



Image: Guy Goldstein, *Few Moments* (detail), 2016

Contemporary Visions of the Future in Literature and Art

INTRODUCTION

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ON FEBRUARY 2018 A GROUP OF SCHOLARS from the social sciences and the humanities met in Paris for an intense workshop. The workshop was organized by Stanford University and by the Centre européen de sociologie et de science politique (CESSP) at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris.¹ The meeting had two goals in mind: to examine the ways in which contemporary cultural productions imagine the future and to search for intellectual pathways that will provide us with the language needed in order to speak today about our common tomorrow. The idea was to explore how current narratives attempt to make sense of, reflect, and react to the rapid pace of social, political, and technological changes of the last few decades.

As part of the discussion, the workshop addressed issues related to temporal modes, analyzing the chronotopes of our contemporary time, looking into the time-space models or molds that shape some of the narratives about the future. While the questions were presented in a global and theoretical manner, the scholars also spent time looking at specific examples, paying attention to particular genres and/or to certain social and political contexts.

¹ The organizers were Vered Shemtov (Stanford), Gisèle Sapiro (CESSP-EHESS), and Sadia Agsous (CESSP-EHESS). The meeting was also funded by the Centre de recherche sur les arts et langages (CRAL) and by Paris Sciences-Lettres (PSL).

In this issue of *Dibur* we share with the wider public the proceedings of the talks. The issue includes scholarly studies, academic and intellectual essays, and poetic and artistic contributions. It is an unusual issue for us: a combination of research on contemporary visions of the future as well as scholarly engagements with the future. The eclectic nature of the issue comes out of what we believe is an authentic meeting between different schools of thought. It was important for us not to ask the writers to “translate” their way of thinking to the format of the journal but rather to stick to the original presentations.

At the introductory remarks to the conference, Gisèle Sapiro argued that investigating contemporary visions of the future in literature is a way to examine how literature functions as “practical knowledge,” following French philosopher Jacques Bouveresse.² Commenting on the latter’s argument, another philosopher, Pascal Engel, suggests, however, that this practical knowledge should be understood in a robust fashion, as a propositional knowledge: not meaning that fiction offers descriptions that can be summarized as theses but that literature presents descriptions of a “know-how” that do not teach us how to do things but represent this knowledge through ostentation.³ Engel seeks in this way to support the validity of the notion of truth for fiction.

From dystopias to science fiction, literary fiction that tries to provide a picture of the future oscillates between prophecy and prediction. Despite the strong imaginative dimension that differentiates such fiction from the realist novel, the possible worlds it describes in fantastic or allegorical modes do obey some patterns of historical causality and/or scientific determinism and do refer to trends in the present.

While science fiction draws from scientific and technological knowledge, political dystopias such as George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) are a way to condemn political trends in the present, in the prophetic mode. There is now in France a renewal of this genre: the most famous example is Michel Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* (Submission),⁴ which imagines French society after the electoral victory of a Muslim party; one can also mention Chloé Delaume’s *Les sorcières de la République* (The witches of the Republic),⁵ which stages the trial of a woman prophet, la Sybille, after fifty years of amnesia due to the political decision to forget about the crimes of a feminist party that ruled France for a couple of years. Both novels contain many references to present French society and to real events such as the recent elections. Both build on the rise of a political party that reverses the present power relations in French society and achieves revenge against the dominant groups of today. In both cases, these parties deprive the once-dominant members of society of their freedom and exert symbolic (or even physical) violence. Despite their improbability, these novels express and give a form to and possible grounds for fears that are deeply anchored in French society, a typical property of prophetic messages according to Max Weber and Bourdieu.⁶ Nevertheless, both have an ironic or even

² Jacques Bouveresse, *La connaissance de l’écrivain: Sur la littérature, la vérité et la vie* [The consciousness of the writer: On literature, truth, and life] (Paris: Agone, 2008).

³ Pascal Engel, “Literature and Practical Knowledge,” *Argumenta* 2, no. 1 (2016): 55–76.

⁴ Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015).

⁵ Chloé Delaume, *Les sorcières de la République* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

⁶ Max Weber, *Économie et société* [Economy and society], vol. 2 (Paris: Plon, 1995), 190–211; Pierre Bourdieu, “Une interprétation de la théorie de la religion selon Max Weber” [An interpretation of the theory of religion according to Max Weber], *Archives européennes de sociologie* 12, no. 3 (1971): 3–21.

satiric dimension that makes them acceptable to cultivated readers as literature and not ideology. *Les sorcières de la République* is, however, more parodic than *Soumission*.

The present social, economic, and political situation in France and beyond and the possibilities it opens and closes for future generations inspired Marielle Macé's poetic and philosophical piece "Our Cabins: Youth, Precariousness, and Imagination." In examining the forms of organization of new politicized groups such as *Nuit debout* and the opponents of building the airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, Macé's starting point is that, for the new generations, the future "is summoned here, not as a great utopian figure, but rather as both a joyful and an unpeaceful form of *impatience*: the impatience to make and build things, to be together." Macé compares these alternative forms of life in cabins to the migrants' cabins at Calais, a refugee camp that was dismantled by the French government.

In his "Search for Tomorrow: An Epimodernist Future for Literature," Emmanuel Bouju also deals with forms of resistance to the present economic determinism, but focusing on literature. Analyzing European contemporary novels, he argues that "there is a renewed *diagonal force* of the contemporary," which came to replace postmodernism: he suggests calling it "epimodernism." The epimodernist values are superficiality, secrecy, energy, acceleration, credit, and consistency. These are six relations to the heritage of modernism that reorient postmodern critique. Focusing on the fifth value, "on-credit authority," he examines the shift from the "indiciary paradigm" (Carlo Ginzburg) to the "fiduciary paradigm," which is interested in issues of credit and debt, confidence and risk. Thus, as novels by Walter Siti, Rhéa Galanaki, and Christos Chryssopoulos illustrate, the Debt Narrative can be read as ways to envision any future out of hyperfinance, rating agencies, systematic calculation of behaviors—and their consequences for politics.

The politics of the future is at the center of Ella Elbaz's essay "The Future of Temple Mount: Imagined Possibilities in Contemporary Palestinian and Israeli Art." This essay analyzes Israeli and Palestinian visions of the future in the arts through a video artwork by the Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour and one by the Israeli artist Yael Bartana. The Temple Mount serves here as "a study case that assembles many of the most essential themes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Elbaz asks "whether these works exit their own cultural and political *zeitgeist* and therefore open up new possibilities or whether they are, rather, exemplary of our times, in which we find a growing tendency to depict the future as hopeless." The future and politics in Israel/Palestine are also the focus of Sadia Agsous's essay "Hegemonic (Israeli) Time and Minority (Palestinian) Space: Sayed Kashua's Chronotopic Approach in *Let It Be Morning*." Agsous offers a new reading of this novel. She argues that the novel anticipates the exclusion of the collective Palestinian identity from the hegemony of Hebrew. In Kashua's book, Agsous finds an allegory for a time-place storytelling that is set between the hegemonic Israeli time and minority Palestinian space.

Elana Gomel and Vered Karti Shemtov look at contemporary literature that refuses to write the future. They argue that contemporary narrative form(s) correspond to a current paralysis of the historical imagination. In part 1, Elana Gomel examines the sense of no ending in contemporary young-adult fantasy and science fiction, analyzing the specific ways in which this genre engages with the inability to write the future. In part 2, Vered Shemtov analyzes the focus on the present in Israeli literature and, more specifically, in the works of the author Etgar Keret. Looking at questions related to time through a study of the poetics of a writer is also the topic of Smadar Shiffman's essay "Others' Time, Time as the Other: Sami Berdugo and the Time of Immigration." This essay was not presented at the workshop but we found it relevant and important to the

conversation. Shiffman describes the concept of time in Berdugo's work as "floating with no apparent progress in any direction. Berdugo's time is not the linear time we are accustomed to think in." Shiffman "describes immigrants' time as the Other, the time that cannot be properly measured, the time that refuses advancement." This study creates an interesting dialogue with the arguments about "being stuck in the present" in Gomel's and Shemtov's essays.

In addition to the above studies of literary reactions to contemporary conflicts, immigration, or the housing shortage, we discussed contemporary visions that go beyond the framework of human temporalities, yet retain the political and ethical context of the questions. Anne Simon's essay "Other Temporalities of Life: Zoopoetics and Animal Perspectivism" calls into question the contemporary, which is characterized by the Sixth Extinction of species, and shows us how poetic language can reappropriate biblical promises of the noetic arc, today jeopardized by the objectification of the living, notably animals. She discusses the procedures that numerous writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries crafted to exit anthropocentrism and an Occidental vectorization of time and to provide us with an opportunity to imagine "relationships to reality and duration that are radically different from those of human beings." Our major challenge is to grasp this otherness and find a language for it. In her study "The Helmeted Beholder," Margaret Cohen, in following Maurice Blanchot's reflections on how the experience of disaster can be narrated, explores the changing image of the figure of the helmeted beholder from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1869–70) to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), arguing that in these movies a new image of spectatorship is created "in tandem with a new temporality of ruins, collapsing past, present, and future into catastrophic paralysis."

Looking on literature and visual arts of the post–Second World War era, in "Beyond Metaphysics: *B'Tselem* / In the Image—on Literature and the Arts in Our (Post)Secular Age," Amir Eshel reflects on what he describes as a move away from metaphysical ideas about politics and ethics. Post-1945 works, according to Eshel, provide us with ample examples of attempts to "transform the ancient biblical metaphor of humankind as created 'in the image' of God into a viable framework for discussing and debating how to negotiate our various ideas regarding a better future."

At our workshop, the final screening of the film *Les impatientes* (The impatient ones) by Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quirós, a sort of work in progress that attempts to put into image and rhythm "a crisis of time" along with the different responses that appear the world over, tied together all the political paths introduced by other contributions. For this issue of *Dibur*, we have asked the two artists to present their book, *Les potentiels du temps* (The potentials of time), cowritten with Camille de Toledo and published in 2016. Drawing inspiration from the "historical regime" elaborated by François Hartog, the authors explore their interest in the relationship between future and potential and the ways by which artistic fictions allow us to invent what may be and not to suffer the future as a predetermined event. To do this, it is necessary to exit the triangle of past/present/future and envisage the plurality of the "now" as constitutive of acts of speech, projections, reconfigured memories, collective desires, diversified bodies, and multiple possibilities. The authors acknowledge the paralyzing "astonishment" that has been produced by representations of a planet harmed by humans to the point of collapsing into itself and swallowing up the entirety of the living. There is no planet B. They are inspired by artistic works and performances that put into practice, both in fiction and in reality, new ways of confronting the

present and envisaging political action. A new ontology is put into place in which the event is not already written but can be deflected, corrected, and reinvented thanks to the superposition of the actual and the potential. A