666 Ways to Ambush the Future

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For some time, I have been concerned with uses and abuses of the future, how the exchange of temporally loaded language through conversation and text affects the pace, moods and behaviour of individuals, communities, cultures and civilisations. I am equally curious about Christianity which as a narrative structure begins with creation but awaits a conclusion. Whether it is religions announcing ten-point plans to attain paradise quickly, or cults encouraging group passes to heaven through suicide, it is the future end that counts. Whether it be ego-theologists -- as I prefer to call those pastors who proclaim the 'you are/they are god' creed -- scalping spiritual quick-fixes at the local entertainment centre, with a McDonald's-like serving of 'Would you like a blessing with that?', or the visiting soulwinner from New South Wales distributing 'Mark of the Beast' warning pamphlets, the future conclusion of the Christian narrative plays the lead.

I cannot disguise my discomfort with the salvation franchises or merchants who market pre-fabricated responses to the Christian apocalyptic narrative, curiously shaped by contemporary circumstances, and who profit excessively from such business. Many times I wonder what dubious purposes their perception of the future is put to. Surviving Armageddon, it appears, can provide a diverse source of mobilisation for many. With such prominence in the everyday topics of public and mainstream dialogue, our age is the first historical period where the marginal phenomenon of apocalyptism has moved from the edge of society to its present-day popular near-centre.

Money, I dare say, is made from such a shift.

Ego-theologists are keen to boast the vices of contemporary society that are bringing apocalypse while conveniently offering the hefty-priced product that upon purchase will begin the process of surviving the end.

It is no accident that the narrower the definition of salvation, the more specialised the rituals for attaining it, the qualifications for distributing it and the exclusivity for keeping it. Such restrictions place the power of salvation into the hands of a small number of people who make available -- upon specialised or ritualised request -- the means to lease it. I use the word lease because salvation is never completely settled. Instead, a symbolic contract is achieved between the franchise and the seeker in which salvation is conveyed to the seeker for a specified period but usually in exchange for membership and often mental and financial obligation. If the seeker breaks the contract, salvation is lost. Jehovah's Witnesses call this act of severance 'disfellowshipping' and the seeker is designated by continuing followers of Watchtower as an 'apostate', as one against the almighty creator. Many ex-witnesses are emotionally scared by this devastating, violent act of seemingly removing salvation.

In this sense, a small elite using exclusive language and narrow definitions and who therefore monopolise the forms and the senses of achieving salvation habitually frame salvation and the rituals of being saved from a monstrous future. Who benefits and who is disempowered by the agenda being set in this manner? Why are only selected people able to lease directions to the road of salvation with maps that periodically imply the master planner has changed compass, be it the secular salvation from ecological doom or theological salvation from the damnable mark of the beast?

Saving a person from the antichrist has today become a robust industry. Religious entrepreneurs proliferate their scriptural shandies and spiritual quick-fixes to the middle-class disheartened with the expertise of experienced confidence tricksters and the finesse of door-to-door selling. Subscribe to a local salvation franchise of the 'gospel of wealth' variety found marketing in the early morning hours of Australian televangelism and a continual stream of ministrations will arrive in the mail replete with US postage markings and external messages warning you and your postie: 'This envelope contains important information the devil hopes you will never find out!', 'Eight things you need to know before the new millennium', 'Has Y2K plunged us into a countdown to chaos? Don't panic --
prepare and trust God!' or 'Unleash the power of your faith!'.

Content will vary across a range of marketable approaches. Two recent postings I received from the same franchise respectively presented a 4-5 page personalised letter requesting I purchase 'dynamic ministry materials' like Your Y2K New Millennium Survival Personal Library Kit for an appropriate 'seed harvest' of $165.99. This reflected fair market value, naturally, on 'powerful' items including The Antichrist: 666 video, a three audio tape set called End Time Signs and the Book of Revelation Comic Book.

An explanation sheet was also included for explaining the rituals required to activate an enclosed 'miracle touch' 2-inch square cloth, apparently anointed -- touched in a supernatural way -- by a special class of persons self-identified as 'prayer warriors'. Some packages have reflected telegram-style formatting to 'emphasize the great URGENCY' felt by a pastor 'that many of you may be on the verge of falling apart or feeling absolutely overwhelmed by fear, anger, depression, rejection, worry' and who desperately require a newly-released 'powerful book of wisdom' to overcome personal tribulation and to successfully 'rebuke the devil'.

Often, correspondence signed from the pastor displays these excesses of individual concern, claims of divine new revelation blended with unbiblical doses of numerological deduction. The accompanying letter to my Y2K Personal Request Sheet begins: 'Dear Jason, you are now reading a letter that had to be sent to you ... Yes, the Lord told me to prepare this ... He gave me a vivid, supernatural glimpse of the miracle difference this one letter could make in your life ... especially in this year of 1999 ... See it as your year of double fruitfulness'.

What role does this type of 'future-thinking' and others play in Australian forms of hope and expectation? Can we establish a discourse of ethics regarding the use or abuse of future mythology? And how might we engage studies of the future in the historical and sociological disciplines which would see the future as itself: a theory with very particular ideological and metaphysical investments; an address to the present, transforming it into the fulfillment of the future we aim to aspire to; and, often, as a tool or weapon which has been waved about for some form of gain?

To answer these questions requires us to place ourselves in a position to see something of the design and construction of contemporary futures as an invented thing with specific limitations.

George Orwell's famous and relevant exploration of the future in 1984 is the story of Winston Smith's rebellion against the Party, of his hatred towards Big Brother and the thoughtcrime. On page thirty-four, Winston reflects on the perpetual state of war that has existed between Oceania and Eurasia: 'The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia ... But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness ... if all the others accepted the lie which the party imposed if all records told the same tale, then the lie passed into history and became truth. "Who controls the past," ran the Party slogan, "controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." It was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. "Reality control," they called it; in Newspeak, "doublethink."

Transposing the direction of Orwell's commentary, from a control of knowledge about the past to a monopoly control of future mythology, provides more than just an occasional point. To paraphrase, I would like to suggest that: 'Who controls the future controls the present. And that all is needed is an unending series of victories over your imagination'. In futurespeak, that is, the language and discursive strategies used to talk and think about the future, I call this 'thinkphobia'.

Alvin Toffler, in his successful sociological trilogy, describes the cultural fallout from overchoice and the dangerous discrepancies between society's technological accelerative thrust and the pace of our individual adaptive abilities. This peculiar state results in what Toffler defines as future shock; that is, an overload of our individual decision-making processes from the demands of choice that we simply cannot tolerate. Thinkphobia, as an analogy to thoughtcrime, is one step removed: it is the fear we develop of options in the future and it is not, I suspect, limited to doomsayers.

For members of Watchtower (Jehovah's Witnesses), the present is probed only in the interests of the future and they project only one intended and necessary future, squashing coherent, intellectual responses to it, closing alternatives to active public and popular debate. The future as promoted by Watchtower is totalist, monocultural, and biblically sealed, closed to individual modification, to the extent that a handbook 'Reasoning from the Scriptures' can provide the dialogue that accompanies their knock at your door. But, I wonder, are the future-systems of our societies any different in their
What I’m suggest here is that the secular billions of people today who are either implicitly or explicitly coerced to reckon the future and time in ways they did not choose is highly questionable. While we may scoff at the witness who has their dialogue mapped out and a sense of the future pre-structured for them, should we ourselves spend much time exchanging talk about things called the 'millennium' and the year 2000, encouraging other cultures to share our enthusiasm, much like a cultist would promote their pattern of future for emulating? In other words, when our societies are diversifying culturally, socially and intellectually, why is our concept of the future homogenising, almost, dare I suggest, in cultic mimicry?

The approach of the year 2000/2001AD seems to evoke excess response from Christian groups throughout Australia. But can a culture of apocalypse or a cult of the future -- that is, a philosophically sealed community deriving identity from its expectation of doom in the future -- be limited to popular, extra-societal ideas of cult?

A ‘cult of the future’ could be described as a community of people, which embraces a particular system of linear time reckoning as part of its cultural and/or social code, which encourages (either explicitly or implicitly) and sustains specialised activity as supplication to some qualitative or quantitative 'future'. A 'cult of the future', to draw from sociological literature, does not adhere to the possibility of unforeseen occurrence but rather devotes itself to a presumed unalterable and necessary future to which all current activity and thought seems conditional upon it.

I wonder whether the term 'cult of the future' can be applied to a whole society and not just to the small evangelical cult based in the outer suburbs, which studiously awaits the end of the world. Can a cult of the future, traditionally applied to an unconventional extra-societal gathering, include society itself? How our societies conceive of the future may be different in content and style to evangelical and theological communities, but could the aim be similar? Whether it is a social reformer or a cult leader, is the process the same in the way future mythology is constructed? Could future-oriented systems conceivably sit alongside the systems of more controversial groups like Heaven’s Gate or Jehovah's Witnesses as related efforts of installing pre-organised future-mythology into the mindset of a group of receptive people?

To interrogate the monopolisation of future mythology by the leading mythmakers and the salvation merchants, whose greatest tool is the rumour of what we fear and whose largest assets are the hopes of seekers, is to begin reclaiming responsibility about the future. It is to reclaim meaning for an individual long-term present that would otherwise be lonely in the crowd of social, commercial and regulated short-term futures. Futures thinking should encourage us to ponder what part of ourselves goes on to the future and it should initiate a strong sense of responsibility to prospective generations: it should not invite us to consider what books or tapes to purchase in order to survive the various doomsday scenarios marketed at us.

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