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### Talk (post)normal: conceptualisations of the future in Laurie Anderson's work

Over the course of her long career in multimedia art,<sup>1</sup> Laurie Anderson has spent a lot of time dealing with various visions and conceptions of the future; one might be tempted to think that it is actually closer to her than the present. For over four decades, the future has been both a theme investigated in her work and a reality materialised through her activity as an artist. In Anderson's songs, installations, performances, books, films and other media, she has persistently remained an innovator, using cutting-edge tools to explore the possible future shapes of the ever-changing landscape of late twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century America. She has been forecasting, but also embodying, new forms of existence imposed on us by the development of the Western civilisation. Anderson has been described as "the ideal future human living in perfect harmony with all sorts of electronically synchronized equipment," someone who "eats silicon chips sprinkled over her shredded wheat for breakfast."<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, the persona she created in her performances seemed to feel at home in realities that many members of her audience were only beginning to envision. As

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<sup>1</sup> She refers to "multimedia art" as an admittedly "meaningless term" that she herself favours because it allows freedom from the restraints of classifying labels (*Laurie Anderson: Advice to the Young*, accessed 6 August 2019, <https://vimeo.com/168741953>).

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Ricci, "The Nerve Bible: Laurie Anderson Live," quoted in: Jim Davies, *Laurie Anderson is a Storyteller of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Or Is She?*, accessed 15 August 2019, <http://www.jimdavies.org/laurie-anderson/commentary/papers/laurie-dissertation.html>.

I hope to demonstrate, her intuitions have often tapped into the zeitgeist; Anderson has repeatedly anticipated and projected the shape of things to come, or in some cases perhaps simply read the current developments more perceptively than most people.

Inevitably, at some point the futures depicted by Anderson gained a historical standing of their own, so it is not difficult to see her as no more than a fixture of the 1980s, offering predictions of developments which from our point of view have already become the past. It is therefore hardly surprising that nowadays, even though questions of what lies ahead still concern her as an artist, her work appears to be much less ostentatiously “futuristic.” One may actually get the impression that Laurie Anderson is increasingly putting the future behind her, although this is not to say that she has lost interest in the topic. What is meant here is rather that she more and more consistently allows the possibility that the future in its many incarnations might be coming to an end: what Anderson says – and does – in her most recent work, as well as some remarks she has made in conversations with other artists, seems to imply that for the first time in her career she is contemplating the possibility that there could literally no longer be any future to speak of. It is not impossible to consider the shift from a strictly personal perspective: Anderson is seventy-two and a widow of eight years, so it would only be too easy to see this as at least one reason why much of her recent output deals with grief, bereavement, and why she sees rather less ahead of herself than she used to. It is, however, perhaps more intriguing to ask whether this perceived change might be the effect of an actual shift in what is currently considered to be the future. While the passing of time has undoubtedly allowed her audience to become accustomed to the once-shocking visions of things to come, the fact that they were created in a very different sociopolitical setting, when the notion of uncertainty itself was perceived differently, is probably not without its significance. In other words, it might be that Anderson’s conceptualisations of the future in her recent work seem different because the artist now actually gazes directly into the terrifying abyss of the unknown, and unknowable, something that might not even be recognisable – or acceptable – as anything that we might call the future; however, it might also be that we are all now in this very different position.

This article will consider selected examples of Laurie Anderson’s approaches to the notion of the future and argue that the change observed in her latest pieces is perhaps no change at all, but an expression of a tendency

present throughout her oeuvre to destabilise any conceptualisations that might be seen as colonising the future. I am not, strictly speaking, using the term in the way it functions in Ziauddin Sardar's theorising, referring to the dominance of the Western vision in shaping the global futures,<sup>3</sup> but more broadly, in the sense of imposing a hegemonic vision of what the future may be, endowing the idea with a sense of predictability, inevitability, or security. Anderson here acts almost like a double agent: an American, speaking from an undeniably very Western perspective, but striving to undermine its givens, to open it up to the unpredictable. Indeed, questioning the very existence – the very possibility – of any future is no more than an admittedly rather radical manifestation of this familiar strategy. It is for this reason that I am going to place Anderson's conceptions of the future in the context of the still relatively recent notion of the postnormal times first proposed by Ziauddin Sardar in 2010.<sup>4</sup> I believe it is possible to find certain traces of the shift Sardar describes in Anderson's works. With the primary parameters of postnormality being complexity, chaos and contradiction, Sardar depicts a reality whose elements are overconnected to the extent that chaotic behaviours become the norm, and contradictions become impossible to resolve (indeed, clear-cut resolutions typical for normal times are nothing short of undesirable). Much of his description may invoke associations with the postmodern condition, but the strategies Sardar suggests in the face of the postnormal shift clearly go against the postmodern despair and detachment. Based on the character of the postnormal reality, Sardar postulates a return to "age-old virtues: humility, modesty and accountability."<sup>5</sup> This in itself is another factor that encourages the possibility of considering Anderson's texts as an anticipation of the concept of postnormal times, both in her diagnoses of an overconnected, unpredictable reality of late twentieth-century America and her Buddhism-inflected responses of unconditional empathy and kindness.

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<sup>3</sup> In his essay "The Problem of Futures Studies" he formulates his thesis very directly: "It is simple. The future has been colonised. It is already an occupied territory whose liberation is the most pressing issue for the peoples of the non-west if they are to inherit a future made in their own likeness." (in: *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures. A Ziauddin Sardar Reader*, eds. Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 247.)

<sup>4</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, "Welcome to Postnormal Times," *Futures* 42, issue 5, 2010, pp. 435–444.

<sup>5</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, "Welcome to Postnormal Times," in: *The Postnormal Times Reader*, ed. Ziauddin Sardar (Great Britain: Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies, 2017), p. 64.

### Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am?

After the attacks on World Trade Center, Laurie Anderson was perceived by many as something of a prophet, if only temporarily. The lyrics of her biggest – and somewhat unexpectedly successful – mainstream hit song, “O Superman,” released in 1981, describe the conversation between a first-person narrator and a mysterious voice calling her on her answering machine. Invoking themes of authority and threatening institutional presence, the message includes words which do indeed sound prescient in the context of September 11, 2001: “Well, you don’t know me, / But I know you / And I’ve got a message to give to you: / Here come the planes / So you better get ready.”<sup>6</sup> The lyrics continue even more suggestively as: “And I said: OK. Who is this really? And the voice said: / This is the hand, the hand that takes. [...] / Here come the planes. / They’re American planes. Made in America.”<sup>7</sup>

Describing the performance of the song during a Chicago show on the night of the attack, Joshua Klein notes: “The crowd was dead silent throughout, but when Anderson began ‘O Superman’ you could hear the room shift as the already menacing song took on new layers of eerily contemporary meaning. [...] The lyrics chimed out like an answering machine message sent to the future, picked up several decades too late.”<sup>8</sup> Laurie Anderson’s response to such comments, some 20 years after the release of the original single, is typically to-the-point and down-to-earth at the same time: “I had just brought the song back to my live set when 9/11 happened. People said: ‘I can’t believe it. You’re singing about current events.’ I said: ‘It’s not so strange. We’re in the same war and our planes are still crashing.’”<sup>9</sup>

Klein agrees, pointing to the timeless quality of the piece’s effect in 2001, without denying its embeddedness in a very specific historical context:

That song’s mix of politics, Zen-like aphorism, and sentimentalism hit like a punch to the gut as the nation stood on the precipice of the unknown,

<sup>6</sup> Laurie Anderson, “O Superman (For Massenet),” *Big Science* (Nonesuch, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> He also remarks that *Big Science* is “less a document of the early 1980s than it is a dark glimpse of the future recorded at the dawn of the Reagan era.” Joshua Klein, *Laurie Anderson Big Science Review*, accessed 20 February 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/10455-big-science/>.

<sup>9</sup> Dave Simpson, *How We Made: Laurie Anderson’s “O Superman,”* accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/apr/19/how-we-made-laurie-anderson-o-superman>.

and the toll the collapse of the Twin Towers would truly take on this country – and the world – hadn't quite settled in. ... Then again, the almost mystically timeless song was in a way always about the shifting 'present.' Anderson writes that 'O Superman (For Massenet)' was inspired by a composition from Jules Massenet's opera *Le Cid*, 'O Souverain', which in turn reminded Anderson of Napoleon's fall at Waterloo. She had also taken into account the bungled U.S. rescue mission in Tehran. It's a song of military arrogance, failure and the price we all pay.<sup>10</sup>

"O Superman" is highly representative of Anderson's work, especially, though not exclusively, early in her career. This is how she has been employing the notion of the future: generally considered something of a specialist on the issue, she has in fact been persistently preoccupied with how we create our conceptualizations of what is to come and how they shape – and are shaped by – our past, extended continually by means of the present. In this sense, the piece admittedly represents the period in Anderson's career when she wore her fascination with the future on her sleeve. The album sleeve in its turn offers another telling hint on how Anderson approached the future at that time. The cover art of *Big Science* is a photo of the artist posed as a figure less like a prophet and more like a blind oracle.<sup>11</sup> Considering Anderson's persistent undermining of gendered identities, Tiresias seems an eerily appropriate association. In its unresolved contradictions – Tiresias is a blind seer, a man and a woman, a link between the human and the divine planes of existence – the figure

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<sup>10</sup> In a sense, "O Superman" therefore predicted also what would become of this potentially decolonising moment. A shift in the balance of power, an attempt to undermine USA's position of global hegemony, to infest the American vision of the inevitable future with uncertainty has ultimately been reappropriated by the US and turned into a justification for "war on terror" which solidified the country's global hegemony. Cornel West makes some strong-worded remarks on the situation: "The ugly events of 9/11 should have been an opportunity for national self-scrutiny. In the wake of the shock and horror of those attacks, many asked the question, why do they hate us? But the country failed to engage in a serious, sustained, deeply probing examination of the possible answers to that question. Instead, the leaders of the Bush administration encouraged us to adopt the simplistic and aggressive 'with us or against us' stance and we ran roughshod over our allies, turning a deaf ear to any criticisms of the course of action the Bush leadership had determined to take." (Cornel West, *Democracy Matters. Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 12) West also emphasises the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and American authoritarian tendencies. He considers the two as at least equally dangerous to our futures, deeming it necessary to recognise "that Islamic fundamentalist gangsters do pose a threat to the United States and the world and that they gain their potency from U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. An American imperial response to this real threat may pose an even greater threat to the United States and the world." (p. 11)

<sup>11</sup> Laurie Anderson, *Big Science* (Nonesuch, 1982).

encapsulates Anderson's own ambiguous stance and anticipates Sardar's postulate of indissoluble contradictions that constitute an essential aspect of the postnormal condition.<sup>12</sup> More importantly from the point of view of this text, the image embodies the sense of facing the future without seeing what is coming, which permeates both *Big Science* and *United States Live* (1984), two related works portraying the turn of the 1970s as a period of change and uncertainty in the American culture.

With elements of the postnormal condition featuring so prominently in Anderson's early output, it might seem questionable whether any very specific "postnormal turn" has indeed taken place in her later work. At the same time, *Big Science* shows Americans as constantly organising and planning their futures. Events and object that are not here yet are perceived as very real, almost palpable. This is reflected in a literal manner in the title track from the album, where a mundane exchange takes a slightly surreal turn, in effect depicting the US as a country of the future seen as a simple matter of making arrangements:

Hey pal! How do I get to town from here?  
 And he said: Well just take a right where they're going to build that new shopping mall,  
 go straight past where they're going to put in the freeway,  
 take a left at what's going to be the new sports center,  
 and keep going until you hit the place where they're thinking of building that drive-in bank.  
 You can't miss it. And I said: This must be the place.<sup>13</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the future is a distinctly commercial one. As Omar El Akkad observes in his own reflection on the increasingly precarious nature of the future, "[i]n the age of capitalism everything is a placeholder for its more lucrative replacement."<sup>14</sup> The intertwining of the spatial and the temporal is interestingly repeated in the closing song of *Big Science*, "Let X=X," where the prophet claims not to be blind after all: "Cause I can see the future and it's a place – about 70 miles east of here / Where it's

<sup>12</sup> Sardar, "Welcome," pp. 55–59.

<sup>13</sup> Laurie Anderson, "Big Science," *Big Science* (Warner Bros, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Omar El Akkad, *Faster Than We Thought: What Stories Will Survive Climate Change?*, accessed 31 July 2019, <https://lithub.com/faster-than-we-thought-what-stories-will-survive-climate-change/>.

lighter.”<sup>15</sup> Again, Anderson combines the aphoristic and the cryptic with the down-to-earth: after all, the future *is* a place somewhere in the east, if one considers the Earth’s motions and our conceptions of time related to them. The notion of the reassuring familiarity of the future is also represented here: the future is perceived both as being easily within reach, and as depending entirely on human conventions. The future exists already, and is whatever we choose it to be.

However, Anderson’s treatment of the theme in her early works extends well beyond this sense of wonder at our existence in time. In fact, motifs of authority and potential violence connected with it, as well as the idea of the future as fundamentally threatening, figure prominently in the oeuvre. The inevitable failure of the authority, reappearing throughout Anderson’s output, is also already present in these texts. For example, the opening song on *Big Science*, “From the Air,” also invokes images of an alarming situation involves air travel. This time, we are inside the plane and receive an increasingly absurd message from the captain:

Good evening. This is your Captain  
 We are about to attempt a crash landing  
 Please extinguish all cigarettes  
 Place your tray tables in their  
 Upright, locked position  
 Your Captain says: Put your head on your knees  
 Your Captain says: Put your head in your hands  
 Captain says: Put your hands on your head  
 Put your hands on your hips.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of the future as a constant replay of our past failures, invoked by Anderson in her interpretation of “O Superman,” is here made explicit:

Uh – this is your Captain again  
 You know, I’ve got a funny feeling I’ve seen this all before  
 Why? Cause I’m a caveman  
 Why? Cause I’ve got eyes in the back of my head<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Laurie Anderson, “Let X=X,” *Big Science* (Warner Bros, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Laurie Anderson, “From the Air,” *Big Science* (Warner Bros, 1982).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

The conclusion of this piece is not unlike what can be found in many other texts by Anderson: the Voice of Authority abdicates, leaving the subject to their own devices. All the predictions and announcements concerning the future prove futile, and we are faced with the radically unknown: “Put your hands over your eyes. Jump out of the plane. / There is no pilot. You are not alone. Standby.”<sup>18</sup>

This is not to say that the Voice of Authority does not have anything to say about how we are meant to be living our lives in this future that is lurking just around the corner – indeed, the opposite is the case. Much of Anderson’s output from this period handles the question of omnipotence of new bureaucratic and technological frameworks. A perfect example is “Jim Davies,” a piece from *United States Live*, offering a vision of technological intersubjective connectedness that once again sounds rather prescient 40 years later:

Well I walked uptown and I saw a sign that said: Today’s lecture Big Science and Little Men. So I walked in and there were all these salesmen and a big pile of electronics. And they were singing: Phase Lock Loop. Neurological Bonding. Video Disc. They were singing: We’re gonna link you up. They were saying: We’re gonna phase you in. They said: Let’s look at it this way – picture a Christmas tree with lots of little sparkly lights, and each light is totally separate, but they’re all sort of hanging off the same wire. Get the picture? And I said: Count me out. And they said: We’ve got your number.<sup>19</sup>

Let me emphasise, however, that the omnipotence of the ominous structures of the future is persistently questioned in Anderson’s work, or at least disclosed in its violence as well as its fallibility. Laurie Anderson is not perhaps famous for excessive optimism, but always ready for some insubordination. As Fernando do Nascimento Gonçalves puts it: “She does not refuse the ‘present’ in order to resist it. Rather, she questions the naturalized premises of the present by producing a perennial break and rearrangement of its codes.”<sup>20</sup> I would add that this is exactly the way in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Laurie Anderson, “Jim Davies,” *United States Live* (Warner Bros, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Fernando do Nascimento Gonçalves, *Performing the Trojan Horse*, accessed 13 August 2009, <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/2no2/Papers/Fernando-Performing%20the%20Trojan%20Horse.htm>.



which Anderson creates the future anew in the sense of decolonizing it, making it unpredictable again.

These examples also illustrate Laurie Anderson's engagement with an arguably normal kind of future. This is admittedly a threatening and unpredictable situation. However, in this future, there still appears to be a clear polarisation of the individual and the system, where, as "O Superman" reminds us, there is a central figure of authority to obey or rebel against ("When justice is gone, there's always force / When force is gone, there's always Mum / Hi, Mum!").<sup>21</sup> It is hardly surprising that Martin Patrick postulates including Anderson into the ranks what Cornel West terms the "deep democratic tradition" in American art alongside figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison or Tupac Shakur.<sup>22</sup> She functions in many ways as another embodiment of the archetypically American individualism, and of dissent in the face of the soul-crushing Moloch of industrialised, capitalist, (post)modern United States.

### Backwards Into the Future

This approach is by no means limited to the early period in Anderson's work, although it does appear to be somewhat less representative of her late 1980s and 1990s output. This is not only because the time that had passed since her earliest work was produced had rendered its terror somewhat tame and overtly familiar: the levels of surveillance invoked by pieces such as "We Are Tapping Your Line" were beginning to look disarmingly old-fashioned, not to say unthreatening by that time. More significantly, like many other performance artists at the time, Anderson began to change her stance and decided to make her work more overtly political in the late 1980s.

The blindness implied on the cover of *Big Science* proved unexpectedly literal when Anderson admitted to having "slept through the Reagan Era politically."<sup>23</sup> The rude awakening of the late 80s and early 90s resulted both in more explicitly political texts (e.g. the entire *Empty Places* perfor-

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, "O Superman."

<sup>22</sup> Martin Patrick, "Not Walking But Falling. Laurie Anderson's Adventures in George W Bush's America," *Art Monthly*, 284, March 2005, p. 284.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Woodrow B. Hood, *Laurie Anderson and the Politics of Performance*, accessed 12 September 2019, <http://pnc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.594/review-6.594>.

mance (1990),<sup>24</sup> “Night in Baghdad” or “Love Among the Sailors” from her 1994 album *Bright Red*), and in ones that were far more particularised than the arguably rather abstract texts from *United States Live* or *Big Science*. Anderson’s clash with the harsh realities of neoliberal America is strikingly represented in “Falling,” a piece from *Empty Places*, her first big show since *United States*.<sup>25</sup> A personal anecdote about falling into a sewer leads to an account of an encounter with human suffering in a pauperised emergency room. No longer as vague about her setting as in much of her earlier works, Anderson describes the grim reality with both ironic detachment and moving detail. The story culminates in a plea for empathy and Anderson’s admission of her own inability to meet the challenge: “And there was this old woman sitting next to me / She was a bum and her feet were bleeding / and swollen up like grapefruits / and she kept saying: / ‘Look at my feet! Look at my feet!’ / And I couldn’t...”<sup>26</sup> Anderson’s own guiltily uninvolved position is suggestively juxtaposed with another person’s. This way the piece offers at once a social critique and a human response to actual suffering: “There was an old man sitting on the other side of her / and she kept saying: / ‘My feet! Look at my feet!’ / And he did. / And he said: / ‘They must really hurt.’”<sup>27</sup> The “expert on the future” reveals herself to be embarrassingly easy to surprise; she faces the unforeseen (or, indeed, literally overlooked) challenges, and confronts oppression hidden underneath triumphalist patriotic narratives of the time, but also discovers unexpected tenderness in people around her.

Empathy plays an equally significant role in texts that represent Anderson’s strategy of subverting seemingly inescapable futures, expressed for example in the opening piece from *Ugly One With the Jewels and Other*

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<sup>24</sup> Hood comments on the overall intent of the performance in language that brings to mind the caveman with eyes in the back of his head: “What one sees is Anderson reflecting back on her career with an eye towards her future. She even says that the show is a retrospective about the future; by looking at where you’ve come from, you see where you’re going.” More interestingly, his notes on the effect of the show on its original viewers have arguably postnormal resonance: “What the audience gets is an apparently free association of juxtaposed images and ideas; the responsibility of finding meaning in the juxtapositions is placed solely on the audience. The arrangement of the pieces may vary from night to night as Anderson creates new material or deletes old, establishing a whole new arena in which meanings can be created.” This sounds very much like a postnormal experience *avant la lettre*, and I will point to similar effects when discussing Anderson’s most recent effort, *Songs from the Bardo* (2019).

<sup>25</sup> Laurie Anderson, *United States Live* (Warner Bros, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Eddie Paterson, *The Contemporary American Monologue: Performance and Politics* (London, Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

*Stories*, a predominantly spoken-word live album released in 1995. The all-too-appropriately-titled “The End of the World” begins in a manner as straightforward as it is self-referential: “Hi. This evening I’ll be reading from a book I just finished and since a lot of it is about the future, I’m going to start more or less on the last page, and tell you about my grandmother.”<sup>28</sup> Anderson uses her trademark deadpan sense of humour to approach a fundamentally serious theme lightly, and with empathy for her subject. The piece is an anecdote of the artist’s grandmother, a Southern Baptist who had lived with a very clear idea of the future. In a move highly representative of her approach, Anderson ironically describes how her grandmother had spent years of her life sharing detailed visions of a fire-and-brimstone apocalypse with those around her. Then, she takes a deeply empathetic, humanizing stance, and reveals a powerful streak of uncertainty that undermined her grandmother’s ideological orthodoxy in her final moments:

And I remember the day she died. She was very excited. She was like a small bird perched on the edge of her bed near the window in the hospital. Waiting to die. And she was wearing these pink nightgowns and combing her hair so she’d look pretty for the big moment when Christ came to get her.

And she wasn’t afraid but then, just at the very last minute something happened that changed everything. Because suddenly, at the very last minute she panicked. After a whole life of praying and predicting the end of the world, she panicked. And she panicked because she couldn’t decide whether or not to wear a hat.

And so when she died she went into the future in a panic with absolutely no idea of what would be next.<sup>29</sup>

One might argue that for Anderson this uncertainty ensures a space beyond total control of the workshops producing the future. This is something she has emphasised throughout her career. We have seen it in her early work and the 1995 piece just discussed also illustrates this tendency; we could easily find an example in any of her output between these points. Take “The Dream Before,” a song from 1989, dedicated to Walter Benjamin. In this song, Anderson introduces his concept of *Angelus Novus*, the angel of history, in its turn inspired by the famous Paul Klee painting:

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<sup>28</sup> Laurie Anderson, “The End of the World,” *The Ugly One With the Jewels* (Warner Bros, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

“History is an angel / Being blown backwards into the future / History is a pile of debris / And the angel wants to go back to fix things / To repair the things that have been broken / But there is a storm blowing from paradise / And the storm keeps blowing the angel backwards into the future / And this storm is called progress.”<sup>30</sup> This retelling of Benjamin’s text is presented as part of a dialogue between Hansel and Gretel, living unhappily in Berlin many years after their fairy tale is over. The conversation is filled with regret for the past, culminating in Hans’s observation: “I’ve wasted my life on our stupid legend, when my one and only love was the wicked witch.”<sup>31</sup> Apart from its emotional baggage, the piece demonstrates the impossibility of containing the ever-changing, constantly progressing reality. Whatever discursive framework or administrative apparatus is employed, the future remains unknown and we walk into it backwards.

The same sentiment is found in Anderson’s adaptation of Edward Lear’s “The Owl and the Pussycat.” The text of the nonsense poem itself is introduced by an appeal to “Mom,” reminiscent of “O Superman”’s ultimate authority:

I’m lying in the shade of my family tree / I’m a branch that broke off /  
What will become of me? [...] I’m thinking back to all the stories you read  
to me [...] But I can’t remember now / What happened then / Dear Mom,  
how does it end?<sup>32</sup>

Neither the maternal authority nor the familiar framework of children’s literature, designed specifically with the aim of manufacturing a specific shape of the future through its didactic devices, is of much use, and the grand question of “What happens then?” remains a mystery, to which the only reply is nonsense. This is hardly surprising, considering that the speaker describes herself as “a branch that broke off” the family tree – she is a misfit, her insubordination signalled in the first words of the song.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Laurie Anderson, “The Dream Before (For Walter Benjamin),” *Strange Angels* (Warner Bros, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Laurie Anderson, “The Owl and the Pussycat,” *Bright Red* (Warner Bros, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> A similar question appears in “One Beautiful Evening” from her 2001 album *Life on a String* (Atlantic). The text revolves around issues of heritage, historical continuity, and the price to be paid for ensuring a certain future. In the final stanza, the future’s indebtedness to the atrocities of the past is presented in terms of stepping beyond the limits of the conventional world presented in drama, which provokes a very similar kind of uncertainty:

It’s like at the end of the play and all the actors come out  
And they line up and they look at you...

## Never What You Think It Will Be

One could therefore argue that the effort of decolonizing the future resonating on a personal as much as a social or political level has been a constant in Anderson's work. Indeed, in some of her latest output, admittedly rather bleak in its outlook, we do find a perspective that is immediately recognisable to anyone familiar with the artist's work. The colonization of the future by political discourses is satirized rather aggressively in "Only an Expert." The lead single off the album attacks the ways in which state and financial institutions determine what counts as a future and what does not, and how they privatise responsibility for any failure of their visions of the future.

Now sometimes experts lend you money  
 And sometimes they lend you lots of money  
 And sometimes when the subprime mortgages collapse  
 And banks close and businesses fail  
 And the crisis spreads around the world  
 Sometimes other experts say:  
 Just because all the markets crashed  
 Doesn't mean it's necessarily a bad thing.  
 And other experts say: Just because all your friends were fired  
 And your family's broke and we didn't see it coming  
 Doesn't mean that we were wrong.  
 And just because you lost your job and your house  
 And all your savings doesn't mean you don't have to pay for the bailouts  
 For the traders and the bankers and the speculators.  
 Clause only an expert can design a bailout  
 And only an expert can expect a bailout<sup>34</sup>

With a shockingly crude house beat driving the song to the accompaniment of Lou Reed's jarringly distorted guitar, "Only An Expert" is an over-the-top re-make of "O Superman," whose urgency may also be seen to justify the rather unsubtle comedy of its lyrics. The entire album from

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And horrible things have happened to them during the play  
 And they stand there while you clap and now what?  
 What happens next?

<sup>34</sup> Laurie Anderson, "Only an Expert," *Homeland* (Warner Bros, 2010).

which the song is taken (*Homeland*, 2010) offers images of a world in a state of crisis, and it seems that the best the future has to offer at this point is the openness to a potential threat.

This impression finds confirmation in a sequence from *Heart of a Dog*, her film from 2015, where Anderson recounts an incident involving her rat terrier, Lolabelle.<sup>35</sup> On a long walk in the countryside, a couple of hawks mistake Lolabelle for their prey, and only decide not to attack as they approach her, realising that she is not quite defenceless. For the dog, this is a revelatory experience of a type of danger she had never considered before. Anderson observes Lolabelle's drastically modified perspective after her earlier methods of surveillance, ensuring a sense of security based on her ability to anticipate potential threats prove insufficient: "It was the realisation that they could come from the air. I mean, I never thought of that. A whole 180 more degrees that I'm now responsible for. It's not just the stuff down here – the dirt, the paths, the roots, the trees – but all this too..."<sup>36</sup> This is a shift that can be extended to Anderson's own experience, and not just hers, as she is quick to point out. Her comment on Lolabelle's reaction to the incident connects it to the World Trade Center attacks:

And I thought: "Where have I seen this look before?" And then I realised it was the same look on the faces of my neighbours in New York, in the days right after 9/11. When they suddenly realised – first, that they could come from the air. And second – that it would be that way from now on. And we had passed through a door. And we would never be going back.<sup>37</sup>

The reference to the WTC attacks is in itself a link to Anderson's earlier oeuvre, a connection also signalled by the text's title – "From the Air" – recycled from the *Big Science* song discussed above. Anderson very often reuses and reworks her own material, but in this case this is a repetition with a variation, which conveniently brings into focus a shift in her approach. The 1981 "From the Air" is an abstract allegory of a state of danger, told by a nameless narrator; in the 2015 piece the same issues are approached through an undisguised autobiographical reference filled with concrete detail. The future has once again returned, and even if it has been foreseen, it still proves to be unexpected and threatening. The repercussions of the

<sup>35</sup> Laurie Anderson, dir., *Heart of a Dog* (Canal Street Communication, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

return also take on a far more concrete form than they did in the early works. Anderson's observation on the re-opening and re-sensitising of the future is followed almost immediately by a very concrete account of how the authority reasserted its hold of the future by normalising a state of emergency, which is taken to justify the global war on terror. In this, she clearly echoes the remarks of Cornel West quoted above:

It was so strange the way it happened, almost overnight. There were soldiers everywhere in the city. Where there used to be just maybe one policeman, now there were groups of soldiers with machine guns and riot gear. Almost immediately it became normal, they began to blend in. Nobody talked to them, but they were everywhere, like ghosts. And I thought: When did that start to happen?<sup>38</sup>

The perspective of these sections of *Heart of a Dog* is as American as ever in Anderson. However, in a conversation with the Icelandic writer Sjón in 2018, she switches from the local to the global perspective with ease that has become all too familiar to anyone living in the overconnected age of the climate crisis and the ascendancy of political populism on the global scale:

Everyone is struggling now to tell the story of what is going on. Is it this big slide we're experiencing, or is it ... what kind of thing is this? For us Americans, the bottom keeps dropping out of the plausibility of events. We think "He can't do that and go on. He can't say that and go on." But he can say anything and it will go on. So, we were thinking what if this carbon event, which has happened before happens again? What does that do to stories? What if there is no one left to tell stories to? That is something that no human has had to contemplate before. And it's a very awesome way to think of what a story is, if you're telling it and there's no one listening, no one there.<sup>39</sup>

Sjón's compatriots apparently realise the fundamental threat as well, though their approach, despite everything, is characterised by a considerably higher level of optimism. In August 2019, a commemoration took place for Okjokull, the first Icelandic glacier to have lost its status as glacier

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Sjón and Laurie Anderson, *Living in the Time of Being. Sjón and Laurie Anderson in Conversation*, accessed 20 July 2019, <https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2018/10/26/living-in-the-time-of-being/>.

(it was “declared dead” back in 2014). The plaque devoted to the event includes “A Letter to the Future,” which reads: “In the next 200 years all our main glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.”<sup>40</sup> Addressing the future generations in itself indicates a level of faith in the survival of humanity that Anderson apparently struggles to muster recently.

Released the same year that the interview was published, her Grammy-winning Kronos Quartet collaboration *Landfall* (2018) sees Anderson facing the perspective of a storyteller unable to imagine an audience for her stories. Natural disaster related to climate also dominates the album, inspired by the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, which hit New York in late October 2012. The storm caused serious damage to Anderson’s studio – and much of the city. In an introductory note to the album, Steve Smith calls Sandy “the third *costliest*<sup>41</sup> storm in U.S. history,” which immediately situates the natural phenomenon within the framework of economy. More interestingly from our point of view, he notes that while dealing with a particular situation, the piece assesses a more fundamental – and far-reaching – change of the status quo: “*Landfall*, then, is not explicitly about a hometown hit by a devastating storm, but it deals with the way we process the kind of loss that might be caused by a storm – an event beyond our capacity to predict or control, and one that makes full recovery untenable.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, *Landfall* examines the same observation that we already saw in the 2015 version of “From the Air”: the situation is changing in ways that leave us forever susceptible to unprecedented dangers. These are the fundamental features of Sardar’s postnormal condition: it is not simply that there are certain unpredictable occurrences ahead of us, but that their very unpredictability has become the norm. As Sardar puts it:

In normal times, when things go wrong, as they so often have, we know what to do. We identify and isolate the problem and apply our physical and intellectual resources to come up with a viable answer. The solid foundations and proven theories of our disciplines, from economics and political science to biological and natural sciences, guide us towards a potential so-

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<sup>40</sup> Toby Lockhurst, *Iceland’s Okjökull Glacier Commemorated with Plaque*, accessed 18 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49345912>.

<sup>41</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> Steve Smith, “Laurie Anderson and Kronos Quartet: *Landfall*,” *Landfall* liner notes (Nonesuch, 2018).



lution. The weight and sheer power of intellectual, academic and political orthodoxy ensures that we successfully ride the tiger of change.

Little of this now holds true. Much of what we have taken as normal, conventional and orthodox just does not work anymore.<sup>43</sup>

Sardar points out that the very frameworks behind the modern notion of “the normal” are partially to blame, because it is their relentless categorisation that has produced the current conditions. He also quotes Ban Ki-moon’s observation on the unique nature of the contemporary crises, unprecedented in their scale and co-occurrence, and comments: “It is not just that things are going wrong; they are going wrong spectacularly, on a global scale, and in multiple and concurrent ways.”<sup>44</sup>

Admittedly, Anderson can be said to be taking a rather more affirmative attitude to a chaotic, unpredictable type of future. This stance is expressed not only in the texts she produced for the performance but also in how she produced them. One example of the former is the culminating piece of the project, “Everything Is Floating,” in which she faces the destruction of her archive and embracing the loss as a blessing: “And I looked at them floating there in the shiny dark water, dissolving / All the things I had carefully saved all my life becoming nothing but junk / And I thought how beautiful how magic and how catastrophic.”<sup>45</sup> Anderson’s response to loss is marked by the consolation of representation – “I didn’t have to look at the stuff anymore, or deal with it; I could have this very magical representation of it [in the form of a list of lost items]. And from there, it began to be about so many things – basically, the world is made up of stories.”<sup>46</sup> So the loss of any future in which stories might be heard equals quite literally the end of the world – and this loss is apparently something to be approached with gentle resignation, and perhaps even a touch of exhilaration.

In terms of the method she adopted in the project, Anderson’s leap into the postnormal is embodied in her randomising the lyrics, at least partially. This started out with an attempt to enable her collaborators to participate in the album’s storytelling: “[Kronos] said at the beginning, ‘We want to tell stories.’ I said, ‘Why don’t I make something so that you can tell them with

<sup>43</sup> Sardar, “Welcome,” p. 48.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.49.

<sup>45</sup> Laurie Anderson and Kronos Quartet, “Everything Is Floating,” *Landfall* (Nonesuch, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Laurie Anderson “Making Landfall,” *Landfall* liner notes (Nonesuch, 2018).

your instruments?’<sup>47</sup> What resulted was *erst* (electronic representation of spoken text), a program Anderson developed with software designer Liubo Borissov, through which notes played by the Kronos instrumentalists triggered words of text that would be projected on a screen overhead.”<sup>48</sup> The conception evolved and “eventually I used spoken language instead of music to trigger projected language, which created complex multitasking on the part of the audience.”<sup>49</sup> Mirroring the thematic concerns of the work, its form also addresses issues of unpredictable complexity as well as loss: “In recounting struggles with loss in myriad forms – animals gone extinct, dreams recounted with effort, even a karaoke session disrupted by a power failure – *Landfall* quietly yet insistently evokes notions of things lost and gone. Onscreen as well, words lost letters; symbols filled the gaps, suggesting a perhaps futile attempt to restore order.”<sup>50</sup> This destabilisation thus affects the language layer of the work as well, although most significantly, it alters our relationship with more recent human technologies.

Opening up to chaos, unpredictability, but also to inevitable loss happens in the setting of the all-encompassing electronic network which is no longer a source of unspecified danger; it is rather taken for granted by now. Instead, Anderson focuses on the random, unpredictable behaviours of the network itself, which appear to merit no commentary whatsoever. Unlike the network from “Jim Davies,” representing a sinister, powerful secret organisation, this is an anonymous, randomly global system that has become autonomous to the extent that nobody can actually predict or control its behaviour. The episode that Smith refers to is the subject of another piece on *Landfall*, entitled “We Learn To Speak Yet Another Language”: “I was in a Dutch karaoke bar / Trying to sing a song in Korean / In addition, I was just getting the hang of things / When the software crashed / And the video background of sand dunes / Got all glitchy from the bad connection / Via the Indonesian version of Netflix for no reason / Then for no reason it would all come back up again.”<sup>51</sup> There is no commentary and the system is no longer threatening to envelop us, because it already has, and we hardly noticed, too busy enjoying ourselves in the process.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Steve Smith, *Landfall* liner notes.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson, “Making Landfall.”

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Landfall* liner notes.

<sup>51</sup> Laurie Anderson, “We Learn to Speak Yet Another Language” *Landfall* (Nonesuch, 2018).

### And now what? How do we start? How do we begin again?

In what may be read as a variation on her anecdote about her grandmother's death, in "Tell All the Animals" from *Heart of a Dog* Anderson returns to the experience of witnessing the dying moments of a close person as a way of facing the unpredictability of the future.<sup>52</sup> Compared with the former story – touching and amusing in equal measure – this piece is far more sombre and more direct. It offers an account of the collapsing consciousness of a person on their deathbed. Anderson quotes the more and more incongruous final words of her mother in a manner that displays features characteristic for her own style: "Is it a pilgrimage? Towards what? Which way do we face? Thank you so much, for having me."<sup>53</sup> Anderson faces directly issues of nearing demise, and records traces of a collapsing consciousness, which means she is dealing with the erasure of any future with which this situation is associated. This reinforces the impression that Anderson has reached a final limit in her exploration of the theme. Her repeated discussion of the deaths of her close ones, her visions of the end of humanity as a whole, her tendency to reproduce in her own output the loss of control that dying involves, might all be taken to indicate that Anderson has arrived at a point beyond which any future is indeed unthinkable. However, in her latest collaborative project, *Songs from the Bardo*, released in September 2019 (with Tenzin Choegyal and Paris Smith), she takes the logical next step, and confronts death itself as a manifestation of a future to be managed through compassion.

The bardo is in many senses the ultimate postnormal state: the term describes a stage immediately after death, when the consciousness of the deceased struggles to come to terms with its new situation, before moving on to a new life.<sup>54</sup> Sardar's choice of words brings the two concepts surprisingly close: "We live in an in-between period where old orthodoxies

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<sup>52</sup> In "Slip Away" from *Life on a String* she recounts the death of her father, this time exclusively from her own perspective, giving no voice to him. The question of arriving at an ultimate limit, taking a leap of faith into the dramatically unknown is not as explicit as in, say, "The End of the World," but is also present: "You told me you had no idea / how to die / but I / saw the way the light / left your eyes / And after all the shocks / the way the heart unlocks / And oh then you slipped away."

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, *Heart of a Dog*.

<sup>54</sup> Graham Coleman, Thupten Jinpa, Gyurme Dorje (eds.), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The First Complete Translation*, composed by Padma Sambhava; revealed by Karma Lingpa; translated by Gyurme Dorje (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

*are dying*, new ones have yet to *be born*, and very few things seem to make sense. Ours is a transitional age, a time without the confidence that we can return to any past we have known and with no confidence in any path to a desirable, attainable or sustainable future.”<sup>55</sup> The bardo is literally a state in which all human constructs appear to be of no use: science, technology, religion, art can really do nothing to help us make sense of this frightening and disorienting experience.<sup>56</sup> *The Bardo Thodol* provides a set of guidelines and practices which are supposed to prepare us for the experience of dying, and enable the living to assist the process. Admittedly, however, even the Dalai Lama emphasises his doubt in the method:

Normally in our lives, if we know that we are going to be confronted by a difficult or unfamiliar situation, we prepare and train ourselves for such a circumstance in advance, so that when this event actually happens we are fully prepared. ... [T]he rehearsal of the process of death, and those of the immediate state, and the emergence into a future existence ... are part of my daily practice and because of this I somehow feel a sense of excitement when I think about the experience of death. At the same time, though, sometimes I do wonder whether or not I will really be able to fully utilise my own preparatory practices when the actual moment of death comes!<sup>57</sup>

There is a decidedly postnormal ring to the final remark: the frameworks established thousands of years ago for the specific purpose of managing the condition are almost gleefully put into question. Apparently the Dalai Lama is as prepared to run headlong into the future as Laurie Anderson’s Baptist grandmother. Anderson herself extends the uncertainty of the bardo experience to the human condition in general, when she describes *The Bardo Thodol* thus: “The most visual language of any book I know. Which is odd since this is a book about the bardo — the disintegration of the self and the transformation of energy. I love the imagery and it reminds me that every minute of life is the bardo!”<sup>58</sup>

The project in some ways confirms this perception in continuing Anderson’s withdrawal from the central position – immediately after the

<sup>55</sup> Sardar, “Welcome,” p. 47 (my emphasis).

<sup>56</sup> Coleman, Jinpa, Dorje, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XXVI.

<sup>58</sup> Laurie Anderson, “My 10 Favourite Books,” accessed 29 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/t-magazine/my-10-favorite-books-laurie-anderson.html>.

collaboration with the Kronos Quartet, *Songs from the Bardo* is a result of Choegyal's long exploration of the *The Bardo Thodol* (also frequently referred to as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*), with Anderson being an equal of three partners at most. What is more, following the randomisation of her lyrical contributions to *Landfall*, on *Songs from the Bardo* she only delivers words taken from the ancient book. Finally, the musical form of the project, suggested by Choegyal and based on improvisation, is presented by Anderson in terms of the exciting sense of exposure and lack of control. She associates these with the unpredictability of such endeavours, and claims they affect in equal measure the performers and their audience:

I had never been that vulnerable, because if you don't have ideas, you can't hide that. The entire audience knows you have no ideas, no idea where you're going. But then of course, the great thing is that if you find it, they find it too. [...] So in fact, it was exhilarating. It was like building a giant ship that we could then revolve around and look at from different angles, and we could sink it and we could sail it and we could do things to it. It was beyond thrilling to create a piece of music like that, because it isn't only in the present.<sup>59</sup>

Improvisation allows the musicians to achieve effects that Anderson likens to those of Buddhist meditation exercises aimed at freeing one from the tendency of the human mind to impose patterns on reality.

In this work, *Songs from the Bardo*, we try to [...] create a flow in which your mind is able to free-associate, and let one image pile on top of others, stir about and color each other. Yet at the same time, it invites you to just be awake to what is going to happen next, because it does not have a strict tempo. Things just happen in these songs, and images collide.

Listeners, I think, or at least I'll speak for myself, try to make sense of these lines, try to make associations, and comparisons, in all sorts of ways: how do these things work together. And that's the collaboration we're trying to set up with our listeners. To really have that happen in your mind as you listen.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Laurie Anderson, Tenzin Choegyal, Jesse Paris Smith, *Songs from the Bardo* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2019), p. 15–16.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

This is arguably an exercise in antidogmatism, endlessly useful in the face of the postnormal times, though clearly approaching the issue from an individualised, psychological perspective. The Pitchfork reviewer makes a more specific and more political connection, linking the experience of the bardo with the conditions of the postnormal stage of the late capitalism:

Anderson encourages the listener to hold their ground [against the wrathful deities appearing to the dying person]. “Awakened one, when projections appear like this, do not be afraid,” she recites. Then, later, “They only arise out of the spontaneous play of your mind.”

The spontaneous play of your mind. These words hold particular weight at a time when systemic injustice, existential crises, and self-commodification pull the psyche in a thousand different directions at once. Anxiety, stress, depression, and a general sense of paralysis are common complaints of everyday people, and are without fail capitalized on by the very institutions and corporations that purport to support us.<sup>61</sup>

To my mind, the distinction between these two references – as well as what they have in common – captures the essence of the interrelation between Laurie Anderson’s ongoing diagnoses of Americans in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and Ziauddin Sardar’s notion of the postnormal condition. On the one hand, Anderson is considering an increasingly specific socio-political context, adding detail to her inquest into the American spirit as embodied in very particular situations. On the other, her work has a universal appeal, inevitably posing questions that go beyond the scope of Sardar’s interest as a political scientist. The conclusion to be drawn from the examples of Anderson’s work presented here may well be that what Sardar describes as historically specific postnormal situation is in fact a universal experience but this need not be read as depoliticising a particular set of conditions. In the light of her consistent distrust of and tendency to subvert sanitising discourses explaining away paradoxes of human reality, the opposite may in fact be argued. The coincidence between Anderson’s observations and the theory of the postnormal times may be taken to point to the validity of Sardar’s solutions in any histori-

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<sup>61</sup> Ruth Saxelby, *Laurie Anderson / Tenzin Choegyal / Jesse Paris Smith Songs from the Bardo Review*, accessed 27 September 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/laurie-anderson-tenzin-choegyal-jess-songs-from-the-bardo/>.

cal circumstances, the need to beware of the numbing modern conception of the normal itself. Anderson's work is political, spiritual and emotional to different degrees, and thus in many ways complements Sardar's analyses, reminding us how strange the very concept of anything that might be called a future really is – or at least should be – while constantly revealing the political tensions that might be hidden under universalising perspectives on the issue.

**Sławomir Konkol**

**Talk (Post)Normal. Conceptualisations of the Future  
in Laurie Anderson's work**

To call Laurie Anderson a multimedia artist – as she herself has done on more than one occasion – is to state something so obvious as to be nearly meaningless. Indeed, it is as redundant as to say that her work has persistently concerned the future. Offering universalizing depictions of American postmodernity through the new technologies that were the theme of many of her projects, Anderson has, nevertheless, persistently stressed her attachment to a very traditional art form, that of storytelling. Paradoxically, however, this ancient form implies an interest in the future just as intense as and perhaps in fact even more fundamental than her cutting-edge interactive installations and multimedia performances. Voicing her concern about whether there is indeed any future before humanity, Anderson presented herself in a recent interview as an artist in danger of being radically deprived of her medium, which for a storyteller is, by definition, the future. My paper is a look at the various facets of futures conceptualized by Laurie Anderson over the forty years of her artistic activity, stretching from political fear and anger, through philosophical reflection, to personal considerations of our individual temporality.

**Keywords:** Laurie Anderson, the future, Ziauddin Sardar, postnormal times

**Słowa kluczowe:** Laurie Anderson, przyszłość, Ziauddin Sardar, czasy postnormalne

