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The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

בדיון 2006 – תיאוריות זמן והיסטוריה חלופית

ההכנות לכנס "בדיון" 2006 בעיצומן! הכנס, הנערך השנה בפעם השלישית, יתקיים בבית אריאלה בתל-אביב, שדרות שאול המלך 25, בתאריך 8 ביוני 2006, החל מהשעה 17:00. בכנס יתארחו הסופרת האמריקאית לורה רזניק, ד"ר עמנואל לוטם, פרופ' נחמן בן-יהודה, פרופ' יחזקאל דרור, פרופ' גבי מוצקין ואחרים. הרצאותיהם יתחלקו בין שני פאנלים: האחד יעסוק בתיאוריות זמן, והשני בהיסטוריות חלופיות. פרטים נוספים ניתן למצוא באתר הכנס: <http://fiction.sf-f.org.il>

נא שימו לב לשינוי מקום ההרצאות בסדרת ההרצאות ע"ש עמוס גפן המפגש הבא יתקיים באוניברסיטת תל-אביב, בניין מקסיקו, חדר 120

חוג מדע בדיוני ברחובות – SFIR - Rehovot Science Fiction Club

פעילויות התא מתקיימות בימי א' בשעה 20:00 בפקולטה לחקלאות ברחובות, חדר 2, בבניין ליד הבריכה. הפעילויות ללא תשלום.

21/5/2006 – הקרנת פרקים נבחרים מהסדרה "סיפורי עמים"

28/5/2006 – סרט: "המירוץ לחיים" (Logan's Run)

מידע נוסף ניתן לקבל באתר התא (<http://sfir.tk/>) או בדוא"ל sfir42@yahoo.com

דנת הכתיבה ברחובות

דנת הכתיבה הרחובותית תקיים מפגשים בתאריכים הבאים:
 לפרטים נא לפנות ליולי גנטמן בכתובת ygantman@yahoo.com

More Society information is available (in Hebrew) at the Society's site: <http://www.sf-f.org.il>

Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Return from the Stars by Stanislaw Lem (1961), 247 pages.

Stanislaw Lem's great strength in his serious novels is describing the truly alien, and making it clear that we may never be able to understand it. In this book, the alien is the entire human race, and the human is an astronaut who has returned to Earth after being gone a hundred and twenty seven years, but having aged only ten years (because of time-dilation as the result of travel near the speed of light). While the astronauts met no non-human aliens in their travels, they discover that humans on Earth have changed so dramatically that they are like aliens.

The simplest things have changed. The astronaut is much taller and stronger than Earth people. He was chosen because of his strength, and the high gravity of much of the trip has made him taller and much stronger than Earth men. Men are dressed in highly colorful costumes that seem affectations. Lights are too bright, vegetation incandescently shrill. Seats are active, adjusting themselves to your body, whether you want them to or not. "I bent forward.... The back of my seat moved with my shoulders and clung to them elastically.... It was not pleasant." [p. 6]

Problems of gravity and inertia have been solved. Travelling vehicles stop and start without the passenger feeling any motion. He flies from the moon to the Earth in minutes, and feels nothing, sees nothing. When he lands, "I went to put my foot on a step, but there was no step. Between the metal hull and the edge of the platform yawned a meter-wide crevice. Caught off balance, unprepared for such a trap, I made a clumsy leap and, in midair, felt an invisible flow of force take hold of me as if from below, so that I floated across the void and was set down softly on a white surface, which yielded elastically.... I felt a number of amused stares...." [p. 7]

In the terminal on Earth, there are tremendous masses of people. He has no idea of where he is, of where to go, of how to get anywhere. "Now the flat surface on which we stood close together began to move upward and I saw below, in the distance, double white belts packed with people.... The moving platform made a turn, accelerated, continued to higher levels." [p. 8]

People stare at him. He is *old*. In this new Earth everyone can remain youthful-looking all their lives. But the astronaut looks his age: forty. He frightens people.

He is not the first astronaut to return from a long trip to the stars. There are experts whose job is to help them adjust to the shock of realizing that in this modern Earth he is a useless monster. They met him on the Moon, and talked to them. But he hates their condescension. He wants to try and find his way by himself, but in any case he never finds out how to meet his psychologists once on Earth. He is lost from the start.

"In front of me stood a man in something fluffy like fur, which, when touched by light, opalized like metal. He supported by the arm a woman in scarlet. What she had on was all in large eyes, peacock eyes, and the eyes blinked. It was no illusion – the eyes on her dress actually opened and closed....

"'Excuse me.' I touched the arm of the man in fur. 'Where are we?'

"They both looked at me. Their faces, when they raised them, took on a startled expression. I had the faint hope that it was only because of my height.

"'On the polyduct,' said the man. 'Where is your switch?'

"I did not understand.

"'Are ... are we still in the station?'

"'Obviously,' he replied with a certain caution.

"'But where is the Inner Circle?'

"'You've already missed it. You'll have to backtrack.'

"'The rast from Merid would be better,' said the woman. All of the eyes of her dress seemed to stare at me with suspicion and amazement.

"'Rast?' I repeated helplessly. [p. 10]

And so it goes. He does not know their vocabulary, he does not understand the obvious, he cannot find his way around. He sees an announcement that something will take place at hour twenty-seven. "So even the way of telling time had changed." [p. 16]

He is still in the station, and wants to leave it. There are robots everywhere – in every form. All manual work is done by robots. He sees the words "INFOR INFOR INFOR" racing without end.

"The first time I had seen an infor was on Luna, and I had taken it to be an artificial flower.

“I put my face close to the aquamarine cup, which immediately, before I could open my mouth, froze in readiness.

“How do I get out of here?’ I asked, none too brightly.

“Where are you going?’ a warm alto answered immediately.

“To the city.’

“Which district?’

“It doesn’t matter.’

“Which level?’

“It doesn’t matter; I just want to get out of the station!’

“Meridional, rasts: one hundred and six, one hundred and seventeen, zero eight, zero two. Triduct, level AF, AG, AC, circuit M levels twelve, sixteen, the nadir level leads to every direction south. Central level – gleeders, red local, white express, A, B, and V. Ulder level, direct, all escals from the third up...’ a singsong female voice recited.

“I had the urge to tear from the wall the microphone that was inclined with such solicitude to my face. I walked away. Idiot! Idiot!” [p. 18]

Of course he doesn’t know what the triduct is, what rasts are, what gleeders are, what ulders are, what escals are.

What does an astronaut do who hasn’t been with a woman for ten years? He meets a woman called Nias, they chat, walk together, have something to eat. She invites him to her place. He accepts, expressing surprise that, although she does not know him at all, she has invited him to her place.

Nais gives him something to drink, called “brit”, which she explains to him – after some discussion – makes it impossible for him to have sex. Women always give brit to men who come to their homes to visit.

But it’s not long before he gets a real shock. “Why are you looking at me like that? What’s the matter with you?...

“She got up slowly. She stood behind the armchair.

“How long ago, did you say? A hundred and twenty years?’

“A hundred and twenty-seven. What about it?’

“And were you ... betrizated?’

“What is that?’

“You weren’t?’

“I don’t even know what it means. Nias ... girl, what’s the matter with you?’

“No, you weren’t,’ she whispered. ‘If you had been, you would know.’

“I started toward her. She raised her hands.

“Keep away. No! No! I beg you!’

“She retreated to the wall.

“But you yourself said that brit ... I’m sitting now. You see, I’m sitting. Calm yourself. Tell me what it is, this bet ... or whatever.’

“I don’t know exactly. But everyone is betrizated. At birth.’

“What is it?’

“They put something in the blood, I think.’

“To everyone?’

“Yes. Because ... brit ... doesn’t work without that. Don’t move!’

“Child, don’t be ridiculous.’

“I put out my cigarette.

“I am not, after all, a wild animal. Don’t be angry, but ... it seems to me that you’ve all gone a little mad. This brit ... well, it’s like handcuffing everyone because someone might turn out to be a thief. I mean, there ought to be a little trust.’

“You’re terrific.’ She seemed calmer, but still she did not sit. ‘Then why were you so indignant before, about my bringing home strangers.’

“That’s something else.’

“I don’t see the difference. You’re sure you weren’t betrizated?’

“I wasn’t.’

“But maybe now? When you returned?’

“I don’t know. They gave me all kinds of shots. Is it so important?’

“It is. They did that? Good.’

“She sat down.

“I have a favor to ask you,’ I said as calmly as I could. ‘You must explain to me ...’

“What?’

“Your fear. Did you think I would attack you, or what? But that’s ridiculous!’

“No. If one looks at it rationally, no, but – it was overwhelming, you see. Such a shock. I never saw a person who was not ...’

“But surely you can’t tell?’

“You can. Oh, you can!’

“How?’

“She was silent.

“Nais ...’

“And if ...’

“What?’

“I’m afraid.’

“To say?’

“Yes.’

“But why?’

“You’d understand if I told you. Betrization, you see, isn’t done by brit. With the brit, it’s only – a side effect.... Betrization has to do with something else.’ She was pale. Her lips trembled. What a world, I thought, what a world this is!

“I can’t. I’m terribly afraid.’

“Of me?’

“Yes.’

“I swear that ...’

“No, no. I believe you, only ... no. You can’t understand this.’

“You won’t tell me?’

“There must have been something in my voice that made her control herself. Her face became grim. I saw from her eyes the effort it was for her.

“It is ... so that ... in order that it be impossible to ... kill.’

“No! People?’

“Anyone.’

“Animals, too?’

“‘Animals. Anyone.’

“‘She twisted and untwisted her fingers, not taking her eyes off me, as if with these words she had released me from an invisible chain, as if she had put a knife into my hand, a knife I could stab her with.

“‘Nais,’ I said very quietly. ‘Nais, don’t be afraid. Really, there’s nothing to fear.’” [p. 35-37]

They have a discussion. Gradually he begins to understand what betrization has done to world society. Not only have they eliminated war and violence, football battles and religious compulsion. All aggressive or dangerous acts are impossible for people to carry out.

“‘No, it’s impossible,’ I insisted. ‘What about people who do dangerous jobs? After all, they must ...’

“‘There are no dangerous jobs.’

“‘What are you saying, Nais? What about pilots? And various rescue workers? And those who fight fire, floods ... ?’

“‘There are no such people,’ she said. It seemed to me that I had not heard her right.

“‘What?’

“‘No such people,’ she repeated. ‘All that is done by robots.’

“‘There was silence. It would not be easy for me, I thought, to stomach this new world.’” [p. 38]

And this is the returned astronaut pilot’s horrifying discovery. His job no longer exists. This new world has no explorers, no adventurers. No one takes any risks. Thanks to betrization, the thought of such is inconceivable, terrifying to all people on Earth. There are no boxing matches, no bungee jumping, no motorcycle riders. This is a new world in which he does not belong, and can never belong. Earth, all of Earth, is now an alien planet to him, and to all his fellow astronauts who left Earth before betrization was introduced and became universal. No one on Earth has the slightest interest in their discoveries, in their actions, in the risks they took to gather knowledge from far places.

Robots do all the hard work. There is food and clothing, medical care, entertainment, transportation, free for everyone. Hardly any human needs to work. A human doctor may need to help a robot diagnose, but the robot will (must) perform the operation. Humans are needed to supervise the robot system, to make sure it continues running smoothly; that’s perhaps the only job that only humans can do.

And when those astronauts who went far away come back from the stars, as the hero of this book has come back, they too will have to learn the truth. And if they get married, and have children, they must cheerfully take their children to be betrizated.

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