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Semiotic Ghosts: Science Fiction and Historicism

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Christopher Williams, *Pacific Sea Nettle, Chrysaora Melanaster*, Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific, 100 Aquarium Way, Long Beach, California, September 5, 2007, 2008, gelatin silver print, 61 × 50.8cm. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York

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# Semiotic Ghosts: Science Fiction and Historicism

– Peio Aguirre

In William Gibson's short story 'The Gernsback Continuum' (1981), a photographer (the narrator) is commissioned to illustrate a coffee-table book about North American architecture of the 1930s, to be published under the suggestive title *The Airstream Futuropolis: The Tomorrow That Never Was*.<sup>1</sup> Excavating the architecture of the so-called 'American Streamlined Moderne', full of chrome surfaces and buildings inspired by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), the narrator is haunted by what he calls the 'semiotic ghost': hallucinations of unrealised futures — an airplane that was 'all wing, like a fat symmetrical boomerang with windows in unlikely places' or 'fifth-run movie houses like the temples of a lost sect that worshipped blue mirrors and geometry'.<sup>2</sup> Gibson used this concept to describe the science fiction imagery that permeates Western culture — that is, 'bits of deep cultural imagery that have split off and taken on a life of their own'. More precisely, Gibson's some-

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**With the help of science fiction's melding of future and past, Peio Aguirre unpacks art's current obsession with recuperating modernism and deciphering the historically 'new' in postmodernism.**

what satirical criticism drew both on various modernist movements (which he labelled 'futuroids') and on the 1920s-esque fake technology featured in sci-fi magazines such as Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*. Gibson's version of a futuristic pop ghost echoes that 'old-fashioned future' that Bruce Sterling, Gibson's cyberpunk peer, coined in the title of one of his books to

describe the time-space shifts that tend to present the past as science fiction and science fiction as past.<sup>3</sup> 'The Gernsback Continuum', as a hilarious compilation of sci-fi tropes, also managed to short-circuit the categories historically assigned to the genre, and functioned as a critique of its own aesthetic clichés. For this and other reasons, the story is seen as inaugurating the cyberpunk subgenre, which mixes science fiction with postmodernism.<sup>4</sup>

But today Gibson's semiotic ghosts have transcended the realm of the science fiction genre to shape our current cultural reception and understanding of history. Gibson's account is one of the most valuable examples of a postmodern conception of history, particularly in postmodernism's challenging of social and political institutions, ideas of continuity and structure and the nature of historical research and knowledge. Today, much looks as if it were the product of a ceaseless proliferation of textuality, which holds that history never comes to us 'as it was', but in the form of texts and other documentary objects. Having now discarded the ideal that objective and factual knowledge of a historical reality is apprehensible, the past becomes a narrative composed by infinite other texts up for refutation.

As a result, the reception of history (as well as the present) is based on the eternal return of fragments — each reinterpreted indefinitely. But, as Terry Eagleton once wrote, 'in *over*-historicising, postmodernism also under-historicises, flattening out the variety and complexity of history in flagrant violation of its own pluralistic tenets'.<sup>5</sup> And where

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1 William Gibson, 'The Gernsback Continuum', *Burning Chrome*, New York: Arbor House, 1986. Hugo Gernsback (1884–1967) created the first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, in 1926. Gibson's story is reprinted in Bruce Sterling (ed.), *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, New York: Arbor House, 1986.

2 W. Gibson, 'The Gernsback Continuum', *op. cit.*, p.27.

3 See B. Sterling, *A Good Old-Fashioned Future*, New York: Bantam Spectra, 1999.

4 Additionally, Gibson, in his 'Sprawl series', lays the ground for the use of a new technology that is happening in an unspecified future, one intimately connected to our modern condition. See the trilogy of *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), *Count Zero* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd, 1986) and *Monalisa Overdrive* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd, 1988), as well as *Burning Chrome*, *op. cit.*

5 Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p.49. Emphasis Eagleton's. About this tendency of *over*-historicising he also sees the implied inner contradictions: 'The impulse to historicise capsizes into its opposite: pressed to the point where continuities simply dissolve, history becomes no more than a galaxy of current conjunctures, a cluster of eternal presents, which is to say hardly history at all.' *Ibid.*, p.46.

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postmodernism reads history, modernity and modernism can also be read. Think, for example, of the International Style, Bauhaus, certain elements of Minimalism, the Citroën DS, geodesic domes and post-punk as elaborate semiotic ghosts, integrated and absorbed into our individual and collective unconscious to symbolise not the referents themselves but a popular, more nebulous understanding of their implications. The iconic content of these real objects seems to liberate itself from the source or reference, becoming an idea which is self-generated and belongs to no one in particular. They are volatised, perhaps like bodiless ghosts, and wander around. But what matters here is not questioning the authenticity of styles of modernism, but determining the precise location they occupy as form-concepts in prefiguring our idea of the past and its reception from the present.

The insight that cyberpunk can provide not only lies in the imagination of utopian futures – alternatives to the current situation – but also in the understanding we have of yesterday and of the way history can be constructed and represented collectively. Thus we might be able to trace strands of sci-fi historicism in artworks that draw on the past for their material (not in vain does Chris Marker open the monumental *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre (The Last Bolshevik)*, 1983), with George Steiner's words: 'It is not the past which dominates us, it is images of the past'). This textuality, hosted in the narratives of the past, is a reminder that although history (and modernity) is not a text, it is only accessible to us as a text. The categories 'postmodernity' and 'postmodernism' were invented as periodising concepts to describe a new type of social life and economic order that had a tangible impact on the formal and stylistic characteristics of culture. Decades after these labels were coined, the context in which we are now immersed sees the postmodern as something outdated, old-fashioned. But we are seeking the answer in a post-postmodernism that never arrives, while impatiently attempting to pin down new terminology to describe the present. However, while postmodern culture seems to be fizzling out, the ghosts of modernity continue to appear, transformed into a critical revision of modernism that flourishes in 'multiple', 'vernacular', 'peripheral' or 'local' variations. Contemporary art is one of the key sites of this revival of modernist aesthetics; as T.J. Clark wrote in 1999, 'Modernism is our antiquity'.<sup>6</sup> If that is the case, what can be said about its temporality? Frozen, almost cryogenically preserved, modernism as a cultural period expels the essence of its own definition; it isn't merely content with being a period within a sequential historical continuum, but is reaffirmed in the present by always being the subject of a self-reflection. 'Modern' or 'modernism' are no longer periodising categories but rather models of self-consciousness. As such, the mere mention of modernism in the arts or modernity in history requires a degree of reflection on its naming or categorisation (as modern in the sense of new, etc.). Thus, modernity's bid to be the final word, full of assertive manifestos and bombastic harangues, sows the seed of its constant and perpetual auto-critique: modernism, High Modernism, late Modern, new Modernism, postmodernism and so on. Fredric Jameson has written that the

*trope of 'modernity' is always in one way or another a rewriting, a powerful displacement of previous narrative paradigms. Indeed, when one comes to recent thought and writing, the affirmation of the 'modernity' of this or that generally involves a rewriting of the narratives of modernity itself, which are already in place and have become conventional wisdom.*<sup>7</sup>

The current referential exercises in art exemplify this inability to transcend a historicism that subsumes the present (something that does not mean that we are at a time of strong historical consciousness, but rather the contrary). Gibson's sophisticated critique of an 'antique future' becomes parodic when aligned with the representations that a futurist modernism tried to shape. His vision not only defines modernism as a Habermasian 'unfinished project', loaded both with historicity and futurity, but also as a huge bazaar, filled with artefacts that match modernism's own inexhaustibility, paving the way for postmodernism. These obsolescent artefacts have today become semiotic phantoms. Unsurprisingly, referentiality in art and culture has not only become a convention, but

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6 T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, p.2.

7 Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present*, London and New York: Verso, 2002, pp.35–36.

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*the* privileged strategy, where whatever seems to be new has already been produced, mediated or processed in another way by someone else, another author. One of the great paradoxes of the alleged fecundity of historical content (the result of thinking of history as hunting grounds) is that it expresses just the opposite — an exhaustion of the possibility of invention in a culture given to endless retrospection, unable to generate real innovation and novelty, and in which the return or recurrent reinvention of the old-fashioned has given birth to what we call postmodernism. Jameson himself diagnosed such a condition in his study of the cultural logic of late capitalism, notably through postmodernism's adoption of pastiche and film nostalgia and its dreamy, narcissistic recreation of nonexistent pasts through signs and remnants.<sup>8</sup>

Almost three decades after the debate on postmodernism as our cultural condition, the current state of contemporary art sets the ground for a renewed interest in gaining inspiration from art history and other cultural sources, with referentiality and historicism (with its archives and 'documents') again becoming the main strategies for meditations of history. Christopher Williams and Willem de Rooij, for example, say that referentiality

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in art has become an orthodoxy; for each this has to do with preserving the critical potential of art, as their practices are characterised by hyper-encoded referentiality that is then followed by the fine erasure of the traces left by these overloaded references.<sup>9</sup> Williams's photographs, in their bland, perfected appearance that mimics the imagery of advertising, hide an entire web of links; testing the extent to which complex layers of information can condense and remain distinct within a single image. De Rooij's

solo work (following his collaboration with Jeroen de Rijke) investigates the connection between Conceptualism and institutional frameworks in order to question the naturalness of the reception of any image. Each is representative of a postmodernism that often enacts a critique of referentiality, and of the way that language operates and meaning is constructed, by demonstrating that the referent and referentiality are ideologically constructed. Both artists, whose work has been widely present since the 1990s, are aware of how the characterisation of mid-to-late 1970s Post-conceptualism as the era of polemical referentiality (Jeff Wall's photographs, for instance) has now become a mainstream convention. They establish a link between the 'golden age' of postmodernism, namely appropriationism as a critical strategy in late 70s and early 80s, and contemporary referentiality, where the interestingness of the source seems enough to generate the work. In their self-sufficient self-reflexivity, Williams's and de Rooij's works are clearly symptomatic of, and responsive to, the difficulties that stem from the overdetermination of historical references.

However, the difficulty lies there — that is, in the endemic inability of contemporary culture to create a form that does not refer to anything else. As an antidote to this cultural condition, de Rooij states that he is working on a list of rules (as did Dogme 95, the Danish film group of the 1990s) to facilitate the production of non-referential art. But can we think of something new that does not refer to anything? That is, a form that no longer fits in Barthes's 'degree zero', Susan Sontag's 'aesthetics of silence' or Minimalism's tautological objecthood?

### **The Archaeological Turn**

Not surprisingly, at this juncture, in the era of globalisation, our devotion to contemporary forms of historicising is accompanied by a profound scepticism about the nature of historical time itself. How can we define our historical period? Are 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' still valid terms for our social, economical and cultural system? Undoubtedly, grasping period shifts and nomenclature has always been a major concern

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8 See F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

9 Christopher Williams and Willem de Rooij in conversation with Jörg Heiser, 'As We Speak', *frieze*, issue 134, October 2010, pp.178–87.

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for humankind, while anxiety about the future determines our desires and social dispositions. Philosophy has made time one of its great subjects. However, a large-scale shift in thought means that its ideas about the history of events and the becoming of humanity materialise today in cultural territories that render obsolete the distinctions between high and low. Such fields as cyberpunk, contemporary art, auteur cinema and postmodern architecture have created a referential magma, turning culture into a viscous mass of historical pop.

Bruce Sterling has recently offered an alternative to traditional historiography and its distinctions between classical, modern and postmodern. He speaks of ‘atemporality’ as the cultural trait most suitable for our time.<sup>10</sup> For Sterling, new non-synchronic and globalised forms of communication emerge in the structure of the network; there is no authoritarian or unique voice that can speak about history, since this discipline, which emerged in the linear culture of the book, has been fragmented in cyberspace. Technological tools have an influence on knowledge, narratives and presentations of history, irreversibly changing history itself. The conflict, according to Sterling, is between the ‘Gothic High-Tech’ that we have inherited as part of analogical culture (‘a ruined castle or the ruins of the unsustainable’) and ‘Favela Chic’ as an informal and outlawed network in the emerging order. Not content with describing what he considers to be the atemporality in which we live, he offers solutions for the artist who is working within this chaos, such as recuperating forms that could not be written, writing histories about people who were not the ‘winners’ or those without literature or re-creating human experience from before the historical record:

*What can we do to liven things up, especially as creative artists? Well, the immediate impulse is going to be the ‘Frankenstein mashup’. Because that’s the native expression of network culture. The ‘Frankenstein mashup’ is to just take elements of past, present and future and just collide ‘em together, in sort of a collage. More or less semi-randomly, like a Surrealist ‘exquisite corpse’.*<sup>11</sup>

Sterling’s position risks being adopted by the so-called ‘creative class’ as a new version of the neoliberal call of the ‘end of history’. However, it encourages the practicing of history in innovative ways, outlining novel forms of cultural history. The white noise of the cultural field’s over-historicisation finds its counter-narrative in this atemporality or, as Gibson says in his latest book, in ‘opting out of the industrialisation of novelty’.<sup>12</sup> Gibson’s literature over the last decade shares a future-is-now approach with Sterling’s, perhaps because his fascination with the complexity of the world prohibits him from imagining further artificial created futures. In another agonistic effort, Jameson himself located the current crisis of utopian imagination in the difficulty in thinking about solutions to the current neoliberal order — a crisis that leads us to repeat ad nauseam that there is no alternative to capitalism. Thus, the political function of science fiction is not merely to forecast the day after tomorrow, but to make us aware about the problems we have in imagining it.<sup>13</sup> For Jameson, science fiction’s powerful historical self-consciousness is useful precisely when political imagination is in decay.

Different forms of ‘archaeologies of the future’ appear in recent art, when evolved forms of postmodern historicism surpass the recontextualisation of narratives of the past about the ‘new’. This archaeological turn is palpable in Carol Bove’s installations of shelves, objects and books, which adapt the appropriationist practice typical of the 1980s, for example in the work of Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine and Haim Steinbach. A self-reflexive commentary about appropriation as artistic solution, Bove’s work uses presentation rather than representation to highlight the extreme textuality of any historical object. Collector, bibliophile, historian and feminist — these are some of the terms that describe Bove in her personal exhumation of fragments of US culture from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the approximate years when the artist came of age, when a particular climate of idealism

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10 B. Sterling, ‘Atemporality for the Creative Artist’, presented at the conference ‘Transmediale 10’, Berlin, 6 February 2010. Available at [http://www.wired.com/beyond\\_the\\_beyond/2010/02/atemporality-for-the-creative-artist](http://www.wired.com/beyond_the_beyond/2010/02/atemporality-for-the-creative-artist) (last accessed on 2 August 2010).

11 *Ibid.*

12 W. Gibson, *Zero History*, London: Penguin, 2010, p.116.

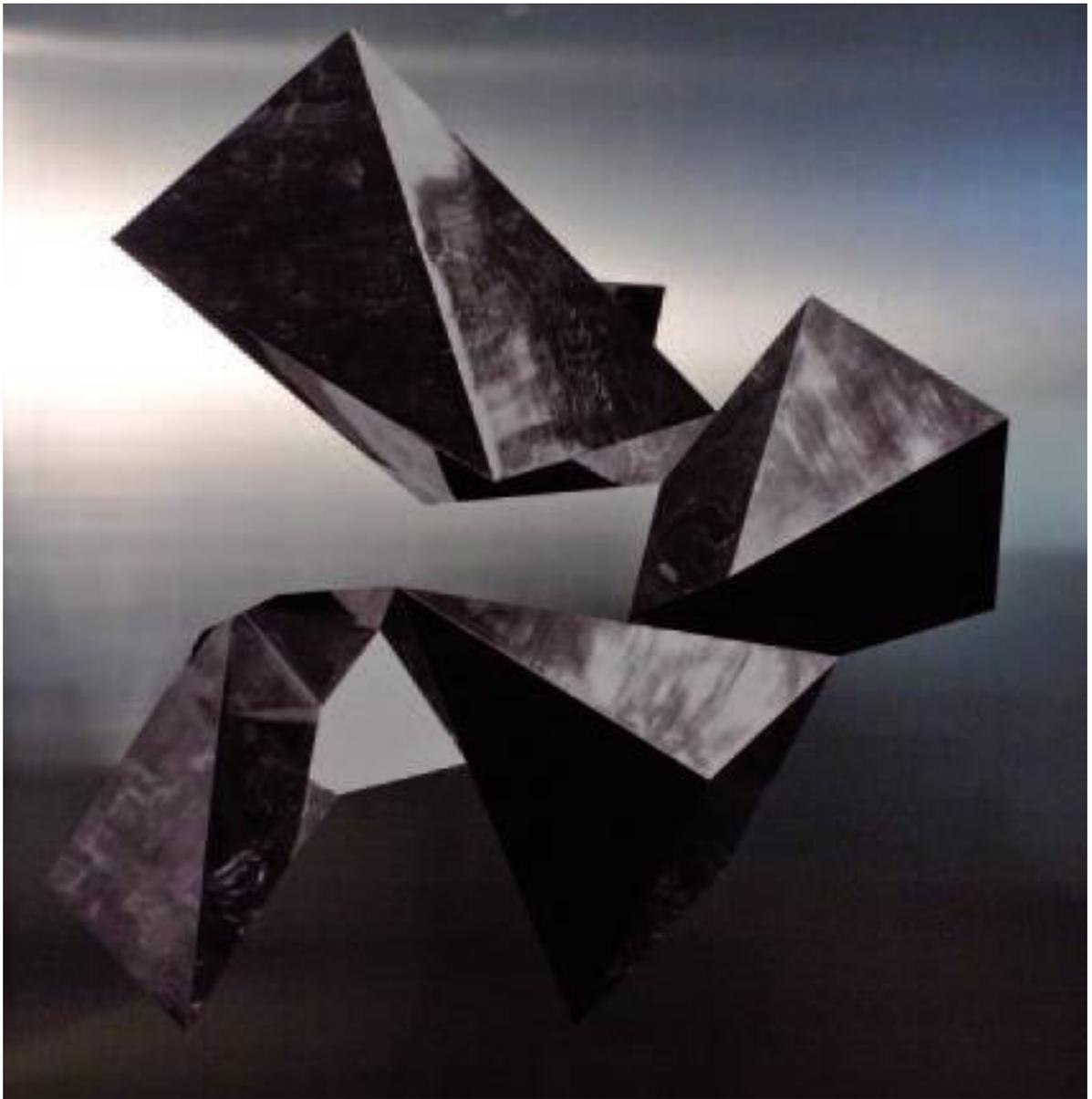
13 F. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London and New York: Verso, 2005.



Carol Bove, *The Occult Technology of Power*, 2006, wood and metal shelves, books, peacock feather, cement, 112 × 165 × 25cm. Courtesy the artist, Hotel Gallery, London; Maccarone Gallery, New York and Georg Kargl, Vienna

was in the air. Her excavations call up a past that, far from being fossilised, appears as an open code to be deciphered in a circular manner. For example, Bove began some years ago to draw female nudes based on *Playboy* magazines from the 1960s. This copyist technique – with the otherness of identity and difference it entails – crystallises into fragile, objectified bodies that the spectator has to focus on closely due to the near invisibility of the drawn image. Other drawings also sourced from *Playboy* feature the model Twiggy, Mia Farrow, Jane Birkin and an extremely young Mike Oldfield – icons of a sexuality which, when viewed with hindsight, complicate the feminist reception of the role of erotic publications during the sexual revolution. Like ghosts, these drawings, with their recognisable but ultimately unplaceable ‘60s-ness’, show phantasmagorical effigies of a past the artist has revived, revealing the mythologies implicit in them from our point of view. Her arrangements of books and use of Knoll furniture owe as much to Sherrie Levine and Haim Steinbach as to the illuminating and melancholic thinking of Walter Benjamin in his ‘Unpacking My Library’ (1931). Bove’s asceticism tends towards the reordering of a macrocosm on another scale more in keeping with the personal and domestic. Books are readymades, but they are also good time-travellers. Her collecting suggests that ownership of the (desired, sought and bought) object will create an intersubjective identification between subject and object similar to an act of cultural cannibalism. Bove’s work makes explicit the tendency to read objects as texts, to increasingly objectify texts (included in her installations are the *Kama Sutra*, the *I Ching*, Alex Comfort’s *The Joy of Sex* (1972) and Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium Is the Massage* (1967), among other technologies of the body and spirit) and to see palimpsests as images – in short, to make Benjamin’s allegorical reading a regular mode of interpretation. But more than a melancholic impulse (a feature of allegory for Benjamin) or a nod to the commoditisation of the past, central to Bove’s work is a critique of the fetishisation of meta-narratives. As one of the characters in Gibson’s *Zero History* says, ‘consumers don’t buy products so much as narratives’.<sup>14</sup>

14 W. Gibson, *Zero History*, *op. cit.*, p.21.



It is in this reification of the narratives (and not just objects) where one identifies the rupture in Bove between the first generation of postmodernist appropriationist artists, who were overtly citationist (Levine, Lawler, Steinbach and others), and a second wave of referentialism that digs into the gaps of the narratives of history. The artist herself has made explicit this endless recycling as well as the exhaustion of invention:

*One of my rules is that I don't want to be inventive or, more precisely, I want to avoid needless innovation. For a long time I only re-presented things that I found, but at certain point, when I felt a strong pull towards making things, I loosened the constraint. So now it's okay to invent a form, but I have to feel like it existed in advance of me. I think that's some version of pastiche, however vague the source forms may be.<sup>15</sup>*

David Maljkovic,  
*Retired Form* (detail),  
2009, collages  
on aluminium,  
silver screen, light.  
Courtesy the artist  
and Sprüth Magers  
Berlin London

15 Carol Bove and Bettina Funcke in conversation, 'Style and Pastiche', *Parkett*, issue 86, 2009, pp.92—93. Besides this exploitation of the narratives of the past, there is in recent art practice an exploitation of all those lost futures that never existed — semiotic ghosts them too, narratives in the form of unrealised utopias and science-fiction scenarios of thwarted pasts. In this regard, I think especially of the utopias of the Eastern Bloc countries, which have returned in a modernist retro-futurism in which David Maljkovic is an accomplished expert.

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### Crisis of Historicity

In a philosophical sense, historicism and historicity are opposed concepts, because while historicism is about looking into the past (not without revision) its focus remains in the present, using the former to understand the latter. Historicity is a concept that investigates the persistence of the past in the present and also includes futurity. If history has become a bazaar of missing narratives, no doubt this crisis of historicity increases as we retrieve, recycle and review the past with the same speed we store it away. As Jameson argues:

*If there is any realism left here, it is a 'realism' which springs from the shock of grasping that confinement and of realising that, for whatever peculiar reasons, we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach.*<sup>16</sup>

It is precisely because of our overexposure to historical content that we should be cautious when considering our period as one in which historicity is a reigning trope. A great contradiction lies in the fact that postmodern over-historisation produces our 'continuous present'. But if the crisis of historicity is obviously related to the present temporal mode, what can we say about the state of space in the postmodern or geopolitical spatialisation that is globalisation? It is not by chance, moreover, that the narrator in Gibson's story, in his need to exorcise his semiotic ghosts, loses himself in the vastness of the Californian landscape: in this non-place, surrounded by eight-lane highways, he is able to recover from his fantastic thoughts of the stalking semiotic ghost. California, from a historical point of view, becomes the perfect setting for a sci-fi historicism, a deliberate metaphor for the fragmentation and discontinuity of urban experience. The work of Los Angeles-based artist Mathias Poledna amply represents such a saturation as well as the contradictory nature of media historicity. Decelerating aesthetic experience, Poledna's film installations – mostly looped short narratives – are orchestrated on the basis of veiled cultural references. *Actualité* (2001–02) explores pop cultural phenomena, depicting the rehearsal of a band that sports the highly codified post-punk 'non-style' of the late 1970s and early 80s; *Western Recording* (2003) shows a recording session in the legendary Studio 3 at United Western Recorders in Hollywood – a studio that has remained largely unchanged since the 1960s because of its special sound; in *Version* (2004), dancers perform a choreography against a black backdrop that calls to mind the minimalist style of the Judson Dance Theater. In each film, few specific clues establish the time period depicted or the location. Each could be an *objet trouvé*, a 'lost product' – the name of the artist's production company). Crossing a multiplicity of contrary temporary coordinates, the artist problematises filmic documentation or the audiovisual construction and reconstruction of history. His preoccupation with the aesthetic and media conditions of historical perception, underscoring the constructed character of audiovisual space-time. He describes his works as fragments of culture of the twentieth century, perhaps emphasising a belief in ruins as a metaphor for the state of culture and the collective consciousness.<sup>17</sup> It is as if the artist were attempting to search for the paradoxical presence of the inexpressible, which ends to favour works imbued with silence – works considered difficult in the language of this epoch rather than full of meaning.

Poledna's position suggests possibilities for critical exploration into the pop cultural landscape in relation to the material and historical development of recent decades and, of course, to the conditions of resistance to dissolution into postmodern banality. His films provoke lasting cognitive and sensorial experiences, and in each a relentless succession of moments aspires to approach a status that is now extinct (or reserved exclusively for modernist works): that of the 'masterpiece'. In an era of rapid consumption, Poledna extends the life of every one of his productions to match the manner in which they persist from inception to reception, seating them within a temporality that replicates the form of the work itself – requiring a large, meticulous production process just to show that each detail brings with it a surplus of historical background to be decoded. His pieces already foresee their future reception, since their main material is time, accumulated and laid down.

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16 F. Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998*, London and New York: Verso, 1998, p.10.

17 See Pamela M. Lee, 'Actualité', in *Mathias Poledna: Actualité* (exh. cat.), Graz and Frankfurt: Grazer Kunstverein and Revolver, 2002.

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These careful ‘fragments’ might work here as bearers of Benjamin’s idea of the ‘citability’ of history and the past, while at the same time their neat stylistic erasure, or the return of a certain stylistic neutrality – the post-punk in *Actualité* or the choreography in *Version* – indicates this dialectical tension between the timeless fog generated by decades of televisual idioms and the precise periodisation or historicisation of the same fragments of artistic culture and pop. In the film installation *Double Old Fashion* (2009), temporal and aesthetic categories become even more abstract: an ensemble of glass vessels designed by Adolf Loos (*Bar-Set*, 1929) appears as a hypnotic phantasmagoria, as if rescued from the origins of experimental cinema. The jar, the liquor bottle and bar glasses are all based on a basic form: the cylinder. Slowly, hypnotically, the camera moves around the glasses, creating hyper-aesthetic close-ups that alternate with sober shots of the entire ensemble, arranged on a rotating surface before a black background. The selection of this glassware is intentionally loaded with meaning; it should be noted that presenting any object by Loos, as Poledna has done in other occasions (for example, with *Elefantenrüsseltisch* (*Elephant Trunk Table*, 1910), or originals of Loos’s magazine *Das Andere* (*The Other*), which he used for his exhibition ‘Crystal Palace’ at Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, in 2007), also refers to the everlasting idea of the readymade.

Rather, Poledna’s approach embodies that expert and dormant gaze that after its awakening selects a historical moment and reveals the contradictions accumulated in that moment’s cultural marker. The inherent strength of the referent functions autonomously, becoming the first element of meaning, while the artist’s subsequent act of making a film around it complicates an already dense background. Loos’s vessels, as shown in the film, are ghostly images, almost narcotic ones, filmed under special dark lighting. ‘Cognitive estrangement’ is a defining characteristic of science fiction, and a certain Brechtian ‘alienation effect’ of the modern as such is what the meta-historical conceptualism of *Double Old Fashion* brings to us now.<sup>18</sup>

In the extraordinary revival of discussions about modernism, the spectral apparition and the ghostly presence of the modern after its postmodern denial or challenge resemble in some way the charm of primitive original forms for artists of the modern period. But Poledna tells us that modernism is not only outdated or old-fashioned but that it is doubly passé. His work seems to demand a new category for cultural productions, since they no longer fit into the canon of the postmodern description of pastiche and film-nostalgia, nor can they be seen as modernist work. New categories (of post-postmodernism) need to be invented, in order to show how current cultural artefacts enact what Jacques Derrida has called ‘hauntology’. In *Spectres of Marx* (1993), he uses the term to describe the way that after the various ‘ends of history’, the present remains haunted by ghosts of the past, which continuously erupt (an obvious cyberpunk metaphor).<sup>19</sup> Postmodernism’s effect of mirroring the past stems from the collision of modernity’s ‘ontology of the present’ with hauntology’s spectres.

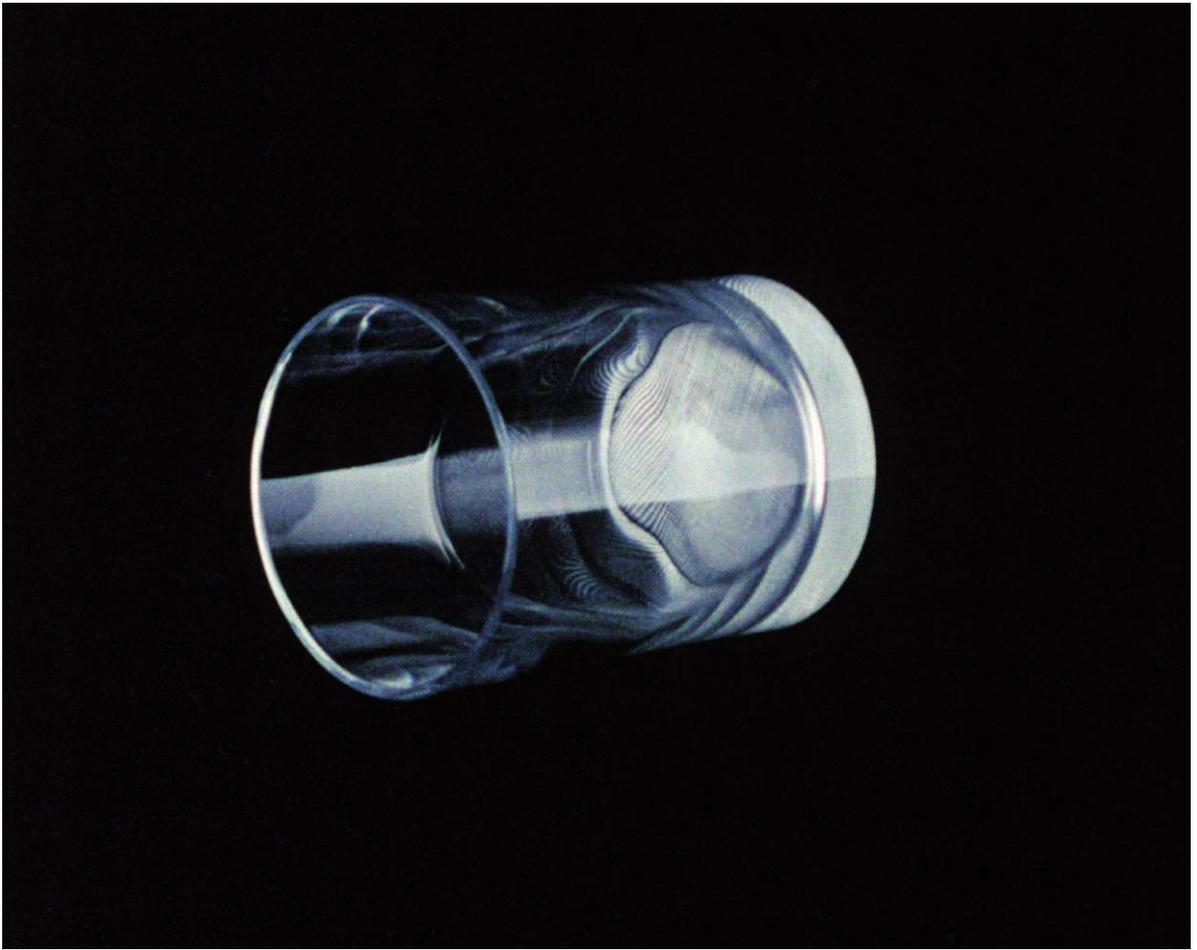
Beyond any impossible demand for a ‘return to the modern’, Poledna creates in *Double Old Fashion* a meta-commentary on the modern condition embodied in its material, glass. (Indeed, Loos once said that the aesthetic effect of an object should last for as long as its material does.) Regarding *Bar-Set* Loos noted that he was inspired to use a cylindrical shape after seeing drinking glasses at a farm in France, perhaps following an imperative: that the modern spirit demands practicality above all. This reiterates Loos’s thesis about the gratuitousness of the inventive imagination in the applied arts, proposed in his polemic ‘Ornament and Crime’ (1908).<sup>20</sup> For the modern – to which Loos belongs – the ‘best form’ exists because it remains ‘crystallised’. In his view, the only legitimate innovation is that of technique, even if the elegance of the result is still relevant as a touchstone for verifying the validity of Loos’s method. What matters here is precisely this condition of timeless ‘best

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18 ‘The literature of cognitive estrangement’ is the definition given to science fiction by Darko Suvin in his seminal study *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Another pathbreaking study is Carl Freedman’s *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

19 ‘Hauntology’, which combines ‘haunted’ with ‘ontology’, has been used to describe some recent ‘spectral’ music (by Burial, The Caretaker, Ariel Pink and Boards of Canada, among others) in the blogosphere, to the point of becoming a cultural phenomena in itself. See for example the blogs of Simon Reynolds (Blissblog), Mark Fisher (K-Punk) and Adam Harper (Rouge’s Foam), and the article ‘Society of the Spectral’ by Reynolds in *The Wire*, issue 273, November 2006.

20 Adolf Loos, ‘Ornament and Crime’ (1908), *Ornament and Crime* (trans. Michael Mitchell), Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 2008.



Mathias Poledna,  
*Double Old Fashion*,  
2009, 16mm film,  
colour, no sound,  
20 min, 16mm frame  
enlargement.  
Courtesy the artist  
and Galerie Daniel  
Buchholz, Cologne/  
Berlin

form' that questions the lack of duration of any postmodern product. Even in a twist, all this historical speculation might follow that postmodern formula of appropriation, whereby in order to produce 'modern' objects, it only remains to find, collect and recycle them.

#### Low-tech Returns

An apposite bookend to this argument, to be shifted forward with the addition of new volumes, concerns the re-politicisation of nostalgic impulses linked with both the capitalist developments of mass culture and the fetishisation of historical experience. For this task, an analysis of the appreciation of low-fidelity or simpler forms of technology could give us valuable information. The low-tech fetishism proliferating today in contemporary art (somehow also an extension of the consumer technology, as the various Polaroid apps for the iPhone and other devices suggest), might have an equivalent in forms of retro-futurism like steampunk or dieselpunk, subgenres that imagined a better alternative historical past, one in which the digital revolution occurred in the middle of the industrial revolution.<sup>21</sup> Some of this fetishism works as a reminder, again, of that postmodern nostalgia in which 'from the present' or futuristic references at the level of content hide a dependence on established or outmoded forms. The low-tech comes here to the rescue, this time revived through a yearning for analogue technology. For example, in *Double Old Fashion*, the quality of the 16mm film stock and the perception of its texture (its elusive, auratic essence stripped of any soundtrack beyond the sound of the film projector) makes its own technique hauntological. The contemporary obsession with low-tech in a fully technological time is now a constant that can be traced from the light and film grain of Xenon bulbs or a hackneyed use of celluloid to the textured sound of a vinyl needle in electronic or pop music (the lo-fi haunt). All this retro-modernism explains desperately the fruitless attempt of postmodernism and some forms of popular culture within mass culture in general

21 I refer here to the novel *The Difference Engine*, by W. Gibson and B. Sterling (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd, 1990).

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to establish themselves as the site from which to build a critique of its own diseases. Modernism is faced with its own 'retro-spectralism', not just its retrospective. This does not mean a return to high art, but rather suggests that it is precisely within this semiautonomous domain of art (as defined by Theodor Adorno) that critique of the regimes of visibility within mass culture can emerge. Since postmodernism immunises itself within the system, the new 'extemporary' work of art is a haven for the spoils of mass pop culture that constantly and endlessly demand decryption.

If modernism was based on radical principles of originality and rupture that enthused the bourgeois class, and if the 'new wave of modernism' has been merging with popular and mass culture since the 1960s, giving rise to what is now known as postmodernism, then current retro-modernism in the arts raises possibilities for dissent within the culture industry. But the main problem lies nowadays in the difficulty of finding a systemic definition of cultural production as a totality, and thus the question turns to 'naming the system'. The term 'postmodernity' has been dismissed today due to its association with not too distant historical cultural and theoretical circumstances and to the market and consumerism. Many of the misunderstandings with this term are the result of an ongoing mix-up between postmodernism as an ideology, as a style or sum of cultural features, and as a historic condition, which is obviously the option that I seek to highlight here. Modernism, on the other hand – both in its classical and late versions – turns out to be the space where the delusion of the modern as virgin territory operates as a large iconic and narrative reserve for re-framing, re-reading and re-writing. Attempts to define these new systemic paradigms eventually reveal their weaknesses. In art, this results in a glaring contradiction: in an era that can be described as that of the end of temporality, historical and referential art becomes pervasive. The failure to set up a new cultural scene marks our present,<sup>22</sup> from the Jamesonian 'continuous present' and Sterling's 'atemporality', to the 'altermodern' and 'heterochronicity' of Nicolas Bourriaud, to the 'capitalist realism' of Mark Fisher – all of them provisional solutions that aim to define a theoretical alternative to the dilemmas posed and left unresolved by postmodernity, to that realm in which semiotic ghosts become myths of the near future.

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22 See Mark Fisher, *Capitalism Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, London: Zero Books, 2009, and Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Relational Aesthetic* (trans. James Gussen and Lili Porten), Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2009.