HOW FAR IS THE FUTURE?

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The pandemic and consequent economic fallout, intertwined with the climate crisis, has led to a recalibration of the distance that separates the present from the future. This essay draws on media theory to delineate some of the paradoxes involved in predicted or knowing when the future will have arrived during this period of 'new normal'.

The coming of the virus, the consequent economic recession and the climate crisis have upended more traditional responses to the question 'how far is the future?'. In one sense the pandemic brought the future closer. It did this with the indication of a specific event that would signal a crossing of the threshold between the present state of emergency and the 'post'; an event that could be heralded with headlines and a market rally: the announcement of the approval of a safe and effective vaccine, one expected to arrive much faster than it might have in the recent past due, in part, to the immense acceleration of biomedical computation and to an unprecedented investment of capital[1]. Donald Trump called 'his' vaccine search 'Operation Warp Speed', a reference to the fantasized mobility of the star ships of the twenty-second century in the *Star Trek* media empire through folded spacetime[2].

In any case, a vaccine would certainly qualify as a breakthrough of the sort that some hope will come to 'solve' climate change. It will signify a break from the present of the crisis and trigger a 'restart' that might be greener and more equitable, in the best of circumstances. The early months of the pandemic saw cleaner skies in some urban centers but mainstream reporting on this phenomenon, I argue, only served to muddy existing confusion between air pollution and invisible greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Most experts believe CO_2 will spike again in the period 'after' the coronavirus. Meanwhile, unprecedented warming in the arctic has begun to trigger positive feedback while 'ghost flights' transport wealthy tourists to nowhere and back, just for the feeling of being on a plane. Fossil fuel companies continue to receive subsidies and are among the recipients of bailout funds meant to keep 'the economy' going. ExxonMobil, the world's fourth largest oil company, expecting huge losses due to the economic slowdown, may be forced to increase emissions as much as 17% over the next five years (The Energy Mix Staff, 2020)[3]. And the Amazon continues to burn.

Before the pandemic a climate-changed future was, for most humans of the first world, simultaneously a real threat

in the present, but rather distant: a shift, a collapse that will affect 'people like me' but not me. It was decades away, far enough that I might hope 'technology' will 'solve' it; far enough that it did not impinge on my sense of the present –one where each year for the past thirty has been warmer than the one before it; a blurry horizon such that my inability to visualize it gave me dispensation to think that my choices in the present might contribute to stopping it while the genuinely significant forces adding to atmospheric greenhouse gases continue(d) unfettered. The targeting of the individual consumer with mild forms of guilt, which also served to distract from the question of distance, was a strategy, whether conscious or not, that even the most brilliantly cynical of the fossil fuel industrialists could not have cooked up.

Fig. 1 New York City, October, 2020. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 2 Climate change Countdown Clock. New York City, October, 2020. Photograph by the author.

It goes without saying that various vulnerable states of the developing world cannot and do not project climate change into the future with the same sort of logics.

Today, the term 'energy transitions' is quite common in climate change discourse. The 'transition' may begin soon. Perhaps it has already begun and it is expected to ease us into the future without disruption, and so it is aligned with a Keynesian, steady-state model of compound interest, once described by sociologist Daniel Bell (1973) in the following terms:

> 'If in the foreseeable future –say for the next hundred years– there will be neither Utopia nor Doomsday but the same state that has existed for the last hundred years –namely, the fairly steady advance of 'compound interest'– the banality of this fact –how jaded we soon become of the routinization of the spectacular!– should not obscure the extraordinary achievement Keynes called attention to. For the first time in human history, he reminded us, the problem of survival in the bare sense of the word –freedom from hunger and disease– need no longer exist. The question before the human race is not subsistence but standard of

> living, not biology but sociology. Basic needs are satiable, and the possibility of abundance is real. To that extent, the Marx-Keynes vision of the economic meaning of industrial society is certainly true'. (pp. 810-811)

This foundational, common-sense narrative is hard to dislodge. However, a planetary future was drawn much closer than it been by an explosive report by the IPCC released in 2018, outlining a very short period of time –roughly ten years– to a point of no return. This narrow window is now displayed in real time in a countdown clock in New York's Union Square[4]. Still, the older language of transitions continues alongside, or underneath, a new set of terms in limited circulation such as 'emergency' which implies immediacy and conjures up the sirens of ambulances carrying Covid patients during the height of the city's viral spike.

But of course, climate change is not a 'novel' molecule introduced into populations, causing panic, death, and upending daily life. Activists may use the term 'emergency', as often as they like, but they have not –yet– achieved the minimum threshold of adherents to cause a seismic shift in 'public opinion', let alone action. We have not yet found the language to speak about the unfathomable temporal compression of climate change, let alone how to mitigate or adapt to it. For instance, in a speech delivered on November 7, 2020 in which he accepted his win –without a prior concession by the loser– Joe Biden awkwardly mentioned the need to 'control the climate', as if this were a matter of flicking a switch on some domestic appliance.

In the United States, climate activism has been forced to confront its homogeneity in the face of a fourth, long-simmering crisis brought to a boil in 2020 by the death of George Floyd and other people of color at the hands of police. 'That crisis' has meant a reckoning, for some, with a national past marked by slavery, the formation of militias and white supremacy. And for all that the media acknowledges the racialized imbalance of the effects of the virus, economic collapse or climate change on communities of color, it is not

clear what symbolic or quantitative figure or event might signal a shift into the future for *Black Lives Matter* adherents, for instance. Afrofuturism has ushered in a new iconography of images and possibilities for a/the black future that is here and yet not yet here; joyful and chaotic, but disembodied from mainstream temporalities.

The future, in a more 'unracialized' or better, a white sense, is, among other things, an aesthetic style that reappears with a certain periodicity. That style may be characterized by space-age or atomic imagery, advanced mobility, skyscrapers and urban growth. World's Fairs, for instance, have often been highly 'futurized', and notably, the 1939 New York World's Fair. At that time, the end of the war would have signified a threshold onto the future and wars, to this point, no matter how bloody, did come to an end. The postwar period certainly did see a rise in a professional futurology notably tied to scenario planning and cybernetics.

A generic futuristic aesthetics –including some elements of Italian Futurism– has characterized twentieth century world's fairs, design, and various media, including popular television series such as *The Jetsons –I pronipoti* in Italy– or the

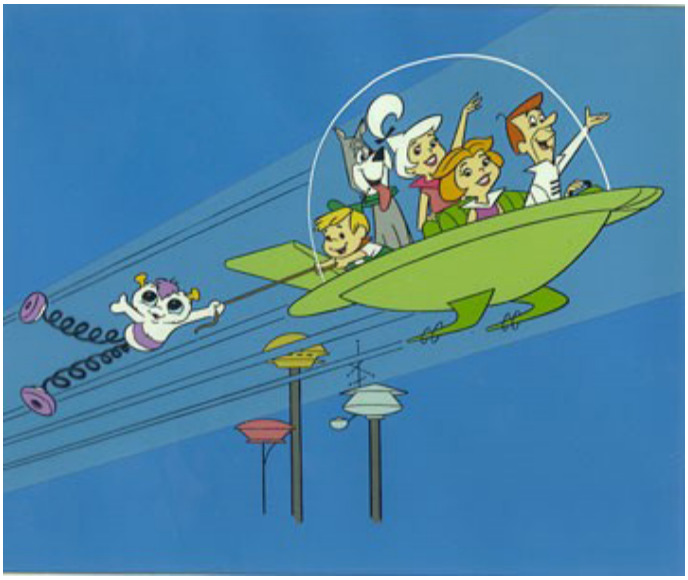

Fig. 3 *The Jetsons* was projected several decades into the future, recycling familiar 'futuristic' imagery. Retrieved October 7, 2020 from https://hanna-barbera.fandom.com/wiki/The_Jetsons

blog *paleofuture.com*[5]. If one were to generalize one might say that such futures are characterized by cleanliness and order, but not large crowds. They are urban without the dirt, often airy –personal jet-packs or hovercraft. They feature video communication devices –hence a number of older images have been recycled during the pandemic in memes for the home worker or student. What I will call 'World's Fair-Style' futuristic technologies have often been realized, which grants retrospective authority to the inventors of the styles and simultaneously suggests that the groundwork was already laid for social acceptance. In many cases, the nuclear family remains intact in such futures –a white American nuclear family, to be sure. Alongside this milder and rather nostalgic futurism, a group of men called *The Long Now Foundation* is creating a 10.000-year clock in a mountain in Texas that they expect will continue to tell time in a future roughly equivalent to the past of human civilization[6]. The clock will be accessible to those able enough to make a day-long hike over rough terrain. Members of the Foundation view the project as a means of raising awareness in the hope, perhaps, that awareness might lead to action to save the earth. In an interview, the clock's designer, Danny Hillis (2019, May 19), engages in fuzzy thinking, typical of the futurism of disaster or better, disaster futurism. After discussing the fact that the clock will continue to mark time long after 'we' are present, he states:

> 'Speaking personally, global warming was a very abstract issue for me until I started designing the clock. I had to account for the slowing of the earth and the melting of the icecaps, and incorporate this into the design of the clock. I now think completely differently about a radioactive waste disposal. If you start thinking on those timescales, what is radioactive waste today will actually end up being a very valuable resource for people in the future'[7].

Recently, as part of a thought experiment meant, in part, to help us realize our insignificance in terms of geological time, several scientists have put forward the hypothesis that there are plenty of spaces in the deep time rock record for the existence

of an advanced civilization (Frank, 2018). If they had existed for a brief period, leaving no legible traces in the rock record, would they have necessarily have had to exploit fossil fuels? And would they have been undone by high concentrations of greenhouse gases? Published in the *International Journal of Astrobiology*, this was a speculative exercise rather than a serious hypothesis about the past and the future, one that at the very least forces us to confront the limits of the uniqueness of the present. No doubt speculations on futurity belong to a heterogeneous archive that threatens to expose us to too much information –'infowhelm,' as Houser would say (Houser, 2020)– an archive that is growing thanks to the acceleration of media and fossil fuels as they are authentically intertwined[8]. Such acceleration might be paused –this is one of the myths of the pandemic lockdown– or reversed –a return to nature, with all of the bad faith this implies– and in this sense, the present essay may have a short shelf life, since it refers to a peculiar moment. Regardless, the language of the 'restart' or the 'post-Covid era', the collective slogans declaring 'we will get through this together' or '*andrà tutto bene*' are inadequate to the wicked complexity of measuring the distance that separates today from tomorrow.

At the corner of 6th Avenue and 47th Street in Manhattan, a faded billboard –left over from last winter and waiting to be replaced, one assumes, once the city restarts– advertises a pass to several ski resorts on the East Coast of the United States. It looms over diamond stores, traditionally owned by orthodox Jewish families, while a news kiosk asks residents to consider the possibility of genetically engineering their future children[9]. These three signs, if we like –a rather desperate attempt to keep alive a leisure activity threatened by warming (all of the resorts make snow but they require a base), the persistance of an old hedge against market volatility, and a popular book suggesting that genetic engineering of children is not far off– together provide a rather emblematic backdrop for the present.

NOTES

1 Things are moving so quickly that between the time I began to write this essay and the time of its publication this signature event is likely to have 'occurred'. Markets did rally on November 9, 2020, for instance, with the announcement by the American pharmaceutical giant, Pfizer, of better than expected results in their trial, although at the time of this writing the company has not yet published their precise data. But even before this, United States markets had been rising for a week or so on the expectation that Joe Biden would win the White House but the democrats would not gain control in the Senate, meaning four years of gridlock in which no major legislation would be passed, and especially not around energy or climate.
2 This is a *cliché*, to be sure. For instance, when interviewed about the recovery of markets after the precipitous dip in the early spring due to the pandemic, a financial analyst responded: "Everything about this crisis has been oversized and has moved at warp speed […] If the economy continues its recovery and real GDP growth is anywhere close to the current consensus view, the stock-market bull may just be getting warmed up" (Paulsen, 2020, as cited in Banerji, 2020).
3 The fantasy of the oil giants engaging in self-regulation or deliberately shutting down carbon intensive operations is a fascinating one that I can't explore here.
4 This clock had been developed over a decade ago as an art project meant to scramble our perception of time, but it has now been repurposed. Since it includes spaces for days, minutes and seconds, these intervals have been programmed in, even though they make little real sense in this context.
5 One of the many brilliant aspects of this series, produced by Hanna Barbera, was that it was essentially *The Flintstones* (in Italy *Gli antenati*), but redeployed from the primitive past to c. 2000, several decades in the future. To be sure, though, this is not a rigorous futurology: the year 2000 sounded like an appropriate threshold to ears of the 60s. The nuclear family, including a stay-at-home mother, is at the core of each cartoon civilization. A number of recent studies have detailed the development of postwar futurology in relation to computing, including Jenny Andersson (Andersson, 2018).
6 'Whole earth' visionary Stewart Brand is among the founders, along with Jeff Bezos, of Amazon. The title for the group came from Brian Eno, who also composed the music for the clock's bell chimes. The project is said to cost at least forty-two million USD.
7 Important recent scholarship has documented the design of surface markers meant to communicate to future beings the existence of dangerous matter buried below. See Bruyere, 2018; Moisey, 2017; Bryan-Wilson, 2003.
8 For a brilliant analysis of media ecology and infowhelm, see Woods, 2017.
9 The allusive image is an advertisement for a mainstream nonfiction book, Jamie Metzl's (2019) *Hacking Darwin. Genetic Engineering and the Future of Humanity*. Metzl argues that the availability of gene-editing technology now means that 'his' future –including freezing his own sperm– is imminent, while there are currently, in our present, no ethical standards, whether universal or local, to regulate practices.

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