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OUT OF FUTURITY:
TIME-TRAVELLING WITH ROSELL MESSEGUER
AND SUSANA BARRIGA

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In H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), the main character, a scientist called Alexander Hartdegen, travels to the year 802.701. In this distant future, where civilization has apparently reached a "happy" evolution, he progressively discovers a tenebrous underworld. During his wanderings about an imprecise London, he enters what seems to be a ruined museum, The Palace of Green Porcelain, where Wells draws a fictionalized description of South Kensington Museums. In this museum, the Time Traveller discovers that the past of his own present does not correspond faithfully to the past as displayed in the future, producing for him a paradoxical doubled past. Among the deteriorated and unrecognizable objects that Hartdegen needs to recognize and understand, he must look for the ones that have a utility for his present adventure. Is it not the same rationale that we apply when we write history, after all? In the novel Hartdegen is able to escape from the future and even tell a captivating story to his nineteenth-century minded contemporaries.

In the twentieth century, the future has been usually portrayed as a dystopian totalitarian nightmare, an unforeseen aftereffect of the dream of modernization. Dystopia is a common genre in science-fiction and usually serves a moralizing purpose that alerts us to the undesirable—and therefore avertable—consequences of a conflicted situation.

In these narratives, the present is confronted with its collective fears a possible solution is recommended via anticipation. Less common is the strangeness that takes place in the film *The Planet of the Apes* (1968), where the travel to the future (1972 to 3978) takes the astronauts to a planet that re-stages a diverted evolution. Contrary to Hartdegen, when Colonel George Taylor finds the Statue of Liberty, he realizes that there is no return, and no hope. For us, modern believers, this Uchronia where the past is a safer place than the future may be too scary and disheartening.

At this point I would like to address the leitmotiv of Documenta 12, *Is Modernity our Antiquity?*—which I consider to be a tricky question. If we think carefully about its enunciation, we may give two different possible answers. In the realm of artistic forms and techniques, on the one hand, we could consider that modernity (modernism) has already passed and that we are definitely postmodern or postmodernist. But we could also consider the modern imaginary as an “original” source to which we are bound to cyclically return, a Benjaminean deposit of dialectic images. Modernity as the new Classicism. In this framework it is worthy to note the popularity gained by the neologism “prequel” and the development of a whole range of narrative strategies by script-writers and fans. These *alter-logics* (reboot, origin-story, retcon, fanfictions, retronyms) are mainly used in popular culture (comics, TV-series, films, video games). All of them expand forms of retroactive continuity or derivative fictions.

Although as narrative procedures they are not different from old modes that revamp myths, they embody contemporary ways of reinventing the past as a product of the future (not the usual other way around), especially the past-as-story (as fiction), or rethinking history as memory (as in memory studies). These are forms that question the vision of a future engendered by progress and modernization. For me, the works of a generation of artists (born mainly in the 1970s) are very significant, in that they contaminate history and myth, using retro-modern forms—not to melancholically mourn over them, but to re-signify them. These artists look for and use archive images from the Cold War Era and recreate a repository in which retro-communist and retro-capitalist imaginaries and their *political fictions* still co-exist, interrogating each other. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall, when communism was declared dead, the 2008 crisis eroded the expansion of late capitalism. This specular collapse reaffirms the need to go beyond *capitalism*, towards a new social order that, in spite of the worldwide revolts, is still to be imagined.

In *Ovni Archive* [U.F.O. Archive], Rosell Messeguer assembles photographs, images, press clips, postcards, book covers, leaflets, maps, objects and all kind of documentation related to defense apparatus and espionage systems since the Cold War. The project was born after a trip to Rio de Janeiro in which she discovered and photographed military batteries that appeared, formally, as alien flying saucers. This formal similarity related to other objects, such as Isaac Peral's submarine, which she saw everyday in her hometown Cartagena when she was a child. The archive emphasizes the resemblance of objects (submarines, balloons, rockets, helmets, ufos, lamps, cameras, bombs) that were designed with the common visual alphabet of the modern era style. These shapes, caught between positive science and popular belief, attempt to figuratively provide an aesthetic unconscious of the Cold War fears (communists, imperialists, guerrillas... and aliens). Behind the faith in progress, modernity was inhabited by phantoms that also took modernized forms. Espionage and defense objects that needed to be invisible due to their function also needed to become materialized, providing an allegorical image for fears that didn't have one. U.F.O.s embody a symbolic displacement of the anxieties of those years (nuclear war, communism attack), and they are, at the same time, cause and effect of those fears. Rosell collects images of these types of objects that both activate our imagination, and are expressive of a specific socio-political moment.

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Rosell's archive is complemented by textual information (official documents, press clips, books), making visible this war against the invisible, connecting imagination and historical facts. Rosell's work opens a field between science-fiction and political fiction that suggests what forms conceal, or what we *think* they conceal. In this imaginary realm, the present digs into the past and projects itself in retro-active continuity. The distinct speculative element in espionage facilitates a fictional "pre-quelisation" of the present-day. In its repetition (Wikileaks, PRISM), the past is produced from and by the future. Repetition is not an inevitable neurotic symptom, but re-produces the conditions of possibility of the new cover-up. The archive ambivalently reveals and contributes to this dark zone.

Contrary to Rosell, the work of Susana Barriga projects not the present into the past, but the past into the future. *Memory for a house. Project of a voyage to the East* is not a completed work, but a film to still to be produced. In this respect, any following comment can be considered science-fiction. This project was triggered by a trip that Susana made from Cuba to Berlin in the winter of 2009, in which she encountered

the ruins of the former eastern part of the city. She especially recalls her visit to Mauerpark flea market, where she experienced a folding up of temporalities: the realm of her childhood memories, the Cuban present-day embodied in obsolete objects still in use on the island, and the Berliner present-future of a past shaped by the communist utopia, that she inevitably projected back onto Cuba's prospects. In Mauerpark: an incomplete past met an unaccomplished present.

What needs to be remembered? What needs to be forgotten? How can we imagine the yet-to-come? Up until now Susana has gathered fragmentary elements, photographs, interviews, film excerpts—all adding to an on-going audiovisual research that wishfully will become a film. Susana does not want to position herself in a melancholic *Östalgie*. But neither does she want to celebrate the immersion in capitalism and the disappearance of hope for a better world. The yet-to-come is only to be prefigured here, in our present. For Susana, this pre-figuration can be intuited in repetitive acts. In one of the excerpts, we can see the tedious, learning exercises that a group of teenage skateboarders repeat, suspending time in an endless future offering. There, lies a promise.