

Bahar Noorizadeh

Weird-Futuring

Özgün Eylül İçcen: Dear Bahar, your works highlight the entanglements between past futures and the speculative nows of computation, which intend to respond to the present moment and, we may add, reprogram it via alternative resources, whether historical or aesthetic. What would you replace in the “N” of “N-futuring”? I’m thinking here of how you situate your theoretical and artistic work within the hegemonic spectacles of ethnofuturisms and speculative design, even heightened more with the global pandemic nowadays.

Bahar Noorizadeh: It’s interesting that you ask that. Of course, I share many of your concerns with future-driven discourse and practice these days, but I’ve also been fascinated by the sudden surge and popularity of certain futural genres like science-fiction—hitherto existent but not as visible and marketized as today—especially in the art field. I think my work has often been categorized as belonging to this new generation of sci-fi creators, so I wanted to attain a critical assessment of this current traction and this new favorable lens that’s been directed at science fiction. I developed a sort of frustration with the majority of explicitly future-oriented contemporary cultural productions for different reasons: The western variant that’s happily techno-solutionist and content with quick ahistorical fixes (that you describe very well in your brief), but also, as if counter to that, the emergence of *supposedly* global southern variations on sci-fi—in various types of ethnic, non-western futurisms, for instance, hailed in the art world since the 2000s.

Basically, these modes of fictive futures often rely on a simple plot twist concerning how the idea of what progress and development *should* look like does not match their real implementations in the Global South. How Dubai doesn’t look like Los Angeles, for instance. So Dubai as the *artificial* city vs. Los Angeles as the *natural* one. This fascination relies on an underlying technological essentialism, that the form of technology native to the west becomes grotesque when transposed onto the east or south, which indicates that these forms of ethnic futurisms have not decolonized their own discourse and still hold the Euro-American iconography of the techno-urban landscape as the ‘original’ model from which everything else deviates. And this deviation enables irony and the light chuckles to slip in. In short, these new glitzy non-western futurisms are bereft of any political dimension or even concerned with the future at all. In fact, they are often diasporic gazes on real situated contexts (for example, in the

Middle East or the Gulf) and reproduce the monotheistic notion of Technology (with capital T, the singular one affixed in Western thought.)

And just to clarify, the non-western futurisms I'm describing have nothing to do with afro-futurism, which is immediately a political and radical practice. Or as Kodwo Eshun puts it, afrofuturism is the category for the appeals that black culture has made on the future when any future was made difficult to imagine.¹

Back to what I would replace the "N" in N-futuring with, I'd say I'm still very much invested in the future. And I mean it as "an investment in the future" that upkeeps the notions of risk and speculation we attribute today to the modernist turn. But also I would want to delineate what's usually jammed into temporal states—past, present, future—as conceptually different entities: The past as the domain of the *experience* (that has may or may not been recorded, and if recorded has been in local and particular instantiations without a universal image); the present as the state where the impulse to record and to archive is suspended because witnessing is immediate; and the future as not a time dimension but the realm of the *unknown*, in all its mythical and metaphysical intimations. So there is an ontological distinction between the future and the past. The past is concerned with knowledge or forms and possibilities for knowledge, whereas the future relates to the impossibility of knowing.

So rather than staying content with certain decolonial critiques of modernist time that want to replace it with a *nonlinear* chronopolitics, I want to stress that past, present, and future belong to fundamentally different categories that are not a matter of linearity or otherwise. That is, "experience" and "expectation" are of two essentially different onto-epistemological orders.

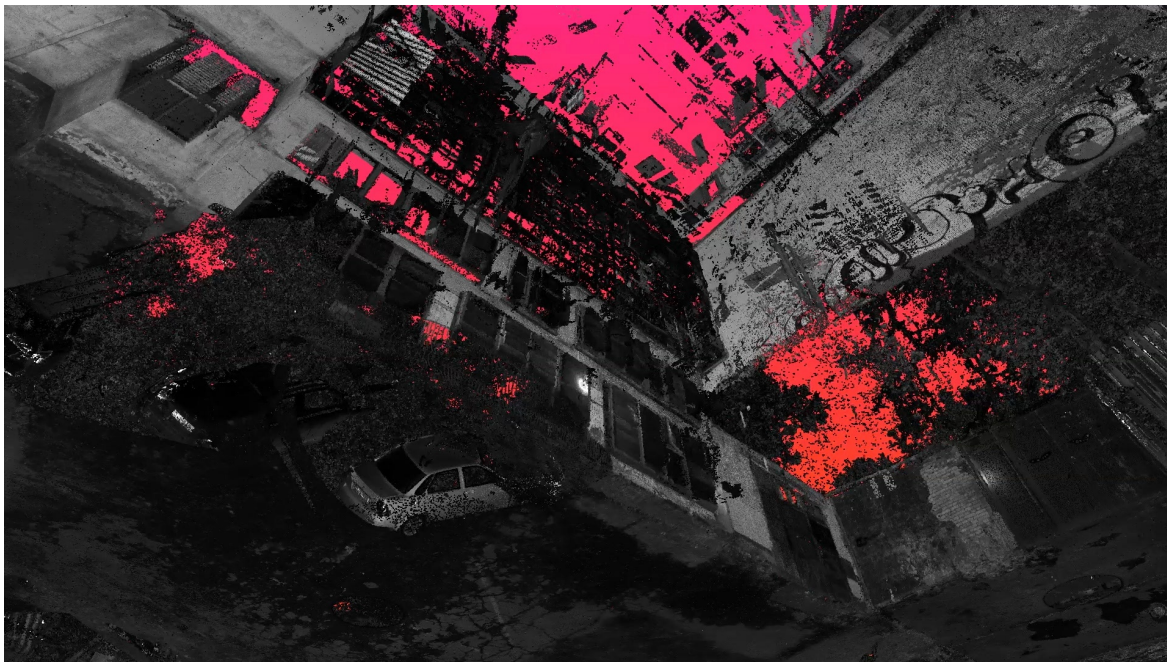
This all to say that I would like to replace your "N-futuring" with "Weird-Futuring," which I think resonates with the activity of speculation, as another word for non-essentializing a matter of experience to allow the expectation to unbound itself from experience and become open-ended. In a way, to reclaim the state of unknowability that the concept of future is referring to from the politics of time. When we are at 'risk' (literally a 'society of risk') we give in to the comfort and the insurance provided by positivist knowledge, by what's known to us in advance. But at the extremes of some collective modes of risk-taking—revolution and the rave being two prime examples—we let go of knowledge. Weirding for me, in this sense, has something to do with revolution.

Özgün Eylül İçcen: Your emphasis on weirding, as you describe it, is tempting. It reminds me of the idea of building on the science-

fictional potential of the present, which makes other futures possible that are open in the sense of their capacity to evolve into something different than what the past prescribes. Here, I refer to Kodwo Eshun's idea of counter futures, too. In this sense, I am curious to hear your opinion on the aesthetic of utopian and dystopian narratives, which we encounter a lot nowadays, but whose distinction you seem to problematize in your works. In this sense, I like your deconstructive(?) gesture of refusing to offer a settled positionality. Instead, your speculative narratives, such as your works on Soviet cybernetics, are closely tied to material histories that complicate the projected path of computational capital.

Bahar Noorizadeh: I think the dystopian/utopian dyad is closely related to the techno-solutionist/ethno-futurist categories. I think ultimately both these attitudes are caught up with predictive modeling as their *modus operandi*. They want to replace a certain image of the future with a stronger agitprop—and at the end of the day, it almost doesn't matter if it's utopian or dystopian as long as the purpose is this act of substitution to shift public opinion through representational means. Of course, I don't denounce the power of images in pushing a certain political agenda (I'm actually on the side of good propaganda when needed), but I'm more fascinated by the idea of a *speculative politics*: agendas that we don't and can't know in advance and can't program for through propaganda. I think this is really the blind spot of most *attitudes* towards political emancipation and the future: Certain ideas of certain schools of thought and ideologies are set in stone. We think we know what neoliberalism or anarchism or socialism are and by default we set ourselves an impossible task to steer the planetary wheel towards either/or. But as you noted in your question, there is a certain way of reading the history of political thought that really complicates what we know of neoliberalism, finance capitalism, and socialism, for instance, and deconstructs some of the idiosyncrasies we take for granted with each, revealing them to be much more protean in nature.

Going back to what you described as the reliance of these speculative narratives on material histories, I think the key is to not entertain history as anticipatory or predictive studies—not “to learn from history so to know how to navigate the future”—but to be reminded of the truisms we hold so dear, of what we take as what we know, and how there are myriad universes within the present that requires a shift in our narrative perspective. This mode of reflecting on contingent pasts and histories is not in the service of projecting results onto the future but opening up the future to countless scenarios.



Still from *After Scarcity* (2018), courtesy of the artist.

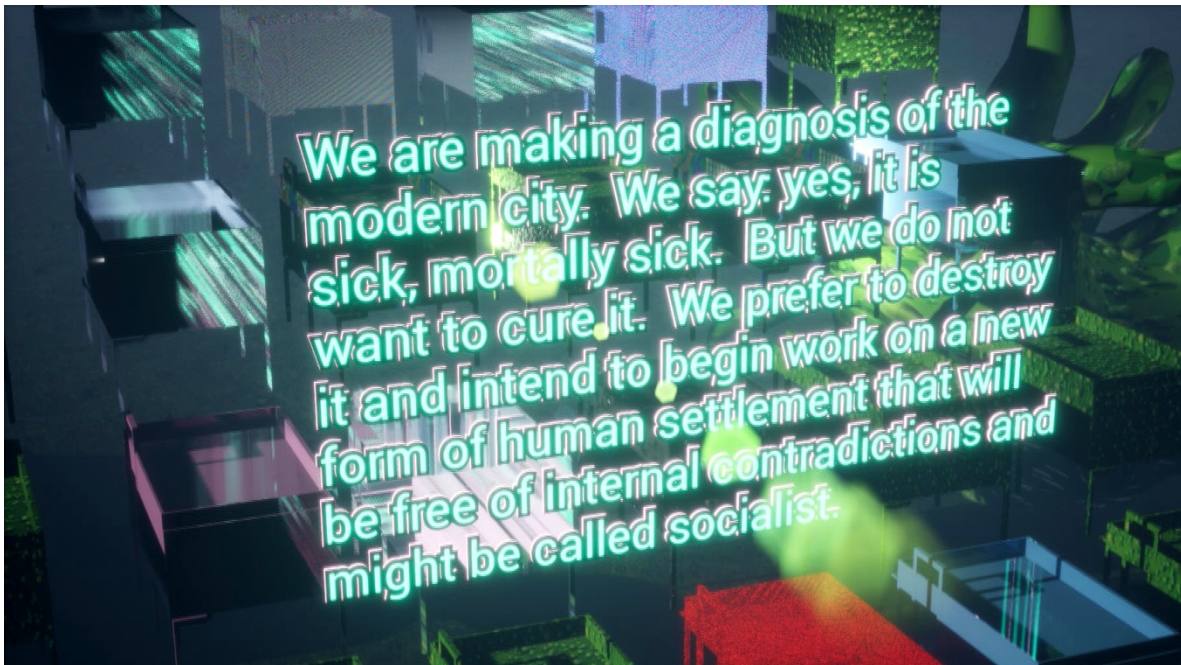
Özgün Eylül İçcen: Concerning this, I find your work on Soviet cybernetics and urban planning super relevant. You don't essentialize or superiorize that history. Instead, you do something more interesting by demonstrating the possibility of alternative networks and imaginaries that contest the monolithic trajectory of technocapitalism today. You completed two video works around this theme in the last few years: *After Scarcity* (2020) and *The Red City of the Planet of Capitalism* (2021). These adopted a futuristic but haunting aesthetic for which the aesthetic of 3D modeling worked very well. Interestingly, I am currently writing about the United Arab Emirates' national space program for establishing colonies on the red planet of Mars as a way of surviving the expected planetary collapse. In absurd ways, via your title, my mind wanders around this other meaning of the "red city," a communist one, unsettling the most recent manifestations of capitalist realist aesthetic (as in Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher, among others). Would you like to briefly reflect on those films regarding the political-aesthetic of Weird-futuring?

Bahar Noorizadeh: This question of the aesthetics of communism is a very important starting point for artistic creation, from the early Soviet avant-garde and constructivists, whom I've been very indebted to, until today. In this case, the urbanists that are featured in *The Red City* film have a different answer to the question of the aesthetics of a communist city: They suggest that the city should completely perish and be replaced by a communist network. This is because any form of hegemony, spatial or otherwise, to them is by default a manifestation of authoritarianism and a class society. This is also particularly relevant in the context of the Russian war on Ukraine and

how that heritage of Russian imperialism has lived on till today. For Disurbanists, the network is a political form that is quintessential in liberating the rural areas from the totalitarian impulse of the Soviet state, present from the early days of the revolution.

But also the 'look' of the network is already a shift towards abstraction, from the unified form of the city. And again, this is something that's very interesting to me as an artist—all these abstract forces and ebbs and flows that shape our material and political reality while we stride further and further into capitalist abstraction and alienation, either processes that are exponentially larger than our bodies, i.e. logistics or extractivism, or transactions that are based on time frames where our bodies won't even exist (like 900-year leases on land for property ownership in the UK.)

The question that's been central to my video practice since *After Scarcity* is exactly whether art is bounded to the limits of human sensorial experience, as it's traditionally been, or if we can expand the ambitions of art-making to 'sense' and 'express' all this invisible matter that our embodied sensors don't capture, yet are fundamental to our political and biological life. I think engaging with the aesthetics of machines is one way of getting into it, but there's also a myriad of ways to experiment with the more-than-human entities surrounding us.



Still from *The Red City of the Planet of Capitalism* (2021), courtesy of the artist.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: A further question would be related to your historical references within the fields of computation, design, arts, and architectures, alongside theoretical frameworks and social movements. You are a practitioner committed to all these sides of

practice at once?

Bahar Noorizadeh: I'm very much fascinated by the history of economic thought. I find it such an amusing disciplinary angle to untangle the sum of intellectual and political acrobatics that were required to establish these great fictions of our time, especially those that prevailed, like capitalism. It's also particularly exciting to study original progenitors of neoliberal doctrine and market proponents, rather than staying on the safe shores of the critique of political economy, which left academia has been taking for granted in the past century or so. Reading the original supervillains of our current political systems really complicates how we view the world at the moment and whether the terms we use to describe the current condition hold true to their moment of initiation. The starting point for me was 'neoliberalism' which, according to the economic philosopher Philip Mirowski, is one of the most overused and misunderstood stock phrases of left scholarship.²

So through the study of economic history, I started to see how the fields and sciences of planning, management, cybernetics, logistics, and spatial organization via architecture have come to shape the world as we know it. And as an artist, I really started to grasp my own historical conditioning as a blank canvas, laid open to shifting forms of subjectivity and performativity that emerge from these economic transformations throughout modernity, from industrialization to globalized financialization and its current culmination in reputational and credit regimes. Economic history is the artist's mirror.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: As I struggle with this topic, I am curious to hear how you relate to the tension that underscores the dialectical nature of computation, capital, history, etc., totalizing and differentiating at once, whether spatially or temporally. Or in terms of scale, the global/universal, on the one hand, and the particular/local, on the other. Is this ultimately related to political consciousness regarding our situatedness? What are the constantly shifting scopes of our theoretical/artistic interventions?

Bahar Noorizadeh: I think perhaps this binarism (universal/particular) has been a hangover from the early 2000s when the globalized condition really seeped into our flesh and bones, giving birth to this era of confusion as if we are bound to pick one over the other. It's essentially our 20th century's monolithic spirit trying to come to terms with the 21st century's epistemological metamorphosis through globalization.

But I really think after that initial moment of shock these dyadic views are changing by the day, and the complexities of scale are starting to jar people much less. With recent social movements, we

really see how ideals of decentralization and scaling up your modes of organization and operation are being upheld simultaneously. I also think this shift was enabled by the vanishing of the figure of the individual as the center of political thought and practice, to the more volatile and fluid idea of the "dividual": ever-unsettled and shifting collective drives that don't find much value in institutional validation. The new reputational and ranking paradigms are making institutional recognition a matter of the past. A concrete example from the art world: We no longer rely on the *image of value* bestowed on art works by MoMA, but the *counter-image* that's provided by the strike MoMA movement has enabled a whole new regime of valuation, changing previous trends and notions of hipness/value. (Of course, there's a long way to fully get there, but these new valuation metrics are in the making as we speak.) The same practices of counter-speculation, or counter-speculative insurgency, happened recently on a mass scale during #MeToo, BLM, and the 2021 pro-Palestine movements. Value is becoming considerably more liquid and distributed than ever before. And as this happens, globalization is becoming much more "natural" to our bodies.

Of course, this is also related to the question of funding. We're seeing a shift in how people are increasingly coming to grips with the flawed and fraudulent funding mechanisms and finding alternative ways of doing their economies, whether via networked P2P Blockchain applications or IRL community exchange on the ground. The obsession with *counter-institutional* discourse—without offering any pragmatic substitutes—is finally fading away and giving in to actual, distributed, and equitable models of financing projects. Ones that are gaining muscle and traction to come back and change institutional norms recursively. I think with everything that's going down on the planet, there is also evidence of groundbreaking radicalization and political change, particularly with younger generations (which makes me sound like a senior).

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Finally, this leads me to a more personal question about something we felt resonated with one another during our initial meeting: How have our intellectual formations been strongly bounded by our movements across different geographies, institutions, and socio-political contexts? On the one hand, we are concerned about the dominant rhetoric and spectacles of so-called speculative futures in the hands of global capital and its local instantiations. They obscure not only their underlying structures but also a political clarity that is much needed now. On the other hand, I share a frustration with many other (media) theorists who are worried about the future implications of computational capital, but I don't think we can afford to get stuck in visions of canceled or dark futures as if it were a lost battle. There are many people in different parts of the world whose futures have already been canceled and who still struggle to invert the existing cultural politics of space, time, and technology. For

instance, Aimee Bahng's work on "migrant futures" demonstrates how various communities reclaim the realm of speculation from the speculative fictions of financialization and datafication.³ Likewise, I insist on developing a theory of computational media that speaks to the ongoing struggles on the streets by means of going back to its material conditions and histories. How do you identify your path negotiating all these political and aesthetic struggles at once? Any strategies you found yourself having developed on the way? Has one of your most recent projects, *Weird Economies*, grown out of such efforts? For instance, what are the motivations/implications of creating a platform as such (which I find myself doing, too, with Counter-N)?

Bahar Noorizadeh: It took me a very long time to come to terms with my own subject formation and so to understand its implications on my work (mostly through undergoing psychoanalysis, which I defend wholeheartedly despite the conventional critique).

I'm one of the 'children of the network,' so to speak. Not only did we experience the rites of passage from paper print to the screen in our teenage years, the middle class from the Middle East went through the '90s and early 2000s waves of diasporic mobilities, as there was a window of time where financial investment and job opportunities in places like Canada and Australia became a viable option for acquiring a more robust passport. This, added to womanhood's counter-identitarian psychic structure (Lacan's famous formulation "Woman does not exist"), leads to a very neurotic, diasporic life experience, traversing several geographies, schools of thought, practices, and disciplines. A kind of fundamental uprootedness that inhabits the network much more comfortably (digital natives) than a situated and localized idea of home. So personally, for me, the local exists but not in my immediate material surroundings. It's dispersed and distributed in my various friendship networks across continents. I very much exemplify the precarious, nomadic, *biennialized* art subject that's the topic of much criticism these days, but somewhat being born into it?

I'm saying all this also partially to say that we are not all inserted within indigenous pre-globalized communities. That some of the conversations around indigeneity in critical spheres have an undertone of fetishization of that form of sociality as a primary state to return to or something that can be regained for everyone. But these categories are much more porous at the moment. On the one hand, there are indigenous populations that have been subjected to expulsion from their lands to form the most precarious, bottom-of-the-chain migrant labour force in developing states. On the other hand, nothing is untouched by the extremely porous processes of financialization, not even the most secluded and bordered (physically and digitally) spaces, i.e. Iran. In a country undergoing half a century of cultural and economic isolation from the rest of the planet (imagine a supposedly anti-capitalist

society on Mars) we are observing the exponential growth of platform capitalism, competing sharing economy applications, and the uberization of everything ever possible: from medical services to seeking Sharia consultation (through the online application National Center for Answers to Religious Questions and others.)

What my own subjective limitations allow is to ask what kinds of sociality and collectivization are *also* possible for a rapidly growing global precariat that includes all class strata and citizenship statuses? Without falling for the fantasy of returning to a more 'natural order,' which I exceedingly find popular in places like the UK with hostile border practices.

Like you mentioned, *Weird Economies* for me is first and foremost a response to this question. Personally and politically I desired a community of thinkers and practitioners (in art and beyond) that is concerned with building these various images and imaginaries of the world operating outside the current business-as-usual. But like you put it, not so much through strategies of *co-opting* or *hacking* previous or available tools (computation, finance, etc.) but by understanding the material and historical contingencies of our technological affordances, which opens up this myopic critique to the manifold existences present in technology and finance in their expanded sense, at every moment. Just like the possibility of a political revolution, technology at every moment can be radically otherwise. So to shift our narratives of what technology is as an *instrument* to one that understands it as processes enabling emergence through the integration of the human and the social beyond previous essentializing categories. I'm definitely not talking about machine learning here, which usually supports the delusional argument that there is algorithmic generation beyond the social.

So in *Weird Economies*, *platform* becomes a key starting point to discuss these techno-human assemblages. And the question of what kind of coordination and design is required for *Weird Economies'* form to correspond to its thematics: to embody and enact a speculative politics. It also means that it needs to think about its economic model differently. The way you describe the "counter" in "counter-futuring" resonates quite a lot with platform: as a table or a flat surface where people meet and engage in a form of, historically political, 'exchange.'

1 Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2, (Summer 2003): 287-302, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021>

2 Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2013).

3 Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

Bahar Noorizadeh's Bio:

Bahar Noorizadeh is an artist, writer, and filmmaker. Her research examines the historical advance of speculative activity and its derivative politics in art, urban life, and finance and economics. Noorizadeh is the founder of Weird Economies, an online art platform that traces economic imaginaries extraordinary to the financial arrangements of our time. Her work has appeared at the German Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennial 2021, Tate Modern Artists' Cinema Program, Transmediale Festival, DIS Art platform, Berlinale Forum Expanded, and Geneva Biennale of Moving Images among others. Noorizadeh has contributed essays to e-flux Architecture, the Journal of Visual Culture, and forthcoming anthologies from Duke University Press and Sternberg Press. She is pursuing her work as a PhD candidate in Art at Goldsmiths, University of London where she holds a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship.

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