



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

כנס מאורות בנושא אסטרונומיה ומדע בדיוני יוצא לדרך!
האגודה גאה להכריז על כנס "מאורות" הראשון. כנס חורף חד-יומי שיוקדש למדע בדיוני. הכנס יערך ב-17 בדצמבר, יום חמישי, נר ששי של חנוכה. לקראת תום שנת האסטרונומיה הבינלאומית האגודה הישראלית למדע בדיוני ולפנטסיה ונוער שוחר מדע מזמינים אתכם לצאת אתם להרפתקה שלא מהעולם הזה. מאורות, כנס המדע הבדיוני החדש, ייערך השנה בסימן "פני מועדות לכוכבים".

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Film Review by Aharon Sheer: *Surrogates* (המחליפים) (2009),

directed by Jonathan Mostow, starring Bruce Willis, 104 minutes, PG-13. Based on a graphic novel, *The Surrogates*, written by [Brett Weldele](#). Now playing in Israel.

This film was recommended by Eli Eshed as a mediocre film based on a genuine science fiction idea. As required nowadays for a Hollywood "science fiction" film, there are plenty of explosions, car chases, fights and shootings, to keep the teenaged kids happy. The science fiction idea is based on a development which allows direct brain control of electromechanical objects, plus direct input to the brain of electronic sensory information. The inventor, Dr. Lionel Canter (no, he doesn't look Jewish), envisioned this as a method that would allow physically handicapped people (like himself) to carry on a more-or-less normal life despite being confined to a wheelchair or even to a bed. The electromechanical objects are *robots*, which look like physically excellent human beings, with eyes, ears, nose, mouth (for speaking), etc. However, the

robots lack brains. These robots can move about appearing to be normal human beings although they are controlled by some kind of sophisticated very high speed communication system, enabling the physically handicapped person to see, hear, smell (?), and feel what is in the vicinity of the robot. More important, the person who is operating the robot from a distance can direct the robot's movements, speak through its mouth, touch its surroundings, and so on.

While Dr. Canter envisioned a world of normal human beings joined by an occasional remote-controlled robot operated by someone physically handicapped, the company (Virtual Self Industries, whose slogan is "choose your own surrogate") which manufactures these robots, has a better idea: *Everybody* should have his or her own robot! Each person can go out into the world in a risk-

free way, carrying on daily actions such as driving cars, but without any risk to the operator in case of a traffic accident. An automatic cutout immediately disconnects the operator from his or her robot, protecting the human from the trauma of seeing his or her robot damaged in an accident. Men can be women, and women can be men, and nobody will know the truth. The old can be young, the ugly beautiful, for only the robot's appearance is what others see.

Your children can go to school, but no bully can cause the child physical suffering, since the actual child is actually at home. In this respect the film is not fully thought out, since the operator at home still has to have food, clothing, physical exercise, and all the other things which maintain the physical body. The movie can have some fun with this, as one robot approaches another standing at work and asks a question, but gets no response for a while, until the second robot apologizes, saying, "Sorry, I had to go to the toilet."

Other ideas are suggested, including one that, since communication is two ways, the operator might stimulate his robot with some electric device which will indirectly provide the operator with some kind of sensory excitement as one might get from taking a drug or drinking alcohol, but perhaps without any danger of addiction.

At the future time the movie takes place, almost everyone in the world, from the U.S. to Europe to China, stays at home, and most work, study, and social interactions are via the robots. At night-time the robots are shut off, and hooked up to a recharging system, so that the operator can send them off to work or school the next morning. During this night time presumably the operators eat and sleep.

The exceptions are groups of people who refuse to use robots, and have fought for permission to set up robot-free communities, gated communities to which

only real humans are admitted. These robot-free groups of people are presented as minor, minority, and inferior, radically unfit communities that have rejected what are almost universal mores in this future world.

Alas, into the wonderful world of almost totally robot societies comes a murderer, or a group of murderers. Although the communications systems are built to protect the operator from any danger (which is one reason for having the robots), someone has been able to override these protections and kill operators in their own homes. Agent Tom Greer (Bruce Willis) is the good cop whose job is to find out who the murderers are, and to deal with them. Greer, however, has been having personal problems with the robot system, since his wife Maggie (Rosamund Pike) has lost all interest in her husband, and finds all her pleasure in life in her robot activities (she works in a beauty parlor for robot women). Greer wants some human interaction with his wife Maggie, and is not getting it. So he himself may perhaps have some sympathy for those who have rejected the robot dominated world.

One amusing scene has Greer go out walking in the street in his human form. The big-city street is filled with robots walking from place to place. (One wonders why they walk – why not run? They will not get tired.) The robots seem to have some automatic system which protects them from bumping into other robots, but the distant operators apparently can not easily avoid bumping into a human. Greer is warned that the world has become dangerous to a human walking in the street. Robots keep bumping into him but curiously their operators seem to be indifferent to this, and do not apologize as a normal human would be expected to do when bumping into another person.

The science fiction idea is not completely reasonable. Robots must be expensive. How can everyone in the

world afford them? (Admittedly, there are various levels of robotic capabilities, with the more expensive ones having more sophisticated sensory systems, for example. As a cop, Greer has a robot which can leap over buildings, run as fast as a speeding bullet, and so on – I exaggerate slightly.) Recharging them every night is going to cost money too. And the maintenance of a semblance of a normal world, with cars and trains and office buildings and work places and schools, will cost as much as these things cost in our world today, and that *in*

addition to the robot system which overlays it.

Still the fact that we can ask questions about these problems in a reasonable way shows that the science fiction idea behind *Surrogates* is a genuine one, and thought-provoking. I'd rate it a B movie, as did most of Yahoo's readers. According to Yahoo, the critics rated it a C+, but I suspect the critics know nothing about science fiction; they are judging it is a pure action movie. The thought-provoking sf ideas presented are far above the heads of the average movie critic.

Quote of the Month

Appendix Not So Useless by Caroline Ash (from *Science*)

“For humans, the value of having an appendix seems to be negligible and, given the prevalence of appendicitis, having an appendix can even be dangerous. This gut attachment has long been thought to be a remnant of the time when hominids ate a high proportion of plant matter that needed fermentation before digestion. More recently, the appendix has been proposed to play a role in the immune-mediated maintenance of symbiotic bacteria in the gut. On the basis of comparative anatomical and phylogenetic approaches, Smith et al. now contend that the appendix is a specialized organ for harboring symbiotic bacteria essential for health. Diarrhea was a common hazard during hominid evolution. Because the opening to the appendix is constricted, it may escape colonization by bacterial pathogens. Bacterial symbiont reconstitution after diarrhea can be achieved rapidly from the populations harbored in the appendix. Thus, far from being useless, positive selection may well have acted to maintain the appendix.”

Based on *J. Evol. Biol.* 22, 1984 (2009).

Short Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Genometry, edited by Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois (2001), 272 pages.

This is a collection of short stories, almost all published between 1984 and 1999. All of them deal with the consequences of genetic engineering, hence the clever book name, a combination of “genome” and “geometry”. The problem with most of these stories is that they are in the style of the magazine *Asimov's Science Fiction*, a magazine whose only connection with Isaac Asimov was twofold: Asimov lent them his name (and got some money for it), and in each issue he wrote answers to some letters to the editors. The stories, alas, were written in Clarion style. “Clarion” is a famous and very successful school for science fiction

and fantasy writers. The basic principle of Clarion is that readers of sf have absolutely no interest in science. What readers want to read about is human relationships. Of course an sf story has to have a few sentences about science; otherwise, how could it be called an “sf story”? But normal healthy readers aren't geeks. They really don't want to read about science, they want to read about people.

The second thing that bothers me about this collection is that every future described is *bad*. The basic idea is that in the real human world things can never get better, they can only get worse. It follows

that a story about the future has to be miserable and unhappy. That's the *real world*. Otherwise it can't be a *good story*. *Good* stories have to leave you depressed about the future. And remarkably, this is true even if the story has a really phony unbelievable happy ending.

The best example of this is the first story, "The Invisible Country", by Paul J. McAuley. McAuley is a biologist, and he knows what he's talking about. This story has the longest, most convincing, and solidly scientifically based story in the entire book. Here is the *entire* science content of this story:

"I've a culture. Dormant now, until it gets into the bloodstream. A gene-melded strain of *E. coli*, MIRV'd with half a dozen sorts of virus. Gets into lymphocytes, makes them cross the blood / brain barrier, then kicks the main viruses into reproductive gear. A day, two days, that's it. Some bacteria remain in the blood, spore-forming vector. Breathed out, excreted. Any warm-blooded animal. Spread like wildfire.'

"And what does it do? You still haven't told me.'

"At first I thought of bonding, pheromonal recognition. But bonding, the pack instinct, is the cause of the trouble. And the committee running the center were real enthusiastic about the idea, so I knew I had to take the opposite direction. You know about kinship?'

"The way animals recognize their relatives? You talked about it.'

"Yeah. One of the viruses turns that into a global function. You recognize everyone as a brother or sister. It makes you want to make other people happy, to care for them. It gets into the base of the brain, downloads information into cells of the hypothalamus. Subverts the old lizard instincts, the crocodile in the basement. Are you following this?...

"Infected cells start to produce a variant of an old psychoactive drug, MDMA. What they used to call Ecstasy. A second virus gets into the neurons, makes them act as if they've had a dose of growth hormone, forces them to grow new synapses. That and the MDMA analog kicks in a higher level of awareness, of connections. The way everything fits together, could fit together....'" [p. 13]

So all you have to do is spread this viral concoction through the population of people. Use rats and birds to spread the virus. The rats will quickly learn to love one another, and cooperate to spread the virus. And every human infected will love everyone else the way brothers always love each other, the way sisters always love each other. And all the world will become a wonderful place to live.

The future McAuley is describing is a London which sounds much like Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo in Brazil as it is today. Most people live in horrifyingly poor slums in the most miserable of conditions. A small number of successful wealthy people live and work in gated communities, into which the rest of the population cannot enter, no matter how capable they are. The rich live lives of luxury, the masses suffer terribly. The slums of the poor are overwhelmed by vast numbers of sick, starving children, violent criminals all (otherwise they cannot survive).

And in McAuley's future, all this horror is solved by the spread of this utopian virus which makes us all brothers. Do I have to explain to you why this is nonsense? Do I have to explain how in the not so distant past brothers have taken weapons against brothers, brothers have killed brothers, all to bring about some ideology which one brother has embraced and the other brother has rejected. Or how about this: The parents die and the brothers and sisters have to divide up the

estate. Does that bring out the best in people? Sometimes yes, but quite often brothers and sisters end up with deep hate for each other.

And this is one of the best stories in this book for its excellent description of the horror that will be London (and presumably every other city in the world) in the not-so-distant future.

There are other stories about the inevitable horrors of the future world. Some have happy endings, in which genetic engineering solves all. And in others genetic engineering is the cause of all the misery. However there are a few stories which are exceptional.

“Good with Rice”, by John Brunner, describes a future China in which a new fruit has appeared which has the characteristics of meat – it has a high protein content, carnivorous animals love it, and humans eat it with pleasure. The new fruit grows independently, it does not need to be planted or cared for, it’s like a weed. It is a wonderful food source, which everyone can enjoy with no effort –

a solution to the world’s food problems. A genetically engineered plant with wonderful characteristics. But it has a surprising side-effect. A fascinating story.

And another story, “Written in Blood”, by Australian Chris Lawson, has some clever science to it. A Muslim biologist has discovered a way to encode the entire Qur’an into the DNA of white blood cells. It’s called bloodwriting. So any devout Muslim can carry in his blood the entire Qur’an. The daughter of the story’s hero (a different Muslim biologist) realizes that this carries the risk that such bloodwriting might enable an evil country to identify Muslims with a simple blood test, inviting pogroms against Muslims. And she solves the problem. An interesting story with a convincing pseudoscientific idea, well done. And it was even published in *Asimov’s Science Fiction*.

Over all, this book made me miserable. Maybe a geneticist would appreciate it more than I did.

Limericks by Miriam Ben-Loulu (October 1993)

**A flighty young dragon of Pern
With disdain would-be lovers did spurn
She flew between Thread
Wherever it led
While the poor males just waited their turn.**

**The wife of a space captain bold
Discovered his love grown cold.
She let out the air
Of his space suit with care.
(At least that is what I was told!)**

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