

more hellish hues

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 08 Jul 1997

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Ron Crown — 08 Jul 1997, 09:42

Although in general terms, I can buy some type of generic apocalyptic scenario for this story, I think the evidence is thin at best for the "antichrist" motif; the shadow being is only described as "demonic" and does not have any other (anti)messianic traits that I can pick up. Wolfe did use the number "666" _explicitly_ in Fifth Head; I don't see any clues for treating the number 230011 as equivalent to it; various relationships between these numbers are possible if, in fact, we are to do anything with it. And Marilyn=Mary is surely a stretch; Mother Mary as the bearer of antichrist? That would certainly be bringing the antichrist motif to new heights (or depths, take your pick).

Also, the machines haven't completely taken over; Kyle has to get Marilyn to agree to imposing restraint on Skip (i.e. keeping him in his harness) when it appears he may be psychotic. And the "Director" only "advises restraint."

As it turns out, a macaw is a kind of parrot so Alga's memory was correct after all! According to Webster's 3rd International, the macaw belongs to the genus _ara_; could this be behind the -aris in Polyaris? Perhaps this plus "Polly want a cracker" lies behind Polyaris. What actually occurred to me as I read the story was the North Star, Polaris, as a navigational guide (Polyaris as a beacon, so to speak); also, I thought of the canaries miners used to take down in mines to warn them when the air was getting bad.

On Kyle: It seems pretty clear that we're supposed to do something Greek with this name since the letters kappa-epsilon-lambda are spelled out. Wolfe's transliteration would then match the one he used for the Greek word hyle (in the story "The Death of Hyle") which means "matter." But in the case of "hyle," there is an exact correspondence between the transliteration and the Greek term; there is no Greek word that I could find that matches "kyle" in the same way as "hyle;" Alga's "roll" comes as close as anything. (The first sentence of the story is "Three with _Egg_ roll, Kyle thought." That would be a rather crude pun--if that's not tautologous).

On rereading this story, what strikes me is how 30s pulpish it all sounds--Campbellian superscience (gravitic beams and so forth); there is even a reference to Charles Fort and (I think) a humorous allusion to Weinbaum's A Martian Odyssey (ostriches on Mars who are pests). And the bright colors (especially of Polyaris) could put one in mind of a Frank Paul cover, I suppose. This kind of thing makes it difficult for me to believe that Wolfe was really being very serious with this story; it is too thin to carry its freight of supposedly apocalyptic baggage.

One final note: this story originally appeared in the Byron Preiss edited volume _The Universe_ where essays on astronomy, cosmology, etc. were paired with stories. Wolfe's story is paired with a James Trefil essay on "The New Physics and the Universe" which has a passing reference to dark matter. I obviously don't know how the volume was put together; whether the writers ready the science essay and then wrote a "speculation" (as it is designated in the book) based on that or what. However, Wolfe was obviously not interested in serious scientific speculation (IMHO), his "speculation" appears to be much more metaphysical than physical.

One more thing just occurred to me: someone asked about the movie allusion re the line "Call me master"; could this be to Harry Bates' story "Farewell to the Master" which was made into the movie "The Day the Earth Stood Still?" The story had an ironic point lost in the movie which was that the robot was the actual master when all along the reader is assuming it is the servant. That would certainly support the "machines in charge" line but since that is missing from the movie; perhaps there is another movie in view here?

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