Introduction: Rewriting the Past in the Future in Straczynski’s Babylon 5

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At Easter 1996 we were in Heathrow, attending the annual British science fiction convention. We had been to a few panels, including one or two on Star Trek. These were interesting, but nothing new was said, and the half-full rooms contained the usual collection of people comfortably considering a comfortable show. Afterwards we decided to go to the one panel on Babylon 5, a relatively new TV series which we had managed to catch from the very beginning and had watched with commitment, not missing a single episode. We were a little late getting to the room, which proved a mistake: the room was packed, with little space left even to stand, and the debate heated and enthusiastic. Impressed by the overflow and the quality of the discussion, we became fascinated by the fandom around Babylon 5: many of the people in the audience we knew to be predominantly fans of written science fiction – who are normally sceptical viewers of televised “sci-fi”.

Six months later, we were at “Envisioning Alternatives”, a science fiction conference at the University of Luton. Chatting with Karen Sayer, one of the organisers, we bemoaned the fact that so far no academic work had been done on Babylon 5 nor had there been a conference. Karen suggested that someone organise one. One of us (Farah) was in a better position to do this than either Karen or Edward, since she was in a dedicated American Studies department: if it is American, it is a legitimate area of study. Luckily for Farah, the then Dean of Humanities at the University College of Ripon and York St John, Geoff Stoakes, was also an Americanist, and an enthusiastic fan of American popular culture (although we have yet to make him an sf fan). He agreed to the idea of a conference, and we decided to run it on the college’s York campus in December 1997. We issued a call for papers, and soon found that the conference would need to run for two days and not the one for which we originally planned.

As historians, we were attracted to Babylon 5 as historical narrative. As the first season gave way to the second, our game of guessing the historical references and parallels became ever more involved, moving from simple historical referents and backgrounds to careful paralleling of the collapse
of the peace process on Babylon 5 with events in the inter-war years and in contemporary Yugoslavia. However, all this makes us is fans with an agenda, no different from military buffs watching Babylon 5 for the battle sequences. The issue for us was in part that our agenda was not necessarily a welcome one. As friends rushed to point out, Straczynski himself appeared to be uneasy with critical analysis of the series, and in at least one episode appeared to have a very direct dig at the academic historian. However, he himself has some very clear ideas on the nature of history.

The most detailed and direct expression of Straczynski’s ideas on history comes in a segment of “The Deconstruction of Falling Stars” (422). Set in 2362, on the hundredth anniversary of the declaration of the Alliance, it features an historical discussion between three academics, broadcast to half a million students. Oddly for an historical discussion, the only historian present, Dr Jim Latimer from the University of York, does not take part: he merely asks the questions. (It is reasonable to imagine that this is a reference to one of the editors of this volume, who, when a historian at the University of York, put the questions to Straczynski which formed the basis for his Foundation article "Approaching Babylon"). The historical arguments are put in the mouths of Dr Barbara Tashaki of Tokyo, a political scientist, and Dr William Exeter of NYU, a psychologist, whose arguments are parodies of the historical method: dogmatic, reductionist, and innocent of research or an awareness of the problems of evidence. Discussing the role of the space station Babylon 5 in the creation of the Alliance they are agreed on one thing: that individuals do not matter in history.

Tashaki: The publicity machine for the Alliance would have you believe that somehow all this came about because of what a few people did. But large political movements are rarely the work of any one person. The individual at the centre gives permission for others to act... can inspire others, but the individual really cannot effect change in an act of will. They did not do; they allowed others to do.

Exeter: We all have the need to believe in heroes, a shining knight on the white horse. They do not exist; we create them. Sheridan and Delenn are two classic examples... They were the open vessels into which people poured their hopes and their dreams... In a lot of ways they blew it.

Tashaki: It was only the force of history that saved the situation from collapsing under its own weight.

Exeter: He thought they could control the telepaths, when any fool knows that’s impossible. Sooner or later they were bound to turn on Sheridan and everybody else, and that’s exactly what happened.

Amateur historians like Exeter use hindsight to show their superiority to the individuals who take part in history, by suggesting that they would not have made the same mistakes, and they mask their use of intuitive analysis by the fake rationality of lay psychoanalysis and psychological profiling.

Exeter: Sheridan was clearly pathological... He was power-hungry, simple as that.

At the end of the discussion the political scientist sums up their position, in equally simplistic and dogmatic fashion.

Tashaki: The force of history is what moves us forward. Our common shared destiny. The individual does not move society forward. To give them undue credit is immodest and impertinent. Sheridan was a megalomaniac, and to allow history to feed that megalomania, even posthumously, simply compounds that error. We have a duty as academics to uphold certain standards...

And on that ironic comment, the broadcast is interrupted as an aged Delenn hobbles in to protest that John (Sheridan) was a good man, and to make her (and presumably Straczynski’s) comment on the particular type of historical nonsense propounded by the two academics. One should note for the record that the British historian from the University of York does visibly wince at one of their idiocies.

Delenn: You do not wish to know anything. You wish only to speak. That which you know, you ignore because it is inconvenient. That which you do not know, you invent.

When she repeats her contention that John was a good man, Exeter feels compelled to add “Of course, we would expect you to say that...”; her withering stare is all that is needed to collapse the stout party.

There are of course elements of the academic historian in Exeter and Tashaki. “That which you do not know, you invent” is a standing rebuke which one of us, the early medieval historian, feels particularly keenly. But, in the twentieth century at least, historians do not talk like these two, even if political scientists and psychologists may. “The force of history” and “destiny” are concepts that do not exist in the world of the professional historian; to personify “history” – as in “to allow history to feed that megalomania” – is likewise a meaningless idea, which historians are unlikely to express even under the lights of a television studio. But Exeter and Tashaki do voice a view of history which has been expressed by historians, and to some extent still is: that individuals do not matter. This however, is not a matter of academics versus actors but a matter for historiographical debate. The Annals school, founded in France in the 1930s, taught that history was a matter of forces. Fernand Braudel (1902-85), for example, was convinced that history could be written through a description of the impact of environmental forces on a culture. Nobody
today would take such an extreme line, but, equally, few historians would ignore the impact of the physical and cultural environment on the outcome of modernisation projects undertaken by various colonial and indigenous rulers. In contrast, in the late nineteenth century, the predominant fashion in history had been for a form of empiricism considered to be so objective that the Germans elevated it into a science. Only in the 1950s and 1960s did historians begin to point out that the questions asked could distort the results, and that the very rigid notions of value—the privileging of high politics and the actions of men for example—thoroughly distorted the historical record. It is worth noting that under this type of history, Deleuze might have found herself reduced to the role of mistress and consort—thought to wield influence, but not power.

What Exeter and Tashaki argue very clumsily, is that history should be wider than simply a recounting of high politics, and for that we have sympathy. So too must Straczynski or he would not tell us of the strikes on Babylon 5, of the struggles of the resistance and of the difficulties facing ordinary people under the regime of President Clark. But it is true that in the 1960s the academic profession began to lose sight of the important individual in an effort to reclaim knowledge about the lives of the unimportant. One effect of this was that history took on a Marxist note. Whether you were a Marxist or not, it did seem to be possible to trace the movements of vast forces that propelled people to collective action with a curious sense of inevitability. Ove Rasmussen in Harry Harrison’s *The Daleth Effect* complained that some people “will never understand that when it is steam-boat time you build steam-boats, airplane time you build airplanes.” Narrative history was subsumed by the attempt to analyse the contexts which made such movements possible. Ironically, however, Straczynski’s *Babylon 5*, emerged on our screens almost simultaneously with the re-emergence of narrative history. At the first conference at which we gave this paper, “Consuming History” at the University of York, 1996, one of the most exciting discussion panels was about this re-emergence. The following year, the same university held a conference on heroes. Far from being a lone voice, battling the academics, Straczynski is firmly in the mainstream of historical debate.

Science fiction is itself an historical literature: it writes the history of the future, and sometimes rewrites the history of the past. Probably no work of written science fiction, and certainly no work of science fiction in the movies or on the television screen, has taken history as its theme quite so consistently and in such integral fashion as *Babylon 5*. Both structure and content are designed to keep the viewer hanging on, both for plot resolution and the resolution of moral dilemmas. As with real history, however, the viewer is rarely offered either. *Babylon 5* is more like historical narrative than any other science fiction series in a number of ways. There is the famous story-arc which turns the series into both novel and epic, in comparison to the short story, episodic approach of most syndicated television series. There is the moral ambiguity which forces the viewer to be continually alert to shifts of perception: as in history both we and the protagonists are always trying to understand the apparently irrational workings of the universe.3

This matters because, as already indicated above, Straczynski’s view of history is fundamentally related to the Greek tradition of epic. History is not about impersonal forces, it is about human (or sentient) choices and actions, but like Greek epic, he is not averse to allowing the gods to take a hand. And just like Greek gods, the Vorlons and Shadows are unpredictable, irascible and turn out to have an agenda of their own: rely on the gods at your peril is at least one of the messages in this “history”. There are resonances throughout *Babylon 5* of other epics. One episode, “A Late Delivery from Avalon” (313), deliberately, though probably with tongue firmly in cheek, draws direct parallels with the Arthurian cycle. Although Straczynski has generally denied the parallels with Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* there is a direct quotation from Tolkien in “The Geometry of Shadows” (203), and the pin in the heart of the Shadow planet Z‘ha’dum into which Sheridan falls is clearly Tolkien’s Mines of Moria (in the Dwarfish tongue Khazadum) into which Gandalf plunges. However, where Gandalf is purged and re-energised by his experience, emerging as Gandalf the White, Sheridan returns resurrected but not restored, his life expectancy considerably shortened. Again Straczynski has rejected the moral certainties of fantasy. Finally Straczynski draws on old-fashioned, science-fictional epic in which the past is so often portrayed as greater than the present. Ambassador Delenn speaks of the First Ones in words drawn straight from Olaf Stapledon or E.B. “Doc” Smith: “They walked among the stars like giants, vast and timeless” (“Matters of Honor”, 301). As with his use of Tolkien, however, Straczynski is a sceptical commentator. The help of the First Ones comes to little. When the magic goes away, the past is just the past and we must rescue ourselves. Deleuze’s faith in past glories leads her to misread Minbari politics; Londo is so determined to regain his species’ imperial magnificence that he sells its soul; whilst G’Kar comes close to being eaten up by his need for vengeance for past injustice. Those who try to live in the past are doomed to pervert it. Straczynski does not imitate epic, he critiques it. As he himself has said, his use of epic provides “an echo at the back of your mind that whispers and guides you through the dark places”.

If Straczynski is writing epic he needs a moral struggle. Like many in the realm of fantasy writing he elects to analyse the role of an eternal struggle between chaos and order as the driving force of history. His chaos and order, however, are not merely events but ideologies: the Vorlons and Shadows seem at time like Cold War super-powers, fighting their battles on other people’s territory, with other people’s lives, and at other times like founders of rival historiographical schools.

We have already seen the historical philosophy of the Shadows on
television, in the mouth of Captain James T. Kirk, in the Star Trek episode, "This Side of Paradise":

Maybe we weren’t meant for Paradise. Maybe we were meant to fight our way through, struggle, claw our way up, scratch for every inch of the way. Maybe we can’t stroll to the music of the lute – we must march to the sound of drums.

The same comments in another context are rather more threatening. Sheridan’s encounter with the Shadows’ human agents on Z’ha’dum is unnerving, since it is so apparently innocuous. Over tea with Justin, a cuddly Einsteinian old man, and Morden, an old enemy, Sheridan is given a potted version of a social Darwinian theory of racial and cultural struggle.

Justin: It’s really simple. You bring two sides together. They fight. A lot of them die, but those who survive are stronger, smarter, and better... A few get lost along the way, yes, and that’s unfortunate. I don’t think it was ever easy, but you can’t let that get in the way of the dream...

Morden: ... We would never have come this far if we hadn’t been at each other’s throats, evolving our way up, inch by inch.

It is important to understand here that what is central to the Shadows’ philosophy is not so much the notion of struggle – that is held in common by all the species which we see on Babylon 5 (with the exception perhaps of the Markab, in “Confessions and Lamentations”, 218) – but that of chaotic struggle. In some social Darwinian theories each against the other hones the strength of the race; there can be no alliances, no unity, for that would weaken the warrior and lengthen the conflict. The only way to acquire support is to conquer it. From this point of view, Sheridan’s belief in alliances and compromise is thus a fatal flaw, or a false consciousness, a misunderstanding of the “true” nature of the situation which the cosy kaffee klatsch attempts to correct.

But Sheridan is already a convert, and like most converts hard to shift. He has fallen prey to another all-inclusive ideology. The reverse of chaos is order; the reverse of the Shadows’ individualistic philosophy is co-operation and communalism. The Vorlons, in effect, are acting within a Marxist dialectic. It is not that they do not desire conflict, although for a long while we are led to perceive them as peacemakers, but that the conflict must be ordered, and it must be prepared. As the Shadows push for war, the Vorlons hold back, whispering that more preparations must be made, more alliances forged. The Vorlons are creating an Internationale.

If their methods strive for order, their aim is also for the controlled society. As in the socialist state, all talents and personality are to be placed at the service of the community. Lyta Alexander, for example, finds her conversion to the Vorlon cause comes at a high price: she must place her telepathy almost exclusively at the service of a master who offers few explanations for his demands, and she must sacrifice her personality and privacy in order to turn herself from a person into a tool. Kate in the Taming of the Shrew has this done to her, but the Vorlons, like the very best totalitarian institutions, whether political or religious, persuade Lyta to do it to herself.

Sheridan’s seduction into the Vorlon point of view is in part due to his own cultural construction. He is a military officer, accustomed to taking orders and with an ingrained belief that he is there to protect people: a supposition which fits more comfortably with the Vorlons’ paternalistic notions of order than the Shadows’ free wheeling individualistic chaos. At the end of Season Two, Kosh, the Vorlon ambassador, presents himself to those gathered in the garden as a composition of light (“The Fall of Night”, 222), exploiting the cultural prejudices which have identified light with the good and the safe, dark and shadows with the evil and dangerous. In his depiction of the Vorlons and the Shadows, Straczynski traps us into thesis and antithesis. Unable to see the shades of grey we are caught up in the rhetoric and passion, as much as any of the participants in this fictional conflict.

If Straczynski’s depiction of the Vorlons and Shadows is subtle and deceptive, he is not averse, however, to delivering the same lesson in a more direct way. In one of the finer comic sequences in the show, in “The Geometry of Shadows” (203), Ivanova is assigned to sort out an increasingly violent dispute between rival factions of Drai.

Ivanova: This station is dedicated to the goal of finding peaceful solutions to our problems... You can start by helping me to understand the precise nature of the conflict between the two sides that you’ve set up.

Green Drai (pointing at other): Purple
Purple Drai (pointing at first): Green
Ivanova: No, I understand there are two factions, but what is the point of contention? Where do you disagree with each other?

Green Drai (pointing): Purple
Purple Drai (pointing): Green
Ivanova: Yes, but who gets to wear the purple sash and who gets to wear the green sash? Is it based on income or caste or rank?...

Green Drai: We put green and purple in great barrel, equal to numbers of Drai. Then we reach in, we take. Where there was one Drai people, now there are two. The two fight until there are one.

Ivanova (incredulous): That’s it? It’s totally random, arbitrary?

In an attempt to understand the conflict she places a purple scarf around the neck of a Drai already wearing a green. The room erupts in violence. The incident demonstrates clearly Straczynski’s awareness of history: “there is a great deal of generalized historical and political metaphor in the show, never one-to-one because that is too easy, but disguised in one form or another, transmuted... you can find parallels to the story in World War II and the Bible.” More obviously in this case, we can see parallels to American party politics and more seriously, to the conflicts in the former
Yugoslavia, in Israel/Palestine and in Northern Ireland. Each of these conflicts is equally opaque to the outsider.

Such incidents as the Drazi conflict depict clearly Straczynski’s commitment to exploring the nature of democracy. At other times he expresses his faith in democracy in an often very direct manner. He uses throwaway references such as the quotation from Abraham Lincoln in the opening sequence of Season One: “the last best hope of mankind.” Sometimes there are phrases which are meant ring alarm bells, such as the declaration of a weak Earth Minister, about to sign a non-aggression treaty with the expansionist Centauri: “peace in our time” (“The Fall of Night”, 222). At other times it is less the words than the placing of the actors which is meant to resonate. In the news broadcast of President Clark’s inauguration Straczynski has set up the ceremony’s participants just as they were for Lyndon B. Johnson’s inauguration (“Chrysalis”, 122). If we recognise this we begin, correctly, to surmise that the accident which killed Clark’s predecessor, President Santiago, was in fact an assassination, just as in the case of Johnson’s predecessor Kennedy, and to recognise also the premium which Straczynski places on human action. Alternatively, the words of somebody we are taught to admire, such as Thomas Jefferson, find their way into the mouth of a member of the Nazi-like Nightwatch (“Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom”: “Messages from Earth”, 308), and force us to consider the real meaning of liberty.

Straczynski is not using history in a simple way, despite the examples given; there are few direct correspondences between events in the Babylon 5 universe and our own. The alien Centauri Republic, with its Emperor, seems at times to be modelled on the Roman Empire – suicide is the favoured option for those accused of treason (“Knives”, 217) – and at other times on the Austro-Hungarian Empire, both through their costume and the generic European accent of their ambassador, Londo Mollari. Still more are we reminded of the grandiloquence of Mussolini in the language of Centauri aggression and their methods of attack. But, coincidentally or not, it was fifty years to the day after America dropped an atom bomb on Hiroshima that the episode “The Long, Twilight Struggle” (220) was screened and we witnessed the Centauri using mass drivers to pound the Narn home planet “back to the stone age” (a phrase used of the bombing mission against Vietnam). Straczynski is too subtle, however, to leave us with only one villain or to make that villain too evil. Londo Mollari, as he is presented to us, is less an evil man than a man who has not the courage to step aside from, or in front of evil when he sees it, and is willing to sacrifice his principles, one small step at a time, believing that they can be reinstated at a more convenient time. In this Londo, for all his grandeur, must realise that he too is merely “every man”. Like many of us he confuses love of country with honour.

Londo, however, is not the only example we are given. It is too easy to recognise Londo as “foreign” and thus dismiss his actions as not relevant to ourselves. The Nightwatch are less easy to dismiss. The episodes in which we watch the rise and fall of the Nightwatch and the testing of Zack, one of the programme’s John Does, are some of the most tense in the arc. What is at issue is the responsibility of the individual for the health of society and the path of history. The rise of the Nightwatch – which has emerged with the connivance and covert support of the government – may be a reminder of the rise of the Nazis, but – even if only because all its members are played by American actors – it is also clearly intended as a reminiscence of the McCarthy era, or even later. In his comments on the Net, Straczynski is adamant that it should not be read merely as historical analogy; rather it is a warning: “[The Big Lie] will continue to work... for as long as people think that they would never fall for such a thing.” If Straczynski is clear that it could happen here, he is also emphatic that we do not have to sit back and accept it. However, whilst Zack’s choice to reject the blandishments of Nightwatch is taken in the context of a potential source of authoritative support – he is able to turn to his Captain – the most heroic choice is taken by perhaps the most unlikely of figures.

On the Narn homeworld the Centauri are conducting a holocaust amongst their ex-slaves, weeding out those with any tendency to resist. Lyndst, arranged fiancée of Vir, Londo Mollari’s apparently naïve subordinate, has been intimately involved with this “sport” (“Sic Transit Vir”, 312). Like Lyndst, we may not realise that what we are doing is wrong, if our cultural context tells us it is right, but we do retain the ability to step beyond the insidiousness of propaganda and listen to our own inner voice. Vir, it turns out, has taken that step: like Pastor Niemüller, he has asked himself, “if not me, then who else?” and, behind the back of both the station command and Londo, he has used his position as ambassadorial aide to ship Narn refugees to safety. Inspired by Earth history (but clearly a version that focused a little too wholly on the myths of high politics), Vir has constructed a fake Centauri persona, Abrahama Lincoln, to expedite the transfers. In Vir, therefore, rather than in Sheridan or Delenn (both of whom have the support of mentors), we see Straczynski’s construction of the hero principle. Vir may not achieve much in the long term, but every little counts in our construction of the societies we choose to live in. It is perhaps no coincidence that his name is the Latin for “a man”: more than any other character in Babylon 5 he embodies the principle of individual free will which is traditionally held to separate “man” from the animals.

In Babylon 5 most characters lie to each other and to us, but almost all of them share our own bewilderment about what is happening to them, or deliberately keep fragments of the puzzle to themselves. As Sheridan (the second commander of Babylon 5) puts it “I’m not saying what I’m saying. I’m not saying what I’m thinking. For that matter, I’m not even thinking what I’m thinking” (“A Race Through Dark Places”, 207) Through Vir, Sheridan, G’Kar and eventually even Londo, however, we learn that what we must not do is lie to ourselves or to history. In “Voices of Authority”
(305) Julia Musante, a political officer from Earth's Ministry of Peace, is sent to Babylon 5 to explain the political situation on Earth.

Musante: In the coming months, certain individuals will be purged from their government positions on charges of sedition, immoral conduct, even spying for alien governments. With our basic freedoms at stake no response can be too extreme. There may be some minor and temporary abridgements in the traditionally protected areas of speech and association, but only until the crisis is over. We have been betrayed on nearly everyone. It is going to take the efforts of every loyal citizen to keep Earth safe and ideologically pure.

Her reference to the purging of political elites on Earth is a clear reference to the regimes of Stalin and the Gang of Four, but Straczynski comments on the Internet that you don't have to go far back for the Big Lie: "Go to a Pat Buchanan rally sometime."

Musante's speech to the Nightwatch is, he says, assembled from Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, McCarthy, Stalin, Pat Buchanan and Representative Dornan. Straczynski is unafraid to confront and challenge his audience, unafraid to make us feel uncomfortable and unafraid to remind us that, if we do not know our history, we are condemned to repeat it.

The conference which took place at the University College of Ripon and York St John on December 13 and 14 1997 was one of the liveliest and most enjoyable that either of us had been to. Almost everybody present contributed to the discussions, and those discussions ranged very widely. Not everyone decided to submit a paper to the volume: what follows constitutes about two-thirds of the papers delivered. The contribution by Anne Schofield and Nickianne Moody was commissioned at a later date, to fill one very obvious gap: a discussion of the role of the female characters in Babylon 5. We were sorry that the speaker who had promised a paper on Garibaldi and masculinity was in the end unable to come to the conference. Gender issues may be one area that is not well enough covered in this volume; another - and a subject that could fill another volume of essays - is in-depth studies of all the characters.

The criteria we set for contributors to the conference, and to the volume you are about to read, was that they be both fans - enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the show - and a practitioner of a relevant academic discipline, whether it be psychology or engineering, excited by the prospect of applying their work skills to an area which for many of them was outside their normal activities, and for which most would receive little academic credit.

Most of these papers have been rewritten to some extent since December 14 1997. Some, for instance, take account of "The Deconstruction of Falling Stars" (422), which was first broadcast in Britain on December 19. But this volume is almost entirely based on the first four seasons, not taking into account the fifth season (which began in Britain in April 1998 and is due to finish in September).

The essays we present seem to fall into four categories: Narratives; Echoes; Technologies; Faiths and Moralties. In "Narratives" Stephen Keane leads straight into the most significant question of all, for Babylon 5 enthusiasts: how is it that Straczynski keeps us watching? By taking one crucial and complex episode in Straczynski's arc, "Babylon Squared" (120), Keane looks at the way in which Straczynski uses time travel, prophecy and continual foreshadowing in order to produce anticipation and pleasure. Herbert Chan takes the discussion further by looking at how Straczynski finally, two seasons later, resolves the enigmas set up in "Babylon Squared", in the double episode "War Without End" (316/317). Like Keane, he relates the complexities and inherent paradoxes of time-travel narratives to "spatial experience of everyday life in postmodern society". Roberts examines the way in which Straczynski uses the narrative to present his own particular philosophy and vision: that we should strive for balance, not conflict and polarity. The Vorlon/Shadow struggle is defeated by an alliance, a balance of desires and ideologies; the balanced individual, Sinclair/Valen, brings that sense of balance to the Minbari themselves, creating a Grey Council, which eschews the extremes. As Schofield and Moody show, this philosophy of balance is epitomised by the character of Grey Councilor Delenn, whose unconventional heroism is balanced between human and Minbari, male and female, passivity and activity, confidence and introspection. She is "a character who allows us to question the composition of heroism".

"Echoes" looks at some of the influences behind Straczynski's creation. This is not an approach which Straczynski himself finds appealing, or even legitimate, but it is in our view an essential part of our understanding of the series. To make, again, the inevitable comparison with Star Trek (another approach which Straczynski does not appreciate), Star Trek exists in a cultural desert, or at least in a wilderness with very few points of reference, and thus very few challenges to the viewer's cultural knowledge, while Babylon 5 makes numerous self-conscious references to literary culture and to its own artistic predecessors. It is what has made it so popular to a science-fictional audience. Sawyer starts by looking at just one author, to whom Straczynski made specific reference in his novel Otherside: H.P. Lovecraft. It is not the similarities between the Lovecraft universe and Straczynski's that catch Sawyer's eye so much as the differences: "it is possible that part of Babylon 5 is a dialogue with Lovecraft's version of cosmic pessimism." Archell-Thompson examines the mythological underpinnings of the series, in particular the resonances of the Light/Dark, Vorlon/Shadow antithesis. McMahon looks at this dichotomy too, but
relates it and similar themes to psychology rather than to mythology, arguing that the appeal of Babylon 5, like that of other good science fiction, can be seen in terms of psychological function. Finally, in this section, Sayer looks at the narrative function of Babylon 5 itself, the space station, "a home away from home": a home which is not home, a haven which is not safe, a venue for the textual ambiguity and sense of irresolution which makes Straczynski's narrative so appealing.

Babylon 5 is two million five hundred thousand tonnes of spinning metal: not the least of the engineering and scientific speculations to be found in Babylon 5. In "Technologies", Packwood looks at the range of such extrapolation to be found in the series, and at the way it is used as narrative effect: it is sadly the only contribution in this volume towards an understanding of the particular visual appeal of Babylon 5, which set new standards in science-fictional imaging, not just through computing technology but through aesthetics. Brown focuses on one aspect of technology – the cyborg – but uses this as a point from which to launch into a wide-ranging discussion of the role of the machine, and the nature of Babylon 5's envisioned future: in particular he examines the way in which Straczynski posits a particularly American future.

The final section in the book deals with "Moralities and Faiths". McCarron (the only person in this volume to deal with the Babylon 5 novels which Straczynski has spoken of as additional episodes in the story-arc) picks up Brown's idea of Americanism, and examines it in relation to Babylon 5's treatment of religion and its "robust, even aggressive, faith in the endurance of capitalism, individualism, and humanism". Moody looks at the question of medical ethics, which usually revolves around the dilemmas faced by the character Dr Franklin, and which is not only central to a number of episodes of Babylon 5, but also a theme in a number of other recent television series. Clark, a philosopher, discusses the nature of ethics in a universe, like Babylon 5's, in which there are numerous alien races; and asks the question "why are Babylon 5's aliens comprehensible?"

The book ends with brief biographies of all the contributors, and with a list of all the episodes of the five seasons of Babylon 5. We should end this introduction with thanks to our contributors, for working sometimes to tight schedules, and with especial thanks to two sources which made our episode guide possible and which have helped to eliminate (we hope) most of the purely factual errors in what follows: Andy Lane, the author of The Babylon File, and the numerous contributors to that indispensable cornucopia of information, "The Lurker's Guide to Babylon 5" (http://www.midwinter.com/lurk/universe/intro.html).

Notes
3. It is clearly no coincidence that Babylon 5 so closely resembles Stephen Bochko's Hill Street Blues, both visually and in terms of unresolved storylines and ambiguous moral choices.
6. Neville Chamberlain, agreeing to the German annexation of Czechoslovakia, September 1938.
8. Abraham Lincoln, whilst he did issue the edict freeing the slaves, said in his inaugural address, "If I could save the union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save the union by freeing all the slaves, I would do it." Fortunately for African-Americans, the latter proved to be true, but the emancipation edict of 1862 freed slaves only in rebel-held territories and was an attempt to create a fifth column, not a generous and humanitarian gesture. Slavery was maintained in the four Union slave states until the end of the war. A better choice might have been Harriet Tubman or Oskar Schindler.
9. As in note 7.