Figure 77 Artist Wang Yuyang poses with his installation Artificial Moon (Yuyang, 2011)
02 :: 03 Liquid Electric Ambitions

The Impressionists, whom I have called scientific temperaments, were the real initiators of the break with the past. After their arrival a new light coloured the world. They recreated it and laboured throughout their existence to discover new elements that our epoch has made its own, because on these, as on new foundations, would rise the luminous edifice of the future Aesthetic.

- Umberto Boccioni, *Futurist Painting* lecture given at the Circolo Artistico, Rome, May 29, 1911 (Boccioni, 1911b, p. 232)

In the landscape of the Cyber City the iUser is connected to the network, tethered to the unseen data cloud and in touch with the experience of technology and information exchange through the corporatized visualisation of the contemporary digital aesthetic. Here, the representation of the unseen, or the soul of experience as the Futurists would have it, becomes a vivid – if somewhat abstract – visual metaphor in which the technologies that construct the colourful chromatic energy of technoculture are now components and applications within the very devices and services which the end user is being sold. The visual metaphor is a diversion designed to earn trust through distraction and spectacle and to cajole the consumer into buying into this particular variant of the machine ambience. This of course is Advertising 101, as General Electric surmised in the 1920s with their analysis of electric advertising signage and the allure of its illuminated aesthetic: “The attracting power of brightness is instinctive – its appeal to the senses is the most elementary sort … automatic motion is an exhaustive characteristic of electrical advertising and its appeal is also dependent upon instinctive feelings. The use of colour is one of the most powerful means of creating an atmosphere – an inner feeling – a pleasant association and these are among the chief functions of displaying advertising” (General Electric Company, 1925).

The use of electrification to advertise a product or illuminate a business or represent the “essence” of a product’s process have long been employed by manufacturer’s and marketeers since the introduction of street lighting and electric signage at the turn of the century. Yet the representation of technology in contemporary culture through advertising is problematic, much of new media technology and the business of information retrieval and exchange is an often invisible
ethereal practice. Wireless communications, access points, data quotas, network speeds, search algorithms, image and audio compression are largely conceptual ‘back end’ technologies which are neither visible nor explicitly understood by the end user. To promote or eulogise such technologies, advertising agencies and their manufacturing clients represent technology in a manner that is akin not only to the Futurist artists of the early 20th century or the complex constructions of the 1930s World Fairs but also the very first marketing strategists who employed electrical signage in advertising. While the Futurist’s compositional techniques employed to represent the soul and psychological state of the individual and to evoke the dynamism of electricity and mechanised technology through paint on canvas, the contemporary media designer is now using technology and electricity to promote and sell a similar agenda. Hyper-charged via the high contrast primary colour compositions of TV and web advertising, specifically brand and product promotion, these companies are conjuring a new universe, recasting the dynamics of speed, verticality, electricity, and sound in a similarly provocative cloak of technological utopianism. Woven together these elements conjure a powerful narrative of a compelling existential technological reality – one that is alive, cognisant and embedded. As Balla and Depero noted in the Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe, to achieve such a mandate the Futurist architect, “... relies on plastic dynamism to provide a dynamic, simultaneous, plastic and noisy expression of universal vibration” (Balla & Depero, 1915, p. 197).

But where Microsoft and Google’s image making is reserved mostly to corporate identity collateral rather than technological application, corporations such as Sony, IBM, BskyB, DHL, Samsung, Mazda and Comcast are among a group of publishers, manufacturers and service providers who actively seek to attract consumers to their wares via the metaphorical representation of broader technological visions and the Futurist possibilities of their application. Indeed, the use of visual metaphor and the amalgamation of language into easily deployed catch phrases and slogans – even singular symbolic motifs such as “i” and “X” – are essentially about the recasting of the glowing orb into the chromatic ‘vibration’ of the techno-cultural narrative. This re-ordering of the universe according to the supposed technological suprematism inherent in these products and services is not only an appropriation of the Futurist oeuvre but also a gleaning of distinctly contemporary notions as well. Familiar ideological buzz words populate this progressive futuristic space, such as sustainability, virtuality, information ecology, augmentation, regeneration, globalisation, surveillance, networked data, and artificial intelligence. This language is supplemented by the use of metaphor and symbolism in a manner reminiscent of the “tiny robots” from WC Handy’s Leave It To Roll-Oh film who were portrayed as the instigators of all of the sophistication and intelligence hidden within a 1940s era Chevrolet. But now there really is something lurking within, in this period of rapidly evolving computational power and miniaturisation, there are a plethora of “tiny brains”
humming away at our behest. The distinction here is that the engineering and the manufacturing of technological change in the early Futurist period was identifiable, solid, robust – trains, steam liners, aeroplanes and cars – highly visible industrial and mechanical icons of early modernity. The current technological shift – the information flow – is operating on an entirely different premise.

Its changes are – paradoxically – less visible, less controllable and more molecularly pervasive than in previous periods of technological change. The Iron Age, The Agrarian Revolution, the first and second Industrial Revolutions all delivered us new tools that could be grasped by most... One could understand the workings of new inventions – the gramophone, the record, the light bulb, the car engine, the radio. You could see them, pull them apart, and put them back together again. Inventions came more slowly and were not immediately global or viral (Christoff, 2013).

The complex notion of “liquid modernity” is posited by Zygmunt Bauman: “The liquidizing powers have moved from the ‘system’ to ‘society’, from ‘politics’ to ‘life-policies’ or have descended from the ‘macro’ to the ‘micro’ of social cohabitation” (Bauman, 2000, p. 7). In this space, in the Cyber City, the ingredients of the techno-cultural narrative liquefy – as dispersed by the new media authors and their marketeers – accumulating in the seductive guise of the digital object. The authors of the techno-cultural narrative make busy with the gloss and the sparkle of Hollywood to explain away the complexity of this technological shift instead replacing the mechanics and science of their creation with a gaudy high-definition stream of media content. The flow becomes electric. Information and meaning just a diversion. The seeds of Sterling’s gothic high-tech bubbling to the surface.

In the Cyber City this electricity is kinetic. Steel and flesh and gorilla glass are tangible physical surfaces of interconnectedness bridged only by the fluid dynamics of motion graphics. This mode of experience advertising relies on movement, frame rates and motion control, the dynamism of its properties transition across the colour spectrum as waves, currents, loops and spikes. It is the...
liquid electric ambition of the Futurist narrative authored for the screen and deployed right into the palm of your hand. This kinetic fluid visual construct is the stylisation of a “near future” reality. In this hard to define space the benefits of technological progress operates in the interface between science and fiction: media designers become the new magicians conjuring clarity through screen resolution and colour depth, promising an “immersive experience” to promote imagination and dreaming; connectivity and contextual augmentation via wireless technology and pre-emptive service delivery; convenience and comfort through interface design and ergonomics; information delivered with speed, compression and specificity; and above all, a future that is clean, pure, sustainable, and within reach - almost. Almost because this future is a fiction, almost because high-tech promise is a promise that cannot actually be “experienced”, almost because the future is always invariably only ever just out of reach. These are distinctly marketing constructs of the technocultural narrative in the new millennium. They blend the basic elements of the Futurist technique with the hybrid landscape of the information society.

Even in a literal structural sense, there are many instances in which the approach is a direct extension of the chromatic colour experiments of the Futurists. In the case of the Comcast in the United States, BSkyB in the United Kingdom and Samsung online (see Figure 79) their marketing collateral directly references the act of mixing paint in liquid form to represent the technological advancements in colour fidelity and screen resolution.

Figure 79 Primary colours and paint montage (From Top) Sky+ HD Supertelly commercial (WCRS, 2010); Sony Bravia ‘Paint’ commercial (Fallon, 2006); Introducing Samsung Galaxy S4 web only commercial (Cheil, 2013a); Samsung LEDTV Series 7 ‘New Species’ commercial (1st Ave Machine, 2009)
The lead online web video for Samsung’s most recent entry into the Smartphone market, the Galaxy S4, uses an abundance of primary colour imagery including buckets of paint, a bunch of balloons and a set of coloured pencils to denote the “unimaginable clarity” and “immersive experience” of their new device. The opening gambit of the promo clip claims that the Galaxy S4 is “creating a richer, simpler and fuller life” for the user. The device’s primary tag line - which appears alongside all of its advertising collateral - is the descriptor: “Life Companion”. This is probably the biggest conceit of a campaign which promises that “life becomes more fun” with a Galaxy S4, that the device will make “daily life more convenient”, “relationships” will “grow closer”, and most importantly, your “wellbeing is cared for” (Cheil, 2013a). BSkyB, which provides cable and satellite subscription television and internet services in the United Kingdom, picked up the paint-as-metaphor technique for their 2010 promotional video for their new set top box, Sky+HD (see top image Figure 79). The advert featured an assembly line of robots injecting the Sky+HD cable TV box with tubes of colour from gigantic paint filled vats, while engineers regaled in NASA-style outfits (or are they “colour scientists”?) lurked nearby with requisite clipboards and hard hats. The LED information screen on the Sky+HD Box blinks “Super Colour”; the advertisement’s tag line? “Believe In Better” (WCRS, 2010). The advert is sound tracked with

The web only video, was the second most popular commercial advertorial on YouTube in the month of March 2013 and at the time of writing had been viewed over 12 million times. (Google Inc., 2013)
Gene Wilder’s beguiling take on Pure Imagination from the original Charlie & the Chocolate Factory film (M. Stuart, 1971). The lyrics perfectly articulate the consumer electronic industry’s fantasy idealism: “There is no life I know / To compare with pure imagination / Living there you’ll be free / If you truly wish to be” (Bricusse & Newley, 1971).

In a strange act of retro-fitted futurist logic, Sony followed their famous ‘Bouncing Balls’ commercial of 2005 with a sequence of exploding paint bombs in a disused tenement block in Glasgow Scotland (see Figures 79 & 80). Here the colour is vertical, violent and exploding; the primary colour spectrum detonating up the face of a 30 storey building is akin to a vibrant act of colour demolition. Internally placed cameras transmit sequences of paint exploding towards the camera - crashing through kitchen windows, torrents cascading down graffiti scrawled stair wells and blood red fountains of paint exploding up from beneath the earth below a children’s playground like an outtake from The Shining (see Figure 81). Each of these videos is emblematic of an ongoing trend in the use of colour symbolism via paint, liquid and electricity to promote an experience of technology. From the iconography of the company branding of software publishers such as Microsoft and Apple through to device manufacturers such as Samsung and Sony to service providers such as BSkyB and Comcast, media designers are using a bright, loud, primary coloured aesthetic to communicate high technology concepts to move the advertiser’s products.

Elsewhere corporations and the advertising agencies they employ have taken Futurist symbolism a step further by utilizing cinematic production techniques to animate the soul and the wisdom of the machine via the fluid kinetic movement of digitally animated electricity. Sometimes this is used as a framing device, to symbolise power, technological achievement and dynamic functionality, and sometimes it has a more commercial conceit of making an inanimate device appear alive. This is evident in the series of clips for a range of mobile phones released by HTC in late 2011. For the HTC Titan, bristling blue prickly static collides on the screen to form the body of the mobile phone as if the phone itself has emerged from
this electrical maelstrom, a visual motif which is repeated throughout commercial when a function or process is in need of an energetic highlight (see Figure 83). A similar approach is used for the HTC Radar, in which purple liquid energy is seen to be zapping and zipping across the screen, with an electric charge sizzling within the device’s midst, the purple liquid electric clouds birthing the body of a HTC phone from its interstellar cosmos (see Figure 84). Such techniques are relatively common in television advertising and brand packaging and can be seen across a range of promotional materials for a variety of industries, especially in an era when the software packages used to develop such fluid, flame and smoke effects are no longer the exclusive preserve of high-end Hollywood effects houses. The creative application of these motion effects as metaphor however, rather than simply a glossy diversion, is a far more sophisticated operation. Contemporary advertising agencies have mastered the behaviour of this precious liquid energy and their corporate clients the language of the techno-cultural narrative and by doing so they have channelled their own creation myth. The recurring motif is of a primordial gas, sometimes a celestial object, but most commonly a coalescing of liquid and kinetic electricity which emerge from the dark veil of soupy black nothingness to give life, to mimic intelligence and foster a futuristic idealism in their ecosystem of products and their users. The message is simple: from nothing, from darkness, comes light.

DHL is a global courier service, they call themselves the “Logistics Company of the World”. They deal in the speedy passage of physical objects and rely on accurate data collection and data sharing to facilitate that task. They are in many ways a truly modernist construct with a very real and tangible service. Yet DHL also inhabit a space which fuses notions of global systems, technological innovation and the dynamics of high speed transportation with more social aspects of information exchange. Their stated “purpose” for instance, which is outlined in their corporate mission statement, is to deliver “joy”, “prosperity” and “trust” (Deutsche Post DHL, 2013), a very liquid manoeuvre from the complexity of the system to affective sentiments of cohabitation. For the last few years DHL’s global brand has been using a glittering yellow comet like streak of electricity to articulate this bridge between the system and the individual by animating the “logistics” of speed, machinery, people and information. Their ‘Power of Yellow’ campaign and their strategic corporate profiles on their YouTube channel (see Figure 85A - C) utilise the gamut of Futurist imagery including object orientated illumination, incandescently lit cityscapes and images of extreme speed and modernity – planes, Formula One racing cars, bullet trains – all of them out run by “the power of yellow”. Even the Furturist obsession with verticality is reflected in very obvious appearances by the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the Tokyo Communications Tower in Japan, the UN Building in New York City and the ultimate Futurist icon, the Eiffel Tower, as the yellow bolt of electricity zips across continents at hypersonic speeds. But this application is not restricted to the
Figure 85 Advertising featuring liquid and kinetic electricity A)–C) DHL “The International Specialists” TV Commercial, (180 Amsterdam, 2011) D) DHL The World in 2050 corporate video (Deutsche Post DHL, 2012) E) IBM commercial, Data Anthem F) & G) IBM commercial, Data Energy; H) IBM commercial, Data Baby (Ogilvy & Mather, 2010)
mere wonders of transportation and logistics, DHL is also in the future business, their corporate video, *The World In 2050 – A Future Study*, presented by the company’s CEO Frank Appel veers greatly from the concept of logistics and transportation and discusses what he calls, “Customised Lifestyles” placing the idea of society and the individual at the core of its mantra: In “2050 our world is much more colourful, diverse and local. Technical progress, especially in 3D printing turns consumers into producers. Self-made and individually tailored becomes the new ethos for society” (Deutsche Post DHL, 2012).

IBM observes a very similar methodology in their 2011 series of commercials which mix visual metaphors with social applications for complex systems and services in the almost here, the very near and the distant future. ‘Data Anthem’ was the signature commercial of a campaign that featured a lead in graphic resembling a sub atomic act of nuclear fission supposedly to denote the origins of data and its myriad of complex applications (see Figure 85E). In a whole suite of corporate videos on their Vimeo channel, IBM employs to dazzling effect, the liquid electric metaphor. Swirling streams of kinetic blue and red radiating light dance along power lines, the full spectrum of the rainbow swirls between wind turbines on sprawling coastlines, shimmering iridescent ripples rise from a new born baby’s chest, while ribbons, arrows and cellular shapes move in the virtual x and y axis of distant server farms (see Figure 85F & G). The heavy measured male narration in each instance begins, “This is data,” as we regard yet another simulation of the invisible machinations of information flows – big sexy graphics for big databases of personal information, the currency of the new economy. In each instance the colours are rich, the movement is fluid and the archetype is electricity. Each video segment concludes with an equally measured plea to the viewer: “Let’s build a smarter planet” (Ogilvy & Mather, 2010). American internet service provider Comcast ran a series of commercials in 2007 for the introduction of its new “High Speed Data with Power Boost” service. Speed is obviously the core attribute on offer yet they chose a liquid substance and a primary colour palette to articulate the concept. In one commercial typical of the series, ‘Pagoda’, set in the “Comcastic abs”, a young scientist presents to his superiors a syringe full of a mysterious substance. The syringe appears to contain iridescent strips of primary colours, (a marketing necessity perhaps as they also feature in the Comcast logo of this period). A man standing behind a large table is given half a dozen decks of playing cards, the syringe is then squeezed into his hand and a shimmering liquid metal – similar to mercury – oozes forth (see Figure 86). The man gleefully rubs his hands together and proceeds to construct an elaborate palace of cards in a matter of seconds. The young scientists is delighted, “It’s a Pagoda!” he declares triumphantly. His boss, clearly impressed, turns to him and asks, “Have you got more?” After a beat and the requisite raised

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34 3D printing is an odd example of Futurism for DHL to cite. If this indeed is the future of 3D printing as envisioned by DHL (see Figure 85D) it would no doubt spell the end for DHL if it were ever to come to pass.
eyebrow we cut to a set of sliding doors opening into a vast warehouse - in a similar manner to the aforementioned BSkyB commercial (or is it *Raiders of the Lost Ark*?) - to reveal rows and rows of huge vats of the primary coloured ingredients (see **Figure 86**). These icons of the chromatic colour experiments of Delaunay and Boccioni appear here again, this time as the base properties of a mysteriously transformative liquid called “PowerBoost” or as it is described in another video in the series, “Comcastic High Speed Juice”, which produces unimaginable speed and power (Goodby Silverstein and Partners, 2007b). This campaign was followed in 2009 by a web based series of commercials and a now defunct website called *Comcast Town* in which a user could create their very own virtual world resplendent with all the trappings of Comcast’s many services and products. The series of commercials which direct audiences to the site feature futuristic locations where people travel on a form of personal transport called Power Boosters, squirrels play guitars and families gleefully sing and merrily dance at the prospect of living in a super-connected urban enclave with ubiquitous super-fast broadband internet. The lyrics from the “*Future Hopping*” spot which are sung over a repurposed tune from the film *Juno* (Reitman, 2007), are giddily fantastic and technically aloof yet they perfectly reflect the near future narrative so typical of techno-hyped advertising: “Happy hi-tech automatic / Exponentially ecstatic / Speeding forward, future hopping / Always dreaming, never stopping” (Goodby Silverstein and Partners, 2009). This genre of advertising, while vague on the specifics of their technological superiority and even more obscure when it comes to their application, also peddles a human centred narrative, the “co-habitation” of Zygmunt Bauman’s light modernity. This techno-cultural construction is built on the fantasy that the devices and services being sold will somehow “come alive” in the hands of their prospective owners. In most cases the imagery tries very hard to give the viewer a sense that these products – while being unimaginably sophisticated and technologically superior – have very personal attributes. While the network maybe electric, the interface is somehow organic. They have an inherent “social” value,

![Figure 86](image.png)

**Figure 86** Comcast High Speed Data with PowerBoost commercial, “Hair” (Goodby Silverstein and Partners, 2007a)

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35 A link to a promotional video for the Comcast Town website and social media environment by the agency who produced the campaign, Goodby, Silverstein & Partners (San Francisco) can still be found at the One Show Interactive awards [website](#) for 2010. Promotional videos and creative credits can be found at the [Inspiration Room](#).
they have “soul”, and they take our “wellbeing” to heart. This is something completely at odds with the iconography of the liquid electric narrative and the networked lifestyle being depicted in the snappy imagery and cool sizzling motion graphics. But in most of these commercials there are carefully placed glimpses of these humanising attributes at key narrative junctures.

In the IBM “Data Baby” commercial we see intimate images of an infant, the data curling and swirling around her clenched fist (see Figure 87 Top Left); in the DHL “International Specialists” campaign the yellow streak of energy, after circumnavigating the globe at incomprehensible speeds finally comes to rest in a gentle buzzing swirl of kinetic energy in the palm of a hand (see Figure 87 Top Right); the Samsung Galaxy 4 campaign website greets the idle web surfer with the banner “Life Companion” and the golden hour imagery of two young girls one white and one distinctly not, holding hands and skipping innocently through a neighbourhood park juxtaposed against the graphic of two Galaxy S4s, one white one black (see Figure 87 Middle). But the synergy between the technically obscure use of the liquid electric imagery and the human properties of the devices and services they perpetuate is most literally depicted in the web video “Unleash Your Fingers: Next Generation” for Samsung Mobile France for the 2012 edition of the Galaxy SIII handset (see Figure 87 Bottom). In this choreographed video two performers directly handle the swirling aqua graphics, stretching them and framing them with their hands and their bodies, considering their plastic-electric properties as controlled yet dynamic substances. The advertisements conceit of course, is that the liquid electric motion of the graphics and the symbiotic movement of the two performers embody the potential dynamism and obvious inherent humanity of the product and the fluid dreamlike state of lifestyle the device permits. Yet, in this space of flows where there is no device, no text to allude to functions or services, the imagery is completely devoid of any technological artefact. Rather it is a streamlined performance of an explicitly artificial nature – ultimately the graphics, the data and the liquid electricity giveth life. The information flows through us, is all around us and in this space, in this closed world we have become the embodiment of the technocultural narrative. But what is presented here is a false dream. As Thomas Hughes observes, this is “an artificial space inside a computer or a computer network. In this space nothing exists except abstract non-physical information” (T. P. Hughes, 2004, p. 106).

In a contemporary twist on the Chevrolet film, Leave It To Roll-Oh from 1939, Mazda Corporation has produced a promotional film entitled, “The All-New Mazda6 Infographic”. A central part of its ‘Driving Re-Energised’ campaign for 2012, the video was a web only infomercial designed to highlight the technologically advanced design and futuristic engineering of the new Mazda6 line of vehicles. In terms of the scope of its language and superfluous sloganeering the video has similarities in tone with both the DHL and IBM campaigns and matches the ambition of the Samsung
Figure 87 The personal touch of the liquid electric (From Top Left): IBM commercial, Data Baby (Ogilvy & Mather, 2010); DHL “The International Specialists” TV Commercial, (180 Amsterdam, 2011); “Samsung Galaxy S4 Life Companion” website home page image (Cheil, 2013b); “Unleash Your Fingers: Next Generation” web video for Samsung France (Heaven, 2012)
clip by claiming that the vehicle represents the “soul of motion” (Garage Team Mazda, 2012). This reassuring fantasy of political correctness conjured by Garage Team Mazda is designed to relieve the potential driver of any feelings of culpability for the blatant act of carbon pollution production that driving a 6 cylinder car produces. This vehicle we are told, is an “energy conservation machine”, it has a “regenerative breaking system” that “redistributes its energy reserves” to help run the vehicle’s electrical instruments, such as its “interior lighting” and “climate control.” The commercial claims these components are evidence of Mazda’s “smart futurist thinking” and that – somewhat confusingly – that the car embodies “the spirit of an animal that is ready to pounce on its prey”. The commercial which is comparatively long, at 2 minutes and 49 seconds, then goes on to explain the benefits of systems it calls “i-Eloop” and “i-Stop” by employing blue kinetic streams of electricity emanating around the vehicle while an enthusiastic voiceover tells us how “clever” and “revolutionary” the vehicle is while reassuring us that inside this “brilliant new Mazda” technology “lives and breathes” (see Figures 88A & B). As in most commercial appropriations of this kind, Mazda’s in-house design agency has adopted a (now) familiar tactic of blending the language of climate science and computer technology into their pitch. A potent, if distracting mix. This comes at the expense of more standard automotive concepts such as “power” and “control” and “speed” and “safety”; rather we are regaled with an alluring graphical expose on the unseen machinations of computer logic embedded within the language and iconography of its branding. The liquid electric ambition here is the “soul of motion” as it is in the follow-up campaign in which Mazda partners with Paramount Pictures to promote both its 2013 Mazda6 model and the forthcoming Star Trek sequel, “Into the Darkness”. Here we see the same aesthetic design employed: a cool, gilded electric blue within a void of infinite blackness in which the outline of the Starship Enterprise gels seamlessly with similar imagery of the “all new” Mazda6 (see Figures 88C & D). Like the “tiny robots” in the Chevrolet film and Google Search’s “404 Error” screen a similar fantasy has been constructed by LG Electronics, for their 2008 campaign “Advance Technology. Beautifully Hidden” (see Figure 89).

While the title itself is a neat summary of the conceit of the digital objects collected in this survey of techno-cultural advertorials, it is also a fabulous convergence of millennial iconography. The techno-futurist dreamscape is swiftly constructed in a domestic living room by everyday metallic household objects which morph from the conventional forms into exotic luminescent automatons. These regularly inanimate objects perform a merry dance – buzzing, whirring and clicking as they orchestrate a holographic projection of pastel rainbows of hot white lights, a large glowing orb and finally a swirling gaseous electric light. The advert cites numerous science fiction touchstones in

36 Even as recently as April 2014, Mazda was still using the electric blue aesthetic in their promotional design with the “Neuron” advert for the new Mazda 6 Atenza launch in China.
Figure 88 The electric blue aesthetic in cinema (From Top Left) A)-C) The All-New Mazda6 Infographic web only promotional video for Mazda Australia (Garage Team Mazda, 2012); D) Star Trek: Into the Darkness/ Mazda Corp. product tie-in (Abrams, 2013); E) Star Trek: The Motion Picture (Wise, 1979); F) Tron (Lisberger, 1982); G) Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi (Marquand, 1983); H) The Matrix (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)
rapid succession, the mechanics of *Short Circuit* (Badham, 1986) and the *Transformers* series of films (Bay, 2007), the holographic visualisations of the original *Star Wars* trilogy (Lucas et al., 1977-1983), the cute wobbly choreography of *Toy Story* (Lasseter, 1995) and, most evocatively, the ethereal bejewelled swarm of space crafts in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977). Then in a classic Spielberg trope, the family sedan pulls into the drive – the domestic realism interrupting the other-worldly fantasy – the headlights reflecting up the living room wall scattering the tiny automans as they hurriedly scurry up the mantelpiece and fold themselves like Tetris blocks into the relative safety of the sleek LG LCD black mirror perched upon the wall. Once again all meaning, all understanding, all potential examination of the product and its technology is subjugated by a facade of the digital sublime rendered to stunning effect by the dense Futurist imagery.

This meeting of technology advertising and the promotion of a science fiction fantasy film brings full circle the history of this prominent visual aesthetic in both advertising and motion picture cinema. The heritage of sparkling, crackling – sometimes violent – blue electrical energy is dotted throughout science fiction cinema from the mysterious unknowable energy field lurking on the outer edges of the galaxy in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Wise, 1979) (see Figure 88E), to the first appearance of a visible representation of “the force” in the original Star Wars trilogy when the Emperor infuriated by Luke Skywalker’s loyalty to his friends and his failure to join him on the dark side, conjures a deadly blast of blue electricity to strike down his young counterpart (see Figure 88G). And perhaps most tellingly, for the approaching millennial period that would emerge and gather pace in the early 1980s, the “digitiser” in the first incarnation of the *Tron* series uses a blue electrical laser beam to decode the molecular properties of human flesh and author their avatars a new virtual self (see Figure 88F). This pre-empts William Gibson’s cyberspace from *Neuromancer*, by creating a video game stylised interpretation of his since often quoted description of the virtual artifice of the network: “A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of
the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding” (Gibson, 1984, p. 69). The light on the dark. This is the liquid blue world of *Tron* and the luminescent green data trails of the *Matrix* rendered some fifteen years later. But more significantly, these images, these notions of the liquid electric, the incomprehensible technologies of the everyday and the magic and mystery of the Futurist CyberCity are cast against a dark, seemingly impenetrable palette. It is in the properties of these visual design elements that the template for the dark gothic aesthetic emerges. And it is in these intersecting histories that the neo-gothic tendencies of millennial technoculture haunt the digital archive.

I return to the notion of the light on dark aesthetic - or more precisely in this context, illumination upon a black canvas. Here the liquid electric gives presence to the unseen. We have seen so far how this has been established as a dominant techno-cultural aesthetic across the 20th Century and beyond: search lights probing the night sky, arc lamps illuminating the Eiffel Tower, the Trylon and the Perisphere, incandescent bulbs bejewelling the Pan American, the carnival and the streetscape, blinking orbs directing the flow of traffic, neon signs screaming at the pedestrian throng, data visualisations of physics, economics and climate science, the CGI tricks of animators and media designers – all of them like Apollinaire’s diamonds in space.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the evolution of this form - the electric blue aesthetic of contemporary sci-fi story telling. Here the darkness provides the context for the illumination, the depth and space for the action, the surface texture for a deeper ill-defined anxiety. This is embedded in the mathematics of visual display algorithms and the digital production technologies of computer animation. The first ever film to feature complete animated sequences derived solely from computer generated images (CGI) was Disney’s *Tron* (Lisberger, 1982). The film borrowed many of the sci-fi tropes developed in earlier cinematic work such as *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Wise, 1979) and *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977) and included existential flourishes which echoed the inter-dimensional explorations of Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968). There is a cognisant central computer, a worm hole, a collapsing universe and the very familiar (1980s) icons of 8Bit computer gaming – secret research laboratories, menacing red lasers, marauding tanks, clunky gun turrets, chunky crumbling environments, flying aircraft, tractor beams and sporty fluorescent outfits. The film’s major shortcoming of course is the market demographic. There’s plenty of fun to be had in Disney’s first animated feature for the Atari generation and the actors play-up to the material accordingly but there’s certainly no screen time given to any thoughtful examination of many of the film’s more existential moments. By association, we the viewer, must accept that this universe exists, that this is a computer program and we are living in it. However, in one scene there
is a glimpse of logic at work, either by design or sheer expositional necessity occurs. Two lab scientists (resplendent in appropriate scientist garb - lab coats, goggles and hard hats) discuss the impending test of the film’s central novum – the ray-gun that can digitise an object into computer code and then return it to the real unharmed. Ultimately this will become the method by which the central characters are appropriated into the computer program from which the film gets its name. The following is a neat summary of not only one of the film’s key moments but also the premise of the liquid electric conceit:

**Lora**  
(young female technician)  
Well, here goes nothing!

**Dr Walter Gibbs**  
(elder eccentric scientist)  
Hmm, interesting ... Do you hear what you just said? You said, ‘here goes nothing.’

Well, actually what we propose to do is to change something into nothing, then back again. You might as well have said, there goes something, here comes nothing.

At which point the ray-gun emits a blue laser – or as the scientists are overheard muttering, “a UV scan” - that engulfs a test object – an orange fruit - “dismantling its molecular structure and suspending its molecules in the laser beam”; aka the virtual world (see Figure 90). In another sequence, sometime later into the film the central characters who have been “digitised” and are now fugitives inside the computer program stumble upon a rippling stream of fresh water. In a peculiar, almost childish manner, they rush to the water’s edge and gleefully begin to scoop up the liquid drinking from the shimmering electric blue stream. Dramatically, it’s an uncomfortable scene, a quaint diversion from the main narrative; at odds with the film’s dramatic tone and completely outside of the film’s logic. While it’s possible to deconstruct this as a typical “in-game reward” i.e. water, the giver of life, conveniently appearing in the path of the game players, who being human are the only participants in this contest who would benefit from its existence in a virtual world otherwise codified as unnatural and devoid of all organic matter. But we could also read this as one of the earliest cinematic manifestations of the liquid electric form, its properties giving life to the digital, giving human-like attributes to the errant computer code and like the social animals we have become, giving forth the waterhole to which the tribe is inexplicably drawn.

37 Interestingly, the colour orange is the primary colour counterpoint to the predominately blue aesthetic once the film shifts into the virtual environment of the computer game.
In addition, if we were to take a broader view of the film’s aesthetic precedent – a highly stylised art direction which accentuates the streamlined design rather than trying to obscure the origins of the film’s code, we can begin to see how such a device is so appealing in the context of advertising. The much heralded special effects are almost the contemporary digital motion artist’s first draft or production designer’s pre-viz storyboards; these are the outlines, the plot points, the mud map rather than the substance of the end game. Here we see the wire mesh of the 3D design as characters tumble between the real and the virtual (see Figure 90), while object movement is jerky and pixels are drawn as exaggerated forms to heighten our sense of depth and space. Here the surface is the stuff of the real, the embellishment is the code running in real time and controlled from the outside – out there, in the darkness the electric blue aesthetic points the way. Somehow, from nothing, comes the essence of technology, like an exotic seductive force that is from nature but not of nature. In this instance, in the liquid electric’s very first cinematic rendering, we can decipher the emergence of a dark permeating aesthetic in digital media design. One of the earliest moments in which the luminescent promises of the techno-cultural narrative began to unravel.

Figure 90 Tron (Lisberger, 1982)

Is the implementation then of this uniquely digital design aesthetic – the liquid, the light, the laser, the code – the agreed aesthetic position to signify a “going back”, to articulate a truth, to source the
origin of the digital/human hybrid species? Is this the “jet quenching” that results from the collision of lead ions close to the speed of light in the Large Hadron Collider? After all, as Ian O’Neil relates in his article, In the Beginning the Universe Was Liquid, in 2010 scientists discovered that in the $10^{-6}$ seconds after the Big Bang at temperatures 500,000 times hotter than the sun’s core, the conditions created something akin to a “primordial soup” which behaved much like a liquid:

Immediately after lead ions collided, jets were created by the quarks and gluons blasting away from the micro-Big Bangs. By monitoring how these jets formed, physicists were able to see how the intensely chaotic turmoil evolved... As they tangle together, jets lose energy through interactions scientists are only just beginning to understand. This loss of energy is known as ‘jet quenching’ (O’Neil, 2010).

If we take a cursory look through the gamut of speculative science fiction cinema from the late Modernist to the mid-Millennial period it’s obvious that production designers and auteurs have relied heavily on the blue electric motif to express such ideas. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the long gestating sci-fi parable A.I. Artificial Intelligence the Steven Spielberg (2001b) rendition of a passion project left behind by the late Stanley Kubrick based on the short story, Super-Toys Last Summer by Brian Aldiss (1969). The story, published the year following Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, deals with notions of rampant overpopulation, climate change, loneliness and social engineering. David, the central protagonist, is a robot engineered for a childless couple. He believes that he is unique; he believes his adoptive human parents love him because he is a “real little boy.” David is forced to confront the dystopia of his true reality when he is abandoned in the woods by his adoptive mother. The isolation of being a robot (a Mecha) in a human (an Orga) built world, seems impossible for David. He who thought himself to be special, to be unique and who deep down believes his mother still loves him. And so begins his quest for the real – to be “made into a real little boy” so he might regain the love of his human masters. In a world in which so much is synthetic and so many of his kind are nothing more than discarded or banished refugees living on the fringes of society, his quest has a distinctly contemporary gothic subtext. As
the source code of his origins is not in his DNA but rather in the patent files in a lab somewhere beyond “the end of the world”, to be made real it would seem is a fruitless endeavour.

His immortality is his curse, his quest his folly. The aesthetics of the production design comingle with the central metaphors for an origin story, a tale David believes in his engineered innocence must begin with the Blue Fairy, a character with mythical powers he recalls from the story of Pinocchio. The idea of the Blue Fairy is the first measure of this aesthetic ideal that will make an ongoing appearance at critical junctures throughout the film and especially as the story arc of the last act begins to unfurl (see Figure 92 A-C).38 At first we see the electric blue neon reflected upon the wet bitumen of Rouge City, then in the sky blue eyes of Dr Know a holographic carny that purports to provide answers to the unanswerable questions. The answer he supplies David is, of course, a ruse. This too is a program, a hack in the source code, embedded in the sleazy sexual Mecha of Rouge City to lead the industrious David back to his maker, Dr Hobby. There is the promise of the Blue Fairy of course, and like any clever sleight of hand David is driven hopelessly on towards his goal and the tragic fate which awaits him.

Dr Know
Discovery is quite possible. Our Blue Fairy does exist in one place and in one place only - at the end of the world where the lions weep, here is the place where dreams are born.

Gigolo Joe
Many a Mecha have gone to the end of the world, never to come back. That is why they call the end of the world: man-hattan.

David
And that’s why we must go there.

Gigolo Joe
What if the Blue Fairy isn’t real at all, David? What if she is magic? The supernatural is the hidden way that unites the universe? Only the Orga believe what cannot be seen or measured. It

38 This shift in story and locations takes A.I., which up until this point is probably one of Spielberg’s more underwhelming science fiction outings, into more transformative territory that is more in keeping with the playful distortion of time and place carefully modelled on Kubrick’s extensive research and planning. However, even this is not beyond critique and many Spielberg critics feel that this was a step too far although opinions on the origin of the film’s structure, including its ending, differ.
is that oddness that separates our species. Or what if the Blue Fairy is an electronic parasite that has arisen to haunt the minds of artificial intelligence? They hate us you know, the humans, they will stop at nothing. They made us too fast, too quick and too many.

- David and Gigilo Joe receive the answer they are looking for from the hologram Dr Know (Spielberg, 2001b)

They of course travel to Manhattan, the end of the world, with the iconic torch of the Statue of Liberty poking out of the vast acidified ocean that has now engulfed the once thriving metropolis. David unfortunately does not find the answer he has been promised, instead he discovers that he is far from unique, like Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story*, and that the truth is much more banal and commercially derivative than either of them would ever have expected. Confronted with the true horror of his robot self David falls, like a bag of wooden limbs, from a precipice upon high, the Rockefeller Centre. The helpless form of a broken hearted ‘boy’, plummets downwards, adopting the now iconic pose of the falling man, down, down into the icy waters of the mangled trenches of the city below. The gleaming blue fractures of light splinter about his splayed form – the visual icon of his dark euphoric turn. For David this is not the origin story he has so desperately been seeking. Instead he becomes frozen, cemented in the permafrost for a millennia. Deep down in the darkness he assumes the thousand year stare of the robot in the garden. His ultimate prize, the angelic Blue Fairy eludes him. But like all broken promises she does exist as an inanimate decorative carving on a pirate ship in what was once Coney Island now sunk deep beneath the flooded boulevards of New York city, circa 2142.

Here the Futurist narrative takes a stunning turn in contemporary
cultural production, especially on the vast pop culture loop that is Hollywood cinema. A subtle aesthetic shift to be sure, but a prescient one all the same. This distinct aesthetic intent that predates the darker moments of the coming decade is a recurring theme in many of the most recognised Futurist techno-cultural narratives of this period: *iRobot* (Proyas, 2004), *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002) and more recently *Pacific Rim* (del Toro, 2013). These films are particularly resonant as the liquid electric ambition is the central novum – the hybrid intelligence of the man/machine prototype designed to transcend its most extreme intellectual pursuit. For *iRobot*, it is V.I.K.I. (Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence) the central supercomputer which controls the massive swarm of networked robots designed to serve the human population (see Figure 92D). V.I.K.I. is connected to the core, and just like in *Star Trek*, the core upon which everything else relies is electric blue. Through learning from the less than savoury examples of human behaviour, V.I.K.I. – in an ultimately fatal decision – decides to fundamentally alter Isaac Asimov’s 1st Law of Robotics: “A robot must never harm a human being or, through inaction, allow any harm to come to a human” (Josh Jones, 2012). In *Minority Report* the future is predicted by three “precogs” who can predict crimes so perpetrators can be intercepted in pre-emptive strikes. There too, the precogs are feminine, vastly superior and yet vulnerable to corruption from external forces. As they lie in a pool of water their minds are as one, the water electric blue (see Figure 92E). And in *Pacific Rim* the Earth is under attack by monstrous alien forms that have been lying dormant beneath the earth’s crust for many millennia. To fend them off, humans develop gigantic mechanical exoskeletons piloted by two human warriors. In a neat re-routing of Castell’s “flows” this process is known as “the drift” in which the minds, the memories and the consciousness of the human pilots are melded into one in order to operate these vastly complex machines. Each melding of minds, each resumption of conflict, is a convulsive moment of electric blue rushing (see Figure 92F). In each instance the visual motif of the electric blue aesthetic is present and most discernible when the central novum of these films is revealed. And in each instance, similar to the bright electric blue water in *Tron* and the Blue Fairy in *A.I.*, this visual signifier refers to the origin of the parable: the man-machine symbiosis, the core, the beginning, the code.

This is also strongly evident in the replication of computer code and networked systems in the promotional collateral for large civilian and military contractors who deal explicitly with the notion of cyber security. The depiction of knowledge as at-risk data capital and information security as a vital process of software and machine function is almost always blue, electric and all pervasive. Here the use of the liquid electric is just as vital and dramatic as anything Hollywood might construct as the electric ambient blue 1s and 0s cascade and sizzle like the strips of code in the *Matrix*, falling like rain liquidising the solidity of the urban space, the office block, the subway and the stock
exchange into a living organic pool of liquid code. Several companies which appear at other intervals throughout this text are represented here too: Northrop Grumman, Boeing, BAE Systems and Raytheon Company as well as the US Air Force and US Army’s cyber divisions, all of whom subscribe to the blue logic of the liquid electric. There is a consistency to the colour palette of these advertorials, promotional videos, graphical demonstrations and corporate brochures – wherever you might be, whatever your electronic communication needs are, the steadying hand of encryption and the stealth like stalking of cyber threats is inevitably signposted by the reassuring blue ambience of the liquid electric (see Figure 94).

And yet there is a site where this sense of peace and of calm and of notional safety is most strongly felt. It is a place where the blue liquid motif most profoundly demonstrates the origin parable – far from the digital renderings of the cinematic text, or the commercial communication device or the business of information security. It is the oasis, the soft waters of the shallow pool in the otherwise dry and desolate savannah. Here amidst the maddening crowd is the origin of the species, the genesis of life on Earth, the gathering of the clan. Commonality of need and the essence of extraordinary beginnings is brought into startling relief by a simple visual allegory. Cai Guo-Qiang’s installation work *Heritage* at Brisbane’s Gallery of Modern Art is that site. It is the central piece in an exhibition entitled, *Falling Back to Earth* which pre-empts the return to nature subtext that would appear to be emerging so strongly in the broader techno-cultural narrative not as an option, or a simulation but as an absolute. Here the complexity and diversity and commonality of nature is represented by 99 animals hunched over the water’s edge lapping at the cool blue liquid. They have gathered like a disparate tribe of interlopers in a pilgrimage from multiple continents from forests and grasslands and hillsides all driven by necessity summoned back to the beginning in an elaborate reconstruction of what could be the dwindling resource at the heart of any number of fragile ecosystems – beyond the code, beyond the server farms, far beyond the electric – it is the call of fresh water.

Guo-Qiang’s work is often large in scale and dramatic featuring trails of gunpowder and fireworks and controlled explosions but it can also be intricate and subtle, in *Heritage* Guo-Qiang has found a simple peaceful aesthetic that presents an audience with the possibility of a more layered somewhat darker reading, “They could see it as tranquil and quiet but there are complex issues… there are environmental issues around the world. People can look at the works and see all sorts of different things” (Murdoch, 2013). According to the notes on the exhibition, the work is perhaps neither an origin story or Utopian destination but rather a struggle with the journey itself, “the idea of coming full circle – of working through competing aspects of human nature, as well as the obstacles we face in our relationships with our environment and each other, now and into the
future” (GOMA & Cai Studio, 2013). As Guo-Qiang himself has observed of the shifting focus of his practice and the evolving notion of the self in the physical world, “I am shifting my focus from the universe and cosmos back to earth. I am now thinking more about the earth, our surroundings, and the physical world” (Zeccola & Stone, 2013). And as it was some half a century previously, it is the liquid blue aesthetic which leads us back to the duality of the techno-cultural narrative and its neo-gothic sense of infinite wonder and endless futurity. Just as Brand and Bowie had observed in that famous colour image of the Earth from the depths of space: “the planet earth is blue, and there is nothing that I can do” (Bowie, 1969).

Figure 95 Cai Guo-Qiang’s installation work Heritage at Brisbane’s Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA & Cai Studio, 2013)

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From Edison’s Electric Tower, to Balla’s illuminated boulevards, to the cinematic renderings in Tron and A.I., to the kinetic blue electricity of the Mazda6 and the seismic “drift” of Pacific Rim, the Futurist colour palette has been refined to a signal of a most singular hue. It is streamlined, it is electric blue, it is the source code. In this chapter I have demonstrated how the blue hue of the present-future space – the site of fiction, the site of fantasy, the site of consumption – has taken on Gatsbyesque proportions: the blue electric orb shimmering across the inky black estuary of a convergent cultural narrative. The attraction of its design malleability apparent in its presence across cinema, media design, corporate advertising and the gallery space.

In the coming section I will demonstrate how the background of this media construction – the subtext, the darkness – breeds an atmosphere of uncertainty and endlessness. I will first establish however, the manner in which the techno-cultural narratives of Microsoft, Ericsson and Nokia produce archetypal Futurist constructions not dissimilar to the fantasies of the World’s Fair of 1939.
It is in these texts that the most explicit articulation of the broken promise of the new Utopian idealism is expressed. A neo-gothic anxiety is a logical consequence of this false-future, especially if it is allowed to permeate the broader cultural network. I will therefore attempt to confirm the inevitability of the dark euphoric moment as embedded in the fabric of these simulated digital futures.