Hijacked Futures (Wien, 19-20 Mar 26)

University of Vienna and TU Wien, Mar 19–20, 2026
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Hijacked Futures:
Counter-(Hi)Stories and Complex Temporalities in Modern and Contemporary Art.

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The future is always fiction. Yet, the real power dynamics of the present are inescapably mirrored in projections of a planetary future. Two crucial questions arise: Who holds the authority to narrate the future, and to whom is it addressed? And, how can conventional narratives be challenged – by whom, and through what means? The fact that dominant future scenarios are primarily shaped in the affluent, industrialized Global North corresponds with the reality that the material power to influence the ecological future of the Earth is similarly concentrated there. Consequently, the significance of alternative imaginaries of the future within societal discourse cannot be overstated. Science- and eco-fiction, diasporic narratives and other forms of world-making offer means to disrupt the capitalist monopoly on future-making and empower individuals and communities to actively redefine their roles within these imagined futures. The complex temporalities of these narratives incorporate visions of different pasts and presents, pre-histories and (un)mapped territories.

We posit that art holds a specific potential to embody these temporalities. While literary studies have engaged with science fiction scenarios extensively, art history has yet to probe them with the same rigor. Artistic media – visual, auditory, synaesthetic, olfactory, performative, as well as combinations of mediums and documents – reflect world-making potentials that differ from text-based narrative. On the one hand, media artifacts are historically embedded when visions of tomorrow are represented through yesterday's technological apparatuses. On the other, shifts in media offer strategies of appropriation that have been a hallmark of postmodernist practice. The envisaged special issue aims to examine future scenarios in the arts in their respective historical context of the 20th and 21st centuries, highlighting how their subversive potential has been harnessed to hijack and appropriate popular narratives. Our primary focus lies on artworks that subversively employ pre-existing narratives, drawing on historical events, contemporary discourses, dominant and marginalized narratives of the future, to construct critical counter-futures beyond the simplistic dichotomy separating utopia and dystopia.

In this context, we direct close attention to the temporalities inherent in these artistic designs. Often, such works are more attuned to the complexities of time than the reductionist visions offered by future populisms. A starting point for this critique is the rejection of the illusion that a

single, unified global future can apply to all inhabitants of the planet. Just as the long-realized human dream of flight has not been experienced equally by everyone, so too will the unfolding climate catastrophe affect different populations in disparate ways. A wide range of geographical, social, cultural, economic, and even biological factors intersect to produce differentiated experiences of the future. While there may exist a shared planetary trajectory, there is no homogenous experience of this future; individual consequences are inevitable. The future, in this sense, is plural and fragmented. These multiple futures do not follow the same temporal rhythm but are non-synchronous. Some unfold in disparate locations and social groups at different times, or not at all; some futures regress, while others proceed in slow motion. This complexity collapses easy distinctions between past, present and future, as the past several decades have been marked by a dense temporal haze in which retrotopias and sci-fi post-apocalyptic visions increasingly shape contemporary experiences. Furthermore, it can be argued that from indigenous and diasporic perspectives, apocalyptic narratives such as the destruction of homeland and genocides are in no way future fiction but already experienced history. Since planetary changes such as melting glaciers and massive levels of species extinction have already happened, we are living in the aftermath of catastrophe while at the same time anticipating it as a future event. In art history, concepts such as “post-histoire” have designated the period since the 1980s as a time outside of history, and have thus anticipated the post-apocalyptic vibe of the present. From today’s perspective, however, these notions themselves appear as historic concepts – writing history after the end of history. If the end is – or was – already here, for whom do we imagine (hi)stories at all? What would a future without history look like? And, finally, how does the uncovering of previously silenced or lost (hi)stories impact the writing of anti-hegemonic futures?

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Outer space imaginaria
- Pre-history/post-histoire
- Futures beyond utopia/dystopia dichotomies
- Counter-worlds narratives / creations
- Ecofiction, uchronia and speculative fiction
- Indigenous, Latinx, Chicana, and Afrofuturism
- Forensic approaches to the past/history
- (Cyborg) bodies and microchimerism as reservoirs of complex temporality

We invite submissions for written contributions to be published in a peer-reviewed journal. To this end, we will convene for a workshop at the University of Vienna and TU Wien from March 19 to 20, 2026, where we will collectively read and discuss the article manuscripts in a collaborative setting. Both the contributions and the workshop will be conducted in English. Please submit an abstract of no more than one page, along with a brief CV, to thomas.moser@tuwien.ac.at by May 18. Travel and accommodation expenses may be partially subsidized, depending on available funding.

Organized by Laura Bohnenblust, Thomas Moser, and Barbara Reisinger.

Reference:

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