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Retro future. Present and past in the costumes of futuristic films

Over the next pages I will try to demonstrate the importance of signs from the present in the characterization of men and women in futuristic films. Being an uncertain and unknown time, the future configures itself as a reflection of the present and the past, envisioning the aesthetic and the fashion of the time of its production. The different ways in which we look from the present to the future are also an important factor in the meaning of the futuristic film, and manifest themselves in the selection of this or that type of costume, this or that aesthetic trend; be it an aesthetic trend from the present, from the past, or *disguised* as if from the future.

Views of the future

The ways in which different generations have imagined the future of human appearance in films, differ according to their perception of the concept of *future*. Although apparently “time” is an universal concept, present, past and future are understood in different ways depending on the cultural perspective from where they are observed. Regarding this, the Russian semiologist Boris Uspenski in his conference *Semiotics and Culture. The perception of time as a semiotic problem* (2010: 1), maintains that “*the present can be evaluated from the perspective of our past or of our future and, in the same manner, past and future can be understood as visions that are conditioned by the present¹*”.

It seems self-evident that the human appearance of men and women of the future

¹ The concept of future time does not exist in certain languages. Such is the case of the language of the Russian Orthodox Church, and also of the Old Russian. They distinguish present from non-present, but their gramatical code do not contain the idea of future. (Uspenski, 2010)

imagined by H.G. Wells in his novel *The shape of things to come*, novel that in 1936 would be adapted for the screen as *Things to Come* by W.C. Menzies, is not the same human appearance that Robert Zemeckis would describe in the late 1980's *Back to Future II* (1989). In the fifty three years between these two films, two World Wars have passed, television has made its appearance, man has reached the moon.

Fashion has also significantly changed during this period. The fashion of the 1930's will give way to the ideal glamour of the Classic Hollywood stars, or that of designers like Balenciaga and Dior who, in turn, will make room for the new youth tendencies: *beatniks, mods, hippies, punks...* and others that will successively become the trends of the 1950's, 60's, 70's and 80's. .

Beside the social changes and the variations in costume, there is a significant change in the perspective of the viewer of both films.

Things to Come, with a script by H. G. Wells, is along with *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926), one of the first attempts at predicting the future in the movies. It begins with a warning of a new World War (the year of production is 1936), continuing with the war itself, war that will last until 1966. The film ends in the year 2036, with humankind reaching an utopic technocratic society that is quite distanced from the barbaric times right after the war. H. G. Wells reflects in his film the perspective from his time; a perspective that, contrary to Fritz Lang's fearful and distrusting look at the progress of mechanics, dreams of advancing towards the future, in a brotherly chant to the progress of humankind.

The last scene features two of the technocratic leaders of the new utopic city (meaningly named *Communication World*), Cabal (Raymond Massey) and Passworthy (Edward Chapman) observing the "flight" of the rocket in which their sons are travelling moon bound. "*And when he (humankind) has conquered all the deeps of space and all the mysteries of time, still he will be beginning*", declares Cabal, his eyes fixed on the stars.

Things to Come is a clear model of the technocratic and developmental conscience of the 1930's, with its desire for innovation and transformation aimed at the goal of a better tomorrow, represented by the shiny, spick-and-span city designed by Vincent Korda and the professor and Bauhaus artist Moholy Nagy, and by the

“apparently” futuristic costumes of René Hubert, John Armstrong, the Marquise of Queensberry and Sam Williams.

Cabal and Passworthy look at the future of humankind dressed in Roman breastplates and long tunics and togas inspired by Classic Times; while the women and children sport pleating dresses and classic headdresses. All these clothes are *disguised* as future by means of details, such as the prominent shoulder straps. The greek peplums and chitons and the roman tunics and gowns have been transformed through aesthetics of the *Avant Garde*, and the geometry of the shapes has acquired more importance, substituting the natural way that soft garments fall on the body by more rigid materials and structures, and in the case of women by short and daring dresses. Being the new town located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and having as its political model a sort of technocratic platonism, it's not surprising that Classic Times are also the model used to dress the humans of the future (Yance, 2011).

In contrast, the perspective of the viewer of *Back to Future II* is soaked with nostalgia, with the difference that this time it's a nostalgia for times that *have* really been experienced and not just idealised as in the case before. Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox), arriving in the future in the year 2015, seems quite impressed looking at the window of an antiques shop that shows objects that belong to the past. The window features the most innovative products of the 1980's, such as one of the first Macintosh computers, or the now classic badge *smiley face*, objects that in the present year of 2011 are regarded, just like in the film, as valuable *retro* items. We may be tempted to think that this way of looking into the past was something innovative for the epoch, but in fact the perspective of the 1989 spectator already regarded with nostalgia its immediate past, particularly that of the 1960's and 70's; therefore, the representation of a “nostalgic” future didn't seem strange for the first spectators of the film.

In both cases, and in any analysis of any other futuristic film, it's important to bear in mind that the perspective of the spectator-reader to whom the film is aimed at the moment of its release, will determine the correct reading of the film-text, since the interpretation of that future time will depend on the codes that, at that particular moment, are known by a community of spectators. Perspective that will gradually transform as it assumes new aesthetic and cultural concepts, or abandons others. And so, the lecture made by the spectators that went to see *Things to Come* in 1936, or that of those who

attended the premiere of *Back to Future II* in 1989, is very far apart from the possible lectures of the spectators of 2011.

The present is the past in the future

The *future*, or that “*that is to be or come hereafter*” (according to R.A.E.²), is closely related, when we refer to fashion, with the concept of tendency, or *trend*: “*to have or take a particular direction; to tend*” (Winston’s). Fashion is expected to give evidence of the immediate future of clothing, and to indicate the direction of up-and-coming tendencies. But the future, and the future of fashion, understood as the different uses and shapes of clothes, is uncertain and unpredictable.

If fashion worries about envisaging the immediate tendencies, the cinema can dare to imagine future worlds. And just as fashion tries to guess how the next trend will develop into others, cinema is able to imagine a complete fashion that applies to the entire society, and a type of costume associated with the construction of a cultural model, that includes the uses and lifestyles that relate to these clothing proposals.

Since we have no way of knowing the future, or the tendencies of future fashion, cinema and fashion face the same problem with the same incertitude. But the relationship between fashion and futuristic cinema is more intense than it seems at first glance.

All futuristic films show traces of the moment when they were produced. *The present is the past in the future*, says Uspenski (2010, p. 1).

To illustrate this point, let’s make a brief analysis of the costumes used in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926), *Things to come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936), *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), *Fahrenheit 451* (François Truffaut, 1966) *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), to pick but a few.

The robot in *Metropolis*; the costumes with big shoulder straps in *Things to Come*; the short miniskirt of the main female character Altaira (Anne Francis) in *Forbidden*

² R.A.E. Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española.

Planet; the uniforms of the fire brigade in *Fahrenheit 451*; the space suits in *Alien*; or the blue body of the Na'vi from planet Pandora in *Avatar*; are some “futuristic” signs that in each epoch the moviemaker has proposed in order to make the movie more convincing. But these “futuristic signs” camouflage other less evident signs, that come from the contemporary culture to the making of the film. And so in *Metropolis* the robot that has taken the identity of Maria (Brigitte Helm), and that wants to fool and conquer mankind, dresses up like a character from Diaghilev’s russian ballets, all folded up in veils and oriental decoration. We have already seen how the classic gowns of *Things to Come* are closely related to the aesthetics of the *Avant Garde*, with their pure lines and innovative materials. The miniskirt sported by Altaira in *Forbidden Planet* has the appearance of a *novelty*, but it had already be seen in many Broadway musicals. Yvonne Blake designed “normal” suits and dresses for *Fahrenheit*, and a pleating skirt for Julie Christie simply because “Truffaut liked it”, as she personally told me in an interview. The costumes of *Alien*, designed by John Mollo, don’t even conceal the present, but highlights it instead, with characters sporting hawaiian shirts and swearbands. And in *Avatar* humans are dressed with tanktops and cargo pants, as if they were military forces on their day off. Consequently, we see that in the same film there are always “futuristic” signs, intertwined with other signs contemporary with the time when the film has been produced.

Yuri Lotman reminds us in *Aesthetics and Semiotics of Cinema* (1979) that “*the canons of beauty are very changing, and the moviemaker has to present us with a heroine that is beautiful according to the taste of today’s spectator, and not to the taste of the old Egyptians or Romans*”. This affirmation referred to the past can also be applied to futuristic films. The uncertainty of the future needs to be understood by means of recognisable signs, that are present in the contemporary fashion, and that are given the appearance of novelty³.

The spectacular and contemporary fashion in Back to Future II

In *Back to Future II* the fashion of the 1980’s, with its screaming colours, blue jeans and short sport jackets, *evolves* in Zemeckis’s future into the autonomy of an

³ Novelty, or what is apparently new and futuristic, springs from the latest technical inventions, be these artistic or scientific.

intelligent apparel that is able to adjust to the body by itself. The *Nike* brand sport shoes designed for the Marty McFly character would fasten to the foot automatically, and so would his jacket, that zipped and immediately fitted the size of the wearer. Both responded to the desire for minimum effort of the consumer society, fulfilling the “utopia of comfort”, particularly sought after the teenage public to which the film was aimed at.

The costumes, in spite of their futuristic appearance, maintain the colours and aesthetic lines that were popular during the 80’s, and amplify and make them spectacular by means of synthetic materials and colours even more shiny and brilliant. The exaggeration, lavishness, the outlandishness, or the “amplification” are common characteristics of the costumes in film, as Ugo Volli points out (in Calefato, 2002: 25-26). To Volli, the dress must be seen and perceived as sign in “*that measure of excess that merits the status of the spectacular*”. P. Church Gibson however defines the spectacular in film costume as calling the attention to the dress, forcing the spectator to distance himself from the narration for a moment.

“costumes or fashion are *spectacular* if they interrupt and destabilise character and the unfolding action, offering an alternative and potentially contrapuntal discursive strategy –a vertical interjection into a horizontal and linear narrative” (Church Gibson, 2001: 115).

This distraction of the attention frequently provokes aftereffects in the public who, fascinated by the dress that appears on the screen, transform it into an object of desire. And so in 2008, almost twenty years after the film, *Nike* released the *Hyperdunk 2015*, inspired by the model sported in the film by Michael J. Fox, answering the requests of the many fans who demanded them through the www.mcfly2015.com⁴ internet site (Sorrel, 2008). Alas, the new *Hyperdunk 2015* lacked the principal element that made them so spectacular in the film. Their self-lacing feature was substituted by merchandising that related to the movie: a complete packaging loaded with nostalgic elements, and the inscription “2015” embroidered on the tongue of the shoe.

The costumes of *Back to the Future II*, designed by Joanna Johnston (*Forest Gump*, *Saving Private Ryan* or *The Sixth Sense*), in spite of their dazzling glitter, maintain articles of clothing that clearly belong to the 80’s, such as the blue jeans and

⁴ Now this web site is closed.

Tshirts that, without a need for transformation, persist as “eternal” clothes that in the future won’t need to be submitted to any changes, with the exception of the curious way they wear pockets. “*Bring out your pockets, in the future they wear them outside the pants*” says imperatively Doc, the scientist, to Marty, who responds with a gesture of not understanding such absurdity, but who immediately rationalises it as something normal, since in his own times he has also experienced the arbitrary dictates of the fashion game, and understands their imperativeness.

Besides this dig at the established fashion, blue jeans and Tshirts remain unmutable: their cut, shape and colours are the same as those of the 1980’s. And this ensures a more complete identification between the spectator and the characters on the screen, since a swift recognition of the figure, this is, an instant decoding of the physical aspect, produces in the viewer a greater feeling of proximity to the character than what would be attained if those same characters were dressed with attires completely alien to the culture of the spectators. If, for instance, Marty were dressed with a green face, yellow contact lenses and a blue skirt all the way to his feet, the public would see him as someone disturbing and unsettling, since it’s not the normal practise to dress in such manner in our Western society, nor is it a code related to the dress of any community, group or social act from the present or the past that are familiar to the public in any way. This lack of references and syntactic coherence would make our public think that they are looking at an insane character, not at a character that comes from the future, in spite of this same public being able to understand quite well that the future is a space of which nothing is known and in which everything can happen. It is not surprising, then, that the futuristic cinema uses clothes from the present time in which the film is made, since fashion is the mark of identity of an epoch, or as defined by Lotman, the *metronome of cultural development* (Lotman, 1999).

Myth, science and dress in Planet of the Apes

Fashion as a semiotic system, this is, as a system of signs, operates according to codes that are related to specific communities of speakers who are able to understand the language of dressing, and this implies the knowledge of its uses and syntax. From anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss postulated that a language, in order to be a language, requires a community of speakers that communicates by means of

shared codes and signs.

Costume in cinema works as a secondary language that we encompass within the general system of dressing, but whose proper function is the metalinguistic: this is, the representation of clothing.

The dress of the future, as a system of signs belonging to a community of speakers that only exists within the *frame* of the screen, that is solely intradiegetic, must adapt to an extradiegetic community of speakers: the spectators, who happen to live in another place and time. This is why the dress of the future in cinema constructs itself following codes shared by its readers-spectators, but *plays* at being a code created by the characters that inhabit the fiction.

The ragged and dusty furs in *Planet of the Apes* pretend to be veracious and faithful to the primitive state of humankind, and are easily accepted as such by the spectator. Nevertheless, there are clear evidences of cultural intervention in the fact that the furs only cover the genitals. The Hollywood industry would never allow the portrayal of a man naked like an animal, let alone if the man in question was a movie star like Charlton Heston. It was necessary to keep the required modesty, while at the same time offering erotism. This is why the primitive woman, Nova (Linda Harrison), did not dress in coarse rags crudely covering her body, but sported instead a well tailored, short trikini *disguised* as prehistoric clothes⁵. In order to enhance this suggestive silhouette, so characteristic of the epoch, a hidden brassiere was probably included.

But, who dresses the humans at *Planet of the apes*? Themselves? The apes? Where do they get their clothes? Do they hunt other animals? Or do the apes hunt other animals in order to give the humans the furs? And the men, they cannot talk, yet dress in fashion? It may seem vain to ask all these questions, but it is not. Because by asking them, we shed light into the null causality of facts within the film, and on the importance of including recognizable signs from the contemporary epoch, for the comprehension of the text by the spectator. The *significant* clothes from the present, those that are important for the recognition of the figure, persist in this future: trikini for

⁵ Shortly afterwards, in 1971, the trikini would be officially released with the *Roualt* model by designer Rudi Gernreich.

the ladies, shorts for the gents. But the primitive humans did not know or care about the proper modesty of the 60's (or today's for that matter), or at least so the latest studies on the origins of clothing seem to indicate us, when they conclude that dress originated from the need of warming up the body during the Pleistocene Ice Ages (Gilligan, I. 2010), and not from the sense of modesty that the Bible's Genesis proposes, when Adam and Eve cover themselves with vine leaves in order to hide their nakedness.

The look at the past is always a cultural one, as we pointed out in the beginning of this conference. In the film's election of clothes used by humans there is but a vague and popular idea of prehistory, that works particularly well within the discourse, since the spectator is generally unfamiliar with the clothing worn by the first humans. And if there were a logical coherence in the relationship between humans and apes, regarding their clothes, the apes would pay no heed to human nakedness (just as we humans do with animals), especially when in the film humans are treated as game and subjected to scientific experiments. Outside of fiction, in our actual world, humans only dress animals when they are pets, or maybe if they are to be part of a show or display. If the action developed in accordance with a causal logic, the only reason to dress the human would be that they are appreciated as pets, and not as dirty beasts. But even in that case, they would not sport the dresses they wear, but a mocking imitation of the clothes of the film's "simio-sapiens".

All this, of course, never happens, since in the cinematic text the spectator must previously recognise certain codes in order to understand the message, codes that are especially important for the identification (or non-identification) with the *actor-protagonist-hero*. This appearance, related to culture and without causal connections is used to articulate the text and make it understandable. So we see that in *Planet of the Apes* costumes do not work as a causal system, derived from the present reality, or from paleontological research, but they do instead as signs of mythical and remote times viewed from vantage point of the present day.

Conclusions

We have analysed the dress of the future in film, using examples that are completely different in theme and year of production, but that share a unique and crucial characteristic: they are all take place in a future time.

The variety of examples has the objective of demonstrate how, in all cases, the contemporary vision is present in the costume design, since it is fundamental that the spectator-reader of the cinematic text is able to understand the characters, and eventually identify with them.

Along with the signs from the present, other signs from a future made spectacular emerge. So the signs from the present get camouflaged by these other foreign, “amplified” elements, to the point of becoming almost invisible to the eyes of the viewer.

The cultural characteristics of the contemporary vision is hence the fundamental factor in the construction of a future appearance, since this vision is ultimately responsible for the choice of certain elements, and not others. The costume designer, the makeup artist, the director, the producer all have a hand in the characterisation, but they are not totally responsible for the creation of the text, since their designs must be based on a language that is understood by the spectators. So the futuristic *novelty* intertwines with signs that are contemporary to the spectators enabling communication to happen.

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