A GONZO FUTURIST MANIFESTO
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2012

1. INTRODUCTION: VERY VUCA

2011 was a rum year. Though there there are those who would paint it as outlier or aberation, I see no reason to think things will quietly return to normal. Without substantive, structural change, the genuflections of austerity and 'expansionary fiscal contraction' can be nothing short of cargo cult behaviour — a political echo of the Vanuatuan tribe who, when confronted with a world that exceeded their cultural scaffolding, ended up worshipping Prince Philip.

We are all Vanuatuans, now. Subjected to uncertainty or sudden disruption, our grasp of causality collapses like an undercooked sponge cake. With brains wired for pattern recognition, in the absence of signal, we'll (metaphorically) run over hot coals to derive meaning from noise. To Pavlovian dogs, clouds-with-faces, and the succubi of sleep paralysis, we can now add austerity economics. The rhetoric of 'expansionary contraction' is today's sympathic magic. Keep Calm and Carry On. Keep your head down. You're not important, so make yourself small, docile, unobtrusive. Go and out and shop, and everything will go back to normal.

Trust the financial authorities to feed another scalp to the markets, if you must, but treating markets as people (or, worse, secular gods) is like expecting a wicker man full of kidnapped townsfolk to make polite conversation at your next dinner party. Sooner or later, you're going to have to acknowledge that we're not going back to the high-gloss plastic hedonism of the 1990s. There's no time machine for us; no recanting that particular djinn.

Instead, we have the dubious honour of living in post-normal times. Hooray for us.

As used here, the concept of the 'post-normal' originates with British philosopher Jerry Ravetz and Argentinian mathematician Silvio Funtowicz. In their work on science policy and risk, the term 'post-normal' is used to describe situations where 'facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent' (Ravetz, 1999). Does that sound familiar? Scholar and commentator Ziauddin Sardar suggests it should, for ours is an age:

'characterised by uncertainty, rapid change, realignment of power, upheaval and chaotic behaviour. We live in an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense. … a transitional age, a time without the confidence that we can return to any past we have known and with no confidence in any path to a desirable, attainable or sustainable future.' (Sardar, 2010)

More than anything else, this is the background hum of the 2010s. For a second opinion, we need look no further than the feeder schools and colleges of the American military-industrial establishment, where the talismanic acronym 'VUCA' has come to identify operational contexts of notable 'volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity'. VUCA situations change quickly and in unexpected ways, with participants befuddled by information overload and the fogs of war, and the risk of second-order blowback more deadly than any enemy.

Whether on or off the battlefield, 2011 was very VUCA.

2. BETWEEN COLLAPSE AND TRANSCENDENCE

In 2012, then, things reach a head. The world spins faster, accruing whole orders of complexity as the American Empire crumbles into a decidedly more interesting new world order. After twenty, fifty, or five-hundred years of globalisation (depending), we stumble across the threshold of (dis)integration, watch the Mayans emerge from their hole in the sky, and find out what we've won: transcendence or oblivion.

Well, that's the scheduled broadcast. The looming reality is a lot less binary. In postnormal times, the world has both centrifugal and centripetal tendencies: transcendence and collapse; integration and fragmentation. History didn't end with Fukuyama. Collapse contains the fractal seeds of transcendence. Things come together as they fall apart. Ours is not the flat world of Thomas Friedman, but the 'unevenly-distributed' future of William Gibson. It has contours.

With the mists of VUCA obscuring the theatre of action, it can, at times, be tricky to work out the precise configuration of these contours. For everything beyond our immediate experience, we rely on media — and while the social media 'revolution' has democratised access to these tools, it's also made it easier to spread rumour and misinformation. As we enter 2012, be sure to check your bullshit detector is present and switched on.

For Mark Lind, the collision of transcendence and collapse manifests as 'turboparalysis'; a 'combination of vigorous and dramatic motion with the absence of steady movement in any particular direction.' (Lind, 2011) In this reading, a sudden spike in VUCA dynamics causes big actors — big business, nation-states, organisations — to flail wildly, muddying the waters with u-turns and knee-jerk cargo cult behaviour as the old certainties are swept away. For cyberpunk arch-deacon Bruce Sterling, this is the Transition-to-Nowhere: 'There's neither progress nor conservatism, because there's nothing left to conserve and no direction in which to progress.' (Bruce Sterling, Reboot 11)

From the US Republican Party to Occupy Wall Street, from Benghazi to Wukan, 'wheels are spinning furiously and engines are being gunned, to no effect.' (Lind, 2011) Well, seemingly to no effect. Though my evidence is shaky, I'm tempted to interpret this as apparent retrograde motion. All is not yet lost!

So, though we may yet lose 2012 to the churn and flailing of turboparalysis, it isn't going to spell the end of the world — and certainly not in a way that sticks the programme of our Mesoamerican-quoting brethren. Worryingly, it doesn't need to. The meme has escaped the laboratory. As I write, it's already affecting people's behaviour, lending a nervous edge to pop culture and public discourse. For archeoastronomer Anthony Aveni, the rhetorical impact of the 2012 phenomenon hints at a deeper cultural malaise. Deprived of the certainties of Progress-with-a-capital-P:

'we turn outward to imagined entities that lie far off in space or time — entities that just might be in possession of superior knowledge … If we cannot talk to ourselves, maybe we can talk to the Other — even if they never spoke our tongue. Evolution needs an assist; our world needs saving. The Maya offer us a transcendent fix, an alignment, an epiphany. And so we romance them.' (Aveni, 2009: 161)

Were we to scrub 2011's torrent of world-historical events from history, this desperation would have been enough to ensure 2012 was weirder than the baseline. Is it enough to meet the challenges of the postnormal with half-hearted nods to a cosmology based on human sacrifice and the cultivation of maize? Of course not. If we're looking to invisible Mayans for the answers to our world-historical crisis, then something, somewhere, has gone very wrong. Against a background of peak oil, protein, attention, and confidence, perhaps we've reached peak future, with 2012 as 'the mythical wall where the imagination of the West comes to an abrupt end.' (Montuori, 2011: 224)

Montuori's argument is persuasive. In terms of future visions, what do we have left to work with? Microsoft concept videos, Hollywood apocalypse, and the jet pack dreams of greying Baby Boomers. Meanwhile, trapped between economic apocalypse and transformations, we're besieged by a world we barely understand. Bruce nails the mood:

'Things are just falling apart, you can't believe the possibilities, it's like anything is possible, but you never realized you're going to have to dread it so much. It's like a leap into the unknown. You're falling toward earth at nine hundred kilometres an hour and then you realize there's no earth there.' (Bruce Sterling, Reboot 11)

Preprogrammed to avoid unnecessary risk, our mammalian brain tells us to dig in; to fortify; to consolidate our position. Drawing the curtains, we play dead, for fear of what we might lose. And it works, for a time: the monsters don't eat you. But when you open your eyes, they're still there — a pair of bloodshot eyes, glowing in the darkness. Despite the monsters, this is not the time for retrenchment. Far from it! Instead, post-normal times call for post-normal measures; they urge you to up your game. In the immortal words of Hunter S. Thompson, 'when the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.'

In 2012, the going gets that much weirder.

3. ACTION AND DECISION-MAKING FOR THE PROFESSIONAL WEIRDO

In 1991, Bruce Sterling gave a speech in San Jose. Extolling the strengths and virtues of the power weirdo, he urged the audience to avoid the spring-loaded bear-trap of mediocrity:

'You don't get there by acculturating. Don't become a well-rounded person. Well rounded people are smooth and dull. Become a thoroughly spiky person. Grow spikes from every angle. Stick in their throats like a puffer fish.' (Sterling, 1991)

With an idiosyncratic outlook and skill set, the power weirdo — and its subset, the gonzo futurist — is particularly well-placed to deal with a turbulent decade. With an eye on the road ahead, she can meet or dodge situations as they arise, charting a clear course through the VUCA battlefields of a turboparalytic world. One thing we can say: in 5-10 years time, ours will be a world of ubiquitous computing (in some form). When sensors are everyone, and the 'big data' of the post-normal threatens to bury us all in a torrent of noise, finely tuned sense-making capabilities may prove to be your greatest asset. For futurist Scott Smith, 'warehousing massive amounts of data is simply an exercise in hoarding if we can't see, contextualize, and use the patterns in the noise.' (Smith, 2011) The pattern analyst is

less likely to find her job outsourced or automated, but, to effectively lever the patterns in the noise, we have to be able distinguish between real patterns and the faces in the clouds.

We need pattern recognition. Pattern Recognition. The protagonist of William Gibson's 2003 novel of the same name, Cayce Pollard, though something of a 'self-facilitating media node', provides a model for the gonzo futurist. For Cayce, the lived experience of 9/11 flipped a switch somewhere, hyper-sensitising her to the aesthetics of corporate branding. By the time the story begins, she's found a niche as a coolhunter and creative consultant, exploiting her body's physical, pre-cognitive reaction to logos (the bad ones induce nausea and panic).

'Dorotea removes an eleven-inch square of art board from the envelope. Holding it at the upper corners, between the tips of perfectly manicured forefingers, she displays it to Cayce. (…) There is a drawing there, a sort of scribble in thick black Japanese brush, a medium she knows to be the in-house hallmark of Herr Heinzi himself. To Cayce, it most resembles a syncopated sperm, as rendered by the American underground cartoonist Rick Griffin, circa 1967. She knows almost immediately that it does not, by the opaque standards of her inner radar, work. She has no way of knowing how she knows.' (Gibson, 2003: 12)

Though Cayce's 'base' of domain-specific knowledge is both wide and deep — note the reference to Rick Griffin — she has no way of knowing how she knows. She's aware of an 'inner radar,' but, as something separate from her conscious mind, has no idea how it works. Though Cayce leverages her capacities as a source of income, her role of sensitive-slash-coolhunter is more bodily disposition than career. Unpicking the details and implications of Gibson's novel, literary theorist Lauren Berlant describes how Cayce's disposition allows her 'to ride the wave of the moment, to make her situation what it is, a thing to live through, be embedded in, and feel out' (Berlant, 2008: 11). Sounds a bit gonzo, doesn't it?

Lacking Cayce's near-supernatural capabilities, our gonzo futurist needs a prosthetic substitute; some kind of cognitive aikido. This would be a general framework that would allow her to easily grok the dynamics of the post-normal world, and identify the key sites and tipping points for action. To my knowledge, the closest currently existing equivalent is the OODA loop. Originally devised by US military strategist John Boyd, the OODA loop is a rolling heuristic cycle, a structure for those who need to make quick decisions under pressure. OODA. Observe, orient, decide, act.

The gonzo futurist is a super-empowered hopeful individual. She may have been a 'graduate with no future' (Mason, 2011), or the victim of public sector cuts, but has since grieved and moved on. She plays, tests, and play tests; making the best of the tools and technologies at her disposal. Comfortable calling on (and being called on by) her friends, peers, and tribe, her sense-making skills are social and connected. Her thinking may, occasionally, 'be located inside the brains of other people.' (Wheeler, 2011)

The gonzo futurist is a 'deep generalist' (Cascio, 2011) and 'analytical polyglot' (Smith, 2011). She has an 'almost supernatural awareness of impacts and implications … [is] ready to adapt when necessary, building long-lasting systems when possible.' (Cascio, 2011) Like Cayce Pollard, she is a 'woman of affect, not of feeling (…) [an] empress of the amygdala.' (Berlant, 2008: 11)

The gonzo futurist is resilient. She works smart, not hard. She has one eye on the 'adjacent possible' (Johnson, 2011), switches codes, and contributes to the commons. She may be privileged, but has no time for competition, alpha male dick-waving, or beggar-thy-neighbour. Her success does not come at your expense.

Bombarded by stimuli, the gonzo futurist is an OODA cyborg. Observe, orient, decide, act. Let's break that down.

3A. OBSERVE AND ORIENT

For the gonzo futurist, the observation stage of this operational loop looks like some vernacular, ad-hoc ethnography. This kind of observation is shorthand for all kinds of evidence-gathering, so read widely, take photos, and ask questions. Probe. Keep records. If something seems incongruous, it's probably important.

When it comes to observation, your nemesis is the filter bubble — an echo chamber forged by Google and Facebook; a 'unique universe of information for each of us … which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information' (Pariser, 2011: 9) It may be comfortable in the bubble, but 'there's less room for the chance encounters that bring insight and learning.' (Ibid.: 15) The future is a crime scene, and all the clues are out there. Get out into the field. Wherever possible, maximise your exposure to randomness — lever the tools of the 'media cyborg' (Sloan, 2010), and go to more parties.

The observations you make are the stars by which you navigate. The orientation stage of the OODA loop builds on these, as you begin to construct a map of the situation in which you find yourself. At this stage, you need to trust your gut, the pre-conscious, and the unknown unknowns — things that you don't know that you know. Blending new information with previous experience, you should look for links. Pursue unexpected synergies. Cultivate a cultural and aesthetic sensitivity to weak signals.

Screw objectivity. When true objectivity is impossible, the pursuit of such leaves you open to exploitation. Berlant described Gibson's protagonist, Cayce Pollard, as 'empress of the amygdala' (Berlant, 2008: 11). Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler describe this portion of the brain's temporal lobe as 'our early-warning system, an organ on high alert, constantly scanning our environment for anything that could threaten survival.' (Diamandis and Kotler, 2012) Gonzo futurism wants you to listen to your amygdala: elevate the subjective, the emotional, and the memetic. Future shock is social and psychological, so keep asking: how do these observations make you feel?

Read (and hang out with) other people who get it. My list includes John Robb, Paul Mason, Carlota Perez, Bruce Sterling, Noah Raford, Marina Gorbis, Jamais Cascio, and Venkatesh Rao. Your list should include enough people to cover any weaknesses on the part of a given individual.

In the words of Bob Johansen, it's best to enter this stage of the loop with a comprehensive set of 'strong opinions, weakly held.' Be prepared to abandon beliefs as new information surfaces. Intransigence is the enemy. Don't dig in. The war on cargo cults urges you to

question received wisdoms, challenge groupthink, and uproot legacy futures wherever you find them. Avoid hubris. You don't have all the answers, but you can bring better questions.

Turn your own evolutionary biases to your advantage. Don't just be a slave to your amygdala, but put it to work. In Inside Jokes, Hurley, Dennett and Adams suggest that the positive buzz of 'humour' exists to mitigate the risks of quick-and-easy heuristic processes that the brain relies on 'to permit real-time conclusion-leaping' (Hurley, Dennett & Adams, 2011: 4). To weed out false assumptions and magical thinking:

'there has to be a policy of double-checking these candidate beliefs and surmisings, and by the discovery and resolution of these at breakneck speed is maintained by a powerful reward system — the feeling of humor; mirth — that must support this activity in competition with all the other things you could be thinking about' (Hurley, Dennett & Adams, 2011: 13)

For Stuart Candy, 'design is primarily a search for killer apps, while the futurist hunts killer imps' (Candy, 2010, 188). To cultivate a cultural-aesthetic sensitivity to weak signals, you need to hitch the chemical releases a stimulated amygdala, and — latterly — the mirth response, to these 'killer imps', something which entails a certain level of brain training. We're not talking sudoku, here. Instead, maximise your exposure to cognitive dissonance and big weird shit. In 2010-11, Sterling and Gibson began talking about the 'fubar' as a metric unit of contemporary weirdness. The gonzo futurist lives on an information diet of news reports forged from raw futurity, situations fucked-up-beyond-all-recognition, and fleeting manifestations of the technological sublime. They focus on things that exceed their frame of reference, deliberating seeking out that which provokes, in the words of Joseph Addison, 'an agreeable kind of horror.'

Some of this effect derives from a lack of limits and boundaries, the sudden revelation of previously-obscured levels of situational complexity, and the juxtaposition of disparate elements. As Sardar notes, 'since everything is interconnected, complex and chaotic, and changing rapidly, nothing can actually be described with any certainty.' (Sardar, 2010) The best we can hope for is a partial mapping; a 'you are here' marker in a fuzzy, partial birds-eye view.

3B. DECIDE AND ACT

Having (semi-)successfully oriented yourself in a volatile and uncertain environment, the next challenge is to move from mapping the world to acting in it. The characteristics of this new operational environment striate the space within which you can act, with the complexity and ambiguity of the 2010s presenting a unique set of challenges for those seeking to leave a lasting dent in the world. As Sardar argues, the conditions of VUCA teach us an vital lesson: ' the notions of control and certainty are becoming obsolete … [today,] there is no single model of behaviour, mode of thought, or method that can provide an answer to all our interconnected, complex ills.' (Sardar, 2010)

With no way of preventing blowback, or unexpected, potentially even counter-productive, second-order effects, today's social actants have to be prepared to relinquish control. This is a war on timidity. The actant of 2012 has to be prepared to make decisions with incomplete

information, optimising their plans within the constraints of the visible and the known. She understands the intrinsic value of prototyping, beta testing, simulation, and roleplay. These are, in Cascio's words, tools and strategies which deploy 'iteration in service of complexity, diversity as a means of dynamic integration into a changing environment.' (Cascio, 2011)

Equally, the gonzo futurist knows when not to act. She recognises the difference between playing dead and saying no. She keeps a small footprint, and has a bug-out bag locked and loaded by the door.

The gonzo futurist hails the social possibilities of acting-in-concert-with-others. Though careful to avoid reinscribing the dynamics of groupthink, she recognises the importance of the time-limited, stand-alone project. Hers, after all, is a post-auteur world. Though superempowerment promises to arm the individual with tools of unprecedented potency, from garage biotechnology through 3D printing and autonomous drones, 'there is no necessity or inevitable rule that such individual empowerment will be inclusive, extensive and equitably distributed or dedicated to collective benefit.' (Sardar, 2010: 4) The most effective way to forestall the more dystopian scenarios is to identify a tribe-of-affinity; your personal community-of-interest. As Montuori says, 'in postnormal times, creativity will have a few surprises in store for us … [and] may paradoxically become normal in the sense that it will not be the province of lone tortured geniuses any longer (which it was not anyway), but an everyone, everyday, everywhere, process' (Montuori, 2011: 221-222)

When you act, act with courage, free from the fear of consequences beyond your control. Try not to sweat the small stuff.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the world of 2012, Sardar echoes Aveni in arguing that 'our current impasse represents a failure of imagination … [and the] subservience of imagination to orthodoxy.' (Sardar, 2010) As we come up against the limits of our frames of reference, 'what we have taken as normal, conventional and orthodox just does not work any more.' (ibid.)
In this context, our best weapons are imagination, creativity, and a recognition of the sheer contingency of the times in which we find ourselves. Here, there's a single panel from an XKCD comic that — by now — must form a load-bearing part of my cognitive architecture:

'You're curious and smart and bored, and all you see is the choice between working hard and slacking off. There are so many adventures that you miss because you're waiting to think of a plan. To find them, look for tiny interesting choices. And remember that you are always making up the future as you go.' (Munroe, 'Choices: Part 4')

This, perhaps more than anything else, is the gonzo futurist's creed. Good luck out there.

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