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MORTAL ENGINES
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TALES OF PIRX THE PILOT
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WRITINGS ON SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY
IMAGINARY MAGNITUDE
ONE HUMAN MINUTE
FIASCO
HOSPITAL OF THE TRANSGURATON
EDEN
PEACE ON EARTH
HIGHCASTLE

STANISLAW LEM

MICROWORLDS

WRITINGS ON SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY

Edited by Franz Rottensteiner

A HELEN AND KURT WOLFF BOOK
A HARVEST BOOK
HARCOURT BRACE & COMPANY
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MICROWORLDS

bility greater than those to be found even in mediocre novels of other kinds. Although events impossible from an *objective-empirical* standpoint (such as a man springing over a wall seven meters high or a woman giving birth in two instead of nine months) do not appear in non-science-fiction novels, events equally impossible from a *speculative* standpoint (such as the totally unnecessary end-game in Disch's *Camp Concentration*) appear frequently in science fiction. To be sure, separating the unlikely from the likely (finding in the street a diamond the size of your fist as opposed to finding a lost hat) is much simpler when your standard of comparison is everyday things than it is when you are concerned with the consequences of fictive hypotheses. But though separating the likely from the unlikely in science fiction is difficult, it can be mastered. The art can be learned and taught. But since the lack of selective filters is accompanied by a corresponding lack in reader-evaluations, there are no pressures on authors for such an optimization of science fiction.

*Translated from the German
by Franz Rottensteiner
and Bruce R. Gillespie,
with R. D. Mullen and
Darko Suvin*

SCIENCE FICTION: A HOPELESS CASE—WITH EXCEPTIONS

1

On reading *In Search of Wonder* by Damon Knight and *The Issue at Hand* by James Blish, a couple of questions, the answers to which can be found nowhere, came to my mind.¹

1. This essay is a rewritten chapter ("Sociology of Science Fiction") from my *Fantastyka i futurologia* (Science Fiction and Futurology). I have polemically sharpened the original text in several instances, and added the later review of Dick's work, which is absent from the book. I confess that I made a blunder when I wrote this monograph, since then I knew only Dick's short stories and his *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* I believed that I could rely on reviews published in the fanzines of other novels by Dick, with the result that I considered him merely a "better van Vogt," which he is not. This mistake was due to

For example: in science fiction fandom rumor has it that science fiction is improving every year. If so, why does the average production, the lion's share of new productions, remain so bad?

Or: we do not lack definitions of this genre. However, we would look in vain for an explanation for the absence of a theoretical, generalizing critique of the genre, and a reason why the weak beginnings of such criticism can be found only in "fanzines," amateur magazines of very low circulation and small influence (if any at all) on the authors and publishers.

Furthermore: Blish and Knight agree that science-fiction readers cannot distinguish between a high-quality novel and a mediocre one. If they are right, how are readers selected to belong to the public who reads this literary genre, which intends to portray the (fantastically magnified) outstanding achievements of mankind?

The important question is: even if science fiction was born in the gutter, and lived on trash for years on end, why can't it get rid of the trash for good?

the state of science-fiction criticism. Every fifth or eighth book is praised as "the best work of science fiction in the whole world," its author is presented as "the greatest science-fiction author ever," great differences between works are minimized and annulled, so much so that in the end *Ubik* may be regarded as a novel that is just a little better than *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Naturally, what I say does not justify my mistake, because no criticism is a substitute for reading the books concerned. However, my words still describe the circumstances responsible for causing my error, because it is a physical impossibility to read every science-fiction title, so that there must be a selection; as you can see, one cannot rely on science-fiction criticism to make this selection.

My essay tries to answer these questions. Therefore, it is a "Prolegomenon to Science-Fiction Ecology"—or an "Introduction to a Socioculturally Isolated Realm of Creative Work"—or a "Practical Guide for Survival in the Lower Realm of Literature." These pompous titles will be justified below. The books by Blish and Knight were of great assistance to me in writing, but I did not regard them as only collections of critiques, but more as ethnological protocols of several explorations into the exotic land of science fiction—i.e., as raw material to be subjected to a sociological analysis. For me, the facts collected by these authors were often more valuable than their opinions; that is to say, I arranged this material in a way not completely corresponding to the spirit of the sources.

Ω

I call science fiction a "collective phenomenon" of a sociocultural nature. It has the following parts: (a) the readers—on the one hand, the mute and passive majority of science-fiction consumers; on the other, the active amateur groups that constitute fandom proper; (b) the science-fiction producers—authors (some of them also critics) and publishers of magazines and books.

Science fiction is a "very special case" because it belongs to two distinct spheres of culture: the "Lower Realm," or Realm of Trivial Literature, and the "Upper Realm," or Realm of Mainstream Literature. To the Lower Realm belong the crime novel, the Western, the pseudo-historical novel, the sports novel, and the erotico-sentimental stories about certain locations, such as doctor-nurse romances,

millionaire-and-the-playgirl stories, and so on. I'd like to spare the reader a detailed description of what I mean by mainstream. Perhaps it will suffice to quote the names of some of the authors who inhabit this Olympus: Moravia, Koestler, Joyce, Butor, Sartre, Grass, Mailer, Borges, Calvino, Malamud, Sarrault, Pinget, Greene.

It cannot be maintained with universal validity that these authors do not descend to the lower floors occasionally, for we know of crime novels by Graham Greene, "fantastic" novels by Orwell and Werfel, and Moravia's "fantasies." Some texts by Calvino are even considered science fiction. Therefore it should not be conceived that the difference between authors of the Upper and Lower Realms is that one of the first does not write fantasy or other literature related to science fiction, while one of the second does just this: the difference can be examined according to neither intrinsic type nor the artistic quality of a single work. To be a subject of the Lower or Upper Realm does not only and exclusively depend upon the product made by the author. There are much more complicated interrelationships of a sociocultural nature. I will talk about them a little later.

At this point I want only to propose a practical rule of procedure, which will predict with ninety-eight percent accuracy whether an author will be considered as an inhabitant of the Upper or the Lower floor. The rule is simple and can be stated as follows: if someone starts to write in the mainstream, and the public and critics get to know him by name, or even as a world celebrity (so that, on hearing the name, they know that they are talking about a writer, not an athlete or actor, so his attempts at

science fiction and/or fantasy are regarded as "excursions" or "side leaps," even if repeated) then that man lives on the Upper floor. For instance, the "entertainments" of Graham Greene express a private mood or tactic of his.

During H. G. Wells's working life, there was no such clear-cut border between these two realms of literature. They shaded into each other gradually and continually. At that time Wells was known simply as an English writer, and the readers who appreciated his prose often knew of both his ambitions—the realistic and the fantastic. Only much later did an Iron Curtain descend between these two kinds of literature so that the typical science-fiction fan often knows the works of science fiction written by Wells, but ignores the fact that Wells also wrote "normal" realistic prose (and highbrow connoisseurs value it highly today, and more so than his science fiction). This curtain, this concrete ceiling (to maintain the image of a two-story building), has grown little by little, and this ceiling, hermetically sealed, became an impenetrable barrier only during the twenties. We can recognize this by the fact that Capek's works are still classed with the literature of the Upper Realm, while Stapledon, who was writing about ten years later, is not accredited with being there. Therefore some authors do not earn their classifications exclusively on their merits. On the contrary, their works are subject to higher rules of taxonomy, rules that have developed in the course of history and know *no* exceptions.

If, in spite of all this, a classificatory exception is made, the judgment is given that the (literary) case under consideration is *not essentially* science fiction, but wholly "nor-

mal" literature, which the author intentionally camouflaged as science fiction. However, if we proceed by disregarding all these "extenuating circumstances," some novels by Dostoevsky become "crime novels," though in fact they are not regarded as such. The experts say that the plot of a crime novel served the author only as a means to an end, and he definitely did not want to write a crime novel. This is the same situation as is the case of a brothel searched by the police. For simplicity's sake the nameless, ordinary guests are regarded as customers of the prostitutes, but a prince or a politician defends his presence on the pretext that he descended to these lowest floors of social life because he longed for something exotic, because his fancy took him on such an excursion. In short, such people stay in the land of pestilence as extravagant intruders or even as curious scientists.

3

The status of trivial literature can be recognized by several typical attributes.

First: its works are read only once, just like the cheapest mass products, which are also intended for but a single use. Most of them become obsolete in the same way as mass products do. If crime novels were selected according to their literary merits, it would be superfluous to keep throwing new ones onto the market, because we could find so many good ones among the multitude there already that nobody could read the choicest of them during his lifetime. Still, publishers keep on putting "brand-new" crime novels onto the market even though there are quan-

tities of crime novels of undisputedly better quality that have sunk into oblivion. The same goes for refrigerators and cars: it is a well-known fact that today's models are not necessarily better, technologically, than those of yesterday. But in order to keep going, the machinery of production must put new models on the market, and advertising exerts pressure on the consumers to make them believe that only the current year's models have the best quality. The dogma of continual change of models becomes a law of the market, although every specialist can distinguish clearly between fictitious obsolescence of the product and authentic technological obsolescence. Off and on there are real improvements in technological products. More often, change is dictated only by fashion, a dictatorship in the interest of profit by supplying new goods.

The entanglement of real progress and economic laws constitutes a picture of a situation quite similar to that which reigns in the market of trivial literature. On principle, publishing houses like Ace Books could put on the market science fiction from the first half of the century exclusively, in ever-renewed reprints, because the number of this kind of book has already increased to such an extent that nobody could read even the better ones among them, even if he devoted all his time to this genre. Printing new books, ninety-eight percent of which are miserable products, published for purely economic reasons, makes many older works fall into oblivion. They die in silence, because there is no place for them on a clogged market. The publishing houses provide no filter to bring about a positive selection, because to them the newest book is also the best, or at least they want the customer to believe this,

the justification for the well-known total inflation of publishers' advertising. Each new title is praised as the best in the science-fiction genre. Each science-fiction writer is called the greatest master of science fiction after one or two of his books have been published. In the science-fiction book market, as well as in the whole market of trivial literature, we can perceive the omnipotence of economic laws. The literary market, moreover, has in common with the whole market the typical phenomenon of inflation. When *all* books and writers are presented as "the best," then a devaluation, an inflation of *all* expressions of value is inevitable.

Compared with these carryings-on, with this escalation of advertising, the behavior of mainstream editors is quite shy and silent. Please compare the blurbs on the jackets of science-fiction books with those that serious publishers put on the jackets of a Saul Bellow or a William Faulkner. This remark seems to be banal, but it isn't. Although instant coffee or cigarettes of every brand are always praised as the best in the world (we never hear of anything advertised as "second best"), Michelangelo's frescoes and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* are not offered, with the same advertising expenditure, as the best works of art possible. The activities of the publishers of trivial literature make us recognize that this literature is subject to economic laws exclusively and to the exclusion of any other laws of behavior.

Second: I must remark that a reader of trivial literature behaves just like the consumer of mass products. Surely it does not occur to the producer of brooms, cars, or toilet paper to complain of the absence of correspondence,

fraught with outpourings of the soul, that strikes a connection between him and the consumer of his products. Sometimes, however, these consumers happen to write angry letters to the producer to reproach him with the bad quality of the merchandise they bought. This bears a striking similarity to what James Blish describes in *The Issue at Hand*, and, indeed, this author, more than five million of whose books have been printed, said that he received only some dozens of letters from readers during his whole life as an author. These letters were exclusively fits of temper from people who were hurt in the soft spot of their opinions. It was the quality of the goods that offended them.

Third: the market of trivial literature knows only one index of quality: the measure of the sales figures of the books. When an "angry young critic" snubbed Asimov's *Nightfall and Other Stories* as old hat, Asimov put up the defense that his books, this year and for years previously, had sold excellently and that none of his books had been remaindered. Therefore he took literary merit for the relation of supply and demand, as if he were unaware that there have been world-famous books that have never been printed in large quantities. If we use this yardstick, Dostoevsky is no match for Agatha Christie. There are many fans of science fiction who have never read a novel by Stapledon or Wells in their lives, and with an easy mind I can assert that the silent majority of readers does not even know Stapledon by name. Blish and Knight agree that the public cannot distinguish a good novel from an abominable novel; and this is correct, with the proviso that they are talking about only the readers of the Lower Realm. If this generalization were valid for all readers at

all times, we should have to consider the phenomenon of cultural selection in the history of literature as a miracle. For if all or almost all readers are passive and stupid beings, then who was able to collect Cervantes and Homer into the treasure troves of our culture?

Fourth: there are crass and embarrassing differences between the relations that link the authors of Upper and Lower Realms with publishers. In the Upper Realm it is the author who alone determines the title, length, form, and style of his work, and his right to do so is guaranteed unequivocally by the letter of his contract. In the Lower Realm, the publishers appropriate these rights. We can recognize from paragraphs of the printed contracts of large science-fiction publishing houses like Ace Books that it is the publishers who can, at their own discretion, change titles, length, and even the text of a book without express permission of its author, just as fancy dictates. Naturally, the editors of the Upper Realm also make encroachments. In practice these actions are quite different; they occur before the author signs the contract—i.e., first the editors propose to the author what they want changed, and only after he has agreed is the contract made, and not one syllable says that the original manuscript must be revised. The difference is because in the Upper Realm literary texts are considered in their integrity untouchable and taboo because they are almost sacred art objects. This is an old custom, in the spirit of the historical tradition of Western culture, though the practice of publishing, even in the Upper Realm, is not always so pious and fair as we are told. However, this difference between the two realms is of great importance.

In the Upper Realm one always strives at least to keep alive the appearance of intact virtue, in the same way as in high society women do not permit themselves to be called “prostitutes” although they indulge in open promiscuity. The “ladies” of the underworld do not have such pretensions, and it is no closely guarded secret that one can buy their favors at the appropriate price. Sad to relate, the authors of science fiction are quite similar in behavior to those “ladies,” and they do not feel the disgrace of making transactions, either, as part of which they willingly hand over their works to the publishers, who are allowed to revise the texts at will. Thus James Blish² tells

2. It is quite difficult to shake off either a bad or a good tradition, once it is established. In *The Issue at Hand*, James Blish complains that English criticism surpasses American, and that this difference of level can be seen also on another plane—according to Blish, English publishers treat science-fiction authors with a consideration scarcely to be found in United States. His words date from the fifties. From what I know of the state of things today, this difference has decreased insofar as American criticism has improved, insignificantly, and English publishers have become a bit less considerate.

However, these particular differences should not make us wonder. American science fiction descends from the pulps; English science fiction had as its father, not Hugo Gernsback, about whom nobody outside of U.S. science fiction knows a thing, but H. G. Wells. What else? American science fiction worked itself up from the gutter of literature (though it could not fly into the sky); English science fiction has Americanized itself partly for commercial reasons, and partly has stepped into Wells's shoes, something that should not be taken as praiseworthy. The “classical” successor to Wells, John Wyndham, worked like a huckster, seeking to supplement the work of the master and teacher by filling what was, in his eyes, a gap. But even as anyone who paints like Van Gogh today cannot become a Van Gogh, so Wyndham did not add anything

us that his *A Case of Conscience* is only the length it is because his publisher at the time, owing to certain technical circumstances, could not produce a work of greater length! Just imagine if we read in the memoirs of Hermann Hesse that his *Steppenwolf* was only so long because his publishers. . . . Such a disclosure would cause a shout of wrath from literary circles, but Blish's words do not affect either him or any other author or critic because in the Lower Realm the station of a slave is taken for granted. Publishers are within their rights when changing the title, length, and style of science-fiction books as these encroachments are determined by economic considerations: they act like people who must find a purchaser for their goods, and they have a firm conviction that they work hand in glove with the author, like project leaders and advertising managers for Ford. Naturally, nobody thinks it strange that the project leader for a new model does not have the right to think up a name for it.

major to Wells's work. Wells worked according to the known principle of escalation, so that in *The War of the Worlds*, earth is attacked *only* by the Martians; but in Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, the author does not think it sufficient to let all mankind go blind—he foists poisonous plants upon it; but because those plants do not seem dangerous enough, he adds the gift of active motion as spice.

After all, there are two distinct traditions in science fiction: the English, with the better manners and customs of the Upper Realm, and the American, which has lived from its beginnings in the slums of the Lower Realm, this slave market, which has no overabundance of courtly manners. Also, the language of English science fiction has always been more cultivated.

Seen in isolation, a number of the traits of trivial literature, as described above, are quite unimportant. However, when added up, they form an ordered structure of the environment in which science fiction is born and gains a scanty living. These traits are clues, pointing out how in different ways the status of a work of literature is determined; it depends upon whether it is born in the Upper or Lower Realm.

Thus science-fiction works belong to the Lower Realm—to trivial literature. Thus sociocultural analysis finally solves the problem. Thus words said about it are wasted; the trial can be closed with a sigh of relief.

But this is not so. Without a doubt there is a difference between science fiction and all the neighboring, often closely related, types of trivial literature. It is a whore, but a quite bashful one at that; moreover, a whore with an angel face. It prostitutes itself, but, like Dostoevsky's Sonya Marmeladova, with discomfort, disgust, and contrary to its dreams and hopes.

True, science fiction is often a liar. It wants to be taken for something else, something different from what is really is. It lives in perpetual self-deception. It repeats its attempts to disguise itself. Has it got the shadow of a right to do so?

Many famous science-fiction authors are trying to pass for something better than their fellow writers—the authors of such trivial literature as crime novels or Westerns. These pretensions are often spoken out loud. Moreover, in the prefaces to their books, embarrassing praise is given to

the authors by the authors themselves. For instance, Heinlein often emphasized that science fiction (that is, his own science fiction) was not only equal to, but also far better than mainstream literature, because writing science fiction is more difficult. Such pretensions cannot be found in the rest of the field of trivial literature.

This does not mean that there is no standard of quality for crime novels. Here, too, we distinguish bad, boring novels and original, fascinating ones. We *can* speak of a first-rate crime novel—but it does not occur to anybody to consider such a hit as equal to the masterpieces of literature. In its own class, in the Lower Realm, it may be a real diamond. When in fact a book does cross the borders of the genre, it is no longer called a crime novel, just as with a novel by Dostoevsky.

The best science-fiction novels want to smuggle themselves into the Upper Realm—but in 99.9 percent of cases, they do not succeed. The best authors behave like schizophrenics; they want to—and at the same time they do not want to—belong to the Realm of Science Fiction. They care a lot about the prizes given by the science-fiction ghetto. At the same time, they want their books to be published by those publishing houses that do not publish science fiction (so that one cannot see from the book jackets that their books are science-fiction books). On the other hand, they feel tied to fandom, write for fanzines, answer the questions of their interviewers, and take part in science-fiction conventions. On the other hand, publicly, they try to stress that they “do not really” write science fiction; they would write “better and more intellectual books” if only they did not have to bear so much

pressure from the publishers and science-fiction magazines; they are thinking of moving into mainstream literature (Aldiss, Ballard, and several others).

Do they have any objective reasons for surrendering to frustration and feelings of oppression in the science-fiction ghetto? Crime novels are another, an open-and-shut, case. Naturally, a crime novel reports on murders, detectives, corpses, and trials; Westerns, on stalwart cowboys and insidious Indians. However, if we may believe its claims, a science-fiction book belongs at the top of world literature! For it reports on mankind's destiny, on the meaning of life in the cosmos, on the rise and fall of thousand-year-old civilizations: it brings forth a deluge of answers for the key questions of every reasoning being.

There is only one snag: in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it fulfills its task with stupidity. It always promises too much, and it almost never keeps its word.

For this reason, science fiction is such a remarkable phenomenon. It comes from a warehouse but it wants to break into the palace where the most sublime thoughts of human history are stored. From the time it was born, science fiction has been raised by narrow-minded slaveholders. Thomas Mann was allowed to work on one novel for fourteen years; John Brunner complains that there was a time when he had to write eight novels a year in order to stay alive comfortably. From shame, science fiction tries to keep some sides of this situation a well-guarded secret. (Often we hear from science-fiction authors how much freedom they enjoy in their work.)

Science fiction is subject to the rigid economic laws of supply and demand. It has not completely adapted itself

to the "editor's milieu," meaning that there are recipes on how to write a science-fiction work that appeals to a certain editor and gains his appreciation (for instance, the late John W. Campbell, Jr., was an authoritative man who published only a certain easily definable kind of science fiction, and some authors knew how to foresee his demands). In Geis's *Science Fiction Review*, Perry A. Chapdelaine gives us a detailed account of how he was carefully briefed by well-known science-fiction authors when he wrote his first novel. Special care was taken to include those qualities that maximize sales; no mention was made of the immanent quality of the work itself. Often the same is the case in the Upper Realm—but only for beginners. However, science-fiction authors remain minors in the eyes of their publishers—all their lives. Such circumstances breed frustration and compensatory behavior. Indeed, the same sort of thing abounds in the science-fiction ghetto. All these compensatory phenomena, taken together, clearly have the character of mimicry.

(a) In the science-fiction ghetto there is no lack of makeshift and ersatz institutions which exist side by side with those of the Upper Realm. The Upper Realm has the Nobel Prize and other world-famous literary awards. The science-fiction ghetto has the Hugo and Nebula awards; and American science fiction poses (still) as "world" science fiction, as can be seen from anthology titles such as *The World's Best S/F*.

(b) The Upper Realm has academic and other highbrow literary journals, containing theoretical and hermeneutical articles. Science fiction also has its highbrow fanzines (*Riverside Quarterly* from Canada, *Science Fiction Com-*

mentary from Australia, and *Quarber Merkur* from Austria). These are parallel, although not analogous phenomena. The highbrow periodicals of the Upper Realm command real authority in cultural life. The most famous critics and theoreticians of the mainstream are all known to the cognoscenti and to almost all intelligent readers, at least by name (e.g., Sartre; Leslie Fiedler). Yet the names of the best science-fiction critics are not known to one soul outside the inner circle of fandom, and the silent majority of science-fiction readers does not know of the existence of the highbrow magazines. Even if they did know of them, they would not care for the evaluations of the cognoscenti—i.e., they are not influenced by these fanzines when choosing the new science-fiction books they are going to buy.

The *structure* of the flow of information is quite different in the Upper Realm than in the Lower Realm. In the Upper Realm the highbrow periodicals form the peak of a pyramid whose base is mass culture. The popular critics of the dailies need not agree with the judgments of the initiated highbrow experts, but if one of them opposes a man like Sartre, he knows quite well that he is fighting a world-wide authority. Nothing of this sort in science fiction. Its pyramid is hidden deep in the fan underground, the best fanzines have only insignificant circulations, and they cannot count on financial help from social or cultural institutions. (There are rare exceptions, such as *New Worlds*, which at one time received essential aid from certain British cultural institutions, but this is no longer the case in the United States.)

(c) Science-fiction conventions are intended to form a

kind of match for the meetings of the PEN Club and other similar gatherings. This also involves mimicry, because PEN meetings do not have in the slightest the character of a party that is so characteristic of science-fiction conventions. At conventions, theoretical reflections are nothing but seasoning; at PEN meetings, however, as well as at similar conferences of professional writers, they are the main course.

I must stress that no esoteric highbrow magazine of the Upper Realm has any direct influence on the policies of publishers. These magazines possess only a purely moral authority, founded on tradition. They do not try to wage open warfare upon the typical phenomena of mass culture today (e.g., normally they hide all data about one-day best sellers) and their activity becomes visible only in the long run, as all of the institutions in the structure feed the slow process of the Upper Realm. They should be the (often quite powerless) conscience and memory of world culture, its highest tribunal, which is at the same time an unbiased witness and judge. Often this tribunal loses a single skirmish but wins the great, epic wars—just the way Great Britain did. It cannot give a guarantee of today's fame to a great, misjudged poet, but it provides a memory, helping the next generation sometimes to dig up treasures that are almost lost. In short: these tribunals are not subject to the economic rules of the market, and because of this they are able to defend the cultural heritage against the chaotic onslaught of mass culture.

Nothing like that can be seen in the Lower Realm. Science fiction has no independent periodicals that supervise critically the whole production and form a simi-

lar fraction of the bulk of publications in the field, as in the case in the Upper Realm (measured by the yardstick of the circulation of books and especially of literary periodicals). The evidence of the best and best-known science-fiction authors is suppressed when it is contrary to the interests of the publishers—a fact that Knight reports on. The highbrow fanzines are known exclusively to a very small circle of initiated readers, and their influence on publishers' policies is nil. These amateur magazines often publish analyses and reflections that are equal in quality to the best of what is published in the Upper Realm. But this does not change the fact that no one listens to the voices of the critics. This important fact shows clearly that it is not the immanent quality of a statement that determines its scope of action, but this radius is contingent on the broader structure of the whole network of information with which the medium that published this statement is connected.³ It is a typical

3. This does not mean that the radius of effective action of a statement varies directly with the range of a medium—i.e., in our case, that this radius grows in proportion to the increase of circulation of the periodical in which this statement is printed. In regard to circulation, many highbrow literary periodicals are no better off than the high-circulation fanzines, and the literary and theoretical publications of university faculties sometimes have tiny circulations, as low as three hundred or four hundred copies. What I am saying is that the degree of attention paid by the public to a "message" (a normative judgment) is determined by quite different factors from those of circulation. So, in some countries, an extreme degree of public opinion is paid to several "underground" papers, though these pamphlets look shabby and are circulated in very tiny editions. The authority, the weight, of such statements belongs to the imponderabilities of civilization; the public must be aware in advance that somebody important has something to say;

science-fiction custom that critiques are not produced independently, but are written by either the authors or the editors of anthologies, who evaluate each other's works. This state of affairs only helps to cloud the line of demarcation between apologetics (a public-relations affair) and objective criticism.

Taken as a whole, science-fiction institutions (cons, fanzines, and awards) appear similar to those of the Upper Realm, but dissimilar as regards the function of furthering social values and selections. In the Upper Realm, as time goes by, the worst and the best literary works drift apart from each other; in science fiction however, the forces that are the result of economic laws of the marketplace, an absence of independent criticism, and a lack of cultural assistance are all directed toward the opposite tendency. They put trash next to valuable books; they impede any experiments in literary creation, choke independent, demanding, probing criticism, and they assist publishers in

but the "inherently wise," or even the "eggheads," do not possess such authority and attraction in their own right. The channels that serve to disseminate information are not built by technical and material means (such as the number of copies of a periodical distributed). Instead, these copies find their own way and have their maximum effect only if they flow into a broader structure that strengthens the message. This is the case for the highbrow periodicals because they live at the peak of the cultural pyramid. It is an extremely important phenomenon, which has been almost neglected. In many circles of fandom, people believe that one could wake the "silent majority" of the public from its slumber if only one could bomb the public incessantly with beautifully made publications with mass circulations. Most probably the public would throw these fine pamphlets into the nearest wastepaper basket because this bombardment of mass-produced science fiction would still lack the necessary influence. Authority and influence are not acquired easily.

camouflaging as true criticism the advertising that boosts the sales of their products.

Furthermore, the chain of publishers who specialize in science fiction—and the silent majority of mute, passive readers—forms an environment to which even the most gifted science-fiction authors must adapt themselves eventually. The authors are initiated early into the rules of the game, and they must either obey or take immense risks. Suppose an ingenious, even inspired author enters the realm of science fiction. This man must adapt rapidly and without scruples to the simple truth that it is impossible for him to be valued and esteemed according to his extraordinary achievements. The silent majority of the readership will devour his valuable books in just the same way, at best, as they are used to absorbing the worst nonsense of mass production. Taking into account just the economic barometer of the market, the publishers will treat him in the same way as they treat his colleagues—i.e., as authors who willingly allow the titles, lengths, and structures of their books to be changed in advance according to the wishes of their masters. This author will watch helplessly the embarrassing sight of his books submerging in an ocean of trash, for the stigma of science fiction links them irrevocably to this sea. Surely Sturgeon is right in maintaining that ninety-nine percent of all books in every genre are trash, but the fact remains that in the Upper Realm of culture there are forces that never cease furthering positive selection. In the Lower Realm, the best books are placed beside the worst and most stupid, and submerged by them under the pressure of the objective situation.

Thus, science-fiction institutions only seem to be the equal of the institutions of the Upper Realm. In fact, we see before us a superficial mimicry. Science fiction merely apes and simulates the Olympian quality of literature, without reproducing the same performance capability. No famous author from the Upper Realm concerns himself with disqualifying trashy literature or defending himself against the attacks of graphomaniacs. For a while, the Knights and Blishes tried to do this, but in the end their aggressiveness had to give way to a moderated, more passive attitude. To some extent these intelligent men are conscious of their own defeat. They feel that this behavior, typical of science fiction, merely apes grown-up literature. They can see how grotesque such goings-on must look to an outside observer. The unauthenticated (because not earnest) quality of fandom, with its letters, parties, and friendly exchange of opinions, is for the authors only a weak substitute, an asylum where they can play the part of the great writer by confessing in fanzines with circulations of two hundred or less the secret of their creative writing and their deep psychological secrets.

We could consider these phenomena as insignificant and pay no attention to them, because in the end the ways in which the literati compensate their inferiority complexes, their feelings of frustration, and their *Wille zur Macht* are not necessarily those aspects of literature that flourish in the Upper Realm. However, in the Lower Realm these are symptoms of the chronic illness that impedes so embarrassingly the growth of the science-fiction genre. Thus the only way to better the prevailing situation is to make an outspoken diagnosis. We could support this

conclusion with hundreds of examples. In an article by a contemporary science-fiction critic, the names of authors, including Farmer, Joyce, Sturgeon, and Kafka, are listed indiscriminately. But mainstream critics never reciprocate this striving for equal status. In today's science-fiction anthologies we find, apart from science-fiction authors, such writers as Grass, Calvino, Ionesco, and Michaux, but the Upper Realm does not offer any just return. The inhabitants of the Upper Realm are invited to the Lower; they accept these invitations, but there is no return service. The inhabitants of the Upper Realm treat those of the Lower Realm properly, just as the gentry treat the rabble properly. A lady may enter a honky-tonk, but the "ladies" who reside there permanently are not allowed into a respectable house.

5

We shall now show how the work of a gifted science-fiction writer grows in the science-fiction environment and how it is accepted there. (The fate of the untalented does not concern us—but we will report on it, too, if only marginally, as it turns out in quite a characteristic way in the Lower Realm.)

The substance that fills the entire milieu of science fiction, and upon which the work of its authors feeds, is kitsch. It is the last, degenerate form of myths. From them it inherited a rigid structure. In myth the story of Ulysses is the prestabilized structure of fate: in kitsch it becomes a cliché. Superman is a spoiled Hercules, the robot a golem, even as kitsch itself is the simplified, threadbare,

prostituted, but original constellation of values central to a given culture. In our culture, kitsch is what was once holy and/or coveted, awe-inspiring, or horrible, but now prepared for instant use. Kitsch is the former temple that has been so thoroughly defiled by infidels for so long that even the memory of its ancient untouchability has been lost. When hitherto untouchable idols get the status of mass products, through mechanical reproduction, and become obtainable as everybody's objects of enjoyment, we observe how the originally sublime is degradingly transubstantiated into kitsch. The venerable paradigm is reworked in order to make it easily consumed and as simple as possible. And—quite important—kitsch does not present itself as such to its consumers; it believes in its own perfection and wants to be taken seriously. Even the psychic process that originally kept the mass of the uninitiated at a distance from the object of worship, because it was an obstacle that had to be overcome, comes wrapped up with the goods as an appetizer. Kitsch, free from all difficulties of consumption, is a product that has been prechewed for the consumer. In literature, kitsch results when all the complexity, multi-sidedness, and ambiguity of the authentic product is eliminated from the final product.

However, the people concerned (both authors and customers) have a splendid feeling of well-being if this final product retains the air of being an *objet d'art*, in full bloom, without restrictions. Kitsch is composed exclusively of ersatz products: of heroism, of need, misfortune, love, etc. In science fiction, kitsch is made from ersatz science and literature. From reading "inner cir-

cle" critiques and considering what science-fiction prospectuses have to offer, you would hardly believe that the authors who are reviewed display an abundant ignorance of the grammar, syntax, and style of their mother tongue; it is as if one suddenly hears that a team of athletes preparing for the Olympic Games cannot yet get up and stand.

In a stabilized culture, the sphere that kitsch might inhabit is quite small. In mass culture, it tends to overflow into neighboring genres; it has an aggressive and explosive pressure; it is a tumor that grows exuberantly, devouring that part of the body which is still intact. It is quite hard to justify morally a defense against its attacks, because the dilemma always arises as to which is the lesser evil: the trashy deformation of an art object, or its total absence from the circuit of a mass culture that cannot assimilate the real thing. Science fiction is a clinical case of a region occupied exclusively by trash, because in kitsch, the culturally and historically highest, most difficult, and most important objects are produced on the assembly line, in the most primitive forms, to be sold to the public at bargain prices.

Knowing no discretion and no reverence for things inconceivable by the human mind, piling universes upon universes without batting an eyelash, mixing up physics, metaphysics, and trite trash from misinterpreted philosophical systems without end, science fiction is the true embodiment of kitsch, because of the cheekiness of its total ignorance, which even denies the existence of a higher knowledge, toward which it finds no path, and denies it triumphantly and obstinately.

Even if there are subjects about which philosophers dare not even think, topics about which world-famous scholars can say scarcely anything at all, they can be bought for 75¢ to \$1.25 at every newsstand for immediate inspection. Science fiction provides a pleasant substitute for the study of the handbooks of the greatest thinkers, cosmologists, astrophysicists, and philosophers who have ever lived—yes, it can even report on what scientists born a thousand years from now will know. I am not ridiculing this maximum offer; I can only repeat what you read in the science-fiction advertisements. If somebody ridicules somebody else, you could not tell from the earnestness of these statements; it is just another case when you can't take a single word seriously, for this is advertising, which is used to talk only about the best possible and previously nonexistent products. If all this is not meant to be taken seriously, then what is the real content of all their cipher language?

One of the most incredible secrets of science fiction (although one not too closely guarded) is the fact that ninety-nine percent of its authors do not know even the titles and authors of today's learned works, but still they want to top these scholars with their knowledge of the year 6000. If an author understands schoolteacher's physics, he is praised by Knight, quite in earnest, and presented as a model to authors who seem to have been forced to drop out of school after three years because of general mental weakness. The public does not seem to wait to find out about these interesting facts, probably because such news would annoy them. It is quite embarrassing to find out that for the least amount of money

and mental effort, one has been convinced that one was initiated into the vastest secrets of the universe and existence.

6

The exception mentioned in the title of this essay is the work of Philip K. Dick. Because of the lack of a selection process to struggle against trash and promote real value, the works of Dick are sometimes compared with those of A. E. van Vogt.

The novels of both authors share the common characteristics that (1) they are composed of trashy parts and (2) they are full of contradictory elements. The contradictions include those of an external nature (as when the world depicted in a book runs counter to empirical scientific knowledge) and of an internal nature (as when during the course of a novel the action becomes self-denying—i.e., contradicts itself).

Such a diagnosis does not automatically invoke a subsequent condemnation. It is true that literary judgment is undemocratic, but nevertheless in the course of each critical trial it is also just. Yet it must be ascertained why the case under scrutiny allows a sacrifice of values. These works contain local nonsense and a local destruction of values (sense is always to be preferred to nonsense), but this local inroad might aid the construction of a higher sense of the totality. This point is connected with the general relativity of all values: even a murder may be justified in a civilization where it is considered a link in a chain of connections in which, according to prevailing