

...uhh...a bit more Stranger...

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 22 Apr 2003

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ArchD'Ikon Zibethicus — 22 Apr 2003, 10:40

MEH:

Edgar Rice Burroughs was dead and buried by 1951.

(sigh...) OK, OK...I left myself _wide_ open for that one...fair enuff...

William burroughs i really wouldn't consider as a science fiction writer...

Here we enter interesting territory; just _who is_ a science fiction writer?
And what is _science fiction_?

and, further, Blattid thus:

I say "sort of" for Burroughs because he's writing outside the SF >genre,
using tropes from the SF/F toolbox ...

I find this thread to be of particular interest. I cannot and will not purport to be an expert in 'SF', but the above comments from you both have given me pause for thought last coupla days, roughly to the effect of what
is science fiction, anyway?

Is it a story which depends on a scientific construct for its plot?

Is it a story which could not be told without the existence of a particular sciento-technical structure?

My dictionary: "a form of fiction which draws imaginatively on scientific knowledge and speculation in its plot, setting, theme, etc." (Macquarie, 1st Edn.)

Now, this is a very broad definition - so broad that I would tentatively suggest that much of Mr. Burroughs's (William Seward henceforth unless stipulated otherwise) work could be called SF in this sense; as his metamorphosing creatures are (partly) based on biological instances, to give just one example of what I mean. (Not to mention the psychological - or pop-psychological, if you prefer - basis of his studies of control addiction...)

(In fact, it just occurred to me, by the above definition Ambrose Bierce's 'The Damned Thing' could also be defined as an SF story, as could many others not normally included in this canon.)

And, if Burroughs is not a SF writer in these terms, is this being said because his work also attempts to meet other objectives? And, if so, it is possible for a work to be SF but also _more_ than SF?

In fact, his SF owes more to Edgar Rice Burroughs than to modern SF,

Oh, to be sure! But if the images are employed by a 'modern' writer such as WSB in a different context, might they not take on a contemporary value of their own?

but even he uses the strategic-deployment-of-details riffs Heinlein pioneered (especially, but not solely, in NOVA EXPRESS).

I'm afraid I haven't read enough Heinlein to really understand what you mean by this pioneering.

Of the three you mention, Le Guin is actually the easiest to demonstrate the point for; read the first few pages of THE DISPOSSESSED. The technique used there, to establish the border and contrast between two worlds, is pure Heinlein; what's pure Le Guin is the repurposing of that technique to put the two societies in a meaningful [juxta]op]position.

Well, sieur, you may very well be right - I've disqualified myself already from passing specific judgement - but, surely, by the same standard, the invention of another world to comment on this one (Ballard's words, BTW) is hardly original to Mr. Heinlein, is it?

Brings us back to the question of defining SF...I'm thinking of all the moon-voyages throughout history...starting, perhaps, with Lucian...

As far as I can understand (admittedly not very), it could just as well be said that Heinlein's world-juxtaOPposition (beautiful portmanteau!) is very Lucianian...

Ballard is the toughest one, because so much of his SF is in a deliberate rejection of Campbell-Heinlein SF/F;

I would guess, once again, that it might be more of a matter of an expansion beyond these parameters rather than a rejection of them per se; I believe that Mr. Ballard has cited Celine as a primary influence, and he certainly wears Jarry enough on his sleeve to paraphrase 'The Passion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race' as the last chapter of 'The Atrocity Exhibition'.

Yet, many of his early short stories are conventionally set off-world...

Some years ago I suggested in a review that THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION, CRASH, etc., are what happens if you write "hard SF," but do your speculating in abnormal psychology instead of physics or chemistry.

"In fact, I believe that if it were possible to scrap the whole of existing literature, and be forced to begin again without any knowledge of the past, all writers would find themselves inevitably producing something very close to science fiction...[w]e live inside an enormous novel. For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality."

- from the introduction to 'Crash'

I do agree with your contention that Ballard has used rhetorical and thematic devices which were employed by Heinlein and his contemporaries, especially in his earlier work, as you say...although ultimately to a very different end. (I find it interesting, BTW, that Ballard's status as an SF writer seems to be unquestioned, in contrast to that of WSB.)

Which isn't about sex at all (as the feminist movement spent many years informing us), but is nonetheless boneheaded.

Unfortunately for your understanding, the whole business about Manson basing his religion on STRANGER turns out to be a sort of STFnal urban legend; he had never even read the book before going to jail. Oh well, it's a good story anyway.

General remarks: firstly, I do apologise to any Heinlein fans whose feathers or feelers I may have ruffled. I am sure that he deserves his stature, but unfortunately, I didn't read much Golden Age stuff in my vanished youth, and the passage in 'Stranger' I've cited has pretty much

put me off re-examining him for the present. Vita brevis - and in the event of having the hypothetical spare time, I'd probably rather spend it in re-reading Cordwainer Smith...just a question of personal taste...

Re. Manson, please forgive my offhand remarks if they caused offense; nevertheless, I am a trifle confused about your correction. I was under the impression that Mr. Manson had read 'Stranger' well before his release from Terminal Island in 1967. At any rate, as I already observed, he was well-misversed enough in the text to name his son Michael Valentine Manson...or are you saying that this did not happen?

In any case, I'm sure that 'Stranger' bears as little responsibility for the events precipitated by Mr. Manson as the other influences to which he was exposed, _allegedly_ including Scientology and LaVeyesque Satanism, and I'm sure that Mr. Heinlein didn't intend the work to be used in that manner _if_ it did happen...but the abuse is suggestive, given the nature of the text...it was also alleged that the Family referred to some of their murders as 'discorporations', despite their all-too-tangible and messy nature...

This is about all I know of the matter, and I may very well be mistaken. In any case, as I have already said, I am probably disqualified from passing judgement on 'Stranger', as it is my mother-in-law's favourite book...

Solemnly,

->Zx<-

PS: _Every SF writer?_

Lem?

The Russians?

The Hell Law says that Hell is reserved exclusively for them that believe in it. Further, the lowest Rung in Hell is reserved for them that believe in it on the supposition that they'll go there if they don't.

- The Honest Book of Truth, The Gospel According to Fred, 3:1
