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Do Authors Dream of Repetitive Puns?
An Inditment of Kiln People

Anyone enduring the scenic route through David Brin's 2002 magnum opus, *Kiln People* is apt to emerge with at least one of the following questions:

"Why did he keep making 'dit' puns even in extremely serious chapters?"
"Are we going to ignore the fact that Morris's Green was a completely new human?"
"Did he really name the chapter with the bad sex scene 'Glazed Buns'?"
"What the fuck did I just read?"

Over the course of 943 pages, Brin kicks off with a surprisingly competent sci-fi 'ditective' thriller, meanders through ham-fisted social commentary, detours through a problematic sex scene, and concludes with a frantic stab at metaphysics.

Critically reviewing *Kiln People* is a thankless task. To those who have had the ill-fortune to receive it, I offer the following advice. First, the book has been out of print for years. Your analysis will hinge on either a surviving paper copy, or on a low-res bootleg PDF. Second, understand that your success hinges upon both extreme endurance (actually reading the fucking thing) and existing knowledge of Brin's primary influences (decoding why the fucking thing was written).

Dit You Say Influences?

Let us turn to Brin's own website, particularly his response to the question "Which authors have most influenced your writing?" I find the following excerpts particularly illuminating:

> My favorite depends on which "me" you ask. The Serious Author in me, who comments on deep human trends, would like to think that he's grounded by Huxley and Orwell.
> …
> But I guess the ones I revere most are those who briefly left me speechless. Unable to write or even move, because something in a perfect story left me stunned, changed. I guess in that category I'd put Tiptree and Varley. Vonnegut at his best. Shakespeare. And Philip K. Dick.

And so we already see Brin's primary inspiration for *Kiln People*. While there are other authors who clearly emerge as influences (Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and Gibson's Sprawl Trilogy deserve special mention), given the timing and context of *KP*, four names emerge from Brin's rambling: Huxley, Orwell, Vonnegut, but particularly Philip K Dick.

While these writers inspire Brin, their famously bleak visions of our world and our society frighten him. The defining technology and plotlines of *Kiln People* find an optimist and a humanist struggling to reconcile his writing and personal philosophy with the darkest fables of the dystopian, postwar era of science fiction.

Jar-gon and Linguisdits

For those of you fortunate enough to have never encountered *Kiln People*, the driving technology behind the novel is this: scientists have discovered a physical abstraction of the soul, referred to as the “standing wave”; further research has made it possible to imprint this pattern upon clay copies of an “original” (“rigs”, “archies”) human to form replicas (“dittos”, “dits”, “golems”) possessing the same personality and traits as their original model. These dittos come in different colours and abilities (ebony for intellect, white for sensuality, green for drudge labour, etc. etc.), and after a short lifetime can be re-integrated (“inloaded”) into their archie, merging both personalities and memories.

From this morass of summary, the reader can already detect the glimmers of the jargon and puns that plague *Kiln People*.

Language is a critical aspect of modern-era science fiction. Writers rarely resist the temptation to indulge in creating their own jargon for the worlds they build, ranging from technical language to the creation of entire dialects (e.g. Nadsat, *A Clockwork Orange*) or even grammar-complete languages (Klingon, the *Star Trek* universe).

While this is masturbatory fluff for many writers, language plays a deadly serious role for many of Brin’s cited authors. In Orwell’s *1984*, “newspeak” is adopted language of the nation of Oceania. Crude and stripped of nuance under the guise of being a more populist language, newspeak is designed to cripple its speakers’ ability to express ideologically dangerous concepts. Nadsat, the street slang of Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, gleefully mixes Russian terminology (“droog”, “baboochka”) with Cockney rhyming slang (“cutter” is slang for “money”, derived from the rhyme “bread and butter”).

In both these novels, language is an expression of dystopia and ruin. Orwell’s Newspeak is the pinnacle of lingual castration. For Burgess, Nadsat is a perversion of integration - a hodgepodge of languages so densely combined that the criminal class who speak are completely alienated from culture at large.

In *Kiln People*, one readily sees the emergence of a type of slang. Humans are “rigs” or “archies”. Copies are “dittos”, “rox”, “golems”, “claymen”. However, these terms quickly fade into background. More apparent (and fucking obnoxious) are Brin’s constant puns. I submit here a list of the most egregious:

“Daddit” (someone’s dad, in ditto form), “holem” (an impressively offensive term for a clay sex worker), “inditgenous population”, “role-claying”, and by far the worst: “what I ditto deserve this”.

While it’s easy to write these off as irritating tics from an irritating writer, they also illustrate the lowered stakes of Brin’s universe. While *Kiln People* clearly imitates the lingual ambition of *1984*, it does so playfully, allowing speakers to retain their agency and their sense of humour.

This choice, as with others that we’ll analyse, allows Brin to explore themes of science fiction that clearly fascinate him, but to do so without negative consequence or a sharp veer into dystopia. For Brin, humans craft language, while it’s likely that Orwell would argue that words maketh man instead.

Coitus Interrup-dit

Kiln People's obligatory sex scene is bad. Really bad, like bad by sci-fi standards, and sci-fi sex scenes have classically been written by men who are more capable of describing a complex space station than they are a human breast.

Here is an excerpt, because you deserve it for making me write this shit:

> [Ritu Maharal, femme fatale] "I…well…what's your personal philosophy about banging pots?"
> [Morris] "I beg your pardon?"
> "Clay play. Kneading slip. Do I have to spell it out, Albert?"
> "Oh…dittosex. Ritu, you surprise me."

And it goes downhill from there. Our two characters, after a clumsily contrived cuddle, decide to have sex under the impression they're both dittos, only to realize that they're both actually archies, at which point they stop and Ritu gets angry.

Hilarious.

We make note here of two elements of this very bad sex scene. First, the writing again cushions the writer against reality. I count three euphemisms in the above excerpt alone. Second, the writing protects the *characters* from reality. There are no consequences from this act, or in any of the depraved sexual adventures that dittos apparently have, a stark departure from how sex has functioned in genre fiction.

Sex in sci-fi represents intimate contact with the unknown. It is a laden act, and often (because, you'll be shocked to know, sci-fi writers are often vaguely sweaty men) represents human masculinity colliding with alien sexuality. This dynamic can be explicit, as in *Alien* where a facehugger's oral penetration of a crewman eventually kills both the crewman and several of his colleagues, or more palatable and colonial, e.g. Kirk and countless green ladies with nice hair.

Even in Brin's stated influencing texts, sex matters. In *1984*, it is Winston's affair with Julia that eventually results in his capture, torture, and subversion. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, protagonist Rick Deckard's decision to sleep with the replicant Rachael Rosen leads to her revealing her programmed nature as a seductress and (eventually, don't question it) killing his pet goat.

In both cases, sex results in characters rendering themselves vulnerable in the face of a hostile presence, and in both cases, the protagonist suffers from their decision. In *Kiln People*, Brin's protagonist has sex under false pretences with a character who later turns out to be at least a partial antagonist - he then faces absolutely zero consequences and the event isn't mentioned through the rest of the book.

Again, we see Brin confront an avenue toward seduction and investigation of power dynamics between the human and alien. However, the very nature of ditto technology and

Kiln People's social context allows Brin to waltz past it, shoehorning in some puns as additional cushioning, his vision of human safety (and male fantasies) safely intact.

Pottering Around with Religion

Brin's language also tips his hand as a spiritualist, and a member of the school of Zelansky, another one of his stated influences. Note his use of "golem" to describe dittos (and yes, this is massively intentional. The antagonistic Maharal family derives their last name from an apocryphal rabbi who produced some of the first golems), the very fact that instead of metal-clad machines, dittos are made from living clay ("But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." Isaiah 64:8), and the fact that antagonist Yosil Maharal refers to his nefarious plan as "project Zoroaster".

Already, we see three faith traditions lying between the lines of *Kiln People*, but why? I would argue that, in religion, Brin is searching for a means to depict an optimist's singularity.

In sci-fi terms, a singularity is a crossover point at which technology (specifically artificial intelligence) renders human society obsolete. We see this an extremely ham-fisted terms in *Terminator* and *The Matrix*, which both feature a future of hostile domination by intelligent machines. Not incidentally, these two movies would have been among Brin's biggest pop-culture influences during the period at which he wrote *Kiln People*.

But, as mentioned, Brin seems to have no interest in dystopia. His version of singularity is simply an endless series of improvements to ditto technology (longer lived dittos, long-range imprinting, etc.), culminating somehow in a process that leads to godhood.

And again, we must pay close attention to language. While we've mentioned the "soul standing wave", the device that analyses it, the "tetragramatron", is simply a crude pun on "tetragrammaton" (YHWH, the Hebrew name of god). The device that antagonist Yosil Maharal attempts to ride into godhood is the Glazier (God-Level Amplification by Zeitgeist Intensification and Ego Refraction), another use of religious terminology and one of the most offensive sci-fi acronyms I've ever seen.

While classic singularity events are driven by machines' ascent to consciousness and humanity, Brin's is driven by the human soul, magnified and reified into a form that defies scientific description. Again, we encounter a strange version of a familiar apocalypse. Rather than machine deposing man and ascending into dominance, Brin's humanistic urges demand that his ascent is one defined by religious iconography and a mathematical abstraction of the soul.

Solidifying this stance is Brin's open disdain for AI and technology. As he skirts his own version of singularity, he is extremely careful to disparage all other paths to it.

Dit-rivities of Replicants

Were you to peruse Brin's list of his favorite authors, you'd see (right below *The Hunger Games Trilogy) Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* PKD and Brin may write on similar themes, but while technology creates a post-scarcity utopia in Brin's, Dick's world is one

ravaged by humanity (ownership of a real animal is a key status symbol in *Androids* and a driving goal of its protagonist). His versions of dittos are ruthless enough to match.

Dick's replicants are perhaps the founding figures of the plausible singularity. The titular androids, especially the Nexus-6 models that protagonist Rick Deckard is charged with hunting, are physically indistinguishable from humans (detectable only with a detailed postmortem), and can only be identified by use of the Voight-Kampff test, a series of questions aimed at evoking sympathetic physical responses. However, this test proves repeatedly imperfect, to the extent that even Deckard himself may be a replicant.

This ambiguity drives *Androids* and asks, but fails to answer, the painful question: "what is humanity?"

Brin would answer "well, the soul standing wave, of course."

And in doing so, Brin severs any ties beyond the aesthetic that may bind *Androids* to *Kiln People*. The prime agony of modern science fiction is the concept that humanity, surrounded by technology, will eventually render itself extinct. What form that takes, whether it's the subtle replacement of *Androids*, the escape into a digital neverworld seen in *Snow Crash* (or, kill me, in *Ready Player One*), or Butler's climate apocalypse in *Parable of the Sower*, is effectively moot. The prime threat remains consistent: we have forged the blade now held to our throats.

Brin didn't really want to write about that. More than anything else, his deviations from such an obviously antecedent novel illustrate the point. While replicants are physically identical to humans, dittos are *literally colour-coded by function and made out of clay*. Replicants are ruthless, as ruthless (PKD would say) as humans. Dittos have mayfly-short lives and a "salmon reflex" to return and inload to their originals; even the advancements hinted at near the end of the book fail to give them the agency needed to replace or usurp their archies. In *Kiln People*, technology is convenient, safe, and above-all, dependent on humanity rather than the other way around.

Even the crowning battle between "ditective" Albert Morris and Yosil Maharal concludes in Albert's favour specifically because his dittos are supported by a human original. Yosil, a "ghost" ditto who has killed his archie, fails to kill Albert and is defeated as a result. In this final rejection of replacement, humanity wins handily. After this confrontation, the original Albert retains some measure of his godly awareness, while his "frankie" ditto (a mis-imprinted copy with a divergent personality) happily surrenders agency and inloads to conclude the novel.

At every turn, we find Brin neatly dispensing with potential threats to humanity. Ditto-villain Beta turns out to simply be an expression of a human character's multiple personality disorder, rather than some form of persistent rogue golem. Overpopulation is mentioned, but only in the context of dittos, who will dissolve (even the ditto life-lengthening process is explicitly described as being too expensive for mass adoption). One natural resource is mentioned as running out: "the best clay beds".

Even the metaverse, possibly the sexiest singularity scenario of *Kiln People's* time, buoyed by *The Matrix* and of course by Stephenson's revolutionary *Snow Crash*, is trivialised. An entire digital universe exists, and Morris does interact with it, at one point even creating an "avatar" (a very new term in 2002, only recently coined by Stephenson at that point). However, this avatar then simply sniffs for information - a sort of glorified Google search, if you will, and a far cry from "if you die in the matrix, you die in real life".

Humanity triumphant. With no contestants, and no real threats. Brin explores the far future and builds himself a pillow fort.

Wrapping Dit All Up

Kiln People is a long novel, and explores a huge number of the themes that defined turn-of-the-millenium speculative fiction. What makes it remarkable is the optimism and belief in humanity that suffuses the book. While most writers who examine the far-future do so tentatively, Brin plunges into it with a riotous lack of concern.

His approach to technology is remarkable, in its own right. In creating dittos, Brin hauls concerns over cloning, AI, and overpopulation squarely into the limelight, only to casually dispense with each of those scenarios in turn.

While it's easy to write off *Kiln People* as simply a thought-experiment that got wildly out of hand and a little too spiritual for its own good, it's perhaps more accurate to instead view it as an answer to a genre that, in 2002, was at a true zenith in how it viewed humanity. Brin's love of man suffuses *Kiln People*; in it he directly confronts the tropes that his greatest idols perfected, and writes a 900 page, defiant love note right back to them.

Does this make it a good book?

Fuck no. Awful. Fuck you, Frankie.