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DONNA LEE BRIEN

EDITORIAL

Paul Mountfort

Editor's log: Startdate 2015 - An overview of proceedings

With every year that passes the world more and more resembles science-fiction. As I write world leaders jet off from a Paris recently racked by terrorism spookily reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's surreal and future-noir *Brazil* (1985). The pretext for this gathering was, of course, the latest and (based on the trend lines) gravest Global Climate Summit, to date. We can only imagine the Strangelovian scenes that went on in back rooms and roundrooms where, away from prying eyes, this spectacle of – depending on your optimism – paradigmatic shift or intergenerational betrayal played itself out. Down in the Med it's groundhog day for the refugees displaced by resource depletion and asymmetrical warfare, lapping like waves at Europe's shores, as the great dream of open borders comes under attack not from the barbarians at the gate but the savages within. Meanwhile scientists and opportunist-entrepreneurs talk of geo-engineering our way out of catastrophe, one suggestion being the seeding of fine aluminium particulate in the upper atmosphere to reflect the sun's rays back into space. Remember that chilling realization in *Highlander* (1986) – that the lunatics had finally taken over the whole damn asylum and torched the sky? The crazy thing is, this ain't a movie anymore folks, or if it is, I want my popcorn back.

Against this backdrop, what can the study of popular culture and, indeed, popular culture itself, possibly offer? Species slide into extinction at a matricidal rate, while in the consumer world the debit side of the ledger waxes huge, proportional almost to the widening girth of flatscreen tvs. You'll all have seen the 'Where's my jetpack?' t-shirt lampooning the *The Jetsons* and similar mid-century evocations of techno-positivism that have long fallen by the wayside. Yet we all got our mobile communications devices in our overalls, here in the first and second worlds, and some! In the lucky countries, like Australia and New Zealand, there are more smartphones per capita than people. It's enough to put Gene Roddenberry's prescience to shame. And with a smart DNS all the networked screens under one roof can be

configured so that if I want to watch Netflix I'm in the States and when it's the BBC I'm AWOL in the UK with my virtual iPlayer. With all this at our fingertips it's a wonder any of us can gather the gumption to get up off our sofas. That'll be quite handy when the sky falls, so long as the Net doesn't go down. Anyone who has read David Mitchell's post-cyberpunk rift in *The Bone Clocks* (2013) will know that horror of which I speak – *shudder*.

In other news, I was telling to my boys (11 and 15) about the cheerful cadets lining up for the Space-X Mars settlement programme. They have the jump on me. *What about the internet*, they said. *Would there be internet on Mars? And wouldn't there be an awful lag? It'd be worse than dial-up!* For my own part, I think wanna-be zero-gravity cowgirls and boys who are contemplating following a guy with a name like Elon Musk out of the pleroma into the starry night should read their Philip K. Dick a little more closely. It never panned out that great for the pioneers of *his* Martian chronicles, and if you want to know why the corporate megalomaniac in *The Strain* who sells us out to the aliens within is called Eldrich Palmer, try reading PKD's *Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldrich*.

It seems, at times, that, in the developed and (at rocket-ship speed) developing countries, at least, the trade-off we've all made is between a viable planetary ecology and an archology of smart devices. Devices that whose LED diodes pulse as they deliver us an endless stream of the Lacanian imaginary, dished up in ultra HD and 5.1 Surround. Next it's gonna be virtual and then fully, 100% augmented-reality. Hell, screw the planet, we'll be able to just skin up the whole tattered caboodle of a biosphere with digital wrap, clean it or green it or whatever else takes our virtual fancy, all by voice command. Print ourselves a new world, after we've smoked this one down to the butt. In William Gibson's latest novel, *The Peripheral* (2014), there are two future tracks: one of them only a decade or so from now. There, big industry is superseded by 'fabbing' outfits: 3D printeries as common as the once ubiquitous cornerstore. For a few credits you can zap into reality pretty much anything that occupies, well, three dimensions. The further future track – think a century or so – is set some time after 'The Jackpot' arrives (it's an ironic, casino-capitalist moniker for what others have called the Eco-Apocalypse, Collapse, or Clusterfuck – call it what you will). Nano-engineered biomorphic cleaners have cleared up most of the wasteland, even turning the continents of garbage that float in the oceans into brand-spanking new real estate. Googleglass' distant successor is lodged in your eyeball and when your friends call, their animated sigils' fire up, even when your eyes are wide shut. But there's little to rock your retina in this futurama. The great pop cultures of the 20th and 21st centuries have been crushed

under the weight of the Klept, hereditary oligarchs who rule a diminished fiefdom on what's left of Eearth. It's a reminder that while some things are already bad, really bad, they can get worse – a helluva lot worse.

For all the fripperies, irrelevancies and sugar-coated placebo coating of much of what passes for popular culture today – the endless diet of memes and celebs, paps and tat – let's face it, there's still something vital beating at the heart of the Rabelaisian body of our networked digital age. Despite our corporatized, monetized, compartmentalized, securitized, weaponized gestalt, fan cultures can still be transgressive, ceaselessly requisitioning the scraps a profit-mongering 1% toss us from their banquet of fools. Cosplayers cosplay in the skins of superheros which they 'own' in ways the mega-entertainments complexes who hold the IP rights never will. Anime fans rip scenes and soundtracks to mash them up into AMVs that may receive a million likes. Fandoms are not *always* but often *are* subversive – they rework the dominant media industries away from hegemony and towards heterotopia. Even in the 'mainstream,' it's a new golden age of television in which the digitization of cable, moves by distributors such as Netflix and Amazon into content production, and coalescence of superior viewing platforms and streaming networks have brought more tv drama and reportage into our homes than in all previous decades of the televisual combined. If only we can wrest the popular gaze away from the inanities of free-to-air (at least, in the majority of countries where the public service model has broken down) long enough to make sure our favourite shows don't get canned... Agreements like the TPPA and TTIP may try to outlaw many of the circumlocutory ways we can access such content (my lips are sealed), but a generation of kids who have grown up hacking and cracking everything they can get their hands on, everywhere, all the time, are not going to give up easily. New Snowdons, Mannings and Assanges are doubtless being born as you read these words.

At the very least, the battle lines are drawn.

Against this backdrop it seems to me that, for the most part, scholars of popular culture know – or should know – where they stand. The Situationist nomenclature of *détournements* and *récupération* is appropriate here. To the Situationists, and Guy Debord was particularly hot on this point, defiance of the hegemony is in part an aesthetic strategy, in part corporeal. Right as the Spectacle fixes you in its gaze, you stare right back, and say 'what're you looking at?' You take the materials lying around in the ruins of failed utopias and patch them together into new cloth. You jape and prank and make fun of the beast to distract it and create the space you need for flight or fight. You don masks of the

carnavalesque and show late capital how things are really done round here, down in the rat-house of everyday Planet Earth. You avoid, at all costs, the dreaded *recuperation*, that deceiving chameleon which subverts subversion itself. You assess, to misquote Allen Ginzberg, your national assets, the whole toolkit of our posthumanity, and fashion them into whatever kind of paraphernalia gets you out-of-it in the age of the hyperreal and simulacra. Even if it means being cut adrift in the desert of the real. If as pessimistic a cultural critic as Judith Butler could recognize in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) a small space for the individual woven almost imperceptibly through our involuntary shaping by hegemonic social forces, then surely we can find a way to keep slipping out and back again.

But shhh! Quietly now, don't wake the wardens. One of the great secrets of popular culture studies is that, like demure-by-day but fly-by-night comic-book figures, most scholars in the field have dual identities. We write about fiction because we have a giddy predilection for following – often multiple – narrative threads in the labyrinth of forking pathways. The same with film and television: we're inveterates, we binge, we geek-out over it, we can't help ourselves. We ponder gender because we're queers, or trans- or at least don't fit so willingly into the conformist coffins of a hetero-normative identity, and want to make anew what it means to be a 'man' or a 'woman' or whatever lies between or outside. We perform because we're not going to be cauterized by performance anxiety. We're Gothic because it's cool and encompasses the living *and* the undead. Where religion's concerned we probably wish at times there was something, anything, extra-fictional that we could actually believe in, but we're reconciled to the fact that we humans just make up as we go along. Because we're critics and we know it's all a construct – which goes for everything in the life-world, till death us do part. Yet we're celebrants, too, because we figure it feels good and we might as well do it anyway. And you know what? At the end of the day, as the politicians say, we'd scarcely hesitate to do it all over again.

For invaluable help with the following collection of papers – which may or may not have anything to do with the above –I'd like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Olivia Oliver-Hopkins, whose assistant-editorship of the Proceedings has been exemplary. Any slips of hand or eye remain, of course, the responsibility of yours truly,

Auckland

8 December, 2015