

## Loose Canons: Cultural Studies & Visual Culture

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I must start by saying how honoured I am to be here at this very interesting event. I am hoping in this paper to explain the relationship between the emergence of Cultural Studies in Britain in the 1960's, and the simultaneous, but less organised tendencies which have recently begun to cohere in the study of Visual Culture.

I apologise in advance for the reminiscences. In recalling my own experiences, I am not seeking to claim any distinction. On the contrary – my own career and encounters with the texts, institutions and people I have mentioned, can best be regarded as generic.

In the spirit of comparing disciplines and methodologies – what interests me here is the impulses behind the emergence and cross fertilising of areas of academic study.

The dominant characteristics of British Higher Education in the last thirty years have been change and instability. In intellectual terms this has aided the development of new areas of study, a growth of inter and multi disciplinarity and considerable pedagogic innovation. Much of the energy which has resulted in the development of new areas of study was derived from an urgent sense, among some academics and not a few students, of the need to account for and remedy the peculiar absences and articulations described by Perry Anderson in his important essay on the "Components of the National Culture" (1968). In that polemic, he revealed an absent centre in British intellectual life. Cultural studies grew to fill that absence by making a series of connections and affirmations. In more recent years it has moved to accommodate essentially new and radical ideas generated by feminism, post-colonialism and the various initiatives usually tied together under the heading of post modernism.

In retrospect, Cultural Studies served some urgent needs – emerging as it did at a time when a new generation of students gained access to the Higher Education system. It challenged the liberal Humanist status quo – It looked to Europe for its enabling methodologies – It validated the experience of every day life and provided space for thinking about the personal as political. Many of the impulses behind these initiatives predated the setting up of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964 – and it is possible to trace the mood of revolt against the certainties of an intellectual Establishment to the previous decade, and in particular to dissident groups of the 1950's.

Re-considering the origins of Cultural Studies and its supplementary relation to English – it seems that its impulses were very much of its time. In art, film and literature – the burning issues among the younger generation of practitioners and critics included: finding space for "experience", exploring the "meaning of style", and operating in the "space between art and life". These disruptive and often irreverent impulses were expressed by substituting new canons – and by refusing the assumptions which underlay notions of Art and Quality. The critic Kenneth Allsop, in his account of the 1950's, which he called "The Angry Decade" (1958), coined the term "delinks" to describe the new generation. This term was simultaneously an acknowledgment of current media panics about "delinquency", and a reference to the impulse to systematically dismantle axiomatic linkages. This modest and instinctual process of deconstruction testifies to the stirrings of a structuralist consciousness. It demonstrated the growth of a generous and inclusive AND ... AND, posed against the relentlessly EITHER ... OR which was the rationale for Humanist validations of "organic texts", and the priorities it placed on discrimination, critical distance and durability.

The Independent Group, who were a brilliantly eclectic band of artists, architects and designers started meeting in 1952, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London over a decade before the Birmingham Centre came into being. They systematically opposed what they saw as the tyranny of Art, Quality and Culture with a programme of re-energised modernism which deployed "POP" strategies to describe a lived culture dominated by expendability, immediacy, repetition and fun.

In the mid 1960's, I went (on my Lambretta) to the University of Cambridge to read English Literature. I was assigned F.R. Leavis, then approaching 70 years of age, and still something of an outsider, as a tutor. The literary canon was firmly established, nothing on the syllabus was less than fifty years old. We were expected to study the "background" to English Literature, which was at its most interesting in the books and teaching of Queenie Leavis. But, disconcertingly, Leavis himself regarded the world of films, newspapers, advertising as "counterinfluences" to the main business of education – which was, for him, "the training of taste" and helped students to work towards the acquisition of a culture which would afford us some measure of protection from our environment. We were advised to attend some lectures in the School of Philosophy, and there was a paper on the Tripos called "English Moralists" which was a space for overviews of culture. We made close analyses of texts. There were weekly tutorials, many informal seminars and exams. At the end of the second year, and at the end of the third, there were Finals. Gowns were worn for dining, and in the streets after dusk. We were all locked in after midnight.

Grants were generous, our beds were made, the food was good and plentiful, there were exceptional libraries and bookshops.

Bibliographies were short by current standards – in a week it was possible to read a lot of what was necessary for the weekly essays and a lot that wasn't. I continued to acquire an autodidactic education from reading Penguin Books which at the time were publishing classics, modern classics, modern novels and poetry, and key cultural studies texts by Williams and Hoggart. I didn't know at the time that for much of the 1960's Stuart Hall's salary at Birmingham was paid through a grant from Sir Allen Lane, the proprietor of Penguin Books. But I'm sure it was money well spent – it would be hard to calculate how many students were encouraged to read by Stuart Hall and his extended influence.

I certainly wasn't aware of the recently revised publishing and editorial policy of New Left Books, which from the early sixties began to introduce French, German and Italian Marxist theory to supplement native British intellectual traditions. I studied through the sixties without knowing about Birmingham or the Situationists, the Frankfurt School, Sartre, Benjamin, Lévi-Strauss, Propp, Brecht, Russian Formalism, Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and many others too numerous to name.

However, in 1966 I bought Lucy Lippard's book on Pop Art – available in another cheap paperback series, and found there exciting evidence of miscegenation between high and low culture and an introduction to the work of the Independent Group – a native school of semiologists who were light on theory but big on visual practice. Lawrence Alloway, a member of that Group who had begun to meet in 1950, was responsible for a chapter in Lippard's book, and he described the "Pop" project in these haunting words: "One result of our discussion was to take Pop culture out of the realm of escapism, sheer entertainment and relaxation, and to treat it with the seriousness of art."

The visual seemed to me the terrain on which this interesting dialectic of frivolity and seriousness was taking place. In the distracting year 1967, I switched Faculties and became a student of Fine Art and Architecture. Although the syllabus was even more antiquated and arcane, there was an option on Modern Architecture and some inspirational visiting lectures. One of these was delivered by Reyner Banham, a member of the Independent Group, who in his lecture commented that the famous photograph of Marinetti and his avant-garde, taken in Paris in 1912, resembled an album cover, and that there were strong similarities between Baroque sculpture and 1950's American car styling. For me, this had the effect of touching two live wires together. It also gave me an insight into what the Independent Group had referred to as "the democracy of images" as well as their virtual inexhaustibility.

Art History was then a very conservative discipline, but in the realm of architecture and design it was impossible to ignore the relationship between

ideology and forms, between ideas and a material-rendering, which in some mysterious way captured and transmitted their essence. The British Arts and Crafts Movement went some way towards closing that gap between art and life, they combined socialism, utopian thought and a strong sense that objects were ideologically charged. Few would want to claim "timelessness" for a streamlined pencil sharpener, or an inflatable armchair – what was important about objects was the conjuncture they inhabited, and the relationships they formed in time and space. What's more, an interest in objects provoked the thought that most novelists and some poets were also design historians and that, from Dickens to Raymond Chandler, they had a great deal to say about things as metaphors, codes and clues. My thesis was on a little known English designer who tried to rediscover the socialist principles of mediaeval practices in the Cotswolds at more or less the same time that Signor Marinetti was posing in a Paris street.

After University, I pursued architectural studies to Paris, witnessed the student revolution and came back to a similar situation in Hornsey College of Art, which was near my home. I was so enthralled that I obtained a job on the strength of being able to teach design history to furniture and fashion students. I knew nothing of art education, but my new part time post was largely the result of an initiative which had taken place about ten years previously. The Coldstream Report, which transformed and de-bohemianised British art education was partly motivated by a widespread anxiety focussed on the launch of the first sputnik. The idea was that Britain was still producing designers who were out of touch with technology and the cultural context of a rapidly modernising nation. The answer to this problem was to find staff who could teach about art and design in relation to the social and commercial realm. By the time I arrived the students had more extreme demands for another kind of "relevance". They wanted some guidance to the rapidly expanding cultural reference of a counterculture which raided the archive and enjoyed a mood of radical empiricism. One of my first lectures exploited the cultural references of the Sergeant Pepper Album Sleeve to indicate to students who a few months earlier had been defying the college authorities the roots and scope of the new "alternative culture".

The virtue of teaching design history was that design, as a commodity form, was clearly marked by the ideals and desires of its time and by those of the market sector to which it was addressed. Planned obsolescence was imbricated with desire in ways which enabled a temporal sequence of refrigerators, or shoes or advertisement to open up issues of social belonging and change, in ways which few written texts could, and certainly in ways which it was possible to make vividly apparent to students. Design was a bridge between the mundane world of materials and marketing, on one hand, and the irrational universe of fetishism and fantasy, on the other. Reading Siegfried Giedion's monumental study of anonymous design *Mechanisation Takes Command* (1948) not only

again, away from the "supermarket of self", to reconsideration of late capitalism and technology.

Understanding Genre meant bringing a pragmatic understanding of production into relation with what John Ellis (1982) has called the "memorial metatext". By which he meant the accumulated cultural understanding which everyone carries, adjusts and transmits. Genres, like all other products, were intended to be consumed. Consumption was an area of cultural response which particularly interested feminists, because consumption was construed as passive and therefore gendered in subordination to production.

One of the reasons for the increased popularity of cultural studies in the 1980's was that the interest in consumption, customising and identity coincided with a decisive shift to a consumer and service economy, whose chief champion – Margaret Thatcher – denied the existence of "society". It is not surprising that for cultural studies graduates emerging into the job market at that time – the logical destination for skills learned in the classroom was in journalism or making television programmes or various kinds of performance. It has been suggested that the ultimate irony for cultural studies was that the syllabus was recuperated into main stream consumer education. In my opinion that is too cynical. The critical edge of cultural studies was maintained and disseminated by many who made the transition from criticism to production and mediation.

The visual was central to traditional ways of studying Art History, but it was often conceived in an idealist fashion, in isolation from its social context and indebted to the Bloomsbury aesthetics and formalism of Roger Fry and Herbert Read. The need to develop a more socially aware and politicised Art History, partly derived from teaching practitioners in art colleges and partly from a rediscovery of debates which had taken place in the 1930's.

When I told colleagues I was going to Genoa to the A.I.A. Conference, their immediate response was – "Artists International Association"??? ... This A.I.A. was founded in 1933 to fight against Fascism and was, in some respects, a precursor of the present Arts Council. Just as students at Birmingham became interested in the work of the pre-war Mass Observation Movement and War Radicalism, art historians began to explore the radical traditions of artists and art history during the Popular Front.

The development of a social history of Art, then, was contemporaneous with the growth of cultural studies and occasionally the two communicated, and differed in the pages of *Screen* magazine and *Screen Education*. A key stimulant to rethinking art in a context of subjectivity and power was given by John Berger, the poet and painter who had been a pupil of the Marxist art historian Frederick Antal. In 1972, Berger made the television series "Ways of Seeing", the programmes were published as a book and became hugely influential. For many it was the first exposure to the ideas of Benjamin and Bourdieu, and it was

opened up a world in which authorship was insignificant, but it served as an illustrated introduction to the ideas of Walter Benjamin, a friend of Giedion's. Incidentally, it supplied a world of images which had been raided for inspiration by the Independent Group and circulated in their artworks.

The study of everyday objects was an exercise in refocusing the "art historical eye", to take into account the undergrowth of visual culture. Design could be conceived as a socially responsible practice, shaped by irrational aesthetics. A particularly significant contribution to the study of design was made by Dick Hebidge, a graduate of the Birmingham Centre, whose understanding of style and its functions was informed by Barthes, Genet, Lévi-Strauss and Lefebvre. His contributions to *BLOCK* (a journal which I jointly edited), in the early 1980's, re-energised design studies and represented one of the only specific incursions of cultural studies into the visual realm.

Anyone interested in Popular Culture in the mid 1960's would have welcomed the publication of *The Popular Arts* by Stuart Hall (1964), then Senior Research Fellow at the Birmingham Centre, and Paddy Whannel, then Education Officer at the British Film Institute. It was intended as an antidote to discriminations against the popular, and although it adopted a left-Leavisite tone, intent on evaluating and sifting the good from the bad, the coming together of the authors and their institutions is indicative of a potent convergence of interests in everyday representation. *Screen* magazine, then in troubled relationship with the British Film Institute, was a point of entry for the visually attuned theories of Metz, Brecht, Benjamin, Barthes, the Russian Formalists, Kristeva and Lacan.

*Screen* developed two lines of enquiry which were influential on the development of visual culture. Firstly, from 1971, when a new, anthropologically trained editor – Sam Rodhie – took over, the journal pursued the relationship between style and meaning. Secondly, critics associated with *Screen* in flight from notions of authorship, which had dominated film studies up to then, began to rethink the issue of "Genre". The validation of genre meant not only a challenge to left and right wing theoretical opposition to the products of the culture industries, but it generated a more complex theorising of production and consumption and promoted an interest in pleasure.

In cultural studies there was always a tension between exploring interpellative ideology and understanding how audiences and consumers made sense of their relationship to the cultural product and integrated it into their everyday lives. Cultural studies has been marked by opposing factional elements – some exploring the politics of media and occasionally succumbing to fantasies relating to its total domination ... others have been prone to the romanticism of consumer freedom and identity creation. In recent years the balance has shifted

many cases the dropping of terms "art" and "history" generated painful controversies with colleagues who identified more closely with the traditional discursive limits of Art History. Where the study of design was more closely aligned with history or anthropology, it was in some cases designated "Material Culture". The erosion of tradition subject boundaries is evident in the Routledge Catalogue. Routledge, which absorbed Methuen and Comedia, two publishers with strong Cultural Studies lists, has come to dominate British academic publishing, and with Polity, Sage and several University Presses has followed and supplied the formation of new hybrid areas of study. This symbiosis of publishers and academic institutions, is itself partly attributable to the multidisciplinary students of the 1980's entering editorial positions and continuing to appear at, and contribute to, conferences.

In the 1990's new pressures have been put on staff in Higher Education to publish – and the timespan between curriculum development, conference or thesis completion and the appearance of a commemorative book has shortened considerably. The Routledge catalogue is an interesting testimony to the reshaping of the syllabus in the Humanities. As a colleague recently noted:

Art History departments no longer consist of people who are expert in different historical "periods", but of people who asked different kinds of questions about a much wider range of works – questions prompted by interests in semiology, feminism, post-modernism and so on.

and the list makes this re-orientation clear. Texts appear in a number of different categories, the concerns of cultural studies have not only altered the landscape of academic literature, but have invigorated cultural geography and environmental studies. Cultural Studies inspired new ways of conceiving technology and esp. biotechnology and made it possible for Gender Studies to become a catalogue in its own right. Gratifyingly the claims of the visual are everywhere evident.

As Higher Education in Britain enters a new era of funding crises, particularly marked by the falling off of student demand in some traditional subjects, the new requirement is for hybrid theory practice courses with an emphasis on some vocational elements, particularly in electronic media. One of the key problems for Visual Culture, is to provide such students with an understanding of the role of the visual within a wider context of cultural awareness. And, under the present circumstances, a politicised awareness of the claims being made for a new and supposedly universal and liberating image culture.

British culture embodies a fundamental paradox with regard to the visual. Investigations into the history of British art have blamed protestantism, political gradualism, empirical philosophy and the prioritisation of literature as reasons for the relative limitations of British art. The failings of the visual imagination in Britain is often compared unfavourably to the role of the image in cultures

on primetime television! It drew attention to issues of ownership, power and the gaze which had been profoundly repressed in traditional art history.

Tim Clark, an expelled Situationist, continued Berger's project by writing, in the following year, two influential studies of French nineteenth century art (1973 a, b) which focussed attention on "How in a particular case, a content of experience becomes a form – an event becomes an image". In 1975, Clark was instrumental in setting up an M.A. in the Social History of Art at the University of Leeds, and was joined there by Griselda Pollock who established a feminist agenda and particularly focussed on the problems of artists as cultural producers.

One of the almost accidental means for generating this cross-fertilisation of cultural studies, film studies and the encounter with the visual was the formation in the early 1970's of Polytechnics. In 1973 the art school in which I taught was gathered, together with a number of technical colleges and a teachers' training college, into a Polytechnic, one of thirty or so – a rambling institution on many sites with 12,000 students. The only unifying factor was a modular structure which enabled students to combine a number of different subjects towards a degree.

The modular scheme, which by the mid 1990's has become almost universal in British Higher Education, was both idealistic and economic. It put into play the ideal of interdisciplinarity which had been a visionary project of the Independent Group forty years previously. Modularity made for some very productive contact between philosophers, anthropologists, art historians, sociologists and designers. It also went hand in hand with a relentlessly diminishing resource and an inexorable move towards mass higher education. In both respects it learnt from the radical and ever expanding Open University project.

The future of Higher Education in Britain is now entrusted to new technologies of communication which can supposedly generate less and less staff student contact through open and distance learning. There is a rueful suspicion in my mind that the interdisciplinary project attained such total victory because it was so adaptable to the packaging of teaching and reduction of costs. However, it has also been a device for extending the benefits of Higher Education to previously excluded groups, and a way in which the newer and poorer Universities could counter the appeal of the older and better funded institutions which tended to specialise in single subject degrees. Modularity triumphed because of educational rationales, but also because it was better suited to the uncertainties of funding and job opportunities in the unstable economies of the *fin de siècle*.

The term "Visual Culture" emerged in the 1980's to describe the increasingly complex interaction of theory and image being taught in art departments. In

such as Italy, where the visual is assumed to have a greater priority. The paradox is, that looking and seeing are central to commonsense attitudes to understanding, and yet there is a fundamental distrust expressed towards "looking" as a cognitive tool. Looking raises anxieties which are implicated in the superficiality of surfaces and the integrity of depth. In my own University, getting Film Studies accepted by the necessary validating bodies was not easy. At first it was rejected as a dangerously entertaining study, subsequently it was felt to be too difficult for undergraduate students.

Certainly, the British watch more television, own more video recorders, consume more magazines and tabloid newspapers, and are prodigious enthusiasts for computers and video games. Perhaps it is the supposed opposition between the visual and the literary which has aroused such anxiety. As you will know only too well, and as Perry Anderson pointed out in his 1964 essay – in British academic culture, the roles of sociology, politics and philosophy were assumed by Literature. It is English which has made claims to produce an understanding of the social totality. And it is that claim that made it possible for Cultural Studies to emerge in the form in which it did.

Since the 1960's various technological utopianists have been celebrating the end of the Gutenberg era. From McLuhan onwards, and particularly in very recent times, theorists have welcomed a visually based technology capable of emancipating citizens from the supposed linearity, univalence and "coolness" of the written text. McLuhan's fantasy of simulating camp-fire communication in a tribal village has been extravagantly revived in the figuration of new digital technologies. However, writers like de Landa, Virilio and Robins have begun to point to the relationship between technologies of vision, war and surveillance and to the processes of screening out, which are implicated in screening.

Foucault and his followers have, in particular, explored the ways in which vision confers power and authority on centrality and observation. Their insights have demonstrated how the history of photography has been intimately related to the development of systems of information. The "overview" conferred on those who exploit imaging, is a metaphor for a God like omniscience and for strategies of exclusion and control. The significance of this wielding of visual power and its association with capital, have been taken up most fully by theorists in the realm of architecture and planning.

A particular issue in contemplations of the Gulf War has been the construction of visually transmitted accounts which function to repress the non-visible and create an opposition between the specular and open strategies of the West and the secretive, veiled operations of the Orient.

For Visual Culture it is important to introduce students to the relativities of vision. To account for the naturalisation and dominance of Western optics and to extend this analysis into the history of Imperialism. This process is exemplified

by Mary Louise Pratt's book *Imperial Eyes* (1992) and in a number of recent studies in the securing of a priority for politically invested ways of seeing.

Students of art are familiar with the problematising of perspective which was part of the Modernist revision of representation. However, this understanding needs to be developed in relation to the powerful convergences which made the system of perspective coincide with notions of objectivity. Cartesian perspective depends on arbitrary conventions which presuppose monocular vision and fix the viewer in place relative to the viewed. Whilst repressing ambiguity and metaphor, this sets the scene for certain kinds of narrative image. Among the challenges to perspective at the end of the century, which were also challenges to narrative and other kinds of plausibility, was Nietzsche's claim that "all knowledge is perspective" – that the ability of a system of looking to deliver truth was dependent on a subject position.

Destabilising the point of view conferred new responsibilities on the viewer. Responsibilities, on one hand to recognise the complex structures and situations of modernism through adopting a moving position analogous to collage, or the camera eye. On the other hand to recognise the duality of knowledge and aggression by rejecting the mythic "innocent eye" of science and adopting the "evil eye" of primitivism. The "image" still conceived in many of its incarnations as merely a superficial and exploitative exoskeleton of the real, was put in touch with what J.-B. Pontalis has called "the osmosis between the unconscious and the visual". The supplement to the powerful epistemological device of perspective was described by Walter Benjamin as a process in which "The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."

All representation is both a source of information and a source of uncertainty. The fact of dislocation implicit in the *re*, of re-presentation indicates the severance which has taken place in the relationship between the time of perception or exposure and the unpredictable contexts in which images are presented and the new relationships they take up at the point of consumption.

Modernism constituted the visual as a central and expanded field. It assimilated other ways of looking which had been marginalised by perspectivalism – descriptive, theatrical and haptic models were integrated and, in particular, the strategy of collage was adopted to integrate dislocated and discrepant images. In the process, the perspectival space within which narratives developed was foreclosed and modernist narratives were developed in the ambiguous space of collage, or in the delirious space of the imagination.

In the Modern period, the visual has been important as a metaphor – crucial to the construction of cultural otherness. It has been central to scientific exploration and science fantasy and it has been developed as a metaphor for the transformations of capital – notably in Debord's concept of the "Society of the

to some oceanic state before tension and conflict were on the agenda. As with all futurism, there is a primitivism in close attendance and treading on its tail.

Virtuality is a recent version of the utopian desires to attain "transparency" and "condensation", to achieve an immediate temporal and spatial relation between desire and fulfilment. In Hollywood musicals, as Richard Dyer has pointed out, the realisation of transparency – where understanding, love and union become miraculously unmediated – coincides with the interruption of narrative and figures as a moment of pure spectacle.

But in life, pure spectacle is never really possible, or desirable – looking is always compounded with context, epistemology and the ways in which subjects are accustomed to internalise and interpret feelings. I conclude with Julia Kristeva's eloquent testimony to the embodied nature of comprehension:

Where do the world's events take place? [...] on the television screen? or in the pneumatic spaces of our bodies of our sensations of our imaginaries which [...] in the final analysis, confer sense on everything that comes to be.

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Spectacle". Most significantly of all the visual has been at the centre of what Virilio has called "the cinematic device of the war machine" – the symbiosis, from synchronised cameras and machine guns to laser and virtual technologies which has imbricated the mutual realms of sensation and destruction.

Vision has always carried strong associations with foresight and planning and became a key metaphor for the Enlightenment project. All Universities in Britain are now required to have a "vision statement" which is conceived as a looking beyond the present troubles and contingencies to a world where it is possible "to boldly go".

Vision has been particularly associated with the sweeping away of the past. Modernist planners presiding over a blitzed Britain and conceiving developments in the period immediately after the Second World War, used visual metaphors in their attempts to educate a public in favour of the advantages of rationalised environments. In 1951, at the time of the Festival of Britain in London, a new modernist picturesque was offered to the citizens of a new social democratic state. This comprised a point of view which could be educated to see beyond the merely decorative and superficially attractive, to the structures and insights which alone could guarantee a good life. In the process, other pleasures derived from association or non-visual sensations were effectively denied. In British politics it was traditionally the right wing which provided these less enlightened gratifications.

At the moment, in my University, discussions are taking place over the substitution of teaching by packaged learning, including CD Roms and a more instrumental use of the Internet. In all such discussion notions of the supremacy of the visual and virtual are in play. There are clear and reasonable arguments favouring the development of independent learning. Unintended students pursue unintended learning in a network of modularised subjects accessed and quitted in patterns of choice analogous to the operation of information technology.

In a recent book entitled *Into the Image* (1996), Kevin Robins has served notice on some of the pretensions of the promised regime of virtuality. He first of all points out its continuity with other Enlightenment and Modernist projects – like them it invents new frontiers for the imaginary. Secondly, he draws attention to the ideas of the English psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion which describe the projection of psychic chaos into threats of otherness and the ways in which they can then be distanced and manipulated – and in so doing Robins challenges the supposedly rational attractions of digital technology.

The suggestion that the realm of the visual can serve narcissistic fantasies of release from the prison of the body does not originate with Robins and will be familiar to any student of film theory. To those of us who are interested in discourses of the utopia and the future – Cybernetic escapes from mere mortality are a familiar science fiction trope. They are equally familiar as a desire to return