

**THE
LAST ONE
TO DIE
PLEASE
TURN OUT
THE LIGHT**

matrix

The media magazine of the British Science Fiction Association

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matrix

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Words of wisdom

Change, control and fear of the same are some of the biggest themes of the science fictional landscape, and they're part of a paranoid streak running throughout this issue. From the torn-from-the-headlines dystopia of *Children of Men* and Stephen Baxter's identifying of an 'aftermath' fiction five years on from 9/11, through to the surveillance state imagined in *Echelon* compared with the more optimistic (not to mention Russian) vision of the 21st Century in Andy Sawyer's latest Foundation Favourites column.

There are other, more subtle, changes in this issue too as Martin McGrath steps down from helming the design and production of *Matrix*, and we'd like to thank him for every single last piece of hard work he has committed to this magazine over the years and look forward to him continuing on with us as our reader-favourite reviewer in the Media Section for many issues to come.

The Matrix Team

Make Your Escape

I have a confession to make. For sixteen months now I've been lying to everyone about the purpose of Escape Pod (www.escapepod.org).

This is a heinous wrong, and I want to use this opportunity to set the story straight and apologize to the world. The apology will come at the end; I don't want it to distract you.

Escape Pod is an audio short fiction magazine. We buy audio rights to stories from authors, narrate them with a team of volunteers, and release them on our web site and podcast feed. When I started doing this in May 2005, I had ambitions that, by giving away stories in an accessible format, I could have an influence on the genre. I wanted this influence because I have opinions that are sharply at odds with many other publishers. The strongest is this: I believe that short SF markets are crippling themselves - and with them, the success of science fiction - by focusing on beautiful stories at the expense of fun stories.

Science fiction has been around for a long time. For most of its history the short story was the firmament of the science fiction universe. It's where ideas hatched, where strange things crept and where the awe-inspiring was

expected at the door. There was a lot of incredibly bad short fiction written in the mid-twentieth century, but most of it was a dynamic bad - it suffered from too much energy rather than not enough.

Today? Stories have grown languid. The ideas are still there, but they're on a low simmer instead of a boil. How many award-nominated stories are introspective reveries where almost nothing happens? How many are rich tapestries of prose about frustrated artists, or animistic mundane objects, or baroque historical twists?

When was the last time you read a story about a space battle? Did you grow up reading stories about space battles? Did they excite you? Did they make hungry to read more SF? Or was your passion for SF ignited by reading about frustrated artists?

I have friends who have picked up copies of the major magazines on bookstore shelves (often at my urging), read them, and never bought another copy. I ask why. It's because fewer than half the stories actually engaged them, and who has time?

Escape Pod is intended as a response. There are still accessible stories being published -- stories where things happen, with clear plots and strong characters and

Steve Eley abandons the good ship *SF Introspection*

Short SF markets are crippling themselves - and with them, the success of science fiction - by focusing on beautiful stories at the expense of fun stories.



strong ideas. Some of these stories are beautiful, too, but that's a side effect, not the purpose. The energy is there (and with a nod to my hosts, there seems to be more energy in UK SF right now than in the US) but it's buffered by a lot of low-energy padding: if yours is the one amazing story in a magazine, you still have to conquer the "Who has time?" effect.

My goal is to bring new audiences into the conversation. We focus on those stories where things happen. Stories with fun in them. We do it in audio because it's inherently more engaging - it's hard to skim past a boring section (another

reason why our stories have to be well-paced). Nearly everyone has a commute these days, whether it's by car or train or bicycle, and people have time to listen when they don't have time to read. Some discover that they have time after all: my favourite feedback is e-mail saying "Thanks to Escape Pod, I now have a subscription to F&SF/Interzone/Asimov's/etc." By giving stories away for free and operating on a donations model, we lower the entry barrier further. All that stands between audiences and stories that make them hungry for more is a moderate bit of Internet literacy (and we're working on that, too).

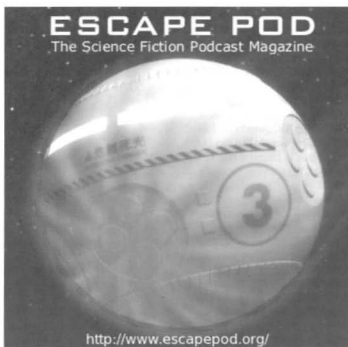
So that's what we're about. I don't believe that any one market is going to save short fiction - but by showing off the fun stuff, by making it easily accessible for people who weren't reading any stories before, we're doing our small part. Over time, as people tell their friends, we're making it a bigger part.

Oh. And what I said above? That was the lie. Not the bulk of it - just the "When I started" part. The truth is, I started Escape Pod because I thought it would be fun to read stories out loud, and putting them on a podcast for other people to listen would be more fun still. I was right. It is fun. The bit about making short fiction better, etc, occurred to me a few weeks later. I do believe it. But it makes a better story when I tell people it came first.

Sorry about that.

Steve Eley

I have friends who have picked up copies of the major magazines on bookstore shelves, read them, and never bought another copy - because fewer than half the stories actually engaged them, and who has time?



<http://www.escapepod.org/>

Flicker

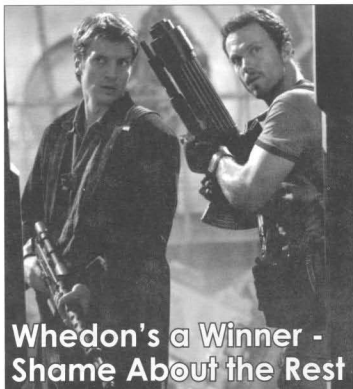
FILM & MEDIA NEWS

Pencilled in for May 2, 2008 Jon Favreau's *IRON MAN* has at last found its villain: arch-nemesis The Mandarin, a world renowned scientist and martial artist who comes complete with alien rings with special powers. Although this will please most Iron Man fans, Favreau warned, "Don't expect a magical Fu Manchu stereotype. We are taking many liberties to update the villain."

Filming has commenced in New York for the Francis ('*Constantine*') Lawrence helmed big screen adaptation of Richard Matheson's *I am Legend*. While Will Smith has long been confirmed to be playing last man on a planet of vampires, the rumours of Johnny Depp playing lead vampire Ben Cortman are unfounded... but Depp may now be appear as another survivor of the plague after re-writes.

While JJ Abrams' new *Star Trek* picture may be raising the hackles of Trekkers and Trekkies up all over the internet, the man behind *Alias* and *Lost* refuses to give them anything specific to moan about. In an interview, he told *Variety* magazine "Star Trek to me was always about infinite possibility and the incredible imagination that Gene Roddenbury brought to that core of characters," but didn't clear up whether or not the film would be the rumoured academy days of young Kirk and Spock. Working on *Lost* has clearly given him too much practice at teasing his fans!

Danny Boyle's hush hush project *Sunshine*, in which a team of astronauts attempt to re-ignite our dying Sun, has been described by comics supremo Warren Ellis as, "The geek catnip of 2007," largely due its combination of Michelle Yeoh and spaceships. Learn all you can on the film's excellent website and blog <http://www.sunshinedna.com/>



Whedon's a Winner - Shame About the Rest

Matrix favourite *Serenity* was amongst the winners at this year's Hugo awards, scooping the Best Dramatic Presentation Award (long form).

Knocking the Hugos is always an easy sport but looking over this year's shortlists *Matrix* can't help but join in the chorus and question the validity of an award that works well enough in its main categories (in other words the ones people pay attention to) but seems

determined to undermine itself elsewhere. With the same small pool of names turning up again and again in many of the other categories and in-joke nominations for one-off plays staged at last year's Worldcon and even last year's Hugo ceremony speech (*although at least this one was pretty funny - ed*), is this really the way we want others to see us and value our supposedly most populist and inclusive award?

30 Years of Dredd

2007 will mark thirty years on the crime-riddled streets of *Mega-City One* for the original old story face himself, Judge Dredd.

Originally appearing in the pages of 2000AD way back in 1977 and staying there pretty much ever since, the big-chinned one has trampled his way to the top of the comics pile to become one of its most enduring and pop-psychotic icons.

To mark this approaching anniversary the original creators (writer John Wagner and artist Carlos Ezquerra) have returned to the character to tell the origin story of the Judges and the creation of the Mega-City lifestyle that's beloved by all (except the actual citizens of course).

Origins runs from September '06 through to February '07.



Orbiting the World

SF and Fantasy imprint Orbit is set to launch in the USA and Australia.

Orbit USA, to be launched by the Hachette Book Group USA, will be incorporated into its Little, Brown division under Publisher Michael Pietsch. Orbit Australia will form part of Hachette Livre Australia.

Orbit USA will be run by Tim Holman, currently Publishing Director of Orbit in the UK. He will also oversee the development of Orbit Australia, where an editor will be appointed to manage the local publishing, and both imprints are expected to launch within the next 12-18 months.

Tim Holman said: "Many of the challenges facing SF and Fantasy publishers are the same in the UK, USA and Australia - and many SF and Fantasy writers have truly international appeal. The success of Orbit in the UK over recent years would not have been possible if we had not published so many great writers from around the world, so the launch of Orbit USA and Orbit Australia is particularly exciting."

Congratulations to BSFA member Steve Dean, whose first novel *Soulkeepers* has been released by Hadesgate Publications.

Described as a fantasy for all ages the book is the first of a three book deal and was swiftly followed by the launch of *The Servicing and Maintenance of Wayland Snowball*, an adult SF comedy, at Fantasycon in September.

A third book is due in April 2007 and they can all be purchased via Amazon or www.hadesgates.co.uk.

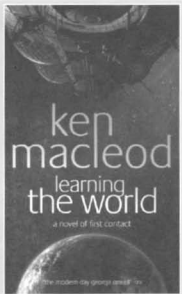


Third Award for First Contact

Ken MacLeod has won his third Prometheus Award for *Learning The World*, his novel of first contact between humanity and a bat-like race of aliens.

The Prometheus Award is presented by the Libertarian Futurist Society and designed to honour science fiction writers who explore the theme of freedom in their work.

Ken's next book, *The Execution Channel*, is due in Spring 2007 and will mark a move from his usual space operatic turf to a far nearer future setting in a story sources are claiming will see Ken truly let rip and could well be his best, and most urgent, book yet.



Peter Jackson Options Novik's *Temeraire*

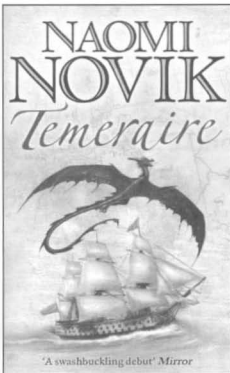
The *Temeraire* book series by Naomi Novik has been optioned for film by none other than Peter Jackson.

Naomi Novik's debut *Temeraire* series was launched by HarperCollins' Voyager imprint in January 2006 to widespread critical acclaim. Set in the Napoleonic Wars, these books blend true history with swashbuckling fantasy, action with romance as a Dragon Air Force participates in the battle for England's survival.

Jackson got involved when producer Lucas Foster read proofs in January and sent them to Jackson's manager, Ken Kamins at Key Creatives. When Jackson read it, he was hooked.

"As I was reading these books, I could see them coming to life in my mind's eye," Jackson said. "These are beautifully written novels, not only fresh, original and fast-paced, but full of wonderful characters with real heart."

Part two of *Temeraire*: *Throne of Jade* is out now with the third book *Temeraire: Black Powder War* out in January 2007.



New Maps for These Territories

Cyberpunk authors William Gibson and Neal Stephenson are to take up virtual residence in the digital world of *Second Life*. UK publisher Penguin is stumping up the real world cash to fund the construction of digital environments based on the author's books as a further extension of the popular online community.

For instance you'll soon be able to stroll your avatar around the plush new media offices of Blue Ant from Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* or simply note that much of

the conceptual architecture behind *Second Life* is already heavily influenced by Stephenson's imagining of the Metaverse in *Snow Crash*.

Meanwhile the release date of the new Gibson novel, provisionally titled *Warchalker* (although subject to change), seems to move ever further back but fragments of work in progress have been appearing on Gibson's blog at www.williamgibsonbooks.com.

SOUND.BITS



Where is People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals - and Moviegoers - when you need them? This is the deviant 'cultural' level to which America has declined. I hope it's the nadir, but I fear we will decline much further. I'm no prude, but I know what sick is. And Clerks II is the epitome of it."

--Outspoken American blogger Debbie Schlusless misses the point of new Kevin Smith movie Clerks II



We learn by imitation, and if we imitate the actions and appearances of successful or beautiful people we believe that we also will be successful or beautiful—a kind of Lamarckian evolution through acquired traits. It's hard to change from the inside, to let go of whatever emotional baggage we've collected over the years. It's a lot easier to change our outward appearance and tell ourselves that if we look different we are different, that somehow this external gestalt has seeped into our psyche and fundamentally altered who we are. It's a lie, of course, but a very seductive one."

--Clade author Mark Budz on life in hypereality. Source: *Strange Horizons*



The generation that is growing up with the phone as their primary means of net interaction - listening to music and podcasts, text messaging and picture taking all with their "communicator" - is only going to be reached by media as antiquated as "books" if we can find a way to deliver the content to where they are. The aggregator that figures out how best to get the book or at least the knowledge of the book into the palm device will have done something."

--Pyr editor Lou Anders on text versus txt. Source: SF Signal



The Japanese are fantastically tolerant of foreigners. They have to be, because without ever realising it we break a hundred rules a day and commit social offences that would be unforgivable to someone Japanese. Tokyo is slightly different, in that it's a highly successful city first and everything else second. So the sense of community is slightly fractured. Tokyoites still wait for lights to change before crossing the street and bow almost incessantly, but you get the sense that most of them don't quite mean it anymore."

--Author Jon Courtenay Grimwood shares his latest research. Source: *Infinity Plus*

The Wars of the World

Stephen Baxter on the date the earth stood still

As I write, the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the US is approaching. The extraordinary images linger – the planes, the buildings, people falling like snowflakes down the glass faces of the towers.

The effects since have been dramatic. Pentagon strategists are planning for the coming 'long war' against terrorism, that, it is said, will shape the lives of the coming generation as the Cold War shaped the lives of the baby-boomers (including myself).

The Cold War did however produce some great art. Some of it was of the awful-warning type, like Sidney Lumet's *Fail Safe* (1964) and Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959). But there was memorable satire, including Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1963), and metaphorical treatments of paranoid fears, such as Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* (1951) – and longings for resolution, such as Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951).

Today, the 'war on terror' is similarly shaping our culture. (My own response, I suppose, is *Resplendent* [Gollancz, September 2006], stories of occupation and resistance, totalitarianism and asymmetric warfare.) Some of the first despatches are drawn more or less immediately from the events of 2001 – perhaps too much so. John Updike's *Terrorist*, Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, and Martin Amis's short story 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' are all attempts to get inside the head of the modern terrorist, but have received mixed

reviews for their overdependence on research rather than empathy (see for instance Natasha Walter's review in *The Guardian* of 24th July 2006).

The apotheosis of literalism so far is the movie *United 93*. British director Paul Greengrass (in a feature in *The Observer* of 9 April 2006) points out that the passengers of the 'other' hijacked flight, still in the air when the news of the other attacks came through, were the first western civilians to realise they were operating in a post-9/11 world; they are a metaphor for the subsequent militarisation of the whole world. This real-time reconstruction seems an agonising work, and agonisingly made.

More direct dramatisations are on the way, with no doubt more controversy, such as Oliver Stone's *The World Trade Center*, starring Nicolas Cage, about police officers rescued from the wreckage. Perhaps such literal retellings are a necessary part of the acceptance of change.

Meanwhile, 9/11 has been used as the background for other dramas. Jeffrey Archer's *False Impression* (2006) is a chase story set during the hours after the attacks when all the planes in American airspace were grounded, and the protagonists have to find other ways of fleeing. The book has a certain ingenuity, I suppose, but good old Jeffrey has always had a problem with taste. Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006) is more thoughtful, a portrait of New Yorkers' consciousnesses suddenly disrupted from without, as shocking as 'a sneak attack from Mars' (which is, of course, is the

"A whole new generation of TV shows in the US reflect the new mood in more indirect ways. You have characters trying to put their lives back together after some immense catastrophe – a plane crash, a hurricane, an abduction – while simultaneously coping with a carnival of ongoing strangeness and uncertainty."

starting point of Spielberg's recent reimagining of *The War of the Worlds*, see below).

One step away from 9/11 itself is fiction depicting the fearful new world we inhabit. The most basic response is perhaps technoporn like *Stealth* (dir. Rob Cohen, 2005), a movie in which gung-ho fighter pilots go to war against incomprehensibly jabbering non-Americans with rebel yells and heavy metal music: 'War is a team sport! Their kin-based morality is a throw-back to the Iron Age.'

The closer a technothriller gets to home, however, the harder it is to get the mood right. Chris Cleave's *Incendary* (2005), in which the Arsenal football stadium is blown up by suicide bombers, had the misfortune of being published in July 2005, just as the bombers hit London for real. James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta* (2006), featuring a bombing of the Houses of Parliament, was put back from 2005.

Timing is everything. That master of the technothriller Tom Clancy actually depicted the crashing of a passenger jet into the Capitol building. But his novel *Debt of Honour* was published in 1995, long

enough before 9/11 for Clancy to seem a prophet, not a casher-in.

This novel is actually the twelfth (to date) in a loose sequence following the career of Clancy's Harrison-Ford hero Jack Ryan, in which Clancy has sketched out a kind of nightmarish alternate history. In *Patriot Games* (1988) Ryan battles Irish terrorists. He faces the Soviets in a set of books through to *The Cardinal of the Kremlin* (1989). In the 1990s Ryan confronts Middle-Eastern terrorists (*The Sum of All Fears*, 1992), economic competition from Japan, in *Debt of Honour* (1995), Asian warlords in *The Bear and the Dragon* (2001) – and, at last, terrorists on US soil (*The Teeth of the Tiger*, 2004). It is a dismal parade of one American neurosis after another, each melting away with time.

The most interesting is perhaps *Executive Orders* (1996), the sequel to *Debt of Honour*, in which Ryan, catapulted to the Presidency by the plane strike, struggles to gain control. You get the sense that it must really have been something like this on 9/11.

Our own Greg Bear's *Quantico* (2005) is a technothriller with





loftier ambitions. A few decades in the future a relative of 9/11 victims uses the toy box of the American-anthrax killer to unleash an appalling new bio-agent on all the world's great religious centres. The heroes are FBI agents; Quantico is their training establishment, where apparently Bear has given lectures on the future of crime.

This is a brave book. Bear directly challenges current US policy; for instance we are shown the dismal legacy of the current intervention in Iraq. But the author of *Eon* seems imaginatively stunned. This is a sort of nightmarish fantasia spun out of the elements of 9/11. And Bear is reduced to didacticism, saying in an afterword: 'The biological weapons and processes in this novel are possible, but not in the way I have described them. I have tried to persuade of the dangers without providing salient details.' This is an odd reversal of the usual strategy of science fiction; here the truth is not revealed but actually hidden from us, so that budding bombers will pick up no 'not tips', while we take away awful warnings.

More metaphorical treatments have been led by Steven Spielberg's

2005 version of HG Wells's *War of the Worlds*, a novel which has been reworked repeatedly to encapsulate the paranoia of successive ages. Now the aliens don't come from space but erupt from beneath the earth, like almighty suicide-bomber sleeper cells. Spielberg deliberately echoes 9/11 images: the hand-drawn notices pleading for news of the lost, the walls of smoke billowing between buildings. There can have been few more powerful depictions of ordinary people under attack in their homes – indeed in their cars, a strikingly American motif. But Spielberg, a master of the telling image, could never match the most extraordinary 9/11 image of all, of planes and towers.

Meanwhile, a whole new generation of TV shows in the US reflect the new mood in more indirect ways. In shows like *Lost*, *Invasion* and *The 4400* you have characters trying to put their lives back together after some immense catastrophe – a plane crash, a hurricane, an abduction – while simultaneously coping with a carnival of ongoing strangeness, uncertainty and threat. Shaun Cassidy, the creator of *Invasion*,

is explicit: 'We are living in an aftermath world. Post-9/11 I think the whole country has felt a sense of unease and disquiet about what the future holds' (quote from the *Guardian* media supplement, 23 January 2006).

Of course this shows draw on older templates. *Invasion* has a heritage that stretches back through *The X-Files* to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. *Lost* often reminds me of the 1956 movie *Forbidden Planet*, set on an island in the sky; just as in the movie an 'id-monster' is one theory about what's going on in *Lost*. But in each case the material has been reworked to reflect the anxieties of a new age.

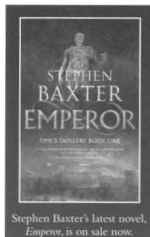
Meanwhile, in an age in which Al-Qaida claims to be meting out divine justice on America, perhaps it's inevitable that the morally purest of all American fantasy heroes has returned in Bryan Singer's movie (2006). If only the Man of Steel had been flying five years ago.

The writers of the Cold War took the mood of their times and spun fables that enriched the collective consciousness of their age. Today there are many excellent examples of aftermath fiction in

the genre and beyond, notably the (very fine) near-future thrillers by Paul McAuley and Jon Courtney Grimwood. But I would argue that the creatives are still exploring the new mood. In April 2006, the first trailers for *United 93* were greeted with cries of 'Too soon!' Perhaps we must wait until the wound has healed over a little more.

And perhaps we are still disappointed that 2001 turned out to be not the year of the Monolith but of the Twin Towers.

Stephen Baxter



Stephen Baxter's latest novel, *Emperor*, is on sale now.

Chaos or Submission

Perhaps Del Rey have data-mining personnel to rival those of the Echelon organisation or maybe I just got lucky, but either way this first novel by Hollywood screenwriter Josh Conviser managed to float its way across my radar at exactly the right moment.

The book is a classic thriller format retrofitted through the dark scanners of the science fictional gaze. However *Echelon* is far more than the sum of its component parts, and where there is undoubtedly a great deal of fun to be had figuring out subtle layers of influence and hybridisation, the book is also an addictive adventure in its own right and benefits from a widescreen style of imaginative storytelling that combines the brevity of screenwriting with a novel's budgetary freedoms.

But what first drew Josh towards the themes and technologies explored in *Echelon*, and was the fact that he started to write this story of ultimate surveillance as a novel rather than a screenplay linked to a more personal desire to explore issues of creative control?

"Yes and no. On a personal level, the theme of control – or lack of it – is something I've struggled with all my life. As a kid, I had real problems with the idea that an outside force could come in and wipe out the world I knew. I stayed up nights terrified that each plane flying overhead was a Russian missile. Even now, I'm a big worrier. The world's chaos is a difficult thing for me to handle. As such, the theme of control was a natural for me. In *Echelon*, I was interested in what a "controlled" world would look like – and then how it might fall apart.

"On another level, control is a central issue in the political choices we're making today. We live in a world with very real threats. Both here and in the UK, we have acquiesced to degrees of surveillance in an attempt to null those threats. I think all of us would accept some loss of privacy to avert terrorist action, but how much surveillance will make us safe? Balancing safety with freedom may well define both our nations' futures."

So, with this in mind, was it hard to strike a balance between the demands of an action thriller plot and the more speculative elements of writing a realistic future? And what about this new genre term spy-fi the book is being tagged with?

"This was something I thought about quite a bit. I want *Echelon* to keep a reader on the edge of his/her seat. As such, it can't have too much that will pull from the raw energy of the thriller. I tried to generate a thriller framework that would capture the reader on an emotional level. That then allowed me to delve into more speculative concepts without slowing the story. This ability (to hit on larger concepts while keeping a reader engrossed in the story) is, to my mind, the thriller's greatest attribute. I think of subject matter fits perfectly within it.

"I should also say that I didn't set out to write a genre buster. When I decided to write a novel, I looked at my stack of ideas and felt *Echelon* was the most interesting. My own interests are eclectic, crossing genres. *Echelon* flowed from that. It was only after I finished the book and my agent took it out that it dawned on me that I had crossed two distinct genres. *Echelon* got interest from both thriller and sf publishers. I think *Echelon* also reaches readers of both genres. Personally, I'm surprised there isn't more spy-fi. Spy thrillers look at our world from a different perspective. Sf looks at our world by showing a possible future. I think the two compliment each other perfectly."

One of the stock-in-trades of the author-interview genre is the favourite writer question, and knowing that Josh has cited influences including Frank Herbert, Orson Scott Card and William Gibson amongst others I wanted to find out what qualities of writing and other inspirational concepts he might have drawn from them. Basically not just who were his favourite authors, but why?

"I love seeing who other authors read and why. I like science fiction for its ability to shed light on our world through the guise of a possible future – a very powerful

ability. It's one thing to write that our actions will have consequences. It's another to thrust a reader into the world our actions may create. I think *Dune* is one of the most astounding creations in all of fiction. To generate such a novel world so thoroughly, and then populate it with characters that are so deeply engrossing is an amazing feat. I reread *Dune* constantly.

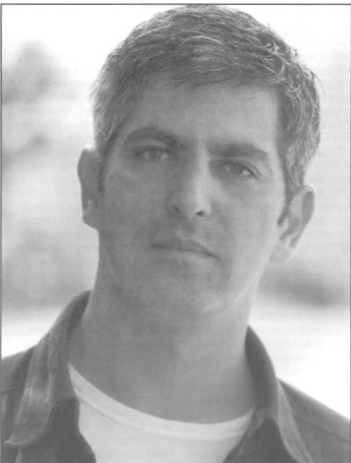
"Orson Scott Card: I love Card's ability to take our own world and extrapolate out possible futures. The political machinations in his *ENDER* and *Bean* series are wonderful. As a writer, I know how difficult it is to show these larger geo-political issues while still advancing the story. In doing such, Card is the master.

"I first read *Neuromancer* in university. It blew me away. I love the dark world he foresaw, and the clarity of that vision. I was also deeply moved by his imagery. His ability to show emotion through physical action is amazing. There's also a tension through all his novels – a sense that his characters are slightly off – just a little different

from us. As a means of showing how man/machine integration will shift the nature of humanity, I think this technique is masterful. Gibson's ability to show how an info blitz both draws us together and isolates us is potent.

"Screenwriting style wise, I take a lot from my experience as a screenwriter. My dialog certainly links more to that of film, or real life, than most authors'. There are very few long dialog sections in *Echelon*. While such does work in literature, it's not how people talk. People talk in fits and starts – leaving unsaid what is often the most important. That is what I've tried to convey in *Echelon*.

"I've also tried to have the emotions of my characters come to light through their actions. In a film, getting into someone's head requires a voice over – something I try to avoid. While I do use internal dialog in *Echelon*, I try to have actions define my characters. Hence Ryan's climbing, or Sarah playing bass in a punk band. How these people do these activities, and why,



Tom Hunter listens in on Echelon author Josh Conviser

shows who they are."

Talking about the novel's main characters some more, I was especially drawn to the way that Ryan Laing, the main protagonist, is a far more complicated creation than the typical indomitable hero of the airport racks. After all, it may be a major spoiler to mention that he dies, but not perhaps when this event takes place on the opening page.

"Laing is the most reluctant of heroes. He's so set in his ways – his life is so controlled – that only death kicks him free. Thrust into a new world, he must then find his way. He begins with a driving need to impose order on the world. After a traumatic childhood (showing him just how chaotic life can be) he finds Echelon. He swallows Echelon's goal of control hook line and sinker. Then, as the book opens, he's pushed into a new world where Echelon begins to crumble, and even Laing's control of his own being becomes impossible.

"As to my intentions for him, and for the book in general, I like playing with the norms of storytelling. I like the idea of shocking the reader with an event that he/she doesn't see coming. Having my hero die in the first sentence is just such thing. I play with the reader's expectations to boost tension. In this, Ryan offered great potential – being a man of opposites. A hard man covering deep insecurity. A man of action who's lost in his own inner turmoil."

Perhaps the other 'main' character is the Echelon technology itself. Rather than ask Josh directly about this, I opted to pick up a couple of key lines from the book itself and asked him to expand on them...

From P146: *Today, success can be defined as maximising the information running through you.*

"I'm fascinated by how information spreads – and who's spreading it. The growing ability for anyone to reach a mass audience was supposed to open the playing field. But, the more access that's granted to all, the more it seems that the real power to shape and disseminate information gets concentrated. Whenever an individual breaks through the

clutter, he or she gets swallowed by the dwindling number of major corporations dominating the media.

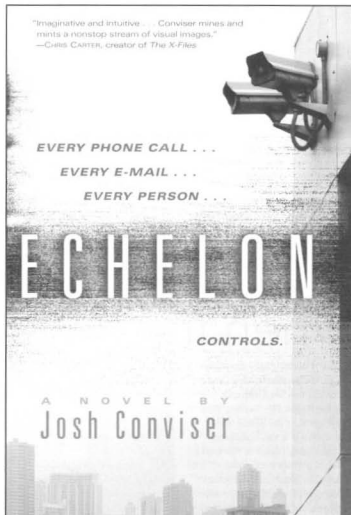
"Don't get me wrong – I don't see anything nefarious in this. But it's an interesting trend. So – to go back to the line, I'm touching on the idea that to gain power in a world of information, one needs to become a node through which that data flows. In today's terms – having a blog on your MySpace page is a drop in the bucket. It reaches very few. But, having all of MySpace reaches many. Hence Fox's purchase of MySpace – which then illustrates the consolidation of successful nodes of information."

From P225: *The map's gone dark here. We've gridded ourselves to death. No place left to explore, nowhere to expand. We've illuminated every nook and cranny and succeeded in electrifying ourselves.*

"This is one of my favourite lines. It's one said by Sarah Peters, Echelon's heroine. It's something I think about quite a bit. There's the physical truth of this idea – that we have mapped out most of our earth. But, more than that, Sarah is talking about the "theme parking" of life's great emotions. I think there are fewer events where one can put it all on the line and get that visceral taste that you're on life's knife edge. This doesn't have to mean putting one's life at risk. It's hard to find purity in our mass of communication. Everything seems sullied by the commoditization of the human condition. To love, to hate, to strive – these depths and heights of our emotional capacity seem harder and harder to reach.

"We're building a world of cycling references – where little that is new and real can be found. Everything becomes a commodity – even our own darkest drives. As a writer, I realize that I'm guilty of this myself. And I'm not advocating the destruction of market economy. I think this is a pitfall of mass information flow – something to be aware of. The key, I think, is to not get lost in the blitz of reality television, terrifying news stories, and infinite web pages. If, within all that, I can still find pieces of my life that are true, and mine alone, then I'm ahead of the game. In the book, Sarah wants to push all that chatter

"Imaginative and intuitive... Conviser mines and mints a nonstop stream of visual images."
—Chris CARTER, creator of The X-Files



away to see what lies underneath. She craves that deep experience. Ryan, on the other hand, uses it to shield himself – to fuzz a view within. He's not sure he wants to know what resides in his "heart of darkness."

So how comfortable is Josh online and does he think it's important for people to take more time to 'touch base' with reality? For instance, in the book Ryan Laing's rock climbing seems to work as a method for grounding him in a tangible and physical way and acts as counterpoint to his increasing posthumanness.

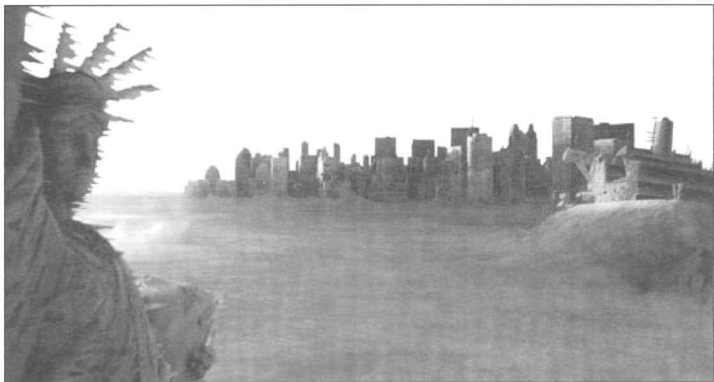
"I'm not sure it matters how one does it – what matters is that one finds a place of truth. For Ryan, climbing offers a world of meaning – one devoid of the grey middle. It's life or death. The rules are simple. The intensity of the experience cuts everything else away and, while he's on the rock, he finds peace.

"My own experiences on the rock are similar. I don't risk my life – not like Ryan – but I think there's something to stepping outside your normal life.

"In Echelon, I also use the natural world to understand the digital. Sarah uses a white water kayaking program to interface with the system she's trying to hack. The interface allows her to make sense of the data stream blowing past her."

Finally, knowing Josh is hard at work on a second book featuring Ryan and Sarah, can he give us any hints on what sort of world they'll find themselves in?

"I'm almost done with the sequel. The next book takes place several years after the first ends. Because of events that occur at the end of Echelon (you have to read the book to know what they are!) the world looks a lot more like what we see around us today. If Echelon was about control, the sequel is about chaos."



When the Big Apple Bites It

Lon S. Cohen

I live a stone's throw from New York City, alternately referred to as The City, Gotham, The Big Apple, The Melting Pot, The Capital of the World, and Metropolis. It is also considered the publishing capital of the world, which is perhaps why many writers make it the object of destruction for supernatural and alien invaders because all of our rejection letters seem to have return addresses from New York City. Of course most of that destruction occurs on film and although the famous Hollywood sign has borne the brunt of many said invasions I don't think people get the same satisfaction watching nine wooden letters shattering to bits as they do from seeing the Empire State Building being reduced to a pile of smoldering steel and dust. When I speak of New York, as a resident of this metropolitan area, I am particularly speaking of Manhattan. Even the word Manhattan suggests the famous skyline with its letters reaching up in Gothic spires and serifs. There in the adopted Indian name we Americans have our very own Rome, our center of commerce, gateway to freedom and democracy, city of every culture, denomination, and social bend. Most of America is plain, white bread, Christian. Manhattan is the bazaar of the ancient world transplanted to modern times. I

admit this grand lady has broken my own heart many times and I've once or twice savored the moments of its destruction in say the miles-wide saucers in *Independence Day* or the demonic marshmallow sailor from *Ghostbusters*.

But why, I wonder, do we love the sight of steel superstructures crumbling under the power of a laser beam or a giant gorilla? What is it about turning the city into a frozen tundra that warms our hearts? Do we all secretly hate Manhattan? Are we afraid of what it has become, a modern day Sodom or Gomorrah? It's a little more superficial than that, not so rooted in our collective morality or religious mythology. The fact is that New York City is the center of the modern world in many, many ways. Think of it: Art, Fashion, Commerce, Publishing, Finance, Bagels! All of them are better and

bigger in New York. Imagine if in one fell swoop, all of that went away. Talk about putting all your eggs in one basket. The lights on Broadway can be put out by a treacherous electrical storm. One robot with giant metal feet can put an end to it all.

Remember Stephen King's great novel *The Stand*? A virus wiped out everyone in America except for a chosen few within hours. People died in their cars trying to escape the city. In one scene a couple of survivors have to climb over and around the stalled cars lining the streets and tunnels to escape Manhattan island. King captured that feeling of utter despair by using the destruction of Manhattan to exemplify the quandary of how to escape the city from the inside when all services, everything imaginable, just goes dead. The entire wealth of the city

is at their disposal and all they can think to do is escape. The smell of rotting bodies, decomposing foodstuff and stagnant water in the heat all posed both a sensory and a very real medical threat to the characters. They were trapped in a floating citadel of death. The closeness of the people and places, once a comfort, becomes the most frightening thing about it.

Also think to the classic *Escape From New York*. The city itself becomes so degraded that the government decides to just wall it in and let the criminals fend for themselves. It's *Road Warrior* on the streets of New York — a dismal apocalyptic future where, of course, New York City represents the lowest of moral and social squalor. Some here in the states and abroad think that this might be a good solution. Especially in the late seventies and early eighties



Do we all secretly
hate Manhattan?
Are we afraid that
it has become
a modern
day Sodom or
Gomorrah?

when crime in the city was high and the flight of the middle class left this borough almost literally smoldering.

Now new threats come from the sky to try to take her down. In *Independence Day*, *King Kong*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *X-Men*, all the threats seem to be bent on destroying what we have built up. If you want to show force, really get to a country at its heart, you don't go to some backwater and kill a few cows. You go to centre stage and put on some fireworks. You shake the society at its foundations and try to interrupt its social and financial hub, New York City is that place. It can be said to be the first modern city, the city of the Twentieth Century. There is history and art, there are people of great import in residence on any given day, and there is symbolism that pervades through every gothic ornament, every cobbled street and every broken down warehouse, even in the small, dark, corners of the city has history. If you can destroy that, you can stab the heart of the world.

The Big Apple is a character in itself. When you speak about the setting as a character in a story, you just can't avoid it with Manhattan. The island is many characters, a virtual Sybil of split personalities and you never know just which face she will show. Of course, Toronto is usually a filmatic stand in for Manhattan because it has similar looking locales and is cheaper to film in. At least when they are destroying New York I can take solace in the fact that it is the wannabe northern neighbor they are trampling and not the real thing.

In many ways the attacks on the World Trade Center met and exceeded every dramatic depiction of destruction we have ever produced. Frighteningly, we now know exactly how those buildings of steel and stone explode from every angle. No special effects technician could have imagined a death more horrible for the Towers. What was left was nothing more than two giant smoldering holes and a red glow, as if they were swallowed by Hell itself. We also know how the masses will react. How the world will react. Watching the real video of the attacks on that day I felt both too close and too removed from what was happening. Too close because it was my city that was falling and too removed because of the eerie feeling of

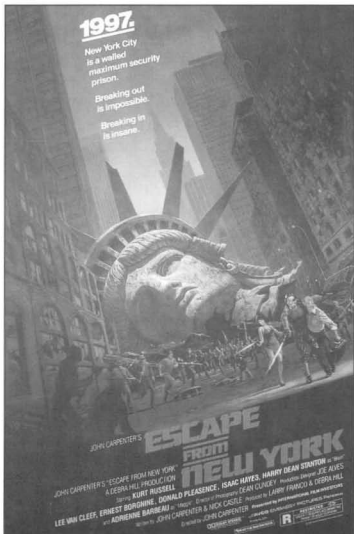
familiarity, that I had seen this many times before. The billowing thick smoke was the *Blob* of the old fifties film and the people were running and screaming exactly as they did in that black and white classic film. Or it was *War of the Worlds* and the invaders

had just touched down and with gigantic guns had blown to bits our most sacred structures. We were awestruck at the power.

The movies of ultimate destruction of this gothic citadel prepared me for the visuals but not the emotion. The sense of utter

sadness and uselessness was missing from those films. It's easy to use special effects to place a spaceship into the skyline of Manhattan. They did it in the eighties with the miniseries event *V*. It's easy to use rotoscoped laser beams to destroy little models of the Empire State Building or the flood a pool with a scale figurine of the Statue of Liberty. But it's hard to capture that real sense of vulnerability that comes with watching a monolith or two that were never meant to crumble come falling down, reduced to dust. In the movies we vaporize people and things all the time, usually more and much bigger. But in reality, to watch these structures literally disappear before my eyes was a scale of enormity I never believed I'd witness in my life.

I remember very soon after the 9/11 attacks on New York when people were discussing these things. I remember that everyone was hypersensitive to violence and destruction. Now the memories and emotions have faded just a little. And although many people like myself think in terms of the world pre- and post-9/11—much the same way I imagine my grandparents thing of life before Pearl Harbor and after Pearl Harbor, or my Great-Great Grandparents might think of life before and after the American Civil War—I long for the next image of dramatic representation that depicts New York City crumbling. I believe that the next time I watch the city destroyed on the big screen, I will know what is exactly at stake.





In the Media Section

ON FILM

Dystopian unrest in *Children of Men*; interference in *Snakes on a Plane*; *Severance* surprises; no hope for *Tideland* and *The Wicker Man*

ON DVD

The avant garde of *The Atrocity Exhibition*; Danish weirdness in *Allegro*; couch potato conspiracy in *The Lone Gunmen*

ON TV

Bones doesn't break

ON ART

Time lapse photography at the edge of space

ON MUSIC

Are music videos really at the bottom of the sf pile?



Suffer the Children

Martin McGrath

One of the many surprising things about Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation of PD James's novel *The Children of Men* is the transformation of a dry and highly conservative novel into an exciting and, at least on the surface, quite radical movie.

This adaptation, the definite-article-deprived *Children of Men*, bears only a passing relationship with the novel. James looked into the maw of Armageddon and emerged concerned only with the emotional constipation of the WASP bourgeoisie, the plodding architecture of the Anglican Church and naive religious allegory. Writing in 1993, James's "future" England actually harks back to an imagined, idyllic 1950s, whereas Cuarón's film could hardly be more contemporary. The two share a premise – what would happen to the world if humanity became infertile – and some character names, but develop in quite a different direction.

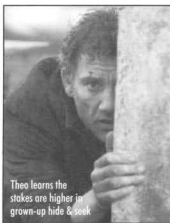
In both stories Theo (Owen) lives in a world where no woman has conceived for decades and where England is ruled by an authoritarian government who have preserved a kind of order as the rest of the world succumbs to chaos. Theo becomes involved with a group of opponents of the regime, the Fishes, and through them discovers that a young woman is, miraculously, pregnant. He becomes committed to protecting the woman and her child from the forces of chaos around her as people struggle to exploit the baby for political ends.

The most visually impressive of Cuarón's departures from James's story is in his vision of this future England. Gone are the novel's depopulated but still genteel country villages and the wistful decay of donnish Oxford, to be replaced by a cramped, dirty and violent metropolitan anarchy. The cinematography and set design are superb. Dystopian London is realised in fantastic detail and is both immediately recognisable and fundamentally alien.

But it is in the politics of the story where James and Cuarón diverge most crucially. Cuarón's story is set in a world where the impositions on personal freedom



Since when were sb masks part of the uniform for five-a-side football?



Theo learns the stakes are higher in grown-up hide & seek

undertaken in pursuit of the "War on Terror" have been extended to their most extreme conclusion. All foreigners are herded into cages like cattle, the freedom to travel has been restricted and law is enforced with unbridled brutality. Meanwhile the country is full of frustrated, disenfranchised and angry masses ready to burst into violence.

James hints at such abuses, but they are distant and never directly impinge on the still comfortable lives of her characters. Even her terrorists ultimately concede that they wouldn't really do anything very different from the government, even if they could. For Cuarón, by contrast, the reality of chaos and oppression is right at the heart of the story and gets presented in eye-blinking detail. One scene, as Theo and Kee (Ashitey) enter Bexhill – a vast

internment camp where refugees live in squalor – is like a "best of" collection of recent news images, replaying scenes from Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.

Cuarón's anger at such abuses of justice is obvious and it is clear that the film's sympathies are with those suffer – the poor, the immigrants, the weak – but if I have a reservation about *Children of Men* it is that, while it is clear what Cuarón is against, it's far from obvious what he is for. The film is awash with moral ambiguity – the government is corrupt, but so are those leading the fight against it. Even Theo is damaged – a drunkard, former activist who now works for the government and who is dragged into Kee's life by the pledge of cash.

Only Jasper (Caine) seems to have Cuarón's undivided admiration – but Jasper has withdrawn from the world, living in isolation in the woods, smoking dope and dispensing stoner wisdom. Jasper has paid a price for his past resistance to the government but, immensely likeable though he is (Caine is excellent), his disengagement from the world hardly offers a solution to the problems of this future.

The only other moment where Cuarón seems to reveal an alternative vision comes in the midst of a battle sequence that pounds the senses like a bad day in Beirut. Soldiers, rebels and refugees

are halted in their tracks by a crying baby as Theo and Kee pass through them all in a moment of perfect stillness. It is an undeniably powerful image – a common thread of humanity amidst carnage – but it is also one of very few moments in the film that don't ring true. Everyone stands back to reverentially let them pass, nobody questions this extraordinary sight, no one tries to grab the child for themselves, and none of the soldiers think of stopping them.

There is undoubted power in Cuarón's furious "if this goes on" critique of the present, but his film is much less convincing when posting alternatives.

Despite this slight reservation, *Children of Men* is a tremendously successful piece of entertainment – I found myself completely involved in the story and wrapped up in the world Cuarón creates. Strong performances from Caine and the trio of women (Moore, Ferris and especially Ashitey) plus a great cameo by Mullan as a corrupt immigration officer bring the story to life. And, as Theo warms up during the course of the story, Owen delivers an excellent, vulnerable performance as a leading man.

This is intelligently made cinema, combining handsome good looks with a genuine desire to talk about important and pressing issue and that makes it perhaps the first truly unmissable sf movie of 2006.

Music of Change

Zetterstrom (Ulich Thomsen) is a pianist with only one flaw – he is obsessed with performing perfectly. Since early childhood, self-imposed high standards have overshadowed his life and now threaten his relationship with the beautiful Andrea (Helena Christensen). When Andrea finally leaves him following the abortion of their child, Zetterstrom loses the last shred of his emotion and focuses on his all important music career.

But his career is not spared Zetterstrom's emotionless tortures. His music is technically perfect but lacks passion, and, refusing to play in front of people, Zetterstrom performs inside a box made of screens – imagery repeated throughout the film.

He also refuses to return to his home town of Copenhagen. But something strange is happening in the city...

Zetterstrom's memories, now 'unused', are claimed by the city to create "The Zone" – an inaccessible labyrinth of moving streets and indoor forests, encased in an invisible wall and completely shut off from the rest of the world.

As director Christoffer Boe explains, "A man suppresses his past. A city takes over his memories. The city now remembers what the man has forgotten. The idea contains three important elements – the man's past, the city and the construct that unites the two.

The end result is a blend of Love, Copenhagen and Science Fiction."

Allegro is a highly stylized science fiction romance that operates on many levels. Undeniably an existential masterpiece, this captivating story is about learning to accept your mistakes and getting a second chance to correct them.

With beautiful cinematography and superb special effects, *Allegro* is striking and unforgettable. The characterisation is wonderful – Andrea and Zetterstrom are truly three-dimensional people and even minor supporting characters have depth and believability. Zetterstrom is selfish and cold and yet remains sympathetic throughout; Andrea is loving but uncommunicative and so shoulders much of the blame.

Their relationship is ambiguous, and not the real focus of the film



Undeniably an existential masterpiece, this captivating story is about learning to accept your mistakes and getting a second chance to correct them.

– very little is shown of their 'good times' (a refreshing change for a romance), indeed their entire relationship is glossed over with a convenient VO.

In a memorable moment at the film's beginning, we see Zetterstrom and Andrea snuggled on a bed (pictured above), supposedly sharing a romantic moment – but their words are far from loving: "You make me play better," Zetterstrom says. "I feel almost human when I'm with you."

"Almost?" Zetterstrom replies, completely seriously.

The relationship ends abruptly and, in Zetterstrom's case, unexpectedly. Shutting his emotions and memories away to hide from the pain, Zetterstrom

leaves the city and flees to New York. Ten years pass and only when spurred by a mysterious message does Zetterstrom return to Copenhagen to face his past.

His forays into the Zone are a nightmarish trip into a jumbled version of his own past – a past he does not recognise and that does not recognise him. His memories are controlled by the enigmatic and untrustworthy character Tom, a wheelchair-bound old man who in turn insults Zetterstrom and helps him. In his own antagonising way, Tom teaches Zetterstrom humility and humanity, allowing him to come to terms with his memories and reclaim them – even if it is too late to change the past.

Not overstuffed with heavy handed meaning, the film is pleasant to watch and there are

some genuine laugh out loud moments. Dark and sombre, charming and emotional, *Allegro* is a rare treat that reminds us not only of what is important in movie making, but also what is important in life.

Claire Weaver

Allegro

Director: Christoffer Boe
Writers: Christoffer Boe & Mikael Wulff
DOP: Manuel Alberto Claro
Cast: Ulrich Thomsen, Helena Christensen, Henning Moritzen, Svetoslav Korolev, Niels Skousen, Nicolas Bro, Ellen Hillingsø
Language: Danish with English subtitles
DVD Release Date: 13 Nov 2006

Footage Fetish Forum

Richard Matthews on the experimental adaptation of J.G. Ballard's classic *The Atrocity Exhibition*

Media landscapes, celebrity death fantasies, psychopathology and the nuclear shadow: the juxtapositions of these fictional terrains is now so familiar, so much a part of the modern man-made landscape, that they even have their own collective adjective. *Ballardian* is a term that evokes a certain sensibility or angle of attack, and for all his literary success with the mainstream novel there is still the sense in Ballard's writing that his chosen form is still a vehicle for ideas, a process more than a product (book as both object and argument), and that the creative template he works to has more in common with an avant-garde art movement than a 19th century novelisation.

This subversion of form is made most explicit in Jonathan Weiss's adaptation of the 1960's 'condensed novel' fix-up *The Atrocity Exhibition*, but whereas the descriptive act of fiction writing offers a distancing technique from the images being created, the visual language of the screen offers no such escape. There's an uneasy trade-off between immediacy and literalness in any adaptation, and for all its experimental ambition the film version of *The Atrocity Exhibition* walks a similar line to its art-house cousin *Crash*, directed by David Cronenberg.

The Atrocity Exhibition is undoubtedly the more 'art' of the pair, and while Cronenberg's faded car-crash imagery was enough to get even the bums of local councillors on to the multiplex seats on its initial release, Weiss's collage approach to found footage and staged mess-en-scene plays more like a video installation in a modern art gallery than a traditional movie screening. This has the curious side-effect of rendering his interpretation somehow safer, even while the real life sequences of napalm victims and plastic surgery operations he employs can make for pretty disturbing/disturbed viewing.

The opening of the film is framed with an introductory voiceover



Is there a doctor in the house?

The film may try to capture an internal world but its viewpoint remains necessarily exterior: a flaw that it shares with any similar adaptation.

explaining how the subsequent footage was itself found and is apparently the work of one Dr Travers (Travis, Traven, etc – as with the book, the name of the central protagonist alters throughout) chronicling the onset of his own mental breakdown, and one can well imagine this film being cut together from a much larger collection of source material assembled by Travers as he sets out to map the undiscovered contours of his own inner world.

This framing mechanism was suggested to director Jonathan Weiss by J.G. Ballard himself, but where Ballard is quite open in supporting Weiss's interpretation of his novel, other fans and critics have offered less favourable interpretations, accusing the director of 'confusing ponderousness with insight' and questioning the validity of a film that centres itself around media

figures from the 1960s (Monroe, JFK, Reagan) rather than applying a modern context or substituting more updated iconography.

These are valid points, and the film's lack of any traditional narrative throughline can certainly be alienating, not only in its lack of linearity but also because of the way it is required to make solid and visible the more poetic and unstable imagery present in the original novel.

But is this a failing of the film itself, or rather a result of our own increasing sophistication in channelling multiple modes of simultaneous communication? And, if this is the case, then is it perhaps more to do with the way we have become overly familiar with the once disruptive tropes of the avant-garde itself? For while Ballard's images may retain a potent symbolic half-life in their latent prose form – waiting for us to read

our own obsessions into them – the film is required to play the role of a filter and damages itself in the same way that recounting a dream episode out loud can reduce a personalised strangeness to a package of stock phrases and second-hand imagery. The film may try to capture an internal world but its viewpoint remains necessarily exterior: a flaw that it shares with any similar adaptation – Cronenberg's *Crash* being the closest example.

Still if viewed from the correct perspective there is much to be uncovered in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and perhaps the best way to approach this film is not as an adaptation of a difficult work of fiction or even as an experimental art piece in its own right, but rather as a documentary that interrogates director Weiss's own relationship to his immediate source material and wider artistic impulses, with Ballard's book serving as a bridge (or perhaps protective membrane?) between him and us.

In this sense at least, the film is certainly true to the obsessions of both its creators.

Richard Matthews

49,550 and counting

Martin McGrath

Television drama rarely specialises in big ideas.

Amongst the comfortably circumscribed crises that litter soaps, medical dramas and police procedurals there is little room for questions about religion, identity or politics.

Which is what makes the new incarnation of *Battlestar Galactica* (BSG – season two now available on DVD) so unusual. Almost every episode contains some huge issue and BSG doesn't just slip this stuff in under the radar as metaphor – questions about belief, faith and the nature of humanity are right in the frontline, driving forward the plot every bit as much as the battle between humanity and the Cylons. Most rewardingly BSG also contains a satisfyingly complex political streak that is contemporary, engaged and dramatically powerful.

Comparisons between Glen A. Larson's *Battlestar Galactica* from the 1970s and this modern incarnation are revealing. Larson, a conservative and Mormon, also filled his show with religious and political allegory, but it was one-dimensional. The original BSG transposed the writings of the Mormon faith to a futuristic setting but the politics remained firmly rooted in the Cold War. His Cylons were militaristic communists in shiny armour and the battle was simply good versus evil. His human community was wholesome and, apart from a pantomime villain, united.

The political drama in the modern BSG almost entirely derives from the conflict between 'civil rights' and 'military necessity' in the show's fractured, space-faring polis. The ensuing struggles are clearly influenced by the ongoing War on Terrorism.

In season two episodes "Fragged" and "Resistance" Colonel Tigh suspends the democratic constitution and imposes martial law in an attempt to impose control. The results are predictably disastrous, with Colonial troops shooting unarmed protestors aboard the ship *Gideon*.

The "Gideon incident" reverberates throughout season two, provoking the need to 'manage' the media and increasing the tension between civilians and the military.



The warm, likeable President Roslin is actually an arch conservative capable of making Bush Jnr blink...

In "Final Cut" a journalist, D'Anna Bier (Lucy Lawless) is asked to make a documentary about the 'human face' of the military. D'Anna's scepticism – she fears that the price of access will be her editorial independence – reflects contemporary concerns about the reliability and credibility of the media under the conditions of war. Throughout the episode the tensions between the freedom of the press and the needs of the military are made plain, though perhaps the episode ultimately disappoints when the final 'documentary' lets the military off the hook.

In the Pegasus arc ("Pegasus" and "Resurrection Ship" parts one and two) high octane space battles play second fiddle to an argument about the importance of civil rights during a military crisis. The discovery of a second surviving *Battlestar*, the Pegasus, commanded by Admiral Cain (who outranks Adama and who has no qualms about trampling the constitution) causes friction and brings what's left of humanity to the edge of civil war.

Perhaps the most interesting conflict in the Pegasus arc relates to

BSG: never short on guns. Though they ran out of bullets six months ago.



the contrasting way in which Adama and Cain treat their prisoners. Adama is hardly soft on Cylons but Cain has permitted mistreatment and the grossest torture on a captured female Cylon and seems set to do the same to a member of Adama's crew who has been revealed as a Cylon. Cain's attitude to prisoners and her pre-emptory military justice creates a rift between Pegasus and *Galactica* and results in a fantastically tense will they/won't they assassination sequence.

The question of the continued utility of historic civil rights in the face of a military threat has obvious contemporary associations in the era of the War on Terrorism. It is clear that the sympathies of the writers are with Adama's uneasy democratic compromise rather than Cain's military dictatorship but BSG offers no pat solutions. The military are necessary, their work benefits all, but the maintenance of a balance between their needs and the needs of a civic order is no straightforward task.

BSG is much more complex than most contemporary political dramas. The issues it addresses are not presented as simply right versus wrong but are expressed by characters who are complex, engaging and difficult to pigeonhole.

The warm, likeable President Roslin is actually an arch conservative capable of making Bush Jnr blink – opposing abortion ("The Captain's Hand"), courting religious fundamentalism, harshly

treating captured Cylons – and yet she remains the most vocal and influential voice for democracy and the rule of law. Adama, by contrast, appears straightforwardly authoritarian – he is the face of the military and the voice of authority – but by the end of the season he is able to see humanity in the Cylons, he demonstrates that he will fight to the death to preserve civil liberties and he saves the democratic system when Roslin succumbs to temptation. Even the Cylons get complex and plausible characterisation with divisions and beliefs and distinct motivations.

BSG does two very rare things. First, it recognises that while politics is messy, annoying and full of political differences that may be forever intractable, the democratic political process remains crucial to any kind of good society. And, second, it asks the viewer to do a very difficult thing – to like and respect those with whom you fundamentally disagree. BSG contains characters and plot elements that can resonate with or infuriate those on both the left and the right, yet it almost never collapses into a cosy centralism that imagines that everything would be better if people could forget their principles and 'just get along'.

BSG doesn't offer solutions or manifestos – indeed it never editorialises – but, at a time when loyalty is demanded and dissent is suspect, this show is doing something rather radical – it is encouraging people to think.

Bloody Brits

Martin McGrath

Severance is a likeable enough horror movie that does nothing particularly original but adds enough humour to keep the viewer on the film's side.

The story sees a team from a reprehensible multi-national arms company, Palisade, wander off the beaten track in Eastern Europe. Coming across a rundown lodge which they mistake for their accommodation, they soon discover that their company has been up to no good in this region for many years and there's a violent group of psychopaths who want their revenge.

This is director Smith's follow up to *Creep*, the patchy, and ultimately disappointing, horror set in the London Underground. *Severance* is much more effective – balancing horror, comedy and character and keeping the plot zipping along. Much credit for the film's success must go to the scriptwriter James Moran – who in 2002 won the

Sci-Fi Channel's Sci-Fi Shorts competition with his very funny *Cheap Rate Gravity* and whose sharp sense of humour is felt throughout *Severance*.

The cast, too, are excellent. McInerney (*Blackadder*) stands out as Richard, the platitude spouting boss everyone wants to see dead, but leads Dyer (*Football Factory*) and Harris (*Dead Like Me*, 24) make a likeable pairing. Nyman, as the bouncy, hopelessly enthusiastic Gordon, also does an excellent job with a relatively small role. The characters are all neatly and realistically drawn. Unlike the glamorous teens of American slasher films from *Scream* to *Hostel*, *Severance* has characters who feel like people you might know and who you might actually care about.

There are a number of stand-out sequences – most notably the bear trap scene – that had me laughing out loud and a number of surprisingly effective moments, such as when Richard finally



meets his end.

Severance isn't quite in the same league as some recent successful British horror movies, being neither as funny as *Shaun of the Dead* nor as effectively shocking as *The Descent* or *28 Days Later*. But that doesn't make *Severance* a bad film – it plays neat games with the audience's expectations and delivers more than enough high-energy thrills to keep an audience engaged

throughout. *Severance* is not a classic but it should go very nicely with a bag of popcorn.

Director: Christopher Smith
Writers: James Moran & Christopher Smith
Cast: Danny Dyer, Laura Harris, Tim McInerney, Toby Stephens, Claudie Blakley, Andy Nyman, Babou Ceesay, David Gilliam
95 minutes

Snakes! On a Plane!

John Hunter

Had it not been for the surrounding furor, *Snakes on a Plane* would have taken off, landed and then slithered away without anyone except the dozen teenagers who thought *Alien V's Predator* and *Terminator 3* were worthy additions to their franchises paying it any attention. And that is the real question: why did the producers think that *Snakes on a Plane* should be a PG-13/12 certificate movie in the first place?

What made all the difference to this mile-high concept movie was the near-accidental involvement of its star. As much as all the re-

shoots and re-shaping of *Snakes on a Plane* appear to be a fan victory, the real winner here is Samuel L. Jackson. Fans filled the internet with their griping when the film was briefly re-titled *Pacific Flight 451* but it was when Jackson threatened to leave that the studio quickly changed its mind back again. As the fans rejoiced, the savvy studios realised that they were now already getting good word of mouth and a positive response from the film's target audience. So why not take it further?

As the film had already been shot, it comes as little surprise that

Snakes on a Plane feels like a family's suitcase with a few duty-free, top shelf items shoved in moments before boarding. The snakes bite passengers in slightly ruder places and the passengers yell slightly ruder things whilst they're being bitten. And in comparison to the rest of the film, these moments do stand out – or perhaps stick out.

The majority of the film's audience knew they were going to love this film from the moment they heard the title and who the star was and anyone who thinks the movie sounded stupid was 'missing the point'. That the filmmakers purposely, even deliberately, made a cheesy, stupid film will leave some sections of the audience bothered that the film thinks it can smuggle itself straight into the 'cult classic' section without earning its way in through years of derision.

If *Snakes on a Plane* has a major downfall, it's that it is too self-conscious of its forked tongue being firmly in its cheek as the film is never clever enough to be a parody of its own genre or a genre crossover hit like *Scream* or *The Matrix*. On repeat viewing, audiences may find themselves unable to laugh at the film in a 'so bad it's good' way, as there are no

unintentional laughs in the same vein as Jon Voight's constant leering at Jennifer Lopez in *Anaconda*.

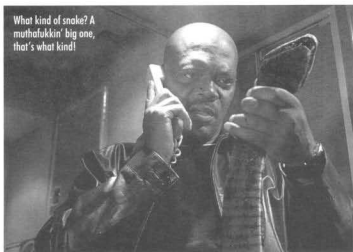
The fact that the studio allowed their property to be played with suggests they could afford to exchange a higher age-rating for the box office appeal of Samuel L. Jackson and the fact that the new 15 Certificate actually guaranteed some lingering boobey shots.

How will fan feedback affect future films? It is doubtful that any amount of 'aficionados' online whinging will see fan-fave Soundwave in the new *Transformers* movie, or a Fantastic Four sequel worth watching.

But worse, could producers now start making changes to films to appease angry audiences rather than to actually improve it? Internet critics may know that to hear Sam Jackson swearing in his own inimitable manner will instantly improve any movie centering around snake-based travel horror. But does that mean they have all the answers?

As for *Snakes on a Plane*, now that it has arrived amid hype unseen since *The Blair Witch Project*, is it actually any good? Well, it's honestly as good as its sounds.

And this reviewer bloody loved it.





Dark Skies

Dan Holdsworth's *At The Edge of Space* is no point & click affair, says Robert Graham

How many of us alive today will ever have the opportunity (or financial security) to experience the reality of a spaceflight, and more importantly how many of us would even leap at the chance if it were offered?

Already the great space adventure is over, and people dream of swimming with dolphins rather than saddling their fate to a rocketship and venturing into the big black. Meanwhile the idea of a life on the edge has been co-opted by the earthbound visions of fashion houses, media-buyers and conceptual artists to become just another lifestyle option.

However not all art is afraid to look up from its own reflection, and it is fitting that the National Maritime Museum, located on the meridian and dedicated to the spirit of oceanic explorations past, should play host to an exhibition that pushes at the boundaries of our present worldview to feed us back a report from the edge of current human knowledge.

Set within its own gallery white space inside the main museum, the exhibition is staged in three linked parts, with each being both a record and its own investigation into our relationship with the boundaries of space and the invisible realm of time.

The iconography may initially appear science fictional, but this is more a result of the way that space technology has permeated the visual language of our popular culture than a deliberate intention. At this point we may have trouble recognising the real thing and instantly start looking for the influence of set designers or the telltale tags of photoshop, but in fact there is nothing more artificial here than a little time-lapse technique and a careful eye for composition.

If the subject matter seems alien it is perhaps because the daily business of modern space exploration is just that, a business, and the surrounding subject matter of verdant jungle and luminous arctic skies is at least partially a

consequence of required geography rather than an attempt to create needless spectacle or somehow beautify the real scientific work being done here.

If it's the business, work-a-day aspect of the technology on show that keeps these photographs grounded in the mundane, then it's the surrounding time-lapsed landscape that lifts the work back into a wider imaginative space once more.

In *Part 1: At The Edge of Space* a rocket sits as if waiting for launch in a surrounding frame of parked cars and two-storey office blocks like the lunchtime recreational project of a bored science park staffer playing a prank on senior management.

Meanwhile in *Part 3: Hyperborea* the stars and satellites spin wildly across the sky, as if to emphasise the vast distances they inhabit and inviting us to join the party, while down below the landscape is haunted by strange, unmovable colours and the equally distant glow of human civilisation,

hypnotising and compelling the viewer to remain in place and watch until either the spell is broken or they become another frozen feature on time's highway.

Speaking of this latest work, Dan Holdsworth describes how "the experience of photographing the Northern Lights felt like I was entering a different time space. Whilst being alone in the arctic wilderness, I became aware of the cycle of the Earth. The lights are a visual representation of everything that we cannot see but which goes on around us all the time. It's like being given a glimpse of the rhythm of the universe."

It may seem a strange idea to use the photographic medium as a means to explore the idea of the unseen, but it's the same logic that led to the development of the Gregorian radio telescope in Puerto Rico (as documented in *Part 2: The Gregorian*) as a direct use of man-made technology to open up the invisible but still real territories of space. Here the technology is not just a simple



At The Edge of Space - Parts 1-3
An exhibition by Dan Holdsworth

All images are ©:
Image courtesy the artist / Store, London

recording device but rather the means of translation and a storytelling machine all rolled into one. In Dan Holdsworth's exhibition it's the man himself who stands in for the translating mechanism, but while the tools are different the final story remains the same.

Ultimately it's the collision of the everyday, rather than the more familiar sense of science fictional wonder, in these photographs that creates the greatest sense of inspiration here. These are not doctored or fantastical images but rather the outsider places where *real* science fictional thought still takes place in the minds of researchers, engineers and now photographers, now that the impulse to explore beyond our own horizons has safely retired from the popular imagination.

We live on the edge of space everyday, but sometimes it takes the outsider's eye of the tourist or photographer to remind us to look around once in a while and enjoy the view.



"The experience of photographing the Northern Lights felt like I was entering a different time space. Whilst being alone in the arctic wilderness, I became aware of the cycle of the Earth. The lights are a visual representation of everything that we cannot see but which goes on around us all the time. It's like being given a glimpse of the rhythm of the universe."

At The Edge of Space

Taken at the European Space Agency's spaceport at Kourou in Guiana, South America in 1999, this series depicts the launch site of the Araine research rockets and the 2011 Aurora robot Mars explorer programme surrounded by the dense jungle foliage of an equatorial forest in a collision of nature, technology and new visions.

The Gregorian

Developed at the Arecibo Space Telescope, Puerto Rico, these images of world's largest single-dish radio telescope evoke a history of signals 100 million years old. From this location the faintest signals of planet formations, asteroid tracks and pulses from the furthest reaches of the universe are translated into visible information. Using camera exposures of up to four hours in length, the images exploit the durational quality of still photography to contrast the limits of our current knowledge and experience with our ongoing urge towards discovery.

Hyperborea

Driving out from the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik and to the Andoya Rocket Range in Norway, here Holdsworth photographs the night skies filled with the constantly shifting patterns of the Northern Lights, while the earthbound landscape is pinpricked with traces of moving vehicles and human habitation. Skies glow green and are punctuated with by the trace imagery of stars and satellites as they follow the curvature of the Earth while a desolate, almost fictional, landscape is revealed below.

From Bad to Worse

Martin McGrath

Signal from Fred: The author's subconscious, alarmed by the poor quality of the work, makes unwitting critical comments: *This doesn't make sense. This is really boring. This sounds like a bad movie.*

The Turkey City Lesson

<http://www.shen.com/writing/turkeycity.html>

I don't believe I had ever seen a more obvious "signal from Fred" as the one planted at the start of Neil LaBute's *The Wicker Man*.

From the opening car crash you can hear the writer/director's subconscious screaming for escape from this terrible film from the car park of any cinema in which it is shown. It's actually rather endearing, by the end, that the car crash repeats so often that even the dullest-witted member of the audience (and presumably the cast and crew) must get the point. This film is a disaster.

It is very nearly a textbook example of a "signal from Fred".

I say very nearly only because the very next day I saw an even better and more ludicrous example of the same phenomenon. Terry Gilliam's *Tideland* ends with a train wreck.

Tideland is a dull, pretentious and ultimately meaningless film which forces the audience to watch Gilliam torture his central character, Jeliza-Rose (Ferland – who is excellent). This eight-year-old girl sees the gruesome deaths of both her drug-addicted parents, including a period where she is left alone in a crumbling and isolated house with her decaying father, before she watches her father's ex-girlfriend (a taxidermist) extract his entrails and stuff him. Jeliza-Rose then becomes involved with a mentally handicapped young man in a relationship that is riddled with unpleasant sexual tension.

I am not against film-makers taking risks and forcing viewers outside their comfort zone when making films. If there's a serious point to be made then I'm all for it. And I love much of Gilliam's earlier work – *Brazil*, *Twelve Monkeys* and *The Fisher King* rank highly on my list of all-time favourite films.

However *Tideland* has nothing to say – except, perhaps, that "life is

shit". And if Gilliam's intention was, simply, to convince the audience of the crappiness of existence then I can think of much better, shorter (at two hours, *Tideland* is unmercifully long) and more effective ways of doing it than this mixed-up film. Personally I'd rather watch Gilliam scream "life sucks" for two hours than sit through *Tideland* again.

As Jeliza-Rose wanders through the carnage of the train wreck that is the film's conclusion it is clear that she has suffered for no purpose other than to allow Gilliam to indulge in some macabre imagery. It is true that the film has visually arresting moments – Gilliam remains a master of images – but that isn't enough. The pretty pictures can't hide the emotional vacuum at the heart of this story nor compensate the audience for the rather seedy sensation that they, like Jeliza-Rose, have just been used to gratify some unpleasant urge that has overtaken the director.

Still, no matter how bad *Tideland's* train wreck, it is a Sistine Chapel-like work of genius next to the plodding, fright-free car crash that is Neil LaBute's *The Wicker Man*.

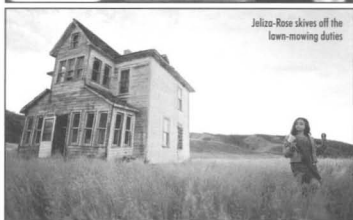
I am not a particular fan of Robin Hardy's 1973 British original but it is impossible to watch that film and not recognise the effective way it evokes a mood and builds tension or the basic intelligence at work in the dialogue about faith and religion.

All of that is missing in this remake. LaBute couldn't summon up a decent fright if his life depended on it and the religious aspect of the story has been stripped away – no doubt because much of America's film-going audience have no stomach for anything that challenges their faith.

The plot sees traffic cop Malus (Cage at his twitching worst) witness a car crash which may, or may not, have killed a young girl and her mother. Damaged by this incident he receives a letter from a long-lost girlfriend who claims that her daughter (and his) has gone missing on the isolated island of Summersisle. Malus goes to investigate, discovering that



The kids weren't impressed with Cage's fake police badge



Jeliza-Rose skives off the low-mowing duties

everyone on the island denies the girl ever existed and that Summersisle is dominated by a strange pagan cult led by women.

If one was being generous one might argue that LaBute has tried to make a film about the relationship between the sexes, but this element of the story is so crudely handled that the film slips perilously close to misogyny. Women are portrayed as wicked old crones or evil seductresses preying on innocent, noble men. In the original Vincent Lee's *Lord Summersisle* is given a plausible philosophy with which to challenge his opponent. In the remake Burstyn's Lady Summersisle is played as a stereotypical comic-book villain with her creepy henchwomen terrorising the downtrodden men.

The Wicker Man is a very bad film. Attempts at symbolism – the repeated car crash and a ludicrously overworked bee metaphor – are crude and ineffective. The acting borders on the inept and the direction and cinematography are flat. The plot is full of silliness that even *Scooby Doo* writers would be ashamed of (Malus's tendency to go grave digging/crypt exploring in the dead of night, for example) and stodgy dialogue.

If you're determined to see one of these (despite what the director's subconscious and I are trying to tell you) then, for those with stronger stomachs than mine, Gilliam's *Tideland* at least offers some reward in terms of the prettiness of the pictures and a superior cast. *The Wicker Man* has no redeeming features.

Conspiracies R Us

There's big bucks in cancelled tv shows these days, and it doesn't take a conspiracy theorist to notice the way that studios are becoming quicker at exploiting the demand for product they never really wanted in the first place.

Studios have no doubt learnt the lesson of the *Star Trek* pressure groups and realised that cancelling any series with cult appeal will lead to some kind of 'save our show' campaign, but it was only when they started noting the phenomenal sell-through success of *Firefly* on dvd (and the following success of *Serenity*, which failed at the box office but was perhaps only ever a full length trailer for the dvd release in the first place) that they really started paying attention to the lost profit potential of failed shows.

And so *The Lone Gunmen* rise again, this time in a collector's box format that brings together all thirteen original episodes plus the tie-in *X-Files* episode 'Jump The Shark' to round off the set.

Originally screened in a period when *X-Files* popularity was already dipping, the pilot was notorious for featuring a plot to crash commercial aircraft into the World Trade Centre: a fact only made worse by the suggestion that shadowy factions within the US government (as always) were behind the plan. The world changed overnight, and not

even the fastest back-peddling on the scripting front could restore the show's balance.

Perhaps it was the creator's plan for the characters all along, but many of the episodes had a too noticeable sense of avoiding what had always been the main point of the *Gunmen*: namely exposing the truths that others would prefer hidden. Instead the show changed direction and headed off into the territory of spy-lite and an uneven comedy that never really hit its stride.

That said, there is much to like in this series and fans of the original paranoid trio won't be disappointed by the surprisingly strong central cast making their transition from *X-Files* film crew and part time actors to leading players.

Equally when viewed individually there's much to enjoy in the stand-alone format of the individual episodes that typically see our heroes discover a secret, loose the evidence, get lied to lots, hack into an impenetrable database, get arrested and then, just possibly, save the day with a little help. Also having made the point earlier that the comedy tone is often uneven, there are still

many fine moments with a glimmer of what could have been.

The real problem here is our own expectations. This is a show that exists in the same world as Mulder, Scully and the sinister Cigarette Smoking Man (and the crossover of characters such as FBI Assistant Director Skinner only flaunts this fact) and which means that somewhere out there is presumably the biggest conspiracy of them all, but tragically we never even get a hint of it. This is perhaps most



important in providing a balance to the show, and whereas even the dullest *X-File* investigation had enough chemistry between its leads to keep you watching, the lack of any greater drive behind *The Lone Gunmen* means the comedy tone becomes the norm rather than a welcome break from all the mythos-building and labyrinthine cover-ups of its parent.

In the end though there's still much to enjoy in this box-set, and if you approach the show as a Saturday couch-time option to be viewed at leisure rather than an example of must-watch viewing, you may well find it makes a happy alternative to the current high traumas of *Galactica* or Jack Bauer's ongoing worst day ever.

Tom Hunter



Aliens, vampires and dodgy Irish accents not included

Smoulder & Skully

Bones is a darkly amusing drama inspired by real-life forensic anthropologist and novelist Kathy Reichs. Dr. Temperance Brennan (Emily Deschanel) is a forensic anthropologist at the fictional Jeffersonian Institution. Teamed with FBI Agent Seeley Booth (David Boreanaz), she is frequently called upon to assist murder investigations with a whacky team of neurotic geniuses by her side to help solve the crimes.

In the best on-screen pairing since Mulder and Scully, the chemistry between Brennan and Booth is so tangible it crackles. The writers are savvy to the audience's expectations and play with us all the way.

David Boreanaz has come on as an actor since his early *Buff* days and, as fans of the later seasons of *Angel* will be well aware of, has great comic timing. The post-Whedon scripts carry a weight of good dialogue and great characterisation, giving Boreanaz – and the rest of the cast – infinite opportunities to show off

their best.

Unlike the rather plodding and obvious *CSI*, *Bones* is more knowing about the human condition and although its individual plots are variations on classic crime themes the clever scripting always manages to keep you second-guessing (even when it was the person you thought it was all along).

And while it's not strictly *sf*, *Bones* is definitely of interest to genre fans. That said, some of the 'technology' employed is firmly in the realm of speculative (in that time-saving, how-do-we-make-this-exposition-visually-stimulating kind of way) and makes you feel at times as though there's an army of hackers stashed in the basement of the Jeffersonian downloading ideas straight from NASA.

With Season Two now airing, be prepared for explosive episodes with many more shocks, twists and surprises still to come.

Claire Weaver



I want your soul, I will eat your soul," the guttural demon face flickering in the TV as it's carried through the deserted council estate by a brood of vandal children all sporting the same deranged ponytailed and goatee-bearded IT-technician-gone-bad head of Aphex Twin Richard D. James.

It's often thought that there's a hierarchy in Science Fiction. Like some strict medieval world view of the universe split into Heaven, Earth, Limbo and Hell – with Written SF at the top of the tree, followed by Movies, then TV shows and finally the dreck at the bottom: music videos and computer games.

Agree with this stratified view or not, it's no coincidence that the youngest medium is at the bottom of the pile and the oldest up top. It seems to take at least two generations of practitioners for any medium to get its first wave

of true auteurs. Whether it's Hugo Gernsback pounding out clunky pioneering tales of scientification giving way to Isaac Asimov's assured robot narratives in written SF, or George Melie's illusionist showcase *A Trip to the Moon* compared to Fritz Lang's politically charged *Metropolis*. The question is whether the same thing has happened for those 'lower orders' of SF.

It's been twenty five years since the birth of MTV and we're a long way from the strung-out visual feedback effects applied live while Queen performed Bohemian Rhapsody on their rehearsal stage. We have our auteurs now, people like Michael Gondry, Spike Jonze and Anton Corbijn, and it's out of this that a true SF vision has come in the shape of Chris Cunningham.

In terms of SF pedigree, Chris Cunningham's background is pretty impressive. Under the pseudonym Chris Halls he was commissioned to illustrate for 2000AD; Cunningham went on to design robots and creatures for the cult 1990 psycho-robot spectacular *Hardcore*, the 1995 *Judge Dredd* movie, Clive Barker's *Nightbreed*, *Alien Resurrection*, and most notably working for Stanley Kubrick on A.I.'s long gestation.

Robots would be a running theme throughout a great deal of Cunningham's most well known videos. He described the source of his obsession: "One of my earliest

memories is seeing an episode of *The Bionic Man* and they had these women that were kind of like robots and – I must have been about six – I remember thinking 'that's the best thing I've ever seen in my life, a girl that's a robot.'"

It is the Bjork video *All is Full of Love* which most clearly shows off this obsession. With its exquisitely designed ivory androids – discretely tattooed with elegant decal – making out in a rain of sparks and milky fluid, the video plays like some post-singularity iMac's erotic wet dream.

It's Cunningham and his Bjork droids that are alluded to in Williams Gibson's most recent novel, *Pattern Recognition*. Gibson met Cunningham in his home not long after making the video, discussing the movie adaptation of *Neuromancer*. The cyberpunk classic had already been sloughing around in development when Cunningham's name became attached to it, and although he has since withdrawn from the project citing that now he is only interested now in working with his own original material, Gibson has gone on record as saying that of all the prospective makers Cunningham was his favorite choice for making the film.

Cunningham's output has been prolific, but there are three short films that really stand out for plumbing that dark space between

SF Horror, Art and music video – Aphex Twin's *Come to Daddy* and *Rubber Johnny*, and Squarepusher's *Come On My Selector*.

Come to Daddy is an urban horror, strange and unsettling, banned from MTV and likely to give you a troubled night's sleep.

Filmed mostly in a monochrome night vision, *Rubber Johnny* is a deranged look at what happens when a wheelchair-bound mutant is left alone in the dark with a Chihuahua and the world's longest line of cocaine.

Come On My Selector is probably the closest to a straight narrative. Set in the Osaka Home for Mentally Disturbed Children, it is satisfyingly off-kilter mix of slapstick and J-Horror.

These little audio/visual heat shots are confident and individual pieces of work, without any sense that they are frustrated feature films, or that they are scavenging the scraps of Written SF's ideas. They fit their form to perfection and would die if forced into any other length or medium. They are liberated by all the baggage that those other mediums have, and yet in their own razorblade way they cut new grooves into the collective imagination of our SF imagery.

Truly the music video has come of age.

Simon Gilmartin



Dinos, Aliens, Ghosts...



Did a dinosaur end the career of Charles Allen, who resigned as CEO of ITV plc this August? OK, maybe not exactly but it is clear that scheduling programmes like *Prehistoric Park* (pictured above) as ITV1's flagship show on Saturday evenings cannot have helped his career. I mean who thought a programme that combines the concept of the *Jurassic Park* movies with the special effects of the *Walking with Dinosaurs* TV series would be a ratings winner? It wasn't – the target audience seems to have had dino-fatigue, with result that the vets-go-back-in-time-to-rescue-endangered-species series saw its viewing figures fall from 3.3 million for episode one to 2.5 million for episode two. The flop of *Prehistoric Park* must also cast doubts on the future of *Primaeval*, another CGI dinosaurs series originally slated to appear on ITV1 Saturday nights early next year.

Personally I found the pleasantest surprise in the schedules this summer was Sky One's new series *A Town Called Eureka* (pictured right). The starting point is US Federal Marshal Jack Carter (Colin Ferguson) being stranded in Backwater USA when his car breaks down, only to discover the town (of Eureka) is a cross between Area 51 and *Northern Exposure*. Lots of hush-hush experiments and quirky characters but – and here's the thing – almost without exception (and that includes Carter's Avril Lavigne-like daughter Zoe, played

by Jordan Hinson) all the characters are likeable. There's even a bit of sexual tension developing between Carter, liaison officer Allison Blake (Salli Richardson-Whitfield) and psychotherapist Beverly Barlow (Debrah Farentino). It remains to be seen whether a promising start to the series can be sustained but in the meantime it makes for a pleasant hour's viewing.

Ironically, while ITV1 may be at a loss what to show when it hasn't got *The X-Factor* running, its Freeview (also available on satellite) offspring ITV4 is proving to be a treasure trove for SF on TV fans. Well, let me qualify that, for fans of series that were originally shown on US TV and cancelled mid-series or otherwise failed to cover

themselves in glory. At the time of writing, SF programmes showing on ITV4 include the excellent *Dark Skies* and *Invasion Iowa* – a William Shatner mini series from a few years ago where a whole town is tricked *You've Been Framed*-style into thinking it is the location for a real science fiction movie shoot. ITV4 is also showing an entire season of *Haunted* (in the US the series was cancelled after seven episodes in 2002). This is another programme with a detective-can-communicate-with-the-dead plotline – frankly I found it tediously dull – however it does star Matthew Fox, now better known for his role as the Jack Shephard in *Lost*, so it's worth giving a spin purely out of curiosity.

Charles Christian



At the end of August Sky One began showing a four-part mini-series *Final Days of Planet Earth* which, despite having a half-way decent cast including Daryl Hannah, must surely be one of the slowest bug-eyed monsters meets *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* series to have graced the small screen in recent years. The fact the characters are all stereotypes and the special effects have been done on the cheap – the same scenes are revisited endlessly (and pointlessly) and I'm sure I've seen those aliens before in *Starship Troopers* – talk to me in incentive to tune in for the remainder of the series.



If you liked *Medium*, the Patricia Arquette crime-scene-investigator-can-see-dead-people series on the SciFi channel (the first season ended in August) then you might like the E4 series *Ghost Whisperer* which Jennifer Love Hewitt is an antique shop owner who can see and talk to dead people. Think *Desperate Housewives* meets *Highway to Heaven*. If you don't like *Medium*, then you will hate *Ghost Whisperer* – but at least Love Hewitt just gets to where some really cute outfits.



Episodes of *Doctor Who* took up three of the shortlist slots at this year's Hugo Awards, with two-partner 'The Empty Child' and 'The Doctor Dances' scooping the prize. Granted it's a worthy winner, but surely there's enough other quality genre TV shows out there to merit some kind of mention? Come on Fandom, broaden your horizons.



The Beeb is really pulling out all the stops for its latest big-budget venture *Robin Hood*. But can it manage to capture the Saturday evening viewer market? Time will tell...



SEDUCTION of the Innocent

COMIC REVIEWS BY JAMES BACON ESQ.

Loveless Vol 1: A Kin of Home Coming
DC Comics September 2006

Brian Azzerello can do very little wrong. After winning an Eisner award for his ongoing title *100 Bullets*, he then went on to pen a *Superman* run with Jim Lee that had sales going through the roof.

I wasn't sure if he could do a western story any justice, what with modern westerns having long lost the rose tinted glasses. He has done though. Not a new idea, a confederate soldier returning to his farm to find much changed, but the characters are well written and the twists in the story suffice to give readers something more than just an average story.

Perhaps the added aspect of a female lead character, the wife of our main protagonist Wes Cutter is what gives this story a slight edge. Although usually western women are stereotyped, one cannot forget that many tough women existed at these times, some that are now legends in their own right, from Anne Oakley, to Calamity Jane to Pauline Cushman. So this adds a slight realism to the grittiness that pervades through the story.

Frusin's art, although at times still a bit blocky, has lost its previous debilitating darkness and works well in this particular comic.

The Fiends of the Eastern Front
Rebellion June 2006

Gerry Finlay-Day wrote and created the science fictional military stories *Rogue Trooper* and *The VC's* among many other titles for 2000 AD.

Fiends of the Eastern Front which first appear in 1980, looked like it should have been from the pages of *Battle* or possible *Action*, rather than 2000AD, but it was hugely popular for a story that ran 48 pages.

The story is simple. Hans Schmidt a German Wehrmacht private

encounters group of Romanian soldiers, led by Captain Costanza. These soldiers appear from nowhere to save Schmidt and he realises that their bat motif badges are more than just regalia and their ability to appear where needed is more than just coincidence.

Vampires in war stories are nothing new, and there was even a Nazi vampire known as *Baron Blood* fighting against *Capt America* in Marvel's *Invaders*, but what sets *Fiends* apart is the realistic artwork and portrayal in the school of *Charlie's War* and the darkness and realistic portrayal of a story that was aimed at juveniles.

The artwork is by Carlos Ezquerro, who has drawn all the best that British Comics has to offer, from *Judge Dredd* to *Strontium Dog* and he doesn't fail to add to the story here.

In the end it is perhaps a tad expensive for such a short read, but it's definitely worth it.

Marvel Zombies
Marvel August 2006

Despite the kitsch, potentially bucket of crap, title this is one of the most off-the-wall and hilarious comics Marvel have produced in quite

a while.

Originally the idea came from the pages of *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, written by Mark Millar as *Reed Richards* encounters an alternative world with the familiar Marvel style of mutants have been infected

and zombified.

Robert Kirkman, whose previous work includes horror comics such as *The Walking Dead*, understands the sick depraved humour of the zombie genre and the laughs come thick and fast, driven by both superb dialogue and striking sequences. Lines such as 'Hulk's man broke' and Colonel America saying, 'look what the punk did to me, if we catch him - when we catch him - I get double rations' coupled with brilliantly timed artistry transforms this into a brilliantly flesh-eating fun fest.

Cover artist Arthur Suydam's multiple covers work as a zombified homage to Marvel covers past, and just top off this collection brilliantly.

James Bacon

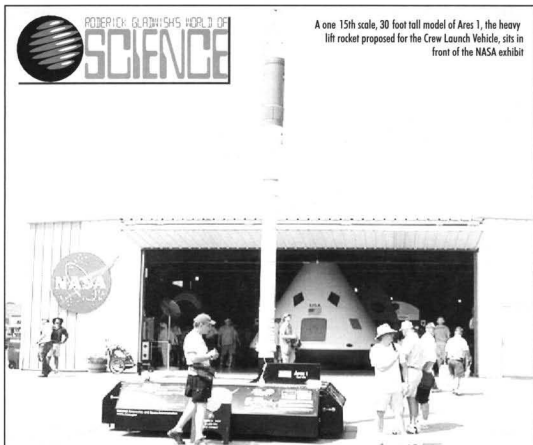


ESA and NASA in Race to Mars

There is an unofficial race for Mars and the funding that goes with it. Both ESA and NASA are developing the next round of landers and rovers to visit Mars. Additionally they are talking up their grand plans for human exploration. The technical challenges are one thing, but the real battleground is funding. Since both organisations get their cash from democracies it involves exciting politicians who only get excited if the general public do.

To excite US voters NASA have announced the names of the rockets that will replace the shuttle and, they hope, will take people to the Moon and then Mars. These launchers will be called Ares 1 and 5, in honour of the Saturn 1 and 5 rockets of the Apollo programme. Ares is the Greek god of war as opposed to Mars, the Roman god of war. These disposable rockets will use a lot of shuttle technology to make them cheap and easy to make. Ares 1 will be used for crew launching. It can put 55,000lbs (25tonnes) into Low Earth Orbit (LEO). Whereas Ares 5 will be the cargo vehicle able to put 286,000lbs (130tonnes) into LEO.

In Europe there is a real media attack going on. You have probably seen the appearance of the demonstrator version of the European rover on the news. Unfortunately, because it is being developed in the UK, Beagle is



A one 15th scale, 30 foot tall model of Ares 1, the heavy lift rocket proposed for the Crew Launch Vehicle, sits in front of the NASA exhibit

mentioned every time implying the government might be investing in a failure.

Beagle was one of a dozen experiments on Mars Express which has been doing some fantastic science since entering the orbit of Mars, and still is. The

spacecraft was built in the UK too. The same team, selected because of the success of Mars Express, worked on Venus Express now winging its way to our hot sister planet.

If you want to see what it's like exploring Mars, Imperial

College London have produced a 3D virtual reality tour for the Royal Society Summer Science Exhibition. But wouldn't it be better to go there for real?

Source: Professional Engineering, ESA, NASA, spacedaily.com

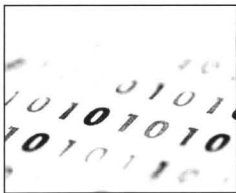
Quantum Power!

Where conventional computers use binary digits (bits) with two states 1 and 0 (on and off) quantum computers use quantum bits (qubits). These have more states and, because they utilise the weirdness of quantum physics, occupies them all simultaneously until they are 'collapsed' into a solution. This allows for massive parallelism in calculations giving them a potential power way beyond conventional computers. The theories behind such machines and some simple 'processors' have been in development for decades. It is turning these inventions into a practical product that presents the problem.

Physicists at the US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) have taken one step towards this. They

have produced an electromagnetic trap for ions that could be easily mass produced allowing processes demonstrated in the laboratory to be built into a practical device. Their design utilises electrodes arranged in one horizontal layer, like a silicon chip, that is easier to manufacture than previous traps with two or three layers of electrodes.

NIST scientists report that their single-layer device can trap a dozen magnesium ions. Work continues to develop more complex structures in which perhaps 10 to 15 ions eventually could be manipulated with lasers to carry out logic



operations.

The NIST dreams of new levels of cryptography and cracking complex chemistry problems.

Source: www.eurekalert.org and <http://www.cs.caltech.edu/~westside/quantum-intro.html>

Something like the Asimov 'Laws of Robotics' may come to pass.

In Japan the aging populous has forced the technophile nation to look toward robots to provide health care and support for the elderly to make up for the lack of 'youthful' human nurses. An example of the technology is Cyberdyne Inc's Hybrid Assistive Limb Power exoskeleton described in *Matrix* 176. However, the Japanese public are becoming anxious about the safety issues with regard to the increasing numbers of robots in everyday life.

To deal with this concern Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry is working on a set of guidelines that will require manufacturers to ensure their machines cannot injure people. Although this initially relates to softer coatings and sensors to prevent collisions, software will also be involved with the prime aim of causing no harm.

'US Robotics' it might not be, but it definitely sounds like Mr Asimov's laws.

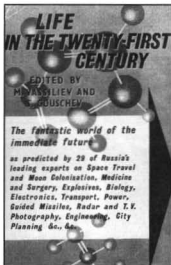
Source: www.technovelgy.com

Writer's Bloc

FOUNDATION
favourites
 By Andy Sawyer
Life in the Twenty-First Century

Science fiction, as we know, is not about predicting the future, so the BSE's President, for instance, is not to blame for assuming in 1951 (*The Sands of Mars*) that by the end of the 20th century or the beginning of the 21st a science fiction writer will be visiting the Red Planet. But science fiction writers are not the only people who talk about the future, and going back fifty years or so and looking at how "experts" have envisioned the world we live now in is always interesting. With his other hat as science writer, Sir Arthur has, of course, done this very thing, but although his *Profiles of the Future* (first published in 1962 and revised several times since) is one of the best examples of speculations about the future – not least because the 1999 revision offered commentary about what was "right", "wrong" and *not even thought about* in the original book – I'm not actually going to talk about it. Not that it's not a "favourite", but rather because I have a sneaking respect for a much less well-known set of speculations: one that is described in the introduction to *Profiles of the Future* as "a somewhat pedestrian Russian book" which a reviewer found "extremely reasonable and ... quite convincing" – charges which Clarke would not be made against him.

This book could only have been *Life in the Twenty-First Century* edited by M. Vassiliev and S. Gouschev, which was published in English in 1960. In it the editors interview twenty-nine Soviet scientists and technologists, who predict likely developments in their own fields. The biologist Roman Antonovitch Jibrak, for instance, talks enthusiastically about developing strains of wheat which will support larger ears and not bend under the wind, or fruit double the size of that grown at present. The director of Moscow Town Planning, Nikolai Fiodorovich Yevstratov, suggests that Moscow will be a garden city, with silent electric cars, air taxis, and



underground heating which will melt the winter snow. Radio expert Vladimir Alexandrov Kotelnikov suggests that radio will link the "electronic calculating machines or electronic brains" which will be found on every office desk. The size of a typewriter, these devices will certainly record, transcribe and translate speech: it is not clear whether Kotelnikov is suggesting they will be linked to databases of information, although Sergei Alexevich Lebedev, of the Soviet Academy of Science Institute for Automation, certainly thinks that "village bibliotechnicians" will be able to access the memories of "electronic information machines" in the great central libraries. We will, however, be able to watch football on pocket-size tv screens.

One reason for the publication of the book is hinted at by Alexander Nikolaievich Nesmayanov, President of the Soviet Academy of Science: "the

Life in the 21st Century

What will it be like?

Enter, with this enthralling book, a world of space travel and planetary colonization ... of time, dramatic changes in medicine and surgery ... "zero-waste", more powerful than a score of 10-horse ... revolutionary designs for ships, cars, aircraft ... below-ground electronic "guides" for road traffic travelling at 200 m.p.h. ... city or electronic photography ... starting advances in television, nuclear physics, atmospheric ...

The earth's core is penetrated, so sea beds explored ... gigantic engineering projects bring climatic changes ... from London to Moscow takes one hour, maintaining flight requires weather forecasts issued from the moon, the earth's growth continues ... the space-time relationship in inter-dimensional flight allows conventional concepts of human aging ...

Disasters become gardens, subterranean gas is tapped by high-frequency radiation ... chemical research brings new clothes, drugs, foodstuffs, food ... automated requirements during sleep allow up to thirty years to pass, saving life ... bloodless surgery is performed by ultrasonic vibrational instruments ... new metal alloys replace iron and steel ... information transforms industry ... biological control the reproductive lives of insects ... barren sea artificially heated and ... lightness become solar stations, playing systems and ships by subsonic energy electronic machines (typewriter-size) record specific critical patterns and translate ... facts are achieved, predictions travel at amazing dimensions, already are fulfilled, atomic trains are ... 15 ft wide, trains are heated to melt snow instantly, houses are plastic and portable ... and the working day is four hours long ...

Radio will link the "electronic calculating machines or electronic brains" which will be found on every office desk. The size of a typewriter, these devices will certainly record, transcribe and translate speech.

year 1957 holds a particular place in the history of the human race". This was, of course, the launch of Sputnik, which gave the Russians a lead in the space race, and there are numerous other references to this event – not to mention the busts and portraits of Lenin which tour scientific luminaries seem to have on their desks or hanging on their walls. It's hardly surprising that one of the visions in the book is that of a lunar city. And there are pictures of "space men" and rocket launchers. "At the beginning of the 21st Century," proclaims the radio-astronomer U.S. Hlebevitsh, "the Moon will become the 7th Continent of our Planet".

Apart from a few hints at massive physical changes to the earth itself – the demolition of mountain ranges, the diversion of rivers and ocean currents to modify climate (for instance, a dam across the Bering Strait) – most of these descriptions of life in the

21st century are domestic, even mundane. There are no robots or AIs, only a passing reference to the possibility of alien life being encountered, no references to the creation of intelligent animals or modification of the human form. So far, "pedestrian" describes it well. I'd perhaps even go so far as to call it "fossilized". The clue to this future lies in the grandiose plans to dam the straits of Gibraltar or create a massive freshwater lake in the Sahara desert. What, ask the editors, is needed to bring them about? "First and foremost, peace, friendship, mutual understanding among the people of the world." The basic assumption here is that to reach this wondrous future there will be an end to wars and that the Soviets will win the ideological battle and that peace-loving communism will be the system of the future.

Well, we know that the half-century after the book's publication turned out very differently. But there is no reason, I think, to crow about the way history turned out. True, we have so far avoided the nuclear war, but we have not achieved the garden-city future envisaged here. Could we have? Well, there are too many unexamined assumptions about energy and resources in the optimistic arguments of many of the scientists here, but such rosy optimism was a feature of many Western Futurologists as well. Moreover, once we move beyond the ideological spectrum, there's reason why this book is so interestingly "pedestrian". Surely Clarke as a science fiction writer is better equipped than many of these scientists to think about the future? *Profiles of the Future* has a greater range of imagination, really is (I think) more visionary than *Life in the Twenty-First Century* and reading the Russian book really underlines this. This is almost an alternate history: rooted in a more "historical" location than most of those we are accustomed to – or is it that we don't notice the ideological confines of most of the futurology we read?

Have Your Say

The BSFA Award for 2006 is now open for nominations in the following categories:

Best Novel

The novel award is open to any novel-length work of science fiction or fantasy which is published in the UK for the first time in 2006. (Serialised novels are eligible, provided that the publication date of the concluding part is in 2006.) If a novel has been previously published elsewhere, but it hasn't been published in the UK until 2006, it is eligible.

Best Short Fiction

The short fiction award is open to any shorter work of science fiction or fantasy, up to and including novellas, first published in 2006 (in a magazine, in a book, or online). This includes books and magazines published outside the UK.

Best Artwork

The artwork award is open to any single science fictional or fantastic image that first appeared in 2006. Again, provided the artwork hasn't been published before 2006 it doesn't matter where it appears.

Best Non-Fiction

The non-fiction award is open to any written work about science fiction and/or fantasy which appeared in its current form in 2006.

(If you are not certain if a work is eligible, please nominate it anyway; the Awards Administrator will check the eligibility of all works nominated.)

The deadline for nominations is midnight on Saturday, 13th January, 2007. Shortlists will be published on Sunday, 14th January, 2007 and voting on those shortlists will then be open to BSFA Members.

The final details for the 2006 non-fiction award are still to be determined. Following the decision to suspend the award for 2004, the 2005 award was judged by a panel of three from a shortlist determined by both nomination and works requested by the judges. Full details for the 2006 non-fiction award will be published in due course, but nominations are still welcomed in the meantime.

Email your nominations to BSFA.Awards@gmail.com

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