

## To re-educate desire: practicing pluralism, participation and possibility

**Jakob Grandin**, PhD Candidate at Spacelab, University of Bergen, and educational coordinator emeritus at CEMUS <sup>[1]</sup>

*teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way* <sup>[2]</sup>

And so we came here - to the point where our primary means to make sense of a messy present is through the futures we anticipate. Futures extrapolated, calculated, approximated, forecasted, back-casted, modelled, and dreamt. Futures brought to life in the present in visions, scenarios, hallucinations, performances, and as the measurable goals and targets in all those PDF-documents that govern humanity's universalist aspirations.<sup>[3]</sup> Futures only occasionally truly desired, longed for; for the most part naïve dreams and equally naïve nightmares, eroded by accelerated change and suffocated by diminishing carbon budgets. Once-viable futures now become obsolete before they have had time to pass through peer-review: a mass-extinction of dreams and possible worlds for those of us who were somewhat recently born.

If we are ever to mobilize and materialize alternative futures that matter it is, in other words, crucial that we learn to desire more, better, differently - and faster. Narratives of unavoidable futures are often deployed to control and constrain the present, but the future may also be a creative and emancipatory domain. The "radical imagination" transforms the future into a space "to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be" and then "bringing those possible futures 'back' to work on the present, to inspire action ... today".<sup>[4]</sup> But such efforts are often frustrated by our "incapacity to think outside the here and now".<sup>[5]</sup> Our aptitude for foresight is limited by values, worldviews, paradigms, and a sheer lack of words.<sup>[6]</sup> Time and again, our collective anticipatory efforts converge on the two well-worn, but largely unproductive, narrative paths of either a status quo thinly iced with individualized behaviour change and miracle technologies, or - the end of the world.

This is the point where we should ask ourselves, as J. K. Gibson-Graham does, how we can create a more-than-academic practice that allows us to "become open to possibility rather than limits on the possible".<sup>[7]</sup> CEMUS, I suggest, has cultivated possibility through a practice of pluralism based on participation, dialogue and debate.<sup>[8]</sup> Pluralism does not imply some form of sloppy "anything goes" relativism where all positions and "alternative facts" are equally valid. In contrast, pluralism-as-practice is a rigorous, disciplined operation, which requires us to "travel some distance beyond [our] own position in order to see reality from another point of view".<sup>[9]</sup> Pluralistic practice is, to borrow from Frederic Jameson's eloquent description of utopian form, a "meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality".<sup>[10]</sup> By cultivating a discipline of examining, interrogating and reframing problems from the position of a range of different conflicting worldviews, aspirations, values and paradigms, and by rereading for difference to identify what is possible, we prepare the ground for "creativity to generate actual possibilities where none formerly existed".<sup>[11]</sup>

In this, we can turn the broad and contested nature of sustainable development into a creative resource.<sup>[12]</sup> CEMUS is where political ecology meets resilience meets the self-help styled management platitudes from Harvard Business Review. We manage-our-energy-not-our-time as we turn green to gold, talk about the mountain, partake in a necessary revolution and review the latest ecological theory of unequal exchange. We close our eyes, get some damp soil and partly decomposed leaves in our cupped hands, breathe, we are not completely at ease when we - eyes still closed - walk in circles and bounce into each other while someone chants improvised poetry but that's probably the point; we open our eyes and examine tax policy, the circular economy, and the merits of carbon capture and storage. We are the air aware, the engineers, the warriors, the alchemists; we are the diplomats with frequent flyer cards, the transition-preppers with local-resilient-life-boat-communities; we have blood on our hands and dirt under our fingernails; we are the shamans, the entrepreneurs, the feminist mansplainers; we are global citizens walking on the iron bridges of Uppsala. We get excited about A+++ fantastic washing machines and cheap red wine; we are always ready to make the business case for sustainability as a driver of innovation, to discuss the finer points of Schumpeterian underdevelopment and degrowth; we know how to find our way through almost any ecomodernist maze-in-the-air. We go to Norway each spring to kneel humbly before the flower at the tree line. We are the structures and the agencies; we are modern, pre-modern, mostly post-modern.

As we swirl and curl through this storm of desire, no one knows precisely where we will end up. What we are striving for is to make use all these divergent points of departure to critically examine the present and extend the range of conceivable futures. By “engaging with other ideas, with the multiplicity of ideas, we enter new spaces of possibility, spaces which were previously outside the realms of our imagination”.<sup>[13]</sup> Our aim is nothing less than to expand the space of the possible.

Such a practice of pluralism will not happen by itself, but requires structure, careful planning and facilitation. As Jeppe Læssøe asserts, participatory education is often nothing more than a “self-deceptive simulation” that serves to reinforce (instead of contesting) the discourses and values that are already dominant in society. To work, pluralism-as-practice therefore calls for a participation of a certain kind, a disciplined dialogue that brings up dilemmas, dissent and deliberation.<sup>[14]</sup>

I'll be the first to admit how good it feels when a common understanding about messy social-environmental relationships starts to emerge in a group, when we get a language that we share so that we can reach each other.<sup>[15]</sup> In all courses there might be pockets of consensus, even a convergence of values and objectives of sorts from which change can be mobilized. But synthesis and redemption is not what we are here for: what we seek is dissonance, disagreement, disruption, trouble.<sup>[16]</sup> If we ever are to open up the future and the choices ahead for deliberation, that will be “predicated on not just the recognition but the positive encouragement of difference”.<sup>[17]</sup> We want countless ideas, visions and ontologies to clash all around us, and as we rise from the ashes it is imperative that we also dare to take our own normative standpoints, that we do not forget to desire.

For all I know, that was why we came here in the first place: to re-educate desire. To desire (an academic practice that is kind of meaningful and fun). To desire more (there is more to life than a cheaper cup of coffee, we can always fight for that). To desire better (a more-than-human society; philosophy as a way of life where we practice radical solidarity through all our incompleteness and potential). To desire faster (before our dreams - and lives - dissipate). And above all to desire in a different way.

## Notes and references

- [1] A grant from Forum för ämnesdidaktiska studier at Uppsala University carved out the space where the reflections in this essay were initiated; it is acknowledged with gratitude.
- [2] Miguel Abensour, translated by E.P. Thomson, quoted in Webb, Darren, 'Educational Archaeology and the Practice of Utopian Pedagogy', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 2017, p. 2.
- [3] For a discussion of anticipatory practices and anticipatory action, see Anderson, Ben, 'Preemption, Precaution, Preparedness: Anticipatory Action and Future Geographies.' *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 6 (2010)
- [4] Haiven, Max, and Alex Khasnabish. *The Radical Imagination : Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity*, London: Zed Books Ltd, 2014, p. 3.
- [5] Webb, Darren, 'Educational Archaeology and the Practice of Utopian Pedagogy', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 2017, p. 4
- [6] See, for example, Miller, Riel, 'Futures Literacy: a Hybrid Strategic Scenario Method', *Futures*, 39 (2007), 341–62 and O'Brien, Karen, 'Global Environmental Change III: Closing the Gap Between Knowledge and Action', *Progress in Human Geography*, 37 (2012), 587–96.
- [7] Gibson-Graham, J-K, 'Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for 'Other Worlds'', *Progress in Human Geography*, 32 (2008), p. 614.
- [8] I would argue that this is a dynamic effect of CEMUS' educational model; for an introduction, see the chapters by Robert Österbergh and David O. Kronlid as well as Jakob Grandin in Hald, Matilda (ed.), *Transcending Boundaries: How CEMUS is changing how we teach, meet and learn*, (Uppsala: CEMUS, 2011). For an example of how participation may be designed, see Grandin, Jakob, Sanna Gunnarsson and Sara Andersson, "It feels almost surreal": being strategic about how we design participation in order to enlarge the space of the possible' in the *ActSHEN Booklet*, available at <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/action-for-sustainability/>.
- [9] Allan Meggill, quoted in Wals, Arjen E J, 'Between Knowing What Is Right and Knowing That Is It Wrong to Tell Others What Is Right: on Relativism, Uncertainty and Democracy in Environmental and Sustainability Education', *Environmental Education Research*, 16 (2010), p. 145
- [10] Jameson, Frederic, *Archeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), p. xii.
- [11] Gibson-Graham, J-K, 'Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for 'Other Worlds'', *Progress in Human Geography*, 32 (2008), p. 614.
- [12] On the contested and broad nature of sustainable development, see for example Hopwood, Bill, Mary Mellor, and Geoff O'Brien, 'Sustainable Development: Mapping Different Approaches', *Sustainable Development*, 13 (2005), 38–52, Sachs, Wolfgang, *Planet Dialectics* (Zed Books Ltd., 1999) Wals, Arjen E J, and Bob Jickling, "Sustainability" in Higher Education: From Doublethink and Newspeak to Critical Thinking and Meaningful Learning', *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 3 (2002), 221–32
- [13] Osberg, Deborah, "Enlarging the Space of the Possible" Around What It Means to Educate and Be Educated', *Complicity: an International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 6 (2009), p. viii.
- [14] See Læssøe, Jeppe, 'Education for Sustainable Development, Participation and Socio-Cultural Change', *Environmental Education Research*, 16 (2010), 39–57
- [15] See Johan Gärdebo's entry for week 15 in the CEMUS Diaries.
- [16] See Alexis Engström & Susanna Barrineau's entry for week 12 in CEMUS Diaries.
- [17] Healy, S., 'Epistemological Pluralism and the "Politics of Choice"', *Futures*, 35 (2003), p. 697.