

Smashing Conformity: Hurling the Hammer at the Machine

Jay E. Gary ^a

^a E-mail: jgary@oru.edu

Oral Roberts University, 7777 South Lewis Avenue, LRC 614A, Tulsa, OK, 74171, USA,
Tel.: 757-287-5055.

Highlights

- Recalls how Richard Slaughter shaped critical futures studies into a practice of social foresight.
- How his T-Cycle prescribed four stages of how we negotiate our way pass social breakdowns.
- Illustrates how Slaughter assessed the IT revolution through examining its underlying assumptions.
- Shares how Slaughter impacted the authors work as an academic futurist and APF leader.

Abstract

How should futurists evaluate Richard Slaughter's four decades of contributions to futures studies? This paper selectively examines Slaughter's body of work, how he shaped the field of critical futures and developed his Transformation Cycle to illustrate how people, organizations, and society process change. The paper concludes with the author asking, "What has endured within me, based on my interaction with Slaughter?"

Keywords

Images of the future, Critical futures, Technological dystopia, Long-term thinking, Alternative futures

Outline

1. Introduction
2. Slaughter's approach

3. Taking on technology

4. Conclusion

References

1. Introduction

The iconic 1984 Apple commercial was only aired once, nationally, during Super Bowl XVIII. The dystopic scene opened with grayish minions marching in lockstep through an industrial tunnel. In well-formed lines they entered the auditorium, to take their seats on benches. In front of them, Big Brother proclaimed from the telescreen,

Today, we celebrate the first glorious anniversary of the Informational Purification Directives. We have created, for the first time in all history, a garden of pure ideology—where each worker may bloom, secure from the pests purveying contradictory truths... We shall prevail!”

At that moment, a nameless heroine in red running shorts and a white tank top, clutching a large iron-headed sledgehammer, sprints to the front of the auditorium. She spins the hammer around and hurls it at the screen. A massive explosion of light and smoke blows back onto the audience. A voiceover ends the commercial, “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like *1984*.” The message was that Apple’s personal computer would revolutionize work, and the future of technology would bring freedom, rather than control (Chiat/Day, 1984).

For nearly four decades, Australian futurist Richard Slaughter has been that outside iconic runner, hurling the hammer at the western Machine to smash conformity, as mass produced by extrapolation-based futurists. Slaughter has not been alone, others such as Zia Sardar, Hazel Henderson, and Ian Miles have challenged western industrialism, materialism, reductionism, and sexism (Ramos, 2003). Yet Slaughter has uniquely labored to free those entrapped by the

straightjackets of Western naïve idealism by shaping critical futures studies into a practice of social foresight that spurs on cultural recovery.

2. Slaughter's approach

I first encountered Richard Slaughter's writings in 1996 via the World Future Society conference in Washington, DC. Through simple diagrams he visualized *Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas* (Slaughter, 1991a, 1991b, 1993), such as alternatives/choice, breakdown and renewal, the extended present, hindsight-foresight-insight, or time frames (Slaughter, 1993). At the time, I worked with clients who were focused on various "by the year 2000" global projects. I was drawn to Slaughter's work because the future to him was not just the outer pursuit for the "then and there," but something we must cultivate from within as a capacity for autonomous meaning making.

Central to Slaughter's concept of critical futures is that we must 'look more deeply' or 'probe beneath the surface' as to why the Western industrial worldview, through its own expansion and success, had created an ecological and existential crisis, a "runaway world" (Giddens, 1999), that had now put both humans and nature at peril. Slaughter saw futures studies as a wake-up call to individuals and societies to search for alternative social innovations that looked backward and then forward to address present challenges such as over-consumption, widespread poverty, climate collapse, and dysfunctional social systems.

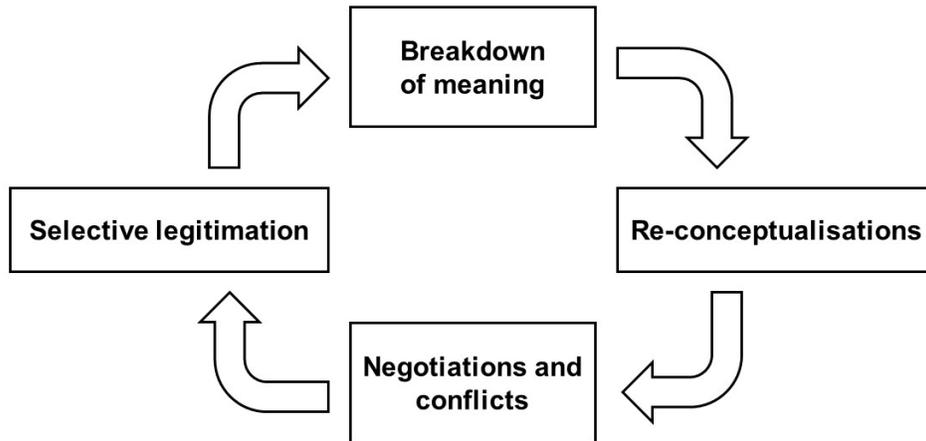


Figure 1: Slaughter’s basic T-Cycle. From “The Transformative Cycle,” Slaughter, et al, 2004.

To depict this awakening to social foresight from modern malaise, in the 1980s, Slaughter had created a transformation cycle or T-cycle for short (Slaughter, Naismith, & Houghton, 2004). The T-cycle unfolds over time across four general stages (see Figure 1), namely:

2.1 Breakdown of inherited meanings.

This happens as we personally come to the realization that the inherited values and structures that once sustained our conventional social landscape, marked by inevitable “progress,” have fallen or are falling apart. For some, this loss of life’s first naïve leads to denial, depression, escapism, suicide, or violence. For others, the breakdown is a trigger to action, as they realize that their inherited symbols and concepts are inherently exclusionary, preserving the status quo for the privileged few.

2.2 Re-conceptualisations.

Those who recognize social breakdowns as a crisis of meaning within families, health systems, schools, or the digital commons often reframe the problem and try out new solutions. In a quest for connection and affordable housing, younger generations might turn to cohousing to build

intentional community. In the face of gender inequity in the workplace, others may lobby for equal pay for equal work, or fight for digital privacy and the right to be forgotten.

2.3 Negotiation and conflict.

As social innovation moves from the periphery to the center, conflict can emerge between traditional vested interests and a new guard. Regressive forces may manufacture an “unreality industry” or deliberately create media falsehoods preserve the status quo (Mitroff & Bennis, 1993). In open societies, negotiation can occur through checks and balances of stakeholders. Public policy can be reshaped as proposals are debated and modified. New voices can bring new synthesis and choices. Yet there is always the peril that populist leaders can reimpose regressive measures.

4. Selective legitimation.

Slaughter’s final stage is selective legitimation, where new ideas, solutions and laws are taken up by various actors, whether by individuals, organizations, or societies. As Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2003 envisioned, new technologies can legitimate innovation, such as mobile phones that provide new trading systems for rural farming families that empower women (Rotondi, et al, 2020). Other times market forces or political expediency may limit social values that reach for universal healthcare, and societies are forced to adopt lesser ideals.

3. Taking on technology

In 2004 Slaughter reflected on his earliest work in critical futures as expressed in the T-Cycle. He admitted, “I referred to the subversive potential of technical revolutions, but it was then a little early to be aware of how subversive post-modernism, economic rationalism and global marketing would turn out to be.” Reflecting further on his 1982 dissertation (Slaughter, 1982), he continued, “Nor was it yet clear how the use of post-modern tools and perspectives of enquiry would become central to any intelligent view of futures work.” (Slaughter, et al, 2004, p. 14).

In 2018 Slaughter put out a 3-part call for a greater assessment of the IT revolution, in keeping with the emancipatory values of expressed by his T-cycle (Slaughter, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In essence he asked, “Had the idealistic hopes of the Internet by its early pioneers freed us from a 1984 Orwellian world of control? Or had promoters of technology ‘solutions’ overlooked the unintended consequences of cyberspace, where privacy is killed, scams proliferate, identities are stolen, and rogue nations disrupt democracies through algorithms?”

In the wake of technological hubris and shattered promises of “cyber democracy,” Slaughter sifts through numerous IT ‘reform and renewal’ proposals that could re-establish meaningful public oversight of digital media, that might free art, culture and commerce from being monetized, commodified and exploited (Taylor, 2014). To illustrate the blank checks that Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are demanding that society cash up front, Slaughter examines two specific case studies, the Internet of Things, and the rise of Autonomous Vehicles (AV), to illustrate the conflict and negotiation that society must undertake in order to adopt what are promoted as benign innovations (Slaughter, 2018b). Slaughter calls for a full accounting of the costs of AVs including mass unemployment of drivers, a further erosion of privacy, an impossible commitment to Internet integrity, and a further increase between rich and poor.

In Slaughter’s third IT article he focuses on proposals to re-humanise Silicon Valley’s techno-capitalism and China’s state-driven digital surveillance (Slaughter, 2018c). Slaughter documents ideas that would expose and track bad algorithms that perpetuate redlining non-white neighborhoods and suppress minority voting. Slaughter admits repurposing the Internet will take time, social action, and political will, but early signs from Europe’s GDPR or more local platform cooperativism may demonstrate that effective regulation and sharing of power is possible, over and against G.A.F.A.—the Four Horsemen of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple.

A decade before Slaughter, the Great Emancipator took on Technology, he tackled the mother of Grendel—America. In his opinion article, “Is America ‘the land of the future?’” Slaughter employed critical futures to ask whether the American futures enterprise itself was at risk from its uncritical associations with its free market ideology, corporate strategy, imperial foreign policy, and its perennial market failures (Slaughter, 2008a). Long before the rise of Trumpism and the backlash of Black Lives Matter, Slaughter asked whether America’s founding myth of liberty and freedom are at odds with its lived narrative of oppression of native peoples and slavery.

Slaughter continued his colonoscopy of misplaced American myths in his frank piece, “Asleep at the wheel: The World Future Society at Forty” (Slaughter, 2008b). At the time it was released, I winched at this examination. But time has proven Slaughter’s case. The year 2016 brought about the downsizing of the World Future Society after its 50th anniversary. His parting words on America’s future have rung true.

The fact is US confidence has steadily declined, ‘progress’ is a term that can only be used with irony, technology is a two-edged sword and, finally, it is now widely understood that no neutral place to stand can be found anywhere. All self-knowledge and human expressions are mediated by language, power, politics, and culture (Slaughter 2008b, p. 100).

As an American, I would only hope that there is some truth to Winston Churchill’s apocryphal statement, “You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing after they have tried everything else.”

4. Conclusion

In thinking back over the years of my interaction with Slaughter, I ask, what has endured? After the millennial year 2000 came and went, on which my early career was focused, Slaughter

became an enduring presence in my life as an academic mentor from afar. I began to carry Slaughter's digital products on my website, including his *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies CD-ROM* (Slaughter, 2005). In 2003 I convinced a client of mine to finance an 8-part "Pathways to Foresight DVD" taught by Slaughter. This would mean that Slaughter would come to Colorado, where I lived at the time, to shoot the series. Slaughter was delighted to come, given he had begun writing on Integral Futures, based on Ken Wilber's frameworks. After we shot the series, Olgy and I celebrated the 4th of July Independence Day with Richard and Laurie, and then visited Ken Wilber in Denver to capture the 8th and final segment of the DVD series.

Later that year I was invited to join the faculty of Regent University to develop and teach a Master of Strategic Foresight degree for their School of Leadership Studies. Slaughter shared with me his accreditation documents he used to incorporate his Master of Science in Strategic Foresight for Swinburne University of Technology. The following year, I hosted a 3-day Foresight 2004 conference for doctoral students at Regent University that featured Richard Slaughter. This led to Regent starting a 4-course foresight concentration in 2006 for their Doctor of Strategic Leadership program that continues until this day (Gary, 2010).

Over the 10 years of teaching strategic foresight at Regent University I followed Slaughter's pattern of teaching internal futures literacy before training practitioners in external futures strategy. Up to 500 graduate students worked through *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies CD-ROM* (Slaughter, 2005) and *The Foresight Principle* (Slaughter, 1995).

By 2015, I took up a new position to teach global leadership at Oral Roberts University (ORU). After 2016 the World Future Society stopped holding annual conferences. Leading up to the year 2020 my correspondence with Slaughter ebbed from its high-water mark of 2003 - 2008.

While Slaughter would continue his prodigious writings from 2010 to 2020, kicking it off with *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History* (Slaughter, 2010), I embraced the mundane life of an academic futurist with the motto to "Keep Calm and Carry On." Today this is a viral meme. But

originally it was a 1939 motivational poster by the British government under the image of the Tudor Crown. It was meant to strengthen morale in view of mass bombing of major cities at the outbreak of World War II.

So, what has endured in me from my ‘Slaughter years,’ that is worth carrying on? I would say that Slaughter’s call that foresight is an individual human capacity that enables discourse, has impacted me the most. I did my PhD on validating a Foresight Styles Assessment, building on Slaughter’s individual capacity premise (Gary, 2008). Beyond the individual, Slaughter envisioned foresight as a ladder of capacity, (a) enabling a methodological level of analytical power, (b) empowering process applications at the organizational level, and (c) emerging at the societal level, where long-term thinking becomes the norm (Slaughter, 1996b).

This focus on foresight as a personal and occupational competency animated the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) from 2014 to 2016 as we produced a Foresight Competency Model (Hines, et al. 2017). Looking back to 2001, a veritable cottage industry of ‘foresight as strategy’ books has emerged, in part due to Slaughter’s pioneering work on personal and organizational foresight.

In looking toward 2030, my university will soon launch a Center for Global Leadership under the theme of “whole leaders for the whole world.” While the founding focus will be on developing emerging leaders (Gary, 2020), the university does envision an emphasis on global challenges. I hope to be undergirding the studies of doctoral and post-doctoral fellows toward this end.

I will carry into this work Slaughter’s call for long-term thinking and the need to cultivate a wise culture (Slaughter, 1996a). In his 1996 call, Slaughter contrasted the industrial culture with a wise culture. One recognized no limits to growth, the other would embrace sustainability. One would see nature as something to be used, the other would embrace nature as community. One would see people as consumers to exploit, the other would approach persons with reverence, as participants.

In July of 2020, as the chair of APF, I had the pleasure of hosting Richard Slaughter for a global virtual e-book launch of the all-new *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies 2020* (Slaughter & Hines, 2020). I took away from this time Slaughter's passion that our understanding of futures studies must always be open to the accumulation of critique. It must always allow new things to come along. It must welcome new voices and synthesize different ideas in new ways.

In August of 2020, Slaughter published a bookend piece to his 1996 call to long-term thinking, entitled "Farewell Alternative Futures?" (Slaughter, 2020). What I took away from this piece was that our underlying three-fold logic of 'Probable, Possible, and Preferable' futures (Toffler, 1970, p. 407) was no longer working. If we generate 'Possible' alternatives to 'Probable' futures, it does not guarantee 'Preferable' futures will emerge. Why? Slaughter points to numerous mainstream opportunities that rose during the 20th century but were ignored, all awhile as negative human impacts grew exponentially on our planet.

The 21st century now faces multiple 'unreality industries' fed by social media, each negating reason, truth and science. Slaughter argues that this Denialism has taken on a pathological form. Perhaps as Smart (2020) argues, it is time we add a fourth 'P' to our future thinking model—Preventable futures—that would join Slaughter in the struggle against pessimism, threats, risks, disruptions, and blocks. This would be in keeping with Slaughter's counsel to combine foresight with moral courage.

Looking back now, I ask, what has endured from my encounter with Richard Slaughter, the man who smashed conformity? I would answer in one word. Love. For love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7, NRSV). What does it mean to endure? To "remain; to persevere; to bear bravely and calmly."

For four decades Slaughter has preserved. He has loved the futures community as himself. He has prodded us, persuaded us, and yes, provoked us. Through it all he has called us to listen to our better angels, to value one another, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. May we go

forward to endure, to remain, and to bear the future bravely. When we find ourselves abiding in this foresight, may we say as the Mandalorians do, “This is the way.”

References

Chiat/Day 1984 (Television commercial, directed by R. Scott), Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_\(advertisement\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_(advertisement)) , 1984, Accessed 9 April 2021.

Gary J., **Foresight Styles Assessment: Testing a new tool for consulting futurists.** *Journal of Futures Studies*, 14(1), 1-26. (August 2009). <http://www.jfs.tku.edu.tw/14-1/A01.pdf>

Gary J. **Leading from the future: A review of the Regent foresight program.** *Journal of Futures Studies*, 15(1), 119-133, (Sept. 2010). <https://jfsdigital.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/151-S03.pdf>

Gary J. **Spirit-empowered leadership. Exploring three dimensions.** *Spiritus* 2(5), Article 8, 235-251. (November 2020). <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/spiritus/vol5/iss2/8>

Giddens A. **Runaway world: How globalization is reshaping our lives.** Profile. (2000). Routledge; New York.

Hines A., Gary J., Daheim, C., van der Laan L. **Building foresight capacity: Toward a Foresight Competency Model.** *World Futures Review*. 9(3) (2017), 123–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1946756717715637>

Mitroff I.I. and Bennis, W.G., **The unreality industry: The deliberate manufacturing of falsehood and what it is doing to our lives**, 1993, Oxford University Press

Ramos, J. M. **From critique to cultural recovery: Critical futures studies and Casual Layered Analysis**. Monograph series 2003 (2). Swinburne University of Technology.
<http://actionforesight.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/critical-futures-m.pdf>

Rotondi, V., Kashyap, R., Pesando, L.M., Spinelli, S. and Billari F.C. **Leveraging mobile phones to attain sustainable development**. *PNAS*, 117 (24), 2020,113413-13420,
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1909326117>

Slaughter, R.A. **Futures studies and curriculum renewal**. PhD dissertation, 1982, University of Lancaster, Britain, 1982.

Slaughter, R.A. **Futures concepts and powerful ideas**. 1991a, Futures Study Centre, Melbourne (1991).

Slaughter, R.A. **Changing images of futures in the 20th century**. 1991b. *Futures*, 23(5) 1991. 499-515. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287\(91\)90098-M](https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287(91)90098-M) (June 1991).

Slaughter, R.A. **Futures concepts**. *Futures*, 25(3), 1993, 289-314. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287\(93\)90138-J](https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287(93)90138-J) (April 1993).

Slaughter, R.A. **The foresight principle: Cultural recovery in the 21st century**. 1995. Adamantine Press.

Slaughter, R.A. **Long-term thinking and the politics of reconceptualization**, *Futures*, 28(1), 1996a, 75-86. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287\(95\)00074-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287(95)00074-7) (Feb. 1996).

Slaughter, R.A. **Futures studies: From individual to social capacity**. *Futures*, 28(8), 1996b, 751-762. (Oct. 1996). [https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287\(96\)00009-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287(96)00009-2)

Slaughter, R. A. **The knowledge base of futures studies, CD-ROM**, professional edition, 2005, Foresight International, Brisbane, Australia. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/kbfs/>

Slaughter, R. A. **Opinion: Is America “the land of the future?”** *Foresight* 10(4), 2008a. 4-27. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14636680810908000>

Slaughter, R. A. **Asleep at the wheel: The world future society at forty**. *Futures* 40 (1), 2008b, 91-101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2007.06.003> (Feb. 2008).

Slaughter, R. A. **The biggest wake-up call in history**, 2010. Foresight International, Brisbane (2010).

Slaughter, R. A. The IT revolution reassessed part one: Literature review and key issues. *Futures* 96, 2018a, 115-123 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2017.12.006> (Feb. 2018).

Slaughter, R. A. The IT revolution reassessed part two: Case studies and implications *Futures* 98, 2018b, 19-31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2017.12.007>

Slaughter, R. A. The IT revolution reassessed part three: Framing solutions

Futures 100, 1-19, 2018c, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2018.02.005>

Slaughter, 2020. R. A. Slaughter

Farewell alternative futures?

Futures, 121, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102496>

Slaughter R.A. and Hines, A.

Knowledge base of futures studies 2020. Association of Professional Futurists (2020)

<https://foresightinternational.com.au/shop/pdfs/the-knowledge-base-of-futures-studies-2020/>

2020.

Slaughter, R.A, Naismith, L. and Houghton, N. **The transformative cycle.**

Monograph series 2004, 2004 Swinburne University of Technology. (6).

https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/AFI_Monograph_06.pdf

Smart, 2021. J. Smart. **The foresight guide: Anticipating, innovating, and leading in the 21st century (Book 1)**, <http://www.foresightguide.com/> , 2021

Taylor, A. **The people's platform: Taking back power and culture in the digital age**, 2014.

London: Fourth Estate.

Toffler, A. **Future shock. 1970.** Random House.