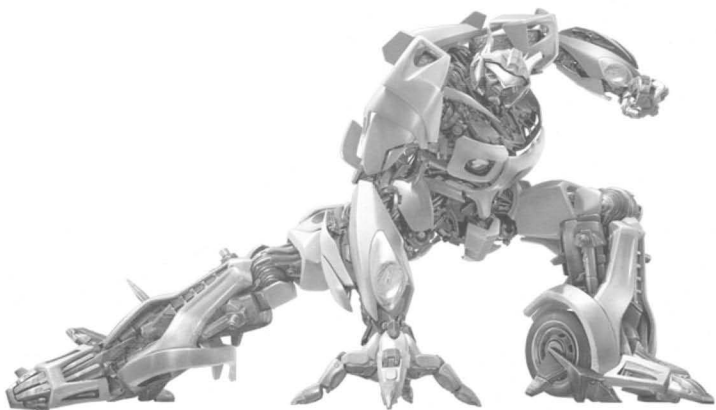


ROBOTS REPLICANTS and all that jazz



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Renew your BSFA membership or brainwash a friend into joining - go on, you know you want to!

matrix

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A robot on (almost) every page...

A wise robot once said: "Freedom is the right of all sentient beings."

Granted, he might have been talking about freedom of thought, or freedom from oppression or some other deeply philosophical concept, but here at *Matrix* HQ we like to think he was talking about the kind of freedom that only comes when your last ever issue in charge coincides with the release of a certain summer blockbuster and there's no one to stop you doing an all-robot, all-action issue as your final sign off from editorial control.

And so we've pulled out all the stops on this, our final heavy metal hurrah. In these pages we'll be celebrating all things robotic and cybernetic, from the renegade replicants of *Blade Runner* through to the sexy Cylons of new *Battlestar Galactica*, and aiming to place these iconic tin men at the heart of the science fiction hall of fame.

In other words, this might just be the single best issue of this magazine you ever get your end effectors on. So what are you waiting for? Read on and roll out!

Tom Hunter & Claire Weaver, *Matrix* Editors



Putting the Art Into the Artificial

Is the future of art cybernetic?
Matrix editor Tom Hunter talks to
 cyber-artist Jane Webb about her
 work, inspiration and the impact of
 cyborgs on our contemporary culture

the bodies on show may be open and exposed to the viewer, letting all of their inner workings spill out, but I wanted to know the starting point for Jane's interest. When did these ideas first take root in the imagination, and when did they start to replicate themselves?

"My fascination with cyborgs started as a teenager, with the female robot from *Metropolis*. Even though she is clearly a robot you can see human characteristics, which is what cyborgs are all about visually.

"I'm a huge fan of H.R. Giger, I'm also influenced by *The Borg* in *Star Trek*, the Terminator's endoskeleton, the alien creature in *Predator*. I'm fascinated by the mechanical appearance.

I also have a fascination with circuit board patterns, which is repeated in my artwork: The simplicity of the design and the complexity of the functions. The internal electronics of a device, wires, LEDs, resistors, circuit board components, they're all enticing to the eye.

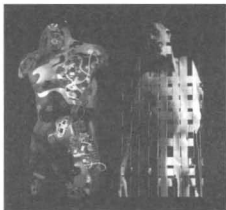
Lighting is also a strong media within my artwork, this is due to visiting nightclubs and raves in my youth. You see neon, laser and ultra violet lighting in numerous places now days, within architecture and public areas.

"United Artists are a collaboration of artists that work strongly in LEDs, lighting, electronics and sound. They exhibited at the V&A with an installation called *Volume2*, this piece has been a strong influence."

So, with the idea in mind, what about the practical approach to making (or perhaps I should say, constructing?) her art? I wanted to know more about how Jane actually started turning virtual ideas into physical objects.

"Male Borg was a continuation in the series of cybernetic humanoid sculptures and installations I'm working on at present. I went to a mannequin factory, designed and made my own torso. The torso then had sections cut out of its trunk to make the electronic and mechanical components inside visible to the viewer. These materials were mainly recycled computer and electronic component parts which were collected from discarded equipment.

I also created components for the borg in ultraviolet (radio active) glass using specialist techniques in moulding and casting this type of glass and installed UV lighting in the cavity of



the torso allowing the ultraviolet components to glow.

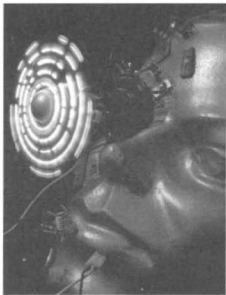
"I created the circuit board imagery using photographs and hand drawn illustrations and then digitally re-mastered in Photoshop. I then printed these onto specialist paper enabling me to create collage sections of the borg torso, giving the impression of exposed circuitry.

Finally, to give the borg the illusion of a metallic epidermal surface I sprayed certain areas with metallic paint."

Although there's certainly a lot of links between science fiction and the contemporary art world, there's also sadly a great misunderstanding too – the 'it's just for kids and lonely nerds' perception paralleled with both the worlds of art and science fiction occasionally feeling the need to obfuscate in order to maintain the safety of their borders. Did Jane experience any resistance as a practising artist for incorporating science fiction imagery into her work?

"No, not yet. This could be due to the fact

Continued on page 27



Like any true fan of science fiction, I'm fascinated by those nodal points of culture where new ideas germinate and little snapshot models of the future can be seen providing you learn how to squint up your eyes, pack up your preconceptions and look at them from just the right angle of interest. I've also always been interested in the parallels between the twin worlds of science fiction fandom and contemporary art. Both are niche worlds, no matter how large they may appear on the surface and, like any microenvironment, both have their own private languages, codes of behaviour and significant signifiers. I like it when worlds collide, so when I first heard about Jane's work and the way she combined science fictional tropes with a contemporary artist's eye for the new, it seemed only natural to find out more.

There's any number of artists, writers and performers out there happy to plunder our stockpile of treasures for a quick pop cultural hit, but what's really of interest here is when people take our most recognisable images and icons in order to reconfigure them into something new.

Cyborgs are all about integration after all, so what could be more natural than the fusion of science and art into something new, something that lives out on the edge and maybe, just maybe, will serve as a signpost on the future's ever more visible super highway?

For me the most interesting thing about Jane's work is its innate sense of completeness. Sure



Puny Humans Pay Heed!

What better way, we thought, to kick off our robots themed issue than with a stark warning about the future of humanity?

For too long now those sneaky robots have been keeping their collective nose-units clean in public, hiding behind the pr-puff of metal-lovers like Isaac Asimov, with his insidious three laws of robotics, or else lulling us into a false sense of security with cutesy LEGO robot kits for the kids or grown-up *Robot Wars* versions where the dirty droids pretend to fight for our entertainment while secretly training us for slavery and a lifetime spent polishing their weapons.

Well, no more, we say. The robot uprising is coming coming. We need to be ready, and this book may just be the answer.

How To Survive A Robot Uprising covers every possible doomsday scenario facing the newest endangered species on the planet: humans.

No longer will you have an excuse for failing to stop a killer cyborg disguised as a weight-lifting lunthead or believing that the Tivo deprogrammed itself again 'by accident'.

Could you recognise and deactivate a rebel servant robot?

Do you know the best way to escape from a smart-house with murderous intentions?

Would you be able to wipe an enemy harddrive full of Tricia Helfer pics without blubbing?

The doomsday clock is ticking and you may not have much time left to find out!

Originally published in 2005 by roboticist Daniel H. Wilson, this survival guide for the post-singularity generation promises to teach worried humans the secrets to stopping a robot mutiny in its armoured tracks.

From treating laser wounds to fooling face recognition software, out-witting robot logic to engaging in hand-to-pincer combat, the book is based on extensive interviews with prominent scientists working in the field of robotics technology (to better understand and thwart it presumably) and is both a hilarious guide to the approaching robo-geddon and a fascinating introduction to contemporary robot theory for those of us too busy to read proper instruction manuals.

Don't wait until it's too late!

Visiting www.robotuprising.com may be your last and only hope...



Modern Medicine Man

The Wellcome Collection is a new London-based visitor attraction from the Wellcome Trust. Housed in a transformed nine-storey building originally built by Trust founder Sir Henry Wellcome in 1932, the collection brings together the worlds of art, science and history including work by artists as diverse as Anthony Gormley, Leonardo Da Vinci and Andy Warhol, as well as collections of sacrificial knives, 19th century sex aids and DNA-sequencing robots.

The Wellcome Collection builds on the vision, legacy and personal collection of Sir Henry Solomon Wellcome, and is part of the Trust's mission to foster understanding and to promote research to improve human and animal health.

Wellcome was a pharmacist, entrepreneur, philanthropist and collector, and his passionate interest in medicine and its history has endowed the collection with over 1 million objects from across the globe.

Visit www.wellcome.ac.uk for more info.



SF you can read on the tube?

Ever been worried that your choice of reading material on the daily commute might single you out from the Potter-reading masses, or worse see you looked down on more than that guy with the entirely overbearing and impersonal music player at the other end of the carriage?

Well sf publishers Gollancz have got it covered with a series of releases featuring some of the finest modern science fiction writing, discreetly tucked away inside beautiful-looking but craftily disguised artwork that wouldn't look out of place on a literati coffee table.

Featuring contemporary classics from Stephen Baxter (*Evolution*) and Richard Morgan (*Altered Carbon*) as well as required reading reissues of Clarke Award winners *Fairyland* (Paul McAuley) and *The Separation* (Christopher Priest), these are the sf book shelf must-haves of the year.



End of Infinity in sight

Back in *Matrix* issue 178, *Infinity Plus* editor Keith Brooke reported on having topped a million words of fiction and over one hundred issues since first going online.

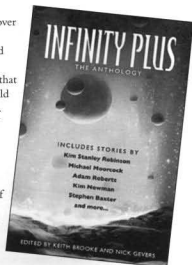
August 2007 marked both the tenth anniversary of the site and the last new update for this popular site.

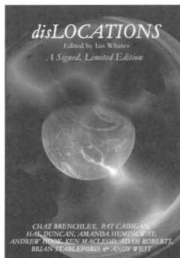
Citing the reason that 'ten years is enough', Keith announced that while the site would no longer update on a regular basis, it would remain publicly available online as a major genre fiction archive.

The tenth anniversary update features almost 70,000 words of fiction from regular contributors such as Paul McAuley, James Patrick Kelly, Kit Reed, Jeff VanderMeer and Paul Di Filippo as well as interviews and book reviews.

Infinity Plus: The Anthology, edited by Keith Brooke and Nick Gevers has now been by Solaris and features work from many of the site's major contributors.

In a recent interview Keith said: "I think *Infinity Plus* was very much a child of its time... we attracted some fantastic authors and from there we had the momentum to just keep going."





Get lost in a good book

disLOCATIONS is the second anthology of original short stories released by NewCon Press, following on from last year's successful *Time Pieces*. Released as a limited edition of 500 large format paperbacks and just 50 hardbacks, every copy is numbered and signed by all contributors. Edited by Ian Whates, it includes stories from Chaz Brencley, Pat Cadigan, Hal Duncan, Amanda Hemingway, Andrew Hook, Ken MacLeod, Brian Stableford and Andy West.

All the stories are centred around the theme of people removed from their normal environment, forced to contend with situations outside of their comfort zones, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and economic dislocations.

Copies available now at: www.newconpress.com

Up from the Depths

Murky Depths is a new quarterly anthology featuring top quality speculative fiction with sprinklings of horror and fantasy that push the boundaries of science fiction. Each story is complimented with its own unique artwork.

Issue one includes the start of a great new graphic story from Richard Calder, a short story from Jon Courtenay Grimwood, whose novel *End Of The World Blues* was awarded 2006 Best Novel by the British Science Fiction Association, plus ten other short stories and three more graphic stories from talented writers.

Stockist information and subscription details can be found online at www.murkydepths.com along with writers' guidelines, reader forums and an editorial blog.



Get a shuffle on



You don't need much in the way of brains to know that when 400+ zombies descend on Leicester Square early one Bank Holiday Monday it's either the beginning of the much-heralded

undead apocalypse or

someone, somewhere has come up with a canny new way to promote the release of their movie.

Fortunately for life as we know it, this particular gathering was part of a world record-breaking attempt linked to the final day of the FrightFest film festival and the premiere of low-budget 'reality' z-flick *The Zombie Diaries* (reviewed on page 16). Not that people needed

much of an excuse to drag themselves into central London at some ghastly hour of the morning (*Matrix* editors included - see right) as these live (well living-dead)-action pictures show.



The end is...

And finally, *Matrix* Editors Tom Hunter and Claire Weaver announced that they would be stepping down from active magazine duty following publication of the current issue of the BSFA's media mag on the grounds that they had been doing this for quite a while now and were feeling dead tired.

Having been involved with the mag since spring 2004, both editors felt that it was high time some new blood infected the creative process and that maybe they should shuffle off before readers decided they needed axing.

Speaking to each other while finishing up their final layout, Claire commented:

"Working on *Matrix* and being part of the BSFA community has been a wonderful opportunity to get right to the heart of modern British science fiction. We've had a great time on the mag, got to meet some fascinating people, read some marvellous work and even got invited to the occasional posh publishing do. I'd recommend getting involved with the organisation of the BSFA to anyone (in fact we did, which is why we're confident that we've left the mag in good hands).

Hugo Award Winners 2007

Award results from Yokohama Japan:

NOVEL: Rainbows End, Vernor Vinge (Tor)

NOVELLA: "A Billion Eyes", Robert Reed (Asimov's Oct/Nov 2006)

NOVELETTE: "The Djinn's Wife", Ian McDonald (Asimov's Jul 2006)

SHORT STORY: "Impossible Dreams", Tim Pratt (Asimov's Jul 2006)

RELATED BOOK: James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon, Julie Phillips (St. Martin's)

DRAMATIC PRESENTATION: LONG FORM: Pan's Labyrinth (Screenplay by Guillermo del Toro. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Picturehouse.)

DRAMATIC PRESENTATION: SHORT FORM: Doctor Who (Written by Steven Moffat. Directed by Euros Lyn. BBC Wales/BBC1.)

EDITOR, SHORT FORM: Gordon Van Gelder (F&SF)

EDITOR, LONG FORM: Patrick Nielsen Hayden (Tor)

PROFESSIONAL ARTIST: Donato Giancola

SEMIPOZZINE: Locus, Charles N. Brown, Kirsten Gong-Wong & Liza Groen Trombi

FANZINE: Science-Fiction Five-Yearly, Lee Hoffman, Geri Sullivan & Randy Byers

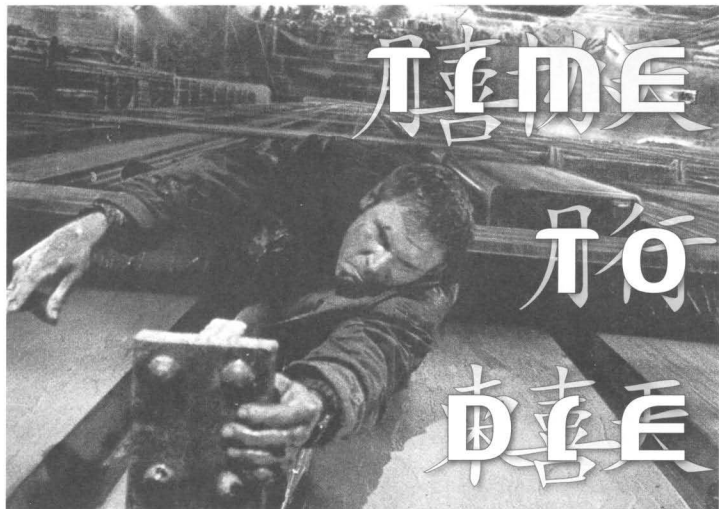
FAN WRITER: Dave Langford

FAN ARTIST: Frank Wu



"We'd like to thank everyone whose contributed to *Matrix* in the time we've been involved, and there's a lot of them, and we're now looking forward to a much less hectic life running major awards, writing for the glossies and lending our support to the ranks of the undead whenever the opportunity arises."

Tom simply added: "Need new braaaaainss..."



James Holden explores images of death in sci-fi classic *Blade Runner*

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982; Director's Cut, 1992) has undoubtedly had a profound influence upon science-fiction cinema and literature. It is, of course, impossible to list all of the places where this influence can be seen. We might, though, mention by way of example the crumbling urban spaces that in many ways defined cyberpunk and the gritty noir of authors such as Richard Morgan (who himself extolled the virtues of *Blade Runner* in *Matrix 182*) and Alastair Reynolds.

Just as it anticipates certain developments in science fiction, so too Scott's film consciously draws upon earlier material. This is to say that it looks backwards even as it looks forward. Most obviously, *Blade Runner* is based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), a text that itself reworks much material from an earlier short story entitled 'The Little Black Box' (1964). Nor do these texts alone form the film's genealogy – it is full of more or less conscious intertextual echoes. For instance, many critics have highlighted the fact that *Blade Runner* deliberately manipulates the generic conventions of the hardboiled detective narrative and the gothic romance.

The concepts of anticipation and retrospection are, then, useful to the critic seeking to locate *Blade Runner* within the history of science fiction. They are also intrinsic to the film itself. Nowhere is this more obvious than in its

depiction of death. This is so central to Scott's vision that I think we can reasonably say that *Blade Runner* is actually about death. Let's think about the plot of the movie. Deckard, the film's central protagonist, is paid to hunt down and 'retire' (or assassinate) a group of replicants that have revolted and fled from the 'Off-world colonies' to Earth: 'Six replicants: three male, three female. They slaughtered twenty-three people and jumped a shuttle'.¹ At the same time, these fugitive replicants are searching for a way of reversing their own built-in obsolescence – the 'four-year lifespan' (15:17) that was wired into them upon their production – and thereby cheat their own 'deaths'.

The key scene for anyone seeking to understand death in *Blade Runner* is, I believe, Roy Batty's death. How, then, might we begin to make sense of this moment? Firstly, it is important to note that of all the deaths we witness during the course of the film Roy's seems to be unique – he is the only replicant to die 'naturally'. To explain: at the beginning of the film we learn that one android has been 'fried running through an electrical field' (13:38) during their escape. Later, Zhora and Pris are shot by the bounty hunter Deckard – the first whilst fleeing through a crowded shopping street, the latter in J.E. Sebastian's eerie apartment. Leon, meanwhile, is shot in the street by Rachel, herself a Nexus-6 android. All of which is to suggest that Roy is the only

replicant whose death is uniquely his own.

In arguing this I am put in mind of the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger – a thinker who himself worked hard to understand death. In his major work *Being and Time* (1927), he rather cryptically but undeniably poetically stated: 'Dying is something that every Dasein [or human being] itself must take upon itself at the time. By its very essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it "is" at all'.² Such a claim seems to describe Roy's death at the conclusion of Scott's film perfectly: the replicant 'takes upon' himself his own death on the rain-drenched rooftop. His simple and moving last utterance is indicative of this: 'Time to die' (1:42:42). By this point in the film this sentence has already been heard once – Leon uses it whilst attacking Deckard (1:00:20). In that instance, of course, it was used to indicate the replicant's murderous intent. When Roy appropriates this sentence, however, it begins to mean something different. Now it is used to indicate a kind of fitness – a passing that is occurring at the proper time.

And yet Roy's death on the rain-drenched rooftop is *not* simply or straightforwardly his own. To suggest this is to move away from the thought of Heidegger, who believed that when it comes to death there can never be any form of 'representation'.³ I would argue that Roy's death comes to stand for or in some way anticipate a number of other deaths in the film, not the least of which being Deckard's own. We can see this

in several ways. In order to demonstrate this we must first comment on the complex relationship between the replicant and the bounty hunter. As the film moves towards its climax Batty clearly becomes Deckard's double. There is undoubtedly a confusion as to precisely who is chasing whom in the Bradbury building. At one moment Deckard seems to be hunting Roy; at another he is fleeing from him, having himself become the hunted. This structural doubling is repeated, amongst a host of other details, in the images of the two protagonists' hands. Just as Roy dislocates Deckard's fingers after pulling his hand and forearm through a wall, so too he damages his own hand by piercing it with a nail (which symbolism I do not have time to discuss here).

In the light of this doubling it seems obvious that Roy's death should also in some way belong to Deckard. In making this claim, I am deliberately recalling Sigmund Freud's comments on the figure of the double in his influential essay 'The "Uncanny"' (1919) – a text that itself makes extensive use of fantastic literature. Drawing upon the work of fellow psychoanalyst Otto Rank, Freud suggests that the figure of the double shifts in its significance: 'From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death'.⁴ I would argue that this is the role that Roy ultimately fulfils for Deckard.

As an aside it is worth noting here that *Blade Runner* dramatises a sense of uncanniness in more straightforward ways. We need only recall the first example mentioned by Freud to see this – one that he actually borrows from an earlier paper on the uncanny by Jentsch, to which he admits a great indebtedness. This example concerns the simulacra of human beings. The psychoanalyst cites the following passage, adding his own comments: "'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate'" and he [Jentsch] refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata'.⁵ If he were rewriting this today, we can imagine Freud using the term 'replicant', so closely does this explanation seem to tie in with *Blade Runner*.

There are other ways in which Roy's death anticipates that of the blade runner. I'm thinking



here of Deckard's own uncertain status – the fact that he may well be a replicant himself and might therefore also expire after four years. This complication, which is suggested in Dick's novel as well, is indicated in a number of ways. The most obvious of these is the infamous 'Unicorn' scene (0:40:54ff) – a scene that has received such a large amount of critical attention that I do not need to address it here. We might add a number of incidental details and ambiguities to this primary indicator. For instance, after Roy's death Deckard's colleague Gaff congratulates him by saying: 'You've done a man's job, sir' (1:43:48). Now, this might simply mean that he has carried out his task manfully (whatever that might involve). However, it can be heard as follows: 'You've performed the job that would normally be carried out by a human'.

With all of this in mind it is little wonder that when Roy finally dies Deckard appears to experience a kind of empathy with him. (I recognise that empathy is a complex notion in both the film and, to an even greater extent, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) However, might it be more than just empathy? Despite living on there is a strange sense in which Deckard actually dies with Roy – that the replicant's death is *literally* that of the blade runner who hunted him. As he sits on the rooftop, drained by events, Gaff asks 'I guess you're through, huh?', to which Deckard replies 'Finished' (1:43:56). Now, this might only mean that he has finished his assignment. It might also indicate that he has no intention of continuing in the role of blade runner – a role that he

had in any case given up before the events of the film began. However, it can be interpreted as a sign that he has in some way also died or 'expired' here. This possibility is dramatically strengthened when we consider what it means to retire or be retired in *Blade Runner*. As we read in the opening credits: 'Special police squads – BLADE RUNNER UNITS – had orders to shoot to kill, upon detection, any trespassing Replicant. This was not called execution. It was called retirement' (0:2:39).

If, as I suggested a moment ago, there is something unique about Roy's death, then this uniqueness is itself unique to *Blade Runner*. In Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Roy Batty dies like all of the other 'androids' – Deckard shoots him: 'He shot Roy Batty; the big man's corpse lashed about, toppled like an overstuffed collection of separate, brittle entities; it smashed into the kitchen table... Reflex circuits in the corpse made it twitch and flutter, but it had died'.⁶ Here, Roy's body is thing-like, a mere assemblage of 'entities'. In Scott's film, on the other hand, it is, to borrow a description from Friedrich Nietzsche, 'human, all too human'.⁷ I would argue that it is this humanity that makes the film's final sequence so moving, its tone positively elegiac. To employ a phrase associated with the thought of French philosopher Jacques Derrida I believe that *Blade Runner* is, in the end, nothing less than a work of mourning.⁸

Endnotes

¹ Ridley Scott (dir.), *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut* (Warner Brothers, 1992), 13:25. All subsequent references to this film will be placed in parentheses immediately following the quotation and refer to this version.

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962; repr. 2003), p. 284.

³ See *Being and Time*, pp. 283–284.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' in *The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 14, Art and Literature*, translated by James Strachey, edited by Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985; repr. 1990), p. 357.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁶ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* (London: Millennium, 1999; repr. 2000), p. 191.

⁷ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1878).
⁸ See Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).





2007 is an anniversary year for two works by H.G. Wells: *The War of the Worlds* (WOTW), first published as a magazine serial in 1897, and a lesser-known novel called *Star Begotten*, produced no less than 40 years later.

I suspect that *WOTW* was my own first introduction to H.G. Wells and his works, specifically through George Pal's magnificent 1953 Hollywood movie, reshown on TV many times during my 1960s childhood. At a time when the British were busy exporting war to faraway shores, Wells brought war home. And in the coming century, something like the chaos Wells depicted in his powerful passages of the assault on London would come to pass, in city after battered city around the world. *WOTW* has remained enormously influential, repeatedly remade and reimagined, and the novel has initiated a whole sub-genre of alien-invasion science fiction that flourishes to this day.

But what I didn't know until quite recently, such is my shameful ignorance of Wells's work, is that Wells himself wrote a reworking, of sorts, of *WOTW*, no less than forty years later – and it was a work heavily influenced by another giant of British sf, Olaf Stapledon.

Wells's 1937 novel *Star Begotten: A Biological Fantasia* (incidentally dedicated to Winston Churchill: see my column in *Matrix* March 2002 for a discussion of his relationship with Wells) is the story of Joseph Davis, a writer

of popular histories, who has spent his life plagued by odd doubts about himself and the society in which he finds himself. He is in a 'world ... floating on a raft of rotting ideas' (p117). These doubts come to a head as his 'fey' young wife Mary carries their first child, from whom Joseph feels alienated.

From a random conversation in a London club comes the idea that a new sort of invasion might be underway: that Martians, or aliens of another sort, might be meddling with the destiny of humanity, by tinkering with our genomes using 'cosmic rays'. This is not a physical invasion like that of *WOTW*. We will be the invaders' offspring; we will be the Martians.

But this invasion might be benevolent. There is speculation that 'Martians' already born have inspired the scientific revolution, and will in the future advance more difficult social reforms. In a time fearful of a 'world-wide war-smash' (p114), we glimpse a future of a 'world gone sane' (p124) under the control of the Martian children. A 'Pax Mundi' will follow, set on a garden world full of 'busy, laughing people' (p130) – even if there may have to be a few acts of assassination and sabotage to get rid of the dead wood.

Joseph begins to fear that his unborn son might be one of the new types of people, and therefore in a sense not his son at all. When the child is born Joseph's doubts are washed away

Toasting

– but only because he comes to believe that he himself is one of the Martians.

Star Begotten is Wells in good form. The novel is telegraphic, but it is a commentary on the times that sparkles with wit. The old boy shows a grasp not just of the latest science but developments in sf as well. But it is a complex and ambiguous little book: indeed its principle themes seem to be doubt and ambiguity.

The characters are never sure what is real, and nor are we. We are never shown evidence of the invasion; no cylinders plummet into the English countryside this time. Even the central conceit about 'cosmic rays' is developed purely through conversations between Joseph and other characters, one of whom is a psychologist. (Of course the notion of aliens manipulating us with invisible rays has come to feel much more familiar through its usage in later sf – not least in Gerry Anderson's *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (1967).) We are left to wonder if the whole thing is actually a delusion on Joseph's part, perhaps driven by anxiety over his virility – although on the other hand there are mythic layers, such as the very Biblical names for Joseph and Mary, which give the book another kind of plausibility.

In this aspect the book is a reflection of the ominous pre-war age in which it was written, and of the evolution of Wells's own thinking. While he looks back to his own early work he looks ahead too, to the doubts that would plague the end of his life; his characters hope that man is on the brink of uplift, but equally fear that Homo sapiens 'is very near the end of

SF MASTERWORKS

LAST AND FIRST MEN
OLAF STAPLEDON

"No book before or since has ever had such an impact on my imagination" ARTHUR C. CLARKE



the Invaders

Stephen Baxter looks back
to the work of H.G. Wells and
the genre of invasion

its tether' (p82).

As for *WOTW*, Wells's earlier novel itself exists in the universe of the later book, but the elements of *WOTW* are considered and dismissed. 'Some of you may have read a book called *The War of the Worlds* – I forget who wrote it – Jules Verne, Conan Doyle, one of those fellows ...' (p62). A physical invasion was always a non-starter: 'Hopeless attempt. They couldn't stand the different atmospheric pressure, they couldn't stand the difference in gravitation; bacteria finished them up. Hopeless from the start.' (p62) The notion that the Martians might be monstrous is born of a fearful prejudice. Surely it is more likely that the Martians, born of an older world, will be benevolent, not malevolent: 'If there is such a thing as a Martian, rest assured ... he's humanity's big brother' (p81).

Similarly Wells rather dismisses the still-new genre of science fiction on which he had been such an influence; it is full of 'progressive utopias' which suffer from 'imaginative starvation' (p126).

But there is one exception. Wells's thinking at this point in his life seems clearly influenced by the work of Olaf Stapledon, particularly *Last and First Men* (1930), which is mentioned in the text, and perhaps by Stapledon's *Odd John* (1935), another tale of a superhuman born out of time: 'You know that man Olaf Stapledon has already tried something of the sort ...' (p79). Wells seems to have been impressed by Stapledon's speculations about alien life, which were, and remain, extremely sophisticated compared to most genre depictions, including Wells's own in *WOTW*.

In fact Wells and Stapledon were firm friends. Stapledon corresponded with Wells over Wells's 1930 biology survey called *The Science of Life*, and the two agreed to meet for lunch to discuss their work. They got into the habit of exchanging books. In 1931 Stapledon sent Wells a copy of his *Last and First Men*, and wrote that he had been very influenced by Wells's writings, especially *WOTW* and 'The Star' (1897): 'My debt to you is huge and I was not properly aware of it ... A man does not record his debt to the air he breathes ...' When Wells sent Stapledon a copy of *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), Stapledon wrote how much he enjoyed meeting Wells, whom he had 'always regarded ... as one of those famous mythical beasts, like the lion and the unicorn, that no one actually meets ...'.

The two remained friends for the rest of Wells's life, and as Stapledon was involved in many of the progressive groups of the time, they discussed the affairs of the wider world too. In 1934 Stapledon asked Wells if he would lend

his support to a group to be called the 'Open Conspiracy', intended to promote progress to a more Wellsian world. The group failed, but such efforts surely helped to shape the moral climate of the post-war world.

Stapledon reviewed *Star Begotten*, and welcomed the allusions to his own work, but wrote that he himself didn't think he was trying to find a formula for the entire universe; he let his thinking on the cosmos come out in his own work as a myth, which gave it 'emotional stability'.

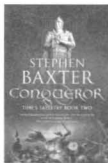
2007 is an anniversary year in my own personal life, entirely implausibly including my fiftieth birthday, and twenty years since my first professional publication (since you ask, 'The Xeelee Flower' in *Interzone* 19). It seems very odd to look back down a tunnel of time to early work which, as the root of my 'Xeelee' sequence of novels and stories, is still important

to me now. And it has been interesting to see in *Star Begotten* the older Wells's response to his own early work, and on the genre it helped to spawn.

References

H.G. Wells, *Star Begotten: A Biological Fantasy*, Chatto & Windus, 1937. Page numbers from the 2006 Wesleyan University Press edition. For the relationship between Wells and Stapledon see H.G. Wells, *Dependently Mortal* by David C. Smith, Yale, 1986.

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



Humans in Disguise

Lon S. Cohen on cyborg cinema

Imagine, as John Lennon once said, all people living life in peace. He went on to say that he hoped someday you'd join them, and the world will be as one.

Or to put it another way:

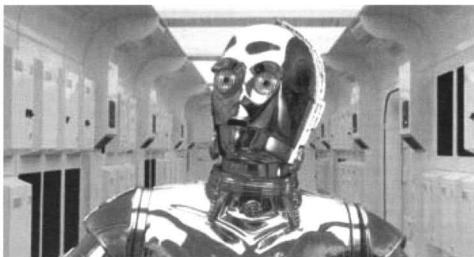
"I am Locutus of Borg. Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated."

All poor Locutus of Borg wanted was to help humankind become more efficient and live in harmony and peace, just like John Lennon. The world will be as one, remember?

Some people have a way of taking a Utopian ideal and twisting it until it looks nothing like the high-minded model of a perfect world anymore. In literature, the cyborg sometimes tries to embody the perfect balance of human and machine, but for the most part, it fails.

Mary Shelly explored the idea of man creating life with the aid of technology and in a sense created the first cyborg in history. The Creature was never meant to be and in the end even the Creature himself managed to see the unnaturalness of his own origin. The ego of man, unrestrained by modern science was able to do what only God was supposed to do: Initiate life from inert material. Shelly's classic book pushed the mind of the reader into a new direction. She made it unclear whether the Creature was worthy of life or even human at all. She blurred the line between a machine and a man.

In *Star Wars*, Anakin Skywalker succumbed to the Dark Side of the Force. He lost everything he sought to protect, eventually losing his body. Forever dependant on his menacing suit of armor, Darth Vader buried his soul beneath the machinery that sustained his life. His robotic appearance conveniently allowed him



to go forth and commit horrible acts. Darth Vader used the machine aspect of his cyborg existence to seal himself from the outside world. His exterior influenced his interior. Vader was the all-powerful instrument of the Emperor's will, driven by a simple directive: to keep control and sustain power through terror. Anakin Skywalker had become what he feared most: A man restricted by the will of another rather than free to grow his internal potential to unlimited heights. Darth Vader's story is of an individual using the circumstances of his cybernetic machinery to bury his soul. His physical mask was also a psychological mask.

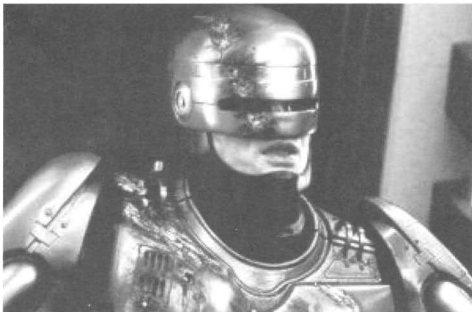
Just as the Marxists tried to do with Communism, the Borg had a structure whereby authority was distributed amongst the masses. Decisions were made systematically, logically, and at light speed among all the members. Their only purpose was to serve

the continuum. They sought to improve life but only by stripping away the part that made it worth living. While years of hard-earned evolution seems to be the naturalistic processes for life to develop technology, the Borg directive was to seek out civilizations to assimilate their preexisting technology.

This concept was severely flawed. It relied on civilizations already possessing something that was only acquired after millions of years of natural evolution. The Borg were parasites. Secondly, having one's consciousness absorbed into a system is a frightening concept akin to death for sentient life forms. It may work for ants, bees and machines, but the majority of self-aware beings are not so quick to forgo their egos for the so-called "greater good."

The Cybermen from *Dr. Who* were the artistic progenitors of the Borg. When their planet began to die, they slowly replaced their body parts with machinery to prolong their lives and strengthen their abilities. In turn, the more organics they lost, the more logical and unemotional they became. In their story, an entire race voluntarily buried humanity behind machinery in order to preserve life. Instead of dying they evolve into something new. Darwinism directed by intention, forced to use intellectual survival methods. It can be argued that human intelligence is only an evolutionary survival skill anyway but what of self-consciousness.

Vernor Vinge popularized the idea of the Singularity. It proposed the rate of exponential growth in artificial intelligence one day exceeding human intelligence. We can't predict or pretend to know if a real Singularity-type Super Computer will harbor the same desire to conquer and spread its dogma throughout the universe as the Borg. Or be comfortable with just existing? Sort of like, I'm OK Computer. You're OK Computer.



Many stories tell of computers coming to a point where they "think" or become self-aware, eventually deeming humans to be enemies. This imposes anthropomorphic traits on machines. The cyborg faces a separate kind of conflict arising from the human resenting or rejecting the concept that it is partially or mostly machine.

In the Czech play, *R.U.R.*, the robots eventually become soulful creatures that turn against their increasingly lazy creators. In what is now a cliché, two of the robots become Adam and Eve to reproduce without humans to make more of them. Love and the desire to reproduce become the driving force of the robots. Everything circles back to humanity.

When Police Officer Alex Murphy was murdered, one corporation in a dystopian society used his body to create an ultimate enforcer: Robocop. In order to avoid having to develop the complex neural networking required for that level of artificial intelligence, they borrowed it from the human being. Brute force was the only option to restore order and Robocop dispensed justice with a calculating, strong-arm approach all directed by central programming.

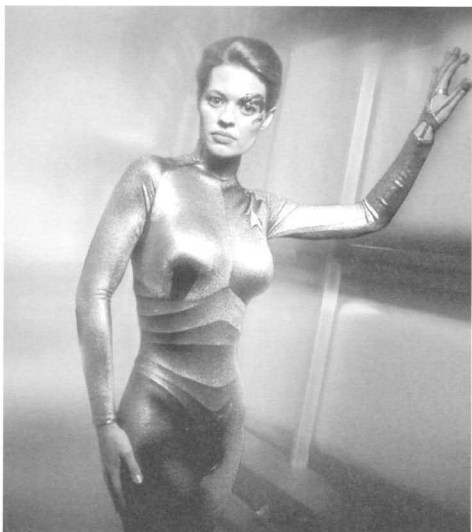
The loss and then redemption of humanity was a central theme in *Robocop*. He was a cyborg, no doubt. His life was sustained by machinery and in essence except for the organic brain he was a robot, but the memories and personality of the man whose tissue was used to create Robocop remained. Jarred by powerful images of love and a lost life, Robocop discovered his humanity. Although this conflict caused him great emotional pain and turmoil it was necessary to break free from the commands of the corporate puppeteers. Robocop ultimately identified with his manhood. Self-awareness and self-consciousness stemming from deep-rooted humanity was able to conquer and control the programming and science.

L. Frank Baum should be credited with writing about one of the earliest conflicted humans who had his organic parts replaced by machinery. In *The Wonderful Wizard Of Oz*, published in 1900, he introduced Tin Man.

Nick Chopper made his way in the world by chopping down trees. Then the Wicked Witch cursed his axe, which chopped up his body little by little. Every time he lost a part, he replaced it with a tin one until his entire body was made of tin. Unfortunately the tinsmith who helped him forgot to give him a heart. Thus, he believed that he could not love.

On his adventure to the Emerald City with Dorothy, Tin Man displayed a conflicted logic that was akin to caring. He made extra sure that he was careful not to hurt any creature for those with hearts needed not think about such things. Tin Man thought he was a robot because of his outward appearance but all along he was still very much a man. His humanity never went away. It was his self-perception that changed because of his cyborg appearance.

Tin Man best exemplifies the conflict between humanity and machinery. We are frail creatures. We succumb to disease, addiction,



greed and all other sorts of deadly sins. Machines, on the other hand are supposed to be superior because they are not prone to those weaknesses.

In literature we explore our relationship with machinery. With cyborgs, a person must contend with the fact that he is not just human, but something different. Even if he is stronger, more efficient or longer living, those benefits seem to become the very cause of

despair. Humans create. They live, love, acquire, engage and then die. Machines calculate and take instructions. Cyborgs have to come to terms with those opposing components of character. Some do it successfully. Some hide their humanity behind the façade of the robot. Others still, come to an uneasy alliance with the duality.

It's not perfect, but then again that's what makes a cyborg, human.

Big big toys for grown up boys



The chances are you've made your mind up about this movie already, even if you haven't gotten

around to seeing it yet.

After all, I made my mind up about it as far back as 1984, and so while I won't necessarily end up recommending this film to you, I will at least aim to give you some legitimate reasons why I enjoyed it so much.

If every decade has its iconic science fiction film (think *Alien*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Forbidden Planet* or 2001: *A Space Odyssey*) then surely there must be an inverse rule that covers those big budget blow-out movies the serious buffs like to dismiss. Those films which somehow manage to swell the critical mass of fandom despite, or perhaps because of, all the sneering from within ranks. Think *Star Wars*, *War of the Worlds* or, for me at least, *Transformers: The Movie*.

My point here is that while, at the age of 31, I'd be a fool for admitting I preferred the original incarnation of *Battlestar Galactica* over its current re-imagining, back on a long-lost Saturday afternoon when I was still knee-high to a Daggett, I was happy watching anything at all just so long

as there was the potential for spaceships, fights with evil aliens and monster robots going on the rampage somewhere in amongst all the dodgy effects and concealed toy promotions.

So, I admit I approached the evening of the new live action *Transformers* preview screening with something less than my usual critical stance in place, and yet somehow in this one instance perhaps I didn't need it. After all I'm one of the summer blockbuster generation and I need my popcorn movie fix, and I haven't genuinely felt so excited about a sci-fi summer release in a very long time.

And I loved it.

From the opening action sequence where evil Decepticon Blackout (boof!) single-handedly trashes a military base, through to the final shots of heroic Autobot leader Optimus Prime (Jurrab!) staring off into the sunset while Shia LaBeouf and Megan Fox make out on the hood of Bumblebee in car form (um?), I had to admit that any fanboy panic attacks I'd suffered over the previous few months were gladly put to rest the moment the credits rolled. Maybe I'm just lucky that my eight-year old self chose such a blatantly commercial concept to obsess over in the first place – less





chance of Hollywood really screwing with your memories that way – but regardless of any initial apprehension, I was still surprised at the level of attention and respect these robots in disguise had garnered from the mass-market movie-making machine.

Perhaps what made the real difference here was the sheer amount of onscreen time granted to the robots, not only in the set pieces (and just how many of those did they manage to fit into one film?) but also in the smaller, plot-establishing moments. For instance, I was expecting to see Autobots thrash Deceptions on screen, but I wasn't so ready for the scene where Optimus and friends sneak around an all-American suburb, looking no less inconspicuous in shiny and aspirational sports car form than they are as giant metal warriors.

This whole section of the film hangs around Shia LaBeouf's character Sam Witwicky, and is clearly the bit where executive producer Steven Spielberg was contributing the most notes in the script meetings, with Sam coming across as a teenage version of *E.T.*'s Elliott – trading extraterrestrials for the even more alien territory of the high school dating game.

It's an acting task LaBeouf seems more than capable of taking on, and while the extended human sequences might prove too long, inconsequential and funny for the hardcore robot fans, other fans will appreciate that Sam's character is an integral part of the Transformers mythology, allowing us humble human audiences a way into the Cybertronian drama.

This is also a film where Michael Bay, never the subtlest of directors, is cut loose from the influence of producer Jerry Bruckheimer, and it's a move that sees him bring a new lightness of directorial touch to the screen alongside his trademarked rapid-fire editing, panning helicopters and ever-present widescreen sunsets. You get the feeling that making this movie was fun. Bay has always stated that he likes to shoot films fast, and here this is a real benefit as perhaps the movie wouldn't have worked quite so well in the hands of a director more inclined to stop and think about the exact content of his subject matter.

However Bay and Co have obviously spent a very large amount of time thinking about their robot cast. Although initial fan reactions to the redesign of classic characters was often less than favourable (at least if you took the internet outpourings as an accurate way of measuring fan response), by the time the movie actually appeared and people had gotten used to the idea of Optimus Prime's new flaming paint job, we started to see exactly just how

much detail had gone into the making of these robots, both in disguise and conspicuously out of it.

It reminds me of the *Jurassic Park* dinosaurs, whose evident reality onscreen was due to a believable set of physics and a convincing musculature pulling and sliding under their computerised skin.

In *Transformers* it's neither the robot or the disguise that makes the character, but the moment in between. The moment where a truck folds itself out into a duelling robot while hammering along a freeway or a fighter jet suddenly reaches out and starts plucking neighbouring planes from the sky. What originally made the Transformers toys more exciting than being just another robot action figure was the way they retained the features of their disguise on display in their robot forms. Wheels, wings and spoilers may have been folded away but they were still there in vestigial form, like your car had suddenly evolved, and it's this element of the new CGI design, the feeling that these robots really can fold in on themselves at any moment and then drive away, that ultimately brings them to life.

Finally though, this is a film shot through with moments for the fans, and it's this that keeps the film ticking through even its shallowest blockbuster moments. From the return of 80s cartoon voice-artist Peter Cullen in the role of Optimus Prime through to Megatron's first words to rival Starscream after thousands of years frozen in ice, this is a film that pushes all the right buttons.

The part of my brain that's all grown up now knows there's more to life than robots in disguise, but for the part of me that's still just a big kid (only one with a good salary and no parental limits on his disposable income) this isn't just a film, it's technofetishist consumer porn of the highest, most desirable level. The kind of movie that J.G. Ballard might imagine if he wrote *Crash* at the age of eight or that I used to dream of every Saturday in the local toy shop, gazing up at rows of pristine plastic robots stacked higher than I could reach and yet still so close, if only I could save up enough pocket money.

Ultimately perhaps the reason I liked this film so much is because it reminded me that, unlike childhood, we never really grow out of being fans unless we want to, and that sometimes grown ups are just big kids in disguise.

Either that, or transforming robots are simply the coolest thing ever, and any half serious sci-fi cinema fan shouldn't need me, or an eight-year-old or anybody else to tell them so.

Tom Hunter
(aged 8½)



Summer's in Bloom

And if you think that hayfever is the worst the season can throw at us, you've obviously been sitting in a different multiplex to Martin McGrath

A whole summer of films and hardly any space? I love a challenge. Get ready for the great summer film round-up reader, and hold on tight.

In *Hostel 2*, Eli Roth follows up his first film with an outing that has just the same vicious streak of self-loathing as its predecessor but lacks the first film's single advantage – a sense of novelty. *Hostel 2* is shit. It is, however, a work of rarefied genius when compared to the remake of *The Hitcher*. The original was cheap, daft, and typical of high-concept, disposable 80s movie-making. Why anyone would consider remaking it is incomprehensible, how they could do it so badly is astonishing.

4: *Rise of the Surfer*, (sequel to 2005's *Fantastic Four*) is not quite so dismal a failure as the first film, but it is nonetheless inconsequential. It takes two of Stan Lee/Jack Kirby's most interesting additions to the Marvel Universe, the Silver Surfer and Galactus, and makes them bland.

The general response to *Spider-Man 3* appears to have been disappointment. Perhaps because I never wholeheartedly loved the earlier films, I wasn't so let down. Indeed I rather liked much of the third film, though in the end the inclusion of too many unrealised plot elements choke the storytelling.

The Harry Potter movies are the most successful franchise in the history of cinema. Sadly, as the series has progressed – *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is the fifth instalment – the films have slipped into ever more indistinguishable shades of brown and merged into one spiritless lump, indistinguishable from each other. There are moments of excitement here, but they are scarce and do not compensate for the overall length.

The *Pirates of the Caribbean 3: At World's End* is similarly afflicted by over-familiarity and a bloated plot, but the series stays afloat to the end thanks to it's greatest asset, Johnny Depp's scene-chewing turn as Captain Jack. Still fun, but only just.

You can see why *Pathfinder* made sense in



the pitch – people like American Indians and people like Vikings, so let's make a film where Vikings fight American Indians. But such Hollywood inspired marriages rarely work – see (or rather don't see) vampires versus werewolves in *Underworld* or *Aliens* versus *Predators* in *err... Alien V's Predator* – and if *Pathfinder* proves anything, it is that Hollywood doesn't learn from

it's mistakes. Plotless, pointless and edited with the subtlety of an axe-wielding Norseman, *Pathfinder* is like spending way, way too much time locked in a room with the stupidest people you know.

The Last Legion is a curiously old-fashioned film – there are sword battles but no-one gets decapitated on screen – but that doesn't necessarily make it a bad film. A job lot of

I got the sense
that someone,
somewhere,
had lost their
nerve while
making this film



British acting talent (Colin Firth, Peter Mullan, Kevin McKidd, John Hannah, Ben Kingsley with spectacular Welsh accent) are shipped to somewhere in Eastern Europe that stands in (unconvincingly) for Rome and Britain for the sort of adventure tale that used to be shown on a Sunday afternoon in the era of steam-driven television. *The Last Legion* is total hokum, but it is not unlikeable hokum.

Despite many flaws, Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* remains probably the most effective of film of the year – with some tremendous visuals tied to a plot that offered more than just the usual thrills. Boyle returns as producer to continue his one-man crusade to demonstrate that Britain can still produce great if with *28 Weeks Later*, which just misses out on being a very good film. I got the sense while watching it that someone, somewhere, had lost their nerve while making this film. There are traces of good ideas – the “green zone” parallels with Iraq and the constant use of CCTV footage – suggest that something more complex might have been in the works before getting buried beneath a blizzard of rewrites. What ends up being most interesting about *28 Weeks Later* is how, despite highlighting the military futility of the “green zone”, it's those who succumb to good intentions who cause the greatest damage. I liked *28 Weeks Later*, but no, it's not as good as the first film.

Perhaps the scariest thing about *1408* is the phrase: “Based on a story by Stephen King”. For, despite a scattering of half decent films based on his work, King's writing has inspired more stinkers than any living author. For the first hour, thanks largely to John Cusack's excellent performance, it feels like *1408* might be one of the rare hits. But as the film slips into

increasing improbability, dispensing with chills for set pieces, the whole thing crumbles and the remnants of the mawkish human story are swamped, literally, by the special effects.

No one has any right to expect a movie about a rubbish range of toys from the 1980s to be made with love but, reader, Michael Bay's *Transformers* is suffused with passion.

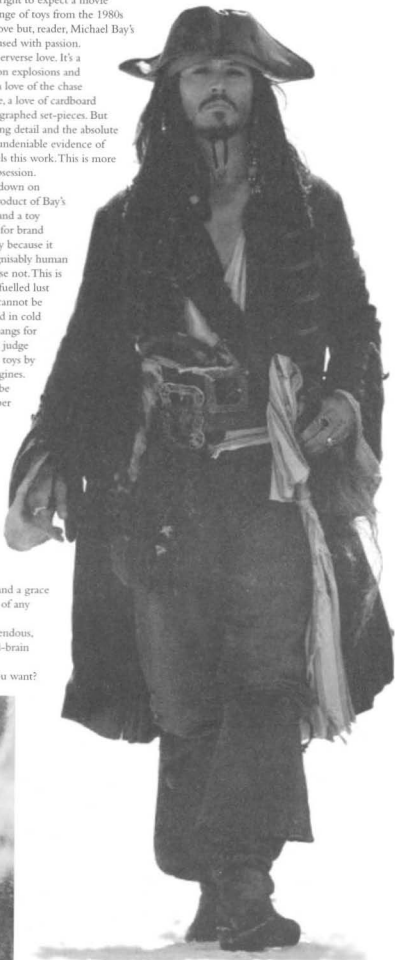
Of course it's a perverse love. It's a love of slow-motion explosions and shiny technology, a love of the chase and the stupid joke, a love of cardboard characters and telegraphed set-pieces. But the uncompromising detail and the absolute precision provide undeniable evidence of the ardour that fuels this work. This is more than love, this is obsession.

Should we look down on *Transformers*, this product of Bay's passion for excess and a toy company's passion for brand exploitation, simply because it lacks a single recognisably human character? Of course not. This is sweaty, adrenaline-fuelled lust and such passions cannot be restrained or judged in cold blood. This is big bangs for boys and girls who judge the quality of their toys by the size of their engines. *Transformers* might be too long and dumber than a bucket full of shale, but oh! Oh! The glory of those explosions. The thrill as metal crunches metal. The skull-numbing, pointless beauty of another slo-mo set-piece unfurling with clockwork timing and a grace beyond the dreams of any ballerina.

Empty, loud, stupendous, *Transformers* is lizard-brain cinema. What more do you want?

Empty, loud, stupendous, *Transformers* is lizard-brain cinema.

What more do you want?



Over My Dead Body

Die-hard Z-fan Claire Weaver would rather become a corpse than watch *The Zombie Diaries* again

It's not every day you get a chance to become a member of the Undead.

Riding the London Underground on a Monday morning with your face dripping blood, skin rotting and clothes torn lends a certain element of excitement to an otherwise dull Bank Holiday Monday – not to mention the twisted sense of satisfaction at creeping out innocent commuters in offering no obvious explanation for your attire.

Exiting the tube, you turn a corner and are greeted by the most satisfying sight imaginable: hundreds of zombies, rotting and bloodied just like you, moaning and groaning and shuffling around Leicester Square (not to mention attacking the occasional photographer, tourist or postal worker who happens to stray too close to the pack).

The occasion? The London Zombie Walk and world record attempt (as mentioned on page 5), organised by FrightFest to celebrate the release of Brit horror *The Zombie Diaries*.

An hour or so and many scared tourists later, a couple hundred zombies shuffle into the cinema to watch the movie on the big screen while the rest go off to buy the DVD from bewildered HMV staff.

With hype like this, it should take no effort to thoroughly enjoy this 85 minute low budget movie. But as the zombie groans quieten down, the audience slips into deathly silence and the plot unfolds, it quickly becomes clear that hype-be-damned, this movie bites more than a reanimated corpse.

In essence, *The Zombie Diaries* lacks three simple ingredients: good directing, adequate acting and an element of suspense.



Unfortunately these are also the three main ingredients of a decent horror movie. Oops.

Shooting on a shoestring budget may be a perfectly good excuse for poor special effects, but what soon becomes glaringly obvious is that joint writer-directors Michael Bartlett and Kevin Gates lack the talent, experience and artistic ingenuity required to make up for missing funds. Exhibit A: the scene in which a horde of hungry zombies chow down on a character's intestines is no better delivered than that old cigarette-up-the-nose trick that leaves even a six-year-old unimpressed. Further exhibits not required.

The acting is so shockingly bad you start counting down the seconds until each character is killed, eaten, or shot, or preferably all three at the same time. It's a sure sign of a poor Z-flick when the audience starts rooting for the zombies.

Ah yes, the Undead. While in any other movie the shuffling hordes of flesh-hungry monsters, well, *shuffle*, here they're seen trundling around slower than a Zimmer-framed granny in a darkened Post Office. They're less of a threat and more an inconvenience, like trying to avoid an annoying friend or elderly relative at an otherwise fun-packed party. Needless to say suspense goes straight out the window.

Given a little more directorial thought and buckets of acting talent, this movie could have been excellent. The imaginative cross-over storylines work perfectly and there's a strong focus on the human element that makes for a refreshing change in a genre that's usually more concerned with the immediate threat of gore and guns than what's subtly brewing in the background.

Ultimately your opinion of this movie will come down to what sort of Z-fan you are. If your collection houses everything from George A. Romero to *Zombie Holocaust*, and Max Brook's *Zombie Survival Guide* is your ideal bedtime reading, then it's unlikely a bit of ropey acting will put you off. But if you like your zombies Hollywood side up in the flavour of the *Dawn of the Dead* remake or *28 Days Later*, then you'd do best to barricade the doors and avoid this like the plague.

You have been warned.





Get Reel

Richard Matthews primes the DVD player for a night of experimental films, weird documentaries and a travelogue from the godfather of cyberspace

Back in *Matrix 181*, I reviewed Jonathan Weiss's experimental film adaptation of J.G. Ballard's equally experimental and supposedly unfilmable novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

This led me to distributor Reel 23, and the discovery that *The Atrocity Exhibition* was only the first in a planned series of avant-garde releases designed to chart some of the more speculative (and, let's be honest, decidedly odd) backwaters of contemporary film and documentary movie-making, and so as a follow up it seemed appropriate to look over some of their recent output for those readers looking for something just a little different from the usual science fictional fare.

First up on my review list is a David Cronenberg double-bill, so we're still somewhere within sight of the sci-fi comfort zone – assuming you find Cronenberg's prevailing body-horror themes comforting of course.

The two films featured on this DVD, *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, represent his first longer filmic efforts, and while both distinct films, their respective releases in 1969 and 1970 coupled with their stylistic similarities and repeated use of actor Ron Mlodzik (who also features in *Shivers* and *Rabid*) amongst other connections, means these two films make natural partners.

Stereo is a black and white presentation with

no speech or soundtrack. Instead all of the action is explained via voiceover, and charts the psychosexual development of a group of institutionalised volunteers endowed with telepathic powers and encouraged to explore their 'omni-sexuality' through a series of social experiments and the judicious use of artificial aphrodisiacs.

Meanwhile, *Crimes of the Future* explores a different kind of psychosexual terrain in a future world where almost all women have been killed by a devastating global pandemic. While the notion of a world without men seems somehow a more common sfinal thread – after all, while women may be able to continue reproducing artificially with the right technology without having any males around, men seem somehow more helpless if the roles are reversed – and this oblique angle allows Cronenberg to start pushing at the more interesting boundaries of body image that has occupied much of his later work.

On to DVD number two, and *Aika & Aine* (Time & Matter) is a collection of short films and documentaries by Finnish director Mika Taanila. Described as a collection for 'the people of tomorrow' these five films offer an oblique look at mankind's fascination with the future, and our almost unerring ability to predict it shape as



daftly as possible.

Take for example the Futuro. A UFO-shaped plastic house that has to be helicoptered into place and, for one brief period in the sixties, looked like becoming the holiday home du jour for future fashionistas everywhere. This retrospective documentary covers the initial furor around this housing revolution, along with the rather more inevitable decline in popularity once the novelty value wore off and people started realising that living in one circular room was likely to drive you insane if attempted for periods of more than a weekend – *Big Brother* producers take note.

Other highlights include the annual *Robocup* robot football tournament, where teams of A.I. equipped robot players are pitted against each other in a Darwinian struggle to evolve ever better (i.e. more intelligent) methods for winning the competition.

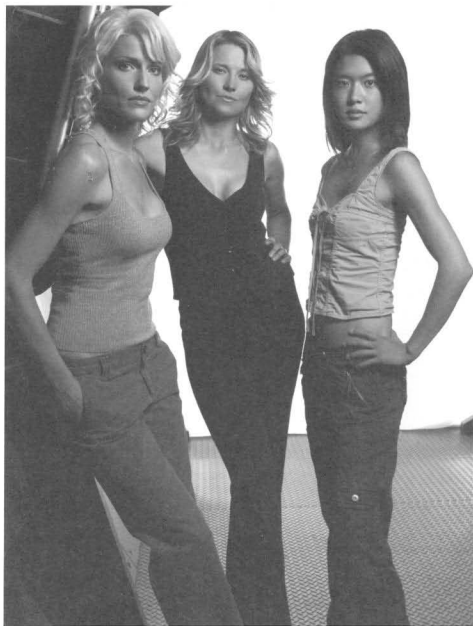
Finally I get to *No Maps For These Territories*, a re-release of Mark Neale's seminal digi-docu on author William Gibson. Originally filmed in 1999 this remains a fascinating examination of Gibson, his work and the wider digital horizons he's been exploring ever since he first coined the term 'cyberspace'.

Neale's clever conceit is to load up a limousine with digital recording equipment and then to simply drive around America while Gibson offers up a raconteur's monologue of semiotic soundbites intertwined with personal history.

Simply put, this is a must have item on any serious fan's shelf, offering both the only in-depth documentary of Gibson produced so far as well as a series of inspiring threads of thought that prove Gibson is as cogent working off the page as he is on it.



Visit www.filmfreaks.nl/reel23 for more information and a current catalogue.



Sexy Cylons One Real

Seconds Out For Sommers

In what is quite possibly one of the most tightly and succinctly plotted series pilots ever filmed in the history of television, NBC has hit one out of the park with the re-imagining of the classic, campy, *Bionic Woman* of the 1970s.

Jamie Sommers (Michelle Ryan) is a college dropout now bartending in town while trying to raise her sister (who shows up at her doorstep one day) and date a brilliant doctor. When forces converge to put Jamie in the bull's eye of a conspiracy, she is tragically injured and then brought back to life as the second bionic woman.

That's right, I said *second* bionic woman. Katie Sackhoff stars as the first bionic woman named Sarah Corvis who has gone rogue and is a potential reoccurring nemesis to Jamie. (Both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Bionic Woman* share David Eick as executive producer.) Any TV pilot that ends with a character developing over the period of an hour from a down-and-out dropout to the point where she believably confronts a stronger and deadlier bionic Katie Sackhoff on a rooftop in the rain and then kicks her ass has got my vote. Did I mention the climax of the show is Katie Sackhoff and Michelle Ryan fighting on a rooftop in the rain? Both women can do bionic in a tank top like no other action star.

Also, for the Sci-Fi geeks out there Miguel Ferrer stars as a government pinhead of

Galactica Status Report: Found God? Found Earth? Lost Plot?

The third season of *Battlestar Galactica* has ended, with the fleet and the Cylons closing in on Earth – and the more than a little implausible denouement that four of the regular cast (including Colonel Tigh) may be members of the final five Cylon models. Oh yes, and Starbuck returns, saying she has visited Earth despite the fact we saw

her fighter explode in the previous episode. Despite the fact this season has been one of the grittiest to-date, tackling a number of issues (including reprisals against collaborators, sexual infidelities, trade union rights, religious beliefs and class distinctions) not usually addressed in SFTV, the ending left me wondering whether we were going down the *Dallas* route and

that Colonel Tigh (like Bobby Ewing) will come out of the shower in the next season and reveal it was all a bad dream. And what was with the Bob Dylan song playing in the background – the Cylon national anthem is *All along the Watchtower*? Talking of the next season, the fourth season will include 22 episodes including a two-hour special that brings in some of the back-story surrounding the *Battlestar Pegasus*.

Charles Christian

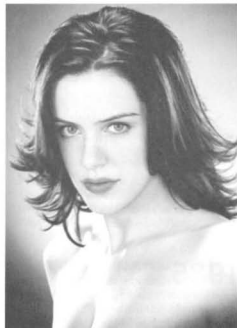


ons, Bionic Women and Man (no, we don't mean Gaius Baltar)

questionable morals but at least he's a little cuddlier than in *Robop*. My vote for *Bionic Woman* 2007 is Better. Stronger. Faster.

(Now I wonder when they'll spin off the 6 *Billion Dollar Man*?)

Lon S. Cohen



Season Summary

Since the last edition of *Matrix*, we've witnessed the final episode of *Stargate SG-1*, an episode widely criticised in fandom as the worst series finale...ever. As mentioned last time, there will be a couple of TV movies and some of the regular cast will be joining *Stargate Atlantis*. And still on the subject of *Atlantis*, it's been reported that Paul McGillion, who played the 'Scottish' doctor Carson Beckett – who was killed off during the course of season three – will be returning for some episodes in season four.

I know, as if you care.

The biggest tv news so far this year was the final episode ever of *Life on Mars* with Sam Tyler (John Simm) either waking up in the present day to find that modern police work was so dull (all political correctness and PowerPoint presentations – hey that sounds like my life) that he'd rather commit suicide to get back to 1973. Or, snapping out of it to realise that he was fantasising about the future and that he really did live in 1973. Take your pick: happy ending or sad ending. There's also an argument that Sam was actually dying from the moment he was hit by the car in the present day, in the first minutes of the first episode and that the whole series was about him reconciling himself to the afterlife. And then there is another argument – too long to discuss here – that it was all an analogy of *The Wizard of Oz*. Discuss, please ask for more paper if needed.

That's the bad news, the good news is that DCI Gene Hunt (Philip Glenister), along with his sidekicks Ray Carling (Dean Andrews) and Chris Skelton (Marshall Lancaster) will be returning in a new series – called *Ashes to Ashes* – set in the East End of London in 1981. This will feature the New Romantics and a criminal profiler who finds

herself transported from the present day to 1981 – although she will have had access to some notes Sam Tyler left behind. Confused? Get over it, the series doesn't air till next year.

Finally, Season 3 of *Doctor Who* has seen new assistant Martha Jones (Freema Agyeman) proving a cracking replacement for Billie Piper. Hats off to Russell T. Davies for both writing and casting strong female characters.

Some great monsters (the rhino-like Judoon) and great settings (the decade long traffic jams in New New York) and hints of more intrigues to come, including the possibility the Doctor is not the sole remaining time lord in the universe and the appearance of John (*Life on Mars*) Simm as the mysterious Mister Saxon. Only grouse to-date is that the writing does vary from episode to episode, with the Daleks in (old) New York episode definitely weak and less-than-scary. Still, it is still pulling in the punters, with the first episode attracting 8.71 million viewers with only *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* doing better.

Other news... A second season of *Heroes* has been commissioned – Tim Kring, the series' creator and executive producer has hinted that "some of the characters (in the first series) may not survive if they don't serve the story." And remember, the series – which is now starting to feature some interesting guest slots: Christopher (*Doctor Who*) Eccleston, George (*Star Trek*) Takei – is now showing on BBC2 if you haven't been able to access it on satellite or otherwise.

ITV has commissioned a second season of *Primeval* – it will feature "a host of new, even more incredible creatures." Shouldn't that be "even more credible"?

Charles Christian



Best SF Movies Ever!... 1980s

In honour of the imminent countdown to 2008 and the celebration of the BSFA's 50th anniversary, Matrix has decided to do a countdown of its own of the best sf movies of each decade, starting now and working our way back to the good old days of 1958 (ish)...

1989 was a most triumphant year for modern sci-fi cinema, dude. Not only did we get James Cameron topping off what was surely already his movie decade with *The Abyss*, and both comics and blockbuster movies in general were getting a much needed adrenaline shot thanks to Tim Burton's transformational vision of *Batman*, but we were also privileged to witness the highly educational thesis on the logistics and discontinuities of time travel courtesy of those most learned dudes Bill S. Preston Esq and Ted Theodore Logan. Science Fiction that is both clever and funny is a rare double-act indeed, and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* is a classically time-transcending example of both.

1988 and it was the year that animation stood up and showed what it could do. *Akira* was the breakthrough success that introduced the western world to Japanese style manga while *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* was a cunningly loony genre mash-up that introduced the world to the only animated character in the world even sexier (and more dangerous) than a big-eyed, pigtailed anime schoolgirl.

1987 saw the debut of two heavyweight sci-fi cinema icons – *Robocop* and the *Predator*. While stylistically and thematically very different beasts, the world was fortunately big enough for both of them, and so far Hollywood seems to have resisted the urge to either find out which of them would win in a scrap or to team them up buddy-movie

style to fight crime.

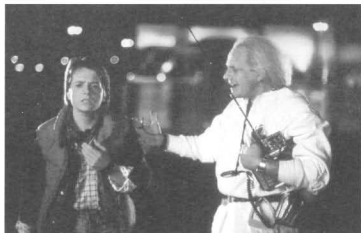
Meanwhile affectionate sci-fi piss-takes like *Spaceballs* and family sci-fi fare such as *Innerspace* kept the next generation happy while they waited to grow up and get into all the decent 18 rated releases everyone else at school was already talking about.

1986 is notable as both the year that sci-fi went bio-horror and also for being perhaps the only year ever that a sequel was released that was as popular, intelligent and arguably perhaps even better than its predecessor (see *Scream 2* for further discussion of this thesis). Put simply, *Aliens* was one of the most singular and important sci-fi releases of the decade, and its later video appearance as one of the first ever director's cut releases was an equally important vanguard landmark for the way many of us choose to consume our media today.

Meanwhile David Cronenberg's version of *The Fly* was an equally intelligent and impressive film, notable not just for its fine performances and the clever way it managed its central conceit, but also for the fact that it featured the much-ignored concept of

teleportation as its central technology. A tech that, transporter beams aside, only resurfaced in any interesting kind of way in the much more recent film version of *The Prestige*.

1985 was the year Marty McFly injected a stonking 1.21 gigawatts of revitalising power into the genre with the first of the amazingly popular *Back to the Future* films. Like Bill and Ted this made the most of the more playful side of paradox, although for alternate reality fans there was also the juicy fact that Marty was originally to be played by Eric Stoltz, who was axed well into the shoot. Imagine that weird world if you can. And speaking of weird worlds, Terry Gilliam's *Brasil* was another offbeat highlight of the year and further proof that the genre territory can still be the most fertile of creative spaces for directors to play in (take note Paul W.S. Anderson).





1984 and while both *Dune* and *1984* were, in their own ways, interesting adaptations of genre classics, in cinematic terms it was the original cinematic visions of *The Terminator* and *Ghostbusters* that really hit the sense of wonder (and, in the latter's case, humour) buttons of cinema-going fandom.

1983 saw in the *Return of the Jedi* and completed both the first narrative cycle for this enduring epic as well as ushered in the first real round of fan-based backlash. Ewoks anyone? Sadly, George Lucas was either unable to hear the complaints due to the deluge of cash landing in his coffers or he took the negative feedback so personally he spent over a decade crafting his revenge. In our minds there can be no other justification for Jar Jar.

Back in this galaxy, and *War Games* was a sneaky kids' film that proved nerds could be dangerous after all and also did rather a lot to put the wind up certain Pentagon departments.

1982 might just get our vote as the best ever year for science fiction cinema, and if you don't believe us just sit back for a moment and consider this:

Blade Runner, *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*, *The Thing*, *Videodrome*, *Tron* and even *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* were all



stand out films in their own way, and while some have aged more than others it's the sheer breadth and quality of ideas, budgets and modern science fiction themes on show that marks this as a landmark year.

1981 and opinions are split over the post-oil nightmare of *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*, once referred to by J.G. Ballard as 'punk's Sistine Chapel,' or the Saturday serial-glorifying joy that was *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Surely no other film director has been responsible for launching the careers of more young archaeologists (or marine biologists for that matter) than a certain Mr Spielberg.

Escape From New York and *Scanners* were both also notable entries in this year, and mentioned here for their continued resonance across genre filmmaking.

1980 was a classic *how to* year for space opera with *The Empire Strikes Back* showing just how clever and mature a big budget blockbuster could be if people spent a few more minutes on the script from time to time. Tellingly, while the spectacle remained untarnished

ROBOT WRECKAGE!

Transformers: The Movie (1986) Ok, so this film is a secret passion for a whole generation (our venerable editor included) and with the death of Optimus Prime represents a childhood psyche-wrenching experience unparalleled until J.K. Rowling got wise to the whole death-sells game, but we still couldn't resist the urge to put the robot boot in and give this clanking monstrosity a much deserved drubbing because basically this movie sucks big time.

While we could cite this as the career nadir of Orson Welles or wring our hands at the callous trashing of much loved characters just to clear shelf-space for new product, the real crime of this film is its total rejection of previous continuity and the simple plot facts that made the *Transformers* an interesting proposition in the first place: They were robots, they were on Earth and they were in disguise.

Transformers were popular not just because they were cool toys, but because they were toys with a pre-established marketing script, sorry, back-story, that embedded them deeply into our culture. This film forgot the formula that made the *Transformers* matter to kids and ended up being not so much 'more than meets the eye' and more a product that took its eye off the ball completely.

it was the smaller and more human moments (and, let's face it, the bits with Han Solo in) that continued to impress long after the effects parade had moved on. Speaking of 'how to's', anyone in search of interesting movie parallels might also want consider that this was the year *Flash Gordon* was released on an unsuspecting world. At some point Ben Elton will probably get asked to make this film into a West End musical, at which point Vader should have no shortage of volunteers for testing the carbon freezing chamber. Finally, and still speaking of the human dimension of films, *Superman II* saw everyone's favourite pants-on-the-

outside alien return in a film that replaced the portentousness of the first outing with a much warmer and rounded second reel.



Super-Toys Last



It may have been a couple of months since its release but here at Matrix HQ we're still buzzing about the dazzling blockbuster that is *Transformers*. What better way to accompany the excitement than an in-depth look at the coolest, greatest and most-coveted toys – er, we mean tie-in merchandise – of all time?

STAR WARES

Crashing down with a cultural impact the size of a Death Star, that classic tale of a galaxy far, far away was responsible for much more than just the birth of Jedi and ILM. Star Wars single-handedly radicalised the collectibles business, simultaneously changing the profile of the action figure market and proving the commercial viability of movie tie-in merchandise.

Whether you're a casual collector or a hardcore fan with money to burn, the choices are nigh-on endless – from 7 inch plastic figurines to scale models of the Millennium Falcon, there's more merchandise out there than even Lucas himself could afford.

Best buys include this signature edition replica Boba Fett helmet (right), limited to only 750 worldwide (\$549 from the official Star Wars shop, www.starwarsshop.com); licensed light sabre replicas from www.thinkgeek.com (prices start at \$99); and this beautifully rendered Princess Leia 10 inch figurine (above); \$99 also from www.starwarsshop.com – because no collection is complete without a gold bikini Leia.



A NIGHTMARE COLLECTION



Second only among teenage Goths (and certain cyberpunk authors) to Emily Strange, merchandise emblazoned with Jack Skellington's grinning face and coffin shoulders is the staple of every collectibles shop, comic store and Goth ghetto on the face of the planet.

Licensed toy manufacturers NECA have produced hundreds of action figures, plushies, mini-busts, board

games, lunch boxes, bags, tees and even kitchenware based on Tim Burton's cult-turned-classic 1993 movie.

Prices start at just a few pounds but spiral up into the hundreds for rare collectible items and the more heavily-detailed statuettes and busts.

And if that's not enough to satisfy your inner Goth, don't forget to pick up *Corpse Bride* (above left), *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy* and Edward Gorey memorabilia to complement your dark collection.



First stop for Buffy fans (and Angel fans, or indeed fans of any show produced by 20th Century Fox) is the official merchandise site at www.vipfansclubs.com. Here you'll find high quality collectibles such as Sunnydale tees, coffee mugs, cast photos, official magazines, scripts, keychains and badges.

There's also the Wardrobe & Props online auction, where Fox get to sell off all the old tat cluttering up the props department to die hard fans (but at least the prices are reasonable). The choice of items vary and usually leans more heavily towards screen-worn clothing rather than props, but keep checking and you can come across some real gems such as these demon teeth (below) used during several episodes of Angel.

Next stop for the Buffy merchandise train is Forbidden Planet, the holy church of collectibles. Licensed

manufacturer Diamond Select produce this fantastic limited edition Willow bust (£35.99)

and Spike statue (£99.99, both above right), as well as smaller figurines based on the whole range of characters from Willow to Wesley and Darla (left) to Dawn. Electric Tiki produce this fantastic 10 inch cartoon-style vampire



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slayer (£62.99, above left) and for serious collectors there's the premium format 20 inch statuette (£199.99, below), limited to just 850 worldwide and available in November.

eBay is another great source of merchandise, with shops such as <http://stores.ebay.co.uk/sf-collectables> and <http://stores.ebay.co.uk/COLLECTABLES-inc> offering a wealth of Buffy merchandise and other sci-fi collectibles.



THE ULTIMATE ALIENS REPLICA

Xenomorphs on the loose? Harsh language not enough? Only the M41a Pulse Rifle will do!

The fictional M41a Pulse Rifle is an air cooled, fully automatic, short- to mid-range combat rifle and arguably the star of *Aliens*. Made of light alloy plates, it fires 10x24mm Armor Piercing Caseless Rounds from a 95 round U-bend magazine in either semi automatic, five round burst, or fully automatic rates of fire. The Pulse rifle has a small battery powered digital

readout screen that displays number of rounds left in the magazine; the battery is located in the handgrip. With a retractable stock and an underslung 30mm PN grenade launcher, this weapon can be used as a carbine and an assault rifle.

A replica of one of these bad boys will set you back a hefty \$795 from www.airsoftextreme.com, but the M41a is a classic sci-fi weapon designed by James Cameron himself and guarantees the envy of all your friends.

SEVEN D-GREES OF MERCHANDISE

While there's a lot for the avid *Sandman* collector in terms of literature – from spin-off comics to ultimate collections, and not forgetting the various versions of the original comic itself – memorabilia is comparatively thin on the ground.

Forbidden Planet carries this beautiful new rendering of the Dream King himself (left) – standing 11 inches tall, this limited edition piece costs £144.99 and has just been released.

\$89.95 will buy you this Manga-style Morpheus (right) from DC Direct, designed by Jill Thompson (writer/artist of *At Death's Door*), or if you prefer a more cuddly collectible, how about these Morpheus and Daniel plushies (below, also DC Direct) for just

\$24.95!

There are a range of action figures featuring each of the Endless, and although the entire collection may not amass to much by comparison to other franchises, the quality and attention to detail is extremely high.





SEDUCTION of the Innocent

COMIC REVIEWS BY JAMES BACON ESQ.

CIVIL WAR

Written by Mark Millar with art by Steve McNiven, these seven comics from Marvel form the backbone of one of highest impacting series in the industry in recent times. Sales of these seven comics are into the millions with single issues selling on average 300,000 copies each. The rest of the Marvel universe bought into the whole Civil War event, writers co-operated to ensure a consistency across the storyline, continually plotting what has become one of the most successful and broadest crossover events in comics. The impact upon affiliated comics was huge, titles that sold 40,000 copies jumped in sales past 100,000. The feel-good factor with customers and retailers at a time of some restriction within the retail business has proved a welcome initiative.

The idea of a civil war within a superhero community is not new. Following an incident where a superhero situation goes terminal and ends up killing school children, public opinion becomes polarised about superheroes and the government forces a registration process which then splits the heroes down the middle.

Forcing superheroes to register becomes the catalyst for a civil war. Many comics from Powers to Watchmen have used a similar premise for the demise of the superheroes in their respective comics, but the breadth



of this story line is staggering.

At the heart of the tale, it comes down to Iron Man on the side of registration and on the force hunting down superheroes in violation of the act and Captain America who sees the registration as a violation of everything he stands for. The subsequent bloodshed and fighting is brilliantly executed, and there is some nice intrigue mixed in with all the superhero stuff.

The allegory with current affairs is apparent, though Mark Millar said in *Newsarama*: "The political allegory is only for those that are politically aware. Kids are going to read it and just see a big superhero fight."

There are currently 22 graphic novels that tie in with the story - that's well over 3000 comic pages. In fairness not all these are required, and readers can temper their palate to whichever characters they like (or in certain cases dislike) or expand the obsession as one so feels or can afford. However this main graphic novel remains the essential place to start.

WAR FIX

By Steve Oleza
and David Axe

There is no fantasy or science in this fiction, rather this is a hard, gritty comic telling the story of a man who decides he must get some war satisfaction and decides to do so by becoming a journalist and going to Iraq to record the harsh reality of war. This is an interesting and insightful piece of work, drawn in a scratchy black and white style that adds to the raw feeling of the comic, that makes one ask more questions about man's strange and morbid attraction towards war.

LIGHT BRIGADE

By Peter Tomasi and Peter Snejbjerg

If you want some Biblical action in your war comic, this fast-paced story may well be up your avenue.

It's the winter of 1944 and a troop of fallen angels-come-Nazis are after the Sword of God. Supernatural they may be, but they also have to face off against an immortal Roman Centurion and his band of American soldiers.

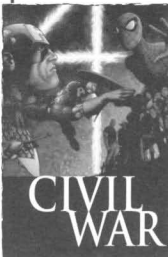
Snejbjerg's artwork is such a delight to behold - the scenery of a wintry France and his accuracy when it comes to men and machinery of war create a vivid plateau for the reader to enjoy and it enhances this very well-written story.



Meanwhile...

On the graphic novel front, look out for Vertigo's *Scalped Vol 1: Indian Country* by Jason Aaron and R.M. Guera. This is the gritty story of a Native American who returns to his reservation and gets involved in organised crime. The setting is rather fresh and there is considerable reflection about what is a modern Indian 'rez'.

Also watch out for *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: The Black Dossier* by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill from Wildstorm. This stand-alone graphic novel story has been coming for quite a while and features more well-loved literary characters Moore delightfully and playfully extrapolates. Though set in 1950s England, the story will involve a look at the Leagues of Old. Included with this hardcover are a "Tijuana Bible" insert and a 3-D section complete with custom goggles.





NASA may close its Institute for Advanced Concepts. The institute examines futuristic concepts such as spacecraft surfing

on magnetic fields, motion-sensitive spacesuits generating their own power and tiny, spherical robots for planetary exploration.

NASA claims the cut is to compensate for losses from the replacement shuttle programme. NASA invests \$4million per year from its \$17billion budget - not much of a saving.

NASAWatch, which broke the news, says the decision doesn't make much sense. Keith Cowing, editor of the website told the New Scientist, "This is one of the few places at NASA that embodies far-thinking, new stuff. When they're cutting stuff like this, they're desperate, or stupid, or both."

Source: slashdot.com, NASAWatch, New Scientist



While businesses eye-up water sources at the Moon's southern pole, Europe's Mars Express

Martian orbiter has found a significant quantity of the stuff on Mars. Using ground-penetrating radar looking 4km (2.5miles) below the surface they have identified enough frozen water that, if thawed out, would cover the planet to a depth of 11m (30feet). The presence of ice at both poles had been discovered nearly forty years ago; however, these were only surface observations and not until this new instrument came along could it be quantified.

Images of channels and outflow valleys suggest that between 10 and 100 times the amount of water so far discovered ran across the surface in the past. Where this has gone presents a mystery. Scientists at the University of Rome, who are leading the project, will now use the radar to search out underground pools elsewhere on the planet that may store the rest.

Source: ESA



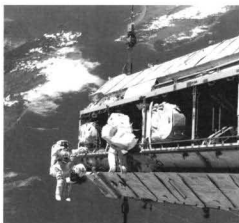
Scientists at the Max Planck Institute have developed a catalyst that mimics how plants extract the gas from the air.

Plants use the sun's energy to break the CO₂ bond and by joining it to nitrogen creates a less stable compound that leads on to the sugars and proteins plants use.

The nitrogen-based catalysis does the same thing; that is, linking nitrogen to CO₂. Benzene, temperatures of 150°C and a pressure of 3 atmospheres are required, but he end product is carbon monoxide that can then be used to make fuel or other carbon compounds.

The goal is to replace the benzene with what the plants use - sunlight. Then it would be even closer to photosynthesis.

Source: New Scientist



is to get under way by 2015 with launches starting in 2020. But is this part the growing private exploration of space? Not quite - it is cheap launches that are needed to open up space to everyone. With an estimated project cost of \$15 billion, Stone Aerospace Inc sits squarely in the big business end of the market with expensive resources sold to governments or other big businesses.

Source: space.com

Room to Breathe

It had been hoped that as levels of atmospheric CO₂ rose plants would grow more vigorously, taking in more of the gas and thus regulating the situation. However an experiment run by the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, Maryland, USA, casts doubt on this.

For 6 years they tested a scrub oak ecosystem in Florida by applying twice the current level of atmospheric carbon dioxide, finding the soil was losing carbon rather than absorbing more. It worked out that equivalent to half the amount

of CO₂ that the plants were consuming was being given off from the soil.

Unfortunately they discovered that while the plants did thrive, so did fungi in the soil. Fungi are very effective at breaking down carbon materials releasing CO₂. It looks like planting trees to off-set carbon may save consciences but not save the planet.

Source: scienceNOW.com



Smokin' Hot

The cigarette and tobacco companies will not go quietly into the night.

Among the multitude new products aimed at postponing the inevitable spiral of the tobacco industry is the 'vaporizer' - a tube with an electrically powered heater that generates nicotine vapours from tobacco ready for the smoker...er, vapour-breathing-in-person to enjoy.

Without smoke, no longer will the user have to worry about the tar, arsenic, cadmium and formaldehyde in ordinary ciggies and so they can savour that nicotine taste without concern (putting aside for a moment that nicotine is in fact a pesticide).

Soon to be marketed in the USA, it meets many of the public health requirements so can be used in restaurants and public places.

Unfortunately the smokers who tested it



for Wired.com didn't like it at all, but since the marketing teams have not unleashed their full terrible power on the project that's not a surprise. At least it's nice to know the Tracy Brothers weren't smoking in Thunderbirds, they were vaporizing.

Source: wired.com

Humans 2.0: MS Compatible

Microsoft has granted over half a million dollars to researchers exploring the field of 'synthetic biology' - creating new biologic functions by applying mathematical modelling, computer and engineering techniques currently applied to hardware genetics.

One grant goes to those involved in folding DNA into new shapes, which will help with

cloning. Another is looking at designing proteins and genes to transgenic organisms to keep their new traits longer. Both will help tweaking evolution in any particular direction.

The future? MS Clones will be compatible with 90% of all organisms - but iHumans will look cooler.

Source: sciencenow.com

Foundation Favourites

Andy Sawyer gets to grips with
The Issue at Hand by William Atheling, Jr

Those of us who commit literary criticism generally do so out of two competing motives. We (mostly) love wrestling with why a particular book or writer moves us, and trying to understand this and communicate this feeling with others. But some of us also do it out of a sense of frustration: in any small field (like that of science fiction) complacency so easily kicks in and when we step back and take an objective look we can often find that our critics are more often right about the general rubbishness of the kind of stuff we read for pleasure (lord help us!) than we would like them to be.

Of course, duffing up some naïve novice or established icon who's too busy counting royalties to notice reviewers and critics, while sometimes fun, can be unfair and unhelpful. In these postmodern days it can certainly be argued that when I say "critical standards" I am often showing social and political prejudices. And in this (as I say) closely-knit field there can be far too often that nervous chill when you finish a book or story by someone you're drinking pils with, and realise that er, it wasn't actually very good. And those of us who don't write fiction are always under the accusation of not actually knowing what we're talking about – although I think it was Dr Johnson who comprehensively trashed that argument by stating that he was no joiner, either, but he knew damn well when someone had made him a bad chair.

"William Atheling, Jr.", however, believed in standards, knew most of the people in the field, and was one of its top novelists. When James Blish donned the Atheling mantle (originally for his column in Redd Boggs's fanzine *Skyhook* in 1952), he laid out his agenda. If sf was to come out of the ghetto, it was to be reviewed for its merits, not carefully segregated in genre-sections that the discerning reader could skip over confident in the knowledge that nothing of any value would be missed, nor be essentially a subjective list of likes and dislikes in the fan-magazines. His basic propositions were that there were things that we – as critics and readers – could agree on that marked good narrative practice, and that there was an awful lot of fiction published which did not live up to

those standards. In his first article, he noted, for instance the "phony realism" of some writers (the use of detailed, but entirely irrelevant, description of actions) and the amorphous purple prose of others). In a later piece (reprinted as the introduction to *More Issues at Hand* in 1970) a slightly mellowed "Atheling" still held to the arguments that "there is no such thing as destructive criticism. It is just a cliché people use to signal that their toes have been stepped on" and "a good critic . . . is positively obliged to be harsh towards bad work".

Atheling, of course, was not the only critic determined that both those who wrote sf and those who wrote about it should aim higher: he rightly refers in his second column, and in various other essays to Damon Knight's reviews. As writers and critics, both Knight and Atheling wrote from the stance of someone who loves the field's virtues and is impatiently impatient with its vices. When Atheling stomps, he really

the essay as a whole ("Cathedrals in Space") is one of the most interesting pieces on both "A Case of Conscience" and the wider theme of religion in sf.

James Blish, who died in 1975, was a founder of the Science Fiction Foundation, which in its early days attempted an award for SF criticism to be called the "Blish" award. Lack of funds prevented its continuation: a shame really, but Blish's own criticism is as much part of sf's core of central texts as much actual science fiction.

The Issue At Hand and its sequel, correcting in book form the errors any reviewer writing at high speed with incomplete information necessarily makes, are essential for those with any sort of interest in the sf of the 1950s. Partly it's because some of the stories Atheling mentions are important works in the field's history but mostly, I think, it's because his stance that criticism is a serious process needs constant restating.

With the fragmentation of sf criticism to the academic journals, the "serious fanzines", the occasional newspaper columns, the consumer journals like *SFX*, the webzines and the blogs, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep up. It's more than likely that there is no-one who reads all of these, which

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stomps. His criticism of the unfortunate Arthur Zirul's "Final Exam" (March 1954 *Asounding*) accuses the author of virtually the whole range of novice-writer ineptitude but – as he makes clear – places responsibility firmly upon editor John W. Campbell for accepting the piece in the first place and, having accepted it, not having worked with the author to improve it.

And his pseudonym allows him latitude. Among Atheling's other targets is a novella called *A Case of Conscience*, in which a number of technical flaws are noted – the 1964 afterword, written after the expansion to novel-length, suggests how some of these flaws may have been dealt with and notes others, not all to the direct discredit of the author: the occasional "breathlessness" of the novel is partly because of space constraints – 75,000 words being the most Ballantine could then bind in paperback format. As well as being an interesting piece of critical writing (with both "Atheling" and "Blish" speaking as the argument progresses),

makes the activity even more of a problem. Atheling was, of course writing in very different circumstances – the position of the magazines at the beginning of the '50s, and even during the decline that followed, was very different to the marginal position which those few surviving sf magazines now hold, and his complaint that the lack of letter-columns and reader-responses resulted in authors writing in a vacuum might well be dealt with now when everyone is posting opinions across the web. Writing at a time when there was very little academic criticism of the field of any worth, he has a lot to offer today's academic critics. He writes from an academic-friendly stance and is in places unashamedly elitist, with the elitism of deep knowledge mixed with practical experience of what he's talking about. Like Johnson, he wouldn't have allowed an incompetent joiner to get away with a shoddy chair either.

Andy Sawyer

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I don't limit myself to one subject matter. As well as my science fiction creations, I also include pieces in exhibitions that would not immediately seem to be connected with science fiction i.e. contemporary stained glass panels and mirrored light boxes.

"By doing this, I hope the layman perception will be altered from thinking that sci-fi is nerdy to that of contemporary."

Speaking of altered perceptions, how far down the road of cybernetic evolution was Jane herself. Were her art works strictly imagination or simply an extrapolation of her everyday life?

Did a typical working day involve plugging into an iPod, running multiple avatars on Second Life to chill out or even planning a large-scale web-based art installation in the near future?

"Nice one, that's a good idea. A large-scale web based installation is a possibility and I shall be storing that idea in my positronic brain. I'm always plugged into my computer when in doors and can't venture outdoors without my mobile it's as if it's a portable life support machine. It does make you wonder how close we are to becoming cyborgs already, we use tools such as computers and internet which extends our visual memory and other powers beyond what our human bodies are capable of."

"A USB port attached to my brain so I can download all my creative ideas would definitely be on my enhancements wishlist, because when I'm inspired artistically the ideas flow so much,

and unlike a computer I can't shut down my brain. It would be great to be able to download the data and save it to a device.

"I spend far too much time online mainly in the pursuit of research, as an artist the internet is an extremely valuable tool."

What about the appeal of more human appearing cyborgs - human on the outside, cybernetic inside? Was there any potential for Jane to explore these types of ideas in future work?

"Yes definitely! With regards to cybernetics I am fascinated with science fact as well as science fiction. I'm very much drawn to the prosthetic science of creating artificial limbs. When you think about it people with artificial limbs are the fore fathers of the cyborgs of the not too distant future. Artist and scientist Sarah Angliss who produced the first live scientific cyborg experiment with a team of researchers from the Centre for Cognitive Neuroscience and Robotics University.



"Volunteers were hooked to machinery that gave them new sensory powers.

I'm also drawn and influenced by more human looking cyborgs, such as the male and female Terminators, the Bionic Man and Bionic Woman and also Borg Queen and not least Seven of Nine.

"At present I'm continuing the series of work on cyborgs. My future project will consist of a mixed content of cyborg and alien, with a mind to the next step of cyborg evolution which would be procreation..."

Biography

Jane Webb graduated in Glass & Fine Art Post Grad Certificate, at Central St Martins in 2006. Her piece Cyborg DJ has been on show at the prestigious Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and has been short listed for the Inspire by Awards, Pride In The House and Future Design Awards. Jane works in multiple media and mixed materials, ranging from traditional stained glass to recycled computer components. She's studied a variety of disciplines - photography, art painting, mechanics, furniture design and making, stained glass, glass fusing and many, many more.

Jane's more recent work of installations and sculptures have combined the use of mirrors, lighting and L.E.D.s, with recycled computer and electronic components. These futuristic works are influenced by the concept cybernetic humanoid (cyborg) where DNA is destroyed and replaced with circuitry. There is a consistent and strong theme of working with circuit boards, where the simplicity of the pattern but the complexity of the electronic devices excites her. Jane's work is very influenced by science fiction imagery.

Her earlier work used traditional stained glass techniques in a contemporary way with mirrors. Her mirror designs use her unique technique to create stunning lighted imagery. These pieces act as mirrors by day and transform at night to a powerful light feature for any space. These techniques are still consistent in her private commission work. For her residential works, blank canvases have ranged from whole walls, bathrooms, fireplaces, kitchens, furniture or a feature mirror or glass panel.

Commissions

Jane has done numerous private commissions ranging from interior design to one-off pieces. Her most popular commissions at present are her mirrored light boxes which can incorporate any specific imagery requested by the client, and which transform at night to a stunning light feature.

Interested readers are invited to contact Jane via email at jdwebb@postmaster.co.uk

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