

"A WEEK WITH ISAAC ASIMOV"

at

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by

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The Institute of Man and Science is set high on a hill overlooking the small forested village of Rennsalaerville. It is a magnificent estate that holds many structures, i.e. the assembly hall and administration building, the dormitory apartments, the main mansion, and the Weathervane Restaurant, the finest (and most expensive) in the area. There is an air of retreat, of elegance, and of integrity that impresses a visitor his first time up that hill. Above all, there is a pervading sense of awe, something imminent in the breeze. A hidden tension, a dynamic intellectual vitality of many diverse minds joined together in voluntary company out of concern for their own race and a desire for knowledge that is compelling.

"A WEEK WITH ISAAC ASIMOV"

People are streaming down the hall towards a display of science fiction books, neatly arranged, all bearing the name Asimov on the front cover. We all flow into a beautifully constructed assembly/hearing room where the chatter of the hall corridor is more hushed and dissipated, but voices sound clear from up front. I move down center and gaze about. Elton John is being piped in from somewhere... I know "Rocket Man" by heart. I'm delighted to be here. It's an assembly different from those I am used to; curious glances are exchanged, smiles. I get the feeling most of the people are familiar with their surroundings and each other. Obviously this must be an annual Event for those faithful followers of Asimov-style Sci-Fi.

I am surprised that most of the people came to be with Asimov alone. Beginning to wonder what was in store, I watch the panel of four men seated down front. One I recognize as Bill Hornick, the main man; I have seen him rushing around greeting newcomers and old regulars. Another man appears beaucocratic; a technocrat, but he looked benevolent. The other two were not hard to guess. Karl Hess, a husky, healthy-looking sort w/ jeans and an untucked denim shirt, looked the way I felt... slightly amused and perhaps hoping the exchanges would prove more meaty than the audience looked. (I have to admit, by this time all my favourite stereotypes had shown up... the strange combination of handsome upper middle class dilletantes, boisterous intellectuals, and SciFi freaks, a rare motley crew, indeed.) I instantly liked Hess, he carried himself well, I was proud of him, whoever he was. The remaining character up front was Asimov, had to be. He had a sardonic grin. Our eyes met once and he waved. I looked around in disbelief, but his grin had already widened as two well-dressed women gamboled in front of him. HMMMMM.

The program began with Bill Hornick, an excellent speaker, who introduced us to the the Institute and to th first topic, Space. We were addressed first by Charles Matthews, the associate administratorfor Space Technology Application, NASA. His presentation was mild and full of th kind of informaton that tends to appease those who are skeptical of the value of our current space programs(like me).He stressed the benefits to our present technology that are direct results of the NASA

efforts. It seems however that most of these benefits turned out accidentally, as "spin-offs" from the program. He also recommended better P.R. to attract more public support, and allow NASA greater flexibility and no doubt, a greater working budget.

Now, we hear Karl Hess. I was feeling a prejudiced rapport with him before he spoke, but he lived up to my preconceptions. He expressed an attitude of earthy common sense, as well as political radicalism; he is a self-professed anarchist. He talked about the waste of such abstract efforts as the NASA program, that only benefitted the people accidentally. He spoke of concrete, tangible atrocities in the middle of Washington D.C. that he preferred to alleviate in a very direct localized effort. Hess mistrusts the distortion of "technology for technology's sake". This phenomenon occurs often in the glorious spirit of science, science being the supreme art of man. This glorious spirit frightens me sometimes. There is at least as much folly there as miracles, for the whole nature of technology is as the mind of man. As Hess spoke, I felt an urgency creeping over me, because I knew what I could do. I believe in his ideas and his efforts and they support my own. He recommended that people be more localized in their organization, more self-sufficient in their information-gathering, technology and energy. They should be more knowledgeable about the tools and machines they are dependent on. Hess pointed out that the nature of our present relationship with technology is dangerous; we are the audience, we are passive, we are non-curious and this leads to a form of enlightened despotism on the part of research and development enterprises. Hess said a solid favorable movement would be to place ourselves in

the picture of our own lives. A consumer population is at the mercy of its suppliers and decision-makers. Their will is not in their own hands, for they are not active creatively. A democracy therefore is not feasible or valid in a society of this type.

Asimov was the concluding speaker and while his talk was charming and intriguing at times, it follows that he is a master of science-fiction and did not contribute much to my thinking. Following all speaker presentations, there was a question and answer session, at which several interesting and spontaneous points were raised. As usual however, such sessions were always cut off too soon.

One of the most interesting parts of the four day program was the formation of task teams to propose solutions to problems facing decision-makers today (or hypothetical situations being highly probable). After each lecture-session, task teams were assigned around twelve members, including a group leader and a scribe. The groups had varying lengths of time to complete a satisfactory response and present it any way they chose to the large group. The presentations sometimes were more challenging than the task questions. I was very impressed with the imagination and creative rapport that arose among members of the group. Time allotted for the task completion was purposely made short (about 2-3 hours) and the exchanges within each group ranged anywhere from mildly amusing to tense and exciting. Frustration arose often of course, over questions of definitions, priorities and goals.

The next lecture session featured Dr. Isadore Adler on the subject of extra-terrestrial life. It was pointed out that instead of asking IF ET's exist, we would be wiser to ask when and how contact will be made. A lot of questions, serious questions arise when we consider that we are not alone in the universe. Adler showed slides of various communicating devices and a special emblem designed specifically for the purpose of communicating our identity to alien intelligence. But in all these considerations, there is always the underlying assumption that ET's must be incredibly similar to us, including means of perceiving, physiologic aspects, and intelligence. I find it hard to believe that all species of life are even remotely similar to ourselves as human animals. Alien intelligence may in fact be so much more complex or simple in form than ourselves that we would probably not recognize each other. Perhaps we have already been discovered a long time ago, and our system has been quarantined for the next millenia or so until we develop into civilized beings. When we are mature enough as a race then we may be allowed a greeting as a member of the intelligent universe. Our task sessions and presentations were very well done this time, I must say; the people had warmed up to each other and were working more loosely, creatively, and efficiently.

The human body was the topic for the third session on Wednesday evening. The panel were of fairly local origin this time, being Dr. Ian Porter of Albany Medical College, and Dr. Corrado Baglioni of the Biology Dept. at Albany State. The discussion was interesting. Dr. Porter addressed himself to question of whether or not man is undermining his genetic makeup. Since our evolution is now evolving along technological

and social lines, is our genetic heritage also adjusting itself to urban life through fitness and survival strategies? Are our reproductive and psychological capabilities changing? Dr. Porter thought not. He stressed that cultural environment does not transmit messages through the genes to offspring. Only when a situation requires a quality that is not present, does the gene pool become modified. ^{However,} There are many cultural factors, some economic and some psychological, not to mention several proven and unproven physical effects resulting from urban stresses, that are very effective in changing reproductive rate of entire groups of individuals, and therefore modifying the entire gene pool composition. Therefore, I disagree with Dr. Porter in his bland dismissal of these factors as undermining our genetic heritage. To survive, it is certain that we must remain diversified. However, I also feel that in view of the time factor involved, it does not seem likely that there has been a sufficient lapse to have provoked major changes in our gene messages. Perhaps four or five generations have passed since the beginning stages of the Industrial Revolution, and only two have been lived in the Atomic Age. I am assuming that my genes are still intact, and my grandchildren will be strong and sane (providing that I move to the country as soon as possible!)

Dr. Baglioni talked about genetic engineering as an experimental measure already possible with today's technology. Instead of cloning or selective breeding, Baglioni stressed the importance of genetic surgery with regard to disease and resistant strains of bacteria, as well as correcting hereditary ailments. There is a biological device, known as a plasmid, that transmits dna messages to similar cells in a bacteria community.

Geneticists can now tack on the genes they feel are desirable, to create stronger and more resistant strains of bacteria. I was very averse to the kinds of consequences that this practice could lead to. Results of genetic surgery might prove disastrous. What if a super-potent virus gene was propagated? (shades of the Andromeda Strain) Baglioni admitted that this is a real danger and at present there is a moratorium in effect on further work in this area.

One task that was assigned at the close of the speaker presentations, was to prove very interesting. The problem was to decide on the three most beneficial physiological changes in the human body, in order of importance. Some of the responses were intriguing and whimsical, better digestion, wings, ESP, voluntary control over fertility. Pretend you have three wishes

The fourth and last session turned out to be the most intensive and electrifying intellectual exchange of the week. Dr. Dennis Livingston, a futurist in the Political Science Dept. at RPI, presented a curious collection of slides about preconceived notions of the future. Comic book covers, science fiction, experimental societies, and economies, incredible technological advances, and hellish technocracies; all these images were familiar fantasies, but were they also self-fulfilling prophecies?

At 8:00 on Wednesday evening, the new panel for discussing the topic of the Future consisted of Dr. Jay Forrester, Prof. of Management at M.I.T., and Isaac Asimov. Asimov spoke first on his specialty, forecasting the future through the device of Science Fiction. Forrester had an excellent presentation for the Institute, and it moved me considerably, I was excited to learn that a relatively new field that expressed

many of the concepts I had felt apparent in my recent intellectual past, was being pioneered in such a scientific and orderly fashion by such a brilliant individual as Forrester. He talked about computer simulated models that incorporate various system variables and rates of flow to determine the consequential interactions. This is called Systems Dynamics. He spoke to the effect that synthesis and integration are concepts that need to be learned to help ^{to} mature peoples' thinking in the type of complexities we have to deal with now. He would like to see the concept of integration taught to school children, to set up a structure in their minds before all the various skills and facts are inserted. Forrester believes that information is not properly used in our present way of dealing in problematics. Two sets of observations are apt to end up opposing each other in forms like semantics, definitions and contrary assumptions. If correctly expressed, observations could only serve to supplement each other.

Isaac Asimov summed up the four day experience.

It was a rather musing, disjointed final session. Isaac took the opportunity to present a few of his more serious ideas for posterity. Most of these I felt to be the Fantastic ruminations of an aging science fiction writer. Indeed, they apply to a whole culture of people that believe in the power and glory of the technological revolution as our salvation. I could accept Asimov for what he was, an identity supported by the space industry and the encouraged macho habits of the industrial world. "Macho" here, means his disrespect for the mother earth and the bully-boy way he has of blustering through consideration for the intuitive and sensitive complexities of the present for the BIG-WIDE-OPEN-FUTURE. He's the John Wayne of the Sci-Fi

world. His ego is based in that medium that is eternally sacred, the imagination. And he is smart, but not smart enough.

Asimov opposed Forrester in his recommendations to localize organizations, and energy, to conserve food, energy, and babies. Isaac looked tense as he stated that to neglect technological advances would surely bring destruction upon us. His reasoning was overly simplistic and dramatic. He made a good point however, that until this point in history, institutional evolution has only come about because of technological demands. He foresaw a communications network to bind the world together. But he also saw that a future of a slower pace, of older people, of most variables lowered in intensity in order to insure a sane, stable survival, would make this "a relatively dull world" Personally I'd rather be bored than dead.

Asimov continued, "It seems to me that we may escape death by a glorious fireworks of catastrophe, only to achieve death by a slow, whining whimper, of boredom." Asimov will not last long with this attitude. Times certainly are changing and man's ever-strengthening sense of species survival will mature him. There.

The motto of the Institute of Man and Science is, after all,

Man Before Science

I felt very pleased with my experience at Rennselaerville I was filled with ideas of magnificent scope and depth and I was encouraged to share them with people not always like myself but open and accepting. The social interactions were reputedly quite an important and dynamic part of the intellectual exchange as I found out later, (not having had the bucks to eat lunch with the celebrities wvery day.)