

REVIEW OF THE BRITISH NEW WAVE OF SCIENCE FICTION

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This year is the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Barefoot in the Head* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*, key texts in the so-called 'new wave' of British science fiction. Although partly a radical literary reaction to the turbulent events of the 1960s, the new wave's influence lives on in such modern writers as Haruki Murakami, Martin Amis, Will Self, William Gibson, China Mieville, Iain Sinclair and Alan Moore.

In *Conversations*, the late great JG Ballard describes post-war Britain as "the triumph of bourgeois values and conservatism ... a sort of deadness in the air" (Ballard 134). The writing of that period – whether parochial social realism or the commercialized last gasps of modernism – was, by the 1960s, unable to grapple with the immense changes sweeping society.¹ A new technological landscape was being formed by the advent of space travel, Concorde, colour television and video conferencing. Relations between young people were altered forever by the legalization of abortion and the contraceptive pill. Prime Minister Macmillan's claim that 'You've never had it so good' referred to social mobility and a huge expansion in university education, exposing a whole new generation to progressive ideas, political and otherwise. The use of psychotropic drugs amongst the youth also became widespread (Miles 89).

In 1963 Michael Moorcock became editor of the trailblazing *New Worlds* magazine. Around him formed a caucus of authors including Ballard, Brian W. Aldiss, Barrington J. Bayley and M John Harrison, all zealously committed to finding new ways of expressing this new world. The genre they created was an avant-garde form of science fiction characterized by philosophical enquiry, experimentation and controversy. All three of these traits were epitomized by JG Ballard's series of vignettes (which is almost certainly too pleasant a description) – first published in *New Worlds* and other journals – that would later be assembled into the anti-novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*. 'Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan', a parodic scientific report on how images of the future US President induce psychosexual fantasies in people, became the subject of an obscenity trial when it appeared in pamphlet form. One imagines that the establishment was piqued by lines such as: "In assembly-kit tests Reagan's face was uniformly perceived as a penile erection" (Ballard 45). One American publisher wrote of Ballard, "this man is beyond psychiatric help. Do not publish" (Ballard 212). Aside from his shock tactics, Ballard's point about the aestheticisation of politics by the mass media was prescient and arguably means more to us today in our age of PR and spin doctors. The postmodern punchline to this saga came when pranksters distributed the story at the 1980 Republican Convention that was to nominate Reagan for the election. According to Ballard, the less intelligent delegates missed the irony and took the story to be an endorsement of their candidate! (Ballard 215). The real achievement of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, however, is in its exploration of how media imagery was beginning to saturate human consciousness in the heady days of the 1960s, endorsing Ballard's own epigram that "external reality is a fiction" (Ballard 28). The horror of the Vietnam war, in which over 3 million were to die, was being transformed by the conventions of television into a kind of entertainment beamed into every suburban lounge². Events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the Moonlanding came to be elevated by the media into a mythology to rival that of the ancients. Along with *Ulysses* by Joyce and *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, *The Atrocity Exhibition* is a classic experimental novel in both form and content, eschewing the normal temporal and spatial rules of narrative fiction and resisting traditional literary analysis. From our modern vantage point, it seems that perhaps Ballard understood better than any other writer how the human condition has been reshaped by the warp-speed changes our societies have undergone since World War II.

Brian W. Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* is set in a near-future Europe that has been carpet-bombed with hallucinogenic drugs. The experience of those affected is aped by the very fabric of the novel, its language slowly breaking down into a kind of fragmentary poetry. However, *Barefoot in the Head* isn't just a frenzy of flip hedonism, it was written at a time when there was still a great deal of faith in the intellectual possibilities of drugs. With reference to such rebel thinkers as Aldous Huxley, CG Jung and GI Gurdjieff, Aldiss suggests a fuller, more nuanced picture of reality than Newtonian physics can allow. For example, in one sequence, the protagonist Charteris is able to perceive alternative futures for himself playing out all at once (Aldiss 67).

There is a direct link here to the work of acid guru and author of *Food of the Gods*, Terence McKenna, who visited shamanic tribal cultures in South America and Asia to study their ritual usage of psilocybin mushrooms and dimethyltryptamine, both of which McKenna became a great advocate. His conclusion was that "psychedelics address a deeper level of human neurological organisation. They reveal the brain and its function unconfined by cultural norms and expectations" (McKenna 144). The power of drugs to invoke an absolutely personal and unique experience in people while reconnecting them to nature, led McKenna to a Romantic individualist philosophy³. This was clearly at odds with the mores of 'advanced' technological societies dependent upon strict binaries that ignore ambiguity and contingency: good/bad, light/dark, black/white, male/female and so on. Heroin-addicted Beat writer William Burroughs, a godfather of the new wave, called this the "either/or error" (Burroughs & Hibbert 55). At roughly the same time across the English channel, Jacques Derrida was developing his deconstruction theory to oppose such Manichean systems⁴.

Although this paper has thus far focused on the British scene, at least one American new wave writer must be discussed: Philip K. Dick. Formally he was very much the pulp storyteller, but his ideas were just as outré as his British counterparts. As Emmanuel Carerre's excellent biography *I Am Alive and You Are Dead* explains, Dick suffered from paranoia all his life caused by mental illness and compounded by external events such as McCarthyism and the later FBI surveillance campaign COINTELPRO. Unsurprisingly then, if there is one recurring theme throughout his fiction, it is a constant obsessive questioning of the nature of reality. In *The Penultimate Truth*, American citizens have relocated to an underground city in the belief that

they must build armaments for a world war that is happening above ground. In fact, that war ended a long time ago but it suits the cynical aims of the elite powers to sustain the fantasy of its continuation. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (filmed as *Bladerunner* in 1982), another world war has wiped out almost every living thing on Earth. As a result, corporations have begun manufacturing robot simulations of animals for human survivors to keep as pets. However, there are also simulated humans (androids) who are out of control and pose a criminal threat to society. Extremely dark and, in places, extremely funny, *Androids* explores what it actually means to be a human or any kind of animate being. In this novel as in many of his others, Dick toys with the reader's expectations, setting up a situation or presenting a case which at first seems absolutely convincing but then is later revealed to be a conspiratorial lie or subjective misperception.

The new wave transformed science fiction from a generally conservative and melioristic genre into one of the truly progressive movements in modern literature. Criticisms of SF for its low-brow escapism could no longer hold water after the 1960s. As our world becomes stranger, more volatile, more unpredictable, the visions of Ballard, Moorcock, Aldiss and others seem more powerful today than ever before.

ENDNOTES

¹For an illuminating discussion of the modish forms of literature that the new wave defined itself in opposition to, see this online interview with Michael Moorcock: <http://www.aural-innovations.com/robertcalvert/collab/collabmain/moorcock.htm>

²During that period many theorists were discussing the socio-psychological effects of television and the mass media, among them Marshall McLuhan, Jack Burnham and Harley Parker.

³One finds intellectual ancestry to McKenna's ideas in the work of William Blake who exulted nature over man-made industrial culture and interrogated dualistic epistemologies in such poems as 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'.

⁴Derrida states that the mission of Deconstruction was to "multiply the cautionary indicators and put aside all the traditional philosophical concepts" (Derrida 110).

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