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“THE DIAMOND AGE” BY NEAL STEPHENSON

A BOOK REPORT

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1 INTRODUCTION

This book report describes and reviews Neal Stephenson’s novel, *The Diamond Age: or, A Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer* (Stephenson, 1996)¹. The report is divided into two parts: this first part describes the structure of the report and gives a quick overview of the novel’s context and setting. Following the introduction is the review proper, in five sections: 1) an overview of the novel’s context and setting; 2) a discussion of its plot and structure; 3) its style; 4) themes found in the novel; and, finally, 5) a summarising discussion.

2 REVIEW

2.1 Context & Setting

The Diamond Age is a, somewhat indirect, sequel to Neal Stephenson’s 1992 novel, *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992). *Snow Crash* explored a world where nation-states had broken down and been replaced by distributed republics called “Franchise Oriented Quasi-National Entities” (FOQNEs)—autonomous enclaves run as franchises of some corporation, party, or ideal, e.g. “Narcolombia” (the Medellín cartel), “CosaNostra Pizza” (the mafia), “Mr. Lee’s Greater Hong Kong” (communist China), and so on. The plot concerned a memetic virus modelled on the Sumerian concept of *me*—a sort of programming language for human brains.

The FOQNEs of *The Diamond Age* are known as phyles¹ or tribes, the three most significant of which are New Atlantis (a neo-Victorian corporation ruled by Queen Victoria II), the Han (Confucian China; split into two separate subphyles known as the Celestial Kingdom and the Outer Republic), and Nippon (Japan). The novel’s setting is a good example of how post-cyberpunk differs from cyberpunk: whereas both posit a world ruled by corporations, where nation-states have failed (in *The Diamond Age*’s case because digital currency collapsed the tax system), post-cyberpunk doesn’t paint this as dystopia. While there are poor people in *The Diamond Age*—the phyle-less “thetes”—there is no starvation: nanotechnology and matter replication have eliminated hunger and basic needs. It is not a utopia either—there is still war and crime—but the novel paints a nuanced picture of future which, partly because it isn’t painted in black and white, feels very plausible. Given the technological premises, I could see a post-scarcity society looking very much like the one in *The Diamond Age*.

2.2 Plot

It fell to Carl Hollywood, who had been a member of his adopted tribe only for a few months, to forward Her Majesty’s message to Princess Nell, a girl about whom he had heard much from Miranda but whom he had never met and could hardly fathom. It did not take very deep reflection to see the hand of Lord Alexander Chung-Sik Finkle-McGraw in all this. (pp. 489–490)

The novel’s plot begins when Lord Alexander Chung-Sik Finkle-McGraw, an “Equity Lord” (i.e. a share-holder in New Atlantis), commissions John Percival Hackworth to create the “Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer”—an interactive book for young girls, designed to teach his granddaughter, Elizabeth, all the things neo-Victorian society won’t or can’t (more on which later).

The above quote, which features a “ractive” (interactive drama) producer delivering a message from Queen Victoria II to Princess Nell, leader of an army of Chinese girls known as “The

¹Page numbers and quotes in this review refer to the paper back edition published in 1996 by Penguin Books (ISBN 9780140270372).

¹From the Greek *φύλη*, *phulē*, “clan, race, people” (Wikipedia, 2011).

Mouse Army" (shortly after they have pushed back the attack of the Fist, the paramilitary arm of the Celestial Kingdom), is indicative of *The Diamond Age's* plot. Like all of Stephenson's novels, the *The Diamond Age* is labyrinthine and expansive, spanning some ten years and at least half-a-dozen focal characters and at least as many conspiracies and counter-conspiracies.

But there is one main protagonist, Nell, a young girl living in the unincorporated "Leased Territories", who comes into possession of an illicit copy of the Primer after it is stolen from Hackworth, who had secretly created a copy for his daughter, Fiona. Hackworth's attempts at covering up his deception lead to him falling under the influence of both Dr X, a mandarin of the Celestial Kingdom, and the Drummers, a phyle that uses psychotropic nanotechnology to link themselves together in a hive mind. Nell's and Hackworth's stories are interwoven with several other plot strands, such as the tens of thousands of Chinese baby girls that are raised by modified Primers and grow into an Army controlled by Nell, the ractor (an actor in interactive plays called "ractices"²) Miranda and her relationship with Nell via the Primer, Finkle-McGraw's granddaughter Elizabeth, who joins the crypto-anarchist³ phyle CryptNet, ractive producer Carl Hollywood, and many others.

One of Stephenson's strengths as a writer is that he doesn't get lost in all these story threads, and nor does the reader. The structure of the plot is complex but also follows an internal logic—the plot strands all mesh together, rather like the gears of some Victorian clockwork device.

2.3 Style

If the gathering had included more veterans of that elongated state of low-intensity warfare known as Society, this observation would have been keenly made by those soidisant sentries who stood upon the battlements, keeping vigil against the bounders who would struggle their way up the vast glacis separating the wage slaves from the Equity Participants. It would have been duly noted that Gwendolyn Hackworth, though attractive, hard-waisted, and poised, lacked the confidence to visit Lord Finkle-McGraw's house in anything other than a new dress made for the occasion. (pp. 286–287)

The complexity of his plots is reflected also in Stephenson's prose; the quote above, with its long sentences, odd terminology ("soidisant", "glacis"), and sardonic tone, reflects his style in general. It is a learned and slightly distant style, but also with a sharp eye for detail and an enthusiasm for its characters and plots. One of the things I like most about Neal Stephenson's writing is this eye for detail—his way of using details (such as the fact that Mrs Hackworth is wearing a new dress) as stepping stones for launching into discussions of the idiosyncrasies of people and their societies and technologies.

He also has a habit—which is either charming or annoying depending on your view—of digressing into long discussions of tangentially relevant subjects, and including long excerpts of intra-diegetic texts. This is not as prevalent in *The Diamond Age* as in some of his other works—*Cryptonomicon* (Stephenson, 1999), with its long diversions into the details of cryptographical algorithms and breakfast cereal and appendices with implementations of said algorithms, being the chief offender—but it does contain long excerpts of the Primer's story of Princess Nell, which in turn, being didactic, explains things such as the concept of the Turing Test⁴.

It is a style I quite like, especially as Stephenson's digressions tend to cover subjects in which I am interested. He also has a certain way with metaphor, making his digressions stylistically enjoyable.

²Traditional, non-interactive media are called, naturally, "passives".

³"Crypto" as in "having to do with cryptography", not as in "pseudo".

⁴A way of testing artificial intelligences conceived by mathematician Alan Turing: if a human tester cannot tell the difference between the AI and a person in conversation, the AI has passed the test (Turing, 1950).

2.4 Themes

"The Vickys have an elaborate code of morals and conduct. It grew out of the moral squalor of an earlier generation, just as the original Victorians were preceded by the Georgians and the Regency. The old guard believe in that code because they came to it the hard way. They raise their children to believe in that code—but their children believe it for entirely different reasons."

"They believe it," the Constable said, "because they have been indoctrinated to believe it."

"Yes. Some of them never challenge it—they grow up to be small-minded people, who can tell you what they believe but not why they believe it. Others become disillusioned by the hypocrisy of the society and rebel—as did Elizabeth Finkle-McGraw."

"Which path do you intend to take, Nell?" said the Constable, sounding very interested. "Conformity or rebellion?"

"Neither one. Both ways are simple-minded—they are only for people who cannot cope with contradiction and ambiguity." (pp. 355–356)

Like most of Stephenson's novels, *The Diamond Age* is about how individuals create ideals and communities, and about how ideals and communities create individuals. The story's catalyst is Lord Finkle-McGraw's plan to use the Primer to create subversives within the neo-Victorian phyle—the artists, idealists, and inventors that the phyle's regimented society would otherwise suppress. Central to Finkle-McGraw's motivation is the fact that both he himself and the Primer's inventor, Hackworth, and in fact all the great imaginations of Atlantis came from outside the phyle; there's something about neo-Victorian society which stifles creativity. Inherent to his plan is the idea that people are not born into greatness but that people are made great by circumstance. Nell grows to be leader of the Mouse Army, recognised as a legitimate ruler by Queen Victoria II, and so on, not because she was predestined or genetically predisposed to, but because she was moulded into that role by the book. But there's also a somewhat hidden complexity to Stephenson's ideas: it's not only circumstance and society that create individuals, but also individuals that create society and circumstance; in a sense, there's a feedback loop—society creates men like Finkle-McGraw and Hackworth, who inadvertently create Nell, who in turn creates the Mouse Army, and so on, and so on.

This theme is further explored in how differently their Primers affect the lives of Nell, Fiona, Elizabeth, and the Mouse Army. Fiona's Primer is racted by her father while under the Drummers' influence, leading her to become a depressed and emotional woman; Elizabeth's is racted by many different ractors, making her unstable; the Mouse Army's Primers are not racted but performed by Pseudo Intelligences (the book's name for artificial intelligence), making them in a sense robotic. Nell's Primer, on the other hand, is racted by a single ractor—Miranda—which is the factor, it is implied, that makes her a more well-adjusted and a more capable individual; she is able to synthesise the primer's lessons in a harmonic way because they were taught to her by a single individual who genuinely cared about her. This also reveals a sub-theme of the novel: pseudo, or artificial, intelligences lack something essentially human, and there is, in the novel's world, always a need for human mediators of information; without humanity, a system is incapable of being truly meaningful.

Related to the theme of the feedback loop between individuals and communities is the uncertainty of effects—human endeavour and history as a chaotic system, with actions having far-reaching and unforeseeable consequences. Neither Finkle-McGraw nor Hackworth—or for that matter Dr. X, the Drummers, Carl Hollywood, CryptNet or any of the other characters and factions trying to influence or control the course of history—can predict how their actions will affect the world. This goes back to the labyrinthine structure of the book: chains of effects are complex but there is a sense of events leading, in hindsight, inexorably to others. After having turned the last page, I felt that of course Hackworth's decision to create an illicit copy of the primer had to lead to Nell leading an army of twelve-year-old Chinese girls and holding the key to radically reorganising the world. Events in *The Diamond Age* are both unexpected and

organic: cause and effect are clear and logical, while at the same time being complex enough to be unpredictable.

2.5 Discussion

The Diamond Age, then, is a dense, multilayered novel—and exciting, funny, and moving. Stephenson builds up a very believable world—with its phyles and ractors and artifexes and equity lords, and all their various plans and conspiracies—then drops a little girl with a Primer into the middle of it and sees what happens. It is this sense of a single event setting off ripples into an intricately designed world that drives much of the best speculative fiction—and it is this that makes *The Diamond Age* such an exhilarating read.

Stephenson's novels tend to have abrupt endings, and *The Diamond Age* is no exception; it's as if he suddenly gets bored of the story, so he compresses what other authors might make into a hundred page denouement down to five pages of quick wrap-up. I'm not entirely sure his approach is really a bad one—I much prefer it to the Tolkienesque approach of stacking ending upon ending—but it is a bit jarring that the novel ends just when it feels like there's a whole other story about to begin.

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