

Title: Middle East and other futurisms: Imaginary temporalities in contemporary art and visual culture

Abstract: This article focuses on recent contemporary art of Gulf Futurism and Arab Futurism with a specific geographical focus on the Near and Middle East. Still only occasionally addressed and analysed in contemporary academic discussions, these art discourses and practices can be understood as particular forms of counterfuturisms and cultural politics of imaginary times; they continue the earlier work of Afrofuturism in using an aesthetic repertoire to complicate normalised notions of time and technology but in an alternative geopolitical context. Some of the analysed works such as Larissa Sansour's films outline political questions about territories and architectures of control but these are also other contexts that address how experience of time is being infrastructured in material media culture. The article analyses these post-colonial artistic practices in dialogue with contemporary theoretical debate about cultural politics of time including the discourses about cancellation of future (Berardi) as well as the idea of counterfuturisms as a form of audiovisual practice.

Introduction: counterfuturisms

Over the past hundred years, the future has been imagined in many guises and in multiple forms, not least in artistic practices. Italian Futurism came to mark an impactful way of understanding machine aesthetics (Broeckmann 2016), crystallising what the city in its sounds and movement meant for perceptual capacities while also acknowledging the centrality of fascism and war as one particularly troubling trope that has returned recursively as part of everyday politics. But the hundred years of futures has also spurred multiple futurisms in art, technology and sound culture in ways that contrast with the original impetus of the art movement. More recent contemporary art discourses such as Black Quantum Futurism, Sinofuturism, Arab Futurism and Gulf Futurism have offered their input to the contemporary politics of time by way of ‘creating temporal complications’ (Eshun 2003: 297) in a manner similar to Afrofuturist aesthetics and its current philosophical forms of post-colonial critique of humanism (Mbembe 2014). Corresponding themes of the city, technological temporalities, media cultures of sounds and visuals are mobilised in different ways and to create an alternative infrastructuring of time as part of the artistic discourse. Questions of what kinds of futures are underpinned by the geographical situations of which Futurisms where. Just as visual practices can articulate post-colonial counterhistories (Mirzoeff 2011) that dislocate hegemonic power structures by careful genealogical work, temporality is in the cases discussed in this article produced through visual practices generating *counterfuturisms* that articulate the productive disjunctive futurisms that investigate the conditions of existence of the contemporary moment. (cf. Sheyma 2014b. Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013.) What sort of discourses, narratives – including practices of time and futurism – are apt for a consideration of the current political moment and what forms of time can harbour any sort of liberating potential that work against the already existing times?

This article will focus on the otherwise broad and heterogeneous spectrum of contemporary futurisms as counterfuturisms. They are not merely quirky collections of multiple narratives of the future-city, or the future-now, but function as complications of the sort that already featured in Afrofuturism too: articulating histories of dispossession as part of imaginary futures. This complication aims to focus on the infrastructures of the cultural politics of time, including imaginary temporalities (cf. on imaginary media Kluitenberg 2006. Barbrook 2006). It is not that these alternative counterfuturisms offer one single perspective of style, politics or narrative, even if I want to discuss them in parallel in order to emphasise the multiplication of futurisms as something of a key discursive trope in contemporary art and critical projects. A good example of the already arrived futurism as a dislocated time is present in Gulf Futurism that is located in the geopolitical contexts of the boom growth of the states of the Arabian Gulf since the 1970s:

The Arabian Gulf is a region that has been hyper-driven into a present made up of interior wastelands, municipal master plans and environmental collapse, thus making it a projection of our global future. From this statement, the themes and ideas of Gulf Futurism emerge: the isolation of individuals via technology, wealth and reactionary Islam, the corrosive elements of consumerism on the soul and industry on the earth, the erasure of history from our memories and our surroundings and finally, our dizzying collective arrival in a future no one was ready for. (Dazed Digital 2012)

The Gulf Futurist art discourse echoes what is discussed in urbanism that recognised the same patterns over the same period as a version of ‘Dubai Speed’, a similarly appealing existing coinage for this version of a laboratory for one sort of a future:

the (momentarily) tallest building of the world; manmade islands (supposedly) visible from the moon; the (probably) highest density of construction cranes worldwide; the transition from fishermen’s ports to megacities; the highest percentage of migrants in the world; the record gross domestic product (GDP) per capita; the contrasts and simultaneity of veils and miniskirts, of Bedouins and executive officers (CEOs), of camel races and prime quality airlines [...]. (Bromber, Krawietz, Steiner and Wippel 2016: 1)

What could easily slip into an Orientalist projection – the future landed in the desert’s imaginary *terra nullius* of the Middle East – is also an attempt at a description of the futurism

that emerged in the contexts of oil, technological imaginaries and a shift in geopolitical priorities.

Arguably, over the past years, Gulf Futurism has become a term integrated in the global mainstream contemporary art circuit. But it is because not despite of this inclusion that it needs to be addressed. Much more than only a part of the genre of non-human dystopia-cool, it lines up with other futurisms and imaginary times, speculative histories and futures, as well as the persistently lingering darker afterglow of the ‘deranged optimism about the sustainability of both oil reserves and late capitalism’ (Dazed Digital 2012) in the midst of another iteration of earlier twentieth century dystopias from the nuclear to the climate disaster.

While discussion about the decolonisation of curricula persist as central in current academic debates in visual culture and art (Mirzoeff 2017; cf. Mignolo 2011), practice-based projects have paid attention to histories and imaginaries of the Middle East. While it is beyond the scope of the present work to analyse this tendency in detail, it is nonetheless worth mentioning the work of the Black Athena Collective and contemporary artist Morehshin Allahyari’s projects as good examples that address these contemporary themes of colonial forms of visual culture and knowledge.¹

Across multiple futurisms from Arab to Sino to Black Quantum Futurists – all of which in some way pick up on themes familiar from Afrofuturism – what connects the heterogeneous set is neither one particular futuristic aesthetic nor an idealised territorial futurism of, for example, the Middle East. The more interesting question that emerges is about how these artistic practices help us to understand already existing forms of temporal

¹ More about Allahyari’s project: <http://www.morehshin.com/she-who-sees-the-unknown/>. ‘She Who Sees the Unknown’ (2017-2018) is an artistic research project into the history of ‘dark goddesses, monstrous, and djinn female figures of Middle-Eastern origin’. It aims to archive the histories of particulate parts of those mythologies but also to insert them into current forms of activism both as narrative figures of feminist resistance and as 3-D printed visual forms. Deep times of female and queer figures are here discussed in relation to contemporary digital activism: the project is a performative way of addressing the historically interesting archive of such imaginary persona while remediating them as part of new contexts and conversations.

power, territorial claims and dislocations, as well as sometimes offering audiovisual forms and narratives that prescribe a post-colonial future for times to come. Needless to say, some of these imaginary futurisms deal with a different notion of time than was provided in the blueprints of European Enlightenment projects reproduced and projected across planetary colonial space (see Mignoni 2011).² The audiovisual practices of counterfuturism, of situated pasts and inventive futures that Afrofuturism laid out are also one key context through which to approach the Middle East and other Futurisms. They also articulate a cultural politics of time, a chronography of power.

Chronographies of power

Time persists as a central concern for different forms of contemporary cultural theory and analysis. Besides media archaeology (Parikka 2012) or variantology (Zielinski 2006) which can be offered as examples of primarily historical methodologies, or the intensive debates about accelerationism, Sarah Sharma's use of the term *chronography of power* is useful. Her take focuses on how contemporary forms of the public are constituted in relation to time. In other words, as Sharma (2014: 13) outlines, '[i]n terms of theorizing publics, at every level from the local to the global, oppositional to the bourgeois public sphere, temporality is an invisible and unremarked relation of power' which, in her words, attaches to lived experience, institutions and social differences. Unremarked does not mean that time has been ignored in political theory or in cultural struggles, but that it still has significant potential at the centre of contemporary cultural politics. Sharma's work offers an important point, but I argue that it is not merely a human-lived experience that is at stake in imagining alternative temporalities. Sharma's focus is on particular forms of the cultural production of

² There is an abundance of work on the multiple forms of time in historical discourse from Reinhard Koselleck (2004) to Fernand Braudel's (Dosse 1994: 87-97) ideas of polyphonies and pluralities of historical time to Fredric Jameson (2005) on the political modalities of utopia and future temporalities. Also media archaeology as a heterogeneous field of theories and methods can be understood as inventing multiple ways of thinking through alternative temporalities that offer recurring, deep and microtemporal ways to look at the production of time in media culture (Parikka 2012: 164-167).

time – for example the slow food movement – whereas I am interested in the forms of time in contemporary art practices. In these examples, time is mobilised as an effective, active force in contemporary political sphere of aesthetic expressions. This includes imaginary future-people (cf. Deleuze 2007) and times-to-come³ as part of the temporal politics of a constitution of a public – including ethnically and geographically specified, non-linear and polyphonic, imagined, projected and sometimes messy time.

Could this be one way of responding to the discourse of the ‘cancellation of the future’ that has become part of the chronopolitical map of the contemporary condition (cf. Cox and Lund 2016)? As Berardi argues, Italian Futurism provided one impactful aesthetic and political modality of the future through the centrality of urban life and technically advanced machines – even if these became increasingly perceived as bankrupt ideals in the context of twentieth century military, economic and social events. In Berardi’s words (2011: 18), the future was not meant to be thought of as ‘direction of time’ but as the ‘cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization, reaching a peak in the years after the Second World War’ which then, on a political level, were voiced as outdated but also, according to Berardi, became internalised in relation to the speeds and aesthetics of information that started to characterise cognitive capitalism (see also Fisher 2014).

But there are particular geographies and situations through which to specify this chronographic situation. In Rosi Braidotti’s words this refers to the ones already earlier dispossessed in the Modernist tropes of time: a dispossession of voice, subjectivity and time has persistently haunted the political scene since the 1960s onwards: ‘the women’s rights movement; the antiracism and de-colonization movements; the anti-nuclear and pro-

³ Here the implicit reference is also to Gilles Deleuze’s (1997) notion of people to come introduced in *Cinema 2*. People-to-come is part of Deleuze’s politics of future and the potential of cinema to virtual potentials of collectivities. I am interested in the time to come as part of this political project inherently connected to the imaginary power of cinema, arts, design, etc.

environment movements are the voices of the structural Others of modernity' (Braidotti 2006: 32; see also Mirzoeff 2011). While the Anthropogenic climate change and the planetary scale ecological anxieties have remained as a significant force that is part of the political affect of the 'cancellation of future', time is a central part of struggles across a horizon of both politics of ethnicities, race and neoliberalism as formative of everyday practices and habits. In other words, it needs to be specified whose future was cancelled and when it was (already) cancelled, thereby connecting the issue of temporality to colonial and post-colonial analysis (see also Nixon 2011). Instead of merely accepting a cancellation of the future, or the representations of cool dystopia of the Middle East or the Far East, addressing the generative power of time functions as a way to invent different horizons of existence as well as to connect them to the lived genealogies of dispossession. This can be seen as a central part of post-colonial theory and practices in writing historical lineages of colonial pasts while also generating potentials of future and the new that are not already prescribed in set temporal coordinates or continuums (see Bhabha 2004: 1-10; Burns and Kaiser 2012: 14).

As forms of temporal ruptures, dystopias of economic and environmental apocalypse are articulated through imaginaries of time to come but also particular painful political histories. In inventive ways, Afrofuturism investigated what temporalities of future and futures past mean by way of sound, literary and visual practices. It was also connected to some discussions in imaginary media research exemplified in the interview with the director John Akomfrah by Eric Kluitenberg. Akomfrah's film the *Last Angel of History* (1996) articulated key tropes such as the archaeological dig of *technofossils* and real as well as conceptual persona from Robert Johnson and the black technology of the blues to the future figure of the data thief. *Last Angel of History* gives a sense of the histories of black music from the drum to the (blues) guitar while narrating one version of the Black Atlantic through

interviews in documentary form: from Sun Ra to George Clinton, Samuel R. Delany to DJ Spooky, Nichelle Nichols to Goldie, these different voices build up the case for alternative times and situations that start to speak to each other from historical references to contemporary popular and sound culture to an imaginary time of a future. The film produces a cartography of the technofossils where technologies, sound, histories of slavery and futuristic imageries of diaspora conjoin. Akomfrah's film was also instrumental in connecting historical Afrofuturist sound cultures with the 1990s theoretical and critical discussions of Kodwo Eshun (1998: -005) who articulated the link between the technocultural posthuman and 'the Black Atlantic Futurism' – not a longing for some essentialised past, but a way to understand the historical and aesthetic role of dislocation. More recently Achille Mbembe (2014) has continued developing Afrofuturism as a particular philosophically apt trope that discusses both historical modernity through black slavery as one enabling condition of global capitalist practices and the emerging new forms of 'planetaryisation of apartheid' (Mbembe 2014: 132): recursive forms of domination as the continuing focus of post-colonial critique.

As Akomfrah points out, Afrofuturism and related imaginary media practices are not mental escapism. They produce and sustain new cultural practices and spaces in which black techno-cultural imagination in sound and science fiction carves a collective existence. It becomes a way to offer a counternarrative of modernity that starts with this displacement in the transformational passage of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993; Eshun 2003). It articulates historical memory through practices such as science fiction while also establishing relations with, for example, gay and women's movements, as seen, for example, in the work by writers Octavia Butler and Samuel Delaney (Kluitenberg and Akomfrah 2006: 293; Sinker 1992). Such practices form alternative spaces and temporalities in narratives and audiovisuals. At times, imaginary media discourses and art/design practices are defined as 'untimely' (Kluitenberg 2011: 56-7), but it would be more useful to consider them as active forces that

can unhinge existing temporal schemes and complexify already existing regimes of time as forms of power. As Zielinski puts it, '[a]ll techniques for reproducing existing worlds and artificially creating new ones are, in a specific sense, time media' (2006: 31). Or to phrase it alternatively, reality creation (or what some would just call *ideology*) is fundamentally related to modalities of time. And those modalities of time both as technical infrastructures and as they are circulated for example in popular culture and contemporary art participate in conditioning experience too. Furthermore, this resonates with a wider set of arguments about how the fabrication of time is part of the production of forms of the true, the untrue, the false, the imaginary, the actual and the virtual (see Hongisto, Pape and Thain 2017) in audiovisual culture.

In the contexts of Afrofuturism, Kodwo Eshun argues that a proleptic form of a cultural activism acknowledges that it must function towards the future as much as the past. In Eshun's words, when 'power also functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures' (2003: 289), time becomes a central field of struggle in both a symbolic and economic sense. Illuminating Mark Fisher's concept of SF capital, the forms of futurity at the core of capitalism are productive of both value and forms of knowledge and range from more official forms to speculative genres: future and/as SF capital

exists in mathematical formalizations such as computer simulations, economic projections, weather reports, futures trading, think-tank reports, consultancy papers—and through informal descriptions such as sciencefiction cinema, science-fiction novels, sonic fictions, religious prophecy, and venture capital. Bridging the two are formal-informal hybrids, such as the global scenarios of the professional market futurist. (Eshun 2003: 290)

SF Capital is in this way a good concept to think through how particular forms of power are embedded in both the media representations, affects and the material infrastructures of generating experiences, senses and horizons of time. The economy of speculative time as part of the circulation of power and cultural activism that functions in the dislocating forces of visual and sonic practices is a central backdrop for my argument too. In many ways, the

examples of practices and creative discourses engage directly with the geographies and unruly temporalities in other futurisms.

Quantum times and Middle-East futurisms

Continuing the work of Afrofuturism, many recent contemporary art and technological practices engage in the work of imaginary futures and cartographies of time. This series of audiovisual examinations of *alternative times* overlaps with some science-fiction and popular cultural imagery and expands in practice-based ways the work of current theory by also bringing into play the situated nature of temporal projections. The Black Quantum Futurism Collective (Camae Ayewa/Moor Mother and Rasheedah Phillips) carries the most direct link to earlier Afrofuturism with their focus on spatial and temporal dislocation. Futurism or possible futures are not enacted as typical science fictional tropes of coming technological landscapes, rather, the audiovisual performances as well as local community work aim to create a different sensitivity to time. Hence speculative quantum temporalities are not meant as mere fantasy devices but ones that can hone in on time as it is lived in communities as much as time can be used to critique existing visions of the future. As Rasheedah Phillips (2014) puts it, echoing perhaps an obvious yet important point:

Although creators of speculative fiction have been able to successfully conceive of novel technologies, map out the future of humanity, and envision new worlds in science fictional narratives, traditional sci-fi has, on the whole, failed to transcend the social hierarchy, supremacy, and privilege that plague our present-day realities.

Recurring figures of time – and technologies of time such as clocks – are part of the aesthetic repertoire of the Black Quantum Futurists who recount the histories of trans-Atlantic slavery and find affirmative forms of local action in projects such as Community Futurisms on gentrification in Sharswood, North Philadelphia.⁴ Well aware of Sun Ra's late 1960s line about the city ('To save the planet, I had to go to the worst spot on Earth, and that was Philadelphia, which is death's headquarters'), Black Quantum Futurists continue on the nexus

⁴ See online at <https://www.blackquantumfuturism.com/community-futurisms>.

of imaginary times and concrete political situations, expressing counterfuturisms through local activism and the regularly lived experiences of cancelled futures.⁵

Dislocated temporalities can however emerge in other sorts of built environments too. In Gulf Futurism, a term that emerges from the work created by the sound and visual artists Fatima Al Qadiri and Sophia Al-Maria, rapid changes in architecture, urban life and popular culture are understood through the geopolitical horizon where the Arabian Gulf becomes a stage for international capitalism in multiple material and affective forms. The term becomes a way to map this connection between luxury consumerism and the geopolitics of Middle East oil-producer countries turned banking and financial hubs, and spatially in relation to the desert-realities and mega-architectures that have emerged there since the 1970s. It also makes illuminating sense to read Gulf Futurism in the context of actual Gulf state plans such as the Qatar National Vision 2030, Dubai's 2030 Industrial Strategy ('a global platform for knowledge-based, sustainable and innovation-focused businesses'⁶) or the United Arab Emirates Strategy for Artificial Intelligence that works towards the UAE centennial in 2071. Outside the Gulf States, it also resonates with other developments where the mundane future of financial infrastructure meets popular discourse about robotics: during the writing of this article, at the October 2017 Future Investment Initiative, for instance, Saudi Arabia granted citizenship to the Sophia-robot, sparking popular media and online discussion about this in the context of the country's poor record on the rights of women and human rights more generally.

[Figure 1 here]

⁵ Rasheedah Phillips (2016) continues Sun Ran's note about Philadelphia with a more recent update about the particular relation of cityscapes and political economy of futurisms: 'In Philadelphia, named the poorest major city in the country in 2014, poverty continues to disproportionately impact people of color, single mothers, and children. Compared with a citywide poverty rate of 27 per cent, 31 per cent of African Americans, 41 per cent of Hispanics, half of single mothers, and one in three children live in poverty.'

⁶ More on the UAE government portal: <https://government.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/local-governments-strategies-and-plans/dubai-industrial-strategy-2030>.

Figure 1. A still from Sophia Al-Maria's *Black Friday*, 2016. Digital video projected vertically, color, sound; 16:36 min. Collection of the artist; courtesy Anna Lena Films, Paris, and The Third Line, Dubai.

As a placeholder term for the complex geopolitical-temporal development, Gulf Futurism starts to articulate an imaginary future that already arrived as technological environments and corporate infrastructure plans; in many ways, it 'feels less of an emancipatory movement than the timely framing of a geopolitical aesthetic' (Zhang 2017). This is where the obvious difference to Afrofuturism or Black Quantum Futurism becomes clear: Gulf Futurism functions to describe the already existing nexus of consumerism, a rewired exoticising Orientalism of technological (Near/Middle/Far) East without the utopian potential of Afrofuturism: not a future to aspire towards (a people to come), but a future that was already prescribed, premediated and integrated as a temporal infrastructure.

Gulf Futurism became a way address Middle East urban elite lifestyles: local and Islamic traditions entangled with consumer capitalism of the petrol era privatised transport and electronic culture. The mundane nature of this Futurism as 'lived quality' (Masumi 2015: 199) comes out in Al Qadiri's observations about the 'consumer-culture robot desert' as the 'teenage life [that] revolves around the mall, video games and satellite TV.' (Orton 2012). Gulf Futurism hovers as an affective environment as well as an infrastructure across urban environments, media technologies and materials. Indoor spaces harbour the mediated realities that are protected by the various building materials in the midst of the increasing heat in Middle East locations such as Qatar: luxury malls and consumer electronics as the signs of a mundane Futurism that belonged to the period from the 1970s onwards, parallel to the emergence of neoliberalism in multiple Western political regimes. These perspectives can be seen as two intersecting geographical timelines in the discussion of a haunting cancelled future (Fisher 2014).

Gulf Futurism builds on a bundle of current forms of material expression from visuals to material culture, which combine nationalist and religious tropes with versions of transnational capitalism, brand culture, high-rise architectures and urban projects of luxury lifestyle. It finds an expression in the oil-driven past futures of the Gulf and its architectural build-up. It can of course also be seen as a theme that finds an expression in other regional hubs of the past years of economic growth and the booming construction business. An apt example is the particularly interesting mix of political authoritarianism and its relation to construction-driven capitalism in Turkey with the return of various megaprojects in Istanbul, for example. Somewhat reminiscent of the nineteenth century monumental nation-state building projects of canals, bridges and other pathways of transportation, we see here a particular link to the current AKP regime especially. This brand of progress-driven future is defined by the megaprojects, high-tech infrastructures, militarised spaces of consumption and surveillance. It is also supported by the Neo-Ottoman narratives from television shows to architectural plans that establish a continuity with some real and many imaginary pasts predating the Turkish republic (see Özyürek 2007).

Skyscrapers and other megaprojects from Istanbul to Dubai to Jeddah to Doha designed by international star architects have of course vast symbolic significance as a remediated version of, for example, the skyscraper's role in the United States' twentieth century progress-laden futurism of modernity (Graham 2016: 153-57). But more than a mere architectural spectacle, in many ways these are part of the series of spatial infrastructuring that defines the contemporary forms of power (see Easterling 2016). In other words, they are not merely about the particular representational or visual forms that offer a context of meaning, but the logic of how they spread as material infrastructures and, in relation to our focus on temporalities, as forms of capturing, creating and envisioning the time of imaginary futures and pasts. In many ways, the descriptions of the mundane future-now reality of Gulf

Futurism thus speaks to the Earthly version of the science fiction term of terraforming; coined *lucroforming* by the writer China Miéville in his description of the Future City, this is one way of understanding the continuum across mediated environments, planning and architecture as political economic and very physical mobilisation of habits: ‘a politico-geo-transformative agenda to make our entire planet, including at the semiotic level, the most fecund biome possible for capital’ (Miéville 2015: 45).

Questions of design and the urban environment expand to lifestyles performed across different platforms from mass media to architecture to social networks. The imagery that is mobilised in writings, visual art works, images and examples can be collected as sort of found footage of already existing futures in the Gulf region. Place is here narrated as alien, misplaced and displaced. In Al Qadiri’s words:

It’s like you’re on the surface of another planet ... the starkness creates this post-apocalyptic feel. When you’re surrounded by sand and sky, there are no limits to the gargantuanism you can dream of – the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Tower of Babel, these are all Arab ideas! And now it’s the space race for skyscrapers. (Quoted in Orton 2012)

Gulf-Futurism is a particularly apt term for the already existing imaginaries of future that become an entry point for the artists to discuss issues of identity, sexuality, technology and the built-environment. For architectural historians, the particular period of the past decades in the Gulf region represents a mix of futuristic aspirations mixed with what actually comes out as antiquated reshuffling of ‘formalistic references to traditional forms and patterns’ (Rabbat 2014: 2). This can also be observed as a form of orientalism that continues Frank Lloyd Wright’s plan for Greater Baghdad (1957–58): ‘Recalling the Round-city of al-Mansur, built more than 1,100 years earlier, the project came complete with an assortment of naïve references to what an American raised at the end of the nineteenth century would have thought of the Orient through his reading of the One Thousand and One Nights’ (Rabbat 2014: 2) A residual part of the material force of design imagination, one cannot escape the

orientalism that remains present in the projected fantasy worlds where in current media and architectural environments the exotic Middle East meets the futuristic technologies. Gulf Futurism is one way to write and make visible this undertone of projects that produce not merely narratives but the material existence of modalities of temporality – even if also tackling some clichéd tropes of time and progress.

In the examples Al Qadiri and Al-Maria present, the references range from Doha Sheraton to soap operas, science fiction and urban street life. Alongside Kuwait Water Towers by the Swedish architect Sune Lindström, the Doha Sheraton (built in 1983 and designed by William Peirera) features as a sort of icon with its own extraterrestrial bent: an alien landing that materially constructed the visuals as ‘a lux monument to 80s-upward mobility and Islamic geometry.’ (Dazed Digital 2012). A related way of articulating the architectural future is further visible in the rather tongue-in-cheek take in the short B-movie *Topaz Duo: Cosmic Phoenix* (2013, directed by Ben Robinson) that takes place in the Doha Sheraton (see Suleiman 2016). Here we find, perhaps, hints of Sun Ra’s *Space is the Place*, as the main duo (Egyptian lounge singers but also Quantum Exorcists) rescues Qatar from alien invasion. But instead of the jazz and funk of Afrofuturism, this universe’s musical environment is Arab lounge pop. From the dystopic to the absurd, the future arrives in different guises, at times parodic, at others more serious. Often attaching to specific cultural markers – for example architectural beacons – they articulate what is in plain sight: the future that was already catered and premediated (Grusin 2010).⁷

As a term for a variety of visual and material representations, elements, intensities and affects, Gulf Futurism functions as the synthetic narrative glue that connects regionally diverse situations and discourses. In other words, it starts to speak to other regions in addition

⁷ One mobilisation of retro is visible in the aesthetics that reroutes futurity through the nineteenth century: already existing Middle East futurism is part of Martin Becka’s architectural photography series *Dubai, Transmutations* (2007), shot with a camera from 1857 to achieve a certain retro time machine effect (Buali 2014b).

to the Gulf and finds affinity in many other theoretical, visual, speculative and science fictional takes. One can also observe how it relates to some contemporary geo-philosophical narratives, not least Reza Negarestani (2008) in *Cyclonopedia* on the Middle-East of subterranean forces of oil that is the non-human infrastructural agency that drives geopolitics on the surface too. But in Gulf Futurism, media technologies and mediation stay as the main driving force describing the Arabian Gulf as ‘a region acting as uncanny preview of long-imagined futures/nows where love is mediated by mobile and death conquered by camera’, as Al-Maria (2008) poetically puts it. Hence, this particular narrative seems somewhat more everyday than one about hidden unseen and underground forces of the non-human kind, even if often surrounded by a feeling of a dyschronic haunting (cf. Fisher 2014) of multiple temporal layers.

It is obvious that Gulf Futurism also speaks to the parallel term of Arab Futurism used by artists such as Sulaiman Majali (2015; see also Suleiman 2016). Majali articulates the relation to ideas of futurism as part of an Orientalist toolset of narrativisation of time and the imaginaries projected onto the Middle East, asking the question how ‘Arabfuturism/s could become an attempt to move towards a decolonial definition of the European-Arab (and beyond?)’ (Majali 2015). Questions of modernity and tradition in the Islamic Middle East is one backdrop to this artistic manifesto while Majali’s take refuses to reterritorialise Modernity or its particular understanding of Futurism to the nation state or any ethnicity in the post-Ottoman historical situation (cf. Findley 2010). But he is also attempting to demonstrate that this field of discourses, imaginaries and art practices offer counterfuturisms that tackle the Orientalist legacy through a refusal of the earlier set of temporal/geographical coordinates. Such a stance relies less on assumptions of essentialised national or ethnic identities and instead speaks of dislocations, diaspora and dyschronia, which also, for Majali’s short manifesto, function to establish connections to recent civil rights movements

such as Black Lives Matter. Hence, in these examples, the cultural politics of time does not fix itself to soil as the place of an original identity. It avoids the temptation to fix practices as stabilised nation-centric geographies of Futurism; instead, these temporal imaginaries are also ways to move horizontally, connecting different political struggles in a manner that seems to speak to the activist discourses post-Arab Spring and post-Occupy Movement (see also Amin 2016). Thus, the term Arab Futurism also performs a link across very diverse contexts of political struggles where many of them have to do with these themes of race, territory and contested histories.

These various manifestations perform the problem of futurisms that are set in the contexts of political histories. They mark a particular discursive space about an imaginary future that is complementary to the ways in which contemporary art activism in the Middle East has recently addressed spatial imaginaries (Amin 2016). In such practice-based contexts, audiovisual and creative imaginaries work through worlds of design, architecture, urban planning and lifestyle. Naturally, other relevant other artistic and installation objects could also be cited. Themes of space travel and science fiction entangle with Arabic Calligraphy and patterns in Ayman Baalbaki's *Helmet* (2016). Halil Altindere's art project and exhibitions *Space Refugee* (2016) draws on the current Syrian crisis; it is both a homage to Muhammed Ahmed Faris as the first Syrian cosmonaut in the 1980s and an imaginary staging of the Palmyra Space Mission, returning to themes of place, placenessness and forced migration through interplanetary travel (see Batycka 2016; Suleiman 2016).⁸ In all of these examples, spatial and temporal dislocation become a central driving force of the practices in

⁸ Also worthwhile mentioning is the film and media art project *Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige focusing on the 1960s Lebanon's space programme as one past future prospect. To quote Sheyma Buali (2014b): 'Hadjithomas and Joreige have expressed that this project is their way of exploring the change in the modernist vision of the 1960s. The film's epilogue is an animation that addresses the question: 'what would have happened if there was no intervention against the Lebanese Rocket Society and scientific curiosity continued? The animation shows a futuristic Lebanon that runs smoothly with high tech devices and a working transport system'. See also Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013 where they articulate their project as one sort of a rupture in time and a re-enaction instead of re-enactment, illuminating that even the project that is focused on a historical episode works towards creating different timescales than merely reproducing past-present-future as a predetermined or premediated infrastructure.

play, a dislocation that manifests as a sense of dyschronia of sorts that is not, of course, merely about popular culture but that attaches to the past years of diaspora and the Syrian and Iraqi refugee situation too.

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2. Nation Estate - Jerusalem Floor, C-print, 75x150cm, Larissa Sansour, 2012. Used with permission.

Placelessness and territory are recursive themes. The short film trilogy by the Palestinian artist-filmmaker Larissa Sansour takes up this particular line of thought about territory, geopolitics, force of temporality and inscription while working through aesthetics that could be broadly classified as science fiction. *Space Exodus* (2008) tackled with similar themes that reappear in Altindere's above mentioned art project; hijacking the Cold War colonial theme of space travel within contemporary geopolitical context of the Near-East. The second part of the trilogy, *Nation Estate* (2012), quietly pictures the Palestinian state as a vertical space inside a single high-rise. The ten minutes of the film follows the female protagonist's (who is revealed to be pregnant towards the end) travel up to the top of a high-rise building and the view across the landscape that awaits her there; from the underground travel to the brightly lit modern spaces of advertisements ('This week's general water supply is provided by Norwegian Fjords') and the movements of escalators and elevators, the contrast between the technological conditions of indoor living and the various historical markers, including the old historical architecture housed in this museum-like environment, food and local ingredients are emphasised. The multiple levels of existence are mixed in a Borgesian list of the different levels of the building: from administrative to cultural, historical sites and locations to buildings and cities that crystallise much of the occupation as a stack (cf. Bratton 2016) of concerns. Dead sea, Energy & Sanitation, Souq, Aid & Development, NGO, Government HQ, Vertical Urban Planning, National Archives, Wildlife Reserve, Olive

Grove, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, Gaza City, etc. present some of the levels which define the building's role as stacking much of the geopolitical situation into a layer of concerns on a material-semiotic-legal continuum. The building itself opens up to the region, seen as a somewhat hyper realistic image through the window of the skyscraper. Yet there exists the possibility also that this could all be merely a digital projection, the building bordered off from its surroundings by the infamous structure of the wall. Displacement rises high and functions vertically through a form that itself is part of the modern futurism in the United States and other places across the twentieth century and brings with it connotations of corporate aesthetics and the megastructures of the mentioned Middle East cities. Aptly, Sansour (2016) describes the seemingly futuristic as a more complex mix of temporal and aesthetic ideas: 'Even the slickest sci-fi almost invariably carries within it a sense of retro, ideas of the future tend to appear standard and cliché at the same time as they come across as visionary.'⁹ In many ways, this could be seen as part of the critique of the already premediated futures that Gulf Futurism has also been interested in describing.

In Sansour's most recent film made with Søren Lind, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015), the desert becomes the main stage for the narrative about territory and the imagined future-past people. Building on earlier ideas about existence, architecture and visibility, this film explores themes similar to *Nation Estate*. Its politics of verticality (Weizman 2007), however, moves downwards through to the soil and future-histories of archaeological discoveries.

In *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, the main protagonist (a female resistance leader, a narrative terrorist as she is named) guides the viewer through desert

⁹ Sansour explains her use of solitary historical objects: 'I try to use these as though they are objects in a museum. It's a comment on identity politics; somehow when you are in the midst of such a long struggle, your identity and things usually associated with it lose their value as they become cliché. I wanted to make the *Nation Estate* building like a museum that houses these symbols we are supposed to identify with; and because they are in this museum, they are not functional. They become exhibited artefacts. This included references to the *keffiyeh* and the key that we all know, plus certain foods like the olive trees. The embroidery on my pockets was actually embroidered by women in Bethlehem' (quoted in Buali 2014a).

scenes. Instead of one narrative line, the film contains scenes that incorporate various historical layers of nineteenth century Ottoman and early twentieth century British rule, but also Bedouin figures and other references. The main narrative thread works as a subtle nod to Afrofuturist themes of archaeological technofossils: how does one recreate an already territorially dispossessed people by way of placing artifacts (porcelain plates) as the cultural heritage of the future to be discovered by historians in order to backdate the existence of this people? Some of the figures remain mute visual references to historical periods, some are even more ambiguous – like the two girls who reappear at key moments as both historical figures from a photograph and as a contemporary reference to the narrator's deceased little sister. But this death is underlined as impersonal – or not merely as personal – in the sense of the public existence of figures (even if for example in old photographs) and personal life being entangled in the hostility of the geopolitical stretch of time: 'It's what we are as a whole that qualifies us as targets' (Sansour and Lind 2016). At the back of histories of ethnic targeting even imaginary counterfuturisms take a particular political significance.

[Figure 3 here]

Figure 3. *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain 3*, C-print, 100x200cm, Larissa Sansour/Soren Lind, 2014. Used with permission.

The air-dropped porcelain becomes a deposit for future excavation. It is a take both on the cultural heritage of disappearance and the future-oriented way of dealing with the geopolitical now (See Sansour and Lind 2016). Belonging and non-belonging become material stretches of time that expand across the continuum of the desert and its tribes and the horizon of the urban high-rises.

Science fiction becomes a transport vehicle that is attached to the political history of Palestine and is a way to express the forced displacement that defines the geopolitical territories. Hence science fiction becomes a way to articulate the necessity to think of futures

as part of a horizon of struggles and the historical awareness past futurisms alongside already existing ones. Such a double bind is also something that has been seen to characterise post-colonial literature that is ‘expressive of, but not specified by the colonial past from which it is drawn’ (Burns and Kaiser 2012: 14). While acknowledging how her work fits in as part of the history of Palestinian cinema as a *cinema of visibility* and articulation of existence, Sansour continues to mobilise this theme through her aesthetic choices relating to science fiction:

What I like about the use of sci-fi is that it always brings back the past and the future, but it never talks about the present. It seems that, as Palestinians, we have built an identity of being eternally suspended in space or stuck in limbo: we think about the Naqba, the tragedy and what happened, and we look for independence in the future. But meanwhile, on the ground, Israel is busy expanding its settlements on Palestinian land and amplifying its reality (quoted in Buali 2014: page number?).

Can you counterfeit a people that were dislocated, erased from history, wiped out from the future? Can you counterfeit futures in ways that are generative of states of things, relations and geopolitical realities? Sansour’s refusal to separate fact and fiction is part of an underlying commitment that would reach deep into histories of modern epistemology too. This narrative force functions as part of the production of reality and it speaks of a future tense that intervenes in the normalised inscription of past and present. At the same time the film summons the various ways in which historical truths and untruths constitute current territories of living. Sansour’s work speaks to a key phrase in Majali’s (2015) take on the decolonising power of Arab Futurism too: ‘If the ultimate hegemonic power is the power to define and not the power to conquer; the map, the straight line, legitimacy and authenticity are questions that flutter between the virtualities and actualities of adopted identities’ (page number?).

The desert is a recurring visual backdrop, but not as a *res nullius*, uninhabited imaginary past. Instead the desert was always, already embedded in multiple histories (for an architectural take on the geopolitics of the Negev desert and the climactic threshold as part of the colonial legacy, see Weizman 2017). In Sansour and Lind’s film, haunting past figures are present as witnesses of sorts, an aspect of the film which also projects a sense of temporal territorial occupation: military-styled intervention into the landscape from the aircrafts above is an iterative retake of the significant role aerial archaeology has played in defining the Middle East territories during the period of technical media. But Sansour and Lind launch the film’s aircraft for a different purpose, that is, the aforementioned airdrop of the porcelain as the future archaeological deposit. The aerial image-artefact restages the earlier activities where military conflict worked in close connection with archaeology,

agriculture and the construction of the built environment. Mapping Palestine as an archaeological entity meant also gradually mapping it into existence as a legal territory and gradually into an object of partition. This is where archaeology and geography have been essential in defining the multiple layers of conflict from Ottoman rule to the British mandate and onto the birth of the Israeli state but also how planning and architecture become part of the occupation, as Eyal Weizman (2007) demonstrated in *Hollow Land*.¹⁰

In many ways, Middle East and other futurisms form multiple forms of future projections and dystopias. They represent, remediate and articulate how time is being produced, and they relate to an investigation of time as productive of reality. Projects such as Sansour's articulate different forms of chonographic power (Sharma 2014) by way of still and moving images and narrative themes. As Majali (2015) suggests, 'The use of '-futurism' here is not intended to reference *Futurism* as movement, neither is it an explicit reference to the 'futuristic'. Instead '-futurism' is anticipating a future, it signifies a defiant cultural break, a projection forward into what *is*, beyond ongoing eurocentric, hegemonic narratives.' The theme of anticipation but also projection work as hinges for temporal thresholds around which materials, affects, visuals, representations, sounds and other forms of expression are gathered. It spreads in images, words and sounds that are not explicitly or easily resolved as either utopia or dystopia:

Arabfuturism conceives instead, an origin in imagined space, towards the abyss of an imagined future

-Dancing on the ruins of the post-orientalist stage; in the desert of the unreal; high on the opulence of emptiness. (Majali 2015)

What Eshun argues about the temporal imaginaries at the centre of contemporary forms of speculation applies here in many ways too: constant market projections of dystopias, from terror to climate change, from biblical (and other religious) narratives of belonging to (forced and voluntary) migration routes and financial projections, estimates, calculations and more (see Eshun 2003: 292). These are some of the ways in which anticipation functions as a

¹⁰ Besides architecture, Weizman (2007: 116) demonstrates how the various historical levels of mobilisation of legal realities about land ownership in Israel/Palestine also functioned through agriculture and soil cultivation.

cultural force that is mobilised not only in narratives but in multiple other forms too, such as simulations and modelling. While there is a clear link to various forms of art and literary practices that work in relation to speculative temporalities and imaginary pasts and futures, this stance towards time also speaks to other forms of technological governance.

Counterfuturism: temporal complications

A series of times, places and geographies emerge somewhere between the already existing and fabulated. But this futurism functions to express the antagonisms of the current cultural politics of time. These heterogeneous futurisms mark dynamics that articulate issues from climate change to geopolitics, from dispossession to alienation where local situations become ways to generate shared languages for alternative counterfuturisms in art and activism. They mark particular dates and places of speculative design imaginaries of urban realities, of displaced cultural identities, lived qualities of futurisms and dislocated temporal markers that exist outside the usual representations of past or future. Some of them write futures into existence as ways to tell a story where time is now being infrastructured as it was earlier in the historiographical sense of Western modernity as a hegemonic project (see Asad 2003; Salama 2011). For some, this orientalist legacy is infrastructured into cultural stereotypes that become also a technological imaginary, such as in Lawrence Lek's Sinofuturism – which deserves more attention than we can give it here and I thus refer readers to Zhang (2017).

By way of conclusion, I would like to point out how the discussed art works and practices relate to visual theories of past years that have placed themes of colonialism and decolonising visual practices at their core. Visual and sound practices are also active as forms of inventing different ways of infrastructuring time as they also intervene in assumed continuums of past, present and future: echoing Homi Bhabha (2004: 10), one could say there is 'a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation' that concerns a multiplication

of times. They can also expose how futurity or narrative and audiovisual tropes about the near-future participate in the current political horizon that has been a concern for many theorists including Berardi, Fisher and Braidotti. However, instead of simply accepting the notion of a cancellation of the future, the cancellation quickly shifts into a tactical multiplication; instead of mourning a lost future, the artistic practices examined here turn to looking at conditions of time and temporality as central to the functioning of power, mapping the situations in which futurity is important for current practices of living and exploring the ways in which an analysis of dislocations of identity and time can become more than mere dystopic representations. Furthermore, while acknowledging the existing Orientalist forms of projection (Zhang 2017) in popular culture of science fiction, the practices examined here can work as counterhistories (cf. Mirzoeff 2011) of the visual worlds, soundscapes and narrative imaginaries of futurisms. The importance of practices of looking (Mirzoeff 2011) is thus that they are shown to be a key part of the colonial form of soft power and through them we can observe how issues of time, futurity, counterhistories and importantly *counterfuturisms* act in the chronographic spectrum of power. Indeed, as Eshun has already suggested, the centrality of temporal unhinging or practices of temporal complication is an integral part of such practice-based work that enacts a visual and/or sonic critique. Eshun writes: ‘By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory’ (2003: 297).

This has been a central theme in the practices and conceptualisations of Afrofuturism and it also binds together the different artistic and design practices that go by various names: Arabfuturisms, Gulf Futurisms, Sinofuturisms and many other alternative forms of counterfuturisms which dislocate any assumed sense of history already written. While anti-colonial cultural activism has long roots in the Arab countries and the Middle East (Amin

2016), imaginary media discourses can also become a platform for history and public memory demonstrating that visual and artistic practices participate in an alternative chronography of power. They write alternative histories but also articulate counterfuturisms as imaginaries of times-to-come.

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