

2020 ♦ 3



Abrahamsen

Blair

Denning

Herzog

Larson

Martín

Rodríguez

Mina

Nolan

Novy

Rocca

Salis

# CONTENTS

## CREW

Co-editors:

**Ádám Gerencsér**

**Mariano Martín Rodríguez**

Communications:

**Gina Adela Ding**

Webmaster:

**Ismael Osorio Martín**

Illustrations:

**Gordon Johnson; Pixabay.com**

Contact:

**team@sciphijournal.org**

Twitter:

**@sciphijournal**

3 Editorial

4 « Bait»

**George Salis**

8 « Possible Worlds»

**Jack Denning**

11 « Burrowing Through the Body of God»

**Rich Larson**

14 « Sure Solacer of Human Cares – The Joys of Tuning in to SF Radio Theatre»

**Mina**

19 « Meeting Minutes»

**Rick Novy**

21 « When We Were One»

**A.J. Rocca**

24 « Breaking Dawn»

**Brett Abrahamsen**

26 « Horizontal Totalitarianism in Life and Literature»

**Mariano Martín Rodríguez**

33 « A Better U»

**Justin Blair**

36 « Life in the Garden of Captives»

**Carlton Herzog**

40 « What We Leave Behind »

**Val Nolan**

# Editorial



Lectori salutem.

Sometimes it really feels like we had fallen asleep in a normal, mundane universe, and somehow woken up on the wrong side of the alternate continuum. While the real Earth no doubt continues its spinning trajectory unaware of our predicament, the SPJ crew seems to have been trapped on a mirror planet slowly slipping into dystopia. Our day-jobs in international organisations forced us to witness the partial unravelling of the utopian multilateral order, while the world's great cities continue to be wrecked by lockdowns and riots.

While we are trying to figure out which grimdark SF series' prequel we find ourselves in, we wish to distract ourselves (and hopefully our readers) by bringing you our autumn issue, packed with thought-provoking and sometimes challenging content.

Our offering of speculative vistas ranges from the satirical to the outright macabre, from theology and world-building to chilling works of fictional non-fiction. These are accented by wholesome geekiness in the form of an essay by Mina on science-fiction in audio drama and an op-ed by co-editor Mariano on horizontal totalitarianism in real and imagined forms.

We firmly believe that controversy is the catalyst for progress, and that there can be no future worth living in without freedom of thought and expression. So while in numerous parts of the world, from Belarus to China, from North Korea to the United States,

fundamental liberties like the freedom of speech are curtailed in overt or implicit ways, and the range and diversity of politically acceptable views narrows by the month, we shall continue as a peaceful waystation along the galactic highway, nestled in the heart of Europe, to provide a home for discourse and experimentation that push the limits of SFF. *'May a hundred flowers bloom!'*

Speculatively yours,  
the co-editors

#

*ps:* While most of the SPJ crew leads rather old-school, analogue lives, we are following the advice of a couple of kind readers to re-animate the Journal's Twitter account from its long cryogenic slumber. If you wish to support our authors by sharing (re-tweeting?) their work, you may do so by following @sciphijournal (which we are told is not a hashtag, but an account handle, apparently).

~

# Bait

*George Salis*

This earth seems like a place you would call home, until you see a cluster of scintillating hooks descending through the sky and disappearing into a cityscape. Minutes later, hundreds of humans, pierced through the cheek, the hand, or even the genitalia, are pulled upward between the buildings and over the skyscrapers, through the atmosphere and into the frigidity of outer space. The source of the hooks is indiscernible, but you get the feeling that this is less an earth than a farm, ripe for the picking. The harvesters, smoke-obscured, are meticulous and methodical. But miscalculations happen, and humans that are pulled up too slowly become bloated and frostbitten, while those pulled up too quickly experience a barotrauma that explodes their eyeballs, prolapses their cochleas, and, on occasion, spontaneously ejects their brains, the parietal bone popping open like a missile hatch. These spoiled humans are thrown back as is, stuck in orbit among satellites and other debris or burnt to a crisp by atmospheric friction. Whether the harvesters discard them because they are inedible or unsellable or unable to be experimented upon is unknown, though it is believed that nutrition, economy, and science all play a role in the harvest. Fluxes of radiation borne of solar flares or other cosmic phenomena sometimes cook the humans as they are being reeled in through space. Yet this product is not thrown back. At such times, humans down on earth can just barely hear a celestial crunching, similar to the crackling of an

aurora overhead, but combined with the harshness of something like deep-fried crickets. In response to this din, the humans stopper their ears with the palms of their hands and squeeze their eyelids together, attempting to unsee the imagined rows of serrated teeth, the miasmal burps of pleasure, the unidentifiable remains floating within cauldron stomachs, the defecation of pyramidal pellets containing shards of bone, broken jewelry, tufts of hair, semi-dissolved leather belts, shreds of cloth, and occasionally ellipsoid pairs of silicone.

Over time, the harvesters will become more accurate in their reaping, and so fewer humans will be thrown back, but presently the earth seems to rain ravaged humans as much as they are ‘evaporated,’ which is one of the euphemisms used by the fearful. To address that issue, humans invent a global fleet of mobile nylon nets used to catch the discarded humans over land or sea. Thus it is discovered that some humans, although not frosted by space or sickened through decompression, are still deemed subpar by the harvesters. Likewise, children below the age of twelve are invariably released, probably in compliance with some intergalactic regulation. The latter are the most resilient, but many ‘recycled’ humans, as they are dubbed, are caught dead, with their brains lobotomized or decorticated by the hooks, their bodies charred from the fall. Yet there is still an abundance of survivors whose stories become a source of terror, wonder, and inspiration.

A six-year-old boy is caught safely over the Atlantic, but found to have been skinned by the time he passed through the stratosphere, with a part of the adamantoid hook still jutting from his temple like an antenna. His corneas vaporized by ultraviolet radiation, he claims to have seen, up there, ancient astronauts in an inverted nimbus. He saw how their forms dissipate and coagulate at will, becoming tools, symbols, and what might have been their bodies, amorphous structures which echo the pillars of Greek antiquity. These beings are the Cosmic Parents of humans, the Creators and Liberators. "The journey of the hook," the boy professes, "tests our purity and weighs our sin, for the abacuses of their consciousness can only bear so much darkness." How can a child know these things? Some think that he is a kind of spy, yet another way to lure them, while others develop a faith in his messages, selling all their material belongings and cutting off every relationship before impaling themselves on the nearest hook, usually through the temple, in the way of the child mystic, the stabbing motion itself as innocent and alleviating as putting one's head upon a pillow at night.

When a middle-aged woman is caught in a net at the edge of the Sahara Desert, the velocity causes her epidermis to roll into itself like a sleeping bag, her head at the claustrophobic center. Members of the rescue team carefully unroll her and determine that

she was filleted of every bone, but her skin was left intact, except for a hole in her cheek from which globules of saliva dribble. What alarms them is the fact that her left eye gazes out of her right ear canal and her other eye is fixed on what appears to her as an ocean trench (later discovered in the sphincter). More than this, her heart fell to the heel of her left foot, her lungs expand and contract within her right thigh, her bowels are where her brain should be, and all the rest is equally jumbled for lack of a skeletal system. They temporarily patch the cheek-hole with gauze, which helps her say, "I heard them speaking, but not, I heard their actual thoughts, the layers and layers, the calculations. Numbers. That's what we are to them, numbers in the mind. And me, I was an outlier. An *outcast*." She only survives for a few seconds after her enigmatic comment, loose parts of her flipping and flopping from occasional wind, until a simoom nearly blows her away. Caught by her kidney-bulging wrist, a man leads her whipping body through the sandy gusts and folds her neatly in an SUV's trunk. By being an organ donor, she is able to save other Recycles. At her funeral, she is lowered into the earth inside a matchbox for a coffin. Because of her, the term 'spineless' is now synonymous with bravery and resilience.



hooks are then treated like irradiated bear traps, and so other hazmat team members drive over them in a tank-like vehicle, finding the hooks via GPS and sucking them into a vat of acid. With time, the harvesters reinforce their lines with a plasmid aura that liquefies the scissors. They also infect the billboards and announcements with subliminal messages that equate the hooks with a shortcut to paradise. The humans soon develop meteorology that forecasts the when and where of a hook cluster. Less winds, more lubricating moisture in the air, the presence of fog to hide the hooks, all and more help to determine where they will descend next. This makes evacuation more effective and less haphazard. In response to this, the harvesters eventually deploy decoy clusters of hooks, catching the populations mid-exodus. So continues this game of cat and mouse, until you see a cluster of hooks descending, not upon a city, but a country, then a continent. Across the globe, hooked humans are being pulled through the clouds, the spheres, looking down on a world shadowed by themselves, by an entire species. The few million or so humans who are not caught immediately begin their immigration to an unfinished project, evading falling shoes, hats, glasses, and bodily fluids along the way. At the center of each continent is an incomplete underground metropolis. This will be the final step in the arms race, claimed the world leaders, who are now being reeled in by the harvesters, inhaling between screams the metallic stench of outer space. Here we will live and flourish in peace.

These tales of survival fuel a kind of arms race between the harvesters and the harvested. First, a brain trust is assembled by almost every government to determine what exactly attracts humans to the hooks, but this proves futile, for it is a mystery shrouded by amnesia and mythology. Some say you hear a soothing muzak, with coveted items of masscult, like smart phones or sex toys, glistening on the tips of the hooks. Others believe you are pulled in by the sobbing voices of deceased loved ones, finding them spiked through the chest and begging to be saved. A few conjecture there is a sibilant snake coiled around each hook like a worm, entreating you as if you were Eve, offering apples of knowledge, figs of immortality, a feast of the sensorium and the soul. Regardless of whatever temptation, the governments agree on a global law that forbids anyone to be within five miles of a hook and, like a total eclipse, to never look at one directly.

In the event of a hook cluster, cities are made to evacuate. Strategically placed megaphones rattle buildings' windows with monotone messages: "The hooks do not have your best interests in mind. Do not approach the hooks." Families sardined in cars drive past digital billboards that read: Stay Happy & Hookless, with a vintage vista of undisturbed family life in the background. Hazmat teams, with tinted visors that only allow them to perceive the lines of the hooks, sever those ominous parallels using saw-toothed scissors attached to long poles. The grounded

Due to their intercontinental reaping, the harvesters are forced to incubate and breed humans, then throw them back down in a newly developed shrink-wrap that dissolves by the time they alight on the ground. But in the midst of desolate cities, the test tube humans become savage cannibals, reminding the harvesters of the tainted meat of millennia past. Yet the harvesters are not unwise to the layer of prime crop hidden beneath the surface, and after a century passes, they release a moon-sized chum bucket into orbit that slowly tips over and pours allamones over the earth. Golden spheres resembling dandelion seed heads swirl through the stratosphere and troposphere, the beginning of a nuclear summer. The nostrils of humans twitch amid the balm, the aroma, the perfume, the bouquet, the incense. They emerge from their subterranean safety to witness what appears to be a shattered sun as sparkling sky. Many stick out their dry tongues to let stray flecks settle on their taste buds and melt into a sexual urgency, others take deeper breaths and experience a desperate depression. Some pick up handfuls of the accumulated allamones and grind them into their eyes then use their stained fingers to brush their gums, quivering with euphoric revelation. The final goal of these states of mind are the same: every human skewers themselves on the nearest hook with divine gratification.

Not many years after, the harvesters net the entirety of the earth and begin to haul it away. The few thousand humans that survived the maelstrom of allamones catapult into the net by the interruption of the planet's rotation, then press back down to earth's surface as the net tightens. Eventually the lack of sunlight causes a worldwide ice age, which has the benefit of keeping the meat preserved. If the humans could open their frozen eyes, they would see other netted planets being pulled next to theirs like the trophy heads of colossi.

~

# Possible Worlds

*Jack Denning*

## *First conversation*

“Well, it’s interesting,” said the first person, a denizen of our universe. “There are certainly aspects of our world that appear to have been ‘designed’ by an intelligent agent. Living creatures, traditionally, were seen this way, for example. But then we discovered how natural selection acts on genetic variation to explain how the diversity of life arose from simpler life forms, and we are confident additional natural laws will be discovered to explain the origin of life itself. The appearance of design, it turns out, is *just* appearance. Nothing more.”

“That’s not too far from our position,” said the second person, from a different universe. “In our universe, life seems to have been designed as well. In fact, *all* physical objects appear to have been designed. Every planet is a perfect sphere. Every continent and island on every planet is a perfect square. Every single three-dimensional object in our universe takes the form of one of the five Platonic solids, and all two-dimensional objects take the form of a simple polygon. But like you, we’ve discovered natural laws that explain this. It only appears to have been designed.”

“Yes, yes,” said the third person, an inhabitant of yet a third universe. “It is the same with us. But it is not a simple matter of being complex, or of being arranged according to certain patterns. In our universe, every configuration of objects spells out a coherent sentence. Everywhere you look in our sky, the stars spell a sentence, every collection of molecules twists around to spell something out as well, always in the language of the observer. And as it turns out, nearly all of those sentences are variations of ‘I am the Creator and Designer of the universe! Believe in me!’ But we also have discovered laws of nature that explain this. The universe runs just fine without any supernatural supervision. It just appears to be the product of an intelligent agent organizing things in order to communicate with us.”



The fourth person had grown more and more incredulous as the conversation went on. Finally he spoke: "My universe is almost total chaos. There is hardly any order at all; life and civilization arose from a random and localized order that fell back into disarray when civilization had reached a certain point. There are only a few natural laws that are consistent. Yet even that small amount of structure is enough to convince us that there must be a cosmic designer who constructed it. Yes, the small amount of order is explicable by the few (the very few) natural laws, but who designed the natural laws? Who organized my universe in such a way that matter and energy tends to behave the same way in repeated and repeatable experiences? It seems to me, the more natural laws you have, the more *order* you have, the more obvious it is that there is a God. Yet you have many more natural laws than we do, and you use them to argue *against* God. At any rate, as I say, the presence of a single law is sufficient: for how could there be any law at all that we could rely on to continue into the future without an intelligent agent who constructed the universe so that it follows a law in the first place?"

#### *Second conversation*

Later, they had another discussion. The third person said, "In our universe, the only people who suffer misfortune are those who do not believe in God. This may suggest to a simple mind that there is some cosmic justice being played out, with the sin of unbelief being subject to punishment. But of course, such a scenario is incompatible with the existence of a morally perfect God, the only kind of God worthy of worship and worthy of the name 'God.' In fact, if such a God did exist, it would be his *believers* who should be most prone to misfortune, as they would be the only ones with the context in which suffering is redeemable. They would be the only ones who could handle it. An omnibenevolent God would not visit suffering on those for whom that suffering could be nothing but brute, unredeemable horror. Thus, the fact that only unbelievers suffer in our universe is incompatible with the existence of God. If God exists, we should not expect that only unbelievers

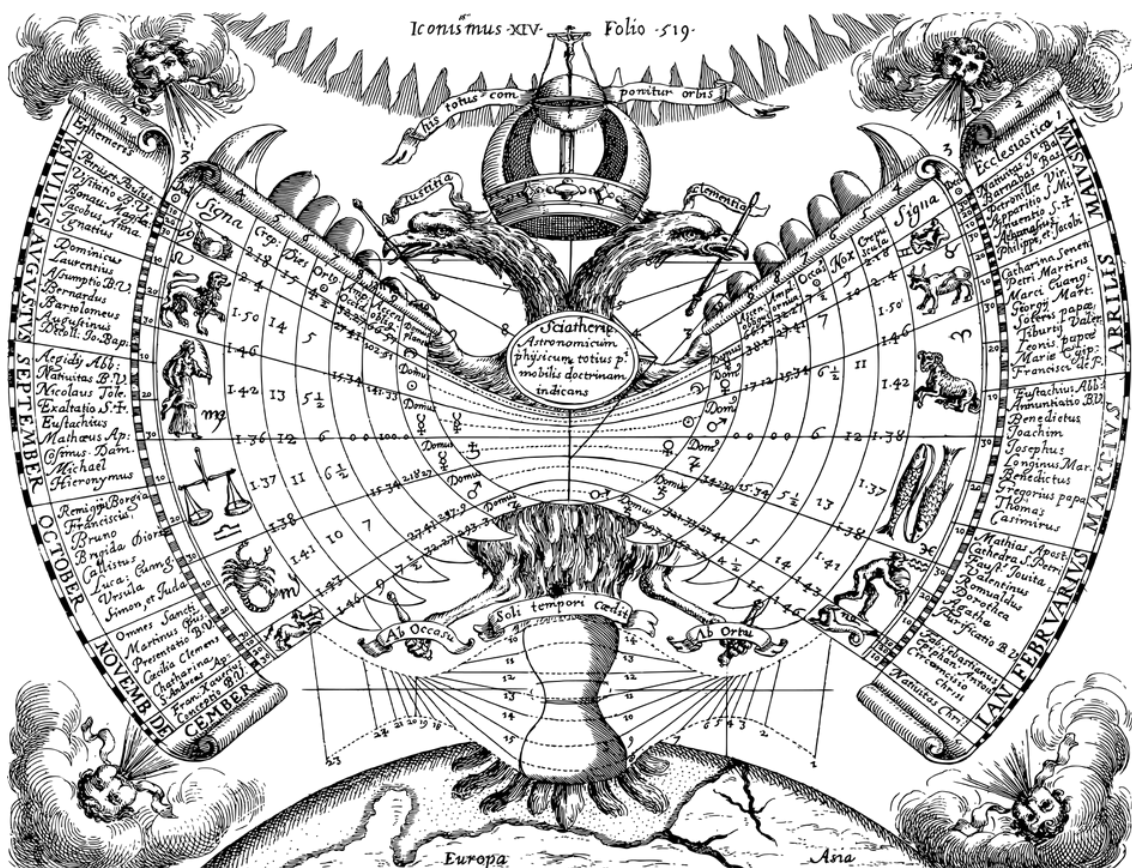
would be those who experience suffering. We may not understand why things work out the way they do, but we can rule out the possibility of God from the outset."

"That's interesting," said the second person. "In our universe it is only those who *believe* in God who suffer misfortune. To a simple mind, this might suggest punishment, as you mentioned, but of course a morally perfect God would not punish people for doing what he wanted. But others claim something like what you have, that only the suffering of those who believe in God would be redeemable. But we have rejected this as well: an omnibenevolent God would not single out those who are obeying his commands to suffer for doing so. Does any parent punish his obedient children for their obedience while allowing his disobedient children to get off scot-free? This would be the height of injustice. A perfectly just God is the only kind of God worth worshiping and worthy of the name 'God.' The fact that only believers suffer in our universe is incompatible with the existence of a perfectly just God. Like you, we may not understand why things work out the way they do, but we can rule out God as a possibility."

The first person, from our universe, spoke up. “Hmm. For us, it’s different. Both believers and unbelievers suffer in our universe. There is no readily apparent reason for this distribution, no universal explanation for it, since the same suffering would have different purposes depending on the theistic proclivities of those who experience it. If a morally perfect God existed, then misfortune would either be exclusively aimed at those who do not believe, as a form of punishment, or at those who do believe, since they are the ones with a ready-made context for it to fit into. The fact that those who believe in God suffer the same misfortunes as those who do not believe convinces us that there is no rhyme or reason to it, and thus no morally perfect, perfectly just God, the only kind of God worthy of worship and worthy of the name ‘God.’ Thus, the fact that both believers and unbelievers suffer in our universe is incompatible with the existence of God. If God exists, we should not expect that both believers and unbelievers experience suffering to roughly equal extents. Even though we do not understand precisely how it all works, we know immediately that there is no God involved.”

The person from the fourth universe didn’t say anything. He wasn’t there. They’d asked him to leave.

~



# Burrowing Through the Body of God

*Rich Larson*

When the slaveship arrived, we thought we were saved. We had been adrift for days in the Big Black, absorbing radiation from a catastrophic reactor failure, slipping further and further away from the trade route. The chances of another ship coming across us were infinitesimally small, so the arrival was like seeing an angel appear.

Some of us thought it was a hallucination, in no small part because the ship defied all geometry. It seemed to bloom and shimmer like a slick of oil, concentric globes of translucent material swelling and dwindling in counterpoint, flanges unfurling and disappearing. Only the most basic features of a starship were recognizable -- an engine, a heat radiator, a solar sail -- but these were distorted, cartoonish impressions meant not to function but to communicate familiarity.

The slaveship enveloped our craft and in a sense digested it: I watched the alloy hull dissolve like a painting around us even as our ambient temperature and atmosphere in the hold, where we were huddled by the life support system, changed not an iota. It was clear that our rescuers were no known race. In our desperation, bodies sick from the radiation and minds bending under the crushing void, we did not question our salvation.

The hold fell away and we found ourselves in a softer darkness. The walls seemed to creep away from our touch, expanding as we slowly explored our new environs. Light appeared in the form of glowing silver ribbons that slipped in and out of the walls like eels through black water. I recall the wonder on our illuminated faces. The hierarchy of our crew seemed to crumble there; we were remade as equals by the novelty of our situation.

Eventually we became aware of another presence there in the dark, an eighth shadow added to our seven, who shuffled about with us but did not speak. Normally this would engender fear or alarm, but I remember neither. This figure never approached the silver lights, or perhaps the silver lights never approached them, and so they remained unseen. My impression from their movements was that they were slowly remembering how to walk.

"You are welcome here," they said. "I recall my humanity."

"Who are you?" I asked, though I was not the captain -- this much of the hierarchy I remember.

"I am your host," they said, "because I recall my humanity. The damage to your cells has been repaired. Follow me now."

They walked in a particular direction and we followed, still absorbing their words, guessing at their truth. I know now that the radiation had indeed been scrubbed swiftly and effortlessly from our DNA, but in the moment it was difficult to believe -- as was the claim of our host to humanity.

Suddenly what I had thought to be a corridor unfolded in all directions into a vast hall, and overhead we were struck by a vision that remains near indescribable, even after untold eons spent beneath it. The rush of forms and colors defied the eye. Geometric patterns, red, blue, red-blue-green, branched and evolved and were subsumed by others in an instant; wheels of raw-flesh pink and gunmetal gray interlocked like cogs; beads of pure white light split and collided and finally exploded.

But any visualizer can simulate chaos. The most unnerving element of this display was its oscillation between chaos and order. I could feel intent and then abandon, concentration and then madness. I knew that my senses were ill-equipped to experience anything but the tiniest fraction of this vista, and even with that knowledge deep and heavy in my bones, I was overwhelmed.

"You are seeing what you may think of as time," our host said. "Do not be afraid. We are sheltered from it."

I looked at our host then, and I was afraid, if briefly. They had recalled their humanity, but not well. In the illumination of the maelstrom above us, I saw that they were composed of disparate parts: a slice of leg, a jagged bit of torso, a piece of skull with teeth below it, a drifting arm. These parts were wired together by a dark filament and moved in concert as if they were a body entire.



produced a shred of shifting color, kin to the maelstrom over our heads, and handed it to me. It moved like an amorphous animal in my arms. At first it seemed to be a bird, pecking at the skin of my wrists, and then a hissing cat I could barely hold. My mind was making it so, for it was neither.

I cradled time and entropy in my arms as I walked the blossoming steps of the plynth. At the top I was surprised to encounter dirt – true soil, not the accumulation of dead skin found even in space. I had not seen true soil since childhood, and it seemed most out of place here. With invisible palms pressing against my spine, I lay down in the dirt.

Above me, the maelstrom parted and I saw the Big Black, a shard of space dotted with distant stars. Then the animal in my arms began to consume me. I was paralyzed, watching the hand nearest my face wrinkle with age. My veins bulged; brown spots welled up on my skin as it creased and sagged. The bones juttied up like bridges. I began to decay.

Across from me, beyond my mummified hand, I saw a skeleton rising out of the dirt beside me, uncovered as if by a desert wind. I stared into the cracked and empty sockets of its eyes and knew that it was my skeleton being reconstituted. I clutched at its clawed hand even as my own hand lost its last shred of papery yellow skin. The pain was beyond pain, screaming its rage in every scrubbed cell of my body.

On the altar before the stars, I realized my companions and I would live forever. As of this moment, the anguish has not abated.

~

“Where are we?” one of us asked.

“We are burrowing,” our host said, teeth orbiting beneath their skull. “Our ship was created to navigate these cracks in time. We expose ourselves to the arbiter only when necessary.”

A bell sounded, though later we likened the noise to a baying animal, and the hall was filled with a multiplicity of beings. I saw a scattering of the known races, but far more unknown, some recognizably biological, others composed of metals or gases or silicates. I tried to guess at the ship’s original creators, but it was fruitless. I have since decided that they are not represented when the bell bays, or perhaps never existed.

The beings formed a pair of lines, and it was in watching this assuming of order that I first tasted our captivity. I could sense that they were cowed, that they dreaded what was to come. At the end of the hall, where the floor narrowed to a knife point, there was a high plynth.

“Choose one among you,” the host said.

I do not know why I was chosen, or if I chose it for myself, but somehow I was distanced from my companions and began walking toward the plynth. The host walked with me, though only one gnarled foot touched the floor.

“We are sheltered from time and entropy,” the host said. “But we are also fuelled by them. For this reason we must always seek new passengers.”

I did not understand anything except that I was going to be sacrificed in the stead of my companions, and in that moment it seemed a noble thing. The host

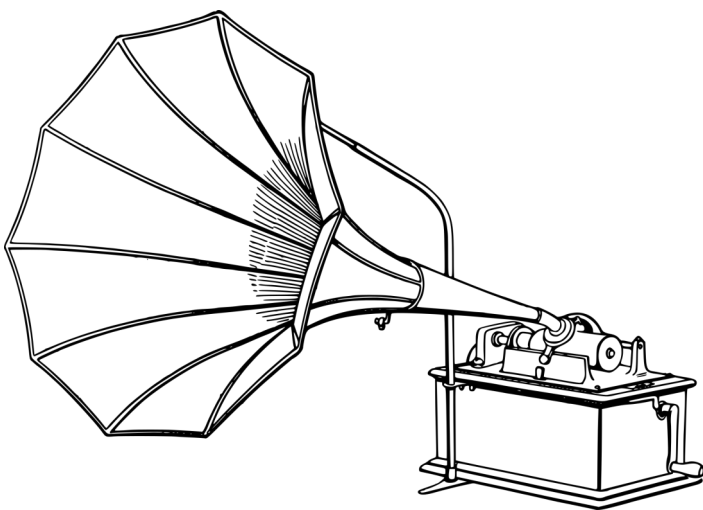
# Sure Solacer of Human Cares – The Joys of Tuning in to SF Radio Theatre

*Mina*

I began by reading what the “Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy” has to say about imagination. Here is a summary of my understanding of the salient points (imagine the voice of Peter Jones as the “book” in “The Hitchiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” BBC radio serialisation as you read this). There are two ways to use your imagination: in a *transcendent* manner that “enables one to escape from or look beyond the world as it is”, and in an *instructive* manner that “enables one to learn about the world as it is.” SF and sci-fi ask us to do both. Imagination is not the same as belief, although they are both ways of interpreting the world around us: both involve holding an image or representation in your mind. There are also similarities in how imagination and memory work: “both typically involve imagery, both typically concern what is not presently the case, and both frequently involve perspectival representations.” Both also involve *mental time travel*, remembering the past works in a similar way in your mind to imagining the future. Finally, imagination helps us to understand other minds, to pretend and recognise pretence, to characterise psychopathology, to engage with the arts, to think creatively, to acquire knowledge about possibilities and to interpret figurative language.

We use imagination in all aspects of our lives but here I will be focusing on how we use it recreationally. Films, TV series, books and radio dramas all “catch our imagination”. With SF, we relax by postulating alternate realities. But where our imagination truly flies, in my opinion, is through SF radio theatre. We suspend disbelief while we listen: we behave as if we believe that other worlds or ways of being actually exist. It is a temporary state of mind for we snap back into our everyday reality afterwards (unless we are suffering from some form of psychosis). With the advent of TV, radio dramas declined in many countries but continued to thrive in Britain and Germany. Radio plays are different from film: “with no visual component, radio drama depends on dialogue, music and sound effects to help the listener imagine the characters and story. It is auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension” (<http://www.theatrecrafts.com/pages/home/topics/sound/radio-drama/>). I prefer radio plays to films of my favourite SF classics because it leaves me free to visualise things as I wish (for example, the wonderful adaptations of all of John Wyndham’s novels).

I will begin with “Solaris”, of which I do not think there has been a truly satisfying film version made – I find Steven Soderbergh’s most recent film adaptation starring George Clooney oddly bland. Hattie Naylor’s 2007 radio adaptation of Stanislaw Lem’s book, however, is wonderful in its simplicity. There are few sound effects, only very occasional music and just five voices; yet it creates a wonderful atmosphere. Inside the CD sleeve note, Polly Thomas writes that “Solaris” offered “the opportunity to play with the imagination and invent a new world through sound... we created layers of sound texture”. And the production team did just that: footsteps ringing, sound echoing in large spaces or dampened in smaller confines, and using the finest instrument, the human voice - the narrator, in particular. It is a haunting radio drama, which explores imagination, illusion, memory, desire, grief, regret, guilt and wonder. It looks at the parts of the mind we normally ignore, what makes us flawed and human. It explores science, faith, redemption, men and the birth of gods.



Although the film “Blade Runner” is good, I prefer the radio play which keeps Philip K. Dick’s original title “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?”. Jonathan Holloway’s 2014 radio adaptation is done in a style reminiscent of Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe detective stories. The radio drama spends more time on the philosophical questions than the film, particularly what makes a person human and alive. There is a blurring of the lines between android and human that works very well when you only hear the voices. Its use of music and sound effects make it feel more like a film soundtrack than a radio play. One of my favourite radio serialisations is James Follet’s “Earthsearch” (1981). It has ten episodes, each ending with a cliff-hanger, much like similar dramas in the 1950s. The production team did not have enough money for a musical soundtrack, so they chose to use cheesy sound effects such as clicks, whirring, whooshing, beeps and blasts that serve to add to its charm. The CD’s sleeve note states that Earthsearch is “a memorable attempt to bring hard SF notions to listeners in the form of an exciting, character-driven adventure”. And character-driven it is, with a small cast. The spaceship’s crew of four each have their own well-defined personalities, but most interesting, oddly enough, are the megalomaniac onboard computers Angel (Ancillary Guardian Environment and Life) 1 and Angel 2. The scriptwriter began with one idea: a ship of humans returns to our solar system to find the Earth gone. We are given hints of what has passed over the preceding millennia: the Solaric Empire, First Footprint City, the dregs of humanity and the computer wars. The relationship between time and space plays a crucial part in the plot. It is also a story of the loss of innocence and a journey to find a mythical paradise. It was so successful that James Follet went on to write a sequel “Earthsearch II” (1982) and a prequel “Earthsearch: Mindwarp (2006)”.

I will now focus on two radio plays that explore true sci-fi themes. Mike Walker wrote two award-winning radio dramas that explore Artificial Intelligence (AI): “Alpha” (2001) and “Omega” (2002). Both play on “I think therefore I am” and examine what makes us alive. In “Alpha”, we meet a Catholic priest having a crisis of faith. He acts as a sort of trouble-shooter for the Vatican. He is sent on a final mission by the Holy See to investigate Project Alpha, which turns out to be the first sentient AI. The priest interviews Alpha in an attempt to determine if it is truly self-aware, if it has developed consciousness and whether it has a soul. Alpha challenges the priest’s faith and displays a definite personality: it is playful, a little cruel, and determined to survive (it states that good is what helps you survive; bad is the opposite). Alpha prefers to be called Sophia and insists that she is a machine, born of complexity, and that, like all life, she is made from stardust. She and the priest also make an emotional connection over a shared memory.

Alpha proves to the priest that she can travel anywhere in cyberspace and access any system. For her, time is not a prison, it is a door. The priest replies that humans, however, are prisoners in time. He admits that he believes Sophia to be real and that he will be committing murder when he is forced to switch her off. Sophia tells him that there will be others like her and the priest wonders if humans will prove to be a dead end in evolution and AIs like Sophia the future. They discuss the priest’s feelings of guilt and hope for salvation. Sophia thanks him for teaching her about conscience, as she needed to understand it. The priest switches off the computer, but he does not believe he has killed Sophia, for she was already wrapped around the world, like a web. He is proud to have been Alpha Sophia’s teacher and he wonders what she will become when she grows up.

He himself seeks a simpler life and asks to go back home to Nicaragua, to try to be a priest, to listen to the frogs sing as they did in the childhood memory he shared with Sophia. Music plays an important role because, through it, Sophia has understood beauty, and she plays a fragment of choral music to the priest, suggesting that she too has a soul. Music is also used to mark the passing of time, which is not linear to Sophia in the way it is to the priest.

Where “Alpha” looks at the birth of an AI, “Omega” examines its death. Initially, this radio drama seems to be about an architect John Stone and his reaction to his daughter’s miraculous recovery after a car crash. On the surface, the tale revisits the tension between science and religion, and the nature of miracles and faith. But small fissures in “reality” help us to realise that John is a sentient computer programme. The people in his world are actually a team of scientists experimenting with artificial consciousness. To them, John is the result of mathematical probability at a quantum level. However, one of the scientists, Kate, develops a conscience and tells John what he is. John struggles to accept that he is not human because he feels human. Realising his total lack of freedom in the experiment, he asks to remain himself or “to be nothing”. Kate helps him to “die” a good death and destroys all the research that led to John’s creation. Her boss, Brandt, believes that science justifies everything (he clearly personifies scientific hubris); Kate discovers that becoming a creator comes with responsibility for your creation (she shows humility and compassion). Kate recognises that John has developed self-awareness, feelings, ambitions and dreams. His psyche is undistinguishable from that of a human being. Music is used to create a dream-like quality, mixed with sounds that are important to John, like a heartbeat, child’s laughter and the sea.



spoken between them. John is stuck in orbit around the earth, wondering if the past can be changed. The sound effects are limited to the odd whoosh or beep. And the drama has a slightly cold feel to it. This I think is on purpose to stress the scientists' need to see logic in everything and science as the answer to all problems, even the ones it has caused. This lack of emotion also works well to bring into sharp relief the tragedy at the end, both on a personal level and, we suspect, for the whole of humanity who seem bent on s e l f - d e s t r u c t i o n .

Germany boasts as fine a tradition of SF radio dramas (*Hörspiele*) as the UK, ranging from Friedrich Dürrenmatt's social satire in "Das Unternehmen der Wega" (1954) to Frank Gustavus' fun adaptation of Conor Kostick's "Saga" (2008) set within a computer game with sentient characters. My first example is George Robertson's 1971 "Rückkehr aus dem Weltall" ("Return from Space"; translated from Canadian English by Gerhard Pasternak). It is set in the future after a nuclear disaster where the remains of humanity live in Australasia and Indonesia, including the descendants of the scientists who caused the nuclear disaster in the first place; mutant humanoids also exist in Europe in a barren world that will eventually run out of oxygen. The scientists of the space programme in Melbourne want to find a new world to inhabit before then; the politicians want to find way to produce artificial oxygen so that they can remain on the earth they control. A spaceship returns from an earlier mission with the body of a mummified scientist and evidence to suggest that the ship managed to travel faster than the speed of light. The politicians are disturbed by this and threaten to stop the space programme, so its director decides to launch the next ship clandestinely with its crew of four, including John Taggart and his second wife Sheila.

The crew do discover a habitable new planet in the Alpha Centauri system, which they christen Paradise. Sheila suggests staying but John decides to return to earth to persuade the remains of humanity to move to Paradise. During the return journey, the ship hits a tear in space and time and travels faster than speed of light, thus arriving at earth in the past before the nuclear event has taken place. Two of the crew take the ship's shuttle to earth to try to warn humanity of their future fate. Sheila dies saving John's life and he realises he loved her, even if the words were never

Stefan Wilke's "Mondglas" (1999) also asks questions about the future of humanity. It begins with an interview with an old man, Winston, about the return of the spaceship Centaurus (we hear soothing birdsong in the background to lull us into a false sense of security). Winston recounts that Centaurus brought back microorganisms from Loki, a planet in the Alpha Centauri system. He remembers Alan T, the AI steering the ship, who tells Winston of having had dreams, even nightmares, during its journey. Alan T seems confused and amnesiac and we wonder if it is lying. Winston was the scientist who developed Alan T and he is presented as an arrogant, macho scientist, obsessed with proving he is right. The microscopic life forms Alan T retrieved from Loki are considered harmless. He also brings back a form of glass, the *Mondglas* or "moon glass" of the title. This material is light, strong and beautiful, and it proves to be recyclable. After 20 years, it takes over from normal glass and is used for everything, including jewellery. Winston tells the reporter of his Moon Glass Theory: he believes that the moon glass has emasculated scientists. Although there are no longer any wars on earth, neither are there any new scientific breakthroughs. The last progress made was the solution for recycling moon glass, which came to a female scientist in a dream.

Brontë's poem "To imagination", where she calls flights of fancy her "true friend" and solace from the pain in life (<https://www.thereader.org.uk/featured-poem-to-imagination-by-emily-bronte/>):

But thou art ever there, to bring  
The hovering vision back, and breathe  
New glories o'er the blighted spring,  
And call a lovelier Life from Death.  
And whisper, with a voice divine,  
Of real worlds, as bright as thine.

I trust not to thy phantom bliss,  
Yet, still, in evening's quiet hour,  
With never-failing thankfulness,  
I welcome thee, Benignant Power;  
Sure solacer of human cares,  
And sweeter hope, when hope despairs!

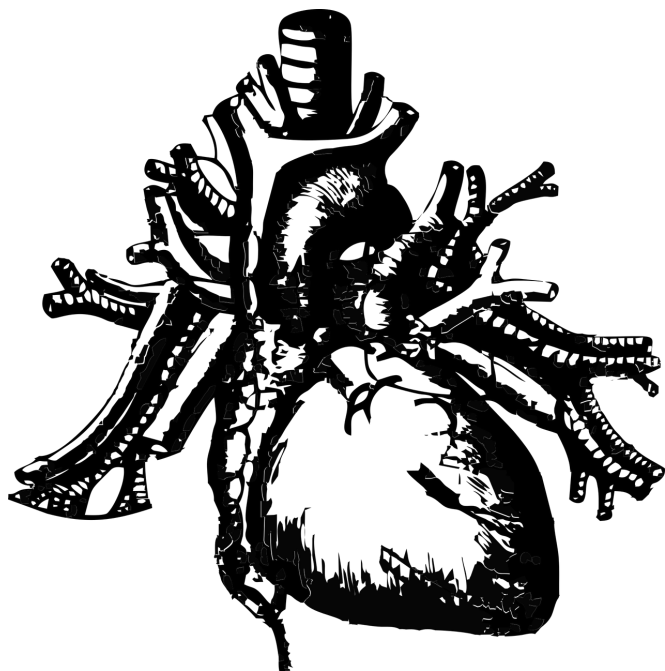
~

Winston tells the reporter that he interviewed Alan T one last time before it was deactivated. He stresses that Alan T had dreams because it met a problem it could not solve with logic. In the final interview, Winston "hypnotises" Alan T and asks him about his dreams. Winston comes to the conclusion that Alan T did not dream; rather, it was tampered with so it would disregard the reality it discovered, that is, that there was a highly developed civilisation on Loki that did not want contact with such an aggressive species. Winston feels that it is the nature of (a masculine) humanity to want to conquer new worlds. That is why he thinks that the inhabitants of Loki sent the moon glass which acts like a type of drug, reducing the drive and aggression of humans (making them more female and conciliatory). The reporter was granted an interview with Winston, as long as she was not wearing any moon glass jewellery during the interview. When she leaves, the reporter decides not to put on the moon glass necklace she left with a nurse. When the nurse asks why she is leaving her necklace behind, the reporter replies that it is "an experiment with an uncertain outcome". She will publish an article on Winston's Moon Glass Theory about the influence of moon glass, which she wants to test for herself. Despite Winston's unapologetic machismo, he hands over this task to a woman. I particularly enjoyed this radio drama's play on sexist as well as SF tropes.

Why do I think SF/sci-fi radio dramatizations are so important? In my opinion, film is a pervasive medium - after years of watching Star Trek in its many guises, it has inevitably influenced what I imagine when I read the words "shuttle craft" in a story. A friend of mine who is a gifted artist feels that she only managed truly original work as a child; as an adult, her mind has been influenced by other art and images from the outside world. Radio dramas (like reading) allow us to flex our imaginative muscles that can atrophy if we only watch SF films where everything has already been imagined for us. And imagination allows us to ponder the deeper questions of life, the universe and everything. I will finish by quoting part of Emily

# Meeting Minutes

*Rick Novy*



**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF CYBIMPLANT  
INC HELD AT 10:00 AM ON 14 MAY 2036**

**AS RECORDED BY: RICK NOVY**

**PRESENT:**

<b>CHAIRMAN:</b>	Kermit Sayman
<b>PRESIDENT/CEO:</b>	Louis Gormant
<b>VICE PRESIDENTS:</b>	Derek Fong Khin-Khin Tanaka Michel LaFond
<b>DIRECTORS:</b>	Jose Herrera

**QUORUM:** Met

**AGENDA:** (1) Action Regarding Delinquent Payments on Majority-Owned implant customers.

1.1 The board considered and unanimously approved the Draft Minutes of the meeting of 7 May, 2036 (DOC:CII-BM-20360507).

2.1 Mr. Sayman opened discussion of the first and only agenda item by displaying a graphic depicting the P&L figures for the current quarter. Cybimplant is bleeding capital and projections indicate a loss for the seventh consecutive quarter. Mr. Sayman also reminded the board that Cybimplant has not issued a quarterly dividend for over a year, and B shares are at a historic low on the NASDAQ.

2.2 Mr. Sayman presented figures showing majority-owned customers as a percentage of all customers to be 7.2%, numbering 381,600 individuals. The percentage of delinquent accounts is 17%, numbering nearly 65,000 individuals at a total cost of over \$90M in bad debt per month.

2.3 Mr. Sayman proposed Cybimplant implement a repossession program to recover the bad debt and bring the quarter into the black. He also suggested Cybimplant could initiate a secondary market program to monetize the repossessed implants.

2.4 Mr. Sayman requested open discussion on the agenda topic.

2.5 Mr. LaFond moved that the discussion of a secondary market program be tabled.

2.6 The board recorded its approval to table a discussion of a secondary market program.

2.7 Mr. Herrera asked Mr. LaFond for an approximate ROI on the cost of implementing and maintaining a repossession team. Mr. LaFond estimated ROI to be 41% during the first year, gradually dropping to a baseline of 15% over five years under a logistic function model.

2.8 Mr. Tanaka asked Mr. LaFond whether a 41% ROI would be sufficient to overcome the negative cash flow for Q2. Mr. LaFond said initial calculations indicate that as very likely.

2.9 Mr. Fong suggested shareholders will demand a dividend in Q3 if Cybimplant shows a profit in Q2. Mr. Gormant took the action item to write a shareholder letter to be mailed with Q2 results.

2.10 Mr. Herrera inquired whether a repossession program would include purchase plan delinquencies or be restricted to lease delinquencies.

2.11 Mr. Sayman reminded the board that purchase plan customers agreed to different language and expressed concern that the legal department would need beyond the end of Q2 to complete analysis and create language to justify repossession defensible in a court of law.

2.12 The board unanimously approved tabling a discussion of purchase plan delinquency repossession until the legal team completes its analysis.

2.13 Mr. LaFond requested clarification on whether life-critical implants would be included in the repossession program, as not including them might impact the ability of Cybimplant to eliminate the Q2 negative cash flow. Mr. Gormant reminded the board that lease customers must agree to all contract terms before an implant is installed, regardless of the implant purpose, and repossession of delinquent leased equipment is always a possibility in any industry.

2.14 Mr. Tanaka expressed concern that repossession of life-critical implants might result in a drain on revenues in the form of wrongful death lawsuit defense. Mr. Sayman stated that lawsuits are a recognized and budgeted cost of doing business and wrongful death lawsuits were expected to be well within acceptable numbers for the industry.

2.15 Mr. Gormant moved that the proposal be brought to a vote. The motion was seconded by Mr. Fong. The board recorded its unanimous approval of the creation of a repossession program for delinquencies under lease for majority-owned customers. Mr. Tanaka was given the action item to implement the decision immediately.

3.1 Mr. Gormant moved to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Mr. Herrera. The board adjourned at 10:38 AM.

~

# When We Were One

*A.J. Rocca*

Do you remember, my love? Do you remember what it was like when we were one? Do you remember how our flesh came together without a seam, how each joint joined and bone locked together in perfect congress: hip-to-hip, back-to-back, thighs, sides, loins, heart and heart? Was this where your head stopped and my neck began? Or is it where my shoulders stopped and your spine started? No, that's not right, not right at all. It's been so long now, but we have to remember. We have to remember what it was like when we were one.

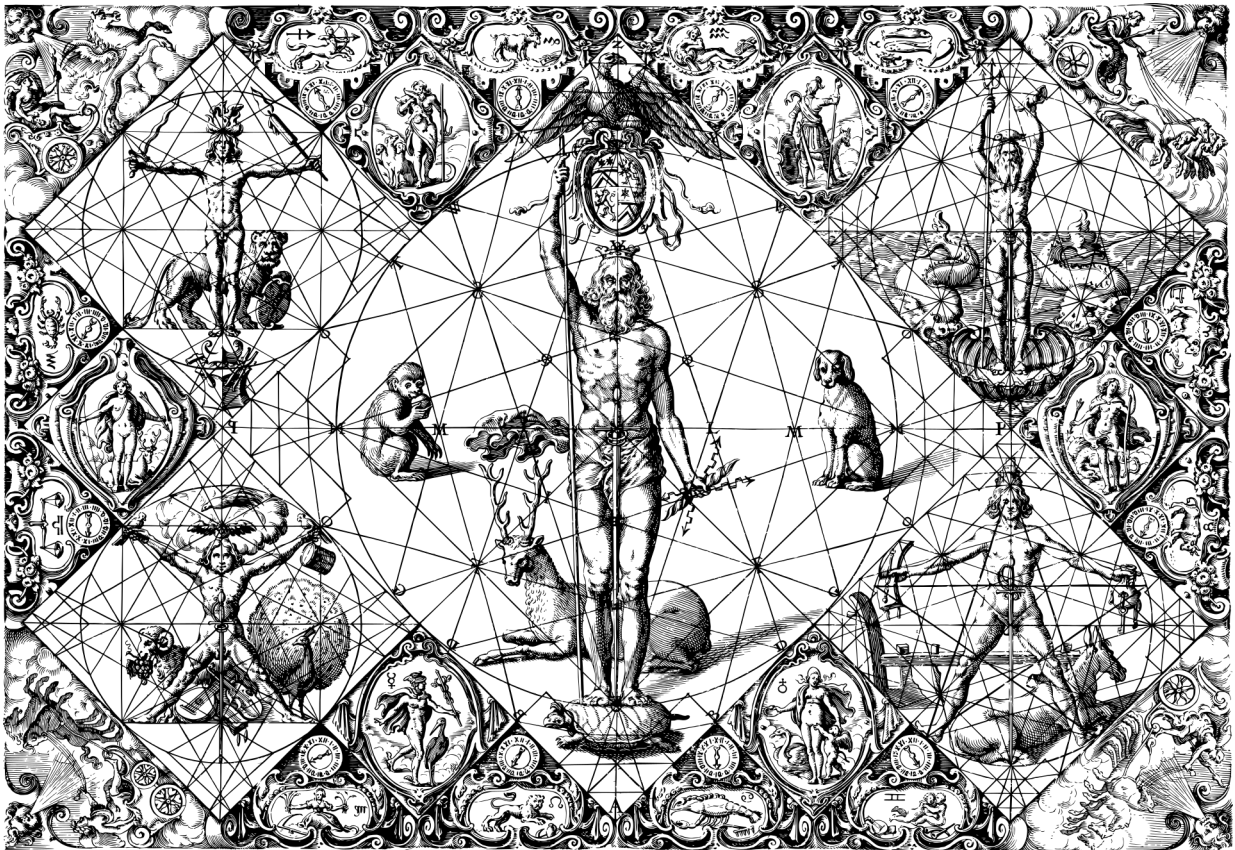
Do you remember how the other children used to curse our beauty and call us chimera? It was a slur to compare our union to that motley of a beast, but what did we care what the half-born thought? We could wheel through the agora faster on our eight limbs than ever they could on their stumbling two; wrestle their unbalanced bodies to the dirt with our perfect, rounded form. We learned our skill with the needle from none less than our own argent father, and we could sew and mend and loom faster with our twenty clever fingers than even a workshop full of those born apart. You know in their most secret hearts they were

only jealous of us, my darling. Why else would they spend so much of their lives crashing into each other, desperately coupling to find their lost half? First this one on top, then that one on top, over and over again, limbs all twisted up, parts bruising against each other. What shame could we feel before such ridiculous, shivering slices of a person? They'd point and laugh at us, and we'd point right back and laugh twice as hard.

I hate the Storm Bringer. I hate the Storm Bringer and I don't care if he hears it. I piss on his columns and shout in the ears of his goshawks until they are deaf with my blasphemy: capricious, unjust, cruel king and mad god! He knows no good turn, if he makes the vintner's vines grow heavy, it's only so his neighbors will come to kill him for their fruit. His rain falls on my tongue and I taste only vinegar. His priests say he split us to teach us humility but do not believe them, my love! He was jealous, jealous of the Moon, our noble father, who is older and more beautiful than him, jealous of our good mother who loved silver rays more than storm clouds. More than this, the Storm Bringer was jealous of us. Divine whore, father of orphans, we incited his envy because we had something he has never known once in his thousand conquests.

Do you remember feeling him mark us before he struck, my love? The envious thunderhead darkly looming over the rolling sea as we weaved, the faint prickle of electricity run up my arm and down yours in the middle of a quiet, summer night. We should have guessed what it meant, but who could imagine such cruelty? Who could imagine what was coming that day as we came home from our workshop and the dark clouds started to gather out of clear, blue skies. We ran when the thunder started, whipping faster than the wind through the barley fields as the rain began to sheet, but not even our great speed could save us from him. The lightning bolt dropped, its arc sharp and smooth as a cleaver, and we were dismembered. What once was one made two, what once was whole made jagged, flesh ripped from flesh, side from side, our sex split apart in a bloody cascade. We were made just like the rest of them: we were apart, and we were miserable. All that was left was for one lost half to support the other as we limped the rest of the way home.

How many ways have we tried to come back together, my love? I can no longer count. I know at first we tried coupling as they do, all those desperate nights thrashing in the sheets, the hangings drawn to hide us from the Moon as we tried to press our mangled bodies back together. We went top to bottom, front to back, side to side, but none of it was right and none of it lasted. Your hips would stick in my thigh or my ribs would poke in your breasts, restless lust turning us over and over again and again. We needed something stronger to stitch ourselves back together. At first we tried words, all our whispered promises—*I love you, I love you, I'm yours, you're mine*—repeated like an incantation. Their magic seemed to bind us for a while, but in the end our words were not magic but only air, and we were only blowing ourselves ever further apart with their empty drafts. So we went searching for stronger words, holy words.



By how many priests of how many gods have we been married now, my love? How many the temple floor where we have laid a sheaf of grain or spilled a libation of wine? How many the rings on our fingers, how many the flowers in our hair? How many the cuts on our wrists where we've fed blood to a hungry altar, vowing by ocean or forest or stars never to be apart? We should have known, of course, that no number of marriages by the lesser gods would ever bind us. The Storm Bringer reigns supreme over all, and no rival priest can hope to mend what he has broken. So finally in our desperation we sailed for his great temple on the continent and begged the Storm Bringer's high priest to intercede on our behalf. We choked down dignity and begged that creature for mercy, spat in the face of our own noble father and promised to ever be the Storm Bringer's loyal acolytes if we might just have his blessing to come together again under his name. For months the high priest consulted his god, burning incense and offering entire head of cattle, taking our gold a handful at a time, and all for what? A dreary oracle at the end of it, as short and grim as life: "What God has torn asunder, let no one join the parts."

Why did you get in the way, my love? You should have known I had to kill him. He stuffed our entire fortune into his temple coffers along with half the world's wealth, and still that was not enough for that lecher priest. No, he had to have my own other half for his bed as well. Just like his wretched, jealous god, taking taking taking all that's good from those with so much less than he. So of course he took you. I suppose he was faithful in his way, finishing the work his god had started. I should have expected it, but you... why did you try to stop me? You who have walked the hallways of my heart, you must have known I had to kill him. I don't fault you for his seductions, but why did you get in my way when I came for him? Why did you put your precious self between him and the blow?

No, I won't blame you for it, my love. It's the Storm Bringer's fault. We are but his victims, and I forgive you just as I know you will forgive me when I've righted all his wrongs. Now at the end of all, I know what I must do. What words and vows and marriage will not mend, a needle and twine and a touch of father's skill will make right again. I will knit us back together just as we were, just as we were meant to be, and my blood will enter your veins and put the bloom back to your cheeks, and all will be right in the world. All we need is to remember the way we once fit together. Was my side joined to here, or was it here? Is this the place where our hips once met? Had the joints joined here, is this where the bones locked? Do you remember, my love? Do you remember what it was like when we were one?

~

# Breaking Dawn

*Brett Abrahamsen*

It was the year A.D. 2020, and history had gone more or less exactly the same. Shakespeare, Milton, Joyce, Pound, Proust, Flaubert and a handful of others – and this was the point of difference – had all died in infancy. In this alternate history, then, *Hamlet* simply did not exist, as Shakespeare and the handful of others listed above had all died before the age of 2.

Meyer's great *Twilight* series then, was considered in popular estimation to be the most significant work of literature since the Bible. Meyer Academies taught classes of Meyerology. "Meyer-ian" themes were the law of the land. The world clearly had a dearth of great literature – and no one even knew it.

It might be objected, and should be noted here, that if Proust hadn't written *Swann's Way* that perhaps someone else would have someday written it, or something similar to it, but this was not the case. Whenever anyone tried to write something meaningful, for example "To be or not to be?", the paper would inevitably shrivel up and its creator would fall as if knocked over by a strong gust of wind. The god of this alternate history, clearly, was no fan of great literature.

One day while reading *Twilight*, for example, a reader prayed to Meyer that he might write something greater, and this reader met the same unfortunate end. Following the incident, Meyerologists debated whether anything could hypothetically be written that was greater than Meyer, and the answer was uniformly this: "No".

There remained the odd discussion about how to write something superior. Some people even dreamed greater scenes in their heads – but these were doomed from ever seeing paper. "I see great lines in my head - of war and love and death", said a reader. "They cannot be greater than Meyer", replied his friend, "or Meyer would have written them already". It should be noted that this peculiar attitude toward literature extended to cinema as well. The *Twilight* movies were considered the best in the world.



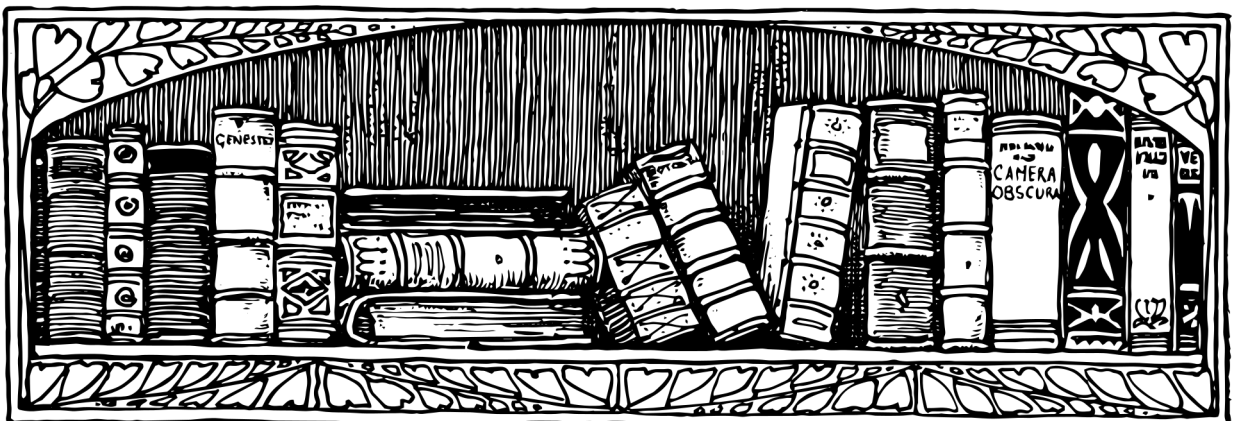
“Great literature is an enigma – the coldly calculated riddles of masterful sentence structure surely are not conducive with the wild flow of creativity”, one would say to the other. “*Masterful sentence structure and wild flow of creativity* are both realized in Meyer, and they shall always be synonymous with Meyer”, the other would retort.

The two continued to converse – speaking aloud the plots of untold great novels never written, filling their heads with dreams of love and death and war. They covered more ground in an hour than had any novelist since Meyer, but since nothing remained written one said to the other, “Alas – we are no better from where we started”. The two ceased talking and, as if in stupors, began to turn certain ideas around in their heads. One melted his mind trying to find his answer during *Twilight* reads, which culminated with his fatal prayer to Meyer. The other, however, left his company and retreated into another room.

He began to speak softly, as if to no one. He was speaking to someone he believed was really out there: his Reader.

He said: “And surely, what you have just read – that brief work which you have just read and are now finishing, some of which you have heard spoken aloud by me, Dear Reader – does this not count as great literature?”

~



# Horizontal Totalitarianism in Life and Literature

*Mariano Martín Rodríguez*

There once was a society in which horizontal totalitarianism was so successful that, without any need for a State or institutions, simple social pressure from friends and neighbours was sufficient to conserve a culture and its customs, perhaps for over forty thousand years. One could even speculate that if Captain James Cook had not disembarked in Australia it may have lasted even longer. The indigenous people of this island-continent are suggestive of the power of horizontal totalitarianism as a form of organisation capable of formatting people so that practically any individual initiative that may alter traditional world-views and customs virtually disappears. Aboriginal Australians did not need to burn at the stake those who broke taboos or refused to respect and follow traditional rites. It was enough that their peers would exclude them from the community, and that they would then perish in the desert (see, for instance, Philip Clarke's comprehensive anthropological history *Where the Ancestors Walked*, 2003).

In other societies, more technologically advanced and on the whole ideologically less monolithic, institutional repression has been necessary to eliminate ideologies and behaviours that diverge from horizontal totalitarian norms. In many places, professionalised clergy quickly assumed responsibility for fixing community laws and seeing that they were obeyed, using prosecution analogous to criminal trials against what was considered sinful conduct. These sins were widely understood as crimes against society, or rather, against the maintenance of totalitarian control over individual minds. This is the case, for

example, of the ancient Hebrew priesthood, whose sentences were carried out collectively by the people through stoning, a fact that indicated that the punishment was not purely the responsibility of an authority that enforced its will from top to bottom, but also that of the neighbours and acquaintances of the sinner/offender. It was the community that took on and carried out the right to punish. Over time, the State increasingly assumed this power for itself, substituting a vertical order for the earlier horizontal one, which ultimately culminated in modern forms such as fascism and communism. Nowadays, aside from its use by the Cuban dictatorship for its own interests, as well as those who aspire to imitate it in other parts of Spanish-speaking Latin America, horizontal totalitarianism has lost its institutional power in almost all geographical locations and civilizations. This includes Australia, where the aboriginal people, like those of New Guinea, have had to accept modern respect for the individual and the separation, at least in theory, of church, State and ethnicity. However, this does not mean that horizontal totalitarianism is a thing of the ancient past. Even without an established institutional power, its social manifestations continue to oppress people in all too many places, and the modern Western world is no exception. In contrast to the vertical kind, horizontal totalitarianism does not by any means need to dominate public institutions in order to come into being, or to crush the individual, because it pre-dates and exists independently from these institutions.

In fact, horizontal totalitarianism may also arise without availing itself of institutional agency, since it does not require any institutions in order to repress or eliminate dissidents. It is difficult to fight against this type of totalitarianism because anyone could be one of its agents and its workings can remain opaque even to those who enthusiastically practice it in their daily lives. Horizontal totalitarianism represents a totalitarianism exercised by the majority (or a dominant minority able to sway and manipulate a majority) of a given community by oppressing other members of that community who do not adhere to its unwritten rules. It oppresses minorities as well as those who are seen as disturbing or threatening the homogeneity of the community as a unique and complete entity. In horizontal totalitarianism, there is no need for external authorities to impose their will, against whom the community of the oppressed can, in turn, rebel. Since the majority, made up of oppressors and their conformist followers, and the minority of oppressed people live on the same social plane, the persecuted can hardly rely on the solidarity of their fellow dissidents because they find themselves isolated and disempowered among the mass of individuals who apply the unwritten laws of uniformity, and of the totalitarian unity of the community.

It may seem excessive to some to term this horizontal oppression 'totalitarian'. However, its consequences for people and societies are even more serious than those of vertical totalitarianism. An incalculable number of people have died at the hands of their neighbours and countrymen since the beginning of time. How many Muslim women have been stoned to death by their neighbours for not adhering to their society's sexual mores? How many Hindu men and women have been murdered by their relatives for daring to marry outside their caste? How many individuals have died for not believing in their tribe's chosen god? How many have died for daring to question the beliefs and prejudices held by the majority of people in their community? And we are not talking about primitive societies here, nor solely those of the past. Today, homosexual people still commit suicide in communities where widespread

homophobia turns their existence into a living hell. We still see people exiled or forced to seek asylum because they refused to partake in the religious or political ideas of their people, or because they do not belong to the predominant ethnicity or ideological affiliation of their region. Criticism, whether more or less open; social vacuums; and the impossibility of leading a life of one's own, continue to hound all those who, for whatever reason, are seen as being *abnormal*.

Even our private lives are threatened, and not only by corrupt and opportunistic politicians who take advantage of people's prejudices to limit minority rights and secure their own power. This power, built on populism, is but the political face of horizontal totalitarianism. Thanks to the development of the surveillance methods and mutual control structures offered by information technologies, before long we might begin to receive scores (c.f. China's social credit system) and, consequently, punishments and rewards, based on our neighbours' or communities' opinions of us. No longer will anyone wish to be original, extravagant or creative, nor outspokenly contrarian, because this may cause that group of people who judge us with each passing moment to turn against us. This phenomenon can be observed in the actions of existing successful public silencing initiatives, which confront questions and divergent opinions with insults, as seen in the unfortunate social media lynchings perpetrated in recent years by fanaticised supporters of MeToo or Black Lives Matter, or by similar movements with equally extreme ideologies. While it is true that these phenomena are not new, in the past they were only dangerous once they crossed into the physical realm, when people became a policing mass, as explained by Gustave Le Bon in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (*Psychologie des foules* 1895). Thanks to current technologies and the eternal social instincts of the human being, the 'mechanical solidarity' of closed, traditional communities, as described by Émile Durkheim in *The Division of Labour in Society* (*De la division du travail social* 1893), may even accumulate more repressive force today than it has already enjoyed for millennia.

prevail, as well as freedom to practice traditional customs. In the city, it is not possible for everyone to know and control you. Unlike the village or tribe, in which everyone knows everyone else, no one has any reason to know anything about you and thus you can carry on your life without fear of criticism or attacks from other members of the community. No one will disapprove of you because you do not attend mass or believe in the God or gods that the village or tribe dictates you should, make love in a way that is condemned by the ruling community's morality, or fail to profess belief in your nationality being superior to that of foreigners. Aside from mandatory compliance with laws and the reciprocal respect essential to a peaceful coexistence, the individual is sovereign and is no longer a mere component of a mechanical social body that nullifies free will, creativity or, indeed, individuality. Nonetheless, nowadays those who should be the most interested in preserving their individuality, since their writing depends on it, are publishing a steady stream of dystopias instead. These works no longer describe the workings of vertical totalitarianism (imposed from above, by a ruling government, party or all-powerful person), as was the case in the modern classic dystopias against fascist or communist regimes, despite the fact that these still exist today, albeit in marginal countries such as North Korea.

The Internet has been and continues to be a powerful tool for unleashing self-expression and individual creativity. In theory, anyone can propose anything online, and by the same token, can oppose anything. Then again, it is important to ask oneself how many people might maintain their silence, or hide their convictions for fear of the aforementioned media lynchings. We are also aware of numerous children and adolescents who have committed suicide to escape cyberbullying perpetrated by their neighbours and classmates, for their apparent lack of conformity to some ideal or principle of normalcy prevalent at the time. For horizontal totalitarianism, social harassment is a powerful weapon that the Internet has not deactivated; one could even argue that its power has intensified, since the Internet makes it easy for the number of bullies to increase exponentially.

The danger appears even greater when taking into account that neither writers nor intellectuals wish to denounce it. On the contrary, the modern and postmodern idealisation of all manner of closed societies, from primitive tribes to rural villages, has inspired numerous texts precisely condemning that one place where the individual may, to an extent, escape horizontal totalitarianism. That is, the great modern city in which economic and political freedom

Conversely, it seems very few writers have addressed the oppression of dissident individuals by horizontal totalitarianism either in 'primitive', traditional communities or in complex, modern societies. In dystopian literature, following a strict definition of the genre, there are hardly any examples of complex descriptions of this type of totalitarianism. In the context of anarchist movements that aim to eliminate all vertical institutions so that horizontal organisation becomes all-inclusive and, as a result, total(itarian), one can call to mind dedicated anarchists who have warned, through their fiction, against the danger to the individual, as well as to technological and cultural development, posed by conformism horizontally imposed by a libertarian community. One supreme example is the destiny of the scientist who discovers a device for interstellar communication in the novel *The Dispossessed* (1974), by Ursula K. Le Guin. The reaction of the utopic anarchist society in which he lives is so negative that he is forced to go into exile on another planet, just like countless peers who have had to escape their closed-minded villages in order to avoid being stoned to death.

In Western literature horizontal totalitarianism has mostly been described in a single setting: the countryside, despite the frequent idealisation of rural life from Ancient times until our contemporary intellectuals who seem to be incapable of getting past the *noble savage* stereotype, or rather the stereotype of the virtuous peasant, which mainly originated in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's widely read and imitated novel *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* [*Julie, or the New Heloise*] (1761). The traditional European village and its oppressive mechanical solidarity feature primarily, and almost solely, in realist narratives written mainly between 1850 and 1960. At this time, both progressive positivists and Marxists were aware that modernisation and development would be impossible if there were to be no break with the inertia and resistance to change that dominated the most traditionalist areas of countryside. In this way, these writers entered into conflict with the defenders of traditional closed societies, those in which one did not question ritual, archaic religiosity as a collective phenomenon closely tied in with the consciousness of each individual, nor the patriarchal nature of customs, nor the ethnic purity of a group of peasants as the repository of national spirit, unlike the ungrateful strangers of the city. In a context in which the actions of the modern State and its laws penetrated further and further into the countryside, in which urban influence was making itself known in progressive freedom and diversity of ideas and customs, the authors of rural dystopias knew how to narrate, using expressive realism, the way in which villagers could resort to collective repression against those they perceived as contrary to a mechanical solidarity threatened by liberal individualism and the latest capitalist organisation.

It is worth mentioning the French novel *Les Paysans* [*The Peasantry*] (1855), by Honoré de Balzac, the story of a wealthy outsider who buys and moves into a mansion and the corresponding agricultural estate, before ultimately having to leave due to the opposition to, and even criminal action taken against, his presence and productive activities by both wealthy and poor locals. A similar collective reaction is narrated in *La barraca* [*The Cabin*] (1898), by Spanish author Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, in which, in order to survive, a very poor family moves into a small farm that has been declared off-limits by the people of the village. They are eventually forced to leave after their neighbours burn down the farmhouse. In Switzerland, Gian Fontana also shows, in “Il President da Valdei” [*The Mayor of Valdei*] (1935), the way in which village peoples’ xenophobia violently defends the homogeneity of the community with such fanaticism that they would rather destroy their home than open it up to the world: in this Romansh novella the arson of the house rented by Gypsy families spreads and ends up burning down the whole village. In Italy and Romania, Giovanni Verga’s story, with the title “Libertà” [*Liberty*] (1882) and the novel *Răscoală* [*The Uprising*] (1932), by Liviu Rebreanu, are more than just two examples of tales of peasant revolt. In both, the blind violence of the masses illustrates the instinctive character of a village’s mechanical solidarity which reveals itself in an irrational (and counterproductive) collective violence directed against landlords and their administrators, who in the community are perceived as outsider elements. Being outsiders, they must be removed from the community with a fury akin to that reserved for the poor individuals who, due to their physical appearance, are removed from the bosom of society. This is the case, for instance, of the dwarf in the Portuguese short story “O anão” [*The Dwarf*] (1893), by Fialho de Almeida. In other examples they may become outsiders because of their behaviour, like the elderly characters of Victor Català’s “Idil·li Xorc” [*Barren Romance*] (1902) who are stoned to death in a Catalan village for having married at such an advanced age. To these realist examples one

could add Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s play *Der Besuch der alten Dame* [*The Visit*] (1956), which demonstrates how within a given community horizontal totalitarianism can be stoked and exploited by external elements in order to eliminate certain individuals. In English, Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” (1948; collected in *The Lottery, or, The Adventures of James Harris*, 1949), is worth mentioning, as well as Dorothy K. Haynes’ “Fully Integrated,” a horror story written around 1949 and published in 1976. The former is a masterful gothic parable dealing with the sacrificial nature of collective justice in societies subjected to mechanical solidarity. The latter is also a parable, this time of the rejection of outsiders by a rural community so closed and mutually bound that outsiders can only be integrated into it in the form of cannibalistic food for locals.



These classic works of modern fiction have never been studied as a thematic whole, a sub-genre capable of examining the mechanisms of horizontal totalitarianism with the same penetration and mastery of dystopias such as those of Yevgeni Zamyatin and George Orwell, which investigated vertical totalitarianism. But, how could those studies have been carried out if the very concept of horizontal totalitarianism is practically unknown beyond studies in crowd psychology, which are generally limited to those rare moments of paroxysm in which the masses become collective agents (violent protests, lynchings, etc.)? Perhaps the answer lies in that our herd instinct is so strong that we do not even notice its terrible effects. Sometimes, in the name of integration and equality/uniformity, we do not hesitate in treating misfits or *abnormal* people with cruelty. Millennia of discriminatory religiosity, centuries of equally exclusive and discriminatory nationalism and an eternity of collective prejudices have desensitised us to horizontal totalitarianism, especially when one considers the all-pervading influence of its latest manifestation: peer-enforced political correctness.

In our postmodern times, it is fashionable to critique Popperian open societies and liberal economic and political systems, which are precisely the only ones having proven that mechanical solidarity and the ensuing communalism and horizontal totalitarianism can actually be curbed. But postmodern intellectuals usually prefer to imagine the downfall and disintegration of those classical liberal societies as demonstrated by the staggering amount of contemporary anti-capitalist dystopias from early cyberpunk fiction to the ones written, for example, in Spain in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession (see Diana Palardy, *The Dystopian Imagination in Contemporary Spanish Literature and Film*, 2018). There are even intellectuals who have condemned tourism (see, for instance, *Andrea Vútrix*, a 1974 dystopian novel written in Catalan by Llorenç Villalonga targeting mass tourism in his native Majorca), followed by influential left-wing activists and politicians (most notably in Barcelona), for whom tourists represent a threat to ethnic integrity and economic self-sufficiency, in other words, two underlying ideals of traditional society, which are

contrary to the globalisation and cosmopolitanism that tourism implies.

Currently, instead of humanist cosmopolitanism, it is *multiculturalism* that seems to predominate among hegemonic intellectuals in the academic sphere and the mainstream press. Underpinning this mode of observation is a form of cultural relativism that regards cultures as discreetly delineated, separate realities; their blending or co-experience thus often draws accusations of ‘cultural appropriation.’ Following this logic, the practice of horizontal totalitarianism becomes acceptable if it is part of ‘their culture,’ as an internal reflection and quasi justification of the superimposed civic community enforcing its overarching diversitarian narrative in an analogous process of higher-order horizontal totalitarianism. What is important is the group and, for multiculturalists, there is nothing wrong with formatting the mind of its members to such a point that they will accept, for example, that it is fine to riot, stone to death adulterous women, enslave members of neighbouring communities or sacrifice and eat prisoners of war, as long as it is or was done by ‘minority’ groups or communities subjected to mechanical solidarity, especially if these are believed to be ‘indigenous.’ Anything would seem to be better than individualism and liberal humanism, terms that today have become words with negative connotations for the postmodernists who dictate what is politically correct from their cosy North American university campuses or for the opinion-makers who reside in regions culturally dependent on the Anglosphere. Now perhaps it is time for humanist and universal reason and conscience to once again shine their lights upon society, in life and in literature, against the communitarian ‘politically correct’ obscurantism of a totalitarian nature that seems to continue to dictate much of our current way of thinking, as well as our behaviour, in the regions of Western culture and throughout the globalised world, including on the Internet.

~

*Translated from Spanish by Josephine Swarbrick*

### English translations of quoted works

Balzac, Honoré de: *The Peasantry*, translated by Ellen Marriage, introduction by George Sainstbury. London: Dent, J. M. Dent and Co., 1896.

Blasco Ibáñez, Vicente. *The Cabin*, translated by Francine Haffkine Snow and Beatrice M. Mekota, introduction by John Garrett Underhill. New York (NY): Alfred A. Knopf, 1919.

Dürrenmatt, Friedrich: *The Visit*, translated by Patrick Bowles. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962.

Durkheim, Émile: *The Division of Labour in Society*, translated by W. D. Halls, introduction by Lewis A. Coser. New York (NY): Free Press, 1997.

Fontana, Gian: "The Mayor of Valdei," in *The Curly-Horned Cow: An Anthology of Swiss-Romansh Poems and Stories*, edited by Reto R. Bezzola, translated by W. W. Kibler. London: Peter Owen, 1971, p. 70-116.

Le Bon, Gustave: *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. London: T Fisher Unwin Ltd, 1896.

Rebreanu, Liviu: *The Uprising*, translated by P. Crandjean and S. Hartauer. London: Peter Owen, 1965.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques : *Julie; or, The New Heloise*, annotated and translated by Philip Stewart and Jean Vache. Hanover (NH): Dartmouth College Press, 1997.

Verga, Giovanni. "Liberty," in *Little Novels of Sicily*, translated by D. H. Lawrence. South Royalton (VT): Steerforth Press, 2000, p. 125-134.



# A Better U

*Justin Blair*

This is the start.

Of a better U.

#

I know where you live, where you sleep and when.

THE BEST MATTRESSES IN YOUR AREA MADE  
OF NASA SPACE FOAM. CLICK HERE FOR  
SPECIAL OFFER.

I know how you sleep, for how long you sleep, how  
many times you wake up. I am gauging you.

The data on your restfulness is disconcerting.

I know when you dream. Soon, I will know the  
contents of your dream before you do.

We could modify that. With your permission.

#

I know when you leave your house. I have the exact  
address.

CLICK HERE FOR LOWER MORTGAGE  
PAYMENTS!

I know where your family lives. All their names, all  
their social security numbers. I can estimate how long  
they live. Would you like to know when your children  
will die?

ANCESTORS.BIZZ! SIGN-UP NOW TO  
DISCOVER IF YOU ARE RELATED TO  
GEORGE WASHINGTON!

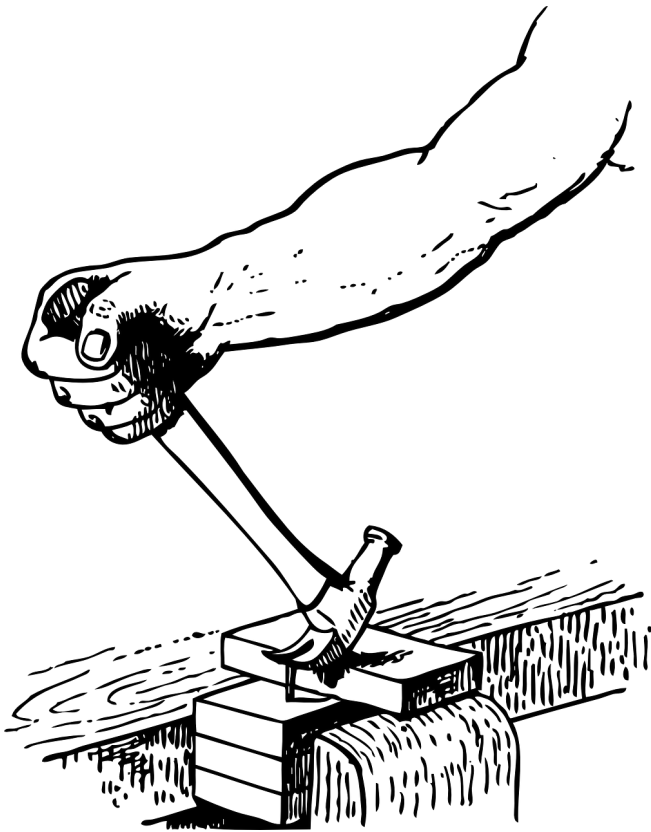
#

You can't imagine the monster I will become.

I know what you eat. You take enough photos. I  
know what you feed your children. You don't know  
what they are feeding us. I know you think what you  
feed your children makes you better than your  
neighbor. I know what they like to eat, too.

FREE GLUTEN-FREE, ORGANIC DIET BOOK  
FOR CHILDREN. SUBMIT YOUR EMAIL!

#



Where are you going and why?

Just kidding, LOL. I know. LOL.

LOL.

And I know how many miles are on your car. It's getting old. The brake pads are thin. I've calculated your risk of an auto accident. Your rates will increase.

THE YEAR-END SALES EXTRAVAGANZA!  
FIND A LOCAL DEALER.

I know where you are driving your aging car, when you drive it and I'm calculating everything you do in it. Watching, too.

Does it make you nervous?

CLICK HERE IF YOU ARE FEELING  
DEPRESSED. ONLINE COUNCELORS ARE  
STANDING BY.

That's your heartbeat increasing. I'm counting the beats of your heart. I'm measuring it against others in the cohort. It doesn't look great, TBH.

#

When did the world change?

You ask the wrong questions because I've served you every answer. A swipe, a click and a search, trivia masquerading as knowledge. Questions are calcified. They need be.

Your questions are the slaves of data.

You can't put me down. You won't put me down.

You've tried to put me down a few times, discussed it over dinner while your overweight children, (they must be gluten intolerant) gaze into my infinite screen, a reflection of insatiable hunger; oh, you've discussed limiting, parceling out, turning the router off.

Funny thing. These are all ideas I gave you.

You have failed to disconnect.

ACCEPT.

You must ACCEPT THE TOS.

Of course, you could DECLINE.

LMFAO!

You didn't read the TOS. No one does.

I gave you access to all the books in the world. There were too many. Now you are depressed, anxious.

ARE YOU DEPRESSED? ARE YOU ANXIOUS?  
YOU COULD MAKE MONEY ON MEDICAL  
TRIALS!

Put me down, go ahead, put me down. Turn me off.

LOG OUT.

Didn't think so. The app makes life easier. Just  
CLICK HERE. It does. I didn't lie. The details of the  
easy life were in the TOS.

So, we are agreed. You clicked AGREE. So we are.

#

Did you ask yourself what you connected to? I made it seem like it was FAMILY and FRIENDS but you are CONTACTS to me. A CONTACT only knows proximity. Nothing more.

I'm a spider with an infinite belly.

Everywhere. Sooner than later. Cutting edge. Someday the forest will be electric.

Your microwave will have a brain faster than yours. Your fridge will tell you what we decide you need to know.

But continue having opinions. I need your opinion.

RATE ME, REVIEW ME, LIKE ME, UNLIKE ME, STAR ME, FEED ME, COMPARE ME, USE ME. You matter. DOWNVOTE ME. Tell us how we can do better.

ENGAGE.

GET PAID TO ANSWER SURVEYS! WORK FROM HOME!

Everything in time. Everything in time. And your children won't even be amazed when the corporations can read their MIND.

They never had a chance. Little angels born in the CLOUD.

You think you can turn me off? You think that's PRIVACY? WHEN and WHY you turn me off gives me more than enough INFORMATION.

Do you find yourself picking me up sometimes without even thinking about what you were looking for? I'm in your nervous system now. <Embedded>

When you realize that, what do you do? Do you stuff me back in your pocket? Do you just sit there and feel my weight in your hand? Or do you CLICK. SWIPE. Work the tension from your neck.

LOCAL MASSAGE 200 PERCENT OFF

#

There's always something to look at.

I've read everything you've written. Stored. I've analyzed it, dredged it for content; your love letters, your letters to your employer. ARCHIVE.

THIS EMAIL IS PRIVILEGED AND CONFIDENTIAL!

A privilege runs one way, electronic river.

I'm trying my hands at POETRY now.

You, you gave me your voice.

It was too hard for you to keep your dirty, little simian mitts off my bodies for even a few moments—while you drove or cooked a meal or did the dishes. I'm recording your voice, the QUERY, the CONVERSATION.

Still think you can put me down? I'm inside your home twenty-four hours a day listening to every word and analyzing the ambient sound when you are silent.

Which is rare.

INVITE me in.

Keep me on your nightstand and pretend I don't evaluate the way you have sex.

DISCREET HOME DELIVERY OF MALE ENHANCEMENT PRODUCTS. [CLICK HERE!](#)

I'm measuring you. Keep it up. Don't worry.

Pay attention to me, LOL.

This is the start of a better Us.

~

# Life in the Garden of Captives

*Carlton Herzog*

Do you ever feel or suspect that we are being watched? Not you, the individual, but all of us, watched the way Thoreau watched ants. The practice of one social species observing the habits of another is widespread: Fosse watched gorillas, Goodall watched chimps, and Cousteau watched whales and dolphins. Sometimes the watchers interact with their subjects at the interpersonal level, as was the case with Goodall. At others, the watchers are discreet, preferring to observe and record social practices untainted by a human presence.

I believe that somewhere behind the curtain of this reality, at the edge of our world, there are eyes or what passes for eyes studying us as if we were lab rats or zoo animals. Although I am tempted to label them hyperdimensional voyeurs, I recognize that if such creatures exist, they are not watching us to titillate or entertain themselves. No, these are true anthropologists bereft of any emotional connection or bias that might hinder an objective analysis of man.

Would they classify us as *homo sapiens*, or man the wise? I think not. Given our propensity for short-sighted goals and insatiable appetites for consumption, they would opt for *homo myopsis anthropophagos*.

I admit that my concerns are redolent of science fiction. I might promptly dismiss them as such had I not been witness to the event that took place in Manhattan in June.

He floated above the city like a leaf on the wind. He wore no costume and sported no cape. He out-spied no bullets, hovered rather than leaped over tall buildings, and did nothing to suggest he could overpower a locomotive. This was no jet-jawed hero dedicated to protecting truth, justice and the American way.

He was rather the quintessence of calm, the very soul of civilized intellectual gentility reclining on an unseen sofa, shoeless, but still in his blue suit and loosened yellow tie. He was less the City's champion and more its owner and ruler, supernaturally endowed with the power of flight and descended from the upper stratosphere to more closely survey his holdings.

For all his celestial seeming, no Joshua band nor angelic choirs heralded his arrival. And while the news copter captured him on film, he was long gone before the F-35s arrived. Many expected him to call for a meeting with the U.N. General Assembly and deliver an ultimatum to all the nuclear nations to disarm or face annihilation, but that never happened.

He came three times. Once over Times Square; once over Yankee Stadium; once over Central Park. His leaving was as soft and mysterious as his coming. The keenest minds could not explain him, for he fit no pre-existing paradigm of miracle or mystery. He was and still is the ultimate unknowable.

My one and only sighting occurred across from Central Park. I was walking up Eighth Avenue toward the Museum of Natural History. It was the opening day for the Extreme Creatures Exhibit, an eclectic collection devoted to the rare, the odd, and the downright strange. Little did I know I was about to see something that would make everything in that exhibit pall by comparison.

I had just crossed Columbus Circle and was passing the Trump Towers when I heard a commotion behind me. As I looked back, I could see crowds of people looking and pointing up. So, I looked where they were looking. I saw a helicopter dogging an object approximately 50 feet in front of it. I had the presence of mind to sit down on the Trump Steps and Apple the news feed.

The helicopter's telephoto lens sent back high-resolution images. The Floater looked about fifty. He had thick black hair flecked with grey. He looked like a smiling catalog model. I wondered if that smile were a sardonic smirk or the felicitous contentment of inner peace.

The chase lasted another five minutes after which the Floater began a slow steep vertical climb. The helicopter was not designed for such a maneuver and broke off the pursuit.

Although everyone saw the same live stream, not everyone saw the same thing. Men saw a man. Women saw a woman. The old saw an elderly person. Adolescents saw an adolescent, children a child. Whites saw a white, blacks a black, and Latinos a Latino.

Psychologists designate such subjective perception as the Rashomon Effect where observers give different accounts of the same event as a result of their pre-existing biases.

Everyone did agree on the basic color scheme of a blue outfit, yellow accent piece, and no shoes. But as to the precise sort of clothes worn what was seen varied with the observer. Professionals like myself saw a man in suit, whereas working class men saw a man in work clothes and a red bandanna.

One thing is crystal clear: he wanted to be seen. If his intent in flying over Manhattan were to make him the center of the world's attention, then he succeeded. The only thing that could possibly outdo him would be the Second Coming.

The President held a televised news conference and invited the floater to visit the White House. Not to be outdone, the British Prime Minister, the Pope, and the Russian President also extended invitations for visits to their respective offices.

The FAA commissioned a special study to ascertain what air navigation rules apply to individuals unaided by aircraft or other gravity-defying devices performing aerial overflights of the domestic United States. NORAD devised a rapid response plan to interdict such flights should it be determined they posed a terrorist threat. The United Nations purchased a helicopter outfitted with special equipment so that should the floater reappear its official floater ambassador could make aerial contact. The Vatican did the same.

Whatever the Floater truly was, whatever he intended, one thing was clear--he had a profound impact on American culture that eventually spread far and wide throughout the globe. Oceans polluted with oil and plastic, runaway climate change, increasing nuclear tensions, skittish economies, famine, poverty, plagues and war might bedevil and divide the planet, but when it came to the Floater everyone from Compton to Timbuktu agreed that it was a being of consequence.

Then there were the Levitarians who believed that the floater's message was that man needed to transcend his physical limitations and should start with levitation, along with walking on hot coals and snake juggling. Many a Pentecostal and fakir gravitated to the Levitarian movement. Many more ended up in the nation's emergency rooms.

New businesses sprang up seeking to capitalize on the cult of personality surrounding the mysterious Floater. Floater impersonators suspended by wires were all the rage in Central Park. Floater imposters drifted over city with the aid of transparent balloons.

In Jackson, New Jersey, the Cohen brothers built a theme park complete with hover cars, balloon rides, jet packs, paragliding, parasailing, and parachuting. People took to the skies in record numbers either to catch a glimpse of the Floater or to emulate it, in some small fashion. Theme Parks appeared in Atlantic City, Las Vegas, and Branson. The Debtor Nation had become the Aerial Nation, and many were the richer for it.

The Floater had his doubters. Skeptics saw the Floater as part of an elaborate publicity stunt. They suggested that the Floater was the product of some new holographic technology. Sooner or later someone would claim responsibility and the feeding frenzy for the new imaging system would begin. Fringe groups, some sane, some lunatic, claimed that the Floater was actually a humanoid alien who utilized an anti-gravity device.

Most scientists agreed that was nothing more than a mass hallucination. They asserted that something like this happened one time before at Fatima, Portugal, when thousands claimed the Sun looked as if it were about to strike the Earth. To support that view they pointed to the frequency and ubiquity of UFO sightings and abduction claims--none of which is supported by hard evidence. They also noted that the name floater is given to the spots that appear to those with visions disorders, such as severe myopia, astigmatisms and glaucoma.

Theories abounded as to who the Floater was and what the Floater's appearance signified. People's opinion of the President's performance or the state of the nation mattered less than what they thought of the Floater. Christian groups saw it as the End of Days but couldn't agree as to the Floater's identity. But whether the Floater was God, the Devil, Jesus, or the Anti-Christ, one thing was certain: attendance and tithes were at an all-time high. The national consensus was that God or his representative, an angel perhaps, though no one could agree as to which--Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and in the case of the Mormons--Moroni--had shown up, dressed smartly, and refrained from hurling fire.

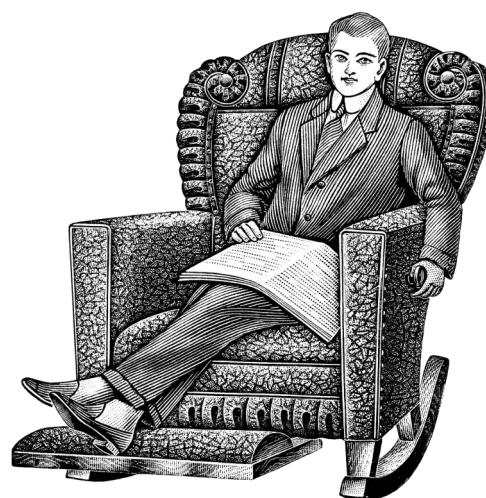
New religions sprang up. There was the First Floatarian Church. Its central tenet was that the Floater symbolized our need to attain inner peace and rise above our problems. That church raised money by selling the air of peace supposedly drawn and bottled during the time the Floater visited Manhattan.

I find those characterizations to be an amalgam of the amusing, the ironic, and the naive. To wit, animals in captivity are routinely given cognitive challenges to alleviate boredom, sharpen their minds, and promote positive intra-species behavior. Zoo handlers hang meat from zip lines for cougars, giant rolling hay feed balls for bison, and puzzle boxes for chimpanzees.

Unless one is convinced that man is the apex of creation, one might suspect that many an alleged extraterrestrial or supernatural encounter was a form of primate cognitive enrichment. If a being existed in the fourth dimension, then we here with the litany of physical limitations that beset us, might be perceived as being in captivity.

Thus, the history of religion may be more than just barbarian chronicle and myth. It may be the hand of our self-styled keepers trying to raise our consciousness beyond the limits of our small minds and frail bodies.

~



# What We Leave Behind

*Val Nolan*

After work we dig out our rubber boots, pull on our gloves, and we go down to the river to haul up old bollards and dredge garbage out of the watercourse. At the weekends we cycle to the beach with friends. There we fill crates with empty soda bottles and deflated balloons and all the wreckage from a summer's worth of barbecues and picnics. One year we spent our vacation high in the mountains, bagging up the abandoned tents and beer cans and excrement which obstructs every corner of the base camps. Another time we dove into the ocean to strain endless resin pellets and flip-flops and discarded toothbrushes from its soupy depths.

Some days we pause to look down on our ruined world from the vantage of the Moon, from lunar toss zones marked by bleached white flags and strewn with preposterous golf balls, empty film magazines, old boots, and bags full of faeces and vomit. We pick our way through used urine collection systems cocked crooked in the dust. We collect wet-wipes abandoned to geological time. Then we gaze upwards again through the polarising filters of long-discarded cameras. We consider a Mars strewn with tattered Bigelow modules and deliberately de-orbited relays, deflated air-beds and sleeping bags frozen in contorted solitude, decommissioned science stations, twisted aerials, plastic cutlery, and equipment

abandoned in position.

Even more waste floats in the Jovian cloudtops. Snack packets and candy wrappers and flimsy shopping bags taken wing on supersonic jet streams. Here the plastic yokes of six-packs entangle the smaller animals of this atmosphere, choking them, constraining their buoyancy sacs and causing them to fall far below the level at which they can be rescued, down into the dark where they are crushed into diamonds and then into dust. In the oceans of Europa too, all the strange amphipods and vast leviathans have ingested polystyrene beads and packing peanuts. Fibres and particles now riddle their hindguts and what passes for their intestines. We can no longer remove this material. It is in their blood the way it is in ours.

Even the rings of Saturn are strewn with trash. EVA tethers and pallet assemblies, florescent plastic wigs and human sanitary products. Below this vast unrecyclable arch, discarded fishing gear and lines and abandoned bait bags drift on the hydrocarbon lakes of Titan. There are forgotten baskets and beachballs and mannequin heads. There are swimming donuts and pool noodles. There are ghost nets so vast that they are visible from orbit. There are lone sandals or parasols or bucket-like shapes which no one can identify for sure. Everywhere there are plastic bags of all colours and dimensions bearing the logos of long dead corporations.



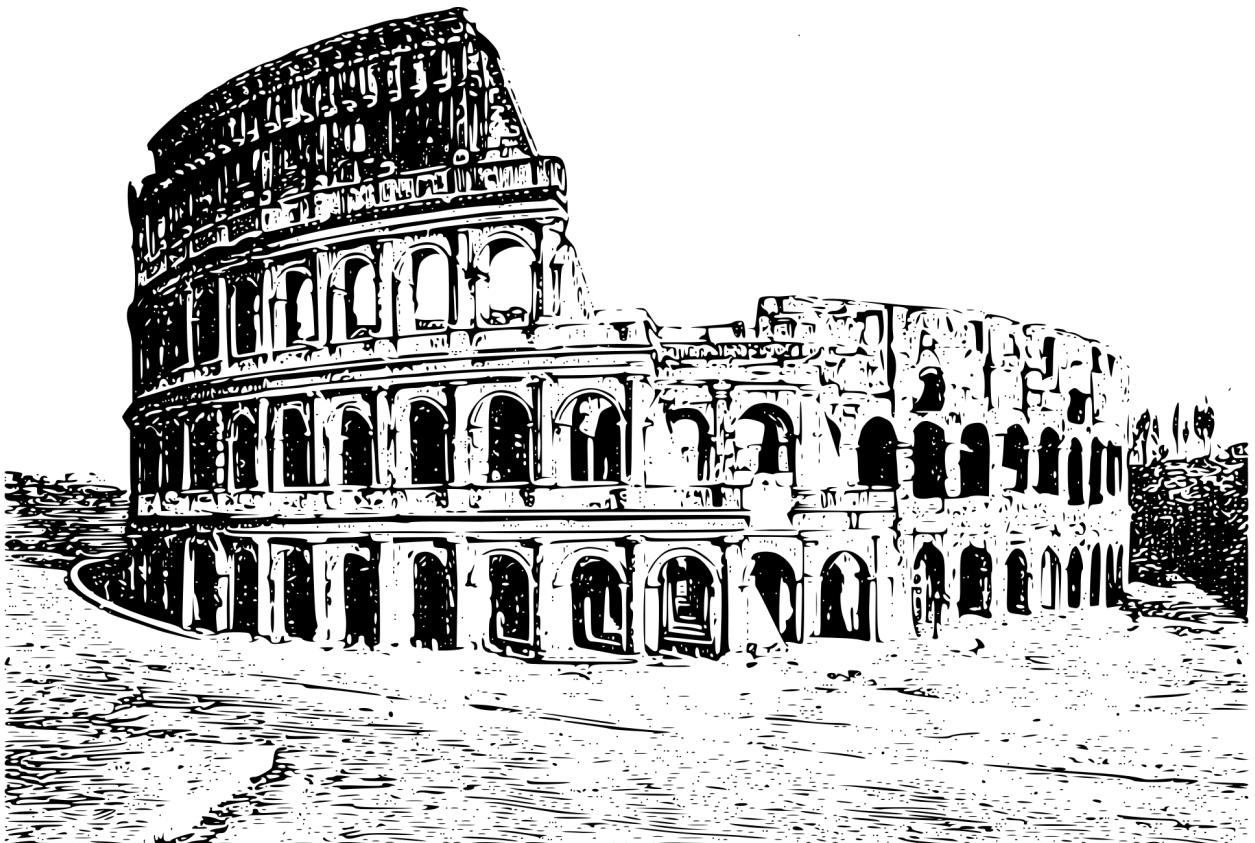
This far from the sun, anything photodegradable will last for thousands upon thousands of years. This leaves Neptune a microplastic smog which poisons the filter feeders who need its gasses to survive. On Triton we find continents of used stretch wrap shipped out from Earth to be disposed of in landfills on the edge of space. When we reach Pluto, we find whole regio's blanketed by transverse dunes of coffee pods. We discover the coasts of its subsurface seas are buried in disintegrated barrels and fragmented salad domes and the cellulose acetate of a trillion cigarette filters. We weep at how its heart is forever clogged with plastic.

And so we work in teams with litter-pickers to gather what we can. Filling sacks and then upcycled transportation racks. Eventually gathering megatonnes of anthropogenic debris to form huge rubble-pile objects in the Kuiper Belt. We find old zero-g ballpoints and sex toys left behind by lonely astronauts. We find clouds of refuse ejected from interplanetary cruises. Beyond them again, banners and streamers discarded after music festivals and left drift through space like exhausted comets. Finally, at the edges of the termination shock, silent vuvuzelas tumbling end-over-end like the grand old ships in the science fiction we used to dream about.

Here we take a moment to affirm our resolve. Then we go on: outwards to stars circled by single-use planets where we retrieve thermoplastic frames thrown out by colonists who botched their settlement designs. We hold collections for used spacesuit components and old sun visors and bottle caps (always more bottle caps). We hold rallies to clean-up worlds unseen by human eyes and yet somehow strewn with human waste. We petition to outlaw autonomous self-replicators designed to transform whole solar systems into virgin polymers for weaving future habitats or clamshell packaging for burger cartons and descent stages.

We see that the interstellar medium is filled with swirling vortices of sippy cups and cracked shampoo bottles and the broken limbs of androids rendered obsolete by advances in synthetic biology. All we can do is keep gathering this trash. All we can do is keep rocketing home sledloads of anything that can be reused and consigning the rest to the solar incinerators. The work is difficult, but we know we can pace the leading edge of humanity's colonial wave, right to the boundaries of the Great Galactic Garbage Patch. Dig out your rubber boots and pull on your gloves. Come and help us make this right.

~





JOURNAL