

Panel

Uncanny Resemblances

(How Science Fiction Produces the Future)

Itala Schmelz— Moderator

A Visit to the Zoo

One Saturday morning, I went with my family to the Chapultepec Zoo. Unexpectedly, we ran into thousands of other people forming a human mass so dense that everyone seemed to lose their individuality. The crowd expanded beyond our sight; there was no escape, no turning back; the collective flow curtailed our own will to move forward. Soon, I felt the stigma of racial difference on me, as our light skin excluded my family and me from this homogeneous mass and made us stand out. We were tourists, *patroncitos*, gringos, blonds, and our presence was submitted to scrutiny without malice but a bit of insolence. The mass of thousands of dark complexions and brown eyes and multiple limbs couldn't stop pointing: "Look, what a beautiful blue eyed *güerita*!" they said, coming closer to try and touch my daughter's cheeks, with the same fascination that their indigenous ancestors greeted the mysterious men who had arrived by sea 500 years ago.

The animal cages looked empty, while the density of humans, the dominant species on Earth, overflowed the walkways. Swept along by the flow of bodies, we couldn't see any of the zoo animals, barely managing to read their names on the huge signs that provide their biological categories. While long ago, zoos were created as a symbol of power, showing off the greatness of the empires, today they offer leisure and entertainment for the masses, so the urban population can supposedly experience nature. However, at the Chapultepec Zoo, the closest children seem to get to the world of animals are the stuffed toys sold at hundreds of stands all over the park. The designs are of the animals they couldn't see at the zoo, but reshaped through commercial imagery: a duck is Donald Duck and a lion, the Lion King.

Among its facilities, the zoo has a Butterfly House, an artificial environment used to breed different varieties of butterflies in a cocoon incubator. At birth, they are released into a small, glass-roofed garden with controlled temperature and humidity. This event of life, suggesting modesty and contemplation, actually, on the contrary, leads to some bedlam. Young hosts and hostesses organize teams to cheer the cocoons on, competing to see which one opens first. "The team that shouts the loudest, wins!" they say excitedly, while parents and children scream as if they were on a TV game show and out of the cocoon, a little test-tube butterfly shyly emerges.

When we left Chapultepec Zoo, it was as if I'd been spewed out of a terrible maelstrom, and I had the feeling that the future had abruptly caught up with us. The

modern standard of wellbeing that some real estate agencies still simulate as a market strategy, has been surpassed by the consequences of underdevelopment and, currently, without overstating it, countries like ours dramatize the dystopias of progress studied by the great authors of science.

Blinded by this shock with the future, I had to make a journey to the past; only by turning back time, can the futuristic perception of the present be re-created. From the vantage point of its geological virginity, Chapultepec Forest was one of the highest hills in the Mexico Valley, and it could be seen as a small island in Texcoco Lake. During the Aztec Empire, it is said, King Nezahualcóyotl built an aqueduct to carry water from the springs in Chapultepec to Tenochtitlán, providing the city with fresh drinking water. This gave him the right to live in Chapultepec, dedicating the place to the god of water, Tlaloc, with fountains and pools filled with the fresh, crystalline liquid. He also had trees brought from all over the Mexica Empire to be planted here and created special environments for the animals in his exotic zoo.

When the Spaniards arrived, Hernán Cortés was horrified by the presence of live malformed human specimens and burned down the zoo. He destroyed the aqueduct as a way of subduing the Aztec warriors during the siege of the city. Later, he set up grounds for cattle fairs and bullfights, thus ruining the natural flora. At the top of the hill, the monoliths honoring the *tlaotanis*, or rulers, were smashed, a chapel for Archangel Gabriel built in their place. During the Colony, a castle was built to house the Viceroy, and the Austrian Archduke Maximilian and his wife Carlota lived in it briefly in 1864. They brought refined European furniture, dishes, silverware and paintings, in order to feel at home. For the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of Mexican Independence, Porfirio Díaz had the park renovated in French style, creating the artificial lakes we see today. During the post-revolutionary period, Mexico's first presidents used the castle as their home until, in 1939, General Lázaro Cárdenas changed the presidential residency to Los Pinos, and Chapultepec Castle became the National History Museum. The zoo, as we know it, was opened in 1924, thanks to biologist Alfonso L. Herrera, who had the idea of re-creating the Aztec zoo and brought together quite a few animals, sometimes even having to pay for their food himself.

With modernist reforms, the National Museum of Anthropology, the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Natural History were built inside the park; an important contribution is Diego Rivera's mural and sculptural fountain dedicated to Tlaloc, a complete vindication of its ancient past. Whereas Chapultepec was an aristocratic promenade in the 1940s and 50s, it was gradually taken over by the working class and became the favorite place for maids, laborers and informal tradesmen who made their way to the capital from outlying regions of the county. During the 80s, it turned into a hideaway for muggers and rapists until finally, during the Salinas administration

in the 90s, a large renovation took place, *Disneylandizing* the zoo, even down to a McDonald's.

In Náhuatl, Chapultepec means "cricket hill", and today the place is plagued with a species that behaves like those insects, forming gigantic swarms that destroy everything in their path. The springs haven't had water for a long time now, and the artificial lakes created by former president Porfirio Díaz have a radioactive look about them. This forest represents 50 percent of the green areas in Mexico City, which went from being known as "the most transparent region" to becoming one of the most polluted and overpopulated cities on the planet. If the future is now, what is now our future?

Gotten Modernity

Modernity has been particularly unsuccessful in colonized countries, the so-called "third world". As an institutional project, it has made it partway and has been getting patched up en route. At the same time, unexpectedly, it has been distorted and diversified with the indigenous cultures. Western domination has created great injustice and destruction within the social structures and environments of such places, exploiting their wealth and featuring their cultural contributions as folklore for tourism. In that sense, Mexico has always had a troubled relationship with modernity. It is lived as an imposition, as something that has given, because of our origin, yet also having had what is ours taken away. We are attracted and excluded at the same time.

The complexity of today's Mexican society cannot be understood without going back to its postcolonial condition and its racial composition, resulting from the miscegenation between the indigenous and the Spaniards. In terms of religion, this meant the burial of the ancient Mexican gods and conversion to Christianity. Pragmatic and atheist modernity followed shortly, which eventually tamed a complex worldview that is today rescued in archaeological ruins.

The vital, calm and placid indigenous timing was superimposed by the Western calendar, practical time for progress, creating particular consequences in the current Mexican idiosyncrasy. As said by Alfonso Reyes: "Mexicans are the amphibian variety of mestizo: they endure all the sins of the modern epoch but still live immersed in the golden age."⁴⁷ Mexican society is often caricaturized as a society unable to focus on the future. Our northern neighbors are "tomorrow's society" for their future-looking attitude, while Mexicans are "tomorrow's society" because we leave everything for tomorrow. The Mexican personality has been described as devious in terms of economic development; in the face of the push for progress, Mexicans play dumb and wriggle out through the unexpected intricacies of the expressions *ahorita* and *al ratito*, which can range in meaning from right away to later on.

When we talk about Mexico, we immediately recognize it as the land of milenary civilizations that encompass its glorious past, yet as a dead thing: “something that happened long ago in the same place where we, the Mexicans, live today.”⁴⁸ At the same time, the political class, as well as the market and the advertising industry, have made the most out of our pre-Hispanic past, exalting the indigenous roots among the main symbols of official nationalism and emphasizing a bucolic life, away from modern life pressures, for consumption by Europeans and Americans in search of their dose of exoticism.

This notable past can be found at the National Anthropology Museum, through the remains of masterfully carved stones, with their rough and different aesthetic, but where is the living Mexican native? “The contemporary Indian occupies a segregated space, disconnected from the glorious past as well as from the present, which does not belong to him”⁴⁹, as Guillermo Bonfil Batalla says in his book *México Profundo*. Roger Bartra, in *La jaula de la melancolía — The Cage of Melancholy* notes that Mexicans “have been hurled from the original paradise and expelled from the future.”⁵⁰

In his renowned essay, Bartra states that modern culture creates its lost paradise, and with melancholic imagination of the past, it clings dialectically to the idea of a mythic stratum and the good savage. If in modernity discourse in general the “other” serves to develop the feeling of guilt for the perpetrated destruction, in countries that rose out of colonization, where modernity took root on the ruins of extraordinarily developed ancestors, this condition becomes a constituent element of the national profile. The past/future opposition is heightened in countries like ours, Bartra notes and concludes: “Mexicans resulting from the immense tragedy begun with the Conquest and ending with the Revolution are imaginary and mythical inhabitants of a violated limbo.”⁵¹

The Post-Colonial Schizophrenia in Which We Live

After the Conquest, Mexico City became the bastion of Colonial power, segregating the surviving Native Mexicans to the outlying neighborhoods. Today’s residential area of Las Lomas, the malls in the south of the city, the Santa Fe hospitals, the restaurants in La Condesa, where the “beautiful people” move, are locations of modernity acquired by the creole and mestizo minority, with European features and unpronounceable names like Schmelz. While the dark-skinned majority, prominently indigenous in origin, uprooted from rural and community lifestyles, continue forming poverty belts. Chapultepec, La Alameda, La Villa, La Merced are some of the meeting points for these masses, for whom the city seems unapproachable. In turn, such places describe their ancestors’ geography in this same valley, today strangled by industry and urbanization.

In his book *Bye, Bye Tenochtitlán*, Armando Ramírez introduces us to the Vagrant Trout, a provincial character becoming urbanized, on his day off at La Alameda Park:

“His sunglasses firmly planted, a yellow sweater that highlights his dark skin, loafers with gold buckles and a haircut that timidly approaches punk.” Every Sunday, Vagrant Trout met up with “the people” at La Alameda, yet it never occurred to him to cross to the other side, where the Hotel del Prado was: “It was as if that hotel never existed for him; it was a world apart, so he never even bothered to register it in his mind. He didn’t realize it, but he had been educated, shaped, conditioned in such a way that he assumed that Mexico City was built in different dimensions and the one he experienced at La Alameda Park and the one with the Hotel del Prado were not in the same frequency.”⁵²

In the novel *A Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley describes a future society where test-tube people are produced. While the genetically superior alphas enjoy all the privileges, the betas are designed prenatally as laborers. In our country, without the need for test-tube creations, race determines an order, rarely transgressed, between those who command and those who serve. In Mexico, a stigmatic bar defines the relationship between white and dark-skinned people, and it acts both inside individuals’ heads and on the social dynamics. In words of Bonfil Batalla: “The Indians were the workers on grandfather’s hacienda, and the Indian women were the domestic servants [...] Here one runs into that which is Indian, but only if one looks down. Looking straight ahead, at equals, the skin is white, and the hair and eyes are light. No one speaks Náhuatl, but many speak French, and today, almost everyone speaks English.”⁵³

The urban upper class in Mexico, characterized by its phobia of the *naco*, in other words contempt for any trait that reveals the indigenous ancestry, has always imported models of conduct and thought from the United States and Europe. The middle and upper middle class “do not possess a culture they themselves developed. In general, they consume foreign cultural products offered to them by an easily controlled market.”⁵⁴ Meanwhile, as described by Bonfil Batalla, the Indians, strictly, “have been deIndianized.”⁵⁵ The American dream has even spread within these lower social strata, who go by the millions to the “other side” to work as undocumented immigrants, earning dollars. While some of the new influences stick with these people, they still preserve many traits that reveal their origin. As everywhere in the world, Mexicans today eat tacos but also pizza; they push buttons on their gadgets and iPods; they drink Coke, dress in copies of transnational fashion brands, use cheap make-up and wear fake jewelry. They are a hybrid that consists of Made in China modernity while also re-creating the taste for color, masks, piercings and spiky hair of their ancestors.

While a century ago, the city still had its fill of native people wearing their traditional white cotton outfits and sombreros, now virtually extinct throughout the country, the new indigenous people, sprouts that have emerged out of the chopped roots of trees, may not preserve their traditional clothes but still keep their old languages.

In the city, rituals and celebrations of indigenous origins are still preserved, such as the markets, open roads where public life takes place, bartering, consumption of bric-a-brac and fried food, as well as pilgrimages to large religious sanctuaries. Working-class congregations today acclaim a generic indigenous identity, an undeniable survivor.

The heirs of the Aztec Empire now make up a mass of dispossessed; with different scales of racial mixing, urbanization and poverty, but as a whole, they are “born on this side of the fence.”⁵⁶ Bonfil Batalla points out that Mexican society nurses a “profound division” which is the reflection of “a past whose basic, antagonistic duality has not yet been superseded. To the contrary, it is expressed in every facet of national life. It is an original sin that has not yet been redeemed.”⁵⁷

Bartra describes the Mexican *pelado* (boor) as the urbanized peasant, a “tragic figure of modernity”, “that social castoff of the great city, still primitive”.⁵⁸ He is the incarnation of the “subdued hero”, with the “outlook of the defeated”. Servile and controlled by a feeling of inferiority, they carry their dignity with proud humbleness and hieratic melancholy, as a sentimental resurrection of their ancestors, while they are also individuals with “violent outbursts”, “shady alliances and vindictive acts”.

The author points out that: “Such a burning of pain and injury in their character is a protection against the mud of industrial civilization, the sludge of asphalt and cement. [...] In his miserable nakedness, the Mexican can only defend himself from the cold utilitarianism of bourgeois exploitation, if he can ignite a feeling of resentment in his spirit.”⁵⁹

Tamed by power and controlled by the market, they trade their labor and, like a docile flock, follow the rulings of modernity. However, as Elias Canetti points out in his book *Crowds and Power*: “Every command leaves behind a painful sting in the person who is forced to carry it out.”⁶⁰ This mass spotlights how partial the triumph of globalized culture is, as it represents the 80% of the population that does not enjoy the cosmopolitan fiction of wellbeing and technological progress. Through centuries of domination, they have grown exposed by modernity and have also lost their original paradise, the right to their own culture and faith, as well as to live off their own land.

This great majority, not only in Mexico but in the entire colonized world, not only share in being much poorer, but their dark skin or almond-shape eyes are reminiscences of their millenary cultures trampled by Western progress. Jean Baudrillard notes, “Around that mass, history is also cooling. [...] this overdense body which slows their trajectory, which slows time to the point where, right now, the perception and imagination of the future are beyond us. All social, historical and temporal transcendence is absorbed by that mass in its silent immanence.”⁶¹

Aliens and Zombies

Similarly to how I described the invasion of the multitudes at the Chapultepec Zoo, in his story of the Vagrant Trout, Armando Ramírez says, “Mass and number have taken the Alameda Park by post-revolutionary assault,” adding: “*Sociocultur* is not involved here. May a laser beam from Jupiter strike me if its social development methodologies programmed for urban coexistence plotted the landing of the Alien, the eighth citizen!”⁶² It turns out that after the furor over the space race, which took place more in the science fiction realm than within great interplanetary events, the “encounter of the third kind” is the one that occurs within the economical, cultural and racial hierarchies that differentiate humans despite the constitution of nation-states and their democratic systems; despite racial mixing and the politically correct culture.

Some science fiction stories produced in the West make the white race’s feeling of superiority clear, showing their racism towards black, brown, Asian, etc. individuals, through the long-winded appearance of menacing creatures on the screens. The fear of “the different” is seen, among other versions, in the appearance of an uncontrollable plague of aliens with lobster features threatening the civilized world. The savage creatures multiply like insects buzzing in their own density.

The most dispossessed are drawn to the crowd. As if called by a primitive instinct, they take over the public space. As a mass, they become one, and such ritual gives them the strength to overcome oppression. Together, as a whole, they can relax, make friends, love, have sex. Those moments foster flirting, carnal release, relaxing; they enable being oneself for a while at the same time hiding, mixing in among equals, since police surveillance of the lower classes is particularly malicious, and the obscene ostentation of wellbeing discriminates them.

Within their fortified paradises of exclusivity, the prosperous minority considers itself besieged by the deprived majority. This ominous mass in search of its place in history, highlights fragile bourgeois individualism; even though it remains on the other side of the bar, it is still dangerous. So far, a few control the many who threaten the status quo.

Canetti observes that the invisible make themselves present as a crowd, merging, shaping. This mass is like The Blob, brought from space by Hollywood’s science fiction. As soon as it exists at all, the moment it becomes solid, it wants to grow;⁶³ it seeks its maximum density; its foremost quality is the yearning to grow, taking everything in its reach, never feeling satisfied and destroying anything that gets in its way. Just as such a crowd can gather to party, it can do so to strike, to riot and to harass. Its size enables an inversion of power: “if many men find themselves together in a crowd, they may jointly succeed in what was denied them singly: together they can turn on those who, till now, have given them orders.”⁶⁴

As for, zombies, also from the science fiction genealogy, they are another figure of contemporary mass society. Inhabitants of the cosmopolitan city, prodigal sons of modern society, controlled by mass media and entertainment, confused with the desire for consumption and quenched needs met at supermarkets. These living dead now travel all over the planet, trapped by electronic commodities, medical health, innovations in audiovisual entertainment, obsolete art and fashion, antidepressant or ecstasy pills; indifferent to the surrounding world and their neighbors, stressed by debts and credits with which they mortgaged their future. Unlike the alien 'blob', the hordes of zombies do not tend to come together but to disintegrate. According to Baudrillard, the digital grid accelerates their access to information "at liberation speed", leading them to lose their center of gravity of reality and history, virtualizing their experiences and isolating them in an individuality lacking of any sense of community belonging.

"These generations," —Baudrillard writes— "no longer expect anything from some future 'coming' and have less and less confidence in history, which dig in behind their futuristic technologies, behind their stores of information and inside the beehive networks of communication where time is at last wiped out by pure circulation, will perhaps never reawaken. But they do not know that."⁶⁵

Media repetition and the permanent reactivation of tales that make ephemeral sense to the postmodern zombie have made humanity stumble in a kind of cyclic and clogged time that can hardly catch up to history's perspective. With this logic, the future is nothing but one more of the collective imageries activated by advertisement and show business, in accordance with certain political and market needs. Zombies and aliens have a common enemy; we mustn't forget the Machiavellian big brother portrayed by George Orwell in his novel *1984*, as a symbol of the dominant class. A handful that obscenely directs and exploits the planet, a society under hierarchical control, where reality is manipulated by mass media. The widespread growth of the human species points to unprecedented violent brutality, and the destiny of modern globalization seems to have caught up to us in its dystopian version... Can the zombie wake up from its postmodern hypnosis? Will the alien be able to overcome its sting of resentment?

The gods of this earth against the gods of progress!

Individuals in today's society, at the technological peak, manifest, however, a disturbing desire to return to the sacred and the ancient roots, reclaiming, somewhat fanatically, ancestral knowledge. In Mexico, a sort of messianic mythology has spread in which the ancient gods come back full of a spirit of vengeance. The science fiction story by César Rojas, "Tumbaga el valle de las campanas" (Tumbaga, the Valley of the Bells), the survivor of the atomic catastrophe, interpreted by burly Mad Max,

blends with the Neo-Mexicanism that idealizes the pre-Hispanic past in order to create a post-apocalyptic scenario where the new “bronze race” is reborn from the “ruins of the swamp valley”.

Called upon by a millenary voice: “Those who survived the sinking, the earthquakes and the war came to the island named Basílica, at the center of which rose up the Guadalupe Tonantzin pyramid, built of rubble amidst the fermenting liquid.”⁶⁶ Before the crowds climbing to worship the bells [...] the fetid and ulcerated dyer appeared. He whose name in the Spanish language had already been forgotten but whose name in the earth’s speech was *Nanahuatzin*.⁶⁷

With disrupted signs of new age millenarianism, the author of this story states that in the near future, the volcanoes that watch over the Valley of Mexico: the Iztaccihuatl and the Popocatepetl, that according to legend are an Aztec princess and warrior, will awaken from their long lethargy with rumbling eruptions, ushering in the cataclysm that will sink the modern city in lava and ashes, surpassing the history of prostration and domination. This retrofuturist epic poem narrates the resurrection of the post-indigenous Mexican, in whose veins flows native blood, adapting it to new times. The post-apocalyptic hero is precisely a *cholo*, a reloaded halfbreed street gangster from Ciudad Neza. In this mythology, the downtrodden, repressed, damned, who didn’t get the paybacks from progress and at the same time was uprooted from his land and traditions, he who cannot lose anything because he has nothing to lose, rises back up, empowered by the catastrophe.

Zoe Whitley— They Walk Among Us

I’m interested in power, specifically in the power artists possess, the way their power holds sway over an audience and where they draw power from. Looking across a variety of practices, there is a particularly powerful field of future-facing artistic expression: namely, the crossover of fine art into the realms of performance. Befitting an investigation into sites of power, my own was quickly undermined by one of the very artists I felt could provide answers. Laylah Ali has said: “I am still unclear —thinking about my own practice— how making a drawing, a painting or looking at one is linked with changing people’s attitudes toward things. Or why it should be. I am not convinced that images seen in a fine arts context —a context that can be extremely nullifying— have this power.” (*Typologies*, p. 20) Certainly, Ali has a point. The “white cube” as we have come to know it, can simultaneously elevate a work of art while draining it of social power. Yet I argue that she, along with Mendi + Keith Obadike and Jacolby Satterwhite, are precisely among the artists whose work does have this power and who use it by expanding the contexts in which fine art is seen and experienced.

Greg Tate remarked: “If you look at the work of black visual artists, from graffiti writers to Jean-Michel Basquiat, there is always this insertion of black figures into a visionary landscape, if not a science fiction or fantasy landscape.” (Dery, p. 209). As a field of enquiry then, recent work by Ali, the Obadike Studio and Satterwhite could all be framed by Afrofuturist theories. It is a modern articulation of racial identity and affinity that exists both outside and beyond our current space and time. The term is widely credited to cultural critic Mark Dery, who explored the dearth of African Americans in science fiction in a 1994 essay. He proposed the terminology for “African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future,” adding, “If there is an Afrofuturism, it must be sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points” (Dery, p. 182). It is a wide-reaching and —perhaps appropriately— nebulous cultural aesthetic that incorporates music, film, text, visual art and, increasingly, combinations thereof.

There is now a groundswell of interest in the topic, evidenced by the proliferation of new research and university courses such as artist Coco Fusco’s Afro-Futurism seminar at Parsons School of Design in New York, exploring “The expediency of science fiction as both a fractured mirror of historical experience and a heterotopic projection of the collective desires of a displaced people.” Professor John Jennings at CUNY Buffalo and Dr. Stanford Carpenter at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago suggest: “Afrofuturism in its current state is very ambiguous and tries to encapsulate all things fantastic in its definition. It basically essentializes identity in such a fashion that excludes any other cultural, biological or social forces that affect identity.” Leading science fiction author Samuel R. Delany believes: “A text speaks loudest and most forcefully when its meanings are clearest and most focused.” (Dery, p. 200) It is precisely this all-encompassing span of the visionary, the fantastic and the science fictive or technologically speculative that demands our exploration, to get a little closer to Delany’s forceful, clear and focused readings.

“We are the Martians”, an introductory essay to the 2006 exhibition on the complex intersections of contemporary art, race and science fiction, *Alien Nation*, noted: “Articulating deep-seated fears about a rapidly changing world over which we exert little control, science fiction’s narratives confront the apparent perils of the present seen through the prism of an imaginary future (p. 11).” And so, if that Orwellian maxim holds true that “Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past,” then we cannot disentangle the future from the past.

I.

“A Vehicle for Hungry Eyeballs”: Laylah Ali

Laylah Ali’s paintings and drawings present disarmingly cartoon-like anthropomorphic beings who clearly aren’t Earthlings yet possess recognizable traits. “Ali’s

characters could be spacemen or aliens, kings or priests or servants, bandits or hybrid superheroes.

Ultimately, they seem to be a species of doppelgangers, stand-ins for the human condition, embroiled in struggles and enacting gestures quoted from the pages of history and contemporary media coverage (Fischman, p. 102).” The figures have earned a reputation for holding up a mirror to our most enduring social and political concerns: racism, abuse of power and hierarchies—all subjects that pervade the work of the late science fiction author Octavia Butler. Ali has described “the iconoclastic work of Octavia Butler”: “I think [she] captured the continuum between past, present and future... Yes, I suppose I feel like an alien sometimes, as for me it means having big eyes that are constantly searching for clues. That’s what I feel like sometimes: a vehicle for hungry eyeballs... To be alien is to be—perhaps necessarily—separate and watching.” (*Alien Nation*, p. 35).

We, too, as viewers, are separate and watching as the picture plane asserts its Greenbergian “ineluctable flatness” in her gouache or ink works. But in 2005, the artist collaborated with choreographer Dean Moss on the performance “Figures on a Field”, based on Ali’s Greenheads series. Where there was intractable freeze frame, Moss translated it into movement, a linear before-and-after to further frame the only moment the viewer was heretofore allowed access. “Ali’s characters inhabit their panels as actors frozen in mid-script, mute and stopped; the scenes resonate with tantalizing narrative implication.” (Fischman, *Fault Lines* p. 101) What Moss brought to the stage were not extraterrestrials in costume but a distillation of Greenhead essence, their thought processes and behaviors animated by a director’s call to “Action.” The figures literally move beyond the picture plane and take on a new resonance. Cultural geographer Katherine McKitterick, whose research has informed much of my thinking, has posited ways of mapping “the where of blackness” given that “Racism and sexism are not simply bodily or identity based [...but] also spatial acts.” So when Moss and Ali’s figures step through the two-way mirror, we’re no longer contemplating abstracted, “alienized” notions of humanity but are sharing space with other humans, less at a remove from their actions and our relation to them.

Still, the art world, as Ali has noted, is not the real world. We suspend our disbelief as receivers and follow certain norms of decorum. This is particularly true in the face of ritualized violence or injustices performed before an audience. Critic Apollinaire Scherr noted:

“Artists have made the point that the way an object is framed changes its meaning. ‘Figures on a Field’ makes the more frightening point that this framing exerts a force on the picture itself, not just on its meaning. Because the theater

is blind to the real —everything is play—, Moss can get someone to asphyxiate him, and we hold our tongues.” (*New York Newsday*, Life’s mystery: Who’s framing whom? May 11, 2005)

I think these norms and the ways in which artists expose them is provocative. How many of us would speak out were we to see a violent act in the street? Considering our own safety, would we remain as silent as we do during an exhibition or a performance? To what extent do we turn a blind eye to injustice, aestheticized or real?

Ali was born in that seminal year of political outspokenness and social upheaval, 1968. In an interview with Kara Walker, she mused:

“Perhaps we are the last generation of black American artists who are tugged by —or held to— this [social] accountability, however irresponsibly we might be handling it. Think of the future, the freedom to ignore what is outside one’s actual experience and concentrate on one’s fetishes while living in a waterless, burnt-out land... actually, I am describing now, aren’t I? And perhaps ourselves, in this moment.” (p. 23)

Samuel Delany has referred to race as our “total surround”, permeable though it may be. “And certainly one of its strongest manifestations is as a socio-visual system...” John Rockwell, a dance critic, saw basketballs in the performance. Hologram-like, the ball most closely aligned/expected of the African American experience projected where none existed in reality, then gets printed in the press as truth: “The [NYT] review’s headline even contained the word “basketballs”. Yet the balls we were using in the performance were those red rubber gym balls that are ubiquitous in [American] elementary schools and used for dodgeball. The dancers, who were all brown-skinned, were not playing basketball at all —they were whipping the balls like dodgeballs—, and the balls had none of the telltale marking... Some misinterpretations seem so strong as to be deliberate or overlaid by the psychology of the viewer to the extent there is nothing in my power to do except watch and note it.” (*Typologies*, p. 20)

II.

Hungry Ghosts, Ghostly Appetites: Mendi + Keith Obadike

If difference is a constant in Afrofuturism, then the specter of the past is its near-constant companion. McKitterick presents a lucid argument for our present landscape being simultaneously “haunted *and* developed” as a result of “the impressions of transatlantic slavery [which] leak[s] into the future, in essence recycling the displacement of difference.”

Welcome to Electric Town, where past, present and future coalesce into a new, liminal, not entirely knowable space. Ghosts and spirits roam a landscape where “Neon trees buzz irregularly, pulsing out of sync with each other and the laser beam grass curves away from the fluorescent sky.” American Nigerian husband and wife Mendi + Keith Obadike are playwrights and networked art vanguards who found critical acclaim through their Internet operas. Passing from two to three dimensions, Obadike Studio then began creating plays and performances for the stage. “Four Electric Ghosts” (4EG) was developed at Toni Morrison’s writers’ workshop and commissioned by the Kitchen in New York, also producers of “Figures on a Field.”

“4EG” relies on a combination of collaboration (as with Moss and Ali, and the Satterwhites, as we shall see) and hybridized sources. The titular four electric ghosts are deceased sisters who must navigate the Afterlife using the respective gifts bestowed upon them by their mother. The sisters express themselves through dance, while their tale is recited and sung by three female members of a chorus. The songs narrate their adventures through Igbo proverbs, my favorite of which, “Death Begins with an Appetite”, is rooted in Chinua Achebe’s text *Arrow of God*. They journey North, South, East and West across a grid any gamer will recognize as the path of the iconic yellow wedge Pac Man. The trail also hints at the presence of the trickster God Elegba, who confronts those on their journey at crossroads. Mendi drew on this powerful figure for a 2006 essay on networked music and art, but it is apt for “4EG”, too: “The question, for those who see this story of the crossroads as linked to the reality of networked art, is where do we go from this juncture? [...] The direction of work made with the network’s tools (its systems of expression) is no different from the trajectory of humanity at the crossroads.” (California Institute of the Arts’ Center for Integrated Media. “Haints in the Stream: Networked Music and Art” 2006).

The Obadikes’ performance is a story both playful and epic, deriving its source material from genre-breaking Japanese video game Pac Man and a Nigerian folktale by Amos Tutola, in his 1954 novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. The game was chosen for its epic qualities, its hero on a quest to outrun ghosts in ever more challenging mazes. The folktale, while epic, was chosen for its elements of playful adventure. Each sister is dressed in a form-fitting unitard banded in red, pink, cyan or orange, just like her ghostly counterparts in Pac Man: Blinky, Pinky, Inky and Clyde. That same palette informs the set lighting and the cover of the forthcoming publication, designed by John Jennings.

So how do we reconcile these specters of the past, ghosts coexisting with digital technology? Jennings and Carpenter propose a theory of “ethnosurrealism” to better encompass dystopian or violent structures, body horror, magical realism and the supernatural, which all currently sit—rather uneasily—under Afrofuturist consideration.

Their theories borrow from Derrida's hauntology and position a "black hauntology" as an offshoot of other Afrofuturist practices. To quote Jennings at length from our extended conversations on Facebook and via e-mail: "This "gothic" sensibility can be read as a "glitch" in the system, "a ghost in the machine" [...] analyzing race itself as an antiquated technology but also using the tropes of the Gothic as a discursive mechanism to unpack and dissemble that technology. And sometimes, those "heterochronies" —the fictive past and the fictive present—, they overlap."

If AfroFuturism is this imagining and building of a future time —hopefully, a positive one—, then perhaps this "black hauntology" acts as a virus, a system error that hacks into the function of this practice. It brings up old "programs". It gets caught in loops and retraces its steps. It doesn't let go of data that is stored in its memory, and it causes the system to shut down in order to truly move forward.

III.

Created in Her Image: Jacolby (and Patricia) Satterwhite

Greg Tate remarked: "The imaginative leap that we associate with science fiction, in terms of putting the human into an alien or alienating environment, is a gesture that repeatedly appears in the work of black writers and visual artists. (Dery, pp. 209-210) But as Jennings has pointed out, Afrofuturism addresses other aspects of identity, not race alone. The work of emerging artist Jacolby Satterwhite is chiefly concerned with sexuality, mental health and uninhibited self-expression.

The basis for his work is the vastly prolific output of schematic drawings and design innovations produced on paper by his mother, as well as sound recordings of her singing.

Housebound following a diagnosis of schizophrenia, Patricia Satterwhite practices what McKitterick has called "imaginary and real respatializations" by capturing unique and intricate series of everyday domestic and fantastic invented objects. The everyday objects provide both solace and escape, linking the past and an alternative future, of which she and her progeny are the shapers.

Retracing her tessellations by hand, Jacolby uploads them into a computer program, which then produces geodesic and other three-dimensional forms. Rendered in bright colors and tubular shapes, the drawings are transformed into an incandescent world, suggestive perhaps of a virtual red light district, and populated, using green screen technology, with innumerable versions of Satterwhite himself.

Jane Brettle has compared the spatial dimensions of digitally created imagery to theater, for in both, things may not be what they seem (essay "In a Shaded Place: the digital and the uncanny"). The Satterwhites are authors of their own world, having chosen science fiction as the literature of possibilities. Whereas Satterwhite says:

“Our home is sacred and only for us,” everywhere else is fair game. The limitless virtual schema spill out beyond physical boundaries. Displacing traditional fine art motives and structures, Jacolby Satterwhite’s films are but one element of his practice; he also designs costumes for performances in nightclubs, the city streets as well as galleries. Like his mother’s drawings, Satterwhite’s costume designs bring together the everyday and the commonplace (objects like a synthetic satin Durag which can be purchased in any black hair beauty supply store) and elaborate new designs which are alternately heavily beaded, embroidered and fitted with technological appendages such as integral iPads, video camera breast prostheses or projectors and other digital protuberances.

Kevin Floyd’s literary and philosophical analysis *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* is a key text for deconstructing Satterwhite, addressing as it does changing gender norms, reconceptualizing the body and a reconciliation of masculinity and femininity. The total practice is comprised of Patricia Satterwhite dematerializing the physical world around her; converting it into a tessellated sketch, which Jacolby then rematerializes, embodies or inhabits.

Conclusion

An emergent discourse, however we wish to name it, begins to crystallize in the work of these three artists. Stuart Hall invites viewers to look for meaning in works of art “for the intimations they offer our uncertain futures.” (in *Fault Lines*, p. 41). Laylah Ali, the Obadike Studio and Jacolby Satterwhite form a nexus in what Okwui Enwezor has defined as the “postcolonial constellation”: “[expanding] the definition of what constitutes contemporary culture and its affiliations in other domains of practice” (*Fault Lines*, p. 77). Building then on Jennings & Carpenter’s theories, this paper is the beginning of dissembling what I believe are the constituent parts of what these artists are accomplishing: i) collaborative projects; ii) refusing the constrictions of the picture plane; iii) exploring ritualized violence; iv) collapsing past, present and future into something liminal and otherworldly; v) mobilizing technology for creative catalysts, and vi) disrupting traditional fine art spaces and modes of display. In an interview a month before her death, in 2006, Octavia Butler called for “people with more courage and vision.” Not content with the two dimensions of paper, canvas or even computer screen, these artists courageously put their visions before us, to perform with us, to walk among us, and therein lies their power; there lies the future.

Mehreen Murtaza—

image
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We are the hackers of abstraction. We produce new concepts, new perceptions and new sensations, hacked out of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colorings, we are the abstracters of new worlds. Whether we come to represent ourselves as researchers or authors, artists or biologists, chemists or musicians, philosophers or programmers, each of these subjectivities is but a fragment of a class still becoming, bit by bit, aware of itself as such.

WARK, MCKENZIE, *A Hacker Manifesto*, Abstraction, 04 October 2004

With apocalyptic visions and machine aesthetic deeply embroiled in local folklore, mysticism and religion, what one encounters in a system of my world is speculative metaphysics; a personal version of “digital philosophy”; a different vision of this tentative, emerging world view.

As the challenging realm of digital media became my paintbrush and canvas, *Divine Invasion* (2008) chronicled a vast array of interests in the celluloid of speculative fiction, experimental music, the occult, radionic technology, aesthetics of failure and post-human literature. The work is both homage to the city of Lahore and an ode to sci-fi tropes as we have become accustomed to over the years.

Science fiction names a contemporary discursive practice, in which the techniques of extrapolation and speculation are used in a narrative form to construct near-future or far-future worlds, in which science, technology and society intersect. This is, of course, a provisional definition, but in it is the important distinction between the methodologies of extrapolation and speculation. As American literary theorist Brian McHale details in his thesis on the shift from modernism to postmodernism, extrapolation is defined as an imaginative extension of a present condition, usually into a future world that is “just around the corner”, or even indistinguishable from the present (the notion that “the future is now”). By contrast, speculation involves a certain imaginative leap, in which a world markedly different from the present is constructed, causing one or several logical discontinuities to be manifest. As can be imagined, most literary science fiction involves some combination of these, culminating in worlds that operate according to their own distinct set of rules to form their own “reality” (what McHale calls the “ontological” mode in sf).⁶⁸

Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*, a jaunty, wittily observed vision of an extremely bleak future, released in 1985, took the look of a film that harkens back to the 1930s, as does the title; *Brazil* is named not for the country but for the 1930s popular song, which floats through the film as a tantalizing refrain. The gaiety of the music stands in ironic

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contrast to the oppressive, totalitarian society in which the story is set. What makes *Brazil* so terrifying (arguably, the most terrifying dystopian film ever made) is that it strikes so close to home. The world of *Brazil* is the logical progression of our own society's worst and most absurd features. When we watch the film, we can see facets of modern bureaucratic, consumerist life shining through, reminding us of the George Orwell classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Brazil employed a sub-genre of science fiction that came into prominence during the 1980s and early 1990s. It involves a setting where steam power is still widely used, usually Victorian era Britain. Alternative history-style presentations of such technology as lighter-than-air airships, analog computers, have been modeled by individual artisans into a pseudo-Victorian mechanical "steampunk" style such as one of the props Electriclark —a typewriter cum commodore 64.

Both the film and Steampunk's theoretical framework became a source of implicit critique of the teleological narratives of societal development and production; mirroring notions of linear technological progress as disparate as a time-warping device, offering in the present time an event or experience that may appear to belong to the past.

William Gibson, a prominent sci-fi writer defined cyberpunk's antipathy towards utopian sf in 1981 as postmodernist prose to describe the often nihilistic underground side of an electronic society. The genre's vision of a troubled future is often called the antithesis of the generally utopian visions of the future popular in the 1940s and 1950s.

My vision is post-apocalyptic. I no longer believe in the fantasies of the 70s of white space suits, planetary travel and global peace. It is a post 9/11 era: a reality-check where phallic towers are castrated and utopian dreams are doused by skepticism. Anxiety breeds nostalgia for pre-digital vintage machinery and appropriation of the absurdist vocabulary used in the 'Goon' shows of the 60s, the Fluxus games of the 70s, the Monty Python wit of the 70s and 80s: a visual/verbal humor with its roots in Dada and Surrealism.⁶⁹

An inference to the aspect of a subterranean city is derived from the mystery beneath the massive stone enshrined at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Israel. The answer to one of the world's most stubborn mysteries may lie hidden on the site of the destroyed Jewish Temple, under a historic Islamic shrine, beneath a bedrock outcropping of utmost significance to the three major monotheistic religions and in a secret chamber below a natural cave under the rock upon which Jewish tradition says Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac. No one knows with absolute certainty whether the Well of Souls—or the Ark of the Covenant—actually exists. Though knocking on the floor of the cave under the Muslim Dome of the Rock shrine elicits a resounding hollow echo, no one has ever seen this alleged chamber. The Temple Mount itself is rife with a network of some 45 cisterns, chambers, tunnels and caves.

One of the greatest examples of paranormal time travel is the account of the Prophet's ascension from Jerusalem to Paradise while sitting in the Great Mosque in Jerusalem. Yusuf Nuruddin, in his article "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology", notes this episode as an inspiration for what he calls the science fiction motif, a belief system that inspires science fiction, although Nuruddin personally sees "very little cosmology which can inspire works of Islamic science fiction", a statement he contradicts later by stating that "... Mythic literature and/or science fiction by and/or about Muslims need not rely upon Islamic cosmology."⁷⁰

"Following the directions on geodesic maps, smelling the magnetic waves in the air, walking long distances, days after days, in the red grass of *Neveralia*, staring at the sky, waiting for a sign, sleeping and walking again, and again. He was sleeping all the time. A dream-recorder plugged in his brain. He was reciting some phrases by a specialist in astrophysics and beekeeping who devoted his life to proving that bees could help the understanding of the Universe.... and everyone thought they were prophecies.

To prove that god is geometry, he connected himself to the machine and began to rebuild the world with combinations of parallelepipeds, polyhedrons, spheres, cones, cylinders. Here is the first cube."

MEHREEN MURTAZA, 2009

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I would like to quote William Chittik, in his reading of Ibn al-'Arabi's *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiya* (*The Meccan Illuminations*). Ibn al-'Arabi was an Arab Andalusian Moorish mystic who drew on the writings of Sufis, Islamic theologians and philosophers, in order to elaborate a complex theosophical system.

He said, "How did you find the situation in unveiling and divine effusion? Is it what rational consideration gives us?" I replied, "Yes and no. Between the yes and the no spirits fly from their matter and heads from their bodies."

This cryptic answer, which reputedly made the philosopher turn pale and tremble, implies the existence of divinely-bestowed knowledge which is superior to knowledge gained by "rational consideration". But what precisely is the relationship between them? Elsewhere, Ibn al-'Arabi speaks not of two levels of knowledge, but of three. First, there is "knowledge based on reason" (*'ilm al-'aql*), that is, knowledge which can be acquired by rational consideration. Here he probably has in mind the principal tenets of Muslim theology. Second, there is knowledge based on states (*'ilm al-ahwal*),

which is what we would call empirical knowledge. He gives as examples the sweetness of honey, the bitterness of aloes and the pleasure of sexual intercourse, none of which can be known without “tasting” them. Third, there is “knowledge of mysteries” (*‘ulum al-asrar*)—sometimes called ‘gnosis’ (*ma’rifa*)—, which is specific to prophets and saints and is akin to Spinoza’s *scientia intuitiva*. It is futile to strive for this third type of knowledge, for it lies concealed in every man but is only unveiled when the divine light is effused into the hearts of those who are predisposed to receive it.⁷¹

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s remarkable discussions and conceptions of the “Imagination” (*al-khayâl*) are metaphysical ruminations that do not render conceptual, logical and rational forms of understanding the imagination. James W. Morris explains: “The Arabic expression *al-khayâl*, refers most often, in ordinary contexts, to what we would ordinarily call an ‘image’ or ‘object of imagination’, and ultimately to the actual underlying reality of *all* the ‘imaginal’ (*not* ‘imaginary’) objects of our perception in virtually all forms and domains. Given this primacy of the *ontic*, ‘objective’ dimension of the term *al-khayâl*—whether that is expressed in theological or cosmological terms— any translation referring to ‘imagination’ inevitably risks falling into the psychologizing or individualistic, subjectivist assumptions that are embedded in the usual usages of that concept in Western languages, whether the term is being employed positively or pejoratively. In fact, precisely at those points where Ibn ‘Arabi wants to refer explicitly to something like a psychological ‘faculty’ or individual activity of ‘imagination’—or to the individual psychic ‘objects’ of such an activity—, he invariably uses separate and quite distinct Arabic terms to emphasize that partial, subjective aspect.”⁷²

In the carefully constructed narrative and digital print *And Here I Dreamt of An Architect* (2009), the ideological space of Sufi theology and artist Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs’ systems adviser, Ian Sommerville’s Dreamachine beckon experimentations with consciousness and creating the possibility of machine as a mind-altering drug.

Since the early 1900s, Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, with his pseudoscientific device entitled the Cloudbuster, pioneered a movement of radionic apparatus as a system of healing. Healing without pills, medicines, surgeries, growing crops without fertilizer and performing a host of impossible feats that defy rational science. Even drawings and bizarre technology could function radionically. Radionic apparatus empowered ideas where skill and creativity in working with nature could achieve profound real world results.

Varying strategies outside the realm of positivist sciences collaborate to extend their analyses of our contemporary “machinic” culture into new strategies for resistance and fresh re-imaginings. The rhetorical war machine, vision machine and the flesh machine become affective as a science fictional extrapolative and speculative

apparatus maintaining its ability to construct narratives of progress and mankind's continuous pursuit of new desires.

Order of the Universe Orchestra marked a series of animated floating cubes proclaiming explicit reference to the Holy Ka`bah, a simple stone building in Makkah that symbolizes the notion of the prime and the core. It has remained at the center of a continuous tradition of human worship and devotion, integrating and unifying power of monotheism in human life. When the Muslim community prays, they not only face the House of Allah, but also connect themselves along an invisible line, forming an axis that proceeds from every point on Earth, to the spiritual center of Islam.

In *Order of the Universe Orchestra (Part I)*, 2008, the cube hovers a few inches above the ground with a flashing LED screen with circumambulating ones and zeros, forming the primary language/life of a machine. The binary code masks a series of cryptic messages; a hypnotic reminder of the machine's inevitable demise, coincides and even conflicts with the serene hum of the cube as four red lights flash from each top corner of the cube ready to take off in a bizarrely familiar image of the Unidentified Flying Object. The Ka'bah, a symbol of the Beginning and the End; of mortality and infinity; of a syncretic engagement with various disparities, embodies an ominous reminder of a preordained destiny. Humanly, death is inevitable and yet, it marks the beginning of life after death —immortality/post-humanism.

In the realm of new metaphysics, a term called digital philosophy, coined by Edward Fredkin, is described by Gregory Chaitin as follows:

The previous century had logical positivism and all that emphasis on the philosophy of language and completely shunned speculative metaphysics, but a number of us think that it is time to start again. There is an emerging digital philosophy and digital physics, a new metaphysics associated with names like Edward Fredkin and Stephen Wolfram and a handful of like-minded individuals, among whom I include myself. As far as I know, the terms "digital philosophy" and "digital physics" were actually invented by Fredkin, and he has a large website with his papers and a draft of a book about this. Stephen Wolfram attracted a great deal of attention to the movement and stirred up quite a bit of controversy with his very large and idiosyncratic book on *A New Kind of Science...* Digital philosophy is actually a neo-Pythagorean vision of the world; it's just a new version of that. According to Pythagoras, all is number — and by number he means the positive integers, 1, 2, 3,— and God is a mathematician. "Digital philosophy" updates this as follows: Now everything is made out of 0/1 bits. Everything is digital software, and God is a computer programmer, not a mathematician! It will be interesting to see how well this vision of the

world succeeds and just how much of our experience and theorizing can be included or shoehorned within this new viewpoint.⁷³

There is a palpable sense of perplexity that accompanies the Holy Ka'bah and its mysterious powers as the epicenter of spirituality. Metamorphosing into an ubiquitous entity that takes a life of its own, its bizarre machinations function radionically and heal in the realm of supernatural. It is a narrative of the impeccable Cube that creates the existence of being in a sci-fi world where machinated apparatus creates the first geometric form. Being one of the platonic solids, it insists on a reversal of functions where science, hard lined symmetry and mathematical exactitude indicate the birth of consciousness; consider it a gnostic technological revelation, even.

The Cube controls, reigns supreme and eventually dissipates in a fiery red explosion.

Part II of this piece is even more perplexing; a trumpet pierces through the intersection of two adjacent walls. The allusion is to the archangel Gabriel (Asrapheel in Islam), who is waiting to blow it, at God's behest, to initiate the Day of Judgment and wipe out all life. Out of the trumpet bellows the shrill male voice of a preacher, foretelling the impending doom; reaching a menacing crescendo, like a jingoistic incantation or, less sinisterly, like the breathless outpourings of a stockbroker. But even before the viewer has properly registered the din, he is struck by the brutal energy with which the horn has penetrated the wall. Suddenly, the trumpet starts looking like shrapnel, an earthly weapon of mass destruction rather than an instrument of divine retribution.

The Chronometric Plates is a triptych consisting of three panels, each circumscribed by the divisions of linear time as past present and future. The cybernetic feedback loop is a mythological reference of self-reflexivity, phoenix and the eternal return. As described by Friedrich Kittler, in his book *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, the ouroboros as an archetype in reference to states of knowledge: changed from a "kingdom of sense" (in 1800), based on understanding and meaning, to a "kingdom of pattern" (in 1900), based on images and algorithms. He defines a discourse network as "the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data."⁷⁴

Norbert Wiener's cybernetic feedback loop is also a kind of systemic ouroboros that seeks to document the intrinsic and divine mathematical plan in living systems. The cybernetic feedback processes involve something more interactive, "a reciprocal flow" of "two-way interaction between controller and controlled".⁷⁵ This operates not only to communicate influence from the former to the latter but also to communicate back the results of this action. Wiener saw feedback as more than a technical idea. When he learned of the principle, he saw an underlying theory that united biology

and technology. With the publication of *Cybernetics*, in 1949, Wiener proved mathematically that the principle of feedback was equivalent to the physiological principle of homeostasis. This would have obvious implications for exploring the connection between man and machine; in fact, many books today with “Cybernetics” in the title have to do with artificial intelligence and robotics. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think of cybernetics as relating solely to cyborg culture.

One of the growing impulses in Triptych is that of the aesthetic of Sufi portraiture. Iconography, particularly portraying religious images, has played an important role in understanding and describing human interpretations about things beyond human imaginations, for example the matter of the creation of the universe. The valley of the Indus River, since the time of its civilization’s peak and through local inhabitants and arrival of Muslims, including the Sufi saints, has been rich in its symbolic expressions and materials related to “image writing”, more specifically, within the context of the interaction between Hinduism and Islam on the Indian subcontinent.⁷⁶

On the subcontinent, the prophet, saint, or deity known as Khwaja Khizr (Khadir), Pir Badar, or Raja Kidar, is the object of a still surviving popular cult, common to Muslims and Hindus. His principal shrine is on the Indus, near Bakhar, where devotees of both persuasions worship him; the cult is, however, hardly less widely diffused in Bihar and Bengal. Iconographically, Khwaja Khizr is represented as an aged man, having the aspect of a *faqir*, clothed entirely in green and moving in the waters with a fish as his vehicle.

Islamic mysticism embraces a personal approach to obtaining a specific worldview. One can see traces of magical realism in the works of 12th- and 13th-century poets Nizami and Attar, who blurred fiction and non-fiction and the past and present within their works. There is also the Sufi philosopher Suhrawardi, whose works often read like surreal dreams and who speaks of an imaginary world. Phantasmagorical interfaces such as these allow for the hallucination of conceptual space where all form is language. The forms that we see, imagine, perceive or find in conceptual space are mind forms made from language, and by language I also mean images, and sounds. Certain ideas are dressed in a language that is oft laden with sizable errors of translation. This also paves the way for an amalgam of historical fallacies and paranoid stylists who observe the consequences of seeing power through distorted lenses, leaving little chance to observe its real machinery and ultimately perceive history in apocalyptic terms.

Early renderings of Muslim science fiction, such as *Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights*, which included stories like “Aladdin’s Wonderful Lamp”, “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” and “The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor” produced futuristic, alternative or otherworldly type scenarios frequently combined elements of allegory, mysticism, science and satire. Similarly, Triptych, 2009, takes

from the narrative of The King of Israel (Suleman in Turkish) 971-931 BC who was the builder of the first temple in Jerusalem. He has been portrayed as great in wisdom, wealth and power but ultimately as a king whose sin, including idolatry—turning away from God—, led his kingdom to break into two. The Seal of Solomon, or Ring of Andaleeb, was the magic ring that gave King Solomon power over demons and jinns able to speak with animals. The magical symbol on it, known as the hermetic Seal of Solomon, visually depicts the concept. “As above, so below”, while representing opposite energies mirroring each other to achieve perfect balance.

Conspiracy theories abound. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic text purporting to describe a Jewish plan to achieve global domination, makes for fantastic literature and describes a lineage of historical influences to present a master narrative articulating a philosophy where fact and fiction meld and the interconnect-edness of science fiction, fantasy and inquiry in the contemporary world spur an effect akin to Orson Welles’ infamous radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, in 1938, that convinced Americans New York was under attack by aliens. What radio listeners heard that night was an adaptation of a science fiction novel written 40 years earlier: *The War of the Worlds*, by H.G. Wells.

Stage 1: The viewer steps on to the steel stepper

Stage 2: The individual’s weight is calculated using an analogue scale

Stage 3: Once the needle comes to a halt, the viewer is to press a red button

Stage 4-5: This red button initiates a statement that is displayed on the LED scroll. *Bismillah-ur-Rehman (In the name of Allah)* is displayed continuously on the LED until the red button is pressed. *Bismillah-ur-Rehman* is the expected prayer to be spoken by Muslims before initiating any activity, as an act of remem-brance of God.

Stage 5: Finally, a statement, which is basically an Urdu translation of an excerpt from the Quran, is scrolled across the LED. Therefore, each person has a unique statement.

The words symbolize a weighing and measuring of one’s actions, and retribution for these actions thus begins here. Here are some examples: (translated further in English)

055.008 *In order that ye may not transgress (due) balance.*

055.009 *So establish weight with justice, and fall not short in the balance.*
Surah -e- Rehman

017.014 *(It will be said to him:) “Read thine (own) record: Sufficient is thy soul this day to make out an account against thee.”*

017.013 *Every man's fate we have fastened on his own neck. On the Day of Judgment, we shall bring out for him a scroll, which he will see spread open.*
Surah -e- Asra

In a research paper outlining a way of understanding the social theory of faith, Thomas A. Bauer, a professor in Vienna, Austria, claims that according to systems of information and theory, a model of knowledge is created that explains the communicability of faith. He says all communication creates relations and all relations create communication. The impetus for a belief system is dependent on relating to others as a community. This social theory of faith purports that all we think is true becomes true through the power of relativity.

In a wearisome play of lexicon, the plotter spews out rolls of paper inscribed with the text borrowed from Bauer's social theory of faith, "Relation generates Truth, and Truth generates relations as a multitude of anagrams."⁷⁷

The Dubious Birth of Geography, 2012 is a series of 16 reproduced photographs, each with an intervention. Obtaining existing historical photographs of specific sites and significant events spanning across the Middle East and Africa, the realities of the past, present and future are converged on a single plane, creating a tear in time; a new dimension, a sort of distribution of points, groups or figures that no longer act simply as an abstract framework but actually exist in space. Invisible architectures are perceived through traces and evidence, making visible or perceptible the geography of an area and the invisible geometries sustaining it; evoking transient occupations of space, shifting boundaries, structures of community and the like. Exploring the notion of history as a time-warping device, offering in the present time an event, experience or person that belongs to the past. The idea of the ghost haunts these photos.

Derivative of Laputa Island, first described by classic novel *Gulliver's Travels*, a series of fictional flying islands or rocks are spotted in the series of photographs. Though no definite etymology of the word *Laputa* is known, it is considered that *Lap* signifies *high*, and *untuh* a *governor*.

The work focuses upon such subjects as conspiracy theories, religious cult, geographical phenomena and unambiguous allusions to the miraculous. She constructs a miniature transversal narrative by taking the position of the archaeologist-archivist. These mined social and esoteric beliefs link together dream geographies with political ones through historical and archival evaluations. Erosion of boundaries between knowledge and irrational thought, which through their identification as historically and culturally contingent narratives of differentiation, may themselves be exposed as mythic and illusory opposites. It is also to be said that King Solomon quarried limestone to build the Temple Mt., along with its secret chamber and underground network

of caves. The apparent story of the miraculous floating rock on the night of Miraj holds various sub-narratives and unaccounted explanations:

When the Holy Prophet (PBUH) reached Masjid-ul-Aqsa (where the Dome of the Rock now presides) in the Jerusalem night, from Masjid al-Haram (Makkah), the voluminous stone also rose up in the air besides *Burraq* (the Prophet's flying steed). As folklore goes, upon noticing this, the Prophet ordered the floating stone to remain poised in mid-air.

The second story states that the rock is now tightly guarded from Israeli soldiers so as not to attack Muslims and to cover the miracle of the Prophet of Allah. The third, that the rock's origin is in eastern Saudi Arabia, in a village called Al Hassa. The rock is said to float about 10 cm from the ground at a specific time every year, only to rest back on earth. And finally, it is also believed that the floating stone attempted to save a jihadi in an un-named battle by hurling itself to save the soldier. Apparently the blood of the jihadi can be spotted as a few red marks.

My rationale for this fabricated research is two-fold. First, it is an attempt to parody the aesthetics of ficto-criticism recurrent in the Middle East, which asserts new methodologies for analyzing history and cartography by appropriating mundane archival objects and imbuing them with a radical affective force of fabricated narratives. Second, I utilize this narrative to draw attention to the way taken for granted personal histories reverberate with over-determined historical narratives, and yet, by playing with the frequency of this reverberation, narrative can ultimately critique cross-cultural representation and geopolitics through the retelling of the mundane as it intersects with the imaginary.

Between disciplines and across varied media, the duration of uncertainty generated by these works is intended to provoke new ways of understanding one's environment. I believe that these moments of hesitation, however temporary, can activate previously imperceptible modes of inquiry and encourage critical reflection. Speculative theories, techno-cultural discourse and scientific jargon permeate monologues and statements that are also wrought with puns, neologisms, hyperbole and other linguistic "glitches".

I open myself to my subjects in a way that does not retreat into a confession of identity politics. My work speaks from a specific position that does not come with political or artistic manifestos. It is not Futurism, nor is it Afrofuturism, and it is often unstable and not always clear in its focus. It is searching to find transnational artistic positions beyond Orientalism, consumerism and propaganda.

Mark Klienberg, writing in 1975 in the second issue of *The Fox*, poses the question: "Could there be someone capable of writing a science-fiction thriller based on the intention of presenting an alternative interpretation of modernist art that is readable by

a non-specialist audience? Would they care?" He says no more about it, and the question stands as an intriguing historical fragment, an evolutionary dead end and a line of inquiry to pursue in this essay: the intimation of a categorically ambiguous art, one in which the synthesis of multiple circuits of reading carries an emancipatory potential.⁷⁸

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Notes

¹ For the concept of non-synchronous contemporaneities, see Ernst Bloch, "Non-Contemporaneity and Contemporaneity, Philosophically," *Heritage of Our Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991; 1st ed. Frankfurt, 1962).

² For a thoughtful discussion of the difficulties confronting the historical project in attempting to recognize the variety of perspectives from which its possibly incommensurate narratives must be written, see Harry Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present" and "Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem," *Boundary 2* 32 (2005), pp. 23-52. See also Anthony Gardner, "Whither the Postcolonial", *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel eds. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), pp. 142-157, 156: "...can we develop global art histories without imposing our own authority over them...without succumbing to yet another form of conceptual imperialism?" For a range of opinions on the problem of "world history", see Peter

Burke, ed., *The Writing of World Histories* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1990).

³ See Nicolas Bourriaud, "Altermodern", *Altermodern* exh. cat. ed. Nicolas Bourriaud (London: Tate Publishing, 2009) unpaginated; Okwui Enwezor, "Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence," *Altermodern*, unpaginated. I am indebted to Alexander Alberro for this reference. For other contributions to the discussion of the status and meaning of time in contemporary art, see also Dan Karlholm, "Surveying Contemporary Art: Post-War, Postmodern, and then What?" *Art History* 32 (2009), pp. 712-733; and Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro, "Presentación. Antagonismos temporales", in *Heterocronías: tiempo, arte y arqueologías del presente*, ed. Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro (Murcia: CEDEAC, 2008).

⁴ Bourriaud, "Altermodern," unpaginated.

⁵ Writing on the aesthetics of migratory art, Miguel Hernández Navarro and Mieke Bal, by contrast, use the concept of heterochrony to emphasize the differences that distinguish temporal cultures by arguing

for their incommensurability. See Hernández Navarro, "Out of Synch: Visualizing Migratory Times through Video Art" and Mieke Bal, "Heterochrony in the Act: The Migratory Politics of Time", in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 191-208 and 211-238. I am grateful to Bal for providing me with page proofs of these essays while the book was in press.

⁶ A typical example of this attitude is the textbook *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004). For criticism, see "Interventions Reviews", *Art Bulletin* 88 (2006) pp. 373-389, with comments by Nancy Troy, Geoffrey Batchen, Amelia Jones, Pamela Lee, Romy Golan, Robert Storr, Jodi Hauptman, and Dario Gamboni.

⁷ Piotr Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History", *Umeni* 56 (2008), pp. 378-383.

⁸ Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2009.

⁹ Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 9.

¹⁰ For an attempt to sketch a periodization of contemporaneity, see Alexander Alberro, "Periodizing Contemporary Art", *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence. The Proceedings of the 32 International Congress of the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2009), pp. 935-939.

¹¹ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 14.

¹² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane-Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005; 1st ed. Paris, 1990); Hubert Damisch, *The Judgment of Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; 1st ed. 1992); Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999);

Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

¹³ Lydia Liu, *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 2.

¹⁴ Kubler, p. 17. Commenting perceptively on Kubler's point, Pamela Lee writes: "History, then, becomes a matter of both belatedness and regressivity, eternal recurrence reinscribed as a problem of communication. Compromised by an endless temporal switching, one always returns to the past too late, just as one always projects the future too early. The problem, however, is that the fullness of the present is forever at a loss, flagging the crisis of historicity that is the constituent feature of postmodernism." (*Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), p. 256. For Agamben, contemporaneity's incapacity to understand its own time is likened to the impossibility of seeing the light of distant stars that recedes from us too fast to be discernible. See Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?" *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39-54, pp. 46-47.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise stated, Richard Hoagland's recollections are from an interview with the author via telephone on 8 September, 2012.

¹⁶ Carl Sagan, *Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record*, New York: Random House, 1978, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁹ A second Golden Record was placed on-board the *Voyager 2*, also launched in 1977.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²¹ Keay Davidson, *Carl Sagan: A Life*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000, p. 305.

²² C. Sagan, *Murmurs of Earth*, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66. More recently, Stephen Hawking has reiterated this concern, dubbing such attempts at alien contact 'a little too risky... If aliens ever visit us, I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn't turn out very well for the Native Americans.' Anonymous, 'Stephen Hawking: Alien Life Is Out There, Scientist Warns', 25 April 2010, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/space/7631252/Stephen-Hawking-alien-life-is-out-there-scientist-warns.html> (last accessed on 30 November 2012).

³² K. Davidson, *Carl Sagan, op. cit.*, p. 306.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zohn), New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 256.

³⁶ Connie Samaras, 'Is It Tomorrow or Just the End of Time?', in Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (ed.), *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 208.

³⁷ Stephanie Nelson and Larry Polanski, 'The Music of the Voyager Interstellar Record', *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol. 21, no. 4, November 1993, p. 361.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 368-369.

³⁹ C. Sagan, *Murmurs of Earth, op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁴⁰ K. Davidson, *Carl Sagan, op. cit.*, p. 309.

⁴¹ C. Sagan, *Murmurs of Earth, op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁴² See 'Sending Google into Space to Search for Alien Life' [video footage], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYd8QiJT6s> (last accessed on 27 November 2012); Seth Shostak also makes this suggestion in his book *Confessions of an Alien Hunter: A Scientist's Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*, Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2009, p. 242.

⁴³ Minsky does, however, give one caveat: 'If those aliens have evolved so far beyond us that their concerns are unintelligible to us ... then communication might not be feasible'. In fact Minsky specifies that his thesis applies 'only to those stages of mental evolution in which beings are still concerned with surviving, communicating and expanding their control over the physical world'. Marvin Minsky, 'Why Intelligent Aliens Will Be Intelligible', in Edward Regis

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⁴⁵ Katherine Harmon, 'Octopuses Gain Consciousness (According to Scientists' Declaration)', *Scientific American: Blogs*, 21 August 2012, available at <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/octopus-chronicles/2012/08/21/octopuses-gain-consciousness-according-to-scientists-declaration/> (last accessed on 3 December 2012).

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⁴⁷ Roger Bartra. *La Jaula de la Melancolía. Identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano*. Editorial Grijalbo. México 1987. p. 34

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⁶² Armando Ramírez.

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⁶⁴ Jean Baudrillard. OP. CIT. p. 9.

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⁶⁶ *IBIDEM*

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