Slipstream – "this brave new genre"

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Résumé : Terme récemment forgé, slipstream renvoie à une frontière flexible, voire fragile entre la SF et la non SF tout en répondant à un problème aigu, à savoir la place exacte de la SF parmi les expérimentations et les innovations imposées par le postmodernisme. Reçu avec réticence par les critiques de la SF, à cause de la définition floue donnée par son initiateur (Bruce Sterling, en 1989), le slipstream provoque de fortes controverses toutes les fois qu'il fait l'objet d'une anthologie de textes. Qu'il s'agisse de la prose courte ou des romans de SF qui dépassent les conventions classiques du genre, ou encore certains livres et écrivains qui, apparemment, n'ont aucun rapport avec la SF mais en empruntent des thèmes et des techniques, le slipstream est le terme à la portée, une sorte de fourre-tout. La riche diversité des œuvres considérées comme des slipstreams donne du fil à retorde même aux adeptes les plus convaincus. Finalement, qu'est-ce que le slipstream ? Une nouvelle espèce de la SF ou un nouveau genre littéraire, qui découle de la SF ? Est-il une partie de la soi-disante littérature mainstream ou est-il une simple manifestation de celle-ci, qui se nourrit de la SF ? Est-ce une nouvelle écriture ou une autre stratégie de marketing ? L'article présent se propose justement de répondre à ces interrogation revue les approches du slipstream depuis 1989 jusqu'à nos jours.

Mots-clés : genre, postmodernisme, fantastique, réalisme magique

In a seminal essay called "Slipstream" (1989), American cyberpunk writer and theorist Bruce Sterling joined a host of critics and authors who kept bemoaning the state of the genre:

> Science fiction's official dogma, which almost everybody ignores, is based on attitudes toward science and technology which are bankrupt and increasingly divorced from any kind of reality. "Hard- SF," the genre's ideological core, is a joke today; in terms of the social realities of high-tech post- industrialism, it's about as relevant as hard- Leninism. […] What's the common thread here? The belittlement of individual creativity, and the triumph of anonymous product. It's like some Barthesian nightmare of the Death of the Author and his replacement by "text." […] Science Fiction - much like that other former Vanguard of Progressive Mankind, the Communist Party - has lost touch with its cultural reasons for being. Instead, SF has become a self-perpetuating commercial power-structure, which happens to be in possession of a traditional national territory: a portion of bookstore rackspace. Science fiction habitually ignores any challenge from outside. It is protected by the Iron Curtain of category marketing. It does not even have to improve "on its own terms," because its own terms no longer mean anything; they are rarely even seriously discussed. (Sterling, 1989: 77-78)

The only way out was, to his mind, an "emerging genre" on the borderlines between science fiction and "mainstream fiction," in which science fiction techniques – no longer able to service what Sterling called the "coherent social vision" of the genre – were adapted by outsiders to produce more imaginative, estranging, counter-realist, and innovative works than science fiction proper could produce. Sterling suggested that "it is a contemporary kind of writing which has set its face against consensual reality," and which "simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility. We could call this kind of fiction Novels of Postmodern Sensibility, but that looks pretty bad on a category rack, and requires an acronym besides; so for the sake of convenience and argument, we will call these books 'slipstream.'" (Sterling 1989: 78).

Trying to define its zeitgeist, Sterling opined that "the heart of slipstream is an attitude of peculiar aggression against 'reality'" which tears sarcastically "at the structure of 'everyday life.'" (Sterling 1989: 78) Some of the techniques that slipstream writers use to illustrate this attitude are "infinite regress, trompe-l'oeil effects, metalepsis, sharp violations of viewpoint limits, bizarrely blase reactions to horrifically unnatural events … all the way out to concrete poetry and the deliberate use of gibberish." (Sterling 1989: 79) Slipstream also goes against the historical record, using history, journalism, official statements and

advertising copy only as raw material for collage work: "Slipstream tends, not to 'create' new worlds, but to 'quote' them, chop them up out of context, and turn them against themselves." (Sterling 1989: 79)

Sterling ended his essay with an alphabetical list of slipstream texts which included works by such diverse writers as John Barth (*Giles Goat Boy; Chimera),* Donald Barthelme (*The Dead Father*), J. M. Coetzee (*Life and Times of Michael K.),* Lawrence Durrell (*Tunc; Nunquam*), John Fowles (*A Maggot*), Max Frisch (*Homo Faber; Man in the Holocene*), Günter Grass (*The Tin Drum*), Doris Lessing (*The Four-Gated City; The Fifth Child of Satan*), Norman Mailer (*Ancient Evenings*), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (*Autumn of the Patriarch; One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow; V; The Crying of Lot 49*), Philip Roth (*The Counterlife*), Salmon Rushdie (*Midnight's Children; Grimus; The Satanic Verses*), Muriel Spark (*The Hothouse of the East River*), Patrick Suskind (*Perfume*), and John Updike (*Witches of Eastwick; Rogers Version*).

Since 1989, the term has found its way to science fiction blogs, encyclopedias, and critical essays. In blogs, science fiction fans have swapped recommendations for "the list," including such names as Jorge Luis Borges, Douglas Copeland, and Franz Kafka, as well as a range of contemporary films, even while voicing deep skepticism about the term itself. In the *Wikipedia* entry on the term, *Memento*, a film about time, memory, and witnessing that plays with the narrative conventions of the medium, is cited as an example because it falls into the category of "the fiction of strangeness." (Wikipedia 2010)

In 1998, Lawrence Person added more writers to Sterling's list, the most famous of them being Kobo Abe (*The Ruined Map; The Ark Sakura, Inter Ice Age 4*), Don DeLillo (*Ratner's Star; White Noise*), Umberto Eco (Foucault's *Pendulum*) and Toni Morrison (*Beloved; The Song of Solomon*). (Person 1998)

Ten years later, during a Readercon held on 18 July, 2007, a panel of SF critics came up with the "core canon of slipstream," 27 books in all:

1. *Collected Fictions* (coll 1998), Jorge Luis Borges
2. *Invisible Cities* (1972), Italo Calvino
3. *Little, Big* (1981), John Crowley
4. *Magic for Beginners* (coll 2005), Kelly Link
5. *Dhalgren* (1974), Samuel R. Delany
6. *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Fiction* (coll, 1995), Angela Carter
7. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Gabriel Garcia Marquez
8. *The Ægypt Cycle* (1987-2007), John Crowley
9. *Feeling Very Strange* (anth 2006), John Kessel and James Patrick Kelly (eds.)
10. *The Complete Short Stories of J.G. Ballard* (coll 2001)
11. *Stranger Things Happen* (coll 2001), Kelly Link
12. *The Lottery and Other Stories* (coll 1949), Shirley Jackson
13. *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Thomas Pynchon
14. *Conjunctions 39* (anth 2002), Peter Straub (ed.)
15. *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Franz Kafka
16. *The Trial* (1925), Franz Kafka
17. *Orlando* (1928), Virginia Woolf
18. *The Castle* (1926), Franz Kafka
19. *The complete works of Franz Kafka*
20. *V* (1963), Thomas Pynchon
21. *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Angela Carter
22. *The Best of Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* (anth 2007), Kelly Link and Gavin Grant (eds.)
23. *The Heat Death of the Universe and Other Stories* [UK title *Busy About the Tree of Life*] (coll 1988), Pamela Zoline
24. *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), Umberto Eco
25. *Sarah Canary* (1991), Karen Joy Fowler
26. *City of Saints and Madmen* (coll 2002), Jeff Vandermeer

27. *Interfictions* (anth 2007), Delia Sherman and Theodora Goss (eds.) (Di Filippo 2007)

The ambivalent tone of Sterling's essay made John Clute, who preferred the more scholarly sounding term „fabulation," note that "slipstream" had derogatory connotations: "As a description of commercial piggybacking, the term seems apt; however, when used to designate the whole range of non-genre sf […] called fabulation, the term - which implies a relations hip of dependency - can seem derogatory." (Clute and Nicholls, 1995)

In 2001, Martin Lewis tried to provide a clearer answer to the question "What is slipstream?" in a short essay of the same title:

> There are two great countries of literature; the fantastic and the naturalistic. The border where these two countries meet however is decidedly hazy. This no-man's-land contains slipstream, books that are neither fish nor fowl. It's a tricky thing to pin down but like a certain other genre we could mention it is easy enough to point to. These are the books that contain fantastic elements but are not fantasies, that are naturalistic but not rigorously so. The popular literary term 'magical realism' is simply a subset of these. (Lewis 2001)

Interested in looking at fiction that crosses genres, Jed Hartman provided, towards the end of 2001, a convincing analysis of slipstream, or *interstitial* fiction, a "multidimensional and slippery concept." (Hartman 2001) His definition was close to Lewis' but with a small difference. While the latter considered magical realism to be a subset of slipstream, Hartman viewed slipstream as either a subset or a superset of magical realism:

> slipstream is fantasy (generally set in a world much like our modern world) that doesn't read like fantasy; it usually Feels Like Literature, but has fantastical (often extravagantly fantastical) elements that are fundamental to the story. It's often a little harder-edged than magic realism - more often William S. Burroughs than Gabriel Garcia Marquez - but then again, it can be construed as being a subset or a superset of magic realism. (Hartman 2001)

Taking Barthelme, Burroughs and Pynchon as perfect examples of slipstream writers, Hartman saw their prose weirder and more hard-edged than magical realism, their weirdness and magic being

> less fluidly integrated with reality – it's often a bit jarring and somewhat over-the-top, whereas a lot of magic realism (at least the Latin American kind) is so dreamlike that you can almost forget that sort of thing doesn't happen in the real world […] Anything that doesn't have any overtly and unequivocally fantastical elements but does contain things that might be fantastical could probably be labelled slipstream. (Hartman 2001)

To Hartman, it is content, language, structure, and attitude towards fantastic elements that make slipstream different from science fiction. Most often science fiction is set in the future and involves technology that goes beyond our understanding but does not contradict physical laws as we know them. Slipstream contains fantastic elements, or elements that verge on the fantastic or just seem to be fantastic, thus making the reader question the reality in which they appear. The language of science fiction is often transparent, not calling attention to itself. On the other hand, slipstream is often "edgy and direct, sometimes choppy, sometimes lyrical." (Hartman 2001) Slipstream uses experimental narrative forms more often than science fiction does: nonlinearity, non-traditional plot structure, inclusion of non-prose forms, strictly consistent and restrained viewpoints. Finally, if the author treats fantastic elements as satire, metaphor, or surrealism, his work will feel more like mainstream fiction; in science fiction they are often treated as literal fact. If it is not "entirely clear whether those elements are intended to be taken literally or not, the work may end up in the gray zones of slipstream or interstitial fiction." (Hartman 2001)

In order to clarify the meaning of slipstream, James Patrick Kelly asked critic Rich Horton and writer Jeff VanderMeer, "two of the sharpest minds in science fiction" (Kelly 2003), what they thought slipstream really was. In Horton's view, while science fiction makes the strange familiar by using science fictional elements in a context that helps the reader understand them, slipstream makes the familiar strange by taking a familiar context and disturbing it with science fictional/ fantastic intrusions. To VanderMeer, who prefers to call it *cross-genre*, slipstream is not a single movement but a "complex, organic creature" difficult to categorize, a group of "individual writers pursuing individual visions that tend to simply share some of the same diverse influences." (Quoted in Kelly 2003)

Kelly's second question was whether slipstream might be the next breakthrough in science fiction or if it would simply replace science fiction. Both interlocutors expressed their hope against the latter, Horton's answer about slipstream's prospects sounding more optimistic than VanderMeer. Horton: "I don't want to lose 'old-fashioned SF.' But I do think that slipstream techniques can help to describe a world that seems SFnal around us – a world that is changing fast enough, and that is multicultural enough, that everyday life can seem strange in a 'slipstream' fashion." VanderMeer: "I certainly don't want it to replace SF. I love SF, too. The problem, the friction or opposition, comes from some of the more traditional genre gatekeepers either being too slow to incorporate these new kinds of writings or totally resistant to doing so – which makes those of us who practice them put more energy into just opening up new ways to find an audience. This energy is perceived as in opposition to traditional genre, even though it really isn't. My fear, again, is that if this is the wave of the future and genre doesn't allow it access, it will turn somewhere else, like the mainstream, and we'll lose energy that would otherwise help create further mutation within genre." (Quoted in Kelly 2003)

In 2006, James Patrick and John Kessel edited the first slipstream anthology: *Feeling Very Strange: the slipstream anthology.* Trying to come to grips with the term in order to justify their choices for inclusion in their anthology, the two editors steered away from the idea of genre and focused instead on the literary effect of "feeling very strange," arguing that cognitive dissonance was at the heart of slipstream, "this brave new genre." (Quoted in Soyka) Reviewers G. Johnson (2006), Neill Harrison (2006) and David Soyka (2006) were unconvinced that this approach brought clarity to the designation of the anthologized stories as slipstream. For lack of a better definition for slipstream, Soyka, for instance, quoted a character from one of Carol Emshwhiler's stories: "a new world for art where each work is judged by its own internal structures, by the manifestations of its own being, by its self-generated commands."

In the end, defining slipstream is as hard as defining science fiction. What emerges out of all this debate and discussion is a series of wonderful reading lists and potential anthologies that do not stay inside the boundaries of any single genre, but rather focus on literary affect and aesthetic taste. Similar lists might well be and often are generated with other starting points, some of which already have established usage and heuristic specificity, such as "magical realism," "anti-realism," "postmodern," "experimental," "surreal," or "fabulation." If the word "slipstream" is to continue to have staying power inside or outside the science fiction community, it will probably be in recognition of a type of writing that crosses boundaries, that has experimentalist roots but can become a series of conventional techniques and stylistic devices, and that can designate a sub-category or subgenre within any genre, including science fiction (de Zwaan in Boulder et al. 2009: 504). One thing is certain, though: as it accretes more talented writers, slipstream is pulling science fiction in its direction.

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