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FUTURES BEYOND DYSTOPIA

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The speculative imagination is an higher-order human capacity that can productively explore the not-here and the not-yet. To some extent it is already doing so. But these explorations are limited by prevailing cultural assumptions. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that there are other arenas to explore that, were they taken seriously, could exert sufficient symbolic ‘pull’ to qualify as desirable images of futures. They could then begin to act as ‘magnets’ for the realisation of possibilities that are presently obscured. © 1998 Richard A. Slaughter. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

The binary future as a default frame

Most stories, images and serious accounts of near-future scenarios fall into one of two groups. The first is a technophilic and naively optimistic view. Here development and growth continue unabated; humankind overcomes terrestrial limits and reaches for the stars. There is a long tradition of this kind in American futurism.¹ The second, more dominant, group depicts a bleak future in which the dreams of progress and unending economic development fall back into a chasm of entropy, violence and despair. I call this the ‘Terminator Two’ (T2) future because the popular film of that name contains so many of the images and themes that comprise this type of future: civilisation under threat, war with the machines, nuclear holocaust etc. As I and others have written elsewhere, the T2 future emerges from a worldview which has indeed placed our lives and our civilisation in peril from its own expansion and success.² This is the ‘flip side’ to industrial-era notions of progress and it has become indelibly inscribed within the collective unconscious.

But, taken together, this ‘binary future’ reflects the human tendency toward a polar choice between optimism on the one hand and pessimism on the other. It has become

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a kind of 'default frame' within which most speculative writing and normal futures work takes place. This reduction in the span of imaginative possibility reduces the core notion of futures studies (that of 'alternative futures') to two narrow bands on a much wider arc of potential. To explore 'futures beyond dystopia' we need not just to adopt a more positive reading of future options and trends. Rather, we need a broader frame within which to situate our intellectual and imaginative journeys. In order to show more clearly why this is necessary I will briefly critique formal futures methods and a couple of examples of recent science fiction. I then turn to other sources which provide a basis for an expanded framework of enquiry.

Critique of futures methods and science fiction

The futures field has developed many ways of probing the near-term future and reducing the inevitable uncertainty of the forward view. Many organisations use various futures methodologies: trend extrapolation, forecasts, Delphi studies, scenarios and so on. Yet when used in isolation, the methodologies *per se* have limitations. There are a number of reasons for this. For example, most futures methodologies lack a strong paradigmatic dimension. That is, they do not encourage those using them to review their underlying worldview assumptions (eg. unquestioned economic growth; the dominance of western thinking; the pre-eminent role accorded to instrumental means/ends reasoning) or the axioms of their disciplinary speech community. A good example of this kind of thinking is a piece by Peter Schwartz and Peter Leyden in *Wired* magazine. It postulates a global 'long boom' but misses the opportunity for critique and reconceptualisations available through a deeper analysis.³

A second factor is that while futures methodologies are usually presented as 'stand alone' items, it is doubtful if they are actually able to 'stand alone'. The reason is that applied foresight rests on two prior 'layers of capability': one is the human brain/mind system itself; the other is the use of futures concepts which permit the emergence of a distinctly futures-oriented discourse.⁴ Without a deep awareness of, for example, worldview assumptions, paradigm commitments and a shared, high-quality futures discourse, the opportunities for profound and innovative work are greatly reduced. Practitioners need a rich framework of futures concepts and an understanding of how language and culture shape the world, indeed shape us, in order to get the best out of the methodologies. I am not aware of many leading futures practitioners acknowledging the centrality of such in-depth conceptual understanding, let alone building this systematically into their work. It is, perhaps, a collective professional blind spot.

A third reason for the limitations of 'stand alone' methodologies is that they are too one-sidedly rationalistic. That is, they use a variety of tools based on reason and analysis. These reveal some *external* aspects of the world but, in true industrial-era style, obscure the *inner* dimensions. The same is true of most science fiction (SF). Some years ago it was the case that SF could be relied upon to supply a profusion of divergent visions. But as the boundaries of modernity were mapped and re-mapped; as the galactic empires and the humanoid robots became *passe* and collapsed back on their creators; as the tone of much SF shifted more and more towards downbeat dystopian futures here on earth; so SF became less and less able to explore futures that transcended the industrial worldview. Taken together, the broad sweep of SF novels depict a surprisingly narrow band of future options. Mostly they are set in futures when current technologies have developed

rapidly, cultural themes such as commercialism and individualism continue unabated and the condition of the wider world has deteriorated. Two recent and well-regarded examples will make this point clearer. In both cases I begin by describing what I see as the strengths and insights of these works; I then show how they also perpetuate dystopian themes.

The Diamond Age is set in the context of a thoroughly worked-out 'nanotech' scenario.⁵ There are now quite a few books which explore some of the implications of 'nanotech' from a kind of 'here-and-now' perspective.⁶ But how can one begin to 'get inside' the wider cultural human and cultural implications? How can one begin to perceive and feel the 'lived quality' of a strong nanotech scenario? Stevenson's novel goes a long way towards delivering just that. Briefly, it is the story of how an illegal copy of 'a young lady's illustrated primer' (that is to say, a full-implementation nanotech 'book' which is really a kind of multi-multi-media education and personal development system in a single package) falls into the hands of a child for which it was not intended. The girl is taken on a learning journey par excellence. I don't know if such a 'book' will ever be possible, but if it is, the consequences for formal education and human development will be profound. At another level, the novel is about what happens when the nanotech revolution impacts on people and cultures, both east and west.

Much of the book's action takes place in eastern locales. But they are places transformed by the ability of nanotech to create new structures, machines, devices both large and small, from simple elements (the latter routinised here as a public utility and dubbed 'the feed'). Both people and cultures suddenly have a vast range of non-traditional choices. Want a memorable birthday party? Build an island for the day and populate it with synthetic mythical creatures. The kids will love it. Want new weapons and communications systems? Fine. Build them on the micro scale and embed them in the human body. Network the 'wetware' of the human mind with highly advanced hardware. The novel sets a number of well-defined characters loose in a world clearly derived from ours, but one transformed through the multitudinous applications of nanotech.

The Diamond Age can be read as a cautionary tale; a warning of 'things to come'. The world portrayed is repellent in many respects. But a major weakness is that no method of transcending it is suggested. The characters are portrayed as being immersed in extended webs of nanosystems that they can neither understand nor control. The powers of physical manipulation bestowed by nanotech are vast and give rise to a huge variety of products and living arrangements. But this external variety cannot compensate for the lack of depth in this world; it is all surfaces. The uses to which nanotech is put are bewilderingly varied. But clearly technical power has outstripped people's sense of meaning and purpose. The psychological drives that motivate the characters are no different to those in our present. So this scenario again replicates the dilemma of our age: technical innovations race ahead, but human agency, human values and purposes, become eclipsed. I return to this theme below.

Similar themes are tackled by William Gibson in *Idoru*.⁷ Gibson, is credited with creating a new genre in SF: that known as 'cyberpunk'. It considers the near-future as it very well might be under the influence of greatly expanded media and the creation of virtual worlds made possible by directly connecting the human nervous system with massively networked computers. The central figure of *Idoru* is a computer-generated personality (an idoru) which is ostensibly young, Japanese and female. The lead singer from the rock band Lo/Rez (a media pun) has fallen in love with the idoru and intends to marry

her/it. Two characters are set to flight by this eventuality. One, a kind of cyberspace private eye with dubious and esoteric skills in culling insight from complex data sets which comprise the electronic ripples of people's lives; the other a young woman from the USA who is a fan of the band. The private eye, Laney, is commissioned to probe into the life world of Rez, the singer, while the fan, Chia, gets caught up in a high-risk game involving the smuggling of a proscribed nano device into Japan. These are the bare bones of a complex and often obscure storyline, the drama of which is heightened by constant cutting between these two themes.

The book is fast-paced and, for this reason, not particularly easy to follow. I found myself reading and re-reading sections just to improve my grasp on what was happening. But, as with *The Diamond Age*, the point is not so much plot or even the characters, so much as the way Gibson uses these elements to evoke the lived quality of a media-saturated world. In *Idoru* the technology is mostly off-stage, but the author captures the oppressive, glitzy, atmosphere, the ramifying VR sub-cultures and splinter groups, with enormous skill. The sight of buildings 'growing themselves' with nano-machines provides one of many compelling images. A nightclub in the top of a skyscraper condemned following an earthquake is another. Clearly this is a version of dystopia in which the secondary world of VR has taken fragments of human culture and vastly exaggerated them. The main drivers of cultural change are bound up with information technology, mass entertainment and diversion on a grand scale. One reason why 'the image rules' is that day-to-day reality has become something to escape from. In other words, part of the dramatic tension of the book is derived from the all-too-plausible sense we now have of the media-induced traps of late industrialism.

After reading both books in close succession I felt as though I had already been immersed in some imaginatively potent fragments of our own likely future. If Stevenson and Gibson are correct in their forward intuitions, that future may well include such things as: a near-total loss of privacy, pervasive meaninglessness, the rapid rise of unreal surrogate worlds (not only among the young), the further decline of governments and the growth of corporate power and influence. The big questions—about power and control, and whether we should continue to allow our futures to be so over-determined by a series of technological revolutions—hover in the background, barely mentioned by these writers. Overall, there are no hints of pathways to other types of futures.

A different treatment of these same themes has been produced by Damien Broderick in his non-fiction book, *The Spike*.⁸ Here he attempts to explore the implications of the much-heralded acceleration in scientific knowledge and corresponding technical power. He portrays a time in which these changes accelerate beyond our ability to either know about or understand them. He surveys such issues as nanotech, artificial intelligence, cloning and the 'up-loading' of human consciousness into computers—all familiar themes of SF over recent decades. In terms of the description of a linear process of development the book is a tour-de-force of structured exposition. But the drawback is that the perspective is again exclusively 'outer'. There is simply no recognition of any inner dimension at all. It is all very extrapolative and pragmatic; and the lesson is a familiar one—pay attention to what is happening, or else! What is overlooked are the frameworks of understanding and perception that would place this necessary analysis in a wider context.

Hence, an unacknowledged problem for much futures writing, whether it be fiction or non-fiction is that it tends to be created on the basis of unexamined cultural assumptions. This was one of the main reasons that I and others critiqued some earlier SF and

a number of now-dated books about solutions to the global problematique.^{9,10} So what is it that these writers are overlooking? The answer turns on the fact that we are all creatures of our own time and place. Hence, we carry with us a particular combination of 'blind spots' and 'ways of knowing'. Hence, the following themes are commonly found in fictional and non-fictional writing about the future.

1. Technology has a dominant role, often being the mainspring of social and cultural innovation.
2. Power and control are vested in large organisations, usually trans-national corporations.
3. The Western worldview prevails and most others are either reduced to remnants or eliminated altogether by a dominant hegemony of techno-economic interests.
4. The global environment has deteriorated significantly.
5. There is some kind of 'escape route' for humanity; either 'inward' ie. immersion in the virtual worlds made possible by new information technologies or an external escape to new habitats, or new worlds.
6. Change continues to accelerate in every area of life, so that impermanence, instability and uncertainty are rife. There is a sense of the continued breakdown of traditional structures and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness.

Stories, scenarios and scholarly comment along these lines work well insofar as they portray dangers to avoid. But at the same time, and in the absence of widespread critical futures awareness, they also constitute a clear default orthodoxy of vision that actually constrains what we imagine to be possible. So what are some of the elements that might lead us in other, perhaps more productive, directions?

Siddhartha's insight and Wilber's framework

In his fascinating book *Siddhartha*, Herman Hesse depicts a young man searching the world for meaning and purpose. He has many, many experiences. He learns the skills of scholarship, becomes a merchant, explores the rich world of physical love. He experiences riches and poverty, sensual indulgence and starvation. He reads, learns, meditates and, over a long period, gradually sheds these skins of outer experience. He slowly becomes aware of an inner world that is somehow prior to all the rest. Eventually he comes to see how 'meaning and reality are not somewhere behind things, they are in them, in all of them'.¹¹ With this pivotal insight, he opens to a new world of reality. It is no longer simply the 'given' world of outer appearances. It is a richer, subtler, many-layered world in which the 'inner' and 'outer' dimensions of existence are no longer exclusive but integrated and mutually necessary.

What Hesse has done is to dramatise the potentially powerful influence of the presently-eclipsed 'perennial tradition', or collective spiritual wisdom of humankind. In so doing he both critiques underlying assumptions of the Western worldview and, more importantly in the present context, expands the framework of perception and enquiry. Chief among the resulting insights are that there is indeed an inner world which is of primary significance. Now in one sense this is unexceptionable. Artists, writers, men and women of many traditions have known this for a long time. But what is interesting is the way that this knowledge of a prior, inner world, has been obscured or lost to most people and virtually all major institutions during the modern period. As a result a whole layer

of reality has been overlooked. This, I think, is the major source of the narrow views of futures I've outlined above.

What is missing from the standard view becomes a good deal clearer if we consider the work of Ken Wilber. For over 15 years he has been carrying out an impressive epistemological rescue operation that, properly understood, has the capacity to help us move beyond the breakdown of a particular cultural matrix to an outlook that vastly improves our prospects for a livable future. Wilber is not a futurist, but a synthesist on the grand scale. His work ranges widely over science, psychology, sociology, spirituality and religion. Many others have trawled these waters and found a variety of treasures. But Wilber's grasp is truly cosmic in scope yet, remarkably, fully grounded in the realities of everyday life. Wilber's grand opus *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality* lays out the full perspective in some detail. Unfortunately only the most dedicated of scholars are likely to read its 600 + pages. His *A Brief History of Everything* provides an elegant solution. Here is an accessible 'map' of the larger work; a 'map' which is clear, concise and profound.¹²

Wilber's account is based on the notion that it is useful to adopt four distinct 'windows on reality' or what he calls four 'quadrants' of 'development'. One covers the external, or physical, development of the individual. Here is the familiar story of biological development, of body and brain function. Next is the stream of external collective development, the physical/social process which leads through the various stages of physical and technical evolution. These two quadrants reveal the world of science that has dominated the industrial period. Next is the interior development of the individual; each person's own unique inner world of feeling, emotion, thought and vision. Finally there is the interior development of collective social being: language, worldviews etc. from the earliest stages, through the present 'rational' period and beyond. The scheme takes a little getting used to. But the triumph of Wilber's work is that he has searched so widely and so thoroughly that what stood before as a confusing tapestry of contending ideas and perspectives here stands revealed in a near-universal perspective. He gives due credit to those innovators and authorities in many fields, each of whom strove to bring forth particular insights, and weaves these into a greater whole. In so doing, he provides a wider framework which can be used to re-balance a one-sided culture and to explore paths beyond its present limitations.

Not everyone gets away unscathed. He strongly critiques those who would employ modernist strategies to escape from our present civilisational crisis. Instead of using the 'descended' frame which elevates rationality to the highest status and, in so doing, creates the 'flatland' of modern life, Wilber asks us to question the frame itself. He shows that evolution advances by incorporating earlier stages, preserving key elements of them, but then transcending them in novel ways. He therefore re-introduces a notion of hierarchy (or, more correctly, one of 'holarchy': a series of nested holons with no upper or lower limit) which has been highly unfashionable, to say the least, for many decades. One of Wilber's significant contributions is to show that deep ecologists, systems theorists, ecological decentralists and others can be surprisingly parochial and, indeed, misleading.

Thus Wilber's views on the future are worth considering. For him the path ahead is not the conventional one, ie., not through the further development and evolution of rationalist thought, not through a one-sided and over-powerful system of science and technology and not by a return to more primitive stages of social organisation. Rather, it lies in escaping from—or rather, transcending—the 'flatland' imposed on us by three hundred years of reductionism and epistemological ignorance. It lies in *acts of recovery*

in each and every domain: the recovery of a deeper sense of self, of higher, transcendent, ways of knowing, of states of social being that go beyond the merely rational, and so on. In Wilber's words: 'we cannot build tomorrow on the bruises of yesterday... This means a new form of society will have to evolve that integrates consciousness, culture and nature, and thus finds room for art, morals, and science—for personal values, for collective wisdom, and for technical know how'.¹³

The key is integration: to see things not in isolation but as interconnected in a structured, evolving way. This is a world away from old-fashioned 'holism'. In Wilber's terms, evolution within each of the quadrants is driven by spirit, which is inherent in the universe. It is significant that within the 'flatland' of late industrial culture, 'spirit' has seemed to be an empty and useless category, much derided by intellectuals and especially by post-modernists. But Wilber's highest appreciation goes precisely to those individuals and traditions who have considered differently: to the nondual Buddhist and advaita Vedanta traditions and to modern sages such as Sri Aurobindo, Sri Ramana Maharshi and Tibetan lamas. Essentially what he offers us is a framework for articulating grand designs of futures beyond dystopia.

Re-enchantment and worldview design

I argued above that futures work in general, and the speculative imagination in particular, has been compromised to a significant extent by hidden cultural assumptions that produced a 'binary' view of the future from an outer-oriented or 'flatland' view of the world. Hence, many futures worth exploring have seemed to lie out of reach, unexamined and unimaginable. However, a critical futures approach can bring these obscured assumptions to full awareness where they can be examined and, if necessary, discarded. In so doing, new realms of cultural possibility can emerge. This is the basis for worldview design. I used the story of Siddhartha and Wilber's account of four quadrants of development to substantiate the view that if we want more inspiring and hopeful futures to explore, we must consider new territory. In part this involves re-admitting the interior dimensions of individual and collective life into the picture as well as re-assessing the kinds of values and deep cultural commitments we wish to take on into the future.

At present the key drivers of change in the world emerge from the still relatively primitive stages of human and social development such as are expressed in: technical dynamism coupled with scientism, materialism, commercial exploitation (profit-driven organisations such as the trans-nationals, banks etc.), nationalism (the military-industrial complex), colonialism, greed, short-term thinking, ego, fear of death and defects in the Western industrial worldview—particularly short-term thinking and the hegemony of instrumental rationality.

We should not overlook the fact that Western industrial culture certainly contains some desirable features (eg. ideals of social justice, technical skill, high material standards of living). But, overall, it has become fundamentally anti-life, having lost sight of 'the inner world' during the industrialisation process. It read out of its world picture key areas such as myth, ritual, connectedness, spirituality and the numinous. This diagnosis will be misunderstood if it is interpreted merely as 'negative' criticism. But I take the view that it is a vital stage of understanding that helps us locate the grounds of the global problematique in what I call the 'metaproblem'. Social movements and some NGOs have

to some extent moderated the dynamic of global deterioration. But far, far more needs to be done.

The elements that lead to futures beyond dystopia include all those social innovations that break away from the industrial fantasy and re-connect us to each other and the earth. This means re-valuing native cultures, ending exploitation and embracing 'the other'. I also want to encourage people to feel symbolically powerful, ie., capable of re-defining their reality and actively responding to their own deeper needs, those of their children and of future generations. I therefore want to see the growth of foresight and wisdom in all the world's cultures. I want to see them implemented in every organisation and built up to the social and global levels. I also want to see morality and ethics become much more widely understood and applied. Otherwise I believe that technology or eco-catastrophe will overrun us, much as SF writers have depicted. On the other hand, with the tools of critical futures studies and the wider frame provided by writers such as Hesse and Wilber, we can explore a different set of cultural assumptions that arguably lead in a very different direction. Here are some possibilities.

1. Assume that the Western worldview is defective and provides us with a very partial and 'thin' view of the world.
2. Imagine that the dominant political and economic powers in the world might be on the wrong track insofar as they are perpetuating destructive and unsustainable views, practices and systems.
3. Consider that there may be significant arenas of human experience that have been marginalised or overlooked by Western institutions such as politics, education and the mass media.
4. Explore the idea that all our much-vaunted 'cutting edge' technologies may actually be derivative and secondary in terms of what matters most to people.
5. Imagine that the present ideology of endless material growth were replaced by an ethic of 'enoughness' or 'voluntary simplicity' and that a stewardship ethic replaced the current consumerist ethos.
6. Speculate on how it would be if to consciously re-design the Western worldview by retiring defective components and replacing them with consciously-chosen equivalents.¹⁴

This kind of 'thought experiment' is surprisingly rare. But what it suggests is that the range of possibility for envisaging the near-term future is much, much broader than even specialists in the fields of SF or futures study seem to realise. It follows that, unlike some of my futurist colleagues, I don't believe that the human race is merely a transitional species that should make way for so-called 'intelligent' machines. Rather, it is a species capable of endless self-transformation, vertical (qualitative) growth and development.

As we reach the end of the 20th century and contemplate the 21st, a viable future for humankind cannot be created on the ruins of the industrial age. We should not therefore uncritically carry over existing cultural commitments from this era to the next. Rather, we need to let go of some earlier commitments and consciously take up others. We need grounded visions, designs if you will, of a world that has experienced a recovery of vision, meaning and purpose; one that has moved beyond the disastrous conceits of industrialism—particularly the obsession with material growth, the subjugation of nature and the marginalisation of non-Western cultures. Such a world is likely to be fundamentally a post-materialist one which embraces stewardship and the needs of future gener-

ations. Intrinsic value would become more dominant than use—, or exchange value. Hints of such divergent futures can be found in novels like Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*.¹⁵ But these are still few and far between. Economics will need to be re-invented to create the kind of global restorative economy outlined by writers such as Paul Hawken.¹⁶ This is a re-enchanted world (to use Morris Berman's evocative phrase) well on the path toward sustainability.—Not one with the tight, oppressive atmosphere of a classical Utopia; rather, a materially stable but infinitely subtle, interconnected and many-layered world.

Conclusion: futures beyond dystopia

What, then, is the role of the speculative imagination? I suggest that it complements and extends reason and rationality; that it gives us other, often divergent, images, options, arenas of possibility that lie beyond reason and instrumental analysis. These sources provide access to an entire 'grammar' of future possibility. The literature on images of futures, and of imaging futures (ie. the process itself), is fascinating, but not large. What there is suggests that these imaginative constructions take the human mind out beyond the boundaries of currently constituted reality—beyond trends, forecasts and the like—and feed our capacities for speculation, imagination and social innovation.¹⁷

I therefore conclude that futures beyond dystopia can be brought within imaginative, intellectual—and thus practical—reach. A strong focussing concept is that of a *wise culture* which places the pursuit of wisdom above raw technical power.¹⁸ Such a culture is far-sighted and imbued throughout with transpersonal awareness. To our great cost, a sense of this future is presently missing from our everyday awareness—but it can certainly be derived from carefully reflecting on works of the kind mentioned above. The route from here (the slide toward destruction) to there (a future worth living in) is through the growth of human awareness across the planet and the implementation of a host of future-saving, future-creating, structures and processes.¹⁹ Most of these already exist but they remain culturally marginalised. The key to their mainstream emergence is an advanced futures discourse which can critique and re-shape existing agendas. Such a discourse can be developed through speculative writing, futures studies and associated fields.²⁰ Beyond it are several other 'layers of capability' that need to be understood and applied. Overall, the goal is to work toward the creation of social foresight and the steady emergence of societies and cultures that are not merely past-driven, but responsive to the emerging near-term future context.²¹

Essentially the task is about letting go of industrial models, values, priorities and structures across the board and opening to the wider processes of transformation available through the perennial wisdom of humankind. In this view, the future is made by weaving and re-weaving pre-existing and entirely novel elements into an ever new tapestry of culture. As I noted in an earlier work, 'when a right relationship is re-established between people, culture, technology and nature a whole new universe of options arises'.²² That is why, in a period of gloom with its pervasive sense of insecurity and threat, we can look ahead and discern futures beyond dystopia.

Notes and references

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