

04 :: 05 Conclusion

At the outset of this investigation I developed a theory that the culture I was witnessing at the cinema, over the internet, in the gallery space and through the mainstream media was displaying a discernible aesthetic darkness. Of course, such tendencies have been a constant presence but more concealed, less obvious, here I was seeing them writ large in the most popular and the most well attended mediums. It was also obvious that this darkness was emerging in parallel to a transition to a distinctly more technological mode of image construction and that the machines responsible for making this possible were also weaving their own aesthetic attributes into the mix. Attributes we might recognise straight away as high-end computer graphics, subtle image manipulation or the seamless integration of the virtual into the real, but also the inevitable anxieties that such ubiquity engenders. The fact that notions of machine vision and network culture were seeping into the fabric of the stories we tell and the futures we design should come as no surprise, but the fact that this was having unexpected aesthetic consequences was indeed something new. Characters, narrative constructions, art direction and the graphic symbolism of contemporary media were telegraphing a gothic anxiety present both in the society from which they had sprung but also the technologies that delivered them. Moreover, other theorists and writers such as Bruce Sterling, Slavoj Žižek, Zygmunt Bauman and Paul Virilio were observing much the same thing albeit from very different perspectives – and in Virilio’s case, over a much longer stretch of time.

Certainly Sterling’s observations at Reboot 11 in 2009 and other appearances he made during this period permitted me to articulate what I was thinking in a much clearer and more coherent fashion.¹¹¹ And while Sterling was delivering his observations via a much narrower prism of a particular technology or cultural behaviour it was clear something tangible was in the air. The concepts of dark euphoria and gothic high-tech captured this well, but *looking back* made the present cultural conditions all the more visceral. And so while Sterling looked forward at the coming decades – the “twenty teens” – highlighting various gothic episodes of our recent past to illustrate

¹¹¹ Sterling’s [Web 2.0](#) and [Wikileaks](#) observations at Webstock in New Zealand in 2009 and 2010 are worth seeking out in this regard. Less so his more constrained video interviews with [Techcrunch](#) at SXSW in 2011.

his thesis I found that excavating similar digital objects over a longer period produced an even more persuasive catalogue of cultural and historical touch stones. It was evident the elements which constituted the dark euphoric moment had a lineage that ran deep into the previous century. As Fredric Jameson noted of the power of the “allegory”, I too found compelling evidence – objects with stories – that constituted a duality in the techno-cultural narrative. This, I would find, was not a subtle inflection or vague subtext but a big bright and at times gaudy narrative that had cut an all-encompassing path across western culture from the outset of the 20th Century.

In the radical expressions of the Italian Futurists to the big canvas constructions of science fiction cinema and super hero parables of the new millennia, there lay in between a litany of both glossy futurist objects and their dark gothic counterpoints. For every manifesto that trumpeted the glory of technological innovation – of steam ships, of trains and aeroplanes – there was a King Kong, a Hindenburg and a September 11; for every HTC device wrapped in sizzling liquid energy there was the sad, dark history of conflict minerals buzzing beneath the black mirror; for every Apollo mission, for every Shuttle triumph there was a fiery tragic fall back to Earth; for every assumption we make about the future there is the stark reality of the present state of things. This duality fosters the neo-gothic anxiety in both the mediascape of simulation – in marketing collateral, in military futurism and cinematic virtuality – and in the new aesthetic paradigm present in the medium of their delivery. Most certainly this is evident in the visual deconstructions of films, games, photography and media art but also in the placement of these works in the vision stream. Their re-occurrence, their repetition and their sampling all point to an active and conscious effort by the media to somehow raise the alarm, not just for what lies ahead but in an attempt to emphasise what has just passed us by. It is therefore perhaps not the network that warrants the ecological metaphor but the content the network carries – the images, the image sequences, and the archive – that is quite possibly the sentient life force of our technological dreaming.

What I have tried to achieve then with this text is an unpacking of the signification of various digital objects to expose their own network logic in the authoring of the neo-gothic narrative. To paraphrase Virilio, in this realm the works and events examined here exist both as a calculated demonstration of technology as saviour – as companion / as evolution / as future – but also as evidence of the fear and anxiety that the accident of that technology engenders. Going beyond this however, the end-game I suppose, is the melding of a fictitious future – a science fiction – with the language, programs and policies of governments and the agencies they fund in the promotion and execution of public safety, cyber security, surveillance, data mining, artificial intelligence and the theatre of war. Both in media art and media reportage the commercialisation of the future is distinctly evident while a concurrent mourning for its failings is equally prominent. How else does

one explain the narratives of the *Matrix*, of *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, of *Mad Men* and of *Gravity*? What do we see when we look at *The Scream* hanging in the Museum of Modern Art in New York its hollow visage staring back at the crowds and the cameras and the security guards? Each of them not certainly a product of their time but also authors of their own evolving narrative as time inevitably moves forward and the cultural logic of their relativity shifts and morphs around them.

Therefore coupled to my investigation into the fabric of the media itself is an effort to delve beyond the artefact as cultural object to the existence of that artefact on a dynamic shifting network. The digital object becomes a plot point within a broader narrative construct – a narrative that was well underway almost a 100 years before. While not an exhaustive historical study, the task here was undertaken to rationalise and expose the links between the techno-futurism of the present with the technologies and cultures of the past. By examining the symbolism and visual design of the work of Robert Delaunay and his Italian contemporaries I could demonstrate that the use of colour as a symbolic force and as a metaphor for technological innovation was being re-played in the contemporary motion graphics of consumer electronics advertising and communication services while also being explicitly rendered in the logos and icons of the “information revolution”. And while these artefacts displayed colourful and at times luminous characteristics – directing us toward the millennial transitional space of the Cyber City – it often masked a darker more pervasive narrative force. That the liquid electric aesthetic can be mapped from Spielberg and *Tron* back to the search for the origins of the universe is telling – not just for their cultural prominence – but for the oft repeated technique stretching back to Delaunay, Carrà, Boccioni and Edison. To simulate but not to show, to point the way but to never reveal became a distinct trend in the techno-cultural and techno-futurist oeuvre. This was the template that was so breathtakingly constructed at the World’s Fair of 1939 by America’s corporate elite – a streamlined future society and an economy of endless growth that was both high-end and high-tech. This vision was ultimately an illusionary one and is indicative of the shallow prophecies that would follow. This sophisticated magic trick it would seem is now set on repeat – an endless image loop – that broadcasts out across all manner of mediums drawing us into the “new economy” of information and of personal device technology. For this reason, the promise of a Utopian networked society falls somewhat short of the glossy pronouncements of Microsoft, Apple and Google today. This is Jaron Lanier’s cursory gadget future: “the hive” that tempts us with design, and ergonomics, and speed and invisibility. The anonymity that it breeds comforts us with its likeness and its sameness and its homogenous shared identity. Is this the gothic high-tech embrace that is played out at the end of Sterling’s dark euphoric fall? Is this the falling man stretched out like the angel of history gasping for air, clamouring for Superman’s embrace? Is this the space in which we retreat when presented with the inverse of the techno-

futurist paradigm? Is the comfort of the hive our only recourse when the reality of the mega-scopic disaster reel – the endless summer blockbuster - reveals the true expanse of the apocalypse? Is it here that we ultimately look away – from the mega-carbon skies, from the zero carbon server farms from the autonomous swarm of drones? In the absence of what it means to be human, in this forgotten place, do we shoot like an asteroid passed the blue planet in another direction altogether?

I have attempted to answer these questions with the analysis that is represented in this text. The iUser, as digital flâneur, is confronted with a conflicting depiction of the imminent future as either a corporate fantasy or a science fiction dystopia; technology as Utopian ideal or an object to be feared and viewed with suspicion. Conversely we have also seen that when these fantasies are realised they emerge as either highly commercialised products or services or more perversely as very real and highly functional devices of war. It would seem that the extreme version of the simulation is taking effect. That the very worst and the most advanced evolution of what the iUser has witnessed in theory and in fiction is manifesting itself across a whole range of media.

I have illustrated that Sterling's dark euphoric fall is far from a mere description of the temperament of the times but perhaps a literal fall from a place heavy with history – and inversely laden with a foreboding gothic anxiety of what may lie beyond. The lowering of the horizon line, the reductive aesthetic of the POV shot and ultimately the twisted form induced by the velocity of the fall itself has become the definitive image assemblage of the neo-gothic turn in millennial culture. The transition is fast reaching an uncomfortable albeit inevitable permanence as a society that once marvelled at the quest for the stars – of planes and of towers and of space dreaming – has now surrendered to a sweeping technological futurity rendered in our name but not of our nature.

Thus a blending of Futurism, consumerism and nation building emerges as one of the most powerful interdisciplinary bi-products of the millennial age. The alternative view – and an equally powerful force – is represented in the fictions, the documents and the dreaming of artists and image makers who have signalled that a darker turn has in fact taken hold. Here the work of McLean Fahnstock, Edouard Salier, Trevor Paglen, Chris Cunningham and Alex Roman in particular demonstrate a very real and very tangible anxiety by exposing the presence of a dark unsettling texture beneath the glossy digital veneer of technoculture. As Kim Stanley-Robinson has observed, our world is an inescapable Beta test for science and technological experimentation which inevitably fosters a raft of anxieties - about technology and the network (see the films of the mid-1990s) the environmental collapse and man-made apocalypse (the disaster cinema of the new millennia) and now the critical appraisal of machine vision and drone culture by media artists and film makers in the second decade of the 21st Century. All of this as the black mirror channels our vision away from the stars, lowering our field of vision, tilting the camera down, focusing the lens of the machine upon

ourselves. The great subjugation of humanity might well be at hand, not by bloody battle or violent revolution but as a slow systematic decline in the boundaries of personal space and with it the loss of the freedom to move, to act and to go there unnoticed.

As Sterling sees it, and as I hope the evidence presented here may show, what we are duly experiencing is an endless journey back to a non-Earth space. The Earth as pixel perfect icon, the Earth as simulation. What remains of the blue planet, barely born but nearly always new again is an origin parable not of soil, or of bone, or of blood, but of pixels. There is an endlessness that is present in this place. In the yearnings of Don Draper, in the anxiety of Dr Stone and in the loneliness of Wall-E we recognise the link with Žižek's desert of the real. This accumulation of evocative digital objects exposes an uncomfortable vision – not of perfect impossible angles, of moulded plastics, of curved glass and of liquid metal but of a scorched Earth bristling with a complex, unknowable, unquantifiable liquid electric Internet of things. And no matter how pronounced the simulacra, no matter how obvious the echo of horrors past what remains elusive, what struggles to be understood is the texture of what lies beneath.



Figure 292 *Tesla Tower* (Shainblum, 2014)