The Imagination Trap

There’s a curious appeal to doomy narratives of techno-apocalypse. A couple of decades ago they were generally relegated to the ostracised genre of science fiction literature and cinema, but they have gradually crept into the mainstream, becoming a dominant staple of popular culture. The enormous success of *Black Mirror* gives a popular voice to dark technological criticism where before there was only the unprovable tech-demo optimism of shows like *Tomorrow’s World*. It’s a buyer’s market for catastrophes. And as the apocalypses multiply and seep out into popular consciousness so do the analyses – why are we (disclaimer – the phrase ‘we’ is used liberally throughout this essay and of course refers to the convivial ‘we’ of you and I) suddenly so obsessed with our own demise as a civilisation or a species? It’s not actually all that modern or sudden; one of the many paralysing phenomena of our total and immersive media environment fuelled by our content addiction is that we can struggle to see historical perspective. Despite pop media theory insistence to the contrary, apocalyptic fantasies are hardly a new thing, technological progress has always been accompanied by horrifying warning tales and the robots have always been coming to take our jobs. [1] From Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to Wells’ *Invisible Man*, we’ve always had a popular critique towards technological notions of progress accompanied by doom – it’s just that there was no Twitter around at the time to throw paranoid opinion-fuel on the fire. These tech-driven apocalypses form an extreme of popular critical dialogue about technology, decades of ‘technological progress’ have fuelled a cottage industry of technological apocalypses.

Increasingly I’m less interested in critiquing technological progress with regards to the technology. Technology is not neutral and is suffused with politics. There’s good work done here but little change is brought about by the endless opinionising about how this or that technology is going to doom us in such and such a way. It’s quite easy to get retweets by pointing at a technology and/or its proponents and say ‘this is problematic.’ This popular critical practice is an important part of our cultural dialogues but in doing this we miss the more interesting part to think about – the ‘progress’ bit.

My work as a researcher, educator, artist and designer are all based in the idea of ‘critical design.’ I was taught by Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby at the Royal College of Art in the tradition of critical design established in Tony Dunne’s thesis *Hertzian Tales*. [2] In this form of practice we use design to create artefacts that might be objects, films, stories or anything else to engage a ‘public’ in critical debate about the future. The purpose of the designed artefact in this instance is not to be a consumable product but to be something that materialises an idea. This method is brilliantly described and analysed by Carl DiSalvo as the idea that since ‘publics’ emerge around particular objects (where ‘objects’ may be a policy, or an event as well) you could theoretically design these objects in order to assemble the public you want to then debate the subject. [3]

[Image 1]

For example, take the work of Strange Telemetry, my company that uses speculative and critical design methods to develop research about ‘the future.’ In the example of our Future of Ageing project we developed images of future workplaces as a way of engaging focus groups in a debate about the types of choices they might make in the future about their finances, family and work life and education. The results of this research are then bundled up into reports that are used to advise policy decisions. The futures we envisioned here are not products or propositions, they are designed to be critical artefacts. However, they inevitably – despite our best attempts – embody a certain set of values and these values are reflected in the people looking at them. In the example of the image above, we show a small independent business, something extolled by western society – we celebrate work and autonomy and ownership. Inevitably, the conversation with an audience steers towards how best to preserve these values as technology changes. The technology is the focus of the critique but the ‘progress’ is beyond the discussion.

For a more popular and (presumably) wider disseminated example, take any *Black Mirror* plot line. Brilliant though they often are, they inevitably follow the narrative inclinations of a fable. There are some normal people and events which go wrong when a technology is abused or misused. Like fables they serve as cautionary tales that bind us into a social consensus and cement a notion of how technology should be used and how it should be directed, once again securing us on the path to an unquestioned notion of progress. It paints a proscribed image of a preferable future in the shadow of a worrying future we can all agree on. The technological phantom changes and brings new questions but the ‘correct’ form of society prevails.

These projects become warning tales, critical interventions in the path of technological progress that aim to invite debate about our future in order to secure it and develop a consensus on the way this future might evolve. In the critical design and ‘design for debate’ tradition there’s often very little consideration of how the debate should evolve or resolve itself other than the idea that we all agree that based on difficult choices we have a collective notion of what good and proper progress is.

What this work eclipses and what wider critical practices around technology often obfuscate is the opportunity to simply propose alternatives – to dream of other progresses. Not to warn of how we might slip of the European social-democratic path of progress but to suggest ways ‘we’ might change course, build something different. Critical practitioners have built a culture and discourse around problematising technology as an antidote to the blindly uncritical optimism of mainstream consumer technology. Increasingly I find both of these deeply unsatisfying – the blind optimism of mainstream technology can be nauseating in its carelessness, riddled with hypocrisy and thoughtlessness too advanced to even go into while the problematising of criticality is just alienating.

Look at the recent successes of Trump and Brexit, both held up by all sorts of thinkers as landmark events where the supposed ship of progress was blown wildly off-course – where the post-Cold War inevitability of European social-democratic values of progress were dragged to a halt. Could we look at these events and the dozens like them and speculate that endlessly critiquing and problematising actually alienates people? That in a world of climate collapse, mass surveillance, mental health crises, precariarity and anxiety that picking more holes, adding more complexity, highlighting more ways in which things might go wrong is not what the world wants? That faced with the choice of lefty Guardianista polemicist like myself prevaricating around an explanation with ‘well.. it’s problematic and complex and entangled and partly your fault’ versus a bristling demagogue pointing and shouting ‘It’s their fault, let’s get rid of them’ or ‘buy/do this one thing and everything will be better’ there’s really very little contest for most folk? Most people have lots of things to worry about already. I find critical debates with my students interesting where we will ponder the value of facial recognition technology while they face unaffordable housing, precarious labour, poor social and mental health support and decades of crippling debt.

This is where the apocalyptic fantasy comes in; that perhaps rather than tackling the overwhelming scale and complexity of the monstrous reality we’re in, it’s more comforting to imagine the Etch-a-Sketch erasure of a biblical apocalypse to just put us all back to zero and start again. The ‘reality-based community’ of the critical classes has analysed and unpacked so thoroughly that it’s forgotten how to tell a good story - but Hollywood hasn’t. And again, to reiterate for perspective, this isn’t just now. The 21st century is the most vein century. Everything right now appears to be incredibly important, but we’ve always had complexity and social threats – from a civilizational perspective we’re in a period of remarkable peace and prosperity. However, can we do more than resist, critique and problematise? Faced with the dissatisfaction of market driven demagoguery and hesitant criticality, there’s a real need to imagine and build. In the words of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams you can’t ‘resist new worlds into being.’ [4]

This isn’t to say that we should reject criticality and become blindly optimistic. Doing that is just as bad as the tech evangelists who in 99% of cases are genuinely convinced that their hair-brained blockchain innovation will change the world. But accompanying our concerns and critiques should be a notion of imagination – of how things could be better. What if instead of either allowing technology to be driven be exploitative market forces or to be lambasted by the critical classes we used it to build alternatives? To dream of new worlds again which is perhaps what we’re missing in the apocalypse-entertainment complex.

The Internet itself is going through a questionable reformation. Recent times have seen a surge in the tech elite professing their *mea culpa* for the failure of the Internet and tech culture to deliver on the utopian libertarian promises it was predicated on – the early dreams of a global village built on principles of equality and access. [5] [6] Analysts and pundits have picked over the carcass of the Internet to try and figure out what went wrong and what happened to the global village and the open society that was supposed to be imminent. Those with a libertarian fringe argue it was bogged down by too much regulation – limiting its potentials while those with a social justice worldview argue that there hasn’t been enough regulation and oversight to crackdown on the hate speech, spam and automation that weighs heavy over swathes of the cyber landscape. The filter bubble, first popularised by Eli Pariser in 2011 [7] has been at the centre of discussion for recent political shifts including the election of the current US president and Brexit. According to the theory we build cocoons of information around us that confirm our biases and support our worldview. The idea of a filter bubble is not new or exclusive in any way to cyberculture; we have been seeking to confirm our biases since the earliest media technologies, but it stands in shocking contrast to the avowed organising principle of the free flow of information espoused by the pioneers.

Rather than pick further over the bones of the Internet looking for any meaning or promise of life, we should perhaps look to our own failure of imagination. The war on imagination begins in the Cold War with the concerted attempt to establish a dominant global hegemony. The capitalist west and communist east engaged the world in a culture war to limit the possible imaginary futures. The ultimate ‘success’ of western capitalism results in Mark Fisher’s notion of Capitalist Realism, an idea neatly surmised by Margaret Thatcher’s famous pronouncement that ‘there is no alternative.’ We need alternatives and we might find them in our technologies.

Where might we find alternatives? Where in the pairing of technology and progress is there an opportunity to deviate from harsh realism and to imagine anew?

The profound otherness of computation presents radical opportunities to move beyond the liberal democratic notion of progress – to develop new ways of being in the world that give us radical opportunities for optimism and hope. Contemporary computation is so drastically different from the other informational structures we’ve been used to for so long that understanding its real potential as a logical system could be liberating. The hair-brained blockchain enthusiasts are part of this, they understand the implications of seizing on a new way of treating information even if most of these efforts are still driven by the same profit motives couched in social change.

Our new relationship with computation is all contingent on decoupling the tool-based metaphors we use for technology and this at some level is a design problem. This is important because the affordances built into technological devices cement their functions and possibilities and if we’re to activate computational potential we need to stop talking about and creating technologies that are extensions of what we already do (more, better, faster – the efficiency drive) or simple frivolous gadgetry. For instance, imagine a western kitchen of the mid-20th century. The kitchen of this time is filled with single-purpose technological tools – toasters that toast, refrigerators that refrigerate, cookers that cook, washing machines that wash. Then the Internet comes along, dragging along the Quasimodo character of the Internet of Things with it and vast amounts of incredibly smart people begin to believe that everything could be better if we took all these devices and added the Internet to them. So now we have smart toasters, smart fridges, smart cookers that solve problems we never had. This is what people refer to as ‘innovation.’

There are several things that need to happen. The first thing to do is to stop being afraid of the word ‘political.’ As Eleanor Saitta has said repeatedly and to great effect ‘…all technical problems of sufficient scope or impact are actually political problems first.’ [8] I’ve been in too many conversations where I’ve raised the political dimensions of a technology or a policy only to be swatted down by the claim that either ‘politics has nothing to do with it’ or ‘we’re not activists.’ Mistaking political literacy for activism is fickle and childish and claiming that what you do has nothing to do with politics is just as ill-informed. There is nothing within the realm of the human sensorium that isn’t political. Even if you are a person who designs dinner forks you relate to the labour conditions of the steel mill and the socially entangled marketing of the fork as well as the long history of the fork as a symbol of upper-class wealth. (Here I am, being hypocritical, ‘it’s complex, it’s entangled, it’s you.’)

As are all thing political, the second thing to do is to recognise that we technologise everything. From the classification of the natural world to our obsession with data gathering, we are in the midst of the civilizational project of technologizing the world – making it human legible and interfaceable. As Stephen Connor brilliant puts it:

*There is no way of framing ethical, political and philosophical questions that would not also have to be a matter of techne, technique or technesis, and so would not have to be imagined mechanically. [14]*

The simple naming and classifying of nature is one of the greatest technological projects where we try and put the Earth in a database in order to process it better. When we begin to classify the world we limit their potential of our imagination and experience, we freeze out the serendipitous and the unknown. This is evident in everything from disciplinary silos to end user licence agreements. We have a need to describe, name things and give them a role that limits their potential. When you design and market a gadget or service that has anything to do with people or data, you are databasing people and that is the primary raison d’etre of this whole civilizational project.

Part three is the hardest. Part three requires you to dream seriously. Not just day-dreaming, not just cynically moon-shotting for profit. You have to dream of things that are disagreeable, unpalatable, difficult and certainly unprofitable.

[Image 2]

In the mid-19th the growth of the telegraph network across the US was paralleled with the brief popularity of American spiritualism, where mediums, seances and visitations were common occurrences across middle and upper class society. In 1854 a group of spiritualists petitioned congress to include in the funding bill for Telegraph expansion money to be used to explore the Telegraph as a site of ‘mesmeric experiments.’ [9] At this time, many drew a spiritual connection between electricity and the supernatural and it was thought by some that the Telegraph – so adept at communication across vast distances of the nuatural – could communicate between the spirit world and our own. The US Congress genuinely considered unleashing the supernatural potential of the telegraphy. These experiments were, of course, impossible but they indicate an imaginative potential of technology that we’ve lost. The telegraph (so far as modern science knows) would never have been able to communicate with the spirit world but the imaginative potential of the telegraph to shape America’s own notion of progress is startling.

Over time the medium of meaning – the core unit that is seen as the underlying power of technology and society, the thing perceived to be the building block of reality has changed from electricity, to the atom, to DNA and now to data. In fifty years people will look back on our curious obsession with this nebulous material known as data in the same way that we scoff at notions of animal magnetism or ether as binding universal forces. Still, where’s our spiritual telegraphy? Where are the concerted attempts to reach beyond the bounds of our current ontology and become more than we are? We gather more and more data hoping to find meaning but no organisation, company, institution or individual has ever said ‘Oh, I’ve got the right amount of data now I can make the decisions I need to, thanks.’ Perhaps the obsession with data gathering in a quest for meaning is because we’re looking for the wrong type of meaning? Instead of looking for ways of accelerating production and consumption and micro-targeting advertising we could look to ways we could use data and contemporary computation to expand the bounds of human experience

To paraphrase Bruce Sterling paraphrasing Jaron Lanier – ‘Whatever happens to ~~musicians~~ artists happens to everyone.’ [10] It’s always worth keeping an eye on what the interesting artists are doing because they inevitably lead the charge on the genuinely interesting work.

The artist and author James Bridle has been diligently working away on an autonomous car in Athens. But rather than being built on the principles of efficiency and speed it’s built on the notion of the derive – to be a serendipitous psychogeographic wonderer taking you places you never knew you wanted to go. Rather than simply lambast Uber and the rest for their thoughtless profit-driven push towards autonomous vehicles he has decided to show us another way they might be. The project opens up the imaginative potential space for what a technology could be and do – more than a tool of capitalistic efficiency and less than a stinging critique of corporate innovation.

Then there are those looking to machine intelligences for ways that we might understand ourselves and the world better, rather than simply deepening and enhancing current trends and values. Betti Marenko and Phil Van Allen have been at work on ‘animistic design’ – a method for machines to be co-creative partners, using the way a machine calculates and cognates to give new insights in the design process - ‘…by disrupting linear predictability, uncertainty can broaden the cognitive spectrum of the (human and nonhuman) actors involved in the interaction.’ [11] This inconspicuous reading of the imaginative potential of machines could have remarkable consequences for creative practice and become a method for broadening the practice of design that is currently confined by market or gallery demands.

Then we can turn to the most pressing and vital problem we face – climate collapse. Timothy Morton speculates that our inability to deal with climate change comes from our inability to comprehend it. The complexity and scale of Earth’s ecology surpasses human comprehension – it is a ‘hyperobject.’ [12] FOAM’s Random Forest [13] project draws on the long history of ecology and computation to suggest ways that we might relate better to nature if we allowed it to use machines as a voice to talk to us rather than our industrial history of impressing ourselves on nature. Under FOAM’s suggestion, we might be able to use machines to speak of and for ecology instead of trying to categorise and translate the microscopic phenomena we can sense in our own terms.

Outside of art we can look to other cultural tendencies for insight into ways we might escape our imagination trap. Speedrunning is a recent obsession of mine. Speedrunners are video game players who exploit the architecture and construction of video games to finish the game as fast as possible. To be clear, speed runners do not complete the game according to the pre-ordained path set by the developers, they exploit the very construction of the game itself; clipping through the landscape, exploiting glitches and bugs that take thousands of hours of practice to learn. I find speedrunning fascinating because it indicates a practice that is critical in that it untangles a complex construction but imaginative in that it uses this knowledge for new purposes, much like the artists discussed previously.

These projects and dozens others like them though small, give us a peak into a world of profound opportunity for new ways of being. Where the notion of progress as presented unchallenged for most of western history is imagined anew. Where progress is a serendipitous relationship with technology rather than one driven by efficiency or one where the previously impossible can be explored and realised.

It’s a lofty demand to ask of the technology world to think and create in a way that is neither doomy and concerned nor blindly optimistic – without either the support of the academic Twitterati or start-up capitalism. But presented with two equally inadequate options there’s nothing to do but invent a third. Break the ship of progress back in to its component wooden parts and build something else instead. Or just return it to the forest.

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