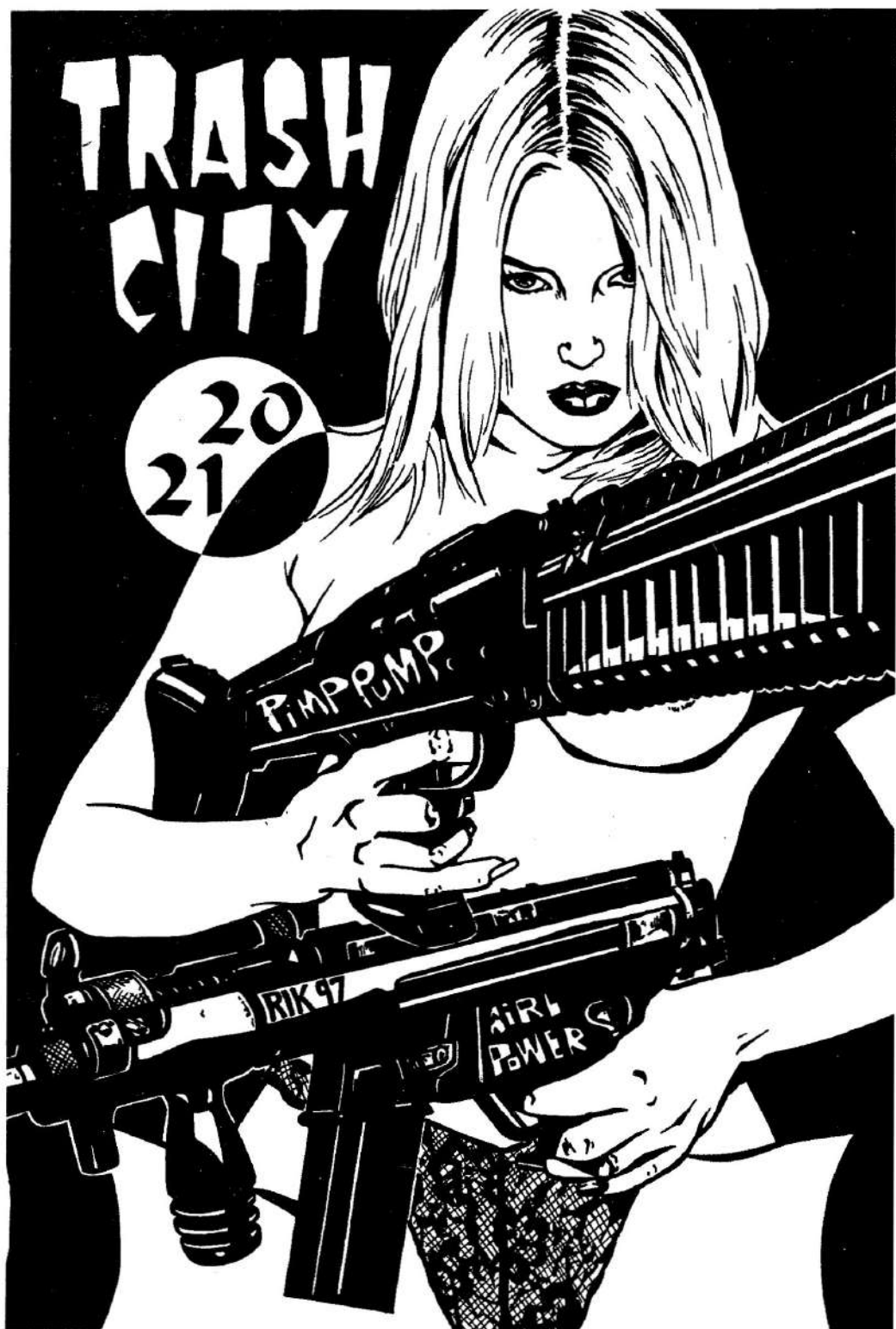


TRASH CITY

20
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Welcome to Trash City, issues 20 and 21

At left is a schematic diagram which will either guide you through the next 100-odd pages or, more likely, confuse you utterly. It's a test. A test, designed to provoke...an *emotional* response.

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Subscriptions. In the UK, you pay £4 for two issues; Europe £5; £6 elsewhere. You can sign up for more than that: work the cost out yourself. Subscribers get additional "stuff". North America is *different* (as anyone who's been there will know) – your best bet there is to speak to Chris.

Back issues are also available, albeit in rapidly shrinking quantities. Specifically, TC16/17 and 18/19, both of which contain a similar mix of weirdness. £2.50 each in the UK, £3 in Europe, £3.50 worldwide. Again, US/Canada – see Chris.

I'll happily take payments in dollars in cash from overseas people – I can always use 'em to buy lap-dances, wrestling tapes or anime. Double the sterling cost to get the dollar price i.e. £2 = \$4.

Contributors:

Texts: Jim McLennan, Des Lewis, Lino, John Spencer, Andy Collins, "Max Renn", SH. *Front cover:* Rik Rawling. *Back cover:* Trevor Brown. *Layout:* Jim McLennan, John Spencer. Printing was, as usual, by the ever-reliable Juma, 44 Wellington Street, Sheffield, S1 4HD.

Next issue

Probably by the turn of the millenium - assuming Nostradamus wasn't right. Contents are as yet sketchy, but will probably include Hong Kong, all 18 Bond movies, female action heroines, and the delights of watching small Japanese girls getting the shit kicked out of them -- which after the past couple of years, probably counts as some sort of therapy. [Bitter, moi? Yep.] Maybe also the long-planned "Best of TC" if time permits? We'll see...

Welcome to the Videodrome

18 months. I suppose this is a small improvement over the nineteen that it took to produce the previous issue; is TC heading back towards being a quarterly? Don't hold your breath. Not that I've been idle: well, actually, I **have** been idle, for quite long periods. But in between times, things have on occasion happened. Some of them have been enjoyable, others have been....oh, let's say, like having the eyes of your favourite posters gouged out by a small, mildly psychopathic Japanese woman. [Any similarity in this editorial to real people is, of course, purely coincidental.]

But, returning to areas less painful. Firstly, there is now a TC Web Site: www.trshcity.demon.co.uk. This contains a steadily growing archive of articles from past issues, as well as new, exclusive reviews, plus additional items such as a weekly rant on the world in general, our top ten babes, and a major guide to strip-pubs in London. Go visit.

TRASH CITY 16/17



There is also, at long last, the long anticipated next generation of TC-shirts. Readers with long memories may recall the fabled "Nekkid Nastassja wielding a blood-spattered chainsaw" design (a shirt which, funnily enough, I can't find any more - I suspect it suffered the same fate as my posters). This time, we've gone for a b/w design featuring the covers of 16/17 or 18/19 -- see the illos at left and right respectively if you've forgotten what they looked like. On the back is an A-Z of TC-approved films: to give you some idea, it begins "Aliens, Blade Runner, Cat People...". Shirts are available in XL only, and cost a mere eight quid including postage. Orders to the usual addresses, I've only got a limited quantity so get your skates on.

Finally on the merchandising front, after selling out of Trevor Brown's postcards last issue, we've got an all-new set. This time, there are five full-colour cards, and the price is £3, again including p&p; a sample may be found on the back cover -- yes, the one that the granny sitting opposite you on the bus is staring at, mouth agape. Believe me, the colour version is much more...arresting. And it's not our fault if you do get arrested. Ladies and gentlemen, that brings us to the end of the gratuitous plugs.



Obscure technical department. In our never-ceasing effort to bring you even more, we've cut down the gap between lines. This should not impact the legibility, and gives you roughly another dozen pages of content. Let us know if you feel the strain though.

Interesting to note the sudden proliferation of movie magazines, following last issue's "expression of dissatisfaction", shall we say, with *Empire*. This is good. What's not so good is that *Neon*, *Total Film* and the rest seem to be little more than wanna-be *Empire* clones, by and large clamped on the teat of the Hollywood publicity machine. There remains a gap in the market for a film magazine which is aware that there is much more to cinema than 'Jackie Brown', yet doesn't disappear up its own posterior in a cloud of mise-en-scene.

Subscribers will (hopefully) have noticed the presence of a 'Mansplat' in the envelopes, being this issue's freebie. I think I should probably have a few copies of this fine magazine left over (barring an inconceivably large rush of last-minute subscriptions), so if anyone else wants one, write me a nice letter and we'll see what can be done. Get it while you can, as rumours suggest that, sadly, t'Splat may not be around for very much longer - unless, perhaps, the editor is deluged with letters from Britain telling him what a fine job he is doing. Hint, hint...

TC cover-god Rik Rawling has unleashed another blast from his unfettered imagination - and believe me, he exercises restraint for us - in the shape of Hog #3. Hardcore violence and brutal sex (or is it the other way round?) combine in epic tales of apocalyptic noir-ishness. £2 from Rik Rawling, 4A Hardy Avenue, Churwell, Morley, Lincs, LS27 7SJ.

This issue's thanks go first and foremost to Chris Fata for flogging TCs in America, as well as a perpetual supply of distractions, without whom... And while thanking Chris's, of one kind or another: Chris W (last-minute scanner help), Chris P and Christine H (anime). Of those not called Chris, John Spencer deserves especial praise for his layout work -- he'll regret it when next issue sidles up ("Hello, John, fancy doing all 100 pages this time round?"). And also, in no particular order of non-Chrisness: Steve W, Rob D, Nicolas B, Miles W, Martin D, Brian B, Rik R, Trevor B, Steve L & Mike C, the gentlemen at the Cinema Store, Psychotronic Video and Media Publications, Michael G, Andy W, Gary C, Pam C, Ian A, Jim S. And that's quite enough initials -- I'd better stop before this begins to sound like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Distractions

Favoured liquid this issue is *Kriek cherry beer*, a startling Belgian concoction which cleans the floor with your average alcopop. Chug it back to accompany your *microwave popcorn* (US only -- the British stuff sucks), while watching *Channel 5*. Despite a cheapskate approach, it's the TC channel of choice, thanks to *Lexx* + *baseball* -- weirdo SF with people like Rutger Hauer, and the ultimate sport for stats freaks. About the only other thing worth watching has been on BBC2: *Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends*, a Michael Moore

spin-off with the best dead-pan comedy since *Brass Eye*. But keep an eye out for the imminent arrival of *South Park*, which will leave your jaw on the floor in shock: "That's sick, dude!". For slightly better quality animation, hunt down *Beast Wars*, easily the best computer-animated show yet screened, leaving Reboot far behind. Though I suppose *Final Fantasy VII* probably also counts, and has wasted far more of my time than I like to contemplate.

If you want to take in a movie, *Starship Troopers* will do nicely - if you don't, why not spend your time *baiting 'Titanic' fans*. Cuddle up with Marilyn Manson's *The Long, Hard Road out of Hell* - likely to be the most amusing book of 1998 - while listening to *Lords of Acid* and tucking into the very pinnacle of Western civilization: *low-fat condensed milk*. This is what 4000 years of progress has been working towards. That and *Hamburg*, a great place to spend all those weekends when I should really be writing the next issue of *Trash City*...



Customary Practice: A Small Victory over the Powers of Darkness.

Certain little things make life worthwhile, providing a warm glow and a spring in your step that lasts far longer than might be expected. The smile of a pretty girl can do this; so can a really good kebab; but both of these pale into insignificance besides the joy of getting a cheque for forty quid in compensation from Her Majesty's Customs and Excise. Next to that, winning the lottery is but an everyday trifle.

This particular escapade started when I ordered a bunch of laserdiscs and tapes from Tom Routledge in the States. The package arrived here apparently safely, but on closer inspection, it soon became apparent that...well, it had encountered hostile forces at some point along its journey across the Atlantic. And looking at the evidence, it seemed likely that said forces were in the shape of our beloved guardians, HMC&E, clearly taking a swift break from more important business -- like making sure no-one brings back too much beer from Calais.

A swift call to my local Customs and Excise office brought me a copy of Excise Notice 1000, which is well worth having, since it tells you who to complain to should they get things wrong. [Of course, not that they ever do, being utterly infallible, but in these Citizen's Charter days, every public organization must maintain the illusion of being "accountable" and "caring".] And so, the following letter went off:

Tel: 0171-336-4971 (day)
0181-671-8611 (eve)

34 Perran Road
Tulse Hill
LONDON
SW2 3DL
April 1st 1997

Dear Sir,

I wish to register a complaint regarding the recent handling of a package by your department. The package, containing a number of laserdiscs and a video-tape, was opened for inspection -- I attach a copy of the sticker from the parcel. The video-tape had been watched, not rewound, and crammed into its case the wrong way round, but worst of all, the officer responsible had lost the inner sleeve for one laserdisk. The disk had been put back directly into the cardboard outer cover, and as a direct result of this sloppy handling, it arrived here severely scratched.

I appreciate that Customs have to examine parcels, but this in no way absolves them from a duty to exercise reasonable care in their handling of the contents. It is clear in this case such care was not taken. According to HM Customs & Excise Notice 1000, "Complaints and putting things right", reimbursement will be made when Customs "damage...freight or baggage during an examination", and this case seems to me an obvious example of such carelessness. I therefore request compensation of £40, to cover the cost of ordering a replacement disc from America. I look forward to hearing from you shortly. If you need any more details, please get in touch.

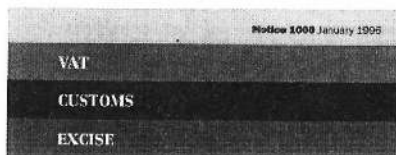
Yours faithfully

Jim McLennan

3rd APRIL Get called by a Mr. Porter, who wants to know a) the Trakback number on the parcel and b) if I'm claiming compensation of 40 quid, why I didn't pay duty on it, since the free limit is only 15 pounds. Ah. Good question. I promise to phone him back with both pieces of information. I suspect they may end up charging me back-duty, which will eat into the compensation. However, I'm not too bothered since the main point of this exercise is not to make money, it's to aggravate and annoy our moral guardians. And I seem to be doing that!

4th APRIL Mr. Porter isn't there (which I'm not really too sorry about, since he comes over on the phone as one of those hard-nosed bastard types -- I had to keep reminding myself that it was *they* who screwed up), but I give the information to his colleague. The computer has no information beyond the fact that the parcel was released on March 7th -- he suggests it might have been Parcelforce to blame: apparently, they are the ones who open the packages, and pass them on to Customs if necessary. Quite how this made the inner sleeve of a laserdisc vanish, I'm unsure -- it seems a trick worthy of David Copperfield. But rather than explain it all again, I just ask him to pass on the details. I am forced to wonder whether pig-sticking Customs and Excise is a Good Thing, given that I'm off to Paris next weekend. On my return, I can foresee them queueing up to greet me warmly with a latex glove: "Let's see if we can find any laserdiscs in here, shall we?"

12th APRIL I return from Paris - unmolested - to find a letter from C&E, asking me to give them all the information I phoned them up and gave them the previous week! I just about manage to keep a grip on my sarcasm and write them a polite letter giving them the details again. The stamp on the envelope is one of those humorous "Greetings" one, with the caption, "I'm writing to you because you don't listen to a word I say". I refrain, however, from putting on the accompanying sticker that says "Whatever it is - I deny it". Otherwise, it might have been the first case of an envelope being taken down and used as evidence.



Complaints and putting things right: our code of practice



HM CUSTOMS AND EXCISE

Thank you for your letter of April 8th. Some of the details you request were already supplied on April 4th, to a colleague of Mr. Porter, as he was not at work that day. The gentleman to whom I spoke told me that the computer system contained no details, beyond that the parcel had been released on March 7th. However, since this information seems to have been lost since then, I will say, once more, that the Trackback number on the package was 0022 4553 594 9.

With regard to the other material requested, I will endeavour to provide evidence of the value as soon as possible -- since the goods were paid for in advance, no invoice was sent with them, and I will need to contact the supplier. All the documentation for the order went via electronic mail, so would a print-out of the relevant message be acceptable?

29th APRIL "Unfortunately our computer system has been out of action and I have been unable to retrieve details of your importation, and therefore have been unable to investigate the circumstances fully...it is the responsibility of the Post Office (Parcelforce) to open parcels and to repack them again after Customs examination. It is possible therefore that the damage may have occurred at this stage".

This is the second time they've said this. I can hear them whine, "It's all Parcelforce's fault!", in what is very clearly little more than an attempt to pin the blame on the Parcelforce donkey. Next letter, I expect to read "while the parcel was being opened, the laser-disc sleeve spontaneously combusted." I also note a sentence, "Thank you for your letter dated 14.4.97 which was received here on the 21st". Seven days for first-class mail? This seems like a flimsy attempt to meet the standards set in the previously mentioned Customs Notice 1000: "we will aim to issue a full response to your complaint within ten working days of receiving it". Let's just pretend it entered a time-warp somewhere along the line, shall we?

15th MAY After a catalog of disasters, up to and including my e-mail box being corrupted (are HMC&E sneaking into the house and screwing up the computer?), I get a duplicate receipt from the vendor in the States. I enclose a copy of the receipt as evidence of the cost and, setting my sarcasm to stun, point out that I am not going to let them pass the buck to Parcelforce.

I fully accept that Customs and Excise are entitled to open parcels and packages, but this in no way excuses damage caused to the contents. I am also at a loss to see how Parcelforce may conceivably have caused the inner sleeve to vanish, if their responsibilities are merely to open and repack parcels. However, hopefully you should soon be able to establish definitely what happened, and I look forward to hearing from you in due course.

29th MAY "I am afraid our computers are still down, and as such we have not been able to investigate your claim fully but in order to avoid further delay we will proceed and authorise compensation for £40, as requested, in full and final settlement of your claim".

I seriously contemplate going down the off-licence and converting said forty quid into rather a lot of Stella Artois. However, it's not an entirely comprehensive victory. The sentence that follows reads: "I should point out that both duty and VAT should have been charged on this consignment but in view of the inconvenience caused we will not pursue the underpayment of Customs charges in this instance". They're not bad at this veiled threat thing, are they?

The other thing that comes to mind is that beyond a "please accept our apologies for any inconvenience caused", worthy of British Rail on a wrong-kind-of-snow day, they haven't actually said they were at fault, or explained what happened to the parcel. Could they perhaps be aware that every word they say is being considered for publication in TC?

They also enclosed a copy of Notice 143, which had some interesting sections. As mentioned, if someone from abroad sends you goods, you are supposed to pay duty if they cost any more than £15 -- how the hell they thought three video discs and a tape were worth less than that, I don't know. However, if they are "gifts", the duty-free allowance goes up to £36. I don't think I need say a great deal more on what this means vis-a-vis getting stuff sent to you from overseas...

So I waited, with baited breath, for my compensation to appear. And I waited. And I waited. And just when I was about to enquire politely what was going on, what should come through the door but another one of those brown, window envelopes that I'd come to know and love.

P.O. Serial number
162604



Issuing Office Tilbury Payments Section, H.M. Customs & Excise,
Tilbury Docks, Tilbury, Essex RM18 7EJ

Payee

J MCLENNAN (MR) *****

Date 16-JUN-97

Pay

Forty Pounds and No Pence*****

Forty Pounds and No Pence*****

f 餐餐餐餐40.00端端端端餐餐餐

Payee

J MCLENNAN (MR) *****

CRF 267

D Robinson
Faculty and Computer Center

15 1600000 10 130 11 00250480

29th JULY "Unfortunately, we have had a great deal of trouble with our computer system and have only just got it back on line... [*Three months! Our users are peeved if their computers go down for three minutes*] It was presented to Customs & Excise by Parcelforce on 7th March 1997 when it was selected for an anti-smuggling examination. I have spoken to the officer concerned who cannot recall this specific case I am afraid after this length of time. [*Lucky it didn't go to court then, isn't it?*] It seems likely that in this case that either the officer did not replace the laserdisk in its sleeve, or that the Parcelforce official did not repack it properly... [*Yep, still trying to blame someone else*] It would be normal practice for Parcelforce and/or Customs and Excise to keep a record of any damage incurred, depending on who was responsible. I have examined both our records and that of Parcelforce and found no details of your parcel. That is unusual. [= "You are a lying bastard"] I have therefore reminded my staff of the need to record details of any accidental damage incurred... I apologise for any distress that our action has caused, and the damage sustained to your parcel, but hope that you understand our need to be vigilant against smuggling."

My goodness, if I didn't know better, and that all HMC&E officers are required to have their sense of humour bypassed on joining the organisation, I would say that the last sentence was bordering on the deliciously sarcastic. It's still not what you would quite call a grovelling admission of blame, but I guess it will just have to do.

I'm sure that readers will appreciate the satisfaction to be gained from the above saga -- though I cashed the cheque, naturally, seeing how the disc is still playable, I haven't bothered ordering another copy [The damage is quite easily visible: while it had actually only been watched once, it looks like a seriously ex-rental purchase] What makes it more ironic, is that the film in question was Hong Kong Category III classic, 'Sex and Zen', a film which has since had over four minutes hacked out of it by the BBFC -- perhaps making it the kind of evil and immoral material for which Customs were looking. That they ended up paying for my copy, is a sweet victory indeed.

Trash TV #1: Sabrina, the Teenage Witch

When the entertainment colossus which is 'The Simpsons' finally hove into view on the BBC, the commercial network feared it'd take out 'Baywatch', which ran in the same slot. And so, instead they sent in a sacrificial lamb, in the shape of new American series, 'Sabrina, the Teenage Witch'. But, verily, a miracle took place in the ratings: 'Sabrina' improved the audience over what "the world's most popular TV show" had managed, and pulled in better figures than 'The Simpsons' too. So it was they who were sent packing from Saturday evenings, replaced by that popular icon of youth culture, 'Dad's Army'.

The reason for this was simple; 'Sabrina' is far better than you expect. Indeed, there's a good case to be made for putting it above the early 'Simpsons' which the BBC screened. Video permitted a straightforward comparison on a show-by-show basis: about 70% of the time, I found 'Sabrina' more entertaining. But perhaps a more accurate comparison is with another teen-com, the series based on 'Clueless', which appeared immediately before 'Sabrina' on ITV. It is so stultifyingly unfunny, it might have been specifically chosen to make 'Sabrina' look like a comedic supernova.

It's a curiously subversive show, replacing the well-tested nuclear family unit with three women - a physicist, a concert violinist and a schoolgirl, all of them witches. The first two, Zelma and Hilda are Sabrina's aunts, her parents being...elsewhere [I missed the pilot episode!]. The only man in the house is a cat: Salem, turned into a feline for a failed attempt at world domination. Hmm, pick the psychosexual bones out of *that* cosy little household.



Sabrina is coming to terms with her, um, witchiness, but rather than using magic to, say, stop world hunger, is more interested in getting boys to like her. Such disinterest isn't really plausible; actress Melissa Joan Hart sets more than one gentleman of my acquaintance drooling -- though we'd better draw a veil over the identities of those who prefer the younger Melissa from 'Clarissa Explains It All'...

Anyway, putting teenophile lust aside, this scenario could be an excuse for patronising dogma of the obvious sort, but generally isn't. While there may be a moral, it has a pleasing tendency to go against the grain: one episode could be summed up as "helping people isn't necessarily a good thing". For American TV, this is only *marginally* less revolutionary than "it's okay to slaughter your parents in the name of Satan".



An interesting variant is the TVM which predates the series; while Hart still plays the central character, her aunts are different actresses and the overall feel is darker. The absence of a laugh track is a genuine pleasure, allowing you to pick up on little things like the sound of a jet engine, tucked in to accompany Sabrina's magic-enhanced javelin throw.

The discovery of her supernatural powers is charmingly handled, with more deftness than you'd expect from Tibor Takacs, director of naff 80's horror 'Hardcover'. However, this is probably down to Melissa Joan Hart's highly personable performance, which is sweet without

ever slipping into schmaltz. This is the stuff of which teenage dreams are made: the ability to take on the richest, prettiest, most popular girl in school and win.

It's surprisingly unfunny, though deliberately so, preferring to play things straight, and the lack of subversive elements does leave it occasionally suffering from a certain over-earnestness. This is mostly down to the aunts, wishy-washy, new Age characters, rather than the feisty eccentrics they became in the series. Add in a climax that keeps heading towards 'Carrie' without ever getting there, and you do have a highly different view of the Sabrina-verse from the television show.

We get a Melissa with short hair, which I'm not sure about. I'm also deeply unsure about a sequence in which Sabrina and best friend try on swimming costumes for a pool party. It's both fascinating, and disturbing-because-it's-fascinating. Worse still, on the laser-disk - yep, I'm that sad - it's even chapter-stopped. Chapter seven, to be exact. Though at least I didn't do the accompanying frame grabs; maybe I'm not *quite* so sad after all...



It benefits from a rapid turnover in episodes. With 'The Simpsons', we get material the best part of a decade old, whose best jokes have already been repeated by every bastard with satellite TV. Instead, the gap between first American and British transmission for 'Sabrina' can be as little as 48 hours, which helps the frequent cross-references to other pop culture. Like 'The Simpsons', there's also usually a gratuitous celebrity cameo; some, notably Penn Gillette's wildly OTT appearances as the witches' boss, work better than the apparently random baseball or pop star appearances. Other highlights include Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa (the bad guy from 'Mortal Kombat'), and Raquel Welch in a costume definitely unsuitable for family viewing...

While by no means perfect, even its weaknesses seem to warp into something that approach strengths; the laugh track is dreadfully grating, but only bespatters the obvious lines, the more subtle, and better, humour is left for you to enjoy in splendid isolation. It has its fair share of naff episodes, but that's inevitable when you take risks, especially in the sterile world of the American sitcom. And Salem is played by a moth-eaten animatronic puppet, yet the effect is charming rather than pathetic (and it improves drastically as the series progresses, to the point where a Frank Sinatra impression is plausible). For, as with all shows, it lives or dies by its characters, and in 'Sabrina', they are plausible and memorable creations.

The series is a notable prime-time hit on American television, regularly in the top 30, and reaching #14 over Christmas. But ITV decided to ignore the ratings on both sides of the Atlantic, and replaced 'Sabrina' with, yep, 'Baywatch', largely relegating the superior show to re-runs during Children's ITV on Wednesday afternoon. Doh! No matter; as far as I am concerned, the name 'Sabrina' is no longer exclusively linked with a large-breasted Italian singer in the Trash City Hall of Fame.

AGAINST CHRISTMAS



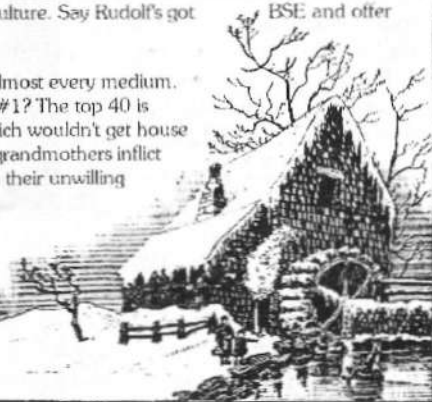
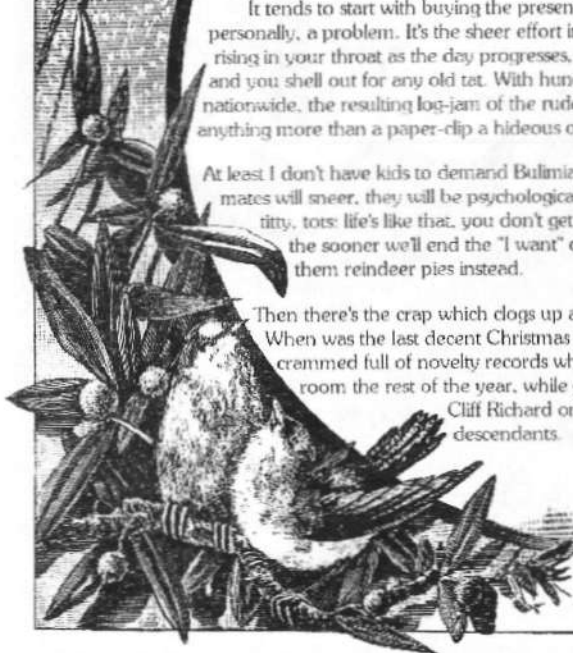
We're now well into the run-up to the festive season, a time when everybody looks forward to a few days of merriment and good cheer. By doing so, we exhibit the memory span of a goldfish, forgetting all about the utter nightmare that last year was, and which this year will be as well. Because Christmas, as she is practiced, sucks.

The basic principle from pagan times - eat a lot, get drunk, fall over, sleep till spring - is sound. However, this has been warped into something totally different, which is a whole lot more trouble than it's worth. Now, this isn't the usual tirade against the commercialization of Christmas - excessive consumption is almost its only saving grace. No, it's just the sheer naughtiness, hypocrisy and pointless effort that aggrieves.

It tends to start with buying the presents. The horror! The horror! The expense is not, personally, a problem. It's the sheer effort involved in slogging to get the damn things, panic rising in your throat as the day progresses, until desperation proves the mother of invention and you shell out for any old tat. With hundreds of millions of presents to be purchased nationwide, the resulting log-jam of the rude, the mad and the extremely ugly, make buying anything more than a paper-clip a hideous ordeal of ferocious proportions.

At least I don't have kids to demand Bulimia Barbie at any cost -- if they don't get it, their classmates will sneer, they will be psychologically scarred for life, and it'll be all your fault. Tough titty, tots: life's like that, you don't get what you ask for and the sooner kids realise that, the sooner we'll end the "I want" culture. Say Rudolf's got BSE and offer them reindeer pies instead.

Then there's the crap which clogs up almost every medium. When was the last decent Christmas #1? The top 40 is crammed full of novelty records which wouldn't get house room the rest of the year, while grandmothers inflict Cliff Richard on their unwilling descendants.



In 1996, we had the Spice Girls (remember them? The correct answer to "Who's your favourite Spice Girl?" was, of course, "They're all talentless, ugly slags"), just ahead of a gang of kids mauling a Bob Dylan song, in order to wipe out one of the very few sports at which Britain is halfway good. As with music, so with movies and TV. Cinemas brim with "family entertainment", which usually means Disney's puerile moralism, and Arnold Schwarzenegger "comedies"; hell for the majority of the population who don't have kids. On TV, it's films that have been sanitised for our protection, more family dross, and wall-to-wall Christmas specials of programs that you didn't watch the rest of the year either. If something is crap in half-hour chunks, it's unlikely to be any better in feature-length episodes.

This is forgivable: after all, the difference between 99% rubbish and 99.9% rubbish is scant. Sadly, you're not even allowed to slump at home in front of the television, you are expected to spread good tidings of comfort and joy. This can be safely done by sending a card, with some banal sentiment such as "Thinking of you", which acquires an ironic charm when sent to someone about whom you don't give a toss. If you actually care about someone, you contact them during the year; a sudden pretence, after ignoring them since last Christmas, is the sort of rudeness you only get away with over the festive season.

But if there's one thing worse than distant relations, it's close ones, people with whom all you have in common are a few chromosomes, yet you are expected to make polite conversation and smile genteely as your uncle spews out his annual sherry-fuelled diatribe. And auntie is convinced that your idea of a wonderful time remains a game of ludo, rather than a session of torrid sex with your second cousin, who would appear to have not so much hit puberty, as been smashed headlong into it, propelled on a tidal wave of raging hormones.

Readers are warned that attempts to act on such urges are unlikely to be treated lightly, despite it being the time of year when "festive spirit" exacerbates the prevailing view that alcohol is an excuse for any atrocious behaviour. Those who decline to take part in idiotic rituals involving party hats, balloons and the office photocopier are labelled killjoys, as if there were any joy to be had watching your boss prove precisely what an obnoxious cretin he really is. Better to stick with the hordes of conveniently drunken secretaries that you will find in the gutter, assuming you can find an orifice free of vomit and other unpleasant bodily secretions. For this is the time of year when pubs that no-one would touch with a ten-foot pole for 11 months suddenly start employing Neanderthals on the door to say "sorry mate, those are trainers".

However, this particular problem comes to a climax not at Christmas, but at New Year, when you queue up to have the privilege of paying an exorbitant sum for entrance into an overcrowded club, in order to listen to someone else's choice of music at deafening volume, while paying over the odds for crap beer. The cloakroom will be full and they will run out of glasses behind the bar, because no-one with enough common sense to foresee such obvious problems works in a night-club. All of us are at home, with our own CD players and a stack of drinks of our own choice, drinking heavily to celebrate the end of another dreadful fortnight.

Whoever was responsible for Christmas should have been taken out and crucified. Indeed, I think you'll find he was. Maybe the Jews knew somehow that they were letting their descendants in for years of misery, and decided to get their retribution in early. I, for one, don't blame them a bit.

E.S.



Memoirs of an Invisible Man

My career as a part-time trespasser was born out of two events, starting with a desire for a free lunch. I work for a multinational in the City, and while we had to buy sandwiches, at one of our sister companies, they got lunch supplied. Some bright spark eventually realised that you could hijack this facility by going in and flashing your pass; even though it was technically invalid, no-one would ever stop you, if you did it with the necessary cheek.

The second incident was getting sent to one of our other offices; I got the address confused and walked into the building next door. Again, a flash of the pass and I was in, even though it belonged to a totally different company. It took ten minutes to work out why I couldn't find our office, but I got to wondering just where I could reach by sheer effrontery. Since then, I've explored many major buildings in the City, including Lloyds, the Nat West Tower and the Guildhall, and wandered round without real interference.

It's a great way to spend your spare time, providing the necessary adrenalin buzz to counteract the dull afternoons, and you get a fascinating glimpse into the way the other 99.95% live. The odds are well stacked against any significant sanctions as a result of your actions, and really, it's so simple that anyone with an average degree of common sense can do it. And much of what follows is no more than that, but it probably bears explicit repetition.

1. Selection of your target.

In general, the bigger the building, the better. With 1000 people, it's hard for any guard to recognise everyone, and even the eidetically memorised will still have to deal with staff turnover and all those people who are there legitimately. A busy place is preferable to one with little activity. The more people going in, the better, as you'll be exposed to proportionately less scrutiny.

Obviously, some places are more open and accessible than others, but the level of security at the front door varies surprisingly little: a couple of security guards are usually about all there is, unless the business of the building requires special protection. Eventually, even these may become viable for the experienced wanderer, but for the novice, it's better to start with easier targets.

2. Advance preparation

You should be as familiar with the place as a "real" inhabitant -- it's a dead giveaway if you arrive, then walk into a broom cupboard! Most places have a foyer where you can wait, and sitting here will let you watch people going in, and learn things like: to whom they show their passes; what do they do after going past security; where are the stairs and the lifts? This will also allow you to check for internal security, such as turnstiles and passcard doors. The latter aren't a problem (see below), the former are tough to defeat but are rare. You're more likely to find them in offices that aren't open to the public because they make that carefully designed airy atria look more like a football stadium, and distinctly unwelcoming.



Through observation, you will also learn which time of day is best. You want to follow the herd in, so early in the morning, or at the end of lunchtime are good times, allowing you to ride on the ratio of workers to security personnel. For this reason, evenings and weekends are pretty much ruled out; the building may be just about deserted, but you'll have individual attention from whoever is on duty. Bear in mind that different buildings run to different schedules: stockbrokers start work earlier in the morning than bankers.

3. Appearance

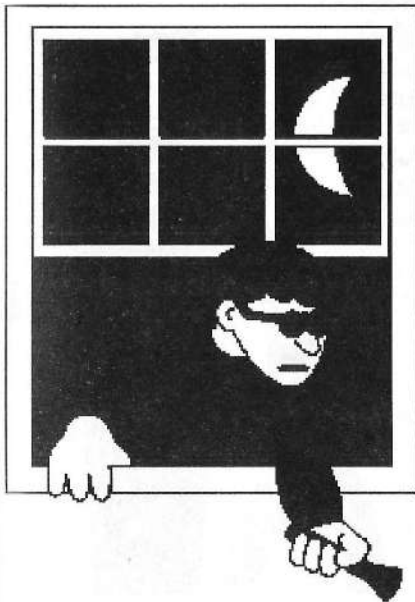
This extends to a little more than the obvious; you're not going to get far into the Stock Exchange wearing jeans and a T-shirt, but if you need to be told that, you're not going to get far anyway. What this really involves is the stuff round the edges; if you are going into a building at lunchtime, carry a paper bag of sandwiches. If it's morning, a briefcase may help, but at 3:20 will mark you down as a visitor. Perhaps there's a standard sort of clothing, except on Fridays, which are dress-down days; a little care will establish what is the best approach to take.

4. The hit.

For the purposes of this introduction, we will assume a standard building where you have to present a pass to someone just inside the front door. There are four basic ways of getting in, which have advantages and disadvantages. In roughly increasing order of risk, they are:

- (a) Semi-legitimate access
- (b) A forgotten pass
- (c) Using dodgy ID
- (d) The fake visit

(a) is simply using a pass obtained previously, which you didn't hand back when you left. Few have a date or other limitation on them; even one which says "4th Floor" can be taken off at an opportune moment as soon as you get inside. Rules about wearing these are rarely enforced with any firmness: it's certainly better to wear no badge, than wear one which immediately marks you as a visitor outside his territory.



The next approach is to pretend you've forgotten your ID. This happens to everyone, especially on Monday mornings ("I left it in my other suit"), or after lunch ("It's in my drawer"). You'll probably have to sign in at reception instead, so have a convincing fake name and a mumbled apology ready. You may well get a temporary pass, which can be kept for a future visit.

While the above two methods are relatively safe, the next one is risky. You flash something on entrance that looks legitimate, but isn't. The aim is to minimise the amount of time your fake ID is visible; ideally, zero. If you appear to have shown a pass, the guard may simply assume that you have done so, and will not hassle you. Certainly, you've a better chance than if he thinks you've tried to sneak past him. Timing is essential, if the guard is otherwise distracted, you can sweep past like a clipper in full sail. It goes without saying that what you flash should vaguely resemble the real thing, so it helps to have seen an example beforehand. In general, it should have your picture on it in the right place, and be roughly the same size.

The final method is really for the daring, and requires you to pretend you have an appointment with an inhabitant. It's tricky because you have to know the name of someone in the building, and you must hope that you get sent up to see them, rather than them coming down to meet you! Of course, once in the lift, you can get off elsewhere, leaving them puzzled but not too bothered. If you do get held in reception, a rapid exit is your best option. One excellent, plausible alternative is claiming to be a photocopier repairman; just give a floor, and say there was no contact name.

For all of these, the key requisite is confidence. If you look like you should be there, you won't have any problems. Seem unsure of where you're going, and you stick out like a sore thumb. First impressions are crucial here: walk boldly past the entrance guard with a smile. Knowing his name, whether through prior observation, or his badge, is a major bonus; if he thinks you know him, it's a major psychological hurdle to overcome.

5. Once inside

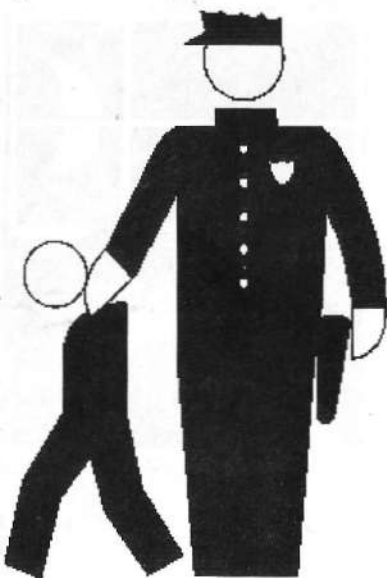
When you're in the building, most of your problems are over; the chances of being stopped are slim, especially if you keep moving, and (as above) are confident about it. Best only to stop in communal areas, near coffee machines, lifts, or photocopiers, where hanging round is acceptable, and less suspicious. In terms of security, you may find passcard doors, whose locks require the application of a smart card or pass to open. The answer to these is the technique known as "tailgating", in which you follow a legitimate worker through the door. Most people, placing politeness above security, will hold it open for you -- especially if you have your arms full with a (possibly spurious) cardboard box. Smile gratefully at them as you head into the restricted area.

6. If you get caught

Even so, sooner or later, someone will become suspicious of your behaviour. Unless they are extremely sure of their ground, their reaction will probably be along the lines of "Can I help you?", and it's best to have an answer for this prepared. The ubiquitous photocopier is convenient, or you can claim to be looking for a spurious person -- pick a less common name, as the last thing you want is to find there actually is someone called that around! If the building is occupied by more than one company, you can pretend to be on the wrong floor.

You have to be very, very blatant before an employee will even think about notifying security, and people are generally leery of mounting any challenge, as the potential losses outweigh the benefits. Most folk just don't care. Of course, if you get caught at the front door, you'll be face to face with security, and your tactics need to be a little different. It's best to write off the occasion, and possibly the entire building (after all, there's not exactly a shortage!), so make your excuses and leave. Pretending to be in the wrong building is good, just get the address slightly wrong, and affect surprise. It is, however, a bit tricky to do this if the foyer features a big logo for the company in question.

Almost certainly, the worst that will happen is that you will be asked to leave. Few companies want to create a fuss over simple trespass, and unless you've caused damage or broken the law in other ways, you'll just be shown the door. It's not worth the hassle for you or them, to extend the confrontation: just leave quietly. There's little doubt that your face will be remembered, so don't even think about revenge, unless you are incredibly fool-hardy.





7. And the point is...?

You may be wondering, why bother? This is the hardest facet to describe: it's easy to teach someone how to elude security, but they have to come up with their own reasons why. I could, if I wanted, loot a huge pile of stuff, but I don't bother -- all offices are much the same, and if you're going to boost stuff, it's easier to do it from your own work-place!

If I had an axe to grind against a company, I could create chaos, by setting off the fire alarms, for example. [It's also worth noting that after a fire drill, as the employees flood back in, security checks tend to be ignored] Realising just how lax most companies are, is something of a salutary experience. However, I am a good capitalist, and any such campaign would eventually backfire on me, as places started to get tough.

I do it merely for the excitement; it's like exploring a new country, complete with the threat of hostile natives. I've seen brilliant views from the top of some of Britain's tallest buildings; I've chatted to everyone from executives to cleaners; I've stalked the corridors of power in banks, newspapers, computer companies and hospitals. It is good to realise just how dumb the glorified bouncers in these places can be.

The next time you see a strange face lurking in a slightly suspicious manner by the photocopier, you never know who it might be. Go up to them, stare them straight in the eye...and ask them when the machine will be fixed!

"Arsene Lupin" was talking to Jim McLennan.

It's the End of the World As We Know It, and I Feel Fine...

In case you hadn't noticed, the millennium is coming. This is affecting people in different ways: religious cults from California to Japan are preparing for the apocalypse (and starting it if necessary), the government here is building a big dome thing at Greenwich, and publishers are flocking like lemmings to open up publications on strange phenomena.

A trip to the newsagent can now easily turn into ATA -- that's Attack of the Three-letter Acronyms, as you are assailed by magazines about UFOs, BEMs, ABCs, MiB, and JFK. Such publications have always existed, but not so long ago, 'Fortean Times' was only available through mail-order and specialist book-shops. Admittedly, in the general interconnectedness of things, it's hard to prove cause and effect, yet there seems to be a massive increase in what might be generically termed "weird shit".

Whether the popularity of 'The X Files' is a cause or merely the most obvious symptom is an interesting question. Chris Carter certainly seems to have tapped into a rich vein of the collective unconscious, and this has been reflected in the publishing world. Most of the magazines make at least a nod to the X Files, and in some cases, it's a lot more blatant.

So, in order to take the temperature of the world's zeitgeist (as it were), I carried out a sweep of such publications, consciously omitting anything hard to find -- everything below came from W.H. Smith's, indicating just how mainstream previously fringe beliefs now are. Going by the strange looks from the sales assistant, the first thing I learned is that I'd probably rather buy £20 worth of porn than £20 worth of UFO mags. "Would you like a plastic bag?", she asked; I mumbled acceptance and stuffed the 'research material' away. However, it was of endless interest to my work mates, proving its millennial fascination even in the financial institution where I toil away.

The common theme is an acceptance of the existence of strange phenomena with a near-religious faith, albeit one varying from the Agnostic to the Fundamentalist Islamic in intensity. There may be quibbles over whether this or that piece of evidence are valid, yet this rarely distracts from a general feeling perhaps best summed up by Fox Mulder's poster: "I want to believe". As the Heaven's Gate cult showed, UFOs and religion are often intertwined parts of the same thing. And here are the results. These magazines lend themselves less well to quantitative analysis, as the blokemags did -- after all, the ads are part of the experience, even (or perhaps especially) if they're for deeply sad stuff like Star Trek credit cards. Instead, I've rated each in a number of areas:

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| BOGGLE | How off-the-wall are the contents? Football rates low, but "aliens abducted Reagan and replaced him with a cyborg" rates high. Though thinking about it... |
| plausibility | The more bizarre your topic, the more authoritative you need to be. Just as with films, the best make anything seem viable through reliable, authoritative writing. |
| longevity | There are mags you read once and dispose. Then there are those you carefully file away for future use - and I have cupboards of the damn things to prove it... |
| amusement | Probably the most important thing, assuming you read them for the same reasons I do. Take these with a jaundiced eye and a six-pack of beer to hand... |

Alien Encounters #11, £2.99, pp84. Though nominally based around the UFO theme, this covers a broad range of topics, connected tangentially. Mind control, drugs, and coverage of film and television are all included in a multi-disciplinary approach. The writing is good, making the abstruse tech stuff interesting and clear. It also benefits from an apparent sense of humour - they even had an April Fool's joke - that to some extent defuses an especially unquestioning tone, which appears a common problem with Paragon Publishing titles (see 'Uri Geller's Encounters'). The 'Bubblegum Crash' article also makes it probably the only UFO magazine to have a gratuitous anime reference...



Bizarre #2, £2.50, pp100. The major problem here is that it isn't. Bizarre, that is. Despite coming complete with a free mini-booklet of "The World's Most Bizarre Facts Ever" (Example: "slugs have four noses"), it's only marginally left-field. Many of the pieces, such as one on being a Tornado pilot, could have come from FHM, Maxim or GQ -- it feels more like Loaded, though it's from the same publisher as Fortean Times. While not badly written, the blokish approach seems hideously inappropriate to some topics, and I suddenly realised this is really one of the men's mags reviewed last TC. Against them, it'd stand up very well, but compared to the rest of this selection, it contains absolutely nothing to give you sleepless nights, apart from some great photographs. [On the other hand, they did get me to do a piece on Category III Hong Kong movies, so I guess we can at least congratulate them on their excellent choice of writers...]

Enigma #4, £2.95, pp68. Takes a slightly different angle, in that UFOs are just one facet of a broad picture, and is also the mag with the most space dedicated to the world of conspiracy theory. Needless to say, this gives it an immediate appeal to me. The articles tend to be longer than average, five or six pages on average, but often the better pieces tend to be the brief and punchy ones: the 'Men in Black' column is an excellent Q&A piece. Less glib than some of its competitors, I loved its tongue-in-cheek suggestion that passport booth pictures are part of a plot by the government to embarrass people into not wanting to leave the country.

Focus, May 1997, £2.30, pp124. This is a long-running publication that used to be a hard-science mag, but now the cover trumpets "SPACE CONSPIRACY" -- albeit, this turns out to be with regard to the Apollo 1 fire, thirty years ago. There are also pieces on exotic animals i.e. Surrey pumas, but you feel it has been driven, grudgingly, into covering the paranormal by the rise of its competition; it's done without much enthusiasm, and it's easily the most sceptical mag on offer. However, the mundane stuff is well handled and interesting, and it's this that proves the saving grace. Worth it on that basis if you're a science fan, otherwise, skip it. This feels horribly like the sort of thing that would have cropped up in your school library. Apparently, the #1 greatest invention of all time is sanitation. This comes from a combination of reader's votes, and "the considered recommendations of the 'Focus' team of experts". Which pretty much says it all about this mag's lack of imagination.



Fortean Times #98, £2.50, pp68. Another veteran, this has been chronicling the strange since 'Carter' was just that bloke off 'The Sweeney'. However, they too seem to have changed, and been forced downmarket: no way would the old FT have printed a totally uncritical "Moon Landing Hoax" piece. Going monthly seems to stretch both the data (it's among the slimmest of the regular titles) and the style a bit thin -- I strongly suspect pressure from the publishers to dumb things down significantly, with the more esoteric stuff being hived off into their annual "Studies" volume. However, its tongue in cheek approach is unrivalled, and with every clipping assiduously dated and located, its rise from 'zinedom to W.H.Smith's is unsurprising. I do find the relentless promotion of Schwa merchandising a tad irritating though: they're now big enough not to need it. Still the best, but should certainly be looking over its shoulder in a worried manner.



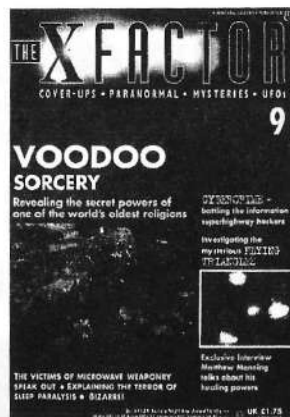
UFO Magazine Jul/Aug 1997, £1.95, pp68. Missed in the initial sweep, it was presumably between issues on its bi-monthly schedule. The contents appear to be angled towards the 'hardware' side, with pieces on hypersonic planes, a satellite launch platform based on an oil rig, astronomy, and a lot on Cydonia and the Pathfinder mission to Mars. This comes across as a little on the dry side, and the 'book reviews' section concentrates mysteriously on titles available from...UFO Magazine! Plus some sloppy proof-reading i.e. "cynagoen" instead of cyanogen, and a design style that includes such dainty delights as white text on a light grey background. Yuk. Some good stuff on Roswell's 50th anniversary though. S'ok, s'pose, but I see absolutely no reason why it should be "The world's best-selling UFO publication".

UFO Reality #7, £2.85, pp76. Skates on the thin-ice of self-indulgence, and occasionally falls through, most notably with an 8-page interview with...the editor, in which we learn about his stultifyingly uninteresting life. Between that, the advert for his novel, and all the stuff he writes, this is teetering precariously on the edge of vanity publishing, but let's be charitable and call it a glossy fanzine instead. It also suffers from too much that is pure speculation, but there are good photos, a lively letters column, and a nice little report on a trip to Area 51, in which the writer sees...nothing much at all. It's always nice to leaven the weirdness with a pinch of mundanity; perhaps this could be the first in a series i.e. "I failed to see the Loch Ness Monster", or "I have absolutely no idea who shot Kennedy".

Uri Geller's Encounters #8, £2.99, pp84. Though Geller's name seems to have mysteriously shrunk on the cover. Inside, he does get a two page advert for various products linked to him, most of which look totally dreadful (though the novel looks interesting, in an Incredibly Bad sort of way). Describes itself as "The world's most *paranormal* magazine" -- presumably this means it's laid out via some method of thought transference, and then teleports itself directly onto Smith's shelves. Another Paragon title, and credulous beyond belief, as you can tell from this sample quote: "Ever since the Beatles' famous White album was released with the hidden backward message 'Paul is dead'...". Utterly gullible, an interesting game would be to see who could get the bizarrest tale printed on their "Reader's Stories" page; there's no effort to investigate or verify them. Chuck in simple factual errors, and the most amazing thing you'll learn is that people buy this sort of over-priced dreck. Cheap laffs a-plenty, but precious little else.



The X Factor #9, £1.75, pp32. This is actually a part-work from Marshall Cavendish, though it's not immediately apparent from the cover - it managed to fool me, and the title is obvious a blatant attempt to associate itself with a certain TV programme! As a part-work, it's obviously less well-up on current events, and with its low page count and large type, probably contains the least data, though the lack of adverts and full-colour content make up for this to some extent. It loses points for a laughably ill-informed article on the Internet: apparently unsuspecting users can sometimes stumble across child pornography accidentally...[yeah, but what are they browsing alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.children for?] There is, however, a good article on electromagnetic weapons, and I suspect that it would indeed "build into a complete library" -- and needlessly clutter up your bedroom floor until you needed the space for something else, as I recall.



title	boggle	plausibility	longevity	amusement	total
Fortean Times	☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	16
Enigma	☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	15
Alien Encounters	☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	14
The X Factor	☺☺☺	☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	☺☺☺☺	13
UFO Reality	☺☺☺☺	☺☺	☺☺	☺☺☺☺	11
Focus	☺	☺☺☺☺☺	☺☺	☺☺	10
Bizarre	☺☺	☺☺☺	☺	☺☺☺☺	9
Uri Geller's Encounters	☺☺☺☺	☺	☺	☺☺☺☺	9
UFO Magazine	☺☺	☺☺	☺☺	☺☺	8

There was, however, one publication that I failed to acquire, on which I do regret missing out, even if it is not strictly available from W.H.Smith's. The following advert was clipped from an unnamed publication and sent to me:

MADONNA'S SECRET

In one of her most popular songs, Madonna refers enigmatically to a secret she has learnt which she hopes she will "live to tell". In 'Madonna's Secret' I reveal that this secret almost certainly involves contact between Madonna and aliens. For a free copy send 29p (UK P&P)/50p (abroad) to: GIT, 11 Wharton Street, London WC1X.

Despite sending off my stamp to the address, I have yet to receive a reply...

THE INCREDIBLY BAD DANCE SHOW: LORD OF THE DANCE



Flatley gets to grips with his forthcoming role as Adolf Hitler.

Irish set dancing may seem a slightly unlikely subject for this august publication to be covering, but I've been something of a fan since a Dublin trip in '96. Suspicions this interest might be put down to excessive Guinness consumption were dispelled on my mother's 60th birthday, when we went to see 'Riverdance'. If seeing three dancers operating in perfect synchronicity is impressive, seeing forty is bordering on the amazing. Besides, the appeal of seeing attractive women in short skirts, bouncing up and down, should really require no further explanation here.

That Michael Flatley, the former star of 'Riverdance', is one hell of a dancer can not be doubted. He has feet to compare with Fred Astaire, Ryan Giggs, and that bloke at the end of 'Drunken Master 2'. Flatley supposedly left the show which either he made a star, or which made him a star (depending to whom you listen) over the old artistic chestnut of creative control, but since then, 'Riverdance' has sailed serenely on without the slightest problem. As the trip to Dublin showed, light-footed Irish people are not exactly thin on the ground -- anyone wandering round Temple Bar has to beware gangs of masked set dancers who leap out from around corners and tap-dance relentlessly for you. They just pulled in some bloke who was nine-times All-Ireland light-heavyweight Set Dancing champion, and have continued to play to packed houses across the nation and around the world, as well as shifting shed-loads of video-cassettes and so forth. At Easter, you could hardly avoid seeing it: I think there were four separate programs devoted to it over the long weekend.

Flatley, however, not a man to take replacement lightly, came up with his own show, and it is quite, quite brilliant -- albeit in a strikingly tacky way. 'Riverdance' took traditional Irish dancing and prodded it gently into the 20th century, with obvious affection. 'Lord of the Dance' drags it down the Hippodrome and pours margaritas down its throat. It's the terpsichorean equivalent of 'Showgirls': you can't help but watch, just to see what will happen next. It may or may not be the product of an utterly bloated ego, but if someone with an utterly bloated ego were to produce a show, the result would probably look not unlike 'Lord of the Dance'.

The first half is relatively traditional -- on odd occasions, the show clearly desperately wants to be 'Riverdance', with very similar moves and much the same music cropping up. The most significant variation is the addition of heady amounts of sex into the equation, for no readily apparent reason. Thus, you get two blonde violin-toting babes, who play a sprightly duet clad almost entirely in PVC, like a pair of fetishist Vanessa-Maes. This was followed by a flame-haired vixen oozing around the stage looking very nice, to be eventually joined by a bunch of girls who rip their skirts off. Now, this sort of dancing I can cope with, and it was beginning to look like Flatley was making a single-handed attempt to destroy the widely-held belief that all male dancers are cocoa-shunters. Either that, or it was a touching tribute to Riverdance's roots in the Eurovision song contest. So far, so not entirely unexpected, nor unpleasant, though I could probably have done without the odd gratuitous close-up of Flatley's groin, encased in tight trousers and with what appears to be an entire sock drawer stuffed down there (including the drawer). Much of the show revolves around Michael's seemingly pre-oiled flesh, and his absorption and encouragement of applause was scarily vampiric in its intensity. But in the second half, that things really started to warm up -- or down.

One advantage of being a star is that you get a big dressing room. If this isn't enough, why not make up your own show, give yourself the spiffiest costume, and become the hero in a spectacularly shallow depiction of the battle between good and evil? For this is what you get here: a mutated strain of Irish folklore, infected with Judaeo-Christian mythology. A kid, pretending badly to play 'Lord of the Dance' on a penny-whistle, has her instrument stolen and broken by some blokes in masks [Behaviour which immediately endeared them to me]. Flatley, the self-styled Lord of the Dance, descends into hell, battles the forces of evil, is apparently killed and - get this - rises from the grave to victory. Resisting temptation by the previously mentioned flame-haired vixen, he prefers instead the inevitable Good Girl in a smock. Flatley sticks the kid's whistle back together (the sleight of hand involved will not be giving Paul Daniels sleepless nights) and after a few dozen rapturous curtain calls, we live happily ever after, flogging \$25 baseball caps.

Now, if my memory of R.E. lessons is right, the song 'Lord of the Dance' is about Jesus. And when Flatley has himself resurrected, it's in a crucifix position. And for most of the show, he has something suspiciously crown-of-thorns like round his head. Yep, all the evidence suggests that for his solo debut, he has opted to start at the top and play Jesus Christ. Ladies and gentlemen, the ego has landed. And this is not any Jesus Christ, this is Christ Van Halen, with flashing lights, pyrotechnics and leather trousers. Think Spinal Tap doing 'Jesus Christ Superstar' down your local faux-Irish pub and you're getting there. All that's missing is John Wayne turning up to say "Surely this was the Son of God". [Incidentally, after the first take of that line, the director said "Very good, John, but could you do it with awe?". And, of course, next time, John says "Aw, surely this was the Son of God". Sorry. I've been wanting to use that joke for ages, and since this article is looking likely to come up a few lines short of two pages, here seems like an ideal point]

Just as no-one lets Giggs run Manchester United, Flatley really should have been dissuaded from putting on his own show, or at least from making it so blatantly Michael-centric. The dancing is great, but beneath the surface lurks a monster of self-aggrandisement and artistic pretension, the odd tentacle languidly breaking the surface. Flatley has made noises about moving into cinema next. Hey, I can hardly wait...

BLOOD AND POSES

Over the past year, there's been a mini-tidal wave of cinematic Shakespeare, most taking the Bard out of his historical era in, presumably, an attempt to add contemporary relevance. Thus, Branagh moved 'Hamlet' to the 19th century and 'Richard III' saw Ian McKellen operating just before World War 2. The most savage dislocation, though, is Baz Luhrmann's MTV-heavy 'Romeo and Juliet' -- passing Brixton Ritz, which had it and Abel Ferrara's 'The Addiction', I was reminded that it's certainly not the first gang-war version. Beside the well-known 'West Side Story' there is also Ferrara's 'China Girl', about love between the Italian and Chinese communities.

The romance at the heart of his 1987 movie is merely a symbol of larger events: when a Chinese restaurant opens in the rapidly-shrinking Little Italy, some Triad members want to "invade" Italian turf and collect their due. This brings them into conflict with their own race as well as, inevitably, the power of the Mafia. It requires no special skill to predict that the poor teenage couple in the middle will catch a great deal of flak. Unknown to them, they have surprising allies in the mob bosses of both communities - "peace is good", says one Triad leader - but will that be enough?



A similarity to J.Depp? Mere coincidence.

In some ways, the film prefigures Ferrara's 'King of New York', in which Christopher Walken played a mob boss also faced with rebellion in the ranks. The central theme of both is "loyalty in a changing world"; this should also be familiar from the Hong Kong movies of John Woo, where chivalric heroes try to adapt to the fact that honour no longer means anything, and the lead characters in 'China Girl' must decide whether to go with their hearts or their heads. Like Woo, Ferrara is an "independent", lured to Hollywood by the promise of big projects such as 'Bodysnatchers'. His recent updating of the 50's paranoid classic (already remade once before) had none of the lasting value of the original and was, like 'Broken Arrow', a spectacular empty shell. It never delivered on the promise of his earlier work and, unlike John Woo (who finally got it at least half-right with 'Face Off'), Ferrara now seems to have returned to his roots. His vision of New York is as immediately identifiable as Woo's Hong Kong: at first glance, this sense of place may seem about all the pair have in common, but in 'China Girl' it's possible to see other similarities to Woo's work.

The New York it portrays is very male-dominated, something true for most of Ferrara's movies, save 'Angel of Vengeance' ('Ms. 45'), where Zoe Tamerlis was fearsome, yet plausible and sympathetic. Certainly there are women in 'China Girl' but they are secondary, reactive characters: even relatively strong-willed, modern Tye (Sari Chang) takes little action on her own, requiring prompting by her boyfriend. This criticism is commonly levelled at Woo, whose 'classic' movies have hardly a single notable role for a woman. [It's also true of Luhrmann's Juliet, who does little save mope in her bedroom] Religion is clearly important to both directors, though with different levels of cynicism. 'Bad Lieutenant' is shot through with Catholic symbolism and overtones, yet is more warped and twisted than any Woo film, where "faith" of some kind remains pure and untainted, even if all around crumbles to dust. 'China Girl' has a brief shot of a statue of the Virgin Mary shattering, which has distinct similarities to 'The Killer' and its climax in a church.

The parallels are imperfect. In Woo's films, there is rarely any doubt over who are good guys, and who are villains -- not quite black and white, certainly, but at least 'slate' and 'cream'. The morality in 'China Girl', and Ferrara's work in general, is much less clear-cut. He adopts an ambiguous tone, where the boundaries between heroes and villains is largely a point of view. In addition, Ferrara seems fiercely averse to happy endings, his heroes are not only killed, but usually fail to achieve their goals. This contrasts markedly to the "heroic bloodshed" pioneered by Woo, whose characters tend to die with the satisfaction of a job well done. Despite this, 'China Girl' remains more a John Woo film than most he's made since coming to America. But Woo at least seems happy with his current lot and it's hard to envisage him returning to low-budget films in the near future. Only time will tell if either, both or none of these directors is able and willing to sustain a fully satisfactory critical and commercial transition to Hollywood.

Slightly more recognisable as Shakespeare - at least in some ways - is 'Tromeo and Juliet', a wild and twisted take on the Bard directed by Troma's head honcho Lloyd Kaufman. To some extent, it is perhaps truer to the spirit than Luhrmann's more technically accurate version, since it shifts large chunks of the dialogue into the 90's too. Thus, we get: "A word with me? How about a word for me? Or better yet, how about a word for you? Let's see, a word for Tyrone Capulet. Goofball. Dickbag. Peon. Freak. Cocksucker. Shithead. Ratcatcher. Geek..."

Kaufman takes the text of Shakespeare as little more than a jumping-off point, from which spirals a typically Tromatic spin on the battle between the Capulets and the Ques -- the latter provoked some puzzlement until it was discovered that the head of the family was called Monty. [Think about it...just not for too long...] This frees the makers from the agony of deciding whether or not to produce a full-length version (Shakespeare was the Tarantino of his day: overlong scripts padded needlessly with excessive, albeit very clever, dialogue) and the ending abandons R&J altogether, drifting closer to 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

But what is taken out is probably less important or interesting than what is added: severed body parts, creepy child abuse, an excruciating mondo nipple piercing, Lemmy the narrator (keeping his record of about one film every five years!), incest, a penis monster, plus Juliet and her nurse in a pleasant lesbian sex-romp. Given the makers, none of this is surprising and I think it's safe to say that Kaufman is not exactly overawed by his subject matter.

If you know Shakespeare, you'll get more out of this since it's stuffed with in-jokes and appropriately warped references to his plays. However, it's not required -- anyone who ever sat through an English class will appreciate the porno CD-Rom, 'As You Lick It'. The performances are good by most standards (and thus awesome by Troma ones) and while the production remains unashamedly cheap-jack, it's a viable contender for the best Troma-made movie since the original 'Toxic Avenger'. Which is probably a better reference point than any Shakespearean adaptation; if you enjoyed Toxie, you should like this screwed-up and thoroughly warped spin on the tale. Oh, and as ever with Troma, be sure to read all the end credits...



"What light through yonder Plexiglass breaks?"

The '97 TC Tour: Beer and Writhing in Las Vegas

Previous issues of TC have chronicled trips to both east and west coasts of America, but rumours persisted that there were some bits in the middle, between California (movies/sun/earthquakes) and New York (shopping/pizza/er, more shopping). To test the validity or otherwise of these reports, a two-week expedition was planned, sponsored, albeit unwittingly, by the Halifax, and the other nice building societies who decided to hand me a wodge of free shares. Having just safely returned (well, most of me, my brain would seem to have been held up at Customs. Jet lag, doncha just love it? All of the problems of being drunk with none of the pleasures. What time is it? What day is it? Which continent is this? Who am I?), I feel a need to get the (ir)relevant details committed to paper before the need for outright fabrication exceeds EC permitted levels.

When you cross off all the bits of America that lie next to oceans, one destination stands out like a beacon in the middle of the desert -- precisely because it is a beacon in the middle of the desert. I mean, of course, that Disneyland for adults, Las Vegas. It's a place that not only meets expectations but passes way beyond them: it is even more crass, commercial, garish, naff, flashy and shallow than you imagine. But yet, just as a bad movie can become a source of great pleasure, so Vegas transcends the tackiness which infects its very essence, and is perhaps the best place on Earth to spend a weekend. No more than that, mind, for it will chew you up and spit you out like a piece of used gum -- except probably with slightly less personal wealth.

The first experience of the city was driving along the Strip from the airport. Luckily I wasn't driving, having been met at the airport by TC-er Chris Fata, who had kindly agreed to see me through the first wave of culture shock. This was undoubtedly a Good Thing: I'd have managed about fifty yards, tops, before provoking a gawp-induced accident, since my mouth was so wide open it would have severely interfered with the brake pedal. The city has to be one of the Seven Artificial Wonders of the World (alongside Pamela Anderson): where else can you see the Court of King Arthur, comfortably nestling - if any building a hundred yards in each dimension can be said to nestle - between a large-scale replica of the New York skyline, and an F-sized pyramid made of black glass?



Said pyramid was my destination, the Luxor hotel, decorated throughout in appropriate decor -- even the shampoo came in little plastic obelisks. It was undoubtedly the coolest place to stay, since it was the only one that looked good both during the day and at night. The Excalibur next door was a fairy-tale castle after dark, but the sun revealed it to be a ghastly multi-coloured pile of precast concrete. The Luxor was immensely cool during the day,

and vanished completely at dusk, making it the world's first Stealth Hotel. Or rather, it would have vanished, if it wasn't for the beacon on top which shone up into space, for no apparent reason beyond being visible from 250 miles away. And that was after they'd toned it down because it was screwing up jets as they approached the airport...

If any city can be said to have a purpose, it's Las Vegas: it is dedicated to the painless removal of wealth with a single-mindedness which would have impressed the Spanish Inquisition. This is despite the fact that, thanks to competition, the average house margin is tiny: on most slots, it's a mere 5%. It says something about the sheer volume of cash flowing through them, that this 5% is enough to cover all the capital costs; subsidise the shows, food and drink; provide spectacles like pirate battles; and still leave enough left over to turn a healthy profit and make Las Vegas the fastest-growing city in America.

The appeal is simple: everyone thinks they can beat the odds, and win the startling jackpots on offer. To anyone used to ten quid machines in pubs, the prospect of winning a Harley-Davidson bike, a car, or simply \$7.7m in cash is difficult to grasp, but the lure is obvious. Needless to say, I did not win any of the above: I topped out at thirty dollars, though I did come delightfully close to winning a thousand on one delirious occasion. Personally, however, I got the same buzz out of playing the dime slots, and with the good payout rates, you could play for ages without losing too many Halifax shares.

The hotels are designed to be self-contained. The punter should not ever need to leave them, and probably will never want to, as it's rather warm outside, even at the end of September. Between the restaurants, shops, thrill rides and IMAX cinema in the Luxor, it's quite possible to spend a fulfilling trip without seeing natural light, as I proved on my second day there, though I did cheat slightly and took the air-conditioned walkway to the Excalibur for King Arthur's tournament. This is horse-riding, jousting, sword-fights and so on, in a central arena, while the audience eats a meal with their fingers, Just Like In Medieval Times. Two millennia of civilisation has brought us the freedom to throw it all away and regress. But in its defence, a) they've been restaging Arthurian legend since the 15th century, and b) it was pretty good fun, especially the fighting, though I could probably have done without the musical numbers. On balance, however, I'd have been as happy with a couple of Xena episodes and a kebab.

The individual casinos have slightly different personalities; one will perhaps be more family orientated (Circus Circus), the next might contain a good video arcade (New York New York), a third has tackier entertainment -- the Mirage wins hands-down here, thanks to the presence of the amazingly camp Siegfried and Roy and their white tigers, not to mention the volcano in the front lot which actually erupts. Every 20 minutes. Despite this, they all blur together eventually into one cacophony of flashing lights, ringing bells, and clattering cash. Not only are there no windows or clocks, which might alert the unwary gambler to the passage of time, but exit signs are few and far between. Once you get into the middle of a football-field sized array of gaming devices which reach to head height, retaining your orientation is almost impossible. It's easy to imagine stumbling across the skeleton of a Japanese tourist who took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom in 1979.

Eventually, the appeal of the casinos will fade, and you will then realise that there is actually little else to do in Las Vegas. The downtown area is worth a visit, for the stunning light-show that happens every hour in Fremont Street: a massive array of computer-controlled lights above your head depict everything from the Amazonian forest to a fighter fly-by, in typically vivid and hyper-real Vegas style. But once you've seen that, and gone up the 108-storey Stratosphere Tower [actually, they're only virtual storeys, as it's a concrete pillar with nothing in the middle hundred or so], what else is there to do?

Er, well...there is perhaps one other thing. Think 'Showgirls'. Think Kyle McLachlan and Elizabeth Berkeley. No, not the bit in the swimming pool with the spouting dolphin -- what visit to Las Vegas would be complete without a lap-dance? I'd solicited advice on the subject from slightly more knowledgeable sources and opinion was that the best establishment was Olympic Gardens. So, armed with a fistful of dollars, I went to experience a lapful of bimbo.

The layout at the Olympic had several small stages, on which a steady procession of girls disported themselves, between which were armchairs and sofas in which the lap-dances themselves occurred. Oddly, it seems that city regulations prevent full nudity and alcohol from being served up in the same establishment, so the girls never went further than G-strings, although these appeared to be made of dental floss. And the artistes themselves were, without exception, quite stunning. However, mere beauty was not enough. What I needed was someone with whom I could connect on a higher level. And then I saw Darlene -- or rather, the Hello Kitty lunch-box in which she was stashing her tips. How could I possibly resist a fellow student of Japanese pop culture?

The experience itself was undeniably very pleasant, even beyond the obvious level (my, what is the Stratosphere Tower doing here in my underpants). You know how it's an ego boost if a pretty girl smiles at you? Well, think what it's like when the girl is writhing over you like a nymphomaniac, not so much with 'come-to-bed eyes' as an entire come-to-bed *body*. And my ego is not so fragile as to be bothered by the fact that it cost me twenty dollars -- the Sisters of Mercy song, 'Lucretia, My Reflection', will never seem the same again... Sweetly, she was perfectly willing to hang around afterwards and chat without demanding I buy another dance (I did, but that was entirely of my own free will -- or what was left of it): she seemed a genuinely nice person, a fan of 'Beverly Hills 90210' who lived in California, and worked part-time at Olympic Gardens. All told, I was happier to have spent my money on her, rather than giving it to one of the casinos.

Clearly, though, it's not the sort of thing you could cope with on a regular basis, and as mentioned previously, Vegas burns you up fast. You just run out of astonishment. As an example, on my last night, I had planned to go to the Mirage for their exploding volcano, but when the time came, I simply couldn't be bothered. I had succumbed to an overload of excess. It was time to move on.

I was heading for Phoenix, but since the route there took me within inches of the Grand Canyon, it seemed churlish not to pop in. At least, it looked like inches on the map. I'd forgotten this was western America, where most single states could swallow up Britain, with Ireland for afters, and so the journey necessitated both getting up at 5:30 a.m. and an overnight stop on the way. But it was undoubtedly worth the effort. Neither words nor photographs can do the scale of the Grand Canyon justice, so I won't bother much. I'll just say:



It is enormous.

I was amazed, and I was somewhat ready for it -- imagine what the reaction of the first people to see it must have been; 'Grand' doesn't do it justice, but I guess 'Fucking Huge Canyon' would have been vetoed by the cartographers. I envisaged something U-shaped, yet it actually has incredibly crinkly edges (I think it was one of the bits of Earth designed by Slartibartfast): this doesn't come across in photos, which inevitably portray only a narrow section. It's the closest you can get to flying with both feet firmly on the ground, and is stepped, which somehow makes it seem deeper; rather than one inconceivable drop, you get half-a-dozen slamming off into the distance. Combined with the different shades of colour in the rock, it looks like a chocolate layer cake attacked by a hungry but discerning pack of mice.

Speaking of layer cake, I have got to mention the quite incredible meal I had that night in the Arizona Steakhouse at the Bright Angel Lodge. A 16-ounce steak was so delicious and fresh you could almost sense the bovine bewilderment - "Hang on, where's the meadow gone?" - and was followed by the most awesome slab of chocolate layer cake, doing much the same on my tastebuds as Darlene had done on my crotch. Altogether, it has to rank among the top five meals I've ever experienced. The total cost, including soup and drinks, was under twenty pounds. Things like that make me seriously contemplate shipping out to America permanently.

One of the problems which always stood in the way of this possibility - the lack of decent beer - has largely been solved since my previous trips, when the choice was limited to Bud, Miller and, if you were lucky, Molson. The incredible rise of the micro-brewery has meant that every area now has a plethora of entirely palatable choices, available in all but the most backward establishment. The only problem is that these are only distributed locally (Samuel Adams is a notable exception), so when you move somewhere else, you get a totally different selection, and have to begin the sampling process all over again. What a pity...

I want to say a few words about the bus journeys from the Canyon down to Phoenix, which was in two parts. For the first, Grand Canyon-Flagstaff, I had the bus to myself, so sat up front and chatted to the driver, who was a nice guy. This was great fun, and I was quite sorry to see the journey end, not least because his views, which had started off on innocuous subjects like the weather, were notably drifting into "how immigrants are screwing up America" and I'd have liked to have seen how long it took before he started to advocate things involving fertiliser, fuel oil and Federal buildings. But he was at least polite and friendly.

Perhaps this was an omen for the second leg, the Greyhound from Flagstaff to Phoenix. The bus station was bad enough; I scanned the low-life scum inhabiting it, trying to work out who was the psychopath, as my subconscious gleefully played scenes from 'Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer'. The worrying thing was that everyone looked a perfectly viable candidate... For let me dispel absolutely one myth about American life, maliciously propagated through adverts for Wrigley's gum. Attractive women do not use Greyhound buses. Those who do fall into three categories:

1. Recently returned 'Nam veterans, now retraining to be mass murderers.
2. Their mothers.
3. Students.

Better make that four: naive tourists who really should know better. But as a general rule there is absolutely nobody with whom you would want to share air, let alone your chewing gum. As a rough idea, imagine a rush-hour National Express coach with less gun control.

[Down in Phoenix at last, to my immense relief, I was met again by Chris -- who deserves a formal tip of the TC hat for efforts that go well beyond what was expected, and without whom, I would have seen and experienced a great deal less. If every tourist to America received the same level of personal service, there'd be nobody left in Britain. For showing me the most delightful sights possible, and for tireless work not just as chauffeur, but in every other position, I am utterly grateful. End of fulsome praise, before Chris's head swells excessively!]

Scottsdale, where I was based for the next three days, is a sprawl of a city, in which a car is not a luxury but an absolute necessity, not least because the ferocious heat makes walking any distance an ordeal. Mind you, having said that, my first day there, the populace were running in all directions as the media did a striking impression of Cassandra over the tail end of hurricane Nora, allegedly about to sweep across the state, bringing death and destruction in its wake. Much filling of sandbags by the nervous later, it finally hit, drenching Phoenix in a torrential... er, 0.03 inches of rain. I was distinctly unimpressed, although the lack of any drains in the road meant a surprising amount of surface water.

This was encountered that evening on the way to 'Rawhide', a pseudo-Western tourist attraction on the outskirts of Scottsdale featuring gunfights, saloons, etc. While hugely entertaining in a deeply shallow sort of way, the highlight was the restaurant where I chewed down on another new breed of dead animal: deep-fried rattlesnake, complete with backbone on the side to prove its origins. Tasted like chicken more than anything else. Despite the irony present in sinking my fangs into something which would happily reciprocate given the chance, the day was a salutary reminder that life in America is not entirely without peril, especially on the natural side of things: hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes are something with which we just don't have to contend. And we're a bit

short on animals that endanger your health as well, unless you count things coming off boats from the Caribbean -- such as West Indian fast bowlers. But even they pale into insignificance beside venomous snakes, spiders, ants and scorpions: one of the best souvenirs I picked up was a plastic paperweight containing an especially evil-looking scorpion, lurking with sting poised. To add the final touch of trash value, the entire thing glowed in the dark...

The time in Scottsdale was so laid back as to be near horizontal. While undeniably just as entertaining as Vegas, it provides little true tourist action on which I can comment in these pages. I was pleased, however, to see that American talk shows continue to plumb the sort of depths to which we British can only aspire. A personal favourite was Jerry Springer, who has since acquired a cult following on ITV. If you've not seen him, he favours deep and searching topics like "My Teen Worships Satan", and derives both guests and audience from the sort of trailer trash beloved by John Waters. A typical show might have a couple, with the woman revealing to the man that not only has she been cheating on him, but with another woman. Turns out he's been unfaithful too: either with a) the same woman, or b) a man -- I only watched a week's worth, and saw both. This is roadcrash television at its very best.

One day, however, we headed North (indeed, almost back to Flagstaff) to see Sedona, which is a bunch of rocks -- in the same way the Grand Canyon is a hole in the ground. These were red and eroded into the most remarkable, fluffy cloudlike shapes. Slartibartfast must have had some help from Salvador Dali around that corner of the world. On the way back, darkness fell, revealing the sort of shimmering sky I had forgotten existed after ten years living in the South of England. We pulled off the highway and just bathed in the splendour of it all: stars, planets, meteors, satellites and our galaxy, sweeping majestically across the sky like a spilt tin of condensed milk.



10 titles from Spy Headquarters

- 1. Build Your Own AR-15**
- 2. Everybody's Knife Bible**
- 3. Home-Built Claymore Mines**
- 4. Improvised Explosives**
- 5. Ragnar's Guide to Home and Recreational Use of High Explosives**
- 6. Pipe and Fire Bomb Designs**
- 7. The Butane Lighter Hand Grenade**
- 8. Successful Armed Robbery**
- 9. Execution: Tools and Techniques**
- 10. Kill Without Joy**

I must also mention two shops in Scottsdale -- I hadn't actually intended to do any real purchasing until I got to New York, but this pair both succeeded in talking me into some fairly drastic plastic action. Zia Records had the biggest selection of second-hand CDs I've ever seen. Now, compact discs are cheap enough in America anyway, so the opportunity to pick up ultra-recent titles for \$7.99 was certainly not to be sniffed at. I don't think anyone had ever asked them for a shopping basket before. The other one was Spy Headquarters. There are a couple of similar places here in Britain, but they pretty much stick to tedious stuff like bug detectors, for legal reasons. No

such problems in Arizona, and the main delight of Spy HQ was the delicious publications on offer [see side-bar], as well as the chance to purchase signs that read "Warning: Trespassers Will Be Shot. Survivors Will Be Shot Again" and "Nuke Their Ass and Take Their Gas" bumper-stickers. Needless to say, I loaded up; I'm grateful that airport X-ray machines don't show up books...

With sadness, I waved goodbye to the friendly natives of Arizona, and headed down to New Orleans. This was the part of the trip I was least certain about: I had a fairly good idea of what I was going to do the rest of the time, but New Orleans was something of an enigma. I'd seen plenty of movies set there, but on reflection, most were definitely on the dark side: 'Angel Heart' is hardly a promotional device for the local Tourist Authority. My first encounter with the city seemed to confirm my worst fears, as I walked along the world-famous Bourbon Street, only to find it combined the most unpleasant aspects of Ibiza and the West End of London. Hideously touristy, powered almost entirely by alcohol, and with any jazz drowned out by the thumping disco beats from the numerous night-clubs which line its length. How long did I have to stay here? Three days. Er, is there any chance of changing my flight?

It has to be said that once you get away from Bourbon Street, the city improves beyond all recognition. It's the only place in America I've been to that has any significant sense of history i.e. it has buildings built before the war -- and the Civil War at that. Since I was brought up in a house which dates back to 1815, nothing younger provokes much in me, but the French Quarter has a timeless quality which makes it very pleasant to stroll around. [Slowly. Very slowly. Any activity beyond that causes immediate metamorphosis into a puddle of sweat] I didn't bother going out of that area, apart from a bus tour, having heard dire stories about murder and robbery. I suspect, like most things, a certain amount of exaggeration has taken place, since dead tourists make good tabloid fodder -- if you just exercise a modicum of common sense, as you should do anywhere, I don't think you would have problems.

In the end, I had no trouble finding things to keep myself occupied, and indeed, there were a few that I wanted to do but had to miss out -- would have liked to head out to the zoo and find a black panther to kiss, in the vague hope that it'd turn into Nastassja Kinski. ['Cat People' is another fine advert for the New Orleans Tourist Board] I also, sadly, didn't get to see the musical version of 'Pretty Baby' which was on at a local theatre... Instead, the highlight of the time in New Orleans was not the palatial homes in the Garden District, or the paddle steamer trip down the Mississippi to the site of the Battle of New Orleans (where the Americans kicked British ass -- I suspect if the opposite had happened, it might not be getting quite as much tourist traffic 185 years later). The last night, I took a walking tour round haunted houses of the French Quarter, and the guide told some quite hair-raising stories. Naturally, these have to be taken with a pinch of salt, but the best of these is worthy of early Clive Barker, and concerns one Madame Lalaurie who...hell, I'll give the story the space (and font) it deserves.

Madame Lalaurie: She-Wolf of New Orleans

In 1830's New Orleans, Madame Lalaurie had a certain odd reputation, despite being one of the leading lights of contemporary society. Her slaves were notoriously jumpy, flinching whenever you went near them, and there was also the mysterious, unexplained death of one girl who 'fell' from a third-floor balcony in Lalaurie's house at 1140 Royal Street, a block down from Bourbon, an accident for which the owner was merely fined.

Then, one fateful day in April, 1834, a fire broke out in the kitchens. It rapidly spread beyond what the slaves could handle, and the fire brigade arrived, eventually bringing the blaze under control. As was required, they checked the house for trapped people and smouldering embers, and came across an attic room, sealed by a heavily barred door. They broke through, only to be sent reeling by a stench which, though hideous, was but a mere appetiser for the room's contents...

To quote a contemporary newspaper, "Seven slaves, more or less horribly mutilated, were seen suspended by the neck, with their limbs apparently stretched and torn from one extremity to the other...These slaves...had been confined by the woman Lalaurie for several months...merely kept in existence to prolong their sufferings, and to make them taste all that the most refined cruelty could inflict". Some of the slaves, of both sexes, were fastened to the wall; others were tied to makeshift operating tables. Organs and severed body parts were scattered around, and also kept in rows of jars on shelves. Most of the slaves were dead, but those still living were barely recognisable – one woman had all her limbs amputated, and most of the flesh removed from her skull, reducing her to a human caterpillar. Another woman, confined in a cage, had so many bones broken and reset, that she looked more like a crab than a person. On one wall was hanging a male who had apparently been the victim of a crude sex-change operation.

When word got out, an angry mob gathered at the house, but Lalaurie and her husband burst through them in their carriage, headed for the Mississippi, and fled, never to be seen again. People took to crossing the street rather than walk past the house, as some claimed to hear screams, moans and cries for help coming from the deserted residence, and it remained vacant for forty years. Eventually, the house was taken over by a group of Italian immigrants, lured by the cheap rent, but they were driven out after encounters with a white female phantom swinging a blood soaked whip, and ghost slaves bound in chains. Another future tenant, a furniture store owner, found his stock mysteriously ruined by a torrent of muck and filth; he waited, that night, with a shotgun for the vandals to return. The next day, the replacement goods were ruined, and the owner was teetering on the edge of lunacy. He didn't stay around either.

The final, chilling edge came in the 1960's; redevelopment work dug up the floor of the ballroom, on which many leading lights of New Orleans had danced in their day. Under it, lay corpses, numbering in the dozens: more victims of Lalaurie's insanity. Worse still, scratch marks on the underside of the floor indicated she had disposed of her household before her departure, by the simple method of burying them alive. Those people who said they heard voices from the house, calling for help, had not been mistaken...

Leaving New Orleans with pleasant thoughts of hideous medical experiments going through my head, I flew on to New York. This in itself was something of an experience, as part of the trip took place on the smallest plane I have taken on a commercial flight. To someone used to bigger craft - I went across the Atlantic on a Boeing 777, the largest passenger-plane in service - the sight of...well, *propellers*, was a throwback to an earlier era. It was reminiscent of the fan in my New Orleans hotel room, positioned right above the bed, which ran with a pronounced wobble and gave the distinct impression that it might crash down onto the bed at any moment. The plane sat only three abreast, and had less than a dozen rows -- I almost expected the air-hostess (singular) to hand out flying helmets and goggles before the flight. Had a nasty moment, as we taxied out to the runway with only one engine running, the propeller on my side staying resolutely still. I was just working out how I should bring this to the attention of the stewardess ("Excuse me, miss, shouldn't that be going round every now and again?") when the pilot realised he'd forgotten something and turned it on...

I like New York. It's somewhere else I can see myself living, apart from London, as it possesses the same degree of life and intensity - there's always something going down - and it has the same cosmopolitan mix of people. Not quite living together like *ebony* and *ivory-y-y-y*, but it's a city that seems to work despite the inevitable deficiencies and problems, like the bumblebee which flies because everyone has forgotten to tell it that it can't. [Actually, that's a myth, but why let scientific truth stop a good simile?]



Eagle-eyed readers may notice a) the roller-coaster and b) the turrets of King Arthur's court. Yep, this is New York, Las Vegas style...

There isn't much to add about my time in New York, since I spent more time in Virgin, HMV and Tower than anywhere else. I had wanted to take in a baseball game, but the end-of-season playoffs had just started, and I never did quite work out how tickets were sold. Still, watching them on television had a certain decadence, sprawled on the bed of my tiny hotel room, with a six-pack of beer, eating cheese and crackers, like some low-life from a Martin Scorsese movie. I also got to see Michael Gingold again, whom I'd met the very first time I visited the city, when he was then doing 'Scareaphanalia'. He's now deputy editor of 'Fangoria', which is rather more career progression than I've managed over the intervening years. Beers were consumed, more excellent food eaten, and vast quantities of scurilous and (probably quite unprintable) gossip discussed.

The flight back was notable only for the worst turbulence I've ever encountered -- so bad that they had to stop serving dinner and strap the stewardesses in. [Lino, stop drooling!] We're probably not talking anything really significant - the odd spilt glass of wine, perhaps - but what would have been minor on a roller-coaster takes on a great deal more significance at an unsupported 30,000 feet. I was more than mildly relieved when we came out the other side of the storm.

And so to Tulsa Hill, pondering on how gravity is a lot stronger in Britain than America -- what else can explain the massive apparent increase in weight of my luggage between JFK and Heathrow? It was a quite superb fortnight, with more jaw-dropping experiences than on any previous trip: while generally, you get maybe one or two per holiday, I was closer to one per day, especially in the first week. It had been a while since I'd been to America, but on the basis of this trip, it's not going to be very long before I return once more.

Life's a Riot With Spawn vs. Spawn...

While we've compared live-action and animated versions of movies before - *Wicked City*, the *Guyver* and *City Hunter* - with 'Spawn', it's the first time two have come out so close together. Both are very much driven by Todd McFarlane, creator of the original comic-book: he's been able to keep a firm hand on the tiller because, as he says, "what could Hollywood offer me except fortune and fame?", and as creator of the top-selling comic in America, he already had plenty of both. Though it seems odd he authorised two such similar projects the same year. The common plot has government killer Al Simmons' resurrected as Spawn, and follows as he comes to terms with his new role in Hell's army, resulting from a demonic pact accepted after his death. He wants to break the contract, but where can a horribly disfigured dead man go? Certainly not back to his wife, now married to Al's best friend and with the daughter she long craved. He also has to deal with the Clown, a satanic mentor who keeps an eye on Spawn to snuff out any signs of goodness.



The HBO animated series was first and is undeniably grittier, meriting an 'R', especially in the video version. In it, Spawn becomes entangled with the mob, intelligence community, and the child-killing relative of a US senator who wants to be the president. You'll hear familiar voices, notably Ronnie Cox as both Senator McMillan and the psychopathic Billy Kincaid, and Mike McShane, cast heavily against type as a seven-stone weakling [The only way to keep him in character was to make him stand motionless, arms by his sides -- as soon as he moved, he started to lose it!] William Hurt was originally down as narrator Cogliostro, but a throat infection ruled him out, so the part went to Richard Dysart, who played Doc Copper in 'The Thing'. In one of those coincidences, that film marked the debut of actor David Keith as Childs. 15 years later, Keith and Dysart are reunited, since the former is the voice of Spawn...

Enough name-dropping; is it any good? Well, from the very start, it's patently obvious that 'Spawn' certainly ain't no Disney film; not with the amount of body fluids, nudity and swear words which are spattered around. This is done in a refreshingly gleeful manner that evokes anime more than any American TV show -- even one intended for broadcast on cable at midnight. The animation is decent enough, if not exceptional; though there are times when the Korean studio occasionally forget they are no longer working on 'My Little Pony', the storyline and voice acting manage to hold your interest, and there's an appealing, bone-dry humour which runs through much of the script. The various facets of the production build upon and support each other, making the end result probably better than the sum of its parts. The atmosphere is heavily aided by Shirley Walker's score, which rumbles along ominously in the background, distinctly reminiscent of the soundtrack to computer slaughterfest 'Doom'.

There are loose ends flailing, notably a Spawn-hunter named Angela who turns up, kicks ass and then vanishes from the storyline. One presumes she'll re-appear in the second series, to which the end of the sixth episode points unsubtly. But McFarlane manages to avoid the obvious clichés of an episodic structure -- they don't all have to end with a big battle, and watching the compiled version, it's almost impossible to tell where one part stops and the next begins. Overall, it's striking, original, and reasonably impressive stuff, whose success will hopefully spawn (ho ho ho) a host of imitators. If so, it might signal a new, more adult direction for the American animation industry: with rare exceptions, it still lives in a quagmire of 'family entertainment'.

The live-action movie was originally passed 'R', "for thematic elements involving the demonic underworld, violence, intense fantasy action and crude humor" according to the MPAA, and was cut to gain a 'PG-13' certificate. This perhaps summarises the major problem with it: while the TV series was pitched at a slightly older crowd - college age, according to McFarlane - the film is aimed lower, with an inevitable toning- and dumbing-down as a result. Thus, the body count is low, there's very little blood and nobody says anything worse than "asshole" even when the end of the world is nigh, and the fart jokes would seem to have escaped from Beavis and Butthead. The plot is a great deal simpler, with the multiple threads of a conspiratorial web replaced by something more akin to a James Bond film: evil villain (Martin Sheen, with an appropriately devilish beard) plots to take over the world, although he is being manipulated by the Clown into triggering Armageddon.

There are significant differences in the telling of the story; it begins before Simmons is killed, and the role of Cogliostro (Nicol Williamson, with definite echoes from his Merlin in 'Excalibur') is expanded greatly, from a mere narrator to Spawn's guru. Terry, Al's best friend, also has his part in things seriously expanded, and in a slightly puzzling twist, also changes from being coloured into a white dude. I guess one black hero is enough for Hollywood to handle in any movie not specifically targeted at an ethnic audience. An odd similarity is that, as in the animation, the live-action version also has a groovy kick-ass femme fatale who singularly fails to do anything of real interest: here, she's Jason's hench-babe, and is swiftly killed the first time Spawn and Jason meet.

Much of the production seems to have taken place inside a Silicon Graphics work-station, and the film's special effects overpower everything else, even though they greatly vary in effectiveness. Spawn's cape is amazing, an excellent showcase for the power of computer graphics, plus a lot of the virtual sets are also superbly detailed, an area in which animation cannot compete. However, the final battle in Hell leaves a great deal to be desired: apparently, their Satanic majesties inhabit offcuts from a budget computer game.

John Leguizamo does a fine job as the Clown, bringing a lot of personality through the make-up, which must have been hell to wear (ho ho ho). He's helped by having all the best lines -- neither Nicol Williamson, nor Michael Jai White as Spawn, can match him when they try and come out with the snappy one-liners required of any self-respecting comic-book hero. White is okay; there's not a lot an actor can do, when all you can see are his eyes, and half the time they're hidden behind some optical effect or other. The musical score, by Graeme Revell, isn't really memorable, and has its work cut out trying to fight its way past the gratuitous interference of tracks from the (near-inevitable) soundtrack album.

Pitting the two against each other, I'd have to go for the animated version. It scores a telling blow with its darker, more cynical and adult edge, making it a more faithful reflection of the attitude inherent in McFarlane's original comic. However, the cinematic experience certainly does add to the spectacle, and I suspect if the animation were blown up, it would rapidly fall over since it was made for the small screen. Both are interesting takes, despite leaving out background depth, especially the more metaphysical aspects. Conclusion: watch HBO's series, then go rent the live-action version for additional fun!

Against Diana

New York, Sept 2 (Reuter) - Slimming company Weight Watchers International has postponed the formal launch of an advertising campaign in which the Duchess of York says losing weight is "harder than outrunning the paparazzi."

Admirable words of surprising sense from the Duchess of Pork -- what a shame that her sister-in-law instead tried to escape them by driving through the streets of Paris at 200 km/h, in a heavily armoured limousine. If you're going to do this, it's probably worth remembering to:

- a) Fasten your seat-belts
- b) Try and have a sober driver.

I used to be a fervent monarchist. This was back in the golden days, roughly between the Silver Jubilee and Charles and Diana's wedding. But since then, the continuing saga of the Royal soap opera, not least the Chuck 'n' Di show, has destroyed my respect for this institution. And, frankly, Diana's death, despite the subsequent media canonisation, makes no difference.



So young; so well-loved; such fabulous baps.

Sudden death is always sad, but in many ways, she's just another in a long line: Dean, Monroe, Kennedy, Lennon, Phoenix, and now Diana, all greeted with howls about "unfulfilled potential". However, even allowing for the high-pressure world of the Royals, her life wasn't exactly a massive success, despite a sudden late burst of charity work. One failed marriage, several affairs, a nervous breakdown and some botched suicide attempts isn't a good record.

Watching TV the day she died, and seeing her mythic status grow by the hour, I felt like I was taking part in 'Heathers'. The establishment fell over to embrace her in death, as they had excluded her in life, but I am forced to wonder just how deep and widespread the claimed grief over Diana actually was. Certainly, there was little sign of it in my office, going by the number of jokes doing the rounds:

Why did Diana die in hospital?

They hadn't any parts for an '81 Princess... Yes, it's crap (and believe me, I've got lots more of them), but it serves to indicate that the *entire* country was not quite as grief-stricken as the press would have us believe.

For Diana was a media creation, who used them just as they used her. She sold papers, while their perpetual pushing of her as the "Queen of Hearts" must have been one hell of a confidence boost for someone chucked out of the world's most dysfunctional family.

The most fitting and appropriate comment on all this came from 'Private Eye', who said, "In recent weeks (not to mention the last ten years) we at the Daily Gnome, in common with all other newspapers, may have inadvertently conveyed the impression the Princess of Wales was in some way a neurotic, irresponsible and manipulative troublemaker...the Princess of Hearts was in fact the most saintly woman who has ever lived... We would like to express our sincere and deepest hypocrisy to all our readers on this tragic day and hope and pray that they will carry on buying our paper notwithstanding."

'Private Eye' was about the only publication to come out of the whole fiasco with its integrity intact ['Time Out' also did not badly, though the timing of the accident meant they missed the initial furore]. Witness the cover cartoon on PE's post-death issue:

Man 1: The papers are a disgrace

Man 2: Yes, I couldn't get one anywhere

Man 3: Borrow mine, it's got a picture of the car.

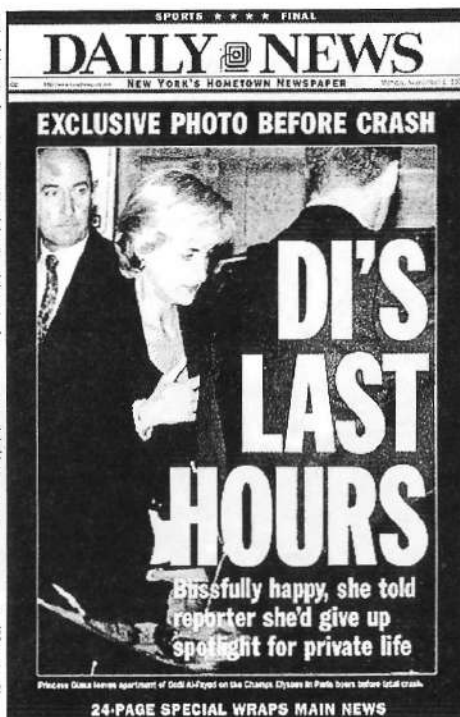
They suffered as a result, said edition being blackballed by a sizeable number of newsagents, yet continued to do a fine job of exposing the double-think of the mass media:

Lynda Lee-Potter, Daily Mail, 27th August – "The sight of a paunchy playboy groping a scantily-clad Diana must appal and humiliate Prince William...As the mother of two young sons she ought to have more decorum and sense. She has for many years criticised Prince Charles for being a distant, undemonstrative father. In the long run he's been the more responsible parent and certainly inflicted less damage, anguish and hurt"

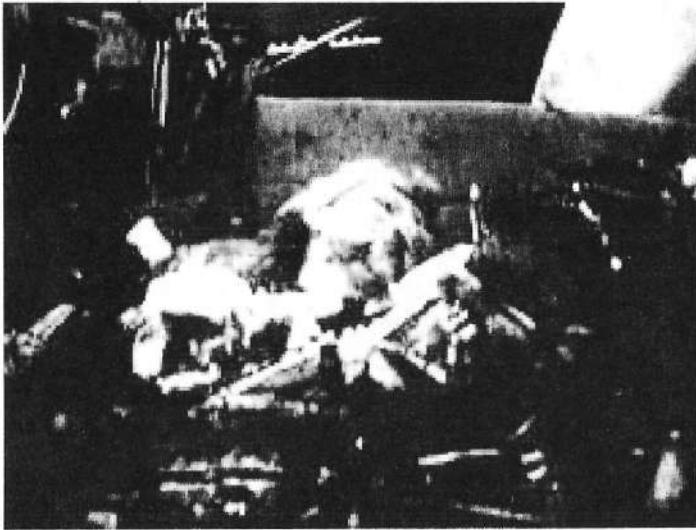
Lynda Lee-Potter, Daily Mail, 1st September – "Throughout their childhood, she gave her sons endless loving cuddles...She adored her children"

What a difference a car-crash makes. Despite this, and those who said "Yep, it's sad -- now get on with life", the country basically ground to a halt for a week, most notably on the Saturday morning. The pressure exerted on anyone who failed to toe the line was incredible; those who wanted to mourn insisted everyone else did so too. Our local supermarket intended to stay open, and donate its profits to charity, but was forced to shut instead -- you do have to wonder which would have been preferred by the 'Queen of Hearts'. Little wonder her funeral drew the biggest TV audience ever, because there was sod-all else you could do, though I was amused by C4's scheduling of a cartoon called 'Princess Cinders' opposite the funeral...

After that passed, things calmed down, with a blip when Andrew Morton re-released his book on Diana, with extra added salacious bits. Needless to say, this treacherous little volume sold like hot-cakes -- one wonders how many copies went to the same people seen weeping uncontrollably outside Kensington Palace? I await with interest the (surely inevitable) Hollywood movie, and would suggest Madonna for the role -- for who better to play the world's biggest media whore than the world's second biggest media whore? Sign up Antonio Banderas to play Dodi, and let's have Jeremy Irons as Charles. Get Oliver Stone to direct it, and we can play up the conspiracy angles. Speaking of which...



None Dare Call It alt.conspiracy.princess-diana



The above picture is allegedly Di trapped in the wreckage, though I've my doubts; apologies for the quality of the reproduction.

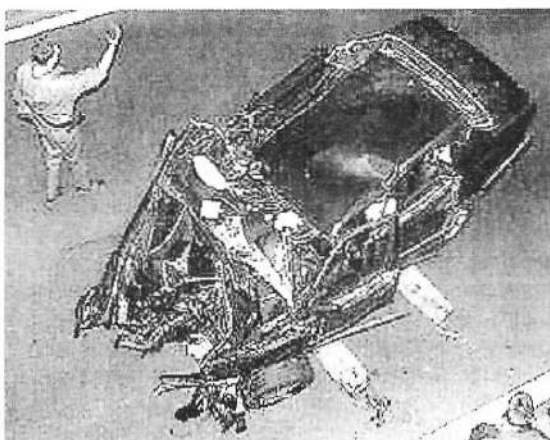
Was there more to Diana's death than meets the eye? Immediately after the event, rumours and theories began circulating. A conduit for many was the Internet: a group set up to discuss the possibilities had 400 new messages a day, clearly striking a chord. However, the unanswered questions began before the accident. Given events since, the 'surprise' she threatened to reveal a couple of months back acquires ominous overtones. Engagement to Dodi, perhaps, or worse still, a pregnancy?

But it's in Paris that paranoia runs out of control, like a Mercedes-Benz with its brake-cables cut. Diana apparently had no British security cover, nor had the UK papers anyone on her tail: were they warned off? It seems strange that Diana allowed herself to be taken at speed by a drunken, non-professional driver, while her trained chauffeur went on a trivial diversionary mission, and near incredible that neither Dodi, a Muslim, nor the surviving security man, realised the driver's state and drew attention to it. It is easy to tamper with a blood sample [it's also easy, incidentally, to give someone a 'heart attack' in an operating room...], and rather than a single figure, we've seen a surprisingly wide range of values quoted for the amount of alcohol in the driver's blood.

The only public evidence of what happened came from eye-witnesses discovered by the media - although you might think traffic cameras would have provided impartial data - as the survivor hasn't given many interviews to the press: perhaps he was given the choice of that or a mysterious relapse. Oddly, everyone else seemed to be American, as if there were there no French around Paris at the time. One also wonders what happened to the paparazzi film and cameras; I suspect they'll be quietly destroyed out of "respect for the Princess". The Al-fayeds said "motorcycles were seen swerving in front of the vehicle", though the source of this information is unclear.

Eye-witnesses describe hearing a loud bang or explosion before the crash; no-one has followed this up, and while the car blew all the way across the tunnel, metal and glass flying, with enough force to kill three out of four occupants, there was so much as a reported scratch on any of the unprotected motorcyclists supposedly closely flanking it. The other story that the French police released and then later withdrew was the speedometer "sticking" at 196 kph. Someone must have pointed out that this type of Mercedes does not have a mechanical speedo... Witnesses driving by saw the passenger side door open and the survivor's legs on the ground as if trying to get out. One described an argument as like that between people involved in an accident - was the security guard walking about? Indeed, the media first reported that Diana too was walking and talking after the accident. The first people at the scene of the accident, heard the bang and run into the tunnel, but were chased away by an unidentified individual.

If the limo could travel at high speed, the roads must have been quiet, yet it took 15 minutes to get an ambulance to the scene. French emergency services often operate on accident victims on the side of the road using especially designed portable operating theatres. On this occasion, they didn't: instead, it was two hours before she went to hospital -- though there were two closer than the one to which the Princess was taken. There, they tried to revive her through heart massage, which seems rather primitive. By now, the BBC and CNN were already blaming the paparazzi who were allegedly chasing the car, strongly promoting this as the true cause of Diana's death, and leaving virtually no room for other theories.



This photo comes with a choice of two alternative captions: "Well, there goes your no-claims bonus for this year, Henri", or "That's what you get for trying to overtake Michael Schumacher".

So many questions, so few answers. You don't expect such a public death to be completely without inconsistencies - even the best Hollywood movies have continuity errors - but in this case there appear to be more than I'd expect. If "they" wanted rid of her, it was a terribly public way to do it, but public spasms of grief allow a great deal to be concealed, and it sent out strong signals to any other enemies of "them" out there. Conveniently, it happened abroad, out of British jurisdiction, but close enough to get her body back, and out of sight, within hours.

Given that someone killed her (and I appreciate this is a pretty big given), who was it? The favourite targets are the British 'establishment', an umbrella term which includes the Royal family. The benefits for them are immediate and obvious. Diana was more than an embarrassment; according to James Whittaker of the Daily Mirror, they regarded her as "poison". Diana cut herself free, did not work for the Government, and was politically unaligned. She was a loose cannon; dangerous, out of control and her access to the future heirs posed serious problems. In death, she can be re-absorbed into the fold, boosting Royal popularity while simultaneously ridding themselves of the most public sign of their failures.

That alone might be enough, even discounting her relationship with Dodi, whose father feuded with the establishment, over both the control of Harrods and his application for British citizenship. He paid Tory MPs to raise the question in the House of Commons, then revealed he had done so, fuelling the "sleaze" crisis which helped bring down the government. But as a relation of the future King of England, it'd be hard to deny him a British passport. Any marriage would probably have meant Diana converting to the Islamic faith, like Jemima Khan. You can imagine concern in certain circles: "My God, what if the Queen Mother were a Moslem?". Unsurprisingly, this has provoked a number of anti-Semitic angles, and to balance these, a few anti-Arab ones as well, with rumours suggesting Al-Fayed was thinking about disinvesting in the British economy.

Meanwhile, Charles, now a widower rather than a divorcee in the eyes of the church, can remarry without causing problems to the "Defender of the Faith" bit. [If I were Camilla Parker-Bowles' ex-husband, I'd be more than a little nervous...] Don't be surprised if it's used as an excuse to bring in draconian privacy laws, limiting the ability of individuals to gather information on and document the activities of the establishment. This theory would presumably be popular with extremist American politician Lyndon LaRouche (and I mean 'extremist' even by their wild and wacky standards), who believes the Queen is the head of an international drugs cartel.

However, it seems pointless for Charles to have divorced her just a few months before the "accident". Another strike against this theory is that Colonel Gaddafi believes it -- though in the same speech, he warned his people that the West might invade Libya because of its sun, sand, seashore, dates, watermelons and, er, camel milk. "The camel is also a reason for them to invade Libya. The camel is unique because he can go for months without drinking. He also has good milk. In fact, why do you import milk from Europe when you have the camel's milk?" [Ok, I take back what I said about American politicians in the previous paragraph...]

While this is the main scenario propounded, it's far from the only one. Second up is that ol' favourite, the industro-military cartel. As is well known, Diana was a outspoken campaigner against landmines. The manufacturers, not just in America but the rest of the world too, cannot have been too thrilled by her activities. Against this, her death will almost certainly result in a total ban, as any other result would seem churlish in the extreme. Maybe the anti-landmine lobby ruthlessly sacrificed their own spokeswoman. This reversal also applies to theories involving the Royal family, as Diana's death could benefit, or be a mortal blow to them. Did a secret faction hope to discredit the Queen and turn Britain into a republic? With Diana at her peak of popularity, but about to remarry and fade from the limelight, they arranged the death of the Queen of Hearts -- "our Queen, their pawn" as one proponent suggests! In so doing they create a martyr, a heroine to remain forever young, wronged by Charles, Camilla, and the nasty Royals.

Bizarre as that sounds, it's by no means the most extreme idea: Interflora were behind it all, Eddie Large did it to divert attention from his road rage conviction, Elton John was to blame (Gianni Versace was just a dry run), or Di is still alive, and the whole thing was a scam to allow her and Dodi to vanish into hiding, with the connivance of the Royal family. Hard to tell who is joking, though the last does explain why there was no 'lying in state': someone would have realised it wasn't her in the coffin -- expect Diana sightings to follow. And Tom Cruise took a strong role in using the affair to support restrictions on news reporters. Cruise is a Scientologist; they have a long history of attempts to silence its critics. Mere bandwagon-jumping, or something more sinister?

But perhaps my favourite surrounds Princes Harry and William. A main tenet of conspiracy theory is "Follow the money": in this case, the money goes straight to the heir-but-one and his brother. As a result of their mother's death, they're now looking at the rough equivalent of a lottery jackpot each, and under normal circumstances, would be prime suspects. I will admit, however, that doubts must be cast, however, over their ability to organise such a hit while on their summer hols, even if their pocket money could probably stretch to it.



We can be almost certain about one thing: the truth will never be known with any certainty. Now that these conspiracies have had mainstream coverage, the entire affair possesses all the trappings of a modern myth: history inevitably shows that such things become more, rather than less obscure, with the passage of time.

[Indeed, this already seems to be happening. Witness the following: is it cunningly constructed Government disinformation, designed to conceal the truth by making it ludicrous, or just a jape? Perhaps it's even the truth -- for who'd believe it...?]

Diana: the Vatican connection

"Ever since the botched Calvi job under Blackfriars Bridge, the Pope has sought revenge on British Royalty. An uncomfortable truce held between the Windsors and the Vatican during the 80's, but the pontiff recently said on VNN (Vatican News Network) that Diana was no longer "the next Mother Teresa", a position promised in 1984 when she followed papal decree and refused to open a new Wyeth factory in the Welsh Catholic stronghold of Abergavenny. The Vatican/Windsor truce was negotiated in early 1985, following four years of intense, secret fighting whose commencement can be traced directly to the '81 botched assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. Carried out by muslim Mehmed Ali Agca, it was arranged by Mohammed Al-fayed, father of the ill-fated Dodi. He longed desperately for British citizenship and was put up to the job by the current Capo of the Windsor mob, Price Philip, still stinging from the 1979 death of his uncle, Lord Mountbatten, at the hands of the Vatican's special Irish service.

The '85 truce was negotiated by Senator Edward Kennedy, representing Vatican secret interests in the US, and vice-president Bush, former CIA Chief and Anglican lay minister, pressed to the temporary service of the Windsors by then governor of West Virginia Jay Rockefeller, a fellow Trilateral Commission member. In 1990, Bush would help arrange the embarrassment of the Vatican's highly placed agent, Chaldean Catholic and Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, by instructing American ambassador April Martin to lure him into encouraging Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait. The Windsors controlled the puppet government of Saudi Arabia, but had been shut out of the lucrative Kuwaiti market, and responded with a mass rejection of the Catholic institution of marriage. This resulted in all the Queen's progeny - save closet homosexual Edward - being divorced in the same year. An angry pontiff almost gave the conspiracy away when, in a fit of rage, he ordered a special Vatican controlled IRA active service unit to firebomb Windsor Castle. The Vatican also instructed their puppet government in Westminster to tax all royal personages.

The burning of Windsor Castle, in which sixteen junior, and luckily nonphotogenic, Royal Family members lost their lives, forced the Queen to sign a treaty with the Vatican agreeing to abide by and promote the one true faith in the UK. At the end of that year in her Xmas Speech, Queen Elizabeth II clearly blamed the murder of Christ on the Jewish race. The last straw for the Vatican happened when Diana allowed herself to be photographed having protected sex with a Muslim, then drunkenly announced she was leaving Britain for good "because the last Tory government were such assholes". John Paul II took this as a personal insult and ordered Masonic lodge P2 to eliminate her forthwith, financed by Du Pont, manufacturers of the world's finest subterranean anti-personnel devices.

The car's brakes were interfered with and her regular driver (trained in anti-terrorist driving techniques) was fed a dodgy meat madras by Catholic waiting staff at the Ritz. It is thought the Mercedes cruise control was hacked into over a land line from the Vatican and reprogrammed to accelerate to maximum revs when going around tight bends."

An Infusion of Dream

The parlour was crammed with party-frocked children, all eager to be let loose upon the games they thought in store for them. One boy (I think it must have been me) wondered if games could exist without children to play them. He imagined hide-and-seek with mere wisps of shadow darting in and out of the corners; musical chairs with a feast of empty seats; hunt the invisible thimble; sardines with only loneliness to come between; Nobody's Knock...

Forgetting his thoughts, he surveyed the remains of food upon the excited faces, almost more to eat than they had in the first place. The dining-room had been a wondrous place that afternoon. With an early dusk outside, the candles had shone out a treat, casting golden tea-leaves of dream upon all the faces. The red jelly had wobbled deliciously. The cakes had dribbled fresh clotted cream even before they saw the tiny white teeth. Steaming samovars of infusions. Neatly manicured cucumber sandwiches. Drinks with more bubbles than liquid. The birthday cake decorated with a mysterious number none of the children could possibly count towards.

He had seen the girl for the first time around that table. Initially attracted by the pinafore frock, the face was very much second best. But the more he became accustomed to its frequently dimplish smile over the trifle, the more he fell in love with the rest of the girl he couldn't see.

The parlour was lit by a log fire. The faces were keen to get the planning phase over and the

campaign of games under way. He spotted the girl again – she was towards the back, the furthest from the fire that one could possibly be. She was no longer smiling but, even at his tender age, he knew that angels did not smile all of the time. There was at least one grown-up ranging about between the tangled limbs, so tall it was difficult to see the lines of the face. It was issuing instructions, however, which, for the boy's part, were pretty pointless. He thought the best present he'd receive today was being the seeker and the pinafored girl the hider whom he'd find in some solitary part of the house. Apparently, though, he was not chosen to be seeker, despite the party being in his honour. Indeed, the sole grown-up was intent on the role of seeker.

Suddenly the children rose in uproar, the girl included, and scuttled off in all possible directions. Only the boy and the grown-up were left staring at each other across the shadows of the flames.

The deep mumbling had no meaning. But the boy understood only too well. He followed the tail-end of the children into the dark hallway outside the parlour. The landing at the top of the steep stairs looked forbidding – although, of course, he realised that nowhere was out of bounds today of all days. Even the servants' quarters were eligible hiding-space, the occupants having been given the night off with a few halfpennies to spend at the Christmas fair. The night off? He wished he could have had the night off. He tore at his face as if trying to scrape the shadows of night from it.



The girl in the pinafore frock was disappearing up the very stairs he found so forbidding. Distantly, he followed the heels of her sandals -- catching glimpses of thin calves in light seeped from some undarkened rooms elsewhere in the house.

Being polite, he knocked on the door. Even in hide-and-seek, one could not ignore the privacy of the hidden one. She had slipped pursuit near the master bedroom, where the loft ladder had been left dangling by devil-may-care servants. She may now be adjusting the frock she wore. He'd not forgive himself if he disturbed her in such a private activity. She may be clambering into an empty tea-chest...

He'd forgotten, in his excitement, that he was not the seeker but a common hider, despite this being his birthday.

From within, the knock sounded as near to silence as a noise could be and still be called a noise.

"Come in," she breathed.

Then from the communal chimney, she could still hear the gruff voice of the grown-up counting in the parlour till reaching the biggest number that existed those days. "Coming ready or not!" And the deep treads began far below in the hallway.

So, who was that already knocking at the bedroom door, she wondered? Probably nobody. Or, at least, nobody who had been born.

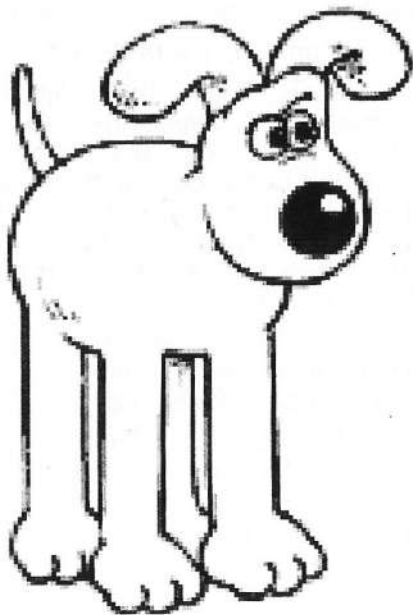
She slipped off the pinafore frock under the bed-covers, imagining that made her quite invisible.

D.F.Lewis

Against Aardman

"Aw, c'mon, how can anyone not love Wallace and Gromit?", I hear you cry. But here's a simple test to show the iniquitous effect they and their creator have had on British animation: how many *other* animators can you name? Very few, I imagine -- because Aardman's (carefully hyped) success means that the media now won't look beyond cuddly animals, lovable old men, and roguish penguins as far as animation goes. British animation is rapidly being driven into a PG-rated ghetto, just as our cinema was in the late 80's. Only this time, the ghetto is made of Play-do.

There's no question Park is hugely talented, and the work-ethic in Aardman's output is easily apparent; but this just makes his apparent subservience to the god of light entertainment all the more aggravating. It's the repetition that gets to me. Animation is a limitless medium, where imagination is your only restraint; looking at Park's work, though, you wouldn't think so. The first piece of his I



saw was jaw-dropping stuff. When the second one turned up and was the same again, I was less impressed. Then number three, pitched at exactly the same "gently amusing" level. And the fourth. Zzzzzzz...

It's like Tarantino's relentless usage of gangster motifs (is this the first time these two have been compared?). I find Park's work quickly goes stale, and rate more highly animators like Jan Svankmaer who've shown their talents in a wide range of genres. And how many Oscars has Svankmajer won? None. Note, however, that Park has some way to go to match the success of 'Tom and Jerry': 13 nominations, resulting in seven Academy Awards. And despite the inherent limitations of the "cat chases mouse" scenario, you'll find far more breadth in half a dozen random selected cartoons of theirs than all of Wallace and Gromit's adventures put together.

Both Tarantino and Park (is this the second time these two have been compared?) have also spawned legions of wannabees, devoid of whatever technical skill their role-models possess. Post-Park, it seems every animator in Britain rushed down to their local Toys R Us and stocked up on half a dozen packs of plasticine.



Here is a textbook example of marketing hype and crass, cynical commercialisation. And the one wearing the cute rucksack is Baby Spice.

In the dash for commissions, more traditional skills seem to have been thrown to one side, whether or not they'd be more appropriate for the story in hand. The results so far have been at best mediocre, and at worst pathetic -- witness the dire 'Gogs' which BBC2 inflicted upon the public last Christmas.

All populist animation must inevitably also invoke comparison with Disney. While Park's films are at least free of piss-poor songs and overt moral preaching, he and they have the same problem with characterisation -- as mentioned in a previous TC, Disney villains are a hell of a lot more memorable than the heroes. It says something about 'A Grand Day Out' that a vending machine comes across as having more personality than Wallace.

Disney and Aardman share another major activity in common: merchandising. T-shirts, books, videos, CD-Roms, cuddly toys, mugs, the range is apparently endless; behind the meek, rather nerdish persona of Nick Park is clearly a razor-sharp business mind. Flogging

twenty-five minutes of animation in HMV for £12.99 isn't bad going, especially given the vast quantities being shifted. Who needs value for money? And why bother rocking the (very comfortable) boat by making challenging animation? With Park now making a feature, 'Chicken Run', for Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks, the opportunity for tie-ins increase exponentially (Gromit Happy Meal, anyone?). But from the artistic point of view, development is required; surely no 90's audience will sit through ninety minutes of animated Ealing comedy?

I don't blame Park for any of this. He's acquired popular, international renown denied all save a very few animators in the West - Disney, Chuck Jones, Hanna & Barbera - and is entitled to enjoy his fifteen minutes of fame, probably as measured on the 'Wallace and Gromit' (TM) watch pictured below. I can't help feeling, however, that in the broader scheme of things, his stretching of said fifteen minutes to five years is not a unanimously good thing. Next, please...?



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I suppose it's traditional for me to start the fanzine reviews by rambling on about what time of year it is... so without further ado... *[but not without further editorial comment...]*

Dateline August 1997...

Has it really been that long since the last batch of reviews? (Well judging by the age of some of the 'zines in the bag by my feet I guess it must be....) Bearing that in mind, you'll have to take into account that some of the reviews below will (by the time you read this) be so out of date the 'zines will be out of print (But being the generous soul I am, I am willing to sell the copies I have at a highly inflated price...hmmm now that's an excellent way of making money... just say that all the fanzines reviewed are "Superb, must buys" and watch the cash come rolling in). So, don't look at the following as a guide to what you should buy (The very thought of someone reading this and saying "Hey, that Lino really knows his stuff -- I'm going to buy that fanzine" is enough to send me screaming into the night *[and me into fits of laughter]*), but more as a "That Was The Year That Was" of fanzines; a sepia tinged look back. Think of me as a Werthers Original sucking, white haired old Grandfather, pulling you up onto my lap and regaling you with stories of "How things were much harder in the old days, none of this computer doings to help me with my 4 page photocopied hand written Ingrid Pitt tribute fanzine". In fact, to use a phrase I haven't used since the old "Creeping Unknown" days: Let me take you by the hand and lead you through the streets of Fanzines. (And if I have used that phrase since the old "Creeping Unknown" days, please let me know, you sad anal freak....)

Of course, you didn't think it'd be that easy did you? You didn't think I'd just witter on for one paragraph (Or whatever is left after Jim, Warrior Editor has finished tinkering *[getting less by the second...]*)... no, this is the part where I start asking for free stuff... Yes, while I know that it is futile to do so, here I go.... I want a DVD player. Me, me, me, now, now, now. I don't expect to pay for it, and I expect it to play Region 1 & 2 discs, hell, I expect a combo DVD/Laserdisc player. If anyone can supply me with one of those (Did I mention the word FREE) I will mention them in every paragraph of the next issue's reviews. (So, ideally, they should have a stupid name too). Of course, I shall expect other people to supply me with FREE DVD's too: I don't care what it is, as long as I don't have to pay for it, and I can keep it. Pornography is *very* high on the list of priorities but, I can't be too choosy, so anything. Thanks then! While I'm at it, a widescreen TV would be nice too...and erm....someone to paint my house and erm...ohhh, one of those Churchill Stair Climbers that Thora Hurd advertises too...and a Craftmatic(c) adjustable bed... If, for some insane reason, I don't get at least *one* of the things mentioned above, I will have no alternative other than whining on and on and on until it happens; you have been warned. All offers of free stuff can be mailed either to the editorial e-mail address marked for my attention or direct to lino@lino.demon.co.uk. *[I await the rush]*

Where were we? *[Editor restrains himself. Ducks in a barrel...]* Aaahhhhhhhh yes, the reviews. Some of you might know that I've now started writing fanzine reviews for Harvey Fentons 'Flesh & Blood', but please, don't worry, because as TC now only appears as often as a Spice Girl sings live on television I shall continue to do both (That said, Harvey hasn't sent me any more fanzines, and when I spoke to him last he affected a German accent and went on to claim "Nein, Mister Fenton, nicht here... ist good ya?") Also, please don't think that I will be unbiased in any way, shape or form. I'm still *very* open to offers of bribery.

The problem I have is when I get the same fanzine to review for both: do I use the same review, or confuse people by slagging it off in one, and *really* liking it in another? Hmm, we shall see... (After all, I'm only here to fill space, I don't for one second think that people actually pay attention to what I'm saying!). *[Sorry, what was that?]*

You know, mentioning "Creeping Unknown" has made me come *[gratuitous editorial intervention for the sake of a cheap double entendre]* over all nostalgic. If anyone remembers those heady patched together and photocopied days, you'll remember one issue that contained an article called "Lino on the buses" and in that article I spent what seemed like hours bitching about buses (like, duh!)... well since then, I've gone up in the world and now travel everywhere by minicab..... and you know, those minicab drivers are scary people. This is where Jim gets VERY paranoid and starts snipping company names. I always use a Wembley minicab company called "Global Cars" (Phone them for a quotation on +44 (0)181 903 4444). Bit of an odd name for a minicab company that takes a good two hours to arrive in Forest Hill from Wembley. God only knows how long it'd take a cab to turn up in Atlanta.

Anyway, one particular driver there, whom we'll call Danny, is quite insane.. and without doubt the biggest and best bullshit artist I've ever come across. *[From Lino, high praise indeed...]* The first time he picked me up, things were progressing quite nicely, then about 5 minutes into the trip, I made the mistake in indulging in some small talk (always a bad move) and asked him how business was doing. "Oh, not bad" he replied. "But, I only do this part time, the rest of the time I'm a British Airways engineer". At that point, I should have said "Great" and stared out of the window ignoring him. But I didn't. I said, "Really? Wow, that sounds like an interesting job." It was at that point that his eyes lit up and he began to explain what it was he did. "Yes, I design and test engines for British Airways. Do you know that I can strip and rebuild a Concorde engine in 25 minutes?" Alarm bells started ringing in my head. "Ignore him, light a cigarette and stare out of the window" was the mantra I was chanting to myself, but by then it was too late, he was in full swing, regaling me with tales of daring engine adventures, punctuated with the occasional cry of "Did you know that the average Concorde engine contains over 300 screws" (Please note that I'm *not* making any of this up!). I don't think I was ever happier leaving a cab as I was that night. He's picked me up since then, and has told me that he was a professional gambler ("Two thousand pounds last night mate"), raced cars for MG, and was seriously considering "jacking in cabbage to become a priest". What's my point? *[Good question!]* Well, I'll be damned if I know, but it filled some space on the page, and it means that I'll have to spend less time actually reviewing the fanzines. *[No bad thing]* So, that's one job done.

Right, now, what else can I talk about, let me see, let me see... Err, nope, you know I don't think I can think of anything else. So, without any more beating around the bush I'm proud to present: the 'Zine Reviews. (Please note that normal review coverage might be halted at any time for me to tell you something I might have remembered) And one more thing, if the tragic death of Princess Diana has taught us anything, it is that the woman had bloody bad timing, I mean, I ask you... getting buried on a Saturday? I'm missing Gladiators and Blind Date. Chances are if they'd held off till the Monday I would have had the day off! BAH!

OK, OK, don't panic, it's now 6th October, and as of yet, I've not actually written anything constructive *[A rare moment of lucidity]*. Jim has been on holiday and come back (please read boring holiday article somewhere else in this issue), and I've done nothing, nothing do you hear me! NOTHING!! Ok, good, I need an excuse, let me see, writers block...hmm it's crazy, but it might just... A combination of writer's block and pressure of work (This is starting to sound more and more incredible as it goes...).

You'll be pleased to know that my writer's block has lifted and my work pressures have eased too, so it's back to the bubbly, wacky, funny yet loveable Lino you all know and love..... Or is it!?!

[While you are eagerly anticipating the answer to that question, I'd like to take the opportunity to rail, in a particularly pointless fashion, against the obscurity of printers. Like every other article in TC, this was laid-out using a font known as 'Souvenir Lt BT', which worked perfectly, right up to the point where it came to print the masters out. Then, inexplicably, the bold bits came out as normal. Everything else worked fine. Every other font worked fine; just not the one I needed. Hence the need to re-lay this piece out, using Times New Roman, which has in turn led to me having to space-fill rampantly at the bottom... Thank you. We now return to your (ab)normal programme.]

Dear diary, Friday 14th November: still nothing written *[you expected perhaps...?]*, and I'm sure people are talking about me at bus-stops. I will get around to writing the reviews today, I will. (The fact that Jim is now forever telling me that the new issue is ready to go, all he needs are the finished reviews, is probably the best reason I know to get them done *[The only way to get work out of Lino is to lie. Repeatedly]*). OK! That's it, READ THEM NOW!

REVOLUTIONS

Issue 1 - Summer 1997

Brazil
Special
Edition

Alex Cox
Interview

True
Romance

DVD
Nightmare

Laserdisc
Reviews

Cinema
Overview

Book
Reviews

New
Releases



REVOLUTIONS Issue 1 (Summer '97) -- A new UK fanzine looking at both PAL and NTSC video disc releases. The first issue has an interview with Alex Cox, well-written reviews of disc releases and more.... I was taken with the "DVD Nightmare" article, where a typical laserdisc owner rambles on at length about the "Horrors of DVD", oh, no, a new format, whatever are we going to do... Admittedly the feature was probably written before we all found out exactly how easy it is to get a DVD machine that has been "tweaked" to allow play of discs from any region, but the feeling of paranoia is still cranked a little too high... Other than that, *Revolutions* is well written and highly recommended.

BOMBA MOVIES (erm, no issue number). Now you see, these days everyone and their mother has got themselves a computer and are putting together easy to read fanzines...well, everyone, it seems, apart from the lunatics at Bomba Movies. But that's no bad thing, in fact Bomba Movies does stand head and shoulders over most of the other things I've looked at for this issue...totally review based, cut and pasted (literally)

together before being photocopied. Mix in a bucketload of comic strip panels and pictures of "ladies" licking giant phallus's, and Bob's your uncle. The issue reviews films ranging from "Traci Lords is Aroused" down to everyone's favourite tubby, wig wearing Spanish uncle Paul Naschy...Excellent! (It scared me a little how I scattered the last review with phrases like "well written and highly recommended", so I'll add this, "Shitting great mate...")

KILL EVERYONE NOW! Fine, ok, give me a music 'zine to review.... because as anyone who knows me will tell you, my knowledge of the music scene is dictated purely on the basis of whom I'd sleep with. Consequently Kylie, Dannii and Alanis Morissette (spacey *[spacey? spicy? specy? You decide...]* hand waving notwithstanding) are always at the top of my personal hit parade... Anyway...oh, and Sheryl Crow, although that bird wants to eat some food and put some more meat on her bones... So...oh, and Simone Angel from MTV, yeah, I know she's a VJ but she did have a couple of terrible records out a couple of years ago so that counts in my book. Right, back to Kill Everyone Now! Erm, well I did spend a good 30 minutes leafing through it, but I was still none the wiser at the end of it, so I'll tell you that it features interviews with guitarist Mitch Mitchell of Guided By Voices fame (ok?), pages of reviews and bizarrely not one instruction to kill anyone. So, while it made the spot between my eyes go numb, you wacky student types will probably love it, and it's got nothing by Jimbo so it earns extra points there.

BOMBA MOVIES Ohhhh, bugger, look, I've just pulled another issue of Bomba Movies out of the bag, and you know what I was saying earlier about being all nice and stuck together and not generated by computer? (Pay attention it was only a few lines ago...) Well they've rasing *[rising? rasping? racing? You (sigh) decide...]* well gone out and bought a computer haven't they... hmmm will this change my opinion... I'll read it and be right back..... OK, don't anyone panic, while it's now totally legible, it's still as sleazy as you like, so that's one panic over... and anybody that devotes half the issue to WIP movies is alright with me... all that and the sordid little pictures are easier on the eye too! Excellent.... More please!

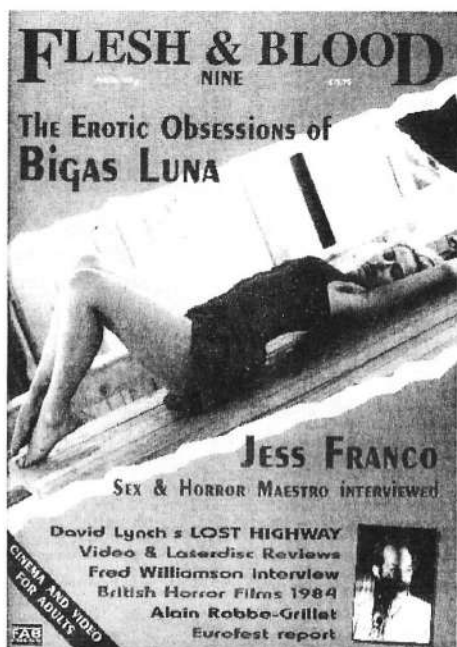
TOO CLOSE Chapter Two. Ohhh LOOK! I was promised I wouldn't have any more of these arsing home made drawn in the back bedroom anime "epics"... this is obviously some sort of joke... *[no, just an administrative error. Giving Lino anime comics to read is like getting David Atton to review splatter movies. I thus handed most of these over to a slightly less prejudiced contributor - see later - but this one escaped the net. Sorry...]*

HEADPRESS 13. Too Close = bad. Headpress = good. Now I don't know if this has got anything to do with the fact that I'm looking at Headpress 13 directly after leafing through the anime antics of Too Close, but if it is, then well done animeboy... Issue 13 comes in the form of a book, ohhh, nice, and it's priced at a mere £4.95, ohhh, nice... (Some people would have taken the new look as an excuse to push the cover price way up). Inside you'll find an 8 page article on Gregory Dark's "Snake Pit," filthy pornography that it is, alongside the usual reviews (Hey, look, they like Bomba Movies too! See, I do know what I'm talking about). Look out for Phil Tonge's Cak-watch, a genuinely laugh out loud review of "Traces of Death 3." Go buy a copy.

Since then, I've also got Headpress 15, and tend to agree with Lino...which may be something of a first. Everything from gang-bang queen Annabel Chong to Jerry Springer, through animal sex films and Gerry Anderson. Sublime.

VEX 3. Marvel at the all animal (Well virtually) issue.... Chuckle as you read the interview with Kaylan "Suburbanite Zoophile/bisexual", giggle as you read the first part of Vex's history of gorilla movies, guffaw as you read a novice's guide to Zoophile porn movies (Page 36...). All that and a profile of G. Gordon Liddy (Sort of like Rush Limbaugh, without the weight), a man so right wing, his face is squashed up against the wall (Please fill in your own jokes here....). I also make no apologies for quoting several lines from the HILARIOUS "Gorehound Gone Good" article.... Wherein a former New York gorehound extols the virtues of God... in a pamphlet entitled "I Was a Gorehound" our lapsed gorehound goes into some of the reasons why "Gore is bad!"... "During the middle of this 12 year period in my life, a cab driver told me about Jesus Christ on the way home from a screening of Rocky Horror (which I saw 60 times!)", "We are only alive (compared to eternity) for a few seconds. Is living your life for sleaze and gore worth risking a Godless eternity" and so on and so forth (In answer to Nicks last question... Erm, YES!!).... As usual, Vex is top notch entertainment, even taking in the fact it's American! Please buy it, you'll make yourself happy without the messy task of touching yourself.





FLESH & BLOOD 9. Marvellous, excellent, a smashing read from cover to cover, unputdownable, it changed my life, enjoyed everything from the Eurofest report to the incredibly in-depth fanzine reviews by Lino... No, it's no good, I can't review myself reviewing other people, it's too weird. It's like going to the doctors, being asked to cough, then being asked to bounce up and down for a while... Unnatural... so with this in mind, I'll turn the issue of FAB over to Mr James McLennan for review!

[Thank you, Lino. I'd just like to start by saying that I hate Flesh & Blood. To start with, it's irritatingly well-produced. Not just disturbingly glossy, colourful and shiny enough to slip off your coffee table, but annoyingly thick too. This'd be unacceptable on its own, but Harvey also insists on content that rarely falls into the "anal obsessive" school of writing. #10 definitely heads out towards more general cult movie coverage, bad news for all other editors. This man must be stopped. Now. But what has happened to Lino's reviews? Enquiring minds want to know...]

MINDS EYE PRESENTS #7 "Vincent". Just to prove that I don't have an axe to grind about comics (See above for my gentle taking apart of Too Close), comes yet another excellent Minds Eye comic from Canada. Everything I've seen from Robin Bougie and Rebecca Dart I have loved, and this is no exception. Telling the story of happy couple Vincent D Panda (a panda), his girlfriend Ashley Sorayama (not a panda), and their trip to the cinema to see Vincent's latest starring role (Did I mention he was an actor?) in hit movie "Bring Me The Ass of Alfredo Garcia". Brilliantly drawn, hilariously funny to read, and just, well, let's not beat about the bush here, fucking blinding mate... Send off some money to Canada, buy everything they've got and enjoy... you will not be disappointed... (Just the thing to brighten up a thoroughly depressing Wednesday at work waiting for an arsing client to turn up after 5pm... Why after 5pm? Well because he's a arsing piss head, obviously too busy getting even more drunk in the pub to consider the feelings of people waiting around for him... Ohhh, it's good to get that out of my system).



MACHO PARANOIA You won't find this anymore... how do I know? Well, the phone number on the editorial page starts 071, there's an advertisement for Psychotronic Video when they were still in Hanway Street, and I don't believe the editor has any issues left... What did you miss out on? Excellent cut and paste antics, pictures of testicles, and a brown paper cover are the first three things that spring to mind.... I could of course be wrong, and there could be a huge stockpile of these things hidden away somewhere... if there is, and you find it, buy a copy.... And sell the rest for a tidy profit!

LITTLE SHOPPE OF HORRORS 13. Always entertaining, always informative, always packed full of interviews with actors who appeared in Hammer movies... LSOH really is jam packed with information and interesting background on films which, by now, you would have thought everybody knew inside out. Issue 13 is a whopping 130 pages and yes, I read every one, and was spellbound throughout... More than half the issue looks at Hammers "Gothic Trilogy" Dracula Has Risen From The Grave, Taste The Blood Of Dracula and Scars of Dracula. Elsewhere you'll find articles on James Carreras (Including his part in the "Palladium Cellars".. Wow, I'd almost forgotten about those... I remember vividly going there as a bratty little 14yr old with some friends and finding the whole thing incredible at the time...) and lots more, so much more in fact that I could quite easily take up another 10 pages gushing on about how incredible the whole undertaking is (Including a mention of Ingrid Pitt...yuck...) Not much more to add. Very, very highly recommended, if you can still find a copy, snap it up.... Excellent.

MANSPLAT Issues 6, 7 & 8. Three issues, one review, no waiting. It's quite apt that I'm finishing with Mansplat, as it's an amalgam of most of the 'zine's I've already looked at (With the exception of Too Much).. it's got the cut and paste (in places) look of Bomba Movies, the laugh out loud funny pieces of Headpress and Minds Eye Comics, and it's got regular articles and reviews by Joe Bob Briggs (who in my opinion is very underrated... and yes, I know he isn't a *real* person, thank you very much!).

Scanning quickly through the issues, #6 contains a do it yourself guide to getting women the James Bond way, an anagram article (funnier when you're reading it, honest!), and more (Including a healthy mention of beer on almost every page!). #7 headlines with the stripping down and dissecting of Bewitched husbands Dick York & Dick Sargent (who swapped mysteriously between seasons...). I actually hated Bewitched, a one joke show that for some bizarre reason managed to run for years... Oh well, God Bless America. Also in issue 7 an article praising 7-11 food (eww), a useful insight on how to send a fax to Batman (Like, really dude!), the official "Mansplat Guide to Toilet Paper" (a little



blinkered as it only covers US brands of toilet paper) and a HUGE article on American ghost movies (and I thought Ghosts of the Civil Dead was Australian? Oh, well...). #8 headlines with the second Annual Barbarella Awards (Or translated,

Tits out for the lads, rewarded), a cover story about UFO sightings that at times seems so rabid, you can almost see the writer's veins stick out as he typed it, a totally gratuitous picture of Ron Jeremy (OK, not really, there is an article too), a slagging off of American "Lite Beer" (and not before time!) and a useful list of "Super Heroes Whose Asses You Could Easily Kick!" mentioning Flash Gordon, Green Arrow and Wonderwoman (Hmmm, great thighs that Wonderwoman.. Ohhh, imagine those wrapped around your neck.. am I getting off the point?). All that and lots more. If I was going to say anything negative about Mansplat, it'd be that there was a little too much in the way of wrestling talk, and a few too many advertisements, mainly there to fund the 'zine as it costs nothing to buy!! So, my last review and look, another thumbs up, you can't really ask for any more now can you?

And that's about it, not bad going what with one thing and another. It's now 10pm on Friday 28th November, it's only taken me three months to finish, not bad going for me... How long before the next issue? Who can say... All I know is that I'm going to Atlanta for a well deserved holiday in January (Watch out Jaime, if you're going to move, do it now!!), and that nasty Christmas thing is on it's way too, the only thing there to look forward to is Jim coming back from a holiday with his family in Scotland laden down with his Mother's home made cakes.. hmmm, them's good eating.

So, before I depart, as usual, I'd like to thank nobody for their help in this issue. No that's not strictly true, I'd like to thank Shane at work, for doing all my work for me while I toiled away getting these things finished, and also I'd like to give no thanks at all to Jim for putting two issues of Too Much into the batch of fanzines to be reviewed... I've not been quite this angry in a long time!!! Any comments, praise, love, hateemail or even dirty jpegs can be sent to lino@lino.demon.co.uk Also, while you're online, do go visit www.bondage.org a fine example of the Net smashing UK censorship. Ok, it's a pay site, and ok, it's in the States, but they do offer some excellent Realvideo footage... in a couple of years time, the quality will be broadcast, what on earth are the wonderful HM Customs and Excise going to do then? Think about it...I know I will...

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Repeatedly, no doubt. While the above was "in preparation" -- roughly translated, "lying in a bag at Lino's work" -- a bunch of other stuff turned up. And there were also the 'zines which arrived with "please do not give to Lino" written on them... So let's have a trawl through the other things that have popped through the letterbox.



Starting with www.fetish-fantasy.com, who sent me a press release and photo of the most incredibly *shiny* pair of boots I think I have ever seen. \$9.95 will get you in for a month; they describe it as being "for the intensely curious, to the curiously intense", and the site looks to have all the things you imagine it would...and a few others besides.

Mansplat 9 has...but we've given them enough publicity already. Oh, alright -- their second anniversary issue (yep, nine issues in two years -- rather than two in nine years...) has Xena drinking games, Edward Swiss-Army-Knife and La Femme Nikita (a series better in concept than execution, I reckon). Warning: few things suck more than spraying beer down your nose 'cos you tried to laugh and swallow simultaneously. In **Cinema Sewer**, Robin Bougie of Mind's Eye Comics (see above) turns his hand to movie stuff, with the same insane freshness that pervades his graphic works. Kekko Kamen, the GoGos video, Deranged, eye violence and the lamest 50's monsters. Let's face it, since you are going to send him money for his comics, you'd do well to get this

too! And, hey, if it ain't **Cashiers du Cinemart**, in which Mike White eases back on his anti-Tarantino *jihad* (QT is self-destructing nicely on his own, it seems), and yaks about life working in a cinema, Jackie Chan, Andre the Giant and his posse, plus Abba. Scooby Doo, and so on.

Random plug time: **Otaku Publishing**, an excellent source for all your Japanese animation needs: videos, CDs, strange plastic laminated things, morally suspect PC games with titles like 'Time Stripper', and layout cards, such as the one shown on the next page. **Midian Books** are similarly comprehensive with regard to what you might call "weird shit" - surrealism, sex and violence - and **Dark Carnival** will satisfy all your needs on the film 'zine front. Those three should be enough to keep any well-adjusted TC reader happy for hours...

Caress 18 continues to document the sound of things falling apart as our new government heads down the road to further oppression, but has its optimistic moments as well, and reviews books, videos, CD ROMs and other pieces of "adult erotica" (as opposed to juvenile erotica, I suppose!). Looking round the somewhat untidy room (there's a floor here somewhere, beneath all the discarded 'zines), I think we have finally reached the last item: **Scattered Remains**, a collection of short stories from the realm of the disordered mind, by Paul Pinn. Think Hieronymus Bosch meets William Burroughs for a pint or six; any book "in celebration of 750 years of Bedlam" is alright by me!

Bomba Movies - (an SAE) Damned if I can find an address... Try Dark Carnival, I think!

Caress - (£2.50) Polly Publications, PO Box 2225, Hove, East Sussex, BN3 1QW

Cashiers du Cinemart - (\$2) PO Box 2401, Riverview, MI 48192, USA

Dark Carnival - 17 Cottage Beck Rd, Scunthorpe, N.Lincolnshire, DN16 1LQ

Fetish Fantasy - www.fetish-fantasy.com

Flesh & Blood - (£4.95) PO Box 178, Guildford, Surrey, GU3 2YU

Headpress - (£4.95) 40 Rossall Ave, Radcliffe, Manchester, M26 1JD

Kill Everyone Now! (???) - Flat 6, 166 Withington Rd, Manchester, M16 8JL

Little Shop of Horrors - (\$7.95) PO Box 3107, Des Moines, Iowa 50316, USA

Macho Paranoia - (???) Alex Smith, c/o Red Brick Rd, 88 Canfield Gdns, London NW6 3EE

Mansplat - (\$2?) 2318 2nd Ave, Suite 591, Seattle, WA 98121, USA

Midian Books - 69 Park Lane, Bonehill, Tamworth, Staffs, B78 3HZ

Mind's Eye, etc - Robin Bougie, 525 E.18th Ave, Vancouver, BC, V5V 1G2 Canada

Otaku Publishing - PO Box 9573, London, SE22 3ZF, www.otaku.com

Revolutions - (???) PO Box 4089, Hornchurch, Essex, RM11 3AW

Scattered Remains - (£7) Tanjen Ltd, 52 Denman Lane, Huncote, Leicester, LE9 3BS

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'Brand New Cherry Flavour' - Todd Grimson, Quartet, £9.00

"Dear Jim,

On a number of levels, I would think the success of 'Brand New Cherry Flavour' might be of some interest to you. Therefore I was disappointed it wasn't mentioned in the latest TC.

Wake up. Smell the...uh, let's not dwell on that one, all right? Walk to your local fucking bookshop & pay the fucking 9 pounds, & PROSELYTISE, encourage your friends to BUY a copy, contribute to the sales, & so on.

YOUR NAME'S on the fucking dedication page -- for Kinski material, etc. This is a fucking BESTSELLER, more or less, & as well as being a free advertisement for TC, it's a wanker's DREAM, being an incredibly sexy sleazy teasy Alice in BloodyFuckingWonderland trip STARRING none other than NASTASSJA KINSKI, or as good as, or actually quite a bit better when you stop to consider would NK wear a thong-bikini or submit to the included tattoos, piercing, etc.

In other words, bro, check it out, and put down some of your HARD-EARNED _____ [illegible...] on the way in or out, too. Every bit helps!

All the best

Todd."

[TC: the magazine that lets authors review their own books. At least no-one can accuse us of hidden prejudice; our biases are right out there in the open. But it is great. Go buy: I did, though one could think I might have been sent a copy... To forestall another savaging from Todd, I'd better also say that his vampire novel 'Stainless' is now also available from the same publisher.]

'Slaughtermatic' - Steve Aylett, Four Walls Eight Windows, \$13.95

It's always a pleasure to see a new Steve Aylett book, even if he produces them with a regularity that TC can only wildly envy. He would appear to have cracked the American market, though his latest won't be out here in Britain until the autumn. The good news is that he's returned to Beerlight, scene of 'The Crime Studio', for more adventures in excessive violence.

The main difference is that, rather than a collection, 'Slaughtermatic' is a single story - plots, subplots and gratuitous diversions notwithstanding - detailing the commission, execution and aftermath of a daring crime. Hero Dante Cubit robs a bank, then goes back in time and shoots himself: what better alibi than being dead? Of course, this does cause certain problems, not least that his 'suicide' bid fails, leaving two Dantes running from cops, enthusiastic hitman Brute Parker (a survivor from 'The Crime Studio') and, to be on the safe side, anyone else who knows him.

The results are occasionally tough going. Here's a sample paragraph:

"Corey breathed deep a while. A commotion of slaying echoed from outside. That Danny guy looked a hypnotised as a Sega brat. They were surrounded by inflatable bastards. She wasn't any virtual puppet, but this wasn't any virtual heist, so the peril level was even stevens. She'd have to take charge. "Kid. You and me get outta here we're happy as pups in a sidecar. Tell ya a secret." And she drew up a pantleg on an ankle-holstered Hitachi 20-gauge, one of the countless untraceable one-off guns designed on desktop since the Crime Bill. "Life's a geology of precaution. You pal's knee-deep in himself. You hold up a a place without thinking? What if everyone acted that way?"

This is page 30, and the novel does drop you in at the deep end. Some sections need to be read several times to squeeze out their meaning, perhaps partly because you've got to squint past the high-velocity English, whose beauty threatens to cremate the unwary. The body count is huge, even if most are cybercorpses, and the plot flips through realities with facile sureness. Aylett is clearly at home in the world of future carnage, and by the end of the book, so was I. If they ever want anyone to script a 'Dirty Pair' movie, Aylett could be the man.



Jim's been telling me there's more to life than Quake2. As if! In a desperate attempt to convince, he gave me these zines to review. So - is there life after gibs?

First up is **Anime Angels**, a straight fiction zine. As co-creator of Tales from the Cajun Sushi Bar, how could I resist a mag that cited CSB as its inspiration? Quite easily, actually, if it wasn't any good. Luckily, it's not bad at all. Written by David Trevett, what you get is two stories: The Angels of Persuasion starring the Dirty Pair, which after a shaky start settles down into a highly readable account of Kei and Yuri's adventures retrieving an emotion manipulation device from a con man and sundry terrorists. Plenty of action, and, of course, it's not their fault! The second story, Fireball Hex File Five features a couple of his own spin-off characters, Chrissis Starz and Lissa Moon in a time travel romp also featuring two FBI agents, Mullard and Skelly (geddit?) which is somewhat less successful - the plot is quite clever, but there's far too much of it, with the characters standing round while it's explained, and the new characters not quite strong enough to hold my interest. Nice try though, and I look forward to his next effort.

Next up, and the worst of the bunch is **British Manga**, which has reached issue 8 - surprising, because it's total cack. With a pseudo Jack Kirby/Barry Smith cover (what's this got to do with Manga?) and printing that manages to lose page edges and several stories that are amateurish, incomprehensible and in some parts, plain illegible. On the plus side, Paul Simmons shows promise, and Laura Watton surely deserves better than this.

However, it was a real pleasure to reach Jean Chamary's **Manganese** (#2 and #3). With only a couple of pages of reviews, the main attractions are the two strips. Heavily influenced by Toriyama's later Dragonball Z style, Jean has it down to a 'T' (!). Dragonball T is an alternate story featuring Trunks, and while I prefer the earlier Dragonball style myself (DBZ looks as if it's been stripped down for faster drawing - not surprising considering how much of it there is),

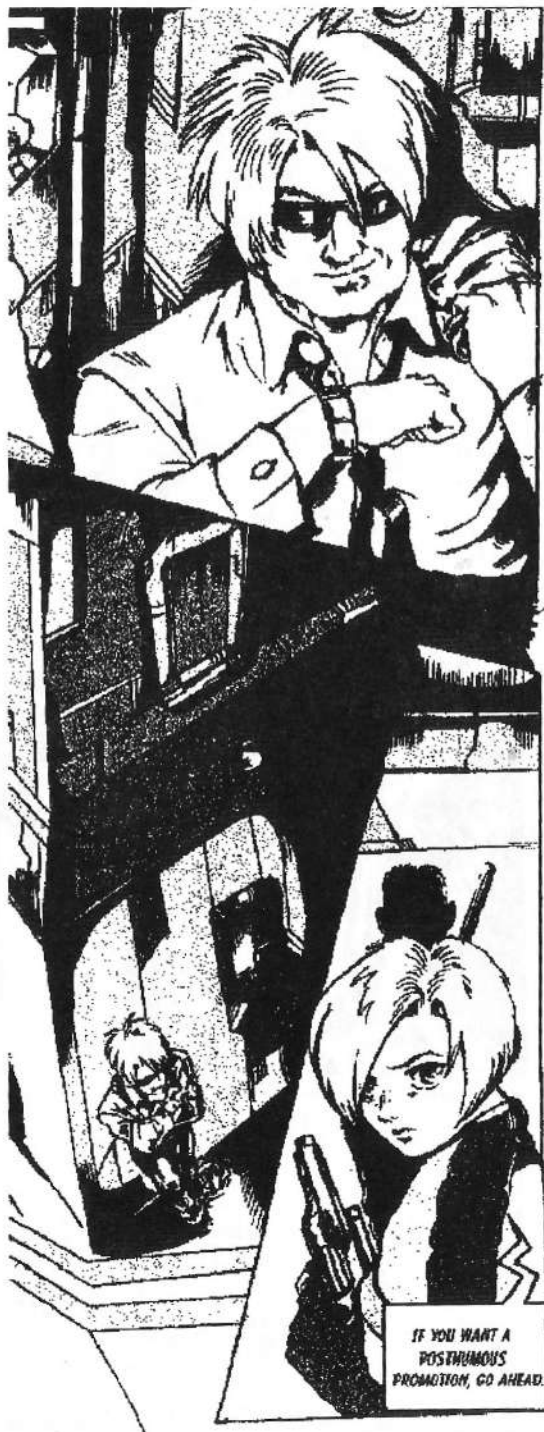


Jean's homage works well - the panels flow well and the art is confident and assured. If there's any criticism, it's that Dragonball has a vast array of characters - you've got to be a real addict to know who the hell everybody is. My favourite is his other strip, Babes and Blades, which started out as a straight adventure and has now turned into more of a parody. It features warrior princess Lea, who falls through a portal into our world and learns about credit cards... It's a lot of fun, but rather too complex for a series which only has a dozen pages a year. That said, I'd love to see more, and I think Jean should go far.

Wild Side #1 is ostensibly an anthropomorphic 'furry' zine, but the production values are pro quality. The stories are a cut above the norm too. The King of Han's Bride by Paul Kidd and American artist T.A.B. is a pseudo mystic fable about a King's search for a bride, but the artwork is terrific - not so much furry, more Deedlit from Lodoss Wars. Zen Zebras by Talis Kimberley and Fox is also something special, about the adventures of a hip group of zebras in an interstellar rock band, with crisp artwork and a nice line in dialogue. Lark and Key is more like routine furry adventures, which didn't appeal to me much at all, and Third Eye had such a cluttered art style that it was difficult to work out (or care) what was going on. Furry aficionados might disagree... But with two good stories, and a Steve Kyte cover, this is definitely recommended, even if you don't like furies.

And now to a familiar male obsession, with **Too Close #1** and **#2**. Yup, it's weapon statistics. Written and drawn by Ian Waugh, this features the exploits of team 2 of the UN 1st Motorsuit Battalion on peacekeeping operations in Paris 2011. Plundering territory famil-





lar to Shirow fans, issue 1 looks rather cramped at A5 size but issue 2 goes to A4 format (both with with colour covers) and really takes advantage of the extra space. There is also a marked art improvement and, while he still needs to work on his anatomy, there is plenty of the complexity and technobabble beloved of Shirow himself. It'll be interesting to see where this goes.

After all those male obsessions, it's nice to get a female point of view - and this seems to involve plenty of wallowing as the hero suffers. Enter **Cyberage** #1, a zine for fans of Cyber City Oedo 808, and this time it's Benten who gets to stagger around half dead, refusing all help because a man's gotta do what a... something or other. Vanessa Wells writes and draws Open Circuit, and while the writing needs tightening up, the artwork is in a class of its own. She's gonna go far! If any of her heroes survive long enough... The zine also contains other short fiction pieces, a take on Kawajiri's chara designs, and mix-n-match hairstyles, plus the usual reviews and fan art.

And now, **JAMM** #6, one of the best of the European fanzines, with the added bonus of being in English. Published in Belgium, with Emmanuel Van Melkebeke as Editor in Chief, this is rather an old issue - like 1996 already! It also puts many professional magazines to shame, with full colour cover and quality printing. Issue 6 has features on Otomo's 'Memories', Ippongi Bang's 'Amazing Strip', Anime toys, Urotsuki Doji IV, French translated manga, Teach yourself Japanese, and reviews of Crying Freeman live action, Tezuka's 'Adolf', The Silent Service and much more. I quite liked the spoof science article on anime 'gravity'. Well, I'm sure you've

been wondering why anime charas all had such big hair, large breasts, and can leap tall buildings in a single bound... While the writing can be long winded, you'd be hard put to find so much (and so much obscure) information in a Brit Zine.

And finally, **Cute Attack #1** from Mark Routledge. This is exactly what it says on the tin: 'a mix of girl-art and humour' and is actually not at all bad. Plenty of anime-style babes, in varying stages of undress as they spend an exciting day... shopping. What can I say? It's made up of short individual scenes, each with a punch line, and while I didn't fall over it was quite amusing and readable. The artwork is basic but adequate, the only drawback being that all the girls look the same. Like absolutely *identical* except for their hairstyles! A bit more variety would go down well. And there's a 'how to draw babes' bit at the back too.

Reviews by John Spencer and now...

Good night.



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85 Croydon Road, Keston, Kent BR2 8HU
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Manganese (£3.00 inc), Jean-Vincent Chamary,
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Cute Attack (£1.50 plus), Mark Routledge, 15
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British Manga (£1.00 plus), James Taylor, 95
Waverley Road, Harrow
Too Close (£2.50 inc), Ian Waugh, 3 Swallow
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Anime Blitz

Blue Sonnet - Took significant effort to see this, first phoning up Manga to get a copy, then returning it after the Post Office trashed it. And it wasn't worth the effort, for a tired cross between 'The Guyver' and 'Project A-ko'. The latter is especially drawn on: artificially enhanced, blue-haired schoolgirl, takes on red-haired schoolgirl with more natural superpowers (well, her hair turns red when she uses her abilities). Pity that this clone lacks any of the original's wit, style or quality of animation. B-ko, sorry, Blue Sonnet, is a cyborg secret-weapon of some multinational or other, suffering the usual guilt pangs, notably about offing the school nurse who discovered her secret, in the only effective sequence. Lettuce-like limpness. **E+**

Detonator Orgun - Certainly impressive, in terms of volume - 150 mins for £13.99 - and actually not bad, given my dislike of the giant robot field. Self-aware enough to defuse the portentousness with humour, it skates close to moralising cant, yet never quite goes over the top. The "alien invasion" plot, #3 in the anime canon, is twisted in novel ways (are the invaders actually our future selves?) and the animation is full-scale. The origin as 50-minute episodes is too clear (half an hour of plot, then 20 minutes of action, with the predictability of the tides), yet it's nicely self-contained in a sweeping, epic kind of way. **C+**

Elicia - Forgettable piracy romp with fantasy elements. Reminded me of 'Sol Bianca', except that one managed to have memorable characters and a plot that stuck in your head for longer than thirty minutes. This one is bright, shiny, nicely animated and possesses very little to recommend it above and beyond the hundred other titles on the shelf. The sort of thing for which the phrase 'Mostly Harmless' was coined, do yourself a favour and go watch 'Cut-throat Island' instead. **D-**

Grappler Baki - Martial arts mayhem, albeit with a smidgeon more flair than, say, 'Shadow Skill'. At moments, so excessive it may be a parody; though the fact that it's not funny suggests

otherwise. The storyline is irrelevant, so let's move on to the lengthy, graphic battles: the final one alone lasts 15 minutes and features a guy who tears out his opponent's nerves. If that's the coolest thing you've ever heard, this is right up your street; otherwise, it could be of limited interest. I dozed off a bit in the middle, between fights, but suspect this did not impact my enjoyment of the show in the slightest. **D+**

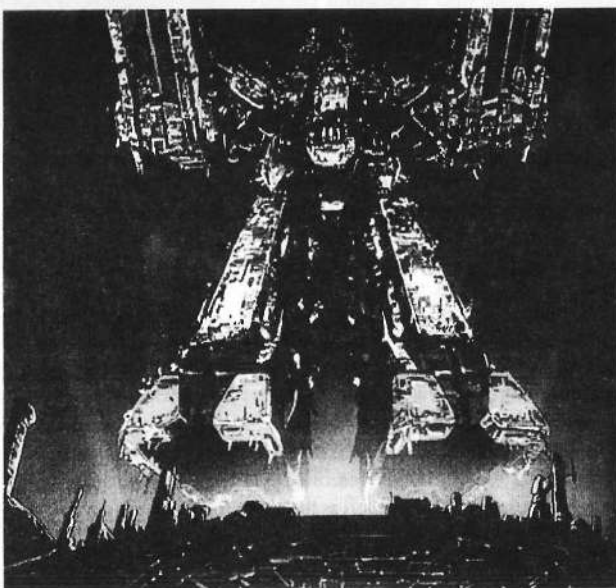
◀ **Gunsmith Cats 3** - The final part of Kenichi Sonoda's paeon to fast cars, babes and guns ties up loose ends left after previous episodes, when the heroines took out a gun-running operation. Said ends are very loose indeed, including a Russian hit-woman and a lot of political sleaze. This is 30 minutes of cheerful shallowness, with hardly a thought in its pretty little head. Like all bimbos, it's expensive for what you get; value for money isn't the strong point of this series, so wait for the compilation edition instead. However, bonus points to AD Vision for putting both dubbed and subbed versions on the same tape, giving the viewer maximum flexibility. **C+**



The Hakkenden - An animated version of 'The Water Margin' is a good way to sum up this sprawling series. It details the adventures of eight characters whose fates are bound together by a series of pearls, engraved with the necessary attributes of a samurai, and tied to a princess who married her dog(!). Throw in the usual venomous power struggles, and you have something where you have to admire the width at the very least. However, this isn't enough to make it actually *interesting*, it was too hard to empathise with characters who never quite lift themselves out of the box marked 'cyphers'. It also seems often to forget that it's animation, and could easily be live-action for long periods. If you like samurai stuff, fine, otherwise this won't convert you. **D**

Hanappe Bazooka - Go Nagai is famous for mixing sex, violence and humour ('Kekko Kamen' is also his), and this bats down a similar line. It's like a parody of 'Overfiend' - guy summons demons, mayhem follows - with the creatures in question more naughty than unpleasant, though just as sex-crazed. However, it's not actually very amusing, despite obviously trying very hard. Some decent in-jokes, and a healthy sense of political incorrectness, which the BBFC will no doubt trim, can't salvage it. In the end (and every other orifice, too), what you get is less parody than tame imitation. **D**

Macross Plus - Reviewing part four of this was a bit tricky, since they never sent parts 1-3. Thank heavens for the Macross Plus movie, which combines them all (with an extra twenty minutes of footage), and alleviated the vague sense of loss, since Part 4 wasn't totally without merit, despite being full of giant robots. It's epic, transgalactic stuff, though the ending has dialogue so cheesy you could put it on toast and call it Welsh Rarebit. Just the sort of po-faced nonsense one expects from mecha-anime. Up until then though, it's very impressive: the animation is top of the range, fluid and fast, and music is used to great effect too. Overall, a very pleasant surprise. **B+**



Makyu Senjou - My, just what the world has been crying out for: a 'Guyver' wannabe. Bloke turns into secret weapon of mega-corporation, and has to fight all the other secret weapons in bloody battles. Yawn. A marginally better storyline than 'The Guyver' (not hard -- the appearance of a telepathic kid tips the balance there) and with a decent minimalist soundtrack, yet it has even worse animation, and dialogue that might be funny if it wasn't serious. Deeply tedious. **E**

Neon Genesis Evangelion - I'm going to go against the grain here; despite uniformly good reviews elsewhere, this again is little more than 'The Guyver', albeit with extra teen-angst. Every twenty minutes or so, a new alien threat attacks and has its arse kicked by Earth's giant robot corps, between which the young pilots agonise about...stuff. Not so much a story arc as a story flat-line, despite the high-quality animation you'd expect from Gainax (responsible for 'Wings of Honneamise'). There's no sense of forward momentum, and having sat through *twenty episodes* without anything significant happening, it's not a series I ever want to see again. **D-**

Phantom Quest Corp - That's "Corp" as in "Corporation", for this refreshing take on 'Ghostbusters', in which an army of freelance exorcists, led by our spendthrift heroine, take on the usual supernatural suspects. It's frothy, feisty fun, with a dub that's a pretty good attempt at capturing the spirit of the Japanese original. With hardly any plot or character development (admittedly, the characters don't need much development being quite fully formed as is, and they are all the more entertaining for it), this is shallow entertainment, no more and no less. Perky and frolicsome candy-floss. **B →**

Power Dolls - 'The Knight Sabres Go to War' might be an appropriate title for this one. An all-girl brigade in power suits ("dolls" is actually a heavily contrived acronym for something), fighting against the invaders from Earth. Yes, "from" rather than "of", an interesting twist, albeit one previously used in 'KO Century Beast Warriors'. This is more tech-inclined, and needs better characterisation on the voice front, where they all sound too alike. The action is dully predictable, and by now the words "AD Vision" should also automatically trigger "value for money" warning bells; in this case, however, the brevity is almost welcome. **D-**

Shadow Skill - Don't bother. This one has all the charm of a video game turned into a cartoon, even though it isn't, being based on a comic (however, I suspect it probably has become a video game since). A thin excuse for a plot is clearly designed to do no more than link fight scenes. After 20 minutes, I had a strong urge to play 'Tekken 2' -- I didn't resist, and not only is the animation there superior, it's far more entertaining. I may have blisters on my thumb as a result, but would probably have got one watching this anyway, through savage usage of the fast-forward. Also available in a "movie" which is three episodes on one tape, and is thus marginally better. **E-**

Tokyo Revelation - For the first ten minutes, this looks like it might do interesting things with the traditional demonic high-school setting: we get two investigators going undercover at said educational establishment, in a cross between 'The X-Files' and cult Japanese horror film 'Wizard of Darkness'. However, neither of these angles are explored significantly, and it descends, perhaps inevitably, into another 'put-upon bloke summoning icky things' show. You've seen it all before, and it's neither extreme enough nor well-animated enough to be other than instantly forgettable. **E**

Zeoraima - While some anime has certainly been BAD, this may be the first to reach "so bad it's good" status. It's dreadful, kid-piloting-mecha nonsense, with a portentous, monotone voiceover and every cliché of the genre you could wish. The dubbing is so dreadful, the characters rarely pronounce the title the same way twice in a row (Zeo-RYE-mah? Zeo-RAY-mah? Zeo-RAH-mah?), and the plot is a tedious succession of battles between ever more giant robots. Even if the second episode adds nothing save another pronunciation (Zeo-REE-mah), this is certainly entertaining, albeit for all the wrong reasons -- I haven't laughed so much in ages. On that basis, and for that alone, **C+**.



Stop Press...

[Those titles which didn't quite turn up in time for the above section]

Hyper Dolls - It's nice, once in a while, to see something that doesn't take itself in the slightest bit seriously. And these two tapes certainly fall into this category. Heroines Mica and Mew are the protectors of Earth -- it's kinda like 'Men in Black' with skimpier costumes. They get their orders through the medium of pizza (look, I call 'em as I see 'em) and fortunately, their opponents are just as dumb as they are: for example, a yokel giant worm with a penchant for imitating a tube train... Though hardly taxing the attention span over its thirty-minute duration, bonus points are due to Pioneer for the live-action shorts which follow each episode: part 1 is especially silly, with a 'giant' rubber-suited monster, straight out of some early Godzilla flick -- part 2's is disturbingly...well, competent, and thus much less fun. It's all unrelentingly silly, and deliciously frothy. **B**



Landlock - I tried. Not once, but twice. And singularly failed to get through more than 20 minutes of this dreck. It's supposed to have something to do with Shirow, who did 'Ghost in the Shell', and it does have the same twisted technology, mystical babble, and unfeasibly large-breasted women, though I suspect that his contribution was a few drawings scrawled on a fag packet one Friday lunchtime down the pub. The translation provokes more unintended sniggers than anything else (po-faced pronouncements about being "master of the wind", for example), and the voice acting is dreadful. Totally irredeemable, this is Manga's worst since 'Odin' -- it may be slightly worse, but I'm damned if I'm going to make a third attempt at it to find out. **E-**

Psychic Wars - "Mum, my head hurts", begins the press release, and yes, a migraine would be preferable. The odd thing is, it feels like a part 3, the first chunk smells suspiciously of story-so-far. At least that bit kept me awake: even though it was just 7pm, sleep overcame me after 26 minutes - between this and Landlock, maybe I could start rating tapes by how long I stay conscious. A swift rewind revealed I'd missed nothing; bloke with special powers/save Earth/demonic forces. Fill in the blanks yourself, you've seen it all a million times before, and done a thousand times better. Two words to Manga: quality control. Keep this up, and even the undemanding teenage boys market will desert you. **E+**

Sword for Truth - "NINJAS FACE SAMURAI IN BLOODY SEVERED LIMB DECAPITATION SHOCKER..." shrieks the promotional blurb, in typically understated Manga Video style - there are times when reading them is more entertaining than watching the tapes. Though for once, this is only *mild* hyperbole -- the gore, while copious, is drawn in a style bordering on the Impressionistic and, most unlike Manga, they even forgot to mention the sex, both straight and lesbian. It plays like a video game, with strong, silent hero Shuranosuke slashing his way past henchmen, then taking on their boss, before moving on to the next level, er, adventure. Despite a familiar plot and some clumsy anachronisms (why is the River Styx mentioned in a supposedly medieval Japanese setting?), Shuranosuke is an interesting, well-rounded character, and the film benefits from its solid visual sense. **C+**

Once again, that handy cut-out-and-keep JC anime guide!

Title	Label	Grade
Macross Plus	Manga	B+
Hyper Dolls	Pioneer	B
Phantom Quest Corp	Pioneer	B
Gunsmith Cats 3	AD Vision	C+
Sword For Truth	Manga	C+
Detanator Orgun	Manga	C+
Zeoraima	Manga	C+
Grappler Baki	Manga	D+
The Hakkenden	Pioneer	D
Neon Genesis Evangelion	AD Vision	D-
Elicia	AD Vision	D-
Power Dolls	AD Vision	D-
Blue Sonnet	Manga	E+
Shuten Doji	AD Vision	E+
Psychic Wars	Manga	E+
Tokyo Revelation	Manga	E
Makyu Senjou	Manga	E
Shadow Skill	Manga	E-
Landlock	Manga	E-

ANIMEXTRA

1997 was a dreadful year for Japanese animation in Britain, the majority of titles released were hard to imagine anyone over 12 (age or IQ) buying. Going by the reviews on the previous pages, you'd be forgiven for thinking all the 'good stuff' has come out. But the problem is less the lack of decent anime, more the narrow market to which it is targetted here. Back in TC14/15, there was a list of seven excellent, unreleased titles: with the sole exception of 'Sol Bianca', they all remain that way four years later. So let's take a look at a selection, available on import or through other fan sources, which all ram a tentacle up the orifice of the prevailing, erroneous opinion which says that anime is just for a 16-25, male audience. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our first contender! At 99 lbs. dripping wet -- and she usually is...



Miyuki-Chan in Wonderland - Er, perhaps prevailing opinion might have a bit of a point here, despite the lack of any male characters. Cross 'Alice in Wonderland' with 'Barbarella' (to which the comic explicitly pays homage) and you'll be in the right area...sort of. For this little gem crams 'Wonderland' and 'Through the Looking Glass' into thirty minutes, while loading them both with a heady air of sexuality.

In terms of pheromones per minute, it's world-class stuff; the minimal nudity and lack of any actual sex is simply evidence of the creators' skills. The main twist is making every character female and more or less sex-crazed i.e. the White Rabbit is now a bunny-girl on a skateboard. Familiarity with the books is thus useful, though at only 15 mins each, plot development is, shall we say, somewhat limited; 'Wonderland' comes off better.

In terms of frilly undergarments per minute, this is also world-class stuff; there's copious lingerie. However, it's done with such charm and humour that you can't possibly be offended, except perhaps by the relentless

techno-reggae soundtrack, that will liquefy your brain and keep you humming for weeks. Deal with the inevitable accusations of sexism by revealing that it's based on a strip by the female artists group known as 'Clamp'. [God knows what they were on. It probably used lots of batteries...] and it was even a woman who first dragged me to see it (Hi, Christine!). Maybe the creators should label their product "politically-correct smut", and get Channel 4 to buy it.

Child's Toy - While most kids' TV is dreck, every so often, you get a show aimed at a younger audience, that also makes fine entertainment for adults: Tiswas, The Press Gang, Tiny Toon Adventures, and now 'Child's Toy', a Japanese show whose target audience would seem to be pre-teen, but whose central characters include an eleven-year old schoolgirl and her pimp.

Yes, pimp. This appears to be how heroine Sana, refers to her manager -- she also has a part-time job as a TV actress. And she *needs* looking after, since her mouth gets her into trouble constantly, notably with the class delinquent, whom we first encounter blackmailing the teachers into permitting his anarchy. Being made for television, the animation isn't the greatest, but this is made up for by a razor-sharp script that can swing from comedy to pathos in a second without seeming strained or forced. And Sana, too, is both wise beyond her years and terminally dumb; 'Clueless', starring a hyperactive version of Wednesday Addams. It also benefits from truly great supporting characters: the mother, as unflappable as Sana is manic, with a squirrel living in her hair; the delinquent, not quite what he seems; and a bizarre bat/rabbit narrator that crops up sporadically.

This amphetamine-crazed remake - the original video told the story rather less energetically - resembles 'Dragon Half', with a willingness to throw the rule-book away and fly blind. Putting it in conventional terms, 'Heathers' meets 'Saviour of the Soul' is as close as I can get, for it blends the mundane and the fantastic with a pithy wit which blows away anything on British TV.

Here is Greenwood - A traditional staple of Japanese animation is the high-school comedy, in which a spectrum of kooky characters interact with humorous results. This is seen frequently, even in shows aimed at adults: it may be that in a strictly ordered and disciplined society like Japan, school is one of the few places where a (very) little individuality is tolerated. Hence shows like 'Urusei Yatsura' have an appeal far beyond the contemporaries of the teenage characters.

Thus we have 'Greenwood', whose title springs from Robin Hood - a place where outlaws hang out. In the show, it's the name of a school dorm which acts as a dumping ground for religious nuts, guys who act like girls, and hero Kazuya Hasukawa, in love with his brother's wife. The whole show is low-key, lacking the manic chases, fight scenes or slapstick humour seen in other series, relying instead on a berserk solar system of plots and subplots (imagine Jerry Springer shows entitled My Sister is a Psychopath, or A Ghost's got a Crush on Me), though a lot of its charm is the phlegmatic way in which the characters react even to these bizarre events.

In terms of progression, there doesn't seem to be a lot, story- or persona-wise, probably an inevitable result of condensing a long running story into a few animated half-hours. Yet this lends it an audacious air: one episode depicts the making of an amateur movie, and the opening credits of the film become the closing credits of the show. The end result is a show that's charming and lightweight, without ever evaporating completely.

Sailor Stars - Finally, a brief nod of unexpected appreciation to this version of infamous teen-girl merchandising machine, 'Sailor Moon'. While still engaging in a relentless recycling of animation, it has...well, a Gothic horror feel which certainly came as a shock. In the first six episodes, the multiple heroines (tall! short! blonde! brunette! one for every taste! collect the whole set!) have to face villainess Neherenia, whom they previously sealed into another dimension. She's great - think Cruella DeVille with a hangover - and for two hours, kicks Sailor arse. Sadly, part VI lets the side down with an (admittedly, entirely expected) "love conquers all" ending, but until then, it's far better than I'd have predicted, assisted by a good score. Chances of this grimly fiendish series ever appearing on British television? Well, do you see this snowball, and this inferno-like region..?

So, despite the gloom and doom of the opening paragraph of this article, there are also signs of hope - maybe not quite a field of daffodils yet, but the odd green shoot. One such title achieved fame after a single late-night screening at a convention, and has since led to it becoming perhaps the most eagerly anticipated title of 1998.

PERFECT BLUE

パーフェクト・ブルー

It's always a delight when something manages to surprise you, or bypass your expectations. Anyone looking at a piece of Japanese animation entitled 'Perfect Blue' might be forgiven for thinking they were going to see something involving barely pubescent girls, demons, and places daylight doesn't reach. You would, however, be utterly wrong.

The first anime giallo owes a lot to the works of Dario Argento, with perhaps a nod to David Cronenberg, as the heroine moves through a lurid world of hallucinations and stylish murders. You wouldn't guess it from the start, as a trio of idol singers squeak away for all their worth, though one, Mima Kirigoe, has decided to leave the group and try to make a career as an actress. Things soon start to sink into the Twilight Zone, with Mima finding herself the target of obsessive fan, 'Mimaniac', who documents her every move on the Internet in disturbing detail, and is clearly not chuffed by her decision to quit singing, as the parcel bomb she gets proves.

Despite this, her first acting job is a stripper in detective series 'Double Bind', and she finds herself exposing rather more than she'd like. Neither this nor the nude publicity pics go down well with her stalker, and the writer has his eyes gouged out for his temerity. Mima is by now seriously losing it under the strain: her old self keeps appearing to her in visions, and the reality/fantasy/dream/nightmare lines become perilously thin. I'll say no more -- not purely out of a desire to avoid spoiling it, but also because I'm still not confident enough to state precisely what the hell is going on; as well as Argento's visual style, they borrow his plot coherence! [And I think Masahiro Ikumi must have listened to Goblin while writing the score...]

Regardless of this, it's one hell of a ride. At first glance, there's no point to 'Perfect Blue' being animated; the style also bears more comparison to a Hitchcock movie than any anime, and the characters lack the excessively over-sized eyes often seen in the medium. It could certainly be said that the film contains little that couldn't be done in live-action -- while technically true, it is hard to envisage how they could have made the hallucinatory sequences which litter the movie, so utterly convincing in any other way. Instead, from half way through (which is only about 40 minutes -- this is no bring-er-own-sandwiches epic), it becomes incredibly easy to lose track of whether anything is going on purely in Mima's head or in 'reality'. [If ever those quote marks were justified, it's here] The movie is based on a novel by Yoshikazu Takeuchi, and even before it opened in Japan, a semi-sequel was already in the pipeline -- it will apparently be 'Double Bind', the TV show featured in the film.



Like 'Miyuki-Chan in Wonderland', 'Perfect Blue' is animated by Madhouse, and so is typically slick. Director Satoshi Kon wrote part of Katsuhiro Otomo's latest, 'Memories' (see the Film Festival Blitz) and Otomo himself was an advisor here, which perhaps helps to explain the painstaking effort that has clearly gone into the project. All of these names are a fine pedigree for any piece of anime, and while 'Perfect Blue' is not a ground-breaking pioneer like 'Akira', it's adult entertainment in the best sense of the word.

['Perfect Blue' is out theatrically in late '98, with a video release to follow]

Stoopid is, as stoopid does

"Psst, kid": Don't fall for cheap cig scam - UI student latest victim of con artist

A 20-year old University of Illinois student was the latest victim of what police believe to be a series of scams involving an attempt to buy cheap cigarettes.

The student told police Monday that he was approached three weeks ago by a man who offered to get cigarettes at \$8 a carton and the student gave him \$24 for three, according to a Champaign police report. They went to an apartment at Sixth and Healey, but the man never returned, the student said.

The student encountered the same man in a campus restaurant again on Wednesday, and the man claimed he returned but the student was gone, the report said. The man told the student he could get the money back from another person, and took him to an apartment in the 500 block of East Clark Street. The man came back from the apartment and said he needed \$17, because all the other person had was a \$50 bill. The student gave the man \$18.

The man told the student he needed \$20 more to make the correct change, so the student withdrew \$20 from his bank account and gave it to the man. The man then said the person who had the student's money was in jail and they could bail him out for \$100. The student wrote a cheque for \$40 and gave it to the man, according to the report.

The man again returned from the apartment, saying the bond had been raised to \$200 and he needed \$70 more. The student wrote another cheque for \$70, cashed it and gave it to the man. The man said the other person had \$300 in cash but needed \$105 more, so the student wrote another cheque, cashed it and gave him \$105, the report said.

The man asked if the student would like to make some money and the student agreed. The man and the student went to various stores, buying a radio and videocassette recorder and some groceries with cheques written by the student.

They then went to an apartment in north Champaign. The man told the student he would be right back with money for selling the radio and videocassette recorder, for more than the student had paid, but again he never returned.

The student waited a few hours and called police.

[News-Gazette, Champaign, Illinois]

The idiocy of certain members of the human race never fails to amaze. I know a guy, Kev, who staggered out of a casino in London, and was accosted by a stranger who offered to take him to a gambling joint, in exchange for a three-figure "deposit". [You can see where this is leading, can't you?] He took Kev through a maze of side-streets, and left him standing before a door, saying he'd go get the security key. Guess whether stranger, or deposit, were ever seen again...

High weirdness BY Mail

ROBIN BOUENMAN -

WILLOW ANTIQUE MALL
P.O. BOX 725, CHEMUNIS,
B.C. CANADA V0R 1X0
246-4333

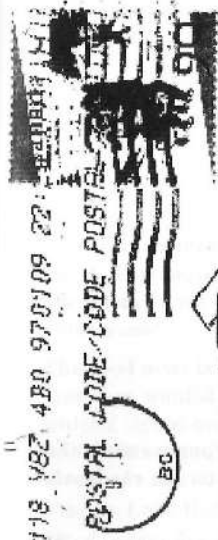
NO THIS
IS NOT MY
NEW ADDRESS

HA HA

MY PAL:

SIM McLENNAN
34 PERRAN RD. TULSE HILL
LONDON SW2-3DL
U.K.

Air Mail Par avion



Tim Greaves, Eastleigh -- "One major league disappointment, however. Where was the "frankie" of Gillian Anderson? I mean, the Phoebe Cates one was very nice, and quite by chance I'd seen the one of Meg Ryan that you referred to (some guy at work was showing a colour print-out of it round a couple of weeks ago, convinced it was real...yeah, like she'd pose for something like that). But I wanted Gillian Anderson!...To ask me in the text if I "fancy Gillian Anderson sucking a rather large dick" (eliciting a scream from yours truly) and then not deliver the payload is just too damn cruel."

TC's printers are a tolerant lot, but I suspect even they might draw the line at graphic oral sex. I merely plead cowardice, having no desire to pen this edition from Wormwood Scrubs. However, I noted with some amusement that a few months after we brought the topic to your attention last issue, the Sunday Sport had a series of articles on the same topic - naturally saying how terrible it all was while providing lots of examples! But for the sake of Tim's health, I should mention that they didn't print the Gillian Anderson one either...

Claire Blamey, Great Yarmouth -- "I am now working at the Citizens' Advice Bureau, and at last have found somewhere that I can use the mine of useless information that is sloshing around in my grey matter. We have such intelligent queries to sort out e.g. "Where is the sea?" (this is mostly in the summer) -- I say "Go to the window. See that wet patch with boats on it? There you go" -- and the occasional "I want to sell my kidneys, do you know where I can go?"

I have also been trying to pass my motorcycle test - trying being the operative word:

- 1) so nervous I couldn't use the clutch properly
- 2) the intercom they use didn't work
- 3) a car ran into me and I went bouncing down Norwich ring road at 40 mph
- 4) the speedo cable came unstuck, so I had to guess how fast I was going. If I had stopped, I'd have failed for not having a roadworthy machine. I was failed for speeding
- 5) the instructor's bike broke down
- 6) the instructor was taken ill and died of a heart attack later on
- 7) I had flu and had to cancel

Then my licence ran out and I've got to wait a year before trying again. What annoys me is that I'm a really good biker and I see some appalling and dangerous people out on the roads who have got their licences."

Claire, your problem is not that you're too dangerous to be let loose; you're just too *unlucky*. After the litany of woes above, who'd ever sell you any insurance?

Paul Burney, Prestwich -- "Good to see 'Showgirls' given a mention...any film which features Siouxsie and the Banshees, good choreography, Triumph bikes and produces a classy picture book can't be all bad... Disappointed you didn't mention its stars -- or more importantly, feature any pics. Elizabeth Berkely (Nomî) appeared to take much of the flak - even her agent ditched her - but has managed to rebuild her career in 'The First Wives' Club' [Er, clearly a different definition of "rebuild" to mine!] Her new agent is the same one as Sandra Bullock; I think any chance of her co-starring in 'Speed 2' is just wishful thinking."

Probably lucky for her given the box-office receipts. Bullock's career is apparently riding the Winona-spiral down; maybe she could swap with Berkeley, and do 'Showgirls 2' instead?

Robin Bougie, Saskatchewan -- "Normally, I hardly ever find anything you write that I disagree with, but this time I actually did...The third season of "The X Files" is the lamest one, not the best...in most episodes [it] works as the opposite of propaganda for the CIA + FBI. If anything, it shows how they'll fuck you over and leave you dead in a ditch. That said, I don't really *like* the show.

However, with one or two exceptions, little of the "fucking over" is done by the FBI, who seem to be presented mostly as guardians of truth, justice and the American way

Robin continues: 'In defence of Showgirls' and the 'Barb Wire' review reeked of "Look! I'm Jim McLennan! Look how different I am! I think the opposite of what everyone else thinks!" Both movies sucked shit. It's okay to think Verhoeven is a maverick genius and still think 'Showgirls' blew, y'know. We don't have to gobble up our idols' faeces... Tell Rik his art is swell, but that girl's hand on the cover is *fucked*...unless that's supposed to be a grotesque mutated meat-hook on the end of her arm, and I'm missing the point."

I had it down as a tribute to the "handgun" in 'Videodrome' myself... As for 'Barb Wire' and 'Showgirls', I genuinely enjoyed both. Deal with it. Robin does however win the award for 'Best Decorated Envelope', with the splendid illo reproduced on the previous page. Our postman hopes to come off Prozac soon.

Steve Midwinter, Scunthorpe -- "...yep, I certainly did have some difficulty with the local police. In late October, the plain clothes police knocked on the door at this address, which is where I rent a room in a terraced house as my office. They had a warrant to search the premises and I was told to open the back door where there were more coppers waiting in case I did a runner! I was immediately arrested for 'Obscene publications for publicational or financial gain' and told to sit down while the 8 officers took my place apart. They basically cleared me out totally of stock, as well as my own mags, paperwork, computer, files, the lot. They wanted to search two locked rooms upstairs (my landlord's bedroom and junkroom) but he was at work so they kicked the doors in (and found nothing, of course). I was then taken to my girlfriend's flat which was also searched, and all my videos were taken from there... I was taken to the station, booked in, searched, and chucked in a cell, thankfully only for an hour before being interviewed (the usual stupid questions about snuff movies, stills from 'Cannibal Holocaust' being real, selling video nasties, etc, etc). I was then released on bail until January 15th.

The good news is that when I answered bail, they said that they were not going to charge me, but that they wanted to keep some of the videos (titles from the banned list and hardcore porn) which I signed away. They also wanted some of the stuff they'd sent to London to be checked out by the Obscene Publications Squad which included: Darkside, Headpress, Divinity, Penthouse Comix, In the Flesh, Mondo Argento, Necronomicon Book, Killing for Culture, Uncut, Fatal Visions, Lord Horror and a load more [I'm disappointed not to make the list. Where did I put that pic of Gillian Anderson...?] I wouldn't agree to that so they said that, if we couldn't come to some agreement, it would have to go before a magistrate to decide, which I was quite happy to do. Finally, they let me have everything back except one copy of 'The Blackest Heart' which had some stills from porn movies in showing erections, so I let them keep that. Apparently I was raided because some guy in Hampshire got the same treatment (he was selling banned videos) and they found a flyer at his home for Dark Carnival. They said it was a letter talking about videos, but I know that was a lie, [Lie? The police? No!!!!] because I don't know the guy and have never dealt with him before... And that's the end of it apart from the fact that I'm seeing my solicitor about some sort of compensation, at least for the smashed door". [Update: "needless to say, they won't pay anything"....]

(Rejected) Poems on the Tube

*The humble cucumber,
the best in its number;
Unique in dimension
demands no extension
Devoid of pretension
or drawbacks to mention
Young ladies with tension
Old maids on their pension
They all like to rumba
with the humble cucumber*

S.H.

Nice to know crime is so rare that the cops can waste time fabricating charges against magazine distributors. I need hardly add that you should send off two quid for Steve's (very impressive) catalogue; the man clearly deserves your support. The full story of how he "helped the police with their enquiries" may be found in #3 of 'It's Only a Movie', also available from Steve. Details of both in the 'zine section.

Mal Aitchison, Liverpool -- "In 'Against The X Files', there was mention of the episode featuring a malevolent computer resembling a bad 60's thriller. This is an outrageous, indefensible accusation. It's quite blatantly a rip-off of a 1970's episode of 'The New Avengers'".

I stand corrected - though at least it was *deliberately* stoopid. Oh, and if you wondered where Andy Collins had got to, after hijacking the letters column last time...

Stitched Up

Pre-face... it suddenly occurred to me, as many things spuriously do, that i have a reputation to live up to. at least, a meagre one within the bounds of trash city - let's say the mclennan crowned king of high weirdness.

nominally, i don't consider my exploits or persona weird in any way. true, at times, i remark on "how strange" recent events have been (1992-1997), or how "that person in the shop gave me a disturbed look as i walked past". all things being relative, i think just about every other living being i chance upon is distinctly weird. a minor tremor of disconcerting reaction quivering through my mental ionosphere. i rarely analyse the circumstances i exist in, or the body blows and seductive caresses destiny deals me. i live pretty much from day to day, pausing only to discern some discernible linear structure in my world. this may be, of course, by examining a map, or taking a rough guess at which phase of the moon i'm in. obviously, then i have to wait for nightfall to challenge my earlier celestial presumption. usually, i am completely wrong, and if you were to see my glimmering face in the solar-neon-wash bouncing off a lurid full moon, you might think "now there's a man who looks confused", expecting, as i was, to be staring heavenward at a pretty innocuous 'first quarter'.

on to the chosen title of my latest piece. luckily, for you, and for my organic psychosis, the previously mooted verbiage on vomiting was never, well, spewed up. it could have been good, but we'll never get to digest it.

'stitched up' is a passionate account of a sometime deranged flatmate, hospital insanity, film making, red-red kroovy and pigs trotters.

IN A CRAMPED STUDIO ROOM,

Barnes north, suggesting itself to be a film crew, were four horrendously tired people. A camera lent crazily on insecure legs, teetering as we did, pointing in all directions, trying to follow just one. Midnight had slunk past like a junkie cat at the end of a fishing line, and everyone felt envious of the imagined sleeping masses around. The final shot in the short film - admittedly at my behest - was an explosion. I admit under questioning that I have a penchant for things that destruct amid brimstone and fire. For your benefit, I have included a copy of the storyboard in question [see fig. EXPL0 #1. Minds are turning now, I feel your outcast mental processes shuddering - drug damaged neurones plaintively trying to connect with others - but there are no others! But one, lone neurone! Sorry, reading the psychiatrists report. You sick little monkeys - yes! Yes, I was injured! Wait, you gore fiends!]

SHOOTING SCRIPT

SCENE:

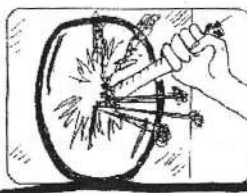
SHOT

DIRECTION

CAMERA

LIGHTING

AUDIO



30

On an overcast strike, arm poised for a while, he plunges the chisel into the heart of the breast. It duly EXPLODES, to the delight of Stanley, Smokey, Sparky, etc.

CU
(reaction)
No-no.

turned down to pick out explosive pieces.

EXPLOSION
FADE INTO HIS DREAMS
||

That sketchy hand - my hand! It was my hand! That speaker? Fabricated, as was my future 'reason for injury' tale to interested parties. Even though it's 2:29am, I am in a generous mood. I will provide a diagrammatic representation of the explosive used. I like to taste fear in my mouth, but not to have it piss down my throat. Therefore, I took safety precautions

- (1) Crash Helmet! Good for deflecting flaming pieces of debris!
- (2) Cardboard taped around waist. You never know!
- (3) Bollock guard. Stuff me full of grapes, I forgot to bring one.
- (4) Spend two hours carefully placing the charge on a carefully angled metal plate, and very carefully placing both into a carefully constructed cavity.

Carefully drill out sections of the wood sides of the speaker which aren't in camera view, so as to hopefully manipulate the explosive force. Which will blow out the carefully positioned speaker cone, of course being held back at a distance of 0.14 inches by a carefully secured tension wire. The carefully weighted structure will ensure the desired energy transference, and a spectacular visual effect! Lovely!

Hmmmm! I smile when I think back. How cunning my plan was. How exacting my devious construction. How fucking perfectly it would all go. With the camera assistant crouched fearfully behind a bunch of boxes ("Don't like loud bangs"), and the camera operator crouched fearfully behind that teetering camera, me stood bravely and without an ounce of pussy-whipped fear in his body before the awesome danger (alright, I was a little anxious) - Sarah, my sometime wild flatmate and director of said film, pushed the button.

At this juncture, it might be useful to tell you what that button was. Operating instructions on the explosive charge mention something about a pissing NINE VOLTS. I laughed with righteous scorn. Toys take 9 volts. Safety devices take nine volts. A glorious moment was not going to be born to a stubby-chunk of over-priced electro chemicals. No. I jacked the whole contraption straight into the mains. "There we go", I grinned. "That will light a fire under it's arse".



Later, in hospital, I learned of regret. Two hours into NHS purgatory and mental insanity, I learned of hell. Charing Cross Hospital is a Mecca to the deranged. A terminally drunken, stinking woman in a wheelchair constantly shouting "Excuse me! excuse me!" to anyone that came near her, then "Where am I? What time is it?" OK, you take pity, you tell her what's what. Not after two hours of the same monologue. You want to introduce her to a Remington 10 Gauge. Men walking into walls. Combat trained ants. Nodding cameras when you proffer your wound to its roving lens. Psychos. Crazies. The wounded, the dying. Sure, just like any New Cross pub - but when you're in pain, sadistically denied any painkillers, blatant NHS travesties. One of many. At 2:30am, 2 hours after I had first limped thorough the foreboding doors, a meek and apologetic nurse emerged from the bowels of the protoplasmic hospital. "I'm very sorry, but we only have one doctor on at the moment. You'll probably have to wait another two hours." Spittle flecked my lips, but I was too tired for remonstrations.

I went home. To nurse my sorrows and blast damaged arm. Familiar surroundings brought me to my senses. The next day, I found myself in St. Thomas'. Ah, yes. The sanctuary of a world famous hospital. As I checked in, at the incongruous reception for A&E, the outside doors nearby burst open and a stretcher was thrust in, hurried along by ambulance personnel and a few policemen, carion like. The man on it didn't look so good. In fact, somebody was heaving up and down frantically on his chest. For a fleeting second, I thought I was watching a staged theatrical version of Casualty. He disappeared with attendants through to the emergency ward. Minutes later, I laid eyes upon several despondent solemn faces as they emerged; another tragic loss. I had witnessed my first clinical death. The reality of the scene I had experienced hit home. With a lurching stomach, clutching at re-awakened mortality, I headed into the casualty to have my hand stitched up.

In a small cubicle. A small trolley laden with a practitioner's tools was wheeled in by a disarmingly charming female doctor. I felt better already. "So, " I started, "is it true you practice stitching on pigs skin?" She faltered for a moment, needle and local anaesthetic in hand, then replied "Yes. Well, on pig's trotters actually." She leant forward. "Sorry, but I have to inject this into the actual wound." The length of steel ebbed into raw, open flesh. Hmmm. Fluid and blood leaked out like forced tears. Pain flooded into my cerebellum. Think of the pig, Andy, I reminded myself: Bacon, pork and post-mortem stitching practice. Some afterlife. Later, I carried myself home on the No. 88 to Clapham, nursing small plastic strands poking out from my hand. A small sacrifice for one's art I believed, as I keyed my front door, and headed for the bed once more.

wounds happen like chance meetings with disastrous consequences. foolishly, I ratified the fact in my brain that this was the year's quota of knotting together accidentally separated flesh. I can laugh now. how I can laugh. not for the first time in my life. I was gravely mistaken. playing with fire has always been my downfall - a spiritual hazard - my mind wanders back in time.....

A NIGHTCLUB! FREE VODKA!

Free beer! Am I dreaming some imagined paradise? No! It was real! A record label party. New toons, new faces. Acclimatise, listen without prejudice, fight the seething mass for another double Vodka. The top level of the Subterranea warms my soul, engages my emotive spirit. To drink, to forget, to enjoy, to have a bloody good time at someone else's expense.

A certain tome by Milton ebbs into my consciousness. Sarah, sometime wild flatmate, something to do with that fire hazard I was talking about, was conspicuously drunk. Leaning strangely against the balcony railing, having left my misappropriated chatting up of a Chinese girl (boyfriend was there too - but, honestly, I didn't mean anything - blah, blah, blah).

Suddenly, afore-mentioned flatmate cries my name; it registers in the dim void that is my consciousness Aaaa.....nnnnn.....dddd.....eeeeee! The noise is lost in the inner tumult that is vodka drenched brain cells. She leaps on me. From behind. Charmed, I'm sure. My legs buckle, you can guess the rest. The scene, the moment of utter embarrassment, pain and loss of dignity - oh, how cruelly it is etched on my mind. The first points of contact with the floor, in order of descent: (a) chin (b) elbow (c) knee. None survived. My chin split open like (I want to say "ripe melon", but besides being cliched, I have never imagined my chin as a large fruit) - like a rabbit's side being hit by a Ford Granada doing 40 mph (how's that?). I lay, dazed and confused, blood leaking around. Pain. Lots of pain. Staring at me was, amongst other people the manager of the record label who I had been talking to not 30 minutes earlier. I struggled to my feet, heavily concussed. I can't remember the exact phrase hurled at Sarah, but she hurried off. I couldn't see the wound, obviously. Hey, I'm a big man. Didn't feel that bad.

The stares of horror I was getting seemed to contradict my diagnosis. I wobbled to the bar. The manager was concerned. The barman was concerned. "Christ, that's really bad." Shit. "Do you want a drink?" Yeah. Yeah, there's a good idea. Goo dripped from my head. I knew what it must feel like to be hit by Tyson. Commiserations to the loser. "Vodka. Big vodka". More vodka. The club manager had now appeared on the scene. Oh-my-God. The evening had turned well and truly sour. A medi-kit appeared, and I was ushered - supported - into the toilets. There, through an endorphin haze, I saw what had once been my chin. A fleshy, split beaver of a chin (well, it had to come, didn't it?). I felt sick. A huge dressing was taped over. Thanking everyone, as you do, I had to make my way through the entire crowd, to the awaiting taxi.



Sarah came with me. Guess where we were going? Paddington Hospital. Enter. Triage nurse. Classification of injury. Sit down. Wait your turn. I knew the procedure. Meek, drunken apologies from my flatmate. Hmmm. Now, as you might be thinking, the madness must be coming to an end. Ha. Ha. Ha. Sitting to my left was Methadone Man. Junkie Man. Crazy fucking man.

"Alright mate. How did you get that?" I duly explained. "What are you in for, man?" I quizzed. He grinned and peeled back a suspicious dressing on his lower leg. I saw a festering hole in the muscle. "Heroin, man. Inject it, but can't use any of the veins in my arms, or neck, 'cos they've all collapsed...." - my stomach flipped - "so began injecting my cock." What do you say? I merely nodded. "But that's all fucked up, so I started on my leg. But as you can see.....". Jesus Christ. This is what they didn't show you in 'Trainspotting'. We chatted. Compared veins. That sort of thing. Still drunk, I found solace in personal amusement - as you have to. Even when he plopped a copy of The Guardian on my lap. A bleeding heart Liberal, eh? Underneath he told me, was a present. I looked. "100mg. of Methadone. Pharmaceutical. Don't give it to your friend, because she's drunk." I didn't understand. "Man, if she takes this when she's drunk, she'll die." I clearly relived that scene from 'Pulp Fiction', and made a note absolutely not to give her any. Ever. "Ur, thanks." I replied. "Something for a rainy day", he grinned. "Great!", I concluded.

Finally, I was in the work room. That room - with the stretcher, the overhead light rig, the surgeons tools. And with the gorgeous doctor. It works. It really works; the pain vanished before feminine radiance. I lay down. Putty. She placed one of those green surgical numbers on me. But over my head, with my mashed chin poking through a small rectangle! This is fucking ridiculous, I thought. "How did you get that?" she chirped. "Ah, urm, well, I was at this nightclub, and, well, free Vodka, and the girl I was with, well, she leapt on me, and, well, yeah, this is what happened." We laughed together, until she jammed a thin bit of steel into my flesh. The smile vanished. 7 stitches later, I was uncovered like a medical display, fiddled with my new plastic stubble, and headed out into the night. I can shave properly now, just a small lump to remind me of that grim evening. But further bad karma-sutres lie ahead, I'm sure...

*[Please, do not try and re-create any of these stunts at home, dear readers.
Remember, Andy Collins is a trained professional...]*

In Bed With Callisto



"Love is just a trick nature plays to get us to reproduce. I want no part of it".

THE SUPPLEMENTAL DELIGHTS OF 'XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS'

Back in the mid-80's, there was a distinct sub-genre of films known as "barbarian bimbo". These had titles like "Warrior Queen" and starred Sybil Danning, Lana Clarkson or some similarly formidable creature, who looked good wielding an F-sized sword. Watching 'Xena - Warrior Princess' brings it flooding back: dodgy accents, small outfits pretending to be armour, and everything else that will warm the heart of a true fan of televisual tack.

Played by the delightfully named Lucy Lawless, 'Xena' began as a spin-off from Sam Raimi's TV show 'Hercules'. Originally a minor character therein, Xena proved popular enough to merit her own show, also set in the nebulous time and space known as "Ancient Greece" (for which, 1990's New Zealand is apparently a suitable stand-in). Starting off as a bad girl - in black armour, naturally - leading a horde of bandits, Xena switched to the side of good after rescuing a baby, of necessity swapping to a lighter shade of costume too.

In her own show, she acquired the traditional accessory of heroes: a perky, annoying sidekick, as personified by Monique Gabrielle in 'Deathstalker II'. And, hey, Xena's sidekick is called Gabrielle! A subtle in-joke? Could be: as a Sam Raimi production, anything's possible. As far as influences go, they willingly admit HK movies, with Brigitte 'Bride With White Hair' Lin a particular source of inspiration for Xena. Her every facet seems cunningly crafted to provoke awe. Hell, this woman had a spring-loaded cleavage dagger, and when she squeezed her (A-grade) mounds together, it shot out, oh, yessss... Rumours, sadly unfounded, abound of Lawless's secret past as a porn star.

One interesting sidelight is the alleged subtext. Xena is a dyke icon, remarkably good taste on the part of the lesbian community, compared to their usual choices, such as Jodie Foster, and much panting goes on over the Xena/Gabby relationship, encouraged by unsubtle innuendo from the makers. However, it mostly relies on "meaningful glances", and much as I enjoy a spot of hot all-girl action, I'm more inclined to point out one eyebrow-raising thing about 'Hercules': the quantity of young guys in skimpy leather outfits, hanging round the plot for no readily apparent reason.

Far better, of course, to have young women in skimpy leather outfits, and on her own, Lucy Lawless would be enough. Yet she is not the top-rated beauty on the show... Every good show needs a good villain: Batman had the Joker, ST:TNG had the Borg, and Xena has Callisto. One of the strengths of 'Xena: Warrior Princess' is its ability to get good performances from un-

knowns. Lucy Lawless had done little of note before, and the same applies to Hudson Leick ("like"), who plays Callisto: despite a minimal resume, she creates perhaps the most memorably evil TV creation of the 1990's.

Her history dates back quite a while, to when Xena was still a bad girl herself. Her army rampaged through Callisto's village, and while Xena's rules were strictly Leon-esque i.e. "no women, no kids", Callisto's family were burnt alive. After growing up, Callisto dedicated her life to Xena's extermination: starting with her reputation, moving on to her friends, and only then killing the warrior princess herself.

Callisto has even had a sword to Xena's throat, and let her go, since she wants first to utterly destroy all Xena loves. Not the least of which is Gabrielle... Without wishing to give away too much plot, in the second series Callisto succeeds in changing the pacifistic Gabrielle into a revenge-driven harpy of rage. This feat forever endeared her to those of us who share Callisto's opinion of Xena's sidekick as an "irritating blonde".

Such devotion to duty helps explain Callisto's appeal — apart from the fact that Leick is a total babe! With cheekbones so sharp you could use them to cut glass, the blonde badness of Callisto does the unthinkable, and makes Xena look dowdy in comparison. Leick's slimness is also the subject of some bitching, especially from fans of the relatively chubby Xena: but, hey, 'Callisto: Warrior Anorexic' has a nice feel to it.

They say the devil has all the best tunes, and in this show, she also get most of the best lines, as Callisto delights in playing mind-games with Xena, smearing her with bloody memories from the past. The quote above is an example of her philosophy, though it sadly puts paid to idle subtext-esque fantasies of Xena and Callisto, and never mind Xena and Gabrielle! But Leick doesn't even need spectacularly excessive dialogue ("You created a monster with integrity, Xena — scary isn't it?"), not when she can load up an innocent line like 'Here comes trouble!' with a deadly, insane edge, and make it ring like chipped crystal.

After one episode in the first series, it was no surprise to anyone when Leick was invited back for more in the second. And such was her success that not even death, smothered in quicksand, could stop her. She moved across to 'Hercules' and traded with Zeus's wife Hera, agreeing to kill Hercules in exchange for life. Needless to say, she didn't quite manage her side of the deal, but... Callisto is now godlike in the strictest sense, having eaten ambrosia — no, not the rice pudding, the food of the gods. As far as Xena is concerned, the phrase "Here comes trouble!" leaps to mind once more, with regard to the upcoming fourth season...





Despite her success, it seems unlikely that we will see Callisto in her own show. American TV is not ready for an evil heroine, and somehow the prospect of Callisto turning good like Xena has little appeal. Though this has been kinda seen already: after Lucy Lawless broke her pelvis in an accident with a horse, the makers used a range of tricks to finish filming — one of which was “Xena taking over Callisto’s body”. The result was... well, it’s an interesting place to visit, but you wouldn’t want to live there. Instead, to see Callisto in full evil flow is a wondrous experience: truly nothing succeeds like excess.

Some reckon the camera should merely spend 50 minutes panning smoothly up and down the firm, lithe bodies of Callisto and Xena, without unnecessary plot interference. Yet the makers insist on inserting stories and, worse still, making them imaginative and inventive. It’d be easy for the series to degenerate into a repetitive saga of “Kill the baddies, save the village”; that it doesn’t is a pleasant shock, even if it’s by wholesale plundering outside the Greek mythos, including Charles Dickens and Indiana Jones.

The characters, too, are often unexpected: Charon, ferryman of the dead, as a stand-up comic, or Sam Raimi’s brother Ted as an ineffectual wimp, and Bruce Campbell turns up as Autolycus, the king of thieves. But it’s Lawless herself who’s the biggest revelation, bringing a surprising amount of depth and colour to a role that could also have slid into the banal and clichéd. In the episode ‘Warrior...Princess...Tramp’, she plays three totally different characters, and they are all perfectly believable. About the only weak link is Renee O’Connor; her attempts to bring variety to Gabrielle’s character are usually squirm-inducingly bad, and stand out all the more because virtually everyone else in the series is so good in their roles.

Xena has succeeded where other female action heroines have been critical and commercial failures: Lori Petty, Pamela Anderson, etc. Before Xena, you have to go back to ‘Aliens’ for a kick-ass babe who made such an impact. And Sigourney didn’t have pop-up breasts. It’s displaced the Trek clones to become the biggest syndicated show in America, providing something for everyone: women can appreciate the strong female characters, men can appreciate the, er, strong females, and the kids can appreciate all the jumping about and shouting. It’s no surprise that it’s one of C5’s top ten rated shows — though, let’s face it, anything with an audience in double figures would probably qualify there...

Oops. This sort of thing can happen to anyone. No, it’s not another “frankie”, this is the genuine article: Lucy was singing the National Anthem at an ice-hockey play-off match, and got a little, er, over-enthusiastic for her costume. That sound you hear is a million VCRs going “whirr” to preserve the moment for posterity!

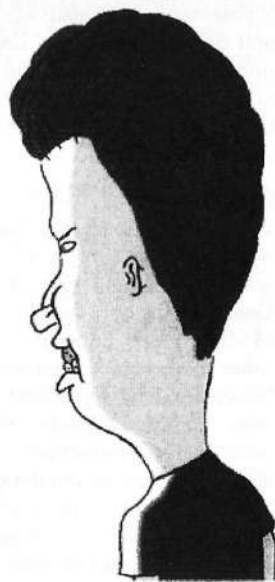
Film Blitz

The Arcane Enchanter (Pupi Avati) - Startlingly tedious Italian 'horror' movie, which looks lovely, but has all the entertainment value of a drying fresco. The story, about a guy sent to act as scribe to a heretic with occult leanings, is worth about thirty minutes -- at movie length, it's near unendurable, and I came close to walking out. Said heretic appeared to spend large chunks of the movie asleep, and I can sympathise, every scene seems to go on twice as long as even fractionally interesting. It's nice to be reminded occasionally of why I tend to the view that most Italian horror movies are vastly over-rated. E

Armageddon (Gordon Chan) - I'm a big fan of religious apocalypse films like 'The Rapture' and 'The Seventh Sign', and this is an HK spin on the theme, with Andy Lau as a tycoon who finds himself caught up in...well, weirdness is perhaps the best word, including SHC and the re-appearance of his dead girlfriend, while sceptical cop Anthony Wong investigates. It's stretched thin for a movie, but Wong and Lau are good fun to watch between plot elements. After a bad start (the worst English accent I've ever heard), the menacing atmosphere improves as the film progresses and a fair head of steam is built up. Definitely different -- just when you think you've got Hong Kong cinema figured, along comes a curveball like this! B-



Beavis and Butthead Do America (Mike Judge) - In a year of strangely unsatisfying Hollywood blockbusters, it was at once scary and wonderful to find this among 1997's best, purely because it succeeds at what it's trying to do, which is simply be funny. I'm no fan of the original TV show at all, but it was a stroke of genius to turn their moronic music video commentary into a road movie, by making it about B&B's hunt for their stolen TV. This broadens out the horizons to permit more than their usual "This sucks", and it's honest enough that you'll know whether or not you're gonna like it within seconds of the start: if not you can probably claim you're in the wrong cinema and get a refund. As for me, I was creased double for most of the film, and very few comedies manage to do that to me. A-



Caged Fear (Fred Olen Ray) - A rather clunky retitling of 'Fugitive Rage', which, combined with the cover, is designed to play up the women-in-prison angle, despite the fact that only perhaps the first third of the movie takes place behind bars. It's closer to 'Nikita', with Wendy Schumacher as the girl given the chance to get out of jail with pal (and Penthouse Pet!) Shauna O'Brien, providing she finishes off the mob boss she shot and injured - which got her in jail to start with - though her victim is keen to finish her off too. Fred's best work is made tongue-in-cheek, and while competent, this one is played too straight, despite the amusing efforts of Toni Naples and Nikki Fritz. With the action lame and the sex mediocre (Shauna O'Brien doesn't get her kit off nearly often enough), it definitely needs something more. D-

Caroline at Midnight (Scott McGinnis) - A Roger Corman production, with the usual cast of B-grade actors, headlined here by Mia Sara, who'll always have a place in my heart for her black-lipsticked appearance in 'Legend'. Seems to have rounded out a bit since then, though I detect the hand of silicone at work. Her and Virginia Madsen both make fine, smouldering femmes fatales, taking on double-dealing corrupt cops and investigative reporters in a risky game involving drugs and cash. Pity the direction relies too heavily on cliched techniques, and the script left me far more interested in Mia's occasionally-exposed charms. A fast-forward job par excellence. **D-**

Conspirators of Pleasure (Jan Svankmajer) - Possibly the downright *strangest* feature film I've seen, Svankmajer's third feature is almost entirely live-action, only the final quarter explodes into the sort of warped animation for which he's famous. You want high-concept? Try this: "six people have a wank". Any further description is futile, and it's the world's most un-pornographic sex movie. If there is a theme, it's "different strokes for different folks": one guy pretends to be a chicken, a postwoman snorts bread balls, a TV newsreader gets her feet tickled by carp. It all loosely ties together, despite the lack of dialogue, and I can't fault the imagination on view, which is often very funny in a dreamlike way. Not so sure that it works on a more intellectual level, and despite having the long-term impact of a pop promo, it remains a refreshingly bizarre change. **C**

Crying Freeman (Christophe Gans) - This adaptation of the manga and anime is a faithful recreation, which fails to ultimately engage despite some well-handled set pieces. Mark Dacascos is Freeman, an assassin who falls in love with a girl he's supposed to kill, amidst a web of betrayal and death. Y'know, the usual. The performances are pretty decent, though the director has an unnerving fondness for the hero's bottom. It's problem is one of pacing, the first half *crawls* past and it takes ages for the hero and heroine to get together. When they finally do, sparks fly, and both Freeman's first hit and the final battle provide memorable moments, albeit too late. As straight-to-video fodder, better than average; as a cinema release, I'm less sure of its merits. **D**

Cutthroat Island (Renny Harlin) - After the disappointing 'Long Kiss Goodnight', I was pleasantly surprised by this - though admittedly wasn't expecting much - as Geena Davis gets support from Matthew Modine, Frank Langella and a bunch of other memorable characters. It lacks the heavy-handed moralising which sank 'Kiss', and Harlin pitches it with the right level of tongue-in-cheek. Things getting slow? Let's blow something else up. This attitude culminates in an explosion which is so large it tends to suggest pirates had access to nuclear weapons. A fast, flashy and unpretentious film, which substitutes things going 'Foom!' for a real plot. **B+**



Darklands (Julian Richards) - Craig Fairbrass's three-film contract with Metrodome has churned up two of the worst British genre pictures ever: 'Beyond Bedlam' and 'Proteus'. This one isn't quite as bad, but is amazingly unoriginal, being a remake of 'The Wicker Man' set in South Wales. Fairbrass is a journalist who investigates a pagan cult and...you can guess the rest. Which is a major flaw: you know where it's going, so there is precious little suspense, and what there is seems largely to devolve from sequences nicked from other films. This is a shame; given the half-million pound budget, it is technically fine, with good use of music to generate atmosphere. It's just a pity the director didn't have the courage to make something a bit less derivative. **C-**

Dobermann (Jan Kounen) - Dutch director, French film, mentality somewhere on another planet. The titular hero gets a gun as a christening gift; leap forward 20-odd years -- he's graduated to blowing up tankers and has embarked on a crime spree with his (equally weird) cohorts. To catch an excessive criminal, it takes an even more excessive cop, and no prizes for guessing it will all end a) excessively and b) messily. This is perhaps the most amoral film of the year; all the nice characters get ripped off, beaten up or killed -- which is exactly the way it should be. Well-shot in both senses, it's somewhere between 'Man Bites Dog' and 'Delicatessen', and there are worse places to be. **B-**

Ed Wood (Tim Burton) - I can see why this bombed, big-time. It's 127 mins long, in b&w, and the hero is a transvestite -- not qualities that appeal to middle America. It also doesn't go anywhere, being a biography of a life without true highlights, even though it almost skips Wood's descent into alcohol and skin flicks. Despite this, for any fan of his movies, there's a wealth of detail that rings true, regardless of whether it is or not. Johnny Depp plays Wood with much sympathy, putting him across as someone deeply cunning when it came to raising finance, yet remaining naive. Martin Landau also stands out as Bela Lugosi, and Burton pushes his usual themes of isolation and "being different". A total mess of a movie, yet none the worse for it. **B**

Electra (Julian Grant) - One hoped this might be a spoiler of the oft-promised 'Elektra Assassin' movie; it isn't. Instead, it's Shannon Tweed (a woman for whom time is clearly running out) as the stepmother of a young man who holds the key to a serum that gives its subject superhuman speed and strength, and who is consequently in demand by a lot of bad people. Far too restrained - it's one of those films where people keep their clothes on while having sex, and even Shannon only gets 'em out once - with strictly low-rent production values: there are almost no extras, everyone in the film is in the film. Never actually *dull* though, and one of the evil henchwomen (sadly, not fully identified in the credits) has definite potential as a leather-bitch-goddess. **D-**

Felony (David S.Prior) - David Warner, Jeffrey Combs, Lance Henriksen, Joe Don Baker, Ashley (Hellraiser) Lawrence, Charles (Supervixens) Napier: truly a cult cast to die for, in this thriller where Combs is a cameraman who films Warner's gang killing a SWAT team. As a result, everyone wants the video. Though double-crosses abound in this standard fare, the pedestrian action and plot are saved by the aforementioned actors who show why they are in the Hall of Fame: Joe Don Baker just sneaks the honours, as a CIA agent -- or is he? Whoever was casting this deserves far more credit than the director. **C+**

Une Femme Francaise (Regis Warnier) - Staggeringly dull French film, which even actors of the calibre of Daniel Auteuil and Emmanuelle Beart fail to make even remotely interesting. Wartime soap-opera stuff, with Beart as a woman whose husband (Auteuil) returns from the war to discover her infidelities. Tedious beyond belief, I found myself reaching for the fast-forward in the hope of finding a) anything interesting or b) whatever provoked the '18' certificate. I failed. It's been a long time since I've seen a movie that failed to justify its existence so completely. Such is the life of a reviewer; we suffer so that you don't have to. Many more turkeys like this and Beart is in danger of disappearing up her own art-house. **E**

Ferocious Female Freedom Fighters 1+2 (Jopi Burnama + Arizal) - This pair of Indonesian movies, catchily retitled by Troma, star the very lovely Eva Arnaz, and TC fave Barry Prima, last seen battling killer shrubbery in 'Special Silencers' (TC 10). Only the first even partly lives up to its title, as a gang of women forced into prostitution fight against their captors with some of the worst kung-fu I've seen (Moon Lee will not be losing sleep), and also one of the most gratuitous mud-wrestling bouts. The second is bizarre: part melodramatic love story between Prima and Arnaz, part occult horror, part kung-fu, and Arnaz's grip on the action (or at least, her stunt double's) is notably better, which just gives it the edge. Prima is his usual square-jawed and heroic self, while Arnaz looks decorative and emotes a lot. Dumb trash, not without its charm. **C- and C**

The Frighteners (Peter Jackson) - Meatier than your average Hollywood FX-fest i.e. it actually has a plot, yet something of a disappointment as Peter Jackson movies go. Reminiscent of 'Mr. Vampire 3' (exorcist teams up with ghosts to make money, only to find himself facing a seriously peeved spectre), it lacks the strong, memorable characters which made his other films such classics. Michael J. Fox is almost forgettable as the exorcist and the superfluous heroine is severely underwritten; only Jeffrey Combs → saves the day on the acting front, playing an utterly mad FBI agent. The effects work well and the New Zealand locations are excellent, but it has a mildness ('15' rating!) that's a bit worrying, even if there have been far worse Hollywood debuts. Note: it's his third consecutive film with a domineering mother. Tell us more about your *childhood*, Mr. Jackson... C-



Grosse Pointe Blank (George Armitage) - John Cusack makes the transition to action hero in this unlikely but likeable tale of a hitman who returns for his high-school reunion, only to find he's the sanest man there. The action and comedy elements are great: good to see Benny Urquidez again, and Dan Ackroyd is excellent as a rival killer. However, Minnie Driver, as Cusack's old flame, seems to have wandered in from a Nora Ephron movie; maybe she's supposed to be the 'straight man', but the overall effect is more to deaden and slow the pace and a better (albeit incestuous) match would be sister Joan, who plays his wonderfully kooky secretary. An amazing gun-battle wraps things up admirably though, and the end result is slick and fun. B+

Howard the Duck (Willard Huyck) - Slagged off last time, Miles Wood insisted I re-view it: "it is a terrific movie", he said, "you owe it to yourself and to Howard to give it a measly two hours of your life". So I did. And? It still hasn't a clue what it's supposed to be: if it's a comedy, it ain't funny, despite leaving no "duck" pun un-utilised. Lea Thomson asking "Can I find happiness in the animal kingdom?" is satisfactorily perverse, and the hyper-extended, excessive climax almost makes the effort worthwhile. However, the novelty of a kid in a feather suit soon wears off, and Howard comes across as just plain unpleasant. Perhaps that explains the original title: 'A New Breed of Hero' means one you don't like very much. What are people like Thomas Dolby and Tim Robbins doing in this? [save inane mugging in the latter's case] Divide by the budget and you certainly have a viable contender for Worst Movie Ever, on a per-dollar basis. Sorry, Miles! E+

The Jerky Boys (Scott Melkonian) - Looks like a possible influence on 'Beavis and Butthead Do America', with two foul-mouthed layabouts getting mistaken for mob hitmen, after which things then spiral out of control. The main difference is that Johnny Brennan and Kamal Ahmed (noted American phone pranksters, as yet almost unknown here) are smart rather than dumb, constantly outwitting the gangsters led by Alan Arkin. Though I suspect it'd be funnier if you're familiar with the New York borough of Queens, the Jerkys are nice characters, and there are a quite adequate number of laughs. Nice to see James Lorinz, of 'Frankenhooker' - and interviewed way back in TC 6 - is still alive, playing a much put-upon associate. C-

Killer: A Journal of Murder (Tim Metcalfe) - James Woods playing convicted serial killer Carl Panzram may not be particularly subtle casting. But who can really complain? Woods, as usual, is excellent, overshadowing Robert Sean Leonard as the prison guard who uses a diary to try and understand what's going on in the murderer's head. The major flaw is that once the central concept ("Society's to blame") is made apparent, it is rammed home for the next hour or so without significant variation. It might have been more interesting to have made the guard question Panzram about taking responsibility for his actions - instead, there's nothing here that will challenge anyone's views to a significant degree. D+

The Natural (Barry Levinson) - On one level, this is your usual shallow baseball film: team of no-hopers fight for the championship. Yet there is rather more to it than this, from the moment when Robert Redford's farmhand easily strikes out the era's biggest superstar to win a bet, it's clear that something special is happening. Even a somewhat curious shooting incident only delays the inevitable by a decade or two before this amazingly gifted "middle-aged rookie" hits the major leagues, an almost mythic figure in status, with a bat hewn from a tree struck by lightning as his Excalibur. This is the stuff of legend, and an excellent supporting cast (Glenn Close plays the Guinevere role, plus you've got Joe Don Baker and Michael Madsen in small parts) make it rewarding, probably even for non-fans. **B-**

Nick of Time (John Badham) - Why this went straight to video here, when so much dreck gets a cinema release, is a mystery; it's a perfectly solid thriller featuring Johnny Depp and Christopher Walken. The former has his child kidnapped by the latter, who gives him 90 minutes to kill the governor of California, or his brat gets it. Aside from the fact that the kid is no nauseating, you pray for her demise, this works well, propelled by the effective idea of unfolding the film in real time. Badham is a past master at this sort of thing, and delivers tension by the spadeful, with Walken outstanding as ever. Implausible as hell, yet if you can accept the central premise, the rest runs like a Swiss watch. **B+**

A Nymphoid Barbarian in Dinosaur Hell (Brett Piper) - Odds on that being the title before Troma got to it: slim. Post-apocalyptic prehistory, with the heroine fighting off mutants and dinosaurs, while trying to keep her top on -- though the cover art bimbo is rather more impressive than the reality there. If you're a fan of stop motion animation, this will be right up your street, with a lot of surprisingly decent (given the budget) work on view. However, the rest of the movie isn't as engaging or appealing, and unless you have a keen interest in the works of Ray Harryhausen and his like, there are better post-apocalypse movies to be found. **D**

Once Upon a Time in China and America (Samo Hung) - Jet Li returns as hero Wong Fei Hung, only this time in the US, defending Chinese miners from small-town bigotry. Lighter in tone than the original, it really tries to cram in too much: there's a sub-plot involving Indians (who switch between English and their native tongue semi-randomly!) that just peters out half-way. There's also every cliché under the sun, which may or may not be sly parody. Oh yeah, and a great deal of fighting -- it's a surprise this hasn't been done before, seems like an ideal combination, even if the result is bordering on a dog's dinner. **C+**

Paganini (Klaus Kinski) - This is vanity film-making at its most excessive, with cinematic wildman Kinski writing, directing and employing his relations in this tale of a tortured artistic genius bonking his way round Europe; I imagine any similarity to Klaus is purely deliberate. Much of this is completely laughable - Paganini's music apparently made women instantly go all squishy, and even starts horses shagging, in a scene reminiscent of Borowczyk's 'La Bete' - yet Kinski has the charisma to (barely) pull it off, assisted by some of the most berserk violin-playing you are ever likely to hear. I'm left wondering why anyone would give out money for this project but, let's face it, would you be brave enough to turn the man down? **C**



The Prophecy (Gregory Widen) - Another entry in the "religious apocalypse" genre (see 'Armageddon' above), Christopher Walken (again!) plays rebellious archangel Gabriel like a mobster, as he hunts the blackest soul in the world. Only people between him and it are a good angel (Eric Stolz) and a priest who lost his faith and became a cop instead. Gothic horror-fantasy, effectively driven by Widen, that uses FX sparingly on the whole, leaving Stolz and Walken room to act. After this, the finale is something of a disappointment, with dodgy optical work (Widen wrote 'Highlander', which had the same problem), though Viggo Mortensen as Lucifer almost steals the film. I suspect we might get more of this sort of thing as the millennium approaches... **B-** [Indeed, there is also in existence 'Prophecy II', which certainly comes into the category of "more of this sort of thing". Sadly though, in this case more is less, and even the return of Christopher Walken can't manage to save a very tired looking sequel, possessing little or none of the innovatively creepy stuff which characterised the first film. The Devil may have all the best tunes, but he also has some rather poor movies...]

The Razor (Misumi Kenji) - Seriously tacky Japanese film, from much the same team as 'Lone Wolf and Cub'. The hero is a renegade cop, macho beyond belief, who interrogates women by bonking them into submission, having honed his technique on sacks of rice (and a training regime which adds a whole new dimension to 'beating your meat'). After finding a conspiracy to cover up some high-level goings-on, he comes under pressure to drop the case. Three guesses whether he does. Body fluids everywhere and a script full of double-meanings, are wrecked by a tendency to go on and on, plus the deeply incongruous 70's soundtrack (19, rather than 1770's). A 'Shogun Assassin' style edit of two or three entries in the series would be an improvement, and conceivably an undoubted trash classic. **C-**

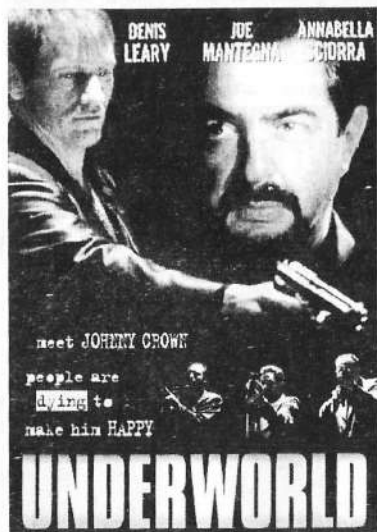
The Relic (Peter Hyams) - In these post-'Jurassic Park' days, monster movies have changed. It is no longer acceptable to hide them in the dark, the odd claw peeping out, they have to be in your face. And, Mr. Hyams please note, in daylight, too -- never has a film looked so murky. With a heroine who is self-centred and whiny, my sympathies were with the monster; some Amazonian DNA-fungoid-mutant-lizard-human, though its origins were obscured by copious technobabble. Rather gory for a '15', with a great decapitation, it is a stream of missed opportunities. When the monster finally lumbers into plain sight, it's quite, quite lovely -- you just wish it had appeared 90 minutes earlier. **D-**

Return of the God of Gamblers (Wong Jing) - A long time after the original, and choosing to ignore completely the Chow Yun Fat-less pseudo-sequels, this was a huge hit in Hong Kong, becoming the first movie ever to gross HK\$50m. Despite this, it's a strangely flat kind of film, which is simply just not as good as the original -- for example, in it, the humour seemed to flow naturally from the characters, but in 'Return', it all seems forced in there, with some parts feeling like discards from a Steven Chow movie. It doesn't take itself seriously, which leaves the dramatic elements flailing around aimlessly, especially a villain whose sheer evilness goes beyond caricature, and that's before he kills Chow's wife and unborn son. Speaking of Chow, he is, of course, charismatic and powerful as ever, yet even he ends up strangely unmemorable -- there are hardly any moments which will stay with you once the movie has ended. **C-**

The Silencers (Richard Pepin) - An interesting counterpoint to what might be seen as the cynical pro-Conspiracy propaganda of 'Men in Black' ("the MiB are your friends!"). Here they are the advance guard of an alien invasion, while a Secret Service agent and a dude from the Pleiades try and stop them. Owing quite a bit to 'The Hidden', though the heroes here lack the same chemistry as McLachlan and Nouri had there, 'The Silencers' tries to make up for this deficiency with nifty whizz-bang action scenes -- it's 45 minutes before any significant plot turns up. The pyrotechnics are cool, but the stuff between them is facile and banal. At least you know you're no more than ten minutes from another car flying through the air. **C+**

Swallowtail Butterfly (Iwai Shunji) - This Japanese movie is all over the place in genre terms, combining drama, blood-spattered action, comedy and musical numbers – if the end result is some way short of perfect, it's always interesting to watch. The setting is the underbelly of Tokyo's sprawl, peopled by gangsters, junkies, whores and migrant workers; a group of the last-named stumble onto a tape of computer data, and use it to forge money. Lots of money. Needless to say, the Yakuza owners are keen to get the tape back: cue mayhem (the fire-fight in a car is particularly impressive), intrigue, and a grunge version of 'My Way'. While it's at least half an hour too long, and sags badly in the middle, it's buoyed up by a host of great characters, and is a glimpse into a part of Japanese culture that is rarely seen. **B**

Teenage Catgirls in Heat (Scott Perry) - Another Troma contender for Inspired Title of the Year, possibly too inspired, as it'd be hard for any movie to live up to it. This is basically a micro-budget comedy slant on 'Cat People', with an ancient Egyptian cat-goddess coming back and turning the local girls into cats (or was it the local cats into girls?). It reminded me of 'Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers', with worse production values - difficult though *that* might be to believe - while the producers must have had the gift of the gab, going by the number of women they talked into taking their tops off. I have to admit I did laugh out loud on a few occasions, though it won't be replacing the Kinski flick in my affections, I was amused enough. **C+**



Underworld (Roger Christian) - One of the better Tarantino ripoffs, it clearly helps a lot to have someone like Dennis Leary mouthing your "amusing" dialogue, since he actually makes it funny. He is in full-on wacko mode, a psychotic psychotherapist (he got the degree in jail) now out to find and eliminate all those who put his Pop in intensive care, while dragging Joe Mantegna with him round a city virtually devoid of other life. Oh, and he sings selections from the work of Rogers and Hammerstein while he's at it. Compared to him, every else in the movie seems to be operating at half-power, and while undeniably loopy, you can't help liking his character. It all takes place over the course of a single night and thanks largely to Leary, comes over as an elegant, compact item. **B**

Wax Mask (Sergio Stivaletti) - Despite the limited resources, this is entirely acceptable as cheerful tack. Originally intended for Lucio Fulci, Stivaletti makes a decent fist of this remake, but ultimately falls down because

he doesn't bring anything much new to the old "waxworks using real people" story. Its looks do belie the \$1.25m budget though, with the sets especially worthy of mention, and there are a few decent babes too, so it's never tedious. However, it is hard to distinguish the actors from the waxworks, and ripping off the climax from 'Terminator' probably wasn't a wise move. **C-**

Wing Chun (Yuen Wo Ping) - A neo-feminist kung-fu flick? For here we have two sisters, neither much in demand by the local men -- at least, not until they rescue a beautiful widow from bandits, and give her a home. The movie then teeters between bedroom farce, OTT kick-ass action, and something disturbingly close to a lesbian sub-plot for the rest of the way. Even if the action is too "fly by wire" for my taste, it somehow works: recent Bond girl Michelle Khan (no, hang on, if it's Tuesday, it must be Michelle Yeoh) is perhaps the only female action star who could be mistaken for a man, as required here. It's also nice to see Donnie Yen back, and the overall package is highly entertaining. **B-**

"FUCK OFF SEVEN FAMOUS ACTRESS. HYPER ADONIS, THIS TIME QUEENS ARE YOUNG, BAD AND SHAKIN' HIP, IT'S HIPPIY HIP! WITH FRUITY SMILE AND SOUP."

There is a school of thought which suggest that not showing something is more evocative than if it is clearly seen. This applies to horror movies, and also to sex -- certain critics bemoan the excesses of the modern era over the understated subtleties of former times. It's not an argument I personally accept (if I want to "use my imagination", I don't need to shell out hard cash to do so), but in some cases, will admit that it can prove culturally productive.

Take Japan which, despite stern censorship, has developed a pornography industry second only to America, probably far surpassing the stale "legitimate" movie business, both in terms of turnover and invention. Each month, the number of tapes released is well into three figures, with the video companies publicising their wares in lavishly illustrated, full-colour brochures of sample sleeves. These are true works of art, in the same way that London telephone boxes become art galleries of the minimasterpieces which are prostitute's cards -- though in comparison, those look like a child's finger-painting. If ever anything made me want to splash out on a colour cover for TC, these sleeves did, despite the same stringent rules for censorship still applying. Thus, all genitals are obscured, with a colourful range of red ink, black blobs and intriguing cross-hatching that makes every willie look like it's been wrapped in straw.

The reason for the intense effort that clearly goes into the covers is simple: in a jam-packed market, you've got to leap off the shelf and grab a punter by the 'nads in the time it takes his eye to sweep across your sleeve. Hence, gold, silver and flashy fonts are in order, though the format hardly varies across titles or companies. The front cover almost inevitably has the women who star in the video, the back is crammed with a cut-up assortment of stills from the film. The most notable point is that the immaculately coiffured woman on the front is all but unrecognisable when getting down and dirty "in action"...

Then there is the interesting usage of English. Now, taking the piss out of foreigners is childish and puerile xenophobia, but if you're going to use a foreign language in your advertising material...let's just say that those who live by the word, die by the word. Sometimes, though, the results have a grace and beauty that are almost poetic, as in the following, taken from the 'Garden of Schoolgirls' sleeve:

*In the forbidden garden
the defenseless girls
who were carried away by sexual impulse*

Not quite the traditional 5-7-5 syllable structure of haiku, but lyrical and graceful none the less. This was, however, an exception, and the vast majority treat English like a prisoner of war. The following samples, like every other one in this article, are presented with exactly the spelling, grammar, capitalisation and punctuation as they possess on the covers:

"Oh, my God! Let's enjoy sexual costume play with Sexy Doll Clice and have a ecstasy".

"A sex oil sticky level 100% The Ultra Estrus Girls"

"I'll make you feeling ecstasy by my buxom bust"

"Bye Bye Super Very Bad Blue Days!! Good morning Satisfaction!!"



The actual titles of the films represent an extension of the mutant English mentioned elsewhere. They range from the relatively straightforward ('Uniform Lesbian BattleRoyal'), through the slightly obscure ('New UniformSniper' -- which perhaps raises more questions than it answers) to some that...well...would you rent 'Illegality Violate Tits [A program on a different channel version]?' Here are some other interesting candidates:

Body Conscious Hunting -- Revival of Ultimate Costumes
Welcome!! Super Exciting Pink Saloon
Super Maniac Play Text for the Beginners
When the Lecherous Ladies Violate a Man
The Best Fucking Game With Pretty Baby
Precious - Wedding Fuck
Satomura - Mad Obscenity - Please ejacurate on my breast.
The Wonderful Cock Suckin' Rolling Thunder Special Sperm is on Heat

Of course, the all-time classic title remains 'Jesus Clitoris Superstar', if only because it lets me tell the (quite possibly apocryphal) story about a Japanese department store whose Christmas display featured Santa Claus nailed to a cross...

The last of these sounds more like an advert for breakfast cereal than X-rated pomography. However, my personal favourite leads off this article, deserving to appear in large text and a different font, since it manages to be simultaneously evocative and completely incoherent,

The most superfluous warning has to be the "Caution X rated!" with which ZET Video is careful to label its product. This does seem somewhat pointless when the rest of the cover ensures that the tape is most unlikely to be mistaken for a Disney movie, and probably falls into the category of reverse advertising, done to lure rather than warn.

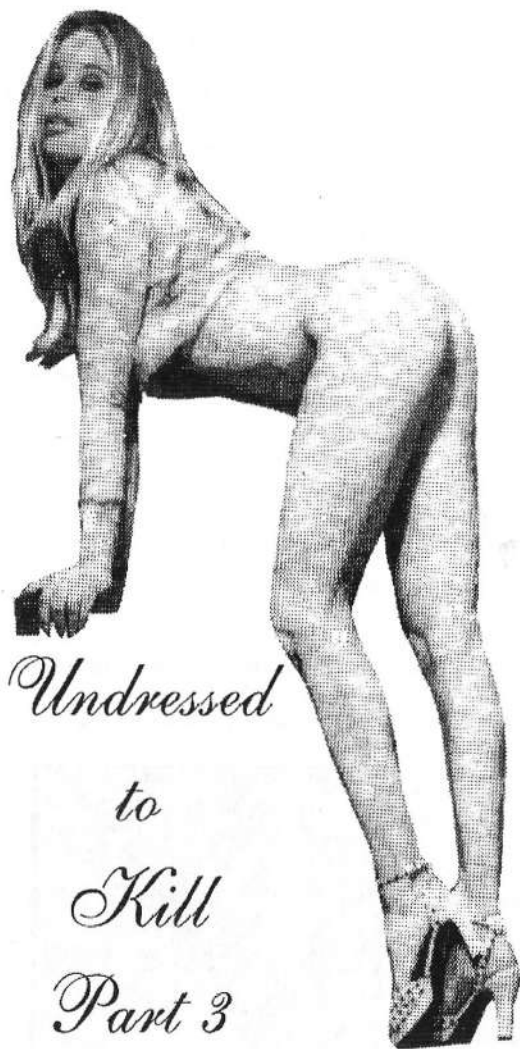
ZET are just one of the many companies competing for business: others, such as Big Morkal, eightman, Sodom, and the engagingly named 'Atlas Radical Adult Fantasy Mega-Pictures', are also out there pitching to the market. Some produce generic erotica while others have found smaller niches: Cinemagic do bondage, while Miss Christine are a "costume play" outfit i.e. dressing up, as nurses, schoolgirls or whatever. The Tiffany label specialise in debutantes, and this is reflected in titles such as 'Legend of Virgin Shrine', 'New Sensual Princess', and 'Virgin Princess' (but oddly, there is no sign of 'Sensual Shrine').

Finally, and for those of you after something seriously dodgy, then you really want to sign up to the truly questionable Maniac company, who definitely live up to their name. Among the delights they offer is 'The Sexy Rape Magazine', which according to the sleeve delivers 'Super Violence Fucking'. The contents include 'The Outdoor Raep', 'The Invasion Raep By Home Site', and 'The Invasion Raep by Mansion', parts one and two. This does beg the question: why do people who are apparently so interested in sexual violence, have such difficulty in spelling it?

[I think I should perhaps stress that anyone asking me for information on where to obtain their tapes, will not find me especially forthcoming...]

The sheer scale and inventiveness of the Japanese erotica industry, in the face of the continually bizarre censorship rules applicable there, would seem to suggest that attempts to regulate and control such activity are doomed to failure. Of course, while the BBFC seem to be gradually realising this, you trying telling that to our beloved Home Secretary.





*Undressed
to
Kill
Part 3*

With another venue open in Hammersmith, the popularity of striptease as entertainment clearly continues to grow -- unless you're a Hollywood producer, in which case it's better to cut your loss, give Demi Moore the \$12m, and send her home. But the heterosexual male in the capital has an every-increasing variety of opportunities to see more-or-less gorgeous girls taking their kit off.

The reasons for this growth may be correlated to the decline in situations where men are allowed to openly interact with women on a sexual basis. Overstep the bounds and you could end up in court, as one prominent doctor found out. He either brushed against a waitress's leg (his version), or put his hand up her skirt (her version): the truth most likely lies in between. Now, the "victim" worked in a theme restaurant, and dressed specifically to appeal to male fantasies: yet when they were acted upon, the perpetrator was found guilty of indecent assault, when surely "lack of self-control" would have been a more appropriate charge.

This just represents the bluntest over-reaction. Men are basically sexual creatures, and it's not something that can be turned off like a tap. Two million years of instinct trump a century of Victorian morality, and less than a decade of political correctness: biology is destiny. Yet an off-colour remark in the office could result in a sexual harassment suit, and catching a woman's eye on the tube leaves you feeling like a pervert. It's no wonder that men flock to places where they can release at least some unresolved sexual tension without fear of repercussions.

There are times, however, when the question of exploitation does rear its head. Less of the punters by the artistes, or vice versa, more the way both (but especially the girls) seem to be getting exploited by the venue. From what I've heard, it seems that at best they don't pay the girls. At worst, the babes have to pay an up-front fee and also contribute a hefty slice of their takings - 30% was the figure I heard - to the house. Now, this money doesn't seem to be used to subsidise the drinks prices: while not extortionate, neither are they exactly happy-hour-at-the-Student-Union. Someone, somewhere is making a very pleasant profit, which probably also goes a long way to explain the proliferation of such venues. From originally being little more than a way of getting customers into out-of-the-way pubs on slow evenings, the entertainment has now become the *raison d'être*. However, it is something of a disincentive to realise that the asshole DJ is taking his pay out of every quid you drop in the jug.

A pleasant development on the scene has been the introduction of table-dancing to, first Metropolis, and then Brown's -- the service lets you select a dancer and have her perform for you in relative intimacy. The cost is about a fiver per head, which gets you a song's worth of undiluted attention in a curtained-off area. While remaining strictly a visual pleasure, it's an experience I'd recommend to anyone -- these girls are good at their job, and when you get to pick the best of them, it's like having a blow-torch turned on your libido. The sensual equivalent of freebased cocaine, you get a cheap, instant, intense high, followed by an overpowering urge to repeat the experience. Fortunately, unlike crack, the main problem is supply and demand: especially at Metropolis, after 'booking', you may have a lengthy and for some reason nerve-wracking delay as you stand around, waiting your turn.

This innovation appears to have come about partly in response to a venue called 'For Your Eyes Only', which opened last year in the exotic location of, er, Hanger Lane. This new Gyrotratory System specialises in the table dance, but has not yet been visited by TC since it's a) miles from anywhere else you'd ever want to go and b) £20 to get in, which goes against our philosophy. When one can see babes of the quality of Ulrike and Marianne for free, why bother paying?

***'The Good Striptease Guide to London' by
Vlad Lapidos, Tredegar Press, £4.99, pp.84.***

A slim volume, and one surprisingly hard to track down. From first word of its appearance to getting a copy took six months; "available from slightly disreputable bookshops", maybe. It contains a swathe of information about the times and places in which striptease may be seen, right down to telephone numbers. All kinds of venues are covered, in and around London, from posh theatrical joints like Raymond's Revue Bar to seedy dives, evaluated for ambience, visibility and totty quality. Fleshing out the bones are anecdotal tales and, for some reason, architectural observations. Perhaps behind the author's (blatant) pseudonym lurks Prince Charles?

Given the anticipation, the book was something of a disappointment, inevitably. There's not an enormous amount of information -- I read it on the tube, between Liverpool Street and Victoria -- and most of it will be known to any seasoned regular. Though a few venues were new to me, it didn't sounds as if I was missing much! The tales of attendance were the highlight; describing one dancer as like "a particularly languid sloth on a diet of beta-blockers" vividly evoke the imagination. But it's all too slight to have more than passing interest: not worthless, by any means, especially for the novice, for whom it's probably priceless. But anyone else would be better off using the money to get 4/5 of a table dance from the babe of your choice.

This is especially true when the escalative spiral is continuing apace in more accessible areas. For a while, Brown's offered "lap-dances" -- though let's be clear, we are not talking anything like the full-contact, sticky trouser experience seen in 'Showgirls'. [See 'Beer and Whithing in Las Vegas' for details] It was more like a point-blank table dance, so close you could feel their body heat, and strictly no contact permitted. This required incredible will-power - or sitting on your hands - and to enforce the rule, it all took place 'in the open'. However, after about ten seconds, you didn't notice, and though the girls may be only topless, it was better value than their table dances.

That wasn't their only new feature, though the appeal of the tequila slammer escaped me: five quid to lick salt from your girl's arm, down the alcohol and pluck the lime from between her teeth seemed a bit steep. Both innovations only lasted a few months, but it'll be interesting to see how their competitors respond: will Metropolis begin doing *proper* lap dances? Whatever happens, we, the customers will likely be the ones to benefit, illustrating perfectly the delights of competition in an unregulated free-market economy...

[Eagle-eyed readers may have spotted Brown's making the news in August -- sadly, for all the wrong reasons. Three employees were shot, when a group they'd thrown out for hassling the girls came back. One bouncer took six bullets, while his colleague and the manager were also injured. Sobering stuff. Not that it's stopped us from going there, of course!]

NIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE

A cellar bar, situated near one of London's mainline stations, is home to the Round Table, a private member's club which represents the next level of fleshly activity down -- or up, depending on your point of view -- from the likes of Browns'. Admission to the Round Table is by request only; they don't advertise, and prospective applicants may face a grilling to ensure they are legitimate punters. Assuming you pass the test, you are told the location, and given the basic details: events happen on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, with special "stag do's" on the first Monday of each month. Membership is forty quid a year, plus six pounds for a normal event and twenty quid for the stags. It's then a question of screwing our courage to the sticking plate and going along. For (im)moral support, I went with a friend, expectations high that this was a ripoff, scam...or something worse. We descended into the depths of the Earth to meet the fabled "Reg", the mastermind behind the Round Table...

For the sort of person whom the News of the World would undoubtedly label an "evil genius", Reg seemed an entirely affable bloke, though I think the fact that there were two of us worried him a bit, since the rest of the customers all arrived on their own. Only Jehovah's Witnesses and undercover cops work in pairs, but Reg's greatest fear appeared to be that we were Inland Revenue. I toyed with the idea of pulling out my work id and yelling "Freeze, scum!", but I'm fond of my kneecaps the way they are.

We paid our subs, got a spiffy membership card, bought a couple of beers, and watched the rest of the audience and the girls, arrive. Like other venues, the clients were a mix of City suits and casual dress, though as mentioned above, no groups were present. The three girls engaged to provide the evening's entertainment were a Mediterranean girl, thin to the point of anorexia, a Eastern European, pretty but with such a frosty attitude that we nick-named her the Ice Pole. and an English lass, the best of the bunch, though a little plump. Below the standard of Metropolis or Brown's, definitely, but scarcely unpleasant to look at, averaging maybe 6.5's. Having reassured ourselves that it didn't seem to be a con, our next question was the deeply philosophical "Why are we here?", specifically, what would we get for our cash. We were answered fairly rapidly when the first dancer, the Mediterranean, appeared. Taking her top off in close proximity to one punter, the customer in question reached out and began caressing her breasts. "My", we thought, "this is new", eyebrows (amongst other things) rising. But they had to be pulled off the ceiling when this respectable-looking gent then began sucking lustily on the teat as if he'd never been weaned off milk. It was clear that at the Round Table, stripping was no longer just a spectator sport, it had become a participation event.

This culture shock resulted immediately in us both assuming defensive, crossed-legs postures, as the girl proceeded randomly round the room, receiving similar attention from other attendees. However, when a not unattractive woman is trying to sit in your lap, keen for you to run your tongue around her nipple...well, it would be churlish to refuse. My "rabbit caught in headlights" expression was soon replaced by a sizable grin.



The process was repeated with the other two girls, leading us to wonder just how far they would go. And, indeed, how far we would -- this was not a place for faint hearts, and many of my companions who happily visit Brown's would find the Round Table a breast too far. From the morality and fidelity points of view, one can defend "just looking" easier than "putting your head between them and going blubbe-blubbe". Much as I love TC and its editor, there are (just) limits.

After the inevitable circulation of pint jugs, the next set of routines pushed those boundaries further, as the girls performed wearing nothing at all. Obviously, this offered better, ah, openings for entertainment, and the girls remained as pliable and available for interaction as ever (even if the Ice Pole still looked like she'd been sucking a nettle or two). This set the standard for the rest of the evening, with random variations such as baby-oil, up until well past 11. Though things were still in full swing at that point, I had to head off, my fingers bearing an unmistakeable souvenir of the evening, which combined baby oil and a muskier, more intimate scent...

It's probably true to say that events at the Round Table blur the boundary between dancing and prostitution. This was made abundantly clear when, less than half an hour after arriving, another attendee sidled up to us, and handed over cards inviting us to a "house party", taking place in Peckham the next Monday. Twenty-five quid got us a show from two of the girls there that night, no pint jugs, bring your own booze and you were "guaranteed a fuck". This was something of a shock: it's one thing to see a girl on stage, and dream about having her, but the knowledge that you actually could have her, for the price of a decent meal, puts the whole event into a new dimension. It's one with which I'm not exactly comfortable: as someone previously wrote in TC, "the gap between fantasy and reality is sometimes a pretty good idea". So I didn't go: besides, the cute English girl wasn't on offer.

Other evenings since have offered other girls, of varying quality as well as the renowned "Sue the Swopper", an amateur performer who turned up to perform on an ad-hoc basis. I was under the impression such women were merely created by the letter column editors of dodgy magazines, but this woman genuinely seemed to be into the exhibitionism. To each their own.

As for the stag events, they really weren't worth the (quite considerable) extra money, unless you enjoy the sight of a rugby scrum of flabby men with their willies out, crowding round a woman, to the extent that nothing can be seen of her. As a spectator sport, it leaves something to be desired, though there is the odd alternative diversion. Seeing a woman stick two cucumbers, a can of Diet Pepsi, a can of Ruddles County, a marrow, and most of someone's forearm up her pussy (no, *not* at the same time) is certainly an impressive sight, but is hardly erotic. Similarly Sue's taking on of, literally, all-comers, leaving her looking like an open condensed milk sandwich (think about it...). The 1-on-1 action was a touch better, but overall it's an experience I was left in no hurry to repeat.

If the legality of the pub joints is questionable, the legality of the Round Table must be even more dubious. I suspect many of the foreign girls probably don't have all the necessary papers, which would limit their employment elsewhere. The premises were clearly not licenced, which led to a visit from the authorities, and a currently on-going hiatus. As for fire regulations, forget it. All this, in a way, makes it remarkable that it did appear to be "honest", rather than a scam. Those who operate beyond the law are not required to have much concern for customer satisfaction, but to Reg's credit, he seems to play it straight.

From the aesthetic point of view, the Round Table is never going to be up to the standard of other venues, where the women are prettier and generally at least give the impression of wanting to be there. You trade off a few seconds of very close attention, against a few minutes of more distant entertainment; which is "better" depends on too many variables to call. If Brown's and Metropolis are the Serie A of stripping; the Round Table are the local park league. The quality on display may not be comparable, but you're almost guaranteed a hell of a lot more goals. There are times when that will be just what you want.

41ST LONDON FILM FESTIVAL bfi

Once again, that frantic fortnight known as the London Film Festival came round, with a strange, hybrid kind of beast this year. For a while, it looked like there were going to be two of them; long-time organiser Sheila Whittaker peeled off and made noises about setting up her own event, but after negotiations, she leapt back on board. So with everything still being run by the British Film Institute and their cronies, the chances of getting tickets for big events were slim.

Looking at this year's programme, very little actually leapt out yelling "Watch me! Watch me!" Tumbleweeds rolled majestically across the pages of the brochure between things I'd marked down as must-sees. The Hong Kong section was especially disappointing, but what do you expect when you get Tony Rayns to choose things? One entry was not too hard to predict: 'Happy Together', both because it was directed by Rayns' friend Wong Kar Wai, and was about homosexuality -- but with 1997 perhaps the most important year in the former colony's history, it would have been nice had that not been the sole film from there.

Bitching aside, I wasn't too worried, as experience has shown that often it's the films that you *aren't* especially looking forward to which are the best ('Miracle Mile', anyone?). I read through the synopses and eventually found some movies that sounded worth a look, and got tickets for most of them, though perhaps inevitably the closing gala had sold out. The relevance of this will become clear in due course...

Mimic (Guillermo del Toro) - The screening started 15 minutes late, not a good omen for the first film of the festival! Actually, it could have started early and you wouldn't have too much to complain about -- like so many other movies this year, plot is not a strong point! 'Them' is a clear point of reference, as giant cockroaches menace the New York subways after a genetic experiment goes wrong, and it's so dark that 'Se7en' might also be an inspiration. Mira Sorvino gets coated from head to foot in gunk, which might appeal to some people; the rest of you should enjoy the effects and ignore the storyline. The director will also quite likely annoy the hell out of you by over-frequent 'false scare' scenes; as a result, when the real things turn up, he's cried wolf too often and you don't give a damn. Still, at least it's certainly a cinema movie, because it makes full use of the sound system to have 'roaches zooming round the auditorium... C-

Incognito (John Badham) - It's hard to work out what the point of this movie is; Jason Patric is an art forger hired to paint a 'Rembrandt', only to find himself double-crossed and on the run. It's not exciting enough to be a thriller, or funny enough to be a comedy, despite making nods in both of these directions. It also suffers from a dodgy sense of location: every time a scene takes place in London, a Major Landmark is sure to loom overhead, just to prove they actually were there. Add in lots of 'quirky' British 'characters', and it all gets rather wince-inducing. The best bit is probably a lengthy sequence depicting the creation of the painting, which is more like 'La Belle Noiseuse' than anything else -- although sadly, without the presence of any Emmanuelle Beart, and Irene Jacob as the French-babe-love-interest-art-professor isn't quite in the same league. Alright, if you're in an especially undemanding mood. **D-**

Sick: the Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist (Kirby Dick) - My, I do like titles which also function as a synopsis, it saves so much time. Bob, the subject of a RE-Search book, lives up to his title in this documentary -- the sequence of him driving a nail through his dick removes all doubt there. But he's not just your average sicko-perv-Liberal-peer; in his case, it seems linked to his Cystic Fibrosis, which he battled for 40-odd years, and was his way of telling the disease, "Come and have a go, if you think you're hard enough". Possessed of a mordant, black wit, Flanagan rages against his life until death, inspiring others with his attitude - notably one 17-year old babe, terminally ill with CF - despite also understandably being prone to severe mood swings. It's uplifting and depressing at the same time: I left feeling grateful for my good health, aware how fragile life truly is, and looking for a Cystic Fibrosis collection box. **B**

Metropolis (various) - Short films are a two-edged sword. While a great way to experiment with new techniques, they can also be an excuse for self-indulgent nonsense of the worst sort. This programme, with a vague theme of 'London', covered both, and points in between. It started badly with 'London's Markets', a collage of elderly footage of Petticoat Lane, etc, overdubbed with out of synch sound and two French people philosophising. Dull. It got worse with 'Wavelengths', a lesbian cybersex fantasy, which was turgid, cliched, ignorant and soporific. Thankfully, that was the pits: 'Bicycle' is a hyper-kinetic sprint through the streets of London and New York, while 'Double' told the story of a man meeting his doppelganger -- at six and four minutes long, neither out-stayed their welcome. The best was perhaps saved for last; 'Stood For This Massive', a documentary about sports gambler Harry Findlay, works simply because Findlay is so extraordinary and extravagant a character you wonder if it's all a spoof. All they had to do was point a camera at him and let it roll. Truly a program of two halves, then, Jimmy... **E to B+**

Hana-Bi (Takeshi Kitano) - The seventh of Kitano's films, and it's all beginning to get a little over-familiar: this seems to combine elements from 'Violent Cop' and 'Sonatine', yet ends up being less than the sum of those parts. Kitano is <sigh> a cop with a psychotic streak, who also has to look after his terminally ill wife, so he <sigh> takes her to the seaside. Of course, it all ends...well, if you've seen his other films, you'll have a good idea of what to expect. There's also shades of 'Bad Lieutenant' in here too, as the hero is deep in debt to the mob, though Kitano's reaction is slightly more measured, since it's frequently demonstrated that he's significantly tougher than the gangsters who lent him the money! The title means 'Fireworks', and while moments of this film light up the sky like the most brilliant of rockets, large parts of it seem impenetrable to those outside of Japanese culture, and sadly, bear more resemblance to a damp squib. **D**

The Life of Stuff (Simon Donald) - Well, at least being a 'Trainspotting' wannabe is better than being a Tarantino wannabe. Though there are distinct nods to him as well, in this Scottish tale of a bunch of inexperienced criminals holed up in a dingy warehouse after ripping off 'Mad' Alex Sneddon for his drug stash. The film gives an interesting twist to the usual structure of such things though, by starting off hysterical and gradually calming down, rather than accelerating towards insanity. This doesn't quite work; its origins as a theatre play are too obvious, there are embarrassing moments of sopiness, and you can see the ending from quite some way off. However, it's a brave attempt, bolstered by a fabulous score from John Lunn and memorable characterisations by most of the cast. Part-funded by lottery money, it's a good incentive to go and buy a ticket. **B-**



It could be you...

The Winner (Alex Cox) - Perhaps that should be 'Alan Smithee', as Cox has effectively disowned this version of the movie. I take his point: "you won't see much editing", he says in the production notes, but the finished version is packed with jump-cuts, even in simple conversations between two people. The film starts off like 'God of Gamblers', with a guy in Las Vegas who simply can't lose a bet, and follows the machinations which surround him as various factions move to exploit the talent. Sadly, this potential is soon diluted by trailer-park angst, and I found there is a limit to the appeal of bickering white trash. It's always nice to see Las Vegas -- for much of the film, thoughts of 'been there' drifted distractingly across my mind. Intriguing enough to make me want to see Cox's version, I think Richard Stanley is the only director with a higher average in the "getting screwed by Hollywood" field. **C-**

Twenty-four Seven (Shane Meadows) - A further step up the scale for the director of 'Small Time', reviewed last TC; this time, he's got a star, specifically Bob Hoskins as the guy who sets up a boxing club in an attempt to keep kids out of trouble. This is an undeniably cliched set-up, and there are gaping holes here and there (the rival gangs stop feuding virtually as soon as the club starts), but Hoskins provides the necessary weight to make it believable. Shot in black-and-white, it occasionally feels more like a pop video for the songs that loom over the movie soundtrack. Although generally light in tone, the movie flips in the last ten minutes into something totally different. Kudos to Meadows for pulling this off, it could have seemed contrived and false, yet ends up ringing true. A name to watch in future. **C+**



They're not games, and it definitely isn't funny...

Funny Games (Michael Haneke) - 'Desperate Hours' meets 'Last House on the Left' by a lake in Austria, as two excruciatingly well-mannered psychopaths take a family hostage for no readily apparent reason. This is a challenging film which plays with the audience -- at one point, a villain talks directly to the camera, while there's another, utterly audacious moment involving a remote control which simultaneously destroys and bolsters the cinematic illusion. The same director made 'Benny's Video', which dealt with a similar topic --

'Funny Games' is probably a film which I'm looking back on more fondly than I thought at the time; the family are mere cyphers, and the psychos have so much more charm that the film seems flat without them. It's very bleak and cold viewing, which asks a lot of questions and offers no easy answers. In fact, I'm not sure it offers any answers at all, even hard ones... **B-**

The End of Violence (Wim Wenders) - This is bordering on the impenetrable, but I'll give it a shot. A film producer gets emailed a document detailing a government surveillance plan. Then someone tries to kill him, though the hitmen are themselves shot before they can carry out the deed, forcing the producer on the run, from where he tries to piece together what's happening. In the right hands, this could have been taut and tense, but Wim Wenders hasn't got the first clue about adrenalin. It's a mess, with films-within-the-film leading to what is perhaps the most meaningful line, from Udo Kier as a film director: "I should have stayed in Europe". Looking at this overlong piece of nonsense, I begin to think Wenders should have taken his own advice. Andy McDowell turned up at the screening, at great expense to the BFI, no doubt, and to no real point. Wouldn't mind, but, she still can't act. **E+**

Memories (Koji Morimoto/Tensai Okamura/Katsuhiro Otomo) - Three stories for the price of one, though only the first, 'Magnetic Rose', bears much relation to the title. It's also notably like 'Event Horizon', with a salvage team exploring an abandoned space-ship, which plays hallucinatory tricks on them, but at 45 minutes, works a lot better -- the first view of the spaceship is a jawdropper, and excellent use is made of music, notably 'Madame Butterfly'. The second, 'Stink Bomb' is very hardware oriented, with a lot of loving attention to detail on tanks, airplanes and the rest of the firepower brought to bear on an unwitting salaryman-turned-chemical-weapon. The final part is an exercise in technique; it's a single shot lasting over twenty minutes, though the purpose of doing this in an animated film escapes me. And, like Hitchcock's 'Rope', once you get over the 'cleverness' of it, there isn't a great deal of depth. A movie of steadily declining return. C

And that was it. Oh, except for the last movie at the festival, which was Mike Figgis' 'One Night Stand', starring Wesley Snipes and oh, some German has-been actress or other -- Anastasia something... Now, with this being the closing event, one would expect all the stars to come out, and I knew that Snipes was around, since an interview with him had been one of the featured events earlier in the festival. Was it too much to hope that my beloved Nastassja might also turn up? Probably. But I was there, outside the Empire, Leicester Square with my disposable Kodak camera, just in case.

Well, when I say "outside", I probably mean "somewhere in the general vicinity of". All the best spots had naturally been nabbed by the tabloid photographers, and all the second best ones by gawking tourists with nothing better to do -- and judging by the general height of those standing in front of me, there appeared to be a Croatian basketball team in town. I was reduced to sticking my camera above my head, pointing it in the general direction of the front, and hoping for the best.

Not that I need have worried, since (and I hope I'm not ruining the tension for you here), Nastassja failed to turn up. Indeed, neither did just about anyone else. Apart from Figgis and Snipes, the only other recognisable name was Alan Parker, the new president of the BFI, whom I suppose really had to be there. The fourth-ranked celebrity, in terms of flashbulbs expended, appeared to be, er, John Fashanu -- and I suspect half the photographers there mistook him for the star of the film.



Er, that's not Nastassja...

And this is perhaps an appropriate note on which to finish. It says something about the pulling power and international renown of the London Film Festival, that hardly anyone can be bothered to turn up to its closing gala. The selection of films this year was also pretty lacklustre, with only the odd one or two that I'd recommend. The most entertainment was to be found watching a man die a slow, painful death -- and that also says quite a lot about the 1997 LFF...

