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Research article

The Past in the Light of the Future – A Case Study in Speculative Architecture

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Abstract

In 2019 a new museum opened in Berlin. The *Futurium* is a museum of the future or, more accurately, a museum that showcases mostly scientific and technological ways of preparing for, mastering, or shaping the future. One might expect that such a museum acknowledges with the benefit of hindsight the visions of the future that were developed in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. This is not included, however. Envisioning the future comes with the risk of these visions sooner or later becoming an object of the past. And so, the creators of the *Futurium* are already laying the foundation of a *Preterium* – and they know, of course, that this is what they are doing. In a fittingly speculative manner, the following text consists mostly of an envisioned speech at the future opening of the *Preterium* in 2100, reflecting on the complicated loops that connect future, present, and past. Intratextually, the speaker of the *Preterium* opening invites reflection on this temporal interconnectivity. Speaking intertextually, the text encourages consideration of the differences in the reception of scientific versus literal futures.

Keywords: Future tradition; Manufactured and Non-manufactured; Museum; Technological futures

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Научная статья

Прошлое в свете будущего – Кейс спекулятивной архитектуры

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Аннотация

В 2019 году в Берлине открылся новый музей. Futurium — это музей будущего или, точнее, музей, демонстрирующий в основном научные и технологические способы подготовки, освоения или формирования будущего. Можно было бы ожидать, что такой музей представляет ретроспективный взгляд на видения будущего, разработанные в 18, 19 и 20 веках. Однако это не представлено. Представление о будущем сопряжено с риском того, что эти видения рано или поздно станут объектом прошлого. Итак, создатели Futurium уже закладывают основу Preterium (то есть музея прошлого) — и они, конечно, знают, что это то, что они делают. В подходящей спекулятивной манере следующий текст в основном состоит из воображаемой речи на будущем открытии Preterium в 2100 году, размышляющей о сложных петлях, которые связывают будущее, настоящее и прошлое. Интертекстуально спикер на открытии Preterium приглашает отразить временную взаимосвязь. Говоря интертекстуально, текст побуждает задуматься о различиях в восприятии научного и буквального будущего.

Ключевые слова: Традиции будущего; Произведенное и непроизведенное; Музей; Технологическое будущее

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INTRODUCTION

Fiction in general, and science fiction in particular serves as a useful medium for speculating about technological futures, offering a lens through which we can explore the possibilities of the future without being obliged to provide evidences. One of the primary reasons for this is its ability to transcend current limitations, regardless of what is considered as probable or not, allowing speakers, writers, and readers alike to envision scenarios that *could* become existent. Imaginative narratives can create spaces where technological futures can be examined, debated, and given a form of *existent non-existence*. This kind of ontolytic talking or writing leads to narratives, in which the future is constructed ‘in such a way that it has an effect of dissolving the fabric of the present’ (Gammel, 2023).

The human activity of visioning is not only reserved for fictional literature (Nordmann & Grunwald, 2023). It is a core activity and “*Gedankenerfahrung* [thought experience]” for everyone, who deals with the future in one or the other way (Mach, 1917). Despite the lack of empirical evidence, this kind of fiction is no less valid or “untrue” than scientific projections about future advancements: Both scientific and fictional speculations share many uncertainties. While they differ in style, for sure, fictions may allow for a distinct impact on readers, as they can explore ideas and scenarios that may not be easily accommodated within the constraints of scientific discourse, which makes such fictions at least through the back door interesting for sciences as well again (Steinmüller, 2016). An opening speech with retrospects at a future museum in 2100 against the backdrop of a speculative architecture could provoke scientific reflections today on the temporal connectivity of future, present, and past.

SPEECH AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE PRETERIUM¹

Honorable guests,

Today we are celebrating the completion and opening of the *Preterium* and it fills me with great joy to be able to contribute to the celebration on behalf of the board of directors with a speech delivered from my underwater capsule in the North Sea, but which I can at least attend holographically.

“Why still history?” This is what the historian Reinhart Koselleck (1971) already wanted to know at his time. So let me start this speech with a confession. Many of our participating researchers approached the *Preterium* project with a simple wish: Looking into the past should be worthwhile again, even in the hyper-hypermodern era of the 22nd century, i.e. after the complete digital recording and automatic content-analysis of all historical artifacts known to us. In view of such a situation, we wanted to emphasize the added value of directly engaging with history. The work of our guild should not be limited to the search for as yet unknown artifacts or the creation of counter-interpretations to those that were automatically generated. Instead, following Habermas’s 2029 publication on the limits of history, we adopted the so-called *perspective turn* as it was introduced by

¹ The opening speech was held in German on September 5, 2100, in the *Preterium* (New-Berlin) and is available here in a different version and supplemented with references.



Tru°sky in 2070, and discussed in the German Journal of Philosophy by van Damme 2093. We adopted the perspective turn not only as a paradigm shift with new research objects, but rather as a comprehensive attitude to time-related questions. It relates pasts and futures to one another, and no longer allows us highly future-oriented observers to thoughtlessly pass by history or to label it as useless. Instead, we are set in motion to walk through the past in order to reach the future. This shift in perspective has enriched contemporary history and could also enrich those here and now who have so far stayed away from it. Seeing the past in the light of the future is the motto of our house. The contribution of contemporary history in the *Preterium* is to open up spaces of knowledge and options for action in the service of the present. This means on the one hand to say goodbye to the insignificance of history as a discipline which confidently positions itself at the pulse of our times again. On the other hand, and this is what matters above all, it means to seriously develop the debates on the future from a preterital perspective, without having to dispute the “primacy of the future” (Heidegger, 1927/1967).

Today I would like to take up the core idea of the *Preterium*. It makes evident why Ms. Qua2K and Mr. Sharani jointly came up with the idea of building the *Preterium* on the foundation of the New-Berlin *Futurium*: The idea was to create a house that would showcase the past in the light of the future and, in such a reversal, open up considerations that had previously been underappreciated or even remained unknown.

So let me first say a few words about the architecture, which almost speaks for itself in conveying the idea of the building to the outside world. As you know, the decision was made from the first draft onward to use the glass block building of the *Futurium* as a base (fig. 1) in order to erect directly on top of it the cylindrical building of the *Preterium* – which was originally called the *House of Preterita*. We were aware that even with this extension, the entire building would still be among the less tall ones in the area of the central district. So, despite the 27 levels of *Futurium* and *Preterium* combined, a curatorial trick was needed to meet the requirements of the building on a comparatively low budget: A new cylindrical building allows for the light of the future to shine into the past. This is to be understood literally, true to the building’s motto: Any lighting in the *Preterium* building has the *Futurium* building as its source. It appears to shine from bottom to top at the desired point using various reflection techniques but also in terms of content. In addition to a missing floor at bottom of the new construction, the building features a missing roof. You may have noticed this as you were flying in. This ensures that guests can experience the intended effect of a nested journey through time. By entering at the top, they journey from the past (from above) to the future (downwards) through the light that coordinates by shining from the future (from below) to the past (upwards) - always reflected in an awareness of presence. The designers, curators, and architects involved deserve great praise for this successful constellation.



Figure 1. Here a view of the *Futurium* as it was originally conceived and before it became the base of the *Preterium* (photographer Lear 21)

Through this building, the *perspective turn* of historical studies and the transformation of the profession of those who deal with contemporary history will find its way into the *Preterium* and thus perhaps into a broader public debate. This is certainly a particular concern of mine. Without giving too much away, of course, I would now like to demonstrate what this is all about by showing a few practical exhibition examples from the *Preterium* and *Futurium*.

As a contemporary historian, I now know that the Twenties of the 21st century were more transformative than was generally assumed at the time. The technologies we take for granted today were still in their infancy at the time. Their promises of salvation on the one hand, associated horror scenarios on the other, shaped the cultural, scientific, and public debate about the future. From today's perspective, some of the things that were debated at the time, or rather how they were debated, seem highly absurd. The temptation to assume a “know-it-all attitude from retrospect” (Radkau, 2017) is once again extremely tempting today: Has it just been overlooked that the use of robots or “artificial intelligence,” as it was called at the time, was less a question of options for the future than already an integral part of social practices in the Twenties? Looking at the past in the light of the future, however, does not just mean being amused by the blind spots of such past debates about the future, but also allowing present-day observations of a past that has been illuminated by the future and, on this basis, allowing oneself to be placed in positions



of observation in present-day debates about the future. The museum attempts to do this in a number of very concrete ways – here, for example: Despite the large-scale implementation of the first chat bots after the turn of the millennium, the distribution of commercial robot dogs after the Corona pandemic, and the mass production of humanoids in the late 30s, their social effectiveness was not taken seriously to the same extent and degree as that of non-humanoids. Their significance was primarily negotiated according to the technical competence and quality criteria of their use, but not according to their social effectiveness based solely on their (co-) existence with humans, which was already indispensable at the time. For a long time, people only counted themselves as individuals (*lat.* single thing) in a society, regardless of their everyday practice with and through their technological and material environment: chat-bots, robotic pets, humanoids were granted only the status of a *thing*, no matter how similar they were to them.

The light of the *Futurium* points to this blind spot of previous generations: The blind spot as an unlit spot in the *Preterium* building is thus made visible by the beam of light from the *Futurium* directed at it. If you now follow the beam of light back as intended, you will float to the light source in the *Futurium* and find futures as they are in circulation today. For example: Renewal ideas for inheritance and family law in the sense of equality between manufactured, non-manufactured, and mixed families and the possible realignment of society, the withdrawal of the right of pre-residence for non-manufactured persons on the earthland, but also imaginations of Industry 8.0 as the complete automation of the quintary sector and thus the last economic sector. Those of you who now want to engage in this reciprocal consideration of the past and the future will recognize in the current comparison of the two our social framework of thought and those gaps that still need to be explicated and filled. It is not possible to specify how the gaps are to be found and filled, but the curators hope to use this museologically staged *perspective turn* to open up an alternative in-between to the otherwise still fixed and detached considerations of future and past in the here and now, albeit with implications yet to be explored, which we must and would like to leave to you.

In addition to such “outdated” debates about the future in the past, another historical perspective reveals shifts in the definition and conceptualization of the human being based on technological distributions: While the society of the young 21st century, for example, was still able to draw clear-cut lines between humans and cyborgs, the widespread use of six-axis 4D printing and customized, prosthetic body upgrades with the potential for change without outpatient surgery have led to a kind of “stylistic break”. Since then, not only do we no longer differentiate between humans without enhancements, if they are still significantly represented at all, and humans with enhancements, i.e. cyborgs, but also between the non-manufactured (humans with/without enhancements) and the manufactured (robots, humanoids, etc.).² Our spatial development space has also increased enormously as a result: As is well known, 4D gill prostheses have opened up the marine world as a living space and, above all, made it more fertile as a place to work. For this, it is sufficient to point out habitat encapsulation in the

² The distinction between the manufactured and the non-manufactured is already a distinguishing factor in antiquity, and not just a new creation of our legal apparatus for designating persons (Mayor, 2018).



oceans or to recall the prospering manganese nodule mining in the deep sea for the high-tech industry. However, these examples only illustrate something that we have known for a long time, namely that since the distribution of technical achievements, humanity can no longer be defined as a purely organic mass, nor as a resident of the land masses. If we follow the highlights here back again, we are led into a corner of the *Futurium*, the subsequent consideration of which can lead abductively to the imagined in-between: The successful sowing, harvesting, production and delivery of the first grain products from Mars is currently leading to the revitalization and modification of futures. The colonization of outer space, the terraforming of known planets, or the further transformation of the non-manufactured to adapt them for life on these planets is once again being discussed as possible futures. One must speak here of a kind of re-emerging *future tradition* – a set dream of the non-manufactured, the realization of which one always imagines to be closer now than in the past, but without ever wanting to dream of something completely different. Such a designation, namely as a future tradition, also makes it clear that perspectives on a future that is liberated from the past are only future beliefs, that are mistakenly thought to be liberated from the past.

A look at the past era shows us that the distribution of and broad access to certain technologies have led to new concepts and updated definitions of the relationality of human existence – and in the meantime, in the same way, of that which is manufactured existence. We cannot say to what extent we and our relationships will be affected in the future. As in the past, the answers to this are still pending until we realize at some point, in retrospect, that something else has already happened in a certain way. However, the *Preterium-Futurium-constellation* offered here can lead to more far-reaching impressions that can here only be hinted at abstractly: When the contemplation of the past, which takes place in the light of the future, and that of the future, which is embarked upon from the past and then contested, are reflectively connected in the present. The exploration of an insightful in-between and the illumination of blind spots of the present by means of a renewed temporalization and curatorially conceived *perspective turn* are again reserved for you, dear guests. Koselleck concluded his speech about the question “Why still history?” as follows: Only “in passing through 'the Geschichte' [history] will the Geschichten [stories] be rediscovered - those of the past and those of today” (1971, p. 18). The *Preterium* could help us do so.

But talk is cheap. Now I don't want to keep you waiting any longer for the future-oriented experience of the past. On behalf of the management, I cordially invite you to the sightseeing flight and subsequent reception. Thank you very much for your attention – and of course your presence of mind, which you please keep as you travel through time.

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