

CHANGING IMAGES OF FUTURES IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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The 20th century has seen a rise in dystopian images of futures and an apparent decline in imaging capacity. This article considers responses to this 'imaging dilemma'. They include critique, futures workshops, accessing cultural resources, renegotiating aspects of a worldview and 'imagining' a different historical dynamic. It is concluded that there is a substantive basis for informed optimism and empowerment. The keys to each lie in the nature of the human response to what is desired or feared.

Futures, and images of futures, play a much greater part in our lives and culture than is commonly realized. Far from being distant abstractions, futures concerns in general are constitutive of our common humanity. Without a forward-looking temporal context we could not create plans, purposes, goals, intentions . . . or meanings. Human life and culture cannot be described or explained simply by referring to the *push* of the past. It is also profoundly influenced by the *pull* of the future. Sir Karl Popper, scourge of historicism, put the point very clearly:

the open future is, almost as a promise, as a temptation, as a lure, present; indeed actively present, at every moment. The old world picture that puts before us a mechanism operating with causes that are all in the past—the past kicking and driving us with kicks into the future—the past that is gone is no longer adequate to our indeterministic world . . . It is not the kicks from the back, from the past, that impel us, but the attraction, the lure of the future and its attractive possibilities that entice us: this is what keeps life—and, indeed, the world—unfolding.¹

Images of the future present us with options and possibilities from which we can select and choose or with which we may argue and debate. Either way, they are active, shaping components of human consciousness. The main purpose of considering futures, and images of futures, is not to predict what will happen in any hard or precise sense, nor even to select from alternatives. It is, perhaps, to discern *the wider ground from which*

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images are constituted so as to take an active part both in creating and nurturing those which seem worthwhile.

The literature on imaging futures is limited, and some is superficial. Academic treatments are useful in sketching in the research background, but they may overlook wider cultural concerns.² In this article I look at more promising sources and consider the human and cultural significance of imaging.

Imaging as a social process

Imaging is by no means a specialized or impersonal activity. It plays a central guiding role in many creative vocations. Consider the writer. He or she may well begin with just one central image. If the image is a compelling one it acts like a magnet and, over time, draws towards it the other details from which a story can be woven—context, characters, plot and so on. Similarly, an architect or an interior designer is likely to begin a new project with a series of sketches or ‘roughs’. These evolve into detailed blueprints and plans. The artist or sculptor often works in the same fundamental way: first comes the concept or image; next the process of refining it; finally there is the hard work of translating images and concepts into a finished product. Social imaging seems to conform to this general pattern.

Imaging is a social process with a long history. If we consider some of the major works of antiquity—the Parthenon, the pyramids, the Great Wall of China—it is evident that they would never have been built without a strong guiding image. The stupendous labour involved could not have been undertaken if this image had not been capable of marshalling a powerful social effort to turn an ‘image-ined’ reality into a real and tangible one. So, at the social level, the right image can act as a cultural force to bring new projects to fruition (see Figure 1).

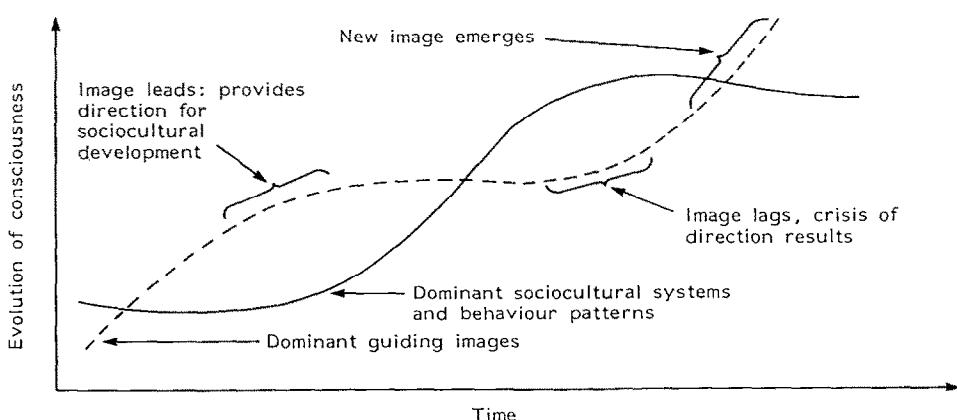


Figure 1. Possible relationship between dominant images and sociocultural development. This diagram suggests how a dominant image may draw cultures in a particular direction. However, when a guiding image loses its power, the changes it stimulates may decay. A crisis of direction may then stimulate the emergence of a new guiding image.

Source: E. Boulding, *The Dynamics of Imaging Futures* (1989).

Such images may be visual or they may be more abstractly symbolic. Consider Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream . . .' speech. Or John Kennedy's 'We choose to go to the moon . . .'. Both helped to define and focus a collective effort to realize major social goals: in one case social justice for black people in the USA; in the other a largely technical effort to realize culturally significant goals (self-confidence, leadership over the Soviets). However, grand visions have become relatively rare in the 20th century. Why is this?

One reason is that contemporary views of futures tend to be not so much about the things we want to achieve as about the things we want to avoid—pollution, the greenhouse effect, the loss of tropical forests. Outside engineering contexts, it is hard to find grand visions to compare with those which provided coherence and direction in other cultures at other times. The late 20th century equivalents of the Great Exhibition (held in London at the Crystal Palace in 1851) manifestly do not represent the triumphant expression of a clearly expressed vision, so much as a desperate, even manic, attempt at reassurance. Behind the slick technology and laser light shows, there is a seldom acknowledged lack of confidence and vision.³ That, perhaps, is why occasions such as the Brisbane Expo draw much more heavily on the mass entertainment values of Disneyland than the assured and optimistic cultural values such as were expressed and displayed at the Crystal Palace. But then, this is a very different age.

The contrast between expo as escapism and expo as confident statement is fairly stark. It expresses a major shift in our views of the world—and the future—during the present century.

Beyond utopia and dystopia

The attempt to imagine ideal societies has a long and honourable past. For over 400 years writers, scholars and speculators of many different persuasions put pen to paper and tried to imagine how the ills of their societies could be overcome and new possibilities created. From Sir Thomas More's classic *Utopia* (1516) onwards there was a vast and varied outpouring of such material. It prepared the ground for many social innovations which we now take for granted—health insurance, democratic government, courts of law and the emancipation of women, to mention only a few.

Perhaps the last great utopia was H. G. Wells's attempt to write what he called *A Modern Utopia* (1905). It was a bold vision based on the assumed benefits of science and technology. But there was also a darker side to the picture. Wells not only saw the rational organization of human affairs leading to an era of peace and prosperity. He also foresaw the armoured land tank and nuclear weapons. There is a powerful description of the latter in one of his later books. He worried endlessly about what he termed 'human folly'.

Four years after the publication of Wells's utopia, another writer produced a powerful story which considered the dark side of Wells's vision. The writer in question was E. M. Forster and his story was called *The Machine Stops*. It was, and remains, a powerful vision of a world in which all human life is dependent on machines. It is a repressive, high-tech

future in which people have forgotten how to control 'the machine' and have also forgotten that technology takes away even as it provides.⁴

So at the beginning of the 20th century we see the long tradition of utopia giving way to anti-utopia (or dystopia). The twin extremes represent two poles of our destiny—progress and disaster. The interesting thing is that as the present century has passed, so it has become progressively easier to imagine dystopia and harder to believe in progress. Utopia has even been subjected to negative reversals which suggest that notions of social improvement are 'unrealistic', pie-in-the-sky or oppressively overbearing. There have certainly been many dystopian images and events to draw on—overcrowded cities, polluted seas, dying animals and birds, stark images of famine, war and decay. The use of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II, the growing fears for the environment and a pervasive sense of uncertainty and loss of control have made the future appear increasingly problematic. The implications are far from obvious because the impacts of such shifts frequently take place in hidden, unregarded ways. After noting that people can be regarded as symbolic animals who seek meaning, Dunphy notes that 'it is at the symbolic level that change hits us hardest, because it so frequently tears apart symbols which have provided our lives with meaning and continuity'.⁵

In popular culture we have become so accustomed to moods of cynicism, violence and despair that it may not be immediately obvious how inhibiting they can be. The great dystopias of the century (Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*) clearly articulated widely felt concerns about depersonalization and other threats to our well-being. So far, so good. But they are succeeded by entire industries which now permeate the global village. In the 1990s it is almost impossible to contemplate an evening's television viewing or the week's films without noting references back to familiar dystopian themes of disaster, decay and dissolution. Clearly our preoccupation with bright new technologies has not fooled the collective unconscious: something important is missing. This sense of loss is faithfully reproduced in the mass media. Yet they reveal little awareness either of the proliferation of negative futures imagery or of the human implications of ersatz surrogate worlds. A number of observers have commented on how the latter misrepresent social reality in important ways.⁶ In other words, the distortions of the technological screen between us and the natural world complicate the task of understanding it and of acting to preserve it for future generations.

It is not that dystopia is necessarily 'bad' in any simple-minded way. The great dystopias can also be read as warnings, destinations to avoid. As components on a map of futures, areas of danger are as important as possible destinations. Moreover, the subjects of such warnings can be falsified by concerted action. Such is the power of applied foresight. On the other hand, anodyne or apparently positive images may conceal many dangers behind a seemingly harmless facade. This should alert us to the fact that, like optimism and pessimism, utopia and dystopia are ambiguous. Care should be taken in believing and interpreting them. These simple oppositions have more to do with the preference of the human mind for polar contrasts than with a profoundly interconnected world. The latter demands a deeper approach to the imaging dilemma.

Responding to the imaging dilemma

As we near the end of the 20th century there is an inevitable growth of interest in the year 2000 and the new millennium. Such transitions are much more than artefacts of a numbering system; they have enormous cultural significance. Hence, projects to celebrate the historical divide are already being conceived. But, at the same time, this is taking place in a context in which compelling images of futures are few and far between. It might appear that our long-term social imaging capacity is failing at the very time when it is needed most. Yet this is partly a question of perspective. It turns on the fact that we already live in a period which incorporates many features that earlier generations thought of as being '*in the future*'. Men have walked on the moon. Human hearts are routinely transplanted. We can speak to each other across the entire world and photograph distant planets. But the *technical* achievements of yesterday soon lose their power to uplift and inspire. Perhaps we should reflect on this hint that today's marvels may not be all they are advertised to be.

Two contradictory factors can be observed. On the one hand, there has been a loss of confidence about our ability to solve major problems and to survive in a world severely compromised by human activity. On the other hand, we have already achieved many things which people worked towards when they were only dreams and visions located '*in the future*'. We live longer, travel further, and know more than ever before. But the social capacity to imagine new and different futures has clearly declined. What can we do about this? There are a number of options.

First, we can recognize that this apparent exhaustion of imaging capacity is only temporary. The human and cultural sources of images have certainly not been lost. In some ways they are stronger and more accessible than ever before (see below). While many have been relegated to the cultural margins, they can be reclaimed and utilized. Second, we can revalue countertraditions that incorporate visionary elements which breach the bounds of everyday assumptions and practices.⁷ Third, it is entirely reasonable to suggest that a great deal more effort be devoted to scanning and exploring futures. But to achieve this will necessitate a fundamental shift of perception. This shift is primarily one which revalues the future; which sees it not as an abstraction or an empty space but as a principle of present action.

Futures people do need to be clear about what they do. They need to explain clearly, and in many different contexts, how it is that the full implications of many actions, policies or decisions made in the present cannot be understood or explained without considering a wide range of future implications. In this view foresight and futures study may well need to take precedence over studies of the past. I do not see this as asserting a false opposition between historians and futurists, for these are complementary enterprises. But this is far from being merely an academic issue. It is important to initiate the kinds of social processes whereby people are encouraged to participate in imagining the kinds of futures they would like to live in and pass on to their children. Such processes are not particularly easy to create and sustain. But we certainly know enough to make a good start. A culture which can invent wonder drugs and place machines in orbit

should not shrink from such work simply because it is human and cultural, rather than scientific and technical. That very partiality (towards the assumed dominance of science and technology) is itself a longstanding continuity which frames our present dilemma.

So while pessimism certainly seems uppermost, there are grounds for reestablishing more constructive views. Those grounds can be explored and developed almost without limit. They can be likened to a set of tools waiting to be taken up, elaborated and used more widely. To be more specific, both 'positive' and 'negative' images can be critiqued. Futures workshops can help people to establish different images and use them as 'magnets' for personal goals or social innovations of many kinds. Nor need the directives and imperatives set by technology fads and international capital be passively followed. Other alternatives can be consciously cultivated.

Among the most penetrating options available is our ability to probe beneath the surface of the industrial worldview, discern its systemic defects and renegotiate some deeply embedded assumptions and values.⁸ This may mean adopting and implementing a stewardship ethic, attending to the rights of future generations, or redefining growth. There is no shortage of important, socially responsible work to be done in such areas. Quite the contrary, if we cannot reinvent the culture and its worldview the prophets of doom will be proved right. Finally, there is value in looking for a different historical dynamic—perhaps one which owes less to a machine-led view of the world and more to an informed, even visionary, view of human development. Since each of these involves imaging processes, the remainder of this article considers them in more detail.

Critique of futures images

Images of futures are constantly being produced, consumed, applied and discarded. At any particular time certain images are gathering social support or losing it. While, in practice, too little critical attention is given to them, all such images can be renegotiated, reconceptualized, refashioned or refused. Take the example of images of futures in young people's media.

A survey I carried out not long ago suggested that, in this context, 'the future' was primarily constituted of powerful machines, arcologies, space rockets and robots.⁹ But credible views of future people as *people* (not as props for the surrounding technosphere) were almost entirely absent. More odd still was that much of the material exhibited confusions in some important areas—good and evil, right and wrong, science and magic seemed interchangeable or incoherent. Even on the level of such simple contrasts, it seemed to me that inversions and category errors here could not but work *against* the child's attempts to construct a coherent picture of the world and his/her role in it. There is clearly a long way to go before children's media adequately portray the range and symbolic richness of futures images or seriously explore alternative, non-standard views. On the other hand this very lack suggests opportunities for a wealth of original work.

Such tendencies are not restricted to children's media. Technophilia is a dominant characteristic of popular television programmes which explore 'recent developments in science and technology'. They come very close to

assuming that the future will actually be built largely of machines which can be photographed and presented in short punchy sequences by young reporters. The resulting images are little other than pure entertainment. Such programmes mystify the public by suggesting that 'the future' can be assimilated to such limited concerns, by their ignorance of the social relations of science and technology and by their habit of entirely overlooking the rich web of concepts and imagery which could provide a broader picture.¹⁰

Another source of futures imagery is associated with science fiction (SF) literature and film. Limitations of space preclude in-depth analysis. Sufficient to say that one purpose of speculative artwork is to dramatize events taken from the plots of SF books and to situate them visually in a variety of different worlds—past, present and future. Much of the imagery—particularly from the pulp era, pre-1950—is fairly crude. Yet even then artists such as Virgil Findlay and Frank Hampson produced high-quality images which still stand up today.¹¹ From this more accomplished tradition, people like Roger Dean, Giger (designer of 'Alien') and Sorayama have emerged with a varied body of material which provides a variety of images of futures. Since these may impact on wider imaging processes, they can legitimately be subjected to criticism.

For example, Sorayama has produced a series of 'sexy robots'—impossibly feminine machines in bright, curving steel. On one level he is simply playing with us: 'gaze on this steel perfection and all you'll see is your own reflection. There's not a spark of life, not a single breath of individuality in these chrome bodies . . .'.¹² On another level he has tapped two converging streams of mythology, the perfect body and the perfect machine. They make a compelling—if repellent—combination. Both are fantasies, but fantasies supported by the prevalent myths of the age. A related fantasy, and perhaps a more dangerous one, is that of the 'humanized' robot—the robot with the child on its knee, the robot which 'sleeps'. There is one particularly striking image on the cover of an Asimov novel which portrays a robot 'resting'. It is a seductive image done in pastel colours, conveying repose. How should we respond? Should we agree so readily that *human* qualities and capacities may simply be read on machines? It seems unwise. While, in fact, the *physical* boundaries between people and machines are being progressively breached, it is important to resist the dehumanization which could follow. Images which forge ahead into this transition without comment could be the thin edge of a dangerous wedge.

Two other types of futures imagery can be briefly mentioned here. One is the growth of engineering futures imagery, particularly in Japan. There the Taisei Corporation has embarked on an ambitious design and PR programme to popularize its notion of 'Alice cities' (after Alice in Wonderland). The images are spectacular—vast underground cityscapes, remote buried factories, immense crystal domes and so on (see Figure 2). One widely reproduced image shows a perspective cut-away of a cylindrical underground structure with ramps, walkways, numerous levels and, of course, a swimming pool. A wooded landscape stretches away towards another forest of immense tower blocks. It is an heroic image. Considerable efforts have been expended on the detailed visualization of the project. A letter from the deputy general manager states, in part: 'Thank you for

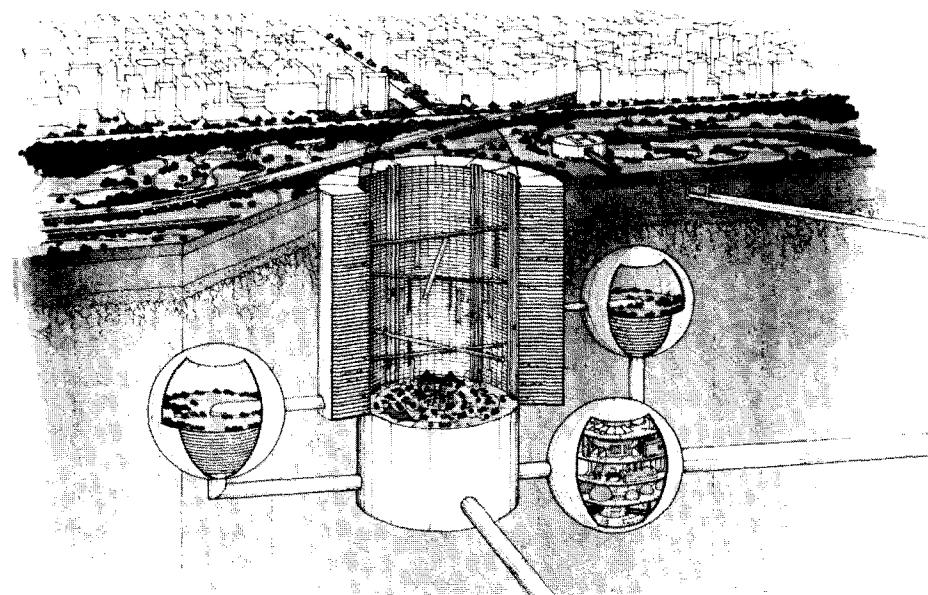


Figure 2. An Alice city. The cut-away shows the cylindrical design of the central Alice city, surrounded by smaller service modules. This exercise in applied futures imaging is one of a series produced to support the concept.

Source: Courtesy of the Taisei Corp, Japan.

paying attention to our Alice cities. We believe our ideas will come true in the 21st century. However, we have to clear so many hurdles to implement them. We really need the support of many people . . .'.¹³

This is a fine example of futures imagery deployed as part of a wider strategy. However, it is important to use such images as a *starting point* for looking deeper. While the Taisei drawings 'probe beneath the surface' in a physical sense, there is no evidence of a comparable effort to uncover ideological or epistemological questions. In some ways the latter is the more important task, yet it may not be an easy one to pursue in a corporate context where strategic directions may be unquestioned and, indeed, unquestionable. Given certain assumptions Alice cities could represent a real option for a land- and resource-poor country. Yet with different assumptions they could become a technocratic nightmare.

Early images of futures also have their uses. As I. F. Clarke and others have shown, such images played an important part in the attempt to speculate about times to come.¹⁴ But, with the benefit of hindsight, they can be used to gain a different perspective on our own time. For example a set of cigarette cards called 'En l'an 2000' were produced by French illustrator Jean Marc Cote in 1899, but were never used. They were re-discovered many years later and published as *Future Days*.¹⁵ The images show personal helicopters, pranks under the sea and numerous applications

of mechanical lever technology—for example in farming, tailoring and even shaving!

It is almost instinctual to look for where the artist 'got it wrong'. But it is more useful to consider that, just as he worked with the assumptions of his own time, so, 100 years later, do we. When we look ahead we virtually ignore lever technology. Instead we appear to believe that computers and information will predominate. So we populate our images and thoughts of futures with them. But what if they turn out to be radically limited in certain important ways? Perhaps they will look as silly in 100 years as the mechanical barber does now. We may be sure that in another century some of the things we believe will also turn out to be false or trivial. But it is in the nature of things that we cannot know what they are. In other words past images of futures comment on historical contingency and therefore provide grounds for caution.

Futures workshops

Futures workshops provide a flexible way of dealing with futures concerns, nurturing images, and exploring their implications in a small group context. Some workshops are exploratory and open-ended, some are more highly structured. Some combine both approaches. Among the most highly structured are those discussed elsewhere in this issue by Boulding and Ziegler. Similar in philosophy, but not in approach, are those developed over a number of years by Robert Jungk.¹⁶ There are a number of distinct phases, as illustrated in Table 1.

These workshops can be run in a day, a weekend or longer. They deliberately intertwine rational-logical and intuitive-emotional strands. They are intended to provide fora in which people can reflect on issues of concern to them and from there produce a plan for action which may result in a social innovation or other creative change. They have been held in a number of European countries with evident success.

TABLE 1. OUTLINE OF ROBERT JUNGK'S FUTURES WORKSHOPS.

Preparation

Announcement of themes, place, time, cost etc. Meeting place, seating, facilities. Materials. Opening: introduction, workshop structure and procedures, timetable, introductions.

Critique

State the problem, log key points and choose key ones. Form clusters and amalgamate key points. Pick clusters or statement by voting.

Fantasy

Objectives—re-write selected key points or statements in positive form. Warmup via playing fantasy games. Brainstorming to gather ideas. Choose ideas with the greatest potential. Fantasy clusters. Collect related items together into clusters. Form small groups to work up into 'Utopian schemes'.

Implementation

Display results so far. Choose the most popular ideas to take further. Check selections for practicability. Try to foresee difficulties. Choose a project and develop an action plan.

Continuation

Extend earlier workshop material via brainstorming and amplification. Outline options and select one by voting. Review feasibility and finalize objectives. Implement plan and evaluate performance.

A different approach is to use a guided fantasy to elicit images of futures. Noel Wilson of South Australia uses this method with teenagers in Australia and the UK. He works from a prepared script to take the participants through several stages. First, there is a relaxation stage. Next, they are taken on a journey into the clouds. Finally they return to earth in some future time and draw what they see. From numerous examples, Wilson was able to draw a clear composite picture. He wrote:

some six hundred students later, a clear pattern had emerged. Over half of the scenarios were dominated by computers and robots housed in block houses, skyscrapers, and ubiquitous domes. Over half contained landscapes of bleak devastation. Nearly all were negative and dehumanised. Most were devoid of humans.¹⁷

It is clear from this work and that of many others that young people tend to have very negative views of their likely futures.¹⁸ The question is, how can teachers and others help them to move away from the pain and anguish involved and explore other options? Are there ways of moving out of the depression and learning to *respond* to the fears? I believe that there are.

Resources for dealing with fears

Joanna Macy is a leading practitioner in this area. Her *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*¹⁹ offers a rich compendium of strategies which deal directly with feelings of helplessness, anger, grief and so on. She articulates five principles:

- (1) Feelings of pain for our world are natural and healthy.
- (2) This pain is morbid only if denied.
- (3) Information alone is not enough.
- (4) Unblocking repressed feelings releases energy, clears the mind.
- (5) Unblocking our pain for the world reconnects us with the larger web of life.

Much of her work takes place in workshops and retreats in locations around the world. These workshops can be powerful since they elicit human responses at fairly profound levels. This occurs not simply because of her grasp of group processes, but, more important, because she herself has explored some of the richest grounds for cultural innovation and the recovery of meaning. She is a practising Buddhist and draws on this (and other traditions) for insight and understanding. Hence, Macy's workshops are based on more than technique. They are founded on a deep understanding of the human predicament, on a substantial involvement with the theory and practice of deep ecology and on a vision of an interconnected and indivisible world. The vision is embodied in various ways—in Eastern and shamanic symbolism, in deep ecology ritual and in the re-spiritualization of experience. The tenor of this approach may best be gauged from her teaching at an intensive seminar in northern England, where she declared:

It sometimes seems that all that can save us is a miracle. However, from a deep ecology viewpoint we *are* a miracle. The work is very much about attending upon a miracle. It does not have to do with our doing. That is where the smile (ie of the Buddha) comes in. The connections do not need to be made. They are there. The web is not an idea. It is a reality. Peace is not something you make. It is the dance of

our true selves. It is the thrust of life which has woven itself through rocks, through waters, through times, travels and forms we cannot imagine.²⁰

Such an approach must be deployed with care and sensitivity. Yet when it is done well it has the effect of reframing issues and concerns and then *linking* the human response to powerful cultural resources at the levels necessary for insights and resolutions to occur. This can be seen in the Council of all Beings, a deeply moving ritual in which people identify closely with different creatures or features of the environment and speak as if from that perspective.²¹ With this in mind, two further principles can be outlined:

- (1) The critical factor in dealing with fears is *the nature of the human response* to the situation(s) from which the fears derive. A group context means that a wider range of potential responses is available.
- (2) The resources deployed to deal with fears must be adequate to the task and will therefore tend to be grounded primarily in cultural and spiritual traditions, and only secondarily in technique or psychology. This helps to explain why more instrumental, goal-oriented approaches can be less productive.

Yet this does not mean that one must spend years practising the Eastern arts before acting or facilitating workshops. Simpler approaches are not without value, so long as their limitations are acknowledged. One such workshop tool is illustrated in Figure 3. The matrix has two main purposes. The first is to place negative associations in a wider context. The second is to pose the question (without necessarily providing a final answer) about what might be meant by a 'quality response'. Working through the matrix provides a series of possible responses which can then be evaluated in terms of 'quality'. The latter can be gauged through such criteria as appropriateness, dealing

	Low-quality responses	High-quality responses
Acceptance of negative images		
Rejection of negative images		

Figure 3. Matrix for considering images of futures. The matrix is a workshop tool for dealing with fears and investigating images of futures. Each cell describes a type of strategy or response. When the matrix is completed, these can be compared. A preferred resolution is normally suggested. Finally, there is a discussion about what resources may be needed.

Source: R. Slaughter, *Futures Tools and Techniques* (1988).

directly with the problem, the role of a creative component and the effectiveness of suggested strategies.

One key point is that fears and concerns about futures depend on human perception and understanding. As such, the locus of power resides not in a disembodied vision but within the individuals who give it life. This, perhaps, is the unifying principle of all futures workshops; they are a means to an end, and the end is an increase in human capacity to create and affirm the visions of futures people want. When the nature of those wants, or needs, is reflected on with clarity (rather than simply assumed in a commonsensical way which merely reinforces the status quo), visioning becomes a precursor of social and cultural innovation. In other words, the necessary idealism of the imaging process can be informed and tempered by a critical review of the cultural context. Part of the essential groundwork is the analysis and renegotiation of meanings which exist as assumptions within a dominant worldview.

Renegotiation of worldview meanings and assumptions

Critical futures study suggests that some of the most productive options involve diagnosis and reconstruction at the heart of the worldview. That implies close, critical attention to presuppositions, core values and constitutive meanings. These may well be hidden, but they are no less powerful for that. They are not immutable since, to some extent, they are refashioned by, and for, each generation.

What areas could be ripe for renegotiation? One is the notion that nations are necessarily driven by technical and economic changes. A perspective which looks at *human* development seems to suggest rather different lines of innovation and change. That is why the notion of a 'wisdom culture' (see below) is useful. It provides a framework of understandings and values which begin not from an economic theory, nor from a set of technical capacities, but from a view of what it means to be human, based on the most advanced models available.

Paradoxically, such models are not exclusively modern. Huxley summarized a lot of the evidence in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945). Since then, Maslow and the work of transpersonal psychologists have shown many paths towards higher stages of integration and development.²² And the point of all this? Well, if we consider how much of our political, social, economic and cultural life is driven by negatives (fear, greed, violence etc) the primary role of human motives and responses becomes clear. If it were possible to reconceptualize politics, society, the economy and culture according to the highest and most advanced human motives (such as vision, clarity and what Schumacher called 'enoughness') then the entire pattern would be transformed. Could this lead to a different historical dynamic?

There are other worldview assumptions to do with temporality, growth, nature, resources, power and so on. The work of 'probing beneath the surface' in these ways, while seen as subversive by some, actually seems to give access to some of the richest options for cultural adaptation. It then becomes possible to look for a different historical dynamic, one that contrasts with . . . faster . . . bigger . . . further away . . . more.²³

'Imag-ing' a different historical dynamic

It seems clear that present-day negative views of futures are driven by fairly primitive human instincts which are magnified and augmented by powerful technologies (particularly tools of communication and the mass media). The interaction of an industrial worldview with the political and commercial opportunism of the 20th century has permitted a crass, short-sighted marketing culture to become dominant. So it is hardly surprising that a positive view of the future is lost. It cannot be overemphasized that the simple extension of present trends leads inexorably on to a devastated and impoverished world. That fact underlies all the reasons why young people get depressed and makes it clear why business-as-usual assumptions are no longer viable. We are caught up in a giddy pattern of dynamic change and chronic unsolved world problems.

Yet if Polak was right, it is entirely possible to 'breach the bounds' of present social reality and to 'imagine' a very different world structured according to different values and assumptions. This could be the role of a 'wisdom culture'. It may not be achieved tomorrow, next year or even next century. What it does do is much more immediate and practical. It creates a contrast which, like the best speculative fiction, de-familiarizes the present, makes it seem strange (ie historically contingent). A compelling vision therefore appears which transcends the catastrophic futures endemic to technocratic scenarios.

How can one define a wise culture? We cannot be entirely sure. Table 2 provides some possibilities, gleaned from the work of Ken Wilber.²⁴ The actual details are less important than *the quality of consciousness* which they evoke, for it is this which is arguably the pivot, rather than the technical or other means by which it is expressed. Nor need this quality be wholly displaced into future time. The startling thing is that people have always been capable of it. Today one such person may be Thomas Berry. His *The Dream of the Earth* seems to presage exactly the kind of shifts outlined here. Following Berman (whose book, *The Reenchantment of the World* is a milestone in this literature), he writes,

This reenchantment with the earth as a living reality is the condition for our rescue of the earth from the impending destruction that we are imposing upon it. To carry this out effectively, we must now, in a sense, reinvent the human species within the

TABLE 2. ASPECTS OF A WISDOM CULTURE.

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- Vivid understanding of common humanity
 - Move beyond roles based on race, gender etc
 - Balanced use of rationality and intuition
 - Higher motivations reshape economic life
 - Methods and institutions to foster growth of consciousness
 - Education as a discipline in transcendence
 - Technology as aid to transcendence, not substitute
 - Local differences set in context of universals
 - All people and religions seen as one in spirit
 - Governance depends upon mastery of the system at each level; body/mind/soul/spirit
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Source: After Wilber, *op cit*, reference 22.

community of life species. Our sense of reality and of value must consciously shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric norm of reference . . . Our challenge is to create a new language, even a new sense of what it is to be human. It is to transcend not only national limitations, but even our species isolation, to enter the larger community of living species. This brings about a completely new sense of reality and value.²⁵

This 'new sense of reality and value' is, perhaps, the key to a new historical dynamic. In part it turns not on the intellectualization of experience, still less on the reductionist interrogation of nature by naturalistic science; but rather on *the direct experience of intrinsic value*. This stands in stark contrast to use-value and exchange-value which still remain core assumptions of the late industrial era. Imaging workshops which can bring participants to this point in living experience are clearly promoting social change at a profound level.

Intrinsic value gives back to the earth, its wildlife and ecology the right to independent existence, regardless of the needs or uses of humankind. But, as McKibben and others have pointed out, from a human viewpoint nature can be said to exist no longer as an independent category.²⁶ This may be overstated. Yet in order for nature to recover and retain its capacity to sustain any life it will need, in some sense, to be reconstituted at the heart of the social order. This is a difficult task . . . but not a hopeless one. It is becoming increasingly clear to many observers that the 'ecological imperative' is indeed primary. For example, Lester Milbrath writes:

Life in a viable ecosystem is the core value of a sustainable society; that means all life, not just human life. Ecosystems function splendidly without humans but human society would die without a viable ecosystem. (Hence) we must give top priority to our ecosystem, second priority to our society; only when the viability of those two systems is assured is it permissible to seek quality of life in any way we choose.²⁷

An imperative of this kind will not be easily sustained due to inertia and strong opposition from industrial-era systems and assumptions. So ways are being sought to widen the debate and transform it into a broad social process. One project which aims to do just that is Imagine the Future (ITF).

ITF is a coalition of organizations and groups in Victoria, Australia, which is based on the premise that 'if we can imagine a better world, then we can each do something to help create it'. In the words of the organizers, ITF is about:

- sharing ideas;
- taking initiatives;
- complementing programmes already begun;
- validating and celebrating people's steps toward ecological sustainability;
- resolving fears about the future; and
- establishing an appropriate structure through which these things can happen more easily.²⁸

ITF is intended to be a process as well as a structure. It will involve all sections of the community, and particularly the young. It is now under the auspices of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), one of the major environmental organizations in the country. The plan is to build up a constituency of support over about two years and to hold an ITF week in 1992. The basic time-line is given in Figure 4. A small staff is working with

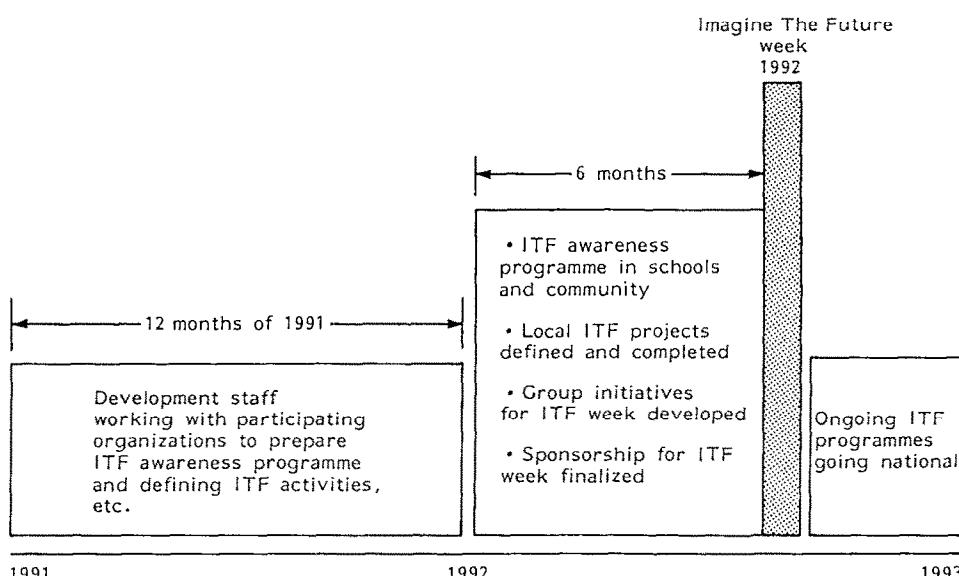


Figure 4. Stages of Imagine the Future (ITF) project. The long preparation period is one of the distinguishing features of ITF. The breadth of the project means that careful coordination will be essential to its success. ITF could herald the beginning of a more sustained approach to imaging futures and linking the images with social innovations.

Source: ITF Discussion Document, Melbourne, 1990.

numerous volunteers to bring about a broad spectrum of events, including conferences, lectures, exhibitions, satellite hook-ups, youth exchanges and a futures expo. If ITF week is a success it could go on to become an annual event.

ITF could be dismissed as misplaced idealism. Yet that would be a mistake. It is designed to encourage exactly the kind of broad social involvement which permits non-specialists to have their say and to contribute to a range of future-shaping actions. It will provide numerous fora for dialogue and debate. It will constitute a seedbed for social innovations. One of the latter is a series of seminars in which presenters will be encouraged to embody their suggestions in the form of desirable images. Another is a community arts project in which artists will be commissioned to create their own images of futures. This 'image bank' will itself become a catalytic resource, making otherwise abstract ideas more concrete and accessible. Such an enterprise may do more to communicate some of the core ideas of futures work than many academic papers! If successful it could become a model to be emulated elsewhere.

Conclusion

The capacity to imagine other, and different, futures is one of the defining characteristics of humankind. When properly harnessed towards shared ends it provides many of the keys to our predicament. Redundant assump-

tions can be discarded, values can be renegotiated, oppressive and destructive systems can be dismantled. In their place the open future is waiting to emerge. Once we give up the impossible task of trying to 'predict the future' and instead begin to participate in creating it, the foundations of informed optimism and empowerment become much clearer.

So while it remains true that violent, cynical and otherwise negative images dominate existing views of futures, it is also true that all the resources, the tools, concepts, methods etc of the futures field, along with an impressive array of non-industrial cultural resources and the inspiration and energy of people of good will, provide the wherewithal to change this otherwise depressing picture. The exhaustion of a particular worldview and its inherent possibilities in no way signals the end of human aspiration or ability. Rather, it directs us back to some of the most fundamental questions about the constitution of the social order: questions about people, nature, purpose, meaning and responsibility. Close attention to the shifting foundations in fact reveals a fascinating picture which can be taken as the outlines of a new (or renewed) cultural synthesis. Here are the most durable grounds for recovery and hope.

The basis for qualified optimism is not an illusion. It lies in the steady emergence of a 'deep consensus' about necessary changes and adaptations, in the creative potential of futures imagining processes and in the richness of cultural resources which have so far hardly been called into play. The upshot is that despite all the major challenges and crises facing us, the 21st century really could be worth living in. The transition to a sustainable society and a global culture will not be easy, but it no longer seems like a distant dream. There is no better time to consider the words of Condor speaking of his gift to humanity from the Council for All Beings:

I, Condor, give you my keen, far-seeing eye. I see at a great distance what is there and what is coming. Use that power to look ahead beyond your day's busy-ness, to heed what you see, and plan.

(And mountain:)

Humans, I offer you my deep peace. Come to me at any time to rest, to dream. Without dreams you may lose your vision and your hope. Come, too, for my strength and steadfastness, whenever you need them.²⁹

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