

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

cynicism, he says, has its origins in the aesthetic theories of the Dadaist painter Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), who declared during the 1950s that artists produce only a raw product; “it must be ‘refined’ as pure sugar from molasses, by the spectator through the change from inert matter into a work of art.” Duchamp’s notion that life and art are inseparable was more revolutionary than anything Picasso did, Gray says, “for the final and inescapable conclusion to be drawn from it was that art could be entirely dispensed with.” No longer an expression of the painter’s spirit, art increasingly became just another market-place commodity. A few contemporary critics, notably Jean Baudrillard, encourage artists to think of their work as nothing

more than objects of consumerism.

A booming art market and a generation greedy for quick riches and fame have speeded the decline of art, Gray says. But his particular peeve is the reproduction of art in 35-mm. slides now used by curators and critics and in competitions and art schools. Paintings so reproduced, he says, are reduced in scale and stripped of their character. “To an ever increasing degree,” the critic Walter Benjamin observed in 1936, “the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.” The result is art intended to shock and startle rather than to invite contemplation. And in the end, says Gray, that is the difference between most contemporary art and what went before.

OTHER NATIONS

Latin America's Protestant Ethic

“Speaking in Latin Tongues” by David Martin, in *National Review* (Sept. 29, 1989), 150 West 35th St., New York, N.Y. 10016.

“Close to the tall iron tower [in Guatemala City] commemorating the 1871 liberal revolution are a converted cinema with ‘Jesus salva’ on its marquee and the tent-like structure of an independent church called Verbo. As you trundle and bump

through the barrios there is a storefront church every two or three hundred yards: Calvary, Jerusalem, Bethesda, Galilee, Tabor, Ebenezer, Prince of Peace.” They are not Catholic churches, writes Martin, a sociologist at the London School of Economic

and Southern Methodist University. Latin America, he says, “the great Catholic continent, home of almost half the Catholics in the world, is swarming with evangelicals, above all with Pentecostals.”

Since 1960, Martin reports, perhaps one Latin American in 10 has converted to Protestantism. In Brazil, where the Catholic Church has been weakened by the importation of foreign priests, there are some 25 million converts; a third of Guatemala’s population, perhaps a fifth of Nicaragua’s, and three percent of

A Disneyland for Moralists

Southern Africa, as described in *Foreign Affairs* (Fall 1989) by Chester A. Crocker, who was Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the Reagan administration.

Southern Africa is a beautiful region, magnificently endowed with human and natural resources, the potential economic engine of a continent and a place whose web of racial and civil conflict tears at our hearts, urging us to engage ourselves. But at another level, southern Africa can become, as former ambassador to Pretoria Ed Perkins put it, a sort of “political vending machine” into which we insert our coins to receive moral hygiene or instant ideological gratification. Featuring almost every form of odious human behavior—racism, brutal oppression, Marxism, authoritarianism, terrorist violence, organized butchery of unarmed villagers and gross official corruption—the region became a moralist’s theme park.