

Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction

116

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on Iain Banks
Emily Alder on Eduardo Paolozzi and Maia Clery on David Bowie
Jim Clarke, Leimar Garcia-Siino, Tony Keen and C.L. Wilson on conferences
at Brunel University and the University of Liverpool

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Wolfe

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Iain Banks 1954 - 2013

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Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction

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Editorial

Paul March-Russell

And so Matt Smith has regenerated into Peter Capaldi. Likewise, Graham Sleight has metamorphosed into me, and yes, I am still learning ‘how to fly this thing’. Luckily, I have a veritable troupe of Claras to save me, namely the editorial team, whom I am glad to say have not only agreed to continue but have been wonderfully forthcoming in their suggestions. In particular, I would like to thank Maureen Speller, who has assumed the role of copy-editor; Heather Osborne, who has established the journal’s presence on social media (for details please see below); and Andrew Ferguson, who will be guest-editing issue 119 on the subject of sf and video-gaming. (The call for papers can be found at <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/52629>; the deadline is 15th April 2014.) I am also grateful to the SFF committee, for making me welcome at our first meeting, and to Nick Hunt of Lavenham Press.

I would also like to commend our subscribers for their patience. This is the last of the three issues with the odd dating of ‘2012/13’. As you will be well aware, *Foundation* has for a long time been behind on its schedule, and this strange date has been the first step in getting the journal back on track. Over the next twelve months, a further three issues will appear – comprising vol. 43, nos. 117-9 – so that, by this time next year, *Foundation* will have indeed caught up and we can then proceed at a more sedate pace with spring, summer and winter issues. Re-synching the journal has been my (and Graham’s) first priority. You will also notice the flier for the new subscription rates and an increase in individual subscriptions to £20 per year. This is the first increase in nearly eight years and has been necessitated by rising postage costs. It may be worth reminding subscribers, especially academic institutions, that the annual fee goes not towards the journal but to the SF Foundation and its sterling work in supporting research and other events within sf studies. (I know because I have been one of its beneficiaries.) So, when the competition for academic research funding is increasingly competitive, subscribing to the journal is a superb method of support, especially for young or non-university-affiliated researchers.

To compensate the increase to individual subscribers, my second priority

over the coming year is to explore a) an online edition of the journal, lending an additional platform to the print edition, and b) the creation of an online archive of past issues – especially important in the new era of ‘open access’. Both of these ideas have been mooted before, and some attempts were made with regards to the latter, but I think it’s high-time that they materialised.

The start of my editorship comes at both an exciting and a sensitive moment. Exciting in that not only will Worldcon be held in London in August but has also galvanised a number of academic events around that same period. Sensitive in that academia is passing through a series of changes that will fundamentally change the university sector and pose severe questions as to its purpose. *Foundation*, a scholarly journal not affiliated to a university or published by an academic press, and dedicated to sf as a ‘literature of change’, is ideally placed to respond via its form, tone and content. One of the journal’s great strengths is that, although I regard it is an academic title (and so has to be read alongside its nearest compatriots, *Extrapolation*, *Science Fiction Film and Television* and *Science Fiction Studies*), unlike these other titles, it is not read by an exclusively academic audience. *Foundation* offers a potential model for other academics in how to communicate intellectual ideas to a general readership and to respond mutually to specialists and non-specialists alike.

Faced by that challenge, I take considerable strength from my illustrious predecessors. The principles outlined by Charles Barren in the very first issue of *Foundation* hold good: to promote academic research in sf, to disseminate work-in-progress, and to recognise the internationalism of the genre. This last point is especially true since, as Adam Roberts has recently argued, the future work of sf will not be dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant men. What has changed since Barren’s time is the rise of the World Wide Web and the instant responses, via tweets, blogs and Facebook messages, to events. Where does that leave a journal like *Foundation* or, indeed, any academic journal? The word ‘review’ in our subtitle is key. There is a substantial place for a journal that can both take the temperature of the times (something that John Sutherland once observed of sf as a whole) and to record and reflect upon new developments in relation to what has gone before. *Foundation* is, again, ideally positioned to take on that role.

This issue bears witness to the extraordinary contribution made by Iain

Banks. Of the four articles, Robert Duggan's was originally presented at the Brunel symposium on Banks' fiction organised by Joe Norman who has also written one of the others. Jim Clarke, one of the delegates, offers his account of this event. I am very keen for *Foundation* to feature conference reports, so that our readers can follow the work being done in the UK and overseas, especially by young scholars. Do please contact me with suggestions of conferences and other events to be featured. In addition to the books section, there are two review-essays of David Bowie at the V & A and Eduardo Paolozzi at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. Another emerging feature will be an exploration into how science fiction has permeated the fabric of everyday life through a myriad of genres. Lastly, do please follow the journal via Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/153811061470013/?fref=ts>) and Twitter (@FoundationSF).

Inside the Whale and Outside Context Problems

Robert Duggan (University of Central Lancashire)

Iain M. Banks' Culture series has achieved immense popularity with readers around the world. In the eyes of many science fiction critics it was part of a broader renewal of the possibilities of space opera, an often disregarded and devalued area of contemporary literature and perhaps even of scholarship on sf. Along the way this collection of works has raised the standard of what readers might expect of the genre, combining as it does imaginative energy, linguistic exuberance and a good deal of humour along with the galaxy-spanning adventures, as well as raising fascinating political questions and. The series was also notable for its capacity to generate compelling new stories while simultaneously deepening its engagement with the complexities of the Culture as a civilization. The contention of this article is that Banks' 1996 novel *Excession* marks a key stage in the literary development of the Culture as a fictional social formation, one that demonstrates the newly-expanded possibilities of space opera to explore and extend fundamental aspects of sf. This entails a re-examination of the novel's complex handling of spatiality and inside/outside, and the political dimensions of Banks' writing.

There are a number of reasons why *Excession* might merit particular attention in scholarly approaches to Banks' sf: the novel was something of a return to the Culture after sf novels *Against a Dark Background* (published in 1993, although reworked from a version written in the 1970s) and *Feersum Enjinn* (1994) the winner of the British Science Fiction Association Award. Another reason is that Culture novels generally stage encounters in which the Culture is markedly more powerful than the groups it meets; as Patricia Kerslake puts it in *Science Fiction and Empire* (2007), 'In almost all cases these other societies are less technologically advanced ...' (176). This oeuvre context has meant that *Excession* has been a significant reference point in a number of debates, such as those set out by Chris Brown (2001) and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and James Heilman (2008), around how

far the Culture as a totality might be regarded politically, especially in its actions towards other species and societies. Even the fearsome Idirans in *Consider Phlebas* (1987), the first published Culture novel, soon discover they cannot match the Culture's military power. In *Excession*, however, the Culture encounters an entity, the Excession, capable of manipulating space-time in ways far beyond the comprehension of the stunned ships who witness it.

So *Excession* arguably inaugurates a movement within the Culture novels toward the Culture being revealed as a smaller, younger and less powerful civilization than hitherto suspected either by the Culture's humanoid and AI members or, just as significantly, by the books' readers. My purpose here is to consider how we might read this 'turn' in terms of genre and politics, and to situate it within the wider contexts of both the Culture as a fictional project and Banks' relation to his political and historical milieu. While other Culture novels have inspired productive political readings, connecting Banks' work to his historical situation, including the Gulf War (Duggan 2007), 9/11 (Stephenson) or the West Bank (Duggan 2013), *Excession* offers us a very detailed picture of how we might understand the Culture by placing it in a unfamiliar context of relative scientific ignorance. The kind of reading I am proposing draws on the sensitive spatial analysis of sf conducted in Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) and builds on the work of James Kneale (2013) who draws attention to the 'geographical imagination' (45) evident in Banks's fiction. In the light of these insights, I will examine how *Excession* handles the distinction between inside and outside, how it returns to the idea of being enfolded within something, and the philosophical, political and somatic qualities of such enfolding.

Excession was published not long after the appearance of 'A Few Notes on the Culture' (1994a), Banks' comprehensive essay on the Culture's workings and systems that is such a useful resource to his readers. I think we can trace important continuities between the novel and the essay, so that we might read *Excession* as staging in a dramatic, literary way many of the significant points made about the Culture in 'A Few Notes', thereby offering a mature reflection on what the Culture had grown into as a creative project spanning many years of writing. This sense that *Excession* might express the core of what the Culture is and does also figures in Farah Mendlesohn's perceptive evaluation of *Excession* in *A Companion*

to *Science Fiction* (2005), where she makes a claim for the novel's centrality to Banks' oeuvre:

While there are other novels that compete for the title of best Culture novel (Use of Weapons may be the most politically sophisticated, and its structure the most impressive), *Excession* epitomizes much of what I have outlined above. It is the most classic, the most archetypal in its revisioning of space opera; the most ambitious in its portrayal of a complex political society; and the most successful in its linguistic display and reconfiguration of the space opera baroque and in the immersive techniques of extrapolative fiction. (Mendlesohn 557-8)

Excession thus forms an archetype of what Banks' brand of re-engineered space opera will offer, and its ambition on several fronts is palpable. Mendlesohn conveys the substantial nature of the book as a literary achievement and in her outline of the novel quoted above there are a number of points that might be elaborated on at greater length. The first of these is her use of the term 'classic', which she goes on to develop in relation to a faith in humanity's future among the stars that she identifies in Banks' work and that has been a longstanding feature of space opera. *Excession* however may be 'classic' in other ways too, and Fredric Jameson's discussion of Vonda McIntyre's 1975 post-apocalyptic novel *The Exile in Waiting* offers one such avenue of inquiry. In a chapter entitled 'Science fiction as a spatial genre', Jameson conducts a meticulous examination of McIntyre's use of space in the novel and how the varying manipulations of spatiality in the narrative may point to a fundamental quality of all sf:

If, as I believe, all SF of the more 'classical' type is 'about' containment, closure, the dialectic of inside and outside, then the generic distinction between those texts and others that have come to be called 'fantasy' [...] will also be a spatial one, in which these last are seen as open-air meadow texts of various kinds. (Jameson 312)

Jameson's argument that classic sf proceeds from a profound preoccupation with containment and inside/outside is particularly pertinent to *Excession's* treatment of the limits of the Culture's collective power and knowledge, and the attempts of its Minds to think outside their habitual terms of reference. Delight in the expansion and decline of galactic empires has been a staple of space opera for decades, and as Ken MacLeod has noted, the parabolic quality of such fictional empires offers

food for thought when reflecting on the transformation of polities.¹ Which is to say that a corollary to *Excession's* classicness may be its sustained engagement and self-conscious play with inside/outside as a constitutive element of its generic identity.

Excession

Excession's Prologue introduces the reader to Dajeil Gelian, a woman in the fortieth year of her pregnancy, who lives aboard a ship which we learn is the enigmatic Culture vessel *Sleeper Service*. The narrative will by instalments reveal the motivation behind the delaying of her child's birth, and her relationship with Byr Genar-Hofoen, a Culture ambassador among the sadistically-inclined species the Affront. Chapter One, however, switches focus from this human-scale story to the appearance of a strange object in a little-visited part of the galaxy, that having come to the attention of the Elencher spaceship *Peace Makes Plenty* now seems to be destroying it with astonishing speed. By the time a group of Culture ships have decided to investigate this unusual appearance, the Elencher craft has disappeared and their quarry has taken up a motionless, uncommunicative position that only increases the mystery. This entity or machine has connections to the energy grid that the Culture has never seen before, and had long considered impossible, and so becomes an object of intense fascination. The artefact becomes the focus of a secret plot to foment war between the Culture and the Affront, one of Banks' more consistently repellent groups, and the novel devotes a lot of space to communication between ship Minds, as opposed to humans and droids. The obscure object of scientific interest is what the Culture calls an excession:

Excession; that was what the Culture called such things. It had become a pejorative term and so the Elench didn't use it normally, except sometimes informally, amongst themselves. Excession; something excessive. Excessively aggressive, excessively powerful, excessively expansionist; whatever. (Banks 1996: 93)

The excessive qualities described here are quite negative ones, and the term itself is explicitly identified as 'pejorative', suggesting a clear normative social order threatened by (antisocial) excess of different kinds, threatened by something external to that order. This fairly simple initial definition of an excession, however, with its emphasis on aggression,

power and expansionism, will give way to an experience that is far more challenging for the Culture, and that leads to critical self-analysis and a re-examination of the Culture's sense of itself and its place in the universe. The Excession, through its excessive relation to the Culture's model of the universe, is therefore an Outside Context Problem, as the novel explains:

An Outside Context Problem was the sort of thing most civilisations encountered just once, and which they tended to encounter rather in the same way a sentence encountered a full stop. The usual example given to illustrate an Outside Context Problem was imagining you were a tribe on a largish, fertile island; you'd tamed the land, invented the wheel or writing or whatever, the neighbours were cooperative or enslaved but at any rate peaceful and you were busy raising temples to yourself with all the excess productive capacity you had, you were in a position of near-absolute power and control which your hallowed ancestors could hardly have dreamed of and the whole situation was just running along nicely like a canoe on wet grass... when suddenly this bristling lump of iron appears sailless and trailing steam in the bay and these guys carrying long funny-looking sticks come ashore and announce you've just been discovered, you're all subjects of the Emperor now, he's keen on presents called tax and these bright-eyed holy men would like a word with your priests. (Banks 1996: 71-2) [ellipsis in original]

Having brought the full stop to the reader's attention as a marker of destructive closure and potential extinction at the beginning of the section, Banks then playfully extends the following sentence far beyond his typical length. The colonial analogy used is surprisingly terrestrial and is based on a significant technological gap, but perhaps more importantly hints at the problem of the outside context itself; the sudden awareness that an outside context about which one knows nothing *even exists at all* is part of the shock of the disorientating encounter. The specifically territorial aspect of this archetypal imperial encounter (which perhaps owes a little to Banks' experience of Sid Meir's computer game *Civilization*²), is crucial, and part of a broader pattern of spatial argument and metaphor within the novel. The moment of colonial encounter centres on geographical exploration coupled with political domination and economic exploitation, and includes the 'civilizing mission' of challenging 'native' ways of life. The charge of cannibalism was historically a useful plank in the rhetorical justification of the 'pacification' of resisting groups. However, as Marina Warner argues:

That imagery of forbidden ingestion masked other powerful longings and fears – about mingling and hybridity, about losing definition, about swallowing and being swallowed – fears about a future loss of identity, about the changes that history itself brings. (Warner np)

Warner here draws attention to the potential pleasures and desires, as well as the anxieties, around ingestion and incorporation. Indeed the long discourse around cannibalism during the nineteenth century can be seen as an almost perverse reversal of the forced incorporation of independent territories and peoples into a European imperial context. More recently, the South African-set sf film *District 9* (Blomkamp 2009) deploys the motif of cannibalism, most blatantly in the figure of the Nigerian gangster boss in the aliens' camp, who threatens to eat the protagonist in order to gain his power. However, the film also requires the viewer to ask how far the South African authorities, with their keen interest in the protagonist's physical metamorphosis and his consequent ability to use alien technology, are different to the gangster boss in their desire to 'incorporate' alien weapons and power into their military-industrial complex. As I will go on to show, *Excession* has a sustained focus on the experience of entities at the borders of (in)corporality.

The potential reversability of host/invader, civilized/savage roles was apparent early on in the Culture series and is at its most prominent in *The Player of Games* (1989, first published 1988) in which the Culture protagonist Gurgeh seeks to win the game of Azad and end the regime's hegemony:

Empires had fallen to barbarians before, and no doubt would again. Gurgeh knew all this from his childhood. Culture children were taught such things. The barbarians invade, and are taken over. Not always; some empires dissolve and cease, but many absorb; many take the barbarians in and end up conquering them. They make them live like the people they set out to take over. The architecture of the system channels them, beguiles them, seduces and transforms them, demanding from them what they could not before have given but slowly grow to offer. The empire survives, the barbarians survive, but the empire is no more and the barbarians are nowhere to be found. (Banks 1989: 276)

This narrative of mutual transformation is placed in opposition to a conventional one of victory in colonial conquest or defeat at the hand of invaders, and offers a more complex account of historical change. Whereas the Culture (and its readers) has been accustomed to it occupying the position, if not exactly performing the role, of the powerful imperium, in *Excession* it is placed, perhaps for the first time, in the position of the ignorant barbarian. The colonial aspect to the encounter with the Excession is developed throughout the novel and is reinforced further near the end

when the Culture ship *Fate Amenable to Change* contemplates its new status:

Unbelievable. I'm in a fucking Outside Context situation, the ship thought, and suddenly felt as stupid and dumb-struck as any muddly savage confronted with explosives or electricity. (Banks 1996: 386)

Banks, who has in an interview described the Minds when faced with the *Excession* as responding like 'barbarian kings presented with the promise of gold in the hills' (Brown 633), here presents the emotional shock that technological gaps can inflict and the reader is invited to marvel at the humbling of something so advanced accomplished through moving it outside its comfort zone.

Mendlesohn's praise for the 'immersive techniques' deployed in *Excession* quoted above may indicate another aspect of the novel that suggests further questions. If immersion in the texture and colour of the lives of the characters is something at which Banks has excelled, then it might also be the case that immersion/emersion can have a broader thematic significance within Banks' novels in general, and *Excession* in particular. Jameson's claim for the importance of spatiality for sf points to the significant political dimensions that accompany 'classic' sf's handling and coding of interior and exterior space(s) and, as I discuss below, *Excession* can be read as a rich contemporary example of the intellectual fecundity of space-opera manipulations of inside/outside. To follow the novel's recurrent meditations on immersion and its metaphoric power is also to place it within a political discourse on the relationship between the writer and their political context, and the sometimes contradictory work of a British critic and writer whose own foray into science fiction is commonly regarded as deeply implicated in the politics of his time.

Inside the Whale

'Inside the Whale' is the title of a long essay by George Orwell that appeared in 1940, and that, for most of its length, is a commentary on the work of the American novelist Henry Miller, whom Orwell met in Paris on his way to Spain to fight in the Civil War. Orwell discusses Miller's use of the image of being inside the whale, and adapts it to a description of finding

oneself at a particular point in history inside a mass social formation that one is powerless to control. Responding to existence 'inside the whale', some writers will abandon themselves to the whale's motion and to the impersonal force of historical change, and instead focus on the self in isolation from its environment. Miller is just such a writer for Orwell but perhaps surprisingly for someone with his political credentials, Orwell regards Miller's apparently quietist position as a comprehensible and in fact predictable reaction to Europe's seemingly unstoppable descent into war. Raymond Williams, in his book on Orwell (1971), has grappled with the apparent contraction in Orwell's thought about the writer's role in relation to their political milieu, and connects 'Inside the Whale' to the apparent pessimism of Orwell's dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

There is a clear line, certainly from 'Inside the Whale' and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to an orthodox North Atlantic mood in which all humane and positive beliefs, especially a belief in radical change, were recognised in advance either as the projection of some personal or social maladjustment, or as an inexperienced, naïve, adolescent idealism [...] (Williams 86)

Williams comes to the conclusion that antagonistic tendencies to promote change on the one hand and to give up on the possibility of change on the other, in 'generalised swearing' (Williams 89), can be found throughout the different phases of Orwell's writing career. It is interesting to speculate how far such contradictions might be at work in the quite specific swearing about contemporary politics found in mainstream works by Banks such as *Dead Air* and *The Quarry*, however that lies outside the scope of this article. Orwell in the essay makes clear the upside to living inside the whale, not caring about what goes outside:

For the fact is that being inside a whale is a very comfortable, cosy, homelike thought. The historical Jonah, if he can be so called, was glad enough to escape, but in imagination, in day-dream, countless people have envied him. It is, of course, quite obvious why. The whale's belly is simply a womb big enough for an adult. There you are, in the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter what happens. (Orwell 107)

There is a seductive quality about being inside the whale, about being held, powerless but perhaps protected, inside a larger structure away from the chaos outside. Being incorporated into the whale is a return to the

womb and a transition into a comfortable cradling free from responsibilities.

The Culture novels have long been sensitive to the different aspects of cradling and security provided to Culture citizens by the Minds, in particular, and advanced technology, from the management of defence forces, energy sources and Orbitals to the personal protection offered by soulsavers and knife missiles. Banks' books also frequently focus on what we might term the somatic experience of being enfolded, giving readers quite precise descriptions of what it feels like for a human-type character to be encased inside a protective suit, or submerged in a liquid environment inside a fast-moving ship, to be covered or shielded by a machine, or getting used to and living inside an unfamiliar body. The narratives often complement the sense of protection with one of powerlessness, with human characters sometimes experiencing what are in the context irrational but instinctive fears of suffocation or of being crushed. The nefarious Colonel Agansu in the final Culture novel, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), has a number of such experiences, including connecting himself to the digitized command centre of a spaceship while his body lies immobile, and uploading a copy of his consciousness into a combat arbite (a kind of military robot). The converse disorienting sensation of floating in a volume without structure, as experienced by humans spending time living in a gas giant planet, is described as 'swim' in *The Algebraist* (2004) (see Kneale 59).

Upon finding themselves inside the huge whale, some people will abandon themselves to this powerful vector, lie back, stop worrying and enjoy the ride. Others will seek to understand their position inside the whale, and are interested in what lies beyond its borders. If we are inclined to read the Culture as having the potential to be a comfortable leviathan of this kind, it is also important to notice how often the novels focus on those at the fringes of the Culture, including Special Circumstances, Eccentrics both organic and inorganic, exiles of different kinds, the Ulterior, etc. Going back to *Consider Phlebas*, the first of the Culture books to be published (although by no means the first to be written, as meticulous research by David Haddock, editor of *The Banksonian* has shown) it seems apparent that as readers we actually started 'outside' the Culture, following the travails of a character we only gradually realize is working for the wrong side. This playful misdirection shows how far the Culture is presented to readers not as a permanently infallible good but as something to be contested and argued over, something evinced by *Excession's* presentation of the various

protracted discussions between the Minds over how to respond to the Excession and to the Affront.

Outside the box

In her investigation of *Excession*, Mendlesohn contrasts Banks' Culture novels with the capitalist frameworks of both earlier forms of space opera and cyberpunk:

Banks refused to accept the inevitability of capitalism posited by Cyberpunk and earlier space opera [...] SF mostly reflects the social and economic mores of the contemporary world – it is actually very difficult to think outside the box – but in this one area, Banks simply disposed of the box. His space operas take place in a postscarcity society which, while currently unavailable to us, is perhaps the one vision that is still within our grasp [...] (Mendlesohn 556-7)

Mendlesohn's comments suggest that Banks has bypassed the tricky matter of how a capitalist society like ours might develop into something like the Culture, and gone straight to the post-scarcity civilization where money no longer exists. Her use of the term 'to think outside the box' is however replete with significance in relation to *Excession* as the novel is preoccupied with attempts 'to think outside the box', both at the level of characters' experiences of their own frames of reference being challenged and the novel's repeated recourse to spatiality and metaphors of containment to explain how transformation occurs. The encounter with a powerful Other that is beyond comprehension has been a key feature of sf for generations but *Excession* is remarkable for the spatial quality of the action and its metaphoric dimensions. This is evident in the book's description of the impact of the discovery of higher mathematics or 'metamatics' on civilizations:

It was like living half your life in a tiny, stuffy, warm grey box, and being moderately happy in there because you knew no better and then discovering a little hole in one corner of the box, a tiny opening which you could get a finger into, and tease and pull at, so that eventually you created a tear, which led to a greater tear, which led to the box falling apart around you so that you stepped out of the tiny box's confines into startlingly cool, clear fresh air and found yourself on top of a mountain, surrounded by deep valleys, sighing forests, soaring peaks, glittering lakes, sparkling snowfields and a stunning, breathtakingly blue sky. And that, of course, wasn't even the start of the real story, that was more like the breath that is drawn in before the first syllable of the first word of the first paragraph of the

first chapter of the first book of the first volume of the story. (Banks 1996: 138-9)

Like the colonial definition of an Outside Context Problem quoted earlier, Banks again uses a long lyrical sentence, delaying the full stop but the mood is almost the complete reverse of the previous painful disorientation experienced through contact with the outside. Here, scientific pursuit of 'higher forms' of knowledge is unmistakably coded as positive, conveying liberation, enlightenment and possibility. The revelation of the world beyond the spatial dimensions of our immediate perception is, as the novel's plotting confirms, the beginning of a new story.

Spatial enfolding has a particular history in science fiction, especially with the genre's interest in dimensions and space. Edwin A. Abbott's 1884 novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (2010) is famous for introducing the concept of higher dimensions. Its narrator, Square, is a two-dimensional entity living in a society of 2D shapes who is visited in a dream by an entity called Sphere and told of another dimension (Spaceland) in which 3D objects exist. *Excession's* detailed description of hyperspace initially follows the template set out in *Flatland*:

The usual way to explain it was by analogy; this was how the idea was introduced to you as a child. Imagine you were travelling through space and you came to this planet which was very big and almost perfectly smooth and on which there lived creatures who were composed of one layer of atoms; in effect, two-dimensional. These creatures would be born, live and die like us and they might well possess genuine intelligence. They would, initially, have no idea or grasp of the third dimension, but they would be able to live perfectly well in their two dimensions. To them, a line would be like a wall across their world (or, from the end, it would look like a point). An unbroken circle would be like a locked room. (Banks 1996: 269)

Thus far Banks follows Abbott's scenario, but then Banks reworks *Flatland's* plot development so that instead of Abbott's narrative having Flatland's inhabitants visited by 'higher powers' and inspired to think of a higher dimension, Banks' hypothetical 2D beings *work out for themselves* that they live in a 3D universe:

Perhaps, if they were able to build machines which allowed them to journey at great speed along the surface of their planet – which to them would be their universe – they would go right round the planet and come back to where they had started from. More likely, they would be able to work this out from theory. Either way, they would realise that their universe was both closed, and curved, and

that there was, in fact, a third dimension, even if they had no practical access to it. Being familiar with the idea of circles, they would probably christen the shape of their universe a 'hypercircle' rather than inventing a new word. The three-dimensional people would, of course, call it a sphere. (Banks 1996: 269)

Excession's endorsement of this hopeful idea of lifeforms being able through science to look beyond their own order of things, to theorize and speculate about the outside context, is of course complicated by the fact that the visit of the *Excession*, while uncommunicative, does share certain features with the angelic qualities of Abbott's Sphere.³ Abbott's series of different dimensions sequentially enclosing one other (Spaceland, Flatland, Lineland, Pointland) may also be an ancestor of Banks' description in 'A Few Notes on the Culture' of how our understanding of spatiality forms the basis for the Culture stories' use of higher dimensions:

We accept that the three dimensions of space we live in are curved, that space-time describes a hypersphere, just as the two dimensions of length and width on the surface of a totally smooth planet curve in a third dimension to produce a three-dimensional sphere. In the Culture stories, the idea is that – when you imagine the hypersphere which is our expanding universe – rather than thinking of a growing hollow sphere (like an inflating beach-ball, for example), think of an onion. (Banks 1994a, np)

This beguiling onion-model image of a series of higher dimensions folded inside one another anticipates both the shellworld of *Matter*, with its concentric strata and literalized 'spheres of influence', and the multiverse of *Transition* (2009) through which its characters travel (and which of course has its own horizons).

Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox's *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction* (2008) begins with a Preface entitled 'Inside and Out' in which the editors reflect on their experience of airport security and control as an index of the political conditions of their historical moment. *Excession's* sustained exploration of inside and out partakes of the politics of its moment and can be viewed in the light of Jameson's analysis of how sf novels can manipulate

our sense of the dialectic of inside and outside, reducing this dialectic (which might also have meant warmth and shelter, say, or miniature comforts after the terror of infinite spaces) to an asphyxiated condition from which one must escape at all costs. I would argue that the function of this kind of episode is precisely to inflect our reading of space, and to program us (or cue us) to the desired system of responses (in this case, emergence into the open is positive, while the logic of the

closed or the interior entails [psychological] shrinkage, contraction and constraint). I am assuming then that there are no 'natural' responses to or evaluations of space; that it is not nature, but culture and history, which determine the reading of the inside/outside dialectic at any given moment (but this is why, in a complex and sedimented historical culture like our own, the writer has to have a formal freedom to nudge us this way rather than that) (Jameson 309-10)

The dynamic, or in Jameson's terms the dialectic, between inside/outside, becomes in *Excession* a complex series of higher dimensions folded into one another, so that a civilization may solve one set of problems but another outside context will appear, setting off a new cycle of self-evaluation and waiting to be explored. This spatial arrangement means that the Culture novels collectively avoid closure, which Jameson sees as a recurrent problem in utopian sf, and instead Banks keeps 'the great galactic civilisational game' (Banks 1996: 87) on the road, avoiding the full stop. Space (and spatiality) provide new outside contexts to be amazed by and Banks' use of the expanding onion might be a useful image of how the different Culture novels work collectively; that is, not as a strictly linear sequence but as journeys into new contexts and new problems, so that the most recent (and very sadly, the final) novel in the series, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, is also about the beginnings of the Culture. *Excession* does not stage an outside as a resource to be enjoyed as liberation, but rather posits it as a horizon of possibility that may help us to understand our position inside the whale a little better, to make its confines a little clearer and to imagine a different future.

If *Excession*, to follow Jameson's model, tends through its complex use of space and manipulation of sentence lengths to cue its readers to respond to exteriority and openness in positive ways, it also important to acknowledge that to read the Culture novels is not quite to encounter the preaching of a higher dimension of truth, as happens in Abbott's *Flatland*. Instead, the people of the Culture, including ship Minds, themselves become aware of their limited horizons, and the limitations of life inside *their* whale. The failure of the Culture to persuade this emissary to have any more to do with it is significant, as the coda shows some Minds are correct in thinking that the Excession believes the social orders it has observed are too undeveloped and unstable to be directly communicated with. What is perhaps more significant is that at least some Culture minds already suspect this inadequacy and are aware but not necessarily complacent

about how the encounter with the Excession has highlighted their own imperfection.

If the earlier two quotes from *Excession* about higher dimensions are remarkable for their sentence length, then Banks' strategy of stretching sentences beyond the usual dimensions reaches its culmination in the novel's Epilogue. This final unnumbered page of lower-case text appears to be a report by the Excession itself, accounting for its actions and claiming that the events set in motion by its appearance show 'a fundamental unreadiness' on the part of the Culture and its peers to contact entities from higher dimensions. The sometimes cryptic stream-of-consciousness text, redolent of modernist experimentation but also of *Feersum Endjinn's* creative idiom, leaves commas and full stops behind completely and comes up with its own aporia in its repeated use of '[no translation]', hinting at things beyond the capacity of (this) language to represent. Banks' novel persistently stimulates his readers to think about possibilities of higher dimensions, and to dream of life outside the whale.

What is so typical of Banks' talent for space opera is his capacity to weave together stories that take place at the level of a few individuals with narratives that span the galaxy and encompass whole civilizations, and that talent to bridge different scales is very much in evidence in *Excession*. It is a quintessentially Banksian move for the civilization-wide reflections on inside/outside and the potential dangers of remaining content 'within the whale' that I have discussed above to be counterpointed in the novel by a narrative of prolonged pregnancy culminating in that most challenging and historically dangerous transition to an outside context, the birth of a child. The journey from stasis, both in-utero and in the suspended animation tableaux created by the *Sleeper Service*, to exploration in space and time is thus coded as a positive development and rendered part of a human's rediscovery of hope for and confidence in a future beyond the confines of the known. The full stops that signal the end of a sentence, having been strategically delayed at key moments in the novel, are in the Epilogue dispensed with entirely as the novel ends with rejection of, almost amounting to a disbelief in, closure and finitude. The sadness we feel at Banks' early death and the premature end of the Culture series is testament to how much we have enjoyed an extraordinary sequence of sf works that arrived it seemed, already formed, already in a main sequence, but that grew and evolved in such fascinating ways written by an author

who brought an acute political perspective and stylistic brio to so much he did. We may all be inside the whale but some of us are looking at the stars.

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Endnotes

1. 'A dialectical trope of sf is the notion of imperial expansion as the vehicle of escape: if empire begins by extending the reach of oppression, it ends by undermining it. A galactic empire has been a staple of sf since Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, and his Roman original and its parabolic trajectory has provided the template for many a tale of decline and fall,

and of post-imperial diversity analogous to the rise of feudalism and capitalism in Europe.' (MacLeod 236-7)

2. See *SFX Magazine*: 'Excession: A Conversation with Iain Banks'.

3. Banks' 'The Spheres' (2010), originally part of *Transition* (2009), plays with the idea of excession-like spheres visiting a society of Neanderthals.

Far Too Strange: The Early Fiction of Iain Banks*

Paul Kincaid

Following the publication of *Consider Phlebas* in 1987, Iain M. Banks would write 'gaudy wall-size canvasses of science/space fiction' (Banks 2013: x), while Iain Banks would write mainstream, essentially realist, novels. But before the bifurcation of his career, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), *Walking on Glass* (1985) and *The Bridge* (1986) appeared under the name Iain Banks. For that reason, they have tended to be included among his mainstream fiction, an interpretation in which Banks was complicit: '*The Wasp Factory* was my attempt at writing an ordinary conventional novel' (Sawyer 1990: 7).

Yet, these three novels are clearly far from ordinary, far from conventional. Indeed, when *The Wasp Factory* was rejected by Gollancz, the reader's report apparently described it as 'Quite well written, but far too strange ever to get published' (Nicholls 1993: 138). I would contend, therefore, that these three novels are most revealingly read as works of science fiction. This is partly because they pick up on devices and themes Banks had already explored in his as-yet unpublished science fiction. Primarily, however, it is because all three novels depend on layerings of reality and a sense of divided identity that have long been consistent elements in what might be termed the Scottish fantastic.

Scottish literature has characteristically centred on 'characters with damaged or distorted identities' (Middleton 1999: 7), from James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) up to Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981). Even works that are not overtly fantastic often share this characteristic, as for instance in *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh (1993) and *Morvern Caller* by Alan Warner (1995). Such doubled or divided characters are also a feature of the work of the Scottish psychologist R.D. Laing, especially *The Divided Self* (1960). Though Laing's work was being called into question by the 1980s, he was very widely read throughout the 1960s and '70s and was a major influence on Scottish writers of the

period (see, in particular, Miller 2005: Chapter Two). Banks is likely to have encountered Laing's work when studying psychology at university, or at least to have found his ideas disseminated throughout contemporary fiction. Laing's study of schizophrenia identified what he called 'ontological insecurity', in which someone 'may feel his self as partially divorced from his body ... [and] ... the world of his experience comes to be one he can no longer share with other people' (Laing 1970: 42-43). This schizophrenic sense is something that various critics (including both Middleton and Miller) have extended from the personal to the national, and hence have identified with Scottish fiction.

In Banks' work, Laing's notion of a divided self is tied in with an idea from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by Erving Goffman (1959) which Banks referred to in his interview with Michael Cobley: 'It's about the way we use more or less assumed identities, take [sic] from films, TV, books, people around us, to construct defences to keep the world back' (Cobley 1990: 26). It is the damaged and doubled characters, the constructed defences, the worlds that have become a private rather than a shared experience, that make it impossible to read these three novels other than as works of the fantastic.

Each of the novels, for instance, features a protagonist who is broken in some way. Frank, in *The Wasp Factory*, believes himself to have been violently emasculated; Grout, in *Walking on Glass*, suffers from paranoia; Lennox/Orr, in *The Bridge*, has been seriously injured in a car crash. Each has withdrawn into their imagination, and therefore inhabits a defensive, enclosed space that that cannot be shared by anyone else and that effectively forms a parallel world. Laing, in *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* (1967), describes it thus: 'If the "ego" is broken up, or destroyed (by the insurmountable contradictions of certain life situations, by toxins, chemical changes, etc.), then the person may be exposed to other worlds, "real" in different ways' (quoted in Miller 2005: 74).

Ritual landscapes

In *The Wasp Factory*, our consensus reality is implied but not actually seen. Our entire experience of Frank's island home, Cauldhame, is mediated through 'his' eyes, and what we are shown is not a physical landscape but a landscape of symbol and ritual. We learn as much in the very first

sentence of the novel: 'I had been making the rounds of the Sacrifice Poles the day we heard my brother had escaped' (Banks 1984: 7). We are told that 'One of the Poles held a rat head with two dragonflies, the other a seagull and two mice' (Banks 1984: 7), and later that, 'My dead sentries, those extensions of me which came under my power through the simple but ultimate surrender of death, sensed nothing to harm me or the island' (Banks 1984: 20). These Sacrifice Poles immediately call to mind the pig's head totem in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), another story of children making a new and violent world order out of their own imaginations. Within this ritual landscape, Frank's daily round consists of carefully choreographed sacrifices. As Maureen Speller puts it:

Almost every action of his day has some significant function; indeed I think it's of the greatest significance that the actual Factory in part comprises a huge clock-face, a modern symbol of order (aren't we all slaves to the clock, though Frank, quite literally, seems to have all the time in the world) and from a bank, another potent symbol of order. It's as though he needs the ritual to keep his world, and his understanding of his world, under control. (Speller 2000: 28)

The setting was suggested by the landscape around Portmahomack near Nigg where Banks spent a summer working for British Steel as a 'Non-Destructive Testing Technician (Trainee)' (Banks 2003: 178), but in fact we see little of the topography of the island. More important is the fact that it *is* an island. There is a footbridge that connects Cauldham with the mainland, but there's a gate midway along the bridge. We are not meant to see this as a place that connects with reality, just as the bridge in *The Bridge* seems disconnected from land, and the castle in *Walking on Glass* is isolated in a bleak, snow-covered landscape.

That the island reflects Frank's identity is acknowledged by Banks when he says: 'That's why the island comes into *The Wasp Factory* because Frank is almost literally cut off [...] from the rest of society, literally insular in his perceptions' (Cobley 1990: 26). The island as Frank sees it is not a place that anyone else can share; both the incantatory rituals and the gated bridge serve to separate him from the world. Banks makes this a more general point when he adds: 'any time a castle appears in any book, certainly in mine, in a way it stands for the individual' (Cobley 1990: 26).

Ritual, as much as isolation, forms part of the defensive wall around the characters in *Walking on Glass* and *The Bridge* also. However, in *Walking*

on *Glass*, ritual and isolation seem to occupy different parts of the story. Steven Grout is the kind of divided self that Laing wrote about, a man whose fantasizing and paranoia, an overt form of ontological insecurity, have led him to construct a private reality that no one else can share. He believes himself to be an exile from some great war between good and evil in another realm of reality, and alien enemies are constantly trying to attack him with futuristic weapons such as the Microwave Gun, a device that sounds suspiciously similar to the Lazy Gun of *Against a Dark Background* (written 1976). To defend himself against these attacks Grout has established for himself a set of eccentric rituals that he must follow, wearing a hard hat at all times and stepping only on the cracks in the pavement. The private world of ritual means that there is isolation here: his paranoia makes it impossible for him to relate to fellow workers, so he doesn't hold on to jobs for long. The start of this day sees him losing his job filling potholes in the road, and during the course of the day we see him failing to sign on at the Labour Exchange, evading his landlady to whom he owes rent, getting drunk and being robbed, all the while being more aware of a shadowy other world than he is of this one.

Quiss and Ajayi, Q & A, the central characters in the third story, are an actualization of Grout's delusion because they are indeed exiles from some great war. They are from opposite sides in the conflict, but each has committed a grievous error and has consequently been transported to an isolated, snow-bound castle. Here their lives are on hold. Unlike the other two stories in the novel, which both take place within the space of a single day, in this section the action spreads over thousands of days.

Within this isolation, totally cut off from everyone and everything they knew, Quiss and Ajayi have their own rituals to enact. Before they can be restored to their former positions, they must play ridiculous games; Chinese Scrabble, dominoes with unmarked pieces, and so forth. The successful completion of each game gives them the opportunity to answer a riddle – what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object – and only by solving this riddle will they be redeemed and restored to their original positions. The story thus echoes the way that playing a game is equated with life in *The Player of Games*, which had been written immediately before *The Wasp Factory*. In fact, games play an important part in the iconography of Banks's novels from this point onwards. As he explained to Michael Cobley: 'The reason games are attractive in that way

is because they're ready-made symbols, the whole idea of the game is an automatic symbol of life, because all games are in a way small attributes of life, small sections that people try to codify' (Cobley 1990: 26). In other words, games make explicit the symbols and rituals that make up so much of Banks's fiction. By codifying games, the characters impose at least the semblance of control upon lives that are out of control.

In the end, the three stories seem to collapse into each other, and there's a suggestion that the story of Quiss and Ajayi really is an actualization of Grout's delusion. In the hospital to which he is confined at the end of the novel, Grout notices two elderly patients endlessly playing games even though another patient keeps stealing some of the pieces. In the grounds, moreover, he finds a matchbox – 'McGuffin's ZEN BRAND' (Banks 1985: 217) – which features, as a Q & A, the riddle Quiss and Ajayi have been trying to solve. And yet, it is not quite so clear cut as that. In a castle made of books, our last sight of Ajayi has her starting to read *Walking on Glass*. The novel is a closed circle; there is no way out of the landscape of ritual and imagination.

That is not, however, the case in the third of these novels, *The Bridge*, in which the 'castle' takes the form of a seemingly endless bridge. This is an elaboration of the Forth Road Bridge, a structure that dominated Banks's own childhood: 'my bedroom window looked out onto it' (Cobley 1990: 31). It is another ritual landscape, and the first of the massive structures that would play such a notable part in Banks's future science fictions, from *Feersum Endjinn* (1994) and *Excession* (1996) to *Matter* (2008). It is also so dominant a figure within the novel that it even affects the structure of the book:

I was doodling on the top of this sheet of paper; three flattened hexagons with two little linking sections between them, which is the shape of the bridge, and I'd been wondering just how to set the book out; chapters or what, and suddenly I realised the bridge itself had a perfect shape; three sections, the little linking bridges-within-bridges, the four feet on the stone caissons ... everything; it was all there; a literal framework. (Cobley 1990: 31, ellipsis in the original)

Orr arrives on the bridge with no past, no memory, and must try to make sense of a world that does not make sense. He can see out (the planes that appear from nowhere and skywrite messages in braille; the comatose man on a hospital bed who appears whenever he turns on the television; the beep-beep-beep of a life support system that sounds whenever he

picks up a telephone), but cannot make sense of what he sees, 'I can't even tell what language is being used' (Banks 1986: 30). But no one can see in. Within this private world, Orr finds himself unavoidably caught up in seemingly meaningless social, psychological and sexual rituals. In *The Wasp Factory* we sense that the entire world of Cauldham is under the complete control of Frank's ritual objects; in *Walking on Glass*, the rituals and the private world of the castle seem to be held apart until they collapse into each other right at the end; but in *The Bridge*, although we may believe that the world is Orr's creation, he seems to have no control over it whatsoever.

The castle in *Walking on Glass* is inconstant: 'they'd changed some of the corridors and stairways en route from the games room to the lower levels' (Banks, 1985, 79); similarly, the character of the bridge is unstable: at one point Orr finds an L-shaped lift which takes him to a forgotten library, but he can never locate either the lift or the library again. This is ontological insecurity made actual, and it echoes throughout Orr's experiences on the bridge. Joyce's office is relocated without warning, and Orr finds himself moved from a comfortable upper-class apartment to a small room in the bowels of the bridge, with all sorts of social consequences. Joyce, the psychiatrist, requires Orr to record his dreams; but Orr does not dream, at least not at first, and must concoct fictions with which to appease his doctor. Yet Joyce then abruptly removes Orr from his list of patients, which is as psychologically devastating as Orr's drop in social status. Towards the end, when we might assume that the coma patient is beginning to wake up, Orr is at last able to find his way off the endless bridge, only to plunge into a series of increasingly threatening wartime scenarios.

What we take from this last section of *The Bridge* is that this private defensive realm is hard to sustain – Frank has to maintain an exhausting round of ritual acts, Grout has to take constant evasive action, Orr is batted about in a bewildering way – yet trying to find a way back to any sort of consensus reality is even more threatening. It is particularly terrifying because one thing this parallel world does is sustain multitudes. Key characters in each of these novels are divided, doubled, often in complex, multivalent ways, and such multiple selves would need to be reunited before leaving the castle.

Divided selves

Every member of the Cauldhame family in *The Wasp Factory* seems to be both damaged and doubled. As Andrew M. Butler points out, this even extends to the family dog, Old Saul, who supposedly emasculated Frank and was consequently killed at the precise moment that baby Paul was born. This pairing of Saul and Paul is a reference to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus into St Paul that Banks carefully does not make explicit in the text. It is also relevant that Paul, apparently the only mentally and physically undamaged member of the family, is one of the three children killed by Frank, a sacrifice or martyr to this weird ritual landscape.

The most damaged and most divided character is, of course, our only point of entry to this solipsistic world. Frank is, to an extent, a non-person: 'I have no birth certificate, no National Insurance number, nothing to say I'm alive or have ever existed' (Banks 1984: 13-14). His questionable legal status means that he must pretend he is only an occasional visitor to his own home. And on the few occasions when he can go into the nearby town, it is to lose control in another way by getting hopelessly drunk. Moreover, within this disconnected existence, he lives in a miasma of untruth: 'If I was lucky, my father might tell me something and, if I was luckier still, it might even be the truth' (Banks 1984: 8). There is no solidity, nothing reliable, in Frank's world, and consequently we can believe nothing we are told either. Maureen Speller sums up the situation thus: 'On the one hand, the story is so bizarre, one simply can't believe that it might be true; on the other, the story is so bizarre, how could it not be true?' (Speller 2000: 29).

Frank is aggressively, excessively masculine. He makes bombs and flame-throwers, kills wildlife indiscriminately, and murders three other children, including Paul, in increasingly bizarre ways, yet somehow the murders are never laid at his door. To an extent this has a satiric edge: 'the whole thing was to try and make Frank a type of symbol for the military establishment' (Newman 1986: 41) – that word 'symbol' again, which crops up whenever Banks talks about these early novels. Along with reports of the extraordinary deaths of other relatives, it is also part of the comedy of the novel – 'I do make violence funny sometimes. That's a tricky operation. You should laugh at it first and then feel the horror, not laugh at it and forget it' (Newman 1986: 42) – an issue that would become increasingly problematic in later novels. All of Frank's violent masculinity seems to be compensation

for his emasculation, except that we learn this never happened. In fact, Frank's cartoonish exaggeration of all things male means that when we arrive at the final revelation of his sex, the divided nature of his character is emphasized.

But such gendered divisions are not Frank's alone. His older brother, Eric, was often dressed in female clothes as a child, which caused him to be taken away from Cauldhame for a while. Eric, therefore, mirrors not only Frank's gender divide but also his legal/physical disconnect from the island. Indeed it is possible to argue, as Kev McVeigh does, that Eric is a creation of Frank's, or that Eric and Frank are the same person. In such a case, Eric's madness, generated by an horrific experience while working in a hospital, might simply reflect Frank's own mental torment. For all the mayhem supposedly associated with Eric, however, the only time he actually appears, right at the end of the novel, he is found peacefully asleep. If he is the mirror of Frank, therefore, we must ask what this peacefulness might indicate for Frank's apparent violence.

This gendered doubling is reflected also in their father, Angus, and Frank's mother, Agnes (the similarity of names alone is suggestive). Angus is injured in the leg, like the Fisher King, and is both a congenital liar (at least in Frank's estimate) and obsessive-compulsive in the way he insists that Frank memorize the exact dimensions of every object in the house. Agnes is simply absent. But McVeigh has also argued that when Frank exposes Angus's 'large, rather greasy-looking cock and balls' (Banks 1984: 174), they are every bit as artificial as Frank's wax genitalia kept in a jar. On this reading Angus actually is Agnes, much as Eric is Frank.

The whole of *The Wasp Factory* is filled with such broken and divided characters that it is impossible to tell what reality might actually look like. The transformations wrought within the text clearly position *The Wasp Factory* in the tradition of *Jekyll and Hyde*, though it is as if Stevenson had told us only the story of Mr Hyde. The other two novels also use divided and doubled characters, though not to the almost excessive extent of *The Wasp Factory*.

Walking on Glass, though structurally more complex than *The Wasp Factory*, with three separate stories told in alternating chapters, is on a much smaller scale and shows some signs of hurry, particularly in the ending, where the different stories do not fully converge. Even in the unequivocally realist first story, in which Graham Park walks from the art college where

he is a student to the home of the woman he hopes will become his lover, we encounter symbols and doubling. Graham looks at his watch and sees that it is 3.33: 'Three three three. A good omen. Today was a day things would come together, a day events would coalesce' (Banks 1985: 11). He doesn't read the omen correctly, and indeed the whole of this part of the novel consists of Graham misreading situations. Moreover, he is too simple a character to be as divided as Banks's other protagonists. However, Richard Slater, his best friend, also doubles as Bob Stock, his rival; while his hoped-for lover, Sara ffitch, is also deceptive Sarah Simpson-Wallace who is engaged in an incestuous relationship with Slater/Stock.

The other two parts of the novel are more overt in their divided characters. Grout, for instance, is very obvious in his ontological insecurity; every step he takes lays him open to attack from forces that can never be seen and do not belong in this reality. He is the only character in any of these novels who believes *himself* to be divided, existing in this world but truly belonging in another. Though it is interesting to note that, however delusional he may appear in any conventional reading of the novel, when his defences are breached and his precious hard hat is stolen, he is indeed felled by a bolt from the heavens, or to be precise by a beer barrel flung from a truck caught up in the accident caused by Slater, the accident that will in turn undo the duplicities of Slater/Stock and Sara/Sarah.

Quiss and Ajayi are even more obviously paired. They are presented as opposites: question and answer, male and female, extrovert and introvert; but these are never more than two sides of the same character. Both have been consigned to the castle for 'crimes' that are ludicrous in their violence; both set out to explore the castle in their own way; and both find some sort of resolution by immersion. Quiss, the extrovert, finds a room where, if he puts his head into a bubble in the ceiling, he enters the mind of a being on another world (by inference, we recognize that this is a woman working the land in what is probably South East Asia). This experience is extremely seductive: a little later he comes upon a place of seemingly infinite extent where previous prisoners of the castle like him all now stand with their heads immersed in such bubbles, forgetting everything else. Ajayi, meanwhile, explores the castle in her own way, finding an analogously immersive experience by learning to read the books that form the crumbling walls of the castle. It is a measure of the ambition of the novel (if not, exactly, its achievement) that Ajayi ends up reading *Walking on Glass*.

If *The Wasp Factory* owes a debt to *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Walking on Glass*, with its riddles and puns and the circularity which means that real and imagined landscapes collapse into each other, recalls Lewis Carroll's Alice, then the tutelary deity of *The Bridge* is undoubtedly *Lanark*. Both structurally and thematically, Banks's novel echoes Alasdair Gray's.

Gray's divided self is Duncan Thaw/Lanark, and the novel combines a realist account of an artist growing up in post-war Scotland with a surreal account of Lanark's experiences in the post-mortem world of Unthank. The ontological uncertainty of the novel is brought out by its structure, in which we first encounter Book Three, then a Prologue, then, in order, Books One, Two and Four; an arrangement that means we cannot privilege the real over the fantastic, or the surreal over the mundane. The divided self of *The Bridge* is an unnamed narrator and John Orr (the two are never specifically linked, though Orr has a circular bruise on his chest that echoes the narrator's 'Circle of pain on chest' (Banks 1986: 2), so we are allowed to make that implication), and the novel combines a realist account of the narrator's life in Scotland from the 1960s to the 80s with a surreal account of Orr's experiences in the strange community that exists on the endless titular bridge.

After a brief, vividly impressionistic passage which recounts the aftermath of a car crash on the Forth Road Bridge from the point of view of the trapped and injured driver – 'Trapped, Crushed. Weight coming from all directions, entangled in the wreckage (you have to become one with the machine). Please no fire, no fire. Shit. This hurts' (Banks 1986: 1) – we shift not to the alter-ego Orr, but to a strange dream scenario. A carriage on a mysterious errand meets an identical carriage on a narrow road across remote moorland. Each makes identical manoeuvres, effectively blocking the other from going on. Later, there is another dream in which two pirate ships engage in a mutually destructive battle until, in extremis, the surviving crew of one ship board the other vessel, only to find that the crew of that ship has boarded their vessel. The symbolism of these two dreams emphasizes the doubling that runs through all three of these novels. Each of the chapters that form the platform of the bridge have the same bifurcated structure, a dream to start with, or at least something to take us to a different place and perspective, followed by the continuing story of Orr's experiences on the bridge or, in the later chapters, in a series of increasingly threatening, war-torn scenarios. Interspersed among these

chapters, the caissons that uphold the entire structure, is the story of a successful engineer and would-be poet, and in particular his occasionally troubled relationship with Andrea. Since Andrea divides her time between the narrator in Edinburgh and another lover in Paris, there is doubling here also. Indeed it is the stress of this twinned relationship, the dread that he may lose Andrea to the other man who is now seriously ill, that precipitates the narrator's accident.

The engineer, the narrator of the realist sections, the comatose figure that Orr watches on his television, remains unnamed throughout the novel. This loss of identity, a failure to know himself, is another connection to the idea of the divided self. Banks does, however, provide two fairly blatant clues to his name. When the narrator is dating a girl called Nicola there is an oblique reference to Nicholas and Alexandra, and later he is asked if he is related to the singer in the Eurythmics. Later, in *Complicity* (1993), the central character, Cameron, meets A.L., Alexander Lennox, and his wife Andi in a bar. 'The idea was that *Complicity*, for all its final bleakness, does have a happy ending. It's just that it isn't its own happy ending, and it's not at the end' (Banks 2003: 292).

Although Lennox/Orr is the doubled self at the heart of *The Bridge*, there are others. Perhaps the most significant doubling occurs in the sex scene, when Orr is making love to Abberlaine (Andrea's avatar). The Xs that decorate her lingerie become 'a language, an architecture. Cantilevers and tubes, suspension ties', her body takes on the shape, 'arms in a V behind her, extended and straining', so that in the end 'I feel like I have just fucked the bridge' (Banks 1986: 154). Abberlaine is the bridge, and in fucking the bridge Orr has become one with the ritual space he has created. There's a parallel scene to this, when Lennox and Andrea climb a tower in the countryside outside Edinburgh, and make love there. Banks notes: 'the tower that's mentioned in *The Bridge*, I did climb up that once, but not accompanied, unfortunately. I didn't get a chance to do what the guy did in the novel' (Garnett 1989: 53). Though perhaps, in the way that Orr's sex scene symbolizes fucking the bridge, so Lennox's sex scene on the tower symbolizes making love to the Scottish landscape that surrounds them, a uniting with the country that is very important in these novels.

Scottish fantastic

The Bridge, like its two predecessors, was a novel written in exile. Banks had moved to London in late-1979, and while *The Wasp Factory* had been filled with immediate memories of Scotland, and *Walking on Glass* was a not always successful attempt to come to terms with his new environment, *The Bridge* is suffused with nostalgia for Scotland. The Forth Road Bridge, which had dominated his childhood, provided the structure of the novel as well as being Orr's Unthank-like distorted mirror of Scottish society. Moreover it is the leitmotif of the realist sections of the novel: Lennox and Andrea are constantly returning to view the bridge, so that it becomes the symbol of their identities and their relationship (which may explain why, for so much of the novel, Orr wonders whether he can ever reach the shore). And it is not just the bridge, Scotland is inherent in every part of the novel from the barbarian's coarse dialect, to the anti-Thatcher politics (which also came out in *Walking on Glass*, and which, at the time, were edging Banks's own politics from Scottish Labour towards Scottish Nationalism), to the lovingly described landscape. Certainly it is no surprise that within two years of the publication of *The Bridge*, Banks had moved back to Scotland, first to Edinburgh and eventually to North Queensferry, close to his childhood home and once more in the shadow of the Forth Bridge.

It is for this reason that I think *The Bridge* is both the most personal and the most successful of Banks's novels. It does stand comparison with *Lanark* as an expression of the Scottish fantastic, dividing and doubling the characters and their worlds so that the real can only be understood in its relationship to the fantastic, and vice versa. But the way that neither the fantastic nor the real can be privileged, how the one is integral to the other, is important in fully understanding all three of these early novels.

The damaged, divided characters who populate these novels have all created the defensive realm, the other reality, that Laing and Goffman talked about. What Banks has done is actualize these realms, just as science fiction actualizes parallel realities or alien planets. In *The Wasp Factory* we have no alternative but to see what Frank sees, a world that is 'real' in different ways, as Laing put it. A conventional reading of the novel, which had to account for all the sacrifices and murders, the repeated sexual reversals, could only end up with an uneasy hybrid of Gothic horror and psychological realism in which every character is necessarily

warped. Yet if we understand the ontological insecurity of the novel, the sense that reality isn't necessarily what we are being presented with, then Frank's island becomes a landscape of the mind upon which every thing and everyone reflects Frank's own divided self. The island is a parallel reality, an alternative world, in which the Sacrifice Poles and the murdered children become fragments of everything that is tearing Frank apart, and his innumerable rituals are the assumed identity with which he tries to hold himself together. And this is a reading that places the novel squarely in the tradition of the Scottish fantastic.

Because *The Wasp Factory* shows us only one reality, as alienating and disconcerting as that may be, the question of which reality is privileged does not arise. Such a question does arise with *Walking on Glass*, however, since the novel opens with the realist section. When Slater relates an idea for a rather silly science fiction story, it is easily dismissed by Graham, so when science fiction enters the universe of the novel more seriously, first in the form of Grout's delusions and then in the game-playing of Quiss and Ajayi, we are tempted to dismiss it just as easily. The realism is privileged, the science fiction is a less valid way of reading the novel. On the contrary, I think we are meant to take Grout's delusions and Quiss and Ajayi's games very seriously indeed. As I have suggested, the three stories collapse back into Grout's story, while the story of Quiss and Ajayi encloses the realism of Graham's narrative within itself.

The belated 'happy ending' for *The Bridge* that occurs in *Complicity* suggests that a realist reading should be privileged for this novel also. But within the novel itself, as in *Lanark*, no such privileging is possible. Both Lennox's world and Orr's are equally real, or perhaps it would be better to say equally unreal. It is a novel of dreams and fictions, in which our understanding of what is going on is constantly interrupted by battling pirates or a Scottish barbarian with a magic dirk that is clearly a variant on the knife missile we find in so many Culture novels. Only by accepting the fantastic on its own terms does the novel as a whole cohere.

These three novels, therefore, may not be the 'gaudy wall-size canvasses' (Banks, 2013, x) of Banks's Culture novels, but they were science fiction. Banks intentionally introduced themes and devices from his previously written but so far unpublished science fiction novels. More importantly, he destabilized our sense of reality, so that when we see damaged and divided characters behaving appropriately for the world they have engendered,

then we come to see their world as they see it. It is a shift in reality that suits a science fictional reading of the books.

On this interpretation, I would argue, therefore, that Banks did not write a mainstream novel until after his career had divided. Indeed, I would suggest that his career lies on three tracks rather than two. There is the baroque science fiction by Iain M. Banks; the mainstream fiction by Iain Banks that began with *Espedair Street* (1987); and before it all the Scottish fantastic of these three early novels.

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'Books of Truth': Iain M. Banks – Atheist, Secularist, Humanist

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'Reason shapes the future, but superstition infects the present'
(Banks 1993: 97)

During his prolific career as a published writer, Iain M. Banks was a vociferous proponent of atheism, humanism and secularism; his eclectic fictional oeuvre is permeated with such expressions of a rational worldview. As an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society and a Distinguished Supporter of the Humanist Society Scotland, Banks frequently wrote related letters of protest to the *Guardian*, including a call in 2009 for state funding to faith schools to be abolished. Banks was a reader of *New Scientist* for thirty years and also sang the praises of its sister publication *New Humanist*, gracing its cover in 1996 and frequently appearing in its pages discussing his work and his views. As pointed out in an obituary for Banks on *The Freethinker* website, various obituaries failed to mention Banks' atheism and how it shaped his work (Duke).

In his mainstream fiction, Banks frequently found a direct outlet for his views on matters pertaining to religion, sometimes writing from the perspective of characters whose views seem to directly align with his own, such as atheists Mr Munro in 'Piece' (*The State of the Art* 1989) and Stewart Gilmour in *Stonemouth* (2012), or featuring more incidental characters with similarly adamant views, like Kenneth McHoan in *The Crow Road* (1992) and Guy in *The Quarry* (2013). It is arguably in Banks' sf, however, especially in the texts depicting the secular civilization, the Culture, that his engagement with such issues becomes most complex and most interesting. When discussing Banks' engagement with religion, critics have focused largely upon his mainstream work rather than his sf. Some exceptions include Victor Sage, who briefly mentions Banks' use of the Gothic trope of civilization versus barbarism in the Culture (Sage 21-22), Timothy C. Baker who places Banks' Culture series within the context of Scottish utopian fiction (Baker 91-117), and Moira Martingale whose monograph, *Gothic Dimensions: Iain Banks - Time Lord* (2013), contains probably the most

extensive exploration of the Culture relating to religion, faith and belief, identifying elements of the Gothic in the series, and arguing, like Baker, that Banks' so-called rational system merely cloaks elements of the spiritual or supernatural in pseudoscience.

This essay explores how Banks' worldview has inspired, shaped and driven his work, especially in relation to the Culture. A complete study of this topic is beyond the scope of my essay; instead I focus on the areas I deem to be most pertinent, or under-represented in criticism on the subject. I begin by outlining the nature of Banks' atheism, and the nature of his 'voice', both as public figure and narrator. I discuss the nature and ideology of the Culture as a rational, secular entity, examining Baker and Martingale's arguments. I contest their shared view that the Culture's Minds reproduce the logic of God or gods in a symbolic form, concluding with a discussion of the extent to which the mission of the Culture sub-divisions Contact and Special Circumstances can be considered akin to the zeal of religious evangelism.

Atheist in the Public Domain

Atheism is extremely simple to define: it is the belief that there is no God or gods [...] The atheist's rejection of belief in God is usually accompanied by a broader rejection of any supernatural or transcendental reality. (Baggini 3)

Throughout his career, Banks described himself as a 'militant' or 'evangelical' atheist (Banks 2010). The 'evangelism' of Banks' stance echoes incredulous comments made by the evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, in his best-selling manifesto for atheism, *The God Delusion* (2006), that he is 'often described as a deeply religious man' (33). It is perhaps tempting, therefore, to locate Banks alongside Dawkins and those other recent writers such as A.C. Grayling and Christopher Hitchens, or fellow fiction-writers such as Ian McEwan and Philip Pullman, referred to as the New Atheists. These New Atheists have all advocated to varying extents the public criticism and debunking of religion, some even going as far as claiming that the non-existence of God can be proven, once and for all. Banks could be, at his most pugnacious, almost as forcefully adamant as Dawkins or Hitchens:

I think a lot of us were naïve, and thought that religion would quietly slip away, embarrassed and mumbling, saying 'Sorry I got it so wrong guys.' Instead it's come

back and said, 'We were right all along.' Well no you bloody weren't! [Religion is] a set of hypotheses arrived at by very primitive people two thousand years ago, and it's not fit for purpose, it doesn't describe reality, it's that simple. (Banks 2010)

The vigour of Banks' comments cannot be overlooked, but they still arguably pale in comparison to the vehemence of Dawkins' invective in the oft-cited opening paragraph of *The God Delusion's* second chapter 'The God Hypothesis'. Here Dawkins denounces the God of the Old Testament as 'arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser' and, amongst other things, as a 'homophobic, racist' and 'sodomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully' 50).

The tone in which one delivers one's views on controversial subjects such as atheism is particularly important, especially as atheism is often attacked for being an overly negative philosophy that provides little positive support to individuals throughout their lives. Banks, however, despite his vehemence, was far from being another iteration of 'Darwin's Bulldog'. In the posthumous *New Humanist* tribute, the magazine's editor compared Banks instead with 'that other atheist sci-fi humourist Douglas Adams', noting that both were remarkable for their 'self-deprecating sense of humour, something that can be conspicuous by its absence from public atheism' (Melville 5). Banks was certainly notable for a sense of humour – sometimes wry, often fluctuating between morbid and wildly exuberant – that permeated his work as deeply as did his atheism, and he is best characterized by the cheerful public demeanour that he maintained throughout his career, even when expressing his most controversial views on politics and religion. While, at times, Banks' responses could be blunt, glib or irreverent, such as describing faith as 'basically bananas' (Duke), he seldom offered such statements without further comment to justify and expand his view, usually accompanied by humour and an element of self-deprecation. The following statement by Banks, quoted in *New Humanist*, perfectly outlines both his views on the existence of God, and the nature of his wit:

I've always felt that one ought to retain just the tiniest, sliveriest wee bit of agnosticism to season what is basically outright atheism, on the grounds that – in the end, after all – each of us is just a solitary smart ape on a piffling little planet in an ungraspable big universe, and the sheer bleeding obviousness of there being no supreme deity could itself be a huge cosmic joke on the part of a particularly

Banks' retention of this 'wee bit' of agnosticism enables us to locate his views on the 'spectrum of probability' outlined by Dawkins in *The God Delusion* in the following manner: 'Very low probability, short of zero. *De facto* atheist. "I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there"' (73). Banks' choice to phrase his views in such a comic manner, highlighting the shared ambiguities of the human condition, and leaving space for the fact that he may – despite his assurances – be wrong, presents him as an open-minded atheist-agnostic, fundamentally motivated by a desire to learn some kind of objective truth about the nature of reality rather than merely preach a position. Francis Spufford's tribute to Banks, published in the July/August 2013 issue of *New Humanist* – part acknowledgement of Banks' long-term support for the publication, part obituary, and part fan tribute – is a key example of the level of respect that Banks received, both for his public demeanour and for his work (Spufford 2013: 14-16). Spufford, who recently discussed his commitment to Christianity in the *Guardian* (Spufford 2012), clearly did not find Banks' worldview a hindrance to appreciating his sf. In fact, Spufford and Banks appeared together as part of the British Library's *Out of this World* exhibition in 2011, discussing the theme of utopia in relation to both Spufford's sf-influenced text *Red Plenty* (2010) and Banks' Culture series, highlighting a commitment to shared political and social values rather than religious differences.

During the final chapter of Banks' career, shortly after announcing that his cancer was inoperable, the extent of his popularity – not just as an author but also as an influential representative for atheism and humanism – quickly became clear. Across a wide range of online platforms, Banks was praised for the bravery and humility that he displayed when discussing his disease and diagnosis, especially concerning his trademark employment of gallows humour in the initial announcement: 'I'm officially Very Poorly' (Banks 2013a). In one of his final interviews, Banks spoke frankly about the experience of hearing his diagnosis: 'The atheist part of me kicked in and I thought, if I was a God-botherer, then I'd be thinking, Why me, God? What have I done to deserve this?' He continued, emphasizing the positive manner in which his atheism helped him come to terms with his predicament: 'at least I'm free of that; at least I can simply treat it as

bad luck and get on with it.’ (Banks 2013c). In a further example of the wide respect that Banks engendered, he received media attention for the announcement that his long-term partner Adele had accepted his marriage proposal. When Andrew Brown, editor of ‘Cif Belief’, the *Guardian’s* page for comment on religion, praised Banks’ ‘eloquent’ proposal, commenting that it ‘speaks volumes’ about the ‘symbolic act’ of marriage, Brown acknowledged that this proposal was significant regardless of whether it had anything ‘to do with God’ or not, as Banks’ comment ‘squashes a lot of the rhetoric about the meaning of marriage on both sides of the religious/ secular debate’ (Brown).

Satire

Despite the respect that Banks garnered over the years, he was of course no stranger to controversy. In dramatic contrast to the wave of tributes he received upon publication of *The Quarry*, the public outrage provoked by his debut novel, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), has been well documented. With this novel, Banks used his violent and deluded protagonist Frank Cauldhame to satirize both the draconian policies and increasingly libertarian stance of the Thatcher government, as well as the processes of dogma and indoctrination perceived to be integral to a religious worldview. It was the first of several novels in which Banks would satirize with varying levels of intensity the various religious practices and institutions that he regarded to be hopelessly outmoded. In *Whit* (1995), *Matter* (2008) and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2013), Banks constructed a fictional world that seemed to feature an undeniably supernatural element – faith healing, Gods, prophetic religious texts – only to rationally deconstruct and debunk them.

In *Whit*, Banks’ satire can be considered to be of a gentle variety: witty, playful and knowingly ironic, in the Horatian mode akin to that of the eponymous Roman satirist. Isis, *Whit’s* protagonist, is a member of a religious cult, the Luskentyrians, from Stirlingshire, that embraces esoteric traditions and patriarchy whilst rejecting various aspects of modern society, especially technology. The Luskentyrians can, therefore, be aligned with U.S. Amish communities who practise a version of Anabaptism based upon a literal interpretation of the Bible and a particular version of the ‘Ordnung’ – the behavioural rules and guidelines agreed upon by each enclave of

the church. Living in relative isolation from the rest of society, the Amish are famous for largely rejecting modernity although occasionally allowing certain technological items to be used under very specific circumstances.

When the mythology upon which this cult is founded is revealed to be the self-serving invention of Isis' grandfather, the revelations about his elaborate system of lies are both shockingly vile and amusingly silly; for example, some Luskentyrians believe that 'the bigger and fatter one was, the larger a receiver for God's signals and so the better one would hear God's voice' (Banks 1995: 10). While Banks may satirize the beliefs of characters such as Isis, and while they may ultimately turn away from their faith, his portrayal was largely understood to be sympathetic and respectful (Kaveney 34). Isis may be a naive and impressionable protagonist but, using her marginal social position, her observations coalesce into a coherent social critique: comparing the Luskentyrian cult with mainstream, secular society, it is clear that the value of the former is found in its sense of community, not its religion. Similarly, through Isis, the flaws of mainstream secular society are revealed, as she realizes that 'efficiency isn't everything, that people not profit are what matters' (Mitchell).

In contrast to *Whit*, Banks' Culture novel *Surface Detail* (2010) is angry in tone, as one might expect from a large, multi-stranded space opera that operates as a relentless and scathing attack on the 'sick idea' of hell (Banks 2010), as described by various Christian denominations. Carefully realized within the rational fictional framework of his Culture series, Banks guides his readers through an obsessively planned and carefully maintained system of interlinked hells in virtual space, depicted with painstaking and excruciating detail. The unfortunate denizens of this virtual afterlife are subjected to the variety of ingenious torture methods that such a flexible space entails, including an endlessly grinding wheel formed of live disembodied nerve endings. The Culture – morally superior to the last – has vowed to end this system, and the novel depicts its intervention, and the ensuing war to destroy the whole infernal network. Here Banks clearly aimed to render as vile and ridiculous any belief that such a torturous and sadistic system – whether supernatural or otherwise – could be justified by its ability to provide an impetus away from sin, and towards moral good. Banks also supplemented this critique of such a punishment-based morality with long sections of direct third-person narration about the history of the alien races with which his narrative is concerned, but also mocking creationism

and any literal interpretation of religious texts: 'Almost every developing species had a creation myth buried somewhere in its past talking utter drivel about thunderclouds having sex with the sun, lonely old sadists inventing something to amuse themselves with' (Banks 2011: 121). Such sections arguably draw attention to some of the more eccentric areas of religious belief in an amusing and highly readable manner, as well as softening the vitriolic tone present in other parts of *Surface Detail*; but here Banks falls into the trap of allowing his own voice to encroach heavily upon that of the narrator, in a manner that undermines the subtlety of his overall message.

In his final Culture novel, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, Banks again develops a religiously-inclined element in order to systematically deconstruct it: the militaristic Gzilt civilization regard the Zihdren species as 'little less than gods' (2013b: 6) because their holy book, the ironically titled 'Book of Truth', seems to predict the technological development of their society with eerie accuracy. It is scarcely surprising, of course – at least to long-term readers of Banks – when the Book's truth is discredited; the exact manner in which this is achieved, however, is worthy of discussion. Firstly, while the Book of Truth, with its prophetic function, seems to parallel the Book of Revelations or Michel de Nostradamus' prophecies, it is unique both to Banks' fictional universe, and to that which we know, because almost everything that it predicts is widely and uncontroversially proven to have come true, even after the Book is revealed to be, somewhat paradoxically, 'a lie'. Rather than proving the Book to somehow be complete fiction, as perhaps readers might predict, it in fact turns out to be an 'experiment in applied practical theology or something' (Banks 2013b: 334) performed by a long-forgotten scientist: a self-fulfilling prophecy designed by a further advanced race, cleverly intended to manipulate the cultural development of the Gzilt. The Book of Truth is certainly a clever plot device that enables much of the book's conflict but it also highlights the insidious nature of a convincing deception, and continues Banks' engagement with the ways in which those in power can convincingly manipulate the realities of those beneath them.

Rational Culture

*'Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do / Nothing to kill or die for,
and no religion too'* (John Lennon, 'Imagine', 1971)

If Banks often used his fiction to deconstruct religious systems or highlight their failures, then the Culture is the elaborate, artificial system that he constructed as a fictional utopian alternative. Designed to bring out the best in human beings, and organized in such a manner that we could live together harmoniously whilst maintaining individual freedom, Banks' framework of Orbital worlds and planet-sized spaceships dispersed throughout the galaxy is portrayed as the ultimate creation of a rational, secular humanity, in a universe with no supernatural or paranormal elements. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay affirms, 'utopia is the [...] consummation of successful planning and social engineering' and 'a matter of rational construction and not historical miracle' (249). The people who live as part of the Culture seem to exist without any need for faith-based belief systems, organized religions or religious practice. The Culture, then, is clearly Banks' *personal* utopia: the dream of a man who once hoped that 'religion would slip away embarrassed'.

Despite Banks' intentions, however, there are various aspects of the elaborate, multi-novum story space that he returns to in the Culture texts that arguably seem to (re)produce elements of a supernatural, religious, or immaterial nature. I have examined elsewhere certain arguably quasi-religious elements of the Culture series – souls, digital afterlives – through the lens of cyberpunk, but wish to use the Minds to illustrate the careful manner in which Banks kept his novels within a fundamentally rational worldview. Critics such as Baker and Martingale have challenged the secular nature of the Culture, arguing that the Artificial Intelligences (AIs) known as the Minds can be compared with gods. The details of their arguments are complex. Firstly, both critics suggest that the Minds have godlike qualities such as 'omnipotence', 'omni-benevolence' and 'omniscience' and are essentially 'unfathomable'. Baker argues that 'the society is governed by [...] enormous computers with unparalleled, "almost God-like power"' (106). Similarly, according to Martingale, 'Banks may have rejected supernatural deities in favour of technological ones in terms of Man's salvation, but he has certainly substituted one set of gods with control over humans for another' (471). Secondly, both assert that the Minds can be considered godlike *regardless* of whether they are in any way supernatural: 'The efficacy, or divinity in any common sense, of these Gods is irrelevant; what matters is that every society finds its own godlike being' (Baker 106). Martingale's view that the Minds function 'mythically

or symbolically' (472) is affirmed by Baker's comment that they introduce a 'religious sensibility to the society' (106).

In my view, if the Minds are to be understood symbolically or analogously, they are more accurately compared with a nation-state, as their power is in fact too limited to be considered godlike (cf. Guerrier 28-38). The power wielded by them in order to control the day-to-day bureaucracy of thousands of habitats is certainly immense. In *Consider Phlebas* (1987), a Mind attempts to explain the vast scale of its information capacity in a manner conceivable to humans, using the analogy of filing cabinets filled with data cards, concluding that the cabinets would fill thousands of entire worlds (Banks 1988: 177). The Minds can appear in avatar form on several Culture environments at once, holding multiple simultaneous conversations, and potentially accessing a colossal amount for information instantaneously, even an individual's private thoughts. Their powers are greatly diminished, even redundant to some extent, when operating outside of the Culture's sphere. They cannot, for example, simply materialize anywhere in the universe instantly, cannot exist everywhere at all times, and cannot access *all* information in the universe, only that which is available to all Culture citizens by default, unless under 'Special Circumstances'. Crucially, also, they are expressly forbidden to penetrate the thoughts of their citizens and access personal information. While their informational capacity is clearly staggeringly huge, the Minds are still essentially supercomputers operating according to logical, rational programs, so their power is 'unfathomable', to the extent that it is difficult to grasp the full processing power of the computer upon which I currently write, albeit magnified greatly.

The Minds, as autonomous and autopoietic intelligent machines, are implicitly the result of a 'technological Singularity' – most famously outlined by Ray Kurzweil in *The Singularity is Near* (2005) and described by Csicsery-Ronay as 'the quintessential myth of contemporary technoculture' (262). Following this, Martingale is convinced that Banks has 'replaced supernatural deities with technological ones [...] hiding behind pseudoscience' (471). I am in no position to explain the likelihood of a machine intelligent enough to create increasingly intelligent versions of itself appearing in reality; and I do not think it necessary to negotiate whereabouts the Minds would sit on the continuum between science and magic that Arthur C. Clarke's much quoted third law of prediction suggests. Even if the Minds are viewed as being closer to supernatural phenomena, I

do not think that they bring a 'religious sensibility' to the Culture, as Baker argues, because they are not treated like gods in any way: there can be no doubt that they exist in material reality, and therefore their existence is assumed, accepted, making faith or belief redundant; also, they do not demand worship or in fact anything but the most cursory contact with Culture citizens at all.

The debates that I have outlined above are pre-empted to a certain extent by Linter, in 'The State of the Art' (1989): 'God, who sees and knows all, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, in a way that no ship, no mere Mind can ever be; *infinitely knowing*' (Banks 1993: 196). Linter – born into the Culture but choosing to reject his native people altogether to live on Earth – is notable because, as he explains in the above quotation, he has chosen to adopt a religious lifestyle. Coming from a believer, his comments suggest that the Minds cannot offer Culture citizens the happiness that religious observers believe derives from God: they are qualitatively different.

Baker's essay does, however, identify one important aspect of the Culture series that comes somewhat closer to religiosity: just as Richard Dawkins has been ironically considered as a 'very religious man', so Baker argues that 'the Culture is presented as a society in which freedom from religion is itself a religion' (106). Drawing upon comments made by Horza, the protagonist of *Consider Phlebas* – a mercenary who finds the Culture repugnant for its supposed lack of morals – Baker implies that the interventions routinely carried out by Contact and Special Circumstances are akin to the Crusades during the Middle Ages: the zeal with which the Culture attempts to perpetuate itself is akin to the fundamentalist religiosity it wishes to replace. Pulling no punches, Baker argues that 'the utopia is already corrupt; it continually engages in a religious self-undermining in which its values collapse upon themselves' (106).

Just as the Culture's egalitarian, post-scarcity, ostensibly anarchist society has been compared with Karl Marx's notion of a stateless/classless society, so too have critics like Murray N. Rothbard compared Marx's proposed transition from capitalism to communism with the projects of Christian missionaries: 'just as for post-millennial Christians, man, led by God's prophets and saints, will establish a Kingdom of God on Earth [...] so, for Marx and other schools of communists, mankind, led by a vanguard of secular saints, will establish a secularized Kingdom of Heaven on earth' (Rothbard 123). Therefore, according to Baker's formulation of the Culture

as 'a society in which freedom from religion is itself a religion', the operatives of Special Circumstances are akin to Rothbard's 'vanguard of secular saints' seeking to expand the influence of Banks' utopia, presumably with the goal of 'Culturizing' Banks' entire fictional universe. That the Culture wishes to expand in some manner, and to some extent, will surely not be contested, although establishing the exact qualitative nature of this project – quasi-imperialist or otherwise – is beyond the scope of this essay (cf. Hardesty 39-46; Vint 83-98). I do however wish to challenge Baker's notion that 'freedom from religion is itself a religion'. While the assertion that freedom is at the heart of the Culture's concerns certainly rings true, I think that this kind of circular argument, as with those who attempt to undermine passionate atheists such as Dawkins, operates according to a narrow and inaccurate definition of religion in a manner that seems to conflate it with *any* passionate cause, seemingly turning anyone with the determination to convince others about anything into a 'religious' person. The Culture crusades passionately to grant others *all* the freedoms that it enjoys, not just for the freedom to be irreligious. As Sma asks in 'The State of the Art':

What is the Culture? What do we believe in, even if it is hardly ever expressed, even if we are embarrassed about talking about it? *Surely in freedom, more than anything else.* A relativistic, changing sort of freedom, unbounded by laws or laid-down moral codes, but – in the end – just because it is so hard to pin down and express, a freedom of a far higher quality than anything to be found on any relevant scale on the planet far beneath us at the moment. (Banks 1993: 161; emphasis added)

The 'planet far beneath us' to which Sma refers is Earth of the 1970s, replete with our various religions and faiths. Sma's comments suggest that she considers the complexity of the freedom enjoyed by people of the Culture to be preferable to the absolute systems of morality, such as those often maintained by religions, as they are more nuanced, flexible and open than straightforward, dogmatic instructions. The Culture crusades, not in order to extinguish the possibility of religion, but to ensure that everyone is free to *choose* how to live their lives, whether this involves religion or not; and crucially, as exemplified by Linter, this includes the freedom to reject the Culture entirely, with no accusation of apostasy. It is this subjective, relative freedom that the Culture ultimately represents, and aspires to, certainly with zeal, although a zeal that cannot be called religious, as the nature of its purpose contradicts that of religious evangelism, as the Culture

wishes to grant people the opportunity to make decisions about their lives in a free and clear manner. Just as Banks wrote to the *Guardian* calling for a secular education system – ‘in which the state takes a *neutral* position with respect to religion’ (Law 2011: 3) – the Culture aims to rid its newcomers of prior ideological markings, producing truly free *tabula rasae*.

Conclusion

Through his fiction, Iain Banks had a relationship with religion almost as turbulent as that between religion and sf itself. He was an author whose vehemently rational worldview naturally led him to the sf genre, and forbade him from allowing a supernatural deity to intervene in his fictional worlds. By using the truly limitless scale provided by the form of space opera, however, Banks was able to adopt what he often described as an authorial stance of god-like freedom, writing into existence the vast, complex and multifarious story spaces of his Culture novels with complete lack of inhibition. Maybe in the future Banks’ fictions will be considered as part of what Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate have referred to as the ‘New Atheist novel’ (Bradley and Tate 2010); either way, I can only hope that critics continue to discuss them, as readers consume them. The Culture novels – as intellectually stimulating as they are wildly entertaining – developed over the course of ten texts and almost forty years, will probably be the achievement for which he is most fondly remembered; and the critical process of unpacking them has barely begun. With this series especially, Banks sought to prove that there can still be wonder and mystery in a godless universe, and that, while he acknowledged that humankind may never achieve anything like the utopia that it yearned for, we should never give up hope in our own potential.

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Lightly Seared on the Reality Grill: Conversations with Iain Menzies Banks

Andrew J. Wilson

I first met Iain Banks in 1988; the last time I saw him was four days before his death. Over the twenty-five years of our friendship, we touched base at book launches and sf conventions, but we usually caught up with each other at informal gatherings of writers and fans in Edinburgh or South Queensferry. A generous and cheerful man, he enjoyed good company in convivial surroundings, as often as not a pub or a curry house. He is greatly missed.

I had been reading his books since the paperback publication of *The Wasp Factory* in 1985, and would eventually cover a number of his novels for *The Scotsman* when I became that newspaper's sf and fantasy reviewer. Banks always took an interest in my critiques of his work. On one memorable occasion, my piece on *Inversions* (1998) was published on the same day as the launch party in Edinburgh. My partner and I had been invited, and I brought the paper along to the event. I mentioned the review when Banks greeted us, and he immediately took a couple of minutes to see what I had written. Thankfully, for everyone's sake, I had given him a good notice!

Banks also happily made himself available for interviews when the opportunity arose, and I talked with him formally on three occasions. In order to provide readers with a scholarly resource, as well as renewed access to his inimitable words, this article uses both published and unpublished material from those sessions. I have returned to the original transcripts that I made from the recordings and corrected some errors that crept in during the production cycle.

Transition: Science Fiction, the Mainstream and Middle Initials

In the last interview we did (2008), I pointed out that his friend and fellow author Ken MacLeod had commented – agreeing with Kingsley Amis and Bob Shaw – that sf is the only genre to be judged by its worst examples. I

asked Banks if he agreed, and if so, why he thought this was the case.

'Ken is perceptive as ever,' he said, 'that's a very good point. It's technofear, in my opinion. The people who control our media and culture are generally - actually, almost exclusively - from a humanities background (indeed a preponderance of them have passed through the distributed humanities faculties of precisely two universities), and they have a degree of contempt for and fear of the nuts and bolts of the way stuff works even in our own society, never mind in how it might all work in the future. A genre which is about ideas and which is fascinated with technology and the future was never going to be their cup of tea. So they take the piss out of it. Not that they'd ever express it in such crude terms, of course.'

This quote was just one more exchange in our long-running dialogue about what we agreed was a false dichotomy between the two apparent strands of his career. In our first interview, which was conducted near the end of 1994 (1995), I suggested, *quoting Robert Burns*, that his sf - especially *The State of the Art* (1991) - *seemed to be an attempt 'to see ourselves as others see us'. Since it had as much literary merit and political content as his mainstream work, I wondered why his publishers still insisted on separating his novels.*

'I suppose it's because that's the way the market's grown up,' he told me. 'I start to get annoyed that everything's compartmentalized, but on the other hand, so many books are being published and you have to arrange them somehow. I don't see anything wrong with this, but when the ghetto mentality takes over ... The attitude from inside the ghetto isn't too dangerous and is not what you're worried about - it's the Nazi guards outside, it's their attitude. In this particular case, this particular genre called the mainstream novel - the psychological novel, the novel of manners, the Hampstead novel, whatever - is basically saying, "We're top dog, we're not a genre, we're the main thing ..." and it's bullshit - they're a genre.'

Pressing the point, I asked Banks whether, barring generic differences, he would make any distinction between his works, suggesting Use of Weapons (1990) and Complicity (1993) for the sake of argument: 'Not really. I try to bring the same skill to both. The difference is entirely one of setting. In Complicity, I had to work in the real world. In Use of Weapons, it was a background I had created myself, and one that I feel happier with because it's a communist utopia where there are zillions of gadgets around and they're all free! Whereas, in Complicity, you have Thatcherism as a

background. I enjoy writing the science fiction more, but not tremendously more. In some ways, the mainstream stuff, for want of a better word, is slightly more rewarding by exactly the same fraction, just because it is that much more difficult, so you've accomplished more when you've done it. But I'm more at home with science fiction.'

Although Banks maintained this opinion in our next conversation (1999: 15), he believed things had changed and that he might be running out of ideas for sf novels: 'I could write Culture stories till the space cows come home, but they'd just be retreads of old ideas in a way. In a sense, it's too easy for me to write Culture stories. The stocks of other sf ideas are definitely going down – I don't seem to be having any fresh ones, which I find quite worrying.'

Banks told me that he had had a stock response when asked which he would pick if he had to choose between sf and mainstream fiction: 'I always said science fiction, because it's my first love in literary terms, and meant that in all sincerity. It's getting to the stage where I can imagine having to reluctantly give up writing science fiction and only write mainstream because it's easier to write it. In a sense, you almost don't need ideas to write mainstream, there are always things happening around you that suggest stories. Whereas, to write decent, good science fiction, you have to have some original idea about how things are going to be different. I'm trying to think of the way I'd feel if I was one of my fans, and I think I'd feel cheated if I did that. I would rather a writer I respected just had the honesty to say, "Well, I can't come up with any new ideas, so I'll stop writing science fiction.'" In fact, his shift to writing one book every two years rather than annually renewed his creativity and he put the crisis behind him.

Back in 1994, he cheerfully dismissed the idea that Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks were two different people living in the same body: 'No, it's just me,' he said. 'I have to remember whether it's an odd or even year to see whether the "M" goes in this year or not. I think Use of Weapons is the second best of all the books.'

I then asked him what his middle initial stood for, and why he used it for his sf: 'It's my middle name, Menzies. Macmillan thought that the "M" was a bit fussy and said, "Would you mind if it was just Iain Banks?" This was the name I went under most of the time – I used the "M" occasionally, not always – but then some of my family were a bit upset that I'd dropped it: "Are you ashamed of being a Menzies?" So I thought I'd put it back in for

the science fiction. At one point, I was going to be John B. Macallan for the science fiction, because these were my two favourite whiskies at the time – my favourite blend, Johnnie Walker Black Label, and my favourite malt, The Macallan.'

Those with an interest in Scotch whisky will note that Banks changed his mind about his favourite single malt after researching *Raw Spirit*, his non-fiction book on the subject. As it was, John B. Macallan evaporated like the angels' share of a batch of whisky.

'My editor, despite being a whisky fan, could never remember this name. So I decided to keep my own name but put the "M" in, which seemed like a good idea at the time, but was a terrible mistake because I've been answering that question ever since, and it does give ammunition to the literary snobs who think I make the distinction because I'm "writing down" when I do science fiction. I got the go-ahead from my publishers so that, if I wanted to, I could keep the "M" for everything or take it out for everything. I'll decide after this next book, I think.'

In 2008 I returned to the question, writing: 'Banks has told me that he doesn't distinguish between his sf and mainstream work, and indeed, some of his greatest books, such as *The Bridge* and *Use of Weapons*, can lay equal claim to the qualities of either of his *noms de plume*. Would he ever consider dropping the "M" from what he's called "the world's most transparent pseudonym" and publishing everything under exactly the same name?' His answer was short and to the point: 'Thought about it. Couldn't be bothered.' Ultimately, as I wrote in a personal appreciation that Banks saw and approved, 'The boundaries between works published with or without his middle initial have always been porous. *Transition*, his 2009 novel about parallel worlds, was published as mainstream in the UK and as sf – flagged up by the addition of his middle initial – in the US' (2013).

In 1994, I asked him what he thought was his best novel: 'The Bridge. It's been reviewed as a science fiction novel, even though it wasn't published as such. It's certainly non-realistic enough to be bordering on sf. There are one or two sf bits and pieces in there.' However, in later conversations, he told me that *Use of Weapons* was his favourite sf novel and he seemed to regard it as the equal of *The Bridge*. Both books are linked by being structurally inventive, of course. *Use of Weapons* adopts a V-shaped narrative structure, with the main narrative and interwoven flashbacks

travelling forwards and backwards in time, respectively. *The Bridge echoes the diamond shapes the Forth Bridge that inspired it.*

In 2009, I asked Banks whether fiction can play a role in engaging with the real world, and if so, sf had a part to play: 'Yes, of course, and sf can reflect upon the present, in some ways, more precisely than mainstream because in sf you can design a setting, set of circumstances, society, civilization or even meta-civilization to highlight whatever message or point you want to make, sweeping away all the clutter that normally comes with reality to focus on the kernel of the issue. It doesn't often do so, mind you, but the potential is there. Most fiction is not engaged in this sense, and as I've discovered to my dismay, I'm not particularly good at crafting stuff that is. Still, a chap can dream...'

We were discussing *Matter*, the seventh novel in the Culture series, which again featured his utopia with teeth. I wondered how he squared the Culture's interventionism with its general live-and-let-live philosophy: 'Well, they're constantly trying to refine their methods. They're honest with themselves and others, and they never try to fiddle with the statistics. They can prove interference works and they know how to do it, so it would be wrong not to do something. But they do make mistakes. I guess the difference between the Culture and the kind of interference we're used to is that the Culture isn't after anything, save some peace of mind. It's not looking for control over or access to natural resources, or to open up and exploit new markets, or to foist unwanted political systems on people who don't want them. The point is that the Culture can feasibly argue that, when it does interfere, it has the best interests of the populations it is interfering with at heart. As opposed to, say – oh – the best interests of the shareholders of Standard Oil, Bechtel, Halliburton and so on.'

I asked if the novel was intended to have parallels with our own times, and if he regarded it as an allegory: 'No. There's no deliberate linkage between *Matter* and events in our world. On the other hand, as I've said before, you don't write space opera in a vacuum...'

Look to Windward: The Evolution of a Writer

'Fifteen years without a proper job – hurrah!' That was how Banks celebrated a decade and a half of being a professional author in our 1999 interview, but he had been writing for much longer than that, of course. In

my 1994 interview with him for *Scottish Book Collector* magazine, I wanted to record his thoughts on his development as an author. I began by asking him about his first attempt at a novel, *The Hungarian Lift Jet*, which was written in 1970.

'I was sixteen,' he told me, 'and I had just gone from being much influenced by Captain W. E. Johns and Biggles to having read absolutely everything by Alistair MacLean I could lay my hands on. So it was a spy novel set in contemporary times, and full of sex and violence, neither of which I had any experience of at the age of sixteen.'

I asked him mischievously if we could expect to see a revised version of this unpublished work, and his response was unequivocal: 'Over my dead body!'

In 1972, he wrote a second novel called *TTR*: 'It stood for *The Tashkent Rambler*. Well, it did and it didn't. I'd gone on from Alistair Maclean to Joseph Heller, and *TTR* was very much a combination of *Catch-22* and *Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner. It was set in a near future where there had been a Sino-Soviet border war that hadn't gone nuclear. The Americans came in on the side of the Chinese because they needed to battle-test their weapons and hadn't had a decent war for a while. The Chinese take Mongolia from the Soviet Union, but they don't want it, so the story takes place in the three weeks before the ceremony in which Mongolia is going to become the fifty-first state of the American Union, renamed Mongoliana, and celebrate their Dependence Day ...

'It's full of bad puns and characters with names like Dahomey Brezhnev and Dogghart Jammaharry. Gropius Luckfoot was another one, and his very unpleasant sidekick was called Toss Macabre, which looks good in print!

'This was the first and last book I ever wrote without a plan, and it ended up at about 400,000 words ... Like a cancer, it kept on growing and growing. Every 50,000 words, I'd try to come up with a new plan to force it to end. The fact that it had about six groups of major characters didn't help ... I've never written a book without a proper plan since.'

As is clear from the above, Banks had no intention of resurrecting *TTR* either, but things changed in 1974 when he wrote the first version of *Use of Weapons*: 'The draft that actually exists came largely from a brainwave my pal Ken MacLeod had of how to order and put it together. It's very complicated the way it works out now, but nothing like as complex as the

first draft, which is unreadable – even I couldn't read it – not to mention the acres of purple prose. I went a bit loopy at this point, I think. There were always two things going on in a chapter and there were sixty-four chapters. The book was in two halves, and it was absolutely vital according to the shape of the book that the emotional climax was in the middle – and therefore, the second half of the book was an anticlimax. I just put the book aside and said it was unsalvageable, but Ken MacLeod said, "I think there's a good book in there trying to get out. Why don't you try it this way?"

'In a sense, the whole Culture came from the character Zakalwe in *Use of Weapons*. I wanted to write about some sort of ultimate mercenary, but not in the sense that he was invincible or invulnerable – a flawed heroic type, the sort of person you'd be very dubious about because he's a paid killer. But I tried to make it more interesting for him as a character, I wanted to have him fighting on the side of genuine good. I thought, *What sort of society do we need?*, and out of that came the Culture. That gave me the chance to answer all the questions I had about the right-wing American space opera I had been used to reading and which had been around since the 1930s.'

Against a Dark Background, which was eventually published in 1993, was first drafted in 1977: 'This was meant to be a fantasy novel with a totally rational scientific background, almost taking the piss out of fantasy in a way. Not that this comes over in the book at all, except towards the end where a baddy's got his diamond crown, but Feril says, "It's part of a triple filament drill, actually." "But look at the runes, the runes around the side!" "That's the serial number actually ..." The whole thing about a team of people with special attributes reforming and then going off on multiple quests is meant to be like a fantasy novel, but not in a fantasy setting. It's probably the one that's changed the least out of all the novels.'

Banks returned to the Culture in 1979, when he wrote a draft of *The State of the Art*: 'This was going to be a longish short story but it turned out to be longer than I thought – a novella. Having invented the Culture, I started playing around with it and thought, *Hey! Wouldn't it be fun if I got Earth and the Culture together?* And once I got the idea that the Earth would be used as a control planet, I had to write it because that was such a neat way to end it ... Yes, they're here, but they're just going to watch.'

The Player of Games, the second Culture novel to be published, came next in 1980: 'Superficially, the published version is very similar to the first

draft, except that, in the first version, Gurgeh leaves the Culture just because he gets bored. No other motive, he's not blackmailed or anything, and this means you miss out on the surprise ending. It's much more complex and darker in the rewritten form. The original draft still exists within the finished book in a sense.'

Then The Wasp Factory was written in 1981: 'There were only about half a dozen publishers for hardback sf, and I wasn't getting anything published. The idea of writing something I could send to more publishers set off a big internal debate with myself. The radical faction was saying, "You're selling out here, you're a science fiction writer. How dare you write other books?" The more pragmatic side of me was saying, "If it gets you published, then you'll be able to write science fiction as well." In the end, The Wasp Factory was what came out of that.'

I asked him whether he was aware of how contentious it would prove to be: 'No. When I was writing it, there were even times when I thought, No one's going to want to read this. This is boring. That was usually when I threw in another phone call from Eric to lift the pace. It never occurred to me that the book was going to be as controversial as it was.'

While Banks was submitting *The Wasp Factory* to publishers, he drafted *Consider Phlebas* in 1982. He told me that this was 'Very similar to the published version. I was getting better.'

His next novel, Walking on Glass, was written before The Wasp Factory was published in 1984: 'I had that "always tricky" second novel out of the way before the first one came out.'

I then asked Banks about Q, which was written in 1984, but remains unpublished: 'This was meant to be the third novel, but my editor said, "Look, you can probably sell this somewhere. Three or four publishers in London would leap at the chance and give you a lot more money for it than we can. But I don't think it's good enough. You should throw it away." So I thought about it, and said, "Okay." It was a big bastard too, about 180,000 to 190,000 words long.'

I wondered if he had cannibalized anything from Q for The Bridge, which would become his third published work: 'Q starts with a guy lying in the desert with a big "O" imprinted on his chest. There are vultures hovering overhead. The vultures come down because he's on his last legs, but he gets one of them, drinks its blood and finds the strength to go on ... That tiny little bit ended up late on in The Bridge, the book I wrote instead.'

I think *The Bridge* is my best book, the most complicated and bravura.'

Parallels have been drawn between The Bridge and Alasdair Gray's 1981 novel, Lanark, and I asked Banks about these: 'I was absolutely knocked out by Lanark. I think it's the best in Scottish literature this century. It opened my eyes. I had forgotten what you could do – you can be self-referential, you can muck about with different voices, characters, time streams, whatever. Lanark had a huge effect on The Bridge. I'm quite happy to acknowledge that debt.'

In fact, the 'Scottish coma fantasy' microgenre would continue in 1995 with Irvine Welsh's *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. Banks would not forget what he owed to Gray. As he wrote on the Banksophilia website on 20 May 2013: 'I sent what was basically a fan letter to Alasdair Gray a couple of weeks ago, telling him how much his work has meant to me' (Banks 2013b).

*Once Banks became a professional author, he would combine the creation of new novels with often radical rewrites of the early work discussed above. In some cases, new books would still draw on his earlier creative work. For example, the songs referred to in *Espedair Street*, which was written in 1986, are actually Banks' own, dating back almost fifteen years: 'The book is mostly set in the early '70s, and the music and even the embarrassing lyrics work in it because they are of that time. I know all those tunes, and though I have no musical skills at all I can imagine every riff in my head.'*

*He was writing his next novel when we first met in 1988. This was the then near-future thriller *Canal Dreams*: 'This is probably the weakest of the books. It's okay, but it's the one I'm least proud of, and the book I found the most difficult to write. I was in the wee flat I had at the time on the South Bridge in Edinburgh. I'd keep the word processor on all day, sit down, look at it, go away, vacuum the flat ... Then at midnight I'd have a whisky and think, *I might as well go through what I did yesterday*, and then I'd work through to dawn, but drinking vast amounts of whisky. It's the only book I've written under the influence of drugs.*

'Canal Dreams was just too far outside my scope. I had intended to go to Panama, but the US was starting to destabilize Noriega at the time. I couldn't afford to go to Japan and so I was working from guide books ... Doing a middle-aged Japanese lady cello player was probably a little hubristic.

'One of the problems of the book is that it would be so easy to turn it

from being left-of-centre to being right-of-centre, simply by removing the ending. That's why I don't want to sell it to Hollywood. I'd sell it if Oliver Stone was interested – there's nobody else I could trust – but he's been there and done that.'

After successfully revising Use of Weapons, as discussed above, Banks then wrote The Crow Road in 1991. I asked him if he was happier with that book than Canal Dreams: 'I was pleased with it in the end, even though structurally it's all over the place, a rag-bag of a thing. I like the characters in The Crow Road, especially Prentice, and as my editor pointed out two days ago, "You always fall in love with your women characters, don't you, Banksie? And it always shows as well." Oops!'

Banks published two novels in 1993: his revision of Against a Dark Background and Complicity, the dark thriller that he had written the previous year. I asked him why the latter was such an angry book: 'This was written because I thought The Crow Road was far too cosy and I was starting to react against that,' he said. 'I thought, I'm approaching my forties and people are going to think, That's Banks over the hill, he can't write anything dangerous any more ... I'll show them what's dangerous! I had all these violent deaths and bizarrely inventive murders which I couldn't find a home for, couldn't do myself! And I did want to write something about Thatcherism and the '80s. I had wanted to write a whodunit for a long time, and it all came together nicely. Also, I was keen on doing something set in Edinburgh, which I thought hadn't been written about enough and really deserved it. It's a strange city in a lot of ways with all its wee wynds ...'

I asked Banks if he thought that Complicity was the completion of a cycle since its creation fell at the end of his first decade of published work: 'I felt that The Crow Road and Against a Dark Background were the end of it. Complicity is a bit like The Wasp Factory, so it's the cycle starting again. Against a Dark Background was the last of the old books to get redone, so it seemed like the end of an era to me.'

Similarly, Feersum Endjinn was the first sf book of the new phase of his career: 'I had wanted to write something I could cut loose on, something that wasn't the Culture ... I'll go back to that in the next science fiction novel. I liked the exotic feel of Against a Dark Background and wanted to do something like that on Earth. I thought the big structures in Against a Dark Background hadn't been big enough, so I came up with the megacastle which was originally a space elevator. I also had the idea that what

virtual reality would become eventually would start to resemble myth and legend. I wanted to use different voices as well.'

When we talked again in 1999, when *The Business* was published, Banks felt far less need to shock: 'I'm in my cruise phase. Yeah, I'm in my boring-old-fart stage already, I think. I've long since stopped being an *enfant terrible*, and I'm now just a boring old bastard – I think that's where I'm heading now. I'm trying, especially with this book, to wean myself off unfeasibly young central characters. It's starting to look not just a bit silly – a man in his mid-forties writing about teenagers – but positively suspicious. "Are you interested in young children, Iain? Oh aye ..." So that's why Kate in this book is all of thirty-eight, which is pretty close to my generation, or not far off it.'

He also had this nugget of wisdom: 'Coming up with ideas is only hard in the sense that it becomes annoying if you haven't had any.'

Raw Spirit: The Life and Opinions of Iain Banks, Gentleman

In the 1994 interview, I asked Banks about his favourite authors: 'Jane Austen, Tolstoy, Graham Greene and Saul Bellow. Loads of underrated science fiction authors – M. John Harrison should be a megastar, but he probably couldn't be because he's too rarefied a taste, I suppose; John Sladek, who should have been the Terry Pratchett of the Seventies; and I've always had a soft spot for Barrington J. Bayley.

'*Catch-22* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* are the last two books which had an enormous effect on me before I started to get my own stuff together. These are the two most influential books of my formative years. Everything you read affects you to some extent.'

Since this interview was for *Scottish Book Collector* magazine, I asked Banks if he *had any oddities in his library*: 'I was invited to the Edinburgh University Science Fiction & Fantasy Society's Freshercon three or four years ago, and they had an entirely free and secret ballot for the book that the assembled patrons thought most deserved to be taken out to a rifle range, and the winner by a large margin was *Dianetics* by L. Ron Hubbard. So this was duly taken out and shot full of bullet holes. It was flourished the next year, and I bought it for a tenner that went to the society's funds. The following year, I went back and got a copy of *She-Beasts of Gor* or something, by John Norman, which was set in concrete.'

His love of playful behaviour and mischievous ideas came up again when we talked in 1999 about the germ of *The Business*: 'I made up this ridiculous story about the Banks Foundation, which employed people to go round to bookshops and place my books more prominently ... and to get the books of authors I was either in competition with or just didn't like on principle – for some reason the words "Archer" and "Jeffrey" come to mind here – and through a subtle combination of origami and tae kwon do twist the covers as they pretended to look at the book so that no one would ever buy the book and it would have to be a return. They were also employed to stand around in public areas reading my books in a conspicuous manner and laughing heartily every one and a half pages no matter what.'

In the same interview, he discussed his thoughts on the need for transparency: 'I had this brilliant idea for publishing my accounts on the Net, and not just the account but actually putting my credit card details – my monthly income and expenditure, and so on – which I thought was a great idea, a really good example to set. You don't actually want more privacy, you don't want more property, you want to have more things publicly owned, and you want to have as much information as public as possible. I thought, just one person who you'd imagine otherwise might want to keep things secret actually saying, "Here's what I earn and here's what I spend it on," and doing it in full public view on the Net where whoever wants to see it can would be a really good blow for genuine freedom.

'However, my wife said this was a very bad idea indeed because it would automatically involve her as well, therefore I'm not allowed to do it. Maybe I'm kidding myself, maybe when it actually came to the crunch I'd have gone, "Oh God, I can't actually do it," but I'm pretty sure I would have done. It's one of the things that I think no one actually wants to be the first to do, but if you actually take the plunge, it's quite liberating. My agent was deeply unhappy with the whole idea as well – everybody was. I haven't met one person who's said, "That's a really good idea!" Maybe I could use it as an idea in a book. Maybe that's its real place, given that I'm allowed to do it.'

Nevertheless, for all his radical ideas, Banks stressed that he refused to follow any party line: 'It's not really in me to be a political writer with a capital "P". I'd sort of like to be, but I'm either too lazy or too pragmatic to

force myself into a straitjacket that doesn't fit.'

However, he was conscious that he had a duty to serve more than just himself and his craft: 'The actual writing of the books has started to become harder work. It's not such a lark any more. It does start to get through to you that – no matter how much you want it to be fun and you're just trying to write for yourself – gradually over the years, as you see more people at bookshops and more people buy the books and the cheques get bigger and the publisher obviously regards it as quite important, it does start to come through to you that it's actually important outside yourself. People are waiting on the next book. The publisher is certainly waiting, the sales reps are waiting and the people in the bookshops are too, to some extent, and the readership you have are waiting and there's quite a lot of expectation behind the books. You're not as free as you are when you start out to do whatever you damn well please. It's not that important if you make a mess of it then – not that many people are going to notice. You can get away with it once and write another book, and it doesn't really matter too much. Whereas now there's a bit more responsibility there. It still beats working for a living.'

We finished this interview by discussing why that was: 'I think that one of the great things about being a writer is you can keep going more or less till you die. I think it must be a half-life sort of thing. You'd write a book every year then once every two years, then every four years, then every eight years ... I'll still write, but it'll be far more seldom than I do at the moment. It won't be a book every year, it might be a book every five years or whatever, or maybe just short stories, or who knows, reminiscences ...'

That was not the way that things turned out, of course. In 2013, Banks was diagnosed with late-stage gall bladder cancer. He announced the news in a personal statement on his website, which began with a line worthy of one of his novels: 'I am officially Very Poorly' (Banks 2013a). As I wrote in my personal appreciation (2013), 'Banks is personally facing what he describes in his science-fiction novel *Excession* as an Outside Context Problem. This is a crisis that arrives without warning and is impossible to foresee: "An Outside Context Problem was the sort of thing most civilisations encountered just once, and which they tended to encounter rather in the same way a sentence encountered a full stop"' (2013).

Banks had planned to meet Ken MacLeod and me for a drink in Edinburgh. 'Mine may only be a pint of water, but it's the thought that

counts,' he wrote in an email to me, adding an asterisk at the end of the sentence that led to this footnote: '* (It is not the thought that counts).' However, he took a turn for the worse and we visited him and his wife, Adele Hartley, in their home instead.

This last meeting was just four days before his premature death. Banks was very frail and would go into hospital the next day, but he remained the man I had always known: interested in and concerned for others, his black sense of humour intact. That evening, Banks told us the same thing he had said to Stuart Kelly in his last interview: 'My first 30 years were pretty damn good and the last 30, since I got published, have been absolutely brilliant' (Kelly 2013).

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Space-Age Archaeology: Eduardo Paolozzi and Science Fiction

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh,
20 July – 27 October 2013

Reviewed by Emily Alder (Edinburgh Napier University)

Imposing bronze towers and vivid chrome curves; plastic toys and the bright covers of pulp sf magazines. Bodies, machines, robots; etching, collage, screenprint and photogravure. In its eclectic selection of artefacts, *Space-Age Archaeology* draws attention to the broad cultural infiltration of science fiction at the same time as it illuminates the artist's own fascination with and interpretations of the social and artistic possibilities generated by twentieth and twenty-first century science and technology. This exhibition showcases works drawn from the breadth of Eduardo Paolozzi's career which register his lifelong interest in science, technology, and science fiction.

The Dean Gallery (the Modern 2) in Edinburgh has housed the largest collection in the world of Paolozzi's work, particularly since 1995 after receiving major bequests from Paolozzi and from his patron Gabrielle Keiller. *Space-Age Archaeology* includes artefacts usually in storage and not often seen. This was an exciting opportunity to experience works not often on display alongside Paolozzi's better known productions. Like science fiction itself, it is hard to say where *Space-Age Archaeology* starts and finishes; Paolozzi's engagement with science fiction transcends the limits of a single exhibition. Paolozzi's objects and sculptures can be found all over the Dean Gallery's building and its grounds, and elsewhere in Edinburgh including the Royal Botanical Gardens and the University of Edinburgh's King's Buildings campus. The powerful figure of Newton, *Master of the Universe*, sits by the gallery gates while the bronze sculpture *Tyrannical Tower Crowned with Thorns of Violence* lurks enigmatically at the end of a corridor.

The opening exhibition board indicates a two-fold aim of this exhibition:

not only to showcase Paolozzi's artwork but to reveal elements of his working practice. The exhibition thus includes not only his artwork, but also the gallery's permanent installation of his reconstructed studio, and examples from of his collections of possible source objects. The exhibition space itself is a square room adjacent to the studio reconstruction. Screenprints, etchings, collages, and photogravure hang on the walls while six sculptures stand on display in the centre of the room.

Travelling clockwise around the exhibition room, the first display is an array of ten images from Paolozzi's 1952 lecture and 1972 portfolio *Bunk!* (screenprint and lithograph on paper). This display includes 'Was This Metal Monster Man or Slave?' incorporating the front cover of *Amazing Stories* from February 1952; 'Will Man Outgrow the Earth?' using the cover of *Time* from December 1952; and other materials drawn from science features or advertisements in magazines about, for example, electronics ('New Life for Old Radios'), weaponry ('Fantastic Weapons Contrived'), robotics ('Man Holds The Key') and cars ('2000 Horses and Turbo-powered'). These images signal Paolozzi's interest in the intersections between humans, science, and society; they suggest his awareness that many such conversations were taking place in post-war culture, in its fiction, journalism, and advertising. His artwork participates in those conversations.

Several other pictures follow as we move clockwise. *Landscape* (1990) (etching on paper) is one of the more recent exhibits; in fine black lines, it shows the outline of a human head packed with abstract buildings and machines. There are several screenprints, including *Metallization of a Dream* (1963) in which bright dream-colours of blue, red, and yellow foreground subtle details of gears, pipes, wheels, bolts, and drills. Like many of the objects selected for the exhibition, the screenprints reveal Paolozzi's persistent fascination with the intersections between humans and machines, both in human mind and imagination, and physical body.

Moving, therefore, to the middle of the exhibition space, Paolozzi's famous bronze sculptures are here represented by the 1950s totemic pieces *St Sebastian I* (1957) and *His Majesty The Wheel* (1958). In an 1958 lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Paolozzi identified his preoccupation here as 'metamorphosis of the figure' (Spencer 2000: 83) and these sculptures hint at both human and mechanical representation. *St Sebastian I*, named for the martyr killed with arrows, contains traces of human shape in its two legs, bony torso of geometric bronze rods and

blocks, and rough 'head' patterned with wires and gears. *His Majesty the Wheel* is less recognizable as a human form, but one bulky rectangular leg and one round cylindrical leg also support a mechanically skeletal torso and head, stamped with a prominent gear-like wheel, tipped by two small circles like eyes.

These sculptures were made by a 'lost-wax method' in which the finished sculpture is several steps removed from its original form. In 'Dialogues on Art' in 1960, Paolozzi told Edouard Roditi that '[i]n the finished casting the original *objets trouvés* are no longer present at all... They survive in my sculptures as ghosts of forms that still haunt the bronze, details of its surface or its actual structure' (Spencer 2000: 86). This production method lends these sculptures a remarkable sense of age and history; these are objects that, at their creation, already possess a past, but in their blend of human and mechanical shapes they also suggest a future post-human form. The caption for *His Majesty the Wheel* quotes J.G. Ballard, who called the bronze figures 'survivors of a nuclear war'.

The exhibition board for *HIFA* (1967) quotes a 1960s *Studio International* description of Paolozzi's 1950s sculptures as looking like 'non-functional machinery'. Arguably, we might see these sculptures as a failure of machinery, or an attempt to imagine the future archaeology of our mechanised society thousands of years hence, or perhaps the archaeology of a space age past. For me, these 'machine idols' captured the essence of the exhibition's wonderfully suggestive title as future relics of some alien symbiosis of human and machine that is in fact a return from deep time. Sculptures like *St Sebastian I* and *His Majesty The Wheel* would not look out of place on the set of Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012).

Ideas about metamorphosis of form and future technology may suggest continuity in Paolozzi's philosophy between the rough bronze sculptures of the 1950s and the shiny chrome steel aesthetic of *Aril*, *HIFA*, and *Kimo*, sculpted in the 1960s. *Aril* (1966-7) is a polished chrome overflow of spilled molten liquid. *Kimo* (1967) is a reflective concave screen on a semi-cylindrical base. *HIFA* is a lean, concave triangular prism, in the same silvery chrome. 'The highly polished surface of this object,' says *Aril's* caption, 'which reflects and reproduces its surroundings, has been interpreted as symbolic of a cultural shift in the late 1960s, away from production and towards reproduction.' If so, then given the unique nature of his creation, perhaps Paolozzi did not see reproduction as necessarily a

bad thing, artistically, but rather a shift that opened up more possibilities for art in a society moving towards modern communications technology, and eventually to the sleek minimalist casings of an iPhone or a MacBook Air?

The sixth and final sculpture in the exhibition is *Model of Osaka Steel* (1969), a bronze model of a much larger sculpture made for *Expo 70* in Osaka, and still to be found there. It is a solid cylinder of metal folded into elongated nodules, with an arched tunnel running the length of its base. In all these sculptures Paolozzi deployed materials much more closely associated with industry than art.

Beyond the sculptures, the final wall of the exhibition presents a selection of photogravures from the series of etchings, *Cloud Atomic Laboratory* (1971), and glass cases of items collected by Paolozzi. The etchings of *Cloud Atomic Laboratory* often draw their inspiration from popular culture, especially robots, including a picture of Robby the Robot from the film *Forbidden Planet* (1956), of the 1960s child's toy Robert the Robot, and of 1950s celebrity robot Garco. 'Garco Robot Nailing a Wooden Box' is paired with 'Little Boy on his Bed in his Room'; the noticeably wood-grained walls of the bedroom hint at questions of whose imagination has produced who. Another pair of etchings provide the whole exhibition with its title: *Space Age Archaeology* is made up of 'Fathers' and 'Sons'. Here, childhood fascination with building rockets and with mechanical figures of puppets and space suits is juxtaposed to professional adult enthusiasm for space age machines.

The cabinets below contain a variety of popular cultural artefacts from a range of decades – toys, magazines, merchandise. These objects include a scrap book from the 1950s, a copy of *New Worlds* magazine and a plastic model of Geordie from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. These are items collected by Paolozzi for possible future use in artwork and (like the studio reconstruction) show the diversity of his curiosity, even though they might never be used.

Although a relatively small exhibition, *Space Age Archaeology* succeeds in providing valuable and intriguing insights into important concerns of Paolozzi's work. His artwork's engagement with science fiction's preoccupations and materials creates an important arena in which fans and scholars of science fiction can look beyond our more familiar artefacts of books, films, comics or merchandise to see how other forms of visual art

engage with the same historical moments and social concerns.

However, it is not just in a shared interest in visual representation and bodily and mechanical objects that Paolozzi's work can be said to be inspired by science fiction. The works on display in this exhibition show that there are common values and philosophies here too. Both Paolozzi and sf embrace difference, and metamorphosis. Both admire, and critique, technology. Both see the future in the present and the present in the future. Keith Hartley of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art has described Paolozzi's as an attempt to 'give [the world] new meaning, recombining things that ordinarily in the scheme of things would never have been seen together', quoting the artist's desire for display of art not as static but with 'all parts moveable, an endless set of combinations, a new culture in which problems give way to capabilities' (Pearson 1999: 7). The art of Paolozzi and the goals of science fiction share some very fundamental impulses. This exhibition demonstrates the continued relevance of Paolozzi's artwork from across his career and its urge, like science fiction, to find new ways to comprehend reality that resonate with our culture's shared past, present, and future.

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David Bowie is

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 23 March – 11 August 2013

Reviewed by Maia Clery

David Bowie is demonstrates how one of the most famous people on Earth has managed to remain an enigma for almost half a century. Like the parable of the Blind Man and the Elephant, many have attempted to describe him but he has remained unidentifiable. Yes, that does compare him to a god, which is exactly the tactic Bowie employed in order to reach superstardom during the early stages of his career, a ploy that seems to have persuaded the curators of this exhibition. Parallels can also be drawn between the messianic 'Starman' who played with and searched for meaning in the themes of sex, space, psychology, science, drugs and religion, and the New Wave science fiction that coincided with the start of Bowie's career.

The unfinished title of the exhibition is plastered across every wall and completed in various ways, none of which suffice as an accurate description of the artist. On entry into the exhibition, the visitor is handed headphones that you are assured are 'not an audio guide but a soundtrack' beneath a sign: 'David Bowie is getting inside your head'. Visitors become part of a production, bombarded with audio-visual stimulation. Isolated by sound, they are entranced by a massive shrine to a rock star. As one walks towards each exhibit, the soundtrack automatically changes to accompany it with extracts from interviews and snippets of music. It seems that one's movement is under surveillance, that approaching each exhibit triggers an alarm, and the repetitive signs begin to feel like Orwellian propaganda.

The first room displays Bowie's rather ordinary beginnings in South London. It offers suggestions as to how the artist David Bowie emerged from the boy David Jones, in particular providing a Ballardian explanation for Bowie's quest for fame – the need to rebel against the soul-destroying dullness of suburbia:

Actually the suburbs are far more sinister places than most city dwellers imagine. Their very blandness forces the imagination into new areas. I mean, one's got to

get up in the morning thinking of a deviant act, merely to make certain of one's freedom. (Ballard 1984)

Bowie's tactical use of sexual 'deviance' is apparent on the cover of *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970) in which he 'reclines across a day-bed draped in shimmering blue silk, sporting a Mr Fish "man-dress" of cream velvet'. Bowie had been influenced by the 'avant-garde mime artist and dancer Lindsay Kemp' (Breward 2013: 194), who instructed him in physical theatre, and with whom Bowie had a sexual relationship. Shortly after the album's release, Bowie declared his homosexuality to *Melody Maker*. Camille Paglia describes this, for the period, as 'a bold and even reckless career move' (2013: 90). At the same time, Bowie was in an open marriage to the cover-girl Angela Barnett and had numerous affairs with women. Bowie's denial of sexual categories enhanced his alien, public image not only by refusing to conform to social constraints but also by embodying what he termed the 'homo superior' ('O! You Pretty Things', *Hunky Dory*, 1971). This freedom and experimentation in sexuality and gender resonates with the sf of the period, for example in Michael Moorcock's own messianic and polymorphous hero, Jerry Cornelius.

After years of attempting to break through as an artist, his first major success came with the single '*Space Oddity*' (1969), a pun on the book and film 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick. It was brilliantly timed, being released just days before the first moon landing and then played over the footage broadcast by the BBC. Ballard emerges again as an influence, with Bowie presenting himself as an astronaut of inner space, asking if we can explore our minds as successfully as we have explored outer space, and if this remarkable achievement has any real value when 'Planet Earth is blue / And there's nothing I can do'. In 1977, Ballard wrote of the moon landings that 'the effects on everyday life have been virtually nil' (quoted Sellars 2012).

Despite the success of '*Space Oddity*', Bowie did not develop a tangible style on the album of the same name, and feared becoming a one hit wonder. True stardom arrived with the invention of his on-stage character, the alien messiah Ziggy Stardust, and the formation of his band The Spiders from Mars. With another nod to Kubrick, he dressed himself and his band in droog-like boiler suits, similar to those seen in the film adaptation of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). This 'ultra-

violence in liberty fabrics' is displayed in front of footage from the Top of the Pops performance of 'Starman' (1972) that propelled Bowie to new heights of success. He even played the soundtrack to the film before coming on stage.

The album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* (1972), combined with the theatrical stage-show, told an apocalyptic tale which Bowie expounded to William Burroughs in an interview for *Rolling Stone*:

The time is five years to go before the end of the earth. It has been announced that the world will end because of lack of natural resources. [...] Ziggy has been talking about this amazing spaceman who will be coming down to save the earth. [...] Now Ziggy starts to believe in all this himself and thinks himself a prophet of the future Starman. He takes himself up to incredible spiritual heights and is kept alive by his disciples. When the infinites arrive, they take bits of Ziggy to make themselves real because in their original state they are anti-matter and cannot exist in our world. And they tear him to pieces on stage during the song 'Rock 'n' Roll Suicide'. It is a science fiction fantasy of today and this is what literally blew my head off when I read *Nova Express*. (quoted Copetas 1974)

Burroughs wrote *Nova Express* (1964) using the cut-up technique expounded by Tristan Tzara in 'How to Make a Dadaist Poem' (1920). Inspired by Burroughs, Bowie adopted this technique in his own writing and used it to compose the entire *Diamond Dogs* (1974) album. Bowie killed Ziggy in June 1973 and in the exhibition we find his suit lying in a tomb-like box with a life-mask of the star covering the mannequin's head. Around the corpse are his other discarded personae: The Thin White Duke, Major Tom and Aladdin Sane. We could speculate upon a comparison between Bowie's reinvention of himself and the successive regenerations of *Doctor Who* (1963-), with the expectation of each re-fashioning helping to sustain their popularity and iconic status.

Diamond Dogs was based on ideas Bowie had for a science fiction film about a post-apocalyptic dystopia inspired by Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Being denied the rights to adapt the novel, he created his own dystopian town called Hunger City. Bowie's various storyboards and plans for the film can be seen in the exhibition. His ideas for the setting were inspired by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and, although the film was never made, he used these designs to create the set for his tour of the album. At this time, 'Bowie's enduring interest in the prophetic power of science

fiction came to a head and a number of novels and films including *Harlan Ellison's A Boy and his Dog*, William S. Burroughs' *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* [...] as well as the 1971 film *The Omega Man* [...] could be cited as key influences' (Broackes 2013: 124).



Bowie landed his first acting role in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), based on the sf novel of the same name by Walter Tevis, and directed by Nicholas Roeg. Bowie plays Thomas Jerome Newton, an alien come to Earth in order to gather water for his dying planet. Due to the superior technological advances of his race, he is able to become a millionaire through selling inventions to people on Earth. Mark Kermode claims that, due to Bowie's already extra-terrestrial image, 'the sense was that

he was genuinely a space alien who had somehow ended up on Earth, and ended up making records of bizarre extra-terrestrial poetry. [...] He didn't have to act it' (2013: 284). A memorable scene in the film shows Newton watching multiple televisions simultaneously, ingesting as much information as possible, and at once having visions of the future. A similar wall of televisions is to be found inside the exhibition. Each screen plays a video from Bowie's career and connects to a square on the floor. Stand on the square corresponding to the video you are watching and the sound kicks in, giving you that same psychedelic experience. The interior of the spaceship from *The Man Who Fell to Earth* formed the cover for *Station to Station* (1976) on which Bowie reincarnated himself as The Thin White Duke, described as an 'emotionless Aryan superman' (Pegg 2006: 303). Philip K. Dick included a film inside his



novel, *VALIS* (1981), as a 'homage to *The Man who Fell to Earth*' (Boonstra 1981:24). The exhibition also presents clips of Bowie's latest sf film role in Christopher Nolan's adaptation of Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (2002).

The most striking part of the exhibition is certainly the enormous 20-foot-high floor-to-ceiling screens showing various Bowie concerts from throughout the years whilst displaying his costumes behind them. Looking at these telescreens, the viewer has the unsettling feeling that they are under the dictatorship of a glam-rock Big Brother. The exhibition itself is another expertly timed piece of marketing, coinciding with the surprise release of Bowie's new album *The Next Day* (2013), with which he has been able to generate great publicity without appearing in public. He refuses to give interviews and evades the public eye whilst firmly remaining at its centre.



The final rooms of the exhibition show the spectacular impact Bowie has had on generations of popular culture. Science fiction often speculates on the future of our universe through literature, film and television. Bowie broadens the scope of the genre further to include music, fashion, art and design, and is shown to be both a foreseer and an instigator of popular culture. This is an immersive exhibition that actively entertains visitors, transforming them into an audience. On *The Next Day*, Bowie acknowledges his human mortality and decline, in spite of the cult of celebrity which has elevated him to a god-like status. His work continues to address the conflict between humanity's search for salvation through science and the promise of other worlds 'dressing in thoughts from the skies' ('After All',

The Man Who Sold the World) with their need to worship the fallible and earthly: 'They are stars, they're dying for you' ('The Stars (are out tonight)', *The Next Day*).

The David Bowie is exhibition is now on tour. Its next stop will be the Museum of Image and Sound, Sao Paulo, Brazil from 28 January to 21 April 2014. The author is grateful to the Victoria and Albert Museum for their kind permission to use images from the exhibition.

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The State of the Culture Conference, Brunel University, 11 September 2013

Reviewed by Jim Clarke (Trinity College Dublin)

The *State of the Culture* conference was never intended to be the first academic examination of Iain Banks' sf achievement. As organizer Joe Norman noted, 'what was to be a tribute to an ongoing series has now become a tribute to Iain Banks' legacy.'¹ Brunel's Antonin Artaud building, known as the 'Boiler House' to locals, seemed an appropriate location for this first posthumous gathering of Banks aficionados, with its atmosphere of the visionary superimposed on the technological. It was also, as keynote speaker Ken MacLeod noted, a location Banks himself had been familiar with, having used Brunel's library to research *The State of the Art*.

In his introductory talk, MacLeod offered some inspiration for critics of sf when he identified the influence of essays by John Clute and M. John Harrison in *New Worlds Quarterly* as seminal in the development of his own and Banks' sf writing. Harrison's essay, 'A Literature of Comfort' (1971), challenged sf to develop beyond the safe confines of established space opera, and from the vantage of over four decades on, it is clear that the New Wave of sf emerged in response to that challenge. MacLeod revealed that it also inspired a different response from Iain Banks, who appreciated the space opera genre and wished while writing his juvenile epic, *The Tashkent Rambler*, to 'create a big scale space opera that could stand up to the criticism of Clute and Harrison.' From this emerged his utopian vision of the Culture.

Throughout his keynote, MacLeod offered personal reminiscence which demonstrated the determination and work ethic that underpinned Banks' writing. Seventeen publishers rejected *The Tashkent Rambler* but the young Banks, undeterred, 'got this half a million words of nonsense out of his system' and at Stirling University commenced work on a novel 'in which all the dialogue sounded like students talking to each other.' Ultimately, this body of work was to bear fruit as 'having written so much before becoming a published writer, he appeared to be very prolific for

a long period, producing novels he had already written.' Among these early writings, later revised for publication, were the first three Culture novels. MacLeod also identified how the Culture functioned as an exercise in wish-fulfilment, arising from the utopian politics which Banks stuck with throughout his entire life.

The Culture emerged from a simple premise – 'Supposing all your technological dreams came true, what could you do with it?' What Banks did with it was to generate a society based on 'pan-sentient utilitarian hedonism', a post-scarcity utopia within which technology functioned to serve and inspire humanity. This required creating artificial intelligences whose power verges on that of gods, and Banks informed Andrew Gregg that he and MacLeod had sf instead of religious beliefs. The trajectory of development leading to the Culture was one that Banks took very seriously 'especially the underlying physics, and he tried to relate the Culture to the real world as a horizon towards which we could steer.' MacLeod's recollections of the young Banks identified the extent to which this vision was intact and implicit from the time of his earliest work.

David Haddock's forensically constructed timeline of Banks' writing and publishing proved a useful correlative to MacLeod's keynote. As the author of the *Banksonian* fanzine,² Haddock has painstakingly tracked Banks' development from *The Top of Poseidon*, his first work, completed at the age of fourteen, of, via 1970's *The Hungarian Lift-Jet*, a 'near-future thriller' with Alistair MacLean influences, to the sf and literary fiction for which Banks is now renowned. Basing his work on Banks' own testimony in Q and As and letters in response to Haddock's questioning, this timeline provides an authoritative and definitive portrait of the artist as young man and boy. Among the many curiosities unearthed by Haddock is Banks' protean approach to titles. *Consider Phlebas*, for example, went through six of them, including *Use of Weapons*. For Haddock, 'the Culture came about as a sort of playground for Zakalwe, the ultimate mercenary who happens to be on the side of good.' This remained Banks' narratological approach throughout the Culture series, locating his dramas on the edges of utopia where transgression arises.

A running theme throughout the conference was the sense that Banks' work was built to last and will survive the scrutiny of posterity. If any single factor confirms that, it is Banks' almost uniquely broad crossover appeal. The conference attracted scholars and fans from a wide range of disciplines

including David Smith, an electronic engineering academic at Brunel whose presentation consisted of excerpts from a 2010 interview he conducted with Banks, in which he described the idea of the Culture as simply being 'our future.' Hearing Banks' vision of a non-imperial humanoid utopia in his own words was both inspiring and emotional, and one hopes that Smith's interview material in its entirety can gain a wider audience at some point.

Nic Clear, head of architecture at the University of Greenwich, offered a fascinating analysis of the Culture as a 'direct lineage of the avant-garde architecture of the twentieth century.' Clear is well qualified to draw out such connections, having written on the importance of architectural design in the work of J.G. Ballard. Comparing the Culture to the post-scarcity 'New Babylon' utopia of Dutch architect Constant Nieuwenhuys, Clear persuasively argued that 'architectural visions that were beyond the ability to be built are effectively nova' in the sf understanding of the term. Both Nieuwenhuys and Banks move away 'from ideas of the natural as somehow morally superior or the best model.' They both envisage post-scarcity societies which are simultaneously troubling and radically different, a space to be inhabited by *homo ludens*, or 'man as player.' Clear's work on post-scarcity architecture with Greenwich's Unit 15 is part of a vanguard of considerations about how architecture can drive utopia,³ along with the work of the Ralahine Centre of Utopian Studies in Limerick. As Clear identified, sf has not traditionally been seen 'as a viable model for architectural considerations', but that may be about to change.

Joe Norman presented a comprehensive study of how music functions within the Culture, focusing especially on *Look to Windward* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*. Drawing on Ruth Levitas's ideas of music's utopian capacity as a 'special case', Norman generated some fascinating comparisons between 'Expiring Light', the musical work at the centre of *Look to Windward*, and musical responses to Hiroshima and World War II. He also parsed the satirical elements of the eponymous 'Hydrogen Sonata', exploring how it jibes at atonal music and quantum physics alike. Banks was a talented amateur musician with his own studio, and Norman has usefully mapped out a locus for future research on Banks' use of music.

Martyn Colebrook examined parallels between *The Player of Games* and John Fowles' *The Magus* as metafictional novels. For Colebrook, both Banks and Fowles are 'playing God games', though Banks 'does not adopt such an achingly pretentious way that postmodernist narration tended

to indulge in contemporary literary fiction.’ Such a brief paper could only tantalizingly scratch the surface of these interactions, and again one hopes that scholars will pick up the baton in future. After lunch, Tony Keen examined *Inversions* as planetary romance, picking up on MacLeod’s earlier comments on Banks’ attachment to the sub-genre. For Keen, *Inversions* is an anomaly in Banks’ sf, since there is ‘no explicit mention of the Culture in the novel’ yet ‘it quite clearly is a Culture novel.’ Akin to other ‘fantasy novels encoded as sf’ such as the Barsoom series or Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, *Inversions* features many elements of planetary romance, including a pre-industrial, quasi-medieval feudal system. Intriguingly, Keen suggested that ‘*Inversions* almost delays us getting to *Look to Windward*.’ His speculation that ‘*Inversions* was a putting on of leaving the Culture’ is definitely worth further exploration.

Nick Hubble, of Brunel’s Centre for Contemporary Writing, offered a fascinating reading of the Culture through understandings of imperium and fairy tale. For Hubble, ‘the Culture is engaged in expansion in the same way as the Brezhnevian Soviet Union – an imperial expansion.’ Yet this programme is often presented through the medium of fairy tale. Hubble usefully drew upon Walter Benjamin’s essay, ‘The Storyteller’, as well as John Clute on sf storytelling to generate an understanding of the Culture as a ‘future beyond history.’

Moira Martingale’s paper explored the interaction between humanity and its technological creations in the context of the gothic, an area explored extensively in her recent study *Gothic Dimensions: Iain Banks – Timelord*. In the Culture, humans are almost defined by their inertia, whereas the Als ‘are the good guys, the civilized guys.’ The interface between the human and their technological overseers is, for Martingale, an exploration of the liminal quality inherent in the Gothic. ‘In much of Banks’ work,’ she explained, ‘conventions of the Gothic are used to evoke this sense of the uncanny.’ In a useful précis of this duality in sf, Martingale revealed how concerns about machines from *Metropolis*, via *2001* to *Terminator* have recently shifted towards concerns about human responsibility for machines in texts such as *Blade Runner* or Spielberg’s *AI*. Extending this trajectory into Banks’ work, Martingale argued that ‘Banks offers us the iconography of divinity without the drawbacks – the soul, rebirth, benevolent but manipulative gods, even an afterlife or heaven.’

Robert Duggan’s paper leaned on George Orwell’s famous essay, ‘Inside

the Whale', to deconstruct Banks' notion of Outside Context Problems, especially in *Excession*. Tracing the lineage of sf depictions of higher dimensions back to Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland*, Duggan noted how the covert imperial quality of the Culture is subverted by the *Excession* which 'expresses a technological gap but also the shock of an imperial encounter.' For Duggan, 'Banks drives readers to think about inhabiting higher dimensions without the pessimism expressed by Orwell's essay.' Such ontological concerns can verge on the indescribable, but Duggan astutely noted that Banks continually deferred definitive notions of truth, always seeking 'to keep the show on the road, and avoid the full stop, and he does that through space and spatiality.'

Jim Clarke's paper similarly examined the concept of the Sublime in the Culture universe, an Outside Context which bears characteristics of both traditional heavens and the Romantic aesthetic sublime. Banks' atheistic universe precludes notions of divinity, which are usurped by technological capability, yet the ontological conundrum of Subliming seems to connote rapture and heaven. Ultimately, Clarke argued that this can be resolved through an understanding of the Sublime as the Romantics knew it, as intentionally ineffable and beyond comprehension.

The final paper of the day was presented by Jude Roberts, who focused on two instances of cannibalism, in *Consider Phlebas* and *The State of the Art*, using their contrasting styles of depiction to explore how Banks constructs the Other in his fiction. She neatly exposed the moral conundrum Banks generates for the reader: 'By separating out the act of cannibalism from acts of violence, Banks forces us to choose between attractive cannibals who do no other harm, and violent humans who do.' Ultimately, Banks' use of cannibalism as a trope 'challenges our conception of the relationship between human beings and human being', she argued.

The conference concluded with a sneak preview of MacLeod's forthcoming novel *Descent*. If anything, this reading demonstrated how the radical and progressive impulse in British sf has not died with Iain Banks, and remains in strong, imaginative health despite the loss of its leading practitioner. Yet such optimism does not preclude further looking back, as the variety and complexity of the papers presented revealed how Banks' sf achievement warrants significant further critical attention. In that sense, this conference ought not to be seen as a commemoration but a commencement.

Endnotes

1.The conference was organized within Brunel's sf and fantasy research cluster, 'Faeries and Flying Saucers', which can be found at www.facebook.com/faeriesandflyingsaucers. *The Banksoniain* can be read at www.efanzines.com/Banksoniain/.

2.The work of the Unit 15 project on post-scarcity architecture can be seen at www.unitfifteen.blogspot.co.uk.

Sword, Sorcery, Sandals and Space: The Fantastika and the Classical World, University of Liverpool, 29 June-1 July 2013

Introduced by Tony Keen (The Open University)

The culture of the classical world (ancient Greece and Rome) continues to shape that of the modern west. Those studying what John Clute terms the 'fantastika' (science fiction, fantasy and horror) know that the genres have some of their strongest roots in the literature of the Graeco-Roman world (such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Lucian of Samosata's *True History*). At the same time, scholars of classical reception are increasingly investigating all aspects of popular culture and have begun looking at science fiction. However, scholars of the one are not often enough in contact with scholars of the other. It had long been an ambition of mine to organize a conference that attempted to bridge the gap.

In July 2010, I happened to mention to Farah Mendlesohn that I had always wanted to run a conference on classics and science fiction. 'Would you like to run that as the next Science Fiction Foundation conference?' she asked. I leapt at the opportunity. At worst, I thought I would get a day-long seminar with perhaps a dozen papers. In November 2011, I was interviewed by OU lecturer, Jessica Hughes, for the *Classics Confidential* website, setting out my ideas and hopes for the conference (Hughes 2011). I remember saying at the time that if I got only classicists to come, I would feel that I had failed.

The conference succeeded better than I could have expected. We had over a hundred submissions, which were whittled down to just over sixty, allowing us to run three streams for most of the conference. About eighty people attended (about as many people as the venue could comfortably accommodate). These came from a range of different academic fields: classicists, science fiction scholars, literature scholars, etc. Europe and North America were represented alongside the UK and Ireland. The day before the conference, the early arrivals went to the Philharmonic Dining Rooms (which became the unofficial conference pub). More people turned

up, including some I didn't know, introductions were soon effected, and everything went swimmingly. I was very pleased to see all the cross-disciplinary discussions between people who had only just met. That set the tone for the rest of the conference – people who might otherwise never have met ended up having long and productive conversations, and forging friendships. As Penelope Goodman said when introducing the session on 'Britain', this was a conference that crossed boundaries all over the place. This was why I set this conference up; the quality of the papers was almost beside the point.

Nevertheless, I am pleased to report that we did have a very strong set of papers. Pride of place must go to the three excellent plenaries. Sophia McDougall (author of the *Romanitas* trilogy) bravely defied food poisoning to give her paper on 'Dreams of Rome', offering insight into how she chose to work on an alternate Roman empire, and some of the research she carried out. This was followed over the next two days by scholars Nick Lowe (Royal Holloway College, London) and Edith Hall (King's College, London). Lowe spoke on 'Fantasising about Antiquity', which included a breakdown of how classicists do reception, and praise for Gene Wolfe's *Soldier* series as the most effective science fiction and fantasy engagement with the ancient world. Hall apologized for not really knowing anything about science fiction, and then gave a fascinating talk on 'The Sea! The Interplanetary Sea! Xenophon's *Anabasis* in Outer Space', looking at the use of Xenophon's work in, for example, Paul Kearney's *The Ten Thousand* and David Weber and John Ringo's *Empire of Man* series.

As conference organizer, it would be invidious for me to single out any of the other papers for particular praise; I shall simply note that a generally high standard was maintained. Besides, as Nick Lowe commented to me, it was impossible for anyone without access themselves to the fantastic to see more than a third of the papers. What I can do is point to some reports of the conference. Liz Bourke, who spoke on 'The Reception of Minoan Civilisation in Science Fiction', has produced an epic thirteen-part write-up of the conference (Bourke 2013b) and reported on it for *Strange Horizons* (Bourke 2013a). Liz Gloyn, who spoke on "'By a Wall that faced the South": Crossing the Border in Classically-influenced Fantasy', has also written up the conference (Gloyn 2013); a version of her paper will soon be appearing on *Strange Horizons*. Cara Sheldrake, who gave a paper on 'Time-travel to Roman Britain', has also written a series of responses on her

blog (<http://carasheldrake.wordpress.com/>). Tweets from the conference (of which there were a lot – it was a well-tweeted conference) have been Storified at <http://storify.com/SFFConf2013/> Edward James, who spoke on ‘The Ancient World in the Writings of L. Sprague de Camp (1907-2000)’ as well as representing both the SF Foundation and Loncon 3, will be writing the conference up for *Science Fiction Studies*. Some of the ideas from Jarrid Looney’s paper (delivered via a not-wholly reliable Skype link) on “‘There is both the god in man, which reaches for fire and stars, and that black dark streak which steals the fire to make chains’’: The Dual Identity of Prometheus in Modern Media Culture’ are discussed by him in a post on *The Classics Closet* (Looney 2013).

There are things I would have done differently: for a start, I would have made sure my own book (*Martial's Martians and Other Stories: Studies in Science Fiction and Fantasy and Greece and Rome*, forthcoming from Becon Publications) was out in time. But considering how often I feared that the conference might not happen at all, or that it would fall far short of my hopes for it, I can only feel that the final result was a great success. Everyone really enjoyed themselves, and so many people said to me afterwards that they did not want to leave. I also got the impression that there was considerable enthusiasm for another conference along similar lines in a few years. There is, after all, a great deal of material to be worked on: I was surprised by the absence of papers on Wolfe or Ursula Le Guin’s *Lavinia* but no one submitted any proposals.

I am also keeping the conference blog open (<http://swordssorcerysandallsspace.wordpress.com/>) to keep up the momentum. I thank once again everyone who attended, the SF Foundation for their sponsorship and the Foresight Centre of the University of Liverpool for hosting the event. In particular, I thank Andy Sawyer, Fiona Hobden and Shana Worthen who did a lot of the legwork. Without them the conference would not have happened.

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Reviewed by C.L. Wilson (University of British Columbia)

The Swords, Sorcery, Sandals and Space: the Fantastika and the Classical World conference, a joint offering by the Science Fiction Foundation and the University of Liverpool, was held at the University's Foresight Centre. The guests of honour were Edith Hall of King's College, London, Nick Lowe of Royal Holloway College, and Sophia McDougall, science fiction writer. The conference was capably organized by Antony Keen and Andy Sawyer and well attended, drawing scholars and students of science fiction, classics, and literature from across North America and Europe as well as the UK and Ireland.

The welcome was delivered on Saturday morning by Prof. Douglas Baird of the University of Liverpool, and then author Sophia McDougall gave the first of the conference's three plenary lectures, entitled 'Dreams of Rome'. Ms McDougall discussed her bestselling *Romanitas* trilogy, and more specifically the process by which she created a coherent and believable Roman Empire that lasted into the present day. Over a weekend, she plotted out the alternate history of a surviving Roman Empire, working to make every decision logical and reasonable and then letting the alternate timeline suggest the more day-to-day changes that affected the narrative of her books. After Ms McDougall's lecture, Leon Crickmore had prepared

a paper on the history of the Science Fiction Foundation, which was read by Tony Keen, as Mr Crickmore was unable to attend. After these two excellent lectures, there were two sets of three parallel sessions.

In the first session were Homer, Britain, and Literature and Poetry; in the second, Television Science Fiction, Ancient Civilizations, and Creatures. Papers in the Homer panel dealt with anime, Le Guin, and MacNeice's *The Dark Tower*. The papers comprising the Britain panel, in addition to dealing with Britain as setting and inspiration, came together around borders and boundaries. The panel on Literature and Poetry contained papers discussing Lucan and George R.R. Martin, ancient and modern cosmic voyages, and an interesting examination of elements of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that sparked continued discussion throughout the conference--as indeed did many of the papers presented.

In the second paper session, the panel Television Science Fiction included papers on fanfiction in the Whoniverse and on ways the world of Battlestar Galactica renegotiates the classical. The panel Ancient Civilizations was heavy on material culture and archeological remains, considering Minoan civilizations in sf, particularly as depicted in television programmes, the literary reception of lost ancient treasures, and ancient technology. The third of the panels, titled 'Creatures', included papers discussing Galen and genetic engineering and a discussion of the uses of Greek mythology in two works of Jim Henson.

Sunday began with tea and coffee and launched straight into a series of parallel paper sessions. The first session had three panels: Hunger Games, Greek Authors, and Masters of Science Fiction. The Hunger Games papers discussed various aspects of Roman culture and its reception in Collins's novels. In the Greek Authors papers, the first paper considered *Callirhoe* as an alternate history novel; the second explored the 'ghosts' of Aeschylus present in Harry Potter, and the third examined the Sophoclean nature of Robert Silverberg's *Man in the Maze*. Masters of Science Fiction brought papers focused on the relationship of the classical world to the works of three sf greats: L. Sprague de Camp, C.L. Moore, and Isaac Asimov.

Sunday's second paper session included panels on the Whedonverse, Alternate Histories, and Philosophy and Rhetoric. The Whedonverse and Alternate Histories panels were very popular. Of the Whedonverse papers, Janice Siegel discussed the 'Cyclopic Reavers' of *Firefly*, and Jennifer Ann Rea the relationship between the Utopia of *Serenity* and Vergil's *Aeneid*.

Juliette Harrisson considered the use of oracles in *Angel* and the *Sookie Stackhouse* vampire novels. In the Alternate Histories panel, the papers focused on history and the ways history can be related and related to. The Philosophy and Rhetoric panel dealt with two different approaches to reading science fiction: the rhetorical, which considered iterations and reiterations of a single story, *The Thing*, and the philosophical, which considered the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics* on modern sf criticism and its suitability as a metric for sf itself.

The third session of the day was made up of panels on Divine Updates, the Greeks, and Epic. Divine Updates was a structured panel from a group hailing from the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and each paper negotiated the use of classical mythology centring on gods in a variety of modern sf, from graphic novels to children's books. The Greeks panel consisted of papers discussing historical and cultural Greeks in popular sf including comic books. The papers in the Epic panel focused around both ancient epics and their influence on sf and modern sf in epic structure, and the discussion afterward was very brisk, as might be expected from a subject so essential to classics and so compelling as a story form. The day finished with Nick Lowe's lecture 'Fantasising About Antiquity', an exciting and well-organized talk on antiquity and sf that was very well-received.

On Monday, the first session had panels on The New Wave And After and Young Adult Fantasy. The New Wave consisted of two papers, one on first century Judaea and Moorcock's *Behold the Man*, and the other on Neal Stephenson's *Diamond Age*. The Young Adult Fantasy paper discussed the increasing use of classical mythology in young adult fantasy. The second session of the day comprised two panels, one on Warhammer 40K and the other on Reusing Mythological Figures. The first of the Warhammer papers compared Virgil and the Warhammer universe specifically and the second discussed the more general use of Roman elements in the game's universe. The panel on Reusing Mythological Figures was made up of papers on the reception of Cassandra in *The Firebrand*, on Arthur, and on the fate of Astyanax, a topic of perennial interest. After lunch was Edith Hall's lecture 'The Sea! The Interplanetary Sea! Xenophon's *Anabasis* in Outer Space.' This final plenary session was spoken of very highly by the conference attendees.

The final parallel session of the conference held two final delights: a panel on My Little Pony, and the panel on Screen and Media. The MLP

papers dealt with the use of Greek mythology in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, and with Greco-Roman Pegasi in the cartoon series. Screen and Media comprised two papers, one on reinterpretations of Prometheus in sf and the other on Ancient Rome as a model for *Star Trek's* Romulan Empire and the Tevinter Imperium from *Dragon Age*, a series of computer games.

The conference as a whole presented a fascinating and remarkably broad picture of the kinds of work being done on science fiction and fantasy by scholars of antiquity as well as those who more closely study SFF or who specialize in television, film, and comics. The conference's twitter hashtag was in frequent use, with attendees in one panel checking their timeline for the live-tweets from other panels. There was, of course, also a great deal of discussion at every break: one could overhear titles being traded, finer points of plot, character, and classical allusion being discussed, and on every side, so much enjoyment around being able to gather with a group of like-minded academics for a dedicated weekend of papers about a shared passion.

CRSF 2013: The Third Annual Current Research in Speculative Fiction Conference

Reviewed by Leimar Garcia-Siino (University of Liverpool)

The third annual Current Research in Speculative Fiction conference took place on 18 June 2013 in sunny Liverpool. It was, without a doubt, a huge success, welcoming around fifty attendees, including presenters, non-presenting delegates, lecturers from the University of Liverpool and our wonderful keynote speakers. As the only postgraduate conference on speculative fiction of its kind, CRSF continues to attract early researchers from universities in Britain and Europe, including Austria, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Poland. Described by Pat Cadigan, as a 'Disneyland-for-the-mind', this year's conference featured papers ranging from fin-de-siècle literature to Italian sf, from television series like *Doctor Who*, *Supernatural* and *Dollhouse* to zombie narratives, from *Final Fantasy* to the post-catastrophic. These diverse and often interdisciplinary studies revealed not only the wide scope of media in current speculative fiction but that it is also fertile ground for significant critical analysis.

This year, CRSF proudly welcomed Peter Wright (Edge Hill University), a long-time specialist in speculative fiction, and Pat Cadigan, acclaimed science fiction writer, whose contributions to the cyberpunk movement have been influential to the development of the genre. Both keynote speakers were well received and their participation, through their respective talks and at various panels, was a testament to their knowledge and involvement with the field. Dr Wright's talk, titled 'Science Fiction From Text to Screen: Towards a Taxonomy of Cinematic Estrangement', explored the implications and difficulties of applying linguistic analyses from literary to visual media such as film. Carefully delineating his argument through the use of helpful diagrams and film clips, Wright proposed a new taxonomy, or rather a new framework, that drew both from Darko Suvin's cognitive estrangement and Peter Stockwell's cognitive poetics.

Cadigan's talk was equally illuminating as well as wonderfully eclectic. It is, however, not fair to talk about the author only in relation to her conference lecture, as she also gave a talk at Liverpool One's Waterstones as a prelude

to the conference. Cadigan quickly won over the Waterstones audience with a reading from her work-in-progress – a novel, based on her 2013 Hugo Award-winning novella, ‘The Girl-Thing Who Went Out for Sushi’, that explores space travel and human relations in an intriguing way. She intermingled her talk with personal anecdotes and insights into the state and dynamics of science fiction, both past and present, and her thoughts on terraforming, space exploration and sf technology were particularly captivating and refreshing. Her keynote speech was just as, if not more, fascinating, as Cadigan divided her talk into concise but poignant sections that focused on issues such as her reasons for writing science fiction and her annoyance at being asked how she feels in a male-dominated genre, the subjects of injustice and oppression, and helpful advice to young writers and academics alike. Her concern with imagining futures according to our scientific and sociocultural present instead of merely imagining sf for its own sake was particularly evident in her closing remarks. Cadigan emphasized her scepticism toward an imminent apocalypse, as well as expressing her doubts about an imperialist space colonization. In short, the title ‘Queen of Cyberpunk’ is well bestowed.

But the heart of the conference undoubtedly lay with the presenting delegates who once more convened, this time with thirty-five papers that embody the strength of current speculative fictions research. While impossible to cover all the studies presented throughout the day, I would like to take the opportunity to offer a small sampling of the varied papers and panels. In the morning, the panel ‘Fans and Fandom’ attracted much attention: ‘Fandom in Fiction and “The Family Business”: Fan Participation and Reformation in the Narratives of Supernatural’ by Kerry McAuliffe (King’s College, London), Kasi Paterson (Liverpool Hope University), and ‘Silhouettes from Popular Culture’ and ‘Lunatics Running the Asylum: Exploring the Influence of Fandom and Fan-Producers on the Narrative Worlds of *Doctor Who*’ by Mark Richard Adams (Brunel University) provoked lively conversation and debate that continued throughout the conference.

The ‘Undead Icons’ panel brought a similar response. ‘From Coffin to Couch: Fin-de-Siècle Anxieties and the Rise of the Psychological Vampire’ by Beverley Dear (University of East Anglia) suggested a new outlook on the vampire, in the form of the perhaps more frightening and psychological threat of vampires who can invade the mind, particularly the dreams of its victims. Exploring the rise of hypnotism and other forms

of mental therapy from the turn of the century, Dear traced connections between the public's growing concern with the mind and the startling shift in vampire stories from the Gothic to the psychological. In 'The Death of the Mind: The True Fear at the Heart of the Zombie Narrative' by Jennifer Harwood-Smith (Trinity College Dublin) explored the inner workings of fear in the increasingly popular zombie narrative. Arguing for a more organic derivation instead of the culturally-oriented consumerist analysis often purported, Harwood-Smith proposed old age, senility and loss of control as the fears metaphorically expressed through the form of the zombie. To round off this examination of cultural and individual anxieties and concerns, 'Preparing for Horror: the Zombie Survival Market' by Michelle Yost (University of Liverpool) focused on the rise of zombie apocalypse survival gear and non-fictional iterations of the survival guide not only intended for the general public but also official government and medical sources, based on the psychological need to prepare for – and mitigate – potential disaster.

Panels on 'Television' and 'Gibson and Cyber-Culture' also proved popular and informative. In the first, Marie Lottmann's (Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, Gießen) 'Ambiguous Objects in 1970s SF Set Design: *Raumpatrouille Orion*' raised awareness of Germany's one and only science fiction television series. Eve Bennett's (De Montfort University) exploration of the female gothic in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* considered its theme of capitalist-driven exploitation. In the Gibson panel, Grace Halden's (Birkbeck College, London) 'The Technologically Rapine: Science Fiction and Technology during the 1980s with specific reference to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*' and Anna McFarlane's (University of St Andrews) 'Gestalt Perception in William Gibson: Fractals and Pattern Recognition' offered new perspectives on cyberpunk and Gibson studies. Other popular panels included 'Biology and the Environment', in which presenters engaged with eco-criticism, shared environments, ecology and sustainable ecological economics, and 'Myriad Horrors', in which presenters took us from the changes in the slasher-film genre through Aleister Crowley to Lovecraftian cosmic horror in the film *Prometheus*. Carolyn Ellam's (University of East Anglia) 'Falling Between Categories: Realism and Fantasy in *Looking for Eric*' in the 'Liminal Fantasies' panel was particularly interesting as it brought to our attention the difficulty that mainstream critics find in interacting with a film whose generic boundaries

are indefinable. Ellam's paper raised intriguing questions regarding the line between fantasy and magic realism, and how this indecision reflects more upon general audiences and critics.

The conference finished on a high note with papers on everything from Japanese role-playing games, comic book adaptations and reinterpretations, and Holocaust comics in the 'Alternative Media' panel, to a comparative analysis of death and hope in the *Hunger Games* trilogy by Claire Browne (University of Sheffield), a study by Arthur Newman (University of Ulster) of China Miéville's *Iron Council*, where he argued in favour of a post-catastrophic reading of the novel, and an overview of this theme referred to as 'post-catastrophic space-time' by Zosia Kuczyńska (Trinity College Dublin). An overall spirit of camaraderie mixed with a high level of academic professionalism permeated the entire event, furthering what has already become a strong network of speculative fiction scholars.

As a final note, the organizers would like to offer our most heartfelt thanks to our guest speakers, Pat Cadigan and Peter Wright, for making us think as well as laugh, and for inspiring us to continue our respective researches. Also, our thanks go to all of our delegates for all of their hard work and dedication to research: they are the focus of and the reason for this conference. Many thanks as well to Andy Sawyer, librarian for the SF Foundation Collection, for managing the book sale, and special thanks to Filomena Saltao, from School of the Arts, not only for her constant support but also for all of the advice and relentless work put in to ensuring our conference went without a hitch. Her love for science fiction and her dedication to the school truly shone through. And finally, as a personal note, thanks to my fellow teammates, Chris Pak, Glyn Morgan and Michelle Yost, without whom this organization would not exist. Watch out for us next year by following us at <http://currentresearchinspeculativefiction.blogspot.co.uk/> or liking our Facebook page.



Benchmarks Continued: F&SF 'Books' Columns 1975-1982

Benchmarks Revisited: F&SF 'Books' Columns 1983-1986

Benchmarks Concluded: F&SF 'Books' Columns 1987-1993

By Algis Budrys (Reading: Ansible Editions/Lulu.com, 2012, 2013, 2013; 267pp, 267pp, 271pp, \$20.00 each vol.)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The February 1965 issue of *Galaxy* featured the first of what became a regular column of book reviews by Algis Budrys, which continued, intermittently, until November-December 1971. They were subsequently collected as *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf by Algis Budrys* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), a collection which would go on to win a Hugo Award. Budrys would always insist on the full title, since others also contributed books reviews to *Galaxy*. He had only a short break from reviewing before he returned with a column in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, the first of which appeared in September 1975, the last in January 1993.

When *Benchmarks* appeared in 1985, Budrys reviewed it in his *F&SF* column (he made a point of reviewing every book he wrote, edited or contributed to), and thereafter consistently claimed that his *F&SF* columns were also on the point of being collected. The title, he told us, would be some variation on *Benchmarks*, the publisher would again be Southern Illinois University Press, there would be an introduction by Ed. Ferman, and the book would be appearing real soon now. By the time of his last column, that real soon now had become 'not so soon now' (*Concluded* 265), and when Budrys died in 2008 it had still not appeared. Now, David Langford and Greg Pickersgill have enterprisingly gathered together all

of these columns and published them in three volumes, pretty much as Budrys would have wished but never got around to.

Algis Budrys was the third of that triumvirate of authors, following Damon Knight and James Blish, who more or less invented serious, non-academic science fiction reviewing. They wrote out of a love of the genre, they were never afraid to deploy insider knowledge, but precisely because of that they believed that every work should be held to the highest standards and were never afraid to criticize those who fell short, often to devastating effect. Throughout the 1950s, '60s and '70s their critical eyes did as much to shape and reshape the genre as any of the great writer-editors of the period, such as Frederik Pohl or Michael Moorcock. For that reason, the long-awaited appearance of these volumes must be greeted with genuine delight.

That delight cannot, however, be unalloyed. Budrys was always an idiosyncratic, often mannered, writer, and this tendency became more pronounced as he got older. He littered his reviews with footnotes that become ever more self-referential, so that by the final volume we find, for instance, 'Don't worry, there'll be a footnote coming along any minute now, but not here' (*Concluded* 102) followed, pages later, by 'I have chosen not to put footnotes in this column' (*Concluded* 125). But it is not just this playfulness that can become wearing. The looseness of his wordplay, his preference for allusion over reference, can lead to passages such as this:

But those antibodies in our psychic systems indicate past exposure to endemic nostalgia. And the logic of assertively maintaining an identifiable literature of our own to be pioneers in, bearing only a resemblance to any other, calls for maintaining tokens of a bent for science. These two factors are synergized in us. (*Concluded* 120)

Budrys is talking about the survival of hard sf in a New Wave age, though it's hard to tell. And with cloudier language come cloudier judgements. When he says of Kevin J. Anderson, for instance, that his prose is 'a tad less journalistic than Heinlein, a shade this side of Lucius Shepard' (*Concluded* 96), he says nothing that can help us understand Anderson's prose.

When we contrast the flaccidity of these judgements with his comment on H.P. Lovecraft's writing style in the very first of these reviews: 'a unicycle of an invention – grotesquely entertaining, inefficiently transportative' (*Continued* 11), or his assessment that Mack Reynolds's ideas outstripped

his abilities: 'he had more engine than steering wheel' (*Revisited* 155), we can see that a critical judgement that was sharp, witty and precise has become blunt and rather vague.

Many of these columns turn out to be more about Budrys than the books. The November 1984 column devoted two and a half pages to itemizing the tote bags collected and celebrities glimpsed, etc, on a visit to the American Booksellers Association conference before hastily squeezing four books into the following page and a half; his October 1989 column consisted, in its entirety, of a 16-line poem; each of the *Writers of the Future* volumes that he edited, received glowing praise for the contest that L. Ron Hubbard had set up while hardly ever mentioning any of the featured writers. Increasingly as the volumes progress we find that X is his best friend, he has known Y since the early 1950s, he first read Z in 1947, and so on. In a July 1992 review of *Glass Houses* by Laura Mixon and *Jumper* by Steven Gould, Budrys spends more time reminiscing about how he met the two and discussing the state of their marriage than he does talking about the books. Insider knowledge is one thing but this becomes queasily intrusive. This self-regard is only a symptom of something that runs right the way through all of these reviews. We might expect that one thing we would get from a collection of book reviews is a snapshot of how the genre was seen at a particular moment, the immediate reaction to new books that would come to dominate the genre or disappear instantly from view. That is not what we get here.

The very first review is of a biography of H.P. Lovecraft by L. Sprague de Camp, the last review is of a novel by Damon Knight, and that range, from Lovecraft through to Knight, pretty much encompasses the range of Budrys's interest in science fiction. He would always review a collection of stories or a reprint novel from the 1940s or '50s in preference to a contemporary work. By the end of the first volume, for instance, it would be easy to assume that the publishers of the 1970s gave over more of their output to John W. Campbell, L. Sprague de Camp, Lester Del Rey, Edmond Hamilton, Leigh Brackett, Clifford Simak and their confrères than to any actual current writer. He says of them that '[t]hey were trained in a school unknown to any of the newer writers' (*Continued* 124), and though he recognizes the crudity of their writing – he perceptively notes of the early Heinlein, for instance, that '[a]ll his people talked alike. You could tell the stupid and villainous from the worthy and heroic only by their choices

of subject matter' (*Continued* 179) – this is still the work he wants to praise. The king of them all, of course, was John W. Campbell. Reviewing the generally rather lacklustre collection of *The John W. Campbell Letters* Budrys says, '[i]t would be a disservice to any other book to review it in such company' (*Revisited* 238). As time goes on, however, particularly though perhaps coincidentally after Budrys becomes involved in the Writers of the Future Contest, L. Ron Hubbard is singled out more and more as the great exemplar of how science fiction should be done.

Every review in these three volumes is shaped by this view of the history of science fiction. The genre achieved its ideal form during the period Budrys calls 'modern science fiction', which essentially equates with the first ten years of Campbell's editorship of *Astounding*, and these achievements were consolidated in the 1950s and early '60s (a period he insists on referring to as 'post-modern sf'). As a consequence, Budrys seems uncomfortable with anything that predates Gernsback. Talking about H.G. Wells, for instance, he has to present him within the terms of 'modern sf' – '[Wells's] intellectual heir, the mighty John W. Campbell' (*Concluded*13) – a view that negates Wells's historical position by ignoring what Wells was actually doing in favour of where Budrys wanted to place him: 'The trouble with all of Wells's work ... is that it is pulp-ethical' (*Concluded*13). He is even more uncomfortable with anything that comes after the mid-1960s. Budrys spends most of these volumes avoiding any reference to the New Wave, and when he has to deal with any work representative of this period he is uneasy. He clearly doesn't know what to make of Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, 'I cannot tell you much about this book ... what he says is poor, transient, and failing' (*Continued* 15). And when he comes to review a novel by Christopher Priest he says that 'only *The Space Machine* ... strikes me as a wholly successful piece of work' (*Revisited* 181), picking out Priest's weakest and least successful novel, but the one that most closely conforms to the ideal of sf as Budrys sees it. Late in the day, just a year before he gives up the column, Budrys begins to glimpse what he hadn't been able to see in those two reviews. Discussing Michael Swanwick's collection, *Gravity's Angels*, he is forced to the conclusion that 'the very face of science fiction has changed, that we are coming to an age when the literary quality is consistently more important than the story' (*Concluded* 226). In fact, the face of science fiction is constantly changing, but by looking only for the face of Campbell and his contemporaries, Budrys had tended not to notice

the variety on offer.

Of course, not all science fiction slips by him. He is good on Benford, Bear and Brin, perhaps unsurprisingly, and, perhaps more surprisingly, very positive about William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, though more of the major science fiction novels of the period seem to be absent from these pages than present. Budrys is better on horror, particularly on the novels of Stephen King, which he covers repeatedly and perceptively (though he seems to be incapable of remembering the title of 'Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption'). The fantasy that gets covered in these columns tends to be rather conservative, and in time loses its place to horror. And Budrys does, quite frequently, cover non-fiction books about science fiction, despite a fixed and immutable opinion that '[t]he formal scholarship of speculative fiction is, taken in the whole, worthless' (*Revisited* 9); unless, that is, it comes from a scholar he knows personally, such as Martin Harry Greenberg or Elizabeth Ann Hull.

In short, these are perceptively, often witty reviews that are well worth reading both for delight in the prose and for what they tell us about science fiction during these nearly two decades. But what they tell us has to be taken with a pinch of salt, because the reviews are informed by a narrow and very particular view of the history and constitution of science fiction. A review of Frederik Pohl's *The Year of the City*, for example, mostly consists of a curious and highly contentious history of science fiction that stops dead with Pohl and Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants*, and hardly mentions the book supposedly under review. Budrys repeatedly uses the phrase 'newsstand sf', which stands for a time when the magazines were the beating heart of the genre, and there is something elegiac in the way he keeps returning to that period, noting that 'something went out of SF, perhaps coincidentally, that has not returned since *If's* demise' (*Concluded*33). This is a science fiction that was perfected under Campbell, so that everything since, the whole gamut of new work he is writing about, can only mark a falling away from the ideal. As Budrys says, when questions are raised about how science fiction used to be, 'I think the thing that's worrisome, [sic] about any assertion that SF is now more correct than it used to be on one topic, is the possibility that we might be seen to need correction on several others' (*Continued* 74). We should not have to contemplate the possibility that anything was wrong in those golden days, but our current age of lead is, of course, a very different thing.

Halo and Philosophy: Intellect Evolved

Edited by Luke Cuddy (Open Court, 2011, 220pp, £11.99)

Reviewed by Anna McFarlane (University of St Andrews)

Videogaming is still considered a new phenomenon in our culture and is not yet the regular subject of academic cultural criticism. This position is exacerbated by the news media who take pleasure in publicizing the more problematic aspects of videogame culture, often completely stripped of its context as a dialogue amongst an engaged community of gamers and developers. *Halo and Philosophy* recognizes this from the outset. In 'Eliminate Hostile Anti-Intellectual Units', the introduction to the collection, Luke Cuddy cleverly introduces the reader to the concept of the 'straw man', thereby engaging with philosophical problems from the outset whilst also facing head-on criticisms of videogames and the videogames industry. This means that when Cuddy later claims that playing *Halo* can be compatible with a Buddhist outlook in 'Enlightenment through *Halo*'s Possible Worlds' his argument is convincing, as well as being a subversion of the opinions we hear from ill-informed, mainstream commentators. This direct confrontation in the introduction allows the rest of the collection to engage with *Halo* and philosophy, rather than defensively justifying the medium of the videogame or arguing against its detractors.

That being said, the volume does act, implicitly, as a justification of videogames and their academic study as it presents an intelligent academic engagement with the game and its philosophical contexts. The collection is part of Open Court's Popular Culture and Philosophy Series and it successfully achieves the mission of the series as a whole – to present essays to a general readership by academic writers who also identify as fans. The engagement of the writers with *Halo* structures the collection as a whole. The collection is book-ended with a foreword and afterword entitled 'UNSC Briefing' and 'UNSC Debriefing', UNSC standing for 'United Nations Space Command', the military body that protects Earth from its enemies in the *Halo* series. The collection is divided into four parts based on academic and philosophical difficulty, which reflects the structure of the videogame; the four different sections, entitled 'Easy...

er', 'Normal', 'Heroic', and 'Legendary', mirror the levels of difficulty in the videogame. This layout immediately engages fans of the videogame with the philosophical content, the form welcoming them to familiar surroundings. Some of these references may sound obscure to those who have never played *Halo* but the writers use this terminology in such a way that the reader – particularly regular readers of science fiction who will be familiar with neologisms and novum – can easily understand the references through their context.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with *Halo*, or with videogames culture in general, the collection remains accessible as various chapters take great pains to give *Halo* in particular and videogames more generally, some context by placing *Halo* in the tradition of science fiction, literature and film. Luke Cuddy's introduction highlights the origins of *Halo* structures in Larry Niven's *Ringworld* trilogy and Iain M. Banks's 'orbitals' from the *Culture* series. He uses this as a starting point to think about how science fiction concepts are used in the *Halo* videogames and how *Halo* interacts with other media, such as prose, in the series of novels based in the *Halo* universe. Peter Ludlow and Chiara Repetti-Ludlow's chapter, 'Personal Identity in Blood Gulch', explores the intersections between videogames and the linear storylines of televisual media through a discussion of the machinima series *Red vs. Blue*, a web series that uses video captures from the *Halo* games to create short movies. In 'Does Cortana Dream of Electric Sheep?' Monica Evans situates the *Halo* games within the tradition of first-person shooters before describing links between *Halo* and dystopian fiction, cyberpunk and, of course, the work of Philip K. Dick. to ask whether the videogame represents meaningful science fiction. Finally, Roger Ngim's 'UNSC Debriefing: Don't Look Now, the Boogeyman's Behind You – Or Is It the Flood?' writes about how different techniques can multiply creative possibilities, or even create new media, from the point-of-view shots in the film *Halloween* (1978) to the representation of a three-dimensional world in the first *Doom* videogame (1993) to the immersive ambitions of modern videogames such as *Halo*.

Halo and Philosophy renders itself accessible through its engagement with fans and its subtle allowances for newcomers while at the same time dealing with weighty philosophical concepts. Issues of identity are thrown into question by videogames in general as players 'become' their avatars and identify with them, no matter how many times they respawn. This is

particularly relevant in the case of *Halo's* Master Chief, a cybernetically-enhanced warrior who has been replaced by a clone. Joyce C. Havstad explores these issues in 'Who is Master Chief?' and questions the importance of historical and material continuity in describing identity. Later, in his chapter 'Playing with Fantasies in the Spartan (Sub)Consciousness', Patrick Tiernan successfully uses Jungian and Lacanian analysis to discuss the psychology of gameplay and the nature of reality. As with other collections of this kind, *Halo and Philosophy* occasionally leaves its subject matter behind in favour of an explanation of philosophical positions, or suffers from a lack of space to develop philosophical questions. For example, Roger Travis asks at the end of his chapter, 'Why Plato Wants You to Play *Halo*', whether violence is an inevitable and biologically-ordained part of life. An extra section would have been welcome here to work towards answering these questions or at least exploring some of their implications. Likewise, 'Master Chief and the Meaning of Life', by Jeff Sharpless, often leaves *Halo* behind as he compares the two models for the good life offered by Camus and Epictetus. 'Would Cortana Pass the Turing Test?' by Sherol Chen departs from *Halo* to provide historical background to the concept of the Turing Test itself. However, overall, *Philosophy and Halo* manages to maintain its engagement with *Halo* despite these problems. Chapters such as Sébastien Hock-Koon's 'The Initiatory Journey to Legendary Play' and Ben Abraham's '*Halo* and Music' focus on topics that seem, at first, very specific to *Halo* but, through the course of the chapters, are revealed to have wider applications to the philosophy of teaching and the temporality of music. Felan Parker's argument for playing *Halo* as an example of Foucault's aesthetic self-fashioning in 'What Would Foucault Think about Speed Runs, Jeep Jumps, and Zombie?' or Shane Fliger's exploration of the potential of videogames for providing a more realistic portrayal of warfare in 'Sandbox Configurations' also serve to show that analysis of gameplay can lead to interesting and unexpected philosophical outcomes. These successes show the value of welcoming videogames criticism as a new branch of media studies as working with different media gives new perspectives and fresh philosophical readings.

The Anticipation Novelists of 1950s French Science Fiction: Stepchildren of Voltaire

By Bradford Lyau (McFarland, 2011, 238pp. £478.50)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer (University of Liverpool)

George Slusser, in his introduction, calls this book 'a gold mine for a critic seeking to understand the development of both post-war French science fiction and the fortunes of the *conte philosophique* in France' (2). He is right.

Fleuve Noir began publishing the 'Anticipation' series in 1951 and concluded it in 1997 after (significantly) 2001 volumes. While between 1951 and 1960 a number of important translations appeared (such as the 1956 translation of Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951)), most of the imprint's output was by French writers. Even during the 1950s, foreign translations made up less than twenty-five per cent of the series' titles. Only one of the French novels covered in this study was ever translated into English, Stefan Wul's *Le temple du passé*, published in 1957 and translated in 1973: Wul's work is described as 'captivating and imaginative' (94);, though Gerard Klein (who published as Gilles d'Argyre) is regarded as one of the central figures in modern French sf, , and various later Anticipation novelists are considered to be among the best French sf writers.

The French authors who wrote for Anticipation worked quickly, often to a formula, and under pseudonyms. But this was not mere hackwork. Lyau argues that the Anticipation writers were part of a general wave of modernization through technology which was central to French thinking in the 1950s, and while this was a period during which anglophone sf was increasingly popular, the French sf tradition, dating back beyond Jules Verne to Restif de la Bretonne, Mercier, Bodin, Cyrano de Bergerac and Voltaire (whose 'Micromegas' was the first story to have an alien from another world visit our earth), had established a vocabulary and basis for discussion which made it a natural tool for philosophical speculation. Hence the subtitle for this study: 'Stepchildren of Voltaire'.

Lyau divides the francophone Anticipation writers of 1951-1960 into

five categories according to their responses to the idea of progress. The 'moderates' are F. Richard-Bessière (Henri-Richard Bessière), who wrote thirty-two novels for the series during this period and ninety-eight in all; M. A. Rayjean (Jean Lombard), who wrote twelve and seventy-seven; and Kemmel (Jean Bommart), who wrote only two novels for the Anticipation imprint although he was prolific in other genres. These writers, says Lyau, warned humanity of the possible dreadful fates ahead but still gave humanity a chance to survive. Rayjean, for instance, wrote three novels in which the dangers of atomic power – which France was aggressively developing both as an energy source and as military defence – were foreshadowed. Bessière dramatized the dangers of war. Kemmel too warned against the dangers of the nuclear programme.

The 'extreme' wing is a single writer: Jimmy Guieu (Henri-René Guieu), for whom 'there is never enough progress in the scientific and technological realms' (76). Guieu was not only the most commercially successful among the first Anticipation writers (he later had his own 'Jimmy Guieu' imprint with various publishers), he was also a successful propagandist of ufology. Of his eighty-three novels for Anticipation, thirty-three appeared between 1951 and 1960. Lyau explores Guieu's work in detail, emphasizing the importance of aliens and alien contact in his writing, and the fact that Guieu argued that such contact was *real*. Much of his work, therefore, can be called pessimistic: humanity is fundamentally dependent on alien aid. But during this period Guieu also produced six novels which provided 'surrogates' for the alien aid-givers through the existence of scientific and technological elites, or *human* secret societies. Lyau contends that, despite his obsession with ufos, Guieu can be read as a writer whose apparent flakiness is a way of arguing that the problems thrown up by modernization simply demand extreme solutions. 'Guieu's pessimism in humanity's ability to handle science and technology is surpassed only by his optimism that these two fields of endeavor will save the human race'(93).

In contrast, four writers form the 'conservative' response to the idea of progress. Stefan Wul (Pierre Pairault) has already been flagged as the most imaginative of the Anticipation group, a writer noted for poetic imagery and dramatic, even operatic stories. He published only eleven novels up to 1959 and did not publish another until 1977. Wul's poetic vision perhaps makes it difficult to discern a particular ideological 'line', though Lyau reads two novels – *Oms en série* (1957) and *Piège sur Zarkass*

(1958) – as engaging with Cold War anxieties, specifically French colonial struggles (the fight for Algerian independence was ongoing), and Gaullist ideas about strong leadership. Scientific and technological progress is not inherently 'bad', but Wul seems to think that societies should blend such progress with a concern for past traditions and maintaining cultural identity.

The prolific Maurice Limat wrote 106 novels for the Anticipation series, but only six of them were published before the end of 1960. Lyau presents Limat as a writer who offers a positive view of religion in novels such as *Les enfants du chaos* (1959), which ends with a rather puzzling echo of a famous passage from Voltaire's *Candide*, and *Moi, un robot* (1960) (which may or may not be an echo of Asimov's classic, not translated into French at the time). Lyau draws parallels between the ideology of the novels and the Christian Democracy of organizations such as the Mouvement Républicain Populaire

Peter Randa (André Duquesne) was possibly the most prolific of the authors considered here, producing over 100 police adventure stories for Fleuve Noir and seventy-nine sf stories for Anticipations, many militaristic or featuring misfit or loner characters. Only three sf stories were published during this period, however: a trilogy of space exploration adventures. Like Limat, with whom Lyau specifically compares him, Randa warns against a loss of human individuality by presenting, for example, a civilization of hornets controlling the will of native humanoids on *Les Frelons d'or* (1960). Randa, however, does not share Limat's religious ideology, being closer in his individualism to Robert Heinlein. Heinlein's *Between Planets* (1951) had been translated into French in 1958 and its conclusion that 'space was [the protagonist's] home' (quoted p. 130) is similar to the escape from mere planetary hegemony in *Baroud* (1960): 'No longer will a nation or even a planet will dominate. [sic] An intermediate race will escape totally from its original influences ... A race that will be from nowhere, thus from anywhere' (quoted p. 128). While Randa is less of a libertarian than Heinlein, he is, perhaps, a Social Darwinist: 'His new human individual, freed from the shackles of inherently corrupt societies on Earth, is really a return to an idealized version of the old individual or groups of such people who will thrive and conquer all who stand in their way' (133).

The last of the 'conservatives' is Kurt Steiner (André Ruellan) who published twenty-two novels in various genres after the war, although his medical practice slowed down his rate of production. Between 1951-1960

he published four novels with Anticipation, and is still active in film and tv. His novels during this period, such as *Menace d'oute-terre* (1958) and *Aux armes d'Ortog* (1960), seem to argue for external guidance in a manner similar to that of Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), which was translated into French in 1956. *Aux armes* presents an elite corps of 'chevaliers-nautes' ('translated by Lyau as 'knightonauts') who search for a 'Planet of Archangels' whose Immortal Prophet may have the secret which will end human stagnation. The secret here is that all living creatures in a solar system are but the cells of a larger entity, the Solar being, which in turn is evolving towards something more cosmic. Lyau, however, does not read Steiner as arguing for the kind of transformation presented at the end of *Childhood's End*: 'it is the continuation of present-day humanity – and not some extreme alteration of it – that will ensure the survival of the race' (139). This distinguishes Steiner from the radical-solution stance of Jimmy Guieu or the 'radicals' of the next chapter.

These 'radicals' are Jean-Gaston Vandel and B.R. Bruss. Vandel is the pseudonym of Belgians Jean Libert and Gaston Vandenpanhuysse, perhaps best known for a long series of spy thrillers by 'Paul Kenny'. During the decade covered they produced twenty sf novels for Anticipation. In these novels, Lyau detects the tension between governing elites and individual liberties, and several arguments for a solution are presented, from an elite technocracy in novels like *Les Chevaliers de l'espace* (1951) to alien-spawned super-intellecets in *Les Titans de l'énergie* (1955). Vandel uses numerous stock sf icons (alien encounters, robots, mad scientists) to argue his possibilities. Lyau discusses the influence of Wells and Verne and, as with Bessière, notes the parallels between the issues raised in the fictions and the shaping of French society by the technocratic elite which emerged in France following World War Two, and the various 'development plans' of the post-war period. Vandel differs from Bessière, however, in calling for a more radical response to the multiple possibilities offered by scientific and technological progress. Three novels, *Naufrages des galaxies* (1954), *Départ pour l'avenir* (1955), and *Les Vois de l'univers* (1956), form a series which draws upon not Voltaire but Jean-Jacques Rousseau to suggest that a more utopian sense of 'social contract' might be the way.

B.R. Bruss (René Bonnefof), who produced forty-three novels for Anticipation (seven during the period covered), is possibly the most interesting of a fascinating group of writers: certainly Lyau describes him as

'controversial' (169). Bruss served in the collaborationist Vichy government during World War Two, and thus for much of his writing career was an anonymous figure, first literally in hiding and then under sentence of 'national degradation' which meant, among other things, the loss of civic rights. Bruss, who also wrote acclaimed surrealist novels as Roger Blondel, has been described as a visionary and metaphysical writer. In his novels of this period, he explored Cold War scenarios, individuality, and human relationships. In a series of novels beginning with *S.O.S. Soucoupes* (1954) he dramatizes the dangers of totalitarianism through a potential Martian invasion, at first favoured by the Soviet Union but, in subsequent novels, bringing about a USA-USSR alliance. *Le Grand Kirn* (1958) has mysterious seeds producing little red men who gain control of human will. Subsequent novels, such as *Terre ... siècle 24* (1959) and its sequel *An ... 2391* (1959), speculate about how individuals or human groups resolve divisions. Although much of the conflict is driven by a division between humans and super-computers, Lyau discerns another major consideration of otherness, the exploration of gender relations. This, as with the computers' development of self-awareness, directly reflects the contemporary arguments about women's rights.

Chapter 6, 'A Last Word', discusses only one book by one writer. Gérard Klein wrote five novels for Anticipation as 'Gilles d'Argyre' ('Argent' = 'money', suggesting a mercenary motive) of which the terraforming novel *Chirgiens d'une planète* (1960) was the single one published in this period. Of all the writers discussed, Klein has the greatest international reputation, as author (*Les Seigneurs de la guerre* (1971), for instance, was translated by John Brunner as *The Overlords of War* in 1973), editor, translator, anthologist and critic. He was responsible for the prestigious 'Ailleurs et Demain' imprint, and (although Lyau does not mention this) was the 2005 recipient of the Science Fiction Research Association's Pilgrim Award for lifetime contribution to sf and fantasy scholarship. His appearance here is perhaps problematic. A number of issues arise in discussing this novel, which Lyau notes was written 'as an attempt to make a Fleuve Noir' (191). Should *Chirgiens d'une planète* be considered optimistic because it is 'a propaganda piece for science and technology as the centerpiece of humanity's future' (190) or is there an element of parody? Lyau raises these questions in considering a novel which seems to argue that science, in the form of the vast project to terraform Mars, must flourish apart from

political or commercial control or the vested interests which stand to lose if the project succeeds. Is this what Klein believes, or was he writing such a novel because this was the template for Anticipation novels? If the latter, Lyau suggests, Klein was mistaken, because apart from Jimmy Guieu, the majority of Anticipation novels question this stance. He does, though, suggest that Klein was the first Anticipation author to 'write with a critical eye to the form and spirit of the imprint's domestic products' (192).

After 1960, Lyau says, a new phase began in French society, which exploded in 1968, and anxieties about progress developed a new vocabulary. Much of the same could be said, in general, about the USA and the UK, and much could, of course, be said about the way sf in the communist world also engaged with such anxieties. The value of Lyau's study is that it explores a milieu of science fiction writing of which most of us anglophone readers and critics are almost entirely ignorant. We can talk endlessly about how sf reflects our own social anxieties, but until now we have had comparatively little information about how this has taken specific local shapes. This book is, therefore essential for anyone engaged with understanding French science fiction, and, more widely, the form and function of science fiction in the 1950s. That Lyau provides background to the Anticipation series helps us, although his underlying argument that these books are written in dialogue with the Voltairean '*conte philosophique*' might have been more illuminating with some more critical engagement with the way that the form and content of what Anticipation saw as 'science fiction' was, as he notes at the beginning, heavily Americanized. Many of the protagonists of these fictions, for instance, have Anglo-Saxon rather than French names: clearly this shows an understanding of the readership but it would have been interesting to have this discussed in some form. How far was French post-war sf in explicit dialogue with the USA? Several of the novels discussed seem to have been doing just that, yet was the Anticipation 'template' (which increasingly moved towards dominance by local writers) reflective of a cultural US dominance? (It is interesting to read that of the thirty foreign translations in the first Anticipations, most of the titles were by J. Russell Fearn as 'Vargo Statten', reflecting the Americanized model of British popular sf.) For someone unversed in French criticism, it would have been interesting too to have more exploration of local reception of the imprint, although Lyau does insert much commentary by French critics within his own exploration of specific writers.

Nevertheless it is the function of good scholarship to raise further questions. This is a book which fills a gap many of us probably weren't well enough aware to realize was a gap, and is a necessary addition to the shelves of anyone interested in 1950s sf.

Sightings: Reviews 2002-2006

By Gary K. Wolfe (Becon Publications, 2011, 434pp, £17)

Reviewed by Maureen Speller (University of Kent)

In the December 2003 issue of *Locus*, Gary K Wolfe reviewed John Clute's *Scores: Reviews 1993-2003*. Wolfe and Clute have a number of things in common, not the least that they are major genre critics who are best known to the reading community through their work in what Wolfe calls 'monthly venues'. While Clute elsewhere ploughs a highly visible if sometimes idiosyncratic theoretical furrow, thanks to his ongoing work on the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, Wolfe's impact on the field is less immediately obvious, though no less significant, be it as editor (he has recently edited a collection of sf novels for the prestigious Library of America), literary critic (see *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature*, his 2011 collection of extended essays), or more recently, as one of the hosts, with Jonathan Strahan, of the weekly Coode Street podcast. No one could ever accuse Wolfe of shirking his responsibilities as a critic and commentator.

Wolfe suggests that one should not approach *Scores* with 'the idea of gaining a comprehensive overview of SF or fantasy' but I would argue that this is to an extent what Wolfe himself achieves with *Sightings* and its predecessors, (*Soundings: Reviews 1992-1996* (2005), *Bearings: Reviews 1997-2001* (2010)), not least because of the magnitude of his output. Wolfe has been writing reviews for *Locus* for twenty-odd years, and in that time he has created a formidable rolling overview of a particular facet of the genre through a series of monthly snapshots.

Wolfe's *Locus* columns employ a comparatively straightforward formula. Each month he reviews a handful of titles, novels, short story collections, anthologies, and occasionally works of non-fiction. How these titles are chosen remains obscure; one assumes Wolfe has some say in the selections, not least because certain authors reappear regularly in his reviews, and they are authors for whose work he clearly has some affection. It is also immediately clear that Wolfe is playing a long game. Each title he discusses is carefully situated in its historical or theoretical context. To take a particularly effective example, the very first review in the collection,

covering Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*, and two anthologies by Gardner Dozois, *Supermen: Tales of the Posthuman Future* and *Worldmakers: SF Adventures in Terraforming*, not only offers a sharp and pertinent discussion of the ways in which alternate history is nowadays so often debased but also provides an illuminating potted history of the theme anthology. Wolfe's reviews are invariably studded with such helpful nuggets of contextual information, intended to bring the reader quickly up to speed on particular genre issues, and valuable even to the experienced reader. At such times, Wolfe's prodigious knowledge of the field is elegantly but unobtrusively displayed; the reader is informed but not intimidated.

This raises, then, the question of how Wolfe perceives his *Locus* audience. *Locus* has always, formally or informally, represented itself as the trade paper for the genre, providing a steady stream of information about markets, sales to publishers and forthcoming publications, alongside reviews and interviews. Precisely what niche *Locus* now fills is not clear, though it has gone far beyond its original intention, to keep fans in touch with what was being published in the sf field. I suspect that one can no longer guarantee that the *Locus* audience will have a deep knowledge of the history of sf alongside an interest in contemporary work, not least because there is now simply too much to read. In which case, Wolfe's reviews serve, in part, as a primer in sf history, situating the texts under discussion as part of the broader continuum of genre. In fact, there is a distinct flavour of the seminar about these reviews at times, perhaps not surprising given Wolfe's own background as an academic and educator.

This raises further questions about the nature of Wolfe's criticism. His analysis is very sharp but as Matthew Cheney noted in a 2011 review of *Evaporating Genres*, 'it is the sort of analysis provided by good book reviews: interesting, provocative, concise, but not thorough', which is of course precisely suited to this particular venue. What is also notable is Wolfe's scrupulous fairness in these reviews – almost too fair, as one occasionally wonders if he is capable of saying a bad word about anyone (not helped by a widespread anecdotal perception that *Locus* only publishes positive reviews). While it is difficult to imagine the ever-courteous Wolfe carrying out a vitriolic takedown of an author (though I find myself wondering what such a thing might look like, were he to be driven to it; and indeed, what would drive him to do such a thing), a close reading of his reviews reveals more than the occasional note of asperity when an author has

done something particularly crass (though this criticism is often softened by being enclosed in brackets). At such times Wolfe writes more in sorrow than in anger; it is remarkably like having a beloved tutor inform you that he is very disappointed in you. At other times, Wolfe has the ability to sum up, in one pithy sentence, a discussion which has generated thousands of words in other venues. I think particularly of his comment on the endless controversy of Margaret Atwood versus SF: 'She's not demeaning the SF market so much as protecting the Atwood market.'

Bringing the reviews together in a collection such as this reveals another, perhaps unconscious, facet of Wolfe's project. Individual reviews are transformed into cumulative wisdom, as Wolfe creates a dense fabric of critical connective tissue through some well-placed cross-referencing, encouraging the reader to think beyond the individual review. While reading an entire collection of these reviews will not provide a detailed portrait of sf activity in those years covered it will nonetheless still flag up the most pressing issues in the genre at any given moment. When discussing the writing of Ray Bradbury, as Wolfe does several times in this collection, he frequently expresses the belief that in Bradbury's work it's not so much the individual story that is Bradbury's *métier* as the short story collection, and I wonder if the same couldn't be said for Wolfe himself. As individual reviews, these are enjoyable, educative, perceptive but inevitably ephemeral; it is only when the reviews are collected that their true strength can be fully realized.

Which is not to say that the collection is in every way perfect. At times, one could wish for a little more bibliographical detail within the reviews – tracking the history of the republication of Kim Stanley Robinson's and John Crowley's short story collections might have been easier had there at least been a year of publication. The text is also marred in places by distracting typos and odd little formatting flaws which momentarily force the eye away from the page as the brain tries to make sense of what it has just seen. However, the sheer usefulness of the text as a whole outweighs the nuisance value of such things.

Returning to Wolfe's review of *Scores*, he concludes that it 'amounts to a long and pleasant evening in which too much wine is drunk and too many ideas are flung on the table, but from which one returns, veering a bit, with the conviction that this stuff matters.' Much the same might be said of *Sightings*; to finish reading it is to emerge with a new sense of

engagement with science fiction, as well as a strong determination to do better with one's own reviewing.

Small Miracles

By Edward M. Lerner (Tor, 2009, 352 pp, \$25.99)

Reviewed by Grace Halden (Birkbeck College, London)

Across the dark red cover, a swarm of bugs with sharp *pincers* scuttle through a pool of blood. Upon closer inspection, we realize that these bugs are not insects at all – they are nanobots, and they are not scurrying over a bloody surface but rather are swimming *in it*.

The plot of *Small Miracles* revolves around Brent Cleary who is on a police ride-along. Cleary is an engineer for Garner Nanotechnology, a company which specializes in cutting edge nanotech-enhanced protective clothing and nanobots programmed for emergency first aid. Cleary and the police officers are lulled into a false sense of security by the safety clothing which can 'stop a rifle round', and is dubbed 'invulnerable' (17, 19). Inevitably, Cleary is seriously wounded but is saved from certain death by first-aid nanobots which are injected into his blood to repair the internal damage.

However, as science fiction readers might expect, the nanobots do something unplanned. Although they are programmed to self-destruct in the blood stream, they actually survive in the brain and fuse with their host. Garner thus becomes the first human/nanobot hybrid. However, the nanobots are not content with one host ... they seek global domination.

Small Miracles propels us into a near future (2015) in which nanotechnology is no longer in a rudimentary stage and is being wielded quite expertly. Although the novel doesn't offer a chronology of nanotech development, the text is very much concerned with cautionary ideas of how technology may develop beyond human control. In the novel's preface, Lerner explains nanotechnology for those unfamiliar with the hard science: 'Nanotech deals with science and engineering at a very small scale (one nanometer=one billionth of a meter) [...] involves the arrangement of matter with atom-by-atom precision. At least nanotech will do that; this is a technology very much in its infancy' (5). Cleary explains nanotech more simplistically: 'They're little machines, chemically fuelled, each controlled by an onboard mechanical computer. They communicate

among themselves with chemical messenger molecules' (73).

Cleary is dramatically altered by the nanobots, even before his family and friends become aware of this. The alteration is initially behavioural and thus ignored as a personality adjustment after the trauma he experienced. Lerner capitalizes on the silent insidiousness of nanotechnology; the technology becomes rapine in a subtle and gently nuanced way to project the true dangers of the technology, namely, its ability to invisibly invade.

Lerner moves us a long way beyond novels such as Dean Koontz's *Demon Seed* (1973, 1997) in which the technology of AI Proteus literally rapes a human woman. *Small Miracles* doesn't deal with rampant robots and overbearing intelligent computers; instead it teases out contemporary anxieties about imperceptible control. This echoes contemporary reservations surrounding security technologies (which monitor discreetly) and computer viruses (which burrow and worm).

The premise of intelligent technology insidiously invading the vulnerable human body and radically altering the human condition is very similar to that of Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1983), in which a biotechnologist injects self-engineered biological computers ('noocytes') into his body provoking a hybridization between artificial intelligence and the human. However, while Bear's noocytes eventually infect the mass population, Lerner's text features a race against time to prevent that scenario occurring. Further, while Bear's noocytes effect a large transformation, Lerner's quiet apocalypse is more localized. There are no grand transformations in *Small Miracles*; it is the subtle and nuanced alteration that lends the novel its uncanny, compelling beauty.

As the story progresses, various short chapters are delivered from the perspective of the evolving nanobots. This development becomes eerie as the nanobots speak of seeing through the host's eyes: 'Wakeful eyes were the primary means of collecting data from the world beyond the host' (110). Lerner plays with concepts of perspective, view and space in this text by casting the body (almost in a dualistic sense) as a host with a 'Ghost in the Machine'. Furthermore, the nanobot (known as One) invades on numerous levels: 'within the mind of Brent, within the body of Brent, within a bed, within a room, within a building, within a city, within a world, within...' (133). As Lerner explains, One penetrates the 'many-tiered universe' which offers 'layers of representation' thus reconceptualizing binaries, barriers and perceptions of limited bodies and environments (133). The body is turned

against itself as One not only inhabits Cleary's body but pilots it, tweaking hormone levels and influencing thoughts to make Cleary an accomplice in his own transformation. Humanity is pitted against transhumanity as the reader is left to consider whether artificial evolution is a good or a bad thing. Even while Kim struggles to preserve Cleary's humanity, the benefits of the nanobots are hard to ignore. Is Kim heroic for trying to 'save' Cleary? Or, has she succumbed to a type of anti-transhumanism that recasts Luddism in a new twenty-first century light? The wish to destroy tiny machines is perhaps a more pressing concern today than that of wanting to break large machines.

Lerner seems to resist notions of positive transhumanity through nanotechnology, lamenting on the many associated dangers. Yet, he resists the glamour of presenting a nanotech scenario to rival that of the iconic Borg in *Star Trek*, who have assimilated whole worlds and travel the galaxy as a cybernetic hive. Lerner's novel is restrained. The text is grounded and legitimized through in-depth research in the fields of nanosystems, biophysics and neurology as well as insights from industry, scientists and academics, which helps present the novel as a plausible speculative creation rather than as sheer fabrication.

Small Miracles is a tight and solid read. However, while it is initially engaging, the limited scope of the setting castrates the threat and renders anxieties over global dominion negligible. The themes of humanity and transhumanity are not fully explored. There is a rich vein of supplementary themes and ideas, that are unfortunately, left unmined. Yet Lerner deals in subtleties – in many respects the discreet and unassuming plot mirrors the quiet and inconspicuous nature of the nano threat itself. Maybe this is the lesson for the reader: dangerous intelligent technologies in science fiction need not be concerned with genocidal weapons, annihilation or grand control structures. Instead they can creep silently and a war can wage in a distant lab completely invisible to the vulnerable general public.

Heroes in the Wind

By Robert E. Howard, edited by John Clute (Penguin, 2009, 541pp, £10.99)

Reviewed by Mark Hall

Until the recent Ballantine/Del-Rey editions of the Conan and Solomon Kane stories, Robert E. Howard, had received little or no respect from academics, critics or many sf/fantasy readers. For several, mentioning his most famous creation Conan brings to mind an image of a heavily muscled, sword-wielding man with long hair, wearing only a 'fur diaper', who speaks in grunts and monosyllables. The suspicion of florid prose and hackneyed plots is raised when it is mentioned that Howard wrote for a variety of pulps, such as *Fight Stories*, *Top-Notch*, and *Weird Tales*.

These perceptions are changing though. Part of this is due to the 'pure-text' editions being brought out by Ballantine/Del-Rey. The other mitigating factor is those critics and scholars who do not automatically hold the pulps in disdain. With *Heroes in the Wind*, editor and sf/fantasy critic John Clute makes a strong case as to why we should appreciate, enjoy, and read at least some of Robert E. Howard's stories.

The volume opens with a short introductory essay by John Clute. Instead of starting the essay with Howard's biography, Clute begins by explaining why someone should want to read Robert E. Howard. His explanation is simple and to the point – Howard was a passionate and skillful storyteller who 'had more on his mind than simply transporting us into the dreamlands of tooth and claw ...' (xi). Clute suggests the messages Howard tried to convey via his stories were: 1) the doom and fatality of being a man in Texas, and 2) the darkness and grimness of the twentieth century. Clute's assessment is partly right but I do feel he misses other themes in Howard's stories. The late Steve Tompkins made a strong case for Howard expressing a variety of facets of the American experience (Tompkins vii-xxii): not just general doom and gloom, but Howard also expressed the fears and hopes of the frontier, and the character of the archetypal American – the individual who is a wanderer, a fighter, and an explorer.

The short biography manages to avoid using the words 'crazy' and

'Oedipal', but is still dominated by Howard's devotion to his mother and his suicide. Clute paints a picture of a dark and intense man, an artist tortured by his personal demons and assuming responsibility for his mother's health and welfare. One has to ask, is this the only view we can have of Howard, particularly now that his voluminous correspondence is available? What about a picture of Robert E. Howard that incorporates his friends, his correspondents, his wit and sense of humor, and his travels through the Texas countryside?

Before the introduction closes, Clute gives a partial explanation of how and why he selected the texts for this volume. First, unlike the Ballantine/Del-Rey collections, Clute selected only from stories written and sold by Howard – thus several posthumous stories, posthumous collaborations, and poems were not considered for inclusion. For copy text, like the Ballantine/Del-Rey editions, he used the first published version. The L. Sprague de Camp and Donald Grant-edited versions were not used.

While Howard had his first sale in 1924, Clute considers Howard's professional writing career as starting in 1929 and lasting through 1935. During this time, Howard wrote and sold over 150 stories to a variety of genre pulps. Except for the comment on the boxing stories, Clute is not explicit about the criteria he used in selecting stories written and sold between 1929 and 1935. The boxing stories were omitted since Clute sees their pathos and viciousness as flaws (p. xi).

The first section of stories is entitled 'Black Dawn'. The five stories here all first appeared in *Weird Tales* between 1929 and 1932, and feature King Kull or Bran Mak Morn, King of the Picts. Noted by Clute, these stories are good in terms of plot and technique, but it is clear Howard is still perfecting his writing. Clute misses the historical importance of two of these stories. Howard created the 'sword and sorcery' genre in 1929 with the two King Kull stories ('The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune' and 'The Shadow Kingdom'). After some preliminaries, the tension and paranoia builds in 'The Shadow Kingdom', as Kull and Brule deal with malevolent shape-shifters. In 'The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune', there is much less swordplay, a slower pace, and much more existential pondering – not your typical sword-and-sorcery story!

Stories from several different pulp genres are featured in the second section, entitled 'Dark Interlude'. From the pages of *Weird Tales* come a story of the Puritan adventurer Solomon Kane ('The Footfalls Within')

and the horror story 'Pigeons from Hell'; a detective story featuring Steve Harrison ('The Graveyard Rats') from *Thrilling Mystery*; and the western 'The Vultures of Wahpeton' from *Smashing Novels*. While all the stories are solid examples of Howard's work, in my opinion, 'Pigeons from Hell' and 'The Vultures of Wahpeton' are examples of Howard at his finest. In 'Pigeons from Hell', Howard fused African-American oral traditions with Texas regionalism to create a unique and distinct horror story. Aside from its western setting and a sheriff with a white hat, 'The Vultures of Wahpeton' is anything but typical. With its flawed protagonist, the lawlessness, and violence, this short novel is reminiscent of a hard-boiled story from the pages of *Black Mask*.

In the third and final section of this book, 'High Noon', Clute focuses solely on the Conan stories, that show Howard at his best. Clute sees the best Conan stories as being: 'A Witch Shall Be Born', 'Queen of the Black Coast', 'Red Nails', and 'Tower of the Elephant'. While Clute includes 'A Witch Shall Be Born' for its nightmare nature (xvii), I would argue that 'Beyond the Black River' is a far superior story in terms of plot, writing technique, and Howard's world-view. Moreover, while Conan survives in 'Beyond the Black River', he does not come out the winner.

While the plots of these four stories may be simple, they work for a variety of reasons. First, forget long digressions on the politics, history, or economics of the Hyborian kingdoms; all the stories open with action and the prose throughout the story is not adjective heavy. For example, take the opening of the 'Queen of the Black Coast':

Hoofs drummed down the street that sloped to the wharfs. The folk that yelled and screamed had only a fleeting glimpse of a mailed figure on a black stallion, a wide scarlet cloak flowing out on the wind. Far up the street came the shout and clatter of pursuit, but the horseman did not look back. He swept out onto the wharfs and jerked the plunging stallion back on its haunches at the very lip of the pier. Seamen gaped up at him, as they stood to the sweep and striped sail of a high-prowed, broad-waisted galley. The master, sturdy and black-bearded, stood in the bows, easing her away from the piles with a boat-hook. He yelled angrily as the horseman sprang from the saddle and with a long leap landed squarely on the mid-deck. (364)

There are just enough to details in there to help the reader form their own mental image of what is transpiring. Howard uses the initial action

to draw the reader and keeps the plot moving, another trademark of his Conan stories.

These four stories also destroy several sword-and-sorcery stereotypes. Forget dialogue loaded with 'thee', 'thou art', and other archaisms; Howard used contemporary English when writing dialogue. While Tamaris in 'A Witch Shall Be Born' is a damsel in distress, Bêlit, Queen of the Black Coast, and Valeria of the Red Brotherhood are anything but. Howard has strong, liberated female characters a full thirty years before the women's movement. Further, three of the four stories illustrate Conan using his brains just as much as his brawn.

Is this a Robert E. Howard 'best of' volume? Unfortunately, my answer is no. While I am not an ardent fan of the boxing stories, I do feel Clute's exclusion of these stories is a flaw in the present volume. Several of the boxing stories, particularly those featuring Sailor Steve Costigan, are humorous and fall into the American tall tale tradition. Also missing is a humorous western featuring Breckenridge Elkins. The humor and levity in these two genres stand in marked contrast to the darkness and grimness in much of Howard's fantasy stories. The stories selected for this collection, while they are among Howard's best, essentially reinforce Clute's image of Howard as a 'tortured artist'. Nonetheless, this collection is a solid introduction to the short fiction of Robert E. Howard. For someone wanting to sample Howard's work for the first time, this is a good collection to start with. Further, given Howard's importance in fantasy literature, I could also see using this book as a text in a course on fantastic literature. Long-time Howard readers should have most of these stories in other editions.

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Wolfhound Century

By Peter Higgins (Gollancz, 2013, 320pp, £15.99)

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

In a grimy coffee shop on a drearily busy street in some faintly Slavic urban district, a policeman named Vissarion Lom and his partner are monitoring a dissident. They discuss Lom's busy work life, his non-existent social one, and whether or not the contact has spotted them. For his part, the contact reads a newspaper, buys an apricot juice, acts inconspicuously. We are in a dozen other Soviet spy thrillers, going through the generic motions.

And then the giants rumble down Durnovo-Burliuk Street.

Wolfhound Century's bold splicing of Iron Curtain crime caper and New Weird fantasy arrives on a wave of hype. Peter F. Hamilton, Hannu Rajaniemi and Richard Morgan all provide cover blurb. Of those, Morgan's is the most telling: 'Like vintage Miéville,' he enthuses, 'but with all the violent narrative thriller drive of Fleming at his edgiest.'

Superficially at least, this is a decent summary of Higgins' style in this, his debut novel. There is no doubt that its thriller element is propulsive and taut: like Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park* (1981) or Richard Harris's *Fatherland* (1992) – and indeed Miéville's own *The City and The City* (2009) – the prose here is crystal clear yet unafraid of elegant turns of phrase; the telegraphic chapters are expertly paced and carefully, if at times predictably, plotted; and the cast of present-and-correct generic characters are nevertheless given just enough room to breathe some unusual life into proceedings. Meanwhile, those giants, like those garuda, are the grit in Higgins's Russian ointment, as New Crobuzon is Dickens's London bent and melted out of shape. Much of what is pleasurable in *Wolfhound Century* lies in relishing the prolonged cognitive dissonance involved in holding constantly in opposition the obvious model and the separated object.

This is where the comparison's usefulness breaks down, however. Higgins is far more indebted to his inspirations than Miéville, whose Bas-Lag novels accrued invention with such dismaying skill and abandon that they rapidly left behind any antecedents and became their own artifact. The world Higgins sketches in *Wolfhound Century*, however, is an explicit

refiguration not just of places, costumes or morphology from our own world, but historical events and personages. These references are mixed and merged – but they never quite come unstuck from their forebears.

Lom lives in the vast territory of the Vlast, a superstate with a Big Brother figure at its head and the air of a Kievan Rus-ish origin: the Vlast was inaugurated by invaders, who trampled over an indigenous culture focused on the mysterious forests of the region. The stories and beliefs of this culture, suppressed by ever-present espionage, are decidedly similar to Slavic folklore and paganism. This posits the Novozhd, the Big Brother figure who presides over a long Cold War with the power known as the Archipelago and yet seeks to end it, as Peter the Great crossed with Stalin, imposing reforms which are contemptuous of his population in an effort to herald in a new world. Higgins is thus able simultaneously to render his not!Russia as a sort of tsarist state on the verge of revolution, and a kind of totalitarian dystopia stocked with the requisite levels of paranoia and secret policing.

The resonances keep coming. Lom is called to the capital of the Vlast, Mirgorod, to assist the crusty-but-noble chief of police, who is in pursuit of the dangerous-but-charming Josef Kantor, himself a sort of Lenin figure agitating against the Vlast, before the grabbing-and-deranged head of the secret service, Lavrentina Chazia, can manage the out-do both of them. Not only is Kantor familiar – at one point, Lom even foresees a statue of him, ‘five hundred feet tall [...] his right arm raised [...] bare-headed, his long coat lifted slightly’ (110) – Chazia, too, is transparently based on Lavrentiy Beria, the head of the NKVD under Stalin. Mirgorod is a real place, a city in Ukraine; not only that, of course, but *Mirgorod* is also the title of Gogol’s famous short story collection of 1835, in which folklore and nostalgia mixed to create its own kind of mythologized Slavic otherworld. It increasingly feels, as Higgins has Lom stay with his childhood friend (a Prince now hiding his aristocratic lineage under the Vlast), or introduces emissaries from the impenetrable Mat Zemlya-ish forest of the Vlast and calls them ‘paluba’(Russian for ‘deck’), or depicts a rag-taggle group of vaguely subversive artists who hang out in a bar known as the ‘Crimson Marmot’, that *Wolfhound Century* is a little like marginalia: divertingly rococo, but ultimately a glossing of another text.

In Higgins’s defense, there are hints that all of this is deliberate. When the novel’s hero finds himself back in the Vlast’s folkloric landscape,

accompanied by the woman who is possibly Josef Kantor's wayward daughter, he is advised by a mystical giant that, 'Different futures are trying to become' (240). The way in which clear analogues for our own world stalk Higgins's fantasy-streaked scenery is implied to have a deeper significance than simply a writer leaning too heavily on his crutches. 'The marshes are bigger than you think,' the giant continues, 'and different every day. Every tide brings shift and change. All possible marshes are here' (243).

The Vlast version of our own Eastern bloc is principally differentiated from it by the angels, beings fallen to earth during an apparently titanic space-bound struggle between forces interpreted by the Vlast's humans as representing 'good' and 'evil'. In the act of falling, vanquished, through the atmosphere, angels die – and are treated for the most part with reverence, but also as sites of scientific interest for certain parties, who chip away the rock-like substance of the angel's bodies and implant the fragments into their own flesh, seeking to develop psychic powers. Unknown to any of the characters at the start of the novel, a new angel has recently fallen to earth – and has survived the impact. It is this angel which appears to drive the plot, reaching out to the minds of several of the characters, most notably Kantor:

'The angel needs them dead, Levrentina,' Kantor heard himself say, and struggled to keep the self-disgust out of his voice. It uses me like a puppet. A doll. A servant. He was getting tired of the angel. More than tired. He feared and hated it. The situation was becoming intolerable. (256)

In its dark purpose and explicit manipulation of events, the angel is the clearest signal that Higgins's is a world deliberately, significantly, orthogonal to our own. 'Mirgorod was a battleground,' we read, 'a contention zone: two future cities both trying to become one.' (111) That vision of a statue experienced by Lom is similar to the ones which afflict his aristocratic friend, and also Kantor's daughter, Maroussia, a woman sought out for uncertain reasons by the forest's emissary, the paluba. As the novel moves inexorably towards a meeting of these plot threads, we come to understand that the visions are connected, the consequence of a leakage from the Pollandore, a device the angel seeks to destroy but which contains the world as it was – and, therefore, the future projections of the worlds which might be. *Wolfhound Century* is a breathless alternative history with an invisible jonbar point, an alteration so radical that it has rendered a world we recognize the severest fantasy.

This sites the novel awkwardly. Unlike a work of historical fantasy such as Guy Gavriel Kay's *Under Heaven* (2010), which mined the real history of Tang China to fashion a fantasy world rather less influenced by *faerie* than Higgins', and unlike more traditional alternative histories such as those of Mary Gentle (e.g. *Ash* (2000), *1610: A Sundial in a Grave* (2003)), in which events and people are recognizable but twisted or given secret cause, *Wolfhound Century* neither fully fictionalizes nor entirely respects its source material. In siting its events not in a reimagined past but a partially imagined parallel world, it purports to New Weird originality, and yet reads at times like the anachronistic scenes set in the Weimar Republic of Ned Beaumann's *The Teleportation Accident* (2012), a sort of knowing satire of historical fiction. The Vlast has a motto: 'HISTORY IS THE UNFOLDING OF THE CLOTH, BUT THE CLOTH HAS ALREADY BEEN CUT AND EVERY STITCH SEWN' (79). Higgins's project appears to be to disown this thesis.

It's not just in this respect, however, that Higgins can be difficult to nail down. All the giants, palubas and angels of his fantasies appear on the surface to be entirely magical, like Gogol's gnome king in 'Viy', a story of the *Mirgorod* cycle which claimed (entirely falsely) to be a transcription of a traditional Slavic fairy tale. But then we read that the forest's trees speak to Lom through 'psychoactive pheromones [...] through the alveolar forests of his human lungs and whorled synaptical pathways of his cerebral cortex' (125). Kantor, meanwhile, is driven by a person motivation in addition to the mystical mind-control of his angelic tormentor, which rejects the quasi-religious explanation imposed by the Vlast authorities on the war in heaven:

'What they [really] tell us is, there are other worlds, other suns, countless millions of them; you only have to look up in the night to see them. And we can go there. We can move among them. Humankind spreading out across the sky, advancing from star to star.' (214)

That is, the novel's villain is driven by a science fictional vision more ambitious than any which launched Yuri Gagarin into orbit. In this way, competing visions - competing genres - jostle the text of *Wolfhound Century* in a number of competing directions, keeping it as uncertain as its world.

All of which makes the novel's execution a disappointment. Weirdly truncated – it ends very much in the middle of the action, one of the most egregious pauses in a multi-volume series I have read in some time ("We'd better go," said Maroussia. "Yes." (303)). This 'closure' comes rather early

in the novel's second part, which is itself in truth more like its final quarter – lending further imbalance to a curiously slow-boiling structure, which suddenly explodes in incident and multiple climaxes at the last possible moment. This slim novel's sequel, *Truth and Fear*, has been written and submitted, and is slated by Gollancz for publication in March of next year. It is difficult to review *Wolfhound Century* completely without its companion volume, so seemingly incomplete is the former without the latter. Too soon to wonder if *Wolfhound Century*'s oddities are explained by the text itself, then, we must instead wonder if its curious awkwardness and uncertain vision are faults of editing more than execution. If it seems not to establish a fresh direction for the endlessly elastic New Weird which Miéville's twisted cities and landscapes did so much to promote, the other half of its map may yet yield something approaching an original topography.

The Time Ship: A Chrononautical Journey

By Enrique Gaspar; illustrated by Francesc Soler; translated by Yolanda Molina-Gavilán and Andrea Bell (Wesleyan University Press, 2012, 196pp + xlii + 52 illustrations, £60.50 hb, £21.50 pb)

Reviewed by Chris Pak (University of Birmingham)

For any student or enthusiast of time travel stories, encountering the first instance of a time machine to appear in any language has an undeniable attraction. *The Time Ship: A Chrononautical Journey*, written by Enrique Gaspar, was published in 1887, eight years before H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and almost a year before his unfinished serial, 'The Chronic Argonauts', appeared in the pages of *Science Schools Journal* in 1888. Entitled *El Anacronópete* in Spanish, the narrators explain that this original title derives from the Greek 'ana' for 'going backwards', 'cronos' for 'time', and 'petes' for 'he who flies' (xi). The English title seems to have been chosen to tap into the widespread recognition accorded Wells' classic novel. It is doubtful that Wells was influenced by Gaspar's novel; according to Molina-Gavilán and Bell's account it was not popular in Spain, let alone internationally, even in the author's own time. A second edition appeared only in 1999, made available in electronic format by the Spanish science fiction club, *Asociación Española de Fantasía, Ciencia-Ficción y Terror*, thanks to the efforts of the science fiction scholars, Nil Santiáñez-Tió and Augusto Uribe.

Although the two stories differ significantly in tone, trajectory and in their specific details, making a comparison between them a matter of great interest for formal and historical reasons. In their prefatory essay, Molina-Gavilán and Bell explore these dissimilarities, as well as the influence of Jules Verne on the narrative, and in doing so situate it within the wider science fiction tradition. Gaspar is not well known amongst anglophone readers, unless they have a little knowledge of the history of Spanish theatre, and the editors provide a useful biography which helps to enrich readings of the narrative. In addition, extensive endnotes and a bibliography help elucidate the heavily allusive narrative and provide further avenues for

scholarly consideration of the work, its place within the science fiction tradition, and the wider Spanish context from which it emerged.

Enrique Lucio Eugenio Gaspar y Rimbaud (1842-1902) was the son of two theatre actors, Juan Gaspar and Rafaela Rimbaud, and became a diplomat, stationed in China, first in Macau, then in Hong Kong. His lifelong love of the theatre shapes this narrative, through elements of the plot, allusions to theatre and to spectacle, metaphors and in the structure of the novel itself. The narrative was initially written as a zarzuela of three acts and thirteen scenes and, as the editors note, many features of this form are preserved in the novel adaptation. Sharing its name with a spiced Catalanian seafood stew, the theatrical zarzuela is a Spanish musical genre, a hybrid form that blends 'sophisticated musical ensembles and arias, verse and prose dialogue, popular songs and lowlife comic characters' (*The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance* 2012). The editors explain that Don Sindulfo and Clara function as the main singers, Benjamín and Juana as the comical duet, and Luis and Pendencia complete two love triangles; these characters are joined by the chorus of Spanish hussars and French prostitutes who accompany them on their voyage through time.

This 'cast list' and the device of the time ship give ample opportunity for a romp through time, with the time travellers spectating on, among other events, the Paris Commune, the Battle of Tetouan, the parting of the Red Sea and the biblical flood. They visit China in search of the secret of immortality, meet the last Han emperor, Liu Xie (Hsien-Ti in the transcription system adopted in the novel) and the fictitious empress Sun-Che, and are thrown into gladiatorial combat as *bestiarii* in Pompeii during the time of the famous eruption. Footnotes explaining the historical contexts surrounding these adventures are instructive and support the curious reader or scholar unfamiliar with Spanish or Chinese history by providing the necessary information to make sense of the many events that the characters find themselves in. They also expand upon issues of translation and the problems of pinpointing historical sources for the events described, as with the case of Sun-Che, whose appearance and particular circumstances as outlined in the novel departs from recorded history.

As the summary above implies, the novel's plot is somewhat rambling and many of the particular historical events that are encountered have no significant impact upon its development. That is not to say that they are always irrelevant; often they are used to revisit events central to Spanish

history with patriotic pride. The motivation for scientist and inventor Don Sindulfo's creation of the time ship is a personal one. After the death of his first wife, his niece Clara is placed under his care when her parents die. His lack of experience in matters of love results in Don Sindulfo's being smitten by her beauty; he proposes marriage but is rebuffed. Clara, for her part, is in love with Don Luis, her cousin and the captain of the hussars. Don Sindulfo jealously forbids her to marry Don Luis and, promising her dying mother to obey her uncle by refusing to marry anyone he does not approve of, she rebuffs any suggestion that she and Don Luis elope. Don Sindulfo's sole reason for constructing the time ship is to travel to a time when/where it is acceptable for him to impose his will upon her and force her to marry him. Complementing this personal motivation is the polyglot Benjamín's desire to uncover the secret of a mummy that he procures, being financially straitened, with Don Sindulfo's monetary support. He believes the mummy is from China and, after studying it at length, wishes that they could travel back in time to uncover the secret of its provenance. These two monomaniacal desires drive their journey through time.

It is clear that the mechanics of time travel are subordinated to the demands of comedy. The opening of the novel, 'In Which it is Proved that FORWARD is not the Byword of Progress', opens promisingly with the image of vast human streams, by the narrator's account the whole population of Paris, converging on the Champ de Mars for Don Sindulfo's exposition of the time ship. The reader is informed that 'Science had just taken a step that was going to radically change humanity's way of life', but how such change might manifest is not explored by the narrative. The wonderment of the Parisian population at this breakthrough in science is, as the narrator is careful to stress, especially interesting because it comes from '[a] name-hitherto obscure and Spanish to boot'. The narrative openly and affectionately tackles the stereotype of Spanish science as backward in comparison to the rest of Europe, especially France, a world leader in science. Jules Verne is raised only to be dismissed with a flippant comment, '[t]he so-called marvellous hypotheses of the famous Jules Verne were but child's play' compared with the narrative being told, thus elevating Gaspar's own unique travelogue (3). Yet the narrative relies heavily on the presence of Verne to make sense of the story being told. During Don Sindulfo's explanation of the workings of his time machine, he clearly signals to his audience that the particular mechanics of the time machine need not be

adumbrated, given that the

public [...] knows by heart the works of Jules Verne: works of entertainment which, if they cannot be compared with the solemn scientific nature of my theories, nonetheless contain hypotheses based on physical and natural studies that relieve me from giving vexing explanations. (18)

Gaspar's narrative, then, is clearly indebted to Verne's far more popular works, and suggests that issues of storytelling and fictionalized science are to be central to the story. This is, in fact, not the case, and once this opening chapter establishes the background for the adventures that are to follow, these potential avenues are not explored in any significant way.

The nature of time that underpins Don Sindulfo's invention is absurd, and the origin of the idea clearly pokes fun at the notion of scientific explanations for marvellous phenomena. Essentially, time is governed by its relationship to the Earth's rotation. The Earth rotates from west to east, and the Earth's atmosphere travels in the opposite direction. Central to this theory is that time is equated with the atmosphere, hence the removal of the atmosphere from tins prevents sardines from rotting. This is because there is no time in the tin for rotting – a process – to occur. Don Sindulfo's metaphor of a hat being turned one way, and a crepe being unwound from just above its brim in the opposite direction, illustrates this idea. This metaphor is accompanied by an illustration that gives the air of legerdemain to the exposition, and this reviewer was reminded of expositions of pseudo-scientific theories that were popular in the late nineteenth century. That this explanation is a farce is established when its origin in a dispute between Don Sindulfo and Juanita over a domestic issue is described. In a retort to Don Sindulfo's command that she busy herself scraping the grime off a burner, she replies that if it were that easy, 'you'd already have made yourself as good as new by scraping the extra layers of years off with a knife' (33). That it is this comment that triggers Don Sindulfo's invention cues the reader to acknowledge that technical explanations – which the narrator openly begs to be absolved from (52) – are not central to the story.

The travellers' visit to China and the wonder with which they react to the technological achievements of the ancient empire becomes a platform to compare 'the decadence and backwardness of nineteenth-century China' and its 'stagnation and even regression of the present' (107). It

is unsurprising that such jingoism would accompany a narrative penned by a diplomat stationed in Hong Kong at the time, but such attitudes do provide (without excusing, of course – this reviewer is a Hong Kong-born Chinese!) an interesting comparison to the mixture of Spanish patriotism and good-natured jokes levelled at the stereotype of Spanish backwardness contemporary to the text.

The novel is illustrated by Francesc Gómez Soler i Rovirosa (1836-1900), an innovator of stage design. The illustrations are compelling and certainly add an extra charm to the narrative of the text. The narrative itself can be read precisely for this charm and enjoyed in spite of its failures which, given the trajectory of science fiction as it has developed and been received by contemporary readers, are failures in retrospect. As a novel its plot is patchy, but as a light-hearted romp patterned on a musical genre that involves low comedy, *The Time Ship* certainly succeeds. That is not to say that its humour is in any way profound or innovative, relying heavily as it does on the contrast between social backgrounds (signified by an orthography that attempts to represent phonetically the speech patterns of the economically underprivileged) and gender norms. The conclusion of the narrative is also particularly disappointing, given the fact that the travellers are ostensibly journeying back toward the creation of time and space itself. Likewise, a mystery arises that is explained in terms of the transmigration of souls but, rather than exploring this notion, it is simply forgotten. Nevertheless, as an insight into the wider international background that accompanied the rise of scientific romance in Europe, this well researched and beautifully presented edition of the first time travel story involving a time machine is a worthy addition to any science fiction library.

Adam Robots

By Adam Roberts (Gollancz, 2013, 391pp, £12.99)

Reviewed by Tom Sykes

Before I had read any of Adam Roberts's books, I met him in person at the 2011 Current Research in Speculative Fiction conference. He delivered an illuminating – and exceedingly funny – keynote speech outlining his theory of science fiction, which he encapsulated in this one idiom: 'the knight's move'. For Roberts, the finest sf takes its readers on a conceptual flight away from mundane and literal-minded ways of regarding reality and into spectacularly metaphorical representations of it. There are traces here of the Romantic concept of the sublime, and it is therefore apt that Roberts teaches nineteenth-century literature when he isn't writing sf. Another of his passions is comedy, which he argues operates in much the same way as transcendental sf; the efficacy of a punchline can often be measured by how strange or surprising a departure it is from its setup.

Roberts's new book, *Adam Robots*, is clear proof that he practises as a storyteller what he preaches as a critic. Manifest in these two dozen short stories are various 'conceptual breakthroughs' (260) that elucidate a number of timely matters, from the theological to the political, the ontological to the technological. But while Roberts consistently takes us to new places and show us things we haven't seen before, his referential, sometimes intertextual style never loses sight of the time-honoured conventions of the genre that excites him so much. Although in the introduction he admits to wanting to write 'at least one thing in all the myriad sub-genres and sub-sub-genres of SF' (1), this doesn't equate to some superficial box-ticking exercise in homage or fan fiction. It is much more about satirising, subverting and reinventing what has come before.

Thus, what better way to undermine the masturbatory masculinity of boy's own sf than to write a story about an adolescent lad whose sperm is harvested to create an all-conquering galactic army? While 'The Imperial Army' works as a rollicking, action-packed narrative level – just as early space opera does – it is, at the same time, able to make sideswipes at

space opera's reactionary assumptions about colonialism, eugenics and the martial mentality.

Taking the military theme in a different direction, 'Godbombs' posits a future war fought, as the title makes plain, with weapons that compel one side to worship the other like a deity. Here are vigorous nods to 'Nam-era New Wave freak-outs such as *Barefoot in the Head* (1969) and *The Forever War* (1974) (Roberts' protagonist is one 'Captain Haldeman'), but also wry winks at the religious fundamentalisms that have driven more recent international conflicts.

If such extreme belief systems appear to be easy comic targets (and Roberts takes aim at them again elsewhere in the book), other stories treat more palatable religious ideas with a sincerity and open-mindedness seldom seen in sf. Whereas a number of high-profile writers in the genre have espoused a militant atheism wedded to an often uncritical scientism (obvious examples being certain Golden Age figures and Richard Dawkins's good friend Douglas Adams), Roberts repeatedly uses the knight's move to think more inventively – and less dogmatically – about the relationship between physics and metaphysics, and the limits of human understanding in both areas. In 'Wonder: a Story in Two', humanity gains the scientific capacity to 'spread itself to ten thousand worlds' and is then faced with the challenge that 'immortality, or God, [is] hidden in a world orbiting a star in the Kyd-blank zones' (256). 'Adam Robots' places a robot by that name in an Eden-like garden and burdens him with an ontological crisis: in the garden is a jewel that contains all the qualities required to become fully human. Rather than programme him not to steal the jewel, his creators simply tell him not to, as an *experimentum crucis* on his capacity for free will. With a healthy amount of irreverence and irony, the tale brings the oldest Judaeo-Christian theology to bear on contemporary concepts of artificial intelligence. Perhaps Roberts's most engaging response to the science-belief question is a memorable 'test of faith' cliffhanger in another story somewhere else in this collection (to explain it in much more detail than that would, I fear, be an unforgivable plot-spoiler).

Adam Robots is packed full of such 'philosophical abstractions made concrete' (to borrow Philip K Dick's definition of sf). The unsettling 'Thrownness' crafts the classic sf conceit of inter-dimensional travel into an ornate metaphor for existential *ennui*. The disarmingly jolly narrator ('My heart was chuntering on at a fair old lick' (51)) is condemned to an

eternity of leaping between alternate realities, all of which are eerily similar to the modern Britain where he originates from, although nobody in these other realities ever recognizes him. He finds himself both liberated and trapped: never held accountable for his actions, he can do more or less what he likes in the short-term, but is denied the freedom to make long-term commitments or form lasting relationships.

In 'ReMorse', Roberts turns ethics on its head by imagining a drug that is supposed to boost human empathy and herald utopia, but in fact leads to a fascistic dystopia sustained by new, unanticipated forms of sadism. The narrator is both sinister and salacious, a hybrid of O'Brien from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and some 1970s sitcom character ('It's – in a word – look, I'm sorry to use this word, but it's sex' (137)).

As we progress through *Adam Robots*, its varied adventures in 'radical otherness' (261) start to have a cumulative effect: we get the sense that the knight's move means a lot more to the human experience than aesthetic transcendence or intellectual expansion. In the epic and cinematic 'Pied', Roberts's personal vision of the apocalypse doesn't doom mankind to a plague of locusts or a nuclear holocaust, but something worse: the loss of our 'capacity for wonder' (272).