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CATSCAN 5 "Slipstream"

In a recent remarkable interview in *New Pathways* #11, Carter Scholz alludes with pained resignation to the ongoing brain-death of science fiction. In the 60s and 70s, Scholz opines, SF had a chance to become a worthy literature; now that chance has passed. Why? Because other writers have now learned to adapt SF's best techniques to their own ends.

"And," says Scholz, "They make us look sick. When I think of the best 'speculative fiction' of the past few years, I sure don't think of any Hugo or Nebula winners. I think of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and of Batchelor's *The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica*, and of Gaddis' *JR* and *Carpenter's Gothic*, and of Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* . . . I have no hope at all that genre science fiction can ever again have any literary significance. But that's okay, because now there are other people doing our job."

It's hard to stop quoting this interview. All interviews should be this good. There's some great campy guff about the agonizing pain it takes to write short stories; and a lecture on the unspeakable horror of writer's block; and some nifty fusillades of forthright personal abuse; and a lot of other stuff that is making *New Pathways* one of the most interesting zines of the Eighties. Scholz even reveals his use of the Fibonacci Sequence in setting the length and number of the chapters in his novel *Palimpsests*, and wonders how come nobody caught on to this groundbreaking technique of his.

Maybe some of this peripheral stuff kinda dulls the lucid gleam of his argument. But you don't have to be a medieval Italian mathematician to smell the reek of decay in modern SF. Scholz is right. The job isn't being done here.

"Science Fiction" today is a lot like the

contemporary Soviet Union; the sprawling possessor of a dream that failed. Science fiction's official dogma, which almos

t everybody ignores, is based on attitudes toward science and technology which are bankrupt and increasingly divorced from any kind of reality. "Hard-SF," the genre's ideological core, is a joke today; in terms of the social realities of high-tech post-industrialism, it's about as relevant as hard-Leninism.

Many of the best new SF writers seem openly ashamed of their backward Skiffy nationality. "Ask not what you can do for science fiction--ask how you can edge away from it and still get paid there."

A blithely stateless cosmopolitanism is the order of the day, even for an accredited Clarion grad like Pat Murphy: "I'm not going to bother what camp things fall into," she declares in a recent Locus interview. "I'm going to write the book I want and see what happens . . . If the markets run together, I leave it to the critics." For Murphy, genre is a dead issue, and she serenely wills the trash-mountain to come to Mohammed.

And one has to sympathize. At one time, in its clumsy way, Science Fiction offered some kind of coherent social vision. SF may have been gaudy and naive, and possessed by half-baked fantasies of power and wish-fulfillment, but at least SF spoke a contemporary language. Science Fiction did the job of describing, in some eldritch way, what was actually *\*happening\**, at least in the popular imagination. Maybe it wasn't for everybody, but if you were a bright, unfastidious sort, you could read SF and feel, in some satisfying and deeply unconscious way, that you'd been given a real grip on the chrome-plated handles of the Atomic Age.

But *\*now\** look at it. Consider the repulsive ghastliness of the SF category's Lovecraftian inbreeding. People retched in the 60s when De Camp and Carter skinned the corpse of Robert E. Howard for its hide and tallow, but nowadays necrophilia is run on an industrial basis. Shared-world anthologies. Braided

meganovels. Role-playing tie-ins. Sharecropping books written by pip-squeaks under the blazoned name of establi

shed authors. Sequels of sequels, trilogy sequels of yet-earlier trilogies, themselves cut-and-pasted from yet-earlier trilogies. What's the common thread here? The belittlement of individual creativity, and the triumph of anonymous product. It's like some Barthesian nightmare of the Death of the Author and his replacement by "text."

Science Fiction--much like that other former Vanguard of Progressive Mankind, the Communist Party--has lost touch with its cultural reasons for being. Instead, SF has become a self-perpetuating commercial power-structure, which happens to be in possession of a traditional national territory: a portion of bookstore rackspace.

Science fiction habitually ignores any challenge from outside. It is protected by the Iron Curtain of category marketing. It does not even have to improve "on its own terms," because its own terms no longer mean anything; they are rarely even seriously discussed. It is enough merely to point at the rackspace and say "SF."

Some people think it's great to have a genre which has no inner identity, merely a locale where it's sold. In theory, this grants vast authorial freedom, but the longterm practical effect has been heavily debilitating. When "anything is possible in SF" then "anything" seems good enough to pass muster. Why innovate? Innovate in what direction? Nothing is moving, the compass is dead. Everything is becalmed; toss a chip overboard to test the current, and it sits there till it sinks without a trace.

It's time to clarify some terms in this essay, terms which I owe to Carter Scholz. "Category" is a marketing term, denoting rackspace. "Genre" is a spectrum of work united by an inner identity, a coherent esthetic, a set of conceptual guidelines, an ideology if you will.

"Category" is commercially useful, but can be ultimately deadening. "Genre," however, is powerful.

Having made this distinction, I want to describe what seems to me to be a new, emergent "genre," which has not yet become a

"category."

This genre is not "category" SF; it is not even "genre" SF. Instead, it is a contemporary kind of writing which has set its face against consensus reality. It is a fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so. It does not aim to provoke a "sense of wonder" or to systematically extrapolate in the manner of classic science fiction.

Instead, this is a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility. We could call this kind of fiction Novels of Postmodern Sensibility, but that looks pretty bad on a category rack, and requires an acronym besides; so for the sake of convenience and argument, we will call these books "slipstream."

"Slipstream" is not all that catchy a term, and if this young genre ever becomes an actual category I doubt it will use that name, which I just coined along with my friend Richard Dorsett. "Slipstream" is a parody of "mainstream," and nobody calls mainstream "mainstream" except for us skiffy trolls.

Nor is it at all likely that slipstream will actually become a full-fledged genre, much less a commercially successful category. The odds against it are stiff. Slipstream authors must work outside the cozy infrastructure of genre magazines, specialized genre criticism, and the authorial esprit-de-corps of a common genre cause.

And vast dim marketing forces militate against the commercial success of slipstream. It is very difficult for these books to reach or build their own native audience, because they are needles in a vast moldering haystack. There is no convenient way for would-be slipstream readers to move naturally from one such work to another of its ilk. These books vanish like drops of ink in a bucket of drool.

Occasional writers will triumph against all

these odds, but their success remains limited by the present category structures. They may eke out a fringe foll

owing, but they fall between two stools. Their work is too weird for Joe and Jane Normal. And they lose the SF readers, who avoid the mainstream racks because the stuff there ain't half weird enough. (One result of this is that many slipstream books are left-handed works by authors safely established in other genres.)

And it may well be argued that slipstream has no "real" genre identity at all. Slipstream might seem to be an artificial construct, a mere grab-bag of mainstream books that happen to hold some interest for SF readers. I happen to believe that slipstream books have at least as much genre identity as the variegated stock that passes for "science fiction" these days, but I admit the force of the argument. As an SF critic, I may well be blindered by my parochial point-of-view. But I'm far from alone in this situation. Once the notion of slipstream is vaguely explained, almost all SF readers can recite a quick list of books that belong there by right.

These are books which SF readers recommend to friends: "This isn't SF, but it sure ain't mainstream and I think you might like it, okay?" It's every man his own marketer, when it comes to slipstream.

In preparation for this essay, I began collecting these private lists. My master-list soon grew impressively large, and serves as the best pragmatic evidence for the actual existence of slipstream that I can offer at the moment.

I myself don't pretend to be an expert in this kind of writing. I can try to define the zeitgeist of slipstream in greater detail, but my efforts must be halting.

It seems to me that the heart of slipstream is an attitude of peculiar aggression against "reality." These are fantasies of a kind, but not fantasies which are "futuristic" or "beyond the fields we know." These books tend to sarcastically tear at the structure of "everyday life."

Some such books, the most "mainstream" ones, are non-realistic literary fictions which avoid or ignore SF genre conventions. But hard-c

ore slipstream has unique darker elements. Quite commonly these works don't make a lot of common sense, and what's more they often somehow imply that \*nothing we know makes\* "a lot of sense" and perhaps even that \*nothing ever could\*.

It's very common for slipstream books to screw around with the representational conventions of fiction, pulling annoying little stunts that suggest that the picture is leaking from the frame and may get all over the reader's feet. A few such techniques are infinite regress, trompe-l'oeil effects, metalepsis, sharp violations of viewpoint limits, bizarrely blase' reactions to horrifically unnatural events . . . all the way out to concrete poetry and the deliberate use of gibberish. Think M. C. Escher, and you have a graphic equivalent.

Slipstream is also marked by a cavalier attitude toward "material" which is the polar opposite of the hard-SF writer's "respect for scientific fact." Frequently, historical figures are used in slipstream fiction in ways which outrageously violate the historical record. History, journalism, official statements, advertising copy . . . all of these are grist for the slipstream mill, and are disrespectfully treated not as "real-life facts" but as "stuff," raw material for collage work. Slipstream tends, not to "create" new worlds, but to \*quote\* them, chop them up out of context, and turn them against themselves.

Some slipstream books are quite conventional in narrative structure, but nevertheless use their fantastic elements in a way that suggests that they are somehow \*integral\* to the author's worldview; not neat-o ideas to kick around for fun's sake, but something in the nature of an inherent dementia. These are fantastic elements which are not clearcut "departures from known reality" but ontologically \*part of the whole mess\*; "`real' compared to what?" This is an increasingly difficult question to answer

in the videocratic 80s-90s, and is perhaps the most genuinely innovative aspect of slipstream (s

cary as that might seem).

A "slipstream critic," should such a person ever come to exist, would probably disagree with these statements of mine, or consider them peripheral to what his genre "really" does. I heartily encourage would-be slipstream critics to involve themselves in heady feuding about the "real nature" of their as-yet-nonexistent genre. Bogus self-referentiality is a very slipstreamish pursuit; much like this paragraph itself, actually. See what I mean?

My list is fragmentary. What's worse, many of the books that are present probably don't "belong" there. (I also encourage slipstream critics to weed these books out and give convincing reasons for it.) Furthermore, many of these books are simply unavailable, without hard work, lucky accidents, massive libraries, or friendly bookstore clerks in a major postindustrial city. In many unhappy cases, I doubt that the authors themselves think that anyone is interested in their work. Many slipstream books fell through the yawning cracks between categories, and were remaindered with frantic haste.

And I don't claim that all these books are "good," or that you will enjoy reading them. Many slipstream books are in fact dreadful, though they are dreadful in a different way than dreadful science fiction is. This list happens to be prejudiced toward work of quality, because these are books which have stuck in people's memory against all odds, and become little tokens of possibility.

I offer this list as a public service to slipstream's authors and readers. I don't count myself in these ranks. I enjoy some slipstream, but much of it is simply not to my taste. This doesn't mean that it is "bad," merely that it is different. In my opinion, this work is definitely not SF, and is essentially alien to what I consider SF's intrinsic virtues.

Slipstream does however have its own virtues,

virtues which may be uniquely suited to the perverse, convoluted, and skeptical tenor of the postmodern era. Or then again, m

aybe not. But to judge this genre by the standards of SF is unfair; I would like to see it free to evolve its own standards.

Unlike the "speculative fiction" of the 60s, slipstream is not an internal attempt to reform SF in the direction of "literature." Many slipstream authors, especially the most prominent ones, know or care little or nothing about SF. Some few are "SF authors" by default, and must struggle to survive in a genre which militates against the peculiar virtues of their own writing.

I wish slipstream well. I wish it was an acknowledged genre and a workable category, because then it could offer some helpful, brisk competition to SF, and force "Science Fiction" to redefine and revitalize its own principles.

But any true discussion of slipstream's genre principles is moot, until it becomes a category as well. For slipstream to develop and nourish, it must become openly and easily available to its own committed readership, in the same way that SF is today. This problem I willingly leave to some inventive bookseller, who is openminded enough to restructure the rackspace and give these oppressed books a breath of freedom.

## THE SLIPSTREAM LIST

ACKER, KATHY - Empire of the Senseless  
ACKROYD, PETER - Hawksmoor; Chatterton  
ALDISS, BRIAN - Life in the West  
ALLENDE, ISABEL - Of Love and Shadows; House of Spirits  
AMIS, KINGSLEY - The Alienation; The Green Man  
AMIS, MARTIN - Other People; Einstein's Monsters  
APPLE, MAX - Zap; The Oranging of America  
ATWOOD, MARGARET - The Handmaids Tale  
AUSTER, PAUL - City of Glass; In the Country of Last Things



BALLARD, J. G. - Day of Creation; Empire of the Sun  
BANKS, IAIN - The Wasp Factory; The Bridge  
BANVILLE, JOHN - Kepler; Dr. Copernicus  
BARNES, JULIAN - Staring at the Sun  
BARTH, JOHN - Giles Goat-Boy; Chimera  
BARTHELME, DONALD - The Dead Father  
BATCHELOR, JOHN CALVIN - Birth of the People s  
Republic of Antarctica  
BELL, MADISON SMARTT - Waiting for the End of the  
World  
BERGER, THOMAS - Arthur Rex  
BONTLY, THOMAS - Celestial Chess  
BOY  
  
LE, T. CORAGHESSAN - Worlds End; Water Music  
BRANDAO, IGNACIO - And Still the Earth  
BURROUGHS, WILLIAM - Place of Dead Roads; Naked Lunch;  
Soft Machine; etc.  
CARROLL, JONATHAN - Bones of the Moon; Land of Laughs  
CARTER, ANGELA - Nights at the Circus; Heroes and  
Villains  
CARY, PETER - Illywhacker; Oscar and Lucinda  
CHESBRO, GEORGE M. - An Affair of Sorcerers  
COETZEE, J. M. - Life and rimes of Michael K.  
COOVER, ROBERT - The Public Burning; Pricksongs &  
Descants  
CRACE, JIM - Continent  
CROWLEY, JOHN - Little Big; Aegypt  
DAVENPORT, GUY - Da Vincis Bicycle; The Jules Verne  
Steam Balloon  
DISCH, THOMAS M. - On Wings of Song  
DODGE, JIM - Not Fade Away  
DURRELL, LAWRENCE - Tunc; Nunquam  
ELY, DAVID - Seconds  
ERICKSON, STEVE - Days Between Stations; Rubicon Beach  
FEDERMAN, RAYMOND - The Twofold Variations  
FOWLES, JOHN - A Maggot  
FRANZEN, JONATHAN - The Twenty-Seventh City  
FRISCH, MAX - Homo Faber; Man in the Holocene  
FUENTES, CARLOS - Terra Nostra  
GADDIS, WILLIAM - JR; Carpenters Gothic  
GARDNER, JOHN - Grendel; Freddy's Book  
GEARY, PATRICIA - Strange Toys; Living in Ether

GOLDMAN, WILLIAM - The Princess Bride; The Color of  
Light  
GRASS, GUNTER - The Tin Drum  
GRAY, ALASDAIR - Lanark  
GRIMWOOD, KEN - Replay  
HARBINSON, W. A. - Genesis; Revelation; Otherworld  
HILL, CAROLYN - The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer  
HJVRTSBERG, WILLIAM - Gray Matters; Falling Angel  
HOBAN, RUSSELL - Riddley Walker  
HOYT, RICHARD - The Manna Enzyme  
IRWIN, ROBERT - The Arabian Nightmares  
ISKANDER, FAZIL - Sandro of Chegam; The Gospel  
According to Sandro  
JOHNSON, DENIS - Fiskadoro  
JONES, ROBERT F. - Blood Sport; The Diamond Bogo  
KINSELLA, W. P. - Shoeless Joe  
KOSTER, R. M. - The Dissertation; Mandragon  
KOTZWINKLE, WILLIAM - Elephant Bangs Train; Doctor  
Rat, Fata Morgana  
KRAMER, KATHRYN - A Handbook for Visitors From Outer  
Space  
LANGE, OLIVER - Vandenberg  
LEONARD, ELMORE - Touch  
LESSING, DORIS - The Four-Gated City; The Fifth Child  
of Satan  
LEVEN, JEREMY - Satan  
MAILER, NORMAN - Ancient Evenings  
MARINIS, RICK - A Lovely Monster  
MARQUEZ, GABRIEL GARCI

A - Autumn of the Patriarch; One  
Hundred Years of Solitude  
MATHEWS, HARRY - The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium  
McEWAN, IAN - The Comfort of Strangers; The Child in  
Time  
McMAHON, THOMAS - Loving Little Egypt  
MILLAR, MARTIN - Milk, Sulphate and Alby Starvation  
MOONEY, TED - Easy Travel to Other Planets  
MOORCOCK, MICHAEL - Laughter of Carthage; Byzantium  
Endures; Mother London  
MOORE, BRIAN - Cold Heaven  
MORRELL, DAVID - The Totem  
MORRISON, TONI - Beloved; The Song of Solomon

NUNN, KEN - Tapping the Source; Unassigned Territory  
PERCY, WALKER - Love in the Ruins; The Thanatos  
Syndrome  
PIERCY, MARGE - Woman on the Edge of Time  
PORTIS, CHARLES - Masters of Atlantis  
PRIEST, CHRISTOPHER - The Glamour; The Affirmation  
PROSE, FRANCINE - Bigfoot Dreams, Marie Laveau  
PYNCHON, THOMAS - Gravity's Rainbow; V; The Crying of  
Lot 49  
REED, ISHMAEL - Mumbo Jumbo; The Terrible Twos  
RICE, ANNE - The Vampire Lestat; Queen of the Damned  
ROBBINS, TOM - Jitterbug Perfume; Another Roadside  
Attraction  
ROTH, PHILIP - The Counterlife  
RUSHDIE, SALMON - Midnight's Children; Grimus; The  
Satanic Verses  
SAINT, H. F. - Memoirs of an Invisible Man  
SCHOLZ, CARTER & HARCOURT GLENN - Palimpsests  
SHEPARD, LUCIUS - Life During Wartime  
SIDDONS, ANNE RIVERS - The House Next Door  
SPARK, MURIEL - The Hothouse by the East River  
SPENCER, SCOTT - Last Night at the Brain Thieves Ball  
SUKENICK, RONALD - Up; Down; Out  
SUSKIND, PATRICK - Perfume  
THEROUX, PAUL - O-Zone  
THOMAS, D. M. - The White Hotel  
THOMPSON, JOYCE - The Blue Chair; Conscience Place  
THOMSON, RUPERT - Dreams of Leaving  
THORNBERG, NEWTON - Valhalla  
THORNTON, LAWRENCE - Imagining Argentina  
UPDIKE, JOHN - Witches of Eastwick; Rogers Version  
VLIET, R. G. - Scorpio Rising  
VOLLMAN, WILLIAM T. - You Bright and Risen Angels  
VONNEGUT, KURT - Galapagos; Slaughterhouse-Five  
WALLACE, DAVID FOSTER - The Broom of the System  
WEBB, DON - Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book  
WHITTEMORE, EDWARD - Nile Shadows; Jerusalem Poker;  
Sinai Tapestry  
WILLARD, NANCY - Things Invisible to See  
WOMACK, JACK - Ambient; Terraplane  
WOO  
D, BARI - The Killing Gift

## WRIGHT, STEPHEN - M31: A Family Romance