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## **Volume 10 Issue 4 (December 2008) Article 3**

### **Jack Zipes, "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much"**

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## **Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.4 (2008)**

### **Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature***

**Edited by Asunción López-Varela Azcárate**

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**Abstract:** In his article "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much" Jack Zipes proposes that fantasy in contemporary culture functions as a celebrity and money-making machine. Fantasy mobilizes and instrumentalizes the fantastic to form and celebrates spectacles as illusions of social relations based on power. Thus, spectacles violate and drain our imagination by glorifying social relations of power made spectacular and involve the magic of fetishism. Generally, the results bring about delusion and acclamation of particular sets of social relations that are commodified, sold, and consumed. We acclaim commodities that we do not know and products not of our own making we consume mentally and physically. We reproduce images consciously and unconsciously not of our own making. The media and the corporate world occupy our psyches and manipulate our fantasies even when we dream. Our relations are mediated through the spectacle of fantasy and the fantastic spectacle and through fetish abetted by the latest technology that connects us while disconnecting us from our minds and feelings. Simultaneously, we seek to project our desires in the form of fantasies onto reality and endeavor to occupy a space in which our most profound wishes and desires can be realized. We seek cognition and recognition. In each instance -- in the tension between corporate determination of the fantastic and individual projection of desire -- we seem to anchor our understanding of reality in artworks dependent on the fantastic such as the Bible and fairy tales.

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**Jack ZIPES****Why Fantasy Matters Too Much**

It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more. Perhaps it has mattered too much, and our reliance on fantasy may wear thin and betray us even while it nourishes us and gives us hope that the world can be a better place. We have imagined gods, the kingdom of a single god, the miraculous feats of divine and semi-divine characters, and the commandments that have been established to lead us to the good life, if not paradise. It is through the fictive projections of our imaginations based on personal experience that we have sought to grasp, explain, alter, and comment on reality. This is again why such staples as the Bible and the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales have become canonical texts: unlike reality, they allegedly open the mysteries of life and reveal ways in which we can maintain ourselves and our integrity in a conflict-ridden world. They compensate for the constant violation of nature and life itself and for the everyday violation of our lives engendered through spectacle. They contest reality and also become conflated with reality. Our fantasy and the fantasies that we conceive have become desperate, because they are outstripped by real existing conditions that instrumentalize them at every waking second of our day, and even when we slumber. It is commonplace today that fiction, especially science fiction and what we label fantasy in the world of art, cannot keep pace with the devastating and disturbing fantastic of real occurrences, or what I call the incredible credibility of the real. We are all being surveyed, marked, and checked through complex technology in the hands of insensitive, ignorant, and puppet bureaucrats and police without our realizing it and without protection. Our everyday practices of work, buying food and clothes, attending school, and using objects in the household are conditioned by the spectacles of commercials and advertising that violate our inner and outer space. The fantastic in artworks seems inadequate to deal with the fantastic in our lives. The fantastic is embroidery and embroidered in our daily lives so that perversity and excess appear to be norms.

When the normal is so fantastically abnormal, what role can fantastic works of art play in our lives? Is the violence that we encounter in our everyday lives so much more fantastic than in literature, film, and the arts that we seek to consume the fantastic like harmless junk food as quick fixes and consolation? Can our joys really and realistically be enjoyed and nourished through the fantastic? Is there hope for the fantastic much less hope for us to alter our social relations of exploitation and delusion? There is no simple answer here. In fact, just as the function of the Bible as holy text filled with miraculous transformations and fantastic phenomena and just as the function of the classical fairy tale filled with utopian wishes have changed immensely in the last two thousand years, always dependent on the socio-cultural temper of the times, the very nature of the fantastic itself has been changed. In contrast to Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson, who might have different notions of fantasy today after writing their seminal books in 1975 and 1981, I do not think we hesitate or are taken aback when we read so-called fantasy literature or watch a fantastical film or see a fantastic painting or performance. Now, I think, we turn to the Bible and fairy tales and all kinds of fantastic artworks for diversion, what the French call *divertissement*, to take our minds off reality, to enjoy a moment of calm estrangement or titillation, to appreciate the extraordinary in the ordinary, to reassess our values and alternatives to determining social forces. Diversion does not necessarily contradict Todorov and Jackson, but it does bring into question the nature of the uncanny and the unexpected in all artworks of fantasy. If nothing can be more uncanny, anxiety-provoking, bizarre, and incongruous than our everyday reality, then our turn to fantastic literature and artworks probably does not stem from our need for greater excitement and shock in our lives. We do not need fantasy to compensate for dull lives, but, I want to suggest, we need it for spiritual regeneration and to

contemplate alternatives to our harsh realities. More than titillation, we need the fantastic for resistance.

But if fantasy is to provide resistance to real social conditions in the form of critical reflection and spiritual regeneration, we first must know what it is and how it operates in our brains and in the public sphere. We must also admit that there is only a vague consensus of what fantasy is, and this vague consensus is probably misleading and perhaps even contrived to be misleading. We must also concede that we shall never know the difference between reality and fantasy, and that this concession will prompt us to know how fantasy operates in our lives. We must also ask whether the imagination and fantasy can be completely commodified? Why do we attribute such great significance to fantasy if it generally deludes us? Or does it? To begin to answer all these questions, if they can be fully answered, we must carefully clarify the difference between imagination and fantasy because it seems that there is no difference at all. The word for imagination in French is *phantasie*, in Italian *fantasia*, in Spanish *fantasía*, and in German *Fantasie*. In most European languages, fantasy means imagination. If we turn to the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*, we can see that there are several meanings attached historically to the word fantasy that stems from Greek, Latin, and Old French and originally meant to show or to make visible and the meaning shifted to designate fantasy as the mental comprehension of an object of perception while it also came to signify a phantom or illusory appearance, a delusive imagination or hallucination, the faculty or result of forming representations of things not actually present, a supposition that does not rest on solid grounds, and a caprice (675). No wonder why we use the word fantasy in such different ways and all the more reason why it is more important than ever to be critical and judicious in our use of the term fantasy and this is why I want to turn to Theodor Adorno's comments on fantasy in his book *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno remarks that fantasy was closely associated with the originality of the artist and his/her capacity to invent or make something artistic out of nothing:

This concept of fantasy was never essential to important artworks; the invention, for instance, of fantastic beings in contemporary plastic arts is of minor significance, just as the sudden intervention of a musical motif, though hardly to be discounted, remains powerless so long as it does not surpass its own factuality through what develops out of it. If everything in artworks, including what is most sublime, is bound up with what exists, which they oppose, fantasy cannot be the mere capacity to escape the existing by positing the non-existing as if it existed. On the contrary, fantasy shifts whatever artworks absorb of the existing into constellations through which they become the other of the existing, if only through its determinate negation. (173)

Two aspects of fantasy are important for Adorno: fantasy as a capacity, that is, the module in the brain called imagination, which enables us to "transform" existing conditions into the negation of material reality and fantasy as the result, the product of the transformative capacity of imagination. As a product or thing, its quality as a work of art depends on what it proposes as an alternative to the existing state of things and how artfully it gives form to the negation of existing conditions. Not genetically, but in terms of its constitution, art is the most compelling argument against the epistemological division of sensuality and intellect. Reflection is fully capable of the act of fantasy in the form of the determinate consciousness of what an artwork at a certain point needs. The idea that consciousness kills, for which art supposedly provides unimpeachable testimony, is a foolish cliché in this context as anywhere else. Even its power to resolve objects into their components, its critical element, is fruitful for the self-reflection of the artwork: it excludes and modifies the inadequate, the unformed, and the incoherent. What is bad in artworks is a reflection that directs them externally, that forces them; where, however, they immanently want to go can only be followed by reflection, and the ability to do this is spontaneous. If each and every artwork involves a probably aporetic nexus of problems, this is the source of what is perhaps not the worst definition of fantasy. As the capacity to discover approaches and solutions in the artwork, fantasy may be defined as the differential of freedom in the midst of determination (see Adorno 174). Adorno alludes to both the responsibility of the artist and the recipient of artworks by insisting on the importance of the critical consciousness of

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the artist and recipient, who both must refuse external pressures to form matter according to accepted conventions or to use the fantastic to reinforce the status quo. This does not mean that all art must be nonconventional and that artists and their audience/readers must think out of the box. Rather, Adorno urges that fantasy be free to explore how people and art are determined and to propose possible solutions to the problems in which we might be enmeshed. All art must become, willy nilly, objectivized as things compelled to take a place in what Adorno called the culture industry. If it is essential to works of art that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things, and thus art turns against art. The totally objectivated work of art would congeal into a mere thing, whereas if it altogether evaded objectivation it would regress to an impotently powerless subjective impulse and flounder in the world" (Adorno 175). All art, thus all fantasy, has to become animate and has to animate. "Aesthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object, in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze. ... Whatever in the artifact may be called the unity of its meaning is not static but processual, the enactment of antagonisms that each work necessarily has in itself" (Adorno 175-76)

Adorno's reflections lead, I believe, to a different and discreet understanding of what we commonly call fantasy, especially fantasy that matters. First of all, it is clear that, for Adorno, there is no such thing as a genre called fantasy, nor can we categorize fantasy. To do this would be to undermine the very nature of fantasy. This point is made most succinctly by Lucy Armit in *Theorising the Fantastic*: "Fantasy (at least in its most creative of guises) is, like all other literary modes, fluid, constantly overflowing the very norms it adopts, always looking, not so much for escapism but certainly to escape the constraints that critics like this [Armit is referring to Kingsley Amis] always and inevitably impose upon it. ... If we perceive genre as a category that 'contains' (being entirely content-led), then the fact that the fantastic concerns itself with the world of the 'beyond' (beyond the galaxy, beyond the known, beyond the accepted, beyond belief) should immediately alert us to the attendant difficulties it has with coping with limits and limitations" (2-3). Indeed, all genuine works of art involve fantasy, the labor of the brain and imagination, and how to incorporate fantastic components into a work of art that negates what is externally expected of art in form and content. Every work of art must have some fantastic component, but not every work of art is artistic. In fact, much of what we call fantasy is predictable schlock and tritely conventional because it lacks critical reflection and self-reflection and appeals to market conditions and audience delusions. Those works are only significant because they reveal to what extent fantasy, the imagination, has become instrumentalized, and how the fantastic is being used to impose views, as impositions: 1) to profit from other people's needs and desires for spiritual regeneration and critical reflection; 2) to reconcile social, political, and aesthetic contradictions that are irreconcilable; and 3) to project images that can be readily consumed and only promote the replication of the same images. Works of fantasy art of all kinds have become depleted of cultural substance because fantasy matters too much. Fantasy has too much potential to subvert and explore the differential of freedom. It must be subdued, controlled, channeled, and sublimated so that it cannot serve to negate the spectacles that blind us to social forces that determine our lives. The culture industry realizes the potential of the fantastic by commodifying it: fantastic elements are produced and reproduced to become important ingredients in the constitution of constant spectacles that impede cognition of the operative principles of the social-economic system in which we live. Delusion has become the goal of fantasy, not illumination.

However, even if the fantastic serves to form permanent bubbles of delusion, society cannot be totally administered and human beings cannot be totally manipulated and corroded, just as the imagination, i.e., fantasy, cannot be dominated by the logic of instrumental rationality. The more the fantastic, which matters too much for our survival as humane beings, is produced and reproduced, the fantasy as commodity awakens, needs and desires that cannot be fulfilled by the culture industry and thus ultimately engenders resistance to the instrumentalization of fantasy and the fantastic. Commodified fantasy must produce fanatical heretics who demand alternate fantasies. For example,

there is a religious intensity I have noted in devout readers of fantasy literature or devoted viewers of fantasy films, and their devotion says something significant about the profound semiotics of the fantastic in literature and film. This is not to say that all fantasy literature and film are religious or that reading fantasy literature or watching a fantasy film will always be some kind of holy cathartic experience. On the contrary, the experience is more often pagan delight or what is called in German *Schadenfreude* (malicious joy about the misfortune of another), because we feel so helpless within the culture industry that systematically tends to deplete genuine pleasure. Nevertheless, there is a quality of hope and faith in serious fantasy literature and film that offsets the mindless violence and banality and contrived exploitation that we encounter in the spectacles of everyday life. If fantasy can be subversive and resistant to existing social conditions, then it wants to undermine what passes for normality, to expose the contradictions of civil society, to right the world out-of-joint in the name of humanity.

As fantasy, even the Bible thrives on subversion and documents why violence and suffering occur in the name of a dictator god, who appears to be just and moral, and in this documentation, the Bible proves to be a faulty text filled with absurdities and contradictions. It shows itself to be all too human, to partake of human experience, and the disparate and desperate voices of the Bible have given rise not simply to immense scholarly and religious commentary (a fantastic hermeneutical undertaking in itself), but to more fiction that weaves the motifs and themes of the Bible in pursuit of the same questions that the Bible raised and could not answer. Here I am thinking of Joseph Roth's *Job* (1930). Written at the time when Jews in Poland, the Ukraine, and Russia still lived in impoverished *shtetl*-s and were exposed to pogroms, Roth sends a miserable and broken Russian Jew named Mendel Singer to New York, where a miracle restores a lost son to him. Then there is Archibald MacLeish's powerful drama *J.B.* (1958), which turns biblical boils into atomic disaster in a modern setting. Even Bernard Malamud's last novel, *God's Grace* (1982), a work of science fiction, portrays paleologist Calvin Cohn as the lone survivor of the ultimate nuclear devastation who debates God's will while seeking to civilize chimpanzees on an island in the "new world." Ultimately, the chimpanzees eat Cohn. In a similar vein, Mario Vargas Llosa wrote a novel of magical realism, *The Storyteller* (1989), in which the branded Saul Zucas joins a tribe of Indians in the Amazon who represent to him a lost wandering Jewish tribe at the mercy of the violent force of civilization. We relate to Mendel Singer, J.B., Calvin Cohn, and Saul Zucas through the Bible and through the fantasy of their authors who resist the tendencies of social reality in their fantasies and the fantastic.

The fantastic is not only a projection of fantasy/imagination but also of rational critical consciousness. As Adorno remarked, there can be no separation of the intellect and the sensual when we talk about the fantastic, for fantasy negates what is corporeally experienced and sublates what must be carried on as a necessary ingredient in the formation of a transformed condition with utopian potential. Ernst Bloch, the great German philosopher of hope, a good friend of Adorno, maintained that the best of works of art and even the worst often contained traces of anticipatory illumination that shed light on a way forward toward a utopian society. Utopia cannot be defined, but it is constituted by fantastic elements in life and art that embody the daydreams of a better life, that is, a different life. A better life can only distinguish itself from what it negates in its differential freedom that is provided by the fantastic. It is through difference that the fantastic provides resistance and illuminates a way forward. It shows what is missing in our lives and refuses to compensate for the lack by proposing solutions and providing categories through which we can define people and situations. The fantastic offers glimpses and markers that recall the original meaning of fantasy, the capacity of the brain to show and make anything visible, for without penetrating the spectacle that blinds us, we are lost and lose the power to create our own social relations.

I have used the term children's literature or youth culture with caution, because there is no such thing as a well-defined children's literature or youth culture with borders that prevents older people from indulging in such literature. Certainly, adults and the culture industry have sought to construct

borders and barbed wires to enclose the young or to keep out pedophiles, just like governments have sought to build fences and denigrate immigrants as pedophiles who might besmirch the purity of an imagined nation. But the fantastic blurs the lines between commodities produced for children and for adults and between boundaries built by governments and corporations. In fact, adults are intricately involved in every aspect of children's and youth culture, while their lives are managed, constricted, and incorporated into the culture industry. My examples of the fantastic in children's and youth culture are not intended to be models of the perfect use of the fantastic; rather, they are personal choices of works that have struck my imagination. In each case I focus how the fantastic can foster alternative thinking and viewing and negate spectacle and delusion. It should be borne in mind, however, that the fantastic, while conveying the fantasies and intentions of the artist, is not defined by its *telos* and is not always ironic or subversive. Its effect cannot be totally predetermined or determined, except to say that a reader and viewer will always be impelled by the dynamics of the fantastic to reflect seriously and imaginatively about the customary ways she/he engages with the world. The quality of the fantastic depends on whether it enables the reader/viewer to see and grasp the social and political mediations that produce the spectacular. Hope for change can only be created if the fantastic illuminates and exposes delusion.

In their important study, *How Picturebooks Work*, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott remark that "If words and images fill each other's pages wholly, there is nothing left for the reader's imagination, and the reader remains somewhat passive. The same is true if the gaps are identical in words and images (or if there are no gaps at all). In the first case, we are dealing with the category we have named 'complementary,' in the second, 'symmetrical.' However, as soon as words and images provide alternative information or contradict each other in some way, we have a variety of readings and interpretations" (17). Nikolajeva and Scott proceed to discuss how counterpoint between textual and iconic narrative creates tension, and it is often through the ironic juxtaposition of word and image, word and word, and image and image that the reader becomes aware of incongruous and bizarre formations. Regardless of whether the reader is a child or adult, the fantastic in picture books fails when it is merely descriptive, complimentary, decorative, or titillating. It succeeds best when it provokes the reader to stand back, take a second look, doubt, and reflect. Often image and text resist one another. The resistance to convey direct meaning and draw literal parallels with reality is at the heart of the design in picture books that make effective use of the fantastic to provide resistance to reality and that show how reality can be transformed. For instance, Peter Sís, the Czech American illustrator, is fond of creating extraordinary worlds out of ordinary occurrences in his picture books. In *Madlenka* (2000) the story begins simply by announcing that a little girl named Madlenka, who lives on a block in a house in the universe on a planet on a continent, discovers that her tooth is loose, and she runs out into her neighborhood to spread the news. At each stop she meets someone from another country, the French baker, the Indian news vendor, the Italian ice cream seller, the German lady at her window, the American grocer, and the Asian shopkeeper. Each visit turns into an exotic journey to another country until Madlenka returns to her parents and tells them that she went around the world and lost her tooth. Sís employs pointillism, brightly colored scenes, cross-hatched black and white backgrounds, cutouts, and unusual typography to transform an ordinary event in a young girl's life and an ordinary walk in a New York neighborhood into a rich, dramatic multi-cultured discovery of the world. In a more recent work, *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* (2007), Sís introduces readers into another world which he experienced as a young boy and fled as an adult. In this remarkable autobiographical picture book that reads like a graphic novel, Sís again uses intricate black and white points to depict personal and political events through images that reflect the drab and oppressive conditions in Czechoslovakia from 1945-1991 with red marking the taint of communism. Interspersed are colorful figures, maps, and photographs, projections of a desire for greater freedom. The typography of his text changes continually fonts and placement on each page. In the afterword, his last paragraph reads: "Now when my American family goes to visit my Czech family in the colorful

city of Prague, it is hard to convince them it was ever a dark place full of fear, suspicion, and lies. I find it difficult to explain my childhood; it's hard to put into words, and since I have always drawn everything, I have tried to draw my life -- before America -- for them. Any resemblance to the story in this book is intentional" (Sís, "The Wall" n.p.). And, of course, the images throughout the book are playful comic depictions of his life story framed by two life-size self-portraits with him in the same pose as a baby at the beginning and as an older man at the end. In the first image, the smiling blue-eyed baby is nude and holds a red pencil in one hand and a piece of paper with a red mark on it in the other. In the second the blue-eyed smiling man is dressed and has whiskers. He holds a red pencil in one hand and a piece of paper with a red question mark in the other. Below we read, "As long as he can remember, he will continue to draw" ("The Wall" n.p.). Indeed, his drawings mark the importance of the fantastic to articulate his desire for freedom of expression and to write and draw his life the way he imagines it as a life of resistance.

Although his style is different from that of Sís, David Maccaulay shares the same artistic vision insofar as he seeks to stimulate readers to re-vise their notion of a picture book, architecture, and narrative by making full use of their imaginations. Most of his work consists of black pen and ink drawings portraying the cultural history of how buildings and machines have been constructed. *Cathedral: The Story of Construction* (1973), *Pyramid* (1977), *Unbuilding* (1980), *Mill* (1983), *Ship* (1993), and *Mosque* (2003) render the process behind the visible structures and machines and to what purpose the fantastic has been put to use in architecture. His most unusual and fantastic book, however, is *Black and White* (1991) in which nothing is black and white and everything seems to be mismatched. The picture book contains quadrants drawn in different styles on two-page spreads, and each quadrant tells a different story throughout the book. The images of the two stories on the right side are often without text. One of the stories on the left side is sketched as scenes from a comic book or graphic novel. When there is text, the typography keeps changing and eventually splices into words that appear torn from a book. Each of the stories has a title: "Seeing Things," "Problem Parents," "A Waiting Game," and "Udder Chaos," and the titles allude to what qualities are necessary to understand the events as one story spills into the frame of another story and intermingles with it. Patience and discerning vision that allow the imagination to play with the words and images are necessary to grasp the problems that are caused by a masked thief, a delayed train, and parents, who appear to be strange in the eyes of their children. In the end the arrival of the train signals a departure for another series of events. The reader is freed from all conventions of reading and seeing to imagine how incredible ordinary experiences are, not unlike the experiences that Madlenka felt as she wandered about her neighborhood.

The Russian American illustrator Vladimir Radunsky makes use of one of his own experiences, his encounter with the small bronze statue of Manneken pis in Brussels for his book *Manneken Pis: A Simple Story of a Boy Who Peed on a War* (2002). Radunsky retells the Belgian legend using collage, pastel water colors, unusual typography, and figures that crisscross two-page spreads. The images are drawn in the manner in which a young boy or girl might sketch, and the story is a charming ironic tale about a boy who becomes so scared about the war in his town that he has to pee, and he pees from the top of the building on both sides until everyone stops fighting. The people are so happy that, in the end, they erect a statue in his honor. Of course, this provocative fantasy picture book has not had wide distribution in the US or in other countries because it breaks taboos. Radunsky prompts children and adults to pee on reality, but he also encourages creative play. In one of his more recent works, *Le Grand bazar* (2006), a brilliant work, which unfortunately has not yet appeared in English, Radunsky has produced a book that is to be taken apart and recreated by "readers from 5 to 105 full of imagination" (cover page). For instance, at the beginning of the book he writes that everyone has at one time or another scribbled on a photo in a magazine, journal, or newspaper, and changed the image. So, he provides seven pages of postcards with images and photos, two of the same sort and he encourages readers to use a pencil, crayon, or pen so that they can change the image any way

they desire and then send to anyone they like. He also suggests that readers can keep one of a pair untouched so that they can see a before and after picture. For Radunsky it is the fantasy of the readers that matters most, and as an artist, he uses the fantastic to break with conventions of the traditional book that, he suggests, can be re-created in a way that enables the readers to project and realize their own fantasies. At the same time, he shares his own writing and images that he hopes will be re-utilized to ignite the imagination of the readers.

Imagination and fantasy are also at the center of Neil Gaiman's *Wolves in the Walls* (2003) illustrated as a type of graphic novel by David McKean. The droll story concerns a young girl named Lucy, who hears noises in her home coming from inside the walls. She and her pig puppet believe that the noises are made by wolves, but her mother, father, and brother dismiss her and believe that she is imagining things. However, wolves do indeed come out of the walls and invade the house forcing the family to flee. After they are settled outside and resume their daily activities, they gather to discuss where they should make their next home until Lucy insists that they return home and live in the walls as the wolves had done. Indeed, they do this, but they cannot stand the way the wolves party and destroy their home. So they come out of the walls and threaten the wolves who run for their lives and disappear. All seems to end happily until Lucy says to her pig puppet that she hears elephants in the walls of the house. Her imagination will never stop just as the story can never end and McKean's illustrations make use of puppets, photographs, maps, ink drawings, different shades of color as the settings change, and diverse fonts for the typography. Gaiman's ironical narrative begins with ordinary events, a mother making jam, a father playing his tuba, and a brother involved in video games, and perhaps because Lucy is bored and ignored, or perhaps because Lucy has a fervent imagination, she hears noises in the walls.

Intrusion, disintegration, and threats to the harmony of the family and community appear to be common themes in postmodern US-America. Numerous other genres, receptive to the modality of the fantastic, reflect this disturbing trend toward disintegration of family and community and the cultural wars surrounding it. The heroes in comic books and graphic novels are no longer Captain Marvel, Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, and others who work with the government to tame the forces of evil. Instead, they are often mutants like the X-Men, who try to restrain politicians, the military, and police from establishing neo-fascist regimes or from destroying the world. Or they are outsiders and refugees who endeavor to maintain a sense of community in an unwelcoming atmosphere. One of the more interesting series of comic books that deal with the topic of the besieged community of refugees is *Fables*, which began appearing in 2002, and now includes over sixty issues of stand-alone comics and composite graphic novels. Conceived by Bill Willingham, the series begins with the premise that numerous characters from fairy tales, legends, myths, and folklore have been compelled to leave the lands of their origins, or homelands. They do not know their mysterious enemy called the Adversary, except that he has taken over their homeland. So they migrate to New York City and form a clandestine community called Fabletown. However, many of them have difficulty adapting to the contemporary world and their community is dysfunctional. The first five episodes, gathered in a trade paperback titled *Legends in Exile* and illustrated by Lan Medina, Steve Leialoha, and Craig Hamilton, concern the alleged murder of Rose Red, whose body is missing from her devastated apartment that has a warning written in blood on a wall: "No More Happy Endings." Actually, there will be a happy ending because Bigby Wolf, the security officer of Fabletown, discovers that Jack the Beanstalk and Rose Red concocted a scheme to make it appear she had been murdered because they were in need of money. During the investigations we learn that King Cole is the incompetent head of the Fabletown community; Snow White is the intrepid director of operations, trying to hold the fairy-tale and legendary characters together; prince charming is a philanderer; beauty and the beast are having marital problems; Bluebeard is a wealthy baron and philanthropist; and a talking pig escapes the Farm in upstate New York where non-human characters from fables must live.

At the heart of Willingham's concept is the subversion of the traditional function and notion of popular genres like fairy tales, legends, nursery rhymes, and fables. Each character retains some of his/her original personality but seeks to reform or is reformed in the contemporary setting of New York. Thus, the big bad wolf is ironically Bigby Wolf in charge of security and Bluebeard is a magnanimous rich gentleman. At any time they can transform themselves or break out into their original identities and become savage. Snow White, who appears as the super management director, keeps trying to clean up the mess in the secret community of fabletown. Reconciliation of conflicts appears difficult although every long episode has its conclusion. The prose and plot of the episodes are not complex and unusual. At most there is a cute ironic play with traditional genres. The resistant quality of the fantastic is minimized, as it generally is in most popular forms of art such as comics and graphic novels, to have a large appeal. This is also the case in Linda Medley's *Castle Waiting* (1996), which, like *Fables*, uses the fantastic to subvert the classical fairy tales. She self-published her graphic novel with black and white ink drawings in 1996 and has produced intermittently comic book sequels and graphic novels that focus on different characters who come to inhabit the castle that Sleeping Beauty abandoned after she had been awakened by a prince. Although the castle has deteriorated and is inhabited by bizarre poltergeists, it serves as a refuge for various fairy-tale and legendary characters who arrive and tell all about their trials and tribulations. The castle is run by a gentlemanly stork named Rackham, after the well-known Victorian illustrator, and there are strange bearded nuns, humorous animals, and a mysterious pregnant woman who inhabit the place. Medley's contemporary US-American slang is in stark contrast to the depiction and setting of the characters in the distant past, while their troubles are very much similar to the conflicts in the contemporary world. It is only in a retreat, Medley suggests, that a true community, albeit one that allows for great diversity and tolerance, can be found. In this regard her fantastic projection of family and community differs greatly from the conflict-ridden community in *Fables* and is more like the mutant school in *The X-Men*, where people who differ from the norm must live on the margins of society in a sanctuary. And perhaps this is the only place that people in contemporary US-American society can find sanctity and sanity. Whereas the fantastic is employed frequently in all forms of popular culture to project utopian possibilities for developing a humane community in which differences among people are resolved through mutual support, the fantastic also serves to provide a persistent critique of the norm that appears to be so perverse and incongruous that the only hope for spectators, young and old, is laughter -- and I would suggest, a laughter that does not necessarily provide relief or hope for a better world. In certain animated television series such as *The Simpsons*, *Southpark*, and *Family Guy* the dysfunctional families and communities are exaggerated depictions of the changing relations in US-American society that indicate how bedeviled we are by our contradictions. Irreverent, ironic, and relevant critiques of US-American quotidian life are created through the behavior of characters who represent family and community gone amuck. Whereas many writers and artists have employed the fantastic to suggest alternatives to decadence, that is, societies in decline, there is clearly a strong dystopian tendency in popular culture for young people suggesting that social conflicts and injustice may never be resolved, and that the outcome to the struggles may be neo-fascist societies as projected in the famous works *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell.

In more recent years, writers who have sought to address young readers in dystopian works, such as William Sleator in *House of Stairs* (1974), Lois Lowry in *The Giver* (1993) and *Gathering Blue* (2000), Nancy Farmer in *The House of Scorpion* (2002), and Susan Cooper in *Green Boy* (2002) have interrogated the pursuit of the perfect society in the name of progress through fantastic projections. This is where the dystopian factor plays a role, for the pursuit of perfection, the perfect place and society, or even the dissemination of democracy and Christianity, can also lead to rigid if not totalitarian societies. Much of what we cite as progress, especially technological progress, has a double edge to it. The cloning of vegetables, animals, and humans that may help overcome hunger and

disease may eventually lead to the mechanization of the natural and human world as we know it. The advances in communication may lead to miscommunication, dis-connection, and alienation. One could argue that the great drive of human beings to establish fairer, more socialist and democratic societies has led to perverse societies, what we might call negative utopias, or what is projected as dystopias in literary works for young and old readers as well as in films such as *The Matrix* (1999). Two important examples are Farmer's *The House of Scorpion* and M.T. Anderson's *Feed*. Both works are dystopian novels in which a young boy realizes that his life is not what it seems and that he is being controlled by forces linked to the corporate world run by hegemonic groups dominating the government, business, and military. In *The House of Scorpion*, the action takes place in the future in the country of Opium, located between the U.S. and Mexico now called Atzlán. Matt, the major protagonist, comes to realize that he is the clone of a drug lord named Matteo Alacrán, who uses *eejits*, people with computer chips implanted into their brains, to work on his farms. As Matt grows, he realizes that most of the *eejits* are illegal immigrants who have tried to cross from Atzlán to the U.S. and have been caught and transformed into zombies. Once Matt grasps their situation and his own, he manages to escape to Atzlán where he encounters other difficulties in an orphanage that pretends to be communist while exploiting the orphans. Eventually, Matt learns that his mother, aptly named Esperanza, is living in the U.S. and fights for the rights of clones. With the promise of her help, he returns to Atzlán with the intention of shutting down the drug trade and transforming the *eejits* back into human beings. While there is some hope in this dystopian novel, it is clear that Farmer's major political purpose in her use of the fantastic is to expose the collusion between politicians and criminals and how new technological inventions are being abused to transform humans into automatons. Given the forces in control of America and Aztlán, it is not clear whether Matt will have any success in "re-humanizing" the small country of Opium, much less himself.

But Farmer's science fiction work is optimistic compared to Anderson's *Feed*, which offers a more disturbing fantastic projection of the future, indeed, a very near-future. Here, too, computer chips, corporate greed, and corrupt governments play a major role, and here, too, we see the destruction of human beings through technology controlled by the government and corporations through the perspective of a teenage boy named Titus. *Feed* is a computer chip that is planted in human beings and is effectively used to socialize young people, control their thoughts, and basically prompt them to consume products of the culture industry. Titus, who is totally configured through a computer network falls in love with a young woman named Violet while on a trip to the moon. It is also there that a man, who belongs to a group of resisters in the Coalition of Pity Party, an anti-feed group, and hacks into their feeds so that they can begin thinking for themselves. But once they return to the earth, their feeds are restored except that Violet begins to die due to malfunctions in her computer chip because it had been too cheap and had been implanted late in her young life when she was seven. Titus disassociates himself from Violet, out of fear that she is revealing the truth about the technologized consumer culture, but he cannot fully wipe her from his mind and the realization that the socio-economic system is causing pollution and probably the total collapse of the U.S. Anderson has a great gift not only for describing a transformed highly technological and consumerist world, but also for inventing a new jargon and vocabulary that the young people use to describe their experiences. In Anderson's "brave new world" of US-America, very few people own their own thoughts, language, and feelings. Most people are estranged from one another and totally dependent on machines of one kind or another. The future is a horrible nightmare that is, it seems, approaching us faster than we realize. Like many other concerned writers and artists, Anderson believes that fantasy matters, perhaps too much, or that it matters so much that the battle for humanity will depend on how fantasy is used in the culture wars. In an interview with Joel Shoemaker in 2004, he remarked:

We live in a culture of corporate-sponsored narrative, which is a culture of underwritten endumbing. In an attempt to reach an ever wider audience, television, movies, magazines, and even publishers rely on three elements pernicious to complicated narrative: first the sapping of particularity (for fear that eccentricity will

frighten off potential viewers, or more dangerously, encourage the splintering of mass demographics); second, the simplification of narrative (because of an assumption that the bulk of people want to hear over and over again the stories they have already heard); and third, the pursuit of anything, be it tumbling helicopters or showering cheerleaders, that might constitute "action." This creates a vicious cycle, however. As children are raised on simpler and simpler narratives, they become acclimated to that banality, and grow distrustful of anything that deviates from it. (99)

Anderson's work is a pertinent example of how the fantastic can be used to explore how the fantastic is being exploited. It brings us back to Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* and Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, works that illuminate the processes and operations developed by hegemonic groups such as the government, the culture industry and its corporations, the church, and educational institutions to create fantastic spectacles that blind us from the seeing the pollution, corruption, and other abuses that they cause. We eat, drink, and consume the fantastic as spectacle from morning to night. If there is such a grand thing as "fantasy" and if it matters, then we must investigate what it is and what we mean by it. We all have fantasy, and through fantasy we seek to encounter the voids in our lives by generating visions of how we want to live and realize whatever potential we have. In most cases these visions do not correspond to the dominant "norms" and ideologies of our society and, therefore, they must be brought into line so that our socio-economic system runs smoothly. Our fantasies must be channeled through the spectacular to curb our critical thinking and creative work. Fortunately, we have not reached the point where we all live in bubbles like Truman, or where we all have chips implanted in our brains. We are not yet totally controlled by hysterical spectacles of terror and the apocalypse. We can still make many choices as to how we can shape the visions of our fantasies and what types of fantastic products that we want to consume, share, and use. Fantasy involves a certain amount if not a great amount of conscious choices and citizen responsibility, not censorship and conformity or even consensus. In a recent interview that appeared in *The Rake*, Steven Heller, author of *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility* and co-director of a design program at Manhattan's School of Visual Arts, remarked, "If you are in a profession that both uses and abuses resources, be aware of what you are doing. I think that's the first step in design citizenship. From there one has the freedom and responsibility to decide how one's talents are used. To knowingly hurt others through one's work or wares is irresponsible, if not criminal. So don't do it" (Heller qtd. in Caniglia 21).

Fantasy matters because it can enable us to resist such criminality, and it can do so with irony, joy, sophistication, seriousness, and cunning. Whether the fantastic works that we conceive and realize become works of art will depend obviously on our talent but also on our refusal to become complicit in criminal operations of the culture industry.

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Author's profile: Jack Zipes taught German and comparative literature at the University of Minnesota. Some of his major publications include *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (1979), *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (1983, 2006), *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (1986), *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (1988), *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (2000), *Speaking Out: Storytelling and Creative Drama for Children* (2004), *Hans Christian Andersen: The Misunderstood Storyteller* (2005), and *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (2006). He has also translated *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (1987) and edited *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (2000), and *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition* (2001). Most recently he has translated and edited *The Folk and Fairy Tales of Giuseppe Pitre* (2008) and *Lucky Hans and other Merz Fairy Tales* (2008) by Kurt Schwitters. E-mail: <[zipes001@umn.edu](mailto:zipes001@umn.edu)>