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Fantasy: exploration of a genre

Abstract:

How much does genre govern writing? To what degree does our conception of genre (its purpose, content, structure, discourse, setting etc) fundamentally shape that genre's writing? Using my own writing as a touchstone, this paper argues that changing our conceptions of genre can have an explicit, if not transformative, effect on the writing process. Entering the debate via Jameson, Miéville and Marcuse, this paper seeks to combine several, important voices within science fiction (SF) and fantasy criticism to suggest that an emergent 'urban' fantasy can become future oriented, offering radical alternatives for progressive political praxis. While this ground is not entirely new in itself, the confluence of different (if not competitive) conceptual frames opens up fertile space within the discourse, interrogating the use of the impossible, unreal and escapism within fantasy fiction. Necessarily, any elaboration of the theoretical paradigms governing the function of genre and interaction between theory and creative practice must proceed along several trajectories. Entering via Margaret Atwood and China Miéville this paper explores how theory can translate into creative practice, while discussing how specific theoretical goals can alter not only how a text is written but how it is read. Creating a dialogic between my own writing the 'popular', Tolkienesque fantasy enables an interesting investigation into relationship between creative practice and theory, asking: can specific theoretical goals govern not only the writing process but transform the genre itself?

Biographical note:

Daniel Baker is a PhD candidate at Deakin University, Australia, exploring the progressive potential of fantasy fiction. He has presented conference papers on fantasy, SF and Utopia at the University of Nottingham and Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi and his article 'History as fantasy: estranging the past in *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norell*' was published in the online journal *Otherness: Essays and Studies*. Recently, his short story 'At the crossroads' appeared in *Aurealis* #51.

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Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light.

– Margaret Atwood, *Negotiations with the dead*

While this compulsion to enter the ‘darkness’ and return with illumination may not be universal, writing is always active and driven by purpose. It is filled with ‘utterances’, sometimes hidden, sometimes obvious, that inform a text, govern its discourse, shape its structure and guide its content. Writing can map, reveal, obscure, construct, deconstruct, translate, transform, reimagine and rewrite the ways we perceive and experience reality. Such utterances – we might call them themes, voices, structures, or ideologies – dictate the ways in which writer and reader relate to any given text. This is genre.

Genre fantasy is often associated with particular formations of content, setting, purpose and form. It takes up conventional quest-romance structures, is populated by elves, orcs, knights, rogues and dwarves, and expresses (consciously or not) nationalism, xenophobia and Christian metaphysics. Such codification can severely limit creativity. However, it also creates a space a transformative dialogue.

Fantasy is impossible; it contains things that have never been and (presumably) will never be, and yet the act of *creating* it takes up very potent material. As China Miéville suggests, fantasy can alter how reality is encountered because:

In a fantastic cultural work, the artist pretends that things known to be impossible are not only possible but real, which creates mental space redefining – or pretending to redefine – the impossible. This is sleight of mind, altering the categories of the not-real. (2002, 45)

By its very impossibility fantasy can interact with the reader’s relationship to reality, but only by shifting the idea of fantasy from the stagnantly conventional to a discourse of the unreal¹. No longer a composition of traditionally recognised content, style and structure, it can become a vessel for sociopolitical thought. This shift alters the question ‘what is fantasy?’ to ‘what does (can) fantasy do and have done to it?’

Moving fantasy out of Middle-earth

When I started writing my own fantasy – with specific theoretical goals – its aesthetic parameters were vague. There were no questions of content or structure or setting – the word ‘fantasy’ had already provoked certain images, landscapes; spawning stories of dragons, orphans-become-kings, blacksmiths, Dark Lords, grail-quests, magical swords and prophecy.

This is Tolkien’s legacy: Gandalf is ubiquitous, accompanied by endless iterations of Aragorn and Frodo through so many idyllic worlds under threat from ultimate evil. Lamentably, this deluge of Tolkienesque sword-and-sorcery (of which Feist, Eddings, Jordan, Donaldson and Rowling are good examples) is a conservative cypher for the genre as a whole.

In general, Fredric Jameson’s identification that these portrayals work ‘primarily as the sign of an imaginary regression to the past and to older pre-rational forms of thought’ (2005, 64) holds true. By appropriating Middle-earth’s reactionary, pastoral feudalism much of the genre feels likewise (and anachronistically) reactionary, invariably carrying Tolkien’s social, historical and spiritual concerns.

Carl Freedman suggests that for all its deep history, linguistic interest and epic styling, Middle-earth is a ‘thin and impoverished world: it is miles wide but only inches deep [...] Middle-earth leaves out most of what makes us real human beings living in a real historical society’ (2002, 263). The problem is that this ‘inches deep’ – being so well imagined, so gripping, so fantastic – blinds the reader to the text’s historical deficiencies, while rehearsing the conservative aspects of Tolkien’s itinerant Christianity, nostalgia, idealism and ethics. However, this picture is out of date.

Modern fantasy is becoming a far more diffuse entity. Indeed, it is increasingly clear that the fantasy pushed forward by writers like Samuel Delany, Neil Gaiman, Brandon Sanderson and China Miéville refuses quantification; it is less about wizards and more about intrusions, reflections and ruptures.

Certainly, fantasy will not lose its popular bindings easily or quickly but, by altering how the genre is approached, it can walk unknown paths and combat unseen monsters. Like Miéville, I believe that ‘we need fantasy to think the world, and to change it’ (2002, 48); change it for the now and the future – change it for the better.

Creating impossible worlds, imagining alternate histories and building radical societies may be escapist, but its escape is invested with purpose. It asks: what should be escaped? How will we escape? And, most importantly where will this escape take us? Via its very unreality fantasy has the potential to interact, if not alter, how we understand categories like ‘real’, ‘possible’, ‘truth’ and ‘everyday’.

When the normal – the real – is confronted by the abnormal – the unreal – the concepts are forced into dialogue. By imagining alterity, fantasy can comment on, reinforce, or deconstruct hegemonic ideology. It can do this (potentially) to develop its own image of reality, its own progressive subjectivity.

By discarding the cloak of Tolkien’s rehashed, reactionary idealism, fantasy is free to transform not only its aesthetic horizons but what those horizons can be used to accomplish. Therefore it is vital we recall Herbert Marcuse’s dictum:

Phantasy plays a most decisive function in the total mental structure: it links the deepest layers of the unconscious with the highest products of consciousness (art), the dream with reality [...] (1974, 140)

While Marcuse is not talking about genre fantasy, we cannot help but see the confluence of dream and reality in *all* fantastic texts. Where Tolkienesque fantasy is arguably interested in the dream, the genre as a collection of impossible, disturbing, subversive, progressive utterances is fundamentally geared to affect some leverage on reality. This was the launching pad for my creative practice.

The legend of the wanderer: fantasy with science fiction’s voice

I started writing a novel – *The legend of the wanderer (TLOTW)* – guided by two Marcusean frames: that civilisation ‘is still determined by its *archaic heritage*’ (Marcuse 1974, 56) and the ‘past defines the present because mankind has not yet mastered its own history’ (Marcuse 1974, 58). *TLOTW* was my attempt to rectify these positions, answering the question: can a progressive fantasy be written?

My protagonist, trapped in the utopian city of Vigilstone, is embroiled with a historical project. His goal – an understanding of a past that led to the collapse of a powerful empire (a collapse that still plagues his world) *and* producing a document that will confront the hegemonic ideology built on the bones of this collapse with an alternate, socio-historical vision. This, in turn, runs alongside the unveiling of the utopian Vigilstone, its society, its technology and ultimately its potential to transform the protagonist and his reality. However, this was the end result, not the initial idea.

One of the most prominent utopians of his time, Marcuse constructed an anthropological map that traced human society through prehistoric groups, patriarchal hierarchies, feudal associations, capitalist reification and modern mechanisation. This historical progression, he argues, has led to increased destruction of the natural and human world. Considering the advent of mechanised labour, advanced medicine and alternative fuels, humanity should be free, but it is not. Repression has increased where it should have declined. Our past defines our present and will continue defining our future.

Not unlike an archive, the first draft of *TLOTW* was a collection of fragments. Roughly matching Marcuse's historical map, the narrative was broken into four discrete sections: prehistorical bible, creative nonfiction, the interrogation of a holocaust survivor and a fallen empire exodus story. And yet these sections, however distinct/dissimilar their structure and style, remained *reflections* of the extratextual world – remained lamentation and warning only. In this, my desire to enter into dialogue with the genre stereotype, to reinscribe fantasy with progressive intent, produced something closer to SF. And this blurring proved both a source of discursive vitality and creative limitation.

Jameson writes that the 'utopian remedy must at first be a fundamentally negative one and stand as clarion call to remove and to extirpate [...] [the] specific root of all evil from which all others spring' (2005, 12). This 'remedy' was the logical first step down the road to understand what a progressive fantasy might look like. It needed to comprehend reality (how reality appears to the individual) before any attempt to alter it. As such, my first draft highlighted several key areas of 'evil from which all others spring', in response to a terrifyingly tangible world described by Darko Suvin:

I see our global horizons as at best a struggle lasting for several generations against the amok runs of global capitalism with a bestial face that rapidly spreads hunger, wars, druggings, brainwashing, and prostitution, and at worst a descent into full super-technoscientific barbarism. (2000, 213)

The response of dystopian SF (think Philip K Dick, William Gibson, Michael Swanwick etc) to this reality is extrapolation: mapping the present into future, building disturbing reflections designing to shock through terrible recognition. This subversive potential can be thought of as a 'snapshot': the artwork 'freezes' the ideological image of reality, estranging the recipient from it via reflection.

Taking Suvin's position to heart, *TLOTW*'s first draft was attached to representations of war, brainwashing and barbarism, which ultimately transformed human into monster. Aesthetically, its fantastic content (demonic creatures, destructive magic, shadowy forces, character splitting) paralleled the growing influence of an imperial ideology. In other words, mapping the extratextual present into an imagined past suggested that nothing has changed and nothing will change. Consequently, the discursive result was negative. Like dystopian

SF, what manifested was reflective, maybe subversive, but not progressive and frustratingly fragmented. Something was lacking.

One problem was structural: there was no cohesive story. The other problem was theoretical. Jameson's dystopian modelling of the utopian 'remedy' is not progressive per se, because it offers no alternatives. Indeed, Jameson makes one point clear, stating that:

[...] at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment; and that therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensibly. (2005, xiii)

Accepting that a progressive literature must not only deconstruct dominant ideology, but *introduce* an alternate subjectivity in its place, the act of mapping the now to past or future is only half the battle: it identifies the problem without offering solutions.

By tracing an empire's rise and fall, my work was tethered to the extratextual world's historical patterns: it was a loose reflection of the horrific conditions leading to the supremacy of Western capitalism. The fiction was an illustration of 'the fatal dialectic of civilization [...] [where] the very progress of civilization leads to the release of increasingly destructive forces' (Marcuse 1974, 54). This is SF's dystopian echo heard from the decaying metropolis of Dick and Gibson's techno-intrusions. Fundamentally, I had clothed SF in fantasy's robes: it was the extrapolative model folded in on itself. In this case, purpose defined content, guiding the fiction towards dark, allegorical responses. It was deconstructively negative, not creatively positive.

Writing beyond reflection: fantasy as a medium for progressive subjectivity

However affective the dystopian representation (in both fantasy and SF), it seemingly offers no alternative. Capitalist subjectivity is found disturbing, made horrifying, but finds no replacement because the 'historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible' (Jameson 2005, xii). This is where fantasy's escapism has a role to play. Mark Bould argues:

Where fantasy differs from the other forms of fiction is in the particular nature of its world-building. All fiction builds worlds which are not true to the extratextual world (itself an ideological – and, arguably, therefore a fantastic – construct), but fantasy worlds are constructed upon a more elaborate predicate: they are not only not true to the extratextual world but, by definition, do not seek or pretend to be. (2002, 81)

Arguably, this is a fundamental difference between SF and fantasy: SF *pretends to be*. Because it must extrapolate, SF's relationship to reality is that of an echo. Fantasy, on the other hand, can be whatever it wants, whatever the writer chooses it to be. By deciding that *TLOTW* would be a progressive fantasy, my writing was drawing a line between itself and the popular understanding of the genre, but it was also entering a dialogic relationship. Miéville states that 'changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real, its potentialities and actualities' (2002, 45-46). It is this expression of the not-real, the exploration of new actualities, which forms the basis of fantasy's (potential) progressive voice.

Atwood suggests that in ‘literature, every landscape is a state of mind, but every state of mind can also be portrayed by a landscape’ (2011, 115). Fantasy needs to move away from its popular association with the pastoral and enter, like Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* and Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, the urban. It must brave the crowded streets and breathe deep the smoke. Traditionally the province of SF, fantasy’s increasing interest with the city can direct its discourse from wish-fulfilment to political praxis.

Inserting a continuous, metropolitan narrative – the city of Vigilstone – between *TLOTW*’s initial four sections completely changed how those reflections, how the novel as a whole, could be read. By juxtaposing the two, the fiction was able to suggest an alternate social direction, anchored by an understanding of and reconciliation with the past.

Fundamentally, Vigilstone became a vision of a future liberated from the barbarism of imperial history; it was the artistic expression of ‘Utopia as an enclave outside of historical time’ (Jameson 2005, 187). It stood apart; an almost sentient conglomeration of people, architecture and technology positioned as a radically different society. Aesthetically, this manifested most strikingly in the city’s technological advances (clockwork, solar and steam engines) that underscored its harmonious population. It is at this point that the importance of fantasy’s much criticised, but inescapable ‘escapism’ becomes apparent. Suvin argues:

I believe we need more precision about which elements or aspects of capitalist rationality, commodification or organization does Fantasy usually react against. What ways out of them does it take, to living or dead ends? And as the end-all, what is the *main effect* of its (perhaps various) ways out? (2000, 236)

The issue is not that fantasy ‘escapes’ reality, only that its traditional escape routes (in terms of structure, plot, characterisations etc) lead the genre towards conservative ‘dead ends’. However, shifting fantasy away from its rational, popularised antecedents allows the potential for a conscientious, self-reflexive, progressive fantasy. Consequently, the continuous city sections were written to ‘escape’ (from traditional fantasy, from capitalist hegemony) through a very particular discursive strategy.

Fantasy’s increasing interest with the city – traditionally the province of SF – can move its discourse from wish-fulfilment to political praxis. This distinct direction underscores Miéville’s acknowledgment that at ‘the same sociological level at which SF and fantasy continue to be distinguished, the boundaries between them also – if anything at an accelerating rate – continue to erode’ (2009, 244).

Althusser’s assertion that ideology is a structure of ‘representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society’ (1965, 231) recovers fantasy’s most useful aesthetic intent: to render the impossible and call it possible – to think it real.

Placed within the utopian city, the sections that had, at first, *appeared* like archival documents, *became* archival documents. They formed the research for my protagonist’s project – a project that set about uncovering history, acknowledging its horrors and reconciling its mistakes so that they could be unmade or not made again. It was only by fabricating the impossible, by imagining a utopian alternative *beside* the dystopian warning, that a counter-hegemonic subjectivity could be realised. This is a progressive fantasy’s base-

code: the purposeful mingling of real and unreal, possible and impossible, to produce alternatives to the present, informed by the past, in order to witness new futures.

Interestingly, Tolkien spoke of fantasy as recovery: recovery ‘(which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining – a regaining of a clear view’ (1964, 52). The emphasis is on fantasy as a curative.

My first attempt was a reflective investigation of history; incomplete, it looked back without looking around, without looking forward. Where I went, where modern fantasy is going, was the city. Including an urban narrative set far in to my text’s future suggested new possibilities – a city of desires expressed and gratified, where technology serves to support, not destroy, humanity and the natural world. Here was a society founded on harmony not destruction, recovery not cover-ups, art not propaganda, peace not war.

By introducing a stark, utopian image to the dystopian ‘map’, by placing the two in dialogue, a new position can be created. Atwood states that the utopian form is ‘always bracketed by two journeys: the one that transports the tale-teller to the other place and the one that transports him (or her) back so he can deliver his report to us (2011, 109).

What I had discovered through the interface of the utopian city (Vigilstone) and the dystopian past (*TLOTW*’s discrete, reflective sections) was two journeys: one back, one forward. And it was only via this interface that those journeys – journeys not unlike my own as a writer – became a causeway above the mire of allegorical warnings and wish-fulfilling idealism.

By bringing these two ‘voices’ together, by mingling negative and positive, there exists the potential for fantasy’s progressive aesthetic. This is a fantasy that uses the impossible (be it temporal, material, transformative, metaphysical, anachronistic etc) to identify social ills and elicit shocking recognition, while offering radical alternatives (be that sociopolitical, spiritual, technological, cultural, historical).

That fantasy naturally, intrinsically ‘escapes’ suggests that hegemonic representations of reality are lacking, that needs (individual and social) are not being met, that people require more. This is a power of the impossible, a power that fantasy can grasp, potentially, if it steps out of Tolkien’s shadow, jumps through the looking-glass and lands in the ruptures being explored by Miéville, Le Guin, Wolfe, Sanderson and Delany. This fantasy can use the strange, the weird, the unreal, to explore, interrogate and (even if it wants to or not) change portrayals of the possible, the real.

Perhaps Brian Attebery underscored fantasy’s significance as a cultural phenomenon most succinctly when he suggested that it ‘denies what everybody knows to be the truth. And, if you’re lucky, the untruth shall make you free’ (1991, 25). Uncovering, unveiling, unearthing speak of a journey into the darkness, discovering a piece of the world that has been hidden or forgotten. The impossible is such an artefact. Fantasy has the ability to delve into that darkness Atwood described, to dig up the unreal and bring it to light. That is why we should not mistake fantasy for fallacy or confuse its untruth with nontruth.

Endnotes

1. Furthermore, it is only after acknowledging this shift that fantasy can freely seek innovative forms, innovative stories not tethered to categorical distinctions. As such, fantasy, SF, horror, crime, modernism and more can meet and there supposedly discrete, generic elements interact.

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