Outdated Enchantments of Progress?

Towards Global Techno Futures

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Abstract

Technology with its allure to extend, transform or even overcome the human, opens the gate to transcendental fictions and fantasies that paint vast futures. While Western and heroic readings proclaim an understanding of technology as social transformation, this article explores future imaginaries from different historical and geographical contexts. The paper offers a critical hermeneutical framework for various cultural case studies that unfold in their response to the modernist legacies of progress, colonialism and consumerism. It aims to decenter the discussion on socio-technical futures and to ask for the role popular culture, aesthetics and media play in their (re)production. Beyond hopeful imaginaries, the article points to perspectives from places around the world that mediate between responses of denial or promotion, opposition or attraction, and resistance or adoption to techno-solutionist progress narratives. These perspectives show that the re-politicization of the present as a gateway to the future does not permit technology to be imbued with an aura of neutrality, innocence and purity, but instead embeds it in the messy questions of power and contested meaning-making.

Keywords

modernity, techno futures, enchantment, popular culture, techno-solutionism

Is it possible to think about the future outside of the dominant lenses of technology – a future that is not mediated through gadget tech environments, human-machine fusions, autonomously flying vehicles, or flashy interfaces conflating the virtual and the analogue? Arguably, technology colonizes our visions of the future. It not only has the pretense of novelty and social transformation but also sets the omnipresent contemporary stage on which the human spectacle of production, human interaction, or mobility unfolds. Humans have always been imbricated with technologies, to the extent that their use of tools and technologies might be understood as a defining feature of being human. But the meanings, the hopes and fears projected on it have been historically and geographically distinct.

Western and heroic readings, reaching from the Enlightenment to Marxist / historical materialist understandings of history, regard technology not as a mere

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tool for functionality, but as a means to engage and intervene with the world, to simplify and speed up tedious processes, enable access to resources, novel goods, and services. But in this tradition, too, technology has always been a means of social transformation: a tool with the power to liberate the human being, civilize the seemingly uncivilized, 'liberate' the proletariat or dominate enemies and nations with military clout. This dominant modernist understanding hails technology as a means to achieve formerly unattainable goals, laying the path to a civilisatory telos of progress, pushing human history towards growth and (societal) wealth. This version of history has, in its very own reading, overcome religious beliefs, superstition and transcendental cosmologies which had long before dictated individual fates, apocalypses or redemptions. The modern mind, so the heroic Western story unfolds, now relies on the creeds of growth, efficiency and technological solutions to find its hopes, comfort – and liberation. In this world, essentially, these are no creeds at all, but self-evident truths, rationally derived by laws and principles, empirically measured.

Shifting the focus from technical possibilities to their social impact, this Western reading of technology, however, reveals that the societal status of science and technology is not innocent but culturally loaded and critically contested. As Jean-François Lyotard famously argued, the status of scientific knowledge and technology in society cannot speak for itself (1984). To create meaning rather than only output, technology needs narratives to justify itself as valid, legitimate, needed, and strived for. Hence, for Lyotard, science and technology are unable to transcend their particular mode of discourse in order to claim anything beyond their own sphere of competence and the rules by which their discursive game is played. As Lyotard writes on the status of scientific knowledge and technology in contemporary society: "scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all" (29). From this constructivist perspective, technology's status in society is thus inseparably tied to narration: epics and achievements, hopes and fears provoked through its bold scientific claims and fantasies. Materiality and functionality in technology may create outputs like automation, speed or efficiency, but the very value of this output is not naturally given or self-evidently understood. It is constructed, maintained and cherished, through imperatives of economic models circulating in schools and universities, top-down tech-policy blueprints being discussed in media, or an advertisement culture that creates needs and voids of consumption that ask to be (ful)filled.

Opening the Hermeneutical Gate Towards Tech Futures

With this hermeneutical opening towards discourse, technology can also be read as a cultural mirror, reflecting how societies understand themselves, what they hope for or what they struggle with. Technology with its allure to extend, transform or even overcome the human, opens the gate to transcendental fictions and fantasies that describe futures and resemble myths, as much as they point to collective memories and the heritage of identities in the past. Moreover, to understand technology discourses as historically, socially and culturally constructed, also facilitates a broader reflection of the underlying power structures that construct and maintain their inevitability.

With this special issue, we want to tap into this rich reservoir of global meanings circulating around technological futures. This hermeneutical perspective looks at narratives and cultural meanings like symbols, visuals, ideals or fantasies that embed prototypes, policies, frameworks, or infrastructures in a variety of international contexts. They mediate technology, but not only as channels to the world or as mere means of communication. These embeddings create meaning in themselves and therefore also guide actions, practices and policies. They represent as much as they motivate practices anchored in symbolic inscriptions, emotional registers, and normative expectations (Austin 1975; Foucault 1975; Jacobsen/Lindskov/Monsees 2019). In short, culture actively shapes the very technological objects it claims to describe, just as technological objects shape culture and behavior through affordances. Meaning and materiality are not separated but co-produce each other.

Our primary aim of this special issue is to decenter the discussion on sociotechnical futures and the role of popular culture, aesthetics and media in their (re)production. This motivation also stems from an experience of crisis, seeing how the Western technological mind has unleashed an insatiable modernist craving that proves unsustainable for both this planet and the creatures inhabiting it. In affluent Western countries, official policies and cultural engagements with techno-futures are now predominantly driven by a small group of powerful CEOs and libertarian techno-oligarchs who, despite reinforcing critical and dystopian counter-discourses, propound celebratory views of technological progress, motivated by their desire to dominate markets and attract venture capital (Belsunces/Bareis 2025). These futures emerge as increasingly hegemonic, as governments tend to share these celebratory views to further their own interests of economic and national competitiveness. Nationalist, elitist, and often ethnocentric imaginaries and narratives blur the line between political, economic, and popcultural realms and become obstacles to a nuanced and inclusive discourse on the risks and benefits of future technologies. What is worse, the political surrender to capitalist and competitive growth-lock-ins disregards or even erases a vast imaginary zone of alternative futures.

In the following section we sketch the main diagnosis of this modernist crisis and circumscribe our conclusion that is, in our point of view, the only way forward: Opening a frank transnational and cultural dialogue on desirable future societies, reflecting on the role technology shall play in them – instead of taking the dogma of global rivalry and unchecked market imperatives as given and natural.

This call to globality and collectivity also stems from the fact that, while the global future is contested, locally experienced, and geopolitically seemingly more scattered than ever, it is at the same time also very univocal. Univocal in the sense that the future speaks with the prospect of commonly experienced crises. The impacts of global warming, rising sea levels and mass extinction, will, although different in scale and impact for any region and class, become a challenge for all humans living on this planet. Financial capitalism has transcended all political and ideological differences across regimes around the globe and still dominates with its imperatives of growth, debt austerity and techno-solutionism. In its fundamentally anti-human pursuit, it produces blatant inequalities, exploitation, and violence around the world. These challenges are global and so must be the transcultural conversation to tackle them.

Civilisatory Tech-Enchantment and its Perils

The modernist understanding of technology predominantly focuses on its abilities to promote social change. It functions as a canvas of future developments because the grand narrative of technological progress taps into a familiar cultural myth spread across the globe by various media, namely, that novel technology will make old truths and established ways of being obsolete. Harking back to the combined impact of the Enlightenment humanist and various colonialist projects, this understanding of technology is rooted in a modernist definition that privileges specific knowledges and practices over others, frequently overriding more localized ways of understanding and interacting with the world. Ironically, technologies come with their own myths and emotional investments.

People often form deep attachments to technologies, from the emotional bond with a favorite device to the spiritual experiences in virtual worlds. From technological "breakthroughs" that conquer the unthinkable and "realms of the impossible" (Beckert 2016) to quasi-religious hailings of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) and transcendence. Even nowadays, mundane technologies (smartphones, streaming, plane travelling) can feel magical when they seamlessly connect people, information, or experiences. Here, technology can create not only marvel but also rituality, from livestreaming events, blog culture to gaming communities that foster a sense of belonging and shared meaning.

This emotional attachment is maybe best encapsulated by the concept of technological enchantment. It describes the sense of wonder, mystery, and emotional or spiritual connection that people can experience through and with technology

(Bennett 2001). The term blends the idea of "technology" — here, the practical application of scientific knowledge — with "enchantment" — a feeling of delight, mystery, or being spellbound. It challenges the Enlightenment assumption that technology is purely rational, utilitarian, or disenchanting — an idea famously associated with sociologist Max Weber's notion of the "disenchantment of the world" (Entzauberung der Welt 2004), where modernity and science strip away magic and meaning.

Technological enchantment can trace its roots to the Romantic sublime: A philosophical and aesthetic concept that describes a pre-rational experience of overwhelming grandeur, awe, or even terror in the face of something vast, powerful, or incomprehensible — often beyond human scale or understanding. For Romantic poets and Enlightenment philosophers (Burke, Kant) alike, the sublime was predominantly associated with the non-human natural world, and projected onto towering mountains, stormy seas, or the infinite expanse of the cosmos. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, the sublime shifted its focus towards "the technological conquest of matter" (Marx 2000: 197). The historians Leo Marx (2000) and David E. Nye (1996) analyse how technological megaprojects such as railways, skyscrapers, canals or dams evoked feelings of grandeur, astonishment, and even reverence, pointing to the mastery, the taming, of humans over nature.

This reverence, to be found, for instance, in the dogma of Manifest Destiny that propelled the western expansion of the American colonial project, was embedded in a narrative of moral and material dominance. It not only set out to conquer nature but also subdued other humans in a self-perception of Western superiority and blatant racism. Western supremacy led to the darkest chapters of world history in its fanatic calling to civilize the 'wild'. In his book, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, Michael Adas illustrates how historical conceptions of European supremacy are deeply shaped by scientific thought and technological innovation (Adas 2014). Whereas the untamed "savages" and barbarians of the world were seen as slaves to their instincts and to the capriciousness of nature, it became the responsibility of the enlightened white man, so the tale of "*The White Man's Burden*" in 1899 proclaims (Kipling), to give the world reason and *techne* – and gain mastery over it. As Adas writes:

> The small numbers of Europeans who actually governed the colonized peoples relied on their superior technology not only for the communications and military clout that made the ongoing administration of vast areas possible, but also for the assurance that they had the "right", even the "duty", to police, arbitrate disputes, demand tribute, and insist upon deference (Adas 2014: 204).

As intersectional feminists like Imani Perry (2018) have shown, the understanding of the human as it emerged in Enlightenment humanism is closely entangled with the exclusion of a non-white, non-European and, by extension, non-human other

that paved the way of political projects like colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. This dark heritage still lives on through the marginalization of different communities – but also through their local stories of resistance and self-empowerment. In their piece **"Internet Futuring: How Communities are Connecting Themselves"**, Henna Zamurd Butt, Nicole Marwell and Nick Feamster show how different indigenous communities in the US, still impacted by the ongoing project of settler colonialism and racially-coded dispossession, practice self-determination in their self-governed projects of internet futuring. They produce connectivity outcomes and practices that fit their distinct local demands, coping with both state negligence and infrastructure absence – in a country that dominates global technological progress narratives and in which high-speed internet is seemingly ubiquitous.

Modernist Nostalgia, Retrotech and Rebellion

Technological Modernism is not only a Western belief system, as it found simultaneous but culturally distinct expressions in a number of Eastern cultures. In these, as in Western cultures, the 20th century, with its narratives of unlimited progress, still functions as a fitting technological blueprint and one of the main reservoirs of ideas that reproduce visions or counter-narratives of bold techfutures to come. In the 20th century, technological change was one of the central drivers of accelerating social transformation, shaping how societies organized work, exercised power, fought wars, and imagined the future. Around the Second World War fascist Germany and Japan, the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union and China partitioned the world into zones of influence. For these hegemons science and technology advancement was not just a symbol of national purpose but of ideological superiority and a crucial element in economic models (Cohen 1993; Harrison 2012; Wead 2020). War times were also times of tech wars and high pressure on innovation and economic expansion. The fascist predatory war economy, capitalist market logic, or communist central planning all heavily relied on technological progress. Despite fierce ideological opposition, phenomena like industrial mass production, consumer culture, information technology and digitalization, mass urbanization, space travel and the globalization of trade and war shaped the globe in unprecedented ways through technological means from the mid 20th century onwards.

It is especially important to highlight these historical roots of progress, because, conceptually, contemporary modernist tropes of tech futurism of enhancing and extending the human through biohacking and wearables, space colonization, flying cars and drones, or augmented realities, predominantly stem from this time. Soviet Cosmism (Groys 2024) and Transhumanism, for example, saw technology as a way to overcome biological limits, extend life, and even resurrect the dead — ultimately creating a "new man" in the most literal

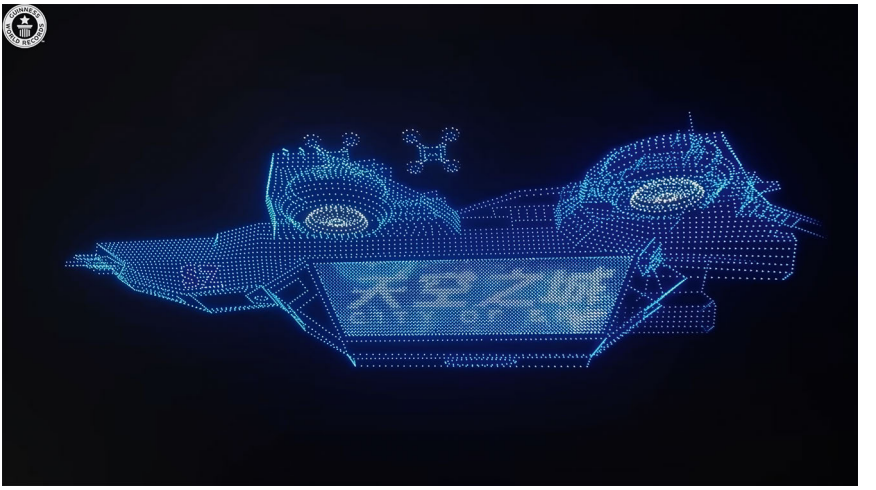
sense. The 20th-century Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Asia crafted the Bolsheviks as an avant-garde, contributing to the progress of society with great human achievements. Dictators like Mao or Stalin encaged humans inside a discourse of modernization, stigmatizing a whole class (the proletariat) in a constant necessity of reformation and state top-down social engineering to advance in the dialectics of a Marxist understanding of history (Cohen 1993). The Soviet Union leveraged these achievements to project an image of technological supremacy and utopian promise, using art, propaganda, and media to amplify the narrative. The launch of Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin's historic flight on October 4, 1957 as part of the space race with the US did not just manifest scientific milestones; they were carefully orchestrated spectacles that reshaped the imagination across the globe of what technology could enable humans to achieve (see images in Sankova 2020).

And these tropes are more topical than ever. Tech oligarchic space missions, like Elon Musk's SpaceX, set out to harvest and colonize the 'new space' as a promised new 'territory' (Rubenstein 2022). For the tech accelerationist thinking that inspires Silicon Valley leaders, inhabiting space through technological breakthroughs depicts the next evolutionary step in humanity, strongly echoing Soviet cosmic thinking. Here, technology discourses quickly move into the territory of racialized, ethnic, national, or class distinctions, as well as a dominant techno-ableism that echoes earlier eugenicist projects (see Shew 2023; see Heise-von der Lippe 2025). Mass-surveillance and self-optimization technologies perpetuate systems of state control that are only seemingly at odds with highly individualized Western cultures, as their impact produces more and more blatant echoes of the totalitarian systems of control that dominated the mid-20th century.

Simultaneously in China, current Sinofuturist projections cling to this vision of a modernist Soviet past. In his piece on **"Negotiating Techno-orientalism in Chinese Digitalized Lifestyle and Aesthetics"**, Chenyang Song shows how Chinese visions of the future in culture and film erase the present and all its contradictions. Instead, a high-tech communist state apparatus is capable of overcoming natural and social disasters through brutalist mega-projects, elevated in a transcendental but timeless cosmic space environment. Here, as Song writes: "the present is rendered absent; the future does not replace the past but rather resurrects it, becoming a medium for nostalgia" (47). In these cultural readings the modernist technological sublime lives on, with mega-projects to cope with future catastrophes like climate change or Earth's vast energy demands.

State-dominated visions of high-tech futures are, however, not limited to Socialist political systems. Japan is an example of a capitalist society that tightly conflates technological futures with past modernization successes. Reflecting national decline since the end of the 1980s, future technologies tend to be framed as retro-tech (Robertson 2018), while anxieties, *Wirtschaftswunder* nostalgia, and vague promises of a national rebirth are employed in techno-developmentalist visions, such as the *Society 5.0*. In their contribution, **"Constructing an 'AI-driven**

Society': Idealization and Anxiety in Japan's National AI Strategy", Felix Spremberg, Takahiro Nishiyama and Jascha Bareis investigate Japanese AI policy papers, identifying elements of international convergence and a specific combination of a utopian vision for digital national leadership with a consent-elliciting narrative of progressivism.



A sinofuturist Guinness world record showcasing of Chinese swarming drone capabilities, forming a socialist space megastructure. To be compared with the nostalgic space images in Song's contribution. Screenshot taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJxM44npcJo

On the flipside of national visions of high-tech futures, the current Special Issue also highlights narratives of re-appropriation, decolonization and the aim to overcome these modernist strivings in different cultural contexts, and to make visible neglected and silenced voices and their needs in the here and now.

Latin American thinkers and creatives, for example, stand in a long tradition of active resistance to imported modernist worldviews and acts of Western imperialism and appropriation. In **"Visualising the Invisible: AI in Latin American Film"**, Anne Burkhardt focuses on low-budget short and experimental films, with their specific styles such as retrofuturism and protest cinema ("cine de denuncia"). These works do not hail technology in the same manner as Sinofuturism but foreground its contemporary extractivist sociotechnical dimension, pointing to current Latin American experiences of social control, surveillance, labour exploitation, as well as resistance and decolonisation as central narrative motifs.

In her discussion of the "**Media Habits of the Future"** in a post-Soviet but nevertheless highly embattled Ukrainian context, Alina Kalashnikova juxtaposes the media habits of Ukrainian students with those of their older relatives to predict potential future developments in media use. In analyzing autoethnographic essays of Ukrainian university students reporting on their parents' and

grandparents' use of specific media as well as the emotional connections of users with, through and beyond the media they use, she analyzes the impact of different forms of socialization and how different generations interact with social media. The students' own analyses revealed an understanding of the impact of their parents' and grand-parents socialist era socialization on the ways in which they interact with specific content, which radically differs from their own habits and interests. Students' self-comparisons to their older relatives further reveal that they deemed them somewhat naive and incompetent, but, at the same time, feel "monotasking nostalgia" resulting from their self-perceived lack of focused attention, experimentation, and direct (social) experience. The study hypothesizes that media habits originally shaped during socialization might prevail throughout later life, allowing her to predict the ways in which current generations may interact with social media in the future.

In a practical intervention against dominant high-tech discourses, Asha Ward and Jon Burgess develop feasible alternatives to the shiny corporate and futurist narratives that foreground AI-bot interaction, smart wearables or robotic automation as inevitable and needed. Transcending the uniform and standardised understanding of human learning and resisting corporate lock-ins that lack flexibility, accessibility, and local relevance, their piece "**voxUp: Co-developing a music technology for beatbox looping in a Special Education Needs Setting"** instead focusses on feasible and highly adaptable low-tech for the specific context of education. Working with accessible digital musical instruments studied from the point of view of critical disability technoscience, they develop a looping and beatboxing machine called voxUp, which takes the needs of students and educators with disabilities into account. They demonstrate "the value of slow, locally embedded, knowing-making over market-driven EdTech imaginaries" (166), and show that a tech future driven by the imaginaries of care, repair, reuse and reduction is not only feasible but also does justice to the individuality of human minds, bodies and capacities that modernist narratives tend to erase in their unwavering pursuit of progress.

As these interventions strikingly show, the modernist ghosts of the 20th century and their discontents keep on haunting the tech futures of the 21st century. They dominate state narratives and company visions as much as they spark alternative futures around the values of empowerment, subversion, care and resistance.

Between Catching-up, Leapfrogging and the Lack of Accountability

A special version of enchantment in modernist development theory is technological leapfrogging. Leapfrogging is the promissory idea that historically disadvantaged former colonized countries can skip slower stages of development by

adopting the newest technologies. As Rose M. Mutiso, the director of the African Tech Futures Lab (2025) writes:

> The concept of technological leapfrogging, by which developing countries can skip traditional development stages or specific incumbent technologies and adopt newer approaches, has dominated African development discourse for decades. Mobile phones are the canonical success story, with Africa's rapid adoption in the mid-1990s to 2000s fueling optimism about replicating this phenomenon across sectors. Yet for all its ubiquity in policy discourse and development strategies, leapfrogging remains a fuzzy and romanticized concept — a form of radical techno-optimism that treats Africa as a blank canvas for grand experiments, unconstrained by facts on the ground.

While the theory promises that leapfrogging can accelerate development, reduce costs, and improve efficiency, in practice, this rarely happens (Juma 2022). Advanced technologies still depend on reliable infrastructures, stable, inclusive institutions, and local capacity resources that cannot simply be 'skipped'[1]. Efforts to implement catchall solutions, moreover, disregard local structures and practices rooted in specific cultural contexts, understanding them as less developed and, therefore, easily replaceable with seemingly more effective technologies. The idea of jumping over structural problems by adopting the *best available tech* instead of sticking to less efficient, more expensive or slower implementation processes is, while seemingly a progressive idea, essentially a solutionist dogma (Morozov 2013). It not only utterly fails in theorizing technology and policy as a standard solution allegedly applicable to any "developing country"; it also glosses over existing debt regimes of structural adjustment programs that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been imposing for decades without substantial impact. These regimes continue to keep many African countries under control through debt rent dependencies and forced market openings to foreign capital and extractivist companies.

Contemporary venture capital culture dominating the US and its geopolitics is just another continuation of the experimental and risky leapfrogging dogma. The Silicon Valley growth and survival mindset of 'disruptive innovation', 'fail fast', 'done is better than perfect', or 'high risk high reward opportunity' shows detrimental effects in many countries. It treats conflict as a playground, speed as

1 Again the 20th century showcases a paradigmatic precursor. In Communist China, CCP chairman Mao saw grain and steel production as the key pillar of economic development to catch up with the West and the Soviet Union. He enforced the industrialization campaign called *Great Leap Forward* from 1958 to 1962. *The Great Leap Forward* attempted to defy the conventional understanding of the time required for economic development, 'jumping over' history through rapid industrialization. It led to one of the greatest famines in human history.

clout, and failure as progress. The newly renamed U.S. Department of War (from Defense) under the Trump administration proclaims exactly this dogma (Hegseth 2026). It uses conflict as a market and seizure opportunity where venture capital, white supremacy, and geopolitical hegemony go hand in hand – all legitimized by AI dreamscapes for "limitless" growth. As Elke Schwarz (2026) writes on the connection between global chaos, violence and business:

> Blending war and venture hype [creates an] apparatus that emerges around a new perpetual need for [...] conflict. Once infrastructures and ecosystems have been created that rely on war and conflict for returns, these must be fostered. Indeed, this becomes an existential imperative for companies and investors.

The consequence of this dogma is a politics of intervention that harvests humans and resources in poorer countries for profit (clickwork and pre-training of chatbots, mineral mining, land grabbing, inflicting conflict etc.) but takes absolutely no accountability for its devastating effects (see e.g. Arends/Clearly 2025).

In their piece on the "**Digital Dimensions of Conflict: Analyzing Malian conflict and violence through Social Media and Mixed-Methods Approach"** Jelena Prokic, Luca Bruls and Mirjam de Bruijn show how communication on the Twittersphere (now X) turns into a battlefield of imaginaries of conflict and misinformation in the Sub-Sahelian region. In the absence of legitimate, trustworthy and sovereign government, law enforcement or news flows, US BigTech algorithms amplify a multi-layered conflict through hatred, state propaganda, and fake news. Violent tensions between herders and farmers, corrupt elites and military coups, interventions of the French army and the Russian Wagner group, or global capital interests in Malian resources, paint a chaotic and torn image of this region. Platform governance or moderation systems are absent. Instead, automated platform recommendation algorithms amplify tensions and the horrors of violence simply because this content generates interest and drives more traffic on the platform – all in the service of generating more profit. The myth of leapfrogging towards a media public through corporate platforms for quick, egalitarian and inclusive communication depicts a cyberlibertarian dream world. Countries with weak enforcement, lack of credible institutions and riddled with tensions became a playfield for big tech companies that let chaos reign to make money.

The need for new platform infrastructures and governance models that do justice to the local needs in non-Western countries is therefore utterly salient. For example, around the world, many marketplaces and communication platforms operate under conditions of infrastructural precarity, including intermittent internet connectivity, inconsistent electricity supply, shared or low-quality devices, and limited access to technical support. Further, dominant platform theories and governance models are largely imagined as Western case studies, thereby overlooking socio-economic and cultural specificities of poorer countries, as well as the competing futures imagined by state actors, corporate stakeholders, and local

communities. In her contribution **"A Methodological Framework to Assess Digital Platform Viability and Sustainability for Marginalized Users in the Global South"**, Aditi Bhatia-Kalluri develops a comprehensive model to tackle this research gap: the Platform Futures Framework. By positioning marginalized users not as lagging adopters but as agents with situated expertise, she challenges dominant evaluative paradigms and opens the space for analysing how more just and inclusive techno-futures might be co-produced. The framework draws on qualitative research conducted on India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), part of India's digital and cashless economy agenda. Her assessment integrates critical factors of mediation, infrastructural dependencies, and governance practices, which need to be taken into account in evaluating digital platforms beyond their presentation in dominant techno-futurist discourses.

Modernist Voids and the Potential of Afrofuturisms

Modernity dismantled many of the grand, unifying stories that once gave life meaning and transcendence – religious, mythological, or cosmic narratives. In the context of modernity and the transcendental void, to come back to the start of this essay, Jean-François Lyotard (1984) argues for the arrival of "the end of grand narratives", implying that the big, overarching stories that once gave societies a shared sense of purpose, truth, and direction have lost their credibility and authority.

In a consumer and technology-driven society, people are often encouraged to seek fulfillment in material goods, status, or fleeting experiences packaged as individualist success stories. Yet, these pursuits rarely satisfy the deeper human longing for purpose, connection, or transcendence. The result is a cycle of desire and dissatisfaction, a spiritual hunger in a material world. Consumerism, a truly modernist creed that has successfully colonized the globe across all ideological camps, governs with the desire for a lifestyle where personal happiness and social status are closely tied to the acquisition of material possessions.

Being ahead of his time in 1989, the year of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and of the communist economic model, the Swiss sculptor Jean Tingeley predicted the global cultural crusade of consumerism. Tingeley, best known for his kinetic art and sculptural Dadaist machines, encapsulates the void consumerist cravings produce, with his art piece: "The altar of Western excess and totalitarian mercantilism".

He described his monstrous rotating machinery with the following words :

> My altar of Western excess will be a festival of absolute commercialism, and useless wealth will become absolute again through the way it is displayed, because it revolves around itself. [...] There will be all kinds of stuff on it, nonsense, rubbish that people like to look at, excess, real excess. [...] The West is in the process of beguiling the peoples of the East, all those

peoples who did not quite succeed in establishing a functioning consumer society under communism.

Jean Tingeley, The altar of Western excess and totalitarian mercantilism (1989), exhibited at the Musée d'art et d'histoire MAHF in Fribourg, Switzerland in 2026. Photographed by one of the authors.

It is debatable if this transcendental void continues to persist in the face of a reawakening of aggressive and expansionist nationalist sentiments across the US, China or Russia, or even a revival of religious belief systems. Especially in the US, highly tech-progress driven, cyberlibertarian elites are practising a resurrecting of a crude Christian prophetic calling of the Anti-Christ (Goldberg 2025), which is often associated with climate activism and other movements calling for the regulation of rapid and uncontrolled tech developments (Lichtenberg 2025). While a fatalist belief of the upcoming Armageddon serves as a basis to introduce cyberlibertarian Darwinist ideas, it, incongruently, merges with a messianic awaiting of a transcendent machine intelligence, and a revival of US white supremacist settler and Manifest Destiny ideologies, privileging white elites under the Trump government. In this context, seemingly Christian motifs merely serve as an instrument to legitimize power and racist systems of control and separation, rather than pointing to a viable and meaningful transcendental experience, let alone a viable version of the future.

Afrofuturist art frequently addresses the flipsides of uncontrolled tech-progress in imaginative ways. The image below, from Fabrice Monteiro's photo series "The Prophecy", for instance, foregrounds a combination of neo-tribal imagery and high-tech waste that evokes and at the same time challenges ingrained medializations of Africa as the dumping ground for global technological waste.

Fabrice Monteiro. "The Prophecy". https://fabricemonteiro.com/the-prophecy/

To understand the ways in which Afrofuturist counter-narratives might resist the pull of more dominant forms of representation, which have ignored or undermined African perspectives for centuries, it is necessary to look beyond the modernist framework and suspend its spiralling progress narratives to examine a number of underlying assumptions. In their article on "**Afrofuturist Techno-Futures Reimagined: Magic, Dreams and Boundary-Crossings"**, Louis Nana and Anya Heise-von der Lippe examine the potential of Afrofuturist texts to push the boundaries of much broader concepts like the human, rationality, science and technology and, thus, raise much farther-reaching questions concerning the dominant meaning of these concepts in contemporary globalized cultures. The main argument of the chapter draws on Achille Mbembe's exploration of Afrofuturism and its implications for the concept of the human in his 2014 article "Afrofuturisme et devenir-nègre du monde", in which he suggests that Afrofuturism possesses the critical potential to push beyond the concept of Enlightenment humanism, which relies on the Othering of Black people and to imagine futures otherwise. The chapter focuses on two Afrofuturist narratives – *Ceux qui sortent dans la nuit* (2013) by Cameroonian writer Mutt-Lon and "A Dream of Electric Mothers" by Nigerian writer Wole Talabi – highlighting Afrofuturist models of re-imagining technology as magic and magic as a form of technology. As the authors argue, this approach does not constitute an attempt to fit African epistemologies into existing Western hierarchies, but to examine the critical potential of Afrofuturism in raising important questions around the exclusionary tendencies of concepts like the human, rationality and objectivity that have historically been instrumentalized as a means of oppression in the service of the modernist / capitalist / colonial

project. Instead of a re-introduction or re-imagining of grand narratives, Afrofuturist artistic practices open up a gateway to rethink possible futures – not from the neoliberal present but from a much more open and explorative temporal and critical position that does not privilege a specific understanding of tech-futures.

Conclusion: Towards Global Tech Futures

The collection of articles in this volume shows that contemporary futures are still entangled in negotiations with modernist pasts. Against this backdrop, the articles mediate discourses in an unequal playing field revolving around denial or promotion, opposition or attraction, resistance or adoption, subversion or glorification. The authors reveal the deficiencies of the modernist mind, which runs on constant wired connectivity and tracking, on accelerating time and production, on conquering matter and space. They show how it promotes violently extractivist practices, treating humans and the earth as disposable resources – while creating cultural and social voids and a craving for community, belonging and transcendence. The histories, narratives and regional experiences which are articulated in this volume, however, also point towards proximities and connections – a multitude of voices that search for radically different angles. These are underrepresented perspectives, local experiences and hidden dimensions; they are work-arounds and turn-arounds – all of them emerging from the widening cracks caused by the grand narratives of tech-progress, neoliberal appropriation or national sentiments.

The pathologies of modern societies are, however, not to be blamed on technology per se but on the reifying, techno-deterministic and undemocratic values underlying the development, design and dissemination of technologies (Feenberg 2023). Rather than in isolated laboratories, the development of technologies should be democratized and informed by a global and inclusive public discourse, ranging from producers to the affected. Most broadcasting focuses on the final chain of consumer products, making invisible the material and human labor behind shiny gadgets. This might not only lead to more just but also to more economically stable outcomes than the destructive boom and bust cycle of technological hypes (Bareis/Roßmann/Bordignon 2023). Admittedly, the firm grip of techno-oligarchs on new media platforms as well as on 'legacy' media and the corresponding regression of public discourses make this seem unlikely – therefore necessitating an ever more crucial struggle toward global tech futures.

The perspectives laid out in this special issue do not center on hopefulness. But hope, optimism and liberation are not necessarily the only principles for individual and collective sensemaking, or for guiding action in a future to come. Climate activists are, for instance, turning towards the principles of just collapse. For historically marginalized communities, the basis of action may lie in the experience of trauma itself. The currents of Afropessimism and Afronihilism, which

are derived from Black Liberation Theology in the US, for instance, work from the assumption that there are futures beyond hope. The horrors of anti-Black violence are structural, historically pervasive and ongoing. They are intergenerationally inscribed in psyches through humiliation, exclusion and trauma, and inscribed in bodies through being beaten, bruised, jailed, or dying. A hopeful future can seem impossible here, but hopelessness and impossibility can become a shared source of unity, dignity, and the integrity to march on. As Udoewa (2026) writes:

> The ethics of hopelessness in impossible futures is infused with a spirituals rituality, a blues sensibility, and a jazz spirituality. It is the rhythm and soul of a people who have learned to live with a limp, in the blue, without resolution, with dissonance. This is liberation as a way of being — ontoliberationality. Our hope is not in resolution or liberation as a destination or goal as in the Western, colonial world. Rather, we walk in hopelessness, but still walk, based on the assets we have — dignity, love, and justice. In this way, we are already liberated.

Similarly, queer, crip communities of color have organized around principles of mutual care networks, that prioritize community over individuality and practices over hope (see Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Hence, within the current crises of the world, there is a momentum of desorientation and despair, but also a momentum for walking, even if blindly, towards renewal, friction, re-appropriation, and possibly, wholesome change. Such counter-narratives often look beyond anthropocentrism (see Tsing 2015), without giving in to posthumanist visions that run the risk of becoming overly celebratory towards tech-centered transhumanist futures for the privileged few. Instead, meaningful futures tackle the social issues and social relations that matter to people. Meaningful futures are situated within the struggles, hopes, despairs and strivings of humans and their communities. Here, the re-politicization of the present as a gateway to the future does not permit technology to be imbued with an aura of innocence and purity, but instead embeds it in the messy questions of contested meaning-making. No matter the geopolitical tensions and diverging national interests, the dedication to a global exchange concerning these matters is utterly vital. We hope that the selection of contributions to this special issue offers a small snapshot of a much broader global discussion.

The Road Towards this Publication

Organized by the Department of Japanese Studies at the University of Tübingen and generously funded by the university's *Global Encounters* platform, a group of international scholars gathered for a workshop on **Popular Cultures of Digitalization** on 12 and 13 April 2024. After some vivid and fruitful discussions, we decided to opt for a publication project and circulated the call for abstracts across

the international mailing lists of a variety of disciplines. The call met an astoundingly broad interest, and we received more than 50 contributions from around the globe, most from India, nine of which made it into the special issue. The venue for publication, *Digital Culture and Society*, allows for different narratives and writing styles that are increasingly marginalized in the academic publishing business dominated by commercial interest, a metrics fetish and linear Anglo-Saxon writing. The editors of this special issue believe that making this edition fully accessible from beginning to publication is a prerequisite in order to hear and see different voices and stories from all around the globe.

As editors of this special issue, we wish to acknowledge with gratitude the work of our international reviewers: Simran Agarwal, Andreu Belsunces, Christoph Bareither, Rebecca Fasselt, Vassilis Galanos, Yishu Mao, Julie Freire Marques, Addamms Muttuta, Olga Pasitselska and Roberto Robalinho. Some reviewers preferred to stay anonymous. We are nevertheless very grateful for their work.

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