

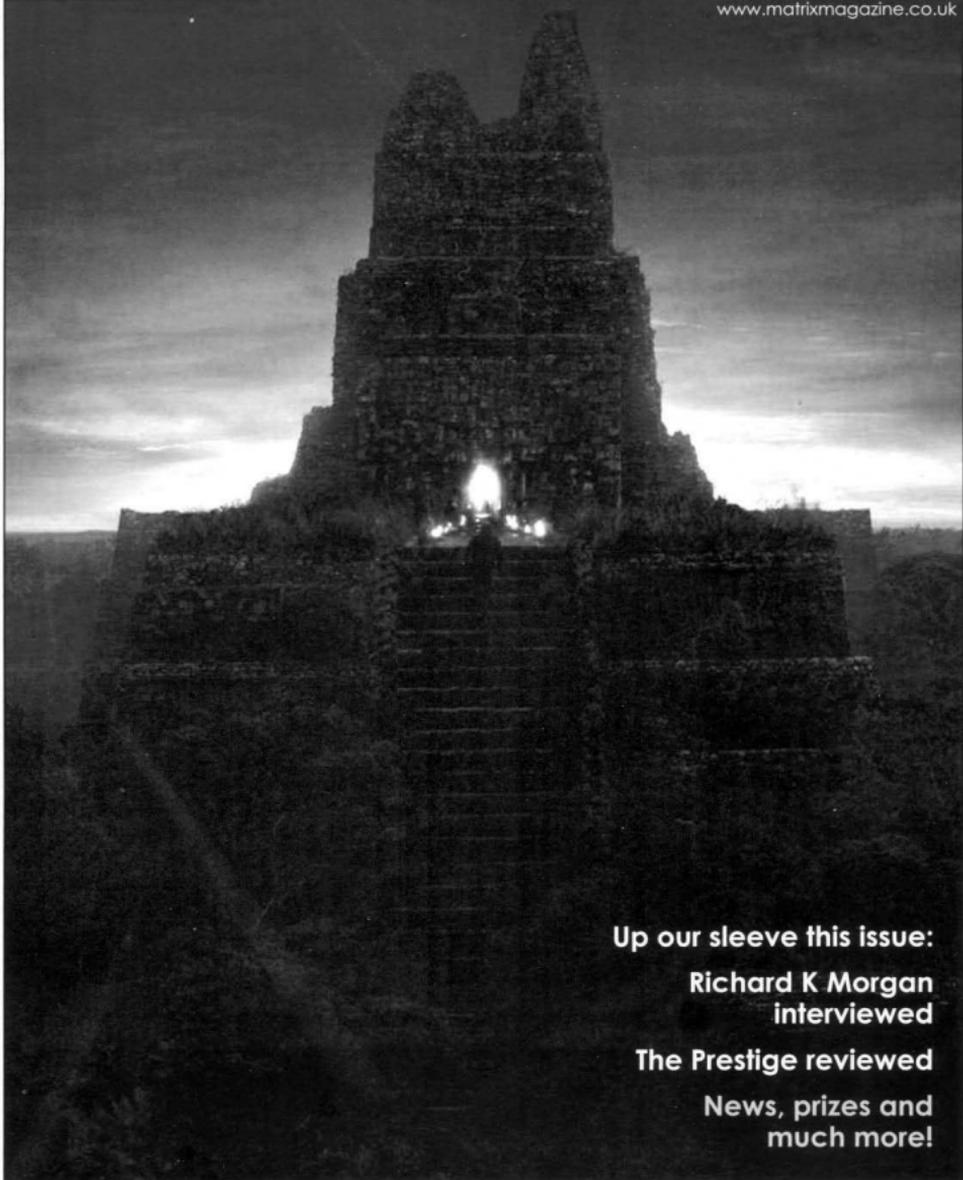
matrix

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Up our sleeve this issue:

**Richard K Morgan
interviewed**

The Prestige reviewed

**News, prizes and
much more!**

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Words of wisdom

"It's always interesting to research a subject for a novel, when you don't know much about it in advance. For *The Prestige* I interviewed professional magicians, and read a large number of books. Magic books are hard to come by, and are expensive. I paid about forty pounds for one book by mail order, which turned out to be a few litho pages stapled together... but those pages contained fascinating information about how to build magical cabinets and apparatus. A lot of that knowledge (if none of the detail) went into the book. I also went to a couple of magic shows. I didn't know any tricks before I began, and I don't know any now. You find out pretty quickly that the appeal of stage magic is not the secret (that's always a let-down), but the skill with which it is performed."

Christopher Priest on researching his novel *The Prestige*
Read the full interview on www.scifiuk.com

Why Music Is Science Fiction

Tricia Sullivan sings a tune about perception and the creation of reality

The late Stephen Jay Gould wrote something that has stuck in my head for years. He suggested that because musical 'intelligence' confers no survival advantage, musical thinking is probably one of those happy accidents that come standard with a big cortex. Music serves no real purpose. It just is.

Now to me, that's spooky. Because cognitively speaking, there's a lot that language can't do, but music can. I don't like to think where we'd be without it.

For starters, there's something singular about the way music stands guard over time. Painting works in two dimensions, sculpture in three; but music works in the fourth dimension. Sure, film moves through time, but as a narrative medium film seldom plays fast and loose with reality the way music does. As one of my fictional characters says, '*Music doesn't reference reality. Music creates reality.*'

Building worlds and messing around with time. Sound familiar? SF makes a career out of doing what music does for free.

Music is also coded. The score (or CD) is not the sound. The sound can only happen in time. That makes music the most elusive of expressive media: before it's been, it's already gone.

It's almost alive.

Musical experience is non-referential to four of our senses, and being nonverbal it's also difficult to access through words, which we hold responsible for capturing sensory experience and subsequently constructing ideas. Have you ever felt that a piece of music did something to you—got at something—changed something—and yet you couldn't talk about it in a satisfying way? I sure have. Talking about music tends to be unbearably mechanistic (a one-six-two progression in C minor) and therefore reveals little of what's important. Or else it's like talking about wine—you know, *piquant with a burst of peach and a lazy Sunday afternoon finish*. I mean: very nice, but...huh? Are we listening to the same plonk?

Of course, some people do manage to write meaningfully about music. Me, when I'm writing I'm pretty



Talking about music tends to be unbearably mechanistic and reveals little of what's important. Or else it's like talking about wine—you know, piquant with a burst of peach and a lazy Sunday afternoon finish. Very nice, but... huh? Are we listening to the same plonk?

much *doing music*. I came to music late in adolescence and on top of that, my ears are a little 'different' from most people's ears. And I mean, aside from sticking out at funny angles. They're weird. So, with my weird ears, not only was I not going to Carnegie Hall, I wasn't even going to make it in a post-punk band. I loved music, but I wasn't going to get paid for doing it.

They pay me to write, though. So I do music by writing.

I sort of *hear* my books as I'm writing them. You can't translate

dance into poetry, or architecture into film, without profoundly altering the subject. I mean, really, you can't *translate* at all: each medium handles its subject too differently. Similarly, there are aspects of human experience that music reaches, touches, and understands that are unreachable in forms other than music.

That's why, when I write out of the musical part of myself, I have to write SF. Unlike many SF writers, who write *out* of a scientific idea ('What if...?'), I write my way in. I

use 'scientific' metaphors to try and put a shape to some internal thing which is presenting itself to me as intuited truth. My work moves from the unknown into the known.

When I write SF, I'm usually trying to make sense of a reality that, in my view, violates its own terms. A musical expression might accomplish this easily, but because I write prose I have to stretch hard to get there. But let's face it: most writers are fantasists. The moment you commit metaphor, you are writing fantasy. All of the impulses that lead me to write fiction are the same impulses that, extended and hyperextended, produce science fiction. All fiction is a re-vision of reality; SF is just more radical in its perspective.

The key to both music and SF lies in opening unexplored places. Musical territory is hard to map, but that doesn't mean that it isn't there, straddling the borderline between the concrete and abstract and enabling us to stretch beyond what we already know.

Accident? Well, that makes music even more SFnal. You gotta love it.

Tricia Sullivan's latest novel *Sound Mind* (a loose sequel to *Double Vision*) is out in January.

Flicker

FILM & MEDIA NEWS

Superman Returns

Producer Gil Adler confirmed that production for the Superman sequel - currently being scripted under the title *The Man of Steel* will begin in early 2008 for a scheduled release in 2009.

Terminator TV spin-off

The Sarah Connor Chronicles has found its leading lady in Lena Headey. The Bermuda-born beauty best known for her roles in *The Brothers Grimm* and *Ripley's Game* will be directed by *The X-Files/Smallville* veteran David Nutter.

Roger Corman has confirmed that his upcoming *Space 3001* has nothing whatsoever to do with the stories of Arthur C. Clarke. The mysterious sci-fi project begins filming shortly in the director's Ireland studios with a budget of \$20 million.

Matrix masters the Wachowskis have been persuaded by producer Joel Silver to write and direct the movie version of *Speed Racer*. Only agreeing to the deal if they could find an original take on the retro anime, the Wachowskis' initial designs already have Silver salivating with their visions for the racing sequences.

Write to Reply

In *Matrix* 181 you ran an article entitled "Whedon's a Winner - shame about the rest" in which your correspondent expressed the opinion that only the "main" categories provided "valid" nominees while the others didn't. The writer decried the fact that the same small pool of familiar names appear year after year. Why do you think that might be? Could it just be possible that they are thought to be the most worthy in their field? Or, if not actually talented individuals, at least popular? What criteria would you use?

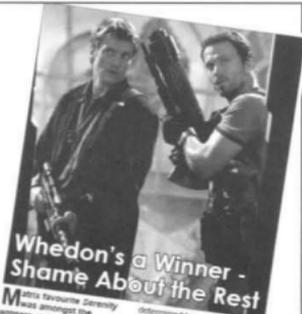
The Hugo awards are voted on by members of the World Science Fiction Convention and reflect what the people who care enough to vote think is most deserving. This year a small number of them decided to nominate the play *Lucas Back In Anger* that Phil Raines and I put together for the 2005 Worldcon in Glasgow. We recruited a bunch of talented people who helped stage it, giving up time before the convention and most of 2 days of the convention itself to make the show the success that it was. Only the Hugo Awards ceremony got a larger audience at that convention and I'm sure that most of the 2200 people who saw the play enjoyed it, some enough to nominate it for a Hugo.

What you seem to be implying is that only shows seen by millions of people are worthy of nomination; that quantity is of more importance than quality;

that ratings outweigh relevance. Why not simply compare viewing figures and announce the winner without the tedious nominating and voting? And if next year's list includes *Dr Who* and *Battlestar Galactica* again, will they be seen as coming from the "same small pool of familiar names"?

I feel, obviously, very protective of the show we worked hard on and was thrilled that it got nominated, even if it was an "in-joke". That anything produced by fans - amateurs who do what they do for the love of SF or fandom - can compete with professional publications or productions is something to be applauded, not dismissed. It would be interesting to see how many votes a one-off play could get if it was seen by the millions who saw *Dr Who* or *Battlestar Galactica*.

The article finishes by asking if this is "really the way we want others to see us and value our supposedly most populist and inclusive award"? My answer is "Yes". We need fans of SF to participate in writing, acting, filming - even criticising - the genre they love. And when someone gets up off their couch and does something for the



Whedon's a Winner - Shame About the Rest

Matrix (Sorensen) Sorensen among the winners at this year's Hugo awards, losing the Best Dramatic Presentation Award

Knocking the Hugo is always an early sport but looking over can't help but see in the Hugo award that wants well enough in its main categories (in other words the ones people pay attention to) but seems

determined to undermine that elsewhere. With the same again and again in many of the other categories and in other nominations for one-off plays staged at last year's Worldcon and even last year's Hugo ceremony (speech although at least the one that pretty funny - not, is this really the way we want others to see us and value our supposedly most populist and inclusive award?)

entertainment or enrichment of other SF fans then they should be applauded, not dismissed.*

—lan Sorensen, co-writer and producer of *Lucas Back In Anger*

Matrix replies: Thanks to Ian for this well-argued response. While this piece aimed to highlight and question certain aspects of the Hugo and reported a sense of concern felt by some sf fans about how the award is seen outside of fandom, it was not the intention of this magazine to suggest that any of the shortlists lacked individual merit and the editors would like to apologise for any offence caused.

*Letter edited for length

Competition Time!



The Day Watch, the second installment of the phenomenal Russian trilogy of vampire novels set in a richly realised post-Soviet Moscow, is out in January.

Three lucky readers can sink their teeth into a free copy by answering the following question.

According to legend, vampires don't like:

- A) Garlic
- B) Ginger
- C) Coriander

Email your answer with your name and address to matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk by March 19th for a chance to win.

Primed for Summer

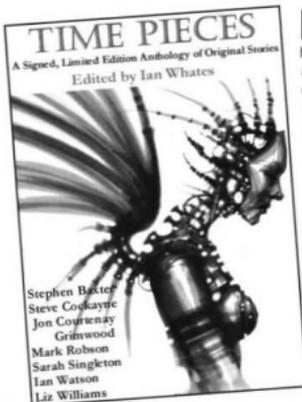
Will Megatron beat up Starscream? Why is Bumblebee a Camero and, more importantly, will Soundwave still be a tape deck or will he succumb to iPod fever like everyone else?

For eighties children everywhere there can surely be no bigger question than whether the forthcoming *Transformers* live action movie will be the biggest blockbuster release this side of Cybertron, or whether it'll actually be revealed as a giant turkey-bot in disguise.



Teaser trailers and internet gossip look promising, and surely a seasoned action-helmer like Michael Bay can't go far wrong with giant robots - but whether the all important carbon-based actors will be able to hold their own and keep the plot together during the cheaper non-CGI scenes remains to be seen.

NewCon Presses On



Following on from 2005's highly regarded and refreshingly different NewCon3, the Northampton SF Writers Group is determined to raise funds towards future conventions. To this end, one of their members – Ian Whates – has edited and published a chapbook anthology, *Time Pieces*. The book, which is printed-bound and perfect on high-quality paper, is being issued as a

very limited edition. It consists of eight original stories written especially for the collection, from Stephen Baxter, Ian Watson, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Liz Williams, Mark Robson, Sarah Singleton, Steve Cockayne and the editor himself. Each copy is numbered and signed by all contributors, including the cover artist, Fangorn, for whom this marks a welcome return to book cover art after many years working as a Hollywood conceptual artist. None of the contributors have accepted any payment for their work, and all profits will be going towards the NewCon project. The book is available from the website: www.newconpress.com

The SF Crowsnest website has long been a first port of call for news hungry genre fans, and now its founder is set to make the news himself with the publication of *The Court of the Air* – a Pullmanesque fantasy adventure set in a darkly Victorian world. Published in April 07 by HarperCollins, the book continues the publishing trend for finding genre books with strong crossover appeal into both the Young Adult and, in this case, the historical fiction market.



Will Dark Victoriana prove to be the new black of 2007? Curious readers may also like to checkout G.W.Dahlquist's *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters* (Penguin), which was originally published in a limited edition 10-volume sequence designed to replicate an old-style serial novel, with a mass-market hardback edition available. Visit www.sfcrowsnest.com and www.glassbooks.co.uk to find out more.

TV Tops while Hollywood Takes Its Time

Has Hollywood stopped taking sci-fi seriously, or are audiences to blame for the failure of 'intelligent' sf movies like *The Fountain* to do big business at the box office?

Quoted in an article in *Wired* magazine, New Line executive vice-president of new media and marketing Gordon Pattison suggests that while the Hollywood machine will remain fixed on the big-budget FX heavy formula flicks for the time being, the return of more smart, speculative fare may not be so far away.

Studios are still getting their heads around the task of reaching 'native digital' audiences, he reckons, and the fact that a notable percentage of this audience is comprised of talented geeks working within the movie industry is bound to play a part in the way the next generation of filmmakers will approach the re-imagining of our future.

Meanwhile, it's better news for genre TV with top quality shows *Battlestar Galactica*, *Lost* and *Heroes* all making *Time Magazine's* list of Top Ten TV Shows of 2006.

Rapturous news for Preacher fans

Cable channel HBO has seen the light and announced plans to bring popular (and controversial) Vertigo comic title *Preacher* to the small screen.

Highly regarded amongst TV aficionados for its commitment to quality and risk-taking television, the channel which brought the wild west to ultra-vivid life with the whorin', cussin' and killin' heavy *Deadwood* should have no

problem with a series that features arse-faced anti-heroes, a Patron Saint of Killers, chicken sex and the main protagonist urinating on a cross, amongst its many standout moments.

Mark Stevens Johnson, the writer-director behind *Dave Devil* and the forthcoming *Ghost Rider*, is writing the pilot while fans everywhere are gearing up for God finally getting his.

SOUND.BITE



Marketing directors,

editors, art directors, the whole publishing machine, that's the reality I work with everyday. The important thing to remember is that they're the ally, not the enemy. When I go into a cover, I realize that they're hiring me to take them to a place they couldn't necessarily go by themselves. That's part of what you have to realize as an illustrator. You have a role in this process, and it's not just to be the hired hand to execute something that others want or think they want. Some may feel going in that that's what your job is, but you have to be aware that there are other avenues available, and part of your job as an illustrator can be to shed light on those roads.

SF Artist and Illustrator John Picacio on being more than a hired hand. Source: upagainstthewallmag.com



I'd love to write some porn, but I don't know if I have the right engines. When I was a young man and I was tempted to write porn, imaginary parents would appear over my shoulder and read what I was writing; just about the point that I managed to banish the imaginary parents, real children would lean over my shoulder and read what I was writing.

Author Neil Gaiman on why we'll have to wait a little longer for issues of *X-Rated Sandman*. Source: rainbox.com



To be honest, I'm not a great one for research... I enjoy not knowing. For me, the fun of seeing a magic trick is knowing there is a trick there and not being able to penetrate the secret. As far as what the film reveals, a lot of it is stuff that we made up. As we came to make the film we realised we had come across certain key principles and so forth through our own process of figuring out how you would do a particular trick. I'm sure it would be very difficult for any magicians to complain we were revealing too much unless they were prepared to admit to all sorts of improper things to do with birds and cages and so forth.

Director Christopher Nolan reveals his research secrets. Source: Sci-Fi-London.com

One in the Eye

Stephen Baxter dodges time's arrow

October 2006 was an anniversary – the 940th in fact – of one of the great turning points of British history, indeed world history, the Battle of Hastings.

I'm old enough to remember the last really significant anniversary, the 900th in 1966, when I collected the handsome commemorative postage stamps featuring the Bayeux Tapestry. And back in 1966 I glimpsed the 1000th, in the pages of the marvellous 1960s comic *TV Century 21*. This newspaper from precisely 100 years in the future told (from issue 87 onwards) how in 2066 supersub Stingray will take part in a naval carnival to celebrate the millennium of Hastings, viewed by the World President.

Not entirely coincidentally my next novel *Time's Tapestry 2: Conqueror* (Gollancz, February 2007) is a what-if exploration of Hastings. Suppose William hadn't conquered? This seems an obvious turning-point springboard for

alternate histories, a decisive battle whose outcome changed the course of all subsequent history. Not only that, the outcome of the battle itself seems very contingent (if that arrow had fallen just a bit to the left or right...). But surprisingly enough, according to the wonderful Uchronia website (www.uchronia.net), which aims to catalogue all alternate-history speculations, there have been only two previous what-if studies of Hastings, and both non-fictional at that – although Uchronia missed *Doctor Who* ...

Hastings was the climax of a dispute over the succession to King Edward the Confessor, who died in January 1066. Edward was a descendant of Alfred the Great. The witan, the English ruling council, elected Earl Harold Godwin as Edward's successor.

But earlier in the eleventh century England's throne had been occupied by Cnut, a Danish monarch who had made England a southern province of a Baltic-Danish maritime empire.

As a result the Norwegian king Harald Hardrada had his own claim to make to the throne. Harold Godwin himself, the witan's king-elect, was in fact half-English and half-Dane, embodying the polyglot nature of pre-Norman England after centuries of Viking incursions.

And then there was William 'the Bastard', Duke of Normandy, to whom Edward was related. William's claim to the throne was tenuous, but he claimed Harold Godwin had sworn an oath of allegiance to him. Whether this was just a pretext or not, William prepared the largest invasion of Britain since the Romans.

Meanwhile Harold had fallen out with his brother Tostig, who cast in his lot with Hardrada. While Harold was waiting in the south for the Normans, in September 1066 Northumbria was invaded by Hardrada and Tostig. Harold marched the length of England to defeat Hardrada at Stamford Bridge, outside York. Then he was forced to march south again and, under his Fighting-Man banner, faced William. Despite the exhaustion of the English army, the battle was long and close-fought ...

There are lots of ways things might have gone differently, and not just on the field of Hastings. William's upbringing had been hazardous; he might not even have survived to see Hastings. Or, what if Harold hadn't fallen out with his brother? Perhaps he could have been spared the fight with Hardrada and saved his energies for William. At one point in the battle itself the Normans were forced back – but Harold didn't pursue them, sticking to the solidity of his shield wall. What if he had been just a little less cautious? And what if that famous arrow had missed Harold's eye?

Even after Hastings, the Normans' grip on England might have been loosened. The English fight-back is known to us mostly through the romantic legend spun out in Charles Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake*



(1866). But it is becoming clear that the native resistance to William in this period was considerable, having some similarities to the resistance in Nazi-occupied France nine centuries later (see for instance Peter Rex's *The English Resistance*, Tempus, 2004).

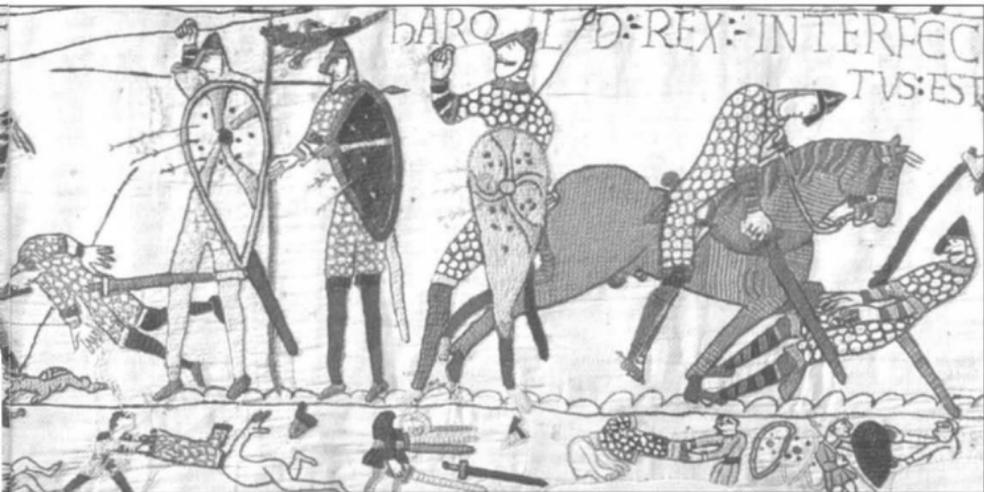
The discontented and rebellious retreated to the wild places. Wearing green or brown for camouflage, they struck at the Normans guerrilla-style, melting away into the rough ground where the Normans' heavy mounted cavalry could not follow. They called themselves wildmen. The Normans called them *silvatici*, men of the woods. Perhaps they inspired stories of Robin Hood in his 'Lincoln Green', and a folk-memory of their exploits may linger even today in the 'Green Man' motif of pub signs and church carvings.

The wildmen were capable of harassing the Normans, but (like the French in the 1940s) didn't have the strength to drive William out without outside help. In the end, of course, William went on to crush the likes of Hereward, and English resistance to the Conquest was effectively ended.

Does it matter? Was the outcome of Hastings really so decisive?

Certainly, argues historian Cecelia Holland (see her essay in *More What If*, ed. Robert Cowley, Pan, 2002). Under Cnut England had been part of a northern community that stretched from Kiev in Russia through Scandinavia and even to

An Anglo-Scandinavian confederation might have spanned the globe from Asia in the east as far as America in the west, and a new empire of the north would have overshadowed the southern Latin world. There might even have been democracy in North America centuries before 1776



There is a lingering sympathy for Harold and his English followers - the spot where Harold fell is strewn with flowers and Fighting-Man flags

Vinland, the Viking colonies in America (Newfoundland down to Maine). If Harold had won and England could have stayed 'northern', its more southern ports could have kept open the trading links to Vinland, which were otherwise lost through a global cooling at about this time. An Anglo-Scandinavian confederation might have spanned the globe from Asia in the east as far as America in the west, and a new empire of the north would have overshadowed the southern Latin world. Viking dragon ships could have sailed the Hudson and the Mississippi. There might even have been parliaments like Iceland's 'althings': democracy in North America centuries before 1776. But William won. England was drawn back into the realm of the Latin south, and the northern empire was still-born.

Uchronia lists Holland's study, but the only other reference there is a chapter in a book called *1066* by our own Robert Silverberg, writing under the pseudonym Franklin

Hamilton (Dial Books, 1964). This is a historical study of the events of the year, but the closing chapter contains what-if speculations. If William had lost, Silverberg thought, a fragmented England, always prone to in-fighting among English ears, might have fallen under France's influence anyhow. Or if Harold had cemented his rule England might have been rather more isolationist. Perhaps North America would have been predominantly a French colony.

And what of *Doctor Who*?

In the serial 'The Time Meddler', written by Dennis Spooner (who incidentally also wrote for *Stingray*) and broadcast on the BBC in 1965, the Hartnell Doctor finds himself on a Northumbrian beach, just ahead of Hardrada's invasion. In a thrilling moment his companions find a wristwatch in the sand ... Another of the Doctor's people is here disguised as a monk, with his own TARDIS, intending to alter the course of 1066 by blowing up the Viking fleet with an atomic

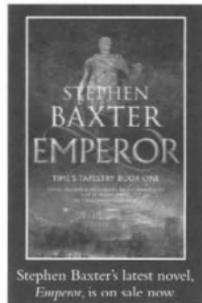
cannon.

These aren't yet Time Lords - the term wouldn't be introduced until 1969 - but the Doctor's people have a folk wisdom about the dangers of meddling with time. The Monk's motives are actually benign, however, and his counterfactual plotting is reasonably plausible. Harold would have made a good king, and without the distraction of territorial wars in France England would have advanced quickly, with jet liners in the fourteenth century and television by Shakespeare's time. But the Doctor warns of the dark side, with medieval kings being unleashed on the cosmos. In the end the Doctor saves history and strands the Monk in 1066 (though you would think that even without technology the Monk's knowledge of the future could be just as perturbing for history).

In the real world, after the Conquest William studied the country with his brooding fortresses, and extirpated the old upper class. If you were English your language was suddenly an underground tongue, and you found your home sequestered as some foreign lord's hunting grounds. Once Northumbria (where I now live) had been the greatest English kingdom. Now it was the source of much resistance. William was crowned on Christmas Day 1066; he celebrated Christmas 1069 in the burning ruins of York, in the midst of a 'harrying' from which the north of England wouldn't recover for fifty years.

Cecelia Holland remarks, 'Hastings deserves its reputation as the greatest battle in English history, and a major turning point in the history of the world.' She's surely right. If it had gone otherwise in 1066, subsequent history would have been so different it's difficult to judge which outcome would have been 'best'. The Normans did build on the solid foundations of the English-Danish kingdom to make England strong. But perhaps we could have been spared their brutality.

By now the Norman invaders are thoroughly assimilated; most of us are probably half-Norman. Yet there is a lingering sympathy for Harold and his English followers. When I visited a Battle of Hastings re-enactment at Battle, Sussex in 2005, I found that the spot where Harold fell, still marked by a stone, had been strewn with flowers and Fighting-Man flags.



Old School Style



Future Noir is a favourite territory of mine, and there's some days when I wish every sf book featured at least one scene set in a rain-drenched, neon-lit alley somewhere in the back-end of a retrofitted future.

This blending of speculative fiction and hardboiled noir has made for an award-winning mix in Richard Morgan's novels but, I wondered, was he always drawn to the killer punch of this classic one-two combination, or did he go through many variations before hitting on his chosen formula?

"The future noir thing was always what I was chasing," says Richard Morgan, "ever since I saw *Bladerunner* and read the stories in Gibson's *Burning Chrome*. If you were (able) to look at the early short stories I was writing back then, you'd find the same basic tone as *Altered Carbon* all over the place, and a habitual protagonist who bears more than a passing resemblance to Takeshi. A lot of those elements then ended up finding their way into the Kovacs books – the bar fight in *Woken Furies*, for example, was

written a good three or four years before I started on *Altered Carbon*. I was always on roughly the same course, I think, but two other things changed along the way – the market, and my ability as a writer. First and foremost, I simply wasn't writing well enough back then to bring off what I wanted to achieve, and secondly, I don't think the SF world was as comfortable with dark and nasty as it is now. *Bladerunner*, remember, was a flop at the box office and took a long time to build from geek cult secret to acknowledged masterwork. And I'll never forget the rejection letter I got from Interzone when I submitted the short story *Market Forces* would later be based on; "you write well, but I was unable to sympathise with either of the selfish yuppie characters." Again, it may well be that this was a measure of my lack of honed writing ability at the time, but I think what's also true is that the prevailing sensibility in SF at that time just didn't gravitate kindly towards antiheroes and moral ambiguity. I think we've all grown up a bit since then."

So, following on from idea of a grown-up SF sensibility, what about

Richard Morgan talks to *Matrix*'s Tom Hunter over a case of Kirin...

the equally important idea of our genre's heritage? On the one hand the sense of shared ownership is especially valuable across the sf community, and yet this can often seem off-putting to those caught outside the loop. Thinking of this, I asked Richard to imagine that SF&F novels were now required reading on the national curriculum and what core texts he would like to see featured...

"Good question! The national curriculum thing would be tricky, I think, because you'd have to walk a fine line between wanting to cover the classics, and at the same time not putting your school-age audience off. Still, the good thing is there's such a wealth of short fiction in SF that you could ease them into the water gently. I'd be inclined to start with a collection of Philip K Dick short stuff and (my old English teaching habits coming back here) ask the students to pick three stories at random, and be prepared to retell them to their classmates the following week. From that you could build an overview. Dick is ideal, I think, because he's pulpy enough to be easily accessible but he's also an ideas man *par excellence*, and each story is very probably going to embody the inventiveness that's at the heart of the genre. At

headphones to seal us up from the world the way Bradbury's seashell radios do in the book, foreign wars no-one understands and return strikes no-one expects. The only thing missing is the firemen themselves and the ban on books, and even here Bradbury got close to the truth with his sense that you wouldn't have to stop most people reading, they'd just drift in favour of the more immediate, visceral attraction of video and music, and also with his sense that history would simply be forgotten as it gave way to a willful proletarian ignorance. *Fahrenheit 451* gets far closer to the reality of our current dystopia than Orwell's *1984* ever did, it puts across far more effectively what it is that good SF can achieve, and it's a better, faster read into the bargain. So yeah, I'd start there."

What about personal favourite authors, I wondered. Were there any particular elements of a writer's style that he had learnt from or been directly inspired by?

"I think I owe Gibson pretty massively, above all, for texture, for the vision of future noir that his short stories (and to a lesser extent *Neuromancer*) incorporated. Interestingly, I also owe him for his increasing departure from those staples as his writing went on. By the

“ I think I owe Gibson pretty massively, above all, for texture, for the vision of future noir that his short stories incorporated ”

later levels, once your students are broken in, so to speak, you could hit them with whole novels; *Fahrenheit 451* would be a fascinating place to start, because in essence all the elements Bradbury was warning us about have now arrived – we have incessant and ubiquitous advertising, reality TV, video as the dominant form of entertainment, ipod

time he got to *Idoru*, he'd managed to excise, quite consciously I suspect, almost every trace of the gloomy neon-lit mean streets Johnny Mnemonic and Molly Millions came in on. But that left me with nothing decent to read in that area, so I started trying to write it myself. And of course, as you've previously mentioned, through Gibson I got to

Chandler, and then the rest of the American noir gang. That led me to, among others, James Ellroy, whom I owe big time for demonstrating, most notably in *White Jazz* and *American Tabloid*, how much you can hack your prose back to the bone, and still tell a good, joined up story. And then there's James Lee Burke, who in his Dave Robicheaux novels, demonstrates exactly the opposite – that is, the extent to which you can build almost lyrical prose sections and powerful naturalistic observation into your story, and still carry the weight of a fast, violent narrative. In my own writing, I try to borrow and balance out the best of both those approaches."

And still on the subject of style, having heard that Richard was fluent in Spanish, or at least his bio notes hinted as much, had he ever considered writing in that or any other language?

"No. Fluent is a relative term. In conversational and day-to-day survival matters, I'm a fluent Spanish speaker. But my written Spanish isn't that great, certainly not up to the standard of being able to write my own stuff. Plus, to be honest, Spanish isn't the ideal language for the noir idiom – nowhere

near laconic enough. Most novels translated from English into Spanish put on considerable weight – they habitually run to about a third more than the original length. Spanish is a great language for talking extensively about concepts or feelings (romantic poetry like Neruda or Lorca often comes across as hopelessly saccharine when you try to render it in English), but tough, hard-bitten dialogue and action sequences generally work far better this side of the divide. They tend to lose a lot of their immediacy when you put them into Spanish."

With his latest novel *Black Man* out soon (in English) I asked Richard what he was most excited about in the book.

"The most exciting thing from my point of view is that it's something fresh, it's a complete departure from the Kovacs series. It takes place in a future noir context fans of Kovacs should feel at home in, but it's an

attempt to examine themes that the Kovacs universe couldn't ever really address."

I'd also heard that Richard was now working on a large-scale fantasy project, and asked what had led to this shift in direction (assuming it was really a shift at all).

"It's been a long-standing ambition of mine to see if the noir staples that worked so well in the Kovacs stories – alienation, dystopian corruption, intensely personal loyalties and betrayals, explicit sex and tuggish violence – can't all be transferred into a standard fantasy format (as opposed to boldly experimental arenas like Mieville's *New Crobuzon* or Jeff Vandermeer's *Amblergris*). I was always a big fan of sword and sorcery, as deployed by Michael Moorcock with Elric, Karl Edward Wagner with Kane and before that by Poul Anderson in *The Broken Sword* and before that of course by Robert E. Howard with Conan. It

seems to me, albeit very subjectively, that a lot of that old black fire and iron has leached away more recently to make way for jolly, feudal pseudo-Tolkeinesque landscapes, an obsession with pseudo-historical detail and

(gagh) cuddly dragons. All well and good if you like that sort of thing, but I don't – it all leans rather too far towards a Disneyfication of the fantasy arena, and as my friend Ali Karim once memorably said, Disney is the antithesis of noir. I've no desire to break actual new ground the way Mieville, Vandermeer, Steph Swainston, Hal Duncan et al are doing (it's not my field and those guys are doing a fine job as it is), but I've been talking a good fight about a return to old school sword and sorcery with a noir texture for quite a while now, and Gollnace has just been kind enough to buy into it (quite literally!). So now I'm contracted to write three of these novels, and it feels like standing on the rim of a vast unexploited land with a bunch of grubby conquistadores and their siege engines at my back. I mean, (twisted grin) there's *nothing* we can't do to this place, right guys?"

So, after a hard day's genre hacking, what would Richard do when he finally managed to escape the keyboard?

"I'm a fully paid up and obsessive member of the Glasgow Climbing centre, and get across there as often as I can, plus occasionally out onto real rock when the weather allows. These days that has to be balanced with some judicial visits to a local gym because to be honest, at forty one my body is getting too old to just bounce back from whatever random physical demands I make on it. Much though I hate the fact, running and swimming laps are the only ways I know to ensure a core cardiovascular strength (and a loss of weight!) at the levels I need it to stay up on the rock, and extensive and careful stretching is the only way I know to avoid crippling myself. I'm still carrying a shoulder injury from the carefree days before that realization dawned.

Aside from the physical stuff, I'm also a devotee of the very very few video games out there that offer smooth gameplay and genuine visceral excitement without insulting your intelligence. For the rest, there's cinema, literature, holidays in far flung places, and yes, I do waste far far too much precious time online."

After seeing Richard enthuse on *Bladenrunner* at the 2005 Eastercon, there was secret part of me that wanted to make this entire interview about one of our shared favourite films. I managed to resist this, but still couldn't help putting on the future noir anorak for a quick question and asking what did Richard see as the film's continuing appeal?

"Well, first and foremost, twenty four years on it *still* – lack of mobile phones aside – looks like a credible future, and that's no mean achievement. It convinces at a contextual level better than any other SF movie I've ever seen. Then there are the thematic elements, the idea of identity and how it links to memory, the question of what exactly emotions are, the debate on what counts as human, subjective morality – all of which represent

a level of intellectual engagement you just don't habitually get in fast moving thrillers. It's long been my contention that you shouldn't have to choose between making your fiction *either* intellectually engaging or viscerally exciting, that this isn't an either/or dynamic, and that you can in fact have both in the same package. I get tired of reading reviews for shite like Matthew Reilly that say things like "sure it's dumb and two dimensional, but it's a great ride," as if this is some kind of acceptable price to pay for your entertainment. I'm sick of being told I'm supposed to check my brain at the door of the multiplex because big bank CGI movies aren't supposed to be intellectually satisfying, and that if I want intelligent engagement I'm going to have to go and check out some stagnant European study in low budget angst where nothing ever fucking happens and the worst jeopardy in sight is a failing middle

class marriage. *Bladenrunner* demonstrated conclusively that you *can* have your fictional cake and eat it, you *can* have sex, violence and protagonist jeopardy in a movie that has something substantial to say, and above all – for the SF constituency

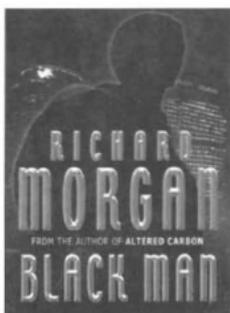
– that special effects and futurity do not automatically necessitate dumbing down to the level of some pubescent male emotional retard. In this context at least, *Bladenrunner* was – or should have been, anyway – a clarion call to the whole genre."

Assuming then that the clarion calls worked and Richard were made secretary of state for science fiction, what policies might we expect from him?

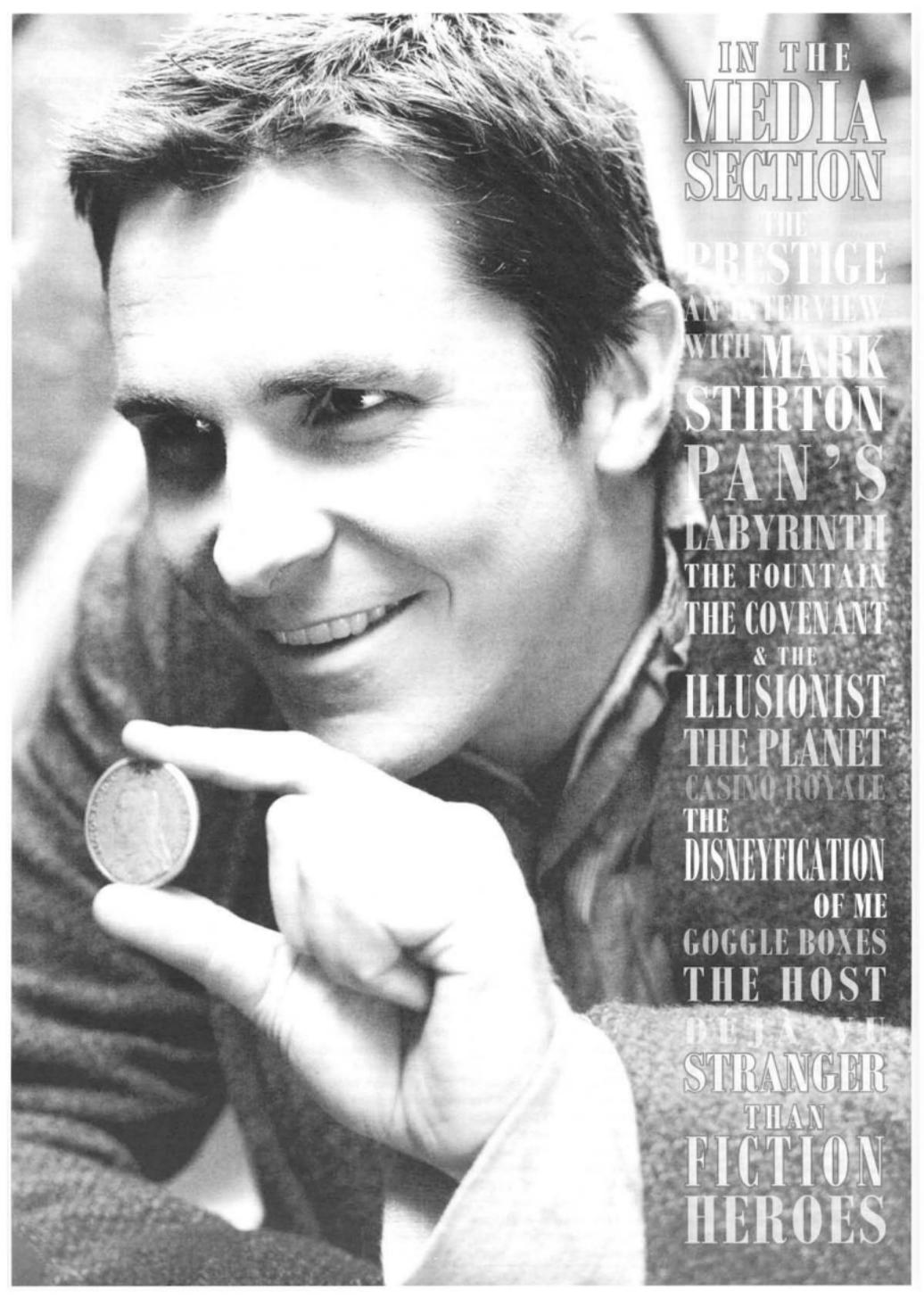
"*Altered Carbon* and *Market Forces* as national curriculum set texts at A level. Definitely. That ought to keep my royalties fairly buoyant."

And finally, as the mind behind *sleeving* technology, could Richard prove to our readers that he was really him?

"Are you kidding? I can't even prove it to myself!"



“A lot of that old black fire has leached away to make way for an obsession with pseudo-historical detail and (gagh) cuddly dragons”

A black and white close-up photograph of actor Mark Sturton. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. He is holding a coin between his index and middle fingers, showing its profile. The background is blurred.

IN THE
MEDIA
SECTION

THE
PRESTIGE

AN INTERVIEW

WITH MARK
STURTON

PAN'S

LABYRINTH

THE FOUNTAIN

THE COVENANT

& THE
ILLUSIONIST

THE PLANET

CASINO ROYALE

THE
DISNEYFICATION

OF ME

GOGGLE BOXES

THE HOST

BEYOND
STRANGER

THAN
FICTION

HEROES

Are you watching closely?

Martin McGrath on *The Prestige*

One of the major themes running through Christopher Nolan's adaptation of *The Prestige* is that many things in life (magic tricks, relationships) retain their appeal only so long as there remains a mystery about the way they work. Knowing the secret of a trick renders it mundane.

I feel rather the same about this film – although perhaps mundane is too harsh a word. Being familiar with Christopher Priest's original novel, I sat through the film knowing what was going to happen when the magician pulled back the curtain and revealed "the prestige" and, as a result, I came out of the cinema rather less satisfied with my evening's entertainment than my companions. Which is a shame because Nolan's film is as sumptuous-looking and well-performed a piece of movie-making as I've watched this year.

Early in *The Prestige*, Cutter (Caine) narrates an explanation of the three stages of a great magic trick. *The pledge* shows the audience something ordinary, *the turn* makes that ordinary object do something extraordinary, and finally *the prestige* twists and shows the audience something they've never seen before. The audience, the narrator tells us, might look for the secret, but they never find it because they actually want to be fooled. The audience buy into the magic and become the magician's accomplice.

The film follows a rather similar structure – the opening relationship between Borden (Bale) and Angier (Jackman) appears no more than a straightforward rivalry between young men in the same trade. However that rivalry quickly becomes obsessive, with both men injuring the other physically and emotionally in their attempts to come out on top. And the ending reveals that, in their obsession, both men have endured almost impossible sacrifice to achieve their goals.

But if an audience's willing complicity is the sign of a great magic trick, then *The Prestige*, despite its many admirable qualities, falls somewhat short of greatness. Never, while watching it, did I find



How many light bulbs does it take to change a magician?



I have some sympathy with Nolan's plea that the audience don't read the novel before seeing the film, though I'm sure Christopher Priest would disagree

myself able to escape into the film – I was constantly on the outside, analysing Nolan's technique, trying to work out how he made his tricks work. My problem, since watching the film, has been to work out why.

The Prestige's faults are far from obvious. Both Bale and Jackman are excellent in the lead roles – Jackman is the more immediately likeable but the pair work well together with Bale's working class cockney sparking well against Jackman's smoother American character.

Caine's Cutter is the wise old head who grounds the film's wilder moments. The women's roles are slight but Olivia (Johansson – who has never looked more stunning in a movie) and Sarah (Hall) do provide *The Prestige* with a sense of the emotional cost demanded by obsession. David Bowie's cameo as Tesla might have unbalanced another film – Bowie's performance is weird and clipped – but it works rather well, the only shame is that his assistant Alley (Serkis) didn't walk with a limp, speak with a lisp and say things like "Yerth Marthter!"

Nolan's direction is superbly assured and precise – intertwining subtle flowing camera movement with moments of great stillness – and Priest's cinematography is lush without ever slipping into period cliché. The script by Nolan and his brother Jonathan takes the essential elements of Priest's novel, tosses them into the air and reassembles them, chopping up continuity but never leaving the viewer baffled and delivering an intelligent, twisting and very modern thriller.

The Prestige has all this going for it, and yet still I didn't love it. Perhaps my reservations stem simply from the fact that I've never enjoyed

magic shows, I always want to know exactly how the trick works – I never consent to being fooled. Or perhaps, in the end, *The Prestige* is just too much about the trick – about the final revelation of the extraordinary – and that the character's obsessions allow too little space for the consequences of their actions to be really explored. I suspect, however, that my reaction simply comes down to the fact that knowing the secret robs the trick of its power. As such I have some sympathy with Nolan's plea that the audience don't read the novel before seeing the film (though I'm sure Christopher Priest would strongly disagree) as knowing how it's all done did rob *The Prestige* of much of its dramatic power.

None of this should stop you from seeing the film. *The Prestige* belongs to a rare band of intelligent, technically brilliant and thematically faithful adaptations of top-rate science fiction novels – and as such it deserves to be cherished.

Directed by Christopher Nolan
Screenplay by Jonathan Nolan and Christopher Nolan (based on the novel by Christopher Priest)
Starring Hugh Jackman, Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Scarlett Johansson, David Bowie

Battle of the Planet

Martin McGrath talks to do-it-yourself director Mark Stirton...

If there is one thing that the Internet has demonstrated – other than some folks' insatiable desire for porn – it is that there is no shortage of people in the world with video cameras and a desire to ape *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

Aspiring film-makers with the ambition and drive to tell their own stories are, however, far less common. Mark Stirton is a very rare thing indeed, because he has crossed the boundary from making "fan films" to producing a genuine feature-length movie based on his own original story. The ambition evident in the making of *The Planet* is astonishing – most film-makers with no budget and no feature-film experience might aim to make something small scale and intimate. No one in their right mind would think of making a high-concept, special-effects-driven, monster movie (with space battles and giant creatures striding across an alien planet) for just £8,000.

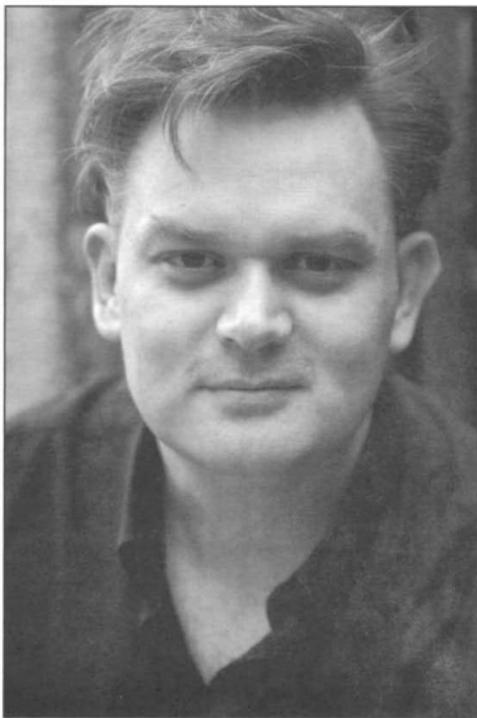
So, when I interviewed Mark Stirton about the making of *The Planet*, the obvious question was: *What were you thinking?*

"Good question! This was a thought which ran through my own head quite a few times during the post-production period. I guess I was just thinking: *if I can pull this one off then there is little else that would be out of the question. If I can make this, I can make anything.*"

This wasn't Stirton's first attempt to make the story that became *The Planet*, a previous short film version floundered and was abandoned. What made it possible to tackle the film now?

"Technology. The first time everything was still 'old school'. Composite effects were very basic indeed and editing had to be done by booking a suite and watching your money disappear. But with low cost digital editing, everything changed. And I'm not talking mega high specs, the whole of *The Planet* was made on two home Macs. But those computers were light years ahead of what I had available in 1994."

The effects in *The Planet* are both ambitious and absolutely integral to the story – it's impossible to imagine the film succeeding without them.



Yet neither Stirton nor anyone on his crew had significant effects experience before production got underway. Wasn't there potential for the film to be a total disaster if the effects didn't work?

"No. It would never have been a disaster, it just would never have been finished! We were going to make it as good as we could or just dump it. The first creature attack was the key sequence. If that worked then we'd finish the film. We looked at it and felt it had worked well enough to continue, but it was fifty-fifty for quite a while. Even the stuff in space was expendable to an extent. If that had not worked I could always pick up the story on the planet. But the creature effects were key. Also (because I'm stupid) I only filmed it one way, so the special effects had to be done."

Post-production took eighteen months to complete – with Stirton

and two colleagues learning CGI techniques on the fly. Weren't there times, I asked, when they felt like jacking it all in?

"One of the good things we started was the Thursday meeting, we'd get together every week and show each other a shot or a test or even just an idea. In a situation like that no-one wanted to be the first to say 'Let's give up'. We kept each other going."

The Planet is clearly made by someone who has watched a lot of science fiction, but were there any particular influences that he drew on for this film?

"I love sci-fi! I'm an old *Dr Who* fan, can't get enough of it. As for influences, I looked a lot at *The Thing*. My film is not as good as *The Thing* but I wanted to aim that way, with sand instead of snow and an all male cast."

The similarities with John

"If I can pull this one off then there is little else that would be out of the question. If I can make this, I can make anything."

Carpenter's work (director of *The Thing*) struck me the first time I watched the film – the blue collar heroes and the unexplained monsters – but also in the music. *The Planet* has a very effective soundtrack which feels a lot like the music Carpenter composes for his movies.

"I would agree with that, but it wasn't by design. Nicky Fraser, our composer, hates scary movies and refused point-blank to watch *The Thing*. So I just told her to go off and do her own stuff. The only music we listened to together was *The Matrix* for some of the action stuff. When the music came in, I recognised the Carpenter-like quality, but Nicky didn't. It grew from the idea of the planet being alive – from heart beat to beat and from beat to Carpenter."

Scotland is a bit of a hot spot for sf at the moment with authors such as Iain M Banks, Ken MacLeod, Hal Duncan, Charles Stross (and many more) who are Scottish or working in Scotland and enjoying success within the genre. Did Stirton think there was anything in particular about today's Scotland that makes it such a fertile place for sf?

"I think it's a reaction to what we're constantly being fed up here, not the food, but the diet of (drab Scottish soap) *River City* and *Trainspotting*. Everything is bloody,



gritty and dull, so some of us start to use our imagination instead. I suppose we're just trying to stand out from the crowd a bit and the easy way to do that is not to make films about single mothers and junkies."

So taking a gang of burly Scottish blokes, putting them in space and making them fight monsters is a reaction to *River City*?

"Absolutely! It was always my intention to put working class Scotsmen into space. No one else had ever done that on film. The idea of a real Scottish accent in space is just great and I get a real impact by not doing very much, just letting the actors talk. And I wouldn't make them scum just because they are working class. I've run out of hairs to pull watching Scottish films where the cast all bastards, drunks, junkies and hard men. We're a nation of cliché! And the daft thing is, it's not true. We're a nation of interesting, hard-working thinkers who have invented some of the best stuff in the world. Unfortunately the working classes are usually written and directed by people who've never met them, but think they know them. And that's why it rarely rings true."

Stirton didn't have much luck when he approached the film-making establishment in Scotland for support – Scottish Screen rudely dismissed him as unworthy of their attention. Was that, I wondered, because he pitched an sf film or because he didn't conform to their picture of a film director?

"Both. I'm working class, but I don't want to make what they consider to be working class films. So that annoys them. Also it's sci-fi! Look at how much sci-fi Scottish Screen had ever funded. It isn't much and, when they do, it's

usually pretentious dribble. Not to mention, and I have some sympathy for them here, that the script looked impossible to make. Even I didn't know if it was possible. So they have trouble making that leap of faith and trusting in a film-maker, it's easier to go for the familiar project without risks."

American film-makers who produce their own low-budget films get praised and pursued by big studios but the attitude in this country seems to be much more about following rules and working your way up 'by the book'.

"I'm afraid that's true. I don't want to blow my own huge trumpet too hard, but if I was in America I believe I'd be working for a major studio right now. But here the attitude is quite different. It's 'Who does he think he is?' and not 'Well done!' You can knock out a five minute black and white short and be called a director in America. Here I get a lot of 'amateur director' and 'would-

be film-maker', that kind of thing."

At the end of the documentary on *The Planet* DVD, Stirton suggest that *The Planet* takes his film-making as far as it can go with the technology and budgets at his disposal, and that this might be his last film. Is this still the case?

"As it happens *The Planet* has led to me being offered a six-figure sum to do a new film. Still a low budget, certainly, but at least I have a budget this time. The money has come from a millionaire oil CEO who saw *The Planet* and asked if he could be of any help. We cut to the chase and managed to get backing

for a new project. It's a comedy. I was tempted to do another sf film, but we've been given the chance to buy High Definition equipment this time round and doing special effects on HD is even more difficult! So it's a smaller, funnier, but still a working class and heroic film."

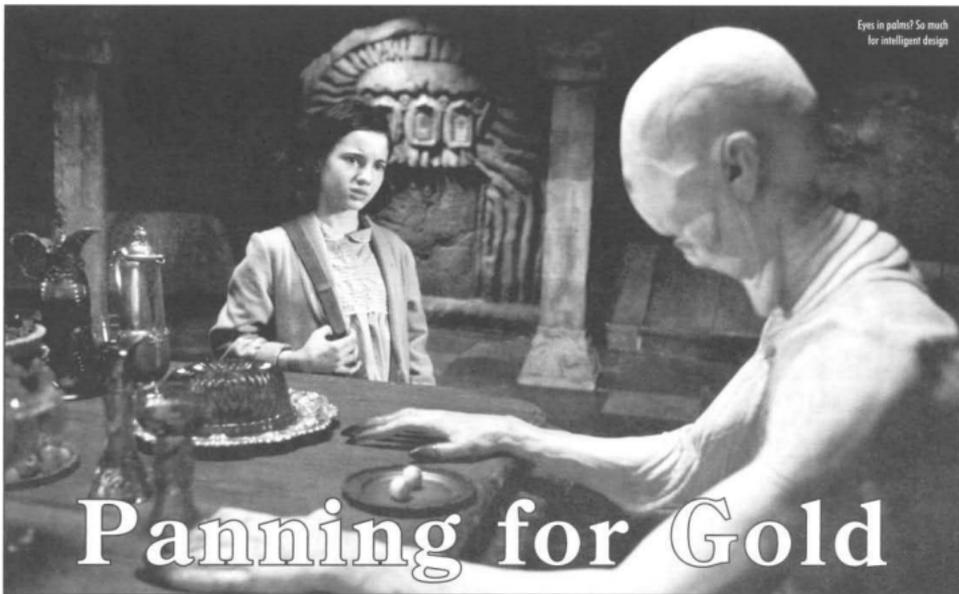
And then what? If money was no object, what would he love to do?

"A big budget American sci-fi film would be nice. I have a great idea for *Alien 5!* Lots of British directors are a little snooty when it comes to that sort of film. Not me!"

See what *Matrix* thinks of *The Planet* on page 17



"I love sci-fi! I'm an old *Dr Who* fan, can't get enough of it. As for influences, I looked a lot at *The Thing*. My film is not as good as *The Thing* but I wanted to aim that way, with sand instead of snow and an all male cast."



Panning for Gold

Pan's Labyrinth is, without any doubt, the most visually stunning film I've seen in a long time. The extraordinary imaginations of director del Toro and cinematographer Navarro have created a truly spectacular fantasy land full of images that will live with the viewer long after they have left the cinema.

It is also, however, a profoundly sad film. It is a film in which the real world flows with blood, violence is brutal and death comes to even the innocent. The only escape is found in a darkly fantastical world, which itself is full of gruesome ordeals and dreadful terrors.

Like Terry Gilliam's *Tideland* (*Matrix* 181), *Pan's Labyrinth* takes Alice in Wonderland's premise of a little girl escaping into a fantastical realm and places it against a more troubling domestic background and twists the magical world into something nastier and more horrific.

Pan's Labyrinth is set Spain in 1944. The Spanish Civil War is all but over, the great battles have been won by the fascists who are mopping up the remnants of the republican forces in a bitter but small-scale guerrilla war. Against this background Carmen (Gul) brings her daughter Ofelia (Baquero) to a rural army outpost in northern Spain to live with her new husband Captain Vidal

(Lopez). Vidal is a martinet, a vicious thug in a uniform who expects automatic obedience from everyone – especially his wife and step-daughter. His only real concern for his new family is with the welfare of the son he believes his new wife to be carrying.

Ofelia befriends Mercedes (Verdu), the Captain's housekeeper who also supplies the republican guerrillas with aid and information, and through her finds the ancient labyrinth and a gateway to a fantastical world. Here she meets the faun who tells her she is really the princess of a magical kingdom and gives her three tasks, promising her that if she completes them she will be returned to her rightful place alongside her true parents as ruler of this mysterious land.

The quest takes young Ofelia into a dark underworld inhabited by huge bugs and a giant, malodorous toad and then into battle with a nightmarish monster with eyes in its palms before finally she must decide whether to sacrifice another for the sake of her own happiness. These fantasy sequences are magnificently realised and full of vivid imagery but they are given their real power by the performance of young Baquero who mixes an innocent vulnerability with surprising steel to bring the fantasy world to life.

But what is remarkable about *Pan's Labyrinth* is the ending, which

can be taken at face value as a victory – albeit bittersweet – as the evil captain is vanquished and Ofelia receives her promised reward. However, beneath the apparently happy ending, is the nagging sense that what we've actually witnessed is a terrible tragedy.

The viewer knows, for example, that in the real world the republicans scored no significant victory in 1944 and that this period was merely the beginning of more than thirty years of fascist dictatorship and bitter struggle. Even today Spain struggles to come to terms with this period in its too recent past.

More disturbing, however, is the sense that Ofelia's fantasy world was nothing more than a daydream and that her apparent escape at the end of the film is simply the flickering imagination of a child steeped in tales of fairies and princesses. If that's how we are meant to understand the film – and it is how I read the ending – then del Toro has presented the audience with the bitterest of fairytales where fantasy represents the slightest sliver of consolation in a violent, bloody and painful world. But even if one allows oneself the



comfort of a more optimistic reading of *Pan's Labyrinth* it remains a sad and sometimes painfully moving film. This is a horror-fantasy that doesn't rely just on shocks or cheap frights but builds a sense of drama and almost unbearable tension out of our genuine affection for its cast of characters and our willingness to be utterly transported into their worlds, real and fantastic.

Pan's Labyrinth is a triumph, easily del Toro's best film, one of the very best films of the year in any genre and it will certainly rank amongst the best horror films made in the last decade or more. The core performances are outstanding, the imagery overwhelmingly powerful and the story is complex and layered enough to keep fans and academics rubbing their chins for years and years.

This is a rare film that can be unequivocally recommended.

Martin McGrath

Aronofsky's last requiem?

Aronofsky supposedly got the seed for *The Fountain* after watching *The Matrix*. Let's call *The Fountain* the anti-*Matrix*, an alternative to the "whiz" and "bang" of most genre films. If you like poetic and visually stunning films with meaning then this movie is for you.

Right from the start we know we're in for a serious ride when the film opens with a biblical quote from Genesis 3:24 that says the Lord cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden and protected the tree of life with a flaming sword.

Cut to a hairy Hugh Jackman as Thomas, a Spanish Conquistador. He and his two compatriots—who after a quick scene of praying to God inside an elaborate room with a gem encrusted cross—decide to single handedly take on a tribe of Mayan warriors. When the battle is finished, Mayans carry Thomas on their shoulders to climb the steps of an immense temple. We learn that he is searching for the fabled Tree of Life that exists in Christian and Mayan mythology to save his queen and his country. He climbs the temple steps where he confronts a Mayan warrior and then ultimately drinks from the sap of the Tree of Life, the Fountain of Youth. Spain is on the verge of collapse because the Queen is in danger of being hauled in for questioning during the Inquisition and only the Tree of Life can save her.

In the present time, Tom is a scientist searching for a cure for cancer. He is racing the clock because his wife, Izzy, played by Rachel Weisz, is dying of advanced brain cancer. His final hope is an experimental extract from a tree found in a rainforest. Meanwhile, Izzy is taking a slow road to understanding and coming to terms with her mortality while drafting a story in longhand.

A thousand years into the future, a transparent, space-faring, bubble contains a shaven, lotus sitting, meditating, Tom. He is alone except for an aged tree taking a long journey to the nebula of a dying star about to go supernova, spreading its material among the galaxy to give birth to new stars. Somehow, he believes that this will bring his Isabel back

to life and somehow so far he has survived all these years. His predicament is the result of a life spent trying to cure death as if it were a disease. He spends a thousand years in a sort of purgatory with only a thin thread of hope.

The scenes meld and transpose, as the past, present and future intertwine. Throughout Isabel whispers almost tauntingly to Tom, "Finish it."

The Fountain takes its time to unfold and share its meaning. The film is beautifully shot and scored. The acting is touchingly sensitive by people who obviously believe in Aronofsky's story and direction. They clearly wanted to be in this film.

Let's get the corny stuff out of the way first. The supporting characters define cardboard cutout. The medical facility looks like the left over sets from the television show *24*. There is some questionable science. There is the standard confrontation between Tom and his boss who says he's working too hard. Some of the visuals try too hard to be profound and end up looking silly. Finally, there is a ring shared between all three incarnations of Tom and Isabel, which should have been edited out, as it adds nothing to the plot.

Beyond all that is a parable that says something profound about life and more importantly death. Tom, frightened by the prospect of losing Isabel, his precious love, denies it and rails against it. Isabel, strong and searching, always in mortal danger, finally accepts death. She tries to teach Tom a lesson about letting the natural flow of the universe take its course.

The repeating symbols of the nebula, the tree, the mythology and the Inquisition as well as the cancer and Tom's struggle to find a cure are all interconnected. She learns through her story that the search for life everlasting is ultimately death every time. He struggles to find eternal life sacrificing what little time he has left with his beloved



to achieve it. His angst and sadness at the prospect of losing his true love in all three time frames forces him to push forward against the incredible resistance of men, science and space.

While Izzy of the present journeys to her ultimate end, she writes the fable of *The Fountain*, which is the story of the Spanish Conquistador. The story has no ending and her final request to Tom is to "Finish it." His confusion and frustration about how to finish it follows him through a thousand year journey and back.

By not finishing her story, she teaches him to find the answer. He figures out that the whisper of "Finish it," throughout the film was not a request but a call to action. He accepts an inevitable conclusion that life is precious and that you can travel to the Garden of Eden to the Tree of Life or the furthest reaches of space but you must accept that death is a natural and necessary part of life and that in death new life flourishes. Eternal life is becoming, transcending, understanding and finally accepting that there is a

progression in the universe from life to death and back to life in another form.

The biblical allegory of The Tree of Life, the Mayan story of the first father sacrificing himself so a tree can grow from his body and give earth life and the supernova nebula are all connected to the metaphor.

There are repeating visuals that will astound you with their tactile effect on screen. The nebula scenes are incredibly breathtaking and the snow and stars blend within every scene to form a cohesive cinematic experience through the juxtaposition of settings and eras. Especially effective are the parallels between the textural symmetry of the cancer cells, the flourishing tree and the nebula, all showing a network of stringy matter from the smallest to the largest scale.

This movie desperately wants to be taken seriously - and despite its flaws it succeeds, but only if you are willing to impose a little creative analogy and be patient.

No Craft

Martin McGrath

Normally while watching a film for review I scribble down notes about my reactions to key moments in the action and a rough outline of the plot. Usually this fills one or two sheets of paper.

For *The Covenant* I wrote just two lines: "Four guys are witches" and "This is shit!" and, I confess, that this review could end there and sum up my attitude to this post-Buffy supernatural nonsense from one of Hollywood's most consistently inept directors, Renny Harlin.

Still, for those still interested, *The Covenant* features a cast of typically handsome Hollywood teens (actually they all appear to be in their mid-twenties, which makes their appearance in school uniforms slightly disturbing) with perfect teeth and buff bodies walking around partially dressed in a New England boarding school. Four of the boys belong to ancient dynasties of witches (they are The Sons of Ipswich, apparently, but there's no

sign of the Tractor Boys anywhere) who survived persecution in England and the Salem witch trials. A new school year brings the boys the promise of "ascension" (they receive their full powers on their 18th birthday).

beautiful new girls to ogle and a dangerous supernatural threat.

There are some okay special effects but the "mystical" battles quickly become tiresome, with their mechanics ripped from *Street Fighter* games and the characters bouncing around like maniacal frogs. An irritatingly large part of



the film is spent watching people fall asleep / asleep / waking up suddenly and even when the cast are supposed to be awake, most appear to be sleepwalking through their performances. To be fair, though, the writing is so dull it could anaesthetise an elephant.

The New England of *The Covenant*

is a miserable place of rolling mists, thunderstorms and persistent rain where the sun never seems to quite rise. The gloom on screen soon spreads to the audience and the heart of even the bravest soul must sink at the appalling ending which makes no sense and, worse, threatens a sequel.

Vanishing Act

Martin McGrath

This year's big idea in Hollywood appears to be magicians. There's a *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* movie somewhere in the works, Christopher Nolan's adaptation of Chris Priest's *The Prestige* is out now and, somewhere in the middle, is *The Illusionist*, a film in danger of being lost amongst higher profile releases.

Indeed, although *The Illusionist* was released in America on 1 September there are, at the time of writing, no confirmed release dates for the UK and even a suggestion that it may go direct to DVD in this country.

That would be a terrible shame because *The Illusionist* is a very strong film, featuring some stunning cinematography, a fantastic cast (Norton, Giamatti, Biel and Sewell all do excellent work) and a clever story that is only slightly weakened by a somewhat illogical conclusion.

Set in turn-of-the-century Vienna, *The Illusionist* tells the story of a stage magician, Eisenheim (Norton) who has taken the city by storm with his act. Eisenheim's life is thrown into turmoil when Crown Prince Leopold (Sewell) volunteers his fiancée Sophie (Biel) to take part in one of Eisenheim's



tricks – unaware that the two were childhood sweethearts. Offending the Crown Prince brings Eisenheim under the gaze of Chief Inspector Uhl (Giamatti) a corrupt and ambitious policeman. Eisenheim and Sophie rekindle their love with tragic consequences and the plot twists into a struggle for revenge against the background of a volatile political situation.

The Illusionist is quite a complex story but the quality of performances, some sharp direction and wonderfully detailed and

layered image-making combine to carry the film over any obstacles. In a lengthening role of high-quality performances Giamatti again provides a solid foundation for a film – and perhaps develops a character that deserves more space. Norton, meanwhile, broods impressively in one of his most accomplished screen performances and Biel is both beautiful and delivers a surprisingly mature performance.

My one reservation it is that the conclusion, as Uhl suddenly pieces together everything that has

happened, is crudely handled and unconvincing – there's no way the detective could have understood everything so clearly and perhaps leaving the conclusion a little more open would have been more satisfying. But this is one slightly discordant note in what was, otherwise, a thoroughly enjoyable cinematic experience.

It is easy to see why a studio might have reservations about *The Illusionist* – it demands both a considerable suspension of disbelief on behalf of the audience and a degree of attention that may stretch the standard multiplex audience – but the viewers' efforts are handsomely rewarded. At its heart this may be nothing more than a pulpy love story, but it is an impressively staged and immensely entertaining film that deserves to be seen on the big screen.

The Illusionist

Director: Neil Burger
Writers: Neil Burger (screenplay); based on the short story by Steven Millhauser
Cast: Edward Norton, Paul Giamatti, Jessica Biel, Rufus Sewell
110 minutes

Roll Over James Cameron

MMG

It is tempting, with a film like *The Planet*, to be condescending. Like watching a dog deliver Hamlet's soliloquy, it is easy to be impressed that the performance is taking place at all and ignore the quality of the delivery.

For make no mistake, the fact that *The Planet* exists at all is every bit as remarkable as a Bard-spouting mongrel. Making any kind of film is challenging but making a high-concept, effects-heavy sf film with a budget smaller than most student overdrafts is astonishing.

But, once we get over the shock that this puppy knows that to be or not to be is, indeed, the question, we still have to ask: Is it actually any good?

My answer: Yes it is, although there are inevitable qualifications.

The Planet's low budget does show through with too many filler shots of people running or walking to pad out its seventy minutes and the script doesn't always deliver the moments of dramatic power or humorous relief that would raise the story out of its rather one-paced gait.

However, *The Planet* also has some genuine strong points.

It is, for example, a surprisingly refreshing change to watch a film where space-faring characters don't speak American or in the plummy RADA-tones of the obligatorily British villain. I was shocked at how long it took me to adjust my own expectations when listening to the actors' Scottish accents and at how much more real it made the characters feel.

The cast, none of whom will be immediately recognisable faces to anyone outside their own families, generally turn in creditable performances with the material at their disposal. I particularly liked Scott Ironside's Vince and Patrick Wight's McNeal, a pair of ordinary, blunt-speaking tough guys caught in a nasty situation who seem to be locked in a competition to see who can say the word "fuck" the most times in any one sentence.

And *The Planet* frequently transcends its limitations with



Genre



Explosion!

regard to set design, special effects and in the director's assured use of the camera. The film succeeds in creating a creditably believable alien world – with convincing props, some good effects and the intelligent use of location. The special effects, however, are a mixed bag. When they work well (such as in the opening space battle, the early monster attacks, and some nice simulated computer displays) they add immensely to the film, but some dodgy (and over-used) fire effects distract early on and the final sequence, when gigantic monsters beset the planet, reveals the limitations of the budget too harshly. By then, however, *The Planet* has stored up more than enough credit to be forgiven for allowing its ambition to overstep its capability.

This is not the sort of film that wins awards or that gets cineastes raving over their cappuccinos,

and it's not without serious flaws. Perhaps, like a Shakespearian pooch, *The Planet's* greatest achievement remains that it exists at all but in terms of its ambition, its surprising scale and the evident determination of the cast and crew to deliver a final adventure that should have been far beyond what was possible with the resources they had to hand, *The Planet* turns out to be an entertaining and likeable film.

If nothing else the DVD of *The Planet* (available from www.stirtonproductions.com) is worth owning just for the included documentary in which the cast talk with disarming frankness and good humour about the film's production.

If for some reason you read Matrix backwards, you may not have noticed there's an interview with The Planet director Mark Stirton on page 12.

Royale with cheese

Like it or not, when Daniel Craig finally mentions that his name's Bond, James Bond, you know that he's absolutely right. Freshly promoted to double-0 status, Bond himself has as much to prove to his superiors as Daniel Craig does to his naysayers. Both pass with flying colours.

Unfortunately, even though the worldwide gross increased with each of Pierce Brosnan's entries into the Bond canon, the producers' decision to reload the franchise didn't extend as far as replacing writers Neal Purvis and Robert Wade – writers of critically underwhelming *The World Is Not Enough* and *Die Another Day*. The fact that *Million Dollar Baby* and *Crash* scribe Paul Haggis was drafted in for a 'polish' suggests the studio's lack of confidence in the script but also results in a wildly uneven script full of character inconsistency and overlong scenes of awkward dialogue.

Despite the script's flaws and give or take the odd chase scene, *Casino Royale* is still the best Bond film since director Martin Campbell's *Goldeneye* opened in 1995 and a good foundation for when James Bond will return.

For a film that's centered round a game of cards, it is Campbell's pointed direction of his actors that keeps the stakes raised. Daniel Craig seems more comfortable in his first outing as Bond than many of his predecessors. Providing natural wit and charm where previous films relied on contrived one-liners, Craig doesn't so much play Bond as inhabit him in an utterly convincing performance.

In a movie industry littered with lazy prequels and origin stories, it is slightly frustrating to wait well over two hours to see the title character fully formed. Whilst there is no question that *Casino Royale* succeeds in giving the franchise a fresh start, it is a shame that there were no aspirations to go further than simply taking us back to square one.

John Hunter

Makes No Difference Who You Are

There is a consensus out there that Disney is Evil.

Disney = Evil.

Anthropomorphic Cartoon Animals in a made-up world called Walt Disney World = Eternity of torture by Anthropomorphic Animals in made-up world called Hell.

Get the point? I have friends who would rather have their eyelashes pulled out one-by-one while bamboo shoots are shoved under their fingernails than go to Disneyland or watch a Disney film.

I used to be one of them.

Yes, I admit, I was a Disney hater too. Mostly because of my ignorance. See, I never went to see a Disney movie when I was a kid. I never saw Bambi in my youth. I never watched the Dwarves smack up with Snow White and I never got to see booty-calling Cinderella make it with her babe-a-licious beau, Prince Charming. I blame my parents. They were not very big fans of Disney. Also, the proliferation of VCR movies and more recently DVDs hadn't come about when I was a lad.

Now if my mother will stop screaming at me I will tell you that once, when I was in third grade my family did make a trip to Walt Disney World in Orlando Florida. I

had the time of my life. It was great fun. All of it. I still remember how it felt to ride in the Haunted Castle or the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. I remember the Electric Light Parade and the butter pats shaped like Mickey Mouse. But alas, that was in the Seventies and I should not return to that enchanted land for almost 30 years.

In between I was rarely exposed to anything Disney-like. There was a dry spell in the eighties of animated Disney films. Or at least very popular films. The kind that harkens back to the golden age when they produced *Cinderella* and *Snow White and Bambi*. Then in the early Nineties they came out with *The Little Mermaid*. A musical based on the Hans Christian Anderson tale. It was a great little movie. A friend of mine had a sister who watched it on a daily basis when she finally scored the VCR tape. By that time, though, I was a jaded art student just discovering my inner Goth. Despite the fact that the bad guy in the movie was a dark, octopus like creature who wanted to steal the beautiful voices of the Mer-People, it still didn't go far enough for my

brash, young, self.

I raised the banner with the best of



I blame my parents. They were not very big fans of Disney

in a new age of animation where 3-D ruled. With the success of *Finding Nemo* and *The Incredibles*, Disney announced that they were giving up on 2-D (traditional) animated movies and called the format dead. But after purchasing Pixar as a wholly owned subsidiary in 2005, Disney has rediscovered a commitment to 2-D cartoons and is producing them again.

When I had children of my own, they demanded that I put on Disney films. My wife sent me out at ungodly hours to buy Limited Edition DVDs that peeked out of the Disney Vault but might disappear for another fifty years if we didn't hurry and buy them all up.

Through repeated viewings and osmosis, the fairy tales began to seep in and I admit to now having the soundtrack to *Aladdin* in a permanent playlist on my iPod (love that Robin Williams!). And for the first time in 30 years the gates of the Magic Kingdom opened and I strode the clean streets while men and women dressed like a Technicolorized version of late nineteenth century America descended upon us.

them as to how bad it was that Disney took stories and themes and simplified them, making happy endings out of them. "The original fairy tales were cautionary tales that rarely had happy endings," I'd explain. It was a bad thing to take the world and candy-coat it into something sweet and fluffy and good. The real world is full of darkness, evil and rarely do things work out. Besides, if the Walt Disney Company had its way we'd all be strolling down fake, cobblestoned streets, hanging onto white picket fences, Zipadeedooing all around town like a nation of Stepfords.

A relentless litany of animated films came out in the Nineties. *The Little Mermaid* followed up with *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1993), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), *Tarzan* (1999). Along with 3-D animation company, Pixar, a former Lucasfilm Company bought by Steve Jobs of Apple fame, (and if you know me at all you know how giddy this makes me!) Disney distributed the *Toy Story* movies (1995 & 1999) and *A Bug's Life* (1998). Then there was the Tim Burton classic, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993).

Since then the studio has produced or distributed many other animated films although they have not reached the renaissance of animated musicals that they achieved in the 1990s. Disney and Pixar produced a slew of new films together ushering





Lon S. Cohen on how everyone's a secret sucker for Disney...

If you've ever been, you know what I mean. At a moment's notice a band of happy characters dressed like they stepped off a paddleboat on the sparkling Mississippi River will roll through the streets dancing and singing a happy tune. There's a candy store on the corner and a bunch of places that will sell you everything that you ever wanted, with Mickey Mouse slapped on it. Any true ex-Industrial-Goth would just melt into a black puddle right there, the sticky sweetness shooting holes into their old black combat boots.

Truth is, I enjoyed it. A lot. And I traded combat boots for Docksidiers years ago.

There is something innocent and nostalgic about the park. Perhaps because the last time I was there I was just an eight-year-old boy. Perhaps it's just because Disney gets it right. You heard me. They get it right.

Kids will always be kids. They love cartoons, they love candy and they love songs they can sing along to. If you combine them all together, well, jackpot! That's what Disneyland is in a nutshell. It's like actually stepping into one of Walt Disney's animated films. Judging from all the historical information you can get on the man while touring the park, this is exactly what he intended.

Disney is not an enigma. It is not complicated or deceitful. No matter what happens behind the scenes in the corporate world, the face of Disney is a cartoon wonderland full of wonder and magic and history. History that might be its own, self-referential history, but by now, after all these years, it's ingrained history. It's magical.

If you don't dig too deep you can find a naive simplicity in Disney. The cartoons always have a happy ending, they always teach some lesson and they are usually so well done you can't help but get sucked into the story, the music, the images or all of the above.

Even Tomorrowland still looks like the wide-eyed version of the future that Walt Disney himself tried to promote. I feel like I stepped into a realm created thirty, forty, fifty years

ago and nothing has changed since.

But there's more to it than just some silly old rides and cotton candy. The movies that Disney puts out for the children of America today are not your father's Disney flick.

I should have known that all along.

Case in point, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. I loved this movie so much when it first came out I went and bought all the watches at Burger King. I saw it in the movie theater

Christmas has become one of Disney's greatest marketing movies, selling characters and merchandise inspired by the movie year after year so among the Mickey Mouse ears and Goofy hats you can now get Jack Skellington snow globes and all kinds of pop-gothic merchandise.

Disney has even conquered Broadway. At the center of the Times Square redevelopment project was Disney's purchase and restoration of the New Amsterdam

by the four main stars, Johnny Depp (brilliantly playing Captain Jack Sparrow as one half-drunk, one half-mad, one half-Keith Richards), Geoffrey Rush (always a pleasure!), Orlando Bloom (playing the anti-Legolas) and beautiful and talented Keira Knightly (did I mention beautiful and talented?). This movie redefines the swashbuckling adventure like I only pray that Indiana Jones part four will come close to. Besides that, it single handedly brought back the pirate craze (when did the pirate craze end, I say!).

It all started with a mouse.

Throughout a visit to Disney World you are continuously reminded by enormous graffiti and the voice of the man himself that Disney all started with a mouse. That's only partly true. It started with a dream. The mouse came second.

Walt Disney and his brother Roy Disney started Disney Studios way back in the 1920s. Originally they began with short animated films starring Oswald the Lucky Rabbit (who looked very much like Mickey Mouse with long ears). When Walt lost the rights to Oswald to another production studio he had to come up with another character to star in his cartoons. Mickey Mouse was created and starred in *Steamboat Willie*, one of the first popular cartoons that also featured a soundtrack.

From then on Walt expanded his empire from short cartoons to great big theme parks in California and then Orlando, but at the core of it all is a basic premise: Tell a good story and tell it right. That has been the cornerstone of the Disney legacy. Walt Disney was a perfectionist. *Snow White* took longer and cost more money than originally planned because of his detailed personality. In the end it was all worth it. Meticulous detailing and an uplifting, well-told tale are what made Disney a great man and a great movie company. Over the years, Disney has had its ups and downs. It has fallen in and out of the public's favor but, in all in, we can't imagine a world without Walt Disney's fantasies. And we would not want to either.



Any true ex-Industrial-Goth would just melt into a black puddle right there, the sticky sweetness shooting holes into their old black combat boots

twice. This is not your typical Disney film yet Disney distributed it. Also, Tim Burton, one of my favorite directors, was employed at Disney as an artist for a time and he originally pitched this film to Disney while working there but they turned him down because it was too dark. After meeting with success, he was finally able to create his masterpiece but Disney still thought it was too dark. They released it under their Touchstone studio releases. At the time the movie was released, I had no idea it had roots in the Disney studio.

Since then, after years of building momentum, *The Nightmare Before*

Theater. Currently a very impressive performance of Disney's *The Lion King* is playing there. If you go expecting a rehash of a cartoon with fuzzy-costumed characters playing the central role, be prepared for disappointment. The Broadway version of this musical is impressive and beautiful in its own right. The production design and costuming are brilliant as is the casting. This is another good example of Disney getting it right.

Recently, Disney hit gold with a live action film done right, *Pirates of the Caribbean*. This movie had it all: Costumes, effects, beautiful sets, dialogue and superb performances



BBC Rediscover

It's been a long time coming, but *Torchwood* is finally with us (BBC3, Sunday evenings with repeats on BBC2 on Wednesdays until mid-January). But was it worth the wait?

Given the build-up hype, you could be forgiven for thinking this was going to be the Second Coming and so inevitably the realisation had difficulty living up to the anticipation. That said, it's currently one of the few programmes on my must-watch list and has all the makings of being a major addition to the television science fiction canon. The high concept is great. The main setting is great. The storylines are pretty good – and, if anything, getting better. The dialogue is good. The action justifies its post watershed time-slot. There is a nice line in wry humour – having the heroine's boyfriend ring her mobile phone with one of those, "Hi honey, I'm on the train" type messages when she was hiding from a killer cyborg was a classic. And then there are the characters... Oops.

Compared with his appearances in *Doctor Who*, the John Barrowman character Captain Jack Harkness is a little bit too cold and mysterious for his own good, to the extent that the only member of the cast currently emerging as a well-rounded and plausible human (or even alien) being is Eve Myles as Gwen Cooper. In fact the Myles/Cooper character looks set to become as formidable in *Torchwood* as Billie Piper was as Rose Tyler. As for the others (Burn Gorman as Dr Owen Harper, Gareth David-Lloyd as Ianto Jones and Naoko Mori as Toshiko Sato) I think to describe their characterisation and motivation as one-dimensional is being generous.

They are like those crewmen on a *Star Trek* away team who are never given a name because they are going to be vaporised by an alien within minutes of landing. For example, in episode 4 we learn that Ianto has his girlfriend – now a half converted Cyberwoman – stashed away in the basement. (So much for the base's impenetrable security). And when she turns into a deranged killing machine, who has to be shot by Captain Jack and the rest of the



team, that's it. No recriminations, no hard feelings, just an order for 5 more pizzas to go and can you please deliver them to our office address but avoid tripping over the mutilated corpse of the last pizza delivery girl. Hopefully as the series progresses we will start to love them more but at the moment this is very much the Captain Jack and Agent Cooper show. There again, *Torchwood* does have the makings of being the British, OK Welsh, version of *The X-Files* rather than *Doctor Who* for grown-ups.

November saw BBC4 start an excellent season of programmes around the theme of **Science Fiction Britannica**. The season will run into December and relax, BBC4 always repeats its original programming – although

to keep track of the scheduling you need to visit the BBC microsite at www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/features/stfb.shtml

Among the offerings are repeats of episodes from such 'cult' series as *The Tripods*, *Doomwatch*, *Survivors*, *Blake's 7*, *Doctor Who*, *The Day of the Triffids*, *Star Cops* and *Adam Adamant Lives!* Spoiler alert – Adam Adamant has not aged well and the Sixties swinging London setting looks as dated as Simon Dee now. There are also re-runs of more recent programmes, including the remakes of *A for Andromeda* and *The Quatermass Experiment*, an all new adaptation of the John Wyndham drama *Random Quest*, profiles and in-conversation-with programmes on Iain Banks, the late Nigel Kneale, John Wyndham, J.G. Ballard and Terry Pratchett.

And, check out *The Martians and Us*, a three-part documentary

– subtitled utopian dreams and dystopian nightmares – on the development of British science fiction writing from HG Wells through to the present day. When this started, my little heart sank as it looked as if it was going to be yet another of those compilation programmes with minimal content and endless Z-list celebrities adding asinine comments (or 'c****s & clips' programmes as they are known in the trade) but no, it was excellent. Not one single duff participant – Kim Newman, Arthur C. Clarke and China Miéville were particularly impressive – and just enough dramatisation to bring alive the books under discussion. There is of course a little irony here that BBC3 and 4 now seem to carry more good quality SF content than the Sci-Fi Channel but there you go. Also have a look at the BBC's My Science Fiction Life microsite: www.bbc.

SF

The next one to mention
Shark Attack 3 gets it!



Another *Doctor Who* spin-off is on its way in the New Year – *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, starring Elizabeth Sladen, one of the Doctor's companions in the 1970s and who made a brief reappearance in the most recent *Doctor Who* season. Sladen as Sarah Jane Smith is yet another strong female character from the pen of Russell T. Davies (think Billie Piper as Rose and Eve Myles as Gwen Cooper) and the series will even feature a strong female villain, namely Ms Wormwood played by Samantha Bond, aka Miss Moneybags from some of the James Bond movies. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your point of view) for contractual reasons Sarah Jane will be having her adventures without the assistance of K-9.



Early reports suggest that the second season of BBC's *Life on Mars* will be the last, with the season finale (which will air sometime around May) clearing up what has been happening to the detective hero Sam Tyler. Was he in a coma or had he really travelled through time? Co-creator and executive producer Matthew Graham says it will be a

"proper ending" as distinct from the ambiguous ending of *The Prisoner*.



BBC2 has commissioned a second series of the SF comedy (comedy? some mistake surely) *Hyperdrive*, with screening scheduled for February. Why? It was dire the first time around. There again the BBC keep commissioning programmes from French & Saunders, and they passed their comedy sell-by date in about 1992. And if that seems an unfair comment, just check out their current vehicle – the WI sitcom *Jam and Jerusalem* – which must already be contender for any worst 'TV comedy of the 21st century' award.



Channel 4 has lost the rights to screen the current (third) season of *Lost* to Sky One – but does anyone care as ratings for the second season were averaging 2.8 million viewers per episode (some were as low as 1.9 million) compared with 4.1 million for the first season. *Lost* airs at 10:00pm on Sunday evenings (although there will be a gap in the New Year to allow UK and US screenings to stay in sync) with Season 3 apparently going to focus

more on 'the Others'. Sky One is also running catch-ups for anyone who missed the first two seasons.



The original Captain Kirk series of *Star Trek* is to receive a CGI makeover – the producers promise the new special effects will be confined to external shots – in readiness for the roll out of HD TV.



Stargate SG-1, one of the most successful and longest running series (now in its 10th season – only *Doctor Who* has had a longer life) in SF TV history, has been axed after the SCI FI network in the US said it would not be taking up an option on an 11th season. *Stargate Atlantis* will however continue – and it has been mooted that some of the SG-1 cast will appear in *Atlantis* story lines, as well as in a possible spin-off movie. If you really care about the fate of SG-1 then visit the fan-site www.savestargatesg1.com In the meantime make sure you catch the 20th episode of SG-1 (it originally aired in mid-November but will no doubt be repeated ad nauseum on Sky One & Two) which features a spoof puppet version (think *Team America: World Police*) of the show.

co.uk/mysciencfictionlife

Nigel Kneale, who died in October aged 84, can safely – without any risk of hype – be described as the founding father of British SF TV with his three *Quatermass* serials in the 1950s (... *Experiment II*, and *the Pit*) constituting one of the first examples of must-see TV in the UK – in fact only the coronation of Queen Elizabeth managed to get better viewing figures than the original *Quatermass Experiment* in 1953. As well as being a talented writer in his own right, he also adapted (among many other things) George Orwell's *1984* for television in 1954 – the programme, which starred Peter Cushing, was apparently so scary that it prompted questions being asked in Parliament and was, at that time, the BBC's

most controversial programme to-date. Talking of scary, Kneale was also responsible for the 1972 ghost story *The Stone Tape* and a spine-chilling adaptation of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* in 1989.

He also wrote and produced *The Year of the Sex Olympics* (1968) which effectively predicted 'reality TV' thirty years before it became a reality; a number of plays – including the ghost story *The Road* in 1963 – which were lost as a result of the then BBC policy of wiping and re-using recording tapes; and, in the 1990s, when he was already in his seventies, he contributed episodes to the *Sharpe* and *Kavanagh QC* series. Here's a thought... maybe the BSFA should institute a Nigel Kneale award for the most significant contribution to science fiction on TV, even if Russell T. Davies would probably win it every year for the foreseeable future.



Host with the Most

Korean monster movie *The Host* is not a subtle film. There's no sneaky hiding of the monster in shadows and no carefully constructed feeling of dread - the monster here is all about spectacle.

Director Joon-ho Bong takes the monster, realised through some genuinely excellent CGI trickery, and shoves it right out in front in a way that we haven't really seen since the heyday of gosh-wow monster flicks like *King Kong* or the original *Godzilla*. Of modern movies perhaps only the *Jurassic Park* films have had the confidence to put their faith in the ability of their central monsters to stun the audience.

It works too, getting the movie off to a frenetic start with an astonishing opening rampage as the great beast - a cross between a tadpole, a catfish and the aliens from *Predator* - tears into a crowd enjoying a day by the river in Seoul.

The risk in chucking the monster out into the open right at the start of the film is that, once it has been revealed, the fickle audience might get bored or become blasé about a great hulking fish thing slaughtering people. And the truth is that there isn't another action sequence in *The Host* that's quite as good as the first attack. But Bong - the films co-writer as well as its director - pulls a host of other tricks out of the bag to keep us watching.

First there's the bizarre cast - the entirely dysfunctional Park family - the dozy Kang-du, his sister Nam-Ju

the very slow archer and their brother the disillusioned ex-student revolutionary Nam-Il. This oddball bunch are watched over by their sentimental father Hie-Bong but are united only by their love of Kang-du's daughter, the precocious Hyun-Seo. There's a lot of comedy in *The Host* and most of it comes from the interaction between the members of this slightly nutty family.

The Host, however, is more than just a silly monster movie.

There's a thread of satire at the expense of the Americans - whose presence in South Korea clearly isn't regarded as entirely benign - and at government and media reactions to the "crises" of bird 'flu and the like. But, most importantly, *The Host* features strong character interrelations and a solid emotional core. The audience I saw it with gasped at the monster, laughed at the jokes and greeted the ending with more than a few sniffs and sobs.

The Host has excellent special effects, but director Bong has no



need to rely on them to deliver a really powerful movie. It's fun, it's funny and it's even a little touching. *The Host* is not a classic but it's definitely worth a couple of hours of your time.

Martin McGrath

The Host

Director: Joon-ho Bong
Writers: Chul-hyun Baek & Joon-ho Bong
Cast: Kang-ho Song, Hie-bong Byeon, Hae-il Park, Du-na Bae
119 minutes

All Over Again

Directed to within an inch of its life, filled with slightly arbitrary car chases and billowing explosions - it must be a new Tony Scott/Jerry Bruckheimer collaboration. Once again teamed with Denzel Washington, the presence of whose rather adult screen persona forces a more grown-up sensibility into a script forever tempted to wander off into *Bad Boys* silliness.

That's not to say that *Déjà Vu* doesn't partake in some seriously popcorn movie logic - why doesn't Denzel take a co-driver with him, when chasing the terrorist in the past? - but this never reaches the truly frontal-lobe-numbing levels of

stupidity that is evident in so many other timebusters.

The time paradox shtick is harnessed to the Bruckheimer boom-banga-bang school of thrills to good effect. It's pretty off the peg pop-science stuff, but despite the fact nothing new is brought to this arguably over-mined sub-genre the film makers have enough playful craft in them to massage out some nice thrills and push-button symphonised emotions right up until the credits roll.

You'll probably find this movie awfully familiar, but in a good way.

Simon Gilmartin



Déjà Vu

Director: Tony Scott
Writers: Bill Marsili & Terry Rossio
Cast: Denzel Washington, Paula Patton, Val Kilmer, James Caviezel, Adam Goldberg, Elden Henson, Erika Alexander
128 minutes

Light but Literate

Stranger Than Fiction is a terrific surprise - first, despite being marketed as a straightforward romantic comedy, it is in fact a rather smart take on the idea of the writer's character coming to life. Second, it features an amazingly restrained performance by normally over-the-top comedian Will Ferrell as Harold Crick, the man who discovers his life is being narrated and the author intends to kill him off. And finally, it's a Hollywood produced romance that won't necessarily have you reaching for the bucket half way through.

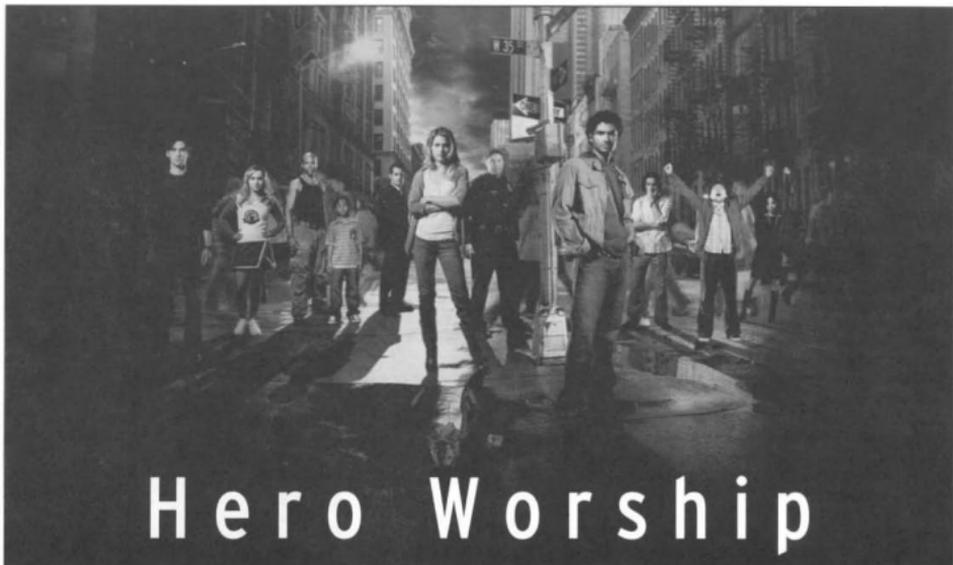
Ferrell is a revelation and love-interest Gyllenhaal is both beautiful and funny. Also excellent is Dustin Hoffman, who casts aside most of the irritating mannerisms that have plagued his acting since before *Rain Man* and gives a smart, funny turn as a professor of literature. Emma Thompson features too, as author Kay Eiffel, but while her voice-over is beautifully mellifluous her actual onscreen appearances - as an overwrought writer struck by writer's block and on the edge of a breakdown - are a touch too indulgently dramatic.

The real star of *Stranger Than Fiction* is Zach Helm's script, which is blessed with a number of memorable passages including a scene that deconstructs the semiology of guitars, another where Hoffman tries to judge what type of book Harold Crick is inhabiting and even manages some finely judged wooing sequences.

I had few positive expectations for *Stranger Than Fiction*, but I was immediately gripped by it, found myself genuinely rooting for the lead characters and really caring about how the story would turn out. This is a light film, but it is blessed with obvious intelligence and a surprisingly warm heart.

Martin McGrath





Hero Worship

Still think *Watchmen* had the last word on superhero hi-jinks? Simon Gilmartin begs to differ...

It's been a long time since we were first told 'The truth is out there,' 12 years to be exact. It's difficult to remember just how big *The X-Files* was: the cons, the key fobs, the T-shirts, TV theme nights, the FHM shoots and so on and on.

Zeitgeist surfing or Zeitgeist defining, who could say for sure, but what was certain was that the show had impact, the show had legs and most importantly that show raked it in.

In the years that followed the airwaves have been strewn with cancelled husks of shows commissioned with an eye on the prize and informed with the knowledge that a cheaply made genre show filmed in British Columbia could be a contender, could be big – I mean really big.

Trotted out onto our schedules, eager to tap the geek dollar, each with their own parade of fresh faced ingénues and chisel jawed matinee idols – investigating aliens, underwater invasions, over ground invasions, the supernatural, government conspiracies, underwater alien invasions run by government conspiracies. They come and go, barely making it past



their mid-season recommission, discretely disappeared from our schedules like an oblivious abductee beamed up into the night sky and the embryonic beginnings of their five season plot arc left dangling so that we never find out who kidnapped his daughter, who the one armed man with the birthmark really worked for, what those ancient Indian cave writings truly meant.

At first glance *Heroes* looks like it might be another of these pod-grown genre shows, beginning as it does with a voiceover spewing soft-headed Mulder-like evolutionary theory – spurious and deterministic, the kind so beloved of nineteenth century eugenicists and TV screenwriters.

Even the show's premise feels achingly familiar – humanity is beginning to make the next step in development, normal individuals around the world are finding their lives disturbed by the discovery of



new 'super' mutant powers – flight, regeneration, control of space and time itself – while meanwhile a shadowy government agency is doing something shadowy. Yet once you get past that first little monologue of cod Darwinism it soon becomes apparent that *Heroes* is much more than this, and not since the first few seasons of *The X-Files* has a genre show had such poise and quality throughout its production.

Heroes lacks any obvious flaw unlike the three main quality genre shows of the moment – *Lost* with its glacial story arc and parsimonious drip feed of narrative secrets, *Battlestar Galactica* with its ever so occasional unevenness of characterisation and *Doctor Who* with its light weight kid's show froth. *Heroes* is not just a genre pleasure, it's one you can watch without having to make excuses for its flaws.

Yet on top of this, *Heroes* shares with those shows the very thing that

makes those flawed shows so good. *Heroes* isn't an *X-Files* clone. Instead like the other genre brethren, it is imbued with its own individual vision.

Its creators expect the audience to be savvy, to have seen *Unbreakable*, or a Joss Whedon script doctored *X-Men* movie. It takes for granted that it has been twenty years since Alan Moore wrote *Watchmen*, and resolutely refuses to opt for empty superhero power fantasies. Instead it uses its over-familiar superpower device to explore the lives of its characters with sensitivity and intelligence so that when our protagonists in the *Heroes* universe discover their superpowers the thought of donning spandex and fighting crime seems so ludicrous and illogical within the context of that universe that the issue is never addressed, because it doesn't need to be.

Heroes is a tight and briskly paced pleasure, like a Vertigo or Dark Horse graphic novel brought to our small screens. It is written by people who obviously love and know their comics, and while it owes the 'Files', if not for anything else then for its economic model, *Heroes* is its own show, and with news that it has been recommissioned and that Christopher Eccleston has been signed to appear on the show, so long as it steers clear of polar bears and four-toed statues *Heroes* should go from strength to strength.

SEDUCTION of the Innocent

COMIC REVIEWS BY JAMES BACON ESQ.

Illustration of a woman in a bikini and a man in a suit.

Hellblazer:

Empathy is the Enemy

(Reprinting issues 216-222)

Writer: Denise Mina

Artist: Leonardo Manco

Publisher: DC Comics (Vertigo Imprint), November 2006

Gaswegian crime author Denise Mina of *Ganethill*, *Deception* and *Field of Blood* fame, joins the increasing list of authors who have recently started writing comics. Orson Scott Card's *Ultimate Iron Man* hit the ground running, JMS is now a senior consultant to Marvel and Mina brings her distinctive style to *Hellblazer*. She is known for her hard crime thrillers, and there is some nice, intelligent nastiness to her comic book run.

Hellblazer is one of the longest running adult titles in the 'Vertigo' stable, and follows the potted life of occultist, horrorist and general mischievous con man, John Constantine. The recent Keanu Reeves movie bears little resemblance to this cynical Liverpudlian living in London, who has left a trail of dead friends in his wake.

The story begins in a Dark London pub. Our protagonist John Constantine is sat sipping a pint of Guinness. A desperate man approaches him with a serious problem. It appears that this naïve character was chatting with a girl

who gave him the wherewithal to use a small bit of simple magic, but like many stories this simple solution comes back to haunt.

The man's life gets screwed up and his simple bit of magic has some potentially horrendous consequences as he starts to view the 'what might occur' of his actions, develops feelings for his victims and a spiralling landslide of hurt compounds his small error.

Initially I thought the artwork was too dark, but after the first couple of issues, some of the images are just spot on.

Mina has an eye for the macabre and there was enough nastiness and horror in this issue that, while never gratuitously overused like so much of the current comics scene, it was enough to keep the darker parts of the mind happy.

Mature story telling is important to *Hellblazer*, and this is a good example.

Albion

(Reprinting issues 1-6)

Plot: Alan Moore

Writers: Leah Moore and John

Reppion

Art: Shane Oakley and George

Freeman

Publisher: Wildstorm, December 2006

No matter what Leah Moore does she will always be labelled as Alan Moore's daughter. Of course that's because she is. This doesn't make much difference to comic readers, where at the end of the day the product needs to entertain. Here old IPC comic heroes are resurrected, though unfortunately for me most of the characters are from before my time. I think I would have been jumping for joy if old *Warlord*, *Victor* and *Battle* characters were resurrected.

All the same Moore and Reppion do a good job of bringing characters back onto our pages, as we learn what's really happened to them for the last number of decades.

The artwork is quite stylised,



and reminiscent of how classic comics might be remembered, but in reality it's much higher quality draughtsmanship. The clever mechanism of having back-stories drawn in particular styles, as if from the pages of *The Beano*, adds that level of homage that shows these guys know what they are doing.

You can see where she gets it from.

DC The New Frontier Absolute Edition

Writer and Art: Daneyn Cooke

Publisher: DC, November 2006

DC The New Frontier has won more awards than you can shake a stick at. Cooke's vision of what happens between the Golden Age and Silver Age of Superheroes is not only well researched and lovingly crafted it's a smart look at what could have been.

The simple story, that brings so many characters into interaction, has Superheroes outlawed, which isn't hard to imagine given some of the things that occurred in the cold war. Some heroes fight on, new heroes

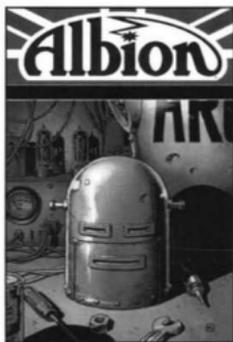
come to light, and an invasion by alien beings brings everything to a climatic and rewarding end.

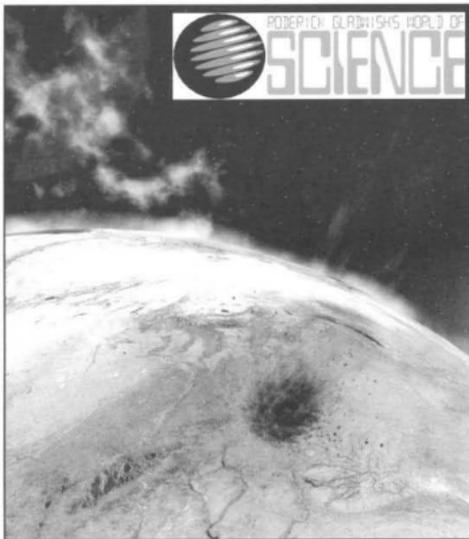
Cooke has a neat style and cleanliness about his artwork, obviously inspired by the animated work of Bruce Timm and Paul Dini. The artwork retains a certain aged look, a pulpish style that along with the accuracy of fashion, hair and machinery, gives one the perfect feeling that it's the late fifties alright.

This version of the comic is the absolute version, so it is hardbound, oversized and has some extras, but it costs extra too, none of which can compare to this fantastic story, but the edition is very nice indeed.

Watch out for Civil War

This series by Mark Millar has caused a small explosion in the comics industry, with titles selling over 400,000 copies a month, (Norm #1 125,000). The story interweaves across all the Marvel titles (which will no doubt be collected soon) and is one to watch for, having proved cynics and experts alike very wrong indeed.





Global Warming Sparks Civilization

Climate change is a major debating point. Is it happening? Isn't it happening? Who's at fault? Added to the list of questions should be: Is it a bad thing?

The theory held by many experts is that human civilization occurred because of the benign conditions after the last ice age. The tough and resourceful ice-survivalists that we were, when given a paradise of warmth and reliable seasons, seized the opportunity and whoosh, off goes civilisation.

Recently Nick Brooks of the University of East Anglia suggested that the hotter, drier climate of 6,000 to 4,000 years ago (when the earliest civilisations are found) forced civilisation upon us.

His contradictory view is that

it was when things got tough people were forced into complex societies to cope with the reduced availability of water.

'Maybe we would have remained village farmers and herders, hunter-gatherers and so on,' he said. 'Perhaps you'd have a more disparate, less population-dense kind of civilization.'

Brooks pointed out that the cause for climate change four millennia past was natural orbital changes. Perhaps this makes the cause of our current climate change irrelevant since if it's not us, it will be something else.

However, we should be thinking about what this will do to our societies because no matter what happens to the ecosystem humans will have to change.

Sources: APF and Spacedaily.com

Electro Sleep Therapy

Orthopaedic surgeon Edwin Cooper may have developed a method of waking some coma victims.

Over two decades he has treated about 60 patients and found that giving electrical stimulation encourages them to emerge from comas sooner and recover faster.

Surprise recoveries occur without treatment and so Cooper accepts resistance to his technique especially since it is outside his usual field. Although he has been involved in two small US studies, his hope for recognition comes from a larger study underway in Japan.

He uses a neuro-stimulator cuff that delivers a 20-milliampere charge into the median nerve, a major pathway to the brain and thus stimulates it.

The effect was discovered while Cooper was carrying out his usual duties of treating people with poor muscle control. The stimulator helps exercise the muscles and improve control. When working on an unresponsive patient, Cooper found they regained consciousness.

Source: Wired Magazine



CSIRO Industrial Physics of Australia have developed a soil cleaning system using ultrasound. It appears 97% effective against the usually hard to clean substances such as PCBs and DDT. It is also a 'cleaner' cleaner than incineration and chemical treatments.

The soil is mixed with water, which allows the ultrasound waves to propagate through the slurry. Sound is a sequence of high and low pressure fronts, the low pressure makes the water boil creating bubbles and

the high-pressure waves then crush the bubbles. This creates localised temperatures of more than 4000°C at pressures of 1000 atmospheres, enough to destroy any chemicals in the mixture.

The current pilot plant can treat between one-quarter and half a tonne of soil per day. The aim is for a mobile cleaning system that could be rapidly deployed at chemical spill sites. The team is still cautious because it will require more testing with other soil types and contaminants to ensure its full effectiveness.

Source: New Scientist

When the Chips Are Down - Cheat

There really was a man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo. Yorkshire man Joseph Jaggars did it in 1873. Being an engineer he realised roulette wheels are flywheels and all flywheels have a bias. That means that they tend to spin the same way and the ball will end up in the same region of the wheel more often than not. Jaggars used a team to monitor the wheels in that famous casino then, once he understood the wheels' bias he bet and won.

Today you don't need an engineer and team, just £1,000. For that Mark Howe of Sheffield makes a device that uses a tiny camera to watch the wheel,

a computer to calculate the wheel's bias and then tell the gambler where to bet.

Does it work? How is banned from every casino in Britain after a profitable phase in the 90's, hence his selling of the gadgets.

Is it legal? In 2003 a group won £1.3m at the Ritz casino in London. After being arrested for cheating they were later released and given their winnings. At the moment, the UK government have decided it's not



illegal, as have other countries, though don't expect to be treated well if caught trying to overturn the house odds with a little know-how.

Source: The Guardian and www.casinotimes.co.uk

When A Plan Comes Together

FOUNDATION
Journal
By Andy Sawyer
Plan 9 From Outer Space

Ed Wood's 1959 b-movie *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (a video of which was among a collection recently donated to the Science Fiction Foundation Collection by editor Nick Austin) can be one of the most disappointing films you will ever see.

Or so was the case when I finally managed to see it.

It's widely regarded, since the Medved brothers' book *The Golden Turkey Awards* (1980), as the pinnacle of bad sf movies. The Medveds named Wood as Worst Director, and their readers voted *Plan 9* as Worst Film. Since then, it is common knowledge among a certain stratum of bad-movie aficionados that Wood was a total incompetent and *Plan 9* fit only to be laughed at. Wooden acting, moronic script, collapsible props (wobbling flying saucers are clearly on strings) and general air of shambles – the film has them all.

And yet when you sit down for a smug sneer at this cross-dressing cretin and his illiterate kitsch, you can end up feeling that the joke's on you.

The description of the film above is correct. This is no unsung masterpiece: at best – very best – it's a chaotic exploitation of the flying saucer craze and the paranoid invasion movies of the time. If there's a plot, it's that aliens are resurrecting dead people as part of an invasion attempt, but within minutes we've forgotten the story for one ham-fisted scene after another. A "ghoul man" keeps his face hidden to prevent us seeing that he is not Bela Lugosi (who died before shooting) but a chiropractor named Tom Mason. "Vampira" (Maila Nurmi), playing (you'll never guess this one) a vampire is ham on legs, but then so is just about everyone who speaks or staggers before the camera. There

is certainly enough portentous dialogue to cause you (if you are so inclined) to want to bite your own head off: "My friends, can your hearts stand the shocking facts about grave robbers from outer space?"; "They attacked a town, a small town I'll admit, but nevertheless a town of people, people who died." The cast don't so much act as declaim their dialogue as if they are trying to shake it out of their minds in case it takes root there.

And yet...and yet...

Wood never was a brilliant director who was wrecked by the material he had to work with. He was responsible for the material he had to work with. He was probably never even a good director. But he was almost certainly a man whose vision far exceeded his grasp, rather than a cynical hack who had no vision at all or a technically slick but emotionally empty one. It sounds damning with the faintest of praise to offer up the opinion that *Plan 9* isn't actually the worst film ever made, but shoddy is not the same as complete turkey. There are plenty of films with the basic plot of aliens invade the Earth with the help of whatever household implements a special effects budget of approaching zero force you to use, and basically Wood was following a time-honoured fashion of producing trash for an audience who were more interested in feeling each other up at the drive-in than analysing the auteur concept of movie direction. Who, in the end, cares?

Except that maybe Ed Wood himself cared. I have no idea if the Wood of Tim Burton's biopic *Ed Wood* (1994) is an accurate reflection of the real Wood's character, but he seems to have been a complex individual who, whatever his level of talent and the shock his audience



wanted, wanted to produce good films and fell apart because he couldn't.

"Outsider Art" is a term sometimes used to describe a large range of non-traditional artists from "naïve" painters like the Franchman Henri "Douanier" Rousseau (1844-1910) to the traditional art of "native peoples". At other times, it is used as a label for the art of people who might be considered insane, such as the American janitor Henry Darger (1892-1973) who spent most of his life working on a vast sf/fantasy text (illustrated with his own paintings) called *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is known as the Realm of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. Darger, who seems to have been either autistic, suffering from childhood abuse, or both, is one of the most interesting examples of "outsider art", but there are others such as the Swiss Adolf Wölfli.

While such art is characterised by a lack of technical training, it's frequently visionary, to the point that many such artists have been hailed by some sections of the art

world as geniuses. It's a lot easier to point to visual artists – painters, sculptors and the like, as such figures. A moment's thought would seem to suggest that film, with its essentially collaborative nature (even if writers, directors, producers and actors are all scrapping like cats and dogs, the point is that there is a team) is hard to slot into this kind of vision of disturbed personal intensity. Much easier to believe that Ed Wood was an incompetent working with a bunch of other incompetents and crooks, and to go for cheap laughs at the cack-handedness of his oeuvre. But watching *Plan 9* makes you wonder about outsiders. A bad film like *The Phantom Menace* is simply a bad film; one that I have no desire to watch again. The technical skill behind it makes its lack of imagination all the more annoying. But *Plan 9*, produced with no apparent skill whatsoever, seems to pull you into it. It's not dull, it's aiming for something, and failing.

But every time I watch it there's a part of me that so desperately wants Wood to succeed.

Andy Sawyer



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