



A review of Ian McDonald's *Brasyl*

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Brasyl. By Ian McDonald. Pyr, Amherst, New York, 2007. 358 pp. ISBN: 978-1-59102-543-6.

Human nature loses its most precious quality when it is robbed of
its sense of things beyond, unexplored and yet insistent.

Alfred North Whitehead (1936)

Brazil is a world in its own right, different from all other places. That tourist-billboard cliché follows one of the main characters of this book as soon as he steps down from his transatlantic ship, but the lack of recognition passes quickly. From coffee to *futebol* (soccer for the uninitiated) to capoeira moves to DJ duels to biodiesel, McDonald has meticulously researched his fictional milieu to the minutest details, fully justifying the glossary to be found near the book's end. A brilliant opening vignette introduces us to a colorful world that is certainly not what it seems, but the true question which looms is: how to maintain the focus on the plot and ideas while surrounded by the phenomenal richness of the narrative?

This is a novel as complex as they come, with three main story strands, symbolically set in the past (1732 AD), present (2006 AD) and near-future (2032 AD). Simultaneously, it covers three key geographical areas of Brazil, namely its two huge metropolises (Rio de Janeiro in the present-day story and Sao Paulo in the future one) and the vast, mysterious Amazonian jungle, where most of the eighteenth-century story is set.

Each strand of narrative revolves around a key protagonist. The novel starts with the present-day story, featuring a thoroughly unlikeable TV producer and part-time capoeirista, Marcelina Hoffman, in search of trashy media cannon-fodder. In 2032, we encounter bisexual, streetwise Edson Jesus Oliveira de Freitas, a self-proclaimed businessman in a tightly controlled society where quantum computing technology has begun to surface outside of the government and military labs. Edson's infatuation with manga-like quantum hacker Fia Kishida eventually leads him to far-reaching and quite unexpected adventures. Finally, the third story strand takes place mostly in the depths of the Amazonian rainforest, where the Enlightenment-era Jesuit Luis Quinn is sent – in the company of a somewhat eccentric French academic, Dr. Robert Falcon – to admonish his missionary colleague who has set up himself as a tyrant in the unexplored vastness of the Brazilian jungle.

The relevant years are precise, but misleading, since – as the reader, especially one versed in contemporary SF mores, will guess after about thirty pages – they do not refer to the same history (or to the same Brazil/syl) in the quantum multiverse envisaged by Hugh Everett and his successors. The three stories converge together in the space of the novel, at first slowly and then at increasing pace, producing a rather impressive, but slightly confusing, kaleidoscopic sequence of images toward the end.

Much of the novel is atmosphere-driven, similar to some of the best contemporary prose, evoking the pages of an Eco (e.g. the texture of the descriptions in *The Island of the Day Before*) or a Pynchon-esque foggy atmosphere in *Crying a Lot 49* or *Vineland*. Some concepts and tropes are repeated in an almost fugue-like manner: the order (Jesuits and others); reality as illusion; media; multiple identities; Borgesian recombination of old metaphors to create a new picture. This pertains to great ideas, as well as mundane occurrences, such as minor emotional infidelities:

There is no bitch or bitterness in his voice. It's not that kind of affair; it's not that kind of city. Here you can lead many lives, be many selves. (p. 71)

McDonald's excellent writing is occasionally irritating because of the positive and life-enjoying spin he puts on everything he touches: from the ubiquitous poverty (likely to persist in 2032 as well), to media predators, to drug-dealing. For the future-oriented thinker, among of the most valuable parts of the narrative are those describing unpleasant (at the very best) aspects of the near-future "age of perpetual surveillance" and almost complete loss of privacy, as well as the chilling implementation of "security markets," where private (para)militias are legally entitled to execute criminals via electronic bidding. But even these dystopian moments fade into the background when contrasted with the sheer colorfulness of living in McDonald's fictional Brasyl.

No novel exists in a *perfect vacuum* (to borrow Stanislaw Lem's warning title). *Brasyl* has similarities with Greg Egan's *Teranesia* (1999) and with McDonald's own *Chaga/Kyrinia* diptych (1995/1998 – two parts of an intended trilogy) and *The River of Gods* (2004). Both *Teranesia* and *Brasyl* explore the fictional limits of many-worlds quantum mechanics against an exotic tropical background (Brazilian rainforest in McDonald's novel, Indian/Indonesian in Egan's), both posit a subtle distinction between "natural" and "artificial," and both use memorable, topographic neologisms for their titles. In the eighteenth-century subplot, the lush, colorful outdoors is similar to Robert Charles Wilson's *Darwinia* (1998), but the similarity here actually runs deeper; both novels have an underlying theme of reality as simulation (in what seems to be well on the way to becoming new SF cliché). Without disclosing too much, both use the eschatological speculations of Freeman Dyson and Frank Tipler to weave the plot; both invoke the cosmological "end times," as well as portraying a particular group of "initiates."

McDonald's novel, however, is much richer, both stylistically and topically; and to this reviewer, this is, paradoxically, a major weakness in his literary architecture – like the bad guy's sailing cathedral in the novel, the narrative is too top-heavy and prone to capsizing. The Grand Eschatological Idea revealed near the end is treated in a simplistic, off-handed way that doesn't allow for the protagonists to hold their breaths for more than a second. In addition, the plot becomes increasingly confusing toward the end, and the occasional *deus ex machina* becomes a necessity, rather than an "ornament." The story of the "quantum toad" and the related book-within-a-book pastiche is somewhat inconsistent (for instance, had the "French explorer" returned from the Amazonian interior or hadn't he?) and quite undeveloped, and there are some other

minor inconsistencies throughout the novel. Father Diego Goncalves, the “bad guy” of the eighteenth-century subplot is distinctly anachronistic in his *Gauleiter* or *commissar* bearing, and it was obvious enough for the author to invoke a little bit of “extemporal” help for him. Still, with his Toledo swordsmanship, his genocidal impulses and his floating cathedral, father Diego is way better off, reader-wise, than the adversaries in the contemporary and future subplots who remain at the level of “phantom menaces.” In addition, the closure is somewhat of a non-closure, opening wide doors to a possible sequel, which is usually bad news (for *belles lettres*, that is, not for the publishing industry).

McDonald draws heavily upon Oxford physicist David Deutsch’s popular book *The Fabric of Reality* (1997), which, in turn, draws upon the research work of Deutsch, Aharonov, Greenberger, Svozil, Vaidman – and others in the last two decades – dealing with quantum time travel. This research activity has shown that the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics is indeed capable of resolving the long-standing causality paradoxes invoking grandfathers, although the price to be paid for it is rather steep. (Another good SF novel employing this form of time-travel as a plot device is Stephen Baxter’s Wellsian pastiche, *The Time Ships* (1995).) It would be superfluous to elaborate how speculative and amorphous such ideas still are, although they have motivated a lot of very interesting work in physics and philosophy. In contrast to his meticulous study of Brazilian culture, here McDonald’s erudition seems slightly slimmer, even apart from the physiological fact – perhaps ironically overlooked – that the human eye can, under particular circumstances, detect individual photons as well as the eye of a frog. In particular, the question of identity of objects and persons in the many-worlds interpretation is a tricky and unresolved one, which McDonald actually abuses in many places, especially when it overlaps with the psychological and emotional drama. Whether a significantly different wavefunction branch could produce a “copy” of the person similar enough for a deep emotion like love to be smoothly transferred from the “original” is a question worthy of an entire novel; but that novel is yet to be written, since *Brasyl* simply sails over it toward the Next Colorful Scene, with just occasional sitcom-like remarks.

A special mention should be made of the “additional content,” quite appropriate to this digital age: the glossary of Portuguese terms and slang used in the book; a charming playlist – it is easy to notice how the music plays a huge role in this book – including wonderful Brazilian artists, such as Suba and Bebel Gilberto; and balanced suggestions for further reading about the “real” Brazil. The latter are annotated, one may presume, in the Enlightenment spirit of Dr. Falcon

himself. The book is robustly and prettily made, with graphic vignettes separating sub-chapters and indicating the appropriate storyline. It ends (following the references, the playlist, and even the short author bio) with the disparaging quotation “Brazil is not a serious country,” ascribed to General Charles De Gaulle inscribed on a soccer ball. But is its use here really disparaging? Following the key thought of Lem from his aforementioned anthology *A Perfect Vacuum* (1971), if the entire physics of the universe is the product of a game, do we need to treat so much smaller things as the nations and countries of the Earth more seriously?

This form of transcendent subtlety is McDonald’s hidden (and, perhaps, hideous) strength; in an epoch where the exotic is often construed as commonplace, he fresco-paints a believable and thought-provoking world which restores the sense of wonder accompanying a great, wide-traveling adventure. This novel is a fine work, great at moments, although McDonald clearly has yet to reach his apogee; maybe the final volume of the Chaga saga (tentatively dubbed *Ananda*) will be it. In the meantime, we should enjoy the relaxing and beautiful music (in all senses) of *Brazil/syl*.¹

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