

THE CYBERIAD - TELLING STORIES OF POWER RELATIONSHIPS IN FUTURE WORDS

DYNAMICS, ARTICULATIONS, CONTROVERSIES, ENGAGEMENTS, IDENTITIES, RELATIONS

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“Attention is the natural prayer of the soul”

Malebranche

ABSTRACT

In this workshop, we mean to explore how ideas of power might be explored through different ideas of “future”.

This workshop asks its participants to open up a more multivalent temporality, looking at multiple possible futures and the ideas of societies (and therefore, also the power-relationship) they might convey. It aims to nurture questioning how this might help to understand better how we, as designers, can help to envision new kind of actions to be undertaken in the present public realm, and which alternative meanings - such as those of citizenship, politics and power - can be conveyed by our design actions.

Design actions are understood here as poetic and speculative, done with the intention of restoring power and affording agency to citizens and communities, like Bruce Sterling’s Casa Jasmina in Torino. With an approach analogous to Sterling’s use of open source to generate new possibilities in the traditional spaces and uses of ‘home,’ this workshop asks participants to reconsider – and collectively reconfigure – things and/or systems which they identify as broken or soon-to-be-abandoned under the rubric of ‘progress.’ In them (be they derelict spaces, craft techniques belittled as feminine, or rituals of birth and death), we will search for other possibilities – possibilities that can realign power in service of the public good. As Marco Navarro writes, this will entail “a process in which the displacement of pieces from their original configuration produces a new graft, releasing an unexpected form of détournement. It also manifests itself through the turnover of established rela-

tions, along with the re-appropriation of all the relations thus generated.”¹

Predicated on the conviction that storytelling is a fertile way to generate new ways of designing, of thinking and making new futures, this workshop is further inspired by Stanislaw Lem’s *The Cyberiad*. Lem’s absurd, ironic, and humorous future scenarios offer models for how we can question the present time and its values, and also reveal and change power relationships in the process. These future narratives will be used as lenses to look at the present with different eyes, and to envision unexpected kinds of actions that can be undertaken in the present in the public realm, where the power relationships might change. The building blocks for creating these future narratives will be the “fragments” resulting from the failure of the ideology of progress. In this operation, we use the philosophy of Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and Aby Warburg as inspiration for our narrative methodology.

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

In the 20th century, the idea of future considered as a continuation of the past and present condition, had already started to crumble. Philosophers such as Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt analysed the failures of this view of time which became particularly evident after WWII. The idea of linear history is to them a concept originating in Western philosophy and dying in modernity. This leaves room however for novel views, new ideas of history, time and hence society. In *The Human Condition* Arendt for instance describes how a rupture of the linear paradigm of history might lead to a return to key values and meanings from the ancient Greek, such as the notion of “*democracy*” - in Arendt’s view, the relational space in which citizens discuss matters of concern to the public realm within the public realm, and act accordingly - as well as the idea of “*power*” - a fluid energy gener-

ated in the interaction between citizens. This cannot be encapsulated, captured, preserved, but is to Arendt the result of citizens’ freedom.

The many different crises that contemporary societies are facing nowadays - symbolical, economic, cultural, social - can also be interpreted as signs of this crumbling idea of a linear development of history - in which the future is considered a direct consequence of the past, and a linear development of what is already or has already happened - is no longer believable. There is no “one” future any longer for us to confide in. Many possible futures, and the many instruments we have in our hands as humans - technological and scientific development, theories on societies, individuals - do not come with guarantees that we will feel “safe” in this sea of uncertainties. Uncertainty presents itself as something we may well want to value, if not cherish, as a state of being that removes false senses of comfort and forces us to engage more directly with the complex environmental and social dynamics we often ignore.

This would mean that in these possible futures, power-relationships could possibly be different from what we know from the past and the present, and from which radically new societies could emerge. Fast forward for example to a future society in which distributed ledgers such as the blockchain are the key infrastructure on which collective governance of commons is based. Or imagine a post-nation state world in which global resource management defines the course of action of a global society.

Each possible future world could also bring with it its own notion of governance, of public realm, of discourse and agency, of power structures, of politics. In them we might find viewpoints shedding new light on current and possible future challenges with respect to these topics.

To envision such possible alternative futures, we propose in this workshop to return to Benjamin’s and Arendt’s philosophy, and to look there for ways to inspire the creation of such possible futures. To Arendt and Benjamin, the fragments re-

¹ https://designpracticesandparadigms.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/wk10_navarro_repairing-cities.pdf

sulting from the destruction of a linear idea of history can help to see those alternative paths which were there in the past but did not have the chance to develop. The one who acknowledges these “*potentialities*”, can bring them into action. He/she who can allow the “new” in history to take place, is the “*storyteller*”. By collecting fragments of forgotten histories and telling their stories, he/she sheds light also on the perspectives of the so-called losers of history.

To Arendt and Benjamin, these fragments are “*dialectical images*”, images where past, present and future are equally present:

“It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.

W. Benjamin, “*Awakening*” (*Arcades*, 462; n2a, 3)

These images manifest themselves in moments of crisis in (linear) history. In these moments, that which is on the verge of losing its significance because it is no longer in use, no longer in fashion - for instance the objects of merchandise showcased in Paris’s galleries - reveal to Benjamin other aspects of those objects which were not valued in the perspective of progress, but could be meaningful for the future. Dialectical images reveal a past that can illuminate the future, and bring to the future something radically other than the past and its logics. These “*fragments*” thus can be considered building blocks by means of which the storyteller can build new narratives for the future, differing fundamentally from the ones of the past, and conveying alternative values and meanings. One needs to have, like the flaneur, an “*attentive eye*”: this attention towards the remains is for Benjamin an ethical quality, probably the most difficult and rare one to find in a time ruled by the ideology of

progress, as it was in Benjamin’s contemporaneity, and, in certain respect, also in ours.

Benjamin often acknowledges in his writings that his idea of “*dialectical images*” is very close to Warburg’s idea of *Pathos Formulae*: i.e. an image that reveals aspects of the past and of the future. The historian, the archaeologist and the geologist, who look at the distant past, have the potential to look into the future with attentive eyes, and see what those blindly chasing progress often do not. Didi-Huberman, in his recent book ‘*Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet*’, speaks about Warburg’s concept of the *Pathos Formulae*², and gives examples of practices related to atlas-making - as for instance Warburg’s work on the *Mnemosyne Atlas* - in which the past is used as a lense to relate to the future. He asserts that historians like Warburg can be considered seismographers of the observed process, capable to build an atlas containing every suffering of the world, and to read in them possible futures, in a almost divinatory movement.

What seems to be a failure in the past, in our perspective, can represent a potential for the future. In this workshop we want to explore how designers - in ways similar to those of historians, archeologists and geologists - can also exert this “attentive” gaze towards the “fragments” resulting from the disillusion of the ideology of progress, and use them to see potential futures that can illuminate our present.

That “*fragments*” can be considered useful building blocks to create new narratives, is a topic that has also been addressed beyond the field of philosophy. Another source for reflection on the potential of so-called “failed” pasts, is David Edgerton’s *Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900*. In it, Edgerton offers useful points of departure with examples such as the East German Trabant, which incorporated wool in its car body structure well before textiles would be seen as viable and advanced materials in 21st century technology and architecture. He thereby illustrates how concretely Arendt’s and Benjamin’s idea of working with the “*fragments*” is more literally exemplified in history in many innovations.

² The *Pathos Formulae* that Benjamin recognized as conveying the same meaning as his notion of the dialectical image.

THE WORKSHOP

During this workshop, we place designers in the position of storytellers in the sense described by Arendt and Benjamin. We will support their activities by providing working materials in line with the chosen methodological approach. Starting from their own selection of “*fragments*” of elements ‘dissolving’ in contemporary society, they will be asked to imagine and build future worlds, placing the unexpressed potential, the alternative perspective and value of these elements at its centre. From the ensuing description of life in these future worlds, new views on power structures and relationships will emerge to be discussed, inspiring insights potentially valuable in light of today’s challenges. Hence the workshop consists of three phases: future worldbuilding on the basis of the fragments, an assessment of shifted/ing power relations in this world, a discussion thereof in light of lessons for the present and designers’ roles therein.

Participants will each be asked to bring a fragment of their own, an (image of an) object which they feel is emblematic for our (changing) contemporary context. Supposing the object - or the principle, system or situation for which it stands - loses its value, participants are asked to characterise what else - which unexpressed potential value - will be lost. For example, if the owned car as we know it disappears because technological advances bring us autonomous vehicles we might lose the unwinding time of our commute, our time to reflect, as it might be replaced with more time to work. Or: if (the) voting (form) disappears, we might ‘lose’ an ‘easy way out’ of participating in political activity or a fixed ritualistic moment in our political lives.

Consequently, groups of 4-5 participants are placed together to discuss the future world that would emerge, supposing it would be shaped around the collective unexpressed potentialities of their fragments. In the case of the earlier mentioned examples: what would life in a world - and its public realm & power structure - centred around ‘time to reflect’ and ‘more continuous and engaged political

participation’ look like? Each team will be provided with 3-5 key developments providing a basic skeleton of their future world at hand as to facilitate the discussion and guarantee sufficient distinction between the future worlds across the teams.

As speculative images of people’s lives in the distinct futures emerge, so will alternative images of people’s relationship to their society in the larger sense. Specific guiding questions (and/or personas) will be provided to make the discussion gravitate towards the topics of power structures and the public realm of political. Participants will be challenged to present their findings by means of short stories, new fragments from a future world, rehashings of the unexpressed potentialities of the fragments from which they started.

These speculative stories might be humoristic, surreal, grotesque, utopian, dystopian ... For each story, a different style will be proposed in which to write it. This increases the distance between present and future and enhances the critical positioning of the future-grounded narrative as a lens through which to address the present.

A closing, plenary reading and discussion of the new narrative fragments will provide the ground for dialogue between the four different futures, and question how they can help us to look at our present societies - and the different kind of power-relationship they convey - through different, “attentive” eyes.

Lem’s inspiration

The inspiration for telling the future stories from the “fragments” comes from *The Cyberiad* by Stanisław Lem. This short book offers a series of philosophically inclined pieces about life in a world built by cyborg surrogates. It is not about postulating new futures but about illustrating how the future will go awry if we continue down a certain path. Futures are to him a way to criticize the present and to allow us to see it through different eyes. Both strategically as well as stylistically Lem’s work inspired our approach to storytelling through worldbuilding, using futures as tools for thought to investigate the present’s un(der)expressed potentialities.

Lem's fantastical tales can be read as political allegories, especially considering they were written in Poland in 1965.³ Thinking with Lem's parodies of invention and, not incidentally, his tactical use of humor and absurdity, workshop participants will imagine futures built upon the potentials of present and past to express new, radically different ways of thinking about and within society as well as the relationship between individuals and society.

Expected outcomes

The immersive and narrative setting of the workshop is expected to lead to a series of insights regarding different models of power, citizenship and politics, which can serve both as critical anchor-points in design activities related to these topics or even direct inspiration on how to reframe problems and solutions in these areas. The workshop will be documented by means of the future world related working materials (print/tangible) and the written (and possible illustrated) narratives. Both will be showcased in the DESIS Philosophy Talks series⁴

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³ But, it is also important to note that blind faith in the calculus of progress was not just localized in communist countries with five-year plans; it was, and is, a tenet of perfectionist-creators everywhere.

⁴ <http://desis-philosophytalks.org>