

Inner Space

Sigmund Freud never knew it, but in 1917 he wrote a science fiction manifesto. His ‘A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis’ outlines the major concerns of a genre which, although still a decade away from being named, had been busy emerging since at least Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). In it, he describes three great shocks to humanity’s perception of itself: the Copernican revolution removed Earth from the centre of the universe, showing it to be just an insignificant speck in an unimaginably vast cosmos; the Darwinian revolution stripped us of our biological exceptionalism, demonstrating that we are just one species of animal among many; and the psychoanalytic revolution (Freud continued modestly) reveals that we are not even in control of our own minds or behaviour. Claiming this intellectual terrain for a genre currently so closely associated with spectacular, often jingoistic, blockbusters – with interstellar wars and alien invasions, superhero smackdowns and *kaiju* stompdowns, the end of the world and the zombies, cannibals, gun-toters and bondage gear that survive it – might seem presumptuous.

There is no good reason to assume that such feisty accoutrements cannot elaborate upon weightier matters, but some people think otherwise. For example, back in 1962, when new waves were breaking out all over, not just in France, but also in Brazil, Britain, Czechoslovakia, India, Iran and Japan, and in the pages of sf magazines and anthologies, JG Ballard’s ‘Which Way Inner Space?’ appeared in the pre-Michael Moorcock *New Worlds*. In this essay, arguably the leading sf writer of his generation insisted that the genre must abandon its pulp paraphernalia in order to fulfil its unique potential to address the contemporary moment and the coming world. It must become more oblique and understated. It must explore the inner world of subjective and synthetic psychologies and space-times. It must be able to tell the story of an amnesiac ‘lying on a beach and looking at a rusty bicycle wheel, trying to work out the absolute essence of the relationship between them’. In short, it must be more like the sf of the *nouvelle vague*, more like Alain Resnais’s *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), say, or Chris Marker’s *La jetée* (1962).

This brief essay will consider the ways in which actually-existing sf, wherever it falls between these extremes, explores the revolutionary decentring of humanity outlined by Freud.

In Basil Dearden’s *The Mind Benders* (1963), Dr Henry Longman risks his sanity by prolonged immersion in a sensory deprivation tank. Major Hall seizes the opportunity presented by Henry’s disorientation to conduct an experiment in brainwashing. He plants the idea that Henry, who is on the verge of collapse, never really loved his wife, and that Oonagh herself is unbalanced, jealous, hysterical, physically repulsive to him and ‘almost a tart’. Initially, Hall’s efforts appear to have no effect, but six months later, Oonagh’s bourgeois façade crumbles in the face of Henry’s remorseless condescension and abuse.

Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010) shares the conceit of manipulating behaviour by infiltrating a simple idea into the unconscious mind. Cobb’s team are hired to alter Fischer’s personality so that he will break up the global corporation he is about to inherit from his dying father. This involves plunging the sleeping Fischer into a succession of dreamscapes which sufficiently resemble reality – or a series of other movies – that he never realises he is being played. At the same time, it transpires that Cobb was once almost trapped in such a world when his wife started to believe it was real. He planted sufficient ontological doubt in her mind that, by committing (apparent) suicide, they could return to really real reality. However, her doubt persisted, leading her to commit (actual) suicide to escape a reality she believed illusory.

The end of *Inception* suggests Cobb is living in a dreamscape. This glib Phildickian ‘twist’ was already sufficiently hackneyed that Paul Verhoeven could not muster an ounce of conviction when he tacked it onto *Total Recall* (1990), and Steven Spielberg could not bring

himself to do it at the end of *Minority Report* (2002), although the final reel of the movie is so preposterous it must surely be a dream the protagonist, incarcerated in suspended animation, dreams. *The Mind Benders* is more successfully ambiguous. When Henry is confronted with incontrovertible evidence of how his personality was changed, he claims to have known all along *and* that Hall's dabbling with his mind just brought out feelings which he would never have otherwise allowed himself to express. This genuinely intriguing moment and its implications are buried under a melodramatic flurry as Oonagh goes into labour and Henry delivers their child. Everything implies psychological healing and reconciliation, but Dirk Bogarde's restrained performance in the film's final moments leaves open the possibility that Henry has merely reconciled himself to playing the role of loving husband again.

There is a similar moment in Hiroshi Teshigahara's *The Face of Another* (1966). After Okuyama's face is burned off in a factory accident, he is constantly swathed in bandages, like the Invisible Man. His wife cannot bring herself to respond to his sexual advances, so he persuades a psychiatrist/prosthetist to craft him a life-like mask – one that resembles not his pre-accident self but someone else entirely. The psychiatrist recognises in his handiwork a metaphor for the anomie and alienation of modern Japan; he has utopian fantasies about the mass production of such masks utterly transforming the world, making everyone a stranger and thus destroying morality. Meanwhile, the masked Okuyama seduces his wife so as to avenge her rejection of him and reassert his ownership over her. When he turns on her, furious at her infidelity, she is stunned. She always knew it was him, and thought that he wanted to her to collude in his masquerade.

The Mind Benders probes what it might mean to have a 'true self' by drawing attention to human intersubjectivity, how we are shaped by our interactions with others; even if we are unaware of such interpellations, we cannot avoid them. *The Face of Another* questions whether there even is a 'true self' behind the multiple social roles we play.

Sf often raises the question of memory so as to emphasise our tenuous hold on identity. In Alain Resnais's *Je t'aime je t'aime* (1968), failed suicide Claude Ridder becomes the subject of a time-travel experiment and finds himself oscillating around his memories of an unhappy affair. Scenes from his past flash by or linger; some of them play multiple times with small variations; some of them are perhaps more fantasy than reality, but his experience of them is no less real. The final quarter of Abel Ferrara's *New Rose Hotel* (1998) pushes this technique to a frantic extreme as the criminal protagonist, X, tries to figure out when Sandii, his femme fatale lover, betrayed him. Close-ups of his face are intercut with streams of surveillance footage and out-of-order flashbacks in which scenes play out differently than when they first appeared in the film: dialogue varies, alternate takes are deployed, scenes begin or end at different points. The viewer's memory is thus caught up in a loop similar to X's paranoid, or solipsistic, fretting. At the crucial juncture when a change in Sandii's expression signals her decision to betray him, X could not have seen her face. Is it only the audience who finds this out, leaving X spiralling inward without resolution? Or is X saving himself by fastening on that moment, even though he must just be making it up?

The ability to erase painful experiences and construct a comfortingly delusional self is at the centre of Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), in which Joel and Clementine both opt, after the bitter failure of their relationship, to edit the other out of their memories, little suspecting that they will meet and fall in love all over again. In Omar Naim's bleaker *The Final Cut* (2004), many people are unknowingly implanted when young with a device that records everything they see and hear. When someone dies, a cutter is hired to trawl through these recordings to create a memorial film – a 'rememory' – that replays the deceased's most treasured memories. Charles Bannister's memories reveal that he repeatedly raped his young daughter, but because cutters are sworn to absolute secrecy, there is nothing Alan Hakman can do with his discovery – especially as Bannister's widow, who was

complicit in the abuse, is only concerned with her dead husband's public image. By constructing a prosthetic memory of him, with all the authority its subjective viewpoint implies, she turns carefully selected fragments of his memory into a public relations exercise that directly shapes how he will be remembered.

As such films suggest, Bruce Mazlish's *The Fourth Discontinuity: The Co-Evolution of Humans and Machines* (1995) was right to add a fourth shock to humanity's self-regard, arguing that the distinction between humans and technology is not only false but also rapidly eroding. David Cronenberg maps the cybernetic and information revolution onto the drives and desires that shape human consciousness and reality. In *Videodrome* (1983), a video signal infects the jaded Max Renn with a brain tumour that induces hallucinations, programmes him as an assassin and triggers physical mutations (although Cronenberg's artful destabilisation of reality makes it impossible to tell how much of what we see actually happens). *eXistenZ* (1999) nests various alternative diegeses – some of them awash in psychosexual material, and none of them an entirely persuasive or stable version of reality – within one another, setting determinism and autonomy at loggerheads.

A whole slew of virtual reality fictions – including Rainer Werner Fassbinder's mini-series *Welt am Draht* (1973), Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* (1997), the Wachowski siblings *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003) and Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004) – similarly probe the relationships between volition and action, cause and effect. Oshii's *Avalon* (2001) directly connects global interconnectedness and social fragmentation to contemporary unease about and enthusiasm for simulacral media, foregrounding the emerging cultures of immersivity and gameplay. Doug Liman's *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) clearly derives its structure – in which Cage must relive the same day over and over again, rebooting it every time he dies in bloody combat – from computer gaming. Its rather smug conclusion, however, plays out like a conservative moral panic, implying that immersive media produce a solipsistic retreat from recognising that actions have consequences.

A more giddy decentering of humanity can be found in films that emphasise not technology but the body. In Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980), Eddie Jessup uses sensory deprivation tanks and powerful ancient hallucinogens to access memory stored on an atomic level, reaching back beyond organic life to the moments after the Big Bang when the first atoms were formed. Jessup is not restricted merely to observing the cheesily tasteless imagery that periodically fills the screen – his regression is physical, transforming him first into a prehomimid ape and then into some monstrous, contorted primordial being, reminding us, however garishly, that our bodies are made of stuff that once was not us and soon will not be again. Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975) features parasites – part aphrodisiac, part venereal disease – that invade human bodies, shattering dull bourgeois rectitude and unleashing human polymorphous perversity. But they do more than that. They adjust the balance between the ego and the unconscious, between reason and irrationality, implying that any such balance is contingent and impermanent. John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) goes further, imagining a Lovecraftian alien composed of irreconcilable parts. Grotesque and abject, it mimics and shapeshifts. It recapitulates elements of the other creatures, terrestrial and alien, it has encountered. Each particle of it is alive and capable of independent action, and we never encounter its original form, if it even has one. This profound corporeality, this roiling, fleshy bare life, is what we share with all organic being – the boundaries of our bodies are illusions, the film argues, as are the identities and the reason to which we cling as we cower before the abyss.