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From SF EYE #11 Dec 1992
Science Fiction Eye, P. O. Box 18539, Asheville NC 28814 (USA\$10.yr \$15
global)

SF EYE CATSCAN #11: "Sneaking For Jesus 2001"

Conspiracy fiction. I've come across a pair of especially remarkable
works in this odd subgenre lately.

Paul Di Filippo's treatment of the conspiracy subgenre, " My Brain
Feels Like A Bomb" in SF EYE 8, collected some fine, colorful
specimens. Di Filippo theorizes that the conspiracy subgenre, anchored
at its high end by GRAVITY'S RAINBOW and FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM and at
its low end by quite a lot of cheesy sci-fi and goofy spy thrillers,
is unique to the twentieth-century, and bred by our modern
(postmodern?) inability to make sense of an overwhelming flow of
high-velocity information.

This may be true. I'm not inclined to challenge that sociological
assessment, and can even offer some backup evidence. Where is that
postmodern flow of information more intense, and less basically
comprehensible, than in the world of computing? Thus is bred the
interesting sub-subgenre of computer paranoia fiction -- hacker
conspiracy! I now propose to examine two such works: the movie (and
book) SNEAKERS, and the novel (and prophesy?) THE ILLUMINATI.

Let's take the second item first, as it's much the more remarkable of
the two. The ILLUMINATI in question today has nothing to do with the
Robert Anton Wilson ILLUMINATI series; in fact, its weltanschauung is
utterly at odds with Wilson's books. Wilson's paranoid yarn is
basically a long, rambling, crypto-erudite hipster rap-session, but
Larry Burkett's ILLUMINATI is a fictional work of evangelical Christian
exegesis, in which lesbians, leftists, dope addicts and other tools of
Satan establish a gigantic government computer network in the year
2001, with which to exterminate all Southern Baptists.

I recommend this novel highly. Larry Burkett's ILLUMINATI has already

sold some 100,000 copies through Christian bookstores, and it

seems to me to have tremendous crossover potential for hundreds of chuckling cyberpunk cynics. To my eye it's a lot more mind-blowing than any of Wilson's books.

The Robert Anton Wilson oeuvre is perennially in print in New Age bookstores, and quite well known in the SF category racks. Therefore the CATSCAN reader may already be aware that the so-called "Illuminati" were a freethinking secret society purportedly founded in the 1770s, who had something to do with Freemasonry and were opposed to established Church authority in Europe.

So far, so good. It's not surprising that a with-it hipster dude like R.A. Wilson would use the historical Illuminati as a head-trip springboard to mock All Things Establishment. The far more surprising matter is that some evangelical Christians, such as the Reverend Pat Robertson, not only take the 217-year-old and extremely dead Illuminati seriously, but are also currently dominating the social agenda of the Republican Party. Reverend Robertson's latest "non-fiction" tome, THE NEW WORLD ORDER, is chock-a-block with straightfaced and utterly paranoid Illuminati-under-the-bed terrormongering. Robertson publicly credits the "satanic" Illuminati conspiracy with direct authorship of the French Revolution and the Bolshevik uprising, as well as sponsorship of the Trilateral Commission and the comsymp "Eastern Establishment" generally. The good Reverend also expresses the gravest possible reservations about the occult Masonic insignia on the back of the one-dollar bill.

George Bush himself, best-known public advocate of a "New World Order," is cast under suspicion in Robertson's work as an Illuminati tool, and yet Bush gave his accuser prime-time TV in his party's National Convention. One can only marvel!

As a comparative reality-check, try and imagine Robert Anton Wilson delivering his Hail Eris rap at a Democratic Party Convention (while the audience, nodding on national television, listens in sober respect and acts really glad to be clued-in). Odd enough for you? No

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imagine ontological anarchists re-writing the Democratic Party platform on abortion, sexual behavior, and federal sponsorship of the arts.

Larry Burkett has taken this way-out sectarian extremist theo-gibberish and made it into a techno-thriller! The result is a true mutant among novels. How many science fiction novels begin with a disclaimer like this one?

"My biggest concern in writing a novel is that someone may read too much into it. Obviously, I tried to use as realistic a scenario as possible in the story. But it is purely fictional, including the characters, events, and timing. It should not be assumed that it is prophetic in any regard. As best I know, I have a gift for teaching, a talent for writing, and no prophetic abilities beyond that of any other Christian."

I was so impressed by this remarkable disclaimer of Mr Burkett's that I tracked down his address (using the CompuServe computer network) and I succeeded in interviewing him by phone for this column. I learned that Mr Burkett has received some six thousand letters about his novel ILLUMINATI from eager readers, many of them previously aware of the Illuminati menace and eager to learn yet more. And yes, many of those readers do believe that the Mr. Burkett novel is an inspired prophecy, despite his disclaimer, and they demand his advice on how to shelter themselves from the secret masters of the coming Satanic computer-cataclysm.

Even more remarkably, a dozen correspondents claimed to have once been Illuminati themselves, and they congratulated Mr. Burkett on his insights into their conspiracy! Mr. Burkett described this last category as featuring "three or four letters that were fairly lucid."

Mr. Burkett himself seems quite lucid. He was clearly "having some fun" with notions he considers serious but not all *that* serious, and in this he is not much different from many other SF authors with active imaginations and vaguely politicized concerns. Now a financial consultant, Mr. Burkett was once a NASA project manager, and

dealt with early mainframe systems for the Gemini and Mercury missions. As a father, grandfather, best-selling author and head of a successful investment-counseling firm, Mr. Burkett seemed to me to have at least as firm a grip on consensus reality as say, Ross Perot. In talking to Mr Burkett I found him a calm, open and congenial gentleman.

However, Mr. Burkett is also a committed "dispensational Christian" and he believes sincerely that abortion is an act of murder. He is therefore living in a basically nightmarish society in which hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings are gruesomely murdered through no fault of their own. I believe that Mr. Burkett considers abortion so great an evil that it could not possibly have been inflicted on our society by any merely human agency. It can only be understood as part of an ancient, multi-generational conspiracy, planned and carried out by the immortal and evil Adversary of Mankind through his mortal cats-paws on Earth.

From the pyramid-eye point of view of this belief-system, it makes good tub-thumping common-sense to assume that "Secular Humanism" is a single monolithic entity -- even if its own useful-idiot liberal dupes seem more-or-less unaware of their own true roles in Satan's master-plan.

All enemies are agents willy-nilly of The Enemy, and their plans run toward a single end: the establishment of Satan's Kingdom on Earth. In the words of Reverend Robertson (NEW WORLD ORDER p 6): "A single thread runs from the White House to the State Department to the Council on Foreign Relations to the Trilateral Commission to secret societies to extreme New Agers. There must be a new world order. It must eliminate national sovereignty. There must be world government, a world police force, world courts, world banking and currency, and a world elite in charge of it all."

Of course, if you are going to string all important global events onto "a single thread," you are going to end up with an extremely variegated necklace. When you formally assemble th

e whole farrago into the pages of a thriller-novel, as Mr. Burkett does, the result is like Lovecraft on laughing-gas. Mr. Burkett's fictional technique owes far more to his favorite authors, Tom Clancy and Michael Crichton, than it does to any genre SF writer. Mr Burkett is not himself an SF reader. Nevertheless, his material itself is so inherently over-the-top that his book resembles the Call of Cthulhu far more than a hunt for Red October.

The pace is whiplash-fast and the set-up entirely mindboggling. In the year 2001, the President, an Illuminati puppet "liberal," stages a coup against Congress in the midst of economic collapse and massive urban riots. The Mossad are bugging the White House and building a

cobalt super-bomb with the Red Chinese. We learn that the Illuminati began as Druids and transmuted into Freemasons; the wily Jews, of course, have known all about the Illuminati for centuries, though never bothering to inform us goyim. The gay Governor of California is a feminist church-taxing coke addict. The "liberal" President sells "brain-dead" crack babies to fetal-tissue medical entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, evil liberal civil-libertarians tattoo everyone's right hand with the scanner-code of the Beast 666. It just goes on and on!

The yummiest item in the whole stew, however, is the identity of the book's hero, one Jeff Wells. Jeff's a computer hacker. A genius hacker for Christ. Somewhat against his will and entirely without any evil intent, Jeff was recruited to design and build the gigantic Data-Net financial network, which the Illuminati secular one-worlders then use to consolidate power, and to pursue and harass innocent Christian activists. When Jeff discovers that the feds are using his handiwork to round up Baptists and ship them by the trainload to dismal gulags in Arizona, he drops out of the system, goes deep underground, and joins the Christian revolutionary right.

With the moral guidance of a saintly televangelist, Jeff, using his powerful and extremely illegal com

puter-intrusion skills, simply chops up Data-Net like a cook deboning a chicken. In defence of his Savior, Jeff basically overthrows the US Government by digital force and violence. He defrauds the government of billions of dollars. He creates thousands of false identities. He deliberately snarls train traffic and airport traffic. He spies on high government officials, tracking their every move. The Pentagon, the Secret Service and the FBI are all rendered into helpless fools through Jeff's skillful tapping of a keyboard. It's like a Smash-the-State Yippie phone-phreak's wet-dream -- and yet it's all done in defense of family-values.

One shuts Mr. Burkett's book regretfully and with a skull-tingling sensation of genuine mind-expansion.

But let's now leave ILLUMINATI for a look at somewhat more actual and far more commercially successful Yippie phone-phreak wet-dream, the film (and novel) SNEAKERS. As it happens, the movie tie-in novel SNEAKERS (by one "Dewey Gram," a name that sounds rather suspicious) is somewhat uninspired and pedestrian (especially in comparison to

ILLUMINATI). The book has a slightly more graphic sexual-voyeur sequence than the movie does, and some mildly interesting additional background about the characters. The SNEAKERS novel seems to have been cooked-up from an earlier screenplay than the shooting-script. You won't miss much by skipping it entirely.

The sinister Liberal Cultural Elite (and their vile Illuminati puppet-masters) must take great satisfaction in comparing the audience for a Hollywood blockbuster like SNEAKERS with the relatively tiny readership for the eager though amateurish ILLUMINATI. ILLUMINATI was written in eight weeks flat, and will have a devil of a time reaching anybody outside an evangelical chain-store. SNEAKERS, by contrast, cost millions to make, and has glossy posters, promo lapel buttons, pre-release screenings, TV ads, and a video release on the way, not to mention its own book tie-in.

SNEAKERS will also be watched with a straight face a

nd genuine enjoyment by millions of Americans, despite its "radical" attitude and its open sympathies with 60s New Leftist activism. ILLUMINATI will have no such luck. Even after twelve solid years of Reaganism, in which the federal government was essentially run by panic-stricken astrologers and the Republican Party kowtowed utterly to its fringe-nut element, it's still unthinkable that a work like ILLUMINATI could become a mainline Hollywood film. Even as a work of science fiction, ILLUMINATI would simply be laughed off the screen by the public. Even R. A. Wilson's ILLUMINATI would have a better chance at production. Margaret Atwood's HANDMAID'S TALE, which promotes anti-network paranoia from a decidedly leftist/feminist perspective, actually made it to the screen! The Burkett ILLUMINATI's theocratic nuttiness is simply too ludicrous.

SNEAKERS is a professional piece of Hollywood entertainment and a pleasant movie to watch. I'm not one of those who feels that Hollywood movies should be required to teach moral lessons, or to heighten public taste, even to make basic sense. Hey, let Hollywood be Hollywood: SNEAKERS has some nice production values, a solid cast, some thrills and some laughs; money spent seeing it is money well spent.

And yet there's a lot to dislike about SNEAKERS anyhow. The entire effort has a depressing insincerity, and a profound sense of desperation and defeat that it tries to offset with an annoying

nervous-tic mockery. The problem resides in the very nature of the characters and their milieu. It's certainly an above-average cast, with Sidney Poitier, Robert Redford, Dan Aykroyd and River Phoenix, who are as professionally endearing and charismatic as they can manage. Yet almost everything these characters actually do is deceitful, repulsive, or basically beside the point; they seem powerless, hopeless, and robbed of their own identities, robbed of legitimacy, even robbed of their very lives.

SNEAKERS is remarkable for its fidelity to the ethos of the computer underground

nd. It's something of a love-note to the 2600 crowd (who seem properly appreciative). System-cracker practices like trashing, canning, and social-engineering are faithfully portrayed. And while SNEAKERS is remarkably paranoid, that too rather suits its own milieu, because many underground hackers are in fact remarkably paranoid, especially about the NSA, other techie feds, and their fellow hackers.

Hacking complex computer systems from the outside -- maintaining a toehold within machinery that doesn't belong to you and is not obedient to your own purposes -- tends by its nature to lead to a rather fragmentary understanding. This fragmentary knowledge, combined with guilty fear, is a perfect psychological breeding-ground for a deeply paranoid outlook. Knowledge underground takes the form of a hipster's argot, rules of thumb, and superstitious ritual, combined with large amounts of practised deceit. And that's the way the SNEAKERS cast basically spend their lives: in pretense and deception, profoundly disenchanting and utterly disenfranchising. Basically, not one person among them can be trusted with a burnt-out match. Even their "robberies" are fakes; they lie even to one another, and they risk their lives, and other people's, for peanuts.

SNEAKERS, in which anagrams play a large thematic role, is itself an anagram for NSA REEKS. The National Security Agency is the largest target for the vaguely-leftist, antiauthoritarian paranoia expressed by the film. The film's sinister McGuffin is an NSA-built super-decryptor device. (This super-decryptor is a somewhat silly gimmick, but that shouldn't be allowed to spoil the story. Real cryptography enthusiasts will probably be too busy laughing at the decryptor's mad-genius inventor, a raunchy parody of real-life cryptographer Whitfield Diffie.) The IRS, though never mentioned overtly, also comes in for some tangential attack, since the phone number of one of the IRS's

California offices is given out verbally during the film by an attractive young woman, wh

o claims that it's her home phone number.

This deliberate bit of mischief must have guaranteed the IRS a lot of eager phone-phreak action.

Every conspiracy must have a Them. In the black-and-white world of ILLUMINATI, all forms of opposition to Goodness must be cut from the same Satanic cloth, so that Aleister Crowley, Vladimir Lenin and David Rockefeller are all of one warp and woof. SNEAKERS, by contrast, is slightly more advanced, and features two distinct species of Them. The first Them is the Hippie-Sold-Out Them, a goofy role gamely played by Ben Kingsley as a Darkside Yuppie Hacker Mafioso, a kind of carnivorous forty-something Bill Gates. The second species of Them is the enonymously reeking NSA, the American shadow-spook elite, surprisingly personified by a patriarchal James Earl Jones in an oddly comic and comforting Wizard of Oz-like cameo.

Both these Thems are successfully fooled by the clever Sneakers in bits of Hollywood business that basically wouldn't deceive a bright five-year-old, much less the world's foremost technical espionage agency and a security-mad criminal zillionaire.

But these plot flaws are no real objection. A more genuine objection would be the entire tenor of the film. The film basically accomplishes nothing. Nothing actually happens. No one has to change their mind about anything. At the end, the Hacker Mafioso is left at large, still in power, still psychotic, and still in command of huge sums and vast archives of illicit knowledge and skill. The NSA, distributing a few cheap bribes, simply swears everybody to secrecy, and retreats safely back into the utter undisturbed silence of its Cold War netherworld. A few large issues are raised tangentially, but absolutely nothing is done about them, and no moral judgements or decisions are made. The frenetic plotting of the Sneaker team accomplishes nothing whatsoever beyond a maintenance of the status quo and the winning of a few toys for the personnel. Redford doesn't even win the token girl. It seems much ado ab

out desperately little.

Then, at the very end, our hero robs the Republican Party of all its money through computer-fraud, and distributes it to worthy left-wing

causes. Here something has actually happened at last, but it's a dismal and stupid thing. It's profoundly undemocratic, elitist, and hateful act; only a political idiot could imagine that a crime of this nature would do a minute's worth of real good. And even this psychotic provocation has the look of a last-minute tag-on to the movie; in the book, it doesn't even occur.

The film makes two stabs at Big Message. There's a deliberate and much-emphasized Lecture at the Foot of the Cray, where the evil Darkside Hacker explains in slow and careful capital letters that the world in the 90s has become an Information Society and has thus become vulnerable to new and suspiciously invisible forms of manipulation. Beyond a momentary spasm of purely intellectual interest, though, our hero's basic response is a simple "I know. And I don't care." This surprisingly sensible remark much deflates the impact of the superhacker-paranoia scenario.

The second Big Message occurs during a ridiculously convenient escape-scene in which our hero defies the Darkside Hacker to kill him face-to-face. The bad-guy, forced to look deep inside his own tortured soul, can't endure the moral responsibility involved in pulling a trigger personally. The clear implication is that sooner or later somebody has to take a definite and personal responsibility for all this abstract technologized evil. Unfortunately this is sheer romantic hippie nonsense; even Adolf Eichmann has it figured that it was all somebody else's fault. The twentieth century's big-time evils consisted of people pushing papers in a distant office causing other people to die miles away at the hands of dazed functionaries. Tomorrow's button-pushers are likely to be more remote and insulated than ever; they're not going to be worrying much about their cop-outs and their karma.

SNEAKERS plays paranoia for s

lapstick laughs in the character of Dan Aykroyd, who utters a wide variety of the standard Space-Brother nutty notions, none of them with any practical implications whatsoever. This may be the worst and most discouraging aspect of the conspiratorial mindset -- the way it simultaneously flatters one's own importance and also makes one willing to do nothing practical and tangible. The conspiracy theorist has got it all figured, he's got the inside angles, and yet he has the perfect excuse for utter cynical torpor.

Let's just consider the real-world implications of genuine conspiratorial convictions for a moment. Let's assume, as many people do, that John Kennedy really was shot dead in a 'silent coup' by a US government cabal in 1963. If this is true, then we Americans clearly haven't run our own national affairs for at least thirty years. Our executive, our Congress, our police and our bureaucracies have all been a fraud in the hands of elite and murderous secret masters. But if we're not running our own affairs today, and haven't for thirty years, then how the heck are we supposed to start now? Why even try? If the world's fate is ineluctably in the hands of Illuminati, then what real reason do we have to meddle in public matters? Why make our thoughts and ideas heard? Why organize, why discuss public policy, why make budgets, why set priorities, why vote? We'll just get gypped anyhow. We'd all be better off retired, in hiding, underground, in monasteries, in purdah, or dead.

If the NSA's tapping every phone line and reading every license-plate from orbit, then They are basically omniscient. They're watching us every moment -- but why do they bother? What quality, besides our own vanity, would make us important enough to be constantly watched by Secret Masters? After all, it's not like we're actually intending to *accomplish* anything.

Conspiracy is for losers. As conspiracy freaks, by our very nature we'll always live on the outside of where it's Really Happening. That's what justifies ou

r existence and allows us to tell Ourselves apart from Them. Unlike people in the former Eastern Bloc, who actually were oppressed and monitored by a sinister power-elite, we ourselves will never *become* what's Really Happening, despite our enormous relative advantages. Maybe we can speculate a little together, trade gossip, scare each other silly and swap outlandish bullshit. We can gather up our hacker scrapbooks from the office trash of the Important and Powerful. We can press our noses to the big mirrorglass windows. Maybe it we're especially daring, we can fling a brick through a window late one night and run like hell. That'll prove that we're brave and that we really don't like Them -- though we're not brave enough to replace Them, and we're certainly not brave enough to become Them.

And this would also prove that no sane person would ever trust us with

a scintilla of real responsibility or power anyway, over ourselves or anyone else. Because we don't deserve any such power, no matter from what angle of the political spectrum we happen to emerge. Because we've allowed ourselves the ugly luxury of wallowing in an enormous noisome heap of bullshit. And for being so stupid, we deserve whatever we get.