A new vocabulary for fantasy scholarship

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When I speak of a new vocabulary for fantasy scholarship, I don't mean new words. Nor do I mean the importation of words from extant discourses into this scholarship. I mean the development of a set of integrated concepts apposite the object in question as it exists in and/or interacts with contemporary political economy, cultural production, subjectivities, knowledge practices, power, etc. Of course these concepts will refer back to older ones, connect with contemporary ones, and may even share the same name as concepts from other fields. They must nonetheless be thought and rethought to be relevant now and with regard to this object. There is a pressing, threefold need for this vocabulary having to with first, the continuing erosion of sf as a means to understand the world and think a way past it, second, the rise of horror to fill this vacuum, and third, the inability of much of the inherited vocabulary of fantasy scholarship to make itself relevant *in this context*.

Science fiction has long been the subgenre of the fantastic that has driven theoretical debates about the fantastic and afforded scholars the opportunity to demonstrate a relationship between what was once merely low culture and, to take but one concept, the political unconscious. Otherwise put, science fiction has, as Carl Freedman might note if for different reasons, found particular connection with critical theory, namely because both discourses, at their best, become meta-historical—not only engaged with history, but productive of history through the questioning of history itself. As Fredric Jameson would note, however, we no longer think in terms of history. Freedman might agree, insofar as critical theory, which is dialectical, gave way to a post-dialectical thought sometime in the 1960s or 70s. And yet, the world moves on, even if our tools of analysis are no longer adequate to it. Whatever some might claim to the contrary, *Capital* teaches us more about the nineteenth century that produced it than it does about cultural and political situations Marx could never have imagined. As McKenzie Wark notes somewhere, we should read it as a classic, that which helps us understand our past and where we came from rather than where we are and where we are going. Likewise, science fiction and its related

concepts—progress, utopia, dystopia, futurity, the horizon, reason, the novum, cognitive estrangement —seem less relevant to our day to day existence and to our future than they do to our past, as perhaps the bearers of our nostalgia. We long for a time in which we could disagree politically, dialectically, and not simply shout past one another, trapped in the confines of our personal disciplines and discourses. Darko Suvin, in re-examining his claims of the late 1970s, notes a certain optimism behind his understanding of sf at that time, in which he implies that the novum and the cognitive estrangement it produces, as the elements of history, imply a forward progress that might move us beyond our present state of existence. But sf not produce socialism, nor did it manifest by way of the inherent contradictions of capitalism. Freedman transforms cognition into the cognition effect which, as China Mieville might remind us, transforms dialectic into sophistry. Hardly dialectical at all. Now our deflationary realisms, our capitalist realisms, can only imagine the end of the world, and not the end of capitalism itself.

In the wake of sf and critical theory, among other things, we find the rise of horror. Eugene Thacker's *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy—*In the Dust of this Planet*, *Starry Speculative Corpse*, and *Tentacles Longer Than Night*—not to mention the writings of Thomas Ligotti—republished by PENGUIN and introduced by Jeff Vandermeer, another horror writer increasingly relevant in the current cultural milieu—find themselves at the center of prestige television. Object oriented ontology specifically, and speculative realism generally—whether practiced by Tim Morton, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Reza Negarastani, or Ray Brassier—displace the human subject into an inhospitable world of objects, arche-fossils, and extinction that refuses to acknowledge the meaning history and narrative formerly offered even as they have come to dominate university press forthcoming lists. This is not even to mention the work of The Dark Mountain Project, the cottage industry in publishing books on the Anthropocene mainly developed and maintained by Verso, the ascendancy of Lovecraft as both a muse for further POPULAR and LITERARY fiction as well as a conceptual persona within anti-humanist theory, and the discourse surrounding accelerationism—from

both sides of the aisle. We have been disappointed, both in the sense of having been let down, but also in the sense of having been removed from a position. We live in a world we do not understand, in which natural systems threaten our existence by way of the unintended consequences of our unthought and unthinking actions. We live in world in which cultural systems exist above and below our thresholds of perception both guide our behaviors and anticipate them in order to co-opt our labor into political economies of which Marx never dreamed. Indeed, as Jonathan Crary would tell us, if Marx dreamed of it now that dream would be harnessed for its exchange value. We are shaped by unseen forces, aggregated by unfelt forces, and sold to unknown forces. We are no longer subjects of history, but subject to something else. If you look around and don't know who the product is, the product is you.

This "progression" from sf to horror seems natural in at least one respect. As I shall discuss momentarily, sf, insofar as it strives to be historical or meta-historical, is a thoroughly modern genre. Horror, insofar as it "narrates" the end of all human narratives, seems to me thoroughly postmodern. If fantasy is left behind in this movement, this is only because fantasy seems therefore to be premodern in its aims, desires, and methods. I do not believe this to be the case, but one can see the argument. Fantasy is, whatever its critics claim about its status as pseudo-fascist mystification and symptomological wish-fulfillment, itself thoroughly modern, a response to modernity and the concomitant entrance into historical thought. It's promise, however, will not be fulfilled by demonstrating that it *is too* historical, that it can accomplish sf's goals by way of accurate, dialectical examinations of race, gender, class, technology, etc. We can't map modernity and politics and history onto fantasy and expect it to measure up to the norm established by sf and the sf/theory intersection. Likewise, we cannot simply see in fantasy horror, as in the cases of grimdark, dark fantasy, and certain types of urban fantasy. Fantasy does in many ways mirror horror, as heaven does hell, but one should not be reduced to the other.

However, the tools we inherit from the history of the genre and its reception are of little use to

us if we want to develop in fantasy that which is unique to it. Insisting on its literary qualities only reduces it to standards established in the 19th century and early 20th century, assuming we can even agree on what literature is. Matthew Arnold clearly believed that literature was what would ideologically satisfy the British working class. If we want to advance the claim that fantasy is escapist this might be the way to go. Beyond this debate, which seeks to connect fantasy in some way to the real world and to modern notions of the universal human subject and its meaning, we might consider world-building and subcreation. These are certainly useful concepts when we think about what it is that writers do when they write, but they cannot be left to this context entirely when they have been so thoroughly appropriated by the culture industry as that which is leveraged by franchise in order to sell, among other things, nostalgia. See the voluminous scholarship—and how to guides—on media franchising for more. The concept of the taproot text and the attendant concern with influence, origins, and inspiration must likewise *continue* to be rethought in the context of intellectual property and cultural appropriation. I do not mean to say that none of this work is being done, but rather that it needs to be done with more of an eye to the present and future and less with regard to the past. Moreover, it must be done with an eye to the larger historical context in which fantasy now exists, as a means to articulate fantasy with its others and with the cultural concerns it is poised to address—*but only if we are able to make it speak*. Much has been made in the last year, and rightly so, of Jemison's use of the Black Lives Matter movement for inspiration for *The Fifth Season*. But we cannot simply note that this is fantasy that deals with race without asking specifically what it is that fantasy might say about race *as fantasy* and not as allegory for reality, as wannabe sf, etc. Much has been made about the appropriation of fantasy by so-called mainstream, literary writers. The discussions of *The Iron Giant* and *The Bone Clocks*, teach us that fantasy can be useful, can be relevant, but we cannot be bogged down in questions of whether this is really fantasy or whether fantasy and literature can co-exist. Ongoing, caustic arguments about the Hugo awards, so-called SJWs and other concepts from the sewers of the internet, demonstrate the importance of fantasy as it intersects with political, social and economic concerns.

Marlon James, Booker Prize winning author of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, has promised an epic fantasy, an African *Game of Thrones*: "One hundred pages describing a village? Hell yeah," he promises. "A big appendix on magic techniques? Of course I'm gonna do it. Two hundred pages on a mysterious dwarf race that lives underground? Fuck yes." We can both pay attention to James' cultural influences as well as how they are transformed by generic conventions, conventions that resist historicity and the reduction of narrative to a reflection of some given reality. This is what fantasy can do.

For the remainder of this paper, I will, first, articulate fantasy with sf and horror by way of vocabulary adopted from French theorist of culture and technology Bernard Stiegler. This articulation will, I hope, demonstrate both how fantasy differs from other subgenres of the fantastic, but also how, especially in opposition to them, it solves some of the problems they develop. Second, I will turn to a discussion of several concepts in want of further development in the manner I have called for here, starting with enchantment and disenchantment.

As stated before, sf seems to me bound to the logic of modernity, in which history is both the cause of and the solution to our problems. Bernard Stiegler calls "existence" that state in which the human subject is bound, in which that subject seeks to align its meaning with its being. Horror seems to me bound to the condition of postmodernity, or whatever comes after that, in which we no longer can tell the story of existence, which requires our belief in the future, in a time to come when the alignment of meaning and being will be accomplished, a sort of utopia if you will. When we no longer believe, and therefore give up on meaning and start to merely be, we no longer exist but subsist. Fantasy, which rejects modernity in a manner somewhat different than does horror—in its full form it desires a return to the moment before history began rather than dismissing history, meaning, and difference as fictions by which humans avoid staring into the abyss. Fantasy is thus thoroughly modern, insofar as it acknowledges what history is and how it works, but rejects the modern assumption that the way out of history is through history itself. It nonetheless understands itself to be trapped in history and must

content itself with a desire for *consistence*—the perfect alignment of meaning and being—that can never be fulfilled.

Before moving on, I should acknowledge that none of these three genres deals with the issues I am describing in just the way I am describing. They are internally diverse, encompassing subgenres that reject, subvert, or otherwise modify the logics of the larger genres. I think we can see much of what I am saying about fantasy in what we call epic or high fantasy, but urban fantasy does not always deal with this sort of thing. Dark fantasy bends always towards horror in some respect. Revisionist epic fantasy such as the *Mistborn* novels and *A Land Fit for Heroes* begin after the great battle has been lost or won, and thereby demonstrate the impossibility of return rather than exhibit a longing for it. Nonetheless, the *theoretical* comparisons I am making here remain instructive.

The language of enchantment and disenchantment, which we inherit from Max Weber and others, suggests, along with related terms premodern and modern, a past filled with belief, superstition, and similar modes of thought and, by extension, a present characterized by secularism and rationality in which such precritical thought has been dispensed with. In this context, in which what had been enchanted becomes disenchanted, fantasy operates precisely as the Marxists claim, as a desire to return to the past, however idealized, a past rendered unreachable by the wrongness called history. Adopting and adapting a term from John Clute, we can refer to this past as Story, which is opposed to narrative and to meaning insofar as it involves the meaning-beyond-meaning of enchantment and belief. Against mere narrative, against the disenchantment of the world, Coleridge proposes the willing suspension of disbelief and, later, Tolkien theorizes secondary belief. But, I think, we misunderstand what happened with the advent of modernity if we understand that it destroyed something positive (meaning "extant" rather than "good") when it disenchanted the world for the simple fact that the world had never been enchanted to begin with. The notions of the premodern, the precritical, the enchanted, the irrational, etc., rather than serving as useful descriptions of the way the past "really was", serve instead to justify the present as a progress beyond the confines of the past. To understand the past through such modern

concepts is to understand the past as having made some sort of choice, to have picked enchantment over the truth, to have accepted ideology (even unconsciously) as opposed to some other possibility. Another way to understand what happened, with significance for the discussion of fantasy, is to understand that enchantment only become possible after disenchantment. Coleridge's and Tolkien's respective forms of belief need not remain nostalgic, but could themselves become creative and progressive. We have, I think, still the opportunity to produce belief, to choose what had never been chosen.

Of course, this choice seems increasingly less possible. Such is Mark Fisher's point, and perhaps Jameson's and Zizek's at times as well. Donna Haraway captures this problem nicely when she produces, in the cyborg, what she calls an "ironic political myth." Irony and myth, self-reflexivity and fantasy, do not play nicely with one another, as *The Magicians* continues to teach us. Stiegler too questions whether we can produce belief, whether it's even possible to believe in the present context, whether our disappointment has grown too vast, whether trust has replaced belief and credit has replaced investment. He notes that the thinkers of today have become themselves thoroughly enmeshed in the logic of disappointment and disenchantment, following the rise of poststructuralism and other such theoretical pursuits in the 1970s: "It was in fact standard procedure, in the course of the dark 1970s, to *disappoint*, and to claim a *disappointing heuristic* in the name of the struggle against 'received ideas' and 'ideologies.'" Writing in the wake of Freud and Nietzsche, and against such figures as Althusser and Foucault, Stiegler continues: "it became simply fashionable to reveal to the naïve world that all these beautiful discourses (on teaching methods, for example) are in fact doing service to a disciplinary State apparatus, and that the teacher who believes she is a teacher is actually a prison guard." How do we think ourselves past this impasse?

Stiegler notes that pedagogy must be supplemented by mystagogy, that we must not pursue rationality and disenchantment to the point they become irrational, that the way to prevent this from happening is to grapple with belief itself and incorporate the mystical into our lives (not in a new age

sort of way, but as that out of which belief is made). Stiegler is somewhat famous for being

paternalistic, for being a philosopher king. He takes pride in being a Platonist and openly advocates for

aristocracy, rule by the best. However, and this may not be enough of a "however" for you and I

appreciate that, he also calls for a constant questioning of this aristocracy, what he calls a "new

critique," a critique that is no longer founded on the assumption of oppositions and, instead, is

conducted under the premise that everything is pharmacological, both poison and cure. Here, story is

the pharmacological object or concept. By way of conclusion, I wish to think a bit more about story as

pharmakon, not to oppose it to modernity, but to demonstrate the manner in which fantasy, as a genre,

has long grappled not only with a longing for story, but also with the problems story presents to us. The

double nature of story, that it exists as both embrace and constraint to the degree that the terms cannot

even be opposed, does not reduce to a question of opposition, but rather implies that belief remains

possible, that consistence might in fact be, if only ever in the future.

So, on the handout I have provided, you will see a set of terms, both those I have adopted from

Stiegler and those I have developed myself. I can only offer a rough sketch of this vocabulary here.

Story is "stated", which is to say "given a stated" by certain fantasies. Other fantasies, less

ambitious ones I think, tend to take up such statements and redeploy them without adding much to

them. That this is so should not be surprising, since the way a field is stated will, in part, determine

what subsequent writers can say within it, will determine if the next thing said in fact belongs to the

field at all. This is Foucault's point in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Media theorist Siegfried

Zelinski adapts Foucault's archaeology into variantology, by which we identify other statements within

a field which might otherwise go unnoticed given the strength of the original and dominant statement.

So, story has been *stated* as existing as an embrace, as being *for* the human, and as therefore

being something we should try to return to. The variants to these statements include the understanding

that story exists but as a constraint, that it is therefore *not* for the human, and that we should therefore

not return to it. The question of the nature of story's existence is a question of its *positivity*, the question

of its relation to the human subject is one of *affectivity*, and the question of whether we should return to it (or advance towards it, I might add), is of its *desirability*. Each of these questions is expressed in a thematic concern in certain fantasies, which I also provide examples of.

Of course, we might also wonder if it's possible for fantasy to express the fact that story does not exist, whether this is another variant on positivity. I am not sure this is possible, as that might exclude the text from the genre altogether. I do think texts can be silent on this question, remain agnostic or what have you, and remain fantasy, but I am not so sure about other possibilities. Regardless of whether I am right, I think that we can even raise this question in this way, in a way that connects this genre to history and to theoretical concerns, is encouraging. I do not expect, of course, that this vocabulary will be useful for many other people, or for any other people. It may remain entirely too invested in my own, local concerns. However, I do think that there is more to do with the genre than we yet imagine, and that what we do with it does not have to depend on turning away from concerns that have previous been hostile to those of us who take it seriously. In an age when horror seems to the alternative, I will take fantasy every day of the week.