

Reinstating Value in Pre-Modern Futures Techniques

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ABSTRACT

Exclusive use of a rational worldview has seen the summary dismissal of pre-modern futures techniques by modern professional futurists. This dismissal has hidden away any actual or potential value of these techniques from the field. Given the wide spread public use of these techniques, both past and present and possibly in the future, it seems prudent to understand their value to human societies. There is also potential value for the futures field in understanding how these pre-modern antecedents have led to modern techniques, and might foreshadow post-modern developments.

INTRODUCTION

The history and depth of a futures orientation...

The illustrious H.G. Wells is often deferred to as the father of contemporary futures studies. Three millennia before Wells started 'Anticipations: An experiment in prophecy' in 1901¹ however, human societies unknown to each other had already devised means to engage with their futures using astrology.

Systems of astrology attempt to comprehensively conceive of the forces active within us and the world. This sense of contemplating the whole of life at once is a broad context within which we can situate our decisions and actions. It is a map that allows meaning to exist and inform our decisions and actions.

The discipline of psychology informs us there are many maps or ways of meaning making, each with different scales of detail, levels of accuracy, and types of information. The investigation of different ontological and epistemological forms lends support to evolutionary views of humanity. From this perspective each emergent capability transcends and includes the previous capability. Each new epistem adds another vista on life, each new ontology expands our experience of existence.

So if there is a developmental tree, on which branch is futures studies sitting? What is the trunk that is supporting our position? Are there higher branches yet to emerge?

THE MODERN

Pre-modern, modern and post-modern futures studies can be seen as the product of pre-rational, rational and post-rational worldviews respectively...

In '*Transcending Flatland*' Richard Slaughter argues that 'modern' futures studies (FS) are mostly the product of the 'instrumental rationality' meaning structure.² Slaughter identifies several blind spots of this meaning making structure or worldview. In failing to integrate previous and concurrent developments in understanding and relating to our world industrialised societies and FS have denied recognition of important forces in our realities and have, and will, paid dearly. Slaughter commences a long needed redress of integrating current developments in human understanding. By continuing his analysis FS still needs to adequately address previous developments, those of 'pre-modern' eras. The modern rational branch needs to comprehend its many leaves, and also appreciate its trunk of support which is in part pre-rational, pre-modern futures studies.

Beyond the modern rational worldview, Slaughter identifies new shoots of growth. One is the integrative branch, an integral way of being and knowing. This 'post-modern' branch values

integrating as many worldviews as possible. A meta-worldview to provide a broader and deeper perspective, a richer context from which to draw new meanings. A worldview able to include the indisputable gifts of the modern with emerging post-modern forms of meaning making. It simultaneously calls for the integration of pre-modern and the pre-rational, aspects required in any healthy modern rational and comprehensive (or integral) post-modern post-rational FS developments.

Before we move to the integral branch, this essay will attempt to appreciate the trunk that supports modern FS, and then glance up at what that might be. We will use a modern rational worldview to appreciate the pre-modern legacy, relate modern methods to pre-modern futures techniques (PMFT), and highlight some aspects that need to be included in any integral embrace by post-modern FS.

MODERN CRITICISMS OF THE PRE-MODERN

For each valid criticism of PMFT, a different interpretation affords insight into enduring value...

Despite the common growth of citizens in industrialised societies to rational modern modes of thinking and behaviour, a fascination with PMFT prevails. Indeed, it has seen a resurgence in the so called new age movements over recent decades. So what do pre-rational pre-modern methods of understanding have that attracts rationally enlightened modern humans? There may be many answers, but we'll start our inquiry with modern FS critiques of PMFT and then search the Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies (KBFS) for further clues.³

Dismissal is the common disposition of modern FS towards PMFT. These assessments seem to be from a rational instrumental modernist stance. The grounds for dismissal involve the unscientific nature of PMFT, incompatibility of assumptions, and/or mis-interpretation and subsequent distorted description of the nature and purpose of the methods. The only techniques recognised (and many are⁴) are ones developed in modern times and couched in modern rational language and means of knowledge manipulation.

The main references to PMFT in the KBFS are by Inayatullah, Coates and Garrett.⁵ Inayatullah provides a critical sketch of astrology and prophecy, citing faith and prediction-as-possible, respectively, for their dismissal. Coates boldly excludes all methods that are not in his definition 'public,' ie empirically repeatable to achieve the same results, and in the process grossly mis-categorises not only pre-modern, but also many modern techniques. Garrett simply recommends futurists 'set aside' pre-modern techniques and acknowledge the 'bewildering array' of modern endeavours that are still to be comprehended.

Perhaps this dismissal is fair enough. Enlightenment rationality has furnished humanity with enormous riches. Maybe their irrelevance has been assumed as common knowledge amongst serious futurists at least. Perhaps, however, PMFT have been overlooked.

None of the approaches mentioned are adequate if an accurate assessment of PMFT on rational grounds with fair interpretations and assessments is reasonable to expect. None adequate if aspects of the PMFT are, by evolutionary logic, to be integrated with modern methods on the way to post-modern. PMFT could be valuable as antecedents of current methods and may yield a hermeneutic genealogical understanding of, or bear inclusion in a new and limited form with, modern techniques. Further, they are still in use today and duly deserve to be understood in their own right and then their influence on societies' futures thinking. They may have an important impact on futures endeavours, professional and personal, in times to come. How this could be so will be explored later.

How valid are the critiques of PMFT in the KBFS? Can a reinterpretation yield more insights into the value of astrology to futures thinking, for example?

'Public' FS methods are necessary. It is obvious to rational thinking that a repeatable technique be developed to be valuable. It is however a gross miss-calculation to assume that because the method is public, the results will always be the same. The form of results may be similar in scenario planning or vision exercises or using other methods, yet the detailed content can vary significantly. It may never be similar. When intangible meanings and subjective preferences are heavily involved in generating results, there are potentially as many differences as individuals contributing.

Astrology is a public method with similar forms of results yet many different contents. The solar system and each planet's common symbols and myths are open to anyone to investigate and use. The interpretations and meaning they may hold for people differs widely however, even amongst internationally renowned professional astrologers.

Rational thinking regards faith in a system of prediction, that doesn't afford consistent and accurate results, as deficient. Astrology as prediction then is guilty as charged. It has never held up under the empirical scrutiny of a rational worldview.⁶ But what about faith in one's future and ability to influence it?⁷ Isn't a system of comprehending the past, present and future and that encourages positive action of some value?⁸ Astrology here serves two values, facilitating one to think inclusively of past-present-future and also supporting faith in one's ability to influence the future.

Prediction as a principle of action regarding the complexities of life has been adequately discounted.⁹ Prediction continues unabated nonetheless. Some forms of prediction are regarded as more valid than others, such as trends over events, accepting that most are heavily qualified. So what value is there in the prediction of astrology? Could it be engaged to inform contemplation and decisions when acting as a statement of probable futures given 'business as usual?' Don't many rational futurists use similar predictions?

Each criticism of PMFT holds some validity, yet each is a site of existing and potentially enduring value to futures thinking. Further criticisms may also reveal further values. What other values do PMFT hold that the KBFS might clue us into?

PRE-MODERN VALUES FOR MODERN FS

The values of PMFT are speaking through modern FS - are there voices we haven't heard or listened to enough?

The only inviting access to PMFT in the KBFS is found in Sohail Inayatullah's '*Causal Layered Analysis: Post-structuralism as Method*'.¹⁰ The technique centres around a critical analysis of four distinct layers of the issue of concern: the litany, social problem, discourse/worldview and myth/metaphor.¹¹ It is the level of myth/metaphor that holds our first clue.

Astrology can be seen as a system of metaphors and myths projected onto neutral night skies. They represent our schemas for understanding the way life works. Importantly, they embody generalised assumptions about the nature of reality and our place in it distilled from millennia of human experience. Assumptions that are generally proven false when tested in rational experiments assessing objectivity accuracy. What is missed however, is the qualitative understanding. The way they speak to our feelings. While these qualitative meanings can be investigated along hermeneutic lines, the important point is that feelings and intangible qualities are often overlooked by a rational worldview. Feelings are mostly pre-rational.

Astrology's metaphors and myths largely enact pre-rational processes, intangible experiences and feelings as they connect to one's thoughts. Simply put they feel right in the way they represent our experience. The valuable insight here from evolutionary psychology is that you can not completely separate feeling from thought. Rational thought must transcend and include pre-rational feeling. The branch needs the support of the trunk. Rational thought devoid of connection to pre-rational feeling, is regarded as pathological, and in the least, to be more irrational than rational.

Inayatullah's critical approach leads to our second clue. James Ogilvy argues that 'critical theory insists on seeing the world as a whole...[the] realm of inquiry [is] the human condition...this totalising perspective is...necessary.'¹² Astrology is a systematic attempt to comprehend the varied forces of life, their nature, qualities and relations. As such it fulfils Ogilvy's critical objectives.

Other clues to be found in the KBFS are in McKenzie Wark's *Tech Noir Cinema and the 'Techno-Fear' Future*, 'Yehezkel Dror's *Futures Studies for Contemplation and Action*,' and Mahdi Elmandjra's *Cultural Diversity: Our Key to Survival in the Future*.' Wark highlights the value of cinema in reflecting fears, desires and visions of the future and the now. Astrology and PMFT that engage the 'tangle of emotional and rational investments and suspicions' can provide similar value. Dror emphasises that overarching principles of contemplation and action are central to FS. Astrology too encourages contemplation before inviting action. Along with the need for diversity of values, ethnicity and nationality, might Elmandjra's analysis stretch to include the cultural investments in PMFT, like astrology, that are still valued and used in the modern world?

No doubt there are many more ways of understanding the values found in PMFT and their relation to modern futures thinking. These have been but a cursory sampling from one source. A more rigorous and detailed account is in order to fully appreciate why modern people use pre-modern techniques. We need to understand how modern FS reflects a growth through and from PMFT. We should also identify the aspects of both pre-modern and modern FS (particularly those common to both as exemplified above) that need to be integrated to form and support the further development of post-modern and even post-post modern FS.

It is to post-modern FS we will now, briefly, turn.

PRE-MODERN VALUE FOR POST-MODERN FS

The value of PMFT could be twofold: to be integrated and to foreshadow developments in FS.

It might be possible to catch a glimpse of the nature of post-modern future techniques by further investigating PMFT. Exploring Slaughter's use of Ken Wilber's insights into pre-modern, modern and post-modern worldviews, the effects of an organising rule emerged that is of relevance to our discussion: the pre/trans fallacy.¹³

To start again with astrology, the general symbology codified therein finds parallels across diverse cultures that originally developed their systems in isolation. As such, these myths and metaphors appear to be common human understandings, or more aptly archetypes. As archetypes, following the works of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and then Wilber, they represent both pre-rational or unconscious schemas of understanding, reflections of our instinct and felt sense of reality, and some are organising principles, chaotic attractors clouded in ambiguity drawing us to our own next worldview. Some, that is, that are from the pre-modern and pre-rational, and some that represent the post-modern and post-rational trans-personal.¹⁴

The clue for us is that both the pre-modern and post-modern archetypes can appear to be the same when viewed from a modern worldview, when in reality they are not.¹⁵ It is the features that are similar but not the same that provides our clue as to what a post-modern, post-rational trans-personal FS might look like.

The valuable features of PMFT reflected or continued in modern FS as outlined above are most likely to be included in an integral post-modern FS. There are doubtlessly others. A further interesting exploration might be to contrast modern and pre-modern FS highlighting features unique to PMFT. Assessing the general character of appearance of these features might lead to a small offering of foreshadowing elements, or future echoes to one day be reflected in a fully developed post-modern FS.

To give but one example. The post-rational stage of experience is often called the subtle realm, characterised by a different sense of space and time, and including such slippery topics as dreams, psychic phenomena and authentic prescient understandings. The later, as prophecy, while discounted in PMFT might be seen in a new light with a different validity and value in post-modern, post-rational form.

CONCLUSION

Whatever we all disregard should be carefully looked upon with the best of our abilities...it may hold clues to our futures.

If modern FS is to achieve greater connection with contemporary social foresight methods, and/or grow into post-modern forms itself, a re-evaluation and integration of pre-modern futures thinking with modern methods and understandings is called for. In short, feeling needs to be united with thought. Many opportunities for exploring valuable developments in FS lies in this process. The process of developing holistic or integral FS is also necessary if the futures field is to viably continue its important growth and contribution to humanity in the post-modern and post-post-modern eras.

¹ Clarke, I. F., *Twentieth century futures thinking: from amateurs to experts*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 1, Millennium Edition, Slaughter, Richard A., Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000.

² Slaughter, R. A., *Transcending flatland*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 3, Millennium Edition, Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000. See also Slaughter's discussion on instrumental rationality in 'Futures Concepts,' vol 1.

³ For brevity all references to the FS discourse will refer to the current 'state-of-the-art' overview of the professional field of futures studies as presented in the Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies. Slaughter, R.A. (Ed), *The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies*, vol. 1-3, Millennium Edition, Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000. Quote taken from the inside 'jacket-cover' of the CD ROM.

⁴ In modern FS many conflicting practices are held as potentially equally valid or worthy of consideration. As Garrett explains 'If we catalogue the methodologies employed in the futures field, we will find everything from envisioning exercises and brainstorming techniques to electronic Delphis and system dynamic models. The goals of various futures projects include foretelling a single predetermined future, forecasting alternative possible futures, or empowering people so that they can shape their own futures. If we examine the philosophies of individual futurists, we discover both belief and disbelief in predicability, a strong commitment to normative approaches, and an equally fierce commitment to objective approaches.' Modern FS then is not adverse to conflicting approaches, and this is one thing that makes the collective dismissal of pre-modern futures techniques so surprising. Garrett, M. J., *Planning and implementing futures studies*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 2, Millennium Edition, Slaughter, Richard A., Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000.

⁵ In the following articles:

- Inayatullah, S., *Methods and epistemologies in futures studies*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 1, Millennium Edition, Slaughter, Richard A., Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000.
- Coates, J. F., *An overview of futures methods*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 1, Millennium Edition, Slaughter, Richard A., Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000.
- Garrett, M. J., *Planning and implementing futures studies*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 2, Millennium Edition, Slaughter, Richard A., Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000.

⁶ For a summary of the conclusions of empirical research into astrology and theories that adequately accommodate the minute proven astrological influences see Wilber, K., *One Taste*, The Collected Works of Ken Wilber, vol. 8, Shambhala Publications, Boston, USA, 2000, pp 441-6.

⁷ Faith, in my conception, is close to hope. Hope is cited several times, and in many different ways, in the KBFS as a crucial factor in empowering people to consider and act consciously and positively to influence their desired futures (see for example James Ogilvy's 'Scenario Planning, Critical Theory and the Role of Hope' vol.1). Definitions of faith invariably contain aspects of positive expectations. And what else could also form a core definition of hope, but positive expectation? The main difference in the terms seems to rest with the degree of certainty invested. Yet given that both rest on unknowns, and therefore risk certainty, its possible to regard faith and hope as similarly involving a positive expectation on behalf of the holder. Faith in the future then, seems just as valid a way of describing hope in the future, something already well argued for.

⁸ I determine astrology to encourage positive action because as a system it is designed to develop an awareness of life and guiding actions that will be in accord, or harmony with it. Working with life, in my view, is positive.

⁹ See Slaughter, R. A., *Futures concepts*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 1, Millennium Edition, Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000.

¹⁰ Inayatullah, S., *Causal layered analysis: post-structuralism as method*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 2, Millennium Edition, Slaughter, Richard A., Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000. All quotes in this section are from this article.

It should be noted that Tony Judge substantially addresses metaphors in '*developing a metaphorical language for futures.*' Judge's presentation centres on deconstructing common perceptual effects of metaphors used in or available to FS discourse. While a crucial contribution that bares relevance to this essays focus, it is mainly concerned with a narrow definition of metaphors as body centric perceptual guides as they effect the FS discourse. This contrasts distractingly from the meaning developed in this essay around the broader definition and complexity of astrological metaphors and associated myths. The focus here also includes the vast forces of nature, their character and intangible qualities and how humans relate to them and each other..

¹¹ Building on Richard Slaughter's futures technique of casual layered analysis (CLA), Inayatullah positions CLA within the critical tradition. Inayatullah observes that 'this tradition is less concerned with the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, as in the empirical, or with creating mutual understanding, as in the interpretive, but with creating distance from current categories.' Typical of Inayatullah's preference to use a combination of all three traditions of FS that he perceives, 'empirical, interpretive and critical,' CLA does incorporate more than just critical methods with aspects of the interpretive tradition and its truth claim of goodness and appropriateness of meaning in evidence. Indeed the very distance that Inayatullah seeks with this method induces questions of the good and appropriateness of meaning in assessing the fourth layer of myth or guiding metaphor.

¹² Ogilvy, J., *Scenario planning, critical theory and the role of hope*, The Knowledge Base Of Futures Studies, vol. 1, Millennium Edition, Slaughter, Richard A., Futures Studies Centre of Foresight International, Queensland, Australia 2000.

¹³ Wilber, K., *The pre/trans fallacy*, ReVision Journal, vol. 3, nr. 2., 1980, pp. 51-73.

¹⁴ Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Ken Wilber in modern times (and Plato and Shankara in pre-modern times) have all pointed to universal deep structures, or forms without content, that shape and are expressed in human understanding and experience. Generic forms of myths, cross-culturally repeated metaphors, perennial archetypes and other forms of universally human ways of being and knowing are found in most fields of developmental studies. The main theoretical difference in the many presentations of archetypes is where they are to be located. To date, Wilber's account provides

more accommodation for the developmental evidence, and affords greater explanatory power, integrating as it does the work of Jung and Campbell and many others. As Wilber's account posits the archetypes that concern us in the post-rational, post-modern (or more accurately post-post-modern) trans-personal domain or level of human experience, we will follow that logic in this essay. To investigate Wilber's model in this regard I recommend: Wilber, K., *Sex Ecology and Spirituality*, The Collected Works of Ken Wilber, vol. 6, Shambhala Publication, Boston, 2000, chapter 6, pp 210-261.

¹⁵ The essence of Wilber's argument is that anything pre-x and post-x, by being non-x, can appear the same but is not. It is an appreciation that the oscillating tendencies of stages in some developmental sequences renders pre-x and post-x with similar characteristics that non-x or pre-pre-x and post-post-x may not exhibit. They are not the same, but may look similar from the vantage point, or worldview of 'x'.