Twitter Thread by Venkatesh Rao



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Reading my own old writing from 10+ years ago is rarely pleasant. It's not that the ideas and techniques are worse/embarrassing by current tastes (though they often are), but that they have a brash energy I can't vibe with anymore even where I can still stand by the content.

Most of that energy is not mine from a younger mindset personally (though there's some of that) but a function of the era. 2010 generally had more of a brash energy going. An energy born of a widespread sense of the world making more sense and humans being more agenty within it.

2007-13: Brash energy. The GFC bloodied our noses but we still felt in control of the plot collectively.

2014-20: Angry-anxious energy. Everybody lost the plot. Winners and losers alike. Great Weirding.

2021 - : Mellow sadder-and-wiser energy on macro, brrr energy on micro.

Opening mood for 2021 feels like how a figure skater spins faster by pulling in tighter. Narrower horizons, more concentrated energy, easy to mistake conservation of momentum effects for an absolute increase in system energy. Shows up in everything from stocks to writing.

Its tempting to retreat to narrow horizons with primarily happy domestic cozy energy (these are really good times for anything that taps into domestic-scale psyche energy). But even the happiest broader thoughts are alloyed with that mellow sadder-wiser plotlessness.

I truly get now the mood shift noted by Petrarch in Europe before/after the Black Death. Big psychohistorical turns can easily swamp personal life turns. I'm just 10 years older (36 —> 46) relative to 2007, but the world seems to have aged like 50 years. https://t.co/BZPXywlZJS

From Petrarch to Psychohistory

The term Dark Age was supposedly coined by the Italian poet, scholar, diplomat, and traveler Petrarch (1304-1368), to refer to the period between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance. He's apparently also considered Patient Zero of the Renaissance, in part due to his rediscovery of Cicero's letters (in many ways, the Renaissance was a mind-virus that infected Europe at around the same time as the Black Death). You can get a sense of the sort of guy he was from this bit from a letter he wrote to his friend Guido reminiscing about his time as a student in Bologna (from *Life of Petrarch*):

> More venturesome than I had been before, I went off with other students, on holidays, going so far afield that we often got back late at night. The city gates were usually wide open; and if they were shut it was no matter, for the confident city was surrounded not be a wall but by an old and decaying stockade, and one could get in anywhere… Things are very different there now: peace has given place to warfare, freedom to servitude, abundance to want, play to sorrow, singing to lamentation, and the dances of girls to bands of robbers.

2007 is when I started blogging, but coincidentally it was also the year I shifted fields from controls/aerospace (a moribund old economy sector at the time, though it has since undergone a renaissance) to web tech and began tapping into the Silicon Valley collective unconscious.

My writing from before 2007 (almost none of which is online anymore, thankfully... very cringe) was definitely very old world/old economy/east coast. I was 33 then, so basically the entire "energy profile" of my online writing is 33+. The first 33 years are thankfully dark ■

I think I stopped tapping into SV ley lines shortly after I published Breaking Smart S1 (the software eating world essays)... 2015 maybe? I still work in tech as far as consulting work goes (I'd guess ~50% of income is still SV) but it's no longer the spiritual Mecca it once was.

In a way it was a supernova that exploded. The heavy elements are streaming across the world. What's left behind is a very pretty nebula and a rapidly spinning neutron star. Still interesting to engage in other ways, but no longer the most vital source of writing-energy around.

I don’t think I’ve found alternative collective unconscious energies to tap into since 2015. I’ve become more self-sustaining/self-contained. Kinda like how space missions tend to switch from solar power to onboard nuclear power beyond Jupiter.

There are no big, public, external psyche energy sources now. Since SV went supernova (what was the precipitating event?) the world’s cultural energy landscape has become a lot more diffuse.

SV pre-2015 was pretty unique. It was a huge ball of solutionism fusion energy.

It’s still financially thriving and the deal-making goes on even more furiously, but it now more of a New York style financial energy. A superego/ego energy. Not the more id-like solutionist energy that is great for writers to tap into.

SV will remain a finically center for a long time. It’s been a century or more since New York and London went though similar phase transitions and they’re still citadels of high finance. Sandhill Road has merely joined the ranks of Wall Street and the London financial district.

Cultural energy landscapes go through cycles of being plugged into a late-stage supergiant stars versus being unplugged/out in the cold. You can see that reflected in writing. Lost Generation and Bloomsbury Set both show signs of a great unplugging from Robber Baron economy.

When big solutionist energy sources decline, cultural producers often try to tap into problemist energies instead — the energy fields around institutions built around big problems. This is almost always a mistake. You don’t get energized by such fields, you get captured by them.

The thing is, solutionist energy fields, like the one around Moore’s Law, feed you an abundance surplus. They don’t have an agenda for you because you’re too unimportant. So it’s free energy. You don’t have to toe the party line (of course there’s one) unless you actually buy it.

But Problemist energy fields... they have plans for you. They traffic in scarcity games around problems that need to be kept alive and managed to perpetuate the institutions. Cultural producers are more important in this scheme of things and their freedoms are reined in more.

To the extent there’s a literary-industrial complex (or cultural-industrial complex) around SV, it’s pretty laissez-faire. Any problems with your work, any cringe earnestness or hustleporn quality, is your own problem. Not the result of a party line.

By contrast Solutionist energy fields (like say the old economy one centered in New York)... boy do they come with strings attached. There are enforcers and gatekeepers and tastemakers and such at every bloody turn. This energy will destroy your soul if you draw on it too long.

Fall in line and produce by their recipes, they’ll love you. Violate any of a thousand subtle production norms, and they’ll turn on you. If you’re incompetent they’ll simply ignore you. If you violate their tastes but draw attention they claim, they will try to cut you down. Etc.

So in the absence of big solutionist energy fields, I strongly recommend you wander off into the desert on your own, without whatever energy source you can strap onto your back. If you accept problemist energy bargains you'll likely regret it.

Energy in this sense is some mix of inspiration, energizing ideological commitments etc. But money is a pretty good proxy for it. If you're a cultural producer, your money source is a pretty good proxy for your energy. So be careful and discerning in whose money you take.

Solutionist energy sources = laissez-faire cultural economy that can fail by producing tone-deaf smarmy cringe

Problemist energy sources = cultural command economy that can fail by producing overwrought incestuous taste-swamp slime

IMO It is easier to do good work in the former

Diffuse energy landscapes requiring self-contained energy sources... they can fail by being too self-absorbed and inscrutably idiosyncratic. Think mediocre autodidact tomes nobody reads or precious and self-important indie films nobody watches.

This is the great risk of the inward-turned domestic cozy place we're in now. It's going to be so easy and tempting to withdraw from broader cultural landscapes altogether and focus on "what sparks joy" a lot of people are going to do just that, and spend years producing dreck.

Staying plugged in beyond domestic walls will be fairly painful and energy-draining in the next decade, but if you can do it, it'll be like buying into a cultural options lottery. You'll have a shot at doing something that finds a place in a 2020s New Lost Generation canon.

To bring it back around to my own writing, despite a weird second wind for the Gervais principle, riding a second wind for The Office, I think 80% my old writing is no longer relevant. It's too 2010s. I was aiming for "timeless" at the time, but turns out there's no such thing.

Time, as it turns out, is too deeply woven into the fabric of reality for anything to escape it. At best you can hope for something to be periodically fashionable again, or worth resurrecting/transposing to new keys for new times. A classic is just a historical-seasonal fashion.