Echoes of the Future

The Crisis of the Utopian Thought.

DOCTORAL THESIS

Author:

Przemysław Liput, MA

Supervisor:

Dr hab. Grzegorz Hańderek

Reviewer:

Reviewer:

Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice

Faculty of Art

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1. Inspirations

In the practical part of the doctoral thesis I produced a series of prints rendered in the digital print technique and a cycle of animated films presented in a form of video installations concerning a set of issues related to time, to chronology. My ideological assumptions oscillate around themes related to time perceived not as a linear record, but as a loop, where it is difficult to distinguish between the future and the past. I am interested in the concept of parallel worlds, time loops, alternative realities, especially in the science-fiction approach. For its starting point my quest takes the closing scene of the film entitled *Planet of the Apes* (the destroyed Statue of Liberty in New York) as well as Isaac Asimov's novel entitled *Nightfall*[1] (1941). It is a tale of a cyclical, looped life of inhabitants of a distant planet who every two thousand years, after reaching the technological limit, as a result of a cataclysm return to the stone age. The protagonists of the novel find the remains of an ancient, scientifically advanced culture. On the basis of archaeological findings, splinters of the former reality, they endeavour to recreate the picture of the fallen civilisation. The cycle repeats itself, the history comes full circle, despite the protagonists' efforts, an imminent regress awaits their world. The chronology becomes disturbed – the future becomes the past, the boundaries become blurry.

Inspired by 'time capsules', so popular in the 20th century, containing information and items addressed to future generations, and fascinated with the cargo on the Voyager 1 space probe (a golden record with a sound 'portrait' of the Earth, destined for alien civilisations), I created a tale of a world which radically departs from ours, both in technological and cultural terms, a world in which futurological promises of the 20th century have come true to become everyday reality. It is something akin to an 'archaeology of the future', manipulation of time, introduction of another order and chronology. The narration of overlapping tales has its foundation in the Wellesian idea of presenting the future from the perspective of a museum[2], employed in *Time Machine:* while travelling in time, the main protagonist arrives at a derelict building filled with bizarre artefacts, traces of unknown cultures. The site turns out to be a long-ago destroyed museum, while the objects collected there in reality are an image of the future to him as yet unknown.

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[1] *Nightfall,* Isaac Asimov, Robert Silverberg, Warszawa 1993
[2] After: Fredric Jameson, Archaeologies of the future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, Cracow 2011, p.119

Figure 1. Frame from *Planet of the Apes*, (1968), dir. Franklin J. Schaffner

Futurology provided a substantial inspiration. I have an interest in daring visions of the future, especially those divorced from reality: off-the-mark future scenarios of the civilisation, constituting sets of 'wishful thinking', where the hypotheses described are closer to an uninhibited fiction rather than to science. I find inspiration in erroneous predictions, utopian criticism, witty anachronisms, and futurological promises. My quest is fuelled by the human curiosity of tomorrow. I am inspired by prognostics and inseparable inability to accurately forecast the future, audacity of futurological theses, while at times - even an outright arrogance of scientific prediction committees. Simultaneously, the leitmotif of the works is nostalgia, longing for times that never came to pass, and a starting point for a discussion on the subject: '*Why/Whether We Experiencing a Crisis of a Utopian Thought*'.

The prepared material is divided into three parts:

1. Two pre-cinematographic machines with analogue animations under a shared title – *Przyszłość (The Future)*,

2. A cycle of video collages rendered in the pixilation technique – *Teraźniejszość (The Present*)

3. A series of prints in the form of backlit slides – *Przeszłość (The Past)*.

The titles of the cycles are suggestive of linearity, a cause-and-effect sequence, however, the narration tends to include loops and repetitions which allow the works to be read in an alternative order.

2. The Mutoscope

The central part of the artistic work is a film machine inspired by cinematographic automats from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century – the Mutoscope (literally: a seeing changer), the Kinora, and the Kinetoscope. The forms of these machines, their construction, and mechanisms differ depending on the model described, yet the shared characteristic of these devices is the manner of creation of motion of films displayed inside. The operation of these simple cinematic apparatuses was based on the retinal inertia, known as a stroboscopic effect. Presented moving photographs closed in a loop, producing an illusion of movement, would be installed inside a kind of an automatic box or cylinder, most frequently propelled with a crank, or - at a later time - an electric engine. Depending on the model of the machine the manner in which cards/film frames were attached would change. In the Mutoscope it was a hand-propelled reel (equipped with a crank handle) with radially attached cards, operating on the principle of a 'mechanical booklet' of a flip-book type (800-1000 cards, i.e. depending on the presentation speed – approx. 30 seconds of film). A mechanical 'finger' released subsequent flexible, appropriately bent beforehand, cards in front of a visor installed specifically for that purpose, which was used by the viewer to watch the film. In the Kinetoscope, it was – differently than in the Mutoscope – a loop of a film tape.

These devices could be encountered in restaurants, hotel foyers, shops, and at stations, but also in tents of itinerant cinemas and popular 'bioscopes'. The Mutoscope and the Kinetoscope soon lost in significance, yielding the market battlefield to a lot more modern and profitable film projection.

3. The Characteristic Features of the Mutoscope

The characteristic feature of the above-described devices is a specific, very intimate manner of film presentation. Photographic images set in motion were usually viewed by a single spectator through a visor adapted specifically for this purpose, akin to a microscope eye-piece. This manner of exposition (peep-show) dominated the commercial manner of film presentation at the inception period of the cinema. At a small fee, usually one nickel[3], viewers watched generic scenes (frequently of an erotic nature), exotic locations beyond an average viewer's reach, historical and sporting events, current social and cultural events. Automats designed for entertainment 'transported' viewers to faraway places, allowed them to satiate their curiosity, and 'magically' participate in stories playing out inside the devices. The visor, similarly as the microscope eye-piece, put the members of the audience in the role of a voyeur, a silent observer.

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[3] Colloquially – a 5 cent coin. This is also the root of the name of the world's first ever cinema: Nickelodeon. After: www.historiasztuki.com.pl/strony/015-00-01-FILM-TECHNIKA.html, 17 May 2017.

The idea of putting the viewer in the role of a voyeur had obviously been known before: starting from portable perspective boxes, moving panoramas, magic lanterns, and stereoscopic devices closed in chests, through to complicated devices combining effects of painting with those of a stage performance. I found the principle of watching an image or a projection inside a box 'through a keyhole' to be very interesting. I associated it with one of the first science-fiction movies – a 1924 Soviet film entitled *Aelita*: *Queen of Mars*[4]. The queen in the title – a resident of a totalitarian Martian city (reminiscent of another futuristic film city form the same era – i.e. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*) using a device contrived by Gor – the court constructor – peeps on life on other planets. The complicated machine, constituting a cross between a telescope and an advanced computer, is something akin to an omnipresent camera allowing the user to pursue the observed object, and freely switch between scenes viewed in real time. Curious, Aelita watches Moscow – crowded and teeming with life, exotic desert landscapes, a port with battleships on their moorings, kissing people.

Figure 2. Frame from the English version of *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, dir. Jakow Protazanow, 1924

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[4] *Аэлита,* dir. Jakow Protazanow, 1924

She finds the scenes alien, the behaviour of humans bizarre (the Martians in this story are almost entirely devoid of emotions). Fascinated with exotic pictures, increasingly more often she slips out to the complicated observatory. The motif of a voyeur, observer of distant lands employed in this adventure film reminded me of the operating principle of the Photoplasticon and the Mutoscope where viewers, famished for and curious of the world, watched tropical landscapes and generic scenes. The fact that these mechanical boxes from the pre-cinema era are practically out of everyday use was not devoid of significance for me. The intended archaic character of the presentation of my films as well as their form remain in connection with the set of issues addressed in my project: the futurology of the times gone by with a particular emphasis on off-the-mark prognoses and technological 'dead ends'.

4. The Prototype and the Machine

I commenced to work on the machine by producing conceptual drafts and a prototype. The stage of designing the mechanism was preceded by the stage of experimentation. A whole series of kinetic toy-mechanisms was produced – praxinoscopes, zoetropes, and other stroboscopic pre-cinematographic devices. Having become familiar with the professional literature on the pre-film history, with a particular emphasis on descriptions of portable 'optical shows', having verified the information on simple cinematic machines available on DIY internet forums, I chose a mechanism loosely inspired by technical solutions proposed in the 1902 Mutoscope design by Arthur S. Ferguson[5]. The gears of the mechanism propelling the film roll and the casing were made of 3 mm laser-cut birch plywood.
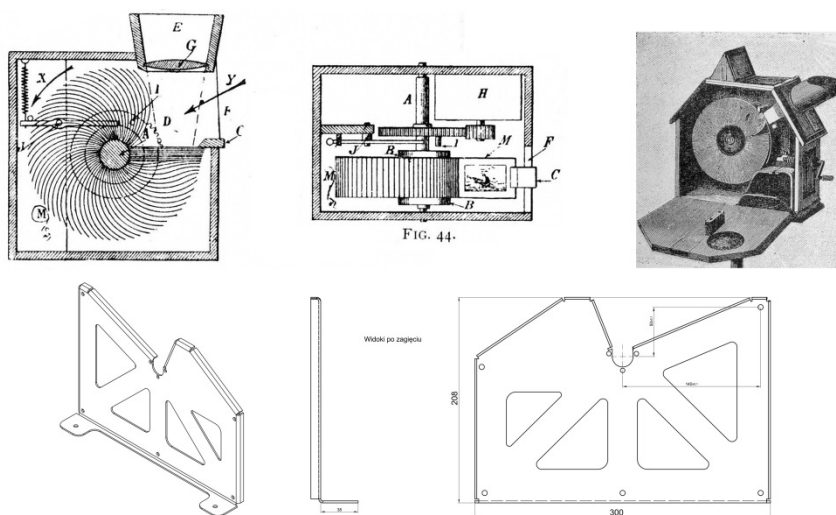

Figure 3. On the left, Kinora manufactured by Gaumont , www.victorian-cinema.net; on the right: the frame of the author's Mutoscope, own resources.

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[5] Patent by Arthur S. Ferguson, 1902; www.google.com/patents/US948272

Figure 4. 1.2.3- The Mutoscope, made by Wojciech Wujkowski, own resources; 4.5.6.7- The Mutoscope mechanism detail; photo by Mirosław Niesyto, own resources**.**

In the final version of the machine, I decided to apply the mechanism of operation employed in Kinora, manufactured by Gaumont, substantially different from Ferguson's proposal in terms of the propulsion of the core with attached film frames.

The mechanism was encased in a minimalist wooden case, covered in Imbuia veneer, and mounted on four turned oak legs at the height convenient for the viewer. The casing features a round aperture with a magnifying glass, through which the viewer may watch an animated film displayed inside the machine. The top section of the device has a lid allowing

for the changing of a film 'roll'. The appearance of Kinora, the application of an exotic veneer, and the manual drive are more reminiscent of a piece of 1950s furniture, an item from another era, rather than a modern designer machine.
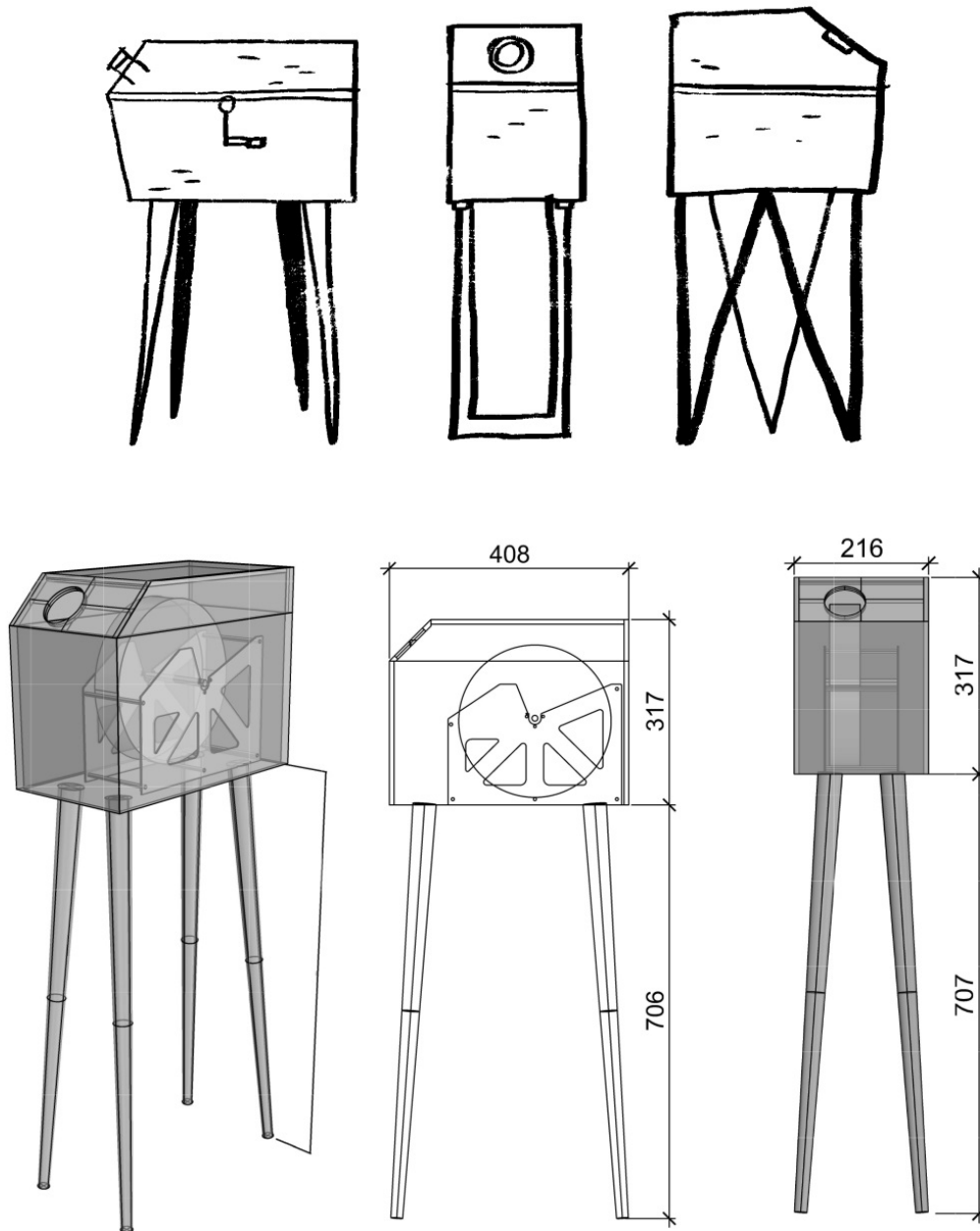

Figure 5. Sketches and preliminary design of the Mutoscope casing, made by Michał Jarmolowicz (design), own resources.

Figure 6. Mutoscope in the casing. Photo by Mirosław Niesyto, own resources

Two identical portable cinematic machines were produced. Inside, I installed two animated films, rendered in the photo-animation technique with elements of time-lapse drawing. They feature an astronaut with a rocket knapsack, flying freely in indefinite cosmic or multidimensional space.
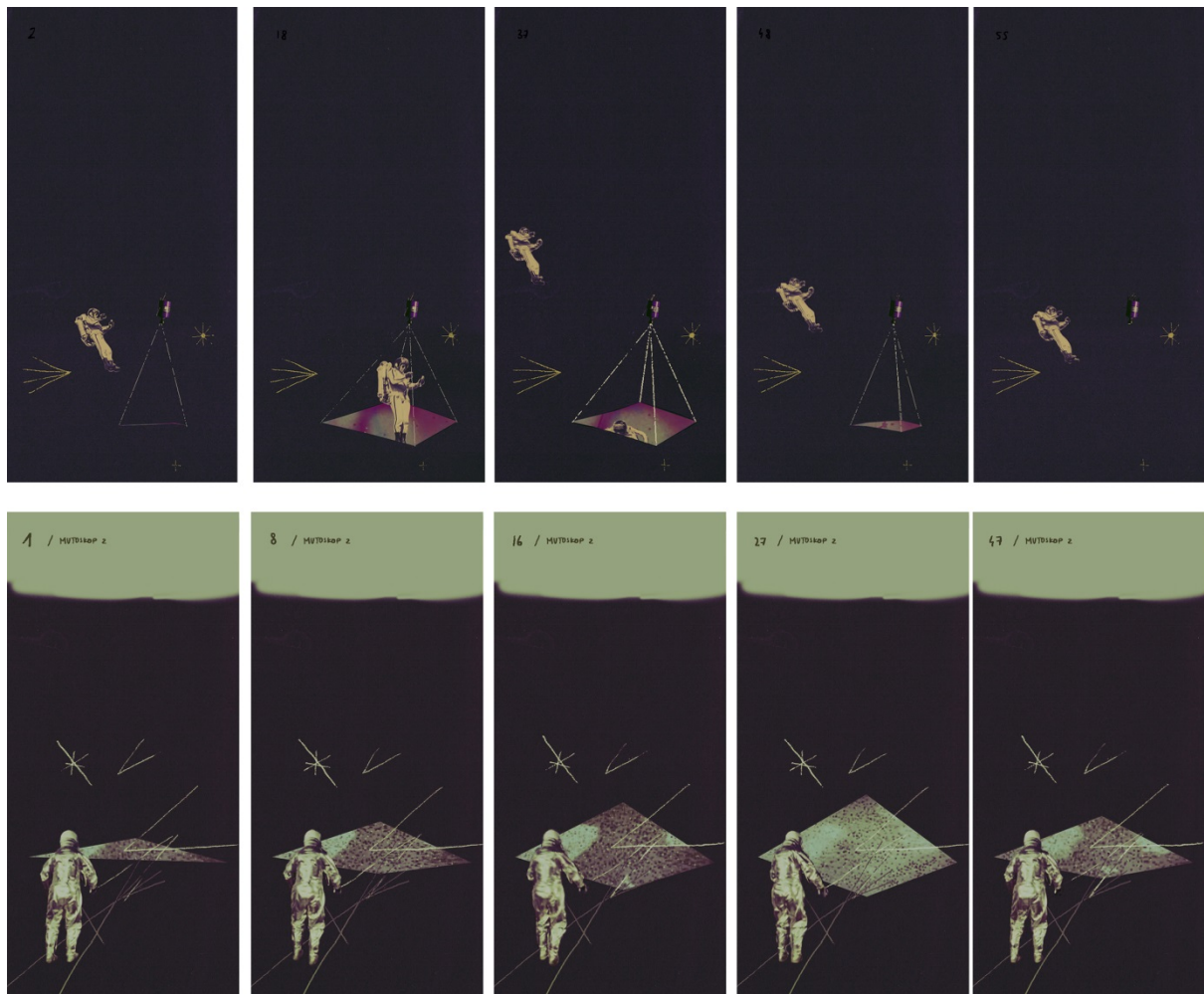
Figure 7. Selected frames from the animated films displayed in the Mutoscopes, 4.5x6 cm, paper; own resources

5. Prints

Next to the cinematic machines, I have also created a cycle of prints rendered in the digital print technique (10 works). A number of works was produced, reproduced in the form of 35 mm slides, installed in laser-cut plywood boxes (14x9, 5x9.5 cm). As in the case of the Mutoscopes, I attached particular importance to adhering to the principle of voyeurism. The prints are viewed through a magnifying glass attached to the casing. The appearance of the boxes is fashioned after slide light boxes and slide viewers. Inside the casing, an LED light is installed. Working on collages, I used graphic materials, fragments of engravings, old prints, archival photographs, and papers. This way a series of prints combining the space age aesthetic with landscape in the classical painting approach was created. The cycle was inspired by the work of German painter Caspar David Friedrich, from whom I have loaned the manner of composition consisting in contrasting a human silhouette with wild nature. Elements of cosmic landscapes, eerie ruins, solitary travellers engrossed in alien landscapes, the composition and the mood draw directly upon the iconography of Romanticism. The cycle refers to the era of great geographical discoveries of the 19th and 20th centuries[6], combining the aesthetic of classical painting with pulp science-fiction and the times of conquest of the Outer Space. In these works I engaged in a play with time, disturbed chronology, narration other than a linear progression – in a way the presented world is 'the past seen from the perspective of a Utopia come true'.

The landscapes were inspired by ironic works of Danish artist Nils-Ole Lund, presenting modernist architecture as ancient ruins[7] and by Ettore Sottsass's[8] prints from the cycle which portrays walking cities of the Archigram group surrendering to nature.

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[6] Times of Amundsen and Scott, Livingstone and Stanley.
[7] Collage cycle *Przyszłość architektury (The Future of Architecture),* 1970.
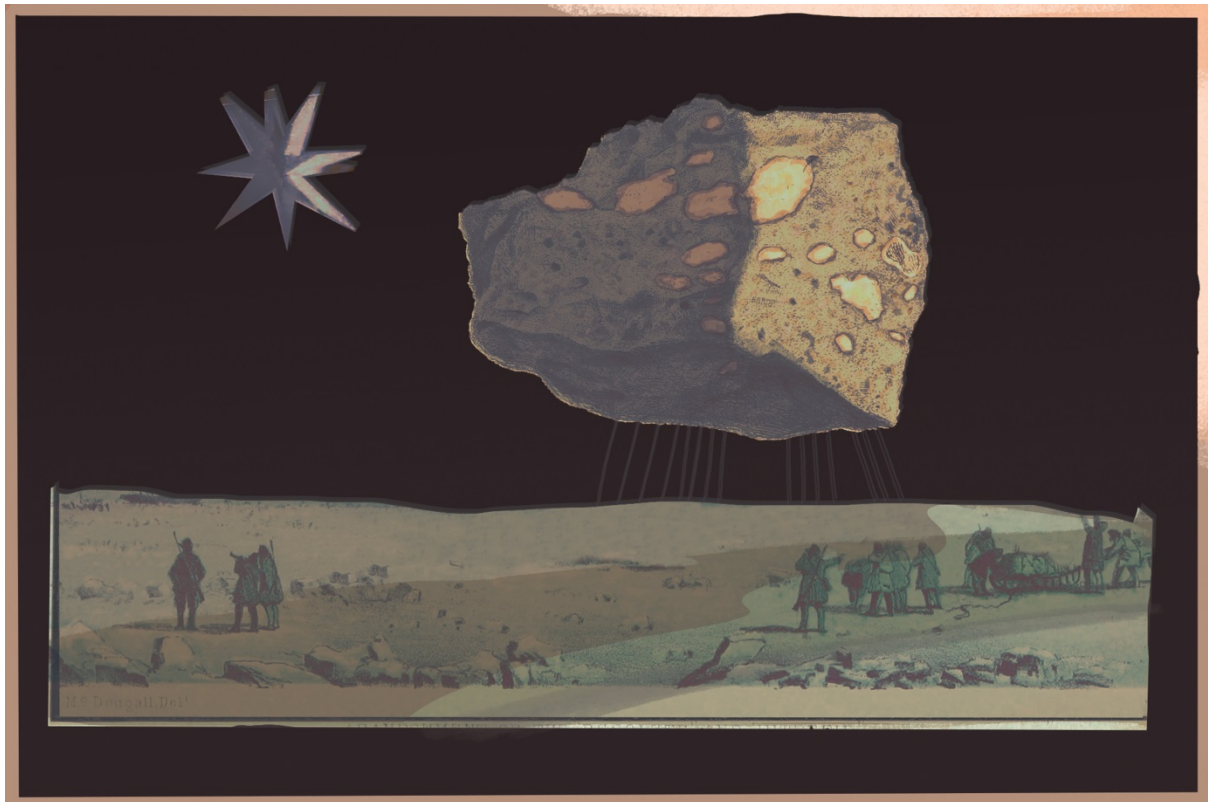[8] *Walking City, Standing Still,* 1973, *Another Utopia,* Ettore Sottsass

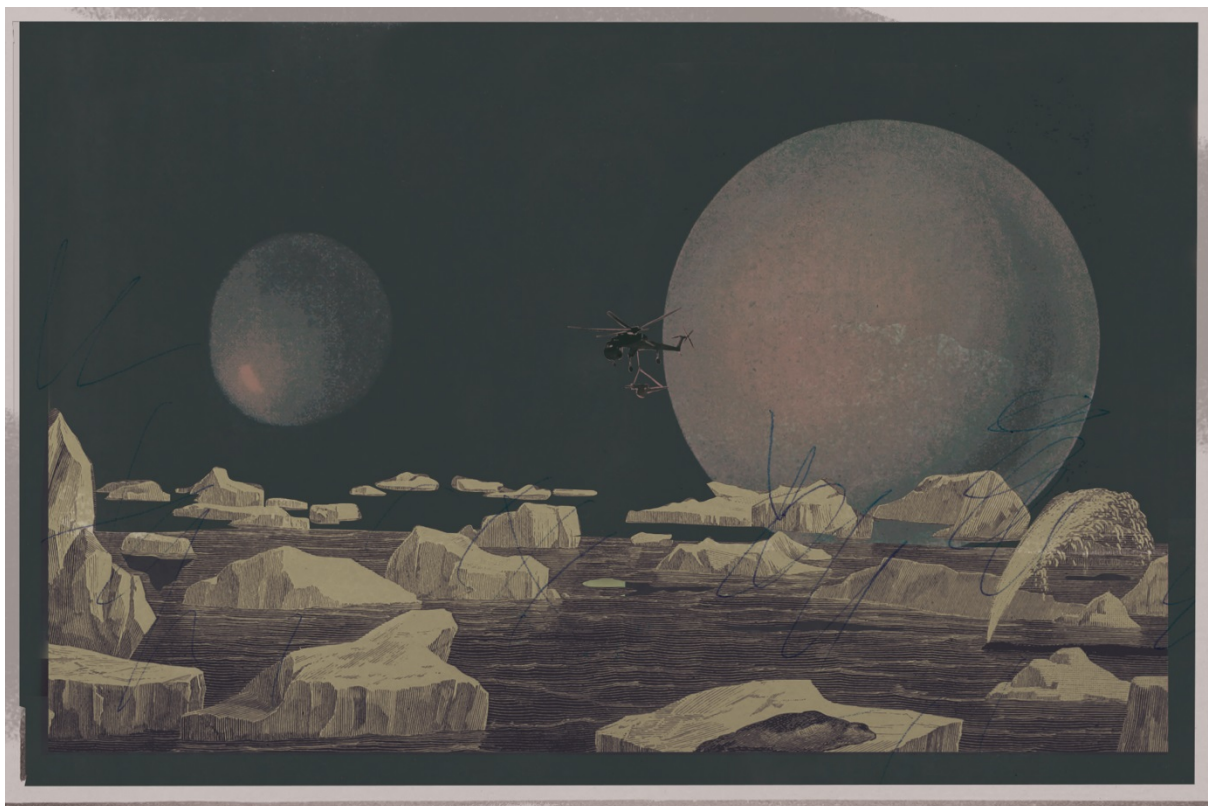**Figure 8.** Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slid

Figure 9. Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide

Figure 10. Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide

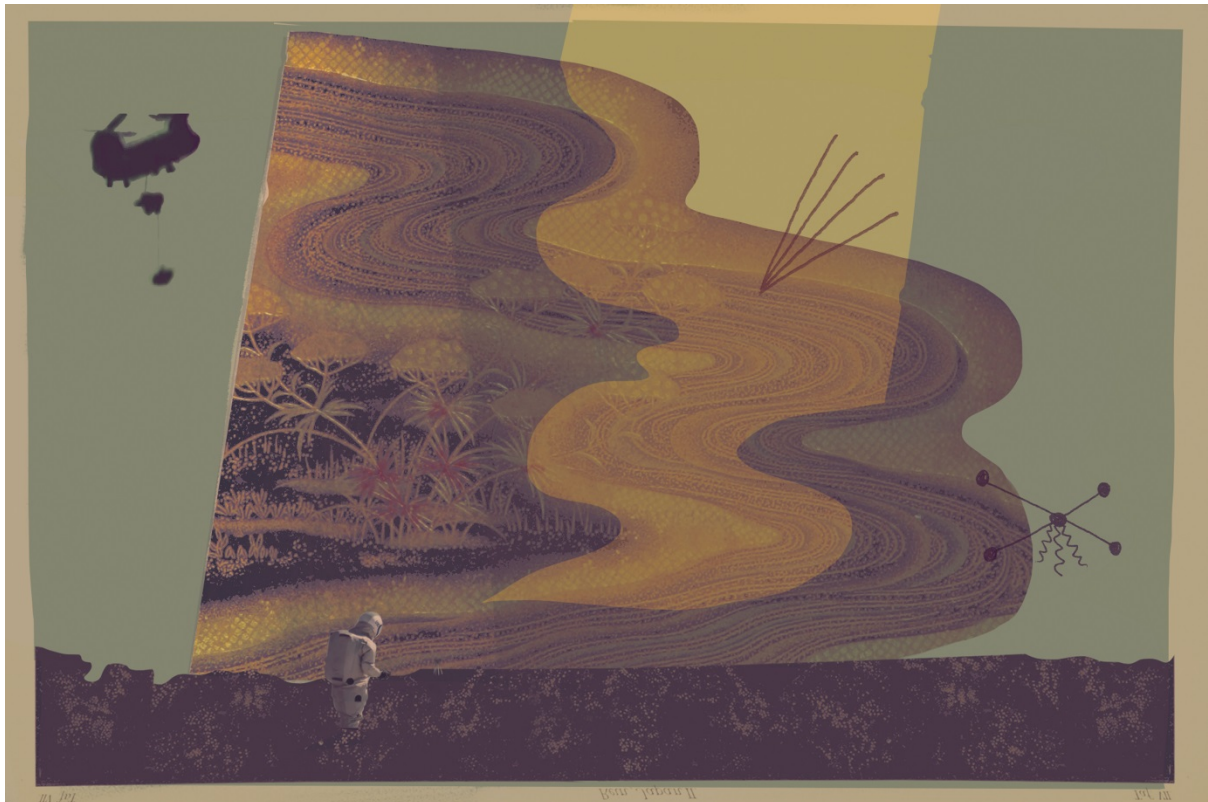**Figure 11.** Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide

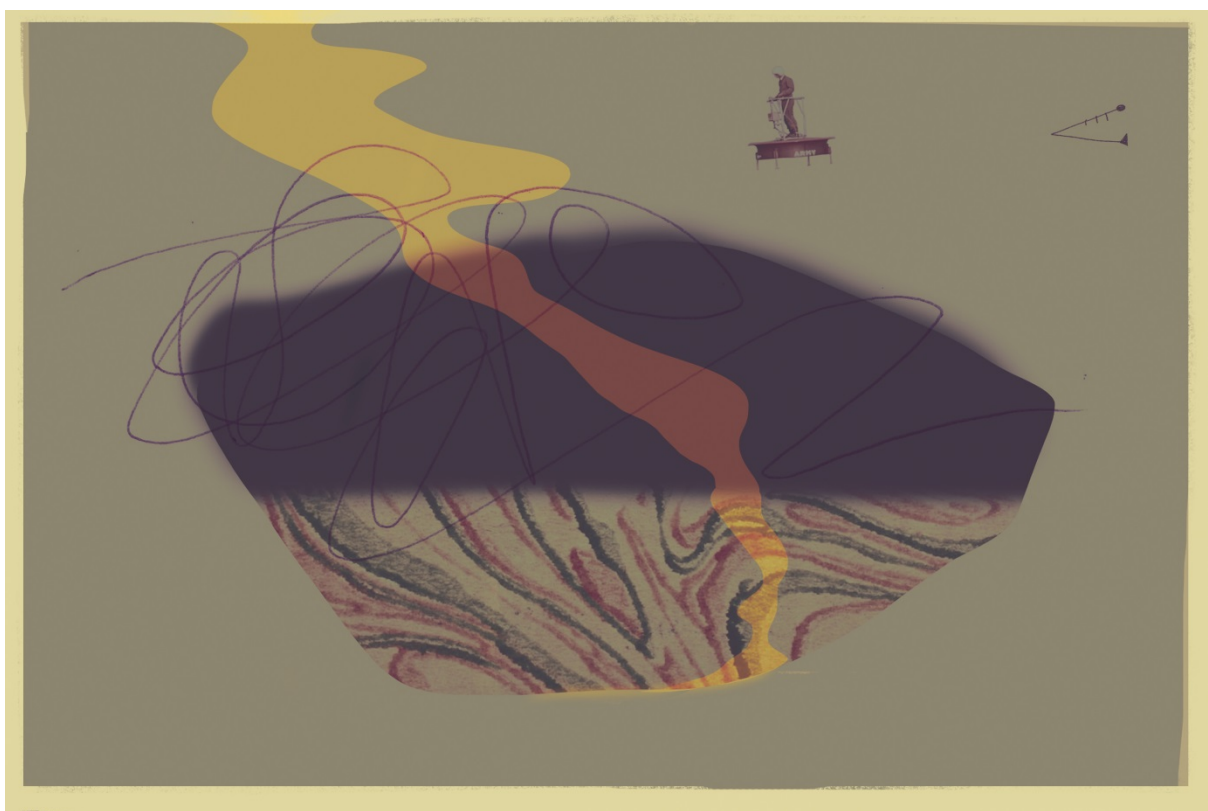**Figure 12**. Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide

Figure 13. Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide

Figure 14. Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide

Figure 15. Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide.

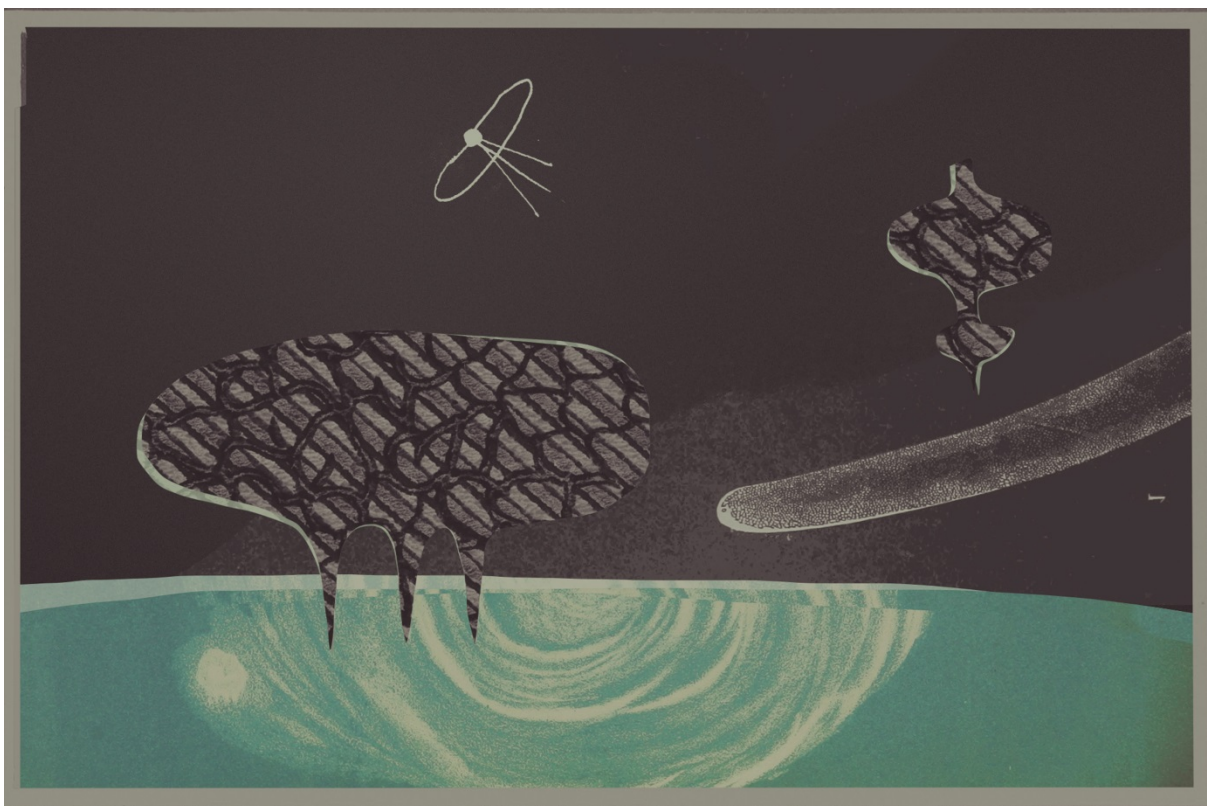**Figure 16.** Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide.

Figure 17. Print from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*, 35mm slide.

Figure 18. The manner of presentation of prints from the cycle entitled *Przeszłość (The Past)*. Own resources

6. Animated Films

The third part is a series of animated collages presented, similarly as the previous works, in the form of encased wooden boxes with a viewing aperture (13x22,5x18 cm). Video frames with a several minutes long looped animation were installed inside. Using digital screens in the approximate vicinity of machines from the 'pre-cinema' period (Mutoscopes) is a deliberate procedure. One of the characteristics of retro-futurism, which I refer to, is a technological anachronism consisting in an aesthetic dissonance arising from juxtaposing incongruent elements where an old-fashioned technology exists on equal rights with the futuristic one. There are five objects, each of them plays a film consisting of three scenes. The animations are played at the speed of 25 frames per second, in the PAL definition (aspect ratio: 4x3, definition: 720x576). In the era of a commonly used Full HD frame (1920x1080), the PAL may seem an archaic choice, yet the choice of this frame shape is deliberate. Its goal is to highlight the retro aesthetic of the displayed content. The magnifying glass installed in the box's front panel delicately distorts the displayed digital content, a small size of the aperture persuades the viewer to get closer to the object and to 'take a look around' (the eye-piece is so small that it is not possible to watch the entire film looking straight ahead of the object glass). One of the inspirations for the use of a lens and a digital screen is the look of computers in *Brasil* (1985) - an Orwellian movie directed by Terry Gilliam, where small semi-analogue cathode monitors are magnified by conveniently mounted magnifying glasses.

The content displayed inside the boxes was composed according to the principles of collage. Prior to commencing the work, I had collected a large archive of historic films from the collection of the US Army, NASA, British Pathé, and stocks offering free or paid public domain records. I established the time frames for the output content for films produced not later than in the 20th century. I processed and looped the selected content using graphic processing software, where frame after frame I cut out fragments of landscapes, figures, or structures[9]. This way a substantial catalogue of generic scenes, representations of architecture, flora and fauna was compiled. Later they were used to compose looped (from 3 to 200 frames per 'module') animated collages inspired by conceptual sketches for architectural designs by SUPERSTUDIO or the Archigram group[10]. The archival works were treated as a raw material, compiled and juxtaposed with other works, contrasted and embedded in a context departing from the original. The works employ an open composition, elements cut out from archival films were combined together against a monochromatic background. The action building manner was loaned from the tradition of the films presented in the Mutoscopes, where technical limitations allowed for the presentation of only short looped scenes without a soundtrack. The animated collages rendered in the Found Footage technique should be read as an 'animated print' rather than a classical

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[9] This technique is called pixilation or photo-animation. Zbigniew Rybczyński's Oscar-winning movie *Tango* (1980) produced in the SE-MA-FOR studio was made using this technique.

[10] *Tuned Suburb,* Ron Herron, 1968, *Tuning London's South Bank (detail)*, Ron Herron, 1972, *Motorway*, SUPERSTUDIO, 1969, *The Continuous Monument: New York. Perspective*, SUPERSTUDIO, 1969

motion picture, they are closer to computer .gif files than to works with a classical introduction, unfolding, and ending. The application of a loop was intended to create an impression of the recorded situation being 'suspended in time'.

The films are characterised by a very specific colour theme, due to the substantial use of archival film materials collected and the application of the Kodcharome Super-8 photographic film[11]. Oversaturated colours with a prevalent amount of magenta, a high contrast level, a fine grain, the fps – all these and many other imperfections of this film tape serve to highlight the retro aesthetic and evoke a memory of nostalgic family films from another era. Deliberate video errors, glitches, interlacing[12] left in some places – all are consciously applied procedures. In the times of hegemony of the Full HD format and ever increasing perfectionism of recording devices, I postulate a return to an analogue method for constructing the graphic quality.

Adapted in a convention of chronicle, the animated films constitute an attempt at bringing closer the image of a utopia come true, told from the perspective of past events. It is something akin to a 'time capsule' from the world that never came to be, or a 'signal' from an alternative reality. The five animated collages oscillate around the iconic themes, fears, or - at times – trivial mundane situations.

The cycle entitled *Domy (Houses)* presents a collection of futurological forecasts regarding flats and apartments of the future. Therein, one can detect inspirations with *Dome Over Manhattan* by Ricard Buckminster Fuller (1971), Soviet megastructures for the Arctic areas of the Soviet Union[13], idyllic American suburbia.

The collage entitled *Pożary (Fires)* employs a convention of a reportage and film chronicle showing engulfed in flames megastructures inspired by Japanese metabolism.

Egzotyka (Exotic Things?) is a series of cosmic landscapes modelled on promises of interplanetary vacations, loosely inspired by the *Tiki*[14] aesthetic.

The *Monorail (Monorail)* cycle takes advantage of an iconic means of public transport in cities of the future – a monorail train which, next to airborne cars and moloch cities, is a popular determinant of the retro-future style[15].

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[11] The favourite film tape of American amateur filmmakers from the mid-20th century. Introduced onto the market by the Eastman Kodak company in 1935, withdrawn from production in 2005. http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/

[12] A technique of image analysis, transmission, and display, consisting in alternate display of odd-numbered and even-numbered lines of image, commonly used in TV. It is used to decrease the bandwidth of the sent signal or to increase the apparent resolution of displayed images. In TV, it is mainly used to reduce screen flicker (twice more frequent projection of half a line instead of less frequent projection of a full frame). After: Wikipedia

[13] A. Szpikow and E. Szpikow ideas for Norilsk. After *Cold War Landscapes*, David Crowley, *Autoportret. Pismo o dobrej przestrzeni*, no. 34, 2011.

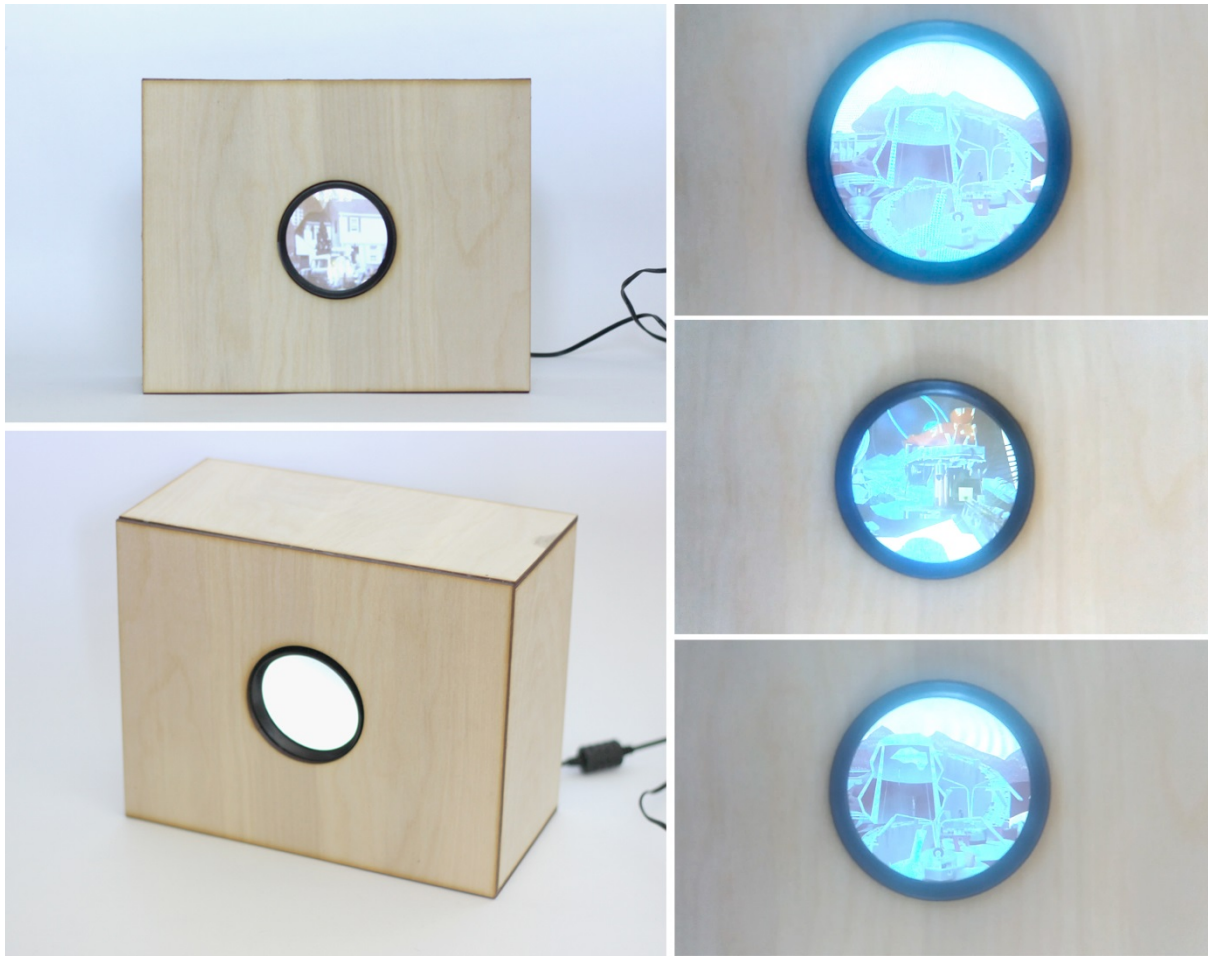[14] A style popular in the USA in the 20th century, drawing upon the culture and art of Polynesia.

Figure 19. The manner of presentation of prints from the cycle entitled *Teraźniejszość (The Present)*. Own resources.

In turn, *Katastrofy (Catastrophes)* is a cycle of dystopian visions engendered on the wave of a Cold War paranoia, fascination with nuclear energy, and life in the shadow of catastrophe.

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[15] Similar ideas may be found on the cover of the *Electrical Experimenter* magazine from August 1919, *Modern Mechanix and Inventions* from April 1935, a monorail was used to sightsee the *New York World's Fair 1964-65*, *Expo 67* in Montreal, Disney's *Tommorowland*, a monorail train continues to operate in many cities around the world.
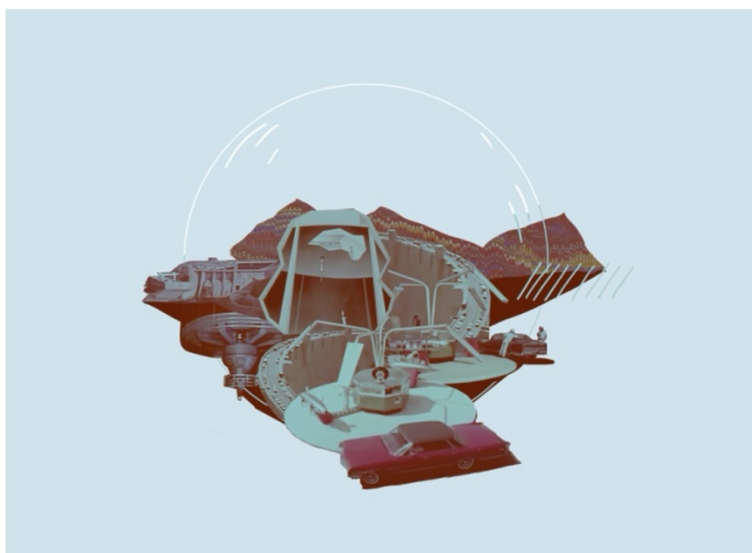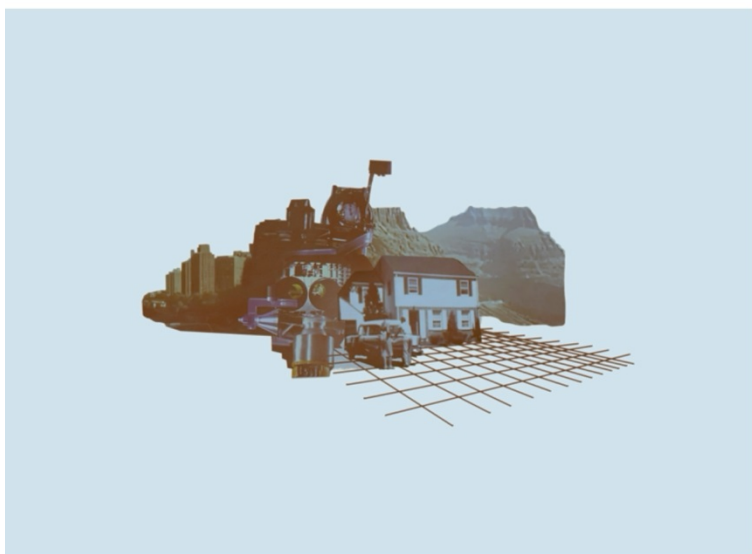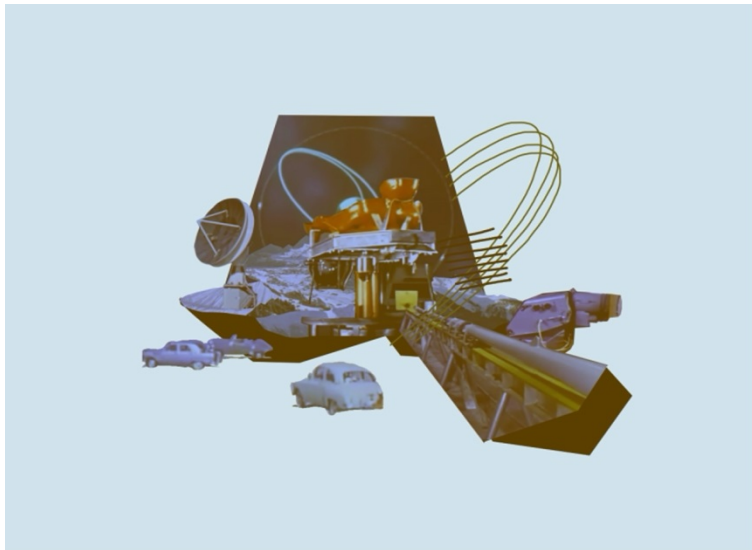
Figure 20. Frame from the film entitled *Domy (Houses)*, *Teraźniejszość (The Present)* cycle, 4x3, .avi.

Figure 21. Frame from the film entitled *Pożary (Fires)*, *Teraźniejszość (The Present)* cycle, 4x3, .avi.
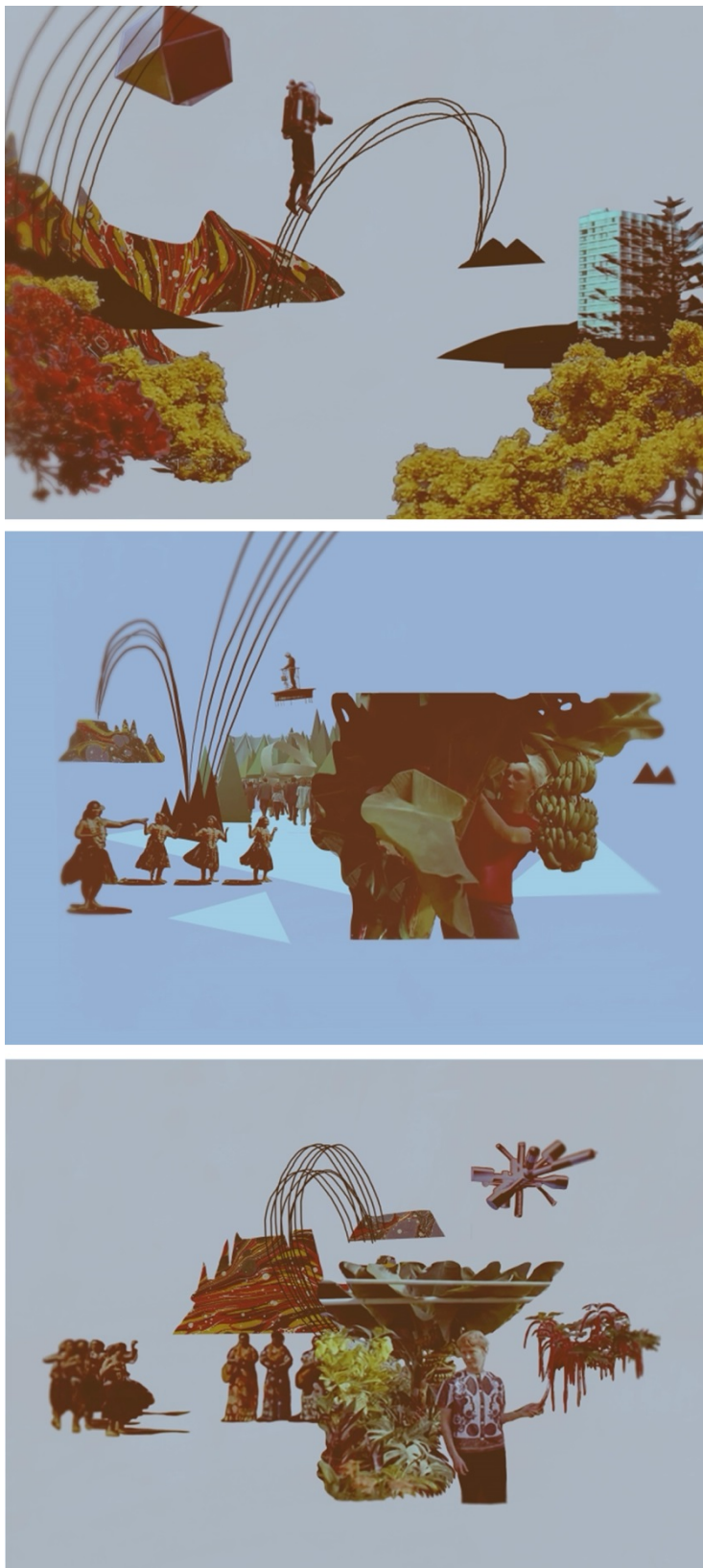
Figure 22. Frame from the film entitled *Egzotyka (The Exotic)*, *Teraźniejszość (The Present)* cycle, 4x3, .avi.

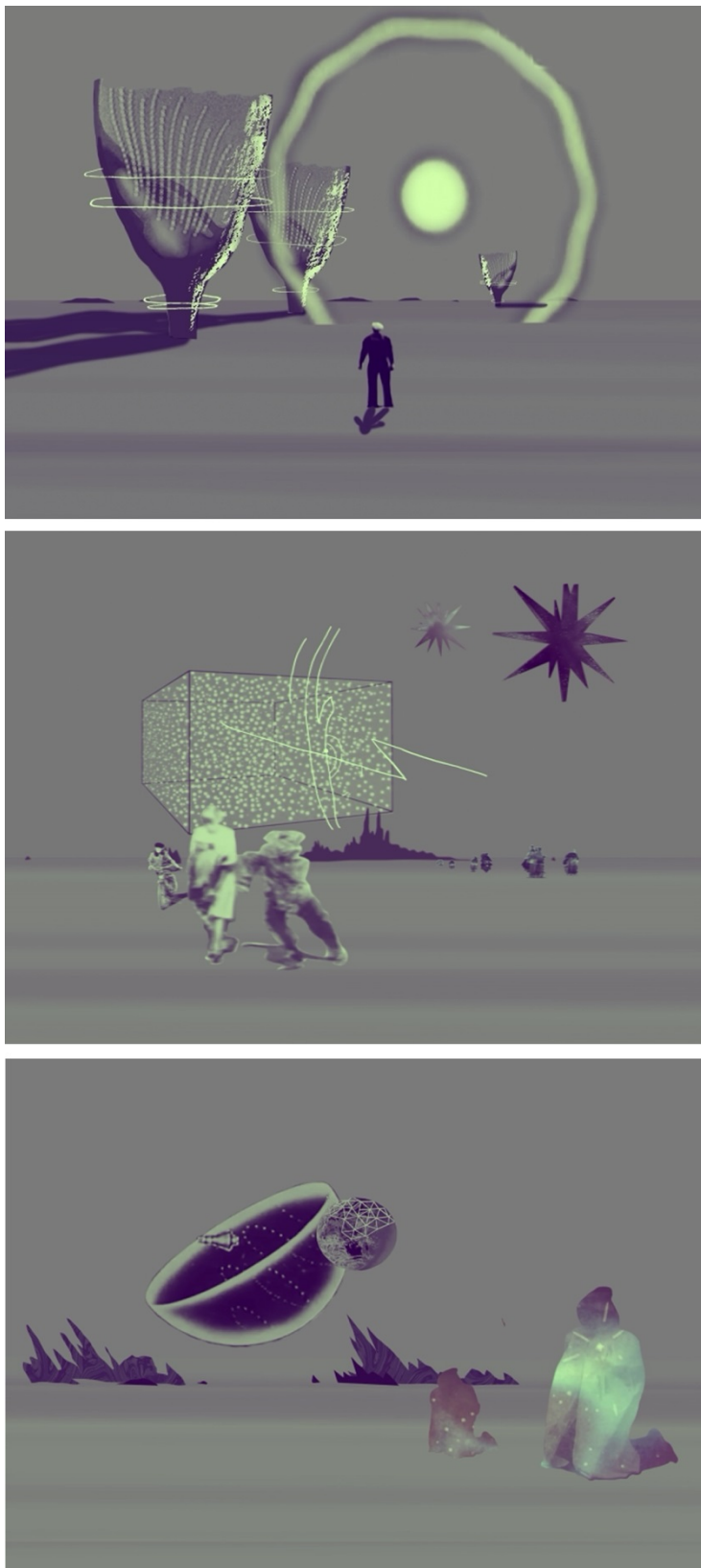**Figure 23.** Frame from the film entitled *Monorail (Monorail)*, *Teraźniejszość (The Present)* cycle, 4x3, .avi.

Figure 24. Frame from the film entitled *Katastrofy (Catastrophies)*, *Teraźniejszość (The Present)* cycle, 4x3, .avi.

Conclusion

My artistic quest revolves around the question 'Are we experiencing a crisis of the Utopian thought?' In order to discover 'what the truth really is', I have become acquainted with opinions of philosophers, architects, and writers of science-fiction. The opinions are divided: from assurances that our present is a technological fulfilment of promises made by futurologists, through to a definite claim that we have reached the end of the predictive thought. I was intrigued by the degree to which we are oversaturated with visions of the future typical of the pop culture, how difficult it is for us to venture beyond the *topoi* of modernity proposed in the 20th century. The visual culture of today, in keeping with spectrology - the idea postulated by Jacques Derrida in his *Spectres of Marx* (1993), far more frequently turns it face towards the past, taking advantage of the aesthetics of the eras gone by. It is for this reason that the aesthetic of retro-futurism is so frequently drawn upon, whereas bold architectural ideas continue to constitute a reflection of the last century's achievements in this field. I found it very interesting that the 20th century has produced a visually interesting and fresh language of futurological predictions which continues to be valid even to-date.

On the basis of the collected material, a number of works was created. These works constitute a criticism of the deficit in creativity in relation to that which 'is on the horizon' and an expression of nostalgia for the promised future that has never come to pass. Fascinated with an analogue language, somewhat in an opposition to today's digital tools of creation, I resolved to return to my former quest, hailing back from my times as a student, rooted in the inception period of the cinema.

Echoes of the Future. *The Crisis of the Utopian Thought.* Przemysław Liput, MA

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