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13
POSTNORMAL CREATIVITY

Liam Mayo

Postnormal creativity
Chess has become very popular in my home recently. My five-year-old son Cassidy has become fixated with the nuances of the game. I am not a particularly gifted chess player myself, but one drizzly Sunday afternoon Cassidy and I found ourselves stooped over an old wooden chessboard, he with wide-eyed curiosity and me scratching my head, attempting to recall the rules of a game I had learned many decades earlier. Nowadays, Cassidy pursues me relentlessly for a match. Any spare moment and he is upon me with request, keeping his own tally of who leads who in our never-ending tournament of chess. Patrick, my three-year-old, is equally as engaged, although his interest peaks and wanes depending on who has captured whose queen (capturing the queen—apparently—signals certain victory). Patrick will hover around us, bouncing a rubber ball against the couch or the bookshelf, chiming into the game when he notices something interesting happening, or hurry us along when he gets bored, or trying to coax his brother and me away from the chessboard and into a game that he would prefer we all played—“I am so bored of this! Hurry up!”

Given that the only real value I can offer Cassidy on his quest to master the game of chess is the tireless commitment of a doting father, I went in search for different ways I could inspire his learning journey. Online, I came across a quote from Thomas Huxley (1868), “The chessboard is the world, the pieces are the phenomena of the Universe, the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature and the player on the other side is hidden from us.”

As someone interested in the ways in which reality is perceived, and how our perceptions of reality are now changing, this quote gave me pause for reflection. Pondering Huxley’s viewpoint—the world, the universe, the laws of nature, and our agency to respond to the moves of our opponent—a salient metaphor emerges for not only how we perceive reality but how our perceptions influence the way we think about the future.

Modern culture
Chess is a game of strategy after all, and while anyone can learn the rules of the game with relative ease, developing deeper insight into the game requires a practiced commitment, emotional reflection as well as an ongoing intellectual inquiry. That is to say that rather than
simply recognizing the characteristics of each element of the game—the chess board, the pieces, the rules of the game, and the opponent—but by understanding the active interplay between these, one may be able to achieve a strategic advantage. A strategic advantage—like capturing the queen—fosters a sense of certainty; our knowledge and experience tell us that a particular set of actions will elicit a desired outcome. The inference I take from Huxley’s metaphor, is that we should not simply recognize the different attributes of our reality—world, universe, nature, and agency—but seek to understand the relationship between these as a means to nurture strategic foresight for how we approach the future, and thus, gain certainty about where we are going, and change that is to come.

This premise fundamentally characterizes the modern approach to understanding the world around us: that certainty may be achieved through critical, rational, reasoned, and scientific inquiry. The foundation of modern society, a maturation of Enlightenment thinking, is that reality is what the subject (essentially, we humans) perceives of our objective world (the things all around us). What we are left with is western ontological constructs of subject/object as the dominant form of reality making. This perception, according to modernity, can be measured and rationalized through scientific inquiry. Huxley after all was a staunch proponent of human reason and the notion that certainty may be gained on scientific grounds. And while a diversity of thinking has infiltrated this space (postmodernism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism, to name a few), one central premise largely remains the same: through inquiry into the interplay between subject and object, a sense of certainty about our reality (or realities as the case may be) can be attained.

Yet, what is often taken for granted is that this premise is deeply cultural. To acknowledge this is to understand the ways in which culture governs our interpretations of the world around us. Culture, as the contemporary philosopher Yuval Harari states, is imagined order (Harari, 2014). Culture acts as a lens; it produces meaning and it brings purpose into focus. In interpreting the relationship between the different attributes of our reality, we must also acknowledge that all those attributes, those things that we consider to be normal, are cultural constructs—imagined order, but very much alive in the way that they influence all aspects of our life. What this means is that the instruments by which modern society is governed—the rejection of tradition in favor of progress, the prioritization of the individual over the communal, and marriage of the political, the vocational, and the aesthetic—are all constructs influenced by the monolithic culture of modernity.

Modern creativity

To interpret and make problematic the assumptions and cultural constructs that we use to make sense of our world has been a source of creative inspiration throughout the modern epoch. Artists such as Edvard Munch, Georgia O’Keefe, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky, Salvador Dali, and Andy Warhol are characterized by the rejection of the traditional art concepts, forms, and techniques and their absolute resolve toward innovation and progress in their work, thought and life. Their pursuit was to explore the juxtaposition between the seemingly contingent nature of life and modern societies yearning for certainty, thus challenging the audiences’ understanding of their relationship to the objective world.

Ernest Hemingway, the great novelist of modernity, experimented with an understated and economical style of literature that not only drew a stark contrast to the more adorned writing styles that had come before, but draws the reader to use their own imagination in their consumption of his works. Hemingway achieved this by abandoning unnecessary adjectives,
instead resting heavily on the use of nouns to structure his narrative. In doing so, Hemingway literally points to the objective world and invites the reader to use their imagination to create a life around the characters within his stories.

Nicholas Ray’s 1955 film Rebel Without a Cause is a cinematic representation of this. The angst that the young protagonists direct toward their parents (tradition) is palpable, although their reasoning is left somewhat opaque. In response to their frustrations, they commit acts of rebellion, that although seemingly trivial, appear to require a grave emotive response from the audience. And with the crescendo, the tension between the young protagonists and their parents appears to be resolved—the parents concede that the young people deserve to be treated with a greater degree of acknowledgment and the young people demonstrated a maturity beyond their frivolities (symbolized by the death of the character aptly named Plato). Modern creativity is a commitment to progress, through ongoing inquiry in our perceptions of reality. This inquiry is grounded in the individual, looking out at the world, and interpreting it. In this way, the arts in modernity are both vocational and political; they produce cultural artifacts to provoke critical inquiry and, as such, further progress.

Modern futures

This approach has bled into the way we think creatively about the future. It is a sweet coincidence that Thomas Huxley was the grandfather of the future-orientated writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley. Like the objective world, the future is outside us, beyond us, interpreted and understood through inquiry into our perceptions of it. The seminal futurist Jim Dator (1975) takes a quintessentially modern view of the future—seeing it as humankind’s “last frontier,” at risk of colonization lest action is taken. In light of this, theories about researching the future have been proposed and methods to achieve greater insight into the future have been developed, all of which play within the creative confines of Huxley’s world, universe, nature and agency quadrilogy. Creativity, for the futurist, is to welcome a diversity of voices and perspectives into this inquiry, to make problematic dominant assumptions, while mapping and articulating trends, events, and emerging issues (Gidley, 2017). Through this, images of the futures are interrogated, and new images emerge. Science fiction is of course one of the most poignant creative manifestations of modernity. By this reckoning, the future—like our reality—is both malleable and multiple: there are many futures, and as such, we can shape them to be desired spaces. For those aware of futures studies, there is familiarity here: by emphasizing the plurality of futures, and the diversity of voices, perceptions, and contexts, potentialities of the future are opened, and human agency is provoked. But I would argue, there is risk too. If the future is both the principle for action and the active space for the realization of potentialities, the obligation is suspended. There is an unexplained cognitive dissonance between changing reality as experienced and change as imagined; the future always seems like something that is going to happen rather than something that is emergent. In this context, the future, as it is conceptualized within modernity, presents an epistemological obstacle to eliciting action in the present. It is a thing that is rationalized into existence; the secular bastion of hope that remains afar; an indicator by which we will progress, rather than the proverbial burning platform for action in the present.

However, in an epoch characterized by significant change, this approach is inessential. The phenomenon of the universe lies far further beyond our understanding than, up until recently, we had thought. We may no longer fool ourselves that we can control nature. Indeed, we are learning, the hard way, that nature controls us. And the concept of agency has revealed
itself to be the notorious emperor without robes. The chessboard that is our world is shifting in ways that means grave uncertainties are abound. While we have discharged our creativity within the constructs of modernity, what are we to do when those constructs begin to rupture? When our conditioned reality ruptures, where to from here?

**Postnormal times**

Sardar (2010, 2015) argues that postnormal times is a transitional period, where well-established ways of knowing and being are rupturing, and new ones are yet to emerge. Ruptures are recurring points within the symbolic structure that testify to that structure’s fundamental incompleteness (Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012). But ruptures also provide opportunities to reimagine the nature and scope of how we know the world around us (Kingsmith, 2017). When ruptures occur in culture, the way we perceive reality is impacted. And, as our perception of reality is impacted, so too the way we approach the future is impacted. Postnormal times theory (Sardar, 2010, 2015; Sardar & Sweeney, 2016) conceptualizes how ruptures across the disciplines of modernity, particularly how our approaches to the future, are becoming insufficient for understanding and interpreting today’s increasingly complex and chaotic world (Mayo & Miah, 2021).

Modernity’s fallacy, postnormal times theory argues, is that the future is something that is going to happen, rather than something that is happening right now. That means that not only are we planning for the future in a way that we consider normal (Sardar, 2010, 2015), we are planning for a future that has already arrived (Rao, 2012). Moreover, the more we approach the future as though it is Dator’s last frontier (suspend obligation for action), the more exacerbated our experience of postnormal conditioning (an acute sense of ignorance and a greater proclivity toward nostalgia) (Mayo, 2020). I have proposed elsewhere that the contemporary perception of crisis (individually and collectively) is the manifestation of a cultural crisis, owed—in part—to the inability of the current dominant cultural frameworks to make sense of, and contextualize, the transformation that is occurring (Mayo, 2020).

Fundamentality, modernity, with its desire for rationalism, reason, and certainty, is ill-equipped to navigate our transformational epoch. Furthermore, because of modernity’s propensity to downplay change in the face of change (Mayo, 2020; Rao, 2012), a collective sense of uncertainty governs decision-making and suffocates our ability to leverage the current transformation toward new cultural archetypes and norms. With this, our cultural processes gridlock, stifling creativity, in what the futurist and historian Marcus Bussey calls postnormal paralysis (2017). Proponents of postnormal times theory (see: the Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies) argue that a postnormal landscape challenges well-established futures approach. Normal strategic planning and foresight work cannot succeed in postnormal times as long as uncertainties continue to be ignored.

To be clear—our postnormal times cannot be controlled, mitigated, or curbed, simply navigated (Sardar, 2015). Postnormal times theory focuses our attention on change in the present and aims to understand and describe the changing nature of change, to develop ways and means to navigate our contradictory, complex, and chaotic landscape. Navigating the imbroglio of postnormal times requires imagination as an intangible function that creates and shapes our reality (Sardar, 2010). As Sardar contends, “the kind of futures we imagine beyond postnormal times would depend on the quality of our imagination” (Sardar, 2010, p. 443). This is because imagination is culturally bound, nested in time and space; we are unable to imagine that of which we have no experience (Bussey et al., 2017). Imagination is the antecedent of creativity. Thus, postnormal times theory is a reframing of the importance
of futures approach and a gesturing toward the importance of the imagination in navigating the change of our age (Montuori, 2011; Sardar, 2010). My argument is that, in light of our postnormal times, the way we have manifested creativity within modernity requires reformulation. If navigation in postnormal times ruminates on the way that thinking about the future may be used as a tool that embraces ignorance and uncertainty (Sardar, 2010, 2013), I propose that the future in postnormal times should be considered with the sophistication anticipated by Bussey (2016): an entity that is yet to happen, freed of the burden of content knowledge—no facts to learn, no burden of evidence to weigh, and no information to manage, accessed through our imagination, fueled by our curiosity. This approach underscores the paradoxical characteristics of the future as an entity that “is ahead but also behind us, it never arrives but is always with us, it is unknowable yet there are things we do know” (Sardar, 2013, p. 6). This is a de–coupling—a break free—from the domination of present–centered imaginary that shapes our understandings of the future and an embrace of anticipation as a sensory device that moves us beyond conditioned reality toward something new—perhaps even surprising (Bussey et al., 2017).

To achieve this is to unlock anticipation as part of the imagining process. Anticipatory imagination (Bussey et al., 2017) extends across three domains of imaginations—personal, social, and cultural, while foregrounding the interdependence between all three, as a reorientation toward a future that offers an open set of possibilities and draws attention and awareness toward a yearning for alternatives already embedded in the present database of imaginaries. This yearning, Bussey (2016) argued, is the compass that focuses energy and gives meaning to futures engagements, deepening the utilitarian thirst for ever–expanding possibilities.

Of course, this is all about agency: the capacity of individuals and communities to make decisions concerning all main aspects of their lives in ways that are neither completely constrained nor completely without reference to social, economic, and family circumstances (Evans & Strauss, 2010). Agency refers to the agentive dimension of human subjectivity; the human–specific capacity to actively influence and change their living conditions (Brockmeier, 2009). By unlocking anticipatory imagination, agency is ignited and the uncertainty and ignorance that characterizes the postnormal condition may be embraced and overcome.

As such, postnormal times theory provides a framework that contextualizes contemporary change and opens space for anticipatory imagination to be unlocked. To enact this requires a framework that is rooted in postnormal times theory while driving an imaging process that elicits creative approaches to thinking about the future.

The three tomorrows

Working with my friends and colleagues, Jordi Serra del Pino and Christopher Jones, I have attempted to achieve this by developing a praxis for postnormal times theory (Mayo et al., 2021). Our praxis seeks to address the chaos, complexity, and contradictions prevalent in postnormal times (Sardar, 2010), and the speed, scope, scale, and simultaneity of postnormal change (Sardar, 2015), while simultaneously tackling the postnormal condition that stifles agency (Mayo, 2020). To develop this, we turned our attention to the Three Tomorrows (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016) as a framework that moves postnormal times theory beyond an analysis of our epoch, toward a creative practice that unlocks anticipatory imagination and ignites agency. The thrust of our work has been to use the familiar (albeit modern) setting of the futures workshop, as spaces for collective and anticipatory learning. For us, the futures workshop provides fertile ground for futurists to facilitate polylogues (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016). Polylogues, in and of themselves, are distinctly creative processes, providing conceptual spaces...
Postnormal creativity

and opportunities for the diversity of agendas to come together to negotiate outcomes toward unthought futures (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016).

The Three Tomorrows is deliberately juxtaposed against the Three Horizons (Curry & Hodgson, 2008; Sharpe, & Hodgson, 2006), the widely used normative and logical planning tool that presents alternatives available in any situation. As a framework, the Three Tomorrows articulates three distinctly different futures, “Extended Present,” “Familiar Futures,” and “Unthought Futures,” each with their own unique perspective on postnormal phenomena, and together providing utility in understanding how these phenomena unfold, interact, and impacts one another.

The first tomorrow, the “Extended Present,” may be understood as our mental projection of the present onto the future. It deals with the most widespread image of the future in foresight analysis, famously coined by Schwartz (1996) as the official future. With postnormal praxis, we explore with our participants the anticipations that are constructed on past and present experiences. This tomorrow is explicitly linear in nature and foregrounds current global crises and conjunctures. With workshop participants, we ask the questions: “What do you know about this issue/topic?; ‘Where is it going?’; How much has it changes to date?'; “How much of this understanding can we use to project change into the future?” (Mayo et al., 2021).

We emphasize the charm of the Extended Present and speak to how reassuring it is to rest on dominant ways of knowing the future; that there is comfort in the notion that we can learn about the future by using our past experiences. Through the process of exploring the Extended Present and developing scenarios, participants are encouraged to list the indicators by which they measure their issue/topic, the qualitative or quantitative measures by which they can demonstrate a history of change and what they will be looking to measure as indicators of change into the future (Mayo et al., 2021).

For Cassidy, in our never-ending tournament of chess, his mastery of the rules of the game, how the pieces move, and an insight into my habits as his opponent, his approach to the game may be considered through the lens of the Extended Present. His competence in these elements and his capacity to read and interpret the interplay between these concurrently determines how successful he will be in his endeavors to out-strategize me and claim victory. There is comfort for Cassidy in knowing that—for example—once he captures my queen, I am at a significant disadvantage. He has played me enough times to know he can capitalize on my bad habit of flooding one flank and neglecting to protect my key players on the other.

The Extended Present is the tomorrow participants cannot miss—the future that everyone is expecting to happen, that is readily available, and that can be formulated through trends (Mayo et al., 2021). Participants are provoked to reflect, not only on what they know about their issue/topic but what they do not know about it. The objective here is to highlight the voids, the gaps in knowledge, for participants to articulate for themselves what it is that they need to learn about their issue/topic.

The second tomorrow, the “Familiar Futures,” seeks to challenge and overcome the appeal of the dominant view of the future that underpins the Extended Present. The futurist Sohail Inayatullah’s (2008) used future is relevant here, making explicit the question: “Is your image of the future, your desired future, or is it unconsciously borrowed from someone else?” The arts are a particularly rich and diverse data pool from where our collective imagination draws alternative possibilities; painters, poets, philosophers, writers, and artists have often been among the first to identify the emerging issues of change precisely because of the ways they see reality in variance with the “mainstream.”

Recently, when I was playing Cassidy in a game of chess, I noticed that before he made a move, he would pause and take a deep breath. I asked him why he was doing it, and he told...
me that at his school, his teacher had explained to him the importance of slowing down and taking time to reflect before he decided how to move. He was now introducing this practice into his chess game. I also noticed he had begun to use his pieces to draw mine out to mount an attack; he was no longer simply anticipating my moves and responding, rather using his moves to tactically incite particular moves from me.

Here, in the Familiar Futures, participants need to be open to new sources of inspiration and to spot change or innovation in places that may seem unconventional in traditional approaches to planning. We encourage participants not to dwell on notions of likelihood or probability of transformation, rather to focus in on the impact that a change may cause on the issue/topic (Mayo et al., 2021). Black swan events have shown that small probability events may have a big impact and, therefore, it just does not make any sense to analyze them according to their likelihood. Thus, more scenarios may be developed, using different futures methods, or existing scenarios further interrogated and developed.

The third tomorrow, the “Unthought Futures,” refers to what is outside the assumptions and axioms of our worldview. This is difficult for us to grasp, not because it is truly unthinkable, but precisely because it is beyond the scope of what we consider imaginable. This is typically the most uncomfortable and challenging part of the Three Tomorrow’s process. Here, the principal call to action is to embrace anticipation, and use imagination, to focus our attention outside the framework of conventional thought and dismantle dominant cultural agendas. By unlocking anticipatory imagination, the Unthought Futures is a space that reinforces and reframes agency. With reinforced agency unlocking anticipatory imagination, one builds confidence and capacity to actively reframe contexts, and deploy skills and materials in problem-solving endeavors.

The Unthought Futures demands a different kind of exercise. Unlike the previous tomorrows, the emphasis here is not so much on looking at the futures in a particular way but on examining the previous scenarios through a diversity of perspectives (Mayo et al., 2021). Essentially, we need to understand why the preceding scenarios have favored some future options and ignored others. By fortune or design, Cassidy often finds himself viewing our game through the lens of the Unthought. Not only because his age means his cultural footing remains embryonic, but because his little brother Patrick forces his way into the game, insisting on being involved in the decision-making process for which piece should be moved where. “Why did you move your knight there?” Patrick will ask with dogged earnestness. “What are you going to do now Dad has moved there?” But Patrick won’t just stop there. He may switch ends of the table, and come and sit on my lap: “Why haven’t you moved your pawn there, Dad?,” “Why does your pawn only move in that direction?,” “Why can’t all three of us play at once?”

The realm of the Unthought is not about visioning desired futures, it is about interrogating the plethora of offerings at hand through a diversity of perspectives. It is about laying out all the scenarios, visions, and images of the futures that have been produced before, and seeking and bringing forth everything from the synergies and the overlaps, to the complementary and the contrary. Here, polylogues truly come alive. Workshop participants, having worked together through the Extended Present and the Familiar Future, now huddle in the Unthought. This is not collaboration, cooperation, or co-design, this is a negotiation, where agendas are named, and outcomes fought for. Polylogues are the manifest and tacit un-comfortability of working through the Unthought. As Sardar likes to point out—Unthought Futures are the realm where human agency can be rescued and reinforced.

For Cassidy and me, Patrick cannot be ignored. No matter how hard we try, the three-year-old that lingers by the chess board will sooner or later make his presence known and

116
Postnormal creativity

influence and impact our game. We may ask him to be quiet, but he won’t be quiet for long. We may move our game to another room in the house, but he will find us. We may give him another game to play, to keep him occupied. But he will soon be done with that, realizing our ploy to preoccupy him, and he will come back bolder than ever! Thus, as Cassidy and I have learned, we cannot ignore Patrick. We must bring Patrick into our games of chess, hear his voice and acknowledge his agenda, embrace his perspectives and ideas, and work with him to ensure he is achieving the outcomes he desires just as we are achieving ours. Lingering in the Unthought, this is chess by negotiation!

Cassidy and I have found we have a great deal more fun playing this way. Decisions are reached through careful and colorful conversations. We learn more about each other, by hearing how each other view the game, their perspective on where we are all up to and what should happen next. When we play like this, there are never really any winners or losers, rather the game of chess becomes a process of exploration and cocreation.

Postnormal creativity

There is more to this story. A new chapter that introduces a radical way of thinking; a way of thinking that deliberately seeks to disturb the human-obsessed (anthropocentric) approach of modern society (see earlier remarks regarding Enlightenment thinking dictates—reality equals human subject plus perception of the objective world), toward an approach that promotes and embraces ecological thought (Morton, 2010). This, somewhat jarring notion wants us to acknowledge that no being, construct, or object can exist independently from the ecological entanglement of our universe. I am arguing here that through postnormal creativity, we may access an understanding of our ecological entanglement in a way that not only acknowledges the implications this type of thinking has on reality making but on how we conceive of the future as well.

Let’s explore this notion via three salient points. One, polylogues provide conceptual spaces and opportunities for the diversity of agendas to come together to negotiate outcomes toward desired futures. With polylogues, postnormal creativity embraces tradition as part of progress (the voices and perspectives of Indigenous and first nations peoples as an example). Moreover, polylogues should not only occur across the diversity of voices and perspectives (Sardar, 2015) but across the diversity of all entities that make up the material world (the environment, animals, matter, for example). Everything in the universe has a voice.

Two, through anticipatory imaginings, agency is unlocked, not to prioritize the individual over the communal, but to ensure that the individual may make sense of their place in our transformational epoch. This is to foster an understanding of their nonlocality in a way that brings awareness that we are all enmeshed in something that may not be reduced simply to the sum of our relations. Postnormal creativity, by nurturing anticipatory imaginings, not only unlocks human agency but the agency of all things in the universe. It is through postnormal creativity emergent realities may reveal themselves, and so too new approaches to the future flourish.

Three, that through polylogues and anticipatory imagining, subjectivity may be reimagined in a manner that signals an ontological shift, from Enlightenment notions of “Being” to new notions of “Becoming” (Morton, 2010, 2017). This takes us toward a re-grounding of the subject of modernity (we humans) in the material world in a way that draws the future from a fixed point of the proverbial horizon, into the present, where change is actually happening and where issues need to be addressed. In doing so, postnormal creativity reformulates the notion of the future entirely.
Remember Huxley’s *world, universe, nature and agency* quadrilogy? The modern approach to reality making is that the subject (humans) perceives of our objective world (the things all around us); agency may only dwell within the human subject. We humans are dislocated and held at odds from our reality in ways that perpetuate our estrangement from the objects around us (Mayo, 2020; Morton, 2010). Thus, the future is approached as an entity outside us, beyond us, interpreted and understood through inquiry into our perceptions of it.

Postnormal creativity seeks to do away with the western ontological constructs of subject/object, in favor of a flat ontology; a universal ontology where all are objects and are given equivalent credence. In this way, Munch, Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp, Kandinsky, Dali, and Warhol, as the artists, have as much meaning and agency as the pieces of art itself. Further, the paints, the canvas, the wood that frames that canvas—all have the equal meaning and agency. Further, Hemingway, the writer, is an autonomous object, just as his stories are autonomous objects, and are equally as real and relevant as any other object that exists. Similarly, words on a page, and the manner in which they are articulated, shared, understood, digested, and interpreted; the characters within stories; the places those characters live, visit, and work in—are all objects, and should be treated as such. This is a rejection of the anthropocentrism of traditional philosophy (that human access sits at the center of being, organizing and regulating) and asserting that all entities share the similar characteristic of sublime unknowability (Martinson, 2015).

So, rather than interpret and make problematic the assumption and cultural constructs that we use to make sense of our world, creative inspiration in postnormal times is found in the complexity, chaos, and contradiction of a universe where all things have a voice and agency, equally. As Bussey (2022) argues, “this offers new ontological possibilities for individuals, communities and more widely, for our relational being with non-human fellow travellers.” What this means for me is, culture—and the cultural codings that influence and induce creativity—may be hacked and reformulated toward a more ecological conception of our relationships with the objective world.

**Postnormal futures**

There are spatiotemporal implications of this approach that define how the future may be understood in postnormal times. Postnormal futures accept that we are part of something far greater than us, that impacts us, but something we cannot tangibly conceive of. As we seek out the future, to know the future, we find that there is no future to know: well not when it comes to our future alone, anyway. Our nonlocality in postnormal futures means that the effects of the future are experienced across huge distance and time scales: you can experience the effects of global warming—rain, temperature, etc.—but you can never experience global warming, an entity unto itself, in its entirety. Just as every decision we make is about the future, our decision-making is enmeshed in the vast ecology of our universe; we are constantly functioning within the multifaceted influence of unseen forces. We are always inside the future; it is a haunting omnipresent force distributed across continuums of experience. It haunts our very existence—no matter who we are, or how we try to avoid it. Through the setting of the sun, the change of seasons, the progressive warming of the globe, its effects are experienced, although we can never comprehend it in its entirety. If you are studying an image of the future, you are not studying the future, you are studying a drop of rain that is an image of the future as climate.

Yet, while a postnormal future is felt as the haunting omnipresent, its causal marks help us identify and understand it. This is an embrace of Rao’s (2012) notion that the future is

118
Postnormal creativity

something that is actually happening—now—rather than something that is going to happen. Postnormal times inspires the futurist to approach the future from the purview of the present moment as a shifting, ambiguous stage set, rather than the dominant metaphysical notion of presence as time; as a succession of “now” points.

Thus, postnormal futures are about an inherently ecological awareness that liberates and consoles us, that shepherds us toward an understanding of our truly intimate relationship with nonhuman parts of the biosphere. Postnormal futures are epistemologically and ontologically non-hierarchical, a mesh of open and complex systems, that remind us that the future is an already existing totality for which we are all directly responsible. In doing so, the postnormal futurist is able to comprehend the truly futural nature of the future; postnormal times forces us to consider the vastness of reality (the real), on time and space scales far beyond our very being.

As an example of what I mean by this, consider for a moment my mobile phone: designed in an office, crafted in a studio, and constructed in a factory—from ancient minerals mined from the ground, will spend the best part of its working life intimately pressed against my flesh, keeping all my secrets, and after death, the mercury from its battery will still exist beneath the earth’s crust in 250,000 years’ time. This is not really a mobile phone, is it? I don’t really own it at all. And we are not really able to address its existence on any preconceived past, present, future continuum. Its matter, its energy, its essence shares our universe. It has its own distinct subjectivity. As such, it has agency, voice, and an agenda, all of which must be considered as part of our negotiation when it comes to polylogues. The postnormal futurists know this, and this knowing becomes part of our navigation through postnormal times.

Postnormal creativity turns these emergent ideas into reality. Thus, postnormal culture is borne. What we have then is a shift from asking, “how do we plan for the future?” to the question, “what do we do now?”

Final thoughts

Back at home with Cassidy, our never-ending tournament of chess continues. His dogged enthusiasm to learn more about the game is infectious. “Do you have a plan, Dad?” he now asks me before each game. At five, he senses that his grasp of the chessboard, the pieces, and the rules, is adequate—it is me, his opponent, that he needs to master. “Dad always does that!” he will tell his brother, Patrick, whenever I make a move that he has anticipated. And when he beats me, which he is now genuinely doing more and more these days, he will look me in the eye and say, “Your plan didn’t work Dad. Checkmate!”

Note

1 I use the terms, “we,” “us,” and “our” as a collective noun that captures not only my own species (humans) but all objects that share the world. My aim with this use of language is to acknowledge multiplicity but intentionally avoid relativism through an embrace of what the philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2019) calls the new collective subject, “a ’we-are-(all)-in-this together—but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same’ kind of subject” (p. 54). This is an important distinction to make in the embrace of postnormal time theory; the effects of postnormal times impact all of us.

References


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