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Item Type	Chapter in book
Authors	Nichols, Philip
Citation	Nichols, P. (2007) Echoes across a half century: Ray Bradbury's Leviathan '99, in Morrissey, T. J. and De Los Santos, O. (eds.) When genres collide: selected essays from the 37th Annual Meeting of the Science Fiction Research Association. London: Fine Tooth Press.
Publisher	Fine Tooth Press
Download date	2025-05-17 00:32:11
License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/622699

Echoes Across a Half Century: Ray Bradbury's *Leviathan '99*

A paper for *When Genres Collide: SF Research Association Conference 2006*

By Phil Nichols, University of Wolverhampton, UK

p.nichols@wlv.ac.uk

Abstract

What happens when an SF writer branches out of the genre and collides with a nineteenth-century precursor? When Ray Bradbury was commissioned, fifty years ago, to write a screenplay based on *Moby Dick*, the power of that collision created reverberations through the remainder of Bradbury's career. His experience in crafting a streamlined narrative from Melville's discursive novel was to affect his approach to dramatization of his own stories. His experience in Ireland working on the screenplay would provide material for countless Irish stories, plays and a novel (*Green Shadows, White Whale*). Bradbury's fascination with Melville saw his continued development, from the early 1960s, of *Leviathan '99*. Glibly describable as "*Moby-Dick* in space", *Leviathan '99* has appeared as a radio play, stage play, opera, and finally a novel, a late-career return to the genre which brought Bradbury early success.

This paper gives an account of Bradbury's original radio version of *Leviathan 99* (BBC, 1968). It relates the play's development to Bradbury's experiences working with John Huston on *Moby Dick* in the 1950s, traces some of the ripples from that experience through other of Bradbury's work, and characterizes the intertextuality of *Leviathan '99* as typical of Bradbury's approach.

Ray Bradbury is widely known as a science fiction writer – particularly to those outside of the field of science fiction – and yet as early as the 1950s he was fighting to remove the “science fiction” tag from his books. His early career actually showed a number of phases to his short fiction writing: weird tales, crime and detective stories, science fiction. Somehow, it was the science fiction label that stuck.

However, most of what Bradbury has published since the mid 1950s has been *other than SF*.

In 2006 there is the prospect of the publication of a new novel, *Leviathan '99*; if not science fiction, then at least a space opera, indicating – at last – a substantial return to the field with which he has become synonymous.

Leviathan '99, like many of Bradbury’s recent publications, has a long history. Begun around 1960, and finished only recently, it stands to reveal a relatively poorly understood aspect of Bradbury’s work. *Leviathan* first saw the light of day as a radio play, before Bradbury honed it into a stage play. And then attempted to turn it into an opera. Not just a space opera in this case, but an honest-to-goodness stage opera, with music by the Hollywood composer Jerry Goldsmith. Finally, as Bradbury has returned to his novel version of the story, we see the

end of a cycle which reveals Bradbury's inveterate rewriting, his influence by Melville, and his rather postmodern tendency to conscious intertextuality.

It all began when the genre of SF collided with the Hollywood dream factory.

In 1953, film director John Huston contacted Bradbury with a view to him scripting an adaptation of *Moby-Dick* for the screen. Bradbury was at this point fresh from publishing his novel *Fahrenheit 451*, and riding a wave of critical acclaim both in the US and overseas. Although Bradbury claimed never to have read Melville's seafaring tome – and admitted as such to Huston (Anon, 1964) – he accepted the assignment on the advice of his friend, radio dramatist Norman Corwin. Bradbury sailed to Europe, to Ireland, to spend nearly a year working with Huston.

The complete story of Bradbury's time in Ireland has been covered, fictionally, in Bradbury's somewhat autobiographical novel *Green Shadows, White Whale* (1992). This account has to be taken with a large pinch of salt, however, since Bradbury's fictionalized persona is clearly not one hundred percent Ray. Apart from anything else, fictional Ray is making his *second* visit to the Emerald Isle (it was actually Bradbury's first visit), and he travels alone (whereas Bradbury really took his wife). Fortunately, the facts have also been explicated by Sam Weller's recent biography of Bradbury (Weller 2005), and will be further clarified in Jonathan Eller's forthcoming book on Bradbury's fiction.

Bradbury did battle with Melville's great white whale, and did battle with Melville's expansive text. On Corwin's advice, he skipped the chapters on whaling, and stuck primarily with the main narrative for his screenplay adaptation.

Nevertheless, like many dramatists before and since, he found that the demands of screen narrative differed greatly from what is acceptable in a novel. But he found ways to compress the story, partly by dispensing with characters, partly by merging characters, and most significantly by re-ordering narrative events to enhance the foreshadowing of doom (Cunningham 1961; Bradbury 2005a, pp17-22)

Perhaps because relatively few people have ever read the original Melville in its entirety, filmgoers and critics barely batted an eyelid when they saw the changes Bradbury had wrought.

Bradbury has claimed that his breakthrough moment in completing the adaptation was when he awoke one morning and declared to himself in the hotel mirror "I am Herman Melville!" (Bradbury 2005,p19 & p92)

Having completed the scripting assignment, Bradbury might be expected to put the work away and move on. However, the re-telling of Melville's tale must presumably have haunted him, for he continued to re-work it long after the

assignment was finished. He turned to a new working of the same basic story:

Leviathan '99.

According to Eller (2006), Bradbury first started writing a novel entitled *Leviathan '99* in about 1960. At some point in the early 1960s he turned his energies towards radio, and began re-shaping the story into a radio play. Examination of various script drafts from the mid-1960s show that it was here that Bradbury was working out the details such as names of characters. In one early draft, “Leviathan” is a spaceship, and “Cetus” is a comet. In later drafts, these become transposed. Early drafts also show Bradbury making the occasional slip such as accidentally referring to his un-named captain as “Ahab” (Bradbury 1966a).

Bradbury’s protagonist says that his father “really did call me Ishmael”. This Ishmael was born in space, so when he is drawn to join the space service, he is getting back to his home. Bradbury’s captain really is Ahab (although he is unnamed) – but *this* Ahab has been blinded, by a great white comet. To give him sight, he is equipped with radar. The Pequod becomes Cetus 7, a spaceship that explores the heavens. Bradbury’s conception of the ship draws as much on Nemo’s Nautilus as on Ahab’s Pequod, reflecting his view – expressed in his essay “The Ardent Blasphemers” (1962) – that the Nautilus is related to Moby Dick.

Bradbury exploits Melville's conception of the colour white, developed in chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick*. He makes the comet white, and he makes the captain bleached white by his earlier encounter with the comet.

Many of the other key figures and events of *Moby Dick* have their counterpart in *Leviathan '99*, but Bradbury follows his own cinematic adaptation of the novel rather more than the novel itself. Gone, for instance, is Fedallah, who Bradbury also dispensed with for Huston's film.

For Queequeg, Bradbury gives us Quell, a giant telepath with plenty of limbs! It is Quell's coffin – actually a spacesuit – that will provide Ishmael with a means of surviving the ultimate encounter with the great white comet.

As Melville presents an overwhelmingly documented view of the nature of the sea and whaling, Bradbury attempts to express the immensity, the mystery, the wonder, the appeal and the dread of space. He constantly shifts his metaphor for space: at one time referring to the "greater sea of space"; at another time to the "far islands" of Andromeda; at other times to "the summer lake of space", "the long night of space", "a sea of dark and measureless stars", and speaks of falling into space, while at the same time referring to the upward draw of flight, of the lure of Icarus, and referring to Ishmael and Quell as kites and autumn leaves.

(Bradbury 1966a; BBC1968a)

On the science fiction front, Bradbury makes use of plenty of stock SF technology and imagery, much of it in a throwaway style: jetpacks, rockets, robots, genetic engineering. But he also has palm-print readers that he calls “a modern witch of palmistry”, whole books stamped on needles, and a spaceship crewed by dwarves – to keep the mass of the ship down! Bradbury is playing with this imagery in much the way that he is playing with Melville.

Interestingly, for a work developing in the mid-1960s, Bradbury’s presentation of 21st-century spaceflight is very much grounded in the era of Gemini and Apollo. Ishmael flies down to the cape, condition go, and the crew live partly on hydroponics and partly on “super-homogenized gunk” food.

Correspondence from the time shows that Bradbury tried to sell *Leviathan ‘99* to the American radio network NBC. From today’s perspective, this seems an odd move, given that the golden age of radio drama was well over, and music and talk radio were becoming the order of the day. Nevertheless, the network was enthused, and looked set to produce the play in 1966 or 1967 (Wogan 1966). Bradbury had approached his friend Norman Corwin to direct (Bradbury 1966b)

But by some point in 1966, the deal was off, as NBC were asking Bradbury to chop his 90-minute play into three-minute segments. Bradbury has compared this to Stan Freberg’s “one-minute *Moby-Dick*” (Bradbury 2005b).

The play was rescued from this comic fate when Bradbury's friend, the English actor Christopher Lee, offered to take the script to the BBC.

Research in the BBC Written Archives has allowed me to reconstruct the chronology of the making of *Leviathan '99*. The following account is based on papers in the BBC file on Bradbury, and other archived BBC records.

Somehow two copies of Bradbury's script found their way into the BBC, which caused some initial confusion as two different departments were considering what to do with it. Once the confusion was resolved, the decision was made to produce the play for the highbrow Third Programme, the BBC's main cultural channel of the time. Bradbury's idea that Corwin should still direct was considered, but soon rejected. The reason isn't clear, but it is likely that the BBC would have been hostile to the idea of an outsider taking on the responsibility of such a production. Instead, production chores fell to H.B. Fortuin. Himself a playwright, Fortuin had established a name for himself first in the BBC's Overseas branch, writing and producing features in Dutch, German and Afrikaans. He was subsequently known for quality drama productions, particularly adaptations of European classics – Strindberg, Shaw, Brecht and others. Fortuin's recent experience in producing a radio version of Orson Welles' *Moby Dick Rehearsed* (1966) probably made him the obvious candidate for this production. Christopher Lee was snapped up as Bradbury's Ahab-in-space.

This excursion into SF was a rarity on the Third Programme, but for all the occasional hostility to Bradbury's work (and other SF) within the BBC, there seems to have been full support for this script, perhaps because of the unusual feature of having been written specifically for the medium by a major writer. To bring the SF alive, another talent from *Moby Dick Rehearsed* was brought in to produce a soundscape and ethereal music. Tristram Cary, long a composer of quality scores for radio drama, a pioneer of *musique concrete*, and one of the founders of the "Radiophonic" tradition within the BBC, produced a remarkable suite, which he would subsequently recreate for concert performance (Cary 2000).

Leviathan '99 was premiered on 3rd May 1968, a Sunday evening. The BBC listening panel – an early form of focus group of representative listeners – gave the play a mixed reception. For every listener who liked the play for blending SF with Melville, there was one who hated it for the same reason. Overall, however, the Audience Research Report gave the play a "reaction index of 58 [...] close to the average [...]" for plays in that season (BBC 1968b).

Critics gave the play positive reviews, and so pleased were the BBC, that the play was nominated for the Prestigious Prix Italia. Bradbury, however, vetoed the nomination, probably because the play would have been edited down to sixty minutes by the producer to make it eligible for submission. H.B. Fortuin, with his translation skills, successfully produced German language and Dutch language

versions of the play, again using Tristram Cary's music and sound collages. *Leviathan '99* thus became a piece of prestige drama throughout much of Europe.

After the radio productions, Bradbury continued to develop *Leviathan '99*. His stage play premiered at Samuel Goldwyn studios in 1972, to mixed reviews. Subsequent productions have been few and far between, but Bradbury has continued to revise his script. Douglas Carter's 2003 paper examined changes Bradbury has made for a recent stage version which take away some of the criticised excesses of the 1972 version and return it to something closer to the radio original.

Meanwhile, Bradbury has evidently been progressing with his novel version, which is currently under consideration by his publisher, and which we can therefore expect to see in print sometime in the next year or so, forty years since the radio version first appeared.

We can speculate as to Bradbury's motives for returning to this material again and again, and on his motives for returning to the novel form for this work. Perhaps, as has been suggested, he is seeking to finally wrest control of the leviathan from John Huston, who so tortured his work on *Moby Dick*; perhaps he is seeking to pay homage to Melville by getting the space age *Moby-Dick* into Melville's medium.

However, I think we can more fruitfully see *Leviathan '99* as illuminating an intertextuality that has actually been key to Bradbury's contribution to literature and media. Several of Bradbury's early short stories were sold first to radio, and only subsequently saw print in magazines and books. His 1962 novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* was first a short story, then a screen treatment, before settling down as a novel... and then becoming a screenplay once more (Eller & Touponce 2004, p260). His classic "I Sing the Body Electric!" first appeared as a TV script for *The Twilight Zone* in 1962 (Zicree 1982, p271-275), taking a further seven years to materialise as a short story.

Although Bradbury only occasionally returns to a published work to tinker with its original form, he regularly adapts his works to other media and other forms. Many of his novels are actually "fix-ups", to use Van Vogt's term for a book-length fiction forged from shorter source material. Bradbury has also written several unfilmed screenplays for each of *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man* and *Fahrenheit 451*. In the process of adaptation, he will amend, tinker, adjust - and illuminate - his original work: "The Pedestrian", solitary night walker, gains a companion when Bradbury dramatizes the story for stage and screen. His adaptation of "Gotcha" for television generated new material that spawned another short story, "The Laurel and Hardy Love Affair". Most interesting of all is the influence Bradbury took from Truffaut's film of *Fahrenheit 451* when he created the stage play of his novel (Bradbury 1986; Nichols 2003).

Bradbury can be seen as constantly striving for a definitive form for his stories, taking advantage of different media to help him and the reader unveil new readings and new meanings in his metaphors.

Once *Leviathan '99*, the novel, is established in Bradbury's body of work, then a "Melville cycle" in Bradbury's work becomes complete. The *Moby Dick* screenplay, the Irish short stories and plays, *Green Shadows*, *White Whale*, and *Leviathan '99* will stand as a significant, inter-related part of Bradbury's body of work – significant in quantity, let alone quality.

It then, ironically, becomes time to re-evaluate whether this return to a science-fiction mode really signals the end of Bradbury's being labeled as a science-fiction writer, and whether he should be allowed to be seen at last as Ray Bradbury, writer.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ray Bradbury, Prof Jonathan Eller (Indiana University), Prof Donn Albright (Pratt Institute, New York), BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK.

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