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**Arthur B. Evans**

### **Anachronism in Early French Futuristic Fiction**

Paweł Frelik, in his essay “The Future of the Past: Science Fiction, Retro, and Retrofuturism” (2013), defined the idea of retrofuturism as referring “to the text’s vision of the future, which comes across as anachronistic in relation to contemporary ways of imagining it” (208). Paweł’s use of the word “anachronistic” in this definition set me to thinking. Aren’t all fictional portrayals of the future *always and inevitably* anachronistic in some way? Further, I saw in the phrase “contemporary ways of imagining” a delightful ambiguity between two different groups of readers: those of today who, viewing it in retrospect, see such a speculative text as an artifact, an inaccurate vision of the future from the past, but also the original readers, contemporary to the text when it was written, who no doubt saw it as a potentially real future that was chock-full of anachronisms in relation to their own time—but that one day might no longer be. My talk today examines this double view of “anachronism” in a few early French futuristic fictions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Let us begin with some definitions. As we all know, an “anachronism” occurs when something is perceived as being in or from the wrong historical or chronological time and is clearly out of sync with its context. But a key word in this definition is “perceived.” It is important to remember that the phenomenon of anachronism is the result of reader or viewer perception—an impression of temporal incompatibility, a kind of “wrinkle in time” that can sometimes sabotage the text’s credibility. Most often, anachronisms are treated as unintentional errors on the author’s part. I can still remember the example my high-school English teacher used to illustrate what the word meant: in Act II, scene one, of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, during a secret meeting of Brutus and his co-conspirators, Cassius says at one point that “the clock hath stricken three.” Since there were no mechanical clocks in 44 BCE, she explained, this was an obvious case of anachronism.

Everyone can probably identify some anachronisms in novels they have read or movies they have watched. There even exists a (rather obsessive) website/blog called “Prochronisms” devoted to catching and publicizing anachronisms in TV programs such as *The Simpsons*, *Downton Abbey*, or *Mad Men*.

But there are also many anachronisms that are *intentional*, used to create an interesting chronological twist or to enhance the storytelling experience in some way. For example, anachronisms can be used for comic effects, as in the animated TV sitcom *The Flintstones* from the 1960s, or the blockbuster *Back to the Future* movies from the 1980s and early 1990s, or the 2001 time-travel film *Just Visiting*, an English-language remake of the hilarious 1993 French

movie *Les Visiteurs*, about a twelfth-century knight and his servant who are magically—and inadvertently—transported to the twentieth century.

Anachronisms can also be used to construct alternate histories, as in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), or Harry Turtledove's *The Guns of the South* (1992), or the Hollywood movie *The Final Countdown* (1980), which hypothesizes a modern aircraft carrier passing through a wormhole and reappearing in 1941 near Pearl Harbor just 24 hours before it was attacked by the Japanese.

But anachronisms can also be used for purely narratological purposes to facilitate the story-telling process itself. It might even be argued that anachronisms are *diegetically essential* in certain kinds of narratives, such as those about the distant future or the distant past. Why? Because they serve as a hermeneutic “bridge” allowing the reader to understand and relate to these unusual worlds and their inhabitants. Here is one example: in narratives taking place in the far future, the language spoken by the protagonists is almost always—and illogically—the reader's own contemporary tongue instead of an historically evolved idiom such as those encountered, for instance, in works such as Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) or Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980).

This use of anachronism for more effective story-telling is not new. In 1820, Sir Walter Scott, in his preface to *Ivanhoe*, justified the presence of certain anachronisms in his novel by explaining how they helped him to bring the historical past to life for his readers:

I neither can nor do pretend to the observation of complete accuracy, even in matters of outward costume, much less in the more important point of language and manners.... It is necessary for exciting interest of any kind that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners as well as the language of the age we live in. (xvii)

Finally, an interesting modern-day example of this phenomenon is director Sofia Coppola's intentional and controversial use of anachronism in her stylized 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*, which among other oddities features post-punk rock music in the soundtrack and a pair of light-blue Converse All-Stars appearing in the young queen's footwear closet. When questioned about these rather jarring cases of artistic license, the director explained that they were simply intended to underscore Marie-Antoinette's character as a fun-loving adolescent. In an interview reported by Kristin Hohenadel of *The New York Times*, Coppola pointed out that she “didn't want to get bogged down with history, but to focus on the personal relations between these people.... I'm not a fetishist about historical accuracy.... They didn't speak English in Versailles, either.”

Let us now turn to some intentional and unintentional anachronisms in a few early French “retrofuturistic” fictions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440, Rêve s'il en fut jamais* [The Year 2440, A Dream if Ever There Was One] first appeared anonymously in 1771.<sup>1</sup> It was promptly banned in France and put on the Inquisition's list of

forbidden books, and not until twenty years later (in 1791, during the French Revolution) did Mercier finally acknowledge his authorship of it. No doubt in part because of its status as a banned book, *The Year 2440* became an instant bestseller: it went through over twenty editions, was rapidly translated into Italian, German, Dutch, and English (perplexingly, as *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*), and by 1814, the year of Mercier's death, over 63,000 copies had been printed. It is said to have been part of the private libraries of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

*The Year 2440* is the first futuristic utopia in Western literature and pioneered a new way of looking at the future for the readers of Mercier's time. As Paul Alkon explained in his *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* (1987):

[Mercier] initiates a new paradigm for utopian literature not only by setting action in a specific future chronologically connected to our past and present, but even more crucially by characterizing this future as one belonging to progress and thus linked causally ... to the reader's time. (127)

The plot of the novel is quite simple: the Parisian narrator falls asleep and wakes up several centuries later in the Paris of 2440. As is common in utopian narratives before and since, he is then taken on a guided tour around town by one of the city's knowledgeable *citoyens* [citizens]. The 1771 version of the text is composed of 44 chapters, each of which focuses on a different aspect of the city and/or French society and how much better things have become in 2440 in contrast to the way they used to be during the *ancien régime*. Mercier's futuristic conjectures were critiques of specific social structures and customs in pre-Revolutionary France, and the readers of his time no doubt understood them as such. But it is fair to assume that many of these novums from 2440 would still have seemed highly anachronistic to a reader from the 1770s. Which is to say that, even considered within the context of an additional six and a half centuries of human progress, they would have still seemed pretty pie-in-the-sky.

Here are a few examples: everyone in the Paris of 2440 is dressed and coiffed in a manner that is comfortable, healthy, and modest, with no ostentation or undue attention to fashion. Carriages are not allowed on the city streets, which have been turned into pedestrian walkways. Doctors and health care are free and accessible to all (there is a single-payer system subsidized by the state). Schools are free and open to the public. As for their curricula, students are no longer required to learn Latin or Greek—only modern languages, mathematics, and natural sciences. Priests and nuns are free to marry and have children. Women have no dowries, arranged marriages are no longer permitted, and divorce is allowed if the couple both agree that they are victims of “an incompatibility of humours” (*Memoirs* 289). Tobacco, coffee, and hard liquors are banned, along with prostitutes, money-lenders, and works of art that do not “inspire sentiments of dignity and virtue” (*Memoirs* 236).

Looking backward (pun intended) on Mercier's futuristic utopia from our vantage point in the twenty-first century, today's readers can also discern a number of glaring anachronisms in the author's prognostications. For example:

apart from microscopes and telescopes, there is virtually no technology portrayed, certainly none having any effect on the daily lives of these twenty-fifth-century Parisians. This is a strictly cash-and-carry economy—there is no credit system of any sort—and all commerce outside the borders of the country is banned. The government is a constitutional monarchy, and the crown is still inherited by the eldest son of the king—but this prince is raised from birth in a middle-class working family and does not know he is of royal blood until age twenty. Further, he cannot marry before age twenty-two (and only with a woman of French nationality) and must willingly relinquish the crown at age seventy. And, perhaps predictably, Mercier's portrayal of women in his futuristic utopia is often contradictory, oscillating between a rhetoric of social liberation and one of pure patriarchy:

You should know that our women have no other dowry than their virtue and their charms.... Music and dancing no longer form their principal accomplishments; they have vouchsafed to learn the arts of economy, of pleasing their husbands, and of educating their children.... Our women, virtuous by principle, are delighted with domestic pleasures.... Our women are wives and mothers; and from those two virtues all others are derived. (*Memoirs* 284-92)

Mercier was able to visualize a wide variety of (sometimes quite perceptive) political and institutional transformations in his Paris of 2440. But visualizing a more multifaceted gender identity for the women in this future society was obviously beyond him.

Let us now turn to Émile Souvestre's 1846 satiric fantasy *Le Monde tel qu'il sera* [The World as It Shall Be], identified by I.F. Clarke as the first futuristic dystopia in Western literature. Young French newlyweds Marthe and Maurice are put into a mesmerized sleep by their industrial fairy godfather John Progress, who travels through time on a steam-powered single-rider flying locomotive. They awaken in the year 3000 to a hyper-industrialized Earth composed of one single nation-state called the "Republic of United Interests," whose capital is located in Tahiti. The remainder of the novel recounts Marthe and Maurice's adventures in this strange—sometimes funny, sometimes horrifying—world of consumerism and technology gone mad. In the words of John Clute:

Steam-driven advances in technology have transformed everything.... Though Souvestre has a light touch, and his illustrators have followed his example, his young protagonists gradually discover a darker side to what turns out to be a dystopia.... Criminals are micro-controlled, sometimes unto death; 384 types of mental illness have been indexed; the government is manipulated by giant corporations, guaranteeing a society based on consumerism; celebrities obsess the populace; [while] the rest of the world beyond Tahiti has entered terminal decline.

Many if not most of Souvestre's dystopian scenes must surely have seemed profoundly anachronistic to the readers of his time. On the other hand, they probably did not take them very seriously. The persistently comical tone of the

narration, reinforced by the eighty-three fanciful illustrations that accompany the text (along with the often outlandish nature of the conjectures themselves), tend to undercut the story's believability, making it seem less a narrative seriously speculating about social progress and more a fun-filled fantasy. As Brian Stableford has observed:

Like any author forced to introduce readers to a whole new world, Souvestre has no alternative but to present them with a kind of travelogue.... [H]e attempts to make up for the lack of conventional melodramatic resources by exploiting the narrative energy of comedy. The result is blatantly farcical (121)

For the twenty-first century reader, many aspects of Souvestre's *World as It Shall Be* ring true: the ubiquitousness of technology, greedy corporations that subvert the integrity of politicians, overspecialized doctors, air conditioning, genetically modified crops, huge shopping malls, the non-stop 24/7 deluge of news channeled directly into one's home, the rise of feminism, industrialized food chains, etc. And the many unintentional anachronisms—for example, that this entire high-tech world is built on steam-power, or that the “science” of phrenology is used to decide children's future vocations, or that the entire country of Switzerland has been transformed into a giant theme park—somehow seem quaint and amusing. Comparing the two works, it is a telling commentary that today's readers would most likely view this dystopia by Souvestre as far less “out of sync” with their own world than Mercier's earlier utopia.

Let us now turn to Jules Verne. Interestingly, and ironically given his world-wide reputation as a so-called “Prophet of Tomorrow,” one finds almost no portrayals of the future in Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires*. There are many examples of extrapolated technologies—the submarine *Nautilus*, the helicopter airship *Albatross*, the projectile sent to the Moon, etc.—but virtually all these engineering marvels appear in novels set in either the present or the recent past.

There are, however, a few exceptions, including three short stories attributed to Verne but actually written by his son Michel and an early novel by Verne that was never published during his lifetime. The short stories are “Un Express de l'avenir” [An Express of the Future, 1888] about a Boston-to-Liverpool Transatlantic subway tube, “L'Éternel Adam” [The Eternal Adam, 1910] about an archeologist of the far future who discovers that the rise and fall of human civilizations is cyclical, and “In the Year 2889” (first published in English in 1889) about a day in the life of an American media mogul as he reports on current events around the world. The novel in question is Verne's much publicized *Paris au XXe siècle* [Paris in the Twentieth Century], the long-lost work that made such a stir in the early 1990s when the original manuscript—written by Verne in 1863 but rejected by his publisher—was discovered in an old family safe. The French version was published for the first time in 1994 and the English translation appeared two years later.

*Paris in the Twentieth Century* is a futuristic dystopia set in the early 1960s. (Sidenote: If Verne's family had thought to open that safe some thirty

years earlier than they did, the timing would have been serendipitous indeed!) The young protagonist of the story, Michel Dufrénoy, is an aspiring poet and dramatist, not unlike Verne himself prior to his fateful meeting with his publisher Hetzel. Michel is just out of school and faced with a cold-hearted, utilitarian French society that is far more interested in profit margins and “progress” than in Petrarch or the Parnassians. The novel recounts Michel’s many unsuccessful attempts to find his niche in this alienating world where industry, science, and commerce are worshipped above all else.

One striking aspect of Verne’s portrayal of this future Paris is that it seems weirdly bi-polar at times. On the one hand, the capital is depicted as an awe-inspiring technological wonderland—a megalopolis of glass skyscrapers containing offices equipped with computer-like calculating machines and fax-like “picture-telegraph” devices that connect the city’s financial markets to all the world’s multinational corporations. Cars with internal-combustion engines roll along its broad asphalt streets, and urban commuters are whisked along in high-speed pneumatic tube-trains suspended from above. The entire city is powered by electricity generated by huge turbines on the Seine river, and most buildings are protected by automatic anti-burglar alarms. Weapon systems have become so sophisticated that war is now obsolete. And, thanks to a massive Suez-type canal connecting Paris with the ocean, the city has become one of the busiest seaports in the world or, as the narrator describes it, “a Liverpool in the heart of France” (131). In the city’s harbor area (very near to where the Eiffel Tower would eventually be built in 1889), there is a giant electric lighthouse, touted as “the highest monument in the world, whose light could be seen forty leagues away from the towers of Rouen cathedral” (136-37). In his detailed descriptions of the high-tech infrastructure of this Paris of tomorrow, the narrator’s admiration and enthusiasm are palpable.

On the other hand, daily life in this city is portrayed as an emotional and cultural wasteland. The citizens of Paris have become unfeeling cogs in a highly efficient but repressive social machine. Conformity is mandatory. Marriage has been reduced to a legal formality without sentiment, warmth, or even a shared home. The once stylish and coquettish Parisian women are now cynical, career-minded, and distinctly masculine in their dress and manner. Most forms of creative self-expression (the fine arts, literature, music, etc.) have disappeared from the public sphere, redirected toward commercial marketing or dumbed down for purposes of mass entertainment. Public education has been “purified” and vocationalized. Electricity not only illuminates the city and its ubiquitous advertising but also is now used as the preferred instrument for capital punishment.

Verne’s young hero Michel attempts to find a meaningful niche for himself in this hard-nosed pragmatic world. Needless to say, he fails miserably. Toward the end of the novel, France is suddenly slammed with an unprecedented cold snap that freezes the Seine river, grinds the life of Paris to a standstill, destroys the country’s agricultural crops, and triggers widespread starvation and death. Michel finds himself wandering alone at night in the

northern *arrondissements* of the city. He enters the Père-Lachaise cemetery and weeps over the tomb of one of his literary heroes, Alfred de Musset. He climbs higher onto a hilltop near Montmartre, gaining a bird's-eye view of the entire city spread out below him. He curses Paris "with a gesture of despairing rage" (204) and falls unconscious to the snow-covered ground. The novel abruptly ends.

Verne clearly intended *Paris in the Twentieth Century* to be a dystopian vision of the future. The problem is that it is a deeply schizophrenic one. It is not surprising that Verne's publisher Hetzel rejected it, saying:

It is tabloidish, and the topic is ill-chosen.... There's not a single issue concerning the real future that is properly resolved.... I see nothing to praise in this story—in all honesty, nothing at all to praise in it. I am sorry, truly sorry to have to tell you this, but I believe that publishing this would be a disaster for your reputation.... Your Michel is a ninny and the other characters are not likable and are often unpleasant.... There is no real originality here (Dumas 25-27)

Verne promptly withdrew the manuscript and never spoke of it again.

Reading Verne's *Paris in the Twentieth Century* in the early twenty-first century instead of the mid-nineteenth—in other words, reading it through the lens of so many other influential dystopias such as Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)—makes Verne's story seem rather lame in comparison. More importantly, the novel just doesn't seem very "Vernian." As I said in 1995 after it was first published in French:

[T]his novel's basic story-line contradicts the general public's popular image of what a work by the legendary Jules Verne should be: i.e., an exciting Industrial-Age epic that glorifies scientific exploration and technological innovation. In contrast, this dark and troubling tale paints a future world that is oppressive, unjust, and spiritually hollow. Instead of adventure, the reader encounters pathos and social satire. Instead of intrepid heroes going "where no one has gone before," the reader shares the life of a lonely and angst-ridden poet. Instead of an action-packed yarn about Man's conquest of Nature, the reader witnesses Nature's conquest of a man. Such reversals are sure to create some bewilderment and consternation. ("The New" 37-38)

In fact, the most serious structural flaw in the novel is directly related to how its protagonist is portrayed. In this high-tech futuristic Paris of the 1960s, Michel Dufrénoy is a walking anachronism, a throw-back to the French Romantic era of the 1830s-40s. Nearly all the Romantic clichés and tropes apply to him: he is an orphan living with his stern aunt and banker uncle who don't understand him; he has long blond hair and a high forehead supposedly denoting intelligence; he is timid, sensitive, and introverted but also disdainful of the materialistic petty-bourgeois society around him. At one point, he describes himself as drowning in an ocean of mediocrity:

"Here I am abandoned on the high seas; requiring the talents of a fish. All I have are the instincts of a bird. I want to live in space, in the ideal regions no longer visited—the land of dreams from which one never returns!" (17)

In these plaintive lines one hears echoes of Baudelaire's poem "The Albatross" (1861), in which poets are compared to graceful seabirds that soar effortlessly in the skies but are awkward and clumsy when forced to remain on the ground. Throughout the novel, Michel seems to be the incarnation of French Romanticism, from Chateaubriand's *le mal du siècle* to Théophile Gautier's *l'art pour l'art*. While Verne's dystopian Paris can be seen as the extrapolated culmination of some disturbing social trends already visible during his own time—including laissez-faire capitalism and positivist utilitarianism, among others—his fictional hero Michel is a simulacrum of Verne's own Romantic affinities from his youth. Further, as Verne scholar Brian Taves has pointed out:

Dufrenoy's alienation is, in fact, inspired by Verne's own situation. At the time, to support his family, he was writing in the mornings before spending his days working at the Paris Stock Market, which he loathed. (133)

There are many other anachronisms in Verne's *Paris in the Twentieth Century*. Women still have dowries and wear corsets, accountants still use quills and write in large ledgers, etc. But it is the glaring anachronism of its main character Michel that both defines this tale's principal dystopian focus and stands out as its greatest narratological weakness.

In closing, let us turn to Albert Robida's satirical and wonderfully illustrated novel *Le Vingtième siècle* [The Twentieth Century]. It was first published in 1882, finally translated into English in 2004, and advertised by Wesleyan University Press as "a cross between *The Jetsons* and the novels of Charles Dickens." Like Verne's story, it too is a kind of *Bildungsroman*, portraying the day-to-day life of a young Parisian woman, Héléne Colobry, and her bourgeois family in the year 1952. Like Verne's Michel, Héléne is blond and an orphan; she too has been adopted and raised by her rich banker uncle (who, unlike Michel's, is a rather jolly fellow named Mr. Ponto). Like Michel, Héléne has just graduated from school and needs to find a way to earn a living. Unlike Michel, Héléne is refreshingly optimistic, extroverted, and has a sunny disposition; unfortunately, she is also not very smart and has no sellable skills. With the help of her uncle's connections, however, she experiments with a host of different professions, trying her hand at being a lawyer, a politician, an academic, a journalist, and a business-woman. This provides Robida the chance to satirize each of these fields with great gusto. But Héléne cannot seem to find any occupation that is a perfect fit. In the end, she abandons the pursuit of a lucrative career and marries the love of her life, Mr. Ponto's son Philippe. The happy couple then spend their honeymoon traveling around the world in Mr. Ponto's luxurious aeroyacht (named, interestingly, the *Albatross*). They eventually settle down in Tahiti, where Philippe dreams up and then spearheads a gigantic engineering project to build a new sixth continent in the South Pacific, ostensibly to solve the world's overpopulation problem. The new continent will be called Helenia. The novel ends with the announcement of Helenia's formal inauguration to be held on 1 January 1960.

The plot of Robida's *The Twentieth Century* is quite straightforward and functions less as a melodrama and more as an (often tongue-in-cheek) documentary on the social institutions and daily life of Parisians in the 1950s. Their world is highly technologized with aerocars and aerial homes, 24/7 news broadcasts, mass-marketed food piped directly into the home, large-screen and interactive TVs called "telephonoscopes," audio books, electric lights, elevators, automated home-security systems, submarine cities, and high-speed tube-trains. But Robida's technology is always treated as a "given," neither explained nor made to appear in any way wondrous or supernatural. It is this oxymoronic (and often very funny) juxtaposition of futuristic technology and nineteenth-century lifestyles and mores that characterizes Robida's unique narrative recipe. Old-fashioned courting is now conducted over the telephonograph; women still dress in corsets and bustles, but their hemlines are now fashionably higher to facilitate getting in and out of aerobuses; the bourgeois home is tastefully decorated with industrial artworks of "photopainting" or "galvanosculture," and so forth. As I've explained elsewhere:

[T]he typical 19th-century reader is led to conceive of a world much like their own, but now filled with new-fangled gadgets the functioning of which they can't possibly understand.... But the text also implies that such an understanding doesn't really matter. The basic social structures are the same, the human problems are the same, and this strange and potentially alienating technology appears to be fully integrated into the daily lives of Robida's fictional characters who themselves are very much the same. ("Science Fiction" 8)

Unlike the imagined futures of Mercier, Souvestre, or Verne, Robida's twentieth century is *not* conceived as a one-dimensional linear extension of the present, where progress will necessarily give birth to a utopia or where capitalism will necessarily breed a dystopia. Rather, as in what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has called a "dispersive future" as opposed to a revolutionary or evolutionary one (94), Robida's vision of tomorrow is a very mixed bag. Technology has improved the overall standard of living and great strides have been made in guaranteeing equal rights for women. But crime is still a problem, as Mr. Ponto learns one night when he is robbed while returning home in an aerocab from the Opera. And this world is still filled with death and destruction. The daily evening news broadcasts tell of the sudden collapse of several new high-rise buildings in Melbourne killing hundreds, and of a transcontinental Asian tube-train attacked by terrorists in Boukara, resulting in the slaughter of 250 travelers including women and children; they also report the assassination of heads of state in Africa and Latin America during bloody government overthrows. In other words, Robida's future is neither uniformly utopian nor uniformly dystopian when compared to 1882; it is simply different. As Brian Stableford has observed:

What Robida was doing—and it remains surprisingly rare, even today—was neither to predict the twentieth century, nor to prescribe for it ... but simply to establish ... that in the future, things would be different, and that no matter

how odd or immoral that different state of being might seem ... it would seem perfectly normal to those living in it. The great strength of *The Twentieth Century*, which makes it an authentic literary classic, is that all the amusing drawings and the jokes in the text are laid upon the fundamental assumption that the moral condition of the future will be and ought to be judged on its own terms, not ours. ("The Twentieth Century" 113)

Although the practice may seem somewhat archaic, the Parisians of Robida's *Twentieth Century* still revere their national history, but they have also learned from the mistakes of the past. Take, for example, the political structure of this twentieth-century French republic. It has a built-in "refresher" mechanism that automatically schedules a patriotic revolution every ten years:

As everyone knows, France's parliamentary government is regulated through the practice of periodic revolution, also known as the *decennial vacation*. Indeed, no event could be more peaceful and orderly. Understandably, after ten years of being stoked up repeatedly, the old political engine becomes prone to clogging up and wearing out, if not overheating. A periodic revolution acts as an institutional safety valve that prevents explosions....

With what impatience the French await this time of liberation, this blessed day of upheaval, as well as the endless recreational opportunities offered by the decennial revolutionary vacation! (*Twentieth* 219-20)

The operative words here are "recreational opportunities" and "revolutionary vacation." This bit of anachronistic role playing—reenacting not only the French Revolution but also the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848—is great fun, but it also serves to rekindle the French people's patriotic fervor and their commitment to the three ideals of "Liberté, Égalité, and (especially) Fraternité." Militias representing the various political parties are organized (Mrs. Ponto is leader of the powerful Feminist Party and Hélène is assigned to the Marseilles Women's Battalion). A full-size replica of the Bastille is built so that it can be stormed and torn down; banner-waving parades, hyperbolic speeches, and well-orchestrated mock battles are numerous in the barricaded streets of Paris; and there is even an international contest to see who can build the most innovative barricade (the French win, of course, beating teams from other European countries and from America, Australia, and China). After a few weeks, when the old government's forces have been soundly defeated and new elections have been held, there is a sumptuous nationwide banquet (paid for with the previous government's budget surplus) and the new government is toasted into office for another ten-year term.

One final word on Robida's humor: it runs the full gamut from parody and vaudevillian slapstick to clever wordplay, irony, and social satire. But he also occasionally makes use of one particular brand of comedy that did not become popular until the mid-twentieth century, when it was first recognized by the French Surrealist André Breton who dubbed it *l'humour noir* [black humor]. Black humor pokes fun at human suffering, death, or other taboo subjects, and its earliest practitioner was probably Jonathan Swift in his provocative essay "A Modest Proposal" (1729). Here's one example (among many) from

Robida's *The Twentieth Century*: Hélène, her two step-sisters, and Mr. Ponto are having dinner at the home of Gontran de Saint Ponto, a distant relative who lives with his family in an upscale neighborhood in Paris. Just before dinner, Mr. Ponto and Mr. Gontran are discussing the Great Catering Company, a culinary business that pipes pre-cooked meals and wines directly into subscribers' homes. Mr. Ponto is a major investor in the company and praises it unstintingly, saying:

"By the way, have you ever visited the Great Company's factory? It is one of Paris's great curiosities.... Admirably designed by engineers of the highest merit, it has roasting furnaces that can cook 20,000 chickens at the same time. It is quite a formidable sight! We also have two large-scale brick and cast-iron cooking pots, with a capacity of fifty thousand liters each. These two containers are under the strict supervision of a mechanical engineer paid as much as a member of the government! That's easily understandable, given his immense responsibility. When the pots are under pressure, the smallest act of negligence could cause the whole factory to blow up! The surrounding streets would become flooded with steaming broth—a hundred thousand liters of it!"

"What a frightful thought!" shuddered Mrs. Gontran.

"Not to mention the steam choppers for vegetables, or the power hammer to mash potatoes—"

"Let me stop you right there with your power hammer," exclaimed Mr. Gontran. "This is precisely one of the reasons why I did not become a subscriber to your Great Company. Surely, you remember that cook who was puréed along with his vegetables by that power hammer of yours."

"I do, indeed; but that was a suicide," Mr. Ponto replied.

"Granted, it may have been, but the incident was not discovered until after the meal. Your subscribers had the cook for supper!" (*Twentieth* 73-74)

On that tasteful note, I will conclude by pointing out another kind of anachronism—one that is not in these retrofuturistic fictions themselves but rather in our assimilation of them. As we read and grapple with the sometimes paradoxical implications of these transtemporal texts, we tend to unconsciously project onto them our own contemporary sensibilities and ideological memes. Our retrospective gaze is not only a seeking gaze; it is also a projecting gaze. Consider, for example, the case of Jules Verne, that legendary founder of hard sf, who—in today's popular imagination—has increasingly been transformed into the putative father of steampunk and whose *voyages extraordinaires* have been fetishized into quaint *objets d'art*, theme-park attractions, and brass-goggled garb. Pre-modern retrofuturistic fictions are often removed from their original socio-historical contexts, mythologized, and repurposed for our social needs, appropriated not only for our literature and cinema but also for our art, fashion, and leisure lifestyles.

But exactly what is it that draws us to these old-fashioned futures from the past? Is it simple intellectual curiosity? Or is it some kind of subconscious need to establish an emotional bond with these tomorrows of yesteryear, perhaps what Fredric Jameson once called "the insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode" (20)? Or might it be that in all these retrofuturisms, we are searching for clues to understand the other unrealized

futures that still reside as “phantoms” or “semiotic ghosts” haunting our cultural memory, such as those described in William Gibson’s “The Gernsback Continuum” (1981)? Whatever the motivation for our attraction, one fact is certain: there can be no retrofuturism without anachronism.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are my own.

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## ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on examples of anachronism—both intentional and unintentional—in several early French “retrofuturistic” novels: Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *The Year 2440* (1771), Émile Souvestre’s *The World as It Shall Be* (1846), Jules Verne’s *Paris in the 20th Century* (written in 1863, published in 1994), and Albert Robida’s *The Twentieth Century* (1882). I examine the many anachronisms in these “tales of the future” through the lens of two different reading publics: the texts’ original readers and the readers of today, who view them in retrospect from our vantage point of the twenty-first century. As members of the latter group, we often project onto these “old-fashioned” visions of the future our contemporary aesthetic sensibilities and ideological memes. In reading them, our retrospective gaze is not only a seeking gaze; it is also a projecting gaze and itself intrinsically anachronistic.