

SYMPOSIUM: MARXISM AND FANTASY

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Editorial Introduction¹

Who cares?

Historical Materialism has a tradition of presenting symposia: in special issues and ongoing debates we have examined the question of political organisation, East Asia, the political economy of Robert Brenner and, most recently, Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. What follows is rather different from previous symposia, however, in that the *point* of the focus may not be clear to the readership of a journal of 'research in critical Marxist theory'. Why should Marxists care about fantasy and the fantastic?

In soliciting pieces for this symposium, we kept the rubric for submission open-ended. 'Fantasy' and 'the fantastic' are terms with many meanings, taking in considerations of surrealism, sex and sexuality, folk traditions, dream analysis, fantasies of everyday life² and utopianism, as well as the analysis of genre literature. We were very quickly reminded that

¹ For greatly increasing my understanding of the fantastic, I am extremely grateful to Farah Mendelsohn, Carl Freedman, Andrew M. Butler and most especially Mark Bould. For invaluable comments on early drafts of this introduction, I would like to thank Paul Reynolds, Matthew Beaumont and Esther Leslie.

² See Kornbluh's piece, below.

considerations of the fantastic have long been part of certain Marxist traditions. They stretch from the Frankfurt School Marxists and Walter Benjamin on surrealism, Kafka and Disney, to Ernst Bloch on utopia, the *Trotskyisant* surrealists such as Breton and Pierre Naville, and the sloganeering of the situationists attempting to turn the fantastic and dreams into class weapons. At the same time, a focus on fantasy allowed for explorations in areas given less attention by Marxists. One example of particular interest to several of the writers in this symposium is fantasy as a specific literary genre.

Even with identifiable traditions of exploring fantasy within Marxist thought, there are Marxists who are uneasy with it. Among the responses to our call for papers, we received an email quoting Engels on the ‘opportunists . . . who create a literature on literature’, compared to the more correct position of those ‘who desire to write about other books only . . . if they contain anything worth writing about’. Our correspondent placed *Historical Materialism* firmly in the opportunist camp: ‘The only thing Marxist about that call for papers is that it uses the terms Marxist and Marxism sprinkled among terms derived from the dominant ideology’.

There are (at least) two levels at which these accusations can be met. *Historical Materialism* is an interdisciplinary journal, focusing not only on questions of politics, philosophy and economics, but also on culture and the aesthetic. A brief survey of popular films, books, television, comics, video games etc. illustrates the extent to which the fantastic has become a default cultural vernacular. The extraordinary success of films such as those of the *Star Wars* franchise or *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001), books such as Rowling’s *Harry Potter* or Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* sequences underscore the popular interest in fantasy. If for no other reason than to make sense of this phenomenon, and to engage thinking in a cultural terrain that clearly attracts such popular interest, this aesthetic mode is worthy of investigation. We would argue, nevertheless, that there *are* other reasons.

One might be the identification of left cultural élitism amongst Marxists who would be happy to read an analysis of the novels of George Eliott or the films of Ken Loach, but who blench at *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Here, the staid tastes of a Melvyn Bragg or a Lenin³ and disdain for popular culture

³ See Watson’s piece, below, on the differentiation between Lenin’s taste and the implications of his analysis.

become the reference points for worthwhile culture and elide with an often un-theorised (unconscious?) Lukácsian critique of ‘decadent’ non-realist forms.⁴ The extent to which anti-fantastic sensibilities are contingent on cultural élitism can be illustrated by thought-experiment: if the same journal that contained an article on Eliott or Loach contained pieces on Kafka or Bulgakov, it is difficult to imagine any objections. As ‘high’ culture, these authors are ‘worth writing about’, because their ‘seriousness’ – their canonical status – somehow subsumes their fantastic mode.⁵ In this symposium, we wanted *as Marxists* to take seriously the specificity of that fantastic mode, free from an ironically (capitalist) modern distinction of high and low culture.

The fantastic might be of particular interest to Marxists for a more important reason, to do with peculiar nature of modern social reality and subjectivity.⁶ The lived reality of capitalism is commodity fetishism. Magnitudes of value coagulated in the commodity form – things – ‘far from being under their [human producers and exchangers’] control, in fact control them’.⁷

[T]he definite social relation between men themselves . . . assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things . . . [where] the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.⁸

Our commodities control us, and our social relations are dictated by *their* relations and interactions. ‘As soon as [a table, for example] emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It . . . stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas’.⁹

⁴ A comrade once told me hesitantly that, while he supposed that ‘ghost stories might do a job of depicting alienation and so on’, it was important not to lose track of the fact that ‘ghosts don’t exist’.

⁵ Such sleight of theory is not at all restricted to *left* literary snobs. The capacity for the ‘literary’ intelligentsia to enjoy works of fantastic fiction without diluting their disdain for fantasy and science fiction (sf) is long established. Kingsley Amis (or possibly Robert Conquest, his co-editor) expressed this well in a now-famous doggerel couplet in one of their early 1960s sf anthologies: “‘Sf’s no good,” they bellow till we’re deaf./“But this looks good.” – “Well then, it’s not sf.” (Amis and Conquest 1964, copyright page.)

⁶ This argument draws on and dovetails with Mark Bould’s, below, as well as on my earlier essay (Miéville 1998).

⁷ Marx 1867, pp. 167–8.

⁸ Marx 1976, p. 165.

⁹ Marx 1976, p. 163.

Under capitalism, the social relations of the everyday – that ‘fantastic form’ – are the dreams, the ‘grotesque ideas’, of the commodities that rule.

‘Real’ life under capitalism *is a fantasy*: ‘realism’, narrowly defined, is therefore a ‘realistic’ depiction of ‘an absurdity which is true’,¹⁰ but no less absurd for that. Narrow ‘realism’ is as partial and ideological as ‘reality’ itself. As I have argued elsewhere,¹¹ the notion that a putatively ‘realistic’ novel about the bickerings of middle-class families that seem hermetically sealed off from wider social conflicts¹² is less escapist than, say, *Rats and Gargoyles* by Mary Gentle – set in a fantasy world, involving discussions of racism, industrial conflict, sexual passion and so on – or *Une Semaine de Bonté* by Max Ernst (1934) – a surrealist collage novel which menacingly reconfigures the bourgeois world in its representations – is unconvincing. ‘Realistic’ books may pretend to be about ‘the real world’ but that does not mean they reverberate within it with more integrity and insight.

It is precisely for these reasons that Kafka was ‘one of the few writers Adorno considered . . . adequate to the problems of making literature in the modern world’.¹³ In fact, the fantastic might be a mode peculiarly suited to and resonant with the forms of modernity. The usual charge that fantasy is escapist, incoherent or nostalgic (if not downright reactionary), though perhaps true for great swathes of the literature, is contingent on *content*. Fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality¹⁴ – constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true* – mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity.

This is what makes fantasy of interest to Marxists. At best, perhaps, in opening up that paradoxical modern form to reflexive scrutiny, the fantastic might enable us to open up for a critical art.

This is not, of course, to attribute an inherently ‘subversive’ tendency to fantasy: nor is ‘critical’ art a function solely of the conscious concerns of the writer. Nevertheless, both the apparent epistemological radicalism of the

¹⁰ Geras 1971, p. 76.

¹¹ See Newsinger 2000, p. 159.

¹² What Iain Banks calls ‘Hampstead novels’.

¹³ Halley 1997, p. 60.

¹⁴ This internal coherence will likely be rigorous, but not necessarily rigorous in the sense of replicating rationalism. I would argue, for example, that the best works of surrealism, like Ernst’s *Une Semaine de Bonté*, are rigorous, though obviously not straightforwardly rationalist.

fantastic mode's basic predicate – that the impossible is true – and its intriguing quasi-isomorphism with the 'grotesque' paradoxical form of capitalist modernity might be starting points to explore why there appear to be a statistically anomalous number of leftist writers in fantastic/science-fictional modes. Questions of definition (where does 'leftism' begin?) make for innumerable grey areas, so this cannot be scientific. However, the sense of an odd preponderance remains.¹⁵

Impossibility and cognitive estrangement

There has been a tradition of Marxist writings on science fiction (sf).¹⁶ Though he has recently finessed his position,¹⁷ Suvin's early claim that fantasy is a 'sub-literature of mystification', *fundamentally distinct* from sf (he deems their lumping together as 'rampantly socio-pathological'),¹⁸ remains enormously influential in the field. Indeed, it is clear in some submissions to this symposium.¹⁹ Suvin's claim is that sf, unlike fantasy, is characterised by 'cognitive estrangement' – it operates according to a rationalist/scientific mindset, but is estranged from the 'here and now' so that it can extrapolate creatively.

In contrast, one of the corollaries of the position I have been outlining above is that sf must be considered a subset of a broader fantastic mode – 'scientism' is just sf's mode of expression of the fantastic (the impossible-but-true). Mindful that the putative 'scientific rigour' of much sf, including many

¹⁵ Sf/fantasy writers who have identified themselves as Marxists (or Marxians or *-isants*) include myself, Eric Flint, Steven Brust, Mack Reynolds, Ken McLeod, John Barnes, Kim Stanley Robinson, Samuel Delany, William Morris, Alexander Bogdanov: left-anarchist authors include Ursula Le Guin and Michael Moorcock. The Marxist theorist David Harvey wrote short stories for the sf/fantasy journal *New Worlds* in the 1960s (although at that point he would not yet have identified himself as a Marxist): see, for example, Harvey 1965. In addition, there are a very great number of other writers who situate themselves on the Left.

¹⁶ Most systematically represented in the work of Darko Suvin (Suvin 1979). Other important figures in this tradition include many of those who have published in the journal *Science Fiction Studies*, such as Carl Freedman (Freedman 2000), and Fredric Jameson (see for example Jameson 1976a, 1976b, and remarks throughout his *œuvre*. Jameson's interest in sf has acted both as titillation for those more hidebound, as well as evidence for the scope of his thought: consider Terry Eagleton's accolade that Jameson is '[a] prodigiously energetic thinker whose writings sweep majestically from Sophocles to science fiction').

¹⁷ Suvin 2000.

¹⁸ Suvin 1979, p. 9.

¹⁹ See for example Jameson, below, and Freedman, below.

defining classics of the field, is entirely spurious,²⁰ Freedman has introduced the crucial refinement to Suvin's original position that

cognition proper is *not* . . . the quality that defines science fiction. . . . [R]ather [it] is . . . the *cognition effect*. The crucial term for generic discrimination is not any epistemological judgment external to the text . . . but rather . . . the attitude of *the text itself* to the kind of estrangement being performed.²¹

Freedman himself deems that even this refined version distinguishes sf from fantasy (he makes this case in his essay below). I would argue that, in acknowledging that unscientific but *internally plausible/rigorous*, estranging works share crucial qualities of cognitive seriousness, Freedman illuminates how what is usually deemed the specificity of 'sf' can be shared by 'fantasy'. The incoherent – not to say ad hoc – cognition often seen as part and parcel of 'fantasy' can be found in much 'sf'. It is better, I would argue, to see sf as only one way of doing the fantastic – though one with a particularly strong set of conventions. One can make working distinctions, but any attempt at systematic theoretical differentiation seems to me to fail.

The question of whether sf and fantasy are sharply distinguished is important for considerations of subjectivity, insofar as it relates to modern conceptions of the 'impossible'. Consider Marx's distinction of 'the worst of architects' from 'the best of bees': unlike for any bee, '[a]t the end of every labour process a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally'.²² For Marx, human productive activity, with its capacity to act on the world and to change it – the very mechanism by which people make history, though not in the circumstances of their choosing – is *predicated on a consciousness of the not-real*.²³ The fantastic is there at the most prosaic moment of production.

The 'estrangement' of traditional sf is based on extrapolation, and its impossible is therefore more exactly *not-yet-possible*.²⁴ This is no abstract

²⁰ See Bould 2000 for several hilarious examples of pseudo-science. My own favourite comes from the extraordinary book *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), in which David Lindsay has his characters' spacecraft travel by 'back rays' from a distant sun, such rays defined as 'light which goes back to its source' (Lindsay 2002, p. 21).

²¹ Freedman 2000, p. 18.

²² Marx 1976, p. 284.

²³ I am developing arguments from Newsinger 2000, p. 161.

²⁴ To be more precise and to take account of Freedman's corrective, this formulation should be *not-yet-(but-plausibly-potentially)-possible*

aesthetic debate. The 'science-fictional' form of the impossible dovetails with socialist theory. The not-yet-possibles are embedded in everyday life, and make the mundane and real fecund with fantastic potential, as Gramsci eloquently points out:

Possibility is not reality: but it is in itself a reality. Whether a man can or cannot do a thing has its importance in evaluating what is done in reality. . . . That the objective conditions exist for people not to die of hunger and that people do die of hunger, has its importance, or so one would have thought.²⁵

What is usually considered fantasy, by contrast, has as its impossible the *never-possible*.²⁶ This does appear to be a fundamental distinction, and makes sense of left antipathy to the outright-fantastic, in art and thought. However, bearing in mind Freedman's corrective, if the predicates for a fantasy are clearly never-possible *but are treated systematically and coherently within the fantastic work*, then its cognition effect is precisely that normally associated with sf. This is why the pseudo-science of so much sf is not merely a charming affectation, but radically undermines the notion that sf deals in a fundamentally different kind of 'impossible' than fantasy. Moreover, it is highly significant that our consciousness does not only revolve around the impossible as not-yet-possible: the fact that the never-possible is not expunged, but in fact becomes a hugely important cultural mode, is astounding. Our consciousness of the not-real is not simply a function of immediate physical productive activities. The defiantly fantastic – the never-possible – will not go away. The idea that one might draw from Marx's architect and bee, that the fantastic is important, but only as a yardstick of the *non-fantastic*, will not hold. While the fantastic does that job, it also – in modernity at least – has its own dynamic.

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. Bearing in mind Marx's point that the

²⁵ Gramsci 1971, p. 360.

²⁶ Although, of course, some writers and readers believe in certain elements of fantasy stories – belief in ghosts, for example, is still very common – I would argue that the never-possible here is a function of the enlightenment, rationalist/scientific mindset of modernity.

real and the not-real are constantly cross-referenced in the productive activity by which humans interact with the world, changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real, its potentialities and actualities.

Let me emphatically stress that this is *not* to make the ridiculous suggestion that fantastic fiction gives a clear view of political possibilities or acts as a guide to political action. I am claiming that the fantastic, particularly because 'reality' is a grotesque 'fantastic form', is *good to think with*. Marx, whose theory is a haunted house of spectres and vampires, knew this. Why else does he open *Capital* not quite with an 'immense', as the modern English translation has it, but with a 'monstrous' [*ungeheure*] collection of commodities?

Crucially, with this more generalised awareness of fantasy, the relation between fantasy *as a genre* and the fantasy that permeates apparently non-fantastic culture become clear. Both articulations and their interplay are examined in the articles that follow.

The limits of utopia

One effect of conceiving the fantastic as impregnating the everyday is to move away from a narrow Marxist defence of fantasy *insofar as it is utopian*. In *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin admiringly quotes the radical critic Pisarev and expresses this dispensation for a particular kind of dreaming:

The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes his life, compares his observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies.²⁷

The notion of fantasy as embedding potential transformation and emancipation in human thinking is of direct political and aesthetic interest to Marxists, as Mandel's article argues below. It might even be seen as a direct political weapon – 'Until our most fantastic demands are met, fantasy will be at war with society'.²⁸ This is not, however, to suggest that such utopian articulations of fantasy is where Marxist interest in fantasy should *begin and end*.

²⁷ Lenin 1961, pp. 509–10.

²⁸ Part of the sloganeering of the radical New York group Up Against the Wall/Motherfuckers, quoted in Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1968, p. 21.

Lenin's approving quotation from Pisarev is, in fact, closed-minded about dreaming and fantasy, not only in its defence of specifically utopian/goal-oriented dreaming but in its implicit – and stern – denunciation of other kinds of dreaming. In contrast to the dream that 'may run ahead of the natural march of events', Pisarev and, presumably, Lenin have no time for a dream that 'may fly off at a tangent in a direction in which no natural march of events will ever proceed'. Indeed, in pointedly saying that the first kind of dream 'will not cause any harm' and will not 'distort or paralyse labour-power', the implication is that the 'tangential', i.e. *truly fantastic, non-reality oriented* dream, *may* in fact 'cause harm'.²⁹ When Pisarev/Lenin concludes by saying 'if there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well'³⁰ the limitations of this approach are clear. There is *always* some connection between dreams and life, and it is our job to tease out those connections, whatever the dream – or fantasy – is about.

To this extent, the division between sf and fantasy in the realms of academic research, publishing and, to some extent, by fans mimics Lenin's myopia regarding dreams. Though sf is held to extrapolate forward *from* the now, and Lenin exhorts us to extrapolate back from our dream *to* the now, both approaches consider fantasies politically defensible insofar as they are future-oriented. What is necessary is to acknowledge the fantastic's specificity – granting it its own borders that do not require constant reference to the everyday for validation. In this way, we evade a narrowly conceived 'extrapolatory' dynamic (because fantastic forms may be extrapolated from social reality in more mediated and complex ways than Lenin and some sf theorists might like), which labels fantasies at best politically irrelevant, at worst, a source of harm.

It is ironic that utopianism, subjected in its most directly political manifestations to such strenuous and trenchant criticism by Marx and Engels,³¹ should, as an aesthetic form, often be considered the only fantastic mode permissible for the Left. Utopianism is an articulation of the fantastic marshalled to socially polemical, potentially transformative ends, and, as such, is of great

²⁹ Lenin 1961, p. 510.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Engels 1979; Marx and Engels 1998, Section III, Part 3, on 'Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism'.

interest to Marxists. This interest should not be at the expense, however, of the mode of which it is an articulation – the fantastic itself.

It is that mode *tout court*, that pervasive reality of the unreal, which this symposium attempts to address. No matter how commodified and domesticated the fantastic in its various forms might be, we need fantasy to think the world, and to change it.

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