

"1-2-3 For Me" as crypto-Urth story

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 12 Mar 2000

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 12 Mar 2000, 13:33

Talarican wrote:

Did anyone else get the impression Jak's story in "One-Two-Three For Me" could have taken place on the world which would become Urth, during the forgotten millenia of the decline of the great stellar empire, chiliads before Severian's time?

To begin with, it's apparent that Jak's world is dominated by thinking engines, and that these have an attitude, as that crack by his 'bot about the numbered cell phone buttons illustrates.

Clearly, their milieu is in a serious state of decline. Earth is now an archaeological site for bored students. To quote Cyriaca (Sword, VI) "But though the empire dissolved, the worlds were a long time dying...nor could they build more cities, because the cities that remained were nearly empty". While she doesn't state that old Earth's own urban civilization suffered such extreme decadence the population committed suicide, it can't be ruled out either.

In both stories, there seems to be a strong element of selfishness and self-absorption on the part of the humans. Why didn't Jak call or check on JoAnn after the weird little visitor vanished? (for that matter, why didn't her 'bot take some sort of protective action?(waves claws and turns side-to-side shouting "Danger! Danger! Run, JoAnn! Highly toxic alkaloid detected!" <g>)).

What is Jak's real problem at the time he tells that story and gets angry with the youngsters over their stick trick? He's not afraid the "pusher" will return. It's pretty clear the world on which Jak told his story wasn't Earth, and the "pusher" clearly wouldn't force the drug on him in any case. He's not merely grieving for JoAnn, although she didn't consciously mean to commit suicide, and Jak didn't consciously know the danger at the time. He's suffering a guilty conscience now because of his failure to exercise caution in an unfamiliar situation, resulting in JoAnn's death, due to his own self-absorption.

Even if "One-Two-Three" isn't a New Sun story, I think we can still agree that its extinct peoples of Earth have much in common with the inhabitants of the nearly forgotten decadent stellar empire ages before Urth. And that enigmatic story title suggests selfishness.

My impression: I had thoughts along the same lines. It is much more satisfying to think of this story as something like what you are saying, rather than taking it as a "Planet of the Apes"-style, straight "realistic" archaeological finding story. In "Planet of the Apes" they find a "doll" that really is a doll, and it says "Mommy" or whatever, and that pretty much shatters the world--revealing that the planet itself is dear old Earth.

If we read "1-2-3" in this vein, it seems weak: a cell phone, buried in some tell mound, still works? (I think I saw some comment about this either here first or here, reported from elsewhere.) The drug connection still delivers the heroin, crack-cocaine, name-your-demon-powder?

Now see, if it were not something that looked to us like a cell phone, things might be different. Say it were a metallic conch shell, covered with intricate runes and redolent with the odor of burnt asparagus; say that it summoned a swarm of flying beetles, who delivered a pair of eye glasses that had rose-colored lenses. Then it might seem less a "just say no" story, and more a fairy-tale type story about the perils of mucking about.

Or if it were the Rod of the Cumaean. Or some other artifact seen through the filter of Severian's sense.

I agree that the robots are in charge, and this does seem like something we see hinted of in posthistorical time. And because the dingus seems more like a cell phone than it seems like a horn of demon summoning, there is a feeling that it is closer to our time than anything in Severian's narrative (with the possible exception of the Apu-Punchau gig <g>).