

SWILD



Table of Contents

Editorial:	Big Ideas...
Thrashing Trufen:	Cri de Cœur
Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings:	a modest column by Lester Rainsford
Flogging a Dead Trekkie:	Death of a Convention
Scribbling on the Bog Wall:	Letters of Comment
Endnote:	Starlost Memories

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SWILL

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Editorial: Big Ideas...

Neil Jamieson-Williams

Back in May, Lester sent me the link to a blog article, "SF, big ideas, ideology: what is to be done?", written by Charlie Stross.¹ This led me to the Neal Stephanson article, "Innovation Starvation".² Stephanson articulates that SF writers are "slacking off" and then discusses how technological (in particular the internet) and societal changes -- related to knowledge and risk -- have created "a system that celebrates short-term gains and tolerates stagnation, but condemns anything else as failure. In short, a world where big stuff can never get done." The Stross article is a reply to Stephanson and begins with examining the underlying assumptions; the Enlightenment concept of progress and whether or not "big ideas" ever really were primary to the genre. He goes on to say that in "recent decades SF has been spinning its wheels...(w)hat we call "hard SF" today mostly isn't hard, and isn't SF: it's fantasy with nanotech replicators instead of pixie dust and spaceships instead of dragons...(that we are) mistaking Sense of Wonder for Innovation." And wrapping it all up, Stross comments that we live in, but he doesn't use this term, a science-fictional world and that "(we) people of the SF-reading ghetto have stumbled blinking into the future, and our dirty little secret is that we don't much like it...(opening) the pages of a modern near-future SF novel now invites a neck-chillingly cold draft of wind from the world we're trying to escape, rather than a warm narcotic vision of a better place and time."

Any amount of whining about the lack of big visionary ideas about the future in SF really comes down to the whiner wanting escapism; where the concept (and the consequences) of progress are accepted as a default setting and never (or at least rarely) questioned. However, there is a lot to be questioned here. It was during the Enlightenment that industrialisation began in England and thus the foundations were laid for our current world with all of its benefits and its troubles. The philosophical concept of progress and improvement did not cause

¹ <http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2012/05/sf-big-ideas-ideology-what-is-.html#more>

² <http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/fall2011/innovation-starvation>

industrialisation (though they did offer fertile ground for industrialisation to take root in) and were it not for unique religious and political situation³ that existed in 1660's England, industrialisation -- at this time -- may not have happened at all, yet (or have happened elsewhere and differently). During the Enlightenment, the notion of progress, while optimistic, was not automatic and the primary emphasis was upon societal advancement in all areas -- including science and the technological arts. It is a forward-looking philosophy and one that held out the belief that tomorrow would be better. And well before there was an established genre of scientific romances, the entire Enlightenment idea of progress was being challenged by the Romantic movement; in the end the Romantics lost and the Enlightenment ideals were transformed into rationalism and positivism (which were seen at the time as a more logical restatement of Enlightenment ideas). When science fiction emerged in the United States, it owed more to rational positivism than it did to the Enlightenment. The notions of progress and improvement began to be questioned in the mid-1950's, loudly during the 1960's to mid-1970's, and continues to be questioned in the present day.

Questioning is not the same as opposing; though many who hold a rational positivist worldview in the SF community seem to behave as if any questioning of progress is an attack as well as a cry to return to simpler times. I am 100% in agreement with Messrs Stephanson and Stross; I don't want to go back to the Upper Palaeolithic -- which is exactly the level of technology we would have if this current global civilisation collapses. I will go further and state that overall science and technology has improved the lives of millions of people and is responsible for the general high standard of living we collectively enjoy (some,

³ In particular, just coming out of a religious civil war; the losers (Free-Churchers such as Presbyterians, Unitarians, Puritans, Baptists, etc. in other words non-Church of England Protestant sects) had to sign a loyalty oath to the Crown and an oath that they would not attempt to disrupt the Church of England. While, the oath to the Crown was not a major hurdle for most Free-Churchers, they tended to hate the Church of England more than the Roman Catholic Church, and there was a significant segment of the Free-Churcher population that dissented from signing both oaths - thus earning them the name, Dissenters. The Dissenters were barred from owning agricultural land (how the wealthy made their money back in those days) and from any form of public office (House of Lords, House of Commons, senior civil service posts, minor civil service posts). They could own land for resource extraction, engage in trade and commerce, or get involved in that new thing called manufacturing; all of which were viewed as being ungentlemanly. Nevertheless, it was the Dissenters that began industrialisation in England.

far more than others, but, even the poorest people on the planet tend to live better than the poorest people before (industrialisation). Scientific and technological progress have made much of human life better than it was in the past; how we have used science and technology has also created us a shitload of problems, too.

However, there are areas within society and culture that have not advanced as swiftly as our technology and scientific knowledge; in particular our systems of governance and economics. There has been little shift power to "we the people" -- post-American Revolution, this over a few decades became just window-dressing; wealthy elites (most of whom earned their fortunes via inheritance) control the political process, not the people.

Advances in technology have not resulted in advances such as more direct democracy -- but, they should have in a truly democratic society. Instead these advances have been employed to more skilfully manipulate the populace while at the same time eroding their civil liberties. All current economic systems have a built-in default setting that there must be progress in the form of growth; all claim that it is possible to have unlimited growth in a closed system.⁴ This is impossible. While it was easy to ignore this impossibility in the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th Century it has become increasingly difficult to rationally ignore today -- it is irrationally ignored via referring to the impossibility as an "externality" and thus outside of the variables to be considered in economic formulae.

So, while I know that we cannot and should not abandon our industrial technology, and that the problems created by the use of industrial technology will probably be solved by new technology, as has happened in the past. I question how we have decided to use our current technology, who made the decisions, based on what data, and for whose benefit? I also raise the question -- because in spite of what our politicians, economists, and owners tell us, the biosphere of Earth is a closed system --

⁴ The formulae that allow for this are highly suspect. First, there is the source of the formulae - physics. These formulae were an attempt to patch up Classical Mechanics and deal with electricity and magnetism; essentially the precursor to Aether Theory which was shown to be unnecessary by Relativity Mechanics. So what happened in the 1830's is that the economists plagiarised these physical formulae, changed the variable names, and proclaimed that they had made economics scientific. So just as neither matter nor energy can be destroyed (just transformed from one to the other) one can never exhaust a resource and one can have unlimited growth in a closed system. These formulae remain the fundamental formulae in modern economics to the present day.

how far can we push (that is degrade, wipe out, pollute, etc.) the biological systems that we depend upon before they collapse? And how is this a long term benefit for the corporate balance sheet; if you wipe out most of your customer base, who are you going to sell to in the next quarter? Actually, that is a rhetorical question -- we already know from the financial sector that corporations no longer look ahead beyond the next quarter and many plan only as far ahead as the next month. I question what is going to happen with our increasing automation and robotics. The automation that we have already implemented was supposed to have brought us more leisure time and the four-day work week; instead, we have higher unemployment/underemployment and those working full-time are working longer hours than people did before automation. As the automation and robotics progress, perhaps the only jobs that cannot be automated will be those that require creativity -- and if we develop true artificial intelligence, even that may be given over to the machines. So, what do the people do? What happens to them? And if the Singularity boosters are right, what happens if I don't want to be an upload, a cyborg, a genetically re-engineered being, or a superhuman cyberintelligence? Is there any choice in the matter? According to More, the only choice will be to accept this new stage in evolution and join in or face extinction -- unmodified Homo sapiens sapiens will not be permitted to stick around by the myriad subspecies of Homo novus.

So there is a lot about progress that can be questioned. There is also the possibility that the Singularity boosters could be wrong. Maybe genetic engineering, nanotech replicators, and artificial intelligence are more difficult to develop. What if we reach a plateau technologically -- we have in the past -- where there is just one thing/or a particular group of things that is missing that are required to move to the next level. Sometimes this has required a change in our theories of how the universe operates; more often it has required a cultural and social change.

So, I definitely agree with Stross that the near future projections based upon extrapolation do not leave me with any warm fuzzies; they conjure up visions of the engines of the night and therefore are more frightening than enlightening. I also agree with Stross that the average SF reader does not want this type of SF story; this type of story would be labelled as "dystopian", "anti-science", "pessimistic", etc. And for these same reasons, may be also deemed "unpublishable". That said, if one of the possibilities that one can extrapolate from current

trends in science and technology, projects currently receiving R&D funding, is that in fifty years time we, the human species, may have created our successors -- transhumans; how can one place a positive spin on extinction? I also concur with Stross that it is only a matter of time before mainstream fiction begins to deal with the everyday angst associated with rapidly changing technology and further invades the domain of near-future SF; with the strong possibility of conquering this realm. What does that leave SF with; escapism.

Perhaps one of the reasons why there is so much space opera, alternate history, steam punk, etc. is to avoid having to deal with the near-future. Face it, the near-future is difficult. By 2062 we will have already set the stage for a handful of possible worlds; collapse (we blow this global civilisation and it has collapsed or is in the process of collapsing), fortress states (our elites lock themselves away in very, very large, nuclear weapon defended, gated communities with all the goodies that high technology will buy and the rest of us make it as best we can on the outside), the Singularity (in one or more of its many forms, thus an end, from our perspective, of humanity), post-scarcity (with advances in nanotechnology, genetic engineering, automation that are far more powerful than today's technologies but which fall short of the Singularity that allow us to create a truly post-industrial, post-scarcity civilisation), and variations on these themes. On top of all that is the increasing pace of change; how do you keep up and not be dated within a year of publication? It is far easier to ignore the near-future (the next 125 years) and set your story in the medium-future (126 to 300 years from now) or the far-future (over 300 years from now) or within an alternate timeline. And that is what writers are doing, many of them. And that is what the audience chooses to read.

Stross states, "(W)e will not inspire anyone with grand visions of a viable future through the medium of escapism." I agree. That means that "big ideas" within the majority of science fiction will be found on the margins of the genre, and they will also be a minority.

Thrashing Trufem: Cri de Coeur

Neil Jamieson-Williams

Over the past year and a half I have heard an impassioned outcry over the demise of fandom, in particular, "traditional fandom". Of course, not everybody agrees as to the definition of a fan or a traditional fan. And, as with most emotional appeals, there is an underlying tone of protest or loss -- as what has happened is in a way a paradigm shift and those howling are resisting and fearing the perceived disintegration of identity and power. Is this perception valid? Actually, it is. Will raging, whining, and sulking restore things to the way they were? Absolutely not.

During the past eighteen months I have attempted to construct working definitions of fandom -- as part of my research project - - with limited success. Part of the problem has been bias and the inertia of the past. Even though I have the rep of being an arch anti-fan in the early 1980s, I was a fan. Back then, I would have fallen into both my categories of active fan and traditional fan. I engaged in a wide variety of fan activity from writing and publishing fanzines to convention organising. While living in Vancouver, I was definitely a traditional fan; integrated into the local fan community which served as my primary social network. So, I have come to this research project with some outmoded concepts about what fandom is and should be; concepts that I probably share with many people who have been involved in the SF fandom community who are age thirty-five and older.

In the old days -- I am not calling them "good old days", just the old days -- in particular, the 1980's, things were different. (Those under thirty-five who may be reading this, bear with me a moment...) SF fandom has always been a subculture and as such retains a strong connexion to the mainstream/dominant culture; i.e. it bears a lot in common with the dominant culture. It most certainly is shaped by the technology and the economics of that dominant culture of any particular time period. In 1980, postage was inexpensive, the average minimum wage was \$3.50 per hour, it cost an average of \$1.15 per minute to call from Toronto to Vancouver, only 20% of households owned a VCR, personal stereos were still a new thing and used cassette tapes, if you were one of the few who owned a mobile phone it was probably a car phone,

hardly anybody owned a personal computer, there were few BBSs around, and if you were connected to the internet it was only text-based. The technology and the economics of the time still encouraged local face-to-face social groups and that was the same for science fiction fandom. Local SF clubs provided a social network, local conventions also served this purpose, and if you lived in a city large enough to host a regional convention that convention would serve as a network with fans outside of your city. Fanzines printed via mimeograph and sent by post were another medium of communication within fandom. Thus, this was a time period in which the active fan and traditional fan thrived.

However, as I tell my students, technology changes everything.⁵

The technological context that was the environment of the active and traditional fan has been overshadowed by technological change. Mobile phones, tablets, the internet, voip, inexpensive long distance rates, online social networking, etc. have transformed society and culture. Like it or not, this is the way things are in the second decade of the 21st Century. Everyone under sixty years of age is a digital citizen to some degree -- and even most people between sixty and seventy five at least have email -- the younger you are, the more digital you are. If you are under thirty, you use social networking and text for most of your interactions; when you meet face-to-face that site was arranged via digital interaction. Community has become more ephemeral, more of an electronic haze of digital interaction than physical, limited to geographic space. That's just the way things are now and that impacts upon fandom. That is why only a few people will read this article -- it is published in a fanzine, albeit an online fanzine -- and fanzines are so 20th Century to the younger crowd (static, with no immediate ability to post comments). Fanzines, SF clubs, large fan-run conventions are the flotsam of cultural lag from the last quarter of the last century. The younger fans are not looking for an old-style local fan community; they have the community that they want via social networking and can arrange face-to-face meetings via that same networking software. When they attend conventions, it would appear that, they want high profile names as guests (be they writers, artists, actors, etc.), talks given by people who actually were involved in the cultural artefact (be it a novel, an online magazine, film, television series, graphic novel, etc.)

⁵ I teach five different versions of the course **Technology and Society** at McMaster and Mohawk - the course examines the impact of technology on society and vice versa.

not just somebody that has an opinion on it (you can find tonnes of that stuff on the internet), signing opportunities, a very good dealers room, and hands-on workshops. In other words they want the stuff, the experience, which they cannot get online. And the social aspect of a convention is secondary at best, possibly even tertiary...

To older fans, the younger fans can appear to be no different than a genre consumer. This is an error, though an easy one to make. Now it has been a traditional SWILL policy to defend the genre consumer vs the typical SF fan; it will now be SWILL policy to defend the typical fan of today, 2012. Not to make an impassioned plea advocating this group, only to firmly and decisively state that this is what fandom is now, period.

With that in mind, here are my revised categories:

Genre consumers: These individuals consume science fiction and fantasy content in a variety of mediums from print to television to gaming, etc. They also have an interest in science fiction and fantasy collectables. They may attend conventions like Comic Con or Sci-Fi Fan Expo. People within this group do not identify themselves as SF fans.

Fans: These individuals consume science fiction and fantasy content in a variety of mediums from print to television to gaming, etc. They also have an interest in science fiction and fantasy collectables. They regularly attend conventions like Comic Con or Sci-Fi Fan Expo. They may occasionally attend large fan-run conventions like Ad Astra or Polaris. They engage in fan activity... They may participate in genre based online forums, newsgroups, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, etc. They may participate in writing fan fiction, blogs, networking sites, etc. They may create crafts, visual art forms, and performance art forms related to the genre. They may network online and organise within the fan community. People within this group identify themselves as SF fans. Fan activity is on a continuum for fans; some are more active than others, some of their fanac is more visible than others. For those fans with low fanac, the boundary between genre consumers and fans is a blurred one. If the person appears to be a genre consumer but they self identify themselves as a fan; then, they are a fan.

Traditional Fans: These individuals consume science fiction and fantasy content in a variety of mediums from print to television to gaming, etc. They may also have an interest in science

fiction and fantasy collectables. They may attend or they may regularly attend fan-run conventions like Polaris and Ad Astra -- they may also attend conventions like Comic Con or Sci-Fi Fan Expo. They may participate the organisation and running of fan-run conventions. They may participate in genre based online forums, newsgroups, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, etc. They may participate in writing fan fiction, fanzines, networking sites, and blogs. They may create crafts, visual art forms, and performance art forms related to the genre. They may network and organise within the fan community. They may identify themselves as being members of a local geographically-bounded SF community and who may belong to a local or regional SF fan organisation/club. People within this group tend to strongly identify themselves as SF fans. Most fans who attend fan-run conventions are traditional fans.

Let the screaming and gnashing of teeth, begin.

Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings!

...a modest column by Lester Kinsford

This spring british writer Christopher Priest produced a little rant that gained some internet buzz. He felt that pretty much all the nominees for the Clarke prize were basically suck and enumerated how they suck. Amongst others, and most memorable, he chastized Charlie Storss as an 'internet puppy'.

Mr Priest - and I do expect hope that he called his sons 'Zadok' and 'Judas' - is wrong. On two counts.

First, sf needs internet puppies. Take Lester's internet puppies challenge: find a copy of the original Science Fiction Hall of Fame, in all its disintegrating Avon paperback form glory. Read it. Marvel at the internet puppieness of all those preinternet writers. They were having FUN. Does Mr Christ Priest not expect sf to be FUN? Maybe not. Too bad for him, too bad for readers who have FUN neither. (And leGuin's "Winds Twelve Quarters" came out more than thirty years ago. Good luck beating that. Don't bother.)

Second, Charlie is not really the internet puppie that he wishes he was, or that Priest preaches he is. I did read the five-volume Merchant Princes series. At the end is a jaw-dropping scenario that I won't give away. It would have been a great saw-dropping scenario in a short story, but to read a bzillion words over five books it was a "this sucks" moment for me. If you're going to end with an unbelievable jaw-dropping scenario, don't waste the readers time by making them read five books, just tag it onto a short story and be done. (Anyway if Zwelazny couldn't rewrite the original Amber books into a second series, Storss doen'st have a hope in hell of managing it either. Hint: ~~Brand did it.~~)

A.E.Van VOgt. That's what sf needs, not Priests nor Strosses. Look, the universe is made up mostly of dark energy which the pyysicists know nothing about, expet that it seems to be determinging the fate of the universe. Oh yeah there's dark matter besides. And planets....planets MOVE. Ice planets migrate

inward to become water worlds, and jupiters move into two-day orbits around their red dwarf suns. And who is writing about this stuff, stuff so new that physicists haven't figured it out yet?

I'll tell you, van Vogt would be writing far-out stories where the hero determines the principles behind dark matter and uses it to defeat the evil floombs who are intent on moving Jupiter within Mercury's orbit thus ~~rule-sevagram~~ ejecting Earth from the solar system.

The crazy thing is that Van Bogt's writing wasn't that wild-ass far-out when it was written. Well, ~~maybe it was. But.~~ NO ONE KNOWS DICK ABOUT DARK MATTER AND ENERGY. SO THEY CAN'T SAY YOU'RE WRONG!!! So go wild. Use some imagination. And keep it SHORT. (Vogt's 9000-word scenes. Plot singularities. Space Nazis introduces from nowhere.)

Internet puppies of the modern scientific age. That's what SF need more of. Wjere is it? Come on! Kibble!!

Flogging a Dead Trekkie: Death of a Convention

Neil Jamieson-Williams

After 26 years, the largest fan-run media convention -- Polaris (formerly Toronto Trek) -- is dead. I never attended the convention in its heyday as I was 100% gaffiated and if I was going to show up at a convention, during that time period (and I did attend Ad Astra 2001 for one day) it would be a literary SF con rather than a media SF con. I did attend Polaris in 2011 and 2012; there was a gallows tone to Polaris 26 as the organisation that hosts the event, TCON Promotional Society, had already informed those on their email mailing list that the end was neigh. In 2013, there will be a final Polaris 27, but this convention will be a ~~wake~~ relaxicon.

What happened? According to the TCON Promotional Society, "There are now a multitude of events going on all year, with traditional fan conventions being joined by Comicons and toy shows and autograph shows and pubnights and concerts and charity events of various kinds - there is now a fandom event of some kind in the area on almost every week of the year, especially in the summer months." This is indeed true. However, there have been times in the past when Toronto has been crowded with SF fan events that have made it challenging for large fan-run conventions. They have survived and come through this period of competition. What is different now?

One of the major issues is that a fan-run convention requires more lead time than that of a trade show event such as Wizard World or Fan Expo. Trade show events require the booking of a convention centre or large exhibition hall for their event; the event is more commercial than social and can be put together in a three month time-frame. A traditional fan-run convention has a more social emphasis; there are dealers but that is not the main

focus of the event. This means booking function space within a large hotel and more advance planning. Because trade show events can be booked and organised in a shorter time frame and are put on by full time organisers (as opposed to fan volunteers) you can end up with the problem that faced Ad Astra this year when the Wizard World Toronto Comic Con was held on the same weekend. In the past, many of the trade show SF conventions were held by small companies operating either in Ontario or within the region. One miss-step, such as setting the date too close to that of a large fan-run convention, could bankrupt the company organising the event. In addition, given the small scale of the companies putting on these SF conventions, they would be able to bring in only the same calibre of names as the large fan-run conventions. This has changed. The corporations that hold the Wizard World and Hobby Star Marketing are large corporations, and Wizard World is a US corporation -- therefore, unlikely to give a shit about date conflicts with any Canadian fan-run conventions.

The other, as mentioned to me by one of my old droogs, is that traditional fan-run conventions are out of date; they are being organised by and for traditional fans -- which, as I stated in "Cri de Coeur", are no longer the typical SF fan. Thus, traditional fan-run conventions are targeting an aging and declining market share. This is not a major issue if you are running a convention like SFContario -- a general SF con with a literary emphasis -- that is aimed at the traditional fan and intended to be small; under 500 people. This is aimed at a niche market and so far the convention has been successful. However, if you are running a "big tent" convention like Ad Astra or Polaris, there are going to be problems in capturing the audience you need to bring in if your event only appeals to traditional fans. This only works when the situation is as "...(o)nce upon a time, there were only a couple of events for our core audience to look forward to every year"(TCON Promotional Society). Those under thirty-five will put up with (i.e. ignore) what they view as lame content if this is the only source for the content that they do want; you have a lot of latitude when you are the only game in town. It doesn't work in the face of competition that is providing the younger generations of the new typical fans with the content that they desire.

So, what's it going to be then, eh? Hell if I know... Okay, I have organised and run over thirty special events, since my days as a fan. None of these events had anything to do with science fiction and nothing to do with fandom. So, while I know a fair bit about running one to three day events; I don't really have my finger on the pulse of Toronto fandom. I can say that in this current environment that the way that things have always been done is not going to work if you are hoping to/require to break even a large number of attendees. The options are specialise, downsize, integrate/work with the competition, or change so that you can outcompete the competition. And I really don't see the fan-run conventions being able to compete with the corporate SF trade shows -- Anime North is only able to do this because it is already specialised.

As for TCON's notion of hosting a big Doctor Who convention in November of 2013 as the replacement for Polaris. I don't know how that will work. [shrug] We'll all just have to wait and see...

Scribbling on the Bog Walk

Letters of Comment

Neil Jamieson-Williams

As I write this, there is only two LoCs this time around. My comments are, of course, in glorious pudmonkey.

Subject: Re: SWILL #13
From: "Taral Wayne" Taral@teksavvy.com
Date: Tue, April 17, 2012 7:38 am
To: swill@uldunemedia.ca

Canadian fans pay little attention to what goes on beyond their group in their city. Canadian fandom is particularly splintered and isolated. There is almost no networking between city fan groups and even within cities the fans tend to keep to their own.

Splintered is such a loaded term - reminds me of Trotskyites of the early 1980s. Fragmented is less loaded. Was Canadian fandom always fragmented? Possibly... Vancouver fandom in the 1980s was fairly unified; there were groups other than BCSFA but they really weren't warring factions. I would let other Canadian fan historians weigh in here. I think that Toronto fandom was always fragmented. Funny, I recall there being a fair bit of networking between cities; that's one of the things that BNFs did, back then (and had the massive telephone bills to prove it - unless they were/knew a phone phreak). I would hazard the speculation that there is even more informal and unofficial networking that goes on between cities today, but it is being done directly by fans themselves not via BNF spokespersons.

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May 4, 2012

Dear Neil:

I will pass on what seems to be the traditional greeting for this day, but I will say many thanks for the copy of Swill @ 30 13 you handed me at Ad Astra. Comments are coming..

Most of us are approaching 'old fart' status, and some have gotten there ahead of us. We remember what it was like, and regret that it's not that way now. We remember the good and the bad, and we've painted over some of the bad with the benefit of memory and its distance on our personal timelines. Overall, the good was great, and the bad didn't really hurt anything but our pride. We took some pride in our activities, and we sometimes felt we had some standing in our communities, and perhaps we had too much pride. It wouldn't matter if it was SF fandom or any other interest that forms a sub-culture around it, we'd find a place for ourselves within the community, and perhaps show a little too much pride. SF fandom isn't nearly as unique as it likes to think it, and the people within it are not slannish, but all too human.

Hi Lloyd... take a peek at my article "Cri de Cœur" .

Too many people I know who do read SF do not take note of the themes within the literature, or enjoy the stories themselves, but who would prefer to lionize the authors, the same way media fans lionize the actors who portray their favorite characters. Many authors are troubled by this, and some just love the attention. The fragmentation of fandom into literary and media has always been unfortunate, and one of the factors may be attention span, whether you are willing to wait until the end of a novel or the end of an hour to get the story you want. It is also due to subjective desires, for some people I might have written off as mere media fans actually do have extensive SF book libraries, and a pile of DVDs; they just prefer the small and big screens to the book. We also want SF to be the literature others say it is not, and we've been haughty in its defence; this also chases people away to the less serious concern of enjoying any of the popular TV shows.

I think that most of the traditional fans cross back and forth quite easily between literary and media SF; except for the fans who have always been and always will be, fortunately, a minority.

It is perhaps the fact we have created a sub-culture centered around our enjoyment of science fiction that pushes it closer to popular culture, and away from literary culture. The fact the press has gotten their hands on SF and (their words) the geek and nerd factions doesn't help, either.

Literature is popular culture too. The genre of literary fiction tends to perceive itself as having no connexion with popular culture and that it is "high culture". As stated in the previous issue; I don't buy into that self assessment.

That radio play you mention...ever get it produced and performed? That's one kind of work I do pursue, voicework for any kinds of radio plays, usually student-produced.

I am assuming you are asking about "Only Fools and Knaves" ... I wrote and produced it back in 2001 using non-ACTRA talent and non-union director. So I am an evil, unfair engager and all that... ACTRA hadn't revised their radio agreement in almost a decade back then; they have since, but it is still written with the idea that the production company is the CBC. They need to take a page from Equity and have some sort of sliding scale based on size of house (in this case size of production company and access to distribution). I have been updating and re-writing the old scripts and then novella-ising them. I am also scripting a graphic novel. I do intend to attempt to produce the new radio scripts, but not until next summer at the earliest.

I have been on several e-mail groups that propose that the people within are the True Fans, the Secret Masters. I admit I aspired to be in the centre of things when it came to fandom, for I always enjoyed myself more when I was immersed in an activity. Now, I am pleased to sit back, relax a little, do what I'd like and not worry about any street cred I might blow by doing something a particular group doesn't approve of. Like the song says, you can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself.

I agree...

Lester would like some reaction? Okay. Piss away, Lester, obviously you're not offending anyone, and getting a rise out your readers. Time to kick it up a notch, and say what you really think. Modern fandom doesn't know what happened in '48, and those

who do know and care are more and more a rapidly shrinking minority in their 60s, 70s and 80s.

Lester has informed me to say, "Thank you for supplying your address. A response will arrive in time, toadspawn.

I have the book on the history of science fiction fandom, and they could be written because the foci of fandom at that time were SF books, SF magazine, SF fanzines and SF fans themselves. Now, there is no single main fandom, in spite of what the sercon True Fen think, and that has reduced the community aspect of fandom, but certainly not eliminated it. Fandom does have a more modern history, but the only way to quantify it is by city or country or interest.

Sercon Trufen tend to be cranky Boring Old Bastards/Bitches who desire stasis. The community aspect has been reduced, but it hasn't disappeared.

Categories of fans...I'd be most comfortable in the Traditional Fan category. My own preferences are to be constructive and creative, and to relay information, for that is the true currency of fandom, to pass along con listings or information about deadlines or special events in the works. That is the truly positive part of fandom, that and the community that fandom creates.

Ah, I have revised them yet again. Feedback please...

My letter...that ad agency job ended prematurely, so the job hunt is on once more. I couldn't find any issues of Swill in my collection, so I need to take the time to look again. You are correct that every fannish generation has to learn somehow, and when I was a newbie, I had to learn too, or figure it out for myself. So many fail to remember their own neo days; remembering mine was the incentive to retire from the concom. We could all easily sit around a table and chat away about our own fannish histories and reminisce and laugh our heads off...unfortunately, that sounds more like a retirement home. WE still have things we want to do, and we are trying our best to make new friends of the new fans on the scene, and for the most part, we've been successful.

I've taken part in the SF Fan Survey #1...I shall remind Yvonne of it and see if she'd like to take part in it, too. The deadline is in July.

Thanks, unfortunately the response has been low and only two responses from Polaris 26... A new survey will be out in time for SFCOntario.

This is more of a letter of comment than I'd intended, but a good zine gets the writing juices flowing, I guess. Many thanks for it, and I will keep looking for further issues. It's been a good exercise to look at fandom from a relatively objective viewpoint, see how silly we've been, but also see what the beneficial parts have been. See you next time.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

Other than the costumes, SF fandom is really no more silly than your average open-mike regulars or little theatre groups. Most of the same positive and negative behaviours found in fandom also manifest themselves within other sub-cultures.

All the best,

Neil

Endnote: Starlost Memories

Neil Jamieson-Williams



At the 2012 Polaris convention there was a The Starlost Reunion panel, with Robin Ward and Gay Rowan. This re-sparked my interest in this programme which has been billed the "worst SF television series of all time"; especially as Rowan and Ward imparted a perception of events during the shooting of the series that had not been heard elsewhere. Harlan Ellison and Ben Bova have both told their version of events, in essay form and in fiction and there are written comments by Douglas Trumbull and Norman Klenman on the web. The written source material I shall be using are: "Somehow, I Don't Think We're In Kansas, Toto", "Phoenix Without Ashes" teleplay, novelisation of Phoenix Without Ashes by Ellison and Bryant, graphic novel version of Phoenix Without Ashes, "The Word" series bible for The Starlost, The Starcrossed by Ben Bova, "The Starlost: a new perspective" by Dennis Valdrón, historical background/context material (e.g. when the WGA-W 1973 strike began), and anecdotal material mined from the internet. In addition, I have talked with two FX people who worked on The Starlost (albeit in very junior positions) plus there are the recent recollections by the actors. Taking all of this together I am going to attempt some detective work and on the balance of probabilities construct an account of what may have happened in the production of The Starlost.

Bias check: I was age 14 when the series first aired. I liked it for several reasons, the core concept was cool, there was some interesting issues raised in the episodes, it was Canadian SF (you had to look hard in the credits to see that it was a co-production) and those positives overshadowed the many scientific and continuity and logical errors -- though even at the time, I

found the last two episodes ("The Bees" and "Space Precinct") to be stupid. Anyway, I was 14 years old and I liked it. Yes, the effects and sets were bad but no worse than what I'd seen on Doctor Who on TVO. The other thing was that we lived in the burbs just north west of Toronto and we didn't have cable at the time (we would get that the following year); that meant that our channel selection was CBC, CBC French, CTV, TVO, and one independent from Hamilton. I knew from friends who either had an antenna tower or cable of some of the things I was missing on USA television, but I didn't feel at all deprived as my situation was fairly normal for the time period. What I am saying here is that at that time I was young and really only knew Canadian television.

Bias check: I have a strong appreciation for Harlan Ellison as the artist, i.e. for his fiction -- the vast majority of his work I have enjoyed and many will be looked back upon as masterpieces in 20th Century literature. I have an appreciation for Ellison as the essayist; however, he has a tendency to use a 20cm brush to spread his tar and often ignores nuances, specific data, and cultural context. That said, he is an essayist not an academic. Harlan Ellison the human being is fallible and flawed (like the vast majority of us). I have met him one and one half⁶ times and our second meeting in 1984 was no more positive than that in 1975, actually it was worse. This was at Westercon in Portland, a SFWA member from Seattle who had really liked the second series of the radio serial that I had wrote and produced introduced us, saying that I was from Canada and wrote radio drama. Ellison looked me over and said, "Get out of my face, Nazi motherfucker!" and walked away. To which I turned to the person who introduced us and said, "Wow; he really is an asshole." And that was it.⁷

⁶ The first meeting or half meeting was a FanFair 3 in Toronto in 1975. This was my first SF convention. I arrived at the convention wearing a Starlost t-shirt and was abducted during my first hour at the convention by some men in their twenties who carried me into a panel room and presented me to one of the panellists who went absolutely apeshit, screaming something like, "get it out of here now before I have it disembowelled." I was informed later that the guy who went nuts over The Starlost t-shirt was Harlan Ellison; which didn't make an sense to me at the time - I had already read some Ellison so I knew the name, what I didn't know was that Ellison had created The Starlost.

⁷ Again, some context. In 1984, I was a punk; I would have had a short Mohawk, be wearing black combat boots, dark jeans, and in all probability a t-shirt for one of the Vancouver bands. While the Vancouver punk scene tended

I have no grudge with Ellison, period. I also don't worship the ground he walks on or consider every word that escapes his lips as near-divine wisdom. Nor do I agree with everything that he says. I am only relating this to establish context -- we anthropologists love context.

Bias check: I was born in and, for the first ten years of my life, raised in Montreal, Quebec and although I am an Anglo, I do have a residual Quebecer's worldview.

Onward...

In February 1973, Ellison had a meeting with Robert Kline at 20th Century-Fox about doing a mini-series with the BBC. I would tend to agree with Valdron that Kline already had a package partially put together; the project probably already had Keir Dullea attached to it and interest from the BBC (Dullea was living in the UK at the time and refused to work in USA and the original mini-series idea "The Fugitive/The Prisoner in space" would be a project that would have some appeal to the BBC then). It is also probable that Douglas Trumbull was also already attached to the project and that it had been pitched to the BBC with Ellison as the lead writer of the series (before Ellison was even contacted); which is why Kline wanted Ellison so badly. In this February meeting, Kline pitches "The Fugitive/The Prisoner in space" concept and Ellison balks and gets up to leave; Kline asks him, "What did you have in mind?" Ellison would pitch him The Starlost, a concept that he had originally planned for audio (either as a drama or reading for LP record) and Kline loves it. Ellison makes a 10 minute cassette recording of his pitch for Kline.

toward the left of centre and libertarian socialism, the LA scene had a significant segment of Neo-Nazi punks - it is possible that Ellison viewed all punks as being Neo-Nazis. In addition, this may have been the same day that Ellison found out at the convention that some fan was selling t-shirts that were making fun of him and which he wasn't making any money off of - two things that historically would have pissed him off. So, perhaps Ellison was having a bad day and was suffering from the perception that all punks were Neo-Nazis; it provides some hypothetical rationale for his rude behaviour.

According to Ellison, nothing happens between February and May -- and from his POV, nothing does. But obviously things happened in the interim. The BBC doesn't like The Starlost concept because it is going to require a higher budget than the original concept (there is a major recession going on and the UK is hit by it far more severely than the USA), so they walk. Kline would have shopped it around in the USA -- thus the scientifically inaccurate promo material he put out -- but, had the snag that Dullea wouldn't work in the States. However, Dullea would work in Canada and that is how CTV enters into the picture and Toronto as the production site.

Sidebar: Nobody else has discussed the Canadian Television Network in any rational manner. Ellison, Bova, and Trumbull all have taken their turn at trashing the CTV, Canadian creative and production personnel, and Canada itself. Some of this is pure blinkered tunnel-vision that Americans don't quite understand that, in spite of our many similarities, Canada is a separate country -- our differences are indeed, different. So was the CTV. The CTV was a private network, like what the USA is used to, but not. The CTV then, was a co-operative, it was owned by the independent stations that formed the network; the keystone being CFTO in Toronto. Incidentally, Glen-Warren Productions was a sister company to CFTO. So this was no large top-down network, more of a bottom-up (with each member station in the co-op having their input) with CFTO having slightly more sway than the others. Not understanding that CTV did not operate the same as USA private networks would be another problem for The Starlost.

By the time that Kline has got all his ducks in a row -- it is now an American style 24 episode series, to be shot at Glen-Warren Productions in Toronto, and aired on NBC and CTV -- he has secured Dullea and Trumbull, all he needs is Ellison. However, by the time he contacts Ellison again, in May, to have him write the series bible, the Writers Guild of America-West is on strike. Not only is Ellison pro-union, he is on the WGA-W executive; of course, he is not going to write a word until the strike is over.

However, Kline needs not only the Ellison name, he needs a series bible and a script for the opening episode, and all he has is an illegal/semi-legal (definitely unethical) transcription of Ellison's recorded pitch. So, Kline panics. He goes through a series of unethical schemes to get Ellison to write the bible and the first episode, he even hires a non-union writer to scab a series bible -- none of this works. In the end, CTV and Glen-Warren get ACTRA (the Canadian equivalent of SAG and AFTRA, and back then also the WGA -- the Writers Guild of Canada separates from ACTRA in 1991) to designate the series a Canadian production. What this means is that as ACTRA is not on strike and the project is under ACTRA's jurisdiction that Ellison could now write for the series. Ellison doesn't like the new situation, but he writes the bible and the first episode. Ellison claims that Kline urged and forced CTV to work this out with ACTRA, I don't think so. I think this was a CTV/Glen-Warren solution to Kline's problem. I also think that had Kline brought the problem to CTV/Glen-Warren as soon as his second meeting with Ellison was done (after all, he knew he had a problem, the WGA-W was already on strike) the same solution would have been arrived at, earlier, and without Kline generating a whole truckload of bad will by all the unethical means he attempted to get Ellison to write. Ellison would still hate this, and still bitch about it, but legal manoeuvring is not the same as full out unethical behaviour.

However, there is now an additional problem. The scab bible has already gone to Toronto and resulted in set construction that is counter to what is in the real bible. There was also confusion among the series producers and writing staff. Now add the fact that Ellison doesn't want to go to Toronto and once he arrives is upset with the producers and the writers as they "knew nothing about science fiction". Except for the fact that few producers or writers in television in 1973 would have experience in science fiction series, unless they were from the UK. Even then, not all of the SF television series in the 1960's and early 1970's were good science fiction, even the ones from the UK (e.g. Object Z, Undermind, It's About Time, Land of the Giants, Counterstrike). And some of the series writers did have some background in television science fiction, but not SF as a literary genre. As

series creator (and the original story editor for the series) Ellison actually had a responsibility to work with the writers and mould them into a writing team that would set the tone for the show. According to the FX people I talked with (and this is echoed in part by the actors as well as the Valdron article) neither Ellison nor Bova endeared themselves to the production and writing teams, or the principal actors; both behaving like "ugly Americans". And, they got Canadian nationalism thrown right back at them according to Bova; no in your face aggressiveness, but under your breathe comments and most probably attitude.⁸ There is a bit more on this from Ellison, I think; but since I don't have that source at hand, I will leave it.⁹ One thing is certain, Ellison was (by his own admission) unable (or unwilling) to work with the series writers.

And so the much maligned Norman Klenman was brought in to assist Ellison; the two men did not hit it off, to say the least. Here, Ellison has said more (publicly) than Klenman. Ellison's comments are vitriolic; Klenman is a hack, a nobody, somebody's crony, who "didn't understand this science fiction stuff". Klenman began his work in documentaries and then crossed over into drama; he had worked for the CBC, BBC, and USA network television; he had worked on two previous projects with William Davidson (the Producer for the series) but had been called in by Arthur Weinthall (Head of Production at CTV) to please be the story editor for the series. His task was to work with Ellison and the writers to develop the themes for the series, hire the writers, edit, polish, and rewrite; Klenman was also (it would appear for the subtext) to act as a buffer and/or (if at all possible) to handle Ellison. The two men ended up in an

⁸ With the series being designated a Canadian production by ACTRA and Ellison and Bova trashing Canada, the City of Toronto, and everything else Canadian, I can easily see an attitude begin to emerge; this is a Canadian show, listen to the "white shoes" (CTV/Glen-Warren execs at the time all wore white dress shoes) and fuck the damn Yanks.

⁹ I am on holiday right now and have no interest in going into my cubicle to check my first edition paperback copy of Phoenix Without Ashes, which has the original version of Ellison's essay "Somehow, I Don't Think We're In Kansas, Toto". The version in my copy of Stalking the Nightmare is different - I cannot find the quote I'm looking for and there are all these references to series such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Buck Rogers in the 24th Century* and the movie *Star Wars*, which obviously were not in the version published in 1975.

adversarial relationship from their first phone call -- though, this would seem to be more due to Ellison than Klenman. Klenman also has negative words about Ellison, that Ellison is "explosive and acidic" and that the first draft of "Phoenix Without Ashes" was "boring, turgic, biblical, heavy, and dull". Klenman also states that Ellison was egocentric, vengeful, and infers that Ellison will do anything for money (provided his price is met).

Nearly forty years after the events in question, my interpretation based on the information available is this: because of the WGA-W strike and Kline's attempts to get Ellison to write during the strike, because of the scab bible (and possible other scab writing) sent to CTV by Kline, because of how this poisoned the relationship between Kline and Ellison, because these events there was a state of confusion at Glen-Warren/CTV when Ellison arrived; Ellison came to Toronto in not the best of moods -- he didn't take action to make anything better. On the part of CTV/Glen-Warren, they had received what they had been told was the series bible from Fox only to have that reversed when the real bible appeared. The arrival of the series creator did not ease confusion, only add to it. Ellison was uncompromising and also absentee -- his mother was ill and he also had previous speaking engagements to attend. In the end CTV brought in someone (Klenman) their people had worked with before (successfully) to be the story editor as the series creator didn't appear -- from their point of view -- to be interested in actually doing any story editing. Ellison interpreted this as a further betrayal by William Davidson, CTV, and Robert Kline. In a less hostile atmosphere, it is possible that Klenman and Ellison could have worked together, which would only have served to improve the series itself.

To further add to this toxic mix, the effects promised by Douglas Trumbull were not working. First, the Magicam system was not reliable and when it was, it didn't really work too well on videotape.¹⁰ The Magicam system used two cameras, one filming the actors against a blue screen, the other shooting a model background. When operating properly the motion of both cameras

¹⁰ Note: it was Ellison who insisted that videotape rather than film be used for the series.

would be synchronised and scaled -- which would allow both the camera and the actors to move through model sets. This technology had been a key factor for the series; it would permit massive savings in sets. The failure of the Magicam system¹¹ really hurt *The Starlost*, in lost time, expense in trying to get the system to work, the construction of models that couldn't be used effectively, and now having to build sets in studio space too small. Because so much of the budget had been spent trying to get the Magicam system to work, there was now a shoestring budget remaining for the sets -- and that definitely showed.

Other factors that impacted the series were: that Trumbull and Dullea were more experienced with cinema than with television; that Canadian television personnel had little experience with the 1 hour episodic drama format (Canadian television preferred the 30 minute episodic format or the 90 minute television movie); that SF as a genre is not as strong in Canada as in the USA and we Canadians have a tendency toward slipstream¹² (SF with ghosts, urban fantasy, new weird; and that, with the lack of focus from Ellison, the stories told had a more Canadian worldview than an American one. In the series bible there is a section "WHAT KINDS OF STORIES WOULD WE LIKE TO TELL"; many of the suggested ideas that Ellison places in this section, were developed into scripts for the series. However, not in the way that Ellison or Bova would have envisioned; I agree with Valdron, that these episodes (for good or bad) had Canadian undercurrents to them which would not resonate with USA audiences.

At the end of the day, there is no simple answer as to why *The Starlost* failed as a series -- there are multiple reasons. And there are multiple reasons why it almost succeeded; it did come close to surviving, even with NBC and Fox pulling out. If they had produced just four more episodes, there would have been a possibility that CTV may have renewed it for a second season. The ratings for the series in Canada were acceptable, not great, but acceptable. Was it the worst SF television series of all time? No, it was not -- the British-German co-production for the

¹¹ Trumbull would have success with the Magicam in 1975 and it would be used successfully until it was superseded by superior technology in 1983.

¹² We actually like this a lot as a culture, far more than the Americans do - recent examples are the series *Being Erica* and *Saving Hope*.

late 1970s *Star Maidens* is a far better candidate for that title.
Was it a missed opportunity? Yes, indeed.

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