

Tracking gestures inter alia

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 12 Sep 1997

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Ron Crown — 12 Sep 1997, 15:44

In trying to track down any information on the finger-to-chin gesture used in "Tracking Song," I came across a Dictionary of Gestures (yes, such things exist) which lists no less than 14 meanings for the use of finger to the chin (not all exactly the same gesture); unfortunately, "affirmation" is not one of them. Furthermore, native american sign language used the index finger pointing straight up and then curling down around the thumb to signify "yes." So that looks like a blind alley so far. I still think that, whether or not Wolfe was using data collected about actual cultures or not (he came up with new inventions for the stone age, why not new gestures as well?), the gesture is an important clue for the common origin (dare I say genesis?) of the "tribes" and the robots'/cyborgs'/jonases'/whatever's use of the same gesture implies their relationship with the originators.

On "Seven American Nights" (BTW, nice sequel, alga; how about a prequel?), I was looking up info on the Shah Nameh (Book of Kings), mentioned by Nadan in the text and discovered that it is the great national epic of Persia (every Iranian child reads it, or I should say, reads part of it (since it's roughly 60,000 lines) in school). The poem recalls a glorious pre-islamic Persia (it was written in the late 10th-early 11th century well after the islamic conquest) at a time when Persia had a Turkish ruler; in fact, it's credited with ensuring that the national language of Persia remained Farsi. Rostam is one of the heroes whose exploits are recounted in the poem; Nadan evidently refers to this hero when mentioning the play "Rustam Beg." Make of that what you will.

This probably has no significance, but fwiw here it is. Nadan's "mission" (if we assume for the sake of argument that he was not simply a tourist) appears to have had something to do with the "miniatures" mentioned in passing in the text. According to one introduction to Persian literature I looked at, manuscripts of the Shah Nameh are frequently illuminated with miniatures. Since both the S.N. and miniatures are mentioned in the story; I wonder what might be made of this. Probably nothing since there's no further evidence to go on that I see. And the use of the word "miniatures" alone would be an odd way to speak of a manuscript containing "miniatures."

Another point re Wolfe in general: Nutria, e.g., talks about the "gestalt" of a Wolfe story and how the details of the story will not fall into place until we grasp the gestalt. But I don't think I need to argue that Wolfe sometimes makes the "gestalt" VERY obscure (anyone care to enlighten me on "A Solar Labyrinth?"). But even second-rate Wolfe achieves what I would call the "illusion of gestalt" and makes people like me want to chase down info about things like Persian national epics and significance of gestures (and I'm not saying that either SAN or TS are second-rate) to see if it helps in determining what the gestalt might be. Maybe I'll (we'll) come up with something, maybe not. But even if I don't, a story like SAN or TS is so fully textured that if I can't finally determine its "gestalt," I can imagine that there is one there somewhere; the story "coheres" even when I may not understand it completely. I think BotNS worked this way for a lot of people; many of whom probably enjoyed the series just fine without ever knowing who Severian's parents were, e.g. Which is not to say that they couldn't enjoy Wolfe even more

by digging deeper; I do and that's why I'm on this list. And if some of us get a little carried away sometimes on the details, well, Wolfe himself invites it. And none of us, I think, (not even Nutria) thinks he/she is uttering divine revelation.

From a walking compendium of useless information (otherwise known as a reference librarian),
Ron Crown