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Aerial Views

Three Sci-Fi Satires

By Fred Russell

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In memory of Ada Steinberg
scholar, teacher, friend

Aerial Views

Three Sci-Fi Satires

By Fred Russell

DAILY LIFE IN ANCIENT AMERICA

(From a Report to the Intergalactic Exploration Society)

The planet Earth, as we all know, is the third body in the so-called solar system of the galaxy referred to by its former inhabitants as the Milky Way. That there are similar systems throughout this galaxy is common knowledge. The current report sums up the fifth season of excavations on this dead planet, confining itself to the region known in local parlance as “America,” or, in other sources, “the United States of America.” And while the primitive beings who populated this region are no different in essential features from those who inhabited other regions of the planet, our finds have made it possible to speculate more boldly about a number of questions that have occupied researchers for eons. These concern, first and foremost: 1) the age-old question of a possible evolutionary link between these beings and ourselves, as farfetched as such a link has always seemed, given the enormous distance and span of time that separate us; 2) the relationship between the two species of intelligent life uncovered on the planet; 3) the relationship between these species and the drones who served them in the peculiar society that prevailed there.

The chief inhabitants, and certainly the rulers, of the planet Earth can best be described, in physical terms, as rather squat in appearance and possessing a single large eye which was apparently the seat of their intelligence. It was through this all-seeing eye that the activities of the servile drones were monitored and controlled, the latter being instructed minutely and continuously in everything that pertained to their lives. Fortunately we are in possession of both

written and recorded materials relating to both masters and slaves and can now decipher their primitive language, or at least the language by which masters and slaves communicated with one another if not among themselves. This is largely a result of the work done on the thousands of so-called Coca-Cola cans now housed in the Museum of Galactic History and displaying a variety of scripts that have been definitively collated and furnished our first insight into the structure of the American language. Having ascertained that the cans contained an acidic liquid that the drones were instructed to imbibe, conceivably as a means of pacifying them, researchers were able to decipher two words—"drink" and "refreshes"—that in effect made it possible to arrive at a full understanding of the system of meanings attached to the various combinations of symbols in this language.

Another question pertains to the dating of the various strata unearthed on American soil. We know that the American civilization flourished around 500,000 years ago. The Americans themselves, in the documents we have discovered, refer to what they call the 21st century as a pivotal time in their unfortunate history. However, there was apparently a zero year at which the count was reversed for an unknown reason, so it is unclear whether this refers to the 21st century before or after the zero year. In the former case the Americans would have antedated the people known as the Romans as a planetary power; in the latter case they would have followed them, and we shall allow ourselves to speculate about what contact, if any, these two civilizations had.

As for the relationship between the two species of intelligent life uncovered on the planet, though both flourished in America at around the same time it remains unclear whether one evolved from the other or simply destroyed the other. One school of thought maintains that the two species coupled and thus gave rise to yet a third species, to which we owe our own ultimate design. We shall discuss this question in greater detail later on in the Report.

For the present let it be said that the first

of these two species, known as Console I, strikes researchers as the more primitive of the two. The fortuitous discovery of the so-called Console Memory Disks allows us to view its thought processes as well as to observe the drones in various activities and to study the system of instructions by which they were controlled. On these disks, the drones themselves may be viewed performing the actions and speaking the words dictated to them by their masters as mirrored in the latter's all-seeing eye. Thus in one of these disks drones are seen drinking the aforesaid Coca-Cola beverage while feigning enjoyment in order to encourage others to do so. Females of the species with long, bare legs are gathered around the drinkers to create the illusion that drinking Coca-Cola leads to successful interfacing. Many of these tranquilizing drugs are administered to the drones as they perform their tasks. Occasionally they are seen gathered around the console to receive further instructions.

As for the second of these two species, Console II, this was no doubt an advanced type vis-à-vis Console I, though as mentioned before their precise relationship is difficult to define. Certainly they coexisted for a brief period, whether in harmony or strife it is also difficult to ascertain. That both were continually engaged in war can be seen by even the most cursory review of the disks. Console I in particular reveals images of the most violent nature, apparently sending armies of drones around the planet to do his bidding. Occasionally some of these drones achieved a measure of prominence among their own kind and are displayed being put through their paces, sometimes hitting a ball with a stick, sometimes jumping up and down in an enthusiastic manner.

Console II seems to have been a more subtle creature, performing what must have been regarded at the time as complex mental tasks which were displayed in its eye. The transparency of these mental processes, or at least the immediate results, is one of the features that distinguishes this early form of life. Console II was always thinking, but also always observing, its eye jumping from place to place in

search of information and often engaged in “creative” activities.

As for the drones, they were less compactly made and put together out of inferior materials that could not be recycled. They possessed the aforementioned “legs” to transport them from place to place and “arms” for snatching things out of the air which they then guarded jealously. Planted atop this nexus of appendages was a globular mass that contained two small eyes with which they surveyed their surroundings and an active mouth generally engaged in the acts of eating or talking. They were by and large incapable of thinking for themselves and hence, as mentioned, had to be instructed continuously.

So much for the broad features of the creatures who inhabited the planet Earth in that distant time when intelligent life was not yet self-sustaining. Of the beginnings of the consoles little is known, though a still more primitive creature has been identified from a somewhat earlier time which by no stretch of the imagination can be called intelligent. It too was squat and boxlike but unlike Console I and Console II could project no images, making instead sounds that mimicked speech but cannot be said to reflect any processes of thought, though some have argued, quite controversially, it may be added, that Console I evolved from it, just as it is said that Console II evolved from Console I.

Be that as it may, and irregardless of where we place Console I and Console II in our time frame or how we perceive their evolution, we find the consoles always engaged in three principal activities: the making of war, the accumulation of wealth and the control and manipulation of the drones. In America these activities reached a pinnacle of sorts in the aforementioned 21st century, not long before the series of catastrophes that put an end to this ill-fated civilization. At the time of which we are speaking America was ruled by a group of individuals known as “producers.” These determined the content of the messages transmitted to the drones. It should be pointed out that though

the drones cannot be characterized as intelligent beings, their role in this civilization was paramount, for it was they who performed the tasks on which it was founded, including the making of war, while themselves being dependent on the instructions they received from their masters, being incapable of acting without such instructions and having to be frequently reminded of them, such as in the case of the need to drink Coca-Cola in order to maintain their mental equilibrium.

These producers, while thought of collectively as a group, were often at odds among themselves and apparently competed fiercely to achieve positions of power, even to the extent of sending out contradictory messages to the drones. For example, each of the producers instructed the drones to imbibe different kinds of acidic beverages or to think different kinds of thoughts, employing prominent drones to endorse these messages and thus deceive the general drone population into believing that it was admirable to obey them and that they would furthermore be rewarded in some indeterminate way, perhaps by becoming prominent themselves.

Our good fortune in obtaining fairly complete individuals of both the Console I and Console II types as well as a large number of memory disks, all on view at the Galactic Museum of Natural History, has given us, as mentioned, a rare opportunity to study their thought processes as well as the behavior of the drones. When the drones were left to their own devices, that is, not receiving messages or doing their masters' bidding, they were generally engaged in conflicts among themselves, many of which were resolved violently. It can only be surmised that their masters viewed these proceedings with a certain measure of amusement and conceivably were in the habit of observing them as a form of entertainment. In a typical spectacle of this sort one of the male drones would be seen pursuing a female drone with long, bare legs and occasionally interfacing with her. When another male drone appeared on the scene one would inevitably destroy the other. All this heated

activity was regulated by instructing the drones to imbibe pacifying beverages at certain intervals.

The consoles we have investigated are of a more or less uniform design and nature. All have mysterious cords or cables hanging from their bodies which are conceivably sex organs used in interfacing, though this conclusion has been challenged by a number of researchers who believe they are feeding appendages. In truth it is not precisely known how the consoles interfaced or nurtured themselves. More advanced beings have no need for appendages to interface or feed but like us are part of a central processing unit in which interfacing and feeding are automatically achieved. Among the drones, of course, the system was even more primitive, with interfacing performed by pinning females on the ground.

When the consoles were first interfaced with our own system in a bold experiment carried out here at the Society, a measure of mental activity was detected but none that could be defined. In the case of Console I a turbulent field of some kind was produced in its eye. In the case of Console II a series of colorful boxes or logos was produced against varying backgrounds. Our preliminary conclusion was that this activity represented a state of somnolence. It was only when we inserted the recently discovered memory disks that both came to life and began to yield their fascinating secrets. These will be discussed at length later on. For the moment I will describe just three of them:

Disk 12, Console I Series, shows a drone reading messages which are interspersed with views of other drones in varying states of excitement and by instructions urging the drones to dye their hair. Towards the end of this presentation the reader drone is replaced by a female drone with long, bare legs reciting mysterious numbers.

Disk 84, Console I Series, shows a number of drones sitting around a table telling the general drone population what to think and describing future events. For example, at the beginning of the disk, the first drone describes what a producer in America will say to a producer in "Europe" when the two meet at a

later date to discuss the future of the planet and the second drone describes what the European producer will reply. A third drone discusses the significance of this imaginary conversation. On many points the drones are in disagreement and therefore raise their voices to make a stronger impression on the ordinary drones waiting to be instructed.

Disk 243, Console I Series, shows a drone sitting at a desk and various prominent drones reporting to him and replying to questions. After each reply the drone at the desk laughs heartily pretending it was the wittiest reply he had ever heard and thus encouraging large numbers of unseen drones to join in the laughter. Between these exchanges messages are transmitted instructing the general drone population to eat fried chicken.

It can be surmised that the engagement of the drones in the manner depicted in these disks was intended to keep them occupied lest they engage in violent activities, such as destroying one another or pinning females on the ground. As previously mentioned, the general drone population was controlled by the consoles designated “producers.” In the time of which we are speaking, the leader of the American producer consoles was generally referred to as George Bush though occasionally—and significantly—as George W. Bush as well. We find the former name in records of the Earth years 1992 and 2000 and this accords with the generally accepted notion that the lifespan of Console I was just eight years before recycling or upgrading. This is indirectly supported by the colloquial American expression “the mind of an eight-year-old” occasionally encountered in the texts, especially with reference to the said George Bush. A particularly intriguing thesis has recently been advanced arguing that the console known as George Bush and the console known as George Washington were identical, the proper designation of the former thus being George Washington Bush. This would explain the mystery of the letter W occasionally encountered in the George Bush designation. The fact that the only Earth year associated in the records with

this George Washington is 1792 would seem to bear out this argument, as clearly a scribal error would have occurred, substituting the number 7 for the number 9. If then this George Washington Bush flourished toward the end of the 20th century it may be suggested that the Roman and American civilizations were contemporaneous and the wars previously believed to have been fought between the Romans and the “Persians” or “Parthians” were in fact fought against the Americans, who “crossed the Delaware” (that is, the Tigris) and toppled the statue of the Roman leader in his capital city after dropping heavy objects on the heads of its inhabitants. It is through such ingenious syntheses that our understanding of ancient history is largely derived.

As stated, the American wars were fought by its drone population. However, in addition to destroying one another and pinning females on the ground the drones also engaged in a peculiar activity best described as the acquisition of commodities. In such transactions these commodities were distributed to the drones in exchange for quantities of paper known as “money.” The circulation of this money, like everything else in this society, was controlled by the producers, who apparently made a limited amount available to the general drone population while keeping the bulk of it for themselves. Among the drones too there were considerable disparities in the amounts of money thus received. Those who were adept at hitting a ball with a stick or jumping up and down, for example, received much more of this money than those whom the producers enlisted to fight their wars. Many theories have been advanced to explain the principles that governed the distribution of commodities in America, as there is no apparent logic in the disparities characterizing this distribution and it cannot be explained rationally why hitting a ball with a stick or jumping up and down was considered more admirable, for example, than cleaning toilets or collecting garbage, not to mention fighting wars. Among other things, it has been argued that the distribution of commodities among various classes of

drones was made on a random basis, one group or another being given preference in a given time. Thus it is said that while hitting a ball with a stick was greatly admired in the 20th century it was considered a somewhat puerile occupation in previous centuries, engaged in only by children or the mentally defective. This has not been proven conclusively but as a theory it has much to commend it.

Still another theory maintains that commodities were distributed according to a color code, with drones colored white receiving a greater proportion of commodities than drones colored black, for example, unless the latter were adept at hitting a ball with a stick or jumping up and down. It is not known how the allotment of these colors was determined or why they might have been chosen as a criterion for distributing commodities. The Console I disks display many of these black-colored drones being apprehended by white-colored drones wearing odd hats and sometimes also hitting them with a stick. It is conceivable that these are the same sticks used for hitting balls but there is no evidence to indicate that the white-colored drones were rewarded for hitting black-colored drones to the same extent as for hitting balls and it must therefore be concluded that the white-colored drones engaged in this activity for simple pleasure.

As mentioned, the drones were encouraged to acquire commodities through messages mirrored in the all-seeing eye of Console I or Console II and clearly displayed in the memory disks we have obtained. The supply of these commodities seems to have been unlimited but, as we have pointed out, the amount of "money" available for the purpose of acquiring them was not. It can only be concluded that the tactic of "teasing" the drones by offering them what they could not obtain must have had a deleterious effect on their mental state. Why this was done is not altogether clear. Inevitably it would have produced unrest among the drone population and even attempts to obtain these commodities without the said money, that is by seizing them, just as many were in the habit of seizing females with long, bare legs and pinning

them on the ground for the purpose of interfacing. Many researchers have attempted to tie together these many and diverse peculiarities to present a coherent picture of how this society functioned, but with little success. The central motifs of this society—endless wars, unobtainable commodities, females with long, bare legs, hitting balls with sticks and drinking Coca-Cola—do not add up to anything that resembles a rational social order.

The consoles were housed in lodgings of various kinds together with the drones who served them, generally four or five in number, though producer consoles were understandably served by a great many more and were therefore lodged in much larger abodes. The consoles began issuing their instructions and monitoring the drones early in the morning. A female drone was generally instructed to prepare a beverage called “coffee.” To encourage her to do so the consoles displayed prominent drones imbibing the said beverage as they sat around a table chatting amiably and frequently laughing. A full-grown male drone, sometimes barely dressed and often scratching himself, then appeared and was served the coffee. In some cases the male and female interfaced, but generally on these occasions the female was not pinned on the ground. It may be that this “coffee” prevented the drones from interfacing too violently at unpropitious times. Smaller drones often joined the full-grown ones and imbibed various nutrients while images projected in the all-seeing eye of the console, most often in the form of “morality tales,” also reminded them to uphold the values deemed by the consoles to be the most beneficial to themselves. The drones were furthermore instructed to engage in gainful employment in the service of the consoles, for which, as we have suggested, they were paradoxically “rewarded” by being allotted small amounts of “money” with which to obtain the less valuable of the commodities which they themselves produced while the consoles used the bulk of the money to augment their material wealth and conduct their wars. The consoles observed the drones very closely during

these morning preparations and made certain that they got out of the house on time to perform their allotted tasks. Though Console I was a primitive being possessing limited intelligence, one cannot but admire the ingenious manner in which he was able to manipulate the hapless drones.

It is not always clear how the gainful employment in which the drones were engaged served the interests of the consoles. While it is clear that drones were needed to fight the wars of the consoles, it is less clear why they were required to produce such a bewildering variety of acidic beverages. We have no reason to believe that these beverages differed from one another in any essential way or served any essential purpose other than pacifying the drones, in which case one such beverage would have sufficed. One theory maintains that it was not the production of commodities per se but the generation of economic “activity” as such that was the primary objective, and in fact “interests” in often imaginary commodities were traded back and forth with the sole purpose of accruing “money.” Those among the drones who accrued money in this manner were often more prominent than drones who excelled at hitting a ball with a stick or jumping up and down and were held up to ordinary drones as positive examples by the producers, who encouraged them to believe that any drone could become prominent and that it was therefore in their own best interests to be gainfully employed and continue to manufacture and consume acidic beverages. In this way a measure of harmony was apparently achieved which allowed the consoles to rule their domains and pursue their interests in relative peace and security.

The consoles occupied a central space in their abodes while the drones were sent hither and yon to perform their tasks. Frequently the drones were called together and clustered around the consoles to receive messages or instructions, entering what appears to be a hypnotic state, perhaps induced by the tranquilizing beverages they were encouraged to imbibe. These were generally protracted sessions, lasting hours in

Earth time, as the drones were apparently slow to comprehend what was required of them and therefore each message had to be repeated many times.

The eyes of the consoles were everywhere. Mirrored there were shifting scenes as the drones were monitored from one end of the Earth to the other. As stated before, in addition to allowing the consoles to “keep an eye” on things, these scenes no doubt served to entertain the consoles as well. Apparently nothing amused them more than watching the drones destroy one another and pin females with long, bare legs on the ground. It is also conceivable that the drones summoned to receive instructions were meant to be mesmerized by these scenes as much as by drinking their tranquilizing beverages and therefore made more receptive to the messages being transmitted to them. Sometimes, after observing such scenes, the assembled drones also pinned females on the ground or attempted to destroy one another, though this could not have been the intention of the consoles, whose purpose was to instruct the drones in their ordinary tasks and encourage them to acquire commodities. Conceivably these violent scenes were the “price” the consoles had to pay to maintain the drones in a hypnotic state and thereby hold their attention, though as mentioned before the end result of this policy was to frustrate the drones since the most desirable of the commodities they were encouraged to acquire were unobtainable as were the most desirable of the females with long, bare legs displayed in the all-seeing eye of the consoles so that many of the drones were brought to a state of frenzied excitation and pinned on the ground any female that came along.

It is not clear whether or to what extent the producer consoles also controlled the ordinary consoles, who were apparently delegated to monitor and instruct the drones at what might be called the local level. The truth is, we have no way of distinguishing among consoles of either the Console I or Console II type, just as we have no way of distinguishing among drones, other than recognizing that some were ordinary and some prominent. All we