AGLSP 2010 Conference
The Transformation of the 21ˢᵗ Century City
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In the summer of 1976, when I was 9 years old, I experienced something profound that changed my perception of civilization, my place in it, and my future: Logan's Run.

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Like so many kids growing up in the atomic age, I saw visions of a technological future that offered **immense promise** (flying cars, jet packs, food replicators) *and* **dehumanizing terrors** (malicious robots, forced euthanasia, vapid shopping channels). The sources of information about what was in store for us were low-to-medium budget science fiction movies with predictable characters and moderately cheesy special effects. But in those wonderful, mythical moments in the dark theater with no reality but the big screen, both my hopes and fears for my future were forged.

The Domed (and Doomed) City

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The city in Logan's Run is of the ubiquitous domed variety – humankind has destroyed the earth through overpopulation, war, and pollution. To survive, the remains of society have sequestered themselves in sealed isolation and perfected the pursuit of pleasure. **But there's a hitch.** At the age of 30, this neat little crystal that is implanted in the palm of your hand blinks red, signifying that you are selected for the ritualistic passage into rebirth, which, of course, means death. These themes of the future city are rampant in science fiction: imprisoned in exquisitely, efficiently engineered cities, cut off from the natural environment we ravaged out of greed and short-sighted stupidity, we coddle and distract ourselves with still more technological wonders until someone makes a break for it and reveals the terrible secret that there *is* indeed breathable air outside the dome or intelligent apes now run the planet or Soylent Green is people.

The Dual Nature of Cities

A city is a physical entity with an objective purpose to provide a functional conglomeration of commerce and community.

A city is also a metaphor and a dream, a fantastical factory of human expectation and expression.

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Our real cities are a mix of physical reality and metaphor, objective purpose and unspoken dream; they are a functional conglomeration of community and commerce and also fantastical factories of human expectation. After all, people go to the big city to be discovered – not to the forest or the farm. The modern city is shaped by this dual nature as a purposeful, communal physical place and as an opportunity for individual expression and possibility. To explore this dual nature further, and to expand my literary sources beyond the B-grade sci-fi of my childhood, I chose three other literary works to look at:

Sources

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" by Jorge Luis Borges
The City & The City by China Miéville
The Lost City of Z by David Grann

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Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius;" China Miéville's novel The City and the City; and David Grann's The Lost City of Z, a biography of explorer Percy Fawcett.

Each describes a fictional city that challenges our dream of civilization: Borges' world is manifested by thought and desire with little regard to history, authority, or laws of cause and effect; Miéville's cities are hyperbolic reflections of each other with civic rules that require inhabitants of each to creatively ignore the existence of the other; lastly, Grann's biography of explorer Percy Fawcett reveals how the narrative of a contrived civilization can reshape a real one. These fantasies give us clues to how we think about our cities, what their roles are as cells in the body of civilization, and therefore, can give us insight in to building more humane, sustainable, and artful cities that can go beyond meeting basic social needs.

Lost and Found

Industrializing 20th century western societies had distinct, immovable perceptions of the rest of the world. From Ben Macintyre's article in the January 7, 2010 issue of the UK's Times Online: "Outsiders have always projected their fantasies on to the wilds of South America: Nelson Rockefeller thought 4,000 miles of the River Amazon could usefully be chopped into canals; Elizabeth Nietzsche, sister of the philosopher Friedrich, came here to set up a vegetarian, Aryan society at the end of the 19th century. Sixteenth-century theologians concluded that Native Americans were not human at all, but "natural slaves."
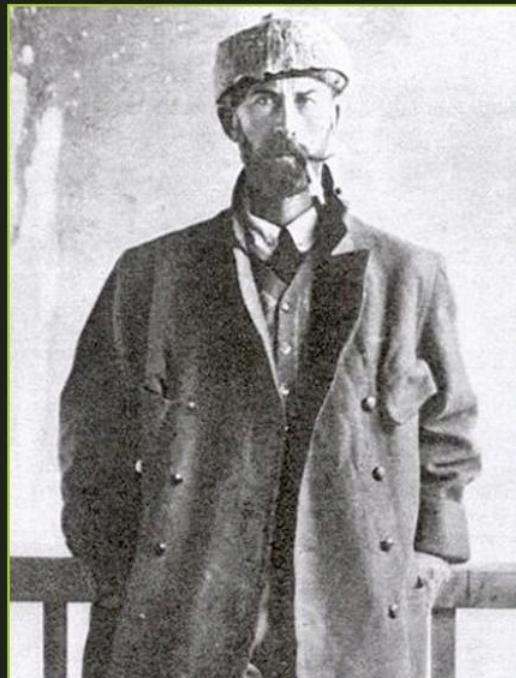
Explorer Percy Fawcett

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Percy Fawcett was a quintessential middle class Victorian man, steeped in the lessons of his industrializing and colonizing 20th century culture: he was educated, ambitious, abstemious, and obsessed with making a unique discovery.

He spent years working for the Royal Geographical Society, extending the known borders of the Bolivian and Brazilian jungles. Famous for his resolve, he expected quiet stoicism and strict adherence to Christian mores from the men in his expeditions. Creative, innovative, and insightful, Fawcett was legendary for his ability to turn terrible circumstances to his advantage. It was one of these experiences that inspired his growing obsession with the Lost City of Z.

The Lost City of Z?

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Facing a hail of deadly arrows from a tribe of Guarayo Indians, Fawcett uncharacteristically surrendered to them and was taken into the forest. An hour later,

he returned, having brokered a peace with the tribe. The tribe helped Fawcett's party make camp and gave them food and water. After spending time with the tribe, Fawcett had a revelation that few of his Victorian compatriots would ever have: these were not backward savages, but intelligent people who had adapted magnificently to their surroundings. They had ample food and creative techniques for fishing; they used natural substances for everything from poisons to medicines; they manufactured their own tools and clothes and shelters. From David Grann's biography of Fawcett: "After the 1910 expedition, Fawcett, suspecting that the Indians of the Amazon held secrets long overlooked by historians and ethnologists, started to seek out various tribes, no matter how fierce their reputation."

Fawcett's Real Find

Amazon tribes adapted productively to their surroundings and had displayed all of the necessary elements of an enduring civilization:
- developed creative methods for fishing
- could store and stockpile food
- used natural substances as medicines and poisons
- made their own clothes and tools
- constructed durable shelters

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The popular myth that the second and third worlds were peopled with sorry backward souls who eked out a miserable existence in an unforgiving land began to fall apart.

Coupled with his insatiable need for challenge and adventure, Fawcett imagined another possibility. He now had proof that the Indians of the Amazon could stockpile and store food, they could construct durable shelters, they could manipulate their environment to make useful objects and powerful medicines: all necessary precursors to the development of an enduring civilization. Rumors of unique artifacts and geometric shapes and paths in the forest led Fawcett to believe that the Amazon jungle could easily hide a complex lost civilization. The discovery of Machu Picchu in 1911 by rival Hiram Bingham only further fired his imagination. He would endeavor to uncover the lost city of the Amazon.

Fawcett endeavored, but we'll never know if he succeeded. He disappeared along with his son and another man on his last expedition. Explorers followed in his footsteps for many years, looking both for Fawcett and his lost city of Z, but found neither. This is the nature of most lost cities – they tend to stay lost. However, Fawcett did find something incredibly valuable. He challenged the absolutes of his Victorian culture. Fawcett had even begun calling his own Victorian tribe "savages," recognizing that the civilized white world had wreaked immeasurable havoc on others. By seeking the mythical city, he re-imagined the ancestry of humankind and did indeed find a valuable civilization based on intelligence, empathy, and community that challenged the western world's idea of not only the past, but the present and the future.

Fawcett's Real Find

A valuable civilization based on intelligence, empathy, and community that challenged the pre-existing myth.

Further impetus to challenge our use and manipulation of the Amazon jungle for the benefit of only our civilization.

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Recent discoveries in the Columbian jungle suggest that Fawcett may have been on to something. Early in 2010, Antiquity magazine published reports of an elaborate settlement with an impressive array of architectural and engineered features, including moats, bridges, and avenues. This discovery, possibly Fawcett's real legacy, challenges our notions of civilization anew: do we continue to vanquish and destroy the Amazon jungle, now not just an environmental rarity but an historical one as well, to support our existing cities and civilization?

Lost in Plain Sight

Lost cities are especially fertile fantasies. The archetypes – Atlantis, Babel, El Dorado, Shangri-La – return to be re-imagined in our stories over and over again.
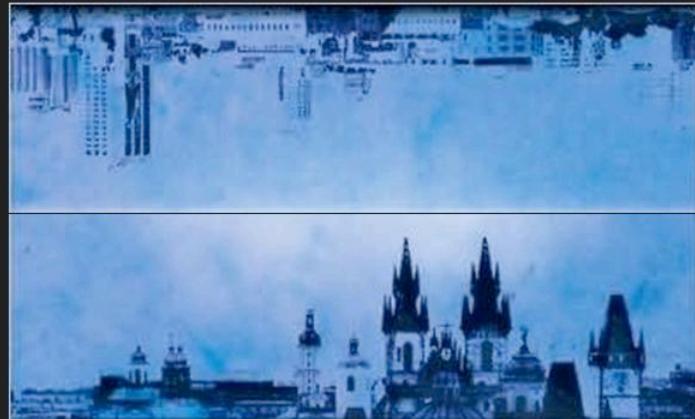
The City & The City

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There is a lost city in China Miéville's The City & The City, a novel about two cities that through some quirk of the law of conservation of matter exist simultaneously in the same physical space. What is lost is not a place, but the very gap between places, forcing the denizens of both cities to craft psychological barriers to retain their individual, nationalistic identities.

Beszel and Ul Qoma are two cities joined by this proximity and a mysterious, shared history. Unlike other twin cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma are not divided by a boundary such as a river or a Cold War era wall. These two cities are topologically the same: they occupy the same space at the same time. They are also somewhat schizophrenic – while each knows of the existence of the other, they are not cooperative personalities. To exist in Ul Qoma, one must navigate around Beszel, one must "unsee" Beszel as it exists

all around. People in Beszel must do likewise, where their city streets are "cross hatched" or altered by infusions from Ul Qoma. Citizens of one city are trained to unsee the elements of the other because politically, these two cities are irretrievably riven. Passing from one to the other without going through proper, complicated diplomatic channels is considered a serious breach and interlopers are severely punished by a shadowy agency that functions outside the governments of either city.

As the novel unfolds, we find out that there are more than two cities, there is a possible third – a secret so profound, that those in search of it are murdered. The third city is truly hidden, not just ignored through arbitrary political and social wrangling. The third city – called Orciny – by nature of being truly secret, has the power of conspiracy and ultimate control.

City Limits

- What defines a boundary?
- What makes us adorn one boundary with a fence and another with a bridge?
- Who defines the boundary's permeability?

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The fiction of these three intertwined cities challenges the idea of a civilization characterized by boundary. What makes a boundary real? A geographic feature like a river is a clear physical boundary. But what makes inhabitants of a shared space build a bridge as opposed to a fence? What is the nature of boundary and who or what determines its permeability?

El Paso, as seen from Juarez, Mexico

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Years ago, I spent a week in New Mexico for my brother's wedding. On my last day there, I drove to El Paso to get a flight back home. I was intrigued by the nature of this city, which is defined by a geological border (Rio Grande) that is also so economically and politically evident. From the interstate I could see into Juarez, Mexico, and the landscape there was distinctly foreign to me. Yet, like Beszel and Ul Qoma, El Paso and Juarez are crosshatched together; they share history, economies, geography, and physical space. People cross the border back and forth to shop, to go to work, to go

home. These intertwined cities, these siblings, speak to our current political climate regarding immigration, political ideology, and national identity. The immigration debate, which is partly about the character of border cities, is an effort on both sides of the political spectrum to see and unsee the things that define us as members of cities and nations.
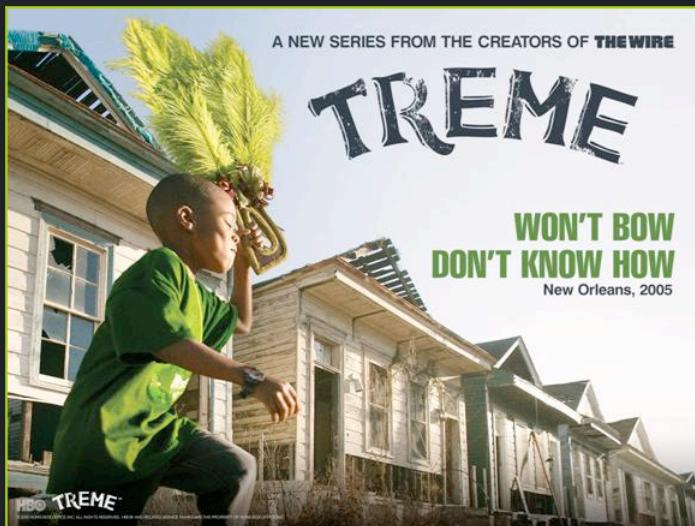
HBO's Treme

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Many cities are built on myths of interdependent multiplicity and identity. The relationship between reality and fantasy is often purposefully convoluted to give a city its unique power and personality. The HBO television series Treme is, I think, one of the best dramas out there to help us process reality through fiction. Treme is about the eponymous neighborhood in New Orleans struggling to adapt and move forward after Hurricane Katrina. In one episode, there is a scene where a group of missionary kids visiting the city to help rebuild it ask Davis, a local working reluctantly as a concierge at a

tourist hotel in the French Quarter, where they can see the real New Orleans. He impishly tells them how to breach, to use Miéville's term, giving directions to a dive bar where they can see into the other city that coexists with the tourist-safe, sanitized, marketed version of New Orleans. The result the next morning is that Davis is fired from his job at the hotel because the kids never showed up the next morning and are missing. Later in the story, the kids bump into Davis on the street and they thank him for his suggestion, grateful for the glimpse into the true New Orleans.

But what is the true New Orleans?

Mardi Gras in New Orleans

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Originally a port city, New Orleans in the 1970s shifted its economic identity to tourism, focusing on ways to remake the abandoned waterfront. From an article in The Atlantic titled "Hard Times in the Big Easy:" "Retail stores, restaurants, and hotels – all designed

to show tourists what New Orleans was "really" like – were installed. The old buildings and businesses that had typified New Orleans for locals were overrun by corporate institutions, and the city's traditional culture was gradually commodified."

New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

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Now, in the wake of Katrina, New Orleans faces another identity crisis, at the core of which is an attempt to integrate the city's nature with its promise. Flooded again, this time by celebrities and entrepreneurs with good intentions, the city is full of architects, urban planners, and others who are clamoring for the right to reclaim it. Rebuilding projects are scattered all over the city, but like any attempt to excavate and best interpret a ruin, the managers of these projects are dealing with a reality that has been built on several myths. This is from architect Andres Duany, a native of Cuba, who is working on one of the rebuilding projects in New Orleans: "'When I originally thought of New Orleans, I was conditioned by the press to think of it as an extremely ill-governed

city, full of ill-educated people, with a great deal of crime, a great deal of dirt, a great deal of poverty…. And when I arrived, I did indeed find it to be all those things. Then one day I was walking down the street and I had this kind of brain thing, and I thought I was in Cuba. Weird! And then I realized at that moment that New Orleans was not an American city, it was a Caribbean city. Once you recalibrate, it becomes the best-governed, cleanest, most efficient, and best-educated city in the Caribbean. New Orleans is actually the Geneva of the Caribbean."

New Orleans is not a city transformed by fantasy; rather it *is* fantasy constantly in motion, realigning and redefining itself as much as its surrounding geography is transformed by seasonal storms. It is also a fantasy that people want to participate in, which enriches the city's character but complicates its governance.

Lost in Translation

This is one of the difficulties with myth and fantasy as an engine or prime mover in the building of cities and civilizations – it doesn't always function well at a collective level. However, I'm an optimist – I think fantasy is a good thing. It leads us to opportunities and new ways of thinking about the world and about other people. I'd like to think that those of us who are imaginative use our powers for good and not evil. We endeavor to be like Percy Fawcett: intent on finding truths that elevate people and society and ultimately, all of human civilization, not propagate lies that denigrate them. The key is to constantly manage the border between fantasy and reality; to monitor what passes between and for what purpose.

While I believe that fantasy can be a wise and humanistic source of ideas, I have to include a cautionary tale from Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Borges sees this membrane between reality and fantasy as a mirror, but warns us against believing that

the reflections are equal representations of the same thing. In his short story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Borges describes what happens when we stare into this reflection and see more than a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object.

Jorge Luis Borges: The man and the man in the mirror

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The narrator of Borges' story describes the discovery of a mysterious land: "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia." While the encyclopedia gives Uqbar the appearance of an actual locale, the map is suspect: "...a literal but delinquent reprint..." Further exploration reveals an entire set of encyclopedias that detail not only the land of Uqbar but that of an entire planet, Orbis Tertius, and the unique characteristics of its hemispheres, nations, and cities, if you can draw such definitive boundaries around indeterminate places.

The narrator goes on to describe the nature of Uqbar and its regions, specifically, Tlön. Tlön's culture is built on idealism and psychology; there are no nouns in the language, because to name things is to define them in some way; instead objects are "convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs." There is no footprint of literature or science or art or mathematics in Tlon; all are merely mutable manifestation of mental processes brought into being and then just as easily taken out. Thought can manufacture objects and their relationship to each other; the whole of cause and effect is rendered impotent to the whim of the imagination.

Uqbar

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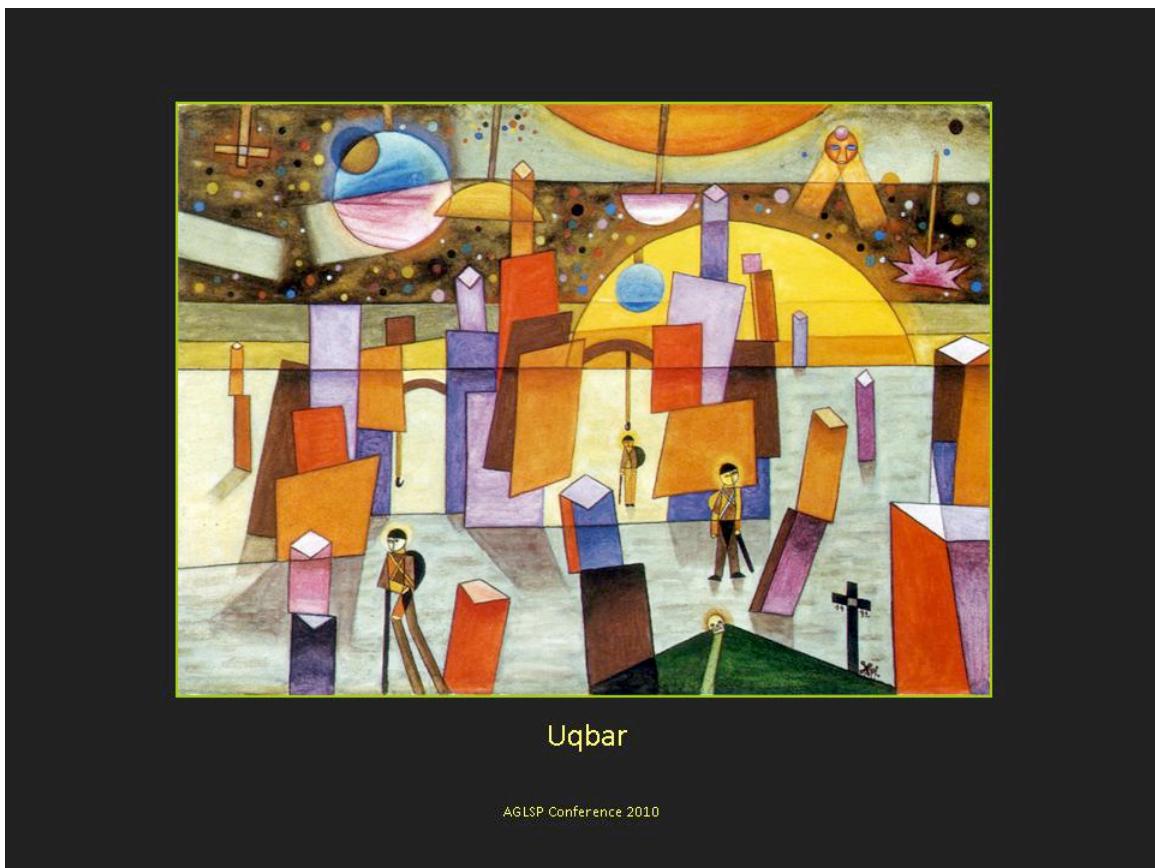
Uqbar is the embryonic stem cell civilization, bound only by possibility and potential. It is free from sequence, and therefore, consequence. The seductive power of this purely psychological idealism begins to supplant the narrator's real, unpredictable world, despite the knowledge that Uqbar is a fantasy created by a small conspiracy of men for

the purpose of claiming dominion over nature and God. To free themselves from the unpredictability and lack of control over their real lives, people begin to accept the ways of Uqbar and Tlön as their own:

"Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield. Ten years ago any symmetry with a semblance of order – dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism – was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet? It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws – I translate: inhuman laws – which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men."

However, a purely imagined, self-referential world without cause and effect does not free humankind from the vagaries of natural laws; it simply enslaves us to our inability to cope with uncertainty. Uqbar is a world of infinite iteration, in which we can have anything we imagine until the gaps between reality and fantasy are completely filled and nothing can pass between, destroying the engine and the prime mover of civilization itself.

So how do we harness fantasy and hyperbole and fiction for the making and remaking of the 21st century city? There are endless ways, but here's a few:

Harnessing Hyperbole

- Seek out ancestors
- Redefine boundaries
- Reconnect reason and imagination

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- Seek out ancestors. Engage the full history of a place to understand its potential and its promise.
- Redefine boundaries by seeking diverse stories and empowering multiple identities.
- Reconnect reason with imagination and monitor their relationship, continuously recalibrate.

"...likely conjecture about useful things is far preferable to exact knowledge of the useless..."

-Isocrates
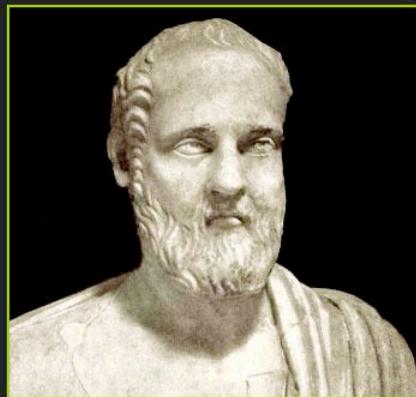
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Isocrates, respected Greek rhetorician and teacher, complained that his competitors, Plato and Aristotle, focused too narrowly on philosophy's use as a definitive underpinning of science and mathematics. Isocrates believed that a real understanding of the world came also from an analysis of human choice, not just a factual accounting of the behavior of things. He understood the power of the human imagination and implored its judicious use: "...likely conjecture about useful things is far preferable to exact knowledge of the useless..." We must therefore clarify for ourselves and others, what is useful about our cities and what is useless.

To conclude, I'd like to quickly revisit Logan's Run. At the end of the movie, the hero, Logan, returns to the city to share his newfound knowledge of the life he's experienced outside the dome. But he's captured and taken to the central computer, where he's interrogated about the existence of a place that the computer calls sanctuary, a

mysterious place that threatens the computer's total control over the city. But Logan insists repeatedly that sanctuary is not a real physical place, it's a construct, a myth designed to empower people to want to leave the tyranny of their controlled society. Unable to compute the meaning and purpose of a myth, the central computer explodes, destroying the entire domed city and freeing its bewildered people to begin anew in the natural world.
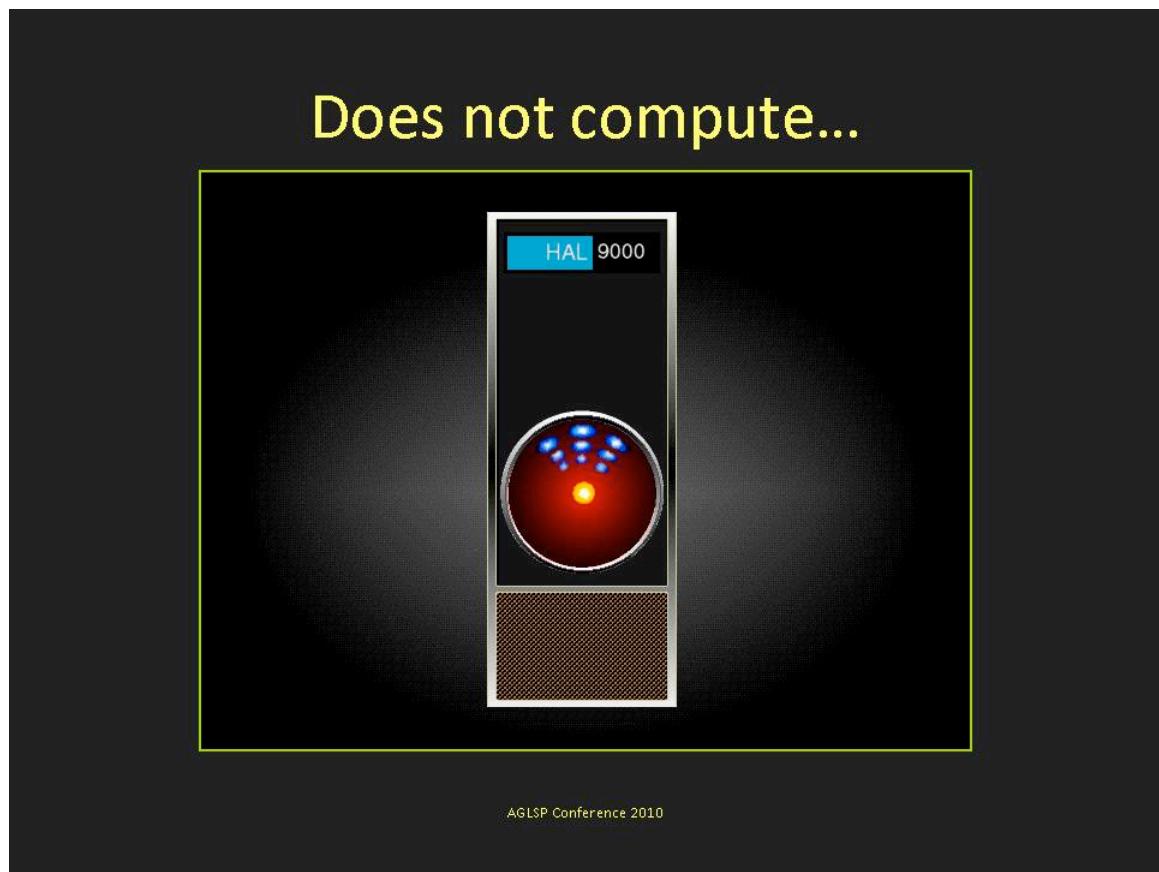
We must not build any system so rigid that it favors useless certainty over useful conjecture. Fantasy can help shepherd reality to new incarnations. It can catalyze new iterations and connect seemingly disparate ideas. To transform our cities into more egalitarian, prosperous, and sustainable places, we must leverage fantasy to help us define the boundary and build the bridge; to construct the fence, but also the gate.