

AVANT-FUTURES: IN LIEU OF AN INTRODUCTION AND NOT BEFORE TIME

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Yet the discovery that is quietly moving forward, one articulated by Freud, is that the past is now the future. Not the linear past, as told by historians and schools, but an explosive past, whose DNA is only just beginning to be decoded. The 21st century, in an extremely present genetic present, is a brutal detox which will highlight all of the singularities of the past, from prehistory to the present day. What surprises await us! What a wonderful encyclopedia!

Philippe Sollers, "What is the Meaning of the Avant-Garde's Death?"

If I clearly saw ahead of time where I was going, I really don't believe that I should take another step to get there.

Jacques Derrida, "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations"

A Thin Man ambles down Prager Straße towards the train station breathing in the hybrid aroma of fresh bread, horseshit and pipe tobacco. Over 50 years later, in 1945, this very street will be firebombed by the Allies, who drop nearly 4,000 tons of high-powered explosives on Dresden, destroying the city centre and immolating over 20,000 Germans. The Thin Man experiences this future memory, observing the flames dance across his skin and swim into his open throat. His organs catch fire and burn like prayers. Street performers, movie-goers and flâneurs point at the madman and gossip about his madness. He knows he can kill them. He can kill them more swiftly and more effectively than the Nazi futurians that will succeed him,

but he forgives them – he forgives all of them, the living and the dead, the unborn and the unbridled, the imagined and the erased – knowing he will assimilate the bodies, organs and souls of humanity into his nerves. Killing the other is as good as killing the self.

D. Harlan Wilson, *The Psychotic Dr Schreber*

Play: If the riddle of the Sphinx is to be believed, humanity is a poor and chronically misshapen thing, slave to a repetition automation driving it in a direct line from infantilism to senility, born into a death sentence, where the only dream permissible is of emancipation from life. It is a riddle too easily guessed, like a mirror held up to its reflection. The risk-averse desire this more than anything: the shadow that strides out to meet them halfway before they even get there – this ideal commodity, this avatar of Time itself, of a Future that will deliver a profit without fear of ‘speculation.’

Still, the ‘riddle’ of the Sphinx was never really a riddle, but a seduction: by an inscrutable power that draws us to the edge of the precipice on the promise of witnessing the spectacle of something incredible: power relinquishing itself to us. And just like that, the iron laws of chronology appear to smash upon the rocks, too far below to clearly identify them, but the view is edifying in any case. We have seen the End of History; tyranny has fallen – all will be well, we believe. So easily have we forgotten the Sphinx is a creature with wings: it has flown behind us without our noticing. Even now it is breathing softly down our necks. Only a moment ago, our little Oedipus Complex had made sense of the Great Irrational, scared the plague into remission; now it embarrasses us. Our fetish is made to pluck out its eyes. Now we must be wise Anti-Oedipuses, cyborgs, bodies-without-organs, Tiresiarchs of the New Schizopolis. To kill the Sphinx, it’s necessary to become the Sphinx.

Godard in *Alphaville*: “Elle me parla de sa voix de joli sphinx... de joli sphinx... de joli sphinx... de joli sphinx...”

Once upon a time this was all science fiction.

Restart: Time, as pinned down by the Moravian physicist-turned-empirio-critic Ernst Mach at the dawn of the twentieth century, is the great producer, destroyer and alienator:

The temporal order is even more important than the spatial. Reversal of the temporal order is even more destructive of a process than is the reversal of an object in space by turning it upside down; reverse the

temporal order, and an experience becomes something other than itself, something quite new.¹

The temporal double-bind of being *avant*, coming-before and exerting purchase on the future by collapsing it into the present, combined with its 're-revolutionary' *guardism*, by definition anachronistic, is essential to the programmes of the avant-garde *as such*, to what Harold Rosenberg in mid-twentieth century not unironically termed "the tradition of the new."² But if the truly new could speak, how could we understand it?

The task modernity bequeaths: how to critique this attempted capture of the "new" within the avant-garde tendency itself, from historical futurism through surrealism to sci-fi to posthumanism, accelerationism, xenofeminism. All these discourses might be contiguous with human obsolescence, but do they avoid essentialising the human exception, reinstating the human vs. technology binary, pointing to transcendental moments while reinstating business-as-usual? The "new" as *raison d'être*, as autonomous agency, as alien cultural capital, as teleology...

Midway between the historical avant-garde moment and now, Renato Poggioli may have optimistically distinguished between "the futurist mentality" that "tremulously awaits an artistic paligenesis, preparing for its coming practically and mystically," and "the decadent mentality" which "resigns itself to awaiting it passively, with anguished fatality and inert anxiety."³ And yet, what is becoming clear a hundred years further down the futurist rabbit hole is that all such avantgarde aspirations never escaped (for how could they?) the tractor-beam of History, the mystique of abolished utopias, their *a posteriori* promises turning out to be yet a further symptomatology of a Cassandra complex rooted in the most avid of all anachronisms.

1989: this 'time out of joint' providing an already expired postmodernism with a posthumous end-of-history narrative in which *all futures collide*, and yet all the Ends are doomed to be outlived, the genres of a 'present' burdened by an impossible realism and stupefied by the *tranquilising criteria of acceptability* and

¹ Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychological*, trans. C.M. Williams (Chicago, IL, and London: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1914) 246.

² Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959).

³ Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968) 75.

the categorical imperative to consume. The high priest of this End-of-History, Francis Fukuyama, may have been right about one thing: postmodernism was indeed neoliberalism's 'masterstroke' – the apotheosis of unfettered consumption based on the apparently boundless ability of commodification to absorb and neutralise any critique whatsoever by reversing the usual operations of subversion.

All resistance from here-on futile, the only way out is through: accelerate! Thus the mantra of intensification, hastening the (capitalist) world-order to its (inevitable) end – historical materialism on crystal meth, acid communism. The only remaining task of the avant-garde is thus to envisage its own terminus, time-without-end. So terminal is this condition that, quoth Fisher quoting both Jameson and Žižek, "it is easier to imagine an end of the world than an end to capitalism."⁴ Even Mackay and Avanesian's assumption that "we are at the beginning of a political project, rather than at the bleak terminus of history,"⁵ on which they base their impressive 500+ page tome, *#Accelerate*, does not dispose of the two evident risks that accelerationism courts: "a cynical resignation to a *politique du pire*, a politics that must hope for the worst and can think the future only as apocalypse," and "a championing of the market whose supposed radicalism is indistinguishable from the passive acquiescence into which political power has devolved."⁶ If only to accelerate the capitalist night in which all cows are black so the sun will rise on high blue tomorrows.

Pause: As the fireworks erupt in corporate fanfare for a new exploitable decade of borrowed time – and while catastrophic fires burn across Australia, and Molotovs explode in Hong Kong, Santiago, Paris – the moment of speculative futurism appears to have passed, overwhelmed by the critical mass of a 'return of the real.' No longer as the rhetorical figure of a vicious circle, of a periodic apocalypticism, of a hauntology of lost futures: this distended moment, of the so-called Anthropocene, presents with all the ambivalence of a worldliness amplified beyond the scale of any metaphysics, of any *mimēsis*, at any instant ready to crash down in all its flagrant materiality. It comes not to praise but to bury us in our house. *Dasein* has nothing left to do but trade carbon credits till the curtain drops, once and for all. The history of an illusion has become the future of a void: collapsology *sans* appreciative audience. Will humanism find a way in through the back door, for a posthumous encore? "How we became

⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009) 8.

⁵ Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian, "Introduction," *#Accelerate# – The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic Media, 2014) 5.

⁶ Mackay and Avanesian 4-5.

posthuman” – thus spake N. Katherine Hayles.⁷ “Became”? Has the future already happened? Did we blink or did the lights suddenly flicker? Did the EMERGENCY EXIT lead to a brick wall?

The Anthropocene is to 2020 what the postmodernist doxa was to 1980: all futures colliding in a terminal and interminable present. Futureshock meets future-aftershock. End-of-History as Return of the Real. *Die Illusion einer Zukunft*: grasping at the geological register for a transcendental ‘situation of the truth,’ as if the Anthropocene were ‘a natural process’ of *ricorso*, resetting the clock, back to that mythopoeic future of *time immemorial*. To believe that the Anthropocene is the ultimate ‘hidden hand,’ operating within the *real* as the guarantor of a truth everlasting, all the repugnant Rousseauisms of a post-human phantasy programmed to let the free market of the free will ‘off the hook.’ Nature will take care of its own! Beyond lie monsters, quoth Dr Frankenstein. We could count ourselves bonded nutcases were it not that we have bad dreams, as per the Cyborg Mamafesta: “The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the Oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.”⁸

Fast-forward: In 2019, it was time for the cold hard truth, they said. Instead, the temperature rose faster than a melting reactor core. Well, was the future biodegradable at least? “Garbage time is running out,” somebody observed. “Can what is playing you make it to level-2?”⁹

On the scale of progress, a belated modernity finally appeared to have reached its Vesuvius. Its baked ruins turned to instant classics – like space-junk on the moon, never to be renewed, benchmarking the asking price in whatever alternative universes come after this one (to make a killing, all anyone had to do was survive the Impossible). The avantgarde, like G.O.D., was already dead – no-one could expect anything from art, let alone to be saved by it. Unless it meant teleporting the collective unconscious into an AI and hacking the terminator code. *Life as ‘we’ know it*. DNA was just a tone-poem with a red light

⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁸ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 151.

⁹ Nick Land, “Meltdown,” *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007* (Falmouth: Sequence / Urbanomic, 2011) 456.

stuck on it, lost in space. "There are more things in Heaven and Earth," HAL, / "Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Science, they said, must hold the key. The monkeys put on their thinking-caps and stared into their Visomatics. Statistically, one of them was bound to come up with the complete works of Alan Turing sooner or later, all they needed was Time.

That year the machines captured an image of the blackhole at the centre of the galaxy. It was the first of its kind. Despite its visible alienism, it reproduced freely in the cybernated atmosphere. Soon blackholes were everywhere, like saltweeds among the lithium. Nothing seemed more natural...