

BEYOND
“LIKE”
THOUGHTS
ON
PSYCHIC
OCTOPI,
SOFT
SUPERSTITION
AND WISHFUL
ACTIVISM

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Recent media activity during the 2010 world cup was indelibly marked by the presence of *Paul the psychic octopus*, who correctly predicted the outcome of eight games - having been challenged to do so the same number of times, that is. These things would happen, that much we understand, given the sheer amount of people (and other

living creatures, it seems) engaged in world cup predictions at such times - and besides, a fairly accessible lesson in statistics would probably wipe out whatever residual magic sprinkles we could be holding on to in this regard. We obviously understand the octopus has no clue, but we chose to engage in a game of collective fiction (anthropologists no doubt have a better name for this), one that flourished in the most extraordinary hypernarratives, covering the whole spectrum of social and political references.

From the innocuous and inevitable Facebook pages to home-printed octopus posters in the *calles* of Madrid on victory night, from death threats to restaurant chains withdrawing octopus from their menus, from alleged state protection to public TV channels broadcasting Paul's predictions as breaking news, from pop-up ads in peer-to-peer websites to news that a Spanish aquarium was preparing to bid for the acquisition of Paul (and subsequent prospect of arm-wrestling with the Russian Mafia in this endeavor). Quite extraordinary, come to think of it - but in a way we've seen it all before, in countless shapes, contexts, guises, websites, tweets. It's all become a bit tired, it seems.

So why would Paul be any different from, say, *Bert is Evil's* sudden appearance next to the image of Osama Bin Laden in a demonstration in Bangladesh? Or from the good old days of Chris Crocker screaming "Leave Britney Alone" on YouTube - and, for a brief while, becoming more Britney than Britney herself?

Because the fiction of Paul is rooted on futurology. And at times of uncertainty and slow-motion catastrophe, when the vertigo of digital totality is only matched by randomness to the point of cynicism, when five years from now is pretty much impossible to even

begin to reveal itself in any possible respect, superstition may once again become the driving force of our contemporary ethos.

Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) was itself an oracle of things to come - a glimpse of social media *before* social media, the soft triumph of amateur video over the Hollywood blockbuster (low-definition fragments of daily nothingness, now fostered and woven by Ridley Scott et al), the allure of meaning where there is none, the *need* for meaning where there is none. The truth is, Paul only became a star psychic because he rose from that primal soup of randomness where most others failed, his rise itself a random occurrence. This we know, but this reading would not have inspired.

The slight twist is, the same blueprint of collective dream sequences that hailed Paul as the World Cup Messiah is at the same time inspiring a kind of "wishful activism" that may end up paralyzing the very same social involvement it proclaims. A quick scan through recent activist groups on Facebook could reveal: *Stop the Bull-fights; Save Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani from being Stoned to Death in Iran; One Million Against The Death Penalty for Homosexuality; We Don't Want the State to Pay for the Pope's Visit; Animal Rights; Against Chauvinism; End Child Slavery; Extend Unemployment Benefits*. The list could go on pretty much *ad infinitum*, and full of worthy, honorable (or at the very least *interesting*) causes it would be. Yet most of these social media groups tend to invite us to simply press the "Join" or "Like" button of the cause at stake and feel oh-so-socially-involved in the process. The heart may warm up, but the world surely won't change a heartbeat just because you clicked on that "Like" button: fine, an ocean of "Likes" will show up on some statistical radar somewhere and may somehow eventually produce some kind of effect - but we'd have to agree this would all be a bit too

Chaos Theory for the sake of the above causes, their worth and urgency. The future will not be built on “Likes”, Beavis, that much we can be sure of. That much we *choose* to believe.

Ultimately, Paul’s legacy was a revised version of another entity’s words, a version that resonates as the vertigo of overabundance intensifies: “believing is seeing”. What comes after clarity, then? Action. Maybe Paul *did* give the Spanish team that extra bit of poise to go and get that trophy (a self-fulfilling prophecy, understood). But those players sure acted on it. So forget the ball and look up the above causes. Follow them through, find out what you can *do*. Go beyond “Like”. We will look forward to the future you will build.

Heitor Alvelos, September 2010.

