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Tales from futures past; the lessons of Lemmy Caution

Darren Tofts

The intergalactic traveller of Jean Luc Godard's 1965 sci-fi noir thriller *Alphaville* may seem an unlikely figure in the history of video art. While the title of this exhibition has its origins in nineteenth century speculative science, Lemmy Caution is its atavistic guide. A traveller in time and space, he represents that which is at a distance, from afar, a stranger in a strange land. Between smokes and dishing out rough justice he can tell you all you need to know about advanced technology, computers, urban screens and artificial vision— themes that are central to *Seeing to a Distance. Single Channel Video Work from Australia*. Like Caution, Australia for many years was defined as the antipodes, a remote other perpetually out of sight. Long before the Internet and the idea of a networked, global culture, Australia's relations to the rest of the world had been technologically mediated. It was the outer limits, always experienced at a distance.

Alphaville may seem a rather oblique manual on media theory or more specifically videography. But Sean Cubitt's *Timeshift* (1991) can be read as a footnote to it, as can Jacques Derrida's 1990 "Videor" essay on Gary Hill. Its dystopian vision of a high tech, computer-mediated dictatorship of command and control (crying is forbidden, people are executed for acting illogically) reaches back variously to Norbert Wiener's cybernetics, George Orwell's *1984*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and more distantly the hard-boiled novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. But at the same time it looks forward to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and an entire sub-genre of retro-futurist films in the 1980s and 1990s (in particular *Blade Runner*). The film's queering of different, though familiar genres resonates a strange attraction which is deliberately hinted at in its subtitle, "*une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*". And if you think that this essay is becoming stuck in some kind of nostalgic, cinephile time-warp, then think again.

In 2009 artist Paul St. George installed on London's South Bank a working version of an optical instrument first theorised in the 1870s. Resembling an industrial age telescope that might have been dreamed up by Jules Verne, the instrument enabled Londoners to look into one end and see passers-by in New York looking back at them via a real-time VPN link. St. George's *Telectroscope* gestured to well-documented 19th century accounts of a "proposed method of seeing by electricity" that a number of scientific visionaries (from Louis Figuier to Alexander Graham Bell) had in their own way imagined but never actually made. The telectroscope was a speculative technology that haunted the modernist imagination until it was actually realised under the rubric of television in the early twentieth century. But its holding power was so strong that it had a virtual existence in the collective psyche of progressive northern hemisphere inventors. It was, to use the parlance of 1990's cyberculture, vapourware, a technology so widely discussed that we forget that it does not yet actually exist.

For a post-media-savvy always-connected-mobile generation, St. George's *Telectroscope* was a minor sensation on both sides of the Atlantic, as crowds flocked to see live images of people nearly 6,000 kilometres away transmitted in real time. It was as if, and this is way out there I know, you could experience the sensation of being in two places at the same time. In the argot of new media theory this is called telepresence. Now what might sound like jaded irony here is in fact a device for defamiliarising what actually happened when Londoners and New Yorkers saw each other via the *Telectroscope*. When the familiar is taken out of context, or made strange, it is seen as if for the first time. It is an uncanny familiarity, the commonplace experienced for *what it is* rather than *that it is*. This uncanny familiarity is at the heart of *Seeing to a distance*, with its decidedly old school methods for displaying the highest standards of mediated vision. And it prompts us to wonder if we have ever really naturalised and thereby completely forgotten the weird, discombobulating effects of telesthesia, of sensing at a distance. Scott McQuire pondered this dilemma in relation to the epochal change brought about by the Internet, whereby people no longer had to

be in the same place to congregate in real time. At the height of the video age Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer asked a similar question, “When we can go to the antipodes in a second or a minute, what will remain of the city? What will remain of us?” And this dissolution of distance brings with it an entirely new regime of being in the world that is efficiently captured in the three thematic categories in *Seeing to a Distance*: action, abstraction, interaction.

But art works, like technology, also have memories. Or perhaps such memories are unwitting avatars, anticipating the arrival of its other, at another time and place to come. One November evening in 1980, St. George’s *Telectroscope* was prefigured in Kit Galloway’s and Sherrie Rabinovitz’s *Hole In Space*. Described as a “public communication sculpture”, this work linked passers-by in New York and Los Angeles via a satellite video hook-up. “Suddenly”, as the project description goes, “head-to-toe, life-sized, television images of the people on the opposite coast appeared. They could now see, hear, and speak with each other as if encountering each other on the same sidewalk”. Art historian Christiane Paul has observed of this work that its most remarkable outcome was the surprise and sense of novelty it engendered in those who experienced it. From this she concluded that it dramatically revealed how relatively short the history of perception at a distance actually is. The contemporary responses to *Hole In Space* and *Telectroscope* reveal that not so long ago seeing to a distance was akin to a form of magic (the well worn story of Parisians fleeing in terror at the premier of the Lumière brothers’ 1895 film of a train arriving at a station comes to mind here). It would seem that little has changed between 1980 and 2009. Traces of this collective astonishment at the manifestation of those who are absent still haunt our collective psyche and are manifest in the sensation of uncanny familiarity.

And this is why we have much to learn from Lemmy Caution when thinking about the way memories of things past leave traces in the present. For instance, Caution carries around with him a piece of technology that to us looks positively quaint and deliciously retro, a small instamatic camera complete with Zirconium foil flash-cubes. He snaps everything he sees. But the sensation of uncanny

familiarity arises from this clash of expectations of what is new and of the past, the present or the future, and from precisely *when* such an intimation occurs. The term retro-futurism was coined in the mid 1980s to account for multiple imaginings of the future and how such visions are grounded in a specific present and its expectations of what the future might look like. It also implies how quickly dated and disappointing the future can become to subsequent generations (2001 has come and gone man and it didn't look like *2001!*). The streets of the futuristic Alphaville through which Caution prowls would have appeared familiar to Parisian audiences. Godard's portrait of the future in 1965 was in fact a snapshot of his present. The chic neo-modernist architecture, Ford Galaxy cars, space-age ambience of glass, chrome and sweeping spiral staircases, mini-skirts, thick mascara and Mary Quant bobs condense the vibe of *nouvelle vague* Paris. But to us it is very '65, a style of the past, not the future. So while Caution's instamatic may appear today as funky as a cool grand-dad, it was an excitingly new gadget at the time and one of the first really portable machines of artificial vision. In one of the film's many reflexive gestures to its "memories of the future" (to use Mark Dery's phrase), one of the goons holding Caution under arrest observes that it is "a very old camera". The anachronisms that such irony draws attention to concentrate the sense of being in and out of time, at the same time.

Terms such as "telectroscope" and "Seeing to a distance by electricity" would undoubtedly have been strange, anticipatory and epochal in the last decades of the 19th century. Bell's 1880 coinage "photophone" would have seemed even stranger, for as a word it actually sounded plausible since photography and the telephone were already realities at this time. In this respect Godard saves one of his more telling asides for a very mundane moment. Caution walks into a hotel lobby. He says to the attendant "I'd like to telecommunicate". He is asked if it is inter-galactic or local. He then proceeds to make a telephone call. In two simple lines of exchange this scene captures the capacity of words to transcend time and disarm those who hear them. To our ears it sounds decidedly odd, suggestive of a regime of the new that we know is now very old, but a new nonetheless that would not have been out of place in a manifesto by F.T. Marinetti. But the clever

conceit of Godard's script is that it would have also sounded very odd indeed to his contemporary audiences, and in so doing would have evoked the idea of a techno-future to come, such as Alphaville, in which it made perfect sense. Caution's use of an archaism to signify the future was as disarming in 1965 as it is today for it heightens the inhuman strangeness of communication at a distance forewarned by Socrates a very long time ago; a strangeness that has resolved into familiarity over time through our immersion in and embrace of successive technologies of remote sensing.

We should never underestimate the effect on perception of the figurative conceit. The rhetorical manipulation of language tests the limits of credulity and it can warp perceptions of what is old and new, vestigial and obsolete. Had Lemmy Caution referred to something called a "cathode ray tube" it would have sounded out of this world. And as Llewelyn B. Atkinson's persuasive description of the fabulous yet fictional telectroscope revealed in 1882, the still-imaginary, over time, can stand in for an absent reality. We are the future implied in Atkinson's article, yet St. George's installation reveals that we can still marvel at the prospect of seeing to a distance. He based the design of his telectroscope on prototype illustrations purportedly drawn by his great grandfather, one Alexander Stanhope St. George. These were found in an old suitcase concealed in the forgotten recesses of a wardrobe. A wonderful fabrication in its own right, this apocryphal story with its beautiful drawings recalls images of remote sensing technologies produced in the 19th century. It would seem that St. George had to invent a mythical and entirely fictitious creation story in order for something real from the age of steam to come into our world. On the basis of the wonder and excitement that greeted its London installation, his strategy would seem to have worked.

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