

One-Two-Three for Me

The Urth list — 7 messages, 5 voices, 09 Jan 2000

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2062>

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Nicholas Gevers — 09 Jan 2000, 00:29

(Spoilers)

All right, taking up the matter of "One-Two-Three For Me": I haven't assigned it a specifically religious meaning. For me, the story corresponds closely to "And When They Appear", perhaps occurring much later in the same general future. The civilization whose remains the protagonist of "One" investigates has, like that in "And When", committed suicide, apparently from an ennui born of the loss of meaning of all cultural symbols (including, very prominently, God). In "One", Jak's girlfriend summons up the figure (pusher and psychopomp) that brought the killing drug to members of the now-dead civilization, in effect placing the order by phone. Death is preceded by ecstasy; the people of the past couldn't even face Death square in the face.

Jak's own culture is an experiment in averting this syndrome: its members live rough outdoor lives, and are supervised in certain crucial respects by AIs or "bots". Thus their curious mingling of the primitive (playing with sticks by the campfire) and the advanced (interstellar travel). My suspicion, given the gloomy tenor of STRANGE TRAVELERS as a whole, is that this formula, which seems Godless, is also doomed to failure.

Key questions:

What is the significance of the numerical sequence 1-2-3? (Possible answer: it's the simplest possible phone number, underscoring the past culture's preoccupation with easy death.)

What is one to make of the appearance of the "pusher" (what we hear of it)?

That's all for now.

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Jim Jordan — 09 Jan 2000, 17:07 · follows Nicholas Gevers

At 12:29 AM 1/9/00 -0800, you wrote:

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Jak's own culture is an experiment in averting this syndrome: its members live rough outdoor lives, and are supervised in certain crucial respects by AIs or "bots". Thus their curious mingling of the primitive (playing with sticks by the campfire) and the advanced (interstellar travel).

Odd "sticks." When struck they sound like telephone bleeps. Dunno if I've ever encountered sticks like these.

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tenor of STRANGE TRAVELERS as a whole, is that this formula, which seems Godless, is also doomed to failure.

Like CordwainerSmith's "instrumentality of mankind," perhaps.

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Sounds good. Also, the phone number of the Ruler in "Westwind" predominates in 7s. $123 = 6$. Biblically, 6 (and 666, of course) are inadequate and flawed numbers, speaking of the death-judgment against Adam, who was created on the sixth day. But your suggestion sounds better; though both might be in view.

Nutria

Jonathan Laidlow — 12 Jan 2000, 15:53 · follows Jim Jordan

Oh joyous day! Today is the day bookshop.co.uk supplied me with a copy of 'Strange Travelers'. What fun! And to think, there'll soon be another Wolfe tome out. Three books in the space of twelve months. Fantastic

Anyway: to the discussion on 'one-two-three for me' which I read just now.

SPOILERS□

Nick's exegesis of this difficult tale is excellent, but.

BZZZZZ Challenge:

I like very much what Nick has written, but I would ask for more evidence from the text to support it. I haven't read the companion tale, and while I take the point that so much of Wolfe's work has inter-relations, the short story has to work on its own, especially on original publication (although it's nice to see the two traffic jam/folk singing stories bookending this collection)

Nick wrote:

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I presume Earth is the major cultural symbol in this tale, although its significances to the culture of the protagonists are eroded and indistinct - everything is filtered through the 'bots'. Jak sees the stars differently when he abandons the 'bot', for example.

In "One", Jak's girlfriend summons up the figure >(pusher and psychopomp) that brought the killing drug to members of the now-dead >civilization, in effect placing the order by phone. Death is preceded by ecstasy; the people >of the past couldn't even face Death square in the face.

Okay - well yes, but where is the evidence that the drug killed this civilisation. The city ruin is a relatively recent civilisation - what about all the others?

Jak's own culture is an experiment >in averting this syndrome: its members live rough outdoor lives, and are supervised in >certain crucial respects by AIs or "bots".

Is it all of Jak's culture, or just their excursions to Earth. I wasn't clear whether the framing tale of Jak and the kids with the sticks also took place on Earth. The arrival of the figure 'called' on the phone suggests it was, but Jak says 'on Spring walk we went back to the old one, back to Earth'. Rather than some specific death by euthanasia device I think the rediscovery of the phone symbolises a re-entry into dial a convenience culture/dial an escape culture, which ultimately brings some kind of spiritual death.

Thus their curious mingling of the >primitive (playing with sticks by the campfire) and the advanced (interstellar travel). My >suspicion, given the gloomy tenor of STRANGE TRAVELERS as a whole, is that this >formula, which seems Godless, is also doomed to failure. Key questions: What is the >significance of the numerical sequence 1-2-3? (Possible answer: it's the simplest >possible phone number, underscoring the past culture's preoccupation with easy.

In the UK 1-2-3 is the number for the speaking clock..... What does it spell on a US handset with letters? [and I like Nutria's reminder of the difference between six and seven as mystic numbers]

I'm not sure it does symbolise the failure of this culture. It feels more like a folk tale warning to the young to avoid the dangers of the past. They aren't visited by the 'pusher', they merely hear sounds of its awakening, and they quickly destroy the tools (the sticks of firewood). Is it too late? The bots claim they've found many phones and so Jak's phone is unimportant. Yet they conspicuously place it in his belongings, even though it was found and kept by Jo Ann. Are the bots up to something? Are they spreading the seeds of cultural downfall. Which leads to a further point: if the story really is critical of our easy push-button culture (as I read the description of the numberpad of the phone I thought first of a TV remote until I got to the asterisk description) what are we to make of its suggestion that our culture is corrupt, decadent, and liable to self-destruct.

death.) What is one to make of the appearance of the "pusher" (what we hear of it)?

The only descriptive symbol is of hair, isn't it? The yeti is drug pusher? :-)

One further thought: any other appearances of the telephone in Wolfe's fiction? Must investigate its use in Castleview.

And when oh when is 'Green's Jungles' due out?

Jonathan

Visit Ultan's Library - A Gene Wolfe web resource

<http://members.tripod.co.uk/laidlow/index.htm>

Jonathan Laidlow

University of Birmingham, UK

So far, although I just finished "And When They Appear," I think this collection is good but grim, even for Wolfe--who does not tend to be cheery at short lengths. I've read "The Ziggurat" before, and think it's one of his very best. It seems to me there's an interesting contrast here--a drift in theme--Wolfe's always had stories about the collapse of society ("Paul's Treehouse," "Hour of Trust," "Seven American Nights") and about the prisons of identity ("The Fifth Head of Cerberus," "The Doctor of Death Island," etc.) and many that are intensely about both, as reflections of each other--internal and external collapse ("Forlesen," "Seven American Nights," "V.R.T"). I think this collection, so far at least, reflects a drift towards exploration of the collapse of the whole society as opposed to the individual--it seems to also show a change from NEW SUN--these societies, rather than sacrificing their emotions/"humanity" and going forth to conquer the universe are losing their souls without even conquering anything.

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

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Jim Jordan — 15 Jan 2000, 17:31 · follows Alex David Groce

Nick wrote:

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I did not find an implication of ennui in "And When They Come." Open to being shown, of course. The father simply kills himself and tries to kill his family. I took it that there was a societal breakdown, and roving bands of marauders were on the march, and the father was in despair. Moreover, the father brought home some chemical from work, whereas in "OneTwoThree for Me," the situation seems quite different. Same world? I'm having trouble making such a connection. Open to correction. Write back.

Nutria

Nicholas Gevers — 16 Jan 2000, 00:22 · follows Jim Jordan

For me, the similarity of "1-2-3" and "And When They Appear" relates simply to the notion of cultural suicide: after all, the wealthy elite in "And When" clearly has ample technological resources, surely enough to defeat a mob like "Carker's Army", yet they seem content to die off futilely as individuals, Jefferson with his rifle, the father by poison. They've become demoralized, their cultural symbols have degenerated into mechanical phantoms. What would rescue humanity from this disaster? Answer: the regime intimated in "1-2-3". But that's still not good

enough...

--- Jim Jordan <jbjordan at gnt.net> wrote:
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Nutria

the New Sun and other works

William H. Ansley — 17 Jan 2000, 01:24 · follows Nicholas Gevers

Jim Jordan <jbjordan at gnt.net> started it all when he wrote:
The story called "1, 2, 3, etc." (I don't have my copy here, and that's only approximate). Anybody want to analyze this one? Is it a tossaway, or a more serious story? ...

My guess is that it is a "tossaway." I think this story is Wolfe's idea of a joke, more than anything else, although it is certainly a ghost story. Since this is a Gene Wolfe story, it may have religious significance or significance of other kinds as well, but I think the background information presented in "One-Two-Three for Me" is so sparse that very few definite conclusions can be drawn from it.

I think the most salient feature of this story is that it is a ghost story. Not just that, it is a ghost story being told around a camp fire. It is also a future ghost story that uses ruins from a mysterious past which seems a lot like our present. In these ruins a "cursed object" is found: a

cell phone. This phone has to be, if not cursed, at least supernatural in some way; otherwise it is hard to explain how a portable phone could still be in working order after being buried in the ground for 800 years or more. Even its battery still has a charge!

The primary reason I think this story is one of Wolfe's jokes is that I think I know where the title comes from. It is a line from a Warner Bros. cartoon. I have not been able to completely confirm this, but I believe it is "Racketeer Rabbit" (Freleng, 1946). This cartoon has a character called Rocky, who is a caricature of Edward G. Robinson. Rocky is a gangster hiding out in an abandoned house with his gang and his ill-gotten goods. In a scene where Rocky is splitting up the loot with his men he counts out the stolen bills, "One for you and one-two-three for me."

I admit this doesn't seem to help explain this story at all, except perhaps as a clue that it is about greed. I will also admit that I may be wrong about this as the source of the title, but this phrase does occur in the cartoon. Before anyone says that Wolfe is above watching cartoons, there is at least some evidence that he does. "Three Fingers," in "The Island of Dr. Death and Other Stories and Other Stories", certainly deals with Disney cartoon characters. And, towards the end of "The Fifth Head of Cerberus", the corpse of a small animal is described as if it was a cartoon mouse.

Jonathan Laidlow seems convinced that the sounds of "something, an animal or something, moving around in the dark" that occur when Dik started tapping two sticks together "trying to get the noise right" were the sounds of the being that brought the powder to Jo An rising up. I am equally convinced it was just an ordinary animal, or the wind, and the timing was a coincidence. After all, there are no mysterious movements in the underbrush when several people are banging sticks earlier, before they all had heard the story. Wolfe is just emphasizing that Dik and the others were genuinely scared by Jak's story. It's also slightly humorous, since Dik obviously scared himself.

I don't find Nicholas Gevers attempts to find a link between "One-Two-Three for Me" and "And When They Appear" to be convincing. If there is another story that will help to explain "One-Two-Three for Me," we will have to look for it outside of "Strange Travelers". Another story that came to my mind is "The Most Beautiful Woman on the World" in "Endangered Species". I don't think the stories are linked in any direct way, but they both share have a story within a story and it is very hard to be sure what is going on in either the inner or the outer story.

William Ansley