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(Science) Fiction & Mass Culture Crisis (2003)

Immersed in a vibrating^[1] stopped time, we follow time's arrow – which since the 1960s has not been sure exactly which way it's going, vacillating between the moral conservatism of the baby boomers and Gucci consumerist futurology.

Leaving behind its Galilean scrutinizing of the future, an exploration of inaccessible worlds that only Science (*fiction*) from the heights of its certitude could drive, (*science*) fiction has slipped into the meanders of our digital society. The false footsteps of Bibendum (the Michelin tire man) in the dirty dust of the moon that day in July 1969 marked an end to our entropic flights of fancy. The books of Stephenson, Gibson, Stirling and others, while marketed as speculative fiction, were in fact live broadcasts, and the funhouse mirror that the genre tended to create between the space of the imagination and that of our daily lives expanded throughout a universe of plausibilities and melted into the news, with all its social dimensions.

Astonishingly, (*science*) fiction has shifted neither forward nor rearward but into the here and now. The unfolding scenarios it follows to manipulate our reality are becoming true transformation tools and paradoxically strategic levers to grasp the wobbling of our postdigital societies, our choked mass media culture.

But the main interest of this sudden in vivo matrix immersion lies in the anxieties it provokes.

Instead of Science (*fiction*) remaining a domain for positivist and determinist propaganda, it should nourish the seeds of our own monstrosity – our own loss of control amid indeterminism, chaos theory^[2] and biogenetics – as a force striking alliances with harpies and earthly creatures, the Faustian Dark Side and the *Sturm und Drang*, against the rationalist wigs and the works of the Hegelian spirit, and open up to a world where even fears become fable, as lovely as they are carnal.^[3] We have to negotiate with the fold of the instant, the invagination of the thought of the future, and live in a present that is like an asymptotic bend in time, between *Back to the Future* and *Tomorrow Now*,^[4] between dream time and the day after.

Under these paradoxical conditions where the notion and perception of time are crushed on the surface of immediacy, how can we believe that architecture can only be constituted by fossilized avatars, blind *cadavers exquis* of naïve and progressist values,^[5] by quotational opportunism disguised as global entertainment?

To reclaim the scenarios and substances that condition architecture and reveal the contradictions and fantasies that drive our societies, we need, on the contrary, to draw on this vibrating, disquieting and voluptuous temporality.^[6] Architecture is not something to be thought or produced for later, like the standard bearer for a morality. It can only be negotiated live, in its contingency on a situation and its solubility in a set of givens.

This critical and territorialized attitude is in sharp contrast to macrocynical flights of fancy (the market creates the form!) and their remake of international architecture^[7] (New York, Paris, Berlin, Shanghai, Singapore) and instead launches processes that reactivate the concept of a throbbing,^[8] complex^[9] and unfinished^[10] “localism.”

Our tools for the codification and transformation of territories work not through an ideal projection but a local inventory,^[11] a mutant and tangible biotope, issued from the generalized bankruptcy of urban thought^[12] and its deception. This ambiguity gives rise to our unstable and unique scenarios.

The folded rhizomes of Guattari/Deleuze were a point of fusion and arborescence to attain an nth plateau,^[13] a terra incognita, to break out of the grip of those who declared that they had discursive, pedagogic and linear authority. That made it possible for us to escape from Promethean dreams, millenarian apostles and cynical moralists, and walk gaily over the many and multiple dustbins of the last century, unburdened of the confusion of progressist mythologies, in the voluptuousness of a quotidian cataclysm.

(*Science*) “fictional”^[14] architecture is not a cultural remake of the *Altered States*^[15] variety for the elite. It has nothing to do with a nostalgic idealization of the world in a museum soap bubble, nor a New Age utopia with its kindly moral presuppositions.

Recognizing the new principles of reality, it is a space of confrontation, ceaselessly investing itself in new procedures for the reprogramming and rescripting^[16] of existence, here and now.

By necessity, it confronts its emergence, its *Gestalt*, and can only be negotiated in the visible spectrum. That is its political and operational condition. It generates processes of transformation that take the risk of critical positions and mutations,^[17] on the razor’s edge.

There can be no pleasure in announcing the “infocalypse”. We can only harvest its often strange fruits. The following projects are a few paradigms.

[1] Stanley Kubrick touched off the Big Bang, setting the clock back to zero in '67 / *Clockwork Orange* and *2001* like opposite sides of the same mirror / Dream Time and the Day After simultaneously / NASA and CIA, autistic hostages, two copulating Siamese twins. Because of or maybe thanks to him, ever since we've been stuck in that double bill, a scratched record stoptime without past or future, enjoying our stay between heaven and hell in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

[2] Over the course of time all systems become progressively disordered as they approach their final state of total equilibrium (the second law of thermodynamics). In order to track our environment, physical sciences born out of the study of turbulence, vibration, disequilibria and probability have taken the place of the linear sciences where things are viewed as following a quantitative and determinist path.

[3] One percent of the three thousand polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in Svalbard are hermaphrodites, with a vagina and a penis. The conditions for survival at the North Pole, including Soviet nuclear waste materials carried by the Arctic Stream and the carbon effluence of the Gulf Stream, have allowed us to observe the first natural mutation.

[4] Bruce Sterling, *Tomorrow Now*, Random House, New York, 2003.

[5] How can we reconcile the need to save the Amazonian rainforest and at the same time our fascination with the bulldozer (a sort of Caterpillar with beetle pincers) that is cutting it down? This dual attitude protects us from ecologist alibis, “primitivist” dreams of purity and of the *Heimat*, as well as from becoming enslaved to the mechanisms of the *tabula rasa*. Architecture consists of revealing these two contradictory dimensions, in their constant tension.

[6] “Yet this landscape of terror is also, as in Bosch, voluptuous and nearly infinite in irony. Reminding us that hell is full of laughter, we could call this cataclysm where everything bad is foretold in dark humour, *a black utopia*.” Mike Davis, *Dead City*, The New Press, 2003.

[7] One could suspect that the “Be global and fuck local” attitude is nothing but a passport that allows countries that can afford to hire a Koolhaas or a Nouvel to become integrated into the World Corp. But why not!? The vulgarity lies in their duplicity. They may be in Lagos, at Prada or a certain floating Pavilion, but they want to lecture us about political consciousness.

[8] Dust and pollution in Bangkok, mosquitoes and Nile River Virus in Trinidad, “hairs in the Snake” and “bovine heat” in Evolène, the bush scorched by sun in Soweto... these are the human and territorial raw materials that condition the local scene. Contrary to what Plato says in

his *Parmenides*, where he doesn’t bother to hide his distaste for what he considers ignoble elements, the lowest layers of being – materials like hair and dirt – are no less constitutive elements of urban economies, even if they issue from bankruptcy of city planning

[9] Complexity comes from the entropic dimension of a system, between chaos and chance. Another aspect comes from its situation between two different and even contradictory states. Complexity is not driven by autonomy but by reactivity, and cannot taking into account to all that surrounds it. It is in this sense that disturbances of identity, stealth and hybridization become modes of operation. This is reflected in our own indecisiveness, our inability to “choose between...” to “make to do with...”.

[10] In this regard, consider how Jules Verne completed Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Poe’s last, enigmatic phrase leaves the reader perplexed and frustrated: “But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, far larger in proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.” Afraid by this ghost, Jules Verne, in his sequel, *Le Sphinx des Glaces* (The Sphinx of the Ice Fields), twenty years after, unfold this fiction: “No! These were physical facts, not imaginary phenomena... This massive shape (the shrouded figure) was nothing but a colossal animal... whose power produced effects as natural as they were terrible.” Poe’s novella was published in serial form purporting to be an authentic report from an expedition to the South Pole that never actually took place. The piece is disturbing, a source of endless questions, and prefigured Poe’s own death. The fact that a half-century later Verne brought it back to life to bring the story to an end reveals the oppositeness of the two men’s attitudes: the former scripts and opens the narrative in its non-finitude, while the latter plans and encloses it within the same operational modes as urban planners, full of Fourièrist alibis, Colbertist swindles and the predictions of “knowledgeable” people.

[11] These two models of territorial intervention are diametrically opposed: one employs reasoned and accepted Euclidean forms issued directly from geometric abstraction (deconstructed or not), laid down like a conceptual or mental grid over a particular place. The other is entirely different; it seeks to exacerbate a response by extending the complexity of the site itself. One dominates the territory in order to prove mankind’s domination of the situation, the other folds back on itself, hollow, so as to let itself be absorbed by the pre-existing equilibrium.

The first is a pure projection of the mind, the Hegelian spirit, facilitating the consumption of concepts and images in an extension of modernist ideals; the other – mutant, extracted from the previously existing, more complex to obtain – in contrast suggests that, “In the absence of ideas, we would have to observe.”

Like a chemist who has conducted an experiment in order to reread it and understand it, this empirical and aleatory process is constructed through induction and deduction. Depending on the project, the skin of the photographic or cartographic image mutates and metamorphoses through aspiration and extrusion, folding, heaving, pollution... The pixels, fractal fragmentations of reality, are recomposed in a series of genetic mutations. The context is no longer idealized, conceptualized or historicized; it is the substratum of its own transformation. There is a political difference. This mutant and thus imperfect dimension permits us a glimpse of technology not as the fantasy of one more progressist assertion, but as a tool of contextualization, hybridization and complexity. Beyond the fascination for technological tools and factitious metamorphoses that they engender, what concerns us is its operational function. It is no longer a question of counterposing a project and its context, like two distinct hypotheses, but of linking them through the very process of transformation. The project no longer issues from an abstract projection, but from a distortion.

[12] On the contrary, we have to handle contradictions like that of the island of Tuvalu in the South Pacific. Because of its low altitude and changes in the oceanic water level (due to global warming), a plan for its evacuation has formulated as an objective given.

[13] “This is what the people of Stateless had in common: not merely the island itself, but the first-hand knowledge that they stood on rock which the founders had crystallized out of the ocean – and which was, forever, dissolving again, only enduring through a process of constant repair. Beneficent nature had nothing to do with it; conscious human effort, and cooperation, had built Stateless... the balance could be disturbed in a thousand ways.... All that elaborate machinery had to be monitored, had to be understood. ...It had one undeniable advantage over all the contrived mythology of nationhood. It was true. Greg Egan, *Distress*, Harper Prism, New York, 1995, pp. 171-172

[14] Fiction differs from utopia in that it does not seek to be right. Why would we seek to be right when there are so many people who carry the banner of morality – they are legion, as dangerous and common as criminals.

[15] A Ken Russell film where research into chemical hallucinogenics ends in a polychrome and simian apotheosis.

[16] “What’s the scenario? A constantly mutating sequence of possibilities. Add a morsel of a difference and the result slips out of control, shift the location for action and everything is different. There is a fundamental gap between societies that base their development on scenarios and those that base their development on planning.” Liam Gillick, “Should the future help the past ?,” *Five or Six Previsions*, Lukas and Stenberg, Ltd., New York, 2001

[17] See R&Sie’s *Aqua Alta* 1.0 and 2.0... amid laguna pollution, technological suspicion and hybrid mutation... in both cases, this is a critique of relational mechanisms.



