

The Sci-Fi Speculum

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Published in *The Brutalitarian*, by Brute Press

July 15, 2009

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Today I had a vision—in it, Sci-Fi was dead.

Alright, so I'm feeling a strange essay coming on. It's still a little hot from the soaking fever of the day, and I have a gin poured, but I've been reading, so things are not quite back to normal.

I've been reading a James Blish novel, about a first contact scenario. I also rented a few movies, for what it's worth. But furthermore, I've been working on this writing thing.

The writing is not precisely what I want to talk about—not directly. Not right now. There could be more on that later, all of it clearly involved.

But when you start writing, like not just to link the words together, but to actually attempt at crafting a product, you start to realize a few things. For one, almost all dialogue is complete trash. I have yet to find anyone who is able to synthesize an actual conversation. This is because nobody would want to read an actual conversation. With all the "uhh," and "buts," and "likes," etc. And forget it if they are a little drunk. This is not what you want to read.

This is an old problem, or at least it seems so for me, because I bounce over it again about every week. How to balance what is real, with what should be, with what needs to be, and so on and so forth. Don't write fiction? Don't worry about it. Just keep buying them books.

The writing aside, the balance between form and content, what is "true" and what sounds good, is the heart of the issue in the special case that is SF. Now, just so we are clear, by SF we are talking about "speculative fiction", which is not entirely the same as "science fiction." We can trace these revolving lines to a similar source of course, from the pages of pulp Pop. Mech. mags, to the pulp alien books, to the hard-backed metaphysical SF collections of today, which find better company with Borges than with the moon men.

It's not such a long road, surely, between building a crystal radio set, to imagining a home reactor or personal helicopter, to taking enough drugs to imagine ordering a home-gnosis kit, delivered by those spirits already haunting the gaps between the frequencies you were so fascinated by on that crystal radio. Those who are curious, know where to look. And they always find what they are looking for.

SF then, is about the speculation, more the production process than the act. The speculation is going on all the time, racing through the road-like circuits inside your insipid home appliances, visualizing itself in between the dot matrix lines of your ASCII print out, or simply "above", "beyond", "within", or "inter", depending on the prepositional disposition of your generation. The fiction, is just a business. Write it, move it, print it, sell it. It wouldn't be a magazine, if there weren't people to buy it.

It started with science, of course. Because science is what was there, and ready to be sold. Religion was mostly a closed book. Even sex and love were pretty much figured out. The career, the money, the motion, and the color was coming from the plastics industry, from string theory, from this crazy new email bullshit, and from iPod Nanoscience. Sure, religion can still be a pretty big seller. Vampires, right? Eat of my body, drink of my blood. That's hot. Even the New Agers have themselves a cottage industry. 2012 is big, disaster flick money. And crystals, man. What a scam. You don't even need to write a book—just hand the hippie a pretty rock and lay a thin, thin coat of eastern syncretism over it, and you can charge money for shit you found in the ground. But science—I tell you what. Those zombies are coming up with something new, like all the time. Walking around in the corpses of people, animating them with gadgetized, recycled open-sourcism, flashy freako-apocalyptoniconimation. Hook up to the API, and maybe we can all get paid. Yeah, at least you're involved.

I don't mean to sound blase, or act like there is nothing to like about sci-fi, or SF. I love it, actually. [I talked about it a few posts ago on Welcome to the Interdome](#). Herbert, Dick, and LaGuin, etc. These folks could really lay down a creative line over top of this techno-fantasy. The fashion steampunks, the Star Wars re-enactors, the MMORPGs, the Make-for-Sake-of-Makers, and even the flash-fan-fictioneers aren't the same, but they don't really bother me. We're not going to lose the creativity. This is the great thing. There are any number of "skilled" people out there, doing any number of things. Everybody's got to have a hobby. But then, there are also the really creative people, who don't have to predict the trends, because they just keep throwing out good stuff. Imitators are the ones who define trends, because they have to make sure it stays the same. Ursula K. LaGuin is still at it, writing science fiction and teaching people to write, and I bet she could care less about vinyl Star Wars toys. Who knows what some of the others would be doing if they were alive, but you better believe they would be doing something.

So, SF—the speculative act of fiction, will continue going on, because the creative, crazy, don't-give-a-shit-about-trends folk are going to keep speculating, and probably keep writing fiction, if that's what they like to do.

But Sci-Fi—that's a whole different schematic. Some of 'em will probably fall into the gears, getting run over before they can keep their fantasy-action going, because even going retro isn't enough of an innovation to keep their pulp Pop. Mech. from becoming a back issue by the time it's been published. And these are the ones that survive the great publisher purges of the 21st century. Science, as an area of speculation, has pretty much had it. The venture capitalists are reading science fiction, the science fiction writers are reading economics (either for fun or for profit), the economists are reading the liberal blogs, the liberal bloggers are reading the gossip bloggers, and the gossip bloggers are trying to figure out what VC-backed communication medium will still allow them to consider what they do a job. Everybody is happy, singing the odes of the Age of the Aquarius, as we tumble into a virtual world of Hollow-Earth inspired concept art.

I should probably let you know I'm on my second gin, and I'm thinking about [re-introducing the term, "cyber-time."](#)

Cyber-time! So here's the deal: we are entering an topology of informational territorialization that no longer requires either space or time as its dominant metaphor. As easily as we once sailed through "cyber-space" in our sci-fi concepts of the informational domain, we are now able to fold "cyber-time". Trains of thought, canons, logical extensions, and causality, which once required a plausible conception of a time dimension to explain its interaction, is no longer necessary. We are "traveling without moving", informationally. Whereas once knowledge could be lost, hidden, buried, and built, furthered, sped up, and progressed, one day everything that can be said to "exist" or "ever have existed" will be available instantaneously, if at all. How would you know Homer is not a blogger in Tehran? I mean, his Twitter "timeline" is updated, like every hour. Is it just a loop? Who knows. I'll DM George Orwell, and see if he knows.

No, no, NO! I know it sounds like a really interesting sci-fi concept (hey I'm SMSing all these big names from

history while chasing after the Magic Device and there's a hot chick who wants to get to know me! Movie this summer! Trending topic!) but it is not. It is the end of sci-fi. As this does happen, sci-fi is dead, and not just because all devices that could ever be envisioned will either be launching their websites, or showing off their concept art on a dedicated genre chat site. It is something far more sinister.

And this is the point I've been feeling all this time. It's not the technology aspect. The form of sci-fi is the issue here. Technology, running away with itself, is a problem. But you know what is really dead? The form of sci-fi that relies upon the novel.

Think of any sci-fi novel, or film.

-Act One: It is \_\_\_\_ Century. Life is pretty much how you expect it. There is a guy who could probably be a protagonist, but he's busy with the boring aspects of every day life, of the kind we might read sci-fi novels to escape in our time.

-Act Two: Enter crazy object/character/event, who does something so totally out of character for \_\_\_\_ Century, that even Typical Maybe Protagonist guy is a little confused. But what about his daily life? Too bad, crazy o/c/e calls, and sets a plot in motion.

-Act Three: Turns out, that crazy thing was even more crazier than expected! Now Typical Guy is running, jumping, and chasing all kinds of plot elements all over the \_\_\_\_ Century. Thankfully, there is at least one good looking chick introduced, which gives us something normal to grab onto.

-Act Four: Oh no! All those plot elements are converging! Plus, the crazy thing whipped up the BIG SECRET, which is why is probably the reason it was so crazy to begin with. Where's the hot chick? Oh no, too late, we only have \_\_\_\_ much time to get \_\_\_\_ to the \_\_\_\_!

-Act Five: Whew! The plot pieces all knocked each other out. Oh, and the time crucial thing? That went okay too. But while the hot chick, who is suddenly a relationship prospect, slowly massages our wounds, let's just pause to reflect on the ramifications of that big crazy thing, and how the \_\_\_\_ Century world will certainly never be the same again.

Okay, I took a little bit of liberty with that. It's true: sometimes there is actually not a hot chick. Sometimes it is a really awesome sword, or gun, or spaceship.

Don't worry—I like cheap thrills as much as everyone else. Plus, there are many authors out there that can take a format like this, and actually make it a really enjoyable way to pass the time, and exciting to boot. Hell, I would probably watch *Total Recall* every weekend, if I could see it on the big screen.

My point is more about how this sci-fi format affects the SF. Look at it again.

-There is a basic plateau of reality established.

-Rising from this plateau is a spike, which draws our attention to an area of the plateau, and makes us consider it differently.

-The spike defines expectation, and alters the plateau into a three dimensional shape.

-Our awareness slides down this three dimensional shape towards the void at the edge of the plateau, or perhaps

right in the middle.

-When we have fallen off, the shape flips, and we find ourselves sitting on another plateau.

The plot, the setting, and the characters are often nothing more than plateaus by which the physics of "conceptual reality" can be tweaked. This is the speculative framework of the story. Even the hot chick is not so much the DD appeal to the demographic she might seem to be—she is actually a tug upon the line of desire in the unconscious of the reader. She's a way to get the audience to buy it, even as everything else is thrown upside down. Look at PKD—the chick is in almost every book without fail, and especially the real head-trip ones, because if the reader couldn't trust the sexual desire of the main character, then there would be almost no ground to stand on. Why do you think teenage girls like vampires? Because vampires are hot, ageless boys dying to suck on their necks! Something so easy to represent, like sex, is an anchor, allowing the rest of speculative spaceship to swing free.

So here is what I'm thinking: our cyber-time relationship with our culture makes problems for the technology of sci-fi, but what's worse, it is altering our relationship with the form of the book. It is making it more difficult to write a plot.

Don't misunderstand—it's easier than ever to write a plot. Just follow my diagram above. Hollywood knows this. They have a storage locker at a nondescript health club in LA that is filled with diagrams like the above, marked "teen comedy", "bank heist", "car movie", "sports", or "biopic". The keys are kept by a small, but ever widening cabal. *Imagine a world, very much like our own. A man looks in the toilet one day to see that to his uncanny surprise, his bowel movement looks exactly like the one he made the day before. Not simply consistent to his diet, but exactly the same. He goes to the doctor, who refuses to see him. Running up back alleys after black market medical equipment, attractive female nutritionist in tow, he finally makes the horrific discovery for himself--he is not a man at all, but a script writer!*

We lost the originality of plots when we lost the originality of the formal concept. Proposing a radical departure and reformation of the plateau of our reality isn't really speculative anymore. The Fight Club, the Memento, the Sixth Sense—these unconventional sorts of plots are now their own tropes. What sci-fi has lost is its speculative edge. Everything is already like something, which someone has probably already seen, or something else just like it, before. On the Internet. Cyber-time doesn't just inhabit our world of facts, or objects—but our notions of plausible reality, explored through speculative mediums. What is the Internet if not a huge manifold of all the writing in the world that is even a little bit speculative?

The loss of speculative aesthetics to the Internet is not such a big loss, compared to the loss of form. Anybody can invent a slutty-punk trope; but it takes an author to sell it. The problem is, as good as authors are at selling the concept, there is only one way to do it. This way has been called science fiction. And science fiction is dead. Speculation has moved on.

Cue the suggestion to go to video games, or concept albums, or Twitterized Serial crap. No—this is different from the "death of print", and in my opinion, the true media problem. We have exhausted the speculative power of the form, because the vast assortment of stories at our disposal makes plot superfluous. It is not a dying industry to sell a book simply because you can get the same book online. It is a dying industry to sell a *new* book because you can get *every other book that has ever been written*, in print or online, twenty-four hours a day. Not only is science fiction dead, fiction itself is having palpitations. True, there are a million timeless stories out there, that will never die. But this is exactly my point. If a story is timeless, how are you going to write another one? Oh, add zombies. Better yet, make it porn. That is a great business model—the porn-misappropriation-of-mainstream-films. Because maybe some people will see a crappy movie. But definitely some people will see a crappy movie if its re-made with hardcore sex. And new hosts are born every week.

Now, according to the pseudo-futurist rant formula, this is the part of the plot in which I unveil what is not corrupt, and what has the potential to save us all. Too bad. Nothing will save science fiction, or the plot-novel, or even plot as a form. They've outlived their usefulness and ceased to function, and this is the lifeblood by which all things die. (Except zombies, which I totally expect to see, both in subject and literally. Zombie fiction, and fiction-zombies. Surprisingly hard to kill.)

But speculation, on the other hand, is something resolutely human. As is language—the bare material of fiction: words. Fiction, in the sense that it is writing that is not precisely true, is alive and well within our minds. I bet some of those truly speculative individuals will continue to write it down, working it, shaping it, and making it drive our urge to speculate. You may not recognize it. You may not be able to buy it in a store. It may be digital, or it may be on paper. It may involve technology and science, or maybe it won't. Maybe it will seem like a plot. Maybe it won't have characters. Maybe it will be hard to read. Maybe you read it without realizing it. Who knows? Imagination is the future. Everything else you should have looked up five seconds ago.