

# Christopher Priest and the Persistence of the New Wave

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Any attempt to date the New Wave is always going to be imprecise because it depends on the context within which it is being discussed. One approach would be to link it to Moorcock's editorship of the monthly version of *New Worlds* from 1964-70 and the sense of a shared concept of the multiverse that surrounded it (as exemplified by Moorcock's encouragement of other members of the New Wave to write stories using his character Jerry Cornelius). The quarterly successor to the magazine which ran from 1971-76 might also be regarded as integrally connected to the New Wave. However, other approaches might seek to define the New Wave in relation to literary history. In terms of the development of British SF, it comes between the disaster fiction of John Wyndham and John Christopher, which dominated the 1950s, and the New Space Opera by writers such as Iain M Banks, Colin Greenland and Ken MacLeod that emerged in the 1980s; and can be linked to both. For example, J.G. Ballard's first novel, *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), was an example – albeit extreme – of that type of disaster fiction which his fellow *New Worlds* writer, Brian Aldiss would characterise as 'cosy catastrophes' in which 'the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off' (Aldiss and Wingrove 2001: 280). Banks and MacLeod read and discussed the quarterly *New Worlds* while at school together in the early 1970s and Greenland wrote the first study of the New Wave, *The Entropy Exhibition* (1983), which was based on his PhD.

Alternatively, the New Wave can be seen as a response to the obvious shortcomings of postwar British Social Realism that became manifest in the late 1950s and early 1960s by when it had become clear, as Angus Wilson observed, that it was generally less 'real' than the modernist works of Joyce and Woolf it was aiming to replace (Wilson 1983: 133). In this context, the turn to a form of SF which was prepared to renegotiate the aesthetic terms of the postwar settlement by 'the liberation of fancy, the liberation of imagination, the liberation from the real world around us' (Wilson 1983b: 243) represented a major response to an ongoing crisis of representation that could be traced back to before the First World War. As Paul March-Russell argues, contra Roger Luckhurst, the uneven cultural moment of the New Wave traces 'not the many deaths of sf but modernism' (March-Russell 2015: 10) and the process by which the male gaze of the latter gives way to 'the [hitherto] absent female

perspective' (March-Russell 2015: 152) which would increasingly come to characterise the former from the 1970s onwards. This evolutionary jump is recapitulated in Christopher Priest's most recent novel, *The Adjacent* (2013), which closes with its male protagonist looking through the viewfinder of his quantum camera and taking rapid photographs of a beautiful woman while following her through adjacent parallel realities into a different, less-dystopian version of the future than the ones portrayed throughout the novel. This is no celebration of the male gaze, but rather an inversion of that gaze from passive acceptance of the symbolic order to a creative receptivity to randomness that transforms a tool of subjugation into a means of entering the space of the female imaginary made actual.

*The Adjacent* illustrates how science fiction characteristically draws on science – in this case, quantum physics and the associated idea of parallel universes – to conceptualise social change. According to quantum physics, particles can exist in superposition, which is to say in more than one place or state at the same time, and this can be mathematically described by equations that represent what is known as the 'waveform' state. The discovery of the waveform in the first half of the twentieth century created a problem because, on the one hand, it invalidated the laws of cause and effect on which classical physics and Newtonian mechanics were predicated, but, on the other hand, the old laws remained demonstrably valid for most practical purposes. The solution devised to this problem, known as the Copenhagen Interpretation, was the idea that if something is not being observed, then it behaves as a waveform, but if it is being observed, then its waveform collapses so that we see things in only one place at a time. The point of Schrödinger's famous thought experiment concerning a cat placed in a box with a quantum trigger that might or might not lead to it being killed in some way – for example, by releasing poison – was to illustrate that according to the logic of the Copenhagen Interpretation the cat must simultaneously be both alive and dead as long as the box is not opened and observation has therefore not occurred. The Copenhagen Interpretation is therefore refuted on the grounds that it would be absurd to insist that a cat could be both alive and dead at the same time.

However, the example of 'Schrödinger's cat' can also be used to illustrate the concept of the existence of parallel universes because one way of explaining the uncertainty of knowing whether the cat is alive or dead is to hypothesise that, after the first second of the experiment, there will be two parallel universes in one of which the cat will be alive and in the other of

which it will be dead. As the mathematician and physicist Max Tegmark explains, observing the existence of the waveform does not just mean that microscopic particles are superimposed in two different states but also the mind of the observer. Tegmark gives the example of an experiment in which a playing card is balanced on its edge and viewed by an observer who will win \$100 if it falls face-side up. According to quantum theory, it falls down in both directions at once, in superposition. The point is that it is not just the card that is in superposition but also the state of mind of the observer, which is simultaneously happy and unhappy. That is to say, the experiment is basically a non-lethal version of the Schrödinger's cat experiment, with the observer in the role of the cat. There's only one wave function and one quantum reality but in practice it is as though our universe has split into two parallel universes. At the end of the experiment, there will be two different versions of the observer, each subjectively feeling just as real as the other, but completely unaware of each other's existence (Tegmark 2014: 189). This is the idea that is the basis of the 'many worlds' interpretation and the idea, which is now widely accepted in theory at least, that parallel universes exist.

Radical indeterminacy, therefore, becomes the basis for apprehending new realities, which, from the perspective of sf, offer new social possibilities. The use of scientific concepts to argue for social ends is often deeply problematic but that does not mean that it is necessarily inappropriate to employ such concepts imaginatively, as Priest does. Indeed, it is doubtful that science and imagination can be separated from each other in any meaningful way. After all, what is the story of Schrödinger's cat other than a form of sf? Therefore, this article will suggest that ideas from quantum physics provide a way of conceptualising the renegotiation of realism and modernism that characterised the writing of the New Wave in the 1960s and early 1970s as an ongoing cultural 'waveform' that still persists to this day. Although other writers will be mentioned, I use Priest as my main example because he is one of the two major authors – the other is M. John Harrison – whose career spans from the New Wave to the present. Moreover, Priest was one of the first to apply the term 'New Wave' to the fiction being published by *New Worlds* under Moorcock's editorship. As he explains, the term was being used to describe fanzines such as Charles Platt's *Point of View*:

I was by then a committed filmgoer, and was attracted to the French Nouvelle Vague (as well as other European film-makers). I felt the same stirrings of anti-establishment impatience as Godard, Chabrol, Truffaut, etc. When fanzines such as Charles Platt's

appeared they were dubbed “New Wave”, which seemed to me a bit of a misnomer, but I recognized (or thought I recognized) some of the same spirit in *New Worlds*, and felt the label was better applied there. I think the article in which I expressed this was clumsily written (I was still barely out of my teens), but the idea caught on at once.

I think the qualification from ‘I recognised’ to ‘or thought I recognised’ is particularly telling – there is an elaborate kind of movement there which indicates 50 years of history and a refusal to be constrained within a set of parameters which he helped create. This is also visible in the way that Priest has republished his own early short fiction as a collection, *Ersatz Wines* (2008), framed both within and against the context of the New Wave. As he notes, ‘in 1966, *New Worlds* represented the cutting edge’ (Priest 2008: 118). What he means by this is implied by a discussion of reading J.G. Ballard in comparison to Isaac Asimov: ‘Ballard’s plot were weird and ambiguous, his characters highly stylized, his prose mysterious, beautiful and obsessive. His ideas involved non-Asimovian matters like memory, identity, existence, time, entropy, art, surrealism. Once read, a Ballard story could never be forgotten’ (Priest 2008: 22). Asimov was writing about ‘technology, empires, commerce and power’ and the sort of future that Priest ‘was desperately hoping to avoid’, whereas

Ballard, on the other hand, was radical, risky, open-source. He gave disturbing unusual insights into the present day and the future he dreamed about was one in which the images of Dali, the ideas of McLuhan and the language of the space age would be employed. He unlocked doors that no one had even known were there before. (Priest 2008: 23)

Priest’s own fiction began to appear from 1966 onwards and he was to sell two stories to *New Worlds* in this period. The first of these, ‘The Ersatz Wine’, shared cover billing on *New Worlds* 171 (March 1967) with Brian Aldiss’s *Report on Probability A* and Ballard’s ‘The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race’. Priest’s story was an attempt to emulate the effects of the New Wave while writing about the artificiality of the modern world around him. Its general flavour is summed up by its closing one line paragraph: “‘My life,” said the Actor, “is a constant lie”” (Priest 2008: 118). ‘Conjugation’, written after ‘The Ersatz Wine’ but published first, consists of a sequence of disparate and enigmatic fragments. In retrospect, Priest judges that while *New Worlds* provided a welcome and necessary break from the tired and derivative nature of most of the sf that preceded it, its problem lay in the fact that it ‘soon became a self-sustaining and self-referential school of trendy attitudes’ (Priest 2008: 119) and his own stories contributed to

that result: 'It was actually remarkably easy to turn out stuff like 'Conjugation', while conventional prose was still full of difficulties' (Priest 2008: 126).

Although he accepted 'Conjugation' for publication, Moorcock did suggest to Priest that it might not be the right direction for his writing to take. At the time, Priest thought this a bit unreasonable given that *New Worlds* was encouraging exactly such experimentation but later he came to see it as valuable advice for reasons discussed below. In any case, he did move on and was never 'tempted to try anything like it since' (Priest 2008: 127). However, it was exactly this question of the relationship of style to content which came to define the New Wave, especially for Americans, who, as Greenland argues, were outside the context which produced the movement and therefore dependent on trying to extract 'a New Wave formula' from the manner in which the original texts were written (Greenland 1983: 166). Greenland supports this argument by quoting from Priest's description of this formula in his lengthy article on the New Wave for the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1978):

The writing would be obscure to one degree or another. There would be experiments with the actual prose: with grammar, with viewpoint, with typography. There would be reference to all sorts of eclectic sources: philosophy, rock music, newspaper articles, medicine, politics, automobile specification etc. There would be a 'down-beat' or tragic resolution to many stories, if any resolution at all. There would frequently be explicit descriptions of sexual activity, and obscenities were freely used. (Priest 1978: 170; quoted in Greenland 1983: 166)

Significantly, Greenland draws on Priest's analysis to describe the emphasis on style within the New Wave, which he attributes squarely to Moorcock, as a source of misdirection that obscured the original purpose, which had been to encourage writers to liberate themselves from the 'pulp magazine idiom' by finding 'an individual approach to writing speculative fiction' (Priest 1978: 170; quoted in Greenland 1983: 167; see also Priest 1979: 199). When combined with Priest's insights into why reading Ballard was so exciting in the 1960s, this insistence on the importance of the individual approach can be seen as stemming from the belief that it is the individual writer who, once freed of obligatory genre trappings, is best placed to open new doors of possibility. Reducing the New Wave to a formula occluded this individual approach and thereby destroyed the potential for writers to make it new. Arguably, therefore, the New Wave ended at the point where it became describable as a style. However, as Priest's retrospective account of writing his own stories for *New Worlds* suggests, in some respects it had already reached this point in 1966.

Viewed from this context, Moorcock's misdirecting of readers by emphasising style might be seen as a deliberate manoeuvre to maintain space for those particular individual writers – Aldiss, Ballard and some others – who really were making it new but needed the protective cover afforded by the idea of the New Wave. Hence, Moorcock's private advice to Priest at the time not to focus on the formula; advice which Priest 'found, in the end, extremely useful' (Priest 2008: 119). Similarly, Priest might be perceived as continuing this misdirection by beginning his account of the New Wave with the hyperbolic claim that 'the movement as a whole can now be seen as the single most important development of the science fiction genre' (Priest 1978: 164). In fact, his article is quite meticulous in exposing that 'much of the New Wave was unsuccessful' (Priest 1978: 173), with the one main exception being that it made it possible the subsequent situation in which avant-garde work such as Ballard's *Crash* (1973) or Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975) could be published as sf. For Priest, therefore, the main point of the New Wave was that it potentially opened a path for those like him who were 'in it, but not of it' (Priest 2008: 120) to attempt to break fully free of the constraints of genre sf by moving beyond even the new possibilities that the New Wave had opened up. The concluding paragraph of his article is accordingly ambitious:

The motives behind the New Wave remain as valid today as they were in 1964, when Moorcock took over *New Worlds*. The idiom of science fiction is no less strong; now is simply broader in its scope. How much longer need the idiom continue? That will probably be the next revolution. (Priest 1978: 173)

Subsequently, 'Priest's abandonment of science fiction', to quote the title of a 1986 article by Nicholas Ruddick in *Modern Fiction Studies*, and his pronouncements on the topic achieved a certain notoriety in the field. In the introduction to his edited collection *Christopher Priest: The Interaction* (2005), Andrew M. Butler considers whether 'someone saying things like that has elected to leave the ghetto behind, like a British Kurt Vonnegut' (Butler 2005: 7). However, after considering Priest's continued relationship with sf and the fact that his fiction consistently engages with science-fictional ideas, Butler argues that Priest's work can be read as an 'interaction' with sf in which 'meaning is not necessarily to be found in choosing one state over another, but rather in the interaction by the individual between the two' (Butler 2005: 8). One way to think about this interaction, which Priest embodies, would be to think about it in terms of Slavoj Žižek's concept of the parallax view as a perspective which does not reveal subjective difference so much as 'an "ontological" shift in the object itself' (Žižek

2006: 17). In other words, the significance of Priest's tangential relationship to sf is not what it tells us about him but what it reveals about the plural nature of reality, and the possibilities it affords human beings, which is the subject of both Priest and sf in general. As Žižek explains, the 'Real' which is revealed by a parallax perspective is not fixed and familiar 'but the hard bone of contention which pulverises the sameness into the multitude of appearances' (Žižek 2006: 26).

I have argued elsewhere that Priest's fiction employs something like the Freudian psychoanalytic technique of 'repeating and working through' to place a 'repetitive strain' on the 'reality principle' and so create new possibilities 'as he shows the struggles of his characters to write themselves as beings in their own worlds rather than let themselves be written as things in someone else's' (Hubble 2005b: 47). However, his fiction can also be understood in terms of the ideas of quantum physics, which directly or indirectly underpin much of his fiction, as challenging the limiting constraints of consensus reality. As discussed above, the Copenhagen Interpretation was a fudge which allowed Physicists to pretend the waveform had collapsed so that they could pretend that things were in only one place at a time – in accordance with the classical laws of physics – so that they could continue to do experiments and make measurements even though they were perfectly aware that the waveform does not collapse. The idea of 'consensus reality' functions in a similar manner to the Copenhagen Interpretation as a means of reconciling our subjective internal modelling of the perceptible world around us with an ultimately random and unknowable external physical reality. On one level, therefore, consensus reality is the agreed criteria by which we align our internal reality with one another so that we are not swept away by the randomness of external reality but it also has the ideological function of preventing us from taking advantage of the randomness of external reality in order to reconfigure social relations differently. There is clearly a tension between the extremes of unliveable complete randomness and totalitarian social stasis.

If we think about this relationship between internal, consensus and external reality in terms of magic, as Priest does in his 1995 novel *The Prestige*, then we can see that the external world of random quantum physics, where things can simultaneously be in two places at once is inherently magical, whereas collapsed-waveform consensus reality is by definition not magical since it only exists by virtue of excluding any random unpredictability. In order for a stage magician to really perform magic, they would somehow have to allow the waveform to

function in front of the audience without that audience's observation causing the waveform to collapse. The only way of doing this is would be to misdirect the audience so that they are looking the wrong way when the actual magic happens. While stage magic does not involve actual magic, it is nonetheless dependent on misdirection and Priest makes this comparison explicit in *The Prestige*, in which in order to perform 'transported man' tricks, one of the rival magicians is using stage magic while the other is performing a version of what Tegmark calls 'quantum suicide' (Tegmark 2014: 216; see Hubble 2015: 157-160). While 'it is evident that Priest is using the example of the stage magician's use of misdirection, to postpone waveform collapse long enough for the trick to be enacted, as a metaphor for the writer's use of suspension of disbelief' (Hubble 2015: 160), it is also the case that this suspension of disbelief can be seen as functioning as a suspension of the Copenhagen Interpretation. That is to say the stage magician is able to allow the waveform to function in the open rather than in secret. Therefore, the world is changed and the magic *is* real in effect. *The Prestige* does not therefore just indicate how writing is performative in the sense that it causes things to happen in the world but also indicates how that might function at a quantum level – as precisely a negotiation of the tension between stasis and complete randomness – by causing a kind of interrupted collapse of the waveform that enables the world to be changed.

For similar reasons, scientists such as Roger Penrose have posited that consciousness and memory are themselves quantum processes although current thinking suggests this is probably not the case. In fact the evolutionary utility of consciousness is possibly precisely that it does tend to collapse the random universe into a consensus reality which allows people to work together and develop societies. However, on the other hand, creativity, as practiced in all forms of art including writing, depends like stage magic on suspending waveform collapse sufficiently to make something new happen. Sustained repetition of these processes, sustained 'making it new', will eventually result in a collective acclimatisation to this 'newness' which will in turn alter consensus reality. This can be seen historically on all sorts of levels. One of the more seismic shifts, for example, was the development of photography in the nineteenth century, which eventually altered human perception in the ways described by Walter Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction':

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject [...]



The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (Benjamin 1992: 227-8)

The writing movement that embraced 'making it new' as its creed was modernism, which by focusing on self-reflexivity opened up new subjectivities and hence new possibilities for social being. Arguably, one of the new possibilities it enabled was the social democratic settlement that came into place in 1945, a form of consensus reality that understandably, given the disruption of the war years, favoured stability and consequently privileged an aesthetic of social realism over modernism. However, by the late 1950s, it was clear that postwar British realism had run out of steam, as Angus Wilson noted in 1958: 'Without in any way departing from my adherence to the post-war social novel, I fear that the central characters are inferior in reality and depth to Virginia Woolf's, though their problems and values seem to me of greater significance' (Wilson 1983a: 133). In other words, post war writing was less real, because less in tune with the random nature of external reality, than the modernist writing it sought to displace. The problem which had dogged the twentieth century, the crisis of representation, which was a post-Darwin, post-Freud, post-Einstein crisis of realism, continued without solution. By the 1960s, Wilson was advocating the 'use of old forms in a new way', or pastiche:

Some of the best work of this kind using old forms as pastiche has been done in science fiction. I tried to do this in some degree in the last half of *The Old Men in the Zoo*, and there are people, Anthony Burgess in particular, who have used science fiction, I think, very seriously. (Wilson 1983b: 243)

This was the basis of Wilson's support for the New Wave in general and Moorcock in particular. Similarly, John Fowles was a staunch advocate of Priest in the 70s. In both cases, these mainstream literary figures understood how the interrogative stance towards reality of the New Wave and the avant-garde sf that succeeded it, was central to twentieth-century English literature. The exclusion of works and writers purely on the grounds of their being sf made no sense to them for the simple reason that any such an exclusion makes a nonsense of the postwar history of English literature, which was shaped by speculative writers such as Naomi Mitchison and the Nobel Prize-winner Doris Lessing. Writers like Wilson and Fowles knew this because they also wrote speculative fiction such as the former's *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961) and the latter's *The Magus* (1965). Such postwar speculative fiction, including the New Wave, needs to be incorporated within the official history of English Literature so that it actually makes sense. However, any such incorporation runs the danger of rendering these

texts subject to a kind of literary ‘Copenhagen Interpretation’ which shuts down all the possibilities they open up. In this respect, the fate of the surrealist movement as described by Fredric Jameson, sounds an ominous note of warning:

The stunning and depressing historical irony of the surrealist movement was that this pre-eminent anti-aesthetic vanguard movement, which despised Literature and aimed at the radical transformation of daily life itself, became the very paradigm of Literature and literary production in the Western mainstream high-cultural tradition. (Jameson 2005: 317)

It is this danger of being categorised, and therefore contained, as a literary movement which motivates the ‘misdirection’ of Moorcock and Priest in their descriptions of the New Wave. Their point is to draw attention away from the transformative interrogation of reality that was being conducted by some of its authors and continued throughout the 1970s in works such as Priest’s own novels, *Indoctrinaire* (1970), *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972) and *A Dream of Wessex* (1977). As Paul Kincaid notes, these novels and also Priest’s later fiction often turn on the ways Priest finds ‘to cut his characters off from consensus reality’ (Kincaid 2008: 90), with varying effects. While *Fugue for a Darkening Island* can be read positively as a rejection of the artificial ‘normality’ of postwar Britain, which is ‘dragged kicking and screaming into the world historical current’ (Hubble 2005a: 101), it also documents ‘the collapse of a counter-cultural ideal of the open society and the rise of ultra-right politics’ (March-Russell 2015: 145). In fact, these novels in general and *A Dream of Wessex* in particular, with its competing visions of socialist utopia and proto-Thatcherite dystopia, serve as ‘a prescient demonstration that postwar Britain could break down in two ways’ (Hubble 2014: 64).

That Britain did actually go down the Thatcherite route had an effect on the subsequent development of sf. While the New Wave, part of the 1960s reaction to the complete social stasis of 1950s Britain, tended to promote radical indeterminacy, British sf in the twenty-first century, written against a background of atomising neoliberalism, tends – sometimes, at least – to privilege stasis. For example, both Mary Gentle’s *Ash* (2000) and Adam Robert’s *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2009) turn on characters who, unlike Priest’s magicians, collapse the waveform of quantum randomness in order to create a safe space that ensures continued human existence in the face of the threat of hostile radical indeterminacy. The central event of *Ash* is

a fifteenth-century hunt in which the successor of the dying Duke of Burgundy is selected on the grounds of their ability to catch a mythical white hart and reduce it to the state of reality. It is this capacity which maintains Burgundy as the sole guarantor of stable human society. Although, it should be noted that this hunt is won by a woman, Floria, hence becoming the Duchess of Burgundy, indicating that Gentle is predicating this stability on a non-patriarchal organisation of society. As I have argued elsewhere:

The idea that this ability to reinforce a liveable consensus reality is a rare human attribute is not merely a consequence of the plot but a central aspect of the novel's logic, which is critically concerned with the collective capacity of humanity for creating chaos. (Hubble 2015: 165)

A similar dynamic, although framed in a completely different context, inhabits Roberts's *Yellow Blue Tibia*, set in the 1980s Soviet Union, but beginning with an opening chapter in which Stalin gathers together Soviet science fiction writers following the Second World War and commands them to create an imaginary scenario in which aliens threaten the Earth, which is designed to aid the cause of World Communism, only to rescind this decision a few weeks later and command them to forget about it. When years later, one of these writers, Shvorecky, meets another, Frenkel, who is now working for the KGB, and is told that these events they made up decades before are coming true, he is understandably skeptical, especially in a society where deviation from official thinking is punishable. However, he increasingly finds himself in situations which do not correspond with the binary logic we unthinkingly accept as part of reality:

There is either something in a room, or there isn't something in a room, it can't be both (62)

I could not see the future. Time doesn't work that way. Time runs forward. Or it runs backward. One of the two. But it must do one of those things, and there cannot be a third thing it does. (64)

These lines, which come relatively early in the novel, follow Schrödinger's refutation of the Copenhagen Interpretation on the grounds that the cat must be either dead or alive but can't be both. As the novel progresses, however, Shvorecky becomes less certain: 'I was either dead or I was alive or there was some third option' (221). By the end of the novel, when he has finally come to grips with the notion of parallel universes and the fact that a fleet of

UFOs are massed in the sky ready to invade Earth, he learns that it is only his American girlfriend, Dora, and her unusual capacity to collapse the waveform, who is keeping chaos at bay. As another of the original SF writers, Asterinov, who turns out to have been an alien all along, leads Skvorecky to safety from Frenkel, the KGB agent, the latter gives vent to his frustration at the indeterminacy of the universe and its capacity to thwart the creation of a perfect, social structure:

‘Copenhagen fuck!’ Frenkel slurred. ‘I wish we’d written that the aliens *blew up* Copenhagen, all those years ago. Fucking Copenhagen.’  
‘A blameless town,’ I objected.  
‘Blameless? *Fucking quantum* physics.’  
‘Destroying Copenhagen would hardly alter the facts of the quantum universe,’ said Nikolai Nikolaivitch Asterinov. (314)

The novel exposes how the collective propensity to believe in certain realities, such as the existence of UFOs or the desirability of a Communist social system, brings those ‘consensus realities’ into existence. However, its response to these conditions is ironic as though the only possible response to the vicissitudes of human consciousness is to shrug one’s shoulders. The novel ends with Skvorecky finally convinced by an alien that he can live safely with Dora in a world in which UFOs are not accepted as real. It is as though Philip K Dick’s *Time Out of Joint* (1959) ended with Ragle Gumm choosing to return to the conformist 1950s-America pocket universe that he has spent the whole novel trying to escape from.

While Priest’s fiction does expose both repressive social systems and the human capacity for creating chaos, he avoids the implicit conservatism of endings like that of *Yellow Blue Tibia* and he does not seek the collective transformation of society by altering consensus reality. Instead, he continues to explore the possibility of individual liberation from constraint by any form of consensus reality. This is apparent in *The Adjacent*, mentioned at the beginning of this article, in which the central character, Tibor Tarent, deploys the quantum lens of his camera to undo misdirection and make visible the underlying reality of the near-future dystopian Britain he finds himself in. In one scene, he takes a rapid sequence of pictures of retired quantum physicist, Thijs Rietveld, in his East Sussex garden, arms outstretched, holding a conch shell in one hand. On developing the prints, Tarent finds the first to show Rietveld with the shell in his right hand and the second to show the shell in the left hand; while in the third, Rietveld has a shell in each hand, but in the fourth he smiles at the camera with both hands empty. This set of imaginary photographs functions as a visual metaphor for

the waveform of quantum mechanics but it also connects with the novel's employment of the photographer as a means of representing male subjectivity. *The Adjacent* figures photography as variously perception, memory and the male gaze and therefore may be considered as providing a critique of the means by which consensus reality is enforced. For example, early in the novel, it is suggested that photography is an entirely passive activity that records events without influencing them. However, the capacity of the quantum lens, as demonstrated in the sequence of Rietveld with conch shells, demonstrates that the potential still exists for the radical randomness of reality to be represented. By the end of the novel, Priest has altered his definition of photography to 'creative receptivity'; a capacity to see both present and past without being distracted or misdirected and it is this transformation that allows the male subject to escape finally from the patriarchal order by allowing his female counterpart to lead him away through a series of adjacent parallel realities. *The Adjacent* doesn't have to be written with characters like Jerry Cornelius, Miss Brunner and Una Persson – although once considered, it is relatively easy to see how it might be linked to Moorcock's multiverse – for us to see that it is a persistence of the New Wave concerned primarily with the individual liberation of the writer, Priest, who – as he said of Ballard – continues to open doors that we hadn't known were there before.

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