

Introduction to New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature

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## **Asunción LÓPEZ-VARELA**

### **Introduction to *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature***

Myths, utopias, dystopias, fairy tales, science fiction, and a host of other types of texts in literature are among genres of writing that open up to beyond our everyday reality. What lies behind human desire to search beyond our borders of perception? While the "fantastic" remains a persistent phenomenon throughout the history of literature, what factors contribute to its development in particular moments? Does a relationship exist between expressions of the human condition in aesthetic and scientific perceptions in literature? Which is the relationship between technological development, the materiality of objects, the concept of ontological presence, and the emergence of abstract and fantastic models?

In the collection's opening article, "Cultural Scenarios of the Fantastic" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/2>> Asunción López-Varela postulates that there has been in Western literature a return to the fantastic since the early twentieth century and relates this phenomenon to neo-baroque attitudes whose foundations are a systemic way of knowing that, in turn, unveils a world understandable from an epistemology of complexity and ambiguity. Thus, in what López-Varela terms as "postmodern neo-baroque aesthetics," she designates the notion of technological re-mediation, that is, a process of information transference across different media where originality is no more than the capacity to de- and re-construct pre-established formulas. In this process, the cultural and the technological meet, since repetition arises from an excess of information showing the material character of the cultural. At an epistemological level, postmodern fragmentation questions the concept of totality but it also allows a new vision of the localized other. The emergence of hybrid and fantastic perspectives implies a changing of values, that is, referential parameters about ourselves, the others, nature, life's sense, etc., whose foundations are attitudes and experiences that have profound emotional impact on us. It also shows how those values are interiorized through repetitions of symbolic forms, affecting psychic and non-explicit levels of our experiences. López-Varela points out that the conflict between a vision of the world as a closed system (with the exigency of totality as an ideological and aesthetic condition) and the postmodern neo-baroque vision of the world as group of local open systems with permeable borders represents a conflict which anticipates ideological, political, economical, and axiological systems, and is a cultural conflict.

While López-Varela argues for the categorization of the fantastic as an ambiguous genre, in his "Why Fantasy Matters" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/3>> Jack Zipes defends the culturally transgressive quality of the fantastic for it endorses every artistic mode of expression and inspires forces of confrontation in every cultural field of production. Zipes discusses the fantastic in relation to the violence we encounter in our daily lives and questions the sociological reasons behind this return to the fantastic at a time when nothing can be more uncanny, anxiety-provoking, bizarre, and incongruous than our everyday reality. Thus, Zipes's postulate is that fantasy is needed not to compensate for dull lives, but for spiritual regeneration and to contemplate alternatives to our harsh realities: we need the fantastic for resistance. In his article Zipes discusses the fantastic also in children's literature and focuses on the tension between textual and iconic narrative in order to explain how this resistance conveys direct meaning and draws parallels with reality in picture books. Zipes's concern with iconic aspects confirms current debates in the age of the "iconic turn" and shows the importance of the visual element and its relationship to the body, issues discussed in subsequent articles of the volume. His analysis provides insight into the way fairy tales are tied to the manner in which human beings seek to articulate their thoughts and feelings about everyday life. Zipes's study offers a case study of how intermediality is not a new phenomenon.

Historiographic intertextual analyses such as by Ana González-Rivas and Francisco García Jurado in their article "Death, Love, and Poe's and Schwob's Readings of the Classics" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/4>> provide evidence that support Zipes's argument of what he has termed, following Dan Sperber, an epidemiological approach to culture (see Zipes

*Why Fairy Tales Stick*; see also Ochiagha's book review article in this issue <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/10>>). Their discussion points out how modern authors of Gothic narratives read canonical texts regarding love and death and how they use them in their own narratives, and in so doing, establish a complex relationship between canonical and modern texts transcending mere imitation. Their study of Edgar Allan Poe's "Berenice" and "Ligeia" and Marcel Schwob's "Septima" and "Béatrice" shows how intertextuality in the case of the fantastic can do more than reproducing the past in order to preserve it and canonize it. González-Rivas and García Jurado illustrate how fantasies of the past (and not just of the future) pervade our contemporary world and how intertextuality can be understood as contemporary intermediality and how the notion of genericity explains genres engaged in a dynamic process of transtextuality.

Terri Ochiagha presents in her article "The Literary Fantastic in the English and African Literary Canon" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/5>> a comparative analysis of English and African canonical traditions of the fantastic. Basing her study on Tzvetan Todorov's framework of the fantastic, Ochiagha argues that African prose is seldom a subject of exemplification or analysis in structural analyses seeking to characterize genres such as the fantastic. Ochiagha explains that Western scholars appreciate the West's canonical works of the fantastic as oeuvres of art and dismiss similar African works as "the grotesque imagery of the African mind" (Achebe quoting Elspeth Huxley's diatribe against Amos Tutola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*). Ochiagha explores parallelisms and differences between Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* pointing to the need for establishing the sovereignty of African literatures and thus the existence of alternative canons. Here, Zipes's argumentation in his *Why Fairy Tales Stick* is relevant with regard to the process of canonization of fairy tales, achieved largely after the 1850s with the development of education and the institutionalization of literary genres, thus in Western scholarship the apparent lack of African cultural and literary canons.

Maria Rosa Burillo Gadea, in her article "Entropy and the Fantastic in Pynchon's Narratives" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/6>> shows again how the fantastic permeates contemporary culture and has been received enthusiastically by both readers and scholarship. Burillo Gadea points to Christine Brooke-Rose's notion that metafiction is not only literary and that it represents a transgressive symptom of the pervasive disenchantment in contemporary culture. Burillo Gadea's analysis of Pynchon's metaphors shows how the fantastic is a way to escape different realities and to escape canonical paralysis. She shows how postmodern narratives implicate the reader to share responsibility and authority (authorship) and how desire, suspicion, and sometimes despair represent the psychological grounds of fantasy and concludes that in a world of machines, manipulated media messages, and massive global corporations the individual is overcome by perplexity.

Two articles in this thematic issue on the fantastic focus on the film industry: in "Metamorphosing Worlds" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/7>> Juan González Etxebarria postulates that fantastic films have always been one of the most popular genres as appealing products of both unconscious psychological and institutionalized sociological anxieties and that the binary oppositions of rhetorical strategies open the door to dream of uncertainties and to indulge in traumas. The author defends again, as López-Varela and Zipes, a transgressive indeterminacy to be traced from the origin of creative filmic language to disturbing postmodern fantasies. Like Zipes and Burillo Gadea, González Etxebarria argues for a revolutionary quality of the fantastic, seeking to free the individual from social control and traces an extensive historiographical scenario of the development of fantasy in cinematographic productions and shows how sociocultural practices are relevant in the communication of ideas, values, behaviour, and power politics. He argues that in US-American society contemporary modes of entertainment use the fantastic under a positive or negative light depending on the cultural context. He warns, like Zipes, that transformative and utopian qualities tend to appeal to the general public and may convert it into a mere marketable product, a spectacle of entertainment, diminishing its transgressive powers.

Pilar Andrade's "Literary Intertexts, Cinema's Doubles, and Their Meaning" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/8>> is noteworthy for its attention to the

intersections between psychology and film. Perceived in most cases as a threat, an uncanny appearance, the presence of a double begins to show posthuman tendencies and visions of the body as the site where natural and cultural orders fade away. Doubling the human body, giving birth to creatures, fashioning different forms of the self, copying and cloning are just some of the examples scattered over the history of the fantastic which run parallel to scientific advance and technical possibilities to reproduce it. Andrade shows how the technological and cultural roots behind our new modes of seeing is staged in cinema. Like postmodern fiction and exemplified in Burillo Gadea's reading of Pynchon modern cinema narrates the dissolution of the very ontological structures we have always taken for granted: the transcendent idea of teleological existence and its principle of causality (coherent construction of space and time), the existence of an ordering subject, and the end of subjectivity.

The visual nature of messages, their symbolic meaning, and the importance of new technologies allowing new ways of seeing connect avant garde surrealism, postmodernist narratives, and contemporary science fiction, as María Goicoechea suggests in her article "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>>. Goicoechea argues that the cyborg represents the body penetrated and colonized by the machine and artificial substances and she exposes the underlying tensions and contradictions present in cyberpunk visions of humanity's evolution. She postulates that although cyberpunk narratives have been associated traditionally with the subversiveness and rebelliousness of the more dystopian cybergothic, they are also prey to the mesmerizing promises of technoromantics. Contrasting several working definitions of the cyborg and the posthuman, Goicoechea then proceeds to delineate the main characteristics attributed to the figure of the cyborg in cyberpunk fiction with examples from Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*, Pat Cadigan's *Synners*, and Neal Stephenson's *Snowcrash*. Goicoechea points out that these cyberpunk visions coincide in diagnosing the cyborg with the illness of Narcissus, that is, the crisis behind our modes of seeing the world and seeing ourselves triggered by technological development. Cyberpunk science fiction narratives of the last generation coincide in their depiction of cyberspace as the location where fantasies and nightmares about the body are generalized.

The articles presented here encourage readings of the fantastic as an "ethos" and not a genre, that is, as something that is within us in our psychic mind as suggested by Julio Cortázar <<http://www.juliocortazar.com.ar/cuentos/confe1.htm>>, something that conveys values forged through habit, practice, everyday rituals, and changing attitudes towards ourselves, having much to do with the way science and technology interact with human practices and expressions of ideological, political, economical, and axiological systems of culture. Thought expressed in the articles here take up this challenge by questioning several aspects. First, the contributors seek to connect the growing emphasis on the fantastic in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries to sociological factors across time and space and their political and ideological implications. Second, the authors pay attention to cultural assumptions about the body and the human psyche as an increasingly diasporic locus dependent on technological extensions. Third, the contributors attempt to illuminate the contradictions that emerge from new ways of seeing enabled by technological development. By distorting the representation of our everyday practices to the point of making them alien to us, the fantastic makes visible those naturalized habits, exposing them as cultural and time-bound, and, therefore, local. And finally, the work by the contributors show how the hybrid and borderland nature of the fantastic arises from basic human conflicts and how this encourages further hybridization, recycling, and re-mediating as new technologies enable easier ways of reproducing materials across medial and cultural borders.

Compiled by Terri Ochiagha, the thematic issue at hand includes a selected bibliography of scholarship on the fantastic in literature <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/10>> and a review article <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/10>>, also by Terri Ochiagha, of Daniel Cottom's *Unhuman Culture* and Jack Zipes's *Why Fairy Tales Stick*.

Author's profile: Asunción López-Varela teaches English literature at Complutense University Madrid. Her interests in research and publication include the semiotics of space and time within literary and cultural representation, multimodality and intermediality, interculturalism in literature, comparative cultural studies, education, and the use of hypermedia technologies in teaching and scholarship. Her recent publications include the "El gusto del público y la magia digital," *Teatro y nuevas Tecnologías* (Ed. Dolores Romero, 2008) and "Literature as Node: Bridging Intercultural Education and Multimodal Literary Practices," *Literary Education and Digital Learning: Methods and Technologies for Humanities Studies* (Ed. Vander Viana and Sonia Zyngier, 2008). Contact: <[alopezva@filol.ucm.es](mailto:alopezva@filol.ucm.es)>