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The lucite box: Futurism, world's fairs, and the Phantom Teleceiver

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The Lucite Box

Futurism, World's Fairs and the Phantom Teleceiver

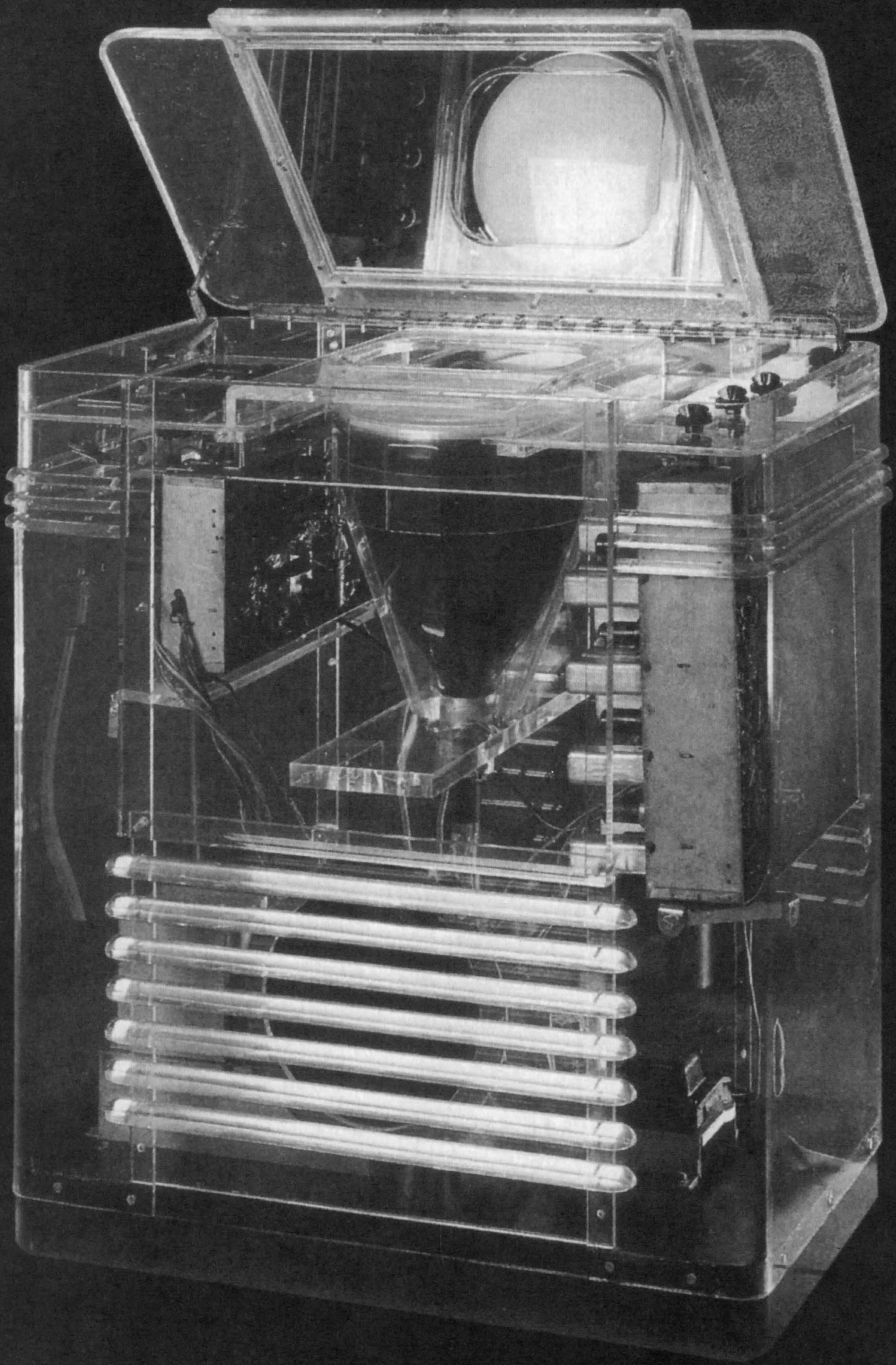
by David McIntosh

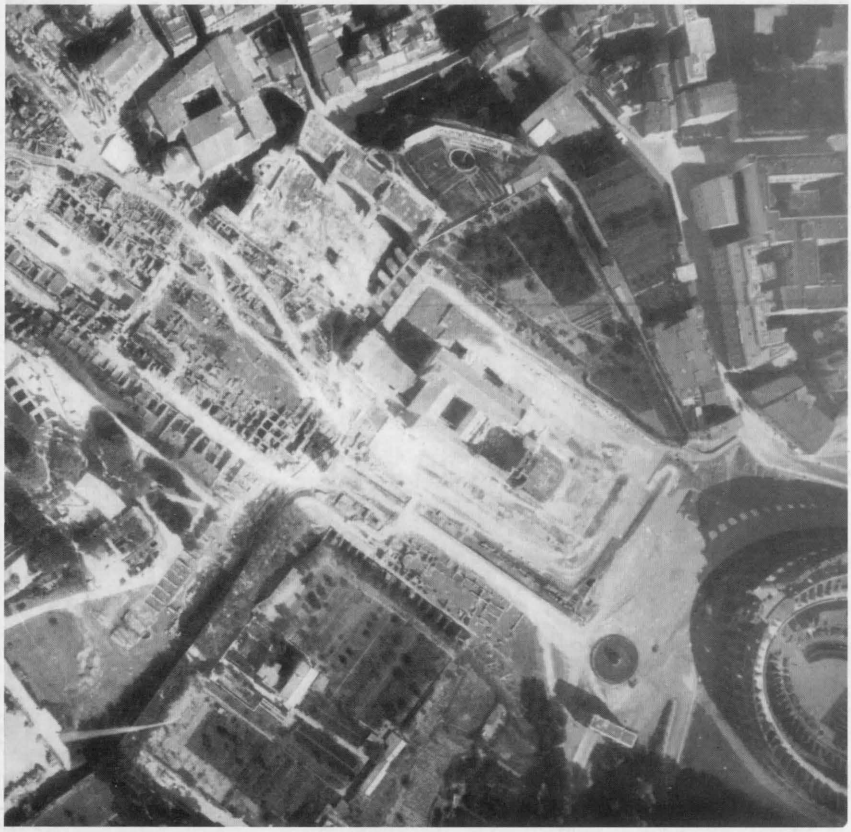
> *Today, a mere seventy years after its introduction, television has become the touchstone of personal, national, and world memory.... All over the planet there is a sudden awakening to television's significance, and very soon, no collection of fashion or manners or machines will be thought complete without a presentation of the boxes that brought us the world in perpetual flow.*
>
> —*Moses Znaimer*[1]

In November of 1995, the Royal Ontario Museum's Institute of Contemporary Culture launched the year-long exhibition "Watching TV: Historic Televisions and Memorabilia from the MZTV Museum." Despite the global impact of the techniques and technologies of television that Znaimer quite rightly points out in his introductory catalogue essay, and despite the historical and artistic importance of his carefully assembled collection of television sets that constitute the ROM's display, the exhibition is disappointing and undistinguished. Comprised of sixty television sets that chart the history of design and construction of receivers from the 1920s to the 1970s, "Watching TV" has been crammed into an inadequate basement space where artifacts and documentation have been piled into an unintelligible jumble. Precious television relics are stacked three and four rows high into a wall of blank staring screens as intimidating as a phalanx of blind Cyclops. The only piece in this chaotic mortuary that has been suitably framed to allow its enormous evocative powers and vitality as historical artifact, industrial product, fetish object and embodiment of futurist ideology to be glimpsed or imagined is the RCA Phantom Teleceiver TRK-12.

Believed to be one of a kind, the Phantom Teleceiver was unveiled to the American public at the 1939 New York World's Fair by David Sarnoff, RCA's visionary but Machiavellian president, as he proclaimed the inauguration of the first regular television broadcasting service in America, a reality not actually accomplished for another ten years.[2] Conceived and created by renowned industrial designer Raymond Loewy specifically for the World's Fair, the massive cabinet of this machine was constructed from Lucite, DuPont's ultra-modern petro-chemical imitation of glass. Streamlined, glamorous and transparent, the Phantom Teleceiver set new standards of fashion for home appliances by assuming a seductive sculptural shape half-way between a wet bar and a Mayan temple, at the same time as it drew from the history of world's fairs by referencing the 1851 London Exposition's Crystal Palace. The colourful electronic guts of the Phantom visible through the Lucite were dominated by an upright cathode-ray tube, pointed to the sky, so that the screen image would be projected onto and reflected from a mirrored lid to viewers.

Simultaneously "a myth and a tool, a representation and an instrument, a frozen moment and a motor of social and imaginative reality,"[3] the TRK-12 was an industrial commodity that stood at the crossroads of past, present and future in 1939. In 1996, it "occupies a privileged position in this time-warp, for it is a knock-out instance of the recently outmoded and the power thereof, a gorgeous billowing forth of superseded promise. It is one of the great signs of the recently outmoded... testimony to the power of ghosts embedded in the





Aerial view of the Colosseum and other archaeological sites in Rome, 1908.

Advertising poster designed by Italian Futurist painter Giacomo Balla, c. 1925: *The Car for Everyone.*

commodities created by yesteryear's technology."[4] As a petrified historical marker of meaning and the passage of time, this machine emissary from the past is a crucial medium through which to summon up the ancient ghosts of futurism and identify their haunting traces in the neo-futurist present.

> *We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created the eternal.*[5]

Written in 1909 by Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, one of the key members of the Italian Futurist movement, the segment of the "Manifesto of Futurism" quoted above outlines the grandiose philosophical underpinnings of the movement. In addition to their obsessive dedication to the purity, beauty and destructive power of the machine, this manifesto also detailed their commitment to the glorification of patriotism, militarism and war—which they considered the world's only hygiene—and their scorn for women. They threatened to destroy museums, libraries, academies of every kind, and to fight moralism, feminism and every other kind of "opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice." Marinetti eventually found an amenable forum for his ideas in the Italian Fascist movement and became a great ally of Mussolini, who in turn dreamed of mounting a World's Fair in 1942 to celebrate the triumphs of Fascism. Mussolini's dream was never realized, but aspects of the futurist ideology turned up in modified forms in many American World's Fairs of the 1930s, most notably the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition and the 1939 New York World's Fair.

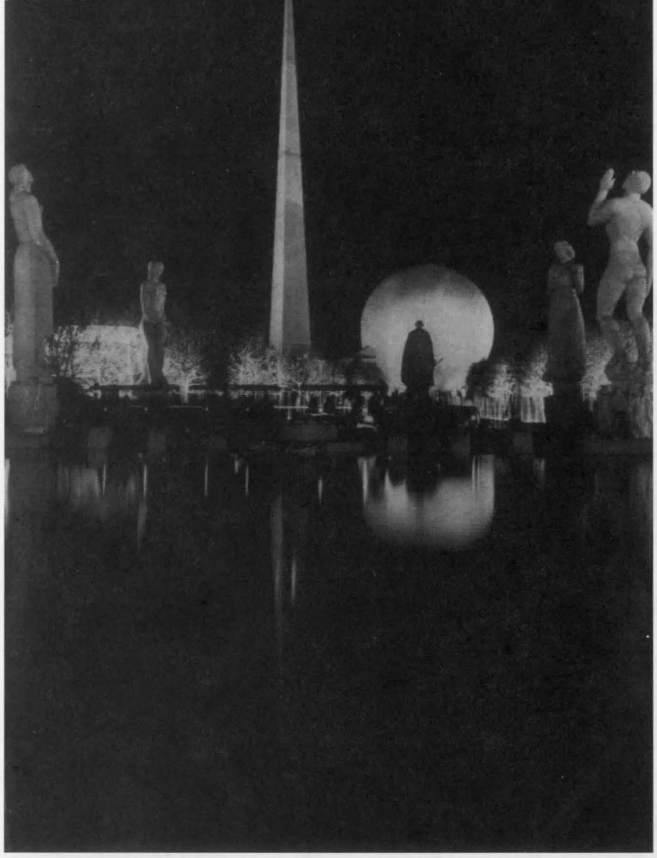
> *Fairs were designed to restore popular faith in the vitality of the nation's economic and political system, and more specifically in the ability of government, business, scientific and intellectual leaders to lead the country out of the depression to material abundance [but] the future perfect world forecast at fairs was a conditional construct: conditional on popular acceptance of the modernizing strategies proposed by exhibition planners.*[6]

A decade characterized by the rise of totalitarianism in Europe and the Great Depression in the United States, the 1930s witnessed the incongruous proliferation of opulent exhibitions promising a better

future. Following in the tradition of American World Expositions held in Chicago (1933), San Diego (1935), Dallas (1936), Cleveland (1937) and San Francisco (1939), the 1939 New York World's Fair took as its grand theme "The World of Tomorrow." Symbolized by two enormous pure geometric forms that dominated the site—the Trylon and the Perisphere—the New York fair offered official exhibits such as "Futurama" and "Democracity," elaborate miniature models of utopian urban landscapes that would become reality in the 1960s. Both of these seductive and obsessively ordered exhibits of future abundance were sponsored by automobile manufacturers so the visions presented necessarily revolved around the vehicles they produced. Masses of children were routinely assembled outside of "Democracity," which was housed in the crystal ball Perisphere, to chant the official anthem of the Fair: "We're the rising tide coming from far and wide, Marching side by side, For a brave new world, Tomorrow's world, That we shall build today."[7] While war raged in Europe and millions of Americans starved in hopelessness, this extravagant event conceived and produced by a wealthy corporate elite constituted an exercise in "cultural and ideological repair and renewal that encouraged Americans to share in highly controlled fantasies about modernizing."[8]

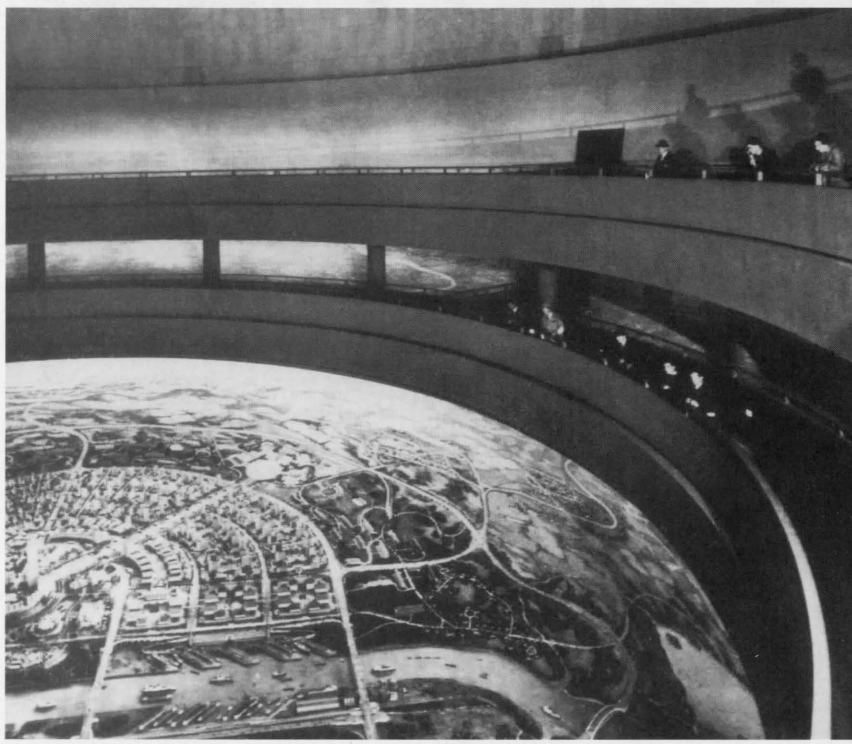
One of the most noxious streams of futurist ideology that percolated through American expositions throughout the 1920s and '30s was the eugenicist "race betterment" movement. Also known as the "fitter family" movement, racist and eugenicist programs were taken up and popularized by scientists, pseudo-scientists and writers like Madison Grant, whose best-selling book "The Passing of the Great Race" captured the public imagination. These notions were consolidated and legitimized to the point where the Second National Conference on Race Betterment, held as a sidebar of the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair, attracted such luminary participants as the presidents of Stanford and Harvard universities, a U.S. senator, and a U.S. judge. The president of this coven of racist thinkers was John H. Kellogg, breakfast cereal tycoon, who dazzled audiences in his discussions with plant breeder Luther Burbank, who proposed applying his plant breeding principles to the selection of the best individuals for continuing the race—the white race.

While no exhibit at the New York World's Fair was quite so overtly racist, eugenicist principles did inform one of its most popular exhibits, the "Typical American Family." Co-sponsored by the Ford Motor Company, the Johns Manville Company, the U.S.



New York World's Fair: Trylon and Perisphere as viewed from the Constitution Mall, 1939.

Below: General Motors' *Futurama* exhibit, New York, 1939. The multi-million dollar exhibit was designed to convince visitors of the desirability of superhighways in the city of the future.



"Living Magazine Covers" exhibit, New York World's Fair, 1939.

Opposite: Nudists in Zorro Gardens, San Diego, 1935.

Federal Housing Administration and world's fair authorities, this participatory promotional project took the form of an essay contest in which non-white families were explicitly ineligible to take part. The winners, all white, were awarded a free trip to the fair in a Ford automobile, and were housed on the site as an actual display in a single family dwelling built by the Federal Housing Administration and clad with the Johns Manville Company's new wonder product, asbestos siding.

These expressions of technological utopianism and eugenics were couched in yet another fantasy of progress—erotic stimulation. Formal exhibits of fully nude females with "world of tomorrow" themes were counterpointed by female striptease acts on the fair's midway. Norman Bel Geddes, designer of General Motors' Futurama, also designed the "Crystal Gazing Palace," a techno-porn extravagaza constructed from gigantic panels of stainless steel and crystal glass set in a reflecting pool, where one naked woman surrounded by mirrors would be reflected an infinite number of times. Dubbed "Sexorama" and "The Peep Show of Tomorrow," this official exhibit faced tough competition from the midway nudie shows with titles like "Dream of Venus," "Living Magazine Covers," "Extase" and "Prohibited Cuban Dancers." Eroticized female bodies served to enhance the desirability of futuristic commodities. While Fair organizers aspired to the purity of scientific legitimacy in having Albert Einstein throw the switch to illuminate the buildings on opening night, this earnest attitude became a source of parody on the Fair's midway, where in a show named "Congress of Beauties," stripper Yvette Dare trained a macaw named Einstein to remove her bra.

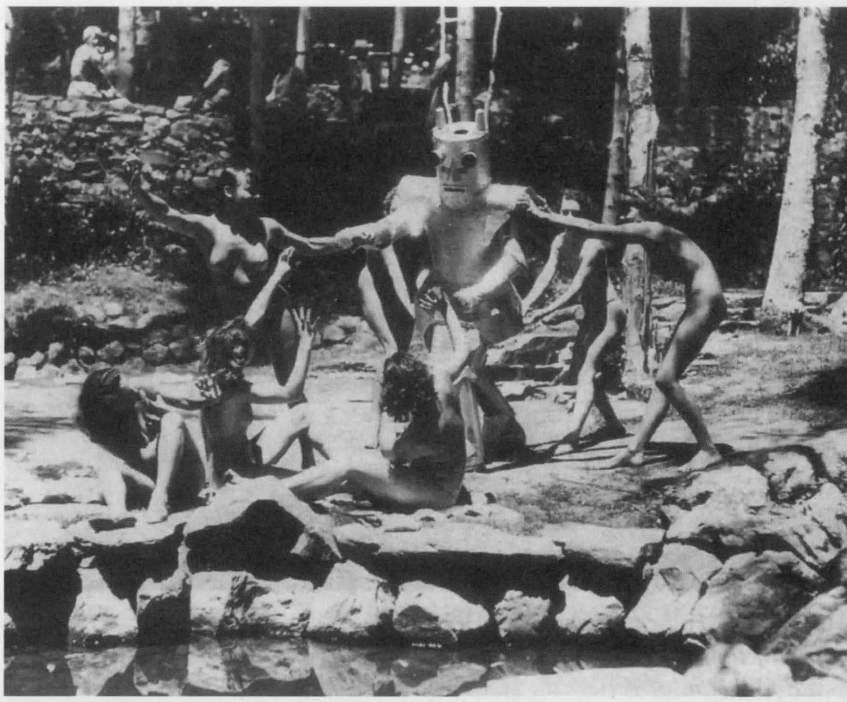
While women's bodies were being exposed in some parts of the Fair, they were being clothed in industrial designers' streamlined techno-fashions in other displays. Every leading American industrial designer, including Wallace Teague, Henry Dreyfuss, Donald Deskey, Norman Bel Geddes and Raymond Loewy, was invited by Vogue magazine to design clothes for the woman of tomorrow. Many of the resulting designs involved transparent machine age materials like Cellophane. When Raymond Loewy, designer of the Phantom Teleceiver, was asked if the designer's fantasies were suited to the actuality of women's bodies, he replied: "Eugenic selection may bring generations so aesthetically correct that such clothes will be in order."[9] As transparent as the Lucite TV he designed, Loewy blithely revealed one of the fundamental objectives behind the New York World's Fair's utopian surface of

progress and development—the control and breeding of human's as functions of corporate and science based techno-aesthetic principles.

Built and torn down within a few years' time, world's fairs are telescoped models of industrial hyperdevelopment.[10]

While few physical traces of the 1939 New York World's Fair remain, its futurist blueprint for a "Better Tomorrow" continues to be played out. Corporate and scientific models of hyperdevelopment in 1939 rested on the dovetailing of technological utopianism, eugenics and commodification of the female body into an impervious condensation of futurist fundamentals that have resonated through the rest of the century. The Phantom Teleceiver also stands as a condensation point for the futurist blueprint for hyperdevelopment, but in as much as it has outlasted its original context, its sheer physical presence as an obsolete but symbolically over-determined commodity disrupts delineations between past and future, between reality and imagination. The revolutionary energy exuded by the Lucite box is like a waking dream; it evokes nostalgic hunger for a future perfect world buried in memories of ephemeral "Futuramas," even as it foregrounds the failure and pathos of our less than perfect neo-futurist present. A rare and precious cultural artifact that collapses myth and prophecy with science fiction tropes and machine aesthetics, the RCA Phantom Teleceiver TRK-12 has become a metaphor for the way we envision the world.

David McIntosh is a Toronto critic and curator, and a part-time film instructor at York University.



Notes

1. Moses Znaimer, *Watching TV: Historic Televisions and Memorabilia from the MZTV Museum*, (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum and MZTV Museum, 1995), p. 9.

2. A comprehensive history of the development of television and Sarnoff's role can be found in Laurence Bergreen's *Look Now, Pay Later: The Rise of Network Broadcasting*, (New York: Mentor, 1980).

3. Donna Haraway, *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

4. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 232.

5. Kathryn Hiesinger & George Marcus, *Landmarks of Twentieth Century Design: An Illustrated Handbook*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), p. 52.

6. Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions*, Robert W. Rydell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 10.

7. *Ibid.*, p 132.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

10. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), p. 158.