polofuturism: programme for a generation of virtual reality, patriotism of neural networks

tl;dr version / abstract (read the whole text for a better understanding of the abstract)

Polofuturism is an ethnofuturism. It was brought to life to combat identity crises and the appropriation of future imaginaries. Polofuturism postulates creating a speculative space for public debates to deal with current and future problems. It also encourages project thinking/project acting – the goal of which is to create a foundation for positive socio-technological changes. Polofuturism rejects nostalgia (retrotopias) and neoliberal narratives. As the name indicates, polofuturism is concerned with Poland – its identity, esthetics, history, culture, language etc. However, polofuturism rejects understanding the Polishness as limited set of icons and tropes, that were imposed by symbolic elites. It rejects elitistic narrations as well. Polofuturism employs several values and ideals: empathy, honesty, eagerness to reduce suffering, dialogism, pragmatism, transparency and openness.

The programme warns that a lack of commitment to the process of future creation leads to the takeover of the future by corporations and political agents. Polofuturists themselves are encouraged to be active and political, but we require full transparency for such activities. We also require quoting your sources and striving to popularize scientific knowledge. We also ask you to understand the influence of biological foundations on the functioning of individual in the society, as well as understanding that knowledge is socially constructed. We want to highlight a strong relationship between humans and technology in the process called technogenesis. We call to reappropriate technology design processes, so they can serve communities, not corporations. At the same time, being aware that the majority of polofuturism’s activities will fall within the field of art and entertainment, we encourage the creation of science fiction, utopia and dystopia - through various channels and modes of communication: games, movies, music, books, etc. However, we warn against aestheticization and limiting yourself to a mere genre conventions. The goals of polofuturism are: creating many alternative visions of the future, warning about negative futures (dystopia), proposing solutions for a better future (utopia), criticism of the present (science-fiction), activities to improve social dialogue and to strengthen social bonds (praxis art and political engagement)

We need future. This is the programme of polofuturism, in which we are giving you tips on how to pursue a future.

The world has many problems, including:   
identity crises (caused by corporate multicultural globalism)  
  
and  
  
temporality crises (caused by accelerating technological progress)  
  
  
Identity crisis means that you lose the sense of "who you are" in the context of your origin.  
  
Temporal crisis means that the relationship between past, present and future (in discourse, not in physics!) has become more complicated than we can easily comprehend, and that there are groups of interest that use our ignorance to operate with time-related concepts for their own profit. Temporal crises also describe the fear of the future, fear that can be used for the benefit of some groups.  
  
  
The solution to these two problems are ethnofuturisms (such as: afrofuturism, arabfuturism, latinx futurism, sinofuturism, indigenous futurism). Ethnofuturisms are movements, metanarratives (narratives about narratives) that are invoked to transfer the identity of a given culture to a speculative space, so as to create a critical perspective on a given culture in the present. Speculative space is most often implemented through the genre of science-fiction, although by using the term 'speculative space' we mean the abstract concept of speculating 'about' a given culture, e.g. by imagining the future. Such strategies are needed for one particular reason: the imaginarium of the future (i.e. a set of collective perceptions about the future) has been dominated by technology corporations and (mostly) American science fiction. What remains for the rest of the world is the nostalgic past (retrotopia - utopia placed in the past) or getting stuck in the endless present in a paralyzing fear of the future.  
  
  
  
Seeing the aforementioned problems, we see the need to create POLISH ETHNOFUTURISM. Let it be PoloFuturyzm. Polakofuturyzm. PLFuturyzm. 🇵🇱futurism. Before the first postulate drops, a few assumptions about the programme itself: we assumed that the program must be written in a (fairly) simple language, so it does not look like a gibberish. We believe that the content of the text doesn’t get more intelligent if it is incomprehensible. The text is still written in an academic style and uses concepts distinctive to ethnofuturistic manifestos; some specific terminology could not be avoided, hence we try to explain it on the spot. Second assumption: the programme should be open and transparent. Open - it means that we want it to be replicated, reproduced, and mutated. Transparent - because we want to openly present the intentions and expectations of the program. Third assumption: we can only propose or suggest some way of thinking. There is no polofuturism without the works and discussions, there is no polofuturism without content and people.  
  
Due to the short form of the programme, we do not explain further the ideas contained herein. Want to learn more? Look inside the bibliography.  
  
  
1. The Past - remember the past, but stop living in it  
  
  
Idealizing the past will not solve current problems and will not lead you to any useful place - the past no longer exists, you cannot go back to it. The past is important and has an impact on who you are, but for God's sake, even the greatest reconstructions and reinterpretations will not make people live better in the present and future.  
  
True - the past is important, it is necessary to understand the present. The past determines what choices we can make now, when creating the future. The memory of the past should be maintained, but no utopia can be built on it. Polofuturism can deal with the past, but cannot glorify it. The lens with which we see the past must be critical.  
  
  
2. The Present - be critical of the present, but within reason  
  
  
A critical understanding of reality is important, but it becomes limiting when it sees only the present. The ‘end of history’ is ridiculed by some environments, but in a sense the same people that criticize the idea of the end of history, have adopted a similar, liberal way of thinking and a particular vision of the future (it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism). The same applies to contemporary art, which, even if it tries to be prosocial and viciously attacks the ‘problems of the world’, it still runs within the neoliberal paradigm, thus acting for its reproduction. No real change is being made. People who adopted such worldview and believed in the readymade version of the future (ask yourself: created by whom?), are often afraid of the future, they do not see the future, or do not think about the future. Fear of the future comes from the fact that the neoliberal project is burning and our imaginary future is burning with it. Polofuturism can be used to explore various alternatives (serious as well as ridiculous) to the current form of capitalism.  
  
  
3. The future  
  
The problem of the future is the problem of agency, the problem of imagination and the problem of action taking. Agency means a subjective sense of being able to change (things). Let's leave aside whether free will exists and how deterministic the world might be. People who change the future do not think about it. Let's leave aside whether the individual, singular human being can make a difference. Let’s suppose she or he can. In this programme, we claim that future can be changed and the first step to it is to imagine many possible futures. If someone says that some particular future is inevitable, ask yourself - does this person, group or institution want to maintain some specific vision of the future? Control of the future is related to power. Creating the future is an act of limiting many possibilities. The fewer options, the more power (whoever makes restrictions). The more possible versions of the future there are, the more difficult it is to take control of the future. We postulate the creation of many futures, by the means of speculative fiction, utopia, dystopia, science fiction and other genres. We postulate the use of speculative fiction for criticising the present and the past. Let's create together an imagination communities.  
  
We postulate creating project art, praxis art - aimed at proposing changes, designing real world solutions, at the same time conceiving completely unreal, outlandish and absurd ideas - that may change collective thinking about what can be done, and what possibilities are available to use. If no one can imagine any good solutions (utopia), then nobody will put them into practice. If no one will imagine some bad solutions (dystopia), then perhaps they won’t be avoided. If no one puts these ideas in form (won’t publish, won’t share), they could be lost. That is why we postulate to imagine new futures and bring them into existence using the forms of: books, pictures, short stories, games, concept art, music, comics, 3D printed objects, tweets, blogs, films, podcasts, discussions, quarrels, political actions. Simultaneously, we warn you not to fall into the prescriptivism and authoritarianism (prescriptivism, i.e. imposing norms). Any utopia can become someone's dystopia. Moreover, utopias are by definition non-existent and unrealistic. Hence, utopia cannot be created in reality, it can only be striven towards.  
  
4. Ethnofuturism  
  
We postulate that the future must be inseparable from ‘Poland’. Imagined future might help build a collective identity (i.e. to answer the question of who we are). That means we need to use Polish culture, history, aesthetics. However, this does not mean confining ourselves to folklore. Polish culture is equally: peasant cottages, gray post-soviet apartment blocks, gated communities and suburban villas. Our culture is Światowid, Black Madonna, Jesus from Świebodzin. Polish history is as much a string of failures and shame as winning wars, powerful kings and heroes. Polish culture is disco polo and Penderecki. Polofuturism should not judge what culture is good and what is bad.  
  
However - since English is currently the dominant language of the world (lingua franca), creations made in Polish language should be translated to English in order to extend the reach of Polish culture. This should also provoke a question - what is the role of ‘Polishness’ in relation to the rest of the world? How can the Polish perspective help solve global problems?  
  
5. Anti-elitism  
  
Narratives are often dominated by elites (intellectual, financial, class elites). We pay attention to this fact and demand for the narrations to be taken away from the elites. We consider particularly harmful the contemptuous, disrespectful or condescending attitude of intelligence towards people below the middle class. Yes, this text is largely addressed to the elites of cultural production (i.e. people who can potentially contribute to creation of culture). So this is the moment for self-reflection.

6. Breaking out of the serf consciousness that limits the cultural potential  
  
Afrofuturists call Black people to break free from their slave or colonial mentality and to become aware of the limitless possibilities in the universe. Similarly, we encourage Poles to break free from their serfdom and discover new subjectivity and new agency. Only in this way we will have a full potential to carry out positive socio-technological changes. The same applies to colonial and peripheral dependencies. The awareness of (Poland) being inferior to some regions of Europe and world is limiting and disabling. Awareness of being superior to some regions of Europe or the world is harmful and counterproductive. Thus, we condemn the tribalism understood as ‘us versus them’.  
  
7. Empathy, honesty and reduction of suffering  
  
The values ​​that polofuturistic people should follow are: empathy, honesty and the desire to reduce suffering (both physical and mental). Whatever your political views are, there should always be three imperatives at the center of your reasoning: (1) understanding others on an emotional and rational level, (2) being honest, honest with yourself and the rest of society, (3) and by doing so, trying to reduce the amount of suffering in the universe.  
  
8. Dialogism  
  
Multi-directional dialogue must be the result of polofuturism’s activities. Whether through deliberation or mediation - polofuturism must create many perspectives and integrate them into something meaningful which could serve as a common ground between many agents. Internalized (deeply assimilated/absorbed) empathy will allow creators to understand the point of view of people with opposite political and moral views. Empathy means compassion for another person; understanding the emotions, thinking in the perspective of the other person. This does not mean a conformist attitude. If necessary, any obstacle standing between you and the goal must be shattered (within the law and social consensus).  
  
9. Pragmatism  
  
Polofuturistic activities should be a response to current, real problems. Polofuturists should come up with solutions. Solutions can be speculative, but this is no excuse for intellectual laziness. Polofuturism should be the product of knowledge, and this knowledge must be based on research and must have the potential to solve real world problems.  
  
10. Fear of social engineering and other scary terms  
  
Utopia, modernism, Italian futurism and other similar terms instilled a reluctance to design the future, due to connotations with fascism, totalitarianism, eugenics, social engineering, etc. Therefore, it is understandable to reject all attempts to control society. However, we must realize that society is being constantly changed by many interest groups. Many of these changes are being done on purpose. Tech corporations, e.g. through social media, cause profound changes in population’s behavior, and that behavior is expected to be monetized. App developers do not have moral barriers to use behavioral psychology to maximize their profit. We still don’t know the full consequences of information capitalism, and the next big technologies: machine learning, neural networks, algorithmic interaction systems. One of the most important challenges of our generation will be to expose these systems and attempt to create alternative solutions that produce positive social effects. Although bare in mind what we’ve already said - any action that tries to change the social fabric must be completely open and transparent.

11. Academy  
  
The scientific community should be involved in creating the future. If the academy doesn't take responsibility - corporations will. We reject the accusation that this will violate the objectivity of science - science tries to be objective, but that does not mean that it is completely, 100% objective. It isn’t. Science has a serious impact on the reality (if it wouldn’t have, would it be justified to exist?).

Much bigger threat is the fact that science is often used as a rhetoric tool in politics and the fact that universities are treated like or perceived as subcontractors supplying technology and know-how directly to corporations. Therefore we dare academy to participate consciously in the design of the future; whilst maintaining rigorous scientific methods, a strong moral ethos and full transparency.  
  
We also call for the integration of various scientific fields and lessening artificial divisions that exist between them - because reality is one and not divided into many fields and specializations. Individual fields lose a lot, isolating themselves in their methodologies and fighting petty wars against other branches of science. And just as the current reality is one and united, the future will not be divided into fields and subdivisions.

It is also wise and necessary to increase our efforts to redistribute scientific knowledge effectively to the society. No one cares about scientific solutions if they are understood only by a small group of people. The popularisation of knowledge is an important polofuturistic goal.  
  
12. Understanding  
  
At the same time, we consider it necessary to understand three things: (1) people are animals, (2) the mind is inseparable from the brain, (3) to understand the evolution. This is not a call for social Darwinism. Social Darwinists are idiots that do not fully understand these ideas. It is a call to use knowledge about man in such a way as to build a less suffering and more empathic society. To this should be added another thing: (4) knowledge is socially constructed. Understanding these four phenomena (and the relationships between them) will help you avoid mistakes of seeking answers where they are not to be found.  
  
13. Technogenesis  
  
Technogenesis means the co-evolution of man and technology. We have to accept that technology increasingly determines who we are (our identity). Taking control over the development of technology will allow us to regain power over our own identity. You can't stop the algorithmization of reality. If anyone thinks that these processes can be stopped - one is naive. Therefore, it is necessary to create systems that are designed for people and communities, not for corporations. We need to prepare for accelerating robotization and the post-scarcity economy of 3D printed goods and self-replicating factories. We must be ready for the moment when technology will cross the boundaries of the human body and when it will no longer be possible to separate man from technology.  
  
14. Games  
  
Games are becoming the most important medium of our world. That is why we should pay more attention to them, to expand the horizon of polofuturistic narratives.  
  
15. Arts / Entertainment  
  
The obvious way to make polofuturistic narratives is to use the science-fiction genre. Poles in space, intergalactic Poland, Polish Frankenstein, Polish cyberpunk, Polish post-apocalypse, time traveling Poles, etc. However, we warn against the trap of the genres, i.e. limiting yourself to genre conventions. The goal of polofuturism is to create so-called cognitive estrangement - with science-fiction as a tool. Cognitive estrangement means creating a critical perspective by showing the 'known' in a foreign, unknown way. The reader/viewer is presented with something familiar (e.g. Polish society) - but that something will be shown in an unknown way. The receiver is forced to look again at a ‘known’ thing, understanding it in a new way, reinterpreting it etc.

But, science-fiction on itself is not the goal of polofuturism. The same applies to aesthetics - aestheticization is not the goal of polofuturism. The goal is to use aesthetics to explore Polish identity in connection to technological development and uncertain future - not the other way around. For example, science-fiction can be a tool to discuss topics that are too painful to address in their own context.  
  
And we don't want to suggest themes. Polofuturism is a metanarrative. Everyone creates their own polofuturism.

This sums up the polofuturistic programme. We want polofuturists to create a multitude of imagined futures, and to work on positive technological and social changes. We want polofuturists to take over, retake the narratives from tech giants and brain-dead politicians. We want polofuturists to propagate knowledge and to always cite their sources. We want polofuturists to strive to build social dialogue and take up difficult subjects. We want polofuturists to observe the reality critically, while maintaining optimism. We want polofuturists to be stubborn in their efforts and prove that it is possible to overcome the lack of agency and inertia. We want polofuturists to work to strengthen social ties and create a strong community: n̶a̶t̶i̶o̶n̶a̶l̶,̶ ̶e̶t̶h̶n̶i̶c̶̶, s̶l̶a̶v̶i̶c̶,̶ ̶p̶o̶l̶i̶s̶h̶,̶  
  
  
Summary in points:  
  
- Polofuturism is an ethnofuturism: a metanarration, speculative fiction, problem solving entity  
- The aim is to create positive social and technological changes, to strengthen Polish identity, to create alternative narratives about the future and to build multilateral dialogue  
- Polofuturism rejects nostalgic idealization and ideologization of the past (which does not mean to be cut off from the past)  
- Polofuturism rejects liberal-postmodern narrative and excessive focus on the present  
- Polofuturism requires the understanding of complicated time relations, as well as the disclosure of unfair practices of certain interest groups that use time-discourse for their own profit (e.g. through rhetorics, framing)  
- Polofuturism is Polish (in terms of identity, aesthetics, history, culture, language)  
- Polofuturism is open (for copying, redefining)  
- Polofuturism is transparent (all activities must be communicated explicitly)  
- Polofuturism is pragmatic (it aims to deal with real world problems)  
- Polofuturism is dialogical (it is part of a wider discussion, it has an inclusive ambition to involve many parties to solve problems together)  
- Empathy, honesty and the desire to reduce suffering are the central values ​​of polofuturism  
- Commitment to polofuturism requires an understanding of the relationships between the biological foundations of human functioning and social structures; and the understanding of the magnitude of processes at which society shapes knowledge, identities, language and narratives  
- One of the problems of the future is the impact of technology on humans (both identity and biology - psyche, body, brain). Technology is dangerous because the main goal of it is to create profit, so in the long run the effects on our bodies can be disastrous. Polofuturism should discuss how to design pro-social technology  
- Commitment to polofuturism requires quoting your sources  
- Polofuturists should redistribute (propagate) scientific knowledge  
- Utopia, dystopia and science fiction are good genres for polofuturism. They can be a starting point for experiments with creating alternative narratives  
- What is the literal goal of polofuturists? Creating and making changes  
  
- Interpretation remains in the hands of readers. Nothing written here is final

* Polofuturism Cooperative, 2020.

Let’s talk:

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