

Decolonizing the image

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Abstract

Fred Polak's "image of the future" has been highly influential in the futures community, but his assumptions and findings are easily critiqued from decolonial positions. Given these contradictions and complexities, an examination of the literature on Polakian images can serve as a useful frame for exploring futures thinking past and future. In this presentation, we adopt a retrospective-prospective stance in critically and appreciatively reconsidering the image.

Writing in the 1950s, Polak saw himself as living through "a literal breach in time." He hypothesized that cultures rise and fall based on the vitality of their images, and he surveyed the rise and fall of images "that have sifted down through history into the receptacle we term Western civilization." His particular focus was on "the meaning of time and its flow in history," such that "a Society is at once pulled forward by its own magnetic images of an idealized future and pushed from behind by its realized past."

Given the breadth, allusions, and ambiguities in Polak's writings, they have been and can be developed in divergent ways. Kenneth Boulding shifted focus from the social collective to individual participants and their anticipatory inferences, writing: "the meaning of a message is the change which it produces in the image." Oliver Markley and Willis Harman shifted focus from "the meaning of time" to "images of man" and described four levels of social change in an iceberg-like diagram. Wendell Bell emphasized the scientific study of people's presently held expectations, and Jim Dator developed a "generic" framework of such expectations. Polak's English-language translator Elise Boulding crystalized his analysis of historical patterns into two axes of essence/influence and optimism/pessimism, which Peter Hayward later reimagined as a facilitated exercise, the eponymous Polak Game. These imagistic research themes have infused the futures literature, and this influence persists in recent attention to the wider literature on social and sociotechnical imaginaries.

Nonetheless, Polak's principal assumptions betray the types of colonizations of space and time described by writers such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Walter Mignolo. For one, Polak based his breach-in-time declaration on the European-centered sequence: antiquity, Middle Ages, modern times. Also, as Polak's survey was constrained to images "sifted down" into Western civilization, it explicitly ignored non-Western cultures and their contributions. By the 1970s, this type of shortcoming was not lost on Elise Boulding, who commented: "the next history of the image of the future will have to record the images of all civilizational traditions."

These shortcomings do not undermine Polak's central hypothesis that cultures rise or fall based on the vitality of their images, but they do require that we carefully reconsider the assumptions and findings of imagistic research. What might be learned from a Polak-style macrohistorical survey of images from across the world's cultural traditions? How has the "meaning of time" been composed? In the 2020s, we are in a better position to grapple with such questions than

Polak was in the 1950s. With regard to meanings in and of time, we might draw upon the writings of Vine Deloria, Jr., C. K. Raju, Lesley Rameka, Rasheedah Phillips, and many others. Nonetheless, entangled as we (many of us) are in modern presuppositions, the challenges remain daunting. As Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti emphasized, “Every time we try to think outside the box, we’re probably reproducing the box in a different way.”

Seeking to not reproduce the box, we return to the imagistic research themes described above. We focus in particular on the Polak Game as an example of the self-reflexive practices advocated by Andreotti and colleagues. We review variations on the game that have been published to-date and propose additional ones. This type of gameplay can be used to bring temporal understandings and assumptions into dialogue with temporal investigations that reflect indigenous, Afrofuturist, feminist, and non-Western positions. Such a dialogue might then point to opportunities for generative interweaving, for braiding.

Our talk will not offer a systematic review of imagistic writings, nor a systematic critique of them. Rather, with this reconsideration, from our own positions, and as called for by Anticipation Conference organizers, we aim to better understand possibilities for decolonizing anticipation. This presentation is based on work initiated with students Ameenah Carroll, Inbar Sharon, and Madeline Silberger-Franek in the 2021 Strategy+Foresight course in the Collaborative Design MFA / Design Systems MA programs at Pacific Northwest College of Art, Willamette University.