

# Threads

AUSTIN  
IVERS

14 November 2020 - 6 February 2021

## Off The Shoulder Of Skibbereen

Pat McCabe

*Blade Runner*, 1982

### **(I Have Seen Things You Wouldn't Believe)**

*Oh, father dear, I often hear you speak of Erin's Isle*

*Her lofty scenes and valleys green, her mountains  
rude and wild*

*They say it is a lovely land wherein a prince might dwell*

*Oh why did you abandon it?*

*because all hell broke loose, motherfucker. . .*

*that's why.*

Ah yes, there's no doubt about it – the past, it sure is the queerest of countries.

I was thinking only the other day about lady protestants way back in the sixties committing mortal sins through not only smoking cigarettes the way filmstars would outdoors but, even worse, the wearing of figure-hugging crimplene slacks in bright pastel colours.

And, along with that, albeit only obliquely connected, a former hippy friend of mine, a Charles Manson lookalike by the name of Mick Greenan who hailed from South Tipperary, gravely attesting that the Spahn Ranch dropouts over in California had cut the head off some fellow and made it into a film – Squeaky Fromme and 'Charlie's Family', I wonder if you happen to remember them?

With all the talk at the time (1974) being that this particular avant-garde artistic effort – it would have been described as 'snuff' back then – was part of what they described as their KAOS project, after which they had concealed the completed product in a can and buried it in an unmarked hole somewhere out among the rolling dunes of Big Sur.

And where maybe it can still be found, I don't know-that is, of course, if it ever existed.

And is not yet another dubious conspiracy theory.

Because, like protestants and the wearing of exotic, sin-inducing colourful apparel, it can often appear, certainly in these sophisticated digital days of enlightenment and instant news, like you made the whole thing up.

Except for the fact that there remain in existence reliable texts which categorically state that, back in the good old days, every time a lady disciple decided to adorn herself, Aubrey Hepburn-like, in a pair of 'Capri-type' pants, certain tectonic plates could be heard to shudder and The Blessed Virgin Mary break down in floods of tears beyond the clouds.

So no, it's definitely not fictitious or fanciful – because the proof is there and we have to accept, like it or not, that at some point in our history people closely related to us sank happily to their knees, kissing the tips of their fingers as they wept before Jesus in the hope that their slack-disporting neighbours might see the errors of their ways and desist from encouraging the onset of Armageddons unimaginable.

And which is why so many of them found their way into the script for my imaginary cold war, full-length feature epic *MONDODROME*.

Which I first conceived during the days of my callow youth and studenthood, preoccupied as I was with the self-same theories echoed in this exhibition, that is to say those of Mass Culture As Social Decay – incisively anatomised, among others, by Patrick Brantlinger in his seminal work *Bread & Circuses* (Amok Publishing, 9.95) which

proposes the idea that modern society is repeating an ancient pattern of decline and fall reflected in most of the writing on mass culture over the past two centuries – illustrating this through his examination of the work of, principally, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, T. S. Eliot and Ortega Y Gasset.

Lest this somewhat eccentric approach to the subject at hand appear in any way frivolous, might I declare it closer to an innate, giddy hysteria – with an omnipresent vein of anxiety perhaps the defining characteristic of one’s sophomore adventures in fiction – most notably, perhaps, in various short pieces ‘for film’ – in which a soldier, for example, his face veiled by a gas mask, might come bursting through the window of our inoffensive terraced smalltown house in Monaghan, sweeping his rifle from side to side. He levels his gun at a cabinet of family photographs (Uncle Joe brandishing a hayfork, Aunt Ellen holding her hat against the wind) and blasts away. Ping-pong balls ricochet around the room, sending the photographs flying. Out on the street people are evaporating into their clothes. A man standing by a tree is reduced to an empty shirt and slacks. A pair of lovers standing in an alleyway become twin piles of crumpled clothes. A soldier seated at a desk picks up an R/T unit and barks an order into a microphone: “You are welcome, my friends, to *The Ultimate Conclusion!*”

My more recent, adult version of this admittedly somewhat jejune effort, will be shot, it is proposed, in the grainiest monochrome.

And, hopefully, illegally distributed on tenth generation VHS cassettes.

*Mondodrome* opens to static, the titles rolling from side to side as if the tracking of a VCR is slightly askew. Tuned, we are introduced to Max Renn (James Woods) via his video wakeup call, who in turn is introduced to ‘Mondodrome’. Renn speaks to various contacts in order that he may discover more about *Mondodrome* despite a warning that *Mondodrome* is dangerous. A girl he spends the night with (Barbara Windsor in the Debbie Harry part, complete with mandatory transgressive crimplene slacks and matronly June Whitfield-style blonde bouffant) is so excited over a pirate tape of the broadcast that she decides to go to Pittsburgh to audition for the show. Renn begins to hallucinate. The hallucinations become so that fantasy and reality are indistinguishable. Later he is told that Nicki is already dead, and when he tunes in to *Mondodrome* again, in the murk identifies her floating image among many similar shadows he has known, anonymous in the icy-blue strip light as it sputters just outside the gates of Paradise, to which access has been denied – as for so many other vertiginously drifting recalcitrant silhouettes. Far above a world becoming increasingly mondo, where the cold war’s glaciers shifted inexorably, inch by inch, a place increasingly one of catastrophe.

Where once prominent states simply dropped out of existence, against a background of meaningless and unceasing military activity, and the Halls Of Heaven became an unlighted fortress, its battlements ossified, encrusted with mesmerising, incandescent ice.

But which still, all the same, is a grand old place – heaven that is. Although, as I suggest, you don’t tend to hear a great deal about it now, and would be nearly half afeared of daring to even mention either it or God, not to mention celestial bawling Marys, in case you might be chased out of the town.

That is to say, if towns – at least outside of the realm of video-trash – could be said to exist anymore.

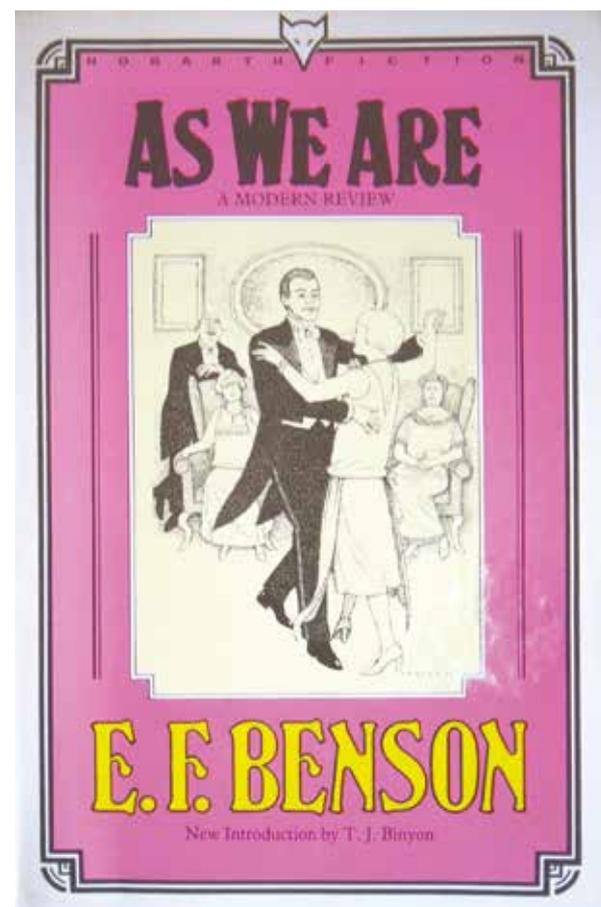
Anymore than ‘protestants’, at least of the character that I’ve, somewhat irresponsibly, been insinuating – conveniently recruited from the treasure trove of the early nineteen-sixties, atomic war atmosphere memory.

And which is principally inspired, it must be admitted, by a single, particular individual whose name was Muriel. Who, for all I, know, may never in her entire life have so much as darkened the door of a church – whether Catholic, Protestant or any other.

But who, for I bore treasured witness, whenever she was not at work in the factory spent a great deal of her time careering, Swan Lake-style, around the carpet of her sitting-room.

*Jealousy* by Frankie Laine was another of her favourites and, even yet, a few bars of that orange-coloured tango recalls memories of plump forms bursting out of oyster-satin blouses, tight-seated slacks or attenuated skirts. Beneath these, stockingless legs pranced and wriggled with unfamiliar caperings – a long way, perhaps, from Squeaky Fromme and Charles Manson – but it must be remembered that, for some of my neighbours, in its day that varnished little Bakelite box in the corner disseminated not only the likes of Frankie Laine but Elvis also, and – God help us! – *Je T’Aime!* by ‘The Frenchman’ Serge Gainsbourg and his doe-eyed mistress Jane Birkin – represented the equivalent of Charles Manson’s adventures in the skin trade.

As another neighbour, a shy retiring lady who had been a nun for forty years exclaimed when first encountering ‘the wireless’: “Ach! Witchcraft!” before racing hysterically up to her room and returning in a chaos of saliva and despair reading selected excerpts through her open window from *As We Are* by E. F. Benson, including: “Across the chasm which, in 1914, split time in two, making, for the space of a generation at least, a new era, A. B. or Anno Belli”.



Where the churned and mangled mud-corpses of Verdun and The Somme, with crushing predictability, were already in the process of becoming anonymous, remote Soyent Green fodder, little glimpses of a world, however distinct, seen through the wrong end of a telescope, now only occasionally flitting across the field of memory.

So, *plus ça change*, as they say – *The End*, whether chorused by Jim Morrison or in *Boccaccio’s Decameron*, can always be relied on to fulfil its promise of dissolution and collapse – yea even unto the middle ages.

Is it any wonder, then, it might be fair to ask, given all these developments in the post-war world, that the poor bewildered people would find themselves up in arms, pledging themselves to new organisations by the dozen, with the League Of Decency and The Legion Of Mary (‘The Blue Army Of Our Lady’) irrevocably exercised, girding themselves for what seemed now an inevitable ‘fight to the death’ against the forces of corruption and the omnipresence of the degraded ‘moving image’.

But then, you’d have to ask, in these digit-bubble days of You Tube, Instagram, Spotify, Tumblr, WhatsApp and even the old long-ago *Skweegle-rrnghnk-biddurnngh!* Dial-Up-who might it be, in these times of the decay of ritual, including everything from religion to the lighting of the fire, and for so long synonymous with the fellowship of the subconscious, is expediting similar *moving?*

One of the most interesting things I ever saw in or around that time was Ray Harryhausen's clattering big skeleton army, and whenever I have occasion to pass a certain spot on Fermanagh Street, Clones, Co. Monaghan, I never fail to hear them screeking and banging, making bits of shields and threatening to tear the entire place to ribbons, and Jason and his Argonauts and stupid ship along with it.

And which is not, I'll willingly vouch, the most immediate image which, unbidden, rises into the mind of most mortal men and women as they make their way up or down that particular street – or, for that matter, any other.

Because it depends on what you've been watching or hearing – irrespective of whether or not you know it.

An impression, I dare say, bearing more currency now than ever. With, might it be advanced, some nascent old-timer of the future, fondly stroking his cheek with a handset, becoming all misty-eyed as he sighs and gazes far down the chute of the 'auld times' – longing to be once more 'back in the day' when Freddy Krueger or perhaps Michael Myers comes charging across the street with a great big latex Halloween mask on his head, threatening atrocities far in excess of anything Ray Harryhausen might have had in mind – or maybe the brown squiggles from Cronenberg's ever-intriguing exploration of visceral bodily transformation, infection and technology, entitled: *Shivers*, set mostly in a Montreal condominium.

You wouldn't want to see them coming out of the bath.

But, the fact is – whether we like it or not, the synthesis of flesh and machine is already a de facto situation, and no amount of protest from the Munch-like bewildered effigies from the past, whether dutiful lady-protestants or comparably perplexed farmers in trenchcoats fearfully wielding lethal-looking agricultural implements, there is no amount of prayer or reason capable of withstanding the silver-black surge of static which has already cascaded across our minds and all the world, as evidenced in the selections of the artist on view.

Why, even the sweetest little birdies in the trees may well have modulated their call to mimic the electronic echo of, perhaps shall we say, the soundtrack of *The Last House On The Left* – the latter once the property of a tea-swooshing shawlie by a half-door, chomping on a *doodgeen* as she abstractedly whistles the tune of *The Old Bog Road*.

Only to find herself, briefly, in receipt of a fleeting signal from the future – and a glimpse, in the scullery of her mind, of a closed human eye which slowly, as the roaming camera begins juddering

sharply before going down, lying at a half-cocked angle on the floor with everything happening on its side, until a swollen veined sphere commands, abruptly, the entirety of her neat little curtained window.

With her point of view shifting towards the slopes of a verdant rolling meadow, where an insouciant sheep now is seen to be unmistakably aglow, softly bathed in a cumulus of brightest orange, standing directly underneath the spreading leaves of a lush, majestic linden.

There is a sense of something 'locking into place'.

Might this be, at last, *The Quatermass Conclusion*? she thinks, even though she has never seen the film. For how could she? – with the Knock magic lantern which, avowedly, with similar ocultry, summoned the Marian vision from skies above the Mayo mountain, not as yet even the wildest, conceivable entity.

Could it be she is to be harvested by aliens – spirited away in the name of science, only to return as the hapless subject of *The Manster*, a Japanese-American co-production (1962) in which a kidnapped newspaperman finds himself transformed into the 'manster' of the title, reluctantly endowed with two beastly noggins, each one with its own set of furry eyebrows and crooked teeth?

Rendered, perhaps, into Soylent Green porridge?

Because, I mean, why not-because what, after all, is *Soylent Green* only people – protestant-farmer, or farmer-protestant – or, indeed, immortal chanter of half-door Gaelic ballads, they too stand shadowed in the trawl of the alien beam. Remaining vulnerable and mute, as all flesh must since the first fog rolled, figurines in a Mondodrome tape which opens to static, the title rolling from side to side, before an explosive device nocturnally secreted in the waistband of her frieze sciorta – her origins being essentially Catholic, she remains unpersuaded by the sinful blandishments of the garment commonly referred to as 'britches' – accidentally detonates.

As, in the aftermath of the explosion, the stiffened birds evacuate the trees and a flock of wide-eyed sheep – orange, incandescent – make their way disputatiously towards the gate.

Only to find, in enormous Gothic lettering burnt black where the lady concerned had been standing, the heedful rubric: "You are being filmed".

What might have been said in the nineteen-seventies regarding the subject of a plastic VHS cassette being inserted in a letterbox located in the middle of someone's stomach is anyone's guess: however, opting for a condition of ossified, quite affronted dread is most likely a safe and secure approximation.

And one which, given the kinetic giddiness with which the forces analysed in this fascinating exhibition have been observed moving, by the time a new decade had been seen to 'red' – dawn, as it were, was already as remote and unthreatening as the cosy warm fireside depicted on the jamjar of 'Old Time' marmalade which our *doodgeen*-puffing protagonist had spooned on her warm fresh oven-baked bread to her heart's content – this now being the era of the 'video nasty', and the tabloid clamour which, slaveringly daily denounced it – after the fashion of *Clockwork Orange* a decade or thereabouts before.

***Driller Killer: undercover investigators have smashed a sickening international racket in depraved videos!!***

It was hard to know which was worse when it came to disseminating the ravenous, invisible, bacillus of moral panic – *Cannibal Holocaust*, *El Jorabado De La Morgue* or just poor old plain and simple Ted Bundy himself.

But, as referenced here, in this exhibition of delightful ever-surprising taxonomy of silver-lit zigzag streaks and striking images, both degraded and high-res, there is also the never-to-be forgotten time-immobilising cultural milestone that forever shall remain the TV movie *The Day After*.

Not having seen it, "The day after what?", I remember my mother replying to one of our neighbours the morning after the show had been first transmitted.

And to which Mrs Peter – now, sadly also, departed to her eternal reward, God rest her soul, like so much plastic melted into infinity's maw – could be overheard morosely groaning: "After a horrendous nuclear attack which now sees God knows how many poor people from Kansas – and probably us, in the heel of the hunt, Mrs, if they go on the way they're going – living in a barren, devastated world devoid of electricity, safe drinking water."

"Completely atomised", we heard her continue, "Like young Billy Mc Coy, the airman, the poor craythur" – a role, incidentally, which had been played quite beautifully in the show by the actor William Allen Young – with my mother promising a decade of the Rosary before closing the front door and quietly disappearing inside.

Not unlike Vincent Price in the fifties technicolour original of David Cronenberg's Oscar-scooping vehicle – *sans* the fly bit.

However, out of respect for the material on hand, an immediate suspension of any further tendencies towards the whimsical is here demanded. If that they be, indeed – for I recall most vividly such matters as Mr Ivers has drawn our attention to here being examined in profoundest detail, in the

popular magazine entitled *Man Alive*, through the period hereby characterised as the ‘Protestant Subversive Trousers (aka Slacks of Shame) Days.

For what are days only the same but different.

As, within those pages, at the age of 13 yrs, I found myself become acquainted with such subjects as the artist on view is anatomising here: including social collapse, corporate government take-overs, theocracy – even, unless memory fails me, talking computers.

Also to be view in the Reader’s Digest, as I recall – on the page directly opposite a review of George Romero’s paean to those wandering, ill-at-ease legions in *Night Of The Living Dead*.

So, right from the beginning *The End* has always been a subject. And will continue to be so.

How could it not?

Whether on the inside of Alexa or a humble little nineteen-sixties radio cabinet – out of which issue warm, woody words maintaining that the idea that modern society is repeating an ancient pattern of decline and fall can be seen to pervade most of the writing on mass culture over the last two centuries. Before going on to discuss many of the most influential and representative theories of mass culture, ranging widely from Greek and Roman origins through Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, T. S. Eliot and the theorists of the Frankfurt Institute, down to Marshall Mc Luhan and Daniel Bell.

Persuasively demonstrating how the belief in the historical inevitability of social decay – a belief perpetuated today by the mass media themselves – has become the dominant view of mass culture in our time.

But a case may be made, nonetheless, for such a perception being an *idée fixe* rooted in the very structure of our DNA, as indivisible as fingers or toes. Certainly this appeared to be the case when I was a boy, when on my holidays to the West Cork town of Skibbereen I was introduced to a local sayer, as they called her, whose name was Kitty The Mountain, and with whom I was to spend many long hours, availing of her wisdom – not to mention the many prophecies which she read as a matter of course from the publication Old Moore’s Almanac. “Make no mistake, there are bad times coming – same as there were in the auld times, and them that will come after that”, she would murmur, before bending her old shawled back to the fire and acquainting me by turns of the plots of *Threads*, *The Omega Man*, *Escape From New York*, *War Games*, *Two Tribes*, *Robocop* and *When The Wind Blows*. But most of all, foreshadowing as it does this cybernautic age of the slyest, most accomplished and duplicitous media-controlled ghosts in Creation, *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971).



Not that she’d have been aware of any of this, puffing away on yet another old clay pipe as she tugged me by the sleeve and, in that distinctive, fluent hoarse voice continued: “The fairies are the loneliest ones of all, for what they are the souls of the poor people left to die without a priest. And which is why our local Monsignor in the past times he took this awful breaking-out on his knee. So he went to Con the Shadow, now he would have been the fairies’ man on earth. Who is doing this to me, says the priest. I’ll tell you who it is that’s doing it to you, says Con. You were shot with a bow and arrow through the window of your very own bedroom. So take a look now whenever you go back, and you’ll see the little hole. It was The Queen of The Fairies herself that shot you. And every day from now until your demise, she’ll be watching and waiting for to see what you do next – even out of the eyes of sheep. Do you mark me now?”

*The Parallax View* describes a world which never was, and never will be, in any shape or form the manner in which it presents itself to us.

**Parallax:** a change in the apparent position of an object relative to more distant objects, caused by a change in the observer’s line of sight toward object.

“Make sure”, she used to say, “that you don’t walk out that road past The Monsignor’s. For, if you do, on account of that what he was guilty of in the old times, leaving them poor folk to die and then wander, you’ll be captured for all time in the country that is known as that of The Stray Sod – where every step forward takes you at least two backwards and never again will you make your way home.”

These are the parallel dimensions of the ever-aching, endlessly monitored mapless zombies – us, in otherwords – paradoxically in a world which has never known greater plenty – where

every single day, in recent years, got their access to free electricity and more than 200,000 piped water for the very first time. Illnesses such as polio, leprosy and river blindness are all, indisputably, in decline. But we find ourselves more terrified than ever, heart-sick to our souls by something we cannot seem to quite name or understand. Once upon a time, in the days after Suez, there was a lovable copper cycling along a leafy English country road, unconsciously in flight from the expectation of impending upheaval that was in the air when the Quatermass comet (might Conclusion be considered a prophetic Brexit movie?) entered upon his world, clipping the side of his head as his conveyance grew wings and into the deepest depths of his long-suppressed dread it bore him, towards a pit of anarchy and inflation, where the corpse of the tea-loving Margaret Rutherford (‘Miss Marple’) was being lustfully shredded by neo-Trotskyists, glue-sniffers, Maoists, punk-rockers, squatters and IRA – far from the lanes of his gentle Sussex boyhood, that pre-Suez land of dog-lovers and morning mist, long shadows on country ground, overwhelmed by The New Aquarians, models, photographers and lank-haired intellectuals, in bells and velvet performing their wanton St. Vitus dance, to the sound of Middle-Eastern influenced music, with a swirling mélange of strings and hand drums, scorning the bewildered bobby, clutching his helmet and to no avail whatsoever abjectly pleading with the motley legions of stoned freaks, blissed-out hippies, assorted sun-worshippers and solstice chasers, tripping in and out of various states of altered consciousness: before dazedly proceeding, once again now in these post-Brexit days, considered from this further shores of the great digital transmigration, towards a mythological stone circle with all of its attendant illusions-quite mesmerised, like us all, by the near-erotic promise of consummate annihilation.

Ladies & Gentlemen: Welcome to ‘The End.’

HELLO? HELLO?  
 This is Lawrence, Kansas. . . . . Is anybody there? . . . . . Anybody at all. . . . ?  
 . . . . . Hello, this is Lawrence, Kansas. . . . .

WELCOME  
 NEWS THE NEWS HERE IS THE NEWS THE NEWS HELLO  
 GOOD EVENING HERE IS THE NEWS

AND HERE  
 IS

YOU'RE VERY WELCOME  
 AUDREY HEPBURN-look into your heart!  
 NEWS  
 CHARLES MANSON

HERE

Stop wearing slacks  
 FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

IS IT OUR PHONES  
 VHS  
 CORPORATION

\*Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.\*

THINK  
 \*simulation\*

THE END  
 \*Hey, head, say bye bye to the neck!Decapito!"  
 \*analog flickering\*

CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA  
 \*static noise background\*

MEDIA THINGS  
 TOTALITARIANISM

SCARCITY  
 \*That's nice shooting there, what's your name, son?\*"SpaceX

FREDDY KRUEGER TIOCFAIDH AR LA

\*like tears in the rain\*

\*high contrast edges\*

BLEEP  
 REGINA FIDEI DEFENSOR

PILE-ON  
 VECTOR DISK MODE

SHADOWS  
 \*soylent green IS people\*

SOCIAL CHAOS  
 AMAZON

TRUMP MALWARE  
 MORE BLEEP ONE-WORLD STATE

YES, HELLO  
 THERE GOES THE  
 ITS NINE O CLOCK  
 LADIES!STOP IT!  
 KAOS  
 AND NOW, THE  
 TONIGHT IT HAS BEEN

HELLO AND HI

IS  
 THE

FIBRE-OPTIC

COLD WAR

WHY?

CLIMATE CHANGE  
 UNREST  
 ERIN'S

YOU

SOCIAL

BELIEVE

HIVE-MIND

REFUGEE  
 \*\*KRIMPLENE IS KAOS!\*\*  
 MORE FAKE NEWS

INLA  
 \*black horizontal streaks\*

HISSING

IRON CURTAIN

ANXIETY

SIMULATED DEFCON 1

Aye, the day will come, when the time is ripe, and every man-jack of them will be atomised and aye, took away-with nary a soul left walking the world, whether 'tis in Skibbereen or anywhere else!”, Kitty The Mountain used to say – before turning, with those narrow shoulders quaking – was it her at all? I found myself wondering – “But with them all so locked and busy with their LCD screens, they won't even notice that 'tis dust they have become.”

Like those lost needy nomads in *The Quatermass Conclusion*, harvested for experiment by indifferent, extraneous scholars of indeterminate origin, dazedly compelled towards Ringstone Round.

With that pulsing, low intensity internal psychic deficit being forensically, indifferently, held up to the light, the conclusions of their experiments never to be revealed – how it came to be that our spirits became shadows, scarce little more than ghosts on closed circuits – forever observed by persons unknown.

Oh, father dear, the day may come when in answer to the call. Each Irishman, with feeling stern, will rally one and all; I'll be the man to lead the van beneath the flag so green,

When loud and high we'll raise the cry,

Remember Skib-**LOOK OUT!!**

\*\*SILOS!! \*\* \*\*!!GOG!!\*\* \*WIND VECTORS!  
 \*Kali Yuga  
 \*immanent eschatology \*Tribulation  
 SUPERFIRE! \*\* \*\*\*\*!  
 \*! \*Age Of Iron \*\*!!! AIRBORNE WARNING\*  
 \*NATO  
 AGONY!! \*Rapture \*DISSOLVE!  
 \*BIOACCUMULATION! \*CRP-2B!! +ASSAULT\*!  
 \*KAOS! \*Messianism  
 \*Sabbatical millennialism \*TEOTWAKI  
 \*ANOXIA \*\* SEE!!SEE!  
 • ALPHA PARTICLE \* \*INVADE!  
 \*BASEMENTS \*BARREN !!\*\*MAGOG!!\*\*  
 \*@\*@!\*!

In The Beginning was The End, the demise of souls – of those who, in the words of Rutger Hauer, quoted here in Austin D. Ivers' vibrant, electrical installation, have indeed seen things you wouldn't believe – not only on Orion or somewhere off-its-shoulder-but, right here beside us, blinded at last in the ubiquity of dazzle, burning in the depths of our ulcerated, yearning hearts.