

Beyond Black and Green: The New Dystopian Plains
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Visioneer Your Future

Visioneering has imbued these pages of late be it the important role played in fuelling the creative and visionary spirit through the crafting of an image, or the political necessity of such work for breaking binaries and embarking on a creative destruction of sense in order to produce new canvases, ideas and actions befitting the 21st century (see [Cabrera](#) and [Peake](#)).

As someone with a fervent interest in the creative destruction of the iron cages of binary thought, visioneering's balancing of the poetical and the scientific fascinates me. Furthermore, a less discussed aspect of latent potency for visioneering lies in its methodological approach, merging the hybridisation of knowledge with polyvocality and a commitment to difference. Its explicit refusal to hyper legitimise one set of knowledge claims over another celebrates a contemporary form Haraway's [situated knowledges](#) which I too find appealing in a world still preoccupied with bestowing status on some (often gendered) knowledge claims over others where researchers are still expected to perform the god trick.

Currently, what I am most curious to explore is how do others, particularly young people, conceive of and understand the future? More specifically, in undertaking the act of visioneering — confronting oneself with a range of future potentialities reconstituted from an interwoven cloth of ideas, experiences and senses, what do people draw upon? What ideas, imagery, texts, talk? How are accounts constructed? What do such accounts tell us about the present as much as the future? These are questions of an ethnographic bent, imbued with a rich phenomenological history ideally suited for exploring those facets of social life that resist naming and delight in uncertainty, much like the telling of the future.

I am not the first to be interested in the tales young people tell about their potential futures and worlds. The left-wing literati in the UK have bestowed upon our current cohort of 11-19 year olds a kind of [dystopian soothsayer](#) role. They associate the popularity of the Hunger Games Trilogy and the rise of films like Divergent with a quiet sense of doom stemming from the gloomy societal position many young people find themselves in. Such an argument has potency when confronting the abysmal stats of youth unemployment, soaring tuition fees and the tearing away of the welfarist ladder by those who most benefited from it. They are right to be empathetic and interested in how young people conceive of their futures and to pay heed to what may emerge as quiet Cassandra moments. Yet as well meaning and as potent as such arguments no doubt are, we are still performing ventriloquism, our words, their mouths. Do young people really ascribe to visions of near-future apocalypses? When you ask a young person to 'visioneer their future' what do they describe?

To tentatively explore some of these matters, and to test our reasoning around the mechanics and poetics of visioneering, Steve Fuller and I attended the national Schools

Science Conference. We had a situational advantage for the entire day was geared around the theme “New Frontiers in Science and Technology” attended by 240 young people aged 13-16. Whilst Steve delivered the event keynote and relished answering the direct and contentious questions from students (check the keynote — number 75 [here](#)), I set up our stall. Armed with two digital voice recorders and a set of visual methods that became “postcards from the future” we set about our eclectic task of asking young people to visioneer their future.



Challenging Binaries

We have accumulated over 6 hours of group data from the event, so all that can be presented here are the very initial themes that punctuated the day. One overly simplistic introduction is to present two group discussions which at first glance appear to fall neatly into the ‘upwinger’/‘downwinger’, Black/Green classifications charted by Steve Fuller [here](#). Both discussions focused on the kinds of existential threats that form the backbone of dystopian futures — one on the impacts of environmental disaster wrought by climate change, the other on the potential impacts of a range of common transhuman proclivities — augmentation, genetic engineering, and AI. But they complicated Steve’s undulating poles. In his original formulation he implies not only an earthly or celestial/trans orientation, but links such orientations to an embrace of or resistance to technologies. Thus, downwingers are cast somewhat disparagingly as resistant to transcendence of many kinds — preferring instead to cling to some Aristotelian essentialised human nature, the mark of which is our biological encasing on earth. In contrast, upwingers receive much more favourable treatment as the bringers of Humanity 2.0, creatively destroying old mores to pull us out of our current ideological stasis.

Yet in the visioneeing work undertaken by young people on the day, such concerns about climate change, environmental crisis and poverty were not marked by a technological resistance. There was no talk of a quest for holism which can only be realised in ‘returning to nature’ and rejecting the malevolence that science has wrought. Quite the opposite, for these downwingers were comfortable in harnessing the power of technology to protect the earth, to almost instigate a second natural flourishing, not dissimilar to some of the ambitions espoused by [‘Living Architect’ Rachel Armstrong](#). They were not afraid to make a political case for living differently; this was a rarity on the day where young people rarely mentioned the role of the state in these future dystopias:

You've got the government to do more, I mean, people keep saying it's going to take a long time but if you don't start you never finish. If you start now we'll be done in 15-20 years. We need scientists to get into politics, they have the knowledge, if they go into politics they can spread that knowledge. They need to stop being scared, their insecurity is less important than what's going on in the world. They need to stop thinking of themselves and think about all the people that would benefit. People are too selfish to think about the bigger problems.

Those young people who were passionately concerned about climate change described a human-centred rather than geo-centred world; there was no mention of animal sentience and the bestowing of rights to non-human creatures. In the group discussion where downwinging played a central role, the young women making the case for climate-interventionism seemed to be making it on a vitalistic rather than Darwinian premise. Such a vitalism may form a better entry point into the cartography being mapped by these young people, as their lives are complexly mediated by the blurring of the body with technology, the ecological with the manufactured. Their sophistication seemed to contest the Green/Black binary by refusing to oppose nature to culture, environment to society, art to science.

Fortunately (for me at least), the column marchers of the [Dark Enlightenment](#) like Nick Land and his foot soldiers were absent in accounts. It appears proto-fascism in intellectual clothing holds little appeal for young people whose visioning activities seem to place them somewhere between Fuller's Black and Greens. This was not to say the darker corners of visioning were not considered. Dystopias and violence of different kinds were present in discussion with a group of young men who would loosely fall into Fuller's upwinging camp.



SF: So how do you see the future?

Very dark really, things going down. Underdeveloped countries, pollution, resource crises...

SF: You sound pessimistic about the future!

Yeah I think there are a lot of big problems.

Such dystopian visions emerged most readily in references to gaming which emerged as a dominant theme this group. Notable mention went to the cyberpunk-styled game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* set in a near-dystopian future. [*Human Revolution*](#) tackles transhumanist themes through the eyes of the protagonist, an employee of a biochemical human augmentation firm, as he considers whether humanity's reach has exceeded its grasp. Its societal setting is cataclysmic, corporations have greater power than states, corruption is rife and rebellion put down with brutal violence.

I play a game set in the future, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. There's global terrorism and someone releases a virus. People are getting synthetic arms, nano technology all kind of augmentation. It'll happen, you know. I've seen these things in the news already, well something like that. The thing is, if we do get these augmentations then it's going to be a taboo to be normal. That is a realistic possibility. Also, in the game you need money or access to resources, there's no ObamaCare you know. So only rich people benefit.

Another game mentioned was the post-apocalyptic game [*Fall Out*](#):

*I think a possible future is like *Fall Out* because of wars and resource shortages.*

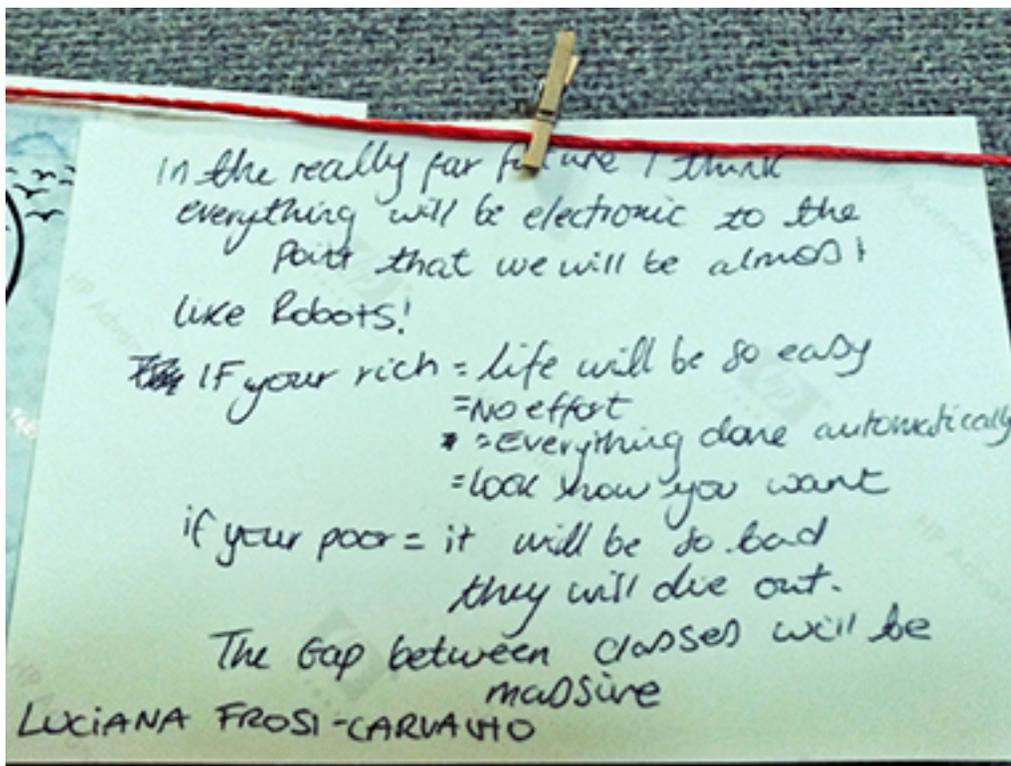
SF: Do you really think nuclear war is a possibility?

Definitely. Nuclear war is a possibility for the future; it'll just be started over different issues than before. Like Russia invaded Georgia and no one cared, militias are growing in Crimea. In the future these little skirmishes become more important as resources shrink.

These young men spoke of the gaming experience as a tool to furnish their visioning activity alongside their interest in the practice of formal scientific enquiry and their own personal hopes and ambitions. The gaming activity offered up a language and a set of tests - to consider difficult 'what if' scenarios. It was as though the practice of gaming enabled a relationship with risk and the ethics of risk to be contemplated and explored. It offered a visceral window into visioning practice as gaming was described as something experienced and embodied not merely thought or seen. It seems to me that the rise of gaming as a new epistemological field and its ability to permeate multiple discursive realms is deserving of a post in these pages in its own right.

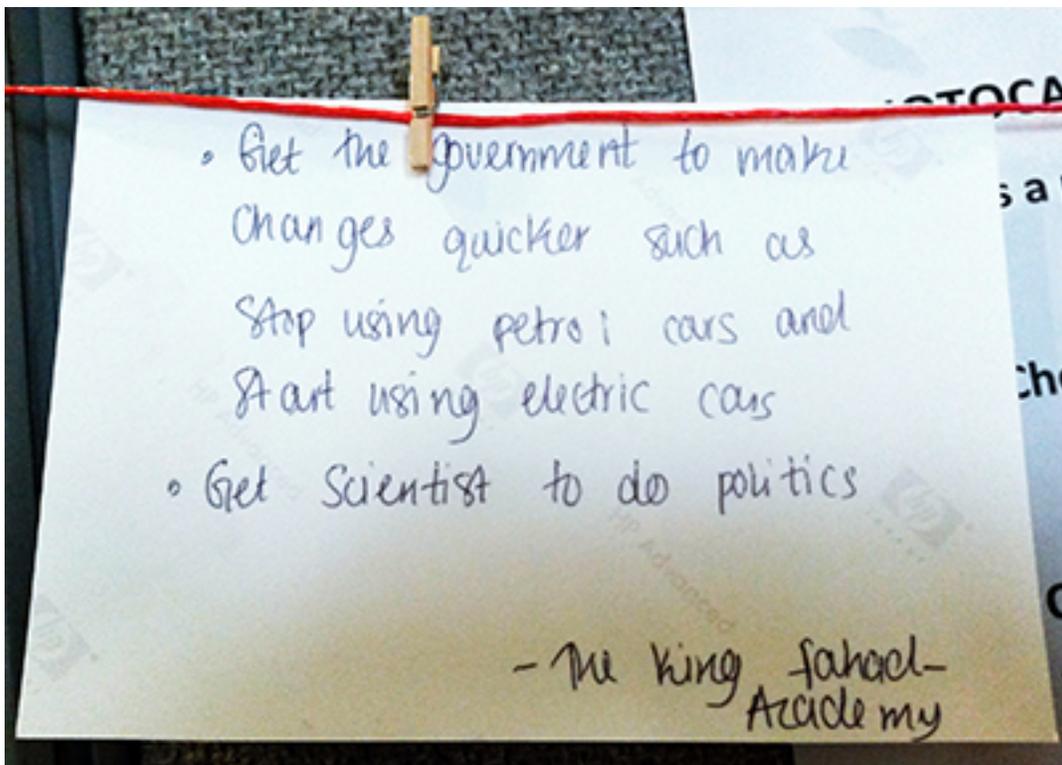
Early Themes

Young people are confronted with the future every day; they are expected to project themselves forward at school, at home, and in conversations with friends. Questions about who they want to be, what they want to do, where they want to live, what kinds of lives they want to craft, are all future-oriented. They have an advantage in practicing a kind of plasticity, an engagement in projecting themselves forward that somehow becomes narrowed as years pass, mortgages grow and ontological security demonstrates itself around flaccid waistlines. Risk — the taking of it, the aversion of it, the reconstruction of it were all discussed yet what shone through was the frustration that our political masters were so tentative, so coy in trying new ideas. In contrast, the engagement of these young people in matters of genetic engineering, fracking, and climate change implies a willingness to take on these complex and potentially catastrophic existential threats. This is not to presume a youthful arrogance about the realities of the geopolitical world in which we exist, nor is it an ignorance of the social conditions within which science and technology may deepen existing social divisions. This postcard illuminates a sensitivity in the accounts told to us and the ways in which young people confront the ethical implications of technology when its power is exercised within a certain economic landscape:



These young people were concerned with the future of the planet, with the human body, with human interaction and the consequences of technology for exacerbating inequality, injustice and oppression. In this respect these accounts mirror the themes of the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. There is less interest in transcending the human body and our planet and more in modifying it, managing it, seeking to share it more equitably.

In contrast to the ontological dissonance which permeates much discussion in ‘grown-up’ circles where [‘Hermies’](#) are a laughable group of fantasists, contrasted to pragmatists who know the future will not involve seasteading, jetpacks or the singularity, the accounts we gathered were nuanced. Nothing was taken off the table. The visioning work of these young people rejects the kind of political generational talk as filibuster arguing instead that, “we need to think differently in order to live differently” and “more scientists need to get into politics.” Their accounts challenge common kinds of epistemological boundary work, the policing of the possible from the impossible, by collapsing the now with the almost-now, the existent with the becoming. In taking their experiences in the social realm of gaming they consider alternative dystopian futures and confront technological advances within an ethical and social framework. Some of the mechanics and poetics of this visioning activity reminded me of [Kelly’s \(1979\)](#) “double-edged vision”. This concept speaks of the power of hybridising lucid argument with political and personal passion leading to the creation of alternative social blueprints. The day was a lesson in the importance of epistemological humility and in the subtleties of potentialities, subtleties that challenge our neat constructions of Black and Green, Up and Down, Trans- and Post-humanity.



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