

Nice Distinctions 27

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This is Discordian Regimentation #127

Hello again from Valentine's Castle, where Bernadette Bosky, Kevin Maroney, and I continue to thrive.

The latest news is my nice new plastic eyes. In the course of 70+ years, I grew cataracts, as most of us do. I finally got up the nerve to face a couple of procedures that turned out to be far less unpleasant than they sound. I now see as well as I did 50 years ago (at distances; I now need reading glasses, which is a modest price).

I consider myself something of a cyborg. (I have confessed here that I am of the Posthumanist faith.) The transition out of doomed raging demanding meat has not progressed anywhere near as fast as the Buck Rogers stuff promised me and may not happen at all, let alone in my lifetime, but medical science is doing wonders, for eyes as well as for a part I am too polite to mention. I hope ears are next.

Scott Alexander, who does the fascinating *Slate Star Codex* blog, shares one of my feelings. He talked about “the kind of website I hate, with all the information carefully hidden away where it can’t interfere with the sleek design.” Since design means two opposite things, I wish to propose terms to distinguish them. **Nerd**

design enables users to see what the thing does and how to operate it.

Arteest design appeals to other designers with subtlety, sleekness, understatedness, and other such qualities without pandering to the needs of the vulgar hordes who actually use the thing. The motto of nerd design is Edward Tufte’s “Good design is clear thinking made visible.” The motto of arteest design is “But that would be telling.”

In the Sixties, the hippies were a great big projective test. Many normal white citizens looked at these weirdos who had apparently broken free of society’s constraints. They would say, “But what if everybody...,” and then they would spit out their heart’s secret desire.

The president of a leading pro-choice organization is pregnant, and many on the other side are aghast. (At least one of them assumed that she was wearing a fake belly for some sort of unwholesome secret reason.) They could not believe that someone would freely choose that condition, so presumably they wouldn’t.

Obvious analogy: Some homophobes doubt that any man would choose sex with soft icky women rather than strong manly men were it not for God’s holy commandment to be fruitful and multiply.

In principle, I have nothing but hypotheses, since lack of absolute certainty is part of the human condition. But there are some that I have settled on my provisional acceptance of, to where continued questioning seems pointless:

- Existence of the outside world
- Personal continuity
- Bernadette loves me
- General validity of science in its chosen areas
- We are not just meat that erroneously thinks it's thinking.

Sports

Pursuant to an online suggestion, I am passing along the news that the U.S. won the World Soccer Championship. I do not know or care who is the champ in men's soccer.

That's easy for me to say because I never liked watching soccer anyway. It's like waiting at a traffic light for two hours: Nothing is happening, but pay attention because something might at any moment. I guess that's what happens when you try to forget that we evolved opposable thumbs. I will say that this particular championship game had a nice baseball-like score, instead of living down to the old canard of being like Twilight. (They run around for two hours, nobody scores, and its billion fans insist you just don't understand.)

Not enjoying soccer is one of the few things that put me in the mainstream of American thought. America was the only country that could crack down on the crimes of FIFA, because if they threatened to take our "football" away, we'd laugh in their faces.

Serena Williams is large, strong, black, female, and extremely good at what she does. She therefore inspires many to various prurient combinations of lust and loathing, which some are unable to keep out of outside voice. Unfortunately, some of the more acceptably phrased versions are published as journalism. (We should likewise speak of tennis and men's tennis. Only the women are interesting.)

A problem with victimless crime

The conservatives used to tell us that whatever victimless crimes we were not sufficiently opposed to were Bad Things because Organized Crime would use the profits to subsidize Worse Things. There were problems with that, such as the assumption that the worse things were not self-supporting and disagreements as to which were the worse things. (One libertarian said that if he wanted to subsidize prostitution, he would hire a prostitute.) But the conservatives were not entirely mistaken. Now we have Sheldon Adelson, a gambling kingpin who wants to use his ill-gotten gains to get us into another disastrous Middle Eastern war. At least Al Capone didn't dictate foreign policy.

Reading

Defender of the less defensible

Alice Dreger began by studying intersexed people and wound up with what I think is one of the best ways of dealing with sex: defending those who would be harmed in the name of maintaining a strict two-valued approach. Now she has written *Galileo's Middle Finger*, named after the one

part of the scientist's body that remains, an occurrence that could be anachronistically interpreted as an appropriate reply to Galileo's persecutors. The book deals sympathetically with contemporary thinkers who have delivered a comparable message. It modified my view of the egregious J. Michael Bailey, publicizer of "auto-gynephilia," from Bad Guy to Asshole Who's Often on the Side of Good. She seems to attract those; the book has a blurb from Dan Savage.

I used to think of **Ralph Waldo Emerson** as a Boring New Englander, an early prosperity theologian, and a foil for Thoreau, but *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, by Robert D. Richardson, presents a complex thinker, influenced by Sufis, Buddhists, and Hindus.

Garry Wills has hope for *The Future of the Catholic Church with Pope Francis*. I hope he's right.

On the Move, a memoir, tells us that **Oliver Sacks** is an even more fascinating person than I thought.

William Gaddis was a great novelist and a very private person. *Nobody Grew but the Business*, by Joseph Tabbi, may be as much as we're ever going to know about him, but I'm glad to know that.

Fandom has given the world another excellent explainer in **Chad Orzel**. *Eureka!* tells us how scientists think.

K. Tempest Bradford suggested not reading white straight cis male sf authors for one year. I am such a burned-out sf reader that I might

wind up accepting the challenge without trying. (As Lee Gold said, a fan is someone who used to read science fiction and likes hanging out with others who used to read science fiction.) But I am calm in the assumption that Bradford has neither the desire nor the means to send jackbooted storm troopers out to rip books from our hands. And if I were still reading sf, the same curiosity that brought me to it would make me want to read all sorts of different writers.

My Great Society Liberal politics* are now "extreme left." My neurotically overprotective parents are now "free-range."

* But that's only in domestic politics. Internationally, I'd support someone more like Nixon: Lie our way out of messy wars and talk to the people we're supposed to hate.

We got gender; number is next

I've been in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage since shortly after heteroracial ones were permitted, but now my support is suspect because I represent the abomination for which same-sex marriage is the innocent stalking horse: recognition of $n > 2$ marriages, such as the loving, committed one K, B, and I have had for more than 20 years. Of course, there will be a whole new set of problems. For instance, we can't have it in the US until we have a single-payer health care system like the First World has because there are already more than enough people getting married for health coverage. Still, I believe we're getting there.

Lehman Brothers has been reanimated. It preys on universities that allegedly didn't pay enough for the dubious financial services of its previous incarnation. So it's a dead thing that eats brains. I have long suspected that I am living in dystopian satire, but I thought zombies were scientifically implausible horror.

Shocked at the diabolical cleverness of Hillary Clinton in violating a law that hadn't even been enacted yet, Sen. Lindsey Graham, who is on the Subcommittee on Privacy, Technology and the Law of the Senate Judiciary Committee, went on TV and mentioned that he himself has never sent an e-mail of any sort. Once again we see the Republican policy of assigning Congressional duties to those uncorrupted by knowledge of what they are supposed to be dealing with, like having someone who thinks evolution is a "lie from the pits of Hell" on a committee on science.

Bad old days

More than 50 years ago, when I was at Swarthmore, a fellow student committed suicide. I learned about it when I was in the hospital for a minor infection and saw in the newspaper that a decapitated female body had been found on the railroad tracks. I worried that it was one of my friends (a number seemed capable of it) and felt guilt-laden relief the next day when I learned it was someone who was only a name and a face to me.

The Alumni Bulletin now informs me that everyone's first guess was right: A friend of hers tells us that the case was a powerful argument for legalized abortion. She adds that the Dean of Women (whom I had thought

of as a minion of the repressive establishment) had been helpful in similar cases. Good for her.

Alternate world

Some of the nicest people believe that Communism wouldn't have killed tens of millions if it had followed the gentle wisdom of the martyred Stalin instead of the bloodthirsty Permanent Revolution of the Butcher of Kronstadt.

One of the first things I learned from feminism is "Never accept a theory that says you don't exist." So much for all the materialist and collectivist theories that deny the "liberal humanist Subject." I am one. (I'm also a product of society, genes, etc. Embrace the power of Also.)

I always assumed I'd be the kind of dirty old man who likes them younger and younger, but to my surprise my tastes are age-appropriate, and the MILFs and cougars keep looking better. I'm almost disappointed.

We didn't do it all ourselves, but...

The United States meddled in Indochina. After great loss of life and resources, we admitted defeat. In our wake came the Khmer Rouge, attempting to wipe out everyone with the privilege of literacy. The United States meddled in Iraq. Same kind of losses, and ISIS.

The Clown Car

Once again the Republican primary race resembles one of those sleazo reality shows where the thought, "No one should have to go through that," is followed by, "Well, maybe these guys..."

Jeb Bush looks generic, as if sinister forces built a White Businessman. At least Dubya looked like a Bush. He was an illegitimate president, but you could tell he was a legitimate son by the face and the verbal skills.

If you can mess up a corporation so much that they pay you \$20,000,000 to leave, imagine what you could get for doing it to a whole country.

Gov. John Kasich apparently hasn't said anything too horrible yet. Perhaps he is a Sad, rather than Rabid, Republican.

Murdoch minions are apparently gaming the Times bestseller list for *They Let Me Be a Republican Even Though I'm Hispanic*, or whatever the new **Ted Cruz** book is called. I guess it's easier when you've got a church full of believers to buy the Founder's dekalogy.

Bobby Jindal has to be extreme about Muslims because his natural base thinks he at least looks like one.

Every so often there's a Republican Special Olympics that someone wins by saying something obvious but (dare I say?) politically incorrect. Usually it's one of the Pauls, but recently **Dr. Ben Carson** won a gold medal by pointing out that everyone should be vaccinated (of course he went to one of those elitist egghead med schools and probably knows all kinds of deep science stuff like women can't get gyno exams by swallowing a camera). He has since regressed to the mean (which is a particularly mean mean).

And of course **Donald Trump**, not content to be an embodied cautionary tale about what capitalism rewards, is also running. I hope he naderizes. The Barefoot 'n' Pregnant Party could siphon off enough votes to elect Bernie Sanders.

The first time I heard the concept of Recreational Shopping, it made as much sense to me as Recreational Hanging by Your Thumbs. The only thing I ever enjoyed shopping for was books. Now if I want to look for books, I have to go online, where my browsing skills do not transfer. I could order food that way, but we usually need it too soon, so I have to shop, and fortunately I'm good at remembering where things are. I'd be satisfied if the stores would never reorganize (as our local one is now doing) and I could look up new things digitally rather than wandering around the store wondering whether the item is officially organic or inorganic, etc.

Not Forgotten

We lost three of the nicest people I ever knew in fandom: **Sally Syrjala** was a mainstay of NFFF who brightened up LASFAPA and other apas. She lived on Cape Cod and didn't like visiting the mainland, but I had the pleasure of meeting her at Noreascon in 1980. I hadn't heard from her for years and I just got back the latest zine I sent her marked DECEASED.

Peggy Rae Sapienza did lots of good work for Worldcon and other cons. I'm glad I got to see her one last time at NASFiC.

Art Widner was in fandom before I was born. We thought he'd go on forever, but he was cut down in his prime (at 97).

Suzette Haden Elgin was at least two of my favorite writers. I enjoyed her fiction and her *Verbal Self-Defense* books, and we were Friends on Live Journal.

Alice K. Turner enabled us to buy *Playboy* for the fiction.

Gunter Grass wrote some awesome books, such as *The Tin Drum* and *Dog Years*. He was also something of a moral nag, so people enjoyed getting on his case when it turned out he'd joined the wrong group as a teenager.

Two Kings are dead: **Ben E.** and **B. B.**

Two guys who made the world more gaudy: **Don Featherstone**, creator of the pink lawn flamingo, and **Herman Zapf**, who gave us dingbats.

Nasty, Brutish, & Short

Movies have to have conflict even when life doesn't. It's cinematically better if LBJ opposes the Selma march, unlike in boring old real life.

Ever since they coined the phrase *adult beverage*, there have been more and more ways to put alcohol in candy and cake.

I checked out Zephyr Teachout's *Corruption in America* today, and the librarian said what I was thinking: "The book should be bigger."

P.T. Barnum sponsored the Connecticut law against birth control. He wanted to make sure there was one born every minute.

I expect Hollywood to make a movie where every element has been optimized for maximum viewer response, and no one will want to watch it.

Baltimore blacks acted like white people whose team won a big game.

Are Margaret Atwood and Kazuo Ishiguro committing subcultural appropriation?

Every minority culture has a word for Not-Us: goyem, civilians, earth people. The important thing to remember is that no generalization about such an out-group can work.

Since nobody ever jumped out of a dark alley and enabled an innocent person, I always believe that the perp is worse than the enabler.

See you in a few months. Meanwhile, I'm on Facebook under my real name (and wouldn't admit it if I weren't—they think they can enforce that sort of thing), and I am much more interesting on LiveJournal and Dream Width as **supergee**.