

Once upon a time there will be

FOREWORD

This is not a true story, but it could be considered near to the truth, because it is entirely based on what was said by hundreds of girls and boys aged between 6 and 11, as they tried to imagine *what the world of the future will really be like, and how they would like to see an ideal world where everyone can live happily together*. By recounting what they believe is possible in each of these cases, the story highlights that the predicted future and the Utopia designed by desire are *very far from corresponding*. It is precisely this lack of correspondence on which we invite reflection by anyone attempting to imagine and plan the future space and time of human relations and the technologies that provide them with connections and possibilities.

THE FUTURE CITY...

Once upon a time there will be a floating city whose inhabitants will live in **super-high**

skyscrapers built on rotating platforms, or in **low-level houses suspended in the air by enormous repelling magnets**, specially designed to reduce the impact of floods and earthquakes. Here too will be the first **flying houses**, freely floating in the air alongside flying **buses, cars, bicycles and flying bubbles** - the most innovative and resistant of all - which will travel along routes signposted by complex systems of projected images. All the methods of transport will be self-driving. To make travelling more pleasant for the passengers, many other things will be suspended in mid-air: for example, stalls for shopping. What were once paved streets will still be visible below, like dried-up riverbeds: **strips of land gradually returned to green areas for walking and growing things**, as soon as it is realised that there are too many people on the planet and not enough free land and plant life remaining.

This will be one of the razor edges upon which the city of the future will walk, vacillating between the intoxicating feeling of power it will grant its residents - such as the power of *individual flight* - and a widespread awareness of the fragility of the whole: a **fragility caused by the ongoing imbalance between connections that are looked after and those which are neglected**. In this fluctuating and ultra-connected city, in fact, the neglected connections could grow faster than those which can be monitored and thus taken care of, *both* within the city itself and between its residents, *and* between the city and natural ecosystems.

Signs of this imbalance will include continued pollution, in its old form and also, especially, new forms, and with it a partial and perhaps deplorable consolation: there will be **more illnesses caused by pollution**, but also **more medicines to cure them**.

This world of floating cities will be a world full of things, but not normal, everyday things, as we may have thought until the twentieth century: these will be **automated things, able to connect and exchange information with other objects, places or people**. An imaginary traveller from the twenty-first century would still be able to recognise some features of the super-American city described by Robert Musil, where “Air and earth form an ant-hill, veined by channels of traffic, rising storey upon storey. Overhead-trains, overground-trains, underground-trains, pneumatic express-mails carrying consignments of human beings, chains of motor-vehicles all racing along

horizontally, express lifts vertically pumping crowds from one traffic level to another At the junctions one leaps from one means of transport to another, is instantly sucked in and snatched away by the rhythm of it, which makes a syncope, a pause, a little gap of twenty seconds between two roaring outbursts of speed, and in these intervals in the general rhythm one hastily exchanges a few words with others. Questions and answers click into each other like cogs of a machine. Each person has nothing but quite definite tasks. The various professions are concentrated at definite places. One eats while in motion. Amusements are concentrated in other parts of the city. And elsewhere again are the towers to which one returns and finds wife, family, gramophone, and soul". Musil goes thus far, yet he could not imagine the subsequent evolution of that ant-hill city, which can be summed up in two categories of objects: screens and robots.

Floating screens, or screens built into various walls, wearable screens in clothing and **enormous yet portable screens**, which can expand and fold away into a small cube at the touch of a button. In the evolution of the multi-screen world, which even at the beginning of the twenty-first century still felt *new* to one of the major players of the age – Google – the images viewed will be commonly available in 3D without the need for special glasses. These images will be so realistic that one might even believe in the existence of a kind of **teleportation technology**, or “multiple presence”, in that a body can be “here” and almost equally realistic in multiple “somewhere else” connected to it. On the other hand, those who are already accustomed to the constant overlapping of online and offline, and the osmosis between experience and screen, the differences between original and copy will be more subtle than they used to be.

... AND ITS INHABITANTS

Just like screens, robots will be everywhere. **Increasingly perfect robots**, from **robotized houses** to **robot-animals** just like the real thing, indistinguishable as Descartes described, popular because they are easily and remotely controlled. With the remote control it's “less effort”, the reasoning will go - clearly exemplified by what happens if we want to take the dog for a walk. People will want to *endure less effort* in doing things: and so they will be **lazier, more sedentary and also more suspicious** of others than in the past, as they will come across avatars of people more frequently than the people themselves. They will be less accustomed to spending time with others, in the old sense of “being together”.

Robots will replace human beings in many situations: above all in cleaning, cooking, tidying the house (at least in houses without automatic tidying buttons); they will also replace humans at work, especially in tasks to do with helping others. For example there will be robots instead of teachers, carers, babysitters and maybe even parents for playing with children, and so - they say - parents will be able to be “calmer”. But not everyone will agree on this point, and there will be great discussions in the town: “*Children are used to being with Daddy and Mummy*”; “*Robots can't talk, they wouldn't understand the children, they wouldn't be able to think about them all the time, every day*”; “*Robots can serve us, but they can't look after children*”; “*You don't get bored with parents*”; “*Parents make you feel good, they protect you*”; *but robots have the advantage that they don't get ill and they're never bored, they're programmed to do one thing and they don't think about anything else, although it might happen that “If you love them too much, they go mad”*.

There will be **robots that work to earn money for their owners**, and others, controlled by voice command and remote control, designed **for defence and attack**: these will be used *to defend men from other men* in the city. **Wars** will also be fought by robots instead of human beings, and consequently, wars could be more destructive than they were in the past, because “*robots destroy everything, although they can be programmed not to destroy absolutely everything*”.

The **human body will have robotic additions**, which will make it possible, for example, to extend arms and legs. There will be wearable automatic machines for curing people, and portable devices

that will take the things we need to wherever we need them (using personal pilotless transport methods - like drones - which arrive when required).

NEW HABITS AND OLD OBSESSIONS

Despite the countless new habits in the floating city, the ancient obsession of war will continue to exist, perhaps even more than in the past, and caused above all by the unresolved problem of inequality between the wealthy minority and the poor majority. Those who venture into the most secret corners of the city will find there paradoxical new heights of human destructiveness: on the one hand, laboratories where they build **weapons similar to the atom bomb, but more destructive**; on the other hand, laboratories where they design **highly advanced robots that are practically indestructible**, which can survive any kind of catastrophe affecting the planet. So, armies which are more destructive than ever before, and indestructible robots which can survive the destruction of the planet and mankind itself!

Meanwhile, in the public spaces of the city, all the new habits of the people will find expression and publicity. There will be devices that allow you to **modify your experience of play by adding powerful elements of virtual reality**. There will sports fields which can change their form according to the code typed in, to become volleyball courts or football fields or any other kind of space, with virtual spectators and virtual players who can reproduce the style and actions of top champions (of the past and the present). Portable video cameras and projection systems will make it possible to produce images which you can play and interact with, making very distant or imaginary objects visible and interactive. It will be exactly as if things and people came out of the screens: in this way everyone will be able to interact with people and objects they would otherwise *not be able to afford*. In consequence, the space and time of the floating city will be full of virtual reality: not only *enhanced reality*, but a **deutero-reality of fantasies floating in the air, like ghosts made visible and interactive**.

Children will learn how to use all the technology at school, where touch screens and smart boards will be preserved as archeological exhibits. There will be devices that make **letters and images appear in the air, floating at eye-level**, demonstrating what and how to read, write and search. “You won’t be able to tell if you’re using your brain or not”: according to some residents of the city, using these devices will allow you to “say without thinking”. “You press a button and it guides you”, but it could be that “the images go away before you can understand”.

The same problem will occur in other contexts: for example, to learn a sport, for example, dance, there will be **robotic bodysuits which you wear, leaving your body slightly “floppy” and “relaxed”**: the suit will make the correct movements: and so you’ll be able to “see how it’s done and know how you’re doing”. There will be some people who think that all this limits and perhaps even endangers human potential: the boldest and most extreme of them will get together and form communities of people hostile to the excessive proliferation of the new technologies. They will devote themselves to researching new and essential balances between “natural” and “artificial”; or perhaps, different forms of artificiality, easier to live with, which can be updated according to people’s needs rather than forcing people to change too rapidly in order to keep up with them. The critical questions for each new technology invented will be: *What new possibilities does this technology really offer? Which old possibilities does it transform? What possibilities and skills will we lose by adopting it?*

BUT DESIRE WILL ALSO LEAD ELSEWHERE

In spite of everything, people will continue to have their inborn trait of *not being in tune with the*

point they're at. It is impossible to say what Utopias the inhabitants of the floating city will foresee; but we know that the girls and boys who imagined the city of the future, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, have a very different conception of their ideal worlds. Their utopian islands contain many limits and words of caution about the use of screens, especially television and video games, which “suck you in”, “bewitch you”, “make you lose all enjoyment outside in the open air” and make parents absent, even when they are present and nearby, but absorbed in smartphones and tablets, playing, emailing or on social networks.

In their utopian communities, green space, clean air and the absence of traffic and excessive speed are desirable, as are well-maintained public spaces for eating, playing and spending time together out of doors. The recurrent theme emerging in the details of all the plans is the avoidance of excess: not to build too much, consume too much allow one or a few people to govern for too long, cut down too many trees, catch too many fish, use too much energy, aspire to have too many possessions or too comfortable a life, allow too much disparity between those who have too much and those with too little; play too many video games or spend too much time watching TV...

The search is for moderation, and technologies for achieving it, in other words those devices that help to exercise the often-deficient *sense of limitation*, are to be welcomed. The most extravagant and costly technologies in terms of energy and environmental impact remain those developed to defend the Utopia from outsiders, to defend humans from other humans. It is not always like this, but in a significant number of cases it is.

Therefore there is no moral to this story. Just as in the past, we are always and still “between”: caught between creation and destruction; between technology that makes us lazy or “bewitches” us and technology that frees us and multiplies opportunities for action and discovery; between what our sense of reality shows us and what our sense of possibility makes us predict. The young versions of Prometheus, capable of imagining floating cities and Utopias, are today hearing many people say we are approaching a critical threshold; they hear talk of imminent social and environmental crises, like Pandora’s boxes that are teetering dangerously and on the point of tipping over; at the same time they continue to hope that they are *on the verge of* not one, but *many possible beginnings*, some of which might be pleasant and reasonably happy.