

Introduction to “Locating Fantastika”

RUTH HEHOLT

This journal issue comes out of the “Locating Fantastika” conference that was organised by Charul (Chuckie) Palmer-Patel and hosted by Lancaster University in 2015. The original call for papers for the conference set out the agenda as follows: “‘Locating Fantastika’ explores all areas of space, setting, and locations, either in the fictional world of fantastika or in fantastical networks with the real world”. This is a wide remit and the papers given at the conference reflected this. Over two days there were papers given questioning genre and narrative structure and theoretical discussions around eco-criticism and the fantastic. The locations discussed ranged from different types of tangible, physical spaces: urban landscapes, wilderness, borderlands and haunted houses, to the more esoteric constructions of location: transitional, borderless or performative spaces and imagined, fantastical spaces and locations. The conceptions of place, geography, topography, setting and space are often what define a work of literature or art, a game or a film *as* fantastical.¹ From the inter-planetary and lunar landscapes of science fiction to the imagined other-worlds of fantasy games, the uncanny spaces of film and fiction or the haunted houses that lurk in urban side streets, the locations of Fantastika resonate with depth, meaning, fear and pleasure.

Genre

Fantastika is a genre, or what Brian Baker describes as “an umbrella term of sorts” which he suggests provides a “framework of generic inter-relatedness” (9). Generic fiction is sometimes criticised as being “lazy” fiction, whereby the generic conventions preclude real artistry from the authors or serious thought on the part of the audience. In relation to film genres Christine Gledhill points to criticism in the 1970s in which “the term ‘convention’ was used pejoratively, referring to the second-hand meanings and stereotypes associated with mass production that militated ... against the personal expression of the artist” (252). Here the lack of “originality” is critiqued and the role of the author/auteur/artist downgraded. However, in more recent criticism of genre texts, this easy (itself often lazy) critique of generic fiction is being questioned. Thus for example crime fiction is now being seen as a form of literature (not just “writing”) that involves active participation by its audience and I want to claim the same for Fantastika. In relation to crime fiction Charles Rzepka claims for the audience “the exercise of our powers of imaginative invention” (25). He argues that with each clue, the reader looks afresh backwards at what has gone before and re-imagines and re-invents the events from each new perspective, leading to a continual re-reading. This he claims is truly active reading (28). Texts (of all sorts) in the Fantastika genre also require “imaginative invention”, a re-evaluation of what is known and

expected and a re-reading of spaces/places and situations. There are reading choices to be made in relation to recognising and questioning *what* we are reading/watching/playing and the interpretation of the spaces and places of these fictions. Fantasy fiction does not turn its back on the real; to journey into the imaginary unreal requires a continual re-reading between the known (the “real”) and the imaginary not-known. For Fantastika to be effective and affective it needs a skilful blend of the real and the imaginary and an alert and active audience who can negotiate between the two. A fantastic landscape is an immersive one and there must be participation in the creating of the space/place on the part of the audience.

In the Fantastika genre in particular, one of the most important and productive interactions is between different texts and dialogues between different sub-genres encompassed under the Fantastika umbrella. The imagined spaces and landscapes of Fantastika need to be intertextual and authors and audiences are alert to this. As with all genre fiction, it is the inter-textuality, the inclusion of other generic forms and conventions that helps to define, form and re-form the genre of Fantastika. Brian Baker suggests that:

“Fantastika” ... seeks to work across generic divisions and sub-divisions, allowing scholars and writers working on sf, Fantasy, the Gothic, horror and hybrid texts to enter into dialogue, to see similarities and shared concerns across these fields. This is, of course, how genres themselves develop: by importation, stealing, hybridization. Genres are not “pure”. (Baker 2015)

Fantastika locations are not “pure” either. This melding and fusing, cherry-picked thieving and re-modelling of genre forms and locations forms a part of the richness of Fantastika and is also vital to its recognition *as* a genre. Baker cites John Clute who coined the term “Fantastika”. Clute insists that generic awareness is a vital part of the genre itself. And for this “awareness” to occur there must be an agreed, communal recognition of what Fantastika is and the forms, styles and imagery that define it. Yet part of this recognition involves testing the accepted boundaries and it is this that enables growth and movement in the genre and the push and pull between author, text and audience is a vital part of this.

Affect

The audience is always implicated in the creation of Fantastika through the imagination and also through the embodied response to texts. In recent cultural geography theory there has been a movement towards affect theory and what is called the “non-representational”. Ola Söderström states that “non-representational thinking has led geographers to [introduce] new figures such as: the body, emotions, spatial practice, interaction, performance, ‘things,’ technology” (14). This resonates with all forms of Fantastika. Whilst the fantastic landscape will of course be represented at a certain level (we have to recognise it), there will also be inter-play, performance, reaction and imaginative intervention.

There is an affective collapse between the imagined and the real, the fiction and the embodied audience reaction to those fictions. Tim Ingold contends that:

perception and imagination are one: not however because percepts are images, or hypothetical representations of a reality “out there,” but because to perceive, as to imagine, is to participate from within in the perpetual self-making of the world. It is to join with a world in which things do not so much *exist* as *occur*. (14, original emphasis)

In *Fantastika* of course there are multiple worlds. These worlds however also “occur” in the mind of the perceiver and are brought to life through the power of the imagination. There is a breakdown of binaries: inside/outside, real/imagined, read/created and this is one of the joys of the genre. *Fantastika* requires us to transport our imaginations elsewhere whilst immersing it at the same time in the grounded here and now. And whilst this can be said for most fiction, *Fantastika* and its sub-genres of horror, sci fi, the Gothic, the Weird, are characterized by this dichotomy. The landscapes of *Fantastika* cannot be too far away (unrecognisable) or too near (merely everyday and mundane). There must be a melding of the two: a fusion of the real and the imaginary. In relation to affect theory Gregg and Seigworth argue that:

almost all of the tried-and-true handholds and footholds for so much critical-cultural-philosophical inquiry and for theory – subject/object, representation and meaning, rationality, consciousness, time and space, inside/outside, human/nonhuman, identity, structure, background/foreground and so forth – become decidedly less sure and more nonsequential. (4)

And if this works for theory, it also creates space for the non-real, the imagined and the nearly-real encompassed in the fluid genre of *Fantastika*. Recently Xavier Aldana Reyes in a chapter entitled “Gothic Affect” claims that: “the purpose of the gothic – to scare, disturb, or disgust – has often been neglected”, and says that: “this is detrimental to areas such as...horror fiction, which commonly rely on corporeality or non-cognitive (somatic) or instinctive human reactions” (2015, 12). Here it is the body that instinctively reacts to the fictions; with horror, fear or disgust. This instinctive, non-logical, embodied reaction is an important part of the *Fantastika* genre too. The texts of *Fantastika* move the audience and demand reaction. We should not underestimate the affective power of the fictions of *Fantastika* and the articles in this issue trace some of the affective landscapes that are so important to the genre.

“Locating *Fantastika*” Articles

The essays collected in this issue explore, test and question the topographies of the fantastic. We begin with Hannah Boaden’s article which is about a specific type of boundary – the doorway. Boaden looks at the emotional and affective reaction of the audience to the cinematic depiction of doorways in *Resident Evil* (Anderson, 2002). In both the game and the film, doorways are borders which represent uncertainty, dread and anticipation. Doors both conceal and reveal spaces, bordering two locations in a

liminal and uncanny manner that both creates and at the same time collapses the binary of inside/outside.

Thomas Tyrrell looks at a collapse of a different sort – in relation to time. His essay traces the influence of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* on the construction of the DC Comics Universe. Tracing unexpected connections Tyrrell looks at a range of popular contemporary texts that parallel and incorporate Miltonic themes and spaces. Tyrrell equates the Angels with the superheroes of the DCU and argues that: "Hell has become a standard location for DC comics". The essay follows Neil Gaiman's series *The Sandman* and Mike Carey's *Lucifer* as well as considering other texts. Tyrrell looks at a tradition that is on-going and vitally intertextual: the imaginative landscapes of Milton's universe live on and are incorporated into the genre of Fantastika.

Rachel Fox moves to locations that at least appear to be more cultivated in her exploration of the "other garden"; the Faerie spaces in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* and Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market". Fox looks at the Faerie space/world as a heterotopia – an other or counter-site of liminality that has crossed the border of the real but which still reflects it. Here is another place of Fantastika where binaries are collapsed. The abjected and rejected still resides besides and within the "normal" and the "real", but it is at a slant – just out of view. Fox describes these spaces as "patchwork" and as palimpsests. Arthur Rackham illustrated both texts showing a faerie world that "transgresses boundaries" in the *Peter Pan* text and a Goblin world of beauty, decay and violence in "Goblin Market". These, Fox argues, are not safe spaces.

Nik Taylor turns to look at performance magicians and the temporary, ambivalent spaces they create for their audience through the practise of what is termed "Bizarre Magick". A truly intertextual practice, Bizarre Magick uses fictional and cinematic tropes and signs to purposely affect (most often scare) the audience attending the performances. Taylor argues that the magicians align themselves "more closely to an occult practitioner", blurring boundaries between the real the imaginary. Taking performance pieces from different eras, Taylor looks at how ritual practice is melded with performance in order to heighten emotion and create certain tangible effects for the audience. It is the task of the magician/practitioner transport the participants into an ambiguous space of uncertainty and possibility.

Nick Hubble further explores transgressive spaces in his essay on Naomi Mitchison's imaginary world in her novella *Travel Light*. Hubble traces Mitchison's attempts to create a feminist fantasy space, noting some of her early, less successful efforts. He follows her quest to represent some form of female agency, looking at her writing in relation to her domestic situation as well as contextualizing it within wider societal changes. Hubble argues that *Travel Light* finally fulfils Mitchison's potential and her desire to write a progressive and transgressive feminist text. This is a text that writes-back to traditional folklore

tales that curtail space for women and, Hubble argues, allowed Mitchison to write-back to her own conventional domestic life.

Rob O'Connor turns to look at the excessive urban spaces in China Miéville's *The City and the City*. Taking a considered approach from psychogeography, O'Connor looks at Miéville's conflation of the genres of crime and fantasy, using them to envisage the cityscapes as sites of politics and power. Miéville stretches and breaks genre boundaries and O'Connor argues that this is reflected in his representation of the two cities where topographical boundaries are also indistinct and uncertain. Questioning issues of observation through the figure of the flâneur and the way that the characters in the novel are taught to "unsee" the other city, Miéville highlights instances of wilful blindness to poverty, violence and injustices in our own urban spaces. O'Connor argues that: "*The City and the City* becomes a text rooted in contemporary urban commentary" in which repression and violence reside in dark politicized spaces.

In the final essay in this issue Vladimir Rizov continues the examination of the seen, the unseen and the urban environment (here Paris) in his exploration of documentary photography. Continuing the argument about the porous boundary between the real and the fantastic, Rizov suggests that historical documentary photography exemplifies the ambiguity of the visible and the invisible. The equation of photography and magic has been of long-standing and Rizov argues that it has occult associations with alchemy and other transformative practices as well as with magic objects such as mirrors. Rizov argues that documentary photography lays claim to authenticity and "truth" yet what emerges are ghostly portrayals that reveal uncanny spaces. Thus the photograph is an image of the "delicate standstill, dialectically formed by the interplay of forces that both precede and succeed the particular moment"; a continuing interplay between the fantastic and the real.

Throughout all the essays in this fascinating issue it is this correlation, the cross-fertilization, the porous bleeding between the real and the fantastic that is of central importance in discussing Fantastika. Todorov claims that "[t]he fantastic occupies the duration of ... uncertainty" (75); the lingering doubt about the relation between the real and the un-real or imaginary. This creative space is explored in the articles here and they provide some wonderful and unexpected connections and ways to locate Fantastika.

Notes

1. Rosemary Jackson distinguishes between what she terms as the "marvelous" in relation to topography as opposed to the "fantastic" (41-60). However the papers at the conference and the articles collected here do not reflect this distinction as both come under the umbrella of "Fantastika".

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