ABSTRACT

We can all imagine this moment from a classic Hollywood adventure movie: the members of a jungle expedition (think Trevor Howard in a pith helmet and a bare-headed Stewart Granger) have just come upon what is intended as a fearsome territorial marker. The sight of a feathered spear, set stake-like in a small clearing, causes the native porters to burst into sustained lamentation—and if they are afraid (here the genius of Hollywood), then we are likewise terrified. But there is also an element of pathos, for well do we know that the as-yet-unseen natives will be no match for the Europeans with their maps, binoculars and Enfield rifles.

I conjure up this scene by way of dramatizing the fact that history has been witness to many meetings between “technologically advanced” and “primitive” cultures—most notably during World War II, when airplane- and radio-bearing Americans appeared en masse before the Melanesians of the South Pacific. But I also wish to suggest, by way of contrast, that such meetings may represent for us more than mere spectacle—especially for those of us who are artists.

Another scene, far removed from the jungle: the bookstore of the Museum of Modern Art, circa 1983. As a nascent kinetic artist, I purchased Jack Burnham’s classic Beyond Modern Sculpture [1], and I was to read his conclusion with astonishment. Burnham suggests that, in its attempts to create what often seem to be alternative life forms, modern sculpture can be partially understood as a subliminal anticipation of contact with aliens!

Equally astonishing—and equally pregnant with implications for modern art—is his corollary conclusion. Citing Ordway and MacGowan’s Intelligence in the Universe [2], Burnham proposes that aliens will appear to us as more machine-like than organic. Or in other words, he believes they will be centuries advanced in the process that we have already begun, of recasting a vulnerable, carbon-based biology into more durable forms—and it is thus by implication that he explains the hybrid mechanical-biological nature of much modern sculpture.

Now, 30 years later, Burnham seems presentient, although no more than the visionaries of every era who have assumed that we are not alone within the cosmic ocean. Science now tells us that there are a billion Earth-like planets within our own galaxy [3], many of them millions of years older than our own planet. As to Enrico Fermi’s 1950 paradox, “Where are they?”, history tells us that we can see only that which we are prepared to see. (Humans, for example, had been slaughtering animals and each other for millennia, but it was not until 1628 that William Harvey, under the favorable influence of the late Renaissance, correctly described the marvels of the circulatory system.)

Imagine, then, the psychic effect of the discovery by the Curiosity rover of in-situ organic carbon compounds on the surface of Mars [4]. Such compounds do not quite represent a footprint in the sand, but given that the beaches of the universe extend unimaginably far beyond what is but our nearest planetary neighbor, the adherents of our own new “poetic-mythic-scientific renaissance” [5] will be suddenly and irrevocably seized with the conviction of a cosmic community.

But what of our original Hollywood scene? Let us now cast said aliens in the role of the European adventurers and ourselves as the natives, and one fact will come immediately to the fore. It is our art—and not our technology—that might hope to gain for us some satisfactory level of respect and understanding from aliens, just as the art of so-called primitive peoples (not least the art of Oceania [Figs 1 and 2]—and however unfortunate such a reliance on art alone might be) has gained permanent recognition for them among the so-called advanced cultures.

I of course suggest no slackening in our efforts at technological advancement—as if such a thing were possible!—for it is these very efforts (shades of another Hollywood production, Close Encounters of the Third Kind) that have elevated humankind to a level at which it might recognize contact with aliens in the first place.

This essay, rather, is intended as an admonition to us artists to take our own mission more seriously and to conduct it in concert with our scientists and engineers—for art is indeed the universal language, able to span barriers of time, culture and, perhaps now, species. So I suggest that we begin to take such a prospect into consideration in our creative efforts.

But again, there are at least two corollary conclusions. First—as per the cultural materials sent aboard the Pioneer...

ENDNOTE

Art, Aliens and the Machine

With the assumption that the extraordinary discoveries being made in planetary science will soon trigger a conviction of the likelihood of contact with sentient extraterrestrial beings—and with the further realization that such beings may well depend upon our visual arts as their primary point of reference in respect to our own species—this short paper uses an imaginative approach to develop some corollary ideas, and, in addition, to throw a spotlight on pioneering “systems art” theorist and visionary cosmic citizen Jack Burnham.

and Voyager missions—it would seem sensible to focus on works expressive of a universal brotherhood (and perhaps a sense of humor!), as opposed to the feathered spear of the Hollywood movie. Second, it would seem sensible to accelerate our rediscovery of an art of the machine [6] in its most comprehensive sense. Although there is at least one reason to argue that aliens will be beings of some empathy and compassion, and thus capable of interpreting primitive expressions of fear and angst, it is even more certain that they will exist in a high-tech matrix, and so we would do well to be as comprehensible as possible to them.

Regarding the utility of an art of the machine in aiding such comprehension, one final point that physicist and art writer Philip Palmedo kindly shared with me: the principles of mechanics are perhaps more universal than the principles of biology [7]. We creatures of meat may be of little interest to the aliens against the background of Earth’s rich biota—but they will view with delight a work of art incorporating axial motion (Fig. 3).

G.W. SMITH
3443 Esplanade Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70119, U.S.A.
Email: <gsmith@space-machines.com>.

References and Notes

1 Jack Burnham, Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century (New York: George Braziller, 1968).


7 Personal communication.