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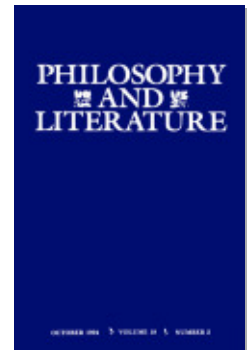
## The Paradox of Junk Fiction

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## THE PARADOX OF JUNK FICTION

PERHAPS on your way to some academic conference, if you had no papers to grade, you stopped in the airport gift shop for something to read on the plane. You saw racks of novels authored by the likes of Mary Higgins Clark, Michael Crichton, John Grisham, Danielle Steele, Sidney Sheldon, Stephen King, Sue Grafton, Elmore Leonard, Sara Paretsky, Tom Clancy, and so on. These are the kinds of novels that, when you lend them to friends, you don't care, unless you live in Bowling Green, Ohio, whether you ever get them back. They are mass, popular fictions. In another era, they would have been called pulp fictions. Following Thomas Roberts,<sup>1</sup> I will call them junk fictions, under which rubric I will also include things like Harlequin romances; sci-fi, horror, and mystery magazines; comic books; and broadcast narratives on either the radio or TV, as well as commercial movies.

There are a number of interesting philosophical questions that we may ask about junk fiction. We could, for example, attempt to characterize its essential features. However, for the present, I will assume that the preceding examples are enough to provide you with a rough-and-ready notion of what I am calling junk fiction, and I will attempt to explore another feature of the phenomenon, viz., what I call the paradox of junk fiction.

The junk fictions that I have in mind are all narratives. Indeed, their story dimension is the most important thing about them. Stephen King, for instance, makes this point by saying that he is primarily a story teller rather than a writer. Junk fictions aspire to be page-turners—the blurb on the cover of *Stillwatch* by Mary Higgins Clark says that it is “designed to be read at breathtaking speed”—and what motivates turning the page so quickly is our interest in what happens next. We do not dawdle

over Clark's diction as we might over Updike's nor do we savor the complexity of her sentence structure, as we do with Virginia Woolf's. Rather, we read for story.

Moreover, junk fictions are the sort of narratives that commentators are wont to call formulaic. That is, junk fictions generally belong to well-entrenched genres, which themselves are typified by their possession of an extremely limited repertoire of story-types. For example, as John Cawelti has pointed out, one such recurring Western narrative is that of the recently pacifist gunfighter, like Shane, who is forced by circumstances to take up his pistols again, with altogether devastating effect.<sup>2</sup>

Junk fictions tell these generic stories again and again with minor variations. Sometimes these variations may be quite clever and unexpected. Agatha Christie was the master of this; she was able to use the conventions of the mystery genre in order to "hide" her murderers. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, she "secrets" the murderer in the personage of the narrator; in *Ten Little Indians*, the murderer is a "dead man"; while in *Murder on the Orient Express*, all the suspects did it. In each of these cases, Christie's brilliance hinges upon her playing (and preying) upon conventional expectations.

Nevertheless, even these surprising variations require a well-established background of narrative forms. That is, in order to appreciate these variations, the reader must in some sense know the standard story already. And with junk fiction, it is generally fair to say that in some sense, the reader—or, at least, the reader who has read around in the genre before—knows in rough outline how the story is likely to go. Readers and/or viewers of *Jurassic Park* surmised, once the dinosaur enclosures were described, that in fairly short order the dinosaurs would trample them down and go on the rampage—after all we had already seen or read *The Lost World*, *King Kong*, and their progeny.

So, junk fictions are formulaic. They rehearse certain narrative formats again and again. And, furthermore, in some very general sense, the audience already knows the story in question. But this knowledge on the part of the audience provokes a question, specifically, why if the reader, viewer or listener *already* knows the story is she or he still interested in investing time in reading, hearing or seeing it? If you have read one Harlequin Romance, it might be argued, you have read them all. You know how it will turn out. It serves no purpose to read any more of them. Or, at least, our persistent reading or viewing in familiar genres invites the question: what sense can we make out of our con-

tinued consumption of junk fictions, since it is probably the case that, for most genres of junk fiction, most consumers can be said to know the story antecedently.

There is something paradoxical here. It seems to be undeniably true that people consume junk fictions for their stories—i.e., that what interests and absorbs consumers of junk fictions are the stories. But it also appears eminently reasonable to suppose that if people read a certain sort of fiction, such as junk fiction, for their stories, then knowing these stories already should preclude any interest in the stories. And yet, at the same time, we must agree that, in the main, consumers of junk fiction are generally reading fictions whose stories—or story-types—they already know. So, from these three observations, we can derive the conclusion that, though we should not be interested in junk fictions just because we already know the relevant stories, recurring narratives are precisely that which interests us in junk fiction.

Moreover, this somewhat contradictory finding calls for an explanation. How can we be interested in consuming stories that we already know? How is it rational? Or, is it simply irrational?<sup>3</sup>

This is what I call the paradox of junk fiction. This is rather different from the paradox that Thomas Roberts addresses in his book *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*. His question is how can consumers of junk fictions speak so disparagingly of them while, at the same time, they evidently derive such great enjoyment and pleasure from them?

And, the paradox of junk fiction should also be distinguished from what I call the paradox of recidivism, which paradox, in turn, is based on the question of how to make sense of the phenomenon that people often read or see mystery and suspense fictions more than once, despite the fact that they have already read or seen them and, therefore, know how they turn out.

The paradox of junk fiction and the paradox of recidivism are clearly related. The paradox of recidivism inquires into the rationality of consuming particular fictions—like the film *Vertigo*—again and again, despite our knowledge of the ending; whereas the paradox of junk fiction is not about particular fictions but about types or genres. Why persist in reading numerically distinct Conan the Barbarian or Tarzan stories, since not only are they always basically the same, but, more importantly, the reader in some sense knows this? In what follows, I will attempt to dissolve the paradox of junk fiction and to explain why it is not irrational for us to read plots whose generic structures we already know.

Of course, one response to the putative paradox of junk fiction would be to accept the phenomenon as it has been reported so far—to admit that there is a paradox here—and to contend that the existence of that paradox only confirms once again that people are irrational. They do read for story, and the stories are monotonously repetitive. This irrational behavior undoubtedly requires an explanation, but the explanation that does the job will not show the consumer of junk fiction to be embarked upon a rational activity. Rather, his or her paradoxical behavior is irrational and what explains it is psychoanalysis.

A longstanding psychoanalytic proposal concerning junk fiction is the notion that junk fiction functions in a way that is analogous to daydreaming. In his classic essay, "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming," Freud explicitly pursues his analysis by focusing upon the authors of what I call junk fiction, whom he describes as "the less pretentious writers of romances, novels and stories who are read all the same by the widest circles of men and women."<sup>4</sup> Freud maintains that many of their central, recurring narrative motifs can be characterized in terms of wish-fulfillment.

Heroes in such stories seem to be under special providential protection. Freud writes, "If at the end of one chapter the hero is left unconscious and bleeding from severe wounds, I am sure to find him at the beginning of the next being carefully tended and on the way to recovery; if the first volume ends in the hero being shipwrecked in a storm at sea, I am certain to hear at the beginning of the next of his hairbreadth escape. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Likewise Freud points out that in such stories, all the women fall in love with our hero while the distribution of good guys and bad guys is calculated in accordance with whether they are or are not the hero's rivals.

In the case of the providential protection of the hero, the reader is thought to identify with the hero and the writing answers to our infantile fantasies of invulnerability. The hero's strength would supposedly correspond to our infantile fantasies of omnipotence. The irresistible attraction that the hero exerts on the opposite sex bespeaks our sexual wishes; while the shape of the moral landscape reflects our unflinching egotistical desire to be always right. Through identification with the hero in junk fiction, the psychoanalyst argues, the reader or viewer secures vicarious gratification for his/her infantile and egotistical wishes. Junk fiction is analogous to the daydream insofar as it is an avenue for wish-fulfillment.

It is irrational for us to consume the recurring stories of junk fiction.

Our behavior is obsessional. Nevertheless, it can be explained in terms of the way in which the recurring stories of junk fiction vicariously satisfy some of our deepest instinctual desires. Those distant, stand-offish men in romance novels all finally succumb to true love, thereby responding to the reader's desire, while it is said that the readers and writers of certain slash lit—concerning homosexual erotica, written and primarily consumed by women, about the crew of the Star Ship Enterprise—are in search of idealized relationships.<sup>6</sup> Thus, on the psychoanalytic account, people read stories they already know and this is irrational, but it can be explained in terms of the compelling, wish-fulfilling capacity of these types of stories. We are driven to reread them, even though it makes little sense, because in rereading them infantile, egotistical, and sexual wishes are addressed.

I have several misgivings about the psychoanalytic solution to the paradox of junk fiction. First, I am not convinced that we should be so quick to concede the irrationality of consuming the recurring stories of junk fiction. We should at least canvass some rational explanations of the phenomenon before consigning it to the realm of the irrational. Indeed, I suspect that the behavior in question can be not merely explained, but even justified rationally.

Furthermore, the psychoanalytic account seems inadequate. It maintains that junk fictions function as wish-fulfillments. Though this may be initially plausible for some types of junk fiction, it hardly applies across the board. For in a substantial number of junk fictions the states of affairs realized in the story fail to correspond to what it is reasonable to presume are the wishes of readers. In Ira Levin's novel *Rosemary's Baby* the heroine is subjugated and the Anti-Christ is born. Do average readers wish for the reign of Satan? Of the recent film *My Girl*, should we really suppose that typical viewers wish for the death of the small boy? And in the movies *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* all the characters with whom the audience might be said to identify are blown apart, while the very notion of identification upon which the psychoanalytic theory seems to ride is at least questionable.

Of course, the psychoanalyst may try to negotiate these counterexamples by saying that junk fictions not only compel attention through promising wish-fulfillment but also by manifesting anxieties, perhaps even deep anxieties. However, this move involves several problems. For if junk fictions traffic in anxieties, it is not clear how this helps explain why we would be attracted to them. Here the psychoanalyst may claim that these anxieties themselves merely mask deeper

wishes. But, needless to say, supporting this claim will involve the postulation of a great many theoretically suspicious, ad hoc processes in order to account for the transformation of apparent wishes into effective icons of anxiety which are still simultaneously wish-fulfilling.

Perhaps our horror at the triumph of the Anti-Christ masks our deeper desire for a reign of chaos and unbridled sexuality. But this seems somewhat arbitrary. For, then, how are we to speak of our wishes being fulfilled in all those junk fictions where the birth of the Anti-Christ is aborted? Turning all the apparent counterevidence into subterranean wish-fulfillment involves too much theoretical "improvisation." But, at the same time, saying that junk fiction commands attention by virtue of manifesting wishes and/or anxieties robs the theory of its specificity. Hypothesizing that junk fictions are wish-fulfillments is an informative conjecture. Saying that junk fictions either involve wishes or they do not isn't merely unfalsifiable, it is also uninformative.

Thomas J. Roberts has recently advanced an alternative account of reading junk fiction that would explain the way in which consuming generic stories is no affront to rationality. According to Thomas, reading junk fictions is always a matter of reading in a system. He says, "In reading any single story, then, we are reading the system that lies behind it, that realizes itself through the mind of that story's writer. And here lies the fundamental distinction between reading one book after another and reading in a genre, between reading with that story focus and reading with the genre focus. Genre reading is system reading. That is, as we are reading the stories, we are exploring the system that created them."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, for Roberts junk fiction reading is genre reading and genre reading is always intertextual. It is reading with some awareness of a background of norms against which the variations in the story before us are to be appreciated. For example, Roberts maintains that Nora's line in Dashiell Hammett's *Thin Man*—"Tell me something Nick. Tell me the truth: when you were wrestling with Mimi, didn't you have an erection?"—stood out, so to speak, because it was unprecedented in comparable detective stories. Likewise, the murder in *Psycho* takes on further significance because of the way in which it subverts a certain genre norm by killing off the putatively main character in the first act.

Moreover, if I understand Roberts correctly, reading in a system is not primarily subliminal. It is not simply that we possess these genre norms

tacitly and that we register their disturbance as we might the ungrammaticality of a sentence. Rather it seems that for Roberts reading in the system is done with self-awareness that includes comparing and contrasting devices across stories.

Given the notion of reading in a system, the fact that the stories in question are simple and broadly repetitive is not problematic. Indeed, these very design-features facilitate what Roberts calls reading in the system. Furthermore, even if the individual stories appear simplistic and routine, the system is complex. Thus, though in reading junk fiction, we read for the story in some sense, the actual focus of our attention is the system in which we track the place of the story and its elements as variations, subversions, echoes, expansions, and so on. That we know the story-type is no impediment to our interest because what concerns us are convergences, contrasts, and extensions within the story type. The roughly repetitive aspect of these stories makes our fine-grained appreciation of their differences possible.

Perhaps there is an element of reading in a system in much genre consumption. One sword-and-sorcery saga may recall to mind another, just as conversations about a TV program often involve tracing recurring or opposing incidents and episodes in the series before moving on to a discussion of analogous shows. That is, there is no denying that a comparative sense is relevant to the consumption of junk fiction. And, of course, fans elevate that comparative sense into a baroque art. Yet, it seems to me that, though what Roberts calls reading in a system (which I prefer to call comparative reading—and/or viewing) is not infrequent, it is not a necessary component of consuming junk fiction. That is, there is a core phenomenon of reading junk fiction where the consumer knows the story-type and derives justifiable satisfaction from the fiction, but not because he/she is reading in a system.

Admittedly, most fans and connoisseurs read comparatively in a genre, as do both academic and journalistic critics. And where someone reads in this way, we have an answer, for the group in question, to the paradox of junk fiction. But this is a somewhat specialized, though not arcane, mode of consumption. And, of course, many readers and viewers are neither fans nor connoisseurs nor critics. A more basic mode of reading junk fiction, I submit, is to focus on the story, not upon the genre of which it is a part. Quite often we become absorbed in a mystery story of the locked-room variety without that experience bringing to mind particular stories of the same sort that we have already



encountered (such as Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*), though, at the same time, we recognize that this is a sort of set-up with which we have been confronted before.

One cannot rule out the possibility of this kind of reading by claiming that all junk fiction reading is, by definition, reading in a system. There is also reading junk fiction noncomparatively, though with a sense of familiarity with the story-type. And for this type of reading, which I suspect is quite pervasive, the paradox of junk fiction still threatens.

The notion that reading junk fiction is reading in a system does not provide a comprehensive solution to the paradox of junk fiction. For though this kind of reading is not uncommon, it is special, and not all, nor perhaps even most, junk fiction reading is of this sort. However, despite its failure in terms of comprehensiveness, the reading-in-a-system approach does suggest a fruitful way in which to solve the paradox of junk fiction. For the reading-in-a-system approach involves the explicit recognition that our interest in a story may not be exhausted by knowledge of how it turns out. We may be interested in a story because of what we can do with it, i.e., in virtue of the kind of activities it can support.

The reading-in-a-system hypothesis locates our interest in a particular junk narrative in terms of the way in which junk fiction invites our contemplation of themes and variations within a genre. This phenomenon does not seem comprehensive enough to solve the paradox of junk fiction in general. But it does suggest that we may answer the paradox by identifying some activity or range of activities that junk fiction affords, the pursuit of which motivates our consumption of junk fiction despite our knowledge of the story.

What sorts of activities might these be? Perhaps the easiest way to begin to characterize them is to start with an obvious example, mystery stories. We open the book. We recognize familiar surroundings—say a house in the country. The master of the house is a real bastard—he manages to do something churlish to every other character he meets. We realize that he is not long for this world; for the author is setting things out in such a way that virtually everyone in the fictional world will have a motive to kill him. We have been here before; we know what kind of story we are in; we have met the characters already. And yet we read on. We play the game of whodunit, which, of course, involves our doing something: to wit, performing a range of activities that could be roughly labeled interpreting and inferring.

Clearly the paradox of fiction disappears when we are thinking of what is called classical detective fiction. Whether we are reading stories by Arthur Conan Doyle or more sundry items like *McNally's Luck* by Lawrence Sanders or *Murder at the MLA* by D. J. H. Jones, we have no difficulty in explaining why, even though we know the story-type, we continue reading. The reading enables us to exercise our interpretive and inferential powers. Perhaps it is even the case that the repetitiveness of the story-types aids us in entering the game, since experience with very similar stories may make certain elements in the relevant stories salient for interpretive and inferential processing.

Nevertheless, be that as it may, it is clear that when it comes to mysteries, the fact that we already know the story-type and, in many cases, even the kind of solution eventually used to ascertain whodunit does not preclude our interest in the fiction, nor indeed our interest in the story aspect of the fiction. For the familiar story serves as a vehicle for such readerly activities as interpretation and inference.

Though this sort of readerly activity is very evident with respect to mystery fiction, it should be noted that it is also available in every other sort of junk fiction. Let a few examples from different genres illustrate this point. When reading Isaac Asimov's science fiction novel *Foundation*, the reader infers that the Empire has settled into a kind of medieval stagnation—where the capacity for original research and invention has been lost and, in fact, is repressed in favor of reliance on the authority of the past—before this social malaise is explicitly diagnosed in the book; just as the attentive reader has surmised the identity of the Mule in Asimov's sequel, *Foundation and Empire*, way in advance of its explicit revelation in the text.

Or, for a more localized example, in the concluding pages of *The Rustlers of West Fork*, by Louis L'Amour, the reader knows that Hopalong Cassidy is about to be set upon in the wintry street by Johnny Rebb. Johnny Rebb is hiding out in a house which Hopalong has been told is empty. When Hopalong steps into the street, we learn that he is looking intently at something. L'Amour writes: "No snow on the roof. He smiled. . . ." And, then, we infer that Hopalong knows Johnny Rebb is in the house, because the house is obviously heated, and that inference, in turn, is confirmed on the very next page.

Harlequin Romances are often held up as the epitome of the formulaic. So many of these novels mobilize the same scenario: girl meets boy; girl misunderstands boy, or vice-versa; the misunderstanding is cleared up; girl gets boy. But despite the formulaic structure of these

stories, each novel affords the reader the opportunity to exercise her interpretive powers.

In *The Lake Effect* by Leigh Michaels, Alex Jacobi, a high-powered woman lawyer, dressed to the nines for success, has been told to lure Kane Forrestal back to Pence Whitfield, the largest law firm in the Twin Cities. Kane says that he prefers beachcombing to big-time law. Alex assumes that this is a bargaining ploy and that her job is essentially to renegotiate Kane's contract. But the reader gradually hypothesizes that Kane is sincere in his distaste for Pence Whitfield, that he is attracted to Alex, and that she is attracted to him. Alex—one might say *of course*—is the last to know. She consistently misinterprets Kane's avowals and advances as negotiating gambits. Thus, the reader is constantly reinterpreting Alex's interpretations of what is going on.

Or, for a more compact example of the kind of interpretation that I have in mind, consider the Harlequin Romance *The Quiet Professor* by Betty Neels. Nurse Megan Rodner is convinced that Doctor Jake van Belfeld is married. The reader realizes that despite his gruffness, he is attracted to Megan, and it also slowly but surely dawns on us that we have no real evidence that van Belfeld is married. In a conversation with Megan, he says his house is too large, but that that can be remedied. She says, "Oh, of course, when your wife and children live here." We know that by this she means van Belfeld's supposed present wife and children. He answers, "As you say, when my wife and children live here," which the reader understands is likely to mean van Belfeld's future wife (whom Megan might become) and their children.

Reading such sentences and situations for their ambiguities is an essential ingredient in appreciating Harlequin Romances. Even if one grasps the Harlequin formula, one still derives value—call it transactional value—from reading the story by means of exercising and applying one's interpretive powers. There is no paradox in reading Harlequin Romances, even though you already know the story-type inside and out, for each different novel provides you with the opportunity to exercise your interpretive powers on a different set of details and misunderstandings, and, most importantly, on different *kinds* of misunderstandings.

Junk fiction, then, can serve as an occasion for transactional value. This is the value that we derive by, among other things, exercising our powers of inference and interpretation in the course of reading. Here reading is construed as a transaction. The transactional value in consuming junk fiction does not come from simply learning or know-

ing the details of the story but from the pleasure we derive from the activity of reading or viewing the story. For example, at one point in the movie *Jurassic Park*, the hunter Muldoon explains how packs of velociraptors destroy their prey by outflanking them. Later in the film, when Muldoon is tracking one raptor, we anticipate that flanking maneuver by another raptor, even though, for some reason, Muldoon does not. When the second raptor finally appears, we feel gratified because our prediction has been borne out and here, just as in the other cases that I have cited, a sense of satisfaction obtains when our inferences and interpretations are correct.

Where junk fictions encourage or invite us to make conjectures about what is going to happen, they keep us riveted to, or at least engaged with, the fiction insofar as we want to see whether our conjectures will be confirmed; and, moreover, when they are confirmed, we derive the kind of pleasure that comes with any successful prediction. In Danielle Steele's *Mixed Blessings*, Barbie's behavior leads the reader to suspect that she's cheating on Charlie Winwood. We read on to ascertain whether or not this is so; we feel excitement as we sense that what we have inferred is about to be revealed; and then once the secret is out of the bag, we feel a flush of self-satisfaction. Junk fiction can sustain interest, in part, because it affords the opportunity for self-rewarding cognitive activity, which, if it is not as arduous as higher mathematics, is not negligible either.

Reading or viewing junk fiction involves the consumer in various activities. At the very least, the reader is involved in following the story, which is not simply a matter of absorbing the narrative but which involves a continual process of constructing a sense of where the story is headed. This may include predicting exactly what will happen next. But it need not.

Generally, however, following the story does engage us, at the very least, in envisioning or anticipating the *range* of things—will she get the job or not—that are apt to happen next. In the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, once the heroine finds the boy's backpack, the viewer tracks the action in terms of the question of whether our heroine and our heroes will meet or pass each other on the elevators. Earlier scenes in popular narratives are most frequently necessary conditions for later scenes. For this reason, earlier scenes implicate a range of options concerning what will happen next, and a crucial aspect of what it is to follow a story is to evolve and to project a reasonable horizon or set of expectations about the direction of the events the story has put in motion. Indeed, it is only

within the context of such a horizon of expectations that the reader or viewer can be said to know what is at stake in the action.

Furthermore, following the story also requires filling-in the presuppositions and implications of the fictional world of the narrative, an activity that can become challenging with cyberpunk fiction such as William Gibson's *Virtual Reality*. Undoubtedly, the implied background of much popular fiction is not as arcane as one finds in cyberpunk. Nevertheless, there is never any narrative so simple and self-sufficient in terms of information that audiences need make no contribution in order to render the story intelligible. Thus, as of any fiction, junk fictions require active consumers.

So far the readerly activities I have called attention to have been what might be called cognitive. But, of course, the consumers of junk fiction not only derive satisfaction and value from the cognitive judgments they make, they also derive satisfaction from the moral and emotional judgments that are part and parcel of their reading. If in Ben Bova's novel *Mars*, our growing conviction—on the basis of various hints and clues before it is stated—that the expedition is deteriorating physically and psychologically is a cognitive judgment, then our classification of the newscaster Edith as an opportunist is a moral judgment and our hatred for the Vice-President is emotional.

Quite often in junk fictions, readers and viewers know more than the characters in the stories about what is going on. For example, in *North by Northwest*, the audience knows that George Kaplan does not exist, but Roger Thornhill, who has been mistaken for George Kaplan, does not. This not only enables us to anticipate what will happen in scenes where Thornhill searches out George Kaplan, but also raises the emotion of suspense in us about whether and when Thornhill will learn the truth. In this case, knowledge, emotion, and morality—since our sense that Thornhill is morally right contributes to the substance of our suspense—lock us into the story.<sup>8</sup> And, in general, our engagement with a junk fiction depends upon the mobilization of our cognitive, moral, and emotive powers, for it is the active exercise of these powers that gives junk fiction a transactional value for its consumers.

The paradox of junk fiction arises from supposing that it is true that people read popular fictions for their stories—i.e., that people are interested in junk fictions for their stories; and, that if people read a certain sort of fiction for their stories, then knowing the story precludes any interest in the fiction; and, finally, that people who read junk fiction read stories (story-types) that they already know. This, in turn, implies

that people are and are not interested in junk fictions. The psychoanalyst and the proponent of genre reading as reading in a system avert this contradiction by denying that the readers of junk fiction read for stories—rather they read for wish-fulfillments, on the one hand, and for systems, on the other.

Not attracted to either of these approaches, I propose that we dissolve the contradiction by denying the proposition that if people are interested in a certain sort of fiction, then knowing the story precludes any interest in the fiction. Why? Because we can be interested in the story as an occasion to exercise our cognitive powers, our powers of interpretation and inference, our powers of moral judgment and emotive assessment. Junk fictions can support these activities; indeed, they are often designed to encourage them. That we know the story-types already in no way deters our deriving this sort of transactional value from junk fictions. Perhaps in many circumstances knowledge of these story-types may make our active engagement with junk fictions more zestful in the way that playing games with well-defined rules enables us to hone our abilities more keenly.

If I am right and junk fictions afford transactional value to readers and viewers, then there is nothing mysterious or irrational about consuming junk fictions. For within the context of recurring story-types, it is possible to exercise our cognitive, moral, and emotional powers. Baseball games are repetitive, but we play them again and again because they afford the opportunity to activate and sometimes even to expand our powers. There is nothing mysterious or irrational about this when we realize that performing the activity itself is a source of pleasure and satisfaction. Likewise with junk fictions, the activities of following the story, of morally assessing situations and characters as well as of admiring or despising them occupy our time with varying degrees of satisfaction even if we are already familiar with the generic plot.

Undoubtedly it sounds strange to attempt to justify the rationality of consuming junk fiction on the grounds of the activities that it abets. For one of the hoariest commonplaces concerning such fiction is that it renders its audiences passive;<sup>9</sup> that it stupefies them; that it is a kind of narcotic. But this view of junk fiction is unwarranted. First, if the truth be told, the active/passive distinction is unpersuasive. After all, it is very difficult to conceive of a completely passive response to anything, especially to anything like a text. Doesn't the most lackadaisical response involve some cognitive processing?<sup>10</sup> Is there such a thing as a thoroughly passive response?

So, at the very least, the burden of proof lies with the detractors of junk fiction to define, in some reasonable way, whatever they mean by passivity. For unless they are able to propose some plausible notion of passivity with respect to junk fiction, we need not hesitate to think of junk fiction in terms of activity.

Detractors of junk fiction or, as it is sometimes called, kitsch, maintain that the audience for junk fiction is passive when compared to the audience for high art. Moreover, they explain this by claiming that junk fiction is “easy” while high art, or at least high art of the twentieth century, is “difficult.” The idea seems to be that high art demands effort and, hence, activity on the part of its consumers, while kitsch and junk fiction can be consumed effortlessly and, therefore, passively.

Now it is true that popular art, including junk fiction, is designed for effortless consumption and that it is rarely difficult. However, it is a logical error to presume that ease of consumability entails passivity, or that activity only correlates with what is difficult. Though difficulty may function to goad activity, there can be activity where there is no difficulty. And this concession is all that we need in order to dissolve the paradox of junk fiction by reference to the activities of the reader of junk fiction.

Someone might charge that the activities that I have invoked with respect to junk fiction are not unique to this sort of narrative. Canonical classics and modernist narratives also support the kinds of activities I have discussed; in fact, they may even in general stimulate these kinds of activities more than standard examples of junk fiction.

Of course, I freely admit both of these claims. The readerly activities in virtue of which consuming junk fictions is rational are the same or, at least, are on a continuum with many of the activities elicited by canonical and modernist fictions. And these latter sorts of fiction may stimulate more readerly activity than junk fiction; and, in that sense, may even be of greater or higher value. However, admitting all this does not undercut my more modest conclusion: that typically junk fiction does promote certain self-rewarding, readerly activities which make it rational to consume junk fictions in cases where we are already familiar with the story. That these activities can be engaged elsewhere, perhaps even more intensively, does not compromise the fact that they are also available in junk fictions where they serve to make reading, viewing, and listening worthwhile.

Here it is important to note that unlike some defenders of junk fiction, I am not claiming that junk fiction has some unique standard of

value of its own that is incommensurable with the standards of what might be called ambitious literature. For the activities that make consuming junk fictions worthwhile are on a continuum with those available in ambitious fiction.

This, of course, does not imply that junk fiction is an evolutionary way-station on the trajectory to ambitious fiction; in fact, I doubt that reading junk fiction necessarily puts one on the pathway toward reading more ambitious fiction. But this is compatible with maintaining that the value in junk fiction is on a continuum with the value of ambitious fiction, even if consuming junk fiction does not lead one inexorably to cultivate more of the same value in ambitious fiction.

Just as a taste for beer does not inevitably lead to a taste for champagne, an appreciation of the transactional value of junk fiction does not lead typical readers to a taste for high literary culture. And even persons accustomed to the transactional value of ambitious literature can savor the perhaps lesser virtues of junk fiction in the same way that a connoisseur of champagne can appreciate beer. Indeed, even the wine taster may think beer is what one should have some of the time, though she values champagne, overall, as finer.

Lastly, the kinds of readerly activities that I have been discussing should not be confused with either games of make-believe, on the one hand, or resistant readings, a.k.a. recodings, on the other. For I am not convinced that while watching *The Fugitive* the viewer must make believe that she sees a train hitting a bus, whereas the viewer cannot appreciate the film without at numerous points structuring what she sees in terms of whether or not the hero is about to be captured, i.e., without following the plot portentively in light of how the story is likely to unfold.

Moreover, the relevant readerly activities are not of the type that people in cultural studies refer to as recodings or resistant readings. For so-called recodings involve audiences in using junk fictions for creating meanings that serve their own special purposes. Australian aborigines viewing Western movies and cheering when the Indians annihilate the white settlers are said to recode those movies—to derive a significance from the story which was unintended by the makers of the narrative and yet is politically galvanizing for the aboriginal community (and its political struggles).<sup>11</sup> Recodings, in this sense, either reconfigure or add something alien to the narrative, something that corresponds to the political needs of the consumers.

Now I have no reason to doubt that, as a matter of sociological fact,



recoding and resistant reading occurs. I am not so convinced that it occurs with the frequency and the invariantly progressive cast claimed for it by certain leading figures in cultural studies. There may be recoding going on, but recoding is not the sort of readerly activity upon which I rest my case for the dissolution of the paradox of junk fiction.

For recodings are ultimately arbitrary. Any group, in a certain trivial sense, can make anything mean anything else for its own purposes. However, the readerly activities that I have been talking about are not arbitrary responses to the text. Rather they are normatively correct—they are the responses that the ideal reader of the text should have to the text. Reading the comic novel *Artistic Differences* by Charlie Hauck, you should come to hate Geneva Holloway. That is what the text or, more precisely, the author expects you to do. The text has been designed to elicit that response. The text requires a reader who fills it in by hating Geneva Holloway, but that hatred is not a readerly invention *ex nihilo*. Nor is it a recoding. For it is not arbitrary, but rather proposed by the text in a structured way.

Perhaps one might attempt to dissolve the paradox of junk fiction by invoking the phenomenon of recoding. My own tendency, however, is to resist this move. For, in the first place, I am not convinced that there is as much recoding going on as is commonly supposed by academic critics and, if I am right about this, then recoding would not yield a comprehensive solution to the paradox. But, as well, I suspect that it is very likely that recoding as it is most frequently described may not usually be a straightforwardly rational response to a text, and that, therefore, the invocation of recoding will not usually rationally justify our consumption of junk fiction.

Instead, I argue that the kinds of rational activities that junk fictions afford—such as interpreting, inferring, following the story, issuing moral judgments and emotive assessments—make sense of our consumption of stories that are admittedly formulaic. That other sorts of fiction might be even more stimulating along these dimensions in nowise precludes the possibility that consuming junk fictions can be a self-rewarding activity, albeit one that is limited relative to certain other alternatives. So, inasmuch as it is reasonable to anticipate that junk fiction can be the source of transactional value, choose your reading for the flight to your next professional convention with an easy conscience.

1. In Thomas J. Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).
2. John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971).
3. Here it is important to note that the paradox of junk fiction is not a creature of idle invention on my part. The quandary can frequently be heard with reference to this or that particular junk fiction genre at cocktail parties. Often, for example, people tell me that they see no sense in reading horror novels because the stories are always the same. Similarly, defenders of high culture often deride junk fiction by stigmatizing its formulaic nature. Thus, in framing the paradox of junk fiction, I have not discovered a new problem, but rather merely have sharpened up logically some criticisms of junk fiction that have been voiced for a long time now both in common speech and by modernists.
4. Sigmund Freud, "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming," in *Character and Culture*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 39–40.
5. *Ibid.*
6. On slash lit, see Constance Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Study of Popular Culture," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992).
7. Roberts, pp. 150–51.
8. For an analysis of *North by Northwest* in terms of the differential knowledge of characters and audiences, see David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: MacGraw Hill, 1993), pp. 75–79 and 370–75.
9. For an influential statement of this view, see Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments, 1934–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986).
10. For a theory of some of these processes with respect to film, see David Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
11. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 25. For further objections to Fiske's approach, see Noël Carroll, "The Nature of Mass Art," in *Philosophic Exchange* 23 (1992).