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Chapter Ten

The Once and Future Thing: Consumption, Nostalgia and Future SF Film Dystopias

Introduction

Arguments about the progressive potential of literary sf or speculative fiction[1] form a

substantial thread within literary Utopian studies[2] but their applicability to popular cinema is

treated more cautiously. Philip K. Dick adaptations are a significant intersection between

literature and film and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) is the canonical example of

cinema's potential to integrate immersive visual and dramatic experiences with complex

political and philosophical themes. If the conditions of big-budget filmmaking limit the

likelihood of regular achievement on this level, sf cinema, constantly refreshed by the social

impact and ethical implications of technological change, continues to construct cautionary

and imaginative future extrapolations of present-day social conditions and tendencies.

Dystopian fiction is central to critical debate about science fiction's (sf) ability to construct

social critique and this essay addresses future sf dystopian cinema in relation to nostalgia and

the narrative past, examining the role played by familiar consumer products. Sf cinema has

been revolutionized by recent advances in digital effects, but industrial and storytelling

practices introduce forms of nostalgia and remembrance of the narrative past that undermine

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[1] For a helpfully succinct overview that clarifies the complex and occasionally confusing usage of sf versus speculative fiction see Marek Oziewicz "Speculative Fiction", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (March, 2017), https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-78#acrefore-9780190201098-e-78-note-3, Accessed 4 August 2019

[2] See Tom Moylan. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia,* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), Patrick Parrinder, ed. *Learning From Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia,* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), Fredric Jameson. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, (London: Verso, 2005)

or limit their critical effectiveness. While disastrous futures provide opportunities to consider their seeds within our present society, many films demonstrate a tenacious counter-fascination with the past; as Adam Roberts states, "despite a surface attachment to 'the future', it seems clear that SF actually enacts a fascination with the past for which 'nostalgia' is the best description."[3] In particular, material aspects of the past, from consumer goods and industrial infrastructure to the cinema itself, function within textual and extra-textual discourses as nostalgic countercurrents that recuperate ideological critique generated by the genre's narrative premises. After reviewing arguments about the critical value of future dystopias, this essay will go on to discuss consumer-capitalist nostalgia and its maintenance or even revitalization of the mystique of branded commodities through product placement and paratextual practices.

Critical and Uncritical Dystopianism

The concept of the *critical dystopia* in its strict sense,[4] identifies a propensity, for some dystopian literary fiction to

"maintain a utopian impulse. Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story, dystopias maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future"[5]

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[3] Adam Roberts. 2000. *Science Fiction,* (London: Routledge, 2000), 34.

[4] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible, edited Raffaella Baccolini,* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014) and *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000)' Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Three faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies*, Vol.5, No.1 (1994), pp 1-37

[5] Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p7. The authors go on to distinguish this from hopeless and unchangeable dystopian situation "This option is not granted to the protagonists of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*. Winston Smith, Julia, John the Savage, and Lenina are all crushed by the authoritarian society; there is no learning, no escape for them". Ibid.

The recent successful TV adaptation of Margaret Attwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017 -)[6] takes a classic example of the *critical dystopia* as its source, but most dystopian sf films place greater emphasis on spectacles of disaster than on utopian narrative implications. Future post-apocalyptic cinema may just provide conveniently Darwinist environments for constant and brutal action,[7] but can also suggest, with varying degrees of critical insight, the conditions of our present. For Frederic Jameson

"the apparent realism, or representationality, of SF has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us "images" of the future - whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily predecease their "materialization"- but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization."[8]

This historicizing our present gains genuinely critical force when we are able to perceive these "multiple mock futures" as extrapolations or mappings of a

> "present moment - unavailable to us for contemplation in its own right because the sheer quantitative immensity of objects and individual lives it comprises is untotalizable and hence unimaginable … [and] … upon our return from the imaginary constructs of SF is offered to us in the form of some future world's remote past, as if posthumous and as though collectively remembered in which a sense of causality may be discerned"[9]

[6] Bruce Miller, creator. *The Handmaid's Tale*, Daniel Wilson Productions Inc., The Littlefield Company, White Oak Pictures, MGM Television (2017 -)

[7] For instance: *The Ultimate Warrior* (Robert Clouse 1975), *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979), *Omega Doom* (Albert Pyun, 1996) and *The Book of Eli* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 2010)

[8] Fredric Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future", *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 9, No.2 July (1982). 151.

[9] Fredric Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia, 152.

If, in Karen Hollinger's words, "sf is most useful insofar as it turns the present into the past of a contingent future"[10], then Jameson's insistence on a 'sense of causality' is crucial. His concern not to misinterpret images of the future as being somehow 'about' the future is grounded within arguments for sf's narrative capability[11] to generate a 'cognitive estrangement' famously established in Suvin's (1979) seminal study and central to its Brechtian critical potential to defamiliarize aspects of our reality.[12] However, *nostalgia raises obstacles for fictions purporting to implicate the past in future dystopias* and if these 'archaeologies of the future' (Jameson) enable cognitive critiques of the present, they may also risk a counterproductive nostalgic fascination as we visit these future museums of our own present . The complex interplay of ideas between film futures, their narrative or implied pasts, and our own experience creates particular problems when the cinema invites us, nostalgically, to cling to future remnants of our consumer lifestyle highlighted against the spectacle of its future wreckage.

Sf Cinema, Nostalgia and Consumption

The role of technology in bringing about oppressive or disastrous futures is central to contemporary cinema, becoming the central theme of sf cinema after the Second World War. While classic post-war sf typically presented us with rogue scientists or technological threats that were challenged by representatives of institutional authority (government, the military, law enforcement)[13], contemporary cinema more commonly establishes high technology as part of a corporate consumer culture or military-industrial complex. Some films - for

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[10] Veronica Hollinger, "A History of the Future: Notes for an Archive", *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (March 2010), 30.

[11] "it is precisely the capacity for *narrative* that creates the possibility for social critique and utopian anticipation in the dystopian text." Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination, 6.*

[12] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). This transformed discussion of sf through Suvin's account of the genre's defining capability for 'cognitive estrangement.

[13] *The Thing* (Howard Hawks, 1951)*, Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954), *This Island Earth* (Joseph M. Newman, 1955) and *Forbidden Planet* (Fred McLeod Wilcox, 1956) are suitable examples.

example, *Blade Runner, District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009)*, Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014) – show (or imply) that technological development is inseparable from problematic power structures within society – corporate capitalism, the perpetuation of power through race, gender and class inequalities. Many construct responses that are evasive, mystificatory and ideologically recuperative.

Especially damaging, given depictions of future Earths ravaged by ecological destruction, is the nostalgic fascination with the material products of rampant consumer culture; one thinks, of *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) as the forlorn little bot makes his rounds of the giant garbage heap that is Earth, scavenging what treasures he may find; these significantly includes an iPod, and a fembot, Eve, in the Apple house design style - credits to Steve Jobs and Jonathan Ives indicate Disney Pixar's deep connections to the company[14]. In fact, Mark Fisher highlights the ways that the film's superficial critique of human wastefulness is a mask for its perpetuation: "the film performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity. The role of capitalist ideology is not to make an explicit case for something in the way that propaganda does, but to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief"[15] Branded products are regularly foregrounded, granting their commodity fetishes half-lives whereby their toxicity persists well into sf's various futures. Judith Berman states that "Too much nostalgia poisons vitality and creativity in any field. But SF should be especially allergic to nostalgia. Science fiction's most important contribution to the culture, it seems to me, is not to predict the future but to imagine it. To help us get our minds around the headlong-into-the-future-without-brakes nature of current times",[16] but it is perhaps

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[14] See Beth Snyder Bulik, "'WALL-E' Gives a Glimpse of Product Placement's Future", *AdAge*, https://adage.com/article/madisonvine-news/wall-e-glimpse-product-placement-s-future/129715 accessed, 11/8/2019
[15] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009)
[16] Judith Berman, "Science Fiction Without the Future" in *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, James E. Gunn and Matthew Candelaria eds. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 341.

unsurprising that nostalgia plays a significant role in future dystopian fictions, where

miserable or oppressive conditions prompt a sense of longing for better times, idealised social

relationships or greater self-determination. Svetlana Boym makes an influential distinction

between *reflective nostalgia* and *restorative nostalgia* in which the former "dwells on the

ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the

contradictions of modernity", opening up a critical reflective potential while the latter seeks a

"transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home."[17] Both forms exist in sf cinema with the

critical, reflective tendency more evident in films centrally concerned with issues of

posthuman subjectivity, versus those restorative instances in which what is lost is represented

substantially by the world of material things. I am principally concerned here with those films

that are ideologically recuperative in their uses of nostalgia but it is important, for reasons of

clarity, to offer a contrast with an example of nostalgia generated within the critical and

reflective sense identified by Boym. Notable instances occur in films problematizing the

nature of memory and nostalgic affect either as a guarantee of human subjectivity – the anti-

Cartesianism of *Blade Runner*[18] - or placing nostalgic recollection within historical

ideological contexts.[19] Themes of personal loss commonly inform dramatic and character

aspects of the cinema's depiction of oppressive futures and fantasies of longing may seem

intuitively positive when placed against future conditions of a bleak and oppressive nature

but risk, however, a revalidation of regressively normative ideals of human relationships and

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See also Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) for a withering assessment of Steampunk blend of technological obscurantism, Victorian tourism and "reactionary ideologies of class superiority" pp 501-503

[17] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 41.

[18] Most incisively in the famous scene at the piano where memory and nostalgia are mutually affirmed through Deckard's (Harrison Ford) family pictures, only for the authority of such 'memories' to be brought into doubt.

[19] Peter Fitting also notes, despite a scepticism of sf cinema's ability to provide genuinely critical dystopian critiques, that film such as *Dark City* which play heavily with nostalgic recall "offer the inadequate but nonetheless satisfying explanation that reality is not what it seems or, worse, that we are living in an artificial or false reality". Peter Fitting, "Unmasking the Real? Critique and Utopia in Recent SF Films" in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds. *Dark Horizons*, pp163-164.

identity. The commonest of narrative devices, the use of flashback in conjunction with subjective camerawork, regularly establishes nostalgia around glimpses of lost times that the narrative seeks, in some sense, to restore by rectifying oppressive future conditions.

Two contrasting examples of nostalgic yearning are provided by *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) and *Oblivion* (Joseph Kosinski, 2013), both of which are set in the dystopian futures: a corporate-sponsored state of martial law in Detroit, and a post-apocalyptic and alien-decimated Earth, where remaining humans service machines to facilitate an eventual population move to Mars, respectively. In each film flashbacks establish the protagonist's recovering memories centered on lost relationships. In *Oblivion* (a promotional tagline proclaims 'Earth is a memory worth fighting for') it is 2077 and after a 'mandatory memory-wipe' Tech-49 Jack Harper's (Tom Cruise) life in a sterile high-tech, minimalist station is an illusory one; partnered with, Vica (Andrea Riseborough), whose name suggests she is a substitute, his romantic and professional life is constructed by the A. I. that has destroyed Earth. Jack's yearning for something authentic is established by the retreat he has created in a place of great natural beauty; a log cabin features cultural memorabilia including classic rock and pop albums (the bucolic lyricism of Led Zeppelin's *Ramble On* is twice heard on the soundtrack) and a centerpiece print (one assumes) of Andrew Wyeth's enigmatic painting *Christina's World* (1948), shows a woman turned away from the viewer to look back at a house against a bare landscape; identifiable books share a common theme of heroic self-sacrifice: Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)*,* Miller's *The Realms of Arthur* (1969) and Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842). Jack will play a revolutionary role in liberating the Earth as he gradually recalls his marriage to Julia (Olga Kurylenko) saved in a life-support pod by Jack, she is revealed as a crew member in a crucial anti-alien mission he was commanding (Vika was co-pilot). Three years after Jack's sacrifice, Julia lives with her young daughter at the cabin, a return to an agrarian lifestyle completed by the arrival of a

Jack clone, Tech-52. The narrative restores classic patriarchal values of marriage and family through heroic male action; the two female threats to Harper, Vica and controller Sally (Melissa Leo) are characterised as emotionless clones, duplicitous and finally lethal, contrasting with Julia's more soulful and loyal portrayal of 'real' femininity; Macaulay's account of Horatius is heard : ' how can man die better, than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers'. *Oblivion* remembers Earth as an America confirming Jack's traditional masculine identity; memories of him proposing to Julia on the viewing gallery of the Empire State building are prompted by their visit to its ruins in New York; the truth of this event guarantees the unmasking, for Jack, of the post-apocalyptic illusion of his life. An earlier scene set in the ruins of the last Superbowl shows Jack acting out plays from the game (see Fig 1.), a sporting theme echoed by his playing basketball at the cabin location. *Oblivion* uses past objects and places to create a restorative and ideologically conservative memory of Earth to re-establish family values; a mixture of nature and culture - a romanticized and iconic Americana.

[illustration-01 omitted]

Against this restorative nostalgic trajectory, we can contrast a key scene from Verhoeven's violent satire *RoboCop*. The film's portrayal of a lawless future Detroit plays into fantasies of male vigilantism as *Omni Consumer Products* (OCP) cynically reconstructs murdered police officer Murphy (Peter Weller) as a crime-fighting cyborg augmented with powerful weaponry. As in *Oblivion* the hero's memory is erased, but starts to return.

   In an unusually affecting sequence, given the film's generally violently black-comic, satirical approach, RoboCop/Murphy wanders through the vacant precincts of his former suburban home, now for sale. Using subjective camera strategies that alternate present and past views of the same spaces, we share his encounter that triggers recovery of obliterated

memories; a jarring effect and traumatic sense of loss is generated by flashbacks of his wife and young son addressing us - a broken coffee mug features the words 'World Class Husband'. Verhoeven's sharp satire is more nuanced than a face-value reading of this nostalgic glimpse of classic familial relations might suggest. If *RoboCop* exists within the vengeful 'killing machine' subgenre of male action backlash films of the 1980s, it comments on those same violent male fantasies and the media's cynical role in a culture of desensitization. The same scene includes a foreshadowing of Murphy's eventual transformation into a repressive authoritarian figure; we share a memory where he and his son watch a TV show based on action hero T J Lazer (a parody of *T J Hooker*) whose fast-draw macho gestures RoboCop will later repeat as an identical reflex action – a violent alter ego. That these male fantasies are inimical to family ideals is also ironically pointed up later in the film when he recalibrates his targeting system by shooting at jars with the face of a smiling infant on the label[20]. See Figs 2 and 3 . The sequence's bitter nostalgia balances sincerity of feeling with the ironic deconstruction of its lost family ideal.

 [illustration-02 omitted]

[illustration-03 omitted]

Here, we are drawn into Murphy's painful nostalgia yet offered a critical commentary on the mystique of violent masculinity offered as the solution to crime in Detroit's authoritarian dystopia. The two films illustrate Boym's distinction that "Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection".[21]

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[20] the film parodies phallic violence in scenes such as RoboCop's thwarting of a rape, the emphasis on his excessively powerful handgun and the spike that springs from his hand to serve as a communication link.
[21] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

Objects, Iconography and Consumption

In future dystopian sf cinema, objects from the past are, as indicated above, deployed variously as part the fictional world's use of setting and décor for verisimilitude, the establishing of character and for dramatic purposes; these range in nature from fine art to popular culture and memorabilia as well as corporate advertising and branded goods and may function quite differently in shaping our nostalgic sense of what is lost.

The Orwellian *Equilibrium* (Kurt Wimmer, 2002) illustrates the potency of iconic fine art to make its point about lost values in a future Earth where, in the effort to eliminate war, all forms of culture have been banned lest they prompt human emotions. An early scene shows a team of state agents, Grammaton Clerics, led by John Preston (Christian Bale) ransacking a house for forbidden objects. On discovering the Mona Lisa in a hidden underfloor cache, Preston first authenticates it and then orders its destruction by flamethrowers. The scene's effectiveness is achieved because of, and not despite, the choice of one of the world's most overexposed images. Walter Benjamin's comments about the loss of aura notwithstanding[22], the narrative situation enables us to accept the sense of loss as authentic within this fictional context. The film's clear debt to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), or Francois Truffaut's (1966) film adaptation, helpfully points up the impact of an art object that is specifically visual; the destruction of books lacks the same effect - we see the destruction of the medium and not the art itself. The famous preservation of them by human 'living books in *Fahrenheit 451*, is contrasted with the sense of absolute loss here.[23] See Figs 4 and 5

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[22] Walter Benjamin 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp 217-251. Here, it is not the painting's original, authentic 'aura' that is of consequence, but its diegetic ability to signify it and to, in this context, persuade us of the enormity of its loss.
[23] A trope that forms the punchline to the post-apocalyptic *The Book of Eli* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 2010) in which Denzel Washington recites the King James Bible. The atrocity of book burning, while allegorically potent (and historically repugnant in its immediate contemporary contexts of Nazi

[illustration-04   omitted]

[illustration-05 omitted]

Despite this, *Equilibrium's* gathering inventory of memorabilia slides towards the inclusion

of all forms of cultural *bric-a-brac,* eventually including model Eiffel towers and snow

globes to diminishing returns. We can move on to consider how mass-produced objects

operate in relation to our sense of the past in film futures.

A useful perspective for understanding these types of image is Vivian Sobchack's pioneering

exploration of science fiction cinema iconography[24] which centers on the genre's approach to

iconography as one constructed within a dialectic of the strange and the familiar (not, for

example, within an historically determinate one, as in the American western). This

 "… lies in the consistent and repetitious use not of specific images, but of types of images

which function in the same way from film to film to create an imaginatively realized world

which is always removed from the world we know or know of."[25]

Thus, alien imagery is rendered intelligible through introducing elements of familiarity in its

treatment: "Although they may contain many alien images, isolated for wondrous effect …

the films must obligatorily descend to Earth, to men, to the known, and to a familiar *mise en

scene* if they are to result in *meaning* rather than the abstract inexplicability of *being*."[26] The

obverse process is found in "those SF films which… do not leave the Earth and its familiar

terrain … These films, starting from home base and the familiar, strive not to bring us down

to Earth, but to remove us from it in various ways, at the same time we remain visually

Germany and Cold War America) shows the destruction of a cultural form not best grasped through
its physical form.
[24] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers
University Press, 1999)
[25] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening* Space, 87.
[26] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space*, pp103-104

grounded."[27] These two complementary processes help us understand the relation of the future dystopia to its putative past through its treatment of objects, the estranging effects refresh our interest in technologies and consumer products. Two aspects of these films immediately present themselves to implicate phenomena of past and present in a circle of reinforcement:

First, futuristic technologies of transportation, communication, domestic consumption or even weaponry, feature within dystopian worlds to promote an ostensibly technophobic message, yet nevertheless provide fantasy projections of product types happily embraced in today. This ideological splitting is found in post-war films such as *This Island Earth* (Joseph M. Newman, 1955) and *Forbidden Planet* (Fred McLeod Wilcox, 1956) where suspicion of intellectual, overreaching scientific eggheads, is nonetheless counterbalanced by a cheerful acceptance of applied science and its consumer benefits.[28] Today, the relationship of cinema and society, implicated as it is within paratextual discourses of both consumption and fandom, is one in which such contradictions are, if anything, amplified. For instance, In *Captive State* (Rupert Wyatt, 2019), an alien-dominated police state projects contemporary anxiety about surveillance onto a grim near future and an introductory documentary-style montage foregrounds contrasts of homelessness and corporate wealth, poverty and capitalism. Driving a 2004 Chevrolet Impala[29] police officer Mulligan (John Goodman) chases a rebel by using a tracking device shown on a screen set into the car – though capable of imaginary new tasks, it appears to be an otherwise standard Impala sat nav. We might reflect on whether readings of this might confirm the negative aspects of current technology

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[27] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space*, 108.

[28] See Pete Boss, "Altair IV Revisited – 'Forbidden Planet' (1956)" in *Movie* Nos. 34/35, Winter 1990, pp 59-64 for a consideration of the ideological aspects of this.

[29] For this and also a general indication of the paratextual fascination with cars in the cinema, see the *Internet Movie Cars Database* https://www.imcdb.org/vehicle_1269929-Chevrolet-Impala-2014.html Accessed, 10/8/2019

for car owners or allow drivers to feel they are high-tech hunter rather than victim? Paratextual issues about consumer/viewer interest will be examined in the later discussion of the film *Elysium*.

Second, Familiar branded technology products and corporate advertising from our present are foregrounded in the future, shaping our sense of the lost past as a culture of commodity fetishism. These persist as post-apocalyptic remains (*I Am Legend*, Francis Lawrence, 2007), antiques and collectibles (*Back to the Future II,* Robert Zemeckis, 1989*, I* Robot, Alex Proyas, 2004) or simply updated models of existing products (*I Robot* - Audi, *Jurassic Park* franchise, (1993 – 2018) – Mercedes Benz 'Gatherers').

The estranging power of sf iconography functions in the depopulated ruins of the post-apocalyptic city. The absence of rules and authority allow protagonists to plunder eerily deserted shops and malls in a futuristic version of the *Robinsonade* - the exigencies of survival a pretext for nostalgic fantasies of self-determination in the past lifestyle of one's choice. This can furnish the basis for a satirical critique of consumer values, as in George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), or simply *I Am Legend's* male fantasy, combining frontier adventure with modern living. Robert Neville (Will Smith), accompanied by his faithful dog, roams through the long grass of New York's streets, hunting deer and chasing them in his Ford Mustang as we see posters for *Legally Blonde* and *Batman*; a combination of Bumppo and Bullitt he selects DVDs at a store, drives golf balls from the wing of an SR71 stealth plane, fills up his SUV at a Mobil gas station and dwells in a well-stocked, heavily defended apartment where replays of Christmas recordings evoke nostalgia for his lost family, remembered in the seasonal period of greatest consumption.[30] See Fig 6

[illustration-06 omitted]

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[30] This is an updating of Neville's actions in the earlier (2nd) filmed adaptation Richard Matheson's novel, *I Am Legend* (1954) *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971) in which Charlton Heston stars as Neville

Product Placement, Branded Goods and SF Cinema

The relations between fictional futures and our own world are grounded in the specific

production conditions of contemporary cinema itself. Cinematic future worlds deploy images

of present-day phenomena as a point of historical reference to add verisimilitude and

plausibility as well as suggesting logical causality for narrative events (*that* past has become

this world). These significantly include product placement and the foregrounding, ironically

or otherwise, of familiar consumer items and branded goods:

> "Steven Spielberg has clearly explained why he inserted brands such as Bulgari, Gap,
>
> Lexus, Century 21, Fox, USA Today, US News, Guinness, Revo, Burger King, Ben &
>
> Jerry's, Aquafina, American Express, Iomega, Nokia and Pepsi in a futuristic film set
>
> in 2054 (*Minority Report*, 2002). He wanted to ensure that, on the one hand, the
>
> consumer understood that the action was supposed to take place on Earth and not in
>
> an unknown world, and on the other hand, that the familiarity that consumers have
>
> with these brands would enable them to believe that this future is not as distant as
>
> they might have thought".[31]

One might reflect that, if the future is not as distant as we thought, it also not as

changed as we might fear; such strategies risk ambivalence in an approach offsetting anxiety

with reassurance. If these desolated futures caution us with respect to technological

overreaching, they also furnish sufficient reminders of its advantages and products as to

reassure some continuity.

As well as contributing verisimilitude, the presence of corporate identity through livery,

logos and branded goods[32] may, also be to suggest critical reflection by conflating dystopian

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[31] Jean-Marc Lehu, *Branded Entertainment: Product Placement & Brand strategy in the Entertainment Business*, (London: Kogan Page, 2007), 52.
[32] Jean-Marc Lehu, *Branded Entertainment,* 10 "As its name suggests, corporate placement prioritizes the brand over the product. It is risky, in that if the audience does not know the brand before seeing the film, it may be absorbed by the décor and never noticed. This is often the fate that awaits service brands. In contrast with the classic placement, which favors the product in most cases, the institutional

worlds of the future with those of our techno-corporate present: the presence of Pan Am in

2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) or the glow of an Atari logo in *Blade Runner*

are well-known examples. Such examples notwithstanding, product placement's increasingly

naturalized presence within mainstream film production establishes a general relationship in

which popular cinema is part of the world of branded commodities. *Stone Management*, a

leading specialist in film and television product placement, declares that they are 'striving to

bridge the gap between Corporate America and Hollywood'.[33] An online feature about their

approach highlights that the process is not principally one of brand advertising in exchange

for film funding, but part of the creative process wherein the world of the film and its

characters are given concrete detail:

> "Based on what they know about a character's job, his/her physical build, the city the
>
> film is set in, etc, they can decide how the character would have chosen to buy
>
> furniture, if certain fast-food boxes would be appropriate, and any regional flourishes.
>
> But because our real lives are often defined by certain brands … the Stones believe
>
> that a film completely devoid of products would feel unnatural."[34]

Such a naturalization of products blends easily with daily experience but the appearance of

branded commodities in future sf cinema admits new contexts for interpretation. Lehu notes

two key tendencies in which

> "Certain brands like to be placed in films set in the past, in order to highlight their
>
> long existence, and sometimes exploit the nostalgia by providing or recreating old
>
> models or old packaging. Many other brands are equally interested in being placed in

placement does not enjoy the material support of a product, or any explicit activity of the brand. On the other hand, it is often easier to insert a brand name or logo into a shot than a particular product.'

[33] "Overview." *Stone Management Company*, 2019, http://www.stonemanagement.net/about/. Accessed July 23, 2019.

Alec Banks, "Product Placement: How Brands Get Their Products Into Films & TV Shows", Movies, *Highsnobiety*, March 12, 2019. https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/brands-product-placement-movies-tv/. Accessed July 23, 2019.

futuristic films … [which] …. sends an implicit message that in this future period …

it is likely that it will still exist and still form part of the daily lives of consumers."[35]

Back to The Future Part II (Robert Zemeckis, 1989) demonstrates a third strategy that cunningly fills a gap between the two and whereby the existing product, through a process of what we might term 'retrofication' is recontextualised to create this 'nostalgia for the present' [36]

When Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) undergoes a thirty-year future shift, a smartly-observed and densely-packed mise en scène sets a benchmark for postmodern ironic nostalgia. The future small-town of Hill Valley is portrayed in a sequence that generates humour through precisely the kind of iconographic estrangement Sobchack identifies. This includes a futuristic car serviced at an automated Texaco station, a holographic cinema display featuring *Jaws 19*, and a retro diner, *Café 80s*. The *pièce de résistance*, is an antique shop window display featuring a cornucopia of 'antiques' from JVC, Black & Decker, Perrier and, foregrounded, a 1984 Apple computer. See Fig. 7

[illustration-07 omitted]

This achieves the neat trick of providing the viewer with a catalogue of contemporary products rendered strange by their future context; our refreshed view of these familiar commodities, available to the viewer of 1989, renews interest through their reassuring and nostalgic familiarity in this changed world. At the time of writing, the eighties are resurfacing as a favoured era for a similar sf-based consumer nostalgia in Season three of Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016 -), and *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019).

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[35] Lehu, *Branded Entertainment*, 66.
[36] Fredric Jameson. *Archaeologies of the Future*, 381. "something that can only be achieved when the present is transformed into a distant past by a future perspective whose true function and reason for being is merely and precisely to be the operator of just such a shift in tense perspectives".

This retro technique occurs in a notorious sequence from *I Robot*. In 2035, robot-hating police detective Del Spooner (Will Smith) is a man stuck in the past and an efficient montage typical of lifestyle commercials establishes Spooner's identity as a masculine object of desire amidst a mise en scène décor packed with retro items. Surfacing from a nightmare (related to a traumatic experience of modern robot culture), he turns off a 1970s-style clock radio, rises, eats apple pie and plays Stevie Wonder's *Superstition* on a 1990s JVC Compact Audio system; a variety of largely twentieth century objects and décor are identifiable and camerawork emphasises Smith's buff naked physique as he uses weights and then showers. We see Japanese swords and his handgun hanging on the shower rail, conflating ideas of the past and masculinity. The sequence's hermetic ethos of the TV commercial culminates in an overhead shot setting up the punchline – the unwrapping of his latest purchase, a seemingly brand-new pair of Converse All Stars. See Fig. 8

[illustration-08 omitted]

The close up allows us to witness his decisive gesture of lace-tying, a 'girding the loins' trope familiar from endless action films. Spooner's verbal approval, 'Thing of Beauty' completes a process of double 'retrification', conferring his blessing on an item that, already imbued with nostalgic significance for the viewer as a design established in the 1920s, now receives an extra level of authenticity as its future consumer status is affirmed; it is pristine, a 'genuine' vintage item in the film's future world, the centrepiece of the scene's nostalgic mise en scène. Spooner's eventual acceptance of robot posthuman Civil Rights (Smith's African American heritage provides a heavy-handedly ironic point of reference) occurs in a future where U.S. Robotics is emblematic of rampant, ethically indifferent techno-corporatism. However, the posthuman politics of the narrative places our focus on individual agency and evades other

consideration of humans' instrumental relationship with technology. Here, the trainers are an especially egregious example of a recurrent consumer fetish in similar future sf films that is worth elaborating (we, might, equally, have chosen cars, or mobile devices). *Back To The Future Part 2* features self-lacing Nike Mag trainers (an imaginary item, later released as limited runs in 2011 and 2016); similar examples feature in *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005) – Puma Nu Mostro, *I Am Legend* - Palladium Baggies, *Elysium* – Adidas Original Freemont and *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) - Bates Waterproof tactical Boots). See Figs 9, 10, 11 and 12:

[illustration-09 omitted] [illustration-010 omitted]

[illustration-11 omitted] [illustration-12 omitted]

Fig.12 Palladium Baggy trainers (*I Am Legend*, Lawrence, 2007)

No matter how oppressive the future, no matter what role unchecked technology plays within it, present-day emblems of its bounty persist. Future-retro chic is compounded by semantic values determined by the conjunction of leisure and sport in paratextual discourse. Marketing exploits ideas of the machine, performance and efficiency, associating fashion with technological advance (Hi-Tec as a brand); trainers as tools. A *Maxim* feature conveniently gathers representative examples including: the Nike LunarEpic ("Nike's most tech-forward material"), the Adidas Ultra Boost ("Boost technology used in the soles"), the Adidas 3D Runner ("spiderweb-inspired sole") and the Reebok ZPump Fusion ("Pump Technology") and the Under Armour Speedform Gemini ("microchips built into the shoe to give you

detailed feedback of your run when synched with their MapMyRun app").[37] While suggesting

individualism and discernment as part of character construction, these mass-produced objects

construct a backwards-looking fascination with our corporate consumer culture that, in

narrative terms, the films seek to indict. Elizabeth Ezra offers an account of prosthesis that

places consumer objects and humans as precisely part of the engulfing world of technology:

"It will not be long, one can imagine, before "naturalness" has been completely devalued and

the attractiveness of a subject will be determined by the degree and forms of supplementation

to which his or her body has been subjected. These evaluations will take place, no doubt, in

relation to a continuum that goes from the micro-prosthetics of wearing braces or contact

lenses to something akin to Robert Downey Jr.'s fully prostheticizing Ironman suit"[38]

An early suggestion of this occurs in *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) when Ripley (Sigourney

Weaver) operates a prosthetic Power Loader exosuit: we see her wearing Reebok High Top

trainers that blend in as if they were part of the apparatus[39]. See Fig. 13

[illustration-13 here]

Elysium's example of the Adidas Original Freemont provides ideological contortions as ex-

con and future liberator Max Da Costa (Matt Damon), living in the corporate-dominated,

robot-policed *favela* of a 2154 L.A. is seen tying up his trainers with a tagging device clearly

visible on his ankle; what is the viewer to make of this visual oxymoron? Ezra's earlier

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[37] John Sciarrino, "Step Into The Future With The 10 Most High-Tech Sneakers Out Right Now", *Maxim,* Feb 20, 2017, https://www.maxim.com/gear/most-high-tech-sneakers-2017-2, accessed 1.8.2019

[38] Elizabeth Ezra, *The Cinema of Things: Globalization and the Posthuman Object* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 5. In here argument she draws, respectively, on ideas of supplementarity developed by Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler.

[39] Also re-released as part of an Alien Day celebration in 2016. See Grace Gilfeather, "Reebok is reissuing its Alien Stompers for Alien Day", *GQ*, March 30, 2016, https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/reebok-alien-stompers-trainers-alien-day-2016, accessed 8/.8.2019

remarks take on more relevance as, mortally injured by radiation in an industrial accident, Da

Costa battles high-tech mercenary oppressors aided by prosthetic exoskeletal enhancements.

A *Metropolis*-like division of class and topography foregrounds oppressive police state

technology and its corporate sponsor *Armadyne*, with L.A.'s earthly ghetto exploited to

sustain the technologically Utopian Elysium orbiting above. Christian-inflected themes of

deliverance are suggested in nostalgic flashbacks to childhood innocence in the ghetto, but

mask what is finally a plea for the underclass's access to high-tech healthcare, reducing

consideration of the mode of technological production to a matter of morality: good and bad

individuals, good and bad technology. The trainers are thus, an unexamined point of contact

between the world of corporate consumerism now and its nightmare future projection (a

future in which updated examples of Bugatti, Kawasaki, and Bvlgari also make a showing).

A further complication is identified in the 'textual poaching' model laid down by Henry

Jenkins[40], where paratextual activities and phenomena generated outside the text by fans may

work, in certain cases, against progressive readings. Film promotion, and official or

unofficial merchandising create paratexts that shape our interest in onscreen products and, for

Jonathan Gray, may "not so much work against a show or radically alter the text as much as

they invite increased attention to a given plot, character, relationship, or mode of viewing.'[41]

The impressive backlog of despotic corporate-technology entities in sf cinema – Weyland

(*Alien* series), Tyrell (*Blade Runner*) ConSec (*Scanners*) OCP (*RoboCop*), Cyberdyne

(*Terminator* series)MNU (*District 9*) and Armadyne (*Elysium*) – might suggest some

corrective counterbalance to nostalgic consumerism, yet even these support a strand of

celebratory paratextual discourse. The website *Fictional Corporations*[42] offers T-Shirts

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[40] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1992)

[41] Jonathan Gray, "Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 146.

[42] 'Movie Archives', *Fictional Corporations,* http://fictionalcorporations.com/product-category/movies/ , Accessed 11/8/2019

featuring corporate logos for all the above, and Sony's viral publicity campaign for *Elysium* centers on a brilliantly imaginative corporate website pastiche for Armadyne, celebrating its ethos and products.

A reciprocal phenomenon is the real Japanese corporation Cyberdyne (est. June 2004) a name, indelibly associated with *The Terminator* universe and, whose website illustrations sit easily alongside those of the fictional Armadyne in its promotion of: "Cybernics" - an integrated technology of human, robot and information systems …[that]... will tackle and solve social issues via R&D and implementation of "innovative technology coexisting with people"[43]

Conclusion

Contemporary cinema's CGI quantum shift in the creation of plausible future worlds ought logically to enhance its ability to satisfy science fiction's vaunted concern with creating credible, rational projections of our society. Despite visionary spectacles, genuinely critical reflection on our present is held back by dystopian futures in which a restorative nostalgic fascination with consumption and branded products provide unchallenged touchstones of the past. This is encouraged by the commercial basis of film production in which product placement has become naturalized as part of fictional world-building, and by paratextual discourses in which cult fascinations with commodities shape audiences' interest in on-screen examples.[44]

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[43] *Cyberdyne* website, https://www.cyberdyne.jp/english/ accessed 8/8/2019
[44] Sean Redmond, *Liquid Space: Science Fiction Film and Television in the Digital Age*, (London, I.B. Tauris, 2017) See Ch. 2 'Eye-Tracking the Sublime in Spectacular Moments' 41-61 Redmond draws on eye-tracking methodology to explore digital science fiction spectacle's tendency to 'commodify the viewer's experience'.

A techno-corporate capitalist mode of production, so often identified as the causal basis for future cinematic catastrophe is, revalidated through its nostalgically fetishised products whose appeal circulates between past and future fictional worlds and our own.

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