

"Hour of Trust" itself

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 01 Feb 2002

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 01 Feb 2002, 00:29

"Hour of Trust" is the short story in THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH AND OTHER STORIES AND OTHER STORIES. Spoilers to follow.

Adam Stephanides quoted Nutria and wrote:

Does he? In "Hour of Trust" (*Island of Dr. Death etc.*) Wolfe himself joins a rebellion reciting the Lord's Prayer.

It's not clear to me why you think the bald man reciting the Lord's Prayer is Wolfe, or even why you think Wolfe approves of the rebellion. Among other things, the bald man is a suicide bomber, and while Wolfe as a Catholic might approve of rebellion under some circumstances, I doubt he could approve of suicide, which is definitely a sin. Moreover, the recruiting centers for volunteers include not only Buddhist spiritual centers, which Wolfe might possibly be ecumenical enough to approve of, but a temple of Kali (166, Orb edition), which he almost certainly isn't. And the government against which they're rebelling is portrayed as incompetent, but not tyrannical.

It's a strange story anyway, and one which I think has been dismissed too readily (myself included). I remembered it as just an anti-corporation tract, and it is that, but it may also be the Wolfe story which wears its modernist mannerisms most boldly on its sleeve, aside from jeux d'esprit like Parkroads. (And I have to admit that it was only on this reading that I realized where the story was taking place.)

I'm not certain but I'm pretty sure that Kali worshipers do not have to be thugs, nor are they more inclined toward suicide than Christians (Buddhists are definitely different: in that case we have the spectacle of Buddhist monks self-immolating in protest, captured on film, and I'm sure that this real-life image is one of the driving forces of the story).

It ~~is~~ a strange story. It starts out with the obsessive detail worthy of REPORT ON PROBABILITY A, but then this gradually lets up and it becomes more like a Brunner novel (THE JAGGED ORBIT and THE SHEEP LOOK UP, say). (It is also similar in some ways to Wolfe's "The Haunted Boardinghouse" in STRANGE TRAVELERS). The twisted way in which Peace (white flag, naked civilian, etc.) is used to further War (the kamikaze hug of the Peace people) is well done, and probably rises out of the reports of Vietcong women and children doing similar things to US servicemen. The sense of "America goes it alone" (i.e., no payback for having helped Europe in two world wars) is well done. The corporate approach to warfare, while evoking the chaos and "strange bedfellows" of 20th century civil wars, also is probably related to the real-world corporate approach in Vietnam, a new form which emphasized incremental quotas rather than military goals (this gave rise to the whole "body count" thing, and was itself a greater or lesser factor in the whole debacle). The telescreens recapture the Vietnam War brought nightly into American livingrooms, "in living color," etc.

All good and fine.

But then there is that ending.

Which is either "simple" ("she was a fembot all along!")) and I don't get it, or it is ambiguous and I don't get it.

I mean this: I understand the image of the woman bursting into flames as he touches her erogenous zones, since this was already established as the kamikaze hug of the Peace woman. But if that is truly the case, then I have to wonder: why him, why now, why here? She claims to have slept with his boss--wouldn't the boss be a better target? Then again, she says that the boss is purposefully losing the war, that is, he is perhaps her puppet, or at least not doing anything she doesn't want. (Or maybe she is lying about one or more things [sleeping with boss/boss losing war on purpose] to see his reaction.) Whereas our hero has the one iota of shame/fighting spirit/refound nationalism or whatever it is, he has the one speck of it in the whole congregation, so maybe that has to be eliminated pronto before he "inherits the throne"? What, is he going to "inherit the throne"? No, he is going to go out to all the expat watering holes in Lisbon, drum up a Lincoln Brigade, and personally turn the tide of the war.

The telescreens pose an interpretive challenge, or so it seems to me. They are two way: viewer is being viewed, except in the case of tv-feed. They present "reality" in real time, yet they are also subject to hacking (the kid in Philadelphia). So for example we get the image of a severed head held aloft on a spear, then we see it is the face of the General, and then the General resumes talking in his office hundreds of miles away from the fighting, and the hacker kid admits he did that fade for effect.

This fact, the blending of images, lends itself quite well to the end: it is as if the hacker kid has cut into the signal we are watching (i.e., our view from the two-way telescreen) and substituted the image of the kamikaze hug.

(The Peace people seem to require the following conditions: a battle-front where they can appear and cause confusion; soldiers to see them and react, and die in favorable ratios [that is, better than one soldier for one Peace person]; cameras to film the whole thing for viewers.

Clio's nova is private, unless one counts the screen; it isn't at a battle-front; it isn't being filmed; she doesn't wave a flag. Well sure, she's a deep agent.)

But no, it is the simple answer. Clio ("history") is tempting Peters, testing him, just as she (presumably) tested his boss. If he agrees with the cues she is giving, then he can have her body (as the boss did), but if he is infected with patriotism/whatever-you-wanna-call-it, then he gets the flaming death (as does she). And she, fembot-like, is always primed, always ready to go off. (Well, maybe not =always=, but certainly for a party/historical event like this.)

=mantis=

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Adam Stephanides — 03 Feb 2002, 15:02 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

on 1/31/02 6:29 PM, Michael Andre-Driussi at mantis at siriusfiction.com wrote:
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STORIES AND OTHER STORIES. Spoilers to follow.

Adam Stephanides wrote:

Moreover, the recruiting centers for volunteers include not only Buddhist spiritual centers, which Wolfe might possibly be ecumenical enough to approve of, but a temple of Kali (166, Orb edition), which he almost certainly isn't. And the government against which they're rebelling is portrayed as incompetent, but not tyrannical.

I'm not certain but I'm pretty sure that Kali worshipers do not have to be thugs, nor are they more inclined toward suicide than Christians

That wasn't what I meant to imply (I actually hadn't been thinking about thuggee at all). But Kali is a goddess of death, and I don't know why Wolfe would drop in a reference to Kali in this context if he didn't want to discredit the rebels.

It ~~is~~ a strange story. It starts out with the obsessive detail worthy of REPORT ON PROBABILITY A

I had been thinking Robbe-Grillet (which was a main influence on REPORT, if I'm not mistaken).

The sense of "America goes it alone" (i.e., no payback for having helped Europe in two world wars) is well done.

My impression was that Wolfe thought the Europeans were just being smart: the "government" forces clearly can't win, so it makes no sense to throw good money after bad.

The corporate approach to warfare, while evoking the chaos and "strange bedfellows" of 20th century civil wars, also is probably related to the real-world corporate approach in Vietnam, a new form which emphasized incremental quotas rather than military goals (this gave rise to the whole "body count" thing, and was itself a greater or lesser factor in the whole debacle).

Viridon even refers to Vietnam when justifying the government's approach to the war. (152)

I mean this: I understand the image of the woman bursting into flames as he touches her erogenous zones, since this was already established as the kamikaze hug of the Peace woman.

I'd interpret the final paragraphs to mean that they make love first, and only after Peters' post-coital conversation does she go up.

But if that is truly the case, then I have to wonder: why him, why now, why here? She claims to have slept with his boss--wouldn't the boss be a better target? Then again, she says that the boss is purposefully losing the war, that is, he is perhaps her puppet, or at least not doing anything she doesn't want.

Referring to her statement "'That's why Lowell is losing his war.'"? (164) But in context, this just means that the war is being lost; and I don't see anything else implying that Lowell is purposefully losing.

(Or maybe she is lying about one or more things [sleeping with boss/boss losing war on purpose] to

see his reaction.) Whereas our hero has the one iota of shame/fighting spirit/refound nationalism or whatever it is, he has the one speck of it in the whole congregation, so maybe that has to be eliminated pronto before he "inherits the throne"? What, is he going to "inherit the throne"? No, he is going to go out to all the expat watering holes in Lisbon, drum up a Lincoln Brigade, and personally turn the tide of the war.

I don't know why she picked him as a target either. My guess would be simply that he's one of the few competent people working for the anti-rebellion forces, and therefore worth eliminating. You'd think, though, that having a spy working for one of the enemy leaders would be worth more than eliminating one subordinate, especially one who hasn't done anything amazing yet. Or maybe she's not working for the rebellion at all, and commits murder/suicide on her own, for whatever reason.

Symbolically, though, it make more sense to me. Clio is history, as you point out (good call; I hadn't noticed that), and she stopped sleeping with Lou about six weeks ago (165), signaling that history has withdrawn its favor from the "government" cause. In signaling his intention to try and turn things around, Peters is attempting to stand in the path of history, and people who do that get steamrolled by history, if you'll forgive the mixed metaphor. (This doesn't explain why history should commit suicide, though.)

The telescreens pose an interpretive challenge, or so it seems to me. They are two way: viewer is being viewed, except in the case of tv-feed. They present "reality" in real time, yet they are also subject to hacking (the kid in Philadelphia).

I wonder if there's an ironic allusion to 1984 here; ironic, since here the telescreens signify not the government's omnipresence but its incompetence.

(The Peace people seem to require the following conditions: a battle-front where they can appear and cause confusion; soldiers to see them and react, and die in favorable ratios [that is, better than one soldier for one Peace person]; cameras to film the whole thing for viewers.

Realistically, it seems like a poor tactic. All the soldiers have to do is shoot anybody approaching their lines who doesn't stop when ordered to. And in any case, the bombers only get a favorable ratio if the soldiers are stupid, like the ones who tried to rape the girl. Its value, if any, seems to be primarily symbolic: "Look how dedicated we are."

--Adam