

160,000 gallons annually.)

But economic incentives alone won't do the job, Postel believes. Population control, reforestation, and political negotia-

tions will be needed in many parts of the world. Ultimately, water shortages are going to force many governments to rethink national needs and wants.

ARTS & LETTERS

Birth of a Genre

"Astounding Story" by Frederik Pohl, in *American Heritage* (Sept.-Oct. 1989), 60 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

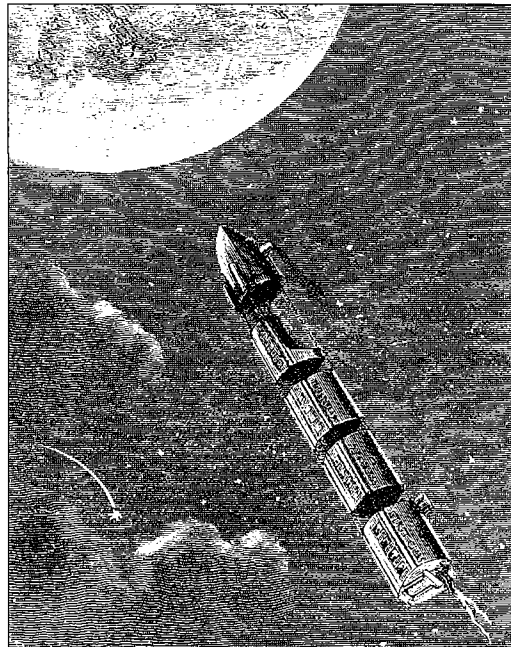
Americans today are swamped by information and speculation about science and technology. It was not always so. Fifty years ago, there was no Carl Sagan, no *Nova* (indeed, no television), no *Discover* magazine. Radio and newspaper coverage of science was skimpy. Pohl, a noted science fiction writer, speculates that "a majority of the world's leading scientists today were first turned on to their subjects by reading science-fiction stories."

Science fiction traces its ancestry as far back as Jonathan Swift, but it developed as a distinct genre only during the 1930s in pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*. Book publishers ignored science fiction and Hollywood's few ventures into the field bombed. The genre was transformed after 1937, when a young writer named John W. Campbell took over as editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine (later renamed *Analog*). Campbell insisted that his writers deal with more than scaly green space monsters and exotic machinery; he said he wanted "stories which could be printed as contemporary fiction, but in a magazine of the 25th century." From *Astounding's* stable of writers came such now-famous science-fiction novelists as Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke.

Their day finally arrived after World War II, when book publishers realized that science fiction was different from other pulp genres. Unlike readers of westerns and war stories, science fiction's consumers were a devoted bunch, enthusiastically forming fan clubs and thronging sci-fi conventions. In other words, they were a natural market. From near-zero in 1945, the

number of science fiction novels published soared until, by the 1980s, nearly one new novel in four was either science fiction or fantasy.

Along the way, the genre shed its image as the sole property of pimply teenaged boys. Academic critics like Leslie Fiedler began paying attention to it as early as the 1950s; today, for better or worse, seminars on science fiction are a regular feature of the Modern Language Association's annual meetings. By the 1960s and '70s, mainstream writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Doris Lessing were trying their hands at science fiction.



Modern science fiction was pioneered by Jules Verne (1828-1905). Among his bestsellers was *From the Earth to the Moon* (1873).

Science fiction no longer monopolizes the attention of science-minded laymen, but Pohl notes that plenty of opportunities remain for what is now sometimes called "speculative fiction." As always, these reflect the mood of the day—technological

pessimism during the 1960s, obsession with the self today. Samuel R. Delany, Ursula K. Le Guin, and others "are showing us possible future worlds in which human beings change their appearance, and even their gender, almost at will."

The End Of The Story

"The Crisis in Movie Narrative" by Richard Schickel, in the *Gannett Center Journal* (Summer 1989), Columbia Univ., 2950 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027.

Consider the life cycle of a Hollywood film today. It begins with the selling of a brief story "concept" over drinks in Los Angeles and ends some years later as "word of mouth," when one moviegoer delivers a plot summary to her neighbor over the backyard fence.

All this talk of stories is a delusion, writes Schickel, a *Time* film critic. The traditional narrative film is dead. Most of today's movies, even critically acclaimed ones like Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, are nothing more than collections of vignettes and gimmicks, haphazardly strung together, barely resembling a story. Schickel believes that the absence of persuasive storytelling explains the absence of the adult population from movie theaters. Only kids can stomach such thin gruel.

Schickel sees filmmaking today as a kind of free-for-all, where everybody from marketing experts to film stars tinkers with a film's "concept," destroying any possibility of narrative coherence. Even directors, who now think of themselves rather grandly as *auteurs* (authors), are usually only bit players who further burden plots with their "personal statements."

At most, says Schickel, a director today can hope to create a "'shimmering forcefield,' not a coherent or fully expli-

cable narrative, something endlessly open to whatever interpretation we care to place on it." Only *Batman* and a few other films, such as Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) have seized this new potential. What *Batman* is really about—"no kidding," Schickel assures us—is urban design. Director Tim Burton's *Gotham* recasts the popular art deco architectural style into a landscape of menace, showing audiences that even urban design, the last best hope for the salvation of our cities, is a mirage.

The death of film narrative is the result of the rise of television during the 1950s. Television deprived Hollywood of the market for its staple genre films (westerns, detective stories), and thus the tradition of finely-wrought narrative; it also encouraged scriptwriters to create short, punchy sequences. Finally, the death of the studio system removed the discipline that kept actors and directors from tampering with stories.

Unfortunately, says Schickel, the "new" Hollywood is conducive only to chaos. Films like *Batman* are accidents that slip through the Hollywood mill, not the beginning of a historical transition to a new and wittier style of filmmaking.

Art by the Yard

"Seduction and Betrayal in Contemporary Art" by Cleve Gray, in *Partisan Review* (No. 3, 1989), Boston Univ., 236 Bay State Rd., Boston, Mass. 02215.

It appears that anybody who doubts the near-universal degradation of contemporary art need only consult a contemporary painter. Consider the aesthetic declaration

made by one successful young painter in *Vogue* last year: "Suckers buy my work."

Artists, laments Gray, himself a painter, have only themselves to blame. Today's