

# What May Happen in the Next Hundred Years: Joanna Russ's Food Forecast

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In 1900, John Elfreth Watkins, Jr published a (now famous) forecast entitled “What may happen in the next hundred years”. In that piece, Watkins, an American journalist,<sup>1</sup> made twenty-eight predictions about what the world would be like “before the dawn of 2001”, and most of them were quite spot-on. Of course some have missed the mark, like when he predicted that we would be able to go from the USA “To England in Two Days” or that “Automobiles will be Cheaper than Horses” (although in this case, it gets more accurate by the day...) (Watkins 1900: 8). Other predictions are becoming dangerously accurate – “There will be No Wild Animals except in menageries” – and a few point to changes we are still hoping for – “There will be No Street Cars in Our Large Cities” or “How Children will be Taught (A university education will be free to every man and woman)” (*ibidem*).

As far as food is concerned, Watkins's forecasts about the preparation, distribution and production of food have totally hit the mark: he foresaw the development of genetically modified crops (“Peas as Large as Beets”, “Melons, cherries, grapes, plums, apples, pears, peaches, and all berries will be seedless” [*ibidem*]); modern farming techniques (“Oranges will Grow in Philadelphia”); the general use of refrigerators and the growing concern about food sanitation (“No Foods will be Exposed. [...] Liquid-air refrigerators will keep great quantities of food fresh for long intervals [*ibidem*]); the depletion of coal (“Coal will Not be Used for Heating or Cooking”), and its replacement by renewable resources such as hydroelectricity (“Man will have found electricity manufactured by water-power to be much cheaper”), electro culture in greenhouses (“Vegetables Grown by Electricity. Winter will be turned into Summer and night into day by the farmer.” [*ibidem*]); and, finally, the rise of convenience food and other commodities of the on-the-go world: takeout food, home deliveries, catering services or industrial cooking. Here's a short excerpt from the last prediction:

**Ready-Cooked Meals will be Bought** from establishments [...] at a price much lower than the cost of individual cooking. Food will be served hot or cold to private houses in pneumatic tubes or automobile wagons. The meal being over, the dishes used will be packed and returned

to the cooking establishments where they will be washed. Such wholesome cookery will be done in electric laboratories rather than in kitchens. These laboratories will be equipped with electric stoves, and all sorts of electric devices such as coffee-grinders, egg-beaters, stirrers, shakers, parers, meat-choppers, meat-saws, potato-mashers, lemon-squeezers, dish-washers, dish-dryers and the like. [...] Having one's own cook and purchasing one's own food will be an extravagance. (*ibidem*)<sup>2</sup>

Watkins's forecast was based on data collected from the leading experts on science and technology at the time. As he explains at the beginning of the piece,

[t]hese prophecies will seem strange, almost impossible. Yet they have come from the most learned and conservative minds in America. To the wisest and most careful men in our greatest institutions of science and learning I have gone, asking each in his turn to forecast for me what, in his opinion, will have been wrought in his own field of investigation before the dawn of 2001 – a century from now. These opinions I have carefully transcribed. (*ibidem*)

It seems obvious that these predictions answer people's anxieties and hopes regarding food at the beginning of the century: they were anxious about overpopulation and food scarcity, and they were hopeful that science and technology would solve these problems (hence, the "super foods" – "Strawberries as Large as Apples" and "Peas as Large as Beets" – which we also find in speculative fiction written around the same time, such as in *Food of the Gods*, by H.G. Wells).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, nineteenth-century fascination with gadgetry and automation, as well as the rise of modern capitalism, contributed to the dream of "a modern urban experience where goods are available" with a minimum of effort or even interpersonal contact in a growing technological environment (cf. Belasco 2007: 174).

On the other hand, if we look at our own century, it is also clear that the problems we are now facing have emerged out of the fulfilment of many of these predictions. In consumer capitalism, uncontrolled growth and waste go hand in hand. So, instead of fighting food scarcity like in 1900, in industrialised Western countries we are facing the problem of food surplus and waste. Add to it the new high-tech consumerism, and we are left with a problem of technological addiction and tech-waste. Especially in our kitchens. The electric kitchen dreamed by Thomas Edison and others (which Watkins refers to) turned into reality during the 20th century and, soon enough, advances in electronics made the vision of a fully automated, Smart Home possible (i.e. a house with centralised control). In the 21st century, it won't be long until "home automation and interconnection elements of our own living place" run our lives through what is known as the Internet of Things (Lee 2017: 258).

Bearing this in mind, I propose a similar – more modest – survey to understand the twenty-first century. Inspired by the fact that this piece was published in the *Ladies' Home Journal*,<sup>4</sup> I suggest that instead of asking "the most learned and conservative minds in America", "the wisest and most careful men in our greatest institutions of science and learning", we "ask" one

of the most learned and radical minds in America; one of the wisest and most controversial and revolutionary women in our great institutions of literature and learning: the award-winning writer, renowned academic and literary critic, Joanna Russ.

Together with writers such as Marge Piercy, Ursula Le Guin, and Alice Sheldon (aka James Tiptree, Jr.), Joanna Russ was one of the female voices who revolutionised American science-fiction in the 1960s and '70s, transforming it, as Jeanne Cortiel has already pointed out, into "one of the richest spaces for feminist utopian thinking and cultural criticism" (Cortiel 1999: 1). Russ was very much interested in the "re-perceiving of experience", which she associated with the writing of science fiction and the process of "anali[zing] reality by changing it" (Russ 1995: xv). As Russ once put it, "Science-fiction is *What if* literature" and, therefore, "the perfect literary mode in which to explore (and explode) our assumptions about 'innate' values and 'natural' social arrangements, in short about Human Nature, Which Never Changes" (Russ 2007: 205, 206).<sup>5</sup>

So if we were to extract a set of predictions about the future of food from her work we would always have to bear in mind that Russ, like any writer, is as much concerned with the future as she is with the present, and is as much concerned with changes as she is with the consequences of those changes for human nature. And this is very clear in two of her short stories, both of which can be found in Russ's *The Hidden Side of The Moon: Stories* (1987), a book containing a selection of texts written over a period of 25 years. The first one is "Nor Custom Stale", published in 1959, in the popular *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and the second one, "The Throwaways", published ten years later, in 1969, in the magazine *Consumption*.

These are two dystopian cautionary tales about the allure of technology and the perils of the consumer society, in which food plays a significant role. Warren Belasco would say that these short stories belong to the "soft" or "cornucopian" variant of dystopias, the ones where "life is too easy, with few struggles, so humans become weak, dumb and vulnerable" and "in which abundance and security are achieved but at the cost of free will and thought" (Belasco 2006: 99). Let's begin with "Nor Custom Stale".

"Nor Custom Stale" was Joanna Russ's first short story, published when she was in her second year at the Yale School of Drama (Cortiel 1999: 1). It is about an "intelligent" house that provides for everything its occupants need, while prolonging their lives for a good many years. The title of the short story is taken from Shakespeare's play *Anthony and Cleopatra*, from a well-known passage describing Cleopatra's charms: "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety: [...]" (Shakespeare 2.2: 242-3). In Russ's story, this description refers to *the house*: there is nothing – neither time nor repeated use – that may end its infinite ability to take care of those who inhabit it... so we are told at the beginning of the story:

They had discovered immortality. Oh not for people, not at all; it was Houses that were immortal. Harry and Freda's House had been in their family for fifteen generations. [...] They were proud of their House, for, as the Company always said (after proving to Harry and Freda that their House was in perfect working order), "Our Houses last, not a lifetime, but forever." (Russ 1989: 124-5)

The House consisted of a tightly controlled environment, totally artificial and isolated from the outside world (typical of technological utopian fantasies) (cf. Belasco 2007: 167). It “stood on a little hill some three or four miles on the highway” (*idem*: 125), like a beacon of technological exceptionalism – as the Winthorpean “city upon a hill” rhetoric fully reminds us:

The House was attractive and semi-spherical and stood on a little hill some three or four miles on the highway. [...] The House was perfect. It gave them Air (for all the windows were sealed), it gave them power, and it would let you choose any delicious dish you wanted and then send its electric voice calling and calling to the nearest city to bring it to you. Or if you wanted Food to cook yourself, it would make that for you too, from the rock under its own foundation. (Russ 1989: 125)

The House provides Air, Power, and Food, which means it has a central information system – a Panel – that coordinates security, maintenance, energy use, and so on. One day a red light appears on this Panel, followed by another red light, and another, and another... and a few weeks later, Harry and Freda have to give up the majority of the technological commodities provided by the House: they lose their car, magazines and newspapers stop coming in, the electric calendar stops on March 17, they are unable to see any broadcasted images, their communications are out of order, and they become more and more isolated from the outside world. Ready-fixed meals are no longer available as well, so they must resort to cooking real food – Freda, does, let us be clear. And the reason it needs clarifying is because the imagery surrounding the “home of the future” that dominated the end of the 19th-century and that continued well through the 1950s, with the Populuxe<sup>6</sup> era, and the mid-60s, was often presented as a “re-visioning of housework in order to liberate women from [tedious] domestic chores” (Belasco 2007: 109). However, in this new “push-button world” women never really left the kitchen. The fact that Thomas Edison predicted that thanks to electric cooking the housewife of the future would be a “domestic engineer” is evidence enough (Edison 2008: 259).

As time goes by, Freda and Harry become disconnected from the world, alienated in a perfectly timed monotony, a never-ending loop, consisting mainly of breakfast, lunch and dinner:

In the morning Freda would get up at exactly 8:30 by the electric clock and make breakfast consisting of scrambled eggs and real bacon. At 9:30 she would wake up Harry and the two of them would eat breakfast. While the house cleaned the dishes and made the beds, they would do the morning’s crossword puzzle (one apiece) and then read a book until lunch time. At lunch they always had the same menu and at dinner, too (after finishing their books). [...] Then the next morning, Freda would get up at exactly 8:30 and the morning after that she would get up at exactly 8:30 and then the next morning... (Russ 1989: 129)

Eventually the House ends up disintegrating into a million atoms, leaving Freda and Harry unprepared and unprotected to deal with the natural catastrophe that had meanwhile occurred: the air of the earth had frozen and a wall of snow had engulfed the entire landscape. Only “old-fashioned”, “archaeological survival” (Russ 1989: 131) could now save them, but they were not prepared for it... as such things go.

Unlike Victorian utopias, in which automation freed people for higher pursuits (cf. Belasco 2007: 112), in “Nor Custom Stale” automation just pushes people into isolation, endless monotony and eventually death. Interestingly enough, five years later, when Isaac Asimov writes about the technological kitchens of the future (after visiting the General Electric Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair of 1964), he echoes some of Russ’s concerns, when he points out that the only downside to smart kitchens is boredom. In a piece published in *The New York Times*, called “Visit to the World’s Fair of 2014”, Asimov writes that gadgetry will continue to relieve people of tedious jobs, since kitchen units will prepare “automeals”. EVEN SO [*sic*], says Asimov, “mankind will suffer badly from the disease of boredom [...]. This will have serious mental, emotional and sociological consequences, and I dare say that psychiatry will be far and away the most important medical speciality in 2014” (Asimov 1964: 20).

Joanna Russ goes back to this theme in a later short story called “The Throwaways”, but this time her target is less people’s dependence on technology and more people’s eagerness to consume and throwaway. The setting is a capitalist consumer society in the future, in which bodies are purchased; heads are used as hats, for decoration; husbands are owned in pairs or more – and everything is commodified and disposable. This is how the story begins: two women meet at a cafeteria – one is a Traditionalist, the other a Fashionable:

They met in a cafeteria (kah-*fet*-er-*ee*-yuh, n. origin unknown. An establishment where fet may be obtained) and the Traditionalist took one slot while the Fashionable took the other. Both were young, barely ninety. Clothes were a bit drab that week and the Fashionable was wearing the ‘natural look’, somebody else’s body, of which she had several spares at home. She had also thought of bringing along an extra head, but did not wish to appear gaudy. The Traditionalist, on the other hand, was genuinely in her own skin. Nothing but.” (Russ 1989: 98)

“Fet” is the most fashionable food of the moment. It’s a *must*. It hangs in the air, “little pieces detaching themselves from the main mass [...] and drifting gently from side to side” (*idem*: 99) – a sort of “Cocaigne-meets-Gernsback’s Appetizer room in Scienticafe” kind of thing.<sup>7</sup> The Fashionable loves fet, and everything else that is “in”. That’s why she lives in a Disposable House – an automatic house, which sets “the machines in the walls to extrude the proper furnishings and accessories for each particular time of the day”, as well as a pattern decoration according to one’s mood: it can be a “French Provincial” theme, a Hawaiian theme, or even random designs (like we usually do on our computer desktops or screensavers) (*idem*: 99). Of course, the Fashionable doesn’t live with the same pattern for more than a day, since that may lead to boredom or, even worse, attachment – which is not “in”. There are other kinds of houses, of

course, like the Instantaneous, which anticipate people's needs and desires, but they make you feel very passive, so the Fashionable is undecided (*idem*: 100).

Now, the Traditionalist doesn't want any of that. She lives in a proper House with walls and only uses throwaways:

"I," said the Traditionalist, [...] "live with solid walls and Throwaways."

"Throwaways!" gasped the Fashionable.

"There's a little shop where you can get them," said the Traditionalist, lowering her voice.

"Illegal, of course. A factory in the Rockies. I go there every week and pick out everything. Guaranteed for a week. They're delivered through a secret underground organization. At the end of the week my husbands and I smash the hard things with our feet and put the whole mess down the disposal chute. Then I go back again."

"Oh!", gasped the Fashionable. "Oh, my!" (*idem*: 101)

Weighing in on this secret, the Fashionable finally finds the courage to ask the Traditionalist about what everybody is now craving for, the "must-have" commodity of the moment – "Things":

"Did you ever hear," she hissed, "of Things?"

"Of what?" said the Traditionalist.

"Things," said the Fashionable breathlessly. "just Things. You make them with your own hands. Everything. To sit in. To sleep on. To eat from. You just make them. First you make them and then you put them around and then –" (she almost choked) "then – you just leave them there."

"You leave them there?" said the Traditionalist slowly.

"Yes," said the Fashionable faintly. "You just leave them there. They're permanent."

The Traditionalist jerked away. She tottered. She turned ashen. She almost fell. "Permanent!" she cried in horror. "How can you say such a thing to me? I may be a Traditionalist but I'm not a – savage! A pervert! A – *nonconsumer!* Permanent? I'd rather die!" (*idem*: 101)

This dread of being identified as a *nonconsumer* is a very insightful critique of wasteful consumer economy. The world's carrying capacity is being strained in the name of "a desire to own and control everything", very typical of "capitalism in its advanced, industrial phase, whether in its ascendant or disappointed phase", as Joanna Russ points out in one of her essays written in the 1970s (Russ 1995: 36, 38). In 2019, standing at the dawn of the 4th Industrial Revolution, we would say that this is a fine example of how "advanced capitalism thrives by selling life-styles and brands of identity", as Rosi Braidotti has already pointed out, producing differences for the sake of commodification, in a logic of hyperindividualism or "quantitative proliferations of the self" (Braidotti 2005-2006: [7]). And this is something Russ understood early on in the 1970s and that will probably be aggravated with the rise of Artificial Intelligence in our present day.

To conclude, I would like to try to extract some predictions from these two short stories, by imitating Joanna Russ's style (she was a brilliant essayist and I will loosely follow the structure

she used in her essay "Somebody is trying to kill me and I think it's my husband: The Modern Gothic" [Russ 1995: 113-4]):

## Predictions

1. Technology will be 100% reliable and autonomous.
2. Intelligent Houses will feed us and make sure our daily routine runs flawlessly.
3. Smart houses will take care of boring domestic chores, freeing humans for higher pursuits (such as reading).
4. The House of the Future will anticipate all our needs and desires.
5. Artificial food will be everywhere.
6. *Nonconsumers* will be vilified.

## Translation

1. We won't understand how 98% of technology works. But, if we must be controlled, let's do it luxuriously and with the utmost comfort.
2. We will be utterly dependent on our Houses and unable to fight for our lives, should we need to.
3. When technology fails, women are still expected to go to the kitchen and solve the problem. (*read*: we'd better learn how to cook... or how to reprogram the robots).
4. Artificially-controlled environments encourage addictive behaviour, emotional isolation, and boredom. (*read*: Asimov was right – psychiatry is still the right career choice).
5. Real Food will only be available on the black market, in the dark web or in any other dark-coloured underground space (such is the schizophrenic nature of advanced capitalism: you crave for what you don't have, and someone always profits from it).
6. Let's hope they can save the world.

CONCLUSION: We should all go and read another Joanna Russ book. She is definitely a "Keepaway".

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## Notes

1. His father was a Curator of Mechanical Technology at the United States National Museum (today the Smithsonian Museum).
2. Supermarkets of the late 1930s introduced packaged, chilled meats and 'frosted foods' (Belasco 2007: 175).
3. In *Food of the Gods*, first published between December 1903 and June 1904 in *Pearson's Magazine*, Wells explores the idea of a superfood (*Herakleophorbia*) that can feed the entire population, thus creating a race of giants.
4. The *Ladies' Home Journal* was a sister publication of the *Post*.
5. As Russ further explains, "[a]ll sorts of definitions have been proposed by people in the field, but they all contain both The What If and The Serious Explanation; that is, science fiction shows things not as they characteristically or habitually are but as they might be, and for this 'might be' the author must offer a rational, serious, consistent explanation" (Russ 2007: 205).
6. *Populuxe* refers to low-cost consumer goods that are still perceived as being fashionable or luxurious. Many of the products produced at the time were based on 1950s architecture and design and they were advertised as "popular luxury" or "luxury for all". The word was created by the author and historian Thomas Hine for his 1986 book of the same name (see Hine 1999).
7. Essences, liquid food and other emulsions were a common motif for female science fiction writers in the 1920s, particularly in pulp fiction (see Donawerth 1994: 138-39).