

# matrix

the media magazine of the british science fiction association

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## Political Animal:

Martin McGrath on the  
modern comic book

Spider-man 3  
reviewed!

Ken MacLeod  
interviewed!

Pecs & death in 300

News, reviews  
and much more!

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

# matrix

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# Quick Questions

**Matrix gets ten seconds to ask *Battlestar Galactica* actress Grace Park a couple of questions...**

**Will your character Sharon ever be accepted by the humans?**

"Sharon 'Athena' will never forget that she is a cylon. As blissful as it may sound to forget the separation of their differences, it is not a reality during the intensity of war. I believe she will fit in, but there will always be someone ready to point a gun at her, or at least a finger. And Sharon will always do the unexpected..."

**What's your best *Battlestar Galactica* moment?**

"Shooting Adama. And Athena and Boomer's first confrontation. That ends in a cylon on cylon bikini mud wrestle. They edited that out... Off screen, any time hanging with the cast."

# Fiction What Is Strange

Guest editorial by  
Hal Duncan

When my first novel came out, many interviewers asked, is this SF, Fantasy or Horror? My answer was simple: Yes. It has nanotech, angels, and a character who spends half the book with a meathook in his chest, so it qualifies on all three counts, mate. Take your pick. Why choose? Genre labels and aesthetic forms aren't one and the same. That label on the back doesn't signify an essential difference, just a pragmatic decision over marketing category.

The urge to pigeonhole is understandable though. As readers who've chosen to classify our tastes by genre, sidling over to the certain shelf in our search for more of a same and something different, we often come to have a relatively clear idea of what our genre is, a loyalty to certain aesthetic forms over others; and we often make the mistake of thinking our own preferred form the only "real" SF, the only "real" Fantasy.

A hundred teacup tempests across the internet rage over whether SF is "real" SF if it's got magic in it (unlike Bester's *The Stars My Destination*, for example, with that rigorously scientific extrapolation of jaunting, where one wishes oneself from A to B without even a click of ruby slippers), or whether the presence of magic makes a book, by definition, Fantasy (like Peake's *Gormenghast*, for example, with its clearly impossible conceit of... um... a Very Big House). Sooner or later these discussions degenerate into status scuffles, with SF as the catch-all term and Fantasy as its spotty younger sibling, or Fantasy as the catch-all term and

SF as its bespectacled offspring. Generally an uneasy truce prevails in which all three are deemed "speculative fiction", a term so vague it demands mumbling.

Somewhere in unmeten attempts to find an answer to that genre question for *Vellum* I realised that I couldn't honestly, meaningfully, use those labels at all, not without all the baggage of those teacup tempests and the slippery content-based definitions that surface in them again and again, particularly those which seek to segregate SF and Fantasy on that hoary old distinction of science versus magic. Which is a bummer.

See, I was always more SF than Fantasy. After the mandatory reading of *The Lord of the Rings* (and obligatory abandonment of *The Silmarillion*), I discovered Heinlein, Dick, Sladek, Delany. I read a few Tolkien imitators but realised, nope, this isn't for me. My genre, the genre for me, was this wildly eclectic SF of Martian love-gurus, galactic pothealers, killer robots, apocalyptic cities. It didn't matter to me that Valentine Michael Smith was a messiah, that Dick had gods wandering his consensual realities, that Sladek's satire was absurdly implausible, that Delany's Bellona defies reality. This was SF; as far as I was concerned, a vast field as much about the incredible as the credible.

The roots of this understanding go back to my earliest readings. One of the stories that got under my skin and stayed there to this day is Bradbury's "The Veldt", a simple story, but one that begs that question, "Is this SF, Fantasy or Horror?" It begins with the nursery as pure SFnal extrapolation, crystal walls and



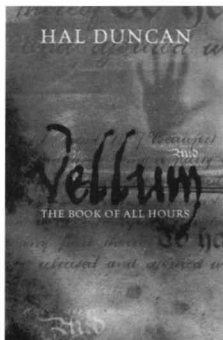
odorophonics, a science-built illusion of a veldt, but, as the boundary between illusion and reality breaks down, the story rejects SFnal plausibility for the impossibility of Fantasy, finally, in its climax becoming unmistakably Horror. That's my SF. But in the world of teacup tempests, metaphysics equals magic, magic equals Fantasy, Fantasy equals dragons, and that is most definitely not SF for many. With stories like Bradbury's I'm loathe to surrender that label of SF to shuffle "The Veldt" off into Fantasy just so a few blowhards can have an SF free of the taint of metaphysics. What's next? Dick's *Váldi*? Delany's *Dalghren*? But I'm equally loathe to defend Bradbury's position in SF if it's only a quality judgement, an analogue of the old adage as regards SF:

If it's Fantasy it can't be good; if it's good it can't be Fantasy... it must be SF.

So I've given up on those labels. I refuse them. I reject them. Ask me what this or that work is, and I'll say Scientific Fancy, Scientific Fiction, Soul Fiction, Symbolic Formulation, Structural Fabulation, Spectaculist Fantasy. My SF is a wide and varied field with room for all those aesthetic forms, some SFnal, some Fantastic, some Horrific, many -- like Bradbury, Dick or Delany -- blithely ignoring the imaginary lines between marketing categories. Look at it on a deeper level and what you find is this... fiction what is strange... strange in some quite specific ways, I think.

Of course, explaining that in an interview is another story.

So is this SF Fantasy or Horror?  
Um... yes.



A hundred teacup tempests rage over whether the presence of magic makes a book by definition Fantasy, like Peake's *Gormenghast* with its clearly impossible conceit of... um... a Very Big House

# King of the Swingers

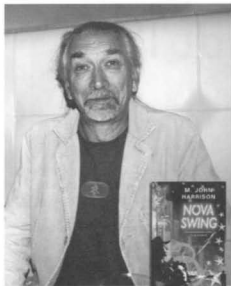
**M**. John Harrison's novel *Nova Swing* (Gollancz) is the winner of this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award for the best Science Fiction novel of the year published in the UK.

The novel is a partial return to the imaginative world first explored in his previous Clarke Award nominated novel *Light*. However whereas that novel was set across a variety of settings and time periods, including the immediate present and far future scenes located within the unmathematically bound space of Harrison's memorable Kefahuchi Tract, *Nova Swing* takes a more planet-bound approach to focus on the city state of Saudade and its misanthropic populace.

The award was presented at a special ceremony held in conjunction with the opening of the Sci-Fi-London film festival and marked the 21st Clarke Award.

The winner is presented with a cheque for £2007.00 and an engraved bookend.

See [www.clarkeaward.com](http://www.clarkeaward.com)



# New Kids on the Block

**S**ci-fi is alive, kicking and (if certain magazine titles are to be taken literally) very much of the now.

We've talked about Geek Chic before in these pages, and the publication of two new glossies (*SciFiNow* and *Death Ray*) is further proof that while sf fandom may indeed be greying (although we're not exactly persuaded of that notion) the public perception of sci-fi is still boldly going strong – and in technicolour too.



These two new titles have recently been launched and join the ranks of established media magazines with a definitive genre bent including *Total Film*, *SFX* and *Starburst* as well as a host of other specialist mags available.



## 30 Years and one Galaxy Far, Far Away

**I**magine, if you can, a science fictional world a long time ago (thirty years in fact) when there was no such thing as Darth Vader, Wookies or the Millennium Falcon.

There are many ways to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the holy trilogy (ok, and the prequels) and two of the best are July's *Celebration Europe* event and *Star Wars: The Exhibition*, both of which take place in London. See [www.celebrationeurope.com](http://www.celebrationeurope.com) and [www.weirdandwonderful.com](http://www.weirdandwonderful.com) for info.

## BSFA Recommended Reading List

### Non Fiction Books Published in 2006

The non-fiction category of the BSFA Awards includes any written work about science fiction and/or fantasy which appeared in its current form in 2006. There will not be an individual award for this category; instead the shortlist below is recognised as the BSFA Recommended Reading List.

#### **The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology**

Edited by Paul Kincaid with Andrew M. Butler  
Published by Serendip Foundation

#### **Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century**

By Justine Larbalestier  
Published by Wesleyan University Press

#### **Great British Comics**

By Paul Gravett  
Published by Aurum Press Ltd

#### **James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon**

By Julie Phillips  
Published by St Martin's Press

#### **Polder: A Festschrift for John Clute and Judiith Clute**

Edited by Farah Mendlesohn  
Published by Old Earth Books

## END OF THE WORLD BLUES



JON COURTENAY  
GRIMWOOD

'Dazzling panache and an acute satirical eye'  
The Times

# BSFA Award: Winners in Full

The British Science Fiction Awards for 2006 were presented in a ceremony on the evening of Saturday the 7th of April at Contemplation, the 58th National British science fiction convention (Eastercon).

The award for Best Novel went to Jon Courtenay Grimwood for *End of the World Blues* (Gollancz); the award was presented to Jon by Ian McDonald.

The award for Best Short Fiction then went to Ian McDonald for *The Djinn's Wife* (Asimov's Science Fiction, June); the award was presented to Ian by Liz Williams.

The award for Best Artwork went to Fangorn for *Angelbot* (Cover of *Time Pieces*, ed. Ian Whates).

Geoff Ryman also read out the BSFA Recommended Reading List for Best Non-

Fiction, as no individual award was presented this year and the full list can be seen on the previous page.

The ceremony was hosted by compere

extraordinaire John Jarrold, administered by Ian Snell and with an audience made up of the members of the BSFA and Contemplation attendees.

See [www.bsfa.co.uk](http://www.bsfa.co.uk) for further details.



## Fame at Last?

Director Ridley Scott's films *Alien* and *Blade Runner* are major science fiction movies and landmarks in American cinema, so it should come as no surprise that he's been named as one of the inductees for this year's Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

Scott joins *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry, artist Ed Emshwiller and author Gene Wolfe in the 2007 honours list, and will be inducted in a special ceremony hosted by award-winning author Neal Stephenson.

The Science Fiction Hall of Fame honors the lives, work and ongoing legacies of science fiction's greatest creators. Founded in 1996, the Hall of Fame was relocated from the Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas to its permanent home at SFM in 2004. Induction nominations are submitted by SFM members. The final inductees are chosen by a panel of award-winning science fiction authors, artists, editors, publishers and film professionals.

As part of the induction, a display featuring personal artifacts and video footage from each inductee will be added to the existing Hall of Fame exhibit.

Previous inductees include, Stephen Spielberg, George Lucas, Ursula K. Le Guin, Mary Shelley and Isaac Asimov.

# Shanghai to Shepperton

From *Shanghai to Shepperton: An International Conference on J.G. Ballard* was held at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom Saturday 5th & Sunday 6th May 2007.

Featuring guest speakers including editor David Pringle and author Toby Litt, the event was held in the impressively oppressive and Ballardian surroundings of the ziggurat styled university and featured a list of panels on

topics as diverse as urban semiotics, the pornography of abstraction and the secret truth of why every Ballard novel has to feature at least one doctor (ok, we made that last one up).

"If I had a pound for every time someone mentioned the word 'psychopathology' at this conference, I'd be a very rich man," was one of the most notable conclusions of the weekend according to [www.ballardian.com](http://www.ballardian.com).



## Prime Time

For those brave few who've managed to resist a nightly internet vigil of rumour boards, sneak peeks and the sight of fully updated live action *Autobots* and bad-ass *Decepticons* infiltrating their way into the nation's multiplexual imagination, it may come as some surprise that *Matrix* is proving surprisingly positive about the imminent big screen unveiling of *Transformers*. Perhaps it's because certain editors are exactly the right age demographic to have imbibed the merchandise meme without the slightest degree of cybernetic cynicism, but for some staffers this movie couldn't be more hotly anticipated if it was divided up into 5 min segments and introduced by a fake rodent.

Meanwhile here's a quick pic of Optimus Prime...



# History Reshaped

**The second series of BBC1's *Spooks* opened in September 2006 with a story of a failed British coup. It was fiction, of course – coups happen only in remote places like Thailand and Fiji. Don't they?**

In fact, remarkably, in 1968 a serious coup was attempted against the British government.

The truth about the plots against Harold Wilson's government has been revealed over the years. Wilson himself spoke at length to two journalists, Barrie Penrose and Roger Courturier (see *The Penicill File*, Harper & Row, 1978). One of Wilson's key opponents in the secret services, Peter Wright, gave his own account in *Spycatcher* (Viking, 1987). The events have been dramatised in a novel by journalist Mark Lawson in *Enough is Enough* (Picador, 2004), and explored in a 2006 Channel 4 documentary called *The Plot Against Harold Wilson* (2006). The attempt was real enough.

But why was a coup tried at all? Could a Prime Minister really have been toppled? And what then?

There was certainly dissatisfaction with the government, elected in 1964. Wilson's economic policy had been derailed by sterling crises. In the age of the permissive society some saw Britain as decaying from within; there were examples of massive civil unrest in America, and in France workers were striking and students rioting. The military were unhappy, specifically over cutbacks to pet projects like the (very beautiful) TSR-2 aircraft. Internationally, Britain was still outside the European Economic Community, and President Johnson was not impressed that Wilson had steadfastly refused to send British troops to the war in Vietnam.

Of course not much of this was Harold Wilson's fault. For many, it was easier to blame a government for Britain's woes than to accept the realities of global, political and cultural changes. And I have to say that in my experience there are some elements in British society who have always found it hard to accept any Labour government as legitimate.

At the heart of the coup attempt was a cabal of people willing to believe that Harold Wilson wasn't just incompetent but treacherous. Peter Wright and CIA agent James Jesus Angleton theorised that Wilson was a Soviet mole – a spy, at the top of the British government. Of course it was all nonsense. As it happens Harold Wilson was my constituency MP; my father thought Wilson was a bit shifty, but as far as I know didn't notice any snow on his boots. Wilson himself was aware of some of the

manoeuvring, and he became secretive and paranoid.

The muttering came to an astonishing head in 1968, when a newspaper grandee called Cecil King tried to organise a coup d'état in which an 'Emergency Government' led by a royal, Lord Mountbatten, would have taken over. To his eternal credit, Mountbatten turned kingmaker King down flat, and the coup attempt became a historical footnote.

But what if Mountbatten had said yes?

The first step would have been the overnight rounding-up of likely trouble-makers, including union leaders, cabinet ministers like Anthony Wedgwood Benn, and no doubt satirical telly types like David Frost and Peter Cook. Vital assets would have been seized: the media and communications, power, transport. The public would have woken up to images of tanks rolling across airport runways. (Indeed Wilson believed an unexpected

## Coups happen only in remote places like Thailand and Fiji. Don't they?

army 'exercise' at Heathrow to be a show of strength against him.)

There would have been nothing so blatant as a storming of 10 Downing Street. The BBC news would have reassured us that after Wilson's sudden retirement to the Scillies through 'illness', power had been handed smoothly to the 'Emergency Government' under Mountbatten.

Why Mountbatten? Then sixty-eight, Louis Mountbatten was a great-grandson of Queen Victoria; Prince Charles called him 'uncle Dickie'. And he had an impressive record, serving as supreme allied commander of South-east Asia during the war, and later as the last viceroy of imperial India. This combination of royalty and statesmanship made Mountbatten a credible leader of monarchist Britain. To older generations at the time, the royals embodied a sort of romantic ideal of the best of Britain. An Elizabethan coup set in 1983 is actually depicted in the novel *In the Wet* (1953) by *On the Beach* author Nevil Shute, in which, in a dismal, rationed, bureaucracy-strangled, Labour-run Britain, the Queen flies off to Australia and refuses to return until one-

man-one-vote is replaced by a more 'modern' system based on merit and royal patronage. Loyalty to the royals could have been leveraged in using Mountbatten. If 'uncle Dickie' says everything's OK, Joe Public might have felt, that's good enough for me.

Of course MPs on all sides would have been perturbed by such a blatant threat to democracy. For one thing there was a strong convention that the Prime Minister must come from the Commons. But there is ambiguity at the top of our constitution, with residual powers being reserved under the 'royal prerogative'. If the Queen (perhaps with her arm subtly twisted) had selected uncle Dickie, it might have been hard to resist. Even after this, however, parliament might have proven a focus of resistance. Britain has no written constitution, but its governments are constrained by a web of laws, institutions and customs which might, paradoxically, have been a stiffer challenge to the Emergency Government than forcing through an amendment to a written constitution.

The Emergency Government would eventually have had to impose its will. Soldiers in the Palace of Westminster would have cracked any veneer of political legitimacy. No doubt subtler measures would have been sought.

Internationally, the stance of the Americans would have been crucial.

The Americans, at the height of the Cold War, would have been very wary of any threat to their interests, not just for Britain's strategic value but because of the billions of dollars invested in military bases on our soil since the Second World War. Labour MP Chris Mullins' *A Very British Coup* (Hodder, 1982) shows a left-wing Labour leader intent on ejecting American bases. He is speedily toppled: 'Membership of NATO is about as voluntary as membership of the Warsaw Pact!' In Brian Aldiss's 1986 story 'My Country 'Tis Not Only of Thee' (in the collection *Man in His Time*, Gollancz 1989), economic decay and inequality leads to a hotchpotch rebellion in the north of England, and American occupiers in the south treat British history and culture with utter contempt. The story was a look-back to Vietnam; now it serves as a prescient glimpse of the 'wars for democracy' waged in our own age.

In the aftermath of the 1968 coup, however, a more pro-American British regime might actually have been welcomed in Washington, especially if the new Prime Minister Royal committed British troops to Vietnam after all.

In subsequent years the special relationship might have got more special still. In our

## Stephen Baxter takes an alternate look at the secret history of coups, conspiracies and political cabals

world Britain finally gained admittance to the European Union in 1973 – but perhaps the European democracies would have recoiled from a post-coup Britain, leaving us to the American embrace. In the later 1970s the exploitation of North Sea oil would make us a still more valuable asset to America, a Saudi Arabia of the Atlantic. We might have had some compensatory treats from our American masters – a British guest astronaut on Skylab, for instance, as the Soviets hosted guests from client states on the Mir.

But what about democracy? Well, in their dealings with awkward democrats like Allende in Chile, American administrations at that time had a record of ruthlessness: the other guy's a dictator but he's *our* dictator.

As the years passed there would have been elections, but with the office of Prime Minister within the royal family and Labour forever excluded from power, Britain would have been a one-party state in all but name. Finding an eventual successor to Mountbatten might have been tricky. Prince Charles? ... The miners' strikes of the 1970s, which brought down

the Heath government, would have been met with at least the sort of force that Mrs Thatcher used against Scargill's strike in the 1980s. No resistance to measures like the poll tax would have been tolerated.

Of course there would be discontent. The passing years would have thrown up resistance movements, operating like the IRA, perhaps, funded by Britain's (and America's) enemies. (The IRA actually killed Mountbatten himself in 1979.) But a heavy cost would have been paid. Investment would have been deterred by terrorism, and the economy would stagnate: witness Northern Ireland.

One odd consequence of a lack of economic development and intellectual freedom might have been the slower development of the mobile phone. See Francis Spufford's *Backroom Boys* (2003) on British industry's crucial contribution to that technology.

Everything about our culture would have been different. The output of the media

would have been heavily controlled from the start. In 1982, when Mrs Thatcher was ambushed on the BBC's *Nationwide* about the sinking of the *Belgrano*, husband Denis noted that she had been 'stitched up by bloody BBC poofs and Trots.' None of that sort of nonsense under Mountbatten!

The Establishment would have swiftly taken its revenge on the 1960s counter-culture. The coppers were already arresting drug-experimenting rock stars; *Sergeant Pepper* (1967) might have been the Beatles' last album. Later, punk rock might still have emerged, but, ruthlessly suppressed, would have stayed underground. Rock festivals like the Isle of Wight and Live Aid would never

the collapse of the Soviet Union might have happened on schedule.

After that, perhaps there could have been a British 'velvet revolution' like those in eastern Europe, and then a mood of reconciliation, with emissaries of President Clinton seeking to broker 'Good Friday' agreements between Britain's armed dissident groups. Three decades after the coup, the values of the vanquished Labour movement might have been reconsidered.

But the atmosphere might have changed again with 9/11. The coup's ghastliest long-term consequence might have been the emergence of a super-terrorist from within our uncomfortable American-owned shores,

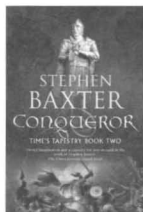
as Osama bin Laden emerged from Saudi Arabia.

It's said that most alternate histories we imagine are worse than our own. Certainly I find it hard to dream up anything very pleasant about the history that might have come about had Mountbatten said 'yes' to Cecil King in 1968.

And it's an odd irony that while men like Wright, Angleton and King were motivated

by fear of Soviet destabilisation, in the end it was they who damaged Britain's elected government.

(I'm grateful to Simon Bradshaw for stimulating discussions about the content of this piece.)



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

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have been allowed, though Wembley might have hosted state-sponsored rallies to the accompaniment of decorous tea-dance music. For the young the 1970s and after might have had more of the feel of the drab, conformist 1950s than the 1960s.

It would be nice to imagine the New Wave generation of sf authors prevailing as gadflies against the new regime, publishing spiky satirical novels from small presses. But Eastercons and other conventions might have been banned under anti-sectarian laws. And it's hard to imagine a fantasy series starring a maverick, anti-war, anti-Establishment figure being put out by Mountbatten's BBC: *Doctor Who* would have been cancelled long before 1989.

History would have unfolded in the wider world. A supine aircraft-carrier Britain might actually have strengthened President Reagan's hand in his 'Star Wars' showdowns with Gorbachev; the fall of the Berlin Wall and

# Surviving Science Fiction

**Tom Hunter:** What prompted the move from your more space-based fiction over to the contemporary (even if alternate) world of *The Execution Canoe*?

**Ken MacLeod:** I felt I'd gone as far into space opera as I was interested in going at the moment, and I had accumulated a whole new decade's worth of political anger. I began to say things like that we'd done New Space Opera and maybe it was time we tried New British Catastrophe. In the meantime, directly political, near-future SF novels – sometimes in a crime, noir or technothriller mode – had begun to appear: from Paul McAuley, Kim Stanley Robinson and Richard Morgan, for instance. My agent and my editor were in hearty agreement with this shift back to near-future books, and that's what my next two are going to be.

**TH:** This change of setting also marks a newly transparent, stripped down, writing style for you. Is this a deliberate move, part of the territory of the thriller or simply a component of the sf element becoming more invisible?

**KM:** A bit of both. Also, my writing style has become more straightforward over the years. The writing in my second novel, *The Stone Canal*, is noticeably less cluttered than in my first. This was largely due to a short and salutary exercise with a sharp pencil on a few pages of the manuscript, carried out by my friend the Scottish novelist and poet Andrew Greig. He called it 'removing the fluff from the needle'. After he'd shown me how, I was able to do it for myself.

**TH:** So are we seeing a revival of sf cloaked in the spy thriller genre, and is this perhaps a recognisable trend/symptom of post 9/11 literature?

**KM:** Paul McAuley and Greg Bear were doing this sort of thing before 9/11 as well as after. What I think it's a symptom of is that the quality of writing in other genres, particularly thriller and crime, continues to advance – and, to be blunt, gets more mainstream recognition and more sales than SF. Speaking for myself, I quite deliberately set out to sugar-coat the virus to slip it past the immune-system.

**TH:** Given that at least part of the sf readership will be technology-

savvy, is it a particular challenge to write edge of now tech in a book like this?

**KM:** The big scale stuff is not that hard to do. Just read *New Scientist*. What's difficult is the small everyday tech. In the book I have a greater-than-now cheapness and ubiquity of mobile phones and GPS, something called 'earbeats', and a slightly more scary network of CCTV and face-recognition than actually exists today. I have no doubt that all of these will come a lot faster than the book implies – GPS is now a regular feature on phones, as I've just noticed.

**TH:** I couldn't help noticing you have a main character called Travis and a mediated title? Crafty nods to J.G. Ballard, or just my wishful thinking?

**KM:** The name is definitely a nod to Ballard, yes. I didn't include any others, but the book takes up some of Ballard's themes, particularly of the media landscape and the normalization of violence. I said in an Interzone interview that in Ballard's Vietnam-War-era work pornography is a metaphor, whereas in the time of the Iraq War it's an interrogation technique. Another perhaps Ballardian trope is the middle-class radicalism that crosses the line of legality: my 'Travis' is a spy, while one of Ballard's might more likely be a terrorist. I was quite interested to see that the recent MoD report on possible changes by 2030 included a

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radicalization among what it called the middle class as a definite prospect.

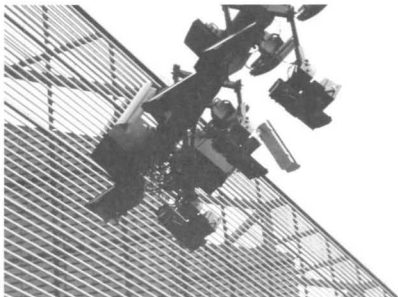
**TH:** It's traditional to ask the author about their research process for a new novel, so I thought I'd reverse this and ask what kind of extra research I might do to gain a deeper understanding of the story and its background.

**KM:** Eric Lerner's research on plasma focus fusion was one inspiration for the background tech and the cosmological connection. Michael Klare's book *Blood and Oil* on the connection between oil dependency and recent and forthcoming wars – you can find relevant articles by him at TomDispatch – will give you a fix on the geopolitics. Likewise, though slightly over-heated, Michel Chossudovsky and others at GlobalResearch.ca. Various no doubt dated bits of CIA tradecraft I took from Philip Agee's fascinating memoir *CIA Diary*. If you want to know more about what the CIA gets up to, read William Blum's *Killing Hope*; and for the British equivalent, Mark Curtis's *Web of Deceit and Unpeople*. Neil Mackay's articles on the War on Terror in the *Sunday Herald*, now collected in a book, were part of my background reading too.

**TH:** I was also especially drawn to the sense of contingency and preparedness the main characters showed in anticipation of possible attacks and other unforeseen events. Finishing the







## Tom Hunter talks to Ken MacLeod about modern catastrophe, pared down prose and the stealthy spread of the SF virus

book, I couldn't help but feel that perhaps I should start packing more survival hardware for my daily commute and stocking tinned food under the bed. Healthy paranoia or dangerously presumptive thinking?

KM: It's always a good idea to be prepared, so long as it doesn't become obsessive. At least have drinking water, candles, maybe a camping gas stove, and non-perishable food in the house! And a torch and multitool or Swiss Army knife, however tiny, in your pocket. (Except when you're going through airport security, of course.) More useful than stashing stuff is learning stuff - First Aid and so on - which I (to my embarrassment) have still to do.

TH: I was also (strangely) pleased to see the book featured terror groups attacking major UK road-links rather than more overtly symbolic targets as a quick and easy way of inflicting massive damage on a country. It made for a nasty kind of common sense thinking, but how difficult is it for you as a writer to approach a story with this kind of angle of attack?

KM: One of the reasons why I don't think Al Qaeda is all it's cracked up to be is that they haven't done anything like this. In fact no terrorist group, anywhere, has done a fraction of the damage they theoretically could with the resources they actually have. Whatever the reason, I doubt that it's failure to come up with the idea. I have no

difficulty at all coming up with such scenarios. I once had an idea for a terrorist attack that seemed so scary and easy that I put it to Bruce Schneier, a security expert. He assured me that the tactic I'd thought of was indeed obvious and there are already counter-measures in place. This may explain why the sort of 'obvious' attacks described in *The Execution Channel* have never happened, and - one hopes - never will.

TH: The book features a great mix of blogs and anti-blogs. What are your favourite three real(ish) blogs, assuming you read any, and how much do you trust them?

KM: *Making Light*, by Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, is a great place for acute comment on and fannish discussion about all kinds of things. Avedon Carol's *The Sideshow* distills an enormous amount of reading and thinking about the news, culture and politics into link-rich text. Finally Ellis Sharp's *The Sharp Side* gives a less frequent but much sharper, shall we say, look at literature and politics. In all of these the issue of trust doesn't arise, and if it does I trust them anyway - they're people I know in real life!

I can't resist mentioning three other sites, the first of which is not a blog, because without them I couldn't have written *The Execution Channel*. For a portal to the news and some commentary and analysis you can take or leave, *Antivax.com* is the heavy hitter. *Lenin's Tomb* often points up stories or angles too easily overlooked. For a compassionate and very hard-

left take, *Left I on the News* takes no prisoners.

The various blogs and sites that served as models for the disinfo and conspiracy bloggers in my book would be invidious to name, as well as superfluous.

TH: Social networking theory is arguing that we are now far more likely to believe our immediate circle of friends over any issue (politics, environment etc) over more 'official' or researched sources of information - no matter how much more substantiated or knowledgeable. What role does a creator of literary fictions have to play in this arena?

KM: If this is true it's quite alarming. On most issues it would show a disturbing level of irrationality to rely on our friends rather than experts. I mean, what is this saying - that we are likely to believe our pal down the pub when he shoots his mouth off about global warming or whatever? Nah. I hope not, anyway. And if it's true, then all that a fiction writer can do in such a context is hope that reading their work in some way helps to undermine such nonsense.

TH: And finally I'd like to ask if you could expand on the following quote from a past article of yours. "SF is by no means dead - its literary and scientific sophistication is in many respects better than it's ever been. And if it reflects a stalled and fragmented world, it also, as we peer through our own reflections, continues to give us glimpses of the world beyond that wall of glass which - with hard work and a bit of luck - we may yet break."

KM: It's hard to expand on without rewriting the article it concluded, but I'll try. Whatever the virtues of the Golden Age, and they're many, the quality of SF has improved radically in the past couple of decades. I think it was cyberpunk that did it, and that the New Space Opera and the New Weird and whatever the next big thing is - Mundane SF maybe - wouldn't have happened without the kick-start of cyberpunk. Over the same period, however, confidence in the future has declined sharply in the wider society. The fall of socialism has been followed not by a flourishing of liberalism but a rise of irrationalist ideologies like religion and environmentalism. Science fiction is one of the few areas of culture that still promotes humanism and shows us the possibilities of a better future. I'm not saying that's the function of SF, and certainly not that we shouldn't write tales of woe and gloom and doom, but that the SF mentality can hardly help taking such tales as warnings of dangers about which something can be done. It's the only form of literature that is founded on the attitude that big problems are there to be solved.

THE NEWS ON TELEVISION IN THE UK - 'TERRORISM WITH THE  
**EXECUTION CHANNEL**

**KEN MACLEOD**

ken  
macleod  
learning  
the world  
a novel of hot corners

ken  
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KEN  
MACLEOD

THE  
SKY ROAD

# Who Wants To Be An Early Adopter Anyway?

**Who wants to be an early adopter?**

Being a late adopter is so much better anyway. When you take a basic marketing course you learn all about how people will adopt a new product or technology. There are those who are early adopters, people who need and want to have the latest thing no matter what stage of development it is in and will pay a high price for it either in cash or in dealing with glitches that come along with being the first to use a certain product. Then, on the other end of the spectrum are the late adopters. Those who have waited to make sure all the little nuances are worked out before they go out and begin using a product or service. It must be safe to use and probably either well ingrained or passé. These are the people who you find surprised and excited at the items they buy in a dollar store, which is usually by then a good sign that a product has run its course.

When you think of geeks and nerds and science fiction aficionados you think that for the most part they are a group of early adopters when it comes to technology. When digital watches came out, the early adopters were the science geeks and nerds in your

school or office. Remember those guys who wore big honking black squares on their wrists. The ones that blinded pilots with the time of day as they flew overhead. Yes, they were the early adopters of that technology. Sometimes, like with those digital watches, the fad doesn't last too long. Look around you. How many people over the age of twenty wear digital watches nowadays, unless you happen to work at Brookhaven National Lab, or CERN, probably not many.

Now take cell phones. In the old days—and by old days I mean the 1980s—we called them car phones. That's because they were so big and had to be hardwired into a car to work. Talking on one was the equivalent to picking up an entire phone booth and sticking that to the side of your head. "Hello? Can you hear me?!! Yes. I'm on the car phone."

Eventually they were able to streamline the technology and now we have Star Trek communicator sized phones, flip phones. The phones went from carbine steel monstrosities to card sized slivers of plastic that have more computer memory than the original moon lander.

Think about that. They navigated three men millions of miles to the moon and back on less computing power than your cell phone. And I bitch because I can't fit all my stolen music onto my iPod (Kidding, Apple, just kidding). I've downloaded



more bytes of MP3s than all the memory it took to navigate all the moon rockets NASA ever sent to space. I carry more power to compute in my pocket than Neil Armstrong had at his disposal in an entire space ship. (There's a line for the ladies!)

That's the point. If you are a true early adopter like, say, NASA, you'll take your chances with slide rules and room sized computers sending a man to the moon. Me, I'm not quite comfortable with international flights yet, much less interplanetary ones.

When you watch a science fiction movie, and they're running around with all their flying cars and laser beam guns, you're watching the late adopters. Everything works as expected. They have the same reliability in hyperspace travel that I have on the Long



Remember those guys who wore big honking black squares on their wrists. The ones that blinded pilots with the time of day as they flew overhead. Yes, they were the early adopters of that technology

There may come a day when laser beam guns and flying cars are a possibility - but Lon S. Cohen asks should we be so eager to embrace new technologies?

When you watch a science fiction movie, and they're running around with all their flying cars and laser beam guns, you're watching the late adopters. Everything works as expected. They have the same reliability in hyperspace travel that I have on the Long Island Rail Road, spotty yet effective



Island Rail Road, spotty yet effective. When you go into a transporter tube, it sucks you up and you end up exactly where you expect to go. Your gene splicing will transform you into some other level of humanity every time and your robots never complain about needing hydraulic oil changes. That's because all the kinks have been worked out by the time the writer gets to the story. Unless of course that's the point of the story; that the technology just isn't perfected enough and the gene splicer creates a monster instead of a super human. Invariably, anyone trying to attain a higher level of humanity in Science Fiction is always going to create a monster of himself of someone else, preferably someone they care deeply about. I'm thinking specifically of the remake of *The Fly*. It's a

fantastic story with superior acting. But the basic plot point is, don't screw with the beta version of your technology on yourself or you're going to end up trying to devour your girlfriend.

Most of this type of SciFi is either on one of the following:

A. Based on superior effective technology that is reliable and well tested like *Star Trek*.

B. Flunky yet still operable to the point where it only fails when it's either funny or important for the good guys to hide in a giant space slug like say, *Star Wars*.

C. Based on the premise that early adoption of technology will result in seriously bad side effects that will either destroy the world, ala *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (I mean the whole darn movie was a wreck!) or the one that you love as in the aforementioned movie *The Fly* or better yet, *Jurassic Park*.

D. There is a fourth one where evil people just don't give a flying frell about whether their technology is tested or not. Inevitably there's the line where one scientist says to the other that "it's not ready yet!" Category D. is chock full, from *Robocop*

to the first *Spiderman* when the Green Goblin is created and of course the precursor of them all, *Frankenstein* or the sequel *Young Frankenstein*.

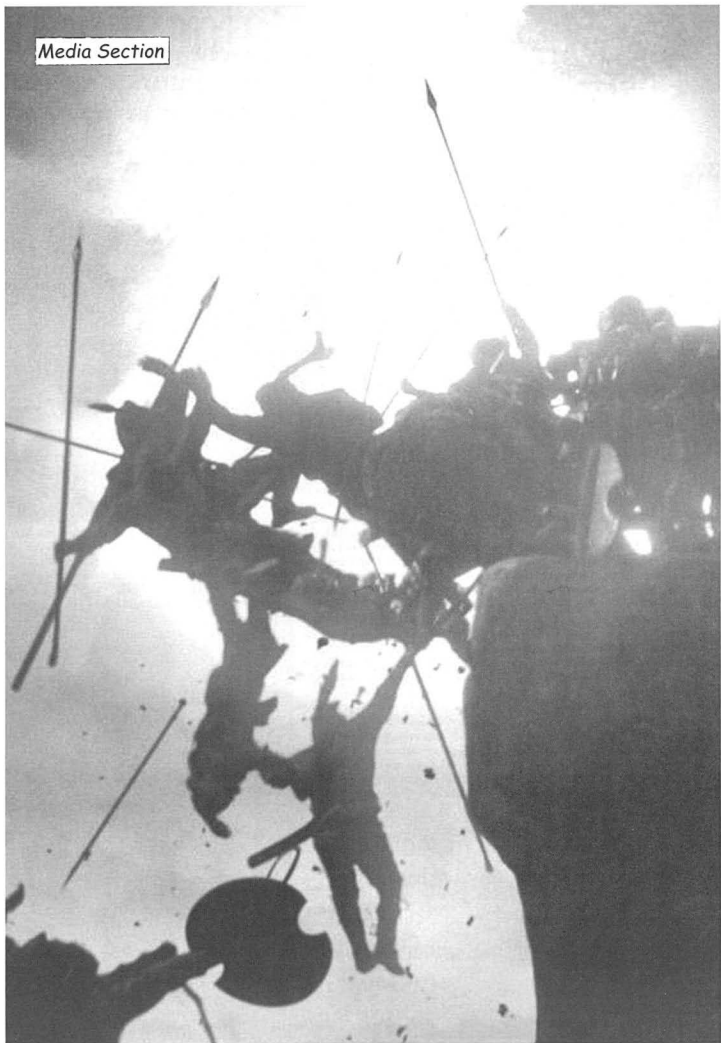
a. Which brings me to a sub category of D, which is the sequel movie where no one learns the lesson of the first beta screw up epitomized in the classic, *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. I mean, didn't Lucas learn anything from *Howard The Duck*?

What fun would it be if we read a story where the protagonist has to deal with the constant worry that his beta tested laser gun won't fire at the bad alien? Or that his robot will suddenly get a virus? None. We'd be watching *Buck Rogers* in his 25<sup>th</sup> Century version of Jiffy Lube getting that little annoying robot he hung out with an oil change. Or perhaps Starbuck would be grounded because his Viper needed a new air filter and the right size wasn't in yet. What fun would it be if Tarkin ordered the destruction of Alderaan and his computer screen said he needed to hit CTRL-ALT-DETE to continue? None, I tell you.

That's why, despite the fact that everyone who reads SciFi thinks they are reading about the early adopters, the pioneers of technology, they are severely incorrect. What they are seeing are people just like us, living with, for the most part, reliable technology that just happens to be 500 or 1000 years in the future.



Media Section



# Get Your Sparta On

Richard Matthews on the pecs and death epic adaptation of 300



**What is 300 the film trying to be, and what is it about the portrayal of comic book heroes that reverberates so powerfully across our modern movie-watching culture?**

Is this movie big dumb fun or a historical travesty? An expensive trailer for a new type of computer game (the kind you can only play with a multi-million dollar budget and your own green screen stage) or some kind of bizarrely double-edged political allegory that seeks to position its heroic Spartans as both defenders of the free world and a stubbornly anachronistic force of martyrs facing off against an irrepressible world power riddled with decadence and crushed beneath a literal embodiment of church and state in the form of its God-King?

At their best, comic books have always struggled with the difficult issue of heroism, from the off-ridiculed masturbatory power fantasies of the supposed teenage majority readership through to the apparently more mature world of the graphic novel and its artful deconstruction of modern myth-forms and liberal attitude to adult language and high nipple-counts; so long as they're artistically justified, of course.

Heroism is a surprisingly tricky subject these days, at least when played relatively straight. Apparently we've no problem with wise-cracking maverick cops racking up huge levels of property damage or campy pirates jolly-rogering their way across the high seas, but dare send a bunch of strapping young lads off to war, and show them proud to be doing so, and you'll be blitzkrieged by a backlash of reviews so vicious and numerous they'll make the hordes of Persia look like, well, a namby gaggle of warmed-over orcs and the leftovers from an aborted episode of pimp my sovereign.

Given this, it's easy to overlook one of 300's key storytelling elements in amongst all the slow-mo battle-ballet and cheerfully morbid 'Dine in Hell' dialogue, so easily does it sneak into the background of the plotting, but from its opening voiceover through to its final valedictory battle-speech, 300 is deliberately spinning us a one-sided story, only this time it's history being

written by the apparent losers.

Spartan warrior Dilios opens the film with a swift retelling of the childhood of King Leonidas – fitness to live judged at birth on a suitably ominous cliff-top, sent off to a kidszone version of *Fight Club* at age seven and killing his first wolf soon after – that works in a similar way to the pre-credits bits in Bond movies that remind you exactly why he's such a tough bastard sonfabitch.

Naturally the main meat of the film concerns itself with the build-up to, and execution of, the Battle of Thermopylae itself, along with some incidental political backstabbing back home, but this story too is being told to us by Dilios, and from the waves of mutant ninjas broken on Spartan shields through to the charge of the

blinded-up monster rhinos, we're asked to watch the action unfold through his one remaining eye.

Is any of his story really true except for the bit where Leonidas and crew finally succumb to the epic weight of enemy numbers and don't make it back home, on their shields or otherwise? Who's to say? As an audience we're cast in the role of Spartan army number two. The far superior force gathered against the Persian hordes a year after the fateful battle at the Hot Gates, and sole survivor Dilios is the only witness left alive from that particular campaign.

We learn that the King has deliberately sent the wounded Dilios home before the final showdown as the one man whose skill at oratory matches his martial prowess, and it is his appeal to the Spartan council that finally sets the country on the path to all our war.

It's a neat narrative trick that enables the preceding action to be read entirely as a last-ditch heroic fantasy constructed by Leonidas and his colluding countryman and designed to simultaneously spur their nation into action and provide the necessary fictional framework to ensure the names of the dead live on across the ages.

Does this interpretation make the film any less fun or any more politically correct? Probably not, but it does, perhaps, allow the film to be read as a type of myth form rather than as a more explicitly allegorical or political effort, or even as just a buffed-up blockbuster workout with a few new tricks hidden behind its billowing red cloak, and it is all the better for it.





# Spidey Strikes Out

Too many cooks ruin *Spider-man's* popcorn appeal, says Lon S. Cohen

One may be the loneliest number and two is symmetrical, but three is a crowd. *Spider-man 3* is no exception. The plot and the characters can't get out of each other's way long enough for the true story to emerge and what worked so well for the first two movies is strangely abandoned in this third instalment.

The second instalment ended on a high note for Peter Parker, which is carried over to this third movie. Meanwhile the troubled look on Mary Jane's face as he takes off to battle crime in the final scene is brilliantly extended into this new film. The story opens with Peter Parker/Spider-man on top of the world, while Mary Jane's career is falling apart.

Harry Osborne starts his revenge cycle only to be derailed by a bout of amnesia brought on by a bump on the head during a fight with Spidey. This makes room for the Sandman to be created so Spidey doesn't have to deal with a revenge seeking nemesis and a troubled ex-con turned silicon monster at the same time.

Thomas Haden Church comes into the movie as Flint Marko, the "real" killer of Peter Parker's Uncle Ben. Church makes a passable attempt at Sandman, but you get the sense that he knows his character is extraneous.

Tension ensues and a wayward meteorite breaks into black goop, follows Peter Parker and Mary Jane home one night and goes then into hibernation. Step aside, Venom.

Next, Topher Grace, playing Eddie Brock a rival photographer to Peter Parker at the Daily Bugle, shows up. I'm still undecided about him. Grace puts in an excellent effort as Brock, a confused, delusional and vindictive young man. He is the perfect symbiosis for the Venom alien (black meteorite goop.) Both Venom and Brock were underused, serving as plot devices instead of fully fleshed out characters.

Ditto for Bryce Dallas Howard playing Gwen

Stacy who is only an object for both Brock and Parker. This is obvious when she is in mortal danger, hanging off the side of a building and both Brock and her father, a Police Captain on the scene, barely flinch, even cracking a joke about how this is the first time Brock admits he is dating the Captain's daughter.

The plot is all pushed together like an accordion and even running at over two hours, the movie never really lets out enough for us to get into the storyline. Essentially, this series has been about three souls tormented by dysfunctional family lives and the places that fate put them in this world. Halfway through *Spider-man 3* I couldn't even remember that it was ever a great franchise. (Much like how I felt watching *X-Men 3*.) There is too much extra junk thrown into the movie. Wasn't there enough tension between the three original characters plus Venom to pull it off?

The tragedy of the film is the muddled and heavily laden plot that can't get out of its own way to realize that the story is a very good one if only it had more room to breathe. Where are the central themes of choice and responsibility? The turmoil is brought on by an obvious

external force that has nothing to do with Spider-man or his personal challenges.

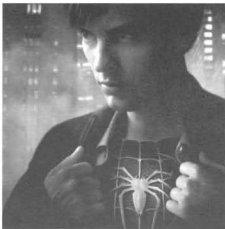
At the end of the film Peter Parker says that he's done terrible things. Besides wearing a corny black suit (not the Venom suit but the mafia-type garb) and strutting down the streets of New York John Travolta-Staying Alive style, I can't think of what he has actually done that anyone else might have done. He is supposed to be a real hero, not the Super Duper kind that puts the pressure on himself to always do the right thing no matter what.

No one chooses his own destiny. It is what we do with our life that counts. This movie misses the point. Though Peter eventually forgives, this becomes the entire reason for the Sandman's existence. So Peter can resolve his angst for his Uncle Ben's killer. But that angst carried him forward. He might as well hang up the Spidey suit now.

Oh by the way, the butler did it. He is one responsible for all the animosity between Harry and Peter. For two years he forgot to mention this one little tiny detail. Alfred, he is not.

Harry Osborne makes the best choice of all. When he finds out the truth he does exactly what he should, help Spidey. Harry is the real hero of the story. Despite being victimized by bad plot twists, mind-boggling dialogue and hidden secrets he makes the character of New Goblin rise above it all. The premise of the climax of the movie with Spidey and the New Goblin is excellent. There's just that missing element of satisfaction, probably because Harry spends half the movie in an amnesia state.

*Spider-man 3* is a good comic book, action movie. It is very satisfying to watch and will not disappoint the fans of fast-paced, popcorn movies. But as for the entire story arc, it doesn't cut muster. And I can't see how to continue this tale any further without changing the focus entirely.



# Superheroes & Big Issues

Martin McGrath on the politics of the modern comic book

**"Find it both morally and artistically repugnant that the most urgent political crisis of our time, one that's currently claiming thousands of lives every month, can be denuded of all context and cheerily co-opted by the wish-fulfilment fantasies of some insular adolescent jerks. It is, surely, a sign of growing American political apathy when the cultural response to the Iraq crisis is simply to send Magneto into Baghdad. What's next? Spider-Man for president? Wonder Woman at the UN? Or would that just be silly?"**

Kevin Maher, *The Times*, 20/02/07

It was *Vector* editor Niall Harrison's excellent blog *Torque Control* (<http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>) that brought this review of new *sf* show *Heroes* to my attention. I thought the review was unfair in a number of ways – not least in impugning a political mission to *Heroes* that it simply doesn't possess. What struck me most forcefully about Maher's comments though wasn't that he didn't like *Heroes* but that he was outraged (not just morally but artistically – it really is quite something when a television reviewer is artistically outraged) and that he considered it appalling that a superhero story should dare try to deal with serious political issues.

Maher's spew of rhetorical questions – Magneto into Baghdad? Spider-man for president? Wonder Woman at the UN? – clearly reveals that he hasn't been paying attention

to comics in the last twenty-five years. Even if we ignore the high-brow end of the comic world inhabited by the likes of *Mao* or Moore's *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* – the use of the comic book as a medium to deliver political allegory is hardly new.

Stan Lee's *X-Men* pitted the integrationist Xavier against the separatist Magneto right at the heart of America's greatest turmoil over race. Neal Adams and Denny O'Neil reinvented DC's *Green Arrow* as a left wing successor to Robin Hood in a key run of stories in the early 1970s. More recently the ante has been upped by writers like Warren Ellis and Mark Millar – who, for example, in bordering runs on Wildstorm's *The Authority* imagined a world where a superhero team imposed itself as a world government.

At the same time as Maher published his review I was doing some catch-up comic reading of my own. Specifically I've been reading Marvel's current company-wide crossover story *Civil War* – the story of the



bitter divisions that rend the Marvel Universe's superhero community when the government introduces a "Superhero Registration Act" that will require all costumed heroes to give their identities to the government.

What is interesting about the story, and what I believe would utterly flummox Kevin Maher, is that this vast, commercial and populist story clearly casts its debates in terms of the struggle for civil liberties in an era of fear and distrust sparked by a terrible act of death and destruction. The story is clearly intended to be seen as a commentary on America after the attack on New York and the introduction of The Patriot Act.

The Superhero Registration Act is introduced when one of Marvel's B-list superhero teams – The New Warriors – bungle a battle with a team of super villains. The result – in a genuinely shocking sequence – is the vapourising of a good section of Stamford Connecticut, destroying a school, killing 600 people including many children and most of the superhero team.

Some superheroes, notably a group of Marvel's plutocrats including Tony Stark/Iron Man and Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four not only go along with the Registration Act but take it upon themselves to commit to ensure its full realisation. Vast detention centres are built, not in Cuba but in the Negative Zone, individuals are detained without trial, those who refuse to go along with registration are immediately branded as traitorous and pro-terrorist. But the pro-registration group are not simply dismissed as villains, they're allowed to present themselves as patriots, they're allowed to point to the massacre at Stamford and most (perhaps Reed Richards excluded) are given reasonable

Article continued on page 27



# Here Come The Fuzz

Comedy collaboration is no  
cop-out, says Simon Gilmartin

## First thing first, is *Hot Fuzz* funny?

Well yes, it is. *Hot Fuzz* is dense with funny – almost selfishly so. In fact they've probably used up so much of this year's National Lottery funny fund that all we'll see from the Brit film industry for the next six months is a raft of releases about plucky Northern underdogs, eye-gougingly bad rom-coms with twenty-something metrosexuals flitting around Clapham and some kind of vehicle for Billy Piper.

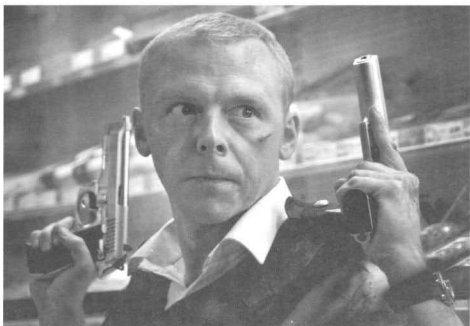
Relieved of that second album anxiety, and putting aside the distraction of a British comedy that is actually funny, we find in *Hot Fuzz* an odd, endearingly frenetic, furniture-chewing mongrel of a movie. In terms of its genre pedigree it is the unholy union of a US Police actioner, townie comes to countryside comedy à la *Local Hero* and its cousin the pastoral gothic à la *The Wicker Man* and *Straw Dogs*.

As in *Spaced* and *Shaun of the Dead* both writer/star Simon Pegg and writer/director Edgar Wright layer their work with a dense texture of movie references, from *Point Blank* to *Point Break*, and as with their previous output this isn't for the sake of a cheap joke or lack of imagination, but rather signals the cinematic language of a generation indelibly marked by first the Dolby sound *fizack-fizack* of an Imperial Star Destroyer chasing down rebel scum in a darkened Somerset picture house and then the thirty years of VHS and DVD couch-based repeat movie-viewing that was to follow.

Like *Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz* isn't parody, but instead a lovingly created full-blown version of the genre it sets out to deconstruct. *Hot Fuzz* makes sense on its own terms, never cheating, never betraying the tenants of decent storytelling just to get a cheap laugh, and instead laying its own groundwork so that by the time you reach its final reel of frenzied, cordite-stained slice of Tony Scott-esque heroic bloodshed, the transition seems entirely natural.

Alongside the movie vaults and DVD stacks, there's more than the odd tinge of comic book genre-bending infecting *Hot Fuzz*'s creative DNA as well, and influencing both the film's composition and pacing as well as the super-cop-who-can't-be-stopped image of Pegg's character Nicholas Angel, who has something of the fun-crushing relentlessness of Dredd about his uniformed shoulders.

On initial view *Hot Fuzz* may seem a less personal film than *Shaun of the Dead*, its characters lives not meshing so directly with its creators. Nicholas Angel is a far cry from the PlayStation slackerdom of *Spaced*'s Tim or



They've used up so  
much of this year's  
National Lottery  
funny fund that all  
we'll see for the next  
six months is a raft  
of eye-gougingly  
bad rom-coms with  
twenty-something  
metrosexuals flitting  
around Clapham



*Shaun of the Dead*'s Shaun, however once you get past this surface detail the film's often as personal in vision and influence as *Shaun* or *Spaced* ever were.

Knowing this is filmed in Wrights' home town of Wells, Somerset, and that it's also the setting for his spaghetti western debut feature, *A Fistful of Fingers*, it's hard to see *Hot Fuzz*'s hoodie-wearing kids sitting, bored and restless, on the village fountain wall, trapped in their small rural town and not even old enough to enter the hallowed village pub as anything other than a stand in for the young Pegg and Wright: their heads full of films, and watching

the adult pleasures of real ale, cigarette smoke and glam rock from behind the concave glass of the bull's eye windowpane.

How long had Edgar Wright been gestating *Hot Fuzz*'s final gun battle? How many dull minutes had he whiled away waiting for the number 173 in Wells town square, imagining what it would be like as a setting for blasting bad guys and jumping through doorways with a pair of 9mm Berettas?

How long is it until this comes out on DVD, and what should I pair with it to make the ultimate couch-based double bill?



# Flaming Skulldullery

Lon S. Cohen tears strips off Ghost Rider

**J**ohnny Blaze has a flaming skull head and a CG body because he is cursed by the devil after selling his soul to save his father from dying of cancer. And then the devil watches as the father dies performing a carnival stunt driving a motorcycle through a ring of fire but waits to collect until he needs Jon most - which is when his son raises some chumpy elemental demons to bring about the Apocalypse whereby the devil then evokes the contract at a most inconvenient time in Johnny's life, turning him into a flaming, ghostly instrument of revenge that spouts very forgettable and sometimes perplexing one-liners, but worst of all stands-up his extremely hot ex-girlfriend, not for the first time.

It's not really that complicated. In fact the whole megillah can be summed up with a Top Eleven style list: (some lists go to ten but mine go to eleven!)

**Number Eleven.** This takes place in the American West, a red state like Texas, where cowboys roam and the antelope play. Don't forget that. But if you do, there are deserts, motorcycle shows, guys in sleeveless denim who treat their busty women-folk like busty women-folk should be treated, and bars in the middle of nowhere just begging for a reunion with the devil's little boy and his twitchy little demon friends.

**Number Ten.** The devil's son is a spoiled rotten kid. An ingrate, prep school, pretty boy who thinks he knows everything. His friends are all losers and they get shit-canned pretty quick by Ghost Rider. As a matter of fact, Ghost Rider has a harder time lassoing a police helicopter than he does ridding the world of the eternally cursed former angels cast from heaven into demonic elementals.

**Number Nine.** In what could have been played as one of this year's great tongue-in-cheek, over the top, classically evil roles to rival The Emperor from *Star Wars* and Jack Nicholson's Joker, Peter Fonda plays none other than the Devil himself, in the creepy flesh. If you know Peter Fonda's work then you know he oozes Chester-The-Molester-type creepiness. But he plays it way too straight. One can see him mouthing his Academy Award speech as he exudes his awkward, unintentional,

schmaltzy, performance.

**Number Eight.** The whole thing is just another in a long run of mindless, MTV style movie dreck, with the occasional *Matrix* effect thrown in. The best I can tell, it was plotted with a ten-pound bowling ball, a yard of rope and a copy of "How to write a screenplay for thirteen year olds in three days or less." This movie was cobbled together like a MySpace page with everything cool slapped in wherever they could find a blank space.

**Number Seven.** They took Ozzie Osborne's

for this amazing trick of modern movie magic.

**Number Four.** Apparently they blew the entire FX budget on the Sam Elliot cut-and-paste so there was nothing left over when it came time to animate the Ghost Rider. Fortunately they had some old Herman Munster body shots that they were able to salvage. That and the cheap overstock of Halloween Skulls they cut in almost saved the Ghost Rider character. Almost. Not quite but you have to give them credit for doing what they could with limited resources.

**Number Three.** They didn't write one word of dialogue or an entire scene. They took a bunch of undergraduate film school student Screenwriting 101 papers and threw them up in the air. "Over here is the drunken, semi-abusive father. I found a scene where he leaves his girlfriend standing in a field of purple heather. In the rain. She's holding her suitcase! This guy's a Carni! Cool! Motorcycles. A best friend. A drunken father! A deal with the devil! An ex-girlfriend! What's this? A monkey doing karate? What the heck? Oh, just throw it in the middle for laughs! Leave no cliché unturned. No bad pun unpunched. Who needs tension, meaningful dialogue, subtlety and story?" I waited for the moment when Cage would turn to the camera with his dumb grin, wink and whisper, "Now this is the part when..."

**Number Two.** I gained exactly three pounds watching *Ghost Rider*. The popcorn and sugar from the soda had nowhere to go considering the fact that I expended not one ounce of energy in my brain trying to think about the plot of this movie.

**Number One.** Nicolas Cage has the uncanny superpower to invoke one role in one great movie and has recycled it for almost every film he's ever done since. (And doubly for *Ghost Rider*, *Raising Arizona*! He's naive, confused, troubled, somewhat out of place, has a slightly raspy voice, beady eyes and a perpetual furrowed brow. Unfortunately he does it so well it's not acting anymore, it's just Nicolas Cage in another movie.

Can somebody get this guy a roadmap, please?



classic, heart thumping, cooler than cool, metal anthem, "Crazy Train" and made it dull. When I am usually pumping my fists to the throaty guitar riff I was staring at the screen, mouth open wide, hoping that the 50-ounce soda I just drank would kick in so I could spend a few minutes at the urinal.

**Number Six.** Waiting for the time when my bladder would finally kick in was the most conflict and tension in the entire movie. It turned out that my bladder had more depth than any of the characters.

**Number Five.** Sam Elliott never even showed up to play his part. Seriously. The best special effect in the entire movie was how they cut Mr. Elliott from previous roles and simply pasted him into this movie. No kidding. See this movie just

# Planet of the Japes

Martin McGrath on a film where the future is anything but bright

**I**t would be wonderful if *Idiocracy* was a great film.

Director Mike Judge, the creator of MTV's *Beavis and Butt-Head* and the cult comedy *Office Space*, found his latest film left on the shelf by distributor Fox for two years after its completion. Normally this is a sign of a terrible dud, but the early word was that *Idiocracy* was great and that Fox, Murdoch-owned and America's most vocally neo-con corporation, were really holding the film back because they objected to the movie's satirical take on modern America.

When the film was finally released – a contractual obligation – Fox tucked it away in around 100 screens across America without advertising or review-screenings and without even posters for many of the cinemas – and when, no surprise, the film flopped it was locked away. *Idiocracy* never saw the inside of a cinema in the UK, but it's now available on DVD.

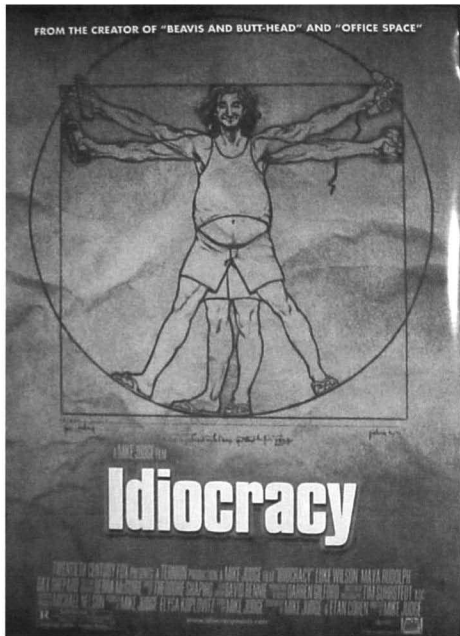
So, is there a conspiracy? Did Fox kill *Idiocracy*?

Well, Fox might well dislike Judge's attack on the dumbing-down of American culture and the power of big business – they are, after all, the company responsible for such high-brow classics as *Epic Movie* and *Big Momma's House 2*, while owning the hugely influential Fox News – but *Idiocracy*'s greatest enemies aren't to be found in the corridors of evil corporations but in its own weaknesses.

*Idiocracy* is the story of Joe Bauer (Luke Wilson), America's least exceptional soldier, who is put into hibernation for no really important or interesting reason with Rita (Maya Rudolph) a prostitute. 500 years later they wake up in an America that has become so dumb that the two time travellers find themselves judged unparalleled geniuses.

How stupid has America become? Well the president is a WWF-style wrestler, the populace have been reduced to grunting swine who make *Beavis and Butt-Head* seem loquacious, the year's Oscar-winning movie is *Ass* and people are starving because the fields are being sprayed not with water but with the Gatorade-like soft drink Brawndo.

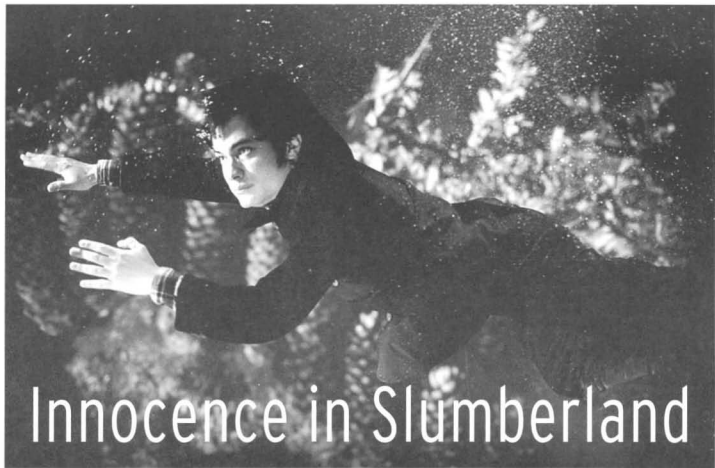
*Idiocracy* does have funny moments. There is a smart passage that explains how stupid people, trailer trash breeding like rabbits, have overwhelmed the intelligent who take the decision to have children seriously. The set design is excellent – the future world is often brilliantly realised with everything from Starbucks to Fuddrucker's getting "product placement" in this new world as various forms of sex shop. There's also a blizzard of visual jokes that go some way to keeping the eye busy throughout the film.



But the weaknesses of *Idiocracy* far outweigh the positives. The plot wanders round in circles, with Joe apparently searching for an unlikely time machine that will take him home but constantly finding himself to be sidetracked for no reason other than the suspicion that Judge's attention has wandered elsewhere. Things happen in spurts and stutters with long periods of unfortunate stillness as a kind of joke-free miasma descends on proceedings. And when the jokes do come, they quickly become repetitive. While *Beavis and Butt-Head* fans might disagree, there really are only so many times that watching someone grunt and swear can remain funny.

The satire is too crude, lacking any sense of subtlety and therefore lacking any penetrating cutting-edge. Like the comedy, the canvas of Judge's story is too broad, the characters are interesting enough to engage our sympathy or even our interest. Luke Wilson is too slick to succeed as a lost everyman and Maya Rudolph, despite a pedigree that includes over 100 appearances on America's *Saturday Night Live*, demonstrates no discernable talent for comedy and nothing remotely like comic timing.

Even at 84 minutes, *Idiocracy* outstays its welcome. I wanted to like it, but in the end *Idiocracy* is neither funny enough nor clever enough to entertain for long.



# Innocence in Slumberland

**O**ne of the most common criticisms I've heard levelled against *The Science of Sleep* is that it is a "slight" film – that in its simplicity, wit and even innocence, somehow Michel Gondry's new film fails to be serious enough.

In a sense, I suppose, *The Science of Sleep* is asking for trouble.

First, it is writer/director Gondry's first film since the excellent (Charlie Kaufman-penned) *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* – a film that may well be the most complex and intelligent fantasy film of the last ten years.

Second, English-speaking audiences tend to approach foreign films in general and French films in particular (actually about half the dialogue is in English and there's a smattering of Spanish too, but this is a French-funded production with a French director), as intellectual exercises rather than entertainment. Perhaps it is because we believe that, because we have to read bits of text, the films are somehow good for us.

Finally, most viewers will have read the reviews or seen the quotes on the posters that claim that the film has moments of surrealism. And, as we all know, any *ism* must be intellectual.

But when I say that *The Science of Sleep* is not an intellectual film, I am not being rude, I am encouraging viewers to approach this film with an open mind.

Stephan (Bernal) is the film's central character. He is a bruised, innocent, romantic young man who is clearly shaken by the recent death of his father and has been tricked back from Spain to Paris by his estranged mother. Stephan has difficulty separating reality from his dreams

– vivid, candyfloss leaps of imagination which take place in a world of funky gadgets made from scraps, cardboard and egg-boxes. It's a universe where god was a fan of *Blue Peter*.

Stephan gradually, slightly reluctantly, becomes infatuated with Stephanie (Gainsbourg), the girl who moves in to the flat across the hall. But, while Stephanie shares his ability to make the fantastic from the mundane, there is an impenetrable barrier between them. Stephan can never entirely escape from the trap of his own imagination and he is always trying just a little too hard. As their courtship struggles to reach any sort of consummation, *The Science of Sleep* is filled with wonderful imagery and ideas – from the one-second-time-machine to the robotic horse Stephan builds, cellophane oceans and cotton wool clouds.

Those expecting chin-rubbing intellectualism will find themselves disappointed. At its heart and beyond the clever visuals, *The Science of Sleep* is simply a love story between a troubled boy and a reserved girl. Some of the twists and turns of Stephan and Stephanie's relationship feel a little forced and the time Stephan spends working in the bickering office of a calendar design firm feels like a diversion that adds little except some questionable slapstick. But, while Gondry's script offers no deep insights, his film is warm and generous and the fantasy elements, though sometimes reflecting Stephan's troubled nature, are most often uplifting. Stephan is not so much running away from the world but constructing a safer, softer place where he can find refuge.

That Stephan's childish innocence remains engaging and the fact that it never crosses over into the creepy or the sickly sweet

is a testimony to the quality of Bernal's performance. The relationship between Bernal and Gainsbourg works exceptionally well, their fractured and vulnerable performances allied to Gondry's startling visuals deliver a film that feels emotionally powerful even while it retains a quirky distance. *The Science of Sleep* even delivers an ending that the optimistic can take as happy, though we may never really know whether we are simply drifting off with Stephan on another journey into the cuddly, secure world he has built following the instructions of some Gallic Valerie Singleton.

**Martin McGrath**



# Best SF Movies Ever!... 1990s

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

**1999** Was it really so long ago that the world was about to end/ascend in a fury of Y2K horror, internet apocalypse and the oft foretold biblical floods of spam mail? As we look back over the filmic history of the naughty but nice nineties perhaps there are subtle clues to our future fate tucked away within our dvd collections, hidden like a secret message in a bottle with a terrible wake up call for us all.

Or perhaps *The Matrix* really is just a movie after all – the machines didn't really rise up against us and we're not all trapped in a giant battery farm dreaming the same dream of a nineties that never really ended and hoping for a little kung fu action and the chance to snog Carrie-Anne Moss.

Years on and *The Matrix* remains the defining cinematic moment when fanboy wish-fulfilment crossed the line into a newly fashionable era of geek-chic. It may not be the absolute best science fiction film of the decade, but its legacy may well be the most enduring. Like it? Loath it? Red pill? Blue pill?

Meanwhile, on the flip side of science fictional lineage, one of the benchmarks of Old Skool SF came in for a roasting thanks to the deviously straight-faced satire of *Galaxy Quest*. For all those who'd sensed mocking Vulcan salutes being made behind their backs by non-geek friends and family every time they so much as strolled near the SF&F section of a bookshop, this was a welcome underscoring of the fact that, yes, fans can have a sense of humour too. We did give it a Hugo after all.

**1998** was the year of two deliberately dark and different movies. Prefiguring the confused realities contained within *The Matrix*, Alex Proyas's *Dark City* was arguably both the better and more original film, even if it permeated under the mainstream SF psyche rather than plundering its tropes and radically rewiring them.

Equally, Darren Aronovsky's *Pi* offered its own take on the codes that form and inform the patterns of our lives, and proved that budget is still no match for brains when it comes to creating a singular science fictional world on screen.

**1997** didn't produce any singular genre-defining movies with



the resonance of, say, *The Matrix* or *Terminator 2*, but it was still notable for being a rare year of quality science fiction cinema across many of the movie sub-genres from summer blockbusters and big budget adaptations through to original SF screenplays and quality indie releases. *Gattaca* had perhaps the most in common with literary SF, offering a highly original take on the future of genetic research and its deterministic implications for society. As proof of what intelligent science fiction could achieve on screen this rivalled the two big-budget adaptations of the year – *Contact* and *Starship Troopers*. Meanwhile *The Fifth Element* displayed very little by way of intelligence, or coherent plotting, and was likely the better for it – allowing the brain to relax and truly revel in the visual storytelling. *Men In Black* managed the neat trick of being both clever and intelligently funny while *Cube* served up a memorably tricky puzzlebox of treats (and traps).

**1996** was the year that science fiction returned to the joys of the double feature. Alien invasion was the only game in town and *Independence Day* and *Mars Attacks!* played like two different sides of the same film reel. Featuring uncannily similar plots, characters and unlikely ways of defeating the outer space peril (is uploading a computer virus into an alien mainframe really so much more plausible than confronting Martians with the cross-cultural atrocity embodied by

Slim Whitman?) the two films also shared the hidden sense that maybe we really deserved to take a global kicking. Or, as we overheard at the time from one less than impressed punter in the cinema lobby, "At least *Independence Day* was believable, but *Mars Attacks!* was just taking the piss." Um, quite.

**1995** was the year of the *Twelve Monkeys*. Set across several different time periods (including one before Terry Gilliam's directorial ability had begun to decline) this was a clever re-imagining of the equally inspiring *La Jetée* (1966) by Chris Marker. What makes this especially noteworthy is the way in which Gilliam opted to adapt a piece of French arthouse cinema from source rather than looking to classic SF texts for his inspiration.

In many ways *Twelve Monkeys* represents both a return to maturity in SF cinema as well as echoing the preoccupations of movements like the New Wave.

Modern French arthouse cinema



also offered us *The City of Lost Children*, even if in French terms this wasn't really arthouse at all and rather budgeted at official blockbuster level.

Finally, the increasing influence of Manga and Anime on the science fictional consciousness was embodied in the crossover success of *Ghost in the Shell*. A beautifully rendered post-cyberpunk vision of high-tech hardware meeting eastern-style philosophical musings, this also successfully blended traditional and computer-based animation techniques in a way that even further underlined its theme of lost and transfigured humanity.

**1994** was a slow year for onscreen science fiction. Sure, there was some low, pulpy fun to be had with the likes of *Stargate*, but looking back there was the sense that SF cinema in the early nineties had somehow



## TANKED!

The nineties also offered up more than their fair share of mutant turkeys running amok over the multiplexes, although to our mind there can be only one film that singles out the worst this decade had to offer.

While not exactly the crappiest piece of celluloid to ever escape from a secret studio lab, *Tank Girl* (1995) was perhaps the most painful mangling of potential source material from a novice director in many a good year. Take away the title and this could have been any old future plot with an evil mega corporation, some amusingly low-tech sidekicks and a band of motley heroes trying to give something (data, water, whatever) back to the poor oppressed people living in their Disneyfied dystopianland. In fact, put it that way and this movie is basically *Johnny Mnemonic* (also, sady, 1995).

stalled. Perhaps the millennium was still too far off to provoke the sense of impending doom needed to green light the future crop of darker releases we had to look forward to, and for us the most interesting genre release of the year was Tim Burton's *Ed Wood*. This oddball biopic (almost equally biographical of both Wood and Burton) was a delightful homage to the genre spirit of years gone by, and a time when imagination was still more potentially valued than ability. Contemporary science fiction cinema is seeped in the legacy of cardboard flying saucers and even more cardboard characters, and viewed through Burton's outside eye this is a memorably affectionate tribute to our still strong sense of science fictional wonder.

**1993** and Steven Spielberg reminded us all why he was still the master of the big screen with the inspired dino-romp, *Jurassic Park*. While the film represented a technological step forward in CG potentially even more impressive than the genetic breakthroughs that informed the plot, it was Spielberg's understanding of his audiences that still sets this film head, shoulders and big pointy teeth ahead of its successors, with future monsters benefiting from the tech but lacking the heart that made this such a rapturous (ahem) hit with dinosaur-loving children of all ages.

**1992** was a year of complicated sequels. *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* was a furiously fast-edited fantasy that combined cybernetic body horror with an almost surreal level of hyper-kinetic editing and obscure plotting. Result: instant entry into cult hit territory. Meanwhile *Batman Returns* was a pop-gothic treat,

and all the more welcome for almost managing to derail the omnipotence of movie burger tie-ins as hundreds of naive parents took their happy-meal munching moppets to see a darkly stylised vision of fractured identities and rooftop animal courtship.

Finally, while *Alien 3*

disappointed many fans of this classic SF sequence (what, no Jones the cat?) on first watching, this film has more recently been reappraised in the light of director David Fincher's truly remarkable *Se7en* and *Fight Club*, and proves an interesting study into just how far studio interference and expectations can undermine the creative process.

**1991** and big Arnie was back in *Terminator 2*, a sequel that exemplified director James Cameron's motto that 'More is More, and Too Much is Never Enough'. Fortunately for us, this also included more of Cameron's skilled direction, masterful set pieces and careful attention to character as well as carnage.

*Delicatessen* was a cleverly original and comedic take on what could have been a typically dystopian or hackneyed horror trope if played differently. Its story of innocence versus evil may have been as old as storytelling itself, but it's the wonderfully inventive cast of characters, skilled performances and skewed directorial vision that keeps this film feeling fresh.

**1990** Unstoppable Arnie again, this time bringing Phillip K. Dick's paranoid imagination to the big screen in *Total Recall*, an adaptation that sometimes felt like it was trying to make up for the perceived lack of over-the-top actioneering in previous PKD outing *Blade Runner*. At the time the Austrian Oak was so firmly astride the science fictional landscape it must have seemed hard to imagine an adaptation of your favourite novel without picturing it delivered in *that* accent. Fortunate for us then that he opted to pay attention to the postmodernists and reincarnated his media image onto the political arena: a career move that would no doubt have made total sense to Mr Dick.

Finally fifties flashback *Tremors* was an underground hit and a winningly likeable addition to any monster movie collection, while *Back to the Future III* concluded one of the most popular pop-science fantasies of all time.



# Science Fiction? Aye, That'll Be Right!



**It was, at least for me, the defining moment of the second *Aye Write!* book festival, which took place in Glasgow's historic Mitchell Library in February.**

It was the final event in the official programme, a climax in all but name; one of Scotland's biggest-selling authors had just sat down after reading an extract from his new and much-anticipated novel. The interviewer – none less than Rosemary Goring, book editor of event sponsor *The Herald* newspaper – had asked a few sensible questions about the new book. Then she turned to what a few people still clearly see as the author's unfortunate habit of writing "what I believe we can now call *skiffy*?"

Just for a moment, you could tell that Iain Banks wasn't particularly pleased by the question. *Skiffy* may be a cute 'n' cuddly alternative pronunciation of *sci-fi* but it has seldom before reared its head outside of a late-night SF convention bar. And suddenly, there it was being appropriated and used as another denigrating put-down.

Of course, *skiffy* – sci-fi, SF science fiction, speculative fantasy, call it what you will – was notably absent from the *Aye Write!* programme. Even Iain Banks was technically there sans 'M', thanks to his new 'mainstream' novel *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*. (He later admitted that the current promotional tour for this slightly

delayed novel had necessitated a month-long pause in the writing of the next Culture novel.) Elsewhere in the programme, there was a rare public appearance by the sometimes painfully eccentric Alasdair Gray (without whom Scottish literature would be far less fantastical or interesting) and a mild talk by Sebastian Peake on the literary and artistic work of his father Mervyn. But neither event strayed anywhere near using the word fantasy. Or science fiction. To all intents and purposes, *Aye Write!* was an SF-free zone.

Of course, this is hardly unusual; check out the burgeoning number of book festivals being established in towns and cities across the UK, and you'll find that what are nowadays referred to as the genres are usually notable by their absence. Only crime fiction seems to have garnered some reluctant acceptance from the literary critics – particularly in Scotland where hugely successful novelists ranging from Ian Rankin to Christopher Brookmyre and Denise Mina have helped establish a distinctly Scottish movement wittily (or not) named *tartan noir*.

Brookmyre and Mina were amongst maybe two dozen Glasgow and Scottish writers appearing over the ten days of *Aye Write!* Which is fine; crime fiction has become the modern incarnation of Scottish literature's *No Mean City*/ *Trainspotting* tradition of gritty realism.

But what about Scottish literature's older uncanny tradition, which can trace its roots back to the oral storytelling tradition of the Highlands and Lowlands – the portrayal of, to quote the writer Carl MacDougall, "a realm beyond our own that is somehow more real than realism." Outside of perhaps a guest appearance in the child-targeted play and storytelling events, fantasy was nowhere to be seen in a programme that, while it contained many good things, nevertheless seemed somehow smaller than the sum of its parts – and also lacked a clear sense of its own identity.

Organised by a committee of librarians, educationalists and local politicians it is no surprise that *Aye Write!* carried some of the baggage of social inclusion, fired with the twin goals of encouraging

*Skiffy* may be a cute 'n' cuddly alternative pronunciation of sci-fi but it has seldom before reared its head outside of a late-night SF convention bar. And suddenly, there it was being appropriated and used as another denigrating put-down

local people to get more involved with books and reading while also promoting the literary creativity taking place in the Glasgow and (at a push) the rest of Scotland. But the organiser's obvious decision not to include more genre work meant it ignored some of the liveliest writers currently working in Glasgow – the future noir of Richard Morgan, those fantastic genre explosions from Hal Duncan, the dark fantasy of Michael Cobby, the hard edged techno-thrillers and spaced out opera of Gary M Gibson.

However, like the unwanted party guest who never takes the hint and leaves, *skiffy* just doesn't go away. How can it? I know of at least one *Aye Write!* participant (sorry – no name, no pack drill) who, having grown up reading Clive Barker, longs for the day when he can write a novel that will be stocked in Forbidden Planet. And, of course, the downside for any festival organiser of inviting Iain Banks is that you also get Iain M Banks for free.

Indeed, while the 2007 *Aye Write!* did its best to ignore the *skiffy* world, the irony is that science fiction in general and the works of Iain M Banks in particular ended up dominating the audience question time. With any luck, that fact just might begin to sink into the collective consciousness of the *Aye Write!* organisers. But I wouldn't hold my breath.

**Paul F Cockburn**



# Charles Christian's Goggle Boxes



## Heroes and Zeroes

When it comes to hype about TV programmes, there are usually two explanations. The first is the prog is going to be unmissably good – and the second is that the producers are whistling in the dark, trying to drum up some interest in a complete crock. Did I get it wrong with the two new (and much hyped) series – *Primeval* and *Heroes* – that opened earlier this spring.

*Heroes* (SciFi Channel, Mondays 9:00 but coming to BBC2 later this year) has been the television success story of fall/winter season in the US and is being similarly hyped over here. So, I sat down with my popcorn (actually it was a bowl of *All-Brain*) and waited to be amazed. I'm still waiting, although I don't need the bran anymore. The premise is to take a disparate bunch of people with superpowers – not quite of the X-men variety: the stripper Niki has the ability to see a sneering version of herself looking back at her from mirrors – and drop them into a high-velocity 24-meets-*The X-Files* style plot in which all the world's current political crises and conspiracies (including the truth about 9/11) will eventually be solved.

Unfortunately the producers seem to have followed only half of the recipe that initially made *Lost* so watchable – they've picked a cast that are photogenic and/or quirky but they've given them no decent personalities or dialogue, so you cannot engage with them. Add in the fact the tone is relentlessly gloomy verging on the po-faced serious – come on people, lighten up a little – and the net result is a turn-off. Perhaps the problem is the producers are frightened of having fun in case they slip over into the kitschy world of conventional superheroes? Or, perhaps this whole series is a little too-American, an example – as a writer in *The Times* newspaper recently put it: of a 'wish fulfilment fantasy' to solve the world's problems for politically apathetic home audience?

In complete contrast, I had absolutely zero hopes for *Primeval* (ITV1 – the current season has now concluded) and was expecting something along the lines of *Ant & Dec Walk with Dinosaurs* – I mean it even features one of the girls (Hannah Spearritt) from *S Club 7* – she was the blonde one who wasn't Rachel Stevens, nor the one who so spectacularly ruined her career on *Celebrity Big Brother*. But the series was actually very good in a check-in-your-brain-at-the-foyer and sit back enjoy way. There are some interesting dynamics between the different members of the cast – Ben Miller is wonderfully slimy as an Alastair Campbell-like political fixer, while the student Connor Temple (played by Andrew-Lee Potts) is one of those caricatures who is quite close to the truth.

Given that *Primeval* is ITV's first crack at a serious attempt to challenge *Doctor Who* since *The Tomorrow People* 35 years ago, this



combination of dinosaurs entering the modern world through tears/anomalies in the space-time continuum and a not so much a whodunit as a what's-she-up-to involving Douglas Henshall's wife Helen (Juliet Aubrey) who vanished 10 years' ago, is proving seriously watchable, attracting nearly 7 million viewers on its first outing.

## One to watch

One of my personal favourites in the spring viewing season is proving to be *The Dresden Files* (Sky One, Wednesday 9:00pm), which stars Paul Blackthorne as Chicago private eye Harry Dresden, who just also happens to be a wizard. For reasons I've yet to fathom, this series is being criticised in some media as a *Charmed*-meets-*Angel*-meets-*Supernatural*-meets-*Medium* knock-off. Don't you believe it. It has got far more in common with the reluctant-hero private eyes TV series of the 1970s. Think *The Rockford Files* with magic and ghosts. Thoroughly enjoyable – although its gentle pace, including Dresden's evolving relationship with the cop Murphy (Valeria Cruz) is more likely to appeal to a 30 something plus audience – and if you want more, there are a whole series of Dresden books available from Jim Butcher. The ninth in the series – *White Night* – is out in April.



# SEDUCTION of the Innocent

COMIC REVIEWS BY JAMES BACON ESQ.



## Daredevil Hardcover Omnibus

Written by Garth Ennis art by Colin Wilson  
Publisher: Wildstorm PB 120pp May 2007

Garth Ennis readily admits that he was a fan of classic British war comics such as *Battle* and he has had considerable success with his *War Stories* for DC Comics. On this occasion Ennis has managed to resurrect one of the better-known comic characters 'Battler Briton'.

*Battler Briton* was published in digest-sized comics from 1951 onwards, in *Thriller Picture Library* and *Air Ace Picture Library* and these stories were reprinted in the 70's in the digest sized *Battle and War*.

The story is quite a simple one, Battler and his squad head out to North Africa to join an American unit and to help them overcome the men in messerschmids. The interaction between the men of both nations is important and we see this develop.

Where the story comes to its own is the way that Ennis grabs the

readers attention with a subject that one might wonder has had its day. The question whether such stories can offer anything to the newcomer and veteran reader alike is valid, and in this case Ennis definitely hits the target.

Ennis succeeds in doing this by adding a gritty undercurrent to the stories, an edge of realism and understanding, perhaps, of how men work in war times. It's not just the simple things with Yanks and Limeys at each others throats one moment, then fighting side-by-side, wing-to-wing the next, but also the detail of how men really deal with dead colleagues, death and, of course, the fear. There is no glory in this story, just a tale of men and war and it reads all the better for that.

Colin Wilson's artwork is very impressive. He has the aircraft lines down to a tee and the action is brilliant. This is all-important with a war comic, all very well inventing skyscrapers for Metropolis, but the machinery of war needs to be right or it jars the reader back to an unsatisfied reality. Here it's brilliant.

For anyone brought up on the war comics of the 50's, 60's or 70's this will be a pleasantly modern return.

## Battler Briton

Writers: Frank Miller and Roger McKenzie  
Artists: Frank Miller and Klaus Janson  
Publisher: Marvel HB 840pp February 2007  
Reprinting issues 158-191 of *Daredevil*

Before you get wrapped up in how amazing the movie *300* is, it's important to remember that Frank Miller was brilliant quite some time ago. With *Sin City* brought to life with such care and style and in a way that at last saw a movie do justice to a comic, now is a great time look back at a selection of comics that has become a watchword among aficionados - namely Miller's run on *Daredevil*.

Here is Miller's first work on *Daredevil*, and it's brought together in a very neat package. In 1979 Miller was the artist on *Daredevil* from issue 158, where this graphic Novel begins and it was at issue 168, when Miller took on the role of writing script as well as pencils and Klaus Janson took on inking. He continued for another 23 issues, and finished at issue 191.

Miller's artwork immediately gave the comic a strong noir sensibility, something that previously had been missing, and his subsequent writing is recognised as defining the *Daredevil* that we know today, nearly thirty years later. Miller introduced key characters such as Elektra, Ben Urich, the ninja group The Hand, and took The Kingpin from the pages of *Spiderman* and made him *Daredevil*'s human nemesis. This is an interesting dynamic, as the Character Matt Murdoch is blind, but has special abilities whereas the Kingpin is simply a gargantuan man and relies solely on his intelligence as a super fiend to cause trouble.

We also see considerable turmoil in the *Daredevil*'s life as Elektra arrives and then gets killed, something that rarely happened to popular characters.

This collection is expensive, and will probably retail at about £55 in comic book shops, but for over 800 pages of absolute genius story telling, this is not bad value at all. Its over three years of work and well worth the extra spend, especially in this prestige format.



## Meanwhile...

In May DC comics release *SHOWCASE PRESENTS VOL 1: The War That Time Forgot*, written by Robert Kanigher. This is over 500 pages of reprinted black and white comics retailing for about a tanner, and is one of the more fantastical titles from DC, telling the story of American soldiers who encounter Dinosaurs on an uncharted pacific island.

Also in May we see the release of *Batman Black and White, Vol-3*. This 208 page graphic novel is a selection of short stories by the cream of current comic creators.

Finally, Barb Lien-Cooper and Park Cooper bring us *Half Life* from Marvel Comics. A terrorist gas attack on the London Underground turns a young girl into a half-dead vampire. Naturally she's recruited by the Bureau of ParaHuman and Supernatural Affairs and is trained to fight the good fight on London streets.

The premise sounds interesting although I don't think UK government agencies have Bureau in their title too often. Even so a Horror comic set in London should be worth a glance.



# Greased Lightning

Ball lightning is a strange natural phenomenon where glowing spheres are seen during thunderstorms. Although they can burn through things, they have also been observed bouncing off objects with no ill effects.

Theories are wide ranging from plasma held together by its own magnetic fields to mini black holes.

Scientists at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch New Zealand propose that lightning vaporises silica on the ground creating a ball constrained by its charge and glowing with the reaction of the silicon recombining with oxygen.

Following up on the New Zealand work,



researchers at the Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil created balls that lasted for up to 8 seconds by passing 140 amps through silicon wafers. These appear to behave the same way as the mysterious natural effect. Studies continue with other materials as the team attempted to understand the chemical reactions within the spheres.

Source: *New Scientist*

## ROBERTICK GLADWICK'S WORLD OF SCIENCE



Computer viruses are often created by amateurs fitting readily available program modules together from malicious

websites. 'Phishing', the collection of account details to defraud, is going the same way.

For the first time a phishing tool has been discovered being sold by criminals. The Universal Man-in-the-Middle Phishing Kit contains numerous features to help create fake web sites including the ability to duplicate content from legitimate sources in real-time. It is called a Universal kit because it takes any information given by a duped user not just credit card details.

Michael Sutton of security firm SPI Dynamics says, "The availability of point-and-click tools such as this lowers the bar by making advanced attacks available to a wider range of would-be phishers. In order to defend against man-in-the-middle attacks, users should avoid clicking on links in e-mail messages," he warned.

Technology is helpful, but it's your wits that will keep you safe.

Source: [newsfactor.com](http://newsfactor.com), [paypal.com](http://paypal.com)



UK Space interests have drawn media attention recently with announcements of potential all-British space missions to the moon and private space vehicles.

An orbiter firing penetrators into the lunar surface and a lander have been presented as concepts to be funded by UK science and research bodies. These are slated to reach our nearest neighbour by 2010.

This has added pressure on the government for the UK to have a national space programme.

Professor Keith Mason, the chairman of the UK Space Board said that in Europe "the UK is alone in not having a national programme and that's what puts us at a disadvantage."

The British National Space Centre co-ordinates UK space efforts. It is funded by its 11 partners, with a £207m budget during 2005/2006, spent mainly on the UK contribution to the European Space Agency (ESA). Compare this with France's £580m and Germany's £450m contribution to ESA.

Meanwhile a UK-based X-prize loser, Starchaser Industries, hasn't folded like many of the competitors have. Continuing with its development programme it has won a study contract from ESA. The company will present a feasibility study of their Thunderstar/Starchaser 5A launcher and spacecraft from both a technical and business standpoint, particularly focusing on the potential space tourism market in Europe.

All or none of these things may reach reality; however, it's nice to know other people in the UK are dreaming of space.

Source: BBC, *Spacedaily*, [starchaser.co.uk](http://starchaser.co.uk), ESA, ISRO, BNSC

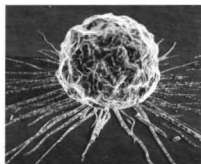
# False Advertising

it equated housework to more conventional fitness activities. That was all certain areas of the media needed.

A woman's place is anywhere she wants to be. Except the first place I spotted this story, the headline was: "Housework 'can cut risk of breast cancer.'" Almost implying women not doing housework would pay a terrible price for it.

Meanwhile, if you can face the cancer risk, Electrolux are developing vacuum cleaner shoes. Literally they are a pair of shoes containing tiny vacuum cleaners. They are aiming at busy people with busy lives, although those lives may be shorter.

Source: [annanova.com](http://annanova.com), Cancer Research UK, Electrolux



Cancer Research UK issued a report recently that shows an hour's daily housework reduces the risk of colon cancer – except it didn't. What it said was that active people had a reduced risk of colon cancer and if they have a body Mass Index (BMI) less than 25 their risk falls further. In their summary

# Absolutely Fabbers

Rapid prototyping, the making of 3D objects via a 'printer', has been mentioned before in *Matrix* for its medical uses (issues 172 and 182) and it is a common industrial practice to make an early concept physical. Finished products are being made this way too.

Now you can build your own rapid prototyping machine.

Launched late last year, the Fab@Home project wants to 'democratize innovation' by helping people build their own rapid prototyping device or fabricator.

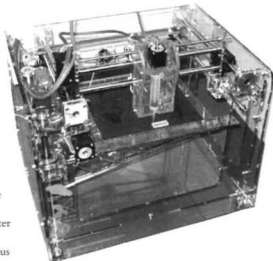
The founders, Hod Lipson and Evan Malone, from Cornell University, see it as the start of a revolution like the original home computer kits that lead to the Desktops and Laptops of today.

Industrial Fabricators cost \$20,000 and upwards whereas the home-built version should cost around \$2400. Unlike the expensive ones their design can use different materials including silicone, plaster and chocolate.

All the designs and software required, plus

building tips and advice are issued for free and are available on their website. Being a Wiki site it is open to the whole world to contribute. The next Steve Jobs or Bill Gates may even be visiting the site as you read this.

Source: [www.fabathome.org](http://www.fabathome.org)



# Foundation Favourites

Andy Sawyer gets caught up  
on *The Caltraps of Time*

**S**cholarship's an odd thing. How much of what we know is what we think we know? The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, tells us that the earliest recorded use of the term "science fiction" in the sense we know it (discounting William Wilson in 1851 who seems to be referring more to poetry) is in 1929, and I've seen this reproduced countless times. Yet it turns up in the January 1927 issue of *Amazing* where Verne is called "a kind of Shakespeare of science fiction". One for the pedant, perhaps, but it's good to get things right. Even more importantly, how much of our history has become forgotten as we disregard it? More and more, as I've been involved with the scholarship of sf, I've realized how many people assume things because someone else has said so. Or overlook things because we haven't actually looked.

What do you mean by "we", kemo sabe? All right – "I".

David I Masson was, as we can read from John Clute's obituary in *The Independent* on 8<sup>th</sup> March (<http://news.independent.co.uk/people/obituaries/article2338397.ece>) a writer known for a handful of stories, mostly published in *New Worlds* from 1965 to 1967 and collected in 1968 as *The Caltraps of Time* (three others were published in anthologies a few years later). I remember reading some of the stories (and the book) at the time, and being impressed. I also knew, probably from his reviews in early issues of *Foundation*, that Masson was a librarian at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

But it wasn't until John Clute told me that his notes on Masson indicated a connection with Liverpool library and asked me to investigate that I put two and two together. For nearly ten years, until December 1955 Masson was curator of the Special Collections of Liverpool University Library. And where has the Science Fiction Foundation Collection been housed since 1993...? It's peculiar (and somewhat chastening) to realise that this information has been sitting around in full view for over ten years (I've since seen the Liverpool connection mentioned on the Ansible E-editions website set up to promote their recent expanded edition of *Caltraps*, but have probably not read any of Masson's fiction since I've been here). Certainly, to the best of my recollection, the fact that a previous librarian at the University of Liverpool actually *was* a science fiction writer was never raised when I started here, and it was only John Clute's request for further information which brought it to my attention. An object lesson. In an odd time-warped connection the Science Fiction Foundation Collection's sort of come home, and ever since the obituary was published

I've been teasing the current Special Collections Librarian (who is of course my boss) about when *she's* going to write some science fiction stories.

And because of all this I've re-read *The Caltraps of Time*, and I'm confirmed in what I do remember feeling first time round – that these are stories with a freshness and originality that confirm the praise given by John Clute and Christopher Priest (the *Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,2029887,00.html>) in their obituaries. It's clear that Masson was a writer of significant gifts; one who was in the right place at the right time to be published in *New Worlds*. His first story, "Traveller's Rest" shows the fascination with time and perception which is a mark of the New Wave and explains why he was greeted with such acclaim: a soldier in a war is relieved and goes home. There's little else, but that's all we need: the point is emphasis and viewpoint. As this happens, it becomes clear that relativistic distortions are coming into play as the protagonist (whose very name lengths in the course of his journey) travels, arrives home, and raises a family. The ironic ending makes this entire life but a moment in a possibly endless war. Another story, "Mouth of

interesting is "Synesthesia and sound spectra", published in the journal *Wond* in April 1952. Noting suggestions that there may be connections between synesthesia and "the evocative power of words, especially words in poetry", Masson draws a distinction between "private" synesthesia – where, say, days of the week and numbers are experienced as colours – which may have their roots in individual experiences and cultural conditions, and other synesthesias – say, seasons, months – which may depend on shared natural symbolism. He gives as examples his own synesthesia in which he perceives winter months as "blackish", spring months green and yellows, and summer reads and golds. He also considers a third group, the acoustic synesthesias arising from music or speech sounds, and again draws on his own experiences. He notes the colours associated with musical sounds ("The brass range from intense orange-white like the heart of a fire, to dark but glowing red and purple") and with vowels and consonants, concluding that "there probably exists in the human brain a map of colours part of which is similar topologically to a map of frequencies there". While he refers to studies of language rather than literary

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Hell", shows explorers entering an increasingly bizarre (and again) distorted landscape. The influence of both may possibly be seen in Christopher Priest's *Inverted World*. A third story, "A Two-Timer", is told in a 17<sup>th</sup> century prose reflecting the protagonist's confusion in entering the world of the 1960s. Language also is at the centre of "Not So Certain", in which the confusion caused by an alien language is unraveled.

While at Liverpool, Masson compiled a *Hand-list of Incunabula in the University Library Liverpool* (1949; published by the University Library); not many science fiction writers do that sort of thing) and wrote several articles for scholarly journals, of which the University Library has off-prints. Given Masson's interest in language and perception, one of the most

texts such as perhaps the most famous linking of vowels to synesthesia, Rimbaud's poem "Voyelles" (sf's most celebrated exercise in synesthesia, Alfred Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!* was not to be published until some years after this essay), with hindsight we can see this piece as foreshadowing elements in his fiction.

It's sometimes said that the strength of sf is the short story, and certainly a number of the classic short stories of sf – Jerome Bixby's "It's a Good Life", Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon", Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" – are the mainstays of their authors' reputation. None of Masson's stories perhaps hit the "essential" mark as individual stories, but as a collection *The Caltraps of Time* is one of the defining texts of the 60s new wave of British sf.

### Continued from page 15

motivations for their stance.

Meanwhile the freedom-loving liberals, with Captain America at their head, aren't quite let off the hook as straightforward good guys. Several intermediaries plead with Captain America not to pursue a violent response to the new laws but his unwillingness to bend eventually leads to a battle that causes the death of a large, likeable, but hardly A-list Marvel hero.

In the end, though, the pro-registration argument is undermined. They are seen to be making increasingly murky deals with dangerous elements. There are suspicions of corruption and profiteering and manipulation. As is so often the case it is Spider-man who acts as the conscience of the Marvel Universe. At first pro-registration, Peter Parker gradually becomes disenchanted with the choice he has made and his journey from one side to the other provides the narrative thrust that places Marvel firmly in the liberal camp.

*Civil War* is far from perfect. Some of the characterisation is questionable – Reed Richards in particular is behaves in a way that grates against decades of continuity – and there are too many “Red Sky” crossovers (issues that claim to be part of the crossover but are, at best, only tangentially linked).

But, at well over 100 issues all told – approaching 3000 pages of comic book art – and employing literally dozens of artists and writers, there can be few artistic endeavours that

have enlisted so many talented individuals to construct a primarily political story.

Nor is this some elitist tale destined for minority interest television channels or art-house cinemas. *The Amazing Spider-man* is consistently one of the highest selling comics in America – it's as close to prime time as a comic gets. So when Peter Parker states: “The question isn't what does a country stand for when things are easy. The question is what does a country stand for when standing is the hardest? When does the country we're living in stop being the country we were born in. If the cost of silence is the soul of the country... if the cost of tacit support is that we lose the very things that make this nation the greatest in human history, then the price is too high.” (*The Amazing Spider-man* #536), he's asking questions about the balance between security and liberty to the largest possible audience this medium can muster.

Should people like Maher be appalled or repelled by the willingness of writers and artists to use superheroes to tell serious, complex, political stories? Does it somehow cheapen the political debate? I honestly can't see how that could be the case.

One may, of course, wish to be critical of the shortcomings of particular stories but to suggest that the simple act of framing political debate within a particular fantastic milieu means that it is somehow automatically “denuded of all context and cheerily co-opted by the wish-

fulfilment fantasies of some insular adolescent jerks” is nonsense. It seems to me that, even for the most insular of geeks, the very least a story like *Civil War* can achieve is to slip the roughage of political debate into their everyday pap.

For me, though, comics – and particularly Marvel comics – were a place where I first found a serious discussion of political issues that weren't hidebound by traditional hatreds. Yes they were dressed up in spandex but growing up in 1970/80s Northern Ireland there were few enough places where tolerance, acceptance and the basic equality of man were being preached and discovering those messages in the racks of yellowing US comics in the newsagents of Bundoran or in the gaudy reprints of Marvel UK was something like a revelation. Mark Millar, Brian Bendis, Joe Quesada and the others behind *Civil War* seem to me to have placed their feet firmly in that tradition. We appear to have moved into an era where the apparently insoluble divisions that I knew in my childhood have, in a new form, engulfed the whole world. A few glossy pictures and speech bubbles won't change this and won't save the world, but maybe *Civil War* will make a few thousand (or a few dozen or even one or two) impressionable young boys think a little harder about the way the world is and the things they've been told to take for granted.

And that's what good art should do, whatever the medium and whether the hero wears a mask or not, isn't it?

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