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2420: Science Fiction Project 2

**Big Dumb Objects Declassified**

To most consumers of science fiction literature, it is not readily apparent why large unidentified fabrications of immense size and unknown origin inexorably evoke a 'sense of wonder'. That the very presence of such concepts within a narrative can have a profound effect on a reader is bother inspiring yet perplexing. Even after substantial inclusion of such objects in the genre, consumers are still undoubtedly drawn to the impossibly large and unknown. One begins to wonder why exactly such a phenomenon occurs. From Larry Niven's Ringworld construct, Greg Bear's infinite inverted spheroid of the novel Eon, to the more recent ring habitats of the Halo Franchise, science fiction writers have been using these ideas to capture audiences over the past few decades to great success, and at times great controversy. Aside from aesthetics and the superficial, these immense construct's inclusion in the genre manage to touch upon fundamental themes of the human condition. This is best exemplified by a quote from Peter Nichols' speech in 1997 on “Big Dumb Objects”:

*“...BDO fiction in particular tends to be about ... being dwarfed by space and hugeness, about attempting to maintain our own humanity, warts and all, in the light of this vastness, while at the same time yearning to be better or other than what we are. And this is not a theme that is intrinsically scientific at all, which makes it all the odder that it is in the hardest and most scientific sf that we tend to find the purest examples...”*

Through observations of works involving the “Big Dumb Object” as well as commentary of such works, it becomes apparent that these constructs manage to appeal to underlying questions of human existence within the universe, which unfailingly and consistently draw the attention of many a reader.

The term “Big Dumb Object” was originally coined by United Kingdom writer and critic of science fiction, Roz Kaveny, in her essay “Science Fiction in the 1970s” (SFE Gollancz, Dec 2011). It was used jokingly to refer to Larry Niven's Ringworld construct. Kaveny's term identifies that not only that the construct is obviously large in nature, but that it's importance to the narrative is so great without having to do much besides existing. In some cases, these objects follow what is known in narration as a MacGuffin – a plot device that is used to either move the narration along or catch the audiences attention, but does little else. That the ring construct held more influence of reader's attention than the protagonists of the narrative was innovative at the time. It wasn't until later, when Peter Nichols included the term “Big Dumb Object” in his Encyclopedia of Science Fiction that the phrase became widespread.

In contemporary times, “BDOs” have become synonymous with macrostructures. Such structures in science fiction often exhibit similar properties: the object is large, which is an understatement when considering the protagonists of the narratives even more so their planet of origin; the object is alien, BDO science fiction is not limited to human to alien interaction but of the protagonists to “other”; the original architects of the constructs are absent, often times being extinct or in another plane of existence. These properties are ubiquitous throughout BDO science fiction, but are not bound by them, as there are some notable exceptions. In terms of scale BDOs can take the form of enigmatic objects such as the Monolith of 2001 Space Odyssey(1968). Another example of a smaller scaled BDO would be the spherical object of the 1998 film Sphere. In both examples, the objects in question exhibit all parameters of a BDO, just not the parameter of scale. Even Niven's Ringworld can be disputed as not being a BDO due to the fact that the creators are eventually revealed in sequels. The distinction between “BDO” and macrostructures is more of a question of hard science fiction vs a narrative object. BDO's often are a designation for macrostrcutures, so long as those structures retain much of it's mystery. Macrostructures are a reference to the objects themselves.

These BDOs have a profound effect on readers, because it has a profound effect on the protagonists that interact with these objects. Often, as in most works of literature, readers are meant to empathize with the protagonists and in the case of BDO science fiction this is paramount. BDOs are often so large in scale that they are often mistaken for natural worlds themselves (Palmer, 2006). However it all cases, the object in question is undeniably artificial. This begs the question of who built these objects and how. More importantly, the protagonist(s) and by extension the reader, must envision there there are other intelligent beings in the universe, that are capable of such feats of technological superiority. Many times in BDO science fiction, the protagonists of the narrative are of the human race or something close to it. This is done intentionally for not only to have readers empathize more with the characters, but to present a very possible scenario that humanity is actually very insignificant in terms of the scale and age of the cosmos. This is further compounded by the trope of having the original creators of such wonders be absent from the narrative. This reinforces, the idea of human insignificance in that if the creators of these objects no longer exist what chance does humanity have in the cosmos? Lastly Christopher Palmer makes a compelling observation of the nature of BDOs when he states,*“In some of these qualities a BDO is like the universe itself, but the universe (so it may be argued) was not made and has no purpose; because a BDO is the product of minds, they may well offer us hints about ourselves.”* Essentially, by being able to construct BDO scenarios and reflect on the implications of these scenarios, readers are able to re-examine their place in the universe.

There are limitations to the effect BDOs have on science fiction consumers. An analysis by David N. Samuelson on Christopher Nicholls, identifies the main detracting aspect of BDOs: *“Nichols finds that 'Big Dumb Objects” invite transcendence, but he finds the wonder evaporates on rereading.”* What this boils down to, is that as the BDO work is revisited the “BDO effect” is lost. The more a reader learns of the origins, capabilities, and purpose of a BDO the BDO looses its purpose; the ability to reduce there protagonist's again by extension the reader's place in the universe. This is done simply by the idea that the more one knows, the less they fear and feel empowered. This effect is also mirrored when BDO works, have sequels. Each iteration in the case of Larry Niven's Ringworld series, brought to light new information on the purpose and origin of the construct, which worked to diminish the “power” the construct had over the reader.

Henry M. Taylor's review of Roz Kaveney' book “Alien to The Matrix” emphasizes another more recent problem of BDOs in the genre; that it's replacing important themes and litereary elements altogether. The review explores the idea that in recent times the film industry has begun to ignore the "critical and dystopian cycle that began with Planet of the Apes (1968)". After the popularity of Star Wars (1977), film industry have been increasingly focused on special effects and CGI to capture audience attention. That film makers get away with weak plot lines and underdeveloped literary elements, is a testament to the allure of visually representing BDOs.

In recent time the interactive medium of the video game industry have been heavily influenced by BDO science fiction. Notable mentions that include BDOs would be the Halo Franchise, Mass Effect series, and the Homeworld series. The Halos of the Halo franchise, follow Niven's ringworld in design but differ in scale, number, and purpose. The Mass Effect series saw numerous artifacts left over by a race of precursors. These artifacts range In size of a building to entire space stations. Lastly the Homeworld series follows the journey of an oppressed race of humanoids to reclaim their home planet. To do so required the use of technologies of an ancient race of beings with constructs that dwarfed entire fleets of star ships. Regardless of the medium, the theme of BDOs remains the same: alien origin, immense size, unknown capabilities, absent creators.

Due to much of BDO science fiction having grounds in “hard” science fiction, its no surprise that they may eventually exist, or in this case already do exist but have yet to be discovered. Freeman Dyson is the theoretical physicist, credited with fleshing out the idea of the Dyson shell as well as coining the term. The concept of a Dyson shell should not be confused with an actual shell, but a network of interconnected habitats that completely surround a star. The purpose of such a feat would be to capture the total energy of that start. Dyson postulated, that a sufficiently advanced civilization might try to construct such a construct. That finding such a structure through examining specific radiation signatures, could be an indication of intelligent life in the universe. Such objects have been dubbed “cosmic archeology artifacts” or astroengineering projects(Carrigan, 2009).

Similar to “moth's to a flame”, consumers of science fiction literature cannot help but feel compelled to want to discover these objects, and find out more about them. Even if doing so, robs them of the reason to do so. Since it's inception, BDOs have expanded from traditional texts to film and interactive media. BDO's will continue to present visual and imaginative stimulation for audiences, and with better newer mediums of liturature such as virtual and augmented realities they will continue to be a prominent element of science fiction in the future.

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