

17 July 74

Dear Joanna:

Happiness is having a free hour, a good sandwich and a glass of tea, and sitting down with a Russ essay on science fiction. Dammit, you make sense. You are about the only writer on science fiction whose nouns and verbs I understand. I hope this does not dismay you---nothing greater than being appreciated by innociles---but I personally of course believe that it means that you think with precision and great range and express it all with divine succinctness.

I refer to your Subjunctivity piece in EXTRAPOLATION 15/1, which I have at last subscribed to.

That's an elegant bit of definition by Delany, isn't it? (I should send for that back issue.) You've probably forgotten your own thing entirely by now but it gave me such pleasure. I had about resigned myself to grunting and pointing after reading some of the Panshin's efforts---hope I'm not offensive here, just put it down to terminal aphasia on my part). Then I came on a thing of Delany's some time back, forget what, but it was like chopping open the cloud layer. He has a clear, clear head. He knows the tools, he knows what the hell he's doing and we're all at, he has the feel of the open-endedness. And he has the learning. Rare in sf, he has a trained mind. And he has the delicacy of the true thinker, you never catch him clumping in heavy definitional boots past the sign that Angels Stop Here. ...I don't mean that he fails in definition or that there are mysteries we cannot name, that rot. I mean he keeps the subject a-kieve on the operating table. He does not insist on putting in that last brick that includes infinity out.

All the above applies to you, too. That is what I mean by sense.
Epistemological tact.

One of the beauties of his "has not happened" is that it places naturalistic fiction, the ough mainstream, as a sub-division of sf. (Has not happened but could have.) I've felt for long that the so-called larger field of literature was in fact a restricted phase of the genre sf, not vice versa. That it was writing under constraints (could happen) that are in fact crutches for the reader whose thinking is limited to 'could happen.' And not only 'could' but 'is very probable in my little world and doesn't upset me.'

The sf reader is one whose mind naturally races to the limit when a category comes up, who when told the boat is leaking immediately releases it may fill and sink, to put it in the narrowest possible case. I have been increasingly, slowly appalled as I go thru the years to discover that one is surrounded by a solid phalanx of people who when told "the boat is leaking" simply register---if that much---the item; "the boat is leaking." Period. Period...One in a hundred may even remember it next day.

The one in a thousand who asks, How fast? Or where are the life-boats? or Should I help bail...that one is a potential sf reader. "EXTRAPOLA-TION is really a very acute name for the journal, isn't it? Not in the sense that sf is extrapolation, but in the sense of a mental activity which can go along any dimension.

Well this is all in a very didactic vein which is not my natural



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Dear Bernard

Spontaneous is having a free flow, a good narrative and a class of
feel, and sitting down with a few words on science fiction. I don't know
what sense, you are about the only one on science fiction who knows
and doesn't understand. I hope this does not annoy you---the greater
than being appreciated by the critics---but I personally of course believe that
it means that you think with precision and great range and express it all
with divine simplicity.

I refer to your subjective place in the world, which I
have at least understood.

That's an elegant bit of definition by D. J. Van, Jan 1974 (I don't
read for that back issue). You've probably forgotten your own little
by now but it gave me such pleasure. I had about reached myself to express
and define after reading some of the "unpleasant" articles---I'm not of-
fensive here, but out to show to technical writers on my part. Then I came
up a line of letters, some time back, forget what, but it was like choosing
over the cloud layer. He has a clear, clear head. The house the foggy, he knows
that the hell he's doing and what all it. He has the feel of the other-
and he has the feeling. Here is all, he has a twisted mind. And he has the
deliberate of the first thinkers you may catch. His writing is heavy, technical
books read the sign that says "I don't know." I don't mean that he fails in
fiction or that there are questions we cannot name, it's not, I mean he
keeps the chief drive of the operating table. He does not insist on putting
in that last part that includes infinity.

All the above applies to you, too. That is what I mean by sense.
Subjective sense.

One of the beauties of the "unpleasant" is that it places
unpleasant fiction, the unpleasant, as a sub-division of art. I've got
remembered that could have. I've this for love that the so-called "unpleasant"
of literature was in fact a restricted sense of the "unpleasant", not vice versa.
That it was under constant (could be) that was in fact a
for the reader whose thinking is limited to "unpleasant". And not only "unpleasant"
but the very words in my little world and the next best.

The of reader is one whose mind naturally moves to the that when
a story comes up, the word told the foot is feeling immediately unpleasant. It
any, it's not kind to put it in the "unpleasant" possible sense. I have been in-
creasingly, almost, as I go back the way to discover that the
unpleasant by a solid effect of people who when told "the foot is feeling"
almost "unpleasant"---it's not. The foot is feeling. "Unpleasant" is
possible.... One is a hundred way over "unpleasant" it next day.

The one in a thousand who says, "You feel? Where are the other
feels? Should I feel?..." that one is a potential at reader. "Unpleasant"
is a really a very acute word for the journal, isn't it? Not in the sense
that it is extraneous, but in the sense of a mental activity which can
be almost any direction.

Well this is all in a very abstract vein which is not my natural



way (I hope). Comes from the fact that your piece gave me a kind of grimly satisfied empathic glow, sort of Well, I guess THAT fixes'em. Not that it was aggressive or controversy-seeking, just that it was a delighting demonstration of How to do it right. Like seeing a mama bsprey demonstrating flying, a pretty scene I had the chance to watch in Yucatan. The great silver creature soared and did aerial arabesques, ending up with an extraordinary dance-in-place in the sunrise air, hooting what may have been encouragement to the large chick awkwardly flapping from palm to palm below.

Your observation that the reader carries his own ^{actuality} frame with him into the work has an interesting corollary. It might mean that the readership of at least some sf is bound to be extra-limited. Since there is a tacit dependence on the reader's having an adequate frame. Thus if the frame changes too much between cultures or times the work will be left inadequately anchored, more so than a could-happen work where the frame is explicit.

Even in my limited experience of writing, I've noticed a problem which I now understand since reading you: Being old, I've accumulated a heap of miscellaneous actuality data; rather a large heap. And I've been aware that effects I was trying to get were dependent on the reader's sharing that heap, or parts of it. And yet I could not bring the actuality itself in, it was as you said the effort to keep alive a fluctuating relationship between unnamed elements of actuality and the whatever-it-was I was trying to make. So I had simply to cut out parts that depended on the reader's sharing an improbably large part of my actuality....A totally different sort of problem than non-sf fiction faces, isn't it?

To take an absurd example, one can depend on the reader's frame for "the pastoral peacefulness of the twentieth century". But you can't do so for "the eleventh century."

Thank you, Joanna. Now I understand.

I love that description of a shifting, many-stranded relation in the work. I love your understanding of complexity. The description of the play of disbelief in satire. When something new is really well caught in words it gives me actual tangible joy. Like having an itchy brain scratched right? No; more like eating a perfect peach on a scorching hot day.

I have moments of wishing acutely that I could attend a good sf workshop or seminar, say one of yours. Or could at least listen to you and your few peers discuss or argue out some point. And then I have reality awakenings in which I know that if I had that luck I should doubtless never write again, that the kernel of my output is the lonesome exploration, powered by ignorant & infatuated curiosity. What I would learn is that I can't do it.

Now this was supposed to be a short snappy farewell note (I'm going on my travels for a couple of months) and a renewed hope that your fight is going well. Would it be a strain to drop a card saying what the status is? The bystanders do fret, you know.

And I was going to ask what you thought about Anna Kavan's ICE. (I don't know what I think yet, the jolt of European real craziness that comes off it first ~~hours~~ vision.) And I was going to rejoice that you too rejoice in PALE FIRE. That Nabokov. And I was going to inquire if you enjoyed Calvino. And I was going to mention ---apropos of your comment on the frame of actuality around a work of fantasy---how Tolkien seems to me to have built a double frame, using the hobbits as a half-actual anchor to go into wilder fantasy, and tying back again through a hobbit-ending to the world of men...and then the strange effect of the Appendices.



