

I am thinking especially of a line from the novel that has stayed with me — in it, you describe Agustina, a central character of the novel, in these words: “She’s had what she calls the gift of sight, or the ability to see the future, and God only knows the trouble that’s caused us.”

I am interested in using this statement as a fulcrum for a meditation on the ethical, philosophical and political consequences of the “visionary” character of artistic work. My hunch is, as writers, artists and militants of the imagination, we all have, to varying degrees; this gift of sight into the future, and it causes us all sorts of trouble. But this trouble is truly worth our while because, as our absent interlocutor, Subcomandante Marcos, says:

The tree of tomorrow is a space where everyone is, where the other knows and respects the other others, and where the false light loses its last battle. If you press me to be precise, I will tell you it is a place with democracy, liberty, and justice: that is the tree of tomorrow.

And that is why we have come together. So, here’s to the future.

SHUDDHABRATA SENGUPTA, Mexico City, 2012

Laura Restrepo— Listening to the Future

Good morning, although it seems like it’s nighttime here, in this dark place. To start stringing thoughts together, I’m going to show you the quote Shuddha just read, highlighted in yellow. It’s the beginning of what I’m going to talk about here.

After his extraordinary exposition, it is going to be very exciting to get into the topic. Many thanks to him for the invitation, to all of our hosts at this event and to you for being here.

As he told you, he invited me in these terms. I have a novel titled *Delirio* that has a character named Agustina. Agustina goes crazy and starts predicting the future, which is what Shuddha grabbed onto to propose that we develop the topic on the basis of the character. What happens is, Agustina has a problem, which is that she always makes mistakes. She predicts things, and they’re always wrong, so she ends up getting people around her in trouble, because she never gets it right.

With that in mind, I thought about how literature and art in general can somehow enter the future or predict it or also invent it, project it. If you take it seriously, it’s a problem that makes you dizzy, because it’s not a poetic formulation; the postulate isn’t rhetorical. It happens, and here we get into strange territory of some sort of magic or alchemy that operates in literature and in art. So, following this line of visionary characters, and visionaries through madness, let’s get to

those who hit upon the real visionaries; let's turn to the classics, which is always a wise move.

Let's turn to *Don Quixote* and *Hamlet*. I'm going to talk about different gateways or thresholds through which art and literature sort of cross from one zone to another, changing the plane of reality. And that's where that vision of the future is produced, the only one I'm going to develop with some care. I'm going to mention other thresholds but only stop at one, madness; madness as a possible gateway for shifting the plane of reality.

It's really interesting that two characters who point toward the age to come most brilliantly are Don Quixote and Hamlet. And both are mad, or they pretend to be. At least their two authors, Cervantes and Shakespeare, respectively, found that making them mad or portraying them as mad was the way to make them the heralds of the future that was to come. And this was done so well that, intentionally or not we wouldn't know, what they achieved is that people today and ever since modernity see themselves in these characters, who appeared or were introduced in their time as madmen.

Why resort to madness? I think that if we put ourselves in Shakespeare or Cervantes' shoes, how do you broach something that others—your contemporaries—are not familiar with? What can be done to penetrate into that zone of the unknown? By breaking established logic, the canon, and turning to what is beyond logic? Madness. So madness seems to be that language of prediction; it is the only conceivable name for that exercise that the two of them embark on, to shatter the old molds and begin to penetrate what is not yet codified.

At what future are both Don Quixote and Hamlet pointing? At otherness, a time gap, estrangement? And at the subjective view of the world, against a world already made, predicted, established and normalized. They are going to step into modernity, which no longer carries weight as an established order of values. On the contrary.

Before that, we are told that Quixote goes mad because he reads chivalry romances. Reading is what makes Alonso Quijano look differently at himself and see himself as a knight errant. In other words, the first distortion produced by his madness is to take him through culture, to reassess and no longer consider himself a person but rather a persona, a trait that is going to be essential for modern man, up to the present.

The same thing happens with Hamlet, who sees himself acting. References to a scene, stage and actors are ongoing in him. In other words, it's not so much life that is lived as life that is portrayed, or that is seen as a portrayal.

In Quixote's case, it's no accident that the character was contemporaneous with that first means of mass communication, the printing press, and with that first literary genre that circulated massively, chivalry romances. We went from the conception

of the human being as a natural being to the human being as an eminently cultural and media-oriented being.

It seemed to me that it was interesting to go into these details to flesh out, through the genius of these two authors, what SITAC is postulating: that the future can be seen through art. Here we see, step by step, how they saw the future. And it's not that they saw it but rather that they invented it. The question is to what extent are we not who we are because we follow their model? To what extent did they see us from back there? To what extent do we identify with them and are therefore what we are?

For them, language itself becomes more important than reality. There is a discrepancy between what they say and what they do that comes to be characteristic of the modern world, where language not only encompasses reality but threatens to replace it. Often, the world we live in is made more of words than of other more tangible realities.

In the case of *Hamlet*, it's interesting to see how action is replaced by introspection. Nothing happens in *Hamlet*. In Elizabethan tragedy, very much like Hollywood movies, the audience hungered for action. They wanted to see action: blood on the stage, things happening, daggers drawn. Yet the first audience to have seen the play must have been amazed when nothing really happened. Everything that occurs in *Hamlet* takes place in Hamlet's head. It is the becoming of his consciousness, doubts, regrets, frustrated attempts at action. Shuddha already brought up a character we are going to mention again: the Cheshire cat. Here we have a cat that disappears, leaving only his smile. The outside world is erased, and interiority is the sole remaining reference.

So, we have two characters who are less obsessed with reality than with the representation of that authority, and that is the mark of the future. Ambiguity is the other great element, the conviction that no matter how hard we try, we can't entirely capture reality, that there will always be a break, a discrepancy, which is what makes us or makes contemporary man a bit of a caricature or a puppet, a sort of monstrosity, in the same way that Quixote must have been, attacking windmills. And once more the Cheshire cat: its smile is irony prevailing over any other reality.

That process of introspection, of weighting perception more heavily than reality itself, actually means being a step away from Descartes, the first modern philosopher, with his "I think, therefore I am." We could draw a straight line from Hamlet to him. Descartes not only introduces his "I think, therefore I am" but also the methodical doubt, that is, the doubt of existence, and we could add methodical mockery. Both Cervantes and Shakespeare mock their characters, which seems to be the essential characteristic of contemporary man.

This mockery, this ironic vision of oneself, is what is going to generate in modernity, the beetles or the Gregor Samsas who become or see themselves as beetles.

So, as an avenger, Hamlet is a failure, and Quixote as a knight errant is a caricature. And we could say that this is how modern contemporary man sees himself: his identity in terms of failure and caricature, or to put it in Cervantes' own words, "to have set off for the world through the wrong door."

This looks at madness as a threshold for entering the future, and now we will attempt to sketch other thresholds. Gilles Deleuze offers one of the definitions of literature that most charms me. He says it is the invention of a missing people, or telling the story of a people that does not yet exist, that we set off from our own memories to turn them into the origin of the collective fate of a people to come, still buried beneath their betrayals and denials.

And Deleuze sees it not as a glorious, dominant or superior people but, in his words, as something inferior, ordinary, as a forever-unfinished process of becoming that persists through all that crushes or imprisons it. In other words, a bastard people, where the word bastard has nothing to do with paternity but rather with the process or drifting of races. That is, the history of a people Carlos Fuentes would, in his novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, call "the order of the fucked mother [*la chingada*]."

This invention of people through literature, and we could say art in general, is then the possibility of life. It's a possibility of survival, of durability, and therefore a possibility of future.

As with the Möbius strip, in art and in literature past and present would become a continuum, which would give that sensation of totality that you get from a work of art, novel or poem when it grabs and shakes you up. It is an intuition of the universe in its totality, what in religious terms would be called a mystical vision and in lay terms we could call oceanic feeling. Joseph Campbell tells the story of a shaman in Alaska. As a young boy, he seemed to have the qualities needed to become a shaman. So, to test out whether he might play that role in the community, he was taken to the outskirts of town and shut up in a dark place for three days and nights, subjected to the cold, lack of water, solitude, the panic of being stuck in a tomb-like space, in the middle of the darkness. After three days, when he was taken out, the little boy appeared before the community and said that while he was stuck in there, he received a message saying, don't be afraid of the universe. I think that's what this is about, the sort of vertiginous glimpse that we get from art when it touches and shakes us up.

Let's pause briefly at the notion of threshold or gateway: that possibility of entry to unexpected or unknown places that come up in art. What kind of gateway? For Ray Bradbury to write the novel *Fahrenheit 451* and for it to lead, chain-like, for so many years, so that a half century later Michael Moore would make a film called *Fahrenheit 9/11*, where he shows that the novel in which Bradbury painted that cruel future is here and now, the future became today.

Rambo put it in a terrifying way, like everything he did or said: life is somewhere else. So what one has to look for in art, or what art and literature have to offer is that threshold that enables entry into the life that's not here, to the life that somehow pulses in a more real way, sort of pulses on another plane. In 1927, Marcel Duchamp made an installation; he put a door in the corner of a room, so the door would open into the space and at the same time the same door, moving the other way, opened into the other room. In other words, a single door providing entry to two planes; that's the sort of alchemy that we can start to seek out.

Who is the threshold genius or one of the great geniuses of thresholds? Lovecraft, of course, beginning with the title of one of his books: *The Lurker at the Threshold*. He was always looking for those presences pulsing on the other side that terrify, enchant, bewilder or, on the contrary, enlighten us. And it is interesting to hear Lovecraft's own definition. He says that in the vicinity of the blasphemous threshold, the very substance of space-time turns out to be intimately transformed. That would be the threshold that transforms the substance of space-time and turns it into the Möbius strip, where past and future touch.

Speaking of thresholds, there's a novel I recommend. I think it's one of the great contemporary novels, and it is by Lebanese writer Elias Khoury. One of his novels, maybe the one I like the most, is called precisely *Gate of the Sun*. Through that gate, which is actually a sort of passageway between rocks in the desert, Khoury manages to glimpse, delve into, break one of the most intense, significant, terrible Gordian Knots of our time, which is the bloody brotherhood between Palestinians and Jews. Unfortunately, the title was translated as *La cueva del sol* (Cave of the Sun) in Spanish, I imagine so as not to be confused with the Puerta del Sol (literally Gate of the Sun) in Madrid, though "cave" seems to be the antithesis of a gate. In any event, the English title is *Gate of the Sun*.

Every door needs a key, and it is interesting to look for the figuration of the different keys in various artistic expressions. Let's stick with one, the golden bough. The golden bough is what enables Aeneas to descend to the depths of the underworld to be able to speak with his father, who is there. Why does he discover the golden bough? According to Frazer, the golden bough is a dried branch of mistletoe. And why would that be the key? Because, at least according to one hypothesis, that branch could be lit when it's dry, and its flame would produce light. The idea is that the golden bough would be the light to illuminate the darkness of the abyss and extract truths from it.

Note the truth that Aeneas hears from his father (as a prediction) when he descends to the underworld. Having returned from witnessing the destruction of Troy, Aeneas is told by his father about the future and the role he is to play in it: precisely the founding of Rome.

As for the darkness of the abyss, let's move on to another threshold, which is, precisely, the night. What it means to stick one's hand into the darkness and stir the dark waters below, or as they say, the waters of sleep. And here we come to another great visionary, St. John of the Cross, who also names his long poem *Dark Night (of the Soul)*. He writes of a night that delights and enamors, and through St. John's night, we come to extraordinary revelations, such as the strange isles, lovers' flowery bed, sonorous rivers and lion caves. And going from visionary to visionary, how could we miss Hölderlin? Poetry itself is vision, but there are some poets, like Rimbaud, to whom the gift of vision is given with a particular force. Hölderlin has that vision of the future in Promethean terms, or with that anxiety to look to the Greeks for a sort of prefiguration *après*, a future of humanity. Hölderlin furthermore combines the two thresholds, that of the night and that of madness, no longer like Don Quixote or Hamlet, who are made mad by their authors, but rather as a poet, as an author, because he had to go through that tremendous trial of madness in his own life, which on the one hand gave him enormous lucidity and on the other turned all the lights off, or as Heidegger said of him, the excess of clarity hurled him into darkness.

But before falling into the darkness of unreason, he crossed that threshold or captured that aura that made him a visionary. In Hölderlin's words, the sincerest man enjoys himself by contemplating the night and readies himself to offer it his garlands, his songs, because even though the night consecrates those who die and those who go mad, its spirit remains eternal and free. Revelation, then, always provides madness, either preceding it or giving way to it: madness as a delirious dream.

Night as a threshold leads us, of course, to that other threshold, perhaps the most shocking of all, the most difficult to confront head on. I love being able to say so here in Mexico, because if there is one country, one people in the world who knows how to cross that threshold, it's Mexico: the threshold of death or the corner, Duchamp's double door, the corner door that opens simultaneously onto the spaces of life and death, that crossing of winds of death and life and what fosters what theorists like Sloterdijk call deep play, where stress is taken to the limit, where everything is at stake, where revelation is possible.

And this people, like no other, has that ability. It's enough to go, as I always do, to the cemeteries in Mexico City or surrounding towns on November 2, to be in a cemetery on the Day of the Dead, to see how Mexican people do what other people cannot and spend the day with infinite naturalness. Well, I can, as a Colombian, because we kill everyone. But I don't recommend that path; better to choose more symbolic ways. To see how they do so, a Colombian student who was obsessed with the theme of getting together with the dead and how Mexicans do so came here. I told her: "You have to be very cautious, because that intimacy is unhealthy. They're not here." And

we went to Tlayacapan to see the Day of the Dead at the cemetery, amidst mariachis and the song “Viejo, mi querido Viejo” being sung at one of the graves, meals being served at gravesites and *cempasúchil* (Mexican marigold). During the day, they got ready for the ceremony and for all the people who would arrive at night. They were arranging flowers; a little path of marigolds led from each grave. I asked the people who were making those paths about what that meant, and they told me something extraordinary:” Well, today the dead come out and celebrate with us and eat and listen to music, but it’s always good to draw the path for them so they can go back.” She said: “Today it’s great that they come out, but tomorrow it’s better that they go back under wraps.”

So, perhaps the grand visionary of that corner where life and death are touched is Rilke. Just by reading his *Duino Elegies*, a sort of continuum of humanity is perceived: its past, its present, its future, through what he calls the blood of the mightiest circulation, which is the meeting point of life and death, or what would later be a theme in Heidegger’s philosophy: man as being-towards-death. These thresholds and all the others you will be discussing here throughout this event have, of course, language, which is fundamental; ciphered codes; to talk about the unknown, it is essential to remake language, to reinvent it, to speak in codes, to speak somehow in secret, to constantly be suggesting codes as Joyce does in *Finnegan’s Wake*, where he takes language beyond, forces it, shatters it, because language as we know it is made to reflect realities already lived, and what we’re looking for is to reflect realities to come. Among Latin Americans, we have one of the greats in this kind of vital, tremendous experiment with language: the Peruvian poet César Vallejo. He especially does this in his poetry but most of all in his book *Trilce*, beginning with the title, which is an invented word. I, who worship Vallejo, thought that I had to make the pilgrimage to his birthplace before I died, and several years ago I went to the little town of Santiago de Chuco, in Peru. The only way to get there was ten hours on a bus through an area controlled by the Shining Path. The town is frozen in time, with a purely indigenous population, and I liked going out into the square and going out there with *Trilce*. Whoever has read it knows that *Trilce* is indecipherable; it’s all riddles, like a labyrinth of indecipherable phrases.

I enjoyed going out to the square and asking local people if they would help me read, because I couldn’t really understand it. So it was great, because some would say: “Ok, sure, here he’s talking about his cousin. He was really in love with his first cousin, and in this poem he’s talking about that love. It might seem like he’s saying something else, but that’s what he is saying.” There were all sorts of interpretations, until I came upon a peasant who grabbed the page and looked at it and began reading, or I opened it for him to one of the more indecipherable forms and he said to me: “Look, we don’t always understand him, but we always love him.”

The mirror is of course another. Alice and her looking glass, the possibility of entering that other plane of reality through the looking glass. The chief of the Shoshones, a tribe that lived east and west of the Rocky Mountains, said the following when he first saw a mirror: “They gave us things that looked like solid water or that shined like the sun and showed us our own face.”

And I want to tell you the story of Marbella, also known as María Emma. A theater director friend of mine in Bogotá, named Santiago García, once told me that a woman had arrived—a nanny—to ask him for work as an actress. So Santiago put her in his cast, and she actually turned into one of the actresses who performed in his plays. Talking with her, he learned her incredible story. Marbella became her stage name, but her real name was María Emma, and this little person had been abandoned by her parents and taken in by nuns from a downtown Bogotá convent. Downtown Bogotá is full of convents, like Tlalpan, the neighborhood where I live here in Mexico City. The nuns took her in, and she didn’t leave for a long time. She grew into a teenager without having left the convent, and there were no mirrors in the convent. Then, one day, the nuns sent her out to get milk, matches and other things they needed, so María Emma went outside for the first time. She was amazed at everything she saw in downtown Bogotá, this sea of street vendors, thieves, altar boys. At one point, she went in some place and asked to use the restroom, and there in the bathroom was something she’d never seen before: a mirror.

So María Emma climbed up onto the toilet and looked at herself in the mirror for the first time. She had been under the impression that there was something weird about her appearance. The nuns were never mean to her, but they looked at her strangely, so she knew there was something that wasn’t quite right. She looked in the mirror, and Santiago told me that María Emma had told him: “I looked at myself, and I found that I looked graceful.” That’s the main relationship of the future, to see ourselves and find the human DNA. Regardless of the catastrophes to come, which will be enormous, which are enormous, which will continue to be enormous, or as Shuddha says, it doesn’t matter if we ultimately drown in shit, as long as human beings don’t forget their nature. And that’s what the great revelation of art and literature is for, human DNA. What does it mean to be a man or woman on the planet? That’s what Hamlet is there for; that’s what Don Quixote is there for, and that’s what María Emma is there for: to remind us. That’s what Alice is there for, crossing her threshold. That’s what *Les Demoiselles d’ Avignon* are there for. That’s what Michelangelo’s *David* is there for and Bacon’s lacerated, bloody beings. That’s what Tamayo’s luminous beings are there for, to remind us what we are, who we are, what it means to be human and why we are on this earth.

The good news I have for you, and which you already know, is that in very different parts of the world, at this very moment, no doubt, sitting in front of me, painting,

thinking, writing, sculpting, composing music, there are the people who see the future, people who are designing it, who are guaranteeing that human DNA will also be ensured in the days to come.

Thank you.