12. *2001* to 2001: Immersion into Deep Space. Baroque Reincarnation

On December 29, 1965, the Electronic Baroque—as cinema—was launched during the first day of shooting for *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Inside a "150 x 50 x 20 foot hole,"[1] the screenwriter Arthur C. Clarke was awed by Baroque miniatures, "neat little electric-powered excavators, bulldozers [that] could really work on the Moon!"[2] He and director Kubrick had been struggling to envision the key image for the film, the modernist shape as a living organism.[3] They agreed upon a "jet-black" slab so easily smudged that only a glove on screen could touch it. It resisted fingerprints, like evolution as a laser device (more as a transmitter for evolution).[4] Its surface was blank, very much in the spirit of Kubrick's grim theories on the occult. It looked godlike because it did not care at all.

Clarke and Kubrick were also envisioning a bridge between late Modernism and the Electronic Baroque. They make a connection that reappears in worshipful copies for decades afterward, the monolith left by aliens, in stargates and mandalas. But even more crucial, Kubrick also imagined the ultimate "all-embracing" view—the universe as blank panorama. The universe was Modernist; but inside, like DNA monads, it was densely packed with Baroque labyrinths. For example, on the blank Modernist spacecraft, a labyrinth was coiled inside HAL's anxious brain. But more "telling," in the grand "Stargate" finale near Modernist Jupiter, a psychic labyrinth unfolds[5]—a psychedelic fifteen-minute slit-scan ride that ushered in Hollywood digital effects.[6]

But in addition to launching the cinematic Electronic Baroque, Kubrick was also delivering a challenge to Hollywood storytelling: the blank as space epic, as in blank space and blank expressions. HAL was the only dramatic character on board—a neurotic database trapped with astronauts (career professionals) about as caring as night watchmen at a kennel. That left no room for

drama beyond cabin fever; everyone was fighting of boredom. In the screenplay, Clarke even tried to add dramatic touches to HAL. For Clarke's generation of sci-fi writers, stories about thoughtful robots were a genre, as in Asimov's *Foundation* series (1942–83). But very little dramatic intrusion seemed possible inside *2001*, not even a few minutes on HAL's motivation, HAL as Hamlet,[7] or HAL's dreams of an electronic Eden. Clarke discovered that any monologue "would have slowed things down too much."[8] While the movie ran over two hours, with long waltzes about machines docking in space, two minutes of dramatic back story might have marred Kubrick's statement.[9]

Every scene had to match the jet-black surface of the monolith, one blank carefully inserted inside another. And perhaps the deepest, most monolithic of these was the theater itself. Outer space looks pure black, particularly during the docking sequence; it leaves no edge on the screen. Thus, the audience is immersed into nothing at all, into a blind labyrinth, the POV of an asteroid. And as I often remind students, we all know that outer space is also air-conditioned, and can support a Diet Coke. Kubrick delivered a complete immersion that Wagner[10] might have wished for, an opera about blankness as control, a Modernism that was both soothing and ruthless.

I remember seeing *2001* when it opened in 1968. I found the blankness inside the theater deeply moving. I caught a whiff of marijuana from the first row. Neighborhood stone freaks, perhaps retired stockbrokers today, were watching the movie upside down while lying on the floor. In rereleases over the years, the digital surround sound gets even grander. The stadium seating perches you more vividly on an asteroid. And yet, the mood of *2001* has shifted for me. I see the loneliness of Kubrick's Electronic Baroque much more. It is spectacle as emptied as anything Beckett imagined, and just as comforting in its emptiness.

Its darkness remains a challenge to all special-effects cinema. But the challenge has not really been met by Hollywood film. And I no longer find it elegiac, as I did in 1968. Increasingly, its emptiness reminds me of the city and the crowd in late-nineteenth-century urban literature, more like Kafka or Musil floating in the North Sea. It is densely packed with the thinnest, most uncaring vapor imaginable. The machine erases nature entirely, like the last breath of Modernism in cinema. Then you are vacuumed through the grand finale, to meet the Star Child, another blank thing. But it no longer feels like a sardonic Taoist statement about letting go. It feels more like a fascist reminder. The alienation is heartbreaking, like studying your imminent death from a hospital bed: no movement is possible anymore, only immersion. You are trapped

in light speed. Fish don't know they're wet; they die assuming that they are already outside their own bodies.

But this week in March 2003, Kubrick's immersive blank also feels weirdly nostalgic, like the architectural "voids"[11] inserted throughout Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin. Those voids stand in for generations of Jews who were never born due to the Holocaust. They position you on precipices that never were built. This week, I sense my reaction to *2001* changing, since the next war is probably days away. But mostly, it has changed because so many people close to me have died over the years. If a civilization were trying to die off, and its story were told as epic cinema—as *2001*—what blank plot points and voids would be needed? But I refuse to accept this sort of future as grim. There is nothing grisly about it. Let Modernism burn itself off on some distant moon, along with postmodernism. Give them both the Viking funeral they deserve, so we can get on with what is left.

Oddly enough, I am suddenly too hopeful for Kubrick's entropic message; or should I say too caffeinated by this crisis. The nightmare that I feared for the United States has arrived. And of course, it does not look at all like *2001*. It looks more like a militarized computer work station, like HAL and Dave enjoying a chess break together, while the ship dissolves on its way to Jupiter. In that sense, *2001* is cybernetic and ergonomic; a panorama filled with Baroque effects. The blank of late Modernism gives birth to the Electronic Baroque on film, as it did for Disneyland and Las Vegas in 1995. Nearly forty years later, *2001* remains the classic document about this transition.

That is not to say that the remnants of the original Baroque did not survive marginally into 1955, outside of Modernist abstractions, as circuses, magic acts, on merry-go-rounds, in puppetry and animation. And these, in turn, were rediscovered by way of Disneyland and Vegas. The older Baroque carnival and high-octane Baroque out of Modernism increasingly grow into each other, even in Kubrick films after *2001*.

We see the mix very clearly as stagy proto-punk in *A Clockwork Orange*, then variously in *Barry Lyndon*, *The Shining*, and *Eyes Wide Shut*. Baroque labyrinths fill his blank panorama more thoroughly with almost every film. Finally, if Kubrick had lived longer, or trusted his instincts more, he might have left a final reply to *2001*: a movie starring HAL as a walking machine, his uneasy, more Baroque answer to *2001*. After all, by 2001, he had spent nearly thirty years preparing *AI*. His version would have starred an eighteenth-century automaton essentially, an even more precise identity with Baroque special effects.[12] Or should I say with the Electronic Baroque?

But I am not convinced that Kubrick was on the right track. He wanted his child star to be a "real robot," as close to an actual machine as possible, to give the Star Child a body. And while a machine with plastic skin, shot in real time, would have brought me to the theater—with due respect to his genius, Kubrick's premise sounds flat to me. By 2000, even by 1990, the robot had evolved far beyond the need for a machine-like body. What's more, a "thinking" and "emotional" HAL still remains pure fantasy more than science; also still far closer to the bodiless HAL in 2001.[13] Nothing like a cyborg either is scientifically due for decades; and probably when it arrives, it will be so miniaturized, we might accidentally swallow it. As early as 1990, a Pentagon official predicted robots as specks of dust,[14] like cyber pollen.

And by 2003, this robotized dust had evolved very clearly, even beyond HAL. It transmogrified into global media. This HAL can tell the astronauts where to get off. It can invent a president, even invent or dis-invent wars. Meanwhile, quite in the open, global media as HAL crosses the continents like a vapor, or a desert sirocco more than a solid thing. This vapor takes flight mostly through branding and collective erasures (the robot that helps us forget our inner life, except as shopper's impulse). It foments a cheerful and well-dressed blindness, as in the following from Paul de Man: "Fashion is like the ashes left behind by uniquely shaped flames of the fire, the trace alone revealing that a fire took place."[15] In other words, the new HAL stands in for media blur, presumably (to follow poststructural logic), the political blur around us, as old standards for diplomacy and balance of power dissolve.

Presumably, the well-trained postmodernist can read these signs. They are as adept as Baroque scientists. They use poststructural logic like surgeons. Of course, I am vastly oversimplifying. That is one popularized misunderstanding of French poststructural theory, 1968–1985. At its bluntest, this misconstruction can be reduced like a jingle: The codes of late capitalism are in a state of blur, but those who are adept can see through the blur if they stay alert. However, our condition in the year 2001 does work that way. We face something quite the reverse. This year certainly, *we* are the blur, while those dissolving codes, protected by global media, are doing *fine*.

In fact, this year (and perhaps every year) special effects rely on blur as a plot point, more as a dissolve. And a well-timed dissolve—the instant of blur—can be precision-timed like clockwork. The dissolve is simply another tool, part of the instrumentality of power. Of course, well-run clocks often tell bad time. The corporations who govern media are too greedy to plan very far ahead (or care about the future, except as stock futures). Still as of 2003, "they" (global

media) can manipulate the moment; that is, they can play *us* like a radio. But clearly they have made a terrible bet by supporting the Bush plan. That will undoubtedly "implode" soon enough. However, why do I get the feeling that when it implodes, we alone will have to clean up the mess? Or worse still, live through it for another twenty years.

Thus, for our moment, Kubrick's interest in AI robots looks "too mid-seventies," not very helpful for 2001 or afterward. And after 1980, while Kubrick was testing robots as actors, digital systems evolved HAL into a powerhouse, into a vapor. Perhaps vapor is the wrong image here, not good enough as an alternative to the robot. Imagine instead a collective noise, a monolith humming like a whale for miles around. The sound would be alive; like mumbling bacteria who clean an oven. Its job would be to help us forget from minute to minute. It lovingly misrepresents the facts for us, like a mother getting her child ready for school. It dresses us for the wrong weather reports.

Screen Treatment

Or better still as movie special effects, the 2003 HAL could be a fungus growing on a news teleprompter. Tiny robots the size of bacteria swarm over any face on camera. They help the face read without thinking, even read bad jokes without laughing. The pores on the face do not realize that it has been invaded. On second thought, this would make a lousy movie. Fungi look boring. They are too weak-kneed for big-budget movies, not enough wow. Perhaps Hollywood cinema cannot visualize robotic signals this faint, not without blowing up a country or a city.

In blockbuster films of the nineties, HAL is often an evil double. First humans themselves become HAL, after getting sucked dry by parasitical aliens. Then it turns out that the aliens are HALs already. Meanwhile no HAL has an inner life, much less a sense of international law. Nor do HALs collect enough memory for an unconscious. Perhaps that is why they keep losing one Darwinian battle after another. Their genes must be a weak soup. Anyway, the alien HALs insert memories as boring as boiled turnips into the human HALs, in movies like *Dark City* or *Johnny Mnemonic*. And in *The Matrix*, they leave nothing for the ego to hold on to altogether. The aliens in *The Matrix* leave Neo three bad choices: 1. be a machine in the office; 2. escape to a bombed-out nothing; 3. become a machine in the engine room. No psychiatrist can help you here. You cannot even dream of electric sheep.

We begin to get the drift of where the Electronic Baroque is going. Let me review, then try another HAL scenario: The Electronic Baroque is a horizontalized system of global media that lives inside the remains of national politics and urban culture. It lives inside the residue left by the decline of our public sector. That is why it feels to us like a vapor, like public space turned into data—and often unreliable data at that. Perhaps in that spirit, Kubrick's AI/HAL might be updated as white noise—the hum of media promotion. It is the vapor of shopping turned into a military and political tool. Then through elaborate staging on film and in themed environments, this vapor operates as scripted space. It fills the vacuum provided by Modernist design after 1955: blanks in cities, Modernist buildings, transistorized fantasies, in media, highspeed travel, TV screens to computer monitors, telematic (telephone) space. Thus *2001* remains much closer to 2001 than *AI* could ever be.

Warp Speed

But nostalgia and technology have a way of moving forward by walking backward, like Nietzsche's image of history as a crab. After 1968, we steadily witness the film industry filling this void of Modernist space with Baroque special effects. Clearly the benchmarks were 1977 when *Star Wars* reshaped the marketing of large films, and accelerated the process toward computer graphics in live action (the new perspective awry):

1977—*Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Alien* mark territories to come.

1982–1986—*Blade Runner* ushers in cyberpunk dystopias, the Pacific Rim as the death of the nation-state. At the same time, MTV, cable, and VHS restructure movie entertainment. Spielberg and Lucas as leaders of the American School of High Suburban Cinema (suburbia as a movie set; the first nostalgic wave of Gothic revival for the wartime American inner city, circa 1942).

1989–1999—computer assisted and generated effects take over in Hollywood, particularly after war simulation software is released to the private sector following the demise of the Cold War. Gothams and Dark Cities.

1996—the victory of CGI (computer graphics imaging) in Hollywood cinema parallels the great boom of the nineties. Production methods standardized.

2001—The Beginning of the "Thirty Years' War." The joys of surveillance become a national obsession, from reality TV to web pornography to homeland

rule. Meanwhile, digital special effects—HAL—leave the computer monitor and the movie screen, to blend much more (even infinitely more) into the nanospheres of everyday life.

Hollywood Secrets

Hollywood f/x have their charm. They are jumbo-sized hoaxes. They are un-abashed. They tell you how much fun it is to cheat. They promise more than your money's worth, every dollar on the screen. They cruise you in their stretch limousine. They know that melodrama looks like a gag. Then they claim that size is everything. So every year they stretch even more, more horizontal, more "cineramic" (wider, more immersive). They are like gangsters who wear the entire store. When it comes to how I dress, they tell you, I like when the suit wears the man.

Hollywood f/x is so playfully lopsided, it reveals secrets about the global economy, particularly about production methods. It outsources continually, shows no allegiance to any country, will fake anything in postproduction. It is indeed very proudly a gas circling the earth. Last night, the Bush administration began their war against Iraq. Suddenly the blatancy of special effects goes too far. All at once, "they" say that they deserve everything in the store.

But through the nineties at any rate, Hollywood f/x turned global investment into a narrative thrill. It showed us how global media work like a gas to spread amnesia. After 1977 (*Star Wars*) it delivered shipwrecks and nightmare on a scale unknown before, not since the seventeenth century surely. And it delivered these in order to reassure us, like Pozzo's Jesuit Baroque ceilings in the seventeenth century.

By 2003, we learned that the political message of the Electronic Baroque has taken a massive shift—away from entrepreneurial and democratic models. Now it teaches you to love your place in the hierarchy. Be a loyal samurai like Han Solo: save the princess, save the president, save the feudal rulers against the nasty Nazi types. Of course, loyalty first has been standard fare in Hollywood movies since the McCarthy era, when stories about New Deal master planning as mass action disappeared.

This conservative drift was already predicted, with naked irony, in block-buster action films about warlords and gangster magi. These stories advised loyalty first, and democracy with a medieval feudal twist. It was a message eccentric enough to take you to a chiropractor, all these cyber revolutions in

feudal settings; cowboys and gangsters in space, in a CG wilderness without codes. The aliens take over with their advanced software and precision bombing. Their intentions remains inscrutable, but obviously it is a land grab. They offer comic book versions of Valhalla as Gotham and Metropolis;[16] or Tolkien's eccentric conservatism about Middle Earth as a neo-feudal democracy filled with tiny people.[17]

Neo-Feudalism: the traces of seigneurial authority; a decayed or camouflaged warlord system; today, also an influence on cultural politics, special effects, media. And a symptom of the horizontal political process, as the vertical nations nation-state declines.

But neo-feudal terrorism is only half the message in action films. The other half lies in something from *2001*, in panoramic (Modernist) deep space. Finally this deep space invaded the theater itself, through surround sound, panoramic screens and stadium seating. Instead of Baroque scripted space under a dome, the movie theater invents blank space that is panoramic to an extreme, again as ushered in by *2001*.

Of course, inside this panorama, there are Baroque labyrinths. These borrow from two sources primarily: fifties film noir (playful Baroque paranoia) and Baroque theme-park effects (animatronics, stop-motion tricks with mirrors, the dissolving foreground, as in rides). I list these contradictory layers as a reminder to myself to never oversimplify categories. Film and architecture should not be conveniently lumped together. That is why the history of special effects requires a second volume, on psychologically driven illusion: the Gothic and noir from 1620 to the present. There are hundreds of films not included in this volume. And there will be dozens more released by the time this book gets to you the reader. Better to simply play with your memory of dark cities and fifth elements and islands of lost children, and Indiana Jones's crusades, and beetlejuice theatricals; and video-art and art-house ironies that use special effects, from *La Jetée* to Bruce Connor to cremasters and Rybczynski films, and so on, from Carolyn Leaf films and Alexeieff pin animation to Brazilian cartoons, to Iranian special effects.

In this chapter, we use these imagos as links to global economic fantasies, about oversized special effects on the "big" screen today. Most of all, movies occupy a unique position in the Electronic Baroque, different than architecture. After 1977, as we all know, movies became the global brand for tourism worldwide. But even more telling, movies revealed how the media corporation operates. Hollywood special effects are filled with traces—clues—left by production methods. In fact, often the story implies production: aliens as media

making war; frequent paranoic details about feedback systems; stories about the gruesome backbiting in warlord capitalism. By contrast, architecture after 1980 used special effects more to camouflage the intentions of the corporation. But for movie special effects, there is no such thing as bad publicity.

Movies also exaggerate—reveal—the uneasy alliances in global capitalism, simply to keep the epic stories fast and furious. Thus, panoramic overkill, as industrial anxiety, is filled with Baroque cockroaches and alien trickery, with creepy labyrinths. (Spielberg was clearly one of the first American f/x directors to build on this contrast; also Lucas, Ridley Scott, Terry Gilliam, Tim Burton, a long list.) Panoramas are spread thin, beyond the reach of governments themselves. Thus, to stay in place, governments have to merge with Baroque media (computerized manipulation and cable news).

This uneasy alliance became clear by the late seventies, at least in media. In 1979, through data companies like Bunker Ramo, the banking industry was digitized. This came under the thrall of emerging neoliberal inflation—the anomalies of world trade. At the same time, video games about neoliberal chaos were the rage after *Star Wars*. In short, once the banks were online, a new political economy was inevitable. The alliance that resulted—between anti-government world capital and the federal government—has proven very uneasy by 2003, and violent—or at least destabilizing. Digital super media, like merchant princes after 1550, cut deals that undercut the state. Then, cable news media began a crusade against constitutional government itself. Of course, this is only 2003.

These devil's bargains clearly parallel deals made in 1650, that barely salvaged the old dynasties in Europe. But 350 year-old comparisons can go only so far. Differences between 1650 and 2003 reveal as much as the similarities. Unlike 1650, the nation-state today is not languishing in late medieval decay; not yet. Instead, it suffers from late industrial decay. Clearly the conservatives who dominate this year no longer trust the vertical power of the national government except to protect against terrorism (much of it invented); or bring anti-abortion morality back to the courts (that is their pitch, at any rate).

But consider how Hollywood f/x have responded to this conservative program, about white male fantasy taking a rigid stand. Instead of big government, action f/x after *Star Wars* show us a bright future dominated by yeoman feudalism as democracy. What a joke on us (a good time to pour a glass of wine and toast the ridiculous). It turns out that oligarchic feudalism is being reimagined as egalitarian. But this feudalism (at its extreme in Bosnia, Africa, the Middle East, South America, on e-commerce, talk radio, cable news)

is far stranger than not egalitarian; it is utterly chaotic, a Hobbesian war of all against all. It really is feudal, as feudalism actually was in 1100—filled with warlords bashing each other to pieces, haunted by fundamentalist lunatics, one crusade cannibalizing another.

We watch today's special-effects version of world news: "around the world in eighty seconds," one network announces. Then we wonder: what deals is media cutting with big government? Also, what on earth will electronic feudalism look like when the dust settles? The last version of the neo-feudal—by way of Versailles, the Counter-Reformation, the sadism at the Escorial during the Golden Age of Spain—led to bizarre and infamous cruelties. What will the next lapse back into Baroque fundamentalist culture bring?

Let us rummage through Hollywood f/x after *2001* (1968), search for more clues. Perhaps we can imagine an alternative script. We start with a quote from one of the heroes from f/x designers in 1965–1970, from Buckminster Fuller's *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth:*[18]

> Our space vehicle is similar to a human child. It is an increasing aggregate of psychical and metaphysical processes in contradistinction to a withering decomposing corpse.

Things to Come: In 1970, Douglas Trumbull, the effects supervisor for *2001*, begins to imagine what films he will direct, now that offers are pouring in. He is thinking of *Saturation 70: An Ecological Horror Fantasy*, "about a five-year-old boy following around a group of aliens, who are busy … gathering samples of everything that represents western civilization."[19] He wants it to be an underground cult film, like an Oingo-Boingo picaresque, with Vietcong encounters in the supermarket, flying trucks, fifty-lane highways and planet-wide garbage dumps. He plans to composite "LA skidrow with a Manhattan skyline with an Eiffel Tower added."[20] To give the movie that "sense of wonder," he prefers visual overload "in and around the central action," to encourage reentries and second viewing. Digitized scripted spaces have found an early champion. The space will be huge, panoramic, but stocked with Baroque oddities.

Trumbull's also directed the visually precocious film *Silent Running* (1972), a transition from the robot movie of the fifties toward the look of *Star Wars*. To achieve that look, he sharpened the motion-capture, and enhanced the miniature cameras, but still with computer-assisted composites, not computer generated. Also, like many directors after him, he consulted with the war industry. His robot reflected designs provided by NASA. He leased a mothballed air-

craft carrier as his spaceship. Then he drew on sixties Modernism, quoted from Buckminster Fuller: The farming colony on Mars was shot inside a "geodesic-domed botanical garden in Missouri."[21]

1975: A good year for Pyrotechnics. For the final shootout in *The Wild Bunch*, over ninety thousand rounds of ammunition were used, more "than the entire Mexican Revolution in 1913"[22]—to convert a 1909 prop machine gun into a special effect. In addition, thousands of "bullet hits" are ignited on walls and on actors (who wore sacs, or squibs, carrying two or three teaspoons of artificial blood, and in later Peckinpah films, even pieces of raw meat).[23]

To blow up Pearl Harbor in *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, nearly ninety-five miles of wire set off about 120,000 gallons of gasoline and diesel oil and 2,500 pounds of explosives.[24] In *Kelly's Heroes*, an explosion was composited with a trampoline jump fourteen feet in the air, to get a corpse to fly. In Krakatoa, potassium permanganate was poured over a special black powder[25] inside plaster of paris, to get a miniature volcano to erupt. The miniature ships caught in the blast were filmed in white water with multi-jet manifolds of compressed air, inside a diffusion filter for volcanic haze.[26]

Within fifteen years, the pyrotechnic options multiply tenfold, or so it seemed, particularly the naphthalene fireball effects of liquid mortar, for indoor explosions. Gallons of "vaporized fuel" (can) just float off in the sky."[27] It made a handsome tail for a terrorist bombing. The glow of individual gunfire also improved, through gas jets or strobes. And "off the shelf weapons" like Thompson submachine guns and Kalashnikovs were converted into blasters for *Aliens* (1986) and *Judge Dredd* (1995). Talk about parallels! These special effects were also popular in actual feudal combat against the "developing" world.

In 1995, I visited a display at Siggraph for *Judge Dredd*, then the movie state-of-the-art for guns and compositing. Directly beside it was a display by Evans and Sutherland,[28] where actual warfare was being simulated, on screens vaguely similar to those used in the Gulf War. The cheery hostess explained: "We're deeply involved in the Balkans." Then, catching my surprised look, she added "in a humanitarian way." During the nineties, movies often reenacted the firepower used by warlords in Asia and South America—the training ground for terrorism to come. Rambo "rides" with mujahideen in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation.

1981: Director Ridley Scott is "constantly waving" a copy of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942) "under the noses of the production team [for] *Blade Runner*"[29]: In this famous "noir" painting, we see a coffee shop across the street in Greenwich Village. Late-night diners are mulling over a gloomy cup of coffee.

Harsh fluorescent lights compete with the blackness of wartime New York. Indeed, Scott wanted forty years into the future forty years ago.[30] His team finally translated Hopper into the "Hades landscape," overhead shot of the city. The factories are erupting like sunspots. Even suburbs have become slums, "industrial wasteland gone berserk."[31] In the storyboard, a forties Deckard waits gloomily for dinner, at what I call the Farmers Market from Hell, under the blind gaze of a "blimp,"[32] circa 1942.

Eventually this atmosphere all but swallows the screenplay. As I explained in *The History of Forgetting*,[33] the art direction for the *Blade Runner* city operates in four horizontal layers. They remember, then forget New York by way of *Metropolis*, and Hogarth's London, thirties photos of New York, French Heavy Metal. Then to design accessories for their city, Scott hired automotive designer Syd Mead, first to fashion the Spinner, "cars that actually fly;"[34] then for inspirational sketches[35] about New York "overkill."[36]

Like many effects masters since 1980, Mead works across industries, from computer games to entertainment architecture to war toys. He began essentially as a "trans" designer, imagineering cars of the future, for US Steel and Ford: "a car is more than a shape in motion." Finally in 1979, Hollywood f/x called: He designed the Voyager space craft for the movie *Star Trek*, as well as a book, *Sentinel*, that Scott noticed—for a London-based rock 'n' roll publisher. Thereafter Syd Mead's adaptability is remarkable. He runs the gamut from cinematic to architectural special effects, very much like the early Imagines for Disney, like Claude Coates and even Marc Davis. Certainly for *Blade Runner*, Mead had no difficulty adapting his "clean realistic vision"[37] and "Flash Gordon"[38] Modernist tendencies to Scott's sense of the city as Gothic ruin.

Nor did he have much trouble designing an "ecotecture" for Kobe Harbor Fantasy,[39] or Intransportation vehicles for Spacequest: A Future Casino, for "the largest rear-projection CGI synchronized scenario ever attempted." After *Blade Runner*, he helped to visualize a ride for a Celebrity Pavilion, "an electrically enhanced walking tour." He designed the restaurant pylon for Universal Studio Tours. And a fantasy boutique arcade in Seoul; and the S.Q.U.I.D. headgear for Kathryn Bigelow's movie *Strange Days*—"a spooky kind of prop to help visualize the bizarre tale of electronic 'snuffing,' mayhem and general dire foreboding for the future." And cyberpunk Lotek in *Johnny Mnemonic*; as well as creepy crawlers for the video game *Bugs*, about "Los Angeles once again [as] a dysfunctional hell hole."

I remember back in 1994 asking another master effects designer—Alan Yamashita, who worked on films, rides, games—what in his mind was the ulti-

mate special effect. Yamashita paused and said: Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, because it was life-sized, but halfway up the wall, and floated like a hologram in its own atmosphere. These designers clarify how special effects on the screen relate to architecture, industrial design, painting.

But what do these links tell about global power, from casinos to war to action movies to urban simulation? For example in *Blade Runner*, the Sentinel Kiosk was added to the lobby of Deckard's apartment block (modeled on Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis Brown House [1924]).[40] This kiosk looks like a prototype for Homeland Security Liberty Watches in 2003: an optical scanner with even more security devices inside the lobby. "Ridley Scott uses these inanimate objects to make a statement about the social fabric of the future, where anti-crime devices such as this command no more notice than a turnstile today."[41]

There is our clue: Syd Mead's job was to normalize the uneasy alliance, make the threat of global power look perversely ordinary. He provided "social fabric" as special effects, from sexy cyber cars to Deckard's handgun to collective paranoia turned into scripted illusions that were reassuring, inside entertainment spaces. His special effects "script" a story in space, about a world where the ominous can appear normal, a magic realism about surveillance blended happily with shopping. It is Electronic Baroque, all-purpose immersion, total theater (*gesamtkunstwerk*). The shopper's daydream replaces, yet resembles the industrial city of 1942, like turning a forties cityscape into a theme park. The Modernist urban grid converts into Baroque special effects. It copies a street perhaps from Haussmann's Paris, particularly from the Opera district in 1900; and turns it into an outdoor mall. Like Baudelaire having a latte, you can study the eyes of the poor in comfort, rest your tired bones during Orange Alerts, in the midst of the Second Gulf War.

The best f/x masters—and Mead is certainly one of the best—can design the monumental fake that this new global imperium requires, much the way Koolhass's "Googs" did in Las Vegas. But this too has its history: precursors during the twenties. Indeed, twenties Modernism may have shunned ornament, but it approved of scripted spaces. It cleared the way for Disney, Vegas, and the entertainment city by promising a future of scriptable blanks. These blanks (even from Le Corbusier, a model for f/x design) become containers that can easily be filled with Electronic Baroque labyrinths.

Modernism even more than Art Nouveau made the Electronic Baroque possible—again in the twenties, at the Bauhaus and at Soviet design schools, at the UFA movie studio in Berlin. In the U.S., beside skyscrapers, missionary Modernism centered often around fussy but "functionalist" kitchen

appliances—the glory of steel as heroic moderne. The Coldspot refrigerator suggests an ocean liner about to steam away; or a train "streaming" into the station. Twenties myths of industrial circulation—of speed as egalitarianism—turn the everyday into special effects. Industrial Modernism honored these effects no matter how abstracted the forms became. Modernist abstraction—the blank—was already a scripted space that could be filled with illusion. Thus, Syd Mead by 1980 joins a grand designer tradition. He updates designs identified with Norman Bel-Geddes— with thirties and World War II modernism— as Hollywood (and European) f/x.

Even Ridley Scott belongs to the same tradition. He began as a set designer at the BBC in 1963. For the *Blade Runner* storyboards, he sketched bizarre 1940's accessories, as a critique of industrial design itself. That critique—about wartime material culture as everyday paranoia—became a nostalgic hallmark in eighties cyberpunk literature as well, of designer ruins inside a warlord city-state. Similarly, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1984) turns the industrial city into a hyperventilated labyrinth of ducts, shortages, and terrorist bombings. Somewhere in Gilliam's twentieth century, transistors were never invented. As a result, technology gets massively lumpy, until it squashes everyone. Options shrink into Orwellian nightmare (the working title was "1984 $\frac{1}{2}$"). Early 1950's Britain is thrown off its orbit. Some things never get to be. Others run ahead of themselves. Fifties consumerism is faintly nazified. All social rules exist in a subjunctive tense.

Thus for Scott and Gilliam, the imaginary 1942 becomes a year of reckoning. Similarly in recent months, while the Bush administration moved towards its ultimatum against Iraq, the news on U.S. cable was shrill and blind, like a scene from *Brazil*. No discussion, no discourse, barely any coverage of the world blanching in horror. The Democrats apparently were showing bad sportsmanship; and French fries were temporarily renamed "freedom" fries. Electronic Baroque media amped up as usual, another grave test for American entertainment, how to show America on the brink, but not lose advertising income—to prove that Americans can stand on one leg for years to come.

By 1996, despite cyberpunk the romance with digital tech had mellowed. Even though Hollywood action films looked ghoulish, the disasters more sensational, an e-boom was underway. E-commerce boosterism was taking over, a flood of excitement about Silicon Valley, about recent college graduates who went there jumping in six-figure incomes right away. Media imagery turned more utopian. Digital special effects finally took charge of postproduction. The worship of the virtual began its short reign.

When I sift through my piles of special-effects announcements about f/x films that fell short at the box office, from *TRON* back in 1982 (too early, too much dazzle[42] to *Natural Born Killers* (1994),[43] I see the spin among insiders as much the same: waiting impatiently for the digital future to save the industry. By 1996, many key effects houses were outside the studios, and claimed, at least, to have shifted entirely to CGI. They remained heavily in demand until outsource boom slipped away by 1998. Movie studios tried instead to develop cheaper in-house effects divisions. That proved a travesty. In 1999, outsourcers experience yet another boom. Indeed, the perverse waves of overproduction in special effects resemble capitalism unbound in the late nineteenth century; or at least globalism unbound today.

As of 2003, the animation industry looks weak, but f/x films appear stronger again. A new trend in overproduction, ridiculously expensive tent-pole features rely ever more on special effects. The new wave is set inside the Marvel universe or Middle earth. Marketers are hopeful again. Gilt-edge f/x sequels seem to mint money. They grow like banks inside the expanding trail of globalization. But is that truly a guarantee?

Hollywood production trends are rarely the same as the economy at large. They often turn profits inversely, while the economy at large is tanking. Thus, special effects do better in times of crisis. They are trauma as reassurance. Apparently, various special effects houses are even gathering more defense contracts, as the war in Iraq speeds along. Digitalics is indeed a morbid science, almost Malthusian. And yet it reveals so much, and in good humor, about collective paranoia. It is indeed our worst nightmare and our fondest desires invading at precisely the same time. Whenever effects "improve", movies will metastasize (consider what digital effects are doing).

Note, February 2023

After 2003, Hollywood marketing continued to rely ever more heavily on f/x blockbusters, especially during the Great Recession. Down a rabbit hole it went: production costs kept soaring, to an average of over $200 million for each movie. And globally marketing these films could almost double their cost. 2011 was a zenith year. *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* came in at over $410 million; and yet still made a handsome profit.

But these numbers grew harder to achieve. Clearly, the cost overruns were unsupportable. Even Disney's Marvel universes began to run out of runway.

A great meltdown was inevitable. In 2021, at the height of the pandemic US box office plummeted by over ninety percent. It has still not fully recovered, probably never will. But the pandemic triggered more than just problems at the movie theater beyond inflation and bottlenecks. It had broken the back of globalization (1973–2000)—when the Electronic Baroque had flourished. A shrinking back of the global supply chain will continue for the rest of the decade. This means end of an age, and a deeply unstable future.

It will clearly lead to a new civilization altogether. This alternative capitalist and cultural universe will take decades to settle down, up to fifty years. And no one can speak with certainty about how humane or reactionary this new age may become. Many of the old symptoms will mature. The average buying power will continue to shrink. Increasing feudal oligarchy and political gridlock will continue to damage nation states, inhibit master planning—just when we need it the most.

Special effects always alters itself during such disasters. Many Hollywood insiders hoped that AI and streaming will provide a cushion. The industry strikes in 2023 indicate that this might not be true at all. In fact, those very advances will accelerate a reversal. The new generation of special effects will be less immersive, not as Wagnerian, not as all-embracing. Instead, they will insinuate; parasitically invade us at home. AI parasites are already teaching us how to market ourselves as a commodity. We will truly become tourists in our own bodies.

Special effects will have to live on tinier TikTok screens. Much of film grammar is already reshuffling—altering its use of closeups, tracking shots, even three-act structure, intensifying the role of the viewer, blurring the sense of beginnings and endings. In "effect," our faces have now become the screen.

It is as if an f/x tracking shot escaped from the projector, and landed on to your forehead; then pierced the skin, and entered your brain, like a parasite. It ships out on a protein packet, traverses the brain. The goal is to give "birth" by escaping into the open air, through an auditory canal.

The Electronic Baroque has been inverted. Instead of immersive meta universes, a parasitic nano culture takes over. It makes physical tools for us, like a new bronze age. Its folklore memorializes the microscopic acts of piracy.

Scripted spaces will shrink down, be Tik-Tokked; and increasingly have an expiration date. Indeed, digital capitalism will go haywire inside our brains for many years. And in the meantime, the nation state, corporate capitalism, and the structure of social classes will fall into a spiral. Our collective willpower is increasingly fragile.

But this is not the end of the world. It is life after the end of the world. This is our Permian Age. It will seem long to us, but it is a weekend in the life of the planet. We will most certainly survive; but not much is guaranteed unless we act. It is now mid-January 2023. The mood across America has plummeted from its 2020 hysteria to a seasonless climate, like the surface of Mars. The business of blockbuster cinema is trembling in much the same way, toward rapid flip-flops. Within the next five years, American government will keep struggling through a moral drought from top to bottom. This section was meant as a coda to the hollowing out of the West—especially to the last years of America's dreamy Gilded Age. But even more so, it was also meant as a template for what comes next. I still believe that Americans will break free. But the second half of the twentieth century will feel almost like a subjunctive tense.