

## The Future Will Have to Wait

Have we achieved so much so fast that the world we imagined as children is totally boring to us now?

I WAS READING, IN A RECENT ISSUE OF *DISCOVER*, ABOUT THE CLOCK OF THE LONG NOW. HAVE YOU HEARD OF THIS THING? IT IS GOING TO BE A SYSTEM OF gigantic mechanical computers, slow, simple, and ingenious, marking the hour, the day, the year, the century, the millennium, and the precession of the equinoxes, with a huge orrery to keep track of the immense ticking of the six inner planets on their great orbital mainspring. The Clock of the Long Now will stand at least 60 feet tall and cost tens of millions of dollars, and when it's completed, its designers and supporters—among them visionary engineer Danny Hillis, a pioneer in the concept of massively parallel processing, Whole Earth mahatma Stewart Brand, and British composer Brian Eno (one of my household gods)—plan



to hide it in a cave in Great Basin National Park in Nevada, a day's hard walking from anywhere. Oh, and it's going to run for 10,000 years. That is about as long a span as separates us from the first makers of pottery, among the oldest technologies we have. Ten thousand years is twice as old as the pyramid of Cheops, nearly twice as old as that mummified body found preserved in the Tyrolean Alps, which is one of the oldest mummies ever uncovered. The Clock of the Long Now is being designed to thrive under regular human maintenance during the whole of that span, though during periods when no one is around to tune it, the giant clock will contrive to adjust itself. But even if the Clock of the Long Now fails to last that long, even if it breaks down after half or a quarter or a tenth of that span, this mad contraption will already have long since fulfilled its purpose. Indeed, the Clock may accomplish its greatest task before it is ever finished, perhaps without ever being built at all. The point of the Clock of the Long Now is not to measure out the passage, into their unknown future, of the race of creatures that built it. The point of the Clock is to revive and restore the whole idea of the Future, to get us thinking about the Future again, to the same degree as we used to, if not in quite the same way, and to reintroduce the idea that we don't just bequeath the future—though we do, whether we think about it or not. We also, in the very broadest sense of the first-person plural pronoun, inherit it.

The Sex Pistols, strictly speaking, were right: There is no future, for you or for me. The future, by definition, does not exist. "The Future," whether you capitalize it or not, is always just an idea, a proposal, a scenario, a sketch for a mad contraption that may or may not work. "The Future" is a story we tell, a narrative of hope, dread, or wonder. And it's a story that, for a while now, we've been pretty much living without.

Ten thousand years from now: Can you imagine that day? Okay, but do you? Do you believe "the Future" is going to happen? If the Clock works the way that it's supposed to—if it lasts—do you believe there will be a human being around to witness, let alone mourn, its passing, to appreciate its accomplishment, its faithfulness, its immense antiquity? What about 5,000 years from now, or even 500? Can you extend the horizon of your expectations for our world, for our complex of civilizations and cultures, beyond the lifetime of your own children, of the next two or three generations? Can you even imagine the survival of the world beyond the present presidential administration?

I was surprised, when I read about the Clock of the Long Now, at just how long it had been since I had given any thought to the state of the world 10,000 years hence. At one time I was a frequent

visitor to that imaginary mental locale. And I don't mean merely that I regularly encountered "the Future" in the pages of science-fiction novels or comic books, or when watching a TV show like *The Jetsons* (1962) or a movie like *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970). The story of the Future was told to me when I was growing up, not just by popular art and media but by public and domestic architecture, industrial design, school textbooks, theme parks, and public institutions from museums to government agencies. I heard the story of the Future when I looked at the space-ranger profile of the Studebaker Avanti, at the burnerless range top of a Jenn-Air stove, at Tomorrowland through the portholes of the Disneyland monorail, at the tumbling plastic counters of my father's Seth Thomas Speed Read clock. I can remember writing a report in sixth grade on hydroponics; if you had tried to tell me then that by 2005 we would still be growing our vegetables in dirt, you would have broken my heart.

Even 30 years after its purest expression on the covers of pulp magazines like *Amazing Stories* and, supremely, at the New York World's Fair of 1939, the collective cultural narrative of the Future remained largely an optimistic one of the impend-

*The Omega Man* was a landscape of semi-barbaric splendor and unfettered (if dangerous) freedom to roam, such as I found in the pages of Jack Kirby's classic adventure comic book *Kamandi: The Last Boy on Earth!* (1972–76). That ambiguity and its enchantment, the shifting tension between the bright promise and the menace of the Future, was in itself a kind of story about the ways, however freakish or tragic, in which humanity (and by implication American culture and its values, however freakish and tragic) would, in spite of it all, continue. *Ee'd plebnista*, intoned the devolved Yankees, in the *Star Trek* episode "The Omega Glory" (1968), who had somehow managed to hold on to and venerate as sacred gobbledygook the preamble to the Constitution, *norkohn forkohn perfectunun*. All they needed was a Captain Kirk to come and add a little interpretive water to the freeze-dried document and the American way of life would flourish again.

I don't know what happened to the Future. It's as if we have lost our ability, or our will, to envision anything beyond the next hundred years or so, as if we lack the fundamental faith that there will in fact be any future at all beyond that not-too-distant date. Or maybe we stopped talking about

## IF YOU ASK MY 8-YEAR-OLD ABOUT THE FUTURE, HE PRETTY MUCH THINKS THE WORLD IS GOING TO END, AND THAT'S IT.

ing blessings of technology and the benevolent, computer-assisted meritocracy of Donald Fagen's "fellows with compassion and vision." But by the early seventies it was not all farms under the sea and family vacations on Titan. Sometimes the Future could be a total downer. If nuclear holocaust didn't wipe everything out, then humanity would be enslaved to computers, by the ineluctable syllogisms of "the Machine." My childhood dished up a series of grim cinematic prognostications best exemplified by the Hestonian trilogy that began with the first *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and continued through *The Omega Man* (1971) and *Soylent Green* (1973). Images of future dystopia were rife in rock albums of the day, as on David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* (1974) and Rush's *2112* (1976), and the futures presented by seventies writers of science fiction such as John Brunner tended to be unremittingly or wryly bleak.

In the aggregate, stories of the Future presented an enchanting ambiguity. The other side of the marvelous *Jetsons* future might be a story of worldwide corporate-authoritarian techno-tyranny, but the other side of a postapocalyptic mutational nightmare landscape like that depicted in

the Future around the time that, with its microchips and its 24-hour news cycles, it arrived. Some days when you pick up the newspaper it seems to have been cowritten by J.G. Ballard, Isaac Asimov, and Philip K. Dick. Human sexual reproduction without male genetic material, digital viruses, identity theft, robot firefighters and minesweepers, weather control, pharmaceutical mood engineering, rapid species extinction, U.S. presidents controlled by little boxes mounted between their shoulder blades, air-conditioned empires in the Arabian desert, transnational corporatocracy, reality television—some days it feels as if the imagined future of the mid-20th century were a kind of checklist, one from which we have been too busy ticking off items to bother with extending it. Meanwhile, the dwindling number of items remaining on that list—interplanetary colonization, sentient computers, quasi-immortality of consciousness through brain-download or transplant, a global government (fascist or enlightened)—have been represented and re-represented so many hundreds of times in films, in novels, and on television that they have come to seem, paradoxically, already attained, already known, lived

with, and left behind. Past, in other words.

This is the paradox that lies at the heart of our loss of belief or interest in the Future, which has in turn produced a collective cultural failure to imagine that Future, any future, beyond the rim of a couple of centuries or the void of planetary catastrophe. The Future was represented so often and for so long, in the terms and characteristic styles of so many historical periods from, say, Jules Verne forward, that at some point the idea of the Future—along with the cultural appetite for it—came itself to feel like something historical, outmoded, no longer viable or attainable. One possible turning point here was *Star Wars* (1977), with its setting in the remote past, its Western gunfights and WWI dogfights, its deliberate evocation of the styles and conventions of *Metropolis* (1927) and old Flash Gordon serials. After *Star Wars*, every cinematic Future has drawn heavily on the Futures imagined by previous historical eras. Even what is perhaps our era's most believed-in, culturally predominant narrative of the Future—the crypto-Christian vision of the End presented in the "Left Behind" series—is derived from imagery and narrative some of which is by now almost 2,000 years old.

If you ask my 8-year-old about the Future, he pretty much thinks the world is going to end, and that's it. Most likely global warming, he says—floods, storms, desertification—but the possibility of viral pandemic, meteor impact, or some kind of nuclear exchange is not alien to his view of the days to come. Maybe not tomorrow, or a year from now. The kid is more than capable of generating a full head of optimistic steam about next week, next vacation, his 10th birthday. It's only the world 100 years on that leaves his hopes a blank. My son seems to take the end of everything, of all human endeavor and creation, for granted. He sees himself as living on the last page, if not in the last paragraph, of a long, strange, and bewildering book. If you had told me, when I was 8, that a little kid of the future would feel that way—and that what's more, he would see a certain justice in our eventual extinction, would think the world was better off without human beings in it—that would have been even worse than hearing that in 2006 there are no hydroponic megafarms, no human colonies on Mars, no personal jet packs for everyone. That would truly have broken my heart.

When I told my son about the Clock of the Long Now he listened very carefully, and we looked at the pictures on the Long Now Foundation's Web site. "Will there really be people then, Dad?" he said. "Yes," I told him without hesitation, "there

will." I don't know if that's true, any more than do Danny Hillis and his colleagues, with the beating clocks of their hopefulness and the orneries of their imaginations. But in having children—in engendering them, in loving them, in teaching them to love and care about the world—parents are betting, whether they know it or not, on the Clock of the Long Now. They are betting on their children, and their children after them, and theirs beyond them, all the way down the line from now to 12,006. If you don't believe in the Future, unreservedly and dreamingly, if you aren't willing to

bet that somebody will be there to cry when the Clock finally, 10,000 years from now, runs down, then I don't see how you can have children. If you have children, I don't see how you can fail to do everything in your power to ensure that you win your bet, and that they, and their grandchildren, and their grandchildren's grandchildren, will inherit a world whose perfection can never be accomplished by creatures whose imagination for perfecting it is limitless and free. And I don't see how anybody can force me to pay up on my bet if I turn out, in the end, to be wrong. ■

**BIG TIME: A SCALE-MODEL REPLICA OF THE CLOCK OF THE LONG NOW. WHEN THE CLOCK IS ASSEMBLED AND PLACED IN A CAVE IN THE GREAT BASIN NATIONAL PARK IN NEVADA, IT WILL RUN FOR 10,000 YEARS WITHOUT MAINTENANCE.**

