

BLIT

a short story by David Langford

It was like being caught halfway through a flashy film-dissolve. The goggles broke up the dim street, split and reshuffled it along diagonal lines: a glowing KEBABS sign was transposed into the typestyle they called Shatter. Safest to keep the goggles on, Robbo had decided. Even in the flickering electric half-light before dawn, you never knew what you might see. Just his luck if the stencil jumped from under his arm and unrolled itself before his eyes as he scrabbled for it on the pavement. That would be a good place, behind the 34 (a shattered 34) bus stop. This was their part of town; the women flocked there each morning, twittering in their saris like bright alien canaries. A good place, by a boarded-up shop window thick with flyposted gig announcements. Robbo scanned the street for movement, glanced at his own hand to be reassured by a blurred spaghetti of fingers. Guaranteed Army issue goggles -- the Group had friends in funny places -- but they said the eye eventually adjusts. One day something clicks, and clear outlines jump at you. He flinched as the thick plastic unrolled; then the nervy moment was past, his left hand pressing the stencil against a tattered poster while in his right the spray-can hissed. The sweetish, heady smell of car touch-up paint made it all seem oddly distant from an act of terrorism. He found he'd been careless, easy in this false twilight and through these lenses: there were tacky patches on his fingers as he re-rolled the Parrot. A few hours on, in thick morning light, the brown women would be playing the wink game.... Jesus, how long since he'd been a kid and played that? Must be five years. The one who'd drawn the murder card caught your eye and winked, and you had to die with lots of spasms and overacting. To survive, you needed to spot the murderer first and get in with an accusation -- or at least, know where not to look. It was cold. Time to move on, to pick another place. Goggles or no shatter-goggles, he didn't look back at the image of the Parrot. It might wink.

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Distribution UK List B[iv] only

... so called because its outline, when processed for non-hazardous viewing, is generally considered to resemble that of the bird. A processed (anamorphically elongated) partial image appears in Appendix

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of this report, page A3-ii. THE STATED PAGE MUST NOT BE VIEWED THROUGH ANY FORM OF CYLINDRICAL LENS. PROLONGED VIEWING IS STRONGLY

DISRECOMMENDED. PLEASE READ PAGE A3-i BEFORE PROCEEDING.

2-6. This first example of the Berryman Logical Image Technique
(hence the usual acronym BLIT) evolved from AI work at the Cambridge IV
supercomputer facility, now discontinued. V.Berryman and C.M.Turner

[3] hypothesized that pattern-recognition programs of sufficient
complexity might be vulnerable to "Gödelian shock input" in the form of data
incompatible with internal representation. Berryman went further and
suggested that the existence of such a potential input was a logical
necessity ...

2-18. Details of the Berryman/Turner BLIT construction algorithms are
not available at this classification level. Details of the eventual
security breach at Cambridge IV are neither available nor fully

known. Details of Cambridge IV casualty figures are, for the time being,
reserved (sub judice).

"IRA got hold of it somehow," Mack had said. "The Provos. We do some of
our shopping in the same places, jelly and like that ... slipped us a
copy, they did."

The cardboard tube in Robbo's hand had suddenly felt ten times as
heavy.

He'd expected a map, a Group plan of action; maybe a blueprint of
something nasty to plant in the Sikh temple up Victoria Street. "You

mean it works?"

"Fucking right. I tried it ... a volunteer." He'd grinned. Just
grinned,

and winked. "Listen, this is poison stuff. Wear the goggles around it.

If you fuck up and get a clear squint at even a bit of the Parrot, this is
what you do. They told me. Shut yourself up with a bottle of vodka and
knock the whole lot back. Decontamination, scrubs your short-term

visual memory, something like that."

"Jesus. What about the Provos? If this fairy story's got teeth, why
haven't they ...?" Robbo had trailed off into a vague waving gesture

that failed to conjure up a paper neutron bomb.

Mack's smile had widened into an assault-course of brown jagged teeth,
as

it did when he talked about a major Group action. "Maybe they don't
fancy

new ideas ... but could be they're biding their time for a big one.
Ever

thought about hijacking a TV station? Just for an hour? Don't think
things

like that, it'll be bad for you."

... Dead TV screens watched him from another cracked shop window, a
dump

that also rented Hindi videotapes. That settled it for them. Why
couldn't

the buggers learn English? The Group would give them a hint: the Parrot
stencil was already in position, the can sliding out of his pocket,
fastest draw in the west. At school Robbo had never won a fight, had
always been beaten down to cringing tears: he'd learned good, safe,
satisfying ways of hitting back. Double-A Group booby-trap work was the
best of all, a regular and addictive thrill.

This had better be the last for now, or last but one. Twenty would be a good round number, but the sky seemed to be lightening behind its overlaid sodium-light stain. If he went round Alma Street way he could hit the Marquis of Granby, where everyone said the local gays hung out. Taking over a good old pub, bent as corkscrews and not even ashamed of it, give you Aids as soon as look at you, the bastards. Right in the middle of their glazed front door, then, glaring red and a foot high ... The light hit him like a mailed fist. The goggles parsed it into bright, hurtful bars. Robbo spun half around, trying to shield his eyes with the heavy, flapping something in his left hand. The heavy something had a big irregular hole in it; torchlight blared through, and, moving quickly closer, there was a voice. "Like to tell me what you're ...?" As the beam dipped and the voice trailed off, he saw the shivered outline of a police helmet through that of the Parrot. Behind jagged after-images a face came into view, an Asian face as he might have expected this end of town. The eyes stared blindly, the mouth worked. Robbo had read old murder mysteries where the unmarked body wore an inexplicable expression of shock and dread. A warm corpse slumped into him, its momentum carrying them both through a window which dissolved in tinkling shards. It wasn't supposed to be like this. The bomb wasn't supposed to go off until you were six miles away. Somewhere there was the broken outline of a second helmet.

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... independently discovered by at least two late amateurs of computer graphics. The "Fractal Star" is generated by a relatively simple iterative procedure which determines whether any point in two-dimensional space (the complex field) does or does not belong to its domain. This algorithm is now classified. 3-3. The Fractal Star does not exhibit BLIT properties in its macrostructure. The overall appearance may be viewed: see Appendix 3, page A3-iii. This property allowed the Star to be widely disseminated via a popular computer magazine [8], a version of the algorithm being printed under the heading "Fun With Graphics". Unfortunately, the accompanying text suggested that users rewrite the software to "zoom in" on aspects of the domain's visually appealing fractal microstructure. In several zones of the complex field, this can produce BLIT effects when the resulting fine detail is displayed on a computer monitor of better

than 600 x 300 pixels resolution.

3-4. Approximately 4% of the magazine's 115,000 readers discovered
and
displayed BLIT patterns latent within the Fractal Star. In most
cases,

other members of family units and/or emergency services inadvertently
became viewers while investigating the casualty or casualties. Total
figures are difficult to ascertain, but to a first order of
approximation ...

"Tape the envelope, all round. That's it. And write DANGER DO NOT OPEN
in
ruddy big letters, both sides, right?"

"So you know all about it."

"There've been bulletins. The squaddies picked up fifty in that Belfast
raid. Leeds CID got another ... some bastard just like this one. I tell
you, this job's been a shambles for years and now it's a fucking
disaster.

Three constables and a sergeant gone, picking up a spotty little shit
you

could knock flying just by spitting at him ..."

Robbo hurt in a variety of places but kept still and quiet, eyes shut,
slumped on the hard bench where ungentle hands had dropped him. He'd
told

them every place he'd hit, but they'd kept on hurting him. It wasn't
fair.

He felt the draught of an opening door.

"Photo ID positive, sir. Robert Charles Bitton, nineteen, two previous
for
criminal damage, suspected link Albion Action Group. Nothing much else
on

the printout."

"I suppose it makes sense. Vicious sods: run into them yet, Jimmy?
Nearest

thing we've got here to the Ku Klux fucking Klan."

"This one'll be out of circulation for a good long while."

"Jimmy, you haven't been keeping up to date with this BLIT stuff, have
you? It's the same as that fucking nightmare with the kids and their
home

computers. God knows how much longer they can keep the lid on. It's
going

to get us all sooner or later ... Look. We are going to have four PMs
with

cause of death unknown, immediate cause heart failure, and have I
really

got to spell it out?"

"Ohhh."

"The only evidence is in that sodding envelope, a real court clearer eh?
I

remember when they nicked those international phone fiddlers way back
when, and all we could do them for was Illegal Use Of Electricity to
the

value of sixty pee. They didn't have a phone-hacker law those days. We
haven't got a brain-hacker law now."

"You mean we clean up after the little bastard, give him a nice room
for

what's left of the night, and that's it?"

"Ah." The tone of voice implied that something extra was going on: a
gesture, a finger laid significantly alongside the nose, a wink. "Car
Three cleans up, they've got the eye safety kit, for what that's worth.

We

show young Master Urban Terrorism to his palatial quarters, taking the pretty way of course. And then, Jimmy, when the new shift arrives we

hold

a wake for our recently departed mates. No joking. It's in the last bulletin. You'll really appreciate hearing why."

Robbo braced himself as the hands got a fresh grip on him. The outlook sounded almost promising.

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... informational analysis adopts a somewhat purist mathematical viewpoint, whereby BLITs are considered to encode Gödelian

"spoilers",

implicit programs which the human equipment cannot safely run. In his final paper [3] Berryman argued that although meta-logical safety devices permit the assimilation and safe recognition of

self-referential

loops ("This sentence is false"), the graphic analogues of subtler "vicious circles" might evade protective verbal analysis by striking directly through the visual cortex. This may not be consistent with

the

observed effects of the "Reader" BLIT discussed in section 7, unusual not merely because its incapacitation of cortical activity is

temporary

(albeit with some observed permanent damage in Army volunteers [18]), but also because its effects are specific to those literate in

English

and English-like alphabets. There may in addition be a logical inconsistency with the considerations developed in section 12. 10-18. Gott's post facto biochemical counter-hypothesis [24] was regarded as less drastic. This proposes that "memotoxins" might be formed in the brain by electrochemical activity associated with the storage of certain patterns of data. Although attractive, the

hypothesis

has yet to be ...

12-4. The present situation resembles that of the "explosion" in particle physics. Not merely new species of BLIT but entire related families continue to emerge, as summarized in Appendix A2. One controversial interpretation invoked the Sheldrake theory of morphic resonance [25]: it might be simpler to conclude that multiple simultaneous emergence of the BLIT concept was inevitable at the

stage

of AI research which had been reached. The losses amongst leading theorists, in particular those with marked powers of mathematical visualization, constitute a major hindrance to further understanding

...

The cell was white-tiled to shoulder height, glossily white-painted as

it

went on up and up. Its reek of disinfectant felt like steel wool up the nose, down the throat. In a vague spirit of getting the most from the amenities, Robbo patronized the white china toilet and scrubbed his

hands

futilely in the basin (cold water couldn't shift those red acrylic stains)

before lying down to wait.

They couldn't touch him, really. They might fine him on some silly vandalism charge, and he might accidentally fall down a few more

flights

of stairs before reaching the magistrates' court ... even now the hard bunk caught him in all sorts of puffy, bruised places. But in the long

run

he was OK.

They knew that.

They knew that but they hadn't seemed bothered, had they?

He had a flash, then, of them smiling, "We aren't pressing charges,"

and

"This way, sir," and "If you could just pick up your property ..."

door

would open and guess what would be waiting there for him to see?

Silly. They wouldn't. But suppose.

Time passed. The terminus was easy to imagine. He'd seen it so often through the shatter lenses, a long bird profile sliced at an angle and jaggedly reassembled: parrot salami. In outline against walls and

windows

and posters; as a solid shape in glistening red that lost its colour to orange sodium glare; in outline again as a dead man's broken eyes met

his.

It seemed to hover there behind his closed eyelids. He opened them and stared at the far-off ceiling, spattered with nameless blobs and blots

by

the efforts of past occupants. If you imagined joining the dots, images began to construct themselves, just as unconvincing as zodiac pictures. After a time, one image in particular threatened to achieve clear focus

...

He bit through his lip, took refuge in a brief white-out of pain.

It was in him. They knew. Even with protection, he'd looked too long,

from

too many angles, into the abyss. He was infected. Robbo found himself battering at the heavy metal door, bloodying his hands. Useless,

because

just as there was no clear crime he could have committed, there was no good medical reason why unfriendly police should offer him a massive, memory-clouding dose of alcohol.

Flat on the bunk again, he ran for his life. The Parrot stalked him through the grey hours of morning, smoothing its fractal feathers, shuffling itself slowly into clarity as though at the end of a flashy film-dissolve, until at last his mind's eye had to acknowledge a shape,

a

shape, a

wink

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This story appeared in Interzone #25, September/October 1988.