The Hallowed Image

*The image of the future dominates popular culture and we’re sick of it. I want to suggest that the future is tired as a space for alterity; that culture is future-nauseous, after hundreds of years of being bombarded by future images, future counter-images and counter-counter-images. With a generation of people believing that the future will only be worse, can we reach ‘beyond’ the future as the intellectual default for imagination and alternative knowledge structures and find alterity somewhere else?*

In Europe, the idea of the future was popularised by the industrial revolution. With burgeoning markets in natural and human resource exploitation and the destructive social conditions experienced by the rapidly urbanising population came the first images of the future that all this suffering was building toward. In magazines, postcards, cigarette packs and advertisements, neat speculations on perfect, technologically mediated futures began to appear. These images proliferated through popular culture, from cinema and early science fiction to world’s fairs. They became the backbone of the ‘myth of progress’ – the social contract used to justify the increasingly destructive social and technological changes taking place. Up until the modern era, governments and the upper classes had looked to emulate the past - the Romans, the Greeks - as the epitome of culture and society, in the industrial revolution the future became an orientating set of images by which anything could be justified.



*From Jean-Marc Côté’s ‘The Year 2000’, published between 1899 and 1901. https://publicdomainreview.org/collections/france-in-the-year-2000-1899-1910/*

This obsession with the future continued with images of progress affecting and directly contributing to the rise of the political propaganda of the Nazis, Bolsheviks and European democracies. The early 20th century was pockmarked with images of towering cities, hulking trains and massive factories fronted by proud and powerful workers each building towards the greatness of the US, USSR, Germany or whoever. As tens of millions died across Europe, governments and propaganda agents attributed the violence to the future that was to come.

In the 1960’s the image of the future splintered. Frustrated with the hegemony of future imaginaries, the violence caused by the myth of progress and seizing on the counter-cultural upheaval of the time, a series of Italian studios, Archizoom and Superstudio the best known among them, began publishing alternative images. Images of towering walking cities and infinite grid systems became critiques of the hegemony of the future imaginary, encouraging artists, designers, urbanists and architects to reach beyond the linear narrative peddled by businesses and governments.

[you could put in a superstudio or archizoom image if you find one without copyright]

In the creative arts, the impact of these radical future images is truly significant. Now in art, design and architecture faculties across the world, Superstudio and the rest are held up as examples of how the future is the de jour space for radical alterity; where the designer can challenge the hegemony in the uncertain playground of the future. This approach is today best exemplified by critical and/or speculative design – an attitude to design which takes the opportunity to speculate about the future, to design new products to talk about that future and to invite plurality and alterity in to cultural imaginations of the future. In this process, alternative scenarios are proposed to broaden the imagination and to question why material culture and technology is the way it is now and how it might change.

However, recent criticism of the field of critical and/or speculative design[[1]](#footnote-1) has suggested that it works to continue supporting the myth of progress and thus continue the violence and suffering that orientating towards the future enables, particularly for the colonised. In design circles, this is certainly beginning to become apparent in the sublimation of critical and/or speculative design into the ouroboros of ‘design thinking’ – a set of tools and generous post-it notes budgets used increasingly by business and government to whitewash decisions and strategies that might have been taken anyway. The de-fanging of critical and/or speculative design – an attitude to design meant to destabilise the dominant design hegemony has left many asking what’s next and what the lasting effect of all these alternative futures will be.

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The future dominates society, every aspect of visual and material culture is suffused with futurity – from whitening toothpaste to development hoardings, fad diets to Hollywood science fiction, ‘cloud services’ to political campaigns. We are now all future-literate - fully bought in to the myth of progress. With all this future around, you might have thought that people felt the wealth of possibility and progress we’re assured awaits us in the cloud, or the off-world colonies, or wherever. However, Millennials, or generation Y, or whichever demographic cohort the press has decided to put my age group in believe that they are worse off than their parents[[2]](#footnote-2) (we are, we even have our own threat of nuclear war now). Furthermore, many Millennials believe the next generation will be even worse off[[3]](#footnote-3). Many pollsters and analysts believe this is the first time in modern history that an entire generation has become so jaded to the myth of progress – sinking nose-first into soy decaffe lattes paid for by declining wages and increasing debt. The reasons for this future-nausea are complex. The end of the cold war and binary history, estrangement from political and social institutions, oppressive debt, cultural tokenism, shrinking opportunities for personal growth and entrenched class systems are all part of the mix. Furthermore, as the world is gripped by tides of anti-intellectualism and anti-globalism, radical imagination cannot just keep receding into the future as if waiting for the present to just sort of solve itself so we can get back on track with our radical idling.

If the future is so lost and inevitable, what’s the use of continuing to speculate on it as a form of radical alterity? Is all our future-thinking just becoming escapism from present conditions? We need alternatives: There’s no doubt that the political imagination thrives on alternatives, of comparing ‘this’ and ‘that’ but the future feels like it’s coming to the end of its tenure for our alternative imaginary space when entire generations are disillusioned with it, anti-intellectual populists deny it and corporations dress it up in post-it notes to carry on business-as-usual.

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Let’s speculate. Let’s say we lost the future, let’s cede control of the future to Hollywood, the cloud servers and the toothpaste people. Let’s say that speculating about the future is complacent because it relegates the present social, cultural and knowledge conditions to unimportance. But, you’re a young, ambitious and angry person with a political drive and a keen set of creative skills, where do you strike your flag to build your story from if not the future?

This is the question I’ve been trying to address in practice, research and teaching. What are the remaining spaces for alterity when the future is lost? Two things come to mind – the occult and rendering platforms.

I’ve been looking at the occult as an alternative knowledge framework, something as old as culture itself and, since the European enlightenment, something that has always stood outside and against the ‘rational’ hegemony. It challenges accepted notions and offers critique of methods and knowledge of the powerful. An increasing number of practices and organisations are dabbling in the occult as a knowledge framework to address complex and entangled problems like climate change, systemic abuses of power and social inequality that future-facing rationality seems ill-equipped to deal with in its promise of an ever-better future.

Artists like James Bridle (he probably has an essay in here) in ‘Autonomous Trap’ uses the occult concept of a salt circle to explore the technical functioning of an autonomous vehicle, something otherwise incomprehensible to human cognition. Ingrid Burrington in her ‘Star Charts for Five Eyes’ uses horoscopes to critique the surveillance powers and operation of the world’s leading spy organisations.

The occult also has a powerful cultural lever – everyone has a conception of magic as much as they do the future and with recent advances in anthropology destabilising the colonial narrative of magic as ‘nativism’ – the question of what is and isn’t magic is becoming a grey area. This is why companies like Apple increasingly rely on phrases like ‘practically magic’ to explain increasingly intelligent and complex human-machine interactions – it’s a term with cultural weight that makes sense for consumers. The turn towards the occult[[4]](#footnote-4) in technological fields is not without problems but it has a deep history as a place for counter-narrative.

[zeitguised or Lek]

Secondly, the young, angry designer might turn to rendering platforms. The word ‘image’ finds its root in the Latin ‘imitat’ – to imitate. The word ‘render’ means to ‘make real.’ With huge advances in desktop computation over the last decade led by the gaming industry, it’s easy enough to build your own world. The same millennials who despair for the future also see no divide between the digital and physical, embracing it as one holistic reality. With the power of gaming engines and computation it’s possible to bring entire worlds into being with little technical knowledge. Studios like Zeitguised, though commercial in their aim create sumptuous renderings of impossible fabrics, making real a defiance of physics and ‘nature’ previously limited to only science fiction and the imagination. Lawrence Lek, in his work ‘Unreal Estate’ uses a game engine to criticise real estate and the construction of fantasy worlds enabled by the hyper rich. We fly through an alternative Royal Academy of Arts in London, draped in leopard skin with impossible statues on a suspended island.

While mostly relegated to fantasy and escapism, the possibility of rendering and game engines to stitch together narratives and alternatives, not in the future but in the now is starting to be explored through 3D artists and critical game-makers.

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Design is a field that is inherently in the future. It’s the codifying of intention into plans and strategies, always looking forward. In it’s history it has used this to provoke and propose alternatives, like the work of Superstudio et al. However we live in a different time; seized by future-nausea – politicians and businesses battle it out to stake a claim to the future while consumer-citizens struggle to reconcile their present with the promises of futures-past. People are sick of being assaulted on all sides by different future visions and receding into despair for it. If design and the other creative fields are to maintain a radical alterity then we need to move out of the future and into the here and now, tools that are available to make real and to construct new frameworks of knowledge. The occult and rendering are just two I’m experimenting with; there are bound to be others and like anything else, no one thing is perfectly suitable to any occasion. There are times when people don’t even need a radical alternative, they just want something to work better and that too is the designer’s job. However, we need to be complacent of just receding into the future and becoming complacent about the lived experience of today.

1. https://medium.com/a-parede/questioning-the-critical-in-speculative-critical-design-5a355cac2ca4 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/only-third-generation-y-think-their-generation-will-have-better-quality-life-their-parents [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/05/2-public-divided-on-prospects-for-the-next-generation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016224399502000205 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)