

EDITORIAL: PRESENT FUTURES

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KEYWORDS

Present futures, future, present, temporalities, AI

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 15, October 31, 2023

HOW TO CITE

The Editorial Team. “Editorial: Present Futures.” *On Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 15 (2023). <<https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2023.1416>>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2023.1416>



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Fig. 1: Boris Eldagsen, PSEUDOMNESIA | *The Electrician*, 2022, courtesy Photo Edition Berlin

The lines between present and future have blurred. In 2023, the German photographer Boris Eldagsen made waves by submitting an AI-generated image titled *The Electrician* to the Sony World Photography Award. This image won the first prize in the creative open category, yet the photographer refused to accept the award: his goal had never been to win, but rather to start a discussion about the imminently

approaching revolution in artificial intelligence and its future in professional photography.¹

The Electrician, like Eldagsen's other pieces in the PSEUDOMNESIA series, seems to merge the past, present, and future. While the artwork's appearance gives the impression of being from the PAST, it engages with the very PRESENT issue of how we are going to deal with growing artificial intelligence in the FUTURE. For us, this mixed temporality is a reminder of the passage of time: it makes us acutely aware that our present will quickly and inevitably become our past, with today's future soon becoming our present. In this image, such a realization is enhanced even further by the similarity of the two women depicted, as it seems they could be the same person in two different stages of life. Alternatively, the image could represent two different people, with the old woman behind the younger one perhaps representing a menacing future looming behind our present moment.

Though Eldagsen was very vocal about the nature of his piece immediately after the prize was bestowed, the competition's organizers did not reclaim the award. Consequently, Eldagsen refused to accept the prize, claiming that the AI-generated image is not in fact photography, and as such cannot be considered in a photography competition.²

In regard to the future, the photo-content scandal even more than the picture itself blatantly undermined the belief that we are fully in control and always one step ahead of our own inventions. In turn, this alerts us to the potential traps of using AI-generated media in everyday life, which have been foretold and forewarned in many works of fiction. We think that the (mis)use of AI is particularly interesting in the field of photography because, more so than in other creative areas, photography's primary goal has always been to capture reality. Even the most creative use of cameras is fundamentally based on capturing what is in front of the lens. The realization that we can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is computer-generated can be frightening, and despite having been cautioned against it for decades, we did not expect this fear to become present so soon.

Precisely for this reason, we want to take a step forward with this current issue of *On_Culture*, delving into the complex entanglements between different temporalities to investigate how various concepts and imaginaries of the future can be made fruitful for the present and *vice versa*.

The present temporality is typically envisioned as a point of convergence: a place where the threads of past experience become intricately intertwined with aspirations for the future, to the extent that the present, paradoxically, ends up being the most ungraspable. Over the centuries, this interplay has leaned towards one temporal dimension or another as epochs oscillated between renewed fascinations with past eras and an eager gaze cast towards the horizon of future possibilities. In the midst of our rapidly evolving contemporary landscape, characterized by technological leaps, environmental catastrophes, and geopolitical tensions, the concept of ‘future’ assumes a tangible and immediate trait that questions conventional notions of linear progression. Once mostly perceived as an abstract concept, the future now stands concretely before us, in examples as disparate as the many AI-generated images that have recently popped up all over the internet (e.g. Pope Francis sporting a fashionable white puffer coat), or the extreme weather events of the past summer (like the numerous fires in Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Hawaii; the earthquake in Morocco; excessive rainfall in Germany and Italy; and the floods in Libya). Thus, the gradual waning of the teleological notion of time’s progression poses major challenges that induce reflections on the role of human agency: the merging of the present with the future intensifies our awareness of the importance and impact of the choices we make today. At the same time, and perhaps accordingly, a sense of uncertainty and pessimism seems to hang over us when we imagine future scenarios. This paradox invites us to seek alternative ways of engaging with the time ahead, in order to diversify our perspectives on the present.

The current issue of *On_Culture* delves into diverse conceptualizations of futures and their impact on the present, and explores how cultural artifacts and practices shape understandings of the future within distinct cultural contexts. Similar to Boris Eldagsen, Christian Vinces, and other photographers who speak of “promptography”³ when talking about AI-generated art, we hope to introduce issue 15 of *On_Culture* as a space for new approaches and critical perspectives to think about the future in the study of culture.

Contribution Summaries

In her *Article*, Farina Asche looks into future-making practices in exhibition projects with a focus on the current musealization of migration in Germany. Empirically based

on the example of the outreach project *Meinwanderungsland* (2018–2020), and theoretically drawing upon knowledge regime analysis, she conceptualizes exhibition projects as networks of knowledge production, and investigates how counter narratives and para-institutional and involved practices intervene critically in the production of knowledge of migration, translating into “anticipatory and imaginative” future-making practices.

In his *Article*, Sandro Eich explores alternative imaginations of the future through an analysis of Ian McEwan’s *Machines Like Me* and Jeanette Winterson’s *Frankissstein*. He argues that as both novels create a past that is technologically more advanced than our present, they collapse the linear distinction between past, present, and future, and propose a co-temporal conception of futurity.

Through the lens of the concept of epistolarity, Sindija Frazetti’s *Article* investigates the relationship between the present and the future in Louise Erdrich’s novel *Future Home of the Living God*. Set in a dystopian present, the novel’s protagonist, a young Native American woman, is able to imagine a future through the act of writing letters to her unborn child. Franzetti illustrates how letter writing enables potentiality in an otherwise uncertain present and unknowable future.

Bart Peters’ *Article* shifts the focus to ninth- and tenth-century southern Italy, where the Franks, the Byzantines, the Roman Popes, and the emirs of Sicily sought to increase their influence and rival Lombard princes had to cope with each other and these external pressures. That combination created unease and tension for the immediate future of the Lombard monk Erchempert and the chronicle of Salerno’s anonymous author. Peters’ article reveals and compares how these texts, in an uncertain present, clung to an exemplary past, to steer their unpredictable present’s future.

Using the concept of Utopia and a reading of Ivan Semesiuk’s satiric novel *Farshrutka*, the narratologist Natalya Bekhta’s *Article* approaches the concept of future. She reflects on the productiveness of Utopia as a future-making category that can be blended with satire to critique the present. Her theoretical contribution is illustrated with Semesiuk’s Ukrainian post-2014 fiction and its formal and political futural effects.

Patricia Gwozdz’s *Essay* takes us on a journey through different time lapses in the works of Vico, Darwin, Woolf, and Arendt (among others), tracing how the

concept of time developed from a natural rhythm that structured ordinary life to an epistemological category of thought. She invokes musical, spatial, and temporal metaphors of time-keeping techniques, which ultimately illustrate the impossibility of capturing the present while it is happening. What remains are only present futures that feed on the ghosts of the past.

Addressing the 250th anniversary of the United States Declaration of Independence, Mimi Yang's *Essay* takes on the future of American society's ethnic make-up. By revisiting the past and looking into the treatment of Native American, African American, and Asian American groups of people, Yang points to the fact that White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant views and voices have shaped American society, power structures, and politics since the early modern era, posing the question of how a 'browner,' more diverse American community can encounter the 2026 anniversary.

The autotheoretical *Essay* on US academia by Mark James explores what it might mean to live in a 'post-debt' condition. By giving an account of unexpectedly having one's student loan debt forgiven, James argues that the weight of the past bears not only on the present sense of self, but also on the future one wants to effect for others vis-a-vis the systemic issues that the author identifies in an increasingly neo-liberal higher education system.

Kiersten Thamm's *Perspective* employs complex temporal constellations and alternative epistemologies for an understanding of contemporary material culture. Throughout a textual ensemble of photo essay, fictional research journal, and explanatory text, Thamm negotiates how we can point a critical lens at the present by adopting the defamiliarizing perspective of a post-human future.

Acknowledgements

By the time this issue is published, our future project will have become the present, and a lot of 'present' will have turned into 'past,' which is why we would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the contributions of those who have devoted their future, present, and past time to issue 15 of *On_Culture*. First, we thank team member Isabella Kalte for pitching the idea of an issue on "something about the future," then we thank the whole editorial team for teasing out our particular interests to develop the concept of "Present Futures." We thank Juan Camilo Brigard who with Isabella drafted the Call for Abstracts, and the rest of the editorial team for editing and

polishing it. Without all the authors who answered this call with inspiring ideas, this future vision could have not become a present reality; thus, we thank all of the authors of this issue's contributions for their creativity, dedication, and hard work. We are indebted to the expertise and commitment of our external peer reviewers whose valuable feedback ensures the academic standard of this journal. We thank Annalina Benner for pointing us to Boris Eldagsen's promptography, Kacper Radny for communicating with the artist about using his work as a teaser image, and Boris Eldagsen for his rapid response and generous permission to utilize *The Electrician* as representation for issue 15. We further thank proofreaders Marija Spirkovska, Shawna Vesco, and Anne Wheeler for their continued dedication to *On_Culture*, as well as our student assistants Katalin Gébl and Miriam von Kutzleben for their editorial and administrative assistance. Finally, we thank Riccardo Buonamici and Kacper Radny for drafting the original text for this editorial, as well as all the team members for polishing the draft into a coherent text.

Giessen, October 2023

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Endnotes

- ¹ DW News, "Artist Wins Photo Award with AI Generated Image, Sparking Debate | DW News," *YouTube video*, 0:55, April 19, 2023, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pv1HUd8rsG4>>.
- ² Boris Eldagsen, "Sony World Photography Awards 2023 | Boris Eldagsen," *Boris Eldagsen*, accessed October 23, 2023, <<https://www.eldagsen.com/sony-world-photography-awards-2023/>>.
- ³ Christian Vinces, "Bienvenidos a la era de la #Promtografía o #Promtography si te gusta el inglés," Facebook, April 15, 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/christianvinces/>>.