Jussi Parikka
Counter-Futuring

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Dear Jussi, I would like to start this conversation by asking how you would replace the "N" in "N-futuring" given the material, social, and technological dynamics underlying the cultural politics of futurity today? I am curious to hear your answer because your work, at least for me, complicates the monolithic trajectory of technocapitalism by attending to material processes, alternative histories/imaginaries, non-human scales, and specific contexts. Within all that, how would you describe Counter-futuring?

Jussi Parikka: Let me start by saying that I enjoyed the note you sent me about describing how "'N' stands for a verb form (-ing), highlighting both its active and processual nature." The gerund form pops up in recent methodological literature too, especially in Celia Lury's work that I have recently been reading again with great pleasure. It's an excellent verb form to describe academic, para-academic, and other work as processual activity that ranges from trained skills and habits to surprising, creative encounters, too.

If you press me for an answer, I would say "counter-futuring," adopting a term that appears in some of my recent writing building on many other theorists and writers before me. It links with work that is interested in alternative timelines, and not just time as a line but as a dynamic force of description and creation that also wanders off from prescribed timelines. In recent discourses, from Afrofuturism onward to more recent Black Quantum Futurists, for example, the idea features in some related ways.

What I like about your theme of N-futuring is the openness that is not tied to one field, nor to one particular strand of ideas only, not one geography, but the whole question of futuring as a suitably open-ended and yet crucial ethico-political, even ethico-aesthetic horizon of an action: to refuse the bitterness we face on a daily basis as a weight that would limit futures and to refuse the work of futuring done for us (whether in terms of calculated futures of prediction machines, or the narrative futures that either say there is no future or that the future is what is already being prescribed). The liberating force of a future—a people to come, indeed—is what has been a forceful driver of theory as practice for decades and I still want to identify with this.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: I want refer back to your article titled "Middle East and Other Futurisms."[1] You discuss the aesthetics and politics of

contemporary Gulf Futurism and Arab Futurism while focusing on artistic practices that complicate, if not contest, the hegemonic narratives of futurity within the context of the Middle East and highlight their implications beyond the region. There are multiple sides of that work that offer entry points for further research, which I have expanded upon in my work in some ways.

The first is your response to the rhetorical popularity of canceled or lost futures from a decolonial perspective, such as in reference to Nicholas Mirzoeff and Rob Nixon, while also building on a posthumanist perspective after Rosi Braidotti. Thus, you encourage media and cultural theorists to attend to the ongoing struggles of communities who have already lost theirs due to the violent histories and presents of Western colonialism. Yet these dispossessed communities still mobilize collective efforts for navigating and inverting the existing cultural politics of space, time, and technology. Second, you offer some entry points for connecting the emancipatory potentials of varied waves of futurisms. We already know that ethnofuturisms do not necessarily embrace an emancipatory agenda since, as we see in the examples of Sinofuturism or Gulf Futurism, they have complicated histories and trajectories. The third point is about your research process, which highlights the relevance of ongoing urban struggles and artistic production to the work of a media theorist today.

So, I am curious to hear more about how you got interested in the themes and examples you tackled in this article. Did your stay in Istanbul have a role here since unpacking the urban spectacles of Gulf Futurism is relevant to understanding contemporary Turkey due to its tightened ties and resemblances with the Arabian Gulf, more specifically with Qatar? Did the artistic trends you observed have a role? In short, what was your motivation for the article, or how did its trajectory proceed?

Jussi Parikka: There is a trajectory to why I got involved in this work, one that does not start merely from academia or theoretical ideas but from collaborative and curatorial work. Around 2015/2016, I and my then-collaborator Ayhan Aytes were invited to develop a section for the Istanbul Design Biennial on Middle-East automata. Ayhan had already been involved in the bigger exhibition Allah's Automata at the ZKM in Karlsruhe; that exhibition developed, on a grander scale, a curated approach to the history of technology and science, a sort of "variantology," to echo the curator Siegfried Zielinski's term. In a somewhat related vein, we wanted to pick up on a theme that Ayhan was meant to develop for a book on orientalism and automata, and to put that into conversation with the Design Biennial's 2016 theme *Are we human?* That year was curated by Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, two architecture theorists and historians whom I have greatly admired since my studies in the 1990s. So, our plan was not to just repeat what was

done at ZKM already but to develop the emerging project into a line about the temporalities of historical reconstruction, of alternative histories, even the imaginary histories that were and are part of the Turkish context and beyond. Hence, the exhibition featured some of Al-Jazari's[2] reconstructed automata—somewhat plastic, which added to their quirky sense of material not just as sublimated objects of great inventors but as remediations across different material periods. It also featured a symposium (with invited guests Laura U. Marks and Azadeh Emadi) and a workshop where our participants were to relate to alternative imaginary histories of the technological Middle-East (a term that we know is also uneasy and in need of much specification). So the section on "media archaeology of ingenious designs" aimed not only to pick up on themes, images, and imaginaries from historical sources such as Al-Jazari's celebrated *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* (1206), as well as work from the Banū Mūsā brothers and others, but also to investigate the current temporal processes of imaginaries. The plan was to ask: Whose time are we in? How are particular architecture and design imaginaries matched and mismatched with design projects? What are the politics of pastiche times that one witnesses in popular culture such as soap operas or architectural constructs across Turkey? What other better times can be designed?

So, my interest in this context emerged through this extension of some media archaeological themes into the design exhibition and biennial context. Of course, already at that point, one reference point was the artistic projects and discourses around Arab Futurism, Sinofuturism (a hat tip to Lawrence Lek), and others. I was intrigued by the tropes of temporality embedded in them and, in many cases, how they function less as celebratory futurisms but as investigations of production of the present, including some oriental or colonial contexts of history. Furthermore, the Gulf Futurism of artists Sophia Al Maria and Fatima Al Qadiri[3] had already specified some of the material contexts in urban planning and architectural construction, a theme that resonated—and still does—strongly with the urban politics of cities and regions like Istanbul. I want to refer to it as a region or area so that we see how the city is linked to the various large-scale infrastructural projects that have shaped the ecological context much beyond the human inhabitants: the massive new airport, the canal plans, etc. This 'resonance' between Gulf Futurism and Istanbul is less to be read as an explanation, though, and more as a counter-point, a variation of themes, a point of reflection that became interesting to me as both a critical and historical but also aesthetic pattern.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Some of the references in your text are to Nicholas Mirzoeff's idea of countervisuality[4] and Kodwo Eshun's[5] idea of counterfutures, both of which involve reprogramming the existing aesthetic regime of the imperial order and thus reclaiming a political imaginary or collectivity that is not rendered possible otherwise. In

other words, reclaiming the right to the future operates through the detour of the fragmented pasts/archives as a means of bringing the present closer to its desired state that is not there (yet). I am interested in hearing more about how you situate your large body of work on media archaeology or environmental media within this growing interest in alternative cosmologies and temporalities to reconfigure our relationship to nature and the future (of our planet). One could also say that your work on biological and geological underpinnings, deep times, of media systems and imaginaries has become more relevant than before—in the age of the Anthropocene, climate change, or global pandemic. They remap our image of the historical and the planetary. In this sense, your attention to the material has a dual role, situating media within violent histories that constitute the unevenness at the level of society or region and the contingent nature of these processes, which render an intervention plausible. In this regard, where do you place your ongoing inquiries within media studies regarding the idea of counter-futuring?

Jussi Parikka: I would say there are two parallel ways of how to respond to this interesting prompt. Firstly, I think the reason I was interested in media archaeology in the first place was because it presents one case, one possibility of development, of a set of temporal methodologies that in some cases stems from historical methodology (new historicism, for example), in some cases media theory and history (whether the work of Friedrich Kittler or others), and in some cases from the many interdisciplinary takes that mapped alternative histories of media in ways that justified the use of the term "media archaeology." I end my book *What is Media Archaeology?*—now soon 10 years old in 2022!—with the different defining approaches that I find particularly interesting in that body of work (that is, not as sometimes implied by bad readings of theory, a unified 'theory' or just one methodology) with a note on temporalities. And to acknowledge this is important: Has it not been a central part of a range of critical postcolonial and decolonial work to engage with archival knowledge in ways that reveal its persisting partiality, its particular role in imperial regimes?

There's already a lot at play when summoning the notion of counter-futurism with the help of several thinkers and practitioners.

Then, secondly, I think the focus on environmental and ecological questions is another direction where the issue of non-human temporality comes in. *A Geology of Media*,[6] for example, was *not* a book of media archaeology as such; it was more about the particular deep times that are not merely metaphorical but very materially present in the production of digital culture. By now, this is not news at all; the focus on rare earth minerals, on lithium, on fossil fuel infrastructures of media culture have been a key part of the critical

debates in media studies more broadly. One reads about these topics in the mainstream news, even the energy costs of digital infrastructures and devices. But to me, this particular body of work was always about the tie-in between the materiality of media (*what* is the object of our analysis even?) and temporality (to echo Thomas Elsaesser, *when* is our object of analysis?) Hence the scale of issues becomes a central part of responding to your question: I have rarely been satisfied in focusing on the standard scales of analysis of digital culture or media and am more interested in the thematically anomalous—such as accidents and malware—or the methodologically peculiar, such as non-human forms of sensing (*Insect Media*), or the other-times of mediation (*A Geology of Media*).[7]

I want to add one more thing, though. This one somewhat reflects the variation of themes sparked by what I said earlier about the question of futurisms in contemporary art but also in relation to technological future-industries. The notion of futures has crucially changed with the automated processing of data as prediction; machine learning would be one, but in general, this applies to different scales of reference from scenario planning and insurance companies to the capture of value in other ways, too; the specific case of machine learning adds to this picture. So what sort of futures are these, as they are not only narrative ones, as was the case with the various textual and audiovisual futurisms of the 20th century and also, now, in the context of ethno-futurisms, for example? Picking up on Kodwo Eshun and others, I've coined this as the production—the constant production—of thousands of tiny futures (a hat tip to Elizabeth Grosz too): future as calculation or calculations, as there is no specific one but a horizon of possibilities that are captured in calculative reasoning, which is not merely read as a negative thing either. In one little text I wrote, "Consider then the future image as one that is future in the most limited sense and yet effective in the most widespread sense: the mobilization of various datasets from satellites to ground remote sensing, from media platforms to urban smart infrastructures as part of the training of AI algorithms and predictive measures. For example satellite data on ground-level changes—infrastructures, buildings, urban growth, agriculture, and crop yields—can be fed into machine learning systems with the aim of predictive data that can feed into for example financial predictions."[8]

To misquote Deleuze (who was quoting Vincente Minnelli): *If you are trapped in the future of the Other, you are screwed.*[9] To be trapped in someone else's calculations of futures: beware. These are devouring forces even if, to repeat: We are not to demonize the calculative futures either, just to seize the means of futuring and calculating.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: I like this framing of "seizing the means of futuring," which truly captures the spirit of N-futuring and Counter-N

at large. It also reminds me of the idea of "decolonizing speculation" from the captures of finance and surveillance, increasingly entangled with algorithmic media. For instance, Aimee Bahng's work on "migrant futures" offers a transnational and bottom-up perspective on the cultural production of futurity.[10] She demonstrates how dispossessed communities envision and enact other possibilities (economies, subjectivities, futures) by reclaiming the realm of speculation, which has become a site of struggle itself. On the other hand, we witness ethnofuturistic and speculative design practices, which often engage profit-driven, techno-orientalist, or politically ambivalent agendas. They often act less as a critical or counter-practice than infrastructures for what Mark Fisher calls "science fiction capital"[11] while prescribing specific imaginaries of preemptive risk and hope. I am curious how you navigate these conflicted realms of speculation. How do you evaluate or situate the current aesthetics and techniques of speculation (e.g. the popularity of speculative design/design fictions) and their political implications in the present?

Jussi Parikka: I think Aimee Bahng and others have better answers than I do to this question. But I want to echo the spirit of your question briefly. I think speculation—like many of the terms we are using, sometimes have to use and reflect upon—becomes a pharmacological term in the philosophical sense often mentioned. A cure and poison. Navigating this ambiguity is crucial like it is for most, perhaps all, of our attachments in life. It's clear that 'speculation' is not directly a liberatory stance at all, and the overuse of the term in artistic and design contexts testifies to this. (I am also guilty for using it a bit too liberally at times.) Speculative design as mapping all sorts of interesting futures is not necessarily very fruitful; speculative design that attaches to a crucial cultural politics of contemporary times from environmental crisis to, for example, an intersectional agenda is, on the contrary, likely to be productive. Speculative epistemology that has a clear understanding of partial stakes of knowledge—and a historical understanding of institutional contexts of such methodologies—becomes immediately something more than a formulaic stance to invention and innovation.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: As you have outlined so far, the trajectory of your research and curatorial practice is interdisciplinary in the sense of engaging with and staying receptive to various ideas and questions arising from different disciplines and intellectual traditions. A further question would be related to this gesture of situating your work, more historically this time. What are your historical and theoretical references within fields such as computation, design, arts, and architecture, as you are a theorist and curator committed to all these sides of practice at once?

Jussi Parikka: This is such a tough one to answer! I would rather retain the right to not do this in ways that become an *identity*. I would be more than happy to refuse many of the labels given to my work regarding media archaeology or media theory or whatnot. Instead, Foucault's note on leaving identification to the cops is more to my liking. But I understand that you are after something else, perhaps something that helps to offer a map of movements across different commitments. One earlier field of discussions that influenced my interest in both theory and cultures of design, art, architecture was new materialism. My original training was in relation to different methods and theories of interpretation and representations, like for many others too; so new materialism, especially in the Deleuzian inspired feminist readings (Braidotti, Grosz, and others) and, for example, Manuel Delanda's 1990s work, provided one particular trail about material forces that stuck to me for a long time and probably still is in the back of my head in whatever I write; same applies to Deleuze and Guattari whose *A Thousand Plateaus* I meticulously read in our little reading group with two friends (Teemu Taira and Pasi Väliaho) around the turn of the millennium in Turku. The various ways of approaching non-representational material cultures as part of cultural analysis is both a theoretical insight and a methodological opening, as well as a way of writing that I find personally interesting. And as said, it is also present in how I approach non-academic practices, too, such as in design and artistic work, including curatorial work. I am now curating a show with Daphne Dragona on Weather Engines in Athens, at Onassis Stegi, that somewhat describes this interest but with a specific environmental angle: Our exhibition, and the adjacent book we did as a sort of an alternative glossary of weather with over 20 contributors, responds to the centrality of weather as measured and somewhat produced in technological contexts, but where technology is not merely read in relation to more recent debates of geoengineering; techniques of the body and experience are present in the works we have selected, as are different approaches to knowing the weather that becomes an epistemic and aesthetic field of dynamic forces. So again, and in different things I do, the puzzle of materiality that is something beyond an object attracts me; these fields, atmospheres, forces of materiality that take different forms and shapes in different projects.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Following upon this last example, I want to ask you about the 'logistics' that have enabled and shaped your research trajectory. You have been passing by various institutions in different parts of the world, collaborating with numerous practitioners, inspiring their works, and getting inspired by theirs. I want to ask how you navigate all these infrastructures, networks, and relations you have accumulated via collaborations. What are some explicit outcomes of such interdisciplinary work while always bringing it back to the debates related to media and arts? We also witness novel forms of

knowledge production and dissemination nowadays. Where do you see the upcoming trends, especially regarding these at-the-edge-of-academic forms and styles?

Jussi Parikka: This question fits with a very mundane moment of self-reflection I had just the other day. I was called a media scholar—I cannot remember what context it was—which, as a description, is I guess as fine as some other term, but I realized that 'media studies' as a discipline has been only one institutional home for me along the years. I studied history (both political history and cultural history), philosophy, and sociology. I did a PhD on the cultural history and media archaeology of network accidents. My first academic job (temporary, though) was in Digital Culture. I ended up teaching media studies first in Germany for a short while, then more permanently in the UK, but after that, I was in an art and design school for 10 years and, in between, was a visiting professor in a cinema studies department as well as in a department of photography (where I still am, at FAMU in Prague, leading the Operational Images project until the end of 2023). And my new job is in a department of Digital Design and Information Studies in Aarhus. Whether this says something about my own shifting trajectory of scholarly work and affiliations, or shows that 'media studies' is also a general term that is not tied to a departmental name is another question.

But more so than outlining an institutional history, your prompt has again a deeper meaning that is more interesting indeed. These various interactions are fundamentally, and in the best cases, an exchange that has an effect on how we do things, something we can call even 'methods' (in the expanded sense that includes practice). With your permission, can I quote a passage I wrote for the Korean and Czech translations of my *What is Media Archaeology?* as part of a new preface?

Media archaeology travels. That is one of the guiding ideas of this book and it is articulated as part of the transformation of concepts, fields, even sometimes disciplines. Ideas take place in institutional contexts, in exchanges, in discourses and in suitcases that carry notes, books, random pieces of paper and other media of thinking. Ideas and concepts take flight as emails and packages of books sent across borders, and in reading groups that open up, resituate, debate and critique concepts.[12] I explain in the introduction to this book that the idea of media archaeology as a traveling set of concepts and methods refers to how it was never placed in just one discipline but travels between media and cinema studies, art history and art practices, history of technology and sciences; however translations such as this one demonstrate it travels also across languages. This is important for various reasons. The obvious one is that new concepts might introduce new sorts of discussions and become useful in transforming fields in different academic languages. But another is that they also trigger

already bubbling under forms of research and give name to practices that are practiced in other contexts of art and research. We often do things we don't have a name for, and this applies also to academic work. Something like media history, but not quite. Something that is part of media theory, but not only. Something that speaks about cultural history of science and technology but is practiced by artists as well. And then, of course the realization that: media archaeology is at times closer to histories of art and technology than traditional communication studies. Sometimes it exercises philosophical arguments about the nature of time and temporality; some ideas resonate with work in gender studies: I am here thinking for example Giuliana Bruno's Atlas of Emotion *as one example of gender studies, art history and cinema studies sharing a common ground.[13] Media archaeology, then, is also a catalyzer and a conduit for interdisciplinary investigations into the worlds of technology but also in ways that provide alternative methodologies to those of mass media or communication studies.*

Just as I had said "Don't identify me with media archaeology only," I go about quoting something in relation to that field! But indeed, I think that the idea of exchanges, travels, and mobility are constant reference points in ways that Giuliana Bruno has so well outlined in her magnum opus *Atlas of Emotions*. And, of course, a longer version of this would go to discuss Edward Said's "Traveling Theory," Mieke Bal, etc.

But besides the theoretical world, the idea refers to an everyday level in which we pick up all sorts of little things, concepts, words, and other habits along the way and take them with us to the next place and hopefully give back in the process. Here, I have been more and more attracted over the years to working with non-academic contexts, such as in curatorial projects, as it forces one to leave the particular style of words behind and think in other ways: in and through space, in collaborative ways with everyone involved, and in ways that also pay attention—and appreciation—to all sorts of expertise of for example technicians.

1 Jussi Parikka "Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 59, no:1 (2018): 40–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1410439

2 l-Jazari, or Badīʾ az-Zaman Abu l-ʾIzz ibn Ismāʾīl ibn ar-Razāz al-Jazarī was a scholar and inventor who lived from 1136 to 1206 and has become known for his work on automata, for example, as documented in *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*.

3 See also Fatima Al Qadiri & Sophia Al-Maria, "Al Qadiri and Al-Maria on Gulf Futurism." *Dazed Digital*, November 14, 2012, https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/15037/1/alqadiri-al- maria-on-gulf-futurism.

4 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

5 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

6 Jussi Parikka *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

7 Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

8 Jussi Parikka, "Thousands of Tiny Futures." *Machinology,* July 5, 2018. https://jussiparikka.net/2018/07/05/thousands-of-tiny-futures/

9 Gilles Deleuze, "What is the Creative Act?" Lecture presented at Tuesday lecture series at the FEMIS Film Foundation, Paris, 1987, revised transcription and translation by Charles J. Stivale, https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/what-creative-act-17-march-1987/lecture-01 See also: Deep Nalström, Gilles Deleuze – Beware of the other's dream," May 11, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Klhi6S6G-OY

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

11 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*. *Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, (Winchester: Zero Books, 2004).

12 See also Mieke Bal, *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

13 Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion* (London: Verso, 2002/2018).

Jussi Parikka's Bio:
Jussi Parikka is Professor in Digital Aesthetics and Culture at Aarhus University in Denmark. He is also visiting professor at the Winchester School of Art (University of Southampton) and at FAMU at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague where he leads the project Operational Images and Visual Culture (2019-2023, funded by the Czech Science Foundation). In 2021 he was elected as a member of Academia Europaea. His published books include *Insect Media* (2010), *Digital Contagions* (2007/2016), *A Geology of Media* (2015), and *A Slow, Contemporary Violence* (2016). Recently, with Tomáš Dvořák he co-edited *the Photography Off the Scale* (2021) and he is the co-author of *The Lab Book: Situated Practices in Media Studies* (2022) with Lori Emerson and Darren Wershler.
https://jussiparikka.net/