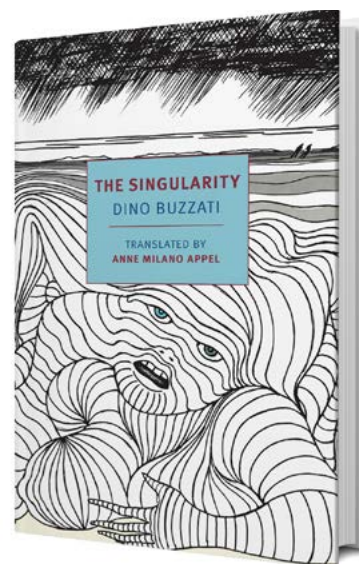


intelligence in public media

The Singularity

Reviewed by Joseph Gartin



Author: *Dino Buzzati; Anne Milano Appel, trans.*
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Reviewer: The reviewer is managing editor of *Studies in Intelligence*.

So ubiquitous now as to be all but unnoticed by harried commuters who slip by every morning and evening, the sprawling and mostly indistinguishable data centers of eastern Loudoun County, Virginia, hug the ground behind fences, guard shacks, and security sensors. Parking lots stand mostly empty. Once the construction workers and their cranes and dump trucks leave their job sites for good, only a dozen or so humans are necessary to run one of the nearly 200 complexes built on fallow farmland. Huge power lines buzz overhead, delivering electricity from plants far to the west. Low-slung, mostly windowless concrete buildings thrum with massive heat-exchanges and thousands of servers. At night, they blink and shimmer with infrared cameras and incongruous splashes

of decorative lights. The buildings seem somehow alive despite their emptiness.

It is a scene that would fit well into Dino Buzzati's 1960 novella *Il grande ritratto* (The Great Portrait), published by New York Review of Books in 2024 as *The Singularity* in a new and vibrant translation by Anne Milano Appel. Buzzati, a prolific and inventive Italian poet, editor, and novelist from the tumult of the 1920s until his death in 1972, spins a tale that was avant-garde in the 1960s but unlike much science fiction has aged rather well.

Recruited to work at a secretive site on an unknown project managed by who knows who, scientist Ermanno Ismani and his no-nonsense wife Elisa approach a collec-

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tion of buildings hidden in a vast mountainous reserve they now call home.

Now that they were looking more closely, they also noticed a dark forest of small antennae poking from the upper edge of the wall: backlit screens, concave dishes like those for radar, think tubes with a kind of cap on top that made them look like tiny chimney pots, and even curious tufts reminiscent of feather dusters. They were opaque, and blue, so that at first glance, especially at night, it was not easy to spot them. In the profound silence of the night, the Ismanis stared at them. But it wasn't silence. (46–47)

The Ismanis' journey to this mountain redoubt is at once comic and familiar to anyone who works in a secret organization. When first approached by a mysterious colonel about committing to a two-year assignment to work on an unspecified goal, Emanno presses for details. They are not forthcoming. The colonel demurs: "At times the military's top-secret machinery rises to the level of absurdity. Our job is to protect the secret. What's concealed inside it, however, is none of our concern." (5)

Later, winding their way through mountain passes to their new home, Elisa (whom Buzzati reveals to have more mettle than the reader first suspects), asks their

minder, Capt. Vestro, "But you know what it is they do there, don't you?" Vestro responds with a mixture of Donald Rumsfeld and Joseph Heller:

Look, ma'am, and forgive me for being pedantic, there are three possibilities: either it isn't a secret but I don't know what it is; or I know but it's a secret; or it's a secret and on top of that I don't know what it is. (13)

We learn the terrible answer along with the Ismanis and their small band of coworkers soon enough. In Buzzati's crisp storytelling (foreshadowed by the cover art, adapted by Katy Homans from Buzzati's graphic novel *Poema a fumetti*), those volatile elements for many tales—secrecy, passion, and hubris—combine to hurtle the reader toward the book's final enigmatic scenes. Elisa Ismani stands in a bare corridor, talking to someone and no one at all:

"Come in. I'll show you a big secret," the voice seemed to be saying.

You too have a secret? Does everyone up here have a secret?"

Everyone. (117)

You won't look at a data center in the same way. ■