Recycled Dystopias: Cyberpunk and the End of History

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Abstract: While cyberpunk is often described as a dystopian genre, the paper argues that it should be seen rather as a post-utopian one. The crucial difference between the two resides in the nature of the historical imagination reflected in their respective narrative and thematic conventions. While dystopia and utopia (structurally the same genre) reflect a teleological vision of history, in which the future is radically different from the present, post-utopia corresponds to what many scholars, from Fredric Jameson and Francis Fukuyama to David Bell, have diagnosed as the "end of history" or rather, the end of historical teleology. Post-utopia reflects the vision of the "broad present", in which the future and the past bleed into, and contaminate, the experience of "now". From its emergence in the 1980s and until today, cyberpunk has progressively succumbed to the post-utopian sensibility, as its earlier utopian/dystopian potential has been diluted by nostalgia, repetition and recycling. By analyzing the chronotope of cyberpunk, the paper argues that the genre's articulation of time and space is inflected by the general post-utopian mood of global capitalism. The texts addressed include both novels (William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and Matthew Mather's *Atopia*) and movies (*Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049* and *Ex Machina*).

Keywords: dystopia; post-utopia; nostalgia; fractal space; end of history; global capitalism

1. The Future Is Dark(ish)

Cyberpunk is often referred to as a dystopian genre. The foundational novels of cyberpunk, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), have been described as dystopias by critics and scholars alike. "But, I think, one of the most frightening of dystopias is the one that is in the near future, and seems to be getting closer and closer. Snow Crash kind of fits that bill" (Fife 2014). But is this really true? What do we mean when we call a text dystopian?

In everyday speech, dystopia has come to be used as a synonym of "something bad happening sometime in the future". In his 2014 discussion of dystopian movies, Christopher Schmidt notes that "the recent uptick in dystopian and post-apocalyptic scenarios seems more urgent and more extreme" and suggests that it relates to the threat of climate change and environmental degradation (Schmidt 2014). In this broad sense, cyberpunk is undoubtedly dystopian: the urban sprawl of Chiba City in *Neuromancer*, the crime-ridden Metaverse of *Snow Crash*, and the corporate-ruled virtual Hong Kong in Kelley Eskridge's *Solitaire* (2010) are nobody's idea of paradise.

But dystopia as a literary genre means something else entirely. It is not merely that the future is worse than the present. Rather, the future is different.

Utopia (at least, Western utopia in modern times) posits that history possesses an inherent drive toward perfection. In other words, it sees history not merely as linear but specifically as dynamic, teleological and future-oriented. Dystopia is utopia's double, its dark twin, its mirror reflection. As Krishan Kumar pointed out in his magisterial study *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987), utopia and dystopia are two sides of the same structural and ideological phenomenon: modern

dystopia is predicated "on the very terms of modern utopia" ([Kumar 1987](), p. 110). Utopia and dystopia share a dynamic future-oriented modality involving a meaningful change, whether this change is seen positively or negatively. As Ruth Levitas explains in her gloss on Kumar, "utopia is about hoping for a transformed future . . . while fearing the worst" ([Levitas 1990](), p. 167). In other words, both utopia and dystopia presuppose a teleological narrative of history which culminates in either millennium or apocalypse. In either case, the future is indeed transformed. But is the future of cyberpunk sufficiently different from our present to be regarded as dystopian?

In this essay, I will argue that cyberpunk is not a dystopian modality of representation. Rather, I would classify it as belonging to the broader trend of post-utopia. The latter term relates to the current geopolitical situation, in which the collapse of communism and other 20th-century utopian ideologies has left neo-liberalism and global capitalism without significant conceptual rivals. David Bell describes this situation as "the supposedly 'post-utopian' here-and-now of capital and the state: a world, in which, we are told, there is no longer any need for utopianism" ([Bell 2017](), p. 3).

Post-utopia is what comes after the end of history, as described by [Fukuyama]() ([1992]()) in his influential book *The End of History*, first published in 1992, the same year as the cyberpunk classic *Snow Crash*. Fukuyama's book has been misunderstood as forecasting the end of the historical process, which is absurd. In fact, it was about the end of History with a capital H: that is, the notion that this process has an inbuilt salvational or destructive directionality. Events, even momentous events such as 9/11, will keep happening. What has ended, though, is the belief that these events are inescapably building up toward some preordained goal, whether it be a communist society of equality and plenty, or a total collapse of civilization.

The utopian/dystopian scenario in Western culture derives from the Christian apocalyptic narrative, in which history inexorably builds up toward a radical culmination of the Tribulations followed by the Millennium. Norman Cohn in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* ([Cohn 1992]()) was the first to make the connection between revolutionary utopias and Christian mysticism. Recently John Gray argued that the utopian ideologies of the 20th century wrought so much havoc precisely because they faithfully followed the script of radical transformation inherited from the religious model of history: the "conviction that the crimes and follies of the past could be left behind in an all-encompassing transformation of human life was a secular reincarnation of early Christian beliefs" ([Gray 2007](), p. 1). Utopias, whatever their underlying ideological platform, are founded on "the belief that history must be understood not in terms of the causes of events but in terms of its purpose, which is the salvation of humanity" ([Gray 2007](), p. 5). And dystopias simply invert the logic of teleology: instead of heaven, history leads straight to hell. Stuck in the Tribulations, so to speak, dystopias nevertheless offer the same vision of a radically transformed social and ontological world as utopias. Indeed, depending on your point of view, every utopia may be read as a dystopia and vice versa. In the famous confrontation between Winston Smith and O'Brien in George Orwell's *1984*, the latter persuasively argues that the totalitarian society of Oceania is, in fact, the best of all possible world and when Smith objects, pointing to human nature as the bedrock of moral values, O'Brien contemptuously calls him "the last man" and forcefully demonstrates that human nature is as malleable as the social structure dominated by the Party. The world of 1984 is the world of New Men, for whom Smith's longings for love, privacy and freedom are simply incomprehensible.

Of course, utopia/dystopia also involves what has been called "the utopian impulse": a dynamic desire to improve the current socio-political situation without necessarily specifying the "terminus" of history. Elaborated by Tom Moylan in *Demand the Impossible*, Darko Suvin and Fredric Jameson, the concept of the utopian impulse emphasizes precisely the temporal and forward-looking nature of utopia. So whether specific utopian texts tend toward the millenarian/apocalyptic model or toward the open-ended dynamic model, the important thing for my purposes here is to emphasize the difference between the future orientation of utopia/dystopia and the past orientation of post-utopia.

The collapse of utopia/dystopia has created the world in which "late capitalism seems to have no natural enemies" ([Jameson 2005]()). Apart from its political implications, this foreclosure

of utopian/dystopian alternatives paralyzes the historical imagination itself. One of Jameson's most famous essays is subtitled "How Can We Imagine the Future?" and the answer seems to be that we cannot (Jameson 2005). We live today not in the expectation or fear of the future but in what Gumbrecht (2015) calls the "Chronotope of the Broad Present":

> Different from the ever shrinking and therefore "imperceptibly short" present of the historicist chronotope, the new present (that continues to be our present in the early twenty-first century) is one in which all paradigms and phenomena from the past are juxtaposed as being available and ready-to-hand. For this present, instead of leaving the past behind, is inundated with pastness, and at the same time it is facing a future which, instead of being an open horizon of possibilities, seems occupied by threats that are inevitably moving towards us (think of "global warming," as an example).

In this "broad present", what is the role of cyberpunk, both as a literary and cinematic genre and as a style and sensibility? Does it offer any glimpse of a "radical difference from what currently is" (Jameson 2005)? Or is it merely one of the plethora of post-utopian genres, ceaselessly scouring history for stylistic innovations that can be integrated in the never-ending "now" of cultural production?

2. Past Present and Past Continuous

In 1992—apparently a bumper year for cyberpunk—George Slusser and T. A. Shippey (Slusser and Shippey 1992) edited the foundational collection of critical essays that defined the genre, titled *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative.* The year 2000 came and went. The future of narrative became the past of criticism. But cyberpunk is still alive, though nowhere near the towering position in the field of narrative representation predicted by that volume. It is not even central to the poetics of science fiction (SF), which is now dominated by the resurgence of space opera.[1] But cyberpunk has spread into culture at large; mutated into an aesthetics of street cool; invaded the Asian visual media (manga and anime); and was brought back into the Hollywood mainstream by movies such as the *Matrix* trilogy, *Ex Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049*.

Perhaps these movies are a good way to start an analysis of time and space in contemporary cyberpunk. While different media employ different means of representation, all narratives, whether visual, verbal or mixed, generate chronotopes: the term defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial-relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 2002, p. 15). As the quote from Gumbrecht above indicates, the notion of chronotope transcends literature or fiction in general, and may be applied to a cultural perception of space and time or rather, spacetime. And this perception is equally reflected in movies, books or political and ideological discourses.

The original *Blade Runner* (1982) revolutionized our perception of space, especially urban space. Wong Kin Yuen's influential article "On the Edge of Spaces: *Blade Runner*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and Hong Kong's Cityscape" argued that the movie's visual aesthetics both reflected and influenced the cityscapes of Asian metropolises, such as Hong Kong and Tokyo. The heterogeneity, fractal chaos and light/dark interplay of the movie's urban scenes introduced the previously marginalized Asian spaces into the Western mainstream. Moreover, despite the common predilection of calling *Blade Runner* dystopian, Wong argued that the shocking newness—to the Western audiences—of the Asian urban space contained a utopian potential: "colonial cities have the best chance of establishing a cityscape of the future that embraces racial and cultural differences".

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[1] It is difficult to gauge the relative popularity of various sub-genres within SF but the prominence of such recent TV shows as *The Expanse*, a space opera based on James Corey's multi-volume series, indicates a shift (back) toward space adventure. See an interesting article by Charlie Jane Anders in the *Wired* magazine discussing the new openness of publishers toward big-canvas space opera. https://www.wired.com/2017/03/rejuvenation-of-space-opera/ (Accessed on 8 June 2018).

Time as well opened up into a future that was problematic, fraught with difficulties and unresolved dilemmas but new and exciting. The conclusion of the original version had Deckard and Rachael drive together into the unknown. The open-ended temporality of Rachael's lifespan, which may, or may not, be as limited as that of the other replicants bled into the open-endedness of the movie's implied history.[2] Whether the replicants' revolt succeeded or failed, there was no question that they represented a genuinely new kind of human beings. The very ease with which their memories could be implanted and manipulated indicated that their existence put into question the biological and social foundations of human identity. Moreover, Deckard's blasé dismissal of the very issue of "real" versus "simulated" in relation to Rachael's subjectivity indicated that the movie ventured into the territory of what we today call the posthuman: subversion of the traditional pieties of liberal humanism. When Deckard was revealed as a replicant himself in the director's cut, the utopian potential of new technologies became even clearer. What is the place of liberal humanism in a world in which the foundational distinction of human/nonhuman no longer obtains, even in relation to one's own sense of self?

Just as the original movie was revolutionary, its sequel was reactionary. First, in the most obvious sense of not breaking new grounds aesthetically or conceptually but rather slavishly following the original's lead. Second, in a more subtle way in which its chronotope revised the utopian/dystopian poetics of the 1982 *Blade Runner* in order to fit into the current trend of nostalgic recycling. And it is nostalgia, I will argue, that characterizes post-utopia in general and the current post-utopian cyberpunk in particular.

Nostalgia, as Svetlana Boym argues in *The Future of Nostalgia*, is a by-product of globalism: it is a "historical emotion . . . nostalgic manifestations are side-effect of the teleology of progress" (Boym 2001, p. 10). Nostalgia is a longing for a homely "space of experience": a familiar corner in an unfamiliar and perpetually changing world (Boym 2001, p. 10). But the "new nostalgia" manifested in such explicitly retro productions as the 80s-infested TV series *Stranger Things*, is temporal rather than spatial: it is a longing for a familiar time. And since time as opposed to space is linear and irreversible—you really cannot go back home again if your home is 1982—the new nostalgia is engaged in historical denialism through a complex system of pastiche, intertextuality, remaking and recycling.

In an astute review of *Blade Runner 2049*, Loufbarrow (2017) lists all the ways in which the new movie is nostalgic:

> It's nostalgic for Sinatra. It's nostalgic for noir. It's nostalgic for horses and childhood and Elvis and dogs and trees and the sheer existence of memory. It's nostalgic for the version of the future that existed in the past—there are no smartphones, and the Pan Am logo flashes in neon lights. If it's nostalgic for the color green, it's also nostalgic for electricity, which seems to be in short supply. It's nostalgic for snow and bugs and touch. For hedonism when it meant good old American excess like Las Vegas and roulette and whiskey, gigantic statues of naked ladies instead of pornified holograms and geishas. It is so overloaded with backward glances that "above all, it's nostalgic for itself". [3]

Both space and time in *Blade Runner 2049* lack the sheer newness of its predecessor. The muted orange palette and the attenuated cityscapes of the new movie stand in sharp contrast to the exuberance of the original: the exuberance that, as Wong points out, was derived from the actual, lived experience of Asian metropolises, just emerging from their marginal colonial status. Those cityscapes pointed forward to what Daniel Brook called "the history of future cities": a "reinvention" of history "written into the cityscape itself" (Brook n.d.).

The space of *Blade Runner 2049* is as faded, as inconsequential, and as devoid of political implications as a Victorian daguerreotype. The political subtext of the replicants' revolt is reduced to

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2   It's too bad she won't live. But then again who does?
3   http://theweek.com/articles/729283/blade-runner-2049-nostalgic-hurts (accessed on 8 June 2018).

some pseudo-Freudian musings, which point to the greatest object of nostalgia in the new movie: the concept of biological time.

Just as the plot of the original *Blade Runner* revolved around what Jean Baudrillard called "precession of simulacra" and concluded with the dismissal of any ontological difference between copy and original, *Blade Runner 2049* is infected with the yearning for the certainty of origin. K's search for his biological parents and Rachael's (impossible) pregnancy reinstate the deeply conservative belief that privileges "nature" over technology. In the original *Blade Runner*, time was malleable, open-ended, and full of possibilities. In the sequel, time is frozen, circular, and forced back into the supposedly immutable cycles of biological procreation.[4]

Whether *Blade Runner* old and new are, strictly speaking, cyberpunk is open to debate since replicants are not cybernetic devices but biologically engineered artificial humans (as Philip K. Dick's original novel makes perfectly clear). But the first film has become part of cyberpunk's "canon" due, primarily, to its visual aesthetics. Other recent movies, however, do fit the generic template of cyberpunk and display the same combination of all-pervasive nostalgia and backward-looking intertextuality, in which the past of the genre becomes its future. Consider *Ex Machina* (2014), one of the few recent SF movies which is neither a remake nor part of a franchise. Focusing on the Turing test performed for a beautiful android Ava, the movie is at pains to draw the dividing line between human and nonhuman: the line that is deliberately blurred in the earlier cyberpunk texts, such as *Neuromancer* (where no character is a "natural" human being, all of them having been modified physically, neurologically or both). The movie ends with a hoary "robot rebellion" cliché that is as old as SF. However, another aspect of the movie's chronotope is particularly striking: its claustrophobia. Taking place exclusively in confined, carceral spaces, it is replete with images of locked doors, narrow corridors and blind alleys. It ends with the protagonist locked up in a cell, from which he cannot escape, while Ava is lost in an equally claustrophobic cityscape filled with dense and gloomy crowds. Of course, the ending can also be read as the liberation of a new posthuman subjectivity into a larger network of social relations, and it is this ambiguity that makes *Ex Machina* one of the best recent SF movies. But the visual aspect of the film stands in sharp contrast to the startling innovation of, say, the original *Blade Runner* which created a new visual vocabulary of urban representation. The spaces of *Ex Machina* are both familiar and suffocating: whether natural or technological, they simply replicate the well-known motifs of incarceration versus escape.

The peculiarity of this articulation of space in post-utopian cyberpunk becomes clearer if we compare it to the chronotope of actual utopia/dystopia.

3. Lost in Space

It has been a cliché that our current era is more concerned with space than with time. Fredric Jameson's classic definition of postmodernism emphasized spatiality as the dominant motif of contemporary culture:

> "We have often been told, however, that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time . . . " (Jameson 1991, p. 16)

Within this broad dominance of the synchronic, however, different articulations of spatiality bear different symbolic and ideological messages. In an earlier article, I argued that the topology of space in the original cyberpunk, represented by the seminal works of Gibson, Stephenson, Pat Cadigan and others, mirrored the topology of the political and social space of globalization (Gomel 2016). The space

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4   There could, of course, be a way for the film to justify Rachael's pregnancy as some new form of bio-technology, the way it is implied, for example, in Paolo Bacigalupi's *Windup Girl*. The fact that it is not done emphasizes precisely the nostalgic reversion to the circular "bio-time" instead of the forward-looking techno-time.

of cyberpunk is unbounded, fractal, and self-similar. It represents the hidden structure of the space of globalization that shapes our subjectivities and interactions both on- and offline. In *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*, the topologies of cyberspace precisely replicate the topology of the post-industrial, post-nation-state global political domain. Both virtual and physical realms are ruled by the same networks of criminals and politicians; both are constructed as complex labyrinths of legal, quasi-legal, and illegal domains; both involve manipulations of power structures by individuals and the backlash of the matrix, whether electronic or social, against the rebel. Cyberspace reveals the geometry of power that has been there all along.

Utopia/dystopia, on the other hand, has a very different spatial structure that reflects its radical alterity, its separation from the power structures of here and now. Thomas More's original utopia is an island, deliberately isolated from the mainland by the canal dug by the inhabitants of this perfect society. Utopias are always guarded by fences, walls, oceans or cosmic distances; protected from the pollution of history; kept pure and undefiled. In Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), for example, the utopian planet Anarres is separated from its dystopian counterpart Urras not just by the gulf of space by a symbolic wall that "enclosed the universe, leaving Anarres outside, free" (Le Guin 1974, p. 1). Of course, from the other side of the wall, the utopia of Anarres is seen as "a great prison camp, cut off from other worlds and other men, in quarantine" (Le Guin 1974, p. 1). But this dialectic of enclosure is precisely what defines utopia/dystopia: the same bounded space can be seen as either paradise or hell, depending on where you are standing in relation to its boundaries.

Dystopias replicate the bounded structure of utopian space. The Crystal City in Zamyatin's *We* is protected by a wall from the wilderness of nature outside; the Republic of Gilead is enclosed by a barrier in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*; and Room 101 in *1984* is a symbol of Oceania's carceral space. Spatial separation echoes temporal rupture. A barrier marks the transition from the present to the future.

Cyberpunk's emphasis on the complex interplay between physical and virtual spaces and on their endless proliferation militates against the rigid division of the utopian/dystopian chronotope. In *Snow Crash*, the infinite Metaverse randomly combines bits and pieces of actual spaces, mixed in no particular order. It is traversed by the infinitely long Street that contains versions of cities in the physical world, including a cyber-Hong Kong, New York and Paris. The Metaverse is a recursive reflection of the physical space, containing the latter, while it is also contained by it.

Our relationship with cyberspace, and the chaotic, recursive, infinitely proliferating virtual spatiality of the Internet make cyberpunk's chronotope seem more natural than the rigidly divided geography of utopia. However, the chaotic topology of cyberpunk, in fact, contributes to the blurred boundaries of the "chronotope of broad present", in which spatial proliferation substitutes for temporal progress.

In his *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1986), Tom Moylan makes an interesting point that the very completeness of the rigidly structured utopian spaces is, in fact, the tacit acknowledgment of their limitations. Precisely because these spaces can never be enclosed enough, they call for a temporal dimension of development and change. Space alone cannot satisfy the human yearning for a better world:

> "In this way, Bloch locates the positive drive toward the future in the negative, in the radical insufficiency of the present, for even those concrete utopian moments of fulfilment are future-bearing only in their very finite and passing nature." (Moylan 1986, p. 22)

Thus, the very plenitude of cyberpunk space is a testimony to its "radical insufficiency". Just like the consumer bounty of neo-liberal capitalism is never enough to stifle utopian dreams and aspirations, endless spaces of cyberpunk only mask but never really fill, the gap left by the end of history.

4. Chronotopia

The interplay between dystopia and post/utopia in cyberpunk is not a new phenomenon. Post-utopia and the "chronotope of the broad present" are implicit in Gibson's 1980s work, especially in the case of *Neuromancer*. But while cyberpunk as a whole has shifted toward the post-utopian pole of this interplay, some contemporary cyberpunk texts display an awareness of their own generic limitations and, in different ways, open up toward a genuine utopian/dystopian future, which is radically different from the present. I want to pause on one such text: Matthew Mather's *The Atopia Chronicles* (2014).[5]

In this novel, a group of techies build an island paradise in the Pacific where the extensive use of brain-wired virtual and augmented reality is supposed to create a new social and ontological structure:

> After the mess the rest of the world had become, the best and brightest of the world had emigrated to build the new New World, the Bensalem group of seasteads in the Pacific Ocean, of which Atopia was the crown jewel. Atopia was supposed to be—was marketed as—this shining beacon of libertarian ideals. She was, by far, the largest in a collection of platforms in the oceans off California, a kind of new Silicon Valley that would solve the world's problems with technological wizardry. (Mather 2014, p. 51)

Mather's *Atopia* is, initially, cyberpunk rather than utopia or dystopia. Much like the matrix in *Neuromancer* or Metaverse in *Snow Crash*, Atopia is an infinite space, a playground of limitless possibilities. The inhabitants of Atopia effortlessly move across virtual and physical spaces without distinguishing between the two. Indeed, since their brains are injected with nano-particles that create a complete experience of being anywhere and everywhere at whim, the distinction between reality and simulacrum is largely meaningless:

> The pssi—polysynthetic sensory interface—system had originally grown out of research to move artificial limbs, using nanoscale smarticles embedded in the nervous system to control signals passing through it. Fairly quickly, they'd learned the trick of modifying the signals going to our eyes, ears and other sensory channels, making it possible to perfectly simulate our senses. Creating completely synthetic worlds had followed in short order. In that they'd more than succeeded—to most Atopians, synthetic reality was more real than the real world. (Mather 2014, p. 57)

Plato's cave has become our playground.

However, as opposed to Stephenson's Metaverse, Atopia is not immune to the tug of history. In traditional cyberpunk, the chronotope is entirely spatial and the action unfolds across multiplying ontological domains. The protagonist may triumph or die (or, like Case in *Neuromancer*, be stuck in the doldrums of his precarious existence) but the fictional world remains in a homeostasis. In *The Atopia Chronicles*, however, it has an inbuilt teleology that, does not become clear until the novel's end. While its multiple characters—pssi-endowed young men and women—party through a bewildering profusion of "synthetic worlds", one of them methodically schemes to take over Atopia and turn it into an old-fashioned dictatorship. He succeeds at the end, and Atopia becomes a totalitarian nightmare, presided over by an omnipotent psychopath.

At the end of the book, one of the characters who is to become the protagonist in the sequels, escapes the cyberpunk paradise into the physical world where he and his group are readying for a revolution:

> "It was true what they said—the future was already here, just unevenly distributed. I belonged to that future, yet here I was with the rest of humanity. The world, however, was

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5　The novel has two sequels: significantly titled *The Dystopia Chronicles* and *The Utopia Chronicles* but I am not presently engaging with them.

about to change, and people could hardly wait. I laughed to myself. They really ought to be more careful what they wished for." (Mather 2014, p. 491)

The "unevenly distributed" future, riddled with choices and opportunities, becomes an escape hatch from cyberpunk into utopia/dystopia. Here is where the endless recycling of history comes to an end, and the radical alterity of the future inserts itself into the sameness of the "broad present". Even the end of history is not forever.

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