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Beyond End Times Narratives: What We Discussed in Athens

CREATIVESUNITE

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At Athens's Bautopia festival, a Creatives Unite panel explored how culture can move beyond passive doomism and a crisis of political imagination, urging artists to expose systemic collapse, reclaim collective agency, and resist AI-driven elitism.

On the final day of the Bautopia festival, the Creatives Unite panel at the Romantso Creative Hub in Athens asked whether culture could help us to move beyond end-times narratives and doomism. Three decades after Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history, doom has become a generational condition. A 2021 survey of 10,000 young people in ten countries, published in The Lancet Planetary Health, found that more than half believed that humanity was doomed. The survey also found that this belief was linked to a sense that governments were failing to act.

Just as we were wondering if resignation was undercutting the will to act and closed off the very stories that were needed, the younger were taking to the streets across France, Albania, Serbia, Spain, and Portugal – across Europe and the world – making our open-ended discussion unexpectedly urgent and up-to-date. Four speakers addressed the question of the crisis of imagination as the backbone of this historical process: Thanasis Moutsopoulos of the National Technical University of Athens spoke about the apparent disappearance of novelty and authenticity. Aïnhoa Jean-Calmettes of Mouvement Magazine and Libération discussed the rise of materialist challenges to the Anthropocene and collapse theory. Igor Simic of Demagog Studio examined what happens when all cultural production becomes content. Angeliki Poulou of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens considered what happens when artistic engagement with catastrophe stops at awareness. We did not expect definitive answers, only the beginning of a

debate.

A crisis of imagination

For Angeliki Poulou, a professor of digital arts and cinema at the University of Athens, the trouble lies less with the machines than with art's own habits. Much contemporary work, she said, offers 'stunning poetic images of dying ecosystems', and audiences 'walk away moved, but I can say unchanged'. 'It becomes an experience, not a confrontation.' Even large festivals, she argued, speak the language of awareness, resilience and impact without naming what produces the crisis.

Artists should look away from ruins, the finished image of collapse, she said, and towards what she called 'ruination': the continuing process of extraction, abandonment and dispossession that produces them. 'The point is to illuminate the mechanism', she said, 'to reveal the infrastructures beneath the surface.' She urged a parallel move from prediction to 'fabrication', treating the future as a collective project rather than something computed on our behalf. Greek tragedy begins with catastrophe and asks what follows, she said, and then moves on to use the example of Orestis Karamanlis's sound performance Tempi, made in memory of the 2023 rail disaster.

The dominance of dystopian narratives about AI in art, she suggested, may reveal less about the technology than about 'a crisis of political imagination', which is close to the diagnosis the moderator had offered for doomism in general. She made no claim for art's power beyond its proper size. 'Art cannot stop climate change by itself; it cannot dismantle capitalism or repair the ecosystems, but it can intervene in the horizon of what we can imagine as possible.'

Theatre as evidence

Ainhoa Jean Calmetes had spent a decade studying how art can be political and still found it 'a mystery': 'it works differently every time'. But she could point to directors whose post-apocalyptic fictions do not leave audiences in the diagnosis. In one French production, surviving crows mourn a dead humanity and resolve to fight, and the performance stops at the moment the audience should act. Rebecca Chaillon, she said, tried to build 'a small army of beautiful weirdos', and 'it brings hope, agency and the urge to organise'.

Others, such as Milo Rau and Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha, take the question out of the theatre altogether, working with Indigenous communities in the Amazon: Rau is supporting a land-rights movement's re-enactment, and Carneiro da Cunha

is helping to gather evidence that gold mining had polluted the Tapajós River. Such work, Calmetes said, supports a political struggle without pretending that 'everything is fine'. And the traffic runs both ways: academics now borrow from theatre to ask how uprisings are narrated, one anthropologist likening them to 'seeds that will bloom later'.

Everybody is a creator now, but art is a thing for the elites

Has artificial intelligence changed everything? 'Thanassis Moutsopoulos denied that widespread fear; it 'just extended the postmodern condition', he argued. There are, he said, more people today calling themselves creators than at any point in human history:

'We are too many.' Human-made art would survive, but 'more and more' as 'a thing for the elite'.

The associate professor at the National Technical University of Athens case ran from Marcel Duchamp to the chatbot. Modernism, he said, cleared the field of every assumption about what art is; postmodernism then turned everything into reference, legible only to audiences who knew the keys. AI 'just extended the postmodern condition'. The Greek artist Stelios Faitakis was supposed to be beyond a machine's reach, he recalled, until someone posted 'the new Faitakis' on Facebook, and the Ghibli filter produced in seconds a style that Hayao Miyazaki had spent decades building by hand. 'The philosophical change has already been done. It's probably too late for that.'

Chefs and fashion designers (the creators), who still cared about form, looked to him closer to the 19th-century idea of the artist than contemporary artists, who he said cared about content and political statements. Most people, he added, come home after work wanting culture to make life 'a little bit better'. Human-made art would continue, 'more and more' as 'a thing for the elite', bought by oligarchs and hosted by universities, museums and cultural hubs. 'But dear friends, socially, this is a thing of the past.'

Image by Stelios Faitakis, New Era, Mixed media on wood, 60 x 60

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