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# VANITY FAIR

MARCH  
2000

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# TOMORROWLAND NEVER DIES

Until the 60s, America's visions of the future were optimistic, un-ironic, and really pretty cool. Well, that future has more or less arrived, and what we're left with is a nostalgia for those space-age mid-century dreams—the semi-kitsch echoes of Tomorrowland, *The Jetsons*, and the 1939 New York World's Fair

BY BRUCE HANDY

**W**alking into the lobby of the Standard hotel, which opened last year on the Sunset Strip, is a jarring visual experience—at least if you're wet blanket enough to stop and parse it instead of just going off and having a drink with Mena Suvari or whomever. With plastic bubble chairs suspended from the ceiling, shiny, parabolic Arco lamps, and a model loafing on a clear inflatable sofa behind the front desk, the interior has been decked out with the kinds of 60s and early-70s furnishings seemingly designed for a moon-colony lifestyle. Technically the pieces are antiques, or reproductions, but 30 years on the look still reads as futuristic. Curious. Perhaps this is because the moon-colony lifestyle never came to pass, because the

space fantasy was supplanted by a more mundane reality. (I predict: the Space Shuttle will never inspire an interior designer.) At any rate, the Standard is both eerie and nostalgic, sterile and comforting—are we in 1966, or 2000-and-something? The effect is like entering an aesthetic warp in the space-time continuum, or maybe a *Being John Malkovich*-like portal into the mind of whoever it was that art-directed *The Jetsons*. The future. Slap. The past. Slap. The future *and* the past, my sister *and* my daughter. Slap slap slap.

You can encounter a similar kind of disconnect 40 miles down the freeway from the Standard, in Anaheim. Once upon a time, Walt Disney's Tomorrowland was intended to showcase the future in the sincere manner of a world's fair. ("You will actually experience what many of America's foremost men of science and industry predict for the world of tomorrow," a Disneyland guidebook threatened in the late 1950s.) Two years ago, Tomorrowland was reconceived as what a press release

calls "a classic world of the future," which turns out to be a euphemism for an awkward and dispiriting hodgepodge of a place, one that incorporates design elements from (in no particular order): the 1939 New York World's Fair; Buck Rogers; Tim Burton's *Batman*; *Star Wars*; Jules Verne, by way of Disney's 1954 movie version of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*; and Leonardo da Vinci. More accurately, this is Yester-Tomorrowland, or Tomorrowland in gently ironic quotation marks. One of the attractions, Rocket Rods, even kids the poky earnestness of the old monorails and PeopleMovers. On a recent afternoon, this ride had an hour-long wait, while a nearby exhibit on NASA, featuring a forlorn moon rock, was empty. Walt Disney himself, one of the century's most enthusiastic futurists, must be spinning in his

## THINGS TO COME AGAIN

Counterclockwise from top left:

Uma Thurman's mid-century chic in 1997's retro-futuristic *Gattaca*; the original Tomorrowland, circa 1960; Buster Crabbe as Flash Gordon; *The Jetsons*; the Trylon and Perisphere at the 1939 New York World's Fair.



liquid-nitrogen tank. Nor would he be thrilled to learn that his heartfelt, scary dream of building a domed city in the muck of Florida's interior swamplands has devolved, in the hands of his corporate successors, into Celebration, the neo-turn-of-the-last-century town built near Disney World after the New Urbanist fashion.

Here is something neither Disney nor H. G. Wells, let alone *Popular Mechanics*, ever predicted: that the future, at the beginning of the new millennium, would have become less about the future and more about the past. Not only has the 21st century been so far denied the jetpacks, picture phones, and unruly robots long promised it; when faced with the task of envisioning new futures, the creators of our popular arts have been slyly, and not so slyly, recycling previous futures. The result is a literal and figurative oxymoron: retro-futurism.

By "the future," I should say, I mean an imagined destination, a vision, as opposed to the eventuality that rolls around whether we want it or not. Unfortunately, fresh visions have been in short supply of late, at least compared with the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. These were years when the future claimed the attention of an avid general public in much the same way that the weekend box-office results do today, an era of dream cars and Kitchens of Tomorrow, of working monorails and cornerless architecture, of science-fiction movies that weren't self-referential, of industrial designers and set designers and architects and other futurists who weren't afraid to make fools of themselves.

The irony, I guess, is that the year 2000 really does look something like the way mid-century designers imagined it, if only because we now patronize their work as semi-kitsch. It's as if the future has become baseball, marketed for its reassuring, old-timey appeal—since everything else in our culture is retro, postmodern, what have you, it makes sense that our future would be retro too.

In the fields of both science-fiction and "nonfiction" forecasting (the lines blur), there are still people who take the task of imagining the future seriously; somehow, Faith Popcorn continues to make a living. Newspapers and magazines have lately been rife with articles previewing what life may be like in the 21st century, though the tone tends to be timid, prudent, more than a little embarrassed by the inherent arbitrariness of delineating a world 20 or 30 years hence. (Could anyone in 1970 have predicted the economic forces that have turned America into a nation of men and women who order their coffee "grande"?) Anyway, the public, which never seems to tire of seeing Marilyn Monroe's photo-

graph juxtaposed with Hitler's, has been more engaged by the same newspapers' and magazines' reshapes of the 20th century. *Newsweek*, for one, discarded a potential year-end cover on the wonders of the 21st century for a farewell salute to *Peanuts*.

Have Americans lost their zest for the future? I put this question to a professional futurist, a man named Graham T. T. Molitor, who is the vice president and legal counsel for the World Futurist Society and who has served as a consultant for numerous companies and government agencies, forecasting societal trends. He agreed that the future has lost its allure for the average citizen. Part of the problem, Molitor believes, has been a dearth of compelling messengers to carry the future's banner. "The architects of destiny are all too few and far between," he told me, employing

## Walt Disney, a most enthusiastic futurist, must be spinning in his liquid-nitrogen tank.

just the sort of phraseology you'd hope a futurist would use. Nevertheless, he is plowing ahead with a wide-ranging study of what life will be like in the year 3000. Extrapolating from current trends, he predicts that humankind will have a 20-hour workweek, a life expectancy of 130 to 160 years, and a brain size of 1,800 to 2,000 cubic centimeters (as opposed to the current 1,200 to 1,500). To accommodate our descendants' expanded craniums, genetic engineers will "take care of" widening women's birth canals and thickening up everyone's neck.

The future wasn't always gross. This is key to understanding the appeal of retro-futurism. It was the operating assumption behind the 1939 World's Fair, arguably the 20th century's fullest, loveliest flowering of non-retro-futurism. "Building the World of Tomorrow" was its theme; among other things, the fair exposed the public to wonders such as television, Lucite, fluorescent lighting, and an early prototype of the fax machine. Its architecture was executed in a fanciful yet restrained (by world's-fair standards), streamlined style so effective that 60 years later the fair's monuments and pavilions still read as futuristic—unlike, say, the Eiffel Tower, left behind by the Paris World's Fair of 1889. The 1939 fair's centerpiece structures were the Trylon and Perisphere (respectively, a white, three-sided, 610-foot spire and a 180-foot-diameter white sphere). Together,

they created an architectural symbol so pure and totemic it still exerts a pull on the imagination, an inspiration to artists as diverse as the novelist E. L. Doctorow and the perpetually aggrieved pop singer Aimee Mann. Older readers will remember that the Trylon and Perisphere also made for great souvenir salt and pepper shakers.

The most popular attraction at the 1939 fair was the General Motors-sponsored Futurama. Visitors sat in Disneyland-style automated chairs to view a detailed 36,000-square-foot diorama of the American landscape in the year 1960, as conceived by the industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes. The ride was meant to simulate a cross-country airplane flight, complete with swooping changes in perspective, while a deep-voiced narrator set a stolidly uplifting tone with lines such

as "Man has forged ahead since 1940. New and better things have sprung from his industry and genius." These new and better things included cities of towering steel-and-glass skyscrapers, in more or less the standard high-modernist

style, ringed by vast suburban greenbelts and, even farther out, large farms run on advanced scientific principles (individual fruit trees, for instance, protected by their own glass domes). Since the exhibit was being paid for by General Motors, the world of 1960 was knit together by seven-lane superhighways (a buzzword of the 30s as well as the 90s) traveled by hundreds of teeny, avocado-shaped cars that actually moved. Today, it's hard to imagine anyone getting worked up over a diorama, but old newsreel footage reveals the Futurama to have been an astonishingly intricate, nearly overwhelming vision. There was even a second, somewhat similar exhibit called Democracy installed within the Perisphere itself, which one entered by what was then the world's largest escalator and exited by means of a ramp known as the Helicline, awkward nomenclature having long held a place of honor in worlds of tomorrow.

Even back in 1939, to be sure, there were people who thought this was all hokum. The writer and Yale professor David Gelernter, in his brilliant book *1939: The Lost World of the Fair*, quotes a number of complaints from *The New Yorker*, including one dig from an anonymous writer who wondered whether the fair would have a Sandwich of Tomorrow and how the Sentence of Tomorrow might read. But amid this drollery the magazine paused to note that "life will probably always be like that—the men of vision creating, the little men carp-



ing, with terror and amazement in their hearts." In those days, even wags had a grudging respect for the future.

**R**etro-futurism is the handiwork of a culture that has a more disinterested, more laissez-faire relationship with its tomorrows. Most people under the age of 70 will only recognize the name *Futura* as the title of the Matt Groening cartoon series that debuted on the Fox network last year and which mocks the very idea of imagining the future; it's a show about futurism in the same way that Groening's *The Simpsons* is a show about well-meaning family sitcoms. The look of the newer series, ostensibly set in the year 3000, draws on a century's worth of science-fiction clichés. "A good space captain needs boldness, daring, and a velour uniform," said the character Zapp Brannigan in a recent episode, delineating the show's aesthetic.

The 1997 film *Gattaca*, a more sober-minded example of retro-futurism, features vast sets that recall the streamlined look of the 1939 fair. The movie posits a not-too-distant future in which genetically engineered supermen wear fedoras and double-breasted pin-striped suits while genetically engineered superwomen top their heads with severe hairdos and parade around in high-collared suits; perhaps the intent was to vaguely suggest the work of Ayn Rand or Leni Riefenstahl, or maybe just Lotte Lenya in *From Russia with Love*

(and what a three-way that would be!).

Another 1997 film, *The Fifth Element*, takes place in a 23rd-century New York that is a digital-era version of the comic sketches of a fantastic, overbuilt Manhattan—a city of mile-high Gothic skyscrapers, its canyons congested with airships—which the artist Harry Grant Dart used to draw for the original *Life* magazine in the 1910s. The Space Age look of the early 1960s, epitomized by *The Jetsons* and Eero Saarinen's swiny TWA terminal in New York, was tapped by *Men in Black*, in which Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones dress like Kennedy-era Secret Service agents, work in a headquarters full of white molded-plastic furniture, and wind up confronting a barrage of climactic special effects on the site of the 1964 New York World's Fair, which, according to the film's mythology, was staged as a front for alien landings.

Released in 1977, about 10 years into the nostalgia craze, *Star Wars* was arguably the first retro-futurist film, most obviously in the character of C-3PO, the robot whose gleaming Art Deco design owed a debt to the famous female robot in the 1927 Fritz Lang film *Metropolis* (a look that has been borrowed yet again by the recent *Bicentennial Man*). *Star Wars* had numerous other retro elements: the setting in a mythic "long time ago," the references to *Casablanca* in the desert spaceport scenes, the evocation of old movie serials in the deliberately stiff dialogue and maybe not so deliberately stiff acting, the famous parody of *Triumph of the Will* in the film's ending.

But those were just film-school jokes used to give a knowing, contemporary

sheen to a space fantasy not intended to be predictive any more than *Flash Gordon* was. *Blade Runner*, released in 1982, was among the first films to use retro elements in a cogent way—it's the *Birth of a Nation* of retro-futurism. In its depiction of a literally vertical class system in 21st-century Los Angeles, this film too paid homage to *Metropolis*—though, tellingly, the 1920s movie is a socialist allegory, whereas the 1980s movie is a meditation on the meaning of self. *Blade Runner's* lasting insight was its notion that the past would disappear entirely, its vision of the future as a palimpsest. In its production design, old buildings and vehicles were overlaid with futuristic "new" elements. Earlier films had suggested this, but not with *Blade Runner's* detail and sweep. Even previous dystopian movies such as *THX 1138* had tended to present the future as a modernist clean slate.

**T**he *Matrix*, released last year, was set some 200 years in the future. As entertaining as it is derivative, the film offers an example of how retro-futurism has become clichéd, reflexive, a contemporary version of the way in which characters in an earlier era of science-fiction movies always wore silver boots and togas with big flared shoulders. As in nearly two-decade-old releases like *Brazil* and the *Mad Max* movies, the technology is a jerry-built mishmash of cutting-edge digital mixed with sprocket-and-flange industrial: computer setups with rotary phones and what look like **CONTINUED ON PAGE 123**

**"A good space captain needs boldness, daring, and a velour uniform."**



#### 21ST-CENTURY TOGA PARTY!

Clockwise from left: Raymond Massey and Pearl Argyle in the weird but dull *Things to Come* (1936); non-retro future in 1927's *Metropolis*; Fox TV's satirical *Futura*; 23rd-century Manhattan in 1997's retro-styled *The Fifth Element*.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 118 airshoes, some sort of invasive medical device accessorized with a pressure gauge. The jacks in the backs of characters' heads look like something you'd plug a vacuum tube into. Even the portions of the film set in a virtual-reality simulation of 1999—the Matrix itself—have a retro sheen. For instance, the movie begins and ends in a seedy hotel—the Heart of the City, according to the blinking neon sign—out of 50s *noir* by way of more recent homages. Maybe the point was to draw a parallel between the lobotomizing illusions of the Matrix and those of the movies. Or maybe the point was to give the film an easy, comfortably hip veneer.

That's the patronizing feel you get at the popular Encounter Restaurant in Los Angeles, which has a campy, space-age theme, complete with lava lamps, "moonstone quarry" walls, and specialty martinis like the Jet Set and the Bossa Supernova. The restaurant is located in the Los Angeles International Airport's central Theme Building, a genuinely space-age structure designed in 1960 by the architect Paul Williams (most famous for redesigning the Beverly Hills Hotel). With its steel parabolas arching over a suspended disk, the Theme Building looks not unlike a giant spider eating a flying saucer, or, more precisely, one of Alexander Calder's stabiles with a rotating restaurant attached to its underbelly. Encounter, which doesn't actually rotate, was the result of a 1996 renovation, which transformed an authentically forward-looking work into a phony version of what it already was. In tribute to this echo-chamber ersatz, the newspaper *L.A. Weekly* recently named Encounter the quintessential Southern California restaurant of the 90s.

Retro-futurism almost inevitably doubles back on itself. The styling of Apple's candy-colored iMac computer is said to have been inspired in part by *The Jetsons*, a nearly four-decade-old parody of the high-tech world that machines like the iMac epitomize—a development that puts one in mind of the time-travel conundrum in the film *Twelve Monkeys*, in which the Bruce Willis character turns out to be his own father. One of the iMac's designers has described *The Jetsons* as "a comforting portrayal of the future that's nostalgic," which is a pretty concise summation of retro-futurism's appeal. The paradox in that was also gotten at by a member of the production team for the new edgy-but-cute Volkswagen Beetle, who described the car as "a blend of retro and modern, a warm Bauhaus." Indeed, the bulbous new Beetle would not have looked odd tooling down Norman Bel Geddes's superhighways or doing time in movies such as *Sleeper* or *Tron*. No doubt inspired by the new Beetle's success, other car companies have

been exhibiting concept cars at recent trade shows that suggest even more strikingly the Futurama's teardrop-style automobiles—illustrating, along with the iMac, a cuddly, corporate brand of retro-futurism as cannily seductive as a Kodak ad.

The difference between genuine futurism and retro-futurism is the difference between what the future once meant to people and what it doesn't mean now. The issue isn't one that has always dogged humankind: Nobody gave the future a second thought when change occurred at a glacial pace and one could reasonably expect that one's great-great-grandchildren would be just as lice-infested as oneself, and live in a muddy hut not that different from one's own. Humankind's fascination with the future began only when improvements in material standing could be detected, and expected, over a lifetime—the what's-in-it-for-me rule of thumb that applies to most areas of human endeavor. Americans in particular have always had a rooting interest in the future, living as we do in a country founded on relatively utopian principles, but one whose people also have a strong pragmatic streak—utopianism and pragmatism being the yin and yang of old-fashioned futurism.

One reason for the success of the 1939 New York World's Fair—and for the fact

## Teenagers had turned the Tomorrowland PeopleMover into a make-out ride.

that it is still remembered so fondly—is that its visions of a better life were powerfully alluring to a country still struggling to shake the Depression. Since most Americans at the time lived either in crowded, sooty cities or in rural areas where electricity and indoor plumbing could still be novelties, the Futurama's promise of a ranch house with modern appliances and a nice yard must have been seductive in a way we can't really imagine today, just as people in the 1930s would probably have been baffled by the icky suburban disdain of a Todd Solondz movie.

As David Gelernter stresses, there was in the 1930s a greater awe of technology and master-planning—of authority, really—than exists today, a theme made risibly manifest in the 1936 British film *Things to Come*. The screenplay, by H. G. Wells, has humankind reduced to barbarism by a terrible world war, then returned to civilization by a renegade cadre of engineers and

mechanics. Their leader, played by Raymond Massey (a skinny-legged Canadian who, it must be said, looks even sillier than most actors in silver boots and a flared-shoulder toga), describes the new order as "the brotherhood of efficiency, the freemasonry of science." "What government are you under?" another character asks. "Common sense," Massey replies, using the kind of elitist, know-it-all tone of voice that would later, in real life, spell doom for the likes of Michael Dukakis. Unfortunately, as Germany's behavior during the real war would prove, barbarism and engineering aren't necessarily antagonistic, a point some would say was also made at Hiroshima.

Perhaps this was the beginning of our estrangement from the future, of our slide into the nostalgic solace of retro-futurism. As the promises of the 1939 fair began to come true in the postwar suburbs and America began to grapple with the singular unease of having gotten what it wanted, the future turned increasingly grandiose and often, from a contemporary point of view, bizarre. At the 1964 World's Fair, for instance, G.M. sponsored a sequel to the Futurama. This time fairgoers viewed dioramas depicting human colonies on the moon and the ocean floor, in Antarctica, the jungle and the desert, all environments that would be whipped into habitability by the "machines of tomorrow." The jungle, for one, was to be logged by laser and paved over by an 80-foot-high automated highway builder—even in a day when you couldn't buy Rainforest Crunch ice cream, the public found this prospect off-putting. As Morris Dickstein, a historian of the fair, says, "Observers in 1964 complained that they had no practical interest in exploring the moon, setting up shop in Antarctica or under the sea.... Despite the ingenuity of the new Futurama, it could not reach people where they lived."

You yourself can recite the usual litany of historical reasons why we have since become further alienated from technology, science, government, and the other things that used to go into making the future the future, why our futures started to grow darker and dystopian. Even the genuine promises of today's future don't necessarily fire the public's imagination: though the Internet's boosters have been going on and on over the past decade about its revolutionary import, only when the Web became a vehicle for making recent college graduates richer than Michael Eisner did most people sit up and take notice. During discussions of America Online's purchase of Time Warner, television analysts repeatedly said the goal was to make the Internet

a constant, virtually invisible presence in people's lives, accessible through refrigerators and other appliances. Fine by me, but hardly the thing to inspire the old wonder. Meanwhile, the more utopian, Al Gore-ish vision of an "information superhighway" that will empower ghetto children has begun to seem as quaint as the Helicline.

**B**ack in the 1970s, when Alvin Toffler was a best-selling author and not a sidekick of Newt Gingrich's—there's the recent arc of futurism in a nutshell—he predicted we would soon suffer from "future shock," driven mad by the quickening pace of change. Instead, I think, we suffer from future ennui; we expect change, we are used to it, it doesn't get us in a twist. If anything, one could argue, the pace of truly life-altering change has slowed: the upheavals and innovations of the first quarter of the 20th century (World War I; the Russian Revolution; the invention of the airplane; the widespread adoption of the telephone; the phonograph, electricity, and radio; the rise of modernism) were far more radical and/or disruptive than the upheavals and innovations of the 20th century's last quarter (the fall of Communism; the Gulf War; the invention of the World Wide Web; the spread of cell phones and cable television; the revolutions in genetic engineering; the rise of tabloidism).

There are some interesting, non-retro futures bubbling up in contemporary popular culture. Smart science-fiction writers like Neal Stephenson have been exploring

the implications of virtual reality (I predict: an epidemic of ocular migraines), and there is a futuristic, computer-derived aesthetic emerging in the slick-yet-disjointed graphic design of youth-oriented advertising: the unstable architecture of Frank Gehry and Rem Koolhaas; the abstract, Mylar and Benday look of Nike's flashiest sneakers; the jittery, atomized images that stream across the giant video screen that NASDAQ has affixed to the side of this magazine's Times Square offices and which, as reflected in the windows of the steel-and-glass tower across the street, annoys me to no end. But no pop visionary has yet harnessed these elements to a genuinely fresh, sweeping, "realistic" look into the future in the manner of *Things to Come* or *Blade Runner*.

**O**h well, those films were boring, anyway. In a fat, contented age, the future has lost the old urgency, either as promise or threat. We are left feeling nostalgic for a 1930s future that in real life we long ago grew weary of, and for a 1960s future that in real life we largely took a flier on. What we miss are the hope, the awe, even the scariness of those visions. That's what retro-futurism really longs for: a future that matters.

Digging one up somewhere was the task faced by the designers of Disneyland's new

Tomorrowland. A few months before it was completed, I had an opportunity to tour the site with Tony Baxter, the park's chief "Imagineer." Visitors, he explained, had been shunning the old Tomorrowland (except for teenagers, who had turned the PeopleMover into a make-out ride). Baxter kept talking about the need for "reassurance," for Tomorrowland to make an "emotional connect" with visitors the way it had 40 years ago, when it first opened. He said things like "The task for us is to re-ignite dreams. Dreams are the fuel of the future. What are people dreaming of now?" Yesterday's dreams, it turned out.

As we were picking our way through one construction site, a kid stuck his head through a hole in the fence. Baxter knew him: a local teenager named Jason who is something of a Disney obsessive. At the time, he was stopping by the park on a regular basis to get updates on the progress of Tomorrowland, and to shoot pictures to post on his Disneyland-themed Web site.

Jason's eagerness was almost too good to be true. (Hmm, I thought. A setup? Not *Disney*, the world's most controlling company.) "The old Tomorrowland was a world on the move," Jason told me. "Now there's even more movement. There's twice as much stuff going on." He went on about how great the new rides would be, sounding a little as if he had been ingesting too much promotional literature. But what about *his* dreams? I wanted to know. What was his "emotional connect" to the future? He looked at me as if I were asking him something incredibly stupid, like did he enjoy playing Barbies? "I don't think much about the future," he said, genuinely perplexed. □

## Instead of future shock, we now seem to suffer from future ennui. We're used to change.

### RETROBOTS

Clockwise from top left: Eero Saarinen's un-ironic TWA terminal; the robot in *Metropolis*; *Star Wars*' homage, C-3PO; the new, "classic" Tomorrowland; 1997's ironic *Men in Black*; *Blade Runner* (1982).

