travel is understood to be less when going backward than facing going to the future. For the "now" in Marker's film, the future contains salvation: the power source necessary to make life above ground possible again. The past contains only a wistful sense of child-
hood, a field of possibilities whose only utility is to make travel to the future possible.

In contrast with this, in contemporary films of this genre, the possibilities lie in the past: the only future to be manipulated is the diachronic "now" — as the quote with which I opened this paper has it, "This is the future now." In Back to the Future, as Vivian Sobchak says, "Time travel is marked in terms of brand-name identification." (1986, p.249) In fact she claims that there is no imagined future at all in the film; actually, that's not entirely true — but the only element in the film that arrives from the future at all is an artefact, a power source called Mr. Fusion. Home Energy Reactor. This fascinating device consumes our refuse, our cast-off commodities, in order to supply the propulsive energy necessary to reach the future. It is the essence of a capitalist machine — it carries out what one might term "consumerism by other means": it utterly uses up what has been made, and "produces" a future whose only distinction is that it contains new things.

In the closing moments of Back to the Future, the teenage protagonist is about to embark into the diachronic future (as opposed to the now-as-future referred to in the title). The motivation for this trip, however, is decidedly anti-futuristic: it is merely another instance of the conservative impulse that wishes to take advantage of time as it were, to enforce present values, inflicted with a 1950s version of intergenerational struggle: "It's your kids, Marty; something's got to be done about them!" — The new things of the future are not complemented by any new imagined social relations. The premise at the end of the film, then, concerns the future of a teenager who has viewed (and played match-maker for) his own parents in their teens, and who, in reverse, is displaced by the values of middle-

age, which are themselves imported from a mythological past — is now about to leap forward to his own middle age.

This whole set of differences works as the ashlite, as it were, for a huge same-
ness, a conflation of new with than post, and then future. It is as if, to play on the title of another contemporary film, this is then, that'll be now.

Vivian Sobchak offers a reading of the evolution of science fiction films in the chapter of her book Screening Space, whose title, is for my purposes, very telling — "Postfuturism"; we are, in a sense, living after the future. Sobchak identifies a contraction of the sense of space, and an associated change in the attitude to time. The former, she says, has become flattened, diverted of both threat and promise — no longer a men-
sacing warehouse of monstrous aliens, but something more like a flattened field characterised by "fragmentation and equivalence." (p.232) Snow says Sobchak, "is sensationally described as a surface for play and dispersal, a surface across which existence and objects kinetically displace and display their materiality." (p.226) She goes on to point out that "a space perceived and represented as superficial and shallow, as all surface, does not conceal things: it displays them." (p.229) The archetypal illustration of the Disney film To

typical excursus on the virtual, not real, life of the electronic chip.

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typical illustration of this, she suggests, is the Disney film *Tron*, whose space is virtual, not real, literally flattened into the electronic circuitry of a computer.

To the example of *Tron*, I would add Max Headroom, another electronic persona, manifested on the screen of a cathode ray tube, who Arthur Kroker has called "the first citizen of the end of the world." Max's "three-dimensional" human prototype has a problematic relationship with him, both within the story-space of the series, and in terms of the ways in which the relationship can be understood when one attempts to "read" the show. For instance, in describing Max as "simplified," Newsweek (Apr 20, 1987) attempts to keep a reality fixed to his human other, by discussing [actor] Matt Frewer as the reality in whom his character, Edison Carter, is rooted. Carter, meanwhile, is the model for Max Headroom, the "real" simulation. Always, the "outer shell" of the simulation is taken as real; only the video screens represented within the video screen are perceived as informative and discarded. This typifies, to borrow a phrase from Bennington, "the perversion of the relation between the image and it's referent, the supposed real" (1984, p.13), a perversion that takes fragmentation for differentiation, and masks a distorting sarcasm. I believe the point applies as well to the fragmented presents taken to be past, present and future — a notion to which I'll return in a moment. Max Headroom's subtext places it a mere "20 minutes into the future": how much can have changed? This is a simulacrum of the future.

In Sobchak's argument, space and time are by definition, not analytically separable. I'm nominally more concerned with time, and her treatment of it, but evidence of a collapse of any difference between the two makes the distinct as arbitrary move in the service of convenience, rather than a theoretical claim. Sobchak re-thinks the representation of time in these films, and finds it to be a loop with more potent links to a past than to a future: when illusions are made to the future, when the diegesis is set in the future, it turns out — or I've already suggested — either to be rather like the present, but dirtier, or atavistically savage. In the latter case, there is a sort of triumph of "nature" over "culture", the outcome of the "system of differences" which makes signs signify.

Andrew Britton (1986, p.14) has a rather similar view of this decline. He describes the citons of *Blade Runner* as a sort of future/past complex representing capitalism stripped to its essence — "decadent, authoritarian, amorphously polyfoil... at once technically sophisticated and culturally debased." Sobchak points out that the new science fiction film tends to confute past, present and future in decor constructed as temporal pastiche and/or in narratives that either temporally turn back on themselves to confute past, present, and future, or are schizophrenia constituted as a "series of pure and unavowed presents in time". (1986, p.274) [My emphasis]

In the films Sobchak discusses, the variations thus played upon time range from this unpleasant past, to a nostalgia for a mythically perfect past state, which mirrors the current wishfulness for a world of the nineteen-thirties. To this Britton adds that "Reappropriate space fiction is there to tell us that the future will be a thrilling re-play of the past — with special effects." (1986, p.12)

The division, then, seems to be between future conceived as replicating a happier past, and futures conceived as
fictions: "alien" and Other become our familiar, our close relations if not ourselves. (p.239)

As the difference between ourselves and the other — and I believe that a conception of the future as something other is crucially implicated (and absent) here — as this difference disappears, with it is lost any sense of possibility for change; where, or what, is there left to change to? The same I want to offer for this is a postmodern aesthetic of time, it is a temporal component of what one might call a dis-allegation, a move that can be summarised using Sobchak's formula "Aliens R Us"...she draws a parallel between an "embrace of the other" and an "ensnare of alienation." We cannot be alienated from that which is who work as spokespeople for cultural contradictions revealed in such films representation of a symbolic catharsis of unrepresentative monstrosities." (1999, p.280) The difference which empowerment monstrosities allow us to see who we are has been lost; since they are not different either, the other times that give us a sense of our own temporal can no longer tell us that this is our time, a historically determined and necessarily ephemeral moment.

I don't want to suggest that what I'm describing occurs only in science fiction films, or only in films generally; one can observe the principle in virtually any medium one looks at. My previous paper was partly based, for instance, on reading of advertisements for Honda automobiles. Even clothing labels are involved, as in the case of the bilingual tag, which in French says ce fut; in English, it says, glance into the future, which is quite a different message, as it seems to position the future so that we can look into it now. This distinction between anticipation and accomplishment captures part of the theme.

I hope, in continuing this work, to comprehend the way in which such images of future are distributed across media, genres and audiences.

One measure, perhaps, that tells how pervasive this sense of the future has become, is to ask: How different from the present is any imaginable future? In Minds Meet, a short story by Walter Abish, a message received from Outer Space reads: Is there any other way to live?

A sense of inevitability — a phenomenon of naturalisation which necessarily includes a presumption of timelessness, this variety of temporar-ventrism — is clearly not new. But the connexion between this inevitability and a blank sense of non-possibility seems symptomatic of social relations and representations which, in their unwill- ingness to admit a different future, end up allowing none at all. It is not accidental that this non-con-ventriment urge for presenting a status quo should be accompanied by the restructurings of the future. The very title of the film Back to the Future, as Sobchak points out, speaks volumes about this foreclosure on options.

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Bibliography


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pulp
In representing the world in a mode of idealized nostalgia, a material intervention is made in the field of “lived social relations and representations” within which Janis locates the postmodern aesthetic in general. Rock to the Future is not unique in this respect; its most obvious companion is Peggy Sue Got Married, and it has, I believe, some parallels in the technological aesthetic of The Terminator, Brazil, and Max Headroom; there are also echoes of this in Walter Hill’s Streets of Fire and David Lynch’s Blue Velvet, where conventional markers of time become blurred, and the diegetic “no time” connotes the sameness of all times—a formula in which all times cover the period from about 1890 to the present.

I end on an irresolute note, with the suggestion that my own task is to read closely some of the films I’ve named, as well as other texts, in an attempt to specify in greater detail the ways in which this representation of the future is made.

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