A Transrealist Manifesto

by Rudy Rucker

In this piece I would like to advocate a style of SF-writing that I call Transrealism. Transrealism is not so much a type of SF as it is a type of avant-garde literature. I feel that Transrealism is the only valid approach to literature at this point in history.

The Transrealist writes about immediate perceptions in a fantastic way. Any literature which is not about actual reality is weak and enervated. But the genre of straight realism is all burnt out. Who needs more straight novels? The tools of fantasy and SF offer a means to thicken and intensify realistic fiction. By using fantastic devices it is actually possible to manipulate subtext. The familiar tools of SF — time travel, antigravity, alternate worlds, telepathy, etc. — are in fact symbolic of archetypal modes of perception. Time travel is memory, flight is enlightenment, alternate worlds symbolize the great variety of individual world-views, and telepathy stands for the ability to communicate fully. This is the "Trans" aspect. The "realism" aspect has to do with the fact that a valid work of art should deal with the world the way it actually is. Transrealism tries to treat not only immediate reality, but also the higher reality in which life is embedded.

The characters should be based on actual people. What makes standard genre fiction so insipid is that the characters are so obviously puppets of the author's will. Actions become predictable, and in dialogue it is difficult to tell which character is supposed to be talking. In real life, the people you meet almost never say what you want or expect them to. From long and bruising contact, you carry simulations of your acquaintances around in your head. These simulations are imposed on you from without; they do not react to imagined situations as you might desire. By letting these simulations run your characters, you can avoid turning out mechanical wish-fulfillments. It is essential that the characters be in some sense out of control, as are real people — for what can anyone learn by reading about made-up people?

In a Transrealist novel, the author usually appears as an actual character, or his or her personality is divided among several characters. On the face of it, this sounds egotistical. But I would argue that to use oneself as a character is not really egotistical. It is a simple necessity. If, indeed, you are writing about immediate perceptions, then what point of view

other than your own is possible? It is far more egotistical to use an idealized version of yourself, a fantasy-self, and have this para-self wreak its will on a pack of pliant slaves. The Transrealist protagonist is not presented as some super-person. A Transrealist protagonist is just as neurotic and ineffectual as we each know ourselves to be.

The Transrealist artist cannot predict the finished form of his or her work. The Transrealist novel grows organically, like life itself. The author can only choose characters and setting, introduce this or that particular fantastic element, and aim for certain key scenes. Ideally, a Transrealist novel is written in obscurity, and without an outline. If the author knows precisely how his or her book will develop, then the reader will divine this. A predictable book is of no interest. Nevertheless, the book must be coherent. Granted, life does not often make sense. But people will not read a book which has no plot. And a book with no readers is not a fully effective work of art. A successful novel of any sort should drag the reader through it. How is it possible to write such a book without an outline? The analogy is to the drawing of a maze. In drawing a maze, one has a start (characters and setting) and certain goals (key scenes). A good maze forces the tracer past all the goals in a coherent way. When you draw a maze, you start out with a certain path, but leave a lot a gaps where other paths can hook back in. In writing a coherent Transrealist novel, you include a number of unexplained happenings throughout the text. Things that you don't know the reason for. Later you bend strands of the ramifying narrative back to hook into these nodes. If no node is available for a given strand-loop, you go back and write a node in (cf. erasing a piece of wall in the maze). Although reading is linear, writing is not.

Transrealism is a revolutionary art-form. A major tool in mass thought-control is the myth of consensus reality. Hand in hand with this myth goes the notion of a "normal person."

There are no normal people — just look at your relatives, the people that you are in a position to know best. They're all weird at some level below the surface. Yet conventional fiction very commonly shows us normal people in a normal world. As long as you labor under the feeling that you are the only weirdo, then you feel weak and apologetic. You're eager to go along with the establishment, and a bit frightened to make waves — lest you be found out. Actual people are weird and unpredictable, this is why it is so important to use them as characters instead of the impossibly good and bad paperdolls of mass-culture.

The idea of breaking down consensus reality is even more important. This is where

the tools of SF are particularly useful. Each mind is a reality unto itself. As long as people can be tricked into believing the reality of the 6:30 news, they can be herded about like sheep. The "president" threatens us with "nuclear war," and driven frantic by the fear of "death" we rush out to "buy consumer goods." When in fact, what really happens is that you turn off the TV, eat something, and go for a walk, with infinitely many thoughts and perceptions mingling with infinitely many inputs.

There will always be a place for the escape-literature of genre SF. But there is no reason to let this severely limited and reactionary mode condition all our writing. Transrealism is the path to a truly artistic SF.

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