

electro-torture of Urth

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 05 Mar 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3013>

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 05 Mar 2002, 16:03

Jeff Wilson quoted and wrote:

Thecla (p. 239) correction, she did not exactly take her own life to avoid another session with the revolutionary, rather, she did so to avoid further torment by the in-dwelling demon summoned by the device.

I think that this bears closer examination. Rather than a device that literally summons demons (just as the Book contains hierodules rather than literal angels), I think that the Rev is meant to be an electroshock device of fiendish refinement that divides the brain by damaging tissue electrically and leaves the non-speaking part greatly resentful of the trauma and perhaps envious of the speaking part.

In "Languages of the Dying Sun" (Damien Broderick's EARTH IS BUT A STAR; also in NYRSF No. 149) I wrote something somewhat similar. I was talking about how Wolfe uses techniques to make common sf notions fantastical (using old words for new things), and also making 20th century items very strange (through reversals that employ magical thinking):

"In other words, the revolutionary is an electro-shock therapy device that instils suicidal depression rather than removing the same. Such a thing seems implausible, impossible; since we know that sane people are not made insane by electrical shock. But a moment of magical thinking shows that suicidal depression can be seen as an entity which cannot be destroyed, it can only be sent away; so the twentieth-century machine is the 'sending' device, and the torturers' machine is the 'receiving' device: mental illness has been teleported to the end of history."

Well no, it isn't the same in fine detail as what Jeff Wilson wrote, but in the category of "looking-beyond-demons-toward-20th-century-medical-techniques" it is quite close.

=mantis=

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matthew.malthouse — 06 Mar 2002, 12:53 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

On 05/03/2002 16:03:09 Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:

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There is a mistaken premis here.

ECT can induce changes, physiological and emotional, that themseleves can lead to suicidal tendancies. Here I write having observed the effect culminating in my cousin's suicide jump from the Rosedale Bridge, Toronto.

The official conclusion was that the treatment had not been "inappropriate", the concequence "unfortunate".

It seems plausible to me that very little would be required in the way of "refinement" to turn ECT into a torment. Perhaps no more than a difference in intent.

One thing struck me about Thecla's reaction: it didn't appear so much a depression as akin to that condition (the medical name for which escapes me) where a person is convinced that (typically) a limb doesn't belong to them, indeed is so alien that they require it removed. There are cases where no remedial therapy is effective and surgical removal of the offending limb is the only "cure" available. Thecla's involuntary clawing at herself, her horror at her own form and existance seem similar, albeit perhaps applying to the whole body.

Following this discussion I was wondering if there was any indication of post-the-revolutionary Thecla in Severian after he receives the Alzebo of her. Surely "she" should have the memory of her excruciation and death and with it potentially the same effects. Shouldn't post mortem Thecla be just as mad? Yet I don't recall any hint of it. Could death, suicide, be a redemptive or curative act? That too doesn't seem obviously indicated because Thecla's memories - particularly those invoked while Severian is in the House Absolute - suggest only a slight change of perspective and priorities concequent upon her stay with the Seekers of Truth and Penitence; not a fundamental alteration.

Matthew

--- matthew.malthouse at guardian.co.uk wrote:

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ECT does help some people, including my late grandmother. I suppose in those cases the consequences are fortunate.

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I totally agree that there's no need for magical thinking. The revolutionary literally does just what Master Gurloes (I think) says: activates the victim's death wish, as Freud called it. Mantis's speculation on depressions cured by ECT being transmitted to the future strikes me as fascinating but unnecessary.

I somewhat disagree, though, about depression. Self-hatred is often part of the suicidal feelings in depression, and it's precisely the way Thecla describes the experience. The revolutionary showed her herself (not just her body) as her worst enemy.

Judging from this passage and from the Long and especially Short Sun books, I'd say Wolfe knows something about depression, either from his own experience or from reading and conversation.

Taking the descriptions literally, though, doesn't conflict with people's symbolic readings of sin and redemption or political revolution, which I'm grateful for your mentioning--more depth for the BotNS!

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Now there's a good point, which hadn't occurred to me!

Jerry Friedman

Michael Andre-Driussi — 07 Mar 2002, 00:05 · follows Jerry Friedman

It has been written:

ECT can induce changes, physiological and emotional, that themselves can lead to suicidal tendencies.

Back up a bit.

The Revolutionary is:

1) a device which behaves in a manner somewhat recognizable in 20th century terms, i.e., like an electro-shock therapy machine (we don't seem to see any contention here), yet

2) it functions in a manner decidedly opposite to therapy (again, no argument so far).

Now then. Electro-shock therapy is not terribly specialized knowledge; the term and the general outline is part of general knowledge.

Presumably there was a certain amount of testing done before the therapy became a standard procedure. The success rate must have been relatively high to warrant it being used at all. There may well be cases of such therapy not working; no doubt--nothing is ever 100%. And that is sad in general, and more terrible in specific cases.

Nevertheless. The Revolutionary is assumed to perform its task 99% of the time (just as a guillotine or an electric chair functions). If there was an identical device in use in the 20th century, we would know about it in general knowledge.

Since such a device is unknown in general knowledge, then we suppose that the author invented it (as Fleming invented diabolical devices for SMERSH, et cetera).

The purpose of "The Languages of the Dying Sun" essay was to show how =language= is being used by the authors in three different "dying sun" works. So it would have been out of place for me to investigate the failure rate of a given therapy; the history of the therapy; the peak and decline of the therapy. Yes, another essay could be written on that topic--bring in the frontal lobotomy from oft-mentioned (original motion picture) "Planet of the Apes" and you've got the start of an sfnal take on psychiatric surgery!

If people now are offended that I wrote such a device seems "implausible, impossible," then I apologize. My intent was not to get into "how to make such a device in your garage today" nor any other hard-science approach: I only wanted to say such a thing did not exist when Wolfe wrote of it; in imagining it, I suspected Wolfe used a form of magical thinking (perhaps ala Kafka or David Lindsay); I specified one example of magical thinking involving a psychic/psychiatric link between Urth and Earth (odd how often this happens very obviously in far future novels set on Earth).

Readers are free to disagree on every point (as they already have):

- 1) it does not exist;
- 2) Wolfe created it through magical thinking rather than, say, engineering;
- 3) it might teleport 20th century mental illness to the dying world of our future.

Readers might think that the Revolutionary was not a good choice to make for an example in such an essay. But I brought it along because it was different from most of the other cases (contus, khaibit, etc.), and while people may have chatted about it being similar to an electro-shock therapy machine (like allusions to Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" with regard to the slogan-writing tattoo machine of the torturers), I had not seen it set down in an essay anywhere, making it somewhat "fresh and original" to the essay world, at least in my experience.

Now I find myself sick of talking about it, so excuse me if I say no more.

=mantis=

Matthew wrote:

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If I remember correctly, when "Thecla" awakens in the Antechamber of the House Absolute, her hands rise to claw her eyes as she remembers who she is. I think that's also when she remembers how to get out of the Antechamber.

r.

Jeff Wilson — 11 Mar 2002, 00:22 · follows Ranjit Bhatnagar

From:

Michael Andre-Driussi <mantis at siriusfiction.com>

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A superb inference, Mantiss, and I see no reason it could not have been part of GW's thought on the subject.

I rather think that if true, some information from the original sufferer should be transferred to the receiving victim in the process, perhaps as false memories or mannerisms or other personality traits. There is not much evidence of this transfer, but there's not really much opportunity to have seen it, either. The eyelid-peeling, lip-tearing compulsion may be such, as the other prominent psychotic in the BOTNS, the woman who made children into furniture, displays similar obsessive recidivism.

Jeff Wilson

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