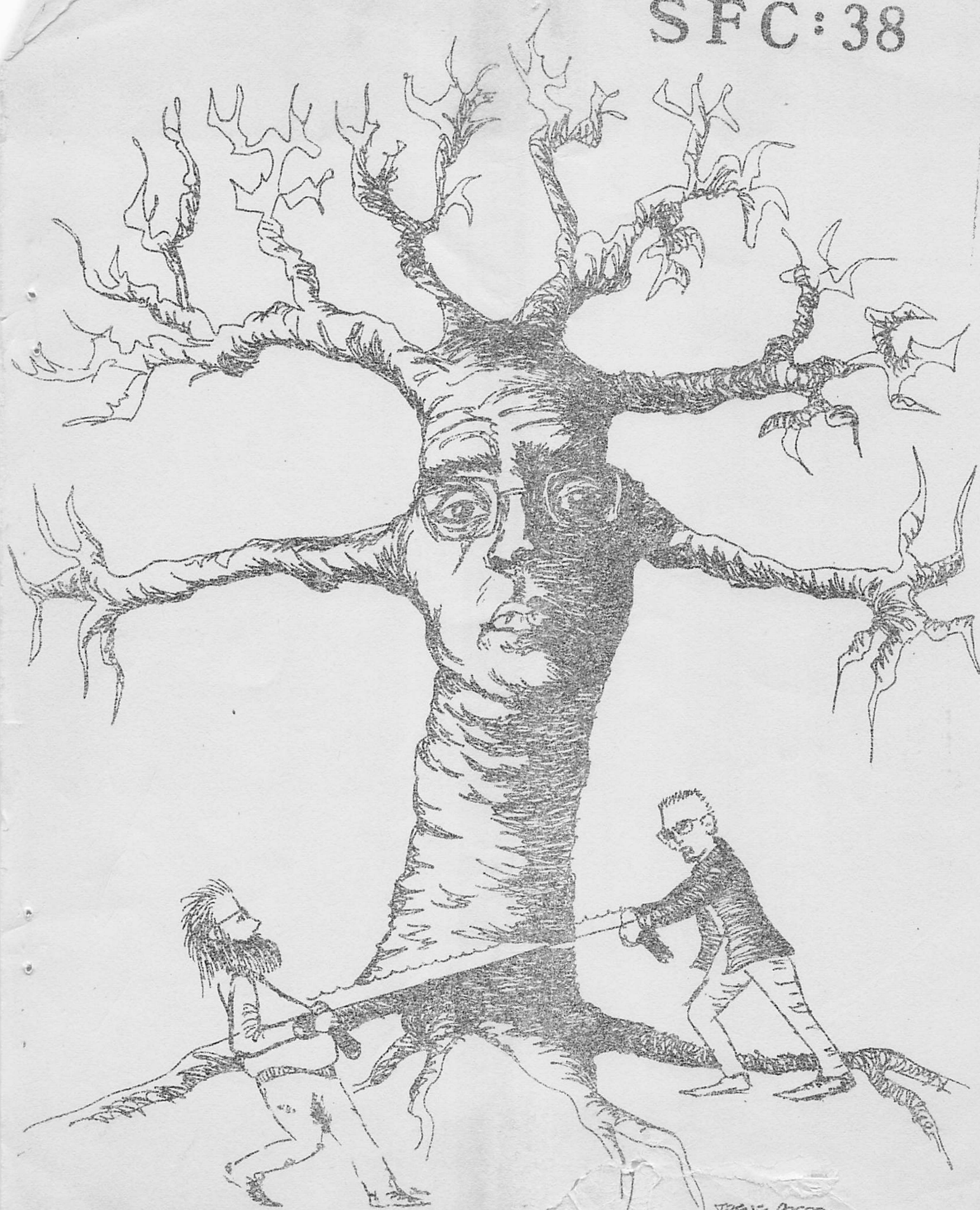


SFC:38



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SF COMMENTARY is edited and published by Bruce R. Gillespie, GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia.

Mostly, that is: This time, however,

SFCOMMENTARY is edited by John Foyster, 6 Clowes Street South Yarra, Victoria 3141, Australia, and all responsibility for material in this issue is accepted by him.

EDITORIAL; Well, I edited SFC 34, so I suppose it is only fair that I get in the chair for 38, even though it is a little late. I should apologise to my loyal contributors, both of whom had their stuff with me by the end of 1973, but I'm not going to. After all, if Bruce Gillespie had badgered me more harshly, SFC 38 would have been published long ago: take it out on him, Lee and George.*

The word which appears in here as 'pretention' was 'pretension' in George's manuscript. However, John Bangsund was unable to come up with any good reason for preferring the latter, and I (and Edmund Wilson) prefer the former.

For the most part, the contents of this issue of SFC go about the way I would like to see issues of SFC go - long and short contributions, comparisons, reviews, general articles. The part I don't like so well is that part in which it turns out that to beat a postal rise and a shortage of the appropriate paper my own glorious contribution is cut off just as it is warming up: however, this unfortunate truncation will at least ensure that the rest is not written on-stencil.

Good old Noel Kerr cut the stencil for the cover.

*I don't apologise to Irene, because if I did that she might come to expect better treatment - these things should be nipped in the bud.... John Foyster 22/9

ONE NOVEL - TWO REVIEWS

CRASH

J. G. Ballard

Jonathan Cape, A\$5.75

(review by Lee Harding)

'It's a strange notion to consider, but it seems increasingly likely that the whole Gernsbackian-magazine era of science fiction was a passing aberration from which we are now recovering.'

Richard Lupoff: Alqol 20

The early novels and short stories of J. G. Ballard represent a peak period in the history of SF. They were important in several ways: they were personal to a degree seldom found in commercial fiction, they were considerably better written than most magazine SF, and they were strikingly original. Alone among his contemporaries, Ballard's preoccupation with mythopoetic technology made him seem to be the only writer working close to the SF ideal, a direct descendant of A. E. van Vogt, Henry Kuttner, Alfred Bester and other giants of the past.

It was unfortunate for his many fans - but perhaps necessary for Ballard the writer - that his preoccupations encouraged him to stray into an obsession with form. Many readers found his later works obscure, over-written and indulgent to a degree common to young writers who have achieved notoriety, as opposed to widespread fame, and have begun to respect the inflated opinions of their idolators.

But CRASH is a remarkable return to form, an apocalyptic linear novel with a beginning, middle and end, told in clear, concise prose, and a style haunted by the elusive shade of Genet. Ballard has surfaced from his previous stylistic excesses and the result is a considerable literary achievement and a book of extraordinary impact.

But a word of warning. CRASH is not for the squeamish; it has the potential to shock and enrage some readers and I would advise you to proceed with caution. Those of you who consider content the prime ingredient of your entertainment will find much to object to in CRASH. But those who can commit themselves beyond a superficial interest in narrative will find much to command their attention.

In this novel Ballard explores the iconography of the automobile in a bizarre and original manner. His characters, trapped within the nexus of their interpersonal relationships, and bound together by the grim obsession that is the book's theme, perform ritualistic sexual acts in conjunction with a series of road accidents. The pages are stained with semen and unforgettable images of passionless sex. Ballard explores the nightmarish landscape of the freeway and the social climate of our wheeled existence, and anyone who feels - as I do - intimidated and at times terrorised by traffic will respond to Ballard's vision. There are moments of almost supernatural horror: a long scene where a simulated crash between a family-filled saloon and a motorbike is replayed over closed-circuit television in slow-motion; a multiple freeway collision where 'a considerable number of children were present, many lifted on their parents' shoulders to give them a better view'; and a grotesque sexual encounter that takes place inside a car performing a cyclic routine through an auto-wash (Ballard makes this momentarily terrifying and not at all amusing). These moments transcend the many pages filled with detailed sexual activity. Ballard has found a terrible poetry in his lovingly-depicted accidents and it requires a courageous effort from the reader to follow him through this labyrinth. And if you think his premise is fanciful, consider for a moment the repressed male who flashes his beautiful red penis/Charger at the intersection of Collins and Swanston Streets at 45 mph: will a policeman someday arrest him - not for speeding - for indecent exposure?

Ballard knows this world intimately, a fact brought home by the jacket blurb. He was himself injured in an automobile accident and was driven to stage an "art exhibition" of damaged cars; and this novel is the fruit of those experiences. The mysterious Vaughan who dominates the book with his sexual obsessions and, in the final chapters, drives the freeway unceasingly, like some latter-day angel of doom, haunts the pages in grand style, having much in common with the archetypal characters of Ballard's early novels. The book moves forward inexorably towards an acid-filled climax, where the narrator performs a culminating act of lust by sodomising the pathetic Vaughan against a mystic background of an automobile graveyard. Surprisingly this section is one of the most evocative and most restrained pieces of writing Ballard has ever produced. Wherever he has been these past few years, he has learned some important lessons. He impresses one again and again with the accuracy of his vision.

But is it SF? Ballard has made the label redundant. More importantly, he has indicated an important direction in which the genre can move, if it is to remain relevant. The majority of SF writers - oldtimers who seem content to grind out weary formula stuff and squeeze it into bland new jars - will not heed him; the years have passed them by. Farewell Poul Anderson and Isaac Asimov! The New Wavers are far too busy refurbishing old ideas to see the vision he has opened up, but perhaps some of them will see, and understand.

One day the magazines will all be dead and SF will be free to evolve again. And Ballard will be there still, light-years ahead of his peers, his vision as true and as strong as it ever was and, one hopes, no longer sullied by literary indulgence. He is the truest SF writer of his time. If you read CRASH you might agree with me, but only if you are willing to forget your prejudices.

CRASH is arguably Ballard's best book. Critics will debate its merits as a novel, but the adventurous reader will discover that, in whichever way he examines this cautionary nightmare, it will reveal itself, in every respect, as a fully-fashioned, minor work of art. You will find much here that will enrage and disgust you, but I urge you to read it.

For the truth is sometimes ugly.

CRASH

J. G. Ballard

Jonathan Cape, A\$5.75

(review by George Turner)

I may be premature, but I think J. G. Ballard has uncovered a fresh literary theme: the identification of modern man with his technology. In this curious novel man strives to achieve a merging of his deepest instincts with his most characteristic artefact - he tries to merge in one cataclysmic 'experience', sex and the automobile. That the attempt can only be by way of collision course must be obvious.

Though the theme has a certain intellectual attractiveness - as a springboard for argument, perhaps - Ballard's handling swiftly turns it into the supreme novel of the death wish triumphant.

Since he gives the plot away in the first few paragraphs (the emphasis is on theme, not on plot) a summary will do no damage.

A man named James Ballard (make no mistake about it) is injured in a car crash, killing the other driver. During convalescence he is followed and observed by Vaughan, a 'hoodlum scientist' (sic), and eventually becomes friendly with him. (This is about tantamount to befriending a falling axe.)

Vaughan is obsessed with the idea of sex and death in the form of orgasm during a car crash. He equates specific injuries with specific items of the car's structure (every injury, however small, having a sexual connotation) and orchestrates positions and degrees of sexual involvement with speed, driving techniques, make and colour of car and so on. He forgets nothing. His obsession is total, and no form of sex - normal,

inverse, or perverse - is omitted from his dedication. He is, in fact, certifiably mad. He reaches a point of deterioration wherein he is at first imagining, then actively rehearsing the deaths of others, fashioning them in his mind as works of art with hideously mutilated extinction as the final stroke. His planning is centered on the death of actress Elizabeth Taylor, designed to be forced off a flyover to plunge into the traffic on the lower levels while he ejaculates in spiritual union with raucous death.

He fails, and it is his own car that goes off the flyover and crashes through the top of a bus below.

Meanwhile his friend Ballard has come more and more under the spell of Vaughan's obsession and allows himself to be used as driver and sometimes as sex object in the savage 'rehearsals'. He becomes involved to the point where he sodomises Vaughan in the car at the climax of a hair-raising drive with both of them under the influence of LSD. (Some remarkable writing here.)

After Vaughan's death Ballard drives home with the realisation that he is already planning the orchestration of his own crash-death.

This may well be the strangest product of the new freedom of expression, and it is narrated in an endless catalogue of orgasm and ruin. The two images dominating the book are automobile wreckage and semen glistening on metal and upholstery.

Ballard's language throughout is unexceptionable to the edge of pedantry. For him the four-letter genre is out, replaced by a curious coolness of 'vulva', 'vagina', 'semen', 'faecal matter', etc. Only once does he use the common synonym for intercourse, and then he places it in the mouth of his wife (in the novel) Catharina, as a symbol of the coarseness of soul which does not observe the artistry of the pursuit of ecstatic death.

The result of this patrician use of language is to throw a clinical aura over the proceedings; one views the mystery but remains outside it. Only those with gut-understanding will join the vision. And God help them because no one else can.

The idea that finally squeezes out of the heaped-up, rammed-home, cornucopial avalanche of eroticism-fathered-on-machinery is a bemused wonderment: why did this extraordinary, original, incandescently-written novel bore me to tears? I had to take five bites to get through a mere 65 000 words and persevere only because I had promised this damned article.

Does that mean that I think it something less than an effective work of art?

Certainly not, because it is plainly a very successful (within its given parameters) work indeed. It means that I find it a thoroughly successful essay in the presentation of a theme which interests me not at all.

The theme has been stated: that man is neither the servant nor the master of his technology but its equal, its helpmeet, its symbiote. The idea, that the driver is the sexual partner of his/her car and that death in a crash is the nuptial celebration, is given explicitly at least four times in the text.

If you can identify with this idea, which means identifying approvingly with the driver who deliberately seeks death and mutilation while reaching orgasm at the moment of impact, then this novel will probably seem to you one of the major literary works of the period. I find it thoroughly repellent and a negation of all I believe in as regards mankind.

And what do I believe?

Relevant to this conception:

That mankind is young, at the beginning of evolution, not the end or even the middle; the best is yet to come.

That the road toll, the misuse of atomic fire, violence in the streets and the incessant call to war are not the flowering of any Freudian death wish but the simple fumbblings of a race whose IQs span too great a spectrum for easy tolerance of man by man, whose racial need to fight for existence has not yet been bred out and whose philosophy has not kept pace with his fiddling technical fingers.

That people who mutilate and murder themselves - and particularly those who do it without regard for the incidental damage done to others - are not necessarily pathetic dropouts from the struggle; they may well be necessary dropouts as the race strives to turn new racial weapons against that fundamental challenge and biological terror, the survival of the fittest.

Believing so, I must believe that Ballard celebrates the unfit. I have neither sympathy nor shred of fellow-feeling for the characters of CRASH. And, since the climax is revealed on the first page, there was not even the interest of following the plot to its conclusion.

There is another kind of interest, non-literary, to be taken in this work.

It may be argued against what I have written above that I have treated the theme as being an expression of Ballard's true mind, whereas it may be no more than a piece of inspired fantasising.

It is just possible that this is true, in which case the whole thing can be written off as the most explicit exercise in pornography since the PSYCHOPATHIA SEXUALIS. But the odds against mere fantasy are very high. Consider these matters:

1. About six years ago J. G. Ballard was injured in a bad car crash.
2. A couple of years later he organised a 'conceptual art' exhibition of crashed cars.
3. He later appeared in a BBC telefilm on the same subject.
4. He claimed to be deeply affected by public reaction to the wrecks, which in some cases showed itself in attempts to cause further damage to the vehicles. (This could be whence the idea of identification-marriage arose.)
5. The hero of the novel is the narrator, James Ballard.
6. He lives in Shepperton, as does the real Ballard.
7. I do not know the name of J. G. Ballard's wife, but if it is Catharine as in the novel (she is the coarse-grained one who alone says, 'fuck') then the nature of his involvement with what he has written is deeper than mere empathy can follow.

Considering these things, it is reasonable to conclude that Ballard has been regurgitating highly personal and revoltingly dangerous ideas from his psychic system. One can only hope that the catharsis has been successful. If not, we may await with morbid curiosity the news of the manner of his death.

CRASH is, in literary terms, a powerful and horrifying novel. For me, whose world is not viewable through Ballard's lenses, it is technically of great interest but as entertainment a bore.

Finally an observation which may serve to sum up the sterility of the conception and its execution: nowhere in the book is sex equated with love. I cannot recall that the word is mentioned anywhere in the novel.

S.L. : A HOPELESS CASE - WITH NO EXCEPTIONS

Stanislaw Lem and the Lower Criticism.

(by George Turner)

I A CASE FOR REBUTTAL

Even without SF COMMENTARY 35.36.37 we know what Stanislaw Lem thinks of science fiction in the Western world and of its readers. I quote, not for the first time, from SF COMMENTARY 23, the closing line of his review of a Japanese anthology: '...if we may judge from just this one example, its (that is, Japanese) sf is even more of an institution for retarded people than Western sf.'

And that puts us all in our huddling place - a refuge for the subnormal.

In 'SF: A Hopeless Case - With Exceptions' (SF COMMENTARY 35.36.37, pp 7-36) he is never quite so insultingly vitriolic as in the remark above, but he does set out to explain his reasons for such contempt - and very good reasons they would be if they were not based on a structure of misinformation, literary misconception and omission of relevant data.

His case would appear to be this:

1. Western sf is trash.
2. It is pretentious trash.
3. It will never be anything else because
 - (a) it has no useful critical apparatus to guide its development,
 - (b) it is dominated by the demands of the market,
 - (c) because of (b) the writers are dependent on the repetitive presentation of 'kitsch',
 - (d) the 'establishment' keeps sf in the ghetto by ignoring it, and,
 - (e) if a worthwhile work emerges from the sf ghetto it is no longer sf.

If all these conclusions sound familiar as of 1935 or thereabouts, be not dismayed; there is some sort of case for them, if for you the year is still 1935. And if you think that Lem is in fact considering all sf, as the title of the essay indicates, be undeceived at once. He is writing only of Western sf, and the implication of the superiority of European sf in general remains unspoken. Which, in view of such works as have come our way, is just as well.

If this were all, the matter could be dismissed as the unimportant personal opinions of a man less well-informed than as a practitioner and critic of sf he should be.

But it is not all. The essay is a revised version of a chapter in his huge critique of sf, FANTASY AND FUTUROLOGY. This work is not yet available in the English-speaking world, but we must assume that the statements and conclusions contained in it will have some influence in Europe among readers to whom the

bulk of Western sf is not available. And, since Lem is being publicised as a 'big name' in sf, its influence may eventually extend to the West. Therefore a viewpoint based on idiosyncratic conceptions and errors of fact should be combatted. And since many of these conceptions and misconceptions are literary and critical, and not confined to the field of sf alone, a more serious view must be taken than if they applied only to unimportant productions in a minor genre.

I propose, then, to show that:

- (a) Lem's factual data are inadequate and often incorrect,
- (b) his critical assumptions are in many cases untenable,
- (c) his presentation of the present condition of Western sf is unduly harsh, omitting much material which contradicts his thesis,
- (d) the values and conditions of modern sf are vastly different from those he proposes and
- (e) his critical equipment and expertise are inadequate for the study of sf in depth.

II THE FIRST QUESTION

Lem's article opens with a group of questions to which he proposes to find answers in the body of the discussion. In fact, the article is a work of demolition in which the answers are assumed and the Aunt Sally questions knocked down at leisure. The phrasing of the questions themselves is calculatedly destructive, and since the apparent answers to these questions form the basis of his attack on the genre, it will be as well to examine them before developing a further thesis. In this way it will be plain wherein my thinking differs from Lem's and the reader will be in a position to make point by point comparisons.

And so to Question 1, (p. 8, para. 2):

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

Note that there is no question whether or not it is in fact 'so bad', merely an assumption you are required to make.

Lem's 'answer' to this is that production is governed by market considerations, by publishers with an eye on the till and writers with both eyes on what will sell (despite the aesthetic pretensions some make in the fanzines). There is a partial truth here, if one is considering only fiction geared to the lowest level of appreciation. But considerable reservations are necessary and one must look closely at the question to decide how far one can agree. What one agrees with concerns 'the average production, the lion's share of new productions.'

Let's be generous and say that this means 90% of all the new sf presented in a year. That is too high a figure, but for the moment I seek only a common base for argument.

Now Lem, whose business is not merely sf but literature in its wider sense, knows, or as a critic should know, certain things:

- (a) You do not make decisions about a genre, or indeed about anything, on the evidence of the worst available. (The worst available may well be the German-born 'Perry Rhodan' series, but only Western sf is under Lem's fire.)
- (b) No genre ever produces work of the supreme class. The fact that it is a genre imposes upon it certain limitations of method and approach which effectively bar it from the highest artistic levels - save perhaps in the hands of a genius. (No, Virginia, sf has not yet produced a genius, not even Edgar Rice Burroughs.)

But what is genre sf? Lem offers no definition. One can never be sure just where the cut-off point lies in his summation, and this must allow him to disregard a deal of objection by saying, 'But we are talking about different things', without ever saying what things. One can only assume, from the references in the body of the essay, that he refers specifically to magazine sf and the productions of Ace Books and similar mass-circulation publishers. All other sf he ignores save for passing references, often of doubtful accuracy.

So I suggest at once that there is a significant body of sf which surpasses and transcends genre limitations and yet remains basically sf, and that this is the definitive body of sf upon which literary judgements must finally be based.

These matters aside, there is a logical trap in his question, and it is one with which we will become increasingly familiar as the investigation proceeds. The trap couples two matters of different reference - and this is an unexpected finding in a man who reputedly publishes studies in philosophic journals, for one of the requirements of philosophy is a thorough grounding in logic - and this coupling is a logical anomaly.

Here are the matters: (a) '... rumour has it that sf is improving every year'. Lem effectively turns this into a question by casting doubt upon it with the following 'if so'. Note that this purports to refer to all sf; indeed the title of the article entitles a belief that all sf is a continuing reference. But it is not, because the following question limits the field of discussion by introducing a second matter, (b) 'the lion's share of production'.

So the whole compresses to 'If all sf is improving, why does the worst remain bad?'

The answer, obviously, is that the lower levels of any literature will always be 'bad' (not a proper critical term but sometimes admissible to save wordiness) by comparison with the higher. The question is valueless because it simply states an unchanging relationship. As well ask, 'Why isn't a short man as tall as a tall one?'

Also, 'improving every year' is a meaningless restriction; literary improvement does not come in annual jumps but in continual shiftings, strainings and upheavals. That these have occurred and benefitted sf is too well documented to need labouring here.

So it seems that his first 'question' resolves itself finally into a statement that 'bad' sf exists in major quantity; later this couples with a further statement that this is the fault of publishers and mass-circulation writers.

It is almost a truism. It is also true of every other branch of writing, including philosophy, poetry, drama, pornography and biblical commentary. As an inference of the stature and status of sf - or of any other literary genre - it is meaningless.

But the inference, made by omission of reference to any possible value in the genre, that sf is by and large a shoddy product is grossly unjust and will be shown to be so.

My intention in treating this section in such detail has been to point out the nature of Lem's critical method, which poses argument (seeking some sort of assertiveness) instead of dialectic (which seeks truth). The difference is vital.

III THE SECOND QUESTION

This is not posed as a question but as a series of assertions begging a question. Here it is:

'We do not lack definitions of this genre. However we would look in vain for an explanation for the absence of a theoretical, generalising 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.'

The technique of Question 1 reappears; we have here five separate statements masquerading as a single problem.

Statement 1: 'No lack of definitions'. Indeed, we have far too many, but the relevance of the statement to what follows is not easily seen; I haven't seen it yet.

Statement 2 says that no explanation is available for Statements 3 and 4, thus telling us that Statements 3 and 4 are true. But are they?

Statement 3: '... the absence of a theoretical, generalising critique of the genre...' This can be contradicted outright. Amis's NEW MAPS OF HELL, however faulty or at least arguable, was precisely a theoretical, generalising critique. It was published in 1961, reprinted several times and republished in pb by Faber and Faber this year (1973). There is also UTOPIAN FANTASY, which is a little more specialised but still theoretical and generalising, by Richard Gerber, published in 1955 and republished by McGraw-Hill in 1973. There are others, less well-known. Statement 3, being incorrect, can be disregarded.

Statement 4: '... the weak beginnings of such criticism can be found only in 'fanzines'...' Lem may be on safer ground here, but an incautious step may find him wallowing. Australian 'highbrow' magazines MEANJIN, OVERLAND and AUSTRALIAN WRITER have all published critical articles on sf over the past twenty years - not many, admittedly, but a few. The magazines are fully professional and the articles satisfy Lem's demand as theoretical and generalising. If a country with about two-fifths of the population of Poland can refute Lem's statement, one wonders how much more in the world he is unaware of. Statement 4 is utterly doubtful and must be disregarded.

Statement 5 deals with 'amateur magazines of very low circulation and small

influence'. True, I suppose. So what? The matter of influence is unimportant to the status of sf. Other genres don't have even fanzines.

All these statements would have been near enough to true in the early fifties because at that time sf, as a genre, had produced little to engage critical attention. Most of the best sf novels were 'sports', written by mainstream novelists and considered critically in relation to their other production rather than in relation to sf, which at that time was still struggling to escape from the literary bargain basement.

That situation is dead. Sf of literary merit is regularly reviewed throughout the English-speaking world and even science fiction - as distinct from fantasy and space opera - is noticed and reviewed by as reputable a publication as NEW SCIENTIST. The situation is not even better because sf has not yet produced a body of work sufficiently major to attract consistent critical notice in its own right. I write now of higher criticism. But neither has any other genre with the single exception of the historical novel, which is a very special case.

This does not mean that sf has produced only a great load of trash. I won't pretend there is much yet of permanent value in the canon (though Wells' sf is still reprinted inexhaustibly after 70-odd years and Verne is having an inexplicable revival) but I feel that there has been a great deal of immediate value. More of this later, when I present my final statement in opposition.

Having tossed out statements 2,3,4, and 5, we are left with Statement 1, that we 'do not lack definitions'.

This is true: from Damon Knight's idiotic 'what I'm pointing at when I say it' (or words to that effect) to Asimov's more useful but too narrow 'fiction about the future of science and scientists' we have been deluged with them.

In fact we have no useful definition, but each reader makes his own, and the results are kaleidoscopic but critically useless. I shall therefore propose my own, not with any intention of being definitive, but in order to make plain what I mean when I write the symbols 'sf'. We are not given a definition by Lem, so it will be as well if we know at least what one of us is talking about.

'Sf is a generic term covering fiction which is concerned with today as well as tomorrow, with where we are and what we have as well as where we are going and what we will find when we get there and ultimately with personal and general visions of mankind, of intelligence, of philosophical directions and psychological fumbings and even of God. It is in fact concerned with the common preoccupations of literature, but where fiction has in the past probed, described and discussed, sf attempts to extrapolate the results of human behaviour. The literary basis remains unchanged but the approach is different.'

(The extract is from my article, 'SF: Death And Transfiguration Of A Genre', in MEANJIN QUARTERLY for September 1973, one of those highbrow journals which does not notice sf.)

IV THE THIRD QUESTION

This one begins with a statement: 'Blish and Knight agree that the sf readers cannot distinguish between a high quality novel and a mediocre one.' Since Lem's familiarity with the critical work of Blish and Knight would seem to stem from the collections of reviews published many years ago, it is open to doubt that either writer would now agree on the statement.

Both sf and readership have moved on since those books were written, critical work has moved upward in the fanzines and one supposes Blish and Knight have also moved from the positions they took in those dreary days. So Lem's opening statement may be true still or may not, and if true remains the opinions of two men, not proven fact. Let us disregard it.

A question follows: '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?'

A partial answer to this is available.

Surveys conducted by ANALOG and other magazines have indicated that, in America at least, there is a large reader-bloc of technicians and scientists. (Fans who dabble in sf 'history' can probably dig out relevant files of statistics and findings.) These may well be people more interested in theme and extrapolation than in literary values, and would account for much of the popularity of the ANALOG-type story.

My own observation of the types who write to me as a reviewer (quite a few do) and who seek me out for the occasional speaking date indicates that, in Australia at any rate, the universities are fairly solid strongholds of sf readers. Nearly every Australian university has an sf club and such membership just might, I think, know the difference between a high quality novel and a mediocre one. On a quick check I can name more than a dozen poets, painters, musicians, politicians, doctors and other professional men who are personally known to me as readers of sf - and my professional acquaintance is not very extensive. The cerebral quality is not low.

The members of local fan clubs seem to be a fair cross-section of the more sedentary occupations and to represent a wide band of the IQ spectrum; they are not easy to group for any characteristic but a common interest. The quality of contributions to the various fanzines is probably as good an indication as any - from excellent to dreadful.

Then there is the great group of the unintellectual who will read a comic, a Smith space opera or a volume of hardcore porn with equal interest, or disinterest when they happen to be doing nothing else. It is for these that the great bulk of tenth-rate sf, love stories, blood-and-guts thrillers, westerns, pornography and comics are produced. Since such work has no literary pretention of any kind (pretention begins in the middle ground, between the best and the worst) let us ignore them and concentrate upon what seems to us significant.

So it seems that the question is answerable, though Lem has made no attempt at it. Unless we hark back to that 'institution for retarded people' . . .

He seems to have raised an issue and dropped it. Having at least looked at the issue, let me also drop it, and with it the question which is of no importance to his or my argument.

There remains a statement embedded in his question which is worth a glance before passing on: '... this literary genre, which intends to portray the (fantastically magnified) outstanding achievements of mankind. ...'

This is all Lem offers us in the way of a definition of sf. In my experience (forty-six years of reading sf) this has never been the intention of more than a small body of the genre, and that mostly in the ANALOG past.

It is difficult to take him seriously here. For what I feel sf does seek to portray, please refer to my earlier provisional definition.

V THE FOURTH QUESTION

Here it is - the snapper: 'The important question is: even if sf were born in the gutter, living on trash for years on end, why can't it get rid of the trash for good?'

First, was sf born in the gutter?

The origins of the genre have always been much in dispute. Lucian's 'True History' has been cited as a forebear and even 'The Odyssey' (God help us) has been dragged into the argument. There is little point in accepting these as origins, for they lead us only back to myth and the origins of all fiction. What we need is a point where it can be seen that the sf mode broke away from the mainstream.

Now, it seems to me that sf is concerned with the exploration of possibilities rather than with that minute examination of the known which is the preoccupation of other fiction and drama. Further, it seems to me that the first person to realise the usefulness of fiction as an extrapolative vehicle (aside from fantasy and satire, which are separate genres) as a means of propagating the dream of change, was Thomas More in his UTOPIA. Published in 1516, UTOPIA was written in the scholar's language of the day, Latin. Thus it was circulated in quantity throughout Europe and quite possibly became the basic sf text for all countries.

Sf was not born in the gutter. Who will call the roll? More, Kepler, Poe, Verne, Wells, Bellamy, Kipling, Bulwer. . . If of these only More can be safely judged immortal (a rare species, immortals) neither did any roll in the literary gutter.

Sf has an honourable ancestry and a long one. If it has been often debased, so has every idea that a mean and narrow humanity can exploit for wealth or death. Once again, our business is with the best, not the worst.

But - '... why can't it get rid of the trash for good?'

Lem knows the answer as well as you and I do. While there is a market for rubbish - and there always will be - rubbish will be manufactured in quantity. As a product improves at the highest level, so what we considered second-rate yesterday becomes painfully fourth-rate today. And if Lem thinks that the worst of sf has not improved it would give him a shock to the sensibilities to see a few copies of AMAZING or WONDER STORIES of the early thirties.

That rubbish exists need have no effect on our appreciation of the worthwhile, apart from the time wasted in separating the fine metal from the dross. His final question is as critically useless as all the rest.

VI HOW TO GET RID OF A PROBLEM

Since Lem's opening question-statements leave no doubt that Western sf is to be demolished utterly, how is he going to account for the existence of LAST AND FIRST MEN, BRAVE NEW WORLD, EARTH ABIDES, ONE, 1984, and dozens more?

He accounts for them by blatantly pushing them and all 'quality' work right outside the ambience of the argument.

Here is how it is done, step by step.

It is necessary to quote the whole paragraph:

'Science fiction is a 'very special case' because it belongs to two distinct spheres of culture that overlap nowhere. We will call these spheres 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, etc.'

Note especially the first sentence. SF belongs to both realms. Agreed. But so does all fiction. Crime, love, SF and all the rest are and always have been represented in the highest and the lowest, as have poetry, drama and all other forms and themes. Why, then, is SF a very special case? And if SF belongs to both realms how can it be a hopeless case, as proposed by the essay's title?

Well, you see, if it's good then it isn't SF.

Lem doesn't make this monstrous about-face right away. He creeps up on it later in a magnificently confused paragraph about Dostoyevsky and other matters. For the moment please keep the question in mind - why is SF a 'very special case'?

The rest of the paragraph quoted is a marvellous example of a literary mode which bedevilled the English-speaking writers in the last century and has not yet been shaken off by many European literatures - the extended metaphor.

Not only is an extended metaphor clumsy but, like a synonym or an analogy, it can never be accurate. The purpose of Lem's metaphor is to prepare the ground for (a) the rejection of SF from the Upper Realm by calling it something else when it qualifies for promotion and (b) the firm placement of SF solely in the Lower Realm by proclaiming (three paragraphs further on)

that the two realms are completely sealed off from each other.

And its inaccuracies are plain. Is it really necessary to point out that the two realms do not exist, that there is in fact a steady progression of competence, artistry and ultimate value from the lowest to the highest? Or that the enormous middle ground is where the bulk of informed reading and writing takes place, simply because Olympus is for the very few and its works do not take in all that is necessary for man's intellectual existence?

That the lowest class of fiction writer lives on scraps from the tables of talent is undeniable, but real talent shows itself at a much lower plane than that of Lem's galaxy of names. Where, I wonder, would he rank Le Carre, Maugham, Cary, Bates, Powys? None of them are supreme artists but neither do they belong to any hypothetical Lower Realm. They are some of the craftsmen who keep literature alive and forceful and popular while we wait on the occasional first-rater to move into prominence.

After the metaphor comes a paragraph of justification of people like Orwell and Moravia for their fantasies (1984 is not SF?) or Greene for his 'entertainments'. What it seems to mean is that an Upper Realm master can write a bit of nonsense if he likes, representing a sort of highbrow relaxation, a sop to the plebs. In fact this is just further preparation for eliminating 'good' SF from the discussion.

There follows a fabulous instruction on how to tell an Upper Realm master from a Lower Realm varlet. It is beyond rational criticism; one can only disbelieve one's eyes and pass on. Examine it for yourself, and wonder!

Then comes the clincher. When H. G. Wells was writing, it seems, there was 'no such clearcut border between these two 'Realms' ... Only much later did an Iron Curtain (a subtle jest, this? - GT) descend ... this concrete ceiling (to maintain the image of a two-storey building) ... became an impenetrable barrier only during the twenties.'

Perhaps this happened in continental Europe; I wouldn't know. It certainly did not happen in English-speaking countries; the imperceptible graduation from trivial to masterly obtained in the twenties and still does. It always did. Proof is not required. Simply scan the booklists of any period of publishing and see it set out plainly. And if Lem feels that the twenties represent the peak of trash-production and so provide some sort of cutting-off point, he should shift his sights back to 1880-1900 to discover just how high rubbish can smell.

However, he offers a justification for his statement: 'We can recognise 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.' If this means anything at all, it must mean that Stapledon was a writer of trivia. Since he was nothing of the sort, the statement becomes wholly ignorable - save for one thing; it does allow Lem to ignore the Stapledon contribution to SF. On the same ground he would equally be able to ignore A CASE OF CONSCIENCE, A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ, EARTH ABIDES or even 1984.

H. G. Wells, however, seems to have been a stumbling block. There is just no way of ignoring him. So we are presented with this: '... the typical science fiction fan (sic) 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 much more so than his science fiction).'

The 'highbrow connoisseurs' do nothing of the sort. They don't really value him for anything very much, and certainly not for his vast output of sociological novels. He has never, save for a short period early in the century, been recognised as a literary giant - as a thinker, yes, but not as a writer. His works were valued more for their content in the age for which they were written and their value to the present is small. He is remembered for his SF, which remains obstinately in demand, even by people whose experience of SF is limited almost to the Wells early canon. Also a couple of the gentle early comedies still have a limited public. The rest is dead.

The purpose of that paragraph was to underline Lem's unfortunate habit of writing what will suit his polemic purpose rather than seeking out truth, and we have seen far too much of this in the two opening pages of his essay. In Europe, where the English-language canon is understandably not known as we know it, he may well get away with wild statements about it, but heaven help his critical reputation if FANTASY AND FUTUROLOGY ever achieves English translation and the rest is discovered to be as faulty as this chapter.

And the best is yet to come.

In the next paragraph he disposes of upstart SF for good:

'If, in spite of all this, a classificatory exception is made, the judgement is given that the (literary) case under consideration is not essentially science fiction, but wholly 'normal' literature which the author intentionally camouflaged as science fiction. (Lem's underlinement - G.T.) However, if we proceed disregarding all these 'extenuating circumstances', some novels by Dostoyevsky become 'crime novels'; however, 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.'

There are elements of correctness here, but the argument fails because it does not include all the relevant material, which will ruin it. Let us include some relevant material.

The major novels of Dostoyevsky are 'crime novels' and, despite Lem, most critics observe the classification, but they are not genre crime novels. They are novels about crime and the criminal mind. They are not mysteries turning upon points of erudition and deduction or thrillers dependent on plot-surprise and eruptions of violence. They are not dependent on the techniques of the genre crime novel and, because their author's interest

does not lie in violence or literary shock tactics, neither are they dependent on the content of the thriller. It could be said - and has been said - that they begin where the conventional crime novel ends.

For similar reasons we cannot dismiss ANNA KARENINA as a tearjerker (though to a degree it is) or JEW SUSS as a cloak and dagger romance, or - watch this one now, because this is where the catch is - Hesse's THE GLASS BEAD GAME as science fiction.

Now, SF fans have taken THE GLASS BEAD GAME to their too-capacious hearts, along with the stories (or fictive essays?) of Borges, the ebullitions of the difficult but rewarding William Burroughs and other literary sports and mutants. But these are people and productions against whom/which classification batters in vain. They contain much to interest the SF reader, just as CRIME AND PUNISHMENT contains much to interest the connoisseur of superior thrillers, but SF they are not.

These are examples of where Lem is right, but there are hundreds more where he is wrong. Let us consider some works usually regarded as SF: BRAVE NEW WORLD, 1984, LIMBO. Also EARTH ABIDES, A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ, FAHRENHEIT 451.

By Lem's tortured argument the first three must be considered non-SF because they were written by writers of high degree, that 'the plot of a crime (orSF) novel served the author only as a means to an end.'

This is probably true, but the fact remains that whatever these novelists intended they did produce SF novels. It is no secret that all these were quite familiar with SF (but, rightly, didn't think much of it as it was in those days) and saw it only as a useful method of presenting their ideas. But they 'did not 'do a Dostoyevsky' and take up where SF left off; instead they wrote their novels in a perfectly familiar SF format whose superiority to the ruck lay not in approach or material but in literary technique and intellectual power. They wrote 'good' SF.

Indeed it was they who, with a few others, began the long haul of making modern SF respectable.

The three other novels mentioned are by persons of no great account in the literary hierarchy, though Bradbury had his short term of glory, and so may safely be dismissed into Lem's Lower Realm.

So?

No, they damned well cannot be dismissed. By any standard of criticism they are very little inferior to the first group. They are good SF. They are not trash and they are not descended from anything born in the gutter. Nor are the works of Arthur Clarke or James Blish or Brian Aldiss or John Sladek or Thomas Disch or Ursula Le Guin. These are only a few whose standard remains consistently high; the list of stories and novellas or real excellence published in recent years would run into many dozens.

The ghetto days are over and have been for a decade or two. Lem's viewpoint has been overtaken by the facts of literary history.

SF now produces work of quality simply because it has ceased to be a genre

in the narrow sense. It has abandoned the preoccupations - gimmickry, monsters and catastrophes - which tied it to triviality too long and has begun to roam more freely. One wonders has Lem noticed the comparable occurrence in the thriller genre - Simenon, Le Carre, Greene, etc? Indeed he mentions Greene's entertainments, but has not understood them as representing more than a form of literary condescension. But where is the line to be drawn between entertainment and serious novel? Read Greene's BRIGHTON ROCK, originally published as an 'entertainment', and try to decide.

The upshot is that Lem's attempt to dispose of the more literate SF by way of the two-realms metaphor falls apart as soon as examination begins.

At this point one may well stand back to survey the first two pages of his essay and wonder how the devil Lem managed to involve himself in such argumentative nonsense. After all, he is not an illiterate or a third rate mind. I can only conclude that he has made the critically unforgivable error of arguing from a preconceived position instead of examining the position itself. His argument is dead before the body of the essay begins.

VII ON THE TOO CAREFUL SELECTION AND PRESENTATION OF EVIDENCE

In Section III of his essay (pp 10-12) Lem describes the condition and status of mass-produced SF as it applies to the writer, publisher, and reader. It is fair, so far as it goes, but - and here is this same great 'but' which neutralises section after section of the essay: by now he has, to his own satisfaction, removed all worthwhile SF from consideration and so is able to offer this dreary and all-too-familiar expose of the literary trade as representing the dominating mode.

Lem must know that cultural advance does not mount on the shoulders of the worst in each field, but of the best; otherwise advance is scarcely possible. The dominating, i.e. the most influential, mode in any area is ultimately (and despite occasional lapses of universal taste) the best that is available. The preponderance of lesser and thoroughly trivial work is created by the scaling down of artistry to the point where it can be marketed as a consumer item, something to be swallowed on the run; it is created for money whereas the finer is created, in most cases, for its own sake.

But the huge and not-easily-delimited middle ground of literature, where the best of SF is to be found, is the creation of those with ambition but a limited talent or limited intellect or, often enough, much intellect but little literary talent. They represent the solid body of continuing effort without which no literature exists and without which genius finds little fertile ground upon which to flourish.

So we can eliminate Section III from consideration. It can have meaning only as a extension of the already discredited Sections I and II.

Section IV will prove ultimately discardable but requires scrutiny because in it fresh artillery is brought to bear together with a fresh method of false argument. What must be demonstrated is that the shot is puffball and the argument thunderflash.

The major statement of Section IV is that SF is pretentious, that it tries to pass itself off as a lady but is in fact a bedizened whore.

On the basis of past argument Lem begins with a proclamation: '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.'

'Sociocultural analysis'? Heaven help society, culture and analysis if the logic of pages 8 to 12 is a yardstick!

Lem continues: 'But this is not so. For ... there is a difference between science fiction and all the neighbouring ... types of trivial literature. It is a whore ... moreover, a whore with an angel face. ... It wants to be taken for something else ... it lives in perpetual self-deception.'

So SF is a literary prostitute - and it may be well to note the rapid increase of pejoratives in this Section: whore, prostitute, ghetto, liar, schizophrenic, slaveholders, etc.

The Section is an attack on pretention, and pretention should be attacked wherever it can be shown to exist. But Lem's attack warrants close observation. Here he goes:

'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. ... For instance Heinlein often emphasised that science fiction (that is, his own science fiction) was not only equal to, but also far better than mainstream literature, because writing SF is more difficult.'

'Many' is the opening word and may be the one which throttles his argument. How many fit this description? In these days, not many. John Brunner, Philip Jose Farmer and Samuel Delany spring to mind as jealous guardians of the value of their writings, and very noisy they often are, with Silverberg occasionally decrying the numbskull public, but all in all they don't make such silly outcries as the quoted Heinlein. In any case none of them belongs in the absolute top bracket (literary bracket) of SF writers, being competent and popular rather than outstandingly talented, and their soundings-off are not typical of the whole writing group.

Lem is wielding a twig for a club. The activities of a few, largely ignored and unsupported, cannot be used to castigate a more level-headed majority. Perusal of the fanzines will offer the alternate thesis that the most outrageously untenable literary claims are made by fans in hysterical defence of their idols of the moment. That is the curse of fanaticism in any activity.

His mention of Heinlein is just, but he needs many more names to range alongside before he has a case. Shall we, on Lem's terms, denigrate Olympus because Hemingway couldn't stop talking about writing 'what is true' without ever finding out what he meant, or because Dickens habitually referred to himself as 'the Inimitable', because Tolstoy found CRIME AND

PUNISHMENT a predictable bore or Doctor Johnson, referring to TRISTRAM SHANDY, remarked that 'nothing odd will do long'?

It won't do. Lem must not jab at a few names and pretend these cover the attitudes of the whole field.

His next accusation reads thus:

'The best authors ... want to - and at the same time do not want to - belong to the Realm of Science Fiction. They care a lot about the prizes given by the SF ghetto. At the same time, however, they want their books to be published by those publishing houses which do not publish science fiction ... 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 SF magazines; they are thinking of moving into mainstream literature (Aldiss, Ballard and several others).'

Had Lem quoted the actual sayings of 'Aldiss, Ballard and several others' one might pay attention. In my recollection Ballard has claimed a desire to go beyond presentday SF, though not necessarily outside it; his desire has seemed to be to open up the genre further than has been done. This he has tried to do (his success or failure is not my present interest) and, having read several of his interview transcripts, I cannot recall that he was ever snide, hypocritical or self-important about it - and certainly not 'schizophrenic'. I may disagree with his ideas but I am not fool enough to look down upon him, and he does not seem to fit the implications of the paragraph quoted.

Nor does Aldiss, who sits as close to the top of the SF tree as any. Aldiss, for Lem's information, was a writer before he turned to SF, became a much better writer during his years of concentration on genre work, left genre behind to become one of the most gifted stylists and thinkers in the broader SF field and finally moved firmly back into the mainstream with novels and essays in which only the knowledgeable will discover the SF affiliations.

Whatever Aldiss proposed to do he has done, and had it done by 1972, the copyright date of Lem's article. Lem, if he pays attention to what goes on above the ghetto level, should have known it.

Some second-rate writers possibly do behave like schizophrenics, as is the way of second-raters in all fields of endeavour; the best do not, and since the influence of the second-raters is confined mainly to outbursts in fanzines (which, Lem says, have little influence) they can be ignored. And so can the entire quoted statement.

Next comes a repetition of the warehouse metaphor, and then a passing stab at publishers and writers: 'From the time it was born, science fiction has been raised by narrow-minded slaveholders.' Let Thomas More rest in peace, but Verne and Wells and Bellamy and Stapledon and Fowler Wright might

stir in their graves to spit. And their publishers with them. Just another Lem essay into the pejorative without regard to fact.

Now, on page 14, comes the real barrage against pretention. Here is the key passage:

'SF authors remain minors in the eyes of their publishers - all their lives. Such circumstances breed frustration and compensatory behaviour. Indeed, the same sort of thing abounds in the SF ghetto. All these compensatory phenomena, taken together, clearly have the character of mimicry.'

In other words: starved of adulation, they mimic their betters. Lem's proof of this statement is in three parts, of which (a) proposes that SF awards are vainglorious imitations of the 'Nobel prize and other world-famous literary awards'.

Let us look at the literary award situation. My copy of the WRITERS' AND ARTISTS' YEAR BOOK - 1973 lists 58 major awards in Britain alone and prints no list for America because of the number involved. I can number about 20 Australian annual awards without stopping for breath and the worldwide count must be huge. Many of these are quite unashamedly offered for Romantic Novels, Historical Romances, Adventures, Adventure Stories, Mysteries and Thrillers.

All, of course, are envious imitations of the Nobel Prize - which happens to be a comparative latecomer in the literary award field.

SF's tiny range of awards is almost unnoticeable in the great literary compost heap. Admittedly the winning of a Hugo or Nebula Award, decided in accordance with circumstances and a voting system as hilarious as any on Earth, must be for the lucky writer a matter of puzzlement as much as pleasure (though good novels sometimes make the grade), but this can also be true of the awarding of even the most prestigious prizes outside SF. Steinbeck, for instance, when a reporter put the straight question to him, admitted that he did not deserve his Nobel - which everybody else already knew.

SF merely follows the fashion of encouragement by award, and probably does no harm thereby. And a couple more prizes, judged by competent critics rather than voted upon, might be a good thing; they wouldn't be won by accident or lobbying.

So there goes Derogation (a), a simple sneer levelled without attempt at a perspective view of the situation. Forget it.

Derogation (b) deals with you and me - friends, fans, neofans and sheeplike readers. According to Lem, SF has a critical structure, per medium of the fanzines, which, as in the case of the awards, apes its betters and puffs imitation into a flattering opinion of itself.

Let's have it a sentence at a time.

'The Upper Realm has academic and other literary journals, containing

theoretical and hermeneutical articles.' 'Hermeneutical', eh? Don't cry, Virginia, the big word only means 'interpretative'. Since its English use is mainly applied to the interpretation of scripture there could be some confusion here, but I tire of pointing out that simple language tends to greater exactness than specialised words used out of their academic context.

There follows: 'SF also has its highbrow fanzines (RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY from Canada, SF COMMENTARY from Australia and QUARBER MERKUR from Austria).'

So SF COMMENTARY is highbrow? You could have fooled me, Stanislaw! Also that dull compilation of straight-faced boredom, RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY, which would be quite capable of publishing a scholarly discussion on the precise number of hairs on Tarzan's left tit!

Well, I like SF COMMENTARY and can't stand RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY and must assume this is a Lem joke. (My German isn't good enough for QUARBER MERKUR - or indeed anything more than a few phrases used with care and prayer.)

Or is it a joke? After all, Lem and Rottensteiner write for SFC and nobody can tell me their brows aren't as high as a Gothic arch.

SFC is certainly one of the best of the fanzines, occasionally intellectual but never losing touch with us of the common herd who wear our SF lightly. I can't say as much for the dreary RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY, and if the Lem article, reprinted from QUARBER MERKUR, is a fair representative of that magazine, the RQ and QM are better avoided. Any subject touched by them will drop dead of intellectual congestion. But highbrow? God forbid.

However, Lem suggests these three as highbrow criticism. His point is that they don't matter a damn, that they cut no ice in the great cultural world. That they don't attempt to does not seem to have occurred to him; that they serve fandom in an inturnd, fannish fashion has passed him by. So he draws a comparison with the 'highbrow periodicals of the Upper Realm', all of which are commercial publications with an axe to grind and aimed at the world at large rather than a small in-group.

The difference, says Lem, is that 'The highbrow periodicals of the Upper Realm command real authority in cultural life.' The sentence speaks of literature in general, so let's see if his touch is any surer there than in the more restricted area of SF.

Try this as a direct contradiction of his sentence: The world's highbrow periodicals have often sought to command real authority in cultural life but have rarely achieved more than a local or transient impact. (Their high mortality rate speaks for itself.) Their interests are in general too narrow and too sectarian and their presentation too polemical to command mass attention. They do, however, serve a valuable purpose in providing preliminary testing grounds for ideas and proposals which can be licked into shape by argument and criticism. These may or may not have an impact, from small to immense, when finally shaped into a definitive book. It is the book, the finished work, which exercises authority in cultural life, not the germinal essay whose fate is rarely better than to be remembered in a footnote. (The foregoing does not apply to scientific periodicals, which have a premeditated authoritative function in the dissemination of information.)

Choose your own version. I prefer mine as closer to the facts. What matters is that Lem is at the old diversionary tactic of comparing two matters which are not comparable. He is blaming fanzine backchat for not having the cultural relevance of NOVY MIR or NATURE or even our own MEANJIN and QUADRANT. This is the sort of thing referred to when I gave this section its title.

Still on criticism, Lem notes: 'The popular critics of the dailies need not agree with the judgements of the initiated highbrow experts, but if one of them opposes a man like Sartre, he knows quite well that he is fighting a worldwide authority. Nothing of this sort in SF.'

This is very disturbing. Lem, so Franz Rottensteiner informs us, writes for very highbrow magazines indeed (although perhaps he is not really a Sartre) and here am I, a 'critic of the dailies' (and not even particularly popular) opposing him! Is it simply not done? Should I beware the lightning? But wait! I recall having written articles for highbrow journals myself - one on Patrick White, who has just been awarded a Nobel Prize and one on (shudder) science fiction with which, Lem curiously infers, such magazines would not soil their pages. Perhaps the critics of the dailies have a foot in both camps, and perhaps they are less than properly respectful of all but a handful of those highbrows whose mortality tends to show through as they pontificate.

The section closes with a remarkable non sequitur which infers, among other matters, that NEW WORLDS was a fanzine. I hope Moorcock hears about that.

Derogation (c) must be quoted in full. It carries the crushing, devastating expertise of a man who hasn't a clue what he is talking about.

'SF 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 gay parties which is so characteristic of SF conventions. (So wherein lies the mimicry? G.T.) At conventions, theoretical reflections are nothing but seasoning; at PEN meetings, however, they are the main course, as well as at similar conferences of professional writers.'

Of course the SF 'opposite number' of the PEN Club is the SFWA, and anyone who cares to tell Lem wherein conventions differ in intention and character from the PEN Club is welcome. There's a limit to how long I can go on stating the obvious.

With the three major derogations over, Section IV continues with some much more level-headed but slightly overstated appreciation of the true role of the highbrow periodical. But the first paragraph ends with this: '... these tribunals (the periodicals) are not subject to the economic rules of the market and ... defend the cultural heritage against the chaotic onslaught of mass culture. Nothing like that can be seen in the Lower Realm. SF has no independent periodicals which supervise critically...'

He's at it again, comparing the incomparable. Fanzines are basically forums where fans talk to fans, and if authors intrude they must do so at fan level

where they are welcomed, perhaps respected, but not revered.

I suppose the inference is that if SF were any good it would have a halo of highbrow periodicals orbiting its stately brow. This is a load of old codswallop, if I may quote a friend I met in the ghetto. No literary genre receives more than the occasional interest of the highbrow; it is when genre has been left behind and individual conception and artistry have taken over that major criticism begins to take notice.

I have been saying for several years that this process of rejecting and escaping from genre restriction is visibly at work in SF; I have said it so often in so many publications that repetition here would be mere parroting of the past. When this is finally effected by the most viable and insightful authors - and it may take another decade to finally discard the chrysalis cocoon - then major criticism will take the measure of such individual works as merit attention. It is not likely ever to concern itself much with anything as self-limiting as a genre. Dozens of SF works have already broken the 'genre barrier' but have not reached the literary or intellectual standards required for a foothold on Lem's Olympus. Such will come, but in the meantime the genre cannot be dismissed with contempt simply because it doesn't sport the trappings of genius. It exists at all literary levels save the immortal, and it takes literary snobbery of a virulent kind to lump them together in one gigantic brush-off.

The rest of Section IV is just two pages of affirmation that the Western SF scene is only a mimicry of the highbrow scene, with a blunt statement that the most gifted and inspired author must bow to mediocrity if he enters the SF scene. That many have entered and not bowed passes him by.

The whole of Section IV is a massive comparison of dissimilar conditions, false analogy and unsupported pejorative.

Forget Section IV.

VIII ALL ABOUT KITSCH

SF is all 'kitsch', says Lem, delivering his final kick in his Section V - and fair in the genitals he aims it.

'The substance which fills the entire milieu of SF, and upon which the work of its authors feeds, is kitsch. It is the last, degenerate form of myths. From them it inherited their rigid structure. In myth the story of Ulysses is the prestabilised 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 once was holy and/or coveted, awe-inspiring or horrible, but now prepared for instant use.'

The remainder of the paragraph says it over several times and ends with :
'In literature, kitsch results when all the complexity, multi-sidedness and ambiguity of the authentic product is eliminated from the final product.'

That last sentence is true. It is almost out of place in the rest of the essay. But not quite; like so many others it earns its place by referring to the worst of SF as if it represented the whole field.

All Lem's wordage defining kitsch amounts to this: that the eternal mysteries are debased by being treated as everyday facts or facets of life or by having their superficial aspects offered as all there is. So the mystery of love becomes bedroom farce, the mystery of catharsis becomes a blood-drenched thriller, the mystery of creation becomes a cosmologist's big bang and the mystery of eternity becomes a time-travel paradox-comedy.

On the lowest levels this is true. On the higher levels these matters, and all the other great mysteries, are compressed into symbolic actions or conditions exhibiting only such surfaces as are relevant to the author's intention. He must assume some understanding in his readers or the novel will not get written in a single lifetime. The process is called 'selectivity'; it is practised by the greatest writers as well as the least. In order to throw light on a single facet of his subject he has to assume that the reader is familiar with those contingent to it.

If he treats all the other facets with boorish superficiality, doing little more than acknowledge their existence, the result will be kitsch, as in the Spillane thriller or the Doc Smith space opera; if he treats his one facet as though it outweighs all the rest, the result will be kitsch, as in Segal's LOVE STORY or an ANALOG technological fantasy. It is a matter of sensitivity and balancing of values.

Are these novels kitsch: REPORT ON PROBABILITY A, A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ, THE MULLER-FOKKER EFFECT, ONE, A CASE OF CONSCIENCE, THE DROWNED WORLD, ODD JOHN? They are not; they belong to the hierarchy of superior SF which Lem must ignore in order to pretend that Western SF consists solely of rubbish.

Later on he notes, almost wide-eyed, that the works of Philip Dick (who alone escapes the holocaust) are based on kitsch but transcend it.

Growing weary now, I must point out that this is the way of all the literary world, for kitsch is the basic stuff of living reduced to immediately manageable proportions. Take WAR AND PEACE, DAVID COPPERFIELD, DON QUIXOTE, MOBY DICK, even SOLARIS; all, all are based on kitsch and transcend it.

(I'm not so sure that Dick does transcend it; even after Lem's appreciation he still seems a writer with an obsession which may well erode him into SF's No. 1 bore if he doesn't break free of it. It may do worse than that to him; possibly it already has.)

In Section V, then, Lem has excelled himself. He has thoroughly discussed a proposition which does not exist.

Forget Section V.

IX SF AND THE 'ESTABLISHMENT'

Stanislaw Lem has launched an attack on the whole of Western SF and I have attempted to refute it, following his argument step by step. These are the things I have tried to demonstrate:

- (a) that Lem's facts are often shaky,
- (b) that in his thesis he ignores all worthwhile SF or elevates it into a non-SF category,
- (c) that, as a consequence, his argument pretends throughout that only trash is written in the West,
- (d) that often he depends upon pejorative statement unsupported by evidence,
- (e) that many of his so-called questions are concealed statements or logical traps,
- (f) that he uses invalid comparisons as argument,
- (g) that throughout he displays a disregard for common logic and an embarrassing lack of common critical knowledge and technique, and
- (h) that I am unable to detect a single valid argument in the entire 10½ pages of SFC which comprise the attack.

I hope the demonstration has been made.

But a question nags. What does the 'establishment', the literary hierarchy of critical taste, know about SF?

It knows quite a lot. I have room for one large example of some consequence:

There is a huge volume called CONTEMPORARY NOVELISTS, produced by the St. James Press, with a preface by Walter Allen (surely a high enough brow by any standard). It lists about 500 of the most important English-language novelists, with a commentary on each by a critic of admitted standing. (500 would be about 5% of the field.) It is authoritative but not snobbish; some people get in because, like Agatha Christie and Robert Heinlein, they are too well known to be ignored and have a particular personal significance in their own branch of fiction, but the bulk of names are there on merit. Among them you will find these, with their SF relationships presented full-face:

Brian Aldiss, Isaac Asimov, J. G. Ballard, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Fred Hoyle, Frederik Pohl and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

There are names one would like to see here, such as Blish and others; but those included, though not all superior writers, are all men of influence on the SF scene. Worse choices could have been made by an ignorant establishment.

A list of other inclusions, not specifically SF writers, but who have used the techniques and mechanics of the SF genre to produce SF or fringe SF, may be revealing:

Paul Ableman; Kingsley Amis, Anthony Burgess, William Burroughs, John Collier, C. Day Lewis, August Derleth, Allan Drury, Howard Fast, Janet Frame, Michael Frayn, William Golding, Robert Graves, Graham Greene, Evan Hunter; David Karp, Doris Lessing, Norman Mailer, Naomi Mitchison, Nicholas Monsarrat, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Ayn Rand, Gore Vidal, Colin Wilson, Bernard Wolfe, Philip Wylie.

Such names leave one with the feeling that perhaps fresh breakthroughs are on the way as persons of such expertise continue to experiment with the SF form. These are not the names of writers who dabble their hands in literary gutters.

Another question nags - the one John Foyster has termed the 'Moskowitzian riddle': if this one chapter of FANTASY AND FUTUROLOGY is so riddled with error and false logic, what is the rest of the reputedly vast tome like?

Perhaps it will be translated for us one day, and all Western SF's frustrated critics will queue for their pound of Lem's flesh. Meanwhile, one suspects, European SF is patting itself on the back, assured by its major critic that the West produces only low quality trash.

One also suspects that Lem knows better, no matter what he has written to the contrary.

In fact, if I were not a fine old Australian gentleman, descended from convicts on both sides of the family, I would be inclined to abjure rational argument and opine that Lem has done nothing more than a good old-fashioned job of literary bitching.

But he isn't good enough at it. It might succeed with those overawed by local literary status, but not with us two-bit newspaper critics who have to deal with facts as they come.

And SF goes on regardless. Not a magazine will fold under the attack nor an author tremble, and fans will continue to read Blish and Knight for informed opinion.

George Turner, December 1973.

*It would be a trifle boring to recite a list of books dealing critically with SF. Interested readers may care to consult page 351 of SF: THE OTHER SIDE OF REALISM, edited by Thomas D. Clareson (1971). Since Lem has an essay therein, one presumes he also has a copy of Clareson's book.

APPENDIX I - Philip K. Dick

My essay covers only the first half of Lem's, the half which attacks Western SF in general. For the remaining pages he examines the work of Philip K. Dick, allowing him as the sole exception to his denigration of the genre. Whether his view of Dick is right or wrong does not concern me at this stage and can have no effect on what has gone before.

Lem appends also a 3½ page addendum pointing out that something I said about Dick's UBIK is demonstrably wrong. Maybe; I have no intention of re-reading a not particularly outstanding novel to discover whether or not the plot can be made to work by having the reader do the author's job for him.

Let me note only that Lem has gone to enormous trouble to make a scientifically technological case which could fill the gaps in the novel, and then stated that to include such reams of information would have been inartistic. Of course it would. But the detail would not have required inclusion; an indication of the line of thought would have been sufficient.

In my experience a beautifully made artefact with gaps in it is a failed artefact, and the postulate that it can be made to work by having the buyer fill in the gaps does not interest me. An artist may certainly work by indirection, but that does not mean simply ignoring anything he doesn't feel inclined to explain.

APPENDIX II - As I see the present state of the art

Having set myself to demolish a demolition, it is only fair that I offer my own opinion of the present condition of SF. I shall offer opinion without justification because this essay is already overlong, and who wishes to tear me down in my turn is welcome to do so. That's what polemic is all about.

As with the bulk of fiction, the major portion of SF is read-and-discard stuff that we (that is, we 'criticanto' types who keep telling you that your favourite novel is bilgewater) can do without. If others find it entertaining that is their affair, and I doubt that the general cultural level will show a disastrous downcurve because of it.

Having had to read a fair amount of the rubbish portion in order to know what to exclude from my review columns, I solemnly aver that today's trips are immeasurably better than the sheepguts cooked up for us twenty or even ten years ago. It has no better basic ideas than its awful forebears but it is better written (though not necessarily well written), the themes are better developed and the writers have heard of characterisation (in a small way as yet, but there are years ahead of us),

But these are the several hundred titles a year we can skip without even noticing a shortage. On a higher plane they merge into more readable, more courageously conceived work. Novels like THE LATHE OF HEAVEN, THE GODS THEMSELVES, STAND ON ZANZIBAR, THE MULLER-FOKKER EFFECT are not likely to achieve immortality even in the capacious memories of fans who are still capable of sighing for Merritt and Serviss, but while works of such competence are appearing with reasonable regularity - and they are doing that - we need not fear for the status of the genre.

Novels which really belong at the top of the tree are rare (and so they should be, in SF or any other field) and only now and then do we find one which really deserves to be remembered. The latest, in my estimation (an estimation which will no doubt be smothered under loads of reader disapproval) is THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS, a novel which improbably offers charm combined with intelligence and the necessity for great concentration. Its theme is 'identity'; mainstream novelists have done this to death over three or four decades, but Gene Wolfe has shown that SF can say something fresh on a faded subject when its special perspectives are employed. It is not a book which Huxley or Wells would have dreamed of writing, but it is one of which they most probably would have approved.

Old time science fiction is by no means dead. As well as Hal Clement and Larry Niven, there is Arthur Clarke giving us the occasional hardcore novel. RENDEZVOUS WITH RAMA is no contender for the Nobel but is the kind of solid no-nonsense SF which shows that the basic premises of the genre are not yet worked out. It does not scale Olympus, but even Lem would not dare dismiss it as trash or describe it as other than SF.

The New Wave would seem to have ebbed and taken back with it the worst of its excesses. Left on the beach - but not at all stranded - are such people as R. A. Lafferty, Thomas Disch, Norman Spinrad and others; not all of them are memorable but they are providing fictional nuclei of fine quality for anthologies of surprisingly high literary and intellectual level.

There are, of course, the noisy fringe works, which some revere and others exorcise. So if I turn my nose up at such semi-literary hotchpotches as THE WIND WHALES OF ISHMAEL, TO YOUR SCATTERED BODIES GO, NOVA and those Zelazny novels which can't make up their minds whether they are going to be SF, fantasy or warmed-over mythology, please excuse me on the grounds of age and cantankerousness.

But, all in all, the vista has charm. It also has a rock foundation of craftsmanship which was present only in outcrops twenty years back. Despite Mr Lem the worst is getting a little better, the middle ground is extending to crowd out much of the worst and the higher levels are being ever more frequently occupied by novels having qualities to make the reader think.

The non-English scene has heaved into prominence after years of unfulfilled - and vilely translated - promise. NOTES FROM THE FUTURE, INTER ICE AGE 4 and SOLARIS are enough in themselves to justify a continuing attention to the wider world. If as yet we find them a little different, a little more demanding (mainly because of their different literary traditions) this is only a challenge to be met by an increasingly literate readership.

The more literate periodicals - for example PARIS REVIEW or ESQUIRE - are publishing quality SF, and a glance at the attribution lists at the fronts of a few anthologies may leave one wondering who doesn't publish it these days. That novelists of intelligence and standing are interested and active is amply pointed out by the list in Section IX of the preceding article.

Whether the SF magazines have improved I cannot say. I long ago gave up buying them; there is too much in permanent format now for one to need to bother with the ephemeral.

Criticism seems to me to have improved; at least it has become reasonably intelligent, with little of the frenzied praising or damning which once made all SF reviewing ridiculous. Improvement may well be largely due to the lash-wielding of Blish and Knight, whose solitary work is perhaps bearing belated fruit. But some credit must go to the editors of the more outstanding fanzines - such as ENERGUMEN, SPECULATION, ALGOL, SFC - who have battled to preserve a standard of literacy without losing the 'common touch' of fandom. Within fandom, which is more vocal than truly numerous, the

fanzine editors have done their bit to encourage maturity of attitude. If fandom has any influence on the course of SF, it is probably by way of word-of-mouth proselytising. And why should one ask more of it?

SF is not about to whizz off all the major literary prizes or become the most revered genre of the intellectual world, but it has justified its place in a comfortable niche.

Its greatest danger is that it will - all but space opera and gimmick yarns - disappear into the mainstream as the writing world realises (is already realising) that science is a fact of life, not a subject separate and apart, and that popular as well as erudite literature must learn to cope with it as a facet of the business of living. (Another myth for debasement into kitsch?)

SF is alive and well. Even, I suspect, in Poland.

AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP

(by John Foyster)

Recently the Australian Broadcasting Commission radio program INSIGHT (15 minutes a week of material of variable quality) ran a hoax interview with one 'Sir Clarence Lovejoy'. The announcer's introduction of Sir Clarence included so much false information that most listeners, one hopes, would have soon become aware that the program was a hoax. Initially the interview was entertaining as satire, but the author (authors?) of the script apparently possess a very heavy hand, and soon the interview degenerated into broad farce, at which point I ceased to listen to it.

Reading SF: A HOPELESS CASE - WITH EXCEPTIONS (Stanislaw Lem, SFCommentary 35-36-37) gave me much the same feeling. I could not believe that all of these remarks could have been produced by the author I knew as Stanislaw Lem. Though there are elements of contradiction in some of Lem's earlier writing, it seemed to me that the SFC article went too far.

Lem, it seems, plays the game less fairly than the ABC, and it was only on reaching the 24th page of his article that I felt Lem gave the game away: he writes:

'humour shows up the rich ambiguity of an earnest way of narration in but a lesser degree. The reader must recognise that an example has been ridiculed, or else the reader and writer are as much at cross-purposes as when somebody does not grasp the point of a joke; one cannot misunderstand a joke and savour it at the same time. Therefore humorous prose is assured of a more stable reception than complex prose which wants to be taken seriously. Because of Dick's method of "transformation of trash", I have found a third (just this) tactic of creation. A novel by Dick is not - and often is not - bound to be understood, because of its peculiar maximum span of meanings; because trash is not ridiculed; therefore because the reader can enjoy its elements and see them isolated from reciprocal relationships within the same work. This is better for the work, for it can survive in different ways in the reader's environment, either correctly or incorrectly understood. Similarly one can recognise a humourist at first glance, but not a man who makes use of Dick's tactics. It is far more difficult to grasp the complexity of the work in its entirety, and in no other way can we deal with the "transformation of trash".'

(SFC 35, page 31)

Lem is correct: one does recognise a humourist at first glance. But can one recognise in Lem's essay, SF: A HOPELESS CASE the third tactic of creation, the technique Lem describes in the

following way.

'He has invented an extremely refined tactic: he uses elements of trash (that is, those degenerate molecules that once had a sacramental, metaphysical value) so that he leads to a gradual resurrection of the long-extinct, metaphysical-erotic values. In a way, he makes trash battle against trash. He does not deny it, he does not throw it away, but he builds from it a ladder that leads straight into that horrible heaven, which, during this operation, ceases to be an "orthodox" heaven, but does not become an "orthodox" hell. The accumulating, mutually negating spheres of existence enforce the resurrection of a power that has been buried for eons. In short, Dick succeeds in changing a circus tent into a temple, and during this process the reader may experience catharsis.'

(SFC 35, page 19)

the tactic parenthetically described as 'just this'? It is difficult to do so. Lem states that in Dick 'trash is not ridiculed', and yet his own essay seems little more than ridicule. But since this is a technique which Lem has but recently acquired, perhaps he has yet to master its intricacies. So it goes. (Or as Lem would put it: 'If all this is not meant to be taken seriously, then what is the real content of all their cipher language?' SFC 35, page 18)

But George Turner (who is admittedly wrong about most things most of the time) takes Lem's article at face value. Perhaps he is right this time, for unless Lem is lying, he did not discover this 'technique' until his understanding of Philip K. Dick was relatively advanced, and his first footnote implies that the early part of SF: A HOPELESS CASE stands alone, being written before the Dick illumination. This, and the well-known deadly seriousness of SFC's editor, Bruce R. Gillespie, almost forces one to the conclusion that SF: A HOPELESS CASE is not a hoax. I cannot completely accept this myself, but who wants to stand out in a crowd?

If I am to take SF: A HOPELESS CASE seriously, at least for the sake of argument, I must first outline some of the sources of my hesitation in rushing to the task. Firstly, I suppose, the Lem of SF: A HOPELESS CASE is not the Lem with whom I had a brief correspondence: Stanislaw Lem in 'person' has a lightness of touch which seems to be lost in the translations to German and then to English which most of his works undergo before being revealed to our 'Western' eyes. Secondly, some of Lem's earlier, shorter pieces of criticism seem to me to have been most valuable; Lem's very different attitudes towards science fiction illumine new and worthwhile perspectives which can be exciting and inspiring to Western readers (but sometimes Lem's light results in grotesque distortions of science fiction, and even when he recognises this, Lem seems unwilling to accept any of the blame for the distortion himself: this problem is particularly prominent in the article to be discussed). Thirdly, Lem's subject is the whole of Western

science fiction. I think I can say without false modesty that I am almost totally unequipped to discuss science fiction in such broad terms. (But I console myself with the thought that Lem himself seems ill-equipped on occasion.) In this context then, and with some reluctance, I should like to make some observations about the probable hoax, SF: A HOPELESS CASE - WITH EXCEPTIONS.

Let us begin by looking at the subject under discussion, science fiction, through the eyes of our author. Here are a couple of Lem's remarks regarding science fiction:

'this literary genre, which intends to portray the (fantastically magnified) outstanding achievements of mankind' (page 8)

'However, if we may believe its claims a science fiction book belongs to 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 civilisations: it brings forth a deluge of answers for the key questions of every reasoning being.' (page 13)

Elsewhere Lem remarks that 'we do not lack for definitions of this genre' (page 8), and certainly he is capable of producing interesting if not startling variations. There is more than a hint of socialist realism in the remarks quoted above: whether this 'definition' of science fiction is appropriate in the West is of considerable importance. For if Lem's idea of what science fiction in the West is about is to be of any value, then either it must be self-evidently true about Western sf (or all sf), or if there is room for doubt, the relevance of the Lem definition for Western sf must be made apparent. If Lem's ideas about the nature of science fiction are not related to Western sf, then his statements about Western sf can probably be ignored for in the fullest sense of the words he does not know what he is talking about.

Does sf intend 'to portray the (fantastically magnified) outstanding achievements of mankind'? Does sf report 'on mankind's destiny, on the meaning of life in the cosmos, on the rise and fall of thousand-year-old civilisations'? Does sf bring forth 'a deluge of answers for the key questions of every reasoning being'?

I submit that sf does not, in general, make such claims, and that few, if any, of its authors would make such claims. There is little reason to do other than regard Lem's suggestion as an idiosyncratic pseudostructure. Little wonder, then, that Lem is alarmed and remarks that sf 'always promises too much, and it almost never keeps its word' (page 13). If this is what Lem genuinely believes the nature of science fiction to be then it is he and his works which must echo the words of a poet born one hundred years ago

'But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

(Robert Frost)

for Lem's works, I feel, hardly live up to his own prospectus.

The other remarks Lem has to offer about science fiction can be grouped with the more general comments in this essay. However I should particularly like to draw attention to one of these:

'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.' (page 8)

This paragraph clearly reveals certain aspects of Lem's critical method. Firstly, Lem uses an approach which is intended to put the reader off his guard: the statement is so startling that the reader can do little more than hurry on in the hope that the horrors lessen as the argument progresses. This is a useful technique, as Lem is generally more temperate in the latter portions of his arguments (indeed, he is quite happy to reverse his position halfway through a paragraph) and the reader who is holding his judgement in abeyance pending further investigation may find himself or herself accepting, in this strange context, ideas which in isolation would be dismissed as nonsense.

Secondly, Lem anthropomorphises this problem: on the one hand this enables him to look at the broader ramifications of science fiction and its social concomitants, and on the other (and this is where exception must be taken) he allows himself the luxury of not talking about science fiction, the literature, at all. Were Lem to write about science fiction, one might reasonably ask for facts and documentation; whereas a discussion of the readers, writers and publishers allows him to generalise rather casually. ('with an easy mind I can assert that the silent majority of readers do not even know Stapledon by name.' (page 11))

The advantages of 'sociocultural analysis' over 'literary criticism' are immediately obvious.

However, Lem pretends to be answering questions involving literature, and his anthropomorphised problem has no relevance whatsoever to the question of the literary quality (in most senses) of science fiction. If Lem wishes to argue about the social acceptability of science fiction, or the literary acceptance of science fiction as a 'valid form' by particular literary cliques he is of course entitled to do so - but let us ask that he make it clear that he is defending that case and not some other, and let us ask him to produce some documentary evidence.

But of course he will not do so: one thing which emerges clearly from the muddled prose of SF: A HOPELESS CASE is that Lem is incapable of reasonable standards of critical precision and care.

I propose to document this.

Let me begin by quoting in its entirety the first of the footnotes to this essay of Lem's.

'This essay is a rewritten chapter ("Sociology of S F") from my PHANTASTIK UND FUTUROLOGIE (FANTASY AND FUTUROLOGY). I have polemically sharpened the original text in several instances, and added the later review of Dick's work, which is absent in the book. I confess that I made a blunder when I wrote this monograph, for then I knew only Dick's short stories and his DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP? I believed I could rely on reviews published in the fanzines of other novels by Dick, with the result that I considered him a "better Van Vogt", which he is not. This mistake is due to the state of s f criticism. Every fifth or eighth book is praised as "the best work of s f in the whole world", its author is presented as "the greatest s f author ever", great differences between works are minimised, 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 it is not fit to consider any arbitrary criticism as a substitute for reading the books concerned. However my words describe the very circumstances guilty of causing my error, for it is a physical impossibility to read every s f title, so that there must be a selection; as you can see, one cannot rely on s f criticism to make this selection.' (page 28)

Here the nature of Lem's distortion is made quite clear. Although times may have changed, it is surely still not too much to ask of a critic that he reads for himself the work he proposes to discuss - and surely when the critic discovers a blunder, something other than a sharpening of the polemic is required? Let's note this as Lem's first handicap: lack of familiarity with the science fiction field.

Further: on what grounds did Lem believe he could rely on reviews published in the fanzines? (And what does he mean by "in the fanzines"? In some fanzines, such as RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY or SFCOMMENTARY, or in fanzines generally? If the latter, is Lem really so bereft of critical faculties that he cannot distinguish the good from the bad in book reviews? (And if the former, the same question arises) But I am straying from the point.) Now since this is a matter of considerable importance to Lem, and to us as readers, perhaps we may justifiably formulate other questions: precisely which reviews in which fanzines led to Lem's false impression of the work of Philip K. Dick? If that can be determined, we can evaluate Lem's excuses for himself.

But now we are in deeper water: Lem continues in this footnote with the casual generalisations which bedevil his work (perhaps this is Lem's second handicap?). The date of the footnote is 1972-1973. Lem claims that "Every fifth or eighth book is praised

as "the best work of s f in the whole world", its author is presented as "the greatest s f author ever". I should very much like Stanislaw Lem to document this. Let him take 1971 or 1972, and state precisely which books of either of those years were described in the terms he quotes. Let us be generous and allow that if he can name the authors of these glowing descriptions and the places in which the descriptions appeared for one-tenth of the books produced in the years in question he has proved his case. If he cannot produce such documentation I shall have little choice but to call his statement a lie (and a malicious lie) and Mr. Lem himself a liar.

The fact that Lem's essay was originally conceived as a chapter titled "Sociology of S F" might at first seem to excuse some of its shortcomings: in that context we could easily understand the emphasis on 'sociocultural analysis'. But the essay has been published now as an object which can stand alone, its title suggests a more all-embracing approach, its structure **remains** careless: one cannot generate much sympathy for the author.

Now let's reflect for a moment on the final sentence of this footnote. If 'it is a physical impossibility to read every s f title'; then perhaps this is a good reason for the hesitancy of the likes of Blish and Knight to come forth with "a theoretical, generalising critique of the genre", though my feeling is that they would have other reasons as well. Lem's example makes it plain that the author who does not do his homework, may very well need to repent at leisure. I'm unable to be optimistic about this however, for the slovenliness of Lem's approach to criticism is revealed time and again in SF: A HOPELESS CASE: to expand upon this, I should like to look more closely at Lem's opening paragraphs.

In his introduction, Lem asks the questions which his essay purports to answer.

'For example: in science fiction fandom rumour has it that science fiction is improving every year. If so, who does the average production, the lion's share of new productions, remain so bad?' (page 8)

Lem is seeking an explanation of the quality of the average s f work. I wonder whether s f really is improving every year. More to the point, I wonder who it was, precisely, who was involved in the circulation of this rumour (apart from Stanislaw Lem)? Is Lem unwilling to formulate such a notion by himself (and then to present counterarguments), or is it merely a part of his campaign to hang the blame on anonymous fans and critics? Still the question is interesting, if it is based upon a true summation of the present situation and we have the apparatus to check on the matter. Unfortunately we have no way of knowing whether or not 'the average production' is 'so bad', and consequently no way of talking realistically about 'improvement'. As the question is unanswerable, it is not surprising that Lem's "answer" is shrouded in 'sociocultural analysis'.

'we do not lack definitions of this genre. However we would look in vain for an explanation for the absence of a theoretical, generalising 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.' (page 8)

If Kingsley Amis's NEW MAPS OF HELL fits Lem's requirements for a 'theoretical, generalising critique' then there is no need to look for explanations of its (NEW MAPS OF HELL's) non-existence. If NEW MAPS OF HELL does not fit Lem's requirements, then perhaps it does fit the requirements of others, and this in itself explains why no one bothers to explain the absence of a present object. Alternatively, Lem's first footnote to his essay contains an explanation, as has been indicated above.

'Blish and Knight agree that the s f 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?' (page 8)

The latter part of this statement has already been examined. Lem does not choose to answer the major question raised - that of the selection of readers. On page 37 above I have already quoted two of Lem's remarks about readers of science fiction - a description of them, and an assertion about the 'silent majority'.

On page 11, in the course of a discussion on the attributes of trivial literature (which naturally includes science fiction), Lem says:

'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 that 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.'

Before looking at these remarks about readers in context, I think this is an appropriate moment to draw aside another curtain and suggest a little more of the critical method of Stanislaw Lem. Here we have a chance to compare Lem's representation of a situation with the actual situation. I quote from page 99 of THE ISSUE AT HAND

(ADVENT:PUBLISHERS, 1964).

'out of a readership (or at least, a sales record) of better than five million, accumulated over 22 years, I have only 56 letters from book readers, and 47 of them were written to tell me that I was a dirty fascist, Jesuit, n----- lover, liberal, Communist, Madison-Avenue brain-washer, anti-Semite, corrupt capitalist apologist, bisexual pervert, aesthete or propagandist for XXXism (supply your own term here). Though I can't deny one or two of these accusations - if I did, it would cost me money - what impresses me is that letters written directly from reader to author are rare to begin with, and secondly seldom have anything to say about the story; they are written to pick fights, usually regardless of whether or not the story was a good one.'

The differences between what Blish wrote, and what Lem says Blish wrote need not be outlined by me: they are all too plain. But what I find even more curious is the fact that Lem seems to regard the paragraph I have quoted as making a comparison between the s f reader (as Lem misreads Blish) and the 'consumer of mass products'. The behaviour of the consumer is rather more complex than Lem states it to be, just as the behaviour of the s f reader is more complex. Perhaps one could assume that Lem has tried to find a common element (any common element) to bolster his sociological argument, and that he is not interested in the completeness of any comparison. His assertions about readers of science fiction, as we have seen from Blish's actual remarks, are unfounded, and he makes no comment at all about the actions of readers of non-trivial literature. Later in his essay (page 16) Lem returns to this theme, but I wish to look at those remarks in a different context, and so will consider them then.

On pages 15-16 Lem tells us more about the selection of s f readers:

'Suppose an ingenious, even inspired author enters the realm of s f. 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.'

(In an aside, let me reassure the reader that I am quoting from Stanislaw Lem, and not Harlan Ellison.) Here Lem's 'sociocultural analysis' enables him only to echo the statement he attributes to Blish and Knight - that s f readers are incapable of discrimination.

'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. S f

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 even ridiculing this maximum offer; I can only repeat what you read in the s f advertisements.'

This says something about readers, but only peripherally. But also we find the re-echoing of Lem's peculiar and idiosyncratic definition of s f (the last persons to have made claims about s f reporting on the future would have done so in Ray Palmer's AMAZING STORIES or OTHER WORLDS), and (perhaps as a bonus?) ridicule enters the lists again. Lem manages to ignore the fact that even in the West s f is read by students of culture, and by cosmologists, astrophysicists and philosophers. But perhaps it is worth making the point that the failures of the various s f magazines over the years is at least some evidence that s f readers are discriminating.

Lem's final ('important') question is: 'even if science fiction were born in the gutter, living on trash for years on end, why can't it get rid of the trash for good?' (page 8)

Before tackling this 'important' question (and indeed, it is this question towards which Lem directs his attention throughout SF: A HOPELESS CASE) I should like to dwell a little longer upon Lem's critical inadequacies. I shall deal with statements which are either (i) clearly false) or (ii) involve false comparisons.

((Interrupting note from the editor: technical requirements make this the final page of SFC 38. The remainder of this article (dare I say, the bulk of this article?) will be found in a later SFC, but there will nevertheless be room for a paragraph or two more.))

Since Lem is not given to making statements which are verifiable or falsifiable, it is not easy to pick out examples of remarks which are false (although the Polish quotation above is a reasonable example). However, here are two false statements.

'During the lifetime of H G Wells, there was no clearcut border between these two "Realms" of literature. ... Only much later did an Iron Curtain descend between these two kinds of literature ... This curtain, this concrete ceiling (to maintain the image of a two-storey building) has grown little by little, and this ceiling, hermetically sealed, became an impenetrable barrier only during the twenties. We can recognise 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.' (page 9)

Herbert George Wells died in 1946.

(to be continued)

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