

Speculative Openings, Livable Environments, Educational Futures:

Remarks for the virtual CIES 2020 Presidential Plenary

Casper Bruun Jensen [cbruunjensen@gmail.com]

As an anthropologist of science and technology—far from a specialist in education—I must begin by expressing my gratitude for the opportunity to speak here, virtually, today.

The panel concerns the possibility of reclaiming imagination in a planetary context of radical change that goes far beyond educational systems. Speculation, fiction, and diverse orientations to ontological transformation in fields including science and technology studies and anthropology are evoked as possible sources of inspiration for grappling with the unpredictable twin trajectories of technology development and climate change.

The latter fields have themselves turned to speculative fiction for new conceptual resources in recent years. Ursula K. Le Guin (1976) described such literature as thought-experiments entailing a “strange realism.” Later, Donna Haraway (1990, 149) argued that the supposedly clear boundary between science fiction and social reality is “an optical illusion.” And quite recently, the philosopher Deborah Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro characterized SF as the “pop metaphysics of our time” (2017, 7). These descriptions cut several ways. On the one hand, a science fictional imagination nurtured by technological hype already infuses policy when it comes to AI, despite its potentials probably being less certain or grand than often assumed. On the other hand, SF makes it possible to rethink some configurations of reality that, while they actually do exist, are so weird that they might well be taken for fiction. Realities, like the cancellation of a Miami educational conference due to an uncontrolled viral pandemic arising from wild animal consumption in central China.

With the advent of “the Anthropocene”—ongoing climate disruption—and tendencies everywhere towards the breakdown of modern certainties, not to mention the return of political archaisms in new technologically-mediated guises—as explored by my co-panelist Malka Older—there is every reason to think the world is only going to get stranger. Correlatively, finding resources for dealing with its strangeness, learning to recognize its dangers, and to pursue its possibilities are only likely to become more important. What matters is to learn new pedagogies for thinking and acting across worlds. I evoke three quite different examples.

I live and conduct research in Cambodia and have long been affiliated with Japanese universities, so it seems fitting that my comments relate to these contexts.

Though I am not an education specialist, I can confidently characterize the Cambodian situation as one where basic schooling faces severe challenges in rural areas with ramifying consequences up to university levels. Yet, while missing furniture, textbooks and teacher salaries are unresolved issues at one level, initiatives to leapfrog STEM research are underway at another. Though quite banal, the situation thus exhibits a futuristic policy imagination. Recently, politicians evoked Sihanoukville, a central site for the Chinese belt and road initiative and a hub for gambling, as a new Silicon Valley. In contexts like Cambodia, where practical circumstances and discursive hype is so cleanly differentiated is it preposterous to try to create room for alternative futures? What might it mean?

In a short story from 2006, Geoff Ryman narrates the life of Sith, the beautiful daughter of genocidal Pol Pot. After her father’s death, she has been moved to the capital Phnom Penh, where she lives an anonymous life of luxury. On one of her daily trips to the Sorya market to buy accessories, she meets Dara, a poor salesman, whom she starts dating. Questioned about her family, she invents an alternative, in which her murderous father is replaced with a famous freedom fighter. At the movies, Sith observes that the only choices seem to be nightmares about

ghosts or nostalgic evocations of the past. When, she thinks, will they make a movie about Cambodia's future?

While Sith's love-life flourishes her house becomes haunted. Her mobile phones begin calling night and day. At first, she is dismissive: how unmodern Cambodia must be, when even the phone network is haunted. But she starts to wear down when a child's voice tells her that "they tied my thumbs together." Then her Japanese robot dog begins talking. "My name is Phalla," it informs her, "I tried to buy medicine for my sister and they killed me for it." Next, the television turns on, showing starving men in the fields. Finally, she accepts the phone call. One by one, the ghosts asks her to take their names and write their stories.

This short piece brings together various elements of Cambodia's recent history. The country is getting richer, but very unevenly. A few people emerged out of the Khmer Rouge tragedy with wealth, which has continued growing, while most others have almost nothing. But even while living in opulent homes with big cars, tv sets and robot dogs, families still cope with unresolved tragedies and the bad feelings of yesteryear. To this day, the standard response to every sign of a critical opposition is to raise the specter of civil war.

What is the point of education, of developing competencies in excel, project management or double book accounting, say, if the younger generations are never encouraged to come to terms with the country's and their families' violent past. How then to imagine a better Cambodian future? Against the backdrop of a very plausible future in which these issues are not resolved, but rather, like land-mines, retain their explosive force right under the surface, "Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter" gestures at the importance of learning to take care of the possible.

Ryman, of course, cannot tell Cambodians what they should do. But his story suggests that the conflicting dimensions—past and future, material and immaterial—somehow have to be rewoven, for there to one day be a movie about quite a different Cambodia. If the ghostly messages are almost empty of informational content, it is because they are existential, ontological appeals for recognition that at the same time open thin, spectral lines of hope for different futures.

In "Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter" access to new technologies marks the difference between past and present, rich and poor, even though technologically-mediated ghosts blur the boundary between modern and nonmodern media spheres. This is not the only modern distinction requiring a fundamental rethinking. Today, our urban environments are hybrid, techno-social or natural-cultural, through and through. I use Geoff Ryman's work *Air*, a mundane science fiction story about technology translations in developing countries as a bridge between these issues and my counter-modern Japanese example.

Here we are, with Chung Mae, an impoverished local clothes designer in a small village of imaginary Karzistan, a mountainous inner Asian country loosely modeled after Kazakhstan. Soon the country is going online with *Air*, which is similar to today's internet, except it is installed directly in your skull.

Roll-out is postponed for a year after the initial test kills some people, including Mae's neighbor, old Mrs. Tung. But due to some kind of glitch *Air* remains in Mae's head, which in the same process becomes inhabited by the thoughts and memories of her dead friend.

While most everyone, including herself, starts doubting her sanity, Mae realizes she will have to prepare her village for the radical changes *Air* will soon bring. This creates a series of conflicts with government officials and leads to petty village jealousies and rivalries. Technological capacities, meanwhile, are far more significant than in "Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter." While Mae carries on with the task of convincing conservative villagers that they need to learn *Air*, she also succeeds in linking with overseas fashion outlets thirsty for new "ethnic" designs. She manages to reclaim imagination and create an alternative future, almost out of thin *Air*.

And then, Japan. Sometimes known as the Rachel Carson of Japan, Ishimure Michiko became known for her environmental activism on behalf of villagers suffering from Minamata disease—a neurological disorder due to severe mercury poisoning—in consequence of leaks from a nearby factory. She also became a highly acclaimed novelist, as exemplified by *Lake of Heaven* from 1997. Ishimure’s views of modern life and technological capacity are decidedly more circumspect than those depicted in *Air*. Nevertheless, *Lake of Heaven* can also be read as a meditation on many kinds of mediated relations between technologies and environments.

The setting is a rural area of Kyushuu in southern Japan. Decades ago, the village Amazoko had been destroyed due to the construction of a new dam. It now sits at the bottom of an artificial lake. Almost all the inhabitants of the replacement village are elderly, poor, and left behind by modern development. Into this scene enters the young, well-educated Tokyoite Masahiko, arriving to scatter the ashes of his grandfather, who had left after Amazoko’s flooding. In the mountains, he meets the old woman Ohina and her daughter Omomo, who live from catching snakes and making medicine. Both are out, this *obon* night, to pay respects to the watery graves of their ancestors. Masahiko is deeply out of his modern element.

During this night of funeral rituals, the house of Jimpei catches fire. This was the man who had negotiated the sale of the village long ago, and earned handily from it. While he is dying from the burns, the mute shrine maiden Sayuri is found drowned in the lake.

As Masahiko stays around for a second round of funerals, he becomes increasingly entangled with village relations. These entanglements are more than human and different from modern in several ways. Rather than following the linear arrow of modern time, Ohina and others seem to move freely between numerous pasts and presents, in spiral temporalities. The dam and submerged village now encompass ancestor spirits, which locals visit in their dreams and engage as if they are fully real. Even the respected priest of the Buddhist temple intuits that his scriptural learning and recital of sutras cannot compete with proliferating animistic Shinto agents, like trickster foxes or monkeys. Sayuri, the drowned shrine dancer, might have been a water elemental. At the time of the flooding, her dance had miraculously saved the life of the boy Kapppei, whom everyone had assumed beyond hope after he was impaled on an iron rod. As the story comes to an end, Kapppei, now an old man, dreams that he must rebuild the Moonshadow bridge to restore ontological order and tranquil relations between gods and people.

For all purposes, we seem quite far from questions of education. So what should we make of these scenes and stories? I end with some open-ended reflections.

To my mind, all the stories connect in a general sense with the decolonial aspiration to challenge Western-centric ontologies and epistemologies, including their assumptions of what an ideal educational model can or should look like. Nevertheless, such analyses are often confined by their insistence on the near impossibility of escaping Western hegemony. This is paradoxically exemplified by the fact that their primary source of inspiration tends to be Western critical theory. In contrast, the stories I have evoked gesture at the possibility of *activating* more diverse forms of nonmodern thought. To make one connection explicit, this aligns, in the *Japanese* context, with efforts to locate alternatives for educational theory in forms of esoteric Buddhism. As suggested by the uneasy relation between Buddhist scriptures and a Shinto orientation to the varied capacities of nonhuman agents depicted in *Lake of Heaven*, however, the possibilities might be *both* more expansive *and* more complicated. That there are many sources of non-Western thought, and that many of them are valuable, after all, does not mean that they are all in mutual harmony.

In both *Lake of Heaven* and “Pol Pot’s Beautiful daughter,” we encounter nonmodern composites of technology and politics—but also of more-than-human environments, of dreams, spirits and ghosts. Together all these elements shape hybrid worlds. *Lake of Heaven* clearly distinguishes between modern development and the worlds it has destroyed, and it invites a

reorientation to lost practices premised on a disavowal of technology. In contrast, *Air* explores futures in which uneven socio-economic landscapes are reconfigured by technological means. But these options are not always or necessarily mutually exclusive.

As I write this, a car passes by, carrying the slogan “Mekongnet—connecting us all.” The sign, of course, evokes modern technology. *Lake of Heaven*, however, provides us with a vastly expanded sense of *what it is that needs to be connected* in alternative educational futures. After all, Japanese society is infused with techno-animism, Cambodian networks are haunted, and biohazards proliferate.

Most urgently, however, the **question of what educational futures need to take into consideration is spectacularly raised by climate change**. Because modern education and knowledge systems are more than passive spectators of the drowning that will happen to the intended site of the conference, Miami, as surely as it did to Amazoko village. Over several decades Western-style education systems have become increasingly, indeed obsessively, oriented towards the acceleration of growth at all cost. As concerns with *bildung* or the attainment of rounded knowledge about the paradoxes of life went out the window, institutions of higher education became competitors in a suicidal contest to make the most efficient climate destroying engines, with consequences felt more strongly year by year.

If we must speak, today, of a need to reclaim imagination it is with a view to confront this wall of reality, which is embedded in educational and political agendas easily duped by technological hype, rooted in institutional inertia and aversion to more than cosmetic change, and which thrives on our collective professorial mind-sets running in narrow disciplinary grooves.

Because the wall is real—Miami will really go underwater, for example—reclaiming imagination has nothing to do retreating from reality into a more carefree and pleasant speculative dream-world. Instead, the issue is how to enrich our repertoires of reality in ways that have potentials for nourishing more encompassing futures. As Paul Feyerabend once wrote, “the problem is not what is ‘real’ and what is not,” but rather what can be *made to occur*. Reclaiming imagination names an urgent collective effort to discover and invent the tools that will allow us to imagine, construct, and care for alternative practical ontologies of education that, while improbable under current circumstance, are nevertheless not yet impossible. Here non-conventional social and educational theory, philosophy, anthropology, and speculative fiction join hands. As our worlds keep burning and drowning, we urgently need to learn think, to imagine and teach *livable* environments, societies, and technologies together.