

# Technology as Magic and Metaphor (long)

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 02 Nov 1999

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Greene, Carlton — 02 Nov 1999, 10:38

Nicholas Gevers wrote:

I'm glad to see that my "Fairy Tale Logic" posting ended our dry patch;

I'm also gratified that mantis agrees with me in part, a rare event. But to take up the cudgel again: I still contend that Inire's description of the working of his mirrors is intentional gibberish on Wolfe's part, to the extent that he wishes it to be read as gibberish, in contrast with all the intended-to-be-plausible explanations of FTL technology in SF. An ideas-driven writer like Poul Anderson or Isaac Asimov desires his FTL conception to be believed, to be given the benefit of a very large doubt; but for a style-driven writer like Jack Vance or Wolfe, an FTL-exposition is a CONCEIT, a rhetorical contrivance, serving a metaphorical or humorous purpose. Inire's mirrors should be interrogated on that basis. <<

Roy wrote:

<<To say nothing of the "white fountain". I would like to see the scientific explanation for the mating of a man and a larval "angel" producing an extra-universal remedy for a black hole in a dying sun. Roy >>

Two points. First, I see no reason to give the boot to "scientism."

Second, and more importantly, "scientism" and technology-as-metaphor are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually enhancing.

Wolfe's explanations of technology are often mysterious and incomplete, but Wolfe's resort to complete, detailed explanations for certain technologies implies that even the really strange examples have some explanation to them that has not been made entirely clear to the reader. I agree that the explanation of Inire's mirrors reads like sleight of hand, but wasn't it supposed to be a simplistic explanation of a very complicated technology given to a child? (Maybe I've forgottent the context in which the speech was delivered). As to Typhon and his grafted head, its important to remember that the pieces of humanity's scientific knowledge that have survived the aeons are weird and patchy throughout the books -- maybe a head graft was the most rational means at Typhon's disposal to achieve his goals. We know very little about the operation itself or the medical knowledge available in Typhon's time. It boots us little to say that the operation makes no sense because of what we know about medical science in the 20th century -- many of the technologies described in the TBOTNS assume capabilities (and limitations) which we can neither verify or reject based on current science. Instead, we take from Wolfe's attempt to provide or hint at some scientific explanation for these phenomenon the \*flavor\* that these are miracles of technology rather than magic. In sum, the fact that many of the explanations of particular technologies are shadowy, unclear, or apparently paradoxical given current scientific understanding does not mean that we as readers are not intended to, and should not, understand that some rational explanation lies lurking in the background. I think we are.

More importantly, maintaining the idea that some scientific explanation for these phenomenon

exists strengthens, rather than weakens, the power of these technologies as metaphors. If it were clear that items like Typhon's two heads and apheta's quasar-producing, larval lust were meant simply as pure, fluffy fanstasy, existing only as a metaphorical allusion, their power as symbols would be less. Instead, the idea that they are simultaneously scientifically explainable events and spiritual metaphors with real power creates a sense of destiny and religious meaning in our physical universe. In TBOTNS every action, object, and interaction reveals some significant truth about the Increate. Sev's discovery of a thorn on a (Pacific!) beach, which is at once biological matter, a relic of real physical power, and a revelation of the divine nature of physical existence, is an example of this principle.

One last point: Given the above, it is interesting to note that the technology of the heirogrammates, a technology infused with love and divine grace, is more obviously metaphorical and more difficult to explain scientifically as physical technology, as Roy points out. My take on this: the closer we get to the divine, the more we understand that the physical universe does in fact exist, but is intended as a functioning, scientific metaphor for certain underlying principles, a particularly graceful way of revealing spiritual truths. The heirogrammates pull the curtain aside on this methodology in a way that we are not exposed to normally, explicitly fusing technology and metaphor. In contrast, the sturdiest scientific explanations in the books are given for items in the hands of the "godless" exploiters of scientific knowledge -- Baldanders and Typhon. I always understood this to mean that this was the sin makind was being punished for -- the exploitation and achievement of god-like scientific power without the concomittant moral and spiritual development -- without the principle of love or grace or what have you. Mankind is being punished for selling off its emotions in furtherance of blind ambition.

I apologize if I am rambling here, but if I am, it is because I have been inspired by the exceptional quality of the discussion on this list, and I am certainly grateful for the opportunity to contribute.

C/

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Daniel Fusch — 02 Nov 1999, 19:29 · follows Greene, Carlton

Carlton:

(snip)

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scientifically explainable events and spiritual metaphors with real power creates a sense of destiny and religious meaning in our physical universe. In TBOTNS every action, object, and interaction reveals some significant truth about the Increate. Sev's discovery of a thorn on a (Pacific!) beach, which is at once biological matter, a relic of real physical power, and a revelation of the divine nature of physical existence, is an example of this principle."

Precisely. There is a technological level, a metaphorical level, a mythological level, and a spiritual level to all these things. I think what whoever-started-this was trying to point out was that the symbolic level of analysis is more important (or higher, to use a Miltonic concept) than the scientific level or analysis. In other words, it is more important that the reader understand what Typhon is doing on a symbolic level than it is for the reader to understand the anatomical knowledge that went into putting Typhon together.

I also agree that there is no "magic" in Severian's world, as that term is usually understood. On the other hand, I don't think that we can gain much by a technological discussion of the possibilities and probabilities involved in sewing Typhon together, in creating Father Inire's mirrors, or in producing a white fountain. If we focus too closely on a literal and scientific reading of Wolfe's work, we risk missing or overlooking the point. If Wolfe had meant for *The Book of the New Sun* to be a treatise on physics, he would have made Severian a physicist.

I think that we need to accept the following suppositions when approaching *The Book of the New Sun*:

A) On the literal level, Urth is governed by a future technology that is really a medley of a dozen or so past technologies. We cannot really get an intellectual grasp on how all this technology works, because Severian isn't able or isn't interested in telling us.

B) While it is scientifically possible to create a Typhon, the probability of the matter is really irrelevant; the significance of the Typhon episode lies in the metaphorical and mythological meanings of the text. The same goes for Baldanders, etc. *The Book of the New Sun* is science fiction, yes, but it is also mythopoeic.

So, while it may be interesting to those engineers among us to discuss the inner workings of the Autarch's flier, we should be aware that such discussions can only take us so far.