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Teaching Transhumanism in The Science Fiction of Linda Nagata : An Critique

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Introduction:

Transhumanism is an international intellectual and cultural movement. Transhumanism affirms the possibility and desirability of transforming the human condition by developing and making widely available technologies. A Transhumanist believes that these developing technologies would greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities. The present research paper proposes to analyze the perspective of transhumanism in the select novels of Linda Nagata. Many of the tropes of science fiction can be viewed as similar to the goals of transhumanism.

Science fiction literature contains many positive depictions of technologically enhanced human life. This type of science fiction occasionally set in utopian societies. However, science fiction also depicts the technologically enhanced humans or other post human beings frequently with a cautionary twist. Therefore the scenarios of science fiction include many dystopian tales of human bioengineering gone wrong. Transhumanist art has been defined by Natasha More as art that is based on the transhumanist principles, visions, goals and sentiments. Transhuman novels are often philosophical in nature. These novels explore the impact such technologies might have on human life. Nagata's novels, for example, explore the relationship between the natural and artificial. At the same time, her novels suggest that while transhuman modifications of nature may be beneficial, they may also be hazardous, so should not be lightly undertaken.

The human desire that tries to acquire new capacities is as ancient as our species itself. We have often sought to expand the boundaries of our existence, be it socially, geographically, or mentally. There is a tendency in at least some individuals always to search for a way around every obstacle and limitation to human life and happiness. Transhumanist philosophy, however, is rooted in Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment. Transhumanist theorists and advocates seek to apply reason, science and technology for the purposes of reducing poverty, disease, disability, and malnutrition around the globe. Transhumanism is distinctive in its particular focus on the applications of technologies to the improvement of human bodies at the individual level. Many transhumanists actively assess the potential for future technologies and innovative social systems to improve the quality of all life. Transhumanist philosophers argue that there not only exists a perfectionist ethical imperative for humans to strive for progress and improvement of the human condition but that it is possible and desirable for humanity to enter a transhuman phase of existence, in which humans are in control of their own evolution. In such a phase, natural evolution would be replaced with deliberate change.

Some theorists, such as Raymond Kurzweil, think that the pace of technological innovation is accelerating and that the next 50 years may yield not only radical technological advances but possibly a technological singularity, which may fundamentally change the nature of human beings. Transhumanists who foresee this massive technological change generally maintain that it is desirable. However, some are also concerned with the possible dangers of extremely rapid technological change and propose options for ensuring that advanced technology is used responsibly. For example, Bostrom has written extensively on existential risks to humanity's future welfare, including risks that could be created by emerging technologies. This cautionary urge can clearly be seen in the novels of Linda Nagata too along with the exploration of beneficial advancement in technology for the human beings.

Linda Nagata [1960-] is an American science fiction author who won the Nebula award for best novella in 2000 [for "Goddesses"]. She frequently writes about nanotechnology and the integration of advanced computing with the human brain. Her novels are *Tech-Heaven* [1995], *The Bohr Maker* [1995], *Deception Well* [1997], *Vast* [1998], *Limit of Vision* [2001], *Memory* [2003].

Linda Nagata is one of the most promising new authors of transhumanist fiction. Unlike many more conventional science fiction authors, she understands and does not hide from how deeply transhuman technologies that can change society and what is considered human. Her first three books forms a kind of loose trilogy. Each book is independent of the others, but it is clear from various details that they are set on the same timeline. *Tech Heaven* begins in the present and stretches 30 years into the future. *The Bohr Maker* is set around a century later, while *Deception Well* takes place several centuries or millennia later in another solar system. They can be seen as a chronicle of the gradual evolution of humanity, from the first transhumans to remote post humanities.

The theme of *Tech Heaven* is cryonics and how people react to social and technological change. The husband of the protagonist is killed in an accident and chronically suspended, perhaps more due to

her wishes than his. The story then follows her life, as she gets involved with the cryonics movement and the political struggle against deathism, the tricky family problems in a family where the father is neither truly dead or alive, the social changes brought about by information technologies, space colonies and nanotechnologies and the emergence of biofundamentalism as a reaction to the numbing rate of change.

Nagata's portrayal of cryonics and transhumanism is positive, but slightly ambivalent: the opposition may be misguided and often fanatic, but sometimes it has a point. This ambivalence recurs in the protagonist, who is determined to bring her husband back to life but still have doubts about her actions (these doubts get rather tiring after 30 years). On the technical side, Nagata describes cryonics correctly, both the suspension methods, how to keep the bodies frozen and a possible reanimation method.

The Bohr Maker, Nagata's debut novel, is set several decades after *Tech Heaven* and a quite different book. While *Tech Heaven* was more of a political thriller, *The Bohr Maker* is action-oriented. By now much of humanity lives in orbital habitats, technologies such as bionics, nanotechnology, biotechnology, AI and uploading are commonplace and the political landscape has changed even further from the present. To protect humanity from dangerous technology the supranational organization called the Commonwealth enforces strict rules on what technologies are allowable: no independent AIs, no nanotechnology beyond certain limits, no genetic alterations too far beyond the human norm. To make sure these rules are followed draconian measures have to be used, since a single breach could have global consequences.

Needless to say, there are still people willing to risk everything to get their hands on the Bohr Maker, a nanosystem which integrates itself with the brain of its owners, making them able to design and assemble any nanodevice just by thinking about it. The story revolves about the wild chase after the Maker, which at times become quite labyrinthine as characters move around between different places

and bodies or create uploaded "ghosts" to act as intermediaries. Many interesting applications of advanced nanotechnology are suggested, such as mixed virtual and real meetings between ghosts and humans or radical artificial ecosystems.

The story is gripping and would likely do well as anime; it is even more appealing for us transhumanist since it is so clearly a battle between biofundamentalism and the wish to keep humanity bounded, and the idealistic vision of an unlimited transhumanism. It may not be a terribly deep analysis of the problem of dangerous technology, but it provides a good and inspiring read.

Deception Well is the third and latest book. It is set a long time after the events of the first two books, above and on the planet Deception Well. This book balances between the epic scale of *Tech Heaven* and the action of *The Bohr Maker*; it is maybe best described as a mystery novel where more questions are asked than answered. Its theme is ecology, evolution and the ever more tangled webs of co-evolution that lives of all kinds [biological, emetic, nanotechnological] spin.

Most of the novel takes place in Silk, a city built on a beanstalk rising from the verdant planet. The inhabitants of the city keep the planet in quarantine - its seemingly welcoming biosphere is controlled by nano-devices that appear to have killed the original builders of the city and beanstalk. In fact, the whole region of space around Deception Well is filled with dangerous nano-weapons left by the alien Chenzeme, bent on exterminating all life they can find.

Despite the quarantine a cult following the charismatic leader Jupiter Apolaro attempted to descend to the surface of Deception Well. As Silk resisted their attempt violence erupted and the cultists were stranded in the city. Jupiter's son Lot is the protagonist. Lot has grown up in Silk, kept under close surveillance by the authorities who fear his extensive modifications: he has the potential of becoming a new Jupiter, and that is something the gerontocracy of Silk definitely does not want. At the same time tensions are slowly growing in the city between the restless young and the patient old, between

the still believing cultists demanding passage down to the planet and the cynical silkens fearing nano-diseases.

This book is largely a series of interlocking mysteries: what is Deception Well? Why are the people trapped in Silk? Who was Jupiter and what happened to him? What is the relationship between the Chenzeme weapons and Lot? What happened to the builders of Silk? What is really going on in the universe? Many questions are slowly discovered through the novel and then suddenly answered when the reader least expects it. It is a tangled ecosystem of questions and intrigues from the nanoscale upwards, hinting at a universe that is frighteningly large and subtly dangerous.

In all three of Nagata's books the central conflict seems to be between Nature and the Artificial. It is not the common confrontation of "good" biology against "evil" technology. The sides are seldom simple, and it is often unclear what should be seen as natural or artificial in a world where biotechnology is commonplace. On one hand stands the vision of control and guardianship, what Jaron Lanier called the stewards, and on the other hand growth and freedom, the extropians. The stewards seek to retain stability and survival, while the extropians want to risk it for transcendence. In *The Bohr Maker* the conflict is between the stewards of the Commonwealth and the extropians of the corporation Summer House. While it is clear that Nagata is more on the extropians than on the steward side, she describes both benevolent and malevolent stewards, and suggests that auto-evolution should not be undertaken lightly. Transcendence may well be a trap.

She knows what nanotechnology can and cannot do, and uses it in many ingenious ways without making it central to the stories. She points out many of the central problems we often conveniently ignore, and suggests some unexpected problems and possibilities. Most importantly, she manages to describe daily life in very different futures without going over the edge or assuming nothing has changed. They bring up enough intriguing problems and ideas to keep our discussions flowing for a long time.

The author assumes a certain amount of previous knowledge of the characters; with the action continuing on from where *Deception Well* ended... 'Ex-human' Lot - still infected by the Cult virus - is travelling aboard a thousand-of-years-old organic space ship the Null Boundary. Lot and those with him are in search of the truth about the Chenzeme, an ancient, maybe already dead, mutated or evolved alien race who - millions of years back - fashioned hunter/killer spaceships programmed to destroy any sentient race they meet.

The strength of *Vast* is that Linda Nagata makes it clear from the start that while the crew might be running silently across billions of miles and endless years from the Chenzeme cruiser, their real battle is internal. Not with each other, but with their own inner desires for revenge against the elusive Chenzeme, their guilt at surviving what others didn't and their fear that they are becoming less and less human. Lot isn't quite the main character, but he's the only one who can't create copies of himself, giving him a vulnerability and pathos the others lack; if only because it's difficult to care as deeply about characters whose first response to danger is to duplicate themselves and e-mail the back-up copy to somewhere safer.

There' is one other neat touch. The book opens with Nikko, the Null Boundary's disembodied mind, counting off life in 90 second bursts, wiping everything that just happened and starting the count over again. And in a way that says more about the mind-numbing boredom of long-term space flight than whole chapters of *Das-Boot* like silent running ever can. The *Vast* curtain opens with four crew members on the vessel Null Boundary making their centuries-long journey towards the star system of Alpha Cygni. More refugees from a broken civilization than explorers, they seek the Chenzeme, murderers of the human race, whose 30-million-year-old warships prowl the near and far reaches of space, destroying all they encounter.

Linda Nagata is remarkably adept at introducing new concepts without disturbing the flow of the narrative. Vast molds human figures out of clay of genetic, nano, and virtual technology, allowing their humanity to take primacy:

"It came without warning, making no sound. Lot first sensed its presence as a flash of motion in the central tunnel. He looked around, to see a flood spiraling down on him, white water sluicing through an invisible pipe, a snake made of water. It swept into the chamber; it coiled around him, an arm's length away. The coils of the snake melted together, and he was encased in a glistening shell. Charismata of exhilaration rained against his sensory tears, a strange foreign sense of greeting. Tendrils reached out to him from the shell's shimmering white surface, a thousand slender white tendrils brushing him. Faint touches. Where they contacted his skin suit they retracted, but where they touched his bruised face they stayed. Familiarity flooded him, a warm sense of union that eased the black pressure of the cult [virus] forever burning under his skin. A voice whispered in his ear, produced by a trembling membrane on the end of a tendril. 'You know us?'" [Brian, David Johnson: 2005: 23]

Limit of Vision is a 2001 science fiction book by author Linda Nagata. As is the case with many of her novels, there is a strong focus on nanotechnology and genetic engineering. Also typical of her works, government and corporate corruption plays a large role in the story, in this case as antagonistic suppressors of generally positive and liberating transhumanizing technology.

Limit of Vision tells the story of a rogue colony of artificial, independently viable neural cells called asterids [nicknamed LOVs, because their size is at the limit of human vision] which escapes from containment aboard a corporate research lab in low Earth orbit. Ela is helped by a group of young children living under the protection of a ROSA [ROving Silicon Agent, a nearly sentient computer program] named Mother Tiger, who see an opportunity to advance their lots in life by cooperating with the LOVs in a form of symbiosis. Events quickly spiral out of control as the corporate lab, Equasys, joins with the UN to eradicate the LOVs.

Acclaimed hard-SF author Linda Nagata introduces a new world in her novel *Memory*, where the sky is bisected by an arch of light, and the mysterious "silver" rises from the ground each night to completely transform the landscape--and erase from existence anything it touches.

Young Jubilee is devastated when her brother Jolly is taken by the silver. But when a forbidding stranger with the power to control the silver comes seeking Jolly - and claiming that Jolly knows him - Jubilee flees. For she has learned an impossible secret: Jolly may still be alive!

Jubilee's flight will lead her to discoveries she could never have imagined, from the secret history of her civilization, to the awesome forgotten memories within her. And with these she will forever alter her world's future... unless the dark stranger, relentless in his pursuit, achieves his goal of destroying it.

All the novels - *Tech-Heaven* (1995), *The Bohr Maker* [1995], *Deception Well* [1997], *Vast* [1998], *Limit of Vision* [2001], *Memory* [2003] - are significant as they explore the principles, goals and limitations of philosophical concept transhumanism. These novels are not just the representation of transcending humanity spread across the borders of world, but also the imaginative assessment of Post humanist experience as a result of transhumanism. These novels are representative of new emerging cosmopolitan 'trans' culture.

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