

## Toward a Comparative Futurism

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*Tehran 2121* is the alternate title for *Tehran 1500*, an Iranian animated science fiction feature film from 2012. The film begins with voiceovers reading out the headlines of Esfand 29, 1499, the last day of the year in more than one hundred years according to the Solar Hijri calendar, which is in official use in Iran and Afghanistan (March 20, 2121, according to the Gregorian calendar). Within the first few seconds, it is made clear that the rule of the Islamic Republic will not have disappeared by this date: Voices on the radio speak of the last barrel of the Iranian oil that will be donated to the National Museum, and that more than 99 percent of the Iranian population will be *shareholders*, actively participating in the stock market. Only moments later, these rather vague statements about the financial status of a government corporation with dried-out resources and little environmental grounding start looming over a techno-caliphate on steroids. Antiseptically clean high-rises with glittering architecture are embellished with the calligraphic expressionism and abstract patterns of Islamic geometry. They often carry a recognizable logo too, surprisingly that of the Ministry of Petroleum or the MAPNA Group, the country's leading energy conglomerate. Very long suspension bridges and elevated freeways sprawl in every direction, and aerial traffic flows with flying cars on multiple levels. Even Paykan has gone turbo-cyberpunk—modeled after the 1967 Hillman Hunter, Paykan was a symbol of Tehran taxicabs and almost synonymous with Iran's automobile industry until its (re)production was discontinued in 2005.

While the formulaic essence of the vertical city à la classical science fiction and its attachments and ornaments are maintained, this is not a place for a *future noir* scenario. Not an ill-omened arena of evil, Tehran is here depicted as a satellite city of grace and wonder floating between the snow-covered mountains in the north and the salty lowlands in the south. Into a bird's-eye view of the cityscape, above the Grand Imam Khomeini Mosalla—a mega-mosque and the second contemporary landmark, after Milad Tower, to be featured in the film—bursts the

sound of Adhan, the Islamic call to prayer, which happens to be the well-known rendition by Rahim Moazen-zadeh Ardabili from 1955. However, it is striking how the Grand Mosalla does not look much more developed than its current half-finished status since the early 1990s, although it is engulfed by the curvaceous and exuberant structures of the early 2100s.

Not very convincing as a PR stunt that verges on propaganda, *Tehran 2121* simultaneously presents an exemplar and an exceptional portrayal of the Islamic Republic, especially because an Iranian science fiction genre, whether of this kind of a techno-theocratic military-industrial complex or not, is in fact entirely nonexistent. The director and lead animator as well as the production company behind the film gained popular recognition in the early 2000s for a series of short educational clips commissioned by the Tehran Municipality and aired on national television. For the clips to appropriately deliver their content – traffic issues and the everyday ethics of modern citizenship – the spirit of authoritarian didacticism had to maneuver through and even incorporate aspects of popular culture that, although emerging in the post-revolutionary years, had little to do with the signature traits of the Islamic Republic’s idealized self-image. Since its inception, the regime had in fact been involved in constantly renegotiating its terms of openness to the liberal outside, figuring itself as the measure or the interface of cultural influence, and this was thereby another moment of crystallization. Characteristic of this cultural moment and its legacies is the regime’s long-standing investment in the reality effect of alleged claims to near-perfect synthesis between the inside and the outside, fabricated narratives that try to leave no gap between their eclectic elements uncovered and avoid revealing the course of their own coming into existence, creating the illusion that it has always been the way it is. The attitude is less like “beating them at their own game” and more like “compensating for belatedness by blending in,” even if an embarrassing feeling, or fact, of inferiority, failure, or compromise might remain in place. In this sense, the Islamic Republic has persistently tried to excel at a peculiar play of resistance and affirmation, one which invariably and exclusively follows a basic survival instinct, which most often is incapable of seeing any future beyond a repro-destructive horizon, forever on loop in a liminal zone, an evolutionary anomaly.

James Arthur Snead once argued that following nineteenth-century historicism, for a culture to survive it must not only “be immanent now, but it must also give the promise of being *continuously* so.”<sup>1</sup> Continuity, however, is threatened by repetitions that cut its course, and repetition cannot be simply denied, it must be reconciled with. And that is not only because the material world that sets the circumstances for cultural formation is not a reservoir of inexhaustible novelty, but also because a culture needs to maintain a certain degree of self-identity too. Therefore, “*transformation* is culture’s response to its own apprehension of repetition,” transformations that are either considered as “progress,” if positive, or as “regression,” if negative.<sup>2</sup> This is how the valorizing regime of European culture subsumed stasis and repetition within development and progress, giving way to a whole range of protections or “cover-ups,” as Snead puts it, to gloss over inevitable cuts, ruptures, and repetitions. The New Year, for example, recurs at preset intervals, but a New Year’s “resolution” is a cultural instrument by which a certain sense of personal growth is extended onto and expected from an all too impersonal world. Snead explains how such a formulation of culture and its underlying temporalities follows a logic of territorialization or stratification that originates in the early years of modern colonialism and its modes of expansion and extraction. The double bind of cultural survival corresponds to how capital should both circulate and accumulate, and also reflects the kind of underlying chronopolitics that have historically determined the coordinates of racial capitalism in its different stages of development. Such chronopolitics are characterized by what Johannes Fabian has termed the “schizogenic use of time,” that is, the placement of certain territories and their people not only as spatially but also, and more importantly, as temporally distanced groups despite immediate and coterminous exchanges with them, locking them up in an eternal present that only provides for historical continuity but itself falls outside of history.<sup>3</sup>

Whether despite or because of its intentions, *Tehran 2121* remains within this historicist framework. Its treatment of technological horizons as well as what is considered Iranian and Islamic boils down to that of an ethnic marketing campaign, designed to facilitate tapping into

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Black Textual Strategies, Volume 1: Theory (Winter, 1981), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Snead, 146.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Made Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 21.

the regional market of technical devices and infrastructural facilities. The film maintains an identitarian attitude that sticks to insider/outsider divisions, but what it actually frames as what ceases to require negotiation, a force to certainly reconcile with when survival is at stake, is not repetition but progress. In this sense, Paul Virilio's concept of "endocolonization" seems oddly relevant, a concept that accounts for how in parallel to the rise of information technologies, global forces of capital need not intrude from the outside of a society and can instead emerge from within. Virilio's critique refers to "the transfer of the West's expansionist drives from the exhausted geography of the terrestrial to the human body," that is, "the drift ... of a colonial savoir-faire towards a world-scale project of an endocolonial nature." This human body, of course, can be extended to a national imaginary, if the biological metaphor that underlies Virilio's political thinking would be further followed.<sup>4</sup>

*Tehran 2121* unapologetically depicts the Islamic Republic in the frame of cultural endocolonisation, which still inherits certain tendencies from the historicist framework of scientific discovery and technological progress. However, it certainly speaks to possibilities for overwriting technoscientific objectives too, insisting that technocultural *orientation* is not destined to be Western. Eventually, the film inadvertently reveals that repurposed technologies are often no more than the very bottom line of survival, and this is an issue that demands a more nuanced account than the defeatist humanism that underlies Virilio's critique. The matter of survival and its required modes of instrumentalization probably ask for narratives more like Reza Negarestani's framing of petroleum as the autonomous agent of global capitalism, particularly in a Middle Eastern context, which immanentizes the ebbs and flows of capital beneath the surface of the Earth: "Capitalism was here even before human existence, waiting for a host."<sup>5</sup> The political unconscious of the Islamic Republic's technocultural imagination seems to have long been both driven and agonized by such and similar convictions. Acceleration, in terms of increasingly activating every hibernated resource of immanent transformation, knows no context but is hinged upon territorialization nonetheless. Therefore, the key to a future beyond survivalism is none but navigation. After all, acceleration is, according to its scientific

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<sup>4</sup> See Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: Re-Press, 2009), 27.

description, not only a matter of the magnitude but also and decisively the direction of the velocity vector.

More promising than asking whether *Tehran 2121* can be an inaugural instance of an Iranian-Futurism-to-be is to read Virilio alongside Snead, which is to ask in what ways the film's depiction of a particular relationship between the endocolonial nature and immanent transformation amounts to a fundamental question of survival versus or vis-à-vis change, one which goes beyond the territories of the Iranian state and concerns the means of technocultural navigation both in the background and as part of the accelerating processes of globalization. On the other hand, the Iranian Futurism that *Tehran 2121* would be a representative of nonetheless remains situated within the official portrayal of Iran as a nation with borders larger than those that might appear, given its expanded regional involvements that make it difficult to map its geopolitical position without some sort of multi-perspectival positioning. Therefore, this film ultimately speaks to an entangled set of circumstances that condition and are conditioned by the ways in which imaginaries of a future world correspond to that which is geopolitically and geohistorically immanent. Such entanglement is the ground on which the task of a comparative chronopolitics grows. The future, as technically and culturally circumscribed as it might be, cannot be discussed but with respect to practices that resist or negotiate with authoritarian futurism and any non-agential relationship to the idea of the future, a function of survival and change, particularly in the ways in which time and temporal categories are conceptualized, acted upon, and put into practice. Accordingly, there might be a clue in a critical review of those *futurisms* that together carry a variety of navigational agendas and attend to an array of regional micro-histories and technocultural orientations. They provide different outlooks upon the horizon of change, endurance, and survival. Accordingly, the attempt to set up a framework of comparative futurism hopes to not only find some shared patterns of imagining the future among a constellation of technocultural practices, but more particularly to form imaginative patterns that allow for sharing the future as such and in all its plurality—a translocal politics that registers the tensions between conflictual imaginaries and instantiations of the future here and there.

In this regard, this study draws the sample contours of a comparative futurism in an “ethnofuturist” register, following various “ethnofuturisms,” as in technocultural practices that resonate between the scales of the ethnoracial and the techno-universal by reflecting on the divergent ways in which technical imagination corresponds to historical thinking. Ethnofuturisms simultaneously express understandings of a terrestrial spectrum, an inter- or supranational order, as well as the planetary infrastructures that are required for such ensemble, which are in constant negotiation with various kinds of national formation. Attending to the rhythms of change on various scales ranging from the individual to the collective, from the human to nonhuman, and from the natural to the naturalized, ethnofuturisms strive to leave behind the stagnating either-or of multiculturalism and ethnopluralism. In other words, ethnofuturisms respond to an intensified condition where “the only truly alien planet is Earth,”<sup>6</sup> and when “the future is here,” the future has already arrived on Earth, but “it’s just not evenly distributed yet.”<sup>7</sup> Ethnofuturisms address the future imaginaries of an alien Earth as a chronopolitical project. By tying ethnic and racial diversity to the universal impulses of technicity, ethnofuturisms reflect on the ways in which processes of alienation in fact intersect with and perhaps mutate the processes of anthropogenesis, or hominization. Ethnofuturisms investigate the Human status (as distinct from nonhuman, subhuman, superhuman, etc.) through a look at the history of technocultural traditions from the vantage point of their immanent futures. The inquiry into the Human status is often carried out via some sort of reverse engineering: Ethnofuturisms begin by asking whether alienation, as in the effects or residues of dehumanizing mechanisms, can be repurposed in the direction of becoming not *the other* but *another* human being that *has always been so*.

Attempts at making the (apparently) least uninhabitable planet livable coincide with the attainment and dispossession of the human status, a pattern that follows the ebbs and flows of resistance, coexistence, and survival over time. Bernard Stiegler has argued that the relative positions of different human cultures (or cultures of hominization) toward each other combine in the figure of technological development, which in turn embodies the history of human

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<sup>6</sup> J. G. Ballard, “Which Way To Inner Space?,” *New Worlds Science Fiction*, No. 118 (May 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Quote attributed to William Gibson. See further investigations on the origin of the quote at: [\[http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/01/24/future-has-arrived/\]](http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/01/24/future-has-arrived/).

evolutionary thought. “The history of life,” Stiegler writes, “can thereby continue according to new laws: in *interethnic* relations, insofar as *human groups do not behave as species in these relations*, a diversity of technical facts opens out within which the universality of technical tendencies is concretized.”<sup>8</sup> So not only is technology complementary to hominization but it also registers the diversity and plurality of the histories of being and becoming human. In other words, the techniques involved in the externalization of intelligence manifest feedback loops running between evolutionary processes of anthropogenesis and the ethnic or racial (as in transregional) diversification or proliferation of technocultural traditions.

In a relentless move back and forth between the dissolution of differences and the preservation of authenticities, ethnofuturisms resist an ethnicity-free or post-racial vision of the Earth’s future. The evolutionary history of life on Earth as we know it is tied as much with the history of technoscientific progress as with the processes of racialization. In other words, the future of Earth and its inhabitants cannot be discussed separately from the future of techno-(racial-)capitalism and its terraforming capacities or anthropogenic imaginaries. As the means of primitive accumulation are repetitively restored and put into work, race and ethnicity need to be addressed in terms of “the collective being” and “the ontological totality” of those who are forced to grapple with the inseparability of progress and development from discrimination, dispossession, and displacement.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, ethnofuturisms are focused on the blind spots and paradoxes of inter- and supranational cultural politics, emphasizing both the legacies and complications of postcolonialism, as well as the struggles bound up with the emergence of a hybrid and mobile subaltern worldwide.

A final introductory note needs to be made on the principle of comparison, particularly in relation to Stiegler’s thesis that “human history, unlike that of other species, is combinatory rather than comparative.”<sup>10</sup> Ethnofuturisms can be considered as emancipatory movements that take the possibility of change seriously only if they seek to abolish the conditions that made it

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, Volume 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 63.

<sup>9</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 171.

<sup>10</sup> Beth Coleman, “Race as Technology,” *Camera Obscura* 70, Volume 24, Number 1 (2009), 184.

not only possible but also necessary for them to evolve. The genealogy of comparison as an intellectual device can be traced back to nineteenth-century globalization, when old imperial orders were crumbling and the new nation-states were required to rethink their global positionality. The rise of evolutionary thought, lubricating the modern mechanisms of racialization, was accompanied with diachronic comparisons between different cultures and societies. “Comparison,” as Vanessa Ogle argues, “translated between the global panorama of economic, political, and cultural trends and the level of local experiences.”<sup>11</sup> But the instrument of comparison only made it clear that the world is far more heterogenous than it could be easily subsumed within a single global imagination. “In this world,” Ogle continues, “it was *time* that served to measure and establish difference... Time is what made the global imagination possible in the first place.”<sup>12</sup>

The study of various temporal orders and time patterns can therefore make a platform for scaling up and down between universal and relative qualities, oscillating between comparison and combination, and registering how differences crystalize as well as how they dissolve. In this sense, the comparative approach is intended to ultimately bring the combinatory processes that run through diverse technocultural traditions to the fore, while proceeding from within the history of systemic disparities and discriminations that have often territorialized inter-ethnic relations in terms of comparison between different species.

### **Afrofuturism: Genesis, Regeneration, and the Reality Effects of Race**

“Equation-wise, the first thing to do is to consider time officially ended,” says the legendary Sun Ra in the 1972 science-fiction film *Space is the Place* (directed by John Coney). “We work on the other side of time,” he declares. Sun Ra’s pioneering Afrofuturism is an exercise in reworking the relationship between historicist fixtures and racial constructs particularly via the deployment of technoscientific tropes. To use Beth Coleman’s formulation, Afrofuturism à la Sun Ra treats race as “a disruptive technology that changes the terms of engagement with an

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<sup>11</sup> Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870-1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 7.



all-too-familiar system of representation and power.”<sup>13</sup> A technical device is a construct that acts back on its own conditions of possibility, on what it confronts as a given, as preconstructed, and changes its background conditions to the extent that it becomes an inextricable part of those conditions. A technical device, in this sense, is like a fiction that makes itself real. Race, too, is a fictitious construct that has made itself all-too-real in the figure of a complex machinery of power relations, hence the so-called “reality effect” of race. As a device can be continually repurposed to different ends, and not only broken to merely reveal its preordained functionality, Afrofuturism considers how the future-orientation of a repurposed construct of race can serve an agenda of empowerment as a means to gain agency over the historicity of one’s own destiny.

What is particularly important about Coleman’s argument for the purposes of this study is that for race to be considered a technology, it must be estranged from its history. Sun Ra shows how for the genesis of an alternative history of the future, often there’s a need for speculating over the already historicized points of origin. The question is about where an alternative future descends from. Since the 1950s, Sun Ra had been developing what came to bear the title of “cosmic jazz,” and also forming a performative style that brought together tropes and tokens from ancient Egypt and the Space Age. He would have situated himself somewhere between a descendant or survivor of the transatlantic slave trade and an interstellar sentient lifeform currently on a voyage across the solar system. Jazz is in general characterized by repetitive cuts that together function as an organizational principle, making sure that relational beats keep circulating and do not get captured into a harmonic resolution or a single rhythmic climax. Sun Ra’s introduction of ambivalence into the matter of genesis directly engages with the musical principle of repetition, which according to Snead is “often in homage to an original generative instance or act. Cosmogony, the origins and stability of things, hence prevails because it recurs, not because the world continues to develop from the archetypal moment.”<sup>14</sup>

An origin stretched between space suits and ancient Egyptian regalia produces performative enunciations of coincidence where the reality effect of a racial construct is claimed, owned, and repurposed toward a higher level of shared consciousness and agency. This is manifest, for example, in a scene from *Space is the Place* where Sun Ra meets with a group of

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<sup>13</sup> Coleman, 178.

<sup>14</sup> Snead, 149.

black youth in a community center. When challenged on his claim to the extraterrestrials, Sun Ra explains that his “not really” being from outer space overlaps with the “unreality” of underprivileged black youth, or, to turn it around, Sun Ra’s internalizing of an alienating point of origin, so to speak, happens to be as real (and simultaneously unreal) as the life of the black youth on Earth. This is an early reflection on the conditions of social death for racialized subjects, but one which is simultaneously channeled through an active and self-empowering response to it. Speculative points of departure toward alternate futures neither ignore the history of slavery nor turn a blind eye to its living legacies. This history of racialized repression has long been the subject of a radical tradition of “countermemory” that tries to read past the surface of historical cover-ups and reassemble inherited archives and narratives as sites where power silently manifests itself. Accordingly, fictions of genesis feed into “counterfutures” that, according to Kodwo Eshun, aim to expand on the tradition of countermemory by “reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective.”<sup>15</sup> To go back to Coleman’s argument, counterfutures perfectly correspond to a rigorous conception of race as technology by suggesting that “agency is possible within repressive systems and that this agency often renegotiates the tools of mastery.”<sup>16</sup>

How a fictional genesis can cause a reality effect in the figure of an immanentized future also points to ways in which Afrofuturism poses fundamental challenges to humanism. In the sleeve notes of their 1997 album *The Quest*, the electronic music duo Drexciya introduced themselves as “water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants.” A Drexciyan genesis, they explain, goes back to the story of “pregnant America-bound African slaves thrown overboard by the thousands during labor for being sick and disruptive cargo. Could it be possible for humans to breathe underwater? Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? Did they then migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi River Basin and to the Great Lakes of Michigan? Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us?” Another example for such an approach is Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy, which tells the story of an African-American woman who, after a nuclear catastrophe of planetary scale, must

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<sup>15</sup> Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, Number 2 (Summer 2003), 289.

<sup>16</sup> Coleman, 194.

let her DNA merge with that of an alien race in order for humans to survive and keep living on Earth in whatever form possible. Through a certain rationale of instrumentalization, human survival and “xenogenetic” inhumanism become inseparable.<sup>17</sup>

A similar logic forms the basis for Aria Dean’s proposed notion of *blacceleration*, which can be read as a recent theoretical update on earlier Afrofuturist inhumanisms. The focus of blaccelerationism is on “the form of the living capital, speculative value, and accumulated time” that is “stored in the bodies of black already-inhuman (non)subjects.”<sup>18</sup> This is to point out a fundamental blind spot and an unthought position in classic critiques of a capitalist political economy. A human/capital binary, as the theoretical basis for a Marxist critique of alienation par excellence, does not hold for blackness. A theory of alienation, in this sense, should be approached in how its constituent elements are preceded by ethnoracial othering, by the pre-established but often overlooked boundaries between the human, whose labor can be proletarianized, and the dehumanized slave, whose pseudo-ontological dispossession sets it beneath the human and offers it as a resource for extraction and accumulation.

### **Sinofuturism: Counter-Conspiracies and the Contrary Effects of Globalization**

In the mid-1990s, David Morley and Kevin Robins laid out an articulation of techno-Orientalism as the franchise on the story of the future was widely perceived to be passing from Western to Oriental hands. They observed how Japan’s path to modernization had become a crucial aspect of its exoticized image as an Oriental other, an image particularly shaped to reflect the same Western fears and anxieties that were the underlying cause of centuries of xenophobia and racism, modern imperialist warfare, and a belief in technoscientific supremacy.<sup>19</sup> Today it seems to be China that, having established itself as an inimitable global power, has been entrusted with that image. In Lawrence Lek’s 2016 video essay *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, the computerized voice of a text-to-speech narrator declares that “Sinofuturism is an invisible movement. A spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals.”

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<sup>17</sup> See Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi, “The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility,” *e-flux journal* #77 (November 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Aria Dean, “Notes on Blacceleration,” *e-flux journal* #87 (December 2017).

<sup>19</sup> See David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

Considering the robot as an agential being sans the human status, Lek himself once pointed out in an interview that “the robot is for Afrofuturism what AI is for Sinofuturism,” a thinking subject that is supposed to submissively get trained for various purposes beyond the human’s innate capacities, and one which has often been portrayed in the menacing image of a Manichean devil.<sup>20</sup> Lek both internalizes and inverts the techno-Orientalist narrative, assuming Sinofuturism as a global conspiracy or, rather, the conspiracy of globalization itself. His work reimagines the state of China as a posthuman intelligence, a distributed network of bodies and brains more creative, disciplined, and collectivized than any descendant of the European enlightenment. What Lek’s vision of Sinofuturism suggests is that it is right within alienating portrayals and reductive representations that the subjects of many non-Western cultures can find a point of radical convergence, recognizing the violence inflicted upon them as a common ground for reorganizing their agency. Sinofuturism, in this sense, asks how exoticism, for instance, can open up a shared space which tackles Western imaginaries from within.

Such an approach might only superficially seem to hint at a kind of neo-essentialism, but in fact it is about giving up on a fetish of communicating a true or authentic self, or recognizing the hollow promise of a balance between one thing and its representations. Accordingly, Fatima Al Qadiri’s sonic explorations often engage with a whirlpool of geopolitical turbulence and its corresponding fantasies. She speaks of her 2014 concept album *Asiatisch* as “a simulated road trip through an imagined China.”<sup>21</sup> It is an exploration of both the musical quasi-genre of sinogrimé as well as the concept and practice of Shanzhai, confronting “the fantasies of east Asia as refracted through pulpy Western pop culture,” as Al Qadiri has frequently put it herself. She asks, “what is meant by the term ‘Asian’ in a digital age of viral interchange and the hi-speed trading of cultural bytes?” This question is delicately posed in a track that also carries the title “Shanzhai.” Produced in collaboration with Chinese actress and singer Helen Feng, it is a cover of Sinéad O’Connor’s “Nothing Compares 2 U” sung in Mandarin, only with nonsense lyrics, which will not be recognized as such by any non-Mandarin speaking people listening to it, and there are potentially many of them. Again, this highlights the possibilities for owning and then

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<sup>20</sup> Josh Feola, “Lawrence Lek: ‘It isn’t a manifesto, it’s a conspiracy theory’,” *Time Out Beijing* (March 27, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> All quotations from Al Qadiri’s statement for her debut album. See [\[http://fatimaalqadiri.com/music/fatima-al-qadiri/asiatisch/file/about-asiatisch/\]](http://fatimaalqadiri.com/music/fatima-al-qadiri/asiatisch/file/about-asiatisch/).

repurposing clichés, representational tokens, misconceptions, or misunderstandings via finding ways to exacerbate their fictional inherence, so as to realize it, through sense and desire, in an equally if not more real sense as anything pre-representational, or presumably authentic. The resulting reality, though, might be even darker than the West's darkest fears. According to Steve Goodman, such is Sinofuturism as "a darkside cartography of the turbulent rise of East Asia."<sup>22</sup>

Anna Greenspan, on the other hand, argues that the "Shanghai futurism" of the early twenty-first century steps in when historical futurism in the West has almost completely run out of steam.<sup>23</sup> More than anything in particular among futurist manifestations of technoscientific advancement, it is the very "spirit of futurism" that is strikingly "out of date" when looked at on the world stage today. Greenspan, however, warns against the easy conclusion that is often made, that Shanghai futurism, and Sinofuturism by extension, is no more than a recurring affair of retrofuturism, both in terms of its outdated spirit in and of itself, and in terms of the objects it puts forth along its own course of development. Greenspan's argument pivots around an alternative formulation of the future via a reinvented sense of time-consciousness. Against an understanding of the future which posits it as a relative point located somewhere ahead of us on a line that extends from now to then, she suggests that Shanghai, in how it weaves temporal coordinates anew, fundamentally reformulates what the very idea of future might mean. This gestures toward an "absolute futurism" which defies all attempts at prediction, and in fact dissociates futurism from planning itineraries for arriving at certain points then and there. This is instead about "an atemporal presence, a virtual realm" that is addressing the present as having already been infused with its future effects.<sup>24</sup>

Retroaction, in this sense, is not about repeating the past, or even amending the history as has been chronicled, but putting pressure on the present to unleash its inherited but unfulfilled future impulses, that is, a futurity that is found in the virtual extremes of the here and now. Greenspan traces the modern history of grandiose engagements with the future in urban contexts to the heyday of twentieth-century international world fairs, and highlights how the aesthetics of today's Shanghai overtly references this bygone era of forward-looking ambitions. Nonetheless,

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<sup>22</sup> Steve Goodman, "Fei Ch'ien Rinse Out: Sino-Futurist Under-Currency," *PLI: Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 (1998), 155.

<sup>23</sup> See Anna Greenspan, *Shanghai Future: Modernity Remade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Greenspan, xvii.

she argues that this should be celebrated as a sign of confidence and persistence in the absolute pursuit of the future and not giving in to the post-utopian consensus of the current globalized era. In fact, this makes the strong point that the so-called “contrary effects” of China’s market regimes, although compatible with global capitalism and its Western watermarks, has sustained a spirit of faith (or a strategic suspension of disbelief, as far as the effects are concerned) in the idea of the future in the face of the cynical consensus of Capitalist Realism as we know it.<sup>25</sup> This is also to state that in contemporary times every futurism is a retrofuturism, both because the promise of continuous transformation seems to have reached its practical and ideological limits, and also because tradition is being treated as an unfixed record of unprecedented techniques and technologies.

### **Gulf Futurism: Lived Experience and the Special Effects of Statecraft**

Gulf Futurism simultaneously stands for the hegemonic state policies of development in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and a range of artistic practices that encounter such state of affairs with tactics that include cloning, doubling, parody, and the invention of alter-egos and fictional personas. Gulf Futurism, in fact, amounts to the lived reality of the (Arab) Gulf region, torn between realities lived by the citizens and residents, inasmuch as the region itself appears like the accumulated reality effect of Gulf Futurism itself. Most characteristic of the region is probably the various forms of displacement to and from it as well as the difficulties of a sense of belonging even for those who have never left the region in their lifetimes. The inconsistent reality of Gulf Futurism is built upon a simulated tissue, one which marks probably the largest parcel of the earth ever born directly out of the fundamental temporal shift that characterizes the precedence of the map over the territory. Gulf Futurism anticipates the full- fledged production of a post-simulacra reality on a world scale. This indicates a time-crisis, a quantum leap, a temporal gap, which is placed into the very infrastructural setup of the Arab Gulf states, as their entire skylines carry the digital gloss and the smooth depthlessness of projections put forth by

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<sup>25</sup> See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009). For a critique of the “contrary effects” of the Chinese state’s developmental agendas, see Yuk Hui, “Sinofuturism in the Anthropocene,” in *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2016), 290-301.

architectural renderings. The speed at which the (Arab) Gulf jumped from “camel and wool” and nomadic desert-treading to “steel and glass” and boulevards lined with blustering supercars only matches the time-frames of a computer graphics software exporting a set of renderings over a few days and nights.<sup>26</sup> Entire cities are as if directly poured out of the virtual environment of 3D modeling. The less glossy underbelly of the same hyperreality, however, is populated by those who are forced to compensate for this historical gap and facilitate its stitched-up condition. Gravitating to the (Arab) Gulf from across the Global South are the precarious laboring bodies who fall victim to the tyrannies of time travel, and whose bodies get lethally stretched across not only the time zones but also, and more importantly, the historical periods that they are moved through. The (Arab) Gulf serves as an exemplary transit lounge for time travelers that together demonstrate the contemporary condition of a time-crisis, the patchwork of inconsistent temporal layers stretched across transregional scales. Such is the Dubaification of the world.

In a 2013 article titled “Transformers,” Sophia Al Maria wrote that “a new flesh is being forged in the hyper-pressurized combination of extreme wealth, embittered Islam, and magical thinking.”<sup>27</sup> Al Maria, who coined the term Gulf Futurism back in 2008, treats the urban fabric of the contemporary Arab Gulf as the flesh of her own conflicted mind-body and vice versa, crafting what is as much a plausible personal anecdote as it is certainly the lived reality of certain burgeoning or mutating settings in one part of the Arab Gulf or another. By addressing things all too personal and experiential, she reveals the absurdities of experience and the lack of empirical certainty in such a context. This is, more or less, a condition of pre-installed auto-alienation, or what Al Maria herself calls the “scripted disorientation” of descendants of a nomadic form of life, peculiar to Bedouin tribes, walking through world-famous mega-malls in the Arab Gulf. Alienation, in other words, is always already scripted in the lives of those who have nowhere but the Gulf to call home. If the present moment is mainly defined by experiential attachment, it is this present that is lost as it cannot be experienced, or as its experience comes with no attachment, no sense of belonging to that experience. The premise of Gulf Futurism, therefore, is

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<sup>26</sup> See Karen Orton, “Desert of the Unreal: In Conversation with Sophia Al Maria and Fatima Al Qadiri,” *DAZED* (November 9, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Sophia Al Maria, “Transformers,” lecture at *FORMAT*, Issue 3, Architectural Association, London (July 2, 2013). See [<https://sophiaalmaria.wordpress.com/2013/07/09/transformers-format-3-reality/>].

a reworking of the present tense, of the contemporary moment, of the nature of nowness, of a sense of entitlement or belonging to the here-and-now, which can be inherently alienating if a heterogenous present is itself sutured via the shape-shifting assemblage of chronotopes both arriving from the future and simultaneously resonating with the past. Artistic practices that shape Gulf Futurism express uneasiness towards the categories one is brought into through the practice and experience of life; in Gulf Futurism's case, uneasiness towards "future orientation" itself, the myriad ways in which "futurism" has been an integral part of the official rhetoric for speaking of a project of national or regional federation, whether in the image of the UAE or GCC. Gulf Futurism, then, reflects and reveals the Gulf between what one feels in their body and the perspective they see in the mirror, or more truly, within the confines of a computer generated rendering or under the surveillance of a recorded and broadcasted frame.

Early considerations of Gulf Futurism were penned and posted on Al Maria's weblog "The Gaze of the Sci-Fi Wahabi," which did reflect the favela chic of neo-Arabness, a period that saw the prioritization of cell phones and internet access over much else that would have hitherto been considered as basic needs. The promise of online or wireless connectivity was beginning to reshape the pre-existing and stultifying perceptions of proximity, inaugurating a different set of aesthetics, an unprecedented regime of sense-making in the region. Around a decade after those early remarks, extreme connectivity seems to have instead extended the authoritarian organization of the ruling classes — all as part of a more recent agenda of planetary Dubaification. Now is the time when Khartoum is marketing itself as "Dubai on the Nile," and cross-border cities like the Saudi Arabian NEOM are being planned and advertised as "a startup the size of a country."<sup>28</sup> High-tech trans-regional gov-corps are looming on the horizon more vividly than ever. This is a scenario of CEO-monarchs ruling over populations of privileged citizen-shareholders and their lower-rank (un)fixed-term resident-contractors. There is a fine micro-example for such a techno-dystopia. In 2017, Hanson Robotics' AI-based humanoid robot named Sophia became the most famous naturalized citizen of Saudi Arabia. This media darling, the straw woman in the middle of a PR stunt, and designed to represent an Audrey Hepburn type of feminine beauty, de facto stands as a poster-child for today's time-crises since she embodies

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<sup>28</sup> See Monira Al Qadiri, "OCTO-POLITIK," in Armen Avanessian and Mahan Moalemi, eds., *Ethnofuturismen* (Leipzig: Merve Verlag, 2018), 169-174.



the clash between futures and futurisms. Incorporating the techno-libertarian fantasies of racial capitalism, she stands as an affront to all the alternatives that have long been imagined and fought for by a population concerned with its future beyond a dysfunctional language of nativity.

<sup>29</sup> Although some might discard it as a side point, it remains a fact that Sophia's fictional and symbolic right to citizenship was prioritized over the true right of all those migrant workers without whose labor the fast leap from digital rendering to the materialized cityscapes of Doha, Dubai, and Riyadh would not have ever been realized. This gives all the more reason to urgently rethink the underlying circumstances of processes through which nature is both deployed and founded by a language of rights and, furthermore, to reconsider how legal verdicts are themselves naturalized in turn.

Eventually, the effects that go into and result from the craft of Gulf Futurism seem to embody a particularly ironic counterpart to the tyrant utopianist aspirations of *Tehran 2121*. By extension, neither of the regional juggernauts on the two sides of the Gulf seem to contain visions for a future that registers societal change from a non-elitist perspective. As the Dubai-born, Brooklyn-based writer and editor Rahel Aima once put it, the artistic discourse that has been shaped around the material, historical, and political inconsistencies of the Gulf states is “not imagining a future so much as mapping shards of future detritus in the present. It is an aesthetic scaffolding that reproduces all the injustices, structural degradation, and racial erasures of the present.”<sup>30</sup> The question that remains to be asked is, how the spectre of Gulf-ness, and its futurism, can work to destabilize conceptions of authoritarian futurism that, as the Dubai-based geographer and publisher Ahmad Makia puts it, masquerades a strictly mononationalist project that subsumes and pacifies its multi-ethnic heritage, pretty much on both sides.<sup>31</sup> That is to ask, what reformed modes of sociality does or could Gulf Futurism embody?

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<sup>29</sup> See Pedro Neves Marques, “Sophia, with Love and Hate,” *The Baffler* (November 14, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Scott Smith in conversation with Rahel Aima, “What Was Gulf Futurism?,” *Current Intelligence: Ethnic Futurism in the Gulf* (July 31, 2013) [<http://thesigers.com/analysis/2013/7/31/ethnic-futurism-in-the-gulf.html>].

<sup>31</sup> See Ahmad Makia and Mahan Moalemi, “‘What Was Gulf Futurism’,” in *ZIGG: Superficial* (Dubai, 2018).

## Further Remarks on the Navigation of Ethnofuturism(s)

The background from which ethnofuturisms emerge, as outlined and introduced above, is an alien and alienating Earth whose immanent future(s) have been unevenly actualized. In this sense, the mix of special, contrary, and reality effects that play into the formation of ethnofuturisms seems to descend from the archetypal cyborg, “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction,” as Donna Haraway once put it.<sup>32</sup> Ethnofuturisms provide evidence and act as advocates for the assertion that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, to undo such an illusion is to bring the hybridies of ethnofuturist creatures into sight, rendering them visible and, by extension, sensible, without pressuring them to necessarily make sense.

A complementary method for such an observation is what Arjun Appadurai calls “an anthropology of the future,” which considers “imagination,” “aspiration,” and “anticipation” as critical elements in the study of “the future as a cultural fact.”<sup>34</sup> Resonating with Haraway’s critique of “an optical illusion,” Appadurai frames this study as one which dispenses with the “lens of pastness” which still dominates cultural anthropology by and large.<sup>35</sup> Important in this study is to reconsider the role of imagination not as contrary to “the logic of habitus” but as a “quotidian energy” that is involved in “the production of locality.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Appadurai articulates “the capacity to aspire,” which is integral to a chronopolitics of hope, as “unequally distributed” and situates “its skewed distribution” as fundamental to global economic disparity, which seems to have reached disproportionate extremes on the Earth of ethnofuturists.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Appadurai argues that a study of the different anticipatory mechanisms that are often at war over the shape of the future should engage with “the zones and practices through which the ethics of possibility come into contact with the ethics of probability in specific regional, historical, and

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<sup>32</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985), in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “The Future as Cultural Fact,” in *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013), 293.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 287-288.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 289, 292. See also Arjun Appadurai, “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition,” in *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013), 178-195.

cultural milieus.”<sup>38</sup> This ethical encounter trigger a fundamental question of scale. While the former is defined as a set of quotidian practices of future-making that are closely tied with the production of locality, the latter consists of enterprises that are in principle directly linked to a universal promise of calculability epitomized by data analytics and probabilistic modeling, and put in the service of insurance policy-making and risk assessment, among other regulatory technologies that are in one way or another involved in the rhythms of sociocultural life across the world. In this sense, the anthropology of the future is indeed an attempt “to reopen the many meanings of the idea of ‘speculation,’ ”<sup>39</sup> an idea that ethnofuturisms pursue in engagements with art and fiction, examining potentials for historical thinking in the overlaps between the forces of imagination and instruments of calculation.

In this background, Stuart McLean’s discussion of anthropology as “a fabulatory art” that has the radical capacity to undermine “conventional distinctions between fiction and documentary” is pertinent to the study of ethnofuturisms, or a project of comparative futurism in general.<sup>40</sup> Reframing the tradition of ethnographic comparativism, McLean argues for juxtaposition and montage as informing principles for probing the interstices of differently constituted human worlds as well as those of non-human agents. The aim would not be to explore diverse scenes “under an already established rubric or with reference to a notional sociohistorical context but rather to manifest a set of associations and connections that need not be assumed to have existed at all prior to the act of comparison itself.”<sup>41</sup> Fabulation, then, as the ethos of “a comparativism of multiple worlds in the making,” exceeds the mandate of accounting for difference by reworking the task of accountability in terms of engagements with immanent differentiation itself.<sup>42</sup> The methodological implications of fabulatory comparativism are twofold. Firstly, it reveals that futurisms should be attended to not only as registers of the ways in which immanent transformations in the fabric of global realities are realized but also as potential operators of such realizations. Secondly, it speaks to how a comparative study of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Stuart McLean, *Fictionalizing Anthropology: Encounters and Fabulations at the Edges of the Human* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017), xi.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 158.

futurisms is also embroiled in their operations, both in the background and as part of the processes of globalization. In a sense, fabulatory comparativism highlights how ethnofuturisms attempt to reckon with the challenge of mapping the abstractions of global capitalism by inserting themselves into speculative mechanisms that shape and maintain the reality via the regulation of contingencies.

Such tactics resonate with Simon O’Sullivan’s formulation of media arts practices that explore the notion of speculation as caught between speculative fiction and finance capitalism. The significance of derivative and other financial instruments lie in resituating the future as a condition of the present and not the other way around. As O’Sullivan argues, “financialization is not really about accurately predicting—or, indeed, controlling—the future, but rather keeping it open, proliferating scenarios,” whose effects get recursively materialized in and as the present.<sup>43</sup> Finance capital as “the medium of contingency” dismantles the conditions wherein fiction was hitherto set in contrast to reality and instead engages in a fictioning of the real.<sup>44</sup> In a set of practices convened under the title of “mythotechnesis,” O’Sullivan sees a potential for repurposing the ways in which finance draws on the processes of fictioning. These practices involve “the production of technologically enabled (and experimental) future-fictions that feedback on the real.”<sup>45</sup> This task is often performed via aesthetic, affective, and conceptual extensions of the logic of collage; featuring screens within screens as interfaces of nested narratives, blurring the borders between pre- and post-production (as in what is found versus what is made), and exploring the speculative space that extends between mythology and technology. However, mythotechnesis is not so much about a rivalry between art and capital over the extents of their reality effects than the ethical and political nuances of how a technique or medium is repurposed, that is, transposed into a different context of operation. The active role of manifestos, films and audio works in the production of realities remains underwritten by certain chronopolitical demands that concern how causality and contingency are regulated in a system-specific and cybernetic model of the world and the different temporalities it hosts.

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<sup>43</sup> Simon O’Sullivan, “From Financial Futures to Mythotechnesis,” in *Futures and Fictions*, ed. Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed, and Simon O’Sullivan, (London: Repeater, 2017), 324.

<sup>44</sup> See Elie Ayache, *The Medium of Contingency: An Inverse View of the Market* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> O’Sullivan, 329.

The relays of politics, myth, and technics, shared between practices of mythotechnesis and ethnofuturisms, as well as feedback loops between different temporalities and conceptions of time that appear in different imaginaries of worldliness stress the necessity of navigation as a chronopolitical project and an ethical task. These relays correspond with the “cyborg myth” that is about “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities.”<sup>46</sup> Harraway formulated the chronopolitical task of navigation in terms of the promise of “illegitimacy” that the cyborg holds: “The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins.”<sup>47</sup> “All societies,” on the other hand, “contain traditions of messianism, millennialism, and radical change,” writes Appadurai, “and in the era of globalization, these have begun to produce unusual new foci of cultural conflict and ethical adventurism.”<sup>48</sup> Ethnofuturisms, as discussed here, are among these “unusual new foci,” and their conflicts and adventures are manifest in the history of the Estonian tradition of “Ethno-Futurism,” which not only sets a challenging precedent for this study’s proposed nomenclature but also reveals the necessity of navigation as historically immanent to it.

Ethno-Futurism stands for two different sets of ideas born a couple of decades apart and both centered around Finno-Ugrian cultural politics. One originates from a 1994 manifesto by a group of visionary young poets, including an eighteen-year-old Karl Martin Sinijärv, in the Estonian university town of Tartu, while the other symptomizes the decadent rise of supremacist tendencies in contemporary Europe. The former, riding the waves of anti-authoritarian resistance at the tail end of the Soviet era, conveyed a minority history of domestic alienation and social misrecognition within a larger context of international isolation, signaling not much of a choice other than developing forward-looking aspirations via a move backwards.<sup>49</sup> Authors of the manifesto and members of the movement they set out to inspire for years to come embraced a conflicted syncretism of pre-Christian traditions, Orthodox influences, political neopaganism, an almost sacrosanct doctrine of democratic transitology, as well as an obsession with

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<sup>46</sup> Harraway, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>48</sup> Appadurai, “The Future as Cultural Fact,” 292.

<sup>49</sup> See Kauksi Ülle, Andres Heinapuu, Sven Kivisildnik and Maarja Päril-Lõhmus, “Ethno-Futurism as a Mode of Thinking for an Alternative Future” (1994) [<http://www.suri.ee/etnofutu/efleng.html>].

techno-utopianism. Simply put, all this makes Ethno-Futurism an underexplored hallmark of the long 1990s.

However, and according to their first manifesto, the movement remained mainly concerned not with a particular “ideology” but the prospect of a “modus vivendi,” an almost exclusively survivalist strategy that was as much a matter of attending to a way of living peculiar to an ethnic identity and allowing for its constant reformation as it was fundamentally inscribed with a will to integrate in a world of burgeoning globalization even if at the cost of compromising a resolute sense of political determination, that is, navigation. Significantly, the onset of the internet, prime time for cyberpassing, was hailed as the basis for a sense of global orientation as it was perceived to allow for reverting historical time to the ground zero of a virtual realm that seemed equally distant from anything ever developed by any nation in the world. Fast-forwarding to the contemporary moment, the political ambiguities of the Ethno-Futurist discourse, sliding over a veneer of allegedly post-ideological consensus, have been betrayed by Estonian right-wing populists whose blend of anti-globalism and uninhibited xenophobia carries no reference to the actual history they appropriate, cannibalizing its humanist optimism with a fanatic sense of tribalist futurism.

The curator Anders Kreuger, who has produced several exhibitions of works by Estonian artists involved in the movement of Ethno-Futurism, considers the matter of navigation in terms of a mode of “criticality,” which concerns a “refusal to illustrate a New Age-inspired, ultimately apolitical vision of spiritual positivity.”<sup>50</sup> Navigation is therefore a matter of consciousness about how the cultural mechanisms of late capitalism can serve as conduits for the re-establishment of settled boundaries and anachronic forms of power, whether religious, nationalist, or authoritarian. If the intrinsic temporal tensions that define ethnofuturisms are not well navigated or not strategically tied up with a refusal to entertain apolitical renditions of one or another received belief system, that is, if not attended to explicitly as a matter of chronopolitics (which is, of course, always already subtended by geopolitical and geohistorical realities), they might simply end up falling prey to the tyrannies of ethnic supremacy.

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<sup>50</sup> Anders Kreuger, “Ethno-Futurism: Leaning on the Past, Working for the Future,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 43 (Spring/Summer 2017), 131.

These caveats and provisos circle back on how “the capacity to aspire” serves both as a “cultural” and “a navigational capacity,” in the sense that aspiration is embedded in specific cultural matrices of power and access, attached to local architectures of social mobility and codes of recognition, while it can also be mobilized to alter the mechanisms that maintain the reality as it is, wherever it is.<sup>51</sup> While the politics of navigation remains attached to questions of scale, it remains a mission of comparative futurism to ascertain the ways in which the navigational capacity of aspiration can be repurposed for registering those views of the future that are generated from below while attending to their aptitude for upscaling and recalibrating visions of worldliness across translocal spectrums.

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<sup>51</sup> Appadurai, “The Capacity to Aspire,” 188.