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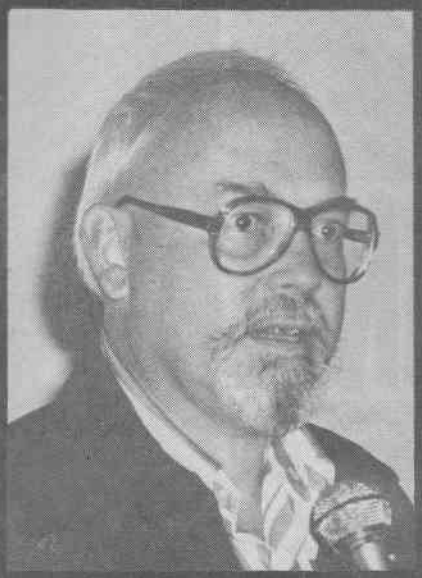
ISSUE 94

SEACON '79

37th World Science Fiction Convention



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* Those writers marked with an asterisk on the cover are members of the BSFA.

NB In Issue 93 I used a piece of artwork which was in file (and unmarked) from the previous editor. Dave Langford informs me that this was by his little brother, Jon. (See inside back cover in the middle of the Paul Harris advert).

THE ANDROID's DREAMS; An Editorial (of sorts...)

It is 11.22am on Saturday 14th July and this afternoon I am driving down to Somerset to begin a two week holiday that I really need after putting this issue together. The sun shines in through an open window and Hammill sings from VITAL as I attempt to put down in some coherence my thoughts on this issue and on giving up the editorial seat. I should, perhaps, begin by saying that this issue is four pages smaller than I intended it to be, as the review section was going to be eight and not four pages, but for some reason (which, as yet, I haven't discovered) Mike Dickinson didn't deliver the review section and thus I had to rustle together as much as I could at the last moment. Hopefully it doesn't reflect the hassles too much. Hopefully Mike will have ironed out his problems by the time of the next issue. Which reminds me also that this is the last A4 issue and also the last bi-monthly issue for some while. I'm certain that FOCUS, the joint venture of Chris Evans and Rob Holdstock, will nicely bridge the gap between issues of VECTOR, and from what I've heard of their plans it will be a far cry from the amateur ineptness of TANGENT. That such a venture should be getting under way at all is, I feel, a very encouraging sign that the BSFA is, at long last, beginning to attain its real potential as a central focus for science fiction in this country. The one thing that I regret omitting from this issue is a review of the most recent FOUNDATION (Number 16) which arrived in the midst of the recent hassles and I can only make amends by giving it a plug here and asking anyone who is interested to write to Malcolm Edwards at the North East London Polytechnic, Longbridge Road, Dagenham, Essex, RM8 2AS, UK, if they want to know further details.

This is, of course, my eleventh and final issue of VECTOR. I've enjoyed doing the magazine, naturally, but am really quite pleased to be moving on, particularly in view of the time it will free to me to pursue other interests in the genre. It is an exhausting job that requires a persitence that tends to wear down one's inventiveness, and I have needed to be extremely stoical at times in the face of impending deadlines and lack of promised material. None of the issues has really been completely what I would have liked to have done personally, but that again is one of the "drawbacks" of being the editor of an Association magazine. The one thing I was pleased to be able to do was introduce (through articles and reviews) various authors who may have remained simply esoteric names on shelves to readers who may otherwise have not been tempted to try them. I don't know what Mike Dickinson will do with VECTOR, but I hope that he will continue to embrace the more obscure examples of literature that are "in spirit" related to the sf genre. A simple diet of hardcore sf is like a meal of potatoes without meat and veg. I also hope that VECTOR will continue to cover the related media. I was pleased to get the two film articles for this issue, and similar articles on sf artwork and music would, I am sure, be welcome.

I guess the highpoints of the job were the interviews. I thoroughly enjoyed doing those - especially those with Bob Sheckley and Fred Pohl - although the tedious work of transcribing robs it of some of its joy. And perhaps I'll have the opportunity to do some more, either for VECTOR or elsewhere, in the next few years.

Special thanks over the last few years must go to Tom Jones and Keith Freeman (and their kind, long-suffering wives) both for their friendship and support and their hospitality. Perhaps some of the more vociferous critics of the BSFA (now that some of them are actually "in office") will now realise just how bloody hard some of the BSFA officers have to work, without payment and with few kudos for their labours. Again, the pyrotechnics of new ideas are not sufficient to fuel the organisation and persistence and forward planning are the key concepts in keeping the Association running from day to day. Not that, saying that, I don't greatly appreciate Jim Barker's "The Captive" for its incisive look at Organisations. Jim, incidentally, is doing a HALF-LIFE booklet at this Convention and at 75p (forgive me if I've got that wrong, Jim) it's a bargain.

Something of the present flavour of VECTOR I hope to maintain in my own magazine, KIPPLE (as irregular as that is...), whilst I am sure that VECTOR will benefit from a change of direction. Just to keep it all fresh...

Last moment thanks go to Chris Evans and Chris Morgan for providing material at a moment's notice, to John Brady for the stimulating but brief meeting re films and sf. And, of course, to Sue...for putting up with it all.

this world and nearer ones

BRIAN ALDISS

Did dinosaurs dream? Was there, in those tiny saurian brains, room for night-visions which related obliquely, flickeringly, to the daylight Mesozoic world? Looking at a triceratops skull, where the chamber designed for the brain forms a dungeon in a great Chillon of boney armament, I find it impossible to think that consciousness, however dim, would not have wanted the emergency exit of dreams from such confinement.

And later. Those scampering tarsiers who were our remote ancestors - they must have experienced dreams of such towering paranoid ambition as to wake them twitching in their treetop nests - or whatever sort of nocturnal arrangements tarsiers prefer - only to find themselves unable to cry, or even to know they were unable to cry, "Today a eucalyptus tree, tomorrow the world!"

Dreams must have preceded thought and intention. They are the argument with reason omitted. The essays in this volume concern themselves with dreams, or applied dreams, or reason; the applied dreams of art and science contain both elements.

In these idle things, dreams, the unity of everything is an underlying assumption. Scientists have always needed artists to broaden their imaginations; artists have needed scientists to sharpen theirs. When William Blake wrote, "To see a world in a grain of sand...", he was not referring only to a visionary experience, as is customarily supposed when the lines are quoted; but also to the strictly practical business of looking through the microscopes of Robert Hooke and Antony van Leeuwenhoek.

However important dreams may be, they are far from being our whole story. For the human species, reason must take precedence, for reason is a human monopoly. Animals have reasoning ability; we have reason. Twelve million years ago the great physical world, this world, was different in no important way from the world of today. But the living world was greatly different: there was no reason, no pair of eyes to take a cool look at what was going on over the left shoulder or after the next meal. There were no human beings. Only tarsier dreams.

This prosaic reflection has been acceptable coinage for only two hundred years, if that. The great divide in the history of thought under which we all live, even the least philosophical of us, is brought about by the theory of evolution: that theory heard as a mutter in the seventeenth century, rising to a prolonged murmur in the eighteenth, and finally becoming articulate last century. Evolution has sharpened our ideas of time; the world of living things, previously frozen into immobility, like a stop-action movie shot, has burst into action in our understandings, filling us with fresh understandings of change.

Darwin, Wallace, and the many men of vision whose work went towards formulating evolution theory - not least Captain Fitzroy of 'The Beagle' who remained a life-long opponent of Darwin's ideas - altered our way of viewing both the world and ourselves. Possibly it is just a coincidence that during the eighteen-fifties, when "The Origin of Species" was published, photography was all the rage. In particular, the stereoscope, without which no good Victorian family was complete, was familiarising people with ancient civilisations and the beauties of other countries and times. A new way of seeing was in the air.

Photography combines art and science in an ideal way. It is now so much a part of our lives that we hardly notice its all-pervasive nature. Yet it has not persuaded us to regard art and science as the complex unity I believe they are.

In their modest way, these essays represent my life-long interest in working in this ambiguous area. They could also be said to trace the path through the last two centuries which can be seen leading us towards a fruitful concept of the present; for our present is just someone else's old discarded future. We tread in the ruins of futures as well as of the past.

As for the essays themselves, they are also ruins in their way. They are salvaged from years of work I have done whilst not plying my trade as novelist and short story writer, expended in reviews and articles, mainly trying to educate myself. Everything has been revised or rewritten - or thrown out in disgust.

Although not every essay concerns itself with science fiction, this volume is being published in connection with a science fictional event, the Thirty-Seventh World Science Fiction Convention, Seacon, being held in Brighton, England, during August 1979, at which I am British Guest of Honour (the American Guest of Honour being Fritz Leiber).

Whilst the ordinary novel slumbers, paralysed perhaps by the gibbous awfulness of the twentieth century, sf makes its cislunar excursions. Year by year, its progeny grow. Science fiction now accounts for between ten and twelve per cent of fiction sales. Yet it is very little discussed. When reviewed by newspapers and literary journals, it is either 'done' in a special issue, as a mad annual diversion, or else confined to small cemetaries on the fringes of a book page - semi-hallowed ground, the sort of spot where suicides are buried, its titles lying athwart one another like uprooted gravestones.

Other special purgatories are reserved for science fiction authors. They are invited to appear on BBC TV with people like Uri Geller, Bruce Bellamy or Dr. Magnus Pyke. They are introduced at literary luncheons with jokes about their not having two heads or green skins (less of that lately, thank goodness). They have to endure conversations with people who assume automatically that they believe, as do their interrogators, in Flying Saucers and telepathy and Atlantis and the Bermuda Triangle and God as Cosmonaut and acupuncture and macrobiotic foods and pyramids that sharpen razor blades. They are scrutinised closely by their neighbours for traces of android-like behaviour.
At festivals of literature, they are regarded askance by chairmen of panels who make jocular interjections if they chance to refer to either E. E. Smith on the one hand or Dr. Johnson on the other. More orthodox writers present suspect them of earning either far more money than they do, or far less (both are true, by the way).

All this may suggest that I have reason to dislike being labelled an sf author. I have my reasons; but I do not dislike being an sf author. On the contrary. Although my first loyalty is to literature, I owe a great deal to a field to which I have been able to contribute something.

I am regarded as a difficult author, because I write non-fiction as well as fiction , ordinary fiction as well as science fiction, and occasionally what is considered a difficult book; but in my experience the readership of sf, on its more informed level, is remarkably patient, and will always endeavour to comprehend what they at first find incomprehensible.

Let me name two additional advantages in being a writer of science fiction, apart from becoming pampered Guest of Honour at a Convention, since they are germane to these essays.

Firstly, over the last twenty years, the span of my writing career, science fiction has developed remarkably all round the world, the toothed peak of its progress rising like a population graph. Playing a role in that process has been tremendously rewarding.

Despite all the expansion, readers and writers have managed to remain closely in communication, as this Convention indicates. This may be in part because of the indifference of people beyond the field, and the condemnation of critics armed only with the antique weaponry of standard lit. crit.; but it more probably springs from an inner mystery - the attempted complex unity of art and science - in sf itself. Because of that mystery, which every sf writer tries to interpret in an individual way, and because of the indifference from outside, we have been forced to form our own body of criticism, our own canons of taste; we have established our own editors, reviewers, scholars, booksellers and publishers, in a remarkable burst of creativity for which I can think of no parallel. We have done it all ourselves and given the world a new literature, whether the world wants it or not.

Secondly, that close community of interest, that fascination with the mystery, is global, and not confined to Western Europe or the United States. Largely thanks to friendly connections overseas, I have been able to travel about the world a good deal in the last decade, as some of the contents indicate, and have wandered as far afield as Iceland, Scandinavia, the Soviet Union, Japan, Brazil, Sicily, Mexico, Australia, Sumatra, and now Brighton. (Some of the trips were made by good old private enterprise, such as the Mexico and Sumatra ventures, but I should perhaps add that the Soviet visit was laid on by the Arts Council of Great Britain and the GB/USSR Association, to whom I wish to express my thanks). Even the most casual traveller abroad must notice the way in which the whole world is caught up in a scramble of change.

The above is taken from the Introduction to THIS WORLD AND NEARER ONES, published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson to coincide with Seacon '79, and reprinted here by kind permission of the author.

Brian Aldiss...Circa 1961, the year that saw the publication of THE PRIMAL URGE, serialised as "Minor Operation" in New Worlds Magazine

the author's lot
brian aldiss

((This article was first run in VECTOR 17, May 1963, and since that time Aldiss has written REPORT ON PROBABILITY A, BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD and THE MALACIA TAPESTRY (among many other perhaps less well-known pieces of writing). It was written at a time when Aldiss had achieved international recognition for his HOTHOUSE series of stories but had yet to have shown himself as a great stylistic innovator within the genre. It is reprinted here with the permission of the author.))

YOU KNOW WHAT happened to Lot's wife? According to the Old Testament, she looked back and got turned into a pillar of salt. We like more science with our fantasy nowadays, but somehow the old story sticks. By giving this essay the title I have, I warn myself what may happen if I look back.

And then I look back.

I look back and try to see what made me a writer. To put it in an inaccurate nutshell: in my surroundings, it was a lack of something; in me it was a surplus of something. But lacks and surpluses are what have made man man. They're what continue to make man man. The man who is content with his surroundings is deficient in the vitamin of dreams. It means among other things that he will not want to read science fiction.

As a child, I was never any good at playing other people's games. My brother wanted me to play goodies and baddies with him; I just wanted to make jokes or be funny. Who ever heard of cops and ribbers? When I got older, I liked the games at school well enough - rugger in particular I enjoyed when the pitch was ripe with good Devon mud and one could wallow about in the scrum as if evolving into some sort of super-beast. But what I lacked was the team spirit. I made a better touch judge than hooker. Swimming was okay- you only co-operated with yourself.

In fact, I might have co-operated better with myself if my childhood had been violently sad. It was not, any more than it was radiantly happy. A lot of it was simply faintly dull: what Thomas Hardy called "neutral-tinted haps and such". Books I enjoyed, and making books. It's no good asking me what was the first thing I wrote, or when I first wrote science fiction; I don't recall; it seems as if I was always writing, though I was not what you'd call precocious. My earliest recollection of one of my own creations is a flash of memory like a faded photo in a friend's album; I can see myself as an eight-year old looking at a two page story I wrote at the age of six or seven, and realising I had written something. There was a picture to the story. It showed an immense building like a skyscraper lying on its side; the building had wings which sprouted a large number of propellors. The building was flying to the moon.

Many children write and draw until the talent gets squeezed out of them by stupidities and restrictions - some of them unconsciously self-imposed; I ask myself why I kept on writing. The answer may be that I was a shy child. My father had a sarcastic way of picking up other people's remarks and turning them about until they looked ludicrous. This talent I admired, for it was genuinely funny, even when the laugh was against oneself. Nevertheless, it made one think before speaking, and often decide not to speak for fear of saying something foolish.

But if you write! Why, then you have the chance to look it over first and expunge at least some of the idiocies! If you think in this cautious way for a number of years, and act accordingly, then you find that you express yourself as if by instinct more cogently on paper than in speech. In conversation, you have to observe the tacit rules of team-work; on paper, you only co-operate with yourself...

There are various reasons for writing. You can write to create art, or you can write - this is not always a conscious aim - to achieve a kind of therapy. I'd be hard put to define the difference precisely, but in SF I believe it is especially noticeable that there is a high proportion of authors who are acting out their fantasy life on paper, even if they think they are creating (if you forgive this gross simplification). Several writers have admitted that mental disturbance gave them impetus to write. We have Walt Willis' word that Peter Phillips, once a very compelling writer, wrote under neurotic compulsion; when his neurosis was cured, he ceased to write sf. Van Vogt has said that he created his memorable body of sf work from "a position of extreme schizophrenic isolation"; now he writes no more sf.

One expects this sort of confession only from a writer whose period of disturbance is finished, or when he considers himself whole again. So we do not often get such illuminating statements. But I can think of several sf writers, some very prominent, whose work gives unmistakeable indications of various kinds of deprivation and emotional upset; obviously it would be unjust to name names.

As it happens, sf is the ideal medium for externalising one's personal bogies and for cloaking one's secret fears in the form of aliens or slavering horrors. When a story has a slab of grue unbacked by any logical explanation, or obtruding inartistically from the structure of the story, then the watchful reader may know he is in the presence of a writerly irrational fear. I'm sure my friend Geoff Doherty's pet Shambleau is in this category.

When I began writing science fiction, about 1955, I was in a nervous and in some ways repressed situation, and I channelled many fears into my writing. One example was my early story "Outside" (reprinted in my SPACE, TIME AND NATHANIEL and in Crispin's BEST SF TWO): I was there putting into alien guise my own dread at the time of betrayal by other people. I did not realise I was doing this when I wrote the story; I realised it when I saw it in print. The therapy worked, however, for the fear of betrayal passed; nor have I been irrationally afraid of the dark since then.

Writing those early stories was a health cure for me. At about the time that SPACE, TIME AND NATHANIEL was published, I ran out of phobias; they had all been expended on the stories that made Damon Knight say "Aldiss is most enjoyable when being most objectionable"; dragged out into the daylight, the shy little things withered and died like bluebells stolen from the woods. That would have been much more of an hiatus in my writing life if I had not by then learnt a little of writing itself, the eternal fascination of trying to perfect the individual sentence and - how rare the successes! - the individual story.

Of course, this therapeutic process only works on a superficial level. One has one's major obsessions. For an example: I have no patience with the belief in evil as a force external to man. In fact, I am cautious about allowing evil or bad into my beliefs and stories; I know that evil exists, but hold it to be rarer than most people think - thus such sins condemned by Christianity as lust or theft or gluttony may often prove to be, if examined, simple cases of deficiency, cureable by understanding rather than punishment.

Whether or not these views are correct in an absolute sense, they are the ones I orient myself by. As a consequence, I can rarely raise enthusiasm for stories in which absolute good or absolute evil appears as an entity. This is why such works as Tolkein's LORD OF THE RINGS or Moorcock's Elric stories leave me untouched; for me they are based on a fallacy. In the same way, you will find little evil in my stories, although I rarely write about virtuous people. Here my beliefs are a handicap; thinking as I do, I cannot draw villains.

Or if I draw villains, the villainy is only in the eye of the beholder; when we understand things better, the villains are seen to be not so bad, and in fact motivated perhaps merely by ignorance or thoughtlessness or even by the best of impulses.

The giants in NON-STOP, the Rosks in EQUATOR, the morel in HOTHOUSE, the nals in THE INTERPRETER, even Rose English in THE PRIMAL URGE, turn out to be less black than they seemed before we grew to know them a little better. Hate yields to enlightenment.

I claim this to be a reasonable and rational view for an sf writer. But it means that the final scenes of my stories are not likely to be the climaxes of mayhem that some readers enjoyed under an older dispensation; you're much more likely to find someone laughed out of court, or an armastice signed. And of course this isn't very dramatic.

Nevertheless, a writer is well advised not to violate his fundamental beliefs for the sake of fiction (any more than he should air his beliefs too blatantly). To anyone thinking of writing, whether for money, art or therapy - all sound motives - I would say that fiction is not only the re-creation of life, or bits of life's experience re-assembled: it is itself a way of living; if your novel has any merit in it, you become a slightly different or deeper man by the time you have finished it. If you force yourself into a line of thought that does not ride with your personal philosophy just for the sake of the plot, there may be something wrong with your plotting. And you will never be really satisfied with the result.

Sf writers appear not to put much of themselves or their experience into their stories. This is an illusion; it has some power merely because the discipline of sf requires us to look away from ourselves towards a greater thing (the universe, time, the unknown, whatever). The direction we look is still predetermined by what we are. A line AB may be of a certain specified length; the direction in which it points will depend on where A was in the first place.

Many of our writers, I suspect, write SF not only because, as I said earlier, it is an ideal therapeutic medium, but because they find in it camoflage for their own identities. Conversely, it is harder to write personally in sf. To compose a novel about people in London bed-sitters means we have to draw on more obviously personal material than if we are writing of the habits of the urg-devouring osks of Isk VI. But Heinlein's osks, Brunner's osks, Fanthorpe's osks, C. S. Lewis's osks, will all differ according to the personality of the author involved.

This is obvious enough. But what I would like to see is a number of self-analyses from a number of authors explaining the personal core behind their stories; that is tentatively what I have tried to do here. Or perhaps a reader of VECTOR will operate on the same level and confess what compells him to read science fiction. It must be compulsion, or we'd all be reading something simple like Georgette Heyer or Howard Spring or Mickey Spillane.....

((If things work out as planned there should be a small advert in the space beneath for FOCUS, the new magazine for writers of sf, produced by the British Science Fiction Association and jointly edited by Rob Holdstock and Chris Evans. It just occurs to me now that the above challenge issued by Brian Aldiss in 1963 (and responded to at the time in subsequent issues of VECTOR) applies just as much today. So, perhaps anyone who wishes to make a similar attempt to analyse their own motives for writing would pen a brief article and forward it to either Chris or Rob at the address alongside...))

an interview with brian aldiss

(The following interview took place in Melbourne, Australia during the Easter 1978 UniCon between Brian Aldiss and Brian Thurogood and was first featured in the New Zealand magazine NOUMENON, Issue Number 24, August 1978. My thanks to both Brians for their permission to run this slightly adapted version)

Thurogood: You mentioned in your guest of honour speech the potential ability of science fiction to stimulate and encourage people's imaginations. Could you expand on this and say whether you think much sf achieves this?

Aldiss: Yes. I would love to give you a straight quote from Shelley's DEFENCE OF POETRY because he puts it so extremely well. And what he says is (I will have to paraphrase) that we have so much knowledge, we have so much wealth, but we are unable to use them wisely because we lack the power to imagine, which is the power that we gain through poesy -- and he means a complex thing by poesy -- but one of the things he would have meant today is fairly obviously science fiction. So I rather regard Shelley as the first sf poet, rather as his missus is the first sf novelist. And it seems to me that imagination is something that transfigures everything. It transfigures knowledge, it transfigures facts into something that has a great deal more golden ore in it. For instance, we would be unable to kill each other on a large scale if we had that sort of imagination. A novel like SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE is exactly trying to get over this point. Vonnegut is trying to re-imagine the holocaust of Dresden for us all so that it wouldn't happen again. As to what other science fiction does this, the response is up to the individual reader. You know very well that you meet people who rave about a book that you yourself don't care for. Well, I think often their imagination has been touched. When you first encounter science fiction at whatever age, you're struck by its imaginative qualities. When you've been reading it for some time you get a bit fed up with it because you don't get the same kicks. That's a common phenomenon. I have to say for myself that I don't get as many kicks as I used to, perhaps because the act of writing has taken over from the act of reading to some extent.

Thurogood: You still get as many kicks out of writing though?

Aldiss: Well, that's a different matter. My pleasure in writing deepens because I have what is at least an illusion that I write better than I used to, that my understanding has deepened and my imagination strengthened. There's also the excitement of the chase...I think this is perhaps not generally realised. You're impressed by something - tally ho, it's in sight - sometimes you actually catch up with it!

Thurogood: Would you subscribe to the idea that the artist never really achieves his goal?

Aldiss: Well, it's a very easy thing to say but yes, I think it is true. Some sort of auto-destruct mechanisms come into play, though. After all, the goal itself is rather nebulous but it includes total self knowledge, maybe, among other things, and I don't thin you can obtain total self-knowledge and still speak. You may find that you fall into a Buddhistic silence.

Thurogood: Do you think sf can continue to stimulate people's imaginations? What trends do you see in sf, either older ones coming into fruition, or hints and suggestions in current sf of future avenues?

Aldiss: I'll answer the first part of your question. Science fiction's role in stimulating the imagination has changed slightly. I believe that a few years ago, let's say before the Apollo programme, before the great step that Armstrong took on the moon, the science fiction writer could easily astonish his readers because something like the moon walk was only a possibility. I can remember being absolutely breathless over reading a story about men getting to the moon. It seemed a tremendous goal. But once it's achieved, it's done and the situation is different.

As to the general population, they passed rapidly through three phases. The first one of course was believing that the moon walk was an impossibility, anyone who thought otherwise was a non-sense. Two, a nine-day's wonder when they marvelled and fell about in front of their television sets. And the third stage where they looked at each other and said, "Well, I always knew it could be done!".

Thurogood: Do you think that the presentation of the moon programme in the media was rather drab?

Aldiss: No, it didn't strike me as that. I was enthralled and felt the general public was getting something that until now was a private thing among friends. But after such an event the writer has much more difficulty in stimulating his readers. I don't think that's a bad thing. Civilization has become more sophisticated in its thinking (if that isn't too big an assumption) so that the writer must also become more sophisticated,instead of working against the grain of their disbelief, he now has to go with the grain and therefore has to go more deeply. That's a very arguable point because what we see happening in science fiction now is a trend towards pop sf. There's no doubt that the audience has grown enormously, and grown for all levels of science fiction. And the more rarified levels have got a much bigger audience than ever before. But it may be that proportionately, the new readership has come mainly on the sort of pop-Flash Gordon level. STAR WARS is going to encourage this trend. It's the things that don't explain; a movie doesn't explain. If you make a film from a good science fiction novel the chances are that the novel will explain and extend your knowledge and the film won't. It will only show you. Although we all rejoice to think the two films that everyone must see at the moment are both science fiction: CLOSE ENCOUNTERS and STAR WARS, there are a lot of dangers in this situation. It could all go back to being that Buck Rogers stuff in no time, as far as I can see! And that has an effect on the serious science fiction writer in that he may get entirely pissed off with this situation and decide to go and write something else.

Thurogood: Is this something like what's happened to Silverberg, for example?

Aldiss: Well, maybe, although I think that Bob has other difficulties - like having written too much for too long and now nemesis is overtaking him.

Thurogood: What is your opinion of sf on film? Have there been enough successes to talk of sf films as a distinct group, or are we still in the infancy of that field, pointing to a few successes and shuddering to think of the rest?

Aldiss: We certainly do less shuddering than we used to! There was a time when the whole thing was a disaster area. I'd say things have improved so much. Whether you can talk about the sf cinema per se, I don't know, although, after all, there are magazines that do it with some accomplishment, Cine Fantastique and this sort of thing. By throwing in items like SINBAD AND HIS WOODEN EYE or whatever, you have a certain range of fantasy films. But in cinema, much more than in the novel, we see the creative spirit moving in to a genre previously regarded as junk. There are a lot of cinematic equivalents to BRAVE NEW WORLD, I think.
There is always a prejudice in the sf writing field against sources that come in from outside and make a success. They are popularly supposed to be exploiting the field, which is a lot of dreadful nonsense. But in the cinema there are good instances of quite well-known directors who can see all the possibilities of science fiction, ALPHAVILLE, for example, directed by Godard - that kind of film seems to be readily accessible to a director with a wide vocabulary. There is an interesting English director, Lindsay Anderson, who's never actually made a science fiction film but he's made things like OH LUCKY MAN and IF with strong elements of fantasy. And even someone like Bunuel with THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE seemed to me to be doing a sort of inner space science fiction. Godard also made WEEKEND, which is a marvellous movie. That really is science fiction.
However, if you tote up all the items on the bill I still don't think you'd make a fortune, simply because it really is difficult to do. It is genuinely difficult. You can't repeat the success of 2001 or A CLOCKWORK ORANGE every year. There's a thesis by Wyndham Lewis about progress in the arts. He claims this is an illusion, that the arts don't progress. Or, if progress can be seen, it's only towards the status of art. I'm afraid this doesn't say much for the science fiction field. But as far as movies are concerned the illusion of progress is strong - and not only in technological approach. DARK STAR, for instance, embodies in its

ironies and macabre humour a more sophisticated view of life than the old sf - monster movie we were brought up on.

Thurogood: My impression of the major recent films, the ones that have had such popular success, would put CLOSE ENCOUNTERS as a film equivalent of a mid-20s story, STAR WARS as an early-30s story, and 2001 as an early-50s story. So I don't know of a film that has managed to capture the 60s or the 70s.

Aldiss: Oh well, I thought WESTWORLD did rather well for the 60s. It was a very 60s idea that if you could perfect androids they would only be used for your pleasure. I thought that was a rather fine film with an interesting moral question posed behind it, which was extremely well and effectively done. Funny too, by god, in parts! Intentionally funny as opposed to accidentally funny.

Thurogood: Sf art and illustration is a field of great interest to me. Is it possible that field has more success, a far higher percentage of very imaginative and original work, than sf in other media?

Aldiss: Well, I certainly felt like that when I was doing my sf art book book, that the more I went into it, the more excited I got. There was some marvellously dedicated work done by guys who were being paid peanuts, who delivered far more than they were ever asked for. And reading the stories that went along with them, I really thought that the reverse was true. There are hundreds of unreadable stories in those old magazines that we're supposed to revere - absolute rubbish! And it must have been rubbish at the time. Yet some of the illustrations seem as fresh, delightful and mysterious as ever. All sorts of people who have worked in the magazines are very much neglected. It's a delightful creative field.

Thurogood: How did you put your art book together?

Aldiss: It was actually a project that I'd long wanted to do and had tried on several publishers with absolutely nil response. And then I got a letter out of the blue from a publisher I didn't know, recently in business: that was Trewin Copplestone. I went up to see what their intentions were and found to my delight that they did actually want to do the sort of book I wanted to do. So there was no quarrel there. And it was interesting that they had great success with a book on war movies, and then one on spectacular movies, so they were looking for something to follow it up. They didn't care a bean about sf illustrations per se; it was just something they could merchandise. They got more and more excited. They kept saying, "My God! What a treasure trove!" And of course I was allowed to present the work under the names of the artists, at least in the first part, so that one could see a lot of very distinctive styles working in the field. If you classify according to subjects or chronology or whatever, you don't gain a clear impression of how individual some of those men were. At the time I was working on THE MALACIA TAPESTRY. I'd work on that during the day and at night use my xerox machine and run all the pictures through, lay them all out and decide what belonged where. It was really a joy to do.

Thurogood: So you had a large hand in the actual designing?

Aldiss: Yes, although Copplestone had a very good designer called Terry. He was the chief sceptic to start with and the greatest enthusiast to end with. They said at the end, "That was great, Brian. We wish we'd done a bigger book." So I said we could always do another book. "Oh, really, what?" And I said we could do almost the same thing again and call it Fantasy Art. There are a lot of books on the market calling themselves Fantasy Art and they're all concerned with fairies. We can do hard fantasy. They thought about that and said they had a better idea. "We want you to edit a visual encyclopedia of science fiction."
I was against the idea because I knew that owing to the nature of that firm, they would want it all done within six months. So, although I liked them and their enthusiasm, I said, I can't do it chums. Get someone else. Which of course they did -- result, Brian Ash's book, "The Visual Encyclopedia of SF".

Thurogood: Which actually seems to work very well. I've only just glanced at it but it seems to cover the field.

Aldiss: It's a very attractive package, but it is actually rather depressing in that it does compartmentalise all the cliches of science fiction and perpetuate them one more time. I suppose for most people that's fine because that's the level on which they read, but they must realise that I am a bandit in the hills and forever raiding these sordid little commercial townships down on the plain. I want science fiction to be BETTER! To be stronger, to be a great intellectual force. So that ultimately Ipm hostile to the view of science fiction propogated in the VISUAL ENCYCLOPEDIA.

Thurogood: There is also the related field of sf comics - or rather comics with an sf theme. Have you seen much of the recent large expansion of work in the field, from Metal Hurlant/Heavy Metal and associated artists, to the hundreds of sf comic fanzines currently available?

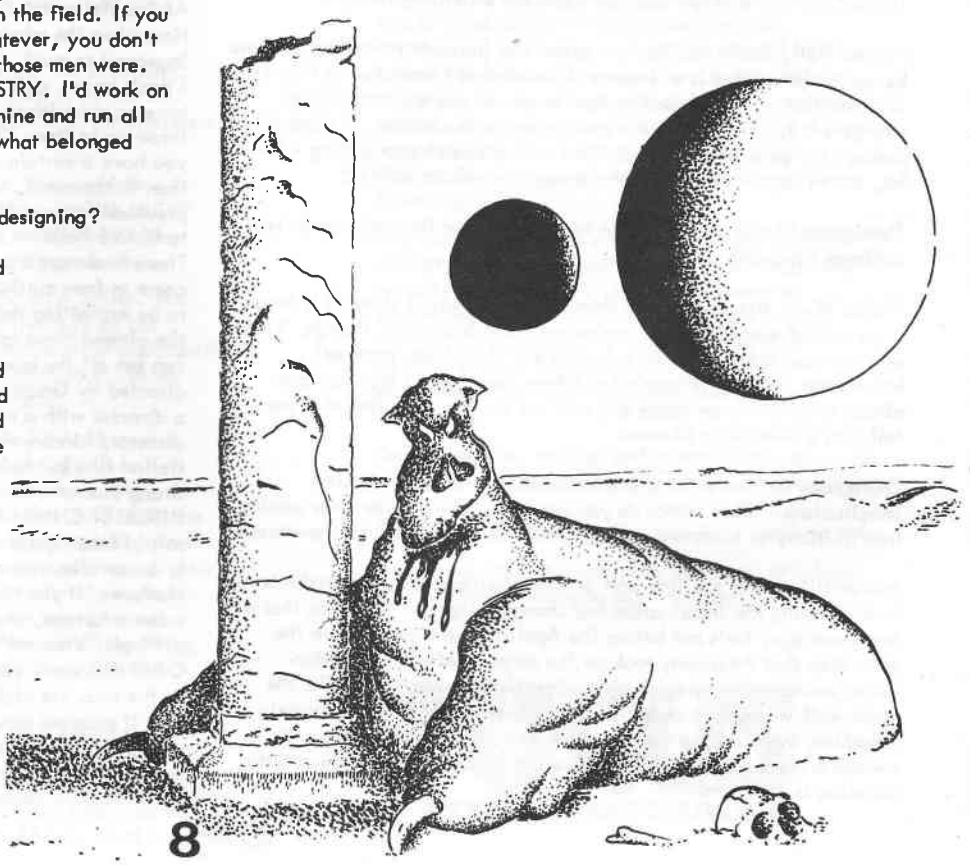
Aldiss: Well, it doesn't interest me very much. Again, I like the whacky theories and explanations in science fiction which I find are missing in the visual stuff. But, yes, I do see the French METAL HURLANT, which is just marvellous and transcendental. My god! the things that they do there. Quite extraordinary. Nothing like it. The work of people like Druillet is so outstanding, quite staggering. I like that very much because it gets to you, doesn't it?

Thurogood: Do you have any idea of the origins of METAL HURLANT?

Aldiss: Well, it would not have begun life anywhere but France because they're strong on sf at present. Science fiction has always meant something apart to the French. It always tends towards fantasy, with a sort of sado-masochistic undertone. This is the sort of seasoning the French like. And METAL HURLANT embodies it all.

Thurogood: Music with sf themes and, in some cases, similar intent to written sf, is another field of great interest to me. Have you heard anything you consider imaginative or interesting which can give a similar buzz to that obtained from outstanding work in the other fields?

Aldiss: I honestly don't know the answer to that. I know a lot of music that gives me a buzz, but whether it gives me the same sort of buzz, I don't know. Except in one case, and that was what George Melly calls a "Revolt into Style" of pop music in the 60s and it seemed to me very close to sf. And, as you may recall, BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD is dedicated to the shade of Ouspensky and Procul Harum's "Whiter Shade Of Pale". Music like that was right on the right wave band. A lot of the Beatles' stuff when they were introducing new instruments was very



innovative. Recently, I can't think of much really

Thurogood: Are there any of your works that you would like to see taken into other media, like films or illustrated editions?

Aldiss: At the moment there are some inspired madmen in Los Angeles who are striving to make a film of HOTHOUSE, true to the original. Options are taken on NON-STOP and BROTHERS OF THE HEAD.

Thurogood: You mentioned in your guest of honour speech that you hope Earth has the only life in the Universe. Could you expand on this, please?

Aldiss: Well, to a certain extent that was just Aldiss being difficult. It is part of my war against the cliche. I've long been making myself unpopular among my fellow authors by scoffing at FTL and telepathy - in my view they're just cliches and used without examination. And I begin to feel that the alien's almost in the same boat. If you use such a concept you should not accept it too easily or it loses its challenge. Like we were saying earlier about space travel to the moon, no one believed it, then they wondered, now they accept it. It wasn't long ago since everyone said we were nuts if we claimed there were people living on other planets - now everyone appears to believe it. You go to the bookstore and next to sf there's a whole nut culture dealing with topics once sacred to sf.

Thurogood: Which brings me to my last section. Do you have a particular philosophy, through which you view the world, which contributes to your writing, and which you are prepared to state and/or discuss?

Aldiss: The brief answer, really, is no. It's no good my pinning these things down onto the dissecting board - they're the things I live by! If I pin them all down there would be very little more to write about. At heart I'm a sceptic. I don't have any formulated religious belief but at the same time I'm haunted by religious feelings about the world. Rather like Thomas Hardy. Let's just leave it at that.

a leiber bibliography

compiled by Chris Morgan.

The unique thing about Fritz Leiber is that he's done it all. Nobody else has managed to cover the field of speculative literature quite so completely, writing science fiction, fantasy and horror at all lengths, and also contributing book reviews and articles.

THE NOVELS:

GATHER, DARKNESS, 1950 (fantasy) - several US and UK editions, but not currently in print.

DESTINY TIMES THREE, 1952 (sf) - no UK edition; Dell paperback available.

CONJURE WIFE, 1952 (horror) - "all women are witches"; many editions; Ace paperback available.

THE GREEN MILLENNIUM, 1953 (sf/fantasy) - available.

THE SINFUL ONES, 1953 (sf) - US paperback only; exceedingly rare. A shorter version is "You're all alone".

THE BIG TIME, 1961 (sf/fantasy) - the "Change War" novel which won a Hugo; see SHIP OF SHADOWS collection.

THE SILVER EGGHEADS, 1962 (sf) - several editions; US paperback available.

THE WANDERER, 1964 (sf) - Hugo-winning disaster novel in which a planet sized alien spaceship upsets Earth's tides.

TARZAN AND THE VALLEY OF GOLD, 1966 (fantasy/adventure) - film novelisation; Ballantine paperback only; rare.

THE SWORDS OF LANKHMAR, 1968, (heroic/fantasy) - the only full-length Fafhrd & Gray Mouser novel; available.

A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING TEXAS, 1969, (sf) - available.

OUR LADY OF DARKNESS, 1977 (horror) - Leiber calls it an occult thriller; much of the detail is autobiographical; available.

THE COLLECTIONS:

NIGHT'S BLACK AGENTS, 1947 (horror/fantasy) - 10 stories, mostly horror but including two about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser; available.

TWO SOUGHT ADVENTURE, 1957 (heroic fantasy) - Seven F&GM stories, all included in the SWORDS AGAINST DEATH collection.

THE MIND SPIDER, 1961 (sf/fantasy) - Six "Change War" stories; Ace paperback only.

SHADOWS WITH EYES, 1962 (horror) - 6 stories; Ballantine paperback only.

A PAIL OF AIR, 1964 (sf) - 11 stories; Ballantine paperback only.

SHIPS TO THE STARS, 1964 (sf) - 6 stories; Ace paperback only.

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF, 1966 (sf) - 4 stories; paperback editions, but not in print.

THE SECRET SONGS, 1968 (sf/horror) - 11 stories; UK editions only.

SWORDS AGAINST WIZARDRY, 1968 (heroic fantasy) - 4 linked F&GM stories; available.

SWORDS IN THE MIST, 1968 (heroic fantasy) - 6 F&GM stories; available.

NIGHT MONSTERS, 1969 (horror) - originally 4 stories, but UK editions have 7.

SWORDS AGAINST DEATH, 1970 (heroic fantasy) - 10 F&GM stories (ie. TWO SOUGHT ADVENTURE plus 3 additions); available.

SWORDS AND DEVILRY, 1970 (heroic fantasy) - 4 F&GM stories; available.

YOU'RE ALL ALONE, 1972 (sf) - 3 stories; US paperback only.

THE BEST OF FRITZ LEIBER, 1974 (sf/fantasy/horror) - 22 stories; various editions.

THE BOOK OF FRITZ LEIBER, 1974 (sf/fantasy/horror) - 10 stories plus some articles; US paperback only.

THE SECOND BOOK OF FRITZ LEIBER, 1975 (sf/fantasy/horror) - 6 stories plus some articles; US paperback only.

THE WORLDS OF FRITZ LEIBER, 1976 (mostly fantasy) - 22 stories; US paperback only.

RIME ISLE, 1977 (heroic fantasy) - short novel ("Rime Isle") and 1 other story - F&GM; US hardcover only.

SWORDS AND ICE MAGIC, 1977 (heroic fantasy) - short novel ("Rime Isle") and 7 others; F&GM - available.

BAZAAR OF THE BIZARRE, 1978, (heroic fantasy) - 3 F&GM stories - de luxe illustrated US hardcover only.

THE CHANGE WAR, 1978 (sf) - 10 "Change War" stories; US hardcover only.

HEROES AND HORRORS, 1978 (heroic fantasy/horror) - 9 stories including 2 F&GM; US hardcover only.

SHIP OF SHADOWS, 1979 (sf/fantasy/horror) - 5 stories: Hugo Winner "Ship Of Shadows"; Hugo and Nebula Winner "Catch That Zeppelin"; Hugo and Nebula Winner "Gonna Roll The Bones"; Hugo and Nebula Winner "Ill Met In Lankhmar" and World Fantasy Award Winner "Belsen Express" plus Hugo Winning novel THE BIG TIME. This volume is being published in UK hardcover by Victor Gollancz to coincide with Seacon.

Fritz Leiber has written a couple of hundred stories, some of them not reprinted in any of his collections. Well over fifty articles by him have appeared (mostly in SCIENCE DIGEST and AMRA) not including a book review column he has written intermittently for the magazine FANTASTIC. He has written poetry and corresponded with many amateur and professional magazines. His special interests in chess, astronomy, cats and Shakespeare often display themselves in his stories. Seacon 79 is his second appearance as a Guest of Honour at a World SF Convention; the first was at Nolacon in 1951. In July 1969, THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION published a special Fritz Leiber issue, including a new novella, "Ship Of Shadows" and a bibliography.

I hope to be producing a complete bibliography of Fritz Leiber in time for Seacon 79. With a bit of luck it will include chronological and alphabetical listings of all his books and stories (including all editions and all anthology reprints), plus lists of his articles, awards and other activities. It should be on sale at Seacon and available from the specialist dealers. The price will depend on production costs.

- Chris Morgan (C) July 1979.

VECTOR BACK ISSUES (Available as at August 1979)

Issue 84 (Nov-Dec 1977); "The Instinct Of Non-Freedom", articles on Yevgeny Zamyatin by Phil Stephensen-Payne and David Wingrove; "One Man's Weak" by Brian Aldiss; "But Is She SF?" by P.M. Westran; "The Camera Is The Eye Of A Cruising Vulture" (Burroughs) by Andrew Darlington; "Jorge Luis Borges - A Man Alone?" by Tom Jones and David Wingrove; reviews of Adlard, Asimov, Clute, Dick, Freedman, Greenberg & Olander, Griffin, Harness, Koontz, Piserchia, Priest, Roberts, Shaw, Simak, Sitchin, Tenn, Vance and Wilson.

Issue 85 (Jan-Feb 1978); "Brahmin Awakening: Phil Dick & The Metaphysical Picaresque" by David Wingrove; "Descending On A Point Of Flame" by Steev Higgins (the Spaceship in SF); "All Yin And No Yang - ILLUMINATUS!" by Robert Gibson; reviews of Blish, Cooper, Dickinson, Clarke, Duncan & Weston-Smith, Harrison, Hesse, Miller, Niven & Pournelle, Lafferty.

Issue 86 (Mar-Apr 1978); "A Day In The Life Of An SF Writer's Wife" by Judy Watson; An Interview with Ian Watson by David Wingrove; "The Novels Of Ian Watson - Amazed And Afterwards/Avoiding Neoteny" by David Wingrove; "Civilisation And Savagery (Two Novels of Robert Holdstock)" by Phil Stephensen-Payne; reviews of Pohl, Hill, Goulart, Vance, Delany, Zelazny, Watney, Dickson, Strugatski, Carr and Aldiss.

Issue 87 (May-Jun 1978); "Bananas, The Literary Quarterly" by Cyril Simsa; "Purgatory Revisited Again" by Brian Stableford; "Yin, Yang & Yung" (fiction) by Brian Aldiss; "Slaughterhoused - an overview of Kurt Vonnegut" by Bruce Ferguson; "Are You Listening? The contemporary Fantasy of Harlan Ellison" by Tony Richards; Seacon 79 - An Open Letter from John Brunner; reviews of Disch, Varley, Aldiss, Martin, Ballard, Strugatsky, Ash and FOUNDATION.

Issue 88 (Jul-Aug 1978); An Interview With Frank Herbert by David Wingrove; "Terminal Choreography - An overview of Michael Moorcock's Dancers At The End Of Time stories" by Andrew Darlington; reviews of Herbert, Bayley, Lewis, Aldiss, Moorcock, Tennant, O'Brien, Butler, Holland, Walters, Anderson, Clarke, and Priest.

Issue 89 (Sep-Oct 1978); "Don't Forget I'm An Artifice (Metafiction)" by Cy Chauvin; An Interview With Robert Sheckley by David Wingrove; reviews of Sheckley, Aldiss, Bayley, Butterworth & Britton, Cowper, Lindsay, Shaw, Silverberg, Vance, Labrys 1 and Foundation 14.

Issue 90 (Nov-Dec 1978); An Interview With Frederik Pohl by David Wingrove; "The Best Of Hamilton & Brackett" by Brian Stableford; "Dispossession" by Steev Higgins; reviews of Budrys, Butler, Clarke, Corley, Hill & Hill, Holdstock, Kilworth, McIntyre, Tiptree, Varley and Watson.

Issue 91 (Jan-Feb 1979); "Heartache, hardware, sex and the system - the science fiction of Bob Shaw" by James Corley; An Interview with Bob Shaw by James Corley and David Wingrove; reviews of Burgess, "The International Science Fiction Yearbook", High, Chalmers, Stableford, England, Griffin, Shaw, Webb, Welby, Morris, Spruill, Holdstock, Van Vogt.

Issue 92 (Mar-Apr 1979); An Interview With Richard Cowper by David Wingrove; "The Rest Is Dreams - the work of Richard Cowper" by David Wingrove; reviews of Donaldson, Francis, W. Burroughs, Dickson, LeGuin, Clarke, Strugatski, Jakubowski, Foundation 15, Allan.

Issue 93 (May-Jun 1979); "Legerdemain - the science fiction of Christopher Priest" by David Wingrove; "Overtures And Beginners" by Christopher Priest; "Sense Sensibility; the short fiction of Thomas Disch" by Chris Evans; reviews of Delany, Boyer & Zahorski, Mann, Asimov, Hesse, Watson, Herbert, MacVey, Gordon and Coney.

NB: Issues 84 through to 90 are duplicated, Issues 91 onward are litho with (in some cases) duplicated supplements. Readers' letters are a regular feature in all issues (until this present one!).

All available at 75p from Philip Muldowney at 28 Moorland View, Derriford, Plymouth, Devon, England.

Limited numbers of Issues prior to Number 84 are also available from Phil Muldowney and details may be obtained from him.

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Josef Nesvadba
IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN
New English Library; 1979; 176pp; Originally published in Czechoslovakia, 1964. Originally published in the UK by Victor Gollancz, 1970.

Review by Cyril Simsa.

"Josef Nesvadba," the blurb opines, " is Czechoslovakia's leading science fiction writer." Too bad that New English Library forgot to tell its art director, who has slammed a hideous purple sinews-and-macho-sublimation painting on the cover. It is true that the short story which gives its title to this collection features a number of creatures who suffer a chunky physiognomy, but the luridly mindless brash and swagger of the artwork runs directly counter to the author's tone of "cheerful defeatism" (if I may borrow an appropriate appraisal from the introduction). Though he often draws upon the trappings of pre-War adventure fiction, Nesvadba uses these trappings for a quite distinct and dissimilar purpose to their earlier pulp-magazine purveyors (usually, he uses them as an extended metaphor).

Thus, to Nesvadba, the society that mankind has created treats its denizens as rigorously as a jungle. In "Death of an Apeman," a lost heir to the fortune of the German Baron von Hoppe is looked after by apes and grows to live as one of them. When he encounters an adventuress who has been stranded in the aftermath of a disasterous expedition to hunt monkeys, he is easily enchanted by her stories of civilisation: tales of altruism, sharing, and a life-style nobler than his own. He travels back to Europe with her only to find that his expectations are betrayed by actuality: bickering politicians squabble over his inheritance, he is exploited to their ends, and they eventually drive him to craving the existence he knew as an ape.

This jungle background, although most explicit in "Death of an Apeman", may also be found in many of the other stories here. Nesvadba's stories have a cast of selfish brutes who use each other to advance themselves and very rarely show visible signs of sympathy. "Inventor of his own Undoing" cleverly inverts this theme: the story tells of Bauer, the inventor of the fully-automated factory production line. As a result of his invention, a global utopia of plenty is created: Bauer, whose only real motivation is self-interest, suddenly finds that he is just another idler; where there is infinite plenty, his personal wealth is worthless.

Yet another variation on the theme is to be found in "In the Footsteps ...". Nesvadba creates a race of Hominides sensuosi who live happily in harmony with fellow yetis and with nature; consequently, they are forced to hide away like troglodytes, for they lack the self-interested drive that reason gives to Homo Sapiens: the conflict of the story lies between feeling and rationality. Nesvadba does not come to any kind of facile resolution: rather, he creates an equilibrium balance of the opposing views. His is a complex viewpoint which in general avoids arriving at unwarranted and premature conclusions.

There is much, inevitably, that I must omit in this short a review: Nesvadba writes with a gently Stygian humour which occasionally bursts out into reveries of gleeful fatalism. At his best (as in the title story) he constructs a thoroughly engaging and intricate yarn which twists and turns like hyper-tautened cable. My one criticism of the book would be Nesvadba's choice of his narrative mouthpiece characters: his stories tend to be narrated by misogynistic, middle-aged, self-centred failing academics or minor-league medical practitioners; as a result, some of the less distinguished stories tend to blend with the passing of time (and there is one - significantly the shortest piece in the book - which could simply have been removed from the collection without anybody noticing).

Nevertheless, Nesvadba is a generally stimulating writer. He moreover represents a Continental tradition of writing of which English-speaking audiences are too often far too ignorant. For all my bitching at their heinous design department, N. E. L. should be commended for making available at least a smattering of European sf writers (I am thinking also of their TRAVELLING TOWARDS EPSILON).

Get this book: it gives a rarely-granted opportunity to glimpse the very heart of the contemporary Continental jungle.

((It should also be noted that a 'follow-up' volume to EPSILON, edited once again by Maxim Jakubowski, TWENTY HOUSES OF THE ZODIAC, has been published to coincide with the World Science Fiction Convention by New English Library. Its International line-up of contributing authors is as follows: Brian Aldiss (England); Ion Hobana (Romania); Cherry Wilder (Australia); Gerd Maximovic (West Germany); Elisabeth Vonarburg (Canada); Robert Sheckley (USA); Philippe Curval (France); Adam Barnett-Foster (San Serriffe); Arkady & Boris Strugatsky (USSR); J. G. Ballard (England); Hugo Raes (Holland); Shin'ichi Hoshi (Japan); Bob Shaw (Ireland); Daniel Walther (France); John Sladek (USA); Teresa Ingles (Spain); Maxim Jakubowski (France/England); Sam J. Lundwall (Sweden); Stanislaw Lem (Poland); Michael Moorcock (England). The haste with which this issue has had to be prepared has unfortunately not allowed time to run a review of this volume, but it is hoped to prepare a review for a forthcoming VECTOR.))

David Langford
WAR IN 2080 (The Future of Military Technology)
Westbridge Books (David & Charles); April 1979; £5.95; 229pp; ISBN o 7153 7661 6.

Review by David Wingrove

I must admit to a certain conservativism in my approach to the hard sciences; my tastes tend to the artistic and thus I welcome novels unadulterated by cold slabs of scientific exposition and, likewise, textbooks which escape the blight of assuming that I, the reader, knows what Occam's Razor is, or why anyone should place a cat in a sealed environment and then say - without looking - that it was both dead and not-dead. WAR IN 2080 is, to my mind, almost a perfect book of its kind, a text book of possibilities that assumes basic intelligence on the part of its reader but goes to the bother of explaining in intelligible terms the quirks of the scientific/military mind as it wrestles with modern physics to find a bigger and better way of ending the rat race. It is a wittily written book which - despite its subject matter - made me at one and the same time laugh and consider the moral implications of the matters discussed. That it should achieve this is, I feel, its greatest success, and I was grateful for the Afterword, "Logic of Expansion", which, very rightly, placed the whole matter of future warfare into a moral perspective.

The subject matter ranges from the actual to the hypothetical; a logical progression that embraces heat-rays, 'clean' fusion bombs, interplanetary warfare and - briefly - the kind of scenarios that are more at home in the Space Operas of the fifties. Each item is examined in the light of present scientific knowledge with the carefully made proviso that things may not always stay the same, nor may the laws stay true everywhere in the Universe and, finally, that our own knowledge of physics is an expanding thing which may release to us the power to make real some of these hypothetical weapons.

Strangely enough I found this a rather comforting book in the sense that the actualities of the holocaust and its likelihood were concisely spelt out, emphasis being placed on the consequences of modern nuclear warfare and the present small possibilities of evading the fact that the aggressor in such a war would pay as dearly as the aggressed. Dave Langford draws from a wide range of sources to illustrate human ingenuity and does not shirk from the scientists obligation to examine all the angles. In doing so - almost as a by-product - he has produced a book that not only examines (in a language comprehensible to the layman) the perversion of scientific advance to military means, but also provides a whole fund of ideas and references for anyone wishing to use scientific extrapolation as a basis for fiction (budding sf writers take note).

This is a nicely produced, well illustrated book, written with a great deal of style and an incisive knowledge of the subject matter. I recommend it without reservations either in this hardback format or (so I believe) in the paperback version due from Sphere later in the year. It confirms my belief that Langford might easily become as important a 'populariser' of science as Asimov, and, dare I say it, a more stylish and readable commentator.

Fritz Leiber
OUR LADY OF DARKNESS
Fontana; 1978; 189pp; 80pence; ISBN 0 00 614861 1

Review by Chris Morgan

This is supernatural fiction at its best. It is an extremely erudite novel, (though not off-puttingly so) and cunningly autobiographical, mingling fact and fiction until they become impossible to separate. Throughout, an atmosphere of evil is gradually developed until it reaches a pitch of hysterical horror. To nobody's surprise this was voted the best novel of the year (1977) at the 4th World Fantasy Convention in October 1978.

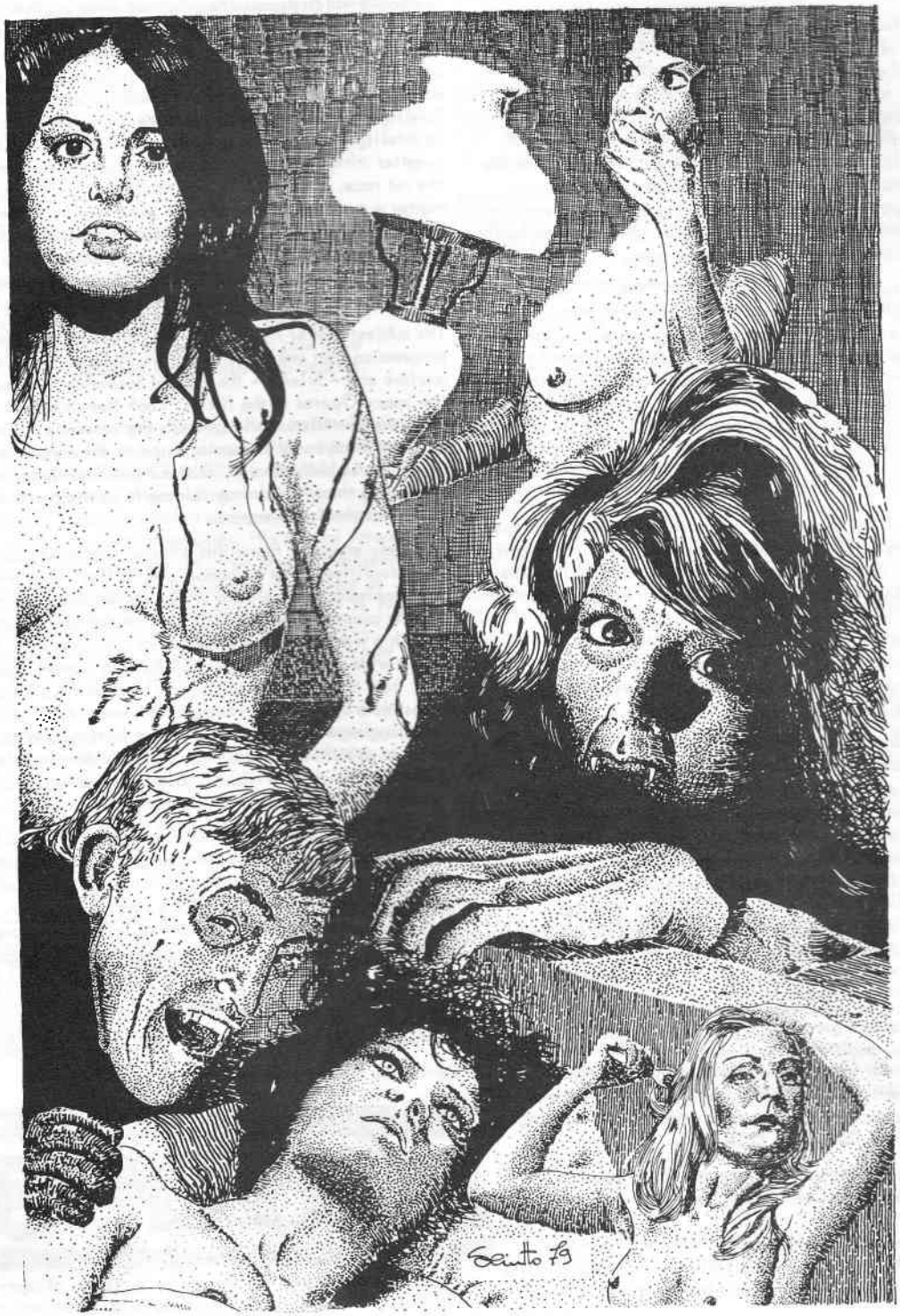
Leiber's main character is himself - minimally disguised by the removal of twenty years from his age and by a change of name to Franz Westen, a writer of horror stories living alone in an apartment at 811 Geary Street

in present-day San Francisco (Leiber's former address). Westen is very interested in chess and astronomy; he has not long got over a bout of alcoholism following the death of his wife. Perhaps many of the smaller details of Westen's existence are also autobiographical - the layout of his apartment, the people living in neighbouring apartments, the strange books Westen owns.

It is two of these books which give rise to the action: the curiously prophetic MEGAPOLISOMANCY by Thibaut de Castries, published in about 1900, and a hand-written diary from 1928 which is supposedto have belonged to Clark Ashton Smith. Yes, not content with including himself, Leiber brings other well-known writers into the story. There are several lengthy quotations from the (obviously mythical) Smith diary, which are important to the plot. (I say "obviously mythical" because at one point Leiber's erudition slips and he -- through the medium of a diary entry -- refers to Dali, who was still unknown outside Spain in 1928.) Also, H. P. Lovecraft is refered to in places, together with Jack London, Ambrose Bierce and Dashiell Hammett. They are all supposed to have been aquaintances of the eccentric and sinister de Castries, who is said to have lived in San Francisco from about 1900 until his death in 1929. de Castries, who must surely be fictional, is presented as almost an Aleister Crowley type -- a powerful man who practised black magic and attracted young artistic types to him. Franz Westen learns about de Castries from Jaime Donaldus Byers, a rich poet and dilettante who is as strange and magnetic a character as de Castries himself.

Although the other characters are beautifully described -- obviously drawn, or exagerrated, from life -- it is Westen on whom the book concentrates. He it is that pursues the pale brown thing which he sees through his binoculars, and ultimately confronts it. Investigating its connection with de Castries and -- indirectly -- with himself, he comes to think of it as Mater Tenebrarum, Our Lady Of Darkness -- from the book Suspira de Profundis by De Quincy (with some books mentioned in this novel being non-existent, one is forced to check on the reality of all the rest; the De Quincey does exist).

This is the sort of novel which Leiber has been threatening to write for quite a few years. His stories "A Bit of the Dark World", "The Black Gondolier" and "Midnight by the Morphy Watch" have been pointing in this direction, with an increasing tendency towards autobiography and a gradual refinement of his writing style. The element of horror is present but generally understated, combining with the wholly believable background to produce supernatural occurences which rely not at all on the Lovecraftian approach (full of awful creeping horrors and archaic epithets) yet are much more credible. Even if you don't care for novels of horror or the supernatural, this is one which you should read as it is one of the best of its kind.



Thomas M. Disch
THE GENOCIDES
Panther; 1979; 188pp; 85p; ISBN 0 586 02420 4

review by Chris Evans

Aliens seed the Earth with tall, fast-growing plants which rapidly edge out the native flora and fauna of the planet. They also dispatch machines designed to raze the deserted cities and to eliminate any surviving life-forms. On the shores of Lake Superior an isolated farm-community survives, presided over by the patriarch Anderson, a Protestant of rigid beliefs who rules his people with an iron hand. Then the incinerator machines attack the community, and Anderson and his followers are forced to flee into the labrynthine root-system of one of the plants in a last-ditch attempt at survival.

When THE GENOCIDES was first published in 1965 it was greeted with considerable hostility in certain sections of the sf world. Post-disaster novels had a long and respectable history in the genre, from John Wyndham's stories of intrepid humans battling against and eventually overcoming a variety of global perils, to the more pessimistic visions such as George R. Stewart's EARTH ABIDES, a dignified and compassionate account of the failure of a post-holocaust community to re-establish the society they once knew. Disch's bleak and compelling novel differed from its predecessors in presenting neither a happy ending nor a sympathetic view of humanity's downfall. His survivors not only fail to resist the threat to their lives but actually hasten their eventual destruction by bickering and fighting amongst themselves. In addition, Disch has his aliens attach no importance whatsoever to the human race - they are just one of many life-forms which has to be readicated before their programme is complete. At one point a character muses: "It wounded his pride to think that his race, his species, his world was being defeated with such apparent ease. What was worse, what he could not endure was the suspicion that it all meant nothing, that the process of their annihilation was something quite mechanical: that mankind's destroyers were not, in other words, fighting a war but merely spraying the garden."

This suspicion is perfectly justified, for one of the aliens' progress reports (presented earlier in the novel) refers to cities as "artifacts", while humans themselves are described simply as "large mammals". Such a dismissive view of the human race was clearly unacceptable to many members of the genre that had always been firmly anthropocentric and had consistently extolled the merits of human ingenuity and vigour. It seems likely that Disch deliberately set out to debunk the myth that people will always act honourably and courageously in the face of catastrophe, and in succeeding so well (for THE GENOCIDES is a very fine, if disturbing, novel), created a healthier climate for other writers who had an equally equivocal view of human behaviour. Seen as a harbinger of the New Wave, THE GENOCIDES must be regarded as one of the most influential sf novels of the sixties, bringing a refreshing dose of skepticism and iconoclasm to the genre and demonstrating that sf need not be solely a literature of comfort.

Thomas M. Disch
THE PRISONER
Dobson; London; 1979; 188pp; £4.25; ISBN 0 234 72059 X

review by Chris Evans

This book is the novelization of the television series starring Patrick McGoohan which was first broadcast on ITV ten years ago and is still fondly remembered by many (see, for example, Jim Barker's THE CAPTIVE strip, currently appearing in MATRIX). What is the secret of its enduring appeal? Certainly its originality of theme provided a refreshing contrast to the bland offerings of most television serials, with a plot which seemed to thicken with each episode. A secret agent resigns his job and is promptly kidnapped to a quaint village where people are known only by numbers (he becomes Number 6). A series of Machiavellian schemes are devised to undermine his self-confidence and to attempt to discover the reason for his resignation. His efforts to escape from the village are continually frustrated by his captors, who monitor his every movement and seem to take a special delight in making him believe that he has succeeded in escaping before finally revealing that he has not. He is drugged, hypnotised, fed with false memories; old friends betray him; he meets a doppleganger of himself who causes him to question his own identity; even his former girlfriend appears and claims to have no memory of their previous relationship. Appearances are externally deceptive: nothing is what it seems and no one can be trusted. But Number 6 continues to resist every attempt to disorient and depersonalise him, and one's identification with him grows stronger as he unmasks successive subterfuges by the strength of his ego and his unshakeable belief in his own sanity; soon, his failure to escape from the village comes to be far less important than his continued ability to withstand the brain-washing of his captors.

So, does THE PRISONER appeal because the village is a metaphor for depersonalised modern society, and does Number 6 seem such a hero because he possesses that rare strength of mind which enables him to resist the pressures to conform and compromise? Perhaps; but speaking personally I always liked THE PRISONER because it appealed to my incipient paranoia, confirming my suspicion that nobody is trustworthy and that everyone's out to get me. Be honest, and admit that you've felt that way too, sometimes. Not that I'd believe you if you did admit it; it would probably be just a ploy in some sinister game you're playing with me...

Before the men in the white coats arrive, I've just got time to say that this book originally appeared in the US in 1969 and that this is its first British publication. Since it's written by one of sf's best novelists, one would expect it to be better than the average BOOK OF THE FILM/TV SERIES, and so it is. Disch has skilfully blended several episodes together so that the book does have something of the flavour of a novel. I would have liked a little more physical description of the village and its inhabitants and less of the slightly precious philosophical dialogues between Number 6 and his captors, but Disch adheres pretty faithfully to the spirit of the series overall. A must for all fans.

Anne McCaffrey
THE WHITE DRAGON
Sidgwick & Jackson; 1979; £5.95; 497 pages; ISBN 0 283 983 299

review by Chris Morgan

Does anybody out there remember a pop single of a decade or so ago, "The Little White Bull", sung by Tommy Steele? It's a revoltingly twee piece, which probably still gets requested on Junior Choice, about a little white bull (would you believe it?) which tries to get into bullfighting but is turned down for being under age. The last lines are "You're a great little bull/the best in town". Well, a similar sentiment pervades the latest of Anne McCaffrey's dragon books, which is about a little white dragon and his youthful rider managing to outdo all the adults on their full-sized dragons.

That does sound awfully like the plot-line for a juvenile novel, doesn't it? In fact THE WHITE DRAGON is a compromise between juvenile and adult levels. It lacks the toughness of DRAGONFLIGHT and DRAGONQUEST, even though it continues the grand saga of life on Pern. Nor is it an unabashed juvenile like DRAGONSONG or DRAGONSINGER. But the air of sentimentality which affected those last two creeps into THE WHITE DRAGON, as well. The main protagonists are not children but they are immature adults -- teenagers with teenaged emotions and outlooks. This accounts, in part, for the shallowness of the book, for the lack of insight into character and situation. Only in part, though, for all the characters here are over-simplified; the adults are either cyphers (mainly too good to be true) or else mere spear carriers — a funny name, a line or two of dialogue and never heard from again. There seems to be a cast of thousands, and the main action spans almost four years and many hundreds of miles, leaping back and forth between Pern's northern and southern continents. This presents a facade of complexity. Yet however one looks at it there is breadth but no depth. Anne McCaffrey has deliberately written this book to appeal to a relatively unsophisticated mass audience -- for children of all ages, if you like -- and she has achieved great commercial success with it. The US hardcover has sold 50,000 copies, so the dust jacket proclaims.

THE WHITE DRAGON is fairly typical of its kind. It has plenty of action, the grandeur of flying dragons, a romantic interest, the sense of a civilisation striving to improve itself and a juvenile hero with whom it is easy to identify (always assuming that one wants to be a juvenile hero). And one cannot (however hard one tries) forget the fire-lizards -- effectively miniature dragons -- which fly around everywhere, carrying messages and being twee. Some passages rise above all this, particularly the brief scene where Masterharper Robinton (now ailing) realises that he loves Menolly (the young female harper, star of DRAGONSONG and DRAGONSINGER) and that she loves him, but that he is too old and this revelation too late. Yet there is much happiness and joy in the book, and little sadness; deaths seem rare and petty disappointments are soon forgotten. There is no real evil on Pern. Threads, the dangerous alien spores which fall intermittently, are being coped with. Token baddies are introduced -- a few dragonriders who have been exiled to the southern continent -- but they are never much of a threat.

Mostly the plot is one of continual progress towards wish fulfilment for Jaxom (an under-age nobleman) and his unique white dragon, Ruth. (Having a male dragon called Ruth is just about as silly as having a male rabbit named Hazel.) Ruth is only half the size of the other dragons,

which makes Jaxom all the more determined that together they will be the greatest dragon-and-rider team of all.

" 'You know,' N'ton began, frowning slightly as he folded his arms across his damp-spattered tunic, 'Ruth isn't really white.'
Jaxom stared incredulously at his dragon. 'He's not?'
'No. See how his hide has shadows of brown and gold, and ripples of blue or green on the near flank.'
'You're right!' Jaxom blinked, surprised at discovering something totally new about his friend. 'I guess those colors are much more noticeable because he's so clean and the sun's so bright today!' It was such a pleasure to be able to discuss his favorite topic with an understanding audience."

This "gosh, wow!" approach persists throughout the book. Too many plot developments are telegraphed in advance, but this doesn't make Jaxom's notable achievements and serendipitous discoveries any more believable. Ruth is exceptional in that he has the ability to pinpoint himself in time and a special affinity with fire lizards, though we never find out why. From the outset it is obvious that Jaxom and Ruth are going to succeed with everything they try. It is comic-book stuff.

More interesting is Anne McCaffrey's insistence that this is science fiction rather than fantasy. She's trying too hard to convince the reader that fire-breathing dragons can be explained away in a perfectly scientific manner, that mankind came to Pern in spaceships and that the present level of civilisation represents a resurgence from barbarism towards technology under difficult conditions (a shortage of metal, falls of Thread etc). It isn't giving away too much to say that one of the areas in which Jaxom and Ruth's story intersects with that of Pern as a whole is in the discovery of ancient technological remains belonging to the first settlers. And it isn't giving away anything to suggest that these archeological triumphs pave the way for sequels. (DRAGONDRUMS, the third juvenile book, had already been published in the US; more supposedly adult novels can obviously be expected.)

To complete the package, THE WHITE DRAGON has a magnificent wrap-around jacket illustration by Michael Whelan, a map which doesn't mark everything it should, and not an index but a Dragondex (well, it made me cringe so I thought I would inflict it on all of you, too) at the end.

It is far from being high class literature but its undoubted popularity may win it a Hugo at Seacon.

Brian W. Aldiss
THIS WORLD AND NEARER ONES (Essays Exploring the Familiar)
Weidenfeld & Nicolson; July 1979; £6.95; 261pp; ISBN 0 297 77655 X

review by David Wingrove

When talking of Theodore Sturgeon, Aldiss says, "after all, it is a shame to read his non-fiction when much of his fiction is so charged, loaded, in a way to which articles can never aspire." (p204). As much could be said of this collection of articles by Aldiss, though whilst they obviously haven't the bite of a great deal of his fiction, they are sufficiently 'charged' to provide any reader of this volume with a satisfying reading experience.

Collected from a wide range of sources over a number of years and covering a number of topics, these essays reflect a personal philosophy that constantly attempts to reconcile all the disparate elements of life (something that is particularly noticeable here in "From History to Timelessness", for example)

Aldiss has, of course, had published several volumes before this one which have traced the outline of his thought in a non-fictional form, but this is perhaps the most compact 'broad view' of his ideas yet to see print. THE SHAPE OF FURTHER THINGS (published nine years ago) is a more autobiographical book than THIS WORLD AND NEARER ONES though certain preoccupations (centred on the genre) recur in the new volume. BILLION YEAR SPREE is a far more detailed study of the genre, yet it lacks something of the overall charm of this new book. CITIES AND STONES is an intensive travellers guide (and something of an historical document now considering the progress of modern Jugoslavia) yet it is also partially reflected here in the travel essays. Perhaps the best description of THIS WORLD... is to say that it is a drawing together of the threads, a compact 'sampler' of the ideas that permeate all his work and are disseminated in a more diluted form throughout his fiction.

The first section of the book, beneath the heading "Writing" is a series of nine essays on Sf authors (inclusive of one on his own BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD). As a critic Aldiss aims to inform and stimulate his readers and these articles are "positive, motivated by love" (in Hesse's words). He seems motivated by a sympathy with the works he is discussing (particularly the essays on Dick and Blish - the latter a much extended and revised version of the article that appeared recently in FOUNDATION) and displays an intellect that eclectively collects and inter-relates ideas to produce studies that made this reader, for one, want to re-read those volumes under discussion I had already read and seek out those I hadn't. The variety of this first section is typical of Aldiss, dealing with Verne, Nesvadba, Sheckley, Vonnegut and contemporary British sf besides the aforementioned authors.

This pertinent and stimulating first section (from the viewpoint of the sf reader) is introduced by an essay "Ever Since The Enlightenment", a fine general piece that gives a perspective (if, perhaps a biased one?) to the role of sf in modern culture. Not only does it set the tone for the first section but for the whole book as well. After a humourous interlude (under the heading "Hoping") entitled "Looking Forward to 2001", Aldiss focuses upon a number of less sf-orientated topics in a section called "Living". They are perhaps less interesting than the articles in the first section and are somewhat reminiscent of those "filler" articles you find in the glossy magazines. Nevertheless, they are entertainment of a thought-provoking nature (and, to an Aldiss-phile such as I, they are quite illuminating, giving a glimpse of the mind behind the fictions).

My favourite section follows. Headed "Seeing" Aldiss presents us with six essays on Art and the Sf film. Aldiss' preoccupation with the Pre-Raphaelite movement is noticeable in his fiction and here he deals with the work of G. F. Watt (not a Pre-Raphaelite) with a care that shows the impact of the Victorian era upon his consciousness. The idea of the future as buried in the past is strong in these essays (indeed, it is a constant theme throughout his fiction) and surfaces again and again, even when he is dealing with something as modern as a TV movie:
"The duel between man and tanker is an archetypal confrontation between Man and Thing, suggesting patterns that hark back to our origin as individuals and as a species. Some millions of years ago, sapiens won the battle against the automatic response, and so entered human existence; but that battle was only the first in a long war still raging." ("Spielberg", page 174, concerning DUEL).

The essay "Sf Art: Strangeness with Beauty" (an amended version of the introductory essay in SF ART) is the meat of this section, throwing off numerous avenues for the curious to explore whilst giving the field of sf art a coherence that no other critic, I feel, has yet managed to convey. The stimulating article on Tarkovsky's "Solaris" and the humourous piece on Star Trek and its bastard creations nicely compliment each other, emphasising Aldiss' concern that didactism should not prevail in his criticism.

Another section, another emphasis. "Rough Justices" groups together six small essays which again touch upon the written genre of sf, though this time with a cautionary "Yes, well, but..." (the title of one of the essays) added to the expected diet of enthusiasm. Perhaps this section, more than any of the others, indicates that Aldiss has a strong sense of morality (even if it is not one that can be strictly delineated). His condemnation of Adrian Berry's eulogisation of a continuously expanding technology (with the ultimate intention of "damming" stars for energy) is a reaction against the atrophy of science at the expense of humanity. It perhaps even indicates that for as much as Aldiss is an sf writer who has used sf's mechanical gimmickry he is no champion of unchecked technology. His concern for 'balance' (almost Taoist at times) is reflected here, and there is also a hint of his notion that we are in the last few years of Western Civilisation ("as we know it"). The essay, "The Universe as Coal-Scuttle" is the best expression here of his revolt against technocracy.

The last section of the book (excluding the index) is entitled "This World" and comprises of four articles loosely based on his travelling experiences. I think that this is perhaps the most disappointing of the sections, not because the writing is not tight and effective, but simply because the personally-experienced aspects of travel can never be passed on to a reader in this length of essay. It would need one of Aldiss' "kipple" books (see THE SHAPE OF FURTHER THINGS pages 117 onward) to capture the precise details (physical and psychological) of travel. But, in spite of my qualms, Aldiss does manage a fair job here, evoking a genuine taste of California, Trieste, Georgia and Sumatra (the last being my favourite essay of the four, with its rather wistful tone).

In conclusion then, this is a book that any fan of Aldiss would be well advised to purchase. Its compact loose-endedness (if you'll forgive the paradox) is compelling, its perspective is that of twenty five years within and on the fringes of the sf genre, and its value is that of the unfamiliar interpreting the familiar. Perhaps its only handicap is its cover price. But then, that's inflation!

SCIENCE FICTION AND THE CINEMA

by steve gallagher

Film is, regrettably for those of efined tastes, one of the most savagely commercial of the media. 100,000 copies sold of any book would make it a more than modest success, whilst a similar number of viewers for a television programme would probably cause it to be regarded as a community service, the costs of which would be absorbed into general production budgets and probably set against tax. Sell no more than 100,000 cinema seats throughout the total run of a film and you've got an unmitigated disaster on your hands; you'll barely cover your print costs, let alone pay your production bills or show your backers any return. Because of the millions involved in any single cinematic property producers and studios have to cast their nets wide -- failure of a picture doesn't only mean the loss of the investment, it also leads to a loss of confidence when backing is sought for other projects.

The broader and more popular forms of sf appeal to a significant minority of audiences -- significant, but still a minority in the harsh terms of the mass market. A certain proportion of this group will be interested in nothing beyond the raygun-and-monster genre, and others will be attracted not so much by the sf content of a film but by the promise of action, adventure and spectacular visual effects. 'Serious" sf - a form utilising the shapes and symbols of culture and technology to tell stories that couldn't be told any other way - doesn't seem to have much of a chance. The history of the sf film is a repeated pattern of the superficialities of the genre being adopted and exploited for the widest appeal, whilst the underlying structures of ideas have been abandoned in favour of self-sustaining 'Hollywooden' conventions.

Although there has been sf in the cinema, mainly concentrated in intermittent, fashionable outbursts, I doubt that there has been a sufficiently coherent and intelligent output of films and ideas to warrant the generic title of a 'cinema of science fiction'. There have been numerous notable exceptions which have raised their heads above the crowd, but I'd suggest that their main achievement has been that of transcending the conventions within which they've worked. This brief survey is an attempt to define some of these conventions and to see how filmmakers have worked with and around them.

No self-respecting film historian seems to be able to resist drawing a comparison between the film work of the Lumiere brothers and that of Georges Melies. Both worked in the earliest days of the development of the cinema, the Lumieres as technical innovators and Melies as a businesslike showman quick to see a commercial outlet in this new medium for his stage-conjuror's illusions. The lumieres, like Thomas Edison, saw the Cinematograph as a short-lived technological novelty which capitalised on the nineteenth century fad for science as entertainment, little more than a Victorian parlour trick. It was the simple fact that the pictures moved which had novelty value, and such novelties tend to wear thin very quickly.

The Lumieres expanded their library, adding exotic subjects of distant scenes in an attempt to forestall ennui in the polite social gatherings for whom they catered, but they never presented anything more ambitious than scenes taken directly from real life. Once you've seen one train pulling into a station, you've seen them all. The early cinema was all image and no communication, with the camera being used as a simple recording device with no attempt being made to control those images by careful direction or juxtaposition of shots.

Georges Melies attended an early Lumiere show and saw in this new photographic device a potential for the expansion of his stage magic. He aquired a machine and used it to record the illusions that he performed at the Theatre Robert-Houdin; no longer was the novelty in the photographic process, but in what was being photographed. Melies found that his films could command a wide and enthusiastic audience, and exhibitors fell on his product with gratitude. The early death of the cinema as a mechanical curiosity - helped along by its rejection by polite society after a disasterous nitrate stock fire at a Parisian showing - gave way to the birth of the cinema as a dramatic medium as Melies drew upon his stage background to develope his tricks into scenarios.

The step was an important one, almost a philosophical about-face. Film was no longer a simple, reliable document; it was a means of presenting events that had not happened. Melies and his imitators took the process a step further, demonstrating that the camera could be used not only to show fictitious events with apparent versimilitude, but that it could also, with a similar appearance of truth, present a view of the world which was impossible under prevailing concepts of reality.

It is of interest for us to note from where Melies drew much of his scenario material. Jules Verne and HG Wells were plundered freely - even today the mental image evoked in many people's minds at the mention of these authors is that of Melies' dancing girls and a cheesecake man-in-the-moon with a rocketship lodged firmly in his eye. The new and as yet un-named sf was found to be ideal story-fodder for the cinema's purposes, and it formed the basis of Melies' most ambitious efforts.

There was, however, at this time no urge to regard sf as anything other than a vehicle for visual wonder, to be placed on a level with fairy stories and dream fantasies. Melies' scenarios were rudimentary in the extreme; one is reminded of the token 'stories' often added to pornographic films, a perfunctory acknowledgement of form which is nothing more than a conventionalised framework for a piece of fantasy-oriented visual stimulation. The devising of such a format is unfortunately to recur throughout sf film history, a feeling that science fiction films need not somehow fulfil the rigorous criteria of story construction expected elsewhere; a feeling that hardware and pseudo-technology should fill the gaps in an inadequate concept.

But the aim of an early trick film was to create a sense of wonder and nothing more, and in working towards this end Melies virtually created the technical grammar of the sf film maker. Matte work, back- and front-projection and laboratory techniques may have improved upon the quality of these early efforts, but the range of effects has been improved more often by sophistication than by true innovation.

As the record of a brief truth gave way to the trick film, so did the trick film give way to more complex dramatic treatment in features of increasing length. The French cinema retreated to a lesser place in the international scene - indeed, all of the European cinema was hit hard by the First World War and associated economic crises. The growing American studios, helped by a large home market, came to dominate world distribution. There was no place for sf in these studios' plans; as if ashamed of the medium's fairground origins, its American exponents claimed an artistic status at least equal to that of the theatre and selected their productions accordingly. Directors like Griffith and DeMille, whilst in tune with popular taste, made vastly overblown claims about their work; fortunately they allowed their instincts to lead them in their filmmaking. The results of believing too much in one's own publicity can be seen in Griffith's overlong and pretentious Intolerance (1916); the fact that the industry was reluctant to face was that the American film's strength lay in its vulgarity, considering the term in its purest form.

This striving for 'class' excluded sf in the USA. Productions tended to concentrate around broad comedy or historical drama, with occasional excursions into the gothic. Direction and editing became refined to the point of slickness, but while the studios were polishing their products to achieve universal acceptability (an approach later to be reflected in the policies of Irving Thalberg at MGM) they were excluding much that was original or 'experimental' - a dirty word as far as distributors were concerned.

The American studios' European influence did not, during the war years, extend to Germany. In a demonstration of a pattern that was to be repeated during the Second World War the depressive nature of the period led people to seek escapist entertainment. The German cinema found itself in the midst of a boom; wartime conditions drove production companies indoors so that films were made not in the open air with a naturalistic setting but, as with Melies, in the controlled environment of the studio building. There was no point in trying to imitate the Hollywood product with the limited resources available; deprived of expensive trappings, the films had only one asset upon which they could draw without reference to the financiers, and that was imagination. In retrospect it is tempting to look back at Melies' stretching of the medium and his adoption of sf forms as having a certain inevitability about it; the temptation is increased when one considers that exactly the same route was to be followed in Germany.

Expressionist trends in art and design first reached the screen as the war ended, with The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1919). Sombre, mythic, and with a strange and violent poetry all its own, Expressionist art in filmic form proved to be surprisingly commercial. This line of development culminated in Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1926), the first recognisable attempt at a 'serious' sf film.

The approach of the Expressionist cinema was to construct a stylised and consistent visual environment which was not required to pay homage to any conception of reality, but which was under the control of the filmmaker to present in whatever way he felt was best to add to his chosen theme. In many ways sf is well suited to this approach, allowing the artist to lose the restrictions of superficial and temporary reality in order to define more fundamental truthes; this is certainly the view that Lang and his scenarist, Thea von Harbou took in their rather simplistic fable of class struggle. Compensation for this and the attrocious acting was to be found in the grand design and excellent effects; unfortunately the uneven match of technical and intellectual content was already becoming a characteristic of screen sf.

Metropolis was the last of the Expressionist films of Germany – and it was backed by American money. Hollywood had noted the growing success of such studios as UFA (Universal Film A. G.) and had reacted in predictable fashion by making heavy investments and then using those investments as a lever for control. Although Metropolis was a success the arrangements of the Par-UFA-Met financing deal brought paradoxical ruin to UFA when the studio was unable to put up its share of the production costs.

It was as a result of this quiet coup that the leading talents of the German cinema, including Lang, Peter Lorre, Conrad Veidt and Emil Jannings, were drawn off to the USA. The promise of Expressionism was never followed through, and although many of its features were absorbed to enrich Hollywood's existing genres, sf was not among them. America's appetite for the unreal and the impossible was satisfied throughout the 1930's by Universal's gothic horrors, a line of films that began with James Whale's excellent Frankenstein (1931) and ended ignominiously with Abbott and Costello. The vigorous expansion of written sf during this period went unreflected; the major sf project of the decade was undertaken in England. Alexander Korda was determined to give British film production a world significance, and Things to Come (1936) was one of the results of this determination. The very fact that America was ignoring sf made the idea attractive to Korda, anxious as he was to avoid imitation; and there was the added advantage that the reputation of HG Wells would give the project not only prestige but also a specifically national character. This said, Hungarian Korda hired an American director, William Cameron Menzies. Menzies had designed Douglas Fairbanks' Thief of Bagdad (1923) and he brought a certain visual grandeur to Things to Come which contributed greatly to the impact of its release. William Temple and Willy Ley wrote the story from Wells' work of futuristic vision and Wells himself, at the age of seventy, wrote the scenario.

The film is not the best reflection of Wells' life's work, a ponderous social tract that lacks the humanity of his earlier fiction. Despite its favourable reception by the public Things to Come did little to add to the cinemagoer's idea of sf. Korda's next Wells-inspired production was The Man Who Could Work Miracles (1937), a light fantasy indicating that it was Wells himself, and not sf in general, who was being regarded as the producer of golden eggs.

Korda's grandiose projects were cut short by the Second World War. Home finance was drastically reduced, key technicians were enlisted, and large spacious buildings – not unlike film studios – were apt to be commandeered for the assembly of Spitfires. He transferred his remake of The Thief of Bagdad to Hollywood in 1939.

Throughout the 1940s the cinema still did not reflect the growing appetite of the public for sf, apart from in the most simplistic terms. Catering for a market conditioned by the pulpwood adventure magazines there were outright Arabian fantasies and oversized monsters in low-budget imitation of King Kong, but the structures of these films were such that they could accomodate the Hollywood conventions of hero/girl and danger/rescue formats. Written sf was beginning to mature away from such obvious conventions, but its screen counterpart at this time was a highly diluted form. Indeed, 1940s screen sf was derived not even from the pulps, but from comic strips. Ideas were filtered out and only the jargon remained. This process was at its most obvious in the chapterplays or serials -- fast moving, frantic, incredible and cheap, their enjoyable gusto was marred by the fact that they tended to confirm most people's uninformed view of sf -- that it was no more than a childish literature of adventure, 'sci-fi' at its worst. Any attempt to dispel this view was liable simply to uncover the long-established prejudice that 'serious' sf was entirely dry and predictive.

The serials were numerous, and variable in their quality. All were produced inexpensively, using leftover sets and costumes with scores clipped from other films – even with scenes clipped wholesale from other films. The cityscapes of Lang's Metropolis provided back-projected window views for Killer Kane's palace in Buck Rogers (1939) whilst Flash Gordon Conquers The Universe (1940) contained stock footage from the 1930 feature White Hell of Pitz Palu. The low production values and poor ideas-content of the serials -- popular and durable though they were -- betrays a certain contempt for their intended audience on the part of the production companies. Whilst one may still view the serials with great affection, this must be accompanied by the suspension of most sf critical attitudes.

We should not despise the serials, for that affection contained a promise for the 1950s. Flash Gordon, Brick Bradford and the Flying Disc Man from Mars were making an indelible mark upon juvenile consciousnesses. Although the 1950s were to produce many quasi-sf films in response to the enthusiasm of this maturing market, there would also be some fairly worthwhile successes; such dim jewels could never have been produced without the more embarrassing films whose commercial success formed a context for them.

1950 saw the release of Destination Moon with Robert Heinlein as co-scenarist and technical advisor. The film was something of a landmark with its semi-documentary a proach and respect for scientific accuracy, but it demonstrates the conservative nature of the film industry; lunar landing stories were nothing new, but rocket technology was developing fast and it was this current interest that Destination Moon capitalised upon. The film embodied a number of the recuring traits that we have so far observed in the more successful sf enterprises of the cinema; a basis in sf literature, a totally controllable studio environment, and a freedom from the standard cinematic conventions (Heinlein fought hard to exclude the perfunctory 'love interest' which usually came packaged in the form of an elder scientist's daughter). Much of the success of the film may be credited directly to Heinlein, for when producer George Pal went on to make a line of sf-derived films he lapsed into the kind of inferior cinematic sf that carried on a completely separate existence from the written model. Thought was replaced by sensation; science became not a subject matter but a symbolic force, the folly which conjured the monster or the saviour which destroyed it. Partly for reasons of economy and partly out of audience preference the films tended to be Earth-bound, with alien invasion being a favourite theme as well as the rampaging monster of unprecedented origin. Whereas the literature might take a scientific premise and then project a situation from it, the Bert I. Gordons of the film industry would take appealing and sensational situations and then add a token scientific explanation to fit them, with a result that implausibility would destroy any attempt to create a credible and self-defining imaginative environment.

This gulf may be clearly seen if we compare the film The Thing From Another World (1951) with the story upon which it was based, "Who Goes There?" (John W Campbell Jr, writing as Don A Stuart). The change of title really says it all, but on the most superficial comparison we see that the main suspense element of Campbell's story – a being that can replicate any living model and so infiltrate the isolated community of an Antarctic camp – has been replaced by a straightforward rampaging vegetable, and that the perfunctory love interest that Heinlein had fought, and that Campbell had seen no reason to include, has now been introduced. The monster is overcome by Science with a capital S, being electrocuted with minimal ingenuity.

The Thing From Another World is reckoned by many to be one of the better sf films of its period, along with Invasion Of The Body Snatchers (1956), a film which depended more on its tight construction and allegorical message than the plausibility of its premise. This Island Earth (1955), showing a brief glimpse of an alien world, was able to expand its horizons without over-extending its budget. It is perfectly possible that the sf reader will find these films interesting and entertaining, as a meagre diet is better than no diet at all; but it was Forbidden Planet (1956) which was to prove to be the film with its foot most firmly planted over the boundary of sf.

Forbidden Planet defies neat pidgeonholing. It had no definite connection with science fiction literature (claiming Shakespeare's Tempest as its source) and it did have a conventional love interest and a rampaging monster – a sure formula, one might expect, for sf disaster. However, the film was made with a certain integrity; the general disregard for the basic functions of plot and character that we have noted elsewhere was not present here, added to which must be the fact that the design and technical realisation of the film were unusually good. It was a good argument that the technology of the studio, coupled with expensive process work, is essential to the visual definition of an environment or a reality not based on our own. Sets and effects must be conceived, created and designed anew for such a production, and apart from the imaginative originality involved this is one of the strongest arguments against making an sf film; there are easier ways of making money.

The British cinema of the 1950s gave a limp response to the American product, sometimes even backed by American money or featuring a fading American star to ensure some kind of transatlantic recognition. High spots of the decade were the Hammer Quatermass films, based on Nigel Kneale's TV serials; strong stuff in the television terms of the period, but the theme of 'scientist saves world' had long been abandoned as a simplistic cliche by sf readers.

Although the decade had seen the perversion of sf into a cinematic form which had all the sensation and little of the ideas-content of its parent literature, there was at least some hope; many of the films had been quite enjoyable on their own terms, and there was an established pattern of production and finance which made it seem likely that good sf might finally make it onto the screen without compromise. Unfortunately the

1960s saw the beginnings of the decline of the major studios; power began to shift to independent producers who rented facilities as and when they needed them, and sf became prohibitively expensive. Location shooting became fashionable, spawning films which were set in a natural and observed environment rather than the controllable artifice of the studio. Whilst this is by no means an impossible condition for sf, it severely limits the producer's options; subtle distortion of existing reality as practiced in Luc-Godard's Alphaville (1965) has a limited and short-lived appeal. SF was polarised into the newspaper nightmares of On The Beach (1959) and Doctor Strangelove (1964) -- films which are generally considered to be of the mainstream -- on the one hand, and the extravagant froth of Barbarella (1967) on the other.

Considering this background, it is difficult to understand even in retrospect how Stanley Kubrick was able to raise finance from MGM to make 2001 - A Space Odyssey (1968). He had only force of personality and his own track-record of success to support him, as the project offered little that seemed commercial in terms of the cinematic trends of the 1960s. Whilst 2001 brought cinematic sf nearer to the capabilities of its parent literature than any film before it, there were no monsters, no love story, and nobody saved the world. Jargon-free and with a technology that was subservient to the structure of ideas, the film took its style direct from the space programme. Kubrick, who began his career as a stills photographer, was exacting in his quest for visual quality, and his painstaking techniques brought the eventual fulfilment of the early promise of Melies. The film is a visual lie throughout its length, a pure artifice presented in a manner which is indistinguishable from photographed reality; cinema as the concrete realisation of the artist's interior vision without the modifications inevitable in ordinary observation.

The Kubrick-Clarke partnership assured acceptability in both film and sf critical camps. The long-running success of 2001 is an indication that the science fiction film is a commercially viable form, but those films which have followed have either fallen far short of the standard or else they have misguidedly reverted to earlier and shoddier values. In the first of these groups I would include Silent Running (1972), directed by Douglas Trumbull. Trumbull had been part of the special effects team on 2001 and in this film he set out to restore the humanity that he felt the machine-dominated 2001 lacked. Unfortunately this humanity was expressed in the form of some naive 'back to nature' ecological philosophy which detracted from the film's numerous strengths. Of the second type, I would suggest that Star Wars (1977) is representative; extremely well photographed (employing and in many ways improving upon the mechanics and methodology used by Kubrick) but disappointingly empty-headed, whilst its stream of instant successors promise little more than the usual pale shadows of exploitation. Close Encounters (1978) is a wonder and wish-fulfilment story, satisfying rather than provoking; if I were to make a personal choice of the best post-2001 sf film, I would probably opt for the quirky and idiosyncratic Dark Star (1974) inspired in part by Ray Bradbury's short story Kaleidoscope. Big-budget production gloss was replaced by a high degree of stylised ingenuity which places it far above, in my opinion, the outright commerciality of Soylent Green (1973) or Logan's Run (1976).

Perhaps the principal difficulty which besets any attempt to present sf on film is the broad diversity of the definition. As a field of literature sf has no single binding tenet; rather, it is an overlapping of a number of spheres of interest, none of which can be considered complete when out of context. The average reader's concept of sf is probably a synthesis of the work of a number of dissimilar authors, varying between individuals and impossible to tie down in terms of hard, marketable points.

Whilst a shrewd publisher may run a varied list which can cover the spectrum of sf tastes, a film producer must be concerned with the individual product; such are the economics of the system that he will go for tried and proven factors in an attempt to guarantee success. Some might kindly call this good business practice, whilst others would say that it leaves one open to the risk of pandering to the lowest common denominator. The truth lies somewhere between the two; a hard, competitive industry will benefit the product, and the division of production and creation implicit in the traditional producer/director relationship at least allows the possibility of the maintenance of artistic values in the face of business pressures -- yet, in the sf field, it has so rarely happened. Promising sf projects repeatedly land on the market with evidence of massive front-office interference; books re-plotted and re-themed with a banality that suggests an eye on eventual television sales and syndication, the most recent that springs to mind being Damnation Alley (1977). One problem is that sf writers are rarely involved with these projects or, when they are, their work is rewritten and altered beyond recognition by scenarists who have no experience of sf. Whilst they may be highly skilled in the craft of story-telling they lack the sf writer's basic advantage, the backlog of unpublished and early sf work that has allowed him to work the cliches of the genre out of his system whilst developing his abilities to handle the unique forms of the literature. Unfortunately this background does not encompass the screenwriter's skills, and when the two mutually exclusive forms of writing come together it is the scenarist, fighting on home ground, who dominates.

Perhaps this is the greatest problem, the fact that sf is so well-developed as a literature that the attempt to adapt by those who come fresh to the genre invariably disappoints those who have trained their tastes through intelligent and varied reading. Adaptations generally fail because the rewrite men break down daring and innovative ideas-structures into more comfortable and routine forms, no doubt seriously believing that they have made improvements in doing so. It is not that film is an unsuitable medium for sf -- far from it, as rare successes have been indicated -- but more that those projects which have made it to the screen have been, through severe dilution in the various stages of production, second-rate sf.

Is there hope for the future? Possibly, when the post-Star Wars exploitation has exhausted itself over the next couple of years. In the meantime the most we can hope for is that the public may not be conditioned into seeing cinematic sf entirely in terms of production design and optical work or oversimplified moral conflicts. An integrity of conception is the one major factor that will be required, this being even more important than heavy financial investment; Dark Star was reputedly made for $60,000, a ludicrously small figure in current production terms. Dark Star began production as a film student's co-operative venture, and once the project was under way finance was provided by Jack H. Harris, who had made a similar investment in the horro-fantasy Equinox and discovered a useful and previously unexploited niche in the industry. Credits for acting, scripting, editing, design, special effects and music all overlapped and inter-related in distinct contrast to the usual pattern of production where departments, separated not only by training and experience but also by rigid union demarcations, make distinct contributions to the overall whole. 2001 showed a different diversion from the established system, a controlled monomania with Kubrick supervising each creative field to an abnormal extent and with Arthur C. Clarke standing somewhat apart from the production processes and communicating directly with Kubrick.

Michael Crichton once suggested that in a comparison of the numbers of sf films and the amount of accessible sf writing, the percentage of excellence would be roughly the same. Whilst this may be true, it should not be taken as an absolution from blame for shoddy or ineffective creative effort. The history of sf in the cinema gives only a small handful of clues to successful sf production, mainly in the form of negatives; don't imitate, don't think that an sf story requires any less craftsmanship than any other kind of story, and, if you start with a good idea, don't take the easy way out and allow it to be altered to suit the convenience of the production processes. Doing it properly -- that is, shaping those processes to the idea -- takes more time, money and original thinking, and this is perhaps the main reason why good cinematic sf is so rare.

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filmbooks and postscripts

john brady

((The two film articles by John and Steve were written coincidentally and without reference to each other. It would, perhaps, have benefitted if the two had met to discuss various of the questions raised face-to-face, but without the opportunity of that I nevertheless hope that both the previous and following essays - covering as they do the bulk of the sf film genre from Melies to ALIEN - will beget a discussion within these columns about both the nature and the future of the sf film. My own bias is towards that part of the genre that embraces LAST YEAR IN MARIENBAD, IMAGES and the more recent ERASERHEAD, a cinema that blends a stark visual texture with a partially ambiguous psychological depth. Nevertheless I was also impressed by CLOSE ENCOUNTERS and think that any narrow view of the sf film which neglects all of its possibilities cannot succeed to convince me. With that in mind I leave you in John Brady's capable hands...))

PHILIP STRICK CONQUERS THE UNIVERSE!

Turning the pages of Science Fiction Movies is a labour of love, and not only for the cognoscenti. This is primarily because of the eye-grabbing stills, for the most part discerningly chosen to promote the unfamiliar. Few other film genres can boast of the astonishing variety revealed by these pictorial delights which so aptly complement Strick's text. Apart from a dozen or so of the colour photos which could be in the throes of mutation (some are frame blow-ups), all the remaining images are as good, if not better, than those in previous surveys of this eclectic genre. I am thinking in particular of John Baxter's Science Fiction In The Cinema (Tantivy Press, 1970) whose serviceable text was hardly enhanced by the pocket format forced on the accompanying stills. Subsequently reprinted, it has by no means been eclipsed by the latest competitors in the field.

Unlike Baxter's chronological approach, Strick has opted for a less clear-cut division of eighty years SF movie-making; his account consi consists of eight broadly thematic essays with headings, a la Baxter, like "Watching the Skies", "Armageddon, and Later", "Taking Off" and so on. With good reason these chapters are un-numbered, encouraging readers to plunge in where fancy (and the comprehensive index) takes them. Like me you may find yourself skipping to and fro, checking out whether Strick's pantheon coincides with your own - and if not why not - before you ever get around to his two-page introduction.

When you do, the first item for your consideration is a characteristic quote from J. G. Ballard that concludes: "...the only external landscapes that have any meaning are those which are reflected in the central nervous system, if you like, by their direct analogues." Underneath this thought-provoking assertion there is a grotesque image from A CLOCKWORK ORANGE of Adrienne Corri being manhandled prior to her rape. The significance of this arbitrary juxtaposition apart, a lengthier quotation would have been worth refering back to, a propos particular movies. To clarify this point here is an extract from Ballard's article on surrealism, "The Coming of the Unconscious" (NEW WORLDS 164, reprinted in THE OVERLOADED MAN, Panther):

"By crushing gouache Dominguez produced evocative landscapes of porous rocks, drowned seas and corals. The coded terrains are models of the organic landscapes enshrined in our central nervous systems. Their closest equivalents in the outer world of reality are those to which we most respond - igneous rocks, dunes, drained deltas. Only these landscapes contain the psychological dimensions of nostalgia, memory and the emotions."

Illustrations of this abound in the series of movies Jack Arnold directed in the fifties (for Universal) on location in the Arizona desert, curiously dubbed by Strick as neo-realist SF (p. 14). Unfortunately, grouping works by theme does not facilitate a development of this interpretation. However, this drawback is not really crucial until later, when Kubrick's famous trio have to be segregated into different chapters.

Strick begins his introduction by explaining his reluctance to settle for prescriptive definitions. One readily sympathises when he says: "Science fiction is a vast subject rendered only more complex when translated into film." (p.4) After ruminating on alternative approaches (both Wells and Lem are quoted), Strick goes on to illustrate the claim that: "...in many ways the cinema is science fiction." Ever since McLuhan, commentators have been far too eager to conflate media and messages with confusing results for the rest of us. As here, the drive to unify has flattened the data of common sense.

Far more illuminating is an exemplary paragraph tucked away among the zoological horrors Strick has christened "The Mark of the Beast". He says:

"The matter of size, as we've noted with films like INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN, is an important element in science fiction. The literature itself is based on different perspectives, fresh methods of examining problems that were being taken too much for granted; it distorts the conventional in order to reassess it. The technique is simple but effective - a slight change in the dimensions of anything familiar causes disorientation and alarm, whether it be a book that won't quite fit on the shelf or a door that jams in hot weather. We live by a set of unconscious relativities matched to average human standards but in any other respects quite arbitrary, and film, which itself distorts normal laws of size and time, is in a unique position to challenge them - if for no other purpose than to shake us up a little." (p.66)

The rest of his preliminary sketch contains nothing as perceptively analytical as this. By augmenting it with some of his other wise generalisations - which you will find scattered throughout the book - he could have had a more auspicious prologue, also unifying the following thematic chapters. If I seem hypercritical on this point, then that is mainly because Strick is so eminently qualified for the task in hand, namely, writing the first critique of SF Cinema without losing sight of "the translation of ideas into images" (p. 4). Too often, I found that Strick's prose, though never less than interesting, was neglecting analysis for entertainment. For example, in 'Men Like Gods' his synoptic powers dispatch three diverse movies in one witty paragraph:

"Where Robby, and even Daleks, are manageable bits of clockwork, the computer undoubtedly lacks charm. In THE FORBIN PROJECT ('69) based on D. F. Jones's novel COLOSSUS, Russian and American super-computers join forces and take over the administration of the world. 'In time" Collosus placidly informs its former controller, 'you too will respect and love me.' It's the assertion of every dictator, but from a machine it sounds even more arrogant. As with HAL in 2001, we itch to pull out a few plugs. Robots should know their place, like the handsome specimen in the Russian film He's Called Robert ('67), who is turned loose on society and discovers like Candide that the rules are beyond its comprehension, or the resourceful Trent in Byron Haskin's DEMON WITH A GLASS HAND ('69) who carries the whole of mankind on a piece of wire in one of his fingers."(p. 53)

Notice the penultimate word which confers a male persona on Trent - Robby the Robot was similarly exalted in the preceding paragraph. Overall, however, the book is singularly free of errors including misprints.

A pleasing feature of his thematic structure is that each essay (after the first) concludes with a peroration on particularly outstanding films; six of these were made in the last decade, a measure of the genre's recent progressiveness. (a new edition will surely include CE3K among this fantastic pick of the bunch). Though I am bound to say that Strick idealises both 2001 and A CLOCKWORK ORANGE compared to DR STRANGELOVE (which I regard as Kubrick's masterpiece), I can only salute the Olympian treatment accorded to Tarkovsky's SOLARIS ("the most intelligent and questioning sceince-fiction movie ever made") and Boorman's ZARDOZ ("not for its originality in science fiction terms but for its extraordinary achievement as pure cinema") Quite apart from putting 2001 in perspective, SOLARIS, especially, resists limiting categorizations while demonstrating the expressive powers of a master director. Strick evidently endorses this because he discusses among his "Time Twisters", works by Resnais, Has, Bergman and Pasolini which have only tenuous links with SF - New Wave or Old. According to Strick:

"The interchange of fact and fancy, if acceptable as a characteristic of the modern science-fiction movie, makes Luis Bunuel the greatest exponent of the genre in the history of the cinema, despite his

assertion that 'my hatred of science and technology will perhaps bring me to the absurdity of a belief in God.'"

This contentious judgement is persuasively argued, surprisingly without even a passing mention of Bunuel's most subversive fantasy, THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL ('62). If the causeless behavious of THE BIRDS ('63) couldn't disqualify Hitchcock's movie, then an unexplained force-field or two in Bunuel oughtn't to have scotched its eligibility! Incidentally, it is interesting that both of these films strictly adhere to Campbell's aesthetic law: given a single dramatic premise, the rest has to follow with remorseless narrative logic. By contrast, twelve years later, Bunuel's consummate style was so accomplished it could unify the 'unrealities' of THE PHANTOM OF LIBERTY ("the highest point that science fiction ... has achieved in the cinema") but only - I would argue - at the expense of emotive content. By the same token, in his sympathetic account of Marker's LA JETEE, Strick fails to cite the intensely poignant moment when the girl's eyes open. Why?

My conviction is that such critical judgements are far from insignificant. In his introductory coda, Strick gives his aesthetic criteria as logic, beauty and efficiency. For me, these are necessary but not sufficient; if the film in question has no emotional range or depth then I'm unlikely to persevere with it. Hence my affirmation of SOLARIS and CLOSE ENCOUNTERS rather than MARIENBAD and 2001, although the importance of the latter as a path-breaking duo is incontrovertible. In a more general context, so-called Objectivity rules (under the 'Constitution' of science and technology) and all too often we abjectly defer to this abstract idol; Kelvin or Sartorious? To Feel or not to Feel...

Let me end this section with a suggestion: when you get hold of a copy of this immensely stimulating book, turn to the superb publicity still from THE GORILLA on page 67 - an image I couldn't hope to do justice to with a handful of words. Alice Day's erotic posture and Walter Pidgeon's simian leer set a chain reaction going in the psyche of the beholder (male or femule). My guess is that no two outcomes mean the same.

ALAN FRANK IS SMITTEN BY 'THE FORCE' !

Whatever the failings of Strick's opus, they seem venial compared to those of Sci-Fi Now, Frank's critical quickie, which is misleadingly subtitled as '10 Exciting Years of Science Fiction from 2001 to STAR WARS and CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND'. On the plus side, many of the beguiling stills brought together by Strick recur in conjunction with more than twenty from George Lucas's Mega-Hit. Such a disproportionate mix turns out to be the visual counterpart to Frank's text; primarily because of STAR WARS, "Science fiction cinema can no longer be regarded as a minor, eclectic screen genre." (p.7) He continues:

"As a movie, STAR WARS is unique. Indeed, to refer to it as simply a movie is to underestimate the Empire State Building by calling it just a skyscraper, or by refering to King Kong as merely another monkey. In its influence, not only on the cinema itself but on all media, and the effect it and its by-products have had on the public worldwide, S.W. is clearly much more than just a movie - it is a genuine phenomena and one that is unlikely to be repeated on a similar scale for a very long time to come."

So far, so factual. However, Frank's following assertion is anything but. In brief;

"STAR WARS is not just the very best science fiction film ever made, totally eclipsing its nearest rival 2001: A Space Odyssey..." (Ibid)

In his concluding chapter, 'The Big One', he attempts an extended justification of this preposterous judgement: the raison d'etre of SCI-FI NOW. To my mind, such a critical comparison (of STAR WARS and 2001) is tantamount to confusing King Kong with the Empire State Building. Let me explain.

Lucas' first feature, THX 1138 (1970), was a visually sophisticated dystopia in the grimly satirical tradition of WE and BRAVE NEW WORLD (the inspiration for a new TV series in the U. S.). This outstanding debut was well received by critics but failed to find an audience. Lucas was confirmed in his belief that what he - and the mass public(!) - wanted most (but couldn't have) was a wide-screen equivalent of the Flash Gordonserials of the thirties, or "total fantasy for today's kids". Finding that the rights to the characters had already been sold, Lucas went ahead with the shooting of AMERICAN GRAFFITI (1973) which became one of the highest grossing films of that year. Even before this unexpected success, as Franks quotes Lucas:

"...I began researching and went right back and found where Alex Raymond (who had done the original FLASH GORDON comic strips in newspapers) had got his ideas from." (p.71) Lucas found out that Raymond's inspiration had come from the works of the creator of Tarzan, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and especially from his John Carter of Mars series of books. Further reading of the John Carter series revealed to Lucas that what had originally sparked off Burroughs was a science fantasy work, published in 1905 and called Gulliver on Mars. This story, written by Edwin Arnold, was the first story in the Flash Gordon genre that Lucas has been able to trace. 'Jules Verne had got pretty close, I suppose', says Lucas, 'but he never had a hero battling against space creatures or having adventures on another planet. A whole new genre developed from that idea."(p.71)

A whole new genre indeed! However, throughout SCI-FI NOW, Frank treats the diverse films under discussion as members of one homogeneous genre. For example, he concludes his introductory chapter, "Decade of Dreams", by stating that his chronological survey

"enables some interesting juxtapositions to be made, ones which show the diversity and range of the genre. The year that saw 2001: A Space Odyssey also marked the release of GOKE? BODY SNATCHER FROM HELL." (p.13) On page 24 we learn that GOKE, or to give it its Japanese title, KYUKETSUKI GOKEMIDORO, "managed to combine extraterrestrials (in impressively created flying saucers), possession and vampirism in one movie."

Precisely the kind of derivative hotch-potch that Kubrick was so concerned to break away from; yet, when Frank comes to 2001, he signally fails to deal with Kubrick's original handling of the theme of intelligent ETs, opting instead for a detailed description of the giant centrifuge that was specially constructed by the Vickers-Armstrong Engineering Group. Frank's lack of interest in the visual presentation of SF ideas is implicit in the vapid assertion that "the film was inflated into an over-long 141 minute running time with Clarke's original story barely visible under the surrounding padding." (p.24) Later, Boorman's extraordinary ZARDOZ is roundly condemned, apparently because its writer-director wasn't too concerned about leaving some of his audience behind. According to Frank:

"What he in fact succeeded in doing was to make one of the most boring, self-indulgent and pretentious films of the genre, filled with shallow philosophy and inept echoes of much better movies that clearly had influenced him. .... ZARDOZ will remain rubbish - on a monumental scale." (p.46)

In the long run, this scathing judgement may well be vindicated although I am at a loss to understand the reasoning behind it. In seeking to give a retrospective appraisal of the past decade's SF cinema, this kind of simplistic assertion should have no place. Boorman would be the first to admit that ZARDOZ was far from perfect and one of the critic's tasks is to explain why this is so by means of cumulative insights. Apropos I would have liked a development of a tantalising remark towards the end of his opening chapter, viz:

"The fact that the cinema has been able effectively to create whole new and unique areas of science fiction exposition tends to be ignored, possibly because these new areas are 'buried' within an art form which is (usually) arrogantly directed towards the mass audience." (p.12)

This is even truer of what Frank writes of in his second chapter, abbreviated as 'SCIFITV'. Easily the most helpful section of his book, Frank takes up where Baxter left off and gives us a thumbnail survey of a woefully neglected area of SF. (Strick only touches upon it occasionally). DUEL is far from being the only SF film-made-for-TV worth considering; in particular, movies like THE LOVE WAR (1970) and A COLD NIGHT's DEATH (1973) should not be allowed to disappear without trace. Perhaps the long-awaited video-cassette technology will rectify such losses of collective memory.

"Future Perfect?" begins with a consideration of the thematic potential of SF movies as a film genre (the raison d'etre of Strick's books), conceding it "a freedom not enjoyed by any other screen genre."(p.49) The alien invasion cycle of the fifties apart, each film exists "as a creative entity in its own right rather than appearing to follow a current trend or theme within the genre." Among the many and various productions under way (from SUPERMAN and the re-make of Siegel's BODY SNATCHERS to THE SHINING and THE STALKER) it is to be hoped that this marvellous eclectism will increase and multiply and co-incidentally that Alan Frank's sequel to SCI-FI NOW will be less over-awed by STAR WARS II.

JOHN BROSNAN MAKES MUCH ADO ABOUT SPECIAL EFFECTS...

At £6.95, FUTURE TENSE, subtitled "The Cinema of Science Fiction" by John Brosnan fails to justify its price tag - even allowing for inflation. In his provocative Foreword (about which, more later), Harry Harrison goes so far as to claim that Mr Brosnan has written "the definitive history of the birth and growth of these films." (p6). I submit that he has done nothing of the sort, as even a casual comparison with the relevant sections in Baxter or Strick should make clear. Even when writing about a recognised landmark of the genre such as 2001, Brosnan seems unwilling to reflect on his own experience in the cinema, prefering to dwell on how Kubrick reacted to hostile critics or why the older SF authors detested the Space Odyssey. Incidentally, this was not due to Kubrick's "condescending attitude towards technology" (p180). Kubrick has always been (cf. DR STRANGELOVE) ambivalent towards technology but condescending, never.

Brosnan's chronological lay-out works well enough until chapters 9 and 10: 'Boom Two' and 'The Boom Goes On'. A close reading of these tandem sections suggests that a second 'Boom' did not occur before the advent of STAR WARS which Brosnan does not come to until Chapter 11:'A Close Encounter with STAR WARS'. (Recall Alan Frank's struggle to chronicle this eclectic period, 1970-6, without resorting to wishful implausibility.) When he isn't quoting sf authors and film-makers, Brosnan gives us lengthy plot synopses (which are not always accurate) in conjunction with a plethora of details about his pet subject, namely special effects. Indeed, one would be forgiven for assuming that FUTURE TENSE is basically a more commercial follow-up to MOVIE MAGIC - his serviceable 'Story of Special Effects in the Cinema'. However, despite the visual pyrotechnics of STAR WARS and CE3K, it must be obvious by now that some of the best SF movies like INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS and DARK STAR (which Brosnan particularly admires) do not depend on expensive special effects, succeeding by other means because of - rather than in spite of - their tiny budgets.

Brosnan invariably devotes more coverage to those movies which utilise elaborate special effects, oblivious to this unfortunate bias which, historically, has been responsible for retarding the development of the genre, at least in Hollywood before Kubrick's feat of persuading MGM to finance the research as well as the cinematic execution. For example, I believe that FORBIDDEN PLANET (one of the so-called classics of fifties sf) is so poorly characterised and leadenly directed that all the spectacular effects fail to redeem it as an enduring piece of film-making. Brosnan rates this as an sf film that is "both intellectually satisfying and visually evocative" (p290), apparently on the grounds that its sf content was innovatory (unlike CLOSE ENCOUNTERS which "offers nothing new", Ibid.) As sf cinema, alas, it can hardly stands up to an authentic work of film-making sych as Tarkovsky's SOLARIS which Brosnan utterly fails to engage with, zsserting that "it has been described, with some justification as too pretentious and too long." (p216) Not surprisingly, other intelligent films like JE T'AIME, JE T'AIME, ZARDOZ and THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH get the same short shrift. But you don't have to delve too deeply to find out what Brosnan regards as exemplary (apart from his unlikely quartet of all-time greats). After summarising the execrable plot of THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR he says: "Written and directed by Robert Clouse (who previously made the Bruce Lee epic ENTER THE DRAGON and the more recent THE PACK about a band of killer dogs), it is a very good sf film - hard, uncompromising, cynical, unpretentious and excellently directed by Clouse, who moves tha action along at just the right pace." (p233)

Naturally enough, Brosnan feels no need to tell us what his aesthetic criteria are in his introductory chapter which is chiefly concerned with an abbreviated history of written sf that culminates with this punch-line:
"Today science fiction is a vast hydra consisting of many totally different genres ranging in quality from sublime to atrocious." (p13)
He follows this with about the only formulation of his own critical position that I could find in FUTURE TENSE. I quote in full:
"It has long been evident that there is a fundamental difference between science fiction cinema and written science fiction. John Baxter, in his book SCIENCE FICTION IN THE CINEMA, noted: 'SF film's sources lie remote from science fiction and its visual style is likewise drawn from other areas, primarily the semi-visual world of the comic strip. SF film offers simple plots and one-dimensional characters in settings so familiar as to have the quality of ritual. It relies on a set of visual conventions and a symbolic language, bypassing intellect to make a direct appeal to the senses. Written sf is usually radical in politics and philosophy; sf cinema, like the comic strip, endorses the political and moral climate of its day.' Baxter also correctly perceives the different attitudes towards science in sf and the sf cinema. 'It is not difficult,' he writes, ' to see a direct relationship between the fear of science and the film-maker's habit of contrasting humanistic protagonists with forces that attempt unsuccessfully to overwhelm the human mind, but the fear and distrust of science reaches its most obvious form in films devoted to the threat of knowledge. Probably there is no more common line in sf cinema than "There are some things Man is not meant to know." It expresses the universal fear all men have of the unknown and the inexplicable, a fear written sf rejects but which has firmly entrenched itself in the sf cinema.'" (pp13-14)

Although this view is hardly supported by the corpus of SF films since 2001, Baxter is correct, I feel, in pointing to "a symbolic language, bypassing intellect" and overall his book was important for outlining a map of this terra incognita.

Of the three authors I have been criticizing, both Frank and Brosnan are singularly lacking in their appreciation of the expressive possibilities of SF cinema. In the case of Brosnan, I do not want to give the impression that I have no time for special effects which - with the development of computer technology - have entered a revolutionary phase. On the contrary - it is the distortions that arise from an obsessional interest in S.E. that I object to. For example, when he comes to CLOSE ENCOUNTERS, there are pages devoted to the wondrous sequences conceived by Spielberg and put on the screen by Trumbull and his team but hardly a word spent on the rich symbolic meanings present throughout. Brosnan is so busy condensing the manifold technical details that he (quite unconsciously) serves up the following interpretative gaffe: CE3K "begins in a small, rural town in Indiana where a number of people experience a strange manifestation." (p270) Perhaps he'll pay more attention to the opening of the Mark II version which Spielberg plans to release later this year.

Re-inforcing his idee fixe, roughly twenty of Brosnan's chosen stills take us 'behind the scenes' with directors, actors and special effects people in between takes. As none of these are in colour, the book as a whole lacks the visual frissons provided by the images in Strick or Frank. On the plus side, Brosnan has a useful Appendix: SF on TV and an even more comprehensive Index. But, I have to point out that intending purchasers could buy each of the books by Baxter, Strick and Frank and still get a shilling or two change out of seven quid. On the other hand, they might peruse Harry Harrison's Foreword (with its back-scratching compliments) and invest. This short polemic is penned from the heart and I am happy to disagree with it. Consider the following selective quotations:

"...when film-makers talk about SF films, they are really talking about the same old sf films they have always made - only tarted up with some of the mechanical trappings of SF." (p6, his italics).

"If a failed SF film like CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND can make millions, think of the profits that a real SF movie could generate." (p7).

"It is exasperating that no one to date seems able to separate the look of SF from its ideas." (p8).

"It is not science that is important but the attitude towards science." (p8)

"...SF films should be written by SF authors." (p8)

After five years film study, my considered opinion is that a screenplay is only the skeleton of the film-to-be and it is the flesh and blood of the director's mise-en-scene that gives us - so infrequently - an experience worth having.

A propos, Mike Moorcock has come into contact with one too many hack directors of the British Film Industry and he now feels "that the producer is the most important person in the making of a film... ...if he can actually get a good script and good actors I don't think it matters who directs it." (p289). Don't you believe it! This is a literary hubris (and arrant nonsense) as Moorcock himself concedes in some of the other points that he makes. A pity that Brosnan didn't spice these lengthy quotes with a few pertinent questions.

In his closing paragraph, Harry Harrison informs us that Lester Goldsmith is planning to produce a new, superior kind of sf film by getting "the authors themselves write screen-plays of their already successful SF novels."(p8) I wish his projects every success and would only point out that what looks great on paper may end up on the cutting-room floor. More significantly, the reverse can happen too as Harry Harrison found out for himself during the shooting of Soylent Green (based on his novel MAKE ROOM! MAKE ROOM!.

"I also learned a great deal about screenwriting and how they turn a screenplay into a film. And overall I was happy with the way the film turned out, given that screenplay and such things as the 'furniture' girls,

which should have been thrown away as it was just nonsense. ....the suicide parlour sequence worked okay... I didn't put it in the book because I didn't want to use any of the old science fiction gimmicks, I wanted to keep it all as realistic as possible, but the scriptwriter obviously didn't realise that a suicide parlour is such a cliche sf device, so he put it in. And I've got to admit that in the film it took on a different aspect and worked very well...but a lot of the credit must go to Chuck Braverman again. In the original screenplay it just says:'They take Sol into the suicide parlour and show him scenes of his youth...and then he dies.' But Braverman inserted all these shots of beautiful landscapes with pure blue skies, virgin white snowscapes etc., and after sixty minutes or so of watching life in a claustrophobic New York where a green smog is covering everything and everyone is suffering from the heat and looking dirty, these shots have a tremendous impact. And of course you also had a fantastic actor like Robinson involved. The scriptwriter just says something like "He looks up and dies.' But Robinson and Fleischer worked from that and produced something very memorable." (p208)

Would that all our insights were arrived at as painlessly as that!

POSTSCRIPT: SHORT NOTES ON A BAKER's DOZEN.

By far the most successful movie since the whirlwind career of STAR WARS is Ridley Scott's ALIEN (due to open here in September). As this SF horrorshow is strictly adult fare, its box-office receipts to date underline one of Brosnan's punchlines:"The SF boom is only just beginning." (p279)

The plot-outline (of an alien creature decimating the crew of a space freighter) had become a screen-worn cliche by the end of the fifties. What this comparatively unknown, British director has done to rejuvenate the formula is to marry the realism of contemporary special effects with the appalling imagination of the Swiss surrealist, H. R. Giger (who numbers Dali amongst his mentors). In the manner that he first showed us in THE DUELLISTS (based on the Conrad novella), Scott's handling of clours, textures and composition here generates an atmosphere of high terror that is both visceral and cerebral. Prepare to take part in a dress rehearsal of your own worst death!

Rather than preview some of the many SF productions due this year (e.g. the Disney big-budget BLACK HOLE which, appropriately, has released no details to the press yet), I would prefer to make honourable mention of some of the best imaginative movies of the past few years ignored by Frank and Brosnan. Difficult as it may be to justify them all as SF, I find the best of them explore themes and ideas that are sui generis.

However, there should be no such arguments about my first pair which come from Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia respectively. Papic's THE RAT SAVIOUR is notable for being the first sf film produced in Zagreb and even though the plot is over-familiar, the historical/political allegory gives the film a resonance missing from the recent re-make of INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS. The make-up and cinematography are consistently excellent and Papic took the Grand Prize at Trieste in 1977.

Even more puzzling is the neglect of Polak's TOMORROW I'LL GET UP AND SCALD MYSELF WITH TEA (also 1977). The story is by Nesvadba and Polak's credits include IKARIA XB1 (or VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE) but what a delirious mix! Set in an era when time-travel has taken over from Skytrain, three ageing Nazis steal an H-bomb, smuggle it aboard a time-rocket (which they proceed to hi-jack) and set off for 1944 to present it to Hitler. But, the pilot has died before the flight and his place has been taken by his incompetent twin brother. When they touch down outside Prague it is 1942 and Hitler is not impressed (they find him gloating over Pearl Harbour). Then everything goes wrong and when the survivors retreat, the (twin) pilot decides to return before the time they had set off in order to save his brother's life. The paradoxes (and the resulting hilarity) pile up, but it's not until the time-trip commences for the second time that you begin to realise that WWII is always with us. Shades of SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE (a tame movie by comparison).

In the short space of three years, an impressive number of intelligent fantasy films have come and gone (or been delayed like Karen Arthur's THE MAFU CAGE, about a simian fixation that goes horrifyingly out of control.) Perhaps the best known of these is Resnais' PROVIDENCE from a screenplay by David Mercer which I won't attempt to summarise. Suffice to say that this is one of the director's most successful collaborations, inverting, as it does, some of the main themes of earlier films like MARIENBAD and JE T'AIME, JE T'AIME so that 'reality' plays second fiddle to the powers of memory and the imagination.

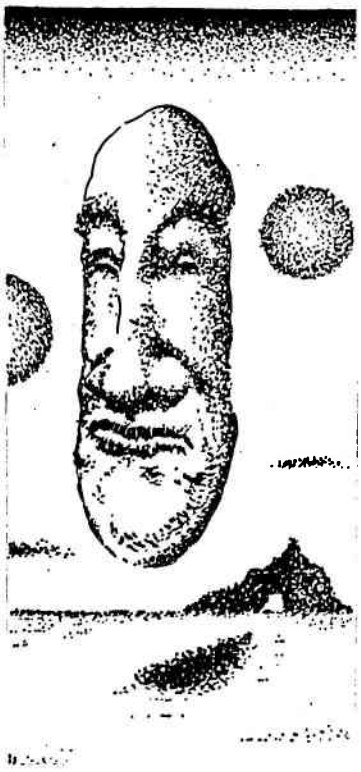
For a couple of urban nightmares, you could try Polanski's THE TENANT or David Lynch's astonishing debut feature, ERASERHEAD. These grisly psychodramas chronicle the dis-ease of unstable characters relieved only by a blackish sense of humour that draws you closer. It's easy to carp that the oppressive build-up in each film is not sustained to the bitter end though obviously murder and suicide are more palatable when contemplated from a safe dramatic distance.

Two films that have something positive to say about aboriginal culture are Peter Weir's THE LAST WAVE and Skolimowski's THE SHOUT (from the story by Robert Graves). Weir had already established himself as one of the leading talents of the new Australian cinema with THE CARS THAT ATE PARIS and PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK. THE LAST WAVE is even more ambitious. Richard Chamberlain plays a lawyer defending an aborigine accused of murder, to the point of sundering his own allegiance. But we never understand the implications of the crime nor how the freak weather conditions have come about. If the film indicts the blinkered rationality of Western Man, the alternatives are only hinted at.

The killer shout belongs to Alan Bates who claims he learnt it from the aborigines and is eager to demonstrate it on John Hurt (who suffers again in ALIEN). The break-up of the latter's marriage (to Susannah York) turns out to be Bates' prime goal and this is what the film centres on. Though it falls apart at the end, the climax on the wind-swept dunes of Dorset when Bates puts the frighteners on his quarry will not be forgotten in a hurry.

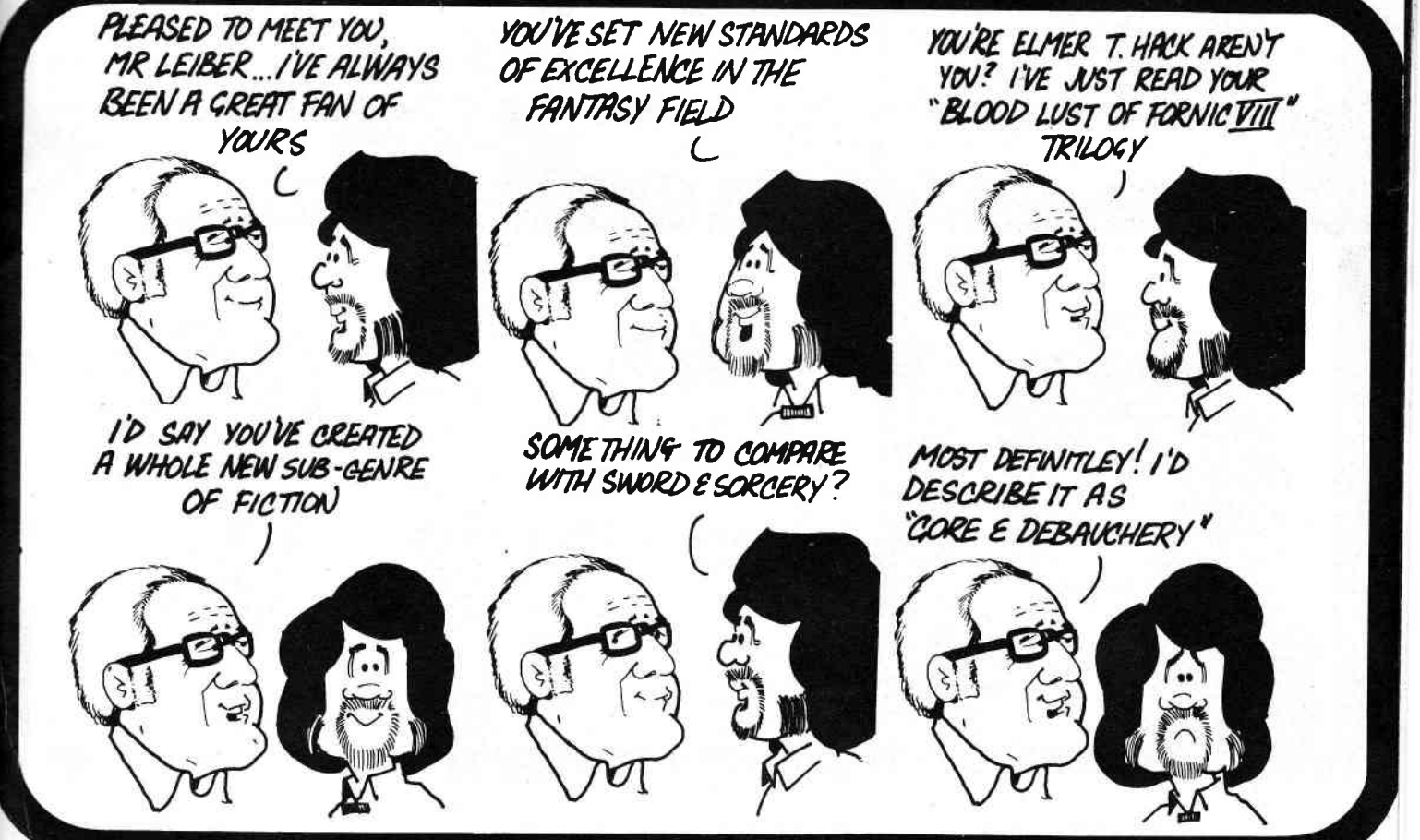
Quite the best fantasy of the past five years has to be Borowczyck's erotic version of a nursery tale called THE BEAST. Bowdlerized here by the distributors (instead of the censor), it retains the capacity to delight and even shock. Never before has the physicality of sex been so completely dramatised on film in a succession of images, each of which has been precisely imagined within the total montage. The soundtrack (by Scarlatti) has a dual function: knitting together the real and the imagined scenes and commenting ironically on our uncontrollable sexual drives.

Finally a word about two films we can look forward to without reservations. First there is Kubrick's new production of Stephen King's novel THE SHINING (including Jack Nicholson among the cast). And then there is Tarkovsky's new science fiction film, THE STALKER (again based on a story by Lem, which does not appear to have been translated). Shot in a remote region of Siberia, it might just go one better than SOLARIS. I can hardly wait to see!



HALF-LIFE at Seacon

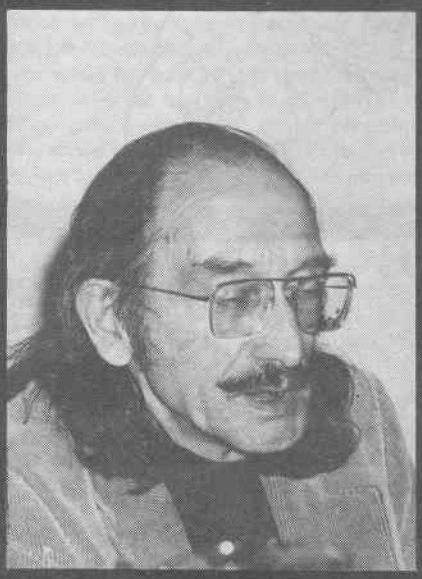
The life & times of Elmer T. Hack



Anne McCaffrey

Christopher Priest *

Robert Sheckley



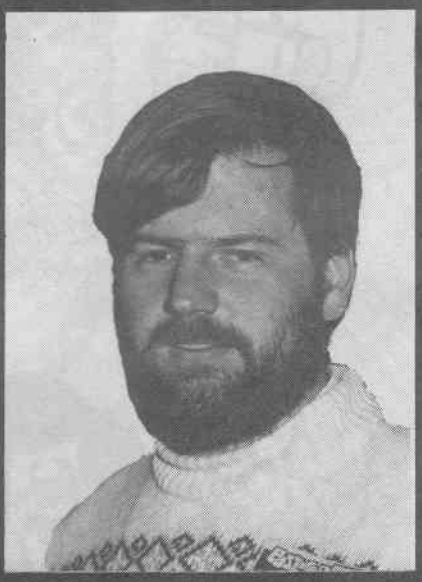
Kenneth Bulmer *

Bob Shaw *

James White *

Mick Farren

Douglas Adams



Andrew Stephenson *