

# But what IS the picture: a selfie, a landscape, a black comedy or a disaster movie?

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(These are notes only, a summary of what I was trying to say)

What is the picture we want to get back into?

Selfie: The ultimate narcissism of the selfie. The selfie says “look at me” and devalues the bigger picture, I dominate it. Not seeing the picture itself, but only as a background for ME. That is not how we look at CD

Landscape: We admire the amazing beauty of the world around us. But for CD at the present time the picture is not lovely; it is an ugly landscape, harsh, abrasive, cruel and dangerous.

These are only still pictures. But our picture is moving, and quite quickly. Movies are a better metaphor for our ‘picture’. Two sorts of movies come to mind. And neither is a picture we really want to be part of: black comedy and disaster movie.

Black comedy:

You have to laugh at it because otherwise you’d get depressed (we look in amazement at what is happening). It would be funny if it weren’t so tragic.

- Managerialism, outcomes, KPIs etc
- The crazy consumption like there is no tomorrow.
- Politics: The craziness of our politics as a solution to anything: Jackie Lambie, Clive Palmer, Christopher Pyne, The Motoring Enthusiasts Party, Bob Katter, Tony Abbott, Eric Abetz, Kevin Andrews, Peter Dutton, Barnaby Joyce, Cory Bernardi, the entire US Republican party and the tea party. In opposition to this craziness: Bill Shorten?
- The journalism of style not substance
- The devaluing of everything that is important, and the elevation of the trivial.

As an example, the world as presented in TV News. (ABC & SBS)

3 things are deemed to be worth a regular spot every day:

- Sport – the great distraction, celebrating male competitiveness and violence. And much of it is in the build-up or in the scandals etc around it, rather than the actual game, race or competition. Most sports coverage is now non-event
- Finance – we are expected to be glued with excitement to the latest news from the markets. This grossly abstracted world of share prices, derivatives, futures, and economic indicators [when finance and sport are our two religions, what have we become?]
- Weather – our only link to the natural world, but governed by immediate concerns temporarily and spatially – will it rain tomorrow and will I need a jacket?

Possibly we can add crime – a constant recurrence, but not a regular spot. A bulletin without crime would be incomplete

What does NOT justify a regular spot? Basically, anything important.

- Environment (why is there not more on the build-up to the climate conference, rather than the Melbourne Cup or Rugby World Cup?),
- Indigenous disadvantage
- Racism and Islamaphobia
- Culture and multiculturalism,
- Political and corporate corruption
- Inequality, poverty, disadvantage
- Social issues such as poverty, housing, etc

These all appear from time to time, when something ‘newsworthy’ happens, but not worth regular monitoring. (e.g. we could have a regular ‘climate watch’).

Sport, markets and weather, together with crime, are what we are meant to be constantly concerned with. The trivial not the important.

It is clearly black comedy. You can’t really believe in it or take it seriously. It is so bizarre that it beggars belief, and you have to laugh at it – yet it is also black because the consequences are so awful.

How do we react in a world of black comedy?

The first step is to realise that it really is comedy, and not take it seriously, but step outside it, and look at it.

We have to appreciate the bizarre kafka-esque view of the world, and work in it as best we can, with great cynicism, but having some fun on the way.

Thinking about it as black comedy helps us to realise that it is only transitory – it can't last and is unstable. It is much easier to think outside the box when the box is so crazy. It is important to have a historical perspective that tells us things can and do change.

### But we are also in a Disaster movie

We are hurtling towards global disaster, especially in the West, where our lives are so unsustainable.

#### Crises:

- Climate change too little too late
- Oceans, acidification, pollution (microfibers etc and plastic junk) and overfishing
- Agriculture, Monsanto and lack of diversity, salinity, topsoil erosion
- Enclosure of the commons, loss of natural spaces, forests, wilderness
- Deserts
- Population growth (black comedy – we are now being urged to have more children!)
- Species extinction
- Resources – they are finite
- Economic – a major crash is inevitable, only a case of when
- Labour – the new precariat hides unemployment. We are used to using work as identifier and as policy mechanism, but the idea of 'work' is changing. Occupational benefits eroded.
- Social – relationships, families, communities eroded by individualism
- Spiritual: lack of morality in 'law', people feel loss of meaning
- Cultural: attack on cultural diversity, mass culture, food and clothing
- Political: political institutions incapable of dealing with the important issues. Corruption of politics, democracy in crisis

Of course we know who will be most affected by all this – the least powerful, and the vulnerable. This group is increasing. The precariat: some are well educated, created by neo-liberalism and labour market casualization, underemployment and ‘reform’.

They are all global issues, and we have nation states with weak global mechanisms. Existing national and international policy and government institutions may be able to deal with one or two of these, but not all of them. And they reinforce each other.

And it’s coming soon. The ‘Limits to Growth’ study in 1972 predicted 2030, Dennis Meadows (lead author of that study) now says 2015-20

Refugee crisis is an exemplar for the future

Two ways to go – xenophobia, isolation, gated communities, racism, scapegoats, intolerance, etc.

Or reach out for a shared humanity.

Probably some combination of both – but community work can help tip the balance a bit.

Chris Hedges: the need for revolution,

Evo Morales (Bolivia) – only way to stop climate change is get rid of capitalism

Naomi Klein argues similarly, sees the only hope in community activism and the reclaiming of democracy.

Recognise importance of Indigenous wisdom – they lasted much longer, and were more sustainable, but now mainstream culture is also eroding. We need to learn from their experience, as we attempt cultural transformation. Dialogue with Indigenous People worldwide.

If it’s cultural transformation that is required, the cultural in community becomes critically important, and it’s a cultural development that does not mimic the dominant culture but establishes alternatives.

Similarly, if it’s economic transformation that is required, we need communities with radical alternative economies

And if it’s political transformation that is required, need communities with alternative politics.

The core belief of community workers, born out again and again by experience, is that these transformations will only work if they are driven from below, not from above. It is where alternatives can be articulated and tried out. Hope never trickles down, it only springs up. (Studs Terkel)

But we need to be wary of the narrative of 'hope' as it can deny agency.

This change is most likely to come from the margins, those communities that are by-passed by the mainstream economy.

We will not be part of that change if we just act for the state. We need to align with pregressive social movements.

We also need to seek out alternative spaces and locations.

Silos – CD workers talk to some workers and not others, e.g. community arts, community economic development, environmental activism, etc. This also means the need for common vocabulary. The 'picture' is much broader than we have assumed, and it is moving fast.

CD will be part of the future only if it reinvents itself away from the welfare state, as the welfare state, sadly, is dying. This means establishing counter-institutions, as happens in disaster movies. We need to be always looking for those opportunities.

There can be no grand plan – utopias fail. But there needs to be a creativity, an opening up of possibilities, even in the black comedy organisations that we find ourselves working in.