

PEACE: the office of Dr. Van Ness (again!)

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 28 Oct 2002

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 28 Oct 2002, 04:33

Roy and I, on this list, have discussed the big plate of spaghetti that is PEACE. The most tangled noodle of the whole thing is, I believe (well, for the moment at least -- bear with) the visit of Weer to Dr. Van Ness's office and all the weirdness that follows.

In the past we have looked at the clear evidence of "bad splices," where time-frames have been patched one on top of the other. This is part of what makes the Dr. V thread difficult to trace, because Weer has visited this one doctor for 30 years, from a period when he was a skinny loser to when he was a fat king of the town. If Weer only had yearly physical exams, that would be 30 visits to pick and choose from for the splicing.

For the purposes of debate, there must be two conflicting points of view. Roy has volunteered to champion the view that Weer's situation is nearly-solipsistic, and the ghosts he sees are puppets of his psyche: Dr. Van Ness, as the ghost who most interacts with Weer, is by this action the most complete puppet of all.

I am putting forth the option of 0% puppetry and 0% solipsism. The trade off is 100% time travel. (And unlike Billy Pilgrim of SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE, Weer's travel is =not= paradox free.)

Now then, getting down to the gist of it. The text suggests to me that the Dr. Van Ness thread is made up of at least three visits, each one in a different decade: 1953, 1963, 1973. Each visit had a crisis: the 1953 visit had Weer flustered/tormented by seeing Sherry again (and probably fearing that she is pregnant by him); it is clear that the 1973 visit was immediately after his stroke.

So what happened in 1963? Our timelines get rather hazy there, other than certain key facts: Weer became president; Weer had three visitors (Bill the ad man, Eleanor the tree lady, and Charlie Turner the dog man).

The text suggests that Weer bounces around in time at the Doctor's office (skeleton key: arranging "Life" magazines in sequence by cover, applies especially to the doctor's office) before more-or-less stabilizing in 1963.

How is this perceived in linear time? President Weer has had some type of nervous breakdown, naturally! Thus all that talk of a future stroke =really did= happen. The mirror test, the TAT cards: all real. And what did Dr. Van Ness think of it? He seems to have decided that Weer was suffering from overwork -- the sudden change in becoming president, moving from apartment to mansion, etc. Because note what his advice is: work is not to be liked; Weer should find a hobby; Weer should walk around some, and talk to people. This advice is not really appropriate for "stroke recovery," which is what Weer is asking about (and he takes it as adequate for stroke recovery by puttering around in the garden and reliving conversations); but it is perfect for helping a person out of an episode of mental illness.

In this way, we see that "the madman is right," in the sense that Weer of 2274 invaded the Weers of 1953, 1963, and 1973 and spoke the truth (as much as he understood it in a vague post-1974 sort of way) about his situation (which amounts to "last man on Earth" stuff). Hence the paradox: does Weer recall the mental breakdown he had at Dr. Van Ness's office in 1963, or did it not happen until he did it as a ghost, overriding the Weer of 1963 to speak out (in a way that Scrooge and Billy Pilgrim cannot)?

(Or wait, have I already said all this before?)

=mantis=

Roy C. Lackey — 30 Oct 2002, 04:52 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

mantis wrote:

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My senility is getting worse; I don't remember volunteering for anything! <g> However, if I've been dragooned . . .

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Halfheartedly I parry: didn't Wolfe write somewhere that PEACE was originally published as a "mainstream" novel; that it was not labeled (or marketed) as "fantasy", as is the case with my Berkley paperback? Is time travel allowed in mainstream fiction?

In the past we have looked at the clear evidence of "bad splices," where time-frames have been patched one on top of the other. This is part of what makes the Dr. V thread difficult to trace, because Weer has visited this one doctor for 30 years, from a period when he was a skinny loser to when he was a fat king of the town. If Weer only had yearly physical exams, that would be 30 visits to pick and choose from for the splicing.

I know I've gone over this before, so I'll give just the broad view. Those "bad splices" you mention are, for me, what most clearly demonstrates that Weer is **not** time traveling. He's dead. Whether his existence in the frametale is purgatorial, hellish, cyclical, or whatever; **it's all in his head**, and he is not entirely sane. He is powerless to alter his "reality", wherever he is. (If people could get out of hell, or limbo, or even purgatory just because they didn't like it, the vacancy rate would be quite high. And he doesn't **like** being where he's at.) He is unable to change the past. If he could change **his** past, that would necessarily change the pasts of everyone he interacted with after he made the change(s), causing an exponential ripple effect in the lives of everyone in the world.

Whether Wolfe intended Weer's situation to be remediable or not, I don't know, but Weer can't change it by an act of will alone. Perhaps Wolfe's religious views allow Weer an eventual out, but in the short term all he can do is think, to remember, and to rail against his fate. Weer's memories are, by and large, not happy ones. Those he chooses to "write" down get altered in the process of remembering. When he gets in his head the notion of his dead-man stroke, and seeks medical advice for it down the corridors of time from equally dead doctors, it's all imagination. His existence is defined by his memories--that's all he has to work with. He is free to reconstitute his memories any way he wants to, and he's only giving us a small part of them.

When he draws on the memory of a visit to Dr. V as the stage setting for his inquiry about his stroke, and remembers a time when he was in a waiting room full of people, he, childlike, wants to see the doctor right **now**. When the nurse points out that he must wait his turn, he just moves ahead to another memory of when he had already been admitted to the doctor. The "stroke" he complains of in the *frametale* is imaginary (even if based on a real one he had when he was alive), because he's dead. The spiritual dissatisfaction he feels with his current state of being manifests itself--in his mind--as a stroke. He wants relief, so he turns to a dead doctor he has known to find it, which, of course, doesn't work.

When his *frametale*-self interacts with Dr. V (or Lois, or Sherry), so that the doctor responds with comments that were never made when both were alive (and which **couldn't** have been made in real life, like those to Dr. Black), Weer is playing mind games with himself, revisiting memories like someone daydreaming; variations on a theme, with what-ifs and might-have-beens.

I don't necessarily believe all this, but it is one solipsistic take on Weer's situation.

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If Weer were able to travel in time, then I would choose the second option.

-Roy

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 30 Oct 2002, 17:17 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy quoted Mantis ...

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Pedantically I riposte: Time travel of the variety Mantis describes occurs in at least one mainstream novel, SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE, which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been labelled or marketed as science fiction or fantasy.

--Blattid, pedantic to the last hiss