Shadows

Roger Zelazny

My subject is one which we all like and respect, whatever specific medium we most prefer. I am referring to fantastic literature. By this I mean to include science fiction, science fantasy, pure fantasy, the horror story, and all things of this sort. I am also going to talk about something I call shadows, as they affect the forms which, in our different capacities, we all pay homage to and/or make our money from. I’d also like to talk about how these things affect me and my work, and how they will affect, I believe, the future of science fiction as a written form (short story, novel) and fantastic literature in the comic art form, in the motion picture, and on television. Before I do this, however, I’d like to discuss the history of that phenomena which we refer to by the general term fandom.

Now of course, we all know that science fiction pretty much began in the magazine form in the late twenties. It continued on toward a sort of “golden age” in the late thirties and through the forties, and is still with us today in the form of several fine magazines which circulate 40 to 60 thousand copies per month. Fandom began, I would say, in the depression years. Possibly this was because there were a lot of people out of work and pulp magazines were cheap. At this time various magazines had lengthy letter columns. Fans (well, I guess you couldn’t really call them fans, they were just readers) with time on their hands would write into these letter columns in order to see their names in print and because they could enjoy a bit in the way of a discussion or reply from the editor or the other readers. They wrote into these magazines to discuss the stories or the art, the format of the magazine, whether to have rough edges or staples, or almost anything of that sort. After a time, because their names and addresses were printed, they began to correspond with one another. If they lived nearby, they would get together sometime. Then, because some were out of work, had nothing better to do, and had funds, they would hitch-hike around the country meeting other fans. Gradually, groups came to be formed which took it upon themselves to print amateur periodicals dedicated to whatever phase of fantastic literature happened to be the primary interest of the group. Gradually a tradition was built up. Little conferences and get-togethers were held. Finally, the first World Science Fiction Convention came along. Over the years a whole body of tradition grew up, so that there are now many regional and local conventions. Fanzines, there are hundreds of them around, fold and are replaced by new ones every year. We can safely say that this is all here to stay. We wonder, and I think the answer lies in the combination of the depression and the letter columns, we wonder why detective stories and western fiction never developed similar interest groups and similar traditions. I think that it just happened...the coincidence of these items...there was a format and a forum in which these people could express themselves, get to know one another, and finally to form organizations developing into what we have today.

Whatever the case, the comic books obviously didn’t come upon us during the depression. There were forerunners and comic strips, but it was pretty much a late thirties and early forties phenomena. It never had quite the same in the way of letter columns. As it happened, much of the subject matter of the comics was a graft from science fiction. There were science fiction people actually doing continuity for the comic books. Gardner Fox does it today, and Otto Binder used to do it. Because of this tie-in, all the science fiction themes with which the science fiction fan was familiar (such as space travel, space war, various space drives, time travel, alien cultures, psi phenomena and telepathy) appeared in comic form. Out of dual interests, science fiction fans began to read the comics, and comic fans drifted into science fiction. It was natural, since they found this pre-existing set up of clubs, periodicals, and journals, that they sort of gradually patterned themselves along the same lines. They actually started coming to the same conventions and putting out their own fanzines, so that we have two distinct fandoms which are linked together quite strongly and pattern in a very similar fashion, though they are still separate entities.

To carry things a bit further, I don’t know if Forry Ackerman is the one person to put the finger on, but a sort of movie fandom grew up also.

There is even a small group dedicated to old radio shows; Inner Sanctum, Lights Out, Hermits Cave, Dimension X, 2,000 Plus, The Shadow, House of Mystery, and the like. They obtain tapes of the old shows and play them. This is another aspect of fandom. I’m mentioning all things now, because I’m going to go into a discussion concerning the effect of the various media on the ideas which make up all of these fandoms.

Literature, of necessity, contains shadows. I think I coined the term shadows, and what I mean by this is that a writer never writes an entire story, an illustrator never draws a complete picture, and a producer doesn’t let the movie tell all. You live part of it yourself, or you draw it in your mind, or you concoct part of it as you watch the movie. Shadows are necessary. If I were, at this moment, to decide that I wanted to describe this room in a story, I could do it in one sentence or two paragraphs, depending upon the purpose for which I was describing it. My description, of necessity, would be incomplete. If I were to sit down and describe every article of clothing that everybody was wearing, the color of everybody’s hair or eyes, the way they’re sitting, whether cross-legged or arms folded, or what have you...the temperature of the room, the background noises, rattling glasses, the chandelier, the colors of the walls...I would have a whole book. If you were stupid enough to read this thing through, you’d be quite bored by the end. So, of necessity, I have to leave a lot of things out. Any writer has to pick out significant features and imply the rest. The inferences that are drawn from what is implied is a good portion of writing the story. If, for example, I were to take a photograph of this room as it stands now, you would see all the things that I don’t say as well as the things that I do say in writing. However, in my description I would have to throw in some adjectives, and these adjectives would give the scene feeling. Just looking at a picture of a crowd staring in this direction wouldn’t tell you if the people were hating the person they were looking at, or listening intently, or if they were just sitting there saying, “Gee, it’s warm in here. When is he going to shut up so we can get out?” So a picture, in one sense, is worth thousands of words, but in another sense is lacking.

Writing involves your taking everything in though those little cryptic bugs that crawl across the page and construct things around them. This is where that strange thing called “sense of wonder” comes into play. There is no special reason why someone has a “sense of wonder,” unless, maybe you fell on your head when you were a kid or something. You’ve got this “sense of wonder” and it sort of enfolds this shadow area. Into those shadows you project those things you are looking for, the fantastic things, maybe the horrible things, or the exotic things. The other media have their own shadows also, but they are in different places. Take a series of cartoon panels...they show the heroes, their skintight outfits, always looking heroic (after a tremendous battle it seems that their hair has just been combed and all the wrinkles smoothed out of their costumes). I was very disappointed when Batman came to television, because his uniform wrinkled. I was used to seeing a very tight, sleek thing that showed all of his muscles, and just couldn’t wrinkle. I never could believe that Batman’s costume could wrinkle, but there it was. If I were to take the photo I told you of a while ago (of all of you sitting here) and stick it up here on the wall behind me and ask everyone to stand up and have another picture taken, stick it next to the first, and then if I were to ask you to kick over all the chairs in the room, break a few, throw a few of these glasses against the wall, and stalk out leaving the room empty, take a third photo and set it up over here, without any word balloons, especially in the last one, or any other descriptions, and if someone were to come in and look at this series of pictures, they would tell him a story. It might not always be the same story, but there is something implied there. You got mad at me, there was a riot, we all got hauled away by the cops. The shadows there, however, are not in the pictures, which put everything in bold perspective (right in the foreground) where nothing is left to the imagination. The shadows are in what lies between the pictures. This is the place where the mind makes automatic assumptions. Say, in a “Fantastic Four” comic book in one scene they are laying around the Baxter building and they get a message. They say, “My golly we’ve got to get down to Brazil right away...to that spaceship where the monsters have landed.” In the next panel we see the Pogo Plane flying across the Andes. We see a few condors flapping their wings, perhaps, while they are stationary. In the next scene they are running from their plane towards an enormous spaceship parked right near the jungle. In between those three panels a lot of things happened. Maybe Ben Grimm went to get a toothbrush. Sue Storm said, “Well, Reed, you’re going to throw a few pieces of equipment into the plane, why don’t I go make a few ham sandwiches?” Ben maybe smoked a cigar while flying out there. Things like this happened because you know what that there is a time lapse between them and you automatically assume that there is a continuance of the characters’ existence between them. So this is the place where your imagination fools around, perhaps subliminally. The “sense of wonder” comes into play as to what is going on between these sequences. Now, this is, of course, a very visual thing. You are highlighted with the scenes of action. It is in this way different from the written word while still dwelling on the same subject matter, fantastic happenings. Consider radio as a medium for a fantastic story. With the old shows I have mentioned, you could sit there with your eyes closed and listen. They did some very fine Ray Bradbury stories, a lot of the ones that appeared in The Martian Chronicles, and some of Heinlein’s stuff. You would sit there and hear a voice coming out that would say, “The ship from Earth came down on the red sands of Mars. Suddenly, like a great silver bird, Captain Smith and his crew descended. They stood there in the chill Martian morning. Ensign Jones turned to Smith and said, ‘Do you hear a strange singing, sir?’ ” Then you would hear a background of wailing, perhaps. You are not looking at pictures or reading words. You are sitting there and getting them through the ear. This, I think, is a very good medium for science fiction (not that I am passing aesthetic judgement on any of them). I think it is good because it leaves a lot to the imagination. It’s almost like the old village story teller. When I gave that little description, when I said that the silver space ship came down, I would guess that you visualized one. If you were looking at a picture of one though, it might cheapen it a bit. It might destroy something of the element of this particular phase of the shadow moment. Now, when you combine the two, the visual and the auditory, and you produce a motion picture or a television show, you do something different again. You feel much closer to it. It’s almost a tactile, kinesthetic sensation that you experience. You are seeing everything happen and listening to it. It’s not at all like reading about it, because it does not leave that much to your imagination. You know that so-and-so looks like Rock Hudson or whomever. In a story, however, if I describe someone who is Rock Hudson’s height and has hair the color of Rock Hudson’s hair and eyes that are his color and that he is smiling a little bit and squinting, how you would picture him would depend on whether later on the page he turned out to be a villain or a hero. You would color in certain things from your imagination. If he were a hero he would be just a bit handsomer than the villain. This element is there. It’s got to be there. It’s participation.

There are different ways of dealing with these things we are interested in. You can hit the various senses with them. Some of us may be fans of one particular media or another. Most of us touch within all the areas. I happen to be oriented toward the written word because I do it. What I am leading up to saying, though, is that we’ve got these fandoms, and that we are each in a way dedicated to one another of these, and they are close because they share a common sense of wonder in the way they deal with the shadows. Not only are the fandoms close, but the various media overlap. I think that comic art has influenced the science fiction novel, and science fiction short story in that this sense of the visual (at least in my case, and I think in others) has served as a tool for describing something. I’ve noticed that on occasion when I’ve wanted to describe a character or a scene I will visualize it, almost as though it were a panel, an illustration. I will describe and then go on. I have noted too, that in the motion picture the one place where the shadows operate is in the camera, in the fact that it can zoom in for a close-up of a man’s face then back off and show a monster stalking him slowly from behind, or show a man and a woman kissing then have a fade out and show them having breakfast together a bit later. The imagination works. It fills in what happened during the fade out. It goes along with the camera movements. This too has influenced writing both in the science fiction field and out of it. I think that movies have had a very strong influence on fiction. I sometimes find myself thinking of the whole thing as a sequence of movie shots. I’ll, maybe, back off for a long shot and describe a scene, maybe two characters in the distance. Then I’ll zoom in and show them clearer and describe them. Then show a close-up...the expression on a man’s face. So there is a cross fertilization of the comics and the movies and writing. I believe that to an extent it has worked the other way also. I think that the modern novel which is antinovelistic and is breaking traditions and is experimenting has influenced the movies. It is truer of foreign movies than it is of those made in Hollywood. There are a lot of surrealistic things, French movies where they apply novelistic techniques.

There are these shadows. They have influenced me. They are present, and I think that they are going to continue to cross-pollinate and fertilize one another, and that as time goes on, these new tools that have been borrowed from the various art forms are going to be switched around and tried in different areas.

Notes

This is Zelazny’s Guest of Honor Speech from the 1967 Detroit Triple Fan Fair convention featuring the triad of comics, movies and science fiction. Zelazny received the first Nova Award at this convention in recognition of outstanding contribution to science fiction and fantasy.