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Imagining the Future

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Contributors



Credits

THE UNFAMILIAR TEAM

Executive Editors

INNA YANEVA-TORAMAN completed her BSc in Sociology at Middle East Technical University, Turkey and her MSc in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, UK. She is currently a PhD student in Social Anthropology at the same institution. Her research explores the masking practices and mortuary rites of the Baining of East New Britain (PNG). Research interests include: the anthropology of the body, personhood, masks, death, Melanesia, material culture, religion and ritual, and affect theory. Additionally, she is interested in modern art, Surrealism, Expressionism, Internet culture, role-playing games, prosthetics and science fiction.

HAKON CASPERSEN completed his undergraduate degree at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology before moving on to graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. He is currently preparing a PhD project titled 'Becoming an Artist: Creativity and Selfhood within Higher Fine Art Education' at the University of St. Andrews. Research interests include: individual agency and self-formation, creativity, aesthetic movements, enskillment, knowledge and learning.

Editorial Directors

KRITI BAJAJ is a graduate of the MA Social Anthropology programme at SOAS, University of London. Her research interests include media and visual anthropology, immigration and citizenship, and mental health and psychology. She worked with the UNESCO Parsi Zoroastrian Project in 2010-2011 as a research and editorial intern. She is currently the Managing Editor of visual art and culture website Art Radar and lives in New Delhi.

BETHANY ELANOR HONEYSETT completed her undergraduate degree in Social Anthropology at Cambridge University, before undertaking an MA in Middle Eastern Studies at Exeter University. This was followed by a PhD in Social Anthropology at Edinburgh University, with a thesis that addressed the passing of time and social change as mediated by families in Damascus, Syria. Her areas of specialism include kinship, the Middle East, generations, gender, temporality and the anthropology of food. She is currently working as a research assistant on a cross-departmental project exploring consumption, futurity and queerness across the GCC.

KATARINA OCKOVA has studied social anthropology at the Comenius University in Bratislava and the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, and is currently a PhD candidate in social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. She has conducted her PhD fieldwork and is presently writing her doctoral thesis exploring the marriage practices among the Jewish minority in post-socialist Slovakia. Her research interests include kinship and relatedness, marriage preferences and practices, religion, memory and intergenerational relations.

Art Direction and Design

CHRISTINE WU is a graduate of the BFA Fashion Design programme at Parsons The New School for Design, and the MSc Social Anthropology programme at the University of Edinburgh. She currently resides in New York, dividing her time between corporate design and academia. She is a part-time lecturer at Parsons, teaching a studio design course on fashion narratives. Her research interests lie at the intersection between fashion and anthropology, with a focus on urban youth subcultures and fashion tribes.

Promotion and Outreach

SHREYA ILA ANASUYA studied English Literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, before reading The Social Anthropology of Development as a Felix Scholar at the SOAS, London. She consults on gender for an advocacy organisation and writes poetry and fiction.

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A Letter from the Editors

Hakon Caspersen and Inna Yaneva-Toraman

Volume 4, Issue 1

Imagining the Future

Time often reveals itself through the sudden realization of years passed, time lost or days enjoyed – a remembrance of the now-old then-alive moments. In such instances, time materialises in our minds as a merciless current, an uncontrollable force greater than anything we can endure. Yet, despite our sense of time as flowing, the future appears to us as a stationary mystery somewhere ahead. It holds multiple ‘worlds’ and possibilities that we can reach. Through our ability to imagine these futures we gain a sense of purpose and directionality; we push against the current of time towards envisioned lives-to-be. This issue of *The Unfamiliar* invites us to ‘see’ the future not as something distant or unknown, but as something concrete – visible in our actions, hopes, and desires. It shows that both imagination and the future cannot be divorced from peoples’ daily lives and experiences, and that ‘imagining the future’ is, in fact, deeply embedded within the practices of both our past and present. The future, thus, becomes real, meaningful, significant, and tangible through lived experience.

The contributors to this issue all seek to elucidate this connection between lived experience, imagination, and the future in their own distinct way. For instance, Fahye describes how over the last 40 years an international community of Hare Krishna devotees in Mayapur, India, have been working towards a prophesied ‘Ideal Vedic City’. Through ritual practices such as *katha* (a form of storytelling), devotees draw upon the central virtues, ideals, and moral guidelines found in stories of an ‘enchanted past’ in order to transform themselves and the present towards an aspired future. Exploring similar themes, on a larger scale, Kuldova directs our attention to the utopian vision of India’s future ‘superpowerdom’. She shows how Hindu nationalism and the philanthropy of the Indian business elite have taken inspiration from India’s ‘golden’ pre-colonial past as they both promote the country’s inevitable success. Her work illustrates how the imagined future is materialized in the aesthetics of ornamentalist fashion and the design of futuristic smart cities. Paradoxically, Kuldova asserts, the propagators of this ‘myth’ all knew that “the reality looks radically different” while “still act[ing] as if they didn’t know, investing their own capital in... projects destined to never look like their promotional images”. What this points to, are the pervasive imaginative power and material consequences of “shared illusions” and “mythical narratives” in shaping and directing future actions. This imagined future of India is then brought before our eyes with Ian M. Cook’s photographic essay of Mangalore, a small city on the country’s South-West coast. Through various photographs of billboards depicting massive residential complexes, his work illustrates how promotional images play a significant role in the production of the city’s imagined future. With this inspiring work, Cook pushes us to see the billboards not as mere images – representations of an imagined future –, but as pieces of the cityscape that bring the ‘big’ future into the ‘small’ present.

The piece by Bachelet and Houdou effectively demonstrates the significance of hope in migrants’ lives when thinking about the future. It takes us to Douar Hajja, a neighbourhood in Rabat, Morocco, where migrants in transit wait, heal, plan, and hope. Through the powerful image and poem we are reminded that hope for the future may as well be deeply intertwined with despair for the present. On the other hand, Maggio’s creative essay takes us to the realm of dreams where layers of the past, present, and future come together in an ever-changing representation of lived experience. Starting with the analysis of a dream, the author then moves to the problems of representation: Where are the people in ethnographic writing? What is the difference between text and photographs? How can we truly represent the people from our fieldwork? Addressing such questions, this essay provides a different look into the future: the future of ethnographic writing. Last in this section, the poem by Emily Lynn Cook explores the relationship between desire and perception and the ways in which they shape dreams of the future. Her work offers interesting insight into the effects of imagined futures on human experience and anthropological understandings of the ‘other’.

In the second part of this issue Kyriakides suggests a different approach to the subject by examining the relationship between stillness and imagination. He argues that stillness is not simply a

lack of action, but rather a practice of imaginative labour and an agency for political transformation. Through various examples of stillness, both in art and political activism, Kyriakides shows that even things that seem radically different, like a fighter and a thinker, can work towards a “common political project of producing and maintaining imagination”. In this essay, the future takes form through the very potentiality of imaginative labour, it appears in the stillness of resistance, writing, and thinking. Finally, bringing this volume to a close, Michael Shea offers an ethnographic glimpse into the imagined future of Japan in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami on the 11th of March, 2011. By examining the ways in which the future is imagined and made present within a Japanese science and technology museum, and more specifically, through a temporary exhibition staged as a direct response to these catastrophic events, this essay demonstrates how particular events of the past can shape people’s vision of the future. This exhibition, we are informed, differs in content and meaning from conventional techno-utopian visions of the future and instead encourages visitors’ to reflect on their own mortality, and to accept the uncertainty of the future, in direct response to the recent events.

We are grateful to all contributors and hope you will find this issue of *The Unfamiliar* an enjoyable read. But before we turn our gaze towards the future, we would like to use this opportunity to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the journal’s previous executive editors Grit Wesser and Jona Fras. We delight in the opportunity to carry on the torch as executive editors and wish them all the best in future endeavours.

Hakon & Inna

Essays I

Between Heaven and a Hard Place:
Inhabiting the Space Between an Enchanted Past
and a Utopian Future

by John Fahy



I. Parikrama (pilgrimage) around Mayapur



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Between Heaven and a Hard Place: Inhabiting the Space Between an Enchanted Past and a Utopian Future

by John Fahy

This essay looks at how devotees of Krishna in Mayapur, West Bengal experience the space between an ideal past and a prophesied future. Through an affective and imaginative engagement with Vaishnav cultural history, devotees learn to relocate themselves in a particular temporal flow, within which both the past and future become constitutive horizons of the ethical imagination. I will focus on how the tradition of katha (storytelling) facilitates a convergence of temporalities, within which devotees are encouraged to routinely participate in the past. Such engagement with an enchanted past, I will argue, in turn informs devotees' imaginings of and aspirations for the ongoing development of an 'Ideal Vedic City'.

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." The opening line of L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1958) evokes the familiar conception that at the heart of the notion of temporality is a sense of alterity; that the past, present and future are divergent spaces that require different modes of attention. In this essay, I will look at the ways in which both the past and the future impose themselves on, and are made meaningful in, the present, producing a sense of convergence. I will discuss the role that practising the past and imagining the future play in the everyday lives of the ISKCON community in Mayapur, West Bengal.¹ In particular I will look at how storytelling, among other methods of invocation, facilitates an intense engagement with the past, which in turn informs aspirations and ideas for the future. In the context of Mayapur's utopian project of an 'Ideal Vedic City', visions of the future are anchored firmly in perceptions and performances of the past, which in Mayapur is not a 'foreign country', but the very ground on which devotees tread every day.

This essay addresses how, to quote Nancy Munn, the "ways of attending to the past also create modes of apprehending certain futures or of reconstructing a particular sense of past in the present that informs the treatment of 'the future in the present'" (1992:115). How do we evoke and engage with the past, and to what end? What is the nature of the relationship between the past, present and future and how do we construct meaningful temporalities that frame both ethical reflection and social action? In his popular work *How Societies Remember* (1989) Paul Connerton writes that, "our experience of the present very much depends on our knowledge of the past...and we will experience our present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which we are able to connect that past" (1989: 2). I am concerned here not only with how knowledge, but also practices of a particular past, inform devotees' imaginings of a prophesied future.

Mayapur

Though popularly regarded as a product of the counterculture that gripped America in the mid 1960's, the arrival of Vaishnavism in the West is but one chapter in a long history of revitalisation and reinvention that can be traced back to 15th century Bengal (Sardella: 2013). It was in what is now modern-day Mayapur that Caitanya Mahaprabhu, considered to be an avatar of Krishna, was born in 1486AD and it was from here that he began his mission of promulgating the chanting of the holy name and instituted *sankirtan* (communal singing of the names of Krishna). Though he spent much of his later life in Puri, 'the Holy Dham', as Mayapur is commonly referred to, is a sacred space and a 'storied landscape' (Sarbadhikary: 2013) in the imagination and practise of devotees worldwide.

Surrounded by vast expanses of agricultural land and situated on the banks of the Ganges 130km north of Kolkata, Mayapur was a typical rural Indian setting until the early 1970's. With little infrastructure and amidst a handful of small temples, a largely dispersed local population of subsistence farmers worked the land as generations had done before them. This all changed in 1972, with the arrival of the first ISKCON devotees in the area. In the 40 years since, Mayapur has been developing as the

1. International Society for Krishna Consciousness, popularly known as the 'Hare Krishnas'.

headquarters of a global religious movement and is home to a community of approximately 4,000 devotees, both international and local. Srila Prabhupada (or Prabhupad), the founder of ISKCON, was determined that Mayapur would become a one-of-a-kind 'Ideal Vedic City' of 50,000 people, from which ISKCON's philosophy would spread around the world. As Mayapur continues to undergo dramatic social, infrastructural and economic transformation, as is symbolised in the construction of the Temple of Vedic Planetarium (TOVP), the founder's vision of an 'ideal city' serves as the narrative within which devotees frame their ideas of a utopian future.

Practising the Past

8 a.m. approaches and international devotees begin moving from the temple downstairs to a large room on the first floor, where the daily *Srimad Bhagavatam* class is being set up.² I find a space to sit while some young devotees enthusiastically scramble to make sure everything is in order. The particular *sloka* (verse) must be written on a blackboard, the *asana* (guru's seat) need to be prepared, and a flower garland is set aside for offering to the speaker. Some cushions are laid out for senior members of the community, while others simply sit on straw mats that cover the cold marble, with women on the right and men on the left. Some devotees chat while most use these few minutes to chant the *maha-mantra* ("Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare"). All around me sporadic syllables of 'Hare', 'Krishna' and 'Rama' penetrates the thickening murmur of communal chanting, while the room fills up. Under the piercing gaze of a Prabhupad picture hanging on the wall, and as the ecstatic *kirtan* (communal singing of devotional songs) downstairs echoes its last crescendo, the speaker signals the beginning of the class, singing 'Jaya Radha Madhava' to the chime of kartals.

This is a typical scene every morning in the ISKCON temple in Mayapur. The classes follow a basic formula that includes reading slokas from the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, translating individual words from the Sanskrit text, and a short *kirtan*. This is followed by a sermon of sorts, picking up on important themes in the text. The speaker is usually a senior devotee, sometimes a guru, though on occasion women and less senior members of the community are also given a chance to give class. Depending on the speaker and the topic at hand, the tone ranges from pedagogic to nostalgic, and at times, can be deeply personal. Some classes are necessarily technical, dealing with content such as Vedic cosmology, while others, discussing virtues such as mercy or humility, might be based on personal experience or interactions with Prabhupad in the 1970's. There is some time left at the end for questions, but typically this is not so much an open forum as it is a space for clarifying specific points from the text.

The daily classes were central to Prabhupad's mission of spiritual education, and remain a staple in ISKCON temples all over the world. They are not only pragmatic in that there is an obvious need for educating aspiring devotees in what is for some a foreign philosophy, but they also facilitate what is colloquially rendered as 'hearing the *Bhagavatam*'. Like most of ISKCON's practices, this has its roots in wider Vaishnava tradition. Gathering with other devotees to 'hear the *Bhagavatam*' is an ethical imperative and is at the heart of a set of practices by which devotees identify as Vaishnavas. Other such practices include chanting on beads, attending the temple, preaching, performing *seva* (service) and following the regulative principles. While 'hearing the *Bhagavatam*' specifically refers to recitations or discussions based around the text itself, these classes also make space for a closely related and equally important tradition, *katha* (storytelling).

While the past is routinely re-enacted through ritual, *parikramas* (pilgrimages), festivals, dramas, and 'hearing the *Bhagavatam*', central to devotees' practises of the past is *katha*. Along with Krishna's youth as a cowherd in Vrindavan, Caitanya's deeds in Nabadwip and Puri, and the lives and deeds of previous *acharyas* (spiritual leaders), stories such as these (referred to by devotees as 'pastimes') comprise a tapestry of tales that animate the storied landscape of Mayapur and locate devotees in a set of

2. The *Srimad Bhagavatam*, affectionately referred to as the 'ripened fruit of the Vedas' is the most important scriptural source for ISKCON devotees. While this English class takes place upstairs there is a Bengali class downstairs in the temple for local devotees.

convergent temporalities, sewn together in both historical and mythical time.³ ISKCON's preference for some pastimes over others can be linked not only to the sacred geography of India, but also to historical, philosophical and moral concerns, as have been inherited from the late 19th century Vaishnav revival to which ISKCON traces its lineage. Popular pastimes include the child Krishna displaying the whole universe in his mouth to his mother Yasoda, the adolescent Krishna playing tricks on the *gopis* (cowherd girls), and the mature Krishna revealing his divinity to Arjuna on the battlefield. Though the tradition of *katha* can encompass stories from different places in different times (both sacred and profane), in Mayapur, the most popular pastimes are those of Caitanya's life and times, his ecstatic devotion, his encounters with renowned philosophers, and early stories of *sankirtan* in the streets of Nabadwip. While these pastimes are referred to in the flow of everyday conversation, it is in the pedagogic setting of the daily classes that they are elaborately recounted, and explicitly interpreted by a senior devotee for the congregation. As one of many examples of such pastimes, I refer here to the popular story of *Jagai and Madhai*.

This story is said to have taken place in early 16th century Nabadwip, the area within which Mayapur is located, and is probably most faithfully rendered, for ISKCON devotees, in Prabhupad's own words:⁴

Jagai and Madhai were two brothers born in Navadvipa (Nabadwip) in a respectable brahmana family who later became addicted to all kinds of sinful activities. By the order of Lord Caitanya, both Nityananda Prabhu and Haridasa Thakura used to preach the cult of Krishna consciousness door to door. In the course of such preaching they found Jagai and Madhai, two maddened drunken brothers, who, upon seeing them, began to chase them. On the next day, Madhai struck Nityananda Prabhu on the head with a piece of earthen pot, thus drawing blood. When Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu heard of this, He immediately came to the spot, ready to punish both brothers, but when the all-merciful Lord Gauranga (Caitanya Mahaprabhu) saw Jagai's repentant behaviour, He immediately embraced him. By seeing the Supreme Personality of Godhead face-to-face and embracing Him, both the sinful brothers were at once cleansed. Thus they received initiation into the chanting of the Hare Krishna maha-mantra from the Lord and were delivered.

In my first couple of months in Mayapur I had already heard the pastime of *Jagai and Madhai* several times, each time more or less elaborately rendered. There were occasions, for example, when a devotee would simply mention "just like Jagai and Madhai" and I was expected to understand the didactic reference in the context of our discussion. This is a popular pastime that serves to exemplify a range of Vaishnav virtues, from the all-encompassing ideal of mercy (think of Jagai and Madhai as the Mary Magdalenes of Vaishnavism) to the radical self-transformation that underpins ISKCON's philosophy and practises. Pastimes like that of Jagai and Madhai are sources not only of morals, ideals and aesthetics, but also of historical facts. They shed light not only on the lofty virtues of an ideal Vaishnav but are also valued as sources of historical knowledge in and of themselves, as they contain tangential but cherished details of what is described as Vaishnav culture. When devotees discuss, for example, the role of women in the community, conflict resolution, preaching strategies, or what an ideal city should look like, it is to stories such as this that they will turn to legitimate their perspective, along with quotes from Prabhupad and scriptures such as the *Srimad Bhagavatam*.

While the tradition of *katha* is of course pedagogic, it would be misleading (and I was indeed misled) to think that the ultimate goal was simply the transmission, acquisition or exchange of knowledge. As Lawrence Babb writes in relation to another Hindu sect, the Brahma Kumari in Delhi, "...the emphasis is not just on knowledge, but on knowing-as-an-experience" (1982: 59). Inherited from traditional Indian epistemology, knowledge in the purest sense is not simply an object of acquisition but more importantly an object of experience. Devotees' experience of their present very much depends, not just on their knowledge, but on their performances of the past, as are routinised through practises

3. The term 'pastime' here is an English rendering of the Sanskrit *lila*, and is used most commonly to refer to the life and deeds of Krishna and the exalted Vaishnavas.

4. Extract from *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, *Adi-lila*, Chapter 17, Text 17 (Prabhupada: 1975).



(TOP) 2. The Temple of Vedic Planetarium viewed from the Ganges

(BOTTOM) 3. The Past and the Future



4. Hati Procession

like ‘hearing the Bhagavatam’ and katha in the setting of the daily classes. Devotees’ understanding and experience of Vaishnava culture is nurtured in the context of an affective and imaginative participation in pastimes such as that of *Jagai and Madhai*.

A reorientation of the self towards Krishna necessitates a relocation of the self in a particular temporal flow; not of distancing, but of convergence, as is made intelligible in the space provided by katha. Just as one ought to reside in a sacred space (*tirtha*), one ought to learn to inhabit a sacred time, and it is within the ethically charged space facilitated by practises of katha and ‘hearing the Bhagavatam’, I suggest, that this is made meaningful in the lives of devotees in Mayapur. Pastimes such as the story of *Jagai and Madhai* are a basic currency of imaginative and ethical exchange, and are mobilised in a wide range of scenarios, dealing with interpretations of the past, conflicts of the present, and imaginings of the future.

Imagining the Future

While it is to an enchanted history that devotees look for their morals, ideals and role models, it is into a prophesied future that they project their hopes, desires and satisfactions (Moore: 2011). This future is itself a projection not just of knowledge, but of practices of the past, such as katha, which are mediated through everyday experiences of an emergent present. As Mayapur continues to develop, it is around the utopian vision of an ‘Ideal Vedic City’ that devotees’ imaginings of the future cohere, framing discourses of both self-cultivation and social transformation.

As the temple of the Vedic Planetarium (TOVP) takes shape, many devotees are asking what is an ‘Ideal Vedic City’? Though Prabhupad often referred to plans for the development on his visits to Mayapur, he left his devotees to oversee the details of his grand ambitions. From the gaps between his recorded statements on the issue has sprung much debate, and there are divergent interpretations of what an Ideal Vedic City might look like. Firstly (though a full treatment is outside the scope of this essay) is the question of what Prabhupad meant by Vedic. This term can be used to refer to a body of literature or a period in history, for example, but for ISKCON devotees, ‘Vedic’ connotes a living and

breathing culture. Thinking about the development of Mayapur, one guru suggested an alternative: "It's a Gaudiya Vaishnav City, it's not entirely Vedic...that Caitanya Vaishnavism which has that special bhakti flavour focused on Radha Krishna, Vrindavan and all that, right..." Another senior devotee, in response to my question "What is Vedic?", simply laughed: "You tell me!"

This idea of an Ideal Vedic City was first conceived by the Vaishnava spiritual leader (and father of Prabhupad's guru), Bhaktivinodh Thakur, in the late 19th century. He had a vision of an *adbhuta-mandira* (commonly translated as 'extraordinary temple'), around which a spiritual city would grow. From this new centre for preaching and education, the chanting of the holy name would spread to 'every town and village' in the world. In the hands of Prabhupad, Bhaktivinodh's vision became a prophecy. Up until recent years, however, this Ideal City was just that: an ideal. The project of developing Mayapur necessarily took a back seat as, globally, ISKCON's fortunes and finances took a turn after the death of Prabhupad in 1977, and locally their ambitions were frustrated by an unsympathetic communist government. The 1980's in particular was a decade of decline, from which it took ISKCON a long time to emerge. At this point, although struggling in some parts of the world, the global movement of ISKCON, and in particular its Indian mission, have emerged resilient and rejuvenated. This is due mainly to ISKCON's ability to adapt to the changing dynamic of its following, evolving from, to borrow Roy Wallis' (1984) terminology, a "world-rejecting" to a "world-accommodating" movement, or from 'cult to congregation'. While under Prabhupad's guidance the majority of followers were *brahmacharis* (male celibate monks), householders (also referred to as congregational members) now represent over 90% of the worldwide demographic, according to ISKCON's own estimates. This rejuvenation is nowhere more evident than in Mayapur itself, as symbolised by the beginning of construction on the TOVP in 2010 and the ongoing building of residential high-rises around the ISKCON complex. The TOVP, when completed (in 2022) will be 35 storeys high and will be the tallest Hindu temple in the world (think St Paul's Cathedral in the middle of rural Indian rice fields).⁵ Plans for the temple include a chandelier representing Vedic cosmology, various exhibits outlining ISKCON's philosophy, and extensive landscaping and beautification of the surrounding area, but most importantly this will be the centerpiece of the Vedic City. As the superstructure pierces the skyline, this idea of an Ideal Vedic City is slowly becoming a tangible reality for devotees, both locally and globally.

The ambiguity that pervades Prabhupad's vision has not, however, hindered the development of Mayapur. Under the banner of 'Vedic culture' (sometimes made synonymous with 'Vaishnav'), devotees, through online forums, daily classes, and in casual conversations, continue to discuss and debate what they feel are the most important elements of a 'Vedic city' to emulate. One devotee argued online (on the community forum), for example, that, "Even if the Mayapur city has the best karmi (non-devotee) standards in the world but does not implement VEDIC ARCHITECTURE then no one has the right to call it a VEDIC city" (his emphasis). Referring to the socio-political system advocated by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, *varnashrama dharma*, another devotee asked, "If this is a Vedic city, where is the King? Where are the intelligent renounced Brahmans?" Yet another devotee insisted that, "We should really be promoting...extended family housing as was previously mentioned and the virtues that extended families bring to society". There are a wide variety of such perspectives, and interpretations tend to be based on expertise and personal preference, rather than organised groups advocating a particular agenda. The sources to which devotees turn to qualify their understandings are few, ranging from descriptions of urban centres in the *Mahabharata* and *Srimad Bhagavatam*, to Prabhupad's quotes on the topic, the pastimes recounted during classes, and on occasion, academic sources (though these are deeply mistrusted). Ideas and interpretations of what this city might look like orbit a wide array of perspectives, encompassing distinctly modern concerns such as waste management, recycling programs, and sustainable energy, alongside aesthetics, ideals and virtues of an enchanted past, as are transmitted

5. The TOVP is based on the design of St. Paul's Cathedral, Capitol Hill, the Taj Mahal and the Hagia Sophia (none of which, interestingly, are Hindu, let alone 'Vedic').

through the tradition of katha.

What has arisen in the cracks between Prabhupad's clear statements for the future city are fertile spaces where devotees invest their own priorities, interpretations and subjectivities into the broader narrative of an 'Ideal Vedic City'. Within these spaces devotees mobilise popular pastimes as a tool of ethical reflection, seeking to understand their own spiritual path in terms of a distinctly 'Vaishnav' set of cultural practices. While devotees disagree on the details of what constitutes an ideal city, it is consistently the aesthetics of the past that are invoked to articulate the multitude of visions of the future that abound.

Conclusion

As objects of both knowledge and experience, the past and future become horizons of what Henrietta Moore (2011) calls the ethical imagination, around which explicit narratives of self-cultivation and social development cohere in a convergence of temporalities. Devotees come to the Srimad Bhagavatam and other classes in search of what they call 'realisations', which are typically described as moments of clarity where ISKCON's philosophy and the lives and teachings of the acharyas resonate profoundly with their personal experience and spiritual practices. Such realisations punctuate the process of self-cultivation, as devotees endeavor to put Krishna at the centre of their lives.

Devotees then do not come to passively 'hear' but rather to participate in and mobilise the stories of the past in a meaningful way in their own unfolding present. Katha is a window through which the past converges on the present, facilitating an engagement between the devotee and the sacred space of Mayapur. In attending these classes, devotees not only get acquainted with what at first is an unfamiliar cultural history, but learn to imbibe Vaishnava culture, morality and aesthetics, through an embodied and affective participation in the pastimes themselves. The morning class then is not so much a stage upon which knowledge of the past is transmitted, but a theatre within which the past itself is experienced. Hearing about Jagai and Madhai, for example, might lead a devotee to identify a need in their own spiritual practice for a focus on humility, or mercy, both of which are not only prominent virtues of an ideal Vaishnava but indispensable foundations of an 'ideal city'. Within the overarching narrative of an 'Ideal Vedic City', pastimes such as that of *Jagai and Madhai* are mobilised in an affective economy of ethical and interpretive exchange that is geared towards reconstructing the past in the space provided by an imagined future.

To live in Mayapur is to live with the past, to engage in a process of becoming, a process made intelligible by intense practices of subjectification whereby the devotee's energies are constantly invested in introspection. Through the tradition of katha, such introspection is facilitated by the collapsing of temporalities, where the past is experienced and the future imagined. As Nancy Munn (1992: 105) has pointed out, while anthropology has had much to say about different culture's "reckoning of time", we would do well to pay more attention to how they "reckon with time". This essay has attempted to describe how various practices and perceptions of the past determine devotees' everyday experiences of an emergent present and at the same time inform their orientation towards an imagined future. Through katha, devotees are encouraged to participate in a storied landscape, not only in the imagination, but in everyday practice, making comprehensible an experience and not just an ideal of 'Vedic culture'. It is from such experiences that devotees negotiate an understanding of their place on a temporal trajectory between an enchanted history and an unfolding prophecy.

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Essays I

Designing an Illusion of India's Future Superpowerdom: Of the Rise of Neo-Aristocracy, Hindutva and Philanthrocapitalism

by Tereza Kuldova



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Designing an Illusion of India's Future Superpowerdom: Of the Rise of Neo-Aristocracy, Hindutva and Philanthrocapitalism

Tereza Kuldova

The article dissects current utopian visions of future Indian superpowerdom and traces them to underlying convergences between right wing political Hindu nationalism and philanthrocapitalism. By looking at how utopian visions are materialized in the elitist aesthetics of 'royal chic' parading on New Delhi's fashion ramps and in the aesthetics of hypermodern smart cities of the future, the article explores the aesthetic and affective convergence of an imagined economy and (re-)invented traditions. In the problematic terrain of philanthrocapitalism, the 'factish' of GDP and the doxa of Indianness have come to form the core of current populist myths. In so doing they produce an illusion of future India that nobody really believes in, yet structures reality and is passionately embraced by many. The article suggests that the problem with such utopian myths is not that they are myths, but rather it is the direction they are pushing in and their consequences which require questioning. The article provides preliminary analysis of, and answers around, this problematic of resonant versus dissonant futures and their imaginaries.

Philanthrocapitalism and the New Benevolent Neo-Aristocracy

'Greed is good, in fact, it is a virtue, only the superrich can save the world!', thus spoke Ravan¹, a Delhi-based businessman and self-proclaimed philanthropist. In an attempt to exterminate or co-opt competing views, this belief is chanted like a mantra within transnational business circles. It spreads like a virus. Recently, this 'benevolent and inherently good' *philanthrocapitalism* (Bishop and Green 2008) has infected the Indian business and political elite. I recall reading a newspaper article in *The Hindu* in 2008 in which the terribly 'greedy' Indian billionaires were identified as the root cause of all socioeconomic evil in India (with a few notable exceptions such as the Tatas²). In 2012, during additional fieldwork, the same newspaper enthusiastically reported on *Forbes India Philanthropy Awards*. The greedy were swiftly turned into the noble and benevolent national heroes and the magic key to India's shining future as a global economic superpower. Around that time, the same business elite also turned, with a newfound passion, to India's pre-colonial past, to the golden eras of heroic Rajput warriors, princes, nawabs and Mughals; and no less, to India's spiritual heritage, scriptures and teachings. They turned to the past primarily in order to design, in a distinctly *ornamentalist* fashion (Cannadine 2002)³, India's glorious future and themselves as its self-proclaimed neo-aristocracy. India's elite fashion designers turned their backs to the 'West' and began instead catering to the desires of distinction and national pride among the Indian elite. Fashion ramps in New Delhi and Mumbai turned into stages for retro-futuristic fairy tale worlds of India's grandeur, with models parading in heavily embroidered and multi-layered neo-aristocratic robes, a fusion of India's crafts, creative design and *Swarovski* crystals. The crystals were there only to add a touch of western luxury that says, as one designer put it: 'the tables have turned, we own you [the West], now *you* are a mere embellishment on our bodies, incorporated on our terms'. The rise of this utopian vision of India's shining future, materialized in the aesthetic production of these fashion designers, coincided with the rise of revamped right wing Hindu nationalism and a concomitant taste for ethical fashion. The recent victory of the right-wing *Bharatiya Janata Party* and its 'muscular' new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, with his campaign 'acche din aane wale hain' (good days are approaching) promising spectacular economic growth grounded in India's spiritual strength, is a testimony to the success and seductive power of this utopian vision. The revival of kingly models of Indian

1. This essay is grounded in long-term ethnographic fieldwork in north India (2008, 2010-11) during which I have followed the production and travel of traditional embroidery from Lucknow to the high end designer studios and elite clientele in New Delhi, looking at relations of power and reproduction of privilege. The quotation comes from a conversation that took place during a business event in December 2010, in *The Oberoi Rajvillas Hotel* in Jaipur.

2. The Tata family features prominently in philanthrocapitalist narratives, due to the family's involvement in the building of modern India. Ratan Tata, who turned *Tata Sons* into the world's 6th largest corporation, is not only every Indian entrepreneur's idealized hero but also one of the most celebrated philanthropists.

3. David Cannadine argues that British Empire was not exclusively about race (Orient versus Occident), but more significantly about hierarchy and its ornamentation. The empire was united through its hierarchy, which positioned the kingly and royal elite across the empire against the 'inferior' subjects.

governance (Price 1989) has become visible in current populist right wing politics and culture. A remark by Anil Ambani, the chairman of the *Reliance Group*, one of India's largest business conglomerates, calling Modi the 'king among kings' fittingly captures this emergence, situating Modi as one who will turn India into a superpower backed by the benevolent neo-aristocracy; the business elite who riding on a wave of CSR (corporate social responsibility) and philanthropy, have been supporting this king's rise to power. In what follows, I trace the underlying convergences between philanthrocapitalism and Hindu nationalism, connecting them to the utopian visions of India's rise to power as materialized in the particular aesthetic form of opulent heritage luxury set amidst the hypermodern smart cities of the near future.



Figure 1. (left) *Vogue India*, November 2011, p. 227. Photographed by Diego Fuga, styled by Deep Kailey, modelled by Jyothsna Chakravarthy. The text reads: "Rule over the stylish masses with season's reinterpretation of imperial androgyny (...) lead the way: craftsmanship at its finest. An embellished ensemble offset by diamonds and pearls creates a look fit for a king – or queen." Image © Vogue India, 2011

Figure 2. (right) The signature buildings of the future smart city of Dholera in Gujarat. Image © promotional campaign by *Dholera Property Management Services*, 2014.

Futuristic Smart Cities and Phantasmatic Economies

The illusion of India's future superpowerdom materializes not only in fashion design, but also in the actions of the architects of utopia par excellence; the planners of, and investors in, India's future smart cities for the worthy citizens, the new rich and upper middle class. Those who build these cities are expelled (Sassen 2014), from imagination, from belonging to the nation, and from state responsibilities. The newly elected right wing government has already allotted start-up money for 100 smart cities of the future in its budget, envisioned along the lines of the yet non-existent utopian city of *Dholera* planned in Gujarat. A city resembling Shanghai, double the size of Mumbai, running on renewable energy, classified as a 'special investment region', no crowds, pollution or excessive noise, and an international airport for this new age to secure smooth penetration of international capital. This 'megalomaniac' construction project promises to deliver the magical 9% rate of growth, or so its political and corporate ideologues claim. Today, there is only land with a bunch of skyscrapers under construction close to the coastline that is being eaten up by the rising sea at the rate of 1cm a day. This land is populated by roughly 40 000 largely poor farmers, the future dispossessed slum dwellers, typical of such construction projects (Roy 2014). They protest in vain. Instead of providing clean water, health care and social services within the already existing cities, the state, much like the business people, is determined to capitalize on phantasmatic virtualities and promises. During the election campaign, merely due to the anticipation of Modi's victory with his promise of further pro-business reforms, the stock of *Reliance*

Industries has gained 20% even before he was really elected, while *Adani Enterprises*, owned by the billionaire and devoted supporter of Modi, Gautam Adani, jumped 60% from April to May 2014. This is the power of carefully designed and staged illusion.

Utopia as Illusion without Owners

The idea of India's inevitable future superpowerdom is repetitively recited, acted out and materialized, and yet it is never clear who and if anyone really believes in it. None of the prominent business clientele of India's renowned fashion designers, with whom I engaged in discussions on the topic, really believed in this myth. They all *knew* that the reality looks radically different, and so would the future, and yet they still acted as if they didn't know, investing their own capital in real estate projects destined to never look like their promotional images. However, they derived great *pleasure* and *pride* from their acts of belief in India's greatness and power. Therefore, we could identify this illusion, as an 'illusion without owners', to use Robert Pfaller's concept (Pfaller 2014b). An illusion that no one really believes in yet is no less powerful and no less capable of structuring reality for it. Even popular writers of non-fiction and economic ideologues regularly perpetuate this shared illusion, despite starting with a sober summing up of the pervasive ills of Indian society. First they talk of poverty, ecologic crisis, caste discrimination, communal violence, lack of quality education, dysfunctional health care system, but then they quickly move on to a discussion of the booming IT industry, the emergence of billionaires, scientists and professionals, and so on (e.g. Kamdar 2007, Das 2000). As Pfaller points out, "not every utopia must then exist in the form of a 'confession' - with convinced followers who know what they believe in or wish for. Instead, a utopia can also be present as an 'illusion of the other,' in the form of an 'as though' materialized in diverse practices and objects, which no one has to believe in consciously or with conviction. Like the tricks at magic shows or politeness, such utopias could also exist as fictions held by groups or even entire societies, without any individual ever coming into question as the owner of such an illusion" (Pfaller 2014: 46, emphasis mine). The utopian visions of India's future greatness consist precisely of such a shared illusion that has, at its heart, a convergence of imagined economy and of (re-)invented tradition. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (Tripathi 2010, Tripathi 2011, Tripathi 2013), the fastest selling book series in the history of Indian publishing is a case in point. Written by a marketing guru, it tapped directly into the desire for national pride. Most of my elite interlocutors were proudly displaying their *Shiva Trilogies* in their book shelves, while openly admitting that they never read the books. Their pleasure derived from the reproduction of the shared illusion of India's greatness.

Imagined Economy and the Doxa of Indianness

In his famous work on imagined communities, Benedict Anderson surprisingly ignored the significance of the economy in the construction of national narratives (Anderson 1990). Yet, in the Indian context, as Satish Deshpande has argued, the economy is the primary source of raw material for the nationalist imagination (Deshpande 1993). This creates an opening for the smooth merger of the ideologies of Hindutva and neoliberalism, and recently philanthrocapitalism. During the 2014 elections, the magical rate of growth equated with 'development' became the ultimate emblem of Brand India's future glory (Crane 1999). Economic growth has become an unexamined virtue and consumption a national imperative. GDP rate is India's national 'factish' - a mixture of a *fact* - calculated by rigorous scientific methods, and *fetish* - made effective by collective belief (Latour 2010) or by shared illusion. The *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977) of Indianness, understood as a particular spiritual quality that distinguishes Indians from the rest of the world, works remarkably well when combined with this *factish*. Together, the factish of GDP and the *doxa* of Indianness form the core of a powerful populist myth that mobilized the *affects* of millions during these elections. Spinoza insisted that to exist is to desire, that we are beings driven by our desires, activated in relentless pursuit of them. The mobilization of affects which redirect our desires and our desire to act, is the goal of all operations of power - from politics to advertising. As Frédéric Lordon in his Spinozist critique of political economy remarks, "to induce an aligned desire is the perennial goal

(...) of all the institutions of capture” (Lordon 2014: 98). Political myths and utopian visions that recycle powerful symbolism aim at affecting us and making us act in alignment with the master-desire, here the master-desire of BJP. The mobilization of *moral sentiments* that induces joyful affects and brings pleasure to their devoted adherents, is significant here.



Figure 3 From the ‘Azrak’ Collection by JJ Valaya inspired by the Ottoman Empire, presented at the Grand Finale of *Wills Lifestyle Fashion Week* in 2012. Notice the staged craftspeople positioned as the subject of the neo-aristocratic lady. Image © Akanksha Singhal, 2012.

Resonances between Hindutva and Philanthrocapitalism

In his article from 2006, Shankar Gopalakrishnan (Gopalakrishnan 2006) pointed towards resonances between Hindutva and neoliberalism, resonances that have become even more acute today. Firstly, both ideologies reduce social processes to individual choices or individual moralities, thus doing away with any conception of social structures and power relations. Secondly, both ideologies divide societies into ‘internal’ and ‘external’ realms, where “the actual existence of social divisions is then explained by identifying certain division as *the* boundaries of ‘society’ itself. Outside those boundaries lie ‘external’ entities, which produce ‘disharmony’ within society (...) those ‘outside’ must be ‘educated’ into the ‘understanding’ necessary for social functioning, or, if this is impossible, destroyed” (Gopalakrishnan 2006: 2805, emphasis mine). Following this logic, in the ‘India shining’ (2004) and ‘acche din aane wale hain’ (2014) political campaigns, where neoliberalism most clearly overlapped with Hindu nationalism, “those without ‘shining’ lives were simply not Indian” (Gopalakrishnan 2006: 2808) and were expelled from ‘Brand India’ together with Naxalites, poor Muslims and slum dwellers. Thirdly, both ideologies share a rhetoric of *transformation* through their main ideological principle – either *market* or *dharma* (Gopalakrishnan 2006). *Dharma* here provides neoliberalism with the ideological moral high, even promising to transform India into a global power capable of saving the world from ‘civilizational’ crisis. The re-embedding of morality or *dharma* into the market (Banerjee 2008) through CSR, ethical business practices and philanthropy, translates into increased power and authority of the business elite. Consumerism is turned into the main form of ‘political’ action and market into the ground for benevolent relations and the showcase for humanitarian compassion. This destroys any potential for non-market politics while feeding the world with a fairy tale story that “one can celebrate a culture of global capitalism while sympathizing with its victims” (Nickel and Eikenberry 2009: 979). Moreover, this compassion often translates into oppression on the ground. Here, we might remind ourselves that dependence on benevolent patrons is at the core of untouchability. Any Indianist is familiar with the story of the village

untouchable banned from using the local well, forced to wait until a benevolent Brahmin pours water in his hands. It is benevolence that *depends* on constant production of dependence and expulsion. The popularity of philanthrocapitalism among the elite can be read as a continuation of traditional structures of inequality. Even more troubling is the aim of billionaire philanthropists to replace the state, increasingly portrayed by corporate lobby as incompetent, overtly bureaucratic, the exact opposite of a dynamic and effective corporation. The state is rendered 'incompetent' and infantilized. And here come the wealthy philanthropists to the rescue! This logic of superior corporate professionalism is behind Aditya Birla's programmes run for the Indian government, a government keen to outsource its duties to private foundations. The new BJP government plans to strengthen the role of philanthropy and CSR, insisting that only the superrich can turn the country into a superpower. Philanthropists have become India's new heroes, portrayed as committed to nation building and as the solution to all social evils. They relieve the state of its responsibility (Nickel and Eikenberry 2009), take on roles previously reserved to government, and insert themselves into governance. In the process, governance becomes depoliticized and the negative impacts of the market that create the 'need' for philanthropy in the first place made invisible (Nickel and Eikenberry 2010). The goal should be the abolition of this need but the result is its perpetuation, even deliberate creation.

Royal Chic and the Aesthetics of Utopias

The last decade has seen not only a boom of *royal chic* (Kuldova 2013a, Kuldova 2013b) but also of ethical fashion. The 'case' of fashion reveals the underlying logic of Indian philanthrocapitalism at large. The value of the Indian ornamentalist fashion and heritage luxury does not only reside, as typical of design today, in the *immaterial* value produced by the artist-designer, but also, undeniably, in the labour of hundreds of largely impoverished craftspeople. The value lies as much in the actual *material* value of embroideries and embellishments and the laborious process of their making. Craftspeople are indispensable for two reasons. Firstly, in their idealized and abstract form, they stand for Indian heritage and past, materializing the *doxa* of Indianness. Secondly, their impoverishment is key to the construction of an image of 'ethical and socially responsible business' (as such, impoverishment is precisely the condition that must be perpetuated), with its proclaimed goal of development and empowerment. This, in turn, transforms the designer and, ultimately, the elite consumer too, not only into a *benevolent patron* imagined along the lines of the royal patrons of arts and crafts of the bygone era, but also into the protector of tradition and a guarantor of its continuation. Philanthrocapitalism's success in India is predicated upon such hierarchical and elitist sentiment. Neo-aristocratic 'ethical' fashion embodies the power of the elite *to subject*, to create dependency and perpetuate poverty and status quo. Philanthropy and ethical consumption, as a distinctly elitist pastime, revolves around theatrical bestowals of benevolence. It is all about the power to subject and the visible display of inequality. Opening paragraphs of a recent volume entitled *Revealing Indian Philanthropy* (Cantegreil et al. 2013) testify to this by tracing the history of philanthropy in India back to rulers such as the emperor Ashoka, rendered here as 'the philanthropic administrator', and placing these heroic rulers next to contemporary philanthropists. Indian philanthrocapitalism and craving for ethical ornamentalist fashion reveals a continuation of the feudal logic of benevolent aristocracy in a transforming world, except that the business neo-aristocracy now resides in gated communities, and in future maybe in 'smart gated enclaves', in luxury spaces of peace amidst the destitution on which it depends.

Where does this Utopian Myth Push Us?

Opulent and ornamentalist royal chic and utopian construction projects of future smart cities, point to the fundamentally aesthetic nature of utopias (Schulte-Sasse and Schulte-Sasse 1991). Aesthetics provides the seductive form to mythical narratives, a concrete and yet fairy tale vision of the future. Such myths are not only able to move the affects of the members of the body politic, but also to push these affects in a desired direction (Citton 2010). It is no coincidence that the media was speaking of the 'Modi

wave' of hope and joy; the slogan *acche din aane wale hain* spread like a *contagion* and, for a moment, even those who in reality are excluded from 'brand India' felt they could be a part of it, if only they cast the right vote. The mobilization of hope and joy is the most powerful tool available to populist politics and aesthetics plays an indispensable role here. This is how the elite manage to align the desire of the masses with their master-desire (Lordon 2014), and convince them to vote against their own interests, for a strong authoritarian leader and the extension of corporate interest. The problem with populist myths and the cultivation of certain illusions is not that they are myths; after all, we derive a great deal of pleasure and a sense of orientation from these myths. Revealing myths as simplistic or unrealistic does not help, since it does not rob them of their *effectivity*. Myths, ideologies and illusions are resistant to knowledge. We cultivate them even when we know better. The important question is here: towards what kind of future is this myth pushing us? The problem with the Indian utopian myth centred on the magical rate of growth, Hindu spirit and benevolent billionaires, is not that it is a myth, but that it is a *bad* myth (Citton 2010). It leads not only to environmental destruction but also, and more importantly, to the expulsion of millions of undesirables into further poverty, beyond the internal border of (good) 'society' itself, thus transforming them from citizens into an internal security threat.

*When there is no longer any violence, there is no need for help,
Therefore you should not demand help, but abolish violence.
Help and violence form a whole,
And the whole has to be changed.
(Brecht 1967: 599).*

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Essays I

Mangalore: Building castles in the air

by Ian M. Cook



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Mangalore: Building castles in the air

Ian M. Cook

Mangalore, a smaller city on the south-west coast of India, is awash with high-rise buildings in various states of construction. I spent eighteen months¹ in the city researching the ways in which urbanisation temporally and spatially re-structures and de-structures everyday life, working with auto drivers, moving vendors and housing brokers.

The city lies in coastal Karnataka, on a narrow stretch of land hemmed in by the Arabian Sea on one side and the Western Ghats on the other. Its expansion northwards – spurred on by the creation of an all-weather port and related industrial activity, and southwards – driven by a slew of new higher education institutes, has given the metropolitan region a population of 619,664, making it the 83rd largest urban area in India.

Property relations in the city are changing: people are now investing in housing, rather than building a home; the local politicians are growing ever more indistinguishable from the local real estate developers; and land-owners are cashing in on the opportunity for joint-builds with these same developers. Mangalore is on the property map.

Whilst most developers are local (although some firms with a national presence are now entering the local market), the labourers who build the buildings come from the northern part of the state, northern states of the country or even (it is whispered) Bangladesh. Living and working on the sites, the construction work involves men and women, and is for the most part unmechanised.

In this set of photos, however, I am interested in a different type of labour – the production of the imagined futures of the city. Billboards have a unique place in this process. These seemingly static representations of the future come alive when placed in relation to the urban presence that envelopes them. They are imaginations of a certain future in which Mangalore's present smallness is revealed through building developers' dreams of bigness. They are visions of castles in the air.

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Billboards offer a glimpse into an imagined future.



Smaller cities in the post-colonial Global South are materially and discursively positioned as secondary sites of urbanity. Imbued with both lack and hope, smaller cities are heavy with their potential futures.



Imagination is not just a product of the mind, but rather intimately tied to perception of, and acting in and upon the world around us; the perceived is engendered through imagination (Ingold 2012).



Material products of an active imagination, the billboards help construct the cityscape.



These imaginative acts are purposeful. They are ‘social value projects’ – “social actors’ reflexive attempts to inter-subjectively construct value with the aim of achieving particular goals” (Nakassis and Searle 2013:171).



They are drawn from class-infused ideas that produce new city-spaces. They are attempts to create an “enclave gaze”, a way of viewing the world from a perspective that is insulated from the city around it, and draws on a desire to make world-class spaces in the city that are both spectacular and safe (Brosius 2010: 42).



However, whilst private spaces in 'gated communities' might suggest independence, they do not sit in isolation. Exclusive private spaces are produced relationally vis-à-vis the public spaces that surround them (Bodnar and Molnár 2009).



Many of the "castles" remain empty; they are but investments in the future, sponges for 'black money' or a migrant's link to the homeland they left behind.

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Tomorrow, might there be glory



SÉBASTIEN BACHELET

&

a poem
by HOUDOU

The following poem, translated from French, was written by Houdou, a young Cameroonian migrant, in Douar Hajja, a marginal neighbourhood of Rabat, Morocco. There, hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants in an irregular situation like Houdou, or the young Burkinabe man pictured on the accompanying photograph, find themselves in very precarious living conditions. After long and harrowing journeys, migrants reach Morocco, a stepping stone to an almost unreachable Europe. On the one hand, unable or too ashamed to return to their home countries, migrants are faced with violent and hazardous circumstances in Morocco which hinder installation for those who would wish to stay. On the other hand, European-Moroccan cooperation at the border makes attempts at crossing via sea or land into the Spanish enclaves and mainland extremely perilous.

In such a context, Douar Hajja is a neighbourhood where migrants return from failed journeys to rest, often wounded and in poor health, or to look for money to prepare other “attempts”. However, sub-Saharan migrants are not mere suffering bodies simply stranded between a rock and a hard place. In the face of adversity and despair, they constantly stress the importance of hope and not “becoming mad”. In places such as Douar Hajja, migrants, or “adventurers” as they call themselves, constantly reassess their options to decide on their next move, whether to stay in Morocco, to return or to continue. They share information on routes and opportunities. During idle moments, they trade old stories and imagine together what their future lives might be. They talk of “reaching the objective”. Aspirations for the future vary from one person to another, indeed from one moment to another; but all point to a better life, wherever migrants will be.

Whilst the picture was taken by myself in the field, the poem was written by Houdou, one of my informants in the field. As he is still in an irregular situation, we decided to simply leave his first name. The poem and picture capture the tension between hope and despair as migrants imagine a better life, and, despite limited agency in the face of hostile migration policies and practices, strive to reach it. Shortly after completing this poem, Houdou crossed to Spain on an inflatable boat. He now lives in Europe, where “the struggle continues”.

This poem and photograph have previously appeared in Jadaliyya.

<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18153/sub-saharan-migrants%E2%80%99-quest-for-hope-and-other-dan>

Title image: Young Burkinabe man in Rabat.

Photograph © Sébastien Bachelet.



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Hope

a poem by HOUDOU

Tomorrow - why not believe?
Tomorrow, why ever doubting?
Tomorrow, there might be glory;
tomorrow, there might be love.

No money in these pockets
but hope in the heart
no care for the spell cast
by those true scorners
one only is the mistress

Youth
tenderness

When love is a feather
fervent on the hand –
never mind today
if I hoped tomorrow

Always I reset in
motion, again
'cause the revolving earth
goes back to the start

Tomorrow - why not believe?
Tomorrow, why ever doubting?
Tomorrow, there might be glory;
tomorrow, there might be love.

Indulgent
penniless

At all times
close to here
despite yourself
crushed
deprived of the
essential
but valiant;
and believing
in oneself

Depicting life one day,
I understood it comes with ups and downs

Today we cry;
tomorrow with joy we shine

When suffering overtakes me,
I console myself, saying
it's a school of wisdom

'Cause in songs –
like my grandfather
used to say –
through obstacles
we recognise a man

Tomorrow - why not believe?
Tomorrow, why ever doubting?
Tomorrow, there might be glory;
tomorrow, there might be love.

Simply: who am I?
Yes! I introduce myself
Houdou is my name
I come from a country
where people are

above the law.
This made me

an outlaw

A far corner
where the future
of the youth
is seized.
Where media

is at the mercy of corruption.
Daily our rights violated.

Where freedom of speech is but an illusion.
Look at the state of my country

We walked one-hundred-and-sixty-eight hours
for things to fall back in orbit
but violence we harvested instead

This injustice, one day,
Held me to a pause

I faced the Sahara
Phew! I faced the Atlantic
I faced Gibraltar

Madness this was! I know,
but I had no choice
but to express myself one day
Yeah! The struggle continues

Tomorrow - why not believe?
Tomorrow, why ever doubting?
Tomorrow, there might be glory;
tomorrow, there might be love.

I was at Home



Friday 28th October 2011
Flight London-Bandar Seri Begawan

This photo of the wing looks like the photo of a road. As I watch it, I feel like it's telling me something: "Don't be afraid, even if this jump to the other side of the world makes your head whirl. Stay focused. It is your destiny! You just need to keep going."

RODOLFO MAGGIO



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This creative essay uses a dream the author had during fieldwork as the starting point for a discussion of the conundrums of representation. The dream epitomises the alterations that observation causes on the portions of reality that the ethnographer selects and concentrates upon. The rest of the essay tells of how the author attempted to find his own personal solution to the problem of representation thanks to inspiration found in a photo exhibition and the letter of a friend and mentor. Such interpenetration of oneiric, photographic, and epistolary materials works as a pretext to discuss the importance of remaining faithful to the anthropological mission of making people visible and not being hindered by the methodological impossibility of representation.

When I leaf through my diaries, trying to revive the memories of my fieldwork, there is a page that always reminds me of how easily we are fooled by our way of representing human life. It is the narration of a dream I had about three months after my arrival in Solomon Islands. That early morning, I suddenly woke up like a soldier after the reveille, and mechanically searched for a pen and my notebook. The air was thin, and cool, very rare in the South Pacific. I scribbled frantically. The marks of my pen look as if they were left by a minuscule hurricane. I wanted to mark all I could recall from that dream before it was too late, before the sirens of hindsight self-narration could turn that oneiric experience into yet another fable. I had the feeling that there was something important that that dream was trying to tell me.

Field diary

Honiara, January 11, 2012

This morning I woke up in the middle of a very special dream. I was in the company of Gordon and Helen, in their timber cabin. The woman was sticking coloured cards against the walls of the room. On each of those coloured cards I could clearly read the names of some relatives. In particular, I remember the name of Reubenson Ramonia, which is one of Clement's brothers. Reubenson is not a blood relative of Gordon and Helen. Indeed, the card on which his name was written had been stuck on the area of the wall that bore the inscription "Affines". On the adjacent wall, more coloured pages had been posted, with names on them, but also with sums due, and with specifications such as 'gift', 'debt', 'offer', and so on. Seeing such a curious composition, I was amazed. I thought, "Just watch how funny accounting is in this country! I can really see that a household is held up by a network of mutual dependencies, as affective as economic!" And as I was meditating on that, I searched my camera to document what I was observing. But in framing the scene, I realised that taking the photo presented some complications: the light through the window was too strong on the wall, whereas not enough light shed on the coloured cards. Also, only some of them would fit into the photo, because the area over which they were fixed was too broad. So, I decided to rearrange them, in order to include them all in one picture. As I believed I understood the logic underpinning their arrangement, I grouped those relating to collateral relatives in a corner, and those concerning blood relatives in the corner of the adjoining wall. But the problem of light was still unresolved, and so I pulled a curtain to cover the brightest side of the window. But, in so doing, I noticed that the room had changed shape. I froze, and looked at the tissue. Its texture seemed somehow familiar. Suddenly, I realised that what I had in my hand was in fact the thick, brown curtain in my grandparents' bedroom, in Milan, Italy. I looked around, and found myself in that very same room. I was at Home! On the walls, however, the coloured cards were still there, with the names, with the amounts due, arranged as I had reordered them. At that point, since everything looked ideal for taking the perfect picture, I adjusted the camera and framed. But then I stopped, for a thought crossed my mind. What was the point of taking a photograph of those cards for research purposes, if in the meantime I had changed the whole context of their use? And in conceiving this last thought, I woke up.

Re-shuffling coloured cards, just like creating a "multiplicity of tiny, fragmented regions in which nameless resemblances agglutinate things into unconnected islets" (Foucault 2002 [1966]). Attempting to illuminate dark areas, for "there is no darkness but ignorance" (Shakespeare, 1998[1623]: 194). And the burning power of light, the "most glaring daylight, rationality at all costs" (Nietzsche 1997 [1989]: 17). All this seems to remind "that in absolute light one sees just as much and just as little as in absolute darkness" (Hegel, 2010[1816]: 69).



Picture 1 *Left to right:* Ralph, Freddie, Tony, and Gordon waiting for transit at the Border Line bus stop, Honiara, Solomon Islands.



Picture 2 *Left to right:* Clement, Joshua, Robin, and Iro posing in their residence in Gwaunaoa, Malaita, Solomon Islands.

Today I like to think that my dream was trying to draw my attention to the risk we run as we try to familiarize the unfamiliar, and the ensuing dilemma between the urge to represent and the constraints of representation. Anti-representational post-modernists and deconstructivists subjected this methodological discourse to such highly severe criticisms that, nowadays, establishing some degree of similarity between reality and representation is not just a matter of accuracy. Not any more. It is often perceived as a shallow act of arrogance. It is shallow, because of the naïve assumption that there be no alteration of content in the process of transforming experience into knowledge. It is arrogant, because social scientists 'ought not' to present their perception of reality as if it was objective. Indeed, it can only be "epistemologically arbitrary" (Rosenau 1992: 94-95).

This critical perspective does not concede that different degrees of accuracy correspond to more or less faithful representational attempts. As a matter of fact, it subverts the epistemological discourse *in toto*, by negating any relation of equivalence between reality and representation. It proposes instead an endless and discontinuous "play of different representations" (Schwandt, 2007: 263).

Confusing and multi-vocal as it might sound, such an intellectual turn was very timely and beneficial in certain respects. Anthropologists who grew up professionally in the last 40 years or so could not avoid the injection of theoretical unpretentiousness that the post-modern critique opposed to the modernist faith in the liberating force of rationality. Furthermore, the so-called crisis of representation forced anthropologists to develop a sort of critical self-awareness, a much-needed implement in their professional toolkit.

However, since by definition deconstructivism promotes the contemplation of the ruins it leaves behind, rather than the construction of novel edifices of thought, the inadequacy of the social sciences to represent reality soon ceased to be a specific methodological problem and became a sort of "epistemological hypochondria" (Geertz 1988: 71). Under such an influence, many anthropological texts turned to be of a "hesitant, stuttering quality (what can I say? how can I say it? with what right do I do so?)" (Eriksen, 2006: 26). In this way, as Thomas Eriksen put it, "Postmodernism taught a generation of anthropologists to dissect the menu without bothering to look at the food" (*ibid.*). Coincidentally, that is the generation in which I grew up. That might explain my hesitation in taking the picture...

In brief, the benefits of theoretical humility came at the cost of a hesitant prose, and the inward turn to introspective self-criticism resulted in a closure to the outside world. Nevertheless, these are the trends that set the standard for the ethnographic writing of the latest decades. As the narrative of my dream suggested, with these standards I had to come to terms. In this sense, my dream was imagining my future, because it foreshadowed a challenge that I was to confront. If I was to propose my own contribution to the panorama of ethnographic writing, I had to find my own middle way between the Scylla of theoretical restraint and the Charybdis of critical self-awareness.

Upon my return to the United Kingdom, the challenge of representation presented itself in the most concrete way. The more I was getting acquainted with my new old life, the more I felt I was losing a grip with the context of my fieldwork. Classic. As I was re-learning to interact with my family, colleagues, supervisors, and fellow citizens, I was feeling increasingly influenced by their categories and relationships between categories (Sahlins, 1985). In the process, I was once again familiarising the unfamiliar and, once again, I was running the risk of understanding a culture in the terms of another one.

I needed something to keep myself close to my fieldwork, something that would remind me of the ways of thinking and behaving of my Solomon Islands families and friends, something that would help me to write with a voice they would find familiar.

However, I was not searching for a solution. It was rather by chance that I realised that my fieldwork photos could be of help. This happened as I was visiting a photo exhibition organised at the Royal Anthropological Institute.

On May 31st 2013, in a medium-sized room at the first floor of 50 Fitzroy Street, I examined about 32 photos exhibited on four walls along with short captions. Some showed people, others presented their skeletons and remains, one displayed an owl monkey, and one a PhD student filming a group of women. The people who populated the majority of these pictures were either working, resting, celebrating, smoking, waiting in transit, washing their children, listening to ethnographic audio recordings with a professional headset, or simply posing for the photographer. The captions bore a brief description of the context in which each photo was taken, and a quick reference to the scope of the research.

As I was looking at the photos and reading the accompanying text, I had the impression that all of the pairs had something in common. It seemed as if the interplay between each pair of text and picture was meant to tell a particular story. The subject of that story was 'fieldwork', which was indeed the theme of the exhibition. The characters were the people, whereas anthropologists oscillated constantly between self-representation as participants, observers, and participant observers.

Nafisa, the curator of the exhibition, kindly explained to me that her aim was to present anthropological fieldwork in its full diversity in terms of location and methodological toolkits. However, she selected those 32 photos (out of more than 400 submissions) not only because they aptly exemplified a variety of settings and the methodological diversity of anthropology. She also wanted the photos to be "visually striking", and by that she meant that they had to make the visitor willing to come closer, to become interested, fascinated enough to read the short text attached. In order to be striking, the photo needed to satisfy at least two requirements. Firstly, it had to be "good" in terms of photographic quality. Secondly, it had to "tell a story".

As I was talking with her about these selection criteria, I became interested in the second aspect. I felt as if that expression provided me with an opportunity to meditate upon the choices that we all have to make when we want to represent our fieldwork experience, the people we lived with, and their culture. That is why I tried to ask questions that surreptitiously moved towards that topic. What are the ingredients of story-telling photography? How should they be organized and presented? Is there a specific way to tailor these elements in order to target a particular kind of public?

Nafisa: There has not been enough public engagement in terms of being able to really show the world of anthropology in an accessible way.¹ But it is very important to be able to do that without taking away the depth and the complexity. That is the trick, and it is a very difficult one to do, I think...

"That is why some anthropologists give up", I must have thought. "Most of the time people are invisible", she added. She was referring to that form of complexity in anthropological writing that conceals the presence of actual human beings to the point that it is not possible to tell whether there are any, the kind of complexity that often makes academics themselves lose their way as they proceed towards the understanding of an argument. The image that her sentence brought to my mind was that of a photograph with nobody in it.

It is not possible to present a theoretical text in the form of a picture. How can you take a photo of a theory, theoretical perspective, or overarching theme? You simply cannot. What you can do, with the help of a text, is guide the reader towards an understanding of how the subject of a photo might represent a particular concept. To do so, a photographer can use rhetorical figures such as metaphor, allegory, or allusion. For instance, she can represent anthropology's task of challenging conventional understandings of difference and similarity with an allegorical picture showing a dark-skinned, body-painted child holding a giant Japanese photo camera, like in the textbook entitled, indeed, *What is Anthropology?* (Eriksen 2004). She can allude to the economic transformation of non-Western societies with a picture of commuters and migrants packed inside and outside an overloaded train, like in Hann and Hart's *Economic Anthropology* (2011). But she cannot take a photo of anti-essentialism, the culturalist turn, or the incest taboo. And that is not because of obvious practical problems such as those one might have in taking a picture of, say, an act of incest. It is actually easier to photograph an act of incest than it is to take a picture of incest taboo. That is why a text can explain the concept² to which a picture can only give an arbitrary visual hint.

The exhibition's interplay between photo and text, and my meditation upon the presence or absence of a subject, brought me to think that, while people can disappear under the mesh of textual intricacies, the same cannot happen in a photo as long as the photo is a photo of people.³ Otherwise stated, the author of a text can claim to be writing about people without necessarily making those people visible in the text. The reader looks for them as she ventures in the understanding of the argument. She believes they must be there, hidden some-

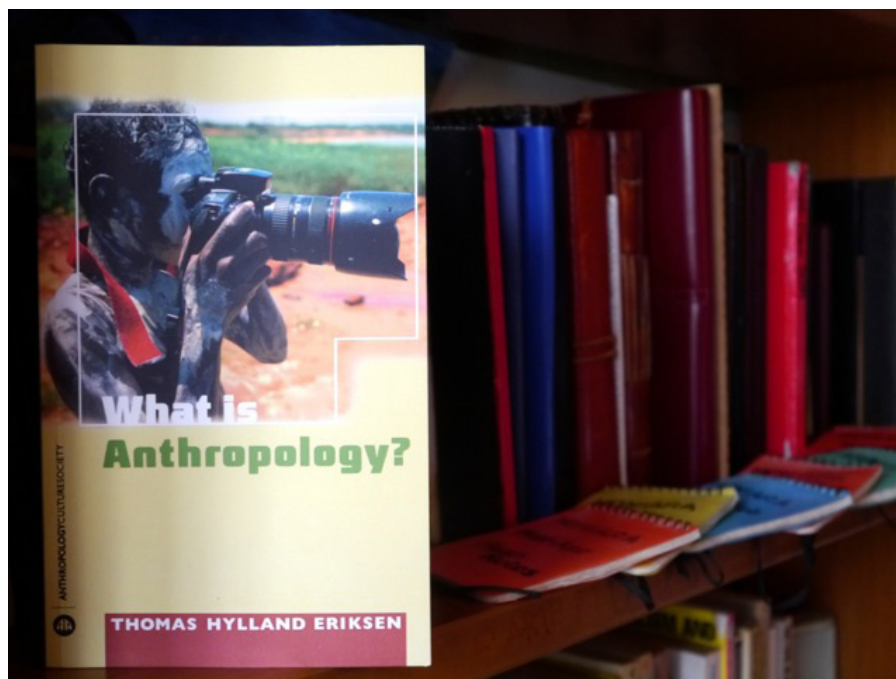
1. Cf. Eriksen, 2006. Ghodsee (2013) made a similar point when she wrote: "Ethnographic monographs once enjoyed popular audiences because earlier generations of scholars were committed to writing ethnographic texts that were as beautifully written as they were analytically incisive."

2. In contrast, photographer Robert Adams once wrote: "For photographers, the ideal book of photographs would contain just pictures – no text at all" (Adams 1994: 34). Cf. Berger & Mohr 2011.

3. That does not mean, however, that the subject is always visible, for the visibility of subjects ultimately depends on the eye of the beholder. That a subject is more or less visible depends also on the intentions of the photographer, as well as the context in which the picture is viewed.

where under the surface of text, for she was told that anthropology is a discipline that investigates *people*. She might not be aware that people have been increasingly absent from ethnographies, notwithstanding that the very etymology of the word contains the term ‘people’.

I would not go so far as to say that there are no original human lives, words, and feelings as ultimate referents of much contemporary ethnography. But the reader never gets to see them because she is too busy disentangling the intricate prose in which authors wave the strings of their introverted rumination. That is not by chance: complexity became a value in itself, a moral idea, an aim rather than a mean, as if its usefulness as a concept has been forgotten and replaced with a unanimous praise of its similarity with the world. Countering this intellectual trend, one of my lecturers in anthropology once told me “The world is complex, and your job is to make it as simple as possible, not to add complexity to it”. I tried to apply this lesson, but I struggled to find a good model to imitate, so many contemporary ethnographers being so reluctant to make people visible.



Picture 3 Thomas Eriksen’s *What is Anthropology*. [Book image reproduced with the permission of Pluto Books]

Many titles float in my head now; anthropology books in which I struggled to see actual people doing actual things. At the same time, I do not feel in the right to criticise ethnographies that I found, so to say, uninhabited. I am not in the position to do that, to point my finger at this sort of ethnographic holocaust, for this very same hand that writes these words has not even produced a single complete ethnography so far.⁴ Nevertheless, I know I am not alone in my ‘search for the lost people’ in the anthropology bookshelf.

Some years ago, an anthropologist with more than 40 years of experience wrote me a letter that made me feel in good company:

I think that the principal problem with much anthropology today is that so-called ‘theory’ has more status in the academy than concrete ethnographic analysis. This is a post 1970s problem. Read any prominent anthropologist in the decades before 1970 and you will find work that is remarkable for its clarity of thought, clarity of prose, and engagement with original ethnographic material. After that things go haywire. Obscure, hyper abstract, badly written books become fashionable. [...] They are ahistorical and asocial and barriers to ethnographic understanding. Students try to ‘apply’ these categories to their field data, which, to me, turns things upside down. [...] Fieldwork should be the basis of a critique of the dominant orthodoxy not the affirmation of it. Good ethnographic documentation is crucial to the development of human understanding.

4. If that does not sound fair, the reader can find several examples in “The Impenetrable Rhetoric of Interpretive Anthropologists” (Lett 1997:105-112).



Picture 4 Roswell and his son resting on a hammock under their house in Gilbert Camp, Solomon Islands.



Picture 5 Frida posing in Bitā'ama, Malaita, Solomon Islands.

Upon my return from Solomon Islands, I wanted to put this advice into practice. However, as I mentioned above, I was losing my familiarity with my fieldwork. But then, rambling around the exhibition I felt that the interplay between photography and writing could help me think about a way in which I could finally let my anxieties go and concentrate on my ethnography. I left the exhibition, this time with the resolute intention to puzzle all these pieces together.

Each and every ethnographer is confronted with the task of representing while at the same time abstracting categories to make people and their culture intelligible. The risk of misrepresentation is inherent in the process of recursive familiarisations and de-familiarisations that constitute the ethnographic practice. My dream was a presage of the time when I would have had to find my own way to cope with this challenge. Once I was back, I had the opportunity to think about possible, though partial, solutions through the lens of a photographic exhibition, a page of my diary, the voice of a lecturer, and the letter of a friend and mentor. I began to wonder whether the visual presence of people in photos could help me to stay focused on them. So, I started to look at them more often.

Surrounding myself with pictures, I recently realised, helps me not only to write and think in the company of familiar faces. It reminds me that each picture includes what I included and excludes what I excluded when I pressed the button; that what I photographed was necessarily influenced by aspects that are not explicit in the picture; and that the eyes of the subjects were looking at me as much as my eyes were looking at them. The point, thus, is that these pictures remind me constantly that it is not possible to write about other people without writing about myself, that every ethnography is to a certain extent an autobiography as much as each portrait represents the point of view of the viewed from the point of view of the viewer. Actually, neither, but both together, interweaved in a single object: a relationship.

The two extremes of the relationship –the ‘who’ and the ‘what’– are either exalted or undervalued, depending on the inclinations of the author. ‘Objectivists’ concentrate on the ‘what’ and tend to neglect the ‘who’, thereby failing to grasp the fugacity of objects. Reflexive thinkers do the opposite: they overemphasise the subjective perspective and understate the object of knowledge (often, to the point of losing sight of it). If the objectivist mission seems to be the eradication of the knowing subject to leave nothing but the bare ‘facts’, the ‘subjectivists’ dedicate their lives to the dematerialisation of objects. In ethnographic terms, that corresponds to the disappearance of people.

In order to go beyond the stall of representation resulting from two tendencies pulling in opposite directions, several ethnographic strategies have been experimented. Some try to ‘reduce’ the presence of the ethnographer and ‘increase’ that of the people, like in the life history method.⁵ As Carolyn Morris wrote, “individual life histories compensate for the absence of the people upon whose lives their ethnographies are based” (Morris 1998: 405). However, as Rosenau wrote, this rhetorical strategy “may not resolve the crisis of representation so much as shift the burden of representing from the researcher to ‘the people’” (Rosenau 1992: 108). The opposite strategy (‘reduce’ the object, ‘increase’ the subject) has some drawbacks too. Ethnographies become evocations of the fieldwork experience (Marcus and Fischer 1986), thereby suspending expectations (and/or pretensions) of objectivity.

Michael Jackson proposes a dialectical solution to the subject-object opposition. He looks at the relationship between knowing subject and object of knowledge as ‘interplay’ (Jackson 2002: 293). The two extremes, thus, are seen as inseparable entities rather than exclusive alternatives. That is, they can be isolated in analytical processes, during acts of reference such as verbalisation or categorisation. But in reality they are not. They are mutually constitutive as “moments and modalities of experience” (*Ibid.*).

The extreme consequences of ‘objectivism’ and ‘subjectivism’ correspond to two forms of reductionism: either regarding “subjectivity as little more than a cultural, historical, or social construction” or “reducing empirical observations to the psychology of the observer.” It follows that the preliminary condition for the construction of “the truth of what is known”, as Jackson put it (*Ibid.*: 292), cannot be found in either. Thus, they must be somewhere halfway between objects and subjects, *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, ‘representation’ of what is seen and ‘confession’ by the one who sees.

Somewhere, at some point, object and subject interact, like a particle and a physician who observes it

5. See, for example, Kwa’ioloa & Burt 1997; Crapanzano 1980; Elota & Keesing 1983.

and tries to describe what it does. They will never be the same again, because who they are is the outcome of that interplay. Such inter-subjective interpenetration between subject of knowledge and knowing subject corresponds to the anthropological version of Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, in that it symbolises the methodological impossibility of observing a point of view without altering it as a consequence of observation.

Attempting to do something impossible and pretending to succeed is folly. But refusing to try is uninteresting. The existential solution to the methodological impossibility of ethnographic representation consists of being aware of the inter-subjective dimension of knowledge production. In other words, ethnography should be an autobiography about the other, the confession of a representation, the story written by an 'author', i.e. the story of a relationship.

My PhD thesis, the cards stuck against the oneiric room, and the photos surrounding me as I write, tell the story of a relationship, of my point of view about someone else's point of view. This concept is epitomised in my silhouette holding a camera, reflected in the pupil of young Frida. Like mirrors facing each other, our eyes produce infinitely deep dimensions. It is impossible to tell where they end, let alone write about it. But Frida would be very disappointed if I failed to write a book about her people. Even more, if I were to tell her that the reason why I gave up writing was that I was not able to wake up from my dream of representation.

The author of a text can claim to be writing about people without necessarily making those people visible in the text. A photographer, in contrast, cannot hide the people she took in a photo, by definition. That is why the photos we take during our fieldwork can help us to remain closer to the people we aim to write about.⁶ Their facial expressions might be obfuscated by layers of memory, confused in the hindsight of our metropolitan crowd, and altered by the constantly changing narratives of our past. However, surrounding ourselves with the faces of our families and friends from the field can help us to maintain that feeling of embeddedness, that relationship that ultimately produces the knowledge that we painstakingly try to convey in our ethnographies, in the forever imperfect attempt to distinguish the other from ourselves.



Picture 6 *Left to right: Gordon, Freddie, Toni and Ralph looking at the sea in front of the Kakabona Beach, Honiara, Solomon Islands.*

6. Here I am not using photographs with any pretention of realism. Rather, if I were to isolate the element that helped me to remain closer to my fieldwork families and friends, I would make use of what Roland Barthes called 'punctum' (Barthes 1981).

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An etymology of desire: *de sidere*, from the stars



"I think the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness."

Fodor Dostoevsky

EMILY LYNN COOK

We rage for more, more, more, like tigers
 against the dawn:
 we don't want stripes, we want to hang in the
 sky
 like lanterns for thousands, and we want to be
 dawn forever.
 These are our dreams,
 these are our fences – these are the summer
 days
 so fleeting, fluid with colour in the moment,
 frozen crystalline in the memory,
 stiff and dull if we rush the dawn to fade
 to day, to evening, to dusk.

I let those summer days and tiger-dreams steal
 me away, once –
 I let them in too close –
 they tottered in like small children, with little
 damp hands
 still cold from sleep and rain,
 with promises fierce like roars,
 and I let them pull me, step by step,
 so I almost thought I was leading them
 into a soft world, soft and eternal as the dawn,
 with throaty promises rounding the edges
 smooth.
 Such are the seductions of promise-dreams;
 they purr into the last moments of the night.

The world grew louder, and their hands
 with eager and childish passion
 turned the green to heady smells
 and the coolness to rain that rolls a smooth
 lake into pummeled,
 hot aluminium –
 all the sweet and distanced promise
 turned into balmy, weighted dreams,
 dreams that while full in their beauty
 rub too heavy against my wrists
 or wall me in, stormfront before me, cloudless
 heat behind,
 bordering out dreamless longing.
 The dreams become fences never crossed,
 and the dreams that come after the fences are
 forever
 in the burnt-over land,
 unusable and rusting and roaring in the heat,
 casting their ripeness to the sky –
 always for sweet-smelling, never for eating.
 And there is no frontier,
 no Great Wide Open, no overgrown
 Somewhere,
 no Let's Hit The Road Baby or melodic,
 careless haze,
 only Here and There.
 Gone are the stars of yesternight, of
 colourless blue-white,

of cold winter – long dead is the spring.
 Summer heat rolls between the fences;
 it drags me with it.

And yet, still –
 who lets a heavy lull
 preclude an aimless wandering?
 Who halts the wandering before it roots
 your very desires out of reach, in the wind?
 Dogs are happy to chase their tails, but not
 we:
 we chase the dawn, the wind,
 we roar like tigers forever clawing at our
 stripes:
 little do we know they're our only stars.

Author's Note

In this poem, I wanted to explore how desire influences perception on a very fundamental level, and from there observe how desire and perception create dreams of the future. These dreams of the future can sometimes be positive and at other times negative; sometimes pushing us on towards better things, sometimes blinding us to all the complexities around us. Often, we would see these complexities if we took a small step away from our own desires and a larger step towards desire itself: the urge to embrace something, even if that something is unexpected.

I believe that this relates to anthropology in that an anthropologist has to be able to distance him or herself from self-oriented desires in order to see the structures and perceptions and motivations of another clearly. This would then, ironically, teach the anthropologist more about how desire and longing work in everyone, including his- or herself. Also, every society has its own hierarchy of desire, which in turn impacts the kinds of dreams and limitations its members are encouraged to pursue.

Image by Reckless Youth (Flickr)



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Stillness as a Form of Imaginative Labour

by Theodoros Kyriakides





Fig.1 Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), copy of “Le Penseur” at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. © Yair Haklai / Wikimedia Commons.

Stillness as a Form of Imaginative Labour

by Theodoros Kyriakides

This essay connects the practice of stillness to David Graeber's concepts of imaginative labour and immanent imagination. It makes the proposition that stillness should not be evaluated as lack of activity or movement, but rather attended to in its pragmatic and productive dimensions. The essay thus explores stillness as a potential mode of production of imagination and means of political transformation: in order for it to be meaningful, we need to reconfigure our relationship to stillness as one of imagination, resistance, thinking, and writing.

This essay was triggered – imagined as it was – from a roundtable organised by HAU on the theme of imagination at the ASA14 decennial conference, at The University of Edinburgh. I was particularly drawn to David Graeber's treatment of imagination as a "mode of production" (Marx 1971, Graeber 2006), and the potential such proposition carries for political deployment. As expected, Graeber's political involvement and philosophical foundations infused the notion of imagination with a conceptual ferment of radical dimensions. Such imaginative radicalism is not to be thought of according to some sort of extremist political ideology, but according to the radical change it can have in the world. Taking Graeber's work on imagination as a starting point, this essay explores the relation between stillness, imagination, and political action. More specifically, I write of stillness as a way to produce and politicise imagination through acts of fighting and resisting, thinking and writing.

Stillness bears a particular relation to imagination, which often goes unattended. Being a scholar of anthropology, and also an avid martial artist, I was always fascinated by two statues Rodin's *Le Penseur* and Magnier's *The Wrestlers*. Through time I found out that the two statuettes, as different as they appear, have more things in common than one might think. The stillness of the thinker, his frowned demeanour and posture, are not that far apart from the agonistic qualities of the two wrestlers engaged in combat. As anyone who has engaged in prolonged and thoughtful stillness will tell you, thinking is not an effortless endeavour but requires labour, as many sore necks and broken backs attest. And as anyone who has engaged in combat will tell you, its most terrifying aspects are the rare moments of stillness, which impose on both combatants an uncertainty and hesitancy as to what might further occur. The winner of a bout is most certainly the one who seizes such moments of stillness in his or her favour; will the underdog in Magnier's sculpture escape his perilous position, or will he have his arm be snapped in half?

To put it another way, to appreciate the relationship between stillness and imagination we need to do away with two obstacles. Initially, we must do away with the notion of activity, utility, and vitality as bounded to perceptible spatial and bodily movement. In addition, we need to do away with the notion of stillness as sterile and opposed to production; we need to attend to stillness in-itself and the effects it produces. Rather than binding it to promise or lack of movement or production, I instead propose that we examine stillness in its pragmatic efficacy, and its relevance for a political project of imagination.

Graeber provides an extensive treatment on the productive dimensions of imagination in his book *Revolutions in Reverse* (Graeber 2011a). The title of the book hints at the way by which Graeber handles revolution, and also imagination. For him, revolution is not a grand narrative culminating in an all-encompassing telos: Rather, revolution, as an ethos and mannerism of orientating one's self in the world, is constantly re-enacted in everyday acts according to pertinent political dilemmas and collective desires. Such a concept of revolution is in-line with Graeber's treatment of communism, not as a radical political ideology or ultimate actualisation of a certain mode of governance, but as a foundation and basis for everyday sociality – a concept Graeber calls "baseline communism" (Graeber 2011b: 98). Likewise, for Graeber, acts of imagination are not driven by an ever-slipping horizon of a grand utopia, but constantly re-emerge in relation to concrete political and social objectives.

In such a way, Graeber does away with all notions of Cartesian imagination as contemplative and out-of-this-world. Imagination is not an ideal quality removed from the material realm but is, rather, *of-the-world*; imagination is, to quote the term he uses, “immanent” (Graeber 2011a: 52). Imagination, as related to desire for change, is the result of socio-material arrangements, and also carries potency of acting on and changing such arrangements. Thus, as Graeber writes, imagination “is in no sense static and free-floating but entirely caught up in projects of action that aim to have real effects on the material world, and as such, always changing and adapting” (Graeber 2011a: 53).

Accordingly, *materialism*, as a modality of exploring and understanding the world, does not only consist of tangible, material objects, but also of *fictions*. Anthropologists and ethnographers have long delved with cosmological, religious and social entities – gods, nations, utopias, organisations, dreams, myths – which, albeit intangible, have the capacity to produce the world because of the beliefs, desires and values people attribute to them. Diverging from schools of scientific materialism¹, which claim that the only things which really exist are hard physical objects and their denominations into atoms, particles, neutrons and so on, *social materialism* insists that entities, tangible or not, real or fictitious, similarly exist and carry political relevance insofar that they bear the capacity to produce material *effects* in the world. Even in the case of Marx, whose philosophy is considered the materialist par-excellence, what distinguishes humans from other animals is the capacity to imagine and bring into being potential entities and events – to “raise structures in imagination before erecting them in reality” (Marx 1978: 174). In other words, the practice of imagining has concrete, material effects in the world insofar that it effectuates practices aimed at actualising such imaginative entities and futures.

Through Graeber’s treatment, imagination is transformed from an individual quality to a collective and political one. In addition, imagination is transformed from an ideal, contemplative act, into a pragmatic and productive practice. Conceptualised as collective and pragmatic – as a mode of production – imagination must not remain in the mind of one but overflow in the minds of many. As he points out, imagination needs constant maintenance, through what he calls “imaginative labour” (Graeber 2011a: 53-55). Imaginative labour denotes practices and communities which serve in producing as well as maintaining imagination on a collective, political level. Thus, in addition to the productive effects imagination has, of equal importance are the ways in which people can produce imagination for themselves and for their peers. Indeed, Graeber’s political treatment of imagination entails that one does not only imagine but also *incite imagination in the minds of others*.

While some engagement with stillness has taken place in the fields of mobility and geography (Cocker 2009, Bissell and Fuller 2010, Martin 2010, Cresswell 2011), the notion of stillness as a creative and productive imaginative force, capable of political transformation, has received little attention in anthropological scholarship. I suggest that this is a rich ground for anthropologists to step in. Initially, an anthropological appreciation of stillness entails critically examining certain dominant perceptions amongst capitalist societies (as well as ethnographically and theoretically exalting the occasions where a connection between stillness and imagination is indeed achieved). In a recent article published by The Guardian reminiscent of the famous Stanley Milgram experiments, people proved to prefer to be zapped by an electrical current, rather than to sit still in a chair and think for the duration of ten minutes (Sample 2014). Stillness widely came to assume a lack of something, whether this pertains to lack of movement, life, purpose or imagining.

Yet, if one can take something away from Rodin’s sculpture, it is that the potency of imagination largely unfolds and is predicated on the practice of being still. It is exactly through prolonged stillness that one is able to engage in thoughtful meditation on the present, the imagination of otherwise futures, and ways to achieve these. Yet, a further leap has to be made in order for stillness to acquire political character. The relationship between stillness and imagination achieves political continuity in two ways.

1. The term scientific denotes the assumption that the methods and knowledge of physical sciences are valid and applicable in all contexts.



Fig. 2 Philippe Magnier (1647-1715), copy of the “Uffizi wrestlers”, stored in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, Italy. © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.

On the one hand, stillness harnesses and channels imagination in the construction of concepts and the production of texts which, through their distribution and circulation in a social field, have the capacity to ignite imagination on a collective level. On the other hand, stillness achieves a doubling of imagination through its very practice in the public sphere. When one visits the sites of Rodin's sculpture, he would probably see it surrounded by likewise still observers, similarly drawn into thought. In this second guise, the public practice of stillness achieves political relevance because it doubles stillness, and also imagination, in the body and mind of those witnessing stillness. The potency of stillness as a political technology oscillates between these two modalities: stillness as a precursor to imagining and writing, and stillness as an infective practice of imagination – stillness as production and action.

In order to deploy these two positive imaginative modalities we must first reconfigure our relation to stillness itself. Amid growing working hours, capitalism dissolves the imaginative potency of stillness into a progressively complex arrangement of monetary abstraction and accumulation. Like the repetitive work of the assembly line, the rise of informatics mechanized and confined the human body to a monotonous template of movement and thought. In such insipid conditions, the two aforementioned modalities of stillness become contaminated by capitalist imperatives. In the workspace, like Rodin's statuette, one is seated, yet production and action are detached from the practice of imagining, thinking, and writing, and are instead diverted to the accumulation of surplus value. Seated production as "inactive activity" yields no intentionality other than the capitalist teleology according to which it is recursively enabled by.² Here, translated into capitalist terms, a perversion and inversion of stillness in its definition and practice occurs: identified negatively, stillness is treated as that which mediates periods of (in)activity, rather than that which *gives way* to activity. Otherwise said, stillness is defined as a 'pause in' and 'lack of', rather than a form of production and action in its own right. Stillness, as a sterile period mediating capitalist production, is enacted in relation to the capitalist system itself. It is treated negatively because, removed from the desk, it is not the body which remains still, but the production of surplus value. According to such terms, bodily movement as activity acquires positive dimensions, while stillness as stasis is relegated to stagnation. Incorporated into capitalist logic, stillness is extracted from the human body and projected onto the capitalist nexus as a bodily quality to be avoided.

Stillness or, rather, the reclaiming of stillness in its positive, political qualities, proved to be one of the most effective weapons against current capitalist-imperialist predicaments. The productive dimensions of stillness acquired political dimensions of collective proportions with the proliferation of occupation practices. These culminated with the recent standing protests in Taksim Square, in Istanbul, where what started as an act of one became one of many. During these protests, and inspired by the initial eight-hour effort of one Erdem Gündüz, several hundred demonstrators stood still around various parts of Istanbul for prolonged periods of time, as an act of outcry against police brutality ordered by the Erdogan government during previous protests. Collective displays of stillness such as the ones which took place in Istanbul, acquire political relevance because they double and intensify imagination: they produce these, not only in the mind of the one standing still, but also in the mind of those witnessing stillness. In events like the standing man protests, an event which many wrongly deemed as "passive" in character, stillness becomes a form of political action that produces an imaginative vitality capable of sculpting political visions. In such cases, stillness does not signify lack of production and action, but rather *is* production and action itself.

Stillness as a form of political activism diverges from rioting. One would not be mistaken to contrast the calm demeanour of the standing protesters to the turmoil and noise of rioters, or the chaos and destruction caused by terrorist bombing attacks to the awe brought upon us by the powerful stillness of self-immolating Tibetan monks. Rioting, as a form of protest, is dependent and maintained by the

2. Workplace conditions can give way to human relations of community, friendship and love, which cannot be contained by their original capitalist context. Nevertheless, I also maintain that one must be careful in treating such relations as distinct, rather than as part of the capitalist arrangement from which they emerge. Extra-capitalist creation by way of capitalist suspension is ultimately the criterion by which such relations are deemed positive.

very evil it opposes. Enacted in retaliation to a problematic present, which it violently affirms, rioting ultimately fails to incite and deploy imagination in its political key. Preceded by hoax media reports of violence caused by the protesters, the impetus for the standing protests in Taksim was exactly to sever this unfruitful relationship of protesting and opposition. At the same time, these public displays of stillness unfolded a spectrum of positive possibility regarding the future of Turkish politics. Unlike rioting, stillness does not legitimise itself through destruction and opposition, but through the labour of its self-actualisation, and the poetics of potentiality such labour produces.

Stillness is contagious, it tickles and irritates. Possibility, rather than space, is the terrain stillness playfully traverses; in the case of occupation practices, stillness is not enacted in relation to space but, first and foremost, to imagined trajectories of otherwise futures. Deployed as such, stillness acquires an infective capacity of triggering collective processes of socio-political transformation. Like the case of the standing protests in Taksim Square, it gives way to what Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre call, drawing from Felix Guattari, an “existential catalysis” (Guattari 1995: 19): an event of transmissive character, “able to generate repercussions in the mode of the ‘yes, it’s possible’, able to arouse the appetite that will make another possibility exist elsewhere” (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: 123). Acting as a form of “dissensus”, (Rancière 2010) acts of stillness disrupt rigid organisational, bureaucratic and disciplinary routines, create a slit on, and explode into the public sphere as a vector of imagination and survey of possibility.

To return to the juxtaposition between Rodin and Magnier’s statues, next to the stillness of the occupier and of the monk, another form of stillness takes place – that of the thinker. The stillness of the thinker takes place in intimate, private settings, and is no less political as long as it is channelled in the labour of thinking and writing. Often, the labour of the thinker is not celebrated as much as that of the fighter: I direct such comment to both, thinkers and fighters, albeit more so to the latter. In a conversation between Foucault and Deleuze, Foucault recounts what a Maoist activist had once told him: “I can easily understand Sartre’s purpose in siding with us...I can partially understand your position...but Deleuze is an enigma” (Deleuze 2004: 205). The Maoist’s hesitancy to include him in his cohort resulted from Deleuze’s lack of political militancy. Compared to Guattari’s intense militant involvement, Deleuze preferred the intimacy of his desk, the stillness of thinking and writing. Elsewhere Deleuze speaks of the relationship between Guattari and himself: “He has extraordinary speeds...I am more like a hill, I don’t move much, I like to write alone.” Deleuze went on to acknowledge the combative dimensions of stillness: “Together we would have made a good Sumo wrestler” (Deleuze 2006: 237).

For Deleuze, both forms of Marxism – militancy and writing – were equally important and inseparable. For him “[t]here is only action, the action of theory, the action of praxis” (Deleuze 2004: 207). The library as opposed to the street, the sword as opposed to the pen: these are unproductive and unnecessary dichotomies. Thinker and fighter diverge in their practices, but find a common home in their co-produced zone of imagination. In such an endeavour, that the labour of the thinker is equally acknowledged and deployed as that of the fighter is of utmost importance to both. Thinking and fighting need not be mutually exclusive (see for example Graeber 2011c). At the same time, the two must be recognized and treated as distinct but complementary modalities of political and imaginative engagement. Such distinction does not entail a separation between thinking and fighting, but a challenge to keep finding ways to rearticulate the relation between the two in powerful combinations. A thinker can take the street prior to writing, as much as a fighter can adopt the chair and write a text or distribute a concept amongst friends.

Fighters and thinkers touch, not because of some sort of overlapping similarity between them, but because both are symbiotically implicated in a common political project of producing and maintaining imagination through their labour. Here, no opposition or even dialectic, but rather “ecology” (Stengers 2005a) of thinking and fighting takes place. Stillness must be recognized as an essential ingredient in such a project. As a collective embroiled in a common task of imaginative action and production, we must reconfigure and reclaim our relationship to stillness and the places where it is enacted

- the city square, the street, the desk, the chair - as one of affirmation to the human condition. Amid constant movement and activity necessitated by hyper-capitalist lifestyles, stillness instead invites us to "slow down" (Stengers 2005b: 994), to use one of Isabelle Stengers' terms, to think things through and imagine them otherwise. We must once again learn to stand still in order to provoke and resist, but also to think, imagine, write, and also heal, rest and sleep. Stillness in no way is indicative of political passivity or lack of purpose and direction. To embrace stillness in all its positive qualities, to stand, persist and persevere *still* could very well be an imaginative and hence political weapon par-excellence.

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The Story of the End of the World

by Michael Shea



Post-it notes in response to questions from the exhibition
The Story of the End of the World



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The Story of the End of the World: An Alternative Approach to the Future at the Japanese Museum of Science and Innovation

Michael Shea

The following discussion is a critical assessment of the “Story of the End of the World: 73 Questions We Must Answer”, an exhibition at the Miraikan. The Tohoku earthquake and tsunami on the 11th of March 2011 created the necessity for collective catharsis regarding various threats posed by the future. I will argue that the outcome of the exhibition differs significantly in content, presentation and meaning to the more conventional visions of the future presented elsewhere in the museum.

The Japanese National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation in Tokyo, known as Miraikan, where I conducted my doctoral research, was designed to be a forum for visitors; a place where people come to engage with the future in science and technologies. The *future* is embedded into the design and location of the museum in several ways. The museum, which opened in July 2001 in Odaiba, is located on an artificial island connected to the mainland accessed by an electronic railway. Miraikan’s building looms around empty space allocated for future construction, semi-completed office buildings, hotels and shopping malls. The museum is vast in scale, with glass walls, a slanted ceiling and a globe representing the earth. The greeters located by the entrance, wear grey Star Trek inspired jumpsuits. By the time a visitor sets foot in the museum the future is already established as the *mis-en-scene*.

On the 11th of March 2011, an earthquake shook Miraikan to its foundations. Large sections of the interior ceiling in its six-story atrium collapsed. Fortunately no one was hurt. The museum was closed for three months. A small display by the main staircase is explaining how the plasterboard ceiling has been replaced by glass fiber textile, a more durable but lightweight substance, causing less damage if it were to collapse again. There is a permanent exhibit that graphically illustrates thousands of small earthquakes occurring on a map of Japan in real time. This shows the country to be gently vibrating constantly. The volunteers sometimes use the Tohoku earthquake as a point of comparison when explaining how small and relatively insignificant these more frequent seismic events are. The GEO-cosmos, a giant LCD globe that displays various kinds of geographic information, demonstrates the impact of the Tohoku earthquake on a global scale.

As an institution that facilitates public engagement with science and nature, Miraikan was compelled to respond to the events of March 2011. During the museum’s closure, the staff had been inundated with questions regarding the future threat of earthquakes and the chances of survival in the event of another large-scale disaster. The most direct reply to the catastrophe is currently found in *The Story of the End of the World* (*seikai no owari no monogatari*) temporary exhibition, which took place between March and June 2012. The exhibition opened on the 10th of March, the day before the first anniversary of the earthquake.

I will argue that this exhibition can be seen as a means of achieving catharsis in regards to the Tohoku earthquake and as a potential for similar such disasters in the future. Its tone and content are significantly different to the visions of the future presented elsewhere in the museum that broadly can be characterized as techno-utopian. The following discussion will consider the exhibition content along with visitor’s responses in order to argue that it constitutes an alternative approach to the future. In the interest of clarity, when the term “catharsis” is used in this discussion, it is not intended in the Freudian sense, by which repressed thoughts that are confronted but rather in a philosophical sense, as a process of intellectual cleansing through the recognition of negative emotions. In these terms the exhibition is cathartic in that it encourages the visitors to confront, articulate, and come to terms with their feelings towards death.

An Alternative Approach to the Future

The purpose of *The Story of the End of the World* exhibition is described on its accompanying webpage as follows:

Everything comes to an end. Human lives, nature, civilization – even our universe. In spite of this, our busy schedules have left us little room for contemplation of “endings.” The disastrous Great East Japan

Earthquake of March 11, 2011, reminded us that even the most peaceful, tranquil days may be brought to an end. We have come to the realization that our lives, bolstered by science and technology, are frail and fleeting. In light of the immediacy of such “endings,” let us consider what we should cherish in our lives and how we should live side-by-side with science and technology ... Out of this knowledge of “endings,” we will find the hope to keep on living (Exhibition Outline, Miraikan 2012).

The exhibition is essentially an exploration of mortality through various existential questions: “What do you want to do during the time you have left?” “What are there [sic] in systems of life that continue forever?” etc. These questions are posted throughout the exhibition space designed to be interactive as there are pens, paper and magnets scattered everywhere for visitors to use. Some of the questions are accompanied by a notice board where visitors are encouraged to post their responses. Others respond through surveys, answering questions such as “Which is a bigger fear for you; acts by humans or acts by nature?” Underneath this question are two columns and by placing a yellow magnet under one of the columns, visitors’ can register their vote (acts by humans was seen as more frightening with a ratio of 3:1). These interactive systems for measuring visitors’ opinions are partly inspired by similar chalkboard-based forums posted throughout the permanent exhibitions. The walls of hand-written post-it notes create a powerful visual representation of visitors’ attitudes and opinions.

The subject of the exhibition was inspired by the disaster and its impact on the museum and its staff. As a result, there is a subtle humour in which several of the staff approached the threat of earthquakes. In one volunteer meeting, the speaker joked that in the event of an earthquake, you should either help others or take off your staff jacket so that you couldn’t be identified as you ran away. In my time at the museum, I only met one staff member who was openly upset about the threat of earthquakes. This individual was visibly frightened the morning after another small earthquake and told me that she “can’t handle them”. To promote the exhibition some of the Science Communicators, and educators at the museum, wear cone shaped hats, each displaying one of the 73 questions displayed at the core of the exhibition. This is a strange choice as the questions are often serious, morbid or open-ended provoking a bemused reaction from many visitors. The appearance of a friendly stranger wearing a dunce hat that says, “What do you fear the most?” or some other profound personal question is a little unnerving to say the least.



Fig. 1 A Story of the End of the World wall poster by Takashi Taima

In terms of content, the exhibition is unusual as the 73 questions themselves are the main substance of the visitors' experience. As a science and technology museum, most exhibits at Miraikan involve an interactive component (touch screens, joy sticks, switches, buttons etc). Yet, in *The Story of the End of the World* most of the content is textual. The visitors make their way through a maze of existential questions. The questions are written on pyramid shaped boards that are lit with spotlights, the exhibition space is low lit and unadorned giving an overall impression similar to a contemporary art gallery. It seems to have been intentionally created as a contemplative space. This similarity is also highlighted by the exhibition's accompanying artwork, designed by Takashi Taima, a well-known illustrator, who created his own vision of the end of the world through a series of vibrant and nostalgic images that covered the walls at the entrance to the exhibition space.

Post-it notes for writing responses to the exhibition questions constituted an interactive component, albeit a decidedly low-tech one. Although, the exhibition did include an accompanying website where visitors could post their responses and a computer terminal, which cheerfully offered to calculate the visitors' remaining lifespan. One of the first questions that a visitor would encounter is "What is the thing you are most worried about in life?" with space below for visitors to post their replies. It provoked an impressive variety of responses. I noticed that someone had written "rice" (gohan); someone had drawn the character for "death" (shi) while another incorporated a picture of a dead body. Some other memorable responses included: "being alone," "tomorrow's life," "if the next day doesn't come," "being separated from family," "getting sick," "if my rabbit gets sick," "hitmen," "no money." With an array of material displayed including educational content, the majority of which is in the form of statistics; a model graphically represents the likely causes of death in each region of the world, as well as a display in which countries in the world are ranked by their suicide rate. Contrary to popular belief, Japan is not the country with the world's highest suicide rate, although it is ranked second in Asia behind South Korea.

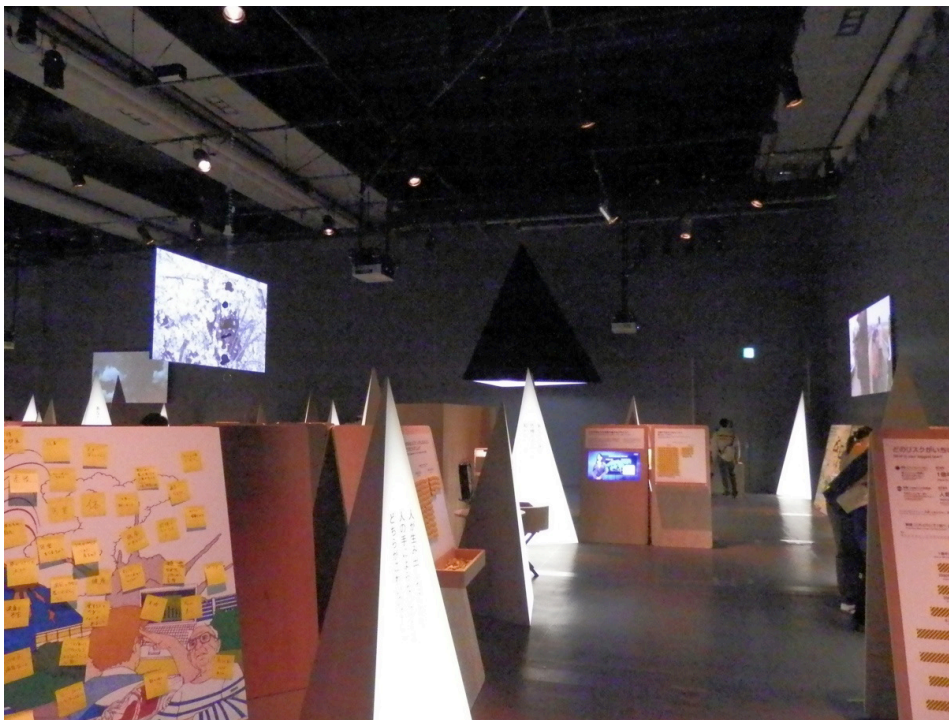


Fig.2 Inside *The Story of the End of the World* exhibition space

There is a similar set of rankings by country for life expectancy, displayed in the form of a line graph. Here, Japan is at the top, "Japan is amazing..." (nihon wa sugoi...) a visitor to the left of me once remarked, before asking why it was that life expectancy for women was uniformly higher than men, as we examined the graph together. This comparative approach is interesting as one way of interpreting various kinds of threats is to rationalize the relative likelihood of their occurrence. A Japanese person might be relieved to see that life

expectancy is so high, but alarmed that the threat of natural disasters is much worse than in most other countries. It goes without saying that mortality is a consistent theme among most of the data and questions that form the exhibition.

Mortality poses a particular problem for a museum that promotes emerging science and technology, as it is not a disease to be cured or a social problem to be resolved. It cannot be fixed, which makes it somewhat of an anomaly in a science museum that elsewhere seeks to set out how technology has and will continue to find all manner of solutions. While beliefs over the potential of spiritual immortality differ from person to person, in Western scientific thought, the dominant belief system at Miraikan, mortality cannot be defeated, only confronted and accepted. The March 11th earthquake forced the museum to respond to the inevitability of death in the only way that it could, through rationalization.

The responses to the questions are at times both humorous and moving. One sign asks: "Are there things that have disappeared due to technological advancement?" The responses include: "waste," "guts," "wasting time," "considerateness," "the self." Another asks "What do you want to do during the time left to you?" "sleep," "smile," "laugh," "it depends how long is left," "spend time with the people that are important," "to live normally." Compared to the utopian visions prevalent in many representations of the future elsewhere in the museum, which presents visions that seek to pose solutions to current problems, this exhibition is quite unusual in that it offers no solutions. To say that the exhibition is influenced by the social climate in Japan would be an understatement. It is a direct response to the devastating events in the recent past, both retrospectively orientated and presenting a somewhat fatalist vision of the future.

The exhibition is divided into four main sections: *Unanticipated Endings*, *My End*, the *End of Culture* and the *End of the Story*. In the *End of Culture* section there is a timeline that charts the rise and fall of various extinct civilizations. The exhibition considers the impending threat of climate change along with its potential for society. One question, which relates earlier, is: "Can we return to the lifestyle of fifty years ago?" This question is an inversion of a question found throughout the rest of the museum: "What will society look like fifty years in the future?"

On the third floor of Miraikan, there is an exhibit titled *Lifestyle 2050* that consists of a scale model of an imaginary future city, Itookashi. Interactive terminals present heavily stylized cartoonish depictions of the year 2050 that resemble *The Jetsons*. For instance, the residents of this future city travel around in multi-colored egg shaped helicopters that suspiciously resemble the iconic 1960s chairs of the same shape. The *Lifestyle 2050* exhibit is not a serious attempt at sooth-saying but rather a playful representation of a utopia based on current social concerns; an example of "future nostalgia" (Rosenberg and Harding 2005). Energy, transport, and climate needs, are fulfilled in this city, the residents are happy flying around in their eggs, the model incorporates lots of green and open space and looks significantly less crowded and congested than Tokyo, as you would expect in an ideal city. The choice of 2050 as the determinate year is interesting. The arbitrary significance of this year is that it is roughly half a century away. It is a year that a Japanese person under 40 should expect to live to see. Japan, which has long been celebrated for the longevity of its population, continues to rank first in the world with a current life expectancy of 84 (World Health Organization 2014).

The year 2050 recurs many times throughout the museum in order to represent a notion of the future. A chalkboard invites visitors to suggest what they think Christmas gifts will be in the year 2050. The question on the board changes daily but often includes this year. Before starting in the field, I was already familiar with this year, by which the proportion of the population over 65 is expected to reach 40%. This impressive life expectancy, coupled with a low birth rate, has led to an aging population, an increase cause for concern. Fears that the working population might soon no longer have the resources to support the elderly both financially or simply in support labor, can be seen in new government policies, such as the Long Term Nursing Insurance that asks individuals to contribute towards the care assistance they may depend on in later life. These fears are put into context when you consider that the population of Japan is expected to shrink by 40 million in the year 2055, from 127.8million to 89.93million. With such evidence, there is an increasing sense of urgency concerning how to deal with the aging population.

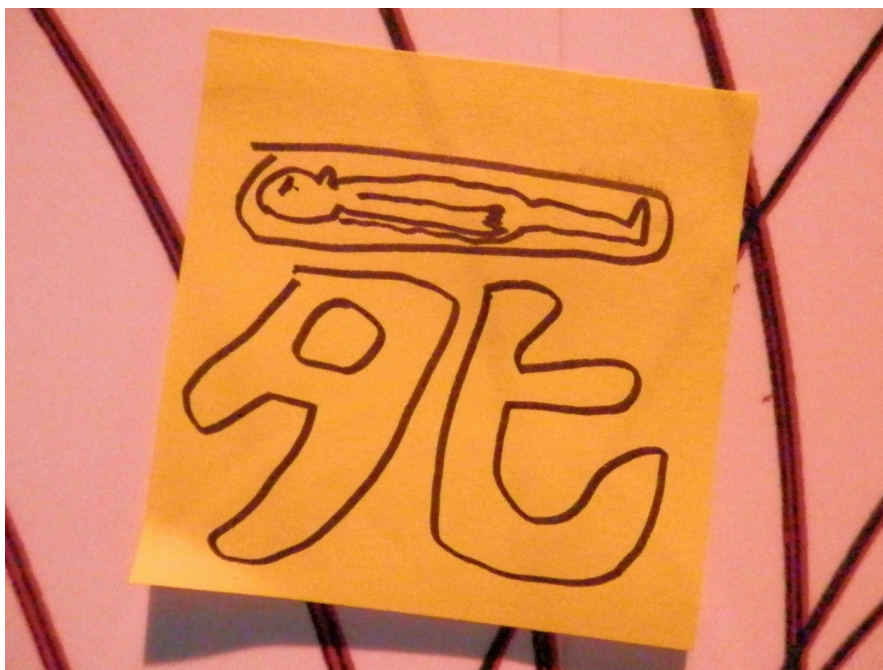


Fig.3 The character for death on a post-it note in response to the question “What is the thing you are most worried about in life?”

Advances in technology are looked to as a potential social savior for the country. For example, the government led initiative *Innovation 25*, announced in 2007, that Prime Minister Abe’s plan for remaking Japanese society by the year 2025 was based around the increasing integration of domestic androids. Writing on this proposal, Robertson describes how *Innovation 25* “emphasizes the central role that household robots will play in stabilizing core institutions, like the family” (Robertson 2007: 370). In my own research into demonstrations of the Honda ASIMO robot, the actions the android would frequently perform – carrying a tray of drinks up and down the stairs, and responding to voice commands – takes on a much greater significance once you consider that its designers explicitly refer to home care as one of its most likely future uses.

In Boia’s *Forever Young: A Cultural History of Aging* it is argued that since the advent of modernity, a kind of “secularized religion”, has emerged whereby mortality is transcended not through religious salvation, but through notions of collective progress and nationhood. The logic underlying this shift is characterized as follows: “Each of us is mortal, but humanity will live on. The only way to give meaning to our lives is to devote ourselves to some grand collective project” (Boia 2004: 7). In science museums, this ethos can be seen in the potential for a better standard of living in the future provided by technology. *The story of the end of the world* exhibition becomes significant because it goes against this dominant trope that instead question the uncertainty of life in the future, natural disasters and the limit of humans potential to solve questions of life and death. The overwhelmingly optimistic ethos of technology as savior which is exemplified in *Lifestyle 2050* is a world away from *The Story of the End of the World*, which approaches the same impeding challenges with a sober questioning of whether even the lifestyle of the immediate past, can endure. This huge shift of emphasis in the approach to the future reflects the sense of uncertainty following the 11th of March 2011 earthquake and leads visitors to ask, if we might return to the lifestyle of fifty years ago, or at least sustain current living standards, rather than, to be invited to ponder what a marvelous place the future might be.

The Uncertainty of the Future: Concluding Reflections

Predictions about the future will always to some extent “re-inscribe the present into the future” (Collins 2008: 89). Although differing in their approaches, both the optimistic vision of the future set out in *Lifestyle 2050* and *The Story of the End of the World*, with its existentialist musings, similarly depends on projecting present social anxieties into the future. While elsewhere in the museum the challenges of an aging population are presented in terms of the emancipatory potential of assistive technologies, the root concern with the challenge of longevity

is the same. The Tohoku earthquake has arguably altered attitudes towards these perceived future challenges from an emphasis on improving quality of life to one of survival. The question of earthquakes might have been approached as how we might one day be able to accurately predict them. This exhibition reframes the problem by questioning: what are the odds of dying in an earthquake? Can earthquakes ever be predicted? It is about achieving catharsis by confronting uncertain and uncontrollable things.

All of the exhibits at Miraikan are maintained by the combined efforts of professional staff and volunteers. Volunteers at the museum tend to be people that have retired. It is interesting, then, to consider that many of the themes being played out in the exhibition are also directly relevant to the volunteers, mortality, future uncertainty, changes in society due to technology and their potential benefits/losses. It is of course ironic that retired volunteers, who offer up their labour for free, largely maintain an exhibit inspired by the impending crisis of supporting an aging population.

A member of staff once lost patience with me for accidentally referring to the exhibition as “the end of life” rather than “the end of the world”. However, this slip of the tongue led me to consider the fact that my mistaken title would have been quite appropriate. In the exhibition, there are few, if any, scenarios presented where our planet and all life on Earth would be destroyed. Instead we are met with statistics on national suicide rates and the life span of various mammals, along with different forums for visitors to express their individual anxieties about their own future and mortality. It is really an exhibition about coming to terms with death and loss rather than an attempt to imagine the destruction of Earth. Although, nuclear war and environmental issues, that could potentially cause an apocalypse, can be seen among visitors’ concerns. Questions such as “What would you like to do with the rest of your life?” are intended to encourage visitors to ponder their own life rather than to present them with a vision of a future apocalypse.

What singles out *The Story of the End of the World* among Miraikan exhibits, that present visions of the future in which missing workers and kin are replaced through technological innovation, is that here the loss is never compensated. This loss is felt even in the structure of the exhibition space itself; there is no central object of curiosity or technological sophistication to gaze at or interact with. One could argue that absence is at the very heart of this exhibit. In the wake of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami there is no room for unbribed optimism. Instead, the museum presents an uncertain vision of the immediate future in which lost social relations are not easily replaced. In this exhibition, the only thing that can fill the void is the visitors and their thoughts. Rather than being faced with a technological utopia or even the destruction of Earth, the visitors are confronted with the uncertainty of the future and the inevitability of their own mortality.

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Contributors

Sébastien Bachelet
PhD Candidate
University of Edinburgh
S.Bachelet@sms.ed.ac.uk

Emily Lynn Cook
Undergraduate Student
University of St Andrews
elc5@st-andrews.ac.uk

Ian M. Cook
PhD Candidate
Central European University
cook_ian@ceu-budapest.edu

John Fahy
PhD Candidate
University of Cambridge
jf462@cam.ac.uk

Tereza Kuldova
Post-doctoral Fellow
University of Oslo
tereza.kuldova@iakh.uio.no

Theodoros Kyriakides
PhD Candidate
University of Manchester
theodoros.kyriakides@manchester.ac.uk

Rodolfo Maggio
PhD Candidate
University of Manchester
rodolfo.maggio@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Michael Shea
PhD Candidate
University College London
michael.shea.10@ucl.ac.uk



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