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A Greenwood Seminar: Beyond Superman Visions of a
Futre

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Hello. Welcome. We, the harpist and myself, are from the Greenwood University of Gnosis, founded in the late 21st century, and assisted by bequests from many compassionate deep ecologists, ecofeminists, transpersonal ecologists, social ecologists and “greenies” of many shades. I am here today to share with you the philosophical historical visions that helped shape our present destiny. To do justice to this presentation, I will refer to a synopsis of a book completed in the year of Earth Summits by a human entity Angela Semmens. While writing her book on visions of a future, the prevailing Western normative, -socio-environmental systems were in the midst of massive change. Some entities, of this period, referred to the transformations as shifts from the Industrial to a Post-Industrial/post modern era. Others referred to these shifts as transformations from internationalism to transnationalism or supranationalism. Yet others challenged notions of Post-Industrialism and trans-nationalism, arguing that the shift was essentially one of Industrialism to hyper-Industrialism, and that the anticipation of a leisure based, non-exploitative One World Order, was merely political rhetoric. We at the Greenwood University Of Gnosis believe that fundamentally all these transformations were one and the same and refer to this period simply as “The Information Age”. Whatever the case, nihilistic despair and naive optimism were bedfellows during those times of change. The World Problematique blurred the outlook of humans. For some, meaningless living and despair were commonplace, while for others, the hope that technological solutions would secure a brighter future, made the despair less anxiety provoking. Visions of futures were needed more than ever during that historical period in order to mobilise the age and help transform it; for despite orthodox technological initiatives and false optimism, the earth’s deep substratum of mind called “collective unconscious”; “morphic field”; the Gaian soul; or the music of the spheres; was thirsting for radical departures from the normative socio- environmental conditions.

But in a world where the “championing of relativism” prevailed i.e. “where no act was considered right or wrong in itself...everything depending on its relation to the agent”, people generally no longer believed in philosophical metanarratives to justify actions; they had no comprehensive visions! 1 Most actions were therefore fraught with skepticism and cynicism.

It is difficult for us in this room today, nearly a century later, to fully comprehend such a condition. Unlike the past epoch, we have certitude. We are certain for example that our solar and wind powered small scaled technologies, our harmony with wildness, our redistribution of resources, our simple lifestyles, and our efforts to alleviate violence, poverty and overpopulation, are right actions. Most people in western countries however, towards the close of the 20th

century lived within a bubble, to borrow Gai Eaton's metaphor. "Their sight was weak and untrained", due to poverty, subordination and/or despair, so that they believed what they were told by hypostatized entities who apparently saw more clearly. "There were those however whose vision pierced the thin membrane which to others seemed opaque, and beyond faith they saw what was to be seen" and needed to be done. 2 They were the ActiVisionaries—and we in this room today in 2080, the year Artemis, owe them for our present conditions.

What was admirable about these people? True, they contended with emotions arising from an embodied existence. They experienced joy, sorrow, anger, lust (and many other emotions too numerous to mention) but their love, compassion and empathy extended beyond their "skin-encapsulated egos" to all entities. Their concern was not limited to humans, but to life itself and to the myriad of life forms with which they shared their existence. Most significantly however, the uniqueness of the ActiVisionaries lay in their visions which informed their personal and group actions. Their visions did not simply accept nor strive to reproduce the orthodox "Superman" visions of their time, which were extolled falsely as socio-transformative or "new", in accord with the discourse of modernity. 3 The visions informing ActiVisionaries went beyond falsely optimistic "Superman" speculations, for the ActiVisionaries were aware that the "Superman" speculations were antiquated and tied to a "Superman-Progress" ideal. What was this "Superman-Progress" ideal?

Tersely stated it was the overriding, often non-conscious, concern with fulfilling an androcentric, or rather androcratic, ambition—the striving for a dispassioned hyper-rational demigod consciousness-realised in a socio-environmental order; the ascent of the metropolis. In populist terminology, this ambition was referred to as the "Superman" project (to borrow a familiar Nietzschean term) but it was not exclusively the dynamic of one gender. Women were also caught up in it. Some people during the 20th century, referred to the "Superman" project as "hyper-expansionist". 4 Others as the project of patriarchy. Some argued that the "Superman" project bore a strong phenomenological likeness to the project of modernity which, in Habermas' opinion, "was formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment...". 5

We, from the Greenwood University of Gnosis, however, believe that the "Superman" project was not merely a characteristic of the 18th century Enlightenment period. Rather the Enlightenment -ideals, which emphasised human transcendence over nature—and hence the project of modernity—were deeply flavoured by the "Superman" urge. The period of "Enlightenment" effectively made the "Superman" project synonymous with the project of modernity. What was the genesis of the "Superman" urge? No one really knows. Of course there have been many theories proposed over the years linking the beginnings of the "Superman" to classical philosophy; the destruction of nature and the subordination of women; Capitalism; socialization into gender roles; the male biological condition; 6 and human confrontation with the finality of death. Perhaps the

Superman urge was fuelled by a combination of factors. The good news is, that here today in the year of Artemis, 2080, the “Superman” ideal does not account for our reality. The Goddess archetype “Artemis” which we have evoked to give significance to our year, does not speak to us in the same “Superman” tongue of the past, but of a future spirit—the realm of wildness. But let us leave the domain of futures aside for the moment, in order to explore further the “Superman” ideal of the past.

This ideal itself was not normatively neutral, but was wedded to a deep-seated social-individual psyche structure of action concerning a linear ascending directionality. Although the striving itself was linear, the project’s momentum had at times been thwarted by other factors. But regardless of obstacles the “Superman” drive persisted along a linear ascending pathway towards the realization of its hyper-rational God-head. In its outreach towards its goal it assumed a monocultural universalist direction; a universalism based on internationalism or “trans” phenomena and domination-subordination configurations. Hence, the advent of trans-corporations and bureaucracies. In some cases it had been predisposed towards an imperialist parochialism. Its crusade towards hyper-rationality towards a super-human remoteness involved techno-scientific prowess and the absolute conquest of nature- anthropomorphised as female throughout western “his”tory. 7 The concrete manifestation of the “Superman-Progress” striving was the metropolis, so that effectively, in Von Laue’s opinion, the “outreach of the idea of progress in its entirety (was)...the global outpouring of the metropolis. Moreover, its signature was the straight line.

The straight line is...the signature of hyper-rational existence. It is a puritan curve, an idea basic to the purge of emotion. It is the hyper-rational spirit...(that) makes the modern city park...an abstraction more to be seen than felt...The significance of the straight...is that it is consistent with...abstract existence...implicit to modern experience. 8

The transcendentalism associated with symbols of the “Superman Progress” drive—the metropolis and the straight line—was one based on human egoic instrumentalist and functionalist interests. This means that the “Superman” grandiosity aspired to have a predominantly egoic character; “a will without limits” concerning absolute power over self and others, whether consciously acknowledged or not. William Day, captured and personified the “Superman” striving thus:

Omega man will emerge...with mechanical amplification to transcend new dimensions of time and space beyond our comprehension... If evolution is to proceed through the line of man to a next higher form... It is reasonable to assume that man’s (sic) intellect is not the ultimate, but merely represents a stage intermediate between the

primates and Omega man. What comprehension and powers over nature Omega man will command. 9

Some commentators referred to this anticipated evolution of humans as the “trans” image of “man”, and emphasised that this image could be “found going back thousands of years”. 10

We, at Greenwood, consider it important however to distinguish between the “Superman-Progress” drive, and strivings towards the creative unfolding of the human psyche. It is important to bring out the differences between these for it was the latter strivings which informed ActiVisions and hence our present state of affairs.

What do we mean by the creative unfolding of the human psyche? Simply, “life affirming creativity”; a striving or rather state of being, which tended towards life preservation and life celebration in the absence of an instrumental-functional calculus. This “life affirming creativity” was not epitomized by some counter-cultural narcissistic concerns shaped by “the liberal notion of freedom”. 11 ActiVisionaries were aware that creativity tied to individualist concerns only served to enlarge a narrow egoic anthropocentric self. “Life affirming creativity” strivings emphasised the development of eco-interpersonal relations and interconnectedness with life.

In contrast, the “Superman” striving was predominantly life negating or nihilistic, not so much as a conscious intention or articulated conviction, but as a by-product of the striving itself. 12 However there were exceptions to this rule, particularly found in the works of Marquis de Sade and Nietzsche, in the 18th century. Both philosophers suggested that the “Superman-Progress” drive can be consciously nihilistic and destructive in its pursuit of godhead. Nietzsche, in one account, ascribed a positive value to this tendency.

Nihilism is an ideal of the highest degree of powerfulness of the spirit, the over-richest life-partly destructive, partly ironic... It reaches its maximum of relative strength as a violent force of destruction—as active nihilism. 13

Such comments from a philosopher who asserted:

I am the immoralist, that makes me the annihilator par excellence...I am a man of catastrophe.

While there were exceptions, generally the “Superman-Progress” ambition did not deliberately effect nihilism and/or destructive acts.

From a strictly Frommian analysis concerning the distinction between the “Superman” drive and “life affirming creativity”, both were perhaps rooted in our

(human) desire to be creative, but in the case of the “Superman” urge, it was a distorted expression of a creative striving. Essentially, the “Superman” striving was pathological rather than healthy. However there were some people like Martin Heidegger, claimed by many to be a Nazi sympathizer, who believed that the “Superman” striving was not only synonymous with creativity, but also essential for creative artists and geniuses throughout history.

It is only by virtue of...violent acts that the encrusted powers of convention and everydayness can be broken, that authentically creative natures can truly assert themselves and that the otherwise concealed primordial power of being can come to the fore. 15

Christine Battersby refuted this idea by placing the genesis of this idea itself within a “Superman” context while suggesting that an association between creativity, genius and actualization be made within feminist aesthetics.

Given the preceding discussion, not surprisingly, ActiVisionaries rejected “Superman” imbued visions of a future in favour of visions imbued with “Life affirming creativity”.

An alternative way to conceptualize the difference between “Superman” visions of a future and “ActiVisionary speculations is to link visions to a perspective dependent context. Notably the gaze or outlook.

Optical and ActiVisionary Visions of a Future

Phenomenologically and metaphorically speaking, two major forms of outlook could be distinguished; the optical and ActiVisionary outlooks. The optical referred to what was observed with the eye or sight. This modality itself was a sensory modality favored by Western rational, hyper-rational societies. The optical outlook or modality, like the societies characterised by it, was concerned with objectifying, distancing subjects from subjectees and focusing on what was within its sensory distance. Additionally, the optical outlook was passive spectator and voyeuristic. Feminist writers such as Simone De Beauvoir and artists such as Cindy Sherman, cogently illustrated during the 20th century, that there was a distinctively patriarchal flavour to this gaze which made women and fellow creatures into the “other”. From a (Ken) Wilberian 16 analysis, the optical outlook emanated from the “empirical eye,” the “eye of flesh” as well as the “eye of reason”; an “eye of reason” which was not aware of its own sight—not metacritical.

Most “Superman” visions of a future were connected to this optical outlook. Moreover their temporal range, content and intentionality, fell short of meeting socio-environmental transformative criteria. We need to remember also that

“Superman” visions of a future were embedded within a wider enterprise; namely Futurism, particularly dominant futurism imbued with the predictive empirical position. 17

In contrast to the optical gaze, the ActiVisionary outlook was not passive but active in the sense that it involved highly imaginative as well as physical activity. It involved a stretching of one’s imaginative capabilities beyond “what is and should be”, to “what can be, may be and must be”. It was not utopic but praxitopic. That is, the sight was not projected towards an absolute perfected state, but rather unfolding processes. The ActiVisionary sight started from somewhere between the “eye of reason,” “by which we rise to a knowledge of transcendent realities”. It is worth noting that ActiVisionary visions did not involve maladjusted lower level pre-verbal activity, but transverbal fantasy. This point is crucial. The trans-verbal fantasy relies, as we are certain today, on a more integrated self “wherein mind and body are harmoniously one”. Ken Wilber referred to this level of being as the “centaur” (centauress?) where mind and body exist in a state of “at-one-ment”. 18 To restate, the ActiVisionary outlook arises from such a state of being. From such a totality, the ActiVisionary outlook was imbued with passion, enthusiasm, non-egotistic compassion and lead to a commitment to personal and group action.

Let us now end this discussion by briefly summarizing the difference between the optical and ActiVisionary visions in terms of their constellations, so that we can appreciate more fully, the character of those visions which guided and informed our age— “The Age of Sophia”.

@BT-TAB = OPTICAL ACTIVISIONARY

@BTTABBULLET = Superman Life-affirming creativity

@BTTABBULLET = Hyper-rationality Reasonableness, contemplation

@BTTABBULLET = ;P9M;Instrumental/functionalism;P255D; Let beings flourish

@BTTABBULLET = Bonsai brain Wildness

@BTTABBULLET = Transient relationships Intimate, loving fellowship

@BTTABBULLET = Universalist/Particularist Eco-planetary/bioregional

@BTTABBULLET = ;P9M;Post-industrial/High infotech;P255D; Appropriate technology

@BTTABBULLET = Anthropocentric Ecocentric

@BTTABBULLET = Egoism/egotism Eco-relational, interpersonal

@BTTABBULLET = Strangulated psyche Wholeness

@BTTABBULLET = Pornography Healthy erotica

@BTTABBULLET = Capitalopia Ecosophy

@BTTABBULLET = Corporate public/private Communal public & private

@BTTABBULLET = Apathy Love

Notes.

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