

Speculating Futures in an Age of Nostalgia

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Abstract

This paper will present an exploration of the relationship between the past and the present and how that interaction influences design thinking when speculating about possible futures. It will argue that the growing influence of nostalgia, supported by the exponential growth of data creation and consumption, together with the democratisation of sophisticated tools, has the potential to introduce the unintended effect of flattening the very creativity that is central to design. The key argument is that design is influenced by visions of futures from the past, either intentionally or unintentionally.

The concept of Hauntology will be introduced as a way of framing how visions of possible futures are continually bound up with the concerns of the present which are, in turn, connected to the past through the “spectres of lost futures”. More recently, critics have discussed Hauntology in the context of describing contemporary culture’s persistent re-cycling of retro aesthetics and the subsequent inability to escape old social forms.

In the time that it takes to attempt to recall the name of a TV programme from our past, it is now possible to view original footage on a myriad of different platforms and services. These tools have the effect of making time plastic and stretchable, where the past has never been more accessible. The paper will argue that slowly and imperceptibly we have become beguiled by the increasing capacity to store, organise, access, and share vast amounts of cultural data and that this could lead to a dampening of creativity.

Author keywords

Speculation; Future; Hauntology; Nostalgia; Data.

Introduction

In the city of Bristol UK, during the summer of 2020 a bronze statue was toppled by protesters, dragged through the streets to the harbour and thrown into the sea. In the grand scheme of things, this might seem like a small local disturbance, but what it raised were much more fundamental questions about our relationships with the past and how these are affected by the present and possible futures. The statue was of Edward Colston, a 17th century merchant and slave trader who was born in Bristol. Colston’s memory had been divisive for years, with some thinking history can’t be changed and others campaigning successfully for his name to be erased from streets, schools, and venues. The toppling of the statue served as a powerful reminder that the past is intimately bound up with futures and critically that the past is also a contested space (Stead & Coulton, 2022). It is subject to many different interpretations when viewed through the lens of the present.

Like so many people, I have been working from home for most of 2020 and 2021 but now I move between home and the office as I engage in what has become known as hybrid working. On a daily basis, I navigate the technology landscape moving between Webex, Teams and Zoom to communicate with colleagues. I am living the 1990s dream of Computer Supported Co-operative Working (CSCW) (Grudin, 1988). Moving seamlessly between meetings comprised of people who are having similar experiences, while all the time I remain physically in the same location. Paradoxically I seem to have caught up with a technological view from the past. From this perspective, the idea of what a future or indeed futures, might hold has become increasingly difficult to imagine. In response to this dilemma, I found myself looking more to the past.

Imperceptibly my social media feeds became populated with terms such as retro, vintage, and redux and these curated images from the past provided a sense of nostalgia in uncertain times. What is the appeal of nostalgia and why does something that is impossible to achieve continue to have such a hold on us? As our lives push forward, seemingly ever faster doesn't it feel natural that we should sometimes stop and wish that we could have some part of it back. Nostalgia keeps happening, even though it is impossible, and it is in that duality that part of the appeal resides (Berry, 2020).

In season 1 of the TV series *Madmen* in an episode entitled *The Wheel* (2007), directed by Matthew Weiner. The anti-hero Don Draper during a pitch to Kodak, describes nostalgia as delicate but potent. He continues that it literally means the pain from an old wound, it's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. Just like Don, we are constantly looking forward and as designers we are always wondering how to improve our futures when we don't always realise that true power comes from the past. The past can offer nostalgia, and, like Don, it is only when we accept the past that we can properly move forward. Speculative design (Dunne & Raby, 2013), in many ways is as much about understanding the past as it is about imagining futures.

Hauntology — How futures are connected to the past

As with the case of the statue of Edward Colston, what these stories illustrate is that our visions of futures continue to be intimately connected to our past. Raising the question of whether that relationship is intentionally acknowledged or is the past an ever-present but perhaps unseen backdrop as we consider our futures? The nature of this relationship between the past and the future was articulated by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida who coined the phrase Hauntology (Derrida, 1994). What he meant by this term is that the present is haunted by the metaphorical “ghosts” of lost futures. The concept raises the question of how “spectres” of alternative futures influence current and historical discourse and if “haunting” has real effects on how we conceive possible futures. In short, our visions of possible futures are always bound up with our concerns of the present which are, in turn connected to the past through these “spectres”.

More recently, critics such as Mark Fisher have discussed Hauntology in the context of describing contemporary culture's persistent re-cycling of retro aesthetics and what he considered to be an inability to escape old social forms (Fisher, 2012). His position is captured in his characterisation of 21st century culture as being “20th century culture distributed over high-speed networks” (Fisher, 2014). For Fisher, creative and cultural production needs to either explicitly reference the techniques of the past in the means of production or risk being implicitly tethered to the past. In his 2012 paper entitled *What is Hauntology?*, Fisher frames an argument that there is no leading edge of innovation anymore and that we are living in what Franco ‘Biffo’ Berardi referred to as “after the future” (Berardi 2011). Fisher states that “what haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the 21st century is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the 20th century taught us to anticipate” (Fisher 2012). From the perspective of Speculative Design, Anthony Dunne has discussed the idea of “broken futures” which I suspect refers to the promises of past futures and how these have failed to be delivered or, what was in fact delivered was a pale shadow of the original concept. In a similar way James Auger (Auger, 2013) refers to Alternate Presents or Lost Futures when considering different development paths, so rather than asking the question “what if?” it is reframed into asking “why are things the way they are?”.

These ideas echo the position of Berardi who, when discussing the influences of the 1960s on the speculation of futures described this effect as “the slow cancelation of the future” in the context of being unable to break free from the shackles of these decades (2011). The horizons of the future seem tethered to ideas that emanate from this period of “peak future” (Smyth, 2021). We are seemingly bound to these spectre's of the past, for example the utopian ideals born in the 1960s and forged in the “white heat” of science. An imagined world of flying cars and jet packs for all, each somehow encapsulating the promise of a future so far removed from the everyday reality and so beloved of fictional secret agents of the time.

Influential Spectres in Uncertain Times

But fast forward to today, as we come to terms with the experiences of various lockdowns, what has become increasingly apparent is that the spectres of lost futures are ever more present as the uncertainties of the present begin to reshape our desires and dreams for the future. These are perhaps not best represented by the canonical visions of futures mentioned earlier, but rather by a gradual shift to a more holistic view of where humans fit in the wider ecology. The impact of climate change is being felt across the globe, sustainability and the circular economy have become a central part of any discussion about production and consumption. The Royal Society for arts, manufactures and commerce (RSA) in the UK refines this conversation when it talks about re-generation, with the twin focus of repair and improve. Meanwhile, the emergence of vintage, up cycling and re-use reflects one of the few growth areas of the high street. This is typified by Waste! a relatively new addition to the growing number of vintage shops in London. What makes Waste! stand out is its deliberate reaction to the modernist aesthetic of many shops. In the shop the owners have created the experience of a teenage bedroom from the past as it foregrounds the work of local designers to a wider public. Our relationship with the past is bound up in the pre-loved world of vintage and recycling both creating sustainability and a direct link to the past. Magnified by the uncertainties in society, economics and the environment, nostalgia provides the balm for this triple bottom line itch. From the perspective of technology, specifically Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and Interaction Design (IxD), the increased interest in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and More than Human Design (Giaccardi & Redström 2020) considers our place as humans in these eco-systems. These nascent entanglements of human and non-human agency pose significant challenges for human centred design processes. Just as we get used to Human Centred Design, the ground shifts again, which could indicate a desire to return to a more symbiotic relationship with nature and the environment. Hauntology extends the concept of action taking place over multiple sites and actors to consider how participation happens across multiple temporalities, to not only consider the present but also what was the past and what might be possible futures (Gatehouse, 2020).

The pressure is coming from technological change or perhaps more accurately the application of existing techniques but manifest in new forms. AI is a verdant ground for the ghosts of lost technological futures and much of the rhetoric associated with the Expert Systems of the 1980s and 90s is echoed in the current discourse around AI that pervades the discourse concerning interaction and its wider impact on society. These mysterious algorithms make selections and predictions that effect our lives. From the relatively trivial, such as choosing where we are placed in the phone queues based on our location and previous behaviours, to the selection of job applicants and the prediction of academic grades. The unconscious bias somehow one step removed as it permeates the code, distancing responsibility from the human actors. Does the promise of AI somehow speak to our lost futures, its vagueness adding to the allure and promise as this particular ghost in the machine quietly monitors in the background, making unseen decisions? This is set against a backdrop of an increased deployment of AI into industry (Industry 4.0) and the environment (Internet of Things) that has re-cast the role of technological artefacts and their relationships with humans.

We are living in times of seemingly constant change, but the direction of travel is uncertain. Technology fuels this illusion of progress, where change seems to equate to ever faster iterations off the same products, services and experiences. The spectre of Berardi looms large. But this is not the whole story, behind the technological tools lies the resource of data. Year on year the amount stored data grows exponentially, as we create and consume ever more amounts. The devices we use to traverse the datascape require more memory capacity to cope with the scale of data. This, coupled with the next generation of data hungry apps that harvest our data on an industrial scale, is a vicious circle that far from trying to avoid, we seem intent to run headlong towards as we upload, comment and retweet, creating vast data sets for third party vendors.

Nostalgia and Technology

The role of data, particularly from the perspective of innovation and skills has been a topic of interest for some years now. Technology lies at the heart of such innovation, but the situation has been further complicated by the growth of media data sets and the diversity of tools available to search such repositories.

In the time that it takes to attempt to recall the name of a TV programme from our past, it is now possible to view original footage on a myriad of different platforms and services. These tools have the effect of making time plastic and stretchable, where the past has never been more accessible. Fisher (2013) refers to this as “technologised” time, where the past and the future are subject to ceaseless de and re-composition. Time becomes compressed and, in effect begins to disappear much in the same way as Marc Augé (2009) talks about “non-place” when referring to airports, retail parks and chain stores as places that have become generic and have lost their meaning and connection to us. Now we can add “non-time” into that discourse.

In a recent article by Lauren Cochrane she describes a similar situation in terms of how we are experiencing an acceleration of nostalgia, which she characterises as being “trapped in what we might call a Revival Spiral” (Cochrane, 2022). She describes the current retro culture as “anemoia”, a nostalgia for an era that a person has not actually lived through, whereas the Revival Spiral is perhaps better characterised by a seemingly increased longing for the recent past. This could be because of the rate of change in digital culture, resulting in a nostalgia for eras that we have just left and accelerated by the plentiful data that documents that last ten years. The situation has been compounded, Cochrane argues, by the turbulent times that we are living through. Pre 2016 might only be eight years ago, but it feels like a lifetime: Trump; Brexit and a global pandemic. The effect has been the tendency to romanticise the cultural signifiers from 2019 or earlier.

The article describes how Sarah Lloyd from University of the Arts (UoA) London, considers the revival culture as a way of gaining a sense of control over the ever-shifting cultural landscape and relocating oneself in the past to better understand the present. The accompanying technological tools are crucial to this relationship. With so many data resources available to us, we can create experiences of the past without the need for newness. A situation that mirrors the concerns of both Berardi and Fisher. With the same search engines and algorithms available to everyone, the effect has been to “flatten the zeitgeist” (Cochrane, 2022) leading to a monoculture across the generations. This view was similar to that explored by Superstudio who were one of the key exponents of the Radical Design Movement that emerged from Florence, Italy in the 1960s. By adopting a speculative approach Superstudio sought to give voice to a new generation of architects who wanted to critique the traditional methods of planning and question the very nature of what cities might become in the future. The Continuous Monument (Figure 1) imagined cities as anonymous megastructures where the last vestiges of local cultures would be removed. Though never intended to be built, their aim was to act as a catalyst for discussion and reflection on the lived experience associated with such a future. There can be little doubt that the spectres of Superstudio haunt the glossy renders of many visions of future cities but perhaps most strikingly in the case of The Line the Saudi governments plan for a 170 kilometre long structure to be built near the Red Sea, complete with 500 metre tall mirrored facades.

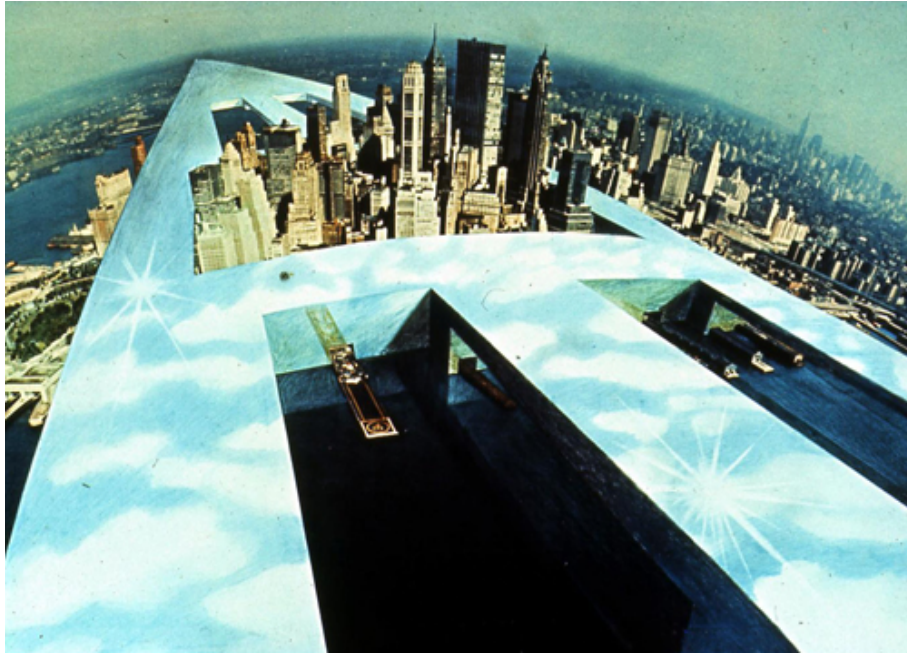


Figure 1. The Continuous Monument, Superstudio (1969-70) image courtesy of C.Toraldo di Francia Archive

But let's return to the idea of nostalgia and how the past continues to exert influence and beguile our imagination of futures. Simon Reynolds coined the phrase "retromania" to describe what he saw as the growing influence of nostalgia on popular culture and the commodification of the past (Reynolds, 2011). Coverley (2020) cites the impact of digital technology on cultural memory, in particular the internet and its power to democratise and make accessible vast resources of data that were once in limited supply and are now available for manipulation and nostalgia. He summarises the 21st centuries' obsessive curating of the past as a "symptomatic yet futile attempt to control time which has only intensified as new technologies become a facilitator for nostalgia, providing instantaneous access to endless new swathes of the past" (Coverley, 2020).



Figure 2. The Zizi Project: 7-channel installation at Inspace City Screen, Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2019, image courtesy of Jake Elwes

The remix culture continues to pervade many aspects of creative and cultural production, from the “cut-up” techniques favoured by authors and musicians, from Burroughs to Bowie. The technique of “cut-up” refers to the process of literally cutting up existing texts to generate new meanings with the rearranged pieces. There is now a new generation of artificial Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs). These employ neural network architectures to generate new data based on learned patterns. As well as generating images of human faces and creating images from text, GANs can generate entirely new data making them core to many leading-edge AI systems. An example of this approach is the work of Jake Elwes, who in the Zizi Project (2019) used films of drag artists to train a neural network to enable audiences to create a synthetic facsimile that could dance to particular songs. The work was exhibited as part of the Edinburgh International Festival in 2019 (Figure 2). Part of the appeal is the capability of seemingly endless recombination of images of the past based on the promise of insight through serendipity. In short, an automated cut up for a new generation.

So, what is the effect of the exponential growth of searchable and retrievable data; the growth of publicly available AI based tools that can manipulate and endlessly re-purpose such data into new forms and the allure of nostalgia? This paper has argued that slowly and imperceptibly we have become beguiled by the increasing capacity to store, organise, access, and share vast amounts of cultural data. The laudable aim of data driven innovation needs to explicitly take on board the prophetic words of Berardi and Fisher and, what these mean for the design and development of technological tools for the creative industries, as these tools might have the unintended effect of dampening the very creativity that is central to the endeavour.

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