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# The “Future Sense” and the Future of the Study of Culture

## 1 Introduction: The Future Unravelling the Present

The title of this collection of essays might, at first glance, sound rather speculative. How are we to know what future awaits the study of culture? After all, the future seems to be, by modern definition, that which cannot be known and is not accessible in the present, following such diverse scholars as Frank Knight, Reinhart Koselleck, or Niklas Luhmann. What is more, this fundamental ‘uncertainty’ regarding the future may be celebrated as indicating the potentially open horizon of contemporary societies – an openness that has to be defended against attempts to foreclose and to predefine it, as seems to be happening in such diverse arenas of permanent crisis as accelerating global climate change, the mushrooming of security apparatuses, or out-of-bounds financial speculation. Should the study of culture not join the struggle for openness, and against predefinition?

However, one might interpret the title of this collection also in a grammatically different sense, such that the study of culture might ‘have’ an own mode of future, or futurity. A brief look at language, still one of the most important and paradigmatic areas of research in the study of culture, already shows that different languages have different modalities of referencing the future. For instance, in English we can differentiate between something that ‘will’ happen, something that ‘will have’ happened, and something that is imminent, something that ‘is going to’ happen. Seen from this angle, ‘the future of the study of culture’ might refer less to a prediction or anticipation, and instead might carve out a research field in its own right. Its question is: How are we to understand things and events with an index of futurity, and what might differentiations in that understanding be?

Recently, two prominent scholars in the study of culture have been attempting to formulate an understanding of futurity that critically reflects on concepts of the future that derive future openness from its supposed unknowability and uncertainty. Literary studies scholar Leslie A. Adelson and cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai have both argued that the future might be understood as a function of the present – not in the sense that the future depends on and follows from present events and decisions, but in the sense that it informs, or may inform, the present precisely inasmuch as the present seems to be caught in a violent and hopeless synchronicity. This “future sense,” as Adelson calls it (2017, 29), is thus invoked in a bid to wrest the present away from its seemingly total interlocking in

a horizon of, in Theodor W. Adorno’s terms, “permanent catastrophe” (Adelson 2017, 78). For Adelson, the recent work of Alexander Kluge provides a vista for identifying a futurity in present conditions that is bound to unravel these conditions as they unfold in catastrophe, where “world-making [...] is constantly undone” (Adelson 2017, 5). For Appadurai, it is the solidarity practices of marginalized social groups all over the world that form globe-girdling alliances whose cooperative ethos is informed by experiences that become salient in the present, but transgress and break open its violent synchronicity and fatedness for disaster. Insisting on a mode of futurity that becomes activated in the present but denies its synchronicity, both Appadurai (2013, 1) and Adelson (2017, 64) speak of the future as a “fact,” or more precisely, of a “cultural” and a “social fact,” respectively.

In this article, I will discuss these suggestions of a ‘future sense’ that take issue with notions of futurity that reduce the future’s openness to its intangibility in the present. As one shared concern in both suggestions is social cooperation, I will then contextualize them with a precursor in the political history of the twentieth century, namely, ‘prefigurative politics’ at whose core, I suspect, one can find a similar concern with the problem that a future that is radically shut off from the present loses its transformative impulse for present cooperation. Prefigurative politics has been experimented with since the 1960s, when it emerged out of frustration both with the violent synchronicity of instrumental mainstream politics and with instrumentalist understandings of revolutionary action. Today, prefigurative politics is related back to particular strands of anarchist thought (see Day 2005, 91–128; see also Graeber 2013, 89, 186–195 *et passim*) that sought to carve out social and political spaces within the existing society that would envision future modes of cooperation without waiting for a revolution to happen. Without claiming the existence of a genealogy between Adelson’s and Appadurai’s understanding of futurity with prefigurative politics or anarchist thought, I will concentrate on shared contextual features that, to my mind, interrelate these approaches: an urge to decipher the future as impacting the present; a characterization of that present that insists on its own normality while being caught in functional imperatives that constantly engender disaster and steer toward greater disaster; and a focus on a field of social cooperation that emerges against the odds.

In the last section, I will conclude on some points that I regard as significant for this volume’s dedication, specifically on the question of what the ‘future sense’ might harbor for the future of the study of culture. Emerging at different sites and settings, it seems that the ‘future sense’ is historically circumscribed by a double dismay at modernity’s catastrophism and its tendency to turn the future into a mere externality of the present. In this context, the question arises what ‘utopia’ can mean for a present that learns to adapt its sensorium to futurity.

## 2 Futurity in Reading and Interrelating

Adelson's current book on Alexander Kluge's "cosmic miniatures" (Adelson 2017, 1) can be read as the continuation of an interest in the literary articulation of discontinuities. In an earlier phase of her work, Adelson analyzed Turkish-German literature with a view to how this literary production in the German language might be understood not as a mingling of different 'cultures' – that of the 'classical' German canon and that of the Turkish 'origin' of writers such as Zafer Şenocak and Feridun Zaimoğlu – but as a site of literary representations whose gist cannot be reduced to a cultural genealogy (see Adelson 2005). Her manifesto "Against Between" (Adelson 2001) challenged the view that these writers and their works cover a space 'between' cultures, instead arguing that this production has to be understood as *German* literature on its way of shedding off not only classical canonical references but the very idea of cultural and literary tradition in terms of continuity. This approach had a methodological side as well. Adelson's analyses do not so much refer to the plot level or the use of metaphors and tropes, which all too easily lend themselves for the 'representation' of 'cultures,' but rather to the textual creation of polyvalent narrative positionalities and spatial markers that shuttle opaquely between geographical referentiality and spatialized phantasm. These narrative devices make culturalist and genealogical interpretations of those texts more and more implausible. Developing this research strategy further, Adelson compared Turkish-German literature with writings of Alexander Kluge. In "Experiment Mars" (Adelson 2008), she argues that, in these writers, the invocation of memories of the past as informing the present gives way to the invocation of the future. These analyses do not only diagnose particular uses of the *referential* category of future in literary writing. More importantly, they converge on a shared insistence on making the future *perceptible* in narration, thus opening a vista on what Adelson terms the "protean abstraction" of futurity.<sup>1</sup>

In *Cosmic Miniatures and the Future Sense*, Adelson focuses on Alexander Kluge against the background of the engagement of his writings with critical theory. While the memory boom in the study of culture has led many scholars to depict the main contributions of Walter Benjamin or Theodor W. Adorno in their invoking the past as a potential horizon for thinking redemption amidst a ruinous world, Adelson argues that another reading is possible, and more accurate, that dissects the potentially enabling and emancipating presence of a sense of the future in the catastrophic present. Kluge's work, according to

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<sup>1</sup> See Adelson 2013, 215. See also the literary analyses in the special issue of *The Germanic Review* to which this text by Adelson is the introduction.

Adelson, vouches for such reading and develops it further; his current miniature writing represents a critical-interpretative elaboration on critical theory, which, as Adorno’s *Minima moralia* demonstrates, at significant points took the form of the miniature itself. Again, the main methodological device in the reconstruction of this argument is a formal-narratological one, as Adelson is interested in the production of complications concerning the narrative positionality that create “experiential portals in time” (Adelson 2017, 44, 69, 127) for the future to enter the present.

Here I can refer only to a few examples of Adelson’s narratological readings. Analyzing Adorno’s miniature “Heliotrope” in a preparatory step in laying out the notion of ‘future sense’ (Adelson 2017, 95–110), Adelson demonstrates that the narrator in this miniature shifts from a voice that would be possible to identify with the little boy anticipating a house guest as a person who for him represents a “radiant other life” (Adelson 2017, 108), to a voice that actualizes that radiant future not as a possibility but as a certainty, speaking, as it were, from the position of the *fulfilled* dreams and hopes of the boy. The mode of futurity crystallizing around this shifting narratorial voice is thus not one of anticipation and hope under the proviso of uncertainty, but one that installs that future as a referential certainty in the present. The point of Adelson’s interpretation of narrative futurity thus relates both to “longing” (Adelson 2017, 107), as a vision of a radiant future life represented by the house guest, and to a “sense,” that is, an imaginary and sensual capacity – “a long-distance sense organ of temporal perception” (Adelson 2017, 200) – that is conveyed in the practice of reading as it follows the shifts and turns in narrative perspective. Through these turns, the reference object of that longing acquires a “utopian dimension” (Adelson 2017, 106) that has a locale in the present. The ‘future sense’ is a mode of perception “that becomes, however incrementally, phenomenologically accessible to social experience through reading” (Adelson 2017, 196).

Thereby, it has to be borne in mind that the ‘future sense’ manifests itself against the background of experiences of macro-violence in the twentieth century that instill a sense of ‘permanent catastrophe,’ and are bound to leave hope only in the quality as “counterfactual hope” (Adelson 2017, 218). Comparing Adorno’s miniatures with those of Kluge, Adelson finds that, in Adorno, the ‘future sense’ as conveyed in the narrative structure of “Heliotrope” still bears the mark of anticipation, even if one that somehow stubbornly and against the odds of a crushed world embraces certainty. In contrast to this, according to Adelson, Kluge’s ‘future sense’ is “more robust” (Adelson 2017, 77), as it assembles the future on par with the present, thus challenging the latter’s catastrophic reality directly. Her reading of one of Kluge’s miniatures on Fritz Bauer, the legal and political architect of the 1960s Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt, shows how this is achieved: The miniature

posits a first-person narrator witnessing Bauer's funeral and at the same time seeing the dead Bauer addressing inmates at a prison as 'comrades' (an episode verified in Bauer's biography). For Adelson, this represents "a perlocutionary speech act in the sense that Bauer is not addressing an existing collective but a future collective he would like to call into being" (Adelson 2017, 244–245). Moreover, all collectives alluded to in the text are almost never circumscribed through a first-person plural pronoun but through its conspicuous absence: "The historical voices of Kluge's conjunctive cultivation of differential temporalities in narrative perspective are not simply plural, collective, or even collaborative, but cooperative instead" (Adelson 2017, 245). Adelson's interpretation thus stipulates the 'future sense' as a mode of building collectivity not through the invocation of a 'we' that always threatens with essentialization, but through envisioning a cooperation between different human beings that is vouched for in the narrative experience enabled by the text's formal narrative structure. That structure becomes the point of entry for a modality of hope that, while unavoidably being 'counterfactual' in the face of the mass atrocities of the twentieth century, is nevertheless a "real counterfactual force" (Adelson 2017, 246).

While Leslie A. Adelson reconstructs political sociality, as based on future cooperation that is operative in the form of narrative address already in the present, through the practice of narratological reading, Arjun Appadurai grounds his understanding of the future as a "cultural fact" (2013, 1) on his fieldwork among marginalized, oppressed, and exploited groups in Mumbai. According to his analysis, the forms of sociality and cooperation found among the members of these groups can be regarded a counter-project to contemporary capitalism, which he characterizes, with Naomi Klein, as "disaster capitalism" (Appadurai 2013, 295–296). The reference to futurity is established by Appadurai, in a way that is comparable to Adelson's pronouncement of the 'future sense' as an antidote to 'permanent catastrophe,' through a juxtaposition with the temporal colonization of the present and the future through out-of-bounds financial markets. The diagnosis that financial capitalism imposes its extractive and exploitative imperatives on societies through a particular commodification of the anticipated future refers back to Klein's notion of "disaster capitalism," as evident from financial instruments that bet on the probability of future natural and political disasters to happen; but it has also been observed by other scholars (see Lee and LiPuma 2002, 203–207). As financial capitalism draws out a certain scenario of the future as punctuated by more or less probable and more or less profitable catastrophes, Appadurai finds in the mundane practices of subaltern populations and in their efforts to create networks of solidarity a different register of futurity, that would be circumscribed by concepts like 'hope' or 'ethics of possibility.' This mode of futurity can be regarded a 'cultural fact' inasmuch as it emerges from everyday

capacities and at the same time creates another capacity, which Appadurai terms the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013, 179).

Here, I will take a closer look at Appadurai’s (2013, 197) interpretation of “cosmopolitanism from below” on the side of the urban poor that, according to this analysis, is both the result of forced adaptive strategies to survive and a platform from which to embark on cooperation in the direction of emancipation. In this analysis, the author refers in particular to female sex workers in Mumbai who were urged to acquire language competencies demanded by their interactions with their male clients, who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in India (Appadurai 2013, 206–208). Their multilingual and multicultural proficiency has thus formed not by dint of an intellectual decision in the horizon of a philanthropic ethics, but as the consequence of highly exploitative and commodified social relationships. Appadurai writes: “Such cosmopolitanism is hard won, unsupported as it is by the apparatus of literacy and cultural privilege or by the practices of leisure and self-cultivation” (Appadurai 2013, 208). Yet at the same time, as a side effect this has led women to greater ability and social resourcefulness with respect to the forging of social links not preordained by exploitation, as they use their communicative proficiencies to transform their neighborhoods<sup>2</sup> and to link up with other marginalized groups and communities in India and elsewhere.

This is an example of how Appadurai conceptualizes cosmopolitanism as having, despite its highly problematic genesis, the potential to open up horizons of change, which he terms the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013, 179). The capacity to aspire can be regarded as a “navigational capacity” (Appadurai 2013, 188) that – where it is situated within social structures, as it is an unevenly distributed resource – encourages, and rests on, cooperation with others, and hence is more than the sheer aspiration toward individual social upward mobility. Rather, the capacity to aspire forms connections and enables cooperation in the present by dint of a future as part of a web of sociality whose present saliency resides in that very cooperation.

To conclude this section, I want to focus on conceptual commonalities between the two ways that the future as a ‘fact’ is introduced by the two bodies of scholarly work discussed here. The concept of the future as a social or cultural fact is invoked in a refusal of a catastrophic present, which threatens to prolong itself into the future. Futurity is thus outspokenly anti-utopian, as it claims its

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘neighborhood’ has been used by Appadurai 1996, 181–183, in terminological function in order to characterize a given form of social organizations that forms in interaction with its context (for instance, its natural environment).

*topos* in the present; we might say that it is only through the present that futurity can actually turn into a future that would be different from a mere prolongation of the disastrous present. This conceptualization thus necessarily entails a radical deconstruction of the modernist conception of the future as principally ‘open,’ as that future is preordained by the self-reproductive proneness to disaster of the present. That modernist conception of the future as that which is open and thus cannot be known gives way to a much darker vision of the future as that which *will* happen in an undeniably catastrophic way if the present continues as it does. In Adelson, this gloomy picture of the future is rendered in critical-theoretical terms such as ‘counterfactual hope’ and ‘permanent catastrophe,’ developed in the wake of the Holocaust as a macro-crime that put an end to any indolent trust in the future as necessarily better than the present. In Appadurai, we find a comparable diagnosis that focuses on financial capitalism’s push to commodify the future, a commodification that rides on a drive toward inescapable, if unpredictable and thus potentially profitable, catastrophe.

In the horizon of these circumstances, the notion of the future as a ‘fact’ suggests an activation of futurity *beyond* ‘mere’ hope, that is, of a future that has a greater robustness than an expectation or an anticipation as it plays itself out already in the present – as a “bridge in time to the utopian dimension of a ‘future without life’s miseries,’ as Adorno put it” (Adelson 2017, 245). While the notion that hope cannot be but counterfactual remains salient as a necessary reminder of the seemingly insurmountable misery of the present ‘damaged life,’ both the ‘future sense’ and the ‘capacity to aspire’ refer to practices – practices of reading and practices of interrelating – that challenge the threatening facticity of a *bad* future by the facticity of a present futurity that is capable of tearing the present out of its violent and catastrophic synchronism.

Finally, we find in both bodies of work a focus on cooperation as a site where futurity can manifest as an imagination-orienting practice. The stunning improbability of this invocation of cooperation becomes graspable if one contemplates the circumstance that modernity has itself compromised the notion of cooperation to ethical incomprehensibility. Adelson (2017, 239) alludes in her work to the fact that the Holocaust was brought about by the expansion of the principles of the industrial and bureaucratic division of labor into the organization of the extermination of the Jewish population. Appadurai (2013, 244–245) builds his critique of present-day capitalism on insights that emphasize the perversion of the means-ends relationship in finance, as when instruments designed to insure against financial risks become the object of financial bets, which comes along with a reduction of any understanding of cooperation to ‘corporate ethics.’ And yet, cooperation figures in both theorists as a futurist challenge to these advanced stages of decline of modernist and capitalist modes of reproduction. For Adelson,

envisioning cooperation posits an alternative to the invocation of a collective identity (Adelson 2017, 244–246), which historically served as an ideological antidote to radical functional differentiation and division of labor. For Appadurai, cooperation is the unforeseen consequence of a radical commodification and exploitation of human beings who, in order to make their living, must adapt to their circumstances and thereby acquire the capacity to transform these circumstances. This kind of cooperation, however socially marginal or narratologically presuppositional, signifies not so much an alternative future but an alternative present: It does not anticipate future cooperation, but instills cooperation in the present so as to decouple the present from its functional entanglement with an imminent catastrophic future that prolongs the present.

To envisage the future as a social or cultural ‘fact,’ thus, has implications first and foremost for the way that the relationship between present and future is conceptualized. This conceptualization is necessarily historical inasmuch it gains its momentum from the contemporary diagnosis of a present that threatens to ‘roll over’ into the future. The ‘fact’ of the future, by way of contrast, intervenes into the synchronist functionality of the future for the present’s cataclysms. In the next section, I will turn to what I believe is a similar conceptualization of futurity as informing the present that might help to even better understand the intervening effect of futurity in the present so as to break open the hold of the present on the future, and the role that cooperation might play in this.

### 3 Prefigurative Politics

The term ‘prefigurative politics’ is currently used in social movements that form against the societal, political, economic, and environmental consequences of a contemporary drive in capitalism that is often termed ‘neoliberal.’ In the wake of Michel Foucault’s (2008) studies on governmentality, which introduced the term ‘neoliberal’ in order to characterize a post-classical discursive order of capitalism, scholars have distinguished neoliberalism from classical nineteenth-century industrial capitalism along the following features. Rather than being a form of deregulated and market-centered *economic* activity that has historically been characterized as ‘laissez-faire,’ neoliberalism envisions a *societal* order that aims at installing competitive markets, which are held to be the superior mechanism of social coordination, as the core principle of the whole social order (Harvey 2005; Gertenbach 2007). The point is thus not only to ‘deregulate’ markets from all norms and regulations alien to the principle of competition, but to *create* and *expand* competitive markets and legal institutions to safeguard the principle of



competition in them. Unlike Foucault, who referred mainly to German postwar ordoliberalism as the site where neoliberalism became articulated, newer studies depict the takeoff of neoliberalism in the expansion and the deepening of the financial system after the end of the Bretton Woods agreement. Recent social movements like Occupy Wall Street, which oppose the consequences of this globalizing mode of societal rearrangement, address the complicity of state institutions in the setup, maintenance, and deepening of neoliberalism. ‘Prefigurative politics,’ for them, heralds a practice of the political that creates a maximum distance between those institutions and the organization of protest and resistance against them: the point is not to buy into the legitimacy of state institutions through, for instance, addressing them with demands that would provide legitimacy to those institutions’ claims to ‘represent’ the political forces of society (Graeber 2013, 87–99). In this respect, prefigurative politics breaks with the reduction of the political to ‘representation’ in the sense of representative democracy (Sitrin and Azzelini 2014). The political system is denied the function of being a point of crystallization for political action and empowerment. Therefore, prefigurative politics also takes issue with the politics of recognition as it implies that demands made by social forces be ‘recognized’ by the political system, thus again installing that system as the major hinge of the political (see Day 2005, 66–90; Nail 2013).

While prefigurative politics is invoked in a bid to articulate alternative political projects that bypass the political system as an addressee, it also has a particular index of futurity. The term was first used in order to describe practices of radical political dissent in the historical context of the civil rights movements in the US, and more precisely, of the protests of student and staff at campuses such as Berkeley in the 1960s. According to Wini Breines’s (1989) historical reconstruction, what was particular about these protests were the ways that alternative political goals and agendas were articulated in tandem with community-building practices that envisioned modes of sociality directly corresponding to the political aims of those groups and networks. These practices were ‘prefigurative’ in the sense that they heralded modes of social encounter that would also characterize an alternative social and political commons of the future (see Day 2005, 19–45).

The first focus of those protests’ critiques was, thus, an instrumental understanding of the political that relied on a distinction between political means and political ends. Prefigurative politics, in contrast, targeted a correspondence and non-instrumental coherence between political means and ends. This privileged community-building over the formation of political organizations, as the latter – like many communist-leaning student organizations – were often seen as embodying and prolonging the dictate of political instrumentalism even if their aims were to overthrow the present political system (Breines 1989, 18–66). In this respect, prefigurative politics was envisaged as a “questioning of instrumental rationality”

(Breines 1989, 50). Community-building, in contrast, was embraced as a political strategy that built possible future communal structures into present ones, thereby redeeming the political viability of the former while probing and developing alternative ways of decision-making in the latter. Crucially, this establishment of a continuity between present community and future commune challenged the main instrument of democratic decision-making, which is the majority vote, as it appeared to be itself complicit in the instrumentalist narrowing of the political in established democratic political systems, relying on a distinction between those represented and those representing them (see Poletta 2002; Nail 2013). Up to the present day, a critique of the majority vote, as the key embodiment of representative politics, is therefore at the heart of prefigurative politics, which keeps experimenting with different practices of consensus-based decision making (see Sitrin 2006; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; Graeber 2013, 196–207, 210–227).

Critiques have been launched against prefigurative politics as a mode of practicing the political that is highly vulnerable to irritations (see Breines 1989, 48–49). Compared to political organizations with a strict means-ends instrumentalism, prefigurative politics might seem to be somewhat ineffective and always threatened by a relapse into communal romanticism (see Breines 1989, 67–95). Its principle of consensus-based decision-making has been confronted with critiques since antiquity, as Egon Flaig, a political anthropologist focusing on collective decision rules, has demonstrated (Flaig 2013). However, the instrumental success of prefigurative politics is not the concern of this article, as neither Adelson’s “future sense” nor Appadurai’s “future as a cultural fact” is concerned with how these two modes of futurity ‘deliver.’ Instead, prefigurative politics, I would argue, is another instantiation of a ‘future sense,’ this time decidedly applied to rearticulating notions of the political as such. At the same time, it shares with Adelson’s and Appadurai’s suggestions a concern with a present that is seen as catastrophic, and with a future that threatens to be reduced to a mere continuation, and ultimately verification, of the present’s proneness to catastrophe. In other words, prefigurative politics is historically circumscribed and motivated by a present that seems to have always already captured the future within an ideological horizon of a future that is allegedly unknown, unknowable, and hence irrelevant for the present.

Richard Day (2005, 91–128) has genealogically connected prefigurative politics with off-mainstream traditions of anarchist political thought. His conceptual concern is the rejection of the critique that anarchism is utopian, which was put forth often by Marxist thinkers. Focusing on the works of Gustav Landauer, Day dissects a peculiar motif in anarchist thought to conceptualize revolutionary political agency without recourse to a revolutionary political collectivity – typically, class – and to the instrumental character that present political action must maintain to such future collectivity. Instead, Day argues, Landauer proposed the concept

of ‘structural renewal’ that anticipated some key components of the later prefigurative politics. Its main idea was that, in order to transform the present capitalist and oppressive system, one has to start out with collaborative potentials already partially established in everyday interactions and affinities. ‘Structural renewal’ therefore did not have to wait for the advent of a revolutionary subject, constructed by the instrumental action of political organizations, but could proceed from these mundane alternatives to an oppressive system in order to corrode it from within. The temporality articulated in the concept of ‘structural renewal’ anticipated that of ‘prefigurative politics’ in the sense that existing communal structures were deemed to bear the kernel of an imminent end of the oppressive societal system, and at the same time foreshadowed such communal structures on a much larger scale.

## 4 Conclusion: What the ‘Future Sense’ Might Harbor for the Future of the Study of Culture

If the notion of “future sense” as proposed by Adelson has been chosen to start and to end this article, it is because that notion is fundamental for the issues raised here. For the transdisciplinary field of the study of culture, it seems to me that Adelson’s conception of the “future sense” is both cautious and foundational at the same time. It is cautious because it circumscribes the future sense not as heralding any radically new political or societal project (Adelson 2017, 62), but rather as an entry point – a “portal,” as Adelson says – for reconsidering the ways that present and future may relate to each other. As a new way of perception that can be added to our senses, it requires “cultivation” (Adelson 2017, 196, 246) through the practice of “reading” (Adelson 2017, 196) that does not necessarily re-constellate fields of social practice, but first of all the ways that we relate to the world as one that is always already interpreted (see Weber 1904). Yet the concept of the ‘future sense’ is foundational too, referring to the capacity of localizing the future in the present, with the effect that the future turns from a utopian into a ‘topian’ point of reference, that is, to something “that is not consistently deferred” (Adelson 2017, 78), but *there* to be perceived.

The contributions discussed in this article do not share all aspects with respect to how they attempt to recalibrate understandings of how future and present relate to one another. However, for the question organizing the present volume – what are the futures of the study of culture? – they together bear important inspirations as well as questions.

First, they urge us to rethink the inherited modernist juxtaposition of the ‘present future’ and ‘future present,’ in Niklas Luhmann’s terms (Luhmann 1976;

see also Luhmann 1998). The gist of Luhmann’s distinction is that the future can be present only ever as an expectation formed in and by the present, which has conceptually nothing to do with how the present will present itself at any point in the future. In other words, the future ‘as such’ is an externality of the present. This distinction writes forth a tradition to conceive of modernity as an episteme and a phenomenology that radically cuts the bond between ‘experience’ and ‘expectation,’ as in Reinhart Koselleck’s distinction between ‘*Erfahrungsraum*’ and ‘*Erwartungshorizont*’ (Koselleck 2004; see also Adelson 2017, 126). While both experiences and expectations undoubtedly inform present social action, expectations are often associated with a quality of ‘fictitiousness’ regarding their reference objects, as those objects are held to belong to the future as being ‘open’ or ‘contingent.’<sup>3</sup> Yet, modernity’s conceptual decoupling of the present from the ‘open’ or ‘contingent’ future might, only seemingly paradoxically, be complicit in ‘rolling over’ the present’s tendencies into the future, because many present problematic or even catastrophic social, political, and economic tendencies operate on such notions as future contingency. This celebration of contingency can be most clearly seen in financial market practices, whose condition of possibility is the claim that the future is open and therefore a projection screen for expectations, manifested as bets.

Second, we need to account for the fact that the “future sense” is a “sense organ” (in Adelson’s terms) whose “cultivation” is historically embedded and circumscribed. This historical circumscription, as can be seen from the above discussion, is informed by a sense of present, ongoing, and imminent catastrophe as a paradigmatic experience since the twentieth century at least. Adelson’s reflections take up the critical theoretical thread to contemplate modernity as a “permanent catastrophe.” Appadurai posits the “future as a cultural fact” against disaster capitalism and systematic exploitation on a mass scale. The radically democratic project of ‘prefigurative politics’ seems to be returned to whenever the suspicion arises that the institutions of representative democracy might either not be able to cope with ongoing disaster or, worse, be complicit with it.

Third, these studies invite scholars of culture to turn their attention to social cooperation and collective decision-making as phenomena that might have a presence apart from modernity’s ‘division of labor’ and apart from invocations of collective identity. In other words, conceptualizing cooperation must resist the temptation of sociological functionalism as well as that of culturalist identitarianism. Instead, cooperation might be envisioned as a lateral – or, in an

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, see Beckert 2013 who diagnoses “fictional expectations” as core components of financial capitalism.

activist idiom, “horizontal” (Sitrin 2006; Nail 2013) – activity that actualizes forms of address in the present that not only anticipate their broadening in the future but make the potentiality of such broadening the basis of their present experiencing.

Fourth, the following question arises: What becomes of utopia when an alternative, more ‘topian’ sense of futurity is in the present’s reach? Is the revolutionary political inclination of utopia lost for the ‘future sense’? While all the contributions discussed in this article insist on a ‘future sense’ that rejects the severing of present from future that, in the modernist account, is often associated with the genre of utopia, it might still be possible to engage, as Adelson (2017, 126) argues that Kluge does, in an approximation of utopia as a “paradigm for imagining social perfection” whose futurity is not an index of inaccessibility but a “social fact” (Adelson 2017, 87) that structures the present. ‘Utopia’ might be revisited as a potential conceptual kernel of a future temporality whose significance resides in its quality of being, as Adelson defines the ‘future sense,’ “an anti-realist and non-empirical but nonetheless real dimensional phenomenon in time” (Adelson 2017, 29). The conceptual labor that such revisiting requires might start with a deconstruction of an array of understandings that have been instrumental in rejecting utopia as a modality of social and political perception. This concerns not only the notion of the ‘empirical’ but also its permutations like probability and risk that, as Appadurai reminds us, foster a belief in the empirical precisely as they play with, and bet on, the possibility of its unreality. It also concerns notions of political ‘effectiveness’ that dismiss the significance as social and cultural facts of however fleeting and ephemeral experiments with prefigurative politics, at the double cost of taking political instrumentalism for granted without interrogating the latter’s ‘effectiveness.’ For the study of culture, the ‘future sense’ might thus be a call not only to robustly withstand the pressure to collapse the real into the empirical, but also to dissect the permutations of the empirical as they reach out into the unreal.

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