Seeing the Future?

Esther Peeren

Sometimes one literary image is enough to transport us from one world to another
(Bachelard 250)

Ceiba tree roots are where the duppies live, and you have to beware falling into that space between the roots. That's where you see things you might not want to
(Hopkinson in Simpson 106)

Faced with, as the "Critical Transformations – Terra Critica 2.0" description puts it, "a world altered by the pandemic, an accelerating climate catastrophe and the continued realities of war," nothing seems more certain than that the future cannot be reliably predicted. Although warnings of the increased likelihood of viruses jumping between animal and human species have long been sounded, who could have imagined that a pandemic would change everyday life so radically, across the world, for a period of two years and counting? Or how difficult it would prove, despite all the advances in big data and AI, to model the course of the pandemic so effective measures to stop it spreading could be taken in time – not too early, not too late? The lesson (re)learned – for of course the pandemic has precedents – is that models of the future, whether computational or held in our heads, are not – cannot be – actual images of the future, and that decisions (about what do to about climate change, about how to combat the spread of COVID-19, about how to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine) will need to be made from a position of at least partial uncertainty. Seeing into the future like clairvoyants will never be possible, and even if it was, this clairvoyance itself would mean that the future seen could not be taken as set, as having seen it in advance would open up the possibility of changing it.

Gaston Bachelard, in *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, published in 1943, in the midst of World War II, a time when the future perhaps looked even more uncertain and bleak than today, insists that "the value of an image is measured by the extent of its *imaginary* aura. Thanks to the *imaginary*, imagination is essentially *open* and *elusive*. It is the human psyche's experience of *openness* and *novelty*" (1, emphasis in text). For Bachelard, when an image "becomes fixed in a definitive form," it will stop people from dreaming and prompt them to act as if following a script: "We could say that a

stable and completely realized image *clips the wings* of the imagination" (2, emphasis in text). Images need to be recognized in their mobility and it is in this mobility that their greatest potential lies.

A very different perspective is provided by Donella Meadows, who, in "Envisioning a Sustainable World," insists on "the establishment of clear, feasible, socially shared goals" that ought to be grounded in "our vision of the world we are trying to create for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren." Whereas Meadows' encouragement of envisioning may be radical and much-needed "in the cultures of science and economics" so dominantly oriented towards information and implementation, her proposed practice of envisioning lacks the openness, elusiveness and novelty that Bachelard associates with the imagination, and appears to reduce dreaming to an uncomplicated, conscious and fully communicable act of modeling. Meadows asks people in workshops what world they truly want – as if wants are never complicated or contradictory; proposes that "our visions, when we are willing to admit them, are astonishingly alike" – as if sustainability is not a strongly contested notion and as if there are not multiple belief systems with vastly different ideas about what the world should look like; and assumes that visions can be made responsible (brought in line with "the physical constraints of the world" – as if there were no other types of constraints) through the intervention of "the rational mind." She insists that visions must be shared universally, but has little to say about how such sharing will come about, other than through the charisma and inspiration of "great leaders" carrying responsible vision – privileging individual leadership and ignoring how charisma and inspiration have been and are used to spread highly irresponsible visions.

For Meadows, visions are meant to make people act to ensure a more sustainable future – "envisioning is a tool for producing results" – and therefore do not have value in and of themselves. She acknowledges that "NOT being able to see something in a vision may be as meaningful as seeing it," but assumes that it will be clear what is absent from holding the vision up to the present, and a particular present at that: Western, Christian, capitalist. Vision, here, is defined and complete (closed), accessible (to the one having the vision and to others) and, because of Meadows' insistence on rationalizing vision (keeping people from imagining themselves climbing a tree and flying off from its top), aligned with the possibilities of the present, in accordance with a view of sustainability as being about preservation rather than radical change.

Against this, Bachelard argues that imagination should exceed what is already there: "we must take account of every urge to abandon what we see or what we say in favor of what we imagine … Imagination allows us to leave the ordinary course of things. Perceiving and imagining are as antithetical as presence and absence. To imagine is to absent oneself, to launch out toward a new life" (3) – to experience "*the dream of flight*" and "*the poetics of wings*" (14, emphasis in text), quite possibly by taking off from the top of a tree. Rationalization, championed by Meadows, is to be kept at bay: "*when a wing appears in an account of a dream of flight, we must suspect that the account has been rationalized*" (27). The story of Icarus with his literal wings is for Bachelard a story lacking imagination, incapable of conjuring an other future. For Meadows, it would be an example of a not sufficiently rationalized vision, a vision with too much imagination and, as a result, unsuccessful in its implementation (if only Icarus had set his sights lower than the sun!).

Bachelard speaks of "reverie" or "wonder" as rightly placed "before representation": "the poetic knowledge of the world precedes rational knowledge of objects. The world is beautiful before being true. The world is admired before being verified" (166). The association of such reverie with primitivism should be questioned, as should the way Bachelard presents as universal a very particular imagination grounded in a Western and mostly male canon in which, for example, "the tree is an ever-present model of heroic uprightness" (207). Moreover, although Bachelard privileges reverie and wonder as "*pure seeing*" or "pure vision" (167, emphasis in text), he sees this stage as followed by stages of contemplation and representation, which add memories and forms (genres) to the pure vision, giving it definition. Here, as in Meadows, there is an insistence on a process of domestication and sophistication, tied to an overcoming of "primitive" reverie, that restricts what futures may be legitimately imagined.

For Bachelard, reverie is "*authoritarian*" in that it originates from the human mind; the substances that inspire reverie – air, water, wind, constellations, clouds – are essentially passive in the process of imagination. This is clearest, he argues, in the case of clouds, which facilitate "*reverie without responsibility* … Clouds provide imaginary matter for a lazy modeler" (185). Because of their ephemerality, clouds can be imagined as pretty much anything: "In this globular mass, everything rolls on just as you please" (186). Yet, at the same time as confirming the human (day)dreamer as "prophet and master" (186), for Bachelard clouds also embody the world as constantly in flux, moving in ways that are beyond human control: "We might say that the contemplation of clouds brings us face to face with a world where there are just as many forms as there are motions. Motion produces form, forms are

in motion, and motion constantly deforms them" (194). This suggests that the imagination may also come from the world, from the cosmos, proposing futures to humans in which they might not even have a place and where clouds do not bend to their will.

I now want to turn to Nalo Hopkinson's short story "Under Glass" and read it as complicating both Meadows' envisioning and Bachelard's imagining in its portrayal of a woman, Delpha, in one world thinking/knowing that the future of her world is in the hands of a girl, Sheeny, in another world doodling on a playscreen (which could be a digital tablet but also an analogue Etch A Sketch). The story starts with Sheeny determined to create, on the playscreen, a "new story" or "fake story of worlds that used to might could be, places that she'd never seen, could only imagine." This is not a rationalized envisioning in Meadows' sense, but an act of imagination, a launching out into the open, out of the present, which in Sheeny's case is an apocalyptic one. Hers is a world beyond the sustainable, where visions of the future can no longer be held up to the constraints of the present because those constraints do not allow for any future. Her world, furthermore, constitutes a warning against building future visions on our present, as, according to Sheeny's mother, the glass carried by the winds tearing their world apart can be traced back to the skyscrapers of global capitalism.

While the speculative force of imagination allows Sheeny, in her world without future, to conjure "worlds that used to might could be," the way these worlds materialize elsewhere moves imagination beyond speculation, beyond mere play, invoking Bachelard's notion of the one who imagines as prophet and master, and thus as called to responsibility. Sheeny, however, is unaware that her doodling is having real effects in Delpha's world, first in a provisional manner (as she draws and redraws images on the screen), but, after she drops the playscreen and it cracks, in a deterministic way: "shake the picture up all you want, this one won't change." With the breaking of the screen, Sheeny's open imagination, with its potential for endless renewal, becomes a vision of the future that can no longer change and that Delpha seemingly cannot escape from: "those damn toys, those screen things that trapped stories under glass. Pieces all the way into the future, the past, the never. And when the blasted things broke, they were all stuck with that story." Delpha's thoughts highlight the way those equipped to imagine (not everyone has a playscreen and in Sheeny's world the factory that used to make them is long gone) might, wittingly or unwittingly, capture worlds in particular (colonial, capitalist) imaginations that cannot be seen beyond: "if a glass wind got into your eyes, you had only one point of view forever after."

And yet, another point of view, another reverie, does emerge in "Under Glass," originating not from a playscreen or any human eye or mind, but from the water of the freezing river Delpha immerses herself in order not to have to live through the future Sheeny has drawn up and fixed for her world. For Delpha, it is "time to lose it all," but the water turns out to offer not just death and oblivion but pleasure; she ends up inviting the water into her – "she managed to spread her legs, open the heat of her" – and her scream as she is "impaled by cold glassy ice" might as well be one of ecstasy as one of terror. The water, like Bachelard's clouds, is in motion, producing new forms that encompass Delpha, launching her out of the world imagined on Sheeny's playscreen, perhaps into death, perhaps into new life, perhaps into death as new life.

Both "Under Glass" and the quote from an interview with Hopkinson that is one of my epigraphs suggest that imagination cannot necessarily be controlled; it may come not from the masterful human mind (where Bachelard mostly locates it) but from elsewhere, from the icy waters of a river or from duppies living between tree roots, and it may show you things, futures, you do not want to see. Consequently, imagination is not only about what you want (as prophet/master) but also about what others (human and non-human) may want from or for you. Given the way capitalism-colonialism has shaped the world according to its singular vision, erasing or discounting alternative imaginations like the ones conjured in Hopkinson's stories, it is crucial to be suspicious of proposals like Meadows' for a responsible or rationalized envisioning of the future that, although committed to a sustainable future, take the world as it is, and the wants this world inspires (which include the vertical imaginations mapped by Bachelard), as its departure point.

Works cited

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