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Fin de 21.C

Darren Tofts farewells a favourite

It is an unfortunate sign of the ironic times we live in that 21.C magazine won't be ringing in the new millennium. The magazine of the future is to be discontinued after 7 fruitful years of projection and speculation, in which the technoculture that now seems so familiar was carefully mapped out and articulated. Its last issue, "Revolting America", edited by R.U. Sirius and prophetically subtitled "No Future", is the magazine's reluctant swansong, signalling, after Baudrillard, that in at least one incarnation the 3rd millennium has indeed already come and gone.

21.C had many qualities that made it distinctive. Its variety and unpredictability made it difficult to identify any singular contribution to the accelerated countdown to the future that has become so rampant in the last decade of the 20th century. However its determination to cross all checkpoints was in fact the quality that made it stand out from the crowd. 21.C was less pretentious and fashion conscious than Mondo 2000 and much broader in its scope than Wired. It recognized that the contemporary world was multi-faceted and fuzzy, a poetic body sans organs, as dependent as ever upon all areas of pre-digital cultural production. Unlike other publications attending to the trajectories of the present into the future, 21.C recognized the importance of cultural memory as well, and did its best to tease out its traces and demonstrate their propulsive force in the casting of these trajectories.

As any vigilant reader will know, 21.C fussed over its moniker as often as it changed editors: "Previews of a changing world", "Scanning the future", "The magazine of culture, technology and science", "The world of ideas." All of these missed the mark, for above all else the magazine was a preparatory guide, a concentration of reconnaissance dispatches from the future: 21.C: Mode d'emploi, a user's manual for the world to come. On the occasion of 21.C's passing, I spoke to publisher Ashley Crawford and editor Ray Edgar.

DT Tell me a bit about 21.C's history.

AC & RE 21.C has had, to say the least, a tumultuous history. In a funny way 21.C has been a bit of a who's who of Australian publishing. It was started in 1991 by the Commission for the Future, and it's interesting to see how it captured so many imaginations. While it was Australian everyone wanted in: Barry Jones, David Dale, Robyn Williams, Paul Davies, Margaret Whitlam, Phillip Adams, the Quantum mob, lots of savvy media folk. After Gordon and Breach took it over and approached us in 1994 it went international and changed dramatically. Our mob was more R.U. Sirius, Kathy Acker, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker and John Shirley; still big names, just in different circles. A different beastie altogether.

DT 21.C has been a focal publication for discussion of contemporary culture and technology. Why is it being discontinued?

AC & RE In effect it is being discontinued as a magazine but will live on as a series of books by regular 21.C contributors. However as a magazine in its most recent incarnation 21.C suffered from several problems. The company publishing the magazine is a successful publisher of highly specialized medical and scientific journals. 21.C was far from specialized in that respect and accordingly the company had great difficulty working out how to market a title which had broader appeal. Without marketing it was difficult to establish the nature of the magazine in the



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public's eye. There was also the problem of advertising. As an editorial policy we avoided sucking up to the Bill Gateses of the world. The material was not about promoting product and when products were discussed such as Microsoft, Disneyland, Nike, software etc, it was usually with a critical tone as opposed to fawning. Most magazines rely upon press releases to inform them, we relied upon our writers and our instincts—probably a mistake.

DT In his Introduction to Transit Lounge [a recently published 21.C anthology, see review on page 25] William Gibson described 21.C as “determinedly eclectic.” What kind of audience were you attempting to reach?

AC & RE Again a problem. Given that the magazine's brief was the future, well the future effects “everyone” and that was reflected by readers' surveys. We had subscribers ranging from unemployed 18 year old hackers through to US Vice President Al Gore, scientists, graphic designers, architects, you name it. Given that it wasn't being actively marketed towards any specific segment, well, Gibson got it right when he described it as eclectic.

DT 21.C provided an important space for Australian digital artists to get their work out into the international community, and looking through the catalogue of back issues, the promotion of new media arts was one of its most consistent features. How important was this to your editorial policy?

AC & RE Very important. One of the most amazing things about our work with digital artists and illustrators is that we could confidently state that Australia produced the best work in the world in this field. 21.C's main sales ended up being in North America and we regularly received parcels from San Francisco and New York illustrators trying to get a gig in 21.C. However there was no comparison to the work being done here by Troy Innocent, Elena Popa, Murray McKeich, Ian Haig, James Widdowson and others. It was a wonderful challenge to illustrate the magazine. Given the futuristic topics we couldn't exactly send a photographer to 2020 to take a snap. The illustrations had to reflect the content, but could rarely be literal. They were impressionistic images of a world yet to come.

DT It could also be argued that 21.C really got into discussions of multimedia art before anyone else. What's your sense of the magazine's contribution to multimedia criticism?

AC & RE Well naturally we would hope that it has a lasting impact. I strongly believe that the writings of McKenzie Wark, Mark Dery, Bruce Sterling and in a more quirky sense R.U. Sirius, Rudy Rucker and Margaret Wertheim stand up very strongly indeed. Really, not many other publications have delved into multimedia criticism as heavily as 21.C with the exception of MediaMatic, which definitely leads the field in terms of words, but which unfortunately doesn't have the budget to illustrate the discussions as lavishly as we did.

DT In the final analysis, you always had a problem with categorisation, didn't you? Do you think in the public imagination 21.C was over-identified as an internet/cyberculture publication?

AC & RE Yeah, people described it all sorts of ways. A socially aware Wired, an intelligent Mondo 2000. But it was by no means a Wired, and it was not really what you'd call an internet magazine, although as a subject area that was a regular element. But it was more what was being done creatively on the New, eg Mark Amerika's Grammatron or Richard Metzger's Disinformation, than it was about commercial or technological developments. 21.C was, essentially, a cultural studies magazine produced in an age of cyberbabble, trying to make sense of the creative furore in an undefined cultural era.

Darren Tofts is the author (with artist Murray McKeich) of *Memory Trade. A Prehistory of Cyberculture* forthcoming 1998, Craftsman House. He is also working on a collection of essays on art, culture and technology.

Some aspects of 21.C can still be found here <http://www.21cmagazine.com> Eds. 2013



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