

IMPROVISING THE COMING WORLD

MICHAEL VENTURA

December 31, 2010

The recording is *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*. The year is 1971. Before the music begins, a voice speaks: “[T]he title was inspired by a statement made by Mr. Marshall McLuhan. . . . Mr. McLuhan says that the whole world is going Oriental and that no one will be able to retain his or her identity, not even the Orientals. . . . And, from that point of view, it’s most improbable that anyone will ever know exactly who is enjoying the shadow of whom.”

That’s Duke Ellington speaking. The phrase “New World Order” had not yet entered into popular usage, but it might have amused Ellington. Jazz artists cultivate an acute sense of interplay between order and improvisation. They know how improvisation relies on an underlying sense of order, and they know how pliable order can become in the hands of a gifted improviser.

Ellington, born in 1899, knew the meaning of change by the time he spoke those words in 1971. Most African-Americans of his generation were the grandchildren of slaves. In Ellington’s 20s, he saw the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the flow of Afro-American culture into America’s arts -- the former, a violent frenzy to reimpose an old order; the latter, an expansive, improvisatory celebration of the present and a herald of the future. Ellington knew which would ultimately manifest.

Ellington was thus uniquely positioned to understand the truth of McLuhan’s vision, a vision that accurately predicted the world of today. As this decade ends, I contemplate Ellington’s grasp of the larger patterns of history and his capacity, as actor Ossie Davis remarked, “to be in the middle of it and above it at the same time.”

That, precisely, is where each of us is in relation to the history in which we participate: We’re in the middle of it and above, or apart, at the same time. Some, like Ellington, have the agility of mind to live consciously in that duality. Most feel a bafflement that boils over into confusion, anger, resignation, or fear, as we make desperate and uncertain stands in a world that spins too fast for any certainty to hold its own very long.

Yet the general contours of our historical development have been fairly clear for a long time. I made my stab at describing those contours in 1985, when, in my book, *Shadow Dancing in the USA*, I presented an essay audaciously titled “Predictions: The Next 200 Years.” I’m surprised that, in general if not in all particulars, I can stand by it 25 years later.

This essay claims that what’s happening, or what is trying to happen, is “the crystallization of a planetary culture. Not the formation of one. That’s already happened. We have a planetary culture right now. Tehran, Los Angeles, Rio De Janeiro, Moscow, Sydney, Peking, Jerusalem, are next-door neighbors. . . . [But n]o culture presently existing on earth is applicable on a planetary scale. . . . [T]hat’s what all the fuss is about. Because we’re not just going to be neighbors. We’re going to be each other. . . . Since we are already living on a planetary scale, this means that every existing culture has been rendered obsolete. Russia, North America, Europe, the Islamic nations, China, the Third World – all are getting more and more frantic as it becomes more and more obvious that their present ideas and customs can’t cope with, hence will not dominate, the coming planetary civilization.” (China realized this first, and, since 1985, has changed many

basic modes of its operation; that is why China has advanced so dramatically and unexpectedly.)

The essay states that the crystallization of our planetary civilization will have five basic themes: the “creation of a world economic system”; “advances in cybernetics, biology, space, and brain research”; the “empowerment of brown, black, and yellow peoples”; the “equalization of men and woman”; and the “creation of a new cosmology that will replace Judeo-Christian-Moslemism. ...

“Like it or not, and for good or ill, multinational corporations are the first entities operating coherently on a world scale. In much the same way as the New World was explored and settled by traders and slavers bent on exploitation, the skeleton of the next stage of planetary culture is being created by the corporations. ... Right now these corporations are performing the first essential steps toward a world community; they are taking jobs and dollars out of the United States and rooting them in other parts of the world. [That is a] crucial step in a world in which 6 percent of the population (the United States) consumes 80 percent of the resources. ...

“Advances in cybernetics, biology and space... will put a tremendous strain on the Judeo-Christian-Moslem cosmologies through which most of us are viewing reality. A view of the infinite such as only mystics once had will increasingly become the stuff of news broadcasts, and the present cosmologies will seem increasingly claustrophobic.

“The advances in cybernetics and electronics are networking the world. ... But it is easy to overestimate computers. ... [I]nformation is a poor substitute for meaning. And without meaning we become maddened – sometimes slowly but always surely. It will take a new cosmology, beyond what we’ve known, to make this information explosion meaningful. And making it meaningful is all that will keep us from being mad. ...

“The white peoples have stabilized their population growth while [populations of color] are growing at unimaginable rates. ... The machinations of the West caused the population explosion by upsetting the... centuries-long balance of indigenous peoples. Now that explosion will swamp the West. ... Cheap foreign labor produced by overpopulation is taking thousands of jobs from the United States every year. ...

“The equalization of men and woman ... is taking root everywhere. ... [I]n Islamic countries it drives fundamentalists into frenzies. ... Here is where the future goes past anything we know. The [basic] unit of civilization is not the individual but the family, so the equalization of men and women is changing civilization at its root. ... We know from what we see around us in relationships and marriages that... this is the hardest change, the change that effects people most intimately. It means that the future of the world is the future of the heart – as it always has been. It means that our capacity for love will ultimately have more effect than our capacity to store information. ...

“While the American people fight among themselves over who gets what civil liberties...the multinationals solidify positions that are fundamentally subversive to American nationalism and that will ultimately result in the disintegration of American influence as the planetary economy gains strength. ...

“The crises of our world express themselves as political crises but they are without political solutions. This drives everybody concerned with solving them quite crazy. The only possible solutions are cultural, and cultural solutions can’t be legislated and they usually can’t be willed. Cultural solutions evolve.”

That may take a century. It may take two.

Throw in climate change and the ever-present fact of war, and our historical contours are clear. But within them is the relentless disorder of one structure of civilization dying while another births.

Art Baron, a trombonist in Duke Ellington's orchestra, reflected on how "you really had to believe in his harmonies. If musicians who were not so in love with [Ellington's] vision had played the same music, it would have sounded insane." A useful idea. Only as we improvise this new world can we discover its underlying reformation of order, dissonant to our sensibilities. Only when we discover and love its harmonies will it not feel insane.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All Rights Reserved.