

00 :: 07 Introduction

At Reboot 11 in Copenhagen in 2009 – “a community event focused on digital change and culture” Bruce Sterling delivered a bristling keynote address in which he outlined his impressions of the coming decade (Sterling, 2009). He proposed two key terms: *dark euphoria*, proposed as the defining cultural temperament of the times and the modalities of its representation, *gothic high-tech*. I have borrowed Sterling’s terms and used them as the key defining concepts in this project. Where Sterling was explicitly referring to the “twenty-teens” the decade immediately following Reboot 11, I have taken a more historical view reaching back to the early decades of the 20th Century to present a much broader and evocative pathway to the current dark euphoric moment.

While this study will be contextualised by an examination of cultural artefacts by film makers, photographers and media artists it is also a narrative exposition on the visual documentation of key historical events which map the emergence of a pervasive dark cultural aesthetic. I have plotted out a sequence of events, which supports my central hypothesis by following a very particular strand of Modernism – the narrative of technoculture. I will achieve this by examining the visual language and manifestos of the Italian Futurists, the works of their French contemporary Robert Delaunay, the origins of corporate idealism in the World’s Fairs of 1901 and 1939, the design and symbolism of technology marketing, the ramifications of the Challenger Disaster in 1986, the symbolism of the Chelyabinsk Meteorite blast in 2013, the militarisation of robotics and artificial intelligence, and most potently the visual representation of the events of September 11 2001.



Figure 1 Bruce Sterling, "On favela chic, gothic high-tech" at Reboot 11, Copenhagen (Sterling, 2009). A full transcript is available [here](#).

In the broader sense, one could read this project as an investigation into the story of Modernity, Modernity and its various forms of visual representation as the screws tighten on a century of unprecedented horror and destruction. The polar dynamics of the trauma of the real – as experienced by people firsthand – and the detachment that the perception of that trauma engenders when viewed second hand via mediated simulation are central to this analysis. Running parallel to this rendering of Modernism is an exploration of the Utopian techno-futurist narrative – in science, politics and art – which has permeated 20th century cultural production and created a false-future space of technological idealism. This futurist expression is as much a cultural marker as an aesthetic blueprint preserved in the media archive of recent cultural history; a space largely online, mostly networked and nearly always digitally rendered. This project explores such artefacts within the framework of a visual communication analysis. As the narrative unfolds I will establish links to a range of socio-political conditions including techno-futurism, political idealism, corporate propaganda, commercial salesmanship, science fiction fantasy and military futurism in order to demonstrate that the neo-gothic roots of this emergent aesthetic is not limited to the arts and the media industries exclusively but across the full human experience. This is best represented by the presence of a deep visual trauma in contemporary image making, whether that be commercial, historical or fictitious.

The first half of this project will spend considerable time on early 20th Century events and their visual documentation in order to establish that a very long and complex transition is taking place in western society and particularly the culture produced. When I use the term millennia and its variants I am mostly referring to the decades that precede and the decades that follow the year 2000. I will also demonstrate that there exists alongside the futurist narrative a concurrent disconnect of the global audience from the recurring themes of the *end times* so entrenched in late 20th Century mass media and so prevalent in this millennial period. It would seem that the amplification of apocalyptic scenarios has reached such saturation levels that what remains in the absence of said destruction is instead a disconnect from *all* future scenarios – utopian, dystopian or otherwise. What is left then is a restless uncertainty about the future that haunts media and culture with a dark anxious gothic tone.

In theoretical terms of course, this aesthetic darkness has numerous precedents. Jaron Lanier has hypothesised that we are experiencing a “new Dark Age” (Lanier, 2011, p. 56) while Paul Virilio cites the “obscenity of ubiquity” of the real-time image loop – the vision machine – for the imposing atmosphere of the mediated apocalypse (Virilio, 2007, p. 11). Phillip Baudrillard’s pre-9/11 pre-millennium treaty on the “end of history” (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 450) Slavoj Žižek proffers instead an “endless utopia” of *things* as evidence of a gothic disquiet permeating a post-9/11 world

(Žižek, 2002). Baudrillard's notion of the "weak event" in relation to the Cold War and America's misadventures in Iraq (Baudrillard, 1989) and Fredric Jameson's writings on postmodernism especially the concept of the "allegory" are also important framing devices (Jameson, 1971). Aspects of these concepts are utilised in the analysis to establish the rhetorical tone of the discussion with the principle goal being to move on from these theories to propose new ground and fresh associations. The text also intersects regularly with science fiction imagery by noticing that science fiction symbolism and fantasy iconography appear in some very real and very peculiar places namely government sanctioned military research and the PR speak of government funded contractors. It is important then that several contemporary science fiction author's observations – outside of their fictional oeuvre – are included here, primarily Kim Stanley Robinson's *anticipations of strangeness* (K. S. Robinson, 2009), Bruce Sterling's *atemporality* (Sterling, 2010) and William Gibson's observation that the non-mediated world has become a *lost country* which we cannot get back to (Neale, 2000).

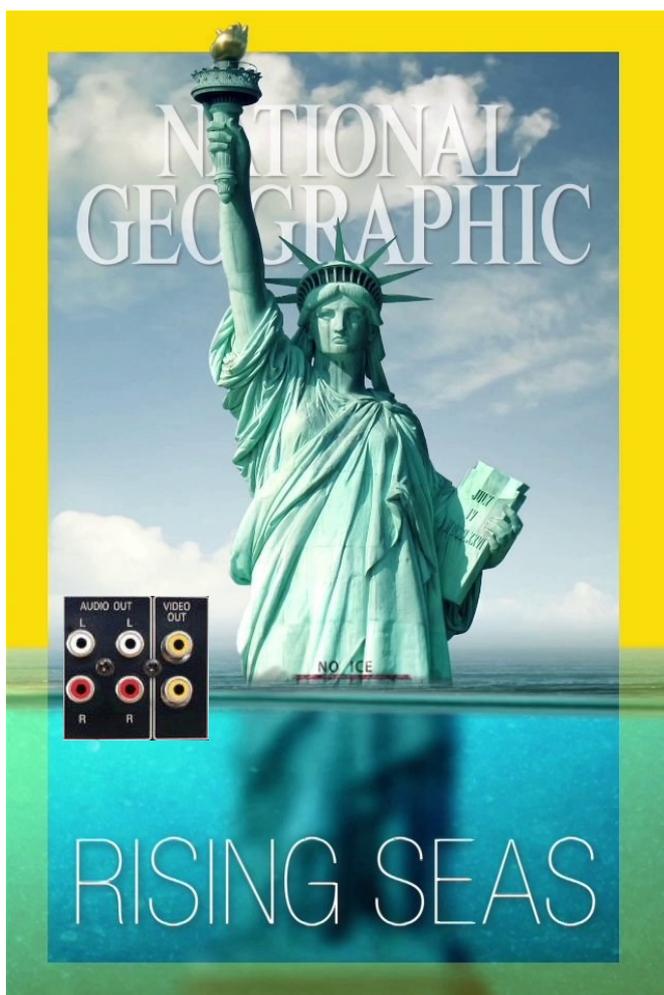


Figure 2 National Geographic, September 2013 issue, "Rising Seas" cover (National Geographic Society, 2013)

This project is an examination of artefacts at both ends of this spectrum including dystopian and apocalyptic Hollywood cinema, the representations of the liquid electric in film and advertising, the obsessions of the Italian Futurists, the promotional ephemera of tech companies, and the observations of contemporary media artists working in a post-9/11 environment. My use of the term *gothic high-tech* should be read as a reaction to this narrative – a very personal and very deep anxiety – about the competing futures and lifestyles that such media artefacts purport to predict by way of cultural signification and aesthetic construction. This anxiety exists because the brightest and most streamlined future presented by corporations and marketers would appear to contradict collectively

recognised realities: imminent climate collapse, dwindling natural resources, the dissolution of age-old traditions, the loss of privacy, the commodification of identity and the ubiquity of stealthy invasive technologies. All of this is in turn amplified by a steady stream of popular cultural products which depict exaggerated apocalyptic scenarios with surprising regularity.

By carefully examining a variety of cultural artefacts – across film, gaming, media arts and advertising – I will endeavour to frame the neo-gothic narrative of millennial technoculture as not just a millennial affliction but a prevailing condition with a deep history rooted in the 20th Century. A complicated and multifaceted history that is (like all gothic traditions) not immediately obvious and not entirely sure of its motivations. By conducting such an examination I hope to tease out the presence of a new dark aesthetic in contemporary digital culture. This, I will demonstrate, is a dense and evolving narrative that has been operating at the intersection of art and technology for the best part of a century. In this regard, both components of the project – the exegetical study and its creative component – should be read as a visual communications analysis focusing on the rhetorical import of design decisions inherent in the construction of key media artefacts and the political and social effects of the aesthetic principles used. Together these artefacts represent cultural markers – plot points if you will¹ – that hint at the gothic anxieties below the surface and map the trajectory of technoculture deep into the archive of the contemporary network.

In ***Part One: An Introduction to the Territory*** I outline the theoretical position of this exegetical project by examining Bruce Sterling’s notions of dark euphoria and gothic high-tech and a broader interpretation of our relationship with the world we live in. Particularly important is our collective understanding of the concept of the Earth and how we have re-organised our interpretation of its signification in the age of the World Wide Web and electronic interpersonal communications. I will state how Manuel Castell’s “space of flows” and his definition of the “informational society” are important in framing the location and methodology of this investigation.

I introduce the theoretical foundations which compliment these terms, in particular those of Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek. In this section I introduce the *iUser* as a composite character, both principal investigator and primary audience member, for the media artefacts and the associated narrative plot points unpacked by this project. I also define the primary site of this investigation as the *Cyber City* – a mostly western, highly networked metaphorical urban space in which these cultural events take place.

¹ Hayden White describes this method of narrative construction through assemblage of cultural events as the procedure of “emplotment”. In his 1978 essay, *Content of the Form*, he writes: “Any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear weight of being told in any number of different kinds of stories” (White, 1978).

Part Two: The Emergence of the Digital Aesthetic establishes our Modernist relationship with vertiginous space, electricity, and human flight. In this section I unpack the concept of simulation and the making of the invisible visible. The concepts of synaesthesia and simultaneism by the Italian Futurists and the chromatic painting in the works of Robert Delaunay are examined alongside the works of contemporary video artists and the corporate image making of Samsung, Sony, Google and Microsoft. Thomas Edison's promotional films documenting the illuminated pseudo-cityscape of the 1901 World's Fair are presented as one of the first cinematic techno-futurist simulations. While the World's Fair of 1939 in Flushing Meadows New York is highlighted as a pivotal moment in the techno-cultural narrative foregrounding the utopian image constructions by electronics manufacturers and communication service providers.

Advertisements, corporate films and science fiction cinema which utilise simulated electricity, liquid energy and specifically luminous blue electrical currents to communicate the invisible intelligence, speed and power of technology are examined in detail. This passage illustrates that the use of electricity as both metaphor and aesthetic embellishment has barely altered since the manifestos of the Italian Futurists some one hundred years earlier.

In **Part Three: The Promise** I present the most explicit rendering of the technologically streamlined utopian ideals of the corporation as presented by Microsoft, Sony Ericsson and Nokia. We see how the spaces rendered in these advertisements are free from advertising and corporate marketing in a way that makes the everyday seem futuristic – minus the commercial presence of products and their advertorial ephemera. This section also includes an extended examination of the commercialisation and militarisation of space and the incorporation of science fiction tropes into military space projects – the new space dreaming – by deconstructing the post-NASA hyper-simulation of fantasy, paranoia and military bravado.

I show how acts of simulated reality blended with CGI fantasy in the hyper-detail of digital image making in DIY cinema, animation and major video game titles evoke a dark neo-gothic tendency in reaction to and sometimes in concert with corporate media production. I explore the practice of video assemblage via remixing and supercut techniques to emphasise the notion of the remix as a very contemporary and very powerful ontological force in the manufacture of meaning.

The last section of this document, **Part Four: The Darkness**, highlights the contemporary state of the dark euphoric experience and demonstrates the notion of gothic high-tech at its most explicit. Using Charlie Brooker's concept of the "black mirror" I dissect the technological symbolism of liquid metal, conflict minerals and machine intelligence. I propose that a superior liquid like substance has always existed across a range of disciplines and technologies all the way back to the

origins of the Big Bang, this I argue is the aesthetic inverse of the liquid electric as proposed in the previous section.

I return to the Italian Futurists and their deep attraction to human flight and vertiginous space, particularly the later works of Domenico Bell and the work of French artist Robert Delaunay. This feeds into a discussion of *King Kong* and the Hindenburg disaster to foreground the notion of falling that so characterises Bruce Sterling's dark euphoric moment. The 1986 Challenger disaster is examined in detail as well as the work of contemporary media artists whom address the notion of falling. This is then woven into a discussion of Robert Drew's photo *The Falling Man* and the continual revisiting of this visual motif in popular culture. I will question the absence of superheros at America's most vulnerable time of need and contextualise the gradual darkening of the superhero aesthetic. The move away from a skyward vision towards a more earthly perspective is foregrounded in an analysis of the first person perspective in film, video games and 3D animation. This will indicate that it is in fact ourselves – the viewer, the end user – who must now assume the role of falling object.

The final chapters of this section deal with the symbolic objects of gothic high-tech and their associated anxieties and uncertainties. I demonstrate the aesthetic links between military machine vision, computer gaming technology and science-fiction cinema. The proliferation of drone technologies and the increased focus on robot automation in military conflicts and defence research projects is discussed in relation to the dominant gaze of the vision machine. The works of media artists Trevor Paglen, James Bridle and Thomas Ruff are presented as evidence of the small number of voices operating in direct critique of these developments.

I conclude by reflecting on a personal visit to Ground Zero in New York City. A site of endlessness, a site of absence. The end game of all of this is the very gothic rejection of the techno-futurist quest and a simultaneous anxiety for the dominant power structure created by ubiquitous machine vision in what can only be described as a collective turning away.