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“U-Chronia and prognosis: The attraction of technology”

Abstract

The nexus between utopian thought and technical visions is today driven highly professionally and under pressure to turn a profit by the guiding intellectual forces of large business corporations. It would appear that while society and politics is becoming accustomed to the status quo or tries to emulate the values of the 1950s, the wheel of history is driven only by the increasingly global benefits of technology.

Behind this lies an intellectual revival that occurred in the 18th century; to pinpoint it precisely, after the 19th September 1783, when at about 1 p.m., the huge blue taffeta sphere of Étienne de Montgolfier rose into the sky before a crowd of 100,000 at the royal palace of Versailles. This event was not only the first mass spectacle in history, but at the same time created a new awareness of the possibilities offered by technology. While the utopians had previously considered a well-ordered body politic, now expectations in the future were invested in technology as the new driving force.

The change of course is palpable in the novel “2440” by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, considered the first systematic “U-Chronia”, as a shift of the desired condition to the future while the location remains similar, in Mercier’s case Paris in the year 2440.

Decisive here are the textual changes following the Montgolfier brothers’ balloon experiment. While the first edition of 1770 discusses the reclamation of technical skills of the past – embalming and Archimedean mirrors – Mercier added passages to the second edition in 1786 that hint at the face of a technologically changed world: “aerostats” that connect the continents and dispatches that can travel within a week from Beijing to Paris hold a mirror up to the world.

Since that date, his Paris of the future was no longer mankind's dream of a beautifully built city populated by educated, well-dressed, well-fed and law-abiding citizens, but one where all limits of space, time and life have been conquered by machines of sublime intelligence.

Today, however, in the new millennium, not only the account of social justice is finished; the technical dream has also lost its attraction – evident everywhere and praised so unpleasantly, it is drummed into us from the moment we are born.

Technical progress, in short, has become banal. What mass spectacles today lead to the news that computers halve in size every two years with double the computing speed? But with the technology the junk also increases, especially of the intellectual kind. That is because the many different options are nothing more than the virtual infinity of the same thing over and over, the recapture and variation of what has already been achieved.

The technically equipped reality is the same, both predictively and prophetically. It enables the preliminary calculation, its shelf life and breaking points; it cements the lines of continuous development. Every new device merely heralds its successor. Hence no technical device is a commitment to the present; as far as I can see, it is a prognosis insofar that it hints at what awaits me in the future: I only rely on a technical device because it makes me believe that it is designed for the future and exists in the future; that it is ahead of my time and can anticipate the future by already possessing the functions that I will only need tomorrow. Technology appears to make the future programmable. But it is also prophetic because the allure of all technology is to herald an ultimate device that will truly solve everything that the device before me could only promise; a device capable of anything.

Merely the representation of technology – its packaging that sells us its importance by defrauding us of its provisional nature – ties us to the present. The

point about the same thing over and over lies in disconnection or replacement. The device itself is always merely a test model: by possessing more and faster functions than the previous model. The car is the more comfortable horse; the human behind has become laxer accordingly.

Our faith in technology has vanished. Technical visions of the future are antiquated; robots, space stations, Martian cities, bio-engineers and surveillance monsters equally belong in museums, alluring or dangerous like airports and the television; no one who does not have a definite profit interest can summon up much enthusiasm for it. With this belief the ability to predict dwindles.