

# *The Future Fire*

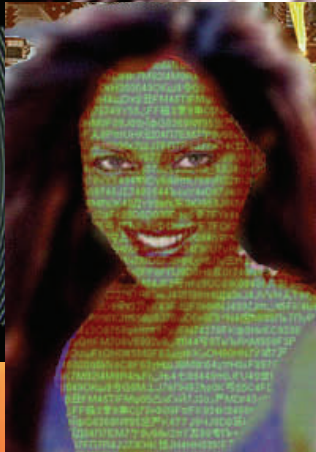
New Writing in Speculative Fiction and Dark Fantasy

Issue 2005.01

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WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU THOUGHT YOU'D BEEN CLONED?



Fiction by Johann Carlisle  
Interview with Kevin Warwick

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# The Future Fire: Issue 2005.01

## New Writing in Speculative Fiction and Dark Fantasy

To invent stories about a world other than this one has no meaning at all, unless an instinct of slander, belittling, and suspicion against life is strong in us: in that case, we avenge ourselves against life with a phantasmagoria of another, a better life.

(F. Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*)

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Welcome.

The maiden issue of *The Future Fire*, a free internet magazine of new writing in the dark, speculative, and fantasy genres, dated January 2005. The theme of this first issue—in as much as there is a theme above our own tastes—is the limits of the human: we have a story narrated by an ancient werewolf; an interview with a real Cyborg; a speculation piece on the virtual celebrity; reviews of books on witchcraft and the posthuman, a brand new independent film starring a cloned child, and of a range of fiction in book and film.

We invite you to enter, browse, read, enjoy and think. And if you feel inspired to comment, criticise, or contribute, then we should be delighted to hear from you. This magazine can only continue to exist and thrive with your help.

Djibril, general editor  
January 2005

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Ixthus, fiction editor

## ‘The Wolf Behind the Sun’, Johann Carlisle



I am cold and empty; everything is torpid and listless as the most depressing of days, when the bitterest hunger and the promise of food is not enough to incite me to move. The irony is that even had I the motivation to move I could not now: I am as cold and powerless as a corpse. It is not passion that I lack, it is life.

The last time I moved myself was the night I met the sorcerer. I was hunting in the dark woods close to my home on an icy and

hungry winter night. Glacial conditions had made prey thin on the ground, and I was forced to go close to the edges of the forest, closer to the realms of human-kind than I normally dared. A hollow cold in my belly made me desperate; I would chase any prey that I spotted.

I became aware of a man in the woods, a hunter who seemed to be stalking the same prey as I. I was unconcerned: what human was ever as strong a hunter as I? The smell of fear excites me as much as blood feeds my body. We do not much enjoy the taste of human flesh, but their fear is the sweetest of all. People hereabouts had long learnt to fear the big, black, man-killing wolf that I was.

But this man was a sorcerer and he did not fear me; he was not after the same prey as I, but was hunting me. This was his hunt and I did not kill him. He stripped the coarse skin from my quivering flesh, and ate my still-beating heart. My entrails, flesh and bones he left for the scavengers. I do not sleep; I hang upon the wall of his tent. My hunger has never abated, but as I have no energy I shall never eat.

### **The Spy**

I let my heavy cloak flap behind me in the wind; it was not a cold night but I was wearing a long woollen shirt and my sword strapped at my shoulder. A cap of weasel's fur sat snugly on my head: I felt warm and secure, although I had on

no metal armour. I was only escorting my father, the herald, to the tent of General Hector, but I felt ready for action.

We entered the tent, and my father bowed respectfully to the general; I stood in the background, observing, and my failure to show homage went unnoticed. Hector was wearing only a cloak on this warm night, and it was the first time I had seen our great commander naked. His body was strong, beautiful, masculine and every inch a warrior, but the hero who led our armies was clad in gleaming armour and borne on a great chariot. He looked so weak to me now; it was distressing to know that under the armour our indomitable leader was soft, mortal flesh.

"How are my services required at this time of night?" my father asked; he was concerned that this was an unusual hour for a herald to be called.

"Go to the tent of General Sarpedon of the Lycians," Hector replied. "Tell him to muster his most valiant officers and send them to me: I need a volunteer for a desperate mission. Then go and tell the same to General Aineias of Dardania, Pandaros of the Zeleans, Adrestos of..."

"What is the desperate mission?" I asked boldly, stepping out of the shadows as I interrupted the general's tedious catalogue.

"Who are you?" the mighty Prince Hector frowned, aware of my presence for the first time.

"This is my son Dolon," my father said quickly and nervously. An officer, a big man who looked familiar but I could not have named, spoke up.

"I saw him fight opposite the Phthians before that army withdrew, my lord," this man said. "He acquitted himself like a hero; I believe he had it in mind to face their immortal prince, if Fate would allow it."

"He would have died like a fool," another officer muttered.

"I would take the chance, if you would not," I said boldly, meeting the man's gaze.

"The mission is this," Hector said, heading off the confrontation. "I want a man to enter the enemy camp this night and learn if there are any plans to move against us tomorrow. We are too close to victory to take any chances."

"What would be my reward if I were to undertake this mission?" I asked, ignoring my father's discomfort.

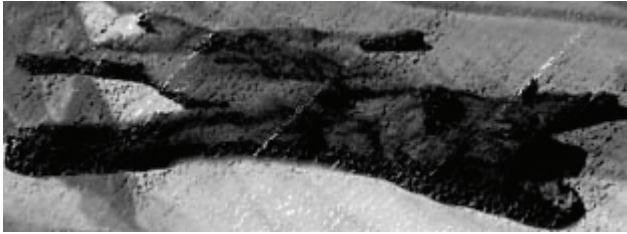
"What would you ask?" Hector said.

"The magical horses of the Prince of Phthia," I replied without hesitation, holding my breath. I had longed to get my hands on those beasts as soon as I learnt of their existence.

"If you return to me with the news I seek," Hector said, pleased with my boldness, "those horses shall be yours when we defeat the Achaians." He made a ritual gesture: "May the Sunlord protect you." This prayer was echoed by several devout voices; they all felt how much I needed his assistance.

So my father went away alone, and I returned to my tent to equip for this desperate mission. As I left the general's tent, I overheard the big officer say something about the newcomer, King Rhesos of Thrace.

## The Wolf



The sorcerer returns to me, takes me in his arms, caresses my skin gently and tenderly. He mutters words to me in his human tongue, his voice exuding love, intimacy and bonding. His passion seems genuine, but his words mean nothing to me; my consciousness is barely stirred by his attention. He can do nothing more to me now; he can not hurt the tanned hide of a black wolf. Laying me carefully beside him on the bedding, he disrobes and lies naked beside me, skin against skin, hair against hair.

His flesh is hard, his skin tingles, his breaths are short and excited. I can smell his juices start to flow as he presses against me. As his smooth chest rubs my coarse fur his nipples are proud and erect. He gasps softly, kissing my hard teeth. His strong thighs crush my hindquarters. His flesh throbs as hard, fragrant genitals, full of blood, respond to the passion in his breast. Groaning again, he rolls over so I am on top of him. I start to feel the most perverse lust I have ever known.

No stinking bitch in heat ever aroused me like this; never was the bleeding meat of a gentle doe so desirable; never did the sick fear of a hunted human inspire bloodlust this violent. For the first time in so many moons since I was killed, I am, I feel, I move, and I live. Bonding this closely with the sorcerer I know his fears, his thoughts, his wants, ambitions, insecurities and his greed. Then we both forget them all. The blood is all, life is all, lust is all. We are one.

## The Werewolf

I am one.

Flying from the tent, my preternatural muscles carry me effortlessly out of the Trojan camp, past the Lycian sentries unnoticed. I recognise the good portent of this: our allies the Lycians are a Wolf-Totem people. A lone figure is picking among the dead of yesterday's battlefield; a corpse robber pillaging the helpless bodies of their petty valuables. A flash of contemptuous anger is soon flooded by my furious desire for his blood. Immediately I am upon him and he can do nothing but utter a pitiful, strangled cry.

His throat is within my jaws; flesh as soft as water is rent between my teeth. My claws tear his body. Limbs fall to the bloody earth. Empty eyes stare as his head rolls and I drink the blood from his struggling heart.

He is dead and I am still hungry. I press on toward the enemy camp. Fires are burning and many men seem to be awake, but the fall of a lone sentry marks my passing. I barely pause, leaving his dismembered body unrecognisable behind me. My

hunger is still vicious and consuming, but the prudence of my human side holds it in check.

Slinking between the tents like a living shadow, I can pass within inches of a vigilant Achaian, and remain unseen. Listening always, attentive for any eager messenger or important officer, any quiet council or discreet word passed in the foreign tongue of these filthy invaders. From a shadow I recognise a general pass me, followed by four noble soldiers. This is the commander of the Kephallenians, a man I hate more than Dark Death himself, and fear as a prudent beast is wary of humans.

With a ravenous cry I spring from the shadows and take out the throat of the nearest soldier. Dark blood sprays and taints the whole scene scarlet. The next man screams as my jaws close loudly, crunching his skull. As a third life pours blood into my throat, I see the face of my enemy glowing red in the light of a hot fire. His eyes are hard but unafraid; I feel that I have not surprised this poisonous, dangerous man. He is at the heart of whatever mischief is planned this night.

The last soldier is still between us when my enemy raises his arms and cries out; we are surrounded by warriors. He knew I was here; he knows who I am. I devour the heart of the first man to stand before me, splash the blood of another all over the ground. The fire sizzles and spews sparks as another smitten assailant falls onto it, dead too soon to cry at the pain. But my enemy is backing away. Desperate men stand between us.

A stabbing-spear's sharp point pierces my pelt. I am not hurt but human instinct makes me back away. I dodge another thrust, taste the bitter blood of the over-keen man behind it. A circle of wooden spears desperately endeavour to keep a murderous black wolf at bay, but they dare not come too close for fear of these limb-rendering jaws. A shaft is thrown by an audacious soldier.

I rise to my full height upon my human hindquarters, catch the spear in flight and return it to its owner, who gratefully receives it in his thorax and drops to the earth too stunned to see the dark cloud of death fall upon his eyes. Supernatural terror takes the



soldiers as they see I am no ordinary wolf. Their panic gives me the edge as I fall upon them, avoiding their frightened spears and shattering their soft bodies.

My enemy is before me again. My gaping maw lunges, eager to end the evil machinations of that poisonous mind. I am upon him, but before I know it his solid silver blade is in my heart, freezing my passion and stealing my strength.

### **The Spy**

The Kephallenian had out-manoeuvred me again, stealing victory from before my very eyes. Blinded by the passion of the wolf, I did not see his silver sword—the only weapon I had to fear—until it was too late.

"Save me, Sunlord!" I cried, turning in desperation to the god of my people. But it was night, and the Kephallenian's victorious sneer told me that the Sunlord was powerless. He twisted the blade in my heart, and as he watched me die his eyes seemed to mock my grieving father.

### **The Wolf**

This man is much stronger than the greedy little sorcerer who loved me and inhabited my skin. Now he possesses me, and he does not love me; he abuses me to assert his power, because he fears me. I have no respect for this bitter man; I do not want him in my skin, but I can not reject him. I would rip out his heart at the cost of my own life, but he is strong and I dare not try. His language is as incomprehensible to me as that of the other human, but as he speaks with his confederates I lie on the floor beside his seat and can feel some of his cares.

He fears that a new enemy among my greedy spy's people will take the field tomorrow and drive the invaders from the land. His motives mean little to me; these people mean nothing to me; their war is as insignificant to me as it is to all of nature, to the earth and to the gods. Not a hair on the Dark Wolf's back is affected by this petty squabble between mortals.

All I know is that I was dead, I was hungry but had neither power to reason nor desire to move. I was dead, but a greedy sorcerer made me live again. Living, I fed, I filled my gut and my heart, I felt passion, joy, lust and the satisfaction of my hunger. Now I am dead again and another sorcerer has need of my skin. Soon I may feed again.

### **The Enemy**

It was decided: I should go into the Trojan camp to learn how true were the stories we had heard about Rhesos of Thrace, and to wreak whatever damage I could to the enemy in the meantime. As the generals left me, I prayed that Maiden Victory would aid me better tonight than the Sunlord would his people. With a thrill of anticipation and fear I considered the wolf-skin on the ground beside me. How long I had known of the shape-shifting pelts, but never had one in my possession! With this challenge I stood at the climax of my magical experimentation: trickery and prestidigitation<sup>7</sup> behind me, I was ready to risk my life

with the sinister craft of lycanthropy.

I reached down and with trembling touch, clothed myself in the skin of the black werewolf.

### **The Werewolf**

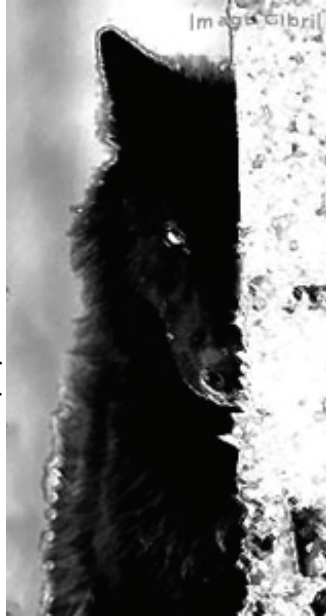
I dash from the allied camp, past the sentries like an invisible herald of death. A sleek shadow single-mindedly crosses the bloody field of yesterday's carnage. I pass the Lycian sentries unseen, not stopping to feed lest I raise some alarm. At the door of the newcomer general's tent two Thracian guards stand at ease, feeling no need to be afraid in the heart of a friendly army. Their blood mixes, silently spraying the ground and the front of the tent. I gulp down a mouthful of brains and lope inside.

The tales were true; inside this great tent a team of magical horses are stalled. Only the famous steeds of Rhesos of Thrace can rival those of our sulky Phthian ally. A young stable-hand sleeps; when he wakes

I am swallowing his tongue, and before he can scream I tear out his heart and lungs. Any other horses would be screaming and stamping in my feral, magical presence, but these Thracian animals are unperturbed. They will be mine.

Further inside the great tent, beyond a wall of stiff cloth, hangs the newcomer general's golden armour, shining like the sun: it has been blessed by Hector's priests of the Sunlord. A dozen men sleep on crude beds in this chamber; Rhesos shares his officers' barracks. I guess that the golden-bearded giant snoring softly is the general, but just to be sure I fall upon the whole group with a hungry roar and begin killing.

A bloodthirsty orgy of flesh-tearing, limb-rending and life-





stealing. A severed arm lands in the general's lap, waking him. A splash of hot brains wets his beard. Men scream as I bury my snout in their viscera and then tear them in half to get loose. Their fear of death fills me with lust and frenzy. Wet flesh, hot blood, sweet entrails and crunching bones become a delicious dance. I move among them, sharing their screams and their death-passions, until I realise that they are all dead, and the general must be among them.

As soon as my bestial passions subside my human cowardice takes over, and I flee the sleeping-chamber, seizing the golden Sun-armor as I pass. More soldiers have come to investigate the slaughter, but my bloodthirsty instinct is repressed now, killing is no longer my priority. I leap, with all my wolf-agility but in human shape, on the back of the magical Thracian horses, and I drive them past the frightened guards. With animal single-mindedness we leave the Trojan camp behind.

### **The Wolf**

The sorcerer has cast me aside like an old coat; I am glad to have him out of my skin. His human mind was more poisonous than that of the greedy little man, his evil of a different colour to my own. Far better to care nothing for others, than to rejoice in their misfortune because it makes one feel less wretched. The sorcerer felt an ugly joy at his enemies' downfall, not because it spelt victory for himself but because he could gloat upon their distress. I feed upon the life and fear of my prey because it strengthens me; he kills in order to feel superior to his foe.

Now I am an empty skin again, with nothing to suggest that I am not merely a rug. But although I am cold and tired and empty, I have fed and known pleasure since I died. I am asleep, but I am not dead. I shall wait—a long time if I have to—but I know I shall rise again, with another body, or alone. I shall feed again.

## Interview with the Cyborg

Kevin Warwick is Professor of Cybernetics at the University of Reading. [\[Web page.\]](#) He is best known for the Project Cyborg experiments in which he has had electronic devices implanted into his body, enabling him to communicate with computer equipment using neural signals. He has also appeared widely in the media speaking on topics as diverse as Artificial Intelligence, robots, and life on other planets, and he gave the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures in 2000. He has not been afraid to court controversy as well as accolade through his work. Professor's Warwick's recent books include [I, Cyborg](#) (2002) and [QI: The Quest for Intelligence](#) (2000). *The Future Fire* spoke to him.



**Future Fire:** How did you first become involved in Cybernetics? What was your motivation in undertaking 'cyborg' research?

**Kevin Warwick:** As a teenager I was always excited by the possibility. In fact I read a book by Michael Crichton, *The Terminal Man*, about a guy who had electrodes pushed into his brain. I thought about the actual possibilities. Now to be in a position to actually carry out research where we are not sure at all what is around the corner is tremendous.

**FF:** Can you explain briefly the difference between 'hard' and 'soft' AI? Does either exist yet?

**KW:** Long answer needed: roughly though—hard AI is the view that a computer will be able to fully simulate the operation of the human brain; soft AI is the view that a complete simulation is not possible, but that some aspects can be copied. Soft AI exists, but hard AI is more of a futuristic viewpoint. I have to say though that my own view is somewhat different. I am more interested in what sort of intelligence a machine can exhibit in its own right—I guess that is neither a hard or soft viewpoint.

**FF:** Let's rephrase the question, then: do you think the Turing-test kind of 'hard' AI is a realistic goal, or even a useful goal? What would you use the term 'computer intelligence' to denote, if we avoid speaking simply in terms of imitating the human mind, or anthropomorphising computers?

**KW:** Computer/machine intelligence is what I am really interested in, so for me the Turing test is merely an interesting aside, a parlour game, but not particularly important in the grand scheme of things. Machine intelligence is then all about how machines can be intelligent, which depends what the machine is doing, how it perceives the world etc. (See my book *QI* for more on this.)

**FF:** Project Cyborg: tell me briefly why it is so important? What major breakthroughs have been achieved by this project.

**KW:** On the one hand it can potentially help people who are paralysed—for example I was able to control a wheelchair directly from neural signals. On the other hand it opens up the possibility of upgrading all humans—extra sensory input (ultrasonic) worked successfully—so it will be good to look at what other senses we can have. As part of the experiment I was able to communicate with my wife telegraphically nervous system to nervous system—in the future with brain implants this will be thought communication.

**FF:** What other essential research is or should be being undertaken in the field of Cybernetics?

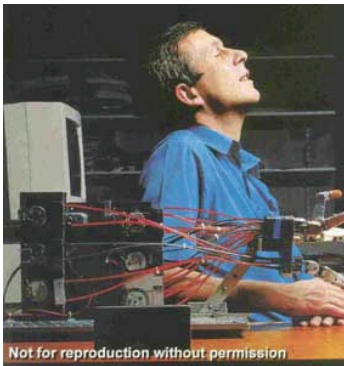
**KW:** The exciting stuff as far as I am concerned will turn up from either Brown University, from John Donaghue or Emory from Philip Kennedy: both have been researching into the use of implants in humans, in different ways. Could be some good stuff from my own lab of course—eg. the new paper just out in the IEE Proceedings - Communications. This describes the communication with my wife and communication across the internet between New York and Reading (UK).

**FF:** Tell me more about this thought-communication: what sorts of information were you able to transmit to your wife? Were either of these experiments controlled in any way?

**KW:** We transmitted motor neural signals between nervous systems in a telegraphic form of communication. The experiment was carried out in front of a selected group of scientists and media folk.

**FF:** What other sorts of human modifications could this sort of technology make possible? You've talked about wheelchair control for the paralysed; could we also see prosthetic limbs that can be controlled via neural links rather than crude muscular movements as today? Would this be preferable to the recent advances in limb transplantation, which involve immunosuppressant drugs to be taken for life?

**KW:** Yes; but also the limb does not have to be connected to the body to be controlled by neural/brain signals.



**FF:** If the brain can communicate with a computer, can we see telepathic connection to networks, one day? (I'm thinking of the Larry Page "Google implant" story, but also more serious applications.) What would be the advantages and disadvantages of this technology? What applications can you think of for thought communication?

**KW:** See the following paper: K. Warwick, M. Gasson, *et al.*, 'Thought Communication and control: a first step using radiotelegraphy', *IEEE Proc.-Commun.* vol. 151, 2004, 185-188 [[online](#)—subscription required]. From the abstract: "A signalling procedure is described involving a connection, via the Internet, between the nervous system of an able-bodied individual and a robotic prosthesis, and between the nervous systems of two able-bodied human subjects. Neural implant technology is used to directly interface each nervous system with a computer. Neural motor unit and sensory receptor recordings are processed real-time and used as the communication basis. This is seen as a first step towards thought communication, in which the neural implants would be positioned in the central nervous systems of two individuals."

Yes: certainly thought communication is a possibility. We have to consider mem-

ory uploads/downloads as well. As for an application of thought communication—I feel this is something we will see generally available in the future. A new way of communicating (bit like when the telephone was introduced). Memory downloads of course change the face of education. Who needs lectures any more?

**FF:** In your web-site you talk about the Cyborg as an "evolution" from current levels of humanity. Evolutionists recognise that there is nothing intrinsically 'good' or even desirable in natural selection (nor 'bad' or undesirable, of course). Just because something is possible, does that mean we should automatically do it?

**KW:** Not at all. I feel we would have to want to do something like this in big numbers. I feel the advantages are enormous, so when the technology is more readily available then many will go for it. So it is upgrading because we want to.

**FF:** Is this not a rather amoral stance? (Compare for example the extreme case of performance-enhancing drugs in sports: left to their own devices almost all athletes would end up using these, but sports bodies rightly forbid this.) What I'm getting at is, don't the advantages need to be weighed against possible disadvantages to decide if something is desirable?

**KW:** As for the morals of upgrading or not, I think these need to be discussed in reality. We need to discover if anyone is against it, or not. I have my opinion, but the opinions of (all) others need to be voiced. There are commercial gains to be made (by someone). As you say there could be problems for those who do not wish to be upgraded. But should they be able to stop others going ahead with it? We need to open up the discussion.

**FF:** Can you imagine a situation where public opinion (or a change of mind on your part) suggests that Cyborg research is dangerous—would you cease researching this area in that case?

**KW:** If there was strong ethical opinion against then of course I would cease. However I would try to persuade gently with my own opinion as I feel we would be leaving many paraplegics in a state that they do not need to be, ie by making such a decision we would be ignoring the possibilities of helping a lot of people. That, to me, is not a particularly good ethical situation—we have the technology to help some disabled people but we do not use it. I think I would have difficulties associating with such a society.

**FF:** How do the technologies of AI and the Cyborg inter-relate? If the one is making computers more like humans (in a limited sense), and the other is making people more like machines, will they meet somewhere in the middle? Or are they somehow contradictory processes that may come into conflict?

**KW:** There is a range of research going on. AI is really one aspect/area of cybernetics. Some AI is aimed at making robots/computers think like humans (albeit in a limited way as you suggest), other (my own) is more aimed at getting robots/computers to think for themselves, in their own (machine) way. My own research is then involved with combining the best of both worlds (human and machine) to form an upgraded amalgam. Improving people by linking them directly with machine technology. Hopefully they will blend together (first indications are that this will be the case). One big reason for going this way is the potential human v. intelligent machine conflict if we do not go this route.

In merging the two systems together, the human brain is very good at cherry picking. If an extra sense or ability is not useful (a bit of a chore) then the human brain will (I believe) tend to ignore that possibility, whereas if it is deemed to be beneficial/useful then it will be welcomed both mentally and physically. The human brain is a mercenary (in a general sense) organ.

**FF:** Many thanks for your time, Professor Warwick, and for sharing some of your fascinating vision of the future.

## ‘Idol Singer: the virtual celebrity’, by Djibril

William Gibson, in his novel *Idoru* (1996), articulated a modern cultural phenomenon by making the Japanese singer Rei Toei totally artificial, existing only in the memory banks of her parent company's computer systems. 'Idoru' is the Japanese rendering of the English word 'idol'; the word is used of pop icons, the "idol singers" who have little or no control over their own music or image but are the tools of their producers and usually disappear as quickly as they appear. Such puppets have always existed in the West too, with striking examples including Motown, Stock-Aitken-Waterman, the winners of "talent" shows, etc., but the phenomenon is apparently particularly striking in Japan.

Gibson's Rei Toei went one step further: she was not and never pretended to be a human being. Her voice, music, and videos were all synthesised, and even her creative output was software-generated. However, she was an artificial intelligence in her own right, not merely a glossy front for the creative talents of her producers. She created her own artistic material by "dreaming" music videos and the like; she had a recognisable personality and was able to make decisions, marry, and eventually (in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, 2000) manipulate media and science to take on a physical form.

We are obviously far from this technology, as far as the AI is concerned, but modern cinematic (and gaming) computer-generated effects almost make this sort of imitation star possible. The ability to imitate a human is of course not the most interesting feature of an artificial intelligence, but that is a different story. I find more fascinating the phenomenon whereby the public is willing to idolise a synthetic entity. Could an entirely and openly virtual star become a successful actor or celebrity, with a loyal following, longevity, range and some degree of independence? It is probably only a matter of time.

For some reason almost all the examples we have to discuss are female. This is no doubt partly the geek effect, as predominantly male computer types like to fantasise about beautiful females. There is a large measure of the objectification of women in this phenomenon too, as a virtual star can be perfect: most of the most successful and idolised women in the movies, as in music, are young and beautiful, while men in the same businesses can be of a much wider range of ages and appearances. (I would not claim there are no exceptions, of course, nor that objectified young and beautiful men do not also dominate the screens.) But it might be argued that a strong, female fantasy character can be empowering in her own right—which is not to negate the importance of the above observations.

In the 2002 Hollywood film *Simone*, the artificial celebrity's success is measured by her ability to fool the world into thinking she is human—on screen she is of course played by human actor Rachel Roberts (although credited as "Simone"). Her attraction in the eyes of Al Pacino's character, a film director

and her creator, is that unlike a human actor she has no personality, no temptation to interfere with the creative process, and therefore will perform precisely according to the director's vision of her role: she will play any part, change her appearance without complaint, perform nude scenes without charging extra fees, and so forth. Like Pygmalion, she is a male fantasy, the perfect, pliable woman. In short, she is a fraud: her appearance an amalgamation of the databank of classic actresses' faces, her movements an emulation of Pacino's own; she is designed to fool the world. (The technology required for all of this to work is of course futuristic, although—in the film—frankly unconvincing.) The twist is that even with the evidence out the world refuses to believe she is fake, but this paradox is never played out to its potential. In fact the film cops out of all the most interesting issues, such as an audience's tolerance for artificiality, and is ultimately a weak story, little better than romantic comedy at its worst.

More recently, the singer Shystie has been dubbed a "virtual celebrity" for appearing (in the form of a CGI sprite), in the car-modding computer game *Juiced*, for which she wrote the theme music. Whether players of this game would recognise the sprite as the singer or not, she is no more an artificial celebrity in our terms than any other computer game character, and in fact her existence in the "real" world makes Shystie significantly less artificial than Rei Toei.

Perhaps the most ambitious all-CGI movie to date was *Final Fantasy: the spirits within* (2001), a film that also derives from a series of successful computer games. It was rumoured at the time that the character of Aki Ross was intended to star in other films and become a virtual actress: the computer programme that generated Aki on-screen was a very sophisticated sprite, with physical contours capable of being clothed in different costumes, assuming any position, and a huge range of facial expressions and mouth movements generated on the basis of phoneme-by-phoneme shaping (her voice, on the other hand, was not synthesised but supplied in the film by the actress Ming Na). It is interesting to observe that even with all this technology, and although the film, while not photo-realistic in the strict sense, is clearly on a different level than a Dreamworks or Pixar animation, was never meant to fool an audience into thinking they were seeing real people and landscapes; within the limits of the suspension of disbelief, this illusion *is* maintained by even the most CGI-intensive live-action movie. All the landscapes and scenery in *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004), for example, were rendered with CGI, and although the film was given a deliberately retro, 60s TV-movie feel, the technology was largely convincing (if only the story and characters had been strong enough to carry the movie).

Of course the extremely expensive *Final Fantasy* was a disaster at the box office, perhaps in part because audiences were not ready for an artificial cast, but more likely, I believe, it was largely because the story and the characterisation were both very weak. The producer Sakaguchi is a game designer, and I think the company expected the amazing technological effects to be enough to carry this



film. They were not. The film made production company Square Pictures such a loss that they no longer make movies as an independent body, but have been trimmed down to the status of a special effects company. It is a shame, because *Final Fantasy* was really not such a bad film, all things considered. But even more so, it would have been nice to see if Aki Ross could have become a celebrity in her own right. (She started out well, appearing in a swimsuit in the centre pages of a gentleman's magazine, and soon even naked on the internet.)



A more successful celebrity is the computer-game character of Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* fame. In the two recent movies Lara is played by Angelina Jolie (not virtual!), and even the computer sprite was famously based on a series of real-life models: Rhona Mitra, Nell McAndrew, Lara Weller, Lucy Clarkson, and Jill de Jong; the game-sprite was voiced by Shelley Blade, Jonell Elliott, and Judith Gibbins. She has also appeared in a wide range of television commercials played by various actresses, including the Lucozade "Gone a bit Lara" series of adverts in which a whole series of women dress and act as Lara. Nevertheless it is probably true to say that more than any of these human models (even la jolie Angelina) it is the well-endowed sprite from the computer game who is memorable, who is recognised, who is the real celebrity. And she is undoubtedly completely synthetic.

We have not yet seen Lara Croft break out of the game medium in her digital form, however. The movies clearly do not count, and fan-authored animations and more or less artistic stills (including a vast range of nude Lara poses) do not constitute official publicity. She does offer evidence that a synthetic character can win an audience's loyalty, though; I am sure that the two *Tomb Raider* films, weak as they were, would not have attracted an audience at all if Lara was not a household name. (The game is sufficiently popular with all levels of gamers that the 'geek factor' can not account for it all. All sorts of people like to be Lara.)

Who then are the candidates for the Rei Toei-style virtual celebrity, if Aki is retired, Shystie is no more virtual than I am, and Lara is locked in a game? The biggest challenge may well be the synthetic voice, since audiences are far more forgiving of cartoon-like appearance than they are of unconvincing dialogue. Perhaps some of the most successful entrants into the Miss Digital World beauty contest (see <http://www.missdigitalworld.com/>) will break out into other media. The winner of the 2004 pageant, one Katty ko, is not really virtual as her physique is closely modelled on a living Chilean celebrity. One entrant however, who goes by the name of Kaya and is designed by Brazilian artist Alceu Baptista, is already projected to be a virtual star in her own right.



Not only can one find still "photographs" of Kaya on the artist's website (see <http://www.vetorzero.com.br/kaya/>), but he has provided animations (with voice) as well. Kaya's face is memorable, beautiful but deliberately imperfect with freckles, a snub nose and wide mouth (not the stereotypical caucasian nymph-features of most models), but she is not yet a household name, so not really a celebrity.

The social question of all our prospective virtual celebrities being female aside, there are three questions that are still to be addressed before we can truly have a digital "idoru" star of the modern media. (1) Is the technology ready to create this star's physique? We have seen near-realistic actors and computer game characters already, and the CGI in films like the recent *Star Wars* prequels creates characters that are meant to be entirely photo-realistic (if alien and fantastic). Animation is also just about there. Voice is another issue: so far almost all CGI characters are voiced by human actors, as the technology is still inadequate to replicate human emotional resonances in voice. (2) Is the world ready to start idolising a virtual person? The answer is probably yes, if only the character is convincing enough: we have been idolising cartoon characters from Mickey Mouse to Shrek, who is now completely digital. Once the voice is mastered, and digital film-makers start to take the story and adult audiences seriously, audiences will have no problem with this. (3) What does an artificial celebrity have to offer over a living, breathing actor with personality, imperfections and indiscretions to keep us interested? Is the only advantage to the producer, who can truly mould the star to his or her will, like Pygmalion/Simone, or does the audience gain from this in some way? It may be, of course, that the knowledge a star is artificial adds to her mystique, makes the fantasy so much more appealing; there is no limit to what you can imagine: she will not marry, have children, grow old and spoil your dreams...

There is clearly a place for the idoru in our world; it is quite possible that the truly virtual actor is already out there, but has just not made it to the big time yet. But it is nonetheless likely that no matter how artificial our entertainment is becoming, with digital enhancements to all aspects of the screen output, with overdubbed voices and models with airbrushed-out imperfections, that the human celebrity will always be with us as well.

## Book Reviews

**Dominique Babin, *PH1. Manuel d'usage et d'entretien du post-humain*. Paris: Flammarion, 2004. Pp. 252. ISBN 2082102793, €18.00.** Reviewed by Stefan Herbrechter, University of Leeds.

*PH1* – or Posthuman.1 – comes with a bright pink wrapper claiming: 'everything you will experience over the next few years unless you should have the rather ludicrous idea to die beforehand.'

This *User's Guide and Service Manual of the Posthuman*, as the subtitle explains, is part of a growing number of books published in France that explore the borderline between philosophy (or 'theory'), anthropology (or 'cultural studies'), 'popular' science and science fiction (other recent examples include Jean-Michel Truong, *Totalement inhumaine – essai*, 2001; Yves Michaud, *Humain, inhumain, trop humain – réflexions philosophiques sur les biotechnologies, la vie et la conservation de soi à partir de l'oeuvre de Peter Sloterdijk*, 2002; and Dominique Lecourt, *Humain, posthumain – la technique et la vie*, 2003).

The central premise and justification for a mixed approach that liberally fuses science fiction, film, popular culture, lived experience, social theory and speculative thought, is the idea of a paradigm shift in terms of the effects recent technological developments will have had on the individual and the idea of humanity as we know it (i.e. 'liberal humanism'). In a little section called 'Vous, cyborg [You, Cyborg]', Babin writes: 'Downloading consciousness onto computers, assembling bodies out of a variety of parts (human, pig, robot), neurological implants and personality-changing medicines... The meaning of what we refer to as 'I' is set to change radically in posthumanity' (137-138).

What *PH1* provides is a fairly complete and thoroughly entertaining account of a great variety of events, developments and changes in many areas that may have catapulted us into 'posthumanity'. In five chapters and one epilogue Babin groups these phenomena under the prefix 'post': Post-Death, Post-Body, Post-Ego, Post-Relation and Post-*Réalité* (interestingly all in English in the original except for the last one). 'Post-Death' provides a context for the crucial stage of current technological endeavours to overcome our 'outrageous human condition', our mortality and their effects on evolution. All the generations of currently living humans have to do is to 'hang in there' long enough to benefit from processes like cryogenics and nano-medical surgery. The strength of Babin's cultural anthropological approach is that it presents and integrates biological evolutionary aspects, psychological, culturalist and technological explanations of human development. Death, from an evolutionary point of view, has been beneficial to the survival and progression of the human species, a fact which, in modernity, has been entirely obliterated by increasing individualisation and the 'denaturalisation of death' (19). But not only the finality of death but also that of the ageing process is now being challenged by technology which allows us to understand ageing as an 'illness' (hence the slogan 'age kills – kill age'). However, all is not rosy in the

future geriatric paradise of the 'geriborgs' because huge social problems await a society and a world in which overpopulation and increasing longevity are contributing to environmental destruction, where resources are unequally distributed and access to technological development remains controlled by capital.

One of the major impediments on our way to posthumanity is the body which, consequently, becomes the main battleground for technophiles and technophobes. The chapter on 'Post-Body' describes on the one hand the increasing 'cyborgisation' of humanity – a fact, however, that may be as old as humanity itself – with its new medical questions about where to draw the line between reparative prostheticisation and artificial 'augmentation'. A specific example Babin discusses at some length is the present and future of doping in high-performance sports and everyday fitness practices. The idea of 'transgenic athletes' in the future is also linked to questions of eugenics of course. If the gene-technology is available why not 'pre-order your own copy' of the next world record holder in 100m? Certain genetic modifications involving the mixture of animal genes could help develop additional qualities that may extend human sportive or physical performance and could also create what Babin calls a kind of 'Body Shop of Art' (59) with further expansions of bioart and biotech gadgets like genetically modified, hypoallergenic cats for example. Science fiction cinema (like *Alien Resurrection*, or *Gattaca*) increasingly provides a 'forum for discourses on the impact of biotechnologies on society and nature' (71). Again the possibilities are not without problems: there will be winners and losers in a 'geneticist' environment in which 'genetic capital' may become as important or even more so than cultural, social and economic capital. Social competition will embrace 'genetic consumerism' as merely another phase of 'hyper-capitalism'. Not only is the boundary between human and machine becoming increasingly blurred but an extension of the ethical and political problematic (cf. for example Chris Hables Gray's manifesto for a 'Cyborg Bill of Rights', at <http://www.ugf.edu/CompSci/CGray/CYBILL.htm>) regarding the boundaries at the other end of the spectrum – i.e. human-animal – is equally to be expected, which may in fact create 'human subspecies'. 'Humanised' apes might for example be used as surrogate mothers for human babies, which, according to Babin, poses all sorts of ethical problems for a 'post-ape' society.

The effects of posthumanity on our understanding of identity may be even more profound at a psychological level. In 'Post-Ego', Babin explains, personality and consciousness, 'far from being a personal property... [are] a cultural and social saga, a collective fiction, a constantly changing construction that can be easily influenced and is hyper-receptive to technological advancements and fashions' (106). Theory has of course contributed to the deconstruction of the Cartesian ego but might now have been overtaken by technological developments and also psycho-spatial changes due to (cultural, media and economic) globalisation. What is curious in this context is that depersonalisation and individualism are in fact not opposed, which makes Foucault's notion of 'self-governing' rather difficult to sustain. How to face the ever-increasing hedonistic needs of a protean and

plastic ego which finds itself constantly threatened by postmodern 'multiphrenia', in a societal structure that is more and more weakened by individualistic ideologies? The 'tiredness of being oneself' (Ehrenberg) however poses fundamental existential questions that are reinforced by a huge 'disenchantment' that the bankruptcy of our old humanist beliefs has produced. The demythologising of intelligence, emotion and the 'self' as such, now all more or less explicable, analysable and hence manipulatable by a combination of neuroscience, biochemistry and nano-medicine leads to the question whether 'man' is not only not that different from other animals but may also be understood in quite machinic and mechanical terms. When the mystery of humanity and human 'genius' disappear the survival of the species may also be in danger. This leads to the question of 'our successor', 'Emergent Intelligences' and robotics.

The psychological changes to identity at an individual level as a result of technological development have to be seen in conjunction with changes affecting the social domain and hence our relation to others. In 'Post-Relation', Babin evaluates the effects of mobility, urbanisation, virtualisation and mediatisation which all lead to a decrease in importance of social exchange with a concrete other: 'the urban dweller who does no longer envisage participation as a necessity loses the experience of a common destiny. The other is no longer intimately similar to oneself. Our capacity for empathy, to feel that what happens to the other as if it happened to us diminishes considerably. The other becomes an abstraction' (150). It is the combination of neoliberal marketisation with its ideology of 'flexibility' and 'fluidity' which makes friendship, solidarity and stability appear obsolete. Posthuman relations are based on the narcissistic values of networks, social appeal and 'formatted' friendships (like e.g. self-help and dating groups, interactive robots, chatrooms, electronic toys, etc.) and an increased dematerialisation of exchange.

All the previous points contribute to a fundamental change of the perception we have of our environment and ourselves, our 'reality'. In 'Post-Réalité', Babin finally tackles the growing influence of the media and technologies of virtualisation. Cinema again plays a prominent role, namely in an in-depth analysis of *The Truman Show*. Babin accepts Baudrillard's diagnosis of the increasing disappearance of the real behind the precession of simulacra but, as cultural anthropologist she obviously claims that these simulations, these forms, are not without content and therefore have to be taken seriously and analysed rather than thrown into the dustbin of general nostalgic, nihilistic disengagement. Babin reopens the old but increasingly fascinating Marxian question whether 'cultural control can lead to social control' or whether 'controlling the cultural imaginary' leads to material and behavioural changes; and looks at some trends in 'hyper-contemporary' American society from Bush's presidential election to new ideal communitarian privatopias, the general expansion of the theme park model, retailtainment, urbantainment, lifies and the general sensationalisation of the self, the world and the cinema, new forms of pathologies like Attention Deficit Disorder, all of which contribute to

what she calls, 'existential zapping' (213). Infotainment, militainment and politainment are all signs of the increasing power of the thoroughly market-driven media combined with an ideology or 'imperative' of amusement. One effect of this development is the advent of the 'Governator', Arnold Schwarzenegger's election as governor of California as a reaction against a 'hijacking of politics by pressure groups'. It was the 'silent majority' that recognized itself in Schwarzie's 'I'll be back'. Incidentally, it is part of the delicious irony of this book that Babin should have dedicated it to Arnold Schwarzenegger.

*Ph1* is a fascinating synthesis of trends and questions that have been analysed in more details by the pioneers in posthumanist thinking – Donna Haraway, Katherine N. Hayles, Chris Hables Gray... However it impresses by its accessibility, the sheer amount of information and its sometimes disingenious, sometimes slightly cynical but rather friendly tone. It is an excellent 'user's manual' as long as one is not looking for ready-made instructions. But in order to make sense of what bears all the signs of a paradigm shift as big as the transition from antiquity to modernity it is a trustworthy critical companion. It does not side with either the 'catastrophists or techno-prophets' as Babin explains in an interview ([http://www.chronicart.com/mag/mag\\_article.php3?id=1215](http://www.chronicart.com/mag/mag_article.php3?id=1215)). Above all it does justice to the fact that in the muddy waters of posthumanity the imaginary boundary between fiction and reality is all but dissolved. In this respect the little 'semi-fictional' scenarios in between the 'factual' accounts are not only amusing epigraphs but an entire parallel discourse which talks about Dracula resuscitated by cloning and the creation of a huge vampire themepark in Transylvania; the recreational link-up between human and animal consciousness (and how a man in search for this kind of 'posthuman' experience 'becomes' an eagle and electrocutes his brains by flying into an electricity pylon); or the distress of a couple of parents at their son's decision to marry an ape (which they put down to the fact that he had a primate as his surrogate mother). But the whole extent of posthuman 'upheaval' may become tangible in this little episode:

Do you know what she did? She had an embryo implanted which was her own father's clone! Can you imagine! She says that he at least won't disappoint her! She divorces, says good-bye, and goes on to have her own father implanted, just like that! Five years of psycho-therapy that were so expensive they ate up half of our money and then she goes and has her father implanted into her!

**Stuart Clark & Bengt Ankarloo, edds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 6: The Twentieth Century*. London: The Athlone Press, 1999. Pp. xii, 244. ISBN 0485891050. £19.99 (UK); ISBN 0812217071. \$24.95 (US). Reviewed by J.G. Bodard, University of London.**

Contributors:

- Ronald Hutton, 'Modern Pagan Witchcraft', 1-79
- Jean La Fontaine, 'Satanism and Satanic Mythology', 81-140

- Willem de Blécourt, 'The Witch, her Victim, the Unwitcher and the Researcher: the continued existence of traditional witchcraft', 141-219
- Combined bibliography

This is the sixth and final book in the competently executed Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. Like most of the rest of the series, the three papers in this volume are academically rigorous and up-to-date, while maintaining a level of accessibility that makes the series valuable to scholars and laypeople alike.

The first essay, Hutton's 'Modern Pagan Witchcraft' (a shorter version of part of his magisterial *The Triumph of the Moon: A history of modern pagan witchcraft* that was published by Oxford University Press later the same year), is a history of the modern religious movement known as Wicca or Witchcraft which has grown in Britain and the US through the twentieth century. Hutton traces the origins of the religion in sources as diverse as the idealisation of pagan nature in Renaissance Europe, secret societies and initiatory mysteries such as Freemasonry, and the theories of folklorists such as Margaret Murray. He shows how these elements and others were forged into the Wiccan religion by groups led by people like Gerald Gardner, after the Second World War, combining spirituality, environmentalism, sexuality, and inventing or adapting rituals and initiatory rites; and finally traces the influence of progressive politics and especially feminism on the movement as it grew phenomenally in the US.

Hutton remains a professional historian throughout, detached from his material and prepared to be critical of the mythology and the now-discredited scholarship that inspired much of early Wicca (many such histories have been written by devotees or "witches" themselves). However, he is also deeply respectful of his sources—and any folklorist or ethnographer would do well to follow his example—and shows an appreciation of and respect for the mysteries he has witnessed in his research.

La Fontaine briefly traces the history of the Christian mythology of Satan and Satanism, including the development from supernatural agents of evil through to human servants of the Devil who can be persecuted as heretics (like the Cathars and Templars), witches, and criminals. This leads to a discussion of modern Satanist groups who practice a religion of self-empowerment, often in stark opposition to Christian philosophies, but neither criminals, agents of evil, nor abusers—this discussion includes Odinist and "Heathen" groups, especially in Scandinavia. Finally this essay treats the subject of "Satanic abuse mythology", the many accusations of human sacrifice or sexual abuse of children, very few cases of which have proved reliable, and even the few successful prosecutions being somewhat suspicious. Many of these cases involved hypnotic regression, the regaining of lost memories; a procedure which, it has been proved, can as easily lead to the "surfacing" of false memories. The most poignant example may be the tragic case of Paul Ingram, who confessed to abusing his own daughters after confabulating his own memories because he could not believe that his daughters would lie.

La Fontaine's essay is the most concise and well-structured chapter of this

book, although in fairness it may have been the easiest to present in this clear manner.

The final chapter, on the continued belief in traditional witchcraft narratives in rural European communities, is a learned collection by Blécourt, of the works of folklorists, anthropologists and sociologists on the subject. He discusses both traditional beliefs and superstitions about the behaviour and powers of, and remedies for and defence against, witches, and concrete examples of accusations, trials, and anecdotes. Blécourt clearly describes the different language and discourses utilised by witches themselves (whether presenting themselves as objects to be feared or as bearers of useful skills); by the victims of witchcraft, who may or may not have a specific culprit available to blame for their misfortunes; and by the unwitchers, whether members of the church or lay professionals whose business it is to track down and reverse the damage done by witches.

Examples of specific beliefs and phenomena are also discussed, with particular influence on the 'Evil Eye', a type of curse that may be both unintentional and anonymous, depending on the culture and the context. Blécourt ends his chapter, and the book, with a discussion of research that remains to be conducted into twentieth-century witchcraft, including the need for more detailed and rigorous sociological study of the relative social and economic roles of witches, bewitched, and unwitchers.

Finally, the level of proof-reading and editing is as high as we have come to expect from this series. Only a few typographical errors have made it into print; the final essay could perhaps have benefited from proof-reading by a native English speaker, but the occasional oddities of expression do not ever hinder the sense nor affect the fluidity of the writing. There is a sense throughout the series that all the essays have been adapted or shortened to fit the requirements of this kind of volume, and one outcome of this is that, ironically despite the very detailed and finely broken-down table of contents, the internal structure is not always transparent. But this would be an invidious and minor complaint with which to end a review of what may be the most successful volume in the current series.

**Brigitte Aubert, *Rigor Mortis*. 1997. *Le Monde* n° 16333, samedi 2 août 1997. Pp. 43. (Reprinted in anthologie *Histoires à lire: sept nouvelles*, Ed. France Loisirs, Paris, mai 2000.)** Reviewed by Djibril

This novella is one of the darkest short psychological crime thrillers I have read in a long time, and while probably not easy to find, is worth catching if you can pick it up (and you can read French). The story takes you inside the head of a serial killer with necrophiliac tendencies, putting the reader far closer to the criminally insane mind than is comfortable. The police investigation, on the other hand, is shown only through telephone calls and conversations with a journalist, and frankly the investigating officers do not seem to be learning very much.

Even more disconcerting than this is the fact that the killer is not a monster: he is very much human, and not even particularly unpleasant a character—although he



can lose his temper violently when he doesn't exactly get his way, giving us a hint of the desperate control-freak behind the madman. But if you accept his worldview (twisted as it is) then he is basically moral, acting out of loneliness and desire—which he calls love. Like the killer in *C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (1998), he can be funny and almost likeable.

It is hard to say more without spoiling the story, except to recommend this dark, frightening and convincing thriller—if you have the stomach for it.

**Thierry Di Rollo, *La Lumière des Morts*. 2000. Folio SF. Pp. 256. ISBN 2070428567. €5.30 (France).** Reviewed by Djibril

Di Rollo is sometimes touted as the most modern of SF authors writing in French today, and this novel is certainly dark, fast-paced and unsettling. The futuristic speculation is all social, rather than technological, and it is not a pretty world that he imagines.

There is an short, intriguing introductory prologue with promises of gunfights, chases and street punks, but then the book is crudely divided into two stories with little apparent connection between them. The first half is tasteless in the extreme, and a reader could be forgiven for getting no further than page 36. Four men staff an ailing wildlife reserve in sub-saharan Africa called BostWen (Di Rollo has a penchant for mixed-case names—the book also contains a city called LinkVille and a chef by name of LongLane). The narrator, Dunkey, is a fugitive from Europe who used to kill cats as a passtime and run a black market trade in accident victims' body parts for a living; Kool is the sadistic radio operator; Lhar the drunken marksman who gets through a dozen bottles of whiskey every day; finally 'Bongo' is a stinking, unwashed, superstitious, cowardly African with a special affinity for nature. (I do not exaggerate the stereotypes, they are as I found them.) In addition they are visited by a patronising veterinary inspector, and a young African whore (dubbed "Guinness" because of a t-shirt she wears), whom the three white men share.

The wildlife reserve is dying, rich hunters are allowed to poach with impunity, and the gene pools are already too small for populations to breed successfully. The team kill a lion while trying to give it a genetic health check, and the corpse mysteriously disappears. Bongo becomes more and more afraid of the forest, and a murderous, fluorescent blue rhinoceros is running rampage through BostWen. Is the reserve somehow taking vengeance for man's murder of Africa's wildness?

In the second part of the book, the action suddenly switches to a futuristic European city, dystopic and brutally ghettoised. The new protagonist, by name of Live Linder, is a "shooter" (not, as she stresses repeatedly, "shooteuse"), a government sponsored assassin who hears the voice of God. Shooters have impunity when conducting a mission, and it is a tragic irony of the story that Linder's own stark background includes having lost her small child to a shooter's stray bullet. She herself leaves more than one innocent bystander ~~cooling~~ pooling in the gutter. Diverted from a run-

of-the-mill elimination to investigate a chain of serial killings that are spiraling uncomfortably close to the "zone franche", the safe quarter of the city where the rich and free live, as opposed to the lawless and ungoverned poor ghettos that no one cares much about, she is partnered with the abusive Chell. Linder soon learns more than she expected, and tires of both her work and the insistent voice of God. And then there is the fluorescent blue light that spills from her nightmares...

Several themes recur in this novel. Dismemberment is one, linking the poaching in the wildlife reserve, Dunkey's former profession as a dealer in human body parts, the cannibalism of the ship on which he sailed to Africa, and the serial killer in the second half. Savagery is the other, the brutality of individuals and institutions alike symbolic of the way both the natural and social worlds have been abused and mutilated for profit and political gain. It has to be said that the European characters are every bit as savage and distasteful as the Africans, but I do not feel that this makes the distasteful representation of the latter any less offensive.

I did not terribly enjoy this book, but it is hard to think of the last time I came across a more disturbing, dystopic world than Di Rollo's future.

**Andrew Hook, ed., *The Alsiso Project*. Norwich: Elastic Press, 2003. Pp. ii, 329. ISBN 0954374754. £6.00. Reviewed by Djibril**

This volume, whose title apparently stems from a typographical error by author Marion Arnott, consists of twenty-three short stories in various styles and on diverse themes, all sharing the mysterious word 'Alsiso' in the title. As the introduction by Christopher Fowler points out, however, this is more than just a 'catch-all' anthology, a poor excuse to bring together a collection of 'dreary', 'ponderous' pieces with no real collective theme (i). As well as being broadly speaking in the speculative fiction genre, most stories are notable for their commitment to showing imagination, to presenting the unusual in an interesting light—be that unusual subject matter, literary style, or aesthetic taste. In fact the quality of stories in this anthology is unusually high, and any negative comments on individual pieces that may be made below are as likely to reflect lack of imagination on the reviewer's part as lack of taste on the editor's.

I shall focus on those pieces which stand out, for good or for ill, with the briefest of summaries of the remainder.

The opening story, K.J. Bishop's 'Alsiso', is a fun parable in which the name Alsiso originates from a mediaeval murderer, and finds its way into the popular imagination and around the world (and beyond). Very Borgesian in mood, the story sets the scene very well, both exploring the creation of myth, and cleverly never revealing the mystery of the original murders. Nick Jackson's 'Alsiso' is a primitivist tale with ethnographic overtones, about a village boy who has to undertake a rite de passage to save his uncle who lies comatose

under a curse. An elegant and beautifully executed piece; the name *Alsiso* enters the picture late.

Justina Robson gives us the third offering, '*Alsiso*', a futuristic story set after the earth becomes uninhabitable, whose action takes place on a planet blighted by the expeditionary team's attempt to terraform it. Told in a mixture of reports and journal entries by the doomed team, the story builds tension and mystery from the start—although it is slow to introduce us to rounded characters. *Alsiso* is a sinister bird-call recorded early in the expedition. The tension rises throughout the piece, and develops into a thorny moral paradox at the climax of this excellent offering.

On a very different note is Kaaron Warren's '*Alsiso* (or *Al's Iso Bar*)', a speculative story that starts out sounding like Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, with a woman whose job is to breed, with husbands chosen for her. But these husbands age quickly, as a result of the same special ability that causes her to lose her children. The sub-title refers to a brief visit she makes to a bar owned by a retired weatherman (hence the '*Iso Bar*'?), and is one of the more contrived titles in the volume. Nevertheless a mysterious tale that keeps you guessing and wondering why, even beyond the end.

Marie O'Regan's '*Alsiso*' is a frankly disturbing story, although very well executed, of a man who starts to hear voices, slipping into madness and alienation from his wife. The story weakens toward the somewhat repugnant ending, and the title turns out to be very contrived also. Not to my taste. A little better is Christopher Kenworthy's '*Alsiso*', about two boys who become obsessed with Ted Hughes and sex magic, and discover a fantasy landscape, to which they attach the name *Alsiso*, whose centre is a gnarled tree and an '*SF*' city on the horizon. Competent, but not the star piece of this collection.

Andrew Humphrey's '*Alsiso*' is a fairly slow-starting, mainstream story about woman trapped in a dull marriage to an intellectual snob in a bigoted village. *Alsiso* is the signature on a painting bought at a car-boot sale that starts the path to free herself from the tedium of the life that is killing her. The characters and events are beautifully observed, the story's morality is uncompromising and un sentimental, and we are left with a nice tantalising ending. A strong piece, slightly unexpected in this collection.

Alasdair Stuart's '*Alsiso*' is a very short piece written in the style of lecture notes; it tries to do what this book does in offering alternatives for *Alsiso*, the 'linguistic tenth planet'. This story is mercifully short, and not intriguing enough to deserve the epithet *Borgesian*. Almost equally pretentious is Allen Ashley's '*Alsiso*', a story in two parts (for no apparent reason): the first, an unconvincing secret service report about attempts to destroy a rock band named *Alsiso* before they subvert society; the second, a slightly surreal narrative involving a young man named *Al Siso* who spoils others' cinema experiences. Not much to say about either.

Nicholas Royle's '*Alsiso*' is a moving, dark tale about a man returning to his native Manchester, facing changes in the landscape, and confronting a tragic epi-

sode from his youth. Filled with forboding, it is less outright horrifying than it might be, but as thought-provoking and sobering as it should. Antony Mann's 'ALS150', in contrast, is a weak piece about an anti-social misanthrope and his increasing road rage in the rush-hour streets of Oxford. The end was unconvincing, but by then it didn't matter; I'd stopped caring.

Andrew Hook's 'Alsiso' is an excellent, atmospheric visit to the noir detective genre with a perverse twist. The protagonist is a retired, crooked police officer investigating a threat against the life of the classy, S&M prostitute among whose patrons he is counted. The characters are convincing, the story gripping, and the ending contains pathos without cliché. One of the most exciting pieces in the volume.

Matt Dinniman's 'Alsiso (or The Sociology of the Unpopped Masses)' is a far less gripping tale of people who explode like tomatoes in a microwave with the word 'Alsiso' on their lips, leading to a breakdown of society. Tamar Yellin's 'AlSiSo' has a similar motif, in her case a debilitating parasite that kills anyone who utters the word 'Alsiso', but is much better executed than Dinniman's, narrated by a journalist who sees the effects of the parasite and the people around him successively giving in to the urge to say the deadly word. Still not terribly convincing, though. Steve Savile's 'Alsiso (or The Pain, Heartbreak and Redemption of Owen Frost)' is a dark, religious morality tale about an attempt by an evil sect of ancient monks to bring God and the terror of Christian faith back to the earth by building a Golem of sin to kill the angels of Heaven. Powerfully constructed and movingly written, it is nonetheless a little too bombastic and amoral for my taste.

Kay Green's 'Alsiso' is a lighter, more acceptable fable with an Irish flavour, about the gods' attempts to understand mortality. Nicely written and entertaining, the only flaw of this short piece is that the parable-like style leaves little room for convincing characters or development. Far less enjoyable is John Grant's 'AlsiSO', a story about a dream come to life who is not allowed to die; the reader is not convinced by the danger in, nor ultimately, the point of the tale.

Gary Couzens' 'AlSiSo' is written in an interesting literary style; the story is narrated simultaneously in the first person plural and the third person singular. The subjects are three college roommates, a couple and their gay friend (Alex, Simon, Sophie), none of whom is the narrator. Literary boundaries are further blurred by a text within the text, which is an autobiography penned by someone other than its subject. An interesting exploration of relationships, sexuality, and responsibility; and, ultimately, honesty to oneself.

Dave Allen Lambert's 'Alsiso' is a strong, disturbing tale about a man stubbornly haunted by a woman he killed, and his friend stalked by a refrigerator salesman. Despite this unlikely-sounding premise, this is a gripping, sensitive story of madness and sadness in their many forms, of friendship in the face of tragedy, and of the fragility of what we take as normal.

Brian Howell's 'Alsiso' is the story of a Japanese family man who is offered access to a parallel reality in which he can fulfil his every fantasy without responsibility or repercussions. Even apart from the slightly pathetic nature of his fantasies, and the trite ending, I find this story somewhat stereotypical and patronising. Conrad Williams' 'Alsiso' is a short, pleasant enough piece about a scrap metal merchant who is offered sheets of a revolutionary new alloy by a strangely alluring woman from a local laboratory. The mystery develops rapidly and relentlessly, but I am not sure I quite understood where it ended up. Lisa Pearson's 'Alsiso' is a difficult to read, fragmentary prose poem, set in Africa and featuring a vulnerable western woman and predatory black male. (There may be more to it than this, but I found it opaque.)

Marion Arnett's 'Alsiso' is the only fantasy tale in this collection—although there is no magic. The protagonist Lyra, the "She-Wolf", is the scarred, vengeful survivor of the Sea Lords' brutality now leading a rebel army to take the undefended castle of Alsiso. She is not unproblematic as a heroine, however, as her propensity to murder innocents makes her little better than the tyrants she is fighting to overthrow. The character of the spoiled, coddled lady of Alsiso is in some ways more challenging. An excellent story with which to end this anthology, certainly to be numbered among the best of the offerings.

Another game that can be played with this volume is to count the ways in which the title word 'Alsiso' is defined, or excused, in the stories (in inferior pieces this comes across as 'how do they manage to *contrive* the word into the story?'). Bishop, Stuart, and Yellin construct their stories around the effort to understand this word; Robson, Warren, O'Regan, and others try to build a logical pun or mishearing around the word, with varying (but usually low) degrees of success; in Mann it is a vehicle registration number; Grant and Couzens make Alsiso an acronym. But the most successful stories, from this point of view, are those in which Alsiso is just a name, of a person or a place, with no need for explanation or justification.

The stories in this book can be judged on their individual merits, and no reader will appreciate everything in such a mixed bag equally. The resplendent success of this volume, however, is that it contains twenty three experimental stories, tied together by the most arbitrary of shared elements, the title, but of a single adventurous spirit. An indisputable success.

**Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. Trans. Andrew Bromfield. Faber, 1996. Pp. 160. ISBN 0571177980. £6.99 (UK); ISBN 0811213641. \$10.95 (US, 1998).** Reviewed by Djibril

Originally published in Russia in 1992, this short, post-Communist novel manages to satirise the Soviet political machine while wisely avoiding any idealisation of the west. The narrator—a young cosmonaut named Omon—as a boy dreams of flying as freedom from earthly weights, 'which, incidentally, is why all

my life I've only been bored by all those Western radio voices, and those books by various Solzhenitsyns' (8).

Omon (who dubs himself 'Ra' after the Egyptian sun-god he read about in the *Atheist's Handbook*) and his childhood friend Mitiok dream all their lives of flying to the moon, and finally grow up to join the army and enrol in a special KGB cosmonaut training programme, where they are instructed to secretly operate an ostensibly 'automatic' moonwalker mission—a one-way trip, naturally. With ruthless cynicism, Pelevin puts his characters through betrayal after deceit after abuse, but never fails to show us the humanity not only of the victims but of the officials and commanders who so brutally manipulate them. It is a credit to the good humour and fluid characterisation that what could have been a grim, nihilistic read remains both entertaining and engaging throughout the quite horrifying developments of the later story. And it is a sign of the strong plot that even after so much illusion and reality-questioning that would leave even the hardest-headed and least post-modern of readers an agnostic doubting the doomed narrator's reliability, the twist toward the end manages both to surprise and to trump the cynicism and deception of the rest of the book.

For a story about space travel, this novel contains remarkably few of the trappings of speculative fiction: the science is neither futuristic nor speculative; the history is mildly revisionist rather than alternative; the 'oriental religion' influences touted on the back cover seem limited to Omon's reading about the falcon-headed Egyptian god, and perhaps the fatalistic philosophy of the characters. If this is an example of mainstream (or is it slipstream?) literature colouring itself with borrowed genre elements, it is a successful (if only lightly tinted) example of the phenomenon.

## Film Reviews:

### *Déjà Vu (Hera's Odyssey)*, dir. Isabelle Alenus

Pre-release showing

Blue Whale Productions and FAB-Film

Starring: Kimberly Dean, Kristie Gallacher, Steven Fessler, Martha Barnett, Viki Friend



This is a film that you will not see in the theatres, at least not just yet. The reviewer has been privileged to witness a special screening of the first pressed version, fully filmed and cut, but not edited to a final release print. The sound in particular was weak, but it was already clear how effective the treatment and the score will be. This disclaimer aside, I am going to judge the film as a finished piece of work.

*Déjà Vu* is basically a road movie. Dean is Hera, a tormented young pop singer who ran away from home after her identical twin died some years ago, and who is still running. Now she has kidnapped a small child (the impressive Gallacher as Hebe) whom she believes to be a clone of herself (and/or of her sister?). The film tells the story of the three days the pair spend in Hera's car as she drives through the New Mexico desert, and the motley characters they meet on the road—some real, some more or less likely to be imaginary. They share the car with Hera's imaginary versions of her brother Jake (Fessler), sister Janie (Barnett), and cousin Josie (Friend). Other secondary characters come and go, and none of them elicit the audience's sympathy in the way that Hera and Hebe do; in fact they are all purposely two-dimensional.

The scenery could hardly be more impressive, and the brilliant landscape contrasts starkly with the claustrophobia of the car's interior. Although light-hearted at times, Dean's performance is brooding and very dark; there is much scowling and staring into the distance, punctuated by occasional flashes of very believable temper, but underlaid with a real vulnerability and affection for her infant charge and *alter ego*. We may not, perhaps, identify with Hera, who is too distant (or the child Hebe who barely speaks), but we certainly like them well enough to care what will happen to them at the end (although it seems too much to expect such tragic begin-

nings to lead to a happy ending—despite Hera's belief that she will finally be happy with Hebe, and her dream of a utopian future where hydro-electric energy has replaced the modern world's reliance on polluting fuels). Most often the secondary characters appear to introduce pathos or humour when the car threatens to become too claustrophobic—but Hera's conversations with her family members are the core of the film. They begin by allowing her to work through her neuroses and obsessions, but soon start to spiral out of her control; she prefers the lucid dream where she decides what happens.

The production team apparently made a conscious decision not to market this film as science fiction, although it contains a human clone, a utopian vision of the future, and other fantastic, imaginary elements. This is probably a tactical rather than a snobbish distinction, but their point is that cloning is no longer futuristic fiction (if indeed the Clonaid scientists are not complete fantasists); the philosopher John Harris argues that human cloning is not only already possible, but desirable. Of course speculative fiction has long paid particular attention to those futuristic technologies that are close to, if not already present. Although I think this film will appeal to a genre audience, especially to those with a taste for dark comedy and thrillers in the David Lynch mould, it has to be said that the background and motivation of the central character is convincing, apposite, and down-to-earth.

In structure this is a simple film, beautifully executed, theatrically and intelligently written (the script is based on an original stage play by director Alenus). I look forward to seeing this movie funded, completed, and released, and wish the team all success.

### ***Alien Invasion* (2003), Dir. Hank Perlman**

Pathé Films

Starring: Jim Broadbent, Eddie Izzard, Joe McFadden

Reviewed by Djibril

This short film is a four-minute public awareness commercial for the environmental charity Greenpeace. The premise is a pan-galactic council of master-race aliens debating the take-over of Earth; they fear that we have damaged our planet beyond repair and that Earth is therefore not a worthwhile investment. One alien (McFadden) however argues that if humans can be persuaded to exercise ethical consumer pressure, they can still save the planet.

On the one hand it is clearly unfair to judge a short commercial by the standards of a science fiction movie, a genre which it is emulating rather than claiming to contribute to. On the other hand, though, the press release bills it as a movie that 'echoes sci-fi classics', and it was shown at the Berlin Film Festival, so it has some pretensions to quality. Nevertheless, the comments that follow should not be taken as tedious pedantic criticism.

As speculative fiction, there is not much to say about this picture: the aliens are



loosely in the Trek tradition—humanoids with funny-shaped heads and cheap rubber masks. They have names like Zarg and Brik, speak like stereotyped bureaucrats, and make references to 2003 popular culture. There is no hint of menace behind their plans for the universe, no viewer estrangement or unsettling weirdness; this is uninspired 1960s sci-fi, not cutting edge cyberpunk.

The film works better on the level of humour. The cult comedian Eddie Izzard plays the central role of the alien listing the flaws of Earth with his usual irreverent charm. Many of the jokes are cheap however: 'e-mail' is defined as an 'early delivery system for pornography'; the film closes with a reference to 'looking into Uranus'. The case for saving the Earth, on the other hand, is delivered in an almost embarrassingly sincere tone. As comedy, this film probably needed a director like Kevin Smith.

Of course the point of the commercial is neither SF nor comedy, but the health of the planet. On this level the intended point is clear: the Earth is not beyond hope, and we can all help by being aware of the bigger picture, buying from companies whose practices do not destroy the environment. This is a worthwhile message, and one can only hope that the commercial has done some good in communicating it.

### ***Darna Mana Hai* (2003), Dir. Prawal Raman**

K. Sera Sera

Starring: Sameera Reddy, Gaurav Kapoor, Raghuvir Yadav, Nana Patekar.

Reviewed by Djibril

This Indian film, whose title translates from the Hindi as 'fear is not permitted' was produced by the accomplished Ram Gopal Varma, but directed by the first-time director and former understudy, Raman. The story is framed in a rather traditional way: seven young people driving across state in the dark are stranded when their car blows a tyre, and while away the night by telling each other frightening stories around a camp fire. The stories they tell make up the six embedded narratives in this movie, but the framing narrative is at least as creepy as any of them. As the young people sit around scaring themselves, and occasionally one leaves and heads back to the car, a dangerous killer lurks in the jungle outside.

The characters of the 'main' story are typical, carefree teenagers; they scare and tease one another, laugh at each other's discomfort and generally behave riotously and (especially Kapoor's character Romi) obnoxiously. Despite the clichéd backdrop and the disjointed plot, however, there are few terribly cringe-worthy moments in this film, and the individual acting saves the characters from being total cannon-fodder. For a western audience, the exotic setting and the conventions of Bollywood film-making may contribute to making this film stand out from the typical US teen horror.

The individual stories in the embedded narrative are divided between a couple each of weak, average, and excellent. Least inspiring were the stories of the hotel

manager who goes to extreme lengths to enforce the non-smoking policy of his 'Healthy Hotel'; and the schoolteacher who becomes disturbed when a small girl in his class suddenly starts doing her homework and he has to stop beating her with a ruler; it may be the case that in both of these stories, this reviewer was for various reasons unable to relate to the characters who were meant to be our sympathetic protagonists. The first and last stories are better, but not hugely original. In the first story, narrated by Reddy, the honeymooning couple who in many ways echo our framing characters, are driving at night when the husband's attempts to frighten his wife backfire as their car breaks down and he disappears into the jungle while trying to fix it. The final story, told reluctantly, is about a high-school loser who is ignored by everyone, and disappoints himself by not even having the courage to commit suicide; when he prays for something to make him unusual, he takes the strange power he is granted and abuses it, proving that he is no more sensitive or deserving than the school bully who is his first victim.

There are two excellent movielets, though. There is the subtle and slightly surreal story of a housewife who buys fresh apples from an unfeasibly cheap market stall, but then becomes afraid of what might be wrong with the fruit. The grocer tells her, 'Once you've tasted these you'll never forget me', and eating of the apples does indeed turn out to bear its own price. The cinematography and score of this piece is bizarrely evocative of a slasher movie, although the horror of the vignette is far more subtle than that. The other good story is that of a traveller who picks up a smartly-dressed hitchhiker outside a cemetery and offers him a lift into town. The hitchhiker (played by the excellent Patekar) claims to be some kind of spirit, but neither driver nor passenger are quite what they seem. This is the simplest story in execution, being almost entirely dialogue across the two front seats of the car, and also the most competently handled. This young director shows promise, and signs of the flair of his mentor.

### ***Parasite* (2003), Dir. Andrew Prendergast**

Fearnort Production

Starring: Saskia Gould, Conrad Whitaker, G.W. Stevens, Margaret Thompson

Reviewed by Djibril

This low-budget horror from director Prendergast (of straight-to-video *Evil Elvis*, 1999), has a largely 'b'-list cast, fairly basic production standards, and a premise which seems likely to be an excuse for gore-fest rather than a serious comment on science or society. These are all attitudes which I held before seeing the film, and to be honest they were largely unchanged by the end of it, but what drew me to the film in the first place was one element of the plot-synopsis. An experimental new enzyme is being used to clean up a decommissioned oil rig by an American scientist (Gould) and a rather anarchic demolition crew (led by a wild-eyed Stevens), when a team of "environmentalists" (led by Whitaker) occupy the rig in protest at the ecological disaster that would result if it were simply sunk

into the sea. When it emerges that the experimental cleaner has spawned a predatory new species of gigantic bacteriophages, the human inhabitants of the rig have to band together to face this common threat. It would be refreshing, thought the reviewer on reading this (approximate) synopsis, if we might see an action film with environmental campaigners positively portrayed, rather than sneered at—as cinema audiences were supposed to take pleasure in Bruce Willis's maltreatment of Greenpeace campaigners off an oilrig in *Armageddon*, for example.

So what were the characters like? Gould the scientist is a stylish but tormented by conscience, knowing her enzyme is not ready for testing; delivered to the oilrig by helicopter, she appears in a business suit but soon changes into more practical (but ill-fitting) clothes. Stevens is swaggering and brutal, but haunted by the death of his wife in a demolition accident; he is the responsible leader of the demolition crew, but cracks under the strain and is no use to anyone. Whitaker is handsomely and smugly confident, but with a seriousness that I suppose is meant to be cinematic code for "idealistic". It is hard to feel much sympathy for any of these, or even to keep count as they start dying in droves. The "environmentalists" are not particularly rounded characters, and their motivation for this particular occupation is not deeply examined; their particular brand of direct action (hoax bomb threats, for example) is not one that most action groups would approve—not to mention a serious security issue in this day and age. But they are neither thuggish villains nor naïve idealists who do more harm than good with their clumsy intervention, or the like. Rather they are as close to positive characters as this film is able to come, and about the only people who do *less* harm than good in the whole story. (The story ends with an almost embarrassingly triumphalist view of the last surviving environmentalists getting even with the villainous bureaucrat, then stripping off their balaclava masks to stare "sincerely" into the video camera as they speak their final words. Even this committed fan of eco-SF had trouble suppressing a giggle.)

So, although I was not entirely disappointed in my hopes for atypical representations of greens, nor was I pleasantly surprised by the quality of the film. The concept was weak: the monsters absurd, toothy, maggot-like creatures, completely implausible as the mutant offspring of microscopic "bacteriophages" (it would be invidious to complain about the cheap special effects, which were the least of this film's problems). The script was diabolical—full of cheesy one-liners and unconvincing repartée, not helped at all by lacklustre delivery that frankly is equally damning of the actors' abilities and the director's. Post-production seems to have been no better. This was not an ambitious project, but still a flawed script and incompetent direction held it back far more than the modest budget. Most troublingly, it is unclear how much the social awareness suggested by the plot reflects any desire to produce responsible art—this film is exploitative in the most typical way: Thompson's sassy, hard-as-nails "grease-monkey" appears topless in a pretty pointless communal shower scene early on, and then strangely loses her clothes again as she is later violently dismembered by a parasite, both scenes that were neither necessary nor titillating.



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