

# Bizarre Gnostic Science Fiction from the Author of *Bolo'bolo*

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A review of

*AKIBA: A Gnostic Novel*, by p.m. Autonomedia, 2007

*AKIBA*, the new novel from Swiss writer p.m., belongs to a long tradition of utopian activist novels: it is not so much a work of art as a vehicle to illustrate the author's political vision. Fans of p.m. will recognize the ideas, but might be surprised by the new sci-fi futurism that drives them.

p.m. became well-known in North American anarchist circles in the 1980's with his book *bolo'bolo*, which creatively analyzed the nature and current crises of what he called "the Planetary Work Machine," and detailed an imaginative alternative vision: a low-work utopia of medium-scale communal living, cultural diversity, and ecological sustainability. He continued these themes in his excellent 2002 essay "The Next Mutiny of the Bounty" (FE #368-369, Spring-Summer, 2005), which analyzed suburbia as a global pathogen and proposed as a remedy our transition to living collectively in large dwellings of 500 to 1,000 people.

*AKIBA* adheres to a similar vision. The protagonist, Marco Vilini, is an insurance fraud investigator living a bland life in Zurich. Marco meets a puzzling man named Thomas and is invited to dinner at the man's house. It turns out that Thomas lives in a kind of urban eco-commune called *AKIBA*, one arm of a global organization with a mission to save the world. Over their meal, Marco is taken to school by a round-table of *AKIBA* members, each speaking with identical eloquence about Peak Oil, resource depletion, energy politics, the precarious structure of capitalism, the evils of suburbia, and the interconnectedness of all social problems. Their proposed solution is to encourage the spread of ecologically-conscious relaxed non-consumer communal living.

So far this is familiar p.m. territory, but as Marco returns to *AKIBA* with his girlfriend Sandra for more talks over more dinners, the story's science-fictional core reveals itself. It turns out that the *AKIBA* members desire to promote sustainable communal living not because it would create a livable future as an end in itself, but because only if our world avoids self-destruction can science and industry progress far enough to permit the creation of what they call the "universal simulation computer," a computer powerful enough to perfectly simulate this world—in fact, all possible worlds—and all humans, living and dead! Our "lives" would then take place for eternity (because time, too, would be simulated) within the simulation, in a world of infinite possibility, a world without hardship or death, a world where we control the amount of physical pain we feel by turning the dial on an amulet we each wear around our neck that controls the basic settings of our simulated lives.

p.m. draws on a wealth of real-world speculative science to substantiate this possibility. Proper names and obscure scientific history fill the speech of the *AKIBites*, and the book closes with a full bibliography. Those who are excited by this kind of speculative physics—in a technological vein—will find a lot of stimulation here, as well as pointers into further exploration.

What I have just described is the conceptual substance of the novel. The bulk of the actual text, however, consists of a long and colorful detour taken by the protagonists through "Limboland", the hypothetical computer-simulated

paradise where any lifestyle is possible and time is infinite. Their journey here is less of an adventure and more of a tour. Along the way they learn how phenomena from the cave paintings at Lascaux and Altamira to the theory of relativity, and the influence of historical figures from the biblical Thomas (of *The Gospel of Thomas*) to Aldous Huxley, were actually interventions performed by concerned citizens of Limboland into Earth's history with the intent of nudging Earth's inhabitants further along the path towards inventing the supercomputer. Eventually the actual plot resumes in the last ten pages, where a crisis in the fabric of the simulation convinces Sandra and Marco to return to Earth and resume the AKIBA mission themselves.

Personally, my innate disdain for digital simulation, and my ecologically-informed skepticism of the sustainability of high-tech, puts me at odds with the notion that so-called "progress" in science and industry must be continued costs to enable the creation of an all-powerful supercomputer. I'm further repelled by the implication, at work in this novel, that fascism and capitalism should be rejected in favor of egalitarian green communalism solely on the grounds that the former are unsustainable pathways to technological progress. But I have a feeling that my first questions regarding this high-tech utopia—what would power the supercomputer? Who will operate it and fix it when it breaks?—would be considered hopelessly simpleminded by its true devotees. Perhaps I should know that the supercomputer will exist in quantum space and run flawlessly on pure entropy, for instance, but the book never specifies.

One wonders whether p.m. really believes in this high-tech heaven we can reach through technological progress? There is nothing in the narrative voice that suggests criticism of that vision. Or perhaps he is simply out to write an entertaining novel haphazardly combining his trusty old utopian ideas with recent forays into speculative physics. At the end of "The Next Mutiny on the Bounty", after delineating his alternative vision to suburbia, p.m. writes: "All of this is just common sense, no 'new system' or utopia... We'll always be our old disgusting selves. No new morality will help, no better humans can be created." Fair enough, we might say. But maybe, in its visions of people turning into sea otters, spending hundreds of years constructing enchanted treehouses, inventing exotic new cuisines, and perfecting human society, *AKIBA* is p.m.'s attempt to imagine less modest possibilities. And in its sheer imaginative power, it succeeds.

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