

## The Critical Reception of Speculative Fiction \_\_\_\_\_

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Contemporary speculative fiction has roots that reach back to the epics and myths of antiquity, when ancient peoples sought supernatural explanations (or at least metaphors) for phenomena in the natural world that seemed beyond understanding from direct knowledge of reality. Speculation beyond the directly observable natural world was also central to the evolution of such literary traditions as Menippean satire, which dates back to the ancient Greeks and for which Mikhail Bakhtin has influentially identified a variety of “fantastic” elements that are crucial to the genre’s critical engagement with and commentary on real-world social issues. Thus, of the fourteen basic features of Menippean satire listed by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984), six involve the use of materials that go beyond the bounds of the contemporary natural world (122–37). If the “scientific romances” of H. G. Wells and the “prose romances” of William Morris, along with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), can be taken as the founding works of the truly modern genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, it is surely no accident that these founding works all appeared at about the same time at the end of the nineteenth century, as critical responses to the growing conversion of daily life into monotonous routine under the increasing power of modern capitalism.

In short, speculative genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror, far from being escapist forms that simply allow their consumers to avoid engagement with reality, are in fact themselves vehicles for new forms of critical engagement, and often quite self-consciously so. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that there has developed a rather sophisticated critical tradition for dealing with these genres and their implications, a tradition that begins with the self-consciousness of authors from Morris and Wells to J. R. R. Tolkien and extends to the recent work of writers such as China Miéville, perhaps the most theoretically sophisticated author in the history of the genre.

Meanwhile, if what is usually regarded as theoretically sophisticated contemporary criticism dates back to the rise of poststructuralism in France in the 1960s and its translation to English at the end of that decade, then sophisticated critical treatment of speculative fiction has much the same pedigree. In particular, critical consideration of speculative fiction can be said to have begun with the publication of Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, first published in French in 1970 and translated into English by Richard Howard as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* in 1973. In this work, Todorov characterizes what he calls "the fantastic" as a genre informed by uncertainty and hesitation in interpretation. Works in this genre are filled with seemingly supernatural events such that the reader has difficulty deciding whether these events are truly supernatural, which would make them "marvelous," or whether they actually have an explanation that remains within the laws of the physical world, which would make them "uncanny."

Todorov's structuralist analysis is largely apolitical, concerned with basic structural characteristics of the genre more than with the possible political implications of those characteristics. Politics have been at the forefront of the most sophisticated critical discussions of speculative fiction since that time, however. Perhaps the single most influential intervention in this critical discussion was that carried out by Darko Suvin in the 1970s, employing a fundamentally Marxist perspective, though with a dash of structuralist methodology. Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, published in 1979, compiles and summarizes Suvin's work of the decade. For Suvin, science fiction is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (7–8). In short, science fiction places readers in a world different from their own (made so by specifically identifiable drivers of change, or "novums," such as technological advances) and then challenges them to examine and critically analyze those differences.

Crucially, for Suvin, this cognitive process has a potentially powerful political impact in that it encourages readers to reexamine assumptions about their world and to realize that even the most fundamental things about their world might be different. Science fiction thus emerges for Suvin as a key utopian form that helps readers to formulate challenges to the status quo and to imagine the possibility of alternatives.

Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement in science fiction, derived from the Russian formalist notion of defamiliarization via the Marxist theories of Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Bloch, would have numerous important implications going forward, including giving the genre of science fiction a privileged place in Marxist discussions of cultural politics. Meanwhile, Suvin's work appeared even as American Marxist criticism itself was awakening from a decades-long slumber caused by the repressively anticommunist climate that prevailed in the United States during the peak years of the Cold War. It could, therefore, be argued that Suvin's comments on science fiction directly contributed to the reemergence of American Marxist criticism by giving Marxist critics a topic on which to focus that was, at the time, not taken very seriously by others in the academy, making Marxist commentary on it seem relatively unthreatening. However, Suvin provided a theoretical framework for the analysis and discussion of science fiction that played a founding role in the growth of a body of sophisticated academic criticism on that genre even among non-Marxist critics, criticism that almost invariably appeals to his notion of cognitive estrangement as a crucial principle.

On the other hand, if Suvin's elaboration of this principle served as an important impetus for serious critical consideration of science fiction as a genre, his corresponding dismissal of fantasy had a chilling effect on the critical exploration of that genre, especially in Marxist criticism. Indeed, Suvin uses fantasy as a sort of straw man to help clarify his vision of cognitive estrangement in science fiction, characterizing fantasy as a genre that creates estrangement of a noncognitive sort by placing its readers in unfamiliar situations but not asking them

to think critically about the differences between the world of the fantasy and the readers' own worlds. For Suvin, then, fantasy is essentially the political opposite of science fiction, a genre that is apolitical at best and reactionary at worst, with the specter of Tolkien's notoriously conservative *Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) looming over the genre to prove his point.

Perhaps Suvin's most important direct influence was on the work of Fredric Jameson, who, as the 1980s arrived, was already beginning to formulate his now-famous notion of the loss of utopian energy in postmodernist culture while at the same time suggesting that science fiction may retain a vital utopian power, even if it is only through a demonstration of our waning ability to imagine a genuine utopian alternative in the postmodern era ("Progress" 153). In the meantime, Jameson published *The Political Unconscious* (1981), one of the most influential works of literary theory of the latter half of the twentieth century. This work, a vigorous defense of the power of Marxist theory for the analysis of literary texts, also marked the beginning of the emphasis on the importance of utopian thought that would characterize Jameson's career from that point forward. This emphasis culminated in the publication of *Archaeologies of the Future* (2007), which includes a long theoretical rumination on the topic of utopia, with a focus on its relevance to science fiction, as well as an extensive collection of his earlier essays on science fiction, primarily from the 1980s.

One crucial chapter of *The Political Unconscious* addresses the topic of "magical narratives," otherwise generally referred to in the chapter as *romances* but also closely related to what I am here calling *fantasy*. In this chapter, Jameson asks the question of why, in our modern, rationalized, high-tech world, such narratives continue to retain a certain popularity. Jameson here notes Northrop Frye's vision of romance as, in Jameson's words, a "Utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced" (*Political*

110). Ultimately, though, Jameson concludes that the most important function of modern romance, and the key to its ongoing appeal, is a negative one. The “most authentic vocation” of romance, then, is “its capacity, by absence and by the silence of the form itself, to express that ideology of desacralization by which modern thinkers from [Max] Weber to the Frankfurt School have sought to convey their sense of the radical impoverishment and constriction of modern life” (135).

Despite this suggestion that fantasy is rooted in utopian longings for a richness in life that is denied by modern capitalism, Jameson remained among those most dismissive of fantasy through the next decades, though by the time of *Archaeologies of the Future*, he was basing his rejection less on its difference from science fiction in terms of estrangement and more on the reactionary implications of such structural features as “the organization of fantasy around the ethical binary of good and evil, and the fundamental role it assigns to magic” (*Archaeologies* 58). Meanwhile, some of the most interesting critical discourse on speculative fiction in the 1980s addressed the genre of horror, fantasy’s darker cousin, partly because horror cinema, especially in the United States, underwent an important upswing in quality and importance in the 1970s, beginning in 1968 with the release of such films as *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Night of the Living Dead*. This surge in the genre occurred just as film theory was beginning to catch the wave of French theory, with predictable results. One of the most important early theoretical interventions in horror criticism was Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Drawing on sources in psychoanalysis, poststructuralist feminism, and structuralist anthropology, Kristeva argues that we define our sense of self in opposition to the abject materials and things that are removed from our living bodies—blood and menses, excrement, semen, snot, dismembered limbs, corpses—thus creating a binary of Self and Other (that-which-I-am/that-which-I-reject) in order to construct our identities. Kristeva’s work on abjection has greatly influenced horror theorists, particularly Barbara Creed, and philosopher Noël Carroll’s seminal

work *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) draws upon some of the same anthropological sources as Kristeva as it distinguishes between horror as a pleasurable aesthetic category (“art-horror”) and the “natural horror” of real-life pain and trauma. Cynthia A. Freeland’s *The Naked and the Undead* (2000) attempts a cognitive theory of horror, while Anna Paul’s *Deleuze and Horror Film* (2005), as the work’s title indicates, relies on the work of theorist Gilles Deleuze, making apparent the continuing influence of French poststructuralism on the criticism of horror cinema.

Also theoretically sophisticated in the 1980s was the work of Robin Wood, who employed the work of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to produce some highly useful critical responses to the horror-film boom of the 1970s. While showing a strong skepticism toward the value of the fantasy elements of the early films of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, Wood, in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986), characterizes the 1970s as a period of crisis to which the perhaps most effective cultural response could be found in the horror films of the decade. For Wood, the rise to prominence of the horror genre in the 1970s was “entirely logical, even inevitable” (63); he concludes that horror, in this decade, became “the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive” (76).

Meanwhile, fantasy continued to receive serious attention in the 1980s. Rosemary Jackson employed Marxist perspectives to supplement the predominately psychoanalytic view of her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981). Here, she links the genre of fantasy both to political subversion and to the forbidden desire that psychoanalysis sees in the unconscious mind. Because it pushes beyond the boundaries of conventional reality, Jackson argues, fantasy can challenge our normally comfortable assumptions about the nature of that reality: “from [E. T. A.] Hoffman[n] and German Romanticism, to the modern fantastic in horror films, fantasy has tried to erode the pillars of society by un-doing categorical structures” (176). Kathryn Hume, meanwhile, begins her book *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984) with a useful

review of earlier critical approaches to fantasy (including those of Todorov and Jackson), noting that much of the work in the area seems to have been oriented toward defining fantasy as a genre. She herself provides an extremely useful “working definition” of fantasy by describing it as “*any departure from consensus reality*, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor” (21; ital. in orig.). Ultimately, however, Hume concludes that fantasy is not so much a separate genre as it is a fundamental impulse that joins with the impulse toward mimesis to provide the two basic forces behind all literature.

This universalizing impulse can also be found in Carl Freedman’s *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000). Freedman, noting that it could be argued that all literature produces cognitive estrangement to some extent, declares that in this sense, all fiction could be considered science fiction, and that the latter may actually be a broader category than the former (*Critical* 21). On the other hand, Freedman (citing Suvin) goes on to argue that the designation *science fiction* is best “reserved for those texts in which cognitive estrangement is not only present but dominant” (22). In other words, while all fiction produces cognitive estrangement, it is only in science fiction that such estrangement is the principal goal and project of the text.

Freedman goes on to support the Suvinian rejection of fantasy, declaring that the genre offers only “irrationalist estrangements,” as opposed to the cognitive estrangements of science fiction (*Critical* 43). However, such traditional critical dismissals of fantasy have become increasingly problematic in the early twenty-first century, which was ushered in by a number of genre-changing events, two of which brought a new level of commercial success to the genre and another two of which helped to redefine what the genre could be and do. The first of the latter was the publication of Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, the three novels of which were published in 1995, 1997, and 2000, which among other things complicates the notion that the genre of fantasy is based on medieval nostalgia by setting its events in

the contemporary world, or at least *a* contemporary world that happens to be one of a number of parallel worlds, in a motif more reminiscent of science fiction than of fantasy. Perhaps more important, in a genre long dominated by the Christian fantasies of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, Pullman's trilogy features an anticlerical presentation of the church as an oppressive, dystopian force in the alternative world that dominates the first volume and challenges the ideology of Christianity throughout, using John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) as its most crucial subtext. Even more powerful a challenge to the supremacy of the Tolkien tradition in fantasy fiction was the publication of Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), the first volume of the Bas-Lag series, which would ultimately also include *The Scar* (2002) and *The Iron Council* (2004). In this astonishing and spectacular sequence, Miéville employs a wide range of generic currents to produce a powerful, politically charged fantasy world that for many, such as Freedman ("Speculative"), feels more like science fiction than like fantasy.

This kind of generic uncertainty is a key characteristic of Miéville's work, which includes a healthy dose of horror and other genres as well as fantasy and science fiction, sometimes residing most clearly in one genre or another but always drawing upon other generic traditions as well. On the other hand, a general blurring of generic boundaries, and of the boundaries between adult and young-adult culture, has been typical of the speculative fiction of the early twenty-first century. This fiction has led to an extensive critical reevaluation of the genre of fantasy and especially of its potential as political commentary, with Jameson himself leading the way by declaring that works such as *Perdido Street Station* suggest the possibility of works of a "radical" or "materialist" fantasy, of a fantasy form "capable of registering systemic change and of relating superstructural symptoms to infrastructural shifts and modifications" ("Radical" 280). Meanwhile, two other events occurred that would radically change the status of fantasy in popular culture. The first of these was the publication of J. K. Rowling's series of Harry Potter novels, beginning with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

(published in the United States and subsequently adapted to film as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*) in 1997 and extending through *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* in 2007. These novels became perhaps the most important publishing phenomenon of their era, attracting a surprisingly large readership among both adults and children. These novels were all subsequently adapted to highly successful films (the last of them to two films), attracting huge audiences that further established the franchise as one of the crucial phenomena of turn-of-the-century Western culture. Meanwhile, the dominant fantasy franchise of the twentieth century had a major impact on the early twenty-first century as well, as Peter Jackson's three-film adaptation of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* sequence premiered in 2001, 2002, and 2003, grossing almost \$3 billion worldwide.

While both the Harry Potter and the *Lord of the Rings* franchises met with mixed critical response, the commercial success of both franchises had a major impact on popular culture in the early years of the new century, sending both publishers and filmmakers scrambling in search of new fantasy materials. These franchises particularly spurred a renewed interest in fantasy works for younger readers and viewers, with fantasy quickly becoming the dominant genre for such audiences. Of course, the spectacular rise of fantasy for children and young adults in the early twenty-first century was not entirely unrelated to the simultaneous growth in serious critical attention to fantasy for adults. Indeed, the boundary between the two categories, in terms both of critical attention and of the works themselves, proved extremely porous, with most of the major fantasy works that came to the fore in this period attracting substantial audiences of all ages. Miéville's complex and difficult Bas-Lag novels were probably the major exception, being less accessible to younger readers than most works in the genre, but Miéville himself provided at least a partial antidote to this by publishing a fantasy novel for younger readers, the delightful (but often dark) *Un Lun Dun* (2007), as well as the highly inventive young-adult fantasy *Railsea* (2012).

It is worth noting that all of these crucial texts I have suggested as the instigators of the recent boom in speculative fiction are British in origin, though the *Lord of the Rings* films were made in New Zealand by a New Zealander using a financial and distribution structure that is very much a part of the American culture industry. To an extent, the dominance of British texts in this phenomenon comes as no surprise, given the long-term British domination of fantasy as a genre, beginning especially with Tolkien and Lewis in the 1940s and 1950s and emanating partly, as Roger Luckhurst has argued, from a sense that science fiction by that time had come to be dominated by American writers, while fantasy remained an indigenous British tradition. For Luckhurst, the association of science fiction with “Americanized modernity is surely part of the reason that the most notable form of writing in England in the immediate wake of the war was the more indigenous form of fantasy” (123). Luckhurst argues that the writing of Lewis and Tolkien, in particular, “responds directly to the condition of modernity in England, and to what they perceived as a disastrous defeat of tradition” (124).

British science-fiction writers have vigorously reasserted themselves in the early twenty-first-century phenomenon widely referred to as the “British boom,” though Miéville himself is probably the leading figure in that boom, while other major British science fiction writers, such as Charles Stross and Richard K. Morgan, have also written works that could be regarded as fantasy. In any case, the distinction between American and British culture that Tolkien and Lewis seem to have viewed as a distinction between modernity and tradition had largely broken down by the heavily globalized early twenty-first century, when American markets became a crucial driving force for the spectacular success of the Harry Potter and *Lord of the Rings* franchises. Indeed, there is something highly American about these high-tech, high-action works, which saw their greatest success in the United States. The success of the *Lord of the Rings* films can be taken as least partly as a reaction to the uncertain and morally nebulous global situation in a post-9/11 world—*The Fellowship of the Ring* was released only three months after the terrorist

attacks of September 11, 2001—in which the United States’ war on terrorism not only was directed against hard-to-define enemies but also led the United States to be widely perceived as a global agent of terror in its own right. In this context, the *Lord of the Rings* franchise, with its clear-cut distinction between good and evil, can be seen to provide fantasy relief from the difficulties associated with the war on terror, very much in the way the original *Star Wars* films answered a need for clear-cut morality and heroism in the difficult post-Vietnam and post-Watergate days of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Indeed, even as authors such as Pullman and Miéville were challenging Tolkien’s dominance of the fantasy genre, Jackson’s films were reaffirming that the nostalgia-laden lure of *Lord of the Rings* was still strong, leaving plenty of room for ongoing critical debates about the nature of the fantasy genre. Miéville has remained front and center in these debates, partly because of the sheer quality and complexity of his fiction and partly because he himself has become an important critic and commentator. A highly public figure who has been widely interviewed and quoted, Miéville, though a Marxist himself, has become perhaps the leading champion of the notion that the Marxist tradition of seeing fantasy as the feeble other of science fiction is “untenable” (232). For example, in his essay “Cognition and Ideology,” which serves as the afterword to the collection *Red Planets* (2009), coedited with critic Mark Bould, Miéville directly addresses Suvin’s influence on the critical reception of fantasy fiction, especially among Marxist critics, concluding that the genres are more similar than they have typically been seen to be and that both can produce cognitive estrangement in useful, if ideologically different, ways.

In that same collection, Andrew Milner conducts a more extensive examination of the critical divide between fantasy and science fiction, viewed specifically through the utopian energies to be found in the two genres. Again, he concludes that the traditional Suvinian opposition between science fiction and fantasy seems to be eroding in the work of contemporary critics, partly because of the “empirical convergence” of the

two genres in “contemporary cultural life,” as markers of achievement in science fiction such as the Hugo Awards have, in recent years, gone to such works as Rowling’s Potter novels and Jackson’s Tolkien adaptations, as well as episodes of television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). Of course, if one had to give *Buffy* a generic label, it would have to be *horror*, though, as Milner notes, horror remains something of a poor relation to both science fiction and fantasy in critical discourse (220).

Such ruminations on the differences between science fiction and fantasy have proved a fruitful driving force for criticism of adult speculative fiction in recent years, though it should be noted that critics of the emerging young-adult speculative fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries seem to have been less concerned with this distinction. Instead, they have generally been happy to lump the two genres together without too much anxiety over the mixture, perhaps because criticism of young-adult speculative fiction, unlike that of adult speculative fiction, has not been dominated by the Suvinian paradigm. Farah Mendlesohn, in *The Inter-Galactic Playground* (2009), a study of children’s and young adult science fiction, perhaps hits on a reason for this lack of importance of Suvin in critical discussions of young-adult speculative fiction when she argues that science fiction for young people is problematic because it “does not resemble the adult form,” whereas, in her view, fantasy for young people does resemble adult fantasy (9). Mendlesohn largely does not follow up on this distinction between science fiction and fantasy for young people, but one could argue that this distinction comes about because children’s and young-adult science fiction, as well as fantasy for all ages, differs from adult science fiction in that it does not conventionally employ cognitive estrangement as the central project of a text.

This suggestion, of course, raises the prospect of whether the recent movement toward more sophisticated fantasy that does, in fact, produce cognitive estrangement will render the relationship between young people’s fantasy and adult fantasy as problematic as Mendlesohn finds that relationship to be in the case of science fiction. On the other hand, the popularity of such young-adult works as the Harry

Potter novels and films, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* franchise, and Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* novel and film franchise with adult audiences suggests a growing convergence between adult and young-adult fantasy rather than an emerging gulf between the two. While some such works appear to answer some popular need to escape the emotional emptiness of daily capitalist life, the general trend has been in the other direction, with much recent young-adult speculative fiction taking a darker turn toward more seemingly adult materials.

The critical response to such fiction has been extensive: Harry Potter criticism is a virtual industry unto itself, and even the often-criticized *Twilight* series has spawned a number of book-length collections of academic essays. Much of this criticism addresses the dark turn in young-adult speculative fiction, whether it asks if Harry Potter is too frightening for children or attempts to place recent young-adult dystopian works such as the *Hunger Games* series within a larger dystopian tradition. Indeed, even before the *Hunger Games* novels and films made young-adult dystopian fiction a major commercial force, this critical response was well under way, as can be seen in such works as Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry's *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003), the essays in which tellingly take almost no trouble to distinguish between science fiction and fantasy, even though dystopian and utopian fiction was a key subgenre of science fiction for Suvin. The critical response to the *Hunger Games* series, which, in somewhat of a reverse of the situation with Miéville's Bas-Lag novels, nominally belongs in the category of science fiction but often has the feel of fantasy, is only just beginning to appear, but its success promises that similar works will continue to appear and that critical responses to them will follow.

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