EXCURSIONS

A Post-Modern Aesthetic of Our Time

Co-Opting the Future:

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, forecloses options and possibilities. In this paper, I want to continue my attempt to elaborate how this retheorising 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 it's 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 depoliticising 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 coexists 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're in the future now, if it looks just like today, who cares about tommorrow? It is 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 Frederic Jameson has called a "reverse millenarianism", a sense of endings — and to try to recuperate a refreshed and boadened sense of them. At least a part

of the effect of cultural texts is ideological — 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 "regressive and circular" sense, it's 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 diagetic present, in a devasted post-nuclear war 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 in 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 childhood, a field of possibilities whose only utility is to make travel to the future possible.
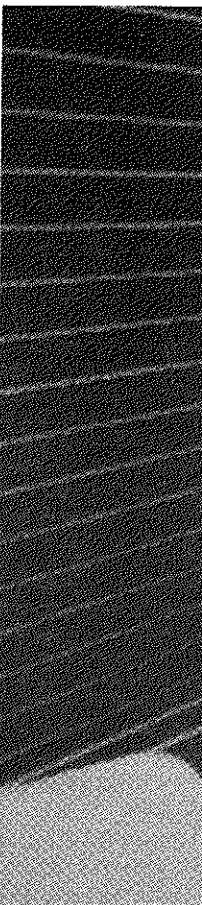
In contrast with this, in contemporary films of this genre, the possibilities lie in the past; the only future to be manipulated is the diagetic "now" — as the quote with which I opened this paper has it, "This is the future now." In *Back to the Future,* as Vivian Sobchak says, "time travel is marked in terms of brand-name identification." (1986, p. 248) 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 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 protaganist is about to embark into the diagetic future (as opposed to the now-as-future referred to in the title). The motivation for this trip, however, is decidedly un-futuristic — it is merely another instance of the conservative impulse that wishes to take advantage of time as it were, to enforce present values, inflected 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 promise 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 —invested prematurely with the values of middle-ag,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 alibi, as it were, for a huge sameness, a conflation of now with *then past*, and *then future*. It's 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 indentifies a contraction of the sense of space, and an associated change in the attitude to time. The former, she says, has become flattened, divested of both threat and promise — no longer a menacing warehouse of monstrous aliens, but something more like a flattened field characterised by "fragmentation and equivalence." [p.232] Space says Sobchak, "is semantically described as a surface for play and dispersal, a surface across which existence and objects kinetically displace and display their materiality." [p.228] She goes on to point out that "a space percieved and represented as superficial and shallow, as all surface, does not conceal things: it displays them."[p.229] The arche-

typal illustration o
the Disney film *Tr*
virtual, not real, lit
the electronic circu

To the example of
Max Headroom, a
presence, manifest
cathode ray tube, w
has called "the firs
the world." Max's "
human prototype h
relationship with h
story-space of the s
the ways in which
be understood whe
"read" the show. F
describing Max as "
Newsweek (April 2
keep a realness fixe
other, by discussin
as the reality in wh
Edison Carter, is ro
while, is the model
the "real" simulatic
"outer shell" of the
as *real*; only the vi
represented *within*
percieved as inauth
This typifies, to bor
Baudrillard, "the pe
relation between th
referent, the suppos

typal 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 presence, 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 "simulated," *Newsweek* (April 20, 1987) attempts to keep a realness 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 percieved as inauthentic and discarded. This typifies, to borrow a phrase from Baudrillard, "the perversity of the relation between the image and it's referent, the supposed real" (1984,

p.13), a perversity that takes fragmentation for differentation, and masks a distressing sameness. 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 subtitile 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 seperable. 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 distinctin an 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 allusions are made to the future, when the diegesis is set *in* the future, it turns out — as I've already suggested — either to be rather like the present, but dirtier, or atavistacally 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 ethos of *Blade Runner* as a sort of future/past complex representing capitalism stripped to its essences — "decadent, authoritarian, amorphously polyglot... at once technically sophisticated and culturally debased." Sobchak points out that the new science fiction film tends to conflate past, present and future in decor constructed as temporal pastiche and/or in narratives that either temporally turn back on themselves to conflate past, present, and future, or are schizophrenically constituted as a "*series of pure and unrelated 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 prior state, which mirrors the current wistfulness for a world of the nineteen-fifties. To this Britton adds that "Reaganite 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 a

E XCURSIONS

regress to something more basic, less cultivated and less appetising. There is something reassuring, therefore, as *now* becomes the *future*, to discover that things are still ok; to find that the contra-dictions which stand naked in *Blade Runner* — demonstrated, for example, by the juxtaposition of high technology with disastrous culture — are still safely clothed. Sobchak connects her reading to an analysis of what I want to suggest (after Jameson, quoted in Sobchak, p.244) is a "deeply lived structure of social relations and representations", one which is not yet dominant, but which is moving to occupy a number of niches in our culture.

In "We Build Excitement: Car Commercials and Miami Vice", Todd Gitlin

offers what is , in a sense, an alternative reading, but also a complementary one — a pervasiveness of the postmodern "blankness", which shares with Sobchak's writing a sense of the collapse of difference and a consequent draining out of possibilities. I should add that, although I am using a Baudrillardian vocabulary, the meaning of "collapse" in this context is only superficially similar to Baudrillard's; for him the loss of signifying difference was absolute, a loss of the real in favour of the *simulacrum*. For Gitlin, at least, the change is the replacement of the real with signification by simulation, a negative value. I doubt that anyone is, at this stage, in a position to decide which is the more accurate understanding.

In any case, I believe the connexion between Gitlin's and Sobchak's readings may be made where the latter says that

...in any culture where nearly everyone is regularly alien-ated from a direct sense of self, ...when everyone is less concious of existence than of its image, the once threatening science

fiction "alien" and Other become our familiars, our close relations if not ourselves. (p.229)

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 name I want to offer for this is a *postmodern aesthetic of time*. It is a temporal component of what one might call a dis-alienation, a move that can be summarised using Sobchak's formula "Aliens-R-Us" ...she draws a parallel between an "embrace of the 'alien' " and an "erasure of alienation." We cannot be alienated from that which is not marked as different; spatially, there can be no other place, no other way to live or place in which to do it; temporally there is left no avenue unexplored, and in all the avenues one discovers one's own time, perhaps in slightly different costume, or driving slightly more bulbous cars. In her "Manifesto for Cyborgs", Donna Harraway points out that "[M]onsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations". (1985, p.99) The monsters "displayed" within the conflated array of times I've described can't fill that definitional role, since we have met them, and they *are* us. Sobchak points, for example, to *ET*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Starman* or even *Repo Man* or *Liquid Sky*, in which the aliens are no weirder than us — what formerly was perceived as radically different turns out to be *essentially* the same.

Britton, too, comments that the *others*

who work as scapegoats for cultural contradictions revealed in such films represent "a symbolic catharsis of unrepresentative monsters." (1986, p.26) The difference which empowers monsters to tell us who we are has been lost; since they are not different either, the other times that give us a sense of our own temporal position 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 *vers le futur...* suggesting a conventional movement through time into the future; the other side, in English, 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 *tempero-centrism* — is clearly not new. But the connexion between this inevitability and a blank sense of non-possibilities seems symptomatic of social relations and representations which, in their unwillingness to admit a *different* future, end up allowing none at all. It is not accidental that this con-servative urge for presenting a status quo should be accompanied by the restructuiring of time. The very title of the film *Back to the Future*, as Sobchak points out, speaks volumes about this foreclosure on options.

In *representing th[e]* idealised nostalgi[c] tion is made in th[e] relations and repr[e] which Jameson lo[cates] aesthetic in genera[l] is not unique in th[e] obvious companio[n] *Married* , and it ha[s] parallels in the tec[hnology] of *The Terminato[r]* *Headroom*; there a[re] in Walter Hill's *St[reets of Fire]* David Lynch's *Blu[e Velvet]* conventional mark[ers] mixed, and the di[stinction] connotes the same[…] formula in which […] period from about […]

I end on an irresol[ute] suggestion that my[…] closely some of th[e…] well as other texts[…] specify in greater [detail] which this represe[ntation] is made.

Bibliography

Baudrillard, Jean. […] Agents Series/Sem[…] 1983.

Baudrillard, Jean. […] *Images.* 1984.

Britton, Andrew. ". […] *Politics of Reagani[sm]* *Movie 31/32,* Wint[er…]

Halliday, Julian. " […] *Future* .Unpublis[hed…] University of Illino[is…]

Haraway, Donna. " […] *Cyborgs: Science, T[…]* *Socialist Feminism[…]* *Socialist Review 8[0…]*

Jameson, Frederic. […] *The Cultural Logic […]* *New Left Review 14[…]* 1984).

Sobchak, Vivian. "[…] chapter 4 of *Screen[…]* edition. Ungar, Ne[w…]

Waters, Harry F., Ja[…] E. Smith. "Mad ab[out…] *Newsweek,* April 2[0…]

Julian G. Halliday
Institute of Commu[nications]
University of Illinoi[s…]
paign

In *representing* the world in a mode of idealised nostalgia, a material intervention is made in the field of "lived social relations and representations" within which Jameson locates the postmodern aesthetic in general. *Back 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 mixed, and the diegetic "no time" connotes the sameness of all times — a formula in which *all times* covers the period from about 1950 to the present.

I end on an irresolute note, with the suggestion that my next 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.

Bibliography

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. Foreign Agents Series/Semiotext(e), New York: 1983.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Evil Demon of Images.* 1984.

Britton, Andrew. *"Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment."* *Movie 31/32*, Winter 1986.

Halliday, Julian. *"Co-Opting the Future"* .Unpublished manuscript, University of Illinois, October, 1986.

Haraway, Donna. *"A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s."* *Socialist Review* 80, March/April 1985.

Jameson, Frederic. *"PostModernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism."* *New Left Review* 146 (July/August 1984).

Sobchak, Vivian. "Postfuturism", chapter 4 of *Screening Space*, Second edition. Ungar, New York: 1986.

Waters, Harry F., Janet Huck and Vern E. Smith. "Mad about M-M-Max". *Newsweek*, April 20,1987.

Julian G. Halliday
Institute of Communications Research
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Border/lines is an interdisciplinary, inter-genre magazine committed to explorations in all aspects of culture-- including popular culture, fine arts, gender, literature, multiculturalism, mass communications and political culture. Although its geographic focus is Canada, this is taken as meaning anything that is relevant to understanding Canadian culture.

Border/lines aims to fill the gap between academic journals and specialist cultural magazines. Our audience is diverse and eclectic; so too are our contributors, drawn from a broad base of writers, cultural producers and animators. Potential contributors should bear this diversity in mind, and try to address cultural issues with spunk, humour and the occasional sideways glance. For example, we would hope that theoretical debates would be opened up to the intelligent but non-initiated reader.

The magazine contains four sections: *"Excursions* " deals with specific cultural themes, topics and responses directed towards a non-specialized audience. It does not review shows, but attempts to provide contextualized readings of events, objects and presentations. Length ranges from 100 to 1500 words. *"Articles* " range from 1500 to 4000 words and include investigative journalism, critical analysis, theory, visual essays and short stories. *"Reviews* " vary in length according to number of books covered and also include review essays up to 4000 words. *"Junctures"* presents and debates other magazines, journals and aspects of radio, television or video that suggest a magazine format.

We welcome new writers, but suggest that potential contributors send an abstract of 200 words before submitting an article.

Manuscripts to be considered for publication should be sent to our editorial address:

31 Madison Avenue
Toronto, Ontario,
M5R 2S2

They should be sent in duplicate, typed on one side of the paper, and double-spaced with a wide margin (at least 5 cm). Submissions should be titled, and should include a short biography of interest to our readers. All correspondence should be accompanied by a stamped return envelope. If your final manuscript has been typed on a word processor, please send us a copy on disk so as to save our typesetter hours of labour.

Illustrations and other visual material
Writers should send illustrative work with their article, or at least indicate how it might fit into the large visual environment of *border/lines*. Visual artists are also encouraged to submit work. Please carefully consider the reproductive qualities of your submissions, as well as the page proportions of the magazine. All photos should be submitted unmounted as black and white glossy prints (as large as possible) showing good contrast and clear definition of outline. Charts, graphs, drawings and so on should be rendered in black ink on good white paper. Captions, photo credits and return address should be typed on an appended sheet of paper. Final design decisions rest with the collective.

Literature Citations
Footnotes are an overused convention and we discourage them. Far more access, ble would be a short list of references at the end of an article. If you must use footnotes, they should conform to the formats below:

BOOK

Dylan, Robert Z. *From Protest to Jesus: F: ·gment of an Agon.* San Francisco: Leading Lights, 1985.

CHAPTER IN BOOK OF MULTIPLE AUTHORSHIP

McCartney, Paul. "Money on the Mull of Kintyre", in Lennon, J. Harrison G., and Starr, R., eds. *Letting it Be.* Bermuda: Scam Press,1970.

THESIS OR DISSERTATION

Postmod, I.M. *Necrophilia in the Split Infinitives of Jacques Lacan.* M.A. thesis, York University, 1987.

MAGAZINE OR JOURNAL ARTICLE

Lenz, J., Zoom, Z., and Stieglitz-Leica, G. "Is There Life after the Image?" *Kodakery*, vol. 28, no. 6, June 1953.

Because *Border/lines* is a (non-paid) collective, editing is a slow process. Please expect to wait at least six weeks for a reply if you submit a manuscript. Contributors are automatically acknowledged and contacted about suggested revisions.