Short Skirts, Telephonoscopes and Ancient Locomotives

Albert Robida’s Vision of the Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

Albert Robida (1848-1926) was a French illustrator, caricaturist and novelist. In 1883 he wrote and illustrated Le Vingtième Siècle, a futuristic novel which gives us a look at twentieth-century life. This book is a science-fiction landmark, with its ambivalent attitude towards technology. In his development of such a detailed and coherent aesthetic of the future, Robida was the first true science fiction illustrator. Robida’s illustrations are an integral part of the novel and are thus worth analysing as a means of expression. I take a closer look at the illustrations, analysing their content and the way they interact with the text. I especially focus on the way they relate to Robida’s own historical context. First, the novel’s place in the science fiction genre is discussed, then its place in developments in illustration. Toward the end, the fashion, architecture, technology and general culture is taken into account. This provides the answers to the central question: how does Robida’s imagined future fit within his time? The novel acutely describes the mass effects of technological change. Robida creates a world akin to an anti-utopia. He conveys his ambivalence towards this progress and its repercussions through the fate of monuments, unthinking historicising fads and the effects of new technology on daily life. He creates a fleshed out world where his contemporary culture is mixed with a futuristic one. His illustrations contribute to this realistic world, which the reader explores from within. I compare this work to the world Robida lived in and to his other endeavours, using both visual evidence and historical context. The illustrations, filled with airplanes, short skirts and telephonoscopes, show a light-weighted commentary on Robida’s changing time, unchanging human nature and the uneasy relationship between past and progress.

KEYWORDS

Albert Robida, Science Fiction, Illustration, Fin-de-siècle, Visual Analysis, Art History.

INTRODUCTION

The phrase du passé au future [from the past to the future] […] accurately reflects Robida’s own chronological focus in his fiction and his art. His principal interests were preserving the past, chronicling the present and visualizing the future (Evans 2009, 523).

With this statement by Arthur B. Evans, Albert Robida’s work is aptly summarised. Albert Robida (1848-1926) was a French illustrator, caricaturist and novelist. He is best known for his futuristic novels set in the twentieth century. The first of these, written and illustrated by Robida in 1883, is
simply called *Le Vingtième Siècle*. Although they are not generally well known today, Robida and his *livres d’anticipation* are usually at least briefly featured in the surveys of science fiction literature. Among them, as in other literary studies, opinions on Robida’s merit as a science fiction author vary. In earlier studies by science fiction historians, the artist has been considered of secondary importance. For example, John Clute and Peter Nicholls’ *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* laments how “the constant ironic intelligence of his work is rather undermined by his inability to imagine the future except in terms of more and more gadgetry: social mores remain frozen in the Victorian mould” (Clute and Nicholls 1993, 1014). However, different authors have tried to revive Robida as an important science fiction writer and artist. Professor in literature Marc Angenot praises Robida for his acuteness in deducing technological changes and their impact on society (Angenot 1983). Philippe Willems, who translated *Le Vingtième Siècle* into English, similarly argues that Robida’s speculations are among the best of the artist’s period. According to Willems, they give dimension to and flesh out Robida’s future more than other science fiction of that era, due a greater amount of contextual elements (Willems 1999, 354). Nowadays, Robida is recognised in the field as a pioneer of the emerging genre (Willems 2004, xv). However, this literature that writes positively about Robida’s use of illustration as a means of fleshing out his story, mostly neglects to analyse specific images. They include examples as illustrations of their articles, but do not specify how they relate to the story. Thus, research can still be done in this area, further substantialising knowledge on Robida’s quality of illustration and imagination.

In this article, I will take a closer look at the illustrations, analysing their content and especially focusing on the way they relate to Robida’s own historical context. This way the analysis bridges the gap between the history of art and literature, between high and low culture. Studying the fashion, architecture, technology and general culture provides answers to the central question: how does Robida’s imagined future fit within his time? With this methodological approach, I acquire new insights into the merits of the artist’s work. His illustrations, filled with airplanes, short skirts and téléphonoscopes, show a light-weighted commentary on Robida’s changing time, unchanging human nature and the uneasy relationship between past and progress.

**ALBERT ROBIDA**

Let us first get to know Robida a little better. He was a productive and versatile artist and writer. In the duration of his career, approximately from 1869 to 1925, he authored or illustrated more than 200 books and made an estimation more than 60,000 drawings. His own books include several futuristic novels, works on the evolution of costume, and travel guides of old towns and their architecture. He has also illustrated others authors’ works, such as the stories of François Rabelais.
or Octave Uzanne (Brun 1984). His books were directed at both the high and low ends of the market, with luxury editions for collectors and inexpensive popular editions (Emery 2005, 75). He was well known among his contemporaries, perhaps mostly as the editor of the satirical journal *La Caricature*, for which Robida himself also made many drawings. The artist mostly worked with the technique of lithography, achieving a dynamic and spontaneous effect (Clute and Nicholls 1993, 1014).

Robida worked in a variety of art forms. This transgression of established categories was characteristic of artistic life in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Artists experimented with styles, subjects and techniques, moving into a whole spectrum of media, such as the decorative arts, poster making and book illustration. Cross-disciplinary collaboration, for instance between writers and visual artists, blurred the borders of artistic production, allowing the emergence of new forms of expression (Gott and Weir 1997, 130). Robida was one of those people. Not only did he both write and illustrate his *Le Vingtième Siècle*, he also collaborated with writers as an illustrator, designed menus for artists’ gatherings, and even put together and entire historic village for the Paris World Exhibition of 1900. Although his production might seem very heterogeneous, some recurrent themes can be identified in it. Firstly, humour is nearly ubiquitous, as is his heavy use of visual media to convey ideas. Distinguishable is also his interest in the many facets of human activity, especially the ways social identities are expressed in areas such as costume, urban life and

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1. For the life of Robida, as well as an extensive bibliography of both his writings and graphic art, Brun’s 1985 biography is the basic source of information. One should be careful to note that the publication does not use any references and should thus be approached critically.
architecture, and education. Lastly, a fascination with science, history and war pervades his works (Willems 1999, 335).

Robida’s place in Nineteenth-century French science fiction

Before I can analyse Le Vingtième Siècle in depth, some context must be provided on the state of French literature at the time, specifically on science fiction. At the end of the nineteenth century, science fiction was still a relatively young genre, as the phrase was coined in 1851, the year of the London Great Exhibition. Jules Verne was the one to put science fiction on the map with his adventure novels (Farrant 2007, 141-142). He might seem to have cast his shadow over most of the nineteenth century as the author of highest acclaim, but a large number of other writers was active too. Scientific achievements and the Industrial Revolution inspired popular novels, and the period ranging from the 1880s to the 1930s could subsequently be called the golden age of French science fiction. Robida’s futuristic works fit right into this time. There were never any specific magazines of the genre, but wide-circulation periodicals such as Journal des Voyages and La Science Illustrée regularly published stories and serialised these novels of anticipation. Science fiction was thus granted a certain degree of respectability by being introduced as an extension of travel and adventure stories (Clute and Nicholls 1993, 445). The fact that Le Vingtième Siècle ran in the satirical journal La Caricature may be interpreted as a statement on its content, as it was above all a humorous story. Additionally, the fact that Robida was the editor-in-chief comes into play here.

Robida’s first futuristic novel, Voyages très-extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul (1879) is a parody of Jules Verne’s adventure novels Voyages Extraordinaires. Robida’s most notable and more prophetic works are Le Vingtième Siècle (1883), La Guerre au Vingtième Siècle (1887) and La Vie Électrique (1891). Frequently, these kinds of anticipation novels were first published as series of small instalments in periodicals, and then generally also as books. Le Vingtième Siècle underwent this process, as it was initially published in fifty parts from January 1882 onwards (Clute and Nicholls 1993, 1014).

But what happens in Robida’s imagined future? The plot of the novel begins in 1952. In the span of a couple of years, the reader gets to know the life in the twentieth century through the eyes of the female protagonist, Hélène Colobry. Having been brought up at a boarding school, she arrives in Paris as a young woman and a relative outsider. As women have been emancipated in this future, she needs to find a career. She tries out several options and although she is skilled at them, her heart is not in it. In fact, she has quite a traditional frame of mind, and would rather settle down than work. Fortunately, she falls in love with and marries a cousin who does not oblige her to become a career woman. The last part of the book is devoted to their ensuing honeymoon. The plot is, admittedly, rather thin. But it is the imagined world surrounding it that makes this novel interesting.
Robida injects current events and institutionalised inventions into the daily lives of his protagonists. This way, the reader gets to explore the future civilisation from within. Here we see the artist’s interest in the many facets of human activity. His fascination with expressed social identities shows itself in his narrative and illustrations.

The novel partly fits into pre-existing literary traditions of the genre. Starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, the anti-utopian genre had emerged in France. The anti-utopia can be seen as a polemical counterpart to both the utopian genre in literature and to the utopian conceptions prevalent in that era, such as the bourgeois notion of progress which supposed that the advances in science and technology correlate with those of morality. The anti-utopia genre depicts a future social order in which the values conceived to be fundamentally human are degraded.² Marc Angenot terms Robida as the master of futuristic anti-utopia of the fin de siècle. Still, Angenot also admits that the writer’s imagined society does not entirely conform to the standard of the genre. His future lacks a certain totalitarian anguish. Although it is grotesque and ridiculous, humans remain the same as they have always been. They are vain, slaves to their emotion, and naïve enthusiasts of progress (Maurel, Angenot and Philmus 1985, 129-133). In a sense, this progress does not exist except on the superficial level of gadgetry (Angenot 1983, 239). If we compare this to Verne’s novels, there are some similarities. For all Verne’s apparent optimism of technological and scientific potential, his stories are underpinned by a deep pessimism. He echoes the alienations and distresses that come with modernisation. But the most important difference between him and Robida lies in their focus. Verne writes tales of heroes taking on seemingly impossible tasks with the help of well-researched and thoroughly explained technology (Farrant 2007, 141-144). Robida, on the other hand, describes a society where these technological innovations are implemented, albeit still advancing. He explores the effects on day-to-day life from within.

**ILLUSTRATIONS IN LE VINGTIÈME SIÈCLE**

The imagined world of the future is fleshed out through Robida’s illustrations. These are truly the aspect of his novels that set him apart from his colleagues. *Le Vingtième Siècle* has even been called the “first hypermedia science fiction novel”, because the graphics and text are closely intertwined in order to enhance and expand the reader’s experience (Willems 2004, xxx). Although this term seems somewhat exaggerated, it is true that the illustrations supplement and at some points even overwhelm the text, as they are found on at least every other page. They consist of plates on separate pages, smaller vignettes put in between the text, or are placed more experimentally around the text.

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² There is a subtle difference between an anti-utopia and a dystopia. The first is a utopia that the author created as a criticism of utopianism or some particular utopia, while the latter is a world that the author intended as considerably worse than the society in which a contemporaneous reader would have lived (Claeys and Tower Sargent 1999, 2).
An example of the latter can be seen in fig. 1. In fact, the author seems to have wanted to add so many illustrations, that they often fall several pages behind the subject in the text.

When Robida’s use of illustration is praised in recent academic writings, it is mainly from the perspective of the history of science fiction, where, as Willems writes, the pictorial aspect of his novels is unprecedented. It was very uncommon for a writer to provide his own illustrations in this genre (Willems 1999, 369-370). At the same time, the artist’s illustrative techniques owe much to artistic developments in illustration earlier in the century, which in turn often occurred due to technical innovations in reproductive printing technology (Mainardi 2017, 1-3). This complicates Robida’s ambivalence towards technology, as he is both reaping the benefits of these developments and reacting against the possible consequences of technological progress.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, illustrations were sparse because of their expense. The processes that developed toward the middle of the century made illustrated books affordable for an increasingly literate public. Wood engraving allowed word and image to be combined on one page, lithography produced images cheaply and quickly, and paper became cheaper. Illustrations proved
to be a major commercial attraction, so publishers increased their quantity. The desire to add more and more images led to new visual strategies, as the artists needed to find subject material for hundreds rather than tens of illustrations. Earlier book illustration depicted an event that presented the essence of a scene, with its focus on moments of high drama. This made way for an abundance of smaller, anecdotal moments. Artists also experimented with different creative innovations. For example, they created a parallel narrative in which the story unfolded through both word and image, added portraiture of the characters, and created vignettes that discarded the conventional rectangular frame (Mainardi 2017, 160-164, 238).

The innovations that were made during this time had their influence on later artists. Robida’s novel shows both many small portraits and different forms of images integrated with the text. On a narrative level, the artwork does not just duplicate information from the written text. Rather, it provides supplemental context (Willems 2004, xxx). In order to understand Robida’s techniques better, it warrants to analyse an example from the Le Vingtième Siècle, in which the characters discuss the respective advantages of two food companies over dinner (Robida 1883, 77-88). These companies operate like factories, providing food to numerous households via pipes. The dialogue mostly focuses on the side of the consumer, where the characters discuss subscriptions and personal experiences. The only elaborate description of the inside workings of these factory-kitchens comes in one paragraph, as told by one of the characters. Contrarily, multiple illustrations, such as fig. 1, provide the reader-viewer with different views of the machines and the employees. In the dialogue, the factory is said to be even more impressive than Le Creusot, a French industrial town that is famous for its powerful steam hammer from 1877 (anonymous 1981). The vignette Le marteau pion de l’usine alimentaire (p. 70) shows a similar-looking machine in action, but this is not discussed any further in the text. Robida leaves it up to the reader to make the connection.

Thus, the production and design of Robida’s novel itself stood in the context of technological progress and the discussion this gave rise to. The artist himself seems to have been ambivalent about the subject, even though his work, such as mass-culture caricature and the integration of illustration and text on the same page, depended on advances in print technology. In his work, Robida has concerned himself with the ramifications of technological innovation for the future of books. This can be seen in one of his more high-end art projects in collaboration with the bibliophile Octave Uzanne, the book Contes pour les Bibliophiles (1895). Written by Uzanne and illustrated by Robida, one of the stories in this book is called La Fin des Livres (Uzanne and Robida 1895, 123-145). It envisions a future where the written word has evolved into audiobooks. Just as Robida’s own novels, it is an ambivalent and humorous account of the transformative potential of technology. Although Uzanne and his bibliophile circle placed importance on the physicality of beautiful books, the envisioned future is not necessarily bleak. Rather, new collector’s items are
just created by designing elaborate cylinder casings. Humans adapt innovations to fit their own preference.

The Nineteenth-Century Roots of the Twentieth Century

After discussing the connection between Robida’s work and artistic and literary roots, I now will analyse certain themes within the illustrations’ content and their relation with the historical context of Robida’s surroundings and his own interests. The artist lived in a time of great urban and technological changes. He did not always think kindly of these changes around him, modifying the city of Paris. In fact, he had joined the Société des Amis des Monuments Parisiens in 1886. This society strove to guard various art forms, including architecture. When plans were announced to build a metro above ground, multiple buildings were to be demolished. Affronted, Robida published a print on the cover of La Caricature in 1886 (Jouan et al. 2005, 65). Fig. 2 shows the city of Paris personified. She is disfigured by the metro, which runs over and through her body and the surrounding buildings. The caricature shows similarities with a bird view of Paris in Le Vingtième Siècle (fig. 3). Here, Paris is also filled to the brim with roads, railways and smoke. Even more pronounced are the parallels with multiple illustrations in the novel showing famous monuments occupied in the name of progress. The Arc de Triomphe has been turned into a hotel, while the Notre-Dame and the Tour-Saint-Jacques have become stations for flying machines (fig. 4). Across the borders, the Egyptian pyramids have been renovated and filled with shopping malls. Thus, he used both Le Vingtième Siècle and other works as a means to show the way innovations can be damaging to treasures of the past.

Another juxtaposition between past and progress is put forward when the protagonist and her friends visit the Museum of Industry and the Louvre Museum. The first one is a mainly retrospective museum of abandoned older industrial methods. The museum is filled with moving machines, steam and loud noises. This museum might very well be based on the Galerie des Machines of the Paris World Exhibition of 1878, and similar industrial shows (Anonymous 1879, 420-423). There are two notable differences, however. Firstly, all the machines in Robida’s novel are working, creating a turmoil, while this was usually not the case in these industrial exhibitions. Secondly, he firmly places the industrial inventions in a historicising setting. While the world fairs were showcasing the countries’ newest machinery, in Robida’s twentieth century these innovations are museum objects, reminiscent of an age gone by. After this overwhelming experience, the women go to rest their minds at the Louvre. Here, they take a circular tramway through all the galleries, comfortably viewing the masterpieces (Robida 1883, 46-51). This juxtaposition is not necessarily one of bad versus good. Yes, the characters are overwhelmed by the loud industrial machines, echoing the unpleasantness Robida must have experienced himself. But they do not experience the Louvre at an intellectual level as one might expect from the writer-artist. They speed through the
museum without the need for active participation. One of the girls even falls asleep. This again demonstrates Robida’s ambivalent attitude towards these innovations.

Fig. 4 – Albert Robida 1883, Station Centrale des Aéronefs à Notre-Dame

Fig. 5 – Albert Robida 1883, La Dernière Locomotive au Musée de Cluny

Fig. 6 – Albert Robida 1883, La Confusion Archéologique – Derniers Jours de la Féodalité à Chatou (D’après les plus récentes découvertes)
Indeed, Robida was all too aware of the way inventions followed each other up quickly. Things considered to be modern could be obsolete in the next century. He shows the exhibition of the last locomotive at the Museum of Cluny (fig. 5), once again in opposition to the contemporary industrial exhibitions based on novelty. The locomotive stands amidst a mixture of objects, seemingly thrown together at random. These contain artefacts such as a Greek capital, medieval statues, and a bicycle. They have all become ancient remnants on equal footing. This is a testimony to the way Robida situates his novels within a continuum instead of a static point of time. The continuous evolution is on active duty. This also means that the characters have an active relation with the past. In Robida’s twentieth century the past is a point of interest, but it is also a blurry mixture of fact and fiction. One scene depicts historical reconstructions full of comical anachronisms (fig. 6). Apparently, this inaccuracy is due to the loss of archives during the ‘Eight French Revolution’ (Willems 1999, 367). These historical reconstructions are not unlike the one Robida himself designed for the Paris World’s Fair of 1900. Along the Seine, he created a picturesque and entertaining model of life in old France, called Le Vieux Paris. The artist had painstakingly researched the structures he resurrected and aimed to make the display educational. By drawing attention to the past neglect and destruction of these buildings, he cautioned his contemporaries. He fused popular entertainment with scholarship and messages about conservation. In this way, his approach was slightly similar to the one in Le Vingtième Siècle, although the latter is more imaginative than scholarly (Emery 2005).

Returning to the novel in question, we see more instances of historical pastiche, such as when the main characters go dining inside a resurrected Tour de Nesle (fig. 7). This medieval tower had been demolished in 1665 (Lorentz and Sandron 2006, 238). The imitation houses a gothic-style
restaurant, complete with medieval-looking furniture and an armour to hang your hat. Here again, the images elaborate on the content provide by the text. The description of the visit to the restaurant is relatively short, but three illustrations give us a better look at different aspects. For example, the text describes the resurrected tower as archeologically well-researched, but the actual appearance has to be discovered through the illustration. (Robida 1883, 92-94).

These illustrations bear resemblance to Robida’s cover of La Caricature of 28 April 1883 (fig. 8). Here as well, ladies and gentlemen dine on neo-Gothic furniture. The text below declares that the Gothic is not dead, but has been restored in architecture, fashion and even manners. Indeed, the women’s dress seems to be inspired by medieval shapes. At the end of the nineteenth century all of society was incredibly interested in the Middle Ages and avidly consumed ‘medieval’ products (Emery and Morowitz 2003, 1). Robida himself was, in the words of Elizabeth Emery, “one of the most effective publicists medieval France has known.” Through his travel guides, published sketches, magazines, and other endeavours, he reached a wide audience (Emery 2011, 71). This
particular caricature seems to mock the unthinking copying of older styles, as opposed to the well-researched resurrections of Robida himself. As with the museums, historical reconstructions and resurrected monuments, Robida seems to ascribe a particular importance to proper research in comparison to anachronistic pastiche.

This brings us to the way Robida depicts fashion in his novel. Robida was no stranger to fashion, having satirised its extravagance in *La Caricature* and having illustrated publications chronicling its evolution. Comparisons can be made between an illustration from the novel showing several women in daywear, and a fashion plate of the same era (fig. 9 and fig. 10). Overall the fashion in Robida’s futuristic illustrations is not that different from the clothing that was worn in his own time, albeit slightly exaggerated in colour and shape at times. An important divergence is the fact that young women dress in short skirts and trousers, instead of the long dresses of the fin de siècle. Robida describes how these long skirts were too inconvenient for climbing into *aerostats*. Moreover, most forward-thinking women considered them to be symbols of their former slavery (Robida 1883, 41-42). As a fine testimony to his sense of humour, he has added a little illustration of a woman falling from a flying machine due to her robes. Robida’s work can thus be said to show how technological progress and new socio-political ideas influence fashion.

In the architecture and ornamentation of *Le Vingtième Siècle* as well, conventional styles are prevalent, while incorporated into futuristic inventions. Airships, cannons, and futuristic machinery are adorned with the curls and fripperies, wrought-iron ornamentation and frilly dress of late nineteenth-century fashion (Roberts 2006, 169). The furniture, just like the Gothic ones before, can evoke older styles (fig. 11 and fig. 12). The marble ornamentation of an illustrated table calls to mind the eighteenth-century interiors that were still in use in Robida’s time. Just like the successive
waves of medievalism, rococo and its aristocratic connotations had made a revival during the nineteenth century (Silverman 1989). The architecture of the illustrated houses, whether they are flying hotels or rotating beach houses, is similar to the typical Parisian streets (fig. 13). The little windows, balconies and ornamentation recalls the façades of the Parisian boulevards. Echoing the crowded contemporary streets, the twentieth-century skies are just as busy. This is illustrated in a depiction of the roofs of Paris (fig. 14). Here, the whole city is filled with flying vehicles, and these very blimps and the buildings beneath them are themselves covered in advertising. It seems to be another exaggeration of Robida’s own surroundings, which were filled to the brim with images (fig. 15). Extravagant advertising posters covered Paris’ streets as if it were an open-air exhibition (Rosa de Carvalho 2012, 131). This visually stimulating environment has in turn been depicted by artists, like Robida’s satire in question. Lastly, there are the technological advances in communication. The most notable new communication device in Robida’s novel, going a few steps further than the telephone and phonograph, is the téléphonoscope (fig. 16). It is a sort of telephone with video image and can also function as a television, broadcasting the news to people’s homes. The invention consists of a crystal plaque attached to a flexible auditory tube. Robida did not grasp the concept out of thin air, but it has its precursors and parallels. The term ‘telephonoscope’ had first appeared on 9 December 1878 in the British magazine Punch in the title of a drawing by the Franco-British Georges du Maurier. The drawing depicts a bourgeois couple at home using the device, fictitiously invented by Thomas Edison, to chat with their daughter while simultaneously watching her on a tennis court. Robida’s own models for the machine may have been based on works in the French press about the telectroscope, an invention attributed to Graham Bell that could transmit images at a distance. Moreover, Robida most likely knew about the théâtrophone invented by Clément Ader, which transmitted the sound of live performances from Parisian theatres. Placed in hotels, cafés and other places of leisure, it increased recreational opportunities for a fee (Silverman 2008, 204-205). Robida embellished these inventions and created the revolutionary téléphonoscope. Not only would it allow people to communicate from person to person, or let them hear the sound of an opera, it would allow thousands of consumers to directly receive theatrical performances from the stage in their homes.
Fig. 14 – Albert Robida 1883, *Sur les Toits*

Fig. 15 – Anonymous 1925, *Français : La rue Lepic vue depuis la place Blanche à Paris*
Alongside this creation, Robida also incorporated existing communication technology, such as the telephone and the phonograph. The telephone, invented by Graham Bell in 1876, had only become available in Paris in 1881, so two years prior to the first publication of *Le Vingtième Siècle* (Silverman 2008, 204). Although professional use prevailed during the century, private use in Europe would only become common in the twentieth century, starting with the elite (Flichy 1995). In contrast, Robida’s novel shows public telephones on the street and private ones at home. Likewise, the phonograph was known at the time of the publication of the novel, but was not widely used. The device, a predecessor of the gramophone, had been invented by Edison in 1877. It had been exhibited widely, but the initial interest had quickly disappeared. It would not be until the 1890s, after several improvements and the introduction of nickel-in-slot machines, that the phonographs caught the proverbial ear of the public (Gelatt 1965). Robida once again depicts a more wide-ranging use, especially in private spaces. It is also this phonograph that the communication devices in his novel visually seem to bear the most resemblance to. The *téléphonoscope*, telephone and phonograph generally contain the similar-looking parts of a cylinder, which contains the sound recording, and a horn, through which the sound is played. This
can be seen on fig. 15, below the screen. The artist thus combined existing technologies and fashions with futuristic inventions and exaggerations. With this he created a fleshed out world, which would have felt both familiar and excitingly new to his contemporaries.

CONCLUSION

Looking at futuristic novels from the past, such as Le Vingtième Siècle, one is tempted to judge them based on their accuracy of their guesswork. The reader can marvel at Robida’s anticipations of modern communication, or laugh at his inability to let go of Victorian morals and fashions. But in the end such a novel is best appreciated from the perspective of its contemporary culture. Robida was innovative in his use of illustrations, using them in complementary fashion to the text, even if his strategies are not as unprecedented as some scholars would contend. Although the overall plot of the novel is quite thin, it allows the reader to look at the twentieth century from within. In this society the imagined innovations are already institutionalised. Instead of complete anti-utopia, we see a world where the daily lives of the protagonists have not much changed compared to the one of the contemporaneous reader, and neither has the way they react to their surroundings. Robida has created a look at a futuristic society which is in some regards completely different from his own, but in others has stayed mostly the same. He has seen the way people have adapted to change throughout time and imagines a future in which we will continue to do so. It is possible to read his tale as one warning us against the dangers of technology, especially in the destruction of historical property, but Robida’s Twentieth Century is foremost a humorous, wry and satirical outlook on the future.3

3 As is necessary with a novel containing this many illustrations, a selection had to be made in the source material. Since the objective was to show the place of Robida’s imagined future into the context of his own time and surroundings, the chosen themes were connected to daily urban life and the way it is affected by historical developments. Subjects like the representation of foreign cultures and war were therefore mostly left out.
REFERENCES


