

"Post-Colonial" Colonization

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 05 May 1999

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 05 May 1999, 13:03

Greg Neyman,

I think I take it for granted, but I'm glad that when I wake up at two in the morning to do that paper that I've been putting off, my computer doesn't return the error message "what the @\$% are you doing up at 2 in the morning, and more importantly, why are you bothering me!!!" the thing is, my computer was created to be my unquestioning servant ... if robots are created, whose sole purpose is to make a planet habitable for human detachment, then they won't care that they're thrown out like rubbish as soon as the terrans arrive ...

Well sure, that's the usual rationale, especially pre-Asimov, who really went far in exploring "robot rights" (which itself is either a cheap and easy rip-off of the serious civil rights movement, or a visionary meditation on rights for intelligent beings).

If the artifact is "just a tool," then it is like a flint arrowhead. But if the artifact has the artificial intelligence at the level of a mouse or a dog (which would sure be useful in a terraforming robot, if not an absolute requirement), and the self-awareness of say an iguana, and the "Van Neumann-machine" ability to reproduce (another very handy trait for this type of project), then the artifact is very close to a lifeform. Even in the 20th century there was debate about whether certain =diseases= should be rendered extinct.

So if your home computer had some robots and built your house and tailored the environment of the house lot from the DNA-level up . . . never mind.

Within the Whorl, Gene Wolfe has approached robots in an interesting way, showing how they are built, how they pay off the debt of their building, how they can engage in reproduction. They are lifeforms.

Robert Patterson,

Another point is that if humans are ever going to inhabit other planets, with >or without current biospheres, those planets will almost certainly require some >level of terraforming. While I find the probability-based arguments for the >existence of biospheres on other planets to be fairly plausible, I see no >reason to expect that their life-chemistry will be in any way compatible with >ours. I just re-read Vernor Vinge's _A_Fire_Upon_the_Deep_, and while it is a >great book, he seems rather naive in assuming that everyone can eat everyone >else and not die.

Right. Even the "minor" difference between left-handed DNA and right-handed DNA is a vast barrier! To be fair, though, a lot depends upon the story to be told. In this case you probably would have been satisfied with a simple sentence or two alluding to whatever miracle would make this possible (forerunners, whatever). Those little details, which don't have to be built up into the central point of the Story, are often a source of vexation or delight: for example, Le Guin's Hainish universe has an escape hatch in the form of the forerunner race, the Hain. So

some of the more outrageous biological whoppers, like the hermaphrodites of LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS and maybe some stuff in PLANET OF EXILE, can be blamed upon bio-tinkering by Hain in the distant past (LHOD is explicit in implicating the Hain; which is especially neat since it gives the otherwise angelic Hain something of the taint of Nazi medical experimenters).

(If =only= those winged cat mounts of ROCCANON'S WORLD could be blamed on the Hain!)

While David J. Lake covers this DNA angle in THE RIGHT HAND OF DEXTRA, he commits some whoppers of his own. Kingsbury's COURTSIDE RITE did a great job of showing humans on a "habitable world" where they couldn't eat the lifeforms.

And yes, the terraforming! Even humans moving onto a habitable planet will engage in something disturbingly like "slash and burn"--bring your own birds, bees, worms, ants, grain, etc. Carve out your little ecozone. Animals that stray outside the perimeter will die of starvation. And the ecologies will be at war: I look out my window and I can see the victorious camps of Australians over on the hill, where they've been for generations now--eucalyptus; likewise, Australia has the cane toad, etc. It would be like that--even if/when the humans stop burning the place, the Terran plantforms would be the vanguard, expanding where they could, preparing the way for other Terran lifeforms to follow. Classic Darwinian "root and thorn" stuff--battle of the lifeforms.

AI,

It's interesting that at the moment, SF seems to be questioning some of the core assumptions which have held good for decades - like, if we had the ability to settle other worlds (in this solar system or elsewhere) we automatically would do so. Remember in Sterling's Schismatrix, how the entire solar system has been "taken over" by humans, but hardly anyone actually bothers with settling planets or moons. Similarly in Egan's recent Diaspora, the posthuman explorers (actually just software running on tiny spacecraft!) are deeply reluctant to introduce any sort of contaminant into the planet they are exploring. Rather than sending submarine probes into the planet's ocean, they toy with the idea of waiting a few hundred years until a tsunami dumps some sea-life onto dry-land, where they can study it from orbit.

In SCHISMATRIX, wasn't it the case that some fanatics (post-human pioneers) were altering themselves into "angels" so they could live in the alien environment of a gas world? Here is a case of "Nature worship" so strong (i.e., don't change the planet, change the people) as to be blind to the ethical dilemmas of such radical self-modification. Such "post humanism" might be only a mask for the serious generational questions faced by humans every day: should I emigrate; should I wed; should I reproduce; etc. But "should I become a mermaid, and all my offspring become mermaids?" is obviously of a different magnitude! And yet, people willingly suicide in cults and on their own, so yes, people are capable of all sorts of things.

But yes, and this revision of sf's core assumptions has been going on for some time now, especially post-Apollo. And it goes hand in hand with starflight becoming more and more distant, more and more impossible--a "sour grapes" sort of reaction. Or we are only adopting the "galactic zoo" credo which we used to think was the reason why the superior lifeforms aren't contacting us!

=mantis=

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Michael Straight — 06 May 1999, 08:36 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

On Wed, 5 May 1999, Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:

In SCHISMATRIX, wasn't it the case that some fanatics (post-human pioneers) were altering themselves into "angels" so they could live in the alien environment of a gas world? Here is a case of "Nature worship" so strong (i.e., don't change the planet, change the people) as to be blind to the ethical dilemmas of such radical self-modification. Such "post humanism" might be only a mask for the serious generational questions faced by humans every day: should I emigrate; should I wed; should I reproduce; etc. But "should I become a mermaid, and all my offspring become mermaids?" is obviously of a different magnitude! And yet, people willingly suicide in cults and on their own, so yes, people are capable of all sorts of things.

If you want to see more of the ethical dilemmas of radical self-modification, you should read Greg Egan's works such as *Diaspora*, *Distress*, and especially *Permutation City*. He imagines people who take all sorts of body shapes, who become software and "debug" and "edit" their own personalities, people who have decided that emotions are just a bad idea and have surgery to become "voluntary autists," and more!

-Rostrum

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