IMAGINED FUTURES (iFut)

A research project by the Media Studies Department, University of Amsterdam, and the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), 2007-2011

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Mission statement

Imagined Futures (iFut) is a research project concerned with the conditions, dynamics and consequences of rapid media transfer and transformation. "Media" here encompasses all imaging techniques and sound technologies, with the cinema providing the conceptual starting point and primary historical focus. While changes in basic technology, public perception and artistic practice may often evolve over long historical cycles, the project's main assumption is that there are also moments when transfer occurs in discontinuous, unevenly distributed fashion, during relatively short periods of time, and with mutually interdependent determinations.

iFut initially identified two such periods of transformation taking place across a broad spectrum of media technologies: the period of the 1870-1900 and the period 1970-2000. The first witnessed the popularization of photography, the emergence of cinema, the global use of the (wireless) telegraph and the domestic use of the telephone, the invention of the radio and of the basic technology of television, while the second saw the consolidation of video as popular storage medium and avant-garde artistic practice, the universal adoption of the personal computer, the change from analogue to digital sound and image, the invention of the mobile phone, and the emergence of the internet and world wide web.

A key characteristic of such periods of rapid media change is the volatility, unpredictability and contradictory nature of the dynamics between the practical implications (industrial applications and economic potential) of these technologies, their perception by the popular imagination (in the form of narratives of anxiety, utopia and fantasy), and the mixed response (eager adoption or stiff resistance) from artists, writers and intellectuals. These shifting configurations among different agents offer a rich field of investigation for cultural analysis, posing methodological challenges and requiring specific case studies.

Three strands

The mutual basis of all research conducted in the context of the iFut is the triangulation of media technology, the avant-garde and popular media as the main areas of cultural practice within and across which imagined futures (and recovered pasts) take shape. iFut clusters three core projects which fall into a historical, a theoretical and an "applied" strand.

The historical strand directly relates to the concept of the (historical) avant-garde and the position of the artist (in the past, the present and the future). The artist, the work (and, by extension, the art world) are explicitly engaged – and intervening – in a dynamic (and not merely antago-

nistic) relation with the theoretical text and its public/popular/commercial applications. This also includes due consideration of technology and technological change, especially as this manifests itself in the media constellations usually referred to as the different *dispositifs*.

The theoretical strand extends very broadly to the academic discourses (and, by extension, the academy as institution) whose ambition it is to make sense of the (technological, aesthetic, social, economical) implications of changes in today's media, and to investigate (new) models of "crisis historiography" (such as Foucault's concept of Archaeology, Systems and Network Theories, New Historicism and Counterfactual History). These discourses include "performative theories", such as manifestos, artists' statements, but also instruction manuals and online discussion groups advising "users".

The "applied" strand is product- and practice-oriented. It includes all manner of applications of (new) technologies, ranging from social issue uses, locative media projects, to commercial schemes, military applications, public space projects. For the sake of mnemotic brevity we can group the various uses in three categories: *social* applications, *military/economic* applications, and *public sphere* applications (among which we include mainstream cinema).

Current research

Seven ongoing Ph.D. projects address different aspects of iFut's venture to explore how, at specific times, particular discursive topoi – such as the digital – function as indices of cultural change and technological transformation. Questioning the validity of many commonplaces about these tropes and constellations, the individual studies of the Ph.D. candidates examine the spatial, temporal and experiential dimensions of divergent – and, often even more so, convergent – media practices, taking them as a point of departure to rethink the history of media technologies and/or the formation of theories in their respective fields. Among the practices under scrutiny are contemporary fiction films, locative media, installation art, and digital dance performances, acknowledging both their timeliness and retroactivity. Important topics in common are non-linear temporalities, continuous dislocations, and shifting relations, as well as questions of agency, subjectivity, and criticality. Particular economic configurations, not only of representations, but also of forms of attention, modes of address, spatio-temporal clusterings, and relational patterns, are traced throughout different contexts.

Tina Bastajian, *Archival Afterlives In Situ: The Shifting Contingencies from Expanded Cinema to Locative Media*

Archival proclivities have become a recurring trope in contemporary art, likewise in unstable filmic performative works rooted in the past (i.e. Expanded Cinema) and their subsequent returns, as reflected in the pilot study *Electric Cinema ReDux*, a curatorial program mounted at the 2007 Rotterdam International Film Festival together with an ensuing documentation project. The ephemeral character of these practices, which always appear under new and fluctuating conditions, call for another methodology or paradigm in which to preserve and re-render them. Conversely, new media formations, specifically in locative media (explored in projects such as *You Are Not Here*, 2006-2008; *NomadicMILK Project*, 2006-2008; *Call Cutta – A Mobile Phone Theater*, 2005; *Loca: Set To Discoverable*, 2006-2008), posit similar aspects and genealogical threads as an oblique resemblance: through the nomadic screen, spatial annotation, mapping, geo-tagging, and hyper-textual encounters and entry points that seep over into the fabric of the quotidian. Through the lens of media archaeology within and beyond déjà vu, the project charts out relational features through diverse configura-

tions of documentation, and migration of materials and artistic movements: traces and indexes, analogue and digital, performed, captured, and databased, both in premise and in praxis. A triangulation of research, curating and artistic practice serves to leverage the shifting of cinematic surfaces, subjectivities, and agencies, and to put forward imagined and alternative dis/locative *dispositifs*.

Zeynep Gündüz, *Interactive Dance: The Merger of Media Technologies and the Dancing Body*

Theorizing "digital dance" performance in the light of avant-garde dance practices created by pre-digital technologies in the 1960s, this project examines the consequences of the integration of digital interactive media technologies in Western contemporary dance and paves the way for developing new views on emerging mediatized artistic expressions and cultural practices. By contextualizing different forms of interactivity and interactive systems incorporated in contemporary dance practices, the study explores the notion of interactivity on three levels: technics/technology, ideological discourse, and experience. Moreover, it aims to illustrate parallels, shifts, and contradictions between these levels from a practice-based perspective, which entails to examine the processes of creation, exhibition, and perception of current digital dance artworks. The main research concerns are: how the artistic intentions of the choreographer are negotiated with the mathematical approach of the programmer; the ways the interactive system may be experienced by the interactor; and how his or her experience may differ from the understanding of interactivity of the choreographer and programmer. *Apparition* (Klaus Obermaier, 2004), *Glow* (Gideon Oberzanek, Frieder Weiss, 2006) and *16 [R]evolutions* (Mark Coniglio, Dawn Stoppiello, 2006) are among the selected case studies of this project. In the context of these works, sophisticated motion tracking systems are used to display real-time responses to the impulses given by the dancer, in the form of abstract shapes, text, and sound.

Pepita Hesselberth, *Chronoscopy: Affective Encounters with Cinematic Temporalities*

The objective of this study is to analyse the ways in which contemporary media rework our sense of time, subjectivity, memory, and agency in an era of pervasive media presence, in order to resituate the embodied subject. By investigating the complex and reciprocal impact of cinematic temporalities – ranging from a play with rhythm, chronology, and duration to the enactment of memory-traces, a developing sense of the future and our being-in-time –, it tries to locate new forms of subjectivity, presence and consciousness, which are made possible by new media practices that regulate the perceptive and affective experiences of the viewer. On a historical level, the project aims at pinpointing changes of and within cinematic *dispositifs*. Theoretically, it proposes to consider our encounter with media practices as instances of *performative philosophy* that "occur" when "texts" are being "viewed". Case studies include the 2007 exhibition *Andy Warhol: Other Voices, Other Rooms* (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) as an example of a contemporary multimedia exhibition, including Warhol's cinematic endurance (con)tests from the 1960s, but also the handheld aesthetics of digital video technology (e.g. Dogma), and memory matters in mainstream Hollywood cinema: e.g. *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), etc. This project is co-hosted by the Copenhagen Doctoral School in Cultural Studies, Literature, and the Arts (CDS).

Maria Poulaki, *Cyberpunk Politics: Worlds and Subjectivities between Reflexivity and Emergence*

Cyberpunk can be seen as a (pop-)cultural attempt to reflect on the – during the 1980s still emerging – new information technologies as nonhuman actors, and to imagine futures where the

role of human agency is downplayed in favour of new decentralized or distributed subjectivities. Taking contemporary "meta-cyberpunk" films such as *The Final Cut* (Omar Naim, 2004) and *Renaissance* (Christian Volckman, 2006) as a point of departure, this research project aims to rethink cyberpunk as a genre that raised questions about the limits of reflexivity in the context of agency, quite similar to how social theory and cybernetics have broached this issue, in a spectrum ranging from biological to social systems. Moreover, it tries to rethink cinema as a medium between reflexivity and emergence, exploring the political and ethical significance of this shifting point for agency. Theoretical and applied cultural responses to information technologies are thus paralleled and intermingled in order to adumbrate a trajectory of transition concerning media technologies and subjectivities alike.

Laura Schuster, *Fetishizing the Fear or Plotting the Possibilities: Adventures in Cinema Fiction*

The period of 1997-2007 saw a proliferation of fiction films taking technological innovation and/or mediation as a direct or indirect subject through topics such as surveillance, memory distortion, artificial intelligence, biomedia, simulation, and code. These films – examples range from *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999) to *Deja Vu* (Tony Scott, 2006) – self-reflexively offer heterogeneous but coherent questions surrounding technology and its representations: questions about perception, reality, and virtuality; about identity, knowledge, and belief; and ultimately, about the status of the human subject in contemporary and future Western societies. Many of the concerns symptomatically expressed in these films use technological reconfigurations such as digitization as tropes for rapid change and the unreliability, permeability, or volatility of information. Tracing these tropes throughout modernity reveals consistent patterns of technological anxiety and externalisation. By a combination of perspectives (spectatorship, pragmatism, psychoanalytical film theory, cognition, media ecology/archaeology, posthumanist theory) this project aims to develop a method of analysis for such films, and for their constant oscillation between technophilia and technophobia.

Senta Siewert, *Displacement Films – Music, Affect, Memory – A Pragmatic Poetic of Contemporary European Films*

European films from the 1990s onwards have drawn on film history, avant-garde techniques, music videos and pop music. This period has also raised theoretical issues concerning the adoption of digital technologies and convergence between the film and music industries, which mark changes in film studies since the "sonic turn". The use of pop music soundtracks, which employ both analogue and digital music, has also influenced the production and the aesthetic style of recent films such as *Head On* (Fatih Akin, 2004), *Inside Paris* (Christophe Honoré, 2006) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996). Consequently, songs become an integral part of the narrative and visual world while at the same time keeping their status as musical song. This study thus builds both on the historical and theoretical strands of the iFut research project, yet simultaneously highlights the contribution of music as a central narrative and aesthetic component within contemporary European film. The musical sampling technique is considered as an overall structuring element, because the rhythm of the songs crosses both auditory and visual registers and also affects the montage. Since mainly pre-existing songs are used in these films, the cinema spectator participates in acts of recognition when listening to the soundtrack during the film. These acts of recognition are considered as layered forms of cultural musical memory and appropriation and have an effect on the experience of time. Moreover, cinematic experience is posited as having a direct affect on the body of the spectator, thereby enhancing a co-participation and connecting audiences from different countries.

Jennifer Steetskamp, *The Endless Endeavour: Installation Art and Media Histories*

Installation art, while it is paradigmatically located in the museum, conceptually moves beyond this space by evoking other institutional frames, such as the cinema, public archives, entertainment park attractions, etc. Considering its key characteristics (such as the mobility of the spectator, the multiplicity of viewpoints and trajectories, and the potential endlessness of the experience), screen-based installation art appears to challenge common assumptions about cinematic and art historical pasts, technological genealogies and discursive formations. It is especially the figure of virtual endlessness as well as the acknowledgement of site-specificity or site-relationality that allow for drawing new connections between early cinema and databases, television and ubiquitous computing. By exploring the spatio-temporal economies of particular installations, such as Kutlug Ataman's *Küba* (2005), Harun Farocki's *Deep Play* (2007), or the collaborative project *T_Visionarium* (2008), the study aims to demonstrate that installation art could not only be seen as a re-enactment of past (pre-)cinematic strategies, but makes earlier media configurations function as pre-enactments of what is happening in the digital era. In this way, traditional historical groupings of visual art and media are called into question, which points to the particular historiographical concerns of this project.

Additional information

Some of the Ph.D. projects are the result of collaborations with other institutions, such as Pepita Hesselberth's dissertation project, which is co-hosted and funded by the Copenhagen Doctoral School in Cultural Studies, Literature, and the Arts (CDS). While Laura Schuster, Senta Siewert and Jennifer Steetskamp are ASCA fellowship holders, other iFut members are supported by additional organizations: Zeynep Gündüz is granted a Mosaic scholarship by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and Maria Poulaki receives funding from the State Scholarships Foundation of Greece (IKY). Tina Bastajian receives a Dr. Carolann S. Najarian Scholarship from the Armenian International Women's Association (AIWA). Her artistic activities are partially made possible by the kind support of the European Cultural Foundation.