against industrialization, and the origins of today's pastoral, pseudo-medieval genre fantasies. Quarreling with the present is a hair's-breadth from being *reactionary*. Are we going to use the great speculative toolbox of sf to deimagine the present? Is sf becoming anti-sf?

We can't imagine the future if we can't even look at the present. To connect with a wider, growing, more youthful audience, sf has to grapple with millennial horrors and alienation, with the rootlessness and ferment and absurdity, and, yes, with the millennial fear of the future, in ways other than to say, "I wish things weren't like this. I liked it better in the past." Without a vital link to the ever-changing *Zeitgeist*, sf will become a closed system where recycling subject matter and theme is all that's possible. And science fiction right now seems to be not only losing its connection to *and its interest in* the *Zeitgeist*, but becoming antagonistic to it. *Of course* that brings with it declining relevance to anyone outside the narrowing circle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Slipstream

James Patrick Kelly

Canned Worms

Slipstream is the name given by some to a type of writing that crosses the genre boundaries in and out of science fiction and that seems to be growing in popularity, but before we can consider slipstream we have to consider something more basic: genre.

What is genre? Mssrs. Merriam and Webster have this to say: "a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content." This is, alas, a not very useful definition, especially when applied to SF. For it is possible to imagine stories that have no science fictional content, but are written in a science fictional style or that mimic the forms of science fiction. Slipstream, for example. But SF is all about content, no?

There is a wonderful site created by Turkish fan Neyir Cenk Gökçe, "Definitions of Science Fiction," which offers fifty-two (count 'em!) different and sometimes conflicting attempts to characterize our genre. Here are three pretty good ones:

"SF is a controlled way to think and dream about the future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious. Anything that turns you and your social context, the social you, inside out.

Nightmares and visions, always outlined by the barely possible." Gregory Benford.

"Science Fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places." James Gunn.

"A science fiction story is a story built around human beings, with a human problem and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its scientific content." Theodore Sturgeon.

Contracts

Science. Change. The Future. We can all point to reams of SF that address these issues. But then there are many stories that "feel" like SF but probably aren't, under most of the fifty-two definitions. Alternate history is yet another example of fiction that seems related to our genre but doesn't feature SF content.

In thinking about what science fiction might be, it helps to distinguish between the genre as art and the genre as a commercial product. The writer's intentions and those of the publisher are by no means the same. When I sit down to start a new project, I'm not immediately concerned with whether I am going to be writing SF, fantasy, slipstream, mainstream, or whatever. I'm just trying to write a Jim Kelly story. As I shape the piece, however, it often becomes clear what genre I've wandered into. But even if it's not clear, I might nevertheless send the manuscript to Gardner and Sheila to see if they'll publish it in their SF magazine. If they do, does that then decide my story's genre?

Sure.

Well, maybe.

Actually not. Longtime subscribers may recall that *Asimov's Science Fiction* once had a letters column, presided over by the indefatigable Isaac Asimov himself. From time to time irate readers would write to ask what certain stories (some perpetrated by me) were doing in their favorite SF magazine, when said stories had little or no discernible fantastic element. Isaac always rose to the writers' defense and proclaimed his confidence in the judgment of the editors. But I understand why those letters got written. It was because the stories didn't fulfill the genre contract.

That contract is a set of promises that a genre implicitly makes its readers. For example, readers buy magazines with certain expectations. You would be understandably chagrined if *all* the stories in *Asimov's Science Fiction* were about people solving crimes. You want detection, plunk down your $3.99 for *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Gardner and Sheila might slip an occasional story in that doesn't strictly adhere to the genre contract, but this is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, by god, and it's SF you're going to get. However, the marketing of *Asimov's* as an SF magazine does not always address the genre intentions of the writers herein.

Another component of our peculiar genre is what Samuel R. Delany has called the *protocols* by which readers interpret context. You read the stories in *Asimov's* differently than you do those in *Hitchcock's*. Impossible things can be commonplaces, moral certitudes can be discredited—the very sentences themselves can take on strange, new meanings. On the most basic level, consider some of the jargon we toss off so blithely. Hive-mind. FTL. Wetware. AI. Nano. Hyperspace. VR. Cyborg.

Namely

In a previous installment I commended a raft of new writers to your attention. One thing that struck me as I took stock of the next generation was how often they practice their craft in the slipstream. Now you should understand that many writers who might arguably fit into this literary movement reject the term *slipstream*. In the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, John Clute refers to it as fabulation. Some writers prefer to call what they do cross-genre or interstitial fiction, while others bristle at the notion that anyone is trying to label them at all. But it may well be too late to stick another name on slipstream, since the critical term has been around for some fourteen years now and people seem to have a general idea of what kind of writing it points at.

It was in July 1989 that Bruce Sterling coined the term in his Cat Scan column in the late great zine *SF Eye*. Here's the big moment: "It is a contemporary kind of writing which has set its face against consensus reality. It is 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 that simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of 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.'" While I think Bruce's provisional definition holds up pretty well, most of his inductees into the slipstream club were folks whom we in the genre might actually think of as mainstream, for instance Kathy Acker, Isabel Allende, Martin Amis, Margaret Atwood, and Paul Auster. And those were just Bruce's "A's"!

Our Stream

While I certainly acknowledge that there are many mainstream writers whose work "simply makes you feel very strange," I am going to take a parochial approach here. Why? Well, I've taught Clarion, the science fiction writers' workshop at Michigan State University, six times now. I've also taught at Odyssey, the other six-week genre workshop, held in Manchester, New Hampshire, and Viable Paradise, a one-week intensive that takes place on Martha's Vineyard. I've taken a good hard look at the people who are going to be writing your favorite stories of 2013 and what I've noticed is that more and more of them are modeling themselves after Karen Joy Fowler and Jonathan Lethem as opposed to . . . say, Greg Egan and Bruce Sterling. Don't get me wrong; I admire all four of these writers; I say we should pitch as large a literary tent as we can. But there's something going on here that's worth paying attention to. So for now, I'm more interested in tracking the folks who start out from our tradition in their journey across genres than I am in mainstream writers who stop in to mess with our tropes. And I've invited two of the sharpest minds in science fiction, writer Jeff VanderMeer and critic Rich Horton, along as guides.

So what is slipstream, Rich? "Most commonly defined, I think, as fiction that crosses genre boundaries (lots of people seem to prefer 'cross-genre' as a term). However, I'm not sure that's very satisfying: is *The Caves of Steel* slipstream because it crosses genre boundaries between SF and mystery? So, thinking about it, I decided that to me slipstream stories feel a bit like magical realism. The key is—they are unexplained. 'Real' fantasy or SF has these elements embedded in the background so that they make sense—in slipstream they are just there. In a sense, SF tries to make the strange familiar—by showing SFnal elements in a context that helps us understand them. Slipstream tries to make the familiar strange—by taking a familiar context and disturbing it with SFnal/ fantastical intrusions."

Jeff is uneasy with definitions. "I prefer, like Ellen Datlow, to call it 'cross-genre.' Today, we have literally many dozens of writers in both mainstream and genre who are working from these influences and creating new forms of cross-pollination. The problem with talking about cross-genre is that it's not a single movement—it's a bunch of individual writers pursuing individual visions that tend to simply share some of the same diverse influences. So it's difficult to pin down and say 'this is what it is and what it isn't.' That's what is exciting to me about it—that it is difficult to categorize. In a sense, that means it's a complex, organic creature."

Top Two

Perhaps *the* place to begin looking for slipstream on the Web is *Fantastic Metropolis*. I will admit to being surprised by the quality of the writing *FM* offers—both fiction and non-fiction—since it's not a paying site. Everything you see here is donated. Clearly some of our best practitioners have decided that this is a site worth supporting, in part because it advocates so eloquently for the importance of taking genre in new directions. There is a wealth of fiction here, some original, but mostly reprints from the likes of China Miéville, Carol Emshwiller, L. Timmel Duchamp, Paul Di Filippo, and Kelly Link, to name but a handful. And as good as the stories are, the critical essays and interviews are equally accomplished, with work from Michael Moorcock, David Langford, James Sallis, and Jeffrey Ford.

Here is new writer Alan DeNiro struggling to define the relationship of cross-genre writing to the established genres in his original essay published in *FM*, "The Dream of The Unified Field." "The genre's new shape might be less of a centralized state and more of a Hanseatic League, a confederation or constellation of different styles, techniques,

and even audiences. This is not quite as scary as it sounds, it's a different but more realistic model for the way the field is already going. The larger magazines will have the central place at the head of the table, but there will be a lot more activity at the side tables—or better yet, in the kitchen amongst the help. There may not be a Next Wave, implying a stable shore, a body of water, and a singular undertow. There might be lots of little waves."

While not explicitly in the slipstream, *Strange Horizons* has published most of the up-and-coming writers who experiment with genre. As editor-in-chief Mary Anne Mohanraj wrote in "Avoiding the Potholes: Adventures in Genre-Crossing," I think at *Strange Horizons*, our editors often choose material that lives in the borderlands between specific and other genres. And while it can be tricky navigating these roads, in the long run, I think that border-crossing enriches literature." While in his wonderful "Where Does Genre Come From?" Senior Fiction Editor Jed Hartman wrote, "By a loose definition of slipstream, probably the majority of the fiction that we at *Strange Horizons* publish could be labeled that way, but calling us a slipstream magazine would probably give the wrong idea. . . . We in the *Strange Horizons* fiction department are definitely interested in slipstream, but we do generally require that stories we publish have a fairly clear speculative element."

Some of the writers to watch who have appeared recently in *SH* are Aynjel Kaye, Benjamin Rosenbaum, Jenn Reese, Jay Lake, Tim Pratt, and Timons Esaias.

Slippage

In her essay "An Introduction to Interstitial Arts," Delia Sherman imagines a continent called Literature filled with countries called Mystery and Romance and Thrillers and Regional fiction. She writes, "Historical fiction, Literary Realism, African-American fiction, and Regional fiction have formed an alliance, Mainstream Literature, which allows them to pass freely over one another's borders." Other countries, including Fantasy and SF, are isolated. She argues that certain writers whose work we might be tempted to call slipstream are, in fact, interstitial, that is, they prowl the borders between these literary countries. This is a useful conceit because it keeps the slipstream from becoming a genre unto itself. Interstitial writers sign no genre contract—or rather, the contract is that rules will be broken and genre expectations thwarted.

You can find Sherman's essay on the website for Interstitial Arts, the site of a group calling themselves Artists Without Borders. Many of these folks have strong ties to SF and might well be considered slipstream writers. However they claim that not only do they cross borders between science fiction and other genres, as slipstream traditionally does, but they cross genres that have nothing to do with SF. Terri Windling lays out the Interstitial Arts agenda: "We're not seeking to create a new category of fiction, but to establish a better way of reading border-crossing texts. In fact, we're not seeking to create a new movement at all, but to recognize a movement that already exists."

That is a telling point. Slipstream may be hot but is it new? Haven't SF artists been crossing boundaries for some time? The theory of interstitial arts and its subset, slipstream, is that these forms inhabit the territory between our genre and various other genres. But the best minds of our genre can't agree on what SF is, and without a coherent definition, how does a writer know when she's crossed a boundary?

Consider Carol Emshwiller who has just, as I write this, won her first Nebula, for her story "Creature." Her work is brilliant and idiosyncratic and much of it is undeniably slipstream. Carol started selling stories in the 1950s. Here's Carol on her writing process: "Whenever I sit down to write too consciously (and I do sometimes) it ends up with no resonance. It looks and feels planned. When I do that it has no . . . what? Underwear? Underside? This is why Kafka is my favorite writer. Kafka's stories aren't about what they're about. I like them for what they don't say. Sometimes Stephen King stories sound like Kafka stories but they're only about the stories you see. They're only about their surface . . . about what happens. Kafka's stories are not about their stories."

How about Jonathan Carroll whose first novel, *The Land of Laughs*, was published twenty-four years ago? He writes: "Over the years my work has been described as Fantasy, horror, SciFi, mainstream, slipstream, Rap, House, and Cha Cha Cha. In the end who cares what it is is as long as it is worth reading? Categories often, sadly, keep people from experiencing things that would enrich their lives."

Then there's Karen Joy Fowler, who has been delighting readers since the mid-eighties. Although her recent story, "What I Didn't See"

touched off a firestorm among some of the self-appointed guardians of genre purity, it's of a piece with most of her earlier work. Karen's stories are complex and deep; even her subtext has subtext. As she writes, "I can not reduce my themes to a single sentence. They are not messages but constellations of issues and questions. It takes the whole story. If I could say what I wanted to say in a sentence, I would do so and save us all a lot of time."

It's true, though, that we've seen a flurry of new genre crossings in the last few years. Besides online zines like *FM*, *SH*, and the promising *Singularity*, three print sources stand out: the *Leviathan* anthologies, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre, the *Polyphony* anthologies edited by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, edited by Gavin J. Grant.

A frequent contributor to *Lady Churchill's* is Kelly Link, who last year won the Nebula for her novelette "Louise's Ghost." Kelly talks about her struggles with genre: "I'll start out thinking 'I'll write a ghost story' or 'I'll write a detective story.' Then I'll begin and think, 'I can't do this. I can't put this together.' So I'll write around the ghost story, vaguely sort of a ghost story, but not really. I'll know when it's not the story I meant to write, but if people ask me questions like, 'What exactly happened here?' my brain will shut down and I'll say, 'I don't know!'"

Exit

I asked both Jeff and Rich whether slipstream might be the next big thing in our genre, or is it perhaps a successor species to SF? Rich wrote, "I hope not the latter—I don't want to lose 'old-fashioned SF.' But I do think that slipstream techniques can help describe a world that [is?] SF-nal around us—a world that is changing fast enough and that is multicultural enough, that everyday life can seem strange in a 'slipstream' fashion."

Jeff agrees, "I certainly don't want it to replace SF. I love SF, too. The problem, the friction or opposition, comes from some of the more traditional genre gatekeepers either being too slow to incorporate these new kinds of writings or totally resistant to doing so—which makes those of us who practice them put more energy into just opening up new ways to find an audience. This energy is perceived as in opposition to traditional genre, even though it really isn't. My fear, again, is that if this is the wave of the future and genre doesn't allow it access, it will turn somewhere else, like the mainstream, and we'll lose energy that would otherwise help create further mutation within genre."

My take? First a confession. I learned everything I know about writing across genre from these three muses of slipstream: Carol Emshwiller, Karen Joy Fowler, and Kelly Link. I've had the honor of workshopping with all three. I've listened to them react to critiques of their own work and learned from the way they unpack other people's stories, especially my own. And over the years, because I admire what they do, I've tried to do it myself. To hell with the anxiety of influence—I can point to specific stories of mine that are in dialogue with the work of each of these fine writers. The thing is, I know what it feels like when I'm writing science fiction and fantasy; I understand what it takes to build the worlds and complicate the plots. But when I write slipstream, I find myself adopting different strategies, shifting my expectations. I don't understand everything; the writing *feels* different. Strange. I suppose that's not very useful description, but there it is. So on a personal level, I can say that *my* slipstream has its own techniques, its own possibilities and its own rewards. It is close to SF, but it is not the same as it. But as it accretes more talented writers, slipstream is pulling SF in its direction. Where will both of these kinds of writing end up?

In his provocative 1998 essay, "The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction," sometime slipstreamer Jonathan Lethem proposed an alternate history of our genre. "In 1973 Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* was awarded the Nebula, the highest honor available to the field once known as 'science fiction'—a term now mostly forgotten." In our reality, Arthur C. Clarke won for *Rendezvous with Rama*. Jonathan's essay was a thought experiment about what would have happened if SF merged with the mainstream. He argued that it might be better for all concerned if there were no genres, if Delia Sherman's continent of Literature had no boundaries. In such a literary utopia there would be no SF or slipstream or mainstream. We'd all be just one big happy family.

Yeah, right. That'll happen just about the time that a robot becomes Pope.