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As our obsession with the past threatens to catch up with us, MARK EDWARDS asks whether we can ever go back to the future

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WE USED TO LOOK FORWARD TO THE FUTURE? THINK WE CAN EVER GET BACK TO THE DAYS WHEN THE PAST STAYED IN THE PAST? IS THERE, IN SHORT, ANY FUTURE IN NOSTALGIA? CAN WE GET BACK TO THE FUTURE? STRAP YOURSELF INTO THE TIME MACHINE. WE'RE GOING ON A BUMPY RIDE.

I just don't get off on nostalgia like I did in the old days. I find myself yearning for the real past, aching for the good old days before we used to be constantly aching for the good old days. Maybe you're too young to remember them--the days before we discovered retro-everything. But maybe you've seen enough late-night Channel 4 movies to realise that there was once a time when Western civilization looked forward, looked for inspiration not to the fifties but to the year 2001.

Boy, that number used to get us excited: The 21st century. Just around the next corner. Coming soon to a cinema near you. Before you know it, we'll all be 21st-century beings. And what were we going to do in the 21st century? Why, we were going to live in the House of the Future, situated in the City of the Future. And we'd be driven to the Office of the Future in the Car of the Future (which, of course, would fly) by the Robot of the Future. Who would be called Robby. And would smile.

The only thing that wouldn't be of the Future would be problems. We wouldn't have any. By 2001 we would have cured cancer and learned to live in peace. And... well, that's it. What other problems could there be?

This attitude reached its peak in the fifties and early sixties, when radio, film, TV and comics were awash with science fiction. By the mid-sixties it had a kitschy fringe to it (Lost in Space, Thunderbirds, The Jetsons) which should have warned us that decadence had set in, that the fun-loving, technology-friendly era was almost over. But the whole thing went back way beyond that. Jules Verne and HG Wells ushered in the modern era of future-watching. For decades after decades we looked forward. Nostalgia for the 19th century? No, no, a favour!

And now? Look forward? Are you kidding? Instead of investing in the future, we're borrowing from the past: living on time-credit. Wallowing in nostalgia. Looking backwards. Ironically enough, we seem to enjoy most looking backwards straight into the era when we did most of our looking forward. Our nostalgia is for the time when we didn't need nostalgia--when we eagerly awaited the future. A time of optimism. A time when we hadn't noticed the side effects of progress yet.

Let's track it. When did the first niggly little signs of oh-what-a-lovely-past rear their recherche heads? I'm not sure we saw them as nostalgia then, not sure we knew the term, but they appeared in the early Seventies. The Boy Friend. The Great Gatsby. The Waltons. The rediscovery of the Twenties. It tied in with the plunge into the mini-recession of 1973-74 and the three day week. On a shorter timescale, the early Seventies music scene had begun raiding the back catalogue. Rock music was suddenly old enough for groups to be nostalgic for a particular earlier period. The post-Summer of Love semi-decade was junked, as David Bowie started what would have been the first and revival if anyone else had wanted to play, with the release of Pin-Ups (his favourite music from way, way back in the mid-sixties) in 1973. Around the same time, Mud and Showaddywaddy rode the crest of the rock 'n' roll revival.

If we can see the early Seventies as the starting point, we can begin to make sense of the switch from sci-fi to cute-past. Through the fifties and early sixties the future ruled. No doubt: The Tornados even made a record about a satellite, for Chrissakes (Number 1 both here and in America, even as the satellite, Telstar, allowed transatlantic communications in what the People of the Future would call 'real time').

But by the end of the sixties, this yearning for the future had gone. What happened? This may sound like a ridiculous idea now, but from all the evidence we have, it looks like--for just a very few years, maybe 1963 to 1966--people actually lived in the present. What happened in the mid-sixties was just that--the mid-sixties. That's what it's famous for--being itself. Just for those few glorious years, the calendar actually coincided with what we'd probably have to call the Universal Mindset: People were actually truly happy to be alive right here, right now. In fact, yes, 'now' was a pretty positive adjective back then; whereas today (now) it's just a heavily advertised compilation album--an exercise in nostalgia for last month, a chance to live in April, in case May isn't good enough.

Maybe it was Kennedy. Maybe it was The Beatles. Maybe it was the psychological effect of the space-travel dream coming true. Like that medieval process where they drill a hole in your skull to release demons. Maybe when the human race pushed up off Earth for the first time, it did something similar--took some pressure off this planet, and everyone on it, gave us all a few years' grace. Lifted our spirits.

In effect, the future we'd been dreaming of for so long began to come true. And if we had satellites, then could the cure for and world peace be far behind? But we hadn't glimpsed any of the problems that the future brought with it.

After 1966, the core group of society (the ones we'd have called movers and shakers in the Eighties) took two years off. Instead of living in the past, present or future, they just went off and lived in a parallel universe (either fuelled by drugs, Eastern cults or just too much money to stay in reality). Then when they woke up again in 1969, it had all started to look ugly. Whether as a real horror or as a small-scale big symbol (Vietnam still going on, Altamont), the signs were all wrong. Instead of living happily in the present, we began to push against it, to protest it. 'Give Peace a Chance,' 'Power to the People,' flowers in rifles, The Beatles break-up, pretty soon people were investigating the President of the US, accusing him of being a thief and a liar--and they were right!

Hardly surprising that people began to look back to the mid-sixties. And it got worse. As the Seventies progressed, the Car of the Future, the City of the Future, the House of the Future all began to go terribly wrong. Those big, thrusting, glorious City-of-the-Future skyscrapers turned into hellish towerblocks. We pulled the glorious future down. Blew it up and pulled it down, before it fell down of its own accord, before it ate up the souls of the People of the Future. The Car of the Future kept spewing out poison. The City of the Future kept throwing up violence.

By the Eighties we couldn't bear to live in the present. So, we had the option to turn back to the future. But look what had happened the last time. This ugly present we were living in was the future we had longed for. The only sane refuge was the past. Why? Because it was intrinsically, inherently better? Well, no, simply because it was safe. The past couldn't be unexpected: It couldn't have unknown side effects. It couldn't die because it wasn't truly alive. It couldn't come up in the street and ask us for loose change. It couldn't wipe out millions of people in Africa. It couldn't kill for a pair of trainers. So in one decade, the Eighties, we went through nostalgia for four decades--the Thirties, Forties, Fifties and Sixties.

Now (if you'll pardon the expression) in the Nineties, we're left with the real problems: First of all--how would you live in the present, even if you wanted to, were brave enough to? What is the present? What does the Nineties look like or sound like? Our music is Sixties or Seventies. Our films are re-creations of classic genres--film noir, Westerns, moral fables. Our TV is "another chance to see." Our clothes are "the X is back!" Our jobs are getting more and more like they were before the Eighties boom. (The Leisure Age? Give me a break!) If you wanted to be a Nineties person what would you do? Have babies and stay home? Nah, that's a Nineties subgenre, not a Nineties person. Becoming more caring and sharing? Nah, that's a late Eighties dream, not a Nineties reality.

There really aren't any rules: But there are a million guidelines for how to borrow creatively from the past. Not only is living in the present virtually impossible. But if you did achieve it, how would anyone else know? What does it look like? What does it feel like?

OK; you're saying "it's too early to know what the Nineties are about--you never know that until the end of the decade." But that's my point. People in the Sixties knew what the Sixties were about in the Sixties. Now we're totally used to the idea that you never what the present is about until it's become the past and the Sunday supplements have done a pictorial review of it. Bizarre. And completely accepted. Admit it: the very suggestion that you should have a handle on what 1991 is all about already seems ridiculous to you. Mid-Eighties? Yeah, got that down. But now? I'll get back to you.

Second problem (which may, eventually, solve the first): we're catching up with ourselves. We're well into the sixties and early seventies right now, and frankly, we're going through it--chewing them up and spitting them out--so quickly that it isn't going to take us that long to wade through punk rock retro, to brat back backback, to have a rose-tinted view of red-framed specs and striped shirts. Then all that will be left will be a nostalgic glimpse at the positive side of the early Nineties recession (remember how everybody got rich then?) and we'll be--gulp!--right up to the present.

Then we've got three choices. We can try right on back into the future (and just maybe, we will after all this is the millennium you know, party like it's 1999 and all that). Or we go back through all the past again (gee, remember the last time we remembered the fifties? Nostalgia was so much better the first time around). Or we stubbornly live in the present. Hmm. Now, let's think. What did we do last time?

PAST

As our nostalgia for the previous page threatens to eclipse this one, CHRISTOPHER VICE urges you to read further

(in) tense / future PERFECT

Possibly three choices aren't enough. Or don't exist.

If we accept that all form, significant or otherwise, has been discovered (personally I don't want to believe this is true but I haven't yet been able to imagine any that hasn't) and that there is no new experience to be realized, then we can safely eliminate inventing a future. And if no one can stomach another cycle of retro anything (not to mention the inherent contradiction of longing to return to the innocent past in which we naively committed the errors that caused us to be disillusioned in the present), then any repeat performances are out, too. And if the present is beyond our psychological capabilities or is too fractured to recognize or agree upon, then we are in trouble. Or we need another option.

Ronald Jones attributes the impowerment of nostalgia to our inability to move beyond the constraints of High-Modernism. We are in the straights of "hover culture" he says. But that is too easy an indictment. We are too savvy to the failings of modernism, yet too critical of its strategies. Modernism is too tired a scapegoat to shore up our collective creative paralysis. Possibly it is our alternatives to modernist practices that are as much to blame for our package tour time travel mentality as modernism itself.

Some time ago the pundits offered a solution in the guise of postmodernism. But the postmodern route can be a treacherous one. Where it clear cuts a path across blocked roads it may create pitfalls. It is a practice that must be engaged with intelligence and wit; the modernists preached the 'good' but we must recognize that there is such a thing as bad postmodernism.

As best as anyone can agree, post modernism is predicated on the demise of individualism (the "death of the subject") at the hands of Corporate Capitalism and a subsequent disintegration of classical modernism. Our inheritance is one of pastiche (blank parody) and "schizophrenia" (unclinically given as the breakdown of the relationships between signifiers resulting in an undifferentiated relationship to the temporal and subsequent hyper-real experience). But this legacy is only acceptable if it can transcend pastiche. Otherwise we haven't the ability to eclipse nostalgia.

While mining the past will take us nowhere, we can effectively address our time and place through an intelligent clash of style and meaning. As examples, Mr. Keedy's typeface design *Hard Times*, Frank Gehery's residence in Santa Monica, Pedro Almodovar's appropriation of Alexi Brodovitch fashion layouts for the titles of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* imbue past expression with new meaning. These projects take what might be accepted at historical face value and interpret through a filter that could only exist in a specific time and a specific place—now. They comment on history and speak for today. They warp. As examples, Duffy design and Ralph Lauren merely warm up a non-existent past for a cold and hungry captive audience. They invent history. They recontextualize. It may sound good but its still just a fancy way to say travel back in time to a place that never was. Tibor Kalman offers a definition of the forked path down memory lane. "Bad History uses tradition to impart an instant aura of instant class and social exclusion. Good History picks up a fragment from the past and "kicks it into the present."²

This forced collision between old and new, now and then can comment on how the fall of modernism altered our posturing of past and future. Envisioning a future as culturally significant as an imaginary past historicized by nineteenth century academicians, the modernists projected a future that was History. Thus, the canon was amended; it became a writ in stone.

But to effectively address the present, one need not shatter the monolith; its too easy a gesture to deny the past and one that for years has been made by those in the so-called avant-garde. We occupy a unique vantage point; our position at the end of the twentieth century, with our understanding of the history of experience and form, yields the power to manipulate. Nothing can be gained in the act of destroying. In fact one may not even find the need; there are evidences of post modern plays in high modern practice. Fredric Jameson points to the works of Thomas Mann and Joyce's *Ulysses* as examples of knowing, pre-postmodern uses of pastiche.³

Furthermore, recognition that we live in a continuum is essential if we are to escape the vacuum of schizophrenia. (And we owe it to our selves to avoid the void; however romantic it might be portrayed, hyper reality can't be fun for long.) Acceptance that the Moderns preceded us and the Ancients before them, coupled with the hindsight that the present bestows, is essential if we are to comment on the past and shape the present.

Since post modernism has broken the restraints of institutional monopolies on culture why not make use of our new found freedom to create. Why fall victim to 'fatal strategies' of the hyper banal, of which nostalgia may be the worst and most unconscious. One can dedicated oneself to the new again, or at least to a new as new can be. The designer can move beyond the correctness of historic 'quotation' demanded by the canon and also subvert the program of historical (mis)appropriation of style mandated as a function of consumer culture obsolescence.

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