

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

Higher Callings

I think it was Andrew Cartmel who once described Gallifrey as a Grandfather Clock, that when the world finally ended it would slowly wind down, a polite whimper instead of a loud, uncouth bang.

Of course, that was before the planet was destroyed but the analogy has been on my mind recently, especially in the light of the ongoing hilarity in England over MP's expenses. As I write this the Chancellor is tipped to resign over an 'erroneous' expenses claim, ten members of parliament have already gone, the leader of the opposition has called for a General Election and a recent MORI poll revealed that the majority of people believe half the MPs in the country are corrupt. This is pretty much the definition of interesting times.

It's also incredibly fertile ground for science fiction. For the first time since the 1980s, the world is changing fast enough that we can write science fiction set now, in the real world. No metaphors, no thinly veiled takes on modern events, stories set now about now. William Gibson is already experimenting with this, as shown by books like *Spook Country* and there are others like Iain Banks' *The Business* but I think there's another stage yet to come, a stage where ideas like Gibson's are married to concepts like *The West Wing* to create something unique; contemporary science fiction dealing with the structures we've put in place to deal with the world, how we make them better and how we survive. Science fiction which is based on corruption and revulsion and human failing and uses those things to tell stories about heroism, altruism and compassion. Stories which exist as a polar opposite to the consumerist, self conscious chic of early Cyberpunk, instead focussing on people engaging with the world, solving problems, building the future instead of complaining that it's not got the right brand.

The world is an interesting place these days in the best and worst possible ways. But it has the potential to be so much more and science fiction has the potential to lead the way there.

FICTION

Storm CHASER

by craig pirrall

I sat in the living room of my apartment reading a famous dry story by a famous dead author. I drank scotch from a cheap glass. I tried, like so many others at that exact moment, not to think about war. The doorbell rang, and suddenly I didn't do any of those things any more.

When I opened the door a young man stood in the hallway holding up a bottle of liquid. Probably a few years younger than myself, I guessed his age at about thirty. He wore an inexpensive brown suit in need of pressing, a simple tie and a white shirt. He also wore an overly enthusiastic smile, marred by a jagged pink scar that ran horizontally across his face and through his mouth. It made him appear to frown no matter how eager his smile.

I wore a pair of boxers and a t-shirt. I did not wear a smile. I still held a glass of scotch.

"Sir!" the young man said, his energy intolerable considering the interruption. "Have you ever desired the forces of nature? Have you ever wanted to grasp the power and majesty of a storm in your hand?"

"No," I said, because at that time in my life, I hadn't.

"Well, today is your lucky day!" the man continued, evidently not completely comprehending my rejection. "Today, and one time only, I can offer you all of this wonderful power in a compact, easily transportable, and recyclable package!"

He thrust the bottle toward my face, and I instinctively took a step backwards. Inside the bottle a clear liquid boiled. It looked as though someone, perhaps someone in a cheap brown suit, had recently thrust a couple of Alka-Seltzer into the bottle and replaced the cap. Skeptically, I raised my eyebrows.

"Now, I know what you might be thinking, my friend! You might be thinking, what could I possibly want with a storm in a bottle? Am I right?"

"Not quite," I said, because what I actually thought was what kind of idiot tried to sell something like this door to door? And, what kind of idiot did he think me? And, perhaps even, should I slam the door in his face and go finish my scotch?

I didn't, you see. For two reasons. First, I was slightly curious where he intended to go with his spiel. And, secondly, I wanted a proper chance to laugh in his face and maybe even ridicule him a little before I sent him on his way. Callous, you ask? Maybe, but damn it, that's my God given right as an American.

"What can you do with a storm in a bottle?" he continued, further intensifying his unsettling smile-frown. His large teeth rose into swollen red gums. "Well, as if impressing your friends and your family wouldn't be enough! Make it rain when it's hot! Create the perfect mood for a romance! Use the raw power of the storm to get the day off from work."

"I work from home."

"You can use it to your advantage there, too! Want to stay home and get some work done? But maybe you have an engagement to attend to? Or a friend that wants your company, even though you really want to keep your nose to the grindstone? Bam! Storm in the bottle to the rescue! *I'm sorry, John Smith, I can't possibly come have a drink! The weather is just too treacherous!*"

"I'd like to have a drink right now." I glanced at my scotch.

"And who drinks scotch neat anymore?" he asked, shaking the bottle at me. "Don't you know scotch with a splash of water is all the rage? Tired? Let the sound of its gentle rains lull you to sleep! Bored? Let it loose in all its ferocity and watch as the sky dances with lightning, the trees bend with roaring gusts of wind, and the air booms with the percussions of thunder! Then turn on the TV, and chuckle to yourself as the confused weathermen try to rationalize their mistakes! The weather is in the palm of your hands! And it even has a pop cap, so you know it hasn't been tampered with!"

"And how much will this marvel of modern science cost me?"

"Oh!" the man said. "I never said it was science."

"Well, whatever. How much?"

"How much you got? Ha! I'm joking. Storm in a Bottle can be yours for the low, low price of thirty-nine ninety-five! Think of it! The power of a storm! Yours for a mere pittance of a donation!"

I had my fun then, though not as much as I might have led you to believe. I don't know; maybe the scar and his pitiful warped smile held my ridicule in check. I laughed lightly and smirked harmlessly, but in the end I said *no thanks* and gently closed the door. He still spoke as I closed it, like a telemarketer calling

out one last ploy as the receiver fell upon the cradle.

"It's a once in a lifetime opportunity!" came his muffled voice through my apartment door.

I have to say that this was my first experience with a professional stoop peddler, except for the occasional college kid trying to unload a high quality knife set, but probably never making back their initial investment. Always felt bad for them. Nice knives, though. Could cut right through a soup can, though I can't imagine why you'd be so inclined.

But a storm in a bottle? Please! What a crock!

I shook my head with frustration. I paced because I didn't know what else to do. I looked at my partially consumed scotch, completely certain that now I'd never be able to enjoy the rest of it. The nerve! To interrupt my evening with such nonsense.

Granted, I didn't have many other plans.

The phone rang and I answered it, casting another wistful glance at my drink and downing the remainder in exasperation.

"Mr. So-and-so?" the voice of the salesman asked. This time, he didn't sound so chipper. In fact, he sounded very tired. "Terribly sorry to disturb you again, but could you take a glance out of your window and check the weather?"

"How did you get my number?" I asked, moving quietly to the window. I parted the curtains just a little. I didn't know if he watched, or listened, but for some reason I didn't want him to know that I actually followed his orders.

"What's the weather like?" he asked.

Without answering I looked at the sky. Dark and clear, the moon hung large and full. Not a cloud obscured the thousands of stars that drifted lazily overhead like a sea of, well, stars. Even with the city lights they were visible; the night was that clear.

"Now watch," he said.

I heard the tamperproof cap pop up with a distinctively tinny sound as the vacuum released from the bottle. I almost laughed.

Whatever laugh began, however, caught in my throat as the stars suddenly began to fade. The moon disappeared behind a haze of clouds, and the city below became depthless and without form as the shadows and the highlights mingled to gray.

A crash of thunder filled the sky and lightning lit the room. Rain followed. Not just any rain, but a torrential downpour the likes of which I hadn't seen since I lived in Florida. Rain that could send shivers up a ship captain's spine. Rain that ended basketball games and brought traffic to a standstill.

My mouth hung open. I think my breathing stopped. I watched in amazement.

"Goodbye, Mr. So-and-so," I heard on the other end of the line, and as I tried to stop him from hanging up, as I called out to him in desperation, I heard the click of the receiver dropping down on the cradle.

Frantically I gathered every bottle, every milk jug, every plastic take-out container that littered my kitchen and swept them all into the recycling bin. I passed a number of neighbors at a pace that would've left Carl Lewis panting as I rushed with my precious garbage in my boxer shorts through the halls of the apartment building. I flew up the stairs and shot out onto the rooftop.

With great urgency I began setting the bottles and jugs and take-out containers on the tar roof. I grinned and rubbed my hands together as I watched my refuse chalices fill with this miracle-storm. Giggling to myself, my clothing became sodden with the liquid, and I could feel the power cleanse my flesh.

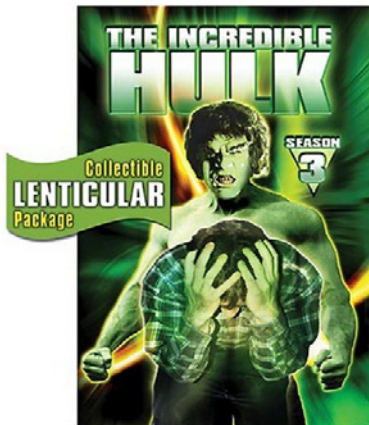
I searched through the recycle bin for the caps I could use to cover the bottles and seal the stuff inside. I would package it properly later; even get the fancy button caps that showed they hadn't been tampered with! Run some labels off at Kinkos.

Of course, later that night, and an eternity of nights to follow, I would find that I could only collect water.



The Incredible Hulk Season 3 DVD Box Set

reviewed by ro smith



Starring Bill Bixby, Lou Ferrigno
rrp £34.99

If you haven't read my previous two reviews of *The Incredible Hulk* (Seasons 1 and 2, *Hub* issues 73 and 80), you may be wondering why I'm bothering to review a random season from an old TV show that probably hasn't been aired anywhere near you for many, many moons. If you have, you may have deduced that I'm reviewing the whole TV show, season by season. But, you may now be thinking, *why?* Wouldn't it have been enough to just go: woo! There used to be this really awesome programme where a mild mannered scientist is on the run because he got a massive dose of radiation, and now when he's angry, he turns into a massive green monster and smashes things?

The simple answer is that I would find this very, very hard to do.

Any review I gave in that way would be woefully inadequate. This is because, despite the somewhat formulaic nature of the episodes and relative predictability of the plot, each season has a distinct character, and there are many more interesting things I could say about it than I could fit in to one measly review.

The third season's character is notably mixed. As the longest season, and the only complete season to lack a feature length opener, if sheer number of episodes is what you are after, then this is the season for you. There are some achingly beautiful moments, and there are some utterly banal, boring, predictable storylines that may make you wince. But hey, with bulk comes choice, and you don't need to watch them all. There's enough of the good shit here to keep me coming back, and I have all five seasons.

Although the first episode isn't feature length, I think it was intended to open the season with a bang. In one of those entertainingly convenient coincidences, our unfortunate scientist, David Banner, just happens to be in the right place and time to use his munchkin physician skills on rock star Lisa Swan, when she crashes her car. This gives him, and the episode, an in to the exciting world of rock stardom. Not to mention some tiresome moralising about the dangers of our kids being lured away from beautiful, thoughtful, folksy music to the violent, primal, and thoroughly commercialised world of stadium rock. This is an irritating, occasional undercurrent in the season, returned to particularly in episode 16, which gives a very shallow presentation of the dangers of biker gangs, and what they can do to good, clean kids.

But enough muttering and grumbling. The glamour of having a rock star character in your series is always a risk. *Lost*'s Dominic Monaghan has done unusually well, going from hobbit to super-star rocker twice over, making a creditable appearance in the similarly awesome *Chuck* earlier this year as the drugged up Tyler Martin. Mackenzie Phillips (Lisa Swan) wouldn't give Monaghan a run for his money, but she makes a passable effort. The lightning rods that are supposed to spice up her show, and form a major plot point, are unlikely, and to modern eyes they make a very cheesy special effect, but they are a product of their times. And seeing the Hulk on drugs (illicitly slipped into David's drink by Lisa's jealous brother) is an entertaining enough concept to make up for a lot.

Unfortunately, after this, there are a number of under-developed and disappointingly obvious episodes that make for an underwhelming start. 'Blind Rage' is an utterly predictable and unimaginative critique of conservative and incompetent military attitudes that would make the most tired and hackneyed *M*A*S*H* plot embarrassed. Even Blind-Hulk couldn't save me from boredom, and I'm pretty easy to please where the Hulk is concerned. 'Brain Child' was a risk that didn't pay off. I can dig precocious children (I like Wesley Crusher, so *there*). I eat up your intelligent and sentient computer like nobody's business. But both of these elements make the implausibility meter tick, and together with the Hulk, I'm afraid they required a lot more in the way of thoughtful development than there was room for here. Although more entertaining than 'Blind Rage', it suffered from the same 'insert 70s TV Show plot element here' syndrome, and I was left dissatisfied, and with a very bland aftertaste in my mouth.

And yet, as I say, the season is very mixed, and there's a lot to recommend it, despite these real nothings. 'Homecoming' could have been awful, but fortunately wasn't. As the name suggests, David feels drawn to come visit his family home at thanksgiving. If you're anything like me, you might have taken the time to wonder at David's complete desertion of his family in his years of wondering. Isn't he at all concerned about how hard it must be for them to think him dead? Of course, David is presented throughout as a reserved, introverted man, so it isn't entirely implausible, but it does seem somewhat odd that he didn't pause to say something about what a shame it is that his father and sister cannot be there to see his remarriage in season two. But perhaps that happens off screen. In any case, if you found a moment

to ask questions like these alongside the general hulk-smash rampage, this episode provides some surprisingly satisfactory answers.

I confess, I was steeling myself for a cringeworthy episode. I have a low threshold of tolerance for watching characters negotiate difficult and embarrassing social situations on screen. Fortunately, though, the reunions were very deftly handled. Diana Muldaur (Dr Helen Banner) pulls it in as Banner's scientist sister, and the father/son conflict outlined to explain David's distance satisfies that worry relatively effectively, and for the most part stays on the right side of cheesy. The Evil Corporation sub-plot is a tad predictable, but I forgive it.

What's really nice about this episode is the beautiful underscoring of the similarities and differences between Banner and his erstwhile pursuer, Jack McGee (John Colvin). Again, the closing tableau (and yes, you should probably skip to the next paragraph if you don't want to be spoiled) of Jack sitting down to thanksgiving dinner with David's family, whilst Banner moves on down the road, alone, once more – this could be painfully obvious. Colvin's always beautiful and understated performance saves it though. We feel the poignancy and the irony palpably as Jack comments on how sad it is for the people who must be alone on thanksgiving. Because it isn't just that David must be alone whilst Jack sits down with his family to the meal his sister cooked for him; Colvin makes the scene about so much more. It is clear that it is Jack who would usually be alone on thanksgiving, whilst David is a man who naturally draws people in to befriend him, and is forced by his curse, and by Jack himself, to leave them behind. Similarly, as explored in 'Proof Positive', it is Jack's obsession with the Hulk that has isolated him from his own interpersonal relationships; and yet it is also that obsession that has brought him to a family meal in the Banner household on this night.

As ever, I'm drawn to the episodes that explore the McGee/Banner relationship. 'Proof Positive' is one of the more successful examples I've seen of a clips show that obfuscates its money-saving purpose in a genuinely interesting exploration of character and motivation. An exploration that is drawn upon again, with great subtlety, in 'The Psychic'.

'The Psychic' is the real gem of the season. Bixby is at his absolute best, here, as Banner is confronted with the possibility that the Hulk may have actually killed. His inarticulate horror at the point of realisation is a moment of acting truth, and purity of connection with the character. The episode is deserving of attention in and of itself, but an extra note is added by the fact that the young 'psychic', who recognises Banner for what he is, played by Bixby's real life ex-wife. Bixby was keen to have an episode where they played opposite to each other for the sake of their son – to show that despite their parting of ways, his mother and father could still work together and get along. Certainly, they work together very well on screen, although on first watching, without this knowledge, I should never have guessed that they had been husband and wife. There is none of the usual romantic subplot for Banner here, and the connection of shared aching loneliness of the characters works all the better for it.

McGee faces a frustrating episode. The psychic, Annie, calls him in initially after a chance encounter with David frightens her with visions of violence, and her landlord's demands for rent make that \$10,000 reward very appealing. But on coming to know Banner better, she changes her mind, and McGee is left without a lead. The tension heightens as another vision predicts McGee's death as McGee continues to investigate the Hulk sighting on his own. I can't quite bring myself to spoil it for you by detailing the moments of masterly writing and tight acting that make this episode the gem that it is. What can I say: buy the DVD! I'm not sure I'd go so far as to say the episode justifies the £34.99 it'll set you back to buy the DVD at RRP, but despite the season's mixed nature, there's enough quality in enough of the other episodes to make it worth your while, and there are good deals to be had if you shop around.

This season is a must have for the collector, but it will reward the casual nostalgic and the genuine n00b as well.

FEATURES

Big Screen Future

by *alasdair stuart*

2. Dark City

'Now you're getting it, John. Maybe one day I'll be working for you.'

There are a thousand stories in the naked city, and each one of them will be lived by it's inhabitants over and over again. The mean streets shift and warp, names change, streets change but the Shell Beach

Express never changes and the Shell Beach Express never stops. Welcome to Dark City, leave everything at the door. Including yourself.

Alex Proyas' film is as mutable as the city it describes, a story that steals the wallets of film noir and Golden Age science fiction whilst they're not looking and creates something entirely new, entirely different. It's Bosch with better urban planning, the story of a lonely man walking down the mean streets who may very well be mean himself.

The story, the world itself in fact, is a puzzle and as a result individual will is second to what roles the characters are obligated to play. John Murdoch is not so much Rufus Sewell's character as the name he wears to enter the world of the city, as vital and as irrelevant as the clothes he's wearing. He's not just a murderer but The Murderer, the boogeyman robbed of everything but his name and no longer sure he's prepared to accept his role in society. Murdoch is a character in search of a different story and the people he encounters are either stereotypes or on the verge of stepping out into the light. The Doomed Hooker, the Lunatic Who Knows The Truth, the Friendly Relative, the Penitent Wife, the Dogged Cop all take their turn in the spotlight and even the lesser characters aren't ignored. Murdoch's belligerent landlord becomes a friendly news vendor, a poor couple become millionaires overnight and the City itself shifts and alters, always growing, always changing, always there. Identity is irrelevant and unnecessary, because the City and what lies beneath it is too big, too elemental. This isn't so much a story about the mean streets as it is one exploring why they're mean and the end result is a dizzying sprint through and behind the scenes of a story that is flimsy and deliberately so.

The opening narration manages to almost completely negate this atmosphere, as Kiefer Sutherland, doing his best Peter Lorre impersonation as Doctor Schriever lays the plot out. The film, certainly on a first viewing, is infinitely more rewarding if this is skipped past and it's no accident that the director's cut removes it.

Regardless, the world that Murdoch and Schriever inhabit, essentially alone, is one straight out of nightmare, a World's Fair that's curdled and stagnated leaving a trail of empty automats and narrow streets behind it. Proyas lets himself run wild as buildings sprout like plants, staircases expand and at one point Murdoch escapes the Strangers on a rapidly growing chimney. The world is a stage and Murdoch and Schriever are the only two actors who've seen a script. Even Richard O'Brien's Mr Hand, the Stranger who takes on Murdoch's memories to find him can't fit in here, his fake memories too real, too enticing to be ignored and yet built, like everything else in the city, on sand.

Like all puzzles, the answers that lie at the edge of Dark City are, in a sense, a little disappointing. The journey is more fun than the destination in stories like this and whilst Proyas' hat wearing Strangers are a simply, nightmarish image they become less threatening the more we know about them. The Strangers' best moments occur in passing, Mr Quick's first murder and the passing reference to how they use the dead as vessels being the best examples. The longer they're on screen the less credible they become and it's no accident that the film's weakest sequence is the telekinetic duel between Murdoch and Mr Book, the leader of the Strangers. It's necessary, both for Murdoch to come into his own and so the final scene can take place but it remains the least interesting sequence in the film.

The film's most interesting sequence follows, as Murdoch, in full control of his abilities thanks to Dr Schriever, changes the city, adding Shell Beach and, at long last, the sun. The film closes with Murdoch and his wife, along against an impossibly blue sky and tranquil ocean, beginning the relationship they've had at least once before all over again. On one level, it's Murdoch's just reward for the hell he's suffered through but on another it's genuinely sinister. The city has exchanged a group of shadowy architects for one who lives out in the open but whose decisions are still influenced by his own desires. The mean streets may not be mean anymore but that's only because Murdoch wants them to change. Just like the Strangers, he's in charge and just like the Strangers, no one knows the truth.

Dark City is exceptional, it's that simple. Proyas juggles the components of story with elegance and grace to create a film which is as timeless and as versatile as any of the classics of film noir or any other genre. Visually stunning and intellectually deep, it's a film as intricate and as beautifully designed as the clock at the heart of the city, each scene, each line moving the clock hands a few seconds closer to the city's first dawn.



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