

האגודה הישראלית למדע בדיוני ולפנטסיה, בשיתוף עם בית אריאלה מרכז תרבות, שמחה להזמין למפגש הבא בסידרת ההרצאות ע"ש עמוס גפן.

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הנושא: אינטליגנציה ומחשבי-על:

האם מותר מוח האדם מן המחשב, או להפך?

מרצה: ד"ר אורון שגריר

החוג לפילוסופיה, האוניברסיטה העברית

Letters to the Editor:

Comments on the article by Eli Eshed in the April 2001 *CyberCozen*: Computer Games and the Internet Considered Dangerous.

I would like to thank Eli Eshed for his insightful article in the April 2001 edition of *CyberCozen* about how the various *Star Trek* TV series reflected societal attitudes, especially regarding "virtual reality". He expressed beautifully my feelings regarding how *Star Trek* represented the ethos of the era in which it was produced. To this day I really enjoy the original 1960's series with Capt. Kirk, Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy, whereas I am totally turned off by the subsequent movies and follow-up TV series.

I was in school during the 1960's and I vividly recall the excitement of the exploration of space culminating in the Moon landings by the Apollo astronauts and how this real-life adventure was reflected in the contemporaneous *Star Trek* series (some of the readers of *CyberCozen* might recall two lectures I gave to Aharon Sheer's science fiction club on the Apollo lunar exploration program in which the audience responded with excitement to the vistas opened by real-life exploration of another world).

Another manifestation of the changes in society reflected by *Star Trek* is how, in the original series, we had Mr. Spock who was always attempting (not always successfully) to suppress his emotions and live strictly by the Vulcan philosophy of pure logic. The introduction of this character to the show was a statement by the writers and producers on a possible way that mankind should attempt to grapple with the human passions that led to the (then fairly recent) two World Wars. Dr. McCoy's barely concealed hostility to this

Aharon, philosophy reflected society's attempt to find some sort of balance and opposition to going to extremes in the search for solutions to real problems which Spock represented. In spite of their real, fundamental differences, Spock and McCoy remained the closest of friends, showing that showing "tolerance" to other people doesn't mean that everyone should give up his beliefs in order to reach some sort of fuzzy, empty, middle-ground, but, rather, how men of truth can have respect for others who are also seeking it, but by means of a different philosophy or religion, and live in peace with them.

In contrast to this, in *The Next Generation* series, we have the antithesis character to Spock represented by Lt. Data who is a goofy robot trying "to get in touch with his feelings". Whereas Spock and McCoy were engaged in a constructive, friendly but serious struggle to find a better way for mankind, Data represents the modern "post-ideological" man whose highest aim is not to find the truth, but rather to "feel good". I recall one episode in *The Next Generation* where the Enterprise crew encountered a society on one planet which was addicted to drugs supplied by a society on another planet. When some crew members felt that they should intervene to help the victim planet, Capt. Picard said something to the effect that "it is always wrong to interfere in other people's problems" even if it means fighting against a clear injustice. While this reflected the prevalent American post-Vietnam War syndrome of the time, one could argue that such indifference is what led to the rise of the

totalitarian dictatorships and the subsequent horrors of the 20th Century. Eli Eshed's question at the end of his article asking whether the Federation was right in trying to prohibit the use

of the Talosian "virtual reality" technology is one of the burning questions of our time, both for parents trying to educate their children and for modern society at large.

Yaakov Macales yaakov_macales@hotmail.com

Aharon:

I would like to comment on the article by Eli Eshed in the April issue.

First of all, putting a penalty (even death) on a technological development is useless. It will only result in criminal elements using the technology. (Try watching the movie *The Sixth Day*.)

Regarding Eli's comparison between the two generations of *Star Trek*: I don't think the *TNG* people are less active, they are simply more sophisticated. The original crew got into a fist-fight almost every episode.... In the second series we hear more about ideals (like the "Prime directive"), which were absent in the original series.

Also, according to Eli's idea, someone playing baseball is more active, and therefore is better, than someone who reads books. If this is the case, Eli has condemned all the readers of this newsletter...

Another thing I would like to mention, which should interest most of the readers, is the fact that the satellite service **YES!** seems to be ignoring English speaking people. According to a call I made they don't show the **Star World** channel simply because they can't provide subtitles, and it seems the same thing is true regarding **Middle East Television**. I think we should send them letters clarifying that English speaking people are not a minority.

Adi Avnit

P.S. I want to recommend a small **Sci-Fi English-language bookstore**. The store offers books (including hardcovers) for 15-25 NIS, and the owner is a Sci-Fi fan himself.
Steve Schenker - Betta books, 131 Ibn Gvirol, Tel Aviv, Tel: 03-5462990

Adi – What I too hate about *Star Trek The Original Series* is all those stupid fistfights. **Aharon**

Eyes in the back of your head

By Gal Haimovich

Prof. Einav, from Tel Aviv University, mentioned in his lecture on "*Futuristic Medical Technologies*" (Amos Gefen memorial lectures of the ISFSFAF March 2000), among other interesting things, a Seeing Aid device for the blind. Basically, this device is composed of spectacles with a small camera. The camera sends signals to a laptop-sized computer that is attached directly (via cable) to the vision center in the brain, thus allowing a blind man to see. This is not Sci Fi – there is at least one blind man who uses it (at this point it is still low resolution).

When I told a friend of mine about this device, she said as a joke that now people could install eyes in the back of their heads. When I thought further about her remark I came to the conclusion that, if micro and nano technology and data processing technology continue to advance, this invention might revolutionize our society in the future.

From a medical point of view, it might eliminate blindness entirely (except for people whose vision center in the brain is injured). But this is just the tip of the iceberg – imagine that the computer will be small enough to be

implanted in the head but its data processing capability will not be harmed. This computer will receive pictures from a video camera via radio waves. Now we can have surgeons who do not need to look at monitors during operations – the data can be transmitted directly to their brains, perhaps from a microscope's camera, from ultrasound and maybe even real time X-Ray or NMR.

For computer people: Instead of using those big screens which take half the space of a table, emit radiation and still have only a limited capacity on the screen, why not use our brain directly as the input device?

I can think of many other applications: cameras surrounding our car to send us images while we drive (instead of using mirrors), television broadcast directly into your brain (with commercials I'm afraid). Everywhere we use screens we can send the images directly to our brain and, as the title implies, we can install eyes in the back of our heads (no more someone jumping on you from behind...).

Of course, there are also some disadvantages. One of the major disadvantages might be confusion.

All the pictures from all the cameras will confuse us; we won't distinguish front to aft, etc.

But I believe that the human brain is flexible enough to allow input from more than one set of "eyes". When we wish to look back, we will switch in our mind to the camera in the back of our head and we will know which camera it is, just as when we look using only one eye, we know which eye we are using.

One danger is Eye Hackers - people who send false images to our brain using our personal radio frequency. We will need an unbreakable code.

So, what do you say? Would you like to have X-ray vision like Superman or, like your 4th grade teacher, to have eyes in the back of your head?

TWO Reviews of Greg Bear's book: *DARWIN's RADIO: The next great war will start inside us.*

(1999), 440 pages

***Darwin's Radio* by Greg Bear.**

Reviewed by Aharon Sheer.

Recommended by Sara Svetitsky, and by Genah Alfandari. **This is the best science fiction book of 1999.** I emphasize the word *science* because this book is heavy with the most up-to-date biological and genetic science, plus some fantastic speculations about the past and future of mankind.

In Greg Bear's view, evolution is not a gradual process. We have, built-in, the mechanism for sudden dramatic changes in our genetic structure. The jump from Neanderthal to modern man was not a gradual process the small steps of which have been lost, but a sudden jump. Occasional normal Neanderthal couples gave birth to a monster: a modern baby. Sometimes the babies were killed, sometimes the parents too. But inevitably these two sorts of humans lived side by side until gradually the modern humans replaced all the Neanderthals.

Why did such punctuated evolution take place? Changes in environment, perhaps? Overcrowding? Climate changes? And what will happen today, with such changes taking place in the environment of modern man? The next step in human evolution?

The heroine of the book is Kaye Lang, a famous biologist who may get the Nobel Prize for her work in HERV, human endogenous

retroviruses. She's predicted the existence of a new kind, which was soon found. But then occasional women begin giving birth to monsters. Most of these women abort, most of these babies die. When Kaye begins predicting, along with a small number of others, that this may not necessarily be a disease, but rather the next step in evolution, she is hounded out of her profession. And then she becomes pregnant....

This is an exciting book, fast paced and complex, with a couple of good major characters and a variety of colorful supporting characters. According to the author, the biology has been checked by pros. The pros may not agree with Bear's conclusions, but they agree (he says) that the basic biology is sound, and the extrapolations may be true – although they doubt it very much. After this review you can read what Dr. Gary Weisinger (our resident genetic engineering biologist) says about this book. For the layman there is "A Short Biological Primer" and a "Short Glossary of Scientific Terms" at the end of the book. I didn't know they were there until I finished the book, but I don't know if it would have made any difference. I don't know enough biology to follow it. But the book was good, and I just pretended the biology made sense, reading it more or less the way one reads "Jabberwocky" in Lewis Carroll. Highly recommended.

***Darwin's Radio* by Greg Bear. Reviewed by Dr. Gary Weisinger**

What starts slowly as an intriguing investigation into apparent murders, primarily of pregnant women, both recent as well as prehistoric, develops as a sociological study of peoples' response to an uncontrolled, apparently deadly, virus.

Mitch Rafelson is a paleontologist who in the past has got in trouble when he discovered bones that the local Indian tribes claimed were from one of their descendents and should be

returned. The bad press around this affair left a bad smell around Dr Rafelson. Offered a job to give his opinion on a putative prehistoric find high in the Austrian Alps near the Italian border, by what turned out to be to be poachers, Mitch makes an interesting discovery, which gets him in even more hot water.

Dr Kaye Lang, a famous molecular geneticist, happily married and living in Long Island New York, has spent her life studying so-

called selfish human DNA for evidence of an innate endogenous virus which she called HERV (Human Endogenous RetroVirus). Some say she should get the Nobel Prize any year now for these studies. As she was in Eastern Europe trying to track down some more data for her basic research and her husband's company, she was called by the US Center of Disease Control (CDC), to urgently make her way to a location in the Caucasus, where her expertise could be helpful in an apparent crime. What she found was not a recent crime and was right in her alley.

Dr Christopher Dicken, a CDC virus hunter, was over worked and in urgent need of a rest, but unfortunately he is always needed to help identify and attempt to relieve more human suffering. Dr Dicken finally meets Dr Lang, a person whose work he has always followed and admired. They both overlap at the so-called crime location in the Caucasus. To their horror they find a grave full of dead pregnant women all shot through their stomachs. But that is not all, they all seemed a little strange in their appearance. What could it all mean?

Through the book, it is discovered that a virus called SHEVA is involved, which is related

to that initially described by Dr Lang. After an international government cover-up, the US public becomes aware of the danger of this virus, when stillborns of infected mothers start becoming public knowledge. The head of the US Government taskforce on SHEVA, Dr Mark Augustine, tries to institute emergency measures to put the brakes on the disease. A consequence is communal excommunication of those infected with SHEVA and widespread panic. Dr Lang believes that SHEVA does not make a disease, but its purpose is to cause accelerated evolution of the human species. Some people will die, but the improvement will win out. She believes in this so much that she married Mitch while infected, after her first husband tragically committed suicide, and she gets pregnant. The witch hunt after this newly wed couple is on.

This book starts slow, it has some technical mistakes that only a specialist can easily identify, but the book is well written. I haven't read Greg Bear before, but expect to read him again in the future. It's a good read, ENJOY!

Two Short Humorous Books by Connie Willis (reviewed by Aharon Sheer)

I love reading Connie Willis books. Most, but not all, are humorous romps, with an sf background and amusing ideas about possible futures. Connie says that it is much more difficult to write a humorous novel than a serious one. The humorous novel is made to look easy, and that takes a lot of work.

***Uncharted Territory* by Connie Willis**

(1994), 149 pages. Here we have two cowboy types sent to a new planet to chart it. They have a native guide, Bult, and two native "horses". Rules are strict: no damage to native flora or fauna, no use of modern technology which might corrupt the traditional native life style. Every violation of the rules results in a fine for the two explorers – a fine which is paid directly to their guide. Bult has picked up the idea quickly, and fines the explorer cowboys for everything he can think of – "Disturbance of land surface", "Inappropriate tone and manner in speaking to an indigenous person", "Disturbance of water surface, generation of waves", etc. With the money from the fines Bult then uses the explorers' computer to buy permitted objects: umbrellas, for example. How can one explore a planet under such conditions? Our intrepid explorers have methods, but they also have hidden objectives. One of their problems is that it's all too easy for undesirable types to open a gate to the planet and come in and do some unsupervised exploring. Such unsupervised exploring is strictly prohibited. Protecting the

natives and their life is serious business. So far nothing of real value has been found, and our explorers want to keep it that way. Every page of this book is amusing, as the two heroes contend with their bosses, an exotic world, strange conditions, alien flora and fauna, ignorant visitors, their clever native guide, and each other. One of the two heroes is a man, and the other a woman. So there is a hidden romance here too, among all the serious business. But – be warned – Connie Willis doesn't like to get her heroes off the hook. It's a bittersweet romance. Recently translated into Hebrew, it's a good book for a sophisticated friend.

***Remake* by Connie Willis** (1995), 140 pages. This one is about the future of movies, in which the technology of Computer Graphics (CG), the excessive domination of the studios, and an outrageous use of the copyright laws, have resulted in a situation in which all movies are remakes of earlier movies. There are no longer any live actors, since anyone can be simulated via CG. Would you like Marilyn Monroe to be the heroine and Gene Kelly the

hero of your latest remake of *Jurassic Park*? No problem. We all know that there are no new plots; everything is based on one of a few hundred formulas. The only differences between two movies with the same basic plot are the actors and the setting. Once all that can be created using CG, there is no longer any need for Live Action. Add to that the fact that the "Musical is Dead" – the last genuine musical having been made in 1964 – when did you last see a new musical? -- and we have the

entertaining but depressing setting for this movie – oops, book. The book is written like a 40s movie, boy meets girl, girl wants to dance in the movies, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back, boy loses girl again, etc. Will it all end happily? Just keep in mind that we are in the post-modern era of cheap drugs and free sex – this is NOT the 40s. Note: This is the shortest book I've read since 1956 that was written after 1956.

Short Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer:

Primary Inversion by Catherine Asaro (1995), 369 pages. Dr. Catherine Asaro is a physicist who stopped teaching in a university to become a full-time sf writer. She writes space opera romances in which the main characters are very powerful women, highly attractive to sexy men. Her heroines leave a trail of happy men and unhappy enemies behind them. In this book the heroine is an heir to the throne of the Skolian Empire, which gets its great interstellar power from some of its people's unique telepathic abilities. This is Asaro's first book, and in it she is still making a pretence at being a physicist sf writer, and not just a writer of space-placed love romances. For instance, how do we go faster than the speed of light (superluminal)? Simple:

"At superluminal speeds, mass and energy become imaginary, square roots of negative numbers. To reach the superluminal universe, all we had to do was add an imaginary part to our speed. Poof. The singularity at light speed disappeared. A ship went around light speed like a flycar leaving the road to go around a tree. Except that for starships, the 'road' was the real universe. "Of course doing the math had been a lot easier than making the engine, or dealing with the bizarre effects of faster than light travel. But when our ancestors had finally succeeded, the way to the stars had opened." (p. 116)

If you are an intelligent woman dreaming of being wonderfully attractive to men and enormously powerful, you will no doubt enjoy reading any of Asaro's many books. I guess that if you replaced the word "woman" by "man" and the word "men" by "women" in the previous sentence, you could probably replace the name "Asaro" by the names of any of several dozen male writers. I leave that to the reader.

Anti-Ice by Stephen Baxter (1993), 289 pages. Baxter has written a Victorian novel of alternate history. In the 1800s British explorers discover a large meteorite in the Antarctic. It appears to be made of what we would call anti-matter, held together by superconductivity. When it gets warm, it explodes, releasing enormous energy. Learning how to use this energy, British inventors have produced tremendous advances in technology, and the British control all the anti-ice there is. We get a marvelous humorous mix of Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Charles Dickens. Our hero travels in an anti-ice powered space ship to the moon, and does space walks. All this while the servant named Pocket of the great inventor Traveller (who has a platinum nose) serves cognac as they float in the Victorian drawing room which makes up the living space of Traveller's ship. It's a romp with some serious sides: Europe is Europe, and Europe's wars are part of the story. It's great fun to read, and yet discouraging too -- it's definitely not a utopia.

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