

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