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ПАМЯТИ: ТЕМПОРАЛЬНОСТЬ

И УНИЧТОЖЕНИЕ ЖИЗНИ

В ФИЛЬМЕ «АТЛАНТИДА» (2019)

Anticipating Memory Landscapes:

Temporality and Destruction of Life

in “Atlantis” (2019)

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Аннотация

«Атлантида» (2019) — украинская драма-антиутопия режиссера Валентина Васяновича. Я использую понятие «предвосхищенной памяти» Стефа Крэпса и теории медленного кино, чтобы пролить свет на комментарий фильма об уничтожении жизни в результате вооруженного конфликта и переосмыслить актуальность этих понятий. В фильме воображаемое будущее Донбасса де-драматизируется с целью подчеркнуть поверхностность телеологического повествования о войне и выйти за рамки его антропоцентрической оценки.

Abstract

Atlantis (2019) is a Ukrainian dystopian drama directed by Valentyn Vasyanovych. I use Stef Craps' notion of *anticipatory memory* and theories of *slow cinema* to illuminate a commentary that the film produces as to the destruction of life as a result of an armed conflict and to re-articulate the relevance of the concepts. The film de-dramatises an imaginary future for Donbas to underscore the futility of the teleological narrative of war and look beyond its anthropocentric assessment.

Introduction¹

The contemporary moment is misleading in its seeming peacefulness. While currently there are no wars in progress of the scale and magnitude comparable to the world wars of the 20th century, the world is far from being at peace. One of the prominent geographical and ideological terrains of today's armed conflicts is that of the post-Soviet space. Some of those conflicts are conserved for the time being (e.g. Transnistria), the others are in their active phase at the time of writing (Nagorno-Karabakh). The film *Atlantis* (2019), directed by Valentyn Vasyanovych, engages with one such armed conflict that is taking place, up to this day, on the European continent – the war in Donbas. The film intricately weaves together modern warfare, ecological destruction, collective traumas, and intimate detail of mundane existence to offer an account of anticipatory memory in the aftermath of the conflict in the East of Ukraine. The (literally) slow drama of daily life, graceful in its organisation of temporalities, reflects on the relationship between war, death, memory, and love with human and non-human life. Set in the future, it engages with the consequences of the conflict that is in progress as we are watching the film in the present.

Taking this rich cultural object as the locus of my analysis, I aim to discuss the engagement of the notion of *anticipatory memory* with contemporary human warfare and its destruction of life (both direct and indirect, human and non-human). The film invites the viewer to engage with an account of an anticipated future and mobilises the mnemonic mode of anticipatory memory as a critique of contemporary politics based on the accumulation of capital and anthropocentrism. The research question that drives the development of my analysis, then, is: **What is the analytical value of the organisation of temporality that *Atlantis* offers in relation to the destruction of human and non-human life?** I use Stef Craps' notion of *anticipatory memory* and theories of *slow cinema* to illuminate a commentary that the film produces as to the destruction of life as a result of an armed conflict and to re-articulate the relevance of these concepts. Therefore, the supporting questions are: What kind of anticipatory memory of the war in Donbas does the film suggest, how does it stage an intervention in the present, and to what effect? *Atlantis* de-dramatises an imaginary future for Donbas, beyond the war, to underscore the futility of the teleological narrative of war and look beyond its anthropocentric assessment. In what follows, I introduce this cultural object, briefly engage with the relevant theories, and develop my analysis in relation to the questions posed.

¹ – I am grateful to Boris Noordenbos, Assistant Professor in Literary and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam, for his invaluable input in the development of this essay.

Atlantis (2019)

Atlantis is a Ukrainian dystopian drama released in 2019 and directed by Valentyn Vasyanovych. It premiered at the 76th Venice International Film Festival, where it proceeded to win the award for Best Film in the Horizons section, which features cinematographic works that offer novel expressive languages (think slow cinema!). The film is set in 2025, “one year after the war,” (*Atlantis*, 2019) as it is stated at the beginning, in the East of Ukraine. Even though there is no direct representation of war, the viewer is constantly confronted with its environmental, social, and psychological vestiges. *Atlantis* opens with a scene that was shot with a thermal imaging camera, in which three men kill and bury a fourth one. The setting of the film is bleak, industrial; the buildings are dilapidating, people are scarce. The protagonist is Sergiy (Andriy Rymaruk) – a former soldier and a steel factory worker who is being laid off. His friend Ivan (Vasyl Antoniuk), having gone through the same experience and suffering from severe PTSD, kills himself after countless sleepless nights by jumping into what appears to be liquid metal.

Sergiy finds a new job – he delivers drinking water to the zona, the uninhabited area that was heavily affected by the war. By accident, he meets Katya (Liudmyla Bileka) and joins the Black Tulip Mission, of which she is part. The mission searches for corpses – the victims of the war – in an attempt to identify and bury them properly. When the protagonist encounters an employee of an international environmental organisation, the viewer learns that the war has induced non-human costs as well: due to ecological damage caused by flooding of mines, the area has become uninhabitable. The film ends with Sergiy’s decision to stay in the area, notwithstanding that employee’s invitation to move abroad, and starts a love affair with Katya.

What *Atlantis* offers its viewer is not a rollercoaster ride but an extremely slow walk through ruins (psychological, architectural, industrial, and ecological). The scarcity of dialogue, long and static takes, long symmetrical shots, attention to mundane uneventful scenes of life, and the film’s general observational and minimalist style facilitates an experience that is above all unsettling. The features of the film that I claim are specific to it and analytically relevant are the following: it is set in the future, 2025, in the area where an armed conflict is unfolding at the moment; it is made in the style of *slow cinema*; it offers a (visual) representation of the conflict’s consequences for both humans and landscape.

Imagining and remembering the catastrophe: trauma, anticipation, representation

The representations of climate catastrophes abound in popular culture. The threat that the human-inflicted environmental degradation poses is perhaps a ubiquitous theme of the commercial blockbuster industry. Scholars have not left this phenomenon unaddressed, primarily wondering to what effect this genre constructs the idea of a looming disaster, in the reasons for which we are all implicated. To what extent does it make us *feel* implicated, and what does it mean for civic action? Demonstrating the casual link between the actions in the viewer's present and the future disasters and picturing the fictional future that should be avoided is the primary mode of critique originating in such cultural products which may activate a strong affective response. Ann Kaplan puts forth the argument that future, anticipated catastrophic events can have a traumatic effect on the viewer (2016). She suggests and operationalises the concept of *pretrauma*, which can induce a *Pretraumatic* Stress Syndrome, on par with widely recognised Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. She highlights the role of the temporal organisation of the catastrophic narratives as a complex reorganisation of the past, the present, and the future. For Kaplan, making the structure of such reorganisation explicit is key to the productive engagements with the threat of human-induced climate change.

In a related vein, Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis discuss the notion of climate grief (2018). In their elaboration, it denotes

“...the grief felt in relation to experienced or *anticipated* ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (2018: 275).

Importantly, these scholars include the possibility of the anticipation of destruction as a cause of climate grief. Hence, imagining a climate catastrophe on screen may be conducive to climate grief, which raises productive questions about the agential qualities of the environment, relationality of the environment and humans, and the cultural work of the catastrophic imageries.

Anil Narine's *eco-trauma* allows to further stress the relational optics of engagement with the (representations of) climate crisis. For him, *eco-trauma* is the one that “...we perpetuate in an ecosystem through pollution and unsustainable resource management [which] inevitably [returns] to harm us” (2015: 9). What it implies, however, is not nature (I use this term

tentatively), to which we now extend agential capacities, taking a revenge on us; it is not *fighting back*. Narine affirms that in the objects of climate fiction that he discusses, the trauma (the environmental degradation) is always already our own trauma (admittedly, with an uneven distribution suffering), and the catastrophes “[force] us to confront our own propensity to inflict <...> traumas” (2015: 9). An eco-trauma, then, is not a syndrome, problem, glitch to be treated; it is a condition which illuminates the complex relational networks and the simple inseparability of the drivers of climate change and those who bear witness to it (widely construed).

Stef Craps’ notions of “preliminary mourning” (2017: 479) and “anticipatory memory” (2017: 485) are the modes of the organisation of diegetic time that bring forth the logic of much of the catastrophic fiction and reveals the structure of temporal positioning of the viewing subject. Craps envisions the work of memory to be in the benefit of the present and future by fictionalising the anticipated future as the memory of the future perfect. In his account, “fictional future history of the present” (2017: 484) is effective by virtue of making climate change and its consequences imaginable and tangible on a mass scale. While aiming to “scale up remembrance” (Plate 2017: 493) and “break through ordinary perception” (Craps 2017: 484), Craps is hesitant to let go of the centrality of the human subject. Liedeke Plate re-articulates Craps’ ideas in a way that is more considerate of post- and non-human. She advocates for the re-introduction of a concept coined by Pierre Nora *milieux de memoire* – environments, or landscapes, of memory (Plate 2017: 495). Plate suggests an analytical lens that conceptualises memory landscapes as those “of which humans are (but) a part, that is lived (not just by humans) in the anticipation of the materialisation of past mistakes” (2017: 495). Refusing to accept “the age-old humanist distinctions between natural history and human history” (Beck qtd. in Plate 2017: 495) paves the way to a more holistic and productive understanding of the very material as well as social processes, related to climate change and beyond, in an effort to foster potentially healing connections. Anticipatory memory, I argue, is an imaginative device that can assist in making these connections.

Anticipatory memory is clearly about fashioning temporal relations in a certain way. While it is one of the dimensions of the organisation of the narrative in Atlantis, durational aesthetic complements it by fashioning the formal organisation of the film. In this way, my concern with time extends into the analysis of the form of the object. I invoke the theoretical work on the style of slow cinema to help me produce a time-based reading of Atlantis. While the notion of slowness as a temporal feature of cinematographic works is by no means new, it has gained

special prominence in the last decade, as Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge posit. They are the editors of the first book focusing on slow cinema and lay the foundation for my understanding of the idea. One way in which slow cinema can be conceptualised is through time as such being made noticeable for the viewer, often through “a disjunction between shot duration and audiovisual content” (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016: 5). In a similar vein, Jonathan Romney describes slow cinema as “downplay[ing] event in favour of mood, evocativeness, and an intensified sense of temporality” (Caglayan 2018: 4). Prevalence of long shots over close-ups and focus on settings lacking human presence might be said to be characteristic of slow cinema, though such claims should be made carefully (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016: 5).

De Luca and Barradas Jorge postulate that a commitment to realism and reality is the “trademark” of slow cinema (2016: 7). Concerning that, De Luca writes about slow cinema’s “sensory mode of address based on the protracted inspection of physical reality” (Caglayan 2018: 1). By observing realities to which varying levels of significance are attributed in contemporary culture and politics, slowness can help to update the affects such realities produce and the ways in which they are perceived (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016: 14). Slow cinema offers a forum for a conceptual variety of temporalities and can be tailored precisely to the subject matter in question. The political force of a durational aesthetic, then, is in its ability to intercede in wider debates reassessing and questioning established systems, values, and regimes through a novel sensory-perceptual lens (2016: 15).

Anticipatory memory and durational aesthetic are the two hinges around which the time is arranged in *Atlantis* and which facilitate the interrogation of the destruction of life and of the conventional political and analytical frames that address armed conflicts. They work in tandem to stage an intervention in the present.

On bathing in an excavator’s bucket: The critical import of *Atlantis* (2019)

In a scene in the last half an hour of the film (1.11.00 – 1.18.52), Sergiy arrives at a barren landscape. It is filled with boulders and rubbles; there is a large excavator bucket in the centre of the frame and an old truck in the far-left corner. Sergiy takes a hosepipe out of his truck, walks to the bucket, fills it with water, and makes a fire under it. He proceeds to bathe in it, occasionally submerging himself in the water. In my reading



Figure 1. A scene from *Atlantis* (2019): Sergiy bathes in a deserted bucket of an excavator. Digital film still.

of the scene I ask how its formal and narrative characteristics organise time (both diegetic and non-diegetic) and to what effect.

The scene (fig. 1) provides an entry point to the analysis of the style of the whole film. It features elements that surface in the rest of *Atlantis* and allows talking about it as a work of slow cinema. The scene is shot in (what looks like) one nearly eight-minute take; the camera is static for the whole duration of the scene, and the shot is long: the landscape, the truck, and the bucket are constantly in the frame and focus. There are no other humans, and there is very limited action. Sergiy walks slowly to the bucket and back to the truck several times, water flows from the hosepipe into the bucket, and fire burns under it. There is no dialogue; it is a long act of bathing, which the viewer is made to witness. Although the act in itself is devoid of explicit narrative significance, I suggest reading it as part of a memory landscape that *Atlantis* produces: the landscape of *Atlantis* as an imaginative metaphor rooted in material realities. Through bringing together and contemplating a lonely human, a barren landscape, an artificial source of water, a spare part of an industrial machine the scene weaves together and amplifies psychic, social, and natural damage wrought by war. It is bizarre at best, and can be made sense of and acquires significance, as a landscape, retrospectively, that is, by gesturing towards the war that fashioned it. Reading *Atlantis* in the context of pretrauma allows to conceptualise the durational character of climate and the related social transformations (Kaplan 2016). It emphasises the refusal of constructing a future dystopian world as a result of an *event*, which is central to the film's narrative. The world of *Atlantis* is a “morbid” but an “ongoing” one (Kaplan 2016: 14).

Even though Sergiy is on screen most of the time in the scene, his presence and actions are as (in)significant as the presence of the other objects in the frame. When he is bathing, he goes underwater, and for

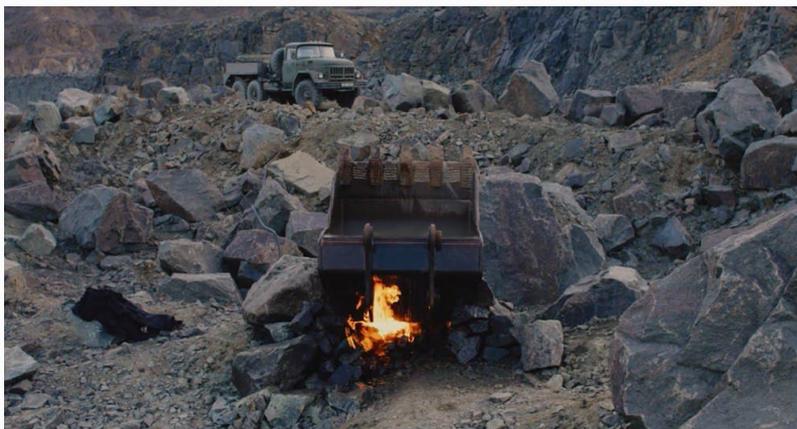


Figure 2. A scene from Atlantis (2019): Sergiy submerges himself in water for prolonged periods of time in the scene. Digital film still.

some time it looks as if there is no human there (fig. 2). That period is long enough to make an impact on the viewer. It raises questions about the position and the role of the human in the film and the (memory) landscape that the film portrays. More generally, a significant feature of the visual storytelling employed in Atlantis is that the length of a take is not correlated with the presence of the protagonist: it starts and/or ends when the human is not yet or no longer in the frame. Again, this delay is long enough to become prominent. The human flows in and out of the environment that exists independently of them. Humans have made themselves optional, nothing but a part.

Machines keep company to humans (fig. 3). The prominence of the truck in the background and the fact that it is an excavator bucket that Sergiy is bathing in is affirmed in other scenes as well, emphasising close ties between machines and humans in that context. The mining industry has been the backbone of the region; the industry is one, albeit important, reason for the conflict; if not the cause, the industry is the source of the ecological crisis in the region. At the same time, what we would



Figure 3. A scene from Atlantis (2019): one of the large vehicles figuring prominently in the film. Digital film still.

think of as nature is completely absent from the stage; it is no longer there. A more conventional, less striking way of having a bath outside, for instance, would be in a natural water reservoir. Notably, we see no natural sources of water, and water is the site where the ecological catastrophe of Donbas unfolds. Water is a shorthand for life in the popular imagination, which is illustrated by the constant speculations about the presence of water on other planets as evidence of its possibility there. The livelihood of Donbas' people needs to be artificially supported in the film because no access to water would mean the impossibility of the continuation of human life.

The act of bathing is invested with another dimension of meaning in relation to the preceding scene. In it, the protagonist, as part of the Black Tulip Mission, unearths corpses for the first time, and the smell makes him vomit. Bathing, then, transforms into a cleansing ritual; visually it reminds of bathing in holy springs which are widespread in Orthodox contexts, and the Orthodox faith is a significant part of Ukraine's culture. Water, thus, is not only a means of sustenance but also a cleansing force in its own right. Arguably, the urge to wash off the sin of participating in the war and the traumatic (hi)story is taken to extreme and fatal consequences in the case of Ivan, who jumps into a "bath" of fluid metal.

In resonance with slow cinema theorists, I posit that *Atlantis*' insistence on and attention to mundane scenes of life has political consequences. The everyday life it depicts is seemingly insignificant and uneventful, as the bathing scene communicates. However, such close focus on it, which the approach of slow cinema affords, invests it with urgency and relevance, arguably for the viewer's present as well. It brings attention to the loneliness and optionality of a human being in an environment torn by war. Its social dimension is embodied by the difficult decision to stay or to leave the almost lunar, uninhabitable landscape, which in itself constitutes the ecological dimension. A close look demonstrates that a post-war landscape is only that of memory, a *memory landscape*. The water that Sergiy bathes in is a consequence and a reminder of the military action that resulted in flooding of the mines and poisoning of the groundwater. The excavator bucket is a trace of an industry that is no longer there. Sergiy is a person who only finds use for himself in staying in the area and addressing the consequences of the war by delivering water and digging out corpses to bury them properly. The emphasised temporality highlights the saturation of the physical landscape with the symbolic and material investment of war.

Such import of durational aesthetic reinvents the significance of anticipatory memory. Its conception that *Atlantis* develops is radically

different from that by Craps. Instead of scaling up remembrance, it scales it down. While the examples with which Craps engages are located thousands of years in the future, the film is far enough in the future for the viewer to believe that it might become a reality but close enough that it is still tangible. The “de-dramatization of narrative events” (Caglayan 2018: 5) that Vasyanovich achieves in the film works to allow reflection about the war, and it is made possible only by virtue of temporally locating the film in the near future. Such temporality, then, warrants the shift of focus from the theatre of war to the matter-of-factness of daily life in the imaginary aftermath that is very plausible, and such a shift, in turn, allows meditating on the tangible and symbolic consequences of the war. The only markers of a real locality are language (the characters speak Ukrainian; albeit, the dialogue is scarce) and recognisable old-fashioned Soviet cars. They are placed against a generalisable background of a barren landscape and vestiges of industry and war. Such staging makes *Atlantis* the metonymy for the global (primarily environmental) crisis. It is an experimental lab, even if with a distinct face, indeed, an *Atlantis*, an isolated imaginary island that, sadly, has a lot to say about our present. For Vasyanovich, the end of the war is ultimately insignificant. Just like the overall climate change, the consequences of the war that are portrayed have an effect beyond humans and cannot be easily undone. *Atlantis* through its focus on the micro-level generates affects that invest preliminary mourning in the now with urgency. If the work of grieving is not done today, one will be forced to do it tomorrow, already as part of a memory landscape.

Conclusion

The landscape of *Atlantis* is a landscape of memory. Corpses, figurines, mines, bombs, debris, machines, and humans — all these elements function as memory tokens. Every action in the film is taken in service or as a consequence of the past. It is also how Sergiy frames himself at the end of the film. By refusing to leave, he decides to stay and grieve. And the grief that he lives through is largely human-centred: he grieves over his friend and his old life. However, by staying he must embrace the totality of both the physical and metaphorical landscape that is left for him; a landscape that is not something that it used to be. These metaphorical operations allow talking about Butlerian grievability, including that in relation to the environment.

What is portrayed in *Atlantis* has been happening and is happening as I am writing. The representation of the future offered by Vasyanovich is speculative only to an extent. The war does not need to end for us to

make sense of the losses inflicted. By offering a narrative of de-dramatised everyday life with the help of cinematographic devices that can be provisionally attributed to the style of slow cinema the film achieves an effective and affective examination of the destruction of life and art's capacity for social critique. Anticipatory memory while not explicit is embodied and saturated in the mundane material elements represented in the film.

In the scene where Sergiy talks to the environmental organisation employee, the film spills out a moralising message very directly (1:26:00 – 1:30:50). “It took ten years to clean up the land poisoned by the myths of Soviet propaganda. But now you need to clean the water and soil. It will take decades, if not hundreds of years,” she says. This short monologue reaches for the reasons of the conflict and projects its consequences even farther into the future. What it overlooks, however, is Sergiy's acceptance of and embeddedness in the landscape. It is not that the destruction of life is acceptable. It is that when we zoom in on an individual life, without overemphasising grand narratives and big events, the protagonist is not an inherent but a necessary part of the landscape. Taken out of the memory landscape, he will struggle to make sense and to be made sense of. Thus, it highlights the cultural problematic and disrupts the extractivist, consumerist logic of relationality between the human and the environment. Such framing is a step towards reshaping the domain of the grievable and de-centring the human body as the only one to be mourned, or at least to be mourned *on its own* (Cunsolo and Landman 2017: 16).

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