

Study Guide

Angels of the Singularity Chapter 2



Siegfried is of course the hero from Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen operas, reputed to be the world's strongest and bravest man. In the operas, Siegfried is also sort of an ignorant bumpkin, raised out in the sticks by an evil dwarf. He's pure of heart but easily fooled by anyone smarter, which makes him a tragic character. Is he only good because he's too dumb to be bad? The Siegfried in this comic is not so benign and fair. His attire is a composite of a few of the Siegfried costumes from past productions. Part of the inspiration for his manner of speech comes from the novel Riddley Walker by Russell Hoban, a writer in England. People of the future, after a nuclear war, are surviving in a more primitive state of civilization, with a form of English language which is both mangled and renewed. This is what would happen if isolated populations lost the arbiters of proper usage, and had to make the language work for their immediate circumstance. It would suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange.

Slot canyons are formed when water erodes down through cracks in sandstone. These can be wider at the bottom than they are at the top, as sand and gravel-filled water scrapes away at the sides. Since such canyons are very narrow, it doesn't take much water to produce a rapidly flowing torrent—called a "flash flood" when it happens without notice—due to a small amount of rain some distance away. People have been killed in flash floods in slot canyons. This almost happened to a friend of mine. Grant and Jackson do just about the only thing you can.

The petroglyphs they encounter are a combination of two different styles found in the Southwest. The central character is based on a panel in Nine Mile Canyon in Utah. I am proud to say I was a petroglyph fan before they became cool. The modern habit of appropriating ancient rock art probably originated in places like Moab, Utah, a mountain biking recreation area. Now you see Kokopelli on cans of soda. I used to go to national parks and pick up scholarly books on Native American rock art, and read speculations about what the various symbols meant. One of these was the "consanguinity line," which connected people with animals and which might have said "the same blood flows in their veins" but what that could mean in a poetic sense is still open to interpretation. Here, I offer an interpretation appropriate for a scientific world view. Ancient people had to deal with the same world we do, and they had to solve practical problems of managing livestock and agriculture. If someone was an expert in these things, and especially if they had a talent for mirroring the world inside themselves, forming a mental model that could enable them to predict what nature would do, this would have been very valuable. You could say they had a special connection to nature, even a blood relation. This is what scientists do these days, even though they don't talk about it in these terms.

Seeing the symbol for eternity, Grant is faced with the realization that while long lost peoples imagined immortality, he has achieved it when the human race is nearly dead. Civilization has been destroyed by the Singularity and its aftermath. The accomplishments of the human race have been erased, save for some infinitely abstracted version out in space. Siegfried and his gang are some of the last remnants, though unlikely to survive long enough to achieve the sophistication of culture and poetic thought represented in the rock art, much less recreate thousands of years of further development. It makes you want to kill yourself, or if that's impossible, at least make the gesture.

A lot of this comic is about the irony of great achievement at great expense, an expense so great that it practically wipes out the reasons for the achievement. Or maybe it wipes out the human context within which the achievement can be valued. This is a good reason to preserve the past: it makes the present meaningful. There is nothing worse than blindly destroying old things in the name of progress. People like myself are often denigrated for opposing such progress, but what they are opposing is the destruction. Plus, new is not always better, and is often worse in certain familiar ways which I'll broadly characterize as "dehumanizing." Well, isn't "transhumanism" really about undervaluing what we are, claiming gadgets are superior? What complaints can we make about humans? Are they not good enough artists? Or should we denigrate them for not being able to see infrared light? The complaints of the transhumanists are technical, and their superhumans would be superior in technical ways. Is this better? What if we wanted better art? Looking back tens of thousands of years at cave art, why do we see talent and sensitivity and beauty comparable to our best painters today (as Picasso famously

commented), rather than works as comparatively primitive as the stone tools used to make the paintings? Technical progress doesn't touch eternal human values. It's on a separate track. OK, stay there. Don't destroy human values by making human beings technical artifacts.

The water from the flash flood could have turned a corner and gone out a different way than how Grant, Jackson and finally Siegfried came in, or it could be disappearing into a "sink" amid the large boulders, going underground. I imagine the latter. It may be that roaring floods making noise in an apparently dry cave inspired legends of cave-dwelling dragons in the area. This is not a bad way to warn others of danger there.

Having Siegfried and his crew terrified of drawn representations derives from stories I've heard about primitive people (I don't mind calling them that) being afraid of photographs because they believe the soul is captured thereby. I don't know if these stories are true. People are just as able to believe such nonsense here today. Have you heard of "orbs"? These are pieces of dust close to the lens of a camera, captured in the flash during nighttime shots, rendered as out-of-focus white circles. Some people think these are the souls of dead people. What's the difference?

Jackson is a very reserved, private person. He is uncomfortable seeing Grant naked. It's just not proper. Grant is oblivious to this, coming from a more liberal family background.