TRANSREALIST FICTION

Writing in the Slipstream of Science

Damien Broderick

Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 98

GREENWOOD PRESS
Westport, Connecticut • London

TRANSREALIST FICTION

Recent Titles in Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Trajectories of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Fourteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts

Michael A. Morrison, editor

Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias

David W. Sisk

Folklore and the Fantastic in Twelve Modern Irish Novels

Marguerite Quintelli-Neary

A Century of Welsh Myth in Children's Literature

Donna R. White

Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction

Russell Blackford

Immortal Monster: The Mythological Evolution of the Fantastic Beast in Modern Fiction and Film

Joseph D. Andriano

Young Adult Science Fiction

C. W. Sullivan III, editor

Spiritual Exploration in the Works of Doris Lessing

Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, editor

The Road to Castle Mount: The Science Fiction of Robert Silverberg

Edgar L. Chapman

Back in the Spaceship Again: Juvenile Science Fiction Series Since 1945

Karen Sands and Marietta Frank

Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on *The History of Middle-earth*

Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter, editors

Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction

Gary Westfahl, editor

TRANSREALIST FICTION

Writing in the Slipstream of Science

Damien Broderick

Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 90

GREENWOOD PRESS

Westport, Connecticut • London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Broderick, Damien.

Transrealist fiction : writing in the slipstream of science / by Damien Broderick.

p. cm.—(Contributions to the study of science fiction and fantasy, ISSN 0193–6875 ; no. 90)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0–313–31121–8 (alk. paper)

1. Science fiction—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. Science fiction— Authorship. 3. Fantastic, The, in literature. 4. Realism in literature. 5. Reality in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PN3433.5.B76 2000

809.3'8762—dc21 99–049691

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99–049691

ISBN: 0–313–31121–8

ISSN: 0193–6875

First published in 2000

Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.greenwood.com

Printed in the United States of America

The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48–1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment is given to the following sources for permission to quote material previously published or taken from the Internet: Nathan Brusovani; Mark E. Crosby, “A Protestation of Faith”; C. Mitch Hagmaier; Sylvia Kelso; Eugene Leitl; Susan Matthews; Amy Stout; Jo Walton; interviews with Rudy Rucker. Some parts of this book have appeared in somewhat different form in *Science Fiction Commentary* and *The New York Review of Science Fiction*.

Every reasonable effort has been made to trace the owners of copyright materials in this book, but in some instances this has proven impossible. The author and publisher will be glad to receive information leading to more complete acknowledgments in subsequent printings of the book and in the meantime extend their apologies for any omissions.

This page intentionally left blank.

For John Clute the world’s finest science fiction critic

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

This page intentionally left blank.

Introduction: Beyond Imagination

Eventually an imaginary world is entirely without interest.

—Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (p. 175)

Transrealism means writing about your immediate perceptions in a fantastic way. The characters in a transreal book should be based on actual people [and hence] richer and more interesting…. My transreal novels aren't exactly autobiographical: I have never really left my body, climbed an infinite mountain, met a sphere from the fourth dimension, infected television with an intelligent virus, etc. But they are autobiographical in that many of the characters are modeled on family and friends—the main person of course being modeled on me. The science fictional ideas in my transreal fiction have a special role. They stand in for essential psychic events.

—Rudy Rucker, Interview with John Shirley, ''Introduction,'' *White Light*

In the mannered, funny tragicomic screenplay *Six Degrees of Separation*, John Guare's self-deluding scamster Paul (played by Will Smith) takes almost exactly the opposite tack from the transrealist prescription sketched above by its originator, writer and mathematician Rudy Rucker. Paul captivates his upper-middle-class victims, after feeding them an excellent pasta, with this coolly impassioned sermon, its text *The Catcher in the Rye*:

The imagination has been so debased that imagination—*being imaginative*—rather than being the lynch pin of our existence now stands as a synonym for something outside ourselves like Science fiction or some new use for tangerine slices on raw pork chops—what an imaginative summer recipe—and *Star Wars!* So *imaginative* and *Star Trek*—so imaginative! And *Lord of the Rings*—all those dwarves— so imaginative.[1]

Paul's own lurching impersonation—he passes himself off as the son of Sidney Poitier, who also famously and discomfitingly came to dinner— is, in its way, an impressive self-fashioning. "The imagination," he tells the Kittredges, whose home he has invaded, "has moved out of the realm of being our link, our most personal link, with our inner lives and the world outside that world—this world we share … I believe that the imagination is the passport we create to take us into the real world" Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation*, (p. 41).

Unmasked as a fraud and impostor, Paul admits that this stirring Jungian outburst was filched from the "Graduation speech at Groton[2] two years ago" (p. 128). His own imaginative duplicity cannot hold up as a passport into that privileged corner of the real world he would like to enter. How much less effective, then, must be the nakedly spurious or ersatz kind of imagination that his borrowed speech scolds. *Science fiction, minimal culinary daring, hobbits*—these, Guare insinuates (with a suitable measure of unreliability and ambiguity) are more correctly seen as ways to avoid the self, the real. "To face ourselves,'' Paul tells his hosts, while doing nothing of the sort and therefore, in his inevitable fall, pointing the validity of his moral, "[t]hat's the hard thing. The imagination. That's God's gift to make the act of self-examination bearable" (p. 41).

We may find this persuasive, in its way, and yet—science fiction, *un*imaginative? How absurd! Perhaps not. In *The Statesman's Manual* (1816), Samuel Taylor Coleridge characterized imagination as "that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the reason in images of the sense, and organising (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors." This high-flown apotheosis might seem, to the convinced aficionado of sf (the mode's accepted friendly shorthand for science fiction, speculative fiction or science fantasy), a rather apt description of science fiction at its best—but Coleridge would not have thought so. Famously, he distinguished (in *Biographia Literaria* [1817] chapter IV) between *imagination* of this Miltonic order and a distinct faculty that he dubbed mere *fancy*.[3] Science fiction's invented worlds and characters, on this account, would be fanciful rather than truly imaginative.

Suppose that it is so. What solutions might an ambitious genre writer

or reader find to remedy this deficit? (It might not, of course, be a deficit, but rather just a variant, or even a distinctive feature—as it is, perhaps, in the explicitly allegorical.) One broad class of answers seems to be emerging out of the often lazy or clichéd textual practices of "imaginative writing" in the sense Guare's Paul deplores. That answer, I will argue, comprises an inventive way of blending with science fiction's unprecedented possibilities other ways of telling stories, both traditional and innovative, that link "our inner lives and the world outside that world."

Following sf writer Rudy Rucker, I call this way of doing things with words, images and ideas *transrealism*, although I extend his original coinage. Not only is transrealism writing about immediate reality—or your idiosyncratic perceptions of it—in a fantastic way, it is also a way of writing the fantastic from the standpoint of your richly personalized reality.[4] To the extent that Guare's implied critique is justified, a new creative intervention of both kinds is urgently needed. Perhaps something of this gesture is registered in Arthur Rimbaud's words, in August 1873:

Sometimes in the sky I see endless sandy shores…. A great golden ship, above me, flutters many-colored pennants in the morning breeze. I was the creator of every feast, every triumph, every drama. I tried to invent new flowers, new planets, new flesh, new languages. I thought I had acquired supernatural powers. Ha! I have had to bury my imagination and my memories! What an end to a splendid career as an artist and storyteller! … I called myself a magician, an angel, free from all moral constraint … I am sent back to the soil to seek some obligation, to wrap gnarled reality in my arms.[5]

As it happens, more than a century later, quite a few writers in and out of science fiction have been eddying in the slipstream of science toward a gnarly attractor in narrative space (as a physicist might put it), a way of combining wild ideas, subversion and criticism of the supposedly inviolate Real, together with realistic thickening of the supposedly airy fantastic, all bound together in a passionate, noncompliant act of self-examination.

This book is an invitation to refigure parts of that textual site currently labelled "science fiction" bringing it into registration (perhaps surprisingly) with other textual sites often regarded as widely separated. In extending this invitation, more is required than a simple analytical anatomy or parade of instances of transrealist writings. We will find it necessary to explore various sectors of the established landscape, spend time in subfields where quite disparate mechanisms are at work centrally, where apparently dissonant tunes are being played on a shared ensemble of instruments. We shall look as well, therefore, at brilliantly conceived alternatives to the transreal option: fictions that plunge away from any direct or even indirect appeal to the human heart in favor of constructing

imaginary posthuman worlds (I am thinking especially of the important new work of Greg Egan, who stands narratively almost as the polar contrary to Rucker while sharing many of his mathematical interests). We need to reconsider, as well, some of the classic moves made inside the evolving games of science fiction and fantasy—those moves, and their histories, which both reader and writer must learn in a (usually youthful) apprenticeship, via drenching exposure to the semiotic environment and set of tools I elsewhere analyze as the sf megatext.[6]

DEALING WITH DEATH

Human life seems to be made up of endless attempts upon the impossible or at least the out-of-reach. That's true for most of us about many aspects of life and for all of us about some of them. Consider, for example, the big truth we divert our gaze from much of the time, even when we watch actors pretending to blow apart the guts and brains of other actors, on the screen, for our enjoyment: the truth that we all dry up and die, sooner or later. Death is a bad thing and so far impossible to avoid. So too are excessive suffering and loneliness and the other miseries afflicting us clever animals. Fantasy allows us to resolve some of these fears and hungers in prompted imagination, which has its good side and its bad. It is a happy discovery that we can evade the cruelties of *what is given* by freeing our dreams and taking solace there.

A side benefit is that by dreaming ''magical" solutions to our woes and limitations, sometimes we work out how to fix them in reality. For hundreds of thousands of years humans looked wistfully at the birds. Now we can fly among them, indeed far higher. It is even conceivable, hard though it seems to swallow, that medical and other technologies might combine, perhaps as early as the 2030s or 2050s, to end the inevitability of senescence and routine death.[7] Fantasy's downside is precisely its flight from reality, from engagement with what ails us and what gives us joy. But the hazards of science fiction are much overrated.

In 1969, the excellent sf writer and commentator Algis Budrys distilled what every one of his peers hoped to achieve in this distinctive, disturbing mode of writing. His apothegm neatly welds together head and heart, giving neither of them priority while scanting neither. "I don't see how a science-fiction writer can do more than wring your heart," he wrote, "while explaining how it works."[8]

Certainly that is what I try to do in my own science fiction, when I am not trying to be funny instead and sometimes then as well. Of course I often fail and cannot make any claim to considerable achievement. Still, when I reread those words by Budrys recently, I felt an odd chill of recognition, recalling a pivotal moment near the close of my novel *The Dreaming Dragons* (1980). The eponymous dragons are those unconscious

forces epitomized in the late Carl Sagan's book about the evolution of the human brain, *The Dragons of Eden*, and more than that, as well: the descendants of a dinosaur lineage from an alternative history in which mammals never quite surpassed their great predecessors, who persisted to evolve intelligence and wisdom. The novel's climax carries several characters into a kind of technological atrium of the collective unconscious, figured as an ancient machine within which all our minds are routinely echoed and archived: backed-up, one might say, against the decay and death of our bodies. My protagonist, a middle-aged scientist with a penchant for the paranormal and mystical, nears the moment of rapturous reunion, deep beneath a sacred mountain in central Australia, with this source of all being, human and draconic alike. Out of the body (or so it seems to him), he visits his sleeping family halfway around the world to make his sorrowing farewells:

Like an arrow of pale fire he passed to their home, to the crumpled bed where Selma lay sleeping. The digital clock showed that by her time it lacked a quarter hour of midnight. Without stirring, she knew his presence. Willy, she told him, you should have phoned ahead. I'd have—Oh. He took her hand and she came out of her body into his arms, pressing her face against his chest. He told her: This will be a dream to comfort you….

Hovering, he considered his pulsing heart, atria and ventricles, relaxing in diastole, contracting fiercely in systole, the striated muscles of interdigitated actin and myosin filaments, the resting membrane potential at 84 millivolts and its reverse potential convulsion at 103 millivolts. He observed the twin syncytiums, and the impulses surging across the A-V bundle. He waited for the depolarisation plateau, watched the calcium ions diffusing inward through the cardiac membrane, its permeability to potassium ions falling. The depleted tissues outside the membrane sucked hungrily at the calcium suspended in the enclosed extracellular fluids. He reached down calmly, then, and shooed the ions away. Potassium conductance plummeted. The dynamic of his heart sagged, faltered, ceased. He died.[9]

THE VOICES OF SPACETIME

Science fiction is no unitary whole, of course; that is half its point. Its tools and perspective shifts, its adapted or invented tropes, have been turned to new ways for imposing old restrictions, as well as new ways to open nailed-up doors, not to mention new ways of breaking new ground. And however much canons are exposed, ridiculed, subverted and declared redundant, they persist or reemerge. In this ceaseless whirl of adaptation and novelty, inevitably conducted under circumstances imposed and constrained from outside sf 's own internal dynamics (it is above all a form of commercial entertainment), this most recent of emergent literary and paraliterary modes struggles between temptations.

One of these, we now begin to see, is the invitation to a transrealist writing, imaginative writing that is not satisfied with the purely imaginary. It can only be understood—and either resisted or accepted—in view of those alternative gestures: at worst, to complacent narratives of comfort and convenience; or, by contrast, to unsettling postmodernist ontological disruption; or, finally, to explorations of a condition beyond even the transreal. One might call it, perhaps, the hyperreal, if the term had not already been frittered away. So this book can provide no single, univocal argument. It is, inevitably, a braided text, enacting in its comings and goings just that fractured realm with which it engages; or, to use a slightly different metaphor, tossed and turned in the turbulence of writing's endlessly chaotic slipstream.

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

Finally, before we begin properly: Criticism has its quandaries. Who are we critics doing this for? How much are we suppressing, anyway, in this supposition that we are indeed "we," with some joint stock of common truths, perceptions, positions, cultural capital? Is art or literary criticism *sub specie aeternitatis*, as it often comically pretends, or *du jour?* Who is sitting here in judgment of someone's months or years of effort, who is this arrogant character asserting with a straight face that for the duration (75,000 or so words) "Science fiction, c'est moi?"

Just now it'sme—and to the extent that you, the reader, are criticizing me, it's you. So be reassured that the argument in this book does not suppose itself to be the word of God, even when the shape of critical language makes it sound as if that is what I am trying to marionette.

NOTES

1. John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation*. Xeroxed filmscript, copyright 1989.
2. A famous preparatory school near Boston.
3. The salient passages from Coleridge are conveniently gathered in Walter Jackson Bate, ed., *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), pp. 386–87.

The term had already been used, in a somewhat similar way, before Rucker published his manifesto. It is the term adopted by two artistic brothers. The elder, Yuri Brusovani, a painter, "is the founder of transrealism, a new artistic method." The younger, Nathan Brusovani, is a photographer and a digital designer. See their own manifesto, and examples of their work, at their web sites: http://best-place.net/best/Brusovani/nathan_brusovani.htm and http://www.geocities.com/~brusovani/statement/statement1_index.htm

The former site declares:

4. Starting from 1978 the artist works on the concept of transrealism, combining modern acrylic technical methods with artistic manners of the old masters. The ''trans" prefix mean-ing "above", "through", "beyond" actually marks this term as belonging to a way of depicting space and time which is different from that of the known ecto-realism (outer, external). Due to acrylic paints and the latest artifices in painting the artist is able to create multi-layer, multi-dimensional spaces on canvas where realistic, sensual images become metaphoric. The transparent watery colors allow, unlike the oil, to give a feeling of transparent reality, in the space of which comprehension the voices interweave and material objects become transparent to a multitude of meanings and senses. Polyphony is the principal method of transrealism, whose goal it is to recreate a concept for new comprehension of reality, not a plain one, based on individualism, i.e. the dictatorship of a single voice, but multilayered where every voice is independent and is looking for a dialogue with others.

(Cited with permission of the Brusovani brothers.) The overlap here with Rucker's program is only partial, since his strategy depends powerfully on just the individual and idiosyncratic perspective that the Brusovani brothers reject.

5. Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: HarperColophon, 1976), p. 213.

6. See my *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*, especially chapter 4. In the present investigation, I have chosen to keep theoretical and scholarly apparatus to a minimum, although everything here is plainly inscribed against the background of Western literary theory's ongoing search for adequate means of analysis and synthesis. Any reader seized by the need to pursue my theoretical presuppositions might turn to the text just mentioned, as well as to *The Architecture of Babel*, which deals with the distinctive yet overlapping semiotic systems at work in the humanities and the sciences, and *Theory and Its Discontents*, which tries to deconstruct some of the more disturbing moves frequently played in the theory game, and to reconstruct relations between the so-called Two Cultures on a new (if highly speculative) historical matrix.

7. This apparently outlandish prospect is discussed in my popular science book *The Last Mortal Generation* (1999).

8. Algis Budrys, from his review "Galaxy Bookshelf," in *Galaxy*, 27, no. 6 (January 1969) of Samuel R. Delany's novel *Nova*. I am grateful to Mr. Budrys for e-mailing me the exact form of this quotation, which I recalled vividly after nearly three decades.

9. Damien Broderick, *The Dreaming Dragons: A Time Opera* (Melbourne: Norstrilia Press, 1980), pp. 220–21.

This page intentionally left blank.

1
Signs Fiction

[F]iction—that clacking, crudely carpentered old roller coaster, every up and down mocked by the triviality, when all is said and done, of human experience, its Sisyphean repetitiveness …

—John Updike, *Toward the End of Time* (p. 277)

The battleground on which I have fought is not merely the divide between fiction and SF, between human and animal. It is also across another—perhaps equally fictitious—divide, that between creation and criticism.

Our characters have to encompass struggles with conflicting kinds of belief. Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin, is generally seen as a cold, unloving father. So he was. But he had a miserable childhood … was often whipped, and was brought up in a strict Calvinist faith…. Doubt entered when he read a French book of the Enlightenment. Those two warring systems of thought, based on faith and reason, also penetrated the sad heart of his daughter Mary and, *mutatis mutandis*, still bedevil us today.

Do you imagine that space travel will resolve the struggle?

—Brian W. Aldiss, *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's A Writing Life* (pp. 145–46)

Binary oppositions, la la. Yet they once had brave days,[1] and still lurk in the basement of our thinking, critical or otherwise, especially when we approach hybrid or hyphenated or zeugmatic forms of writing.

A *zeugma* is the rhetorical yoking, apparently unnatural or at least against the grain, of two quite different terms into one condensed and startling figuration. In this book I mean to consider—to tease into parts, then to recombine those severed parts, not once but several times, not in one way but by various paths—a popular but still despised zeugma: sf or "science fiction." We shall find that it now has two doubled neologistic twins: slipstream and transrealism. Or perhaps the latter is just richly imaginative fiction itself, caught in the slipstream of science. The former, *slipstream sf*, is defined somewhat sarcastically by John Clute, in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*: "stories which make use of sf devices but which are not GENRE SF. The image is either nautical or aeronautical: a ship or an airplane … can create a slipstream which may be strong enough to give non-paying passengers … a ride."[2] The instance Clute offers is the near-sf novel *O-Zone*, by Paul Theroux, set in the future but constructed so clumsily (or so it is widely agreed by sf insiders such as writer and critic Thomas M. Disch)[3] that its author reveals how com-prehensively and datedly he has rediscovered the wheel.

However, Clute adds, although *slipstream* is apt as a description of "commercial piggybacking," to apply it to the whole range of non–genre sf[4] is inappropriate, since "the term—which implies a relationship of dependency—can seem derogatory." Oddly enough, the term's originator, sf writer Bruce Sterling, did not intend to give offense, or at any rate not in that way. To the contrary. Cyberpunk's sometime PR agent (and fine writer in and out of that branch of the sf business), Bruce Sterling coined "slipstream fiction'' as the *mot juste*, proposing it in 1989 as a telling metaphor not without its freight of resentment.[5] According to a meditation he cited, by another ambitious sf writer, Carter Scholz, science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s "had a chance to become a worthy literature; now that chance has passed. Why?" Sterling asked. "Because other writers have now learned to adapt SF's best techniques to their own ends." Since those "other writers" had already in their grasp a whole armamentarium of skills and techniques usually ignored by traditional sf creators, this left the old guard high and dry, by-passed, sluggish textual dinosaurs outpaced by small quick mammals.

If so, what of *transrealism*? Rudy Rucker, who coined the literary use of the term in 1983 (in "A Transrealist Manifesto," published in the *Bulletin* of the Science Fiction Writers of America), meant something like the innovative sf of Philip K. Dick, justly accounted by John Clute "one of the two or three most important figures in 20th century US sf and an author of general significance" (Clute "Dick, Philip K." p. 328). In his most rewarding fiction, Dick used what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) has called *thick description*, detailed rich observation of consensus