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Lucid Dreams, or Flightless Birds on Rooftops?

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In 2002, the British Marxist journal *Historical Materialism* undertook the brave, quixotic project of publishing a symposium on "Marxism and Fantasy." It is hard to imagine a more difficult task. No contemporary world-view can match Marxism's insistence on a theoretically rigorous, hard-nosed understanding of historical reality. Its enemy's most powerful weapon is ideology: distorted, imaginary conceptions of the world that obscure reality. For the most part, Marxists have little good to say about fantasy as a mental activity; as a genre of art, it has been beneath notice. With a few important exceptions, thinkers on the Left treat the imagination itself as the most vulnerable and exposed of human faculties, the most likely to be seduced and confounded by the capitalist manipulation of consciousness. Its natural inclination is to falsify reality, to indulge in fear and pleasure; only with difficulty can it be turned toward recognition of things as they truly are and have come to be in history. Most Marxist artists have committed themselves to political liberation, by inspiring, illuminating, and exemplifying revolutionary commitment. The exceptional rebels—the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s, Surrealists, Situationists—maintained that radical politics also requires radical reality, that the creative powers liberated by revolution must include the power to liberate the world from reality.

This grudging tolerance of imagination by the Left softened somewhat in the late 1960s. The writings of Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, in particular, had profound influence on the New Left and the counterculture. They proposed that imagining utopian solutions and representing them in culture was a necessary prerequisite for socialist liberation. At the same time, sf was also becoming a major influence in oppositional thinking, a phenomenon quickly recognized by a number of creative literary scholars on the Left, several of whom co-operated in launching *SFS*.

For many reasons, sf studies felt it imperative to define the genre in opposition to so-called fantasy. Fantasy—a vexed genre term if there ever was one—was, like sf, also experiencing a boom in the late 1960s and early 1970s, fueled by the first paperback editions of Tolkien's books. In the culture wars of the time, Left sf scholars came to associate sf with progressive modernism, utopian hopefulness, and social criticism, clearly positioning sf in opposition to the right-wing proto-fascist world-view supposedly inherent in sword-and-sorcery fantasies like Robert E. Howard's CONAN THE BARBARIAN series and the medievalist nostalgia of Tolkienesque "high fantasy." It was a distinction similar

to the one Lukács made between the realistic historical novel and "legitimist pseudo-historicism" (27)—a model of political aesthetics that still informs much of the academic Left's thinking about fantastic writing.

This defining opposition was most clearly articulated by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). Suvin argued that, within the encompassing class of fantastic ("estranging") fiction, sf is distinguished from more fanciful modes like the marvelous tale or high fantasy because sf has essentially a cognitive function. It leads the reader to a rational, historically logical understanding of the true condition of things. Fantasy, by contrast, is a literature of mystification that actively prevents its audience from using its reason to critique its social reality. In Brechtian terms, sf is capable of waking its audience up, while fantasy is just another niche-market of the capitalist drug trade. This line has been continued more recently by Carl Freedman, who has also insisted that sf be sharply separated "from the irrationalist estrangements of such essentially ahistorical modes as fantasy or the Gothic, which may secretly work to ratify the mundane status quo by presenting no alternative to the latter other than inexplicable discontinuities" (*Critical Theory and Science Fiction* 43). Although both Suvin and Freedman have somewhat relaxed their stern positions, they have not abandoned the basic stricture: only in the rarest of cases can fantasy be considered a useful kind of art.[1]

Traces of this view persisted for many years in *SFS*'s self-declared mandate. On the inside cover of every one of the journal's issues until #87 (July 2002), was the statement that *SFS* publishes on "all forms of science fiction, including utopian fiction, but not, except for purposes of comparison and contrast, mythological or supernatural fantasy." Although its practical advantages are undeniable, this segregation has become harder and harder to justify. (We have changed the formula to the more honest, *and* more weasely, "*SFS* publishes scholarly articles and book reviews on science fiction, broadly defined.") The lines separating fantasy fiction from sf are becoming blurred, and the traffic between the two zones is heavy. This is partly due to what Arjun Appadurai calls cultural flow (33). The obvious dominance of non-realist imagining in non-First-World national literatures, in the art of marginalized and ethnic populations, in popular fiction and film, and in commercial advertising throughout the world have made "irrationalist" fantasy a dynamic international norm, not easily reduced to simple false consciousness. Many outstanding literary works being produced in the Anglophone world can be categorized as fantastic. They are enormously diverse, written for coterie elites and mass audiences, for adults and children, as subversions and as consolations. Many artistically ambitious writers—John Crowley, Diana Wynne Jones, Jonathan Carroll, Graham Joyce, Philip Pullman, China Miéville, Jeff Noon, Jonathan Lethem, Alan Garner, M. John Harrison, Ursula Le Guin, Mary Gentle, James Morrow, and Christopher Priest, to name just a few—have produced, and continue to produce, memorable work that defies subgeneric definition; it can, however, clearly be called *fantasy*.

It is becoming more and more difficult to make hard and fast distinctions between sf and fantasy. We might distinguish artistically serious fantasy from

hack work, as we sometimes try to enforce the sf/sci-fi distinction. But the trend dictated by the artists themselves is toward a more catholic, fluid concept of genre, as a vast reservoir of possibilities whose devices cannot be distinguished. A sophisticated and in some ways exemplary body of critical theory has grown up around the distinction between sf and other kinds of fantastic writing. What might serious critical theory look like, if the border guards went home?

Many of the names on the list above work in Britain, and the boom in fantastic writing has occurred in tandem with a parallel sf-boom in the UK, ongoing since the 1990s. Of this group, perhaps the most influential exponent at the moment is the prodigious China Miéville, who has in a few short years helped to energize the genre's writers and scholars in Britain and to bring them international attention. Miéville has been able to combine highly original and accessible fiction, a respect for scholarship and theory, and an active commitment to socialist politics, with propaganda skills on behalf of his fellow UK writers. Probably no one else would have had the chutzpah and jam to attempt a détente between fantasy and Marxist critical theory. For the stakes are higher than they might seem. If it can be done, fantasy receives the imprimatur of the critical Left (which matters more in the UK than the US, yet may come to matter a good deal more here as the Empire gets rolling, over us as over everyone else) and perhaps a reconciliation with the mass of Tolkienites and computer gamers. It may also contribute to a transformation in Marxist aesthetics, a de-Lukácsianization of the Leftist imagination that could have implications far beyond Middle Earth and New Crobuzon.

The contributions to *HM*'s symposium fall into two groups. The first sets out to construct an apology for fantasy out of, and in opposition to, hardline Suvinian sf-critique. The second tries to figure out in what form, and by what name, fantasy might be approved in Marxist thought. The latter group paints a chaotic picture of (primarily young) scholars of the Left trying to mesh the dogmas they learned in catechism with the conceptual apparatus of one or another of the modernist/postmodernist demigods. There are distinct essays employing ideas from Benjamin, Adorno, Lacan, Lefebvre, Althusser, and Gramsci. The first group includes Miéville's introduction and Mark Bould's paranoid theory of fantasy, and shorter commentaries by established Marxist critics, including Ernst Mandel, Carl Freedman, Fredric Jameson, and Steven Shaviro. Miéville's and Bould's pieces alone are worth the price of admission; together they offer the rudiments of a bona fide contemporary Marxist approach to fantastic writing. The guest commentaries, for their part, are fascinating for the light they shed on how little even established Marxist theorists of sf have thought about fantastic writing in general.

Theoretical pluralism can be a strength, but when one is trying to establish a new critical project, it's best to have some minimum agreement about the object. The symposium never congeals out of chaos because its participants have no shared idea about what "fantasy" or "the fantastic" mean. Miéville notes in his introduction that the terms have many meanings in the world: "surrealism, sex and sexuality, folk traditions, dream analysis, fantasies of everyday life and utopianism, as well as the analysis of genre literature" (39). Miéville may have

left it up to his contributors to land on the ones they prefer—maybe out of democratic generosity, and maybe just to see whether there is some shared terrain out there in Theoria. But few thinkers on the Left are used to thinking of fantasy as a positive concept that requires no justification; and fewer still are comfortable with it as a generic category of art. The symposium feels a bit like a pack of penned-up hounds being let out to smell a beast they may once have known in their puppyhoods, but lost scent-memory of long ago.

In some of the essays, neither the word nor the concept of the fantastic plays a role. Stuart Elden's "Through the Eyes of the Fantastic: Lefebvre, Rabelais and Intellectual History" gives an account of Henri Lefebvre's Marxist biography of Rabelais, with some comparison to Bahktine. Although it is an interesting piece of information about Lefebvre, it seems to have been included because of Rabelais's canonical status as a fantastic writer and Lefebvre's Marxist bona fides. For Mike Wayne, in "Utopianism and Film," the concept of utopia is sufficiently synonymous with fantasy that he never uses the terms fantasy and the fantastic. Wayne works through several of Benjamin's ideas about nostalgia, melancholia, the role of the archaic as a generator of discontent with the social order, and the dialectical ambivalence of film regarding utopia and ideology. These he uses ultimately to explicate Bill Forsyth's film, *Local Hero* (1983). It is a technically difficult display of conceptual apparatus demonstrating an obvious point: films like *Local Hero* recontain the critique of neoliberalism they play with throughout their story. In "Magical Urbanism: Walter Benjamin and Utopian Realism in the Film *Ratcatcher,*" Alex Law and Jan Law also combine the explication of a film with a difficult discussion of subject and cinema, and they, too, apply Benjaminian concepts. Using Benjamin's suggestions about film's "optical unconscious" and the vital importance of children's play for the unconscious, the authors seem to be linking fantasy with childhood reverie—presented in *Ratcatcher* (1999) in a brutal dialectic with everyday existence in a Glasgow slum during a garbage strike. In the end, fantasy is linked with elegy, and hence with little power against violent reality.

The articles by Wayne and A. and J. Law do not give much help in establishing any general qualities of the fantastic for Marxist critique, other than pointing to Benjamin as a promising source. But Benjamin's notoriously alchemical concepts seem like philosophical versions of slipstream writing, and call out for some of the same sort of critical definition as modern fantastic fiction.

Ana Kornbluh's "For the Love of Money" advances through tangled thickets of jargon (and cameo-appearances by Sartre, Lacan, Kant, and Žižek), to the conclusion that Hollywood romantic fantasies like *Family Man* (2000) provide false compensations for social stalemate (i.e., fantasy bad). At the other end of the spectrum, Ben Watson adopts a medieval scholastic usage of the term fantasy in his essay, "Fantasy and Judgment: Adorno, Tolkien, Burroughs," to argue that fantasy in this sense is an aspect of the Kantian concept of judgment, present in all thought. None of these essays ventures any ideas about the fantastic as a class of fictions.

The Great Adversary for Marxist theories about fantasy is *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's popularity has always irritated critics on the Left. His works cannot be easily discounted, because they elicit real affection by great masses of people; they can't be dismissed as derivative, administered confections, because their popularity is not (or rather was not until recently) artificially produced; they can't be condemned as mere ideological obscurantism, because they are deeply felt, carefully crafted, and based on a lifetime's study. The strongest test for a Marxist theory of fantasy would be a sophisticated recuperation of Tolkien's Ring cycle. One of the high points of the Symposium is Ishay Landa's "Slaves of the Ring: Tolkien's Political Unconscious," which provides just that.

In a fine application of Jameson's ideas, Landa argues that the Ring books, rather than trying to construct a delusory sanctuary from history, are suffused with a feeling of acute historical urgency. "Far from being escapist literature, Tolkien's work in general and *The Lord of the Rings* in particular are very much about the impossibility of escape, the inevitability of squarely confronting reality" (115). For Landa the underlying contradiction of *LOTR,* for which its story is a symbolic resolution, is the dilemma of private property under capitalism. Tolkien's "stories dialectically oscillate between a utopian renunciation of private property and its ideological vindication manifested in the Ring of Power" (117).

Landa reads *The Hobbit* as Tolkien's response to the European crisis of property that was World War I. Restaging the imperialist struggle as the war between the elves and the dwarves, Tolkien cast Bilbo in the role of the resolving trickster. Bilbo gains his power to resolve by first affirming the acquisition of property as a heroic activity through his theft of the Ring. Then he heroically renounces it, getting rid of the Ring in order to prevent the carnage that would ensue between the dwarves and the elves. In the world of *LOTR*, this simple tricky operation is no longer possible. The contest is no longer a quarrel about riches internal to the crypto-European historical system. It has become a struggle against an enemy that comes from outside, and yet has the power to subvert, absorb, and enslave the entire world of Middle Earth. Though Tolkien quite obviously expresses his revulsion at the revolutionary masses and non-Western peoples in his racist representation of the orcs, they are ultimately merely tools of a greater power, which aspires to control all creatures through the consolidation of one great force: property. The Ring compresses the historical dilemma of capitalism.

> For, in the Ring, are congested all the immeasurable contradictions of the capitalist system: the enormous productivity with the annihilating destructiveness, the unlimited power of the few with the utter impotence of the many, the extraordinary luxury and the epidemic poverty, the sanguine promise with its horrible betrayal. All are there in the greatest miniature. (122)

Landa argues convincingly that *LOTR* expresses something that Marxists care about deeply, a problem in the human social condition so deeply rooted that it invites mythopoeic treatment. His essay points to a way that the Jamesonian

hermeneutic can be applied to fantasy in general, and to mythopoeic, myth-based, and secondary-world fantasy in particular. Arguably, such works, when they are successful, do not merely displace contemporary historical dilemmas into fantasies; they draw as well on the cultural memory that these dilemmas have plagued human social life for millennia. Capitalist totality is a modern phenomenon, but the curse of private property is part of the species memory. This is not to say that it is not worth fighting against; it is to say that there is good reason for artists to use techniques that convey how ancient the problem is. It is, in any case, interesting that critics for whom Blochian utopianism is a reasonable hypothesis resist the idea that the adaptation of ancient cultural forms can carry living critical meaning. By the same token, it is myopic to take such fantasies to task for denying actual history; their historical gaze may have a longer sweep than criticism is comfortable with. Who dictates that the links that tie an imaginative work to reality must be to the present or the near past only, and to one kind of ideal resolution, not to the remote past's constructions of long-standing historical dilemmas?

While the above mentioned articles try independently to determine what role the imagination plays in Marxist theory, commentaries by Carl Freedman and Fredric Jameson deal with the more specific question of whether fantasy fiction as a genre can be justified for historical materialism. I would like to dwell on them at some length, given how influential Freedman and Jameson have been in formulating Marxist theories of sf. In "A Note on Marxism and Fantasy," Freedman begins from his premise (quoted earlier) in *Critical Theory in Science Fiction,* that fantasy fiction is inferior to sf because it is irrationalist and ideological, tending to "ratify the mundane status quo" by presenting no critical alternatives "other than inexplicable discontinuities." Freedman thus continues along the hard Marxist-rationalist line that sf can call critical attention to the fallen social world's historical logic by way of the novum, while fantasy—by pretending to break loose from the logic of history—can only distract, entrance, and weaken its audience's understanding.

Freedman begins with the classical anti-Tolkien claims that Landa calls into question. For Freedman, "Middle Earth leaves out most of what makes us real human beings living in a real historical society. It is like a technically perfect and extremely light façade: at a glance it looks solid enough, but touch it with your little finger and it topples over" (263). Its greatest flaw is its intellectual poverty: it presents the struggle between good and evil as a mythologized struggle between ahistorical forces, the "idealist distortion that results when an as-if-omnipotent metaphysical ethics is substituted for systemic historical actualities" (264).

Where the "light facade" is concerned, if Tolkien resolves the problems created by the sin of private property "ideologically," it puts him in the company not only of most artists, but of most mortals, since we are still considerably closer to barbarism than to socialism. And this is the problem at the root of Freedman's critique. Freedman assumes the basically vulgar Marxist position that a work of art is about *presenting alternatives* to social-political realities as they are conceived by Marxist theory—i.e., agit-prop. If such high-

toned agit-prop categories—exposure, rational plausibility, the primacy of the political-economic explanation—were the decisive ones for art, then polemical science textbooks would be the greatest works of literature. Indeed, not only fantasy, but fiction itself would become merely a delivery vehicle for philosophical concepts.

By Freedman's standard, sf should be just as corrupt as "fantasy," since sf's "continuities" (i.e., historical logic) may be "explicable" (i.e., rationally plausible), but its worlds are *imaginary* and their relationships with the real world are not simply reducible to critical ideas. Their obliqueness is not allegorical or Aesopian in most cases. The aesthetic pleasure that comes from willful distortion is an important part of sf's appeal. Freedman himself has provided a good critical tool to study this with his notion of the "cognition effect." Deviating from the purist line articulated by Suvin in *Metamorphoses*, in which true sf must inspire the reader to look for a cognitive isomorphism with the real condition of things, Freedman offers that sf creates the rhetorical illusion of this isomorphic connection, just as Barthes argued that historical writers create the illusion of cognitive identity with the historical past through the "history effect" and a sense of an objective point of view through the "reality effect."[2] The "cognition effect" demands that we consider even actually valid contemporary science to be a device for constructing an imaginary model; its validity may be significant, but it is not essential. A work of sf could create a powerful illusion of validity based on systematic distortion of premises and arguments accepted in the real world. It could also create a compelling model based not on actually accepted models, but on accepted ideas *about* model-making. If the ground of cognition is not facts or things as they are, but the models and matrices through which these facts are structured, then we are no longer speaking of hard truths. And the pleasure audiences enjoy in such fantastic models must not be caused by recognition of reality, but by freedom from it.

Miéville's introduction speaks directly to this problem, and I will defer elaborating on it until later in this essay. Freedman's critique is important because it represents a sophisticated form of the doctrinaire prejudice of Marxist criticism against not only the specific genre of fantasy, but the mythopoeic and ludic imagination in general. Clearly, Freedman does not like fantasy fiction; he does not seem to have read much of it, and what he has read, he does not seem to have read with much interest. His only example of fantastic fiction is Tolkien's, as if it were the template for all fantasy. This alone is cause for concern. (It is worth noting that Freedman's critical work is sometimes marred by a tendency to make vast general judgments about a very small sample of historically specific texts. *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* purported to treat sf as a historically grounded genre, and yet treated only a few literary texts written after 1976, and none after 1985—this in a book published in 2000. In the same way, Freedman chooses one text to stand in for the whole class of fantasy writing.)

The vulgar critique is problematic, not only because Freedman may not have read enough fantastic writing to be able to assess its range, nor because this lack

of interest may be inspired by academic snobbery. It is that Freedman seems tone-deaf to one of the driving impulses of fantastic and mythopoeic writing, the sense of living in the midst of tremendous forces that do not become less mysterious and impinging just because they are given an historical context. The orthodox Marxist critique pretends that art can be valuable only if it represents evil or dread or freedom in terms of concrete historical determination, of "systemic historical actualities" (Freedman 246). (The phrase conceals a paradox, resolved only if we accept that "actualities" are epiphenomenal, preceded by the system in which they appear.) As if collective and personal feelings of defeat, dread, and grief, the anxiety of a coming world war, the horror of its debris, the recrudescence of oppression and mass slaughter, of the corruption and alienation of one's friends, the suffering of one's children, the relentless normalization of betrayal and cynicism (to mention only the most powerful negative feelings) are empty or thin if they are not explained via some alleged logic of political power in the here and now. One might reply that the abstraction lies in the historical logic. The grief is the reality. Freedman's own condescension to fantasy leads to its strongest defense. Collective feelings do not yield easily to critical logic. In the midst of collective life, very few think of their experiences in terms of what Raymond Williams termed a "structure of feeling." The value of much fantastic fiction then may be in the respect it pays to the enormous paradox of living in history that cannot be expressed as history, but only as myth or the repudiation of rational explanation. One way of thinking about myth is that it is a false story that is believed in just the same; another is that it is an explanation of phenomena that does not make them less mysterious.[3]

Freedman softens his position grudgingly by accepting the basic Blochian premise that even the most corrupt artifacts have a utopian component, a spark of hopefulness that can lead to critique. Hence even Tolkienian elvish fantasy has a right to exist. There's better news, though. There is potential for critical fantasy, represented by Samuel R. Delany. Freedman considers the *Neverÿon* series (1979) an answer to Tolkien, mainly on the strength of the way Delany incorporates critical ideas into his secondary world. It may be that Freedman admires Delany's "metahistorical" approach to fantasy because Delany employs ideas that are clearly identifiable as critical theory outside the world of his fantasy texts. This has always been a distinctive feature of Delany's work. Leaving aside the question of whether overtly abstract theories are compatible with fantasy, Freedman may be making an elitist distinction between legitimate and illegitimate fantasy based on academic prejudices, rather than examining what fantastic writers are trying to do.

Jameson is considerably more curious about the genre. In "Radical Fantasy" he sets out "to make a place for a certain kind of historical trace in fantasy" (274). Like Freedman, Jameson begins with sf as his baseline; and he, too, narrowly circumscribes his topic to the commercial genre of magical, or "high" fantasy. This is understandable, since Jameson has long been interested in genre as commodity, but it is also disappointing. The class of fantastic, "anti-mimetic" art is large and varied, and to treat magical fantasy in terms of opposition to sf raises the question of what inspires the explosion of fantastic art in all its

slipstream and idiosyncratic varieties. Fantasy, one would think, should inspire a catholic theorist like Jameson to re-examine even sf from a new perspective, as a particular condensation of the anti-realistic imagination.

Jameson believes that the readerships of fantasy and sf do not overlap. This has certainly been true among sf scholars, but younger readers, many women, readers among minorities, and even young academics are much less likely to make hard and fast distinctions. "Sci-fi" has never been unpopular, and is clearly gaining popularity as special f/x create similar sensations in fantasy and sf spectacles. Besides, Clarke's principle that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic permits more and more fantastic investment in everyday high-tech, as described by Bukatman in *Terminal Identity* (1993), and evidenced in the hallucinophilic styles of William S. Burroughs, David Cronenberg, Jeff Noon, and Miéville himself. Their fantastic content cannot be reduced to science-fictional mimesis. There is simply much more of an inclination to mix realistic and irrealistic elements than many theorists want to admit.

The sf/fantasy distinction may be more durable when it is viewed in terms of Jameson's notion that sf is fiction about mechanical mediation and fantasy is about organic, pre-modern mediation, embodied in dragons, wizards, and magic. In this model, sf always includes modernity in its temporal perspective; one cannot tell a tale about the power of machines and technological prostheses without showing how they intrude on the organic, the archaic, the pre-modern. The "historical trace" of sf, then, is not hard to find even when it is not apparent; it's there in the machines that make the sf world more powerful than our own. But if fantasy ignores or rejects this mechanism of modernity, isn't it fair to say that it is exactly what a Lukácsian like Freedman says about it, that it is "legitimist" romance, all ideology and nostalgia? Like Freedman, Jameson detects the presence of historical consciousness only in recent works in which magic is treated as an historical phenomenon of social power, like Le Guin's *Tehanu* (1991), or in which magic elements are detached from myth and superstition and given a place in an expanded system of material forces, as in Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000).

There is much to recommend this approach. Landa's Tolkien essay demonstrates that it can be used fruitfully to appreciate even putatively less self-conscious works of fantasy. Indeed, it might lead to the recognition that fantastic fiction is rarely naive, and usually includes as much embedded reflection on its narrative conditions as sf. Still, Jameson limits his object unnecessarily. Mechanical-modernist sf and magical-organic fantasy are parts of constellation of relationships among many different mixed perspectives. These include the uncanny (which mixes the natural and supernatural), the deranged (which mixes the mad and the normal—and the latter may well contain science-fictional explanations and devices, as in Walter Moseley's *Blue Light* [1998]), the visionary (which mixes the normal and the mystical), the prophetic, and even more complex inter-graftings, like Darren Aronovsky's *Pi*, for example, in which the deranged, the visionary, the science-fictional, the archaic, and even the fractal/chaotic are "cross-hatched" (to use Clute's apt term). Given the

privileged place that realism has for Marxist criticism—both as a literary style and as a faith in the objective existence of its materialist premises—it is certainly worth examining why these irrealist modes are so popular, and why they can have such congress.

Examining fantastic writing closely might lead Marxist critics to re-examine their preconceptions that sf is a genre partial to rationalism for reasons other than aesthetic pleasure. The hard organic/mechanical distinction has clearly gone by the wayside. Consider the living spaceships that are now a staple of sf —from Butler's *XENOGENESIS* trilogy (1987-1989), through Gwyneth Jones's *ALEUTIAN* trilogy (1991-1998), to Moya in the television series *Farscape* (2001-2003). Or technologies that are patently non-scientific, included as if to flaunt the cognition effect's fantastic basis. Do *Dark City*'s (1998) aliens and technologies have any plausible material basis? Are the machines of *The City of Lost Children* (1995) gestures toward technology, or fantastic parodies? Do *La Jetée*'s (1962) time-travel injections make any "cognitive" sense? We know they are enhancers of Nostalgia Power, but what, exactly, is technological about wishing oneself into the past? Is *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) sf, even though there is no mechanism for shifting in and out of historical realities? Even if one argues that it is a meditation on the logic of history, what do we really learn from Dick about the logic of history other than its arbitrariness, or, alternatively, the power of non-rational consciousness?

The fantastic is a subversive genre, and not only of bourgeois norms; it subverts naive historical materialism as well. Jameson claims that materialist, or radical fantasy, has the capacity to recuperate magical ideas for cognitive ideas, as the "thaumaturgons" of *Perdido Street Station* are treated as if they were alternative material particles, and the thaumaturges of the novel are merely scientists of an alternative material world. But this is a slippery slope. *Perdido Street* also includes Weavers, cosmic spiders spinning the web of the world, who can be conjured up by terrestrial officials with the sound of scissors snipping, and persuaded to intervene in human affairs. That is a different material world indeed. (Let's not even mention the Ambassador of Hell.) Jameson implies that this recuperative operation tends to work in favor of the materialist perspective; i.e., it is easier to frame quasi-magical motifs within expanded materialist parameters than for idealist perspectives to recuperate material science. He believes we might find this only in a few New Age philosophers. On the contrary, one of the main sources of fantastic writing has been the steady elaboration and filling-in of "idealist" ontologies with science. This is a tradition that might be led all the way back to the hermetic philosophers and alchemists; but it is clearly vibrant in the work and biographies of many scientists and esoteric philosophies. The current boom in literary fantasy is paralleled by interest in weird scientists like Georg Fechner, Tesla, Oliver Lodge, Srinivasa Ramanujan, and David Bohm. Rudolph Steiner, for his part, aspired to accommodate the whole of contemporary material science, including relativity and quantum theory, in the cosmology of Anthroposophy.

Miéville's introduction speaks directly to these issues. He begins by weakening the codified sf/fantasy division. Fantasy has an immediate

relationship to real life, which, under capitalism, "is *a fantasy*" (42). In modernity, human beings live in a imaginary world shaped by the magic of the commodity fetish, an "absurdity which is true, but no less absurd for that." Fantasy constructs fictive worlds mimicking this reality-construction: it "is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality —constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true*—mimics the 'absurdity' of capitalist modernity" (42).

A fantasy's impossible predicates are treated systematically and coherently in a given work, creating the same sort of cognition effect that Freedman attributes to sf. This has far-ranging implications for sf, too, specifically in terms of the use of pseudo-science. For many sf critics, especially among Marxists, the use of pseudo-science by sf writers is a sign of intellectual impotence. Yet many sf writers have employed such motifs, and some theorists —including the Marxist Kobo Abé—have argued that imaginary science is precisely the sort of science most appropriate for sf because it serves the play and freedom involved in constructing fictions, rather than the externally imposed constraints of enforced intellectual norms. For Miéville, too, pseudo-science "is not merely a charming affectation, but radically undermines the notion that sf deals in a fundamentally different kind of 'impossibility' than fantasy" (45).

This apology for the impossible clearly owes little to Marxist orthodoxy. Miéville makes two cases, to different audiences. The first is to that small group of writers and critics interested in genre theory. The other is the much larger and more difficult task of justifying fantastic literature to *Marxists*. The two arguments do not coincide exactly. Where the genre question is largely a matter of distinguishing two different kinds of impossibility, justifying the literature of the impossible makes severe claims on Marxist ideas about art's relation to reality. To do it, Miéville essentially has to defend the role of the imagination as a constructive element in human history and labor. He calls up Marx's famous distinction between architect and bee, comparing the bee's unconscious ability to build complex structures with human beings' faculties of intellectual labor, design, and planning. Thus, "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*. The fantastic is there at the most prosaic moment of production" (44). From this zero-degree of the fantastic Miéville makes a case for a form of cognitive estrangement more radical than Suvin's:

> In a fantastic cultural work, the artist pretends that things known to be impossible are not only possible but real, which creates a 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 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. (44)

Any imaginary reconstruction, any act of fantasy, has radical potential because reality and knowledge about it exist in constant dialectical mingling with

the imagination. In fact, the impulse to fantasy is as stubborn as the impulse to cognitive identity.

> 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. (45)

In classical Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, Lenin and Pisarev made a strict distinction between constructive and "tangential" dreaming—i.e., between imagination directed toward revolutionary struggle and idle imagination, which can be harmful to it (46). Miéville detects a trace of this political moralizing in the distinction between good sf and "tangential"/harmful fantasy. For Miéville, "[t]here 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" (47).

Although he does it with elegance and a minimum of polemical challenge, it is clear that Miéville is proposing a theory of the fantastic far more liberal than that of hardline critics.

> What is necessary is to acknowledge the fantastic's specificity—granting its own borders that do not require constant reference to the everyday for validation. In this way, we avoid the 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 may like) which labels fantasies at best politically irrelevant, and at worst, a source of harm.(47-48)

Miéville's introduction lays out an elegantly dialectical notion of fantasy. It also implies a dialectics of ontological pluralism. Whether it is a *materialist* theory is another matter. There is no reason why the process of thinking the not-possible should not be compatible with an "idealist" notion of the imagination as a faculty that works with historical conditions as if it were, in some way, autonomous from them. Unless the dialectic inheres in matter (the vulgar Marxist position, par excellence), then thinking the never-possible is something that human minds bring to the mix—an "idealist embarrassment" at the heart of historical materialism.

What *are* the tools for a materialist theory of the imagination? The most common metonym for the imaginary's toolbox in modern Marxist critical usage is the unconscious, a topos that, in its psychoanalytic variants, permits both irrationality and material recuperation. Each of the Symposium's writers seems to have derived his or her idea of fantasy from one or another variety of the unconscious: Lacan's, Benjamin's (the "optical unconscious," "innervation," nostalgia), and most frequently, Jameson's political unconscious. (Miéville does not bring the unconscious into his theory; the never-possible is not a trace, a symptom, or the dark basement of the psyche. It is part of the basic operation of mind. It is either existential or metaphysical.)

The most elaborately articulated link between the materialist unconscious and fantasy is sketched out in Mark Bould's "The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory." Bould begins his complex essay with critiques of Todorov's and Rosemary Jackson's theories of the fantastic. He

finds in both a tendency to distort their theories toward canonical fantastic fiction, and away from popular, commodified forms. Jackson develops a theory similar to Freedman's and Suvin's normative categories of sf. She distinguishes between uninteresting and unuseful secondary-world fantasies like Tolkien's, which are mere "metaphorical reflections" of reality, incapable of interrogating it, and "paraxial realms," which are located in an indeterminate zone between the real and the not-real, from which they are capable of intervening. For Jackson's theory, the decisive move is the elision of the literary fantasy with the phantasy of psychoanalysis. Fantasy is a subversive mode in the way that it strips away the Symbolic to reveal the Imaginary for an instant, ultimately to recuperate the desire momentarily discovered.

In Bould's view, Jackson's theory downplays the "return," the recuperation, and by doing so ignores the basic condition of possibility for the genre: its commodity form, and with it, the possibility of conceiving fantasy as a social act. Bould challenges Todorov and Jackson with a concept of the fantastic that combines Althusserian interpellation and "paranoid totality." He begins with the premise (borrowed from Freedman's well-known essay on the historical appropriateness of Dick's paranoid world-view) that paranoia is the natural mental operation for subjects that are constantly hailed by a myriad ideological solicitors under capitalism. Fantasizing is the domestic, dominant form of this "shuttling between the vast array of subject positions on offer, which must in some way be reconciled with each other if the subject is ever to feel unified or whole" (80). As fantasizing insulates the subject from the competing interpellations, so fantastic fiction isolates its worlds from the real, creating "textual ontologies" simultaneously created and inhabited by (fictive) whole subjects.

> Upon this basic characteristic the further rules and conventions of the fantastic genres are erected, interacting with each other and the paranoid textual ontology, so as to produce the various types and further examples of fantastic text (which can, in turn, be understood as a further process of product differentiation within the sphere of administration). (81)

The notion of paranoid textual ontologies is especially useful for understanding fantastic fiction (including sf) as a mass-market commodity. In its light, the attraction of such critically despised but extremely popular forms of mass-fiction as spin-off novels and franchise fiction make sense. They have all the characteristics of paranoia: they are "thoroughgoing, internally logical, never trivializing. And all phenomena are aspects of a symmetrical and expressive totality—no detail is so contingent or heterogeneous that it cannot be subsumed within the framework of the grand system of the particular megatext" (82).

Bould's theory accounts for both the psychological and the social operations that produce fantasy fiction. It does beg certain questions, even so: where does the drive for self-insulating wholeness come from in capitalism's world of aggressive attraction and repulsion? Can the theory account for innovative, artistically ambitious works of fantasy as well as mass-market commodities? Is the process the same for pre-modern forms of the fantastic, in the ontologically

diverse cultures that produced the *Ramayana*, *The Journey to the West*, the *Thousand and One Nights*?

What is at stake? A Marxist theory of the fantastic seems almost unimaginable, except perhaps in the domain of fantastic thinking itself, on the order of biological numbers or petrified angels. For the fantastic, taken in its broadest sense, not only insists on the not-possible, it has reasons for insisting. It asserts the counter-possible. Fantastic art radically insists on its fictiveness, resisting the gravitational pull of every kind of secure and isomorphic identity, i.e., every reality—not only empirical contingency, but also mystical vision, dementia, dreamtime, hermetic orders, prophecy, and the realm of forms pantomimed by allegory. Todorov and Jackson are not wrong. The fantastic is about hesitation, and subversion, about suspension of disbelief and suspension of belief simultaneously. Its purpose is suspension, because the imagination, not reduced to blueprint, is "good to think with."

Marxist thought aspires, in its more orthodox forms, to the same thing that most materialist theory aspires to: the reduction of mental phenomena to the material conditions of their possibility. In the Suvinian version, "estranging" fictions break the spell of false reality and intimate the truths of dialectical historical determination. In Jameson's version, fiction reveals a "historical trace" in the midst of total false consciousness, like a Dickian tag, a lagging residue of historical reality that may remind us that we are caged in the virtual reality of capitalist domination. For both, the utopian trace is the positive thread that folks might follow out of the labyrinth, or the faint exit light. Bloch's utopia is not More's headgame. It is real.

Marxist theories of sf have influenced how students of contemporary culture think about the interconnections among art, politics, and technology. It is no exaggeration to say that the early work of Suvin, Jameson, and other *SFS* Marxists helped mediate the conflict between literary culture and postmodern technoculture, not least by providing a sophisticated philosophical language for what was a powerful and growing interest on the ground. The work of Miéville, Bould, and the other contributors to *HM*'s symposium may show the beginning of an expansion of this work, away from the restrictive reductionism that characterizes not only bourgeois morality, but tendentious Marxist aesthetics as well.

The distinctive aesthetic pleasure of the fantastic comes from its refusal to accept reduction to a stable explanation affirming the prior privilege of some logic of the real. The challenge for Marxist aesthetics is to account for this, and for the "goodness" of the fantastic consciousness in dialectical terms. This is as hard for Marxism as it is for bourgeois materialism. Both world-views treat the imagination as a tool, a faculty to be used for a greater good—for making blueprints of what must eventually be materially realized (the positive sense of reification). Marxist aesthetics don't have much to say about play, whimsy, or reverie. Blochian utopia might be fashioned to justify play and fantasy without obvious critical content; but Marxist critics have a job, and that is to identify the critical energy of art. Since this necessarily gives primacy to the relationship between the imaginary and the real, Marxist literary theory perpetually calibrates

the distance between the two; and not just any reality-as-isomorphic-identity, but the ideal reality of Marxism's empirically non-verifiable, non-falsifiable imaginary, its enabling mind-forged concepts: the dialectic, the labor theory of value, the commodity fetish, the necessity of class struggle and revolution. It matters little whether this moralizing realism is couched in terms of art's *use-value* or some psycho-metaphysical principle of *lack*—the fantastic is read as the incapacity of making things real.

In this light, the question of genre is riven by the same ideal/real split as any historical category, between, on the one hand, the crystallization of possibilities, the ideal form, the possible genre, with, on the other, the ossification of main tendencies, the actual genre, the commodity. In vulgar Marxist practice, it is a simple matter: all aesthetic qualities are subordinated to a work's effect on class struggle. Most Marxist aesthetics has had greater respect for the ideal genre than this. Lukács, whose influence on Freedman and Jameson is considerable (somewhat less on Suvin), continually oscillated between the ideal and the real historical realism. He discovered in Sir Walter Scott and the French realists a fortunate fusion of the two, only to describe the decline of the ideal as reality itself declined into imperialist decadence. The Lukácsian critic is always concerned with art's historical "adequacy," on two levels. Is the genre adequate for expressing the age's historical possibilities; and is the age itself adequate for the requirements of the struggle? In the first case, for example, historical drama ceased to be an adequate genre, in Lukács's terms, when historical consciousness emerged among the European masses. In the second, European decadence of the fin-de-siècle suppressed dialectical consciousness and made any serious historical literature impossible. In that age, bourgeois awareness of history could only produce images of the iron cage.

For Marxist critics of sf the problem is not so simple. Bloch's proposition that utopian desire is present wherever the reality of class domination is deposed gives all art—and so all genres—and indeed every age, a minimal honor. This utopian minimum has been the imaginative core, the fantastic heart, of Marxist aesthetics once revolution ceases to be an imminent, or indeed imaginable, possibility. Jameson's well-known thesis articulated in "Progress versus Utopia; or Can We Imagine the Future?" is classically Lukácsian: the age is bad, incapable of historical thinking or dialectical imagination. Sf replaces historical fiction around the time of Verne, precisely the moment that Lukács claims realism dies in the West. Sf's role for Jameson is less to remind us of the utopian possibilities than to obliquely alert us to the iron cage, extended to the universe itself. Sf is a set of gestures of impossibility. But then, what is not? The historical reality of the age has not only the last say, but also the first. A genre is only as good as the age it emerges in.

Suvin, in the *Metamorphoses*, examines the genre from the other end of the telescope. He identifies what he considers sf's *ideal type,* which essentially begins with Wells at the moment when socialist thinking is energized by evolutionary theory. Wells is Suvin's Scott. But for Suvin this capacity to illuminate through the novum's cognitive estrangement exists as the genre's ideal possibility. Most *real sf* is the crap of false consciousness. The real genre's

poverty exists simultaneously with the ideal genre's possibilities. For Freedman, none of these constraints seems to matter much. In *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* there is only the ideal genre of critical sf. (Although, given that Freedman appears to have parked in the 1970s and 1980s, it may be that he has voted with his feet for a Lukácsian historical periodization.)

What if we substituted fantasy for sf in these Lukácsian models? Is it an inherently failed genre, drawing its essential energy from the refusal of history, adequate only for totally commodified culture, like fin-de-siècle aestheticism? Or is it capable of expressing important things of an important age? Only now has the latter possibility come into play for Marxist sf critics, as they begin to yield a little in their earlier blanket dismissals, in each case only because certain recent fantasists, such as Le Guin, Delany, and Miéville, have begun to break with what are seen as the traditional conventions of the genre. Does this mean that fantasy has become a potentially adequate genre? (It is interesting that this new situation coincides with the critics' own budding interests—none have ventured to forgive Peake or Tolkien or MacDonald for coming too early.)

If Marxist sf critics are continually rating the historical age and genre for adequacy, Miéville, Bould, and Landa propose that fantasy is adequate not in terms of the "objective" historical possibilities of the age, but to the social imagination that constructs the model of the age. The risk they take is in abandoning the constant sleepless measurement of the genre/history gap. Worse, they risk claiming that imagination is linked to reality on terms different from the *dogmas* of historical materialism. In *Constructing Postmodernism* (1993), Brian McHale argued that sf is the characteristic art of the age because it expresses the ontological dominant of the postmodern period. I have argued elsewhere that sf is less concerned with ontological pluralism than it is with the technological dominant, a largely materialist conception of technology's capacity to transform raw reality into diverse worlds (a process I have called artificial immanence). But McHale's theory may well prove valid if we substitute fantasy for sf; for fantasy truly does experiment with the construction of worlds that are not images of material transformation, but of imaginative alterity. The test of an alternative world is its strength in resisting reduction to the familiar conditions of this one, however we explain it. Among fantastic genres, sf is happy to traffic with the real; respect for known worlds (usually the material-scientific one, but any verified historical identity model will do) is the source of the full faith and credit of its play money. Fantasy may reject the traffic altogether, sharing only fidelity to the logic of narrative. A historical-materialist theory that respects this will to resist the real cannot countenance reduction; it requires two-way traffic in the imagination.

NOTES

1. Oddly, none of the writers in the symposium engages Suvin's "Considering the Sense of 'Fantasy' or 'Fantastic Fiction': An Effusion," published in 2000. In that essay—one of the best of his career—Suvin no longer treats fantasy with disdain. Roused by the publication of John Clute and John Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), Suvin proposes several ways to ground Clute's concepts in Marxist ideas about genre and cultural history. The concern with the "historical trace" in fantasy that Jameson expresses

in his symposium contribution is worked out with considerable detail by Suvin. Although he still holds fantasy in lower regard than sf, Suvin makes a strong ethical case for his aesthetic judgments. It is obvious that Suvin has read widely in the genre, studied its history, and bases his judgments on experience, rather than prejudice.

2. For the history effect see Lane (145-55); for the reality effect see Barthes (141-48).

3. Uttered in some similar form in an article by Raimundo Panikkar, this is one of those accursed phrases that I've carried around in my notebooks for years and can't trace back to its provenance.

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