William Hanff

The Fantastic & Fictionalism in Flusser's "Now Suppose"

In his essay *Now Suppose¹*, which acts both as an introduction to his philosophy of 'futurizing' and as the title, Vilém Flusser expands on his earlier ideas of positioning oneself into an indeterminate field of possibilities to envision and predict potential oncoming futures. Like his twofold approach to Science Fiction in his earlier writings, he proposes two methods that are not opposites, but instead are very different practices both technologically and philosophically. Of particular interest, Flusser mentions the second method of visioning an oncoming future from the present, by the careful application of new technologies, but the specifics of the idea are also left ambiguously indeterminate. This concept of 'futurizing instruments' seems to be applicable to several techniques and technologies that have come to bear in the several decades since the essay was written. These instruments could be (A) scientific lab equipment, similar to Don Ihde's study of laboratory culture that led to his postphenomenology. These instruments could be (B) big-data algorithms and machine learning for predictive analytics and the social constructs of artificial intelligence. Or these instruments could be (C) the digital production tools for storytelling in social media or corporate transmedia pop culture narrative. All three could be concretized examples of Flusser's 'finger-tips-at-terminal' practices for probing incoming futures. Flusser explained that these practices (at least partially) solved the earlier problems of anticipating futures "The futurizing instruments have solved this problem: they have constructed a zone of overlapping futures, and the apply the principle of proximity to this abstraction." (Flusser, n.d., 1) All three of these 'futurizing instruments' evolved from and are based on a computational approach and scientific method similar to the 'as-if' mode of Vaihinger's fictionalism. Incidentally, that same fictionalism is also the basis for the meta-program of society around them such as 'Law' and 'economics' similar to the apparatus theory from Flusser's *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*.

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¹ See this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

In order to probe and explicate Flusser's 'futurizing instruments', both Hans Vaihinger's fictionalism and Tzvetan Todorov's study of 'the Fantastic' can be applied to Flusser's technological approach to anticipating on-rushing future events. To be an effective media theorist and communicologist, must a thinker/writer also be an efficient scriptwriter, director or some other aesthetic visual communicator? What is the role of 'technical images' in the process of scientific/laboratory equipment and devices, predictive analytics in big-data sets, and even literary and entertainment audiovisual productions?

In *Gestures on Videotape (for Fred Forest)* Flusser explains the academic validity of using video (and possibly even some fantastical or science fiction elements) to reinforce the material and theoretical concepts he explored in writing: "The purpose of this experiment is this: to learn how to use video for communication of concrete phenomena and theoretical comments on them on an 'academic' level. The motivation in this is the hope that video is a medium which may enrich, (and even come to substitute), traditional academic media like books, essays and classroom lectures." (Flusser, 1973)

But this approach does require a balance of the scientific fictionalism on one side and the more literary, archetypal, and even folklore concept of fantasy on the other. Tzvetan Todorov provides a workable definition of the fantastic which is remarkably like Flusser's 'standing-on-tip-toes' as an analog experience of uncertainty. "…there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is a victim of an illusion of the senses, or a production of the imagination — and the laws of the world remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality — but this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us." (Todorov 2007, 25) This literary or archetypal approach is nearly a science of science fiction balancing between the uncanny and the marvelous. Todorov continues: "The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event." (Todorov 2007, 25)

Or, put another way, "'*I nearly reach the point of believing*': that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead use beyond the

fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life." (Todorov 2007, 31) This hesitation is similar, if not identical to Flusser's stance of 'standing-on-tip-toes' to evaluate potential futures coming toward the present. Beyond that, it is similar to an 'analog practice' that becomes tiring after some time and not the 'digital/electronic practice' of 'finger-tips-at-terminal' — fingers that can be sustained for longer and is similar to the postphenomenological study of scientific lab culture. But Flusser complicates his digital 'Futurizing Instruments' when he presents the fantastical risk of 'a terrorist who might jump from the screen' of reverse-anticipating the very problems it is trying to predict. The fantastic is, of course, balanced by the disciplined dreaming of fictionalism—this connects these ideas from Flusser's *Now Suppose* with the apparatus theory of technical images.

To address the idea of the technical apparatus, we can call on Vilém Flusser's philosophy of photography, which defines apparatus both in terms of the camera and in terms of the larger social functioning which surrounds and supports it. Flusser defines the apparatus as, "…a complex plaything, so complex that those playing with it are not able to get to the bottom of it; its game consists of combinations of the symbols contained within its program; at the same time this program was installed by a metaprogram and the game results in further programs." (Flusser 2000, p. 31) Based on this, an apparatus is a plaything which reduces actualities to chance probabilities and represents these probabilities as simulations. The photographic camera was the prototype apparatus programmed by the larger metaprogram of the scientific and commercial program of society for the use of capturing and representing images in terms of numbers as opposed to written instructions. "Thinking is expressed in numbers. All apparatuses (not just computers) are calculating machines and in this sense 'artificial intelligences,' the camera included." (Flusser 2000, p. 31)

However, the apparatus of the camera conceals this chance-probability and the numerical function of its representations and simulations by providing a 'black box' to its human user. "The camera (like all apparatuses that followed it) is computational thinking flowing into hardware. Hence the quantum (computational) structure of all the movements and functions of the apparatus." (Flusser 2000, p. 31) Individual human users interface with outer actualities and the numerical nature of the camera is concealed, while the technology unconceals to them

an entire range of ideas that would have remained beyond their reach. The concealing and (un)concealing nature of the apparatus work together.

Below is a suggested diagram of the use of technologies for the movement of fantastical images in ritual across western history, moving away from the personal, with religion, and reaching its most corporate and cliché in cinema, and then move back towards the personal in the conductive magic of integrated electronic entertainment:

Magic / Ritual — Religion — Theater — Cinema / Television —
Computer Media — Magic / Ritual

By emancipating the work of art from its 'Aura', its perceived sense of distance from the audience, and by making it endlessly reproducible, electronic technologies and mechanical reproduction allowed the audience to form their own personal (or tribal) rituals around their art, theater, or mediated storytelling. They get back to the underlying archetypes, instead of literate corporate clichés based on their archetypes. "To an ever-greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility." (Benjamin 1936, 246)

Across this continuum from Magic/Ritual through the technologies of theatre, cinema, TV, converged media, 'technical images' and back into Magic/Ritual we not only find entertainment, news, and opinion but also ways to anticipate events. To recap these two approaches from his essay *Now Suppose*, Flusser gives two contrasting-yet-related methods:

1) Use 'Standing-on-Tip-Toes', the analog methods — archaic method like early theatre ritual, initiation stories, trance dancing which is described in 'the Fantastic' of literary criticism and structuralism, seeking predictive capacities of archetypes and self-fulfilling narratives/prophecies with examples from Tarot, divination, ritual transcendence, classic hypnotism and contemporary public relations, in order to peer past immediate proximal cultural images and zeitgeist of the present to see the broader trends and possibilities. But Flusser points out that this "…is not easy to maintain one soon tires of it and sinks back into the crowd, (into commitment)." (Flusser, n.d., 1)

2) Use 'Finger-Tips-at-Terminal', the digital ways — instruments have been invented, similar to the scientific method and Fictionalism, but implied a digital/computerized 'Umwelt' similar to Ihde's embodiment relations where some is "…sitting comfortable in front of ones terminal, extrapolated curves which diverge, cross, cancel each other out or form bundled." (Flusser, n.d., 1) This method can be a computer-enabled 'futurization' and it should be considerably less mental and physical strain for the individual doing it. But here Flusser warns that "…it is a dubious method. It does not do away with the tiring gymnastics, it only transfers it from people to apparatus." (Flusser, n.d., 1)

Again, Flusser imagines machine learning and AI in the early 90s based on the overall feel of big data sets. Here we can imagine the next quote as an aesthetically-dated documentary television show.

Run Time	Video	Audio
00:00	3D animations of synthwave aesthetic of large desert plane with low-polygon mountains stretching to the horizon. A swarm of birds/insects floats in the air.	MUSIC: low-key corporate electronic instrumental synth-pop raises and lowers as the NARRATOR speaks. SF/x: whooshes and electronic pans as elements on screen move.
00:05	A box appears over the left third of the landscape with a live-action narrator in a scientific research lab. He is a stereotypical British man with grey-to-white hair in this mid to late 60s.	NARRATOR: …this is the view one gains: a swarm of virtualities which approach the present coming from an empty horizon, and getting denser as they do so. This is of course a familiar situation: like iron filings surrounding a magnet.
00:20	Another box appears over the right third of the screen with live-action archival footage of a magnet surrounded by iron filings. A white flash transition to:	NARRATOR: One is tempted to propose a field theory of the future. But this cannot be done, because, while standing on tip-toes, one is still within the field, and does not have a theoretical distance.
00:30	Full Screen archival footage of an extreme close-up of a magnet and iron filings. A white flash transition to:	NARRATOR: And, besides, the comparison with the magnetic field is not a very good one. Unlike the filings, the future virtualities may turn around and disappear from vision.

00:35	The iron filing are match-cut re-placed with 3D renderings of lumi-nescent bubbles popping in an out of existence. A white flash transition to:	NARRATOR: As they approach, they become ever more probable, the moment they present themselves they become real, and if they turn around and disappear, they become impossible, whereas iron filings are incapable of such ontological somersaults.
00:45	The bubbles are now replaced by plastic/unrealistic phantom forms, close to cartoon ghosts. The continue to wink in and out of existence. The box with a live-action narrator reappears on the right side of the screen. He pauses dramatically while addressing the audience. FADE TO BLACK	NARRATOR: The future does not look so much like a magnetic field, as it looks like a congress of ghosts, some of which disappear into thin air, and some of which materialize, while most of them just press against each other and against the present. The problem is precisely: how to get hold of the speeders. MUSIC: crescendos then fades.
01:00	COMMERCIAL BREAK	COMMERCIAL Sound on Tape (SOT)

As such, both methods of anticipating oncoming future events, the 'standing-on-tip-toes' found largely in earlier, mostly-analog media and the more-recent 'finger-tips-at-terminal' forms of 'futurization' create a similar view of what Flusser characterized as "a swarm of virtualities which approach the present coming from an empty horizon, and getting denser as they do so." (Flusser, n.d. 2) One noticeable drawback to the older analog 'standing-on-tip-toes' method is that regardless of the use of fictionalism or 'the fantastic' in the method "…while standing on tip-toes, one is still within the field of, and does not have a theoretical distance." And so, in imagining the Compu/Media world of technical images, Flusser is suggesting and envisioning a technology similar to machine learning and neural networks possibly similar to virtual reality to create a "Machine to transcend existence, (a metaphysical crane)". From earlier, it is likely that Flusser's 'Futurizing Machines' take advantage of the unique properties of technical images. "The futurizing instruments have solved this problem: they have constructed a zone of overlapping futures, and the apply the principle of proximity to this abstraction." This is the beginning of the 'finger-tips-at-terminal' digital method and is based

on a computational approach and scientific method similar to the 'as-if' mode of Vaihinger's fictionalism where "…the crowd of virtualities which approach an abstract 'common present' may be simulated in an image, (a scenario), and this simulation may be manipulated." This is a computationally accurate 'Fantasia Essata' from several of Flusser's works including *On Science Fiction*. Flusser himself wanted to work and write more in formats such as computer code of narrative script format. In that spirit the next block quotes will be presented in the form of a Science Fiction movie script. Flusser uses several science fiction tropes, "To illustrate the result, take the following example:"

FADE IN:

[INT] [A HIGH-TECH SECRET GOVERNMENT FACILITY] — [NIGHT]

[A 35-YEAR-OLD, AVERAGE/EVERYMAN COMPUTER PROGRAMMER SITS AT A GLEAMING COMPUTER TERMINAL SURROUNDED BY LARGE MONITORS THAT STREAM CONSTANT VISUALIZATIONS OF DATA. ON SEVERAL OF THE SCREENS, WE SEE AN ARMED AND HOODED MAN RUNNING THROUGH A CITY AND JUNGLE WITH A LARGE MACHINE GUN. THE MISSION COORDINATOR IS A SILVER-HAIRED MAN IN HIS 60S, STRIDES PURPOSEFULLY THROUGH THE ROOM. A WOMAN WITH A CLIPBOARD PASSES HIM AND THEY EXCHANGE NOTES. THE MISSION COORDINATOR SPEAKS TO BOTH THE AUDIENCE AND HIMSELF]

                    [MISSION COORDINATOR] [URGENTLY]
          A terrorist with his machine gun
          runs through the landscape. He does
          so in the belief that he is running
          into the future, but of course: he
          does not stand on his tip-toes, he
          is committed.

                    [The Mission Coordinator reaches the Computer
                    Programmer and the two continue to watch multiple
                    streams of video on both his small screen and the
                    bank of monitors above]

[MISSION COORDINATOR]

A programmer sits at his desk, and
his terminal shows him the terror-
ist's progress from the future to-
ward the present. The instrument
calculates when the terrorist will
present himself and kill the pro-
grammer.

[COMPUTER PROGRAMMER]

[tapping quickly, he is lost in concentration,
yet responds to the Mission Coordinator]

It also shows other virtualities,
which may collide with the terror-
ist and stop him.

[An austere woman in her 40s walks quickly to join the Mission
Coordinator and Computer Programmer. She speaks urgently, split-
ting her attention between notes on her clipboard and the images
on the screens]

[CLIPBOARD WOMAN] (CONT'D)

By putting into motion, a very com-
plex machinery, the programmer may
mobilize those other virtualities
and thus cancel out the terrorist,
who will thus never become real.

[MISSION COORDINATOR]

But, since there are, margins of
error, the terrorist may jump out
from the terminal on the desk, and
kill the programmer. It is thus
only when the margins of error come
into play that the terrorist be-
comes real.

[TRANSITION:]

Flusser openly acknowledges the ethical implications of this imaginary scenario and tries to keep an 'exacting fantasy' that could be applied to later technological developments. "However, it is not because of the many ontological and epistemological confusions involved in futurizing that this essay has decided against its application. It is out of an ethical, (political), consideration." (Flusser, n.d.) Many of the visual tropes from science fiction action thriller films were borrowed for corporate cybersecurity training videos. We can imagine another script as a continuation of Flusser's quote:

[INT] [A HIGH-TECH CYBER SECURITY OFFICE] — [NIGHT]

[THE SECRET GOVERNMENT AGENCY IS NOW A CORPORATE OFFICE PARK SELF-CONSCIOUSLY DE-SIGNED TO LOOK IMPRESSIVE. OBVIOUS DETAILS SHOW CYBER THE COMPUTER PROGRAMMER STILL SITS AT HIS TERMINAL SURROUNDED FEWER SMALLER MONITORS THAT STREAM CONSTANT VISUALIZATIONS OF DATA. ON SEVERAL OF THE SCREENS, WE STILL SEE AN ARMED MAN RUNNING BUT HE IS NOW AN OBVIOUS CLICHÉ RUNNING THROUGH A CITY AND JUNGLE WITH AN ENORMOUS GRENADE LAUNCHER]

> [CORPORATE SPOKESMAN]
>
> The programmer can *never* talk to the terrorist,
> Either because the terrorist stays unreal, or
> because if he indeed becomes real, he kills
> him. We can well imagine what the terrorist
> would say to the programmer:

> [TERRORIST] [ON SEVERAL VIDEO SCREENS]
>
> "I have to kill you, because you stand in my
> way toward the future, and this 'having to
> kill you' I call my freedom."

> [CORPORATE SPOKESMAN]
>
> But it cannot be imagined what the programmer
> could say to the terrorist, unless it were:

> [COMPUTER PROGRAMMER] [LOOKING AT VIDEO SCREEN]
>
> "I reckon with you."

> [CLIPBOARD WOMAN]
>
> Now a method which excludes dialogue, because,

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       having built a gray zone of common future it
       cannot recognize any other, cannot be a very
       good one.

                   [CORPORATE SPOKESMAN]

       It is preferable to use the archaic method
       of tip-toe dancing, because, although
       uncommitted, it permits dialogue with those
       who are committed.
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If the imaginary scenario above feels stilted, it is because the 'finger-tips-at-terminal' method of anticipating events coming from the future is uncanny and awkward. The character of the programmer does not know what is resolving, he can only reckon obliquely because the technologies used only calculate, they do not participate. Flusser states, "Instruments which futurize do not live: they just reckon. They reckon well, and they do it ever better, but the future the calculate is a gray, tasteless, un-savorable one, which is why it cannot be swallowed. Still: there is something interesting, even fascinating about this method." (Flusser, n.d.) Fascinating indeed. Fusser has an uncanny predictive nature, in that he could be describing the use of large data sets by machine learning algorithms to create what is called 'artificial intelligence', which by the nature of human reification, pareidolia, and formalism we generally imagine are 'thinking' or 'alive'—even though many of the contemporary A.I. applications have barely passed the uncanny valley of mere reckoning. In many ways these 'futurizing machines' are simply the extension of the probability calculus that has been within the scientific method for centuries. But in the scientific method there is more epistemic humility, as Flusser points out, "Probability calculus tries to approach truth, and it admits that it can never reach it. It is a fiction which does not want to be one, but which admits it is one." (Flusser n.d.) An applied split between the archaic 'standing-on-tip-toes' posture using story instruments, like myth and metaphor; and Fictionalism which is similar to probability calculus which can use 'technical images' to approach 'programmable abstractions' from texts into images in hyper/trans media productions (e.g., print, theater, cinema, computer games) and admit that they can't fully reach them. Examples include clichés/archetypes in pop culture, blueprints in design/engineering, plotted big-data visualizations in computer science. These entertaining narratives, particularly those that evolve around digital production techniques as post-cinema, tend to mix surprise with

expected patterns, just like theatre and cinema. In this practice, these particular 'futurizing instruments' encourage curiosity in their readers (through texts) and audiences (through technical images) in moving-image media. In the realm of Computer Media, art and science are once again intertwined. Or put another way ""It goes without saying this whole discussion of suppositions has to do with the relationship with art and science." We can imagine this in another video teleplay based on Flusser's *Now Suppose*:

Run Time	Video	Audio
00:00	3D animations architectural blueprints which become models, which become façades of famous buildings in a synthwave aesthetic of….	MUSIC: low-key corporate electronic instrumental synth-pop raises and lowers as the NARRATOR speaks. SF/x: whooshes and electronic pans as elements on screen move.
00:05	A box appears over the left third of the landscape with a live-action narrator in hyper-modern art museum.	NARRATOR: …the relationship between art and science. Suppositions go on in the gray zone between art, (the realm of the false), and science, (the realm of the real). This distinction is of course utter nonsense. There can be no science without suppositions.
00:20	Another box appears over the right third of the screen with an animated version of Isaac Newton. A white flash transition to:	NARRATOR: Newton is wrong in saying: NEWTON (voice over) "hypotheses non fingo", NARRATOR: "I do not feign my suppositions". [pauses] What he means to say is that he is feigning probable suppositions. On the other hand, there can be no art without something real to start from.
00:30	Animated words: 'Science Fiction' 'Surrealism' 'Solidify the Gray Zone'	NARRATOR: There are three postures which one can assume if one inhabits the gray zone between art and science. [pauses] One may tend toward science, (like in science fiction). Or one may tend toward the improbable, (like in surrealism). Or one may try to pull art and science together, and thus solidify the gray zone.

| 00:45 | Animated words:

'Future'
'Adventure'

'Curiosity'

FADE TO BLACK | NARRATOR:
Another word for "future" is "adventure" …
[pauses]
…that what is coming. Therefore, curiosity is quite unlike commitment. Commitment is interested in the future for the sake of the present. Curiosity is interested in the future for the sake of adventure.

MUSIC: crescendos then fades. |
| 01:00 |
COMMERCIAL BREAK | COMMERCIAL Sound on Tape (SOT) |

In his essay *The Novel Called 'Science'*[2] Flusser returns to Isaac Newton as the last non-fictionalist, "Newton was still able to say that he did not invent his hypotheses freely. Such metaphysical faith in a concrete reality which sustains science has become untenable since Kant. But matters are even more pronounced at present. Science has become an abstract game with symbols which do not permit to ask what is their concrete 'ultimate' meaning." (Flusser, n.d.) This implication is that fictions can be equally as aesthetic as they can be scientific, especially after the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution(s). Vaihinger compares and contrasts these, "Æsthetic fictions serve the process of awakening within us certain uplifting or otherwise important feelings. Like the scientific, they are not an end in themselves but a means for the attainment of higher ends." (Vaihinger, 82) Like Flusser's 'Futurizing Instruments' they point outside themselves, regardless of whether they are scientific instruments, big-data algorithms, or an entertaining narrative in digital media.

Vaihinger also sees a tension, like Flusser's skepticism of 'Futurizing Instruments, "…in the case of æsthtic fictions…there has been a bitter conflict…as to the degree in which the imaginative faculty may deviate from nature, how far it must be imitative and how far freely creative." (Vaihinger, 82) But that does not insinuate that humanity should stop both using and evolving these technologies and techniques because, ""The real criterion as to how far such fictions are to be admitted into either field, and one which had always been adopted by good taste and logical tact alike, is simply the practical value of such fictions." (Vaihinger, 83)

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[2] See this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

The fantastic and archetypal narratives encoded into Computer Media (post-cinema) can serve as very effective 'Futurizing Instruments' even as they lead back towards the personal in the conductive magic of integrated electronic entertainment.

Magic / Ritual — Religion — Theater — Cinema / Television — Computer Media — Magic / Ritual

Here Flusser's *The Novel called 'Science'* runs parallel to the above suggested movement through the fantastic by way of fictionalism. Flusser wrote of similar phases in "The novel of science is an epic which unrolls against a changing back-ground, a travelogue from out of destiny, through causality, toward the realm of forms." (Flusser, n.d.) Like the movement from magical ritual and 'standing-on-tip-toes' analog future forecasting, into the digital 'finger-tips-at-terminal' all of these 'futurizing instruments' like the Internet and a digital entertainment culture — Flusser imagined. His *The Novel Called 'Science'* imagined the human practice of Science as divided into three chapters, where "each chapter has a specific meaning, its own 'universe of discourse'. The universe of the first chapter is one of purpose and destiny. The universe of the second chapter one of causality. The universe of the third is chapter one of structures" (Flusser, n.d.) The structures of these futurizing machines, these uncanny and marvelous devices lead us back to our scripted scenario where the reasons for writing and collecting the essays of *Now Suppose* are brought into view -- not unlike the probabilities that are scanned on the monitors themselves.

FADE IN:

[INT] [A HIGH-TECH SECRET GOVERNMENT FACILITY] — [NIGHT]

[THE MISSION COORDINATOR STANDS ABOVE THE CYBER SECURITY ANALYST THE LARGE MONITORS THAT STREAM CONSTANT VISUALIZATIONS OF DATA. ON SEVERAL OF THE SCREENS, WE STILL SEE THE TERRORIST A LARGE MACHINE GUN]

        [MISSION COORDINATOR] [CONFIDENTLY]

    Another word for "future" is "adventure",
        [PAUSES]

…that what is coming. Therefore, curiosity is quite un-
like commitment. Commitment is interested in the future
for the sake of the present. Curiosity is interested in
the future for the sake of adventure.

[CLIPBOARD WOMAN] [URGENTLY]

Which does not exclude, of course, that a terrorist may
not jump out from curiosity into the present. Which is
another way to say that curiosity is a manifestation of
that absurd knot of contradictions called "freedom".

[MISSION COORDINATOR] [URGENTLY]

Now suppose that this is the only possible way to serve
freedom in the present situation, where we have commit-
ted people on the one side, futurologists on the other
side, and a vast majority of indifferent people in the
middle.

[THE MISSION COORDINATOR LOOKS DIRECTLY INTO THE CAMERA, BREAKING
THE 4TH WALL AND ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCE DIRECTLY. AT THE SAME
TIME THE MONITORS AROUND HIM ALSO SHOW HIM DIRECTLY ADDRESSING
THE CYBER SECURITY ANALYSTS]

[MISSION COORDINATOR] [WRYLY]

If you can hold on to this supposition for the duration
of this reading, this essay has served its purpose.

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