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### No Longer, Not Yet: Retrofuture Hauntings on The Jetsons

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## No Longer, Not Yet: Retrofuture Hauntings on *The Jetsons*

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From *Back to the Future* to *The Wonder Years*, from *Peggy Sue Got Married* to The Stray Cats' records – 1980s youth culture abounds with what Michael D. Dwyer has called “pop nostalgia,” a set of critical affective responses to representations of previous eras used to remake the present or to imagine corrective alternatives to it. Longings for the Fifties, Dwyer observes, were especially key to America's self-fashioning during the Reagan era (2015).

Moving from these premises, I turn to anachronisms, aesthetic resonances, and intertextual references that point to, as Mark Fisher would have it, both a lost past and lost futures (Fisher 2014, 2-29) in the episodes of the Hanna-Barbera animated series *The Jetsons* produced for syndication between 1985 and 1987. A product of Cold War discourse and the early days of the Space Age, the series is characterized by a bidirectional rhetoric: if its setting emphasizes the empowering and alienating effects of technological advancement, its characters and its retrofuture aesthetics root the show in a recognizable and desirable all-American past. The show's contradictions allow the audience to explore the possibilities of a technology-determined future without the threat of change produced by major epistemological shifts. I argue that, at a time when the threat of nuclear annihilation weighed again on the shoulders of America's youth, reverberations from the past and its unfulfilled promises were key to defining and enabling the nation's sense of futurity.

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*Suddenly she realized that what she was regretting was not the lost past but the lost future, not what had not been but what would never be.*  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *A Nice Quiet Place*

In the summer of 1957, the Monsanto House of the Future opened its doors at Disneyland's Tomorrowland, one of the fictional universes of the then-nascent Anaheim theme park. The attraction, co-created by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and what is currently known as one of the most controversial American agrochemical corporations, aimed at demonstrating the versatility of plastic, at the time considered a revolutionary man-made fabric. A promotional video from the era portrays a young white family of three visiting the House of the Future and day-dreaming of the affordances of futuristic technology in the domestic environment. The woman turned aproned-housewife signals the beginning of a dream-like sequence that features wife and daughter as overseers of the domestic environment. The voice-over narrator can hardly contain his excitement for novelties such as a microwave oven, an ultrasonic dishwasher, storage cabinets and "cold zones" dropping from the ceiling. Out of sheer excitement, we are told that "almost everything is made of plastic! Dishes, cups, countertops, walls, floors, ceilings, table top, shelves, and cabinets" (Monsanto House of the Future).

In the twentieth century, American technology has affirmed itself as a synonym of progress and, as Joel Dinerstein has suggested, it has come to represent "the telos of American culture, the herald of the future, the mythic proof in the nation's self-righteous pudding" (2006, 569). While the Cold War era also produced a wide range of dystopic representations of tomorrow fueled by nuclear anxieties,<sup>1</sup> an overwhelming majority of safe (for whom?) and cheery white heteronormative fantasies have come to define the mythology of the future as imagined in the 1950s. Visions of a bright starred-and-striped future centered around the domestic sphere and enabled by technological advancement – if nuclear incineration didn't ensue – populated *Redbook*, *Life*, *Seventeen* and other magazines of the time and were echoed by other media representations. Among these, *The Jetsons*, an animated sitcom produced by Hanna-Barbera and internationally syndicated to these days became chief in rendering a future aesthetically and affectively akin to the one forecasted by the Walt Disney Company, MIT, and Monsanto Corporation. *The Jetsons* takes its audience in the daily lives of a white white-collar family of four living in a fictional sky-town in the year 2062. The Hanna-Barbera production manages to condense and package futuristic scenarios and inventions that saturated the popular scientific and technological discourse of the era into entertaining 25-minute blocks for impressionable, media-hungry kids to consume.

The opening credits, zooming from outer space into North America, introduce the Jetsons to the viewer: George, behind the yoke of a flying space car, drops off his son Elroy at Little Dipper School, teenage daughter Judy at Orbit High, and wife Jane at the mall, before punching in at Spacely Space Sprockets Enterprise. Missing from the family portrait are the robot-maid Rosie, the Jetson's family dog Astro, and Orbitty, a technically skilled furry alien pet. The show presents recognizable situations in a distinct futuristic setting, with an emphasis on the consequences of living in a machine-

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Atlas Comics publications and sci-fi movies like *Captive Women* (1954), *Conquest of Space* (1955), and *World Without End* (1956).

reliant 21st century. A product of Cold War discourse and the early days of the Space Age, the period of space exploration kicked off by the expansion of America's space program in response to Sputnik 1 (the first artificial satellite to be put into space by the USSR), the series is characterized by a bidirectional rhetoric: if its setting emphasizes the empowering and alienating effects of technological advancement, its characters root the show in a recognizable and desirable all-American past and channel conservative values and traditional domestic roles as per living room sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*. The show's contradictions allow the audience to explore the possibilities of a technology-determined future without the threat of change and the unknown that comes with major epistemological shifts.

It comes as no surprise that, like other elements that made the cultural constructs known as "the Fifties,"<sup>2</sup> *The Jetsons* wasn't actually produced in the 1950s. Whereas the first season aired in 1962 – at the tail end of the long decade that begins with the peace, prosperity, and blossoming consumer culture that followed World War II and ends with the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy – 51 of the 75 total episodes of the series were produced for syndication in 1985, as a celebration of and a tribute to – as Gregory Benford put it in the title of a book based on the predictions of future innovations by the pop science magazine *Popular Mechanics* – *The Wonderful Future that Never Was* (2004). This essay sets out to explore how the show, through its domestic focus and its (by then retro-) futuristic setting evokes a mythical white heteronormative past. Yet, in a fictional world where technology contributes to maintaining life ideals rooted in a conservative (and highly segregated) past and computers are employed to accelerate the turnover of capital, *The Jetsons* also suggests corrective alternatives to present and past visions of the future, whereby unscripted modes of engagement between humans and machines challenge the all-American trope of technological positivism (Sayers 2014, 235) and propose forms of resistance against the perils of technocapitalism.

### **“Who’s Vice President, Jerry Lewis?”**

Following two decades of social turmoil, Ronald Reagan's presidencies (1981-89) revived fantasies of innocent bliss enjoyed by white America in the 1950s. Reaganomics, conservative morality, and a return to traditional family values were to restore the integrity of the national project outlined in the postwar era – based on the illusion of a secure classless society at home and commercial and cultural hegemony abroad<sup>3</sup> – and shattered by the Vietnam War and the liberation movements that ensued.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the conservative ascendancy of the 1980s also led to heightened tensions between the United States and the Soviet Bloc, with an arms buildup and ideological offensive launched right at the onset of Reagan's first presidency. In that context, fantasies of the Fifties served to suture the traumatic events of the 1960s and '70s, reassuring the nation

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth acknowledging that in its conservative connotation, the myth of the Fifties often results in a flattening of the decade and in the erasure of events, affect, and struggles and the complexity of an era filled with contradictions: conformity and rebellion, affluence and rapid expansion of credit, optimism and nuclear anxiety, upward mobility and segregation.

<sup>3</sup> On Cold War obsession with personal and family security, see May 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Accidentally, the House of the Future was torn down in the summer of 1967, a time pregnant with social change in American history: in the span of just two months, the Supreme Court overturned laws against interracial marriage as unconstitutional, uprisings against racial injustice broke out across the United States (and especially in northern cities), and dozens of thousands of (mostly) white middle-class youth converged in San Francisco and other urban areas, expressing pro-drug, anti-war, and free-love sentiments during the so-called Summer of Love.

that the all-American future espied during the so-called Age of Containment might one day be obtained.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, while the House of the Future projected its visitors in a prosperous forward-looking 1986, when the 80s finally arrived, the present was still haunted by visions of the future from the early days of Disneyland. In her interpretation of 1980s television, Jane Feuer has suggested that “the media didn’t cause the 1980s to happen, nor did the 1980s exactly cause [its television programming]; rather, television and Reaganism formed mutually reinforcing and interpenetrating imaginary worlds” (1995, 12). The focus on domesticity of many television shows (from melodramas to sitcoms) reflected the inward-looking tendencies of a historical time when extreme measures of welfare cut required individuals to turn to the family (and other private networks of solidarity), rather than the state, for support.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as Reagan’s America fashioned itself after imagery of affluence, heteronormativity, and all-American single-family homes that made the myth of the Fifties, the state of the American nuclear family was far from its heyday. In 1988, sociologists Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg observed that in the 1950s, “rates of divorce, single-parent families, and illegitimacy were half what they are today: birth rates were twice as high; and many more young adults married at young ages” (1988, 178). With little regard for facts, Reagan’s rhetoric, as epitomized by his infamous political 1984 ad “Prouder, Stronger, Better,” depicted the present as a kind of actualization of the 1950s. From today’s perspective, it also makes clear how what Raymond Williams has called “the residual” – residues of the past that linger on and continue to exert influence, in some form or other, in the current cultural moment – had come to define the shape and values of a desirable future. As Williams writes, “the residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (1977, 123). Indeed, in the 1980s, *The Jetsons* presents, to a mostly young audience, an essentialized version of the 1950s social order, full of what William H. Whyte would call “Organization Families” (1957), transposed to a fully segregated retrofuture setting.

Youth culture of the era, from across aesthetic, affective, and ideological spectrums plays on tropes of America’s alleged age of innocence, either to dismantle or to reinforce them, sometimes both.<sup>7</sup> Repurposing tropes and aesthetic elements from the past was part of a trend that Michael D. Dwyer has called “pop nostalgia,” a set of critical affective responses to representations of previous eras used to remake the present or to imagine corrective alternatives to it (Dwyer 2015, 4). Longings for the Fifties, Dwyer observes, were especially key to America’s self-fashioning during the Reagan era (2015).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> According to Hinerman, fantasy – a way of filling the space that emerges between unconscious and symbolic worlds – can be a means through which the individual sutures their own identity back together (bonding the ego to the unconscious) when it is most vulnerable. In this sense, fantasies work much like a “suture” that a doctor uses to close a “gap” in a wound to allow healing (see Hinerman 1992).

<sup>6</sup> The conservative ethos of the era is best epitomized by Reagan’s British political soulmate’s, Margaret Thatcher, infamous line in a 1987 interview with the British lifestyle magazine *Women’s Own* “There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families”.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, along with the *The Jetsons*, the reader may want to consider John Hughes’ teenpics and 1980s rock’n’roll (especially punk-rock) music.

<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this essay, the Reagan Era is a signifier that precedes Reagan’s presidencies and begins at the historical moment that saw his political ascendancy as governor of California in 1972, a time that roughly coincides with the end of the Vietnam war and the New Right’s articulation of an agenda marked by “an overarching sense of national return to an earlier age after a period of American decline” (Marcus 2004, 5).

Anachronisms, aesthetic resonances, and intertextual references-abundant Hollywood films, television shows, and radio hits operated as both nostalgic narrative devices and melancholic appeals to the potentialities of lost futures. By pointing to both a lost past and to lost futures, popular culture invoked the return to a kind of a Edenic age, casting the Fifties as a national origin myth, in the image of which a present and future set of national values ought to be affirmed.

More broadly, the dithering between past and future is also a prominent feature of 1980s popular culture. A quick look at the highest grossing films of the decade highlights the success of narratives that revolve around a spatial and temporal remove from the present, with the *Back to the Future*, *Star Wars*, and *Indiana Jones* sagas leading the charts (BoxOfficeMojo). As proposed by David Harvey, the 1980s marked the beginning of a historical period when the western world experienced a kind of time-space compression “that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political and economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life” (1989, 9). In his 1989 book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey articulates how technological innovation and phenomena tied to the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation altered the coordinates, qualities of, and relationship between space and time.<sup>9</sup> In that context, images of continuity and stability found in a mythic past became crucial to counterbalance the feelings of volatility and ephemerality produced by an ever-shifting social and economic order organized around dynamism, change, and innovation.

Articulating a hauntological hermeneutics rooted in Jacques Derrida’s 1993 reflections in “The Spectres of Marx,” Mark Fisher suggested that we always experience the future “as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production” (Fisher 2012, 16). He distinguishes two directions in hauntology:

The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic “compulsion to repeat,” a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to the sense of futurity, that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior). (2012, 19)

In the 1980s the specter of the 1950s emerged as an origin myth that determined future possibilities. If the security of the past compensated for the uncertainties of the present, representations of the future provided a cultural space in which anxieties about both the future and the role of technology in everyday life could be addressed, albeit through a series of displacements and distortions. Technology-fueled fantasies were not only central to 1950s American exceptionalism, but as Dinerstein suggests, they have helped maintain the Euro-American myths of progress and of white, Western superiority throughout history (Dinerstein 2006, 572). If technology is synonymous with faith in the future, it is also the means through which fantasies of the future (the not yet) as shaped by the past (the no longer) are enabled. At a time brimming over with feelings of uncertainty, uneasiness, and quiet discontent, the residual came back in the form of a

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<sup>9</sup> Marxist geographers generally identify two historical periods in which time-space compression occurred: the first and the last two decades of the 20th century (May and Thrift 2001). Such radical restructuring in the nature and experience of both time and space often result as a consequence of technological innovations that condense or elide spatial and temporal distances, including communication, travel, and economics technologies.

spectre, haunting present expectations for the future, defining and enabling the nation's sense of futurity and attempting to foreclose otherwise modes of being.

### “That’s Grass. I Read About It in Ancient History”

Lynn Spigel has proposed that the 1960s saw the birth of a new hybrid television genre, the “fantastic family sitcom.” Shows like *Bewitched*, *My Favorite Martian*, *The Jetsons*, and *Lost in Space* blended suburban comedy, space travel and sci-fi, “mix[ing] the conventions of the suburban sitcom past with the space-age imagery of President Kennedy’s New Frontier” (Spigel 2001, 108). The fantastic sitcom, Spigel argues, “presented a highly irrational, supernatural discourse on private life, and gave voice to critical perspective” through a format that “offered ready-made conflicts over gender roles, domesticity, and suburban lifestyles combined with laugh tracks, safe resolutions, and other structures of denial [that] defused the tension and trouble in the text” (2001, 117). In the 1980s, despite appealing to the same tropes and recurring to the same narrative devices, the rhetoric of the fantastic family sitcom seemed to operate in reverse: on the one hand it reaffirmed conservative values and suburban culture while, on the other hand, it soothed anxieties about technological determinism in the context of a renewed ideological conflict with the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the *The Jetsons*' premature cancellation after its first season, by 1963 its reruns became a Saturday morning cartoon staple for decades, until fifty-one new episodes were ordered and produced between 1985 and 1987. For the most part, the fictional world of the new episodes features the same aesthetics of the first series.<sup>11</sup> Unlike most Hanna-Barbera shows, however, the 1980s episodes revolve more around the life of the younger characters, catering to a growing teen culture, as per the strategies of narrowcasting adopted by US television networks in the era. Both Judy, a boy-crazy teenage girl invested in fashion and rock'n'roll and Elroy, a pre-teen all-space-science autodidact, fall in line with the majority of 1980s domesticated (or “square,” as Huey Lewis and the News' 1986 popular single would have it) sitcom teen characters. Leerom Medovoi has argued that the figure of the rebel was a key component of 1950s popular culture and a corollary and corrective to suburban conformity (2005). Instead, in the 1980s – at a time when Reagan topped the list of men teenagers most admired and characters like Alex P. Keaton in *Family Ties* reflected a shift from the cultural liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s to the conservatism of the 1980s (“Exploding the

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<sup>10</sup> The Hollywood star-turned-president's megalomaniac Star Wars program testifies to the central role that technology (and especially engineering projects funded by the government and the military) took in the context of the ideological war against the “Red enemy.”

<sup>11</sup> New features include the use of synthesizers in the new recording of the original theme song, the employment of computer animation technology to color and composite some of the episodes, and a new set of appliances and machines in the fictional world of the show. The advances in animation technology seen in other Hanna-Barbera's productions of the time (such as *Yogi's Treasure Hunt*, *Pink Panther and Sons*, *The Smurfs*, and various productions of the Scooby Doo estate) suggest that recurring to an aesthetic attuned to that of the original show (with a limited color palette, flat look, and backgrounds simplified to the point of merely suggesting a light source) was likely a deliberate choice to evoke the age when the series first aired. On the other hand, the 1990s *Jetsons*' movie features radically different and future-oriented visual and sonic choices, with a timely hip hop-inspired soundtrack, hyper-saturated images, a high use of shades granting objects a feeling of 3D place in space, and characters featuring more details (like fur or hair).

Myth About Teenagers”) – a kind of reactionary conservatism became a television trope associated with youth rebellion.<sup>12</sup>

If *The Flintstones*, the Stone Age counterpart to *The Jetsons*, also produced by Hanna-Barbera in 1960 (and subject of a number of unsuccessful reboots throughout the decades), was shaped after *The Honeymooners* and Fred, like Ralph Kramden, a man of arrested emotional development, personified the frustrations and aspirations of many postwar blue-collar workers as they struggled to make their way up the economic ladder, *The Jetsons* resembled the cheerful middle-class suburban household of shows like *Leave it to Beaver*. At face value, if compared to the primitive Flintstones (pun intended), *The Jetsons* appeared as a new kind of less controversial laugh-tracked domestic comedy, portraying self-contained happy-go-lucky misadventures of a nuclear patriarchal family living in the future equivalent of a white suburb.

Whereas *The Flintstones* is set in the suburban town of Bedrock (where dinosaurs and other animals are portrayed to co-exist during the time of cavemen, saber-toothed cats, and woolly mammoths), the Jetsons live in Orbit City, an all-white (quite literally, the series does not feature a single character of color) hyper-technological sky-city on Earth cast as both and neither city and/nor suburb.<sup>13</sup> In Orbit City all buildings are built on hydraulic pillars able to rise in the sky to avoid inclement weather and pollution.<sup>14</sup> George and his family live in the Skypad Apartments, a 2,000 units complex that maintains the sheltered nature of gated communities (the building is, indeed, covered by a bubble-top). The iconic setting of *The Jetsons* is heavily influenced by Googie, a type of futurist architecture moved by car culture, the Space Age, and the Atomic Age and especially popular among motels, coffee houses and gas stations. Googie gave birth to exaggerated modern buildings that reflected the optimism of mid-century America and incorporated energy into its design with elements such as the boomerang, diagonals, atomic bursts, neon, steel, and bright colors (Hess 2004, 22-5).<sup>15</sup> The Googie-inspired aesthetics on *The Jetsons* contribute to building an anachronistic vision of the future rooted in the past.

If *The Flintstones* already projected Americans into the suburban equivalent of what Leo Marx has called a “pastoral ideal” – the belief that humankind can live in a “middle

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<sup>12</sup> The cultural relevance, as well as the commercial success, of the show in the 1980s is testified by the top-selling double EP “The Jetsons”/“Jane, Get Me Off This Crazy Thing.” In the summer of 1986, the 12” peaked at no. 9 on the Singles Sales chart, sitting between Run-DMC and Pet Shop Boys (“12 Inch Singles Sale”).

<sup>13</sup> The figure of the exopolis, the city without, proposed by Ed Soja to make sense of the oxymoronic ambiguity of scenes created by and for rampant industrialization (such as Orange County, Disneyland’s very site) seems most apt to speculate about Orbit City. Soja writes that “the exopolis [in Orange County] is depicted first of all as industrial and industrious, a transactional tapestry efficiently knotted into a series of flexible manufacturing and service complexes, great swarms of businesses tied up in hive-like clusters to capture the new ‘scope’ economies of post-fordist technology. No longer bound by the rigid hierarchical demands of mass production and assembly lines, a new kind of industrialization was begetting a new kind of peripheral urbanization, an offset urban form” (246). On *The Jetsons*, Orbit City acts as the perfect metonym for an exopolis, a hyperreal collage of urban sites (among others: the Skypad Apartments, Spacely’s Sprockets manufacturing plant, the Fly-In, the Fun Pad, the Swivel Lounge, the Spaceburger Drive-In, the Space Coliseum, the Shopping Center, and the Orbit City Golf Club) “knotted into a series of flexible manufacturing and service complexes” suburban city (1996, 246).

<sup>14</sup> In 2005, Iwao Takamoto, a layout and design artist for Hanna-Barbera told *The New York Times* that the Space Needle, built for the 1962 Seattle World Fair, inspired the apartment buildings in the cartoon (Goetz 2005, n.p.).

<sup>15</sup> Both Disneyland and Tomorrowland were also inspired by Googie architecture.



landscape” situated between nature’s primitivism and civilization’s authority (1964, 3) – *The Jetsons* represent “the interrupted idyll,” the trope of interruption of pastoral scenery by technology due to late industrialization that reduced Jefferson’s agrarianism to an impractical myth, albeit a central one in American life (1964, 27). The social conflict between the pastoral ideal (the past) and the growth of technology (the future) is a common theme on *The Jetsons*, the epitome of which is found in “The Swiss Family Jetson” episode (1985). In order to escape noise, traffic, and other nuisances of modern life that, despite technological advancement appear to be as much part of the future as they are of the present, George, facing a six-month furlough, is convinced to venture “back to the land” and out to the idyllic Paradisio, the last planet of the space frontier. The family signs up for a real estate package that comes with a “Digi-Farm system that includes a robotic tractor and automated drills,” in addition to a DIY house kit. The immediate failure of the Digi-Farm system results in the Jetsons’ discovery of an uncontaminated area of the planet. There, with the help of Orbitty, the family builds a treehouse where they manage to live a sustainable meatless and analogical life in symbiosis with nature. However, the newly found idyll doesn’t last long, as soon enough a re-development company on the lookout for commercial expansion turns their quaint little paradise into a cookie-cutter suburban town filled with condo estates.<sup>16</sup>

The episode follows the pattern of the pastoral literary form: a “redemptive journey” away from society’s problems into the wilderness and eventually back to civilization (Marx 1964: 66-72). As proposed by Marx, however, the American pastoral is complicated by an additional trope: the interrupted idyll, represented by the recurring image of the machine in the garden. As soon as the Digi Development Corporation builds a supermarket, marina, and high school on Paradisio, all members of the family get “corrupted” by civilization and technology, resuming their all-American terrestrial lifestyles (meat-based diets included). Finally, when the pounding of the drums from a neighboring unit (the noise that had caused the Jetsons to leave Orbit City in the first place) reaches Paradisio, the family is prompted to return to their terrestrial home. The drums, like the whistling sound of a steam locomotive in the natural landscape of Walden Pond for Henry David Thoreau, signal the ongoingness of the conflict between nature and technology, the impossibility to escape technology, and the ultimate defeat of the agrarian model.

### **“Jane, Stop This Crazy Thing!”**

Every *Jetsons*’ episode ends with George’s cry for help for Jane to regain control of the ubiquitous push-button appliances in the Jetsons’ home. What became one of *The Jetsons*’ iconic catchphrases is part of a sketch originally aired in the 1963 episode “Millionaire Astro,” when George gets stuck on Astro’s automatic dog walker and requests his wife’s help to stop the machine. Not only is Orbit City a product of the Fifties, but the Jetsons’ apartment is also shaped after fantasies constructed by discourses on technology and its role (and that of women) in the domestic sphere in the 1950s. As Andrea Carosso observes,

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<sup>16</sup> The episode is titled and vaguely modeled after Johann David Wyss’s 1812 novel *The Swiss Family Robinson* – the fictional travelogue of a Swiss family of immigrants whose ship en-route to Australia is shipwrecked in the East Indies. While the episode offers a critique of modern life and (space) colonization, it also allows the audience to vicariously live the capitalist fantasy of total domination of nature.

the American kitchen became one of the central sites of cold war rhetoric. [...] Kitchen appliances quickly became, through this public-relations icon, symbolic of a nation increasingly immersed in new fantasies of privacy and family “togetherness.” Dishwashers, toasters and vacuum cleaners became allegories of much larger transformations of domesticity in the postwar years, at the core of which lay the mass migration of white, middle-class Americans from cities to suburbs. (2013, 56-57)

The consumer lifestyle of suburban culture and especially the technological utopias Americans had hoped to find in their new suburban homes was a mark of the freedom pranced by the Western bloc in its ideological battle against the Soviet Union, as suggested by the so-called Kitchen Debate of 1959 between US Vice President Richard Nixon and USSR Vice President Nikita Khrushchev at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow. An entire house, allegedly affordable by any working-class family in the United States, was built for the exhibition. The home was filled with labor-saving and recreational devices meant to represent the fruits of the capitalist American consumer market.

The episode “Future Tense” (1985) is an example of the conservative rhetoric of the 1980s *Jetsons* revival, through an all but concealed embrace of Reagan’s small-government politics. After George and Jane win a large sum of money at the Alien Horse Racing track, two gangster figures go after the couple throughout the rest of the episode, following them on the stands of the venue first, and in the sky of Orbit City after. As the audience is led to believe the Jetsons’ are being chased by mobsters, George and Jane are eventually confronted by the duo, who reveal themselves to be Interspace Revenue Service (an obvious parody of the Internal Revenue Service) agents trying to cash in on their share: \$199,998 out of the \$200,000 won by the couple. This conservative tendency sets the second and third season of the series far apart from the political irreverence of the first season produced in 1962, when the authors went as far as mocking the military complex in the episode “G.I. Jetson” (1963) – whereby both George Jetson and Henry Orbit get drafted to the space army and through their time in the “indoctrination center” the show pokes fun at the dehumanizing training of the armed force. Similarly, several observers have highlighted the timeliness of Jane’s grievance in the pilot of the show, “Rosie the Robot” (1962; Humphreys 2015, 70; Wosk 2015, 104). Just a few months short of the publication of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*, Jane is portrayed as motivating the family’s decision to sign up for a robot-maid service by lamenting that “housework gets [her] down.” Yet, as feminist scholarship has argued time and time again, technology doesn’t change the role to which women have been confined in a capitalist society, nor does it lessen the burden on women of catering to the social reproduction of the national workforce.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in the 1963 episode “Dude Planet,” Jane is already diagnosed with “buttonitis,” a malady caused by pushing too many

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, Silvia Federici has observed that the reduction of women’s housework by 1980 came primarily through the dramatic expansion of the female labor force, the reorganization of many housework services on a market basis, and the reduction of family size, rather than from any substantial improvement of the women’s conditions. In 1981, Federici also disputes the argument that labor saving devices played a major role in this process: “[Throughout the 1970s,] the persistent stagnation in the sales of household appliances shows a tendency towards the dis-accumulation of capital in the home, in line with the reduction of family size and the disaccumulation of the services the household provides. Even the apartment and furniture designs—the virtually nonexistent kitchen, the trend towards modular units and knock out furniture—are indicative of the tendency to expel from the home large slices of its previous reproductive functions” (2012, 47).

buttons. Even if household machines automatically clean, cook, scan, brush, fluff, coif, rearrange, transport, transmit, remind, and locate, a housewife's domain doesn't seem to have expanded much in 2062, if compared to 1963. Even in a future where most labor of care has been relegated to (mostly gendered) machines, robots, and specialized gadgets – such as the robot-maid Rosie, the speaking secret diary DiDi, the digital organizer Memo-Minder, the automated clerk Tin Secretary, and the robot teacher Miss Brainmocker – women are still depicted as existing in the sole capacities of housewives and mindless consumers.<sup>18</sup>

At a time when inflation hit record highs, as more household members (especially women) worked longer hours, and families were further burdened with the weight of being sole sources of support in the shift away from public welfare and toward private networks of economic relief, Jane's role as a homemaker is based on the myth of 1950s representations, one simply unattainable for the American middle-class in the 1980s. *The Jetsons* casts the stay-home housewife among the likes of robot-maids, flying cars, and other fantasies that populated the imaginary of the 1980s to offer a relief and a nostalgic corrective to a present that saw women increasingly leaving the domestic environment and new family structures arise. The show's massive investment in technology thus produces a visionary nostalgia linked to a utopian future modeled after conservative values that unveils how the 1980s technological discourse produced the false ideal of a future blinded with the belief that there is (or there could be) a technological fix to every problem and that technological progress is inherently good and able to produce social changes. According to Harvey, this kind of technological fetishism "arises because we endow technologies – mere things – with powers they do not have (*e.g.*, the ability to solve social problems, to keep the economy vibrant, or to provide us with a superior life)" (2003, 3). In 1985, not unlike the picture of the housewife depicted by 1950s television and advertisements (and in the promotional video for the House of the Future), apart from catering to the family, and delegating housework to machines, women are depicted as mostly concerned with consumerism (the mall being, indeed, Jane's harbor in the opening credits). Through their obsession for fashion and new gadgetry, Jane and Judy match what Harvey calls "the cyborg consumer," a figure specular to that of the worker as a robot. If the latter becomes an appendage of the machine in the material process of production, the former is subject to technological fetishism through fantasy production, by means of advertising and other technologies of persuasion (Harvey 2003, 17).

If on *The Jetsons*, as in Friedan's accounts, domestic work is cast as a mindless trap, white-collar labor is not depicted as any less daunting. Writing in 1985, Haraway refers to Richard Gordon's understanding of "homework economy," to describe the routine labor mostly performed in high technology employment, as

a restructuring of work that broadly has the characteristics formerly ascribed to female jobs, jobs literally done only by women. Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers;

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<sup>18</sup> It must be noted that only seven episodes across both seasons were authored or co-authored by female authors, among which "Grandpa and the Galactic Golddigger" (1985), an episode that, nevertheless, capitalizes on the dominant and gendered trope of the woman who engages in a type of transactional relationship for money rather than love.

subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day (Haraway 1985,166).

George's job is feminized because, not unlike Jane's housework, it primarily requires him to repeatedly push a single button (or, on occasion, a series of buttons). George is a digital-index operator at Spacely Space Sprockets, a sprocket producing company owned by Cosmo Spacely. George's day at work consists of operating R.U.D.I. (Referential Universal Digital Indoor), a computer with a human personality. The narrative of the show often focuses around Spacely's competition with his business rival, Mr. Cogswell of Cogswell Cogs, and George's unsuccessful attempts at upward mobility.<sup>19</sup>

The relationship between Spacely and Jetson is best explained in "A Jetson Christmas Carol" (1985), where the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Spacely to scenes of his boyhood. Instead of repenting at the sight of his youth innocence (like Dickens' Scrooge), Spacely revels in witnessing his former self exploit a young George's labor to run his lemonade stand. The (present and future) relations of production between wage-worker and capitalist are clearly exposed when Spacely pockets all the proceeds from the sales and pays George a mere penny for his labor. The relationship is further polarized as time, corporatism, and technology progress, relegating the worker as an appendage to both the machine and the capitalist, in a perpetual effort to reach the fullest productive capacity. Throughout the series, George's alleged three-day three-hour work weeks (and all worker's rights, really) are repeatedly violated by Spacely, especially through overtime work, ludicrous tasks, and cyber-intrusion in his domestic sphere. While casting the worker's complaints as both elegiac and parodic ("Yesterday I worked two full hours!"), the show unveils anxieties for both present and future emasculation of labor and warns its audience against the consequences of technocapitalism. If technology has lightened the worker's physical burden, in both the domestic sphere and the factory de-skilling and the homogenization of labor have legitimized wage cuts and, as human labor has become subordinated to the pace of the machine, the alienation of the worker (from the means of production, from their *Gattungswesen*, as well as from other workers) has been exacerbated even further.

### **"George Is the Best Friend I've Ever had"**

The show depicts a future shaped by a blind faith in technology, driven by what Siva Vaidhyanathan calls a kind of "techno-fundamentalism," the belief that, despite its present flaws, a (virtually never-ending) technological race will eventually provide the solution to all social problems (2006, 556). Yet, even if the show predicts a future where technology has been put to use in the name of the tyranny of productivity, a reparative reading allows us to resist the temptation of falling complicit of technological essentialism and a critique of technology as inherently malign. Rather than having some intrinsic nature or essence, technology (and technologies) can be made, interpreted, and used in multiple and often contradictory ways. In fact, not only does the show offer nostalgic visions of the past (what it was) and a counterfactual image of the future (what

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<sup>19</sup> While metal-oxide-semiconductor (MOS) integrated circuits and silicon technology were central to 1980s technology and computer revolution, the fact that sprockets and cogs – a technology commonly used on different kinds of domestic, industrial and agricultural machinery – are still essential in the future world of *The Jetsons*, is yet another anachronism and index of the show's counterintuitive investment in the past.

it could've been), but also presents itself as a hopeful cautionary tale delivering glimpses of what America's dream of its future oughtn't be.

Retrofuturism, as defined by Pawel Frelik, is an aesthetic mode that "exploits the tensions between ideas about the future from our historical past [...] and notions of futurity expressed in contemporary narratives," producing a vision of the future that "comes across as anachronistic in relation to contemporary ways of imagining it" (2013, 207-8). If part of the pleasure in historical fiction comes from the depiction of characters who know less than the viewer/reader does (think, for example, of the relief in knowing better than the medical personnel in historical television dramas, or in reading popular beliefs about tobacco and nicotine in novels set in the first half of the 20th century), part of the pleasure in a retrofuture production comes from positioning the audience as the laughingstock of the show for the technological backwardness of its modern world. At the same time, on *The Jetsons*, we are prompted to find comfort in the present when the show's characters are depicted as having grown distant from their humanity due to the empowering and alienating effects of technology, as well as its flaws.<sup>20</sup> One of the running gags of the series is that, in their Utopian world of electronic modernity, there are still technological glitches that question the very premises of the kind of society and human experience produced by techno-fundamentalism and technocapitalism. Stephen Jackson has called attention to breakdown, maintenance, and repair as crucial but vastly understudied sites or moments within the worlds of new media and technology today.

Breakdown disturbs and sets in motion worlds of possibility that disappear under the stable or accomplished form of the artifact. Thus a standpoint epistemology of repair may offer a different response to the longstanding problem of commodity fetishism, by which the meaning and politics of technology are obscured, stripped, and neutered, and the fiction of separate "social" and "technological" worlds is produced. (Jackson 2014, 230)

In a future where machines are largely employed to accelerate the turnover of capital by speeding up production and reducing the friction of distance (thus, as Harvey would have it, annihilate space and time), their refusals to operate (and co-operate) and their missteps are opportunities to question the way in which technology as artifacts and the fantasies behind them shape our social worlds. For example, George's morning routine often involves a malfunctioning automatic shower, razor, or hair dryer, if not a brutal high voltage ejector bed, or a tasteless breakfast pill.<sup>21</sup> This kind of efficiency-driven (yet brutal) technology, set to allow the worker the least amount of pleasure from their daily activities, act as a critique of the technological design of the devices, as well as their very *raison d'être*.

Further examples of alternative and subversive modes of human-machine interactions are found in "One Strike, You're Out" (1985). Spacely is determined to produce more sprockets by tripling his employee's work shifts. At Jetson's suggestion

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<sup>20</sup> This is especially evident in the episodes where 110-year-old Grandpa Jetson makes an appearance ("A Visit from Grandpa" 1962; "Grandpa and the Galactic Gold Digger" 1985; "Father/Daughter Dance" 1987). He's portrayed as outplaying every member of the family at their favorite sport and generally as a counterexample of how technology has alienated newer generations from their own bodies.

<sup>21</sup> Khrushchev's words come to mind. With reference to the novelties introduced at the National American Exhibition, the USSR vice president asked US Vice President Nixon: "Don't you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down? [...] Many things you have shown us are interesting, but they are not needed in life. They have no useful purpose. They are merely gadgets" (Oldenziel and Zachmann 2009, 125).

of hiring more human labor, the robots revolt against the humans and the humans revolt against Spacely, resulting in a strike and a halt of production. Meanwhile, George is faced with parental problems when he accidentally destroys Elroy's athlete robot, Jocko, on the eve of an important school competition. Struggling to balance his boss' requests with his parental responsibilities, and following a clumsy attempt to portray the robot himself, George shows up at the negotiation between machines and humans at Spacely's still wearing his robot costume. His temporary role as both machine and human allows him to (quite literally) put himself in the robots' shoes and break the impasse. A series of mutual acknowledgements ("the humans do all the programming;" "the robots do let me work five times faster;" "it takes a robot about two seconds to calculate something that would take me years;" "George is the best friend I've ever had") moves the focus away from the exploitative modes of interaction between humans and machine, in favor of a kind of sociality that moves beyond their designed capacity. While the show clearly hints at the superiority of the machine (as represented by Jetson's failure to replicate Jocko's strength) and the inability for humans to maintain full control over the technology they themselves produce, the cartoon seems to settle on a kind of empathetic co-dependence between humans and machines as the only way to possibly co-exist. What emerges from the ending of the episode and between the lines of a technocapitalist dystopia is the possibility for a kind of relationality between machines and humans not driven by productivity but grounded in an ethics of care redeployed to resist labor extraction.

## Conclusion

The myth of the Fifties has been deployed in US popular culture as a park-themed paradise where the American Dream, in the form of white suburban domesticity, has been repetitively renewed and made infinitely available. Identifying (and producing a critique of) those sites of myth reproduction is especially key when it comes to youth culture, due to its inherent pedagogical function. On *The Jetsons*, retrofuture tropes such as skepticism and enthusiasm for technology highlight the tension between a melancholic attachment to the past and faith in the future, the former defusing anxieties for (and caused by) the latter. In the 1980s, the show mitigates threat of an unfamiliar future – because of the destabilizing scenarios produced by the social upheavals of the previous decades and the swift desires for futurity produced by the technological boom of the decade – through hyperreal ideals grounded in the mythology of the Fifties and especially channelled through booming consumer economy, conformity, and conservative domestic and gender roles. Yet, while *The Jetsons* frames technological positivism as a necessary (and rather attractive) evil, it also warns its audience against the perils of technocapitalism. In a future where science has been put to use of capitalist greed, sites of technological breakdown offer opportunities for alternative modes of interactions between humans and machines that encourage the show's (especially young) audience to rethink its relationship with its future(s) as an act of imagination rooted in an all-American past.

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