

# Understanding Slipstream Fiction

*Doug Davis*

Slipstream literature is difficult to define. I am not aware of any author who identifies herself as a slipstream writer. I doubt that any young author growing up today is dreaming of becoming a professional slipstream writer. Should they succeed, there are no professional organizations to which such an author could belong. Slipstream is not a genre or a subgenre. It does not have a fan base. It is not defined by a set of conventions or a megatext. While it often appears in print alongside works of science fiction, it is not science fiction.

There is a science fiction film from 1989 titled *Slipstream*. I do not recommend that you see it. However, it is science fiction. How do we know that? Look at the film's poster. The artwork – the clothing, the otherworldly aircraft, the spacey styling – shows that this film is set in the future. The film is full of actors who appear regularly in science fiction movies. (Mark Hamill is front and center in a beard.) It is also literal in its depiction of science and technology. A slipstream is a turbulent flow of air driven backwards by a propeller, and propellers are on planes. There are planes on this poster. *Slipstream* is a post-apocalyptic movie about people who fly planes around an Earth torn by fierce winds, somewhat like an action-adventure version of J.G. Ballard's *The Wind from Nowhere*. *Slipstream* is about science (meteorology, ecology) and technology (those new planes). It is set in the future. It is science fiction, and for better or for worse it must now stand as our example of what science fiction is.

*Slipstream* the movie is not slipstream fiction, but it was released in 1989, the same year that cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling published an essay in the fanzine *SF Eye* in which he postulated the existence of a new literary genre that threatened to replace science fiction. Sterling calls this genre "slipstream." He provides his readers with a list of famous postmodernist novelists such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Kathy Acker and Kurt Vonnegut, noting select works of theirs that can be identified as slipstream. Sterling defines slipstream thus as follows:

This is a kind of writing 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." (n.pag.)

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Elaborating, Sterling writes that slipstream fiction does not evoke science fiction's sense of wonder. It defies generic expectations. It is textually playful. Its authors take science fiction's best tricks and do them better – by doing them differently.

We may define slipstream speculatively in three different ways, none of which is comprehensive. Given some of the characteristics Sterling describes, slipstream may be merely another name for postmodernist SF. Works of slipstream fiction often feature elements of more than one genre, so slipstream may also be the fiction that results when authors mix – or, more properly, mash – other genres with SF. Finally, slipstream may be read as a form of speculative fiction bred in creative writing programs, a self-consciously literary way of reading and writing SF that emphasizes character, theme and style over science, technology and futurity (to put this in Darko Suvin's terms, slipstream is a literature of science fictional estrangement unmet by many signs or acts of scientific cognition within the text or the reader's own mind).

Michael Cunningham's 2005 novel, *Specimen Days*, may be considered a slipstream text. Cunningham's prior novel, *The Hours* (1998), was a hit, winning the Pulitzer Prize (among other awards) and becoming a major motion picture. *The Hours* is not a slipstream novel. It is a history-hopping postmodernist reimagining of the modernist author Virginia Woolf and her novel about a party planner, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Written in Woolf's stream of consciousness style, *The Hours* is about three women who are writing/reading *Mrs. Dalloway* at three different moments in history: Woolf herself in 1929, Mrs. Brown in 1949 (who is reading the novel while planning a birthday party), and Clarissa Vaughan in 2001 (who is planning a party for a friend). Cunningham uses *Mrs. Dalloway* to explore how variations of the same character act in different moments of history.

Following the success of *The Hours*, Cunningham did something that confounded many of his admirers. He rewrote *The Hours* as a novel called *Specimen Days*, replacing the spirit of Virginia Woolf with the spirit of the American poet Walt Whitman. Instead of sticking with the stream-of-consciousness style that he used in *The Hours*, Cunningham wrote the three sections of *Specimen Days* in popular generic modes: the ghost story, the detective story and science fiction.

As Cunningham describes in his author's note, he plays fast and loose with history in his 2005 novel. *Specimen Days* is a historical novel about New York City, but a lot of that history is made up. To which Cunningham in effect replies in his author's note for the novel, so what?

*Specimen Days* [is] semiaccurate. To the best of my ability, I've been true to historical particulars in the scenes I've set in the past. But it would be a mistake on the reader's part to accept any of it as literal fact. I've taken especial liberty with chronology and have juxtaposed events, people, buildings, and monuments that may in fact have been separated by twenty years or more. Anyone interested in the

absolute truth about New York in the mid to late nineteenth century would be well advised to consult *Gotham* by Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, which was the primary source from which I spun my own variations.

Like *The Hours*, *Specimen Days* is presided over by the spirit of a great author, in this case Walt Whitman. As in *The Hours*, Cunningham puts variants of the same three characters into three different historical epochs. The first section of *Specimen Days* is "In the Machine," an industrial-age ghost story about a young boy who autistically recites Whitman's poetry. The second section, "The Children's Crusade," finds the same three main characters in a contemporary detective story about a band of New York terrorists who recite Whitman's poetry. The third section, "Like Beauty," is a post-apocalyptic science fiction story set in New York 150 years in the future. The three characters from the previous stories become an android programmed to recite Whitman, an alien and a homeless boy who must flee New York when androids are outlawed.

To my three speculative definitions of slipstream fiction discussed above I now append a fourth: slipstream is fiction that mainstream fans (and reviewers) do not understand. Consider the reaction of *The New York Times* to *Specimen Days*:

So *Specimen Days* is both a very bad book and a very brave one. In the flickering light of this ambitious new novel, the silky tour de force of *The Hours* now looks as if, for all its surface complexity, it might actually have been too easy for Cunningham; Woolf's airy sensibility matches up nicely with his own. In that book, he wove together three separate stories, set in three different periods, with little to connect them but a thin, delicate thread of style and a fragile sort of hopefulness in the face of mortality. (All three stories are about the temptation of suicide.) And everything works: the novel floats along serenely, like a boat on a gentle English stream. In contrast, the three stories – again set in three distinct times – that make up *Specimen Days* are arranged in a homelier, plainer fashion, one novella-sized chunk of narrative after another [...].

To add self-insult to self-injury, Cunningham also chooses to cast each of these new stories in the form (more or less) of a popular genre: the first, "In the Machine," is a kind of ghost story; the second, "The Children's Crusade," is a police-procedural thriller; the last, "Like Beauty," is science fiction. The idea, I think, is that the use of such dubiously respectable forms is somehow "democratic" and therefore, again, a possible means of getting in touch with Cunningham's inner Walt [Whitman].

The willfulness of these gestures is all too apparent. Although Cunningham gamely tries his hand at lowly genres, he can't hide his fundamental lack of sympathy (or familiarity) with them. Even in the strongest of the stories, "In the Machine," he still seems a little embarrassed at having to conjure up an actual ghost. (Rafferty, n.pag.)

What has happened here? A serious author writes a book that reads like something other than fine, serious literature, a book that contains elements of "dubious" and "lowly" genres that the author himself seems unfamiliar with and embarrassed by.

Either the book stinks or the *Times* does not get it. I shall tell you that the *Times* does not get it. Many of the claims and judgments in the review are wrong. As someone who is familiar with science fiction, I can assure you that the science fiction in *Specimen Days* does not read like the work of someone who does not have sympathy for the androids and aliens he conjures. In an interview about *Specimen Days* Cunningham has even expressed his admiration for SF and questioned the utility of generic distinctions – at least when it comes to matters of taste. (Indeed, he dismisses most of the new books in the "serious literature" section of the bookstore as "tepid, thinly veiled autobiographies" [Stout 10]). "Like Beauty," the final section of *Specimen Days*, is a touching, melancholic science fiction story about kinship. In my professional opinion, it's the strongest of the three pieces. Suffice it to say that my take on this novel is the opposite of the *Times*'s. This disparity exists because I am reading *Specimen Days* as a slipstream novel whose pleasures and insights are rooted in the very genres that the *Times* calls "dubious." The *Times* wants a stylized character study. Cunningham sees his novel as offering something else. As he tells an interviewer: "It's about the first 300 years of the Machine Age" (Stout 10).

So, on the one hand, slipstream happens when serious literary authors write books that contain elements of science fiction. On the other hand, slipstream happens when SF writers write something that is not set in our real world but that doesn't quite fit the conventions of science fiction or fantasy either. For instance, SF authors such as Ted Chiang and Neil Gaiman often write a kind of speculative fiction that isn't really scientific or focused on technology or science. Ted Chiang's short story, "Hell is the Absence of God," reads like a work of religious fiction; Neil Gaiman's "A Study in Emerald" is a Sherlock Holmes story mashed together with H.P. Lovecraft's mythos.

Cunningham's and Chiang's and Gaiman's kind of genre-mashing speculative fiction has been written at least since the 1960s. Back then it was called postmodernism. In Sterling's 1989 Slipstream manifesto, the reader finds a long list of so-called slipstream authors, most of whom are postmodernists who started writing this kind of 'feeling-very-strange' fiction in the 1960s, around the same time as science fiction's New Wave.

One name from Sterling's list of slipstreamers is Donald Barthelme, whose short story, "The Balloon," reads at once like a work of postmodernism and a work of science fiction (the story has been anthologized in both SF collections such as Judy Merrill's *SF12* (1969) and canonical collections such as the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2011)). Barthelme's story concerns the sudden construction of a giant balloon that, overnight, fills up the streets of midtown Manhattan. Barthelme explores the various reactions New Yorkers have to the balloon before it disappears. "The Balloon" reads in many ways like a science fiction story.

The balloon itself is what science fiction critics call a novum, a new (technological) thing that reconfigures Manhattan. The existence of the balloon is central to the story. Not only does the giant balloon make the story's world different from our own, but that difference is also the subject of the story. As Carl Freedman points out in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, the function of the novum in science fiction is to produce meaningful differences as science fiction is about "the difference that such difference makes" (61). Barthelme's story is about the effects of new speculative technology – or at least a newly big one. The balloon's engineering is discussed. The balloon is treated like a real technological artifact and its effects on society are logically extrapolated. The story is set in technoculture and concerns problems people have with living in a media landscape (which is another common SF story type in itself).

At the same time, the story has many of the elements of postmodernist literature. It is about an impossible technology. A balloon as large as this is impossible to build; for all its narrator's talk of engineering, the story is unscientific and silly. The story is a fable, not an extrapolation. The story evokes the same sense of ontological uncertainty that Brian McHale identifies in *Constructing Postmodernism* as the hallmark of postmodernism (151); what world could this possibly happen in? Much of the story is not about the balloon but, rather, about language, namely the problems of describing the balloon. It is a metanarrative, one of the main forms of postmodernist literature. Finally, the story's resolution is personal, subjective, and has no necessary connection to the vast technological contrivance of the balloon.

I realized that slipstream had made it into the official canon of literature when I came across it in a textbook I use in a creative writing class I teach. In her introduction to *Imaginative Writing*, Janet Burroway informs writing students that

[t]he tendency of recent literature is in any case to move further away from rigid categories, toward a loosening or crossing of genre (in the sense of literary form). Many writers are eager to experiment with pieces that blur the distinction between two genres or even follow two genre patterns at once. So "short short" stories may have elements of poetry or essay; the "prose poem" may be seen as a lyric or a story. An essay might be structured with a refrain. So Adam Thorpe ends the novel *Ulverton* in the form of a film script; [*New York Times*] columnist Maureen Dowd frequently writes a political essay in the form of a fantasy play; Michael Chabon and others write detective or science fiction with literary ambition and intent – "genre fiction" pressing at the bound of "the fiction genre" with results that have been called "slipstream" or "interstitial" fiction.

Now that slipstream has slipped into the contemporary canon, I propose a fifth – and final – speculative definition for slipstream fiction, a definition that contains the prior four: slipstream is the literature of our contemporary "structure of feeling."

Raymond Williams uses the phrase "structure of feeling" in his 1977 work *Marxism and Literature* and elsewhere to describe each generation's artistic forms and conventions as developed in a particular world-historical situation. Cultural forms, for Williams, may be emergent, dominant, or residual. They either anticipate emerging historical formations, or they define and operate as part of them, or they lag behind them, speaking as it were to a past age. In the 1960s postmodernist/slipstream literature was avant-garde or, in Williams's terminology, emergent. By the turn of the century it had become increasingly prevalent across culture, part of what Williams would call the cultural dominant of postmodernity. Slipstream has become an acceptable term in creative writing classes, for example, and slipstream stories regularly appear in the pages of both venerable pulps such as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the toney *New Yorker*. By the second decade of the 21st century, postmodernist mash-up albums, electronic music, DJ mixing, avatars, multitasking, crossposting, photoshop retouching, architectural reskinning and repurposing, trans-media culture (comic, game, film, viral campaign tie-ins), *and* slipstream fictions are ever-familiar mainstream effects. None of these things feel at all strange to the generation doing or making or consuming them. They feel normal.

Slipstream fiction, like DJ music, is part of the contemporary "structure of feeling." Referring to books from the 1980s, 70s and 60s, Bruce Sterling writes in 1989 that slipstream "is a kind of writing 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" (n.pag.). That may have been the case back in 1989. The reviewer for the *New York Times* seems to have felt strange reading Cunningham's book even in 2005. However, in the second decade of the 21st century I argue that this fiction doesn't feel strange at all. Reading it feels *right*. (It might have felt strange for Sterling, but that is because, in his heart of hearts, I think Sterling (like many SF writers) is a refugee from what Williams would call a residual form of culture. He is a Romantic – but that's another lecture.) Reading Cunningham or Gaiman or Chabon or Chiang or even Barthleme feels like the way life is now, even if their stories are all fundamentally speculative. They don't feel strange. They feel natural, normal.

Speculation drives the political economy of the 21st century. Every gadget we own is one month away from being made obsolete by the next generation of gadget, about which there are endless rounds of speculation. Science fiction and capitalism are deeply tied together because both are inherently speculative ventures; slipstream fiction hijacks science fiction's speculative ethos to become a kind of fiction that fits our stage of postindustrial digital-media capitalism just right, a stage of capitalism that is about making money off of hybrid forms and multiple and virtual identities. Every form of culture can be morphed into any other form of

culture on any device with a microchip. We can create, watch, edit and retouch video anywhere and tell stories across media and device. Literature is not an exception to this cultural development. The kind of speculative genre blending found in slipstream fiction is going on all over literature and, indeed, the arts. It is a tendency that was avant-garde, emergent, in the 1960s, but now it is becoming increasingly dominant, common, normal.

There is little structural difference between what Gaiman has done with Sherlock Holmes, for instance, and what the music producer Danger Mouse does with The Beatles and Jay Z in his *Grey Album* of 2004. In *The Grey Album* Danger Mouse mixes Jay Z's *The Black Album* with the Beatles' *The White Album*. The results are amazing – but what is it? Rap? Progressive Rock? It's a mash-up, but the result is a new organic whole, a fine new album. It's not slipstream, but it comes out of the same structure of feeling as slipstream fiction. Structurally, *The Grey Album* is the same as Gaiman's story, which is a mash-up of Doyle and Lovecraft. What is Gaiman's story? A detective story? A Cthulhu story? It may even be an alternate history in which literary characters become real, for on top of his genre mashing Gaiman performs all kinds of fun, post-modernist typographical tricks with his story, printing it up like a broadsheet from the 19th century and filling it with advertisements from notorious Victorians such as Dr. Jekyll.

In his comprehensive survey of slipstream fiction published in the venerable and invaluable *SFRA Review*, Pawel Frelik describes slipstream as two or more literatures occupying the same territory. Different communities of readers and writers can approach and claim the same text, but to very different effects. Take the *New York Times*'s review of Cunningham. For a mainstream literary critic, the novel's generic elements are a distraction, a failed contrivance; the novel would have received a better reception from the *Times* had Cunningham focused more on the inner turmoil of his characters (and the finery of his prose) and less on world-building. For a science fiction reader, the novel's generic elements are its point; Cunningham's procession from the ghosts of the past to a distant future of androids and aliens and space travel feels right, and by focusing on those elements science fiction readers may claim the book as science fiction, even when it isn't that. Ted Chiang's story, "Hell is the Absence of God," is character-driven existentialist religious fiction set in a world extrapolated, in rigorous science fictional fashion, from the question: What if Hell and God and Angels were a visible, tangible part of our everyday world? The story routinely tops the lists of Christian Science Fiction, but is it even science fiction?

There are many interstitial forms or subgenres in SF-land: The New Weird, the New Wave Fabulists, the New Romantics, the New Space Operas, even the Steampunks. There's Science Fiction but before that there was Scientifiction (and

before that there was the Scientific Romance). Then there was Speculative Fiction, soon followed by Structural Fabulation. Now, we have Slipstream Fiction.

Call it what you like. It's all SF, and I think that just as the New Wave can most concisely be defined as a moment when modernism came to science fiction, slipstream – not cyberpunk, mind you – is the moment when postmodernism came to SF. The postmodernists such as Pynchon, Barthelme and Vonnegut had taken tricks from SF starting back in the 1960s. In the 21st century, SF writers are taking their cues from the (science-fiction-inspired) postmodernists while the postmodernists continue to draw from SF. The distinction between SF and postmodernism increasingly blurs. Slipstream is the fiction that happens at the intersection of SF and postmodernism.

Why are writers collected in the slipstream anthology *Feeling Very Strange* or writing for the magazine *McSweeney's* or the *New Yorker* – why are they writing in this genre-bending way now? Why do they write slipstream *now*? For the same reasons writers have always written one word after the next: because it feels like the right thing to do.

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