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The BBC's Money adaptation plots a course to Saturn 3

Martin Amis has never admitted exactly where the inspiration came from for his classic 80s work Money. Could it be the scriptwriting stint he had on much-derided sci-fi film Saturn 3?

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Out of this world ... Farrah Fawcett, Kirk Douglas and Harvey Keitel in Saturn 3. Photograph: Ronald Grant/Archive

Fans of Mad Men currently suffering from withdrawal after the end of the third season, and fans of Martin Amis's greatest novel, Money (1984) – I'm incidentally guessing there's a sizeable overlap between the two groups – have something exciting to look forward to. The BBC is soon to broadcast a two-part adaptation of the Amis novel as part of its 80s season, starring Vincent Kartheiser, who plays the creepy, tormented ad exec Pete Campbell in Mad Men.

Nick Frost is to play John Self, the alcoholic, junk food- and porn-addicted ad director who in the era of the Lady Di wedding gets a glimpse of serious riches when a smooth American producer, Fielding Goodney, claims to want to develop his idea for a short film into a full-length Hollywood feature. Kartheiser, of course, plays Goodney, and Jerry Hall is to play the overripe soap diva slated for a starring role, called Caduta Massi; the name is one of many cheeky puns in the novel.

I have not yet been able to see the BBC Money, and have only the smallest idea of what it can be like. But I've been hearing rumours about possible screen adaptations of Martin Amis's Money for decades. Fully 25 years ago, I found myself at a party where a British producer solemnly informed me it was all set to go ahead with Mel Smith as John Self and David Bowie as Fielding Goodney. Interesting casting, that. But nothing came of it, and in fact Amis novels have been notorious for translating badly to the screen, with feeble versions of The Rachel Papers and

Posted by Peter Bradshaw Wednesday 5 May 2010 08.00 BST guardian.co.uk

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back to the screen, with comic versions of [The Rachel Papers](#) and [Dead Babies](#).

But who is to play Martin Amis himself? Surely the BBC will not jettison Amis from this story? The novel has a dizzying postmodern twist, whereby the author awards himself a supporting role, as the novelist brought in to help John Self punch up his script. It's part of Amis's longstanding interest in autobiographical doppelgangers: splitting his own identity into two halves, a super-cool overachiever and a cringing, pathetic loser: the envied and the envier.

On first publication, it had a great author photo, in which Amis was pictured with Nabokovian hauteur at the chessboard, in such a way that the reader must imagine him or herself to be his opponent. I am not a chess buff: perhaps someone can explain to me the significance of the chess pieces' position in the picture?

How will they portray the ageing Hollywood ham, Lorne Guyland? This character's delusional belief that he is still a stud and a hunk is one of the funniest things in the book. My ideal casting choice would be Michael Douglas, because Guyland is famously based on Kirk Douglas, the star of the very obscure and much-derided 1980 sci-fi film [Saturn 3](#), a film which Martin Amis scripted and which was directed by no less a figure than [Stanley Donen](#). Saturn 3 was, sadly, an awful flop, and considered just one step up from something by Ed Wood Jr. Roger Ebert's [review](#) more or less sums up the prevailing opinion.

This unifying brush with the film world, and all its hilarious grotesques and monsters, clearly inspired Money – so something good came out of it, something magnificent, in fact. It's an unusual novel about writers and movies, because it's set in London and New York, but oddly not Los Angeles. Amis omits the film and any attendant anecdotes from his memoir Experience, so it's not easy to nail down precisely what it meant to him. (I remember he did once write an article for the London Evening Standard in which he made it clear the scene from the novel in which Goodney humiliates Self at tennis is taken from a painful experience in real life.) He may basically think that it's just absurd and marginal, and simply not worth a mention; it may also be that, like many literary heavy-hitters, Martin Amis continues to have a lucrative, unacknowledged sideline in working on not-terribly-prestigious film scripts.

Maybe the TV version of Money is the time to bring Saturn 3 in from the cold. Maybe. It aspires to be a speculative, dystopian sci-fi picture like 2001, Dark Star, Silent Running or Alien, the genre recently revived by Danny Boyle's Sunshine and Duncan Jones's much-admired Moon. Saturn 3 was produced by the legendary showbiz warhorse Lew Grade, and the sets do have the somewhat inexpensive look of Grade's TV series Space 1999. And yet, like Moon, they also have something stylised, unearthly and unreal about them: a kind of theatricality which isn't too bad.

Kirk Douglas and Farrah Fawcett (yikes!) play a passionately sexual couple who are content to live far from the madding crowd on the remote space station Saturn 3, mining energy resources for Earth. A weird governmental monitor, played by Harvey Keitel, pays them a highly unwelcome visit, and insists that they take possession of a labour-saving device: a robot, which, in the tradition of this kind of movie, soon shows a malign tendency to think and act for itself. It all culminates in a preposterous, slapsticky chase scene.

Well, Saturn 3 actually isn't as awful as all that. Keitel is a genuinely strange presence. His obnoxious attempt to seduce Farrah: "You have a beautiful body – may I use it?" is a bona fide writerly flourish from Amis. Maybe he had many more lines like that, ruthlessly excised from the script. It is funny to remember Guyland's endless, tragic preening in the novel, and then to see the moment when Kirk Douglas is ostentatiously working out at the beginning of one scene, for no real dramatic reason, skipping like a prize boxer. (Even here, though, I do have to admit something Douglas did look fantastic for 64 years old: and his skipping workout is very impressive.)

So perhaps some revisionism is in order. We can upgrade Saturn 3 from Hogwhimperingly Awful Rubbish to Interesting Footnote, something for sci-fi historians to muse over. As Money finally makes it to the screen, you could do worse than watch Saturn 3, for interest's sake. But it's more important to read or re-read Money, the book it indirectly inspired.

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nervepill
5 May 2010 9:42AM

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Reading this for the first time in 1984 or 5, in my late teens, I found myself thinking only of Mel Smith as John Self. One of the best comic novels, which impressed me no end at the time.



mastershake
5 May 2010 9:52AM

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I've seen a clip from an adaptation of 'Money' with Mel Smith (and indeed Martin Amis) in it, though i can't find the link at the moment...



mike65ie
5 May 2010 9:58AM

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I saw Saturn 3 many moons ago on video (I think), having been intrigued by its development and the coverage in Starburst magazine (RIP). Its no work of genius and the manifold production difficulties clearly account for its brief running time (88 mins) and clunky narrative but that's almost to its advantage now. Enjoyable, good looking kitsch.



DJPVC
5 May 2010 10:08AM

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"You have a beautiful body - may I use it?" is a bona fide witerly flourish from Amis.

He's responsible for writing lines like this and you're looking forward to seeing more of his work? Does he write chat up lines like "If I said you had a beautiful body would you hold it against me?"

You could do worse than watch Saturn 3, for interest's sake.

No don't, its terrible, watch Dark Star or Silent Running instead.



mike65ie
5 May 2010 10:23AM

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Silent Running? The great Bruce Dern, strong visuals and production design as one would expect from Doug Trumbull, but built on some of the worlds worse science and Joan Baez on the soundtrack.



DJPVC
5 May 2010 11:02AM

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mike65ie

Fair point, some aspects of the science where no better thought out than Sunshine

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or Moon, but you shouldn't knock Joan Baez



Bartel
5 May 2010 11:16AM

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Nice article, **Peter**, always a pleasure to read a piece written with genuine passion. Fairly unlikely any big screen of Money could ever match the whip smart tone of the book, Amis' prose rarely translates well to the screen alright. That said, I would love to see David Cronenberg's proposed take on London Fields come to fruition, now there's a director who knows how to do something unique with rich source material.



godlikegenius
5 May 2010 12:58PM

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I've seen a clip from an adaptation of 'Money' with Mel Smith (and indeed Martin Amis) in it, though i can't find the link at the moment...

IIRC it wasn't a full adaptation, just dramatisations of a few scenes as part of a South Bank programme on Martin Amis (because Money had just been published).

Amis is a great prose stylist, and Money his best novel by far (most of them are awful).



Bassline
5 May 2010 2:14PM

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Can't drive the Fiasco at the moment - nursing a plutonium goofball. The only one of his novels I can claim to have really enjoyed and definitely the only one which is laugh-out-loud funny.



slm63
5 May 2010 2:44PM

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Martin Amis once appeared at the National Film Theatre with Gary Oldman and another writer who's name I'm afraid I forget, to discuss an upcoming adaptation of Money to star Oldman. This was sometime in the late 1980s.

I have a soft spot for Saturn 3, though it features one of the daftest scenes in SF where the rocks of Saturn's rings bounce off the canopy of Keitel's ship as he flies through them.

The music is good work by Elmer Bernstein, available on CD if you look very hard. Some of the tracks on the CD reveal he used some of the unused Saturn 3 score in Heavy Metal.



istultus
5 May 2010 2:52PM

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I would assume (knowing nothing much of chess) that the chessboard in the picture reflects the position of Zugzwang that Martin Amis forces John Self into at the end of the novel, no?



PhelimO'Neill
5 May 2010 3:07PM



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Saturn 3 isn't all bad, despite building an ad campaign around artwork and photos of Fawcett in a costume that never made the final cut. Keitel is dubbed throughout by Roy Dotrice, the production design is great, the film was to be directed by John Barry, designer of Star Wars and A Clockwork Orange (the coloured tubing throughout the moonbase are quite "Droogish". Barry passed away when shooting commenced so Stanley Donen stepped in. Great robot effects too, the Hector robot and partial sets used to reside in the Palladium Cellars in London, a sort of animatronic London Dungeon type exhibition in the 1980's.



mike65ie
5 May 2010 3:26PM

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Yeah that Farrah pic was a swizz alright, I was young and expectant back then :(



davidabsalom
5 May 2010 5:46PM

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Yeah that Farrah pic was a swizz alright, I was young and expectant back then :(

She got her kit off. What more do you want, you ungrateful so and so?



davidabsalom
5 May 2010 5:47PM

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Other than Kirk Douglas keeping his kit on.



Bricoleur
5 May 2010 6:25PM

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I saw Saturn 3 on the telly, I think (BBC Scotland, early 80s) and quite enjoyed it, probably because of the impressive acting skills of FF. It's one of these jaw-dropping moments when twenty years later you realise that Harvey Keitel was in it. I know Kirk Douglas was a bit, intense, let's say, but hell, he is Kirk Douglas. What about that film he was in with Burt Lancaster, also in the early 80s? Two retired gangsters or something. I recall Kirk skipping in that one too, to impress a babe 40 years his junior. Still, he *is* Kirk Douglas. Martin Amis is an earthworm by comparison.



mike65ie
5 May 2010 9:37PM

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Bricoleur that OAP gangster flick was TV movie called "Tough Guys" twas good fun as was another old geezer pair-up "Draw!", with James Coburn



BradStevens
6 May 2010 10:49AM

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"Saturn 3 isn't all bad, despite building an ad campaign around artwork and photos of Fawcett in a costume that never made the final cut."

You can see some shots from this missing sequence in the trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NENXu02bvg>



rotherfieldpeppard
6 May 2010 1:56PM

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in a couple of [talks](#) recently Marty has been quite critical of the draft of the script that he's seen.

http://www.oxfordliteraryfestival.org.uk/podcasts/863_Martin_Amis.mp3

I remember years ago a teacher friend had an *Amis expert* coming into talk with his O level class about Money. My friend knew I loved the novel and asked me if there were any good questions etc. So I said "ask him about the Sci Fi movie Saturn 3" (pre internet so knowledge was not so easily found on the ground then). He did, the expert replied that Amis had never written "*any science fiction*" and my mate thought I had stiched him up. I'd name the pompous "expert" but



buntyman
7 May 2010 10:33AM

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i saw Saturn 3 as a B Movie on its release, and as a small child, absolutely loved it. It my mind its still brilliantly scary.nasty..sexy!



swanstep
8 May 2010 1:31AM

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I remember Saturn 3 as being pretty dreadful alright. It did, however have a couple of quite-stylized scenes where symmetrical rows of soldiers (or functionaries - whatever they were) seemed about to form a chorus-line or some such thing. You could feel Donen's musical-optimized eye at work. Saturn 3 came out around the same time as (Get Carter's) Mike Hodge's Flash Gordon, which also had an explicit, campy musical side (as well as a sex-pot side). There was a sense that producers were giving directors from outside the sci-fi ghetto shots at enlivening the genre (Peter Yates doing Krull in 1983 was a later example) after straightforwardly imitating Star Wars hadn't worked. In Saturn 3's case it looked like Donen had been allowed to try to give them 'something slightly new and different' with a touch of Two for the Road, Charade and Singin' in the Rain (Kubrick baby!) in space, as it were, but producers has quickly rebeled, squashing those ideas, but having nothing to replace them with, leading to an ungodly, barely releasable mess.



RockNRollMassacre
9 May 2010 6:27PM

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Can anyone else see David Tennant playing Martin Amis the character? Maybe it's just me but he'd be perfect.

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