



Shipyard Blues 2000

Welcome to Shipyard Blues 2000

So, this is the new Millennium. January 1st of the year 2000. At the moment, it's not much to look at, just another rather grey winter's day in Milton Keynes, but what better time than now to put together a new fanzine. Well, sort of new, since *Shipyard Blues 2000* is the bastard offspring of earlier Shipyard 'zines, like *The Crystal Ship*, *Rastus* and *Shipyard Blues*, all of which occupied my time between the late seventies and the mid nineties.

Of course, some of you will be aware that I tentatively stepped back into the fannish arena during 1999, with the *Shipyard Blues* website which continues, but the thing I find most unsatisfactory about publishing on the Web is the lack of feedback. In the end, that is the element I decided I most missed, so I'm stepping back to 'old technology', and starting a new run of the fanzines, of which this is the first.

The two things, zine and website are supposed to compliment each other. If you can access the website, you can see almost daily updates on the things that catch my eye and interest me, plus other things like an archive of past fanzines, book reviews etc. The fanzine, meanwhile, will try to recapture the buzz that the original zines had, both for me and my correspondents. That's the plan, now on to the execution!

The most important thing about all the Shipyard products in the past is that they were very much collaborative projects. The same

applies with *Shipyard Blues 2000*: this is not a 'personal zine', written by me, but a wider 'genzine' seeking and accepting contributions from a range of people, both in the form of articles and letters of comment, but also artwork. I've still got a stash of artwork from former contributors to use for this and the next issue, but I do need more. Shipyard products have always been heavily illustrated, so I'm looking for artists to carry on the tradition.

As former readers will remember, just about anything goes within the pages of *Shipyard Blues*, so articles can cover a wide range. I kind of figure SF fans are bright, funny and eclectic folk who can find something of interest in just about anything. Whatever the subject matter, if an article passes the editorial "Yeah!" test, it goes in (subject to the normal laws of libel, copyright, etc, naturally). Got something brilliantly odd to say – try it on me, you never know, it might get the thumb's up.

So, what are you waiting for? Get reading, get writing, get drawing. Get on with the new Millennium. There may seem a lot of it to go, but time does fly by. Do it now!

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The Rastus Eye

A jaundiced look at the last Millennium.

Massacre of the Innocents

It seems somehow appropriate that the final year of the second millennium should reflect so absolutely the first year of the first millennium of the Christian Era. Then, King Herod ordered the massacre of the innocents, the murder of all newly borne male babies under the age of one year, because one amongst them was prophesied as being a new "King of the Jews", and Herod didn't want any rival claimants to his own crown.

Skip forward from 1AD to 1999AD and another massacre of the innocents is taking place, in Chechnya, this time of the inhabitants of a city, on the pretence that Chechen capital Grozny houses many 'terrorists' and 'rebels' against the Russian state. I'm sure there is some grain of truth in the claim, but I'm equally sure that the vast majority of Chechens have absolutely no terrorist or rebel inclinations. The forces arrayed against the few thousand 'real' rebel fighters encompasses a large percentage of the massive Russian Army, who are methodically pounding Grozny into rubble, rather than risk the high

casualties of a costly street-fighting assault.

I don't know about you, but hearing about the Russians' onslaught on Chechnya has generally made me wonder whether Boris Yeltsin and his successor Vladimir Putin really know what they are doing. Ostensibly, the war (police action, internal pacification, call it what you will) is about suppressing "international terrorism" perpetrated by Chechen gangs, following on from some high profile bomb attacks in Russian cities. Granted that the Chechen republic had become a pretty lawless place since the breakaway attempt a few years ago left it in a kind of stalemate. But this kind of ruthless attempt to bomb and blow Chechens into submission isn't really going to bring an end to terrorism. On the contrary, it will drive more Chechens into the arms of extremists, encourage more of them to start taking covert action against the Russians.

The wholesale destruction of Chechnya that is going on is a temporary palliative, and presumably serves to deflect attention from Russia's many other problems. It also gives Valdimir (Ras) Putin a strong hand, making him favourite to retain the presidency next March.

But down the line, once the Chechens get themselves together again, you can be sure that their hatred of Russia will be even more deeply entrenched, and it doesn't take many pissed off people to form an underground terrorist organisation. Putin's ham-fisted attempts to use the Chechen war as a means of elevating his own popularity could, in the end, backfire disastrously.

All that Glitters...

The curious thing about the Gary Glitter case (resolved with the Glitter man being shunted off for a four month spell in prison for possessing child pornography) wasn't the fact that it made such a big splash in the newspapers, since any celebrity misadventure gets maximum coverage in this tabloid age, even in the so-called "quality" newspapers (especially when they can hypocritically tut-tut editorially about the misdeeds of their lesser brethren and their "cheque book journalism"). What made me chuckle was how thoroughly stupid Glitter was. He carts around a portable computer with him loaded with hundreds of pictures of child pornography, stuff he'd downloaded from the Web. When the PC goes wrong, he sticks it straight into a local repair shop where he happens to be, complete with incriminating evidence. Is this dumb, or what? I guess all those really stupid lyrics Glitter has perpetrated over the years really did come from the heart, after all. Do I wanna be in your gang? No thanks, Gary, I'll pass on that one.

Of course, the Glitter man was pretty lucky, since he beat the more serious charge of sexual abuse of a fourteen year-old girl, because the woman (the alleged abuse took place twenty years ago) essentially was offered extra money by a national newspaper if Glitter was convicted. The judge, quite rightly, told the jury to view the woman's testimony "with utmost care", since the opportunity to profit could be regarded as reason enough to exaggerate or lie in the witness box. Had there not been that element to the case, then Glitter could very well have had a much longer sentence. As usual, various media folk and politicians are frothing at the mouth about the effect such a case has on people's view of the press. Relax, guys, no one ever thought of the *News of the World's* output as anything but gutter journalism in the first place, so no change there.

Have you cyberslacked today?

Came across a new word today: "cyberslacking". Seems there is some kind of epidemic of it sweeping the world. Before you jump to the conclusion this must be some new form of computer virus, let me tell you it's not. It's the perfidious act of logging onto the internet for personal reasons, or sending and receiving personal email, in company time, and on company machines. "Billions of dollars worth of lost productivity" say American employers. Wow, could this be the end of civilisation as we know it?

It's all crap, of course, generated by industry people who want to sell our

managers complicated systems which monitor employees use of their 'personal' computers. They should resist such actions, since the few minutes lost to productivity by the 'cyberslacking' employee are probably more than repaid by the increase in morale of said employee. Crack down on such use, and employees get resentful of the restrictions, morale goes down and productivity goes down too. Like personal phone calls on company lines, the private use of internet and email facilities is part of the grease that keeps the wheels of commerce turning smoothly. "Cyberslacking?" No, let's instead call it 'cyber-relaxing', the recuperative break that gets you going again.

Creativity and the finding of patterns

Came across a useful quote from SF writer Thomas Disch today (courtesy of Arthur Hlavaty's excellent *Derogatory Reference 94* fanzine):

"Creativeness is finding patterns where none exist."

It's very true. The truly creative people come up with combinations of things that most people would simply pass up on as not possible. So, the creative fashion designer puts together colours, cuts and cloth in ways that are surprising, and if successful, they have people saying "I must buy some of those". The creative comedian picks up on unlikely subject matter and turns it into a comic routine that has the audience looking at things in new and hilarious ways (think Ben Elton at his best). The creative painter

does surprising things with colour and shape (Picasso, for example). Of course, it's not just finding patterns where none exist that makes the creative person so extraordinary: it's knowing what to do with them once you've found the pattern, and that is where creativity transcends itself into art.

Of course, just pattern finding isn't always creative. As ever, there is often a thin line between creative thought and madness. The 'patterns where none exist' part can become a trap in itself. It's arguable that the difference between being a genius and a madman is only a matter of timing. Someone painting like Picasso in the mid-eighteenth century would probably have been carted off to an asylum (that was the fate of some artists who attempted to follow in his footsteps in Stalinist Russia). By the same token, maybe there are those regarded as mad now, who are simply seeing the 'pattern where none exists', a pattern that might become blindingly obvious in another fifty years time.

Synchronicity at work

It's weird the way things coincide in life. A few weeks ago, I started re-reading John Brunner's classic SF book *Stand On Zanzibar*, which was first written in 1968, and just re-issued as part of Millennium's excellent SF Masterworks series. The book deals with an early 21st century Earth in which population growth has been every bit as steep as the worse doom merchants of the sixties thought (whereas in actual fact, population in developed

countries generally reached a plateau in the seventies, and hasn't increased much since). I'd just figured out what 'mukkers' were in relation to the plot (literally, people who ran amok, driven mad by the pressure of crowded city environments), when over the radio came news of a naked 'mukker' running wild with a samurai sword in a Catholic Church in Croydon, slashing away at people in the congregation.

Synchronicity strikes!

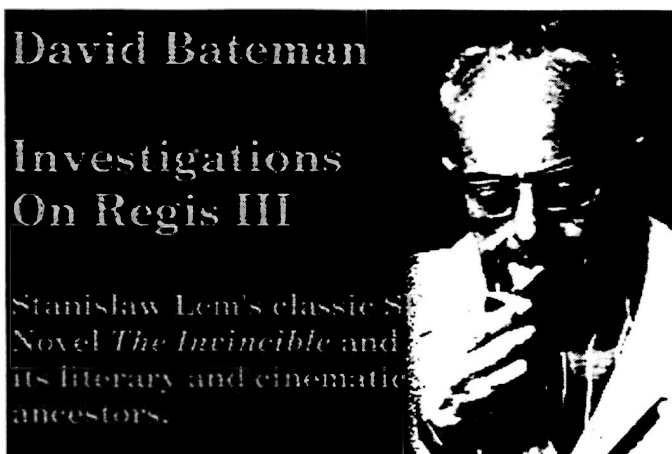
Of course, that got me thinking about parallels with the various massacres in the USA, like the Columbine High School killings earlier this year, and I'm starting to wonder if John Brunner isn't some kind of prophet, a latter day Nostradamus. There are plenty of other things in the book to disprove that, of course – he didn't predict the fall of the USSR and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, for example. But in relation to the 'mukkers', he might have hit the nail on the head. Maybe, like overcrowded rats who eat their own young, humans can only stand so much pressure from their fellow humans before some of them go mad and psychopathic.

I think it's more than population pressure, though. Maybe the constant media bombardment of news, news and more news, and as much of it as bad and sen-

sationalised as possible (no ratings or circulation sales in good news, after all, is there?) just gets more and more people down. Old ladies refuse to go out after dusk because they've heard about the awful things that might happen to them. Parents worry if their children are out in the streets, or are late home from school, because there are "such terrible people about". It all gradually tweaks the anxiety levels, increasing frustration, fuelling anger, until some people just tip over into madness, become obsessed with the very things they are afraid of, until they snap and commit the crimes that started their psychosis in the first place. People beware, for there are "mukkers" amongst us.



Artwork© Peggy Ransom



1: LEM

In Britain, Stanislaw Lem is probably one of the least known great novelists of the Twentieth Century. If he is known at all, it is mostly for Tarkovsky's film of his 1961 novel *Solaris*, touted by film critics as the Russian *2001*. The major reasons for Lem's merely cult status in Britain are firstly that he writes mostly in Polish, secondly that some of the translations of his work are indifferent, and thirdly that he frequently commits the still widely unforgiven sin of writing science fiction.

Lem was born in 1921 in Lemberg (Lvov), Poland, moving later to Cracow. After forced labour as a mechanic under the Nazis, he worked and studied in medicine, philosophy and science, and psychology; and is particularly interested in cybernetics and the history and philosophy of science. He is also co-founder of the Polish Astronautical Society. His output

includes novels, short stories, poetry, television plays, and essays on both artistic and scientific subjects. All this suggests a sort of Polish version of Arthur C. Clarke, but whereas in Clarke's writings, technology tends to lead to answers and progress, technology in Lem tends to lead mostly to further questions.

Lem's SF divides reasonably sharply into comic and serious. The comic material includes moral parables and fables (fairly akin to Brigid Brophy), and flights of scientific paradox (*Star Diaries*; *The Futurological Congress*) influential on, say, *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* and *Red Dwarf*, and often containing some fairly sharp social satire. With a nod to Jorge Luis Borges, the use of paradox and logical loops becomes mind-bogglingly elaborate in *A Perfect Vacuum*, a book of reviews of fictitious books, including a rather scathing one of itself.

Lem's serious SF is concerned with investigations: in *The Invincible*, into the fate of the crew of an

exploratory spaceship; in *Chain Of Chance*, into a series of unexplained deaths which may or may not be related; and in *Solaris*, into the nature of a planet's "ocean" which seems to display signs of sentience. *Solaris* is Lem's finest book – I'd count it as the Twentieth Century's best book – and digs deep into love, communication and awareness at the same time as being both a study of the nature of scientific progress and a forceful adventure story, both violent and haunting, with the happiest sad ending possible. It's a complex book, one that I'm in love with, and I won't talk about it here. I want to talk instead about *The Invincible*, a novel in some ways so simple and conventional that Lem's characteristic touches become easier to define.

2: INVESTIGATIONS AND THE INVINCIBLE

The Invincible (first German edition 1967) is a science fiction thriller, probably one of the most perfectly paced thrillers ever written. In plot, its closest recent relative is Fred McLeod Wilcox's 1956 film *Forbidden Planet* (but not *The Tempest*, on which *Forbidden Planet* is partly based), though in incident it sometimes closely resembles Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds*.

Purely as a thriller, the plot is easily summarized. The cruiser *Invincible* is sent to the desert planet Regis III to discover the fate of its sister ship *Condor*. The *Condor*, a year earlier, had reported its successful landing for initial exploration of the planet; but two days later it had radioed a second and final message consisting

of complete gibberish. The *Invincible's* crew eventually locate the *Condor* and most of its dead crew. Then an expedition from the *Invincible* comes under attack from swarms of fly-like "crystals" which can electro-magnetically disable people by causing complete amnesia. A rescue party manages to retrieve some survivors, but only at the expense of further casualties. Four crew are still missing, possibly still alive but amnesiac many miles from the *Invincible*, in an area where the crystals swarm. In another disastrous attempt to locate the missing four, the crew discover that the swarms can also ultimately disable and destroy their best robotic equipment. Prior to abandoning the planet, Rohan, the *Invincible's* second-in-command, is sent on a solo last-chance attempt to locate and rescue the missing crew members.

But to portray the story like this is to ignore the extent to which the whole action is driven by bafflement and investigation. The search for the missing craft is hampered by its lack of a radio signal and by the surprisingly iron-rich desert landscape, and so has to rely on a video-search from spotter satellites sent into likely orbits. Meanwhile other conundrums arise: why should the planet's atmosphere contain so much oxygen and methane in the absence of any apparent life? A biological expedition to the continent's nearest coast discovers ocean algae, partly explaining the atmosphere, but also poses a further question. Though there are sea-creatures, there are none near the shore or in the shallows, and furthermore the creatures seem to have an electro-

magnetic sense, and flee from electronic machinery such as the probes sent to discover them.

Meanwhile, the results of the first orbits of the satellites include what looks like a city. A further expedition is mounted, but what look like buildings – however alien – even from a few hundred yards away, from close up resolve into intermeshing metallic structures of rods, plates and lattices: clearly artificial, yet of no conceivable function.

To an extent, *The Invincible* is a SF detective story. But in Lem, answers never fall easily into place. This is not the unquestioned inexplicability of Hitchcock's birds' behaviour, nor the silly vanishings of evidence found in *The X-Files*; in Lem, scientists strive for all they are worth to understand what's happening, sometimes because their lives may depend on that understanding; but when answers do come, they are usually gradual, partial, provisional, and disputed.

The "flies" prove to be symmetrically three-winged, metallic structures of apparently simple electro-magnetic functions, capable of very few behaviours when solo, but "instinctively" able to move into formation with other "flies": once in a large formation, they are able to behave almost as if intelligently. The unlikelihood of such an inorganic "life-form" coming into existence is discussed by the scientists of the crew, and one hypothesis is of inorganic evolution beginning with the self-repairing and replicating robots of a civilization known once have existed in a nearby system. In

the new environment of Regis III (then including some land life), competition for resources developed, with simple, energy-efficient automata winning out over more complex robots and over organic life itself. The precise details of this and other hypotheses in the book aren't the issue here: what's important is that this is a fiction which genuinely explores issues in evolutionary theory, and has relevance to, for example, the issue of the chemical and crystalline origins of evolution before it could truly be called life.

In common with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Invincible* explores philosophical and scientific questions; but while *Frankenstein* is concerned largely with moral issues of creation and parenthood, *The Invincible* explores non-moral issues of evolution: indeed, this very difference has to be confronted on Regis III. Though the enemy acts in an apparently intelligent hostile way, it is in fact rather to be viewed as a natural force. Hatred of such a force makes no more sense than railing against earthquakes or disease: "Why be so grimly stubborn?" Rohan wonders to himself. "It's no different than if the men had perished in an earthquake or a thunderstorm. We haven't been confronted by someone's conscious, purposeful effort, or some hostile will. Nothing but an inorganic process of self-organization..."

This questioning of likely consciousness (and the suggesting of unlikely consciousness) is a persistent theme in Lem: the researchers in *Solaris* are constantly questing to determine whether or not the ocean

of Solaris has a consciousness, and if so, what is its nature. But ultimately, as Lem makes clear, we can never perceive another's meaning directly: the best we can hope for is an inter-subjectivity that seems to make sense. Communication between species is fraught with uncertainties as to what is really being communicated. There is even a stunning moment when one of the Solaris researchers suggests to another that the experiences they have until now interpreted as attacks or experiments are actually presents. Later, another re-searcher compares to the ocean to "an imperfect god... one whose imperfection represents his essential characteristic: a god limited in his omniscience and power, fallible, incapable of foreseeing the consequences of his acts, and creating things that lead to horror... a god who simply is." Here, Lem very overtly treads the same theological territory that Mary Shelley trod in *Frankenstein*.

In the case of *The Invincible*, the "flies" of Regis III are most likely descended from automata created for a particular purpose, and have no consciousness; yet they have become independent, and have become a danger: this is something else that is shared with *Frankenstein*, and will be re-turned to later.

3: HORPACH AND ROHAN

Typically in Lem's novels, the main characters are quick to irritation or anger. In the satires, this usually takes the form of petty vendettas and rivalries. In *The Invincible*, it appears at first simply as part of the exhaustion of the main characters.

Tired out by the rigours of the approach and landing, the characters face their task with anything but enthusiasm. The crew resent the elaborate safety precautions; even Rohan, the second-in-command, resents Horpach for setting them: "This man, whose hair was almost as white as the suit he wore, showed no consideration now for his crew." And "Though they had flown together many parsecs, they had never become friends." The Commander in turn is moody: "Horpach fell silent. He was in a bad mood, which usually made him quite talkative and liable to become almost confidential. This was fraught with danger, though, for he might cut short such brief periods of intimacy with some nasty remark." Despite this, Rohan's trust is complete: "He was quite convinced that the Commander would find a solution somehow."

This is very much a men's world: a naval world without even the token woman found as romantic interest in *The Tempest* or *Forbidden Planet*. Naval terms and images are used freely, though almost subliminally, through the early pages: the spaceship is a heavy cruiser; "In the galleys dishes rattled... safety belts and wall ropes swung like pendulums in the long corridors of the decks." Even on landing, "clouds of sand swelled up like ocean waves..." and a complaining crew member asks, "Why can't we go ashore?" In some ways Horpach and Rohan themselves are naval stereotypes: Horpach, the grouchy, white-haired "Old Man", and Rohan, the younger, impatient First Mate.

In this rather stern, all-male world, Rohan feels that his more childlike qualities don't quite fit. "No one would ever have gotten him to admit that he felt the same thrill at the light effects whenever a satellite was put into orbit." He sends the other crew members back into the ship before unnecessarily double-checking a force-field by throwing sand at it: "Not that he needed any confirmation; he just obeyed a playful impulse." And when "he looked forward to this excursion to the seashore, for he preferred working on his own," Lem is only a turn of phrase away from calling it a day at the seaside. But importantly, Rohan's childlike qualities, even his penchant for isolation, never actually clash for a moment with his given role.

The Invincible is a book about struggle for understanding and survival, not a book about character development. But still, a key moment of transition for Rohan comes late on, in the intensely written chapter, "The Conversation". Throughout the struggles and disasters, Rohan's childlike trust in his Commander has never wavered for a moment, and it comes as a profound shock when Horpach himself confides that he has completely failed and does not know what to do next, requesting Rohan himself to take command for a key decision. Rohan's immediate response is a typical flash of unspoken anger. But a minute later his acceptance of responsibility, and his decision to himself search for the missing men, is his key transition in the story, from initial trust in his Commander to full acceptance of the trust of his crew: "Each man needed

the certainty that the others would not abandon him in any circumstances".

4: FROM THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS TO REGIS III

In H.P. Lovecraft's 1931 novel *At The Mountains Of Madness*, the forward team of an Antarctic expedition radio back to their base camp their discovery of traces of a possible pre-human civilization. Shortly thereafter, communications cease, and a rescue party is sent, only to discover the team slaughtered, and their specimens missing along with Gedney, a member of the team. In searching for Gedney, two members of the rescue party later discover, partially buried in ice, the ruins of an unbelievably ancient city clearly of non-human origin. They later discover, amongst other things, that the makers of this city, the "Old Ones", had created and bred large protoplasmic creatures as slave labour, but millions of years later were wiped out by the offspring of these "Shoggoths".

Here is key source (or close parallel) of those elements of *Forbidden Planet* not found in *The Tempest*: the ancient city, and the ancient civilization wiped out by its own creations. However, the Old Ones create the Shoggoth slaves through biological manipulation, later generations of Shoggoths evolving to become more autonomous and intractable, eventually becoming a predator on their creators (like H.G. Wells's Morlocks). *Forbidden Planet's* angle is more psychoanalytical: the Krell, attempting to make their

minds independent of their physical bodies, also inadvertently set loose independent manifestations of their own ids, which ultimately destroy them.

This story-within-the-story, that of the creators brought down by their own creation, is rather like the story of *Frankenstein* told on a colossal scale: a tragedy told in geological time. But the creation here lacks the intelligent, Job-like characteristics of Frankenstein's creature railing against the creator who has created him only to let him suffer. The attack on the creator-species is, finally, a result of causal forces rather than a conscious or reasoned rebellion.

Though the setting and development of Lem's novel has some close similarities with *Forbidden Planet*, the story-within-the-story is clearly more closely related to *At The Mountain Of Madness*. Beyond Lem's unsurprisingly better understanding of evolution, key differences are his focus on non-organic evolution and the fact that Lem avoids the simple tragic plot of having the creators themselves destroyed by the consequences of their creation. Rather, the creators of the automata "ancestors" of the "flies" are long gone for other causes; but the automata unintentionally left behind by this race evolve to become a force of nature which is a hazard to all other species.

For anyone doubting that *The Invincible* is directly influenced by *At The Mountains Of Madness*, the two stories share a number of elements of both plot and incident not found in *Forbidden Planet*. Both

stories involve a sequence of sub-expeditions, and tension is built up partly by the limited radio communication between the groups. Storms interrupt their activities and communication. Scientists establish the minimum age of remains found in caves by the thickness of overlaying calcareous deposits. The ancient cities are half-buried in snow and sand respectively. The wind is forever whistling eerily through the Antarctic peaks and ruins, and it seems a conscious bow to Lovecraft when, in Lem's chapter, 'In The Ruins': "Air masses blew through the steely thicket, got caught inside and whistled eery chants." Despite their different causes, the scenes of death and disorder found at the forward Antarctic camp and at the Condor include great similarities: there are Lovecraft's "evidences of alien fumbling... beyond sane conjecture... tin cans pried open in the most unlikely ways," and Lem's "indescribable disarray... incomprehensible and insane... a can of food that showed impressions of teeth, as if someone had tried to bite through the metal."

But all of this this not to diminish Lem's own achievement. He has taken a well-used plot and created something quite new, more applicable to our larger conceptions of space and time; and if there is a parable in *The Invincible*, it is to do with how intentions can become merged with natural forces, and how consequences of actions can persist through the years far beyond the point where any talk of blame first ceases to make sense.

David Bateman © August 1999



Introduction

Ask ten different fans what *Babylon 5* was about, and you will get fifty different answers – all of them probably valid. This is, as Lorien would say, as it should be. For a series as complex and multi-layered as *Babylon 5*, there will never be a single answer to this question; meaning is wherever we find it, and every viewer interprets the meaning of the story in his or her own way. What follows may be considered a follow-on to Bob Steele's earlier article, *The Deconstruction of Babylon 5* (available on the *Shipyard Blues* website). While I agree with many of the points made in that article, I have inevitably drawn some different conclusions concerning what the most important themes of the story are, and felt there were some important issues which Bob did not mention.

If you are reading this, you are probably already familiar with the programme, but in the event that anyone is not, a brief introduction

follows. *Babylon 5* is an American science fiction television series which ran for five years, from 1993 to 1998. The series is set in the 23rd century aboard the fifth and last of the Babylon stations, and involves a large cast of characters, representing both humans and a range of alien races. *Babylon 5* is unique in that rather than being simply a series of separate episodic stories, the whole series of 110 episodes tells one story over five years, which was planned in detail before a single episode was made. The intention of creator and main writer J. Michael Straczynski was to create the first genuine example of an epic novel on television. This format allowed Straczynski to tell a story of unparalleled (in television) depth and complexity.

This article examines what I consider to be the major underlying themes of the series, excluding those which Bob has already dealt with in his article. What follows is simply my own answer to the question, "what is *Babylon 5* about?"

Process and Change

Firstly, *Babylon 5* is about the future. This may appear obvious, and indeed rather uninteresting, as a great many stories have been set in the future. But the programme raises issues about the future that are not so frequently discussed. *Babylon 5* is a genuine example of a "future history", as opposed to a story set in the future. The series considers process and change. It involves not only the portrayal of a possible future, but the process of how that future comes about; not only where we are going, but how we get there. This is why I chose as the title of this article "Creating the Future", from a line spoken by Kosh in the *Babylon 5* prequel, 'In the Beginning'.

Babylon 5 is about many kinds of change. Over the course of the series, wars are fought, won and lost; governments fall, and new ones are founded. The centre about which the story revolves is the Shadow War – a conflict between two incalculably ancient and powerful alien races, the Shadows and the – Vorlons. But at the start of the series, this war has not yet begun – the galaxy is temporarily at peace. The existence of the Shadows and the true nature of the Vorlons are revealed little by little, with only hints at first. Indeed, we are not told the true nature of the conflict until the episode 'Into the Fire' – four years into the series. And the series continues after the war ends. Therefore, the programme is not simply a story about a war. Rather, it is the history of this war, and of the many characters and events

associated with it – the events leading up to it, and its end and aftermath. The emphasis is always on process, and on change.

Furthermore, nearly all of the major characters in the series go through some kind of change. Some, like Sinclair and Delenn, undergo physical transformations. Others undergo changes in their personality or outlook, or in the roles they play. John Sheridan changes from soldier to diplomat to revolutionary to leader of the newly-founded Interstellar Alliance. G'Kar is changed by his experiences from a scheming, manipulative villain to an enlightened, self-sacrificing hero. Ivanova, Vir, Garibaldi, Zack, Lennier, Lyta and many other characters all go through changes of one kind or another, and the role they play at the end of the series is dramatically different from that at the beginning.

Characters do not fall into archetypal roles such as heroes and villains (or if they appear to, one can be certain they will not remain in those roles for long). Some characters live, and others die.

In the longer term, we see changes in the very nature of humanity – first with the appearance of telepaths, and in the one million year flash-forward in 'The Deconstruction of Falling Stars', we see humanity transformed into beings of pure energy. Only one thing is certain: change is inevitable. *Babylon 5* tells us that we should not fear change or fight against it, because, as John Sheridan says in the penultimate episode 'Objects at Rest', "life is change."

Choices, Consequences and Responsibility

History does not create itself; the future is determined by the decisions and actions of individuals. One single choice, made by one single person, can change the universe, for better or worse. This simple point expresses one of *Babylon 5's* most important themes; in typical *Babylon 5* fashion, this message is hidden in plain sight, expressed as a line of dialogue in the very first episode ('The Gathering'), where Delenn refers to "the power of one mind to change the universe".

The series tells us that we, as conscious beings, have choices. It also tells us that those choices have consequences, for ourselves and for others. And – the part most difficult to accept, but most important to understand – it tells us that those who make choices are responsible for their consequences. These three issues – choices, consequences and responsibility – underlie the whole series, and I will list a few of the characters and events in the story which illustrate this theme.

The power to choose and to make a difference is not always the same thing as political power or rank. In the episode 'The Coming of Shadows', the elderly Centauri Emperor tells Sheridan:

"It has occurred to me recently that I have never chosen anything. I was born into a role that had been prepared for me; I did as I was instructed; married who I was told to marry; took up the role of emperor when my father died... I did all I was asked,

because it never occurred to me to choose otherwise. And now, at the end of my life, I wonder what might have been."

Another character whose story is bound up with choices, consequences and responsibility is Londo Mollari. He begins the series as the Centauri ambassador to the station; he dreams of seeing his people returned to power and glory, but he is out of favour in the Centauri royal court. The Centauri are bitter rivals with another alien race, the Narn. The conflict between the two races goes back centuries, and though they are at peace at the beginning of the series, war does not seem far away. Londo makes a decision to ask for the assistance of the Shadows, a mysterious and powerful group of aliens. This choice results in a terrible war between the Narn and the Centauri, with the loss of millions of lives. As a result of Londo's choice, the Narn homeworld, and eventually the Centauri homeworld too, are devastated.

In the pivotal episode 'The Coming of Shadows', when Londo makes the decision to ask for the Shadows' help, his assistant, Vir, begs him to reconsider. Londo replies "I have no choice". Of course, he is wrong. He has a choice, he has simply made it. It is easier for him to live with his actions in the belief that he could not choose otherwise; that it was his obligation to his people, that any opportunity to eliminate their enemy the Narn had to be taken. There is a strong contrast with the words of the Centauri emperor in the same episode, who is only aware at the end of his life that he had the power

to choose; Londo, by contrast, has the power but believes, or pretends to believe, that he does not. This is his tragic error ; like Shakespeare's Macbeth, he assumes that he can commit evil deeds in order to gain a desirable end, then put it behind him – in other words, to make choices without considering the consequences, and therefore without taking responsibility. Both characters believe that it is their duty to achieve these ends, and therefore that they have no choice other than to act as they do – and this mistake destroys Londo as it did Macbeth.

Soon after, in the episode 'Knives', we see the first indications that Londo is beginning to regret the choices he has made, when the alliances he has made within the Centauri government cost the life of his friend Urza Jaddo. Again, Vir asks him to undo the choices he has made and take a different path. But Londo believes it is too late to change: "The blood is already on my hands. Right or wrong, I must follow the path to its end." These words echo the following speech from Macbeth Act III, scene 5: "I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er." Both characters reason that they have already committed so many evil deeds that they cannot change their course even if they want to.

Londo does not realise his error until the Shadows come to Centauri Prime in 'The Hour of the Wolf'. Their presence puts the whole planet at risk, as the Vorlons are destroying any world containing even traces of

the Shadows. Londo finally turns against the Shadows, and does whatever is necessary to remove them, which includes making a deal with his former enemy, the Narn G'Kar, and assassinating the insane Emperor Cartagia. He is successful, but will later discover that the Shadows had allies who will seek revenge.

In the fourth season episode 'No Surrender, No Retreat', Londo attempts to make peace with G'Kar. Londo's words indicate how far his character has changed:

"I have made some very poor choices these last two years. Because I did not think, those choices almost destroyed my world, and yours. That is a humbling realisation... If, with a single wrong word, I can become the enemy, do I any longer really understand who the enemy is?"

Then, in 'The Fall of Centauri Prime', Londo finally reaches his tragic fate. He becomes emperor of the Centauri, but, thanks to the retaliation of the Narn and the Drazi, of a ruined world and a defeated people, as a puppet ruler manipulated by the Drakh (former servants of the Shadows). Because of the poor choices he made when he believed he had no choice, he has finally ended up in a position where he has no choices left. Londo summarises the irony of his story in a conversation with G'Kar:

"Isn't it strange, G'Kar? When we first met, I had no power, and all the choices I could ever want. Now I have all the power I could ever want, and no choices at all."

G'Kar's story mirrors Londo's in many ways except that G'Kar makes crucially different choices from Londo. Initially, G'Kar has the same hatred of the Centauri that the Centauri have of his people, and he is similarly dedicated to destroying them ('Signs and Portents'). But in 'Dust to Dust', Vorlon ambassador Kosh (assuming the image of a Narn) tells him:

"We are a dying people, G'Kar. So are the Centauri: obsessed with each other's death until death is all we can see, and death is all we deserve... You have the opportunity, here and now, to choose, to become something greater and nobler and more difficult than you have ever been before."

Thus G'Kar chooses to change his path, to act for the common good of all life and not just his own race.

Most of Babylon 5's characters go through this cycle of choices, consequences and responsibility in some way. Zack Allen has to choose between his loyalty to Nightwatch and to his friends ('Point of No Return'). Delenn chooses to enter the Chrysalis which transforms her into a hybrid of human and Minbari ('Chrysalis'). Sheridan chooses not to accept the corrupt rule of President Clark, and leads a revolution against him – the consequence of which is the formation of the Interstellar Alliance, forever changing the Galaxy. What makes Londo ultimately a 'villain' of the story is that he does not truly understand until too late that he has the power to choose one course or another. What makes characters such as Sheridan

and Delenn 'heroes' is that they make choices while accepting responsibility for the consequences, and they recognise the power of one mind to change the Universe.

Building Communities

In 'And Now for a Word', Delenn makes the following speech:

"Humans share one unique quality: they build communities. If the Narns or the Centauri or any other race had built a station like this, it would be used only by their own people. But everywhere humans go, they create communities out of diverse and sometimes hostile populations. It is a great gift, and a terrible responsibility – one that cannot be abandoned."

In the story, humans are unique among races in this quality, and it is humans who unite the disparate races of the galaxy – first against the Shadows and Vorlons, and then into the Interstellar Alliance. Communities are at the heart of Babylon 5 – the idea that we are all part of some larger community, be it an organisation, nationality, the human species or life as a whole. A community's strength comes from its diverse elements, united by some common condition. And a community must not work for its own good at the expense of others, for all communities are part of a larger community still, which progresses by mutual co-operation and respect, and harmed by hatred, distrust and war. *Babylon 5* constantly emphasises the fundamental unity of sentient beings as the universe grown to consciousness (as discussed

in Bob's article). The Interstellar Alliance's declaration of principles, written by G'Kar ('The Paragon of Animals'), makes the same point:

"The universe speaks in many languages, but only in one voice... It is the voice of our ancestors speaking through us, and the voice of our inheritors waiting to be born. It is the small, still voice that says 'we are one.' No matter the blood, no matter the skin, no matter the world, no matter the star, we are one..."

Characters in *Babylon 5* are distinguished by the scale of their vision. Some can only see the good of their own people, and these are the ones who fail or are destroyed despite their intentions. Londo is an example of such a character: he is dedicated to his own people, and does not care about the good of any other race. And yet, in the end, his world is ruined and his people defeated.

Similarly, Psi Cop Alfred Bester is totally dedicated to his people, whom he defines as telepaths. To him, humans who are not telepaths are not his people; they are the enemy. This is why an otherwise decent and even courageous man becomes a ruthless villain, who thinks nothing of manipulating, torturing and killing normal humans if it is in the interests of his 'own kind' (see the Psi Corps Trilogy of novels by J. Gregory Keyes for a more detailed exploration of Bester's character and the history of telepaths than is seen in the TV series).

President Clark and his followers seek to isolate Earth from alien

influences, but only succeed in turning human society in upon itself, stifling freedom and happiness. In general, the characters who are seen as 'evil' in *Babylon 5* are those who act in the interests of themselves or of what they see as 'their people' at the expense of others. The characters who rise to greatness (such as G'Kar, Sheridan, Delenn and Sinclair) are those with a vision beyond the good of themselves or their own, because they understand that each group or race is only a part of the larger community of life: as Kosh tells G'Kar in 'Dust to Dust':

"What is there left for Narn if all of creation falls around us? There is nothing: no hope, no dream, no future, no life – unless we turn from the cycle of death towards something greater... We are fighting to save one another. We must realise we are not alone. We rise and fall together, and some of us must be sacrificed if all are to be saved."

Therefore, the series tells us that anything which appears to benefit one race or group, but harms others, harms the whole community of races, and in the end inevitably harms the race which was supposed to benefit. It is a message which applies to human beings in the real world as much as it does to fictional alien races in the *Babylon 5* universe: we divide, factionalise and tribalise ourselves based on culture, language or beliefs. But conflict, exploitation and hatred ultimately harm all, and benefit none, because of that fundamental truth of human

existence of which *Babylon 5* reminds us: we are one.

The Long, Twilight Struggle: Historical Parallels in *Babylon 5*

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" says Susan Ivanova in the episode 'Infection', quoting the American philosopher George Santayana. This phrase sums up another of *Babylon 5*'s important themes – that if we do not learn from the mistakes of the past, we will make them all over again. This is seen in the series in various ways. The fictional history of the *Babylon 5* universe shows a cyclical pattern – the Shadows and Vorlons have fought out the same war every few millennia for over a million years ('In the Shadow of Z'ha'dum'). As Sheridan tells them in 'Into the Fire', "You're trapped in this cycle as much as we are." Similarly, the Centauri invade the Narn homeworld – and withdraw from it – not once, but twice, and each time the Narn thirst for vengeance blinds them to all else (except for G'Kar, who tries in vain to turn his people away from revenge after the second invasion).

Moreover, many aspects of *Babylon 5*'s storyline mirror real events from our own history. The Centauri, for example, are loosely based on the Roman Empire, and the mad emperor Cartagia is based upon the similarly insane Roman emperor Caligula. Vir, Londo's nervous, and seemingly cowardly assistant who is thought of as a fool by almost everyone yet eventually becomes

emperor himself, parallels the Roman emperor Claudius.

Other aspects of the story parallel more recent history, for example the Second World War. As the Centauri aggression escalates in 'The Fall of Night', Earth's government chooses not to involve itself, and signs a nonaggression treaty with the Centauri, thus giving the Centauri free reign to invade other worlds so long as none of Earth's territories are threatened. Mr Lantz, the diplomat who signs the treaty, says, ironically, "We will at last know peace in our time."

These words deliberately echo those of Neville Chamberlain when he signed a peace agreement with Nazi Germany in 1938: "I believe it is peace for our time." This agreement similarly abandoned Britain's allies in Europe, such as Czechoslovakia, to German aggression.

On another occasion ('In the Shadow of Z'ha'dum'), Captain Sheridan tells the story of how Winston Churchill allegedly knew of the bombing of Coventry several days before it happened, but did not order the town evacuated as this would have revealed to the Germans that their code had been broken, which could have cost the Allies the war. This paralleled Sheridan's own situation, as he face a choice between acting against Mr Morden, an agent of the Shadows, and thus exposing his knowledge about them (which would cause the Shadows to go on the offensive), and failing to act and thus keeping his knowledge secret. Sheridan chose not to act, thus leading the Shadows to believe that their presence was still unknown,

and giving Sheridan and Delenn time to build up their own forces against them.

In 'Chrysalis', Earth Alliance president Santiago is killed in an explosion that appears to be an accident. He is succeeded by his vice-president, Clark, who is later revealed to have planned the explosion. This echoes the fate of President John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1963 as part of what many people believe was a conspiracy within the US establishment.

President Clark uses the threat of "alien influences" to bring about major changes in Earth's government and military, supposedly for the protection of humans against alien threats, but in fact to set himself up as a dictator. He creates organisations such as the Ministry of Peace, the Ministry of Truth and the Nightwatch, to support his power. Nightwatch begin to crack down on sedition, which in reality means that anyone expressing views contrary to President Clark is considered to be a traitor and arrested.

There are clear parallels with the Nazi Party in Germany, and with the US Communist witch-hunts of the 1950s. The members of Nightwatch are ordinary citizens, as are the people willing to name names, manipulated by their fear of an "enemy" into supporting a system which oppresses others.

The purpose is to remind us of how such things happen, as it is all too easy to look at Nazi Germany and believe that "it could never happen

here" – *Babylon 5* tells us that the moment when we believe it could never happen is the moment we are most in danger of allowing it to happen. In 'Nightwatch', the series shows us the birth, development and death of a fascist organisation, which acts as both a demonstration of Santayana's principle, and a timely reminder of how such things happen, thus perhaps helping us to avoid the temptations of such groups in real life.

A similar point is made in the following speech by William Edgars in "The Exercise of Vital Powers":

"Nobody takes power. They're given power by the rest of us, because we're stupid, or afraid, or both. The Germans in 1939, the Russians in 1917 and 2013... They handed over power to people they thought could settle scores, get the trains running on time, restore their prestige... Afterwards, like children who have eaten too much candy after dinner, they denied it was their fault, claimed that it was them. It's always them. Today, President Clark has the power, and we gave it to him, because we're afraid of the aliens and afraid of ourselves."

Edgars makes the point that the real reason why corrupt, totalitarian regimes come into power is because ordinary people let it happen, either because they genuinely believe in their leaders or because they are afraid to oppose authority.

These ideas are developed further in 'Intersections in Real Time', an episode with some similarities to the interrogation sequence in George

Orwell's 1984. Sheridan is captured by President Clark's forces, who try to coerce him into signing a false confession through torture and brainwashing techniques. The Interrogator begins by saying:

"I am not the enemy. To be the enemy I must have some personal stake in what happens to you. I'm not interested in that at all. I'm here to do a job, nothing more. You are a name, a file, a case number, that is all. I have no desire to inflict pain but I will do so, when and as it is required. The level of discomfort you experience will be entirely up to you."

The Interrogator is not a brutal or evil person. Indeed, everything about him – his appearance, mannerisms and language – suggest a completely ordinary man, the sort of man one would expect to see waiting at a bus stop or working in an office, who probably goes home to dinner with his wife and children after the day's work is done. Yet this man's job is to torture political prisoners for the government. Why would an ordinary man do this? Because he is able to distance himself from the reality of what he does by claiming that he has no personal interest in what happens to Sheridan – he is just doing his job. By this reasoning, if Sheridan refuses to cooperate, then it is his own fault if he suffers.

The Interrogator tries to confuse Sheridan by undermining what he believes: "The truth is sometimes what you believe it to be, and other times what you decide it to be," he says. "My task is to make you decide to believe differently." His goal is to

convince Sheridan of what he calls "The pre-eminent truth of our time: that you cannot beat the system." The Interrogator himself has accepted this truth. He believes he has no choice, and therefore no responsibility.

But this returns us to that other fundamental theme of *Babylon 5*: choices, consequences and responsibility. The Interrogator is wrong: the programme tells us that everyone has a choice, and everyone can make a difference; therefore, everyone has responsibility. In denying this, the Interrogator is really the one who has broken. He has the choice to resist, as Sheridan does, what he sees as wrong (and many times during the episode his manner hints that he feels uncomfortable doing what he does). But he does not resist: it is easier to accept "the pre-eminent truth of our time", which is whatever those in power say it is. The poison in the sandwich is a symbol of this: by swallowing a little poison every day, the Interrogator builds up a resistance to it until he can swallow large amounts with no effect. Similarly, by believing lies and propaganda one bit at a time, he eventually believes whatever he is told by his superiors.

This, as William Edgars said, is the real reason why totalitarian regimes survive: because ordinary people allow them to, because they do not accept responsibility. In Nazi Germany, it was ordinary German citizens who worked in offices and factories, kept the trains running, and spied on their neighbours. Without their co-operation the

holocaust could never have happened – but, like the Interrogator in this episode, as far as they were concerned they were only doing their jobs. And, sadly, atrocities committed by governments with the support of ordinary people are not confined to the past, as we can see today in countries such as Serbia and Iraq. *Babylon 5*, therefore, warns us what a dangerous mistake it is to allow ourselves to think that we cannot change anything, that we must settle for what is; and it reminds us that we must always fight for what we believe in. We always have a choice, and we are all responsible for the way things are.

The Candle and the Star: Symbolism in *Babylon 5*

I will end with a discussion of symbolism in *Babylon 5*. There are many examples (such as the poison in 'Intersections in Real Time', discussed above), but here I will consider just one, which runs through the whole series: the connection between light and life.

Perhaps the first example of the significance of light is seen in the Narn religious ceremony in 'By Any Means Necessary' – a vital part of this ceremony is that it must be performed in the first rays of sunlight that touch the G'Quon mountain on Narn. The ceremony is a reaffirmation of life, and a reminder of its connection to the universe.

To the Minbari, the candle flame is a symbol of life. Many times during the series we see Delenn or Lennier praying or meditating before a lone

candle. The meaning of this image is finally made explicit in one of the last episodes, 'And All My Dreams, Torn Asunder'. As Delenn meditates before a candle, Sheridan enters and asks her what it represents. She replies:

"Life... All life, every life. We are all born as molecules in the hearts of a billion stars – molecules that do not understand politics, policies, differences. Over a billion years, we foolish molecules forget who we are, and where we came from. In desperate acts of ego, we give ourselves names, fight over lines on maps, and pretend that our light is better than everyone else's.

The flame reminds us of the piece of those stars that lives on inside us, the spark that tells us, 'You should know better.' The flame also reminds us that life is precious, as each flame is unique. When it goes out it is gone forever, and there will never be another quite like it."

There is a clear connection to one of *Babylon 5*'s most important themes, that life is the embodiment of a conscious universe. The candle symbolises both life, and the connection between life and the Universe.

Similar images are invoked by the mantra of the Grey Council, the mysterious leaders of the Minbari (first heard in 'Babylon Squared'): "We are grey. We stand between the darkness and the light... between the candle and the star." As we have already seen, light stands for life; by implication, darkness stands for death. The Grey Council, therefore,

see themselves as the guardians of life – standing between life and death. In the second part of the speech, the candle represents life as it is today, while the star represents the source of life in the early universe. By saying that they stand between these two things, the Grey Council may mean that they are in some sense separated from the rest of life, occupying a different spiritual plane – perhaps that they are more closely connected to the universe than other beings.

The fact that the final episode of the series is entitled "Sleeping in Light" indicates the importance of the symbol of light in the story. In this episode, at the end of his life, Sheridan travels into space one last time. He meets Lorien, the oldest sentient being in the universe, who tells him: "This journey has ended. Another begins." At this point, whether Sheridan dies, or something altogether stranger happens to him, is left ambiguous. He disappears and is never seen again. At the end, Delenn watches the sunrise on Minbar – and, for a moment, she sees Sheridan sitting next to her as though he were still alive. The implication is that Sheridan has, in some sense, become part of the universe again – he has returned to the stars which were the birthplace of all life. Perhaps the light from the sun carries with it some vestige of Sheridan's soul, and this is what Delenn is seeing. Light, as before, symbolises life, and also continuity. Life always goes on: as every journey ends, another begins.

'The Deconstruction of Falling Stars' gives us a glimpse one million years

into the future of the Babylon 5 universe. Earth's sun is about to explode, and the human race is moving to a new home. A computer stores a record of the past, and the last human to leave says:

"This is how the world ends: swallowed in fire, but not in darkness. You will live on, the voice of all our ancestors, the voice of our fathers and our mothers to the last generation. We created the world we think you would have wanted for us, and now we leave the cradle for the last time."

The Earth is destroyed, swallowed in the explosion of the sun – "but not in darkness", as the future human says, which again signifies the fact that life goes on nonetheless. The rest of this speech embodies the hope which the story of *Babylon 5* ultimately conveys – that our descendants can indeed learn from us and create a better future.

Messages in Babylon 5

Babylon 5 is a story about the future and the past; about how we got here, and where we are going. It tells us that we should not fear change, for change is part of life. It tells us that we must never forget the past, for if we do we will never learn from our mistakes. It tells us that our choices determine the future; that we are not powerless, but with power comes terrible responsibility; and that we must therefore create the future we want, or others will do it for us. It tells us that we should respect diversity, and remember that there are far more things which unite us than drive us apart. Finally, it tells us that despite all the mistakes we

make and everything that can go wrong, things can still work out in the end. Despite its tragic elements and the fact that not all characters are destined for a happy ending, *Babylon 5* is ultimately a story about hope. As long as life goes on there can always be new beginnings, and as long as our species continues, our children may yet learn from our mistakes and build a better world.

These are my answers to the question of what *Babylon 5* was about. I am confident that most, if not all of these themes are "correct" in the sense that Straczynski specifically intended to make these points when writing the series. But I do not believe for a moment that I have covered everything of note about *Babylon 5* – there are many other possible answers. My advice to anyone who is interested is to watch the series for yourself if you have not already done so: draw your own meaning from it, and decide for yourself what the series is about. I will be quite happy if the answers you reach are entirely different from my own.

Sources

The Lurker's Guide to Babylon 5 – the definitive website, containing all the information about the series you could want.

The Babylon File, Andy Lane (1997), Virgin Publishing – another useful reference, less thorough than the Lurker's Guide, but being a book rather than a website it may be more accessible.

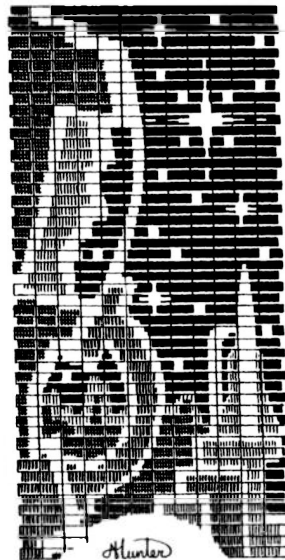
Dark Genesis (1998), *Deadly Relations* (1999), J. Gregory Keyes,

Del Rey – the first two books in the Psi Corps Trilogy of novels (book 3 should be released in July/August 1999), which are set prior to the series and reveal much of the background to the Telepath storyline.

The Coming of Shadows Scriptbook, J. Michael Straczynski (1998), Boxtree – contains the script to one of *Babylon 5*'s best episodes, and also a lengthy introduction by JMS, which reveals much about his reasons for creating the series and his intentions behind it.

The Official Babylon 5 Magazine is published monthly by Titan Magazines, and contains much information (Issue 10 featured a discussion of Londo and G'Kar which was useful in writing this article).

Babylon 5 : Creating the Future
Robin Floyd © July 1999



Rastus on the Jukebox

As readers of my earlier fanzines may remember, I've always had a great love of rock music, which persists, even when I've lurched past the half-century, and have no business still buying the stuff. By now, I always figured I'd be a jazz buff, or hip-deep in classical. Instead, I'm still in hock to rock'n'roll! Am I unhappy about it? Not a bit. This is just a few of the records I've been playing recently.

Timbuk 3 : Eden Alley

I love quirky, clever songwriters, and they don't come any quirkier, cleverer or funnier than Timbuk 3, a husband and wife team (originally the third member was a tape recorder or a beat-box). With titles like "Tarzan was a blues man", "Welcome to the human race" or "Reverend Jack and his Roamin' Cadillac Church", then they have to be good to make the titles pay off. And they are: style is kind of busking skiffle, with guitars and harmonicas, but the dynamics of the music are original and fascinating. Great stuff.

Eurythmics : Savage

By the time they got around to *Savage*, Annie Lennox and Dave Stewart had been through a lot of changes, both in their heads and in their personal relationships with themselves and others. It was no surprise that the partnership broke up a little later, because *Savage* is a much darker album than their

earlier, hit-filled works. Between tracks like "Beethoven", "Shame", "You've placed a chill in my heart" and "Do you want to break up", the message was clear – the working relationship had plainly got a bit heavy. Now they are back together again, which is great. Lennox and Stewart have a catalytic effect on each other, producing better work than either of them manage on their own.

Emmylou Harris : Wrecking Ball

I've been a fan of Emmylou Harris since Gram Parsons discovered her and used her as the perfect foil to his own voice on *GP* and *Grievous Angel* over a quarter of a century ago. She's sometimes got a little too Nashville for my tastes, but occasionally she puts together albums that are pure magic. This certainly qualifies. As soon as I heard she was getting together with Daniel Lanois, I made a note to listen out for the resultant material. It never disappoints: Harris' achingly beautiful vocals go together brilliantly with Lanois' atmospheric musical production to make for a splendid album. It's not country, it's not rock, it's just superb music, outside all categories. Emmylou Harris' finest album?

Kristin Hersh : Sky Motel

Never particularly picked up on the Throwing Muses, but Kristin Hersh's latest solo effort is certainly ear-

catching. Picked up on it via an MP3 digital file of 'Echo' from Real Jukebox, really liked the track, then found the CD was just as good. As a means of sampling various singers or bands, MP3 has a lot going for it, if only the major companies wouldn't be so bolshy about it. They should realise that it's a more effective a way of selling CDs than plugging singles that may or may not get picked up by radio and bought by the public.

**Chris Cornell : Euphoria
Morning**

Great fan of Soundgarden, which I always reckoned to be the best band to come out of Seattle, just ahead of Pearl Jam, so I've been keeping an ear out for what their leader Chris Cornell would get up to as a solo artist. The answer, *Euphoria Morning*, is that Cornell is doing very nicely, thank you. This record is a real grower: it hooks you first of all with the pop brilliance of its opening track, "Can't Change Me", then the other songs pile in behind and take up residence in your head. Sometimes it gets a bit too intense (often a problem with Soundgarden), but Cornell provides a lot of variety here, and most of all he supplies a good deal of soul. I'm finding this an aptly named album: there is something euphoric about Cornell's music. It lifts you up, propels you along with narrative drive, dazzles your sense with some sublime guitarwork, then lets you down gently again with a surprising delicacy. I'm playing this one more than any other recent purchase.

**Steely Dan : Katy
Lied/The Royal Seam**

There is something very satisfying about coming back to Steely Dan again, after not having listened to them for a while. Their music is so involving: you get hooked on the storyline in the songs (most being mini-movies in sound). Along with that comes a band (varying in personnel around Donald Fagen and Walter Becker) that always swings delightfully. If the arrangements lean towards jazz at times, that's no bad thing. They always hit the spot, always make you wonder why rock music can't always be like this. They set a standard few have ever met since. Counting Crows come close, though.

Suede : Head Music

Been a while since I listened to any Suede music. Never quite could get my head around Brett Anderson's voice and lyrics. This is perfectly pleasant listening, but first impressions are what a quaint old-fashioned bunch of lads they are. Anderson's voice seems to be determined to emulate middle period (*Young Americans*, say) Bowie, while the lyrics sort of meander rather languidly, not saying much. Four albums in, and it is obvious why Suede have lost out to Blur and Pulp in the Britpop stakes (and it ain't because Bernard Butler walked out and took the talent in the band away).

Counting Crows : August & Everything After

One of the debut albums of the 1990s, a staggeringly beautiful collection of carefully wrought songs, thoughtful, tuneful, dynamic and enduring. I've played this one to death this past few years and it still gives me an enormous rush every time I play it. Album of the nineties? Possibly. I'd certainly give it careful consideration. Already in my all-time list of great albums I can't do without.

The Band : Islands/Northern Lights, Southern Cross

Two lesser albums by The Band, falling away from the high peak achieved with those initial killer albums, *Music from Big Pink* and *The Band*. That doesn't mean to say that these aren't damned fine records, though. There's enough good music here to sustain a lesser career for decades (which, you might argue, is precisely what the later reincarnation of the group – minus the late Richard Manuel and the disinterested Robbie Robertson – is now doing). These would be worth buying even now, though if you want to hear The Band at their peak, make for those first seminal albums. With the recent unfortunate demise of Rick Danko, I guess I'll have to value just about anything with him on it, now, as there sure ain't gonna be much more.

Beck : Midnite Vultures

First impressions of the new Beck CD are good ones. Not as over the

top as *Odelay*. By comparison, *Midnite Vultures* is tighter, more coherent music. It still has a very wide range, though. There is everything here from sleazy funk to country-tinged songs to cool jazz. Beck makes it all work, the music all hangs together in a pleasing whole. This one will get played a lot in the Rastus household.

Jimmy Page & Robert Plant : Walking Into Clarksdale

There is something special about what happens when Jimmy Page and Robert Plant put their heads together and make music. Each is a catalyst for the other, drawing out that something extra that lifts them both into the stratosphere. It seemed to happen as soon as they met in Led Zeppelin, and it is still there, sizzling off the grooves (pits?) of this CD, their second since they came back together. 'When the world was young' and 'Please read the letter' are standout tracks, though there is really nothing here that isn't top-rate.

Bryan Adams : On A Day Like Today

There's always been a certain simplistic honesty about the way Bryan Adams goes about his rock'n'roll. On albums like *Reckless* and *Into the Fire* he mixed straight-ahead rockers like "Kids Wanna Rock" with strong ballads with a nice lyrical sense and strong intensity. He was a very engaging, enthusiastic new kid on the block. That peaked with the 'Robin Hood' song (Everything I do, etc), which bored

the pants of everyone by hanging around the charts for some interminably long period. Since then, the Canadian has struggled to hit his early stride. *On A Day Like Today* sees him nearly back to his best. What holds it back is a certain guardedness about the lyrics, a loss of the old intensity, the enthusiasm replaced by professionalism. It's solid AOR rock, now, and if it doesn't move as much as it could, well he's older now, settling back for the longer haul, not riding the wave of his early massive success.

Beck : Mutations

Listening to *Mutations* again and really enjoyed this, by far the best thing he's done so far. Considering that Beck regarded it as a kind of side-bar project, not a true follow-up to the multi-platinum *Odelay* (which is over-done and over-produced to my ears), then *Mutations* has no right to be so good. But it is, by turns rootsy, infectious, accessible and downright funny.

Sting : Brand New Day

It's been fashionable for a long time to knock Sting, but the lad from Newcastle still can turn out some good material. Personally, I reckon *Brand New Day* is the best thing he's done since his first solo album, *Dream Of The Blue Turtles*, for a similar reason to that album. He's gone back to story-telling in his lyrics, and given us a diverse bunch of songs as a result, everything from cod Country & Western (with Garth Brooks guesting, no less) to the sunny sound of Stevie Wonder's harmonica on the stonking title track. This is Sting at his best, not

swanning around in introspection, but curious about the world and the people in it.

Counting Crows : This Desert Life

Aside from a tendency to melancholy which occasionally makes you want to give singer and main songwriter Adam Duritz a kick up the backside and an injunction to get out there and enjoy yourself, Counting Crows have been one of my favourite bands of the last few years. *This Desert Life* continues in the groove laid down by that fabulous debut *August And Everything After*. Smart lyrics backed up by some sharp musicianship, Duritz and his cohort are the closest thing in feel to those marvellous early solo albums by Van Morrison, and just as essential.

Chemical Brothers : Surrender

I shouldn't really like the Chemical Brothers. I'm way too old for the club scene, after all, but these lads can't be confined to the ghetto of dance music. They're way too good for that. Using the vocal talents of everyone from Bernard Sumner (New Order), Bobby Gillespie (Primal Scream), Hope Sandoval (Mazzy Star), Jonathan Donahue (Mercury Rev) and Beth Orton to Noel Gallagher himself, *Surrender* invites the listener to do just that. Hey, I've hoisted my white flag, where's yours?

That's all for now, folks. Dunno how regular this new incarnation is going to come out – rather depends on how quickly we conspire to fill it up.

