O’ benighted star travelers of tomorrow

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O’ BENIGHTED STAR TRAVELERS OF TOMORROW

by

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of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
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Deep in the human unconscious is a pervasive need for a logical universe that makes sense. But the real universe is always one step beyond logic.

-from The Sayings of Muad’Dib by the Princess Irulan
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This work explores who we are and what we may become. Essential is a willing suspension of disbelief combined with the freedom to speculate on and invent ethics or experiences that are just emerging and those that have yet to occur, as well as a desire to be cool.
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EPISODE 1

A REMARKABLE OR HARROWING PORTENT

When I say it’s about science fiction, my main fear is that whomever is asking will take away some idea of a retelling of the same old tales with an outer space backdrop, perhaps with a robot sidekick and some odd forehead prosthetics. While maybe not so far off when it comes to the content of my prints, it ignores what is for me the most exciting aspect of science fiction (SF): a willing suspension of disbelief combined with the freedom to speculate on and invent ethics or experiences that are just emerging and those that have yet to occur. SF has a decent track record for predicting the future. Jules Verne imagined traveling to the moon, Aldous Huxley imagined genetic engineering, Arthur C. Clarke envisaged virtual reality, and Stanislaw Lem foresaw the e-book. These are not true cases of prediction or prophecy however, just cases of things coming to pass. More exciting is that by the time these events or developments arrive, society has already digested or grown accustomed to processing their effects or implications thanks to a shared fictional narrative.

In Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus, arguably the first true science fiction story, Mary Shelley imagines a scientist using modern experimentation to create life, only to be horrified by his creation. Her story on the ethics of reanimation was based on experiments at the time by Luigi Galvani, who used electricity to jump-start muscles in dead frogs. ¹ Today we know this technology as defibrillation, and the associations with Frankenstein still survive. In I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream by Harlan Ellison, we are warned of the computational singularity: the rise of an artificial intelligence that infinitely improves itself. In Ellison’s narrative, a global computer network gains self-awareness and decides to ‘Control-All-Delete’ humanity. The necessity for programming

safeguards and a coded morality into machines is a modern concern considering the rise of self-driving cars, which may be forced to make quick decisions in unfortunate scenarios. Science fiction also preemptively considers possible social and societal changes. Notably, the urgent relevance of George Orwell’s 1984, as the Trump administration sentences all mention of climate change down its own “memory hole,” perfectly imitating the fictional “Ministry of Truth.”

EPISODE 2
DOUBLE-CLICK FOR LOVE

Advances in computation and network technologies are of particular importance in my work. They have transformed our ideas of intimacy, privacy and friendship. We are more connected than ever and it is making us increasingly more narcissistic and isolated. We are also entering a new era of being able to create artificial relationships tailored the way we want them to be. As it turns out, what we want is “to never be alone but always in control. This can’t happen when one is face-to-face with a person.”\(^2\) We are becoming more willing to offer emotional intimacy to things that cannot share emotional experiences the same way we do. Your Tamagotchi was just the beginning. Companion robots for the elderly are already in use, caretaking robots are in development in many countries such as Japan, where robots are viewed as a means of “iyashi,” or healing. These robotic and artificial relationships are actually being employed as a means to encourage people to disconnect from cyberspace, engage socially, exercise, and eat healthy. Yet it is more acceptable than ever to spend hours each day interacting with nothing more than flattened personae.

Social media reduces people to their profiles, has perverted our ideas of what social relations are, and has millions acting as their own unqualified public relations specialists. The real world is met

with disappointment. Do you ever prefer to connect with others through your phone, rather than engage with a coworker or stranger face-to-face? Have you ever felt a ‘phantom limb’ sensation in your phone’s absence? What other new solitudes can we imagine? The generation raised with continuous connection experiences real anxiety and sensory-deprivation without network technologies. We are invisibly connected all the time and yet it seems we never truly have anyone’s full attention anymore, and we are beginning to no longer expect it. And maybe that is okay. Perhaps it’s just another example of one generation lamenting the habits of the next, like arguing against the arrival of the printing press.

I am interested in this surge of relationships with technology and the recession of face-to-face interaction. My work speculates on who we are in the age of the internet, as well as the rise of a trans-human era, imagining what we may one day become. Like our notions of intimacy, privacy, and friendship, our ideas of identity, sentience, death, and life may become irresolute due to advances in computation technology.

EPISODE 3
DEATH’S END

Computer science pioneer Marvin Minsky insisted that there is no fundamental difference between humans and machines, famously describing the human brain as a meat-machine: nature’s own wet and sticky way of creating a computer.\(^3\) The position that the mind is itself a computational system is known as the computational theory of mind (CTM). This hypothesis asserts that thinking is the algorithm. Thinking is the tune, and the tune is the same regardless of what it is being played on, or if it is being played at all. Minsky faded into legend in 2016 but, as a member of the scientific advisory board for the Alcor Life Extension Foundation, has likely been cryogenically

preserved, leaving some hope that he will live again to see his predictions for a decoding of the human mind come true.

Cryonics and artificial hibernation will likely be humanity’s first defiant steps through time. The prospects of such advancements are truly remarkable but it is worth noting that all study of modern science is still being done with the brains of Flintstones. We do not have twenty thousand years to wait for the next natural biological evolution of the brain to manifest itself. Intelligence in the broadest sense needs a jumpstart. Once a fundamental understanding of the brain is achieved, we can begin to tackle the problem of mind-uploading. Of course, advances in science are dependent on the human brains themselves, so if it turns out that we cannot solve this problem with our current minds, we can use advanced neuroscience to help others solve it for us. Amplification via computers, or an interconnected network of our meat-machines, or implanting memories are all possible avenues to increase the capabilities of the mind.

If CTM is correct, and if an entire mental life, with thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and intellect, is fundamentally information and can one day be encoded, copied, transferred and uploaded to an artificial substrate, will it change how we consider what it is to be human? This supposition gives the mental substance of Cartesian dualism a new relevance, with the mind returning to an invisible and intangible state of existence that is independent of body, albeit much less ghastly. However, a phenomenological experience can only occur if there is a substrate or platform through which an intentional system can experience and interact, whether it be a synthetic body or virtually through some kind of software. These ideas are gaining traction, and promise to do so as long as people hate dying. Currently, no computers rival the processing power of our meat-machines, and we are far from any sort of cognitive holism when it comes to the mind.
That did not deter Zoltan Istvan from running as the first Transhumanist candidate for president in the 2016 election. Driving across the country in his “Immortality Bus,” a school bus fitted with plywood and painted brown to mimic a wood coffin, the presidential hopeful preached transhumanism, running on a techno-optimist platform that includes embracing implants, merging with machines, and declaring aging a disease. His goals of curing death and living to see infinity are seductive for some – mostly middle aged men I imagine, but they also raise concerns. What would prevent the inequality divide between the poor and rich from becoming the divide between mortals and immortals? Would our concepts of identity evolve with us? Would it change how we react to and treat those we view as being different than ourselves? Would we be driven to constantly self-improve, to transcend our human selves? Would we wax and wane nostalgic for our DNA-rooted heritage? Thinking practically, what would be the proper etiquette for two or more intentional systems sharing the same hardware? Thinking worriedly, can you imagine a worse situation to in which receive a 404? Thinking further, what are the psychological implications of being a mind-copy? How does one cope with being a ‘print’ of an original? Would you feel any new type of happiness or shame depending on the actions of the ‘original’ you? With full administrative access over your mindware, would we choose to feel negative thoughts at all?

EPISODE 4
O’ BENIGHTED STAR-TRAVELERS OF TOMORROW

The characters in my prints exist after the dawn of the post-human age, though they may exist in separate universes and throughout multiple timelines. Their bodies are artificial substrates nano-tailored just for them. If they seem to resemble glam rockers, crust punks or first-wave metalheads it is because that is what freedom looks like. It was punk who introduced me to printmaking through flyering and t-shirt printing. Her stubborn notions of authenticity, her contradictory ethics, distrust of authority and creation of a more
interesting mythos in which to live have been major influences in the tone and voice of my fiction writing and character invention.

Equally, my work is science fiction for science fiction’s sake. Like printmaking and punk, the genre has its own subculture rich in community, ephemera, shared knowledge and a specific language. These genres can be intimidating to the uninitiated but I see them as having, even in their most overly technical, abrasive, or fantastic forms, as having an inherent verisimilitude. Since their inception, they have always belonged to all of humanity.

My stories are told not through a program on a holodeck, by uploading into wetware, or with a fully immersive virtual game, but through the static form of woodcut. The grain of the wood, repetition of marks and the general features of the process make for imagery that feels naturally evolved, and though the subject matter is that of synthetic beings experiencing connection and disconnection, the elements in the printed image tend toward feeling as if they were all made of the same stuff. Sometimes the grain of the wood flows through the image, referencing the real-world living systems used to communicate these scenarios and hopefully hinting at other hidden wave patterns made visible.

The characters are star-travelers and time-tourists and each print is a moment in their story. They are hiding from the reptilian mind-control vapors of the elites. They caress a delicate ecosystem with their synthetic hand, or are horrified by the pain of becoming one with the green. They merge their mindware into the same substrate and leave no doors closed to the other. They attend the destruction of Saturn or accidentally create a new universe that might be more fun than our own. They travel back in time to see what sticks and dirt looked like. They multiply themselves exponentially and break interstellar taboo by creating infinite timelines in order to befriend the caustic Dairy Queen server. They all have a story, though I’m not always telling. In works such as Red Tape and Yellow Tape, the stories
take precedence and the visuals and audio of the cassette tapes serve as context and atmosphere.

Though I draw frequently from science and mathematics for writing prompts, none of my work is particularly bogged down by the flagrant technical exposition that SF is known for. For me, it is enough that the scientific method is applicable in the worlds I create, whether or not these worlds have laws of physics consistent with or similar to our own. The real fun is in speculating on undiscovered phenomenological experiences or questioning the resilience of our humanity. Ideally, my static imagery will be seen as stills from what University of Iowa alumnus John Gardner calls a continuous, uninterrupted dream.4

EPISODE 5
LUMINARIES AND THRASHTERPIECES

Influences such as Canadian thrash-metal group Voivod may be more apparent to certain audiences, while equally important figures such as Luigi Russolo, Italian futurist and creator of the ‘noise’ genre of music may (hopefully) come to mind for others. Russolo’s paintings could easily function as interpretations of what it is like to see the waves of wireless internet, electromagnetic radiation, or the onset of a new velocity of life. His abrasive recordings have a special place in the pantheon of raw and uncompromising music and were decades ahead of their time. Absolutely essential if you go for that sort of thing. I like to think I hear his affects when I listen to Voivod’s cyberpunk love stories or cautionary tales on the rise of the technocracy.

The imaginative works of Hieronymus Bosch are equally if not more interesting as a meditation on what a future virtual polis of intentional systems may look like. In my own version of The Garden of Earthly Delights, each citizen of Bosch’s polis is being represented by an avatar of their own choosing, whether it be a unicorn, a giant

bird on ice-skates, or perhaps a fish-person if ze should so prefer. The enduring fascination with his cryptic paintings and the speed of development in virtual reality will likely make this a reality. How many degrees of difference is there between these ideas of living inside an elaborate computer program and the video game Second Life, where players live an alternate virtual existence typically as a skinnier, richer, more successful version of themselves? How different is Second Life from the way we reinvent ourselves and our lives for social media?

The costume work of artist Nick Cave also conjures a desire to transcend age, race, gender, and perhaps our human selves altogether. His dynamic versions of what we may become perfectly demonstrate the freeing nature of pure speculation. I wonder if perhaps our pettiness will follow us as we bleep and bloop to the stars or the flash drives of the future. Will some acorporeal entities of a future polis discriminate against those citizens who happened to be descended from DNA? How would beings that exist corporeally feel toward those who choose to spend infinity in VR? We may imagine ourselves as inclusive yet we already deny sentient beings who possess established theories of mind basic rights. How would an emerging AI view us if we were unwilling to acknowledge its sentience as equal to humanity’s? What connections and divides have we yet to discover?
Figure 1. Vapors, woodcut, 30" X 28", 2015
Figure 2. *With Sympathy*, woodcut, 30" x 30", 2016
Figure 3. *Green Life or Less*, woodcut, 30” x 44”, 2015
Figure 4. Mindware, woodcut with foil, 26” x 44” 2016
Figure 5. The Star-Traveler Mullall and Fellow Travelers Dekalb, Elgin and M.D.F. Witness the Destruction of Saturn from the Bridge of the Two-Hearted, woodcut with foil, 15" x 11", 2016
Figure 6. Break Your Chrono-Chains. You are Time-Slaved, woodcut with foil, 20” x 26”, 2015
Figure 7. Dairy Queen, woodcut and letterpress, 7” x 5”, 2015
Figure 8. Bridie Starts to Like Bombs, woodcut, 26” x 20”, 2017
You need some chunky riffage in your life. Can you feel it? Your head ain't right and your hose is a cunt and all the mashed-out suburban sweatshirt looks at the local boozers have got you feeling a bit achier. You sit in your basement funk and arrange your cassettes by genre, then year, then color, and as the peacock flail of freebase smoke clears and your vision unfurls, you rise up to the red tape. The one with enough metatopia and youthful semblance to power your entire bullshit world, passed down to you through some tight-spot syrup you met on a coach or a piece of laverbread. You tell your weary earholes to fear not.

You put on your 75 lb. leather jacket and hit the controls for a barren landscape rich in subconscious meaning. The high and wild windness (what way past anything recognizable and you're sure these are not) the same puked-out punks your bov friends are wearing on their patches. You listen on, though, because your friends are too cock to share and they're always talking shit behind your back. The sky always open and the win-grid interloper economy falls and a semi-professional auster man named Happy Ronin holds out his hand and offers to be the Virgil to your nocturnal smacks-choices tense. You fucking doing or what?

At the first crazy-mooning at your skull riff tears down all multinational corporations, your feet mumble beneath you. But Happy Ronin is there and he guides you through the new-world postiche of Aesop compositions and boog you across the-counter PCP using the rich tapestry of his body odor as currency. He accepts his change in the form of public line, hence you his dumb ceramic wizard bone and tells you to give yourself to the ripping ball-deep you splashed in your mind. As the more vile repulsive-yet-one-t-stop-staring-to-your-soul riff salute down all weapons into guitars, you notice that the purring electric beast are your own heart.

You are ready to take on any acne-dragon, macedonian tyrant, or comic pre-cocoon gray woman that seeks to impose your path. Happy Ronin leads you down the aisle path toward the portal to your own mindless world, and imparts upon you some glittery wisdom to remember the next time you have nothing better to do than snort pain, tranquillizers and lay in fields wondering what ball looks like. And then he disappears into the folded out folds of memory and time. You miss him. You arrange your tapes by pitiful riffage and take care to keep the infectious red artifact closest to your tortured soul. You need this in your life you fucking asshole.

Figure 9. Red Tape, woodcut, letterpress, mixtape, 4.25" x 2.75", 2016
Figure 10. Yellow Tape, woodcut, letterpress, mixtape, 4.25” x 2.75”, 2016