

# ***TECHNOLOGIES OF ROMANCE***

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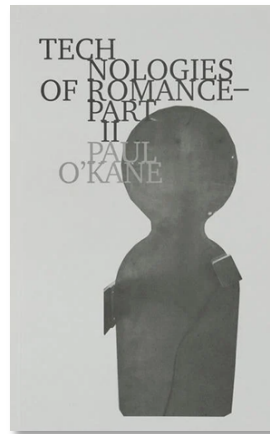
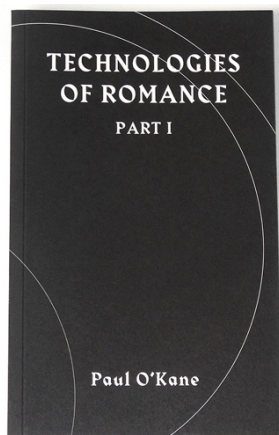
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“Our coming was expected on earth”  
**Walter Benjamin, *Theses on a Philosophy of History***

“We have become impoverished. We have given up one portion of the human heritage after another, and have often left it at the pawnbroker’s for a hundredth of its true value, in exchange for the small change of ‘the contemporary’ ”  
**Walter Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*.**

“... the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future”  
**Walter Benjamin (on Lotze)**

“What is romance?”  
**Jia Zhangke, *Platform* (2000)**



## INTRODUCTION

The newest technologies may have us wrapped around them in seemingly intractable ways. But perhaps we can search for strategies by means of which to create or keep open some anachronistic, less trending possibilities.

Contending with new technologies that crave and claw at our constant attention, we need to open a metaphorical umbrella to protect us from the torrent of unsolicited information raining down.

This might already suggest a romantic image of an isolated persona, contending with the technologized elements; heroic, brave, well connected, and yet more isolated than ever before; truly “alone but not lonely”.

It is also a Quixotic image, but then all of us are potentially, collectively liberated, unified and equalised by new technologies today, only to each of us pursue a blinkered folly, reconciled to a highly superficial, individuated life of simple-minded swiping and scrolling. We are thereby denied historical traction, excused slow thought, and denied hard-won knowledge and deeper meaning.

It might therefore be justifiable to behave a little like Luddites, or the mythical Ostrich that buries its head in the sand at the sign of a threat. It may be wise to strategically wait for the latest technological hype to pass over us; or at least wait for it to acquire some humility that may come, even to the newest technologies, with the passage of time.

We can avert our eyes to thereby see beyond or elsewhere than the direction dictated by the latest technologies. And even if this means critiquing the value of ‘the latest’, even if it means looking back to the past for something *not new* but nevertheless truly different, and perhaps all the more valuable as a result.

We might be guiltlessly justified in performing such retro-manoeuvres, if only because we instinctively know what hurts and what nurtures us; what intimidates and what inspires us. We suspect that the intrusive urgency with which new technologies place



demands upon us, is primarily for someone else's power, glory and profit. It does not have our own best interests – as rounded and vulnerable, curious and adventuring creatures – in mind.

Thus, what I call '*Technologies of Romance*' might include an aspect of care and well-being, aiming to take the harsh and unadorned edge off new technologies; encouraging a perverse deceleration, diversion, or even a reversed trajectory, a clumsy retreat that goes awkwardly against the contemporary grain.

'*Technologies of Romance*' might enable us to embrace and revisit a history of aged, and thereby humanised and mellowed technologies, while shrugging off an insistent emphasis on the present and the new.

## **HISTORY OF '*TECHNOLOGIES OF ROMANCE*'**

My use of the term '*Technologies of Romance*' began as a response to undergraduate students' apparent obliviousness to history, as they sat entranced by their attention-seeking smartphones.

To help them avert their eyes, we started looking back in time together and soon found that artists have always faced new waves of technology and found ways to adapt art to those new technologies, or to reflect them in some effective manner.

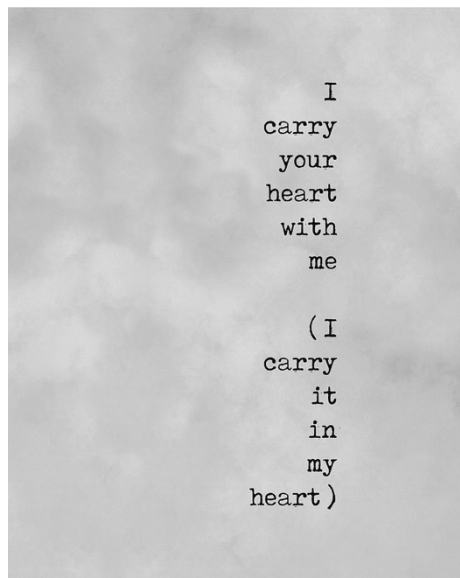
To cite an obvious example, the typewriter<sup>1</sup> may have once presented a threat to long-standing traditions of tender poetry and prose. And yet literary emissions of the human 'heart' still came to be rendered by means of these noisy, ugly, apparently heartless machines. Furthermore, those achievements were dependent upon the typewriter's idiosyncratic tendencies. We might refer to its QWERTY-fication of writing, at first a mechanical restriction, but soon sparking unprecedented methods, and inspiring

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<sup>1</sup> Also discussed by Friedrich Kittler in:

*Gramophone, film, typewriter* / Friedrich A. Kittler ; translated with an introduction by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. by: Kittler, Friedrich A; Publisher: Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, [1999]

corresponding forms and aesthetics, e.g. a stream of modern consciousness made on a paper scroll; or a haiku-sized poem struck by individual steel letters hammered onto paper through inked ribbon.



e.e. cummings



Jack Kerouac

Students of the '*Technologies of Romance*' seminar began to feel freer and more welcome to explore the cavernous archives of the past, and to treat these as: 'another country' (L.P. Hartley); an 'unexplored continent' (Nicolas Bourriaud); or the 'world of yesterday' (Stefan Zweig).

Seeing the past and history as, not detached, alien and anachronistic; and seeing even the supposedly 'newest' technologies, not as exceptions but as part of a long and continuous story of change; allowed us to escape a spectacularly unprecedented present defined by hypnotised attention to a life online.

## ROMANTICISMS

As well as a history of technologies, the '*Technologies of Romance*' seminar considered the etymology, associations and ramifications of the word 'romance', including

Romanticism and the French *roman* as referring to story or narrative. Brief thoughts of Rome, the city and empire gave on to wider connotations of romance, from Don Quixote to Caspar David Friedrich. Then there was the enduring influence on contemporary thought of the Romantic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to consider. We visited Goethe, Wordsworth & Coleridge, enjoyed the modesty of John Clare's poetry, considered kitsch novels and unpacked pop songs. We also glimpsed the Roma people, and here come to reflect on '*Technologies of Romance*' in a congress held appropriately in Romania.

Ironically, the best, most rewarding use we make of the newest technologies might be as tools with which to explore, revisit and redeploy the past. We might even invite new technologies to redefine our established ideas of romance and Romanticism, perhaps thereby rejuvenating our approach to feeling, sense, affect, narrative and story, and even updating and expanding our repertoire of emotions <sup>2</sup>.

The students and I began to see that technology, and all the humanity we associate with romance might interrelate in an overlapping zone where new feelings, and perhaps what Charles Baudelaire called "new emotions", could perhaps coincide with new technologies.

Despite Baudelaire's revolutionary call for a more realistic attention to modern life, his aesthetics remained partly immersed in Romanticism. This led him to claim that the value of art, even of modern art, was *always* emotional – something that cool-headed modernists, cerebral conceptualists or ironic postmodernists might dispute, and yet, given a recent upsurge of interest in affect, we might just be ready to re-embrace.

By raising the possibility of finding "new emotions" to suit a modern world, Baudelaire may have also opened the prospect of ever-renewed Romanticisms <sup>3</sup>, such that we could claim that a new Romanticism, and attendant new emotions, emerges along with

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<sup>2</sup> to include e.g. what has come to be known as the 'face journey'.

<sup>3</sup> This might remind us that J.F. Lyotard once claimed that: "every post-modernism *precedes* a modernism"

every new wave of technology, like an immune response released by a body to protect it from harmful invaders.

## **SURREALISM**

Surrealism adapted aspects of Romanticism to its otherwise *avant-garde*, modern and Freudian ends. It produced an unprecedentedly erotic and oneiric vision of art that immersed the modern, the ordinary, and the everyday in an imaginative, dream-like state, perhaps as a way of anaesthetising and mitigating the shocking effects of modernity and its attendant new technologies.

Surrealism used the new technologies of its own time in ways that we might refer to as emotional, affective, and in this way neo-Romantic. Walter Benjamin, who wrote substantially on Romanticism, here writes under Surrealist influence, becoming enraptured by the technology of cinematic slow motion:

“... Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods ...”

We might hope to locate a similar sense of wonder regarding our own age and its own wave of new technologies. Following in Benjamin's footsteps, Jean Baudrillard later wrote that cinema: “reserves slow motion for moments of highest drama”. But this doesn't fully explain our fascination, and possibly romantic interpretation of the value and quality of slow motion as a quintessentially modern and ubiquitous special effect; a 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic which also implicates the dramatic phenomenon of ‘freeze-frame’<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See ‘400 Blows’ concluding shot, and ditto ‘Thelma & Louise’

In 1950, Francois Truffaut innovated a new and newly appropriate ending for a movie. At the conclusion of his biopic *'The 400 Blows'*, after an unusually long tracking shot of a boy fleeing an institution; running across country and across the screen; accompanied by the romantic music of Jean Constantin, Truffaut has the young protagonist, on reaching the ocean, turn to stare at us and into the camera, which zooms in while the image is simultaneously transformed into a still photograph, accompanied by the unequivocal graphic *'FIN'*.



Truffaut there unravelled a history of technologies, jumping from the moving image back to the still, using the still emphatically as an ending, and simultaneously, we might say romantically compressing the narrative of a young life as if already fully shaped by its past and future, its inevitable end in stillness and death, staring at us, the people of the future, as we stare back into the past, raising both a statement and a question, making a silent visual appeal.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4jGNoag\\_1g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4jGNoag_1g)



This newly technologized modern image of death also featured as a plot resolution for Ridley Scott's 1991 film '*Thelma & Louise*'. By freezing frame and immediately fading to white, aided by the ethereal music of Hans Zimmer, Scott produced a fatalistic and yet quasi-spiritual image to satisfy the audience's investment in this passionately rollicking road movie with its then innovative female focus.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66CP-pq7Cx0>



Meanwhile, in *La Jetée* (1962), Chris Marker made a 28-minute ‘movie’ almost entirely out of still images, excepting a few seconds of mysterious moving image smuggled into the heart of the film. Somehow, this unusual format was appropriate to a short story that resolved its own narrative in a disorienting image of circular time and in which a human subject shuttles between past, present and future – all accompanied by an unarguably romantic score composed by Trevor Duncan.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kee2WnBVxsY>

Romantic music, this time provided by Ola Fløttum, also accompanies a key scene in Joachim Trier’s 2021, Oslo-based movie *The Worst Person in the World*. Here, a modern urban centre – according to the subjectivity of the two main protagonists – comes to a stand-still.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyT2jpyu3VY>

Today, the legacy of the recent pandemic leaves us haunted by an image of a world in which modernity, despite all its novelty, invention, mobility and speed, can be arrested and thereby wrested from us. In fear of a deadly virus, time in our cities stood funereally still, shops were shuttered, aeroplanes grounded, traffic banished, and streets and

skies silenced, as we queued, standing far apart, in fear of each other, or took compulsory walks in neighbourhoods rendered strange and morbid by a deathly threat.

This is not an unfamiliar idea. In Italo Calvino's collection of ancient Italian folk tales, at least one of many imagined worlds is afflicted by a comprehensive stasis, and we will probably find something similar in '*1001 Arabian Nights*'. Meanwhile a 1951 Sci-Fi movie is titled '*The Day the Earth Stood Still*', further leading us to suspect that this image of a stilled world is an ancient and common trope, even a cliché, something both ancient and modern that plays on archetypal images of life and death, individual and society, motion and stillness, life and art.

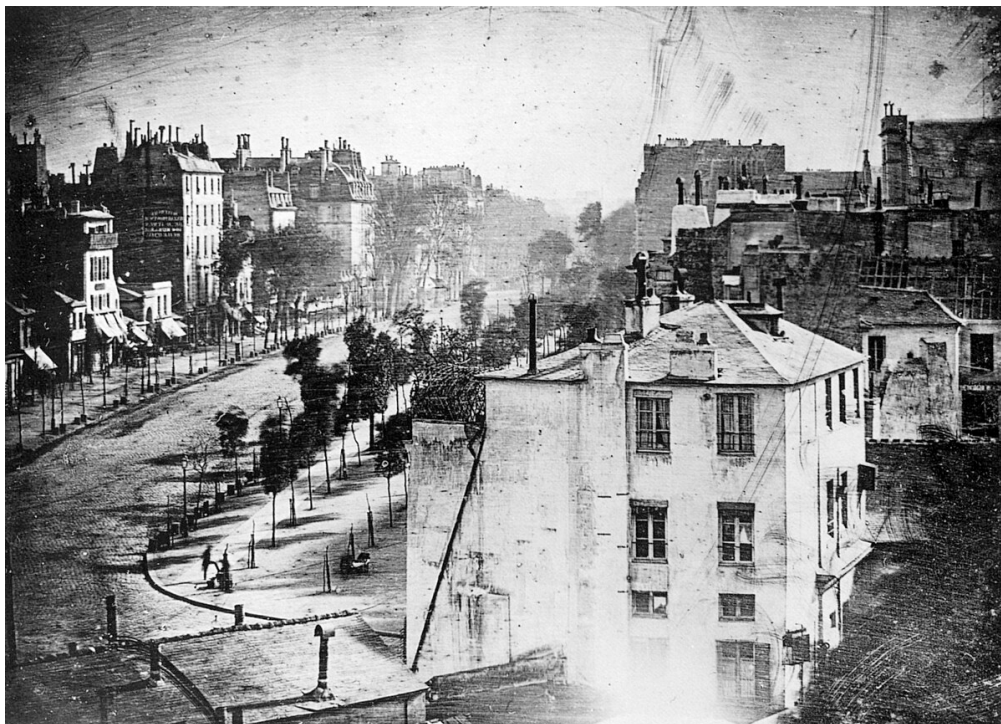
In invoking this image, Trier is not then seeking to innovate, but rather deploying an idea that we know well, and which has long been important to us. In Trier's scene, the general stillness and corresponding isolation of the two mobile protagonists eventually creates a Romantic crescendo and translates a sense in which, in the throes of passion, and despite reason and rationality, romance can still single us out from our surroundings and invite us to occupy a unique sense of being, as we are brought together in a special kind of private time.

This transgressive passion might lead us to break habitual trusts, orders and routines and spend unnoticed hours, an entire night, with a relative stranger. And as a reward for surrendering ourselves to nature in this way, we may witness sunset and dawn, thereby gaining a reminder of the profundity of non-utilitarian time and our most beguiling questions.

But what draws our attention in Trier's scene is not just nature but the technologies involved in the contrivance of the image. Juxtaposing still and moving figures in one scene or film alerts us to 'moving image' as a historical development of still photographic images. Trier's enchanted world, in which only two people move while all others are stilled, is one within which a history of technologies are juxtaposed or nested. It implicates a whole history of theatre, performance, dance, *tableaux vivant* and ultimately the most ancient concerns of art.



Trier's image also inevitably invokes what might be its antithesis, the celebrated '*Boulevard Du Temple*' made by Louis Daguerre in 1838, supposedly the first still photographic image of a human being, determined by their unique stasis. Now the bustling urban crowd is rendered invisible by their movement, and thus by their transgression of a fundamental law of still photography: STAY STILL!'. Meanwhile, by coincidentally standing still during the several minutes it took for Daguerre's image to be registered on his device, one anonymous individual was supposedly recorded for posterity, becoming the first human to be fixed by the newly emerging medium of photography.





But maybe modernity, despite its dynamic reputation, has also, and always had a slower, even static corollary, modernity's shadow perhaps, the corresponding death to its celebrated vitality. Even modern painting, excited by its progressive surge, celebrates its heyday in an iconic image of a frozen scream. And perhaps in still photography, blurred figures, slow motion, looped 'action replays', and freeze-frame we find illustrations of a need to rein-in a hubristic age of otherwise headlong speed and motion, discovering a romantic tension there, between life and death, art and life, stillness and motion, even between black and white.

These modern forms of stasis might be cautions, warnings, signs of a decelerated equivalent to modernity's hectic, blinkered, and at worst frightening and fascistic forward thrust. The Surrealists, like Benjamin, sensed that modernity is an immanent crisis from which we constantly and necessarily need to create imaginative ways of escape. It might appear to be something we rush to keep up with, but can equally be described as a captive, frozen, desperately urgent state, a place and time in which, as

Benjamin said – ending his essay on Surrealism – we: “... exchange ... the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds”<sup>5</sup>.

## **ROMANTICISM & MODERNITY, STILLNESS, MOTION & DEATH**

Modernity produced and over-produced much that it had not accounted for. It heartily and positively championed the new while seemingly unaware that this would inevitably produce so much that is so soon old. Consequently, it surrounds us with the dead, the redundant, the pre-loved and used; the wrinkly rock star, vintage dress and retro-themed cafe. Fashion falls faster and faster out of fashion, leapfrogging seasonal rhythms to become either a timeless monochrome uniform or a regularly renewed raid made on a ceaseless parade of the past.

In a book chapter titled ‘*A Selfie-Stick in the Charity Shop*’ I described the inevitable entropic decline of trending objects and events; of the inescapable, fatal destination that ultimately awaits all modern progress and novelty. Thus, today the humble, well-meaning charity shop might suggest, among its anodyne skeins of abandoned wool; its seemingly innocuous bric-a-brac and nic-nacs, a modernity which has for long vaingloriously failed to anticipate and account for its enthusiastic overproduction of the old.

As Benjamin was aware, the Surrealists were not convinced by, and caught up in the crass drive to simply be more modern or most new, rather they felt that the most peculiar, discomforting and disruptive forces in the modern world are found in unexpected ramifications of the rapid passing-over of the tidal new, and the subsequently anachronistic silt, the formless mass of flotsam and jetsam that modernity leaves in its wake.

A certain modern tendency may have also set aside as redundant (according to a form of quasi-Darwinian evolution) all kinds of unresolved possibilities that come to rest inert

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<sup>5</sup> While Marcel Duchamp invented the rule of thumb “Escape Forward”, today, we are perhaps recommending a reversal of that trajectory.

on the banks of fast flowing modernity. But we can enter and re-cultivate this arena; take on the challenge of each new technology as it presents itself; and do our best to divert its myopic trajectory, broadening and pluralising its one-way street. We might thereby humanise it, expanding and exploring its sensual potential, however remote that might initially seem to be.

In the novella *Mad Love*, Andre Breton and Alberto Giacometti tour a flea market in search of, not 'contemporary art' but *objet d'art*; abandoned objects of debatable value still smelling uncannily of death; debris gleaned unceremoniously from house clearances, but which, given some Surrealist attention might take on a special meaning and even gain an afterlife.

In his essay on Surrealism, while referring to the special value of "the outmoded", Benjamin noted the worth of: "the dresses of five years ago"; of "fashionable restaurants once the vogue has begun to ebb from them". He also spoke of trains that were (already in 1929) "beginning to age" and which therefore promised "mournful railway journeys" – an image far removed from that of the train as a prime example of speedy and effective modern dynamism.

Given the regular fluctuations of a modern environment, and the casino-like chaos of unregulated capitalist and consumerist economies, current technologies and contemporary consumer objects rise into the prominent hype of a celebrated new, only to crash down through the same value system. They fall from the heights of illuminated display, flattered by shining glass and proudly brandishing a high price tag, only to fall to the ignominy of 'SALE' status, then they fall to the 'off-price retailer', down, down to flimsy flea market table, then further, to the abject floor, remaining, without purpose when the market ends and the merchants have gone home; persisting as meaningless cultural artefacts, failed propositions, useless objects that have lost their context and with it their value.

Here lies a broken and unseasonable stocking-filler; there a faded family snap with indecipherable writing on the reverse. Then there is an abandoned shoe, bereft of its

partner. All await the dumper truck to crush them back into formless matter, ready to recycle, to go once again around the block of changing form and values.

## CONCLUSION

This bleak, nihilistic image, and general indictment of modern, capitalist and consumerist teleology might cause us to recall that previous Romanticisms have helped us confront death in a secular scenario scientifically stripped of religious assurances, and to have also enabled us to maintain a space of human wonder in an age dominated by cold-hearted capital, inhuman technology and rigorous reasoning.

The visible archive that the early modern world bequeaths us may be largely made of B&W media, drawn from photographs, films, black shellack and black vinyl, featuring scenes crowded with black carriages, top hats and frock coats, all amounting to a grand *grisaille* that brings to mind Baudelaire's observation, made in 1846, that, despite all our modernity "... we are all of us celebrating some funeral".



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KXmTh\\_Jheg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KXmTh_Jheg)

From 18 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ag5DxAadYY>

from 1 minute

In fact, we do not usually 'celebrate' funerals, however, in the 1924 movie *Entr'acte* by René Clair, incorporating music by Erik Satie, a cortege gradually accelerates, leaving well-dressed mourners to rush and eventually run as fast as they can to keep up with it.

Clair's surprising image of accelerating death might be inspired by the, then new technology of cinema itself; its novel ability to create the illusion of speeding up and slowing down time, using its very own fast-moving procession of still images, each hurrying to pass, first through the gate of the cine camera, then through the gate of the cine projector, and thereby into history <sup>6</sup> .

Perhaps Clair is suggesting that, unless we find some way to rein-in our headlong modern trajectory, by slowing, freezing or reversing, we are (at least in 1924) still destined – both as individuals, and as a society – to reach the grave all too early, and despite the arsenal of modern technologies we have evolved to reduce pain, lengthen life and cheat death.

The absurd appeal and strange meaning of Clair's image might also arise from associating sublime, inexorable and untimely death with the modern hubris and pride we take in our ability, aided by technology, to choose, control and determine our lives and our environment, which in turn becomes not only technologized but itself a kind of technology.

Surrealism, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan, all insisted upon and warned us to acknowledge a haunting and untimely real that the modern world would prefer to deny, defeat, repress or disguise. But death of course remains an ineffable challenge even to a modernity that would like to know and to see all, and which sees itself, allied to

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<sup>6</sup> Recalling that Jean Luc-Godard called cinema '... truth, 24 x a second', which later morphed into Laura Mulvey's title 'Death 24 x a Second'

technologies, as insuperable – albeit Promethean or akin to Mary Shelley’s image of modern man as a mad manufacturer of murderous and melancholic monsters.

Walter Benjamin noted in his *Storyteller* essay that modernity had attempted to sanitise and institutionalise death, taking it out of domestic rooms and houses and placing it in technologised, professional and scientific spaces.

“ ... Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual, and a most exemplary one ... In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died ... Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death ... and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs ... ”

Provoked by Clair’s film, we might recognise a shared plight and perhaps complain that we have been cheated by a modernity that runs away with itself, and which has run away from us. Modernity moved faster than expected, quickly slipped out of our control, accumulated so much and so many kinds of new that these all-too-quickly became so many olds. Thus, there may be no point in debating today whether e.g. Artificial Intelligence could or should grow beyond our mastery of it, after all this is the primary characteristic of all technologies, to only and always be what Marshall McLuhan once called ‘extensions of man’. The primary characteristic of all technologies must be to go beyond ourselves and beyond our control, as their *raison d’être*; to extend our current capabilities at any moment<sup>7</sup>.

In every case, once we have set a new technology in motion, we should not be surprised if we are soon reduced to its ragged followers and obedient servants, hurrying to catch up with its assured and superior stride; anxious to accommodate, please, improve and

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, A.I.’s greatest claim to fame is its ability to ‘scrape’ and remake our collective past, to give current form to a mass of data that is our collective memory, an enormous burial site or tomb, repeatedly raided to make up the present and the future from the dust left by all of our aging activity.

repair it. As Professor Howard Caygill wrote in a preface to the book *Technologies of Romance Part 1*:

“ ... what if we were, not just a by-product, but a *romance* of technology, a toy contrived to amuse and comfort itself during its slow gestation?”

And yet, to find and situate ourselves amid a wide range and a long history of technologies, we need to gain a perspective on them, to be able to choose, to be unharnessed from, and no longer led by any trending technology – e.g. the digital, or A.I. – that would have us swept up in its powers, beyond our own powers and will.

Rather, we might today wish and deserve to be newly freed and newly pleased to use the newest technologies to venture through the widest and deepest history of technologies, enjoying and affirming their difference and celebrating their anachronism, bringing to attention, and into the present, their temporal alterity, perhaps finding ways in which they had not been used or perceived in their own heyday. In this way, we might reclaim some cultural dignity and maintain the primacy of our most human abilities.

Ultimately, it is the artists' role, as a servant and servicer of the senses<sup>8</sup>, to neither flinch nor flee in fear of the new, but to rise to its occasion in artful ways. Benjamin wrote that, as children, figures in fairy tales prepare us to negotiate the many difficulties of life by using “cunning and high spirits”. Nietzsche, another great champion of the child (whose ‘*Thus Spake Zarathustra*’ sometimes resembles a gauche school pantomime) would have approved of this strategy. Today, as artists, writers and thinkers, we might accept Benjamin's advice and take a strategically naive stance in our encounters with new technologies that far exceed us in their own form of intricate sophistication

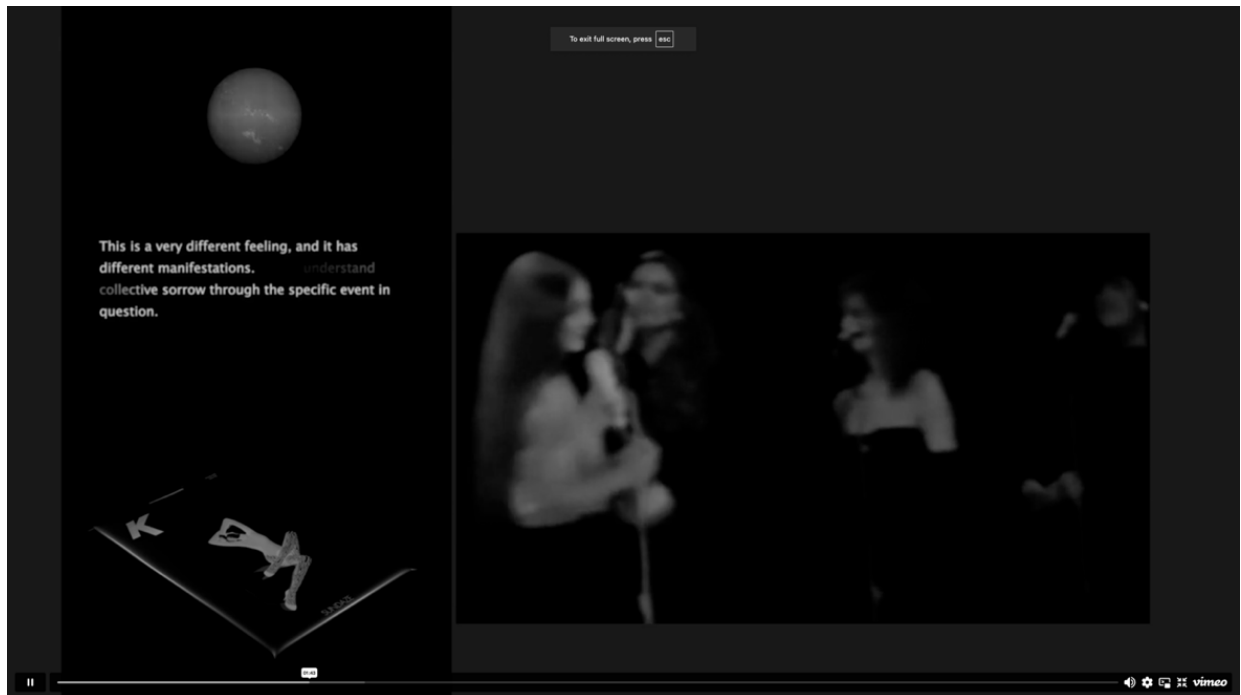
Now, I would like to conclude by sharing some examples of contemporary artists who might just use that ‘cunning and high spirits, and who also treat the past as a productive playground in which to find and explore.

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<sup>8</sup> and as a ‘scientist of exceptions – Alfred Jarry.



## ELIZABETH PRICE



<https://vimeo.com/130197064>

VIMEO PASSWORD (N.B. DO NOT SHARE!) ep100ep100

(from 1.30 to 3.30 minutes.)

Artist Elizabeth Price provides a useful example of how, what we are calling ‘*Technologies of Romance*’ can be effectively deployed. Her sophisticated sonic and visual montages default to a dense blackness as she features morbid reminders of loss; lost singers and lost songs, exhumed from history, along with their style, moves and looks. These images were first made with 20<sup>th</sup> century technologies but are now reborn by the artist using digital archiving and 21st century research methods.

Price’s ‘K’ (2015) features spooky, fuzzy, B&W images of 1960s singers doing a ritualistic dance, swishing waist-length hair, performing rock and roll rituals. In an accompanying text, read by a robotic voice, the artist equates the pop singers’ role with that of professional mourners. Hence, blues, soul, pop and rock, for Price, all account for a general sense of modern mourning.

## OLIVIA PLENDER



<https://vimeo.com/539123662>

VIMEO PASSWORD (N.B. DO NOT SHARE!) HOLD HOLD FIRE

<https://vimeo.com/539129030>

VIMEO PASSWORD (N.B. DO NOT SHARE!) HOLD HOLD FIRE

0 to 1.40 mins

Artist and historian of feminism Olivia Plender has recently toyed with the apparently anachronistic technique of *tableaux vivant*. It is easy to see how and why this tradition (vividly recorded both in Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities* and in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*) was swept aside by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century advent of photography. The precocious mechanical newcomer of photography must have readily satisfied the thirst that, strangely to today's audience, made an entertainment out of *tableaux vivant*'s enthusiasm for dressing and posing as well-known works of art. The photographic camera, with its ability to fix a miniature image and thereby appear to gain control over

an increasingly mobile modern world, may well have rendered the *tableaux vivant* tradition absurd and redundant.

In Plender's work '*Hold, Hold, Fire*' (2023) the artist partially reconstructs a found Edwardian image of a group of suffragettes rehearsing defensive military manoeuvres in an East London park. In Plender's version, staged as a *tableaux vivant*, then recorded on video, the women rehearse a defensive strategy using mock weapons (real in the original photograph) to hold a territorial position <sup>9</sup>.



As part of the same event, the participants in Plender's tableau underwent a training workshop that taught the skill of causing an obstruction by linking multiple mobile bodies together into one relatively *immobile* body – a body of resistance, protest and mutual defence. As such, the anachronistic art form of *tableaux vivant* is effectively

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<sup>9</sup> The original photo was probably taken by a suffragette called Norah Smyth around 1914, although it is not credited. There are also men in the photo, but it is the group of women to the right of the image that I have focussed on. The men were those sympathetic to the cause of votes for women. The group are called The People's Army and were part of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes.

revived and pressed into the service of making a contemporary image, one that falls between the still and the moving image. Meanwhile it uses this uncomfortable, liminal status to address a contemporary political goal from an oblique angle.

## PABLO BRONSTEIN



Pablo Bronstein can confront the audience with a certain power invested in the architecture and design of a pre-modernist era <sup>i</sup> <sup>ii</sup>. This is an architectural and design ‘power’ (Bronstein sometimes refers to it as ‘pomp’) that modernism relinquished only in order to promote a language and power of its own. Should we call Bronstein a post-modernist then? It’s such an unfashionable term that today it is almost starting to sound provocative. Then again, his work wryly never lets us know whether he likes or loathes the materials and references with which he plays. The artist, and some commentators on his work seem to stress certain ironic and absurd qualities. The works might be jokes that you may or may not ‘get’. And while you are trying to work this out you can admire the skill that goes into their creation. This includes an acquired, well-honed illustrative drawing style and the purposeful fashioning of images and objects that necessarily live in a kind of limbo, somewhere between present and past.

Bronstein seems to suggest that history waits to be read, mis-read, re-read, inscribed and re-inscribed on the city’s streets, as a living museum. Those streets, and even (on

annual ‘Open House’ days) some of its most interesting buildings, are free to enter <sup>iii</sup> . Just as when we listen to pop music and its own popular history on the radio, we do not need to be wealthy, nor obtain a reader’s ticket to tend to architecture’s archive, its language, stories and voices surround, contextualise and shape us. One of the few remaining benefits of living, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as an artist or student, in an impossibly expensive historic city, is that, no matter how little we might have left in our pocket or bank account we are still allowed and able to peruse the city and read its story, interwoven with our own, in the brick and stone, glass and steel, concrete and tarmac of its buildings and roads.

**SIGRID HOLMWOOD**

<https://sigridholmwood.co.uk/>





The artist Sigrid Holmwood pushes a meticulously researched feminist revisionism to new and adventurous limits by utilising handmade versions of ancient tools, medieval processes and techniques that open-up, provocatively, seriously and yet also sometimes comically, unearthed tales that are yet to be told of the oppressed and repressed powers of women.

Holmwood simultaneously widens and deepens our notion of both history and technologies, finding the past, the ancient, the medieval to be just as ‘technologised’ as today, but in its very own way. The artist thus tackles feminist history with a unique sense of depth, making and using costumes and props to create, not just her works but her practice, her process and herself, as an artist seemingly suspended between the present and a medieval realm in which art, the artist, and her audience become affirmatively reacquainted with witchery, spell-making and alchemy, all of which, under patriarchal oppression have been slanderously tainted as derogatory terms.

Holmwood’s unique and radical use of history challenges the smooth, illuminated screens and brightly lit consumer facades of the contemporary, all of which are often exemplified in and by contemporary art. She thereby challenges the blinkered positivity and myopic enthusiasm with which new technologies prioritise the present at the expense of the past. Holmwood contrarily suggests that much of the potential richness



and depth that is available to us lies in an imaginative, committed and creative engagement with the past.

## TAVARES STRACHAN



Tavares Strachan, *Black Star*, 2024, installation view in 'Tavares Strachan: There Is Light Somewhere', Hayward Gallery, London, 18 June – 1 September 2024, photo by Mark Blower, courtesy of the artist and the Hayward Gallery

At London's Hayward Gallery in summer 2024, one of that brutalist museum's flat concrete roofs was flooded by the artist Tavares Strachan to create a convincing, *tableau* of a twentieth-century steamship, as if floating on a sea. When a real outdoor breeze gently ruffled the surface of the water it gave more life to the illusion. Meanwhile a few manufactured bubbles added a sense of motion and direction.

That direction turned out to be South and East, or 'towards Africa' as the accompanying information told us. This emotive piece, titled *Black Star* (2024), represents twentieth-century activist and leader Marcus Garvey's one-time vision of 'The Black Star Line'. This was to be a black-owned and run shipping company, which would, or could, develop ethically profitable business and cultural trade between Africa and its U.S. diaspora. Though Garvey's ambitious venture did not prevail (it was probably sabotaged); and while his many audacious contributions to twentieth-century debates remain controversial, Strachan rescues this episode from the shadows of history and offers an affirmative representation of Garvey's vision, thereby providing the present with a charming rendition of an otherwise failed and forgotten twentieth-century dream.

END

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<sup>i</sup> See <https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/pablo-bronstein-sketches-regency-living>

<sup>ii</sup> This is perhaps an appropriate place to mention another architectural intervention at the ICA buildings, by the artist Cameron Rowland titled: *3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London 29 January to 19 April, 2020.

See: <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/cameron-rowland-3-4-will.-iv-c.73>

from which:

‘... in the upstairs galleries ... comparisons are made between the practice of branding slaves as chattel and the current programme of tagging and monitoring used by the U.S. parole service’  
and:

‘The caption for ‘Encumbrance’ (2020) outlines the history of 12 Carlton House (the site of the ICA) and its transfer under George IV from a royal household to rental accommodation that continues to provide revenue to the Crown Estate. Rowland stresses that in general the Crown Estate provides 75% of its revenue to the Treasury and 25% to the monarch. The artist then rolls into this exposition references to the trading of mahogany (synonymous with the slave trade) and five mahogany features within the interior of the ICA - four doors and a handrail. By assigning these features to a mortgage investment that is exempt from the historic contract, Rowland is able to disrupt the flow of profit to the Crown Estate, effectively and selectively diminishing the value of the property.’

<sup>iii</sup> See <https://open-city.org.uk/how-to-take-part-in-open-house-festival>