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Bruce Sterling

Slipstream 2

Slipstream was a literary term that needed to be coined, but the phenomenon doesn't actually exist. Back in the 1980s, I noticed that there were a lot of books being written and published that had fantastic elements, or nonrealistic elements, or (and maybe this is the best term) antirealistic elements. They had none of the recognition symbols of genre science fiction or genre fantasy.

They didn't play to the sf fan base. They were not at all associated with the Great John Campbellian Tradition. They had no puns in them. They weren't aimed for a Hugo sweep or a Nebula. They were written by people who were outside of the genre and perhaps only vaguely aware of its traditions. But clearly the standard, literary, "realistic narrative" had soured on these people.

So, the first step in studying this was to go out and do a little fieldwork. I asked friends of mine to help me compile a list of works that might fit under this circumstance. I vacuumed up everything on the literary landscape that was most loosely attached. Then I wrote a critical article about it, in which I presented the evidence. I said, "Look how much there is," and "What are we to make of this?"

So, "slipstream" was a catchall term that I made up, along with my friend Richard Dorsett, who is a bibliophile and rare book collector, and who now lives in Boston where he is quite the literateur. So, I published the article in *Science Fiction Eye*, and the term did in fact see considerable use. But, in my opinion, slipstream has never come to real fruition, and perhaps it will never come to fruition.

I don't think that slipstream is a "genre" yet, and it certainly has never become a publishing category, a marketing category.

If slipstream had done what I imagined it doing when I wrote that article, there would in fact be wire racks at the Borders and Barnes & Noble that said slipstream on them. You'd be able to go in there and buy these fantastic, antirealistic novels of a postmodern sensibility, and they would have their own awards, and their own little fanzines, and conventions where groups of writers would get together and say, "Well, I'm more antirealistic than you." There would be a certain amount of solidarity within the genre; they would have a generic sensibility. But they clearly don't. Trying to get slipstream writers together is like herding cats. I don't think they have a temperament with which they can unite.

John Kessel is a very dear friend of mine, someone with whom I've had very fertile discussions. We're both professional science fiction writers, with, yes, strong sidelines in academia and journalism, but nevertheless we're primarily sf writers. He and I disagree violently on the most fundamental tenets of our genre, but we have a common ground in which we can at least agree on definitions and actually get somewhere with our disputes.

Slipstream has never managed to achieve that. The closest it has ever come to that....Well, there's a mail-order bookseller named Mark Ziesing, out of

Shingletown, California. He has a very well-known catalog and he is also a small-press publisher. This guy is the closest thing to a slipstream retailer that the planet has. He features slipstream-type books in his catalog and has a rather well-developed core audience of people who are willing to move from one such book to another.

That is the great strength of a marketing category. If you're at the science fiction rack and you look at the "S's," you'll see "Stephenson" and "Sturgeon," and you might pick up one of my books by accident, thinking that I'm Theodore or Neal. This is of considerable commercial use to me. If you're trying to buy a slipstream book, though, there is no way to move from Pynchon to John Calvin Batchelor to Gabriel García Márquez to Kathy Acker to Robert Coover. They're just not in a spot where it would be suggested to you that they have a commonality or any relevance to one another. This damages them. At one point (or so I understand), Forbidden Planet Books in London went out and built a Slipstream rack. People just came in, looked at it: "what in the hell is this?" I think they soon gave up on the experiment.

But the reason I think it's still interesting, and is still compelling public attention years later, is that I think our society *has room* for a new genre. A genre arises out of some deeper social need; a genre is not some independent floating construct. Genres gratify people, they gratify a particular mindset. They gratify a cultural sensibility, and there is a cultural sensibility that is present today that would like to have a literature of its own and just can't quite get it together to create one. This would be a nonrealistic genre of a postmodern sensibility. But since it doesn't exist, I think slipstream is probably best defined by talking about things that it isn't.

So, first of all, slipstream is not science fiction that is written to high literary standards. John Kessel writes science fiction to high literary standards. He is not a slipstream writer. He is a science fiction writer who can punctuate properly. I really think this is a vital and important distinction. The mere fact that you understand grammar, that you can express yourself fluently, that you have some awareness of the literary canon, does not make you a slipstream writer. Because slipstream does not have the intellectual tool-kit of science fiction. It is not extrapolative. You're not going to find slipstream interested in positing something and methodically exploring its consequences and its social and technological implications.

Slipstream is not futuristic. It's not really interested in 2050, 2090, the Twenty-Seventh Century. It is not enamored of sense-of-wonder. It does not make you wonder; it is not intended to make you slack-jawed with astonishment. It's not spectacular, grotesque, or widescreen. In other words, slipstream doesn't have a science-fictional thematic. It doesn't intend to blow your mind by confronting you with super-objects. It is not going to march a dragon across the stage; a giant kraken is not going to rise up out of the river and level London. (Unless, perhaps, it's some ironic, knowing reference to a giant kraken leveling London.)

Slipstream is not written with an engineer's temperament. It's not interested in a gizmo and how it becomes more gizmo-like. It's hard to describe what an engineer's temperament is, unless you've spent a lot of time with engineers; but

an engineer has a hands-on relationship with the technological environment. This is reflected very strongly in the classic hard-sf story, the *Analog* story. Engineers are really interested in the transcendent poetics of a device *per se*. A device, for an engineer, is a romantic and inspiring thing; it demands a kind of immediate, tactile engagement, where you are powerfully driven to get into this thing, and to change its parameters, and experiment with it. Engineers have a unique and very intense personal fascination with gizmos *qua* gizmos. You're not going to see that in slipstream. So there will be no gadget stories, no puzzle-solving stories, no twist endings, no technological instrumentalism. We're never going to ask: "What is this thing good for? How can I make some money from it? How is this device going to empower me?" You just don't see that approach in a slipstream story.

There are other forms of fantastic literature that slipstream also is not. For instance, slipstream is not magic realism. García Márquez was included in my original slipstream list, but I really don't think he's a core slipstream writer. The South American writers probably came the closest to creating an "antirealistic genre which is not science fiction"; but in point of fact, magic realism stalled. Because there is no arc of development there. You can't become "more magic" or "less magic," or discuss how exactly magic to become. Magic realism is a very intuitive, left-handed thing; and, as with surrealism, in some ways the imagination of magic realism is impoverished. You can't build on the tradition.

Nor is slipstream New Age writing. New Age stuff is very fantastic, but that's because it's written by people who are mentally dominated by superstition. New Age writing is all about people who really do think that middle-aged housewives in Ohio can channel Atlantean warlords. That's very fantastic, and nonrealistic, and antirealistic; it's people who are asserting that reality is not all we know; but unfortunately these people are sort of, well, *chumps*. They're dumb losers begging to be robbed, begging to be taken advantage of. And people do take advantage of them, and it's bathetic, and therefore sort of sub-literary. Slipstream is not New Age mystical writing. What slipstream is—or ought to be ... I don't know.

It's post-ideological, first of all. We're now in a post-ideological epoch. The twentieth century really is over, and the kind of totalizing, world-solving, single, central, dominant narrative really has been called into question to the point of disintegration. The United States at the moment is having an ontological civil war in the Clinton impeachment. Which centers around blowjobs, oddly enough; but you know that's *it*; that's the rallying cry. Are you willing to condone an act of sexual deviance, or is this something that is so far beyond human comprehension that it should cause the Republic to collapse? That's what's going on, and a genuine contemporary literature would be written from a perspective where this would *make sense*. We don't really have that being done; but I can imagine it done.

So, it would have to be a literature with no central dogmas, that was polyvalent and de-centered. It would not be about alienation; it would be very much at home in the mess that we have. It would be a native literature of our cultural circumstances. I think it would probably be mostly about subjectivity fragmentation, because that is the postmodernist mindset. The modernist mindset is alienation. You're looking at Henry Ford's machine system, and you can't deal

with it, and you want to retreat to some interior creative space. But in a postmodern stance you are so infiltrated by the various shattering aspects of the postmodern condition that your own core identity fragments. You become a kind of multi-tasking personality: you're handling this contingency and that contingency, but there's no real way to reach a single, consistent, overarching, philosophical stance.

So, who the hell talks in opaque ways like this? Well, Cultural Studies people talk like this. So I think that what we're talking about in slipstream is something that has some of the underlying dynamics of science fiction as a genre, but instead of being based, however remotely, in science, it's probably based in cultural studies. In other words, it's "Cultural Studies Fiction." For instance, instead of paying respectful attention to Einstein and Newton, we're going to really take Lacan and Baudrillard seriously.

If I had to pick two examples of classic slipstream writers—not necessarily the best writers *per se*, but core examples of the genre sensibility—they would be Mark Leyner and Kathy Acker. Mark Leyner has such an intense hold on his material that he is something of a *sui generis* writer. Leyner is a former ad copywriter turned novelist, so his books read rather like *Max Headroom* "blipverts." There's ad slogan, ad slogan, ad slogan; there's a lot of jumping back and forth; there's no real character buildup; and there's eighty thousand words of the stuff. Leyner books read like a drum and bass disco track. Like electronic pop music, it's very much yard goods; you can lay down tracks for three minutes, five minutes, eight minutes; the DJ will just continue to introduce new riffs, and new kinds of squeaks, honks, and breakbeats. It's all bits and pieces, but it's cemented by its attitude.

That's also what Acker's work was like. She would take bits and pieces of stuff, just grab it, rip it off; she chewed up *Neuromancer* in one of her better-known works. She'd appropriate things, jam them together; the force that holds the work together is not the plot, not the structure, not the underlying philosophy, but just a sense that these people are in tune with the realities of culture in an advanced way that other people are not. It's a sensibility. I think Mark Leyner is a very gifted and perceptive guy. I'm a big fan of his.

But in order for slipstream to really work, I suspect that mainstream writing would have to lose all its hegemony. We call things "mainstream" in science fiction; people who write mainstream don't call it "mainstream," they merely assume that they are the unquestioned center of the literary universe. But the greatest enemy of slipstream is not science fiction, which slipstream mostly ignores. Science fiction isn't in any position to do slipstream any harm. Sf can't challenge slipstream for the cultural territory that slipstream would most like to have. Slipstream's real enemy is mainstream lit, because that's the dominant narrative that they would most like to become, and that's what they're unable to become, almost by definition. Science fiction is increasingly stale and self-involved, and unwilling to move into the cultural territory that slipstream should be occupying. I don't believe that science fiction is likely to become more slipstream. It does seem to me that there is a need for slipstream, and a possibility

to invent a genre along this line, but I don't think the opportunity has ever been successfully taken up.

One thing that is problematic for slipstream: being based in quote, Theory, unquote, it has a very hard time taking creative effort seriously. You can see this in certain pop-culture critics, like (say) Steve Beard or Mark Dery, who are pop music people, and culture studies people. Although you can see them straining to become fiction writers, and you can sense a potential literature behind the push there, they're just not ever going to become literateurs. They really want to be two steps back from what's going on. They want to be analytical; they want to understand the structure of society on some higher, abstract level. They're not really interested in embodying culture, or enlivening it, in the way that a major work of literature can. A major work of literature can embody its period and bring it to life, conjure it into being and give it a creative vitality that critique does not have. Even the best critique can't do that; it can cut a corpse to pieces, but it can't put the holy fire into the cadaver on the slab.

So, if I were looking for an emergent slipstream literature, I might look in pop-culture critique. It would probably be European rather than American; many writers of slipstream are from outside the US; they have less techno-enthusiasm than the US does. It would be very intimate and subjective; it would have to be about internal sensibilities. It would not be twentieth century, which is, I think, slipstream's greatest challenge. It would not be of the *fin-de-siècle*. It would not be mainstream writing with a polite whiff of rocket fuel. This is really fatal: the muddled attempt to domesticate science fiction by robbing it of its krakens. This practice is debilitating to all concerned, and is a sad hopeless act.

Slipstream would be about new meanings and new feelings and new structures of experience. It would not be better than the writing that had gone on before; it would just be different, because our culture is different. So: if slipstream were to really work and succeed, I would think that it would have to be the literary reflection of a new way to be alive. We don't yet have that. But I suspect that it will come.

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