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**Facing Backwards: Images from the Future**

Pisters, P.

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Earth from afar for the first time, we finally started understanding the fragility of our planet. The book *Earthrise* (2008) by Robert Poole testifies to the beginning of this planetary awareness.

Artists have always reveled in the great unknown of space. In popular culture, filmmakers and musicians have dedicated numerous works to the landing on the moon, the perils of space travel, and the extension of man's habitat. Rumor has it that in 1969, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Claes Oldenburg created the first Moon Museum, a micro exhibition that was left on a leg of the Apollo 12 lander. The existence has never officially been confirmed or even debated, but the New York Times printed an image taken by the astronaut in its November 22, 1969 edition.

Unfortunately for Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Oldenburg, they are no longer the only artists in space. With the arrival of a New Space Race come new opportunities for artists to revisit the black space for artistic purposes. American artist Trevor Paglen just launched his project *The Last Pictures*, a capsule on board of a spacecraft that carries a visual record of images that define human history. This spacecraft, like other satellites, is destined to become the longest-lasting artifact of human civilization, quietly floating through space long after every trace of humanity has disappeared from the planet.

In 2010, Spanish artist Alicia Framis opened her Moon Life Concept Store, a collaboration with the European Space Agency. In the store, she sold objects made by designers, architects, and artists that imagined the terraforming and habitation of the moon. One of the projects was a 3D printer for moon dust, created by artist John Lonsdale to make buildings with.

This idea was recently picked up by architecture firm Foster & Partners, and it looks like it will be turned into a prototype.

A new generation of designers and architects is being trained for the new normal of zero G design, microenvironments, and orbital architecture. The first civilians are already experiencing weightlessness, and space tourism is expected to be a \$1 billion industry over the next 10 years. It is only a matter of years before we will all be able to afford a ride into space or take a one-way ticket to the moon to retire. But just please be careful with the UNESCO Lunar Heritage Sites of the Apollo missions.

Space is the place again. Nobody knows exactly what this journey will bring us this time. The cynics will see a hyper-capitalist colonization of our galaxy, the romantics a going where nobody has gone before. I will follow these developments with heightened curiosity and critical enthusiasm, always remembering the words of Richard Feynman: "For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled."

## Facing Backward: Images from the Future

Patricia Pisters

The television series *Flash Forward* (ABC, 2009) is based on Robert Sawyer's science fiction novel with the same title.<sup>1</sup> The main

character is a scientist who works at CERN in Switzerland, where the Large Hadron Collider accelerator is performing a run to search for the Higgs boson. While the discovery of this mysterious particle was on the front pages of the newspapers in 2012, the experiment in the fictional versions has the side effect of a global blackout during which everybody on earth has a flash forward, being confronted with an image from their future. In a popular and narrative way, the show examines the question of what it entails to live and act from a vision of the future. Some fear their vision will come true, others fear it won't. But everybody acts on the uncertainty of the speculative image they have seen on their brain-screen.

Everywhere in culture, we have noticed a shift to this future perspective. From telomere testing to determining at what age we will die to preemptive wars, from highly speculative stock markets to profiling to detecting potential criminal behavior, our culture speaks from an image or idea of the future. *Flash Forward* is both a symptom and a popular form of critique of this obsession with the future. But this future is not so much a "facing forward" from the present to the future, but a "facing backward" from the future to the present (and past). This has everything to do with digital screen culture at large but is possible to understand philosophically with the help of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of time that he develops in *Difference and Repetition* (the French original appeared in 1968).<sup>2</sup> Put very concisely, Deleuze conceives time as various contractions of differences and repetitions on our brain-screens. In the first contraction, or the first synthesis of time that forms the basis of our temporal experience, we experience time from the perspective of the present. On the basis of

repeated actions in the present, we recall and anticipate, and hence develop sensory-motor and habitual behavior. The first synthesis of time is a stretch of the living present, in which the future is based on habits we have learned to embody automatically. Making a big leap to image culture, it is possible to argue (which I do more elaborately elsewhere) that this first synthesis of time is also the type of future that is characteristic of pre-war classical (Hollywood) cinema, in which the living present is the dominant temporal mode, and the future depends on habitual expectations of anticipated behavior, often related to genre expectations. Or the future is just relegated to what happens after the film ends: "happily ever after".

The second version of the future in *Difference and Repetition* is a future based on the past, which is the second type of temporal contraction. In the second synthesis of time, memory, as the virtual coexistence of all the layers and sheets of the past, gains more importance. This is the grounding of time in the past, which starts to speak for itself, sometimes at unexpected moments. Post-war European cinema expresses this new temporal form, in which the past provides the basis for the present and the future. The narrative logic of Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), for instance, is based on this second temporal synthesis. Images of the famous love affair of a French woman and a Japanese man in Hiroshima soon starts to mingle with images of her past traumatic love affair with a German soldier as well as the collective traumas of the war and the atrocities of the atomic bomb attack. All levels of the past co-exist, as they begin to speak for themselves in the film. The present is no longer (or not only) a stretch of the living present,

but a culmination point of all pasts: “I saw everything,” the French woman claims in the film, which nevertheless is impossible: “You saw nothing,” the Japanese man argues. When the second synthesis is the dominant contraction of time, we also get a different conception of the future, which is now conceived from the past as well; based on the cycle of remembering and forgetting, on the model of the past, things will happen again. Both on a collective scale, when in voice-over we hear “it will happen again — 20,000 deaths — the asphalt will burn again”, and on an individual scale, when the man says: “In a few years, when I have forgotten you, I will remember you as the symbol of love’s forgetfulness, I’ll think of this story as the horror of forgetting.” The second version of the future takes the past as its cyclical model. It grounds the future with cyclic certainty.

Let me now conclude with a glimpse from the third form of temporal synthesis, in which the future becomes the grounding of time — or better the *ungrounding* of time. Because when we speak from the future, there is no longer cyclic certainty but always a speculative element. The future will happen, of course. However, *how* it will happen becomes an open and speculative question in multiple variations. In films such as *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), *Mr. Nobody* (Jaco van Dormael, 2009), *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), and *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011), we can see what happens in contemporary digital screen culture when this third option becomes the dominant temporal color.<sup>3</sup> In its speculative dimension the future unfolds in parallel options, multiple remixes, and recombinations that are presented as possible variations of this time to come: a phenomenon connected to the context of a digital remixable database culture, which acts

not as a cause but certainly as a co-constituent of this type of storytelling that departs from this third temporal form.

In the field of the visual arts, the future can become the speculative mode of “narration” as well. In *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, a video installation by Silvia Kolbowski (2008), the artist testifies in a different mode to such a perspective from the future. While the subtitles in the video work recall *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the images themselves speak about future war traumas and disasters (Iraq and Katrina specifically, but more traumas are implied). And so these images, many taken from the Internet, recall from a future perspective the past of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. The French-Japanese couple is multiplied and played by many different actors of various ethnicities, race, and gender. The original soundtrack is remixed and relayed. All this adds a speculative dimension to the images and sounds, which start to mingle, mix, and eternally circulate as possible images from the future. They are unsettling images that, depending on the flash forwards on our brain-screens, ask for our action in the present, “facing backward from the future”.

1

Robert J. Sawyer, *Flashforward* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1999).

2

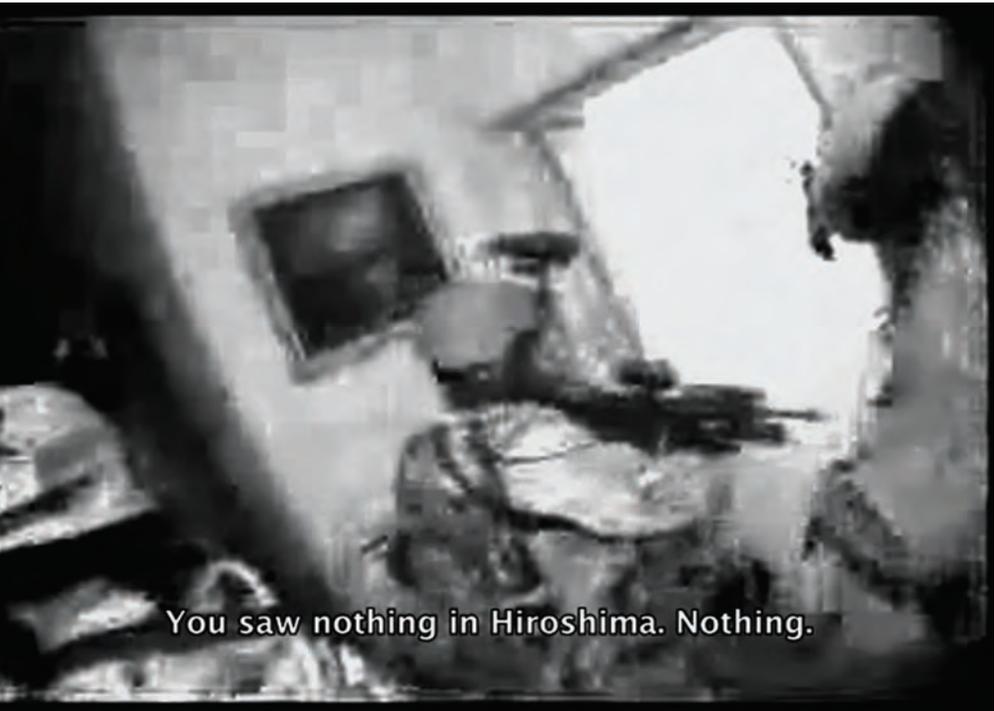
Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004).

3

For a more detailed analysis of such examples, see Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012).



Alain Resnais, still from *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 1959, film, 90"



**You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.**

Silvia Kolbowski, still from *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 2008, video/16mm b+w film, 22"14',  
courtesy of the artist