Waiting for the Future

Filmmakers, writers and theorists, The Otolith Group mine the past in order to understand what’s yet to come
by Nina Power

There are more futures than we realize, and more failures too. The past is littered with the debris of these futures, while our present incorporates the unstable collective memory of hopes that have long since been abandoned. Formed in 2002, the London-based Otolith Group (which comprises Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar) doggedly investigates these temporal slips and Utopian dreams of 'the temporality of past potential futurity', as they put it. Their use of documentary footage, of archives both familiar and alien, provides a melancholy window onto worlds not created and paths not followed. At the same time, by reasserting the potential of underused forms, the group reveals the latent promise of various media: letters, television, science fiction, philosophy. Writers as much as filmmakers, theorists as much as producers, The Otolith Group seeks to unearth hidden histories of the future in the name of the present. Their archival and critical work, such as The Ghost of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective, 1982–1998 (2007) must be understood as being as central to their project as any of their films, for it is in the recognition of their own indebtedness to the past that the group proves so able to understand the future, however absent it may turn out to be.

An otolith is the part of the inner ear that senses tilt. Otolith I (2003), the group's first film (which includes camera work by Richard Couzins), imagines a world in which sustained periods of microgravity on space stations have led to a permanent impairment in the human ability to cope with terrestrial gravity. Humanity has been literally dispossessed of its own worldliness; everything is unbalanced, weightless. Otolith I re-imagines the Soviet space programme through the fictional accounts of a Dr Usha Adebaran-Sagar, a voice from the future who reports from the International Space Station in 2103. However, at the same time, it also channels the past as Anasuya Gyan-Chand, grandmother of the narrator, remembers the impact and importance of the Soviet space programme on Indian socialism and feminism. Footage of a smiling Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, is intercut with contemporary scenes of anti-war protests in London. The future, the past and the present interweave with a delicate sense of proportion; each narrator from each period expresses their hope (or lack of it) in a tone appropriate to the genre each represents. The science-fictional reportage of Kris Kelvin, the cosmonaut in Stanislaw Lem's 1961 novel Solaris, is invoked in Dr Adebaran-Sagar's message: 'Microgravity has evolved new human species. We are better suited to space than gravic humans could ever be; but are unable to survive conditions on Earth. Earth is out of bounds for us now; it remains a planet accessible through media.' The correspondence between Gyan-Chand and her granddaughter, between the past and the future, veers between the personal and the geopolitical: Airports look terminal now, customs officers wear sterile masks and military tanks patrol Heathrow. Did the Russian men look away when you caught their eye?

If there is a feeling of wistfulness that permeates the film, particularly in the narration relating to images of the 2003 anti-war protests ('a protest for the right to protest, as if that might stop the war happening'), it is in the tradition of Chris Marker's melancholy science fiction, or, what amounts to the same thing, in his political critique of the present.

Indeed, Otolith is the natural inheritor of Marker's vision, explicitly declaring its debt in particular to his 1983 film Sans Soleil (Sunless). (Otolith I contains a series of Marker-esque formulations: 'There is no memory without image and no image without memory. Image
is the matter of memory.) In 2007, this affinity resulted in Inner Time of Television, a historical intervention in the name of both Otolith and Marker. The group was invited to participate in the 1st Athens Biennal, but chose instead, with Marker’s blessing, to screen the latter’s 8-part television series about Greece, The Owl’s Legacy (1998). Before the series, originally commissioned by Arte, was released, wealthy backers became outraged by critic George Steiner’s statement – in an episode about nostalgia – that contemporary Greece and Ancient Greece had nothing in common. Despite including a disclaimer, Marker’s series, after having been shown in France and Britain in 1989–90, was never screened in Greece itself, the backers having bought out the rest of the rights. In a piece written to accompany this first screening, The Otolith Group point out the censorship of the series was not only a failing on the Greek side but that what is clear is that a television series such as The Owl’s Legacy could never be broadcast on British television today [...] . [With Marker’s series] television became the collective intelligence it could but was never quite permitted to be; 2 Television’s ‘collective intelligence’, the idea that it could be a repository of ideas, is still unfilled – the diffusion of information reignites the medium itself to a mere carrier, a useful vehicle, rather than a critical form in its own right.

The Otolith Group returned, in Otolith II (2007), to questions of temporality and Utopia, although here the aesthetic is rougher, an effective combination of the trembling images of Marker and the anti-aesthetic of Allan Sekula, with handheld video footage edited alongside documentary footage of Le Corbusier’s planned city, Chandigarh. The tone is sharper; the group appear to be attempting to map the complicated processes of capitalism through the juxtaposition of images and histories. Dr Adebaram-Sagar returns to tell us that it is ‘the age of human capital, and of sacrifice […] Capital, as far as we know, was never alive. How did it reproduce itself? How did it replicate?’ Art historian T. J. Demos has compared The Otolith Group’s tracking of global capital through documentary and science fiction to Steve McQueen’s film Gravensend (2007) and Hiro Steyer’s video Senate (2004); as Demos argues, both of these works are distinguished by the intertwining of the real and the imaginary, which mobilizes a form of address – aesthetic, affective, visual – beyond the strictly information-based correctives of familiar documentary modes of contestation. 3 This intertwining is expressed beautifully in a sequence in Otolith II when the film crew seemingly stumbles upon a gangster film being shot in Mumbai. Mock-up of British telephone boxes are assembled and disassembled on the waterfront as take after take unfolds, as the Director attempts to get the positions of the actor just right. (The narrator jokes: ‘I’ve come all this way, halfway around the world, only to be met by four red phone boxes.’) It’s a beautiful scene, strange and humorous; it segues perfectly into a larger reflection on the changes in labour that have taken place in Mumbai and elsewhere, and the way in which immaterial and material works rub alongside one another amidst the ever-consuming process of the spectacle of everyday life.

At one point, the narrator asks: ‘Why do Indian artists produce such little science fiction?’ A superficial answer would be that there is little need for such fictions in a culture so filled with fantastical Gods and alien deities. But The Otolith Group refuses such reductive answers. While much of their work focuses on India, they can’t easily be slotted into the category of ‘post-colonial artists’. As Sagar puts it, the group are more
interested in ‘opening up the question of the postcolonial to a series of complex interlinkages which are implied but which need to be unfolded by project by project so that what emerges is a complex and baroque aesthetic of conversations.’ This project is pursued far more effectively at the level of form than of content. As Sagar continues: ‘The broad question of the postcolonial is connected to the history and the aesthetics of the essay–film – from Dziga Vertov to Esther Shub to Jean Vigo to Joris Ivens to [Alain] Resnais to [Jean-Luc] Godard to [Harun] Farocki to Black Audio Film Collective to Eyal Sivan to Hito Steyerl. The essay–film already contains a sustained reflection upon the colonial condition. There is a persistent anti-colonial politics running throughout the form of the essayistic.’

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In a suggestion that formed the basis of the third Otolith film, Dr Adebaran-Sagar observes in Otolith II that Satyajit Ray might have radically changed the history of science fiction had the screenplay of his film The Alien (1967) been made by Columbia Pictures, as originally planned. Ray’s alien would have changed the history of science fiction in more than one sense: far from wanting to destroy humanity, his alien merely wants to befriend it, one young boy in particular: ‘Haba is dreaming and the Alien becomes part of his dream. We see Haba and the Alien happy, playing hide and seek in a strange black and white world of geometrical forms.’ The friendly alien that never was points to a different history of the Cold War, a ghastly possibility that remains even after the War itself is over, or has shifted modality.

Dr Adebaran-Sagar’s reflections from 2060 (or thereabouts), by contrast, are somewhat bleaker than this happy alien story: ‘Between 2050 and 2060, Earth’s population reached its maximum growth of 10 to 10.5 billion. Ninety-five percent of this occurred in the cities of the South. There was little data available on the mega slums. They were impossible to control.’ The vote from the future contains a warning and a reflection on cities as ‘psychological field labs for testing new ways of being human.’ The Modernist project, as reflected in Chandigarh, sought to directly intervene in the question of what it meant to test new ways to be human. The narrator notes that in his book, The Establishment Status of the Land (1959) Le Corbusier argued that: ‘The Law of the Sun is of the greatest importance. In Chandigarh, the Sun must be controlled.’ This bid for victory over the sun reveals itself to be a new kind of science fiction: the camera flits from models of the planned city to images of the city as it currently stands, divided into sectors and guarded by gunmen.

In the third part of the trilogy, Otolith III (2009), the group returns to investigate The Alien, creating – as the original film was never finished – a kind of ‘premake’ (‘20 pages in a drawer. An idea. A possibility. Nothing more’). Otolith III imagines searching for its protagonists – the boy, the journalist, the engineer and the director – and includes shots of crowded streets, while an unseen narrator imagines random individuals potentially
filling the roles of each character. At one point, the boy declares: 'We are unfinished characters with interrupted biographies,' the repeated refrain 'we live in a space of friends and a time of enemies' adding an air of temporal menace to the proceedings.

But it is perhaps with Nervus Rerum (the title is taken from Cicero and translates as 'the nerve of things'), the 2008 film shot in the Palestinian Jenin refugee camp on the West Bank, that The Otolith Group's vision achieves its greatest success. The film begins with the camera moving slowly up a backstreet in Gaza. Children look on silently as an eerie soundtrack deepens their gaze. Abandoned cookers line the sides of the road; graffiti is everywhere, a palimpsest of politics. Two men stand talking next to a pick-up truck filled with empty plastic bottles. 'We are death,' declares Sagar. 'We are dead when we think we are living.' The words are taken from Fernando Pessoa's The Book of Disquiet (first published in English in 1991) and Jean Genet's book about Palestine, Prisoner of Love (1966); they both distance us and draw us closer to the slow, quiet images of the settlement. The camera circles the streets and back alleys, more children emerging from doorways. Suddenly, we're inside a modest room; a woman in a headscarf stands by the window with her back to the camera. As the camera turns, we see that the women is elderly, her hands spread out before her. In stark contrast to the domesticity of the scene, the voice speaks of the death of all creation, a menace haunting everyday existence. In another room, a young man too stands at the window, smoking and gazing out. Back on the streets we see political posters and small shops.

An abstract set of reflections on self-sacrifice and parachuting accompany the slow descent of a cable car; a graveyard, another young man touching the names that cover one of the stones. Back to the streets, and more children, this time shouting at the camera with playful engagement. One of them is handed a toy gun by an older boy and the younger child points it at the camera with steely intent, walking ever-closer to the lens. 'Trying to think the revolution is like waking up'; images of Yasser Arafat on television. An elderly woman points to an image of a young man in a family photo; because this is Palestine, we assume he has died violently. 'The image created is quite detached from the man concerned,' says the voice. 'Who wouldn't like to be a world hero? The slow, brooding soundtrack is joined by the harsh notes of a man in the street, blowing too hard into a recorder. The penultimate scene shows two men playing cards, while a story about two men playing cards is read over the footage: the images don't quite match the descriptions in the voice-over, which has an intriguingly jarring effect. This is the success of Nervus Rerum and The Otolith Group as a whole: when image and voice fail to coincide; when the 'big story' of Palestine becomes a whole series of smaller tales; when representation fails because it has to.

Nina Power is a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Roehampton University, UK, and the author of One-Dimensional Woman, published in 2009 by Zero Books.

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1 Email interview with the author, January 2010  
2 The Otolith Group, Inner Time of Television, 1st Athens Biennial, 2007, p.13  
3 T.J. Demos, 'Moving Images of Globalization', Grey Room 32, Autumn, 2006, p.10  
4 Email interview with the author, January 2010  
5 Ibid., January 2010  