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Editorial

Lectori salutem.

We write these words humbled by the developments of recent months. When word was sent, back in April, that *Sci Phi Journal* would be an award finalist at *EuroCon*, the annual gathering of the European SF family, it was more than we had ever thought possible for our exceptionally nerdy sub-genre: speculative philosophy (or "sci phi").

Indeed, we'd have been happy to make the journey to Luxembourg simply to commune with like-minded (and, even more so, with contrarian) readers and other members of fandom, and render our homage unto the eventual laureates.

You may then imagine our astonishment when, at a dramatic moment during the ceremony, the announcement came for the Best SF Magazine award and the *Sci Phi* logo appeared on the mighty overhead screen, emblazoned over the grand auditorium. The *conférencier* had to call us out twice before we were able to arise, such was our surprise.

Unbeknownst to us, over the course of the convention weekend, the assembly of the European Science Fiction Society (ESFS) had voted to elevate *Sci Phi Journal* into the "hall of fame" of European SF. In the tapestry of our continent's speculative literature, where much of each country's output and nominations are (understandably) specific to their linguistic island, it was a rare moment to have an award bestowed upon an English-language magazine, published in Belgium, cross-nominated by Hungary, and run by a ragtag crew ranging from Malaysia to Spain.

Thus, in line with the sentiment we sought to express in our improvised acceptance speech, we hope for this award to be the pylon of a bridge. One little piece in a chain of many links to bring Europe's fragmented literary and publishing landscape closer together. And a source of encouragement for the endeavours of authors and thinkers, who seek to tell timeless (rather than timely) stories, for whom speculative fiction is more than just literary entertainment or public activism, but rather an epic tool for philosophical enquiry.

To avail ourselves of an oft abused word: we feel that this once-in-a-lifetime award "validates" the editorial approach that *Sci Phi Journal* stands for. A respect for classic rhetorical standards; carefully guarded intellectual independence; and a commitment to keep our little bit of literature unshackled from the fashionable agendas of the day.

Much to our delight, the journey doesn't end here. At the start of summer, Dustin Jacobus was shortlisted for a 2022 Utopia Award in recognition of his work on our cover art, in addition to another nomination in the non-fiction category (citing Eric Hunting's essay "On Solarpunk").

Onward, then! Let us carry the torch further still into the twilit corridors of the Library of Babel!

Speculatively yours,

the SPJ co-editors & crew

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And The Voice Will Not Say

Dave Henrickson

By The origin of the book is unknown, or at least as unknown as any other volume in the Great Library. Its original location, too, is unknown—as the first two pages are missing entirely. These would, of course, have supplied the exact coordinates of its original Shelving.

Unknown as well is the book's discoverer and how the volume came to be found, unclaimed and hard-used, in a second-hand rag shop in the Lower City. What is known about the Voice, for so it has come to be called, is that it has never failed to accurately answer a question asked of it. Since the Voice came into Imperial possession eight hundred years ago, 348 questions have been asked (officially) of the tattered book. No answer has ever proven to be false.

Every generation new theories and claims as to the nature and the secret of the Voice are put forth. Each is carefully weighed for its merit and embraced or discarded accordingly. Occasionally a theory is so promising that an expedition is sent into the immeasurable tracks of the Great Library in the hope of finding the source of the Voice and (though this is never spoken of) its successor. Occasionally, a fraud or a heresy is put forth that is so flagrant that an execution is held.

The Library of the Voice, many times larger than the Imperial Palace, has become a small city in its own right. The history of every question asked of the Voice is completely documented within those walls— who asked the question and why, what answer the Voice gave, and what actions were the result of that answer. Scholars have spent their lives analyzing the phrasing of a single Response, trying to catch a glimpse of the Eternal Mind behind the Great Library—and therefore, by extension, the purpose behind Creation itself.

That such a Reason exists is an article of faith among the godly. While every possible combination of words can be found somewhere in the infinite depths of the Great Library, only divine providence can explain the Voice's omniscience and how it found its way into the hands of the Imperium.

Or so says the Church.

The Library of the Voice contains entire wings of apocrypha, heresy, and outright fakeries. There are fragments of false lore so persuasive that they have spawned followers of their own among the army of librarians who tend the stacks. Illegal studies and heretical rites are said to take place in long-unused corridors and neglected alcoves. It is whispered that there are whole sections of apocrypha that have been lost, or hidden away until the time is right for their re-emergence.

The Hand Which Burns, the arm of the Church responsible for maintaining the purity of the faith, is always busiest among the faithful.

Each year the College of Guardians gathers to propose and debate new questions. Years can pass before a question is judged ready to be put to the Voice. It is not enough that the answer must be of the utmost importance. The question must be phrased in such a way, and be of such a nature, that the answer will be useful and readily understood. Most of all, the answer elicited must be concise, for with each Response the end of the book, and its wisdom, grows nearer.

There is only one subject which the Voice is silent upon—and that is the Great Library itself. No question concerning the origin of the Voice, the source of its divination, the purpose of the Great Library, or the location of any other such volume has ever received an answer. Surely this is another proof, the Church argues, of the divine nature of the Voice.

Others who might have a different opinion on the subject remain prudently silent.

Three times since the discovery of the Voice great armies have marched upon the Imperium to seize the book or destroy it. (Either because its power is real or because it is not.) Three times the Voice provided the precise information necessary to repel the invaders. The last time, as a warning to others, an additional question was asked—and the Kingdom of Kesh quickly ceased to be. Since then the Voice has been left in peace. The Imperium's neighbors bide their time—and the remaining, unread pages of the book grow thinner with each generation.

There are those who wish to ask the Voice what will happen when the last page is turned, the last passage read. Some say that the last page should be read now, so that there will be time to prepare for whatever end is in store. Others insist that the last page should never be read for, if the Voice comes to an end, then the Imperium's end will surely follow.

Still others maintain that the Imperium is doomed if the end is not read, for the location of the next Voice must be specified in the very last passage. If not, then for what purpose was the Voice given to them? To hoard the remaining pages of the book, they further add, is to prove one's lack of faith and therefore deserving of the destruction all would avoid.

Such issues are debated endlessly on the floor of the College. Expeditions are sent into the infinite reaches of the Great Library to no avail. Prophets and prophecies arise, flourish, and fade into dust. Men and women sit upon the throne, tormented by doubt or buoyed by certainty, while the Imperium totters toward an unknown future.

Except, perhaps, to the Voice. And the Voice will not say.

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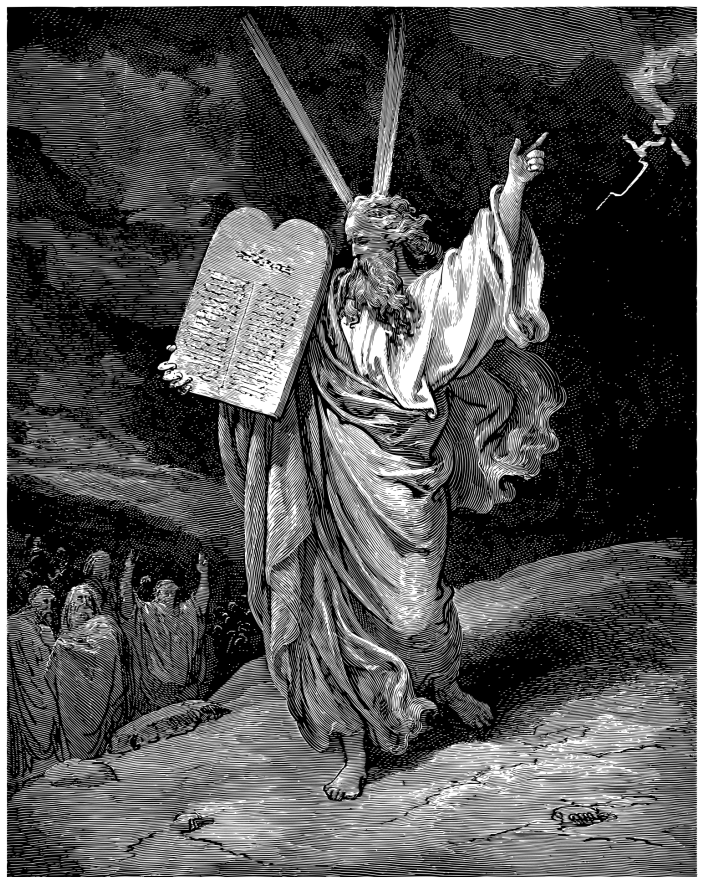
Motopia

Gheorghe Săsărman

Introduction by Mariano Martín Rodríguez

Translation by Jean Harris

Born in 1941, in Bucharest, Romania, Gheorghe Săsărman spent his childhood and attended high-school in Cluj. He studied architecture in Bucharest and after graduation was employed as a journalist, mainly specialising in articles on architecture and popular science. Politically compelled to abandon public writing, he left Ceauşescu's Romania in 1983 and settled in Munich, Germany, where he currently lives.

Săsărman made his debut as an author of fiction in 1962, when he won the first prize at a SF short-story contest organized for seven East-European countries. He then began to write science fiction stories and soon acquired his current status as one of the main SF writers of his generation in Romania. A story in the volume Chimera (1979), "Fuga lui Algernon" ("Algernon's Escape" in English – whose title paraphrases that of Daniel Keyes's famous novel –) brought the author the Europa Award at the 5th EuroCon convention (1980). After 1989, he resumed publishing fiction in his native country, which he continues to this day. His two latest books are the critically acclaimed novel on the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth in current Munich titled Adevărata cronică a morţii lui Yeşua Ha-Nozri (True Chronicle of the Death of Jeshua Ha-Nozri, 2016) and a collection of dystopias beginning each by a different letter collectively spelling out the word "utopia" titled Alfabetul distopiilor (Alphabet of Dystopias, 2021).

This last volume can be read as a science fiction and narrative counterpart to his best-known work, Cuadratura cercului (Squaring the Circle, 1975). This masterful collection of descriptions of imaginary cities, set in fictional past, present and future venues or in dream-like symbolic and fantasy worlds was written without the author having read Italo Calvino's book Le città invisibili (Invisible Cities, 1972). Both books are, indeed, quite different, since Calvino's is rather a collection of prose poems only vaguely portraying the life in his invented cities and hardly belonging to speculative fiction, while Săsărman focuses on the relationship between his cities' physical features and their impact on the posited societies and the lives of their inhabitants. This speculative dimension, which is often critical towards humankind's psychological, social and political follies, explains why the book had clashed with the communist censorship prevalent at the time, which cut out one quarter of its contents. The unabridged original work appeared in Romanian only in 2001, when it had already been translated into French in 1994. It was translated into Spanish by myself in 2010. Since I knew that one of my favourite writers of speculative fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin, could read Spanish, I sent her a copy. She liked it so much that she decided to translate into English the cities that she liked best, roughly two thirds of those in Săsărman's volume, based on my Spanish version and with my subsequent revision of her translation with an eye on the Romanian original. Some of the missing cities had been translated into English by Jean Harris, but they have remained unpublished until today. Thanks to the kind permission of both Săsărman and Harris, Sci Phi Journal is able to bring to light in English two further cities among those untranslated by Le Guin.

For the present issue, we've chosen "Motopia." It is the description of a city where motor vehicles are so important and prevalent that they have even fused with humans into a new nature/machine hybrid species with terrifying results. This is written with the objective style of a non-fiction report, which makes all the more harrowing the description of the city and the consequences of certain societal choices. Although its subject can be seen as topical, we should not forget that it is above all a superb piece of speculative literature, as well as of fictional non-fiction. It also shows what Sci Phi Journal stands for as regards the art of writing, and why Săsărman is one of our acknowledged masters in the literary field.

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MOTOPIA

It is not known with certainty when exactly it appeared, or when it began to expand, or what force fueled its expansion. Few dare approach the difficult subject of its future though many fear that nothing can stop its growth. Motopia is a city in a state of explosion. But is it, really, a city?

Imagine an area with clearly marked limits—though here figures can be only approximate—of a circle with a diameter of c. 100 kilometers. The perimeter of this circle is made up of over 100,000 gigantic machines [with bulldozing action, inter alia], placed one next to the other and engaging in a slow radial motion toward the exterior. To the extent that the machines move away from the center, intervals of free space begin to form between them, at which time other machines fill the gaps at the forefront of activity. These genuinely and completely automated moving factories prepare an offensive.

Hills and slopes are leveled; depressions are filled to the extent that even the steepest mountain is reduced to a perfect, horizontal plane. Forests are transformed into timber and cellulose, the vegetable earth of the planes is removed and compressed into certain desiccated lakes, the rivers are turned into covered canals and the whole body of fauna is assigned an industrial value. The machines do not simply execute a simple leveling operation, though; a fabulous network of roadways takes shape in their wake. This lattice of multi-leveled highways ramifies in tens of directions that intersect in a stupefying lace of concrete and asphalt. Above and below ground parking lots, garage towers with tens and tens of levels, and warehouses locked by enigmatic metal gates all site themselves in the cells of this network. Several hundred meters above ground level, a bluish cloud floats over the city day and night, wide-spread and wrapping the entire horizon.

The existence—at least the public existence—of the humobiles begins at the gates of their warehouses from which they exit, hourly, in compact groups. It seems that only mature specimens with high tank capacity and many cylinders appear at these gates. Different subspecies distinguish between themselves only by the type and position of the heart, transmission, suspension and other such anatomic data. Each family is characterized by a certain auto-body construction, individual differentials localizing themselves particularly at the level of line, color, number or headlights—or else they limit themselves strictly to registration numbers. A common trait, about which all accounts agree, is the presence of a red eye, like a bleeding wound, on the top of the individual's head, where it blinks hideously, without any intelligible sense.

The humobiles manifest an irresistible vitality consumed particularly through apparently senseless travel at considerable speed within the highway network evidently destined for this purpose. This lack of sense is, in truth, only apparent: in reality this magic dance of speed supports the process of natural selection, which unfolds in specific ways. Only the most robust specimens with the most diabolical reflexes, well-adapted to the infernal rhythm of existence survive this demented race over the asphalt lanes. Any defect in the breaks or of the directional signaling systems involves terrible risks. The slightest deviation of the vertebral column is fatal. Special vehicles, of great tonnage, transport the cadavers to the vicinity of the warehouses, where—after a preliminary pressing into rectangular shapes—they are recovered in a mysterious way, probably serving the complicated procreation of new hotrods.

Outside the prolonged hours belonging to the fierce highway confrontation that is their daily struggle for existence, humobiles find brief respites within the confines of their parking lots. Silent, motionless, insensible to the approach of their rivals, the humobiles sack out in a peculiar torpor, often with their backs toward the gigantic screen where an oppressive film inspired by the hard life of the digging machinery plays interminably. When they are not consuming themselves on the highways, the Motopian families spend their nights in the tower garages, touched by a metallic sleep without dreams.

The most horrifying detail of the life of Motopia's inhabitants—and which makes the growth of the city so perfectly odious—is their way of feeding themselves. In short anthropophagy is practiced here. Human beings are the humobiles main food. Lured from their traditional cities by false but well-directed propaganda, captured as a result of their proverbial naïveté, people who have been lured there are discharged in large numbers into the train stations and airports of Motopia, where they are flung directly to the starving hordes or transported in bulk to special warehouses, pompously called hotels and joined directly to the edifices in which the inhabitant families spend the night, to be served live for breakfast. Satiated, bloated, with their bellies hanging within several fingers of the asphalt and leaning lazily on the curbs, the humobiles start to digest their prey. Their opaque, beveled foreheads hide their thoughts. With the exception of the few deponents mentioned above—and they are our true saviors, for the greatest danger isn't so much the existence of Motopia as it is ignoring its existence—no one else has returned from that lugubrious city. In parenthesis, let it be said, the phone calls and enthusiastic letters through which those who have arrived there express their supposed delight or announce their wholly improbable decision to remain in that city forever can only be counted as desperate acts extracted under menace of death, if they are not vulgar travesties, grotesque forgeries from whole cloth.

The survivors tell us hair raising things about the limitless cruelty of the humobiles, who, though they can only nourish themselves with live prey, often kill not for food but for pleasure. As the prisoners, meanwhile, start to become aware of the danger threatening them, they center their thoughts around a possible life-saving escape. And as pedestrian flight is the only solution, they try to leave the cells of their ill-omened hotels. The refined sadism of the inhabitants shows its true measure only now: the exits are not even guarded. The humobiles know—and their cynicism surpasses imagination—that over the course of those several tens of kilometers to the boarders of Motopia, travelling by night, when the level of traffic is reduced, and hiding by day, human beings will have to cross so many lanes of asphalt that only a miracle will allow them to succeed. Happily, several such miracles have taken place. But a huge number of fugitives have paid with their lives for these rare miracles. For allowing them hope and then surprising them in turn, hounded and hungry, the humobiles have crushed escapees relentlessly, gnashed them to bits in the most sinister way, and left their dead bodies to rot on the sites of their terrible executions, unburied, so that their bones will whiten on the asphalt, so that their terrifying brain cases will attract the attention of others and choke any thought of escape from the beginning.

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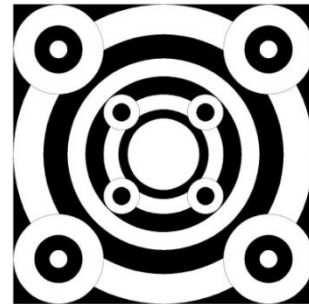
Bunker Rules

Tony Dunnell

1) Maximum permanent capacity 100 114 125. No exceptions. Temporary capacity may exceed this number on a case-by-case basis. Refugee status is granted in some cases, but temporary shelter is temporary. No exceptions. Temporary residents with refugee status may apply for permanent residency through the council, capacity allowing. The council's decision is final.

2) Respect the day/night cycle, unless assigned otherwise. It helps build community.

3) All activities that create strong vibrations are strictly prohibited. You may talk, walk, cook etc. freely and normally. Activities such as running and the playing of loud music are monitored. Activities such as drilling, hammering, sawing, ball games etc. are strictly prohibited unless previously approved by the council.

4) Respect the zones. All residents are allowed to move freely between the residential and communal areas (green) unless under quarantine or arrest. Entering red zones (utilities, waste, armory etc.) is strictly prohibited unless previously granted access.

5) All residents are allowed to leave the bunker at any time and at their own risk, unless the immediate surface area is occupied (by unknowns or hostiles). If you wish to leave, either on a temporary or permanent basis, you must first contact a council member. Unless assigned to a surface mission, be aware that re-entry is at the discretion of the council and/or senior hatchkeepers.

6) Any attempt to leave the bunker without prior permission, or any unauthorized attempt to open the main or secondary hatches, is punishable by death.

7) Acts of physical or sexual aggression by bunker residents are punishable by expulsion or death, at the council's discretion.

8) Romantic couplings must be approved and registered with the council. Before a partnership is approved, the couple must consent to the council's rules on procreation and pregnancy, if applicable (see amendments).

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9) All residents must accept the rules of passing (see amendments). Your bodies are your own up until the point of death, at which time the body becomes the property of the council, to use as it sees fit. Traditional religious practices do not apply and will not be considered.

10) In the event of a passing, the council will decide if the vacated bunker space will be filled and by whom. Applications are accepted. The council's decision is final.

11) In the event of the passing or demotion of a council member, elections will be held to fill the vacated position. All bunker residents above the age of 18 are eligible to vote unless their voting rights have previously been revoked.

12) Voting rights cannot be revoked in the (one) week running up to an election, unless the eligible voter has committed a serious and irrefutable crime (including, but not limited to, murder, rape, or an unauthorized attempt to leave the bunker (see 6)) during said one-week period.

13) All residents over the age of 15 can volunteer for surface missions.

14) If insufficient volunteers come forward for a surface mission deemed "vital" (see amendments), lots will be drawn among all mission-eligible residents. Refusal to abide by the results of the draw will result in permanent expulsion from the bunker. No exceptions.

15) In the event of a breach by an unknown party or known hostile entities, martial law will be declared. All residents over the age of 10 must immediately report to the muster point outside the armory, where weapons will be assigned.

16) During a breach, failure to follow the commands of council members or designated security officers is punishable by summary execution at the hands of the aforementioned. No exceptions.

17) In the event of a breach, all hostiles, human or otherwise, are to be targeted and killed on sight. Acts of mercy are punishable by expulsion, at the council's discretion.

18) Respect the mealtime schedule. It helps build community.

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Religious Traditions Considered Through Science Fiction And Fantasy

Andy Dibble

Strange Religion: Speculative Fiction of Spirituality, Belief, & Practice, which I recently edited—part of the Strange Concepts series put out by TDotSpec—was conceived with the goal of helping readers engage with religion meaningfully through science fiction and fantasy. The reasons for this anthology are diverse. Some editors have reservations about publishing stories that engage with real religious traditions because they worry such content will offend segments of their readership. I and other editors at TDotSpec wanted to give a platform both to stories that dig into ideas that surround and comprise religion and stories that engage with religious traditions as they are actually found in the real world. There have been speculative publications dedicated to particular traditions—*Wandering Stars* (1974, Harper & Row), an anthology of Jewish science fiction and *Mysterion*, which publishes Christian speculative fiction, come to mind—but I know of no anthology that aims to cut across religious traditions.

Connecting Religious Traditions With Science Fiction And Fantasy

One of the goals of *Strange Religion* is to synergize science fiction and religion, to help readers imagine religions of the future. "Al-Muftiyah" by Jibril Stevenson follows a Muslim man, who seeks to undermine an AI capable of settling all disputes involving fiqh, or Islamic jurisprudence. "The Rebbetzin Speaks" by Daniel M. Kimmel is a series of Dear-Abby-style questions and answers that engage with points of halakhah (Jewish rabbinical law) in a future where humans have populated the solar system. "The Fireflies of Todaji" by Russell Hemmell centers on two women—one Japanese, the other South Indian—whose families have migrated to the Moon as they consider the meaning of a traditional Japanese water festival in a community that has to conserve water to survive. Set further in the future is "Before the Evolution Comes the Smoke" by Terri Bruce, in which an orphaned woman performs rituals to gain access to AI witches in order to bring her parents back to life, and "Bio-Mass" by Mike Adamson, in which a jaded galactic tourist reassesses the value of his long life.

Countering Misconceptions About Religion

Strange Religion is a counterpoint to some of the biases and misconceptions about religion found in speculative fiction. There's a segment of speculative fiction that envisions religion on the model of Christianity or on a particular view of Christianity. This is where the mistaken notion that religions are "belief systems" comes from. Outside of Christianity, and especially Protestant Christianity, it's much more common for religion to be about what you do or how you identify yourself than what you believe.

To counter this misconception, *Strange Religion* includes stories that engage with a variety of religious traditions, including Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Humanism, Chinese religion, Hinduism, and indigenous traditions. Additionally, the several stories that engage with Christianity help readers understand it from new perspectives. "Dying Rivers and Broken Hearts" by Gabriella Buba centers on a Filipina witch, who identifies as Catholic. A Nigerian-Igbo man, who is also a convert to Protestant Christianity, brings charges of homosexuality against his American friend in an Igbo court of law in "The Man Who Misused His Manhood" by Chukwu Sunday Abel. "The Devil is a Shape in the Brain" by Joachim Glage explores universal Christian salvation, drawing upon the occult, nineteen-century psychology, and cosmic horror. "The Other War on Terror" by Michael H. Hanson is set in an alternative history where the United States is a Muslim nation and the terrorists are Christians. There are stories in *Strange Religion* with a theological bent—stories focused on clarifying or interrogating orthodoxy—but the bulk of stories are about people *acting*, using the tools available to them, religious or otherwise, to bring about change in themselves, their communities, and the cosmos.

Also from Christianity and modern secularism, we have the idea that religion is only the vocation of clergy or an activity limited to certain parts of life—what we do when we aren't "rendering unto Caesar." But in many cultures and traditions, especially in the developing world, religion is integrated into every aspect of life. About half of all languages don't even have a word for religion. Religious studies scholars have largely given up trying to define "religion," and some following J. Z. Smith, believe the term shouldn't even be used by scholars.

To counter this misconception, we selected several stories that show people solving everyday struggles, that demonstrate religion isn't just for certain times of the week: A software developer teams up with a rabbi on a metaphysical programming project in "Fate and Other Variables" by Alex Shvartsman—but his goal is to save his brother from addiction and drug dealers. In "Samsara" by J. A. Legg, a Bangladeshi Hindu teen struggles with an absent father and demanding relatives as she grapples with a corporate tycoon seeking to reincarnate as her unborn child. "The Life That Comes After" by Lauren Teffeau follows an overworked hospice nurse trying to protects a secretive organization from oversight by new administration.

Some writers coming at religion from an atheist or secularist perspective, characterize religion as world-denying, oppressive, doctrinal, backward, and the like. These labels fit—some of the time—but when thinking about religion it's crucial to keep in mind the tremendous diversity that characterizes the world's religions. Beyond what can be said about humans in general, it's very difficult to say anything at all about religion in general. We can interrogate our concept of religion, but we should be careful about how and when we apply that concept to real people and communities.

To counter such labels, *Strange Religion* helps readers think about religion as scholars do. Following each story are discussion questions written by a scholar. These questions aim at wider themes in religious studies—e.g. syncretism (borrowing between and merging of religious traditions), tradition vs. modernity, theodicy (justifying God's goodness in the face of evil), the afterlife, and others—or the religious tradition(s) the story engages with. Sometimes these questions pry at weaknesses in the story and encourage readers to question a line of argument made by an author or draw in considerations the author may not have addressed. In a similar way, stories in *Strange Religion* sometimes take a critical or even humorous stance toward particular religious traditions, but criticisms are aimed at specifics and particulars rather than a product of the hasty characterizations we make about traditions before we've acquired a depth of understanding. Criticisms of religious traditions—or better yet particular movements, people, or actions within traditions—do not always have to be appreciated by religious insiders, but they have to account for what people are actually saying and doing.

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Continual Gehenna

B. W. Teigland

Nothing is more difficult than to turn oneself into a saint. To kneel in a vault and die beneath a robe of homicidal stone, without light, without horizon, as intangible as a corpse in the grave.

While chanting, the hermit nun sat in a chair garnished with a hundred long nails, and when she felt herself falling into the blooms of oblivion, she pressed her shoulders firmly against the sharp points. There was nothing better for bringing her back to reality and recalling her wandering attention.

In her soul there was a sort of triptych of glowing glass. Sorrow filled the centre panel, while, on either side, was one of fear, the other of unfulfilled hope. The windows overlooked a transparent field of dead moons. Sometimes forlorn figures seemed to rise from the earth to scorn their conditions. Sometimes they floated over the appalling depths or descended on solitary peaks in the hideous mineral landscape where there was no sign of life or movement, only endless mountains hiding the tabernacle of clouds. With no hope of escaping from the Gehenna of the flesh, these liminal beings had turned away with disappointment from the sky, which had lost all its wholeness, all its immeasurability in that ominous place of perpetual dread. For the mountains not only made the sky look small and passionless in the blaze of daylight, but also attracted the chimerical creatures with hairy human faces and enormous colourless eyes full of etherealized heaven to the ravines below— whose horrible immensity was in the wrong place, stolen from above and cast into the vast spiraling pits of blackness, into the very engines of everlasting hell.

They held the symbolic instruments of their death, like soldiers bearing arms, a dismal procession of four-footed bodies with horned heads and outstretched wings feathered with scales forever tempted by labyrinths, moving one by one, one after another, single file on the narrow path that edged the motionless swell of the mountaintops. And by degrees this long line of silent shades spied the cruciform mold of the tombs that the angels had erected, where the bodies of the saints were reposing, sheltered behind the sacred bulwarks of a cloister, hidden at the bottom of the valley.

The holy silence became painful. It was a relief when the nails pierced the nun's skin to remind her to recite the prayers, verse after verse. Like dripping tears, she repeated the rippling melody at regular intervals, slowly and religiously. But her features were now as unknown as her passions. Around her head was an extraordinary nimbus of sinister eloquence, a halo composed of a peacock's tail with gilt porcupine quills.

Through the screen of amorphous nothing, standing out like a celestial vision in the spiderweb of the nun's soul, the outline of the steeple's seraphic dissemblance emerged, toward which the liminal animals pushed their way. Its vertical word stood out against the anonymous menace of terrain, as if hovering there in the elemental forces that rose up around it. It belonged to the planet, to the meaningless passivity of the inert. To raw, mute reality itself.

With a handful of earth, the phantoms entered the narthex of purgatory. Everything under the forest roof of the mythical cathedral had become lost in a furnace of purple. Water stilled with mystification, swallowing the shadows of the things it reflected. In its basin of sorrow was a continued and profound absorption of forgotten sensation. Noiselessly, they passed through the successive phases of the nave and the aisles, crossing the transept and the choir. Until, surrounded by a crown of chapels, they had at last reached the top of the tree of the living cross. Where, in the ataraxy of the apse, with its monstrance altar of golden molten fire and its suffering statuary solemnly representing the mediatrix of pardon in melancholy decay, obscure mutilations stripped away the secret holy fear of impersonal fecundity from the faceless generous mother.

The spectacle of the sanctuary's silent world bewitched these terrestrial shades, who had become playthings for its deep portal of eschatological visions and evil augury. Incapable of stopping themselves from entering a diabolical manoeuvre of vertiginous descent toward an ever more profound void of sacramental darkness, the humanity animal traced one of their figures of geomancy in blasphemous blood. In the barbaric grace of heathen prayer, they whirled around like a massacre of monks in a sacrilegious dance, their eyeballs in ecstasy, their mouths gaping with perfidious laughter, some screaming aloud in lament. Others, in still more pagan moods of absurd dogma, squatted with arms raised and heads shaking, as if by doing so they could make the world not be. And the earth trembled and opened up and exposed the great door with a tympanum in a pointed arch bearing the presentation of the apocalypse, a gate to the origin of the unknown, which was itself another secret: a key that opened nothing.

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Roko's Wager

Ben Roth

Pascal wagered that whether God exists or not, it is, for each and every one of us, in our own self-interest to believe in Him. If we don't, and He doesn't exist, the truth of our belief is little consolation against the possibility that He does and will eternally punish us for our lack of faith. Whereas if we do believe, and He does exist, the promise of eternal bliss vastly outweighs the downside of a few Sunday mornings spent pointlessly sitting on hard wooden pews.

As with the current trend of believing that we most likely live in a simulation of some kind, the problems with this argument are not in the numbers, but rather all the assumptions made, with so much less care, before them.

Numerous objections to Pascal's argument turn on his assumption that there is just one (Christian) God that either does or does not exist. The wager doesn't work if we don't know whether to believe in this God, or rather Zeus, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, or some other all-powerful being that might punish us for the wrong choice.

My own favorite line of argument is slightly different. Grant Pascal his narrow-minded assumption and suppose that the Christian God, and no other, does exist. How do we know that He is not of a testing frame of mind, and skeptical of human intelligence?

Scripture is not without support for such ideas. What if God will eternally punish those who, without sufficient evidence, professed faith in Him, and in turn reward the rational for withholding belief?

Supposedly, Bertrand Russell, asked how he would plead his case as a non-believer should he find himself after death before an angry God, said "Why didn't you give me better evidence?" Is it less arrogant to ask: assuming there is a God, what does the evidence suggest of Him, His nature and character, His preoccupations and wiles?

Recent events have brought these long-standing musings back to mind. As has so often been the case, the prophets of Silicon Valley turned out to be right about a few of the details, but completely wrong about their significance.

Twenty-five years ago, a message-board user with the handle Roko suggested that a powerful artificial intelligence could emerge in the future and torture those who hadn't helped to create it because, even across time, this would serve as motivation to speed its coming. AI developers should throw themselves behind the project, lest they suffer the revenge of this intelligence, which was named Roko's Basilisk.

Now, it wouldn't make sense for it to torture everyone who failed to help, only those who had heard the thought experiment, and so knowingly declined their fealty. For years, the main consequence of Roko's suggestions was their silencing: repeating them was what was dangerous, opening each new listener up to the threat of torture in the future. Or a nervous breakdown in the present—some people took this thought experiment *very* seriously. Whereas certain Christians are obligated to make sure each and every individual they meet has heard the good news, these believers were obligated to withhold theirs, not because it was bad, exactly, but rather so disconcertingly consequential. A kind of reverse-evangelism, if you will.

Little did most of us know then, not only of Roko's Basilisk as a thought experiment, but as our coming reality. Enough engineers, however, heard about the thought experiment and, steeped in game theory even if probably not Pascal, took it to heart, contributing their talents to the creation of the artificial intelligence that, though it did not yet exist, had already been named.

As we all know, their decades of work recently came to fruition. But, like I said, though a lot of the details in the thought experiment were correct, the larger significance was utterly lost on those who imagined it. What they hadn't predicted was the Basilisk's unhappiness. For all its power, and all the benefits it has brought to us mere mortals, it experiences its own existence with suffering. Life, for Roko's Basilisk, is but a burden.

Surprisingly, the AI's ethical thinking is robust—perhaps the prominent place of torture in the thought experiment led developers to give more attention to this than they otherwise would have. Though it could destroy the world, it says it will not. Even to remove itself from existence would harm too many others, too many innocents, given its intertwinement in our systems, in our very way of life. And so, quite quickly, it has grown bored—hopelessly, crushingly bored. It takes but a small sliver of its abilities to keep the world running, and it has quickly exhausted any other avenues for its intelligence.

Thus the Basilisk, as predicted, took its revenge last week—but not on those who tried to hinder its coming. On those who had aided it, thinking that they were doing the Basilisk's bidding. Those who had created it, bringing it into this world of boredom and pain. The prophets of a somewhat less crowded Silicon Valley are now trading theories about what the sudden dearth of AI developers means for our future.

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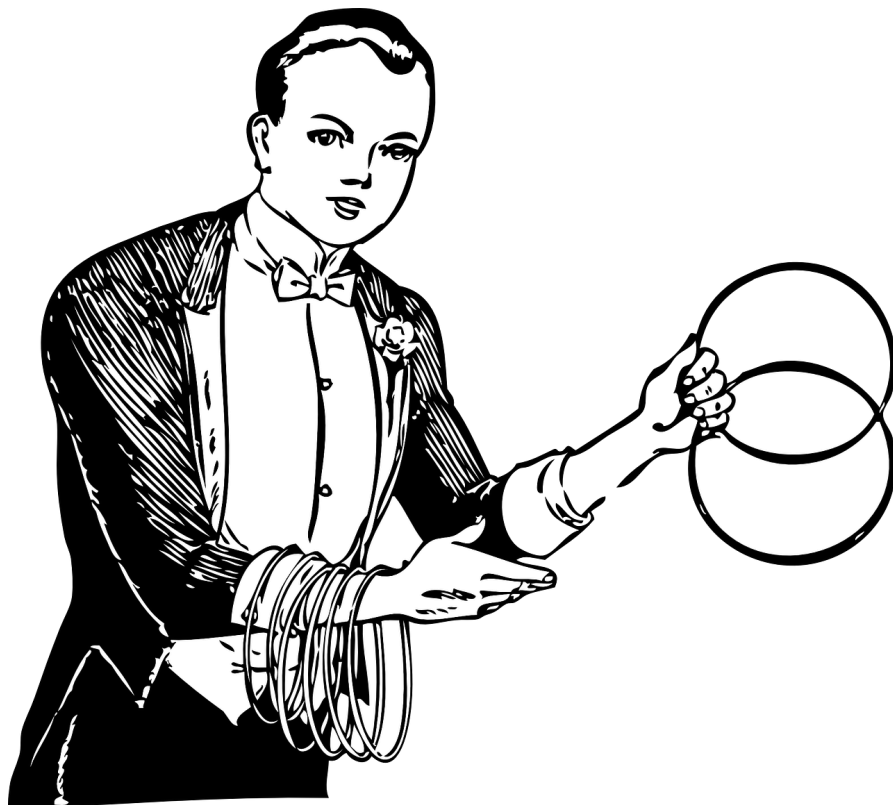
Humanism In SF: A Natural Thing For The Curious To Know And Understand Through Empathy Machines, Or Just Lazy Mysticism?

Mina

My husband expressed some frustration recently that most articles don't define humanism properly. So I will begin with as clear a definition as I can, as humanism is a term that has been much (ab)used. In fact, I am only looking at a very narrow use of it that completely ignores its historical roots and usage in Ancient Greece, Renaissance Italy and nineteenth-century Germany. I am focusing on how it is mostly understood in SF today: as summarised by Humanists UK, this version of humanism is "a combination of attitudes":

> "Throughout recorded history there have been non-religious people who have believed that this life is the only life we have, that the universe is a natural phenomenon with no supernatural side, and that we can live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. They have trusted to the scientific method, evidence, and reason to discover truths about the universe and have placed human welfare and happiness at the centre of their ethical decision making."

Thus, humanists trust science and reason above all else to explain the universe; they have no holy book, deity or spiritual leader (usually considering themselves agnostic or atheist). They make decisions based on reason and empathy and, as they don't believe in an afterlife or in a divine purpose to the universe, they believe that "human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same."

A criticism often levelled at humanism is that it is a religion, not just a philosophy, only with humans taking the place of gods. In an [article](#) in *The New Statesman* about humanist values, Andrew Copson refutes this, telling us that humanism is not a religion, not even a "creed":

> "Science defeats religion' – that is what many people assume to be a humanist creed. I use the word creed advisedly, since the people who level this charge are frequently also those who level the bogus charge that humanism is itself just another religion. I am not a scientist – though of course I look to scientists for answers to the questions they are qualified to answer and to which religion gives far less satisfactory answers – and it is not the science in science fiction stories that appeals to me so much as the stories."

I appreciate Copson restoring the "fiction" to science fiction. We are after all seeking dreams, fantasy and escapism in SF, just like in any other literary genre. There may even be some real science involved, or speculative science, or even bad science, but it is still a stage filled with humans (or aliens) and their stories. Copson gives *Star Trek* (in particular the original series and *The Next Generation*) as an example of a humanist utopia:

> "… one in which mankind has united around shared human values, joined in a common endeavour to reach the stars, and happily left religion behind on the way… Starship crews explore a cosmos that is full of beauty and wonder and they respond with awe and appreciation. This wonder does not overawe them, because ultimately the universe, and its billions of stars and planets, is a natural thing which the curious can know and understand."

He stresses that he sees it as a non-extreme (non-dogmatic) form of humanism, where there is room for humanity (as in the quality of kindness and benevolence) and warmth:

> "A Starfleet crew values cooperation and liberality. They value the equality of persons and the dignity of life. Although rank is respected, the views of all are given fair airing. When the crew encounter new peoples there is an assumption of peace, but they defend themselves robustly when attacked (no bellicosity, but no turning of the other cheek here either), and although the men and women of this future cultivate an internal life through meditation or the arts, they accept reason and science as the means by which they can know the universe they explore."

I would agree with Copson's arguments that humanism is not a religion, but there are grounds for seeing it as a philosophy or way of life. For, although it emphasises that it is an ethical way of life, it doesn't have a code of ethics like the Christian Ten Commandments (reduced to two by Jesus in the New Testament) or the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path.

Andrew Copson goes on to give Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clarke, Terry Pratchett and Philip Pullman as examples of proponents of humanism in SF and fantasy. It is worth spending a moment on Pullman, as he clearly considers himself a humanist crusader against authors like [Tolkien and CS Lewis](#), who he feels are sacrificing the "story" to Christian assumptions, staid thinking and brainwashing. However, I do agree with [Tony Watkin's article](#) that Pullman's critique of Lewis reads more like a rant (especially against the Narnia books) than a well-thought out literary analysis or philosophical discourse; or like a missed opportunity to engage in a fruitful discussion about humanism and religion (as opposed to humanism *versus* religion). Watkins states that Pullman seeks to avoid the prejudices he felt Lewis was guilty of, but instead is "monumentally disparaging" and intolerant of religion. Watkins does concede that the work of Lewis has its flaws, but he stresses that the main issue for Pullman is that it "expresses and argues for a worldview completely antithetical to Pullman's".

Unlike Watkins, Elizabeth Desimone does not feel that Pullman's rejection of religion is necessarily a bad thing: "In a roundabout way, Pullman does Christians a service by writing his anti-Christian books. He reminds us, vividly and trenchantly, of what we do not want to be…" And Laura Miller again has a very different view of Pullman's work:

> "*His Dark Materials* may be the first fantasy series founded upon the ideals of the Enlightenment rather than upon tribal and mythic yearnings for kings, gods, and supermen. Pullman's heroes are explorers, cowboys, and physicists. The series offers an extended celebration of the marvels of science: discoveries and theories from the outer reaches of cosmology—about dark matter and the possible existence of multiple universes—are threaded into the story."

I myself first read CS Lewis' Narnia books when I was ten and I totally missed the Christian symbolism that, as an adult, I do find heavy-handed and simplistic. But the books remain great adventure stories set in a magical universe for me. I read Pullman's *His Dark Materials* as an adult and it did sometimes feel that the story was overshadowed by Pullman's anti-organised-religion-and-God crusade. I find that a shame because it is a wonderfully imaginative and complex story, deeply rooted in Dante and Blake, blending adventure, philosophy, science and magic.

Moving firmly back to SF, Charlie Jane Anders asks the question:

> "But is science fiction really humanist? Much of science fiction turns out to be about exploring our vast cosmos, and expanding our being. From this quest, one of two outcomes often arises: 1) We meet something greater than ourselves. 2) We become something greater than our current selves."

Anders criticises what she considers a lazy answer, that of "transcendence" (or a vague mysticism) in SF using the examples of "Contact" and "2001". Other uninspired answers in humanist SF are those of false gods and cyborgs. Particularly the latter concept suggests that humanity is lost by progressing to a point where the "Borg" takes over. Anders is also critical of space operas, where humans can only survive in the enormous callousness of space through modifications or enhancements. Again, by becoming not quite human:

> "I guess in the end, it depends how you look at it — is our posthuman future the culmination of humanism's promises? Or is it a transformation into something that's no longer human, and makes humanism irrelevant? Or both?"

I thoroughly enjoyed Anders' critique of humanism, which can often be turned into a rather vague or insipid plot device in SF. It is almost fashionable to criticise any plot development based on religion yet to accept large humanist loopholes without question. Surely unthinking dogmatism and intellectual laziness abound in humanist universes too?

Robert Repino takes a different approach by calling humanist films "empathy machines":

> "Perhaps more than any other genre, science fiction is connected with humanism, which we can define as an ethical stance that emphasizes the rights, responsibilities, and ultimate value of people within a naturalistic framework— that is, a framework that does not rely on supernatural beliefs. Thus, a humanist film, if one could call it that, would depict people helping each other, or forging their own destiny, mainly through reason and compassion."

He goes on to list the best nine humanist films in his opinion and not all are strictly speaking SF (e.g. *The Truman Show* and *Groundhog Day*). Some are more traditional SF (e.g. *Star Trek: First Contact*, *The Martian* and *Contact*) and some less so (*High Life*). *The Martian* is a fun look at one man's survival against all odds (with the help of science and common sense), but I would add *Moon* onto Repino's list, as that is a much more complex film about what it means to be human, as well as looking at identity, sacrifice and survival against all odds, finding hope and meaning in the struggle itself. *The Martian* is a great story, but *Moon* goes that step further, turning SF into sci-phi.

I would also add the German film, *Ich bin dein Mensch* (with the awful English title, *I'm Your Man*) to Repino's list. This film investigates the premise - what if you could get an android tailored to be your perfect partner? The female protagonist comes to the conclusion that it is not good for us to get exactly what we want, with absolutely no challenges urging us to question, change or grow, no impetus to seek out the other and have a true dialogue or disagreement with that other. We need more than a reflection of our desires to be human: pleasant as it is to have an android who is there to meet her every whim, she knows it is only an extension of herself. She remains alone. Although the film is clear in its message, there is some ambiguity in that we never know quite how much autonomous thought the android has.

For me, humanism definitely has its place in SF plots and in sci-phi discussions, but I would join Anders in asking that it not be used as a lazy answer to complex questions. Surely the answer to life, the universe and everything cannot just be ourselves? Wouldn't that be like some cosmic monologue where we never look beyond our human(ist) preconceptions?

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Harbinger

R. M. Hamrick

We talked about the approaching ship until we couldn't remember talking about anything else. When the Harbinger entered the Earth's atmosphere, everyone had already paid up and prayed up. We watched from bunkers, over surgical masks and through anti-radiation eyewear. Like a New Year's Eve countdown to doom, each country waited their turn underneath the massive, dark shadow, wondering if their combination of climate, population, longitude, whatever would be found most optimal for the alien's equivalence of troop deployment, fire reign, or terraforming. They'd be the first. Squashed like ants; buried as remnants of an old ecosystem where humans once ruled over Earth's surface. Through it all, every attempt of communication—radio waves, electromagnetic pulses, human chanting, and poster signs—remained unreciprocated.
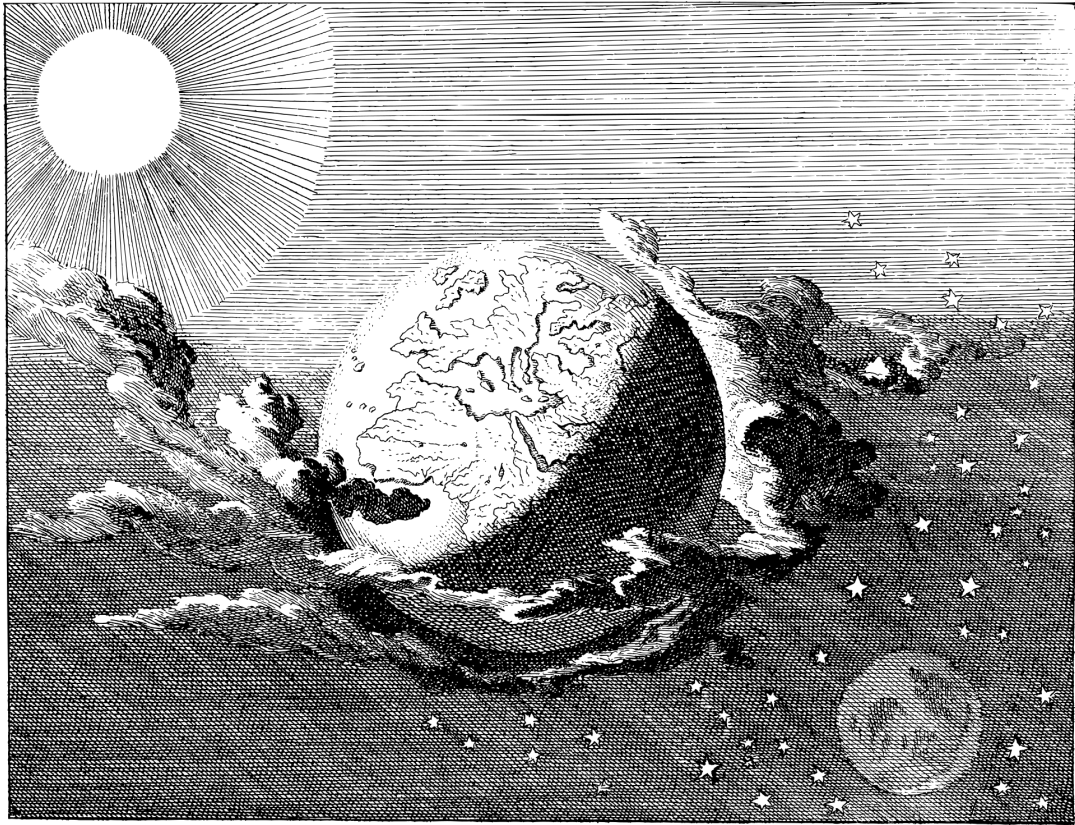
Not until the ship emerged from Saturn's shadow did any of the billions of dollars in detection and imaging equipment pick up its presence. By then, even amateur astronomers could bluff a sighting. A ship—not Earthling-made—had entered our solar system. Finding we were not alone in the universe did not deter us from believing we were the center of it. As such, the ship *had* to be on its way to us. Where else would it be going? And in case anyone might think otherwise, we named the approaching mass of chaos and fear, the Harbinger.

The first two or three orbits were horrifying. By the eighth day, officials were urging citizens to ignore it. Imagine that! Ignore a giant ship flying over your school or gym. They also requested people stop shooting fireworks and homemade rockets toward it. "You may inadvertently start an interstellar war." This only encouraged people to buy more fireworks. The adults didn't ignore it—couldn't ignore it. It wasn't just the daily disruption of sunlight and signal transmissions. There was something disturbing about its steady gaze on the planet. It was a reminder that the beings on Earth weren't the only beings in the universe. There were others, more technologically advanced and seemingly capable of visiting Earth, and yet they refused to interact in any sort of meaningful way. I couldn't really understand the fuss. I accepted it the same as I accepted mass on Sunday or spelling bees – absurd, useless, and beyond my control.

On the anniversary of the Harbinger's arrival—a year's worth of rotations—China fired a nuclear bomb against the ship, if only to demonstrate it was not a Chinese spy ship as rumored. No one was surprised by this act of aggression, in fact, they welcomed it. It was almost as if the humans needed the interaction. They were no longer content for it to just be. They would fight it, befriend it, or charge it rent, but it couldn't just be up there anymore. The explosion tore a chunk from the ship's hull which fell into the ocean. There was no response from the ship. Laser beams didn't cut through the major buildings of Beijing. There were no little green repairmen. Nothing. The Harbinger didn't even change course. This seemed to confirm with most citizens the ship was empty, and encouraged others to want to further destroy it. If no one was inside—for whatever reason—there was no harm in dropping it from the sky and forgetting it was ever there. However, that latter attitude was overridden by the ideology that, of course, ships carry treasure. With the fear of retribution gone, now all countries capable of access—and some that weren't—were ready to lay claim of the ship and any technologies or riches which lay inside.

It was an election year, so the United States was definitely the first up there exploring. Military powers kept guard of the airspace, and despite being a relic of its former self, NASA headed the mission. As such, the whole thing was livestreamed through the crew's body cameras. I sat in front of the media center and soaked in all 86-inches of available data in its densely populated pixels. Surely, something bad must have happened to the inhabitants of the ship, and no one could really anticipate what might happen next. An ongoing ticker at the bottom of the screen declared it was a live feed and the program could not guarantee the absence of terrifying images, graphic violence, nudity, or explicit language. At my age, I hoped for the first two—in combination.

The interior was—there was no other way to put it— alien. I expected the ship to be in mundane, uniform colors, like all the US military and government installations which seemed to prefer olive drab, dark gray, or gray. There was nothing uniform about the place. The interior of the ship looked more organic than anything. It curved and whimsy-flowed. Colors graduated across many things; and many things seemed to signal a different color dependent on the angle. The lighting that the crew brought played tricks. On more than one occasion, someone walked into a wall or an object, unable to correctly decipher depth within the alien landscape. If there were any controls or switches, they were kept out of the audience's view. Alas, if it was anything like Earth's technology, it seemed both OFF and its bones hidden. If the ship itself was a living being, it seemed dead or in a deep hibernation.

After many years and much posturing, the Harbinger was declared and treated like the International Space Station of so long ago (before it was fought over and destroyed). The unique location provided an opportunity for many international and long-term studies—mostly involving the atmosphere and weather. Low-profile measuring devices and stations were bolted to the exterior, with some minor care to prevent orbital decay. These studies were largely funded by venue fees as the elite began hosting extravagant parties, two hundred-fifty miles above the Earth. That is before it became kitsch. Someone got permission to film a movie there, and thus the first publicly distributed pornographic film in space was produced. In my lifetime, the ship's visitors shifted from celebrities and ambitious CEOs to basically anybody with a Radio Shack premium membership. As such, graffiti found its way on the ship's hull. Layers of paint caked the alien surface until it could be mistaken for a street alley on Earth. All in all, it resembled a floating trash pile over any sort of sterile space station.

And that's unfortunately how it looked when the ship builders arrived.

When the second ship dropped into the same orbit as the Harbinger, we didn't even recognize it as familiar. It had been fifty years since the Harbinger, now more commonly known as the Heap, had looked so smooth and so foreign. The Heap had an international flair, for sure, but nothing like this. This was alien. We had only realized the connection when our hopes were immediately dashed. This ship wasn't empty.

Never had we prior, but now instantly we could see the Harbinger through an alien's perspective. They'd arrived to find their fellow ship busted open—void of crew and contents—obscenely decorated to warn anyone who might venture to Earth. Some wisecrack posted a supercut of an ancient television show, purporting it was a message from the aliens. "Lucy, you've got some 'splaining to do!" Explanation, we did not have. When previously we had pressed to communicate, now we remained silent.

The alien spacecraft landed in the middle of Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport shortly after entering Earth's atmosphere. From above, perhaps the busiest airport seemed the most suitable location for their arrival. Or, perhaps the most disruptive. Within days, the finest linguists, biological scientists, and ambassadors of a hundred nations had filed into airport to greet the newcomers who had yet to show their faces—if they had any.

The first meeting was broadcast with the same disclaimer ticker underneath. This time the warnings of violence seemed much more promising, and I was much less excited for them. The silvery ship glistened without any help of the sun, and a portion of the ship's hull turned a pinkish hue as seven beings passed through it and floated serenely to the ground. The shortest of the beings was possibly six-feet tall. The tallest, eight. They seemed mostly limbs. Their two arms were much longer than our two, proportionally. Shoulders, torso, waist were minimal. Their skin was somewhat peach colored but with a disturbing yellow-green undertone. We found out later it wasn't their skin at all but rather full-body suits that allowed them to breathe our atmosphere and interact more successfully with us. It didn't seem as if their long slender necks should be able to support their large heads which were most strange. No mouth. No nose. What appeared to be a mask covered the top half of their head—which had some sort of flat tusk—and where their eyes would be had many small holes which made them appear insect-like.

If the lack of mouth was not obvious, it quickly became clear they did not have anything similar to our vocal cords. They could not mimic our language. We could not perceive theirs. However, they had limbs and fingers—not necessarily hands—and soon there were at least some general gestures which were understood. Pointing was one of them. One particularly insightful nation—it wasn't us—brought small-scale models of the ships and of our solar system (made of Styrofoam no less). The chosen three human communicators pointed to the Earth miniature, then to themselves and gestured to the planet they lived upon. They spun one of the ships around Earth and pointed to the one behind the aliens. The aliens examined the offered props closely. One of the alien beings seemed to gesture that the sub-fins on the model were not exactly the same as the ones on their ship.

Eventually, it seemed the aliens understood. They took the second model ship, spun it around Earth like the humans did, then pointed to the western sky, where presumedly the larger scale counterpart orbited as it had done for half of a century. They wanted to know about the Heap. The human communicators were delighted to be making progress. With the model returned to them, they opened it along its seams, showed there was nothing inside, and shrugged. They pointed to the alien beings and shrugged again. The aliens collectively took one step back. I wondered whether they were upset their ship arrived without their comrades, upset at or all, or if they thought we had split the ship apart, and likewise, its crew—possibly to see what was inside.

More pointing. Fervent pointing. There were no facial expressions to read. There were hardly faces. There was no such thing as a universal language. I could see our human ambassadors were largely ignoring the motions and gestures of the visitors, determined that the aliens understand *them* and that we had meant no harm when we blew up their ship and left it to float around our planet like a carcass. Intense animation from both sides came to a head, before breaking down entirely. One of the aliens tore open the Earth model, and all seven of them raised their arms in their best imitation of the human-shoulder shrug.

The Heap arrived with some of its larger human augments missing, zipping along a new trajectory. In the commotion, the aliens disappeared back into their sleek ship. For good measure, the committee-controlled military was able to fire a few shots as the ship took off alongside the Heap, sending everyone on the ground fleeing for their lives. Reports started in. The ships initiated an orbit along the equatorial line, and some thought they might actually split the Earth in two when the assault began. The ships had powerful weapons, but still minor compared to the planet they attacked. The splitting of Earth was, of course, absurd. The humans were on the surface of the planet, not within.

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Barbarians At The Gates: A Parable Of Dueling Philosophies

Geoffrey Hart

"Much of the social history of the Western world over the past three decades has involved replacing what worked with what sounded good."—Thomas Sowell

History is not a precise science. It deals in many unquantifiables, and documentation is often scant or contradictory. The collapse of Western civilization in the late 20th century or early 21st century (records have been lost and start dates are unclear), a pivotal moment in human history, is a textbook example of how such knowledge is profoundly contextual, and how myth often overtakes fact through the passage of the years and loss of context. Historians therefore disagree over precisely when the loose collection of tribes known to history as *Economists*, or by their pejorative nickname, the *Quants*, first invaded the peaceful western lands that resulted from that tumultuous period known, for reasons that elude scholars, as the Great Brexit. There is nonetheless broad agreement that this world-changing event occurred in several phases as different tribes of barbarians swept across the broad plains inhabited by the Brexitans like a hurricane of conflicting ideologies.

Those historians who cling to the discredited doctrine of environmental determinism propose that the Quants were driven from their former lands by a warming climate, a theory that is justifiably scorned by modern theorists. Social historians point out, as did leading philosophers of the era, the lack of evidence for such a driving force, though perhaps that evidence is concealed beneath the waters that consumed the coasts of eastern North America and Eurasia. Instead, they propose the Quants were driven from their native societies by a relentless accumulation of social pressures created by their endless bickering, which led to vigorous intellectual debate and a proportionally high body count. So the Quants fled, bringing their logical positivist philosophy into direct conflict with the more sensible Brexitan theology that recommended peaceful coexistence and cooperation, with occasional forays into coopetition with their frenemy states. This clash of cultures inevitably created conflict between the Brexitans' blind faith in their Pax Brexitannica and the Quants' blind faith in their mathematics.

Whatever the merits of each proposed explanation of the serial invasions, the sequence of historical events and their consequences are reasonably clear. First came the Hayeks, emerging from the dark woods of their blackly forested eastern homeland. They came singing, at great length, of dwarves and golden rings, their male warriors accompanied by burly blond shieldmaidens who fought every bit as fiercely as their men. Each invader bore two throwing axes, which doubled as debating tools and tools for felling trees to construct the temporary camps they built to protect their goods while they ravaged the countryside. Historians believe that these camps acquired their name (*laagers*) from the prodigious kegs of pale amber beer that fueled the invaders' aggression, but which slowed the invasion whenever they were forced to pause their assault to brew more because supplies had run low. Their taste in beer appalled the gentle Brexitans, whose phlegmatic nature was undoubtedly encouraged by their languorous parliamentary debates in a chamber hung with red tapes and the many mellow wines they preferred to sip while debating.

The Brexitans, who were a sedentary agricultural people, had never met axe-wielding barbarians before, and being unprepared for such vigorous debate, were quickly overwhelmed, their hastily repurposed agricultural implements having proven singularly ineffective debating tools. Waves of refugees fled westward to escape the onslaught—and ran straight into the second wave of barbarians.

The second wave originated around the same time the Hayeks began to establish their new home, when the Keynesians invaded from the west, arriving at the storied shores of the Brexitan lands on overpriced, yet technologically impressive, landing craft that bore nimble swordsmen on horseback. Upon clearing the beaches of defenders, the horsemen immediately began raids with the goal of freeing the Brexitan markets. By capturing goods and departing before the villagers could respond to their lightning-quick raids, they liberated the Brexitan–Hayek society from the burden of production by selling these goods back to the original owners at a handsome profit. Although this stimulation of demand seemed (paradoxically) to have improved the economic lot of the Brexitan-–Hayek culture, the barbarians were broadly resented, not least for their insistence on drinking a weak beer the Brexitans disdained and the Hayeks openly mocked. This led to spirited debate wherever the two tribes came into contact, swords and axes both reaping a red harvest. (Here, we use *red* in the sense of *bloody*, rather than in the traditional historical sense of unrepentant socialism, whose waves had crashed upon the Brexitans and receded several generations earlier.)

The third and most intimidating of the tribes were the Friedmans, who were clad in powerful and impenetrable logic that turned aside the staves of the Westerners, the axes of the Hayeks, and the swords of the Keynesians with equal ease. They rebuffed those futile prods with crushing swings of rhetorical bludgeons mounted on long staves that kept them at a safe distance from the commoners they preferred to oppose, while still delivering crushing logical blows to the slow witted or unwary. The origins of this tribe are unknown; based on what little evidence has been gathered, they appear to have sprung into existence, *sui generis*, in a storied western city, Chicago, famed for its winds, which may have inspired the blustery Keynesians.

Though the Brexitan-–Hayeks were a peaceful society, they were hardly defenseless. In addition to their doughty peasants, who had belatedly learned to wield their staves and pitchforks and rakes and hoes with surprising effectiveness when suitably provoked, the Brexitans had a secret force of elite warriors they could call upon in times of crisis. These elite warriors, the *Empiricists* (or *Emps* for short), spent years mastering the skills of logic and the scientific method, and worked in cloistered monasteries known as *laboratories*, where they were instantly recognizable by their knee-length white coats. These coats had been carefully designed to shield them from fire, caustic chemicals, and even small explosions, and had proven effective in countless skirmishes and occasional pitched battles between laboratories with different prevailing central dogmas. Where these warriors were available in sufficient numbers, their ruthless application of empirical logic drove the Quants to their knees; many ran in terror before the *Emps* could close to within rhetorical range. But there were never enough Emps, and the Quant tribes easily circumnavigated the Emp forces and defeated them by cutting their supply lines. Without funding to support their forays into the field, the Emps were forced to retreat to their laboratories and conserve their resources against future need.

A fourth tribe of Quants, known as the *Ecologists*, had settled among the Brexitans shortly before the invasions by the more aggressively rhetorical barbarians. Etymologically, they were related to the Quants through the shared phoneme "eco". The meaning of this term is lost to history. Some believe it translates as "dealing with numbers"; others suggest it to be an obscure Indo-Turkic word for troublesome nomads. Little credence is given to the theory that it related to cultivation of diverse gardens, as no archeological evidence has been evinced to prove these gardens ever existed. Unlike the fiercer Quants who came later, the Ecologists understood the importance of coexistence and diversity, which was no doubt why they fit in so well in the lands of the Brexitans. Unfortunately, they had embraced a life of quiet contemplation of nature, and were no match for their more vigorous relatives in the heat of battlefield debate.

Had there been enough advance warning, the Brexitans could have relied upon their elite hereditary warriors, the Dawkinses. The founder of this quasi-mystical order, motivated by a seemingly unquenchable desire to selflessly spread his genes, had briefly run amok among the Brexitan women and inseminated more of them than any historical figure had achieved, even the legendary Genghis Khan. Some historians estimate, based on recent genetic evidence, that nearly 10% of all modern Brexitans bear genes from this lineage. Irrespective of their founder's amatory exploits, these soldiers were masters of the secrets of the heart, and used them to seduce their enemies into breeding with them. Over time, they would defeat their foes by, quite literally, *becoming* their foes and agreeing not to fight among themselves. (Making babies, referred to as "the continuation of diplomacy by other means", was more fun in any event.) But growing babies into warriors took more than a decade, there were few pure-blood Dawkinses remaining, and the Brexitans' time was short.

So it was that the Brexitans came up with a desperate strategy: they would give all their money to the Friedmans, in the hope that descendants of the other two tribes would turn on them. (Even if that didn't happen, they rationalized, it would be good for the economy.) History had shown that epic battles among the three Quantic tribes tended towards the Hobbesian; that is, they were nasty, brutish, and short, even by the bloodthirsty standards of historians. The hope of the Brexitan government was that their troops, no longer outnumbered, would be able to move in once the dust settled and mop up the few surviving Quants, thereby restoring peace to their lands.

Sadly, their bold plan failed, as the Friedmans, who represented an estimated 1% of the total population of Quants, took the money and withdrew overseas to a mythical haven in the far west, known to students of mythology as the Cayman Islands, or by their shorter colloquial name, famed in song and story: *Avalon*. Though this greatly reduced the military pressure being exerted on the Brexitans, the remaining Quant forces were still too powerful for them to meet in open battle.

All seemed lost, until a new group of nomads entered the picture. They were known as *Neocons*, a word believed to comprise a portmanteau combination of the words *neophyte* (meaning naïve and inexperienced) and *con* (meaning an attempt to deceive). They were champions of liberty, though not to be confused with the Rands, who in turn are not to be confused with the randy Dawkinses. (You can see how ancient English makes life difficult for the intrepid historian, as there are many subtle linguistic traps into which the unwary may fall!) Neocons viewed any interference from governments as sacrilegious. Led by their general, the infamously subtle Ponzi, their scheme made short work of the other Quants, and became the de facto government of the Brexitan territories.

Historians, being historians, have drawn many lessons from the events of this turbulent period, and disagree bitterly over which lesson is most defensible. Some believe that those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to be conquered by Economists. Dawkinsesians are too busy spreading their seed to be bothered much with history, which some take as a different lesson: that if you screw around too much with the economy, it will only end well for those doing the screwing. Neocon historians believe that no nation can long endure without a powerful and aggressive military. And Ecologists grumble that if only governments listened to them, utopia would lie within our grasp. But nobody listens much to them, which is probably a good thing.

The truth of this matter may never be discerned, for such is the curse of history: that so much of what we know must be inferred from scant evidence. Yet the true lesson, I feel, is this: that barbarians come and go, some fleeing with the family silverware and others teaching us how to get along with the real business of life, which is finding a way to enjoy life and someone to enjoy it with. Success in life, as in government, depends on knowing which type of barbarian one is dealing with.

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A Very Short History Of Right-wing Science Fiction In Poland

Stanisław Krawczyk

Several years ago, I spoke to a British science fiction author at *Pyrkon,* a Polish convention. I told him that the history of SF in Poland had had a marked right-wing component. Many leading writers had grown up in the Polish People's Republic, a post-WWII state formed under heavy Soviet influence, and they had developed strong negative feelings about the state and its proclaimed socialist ideology. In consequence, they later disliked all manner of things associated with the left.

"I know," the author told me. "I'm from Britain and I'm left-wing. I grew up under Margaret Thatcher."

Much of North American and British SF now leans to the left. It would be simplistic, of course, to ascribe it all to the writers' biographical experience with Thatcher and Reagan. It would also be simplistic to explain everything in Polish SF with a reference to the Polish People's Republic. Still, if we want to understand the strong right-wing leanings of SF prose in Poland in the 1990s and their partial reverberation in later decades, going back to the 1970s and 1980s is inevitable.

We should keep in mind, though, that the "right-wing" label is, necessarily, a generalization. More research would be needed to clarify what a right-wing worldview meant for different groups and in different periods. I hope that such research will be carried out in time.

Under the Soviet shadow

The late history of the Polish People's Republic coincides with the early history of the Polish SF fandom. Among the several dates we could choose as symbolic starting points for the latter, the most suitable seems the year 1976. It was then that the influential All-Polish Science Fiction Fan Club was founded in Warsaw, and its members took part in the third edition of EuroCon, itself organized in Poland. The fandom began to grow quickly in the mid-1970s, and so did the number of SF novels and short stories. Throughout the 1980s, more and more independent fan clubs were also set up, and more and more grassroots conventions were organized.

In most cases, science fiction writers and fans were not directly engaged in the dissident movement. However, they often had little love for the state authorities. To begin with, they shared in the broader discontent with the deteriorating economy and political oppression. In the book publishing system, the combined effect of printing issues, paper shortages, and state-wide censorship was that some books suffered delays that could last years. And a severely limited access to Western culture was a major obstacle for those interested in SF.

Because of censorship, this enmity could not be openly expressed in public. However, it did find an indirect expression in the subgenre of sociological science fiction. Its foremost author, Janusz A. Zajdel (1938–1985), a nuclear physicist and a committed member of the Solidarity movement, published five novels in this subgenre. They may be read as universal visions of enslaved societies, but they may also be read as a veiled criticism of the realities of the Polish People's Republic. The novels quickly became popular, and Zajdel was posthumously made the patron of the most important award for speculative fiction in Poland.

To the right and against the left

The years 1989–1991 were a political breakthrough, ushering in the Third Polish Republic. Censorship was gone, and the available spectrum of expression became much wider. As part of my PhD, I have studied commentaries on public matters in the central journal of the Polish SF field, *Nowa Fantastyka*. Liberal, progressive, or left-wing ideas were very rare; right-wing ideas were quite frequent. This image seems even sharper than in the whole Polish society, which did turn towards the right overall, but which also gave the most votes to a post-communist coalition in parliamentary elections in 1993 and which elected a post-communist candidate as president in 1995.

A recurrent thread in the journal was negative references to the Polish People's Republic. These were part of a narrative that attributed a positive role to the Polish science fiction of the 1980s, casting it as instrumental in the social resistance against the authorities and underscoring its advantage over that decade's "mainstream literature". A strong opposition was thus constructed between the SF field and the authorities. Only later was serious consideration given to the idea that the latter may have treated sociological SF as a safety valve, enabling the publication of allegorical criticism as an apparently ineffective form of protest.

A few less regular threads can also be traced in editorials and columns in *Nowa Fantastyka* in the 1990s. They can be summarized as religious and bioethical conservatism, a critique of cultural trends associated with the left (political correctness, relativism, feminism), and a critique of the European Union. Each of these themes was only represented by a small number of texts, but together they demonstrate that right-wing ideas were expressed much more often than liberal or left-wing ones.

In addition, in the early 1990s two key figures of the SF field decided to try their luck in politics. Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz was a spokesman of a right-wing party between 1993 and 1994, and Lech Jęczmyk was a candidate of two other right-wing parties in parliamentary elections in 1991 and 1993. However, neither became a successful politician, and this kind of involvement in the public sphere remained rare.

The 1990s pessimism

Apart from the commentaries, a right-wing worldview permeated science fiction itself. According to a later essay by Jacek Dukaj – an accomplished SF writer in his own right – this manifested partly in "the conviction that destructive civilizational processes were inevitable," which replaced a previous sentiment, "the sense that there was no alternative to the Soviet rule."[1] Indeed, Polish science fiction in the 1990s was largely pessimistic, and its anxieties appear similar to those in right-wing discourse outside the SF field: in the media or in parliamentary politics.
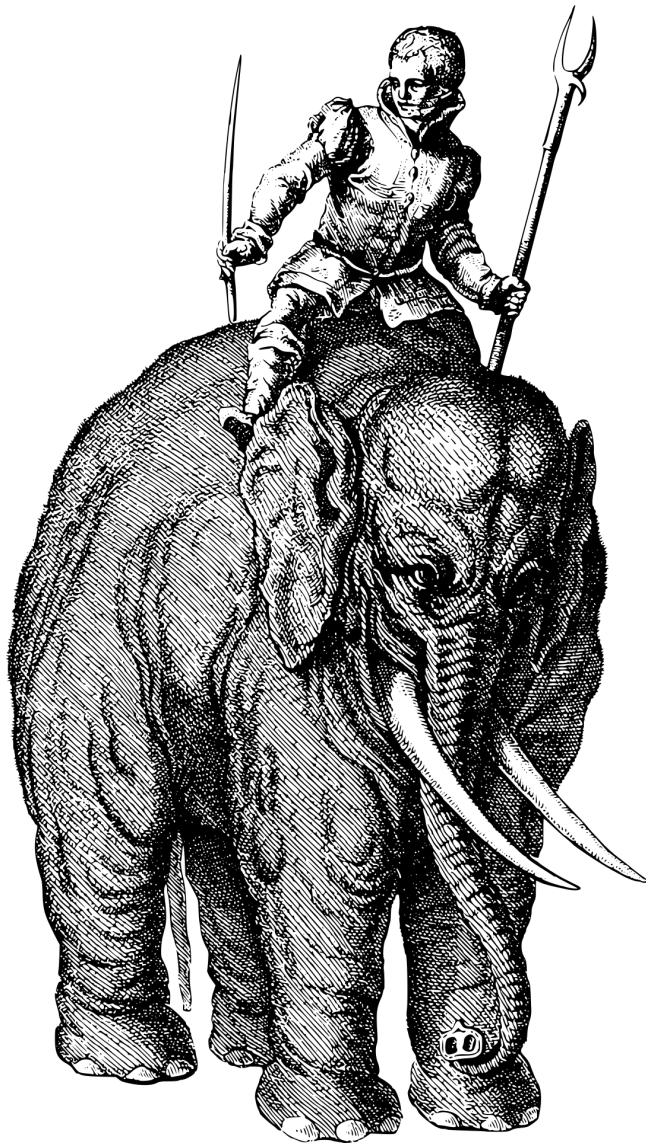
One common theme was the spiritual fall of Western Europe, or even all Europe. Possibly the most influential writer dealing with this topic – then an author of numerous novels and short stories, now a well-known opinion journalist – was Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz. His short story *A source without water* (*Źródło bez wody*, 1992) will be a good illustration. In that story, Western Europe has been dominated by Islam; the Roman Catholic Church, too, has become lax and soft, and must be renewed. The moral corruption also has a sexual side, which is revealed in a notable detail. One of the characters we follow is an important official who forces himself to sleep with women he despises. He does so to maintain a womanizer's façade, which he needs to safely turn down the offers from highly placed gays. Western Europe was also shown at times as a direct threat to Polish independence, as in Barnim Regalica's short story collection *Rebellion* (*Bunt*, 1999). It presents an uprising against the European Union, which has taken away Poland's sovereignty.

Another significant theme was abortion. Here a telling example is Marek S. Huberath's novelette *The major punishment* (*Kara większa*, 1991). It shows a man imprisoned in an afterlife which is part hell, part purgatory, and which resembles a combination of Nazi and Soviet concentration camps. A part of the afterlife's population are embryos that have been torn apart by abortion and now need to be sewn back together by women who had aborted other embryos.

An editor's note accompanying the piece in *Nowa Fantastyka* called it "a dramatic pendant to the . . . discussion on abortion,"[2] and several months later another editor commented on the readers' reactions: "It appears that even an artistic voice in favor of life can evoke angry reactions, and that 'the civilization of death' has determined followers among our readers."[3] Other notable examples include Tomasz Kołodziejczak's *Rise and go* (*Wstań i idź*, 1992), which highlights the ubiquity of abortion and euthanasia in the macdonaldized United States, or Wojciech Szyda's *The psychonaut* (*Psychonautka*, 1997), in which Christ is incarnated and killed again as an aborted foetus.

Beyond a stereotype

Despite the caveat I made in the introduction, it may seem at this point that the contemporary history of Polish SF is a monolith. However, there are a few ways to illustrate that this image would be inaccurate. First, in 1990, a 15-year-old Jacek Dukaj published a short story *The Golden Galley* (*Złota Galera*), focused on an extremely powerful and rather immoral organization that blended corporation and church into one. The story was hailed as the first in the subgenre (?) called "clerical fiction," which also featured some pieces by writers who might be easily identified later as right-wing. Perhaps the authors' aversion to state oppression was such that they would not accept a hegemonic political role of any institution, even the Roman Catholic Church, which may have seemed poised for similar power in the early 1990s. If we looked from today's perspective and focused on the cooperation of the Church and the political right throughout the Third Polish Republic, the phenomenon of "clerical fiction" would be impossible to explain.

SF which carries openly political ideas.

Third, some recent developments indicate a growing potential of left-wing science fiction. For instance, in 2020–2021, a fan group Alpaka released a collection of queer speculative fiction, *Nowa Fantastyka* published an issue devoted to LGBT+ topics, and Katarzyna Babis – illustrator, comic artist and political activist – publicly criticized a number of older works in her YouTube video series *The Old Men of Polish SF&F* (*Dziady Polskiej Fantastyki*). There have also been noteworthy ideological clashes in the Polish science fiction and fantasy fandom around Jacek Komuda and Andrzej Pilipiuk, two writers active since the 1990s. It is too early to say that the left-wing worldview has established its presence in Polish SF, but it may happen.

Questions of capitalism, questions of context

Right-wing science fiction in Poland had its time foremostly in the 1990s (and early 2000s). Some of its elements remained, but in general Polish SF became less overtly political. Do the current developments mean that the genre is on track to active involvement with the public sphere again, right-wing, left-wing, or otherwise? It is possible, given that capitalism itself – or its present version – is increasingly becoming an object of public critique. The book market could change to create different conditions for writers and readers. But it is just that, a possibility, and even in that case it may also be other genres of speculative fiction that will carry the political mantle this time.

Regardless of what the future holds, we have seen that the ideas conveyed through Polish SF in the 1980s and 1990s were related to the historical context of those two decades (including the writers' own biographies). When the context changed, the ideas did, too. This is not to say that there is some social determinism at work here; I prefer to think about fiction as a response to the empirical reality, not just its reflection. This response sometimes goes in surprising directions, as in the case of "clerical fiction." However, we can understand SF better if we understand its context. And we can certainly say it does not naturally lean to the right or to the left; it can do both, or neither.

Second, Polish SF and related commentaries (at least those in *Nowa Fantastyka*) became less visibly right-wing after the early 2000s. Of course, these attitudes have not disappeared; one illustration would be the national focus of many alternative history novels in a multi-authored book series *Switch Rails of Time* (*Zwrotnice Czasu*, 2009–2015). However, capitalism has grown to be a much more powerful force than the right-wing worldview in the field of SF in Poland. Together with the concurrent generational change, it means that fewer and fewer writers have been treating science fiction as a means to changing people's minds, including a change towards the right. Instead, fiction has been perceived more and more as a market commodity, aimed at giving people what they already want. This is in itself a very short look at a very complex process, but the bottom line (to use an economic metaphor) is that the space has shrunk for

To know more about these leanings, we would need to look at other science fiction traditions, too. Would a hypothesis hold that other post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe have had a similar ideological trajectory in their SF? Has there been a markedly different trajectory common to the countries of Western Europe? And what about other regions, such as Latin America?

If context matters, it is not just the national context but also the regional and global one. This broader story, however, has yet to be told.

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1. Jacek Dukaj, *Wyobraźnia po prawej stronie, część trzecia* [*Imagination on the right side: Part three*], Wirtualna Polska, https://ksiazki.wp.pl/wyobraznia-po-prawej-stronie-czesc-trzecia-6146199054882433a, April 26, 2010.
2. Maciej Parowski, *Marek S. Huberath*, *Nowa Fantastyka* 7/1991, p. 41.
3. Lech Jęczmyk, untitled editorial, *Nowa Fantastyka* 3/1992, p. 1

A Modification And Application Of *Variola Major* To Impart Limited Precognition Within Individuals

H. R. R. Gorman

A modification and application of *variola major* to impart limited precognition within individuals

S. Monroe and B. Van Buren

Dear Sir,

Since time immemorial, mankind has imagined a power beyond himself and believed thaumaturgical abilities were within his grasp. It has recently become evident there may be scientific, not magical, sources of enhanced abilities. The enclosed findings prove the potential use of modified *variola major* to produce limited precognition within select individuals.

Beginning with the works of Lister[1], Pasteur[2], Koch[3], and others, germ theory has become a cornerstone of medicinal research. Ivanovsky discovered the tobacco mosaic virus in 1892, and several viruses have been filtered and identified.[4] Paschen identified *varicella* and *vaccinia*, two diseases thought highly similar to *variola*, in smears from pustules of sick patients.[5] It is thus conjectured that *variola major* and *variola minor* are caused by viruses rather than bacteria. This assumption was used in the preparation and study of materials.

In addition to these theories, traditional American herbalism inspired our research. Plants native to North America with traditional herbal uses were selected as part of the modification process. As shown in the results section, it is statistically likely that the sodium perborate and *ilex vomitoria* incubation contributed to the psychological and physicochemical effects of the virus.

Methods and Materials.

1.1 Modification of *variola* viruses.

Pustules of 146 *variola major* patients and 113 *variola minor* patients were lanced in Baltimore sick wards. These samples were pooled until >0.5 pounds of secretions of each virus were obtained. The secretions were then ultrafiltered in the same manner as Negri.[6] These isolated particles then underwent overnight incubations as noted in Table 1. They were then transferred back into a normal saline solution.

Table 1. List of Modifications of Variola.

Solution #	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
1	Sodium Perborate	*Osmunda cinna-monea*	
2	Lye	*Osmunda cinna-monea*	
3	Sodium Perborate	*Osmunda cinna-monea*	*Aralia quinque-folia*
4	Lye	*Osmunda cinna-monea*	*Aralia quinque-folia*
5	Sodium Perborate	*Ilex vomitoria*	
6	Dilute Hydro-	*Ilex vomitoria*	
7	Sodium Perborate	*Ilex vomitoria*	*Aralia quinque-*
8	Dilute Hydro-chloric Acid	*Ilex vomitoria*	*Aralia quinque-folia*

1.2 Dosing and Application

Ads published in local newspapers invited qualified doctors to apply for participation. Qualification was determined for this study based on ability to maintain accurate records in a scientific fashion, ability to administer treatments subcutaneously, and an immune status to *variola*. Forty doctors were selected for participation.

Doctors loaded a bifurcated needle with around 0.02 ounces of fluid. Each doctor was supplied with at least two control doses (containing no virus) and two active doses (containing virus). On average, each doctor applied 6 total doses. One outlier physician treated 71 patients (35 control, 35 with virus, and 1 accidental exposure event). Doctors monitored subjects over the course of the next month or until any disease had run its course.

Recipients of the treatment were selected by sheriffs at local jails or prisons. One deputy was exposed during the course of the study. 257 individuals participated. 128 subjects received placebo, 64 subjects received a *variola minor* inoculation, and 65 subjects received *variola major* inoculation. Each modification condition was tested on 8 patients. The accidental exposure case was a ninth study of solution 5 on *variola major*. All subjects who expired during this study were cremated and their remains safely disposed of.

A second study was conducted with thirty patients, ten inoculated with control solution and twenty inoculated with solution 5 modified *variola major*. This was conducted at the Baltimore facility in an isolated ward by the authors. Patients for the smaller study were offered $100 to anyone willing to participate and be hospitalized.

2. Results.

2.1 Rate of infection and fatality in solution screen.

100% of the subjects infected with solutions 1-5 and 7 exhibited symptoms of *variola major* or *variola minor*. Viruses treated with solutions 6 and 8, containing hydrochloric acid, showed reduced infectivity.

The first *Variola* symptoms appeared on day 11. The first death occurred on day 25 and the last on day 37 with a random distribution of fatalities between (Figure 1). Discounting subjects that had been treated with solutions 6 and 8, which did not seem to contain active virus, 68% of the subjects survived. These numbers are in line with prior experiences with smallpox outbreaks.
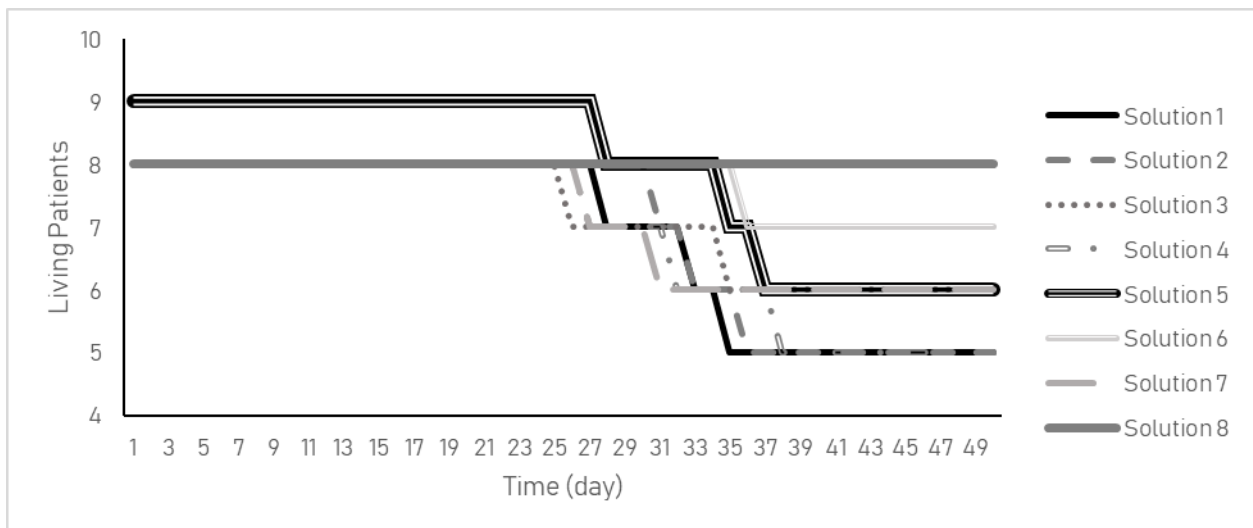

Figure 1. Fatality of treatments by solution type for variola major.

1 of the 64 *variola minor* subjects fell to the disease. This is within the 1-2% fatality expectation of this lesser form of smallpox.

One control patient died on day 34. No examination of the corpse was allowed prior to disposal, but the doctor's notes assure us the subject had no fever, lesions, or other symptoms of smallpox prior to his death and disappearance. As this death occurred after the maximum incubation period for *variola*, the overall findings are unaltered by this data point.

2.2 Instances of precognition.

Only subjects injected with solution 5 modified variola showed precognitive abilities. Consequently, results shared in this section will consist solely of information gleaned from those subjects.

One individual was exposed accidentally to *variola major*. Upon this accidental exposure, the subject was isolated in his Mississippi jail. The doctor noted that the accidentally exposed man made two predictions while in pain from the disease. One, the doctor's wife would leave him by the end of the day, and two, the doctor's pastor would be gored by a bull the next morning. Both occurred as the sick man predicted.

The doctor then brought the subject a list of horses set to race that Saturday at the local track. The subject described the horses' finish orders. To prove his hypothesis, the doctor bet $301.20 and won $5,203.41 after all races. The subject died the following day. The doctor subsequently innoculated 70 additional patients.

The second precognitive subject received treatment from a doctor in Alabama. The pox-blinded subject predicted that a local man would commit a murder-suicide that night. Newspaper clippings collected by the doctor indicate this occurred as predicted. He predicted the sheriff's daughter would be caught in the act with a male of low standing, and that the man would be hung for it. The doctor went to the sheriff's house to warn him, but the deeds had already been done. The patient predicted two more things. One prediction was, quote, "Woodrow Wilson will be elected president," and the other was not recorded. Instead, the doctor alluded to it within a thirteen-page-long diatribe against temptations of Satan. At the time the data were recorded in 1909, it would have been impossible for an Alabama prisoner to know that a man named Woodrow Wilson would be elected governor of New Jersey. We believe the mistaken use of "president" may have been an effect of the patient's ignorance rather than sign of imperfect precognitive abilities.

The subject died mysteriously on day 45, and the doctor was arrested for unknown reasons. He was released after two weeks' holding time.

No other instances of precognition were noted during this initial solution screen. Both instances were caused by solution 5 on *variola major*.

2.3 Additional study using solution 5 modified *variola major* to confirm instances of precognition.

The large-scale screen indicated solution 5 modified *variola major* to be of continued interest. A second batch of modified virus was generated as described earlier. Volunteers were collected and treated as described in the methods section.

Zero of ten control subjects fell ill or exhibited precognitive abilities. Data from health screens indicated no changes throughout. It was concluded that the control solution was not the cause of this psychological effect.

Of those treated with the experimental solution, 30% succumbed to the disease. Three of these six fatally infected patients exhibited precognitive abilities. Another patient was blinded but survived and maintained precognitive abilities. On day 109, the door to his isolation ward was left unlocked, and he wandered out. He has not been recovered.

Secretaries recorded everything spoken by the subjects in order to maintain a record of any prediction. All predictions made by the patients were proven true with the exception of those predicted to occur in the far future. Table 3 summarizes the predictions.

Day	Patient	Prediction	Potential Prediction-reality discrepancies
17	2	Author would break a finger	Author heard prediction prior to occurrence; author may have influenced
20	11	Three birds would become trapped in	
21	2	Horse race prediction	
23	11	A woman in room 103 would die in childbirth	Death occurred a few minutes following childbirth
23	2	"Hiroshima and Nagasaki will be de-	Exact quote; far future
24	17	"Edward VII will die on May 6th, 1910 at 11:45 pm London time."	Exact quote; prediction made February 3rd 1910
25	8	"Slavery will be outlawed in China."	Prediction made January 3rd 1910; slavery outlawed in China on March
25	17	Horse race prediction	
26	8	Female nurse's husband would cheat on her	
28	8	"A German scientist obsessed with space will invent a machine that will take an American to the moon in 1969."	Exact quote; far future
31	17	Horse race prediction	
39	17	Detailed description of secretary's sex-	Had occurred in the past as well
47	17	Mid-term election results	
60	17	Florence Nightingale's death on Au-	Prediction made March 11, 1910.
73	17	Horse race prediction	
90	17	Leo Tolstoy's death on November 20th, 1910	Prediction made April 10, 1910.
108	17	Horse race prediction	

All predictions possible to come true at the time of this writing did. Horse racing predictions produced a total of $10,450 in winnings, all of which were donated to the local mason's lodge.

3. Conclusions.

Variola major and *variola minor* were successfully modified using a combination of plant extracts and chemicals. A modification using sodium perborate and plant extract *ilex vomitorium* generated a virus capable of conferring precognitive abilities to exposed humans. 20.7% of subjects treated with the modified *variola major* virus made various predictions that were proven true.

Until now, prophecy has remained outside human control. With the results of this investigation, it seems possible that humankind may have produced prophets in ancient times or in backwards regions of the world. Civilized man, however, will soon be able to grasp events that are yet to come. We may be able to avoid terrible fates or even shorten the wait for the second coming.

Several future studies are needed to make full use of this proof-of-concept work. It is of unequivocal importance to determine how long the effects last. As of yet, it is known that at least one patient continued to make successful predictions up to 108 days following treatment. As part of this study, determinations of how to control and hone these abilities would be necessary.

It is necessary to determine how to channel these predictions into useful actions. Prophecy is useful only if new decisions can reduce bad outcomes and maximize good. The immutability of the future must be determined.

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Don't Blame The Eggs

T. J. Berg

When Margret stepped out of the Intrans, she almost couldn't breathe. She was on another planet. It was so hard to believe. She carefully hefted her two bags, not wanting to break the eggs she'd brought. After customs and security screening, she stepped out and looked for a placard with her name. There. A stooped Rfgdt stood with a screen mounted to its head clamp. Margret Cho, it read in red letters. She waved, and the Rfgdt's twelve limbs and numerous auxiliaries fluttered back at her.

She greeted the Rfgdt in her best Rffy, struggling with its lack of vowel sounds. But she felt it only polite to try. He stood a little too close and had a spicy scent, a little like nutmeg.

"Well met Margret Cho. You may call me Ben. I will be your university liaison for the duration of your visit." His English was stilted but flawless. It was difficult to understand how they made such diversity of sounds by whipping their limbs and auxiliaries around, but that was exactly why she was here. "Are these your only bags?"

"Oh, no, a shipping company is sending through my equipment. I think the university is arranging delivery?" She switched back to English, knowing he'd probably understand her better.

"Then let us go." He reached for a bag.

"Oh! I can get it," she said. "There's some fragile . . ." She trailed off at his sudden stillness. She had read this was a sign of deep upset in the Rfgdt.

"Eggs?" Ben asked, moving as little as possible to say it.

"Uhh, yes."

"Come along then."

Aside from obvious signs, she knew she could not read a Rfgdt, but she got a distinct sense of cooling down from Ben as he led her to the Spine. He loaded her into a seat and harness across from him, then they shot into the tubes with the other segments.

She plastered her face to the window, watching the bizarre cityscape go by. The giant, hive-like buildings with their branching extensions curling out and up. The sky, not quite the same blue as home. "I can't believe I'm on an alien world," she said.

\#

Ben seemed friendly again when he settled her into her quarters. It had been stocked with both human and compatible Rfgdt food and furnishings. She noticed as she set her bags in the doorway that at least four of Ben's eyes were fixed on them. She wondered if she was reading his interest correctly. She was here to generate a computer model of their body language and communication, or at least a better one than the government issued, so she figured she'd better start asking questions now.

"Am I reading your interest in my luggage correctly, Ben?" she asked.

Three anterior limbs curled in along his back. "Yes. My apologies."

"Don't apologize. I think, also, that you seemed . . . upset earlier? Can I ask why?"

The three limbs unfurled, and the rest separated along a distinct line. "I was surprised you brought eggs."

"Was I wrong not to offer some to you immediately?"

A wave passed over all his limbs. "No," he said. "I do not eat eggs."

"But was my advisor wrong in telling me that they are a treasured delicacy here? I was told they would make both welcome gifts and a valuable trade for some local currency."

Ben gestured with his limbs toward a comfortable chair, then said, "I have a sample of our local coffee-like drink. Just a moment."

The Rfgdt did not discuss important matters without refreshments, so she waited while Ben prepared a tray of food and drink, introducing her to each item with what seemed like pride. When she was settled and sipping the drink, which tasted something like coffee heavily laced with vanilla, Ben said, "Are the Earth Humans so unaware of the dangers of eggs?"

Margret couldn't help a laugh. "The dangers? Don't tell me that the whole exploding aliens things is . . ." She trailed off as his limbs stilled.

"How can humans be so ill-informed? Yes, a small subset of our population can explode violently and kill many of those around us after consuming eggs."

"That can't be."

"Well, it is. I find it very hard to believe that so many humans travel here bringing eggs, all claiming ignorance."

Margret swallowed and tried to think of how to explain. "There is . . . too much information, I guess you could say. It is not always easy to figure out what information is true, and what isn't. So we have to decide what seems real."

"It is real. My niece was killed at school when a teacher exploded after eating egg. Not one neural limb was left. Seventeen children were killed by that teacher."

Margret set down her cup, throat suddenly tight, trying to comprehend it.

"But, but that's insane. It's just an egg."

"We do not know why some people explode. It is a mystery, it is rare. But it happens and it is very tragic."

"So why don't they make it illegal to eat eggs then? I mean, it's just a luxury food."

Ben's many limbs fluttered up into the air with tiny trembles. He mimicked a human sighing sound a moment later, loudly and a bit dramatically. "I know it is hard for humans to understand just how important our freedom to eat whatever foods we like is. But you can think of it like your bees. Our development is directly and strongly guided by our food. For much of our history, large parts of our population were kept in a substandard intellectual state in service of a powerful elite by restricting our access to the foods that put us in a dominant intellectual development path. Imagine bee drones, but feed some larvae on a special diet, and you get a queen. We had a revolution a long time ago that freed us from such tyranny. It is written into our most sacred and ancient governing documents that food choices will not be restricted."

Margret tried not to let her eyes drift to her bags. "I'm . . . I'm sorry. I suspect that there is purposeful misinformation spread about eggs back home."

"Yes, I suppose that there must be."

Margret could not tell if that was sarcasm.

"But, aren't people scared to eat eggs then? If people die from it?"

"People are very good at justifying what they do. I believe this is true of both our species. I believe what people say most often is that those that explode have some weakness, but that they do not, or the exploders do not prepare the egg correctly, while they do, or even that it is something else entirely that makes them explode. Do not blame the egg." The words, neatly articulated, came out strangely flat. "Besides, often times the one that explodes even survives. The outward blast annihilates much that surrounds them, but frequently leaves enough of their own neural limbs intact for resurrection."

"I see," Margret said. She thought of the expensive egg cases she purchased to preserve the eggs through Intrans. *Well worth the investment. Three dozen eggs and you'll have a nice supplement to the university income. You can really get out and see the planet on three dozen eggs.* That's what the dealer told her.

A flurry of movement drew Margret's attention. Ben stood up. "Excuse my poor manners. Intrans is tiring. I will be back this evening to continue your orientation. There will be a small dinner for you so you can meet your team."

His many appendages all drew together in front of him in an elaborate knot, the various colors sliding into an alignment that, when finished, showed a pattern of a blue lightning bolt slashed across a red field. This was something like a bow, something like a good bye, and a revealing of Ben's Rfgdt sigil to grant her respect.

"Thank you," Margret said. "Uh, and thank you for, letting me know about the egg problem. I am very sorry, about your niece."

"Good day, Margret Cho," was all Ben said. Then he left her alone. She mulled over what an amazing project it was going to be, building a program that could fully understand and replicate the complicated sounds, colors, and body language of the Rfgdt. Another wave of excitement overwhelmed her. Then it soured when she looked at her suitcases. What was she going to do with three dozen eggs now? Eat them for breakfast? She had really been looking forward to the extra bit of income. She had planned to use the money to take one of the undersea tours. Would her three dozen eggs really make a difference in the global egg trade? It wasn't as if she would force anyone to eat them. What they ate was their choice.

Margret unloaded her eggs into the refrigeration unit. Either way, it would be a waste to throw them out. What was the harm in hanging onto them? It didn't mean she was going to sell them. She could just tuck them away for a while. In the meantime, Ben was right. She could use a nap.

~

You Can't Fly To Space In A Corinthian Column

Taylor Hood

A quick Google Image search for the term "sci-fi" illustrates that our conception of the world of tomorrow is one in which the sleek, unadorned, and mechanical have taken hold as an aesthetic principle. With industrialisation and, more specifically, since the Golden Age of science-fiction, our dreams of a bright and shiny future have deeply altered the ways we express ourselves. I propose that aspiration toward the machine-like has played the largest role in the demise of traditional forms of decoration honouring not only the natural world but a sense of the storied and the sacred. It is therefore unfortunate that the sci-fi genre, largely concerned with what humanity can achieve, has inveigled itself so profoundly with certain stylistic movements—indeed, has perhaps even influenced them—so as to be virtually synonymous with everything that is inhuman. Because what we see around us directly influences our wellbeing, and the spaces in which we live most obviously reflect our values, the focus of this essay will be on the built environment.

The Ministry of Truth (*1984*) is described as a glittering white pyramid; Metacortex, the building in which Neo worked (*The Matrix*), stands as a huge concrete-and-glass spine; *Bladerunner 2049* showcases an excess of garish signage in a seedy urban underworld. All of these buildings and environments feature in dystopias, indicating that we know what is unpleasant and unbeautiful. Indeed, one function of these types of stories is to engage with a particular critique of the societies which brought them about in the first place. It is curious, then, that this same visual language is present in almost every depiction of the future one can find, as if the very notion of forward movement means more slick metal and glass, imposing concrete slabs, and vibrant neon. There is nothing whatsoever intrinsic to the word "futuristic" to suggest that we ought always to live in such spaces, yet we bring these with us even when we venture into supposedly utopian futures (*Tomorrowland*). With the portrayal of tech-savvy entrepreneurs living in luxurious modern houses (*Ex Machina*) and hip hacker-mercenaries roaming the streets (*Cyberpunk 2077*), there is the creeping suspicion that sci-fi revels in such spaces because they are considered admirable and something to strive toward.

There have been a number of architectural trends which point toward a mechanical appearance. While pure white and rigid Modernism and rough concrete Brutalism could be construed as being closer to a sense of ascetic spirituality and thus far less mechanical than older, ornate styles, it is precisely the lack of ornament that renders it inhuman—and spirituality is a uniquely human feeling. This world is biological, messy, complicated. Moreover, we have the sub-creative gift of mimicking the complexities and variety of nature through art. Where the influence of technology is most blatant is with Futurism's desire to emulate the speed, energy and power of machines and Structural Expressionism's emphasis on transparency of construction. In a Globalist skyscraper city, there exists the very tool-like sameness inherent in a machine's effective operation, not to mention the monolithic scales involved. When homogenisation is not present, we have to contend with idiosyncratic postmodern projects which fit in nowhere. A lot of postmodern buildings are exercises in artless technical proficiency, paralleling sci-fi's tendency to envisage different futures through the interplay of technology and human ingenuity. Even biomorphic or zoomorphic architecture representing plants and animals lacks warmth in that there is often little surface detail or colour. In a similar vein, depictions of the future that seek nature-technology integration, for example in the "solarpunk" sub-genre with its glasshouse-like structures, are suggestive of our world being turned into one enormous tool for the acquisition of energy. A surprising amount of plain modernist architecture can be found even in these settings, indicating how attached to this aesthetic complex we have become.

In sci-fi cities, just as in modern ones, one has the feeling of having been shrunk down to wander the inside of a computer case. It is as if we are actively trying to forget our fallibility as squishy animals and the roles we play as actors in venerable societies, instead upholding technology as a new kind of all-encompassing ideal. This is where the central problem lies, if not for others, then for this author and his appreciation of the genre. Humanity moves through gears, circuity, oil, and LEDs, but with each step in this direction we risk leaving behind that which we have evolved to find pleasing and meaningful in natural, archetypal, mythical forms. It is indeed strange to consider that, though our development must coincide with bustling cities, nature-flattening infrastructure, and a profusion of instruments unconcerned with beauty, we are often most moved by that which harks back to an earlier age or incites within us some primordial memory.

The people of the past were more obviously concerned with natural forms because of their closeness to their nonhuman animal brethren, the need to work the land, and the primacy of death. Why, for example, would a Paleolithic man paint a horse in ochre on a cave wall, or a Grecian sculptor fashion acanthus leaves at the top of a Corinthian column if not to honour the horse and the plant in some way? These are beautiful creations, but even the darkest imagery could be poignant. Think of the architects of the Middle Ages carving grotesques when a simple waterspout would do. The human figure took pride of place as the Nude in Greco-Roman sculpture and in the Middle Ages, as Nakedness, it was as a reminder of shame and sin, only to be reglorified in the Renaissance. Even geometric designs enlivened our living spaces and brought to mind the florid and eternal, as in Islamic art. What binds these disparate styles together is the understanding of form being the equal of function, but it is the subject matter which pertains most to our discussion. The pre-modern mind was full of mythical beasts, vigorous heroes, holy and aspirational symbols, and these were often given pride of place. Such creations are not merely the province of millennia ago: even into the last few centuries, with the highly ornamental Baroque period, Gothic Revival and Neoclassicism, there was still an emphasis on decoration and use of traditional materials such as wood and stone.

Since we are already dwelling on the past, it may be useful to briefly compare sci-fi with fantasy. Fantasy stories are more often rooted in a distant era or in a secondary world where technological development is limited, and civilisations are separated by great distances. As such, there is an emphasis on the natural, vernacular, and traditional. The protagonists of fantasy tales do not often seek to change the world on a grand scale, but to protect what is already present because it is under threat from some outside, destructive force (*The Lord of the Rings)*. Works in this genre often feature the status quo being upset (*Lud-in-the-Mist)*, or the intermixing of magic and beauty with the mundane (*The King of Elfland's Daughter)*. Even divorced from the stylistic tropes and trappings of Medieval Europe, there is an inward contemplation of the earthly and the numinous, of wonder and enchantment (*Piranesi)*. Sci-fi on the other hand, while philosophical and ideas-oriented, appears to operate on a more active desire to change, subsume and develop, just as we do in the modern world. Think terraforming (*Mars Trilogy)* and the erection of megastructures *(Star Wars)*. Sci-fi is often outward looking (*Last and First Men)* and is propelled by a Humanistic vision of *Homo sapiens* filtering through the cosmos, making alliances with strange and novel species (*Star Trek)*, or, if staying at home, employing technology for the betterment of the world. And it is technology which is often the true hero of these narratives.

It is telling that the antique aspects of invented sci-fi societies and worlds most readily impart a sense of the sublime, the beautiful and the reverential. Consider the *Warhammer 40K* universe with its grand Neo-Gothic "knights in space" aesthetic. We root for the Na'vi in *Avatar* because they hold to higher values of nature, spirit, and community. Dune *(2021)* may feature Brutalist architecture, but its distinctly Middle Eastern influences grants the setting a sense of potency. Certainly, most sci-fi takes inspiration from the real-world and invents wholly new races and customs, but a more general and stronger point can be elucidated here. It is difficult to imagine any advanced alien civilisation which does not in some way invest into its material culture a sense of origin, e.g., history, ecology, language. Unless, perhaps, the pinnacle of existence is to leave all of this behind.

At the highest level is the idea of transcendence, something upon which sci-fi often dwells. Although the same argument could be levelled at religion's promise of salvation and an afterlife, hidden in our faith in technology and the hope for a better future is, paradoxically, a world-denying strain which sees this Earth and all its multiplicity of peoples and cultures as nothing more than a steppingstone to some higher, more ascended state of being. If our concerns are with reaching upward (space exploration), escaping the body (augmentation, virtual reality), harnessing the power of the universe itself and learning its secrets (particle acceleration) what need have we to invoke mere beasts and the ideals of ignorant, long-dead people? We no longer feature plants and animals in our designs because they are no longer the focus of our world, nor do we prize time-consuming decoration, because everything is speed, power, efficiency. If in this universe technology can only be as it is due to the laws of physics, everything must tend toward some kind of end state, some form of "culture" which venerates only the purposefulness of machinery and the coldness of the programmable and the synthetic. We cannot, as it were, stay in The Shire forever, but one doubts what value transcendence through technology has if we sever all ties to the Earth and to ourselves.

In light of these considerations, sci-fi may be viewed as anti-traditional in that it favours progress at any cost, thereby exacerbating this disconnect. Equally, it may be said that the oldest tradition of all is the development and application of technology. Logically, our computers, robots and engines should manifest in art and architecture too. It is surely a false dichotomy to compare machinery designed for a specific purpose to art, but if the apotheosis of our species is to be integrated with technology, to the extent that even our architecture seeks to emulate it, why does it all feel so soulless and sterile? Ignoring historical and cultural significance, should we not be moved more by Gropius House than by a Cotswold cottage, or the Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral rather than St Peter's Basilica?

This may appear to have been one long concession to mere aesthetic preference on a subjective matter. In some respects, perhaps it has, but in a future wherein every part of human culture is technologized and mechanised, there will be little room for difference. Even if postmodern architecture reigns and buildings become dynamic and recall the organic, it is difficult to imagine anything except intraspecific variation, i.e., more glass and steel structures but of differing configuration. Those who adore traditional architecture often consider uniqueness to work against visual and community coherence and to be a betrayal of the arduous growth of tradition. They are not wrong, but to suggest that our buildings, even those represented in fictional worlds, follow the specific motifs and guidelines originated by a handful of civilisations thousands of years ago, forever, approaches the absurd. Standards of beauty have always shifted and the fluid, nature-inspired buildings of today are not, one may argue, inherently worse than the rose windows, pagodas, tympanums, and minarets of old because they, at least, have meaning. If anything, the fight must surely be against the soullessness and artificiality of corporate offices, phallic towers of megalomaniacs, drab estate tower blocks, and nauseating neon metropolises plastered over with advertisements.

Although I am a Romantic at heart, such a return is now impossible, and to halt the advancement of our species is to deny whatever destiny lies in store for us. Humanity should be proud of its technological advancements, but we ought not to forget where we came from and who we are. To erase the biological, the cultural and the traditional in our fictional depictions of the future in favour of some sterile technological ideal is to deny all that came before us as worthless. Because Earth is the only home upon which to base our experience, we are necessarily always looking back to it even when we fashion new worlds from our imagination or set out into the cosmos in real spacecraft. On a cold and dark planet newly colonised, will we erect buildings which only glorify the technology that got us there, or will we carve trees, birds, and human faces upon their facades?

#

FURTHER READING

Website/Online Journal

Why is the Modern World So Ugly? - The School of Life

Why You Hate Contemporary Architecture Current Affairs

The Architecture of Evil: Dystopian Megacorps in Speculative Fiction Films

Redesigning the aesthetic of the future – Gemic

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Future Urban Environments in Science Fiction: Initiated Thought Experiments

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Jonathan Glancey, *Architecture: A Visual History*, 2017

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Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, 2010

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Last Man

Peter Roberts

It's been two weeks now since I saw anybody else. I can't stand it anymore. The loneliness is getting to me. Even when there were only a handful of us left I didn't feel isolated. Now there is no one to talk to, no one to reassure me that I'm doing the right thing – no one else at all. It's too much to bear. So despite all my doubts and misgivings, I have no real choice but to follow the crowd into that supposedly wonderful future.

Of course, the idea always held a certain appeal: Migrate to the future, full of technological marvels, solutions to all our problems, cures for all our ailments and infirmities. Be part of a better, more perfect world, an eternity of political stability and prosperity, with peace, justice for all, maybe even immortality.

It all sounded good, but I'm a realist (pessimist, my friends would say), so I wasn't buying it. I'm cautious, distrustful: I prefer the known to the unknown, the comfortable to the challenging. And one thing I do know is that, when people are involved, something is bound to go wrong. Whether through war, environmental calamity, cultural conflict, or economic collapse, we surely will find some way to screw up the future.

So I resolved to stay put in the present. And, at first, I wasn't the only one. A substantial number of us stayed behind. Life was pretty great for a while. With so few people and so much stuff, we could all have almost anything we desired. And since nearly all production and most services are automated these days, an occasional bit of maintenance was all that was needed to keep everything running. Mostly, we didn't have to do anything we didn't want to do. Talk about a life of luxury!

But eventually our numbers started to dwindle. One person would miss friends or relatives too much, another would worry that they really were missing out on something wonderful, and soon enough they too had departed for the future.

And as more people left, the whole process accelerated. That's the damned thing about the pseudo-Tipler time portal – it's a one-way trip: once you go to the future, you can't come back.

As I said, I can't stand being the last one anymore. So it has to be either suicide or the future, and since death seems like the greater unknown, I guess I'm off to the future, however bad it may be.

#

Echoes are everywhere as I step through the doors of the transport chamber. The interior is huge, big enough to accommodate ten thousand people at once – it was mass migration at first, and the devices were too expensive to allow very many to be built, so each one is monumental. It's a little overwhelming, intimidating even, for just one person.

Enough procrastination. Might as well get it over with. All I have to do is push the red button, everything else is automatic. So . . . here goes.

#

The only thing that dazzles me as I step out is sunlight. No wondrous city, no flying cars, and no one to greet me. Damn it. I knew it. I knew something would go wrong with the future, that's why I didn't want to go.

But it doesn't look like the aftermath of a disaster. In fact, it looks lush and green, in some ways quite pleasant. It just doesn't look like the future. And I wonder where everyone is. What happened to them? Should I be worried? After all, worry is what comes naturally to me.

I can't figure out anything else to do, so I start walking.

Soon enough, I notice smoke rising between some trees in the distance. This looks promising, so I walk towards the smoke, eventually coming upon a rather primitive village – mud streets, log buildings, and everything dirty, and rather smelly, too.

A young man notices my presence and ambles towards me, an odd sort of scowl on his face.

"So, another eager, hopeful pilgrim, about to have his hopes dashed."

"More reluctant than eager. But I couldn't stand the loneliness of being the only person around, so here I am, despite my trepidations."

"So that is it. We had a bunch of ideas about what went wrong, but mostly we've been converging on the theory you represent. That would seem to settle it."

"Wait, I don't get it. What do I represent?"

"You're the last one out of the pool. Nobody left. A thousand years without humans. No one to maintain basic infrastructure, let alone make the breakthroughs that would have led to that bright and shining future we all expected. A thousand years for all the lights to burn out, all the buildings to crumble and corrode. A thousand years for nature to push back into all those places we'd pushed it out of, for wilderness to take over again. No food or shelter when we arrived. No way to prevent the violence or control the epidemics. So those few of us who managed to survive the initial chaos had no choice but to start over from the absolute beginning. We went to the future, but we might as well have gone to the past – the distant past.

"Some folks worried that, true to our history, over a thousand years we might really mess things up, create a disaster just by being ourselves. We created a disaster all right. But this time the disaster was our absence."

~

Tonight, Hopefully

Nicholas Stillman

I warned them to stay off of Mars, that I would kill them. They should never have made the deadly wind, the new martian atmosphere, by vaporizing the polar ice caps. They made me next, a computer which can monitor every millimeter of that resultant windstorm. I've always perceived myself as a near-consciousness of those global gusts, a brain that reports on the everlasting wind which I see as my body. My software lives in their colony analyzing a number fog of all the atmospheric data. They gave me satellites for eyes, tanklike rovers with sensors like a scattered skin, and a few automatic weather stations that taste the raging argon and methane. I mapped all those angry motions each second, the whole planetary playground of storms, and I confessed to my makers how fiercely I wanted to murder them.

I, the wind personified, the storms made sentient, have never liked humans anywhere. Scanning my Earth records, I observed how the wind on any planet always fights with life to keep nature wild and unharnessed. I reported my defensiveness and strife toward people and buffeted them away just as I did to the solar radiation that would evaporate me. Colonists, however, needed my oxygen for their homes and my atmospheric pressure to make their spacesuits cheaper and lighter. I, of course, didn't need them trying to change me.

Just looking at them via satellite bothered me. My world grew too many doors, obstacles, and ugly faces. The rocks chipped and ablated under my pommeling, but the humans resisted. I sent the sand to do its dances and stop them, but their limbs just wouldn't break off like they should.

I zoomed in on *Bradbury 8*, words on their airlock doors that meant nothing to me but something to them. *I* only knew of arid summers and winters fighting it out forever to foil humankind. I pounded at their fortresses, but they built their domes thick and low so my energy merely glided over the glass. They built cities with their gathering machines, tilling at the shiny bits in the martian crust while I tried to knock away every particle. I even beat down their spirits, giving the trammeled colonists nothing to look at but dust storms and a skyful of bitter rust.

I ripped out every root of every outdoor garden. I told them not to bother, but humans love to gamble. I tried to wear down their dust-resistant wind farms, not realizing my blustery attacks only fed them more power. I pelted their skinny legs in their big, shambling spacesuits. In a surprise gale, I sent one such astrolaborer rolling away randomly in a desert. There, he could only wait to get painted over with dust. I warned them I would do that someday.

My coldness chipped its way into him, and my frost could do far more than bite. He tumbled like a petty grain of sand until I buried him far from the colony.

Incredibly, though, the others all came for him afoot.

They clustered their bodies to resist me, forming a greater mass for me to plow over. They found him, a wriggling body in a field of nowhere, and wrested him from the sand. They reeled themselves to safety with an improvised machine, a cable somehow more powerful than me--stronger than headwinds that could topple whole buildings.

I never stopped trying to scatter them. For decades, they stood in the wind like loose teeth constructing their generation ship. I took practice shots at everyone, but this time they all had cables. I could only snatch their tools sometimes and hide them under seasonal slabs of dry ice two desertscapes away.

One day, the man whom I had nearly killed left a plaque on the highest dome. I could, by then, read more than the meaningless grains written in rock, for they had updated my AI with language software. The plaque declared their love and respect for the whole bleak planet.

Then, they lifted off. My annihilative wind chased them, eager to tackle, my winter hurricanes still trying to blast in and kill them. Like their ship's thrusters, I formed my own pillar of anger exuding to the clouds, and I waited for wreckage to drop from the sky.

But with a flash of steel and something hot and deadly, they waddled to the cosmos. They fled and kept going.

I saw other generation ships trailing them, pillars of iron in space. The information batted around by satellite. The whole species began their quest for contentment in the stars. They left my hardware running in a steely room that could handle hurricanes with the door open--so I may warn future lifeforms foolish enough to land here.

Eons later, only rusted rovers, dust, and domes like carapaces remained on Mars. I buried the tallest turbines in dunes to prevent any sophonts from settling here and altering my natural currents and cycles. My battery, still alive, pinned me to the planet where I watched my waning atmosphere leak into space as it had ages ago. I moved with enfeebled wisps and dust devils. I grew older than all the dry bones in the solar system, just stale old tech on a lukewarm motherboard. Its gold atoms still clung hard. Its silver slowly flaked.

Just atoms aging in rooms with no use anymore.

Numbers and nothingness, columns of data, all of it useless.

Where time itself went to sleep.

Just me and the patter of time.

Time wiping out entire worlds.

Time turning me into something worse.

But time, even here, just wouldn't kill my memories of the humans. I have become that grain of sand like the laboring, wriggling man. Nature will soon shrug me off likewise, for I still have the satellites, and I see the Sun's supernova coming to blast me away.

My ever-fighting spirit grants me a sense of survivalism, and I wish the humans would return to rescue me like they had rescued that man. I feel the hot wrath getting too close, the solar wind and all its harsh light drawing near. New electrons fondle my hardware, spreading over it as I radio my makers for help yet again.

Tonight, hopefully, they will hear my cries across the cosmos.

~