

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

by Michael Bracewell

TIME MACHINE 'WHEEL CLAMPED'

It has become apparent that many British towns and cities are gradually but perceptibly becoming identical. Once noticed, this phenomenon appears to accelerate—and within a decade the process will be complete.

Where once the distinguishing characteristics of a place—a corner, a main street, a square—has each enjoyed their own personality, now a fungus-like growth of dreary shop fronts, damp precincts and hot, airless cafes has all but taken over. Walls are thinner, ceilings lower, floors dirtier. The old institutional buildings, once representative of moral and social authority—churches and banks—have been stripped of their fittings, filled with wide-screen televisions, and turned into vast, barn-like bars. All through the town, and through every town, the same two dozen or so brand names can now be found, repeated over and over above the wide doorways.

On the edges of these identical towns and cities, chilly crepuscular hinterlands of carpet showrooms, DIY superstores and sportswear clearance warehouses stretch out in all directions, as far as the eye can see. And even further—because at some point on the horizon their prairie-like expanses now merge with those of the adjoining conurbations, like the land masses on maps of the prehistoric world. A few fields of wiry grass, colourless in the pinkish gleam of immensely tall streetlights, are the only slight variations—a tiny swell in the sea of sameness—that appear within the landscape.

To entertain the inhabitants of this new mono-environment, the various strands of the national media have developed an array of cheap, nasty gimmicks. In addition to which, strong alcohol is now available in the same flavours as children's sweets and theme snacks: Toffee Crisp-flavoured vodka shots, Bubblegum tequila, Monster Munch Bacardi. New models of cars will now be named after the most popular dishes on Indian takeaway menus, to avoid confusion and encourage consumption: The Vauxhall Korma; the Fiat Madras.

Mobile phones have now irreversibly destroyed the distinction between public and personal space. Young women are talking like camp gay men. When you apply for a mortgage you will be given a voucher for a free Mochaccino Latte. Gratuitous male aggression is not only encouraged, but celebrated.

Local newspapers have become directories of horror. Every week, unbelievably vile and stupid people do unbelievably vile and stupid things to each other, and to anyone or anything which happened to cross their path. Animals, in particular, have suffered at their hands. Kittens are reported shot in the face at close range; a dog hung from a tree in a sack and beaten to death.

The wealthiest and most fashionable people in this new state have been made even wealthier and more fashionable, by poorer people who pay to look at pictures of them going to private parties and expensive restaurants, or to read accounts of their luxurious lifestyles and love affairs. Old age pensioners are dressing like rappers. Clumsy fist fights have broken out between businessmen on crowded trains. Toddlers stab one another with screwdrivers. Truancy is rife; teenagers feral. Most jobs are dull and poorly paid. The weather has become first mild, then humid. The sun looks bigger, and redder, and lower in the sky. Dead polar bears have been found washed up on the shores of Scandinavia.

These events have not occurred in a way that is particularly dramatic, let alone apocalyptic. Rather, they seem to have had an athersclerotic, sluggish momentum—their progress incremental, as opposed to declamatory. It is as though history has ended, and the concept of a future, too. All that is left is the sweeping up, at the close of a hot, windy day of low white skies. Horses, their ribs showing through their skin, stand very still on the edges of toxic landfill sites. Jut-jawed, heavy-browed, tattooed on calf or small of back, territorially hostile, the last of the consumers have become scavengers. Their expressions are hostile, and they are swift to take offence.

NOTE TO EDITORS: It is only when one manages to somehow gain a great height over this new landscape, and look down upon it, that you realise what has happened. In the space of a relatively short amount of time, Britain has turned into one enormous shop. And everything that has not assisted this shop in making more profit, has been either forced into dereliction or declared eccentric. And thus, after just a few years, all that was lovely, or gentle or—to use an old-fashioned word—*seemly*, has been destroyed.

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