

# REVISITING THE FUTURE

*Strategies of transformation  
in Gerard Byrne's 1984 and Beyond*

*1984 and Beyond*, video artist Gerard Byrne's adaptation of a 1960s roundtable conversation on the future, does not conceal its derived nature, in contrast to most adaptations in a new medium. Tanja von Dahlern shows how the disrupted viewing experience directs attention to the functioning of the different media and the transformation process.

- 1904 und 1920 ist natürlich ein ziemlicher Unterschied.
  - Ziemlich.
  - Ja, ziemlich.
  - Und 1936 auch.
  - Das kann man wohl sagen.
  - Aber zwischen 1984 und 2000 nicht.
  - Was nicht?
  - Kein Unterschied.
  - Woher wollen Sie das wissen?
  - Hab' ich im Urin.<sup>1</sup>
- Alexander Kluge, 1985

*Poul Anderson: [T]oday is a workday, so on to the office for five or six hours. He works four days a week, and has three months' paid vacation, unlimited paid sick leave, too – of which he uses very little, thanks to modern medicine.*

*Frederik Pohl: He's greeted at his desk by a mound of messages and mail, which he deals with by means of an automatic stenographer. He'll still have a live secretary, of course, but he won't waste her on mechanical chores like typing or running out for coffee. [Laughter]*

*Poul Anderson: [...] At the end of the workday, our man hops a robot cab and relaxes with a drink while it threads him through traffic to the apartment of the young lady with whom he's planning to spend the evening. Of course she isn't ready yet; some things will never change. [Laughter]*

This conversation about the 'everyday life' of an 'affluent city-dwelling bachelor at the turn of the coming century' takes place in Gerard Byrne's video installation *1984 and Beyond* (2005-2007). The work is derived from a roundtable discussion in the sixties in which twelve influential US-American science fiction writers, among them Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury, speculate on the future of the world.<sup>2</sup> The roundtable was organized by *Playboy* magazine and published in 1963 under the title '1984 and Beyond' as 'one of a series of provocative conversations about subjects of interest on the contemporary scene.'<sup>3</sup> The science fiction writers were invited as experts on the future, as 'eminent visionaries by profession' who are interviewed about their opinions on future developments.<sup>4</sup> Their predictions cover a period that stretches from their own time to 1984 and



1a-c. Production stills of Gerard Byrne, *1984 and Beyond*, 2005-2007, installation of monitored HDV video transferred to DVD, accompanied by twenty photographs, edition of four. (photos: courtesy of G. Byrne and Green On Red Gallery, Dublin)

1b.

beyond – roughly up to the turn of the century. The issues they discuss vary from future sexual habits and social, medical and technological developments to space exploration and encounters with aliens. Even though possible future problems such as overpopulation, nuclear war and epidemics are brought up in the discussion, the overall perspective on the global future is optimistic and shows a firm belief in progress. The attitude promoted by the roundtable thus clearly contrasts with more dystopian visions such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the book referred to in the title of that article.

For Byrne's installation, a script derived from the *Playboy* roundtable is staged and video-recorded with Dutch actors at two locations in the Netherlands. The article is used as if it were a dramatic text: the long interview has been considerably abridged, but the passages used in the video are nevertheless hardly altered. The script is divided into ten sequences; four sequences without dialogue are added. The video material is then irregularly divided across three monitors that are placed out in the exhibition space.

The sequences are looped in varying successions on the different monitors, and not all of them are shown on all three screens. In order to be sure to have seen the whole footage, the viewer will have to watch all three loops entirely which will force her or him to view certain scenes at least twice and in different combinations. The video material is presented along with a number of black and white photographs depicting scenes from everyday life and a short text.<sup>5</sup> In the present paper however, I will focus on the video part in the installation.

Similar to earlier works by Byrne which are also derived from magazine articles, *1984 and Beyond* is not a re-enactment of a historical situation but can be described as an adaptation of (historical) printed material, as a creative and interpretative act of transformation of a recognizable prior text.<sup>6</sup> The work does not go 'beyond' the source material; its point of departure is clearly the magazine article and its publication context. The focus lies on the representation of the event rather than on the event itself. *1984 and Beyond* does not try to recreate a historical interview meeting of the science fiction authors (supposing that there really



was one), and it does not show any interest in the historical author-figures participating in the original roundtable discussion. The individual authors cannot be identified in the video.

In the following analysis, I will discuss the reuse and transformation of the *Playboy* roundtable interview in Byrne's *1984 and Beyond* and how that transformation changes the character of the source material. *1984 and Beyond* is explicit about its derived nature; strategies of transformation are used in a conscious fashion, connecting different cultural and historical contexts. The work's source text, the *Playboy* roundtable interview, which is clearly referred to in the title of the artwork, is a time-specific, rather ephemeral text, meant to represent an up-to-dateness. Consequently, its distinctive historical and cultural context of production comes to the fore. The following examination of some of the transformative operations at work in *1984 and Beyond* will thus provide insight into aspects of cultural and historical recontextualization as an important part of the transformation process.

The dialogues derived from the *Playboy* roundtable play a central part in the video. The filmic means of expression are rather contained and the video resembles a documentation of a performance. The camerawork is reminiscent of a documentary fly-on-the-wall style which creates

a feeling of uncertainty in the viewer about the situation she or he is watching.

The visual arrangement of the video installation can be said to correspond to an image of life as promoted by the *Playboy* magazine. All filming is done at two post-war, modernist locations in the Netherlands: Hugh Maaskant's Provinciehuis in 's-Hertogenbosch (1959-71) and the sculpture pavilion by Gerrit Rietveld in the garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo (1965).<sup>7</sup> These sites, neither of which obviously could have been the location of the actual roundtable discussion, provide an elegant modernist and airy backdrop for the visionary meeting of the science fiction writers. Costumes and props are historical: the actors are dressed in narrow ties, cardigans and trench coats. They discuss a possible future whilst having espresso and drinks in the afternoon, almost constantly smoking cigarettes, cigars and pipes.

The conversation of these white, well-educated and apparently quite affluent men is framed by abstract sculptures by the British artist Barbara Hepworth which are situated in the garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum. From the roundtable's perspective, these classify as some of the latest artworks of the time, works that have been described as part of an art representing belief in a better future.<sup>8</sup>

The mise-en-scène and the cultural and historical distance from which the contemporary viewer will watch the video have a certain parodic effect and throw critical light on the roundtable discussion. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, other people's ideologies are always more self-evident than our own.<sup>9</sup> It will not escape the visitor of the exhibition that the dialogues are strongly marked by male chauvinist and elitist ideas, and she or he will probably not only react to the issues that are discussed but also to certain issues *not* being discussed, such as the civil rights movement or the expectable future effects of feminism.<sup>10</sup>

#### Mis-adaptation

On the one hand, the video can be said to represent the *Playboy* text in a quite faithful manner. On the other hand, this representation is distorted in several ways. Film adaptations often do not clearly show that they are transformations of earlier works in another medium. They borrow a 'story content' from their source which is then translated into the new medium without remainders of the old one in

order to guarantee a viewing experience in a 'seamless way'.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, *1984 and Beyond* does not present a story derived from the *Playboy* magazine for seamless viewing. The work is explicit about its derived nature; it directs attention to the transformation process, and the viewing experience is disturbed by various means. This creates a tension between the dialogues derived from the *Playboy* magazine and their presentation in the video.

*1984 and Beyond* employs different strategies of estrangement and produces several breaks in the narrative derived from the roundtable interview. The presentation of the video material across three monitors already refuses a linear viewing and instead encourages a process of reviewing and reconsideration. The staging of the roundtable is carried out in a historical fashion: the setting and the actors' costumes correspond to the period of



1c.

the *Playboy* interview. However, the historical picture is disrupted by a contemporary filmic style and the fact that on some occasions, present-day objects and scenery come into view.

Still, the most disturbing (and comical) element in the video is the actors' performance. All of the actors – who are supposed to represent American science fiction writers – are Dutchmen whose pronunciation of English varies a lot. Many of them have a noticeable accent and quite a few of them recite their script with a certain distance. Sometimes they make small mistakes and have to correct themselves. Their interaction often feels unnatural. It is first and foremost the faithfulness to the printed text from *Playboy* that provokes an estranging effect of a trace of the printed discussion and evokes the impression of, as George Baker

has put it, an 'undead form of living speech'.<sup>12</sup> The printed interview has of course passed through an editorial process where its tokens of orality (laughter, interjections et cetera) have been removed. In some of the actors' performances these are re-inserted, but the overall impression of the video is one of artificiality and awkwardness.

The video thus generates constant interplay between the time of the roundtable and today, and the viewer is made aware that she or he is not watching the original conversation but its transformation, a video-recorded performance of a written script. Technical aspects contribute to this effect since the editing of sound and image repeatedly disturbs the viewing experience and directs attention to the medium of video.

Speaking with Francesco Casetti, the video could be described as a 'mis-adaptation' of the *Playboy* article where the source work is not really suited to its new medium or context. This provokes a friction between the source text and its re-enactment and directs attention to the functioning of the different media and the transformation process.<sup>13</sup> These transformation techniques have an important effect on how the roundtable conversation will be received in the video installation.

#### Looking forth, looking back

If *Playboy* presents well-known science fiction writers as experts in futurology 'whose dreams and nightmares have proven prophetic', the panellists inevitably lose this status in the video which is seen by viewers with an advantage of almost fifty years of hindsight.<sup>14</sup> Especially when presented in the distancing manner described above, the ideas and visions presented by the roundtable panellists will seem quite strange, sometimes even absurd to the contemporary viewer.

Some of the ideas brought up in the discussion in fact come quite close to the actual developments. However, the panellists' somewhat superior attitude in the video, the schoolboyish seriousness in the *Playboy* journalist's questions and the confidence with which certain statements are made, tempt the viewer to focus on those predictions which failed, or which seem a little bizarre from a present-day point of view. For example, the vision of space stations on Mars and Venus by 1980 ('The generally accepted time scale is: Moon, 1970, Mars and Venus by 1980. I'll be very much surprised if

# THE PLAYBOY PANEL: 1984 AND BEYOND

*of provocative conversations about subjects of interest on the contemporary scene*

## LISTS

abandoned a promise to become a science-humor and incisive writer. He has published some 20 books and is a past winner: a mystery novel (*The Sword*), and an SF novel (*Best Voyage*), and 200 years of literary criticism, crime and fiction.

and among the *doyens* of SF, divides his time between an association in biochemistry and a prolific authorship of definitive texts on anatomy, anatomy, geology, chemistry, and physics.

an urban public-relations man with a particularly knowledgeable of zoology, is the multi-talented, westerns, history criticism, poetry, and the 90 science-fiction novel (*Case of Conscience*), published in 1958.

received wider public

*Masters*). He has also authored movie, radio and TV scripts, and writes prolifically in the popular-science, mystery, editorial and technical fields.

**FREDERIK POHL**, a former meteorologist, authors' agent and advertising copywriter, was the long-time collaborator of the late C. M. Kornbluth, with whom he wrote *The Space Merchants*, an acknowledged classic of prophetic satire. He is the editor of *Galaxy* magazine and solo author of many short stories, including the eerie *Punch* (*PLAYBOY*, June 1961) and 46 books on SF, history and biography.

**ROD SERLING** is the gifted creator, executive producer and occasional writer of *The Twilight Zone*, CBS' long-running series of imaginative excursions into the world of fantasy and science fiction. He is also the Emmy-winning playwright of *Patterns* and *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, and has participated in a previous *Playboy Panel*, "TV's Problems and Prospects."

**THEODORE STURGEON**, a sometime bulldozer driver, hotel manager and promotion writer, has devoted most of his professional career to first-rate fantasy and science fiction. The sensitive scrutiny



CLARKE: *I can't see U.S. capitalism lasting any longer than U.S.S.R. state socialism. They'll pass each other about 1980, headed in opposite directions.*



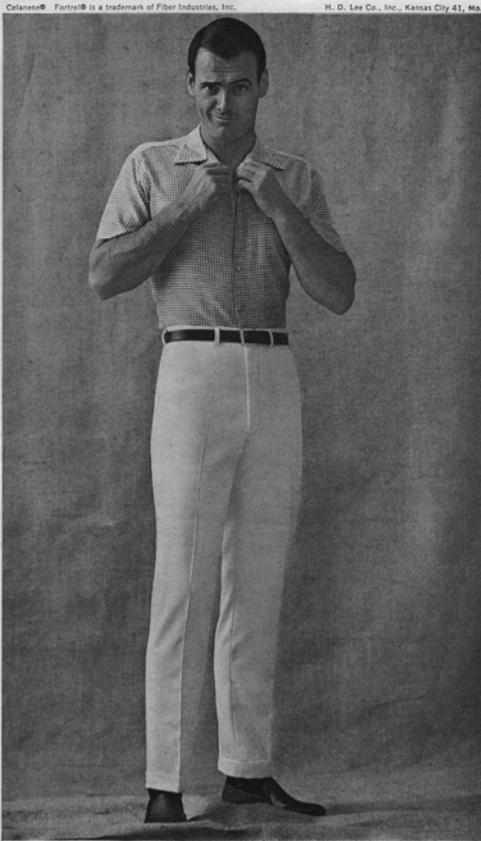
TENN: *Human body styles, like clothing styles, will someday become outré or almode as the genetic couturiers who de-*

2 Playboy, first page of the roundtable interview. Source: 'The Playboy Panel: 1984 and Beyond', *Playboy US* 11 (1963) July, p. 25.

these figures are more than five years off'), or the idea of inexpensive moon travel ('We are going to be able to put people on the Moon so cheaply that it will cost less to rocket to the Moon than it is now to fly to Australia. It's a simpler engineering problem'). Whereas many predictions have proved to be simply wrong, others pointed in the wrong direction, as for example the emphasis on space travel.<sup>15</sup> Some of the future scenarios seem actually further from being realised today than they were at the time of the roundtable. At the present moment, the appealing vision that dull jobs will no longer exist at the turn of the century because 'machi-

nes will be doing most of them', making four-day workweeks and three months' paid vacation possible, does not seem likely to be realized within a foreseeable future.

Many of the ideas and visions that are presented will seem outdated to the contemporary viewer, an effect that has been described as common for the reading of science fiction from past decades.<sup>16</sup> Like the actual *Playboy* issue, the future sketched out in the discussion seems to belong to a certain moment in time, a moment in the past. We will not identify with the writers' visions today –



**DO \$5.95 SLACKS GO WITH A \$15 SPORT SHIRT?**  
Yes...when they have the authority of Lee Blendrel Twills made of Fortrel® and cotton

Nobody thinks of Leesures as \$5.95 slacks. Leesures are Leesures. The look that has become the signature of the young generation. And Fortrel protects that look. It's the modern Colanese polyester that keeps the wrinkles out and the crease in—even when you go the wash-and-wear route. Lee's Blendrel is a fine-line twill of 50% cotton and 50% Fortrel polyester...the fiber that keeps its promise.<sup>™</sup> Classic Ivy or continental style in Loden, Sand, Black-Green, Black. \$5.95.

**Leesures® by Lee**

stimulations. We will assorted Spanules to explicitly direct the your money back, a stimulae—safe for children emotions into soaring. I have been drawn to show business because that the next generation titillations as yet and the entertainment will establish state p while others will rest the free-enterprise system pleasure technicians, producers, directors, cost and scriptwriters and moth pleasure-drug Hollywood "Feelie" **PLAYBOY:** You foresee, of technological discoveries which prom — hopefully — enrich lect, emotions, sensat edge. Do you anticipate strides in his search for hension and mastery — and of all the ills to **STERLING:** Well, this n potatoes in the tech 1984, but I envision cated computing mac analyze medical symp ings fast chemical cultures, and them diagnoses for every k **ANDERSON:** I think we even more spectacul field of curing illness breakthroughs in the whole organs, and les important advances i of antivirus drugs, long last, a cure for **BUDRYS:** By the turn anticipate that medic progressed at a geom have ushered all illne to heart disease, as aids such as glasses an permanent extinction **PLAYBOY:** The elimi would seem to bode v of lengthening the h matically in years to attaining man's imm eternal life. What do the longevity of the a the year 2000? **BUDRYS:** I think that t forever — or for two o least — may already h before we can attain we'll have to hurdle a stacles. Once we eli causative factor in fa apply ourselves to the irrationality from th such an impossible e we could instill eve chemically, or elect

imagination of American futurologists, fills few of us with confidence either about what the future has in store or about how, let alone if, the past will be remembered.<sup>19</sup> The orientation toward the future that characterizes the roundtable discussion is confronted with the video's turning to the past. Watching the panellists in the video look forward into the future means looking back in time for the contemporary viewer.

The belief in progress and radical change that informs large parts of the roundtable discussion is contrasted in several ways in the installation. For example, one of the video sequences without dialogues during approximately two minutes shows the *Unisphere* from different angles: a large-scale representation of the earth that was built as the symbol for the New York World's Fair 1964-1965 with the theme 'Peace Through Understanding', dedicated to 'Man's Achievement on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe'. In the video, the world's largest global structure is filmed on a rainy day, looking somewhat dull and abandoned.

The actors' quite awkward and not very persuasive reciting of their script intensifies the impression that their dialogues and the worldview they convey have been produced by someone else, that they belong to another time. In fact, the writers who originally participated in the roundtable cannot be identified in the video. The panellists are made anonymous (it is impossible to know who is who), and the famous authors are eventually eclipsed by the unknown actors who repeat their dialogue. The writers' concepts and ideas about the future (our present) do not seem to correspond to the current situation and appear somewhat out of place when repeated in the 2000s. Like many narratives at our disposal to describe the world, they appear as a map that 'doesn't match the territory', to use an expression of the science fiction writer Bruce Sterling.<sup>20</sup>

The historical distance of around fifty years and a number of estrangement strategies place the viewer at a critical distance to the science fiction writers' discourse which is presented from new angles by the artwork. The discussion is not dismissed as obsolete but probed and examined in relation to the present situation. Most importantly, the transformation of the *Playboy* roundtable interview into a video installation engages the vie-

3. Playboy, Lee ad. Source: 'The Playboy Panel: 1984 and Beyond', *Playboy US*, 11 (1963) August, p. 34.

they are someone else's future, 'merely the future of one moment of what is now our past.'<sup>17</sup>

The same is true for the roundtable discussion's general project of an all-comprising vision and the optimistic attitude toward the future which diverges from the doubt and scepticism that often characterize the present. Our time is often viewed as post-utopian, as a time where the 'quintessentially modern notion of the future as progress or utopia' is no longer shared.<sup>18</sup> The 'move beyond the year 2000,' Andreas Huyssen writes in the mid 1990s, 'which only twenty-five years ago fired the



4. Unisphere, 1984 and Beyond (2005-2007). Black and white photograph. Source: S. Pierce, C. Coombes (eds.), *The Present Tense Through the Ages. On the Recent Work of Gerard Byrne*, London 2007, p. 13.

wer with that material from the past and inspires reflection on present-day society and its relation to past and future. By making the transformation process visible, the two cultural and historical contexts from which the video and the roundtable interview respectively emerge, are correlated and mutually reflect and shed light on each other.

- 1 A. Kluge, *Der Angriff der Gegenwart auf die übrige Zeit (The Blind Director)*, Germany 1985, 106 min, DVD (DVD subtitles: 'Between 1904 and 1920 there is quite a difference, of course. / Quite. / Yes, quite. / And 1936 too. / Yes, one could say so. / But not between 1984 and 2000. / Not what? / No difference. / What makes you think that? / I feel it in my bones.')
- 2 The other panelists were Theodore Sturgeon, Poul W. Anderson, Robert A. Heinlein, Frederik Pohl, William Tenn, A. E. van Vogt, Rod Serling, James Blish, and Algis Budrys.
- 3 Anonymous, 'The Playboy Panel: 1984 and Beyond', *Playboy US* 11 (1963) July/August, pp. 25-37, 31-118.'
- 4 *Playboy US* 11 (1963) July/August, p. 26.
- 5 The text that is part of the installation is a quote from Perry Miller's biography on the American philosophical theologian Jonathan Edwards (Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, New York 1949). The passage that is quoted reads as follows: 'Edwards' journals frequently explored and tested a mediation he seldom allowed to reach print: if all the world were annihilated, he wrote [...] and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same. Therefore, because there is continuity, which is time, "it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed." The abiding assurance is that "we every moment see the same proof of God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.'" The text will probably be better known to the art public from Michael Fried's essay 'Art and Objecthood', which it precedes. M. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in: M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood, Essays and Reviews*, London 1998, pp. 148-172 (148). The text was first published in *Artforum* 5 (1967) 10.
- 6 Byrne's previous works are reconstructions of an advertisement for Chrysler that was published in 1980 in *National Geographic (Why it's time for Imperial, again*, 1998-2002), an interview with Jean-Paul Sartre in *Le Nouvel Observateur* from 1977 (*Hommes à Femmes (Michel Debrane)*, 2004), and another *Playboy* roundtable discussion from 1973 (*New Sexual Lifestyles*, 2003). In my understanding of adaptation, I primarily adhere to Linda Hutcheon's broad definition of the term. L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, London 2006, p. 8.
- 7 The pavilion was designed and first built in 1955 for the Sonsbeek Outdoor Sculpture exhibition in Arnhem and rebuilt in the Sculpture Garden in 1965.
- 8 The sculptures by Barbara Hepworth which stand in the Kröller-Müller Museum's sculpture garden often come into the picture. Penelope Curtis notices that Hepworth's work enjoys certain popularity among contemporary artists. Her sculptures recently figured in several artworks. Curtis explains this with an interest in 'the previous generation for whom art could represent an authentically better future.' P. Curtis, 'Revival Hepworth, or speaking for sculpture', *Sculpture Journal* 17 (2008) 2, pp. 125-133 (125).
- 9 F. Jameson, 'Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?', in: F. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, London 2005, pp. 282-295 (291).
- 10 E. Pethic, 'On 1984 and Beyond', *Dot Dot Dot* 13 (2007) April, pp. 166-168 (166).
- 11 J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA 1999, p. 44.
- 12 G. Baker, *Gerard Byrne: Books, Magazines, and Newspapers*, New York/Berlin 2003, p. 66. Baker here comments on the earlier video installations *Why it's Time for Imperial Again* and *New Sexual Lifestyles*.
- 13 F. Casetti, 'Adaptation and Mis-adaptations; Film, Literature, and Social Discourses', in: R. Stam, A. Raengo (eds.), *A Companion to Literature and Film*, Malden 2004, pp. 81-91 (87f).
- 14 *Playboy US*, op.cit. (note 4), p. 26.
- 15 '[G]oing to the Moon', Adam Roberts writes, 'was something our ancestors did, not something we do today or are going to do in the future.' A. Roberts, *Science Fiction*, London 2000, p. 33.
- 16 Idem, p. 34f.
- 17 Jameson, op.cit. (note 9), p. 286.
- 18 A. Huyssen, 'Introduction', in: A. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York 1995, pp. 1-9 (8).
- 19 Idem, p. 2. Lytle Shaw comments on *1984 and Beyond* that the discussion takes place at 'a moment in American culture when utopian speculation was emergent, not residual.' L. Shaw, 'The Utopian Past', in: S. Pierce, C. Coombes (eds.), *The Present Tense Through the Ages: On the Recent Work of Gerard Byrne*, London 2007, pp. 121-128 (127).
- 20 B. Sterling, *Atemporality – A Cultural Speed control?*, lecture held at Transmediale 2010 on 6 February 2010. Retrieved 10 August 2010 via [www.transmediale.de/en/keynote-bruce-sterling-us-atemporality](http://www.transmediale.de/en/keynote-bruce-sterling-us-atemporality).