In Britain it has been estimated that 10% of all books sold are fantasy. And of that fantasy, 10% is written by Terry Pratchett. So, do the sums: 1% of all books sold in Britain are written by Terry Pratchett. Coo.2

Although it is unclear whether, by ‘fantasy’, Butler intends a narrow definition (generic fantasy, i.e., imitation Tolkien heroic or epic fantasy and sword ‘n’ sorcery) or a broad definition (the fantastic genres, i.e., generic fantasy, sf (science fiction), horror, supernatural gothic, magic realism, etc.), such statistics nonetheless make the need for a Marxist theory – or preferably, Marxist theories – of the fantastic self-evident. The last twenty or thirty years have witnessed a remarkable expansion in the study of fantastic texts and genres. Literary studies has embraced the gothic, fairy tales and sf, and screen studies has developed a complex critique of horror and is now beginning

---

1 With profound thanks to China Miéville, Kathrina Glitre, Greg Tuck – friends, colleagues, comrades. Thanks also to Historical Materialism’s anonymous readers, and to José B. Monleón for translating a passage from Benito Pérez Galdós’s The Reason of Unreason (1915) and thereby providing me with a title.

to come to terms with sf. However, there is a remarkable absence in all this endeavour.

The first major Marxist sf theorist, Darko Suvin, notoriously described (narrowly-defined) fantasy as ‘just a subliterature of mystification’ and asserted that the ‘[c]ommerical lumping of it into the same category as SF is thus a grave disservice [to sf] and a rampantly socio-pathological phenomenon’. Whether as a consequence of this position or merely consequent to it, fantasy and the fantastic have been relatively neglected in Marxist theory and criticism of literature, film and media. This could be taken as merely concomitant to the critical neglect of fantasy as a distinct genre from other theoretical perspectives, a phenomenon which stems, I suspect, from the fact that definitional problems have made it easier to discuss isolated examples in critical contexts provided by other genres than to produce a theory of fantasy per se. Such theories have, of course, been essayed, and this article will trace the development of the most influential account of fantasy literature, the flaws and limitations of which are exceeded only by the extent of its influence. However, as I will argue, there is rather more at stake for Marxists in such debates than just plugging a gap so as to have a full complement of appropriate genre theories.

In 1926, Trotsky argued that ‘the attempt to declare psychoanalysis incompatible with Marxism and simply turn one’s back on Freudianism is too simple’; during the following half-century, it became increasingly apparent that Marxists had failed to generate an adequate theory of the subject and

---

3 Suvin 1979, p. 9. Suvin 2000 revises this argument, although not necessarily very extensively.
4 Other (or particular) genres of the fantastic have fared better. Robin Wood’s Marcuse-inspired work in the 1970s on the American horror movie influenced a generation of horror criticism (see Bould 2002), and for nearly thirty years the journal Science Fiction Studies (where Suvin served for many years in various editorial capacities) has provided a valuable venue for Marxist and critical postmodernist work. Sharply-drawn distinctions between sf, fantasy and horror have long been characteristic of sf criticism. This has often seemed to be more a consequence of the desire to make sf seem more important than other, ‘lesser’ genre fictions than of any particularly necessary distinction between the genres. Such theorising typically follows the logic of commercial categorisation which sees genre as a pigeonhole into which to place particular texts. I am far more sympathetic to the perspective which views genre as a tendency within a text which will almost certainly also contain other generic tendencies. Therefore, for the purposes of this article at least, I can perceive no value in establishing rigid distinctions between, say, fantasy and sf.
5 Trotsky 1973, p. 234.
subjectivity\textsuperscript{6} and many Marxists of various shades (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, Reich, Sartre, Althusser and Balibar) turned to psychoanalytic theory to remedy this pressing deficiency. More recently, Freedman’s doggedly eloquent pursuit of his contention that both Marxism and psychoanalysis ‘are materialisms oriented toward praxis; that is, toward theoretically informed political or therapeutic work\textsuperscript{7} consistently overlooks the fact that attempts to marry together elements of these two theoretical frameworks have typically resulted in cultural criticism that privileges the therapeutic over the political and tends toward the privatisation of dissent.

Clearly, the pendulum has swung too far. Marxist theories of fantasy and the fantastic offer an opportunity not only to engage with extremely popular areas of cultural production but also to better model the subject for political praxis, and in the closing section of this article I will address this possibility in greater detail.

**Todorov and the fantastic**

The publication in 1970 of Tzvetan Todorov’s *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, translated into English soon afterwards as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, gave the study and criticism of fantasy a measure of academic validation. Todorov proposed a typological spectrum of several related varieties of texts – ‘the uncanny: the fantastic-uncanny: the marvellous-uncanny: the marvellous’ – into which he introduced a temporal element, arguing that for a limited duration during the reading of the text the fantastic occupied the non-space between the two central categories.

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by

\textsuperscript{6} It is a telling fact that even a standard reference work like Bottomore 1991 contains no entries for these terms.

\textsuperscript{7} Freedman 2000, p. 10.
laws unknown to us... The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.8

In Todorov’s schema, the marvellous roughly coincides with the gothic fantasy in which the spooky goings-on have a supernatural origin (for example, Hugh Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1756); *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (since 1997)), and the uncanny matches the gothic fantasy in which rational, material explanations are established for seemingly paranormal shenanigans (such as, Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794); *Scooby Doo Where Are You!* (1969–70)). The moment of fantastic hesitation is exemplified, as Todorov notes, by Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, which leaves the reader unable to conclude from textual evidence alone whether the ghosts of the former servants seen by the governess are supernatural manifestations or projections of her psychosexual anxieties.

The allure and possible complexities of the relationship between the fantastic, the uncanny and the marvellous were made evident by *Project UFO* (1978–9). A rigidly and unimaginatively formulaic TV series lamentable in almost every respect, it nonetheless ran for two series and, in ‘terms of the size of viewing audience’, remains ‘the most successful US sf TV series ever made’.9 Each episode, purportedly based on incidents drawn from the USAF’s Project Blue Book, would see Air Force personnel investigate an alleged UFO sighting, and typically establish a rational explanation for it. In such instances, the fantastic hesitation initiated by the original UFO sighting is reduced to the category of the uncanny by the investigation’s findings. However, this resolution would sometimes be undercut in the closing seconds of an episode by the reappearance of the previously explained-away UFO. The resolution of this reintroduced fantastic hesitation into the uncanny or the marvellous depended utterly on whether or not the viewer regarded such alien technology as a rational or superstitious phenomenon.

Todorov identifies ‘three conditions’ that the fantastic must fulfil:

---

8 Todorov 1975, p. 25.
9 Clute and Nicholls 1993, p. 964.
First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the the themes of the work – in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations. These three requirements do not have an equal value. The first and third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled.\(^\text{10}\)

The clumsiness of this vacillation between two or three conditions (most of Todorov’s sample fulfils all three) indicates a flaw in Todorov’s model which originates in his mistaking of structuralist methodology for scientific method. He argues that

one of the first characteristics of the scientific method is that it does not require us to observe every instance of a phenomenon in order to describe it; scientific method proceeds rather by deduction. We actually deal with a relatively limited number of cases, from them we deduce a general hypothesis, and we verify this hypothesis by other cases, correcting (or rejecting) it as need be. Whatever the number of phenomena (of literary works, in this case) studied, we are never justified in extrapolating universal laws from them; it is not the quantity of observations, but the logical coherence of a theory that finally matters.\(^\text{11}\)

However, as Stanislaw Lem pointed out, ‘representativeness of a sample in the natural sciences and in the arts are two quite different matters. Every normal tiger is representative for that species of cats, but there is no such thing as a “normal story”’.\(^\text{12}\) This perhaps accounts for the inadequacies of Todorov’s sample, which is not only profoundly unrepresentative of fantasy\(^\text{13}\)

---

10 Todorov 1975, p. 33.
11 Todorov 1975, p. 4.
12 Lem 1985, p. 212.
13 ‘Among its twenty-seven titles we find no Borges, no Verne, no Wells, nothing from modern fantasy, and all of science fiction is represented by two short stories; we get, instead, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Potocki, Balzac, Poe, Gogol, Kafka – and that is about all. In addition, there are two crime-story authors’ (Lem 1985, p. 212).
but is also, as Lem notes, comprised of texts which have already been allowed into the canon on other grounds.\textsuperscript{14} Despite an ambivalence for popular or mass literature which often spills over into distaste,\textsuperscript{15} Lem maintains that a theory of literature either embraces all works or it is no theory. A theory of works weeded out in advance by means beyond its compass constitutes not generalization but its contrary, that is, particularization. One cannot when theorizing discriminate beforehand against a certain group of works – i.e., not bring them under the scope of analysis at all. A taxonomically oriented theory can set up a hierarchy in its subject matter – i.e., assign nonuniform values to the elements of the entire set under investigation – but it should do this openly, not on the sly, and throughout its whole domain, showing what sort of criteria it employs for making distinctions and how they perform their tasks of evaluation.\textsuperscript{16}

Perhaps because testing Todorov’s hypothesis by other cases would require them to reject it in its entirety, subsequent critics have built upon his work by discussing the Todorovian fantastic as if it were synonymous with fantasy literature and by continuing to exclude non-canonical texts.\textsuperscript{17} This has significant consequences, not least of which is the occlusion of the processes of textual production. By considering canonical texts, the labour involved in their production is reduced to the familiar biographical and contextual details of individual writers, solitary geniuses who transcend the material conditions of their historical and material situations, and whose bodies reify the social division of labour underpinning the ideological notion of authorship. This

\textsuperscript{14} Recently, Suvin has argued that ‘Todorov draws exclusively on possibilities present in French fiction 1650–1950 (including what can be fitted into it from German Romantics, primarily some Hoffmann) and codified in French literary criticism from Nodier on. The validity of his categorization into uncanny versus marvellous plus oscillation between them is therefore very small for the Anglophone and even German traditions. It is restricted to cases where some of those writings (for example, James’s \textit{Turn of the Screw}) operate within ideological conventions similar to the French ones’ (Suvin 2000, p. 220).

\textsuperscript{15} For example, Lem’s two most famous essays on sf are called ‘Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case – with Exceptions’ and ‘Philip K. Dick: A Visionary Among the Charlatans’ (both in Lem 1985).

\textsuperscript{16} Lem 1985, p. 232.

\textsuperscript{17} For example, although Jackson 1981 adds Lovecraft and Peake to Todorov’s sample, she is rather more concerned to introduce the likes of Mary Shelley, Gaskell, Dickens, Stevenson, Wilde, Cortazar, Calvino and Pynchon.
leads to the negative view of genre as constraint and, arguably, to the naïve celebration of resistance to hegemonic incorporative strategies.

Over the last thirty years, it has become something of a commonplace that the text is produced as the reader reads it. Todorov’s first and third conditions of the fantastic give the reader the dominant role in determining whether or not a text is fantastic, and then whether it is marvellous or uncanny. However, rather than consider actual readers, Todorov introduces the second condition which will later permit him to replace the character and the naïve reader with the text’s implied reader, a hypothetical reader who is defined purely in terms of possessing those attitudes necessary for the text to be completely effective – or, rather, for the critic’s analysis of the text to be effective. For example, there is absolutely no reason why the reader of *The Turn of the Screw* must comply with Todorov’s third criterion and decide between possible explanations of the events it depicts; to do so is like forcing Schrödinger to check up on his cat. One could equally postulate an implicit reader who enjoys the ambiguity of co-existent but mutually exclusive possibilities, or even one who resolves such indeterminacy by calculating ways in which alternatives can be reconciled with each other (for example, ghosts exist but can only be seen by someone in a heightened state of psychosexual anxiety). Although it is a problematic proposition, Jose B. Monleón argues that, used properly, ‘the characteristics of such an implicit reader’ should at least ‘depend on the historical determinants that framed the text’. Todorov, however, is content to deploy this critical-rhetorical device in an ahistoricising manner, reconstructing the implied reader in the image of that required by his theory of the fantastic.

---

18 This move is presaged in the passage quoted above in which Todorov fails adequately to distinguish between ‘a world which is indeed our world’ and the world presented in the mimetic text, despite the emphasis in the early pages of *The Turn of the Screw* on the recreation of the genre world of the literary ghost story rather than of nineteenth-Century England. Such mimetic reconstruction (of a slightly earlier period) is the business of the framed tale, and, without the frame, the possibility of a supernatural explanation would lack sufficient weight to balance the psychosexual reading.

19 Monleón 1990, p. 4.
Jackson and the fantastic

Rosemary Jackson also expresses anxiety about the ahistoricising tendencies of Todorov’s structuralism. Her discussion of fantasy as the literature of subversion opens with an acknowledgement of the difficulties in overcoming the genre’s typical association with the notion of escapism. Following Tolkien’s reactionary defence of the genre, literary criticism has largely suppressed an alternative tradition of ironic and self-reflexive fantasy, emphasising instead the ability of Tolkienesque fantasy to offer the possibility of transcending the human condition – a formulation which might be more accurately rendered as ignoring, mystifying and otherwise obscuring the specifics of social, historical and economic being. In particular, the secondary-world fantasy exemplified by Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (1954–5) can be seen to offer the delusory pleasure of a total and comprehensible world structured around an intense nostalgia for ‘moral and social hierarch[ies]’.

Quoting from The German Ideology, Jackson calls for the rejection of such transcendentalism and advocates a new focus on the material and social production contexts of specific fantasies so as to provide a corrective to the exclusion of the social and political from Todorov’s model of fantasy; but, as in Todorov, this project involves ignoring the dominant contemporary variety of fantasy fiction, the secondary-world fantasy, which Jackson consigns to the ‘realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature’. Her suggestion that this is not mere prejudice against the ‘particular ideals’ of such fantasies, or a dismissal intended ‘to recommend other texts as more “progressive” in any easy way’, is undercut by the distinctions she later makes between romance, in which ‘[o]therness is transmuted into idealism’, realism, in which it is ‘muted, made silent and invisible’, and the modern fantastic, in which it is recognised as ‘culture’s “unseen”’.

Jackson argues that secondary-world fantasy and other varieties of Todorov’s marvellous are based on the creation of alternative orders (such as, Middle-

---

20 Jackson 1981, p. 2. A typical narrative of Big Commercial Fantasies, such as David Eddings Belgariad (1982–5) series, Raymond Feist’s Riftwar Saga (1982–92) or Star Wars (Lucas, 1977) and its sequels/prequels, features a boy who rises from the ranks of slave, servant or freeman to become a king or powerful wizard who replaces despots without affecting the social order: the ugly duckling follows an Horatio Alger narrative transformed, courtesy of prophecies and fate, into a fantasy of obedience.


22 Ibid.

Earth, Oz, the *Star Wars* universe) which are related ‘to the “real” only through metaphorical reflection’; consequently, they are incapable, for the most part, of ‘intruding into or interrogating it’. Fantasy, she contends, is not concerned with such displacements but with creating “alterity”, this world re-placed and dis-located, a paraxial realm that is ‘neither entirely “real” . . . nor entirely “unreal” . . . but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two’. This interstitial position ‘reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs and thereby scrutinizes the category of the “real”’. However, this distinction between secondary-world and paraxial fantasy is a false one produced not only by the tendency to marginalise and exclude mass and popular literature, film and TV but also by emphasising what is arguably a very minor distinction in the variety of milieu a novel offers its readers: namely, the way in which it relates to extra-textual reality. Jackson argues that the paraxial fantasy world is disorientating because ‘its means of establishing its “reality” are initially mimetic . . . but then move into another mode which would seem to be marvellous . . . were it not for its initial grounding in the “real”’. I would suggest that not only is this neat ordering improbable – in most cases, the transition to a fantastic milieu is displaced onto or pre-empted by markers of the text’s existence as a commodity; contrary to popular belief, you *can* often judge a book by its cover – but also that both paraxial and secondary-world fantasy actually present worlds discontinuous

---

24 Jackson 1981, p. 42. I am indebted to one of Historical Materialism’s anonymous readers for pointing out Oz’s exceptional status inasmuch as, unlike Middle-Earth and the *Star Wars* universe, L. Frank Baum’s original novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) was a Populist political allegory. The slightly sceptical Brian Attebery suggests that the silver shoes are a little like William Jennings Bryan’s silver ticket to prosperity, the Scarecrow is, in a sense, the troubled farmer, the Tin Woodman can stand for the industrial laborer, the Cowardly Lion is a witty analog of Bryan himself, the Wizard could be any ineffectual president from Grant to McKinley, and the band of petitioners are another Coxey’s Army descending on Washington. . . . I might propose one more analogy. Dorothy, bold, resourceful, leading the men around her toward success, is a juvenile Mary Lease, the Kansas firebrand who told her neighbours to raise less corn and more hell, or an Annie Diggs, the Populist temperance reformer. Baum and the Populists promoted an active role for women in the rural utopia. Incidentally, the real surname of the Wizard of Oz is Diggs. (Attebery 1980, p. 86)


to our own in prose which is mimetic to their respective milieux. It is with good reason then that Jackson considers ‘understanding of the subversive function’ of paraxial fantasy to emerge ‘from structuralist rather than from merely thematic readings of texts’; because this subversive function is a product of structuralist analysis rather than an exclusive potential of paraxial fantasy uncovered by such analysis.

Having defined psychoanalysis as ‘direct[ing] itself towards an unravelling of [the] laws [of human society], trying to comprehend how social structures are represented and sustained within and through us in our unconscious’, Jackson contends that psychoanalytic theory is the key to transforming Todorov’s model into one which can address ‘political and ideological issues’.

This rather roundabout route proves to be problematic, not least of all in its introduction of a second meaning of ‘fantasy’. Early on, Jackson observes that ‘fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss’. This recurrent failure to adequately distinguish between phantasy (in psychoanalytic terms, the source of unconscious fears and desires) and the genre of fantasy has consequences which run counter to her declared materialist agenda, such slippages often being achieved by expunging the different material bases and modes of production of psychic and literary fantasy. When Jackson does distinguish between phantasy and fantasy, it is often to ascribe the qualities of the former to the latter: for example, fantastic literature

suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. . . . [It] traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’.

The excluded, which Jackson presents as synonymous with the desired, can be temporarily revealed, but the necessary use of the language of the dominant culture inevitably re-excludes it. However, Jackson argues, this momentary

\[28\] Jackson 1981, p. 175.
\[30\] Jackson 1981, p. 3.
\[31\] Jackson 1981, p. 4.
perturbation of the dominant social order ‘is a telling index of the limits of that order’, and paraxial fantasy is predicated on a ‘negative relationality’ to the “bourgeois” category of the real conceived as an ideological and hence linguistic order.

But how is this violation and possible subversion of dominant norms achieved? Jackson stresses the naïveté of trying to equate ‘fantasy with either anarchic or revolutionary politics’. Instead, a swift concatenation of quotations from Irène Bessière, Joanna Russ, Marcel Brion and Georges Bataille is used to link paraxial fantasy with the ‘violent “opening” of syntactic order . . . found in Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, surrealism, Artaud’ and to suggest that ‘fantastic works of the last two centuries are clear antecedents of modernist texts, such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, with their commitment to disintegration’. This passage suggests that fantasy’s subversive potential, its ability to ‘disturb “rules” of artistic representation and literature’s reproduction of the real’ is not, after all, its unique and defining characteristic. Rather, Jackson, like Todorov, is engaged in the sly application of nonuniform values in order to introduce a hierarchy consonant with a pre-existing canon.

What is it, then, that paraxial fantasy subverts, and how? Jackson argues that by ‘[p]resenting that which cannot be, but *is*, fantasy exposes a culture’s definitions of that which can be: it traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame’. Paraxial fantasies attempt to undermine dominant philosophical and epistemological orders. They subvert and interrogate nominal unities of time, space and character, as well as questioning the possibility, or honesty, of fictional re-presentation of those unities. . . . [A]n art of estrangement, resisting closure, opening structures which categorize experience in the name of ‘human reality’ . . . [it] moves towards a dismantling of the ‘real’, most particularly of the concept

37 Her contention that ‘texts subvert only if the reader is *disturbed* by their dislocated narrative form’ (Jackson 1981, p. 23) seems to displace such judgements onto the reader (who must also be considered paraxial: Jackson’s methodology requires an implicit reader, yet she emphasises affect).
of ‘character’ and its ideological assumptions, mocking and parodying a blind faith in psychological coherence and in the value of sublimation as a ‘civilizing’ activity.\(^{39}\)

Jackson likens the disruption of the conventions of bourgeois realism by the intrusion of elements which disturb mimetic illusion to the interaction of the Symbolic (the realm of language, law and custom, and of distinctions between self/other, subject/object) and the Imaginary (all that is excluded from the Symbolic and rational discourse).\(^{40}\) Fantasy, then, strips away the Symbolic and uncovers ‘all that needs to remain hidden if the world is to be comfortably “known”’.\(^{41}\) Therefore, the most subversive fantasies are those which attempt to transform the relations of the imaginary and the symbolic. They try to set up possibilities for radical cultural transformation by making fluid the relations between these realms, suggesting, or projecting, the dissolution of the symbolic through violent reversal or rejection of the process of the subject’s formation.\(^{42}\)

Jackson’s erasure of the distinction between phantasy and fantasy – here written large – results in, or perhaps derives from, a reconstitution of texts as Freudian psyches which innocently and unintentionally express ‘unconscious drives’ and are thus ‘particularly open to psychoanalytic readings’.\(^{43}\) This could, of course, be interpreted as that species of élitism which often haunts studies of popular culture, erasing the realities of textual and commodity production and treating mass culture as a reservoir of spontaneous, naïve and, above all, unreflective expression;\(^{44}\) Jackson’s exclusion of the vast majority

---


\(^{40}\) I have argued elsewhere (Bould 1999b) that, following Adorno, the relationship between the Symbolic and the Imaginary can be usefully reconstructed as that between the ‘objective subject’ which matches and fits bourgeois existence as a whole and the unknowable ‘real subject’ repressed by exchange-value. Fully objectified, the subject (mis)takes the objective subject for the real subject, and the real subject is transformed into a fantasy of transcendence.

\(^{41}\) Jackson 1981, p. 65.

\(^{42}\) Jackson 1981, p. 91.

\(^{43}\) Jackson 1981, p. 6. This circular logic is often reiterated in psychoanalytic approaches to fantasy. For example, ‘all fiction has its origins in phantasy and so it comes as no surprise that psychoanalytic theory has had such an impact upon our understanding of literary texts’ (Armitt 1996, p. 39).

\(^{44}\) Even Fredric Jameson seems to have fallen into this trap, describing cyberpunk as ‘the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself’ (Jameson 1992, p. 419).
of literary fantasy in favour of paraxial fantasy would seem to confirm this. However, there is more at stake. Jackson acknowledges that

[Although nearly all literary fantasies eventually re-cover desire, neutralizing their own impulses towards transgression, some move towards the extreme position which will be found in Sade’s writings, and attempt to remain ‘open’, dissatisfied, endlessly desiring.]

She devotes her analysis to ‘[t]hose texts which attempt that movement and that transgressive function’ because ‘in them the fantastic is at its most uncomprising in its interrogation of the “nature” of the “real”’. There are several problems with this approach.

First, the fact that almost all fantasies neutralise this impulse suggests that the actual impulse is not one of transgression but of a fleeting entertainment of the possibility of transgression. Rather than verify the existence of an impulse toward transgression and examine the material conditions which produced or curtailed it, Jackson merely privileges such an impulse while neutralising the second half of the movement, even though it is, by her own admission, the dominant one. Her failure to consider this impulse in full is indicative of the limited scope of her efforts to introduce the political and ideological into her reworking of Todorov, and suggests a rather simplistic model of the relationship between the subject and the social order which makes no distinction between varieties of psychic and social repression.

Second, Jackson defines literary fantasy in terms of that which it typically is not. The exceptional characteristic she privileges as the defining characteristic of fantasy is not merely a product of finer writing – her examples are exceptional in two senses – but of a failure of form, whether intentional or not. However, her equivalisation of repressions leads her to interpret genre as a constraint to be transgressed rather than as an enabling field of possibilities. Consequently, she has little option but to pursue this rather perverse course of

47 This is not uncommon. For example, Lucie Armitt advocates ‘an approach that accepts genre as a necessary evil: a problem to negotiate, a limit to surpass and a structure to overreach’, arguing that ‘our actual interest’ in fantasy texts ‘has more to do with the complex ways in which an individual tale simultaneously flirts with while overreaching this limiting straitjacket that we know as genre’. Seded by the ‘flirtatious dynamic’ of ‘resistance to appropriative and author/itarian possession’, Armitt valorises the variations in individual fantasy texts which distinguish them from each other as
misdefining fantasy by its exceptions rather than its rules, and of turning – fallaciously – to the avant-garde as the repository of literary production supposedly least tainted by commodity production.

Third, Jackson’s focus on the suppressed impulses of fantasy texts mirroring the Freudian psyche constitutes a self-validating sleight-of-hand which also demonstrates the imperialist project of psychoanalysis: it is not sufficient that all people must be made to coincide with its universalised white male European bourgeois subject, so too must all cultural products. Just as Todorov’s structuralism causes him to reject author in favour of text and actual readers in favour of the implicit reader, so Jackson’s psychoanalysis, by attributing sole agency to the text, exscribes the material conditions of textual production and reception. This is perhaps unsurprising in an argument which draws upon Freud’s own discussions of literature (for which he carefully selected texts to illustrate his own fantasies of the psyche and universal subjectivity) without questioning, for example, the different modes of production of the texts (for example, volumes of literature, folklore, science; the analyst’s accounts of the analysand’s accounts of dreams) upon which Freudian psychoanalysis is built. This becomes increasingly troubling as Jackson’s book proceeds without any recognition that the texts she considers, and the work by Freud that is intended to illuminate them, are products of similar cultures during roughly the same period. It is unsurprising, then, that they share tropes, images and ideas; what is surprising is that, rather than indicating the historical and cultural contingency of Freudian theory, the appearance of these shared elements is deemed to corroborate Freudian theory, which, thus confirmed, can, in an astonishing piece of circular logic, then be used to analyse them.

the ‘resistance to homogeneity that makes them pleasurable for us to read’ (Armitt 1996, pp. 19–20). As Armitt’s recognition of the ‘crucial differentiation between fantasy as genre fiction and the fantastic as a far more resistant, anti-generic mode’ (Armitt 1996, p. 6) indicates, her position is made more tenuous by a failure to allow for the complex interactions of the overlapping distinctions of formula, category, genre, cycle and mode, causing her to mistake formula or category for genre and genre for mode, and thus to distance herself from the mass and popular forms of fantasy. Ironically, although she notes that Todorov’s work belongs to ‘that form of structuralism that gives birth to the compartmentalization approach to fantasy’ (Armitt 1996, p. 6), Armitt seems oblivious to the possibility that the ‘resistance to homogeneity’ she champions arises from the retrospective construction of straitjacketing categories.
Monleón and the fantastic

Perhaps the greatest testimony to Jackson’s failure to introduce the political and ideological into Todorov’s model of fantasy is the extent to which subsequent criticism of the genre has been dominated by psychoanalytic approaches often more concerned with using fantasy texts to explore, for example, the structuralist and poststructuralist psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. On the positive side, this has, courtesy of often strange alliances between academic feminism and psychoanalytic theory, resulted in some strong feminist critiques and advocacies of the fantastic as a site and range of possibilities for the critique of patriarchal, racist and capitalist hegemony, as exemplified in the fiction of Joanna Russ, Gwyneth Jones and Octavia Butler. However, if one believes that ‘[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness’, then any critique which ultimately locates repression in language and opposition to repression in eruptions of the Imaginary, and which frequently seems to posit a return to undifferentiated pre-linguistic flux (Kristeva’s semiotic) as its eutopian goal, is inadequate. As Monleón notes, ‘the exposition of the repressed is not necessarily a subversive act, if by subversion is meant a challenge to the causes of repression, a defiance of order, an assault on dominant ideology’.

Arguably the greatest influence of Jackson’s Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion derives from its misread subtitle. Monleón, like others, assumes that she considers fantasy to be inherently subversive, and, consequently, his Foucauldian sociohistorical corrective to her work is intended as a refutation of an argument she does not make. There is, for example, no contradiction between Jackson’s observation that during the Victorian period, the ‘horrors, transgression and sexual “licence” [of the Gothic were] exploited by many Victorian novelists to deter a bourgeois reading public from political revolution, even as it provide[d] them with a temporary fulfilment of ungratified desire’.

---

48 Marx 1987, p. 263.  
50 Jackson does argue for the subversive potential of fantasy, but only after defining fantasy in terms of a specific type of subversive potential. The mistake is to assume that fantasy, as used in the title of her book, means something other than this very narrowly defined variety (i.e., Jacksonian paraxial fantasy).  
and Monleón’s argument that fantasy was involved in ‘the defense of the status quo and the preservation of economic order’, helping to ‘modify hegemonic discourse in order to justify the survival of bourgeois society’.52 Indeed, Monleón’s attempt to produce ‘an ideological reading rooted in the concrete historical circumstances from which the fantastic emerged and evolved’53 is anticipated by Jackson’s commentary on several mid-Victorian novels concerned with confinement and the collision of bourgeois realism and Gothic horror.54

Monleón, who persuasively argues that Goya’s famous aquatint plate *Capricho* 43 in fact reads ‘The dream of reason produces monsters’, locates the origin of fantasy in the ‘interaction’ in the Gothic ‘of two opposed and irreconcilable worldview . . . as a result of the tensions produced by the inclusion of medieval beliefs within the reasonable framework of eighteenth-century bourgeois precepts’.55 Therefore, fantasy, which Monleón defines as ‘an artistic production articulating a social concern about the essence of nature and law, on the one hand, and the threats and fears derived from such a concern, on the other’,56 could not exist prior to the objectification of nature and the ‘triumph of reason’,57 which he dates at around 1760.58 As soon as ‘the “Rationalists”’ who had opposed ‘the dominance of arbitrary absolutism and feudal organization’ came to power, ‘a very different political configuration came into being, with the end result that reason had to adjust in order to conform to its new social role’.59 This resulted in the establishment of houses of confinement on the urban periphery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as ‘hospitals, workhouses, pauperhouses, and prisons assumed the

54 Jackson notes the apocalyptic coincidence and paralleling of feminist revolt with Luddite violence in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) and with Chartism in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848). She also discusses Dickens’s descriptions of the Gordon rioters as demonically-possessed Bedlamites in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), of Chartists as demons in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), of political revolution as barbarism in *Hard Times* (1854), and of the French Revolution as ‘a grotesque plague of madness’ (Jackson 1981, p. 132) in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).
58 He also argues that fantasy ended in the 1930s, when the modernist assault on language and epistemological certainty had rendered ‘unreason . . . indistinguishable from reason, and . . . reality . . . as nonapprehensible’ (Monleón 1990, p. 75).
59 Monleón 1990, p. 20.
function not only of curing, educating, or punishing, but also of hiding’; and, as ‘[c]riminals and madmen were thrown together with beggars and the unemployed’, many came to see work as ‘the feature that separated those reasonable beings who participated in the productive effort from a fifth estate, composed of the “scum” always ready to rob or riot’. Attempts were made ‘to eliminate the cohabitation by different classes of the same streets or buildings’ by replacing ‘vertical distinction by floors’ with a ‘horizontal displacement’ which saw the ‘laboring classes . . . pushed from the center to the periphery, to that same edge of the city in which stood the houses of confinement’ and relocated cemeteries. Thus the dream of bourgeois reason thrust all that it did not wish to recognise (death, madness, idleness, crime, pauperism, riots and the new working class, lumped together under the metaphor of unreason) out onto the edges of its cities.

Traces of this frenzy of reasonable repudiations can certainly be found in the literature of the period. Don Quixote’s niece pleads with the priest and the barber to destroy his volumes of poetry along with the chivalric romances which have lead to his delusions, ‘[f]or once [he] is cured of his disease of chivalry, he might very likely read those books and take it into his head to turn shepherd and roam about the woods and fields, singing and piping and, even worse, turn poet, for that disease is incurable and catching, so they say’. The deranging irrationality of building a reasonable and enlightened society on expulsion and exclusion, as in More’s *Utopia* (1516), is laid bare in Laputa and the land of the Houyhnhnms in Swift’s *Gulliver Travels* (1726), as are its exploitative colonialist and mercantile tendencies in Neville’s *The Isle of Pines* (1668) and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).

Against the backdrop of this mass confinement, which ‘symbolized unreasonable repression as well as the repression of unreason’, Monléon traces the emergence of the Gothic as ‘a sadistic unearthing and reconstruction of unreasonable forms’ which, by exposing unreason, ‘allowed dominant society to control or tame the image of unreason, to tailor a moralistic dress around its presence’. The fantastic was thus born as ‘an expression of the

---

60 Monléon 1990, pp. 25–6.
61 Monléon 1990, p. 28.
62 Cervantes 1950, p. 61.
64 Monléon 1990, p. 48.
problem and as a means of interfering in it’, as ‘an artistic discourse that would measure and define the cultural and political boundaries between reason and unreason’ even as the bourgeoisie was repeatedly faced with the choice between extending principles of liberty and equality to all or defending its class interests – a conflict, Monléón notes, at the heart of Shelley’s *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818). As working-class political consciousness flourished, the connection between industrial development and the threat it posed to bourgeois order became increasingly clear. Marx and Engels drew on familiar fantastic tropes, ‘using dominant discourse as well as deconstructing a cultural metaphor’, when they wrote of the spectre haunting Europe, of capitalism producing its own contradictions and the bourgeoisie its own grave-diggers.

Monléón provides two important correctives to Jackson. First, he collocates fantasy and other texts of sociohistorical importance in the realm of ideology, giving impetus to the reconsideration of specific fantasy texts in relation to the material circumstances pertinent to their production. For example, he writes of the profound economic changes affecting domestic servants during the nineteenth century as they ‘joined capitalist relations of production’ and ‘lost their status as “members of the family” to become workers inserted within the household structure’. This insight transforms our understanding of *The Turn of the Screw* as the hesitation identified by Todorov becomes a signifier of self-conflicted, contradictory ideology which is brought into focus by the new role of domestic servants in a class society which perpetuates myths of equality despite its fundamental exploitative economic relationships. Add to this Engels’s insight (from *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*) that, having ‘done its best to universalise enmity, to transform mankind into a horde of ravenous beasts . . . who devour one another just because each has identical interest’, liberal economics, through the factory system and child labour, then set about ‘the dissolution of the family’ by intruding the cash nexus into the relationship between child and parent.

---

66 Monléón 1990, p. 60.
67 Refreshingly, Monléón’s few references to Freud seem more interested in considering his work as further examples of literary production drawing on common imagery rather than as a privileged source of insight.
68 Monléón 1990, p. 89.
69 Engels 1975, pp. 423–4. Such a dissolution can be seen to underlie the relationship
Screw, human interaction is similarly dominated by economic relationships. The world of the orphaned Miles and Flora is circumscribed by the financial provision of an uncle who desires to have nothing else to do with them: they are raised by servants and Miles is educated at a boarding school. Consequently, James’s short novel can be read as not just an expression of anxieties about servants and other subordinated groups knowing their proper place, but also of maintaining social hierarchy when everyone within it is reducible, if not yet reduced, to her exchange-value.

Second, Monleón introduces an historical dimension beyond the abstracted temporality of the reader’s experience of the text, an innovation which demands recognition of the dynamic interrelation of texts. This is valuable, but also gives rise to problems. For the sake of concision, rather than treating Monleón’s book-length argument in greater detail, I will instead consider Adam Roberts’s contention – which follows a logic similar to, if simpler than, Monleón’s – about alien abduction fantasies. In the typical scenario, ‘white, moderately affluent thirty-something American[s] . . . are taken suddenly from their homes by aliens, restrained (perhaps shackled) and transported to the alien ship’ where they are ‘subjected to physically degrading and sometimes painful treatments’ which include ‘the insertion . . . of devices into nose or ear’ and of ‘probes into genital or rectal areas, the stimulation of the penis and the removal of sperm, or the investigation of the womb’; the abductees are then compelled ‘to forget, or at least to suppress, memories of the experience’. Roberts suggests that this widespread fantasy and the credulity with which it is often met is an example of the return of the repressed ‘on a societal level’ as the collective denial of the ‘brutal realities of the trade in slaves’ on which ‘the history and indeed the success of America’ is built bursts through the fabric of American national mythology. He concludes that ‘mainstream America is fantasising a science-fictionalised version of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slaving, and interpolating itself into the victim role’.70 Appealing as this argument might seem, it is problematic, and there are several important questions it fails to address: why has this repressed taken so long to return? By what mechanism has it returned? Why is it just about race?

---

Roberts suggests that the alien abduction narrative flourished at this particular historical juncture because race has become ‘central to late twentieth-century constructions of “American-ness”’. This untestable hypothesis is derived not from a detailed examination of any of the many supposedly authentic accounts of alien abduction or from a range of overtly fictional accounts. Instead, Roberts offers a reading of Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy – novels which rework the abduction scenario so as to explore the politics of resistance and incorporation, and which engage with the possibilities offered by the genre to transmute colonial history into a narrative which makes that history resonate anew, remembering the past in order to also estrange the present – and then rereads all alien abduction narratives through the filter it provides. His argument is itself, then, a product of the increased centrality of race in contemporary identity politics: he considers alien abduction fantasies to be about race because a concern with issues of race is what he is looking to find in them. This is not to say that alien abduction narratives cannot or do not work in the manner he suggests, or that issues of race are not important, but it does require us to ask what this emphasis on race is itself suppressing.

It is possible to suggest a range of other equally plausible hypotheses to explain alien abduction fantasies. Two abduction narratives which have little, if anything to do with race, are the film *Fire in the Sky* (Robert Lieberman, 1993) and Whitley Strieber’s *Communion: A True Story* (1987): the former offers a context of short-contract manual labour, and thus of changing gender roles, in-crisis masculinity, and domestic third-worldisation; the latter’s prurient sado-masochistic sexual fantasies provide, however unintentionally, a metaphor for and eroticisation of negotiated subordination. Other explanations might include increased social atomisation coupled to increased media focus on (if not incidents of) abduction, sexual assault, serial killing and child abuse; the increasing surveillance of disempowered people by unaccountable institutions and practices; the impact of new reproductive and contraceptive technologies and reactionary retrenchments on sex education and abortion rights; the greater visibility of gays and lesbians in a homophobic culture. The number of possible explanations – none of them are implausible or exclusive of the

---

71 Roberts 2000, p. 132. For a more compelling discussion of UFO abduction narratives see Luckhurst 1998.
others – indicates the limitations of introducing the ideological and historical into a theoretical framework whose tendency to promote identity politics rather than a politics of identification so readily accommodates it to the exercise of hegemony.

Similar problems attend Monleón’s argument in that his predisposition toward certain discourses similarly shape and inevitably distort his conception of the historical context in which he seeks to embed the fantastic. This is not to say that his particular embedding is without insight or value, but, rather, that the totalising reading he attempts to construct from it and the conclusions he reaches are ineluctably partial and misleading.

Jerry-rigging a Marxist theory of the fantastic

The first question that must be asked in fashioning new theories of the fantastic is, what are the earlier theories marginalising and suppressing? Two things are immediately apparent. The first and perhaps lesser point is that structuralist and psychoanalytic approaches seem incapable of admitting to the existence of the fantasy text as commodity. Monleón and Jackson locate the culmination of fantasy in, respectively, 1930s modernism and postmodernist literature of the late 1960s and 1970s.\(^{72}\) It is surely more than coincidence that these decades witnessed the successful establishment of modern publishing categories in the American pulp magazines (including sf in *Amazing, Astounding*, etc., and fantasy in *Weird Tales* and *Unknown*)\(^{73}\) and the emergence of fantasy as a successful category in book publishing in the 1950s and 1960s with the US mass market edition of *The Lord of the Rings* and other best-selling paperbacks like Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) and Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), all three of which were campus hits. By establishing a fantasy canon of already-canonical texts, Jackson is able to suppress their commodity form and, when dealing with mass or popular literature, to selectively throw out the baby of agency with the bathwater of intentionality. Contrary to her

\(^{72}\) Intriguingly, Armitt identifies several instances in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* novels in which ‘linguistic free-play and textual metamorphoses’ – the semiotic excess which Jackson treats as anticipative of modernist fiction – ‘actually work to suppress the political’ (1996, pp. 157–8).

stated intentions, her approach allows, encourages even, the avoidance of political engagement.  

If this tendency is to be effectively countered, it is necessary to construct a theory of the fantastic which takes account of its commodity status and forms; as a necessary adjunct to this, it is essential that a new canon be constructed which centres on those previously excluded or marginalised subgenres of the fantastic – the weird tale, sword and sorcery, space opera, heroic fantasy and secondary-world fantasy – which most clearly bear the marks of commodification, albeit in complex ways. This is not to be taken as a celebration of low culture at the expense of high culture but as a means of addressing the artifice of that division; ultimately, already-canonical texts would not be excluded from debate but cast in a more telling light. Such a canon, dynamically conceived and constantly re-forming, would help to establish fresh ground on which to build theory and criticism that liberates readers and writers.

The second point is that the dominant tendencies in theorising the fantastic, which build on or take inspiration from Jackson’s work, strongly serve the interests of capitalist hegemony. As I suggested in my introduction, the roots of this problem can be found in the failure of the Left to generate an adequate theory of the subject and subjectivity. A clear example of the problem posed for Marxism by the psychoanalytic turn can be found in the emphasis on subversion and resistance in fantasy theory and criticism over the last twenty years (particularly in screen studies) which parallels the Left’s increasingly common rejection of a programmatic Marxist politics of revolution in favour of the capitulative issue-by-issue politics of negotiated subordination.

---

74 Consider, for example, the imagery of contagion found in vampire fiction. Brian Stableford’s Empire of Fear (1988) uses vampirism as a metaphor for AIDS, and vice versa, in order to examine various discourses surrounding them; although problematic, it works consciously within a genre and tradition, a possibility allowed for by Monleón. In contrast, And the Band Played On (Spottiswoode 1993) imagines AIDS as a contagion requiring a Van Helsing to hunt down its Dracula-like patient zero, and, in 2000, British popular journalism described Romanian gypsy beggars in London in terms familiar to anyone who has read Dracula. By fostering a view of fantasy as the eruption of unconscious phantasy, one is able to avoid direct criticism of the authors of the latter examples because they do not seem to demonstrate any self-reflexivity (or, therefore, agency); the wider indictment of a culture which largely did not notice or did not care about such ideological manipulation is thus forestalled, as is the necessary critique of the role and limited repertoire of the culture industries.
Following Althusser’s description of the ideological interpellation of the subject, throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, screen studies emphasised the discursive subjectivity produced by the text-as-apparatus-of-domination. Subsequently, screen studies, as part of what Bennett described as ‘the turn to Gramsci’ in cultural studies, shifted its emphasis to the social subject who encounters numerous attempts at ideological positioning and responds to them in a variety of ways. In its most extreme forms, this tendency is deeply over-romanticised, absurd and even offensive: for example, Fiske compares the shopkeeper who cannot distinguish between genuine shoppers and people who try on clothes with no intention of buying them to the US invaders who cannot distinguish between Vietnamese non-combatants and freedom fighters.

In screen studies, critics have often taken the relationship between a fantasy TV series or film and its audiences as their object of study, typically focusing on the activities of ‘participatory fandom’. Although such studies are reasonably successful in avoiding the excesses of Fiske, even the more ethnographically-minded are not above projecting their analysis onto their respondents or romanticising the activities they are studying. For example, Bacon-Smith describes the fan as knowing ‘her enjoyment does not arise out of passive reception but out of active engagement with her favorite genre or medium’ and argues that participatory fandom ‘has an almost limitless supply of ingenuity and a capacity to maintain secrecy that... can only be compared to the poetry movement in Russia’ and that ‘the law they break [copyright infringement] is only the mildest part of the subversion fomented in the ladies’ literary group and terrorist society’. In such accounts, fan activity tends to be posited as resistance to incorporation, a triumph, however temporary, over the ideological interpellations of a capitalist, patriarchal, white-supremacist and heteronormative apparatus.

---

75 Althusser 1971, pp. 160–70.
77 Bennett 1986.
79 E.g. Bacon-Smith 1992 and 2000; Jenkins 1992; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995; Clerc 1996; Penley 1997; Brooker 1999. For all its faults, most especially its lack of a notion of affect, Barker and Brooks 1998 stands out for its avoidance of this excessively self-selecting audience in favour of a more varied sample of subjects. See also Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath 2001.
An emphasis on the unpredictability of fan responses to a text and their subsequent activity\textsuperscript{81} indicates the extent to which this critical tendency has lost sight of one of its principal tenets, namely that the subject is involved in the practice of making do with the texts and commodities that the apparatus provides. I would suggest, therefore, that fan activity and all that it is taken to stand for is utterly predictable in all but its finest detail, and that even the most superficial acquaintance with Gramsci indicates that this so-called resistance is actually primarily a form of incorporation:

the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic corporate kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive nucleus of economic activity.\textsuperscript{82}

On a very basic level, and as any of the accounts of participatory media fandom, especially Star Trek fandom, demonstrate, the sacrifice and compromise made by producers who do not prosecute certain kinds of fan-based copyright infringement (indeed they tacitly encourage them) and the role played by organised fandom in policing infringement through establishing its acceptable forms not only does not challenge the decisive nucleus of economic activity, it frequently results in increased profitability for the media producers and the further penetration of the market into fan activity. It is therefore necessary to recognise the vocabulary of subversion and resistance as merely euphemistic, especially when applied to practices such as these, and to identify differently articulated processes of subordination as such, however intriguing they might seem and whatever kernel of refusal they might contain.

Furthermore, it is no surprise to note then that, like much secondary-world fantasy, many of the shows which attract this kind of fan activity, from Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987–94) to Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, are primarily obedience fantasies in which characters, like their authors, are trained to

\textsuperscript{81} E.g. Pearson 2000.
\textsuperscript{82} Gramsci 1971, p. 161.
adjust themselves to an apparatus of domination (whether the neoliberal Federation or the production practices of American series TV). Similarly, the varieties of fan fiction detailed by Bacon-Smith are clearly engaged in processes of incorporating the self into the fictional world or punishing its characters.

In closing, I will attempt to position and connect some of the basic building blocks of a Marxist theory of the fantastic that attempts to redress the balance from the therapeutic towards the political. What follows is not intended to represent anything more than a preliminary and hopefully provocative statement, a Marxist theory of fantasy jerry-rigged from available materials. Jerry-rigging is a form of détournement and as such constrains me to misprision and the appropriation and abuse of terms derived from already established discourses.

To construct a Marxist theory of fantasy, it is necessary to begin with the notion of the subject, and, as I have indicated above, perhaps the place to begin is by returning to Althusser. In drawing out the distinction between ‘concrete individuals’ and ‘concrete subjects’ and attempting to demonstrate that ‘all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects’, Althusser gives the famous example of an individual in the street being hailed by a policeman’s ‘Hey, you there!’: He writes, ‘the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed’; and the hailed individual turns to face the policeman, becoming ‘[b]y this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion . . . a subject’. Eagle amusingly questions whether ‘the fact that Louis Althusser’s friends apparently never mistook his cheery shout of greeting in the street’ can serve ‘as irrefutable evidence that the business of ideological interpellation is

---

83 Bacon-Smith 1992, pp. 52–3.
84 The above comments are not intended to imply that fans are the dupes of the culture industries. To the extent to which they actually believe their activities to be truly radical and/or subversive, they might be considered as such (although a rather more sophisticated and sensitive concept than ‘dupe’ is required); but they are not dupes insofar as they find in fandom a genuine community (of felt unalienation, utopian aspiration, escape). If anyone could be considered a dupe, it is the academic commentator who abandons political engagement in favour of fantasising fandom as the locus for such activity.
invariably successful’. However, it is worth noting not only that Althusser is self-conscious of the shortcomings of his illustration – it introduces a ‘sequence . . . of temporal succession’ into a process that ‘in reality . . . happen[s] without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing’ – but also that Eagleton seems to mistake this illustration by metaphor or analogy for an actual example of ideological interpellation. He suggests that ‘it is hard to know what to make of [Althusser’s] insistence on the “moment” of interpellation, unless this is simply a convenient fiction without recognising that that is precisely what it is. Consequently, he argues that Althusser’s model is a good deal too monistic, passing over the discrepant, contradictory ways in which subjects may be ideologically accosted – partially, wholly, or hardly at all – by discourses which themselves form no obvious cohesive unity’. This is a version of the conventional argument for dismissing Althusser’s model: namely, that it is too rigid and mechanistic and consequently cannot produce a subject who is anything other than passive and manipulated by discourse.

Those who make this argument tend to overlook the possibilities of the ‘always-already’ in Althusser’s ‘one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*’ (Eagleton, for example, dismisses the phrase as sleight-of-hand to avoid logical difficulties with the model). If, like Althusser, we introduce for the purposes of illustration a temporal dimension into his model, and add to that the rather more complex notions of causation that have emerged in complexity and chaos science, we can arrive at a model of the subject who is discrepant and contradictory but nonetheless determined by ideological interpellations. Each hailing positions the individual as a subject, but each hailing is in tension with every other hailing’s attempt to position the individual

---

87 Althusser 1971, p. 163.
90 Althusser 1971, p. 164.
as a subject. The subject, then, is not to be considered as a singular point, a monadic intersection, through which all hailings pass, but as a cluster or cloud of positions, constantly shifting and repositioning in response to each new hailing. This fuzzier model of the subject more or less corresponds to the ‘social subject’ who is often opposed to the ‘discursive subject’, but without the usual mystifications. With such a model of the subject in place, it becomes possible to recover the fantastic, at least partially, from the realms of unconscious eruption favoured by Jackson and Monleón, and to restore some notion of agency to the authoring of fantasy without surrendering determinism or succumbing to voluntarism.

China Miéville has linked fantasy to the capacity for imagination which Marx argued distinguished human labour from animal behaviour:  

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of the weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own . . . to which he must subordinate his will . . . during the whole operation. 

This is, of course, not to conflate the categories of fantasy and labour but to acknowledge the role of fantasy (in the sense of imagination and design) in human labour and the element of labour (the construction in language, and hence in reality, of structures raised in the imagination) in the production of the fantasy text. From this perspective, the potentially most useful psychoanalytic category one can use to link this process of imaginary and material shaping in human labour to a more-political-than-therapeutic model of fantasy is that of paranoia.

In his analysis of the paranoid and conspiratorial worlds of Philip K. Dick, Freedman usefully summarises Freud’s various accounts of paranoia:

the ideational structure of paranoia is that of a ruthless hermeneutic. . . .

[T]he paranoiac has an abnormally high investment in the hermeneutic

---

92 Miéville 2000.
93 Marx 1996, p. 188.
practice which he or she performs on the symptomatic actions of other people. . . . But not only is the paranoiac an interpreter: he or she is one of an especially systematic and ambitious type. . . . The paranoiac is not only someone for whom every detail is meaningful – for whom nothing can be left uninterpreted or taken for granted – but someone who holds a conception of meaning that is both totalizing and hermeneutic. The paranoiac is the most rigorous of metaphysicians. The typical paranoid outlook is thorough-going, internally logical, never trivializing, and capable of explaining the multitude of observed phenomena as aspects of a symmetrical and expressive totality. No particular of empirical reality is so contingent or heterogeneous that the paranoiac cannot, by a straightforward process of point-for-point correspondence, interpret its meaning within the framework of his or her own grand system.\textsuperscript{94}

Freud traces the origin of the paranoid system to the withdrawal of the libido from the world, which then becomes fixed on and aggrandises the ego,\textsuperscript{95} and argues that, by constructing a delusional universe, the paranoiac is attempting to re-direct the libido outwards, to reconnect with the world. Freedman goes on to note Freud’s association of paranoia with philosophy, his suspicion that the delusional paranoid system outlined in Daniel Paul Schreber’s \textit{Memoirs of My Nervous Illness}\textsuperscript{96} might contain more truth than some are prepared to believe, and his concession, in \textit{The Psychopathology of Everyday Life}, that paranoid interpretations are partially justified.\textsuperscript{97}

Lacan, however, does not see paranoia as merely a disease. He considers it, rather, to play an essential role in the development of the psyche. The newborn has no sense of identity and experiences existence as fluxes, drives and desires with no core of self and no clearly defined borders. At the ‘mirror stage’, the infant becomes aware for the first time of differentiation, of the

\textsuperscript{94} Freedman 1984, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{95} A classic example of this can be found in Robert Lindner’s account of his treatment of the Los Alamos physicist pseudonymously known as ‘Kirk Allen’. As a child, Allen read a work of fiction whose protagonist shared his name. Deciding that he was actually reading his own biography, he set about assimilating much of the sf and fantasy he read into it, creating an imaginary (or delusory) alternative universe in which he played the role of saviour. Ironically, in following Freud’s advice not to dispute with the paranoiac analysand, Lindner came to believe in Allen’s delusional system.
\textsuperscript{96} Schreber 2000.
\textsuperscript{97} Freud 1991a.
division of the universe into subject (self) and object (not-self). As Freedman notes,

The rationalizing interpretations of paranoia, elaborated into a system at the center of which stands the ‘I’ of the paranoiac, are for Lacan paradigmatic of human psychic development as inaugurated by the ‘mirror’ stage of objectifying identification, when distinctions and links are first established between an alienated ‘I’ and an alienating not-‘I’ . . . Lacan maintains that the ego is structured on a paranoiac basis and that human knowledge operates according to a paranoiac principle.98

Hendershot argues that if Lacan is correct in identifying ego-formation as a paranoid process, then ‘taking one’s place in the Symbolic Order means living in a paranoiac system that is culturally sanctioned’.99 However, Hendershot is keen to interpret paranoia as a special case of trauma in which the unrepresentable Lacanian Real is interpreted rather than merely repeated,100 and her most useful formulation is that ‘[p]aranoia is an attempt to make meaning out of unarticulated trauma’.101 In analysing 1950s American culture and the sf movies of the period, she argues that ‘the very pervasiveness of the nuclear threat makes paranoia the ideal system for expressing fear of something that is everywhere. Paranoiacs perceive each detail of everyday life to be part of vast networks’.102

Following a brief account of Lacan’s attempt to historicise the Freudian subject,103 linking ‘its emergence with such cultural products of the period of nascent bourgeois hegemony as perspectival optics and the Cartesian cogito’, Freedman concludes that, consequently, not only are ‘the Freudian subject and the subject of capitalism inextricably related’ but that there is also ‘no basis for a sharp distinction between the paranoiac and the “normal” subject of capitalist society’.104 In what follows, my use of ‘paranoia’ (and terms derived from it) is not intended to carry the negative pathological associations.

---

98 Freedman 1984, p. 17.
100 E.g. Hendershot 1999, p. 20.
104 Freedman 1984, p. 17.
By folding these accounts of the mechanism or processes of paranoid thinking back into my variant of Althusser’s model of the subject and Marx’s description of human labour quoted above, it is possible to begin to construct a theory of the fantastic. According to Marx, human species-being and species-life consists of conscious labour undertaken in a collective or community framework. This labour is composed of, if not a dialectical, then certainly a cybernetic process of imaginative construction and material construction.\textsuperscript{105} The performance of such operations on material reality can be seen as a fundamentally paranoid act, a re-ordering of a pre-existing order so as to make a sensible system of meaning within a traumatically and intransigently elusive Real. This also applies in the manipulation of language and the production of text, where the limits of physical matter are replaced by the limitations of language, discourse, ideology and the commodity system.

If the Symbolic Order is indeed nothing more than a culturally sanctioned paranoid system, the act of imagining can be seen as playing upon the themes, structures, possibilities and constraints of that system with varying degrees of complicity and dissent. The act of literary production therefore constitutes an actualisation of such play in a material form, and regardless of whether it is the complexly interwoven realism of George Eliott or J.K. Rowling’s mooncalf dystopias, the depicted milieu is a paranoid construction compensating for the traumatic absence of a sensible Real by offering the interconnectivity of a ruthless hermeneutic. In fictional worlds, the map is always the territory.

In this context, paranoia can be used to describe the force which holds the fuzzily-determined subject together, the shuttling between the vast array of subject positions on offer, which must in some way be reconciled with each other if the subject is ever to feel unified or whole.\textsuperscript{106} This is the role of fantasising. This is how we construct ontologies.

\textsuperscript{105} In the above quotation from Capital, Marx errs in his insistence on a chronology of imaginary preconstruction followed by material construction; in practice, both must continue to feedback into the other, adjusting and readjusting what is imagined as it comes into contact with stubborn materiality, ideology and the commodity system, and vice versa.

\textsuperscript{106} O’Donnell relates paranoia to the knowledge produced by a community which enables individuals to obtain ‘visible identity as historically unified subjects’ (1991, p. 184).
Fantasy fiction, in both its broad and narrow senses, draws upon this force, this continual location and dislocation. Where fantasy differs from other forms of fiction is in the particular nature of its world-building. All fiction builds worlds which are not true to the extratexual world (itself an ideological – and, arguably, therefore a fantastic – construct), but fantasy worlds are constructed upon a more elaborate predicate: they are not only not true to the extratexual world but, by definition, do not seek or pretend to be. Recognising its status, fantasy disavows the very possibility of a territory which is not its map.

This concern with world-building, with the paranoid construction of textual ontologies, is consistently foregrounded in fantasy and the fantastic genres. This foregrounding is the shared characteristic which provides these texts with the identity by which, in the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, they are brought ‘within the sphere of administration’,107 subsumed into the capitalist culture industry and reified in a commodity form. Upon this basic characteristic the further rules and conventions of the fantastic genres are erected, interacting with each other and the paranoid textual ontology, so as to produce the various types and particular examples of fantastic text (which can, in turn, be understood as a further process of product differentiation within the sphere of administration).

The next stage in developing this jerry-rigged theory of the fantastic would be to use it to interrogate and explore a range of fantastic texts. The obvious place to start would be with the novels of Philip K. Dick, or films like Solaris (Andrei Tarkovksy, 1972), Videodrome (David Cronenberg, 1983), Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998) and Cube (Vincenzo Natali, 1998) – fantastic texts which narrativise and thematise paranoia, ontology and subject formation; and it is tempting to do so, as each of them can tell us much about the complex relationship between ontology, ideology and the subject. However, one of the

---

107 Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 131. The reference to Adorno and Horkheimer is not a casual one. The model of the subject ventured above bears more than a passing resemblance to paradigmatic Enlightenment subject they identify in Odysseus and of which they write: ‘The strain of holding the I together adheres to the I in all stages; and the temptation to lose it has always been there with the blind determination to maintain it’ (p. 33). If, as Adorno and Horkheimer contend, twentieth century modernity is the inevitable culmination of the Enlightenment project, then the fantastic texts/ontologies produced by the paranoid and fuzzily-determined subject can be seen to constitute a vernacular modernism (for a discussion of what a vernacular modernism might involve, see Hansen 2000).
implications of the above argument is that, even in its crudest forms, fantasy is possessed of a self-awareness and self-reflexivity that is not essential to other forms of fiction. A more worthwhile approach, therefore, would be to begin with, or move very rapidly on to, initially rather less promising texts (which have not already been accepted into the canon on other grounds), and one of the strengths of this jerry-rigged theory of the fantastic is that it is just as successful in explaining the operations of that most crass example of fantastic cultural production, the spin-off novel set in the diegess of a film (such as, *Star Wars*), a TV series (for example, various *Star Treks*) or a role-playing game (e.g., *Warhammer*). Rigorously constrained by the respective ‘writer’s bible’ containing the rules, concepts, conceits and vocabulary of the given universe with which any contribution must conform, such novels are profoundly paranoid: to paraphrase Freedman, they are thoroughgoing, internally logical, never trivialising, and all phenomena are aspects of a symmetrical and expressive totality – no detail is so contingent or heterogeneous that it cannot be subsumed within the framework of the grand system of the particular megatext.\(^{108}\)

The difference between such franchise fiction and most other fantastic fiction is that, for the former, the megatext is imposed from without. The best of these works – K.W. Jeter’s *Blade Runner* sequels or Kim Newman’s *Warhammer* and *Dark Future* novels\(^ {109}\) – often work effectively against some of these constraints, but such sly rebellion must always be from within the externally imposed constraints of the megatext – and these acts of creative kicking-against-the-pricks are themselves the imposition of internal paranoia such as characterises other fantasy fiction.\(^ {110}\)


\(^{110}\) For example, in Jeter’s spin-off *Star Wars: The Bounty Hunter Wars* trilogy, he is forced to moderate and modulate the frequently cynical and despairing tone of his original novels so as to fit the requirements of a mass-market, multi-media franchise. Similarly jettisoned is his not uncommon theme of paranoia – only to be replaced by the paranoid constraints of mass-market fiction as franchised commodity, which in turn provide an insight into the ruthless hermeneutics of fantasy itself. Set during events familiar from *Star Wars: A New Hope* (Lucas 1977) and *Return of the Jedi* (Marquand 1983), the narrative scope is severely restricted by its relation to these canonical texts and, unsurprisingly, takes a centripetal form (conspiracies within conspiracies, counter-
In non-franchise fantasy fiction, the paranoid grand system is imposed primarily from within; such external imposition as it contains arises from broader generic expectations, constraints, possibilities and the ways in which they are enforced by the publishing industry. The difference, therefore, between the franchise and non-franchise fantasy fiction is one of degree rather than kind. With this in mind, it is possible to conclude that the (paranoid) fantasy text is, then, homologous to the (paranoid) subject within ideology: contrary to Voloshinov, and in chaotically-variant measures, both architect and tenant.

Any Marxist attempt to eulogise fantasy fiction as a mode as being ‘subversive’ or ‘progressive’ will be as one-sided as the alternative stern denunciation of the form as ‘mystificatory’ or ‘reactionary’. What has been attempted here is a schematic outline of the architectonics of literary fantasy, as constrained and informed by the mode of subjectivity of modern capitalism, and as modelling that mode of subjectivity in textual microcosm with a peculiarly neurotic precision. And while it might seem a kind of pessimism or capitulation to artificially construct paranoid totality, fantasy’s paranoia is an expression of the fact that the only possible mode of life for the modern subject is one of everyday paranoid artifice. In other words, what sets fantasy apart from much mimetic art is a frankly self-referential consciousness (an embedded, textual self-consciousness, whatever the consciousness of the particular author or reader) of the impossibility of ‘real life’, or Real life. It is, paradoxically, the

conspiracies within counter-conspiracies) so as not to impinge upon or contradict the continuity they established. Moreover, many passages take the form of lengthy conversations between small groups of characters (or of individual characters reflecting on the possible meanings of previously described events) in sealed environments in the depths of interstellar space – as if to be sure of not disturbing the smooth surface of established continuity. Beyond the self-replicating narrative maze, the remorseless hermeneutic of the franchise fantasy fiction can be located in individual phrases and their relationship to the megatext within which any particular narrative is located and which it must not contradict: as the bounty hunter Bossk observes, ‘this Dinnid person managed to get himself into a large-capacity vat of nerf waste’ (Jeter 1998a, p. 209), echoing Princess Leia’s (Carrie Fisher) description of Han Solo (Harrison Ford) in The Empire Strikes Back (Irvin Kershner 1980) as a ‘scruffy-looking nerf-herder’. Jeter’s rebelliousness against these constraints takes the form of pastiching George Lucas’s inept attempts at inventing exotic-sounding names to make his never-very-alien aliens seem alien, and parodying his inability to imagine the size of a galaxy, his inconsistencies over speeds and journey times, his clunky prose, and what Joanna Russ described as Star Wars’ satisfaction of a need for ‘self-worth and pleasure’ through ‘sexism, racism, heterosexism, competition and macho privilege’ (1978, p. 254). Such moments of resisting the externally imposed megatext are nonetheless driven by an internally imposed self-consistent paranoia.
very fantasy of fantasy as a mode that, at least potentially, gives it space for a hard-headed critical consciousness of capitalist subjectivity. Of course, very often – most often – it does not – the specific contents of fantastic fiction are various and defy generalisation, though there is no doubt that vast amounts of it is nostalgic and mawkish pap. The baroque paranoia of the form, however, embeds an austere realism.

References


Hendershot, Cyndy 1999, Paranoia, the Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.


Jameson, Fredric 1992, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, London: Verso.


Russ, Joanna 1978, ‘Sf and Technology as Mystification’, *Science-Fiction Studies*, 16 (5, 3): 250–60.


