

INTRODUCTION

In her still influential *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (1984) Kathryn Hume argues that all literature is a product of two equally significant impulses – mimesis and fantasy, defining the latter in very broad terms as “any departure from consensus reality.”¹ In her formulation fantasy does not refer to a relatively recent genre of popular fiction but together with mimesis contributes to literary representations of reality across a wide spectrum of texts, ranging from the Icelandic sagas to science fiction. It is in a similarly wide sense that we understand “the fantastic” in this volume, inviting the authors to reflect on the ways in which it engages with “the realistic” not only in speculative fiction, but also mainstream literature and other non-textual narratives.

In speculative fiction, encompassing all narratives including the elements of the fantastic, the supernatural or the futuristic, the combination of fantasy and mimesis can take many forms and be used for a variety of reasons. Within fantasy literature – “a fiction of consensual construction of belief”² – the relationship between these two elements has been touched upon by Farah Mendlesohn, who in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) distinguishes four subtypes of the genre. While portal-quest fantasies (for instance, C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia* or Guy Gavriel Kay’s *The Fionavar Tapestry*) rely on transporting characters from their mundane lives to the fantastic worlds and present these two spheres as clearly separated, the intrusion fantasies – ranging from Gothic romance to horror novels – construe worlds similar to our own that are ruptured by the intrusion of the fantastic that disrupts normality. The immersive fantasies (for example, China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*) are set in fully fantastic

¹ K. Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* New York and London: Methuen, 1984, p. 21.

² F. Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008, p. xiii.

or secondary worlds which need to be consistent, coherent and logical even if the rules divert from the ones operating in the “real” or primary world. Liminal fantasies (for instance, Jo Walton’s *Among Others*), in turn, depend on blurring the borders between the fantastic and consensus reality and create a moment of doubt or hesitation in readers. Despite providing insight into how the fantastic functions within the texts, Mendlesohn’s influential study does not account for all the relationships between fantasy, realism, and consensus reality.

Speculative fiction, whether set in a quasi-medieval imaginary world or in a technologically advanced far-away future, has a potential for exploring contemporary reality and its alternatives and frequently offers a commentary on the problems important for its times. With reference to science fiction, referred to as “literature of cognitive estrangement”, Darko Suvin argued that it “estranges” aspects of a reader’s empirical reality through a new perspective “implying a new set of norms.”³ While in science fiction displacements must be “logically consistent and methodical; ... scientific to the extent that they imitate, reinforce and illuminate the process of scientific cognition,”⁴ the concept of estrangement can be applied to all subgenres of speculative fiction, which typically invites the readers to confront the nature of reality by immersion in worlds that operate according to different rules. Thus, all speculative fiction texts can offer a critique of empirical reality and envisage its alternative – sometimes as an idealized and nostalgic vision of the past, other times as a dystopian or post-apocalyptic future. The essays in this volume are meant to examine various ways in which the fantastic intersects and interacts with both the conventions of realism and the consensus reality, offering insight into the effects that are created through the process.

This volume follows earlier collections of articles devoted to the fantastic published by our interdisciplinary team which brings together researchers with different academic backgrounds in English and Polish studies. The first volume titled *Motywy religijne we współczesnej fantastyce (Religious Motifs in Contemporary Fantastic Literature)* was published in 2014 and the second one – *Tekstowe światy fantastyki (Textual Fantasy Worlds)* in 2016. To continue the tradition of foregrounding two perspectives, which frequently rely on different theoretical approaches, we have decided to include articles in both languages.

³ D. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 6.

⁴ I. Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., *Marxist theory and science fiction*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds. E. James and F. Mendlesohn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 118.

While most authors collaborating in this project have chosen to write their texts in English this time, we believe that encouraging a dialogue between scholars specializing in Anglophone and Polish literature is a worthwhile and fruitful task. The authors approach the theme of this collection from a variety of angles and critical perspectives, including a contribution on a relatively new field of game studies. The core of the discussed texts, however, belongs to the body of speculative fiction – from fantasy to dystopia. Focusing on the analysis of literary aspects of the texts, our contributors frequently ground their discussion in social and cultural contexts, not refraining from sensitive issues and demonstrating the engagement of speculative fiction with contemporary concerns.

The first group of articles in the volume reflects the continuing interest of scholars in fantasy literature. Weronika Łaskiewicz opens the collection with a discussion of George R.R. Martin's bestselling *A Song of Ice and Fire*, arguing that despite its medievalist character, the series employs postmodern conventions and enters into a dialogue with the expectations of the twenty-first century readers. Another fantasy narrative deeply inspired by the medieval tradition is examined by Przemysław Grabowski-Górniak, who demonstrates the role that realism played in the creation of Robert E. Howard's Hyborian Age and argues that the tales of Conan's exploits reflect the real concerns of the early twentieth-century America.

The dialogue between the real and the fantastic also lies at the root of Lord Dunsany's writing. In his essay Francesco Bernuzzi considers the peculiarity of fantastic settings in his fiction to demonstrate that they function as "extensions of reality" rather than "self-standing cosmologies." Aleksandra Dmowska draws attention to the coexistence of the realistic and fantastic elements in Terry Pratchett's Tiffany Aching pentalogy. Arguing that Pratchett's narrative strategy results in the opening of the Discworld universe to mythical dimensions, she focuses on such aspects of the narrative as the world as language, human being as inseparable part of the world of nature and female initiation. Finally, the potential of fantasy to engage with and comment on social and ethical concerns of its times is discussed in two articles in this collection. Magdalena Łapińska explores how the issue of race present in the American society has been reflected in Deborah Harkness' *All Souls* Trilogy, juxtaposing the real-world problems of violence, segregation, miscegenation and racial purity with the events from the novels. Focusing on J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter saga, Paweł Fiedorowicz examines the reliance of the narrative on Tolkien's concept of the Great Escape and discusses the motif of death and various attitudes towards it in the novels.

Another group of articles examines dystopia, post-apocalyptic, and futuristic dimensions of recent speculative fiction. In his more theoretically oriented contribution *Światy władców logosu. O dystopii w narracjach literackich* (*Worlds of Lords of Logos. Dystopian Narratives in Literary Fiction*), Krzysztof M. Maj discusses dystopia in its relation to the utopian tradition, proposing a perspective focused on the fantastic story-worlds rather than investigating sociological dimensions of literary texts. Such approach offers useful tools for interpreting utopias as eutopias or dystopias. Literary dystopias are examined by Karolina Wierel in *Literackie dystopie początku XXI wieku – między realizmem a fantastycznością* (*Literary Dystopias of the Early Twentieth Century – between Realism and the Fantastic*) where she examines the novels by Kazuo Ishiguro, Suzanne Collins and Michel Faber in the context of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of retrotopia. Joanna Wildowicz, in turn, concentrates on the post-apocalyptic vision of the world in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, emphasizing the post-capitalist and post-consumerist aspects of the novel. Turning her attention towards futuristic aspects of science-fiction, Agnieszka Dzięcioł-Pędich examines the portrayal of artificial intelligence in Becky Chambers' *Way to the Small, Angry planet* and *A Close and Common Orbit* to argue that the novels challenge the "AI destroys humanity" trope and portray it in a more positive light.

Yet another strategy to combine the fantastic with the realistic is investigated by Stefan Kubiak, who attempts to explain why Philip Roth, the writer known for his realistic fiction, reaches for the fantastic in his novella *The Breast*. Referring to Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic and Roth's literary inspirations, he argues that the purpose of the fantastic transformation of the protagonist in the novella functions differently than in Gogol's *The Nose* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The volume concludes with the article which offers insight into an emerging academic field of game studies. Izabela Tomczak analyzes two blockbuster titles, *BioShock* (2007) and *Borderlands 2* (2009), through the lens of Foucauldian theory, convincingly arguing that the models of power relations operating in real life are reflected in videogames.

As it is evident from this brief description, the articles in the present volume do not rely on a single theory, but rather employ various theoretical and methodological perspectives to explore the intertwined nature of fantasy and realism in a range of narratives. While the discussed texts spread across the continuum of speculative fiction in both generic and thematic terms, all of them "depart" from the constraints of reality and question the *status quo* by

“help[ing] to liberate the reader from lazily relying on standard assumptions about culture and society.”⁵ When seen together, the essays in this collection make clear that speculative fiction does not really offer any escape from reality but opens up possibilities for the readers to approach it in a reflective way.

Editors

⁵ K. Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, p. 162.

WORKS CITED

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