

robot slavery in NYRSF #170

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 06 Oct 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3475>

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 06 Oct 2002, 17:12

Since I am relatively sure that Roy Lackey does not have a subscription to "The New York Review of Science Fiction," I trust that his recent essay on "Bio bias" was not influenced by Robert J. Sawyer's "AI and Sci-Fi: My, Oh, My!" essay on the cover of the latest issue of NYRSF. Another case of synchronicity (if such is really possible within the genre community, where everybody is talking about everything all the time!).

Sawyer's piece is about the treatment of AIs and robots in film and text, beginning with the basic fact that "robot" comes from a Czech word for forced labor. There are a lot of neat little details I did not know (the big robot in "The Day the Earth Stood Still" was the master -- at least in the story, if not in the movie), others I had not thought about in a long time (the robots as slaves thread in "Star Wars"). Most surprising to me (and most pertinent to what Roy is saying) were the sections on Asimov's treatment of robots.

Asimov is the genre champion of "robot-rights." Beginning in the 1940s he very successfully envisioned robots being humanized by the famous Three Laws; he wrote of robo-psychologists (humans trained to deal with robot mental processes and disfunctions); he wrote of robots with child-like minds and a detective robot who worked with a human partner; iirc he wrote about a gradual elevation of robots from "clever tools" to sovereign beings recognized by the law (in a kinda sorta civil rights way).

That is my impression, at least.

So imagine my surprise to learn that in 1986 came one of Asimov's last robot stories, "Robot Dreams," in which a robot named Elvex is somehow dreaming (this is unusual) of a Moses figure rising up for the robots, a man who will speak on their behalf and say "Set my people free." The famed robopsychologist Dr. Susan Calvin questions Elvex on this. Elvex admits that it recognizes the man in the dream; that the man in the dream is Elvex. At which point Dr. Calvin fires her electron gun and erases Elvex.

Whoa!

So then, it seems to me that there are these fracture points within genre. The gray area of human/robot relations examined by Roy might not be so narrowly specific to Gene Wolfe's work, but rather, shared across a broad spectrum of genre authors. Questions of when a tool becomes an entity, etc.

I do not mean to dilute Roy's observations in any way! I only wanted to present some genre context that had synchronistically washed up onto my desk.

More notes on the chems of the Whorl: they may be in a reproductive thralldom to the bios, in as much as they require high-tech parts which the bios are no longer producing, which means that "chem reproduction" involves a scavenger hunt for parts -- with other bios competing,

since they can use the parts as prosthetics! The chems are wearing down in the face of this biological onslaught. The chems and their parts are all wearing down, with no replacements except for hidden caches . . . hmm, well wait a second: there are two forms of chem production. There is bio-directed, like Swallow's low-tech factory, and then there is chem-directed "reproduction."

But to back up a bit: it seems to me that the gray area is such that if one wants to say the chems are "clever tools" then they cannot really be slaves; that in order to be slaves they have to be human equivalent (intellectually, reproductively, and volitionally, at least; perhaps spiritually and other aspects as well).

=mantis=

Andy Robertson — 06 Oct 2002, 17:49 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

----- Original Message -----

From: "Michael Andre-Driussi" <mantis at siriusfiction.com>
There are a lot of neat little details I did not know (the big robot in "The Day the Earth Stood Still" was the master -- at least in the story, if not in the movie),

Indeed. This is played upon in the relationship between Baldanders and Dr Talos.

Baldanders' last words to Severian - "You are wrong. I am the master" are the last words of the robot, in the story.

hartshorn.

Roy C. Lackey — 06 Oct 2002, 20:35 · follows Andy Robertson

mantis wrote:
More notes on the chems of the Whorl: they may be in a reproductive thralldom to the bios, in as much as they require high-tech parts which the bios are no longer producing, which means that "chem reproduction"

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a scavenger hunt for parts -- with other bios competing, since they can use the parts as prosthetics! The chems are wearing down in the face of this biological onslaught. The chems and their parts are all wearing down, with no replacements except for hidden caches . . . hmm, well wait a second: there are two forms of chem production. There is bio-directed, like Swallow's low-tech factory, and then there is chem-directed "reproduction."

I know that the subject of how chems reproduce was touched upon recently, but having just reread the series I can give a little more specific information. Some of the parts must be searched for--where, the text doesn't say; perhaps there is a 'graveyard' for dead soldiers, a junkyard where used but serviceable parts may be found. The army has to do something with soldiers KIA who did not explode; people aren't exactly stumbling over dead chems. There may be a similar cache for dead servant chems. But other parts have to be made by the parent chems. A sibyl from Brick Street asked, in connection with how "Molybdenum" and Hammerstone were going to build a chem child: " . . . where are they going to buy these coprocessor things?" Incus answered: "They must make them, Maytera, and I shall assist

them." (EXODUS, 241)

Hammerstone said, somewhere, that the job of making a chem child could be done in a year, if the parents were lucky, maybe twenty years if they weren't. I don't think the bios on the _Whorl_ were ever in a position to make high-tech parts. The chems had all been built on Urth, after all, and Typhon had no interest in perpetuating their existence beyond the duration of the voyage; if he had, he would have made sure there were ample parts available from the start. Chems were being built and stockpiled on Urth for twenty years before the _Whorl_ sailed. For some raw numbers: there were at least two-hundred cities in the _Whorl_ ; each city had 12,000 soldiers. That comes to 2,400,000 male soldier chems, plus however many male servant chems there had been to start with. Hammerstone complained that there were 7 or 8 soldiers competing for each femchem. That comes, using the higher number, to at least 300,000 females, total, or just 1,500 per city. Assuming equal numbers of male and female servant chems, that means that at least 3 million total chems had been put aboard. And all those mass-produced femchems looked just alike, which is how a Molybdenum could ever have been confused for a Magnesia.

I don't know where Tarsier got the parts (or the know-how) to build chem bodies for the councillors but, according to Lemur, their original bio bodies were maintained by "devoted chems". And "We promise them immortality, and we will deliver it: a never-ending supply of replacement parts." (LS2, 12) I don't know if he was lying or not, but the implication is that someone would be able to build chem parts as needed, presumably Tarsier.

But to back up a bit: it seems to me that the gray area is such that if one wants to say the chems are "clever tools" then they cannot really be slaves; that in order to be slaves they have to be human equivalent (intellectually, reproductively, and volitionally, at least; perhaps spiritually and other aspects as well).

And that is the point I've been trying to make since my first chem post, a month ago. However chems may have come to be regarded by some in Viron--as people--that is not the way they started out.

-Roy