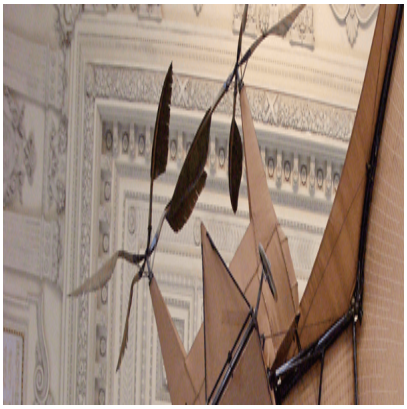


Looking backwards

Description

default watermark

What does the Apple Watch announcement this week have in common with Scottish independence? Both claim to be *about time*, both promise unlimited potential, and neither seems particularly necessary.

In fact technology and politics converge nicely on the theme of ***utopia***. Like a lot of tech, the publicity videos for the not-yet Apple Watch reinforce the benefits of the device with images of a whole world at your fingertips, the closed looping shape of the variety of wrist bands, and the roundy knob at the side called ***the crown***.

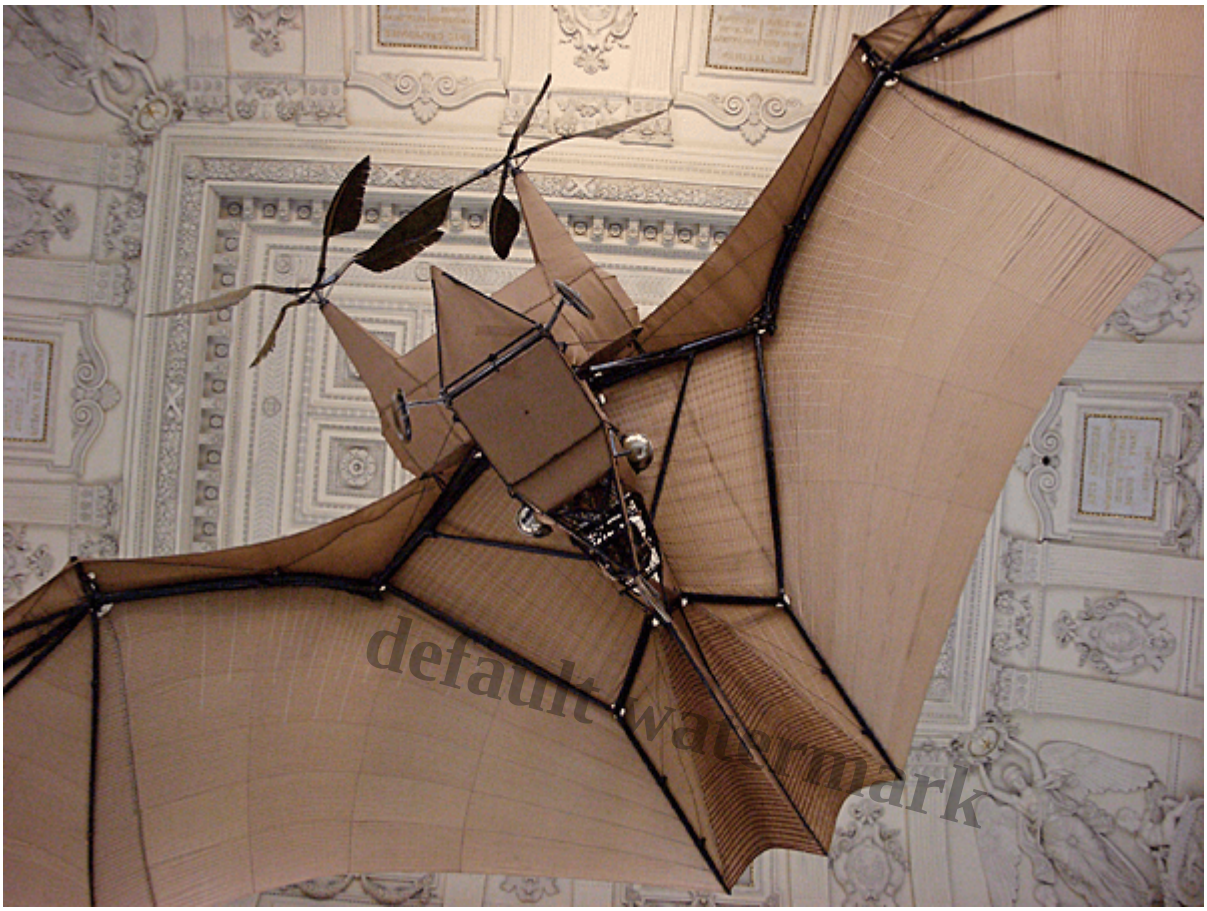
There are further *round* features on the back that record your heartbeat and transmit it to someone else. So they can feel it too. This is the new sensitive, feeling, and highly sociable world where your future is in your hands â?¦ I mean on your wrist.

Shangri-la

On the subject of tech and utopia, Iâ??ve long enjoyed Edward Bellamyâ??s book about time, called *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, written in 1888. The book describes life in the year 2000, as imagined by a well-travelled 19th century American.

At the core of such utopian writing is the triumph of reason. Bellamy describes his future world as one in which people enjoy â??the blessings of a social order at once so simple and logical that it seems but the triumph of common senseâ?• (93). With common sense comes freedom. As it happens, it also comes with compulsory national service.

In fact, most utopias require some kind of rigid social order to which everyone must conform. Thatâ??s the cost of a utopia if it is to raise â??the race to a new plane of existence with an illimitable vista of progress.â?• Of most interest in the current climate thereâ??s no need for banks: â??There is neither selling nor buying nowadays; the distribution of goods is effected in another way. ***As to the bankers, having no money we have no use for those gentry***.â?•



Telephones that tell time

Bellamyâ??s book (and independence) is really about unrealistic social transformation, but Iâ??m also interested in Bellamyâ??s predictions about technology. Goods are transmitted around from warehouse to home via a ubiquitous network of pneumatic tubes. (That would ease Amazonâ??s distribution from Dunfermline.) Even sparsely populated rural communities are so connected. (I had it in mind that people in Bellamyâ??s utopia travel in flying cars, but I think thatâ??s from a contemporary illustration by Albert Robida.)

One of the miracles of Bellamyâ??s year 2000 was/is the transmission of music from performance rooms positioned around the city. Live performances are channeled into homes via hi fidelity telephone. Thereâ??s choice, â??so that all tastes and moods can be suited.â?• This is also where time comes in. Before retiring for the night â??by a clock-work combination, a person could arrange to be awakened at any hour by the music.â?• That prediction was almost on the button.

References

- Bellamy, Edward. 1967. *Looking Backward 2000-1887*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. First published in 1888. Free download from Project Gutenberg.
- Morris, William. 1970. *News From Nowhere*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Notes

- In Bellamyâ??s steampunk socialism everything is connected by tubes and wires. Wirelessness wasnâ??t yet on the horizon. Nor was miniaturisation and personalised tech, though he did anticipate credit cards.
- The image above is of a fanciful flying machines in a gallery at the Musee des Arts et Metiers in Paris. Below is a Better Together campaign stand in Edinburgh.
- I discuss Bellamy and William Morrisâ??s utopias in Coyne, Richard. 1999. *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- On the theme of the circle see blog posts Circles and how to get out of them and Vitruvius does steam punk. Romantic utopian narratives often resort to circular geometries, which symbolise completeness and wholeness, rather than subdivision and fragmentation.
- See article â??Majority of Scottish academics set to vote â??noâ?? in referendum, THE poll showsâ?• on why the majority of STEM (science, technology, engineering, maths) academics think we are better together.



watermark

Category

1. Techno-utopias

Tags

1. society
2. technology
3. technoromanticism
4. utopia

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