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השתתפות במועדון הקריאה אינה כרוכה בתשלום או בהגעה למפגשים ופתוחה גם למי שאינם חברים באגודה. מומלץ להביא את הספר.

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Rehovot Science Fiction Club - SFIR – חוג מדע בדיוני ברחובות

18.11.07 - בלייד ראנר (*Blade Runner*); 25.11.07 - עיר אפלה (*Dark City*): sfir42@yahoo.com

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Unseen by Miriam Ben-Loulu (from CyberCozen September 1992)

To see or not to see -- that is the question. The sense of sight is so important to us that in both Hebrew and English "I see" is equivalent to "I understand". (No quiz throws students into a greater panic than an "unseen"!) Because of this importance, science fiction writers have provided their spacecraft with visual clues concerning the environment outside. I have yet to come across a spacecraft that gave its information concerning the outside environment through tactile or auditory clues. I doubt if anyone has tried smells -- a rose smell for an Earth-type planet, violets for a blue star, rotten eggs for a black hole, perhaps?

Instruments and Instrumentally Aided Vision: Some stories use instruments only, or instruments and some form of viewing with artificial senses:

- 1) Saberhagen: My Best, *The Long Way Home* (Fred Saberhagen, 1961), p. 75: "It was a needle thirty miles long, as near as his radar could measure"
- 2) *Downbelow Station* (C.J. Cherryh, 1981), p.261: "'Rider's turned,' scan op said in her ear. She saw it on-screen. The rider had gotten their acknowledgement minutes ago, had put about; that scan image was meeting them now. Longscan comp had put the rest of the arc together"
- 3) P. 291: "Militia freighters scattered, stationary nightmare. One of them blew like a tiny sun, flared on vid ..."
- 4) *The Crystal Singer* (Anne McCaffrey, 1974), p.281 [in the "dimension tank"]: "The cruiser was a very tiny blip, coasting past the orbit of the outermost planet, down towards the primary. Blinking lights indicated major mining stations in the asteroid belts; two tiny solid light [sic] of the two moon bases."
- 5) *The Man-Kzin Wars* (ed. Larry Niven) "Iron" (Poul Anderson, 1988), p. 62: "Going off watch, Carita Fenger stopped by the saloon. A large viewscreen there kept the image of the sun at the cross-haired center."
- 6) P. 58: "While Rover was in hyperspace, all five of her gang stood mass detector watch"
- 7) *Agent of Vega* (James H. Schmitz, 1960) "The Illusionists", p. 73: "In the vision tank, the fleeing disk grew and grew. During the first few minutes, it had appeared there only as a comet-tailed spark, a dozen radiant streamers of different

colors fanning out behind it -- not an image of the disk itself but the tank's visual representation of any remote moving object on which the ship's detectors were held. The shifting lengths and brightness of the streamers announced at a glance to those trained to read them the object's distance, direction, comparative and absolute speeds and other matters of interest to a curious observer. But as the Viper began to reduce the headstart the Bjanta had been permitted to get ... a shadowy outline of the disk's true shape began to grow about the spark. A bare quarter million miles away finally, the disk itself appeared to be moving at a visual range of 200 yards ahead of the ship, while the spark still flickered its varied information from the center of the image."

- 8) *Galactic Derelict* (Andre Norton, 1959) p. 64-5: "'We can see a little.' The technician stepped to one of the side panels his hand going to a button there.... A plate arose from the board, glowed. Then, over the head of the technician ... they caught sight of swirling ash-filled vapor [there was a volcano outside], as if they were looking through a window into the valley."
- 9) Other methods used: electron telescope (Stasheff), remotely controlled telescope (Saberhagen), general-view tank (Schmitz) and optical compensators that project an exact simulacram (Anderson).

Direct Vision: Direct vision has been used alone or with instruments:

- 1) *The Crystal Singer* (McCaffrey) p. 37: "Captain Anurs alerted Killishandra when the ship had emerged from hyper-space and Ballybran was fully visible. "Good view,' he told her, pointing to the two inner moons, positioned at ten and five, but Killishandra had eyes only for the mysterious planet."
- 2) *Crystal Witness* (Kathy Tyers, 1989) p. 28 [on a shuttle]: "Three passengers already sat in this economy section with neither windows nor a viewscreen. Disappointed to be denied one glimpse of her new homeworld from space" [While this is in the negative it seems to indicate that windows and/or viewscreens were available in 1st class sections.]
- 3) *Sundiver* (David Brin, 1980) p. 28: "This was Jacob's first trip aboard a ship powered by the billion-year-old science of the Galactics. He watched from the first-class lounge as the Earth fell away.... The view was breathtaking...."
 - i. P. 53 [when viewing the sun]: "The Captain ordered the ship's stasis screens polarized and the regular viewing ports sealed."
 - ii. P. 58: "A soft, pearly light suffused through the ports, illuminating the faces of those who watched Mercury glide beneath the descending ship. Almost everyone who did not have a duty to perform was in the lounge, held to the row of viewing windows by the planet's terrible beauty."
- 4) *The Stars, Like Dust* (Isaac Asimov, 1950) p. 22: "The view-room was a bubble on the ship's 'skin', a bubble of curved two-feet-thick, steel-hard transparent plastic."

It is interesting that some authors change descriptions in various stories they have written, while others may in a single story describe different types of spacecraft with different methods being used.

Ambiguity: Looking at the above quotations you may disagree with the way I have grouped them. This is because it is often difficult to decide where un-aided vision leaves off and instrument begins when both are available on the same craft. The same holds true

when an instrument is simply read or when it is a form of vision. The description by Schmitz in *The Illusionists* (above) shows one instrument with both forms.

Faster Than Light Travel: In faster-than-light travel it is logical that things would look different:

- 1) *The Warlock Unlocked* (Christopher Stasheff, 1982) p. 89: "He gazed at the viewscreen, letting his subconscious read ecclesiastical symbols into the random swirls of color that hyperspace induced in the cameras."
P. 90-1: "... and saw the velvet darkness and bright little stars again; but this time they stayed still. 'We're back in normal space?'"
- 2) "Iron" (Anderson) "... stood mass detector watch.... It wasn't torture, of course, once you had schooled yourself never to look into the Less Than Void which filled the single port necessarily left unshuttered."
- 3) *The Witches of Karres* (James H. Schmitz, 1949) p. 21: "The screens all blurred and darkened simultaneously, and, for a short while, a darkness went flowing and coiling lazily past the Venture. Light jumped out of it at him once in a cold, ugly glare, and receded again in a twisting unnatural fashion." [This was when the spaceship was using the "Sheewash Drive" provided by three young witches, and a ship using a conventional drive fired on them.]

Problems Concerning Vision: Several authors have considered the possible problems that might arise in space concerning vision:

- 1) [detection of a craft] *Galactic Patrol* (E.E. "Doc" Smith, 1937) p. 149: "His speedster was immune to all detection save electromagnetic or visual, and therefore, even at that close range -- the travel of half a minute for even a slow space ship in open space -- he was safe. For electromagnetics are useless at that distance; and visual apparatus, even with subether converters, is reliable only up to a few mere thousands of miles, unless the observer knows exactly what to look for and where to look for it."
- 2) [getting un-lost] *Witches of Karres* (Schmitz) p. 56: "Stars filled the screens in all directions, crowded pinpoints of hard brilliance and hazy clusters. Here and there swam dark pools of cosmic dust. On the right was a familiar spectacle but one which offered no clues -- the gleaming cascade of ice-fire of the Milky Way. One would have had approximately the same view from many widely scattered points of the galaxy."
- 3) [care of viewscreens] *The Stars, Like Dust* (Asimov) p. 22: "The K retractile iridium-steel lid which protected it [the view room; for description, see above] against the scouring of the atmosphere and its dust particles had been sucked back."

Aliens and Vision: Nor are humans the only ones with problems and solutions concerning vision:

- 1) "Iron" (Anderson) p. 79: "From what data we have on them, I believe they [the Kzinti] were searching for some time before they acquired us, probably with amplified optics."
P. 131: "They [Kzinti] did hate sensory deprivation, still more than humans do. There was no screen, but a port showed the spacefield."
- 2) *Earthmen and Strangers* (ed. Robert Silverberg) "Dear Devil" (Eric Frank Russell, 1950) p.11 [a Martian craft]: "There were no observation ports. All

viewing was done through a transparent band running right around the fat belly of the sphere."

- 3) "The Best Policy" (Randall Garrett, 1957) p. 47 [on a Fenigwisnok craft]: "Gazing at the magniscreen, he rubbed his palms together in satisfaction.... He twisted the screen's magnification control up, and the scene beneath the ship ballooned outward...."

Conclusion: In short, we can't visualize a future in which we can't see where we're headed, but even sf's visionary writers cannot see eye to eye on the method to be used -- if you see what I mean.

Editor's Question: Miriam's comments suggest the following question:

Has anyone ever written a story about space travelling dogs? Computer generated artificial smells might be their major source of information, just as "false" color is used by humans to picture the unseeable.

Miriam's Comment on Editor's Question: I have a battier idea -- aliens based on chiroptera who use echo location!

Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Plan B by Sharon Lee & Steve Miller (1998), 330 pages.

This is a book in the Liaden Universe. I had previously read and enormously enjoyed another book by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller in the Liaden Universe, *Local Custom*. I reviewed it enthusiastically in the March 2006 *CyberCozen*. *Local Custom* was a fun space-opera cross-cultural love story. Yet *Plan B* was a real disappointment.

First let me refresh your memory and add some more information about the Liaden Universe. This takes place in a far future long after Terra has colonized many worlds in our galaxy. The Terran civilization is roughly what a space civilization would be like if the United States had not abandoned space to the Chinese but had continued to develop space travel, and eventually developed faster-than-light travel. In the course of Terran expansion two other human space travelling civilizations have been discovered: the **Liadens**, originally from the planet of Liad, and the **Yxtrang**.

Liad reminds me a bit of Japan, with its emphasis on honor and complicated rituals and sophisticated social relationships involving superior, inferior, and equal, formal, informal, friendly, unfriendly, at various levels. The Liadens are traders, travelling between the planets, buying, selling, and intriguing. They have also done

a lot of genetic engineering, developing lines of space pilots, and healers, and seers, and no doubt much more.

The Yxtrang remind me of the Klingon: a warrior people for whom military conquest is their most important duty (except that they are human). In *Local Custom* the Yxtrang were not relevant and were barely mentioned, so *Plan B* introduced me to the Yxtrang.

The first thing I did not like in *Plan B* was that it is mainly a war story. The cover is a clue: It shows three soldiers in the foreground holding weapons, explosions on the ground, and two war planes. This is partly the tale of an Yxtrang attack on a Liaden planet, Lytaxin. Battles galore, mostly on Lytaxin but also in space. By contrast, *Local Custom* was mainly a love story.

I admit that *Plan B* had some gripping parts, and some entertaining parts. It even had a parallel part, when hero Val Conyos' Phelium introduces his half-Terran bride Miri Robertson (her mother was Liaden) to her Liaden relatives whom she has never met. Miri first has to be hypno-trained in all the subtleties of the Liaden language and human relationships. Otherwise she would be bound to offend everyone. (There was a similar scene in *Local Custom* when the hero

introduced his Terran bride to his Liaden family.) An amusing example of a mistake Miri might have made: Before meeting her Liaden family, Miri places a flower behind her ear.

“[Val Con] touched the flower behind her ear with a gentle forefinger....

“He touched the flower again, then drew it from its resting place.

“‘Not,’ he murmured, ‘for this sort of dinner.’

“‘Huh?’ Miri followed him into the bedroom. ‘It’s against the law to wear flowers to dinner?’

“‘This particular flower,’ said Val Con, placing it gently in a cut crystal water glass, ‘is an aphrodisiac.’

“She blinked at him; blinked at the canopy. ‘And they’ve got ‘em growing all over the bed?’

“‘What better place?’

“‘Right.’ She closed her eyes, willing tense muscles to relax.” [p. 49-50]

What else bothered me about *Plan B*? It’s a continuation of the first three Liaden novels. There is almost no attempt to introduce the characters to the readers. The assumption seems to be made that the reader read the first three novels, knows the Liaden Universe, and is familiar with all of the characters. Why bother to explain the background and introduce the characters to the reader, when he presumably knows all that? But I was left in constant confusion by the lack of background information. Not only that, *Plan B* ends in the middle: It is clearly the precursor to still another Liaden novel, and ends when still another Liaden relative – presumably well-known to readers of the first three novels – introduces himself to one of the non-Liaden main characters. End of book! Dead end for me!

Local Custom had a beginning, a middle, and an end. It was a stand-alone novel. *Plan B* is all middle.

Was there anything I really liked? *Plan B* introduced the Yxtrang to me. It seems that ten years before, hero explorer Val Conyos’Phelium had encountered an Yxtrang explorer, Nelirikk, on a strange planet with no intelligent life. The encounter was not pleasant, but both men escaped with their lives. Yxtrang Nelirikk reported to his superiors that he had let the Terran live. His superiors thought that he should have killed the Terran or died trying. For the crime of letting an enemy Terran live, Nelirikk was demoted to the lowest level of soldier after having been a highly respected explorer. Nelirikk has almost become a non-person in the Yxtrang world. On the other hand, he *was* a highly skilled explorer. So his superiors give him the job of spying out the Liaden position on Lytaxin. A chance to recover his standing? And what happens to poor Nelirikk? He gets caught by the Liaden, and finds himself facing the same Val Conyos’Phelium that he had fought and ran from ten years before. While rather too much of a coincidence, the tale of Nelirikk’s conversion into an enthusiastic supporter of Val Conyos’Phelium and his whole Liaden tribe is entertaining. Fortunately Nelirikk’s explorer training included learning the Liaden language in all its complications, so he can communicate with them well. Since the Yxtrang are twice the height of Liadens, his appearance in Liaden uniform produces some very startled reactions from those who do not know him! Roughly, “Captain, may I point out that there is an Yxtrang standing behind you?”

I may as well add that I do not care much for psi stuff. That fact that certain Liaden are highly telepathic, that Val Conyos’Phelium and his lifemate Miri Roberson are psi-connected, as well as being connected to some galactic psi underpinnings, a kind of unexplained background power, makes some of this novel read more like fantasy than science-fiction space opera to me.

Well, I still have another Liaden book to read. Maybe I’ll like it better.

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