

Two extremes at the European Peripheries: Baltic and Iberian post-industrial cultures

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ABSTRACT

‘Two extremes at the European peripheries: Baltic and Iberian post-industrial cultures’ departs from a precise title and essays grasping distant and, to a certain extent, unrelated contemporary cultural conditions of two extremely diverse regions in the periphery of Europe, one facing the Baltic sea and the former USSR, the other facing the Atlantic and its former empires. Undergoing dissimilar historical and political processes, the Baltic region and the Iberian Peninsula relate to recent XXth and XXIst Century history differently: the resignification of past events, sites and stories can be extreme, whether celebrated or remembered, other times actively suppressed and effaced. The spatial strategies towards the (industrial) past and the new unbound contemporary cultural practices are diverse and may not be represented in a single overarching map. This written essay aims to bring forth examples of resignification of the past and memory through new contemporary and spatial cultures by posing a set of questions: which pasts are celebrated and effaced through spatial intervention? Are new cultural projects altering historical narratives? The document sits in observations taken from fieldwork and research activity in three different sites – Tallinn, Chernobyl/Prypiat and Porto – and assumes a fragmentary and grounded position, inscribing the annotations and a posteriori conceptualization on a possible dialogue between the conditions and the contrasting cultural approaches.

KEYWORDS

architecture, contemporary culture, post-industrial cultures,
european periphery, projecting memory

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Fieldwork mapping

The conference ‘*Notes on Europe. The dogmatic sleep*’ poses wide questions on cultural and historical heterogeneity within European territories, the conflicting past and present geopolitics, along Europe’s shifting internal and external borders. These fundamental and founding questions resonate with the concerns underlying the fieldwork research which I have been developing in the last three

¹ This paper is part of a wider Post-Doctoral Research titled: ‘*Curating and revitalizing buildings – intervening in postindustrial spaces in Europe in the 21st century*’ and includes a short passage previously published in a book on fieldwork trip to Estonia: Moreira, Ines (2019). *Estonia 2016-2018*. Porto: Circo de Ideias.

years on the the resignification of former iconic industrial sites through new contemporary cultures, practices and narratives¹.

Under the precise title – ‘Two extremes at the European peripheries: Baltic and Iberian post-industrial cultures’ – lays the will and attempt to grasp distant and, to a certain extent, unrelated cultural conditions of two extremely diverse regions in the periphery of Europe, one facing the Baltic Sea and exiting the former USSR, the other one facing the Atlantic and its former empires. The dissimilar historical and geopolitical circumstances, changing boundaries, nationalities, identities, and languages in the Baltic region, contrast with the stable national borders of both former head/metropolises of the Atlantic Empires – Spain and Portugal. As in the past, the two regions relate to history and contemporary culture differently.

In the last three decades the historical, political and cultural history of the regions have changed significantly, it was the period of de-industrialization in the South and of withdrawal of the communist state from the Eastern countries/borders. Recent history has conditioned the ongoing post-industrial processes and, what matters specially to our argument, it affects different cultural readings and approaches to the remains of industry: was it the “heroic” gesture of philanthropic entrepreneurs who brought progress and modernity to rural and poor countries? Was it the imposition of a state machine run by a central management system dehumanizing workers and exhausting resources?

The resignification of past sites and stories can be extreme, whether hyperbolically celebrated and rebuilt, or actively effaced, the spatial and cultural strategies deployed in each location can hardly be represented in a single overarching mapping of Europe, or in a single written text. Therefore, our aim is to bring forth examples of resignification of the past, memory and space through new contemporary and spatial cultures by posing a set of questions: which pasts are celebrated and effaced through spatial intervention? are new cultural projects altering historical narratives?

Relying on a selection of extreme post-industrial sites which I have visited between 2016 and 2019, the text presents observations on three sites: the first site, considered the most extreme site in Europe, is Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Ukraine; the second site is the old Waterfront of Tallinn, in Estonia; the third site is the Eastern Riverside Slope of Porto, Portugal.

To provide the complexity of the textures and contradictions within the specific cases, instead of presenting a totalizing single argument, a final sharp synthesis, or an exhaustive study with detailed comparative charters, the approaches deployed are tentative and case study based, inscribing the annotations taken during individual fieldwork observation.

Extreme site 1: Chernobyl Exclusion Zone



Figure 1

Addressing the contemporary condition of inherited techno-cultural systems in Europe and the relations between collective memory and the physical remnants pushed towards an extreme site which encapsulates the tensions, contradictions and risks inherent to post-industriality: the exclusion zone of the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl².

² The visit to the exclusion zone of Chernobyl took place in May 2019 and was made possible within the period of international academic exchange financed by Mobility Plus 3, with University of Porto and Pavlo Technical University of Uman, in Ukraine. Therefore, the fieldwork observations regarding the site and the cultural practices at stake refer to that period.

The exclusion zone is a post-industrial conundrum within extreme conditions where the former Eastern and Western European blocks were split. This secluded territory is today situated in the border of Ukraine and Byelorussia, in a wider scale in the triangular area of Ukraine, Byelorussia and Russia, which were together until 28 years ago as the Western area of Soviet Union.

The exclusion zone of Chernobyl encapsulates extreme tensions and meanings, initially at the time of the nuclear accident, in 1986, those political tensions between eastern and western at the time of the nuclear accident with the immediate consequence of international propagation of nuclear radiation due to the lack of political admittance and measures to restrain and evacuate population³. Immediately after, the physico-chemical tension between the radiation of the “invisible enemy” and its

³ Chernobyl disaster, facts and events, have recently gained global popular attention through the television series produced by HBO and directed by Johan Renck. The series is a fictional reconstruction providing and insight to the events leading to the nuclear disaster, its immediate response, risks, consequences and remediation and was filmed in a decommissioned nuclear powerplant in Lithuania, Ignalina.

Figure 1. Prypiat 1970. Monument celebrating the new city of Prypiat and marking the entrance to the area. Today it sits within the exclusion zone of Chernobyl, in Ukraine. Photo by the author, May 2019

penetration in the bodies of humans, animals, vegetation, the objects and its deadly atmospheric presence first in local settlers, then in the bodies and minds of thousands of liquidators collaborating in sealing, cleaning and stabilizing the after effects, and now in the debris, the dereliction and the remnants of the abandoned buildings. All these events occurred while the nuclear powerplant kept operating. The visible and invisible enemies, nature and technology, human and non-human continuities, recalling of past events and progressive destruction as problem-solving are embedded in the many layers of the last 33 years.

In 2019, the actual conditions on the ground are a complex material and semiotic reality, where dissimilar agents operate their actions and produce new narratives. As an “exclusion zone” Chernobyl is an extreme militarized post-industrial site, where life runs in new unforeseen tensions between recalling the accident and radiation as it remains an exclusion zone while the effects of the accident shall not be ignored, and remembering its consequences, as the trauma of its impact and consequences affects collective memory – Ukrainian and former Soviet.

In a time when Ukraine undergoes a process of decommunization of its politics and national identity through the destruction of Soviet and Communist symbols such as mosaics, sculptures and other symbolic references, the exclusion zone of Chernobyl mirrors even more complex images, as it constitutes an horror set where mosaics, sculptures, inscriptions and other random objects can be mistaken for nostalgic paraphernalia.

The exclusion zone of Chernobyl is wrapped inside/outside a few shielding layers which create contradictory readings and understandings, pointing the complexity at stake: it is an untouchable radioactive time-capsule which must be kept still and, as a consequence, became a new wild infested forest, a visible and invisible nature-culture.

Prypiat was a “nuclear” city built to support Chernobyl power station, its names, trade logos and symbols, the sculptures and forms point to the atom, to Prometheus and to a bright nuclear future. Materially constituted of buildings, objects and elements static as in the moment of the 1986 evacuation, even though derelict, it celebrates the iconography and toponomy of a heroic nuclear soviet past. Nonetheless, the radiation keeps the nuclear city unliveable.

Unlike the sites of war and collective trauma, where the perpetrators were identifiable “other”, in Chernobyl the enemy was invisible – radiation – and those responsible were not “other”, they were a malfunction and/or part of the same state. The narrative of the accident is transmitted through careful taken care memorials, and a small military museum, celebrating the heroes, the fire workers, militaries, miners and liquidators who gave their time and lives. These memorials have a small scale and presence when compared with the vast extension of the wild woods which took over the territory and host wild fauna, all living with radiation.

If in Chernobyl the enemy was the power plant, the paradox is that is still operating and generating nuclear energy. One of the monuments celebrating the communist heroic extinction of the fires and radiation created by the nuclear explosion is in front the still functioning power station. If human

presence was reduced to a minimum, first with the evacuation, now working by short shifts, the techno-cultural invisible enemy has double manifest presence. The monument, in front of the same operating plant, celebrates the heroes of the past nuclear explosion, unavoidably evoking with eloquence the danger of future threats.

The exclusion zone is a fenced, restricted and militarized area, where access is permitted, and highly controlled, to registered visitors. It is not a park, a public space, nor a museum, a memorial or a historical site, at best, it is all together, plus its new openness to the touristic entrance, following the military rules. The writing of memory is articulated around monuments devoted to heroes, with a memorial referring the names of civilian villages and towns evacuated since the accident. By now, collective civilian memory and subjective testimonies were left outside the zone, as the voices of its former residents published by Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich⁴.

⁴ Individual testimonies and partial subjective stories are published in the book by Byelorussian author Svetlana Alexievich, "Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster", 1997.

Extreme site 2: Old Seafront of Tallinn



Figure 2

Figure 2. Old seafront of Tallinn. Former military and industrial area by the Baltic Sea. Today it is a landscape promenade connecting cultural institutions occupying several recuperated buildings, in Estonia. Photo by the author, November 2016

Post-industriality is a systemic reality, and not a mere memory of the past. In Estonia, most power networks, mining operations and urban settlements that were instruments of the soviet industrialization of the Baltic States remain functional today⁵. Wandering through its physical territory from the period of great industrialization, between identities and remnants of soviet technology, is both an anachronic and individual experience⁶.

⁵ A version of the fieldwork visit to the seafront of Tallinn fieldwork visit was previously published in: Moreira, Ines (2019). *Estonia 2016-2018*. Porto: Circo de Ideias.

⁶ The visit to the Estonia and the Baltic region took place in December 2016 and was made possible with the support of Air Baltic and of The Baltic Pavillion at Venice Architecture Biennale 2016 - the fieldwork observations regarding the site refer to that period.

The reconfiguration or dismantling of those vast spaces calls for a new relationship between society and its environment – the Soviet Union was not a protector of its natural territories. Electricity networks, fossil fuel pipelines, nuclear plants, geological sections, minerals, relevant structures, insulation materials and landscape operations are part of this context and of the new architectural commitments faced by Estonia, whom affirms itself as the most digital European country, the one that invests the most in information technologies and its post-industrial condition.

The post-industrial imaginary of the last decades is marked by facts and fiction. *Stalker*, the apocalyptic science fiction film shot in the late 1970's by director Andrei Tarkovsky, is a paradigm of the influence of science fiction on global collective imaginary. The film foresees the chaos of a strongly built, polluted and industrialized territory. The contaminated environment, invasive nature and toxic atmosphere offer context to the metaphoric dimension of the dialogue that occurs within architectures and infrastructures with strong signs of degradation.

The actual industrial contamination of the locations of the film, some of which in Tallinn, near the Baltic seafront, proved fatal for a significant part of the actual filmmaker's team. In a harsh connection between reality and fiction, much of the team would die, intoxicated by the radiation and chemical composts present on the sets. In the film, *Stalker* says: "*The Zone wants to be respected. Otherwise it will punish*".

Tallinn's old seafront is scored with large trees and fragments of prefabricated concrete slabs, a bucolic path between city, industry and ruins. Soviet prefabrication allowed for the mass construction of facades, slabs and coverings for housing, industry, *kolkhoz* and public buildings. It also drove the construction of access ramps to the water used by people and boats, which today, corroded by the saltpetre and temperature variation, appear as a second nature, profoundly artificialized, where torpedoes, ships and other military pieces from the Maritime Museum are displayed. Further away, new ferries and cruises make the connection with Scandinavia. In the future, these will be substituted by the underwater train tunnel that is being planned.

In the film, Tarkovsky's character, *Stalker*, tells us: "*The Zone is a very complicated system of traps, and they're all deadly. I don't know what's going on here in the absence of people, but the moment someone shows up, everything comes into motion. Old traps disappear, and new ones emerge. Safe spots become impassable. Now your path is easy, now it's hopelessly involved. That's the Zone. It may even seem capricious. (...) But everything*

⁷ Film: *Stalker*, 1979, directed by Andrei Tarkovski. *that's going on here depends not on the Zone, but on us!*"⁷. The site resonates with the film, and back: the apocalyptic film was shot here, and the present abandonment recalls the apocalyptic fiction.

Between the Maritime Museum and the Linnahall, the abandoned soviet sports center, emerges a site of traumatic collective memory, the area of Patarei Prison. Robust walls stretch out towards the Sea, folding over a fortified bastion and enveloped in fences of barbed wire. The vermilion of the imperial brick and the rust of the gates contrast with the grey of the sky, the sea and the concrete slabs that artificialize the seafront. The air is dry, the humidity freezes and falls while it snows. In silence, under the snow, rests the gutted enclosure, partially covered in artistic drawings and interventions.

Patarei Prison building encapsulates the horrors of political history: created in 1840 as a Russian Imperial fortification, it was a Russian and German military garrison, a Russian maximum-security prison, taken over by the Nazi's in 1940 and a soviet prison for the subsequent decades. Its stories are horrifying, it was overcrowded and had rooms reserved for executions and medical experiments. It was closed one year after Estonia joined the European Union, in 2005. Today it is a place that embodies the memory of the fight for freedom, but, since August 2016 it has been closed to visitors. Its present circumstances are also tense, it is in danger and awaits heritagization. (I was not allowed in.)

Celebrating the period of soviet occupation is certainly not the approach of Estonian identity politics, neither is it part of the current sentimental mood, as can be seen in the former prison of Tallinn, the Patarei. It is important to understand that the memory of the soviet past is still fresh, as independence was only achieved in 1991 and many citizens still bitterly remember these times – there is no nostalgia, although it exists some *memorabilia* of the time left for visitors and *hipsters*.

It is also important to recognise that the cinematographic atmosphere of Andrei Tarkovsky was one of the imaginary guides to this territory, both in the fieldwork trip, and to our imaginary of the Baltic region. Almost 40 years after the shooting of *Stalker*, it is possible to gauge the transformation of its sets, real buildings in different states and situations, while also looking at an apocalyptic Estonia represented in science fiction from the 1970's, which is today somewhat maintained both in reality and fiction. Capturing the non-melancholic post-industrial reality that embraces the present and incorporates its contradictions is a great challenge: reality beats fiction.

Extreme site 3: Eastern Slope of Porto Riverside



Figure 3

The eastern slope of Porto's riverside extends from the abandoned XIXth century Dona Maria iron bridge, designed by Gustave Eiffel, and a XXIst century tunnel linking Porto to the next city, Gondomar. For most of its 1500m river long length, the slope consists of empty land, wild vegetation and abandoned builds, part of which rural, having a vast extension covered with post-industrial buildings and sites, originally privately owned, with few exceptions. Industrialization was led by bourgeois families, its traces are many, but not of State scale.

Neglected and dilapidated until very recently, the upper level of the slope is punctuated by small industries in a very populated area where workers housing, the islands (ilhas), are still inhabited and private. These small infra-human structures, where families live in individual one floor houses about 16sqm, with no modern facilities, hide behind the bourgeois façades. The area undergoes real estate investment and transformation, having several buildings converted as new hotels, hostels and other tourist related business.

Paradoxically, the privileged lower level of the waterfront, with its wide river access, Gustave Eiffel Avenue, is abandoned except for a few functioning structures: a gaz station, a magnate's farm mansion, the headquarters of his construction company, two high-end apartment blocks, and,

Figure 3. Eastern Slope of Porto Riverside. The riverside is a vast area of the city marked by severe geographical, economic and social contrasts, split and crossed by layers of infrastructure - electricity, water, sewage, train and highway -, aside poor workers houses, several abandoned industrial buildings and empty plots, spotted by high-end housing blocks, mansions and a five-star hotel by the water.

Photo: Miguel Oliveira

to the extreme east side, the Press Museum and a recent five-star hotel in a baroque palace by the marina waterfront.

The empty mid-slope, between the waterfront and the upper town, occupies most of the area, it is a complex zone, split and crossed by several layers of infrastructure: the former electric power station, its ruins and abandoned structures, where water canals run along rural alleys, train tracks, tunnels, viaducts and bridges (highway, train), all punctuated by minor workers' neighbourhoods. The slope has privileged river views, there are rumours of future construction plans bringing new intensive housing to the area, as in another couple of unsuccessful attempts in the 1990's and in the 2000's. Today, it remains a "terrain vague" of promised future plans, occupied by poor families, and by temporary nomadic groups⁸.

⁸ From 28th September to 4 October 2019, I had the opportunity to co-organize and mentor with Aneta Szyrak, the advanced course Post-Nostalgic Knowings, organized by the City Hall of Porto, with the invited guests Anton Kats, Elena Lacruz, Jonas Žukauskas, Jorge Ricardo Pinto, Solvita Krese. Post-Nostalgic Knowings is a course on culture and critical thinking which aims to look at different places in Europe which contain collective stories in disappearance, scanning the potency of recent curatorial and artistic research and intervention. The course presents a variety of "post-nostalgic" approaches by authors addressing places in Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Spain, to understand how contemporary knowings allow for reading, intervening and may contribute to resignify those places, whether in its relation to past memories and, most specially, as redefining new contemporary narratives. Trying to overcome the strictly preservationist and conservative approaches, the course will focus on a specific location in Porto, the Freixo hillside, characterized by the simultaneity of industrial history and the current pressure of real estate interests on the buildings and the land. Program: http://www.plaka.porto.pt/ficheiros/projectos/190827_PLAKA_PLK_PTENG_programa_1.pdf

Further east, at the eastern vertex, and apex, of the eastern slope of Porto riverside, in Freixo, sits a convoluted historical complex which encapsulates stories as convoluted as its baroque architecture. The baroque aristocratic palace by the river, designed in the XVIIIth century by the Italian architect Nicolau Nasoni, was throughout time reconverted in style and function, later augmented with other less noble functions during the XIXth century. After the original construction as a pleasure house and garden of Távora family, the site of the palace hosted a soap factory which, after a fire, was seconded by a distillery, and decades later, the palace became the headquarters of a flourmill company – Harmonia – which built a 45m high industrial iron cast building in the palace's main terrace, in front of the main façade, resuming the nobility of its origins. Later, Harmonia Company built modern facilities across the road, abandoning the complex, which was dilapidated during XXth century.

Freixo Palace and Harmonia Flourmill embody a set of conditions and decisions which reflect Portuguese history, from a transient aristocracy to the unstable succession of bourgeois industrial production, its long period of abandonment and resurgence as a classified heritage site, a National Monument, and posterior privatization. After decades of neglect, the Palace and the Flourmill were abandoned ruins. Its daunting spatiality and peculiar location were used initially as venue for a site-specific

⁹ The exhibition "Walter Benjamin's Briefcase" took place at the premises of the Harmonia in Freixo, between 6 November and 15 December 1993. Curated by Andrew Renton, it included works by artists: Christine Borland, Andrea Fisher, Douglas Gordon, Graham Gussin, Caroline Russell, Janet Wilson / Louise Wilson. Fernandes, João. Walter Benjamin's Briefcase. Porto: Porto City Hall, 1993.

contemporary art exhibition in 1993, Walter Benjamin's Briefcase⁹, which revealed the modular iron structure of mill, the spatiality of the building and its

existing machinery, opening the possibility to become in 1998 the new Museum of Science and Industry of Porto, to preserve and expose the history and memory of the industrialization. The life of the Museum was brief, and in 2006 the newly reconverted building was emptied, the collections stored, and the building let to the private company Pestana. The Museum was closed so to be converted

into rooms of a luxury hotel. In the other side of the terrace, after the careful restoration work¹⁰ led

¹⁰ During 2000/2001 my academic internship took place at the construction site of the recuperation of Freixo, as an intern to the architects. This period was rich in terms of understanding and contributing to the work of interdisciplinary teams working on the monument.

on the public building by the Portuguese Architects Fernando Távora and son, José Bernardo Távora (2000-03), the recuperated baroque Palace became the social area of the private hotel. When in the late

80's of the XXth century the Portuguese state bought Freixo palace the intention was to instal public education services in its premises. The ambition was set to recuperate it closely to the original, under an experienced architect who was a direct descendent of the same noble family or original owners.

Around 2006, the renewed public Palace and the neighbour Museum of Science and Industry of Porto were emptied and together let to the private company, Pestana Group, to be transformed into the exclusive luxury hotel. The group has added several modern facilities and amenities to the National Monument. Freixo Palace celebrates the ostentatious baroque past through luxury tourism. The collection and documents of the Museum remain stored and packed in a warehouse, suspending the memory of industrialization.

The tensions around Freixo reading as National heritage and the several failed stories in/around the industrial building embody the celebration of erudite architecture and the suppression of industrialization, its technical remnants and artifacts. From the palace we see a complex, convoluted, contradictory succession of stories, as the ones that span along the 1500m length of the slope: old empty land and abandoned builds, part of which rural, having a vast extension of land covered with post-industrial buildings and sites, private, or privatized, with few exceptions.

Going through these three visited and described sites - Chernobyl, Tallinn and Freixo - reveals the impossibility to compare or establish common grounds. All of which are peculiar in its past and present processes, and radically different, therefore, understanding its conditions, decisions, processes and affects was the strategy embraced, instead of comparison, which would reduce the sites to specific relatable traces, reducing its singularities.

On one extreme, the cautious classification and preservation of a relevant historical site, classified as National Monument, and active suppression of its industrial past, creates a strangely polished and time-specific baroque object, while its surrounding context is a post-industrial zone severely abandoned. This approach promoted the definition and celebration of a meaningful historical period and its reconstruction through an object over the intervention on the systemic condition of life in the area. On the other extreme, the environment and territory are the main preoccupations, whether for decontamination, safety or access to infrastructure, the resignification of the objectual buildings and past is a preoccupation lesser related to heritage and more with the actual conditions of life, resulting in architecture, buildings and sites in different states of consolidation and destruction.

If in Freixo, Porto, the history and memory of the past is celebrated and its heritagization is desired and promoted, even if effacing the industrial construction and past, in Estonia and in Chernobyl, we perceive the active preoccupation with the present and of the possibility of forgetting. Eventually, film fiction, contemporary art exhibitions, or television fiction, are some of the most stable references and

protections to part of the memory of the sites. Paradoxically, through the examples we perceive how both the active and the passive suppression of past buildings and sites – through selective preservation or nonchalantly disaffection – overall results in a progressive erasure of the industrial past and, therefore, a careful rewriting of historical narrative.

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TWO EXTREMES AT THE EUROPEAN PERIPHERIES:
BALTIC AND IBERIAN POST-INDUSTRIAL CULTURES

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