

1. The Past of Things to Come

A Futuristic Study of the Case of Exarcheia

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Abstract

The paper discusses the installation work titled “The Past of Things to Come” which was exhibited in Athens in 2018. The main idea was based on an alleged occupation of a building that developed into a critical and sarcastic narrative of a dystopic future by applying fictitious and real events. The visitors were invited to observe archive material consisting of photos, texts and video footage from surveillance cameras concerning a room which appeared to have served as a shelter in 2112 and its exterior surroundings. The work examines the case of Exarcheia and Athens at large, through a dystopian futuristic prism, suggesting a redefinition of the relations between the private and the public, the outside and the inside, the local and the global, the past, the present and the future without leaving room for fixed or secure positions.

In the central area of the city, we came across some digital material that might give more clues to the current research. Our presumptions until now are that the city, after facing serious decline due to a major crisis, was gradually deserted.

The found material includes video and images, originating mainly from surveillance cameras. The videos reveal the interior of a shielded room where some people occasionally enter, whereas the images depict the exterior surroundings where there is no human sign. The fact that the room was most likely used as a refuge, as well as, the constant monitoring and surveillance of the interior and the exterior spaces, leads to the conclusion that its inhabitants were under serious threat.

All the files were dated the year 2112, exactly when we believe that the city was completely abandoned. However, we still do not know what had happened to its residents and what they feared so much. The research is still in an early stage so we can only make assumptions.



Fig.1. The Past of Things to Come (2018)

“The Past of Things to Come” was exhibited during April/May 2018 at A-Dash project space in Athens. It was curated by Elina Axioti and supported by NEON foundation. Its main idea was based on an alleged occupation of a building that developed into a critical and sarcastic narrative of a dystopic future by applying fictitious and real events.

The visitors were invited to observe a hypothetical future archive of an occupied building, consisting of photos, texts and video footage from surveillance cameras. The documentation material referred to a room that appeared to have served as a bunker in 2112 and which was apparently located in the same building and neighbourhood that the current archive is displayed. A door in the exhibition led the visitors in this actual ‘future’ room. The surveillance cameras in that room projected their presence in the monitors outside, so the visitors of the bunker were watched by the other visitors of the archival room.



Fig. 2. *The Past of Things to Come* (2018)



Fig. 3. *The Past of Things to Come* (2018)

They became from passive observers, actual participants, they travelled in time and space: what seemed like a distanced future (or past) was not so far away and there wasn't anyone else facing it but them. What visitors actually experience, is the fluidity of time and space and as such, their role within this fluidity. As they became part of the room's archaeology, they

became part of its archival material. They are being asked not only to decode the significance of the archive, but even more, the meaning of their own visit. Could it be themselves the possible future, past or current residents of the room? The visitors, the building, the exhibition are in-between the past, the present and the future, the private and the public, the outside and the inside, which leaves no ground for fixed or secure positions.



Fig. 4. *The Past of Things to Come* (2018)



Fig. 5. *The Past of Things to Come* (2018)

DELEUZE (2005) when discusses Bergson's theories around time, suggests that what we call time or duration, it is the parallel existence of past, present and future. The present is not possible without the past (and the future) which always exist virtually in the present and constantly produces it. All these three different 'times' that we usually regard separately, coexist and interact continuously shaping our present. The real, the actual is a present which comes into material form of a possible which contains past and future: the virtual. The virtual is present but not actual, it does not materialise, it seems to be the opposite of the actual. But it is however depended from it through difference, through the movements of differentiation, encounters, disruptions etc. that the real takes, and, which therefore affect, transform and 'create' the virtual and vice versa.

Our actual existence then, says Deleuze, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents the two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and recollection on the other. Even though past and present remain distinct they also share a point of indiscernibility, they construct a mutual image (like that of the mirror) which often does not reveal to us clearly its sides: which one is the virtual and which is the actual. This is how memory, fantasies, dreams work, they live in the present and although distinct from it, it is in continual exchange with it. The crystal image is the point of indiscernibility of the two distinct images, the actual and the virtual (2005: p. 79). Virtuality in Deleuze has exactly this sense of connectivity and simultaneity that past, present and future share, it is not a second nature, something else than the real but it incessantly interacts with the real, the real and the virtual become inseparable. In fact, the virtuality of the actual is what renders the actual dynamic and able of becoming other but it is also the reality of the actual that makes the virtual what it is each time.



Fig. 6. *The Past of Things to Come* (2018)

This relational notion speaks directly about space and, perhaps, urges forward into a broader idea of its nature, suggested by GROSZ (2001):

“Obviously, spatial relations happily admit relations of simultaneity: space is that which enables simultaneous or coextensive relations. Perhaps it would be more intriguing to consider spatiality in terms of the coexistence of multiple relations of succession, space as a layering of spaces within themselves, spaces enfolded in others, spaces that can function as the virtualities of the present, the ‘here’. Here a notion of virtual space will be of crucial relevance. If past, present, and future are always entwined and make each other possible only through their divergences and bifurcations, then perhaps there is a way to consider spatiality in terms of relations of nearness and farness, relations of proximity and entwinement, the interimplications of the very near and the very far, rather than of numerals of geometry.”

(GROSZ 2001: p. 128)

Space is also movable, since there are differentiations within it which have transformable relations. Its regional, static position – its topological factor, its ‘placeness’– is not as immovable as it looks as it is also a product of the connection between other places through the relations and networks that the subjects and objects create. What is more, space is actually a ‘container’ of simultaneous relations of present, past and indeed future as it is of differences and of closeness and farness. There are many other qualities of duration that can be met in space in analogous forms. Even virtuality is not an actual privilege of time, although, it seems at first that the materiality and actuality of space come into contrast with the abstract nature of the virtual.

In the episode titled “Five Characters in Search of an Exit” of the TV series “The Twilight Zone” (1961) the characters seem lost in a timeless and spaceless state, which makes them wonder not only why and how they found themselves there but also who they are, wondering of their own actual existence:



Fig. 7. *The Past of Things to Come* (2018)

- *What's going on here? Where are we? What are we? Who are we?*
- *None of us knows. We don't know who we are, we don't know where we are. Each of us woke up one moment and here we were in the darkness.*
- *How can that happen?*
- *That's the question we asked ourselves, a question with no answer. We're nameless things with no memory, no knowledge of what went on before. No understanding of what is now, no knowledge of what will be.*
- *Maybe we are in another planet or maybe we are in a spaceship going to another planet, maybe we are all insane or maybe this is a mirage, an illusion.*
- *We are all dead, this is limbo.*
- *We don't really exist, we are dream figures from somebody else's existence.*
- *Or each one of us is having a dream and everyone else is part of the other person's dream.*

- *This is a nightmare, it must be a nightmare.*
- *Yes indeed but whose yours or mine?*
- *Someone knows we are here.*
- *They have to... You have all been here for a while, a long while. Someone must feed you, someone must give you water.*
- *There's been no food or water.*
- *But we will starve to death, we 'll die of thirst.*
- *Do you feel hungry? Or thirsty, or hot, or cold, fatigue or discomfort? Or anything? Do you feel anything?*
- *No, no I don't feel anything, but it is understandable that I don't feel hungry or thirsty, this is shock or the aftermath of shock.*
- *None of us feel anything. None of us feel anything since we 've been here and we 've been here for an endless time.*
- *This is incredible, this is really incredible. Have you shouted? Have you banged on the wall? Have you done that?*
- *Often.*
- *Have you looked all around? Maybe there's a button or a reliever on the wall.*
- *For a while that's all we did. Searched, looked, felt, but then we discovered that this is the universe right here. For our purposes this is the universe, right here, this little room.*
- *After a while it will be a lot easier, perhaps there are a lot of dungeons like this, perhaps they are for the unloved, perhaps that's who we are: the unloved.*

"Five Characters in Search of an Exit", 1961, Episode 79

"The Past of Things to Come" suggests also a place of indefinite time and as such space, which the visitors are placed in a similar 'context' as the characters of the Twilight Zone's episode. The room itself and the images of the exterior do not have a strong sci-fi or futuristic imagery, they could easily be today or even in the past. They, rather, recall stereotypical representations of dystopian urban spaces. Nevertheless, the main refer-

ences in this work are around the Greek crisis, its basic idea lies within the causes and impacts of the crisis which shapes the current social and political reality. This is the main reason I have chosen to obviously relate the work with the actual building, the neighbourhood and the city of Athens. However, Athens is mentioned nowhere, in none of the texts that the visitors come across in the archival room: Neither in the introductory one nor in the following, taken from “Kathimerini” newspaper titled: “*Handelsblatt: Shadow of fear over Athens*” (8/11/2017), where all the actual names have been removed:

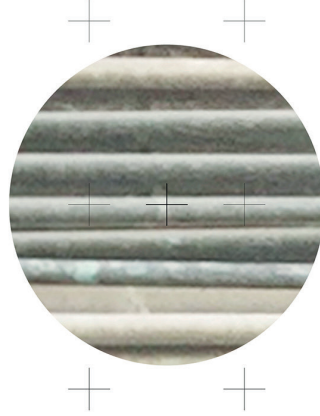
“The online newspaper speaks about “a wave of violence in the country” and “a shadow of fear over the city” referring to the repeated incidents of violence that are recently occurring in the capital. “The perpetrators throw molotov bombs, shoot from motor-bikes on the move – the city is experiencing a wave of violence. The prime minister is accused that the government does not pay any attention to the security of the citizens” the correspondent of the newspaper writes. The article also hosts statements by the mayor who speaks about a “war atmosphere” spreading around the city and stresses that the perpetrators of the attacks “want victims”.

The newspaper notes that «after the attack on the political party’s headquarters the violence has intensified and keeps spreading throughout the city. More and more frequently hooded youths cause anxiety in the centre, destroying shops, burning cars, forcing tourists to leave. The mayor notices a «shadow of fear» over the city. The post offices and most banks have long closed their branches, many merchants have left their shops. Public transport bypasses certain areas after several incidents of bus burnings. Drug dealers have the upper hand in the city» the article says, adding that «police has largely withdrawn from the restricted zone.»

8/11/2112



Fig. 8. *The Past of Things to Come* (2018)



Even though there is no indication of the city or neighbourhood the article is referring to, it is not difficult for most Athens' citizens to guess, as they have come across several similar, almost identical reports, in Greek and international press. Having the names removed the article acquires a timeless quality, but did not have it anyway? Who can remember or who can imagine a different narrative of Exarcheia neighbourhood?

The hypothetical residents of the bunker, just like the five characters in search of an exit, find themselves in a loop, they do not experience progress, linear time, but a repetition of time and thus space. One of the five characters claims that she doesn't feel anything anymore, neither remembers, another one even thinks that: "The universe is right here. For our purposes this is the universe, right here, this little room". Wondering if this place is for the unloved. The thoughts and feelings that they express were widely shared, in my opinion, during the Greek crisis. And I cannot also avoid the association, as cliché as it may sound, of Athens being the 'unloved' city.

Nevertheless, the archival room that visitors first come across is supposedly beyond the disastrous year 2112, meaning that maybe, since there is an actual archive, civilization did not after all collapse and things are at least not that bad as they looked in the past or in the future. Lines of flight and escapes are possible, just as BRIDLE (2018) underlines in the last paragraph of his text in the exhibition catalogue:

“What shimmers and shears in “The past of things to come” is the connective tissue of experience, the contrast between the dead time of historical conditioning and the always already present possibility of revision and reappraisal. We can take our place in the frame, or write ourselves out of it; draw new maps and new strategies. Huddle here, but plot our escape.”

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