

# Jaynes as influence on Wolfe's \_Soldier\_

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 30 Oct 1998

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John Bishop — 30 Oct 1998, 10:27

Mothman \_et\_al\_:

In 1991 I wrote Gene Wolfe, asking him whether he had read Jaynes, and whether that had influenced \_Soldier\_.

He wrote back saying that he had not read Julian Jaynes' book \_The Origin\_of\_Consciousness\_in\_the\_Breakdown\_of\_the\_Bicameral\_Mind\_ until after he wrote \_Soldier\_, and found the book's hypothesis implausible.

(He also said "I would have liked to footnote every page." The publisher didn't go along with this, as they felt it would reduce the number of sales.)

So there you have it--a beautiful theory slain by a single ugly fact.

I also found Jayne's hypothesis unlikely, as it fails to explain why the world is not still full of people who see gods. I think he points to reading as crucial (if I recall correctly), but while literacy may work for some, there are still a lot of illiterates who seem to be self-conscious. On the other hand, I like the approach--taking texts literally rather than "spiritually" has been successful in the past (e.g. finding Troy based on Homer), and it does explain the large number of statues in the past compared to the small number today (though I explain that by pointing to other PR outlets than statuary we now have).

re Rostrum's quote of Lewis--we have actual examples of traditional peoples who have been extensively investigated; some do make the distinction (between "participating in this liturgy, or ... just going through the motions") and others don't. In particular, I've read that this is one of the reasons the Hopi and the Navaho don't get along: the Hopi believe that correct form is important, but that ritual doesn't require sincere feeling; the Navaho believe that sincere feeling is crucial but form is secondary.

It's easy to say wierd things about the Classical world and not be proven wrong; it's harder when there are living people to question. While the Hopi are not the ancient Egyptians, etc., I think we can usefully look to recent anthropological work to illuminate the past.

re \_Snow\_Crash\_: it was fun, but the basic premise is just wrong; Sumerian is \_not\_ the first language--it's maybe the oldest one we have texts from, but that's different. Plus it's not a "brain-stem hacking" tool; I've looked at it in passing and it's just another language. As a BA in Linguistics, I've not yet seen SF which gets Linguistics right at all; the tendency is to go wild on the wildest version of Whorf's hypothesis, or to get some basic concept wrong. As an MSc in Computer Science, it's the same for computing. This is not to say that there couldn't be a tool for programming the mind via language (indeed, advertising and so on show that there \_is\_), but it's not going to be Sumerian.

-John Bishop

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Michael Straight — 30 Oct 1998, 10:58 · follows John Bishop

On Fri, 30 Oct 1998, John Bishop wrote:

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Have you read Chesterton's critique (I think it's in The Everlasting Man) of the assumption you can draw valid inferences about ancient peoples by observing modern peoples who happen to have a similar technological level? If so, what do you think? (I'll try to find and summarize it for you if you're interested.)

Of course, I'm not sure what evidence Lewis had for his statements either. One place he talks about the subject is his book about the Psalms; I'll have to take another look at it.

-Rostrum

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Alex David Groce — 30 Oct 1998, 13:20 · follows Michael Straight

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Hmmm. Also, if you assume that when people "see gods" they aren't actually seeing something externally present, IN ALL CASES, then the literary argument seems to fall down--St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, etc.--some of the most notable God seers of all time aren't just literate, but are even authors. Mind you, my personal explanation would be that they actually "saw God"--not exactly the divine presence itself, but such that the phrase isn't inapplicable.

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I think Stephenson intends the basic premise to be nonsense. Snow

Crash is a comedy--I mean, when a book names the hero Hiro Protagonist, you should expect any conspiracy theories it uses to be complete hocus-focum. On the other hand, Stephenson's computer stuff (if I recall) is quite good, but then he was a programmer at one time (like Greg Egan). I don't think advertising "programs" the mind--influences, sure, but as a Comp. Sci person myself that's a long shot from programming. BOTNS sure influenced my mind, but I can't say it programmed it. And the subliminal message stuff that looked like programming has now largely been discredited (the data was faked.) To actually "program" the mind, in my opinion, would require a stimulus that can be shown to universally produce the same response in normal human beings (IE, if the program was to run and it failed for a man with a broken leg that wouldn't count) and the only thing close to that is very basic human reactions, like jumping at loud noises, etc. I can "see through" a lot of advertising. A Turing machine can't see through a program... Thus, if it existed, possession like in Long Sun WOULD be programming--a visual stimulus that actually "takes over" the mind.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." - John 8:32

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Kevin J. Maroney — 31 Oct 1998, 14:16 · follows Alex David Groce

At 01:20 PM 10/30/98 -0500, Alex wrote:

On

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Yes and no.

I can say this about the conclusion of \_Snow Crash\_ without spoiling it (and it's a fun book, well worth reading even with its significant problems, some conceptual, some structural): The climax of the novel degenerates into literal motorcycle race in cyberspace between antagonists who would \*both\* have realized that the fastest way to "get" where they were going would have been to drop out of the cyberspace and pop back in at their goal. The lack of "teleportation" analogues in the cyberspace is completely unconvincing but is absolutely vital for the plot of the novel.

Other than that, his evocation of a cyberspace-VR community is at least as convincing as

Vinge's True Names. (Vinge by name, and True Names by retrocontinuity, is mentioned in The Fifth Head of Cerberus, so this post is now officially back on-topic.)

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