Analysing Scenarios
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'Now for a really conservative century' by Andrew Marr, *New Statesman and Society, 2000-01-03, pp45-47.*

Before launching into a possible scenario for the 21st century (mainly for the United Kingdom), the article begins with a description of the 20th. It has been described as "the Conservative Century" due to the number of years the Conservative party has been in power, but Marr goes on to point out how it could more qualitatively be described as a progressive, centre-left century:

> This was the century, after all, when women got the vote, when trade unions rose to the height of their power, when the welfare state was constructed, when wealth taxes and substantial income taxation were introduced, when full employment was made an explicit part of government policy.

Rather than seeing the next hundred years continuing this theme, however, he describes the reasons why we could see a drastic shift to the right. Nations are now weaker with their economic, environmental, and defence powers restricted by supra-national organisations such as the WTO, Rio convention and NATO respectively. Despite the 20th century's egalitarian steps, the economic extremes are providing fuel for a new conservatism: the super-rich have fewer ties to culture and nationality and the poor largely ignore party politics but if anything are more likely to associate with nationalist and right-wing causes. Further, populations are ageing which is more likely to produce heavy conservative votes and larger Hindu and Muslim populations could affect traditionally liberal, anti-censorship cultures.

A weak point in the description of a future is Marr's description of rising environmentalism, for which he gives little in the way of supporting trends or explicit causes. Interestingly he sees this as a conservative reaction, rather than a radical left-leaning one, resulting in "new puritans" for whom conspicuous consumption becomes socially unacceptable and who demand "better public transport, fewer cars and more expensive organic food." This is more along the lines of conservation and traditionalism, rather than radical environmentalism. But either way, he sees it having a dramatic social effect on society, with travel and immigration restricted as countries attempt to live within their means. This traditionalism rears its head again as a reaction to the increasing pace of scientific development, similar to the public outcry over genetically modified foods.

In the expanding knowledge economy the poor and uneducated suffer greatly, unable to join in with the creation of wealth and flow of information the rest of the country takes for granted. This increasing segregation is a positive feedback loop, and governments don't help matters by altering policies towards less progressive taxation, charges for public services, and the privatisation of pensions and insurance.

Marr goes so far as to suggest dates for certain crucial events over the next few decades:

2017, the first British National Movement MPs are elected.

2024, the abolition of income tax and the introduction of food stamps for the poor.

2032, the reintroduction of the death penalty following a referendum.

2050, private cars are abolished and international travel restricted.

He summarises the condition of the world thus:

A next century that is dominated by self-righteous puritans, unprepared to pay general taxes to lift the rest of the population out of poverty, picky and suspicious of government action; where national governments are weaker economically but are required to be tougher in fighting crime and limiting migration; and where macroeconomic management has moved so far up to the global level that it is hardly connected to national democracies at all.

As a political commentator and journalist, Andrew Marr is basing his thoughts more on observation of trends and possible outcomes rather than statistics, allowing him a slightly freer and more imaginative scenario than he might otherwise have come up with. One significant flaw is the vagueness of the location he's describing; at times he seems to be describing Britain, other times what we assume is the western world, rather than the whole world. Clarification of this, and supporting more of his statements with current trends leading towards them, would have made for a more robust and believable scenario.

'Things Fall Apart,' from New Media Knowledge's *Report From the Future*, October 1999

'Things Fall Apart' is one of four scenarios generated in an effort to forecast possible futures for the UK new media industry in 2004. The 1999 project was supported by New Media Knowledge (a publicly-funded organisation) and London's SUN-ICA New Media Centre. Given the speed with which the Internet industry is developing, the organisers made an effort to condense the usually lengthy scenario-planning exercise into as short a time as possible, while still allowing contributions and discussions from many sources.

To this end, the first stage of the project, christened 'Living Scenarios,' was an online discussion forum where 200 people were invited to take part in an ongoing brainstorm. This also, in theory but, as they discovered, not necessarily in practice, allowed people to become familiar with each other in a short space of time, before meeting in the flesh for the second phase. This consisted of a one-day event at which the scenarios themselves were created. The final, ongoing, stage of 'Living Scenarios' (which takes place after the publication of the initial scenarios) is a series of monthly planning sessions to keep track of emerging trends and events.

This scenario is the most detailed of the quartet which emerged from this process, and is certainly the most pessimistic. It describes how the Internet bubble burst in a big way, with the public and industry realising many .com companies had little going for them. Market demand failed to grow at anything like projected rates, and a huge fraud investigation into an online pensions company instigated a series of drastic governmental reforms. The morning following the publishing of a White Paper imposing heavy taxes, licences and restrictions, the share prices of new media companies fell 70 per cent. This was 2003, and TV companies had already been expanding their technologies and introducing their own proprietary satellite-, digital- and cable-based networks which were far more attractive and reliable for the public than the chaotic Internet.

The chronology of 'Things Fall Apart' is written as the reminiscences of David Smith, a computer programmer thinking back to the good old days and what went wrong. The four scenarios are designed by and for the British new media industry so perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that networks and electronics are their focus. However, they suffer from this narrow view and even this, the longest of the four, lacks colour and memorable images. It adequately describes the gradual collapse of an industry, but seems too bland for many causes or incidents to stick in one's memory. This may in part be due to the scenarios' tight focus at the expense of other areas of life; only one scenario gives an impression of what every day life might be like, and in this the suicidal man surrounded by

an automated home doesn't encourage one to identify with him! There is little describing personal futures and thus the scenarios have a tendency to seem slightly abstract and distant, unless the reader is concerned about the future position of his/her new media company. Which may of course be the sole intention.

Why is this? It could be that there was limited space in which to publish the scenarios, so they had to be brief, and tightly focused. There may well have been descriptions of the everyday life which we miss in the final form. On the other hand, it sounded like the large number of contributors were all drawn from the new media industry and perhaps more "outsiders" would have generated more variety. In fact, the report expresses surprise at the level of consensus found within the group:

"Bandwidth will increase. Browsers will improve. Hardware will be upgraded. Legislation will be benign. Laden down with share options, our boat will still come in."

Perhaps the narrow experience of the participants and the short period of time taken to generate the scenarios restricted the amount of "out-of-the-box" thinking that went on. A wider variety of viewpoints on technology, and more time spent encouraging fresh thinking may have created more varied, useful and in-depth scenarios.

Infinite Jest, **David Foster Wallace, Little, Brown & Company, 1996.**

This hefty novel (981 pages, plus 96 pages of footnotes) is set an indeterminate number of years in the future, although few would call it science-fiction; it just happens to be set an indeterminate number of years in the future which contributes to its atmosphere of dislocation. It has been described as

the longest novel about tennis ever published. It is also a dystopian political satire set on a North American continent menaced by paraplegic Quebecois terrorists and splintered into new territorial arrangements, the most wildly metaphorical anatomy of drug abuse since William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, and a tender, heartfelt, coming-of-age story.[1]

Just as the narrative strands intertwine and gradually emerge throughout the novel, so the world in which they occur is filled in a little at a time. In the interests of clarity then, it would be useful to bring together and summarise the main features of the scenario.

It is impossible to pin down in which year the events happen due to the advent of Subsidised Time. At a time which would seem to be in the first few years of the new century, it became possible for companies to sponsor individual years, the first such year being Year of the Whopper and the year in which most of the novel takes place, seven years later, being Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.[2] This separation of the two eras makes it impossible to tell how far in the future the story is set, but there are a number of events which are described as occurring before Subsidised Time which would require a few years to happen, so we can assume much of the action occurs maybe 15 years after the book was published.

What we know of these years is sketchy, and often recounted by unreliable sources (such as, in one case, a puppet show). One major change in the US is the complete destruction and rebirth of televisual entertainment. Thanks to the fickleness of remote-controlled TV viewing and VCRs which can avoid the commercials the four big TV networks begin to suffer from lack of ad revenue while the regional and national cable networks form the American Council of Disseminators of Cable. The ACDC convinces the public that it is their American right to have 500-plus channels to choose from, and they soon begin raking in the advertising revenues which allow them to purchase premier sporting events, sealing their popularity further, and eventually (in 1999) driving the traditional networks off the air.[3] Areas of the country which do not yet have access to cable TV see their crime and suicide rates rise dramatically as previously network TV watching citizens realise they have nothing to do with their time. The moribund broadcast networks combine their resources behind a company created by a video rental mogul and form InterLace TelEntertainment, offering pay-per-view entertainment viewable on TV or computer, via modem, fibre-optic cable or mailable diskettes. This gives viewers even more choice, the ACDC companies decline, InterLace TelEnt expands its infrastructure, and sometime after the advent of the Subsidised Era the government considers nationalising the company. There is something strangely retro about this new entertainment format, and the prevalence of diskettes of TV shows, or one's daily news stories, arriving in the mail seems particularly quaint.

The other major change is political and geographical; it would seem that NATO dismantled itself, deciding there was no point existing without an enemy, and the United States, Canada and Mexico formed the Organisation of North American Nations (ONAN). Following this, sometime just after the introduction of Subsidised Time, it becomes apparent there are horrendous problems with waste in the north-east USA; vast amounts of refuse, much of it dangerous industrial and medical waste, is polluting a sizeable part of the country, but no one knows who is to blame. The waste generated by annular fusion (a technology which has allowed the USA to become energy-independent) only exacerbates the problem, and not wanting to be saddled with vast tracts of uncleanable land the US government comes up with a novel solution: they give the area to Canada as a gift, in return for which they only ask that they be allowed to continue dumping their waste in the area.[4] The area, henceforth known as the Great Concavity/Convexity, is evacuated and surrounded

by Lucite walls and checkpoints, and appears to be the spark which ignites the aforementioned paraplegic and other more able-bodied Quebecois terrorists' demands for independence. Annula fusion waste has the effect of making the land super-fertile, to the point that it would get way out of control, but this growth is combated by the contents of the Empire Waste Displacement displacement vehicles – large trash receptacles which are flung deep into the Great Concavity from the USA at an altitude of more than three miles by block-long catapults.

Aside from these scenario-setting reports there is a particularly interesting and hilarious description of the social effects of the rise and fall of a new technology: video phones.[5] The main problem was the stress caused by callers suddenly having to see each other.

> Good old traditional audio-only phone conversations allowed you to presume that the person on the other end was paying complete attention to you while also permitting you not to have to pay anything even close to complete attention to her … consumers began to see [visual-video telephone calls] were less like having the good old phone ring than having the doorbell ring and having to throw on clothes and attach prostheses and do hair-checks in the foyer mirror before answering the door.

This was compounded when people realised how bad they looked when filmed by the small and cheap cameras with which video phones were equipped. The first solution was an expensive procedure of constructing a three dimensional computer model of the user wearing an earnest expression and looking their best. This was soon replaced by cheaper form-fitting masks designed to look good on camera which seemed like a viable solution, despite mistaken-identity problems with callers accidentally putting on the wrong masks occasionally. Inevitably, people soon began wanting to look even better, and began to have masks made which enhanced their features. This, however, lead to a raising of expectations amongst masked video-phone callers so that many became scared of meeting correspondents in person, *sans* enhanced masks.

Problems intensified when cameras improved in quality and began framing a wider field of vision. This created a market for full-body 'masks,' two dimensional cut-outs of handsome and attractive bodies suitable for video calls. From this it was a small step to the creation of *Transmittable Tableaux*, photographs of a whole room which were clipped over the camera lens.

> Facial and bodily masking could now be dispensed with altogether and replaced with the video-transmitted image of what was essentially a heavily doctored still-photograph, one of an incredibly fit and attractive and well-turned-out human being, someone who actually resembled you the caller only in such limited respects as like race and limb-number, the photo's face focused attentively in the direction of the video-phonic camera from amid the sumptuous but not ostentatious appointments of the sort of room that best reflected the image of yourself you wanted to transmit, etc.

It wasn't long before most people saw no point in the expense of transmitting still photos down video-fibre lines and audio-only phones became popular once again, as "a status-symbol of anti-vanity, such that only callers utterly lacking in self-awareness continued to use videophony and Tableaux."

The setting of *Infinite Jest* is, in some respects superfluous to the plots, in that much of the story is about people whose lives would be little different were it set in the present day. However, by shifting the tale an unspecified distance into the future, when the world is different enough to be a little unfamiliar, it provides a sense of unease that would otherwise not be present. While the background stories of ONAN and InterLace TelEnt are in some ways divorced from the central action, they do have an affect on the characters' lives to some extent; characters are always aware of their refuse (the waste containers on the streets, the displacement vehicles flying overhead) and the media, both contemporary and pre-InterLace play an important part in their lives. However, we see little of the effects on the rest of the population, with much of the action confined within the boundaries of a tennis academy and a half-way house.

The future developments are often on the boundaries between plausibility and ridiculousness, which is a good position to be in to encourage thinking about the future: too plausible and one tends to simply accept an event as possible without thinking about it; too ridiculous and one may well dismiss it out of hand as too far-fetched to ever happen. Items such as Subsidised Time, the collapse and rebirth of the TV networks and the allocation of a large area solely as a waste dump may seem unlikely, but with plausible intervening steps they seem like thought-provoking possibilities.

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[1] 'The Panic of Influence,' A.O. Scott, *New York Review of Books*, 2000-02-10, http://www.nybooks.com/nyrev/WWWfeatdisplay.cgi?20000210039R

[2] One effect of Subsidised Time, aside from the decking out of the Statue of Liberty in giant diapers, was a boom in the share prices of companies in the calendar and pre-printed check industries, which is a nice little aside on further effects of these changes, and the kind of thing Wallace is good at.

[3] Incidentally, the vastly reduced cost of advertising on the networks allowed a whole array of new advertisers access to TV, creating entirely new industries based solely on cheaply made spots.

[4] The process of persuading the Canadians to accept this gift is recounted in newspaper headlines, many of which have been fabricated, but succeed in giving the general gist, eg: "CANADIAN P.M. TO [US PRESIDENT] GENTLE: LOOK, WE'RE SWIMMING IN TERRITORY ALREADY, HAVE A LOOK AT AN ATLAS WHY DON'T YOU, WE HAVE WAY MORE TERRITORY THAN WE KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH ALREADY, PLUS I DON'T MEAN TO BE RUDE EITHER BUT WE'RE ESPECIALLY UNKEEN ON ACCEPTING HOPELESSLY *BEFOULED* TERRITORY FROM YOU GUYS, INTERDEPENDENCE RHETORIC OR NO, THERE'S REALLY JUST NO WAY."

[5] pp144-151.