

A Discussion of Stańisław Lem's SF Radio-Drama *Do You Exist Mr Johns?*

Note 2020: This is my translation of the German discussion emitted June 19, 1982 by the Munich flag station of Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Radio), as transcribed from magnetophone tape and published as internal document by the emitting station, care of the radio-drama director (Redakteur), Dr. Dieter Hasselblatt. The discussants were Dr Eike Barmeyer (EB), well-known Munich SF critic, the director (DH), and DS. This translation by DS comprises about one-third of the original discussion, the rest having been devoted to the excellent radio-drama Olympia Männertröst (O. Consolation of Menfolk), a monologue by a female android written by Rosemarie Voges, unfortunately unavailable in English. This was before prosthetics began to be called cyborgisation, and before male personal pronouns ceased to be used (in German) for people in general.

[We listened in the studio to the audio-tape of Lem's SF radio-drama *Do You Exist Mr Johns?*]

DH: This was the tape of Lem's radio-drama as taken over (*Übernahme*) by Süddeutscher Rundfunk and directed by Otto Düben. With me here in the studio are Professor Darko Suvin from Montreal and Dr Eike Barmeyer, both scholars, editors and knowledgeable about SF. Let us briefly discuss this amusing, witty, bright and sometimes laughter-provoking, exhilarating piece by Lem. The theme is "the fully prosthetised person". Did I put this right, is Mr Johns a fully prosthetised person?

DS: Yes I think so.

DH: And the problem unfurled here is: what shall happen, what could happen, if in our societies automatons start solving more and more tasks: would they then get some kind of political or legal responsibility or recognition – or do I see this quite wrongly?

EB: To my mind Lem approaches this from another aspect. Normally, in a story about a robot we expect that it shall behave like a human being. Here is a story in which a human being by degrees, which are described, becomes a robot, beginning with a prosthetic arm and so on up to half a prosthetic brain. And I believe we should consider this as a danger that may face us today. To associate a bit, I believe many people feel today taken over by growing technologisation of everyday life – for example, a patient arriving into one of those giant hospitals and being treated as if he were a machine. Lem is here picking up the problem of growing technologisation of people and their life processes.

DH: What I'm very fascinated by here is this rather light, bright and witty tone adopted, and you, Professor Suvin?

DS: I would put it this way: the story's, the radio-play's, tone is Lem amusing himself. But I believe that in this light tone he is giving us an *exemplum* dealing with very weighty matters. I don't feel Lem is so much exercised by dangers of technology but rather that he is using this as an excuse to question: what is a person or personality? Of course this re-dounds indirectly upon technology too. So here is a human being of whom nothing is left but the principle of individuation, his individuality.

DH: As his personal consciousness.

DS: Yes, all that has been left is merely his personal consciousness, the rest is prosthetic parts. If you wish, this is a lay or secular rephrasing of the question what is a person's soul.

DH: Aha!

DS: It is a kind of negative theology, that Lem anyway loves, doesn't he? He takes the usual Polish Catholic background, which he then of course denies but which is nonetheless present; Lem the atheist has always been fascinated by some theology.

EB: But then I'd say that, as far as the subjects treated go you're quite right: this is a kind of almost sophistic quibbling with a problem. Only, I'm struck by – this story stems surely from a decade ago?

DH: Longer, it is from the beginning of the 1960s.

EB: Aha, longer – so it gets a new meaning because we see it in our present time, the question of the soul, or: where does a human being begin and end? This is suddenly very topical for us. For example, if we discuss “Paragraph 218” [the famous German penal code paragraph forbidding abortion, vehemently attacked already in the Weimar Republic and then again by the 1970s’ feminists, DS] or brain death. That is: all these abstract little games and sophistries suddenly acquire a current significance. This I find exciting.

DH: Oh, I see, if somebody for example gets a transplant, by Dr Barnard and his ilk, first of a kidney, then a heart, then a lung, and finally a brain, is he then still himself or is he no longer himself?

DS: Well, of course the *exemplum* of Mr Johns comes from the socio-economico-technological practice and then returns into it; it is discussed on an abstract level and then we can apply it in our practice. This is what I find beautiful. The radio-play itself is for me not “about” prostheses and similar; for me, that is an excuse to get onto this abstract, general level, which can then be applied to very many matters.

For examples, I would like to stress briefly two matters. First, there is here to my mind a discussion of logic, that is about the inapplicability or no-longer-applicability of the Aristotelian either/or logic. What Mr Johns says is quite clear: if I am a thing, I cannot be sued; but if I am a person, I should not be sued.

DH: But since I’m being sued, I’m obviously a person.

DS: There is a paradox here, the Greeks called it an *aporia*. I think it is a variant of Zeno’s paradox of the arrow that flies and simultaneously does not fly.

DH: Please explain this example to us.

DS: Well, Zeno of Elea, a philosopher of Hellenic antiquity, said that every arrow when it is shot from a bow must travel for a finite space. This space or trajectory can be divided first into halves, then into quarters, eighths, sixteenths, and so on. At any moment of this trajectory the arrow is set at one point, thus it does not move. However, when one adds up all those “-ths”, the points, the arrow finally has moved. How is that possible?

In two-valued logic this cannot be explained. It can only be explained by dialectical logic of not only but also, by the infinitesimal calculus, that is, after the eighteenth century. This is to me one aspect of the play. And Lem is fascinated by logic.

EB: If I may give a tangible example: Lem himself explains this paradox in his book *Summa technologiae*. He imagines that an attempt is made to construct a machine with consciousness or soul, and that this is being done in 10,000 versions. In one of these versions consciousness may possibly arise, but our problem would be to find out in which one.

DS: Yes, when does the arrow begin to move!

And then, the second aspect would for me be the whole matter of economic enslavement, that is of the Cybernetica corporation and the human personality. Lem glosses this lightly by means of demagogic speeches about slavery, Shylock and his pound of flesh, etc., but centrally this is a very serious matter. It is namely not only: where does a human person end and a machine or a thing begin? It is also the opposite: where does the objectification or reification of a human person by the huge apparatus of multinational trusts and pools begin? If we focus on the legal proceedings, which is the foreground of the story, where does the turning of man into thing begin?! The *exemplum* is then so to speak turned upside down. And this would for me be a reference applicable today to many more matters ...

EB: That was exactly the point I made at the beginning, which could be put under the heading of dispossession ...

DS: ... alienation, reification ...

EB: ... a person dispossessed, depersonalised (*enteignet*), let us say as student or patient, that is, in all domains of life.

DS: I quite agree with this.