



Essay

Notes for an Island: Undecided Speculative Futures

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Abstract

This text offers a writerly experiment aimed at developing a possible method of critical speculative fiction. The subject is an imaginary island modelled on the Cycladic island of Amorgos, Greece, which is depicted here as an all-encompassing design project driven by technologically advanced commercial machinations. The resulting fragments of speculative fiction blur the distinction between manmade and natural, architecture and landscape, commerce and myth. In doing so, the text offers a mode of writing heavy on mediated images populated by speculative subjectivities, while avoiding presenting an overtly critical stance. As such, it casts itself as a writerly equivalent of certain traditions in speculative architectural drawing.

Keywords

Speculative, island, fiction, design, Amorgos

Introduction

Amorgos is the south-easternmost island in the Cycladic group. It is an odd, elongated form stretching southwest to northeast, its east-facing side composed for the most part of one long, rugged cliff. Its main village, Hora – meaning ‘village’ and to be found in almost every island together with the tallest peak invariably named after the prophet Elijah – nestles in the terrain above the southern port of Katapola. The northern, more softly contoured bay of Egiali has its own port, and three villages in the steep hills above it, which are connected by a path that traces the topographical contour almost perfectly.

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I visited Katapola in 2004 for the first time, having booked the last remaining single-bed room with a trav-

el agency on Crete. I spent a week sleeping at the back of a building owned by a woman called Maria, waking up to the cries of roosters invisible somewhere in nearby backyards, among the reeds. I sat in the port, always the same café, the same table, with just the right view of the comings and goings around the small port and marina framed by the parasols. I took the limited bus service into Hora, spent evenings in wind-swept squares. I visited the Monastery of the Virgin of Hozoviotissa, a surreal vertical construction on the east-facing cliffs. Below it, to the south, lay a string of pebbled beaches. They could only be accessed by climbing across a series of large boulders, until, in the final cove, you could lie naked and imagine the end of the world.

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But long before 2004, it's 1988. I am a teenager leaving Belgrade's *Cinema Balkan* for the second time that day.

I've had to see *The Big Blue* again right after the first projection. My eyes are filled with the light of the screen, and in it, the deep blue depths of some unspecified sea. The opening shot is one of rushing waves, frame tilting to reveal a white smudge of a monastery perched on a cliff. The narrative suggests Italy perhaps; but it's Amorgos, Greece.

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The first tarmacked island road connecting the south with the north was built around 1995. I was told by the locals that people even looked different there – there had been so little contact between the two populations over the centuries, each part of the island oriented to another island altogether: outwards, across the water. They told me of Luc Besson, his filming equipment lifted on boats to arrive on this island in the middle of nowhere, for the filming of a few scenes. There is an encounter in the film that takes place near a rust-riddled shipwreck. It was there in 2004, and every subsequent year I visited. It is still there today.

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That summer in 2004, I discovered a small café named after Besson's film, which screened *The Big Blue* twice a day – at 6pm, then again 8.30 pm – where the handful of guests sipped their drinks as they watched the small TV screen under an awning. I would pass by listening to the soundtrack I had known so well almost twenty years earlier, and deduce from bits of dialogue where in the narrative we were at that moment. But I never watched it; it wouldn't have done my memory justice. It had simply been comforting, knowing that there was that perpetual projection of my teenage dreams echoing across the narrow bay, a cinematic clockwork reiterating that memory of a teenager who doesn't yet recognise why he is drawn to the unattainable diver who prefers dolphins to people.

A film, a place. An island of architectural repetitions. An echo of other islands of its kind, perfectly unique in its constellation of elements as they all are. The soundtrack I'd owned on an LP, its cover a hand-painted image: a dol-

phin jumping out of a black sea, silvered by moonlight.

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So far, so sentimental. Except for that year when I wrote what follows this introduction: a series of speculative fictions in which Katapola and Hora, Agia Ana and Hozoviotissa, Egiali and Tholaria and Profitis Ilias, had all merged into a site that was simultaneously an island, that island, and some sinister futuristic design project. The act of writing was an unplanned reveal (to myself more than anyone else) of the insidious mechanics of global tourism, which permeate even the least touristy of Cycladic islands. But also, of the proximity of myth to the infrastructures of global capital, even – or especially – when they are light, slender. Barely perceptible.

It was a testing ground, in a writerly form heavy on images, of speculative futures in which landscapes and architectures, and those who populate them – perhaps us, perhaps something other to us, us as entities that have been irretrievably othered – might take over. As such, I offer this series of speculative propositions as an implicitly critical reflection, yet one that remains inconclusive. Dystopia? Utopia? Irrelevant distinction? As an experiment, an open-ended test to explore how we might perceive and think through landscapes and architectures of the future, it remains resolutely undecided.

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Notes for an Island

Fragment No.2

There are tactically sited shifts in the structure of the locale, based on the idea our engineers developed: that the environment should occasionally snap to a two-dimensional matrix, offering a particularly complex set of views for specific viewpoints only. The locations are chosen with the aim of stimulating commercial ventures, by fostering thoroughly appealing views. They also

occasionally change locations, as the locale slowly grows, allowing for further development of hubs of heightened experience. Such shifts in dimensional fabric represent very specific perspectival devices, the success of which is enhanced by the careful and inventive way in which we work on our visitors' perceptual field (of which there will be more mention later).

Take the example of our own micro-locale. As our customers sit in their carefully tempered recliners drinking coffees or sweet alcoholic beverages in the front garden (arranged casually around an engineered tree) they face the view of the mouth of the bay with the open sea beyond. Now, they won't be conscious of it but the view before their eyes will have been constructed as a crude graphic cut-out: the outline of hills reaching the surface of the sea, a few buildings outlined against the sky, the crisp line of the horizon, all mastered to look as if they belong to the same spatial plain (we won't bother you with the technical detail, suffice it to say the manipulation of atmospheric occurrences is crucial in achieving this effect), inducing a clear sense of finding oneself 'on the edge of the world'. This, coupled with the gentle lapping of waves and occasional carefully guided touches of breeze (not to mention the soothing sounds of the environs) is guaranteed to bring our customers in the right frame of mind and enable us to start affecting their perception, laying the groundwork for their conscious appreciation of the island's effect on wellbeing. Such flatness of view is the crucial aspect of our acts of image-welding – as the technical jargon would have it – to consciousness. It is as if they'd been presented with an archaic post-card sprung to life, which their bodies inhabit simultaneously as image and space. The effects of such double coding have proven to be wondrous and are one of the major reasons behind repeated visits to our micro-locale.

Fragment No.4

Our commercial venture in this island is a finely tuned project. There are a number of more robust ventures scattered throughout the region, but ours operates on a particularly refined set of parameters, some of

which might not appear to be geared towards giving immediate commercial results. However, those are precisely the ones deemed to be most fruitful in the long run. This model, due to its current success and in accordance with the broader developmental strategies, is being considered as the primary commercial method for the future, which, as you might have guessed, makes our team extremely proud. It's worth noting that this has been the cause of some considerable envy in the neighbouring projects, as well as a few minor instances of name-calling ('fake prophets'). This is nothing we can't handle and return with interest though, while bonding as a team at the same time. After all, external antagonisms only foster internal cohesion, increasing staff motivation and enhancing productivity.

The business ethics of our venture is simple: the subtler and more tactically located the pressure, the more voluntary and profuse the customer participation. This is manifest in our approach to handling demand for partial ownership of the locale for example. At the time of compilation of this report, there has been a limited number of cells available at any given moment, at peak periods especially, and although we have some leeway with regard to the exact numbers (we can subtly expand or contract the field at short notice) a clear message is sent out to our prospective visitors: that this island is small, exclusive and above all genuine. It is anything but commercial. Furthermore, our prices are highly competitive, even if keeping them so entails failing to make significant seasonal margins. However, this bears fruit in the context of the long-term plan for the locale. You will be the ultimate judge of the scheme's success, we hasten to add.

As for full ownership, there is only ever a very limited number of sectors available, subject to a long, informal waiting lists (a touch we are particularly proud of), which involves a wide range of island staff who carry out the various roles and are linked with property in a number of convoluted ways (in the eyes of our visitors and potential clients. The staff perform an agile transformation from friendly everyday service entities

to hardened locals, keen to preserve the natural beauty and genuine character of the locale by selectively passing on information to the visitors who have proven their commitment to the island. This only raises the level of exclusivity further, while the method serves a dual role: to attract the right kind of permanent settler and allow for staff interference and the spreading of decisive influence on the course of events on the island. For example, this can take the form of sudden presentation of unusual individuals within the locale who will, due to unforeseen complications, need to leave, passing the property in question on to the next interested visitor who will inherit it with that added layer of local history. Dare we say: divinely manufactured myth.

Fragment No.6

The typical cell a visitor would be assigned might look as follows. The jumble of angular geometry that composes the living quarters is organised in a way which, in keeping with the general rules of the locale, fosters ambiguity with regard to the depth of field, defying perspectival decoding whatever the viewpoint. Derived from patterns flat in texture, this method has complexity of view for its aim, experienced by the visitors from specific vantage points. It is therefore difficult to construct in fullness across the spatial field. As successful as our operation is, in terms of the unique environmental experiences it offers, it leaves somewhat awkward gaps in the continuity of field and occasional incongruous overlaps. We should point out that we are in possession of a very efficient set of measuring instruments, in place to counter the effects of the model: we erase the sequences of experience from visitors' memory, which revealed such seams in construction. Visitors retain no recollection of having experienced these pockets of blank depth-fields, which are rendered blank in the fabric of their limited consciousness.

Into this pattern of overlapping forms, we will sometimes carve no more than two or three linear formations, leading to an impression of in-built roads or pathways (depending on the exact section of the village the view from the visitor's cell offers). Some of such so-called

roads will be recognised by the user later on, as they wander around the locale, and they will access and fully render them in their mind's eye. The visitor will remember having seen them from another vantage point, which would allow not only for the sense of continuity to be retained but also offer an enjoyable sense of discovery.

Other pathways, however, will exist only in the image constructed for the vantage point of the cell, and won't appear in any other plane or perceptual field. If a visitor should decide to try and reach a certain location witnessed from the cell that does not possess an actual spatial presence, they will not be able to accomplish the task. In some, this will lead to agitation, the need to penetrate the locale metaphorically and literally, which in turn leads to frustration. In such cases we work on dissipating the negative charge gently, by utilising sensual stimuli inscribed in air currents. In others, this confrontation with an impossible landscape will induce a sense of joyful wonder. More research is needed on the subject though, as it appears that the latter takes place in those who are naturally susceptible to signal stimuli, pre-empting any need for corrective action on our part. They are the ones who enjoy the sense of being lost, of having 'fallen off the map', as they see it. Which, in a sense (and we do take pleasure in such small ironies) is precisely the case.

A young mother holding a small child, lulling it to sleep on a narrow spiral staircase outside her rooms; a couple of children giggling for a long time on a distant balcony; a lone fisherman unloading his catch – all of these are just some of the scenes that we organise as accommodation views, helping create a sense of ongoing, everyday life, serendipitously witnessed by the visitor. Some of the scenes are enacted by members of staff, others constructed solely *in-view* and do not exist in other dimensions. Technically speaking, they never take place.

Fragment No.19

At dusk, the visitors who find themselves in the main harbour square will witness a wonderful birdsong display

centred around a large tree whose branches spread over the umbrellas of interlocking food and drink outlets. The birds are never visible, though occasionally a few small, dark bodies might be spotted darting out of the thicket of leaves, chirping as they disappear into the night. But the aural effect is a result of more than just the presence of birds: the tree in question is a critical node within the micro-locale and serves as the primary gathering hub not only for the visitors seated under its branches, but for our hard-working staff as well.

The reason for picking such an exposed spot is simple: our staff are trained to take interest in the visitors at all times, and there is not a location more likely to be teeming with them, unaware of the inquisitive eyes that follow their every move. Furthermore, it makes it much easier to allow for free staff activities under the cloak of dense visitor presence without attracting too much unwarranted attention. The level of event-production and the buzz of activity ensure staff safety, while turning the micro-locale into an important networking spot. Information can be exchanged freely here, benefiting the development of the overall project.

However, due to the high levels of staff-charge in the air, the introduction of birds was deemed necessary, in particular during the crucial period when day fades to night and the possibility of staff being sensed is at its peak. We refer to this as 'thin time'.

Fragment No.21

There is a very special location on the island of which we haven't spoken yet. It was conjured up by our talented technicians and engineers, bringing together various strands of the project in an experience spectacular not only to the eye of our visitors, but our team as well. It inscribes a complex event-signature into the environment.

The micro-locale is a site of a shipwreck which originates from before our current commercial project was

initiated. It is located in a narrow alcove nestling between two steep hillsides and blends in with the barren, dusty hills, with just that little bit of additional rusty tint which contributes delightfully to the picturesque setting. The tilted bulk of the ship is sunk in shallow waters and looks as if it grew out of the landscape itself. To a perceptive eye it will give the impression of having been designed together with the landscape itself, which, in a manner of speaking, it was. Surprising as this might sound, the impression of artificiality is exactly what we were aiming to achieve.

From up close, it is apparent that although the form of the ship is well preserved, various elements of its structure have been severely affected by decay – to the point of missing altogether in some places, either due to the weathering of materials (here we have been able to engineer the best possible effects, not necessarily in keeping with the expected level of temporal transformation but spectacular nonetheless) or due to an extensive process of chemical decomposition. The latter worked particularly well for the hull, where we have been able to reveal the substructure of the boat and provide our visitors with an indication of the vastness of the space inside.

The method we use to expose our visitors to this micro-locale is carefully crafted for maximum effect, and restricted to small groups of visitors taken on a boat cruise around the island, with the shipwreck its final destination before returning to the port. The crafting of such a specific event into a day-long experience allows for substantial impact. We present our visitors with the most important event towards the end of the day, just as the sun begins to set. The state of stupor that they might have reached prior to that moment is abruptly interrupted, and their attention brought into focus as they come to the realisation that their tour boat will take them extremely close to the intriguing object. This careful timing will result in the experience leaving a luminous trace, a recollective shimmer dreamlike in nature. We refer to this as a super-event: an experience that will linger with extraordinary resilience.

A crucial aspect is the careful orchestration of the required sequence of actions by the staff members involved. The captain of the tour boat is a colourful character, much our visitors' appreciation. A scruffy looking man in his early forties, he has large, bloodshot eyes and curly, unkempt hair. His frame is wide and his movements (when he comes out of the cabin, which isn't often) are slow and inspire confidence. He will appear to our visitors as more corporeally solid than the shipwreck itself. He doesn't say much, opting to communicate with carefully measured facial expressions and minimal gestures. But he will let out a sudden roar of joy as the waves start rocking the boat, and dance to the music coming from the boat's invisible loudspeakers. He will remain inside his cabin throughout the journey, steering the boat, a calculated measure of distance separating him from the visitors on board at any given time. His only companion is an adolescent who busies himself with the activities of anchoring, organising the food during one of the tour breaks, and communicating directly with the visitors in an informal manner. The duo will take the group around the island, stopping at crucial points along the coast until they reach the site of the shipwreck, where the orchestration of the super-event will commence, as follows.

The captain of the boat will steer the vessel at the shallow bay, sailing in slowly between the hills. He will switch off the music that had been playing through the day for the first time, which the visitors won't notice, preoccupied as they are by focusing on the towering, rusty object before them. They will reach for recording devices and busy themselves capturing aspects of the wreck, while the captain draws the boat in, ever closer, until the presence of the wrecking overwhelms the visitors' visual field, tilted at just the right angle and in perfect light conditions at this moment in the day so as to appear to offer itself to their technologically enhanced gazes. Naturally, the desire to record will be additionally stimulated by this point, making the visitors engage in acts of compulsive recording, and fostering a peculiar sense of proximity and detachment from the environment. Such a distancing is underscored by the obvious temporal gap between ship's history and the present moment, in which visitors witness proof of its demise.

The captain will keep drawing the boat ever closer, engine humming in the silent landscape, until the visitors are able to touch the wreck's side, which will, by this point, appear to them as a giant, beached animal of most alien origin. Most of them will be in a state of awe by then. Rocked gently by the waves inside the lagoon, their field of vision overwhelmed by the object in all its majestic, decaying detail, they will feel that they are witnessing something that cannot be fully interpreted. They will stare at the abandoned, empty cabin, its interior vacant yet dense with the sense of inhabitation; they will look at the empty doorframes, which will seem taken over by the same rusting process as the metal, impossible as that may seem; and they will gape at the round opening in the hull below deck, which opens up onto a pitch-dark interior.

This is the point where we have fostered the most exciting proximity to the very mechanism of our project, and offered it to the, by that point, fully engineered eyes of our visitors. Awash with an overwhelming sense of having witnessed something of great significance – the real meaning of which nevertheless eludes them – the visitors will look at the body of the wreck, the openings that were windows once, and ponder their own transience within this world. Obviously, what we have done here is to indicate that there is more than meets the eye to this island; that what can be seen is not all there is to it. In truth, we have also revealed part of the island's highly mediated nature without our visitors realising that that was what they'd witnessed.

Why cast a doubt, you might ask, when at other times we do our best to keep the project and all its intricate artifice out of sight? We came to the realisation over time (and state with pride that we were the first operation in the region to test this) that the right measure of doubt pertaining to the island's status is certain to inspire creative curiosity in our visitors, one that is fuelled by imagination and supportive of an individuated sense of place, and entails a willing fusion of the island's image with visitor consciousness.

Put plainly, our visitors will have participated in the island's creation. By casting doubt as to the value they have discovered in the island up to that point, we are able to irrevocably unify them with it; by undermining the status of their own reality, they give it its ultimate licence to exist.

It is worth pointing out that the success of the experiment is also due to the work we sometimes, though not always, do at the point of encounter with the wreck, what we call 'lending a helping hand to those in need', i.e. a secondary level of intervention. It takes place at the moment when the visitor is facing the wreck in close-up, and is already in a state of mild awe: a significant number of staff who otherwise have no form will rise from within the micro-locale (some dwell in it all the time, others are summoned specifically for the occasion), latch onto the visitors' eye-work done by their colleagues, and start alternating their visual feed, rendering the experience ever so slightly different in each individual case, so that it forms, when compared afterwards, a satisfyingly rich, multi-faceted composite in which each visitor can claim direct participation and personal engagement. It is this additional, personalised render that will bring aspects of the super-event into focus more than others.

Some visitors might busy themselves with the sheer scale of the sight in front of them, while others wonder about the fate of the sailors who manned the boat at the time of the accident. But each will leave the site with a specific, personalised narrative attached to the object, fostered by our staff and appropriated by the visitor's own – by this point highly mediated – perception, leaving a luminous trace in their consciousness. It will have become, in other words, a *special memory*.

Fragment No.23

Even though our locale might appear similar in character and visual appeal to a number of projects in the region, we are proud to report that the planning of the port town on our island was done with utmost care, resulting in a harbour so balanced that it seemingly operates in a

miraculous way. The general perimeter of the bay had been proscribed before the beginning of the project by master engineers as part of the regional scheme, and we are honoured to follow in their footsteps. That said, the fine-tuning and careful development of the port and its three villages was fully our responsibility and a creative achievement, and we will be happy to shed light on the formula that has proven successful to the extent that it might – with your kind support obviously – serve as a general template for ventures of this kind in the region.

Due to the generally favourable dimensions of the bay, we developed the settlement around three distinct focal points, assigning each a separate identity and distinct name. This, as you are surely aware, is one of the surest ways of enriching the commercial field and creating an initial infrastructural grid for the development of a variety of exciting micro-locals. The three nodes were assigned distinct roles and character: the first was the port, with its water-facing row of commercial ventures that centre around the main square (and its interlocking cafés under the Large Tree) and the limited, yet intriguingly arranged, residential agglomerate behind it, which unfolds up the hill, to culminate with a religious edifice that hints in turn at the hilltop above, where the remains of an ancient settlement lie – a veritable crown of prominently exposed rocks and hardly much more. In this way we achieved a good sense of layering and variation within the limits of such a small settlement.

It should be noted that the curve of the harbour was meticulously measured to provide a most balanced sense of depth, which, in conjunction with the simple act of layering and the already mentioned insistence on three-dimensional ruptures, makes for a quietly stunning spectacle of small-scale island life, opening itself up to the eye of the visitor the way a picture book might, particularly from the position of the cafés in the main square. As boats approach from the mouth of the bay, the arrangement provides a great visual effect, recognised in our visitors' minds as stage-like in its perfection (yet another instance of a measured orchestration of artifice). At that point, a clear notion is

triggered in a visitor's mind: that this location is the right setting for them to enter and assume a role, play out their own island scenario, which is dormant in the picturesque composition of the settlement. A meaningful encounter is just around the corner, an experience to be cherished for years to come. An illuminating discovery awaits.

All this careful formal structuring would have fallen flat had it not been for the careful social engineering of the environment – and here, once again, we had top experts in the field on board. The exact mix of ages, backgrounds and relations, and the variety of interactions between the staff ('the locals') and the visitors, was designed to provide a vibrant sense of genuine local character, offering a cross-section of stages of the island's history through the selection and variety of inhabitants (with scenarios varying from partial annual inhabitation to full resident status), as well as visitors-turned-locals, visitors on repeated visits, and visitors who pass through the island and never come back. It might seem that this last category is of use neither to the long-term commercial aspects of the project nor to the creation of sophisticated environments and experience; in truth, this is one of the most vital categories in our mix, since it provides not only the much needed level of commercial closure, but also allows for a better cohesion between other participants in the project – since they all see themselves as substantially different from this corps of 'passers-by' and therefore in the same boat (so to speak). Without the clearly defined otherness of transient visitors, the various gradients separating the local from the foreign would have been much more sharply drawn and obstruct assimilation as a result.

The second section of the bay, the middle, was conceived as least attractive to the visitors, pushed back from the sea to rise up a mildly sloping hill, with a plain surrounding it; so that it appears as if the whole settlement were elevated, fronted by a large cathedral with its two symmetrically positioned towers. The cathedral is rarely open, and as this middle village lacks overt commercial programmes, it serves as the symbol unifying the two sides of the bay, both of which have vibrant village life

of their own. The waterfront assumes a clear-cut, linear character: on one side there is the narrow town beach, cut off by a raised road, and on the other side a scattering of half-abandoned buildings, disconnected from the village in the background. There are a number of trees on that side, lining the road, in-between which there are regularly arranged lamp posts with a bench under each. At night this offers a spectacular, otherworldly scene, as the lamps emit dim light, and the whispers and hushed small talk delivered by the locals seated motionless on the benches work wonders, creating a vaguely sinister yet highly stimulating setting for the visitors passing by. We have heard it referred to as 'phantom village' or 'the road of ghosts' – a poetic touch that we can't but appreciate.

At a certain point along this section there is a short, wind-swept clearing by the road, in which one of our members of staff suggested we grow a grove of short, twisted pine trees, which appear to emerge out of the side of the road. The sheer genius of such a seemingly awkward intervention is in the space underneath, where some of our more perceptive visitors will notice a small herd of goats pass their time in heat-induced stupor. Occasionally, the smell of animals will waft out across the road, a musky variety of the standard odour; but the goats won't be seen. On other occasions, the goats will be fully visible, scattered across the adjoining field, providing an enjoyably rural scene right next to the town beach. The slight friction provided by this juxtaposition of the sea, the dusty roads, and the stunted pine trees that conceal animal presence, make for a well-appreciated quirk in this section of the road, on the way to the third village, our own micro-locale and the site of our moon-themed commercial venture.