



CULTURE

# DREAM-DUST FROM MARS

Psychoactive substances have a long history in science fiction. **Marcus Roberts** takes us on a journey through space and time to sample the likes of marak, LSD-Gas, the pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster, Nuke, soma and Can-D.



Out of this world: books such as Robert A. Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* and (overleaf) by sci-fi hero Philip K. Dick and short story magazines such as *Thrilling Wonder* treated generations to some spaced-out escapism

A husband and wife are lighthouse keepers on a lonely asteroid between Earth and Mars. The husband has become addicted to marak, a euphoric drug that keeps him in a constant state of good nature and wellbeing. This makes meaningful conversation between him and his wife impossible, since he is so agreeable that all discussions trail off immediately, and she is growing irritable for lack of stimulating company. Husband therefore decides secretly to give his wife addictive dose of drug.

This is the plot synopsis for a short story called *The Addicts* that appeared in *Galaxy* science fiction magazine in 1952. It is one of nearly 70 synopses in *Drug Themes in Science Fiction*, a detailed briefing produced by sci-fi writer Robert Silverberg for the largest drug research body in the US, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), in 1974.

It is picked more or less at random, and is not especially bizarre. However, sticking with the role of drugs in relationship

management, a few pages earlier in Silverberg's document you will find the following synopsis of a novel by Robert Heinlein called *The Puppet Masters* (1951):

The Earth has been invaded by slug-like parasitic beings that attach themselves to men's backs and dominate their minds and bodies. The protagonists, Sam and Mary, are members of a secret security agency fighting the invaders. In the middle of the struggle they decide to get married; but because they can only spare 24 hours for their honeymoon, they inject themselves with tempus, a drug analogous to speed, which stretches subjective time for them so that they feel they are experiencing a month long honeymoon.

Even going as far back as 1938, Manly Wade Wellman's short story, *Dream-dust from Mars*, published in the journal, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, sounds well worth a flick-through:

The spores of a Martian lichen are an agreeable stimulant to Martians of the 28th century but throw earthmen into deep trances in which they experience prolonged ecstatic dreams. The dream-dust becomes immensely popular on Earth and is outlawed when everyone seems headed for the oblivion it provides.

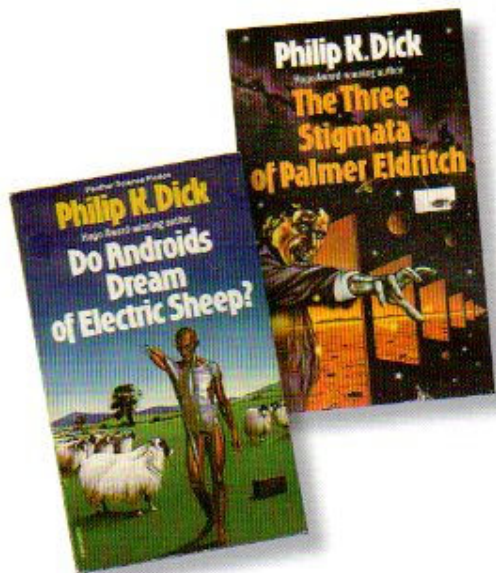
What is striking is the variety of drugs that have been imagined by sci-fi writers. In *The Final Programme*, Michael Moorcock invents an LSD-Gas that is used for home security (it muddles the minds of burglars) and in *Stoned Counsel*, HH Hollis gives hallucinogenic drugs a role within the legal process (lawyers are required to take them to enter into a kind of direct association with the evidence). Kurt Vonnegut, in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, earns a special mention for a contraceptive pill which does not interfere with reproduction, but simply makes people numb from the waist down (it's compulsory to take it three times a day as the world's population has hit 17 billion).

Sci-fi did not finish with drug themes in 1974. In cinema, *Robocop 2* saw 'Nuke', a powerful, synthetic, blood-red liquid which is injected for a cocaine type high. A synopsis of an episode from the US space station series *Babylon 5*, reads: 'Begins after Nann ambassador G'kar uses the drug 'Dust' to telepathically assault Ambassador Mollari. Psi Cop Bester is sent to Babylon 5 to find the dealer' (words courtesy of 'The 10 greatest mind-altering drugs and drinks in science fiction' reproduced on the *Topless Robot* website). And then there is the alcopop to end alcopops, the pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster from Douglas Adam's *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*.

The work continues: one of the most innovative US novels of the 1990s, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, explores addiction and 'the hollowness of contemporary American pleasure'. It is loosely held together by 'the search for the master copy of *Infinite Jest*, a movie said to be so dangerously entertaining its viewers become entranced and expire in a state of catatonic bliss'.

*Infinite Jest* is in a tradition of books and movies that consider mind-alteration in dystopian settings. Others include Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, and some of the work of Philip K Dick, best known for *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, on which the 1982 film *Bladerunner* was based.

In Philip K Dick's *The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, people living on inhospitable planets use a drug called Can-D to escape the tedium of their day-to-day existence. Can-D is used in combination with 'layouts' – miniaturised worlds (a little bit like dolls houses or Subbuteo) offering something like the American Dream and which users can inhabit collectively by taking the drug (assuming the personas of miniaturised characters such as 'Perky Pat'). A new drug called Chew-Z promises a more permanent form of escape to an alternative reality under the control of the shadowy Eldritch.



Another writer well known, like Philip K Dick, for his own drug use is William Burroughs, whose work includes dystopian visions of drugs as instruments of control. In *Nova Express*, first published in 1966, the emerging hippy drug culture is acidly (pun noted) derided for offering 'love, love, love in slop buckets'. Burroughs here portrays drug culture not as counter-cultural, but as an instrument of shadowy 'Nova Criminals', working behind the scenes to control and destroy the planet. 'It will fall apart before you can get out of the Big Store', Inspector J Lee of the Nova Police warns. 'Flush their drug kicks down the drain ... All that they offer is a screen to cover retreat from the colony that they have so disgracefully mismanaged ... souls rotten from their orgasm drugs ... prisoners of the earth come out. With your help we can occupy The Reality Studio and retake their universe of Fear Death and Monopoly'. Inspector Lee's was a discordant voice in a year that saw the release of Lovin' Spoonful's 'Summer in the City' and the Mamas and Papas 'California dreaming'.

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, in *Prisoners of Power*, a 1969 work by the Soviet sci-fi writers, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, the protagonist – Maxim Kammerer – is stranded on a planet where 'The Unknown Fathers' use broadcasts from radio towers to control the population, suppressing the evaluation of information and relieving the mental tension caused by the gap between propaganda and reality. It is people who are not susceptible to this form of intoxication who are outcasts, branded as degenerates or 'degens' and hunted down by the state. (The *Topless Robot* website observes that in sci fi 'sometimes the dealers are young kids or members of resistance movements, but most of the time it's the suits in seats of power manufacturing the goods').

Sometimes the use of drugs for state purposes is more direct and open. In *Barefoot in the Head* (1970), Brian Aldiss imagines that Kuwait has bombed Europe with psychedelic weapons – the affects prove irreversible, order and reason collapse and there is permanent insanity. At the risk of sounding like I've suffered contamination through close exposure to internet conspiracy theory, this could prove chillingly prescient as new approaches to conflict and interrogation emerge in the context of 'terror' and the 'war on terror'.

In his paper, Robert Silverberg notes that more positive visions of the potential of mind-altering drugs were emerging in sci-fi in the early 1970s. A tantalising one-line curtain twitcher to Robert Silverman's own story *Downward to Earth* reads 'protagonist, expiating old guilts, goes among elephant



beings and eventually is admitted into ecstatic communion with them through use of the drug'. And a characteristically sixties take on the visionary potential of hallucinogenics is provided in Frank Herbert's *The Santaroga Barrier*, where the drug 'Jaspers' fosters 'a sense of community through its ability to allow takers to perceive the ultimate relationship linking all aspects of the universe'.

Silverberg draws out some wider issues and themes. He argues that the interest in both science fiction and experimental drug use among young people in the 1960s and 1970s was a product of 'a period of social upheaval', including the death of President John F Kennedy and the escalation of the Vietnamese War. In these circumstances, he argued, 'conventional modes of behaviour lose their appeal, and fascination with the bizarre, the alien, the unfamiliar, the strange, with all sorts of stimulation that provide escape from the realities of the moment, increases at a greater rate'.

Silverberg identifies two broad approaches to drug use in science fiction, one 'cautionary', and the other 'visionary and utopian', and traces a shift from the former to the latter in the mid-sixties to mid-seventies. Reflecting on the earlier development of science fiction, he discerns 'a strong ... bias in favour of capitalism, the work ethic, Puritan sexual morality, and other pillars of western industrial society'. In these stories, he notes, the 'prototypes for the imaginary drugs ... are alcohol and heroin - drugs which blur the mind and lower consciousness', adding that the early authors themselves 'typically had no experience with drugs other than alcohol'. More recently, he identifies an increase in 'visionary and utopian' themes (including in his own work), with a greater focus on 'such newly popular drugs as LSD, marijuana and mescaline', by authors who had often 'sampled' them.

The hallucinogenics tend to figure in the more positive stories. In retrospect, this is itself a reflection of the times. A lot of more recent science fiction tends to a more negative portrayal. In William Gibson's *Necromancer* (1984), which helped to launch the cyberpunk movement, the central character - Case - is addicted to stimulant drugs, marginalised and suicidal. Hallucinogenic drugs figure in China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), but less in their 'turn on, tune in, drop out' mode, and more as foodstuff for giant malevolent insects. The drug 'dreamshit' is fed to a caterpillar 'stimulating its metamorphosis into an incredibly dangerous, hypnotic and monstrously large butterfly-like insect ... that feeds off the dreams of sentient beings, leaving them as catatonic vegetables' (description courtesy of Wikipedia).

Some key works elude the 'cautionary'/visionary dichotomy as set up by Silverman. In particular, he observes that Huxley's *Brave New World* portrays 'soma' as 'an opiate, a mind-luller, and instrument of repression', not from the standpoint of 'work-oriented puritan morality', but 'a classic liberal-humanitarian distrust of technology'. Similarly, the work of William Burroughs or Philip K Dick - or for that matter David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* - take a 'cautionary' view that is highly critical of western industrial society. The themes of these books bring to mind another best-seller from the mid-sixties,

Herbert Marcuse's classic - if dated - work of popular political theory, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964).

Consider, for example, Marcuse's discussion of 'false needs': 'their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability (his own and others) to recognise the disease as a whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease. The result is euphoria in unhappiness.' Euphoria in unhappiness would be an apt description for drug experiences in some of the more dystopian science fiction novels of that period.

At its best, science fiction can encourage us to look at 'drugs' in radically different, 'mind-expanding' ways. By viewing 'drugs' as a form of technology, we can envisage new and different forms of drug experience, function, cultural meaning and control. And these stories suggest a range of functions that drugs might serve, which do not always fit neatly into familiar divisions between legal and illegal, therapeutic and recreational, benevolent and destructive.

There seems to be a sci-fi drugs synopsis available for every occasion, so here is one for nearing the completion of an article, about a short story *The literary corkscrew* by David Keller, published in *Wonder Stories* (1934):

**Satiric story. A professional writer discovers he can write only when in physical pain, and requires his wife to drive a corkscrew into his back to get him started. But the pain of the corkscrew is impossible to sustain for long, and they seek medical help. The doctor they consult discovers that it isn't the pain itself but rather certain hormones secreted as a response to the pain that encourages literary production, and synthesizes a drug that makes writing easier. Doctor takes his own drug and writes a best seller.**

You couldn't make it up ... or could you?

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This article has borrowed from Robert Silverman's 'Drug Themes in Science Fiction' published by the US National Institute on Drug Abuse in 1974.

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