Aleksandra Sekulić

Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

The Imaginary and the Dead Media in the Works of the *Kosmoplovci Collective*

Abstract: Drawing from a movement which aimed to re-activate the practices of the emancipation of cultural production established in Yugoslav cine-amateurism: Low-Fi Video (1997–2003), the *Kosmoplovci Collective*, established in 2001, developed various interdisciplinary experiments, contesting the elements of the media framework of production. In a specific osmosis of practices stemming from the computer demo scene, video, alternative comics, electronic music and design, *Kosmoplovci* contributed to the contemporary explorations of the media-archaeological art, which uses archival work and historical materials related to the shifts of media paradigms. The videos, computer demos and online interactive projects of *Kosmoplovci* produced in the beginning of the 2000s can be seen as the projections, emulations or anticipations of the imaginary or dead media, or even a future excavation and re-invention of media (*Void*, *Selfaware*, *X21*, *Artificial Detection*). The treatment of media machines in the tension of their imagined untimely existence, as in the description of imaginary media by Siegfried Zielinsky, and the imagined future recovery from their deep death which is another form of their dislocation, destabilizes the fixed positions of the elements of contemporary media art production: the camera, the internet, but also the parallel relation of the image and the sound. The practice of this overall destabilization of fixed elements of the media system puts the *Kosmoplovci Collective* in the line of continuity of the experiments of radical amateurism.

Keywords: media archaeology; imaginary media; dead media; computer demo scene; radical amateurism

> "The transition between imaginary and actual media machines,
> in terms of their signification, can be almost seamless."
> Eric Kluitenberg[1]

The concepts of imaginary media which are offered in the methodology of media archaeology participate in a discourse which is aimed to liberate the imagining

---

[1] Eric Kluitenberg, "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media," in *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 2011), 48.

*Author contact information: aleksandra.sekulic08@gmail.com

of alternative futures, as Jussi Parikka notes in his book "What is Media Archaeology?".[2] Siegfried Zielinsky, inspired by the methods of geological archaeology, conceptualized varientology, observing and discovering "fractures or turning points in historical master plans, that provide useful ideas for navigating the labyrinth of what is currently firmly established."[3] That moves the purpose of such excavation to recovering the practices of invention, and, as Parikka describes this approach, to the efforts "to resist an economically driven narrowed understanding of media"[4] having in mind the position of the internet as the phantasm of capitalism. Zielinsky offers several aspects that qualify imaginary media, among them: media "realized in technical and media practice centuries before or centuries after being invented",[5] those outside the abilities of the actual world although modeled or sketched, impossible media and machines which clearly can't be realized, but whose meanings have impact on the world of media. Eric Kluitenberg insists on the task of analysis of imaginary media to be observing them "in a specific historical and discursive setting, to uncover the network of material practices in which these imaginaries are embedded."[6] Whether the media are imaginary, dead (no longer in use) or zombified (repurposed media gadgets) they participate in the configuration of the media system and its horizon.

The methods of media archaeology have been developed at the turn of the 21st century and I will give an insight into experiments by the *Kosmoplovci Collective* from Belgrade, which during that same period, unaware of this theoretical discourse, developed a poetics of media destabilization, whether by dislocating the apparatus in time or in status of the media: imagining the death and afterlife of some of the naturalized media, or erasing the certainty of the user's the position. The emergence of these kind of experiments in Serbia in the early 2000s is connected to the processes of emancipation of culture in the 1990s through the enthusiasm surrounding the Low-Fi Video movement, also inspired by the experiences of the war and destruction of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and changes in post-Yugoslav societies.

Pretext: Media of the dispossessed

The *Kosmoplovci Collective* emerged from the osmotic creative processes among a variety of fields of experiment in alternative culture in Serbia in the 1990s, including Low-Fi Video movement, alternative comics, the computer demo scene, and experimental electronic music, among others.

---

[2] Jussi Parikka *What is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2012), 51.

[3] Sigfried Zielinsky, *Deep Time of the Media: Towards Archaeology of Seeing and Hearing by Technical Means* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2006), 7.

[4] Parikka, *What is Media Archeology?*, 52.

[5] Sigfried Zielinsky, "Modelling Media for Ignatius Loyola. A Case Study for Athanasius Kircher's World of Apparatusses Between the Imaginary and the Real," in *Book of Imaginary Media. Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Commiunication Medium*, ed. Eric Kluitenberg (Amsterdam and Roterdam: Debalie and Nai Publishers, 2006), 30.

[6] Kluitenberg, "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media," 55.

The term Low-Fi Video (1997–2003) refers to the organized and coordinated production, distribution and presentation of film and video, whose models of production and representation, in continuity with Yugoslav cine-amateurism and in collaboration with the international movement *Microcinema*,[7] enabled involvement of vernacular production together with artistic production in the process of production of a new language of alternative culture in Serbia, in public communication with the audience. In this proclaimed mission of subverting the elitism in cinematography,[8] Low-Fi Video openly recalls Yugoslav cine-amateurism of the 1960s and 70s. Its festivals were conceptualized to reflect the osmotic process taking place in alternative cultural production among the computer demo scene, alternative comics, video, music, etc., so that the programs were structured to enable the simultaneous presence of various groups, artists and audiences. Zadruga was established as an association of Low-Fi Video, *Striper* (comics magazine), Corrosion (computer demo group) and Our Pictures (video production group), after those organizations had to leave the space of Cultural Center B92 – Cinema Rex, after the B92 media company was overtaken by the Milosevic regime at the beginning of the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Facing the impossibility of continuing activities in its primary venue, Cinema Rex, Low-Fi Video turned to the basic principle of microcinema: entering non-conventional spaces such as clubs, cafes, restaurants, discotheques, galleries, etc. The Low-Fi Video organization chose to enter these 'renegade screenings' in the form of joint means and work with partnering organizations, and this joining was named analogically to the concept of joint production from SFRY history: *zadruga* (cooperative). Returning to contemporary media space some of the concepts from SFRY social and cultural history through the models of production and presentations of programs in its renegade screenings, Low-Fi Video demonstrated an analogy to the repression of SFRY history from official ideology. Considering video to be the 'media of the dispossessed', Low-Fi Video used some aspects of VHS technology as a visual, performative, conceptual means to expand the forms of events and mobilize new members. Open to all forms of experiment, the movement gave way to the initial public exposure of the computer demo scene in Serbia. Real-time computer animations were screened as part of the program, but for some of the events on tours where there were no technical conditions for real time screenings, the computer demos were transferred to VHS format. This transfer from digital to analog was one of the gestures of solidarity and respect for the widespread Low-Fi Video community which still had access only to video technology. It also inspired some reflections on the relations among media, their order in time, and the nature of the transfer. Computer demo group Corrosion made a demo "Void" (2001) in which the corporeal presence is dissolved into electricity, to be revealed through a journey. This piece anticipated the transformation of the 'micro-cinema event' into a festival realized through television screenings (2002, B92 TV).

---

[7] Based in Seattle, coordinated by Joel Bachar, the network "Microncinema Inc" spread through the USA and had partners in Belgrade (Low-Fi Video) and Barcelona, enabling the exchange of programs.

[8] Aleksandar Gubaš, "Zašto sija ova zvezda," "The Resurrection of the Serbian Underground Film," *Striper: Serbian Magazine for Extreme Comic Art* (1998).

Considering the mode of production and its effects, we can observe the Low-Fi Video movement as a possible continuity of the radical amateurism. "Radical amateurism", according to Aldo Milohnić, describes the amateur practice and cultural practices as part of neo-avant-garde art practices of the late 1960s and early 70s, as well as alternative culture in 1980s a Yugoslavia, a movement that was "participating in a spontaneous ideology of immediate radical intervention in cultural, social and political spheres of Yugoslav society"[9]. After the dissolution of SFRY, in a changed social and cultural system, radical amateurism would be traced as a practice which re-activating resources and mechanisms of the de-elitisation and demystification of cultural work, opening the field of experiment beyond the conventions of naturalized artistic and cultural infrastructure, also in the new modes of emancipation of the cultural production from the limited framework. Both the Low-Fi Video movement and, later, *Kosmoplovci* operated outside the conventional space of cinema and art, and destabilized the notions of authorship, the divide between artists and audience (in the case of *Kosmoplovci* also authors and users), opening a field of experiments with codes, media documents and historiography.

The interdisciplinary structure of the events and production inspired by them gave way to the establishment of *Kosmoplovci* as a collective of artists and programmers, which developed the experiments in exchange of knowledge from computer animation, video, graphics, net-art, and music. The name of the collective comes from the title of the magazine intended to popularize science among the youth in the SFRY: *Kosmoplov*. The "images of the future from the past" was one of the fields of interest, uncovering the horizons of scientific progress as developed a few decades before, and the deployment of popular culture in nourishing this vision of the future. The somewhat manifesto-piece of *Kosmoplovci* was the video *Satellite Station,* exhibited in October Art Salon in Belgrade in 2001 and 2003, the latter being part of the larger spatial installation in the Yugoslav Gallery[10] in Belgrade, along with collages made by the collective.

The lost horizon: Imaginary world in imaginary media

Satellite Station (2001) is a recovered 8mm film from the 1970s about the building of the first satellite station in Socialist Yugoslavia. *Kosmoplovci* digitized the film, recording it from the other side of the screen while projected so the images are reverted, and they had no interventions onto the film material, merely adding their original composed music. The original film was produced by Dunav Film, and shows the entire process of planning, designing, and building the station with Japanese engineers. The film's introduction includes a short history of communication technologies, through the development of humanity, ending in an anticipated tectonic change with satellite

---

[9] Aldo Milohnić, "Radical Amateurism," in *Deschooling Classroom Toolbook* (Belgrade: TKH and Kontrapunkt, 2012), 6/4–6/5.

[10] The last exhibition before the Yugoslav Gallery was shut down and changed status and name.

connections. Put in such a perspective, the satellite positioned in space, transmitting signals globally, marked the final, highest reachable level of connectivity of the planet, risen to upgrade intercontinental communication. Playing with the contrast of the pastoral scenery of the building site and the new technologies being developed in the rural area of Ivanjica, Serbia, the film unveils the aesthetic effect of the white concrete flower rising from a meadow, as it grew and until it was put in operation. The exercise of its function is the message sent personally by Tito, president of the SFRY. The image of a signal as shown in the screen of the apparatus and the imagined future of such communication (in an animated form) opens a view into the horizon towards which the built technology was developed. The intercontinental communication of smiling people depicted in a schematic-animated form is a preserved memory of such a horizon, filmed from the other side of the screen, with reversed images of the world map and Yugoslavia and the written credits, so it gives the viewer the position from the other side of the mirror, until the final credits of *Kosmoplovci*, which belongs to our realm and is readable in the normal order of letters. The position of *Kosmoplovci*, the agency of the image transformation/recovery is suggested to be from the other side of the screen, the border. The view is then suggested to be from the future that was anticipated in the film, the future this satellite station was supposed to deliver.

The original film was discovered in a Belgrade flea market and digitized just two years after the satellite station was destroyed in the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. The landmark Avala [telecommunications] Tower, which appears in the film as one of the key elements of the communication process, was also destroyed in 1999. The destruction of these key points is not presented in the film, but exists in the context of its screening and presentation. This turns the status of the film into a monument to the structure that does not exist anymore, drawing the memorial significance both from its context of presentation and its aesthetic strategies imminent to the film (the rise of the stone flower). In this key, we can examine what are the accented features of the structure in the memorial strategy of the piece by *Kosmoplovci*. The station was not just an instrument, but also a laboratory, and as presented in the film, it was built through massive effort of the Yugoslav state, including the gathering elements from all over the world, and recruiting the help of Japanese engineers. It belonged to the vision of the future, part of the infrastructure of the future in which Yugoslavia was to be connected to the global satellite network, in which the station and the tower would enable this connection to be accessible to the entire country. It was a part of the modernization process (a pastoral scene in which the engineers develop the plans of the station is a metonymic image), in which the development of science, technology and infrastructure was the part of the society's ever-increasing progress. In Socialist Yugoslavia, science and technological progress were embedded in the education system as paths to the future classless society, as disciplines that are the investments in the common good, above particular or merely short-term benefits. The film about the building of the satellite station was therefore already made in a style resembling some memorial practices, giving respect to the achievements of knowledge, technology

and science. Made from the position of the 'failed future', giving the reverse image transferred to the digital format, it became the memorial piece to that same horizon, revealing the changed perception of technology and progress. Although the satellite communication system is not some dead media apparatus, it is presented as an imagined media of progress, where the assumptions of its purpose belonged to the system of a utopian project, and its contemporary functions becoming proof of the zombification of that media. In other words, its value moved from the higher, common good to the particular interest, and the non-existing participant – the station in Ivanjica – is a witness to this change, a reminder of the zombification of the rest of the system. The idea of global interconnection still stands in the contemporary communication system through signals in space, but the higher purpose that gives it meaning is destroyed. It is that horizon that *Kosmoplovci* emphasized in their works, from the very inspiration of their name: *Kosmoplov*, the magazine dedicated to popularization of science in SFRY.

The issues of the *Kosmoplov* magazine in the 1960s, predicted that Yugoslavs would join the exploration of space – and the Yugoslav youth should be prepared for it – because space does not belong to any nation in particular, and its exploration would be a joint endeavor for all the world's people. Thus, *Kosmoplov* brought information to Yugoslav youth about Soviet and American achievements in space exploration and cosmonautic technology. In that preparation and accumulation of knowledge, although without the realized cosmonautic technology, Yugoslavia was the ideal point to imagine space as common good from the peak of the Cold War. At the time of the production of the piece by *Kosmoplovci*, combining the elements of a performance (public digitization of film) and found footage experiment, in 2001, the status of the satellite station changed to imaginary media by exposing the horizon it was built towards as lost. As Parikka notes: "in terms of imaginary media, the new world of science and technology *was* the imaginary […]."[11]

The unsolved tension between death and the imaginary

Artificial Detection (2002) is one of the special net-objects presented on the *Kosmoplovci Collective's* online platform, limiting user interaction to the choice of channels on an interface shaped like an obsolete apparatus. On the screen of the presented machine, the viewer can see shifts in the images as the channels are changed, and as the sounds change as well. The images are unclear, resembling video signals – white noise, shades and shapes pass through the screen. The images haunting the viewer from the machine still function as only a part of the overall process: the tension between their unknown origin and purpose brings us back to the title of the work. The choices made by the viewer are decoded as the questions, and the answers come coded or translated into unreadable, un-decoded form. The discrepancy between the

---

[11] Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?*, 33.

interface, obsolete and mechanical, and its position in the online platform suggests that it is there as a preserved artifact from another time. It can be observed as a recovered dead media apparatus, whose function we can only anticipate by continuous use, entering choices of channels, drawing or imposing trajectories of meaning through the fragments delivered by the machine. In that way, the machine destabilizes the its viewer's time, making the process of communication an uncertain path in time: the signals might come from the past, as a preserved reflection of the viewer's present choices transformed by an obsolete media, or it might be an apparatus which propels signals which current media can't decode, coming from the future, but reanimated and remodeled in an inadequate archaeological laboratory from the past. The unrecognizable interpretation of choices due to the obsolete apparatus would give the machine status of a dead medium, and a witness of the collapsed transfer of media history and knowledge. The supposed death of the now incompatible or obsolescent media technology would suggest that the object presented by *Kosmoplovci* is designed to recover its function to a certain extent, but does not revive the overall system it belonged to. The version of its origin in which it is recovered by the obsolete interface, but gives way to the signals still evading decoding by contemporary media would make the machine either an imaginary media status – untimely media time "realized in technical and media practice either centuries before or centuries after being invented"[12] – or the status of dead media, now unrecoverable. The tension between the excavation or imagining of future practices of re-invention lingers with the machine, intriguing the observer to think in both directions; one indicating the past media invention process which was unknown and uncharted, the other supposing a dystopian future that will not be able to recover or comprehend our own media system. The unsolved nature of the signals and their relation to our choices points to the unknown system which enables the process, which is the illustration for the postulate of imaginary media according to Kluitenberg:[13] it exceeds a single apparatus/realized media and their 'histories'.

Whether it is a piece which offers a possible view into the time of 'deep death' of video and its zombification, or it would be an anticipated new media as the imaginary media that is impossible in the contemporary technological apparatus, the destabilization of naturalized media is at work, as the obsessive shift of the channels does not provide the answer.

Contextual decoding of the elusive subject

In its video piece *Selfaware* (2002), *Kosmoplovci* recovered a recording saved after the repair of a webcam, giving a view of the process from the point of the camera. The speculations on the memory puncta of the technology are correspondent to what

---

[12] Zielinski, *Modelling Media*, 30.

[13] Kluitenberg, "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media," 48.

Parikka describes as sonic archaeology: a "way of understanding how such devices structure the everyday worlds and temporal sequences in which we live in technological societies"[14].

The found footage video *X21* (2005) also reveals the memory of a technology, but of one which participated in war action. The aerial recordings saved in the bombardier aircraft are transformed into a video (with added music, and minimal interventions into the images with high contrasts due to the night and radar vision) and as such give indication that the aesthetics emerged from war technology become the means of artistic practice. Beside the fact that it moves the average viewer in Serbia who experienced the NATO bombing from the ground: the object of attack, to the bomber's position, the video moves the overall meaning of the document of the bombing to the artistic piece, in the imagined future decontextualized art or gaming experience. Although the music gives strong indication of the metallic sound of bombing, the screenings in the framework of the video festivals showed that the audience took time before realizing what the images depicted, mostly dazzled by intense contrasts and colors, epitomes of then-contemporary computer animation. The transliteration happened in the social context of the screening, but it points to another possibility of the operation of the apparatus in question. The naturalization of the video games aesthetics and body experience, as well as the distance created by the cultural context of the screening, makes the bombing and targeting video a plausible object of aesthetic enjoyment or even interactive interface. Before the public exposure of videos, computer demos, visual work, music, etc., *Kosmoplovci* developed an online platform which operated as a realm of interconnected projects, and which gives another context, possibly a different audience, in terms of reception experience and discourse. If we observe the works of *Kosmoplovci* in their initial interface: the online platform kosmoplovci.net, we can find the original environment created around the experiments, minimal net-art gestures and projects directed to sketch a possible future community of their viewers (the project *School*[15]) or to offer a humorous comment on the incapacity of the institutions of 'situated knowledge' (*The Institute for Studying*[16]). The interconnected fragments of their online platform together create paths of decoding particular projects, and help in revealing the directions of their critique and explorations. A different flow of experiments between programming, artistic and textual practices reflects the processes of emancipation of production from the computer demo scene (sharing ethics, collective authorization). In that form of presentation of their work, the same piece *X21* gets a certain support in interpretation from the rest of their pieces, whether the computer demos exercising visualization of multi-dimensional developments, or videos which develop self-awareness of the new digital scene, such is *KDESGRAZ* video (2003), in which the reflection on the convex screen reveals the (supposed future) technologically obsolete way of transmission of digital performance. The shifts between the technological infrastructure of the

---

[14] Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, 152.

[15] Orig. *Škola*, http://kosmoplovci.net/studiostrip.

[16] Orig. *Zavod za proučavanje*, platform kosmoplovci.net.

presented works make the immanent dynamics of the platform, so the attention towards various aspects of media systems is developed, and determines a different reception. In such an environment, *X21* becomes easily decoded: a dehumanized act of documentation reduces visual data to the aesthetic register, and the next step in decoding the future meaning would be imagining the future user, the subject who enjoys the piece. The imagined future then opens a possibility that the piece would not be appreciated only for its images, but could indicate the order where digitized vision is naturalized, not only documenting but also creating the situations. The piece therefore anticipates the aestheticization of war through the eyes of the weapon/machine, which can be also be considered the subject of the piece, as well as the other viewers.

Archaeology of imagination

The works of *Kosmoplovci* which deal with the explorations of the possibilities to think of media apparatus only as a part of a system which can be incomprehensible or lost, changing their status to imaginary/dead, can be observed among the pioneer experiments in media archaeology in Serbia at the turn of the 21st century. It is the specific historical context of the destruction of the SFRY that deepens the complex analysis of the overall change of the function meaning and social role of media, but also instigated a series of works that offer an anticipation or tension before the fulfillment of the cycle of the dehumanization of the media system, and a question about the possible new subjects of mediated communication and its purpose. Imaginary media are theoretical concepts seen as potential indicators of contemporary, yet unsolved relations, as Eric Kluitenberg saw them: "They articulate a highly complex field of signification and determination that tends to blur the boundaries between technological imaginaries and actual technological development."[17] The practice of the destabilization exercised by *Kosmoplovci* in several of its projects opens a perspective on the immediate context of their production – the digital turn, the destruction of Socialist Yugoslavia and its horizon of progress, the initial synthetic process of war and media technologies – as instigators, or anticipation of a wider processes of changes. By their choice to act from the field still not naturalized for the artistic practices in Serbia and destabilize both artistic authorship and hierarchy, media status and historiography, their practice can be observed as the continuity of the radical amateurism, as a re-activation of emancipation strategies from the sedimented and limited structure of artistic and media production. Media archaeology, as described by Jussi Parikka, functions as a method both in media theory and artistic practice, whether giving instruments to analyze and imagine a different concept of media history and comprehension of their current development, or as an artistic practice "imagining media and its histories so they can return the possibility of imagining alternative futures."[18]

---

[17] Kluitenberg "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media," 48.

[18] Ibid, 51.

References

Gubaš, Aleksandar. "Zašto sija ova zvezda." "The Resurrection of the Serbian Underground Film." *Striper: Serbian Magazine for Extreme Comic Art* (1998).

Kluitenberg, Eric. "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media." In *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, Implications*, edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, 48–69. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011.

Kluitenberg, Eric. *Delusive Spaces*. Amsterdam: NAi Publishers, Institute for Network Cultures, 2008.
Kosmoplovci online platform, http://www.kosmoplovci.net/. Accessed December 27, 2017.

Low-Fi Video web archive, http://www.crsn.com/low-fi/. Accessed December 27, 2017.

Milohnić, Aldo. "Radical Amateurism." In *Deschooling Classroom Toolbook*. Belgrade: TKH and Kontrapunkt, 2012, 6/1–6/6.

Parikka, Jussi. *What is Media Archaeology?*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

Zielinski, Siegfried. *Deep Time of Media: Toward a Technology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

Zielinsky, Sigfried. "Modelling Media for Ignatius Loyola. A Case Study for Athanasius Kircher's World of Apparatuses Between the Imaginary and the Real." In *Book of Imaginary Media. Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium*, edited by Eric Kluitenberg, 29–55. Amsterdam and Roterdam: Debalie and Nai Publishers, 2006.