Study Guide

Angels of the Singularity Chapter 1

Here are some of the basic background facts behind the comic series. I haven't included these in an explicit way in this first comic, because I don't like exposition unless it naturally arises in the story. There will be some exposition later, but it's in small pieces and often comes from a particular character's viewpoint, which may be different from that of another character. It's not like all the viewpoints add up to the same thing exactly, but they refer to a series of events experienced by all. That's another problem with exposition at the beginning; it fixes a particular viewpoint of events, so that variations expressed by other characters may be taken as false. I'm no relativist, but I want to enrich the overall interpretation of events by showing how they are experienced by different characters.

What events? Well, the Singularity. In this comic, it already happened, and was a disaster. What is the Singularity? It's an event in the future, basically a science fiction story presented by "futurists" as scientific prediction, where we make intelligent machines, themselves capable of making yet more intelligent machines, et cetera. This blows up exponentially, and all sorts of wonderful things result, because super intelligence can solve any problem and realize any dream. People who believe this are called singularitarians. I identify this belief as apocalypticist, in the sense that it foretells an "end of history" when something wonderful will happen and everything will change for the better. The apostle Paul was such a thinker.

There is also a related belief called transhumanism. This is the idea that we ought to make better humans, either by augmenting the existing human body with gadgets or by making intelligent robots and calling them human, with these options ultimately mixing together and blurring the distinction between humans and machines. This is supposed to be a good thing. I will venture to say that most if not all singularitarians are transhumanists, but not all transhumanists are singularitarians, in that they could envision the development of better humans happening gradually. "Better." In these study guides I'll probably not make much of a distinction between singularitarians and transhumanists, except maybe to say "singularitarians" when I'm arguing against super robots and "transhumanists" when I'm arguing against super humans.

In the prehistory of the comic, machines became intelligent (whatever that means), humans (at least the wealthiest few) became superhuman (whatever that might entail), and the rest of the world was left behind. The immortal, superhuman billionaires rocketed into space, to live (whatever that means these days) in a giant space station created by the world's first trillionaire, known as the Moon God. He's called that because his space station (referred to as his palace) is directly in front of the moon, at a stable point.

An "angel" is an immortal billionaire, a resident of Heaven (except for two of them, as we can see), which is another name for the Moon God's palace. Immortality costs one billion dollars, the ultimate luxury item. ("Now how much would you pay?!") There are various ways to achieve this, and I explore some of them in the comic as it develops.

On earth, global warming has turned much of North America into a desert. There is no country, no society, no hierarchy. Most humans are dead, and may become extinct soon. I didn't want to cover the same ground as all the people who write about future dystopias, showing all the oppression and struggle. In my comic, that's all over with. It's more like the post-nuclear war movies where some lone hero is running around trying to avoid zombies and mutant gangs. Here, the heroes (immortal angels themselves) are on earth for their own reasons, when they could be upstairs with the others.

In the comic series, there's no overarching story. It's a road movie, or maybe a TV series. The movement of the story is physical, as the two angel characters encounter one strange thing after another. I suppose it's time for me to tell you that they don't have names. I don't like names. But, for the purpose of talking about them, I will allow them to be referred to by the names of the presidents whose portraits on dollar bills were the initial inspiration for their looks, before they evolved to look like themselves. The shorter one is Grant. The taller one is Jackson. I

repeat that these are not their names, which they undoubtedly had, but which I do not know.

Why do they encounter one strange thing after another? Because I want to show what would be lost, what kind of injustice would result, and what problems arise when a thing like the Singularity happens. I don't believe it will happen, but those guys and I are both writing science fiction and it doesn't have to be realistic, it just has to express ideas and aspirations. The problem is, what the singularitarians (or transhumanists) seem to want is ill-considered. Hell, it's horrendous lunacy, let's be frank.

For a long time, perceptive writers have warned against creating technology we can't control. Dr Frankenstein wanted to make a super human. In Fritz Lang's Metropolis, a rampant robot causes lots of trouble. In the Terminator and Matrix films we get a similar warning; uncontrollable technology with agency is the problem. But this is what the singularity is all about: creating technology that creates technology and launches itself on an infinite journey. If we were to control it, that would just slow it down. Go robots!

So, what do the transhumanists do to deflect the accusation that they are anti-human? They redefine the robots as human! The robots are our progeny, the next phase of evolution, so we should be proud. Yes, when they try to exterminate us we should tearfully admire their moxie.

Note that this maneuver assumes there is some goal, some destiny to evolution, and that humans, specifically the artificial intelligence researchers responsible for the engineer robots, are the pinnacle of that process. Their brain children will continue the process by running around the universe destroying everything to make giant computers, which is what the universe wanted in the first place, so it can think. I'm not making this up. Guess which handy planet they'll destroy first. Do we remember any recent examples of callous ideologues claiming to be the pinnacles of evolution, and to have heard the call of destiny to transform the world at the expense of most of its inhabitants? You said it, I didn't.

There is an apocalypticist religiosity to all this, and I consider this point in many places in the comic, starting with the titles. All the chapter titles are quotes from the Bible. Most are from the text of The Messiah by Handel, which extracts many of the most poetic lines. In some stories I play with concepts of God and eternality. I'm trying to assemble an array of ideas that link to this Singularity concept in ways that the singularitarians themselves have missed.

Ask them "What is technology for?" Maybe someone might reply "to make human life better." Sounds nice. What do you mean by "human," what do you mean by "life," and what do you mean by "better"? Let me point out, the transhumanist agenda is to change what one means by "human." "Life" changes too, because all sorts of odd things can be called live. If a computer program is conscious, is it alive? If a machine makes another identical machine, is it alive? What about "better"? Does this mean alleviating disease, or giving already powerful people super powers? A transhumanist may think very differently about these issues, compared with most people.

And what will happen to most people? In my story, they died. It's easier to draw that way. Besides, if the super rich made robots to do all tasks, why have humans around at all? With no jobs they all became poor, so no one could get rich selling them anything. If evolution is for creating the people who created the robots, well, we're done. Just living is not OK.

Grant and Jackson's car (well, Jackson's since he invented it) is sort of like the solar race cars that cross Australia, developed by engineering departments at universities. Solar panels on top charge batteries and run motors. I gave it two wheels, so when it stops it has to deploy another two along the sides. Like a bike, has to lean to turn, so there's dihedral angle between the solar panels. A friend and I are making a two-man solar powered electric vehicle in which we'll cruise the desert, so at least that part of the story is realistic.