THE LITERARY FANTASTIC
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THE LITERARY FANTASTIC
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Edited by:
Ana Kechan

To you who've shown me
that reality can be just as fantastic

List of Contributors

The Editor

Ana Kechan, PhD, is a full professor at the International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia. She has a BA in English Language and Literature, an MA in English Literature and a PhD in Literary Hermeneutics. She has the CELTA and DELTA from the University of Cambridge and is a CELTA trainer for teachers of English, as well as a Gestalt counselor. Areas of interest include the relationship between psychology and literature, Jungian interpretation of literary works (and psychological hermeneutics in general), fantasy and the fantastic, folklore, as well as English teaching methodology. She is the author of the following books: The Dark Side of Otherness (2019), The Jungian Hermeneutic Method (2020), Day/Night (2021), Dusk/Dawn (2021) and Tolkienian Essays (2022). She is the editor of Reimagining the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien (2022).

The Authors

Cristina Benicchi, PhD, is an Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of International Studies in Rome - UNINT. Her research activity is focused on Translation Studies, Literary Translation, Anglophone Post-colonial Literatures – with particular attention to the complex linguistic dynamics in the formation and transformation of identities in processes of dislocation and re-location – and Comparative Literature, as evidenced by her publications, including several scholarly articles and her monograph La letteratura caraibica contemporanea (2010), dedicated to Anglophone Caribbean Literature with a substantial section focused on language investigation within Post-Colonial Studies. Additionally, she has a keen interest in the Didactics of the English language and English Literature, shaped by years of experience teaching both English Language and Literature and Comparative Literature. She is a member of the Italian Association of Anglistics (AIA) and the Italian Society of Comparative Literature (SICL).

Bilal Bouzidi is a Tunisian MA student at Ecole Normale Supérieure de Tunis, from The University of Tunis, Tunisia. He has a Bachelor in English Language, Literature and Civilization. The MA program in which he is currently enrolled is entitled 'Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Literature of the Anglophone World', with an emphasis on the tug-of-war between the verbal and the visual, the human and post-human as well as meta-modernist theory and philosophy. His chief interest in research is the trans-medial and trans-generic pollination of thematic configurations and how the visual age refracts questions of logocentric hegemony, visual culture and ethics.

Rich Hasnip, MA, is the course director of Applied theology and Performing Arts at Regents Theological College in Malvern, United Kingdom. He is an actor, director and playwright writing regularly for various U.K. based theatre companies. He read English Literature and Language at St Andrews University, Shakespeare and Theatre at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-Upon-Avon and is currently reading for a PhD in theology with Chester University. His interests include the relationship between art and theology, science fiction and fantasy.

Sezen Ismail, PhD, completed her bachelor's degree at the Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus. She completed her Master and PhD studies in comparative literature at the State University of St. Cyril and Methodius in North Macedonia. She is now an Associate Professor at the International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia, where she teaches Anglo-American literature, and supervises undergraduate and master theses in the field of literature and education. Her research interest focuses on literary theories, feminist and post-colonial criticism, and identity studies. She has also done extensive research on incorporating literature in the English language classroom. She is the author of *The Transgressive Other Female Character in the Contemporary Novel* (2020).

Laura Iseut Lafrance St-Martin, PhD, is a professor at the NAD School (Université du Québec à Chicoutimi) in the theory and practice of video game creation and holds a Ph.D. in semiotic studies. In her thesis, she developed a theoretical model of Secondary Worlds experience based on J.R.R. Tolkien's academic works. Her present research focuses mainly on worldbuilding, on the experience of players and video games as a communication tool, particularly from the perspective of ethical design. More precisely, she works on the links between game design and behavioral norms in gaming communities. She is also interested in the epistemological and ethical issues surrounding big data and artificial intelligence.

Aleksandar Tešić was born in 1961 and spent his childhood abroad, where he started pursuing writing. He later studied Law and is now working as a translator in RTS. He spent years traveling and mountain climbing around Serbia, unconsciously collecting the material for his *Kosingas* series. He is the recipient of the Stanislav Lem award for 2023 and is the author of the following books: The *Kosingas* heptalogy, the *Miloš Obilić* trilogy, *The Curse of Cain* trilogy, *Gorolom*, and *Black Moon Rising*.

Contents

Foreword

A collection of articles and essays is a great way to look at a subject from different perspectives and angles. Multiple perspectives are always an excellent approach to understanding complex objects of interest, such as fantastic literature and art. *The Literary Fantastic in the 21ˢᵗ Century* is a great example of such an approach from different perspectives. The fantastic, as a whole genre that tells and depicts the impossible – be it the not-yet-possible in science fiction or the principally impossible in fantasy, fairy tales, and supernatural horror – is characterized by an almost immeasurable diversity, ranging from slightly paranormal events and themes recounted in the works of magic realism to the most bizarre out-of-reality experiences that weird fiction like David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* or the cataclysmic fantasies of H.P. Lovecraft depict. But since all these stories, pictures, and films are invented by human beings, they are still and necessarily grounded in reality. People can create the most surreal dreams and visions, but those are always the result of experiences

that writers, sculptors, painters, and directors have had in real life. This is a point that is sometimes lost in the overwhelming experiences that the fantastic can offer. In order to understand and interpret the literature and art of the genre, it is therefore necessary not to lose sight of, or to explain, the reality and the real intentions behind the fantastic works.

This is the common denominator of the articles and essays collected in this volume. Whether it is the depiction of moral ambiguity through surreal means, the discussion of real-world politics in a more than human setting, the reclaiming of the possible through the impossible, the potential power of magic in an alienated life or even world, the ability of video games to create secondary worlds, or a renowned author of fantastic literature's take on his own work – all these approaches provide valuable insights into the power of the fantastic to explain and understand reality.

Christina Benicchi's chapter examines the famous novel "Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norell" by Susanna Clarke. Benicchi explores the complex portrayal of good and evil, particularly the moral ambiguity embodied in the protagonists and their actions. This links "Rethinking Good and Evil" to reality and highlights the role of fantastic art and literature in reflecting on the circumstances of human existence.

Bilal Bouzidi, in his article "Fantasy and Power", finds real-world power dynamics reflected in the video game "Elden Ring", which extends these dynamics to non-anthropocentric circles of beings who tend to question the

human-imposed order, and thus to some extent, also question the meaning of human decision-making and human domination while reminding the player that the human point of view (insofar as it can be reduced to a single point) is not the only conceivable point of view. This is, of course, an observation of great importance in modern reality, the very nature of which is threatened on many levels by human lifestyles and activities.

Richard Hasnip's theme in "Piranesi's Index" is the rediscovery of the possible through the visitation of the impossible in fantasy literature, joining Arthur C. Clarke as the most prominent voice advocating that the role of fantastic art and literature should be to explore the frontier between the possible and the impossible, as embodied in his Second Law from "Profiles of the Future". This is a role not commonly ascribed to fantasy, and it serves as a reminder of the importance of the re-enchantment of reality, which has been in constant demand since the advent of the industrial revolution and a certain necessary restraint on the part of the sciences regarding metaphysics in order not to lose sight of humanism. Hasnip's article also deals with Susanna Clarke's "Strange & Norell" but uses it as more of a starting point for further reflections and discussion of the works of C.S. Lewis and Samuel Coleridge, showing that they all explore the boundaries of reality and the possible meanings of things that might be found on the other side of that boundary.

Sezen Ismail's thoughts on magic realism in "Magic Realism and Emotional Depth in Ken Liu's Short Story" is perhaps the most realism-oriented article in this collection,

but it still argues for the importance of the fantastic for real life, albeit starting from the rational side of real life and some of its key points such as alienation, emotionality, immigration, and family values. It then turns to the irrational side when Ismail points out that Liu lets his protagonist find his roots, and therefore security and peace, in an ancient and definitely non-Western cultural object (the art of origami). The folded pieces of paper take on a life of their own, illuminating the power of magic to (re)discover deeper truths that apply equally to the real and the fantastic. The intertwining of magic and emotion highlights another aspect of the role, the fantastic can play in real life and reality, adding a further component to reflections on the relationship between reality and the fantastic.

Laura Iseut Lafrance St-Martin's take on computer games in "Living in a Fantasy World", in contrast to Bouzidi's article on a video game, emphasizes the role of the gamer in general and his or her activities in particular. In the case of both articles on computer games, we have a complementary approach to the subject and thus more explanatory thoughts about a media phenomenon that has gained massive importance for media socialization and everyday life in the last fifty years since the advent of the first computer games. St-Martins argues that the adaptive role of video games results in a secondary world which in this case due to the active role, the players take on, not only the mind but all the senses can really enter, to paraphrase Tolkien in "On Fairy Stories". Experiences made in the secondary world thus acquire significance for the reality of the players, which extends into their social life and then possibly even into politics, or at least into attitudes to

political issues, which again emphasizes the importance that the fantastic can acquire for the non-fantastic.

Aleksandr Tesic's article is a very special and valuable case because it serves as an explanation of an artist's work in his own voice – which may not be the only reliable source in the interpretation of literature and art but nonetheless is a source that carries great weight. From the point of view of the critic of fantastic literature, however, it is above all the Serbian or, to a lesser extent, Slavic perspective on the fantastic that is noteworthy, pointing to other than Western traditions and linking them to the main broader themes of fantastic literature: escapism, on the one hand, and the exploration of universal themes of human existence, on the other. Since, in my opinion, the Anglo-American voice is in some ways too loud, and since the traditions and, of course, the mythic background of non-Western culture, have not received as much consideration, attention and explanation as they deserve, Tesic's view of the artist is particularly valuable. Valuable, I think, because the fantastic views of all cultures are views of their specific realities, and thus of the 'real' reality of humanity as a whole, as opposed to a 'limited' reality from only one cultural point of view.

With this book, you hold quite a diverse collection of papers, viewpoints, and thoughts on the fantastic. All of them are insightful in their own right, and all of them contribute to the analysis of fantastic narratives and their specific themes. What unites them is a reflection on the relationship between the fantastic and reality, showing how the invented is dependent on reality, but also how

reality is influenced by fantastic points of view, or at least could be, if one takes fantastic literature and art and their statements seriously and to heart.

Fantastic literature and art aren't fantastic, are they? At least not in the sense that the Oxford English Dictionary defines "fantastic" as "existing only in the imagination; arising only from the imagination; fabulous, imaginary, *unreal*". Or in the sense that the Cambridge Dictionary treats the adjective "fantastic" as "unbelievable and like a fantasy". The fantastic is not fantastic in the sense that everything it does and says represents reality, it simply reflects what can be found in the real world in which we all live. But it does not do this like a normal mirror, because such reflections would be no different from those in realistic literature. Rather, its mirror acts as a distorting mirror, a mirror that alters proportions, making things appear slimmer or more voluminous, a mirror that enlarges and shrinks, sometimes bringing the reflected object to the fore and sometimes relegating it to the background, according to the author's wishes and her narrative intentions. This allows the creators of fantastic literature and art to emphasize their work, or certain aspects of it, using unusual perspectives. In this way, things we encounter in reality can be depicted in a way that realistic art and literature cannot, sometimes resulting in a clarity of expression that even science can often only wish for. Accordingly, the great science fiction and fantasy writer Ursula Le Guin describes the essential element of the language of the fantastic as "precise and profound metaphors of the human condition. The fantasist [...] can speak as seriously as any sociologist – and much more directly".

The possibilities of the fantastic to explain and understand reality and the power of its arguments may even allow it to reclaim the increasingly elusive reality of modernity. And when this process of reclamation succeeds – as it sometimes does, as the contributors to this collection show – it brings the fantastic full circle back to reality, fulfilling Le Guin's promise that the fantasist speaks above all of human life "as it is lived, as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived".

Frank Weinreich

(Bochum, Germany, November 2024)

Rethinking Good and Evil: A Critical Exploration of Moral Dichotomies in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*

Cristina Benicchi

Introduction: The Transformation of the Fantastic in the 21st Century

The world of Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell is one in which magic and reality blend seamlessly, pulling readers into a richly textured, alternative Regency England where two magicians, Mr Norrell,* and Jonathan Strange, attempt to resurrect England's magical past. While the novel's surface story revolves around their rivalry, ambition, and their struggle for mastery over a forgotten art, Clarke's work delves deeper into timeless philosophical themes, particularly the dichotomy of good and evil and the Faustian price of knowledge.

At its core, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* reflects the age-old conflict between good and evil, as embodied in the

contrasting figures of Norrell and Strange. These two characters, however, do not simply represent a Manichaean dualism of absolute morality. Instead, Clarke presents a more nuanced portrayal of these ethical categories, where the line between good and evil is not only blurred but also intertwined with the pursuit of power and knowledge. This complexity evokes literary archetypes like that of the "overreacher", or individuals whose ambition to transcend the limitations of human understanding brings about their downfall – archetypes of which literature offers us a rich gallery of characters, from Dr. Faustus to Dr. Frankenstein, and even Dorian Gray, despite his peculiar manifestation of the "overreacher" trope. In *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, this figure is embodied most vividly in Jonathan Strange himself, whose unrelenting pursuit of magical mastery leads him into realms of knowledge and power beyond his control, ultimately culminating in his tragic descent into madness. Clarke's nuanced portrayal of such characters serves as a cautionary reflection on the perils of unchecked ambition, suggesting that the pursuit of enlightenment, while seductive, can open the door to forces that irrevocably alter one's fate.

The concept of good and evil has long been central to literature, often framed as binary opposites in moral, philosophical, and theological discourses. In the realm of the fantastic, these moral categories traditionally appear as starkly contrasted forces: heroes against villains, light against darkness. However, as 21st-century fantasy literature evolves, these binaries are increasingly problematized, destabilized, and intertwined in ways that reflect the complexities of contemporary thought. The fantastic

genre, far from offering escapist narratives with clear moral resolutions, now serves as a powerful lens through which to interrogate ethical ambiguity, moral relativism, and the fluidity of power in a postmodern world (Hutcheon, 1988).

Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2004) is an exemplary work that engages with the shifting moral landscapes of the fantastic, intricately blending historical realism and magical elements. Set against the backdrop of an alternative 19th-century England, the novel follows two rival magicians, the conservative and methodical Mr Norrell and the daring, impulsive Jonathan Strange. At the heart of the narrative is a nuanced exploration of the moral dichotomies of good and evil, which are not presented as fixed binaries but as categories constantly intertwined, blending into one another and ultimately defying clear moral distinctions.

This chapter seeks to explore the ways in which *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* disrupts the traditional dichotomies of good and evil, offering instead a vision of morality that is contingent, ambiguous, and often fluid. A close reading of the novel reveals that Clarke constructs a world where moral categories are in constant flux, with neither good nor evil ultimately prevailing by the narrative's end. This perpetual suspension between good and evil and the absence of a clear demarcation between the two is not only intrinsic to Clarke's narrative but also reflects a core element of the fantastic genre itself. According to Todorov's perspective (Todorov, 1975), the fantastic thrives on uncertainty and resists providing definitive answers to

the moral ambiguities it presents. It is, after all, this very uncertainty that generates the sense of unease and terror characteristic of Gothic literature, where the boundaries of reality, like those of morality, remain elusive and unresolved. By exploring the theme of ethical ambiguity through the magical practices and decisions of the two protagonists, the novel challenges established moral paradigms and reflects contemporary concerns about the instability of truth and morality in a complex, postmodern world. Furthermore, the novel's exploration of moral dichotomy draws a compelling parallel to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) – a comparison underscored not least by the title itself, which, as Genette (1997) reminds us, functions as a vital "textual threshold", where the very names of the two protagonists encapsulate an inherent dualism. In both works, the duality of human nature, personified by Jekyll and Hyde, reflects not only individual moral conflict but also Victorian society's preoccupation with outward respectability and its darker, more repressed impulses.

By situating Clarke's novel within both the literary tradition of the fantastic and contemporary ethical discourse, this chapter will also explore the implications of the novel's unresolved moral tensions, examining whether the categories of good and evil ultimately remain equal or if one asserts dominance over the other by the novel's conclusion.

Theoretical Framework and the Disruptive Power of the Fantastic

In his insightful work *Letting Stories Breathe* (2010), Arthur Frank argues that stories are not merely passive reflections of life but dynamic entities that shape and influence the way we navigate and understand the complexities of our daily existence. Frank emphasizes that stories hold the power to illuminate and address the problematic aspects of our lives. He is less interested in interpreting stories through rigid critical methodologies, as these often foreclose meaning. Instead, his focus lies on how stories function—how they exist in dialogue with one another, with individual experiences, and with the larger societies that give rise to them.

Frank's approach is deeply influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986), which posits that all communication is inherently shaped by the interaction of diverse, often opposing, voices. In this dialogic framework, stories become living conversations, continuously reshaped by the social forces and cultural tensions that surround them. Importantly, Frank insists that the dialogic nature of stories enables a constant reinterpretation of meaning, allowing for a deeper engagement with the moral and existential dilemmas they present. As Jack Zipes notes, "In some ways, we live and breathe fairy tales, or, as Arthur Frank insists in his highly stimulating book *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*, stories have lives of their own, which we then embody" (Zipes, 2012, p. XI). Zipes underscores the idea that stories are not inert; they live through us, shaping our actions,

perceptions, and beliefs. While fairy tales, as we know them today, did not exist in the earliest forms of human communication, Zipes argues that the metaphorical seeds of these stories were present, helping to form the rich oral traditions that have evolved over time.

This view of stories as active forces aligns with Frank's broader argument: stories are tools that enable us to make sense of the world and the social structures within it. They are in constant interaction with the individual and the collective, influencing how we perceive reality and negotiate our place within it. This dialogic process – stories speaking to other stories, shaped by varying perspectives – reflects the multiplicity of meanings that stories can generate, particularly in relation to ethical and moral questions.

This theoretical foundation is crucial when considering how the genre of the fantastic operates, especially in works like *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. To understand the novel's ethical complexities, it is essential to contextualize it within the broader framework of the fantastic. Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson offer two critical perspectives on how the fantastic disrupts traditional ontological and moral categories, paving the way for the ambiguity that permeates Clarke's novel.

Todorov, in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970), defines the fantastic as a space of hesitation—both for the characters within a story and for the readers—between natural and supernatural explanations of events. This hesitation, he argues, creates a sense of ontological uncertainty, where the boundaries between reality and fantasy blur: "The fantastic occupies the duration

of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous" (Todorov, 1975, p.25). This uncertainty is not merely metaphysical but also ethical, as it raises profound questions about the nature of good and evil, right and wrong, and the moral responsibilities of those who wield power.

In *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, this dynamic is central to the novel's exploration of magic, which serves as a metaphor for moral ambiguity. Magic in Clarke's world functions alternately as a force for healing, destruction, manipulation, and liberation. Just as the reader is made to hesitate between rational and supernatural explanations of the narrative's events, they are also invited to question the moral judgments imposed by the characters and, by extension, the novel itself. The very distinction between good and evil becomes unstable, reflecting the broader instability of moral categories in the world of the novel.

While Todorov's structural approach to the fantastic emphasizes ontological uncertainty, Rosemary Jackson's psychoanalytic and cultural critique in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981) offers a complementary lens for understanding the psychological and cultural dimensions of the genre. Jackson argues that fantasy serves as a space for expressing repressed desires, fears, and contradictions—elements that dominant cultural ideologies often seek to suppress. According to Jackson, fantasy is not merely a realm of imaginative freedom; it functions as a form of resistance, challenging and destabilizing fixed notions of identity, morality, and reality. She describes fantasy as an

"attempt 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" (Jackson, 1981, p. 3).

In *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, this subversive potential of the fantastic is intricately connected to the novel's moral structure. The Faerie world, for example, operates according to a logic that is entirely alien to the rational, hierarchical world of Regency England. Faerie represents a liminal space where the clear moral boundaries of the human world dissolve, compelling characters – and readers – to confront the fluidity of good and evil, power and responsibility. This breakdown of moral certainty reflects the novel's broader engagement with the instability of ethical categories, suggesting that our understanding of right and wrong is far more fragile and permeable than we might believe.

By integrating Frank's socio-narratology with the frameworks of Todorov and Jackson, we see how stories – whether fairy tales, oral traditions, or fantastic literature – are deeply intertwined with the ways we interpret and live our lives. Stories do not simply reflect reality; they actively shape it, offering spaces where we can explore and question the ethical, cultural, and existential challenges that define human experience.

The Dichotomy of Good and Evil: Norrell and Strange as Moral Antagonists

In *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, Susanna Clarke weaves a rich tapestry of contrasting worlds, where a complex apparatus of dichotomies serves as the backbone of her narrative. The novel presents a striking interplay between the cloistered realms of academia and the untamed expanse of the natural world, juxtaposing theoretical knowledge with the visceral reality of empirical experience. As readers traverse this enchanting landscape, they are drawn into the tension between rationality and madness, the orderly universe of humanity and the chaotic allure of the Faerie realm. Central to this intricate dance of oppositions are the two titular characters: Mr Norrell, who meticulously delineates his "respectable" brand of magic, and Jonathan Strange, whose wild and unpredictable sorcery defies convention. Through their conflicting ideologies and practices, Clarke deftly illustrates how these dichotomies not only shape their characters' identities but also reflect broader themes of power, control, and the very nature of magic itself, inviting readers to ponder the fluid boundaries that define both knowledge and reality.

At the heart of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* lies the moral dichotomy embodied by its two central characters: Gilbert Norrell and Jonathan Strange. Their divergent approaches to magic serve as a profound allegory for the novel's exploration of the nature of good and evil, as well as the ethical responsibilities that accompany the wielding of power. While Norrell and Strange are frequently positioned as moral opposites, a closer examination reveals that the

boundaries between them are far more fluid than they initially appear. The categories of good and evil continually intertwine and blur, challenging traditional ethical distinctions. This dynamic is reinforced by the novel's conclusion, where Strange and Norrell, despite their ideological differences, find themselves united in the pursuit of a shared goal: studying magic together to lift the curse of the Impenetrable Darkness. Their eventual collaboration underscores the idea that the opposition between good and evil is not fixed but rather an ongoing negotiation, reflecting the novel's broader meditation on the complexity of moral categories.

Mr Norrell, the more conservative of the two magicians, embodies a rigid, hierarchical understanding of magic. He seeks to institutionalize magic as a force that serves the interests of the British state, upholding the existing social and political order. His rejection of wild, chaotic forms of magic – particularly the ancient magic associated with the Faerie realm – reflects his desire to maintain control over both magic and morality. For Norrell, magic must serve a higher, rational purpose; it must be governed by rules, laws, and clear ethical boundaries. His insistence on controlling and regulating magic mirrors his commitment to a form of moral absolutism, where good and evil are clearly delineated and can be objectively defined. However, Norrell's actions reveal the limitations and contradictions of this moral absolutism. In his quest to control magic, Norrell engages in morally questionable practices, most notably his summoning of the Gentleman with the thistle-down hair to save Lady Pole from death. This act, ostensibly done for a noble purpose, results in Lady Pole's

enslavement to the Gentleman, a fate that Norrell refuses to acknowledge or confront. His inability to see the consequences of his actions, coupled with his self-deception in believing that he is acting for the greater good, highlights the dangers inherent in moral absolutism. His rigid adherence to ethical rules blinds him to the ethical complexities of his own behavior, suggesting that his pursuit of "good" is not as straightforward as it seems.

In contrast, Jonathan Strange represents a more Romantic and fluid approach to both magic and morality. Where Norrell seeks to impose strict limits on magic, Strange is driven by a desire for exploration, experimentation, and expansion. He embraces the wildness and unpredictability of magic, particularly the magic of Faerie, and is willing to cross ethical boundaries in his pursuit of knowledge and power. In this sense, Strange's approach aligns with a form of moral relativism, in which good and evil are not fixed categories but contingent upon context and the individual's subjective judgment. Yet, like Norrell, Strange's moral philosophy is fraught with contradictions. His willingness to engage in morally ambiguous actions – such as manipulating reality on the battlefield during the Napoleonic Wars – raises important ethical questions about the use of power. Strange's manipulation of time and space, while instrumental in achieving British military victories, comes at a significant cost to himself and those around him. His increasing detachment from the moral consequences of his actions, coupled with his eventual descent into madness, suggests that his rejection of moral absolutes leads him down a dangerous path. Like Norrell, Strange becomes consumed by his desire for power and

control, blurring the lines between good and evil in ways that ultimately undermine his own ethical integrity.

The relationship between Norrell and Strange thus exemplifies the novel's broader theme of moral ambiguity. While the two magicians are initially positioned as moral opposites, their actions and decisions reveal that the categories of good and evil are far more intertwined than they appear. Norrell's rigid moral absolutism leads him to commit ethically questionable acts in the name of order and control, while Strange's moral relativism allows him to justify increasingly dangerous and destructive actions in his pursuit of power. This dichotomy between Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic rebellion is mirrored in their relationship with magic itself. Mr Norrell views magic as a tool to be mastered and controlled, as illustrated in his declaration to instruct his new student Jonathan Strange: "Practicing magic is a thankless occupation, studying is a real pleasure! The greatest wizards of England will become your teachers and interlocutors. Hard study will be rewarded with knowledge, and, most importantly, you cannot see other people at all for months! the greatest wizards of England will become your teachers and interlocutors" (Clarke, 2004, p.864). He envisions magic as something grounded in human experience, divorced from its mystical origins in the fairy world, as his words reveal:

> "[...] even the greatest of the aureates overestimated the influence of elves on human magic. Take Pale! He believed that elves were absolutely necessary for him to perfect the art of magic, and wrote that the greatest treasure of his house was three or four elf servants!

However, my experience shows that almost any respectable magic is possible and doable without outside help! What have I done that cannot be done without the help of elves?" (Clarke, 2004, p. 864).

Mr Norrell wants to assert humanity's preeminent authority over the realm of magic, underscoring the complete absence of influence from the realms of elves and fairies – essentially, the natural world. Notably, the term "respectable magic" employed by Mr Norrell emphasizes the tension between duty and desire, revealing the profound chasm between moral obligation and personal inclination that reflects a broader struggle to maintain the sanctity of nature and the ideals of freedom. In contrast, Jonathan Strange is drawn to the ancient and primal aspects of magic, seeking to reconnect with the magic of John Uskglass, the Raven King. Strange's desire to engage with magic in its raw, untamed form reflects his rejection of Norrell's overly rationalized and sanitized view of the magical arts.

In this way, Clarke's novel challenges the reader to question the very possibility of distinguishing between good and evil in a world where power, knowledge, and morality are constantly shifting. Through the intricate interplay between Norrell and Strange, the narrative invites a contemplation of the limits of human understanding and the eternal tension between reason and imagination.

The Price of Knowledge: Overreaching, Duality, and Their Consequences

In Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, the intricate interplay of overreaching and duality serves as a profound exploration of moral complexity, echoing themes found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Both narratives grapple with the fluidity and interdependence of good and evil, portraying these opposing forces as intricately intertwined rather than mutually exclusive. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, Stevenson delves into the Victorian preoccupation with the dichotomy between the public, morally upright self and the repressed, darker instincts that lurk beneath. Jekyll, the respectable physician, and Hyde, the embodiment of unrestrained malevolence, are two sides of the same coin, inextricably linked in a single consciousness divided by conflicting impulses.

Similarly, in *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, the lines between good and evil are constantly blurred. Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell cannot be neatly categorized as wholly virtuous or malevolent; both characters exhibit traits of each as they navigate the morally ambiguous terrain of their magical endeavors. Norrell, despite his conservative caution, engages in acts of moral compromise driven by a desire to control magic. Conversely, Strange, characterized by ambition and bravery, often exhibits reckless behavior in his pursuit of power. The Gentleman, a pivotal figure within the narrative, epitomizes this duality as well. While his actions may seem malevolent, they are frequently tempered by moments of unexpected benevolence, complicating efforts to classify him entirely

as evil. This fluidity of character mirrors Stevenson's portrayal of Jekyll and Hyde, where good and evil are dynamic forces existing in a complex relationship.

What distinguishes *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is its refusal to provide a definitive resolution to this moral tension. Stevenson concludes with Jekyll's destruction and the triumph of Hyde, symbolizing the collapse of the moral order and the ascendancy of evil. In contrast, Clarke's narrative resists such a conclusive outcome, leaving the conflict between good and evil unresolved. This suggests that these forces are not meant to be definitively reconciled but rather exist in a perpetual state of tension, each continuously reshaping and influencing the other. By presenting the reader with this sense of unresolved conflict, Clarke underscores the notion that the dichotomy between good and evil is not a fixed binary but an evolving relationship that defies simplistic categorizations.

At the heart of both narratives lies the archetype of the "overreacher," characters who ambitiously seek to transcend the boundaries of human understanding and authority, often at great personal cost. Jekyll's futile attempt to segregate his dual nature exemplifies this tragic archetype, leading him into a dark abyss as he becomes consumed by the malevolence he sought to control. Likewise, Norrell and Strange are propelled by an insatiable thirst for arcane knowledge, pushing them beyond ethical limits and triggering consequences that disturb the delicate equilibrium between virtue and vice. Their relentless pursuit of magic unveils the inherent dangers of unchecked

ambition and the moral pitfalls of overreaching. Central to both narratives is the recognition that the quest for power and knowledge exacts a heavy toll. Norrell's self-serving hoarding of magical secrets, disguised as a protective instinct, reveals an underlying fear of losing dominion, while Strange's obsession with magical possibilities drives him to perilous extremes. Together, they illustrate the profound complexities of ambition, ethics, and the human condition, revealing that the struggle between good and evil is not a definitive clash but an ongoing negotiation fraught with ambiguity.

Ultimately, both *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* offer profound meditations on the nature of duality, the moral complexities of human existence, and the dangers of overreaching in the pursuit of knowledge. While Stevenson presents a more straightforward moral allegory, with Jekyll's collapse representing the dangers of unchecked ambition, Clarke complicates this narrative by refusing to offer a clear resolution to the tension between good and evil. In *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, the forces of good and evil are not static but constantly shifting, reflecting the fluid and evolving nature of human morality. Through its exploration of duality, the novel raises essential questions about the nature of power, the ethical limits of knowledge, and the moral compromises individuals must navigate in their pursuit of both.

Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell stands as a masterful testament to the complexities of ambition and the intricate dance between knowledge and morality. Clarke's rich tapestry weaves together the pursuit of magic and the duality

inherent in its wielders, illuminating the often perilous consequences of their quests. The characters of Strange and Norrell, driven by their desires to control and expand the boundaries of magic, reveal the inherent dangers of overreaching and the ethical dilemmas that accompany their aspirations. As they traverse the landscape of their ambitions, the novel challenges readers to reflect on the delicate balance between enlightenment and destruction, suggesting that the price of knowledge is not merely measured in personal loss but in the profound implications it holds for the world at large. Ultimately, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* invites a reconsideration of the moral landscape, leaving us with the haunting reminder that the quest for understanding is fraught with both promise and peril, and that the true mastery of knowledge lies in recognizing its limitations.

The Moral Ambiguity of Power: The Faerie Realm and the Fluidity of Morality

In the intricate tapestry of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, the magical realm of Faerie emerges as a crucial narrative space that epitomizes the novel's profound exploration of moral ambiguity and the complexities of power. As a liminal domain suspended between the human world and the supernatural, Faerie defies the rigid moral and ontological boundaries that structure human society. It exists as a paradoxical realm where beauty intertwines with terror, life merges with death, and the distinctions between good and evil dissolve into a nebulous haze.

Central to this exploration is the enigmatic figure of the Gentleman with the thistle-down hair, who embodies the very essence of ethical ambiguity. Neither wholly benevolent nor irredeemably malevolent, his actions oscillate between acts of apparent kindness – such as when he saves Lady Pole from death – and devastating consequences that wreak havoc and suffering. The motivations behind the Gentleman's unpredictable behavior remain inscrutable; he operates according to a moral logic that is fundamentally alien to human characters, rendering him a figure of immense power and disquieting moral indifference. This capacity to traverse the boundaries between life and death, coupled with his manipulation of time and reality, positions him outside the ethical frameworks that govern human action, challenging our understanding of morality itself.

Lady Pole's harrowing experience in Faerie serves as a poignant allegory for the novel's exploration of moral ambiguity and the limitations of human agency. While her salvation comes through Mr Norrell's magical intervention, it exacts a heavy toll: her existence becomes a liminal state between life and death, rendering her suffering inarticulate and fracturing her experience. Her partial enslavement to the Gentleman encapsulates the broader themes of power and control within the narrative, illustrating how individuals can be ensnared by forces that exceed their comprehension and autonomy.

This complexity is further compounded by Stephen Black's relationship with the Gentleman, which intricately weaves ethical dilemmas into the fabric of Faerie. As

a Black servant in Regency England, Stephen occupies a marginal position within the social hierarchy, yet the Gentleman offers him a semblance of power and agency that he lacks in the human realm. However, this power proves illusory, as it comes at the cost of Stephen's autonomy, transforming him into a pawn in the Gentleman's inscrutable games. Together, Lady Pole and Stephen Black's narratives illuminate the intricate dynamics of power, choice, and the often murky boundaries of consent, highlighting how marginalized individuals navigate the morally ambiguous allure of Faerie.

The Faerie realm, with its fluid moral codes and its inhabitants who operate according to their own enigmatic logic, serves as a metaphorical critique of moral absolutism and an exploration of ethical relativism. Within this fantastical domain, fixed moral boundaries evaporate, compelling the human characters who dare to enter to confront the ethical ambiguity and ontological uncertainties it represents. By placing its characters within this liminal space, Susanna Clarke's narrative invites readers to interrogate the stability of moral categories and to ponder how power and knowledge intertwine, complicating ethical decision-making in a world where truth and reality are perpetually in flux.

Through its rich exploration of the moral complexities inherent in power and the unknowable, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* challenges us to reflect on our own ethical landscapes, urging a reconsideration of the very nature of good and evil, as well as the unpredictable consequences that arise from our quests for dominion over the unknown.

Conclusion: The Enduring Ambiguity of Good and Evil

In *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, Susanna Clarke immerses readers in a world where the boundaries between good and evil are not merely blurred but are in a constant state of flux, intertwining in ways that challenge conventional moral categorization. Through its intricate exploration of magic – as both a supernatural force and a metaphor for ethical ambiguity – the novel invites a profound questioning of the stability of moral frameworks, urging us to consider how power and knowledge complicate ethical decision-making. Clarke deftly navigates the tension between moral absolutism and ethical relativism, offering a deeply ambivalent and nuanced reflection on the human condition within a reality where truth and morality are perpetually shifting.

As the narrative unfolds, we witness how the characters grapple with their own ambitions and desires, often leading them into morally ambiguous territories. Mr Norrell and Jonathan Strange, through their complex relationship with magic and each other, exemplify the duality of human nature, where the pursuit of knowledge and power often comes at a significant cost. This exploration of the moral implications of their choices reflects the inherent tensions that characterize human existence, emphasizing that the quest for enlightenment can lead to unforeseen consequences.

By the novel's conclusion, the categories of good and evil remain unresolved, embodying the broader critique of moral certainty that permeates Clarke's narrative. This persistent ambiguity suggests that in a world rife with

complex ethical choices, maintaining clear distinctions between good and evil is not only challenging but potentially untenable. Clarke's portrayal of the faerie realm, where the rules of morality are fluid and the motivations of its inhabitants are inscrutable, underscores the idea that ethical decision-making is often clouded by the unknown. As characters like Lady Pole and Stephen Black navigate their entangled fates, readers are prompted to confront the uncomfortable reality that power and agency can be as burdensome as they are liberating.

In this light, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* resonates profoundly with the concerns of contemporary literature, where traditional moral frameworks are increasingly scrutinized in light of modern complexities. Much like Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which reveals the interdependence of good and evil within the human soul, Clarke's work portrays these moral dichotomies as two inseparable facets of existence, eternally intertwined. However, while Stevenson ultimately collapses the distinction between the two, leaving readers with a stark resolution, Clarke deliberately leaves this dichotomy open. She posits that the questions of good and evil are not meant to be definitively resolved but rather continuously negotiated within a landscape of moral uncertainty.

Through its rich and multifaceted portrayal of magic and morality, Clarke's novel serves as a powerful reflection on the fluid and contested nature of ethical life. In an age where certainty is increasingly elusive, the text invites readers to grapple with the complexities of their own moral landscapes. It challenges us to confront the

uncomfortable truth that our choices are often fraught with ambiguity and that understanding the nature of good and evil requires not only introspection but also a willingness to embrace the uncertainties of our own existence. Ultimately, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is not just a tale of magic and the supernatural; it is a profound meditation on the human experience, urging us to navigate the ever-shifting sands of morality in a world where the light of knowledge often casts long shadows.

References

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Transl. Caryl Emerson. University of Texas Press

Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. University of Texas Press.

Clarke, S. (2004). *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Greenwood Press.

Frank, A. W. (2010). *Letting Stories Breathe. A socio-narratology*. University of Chicago Press.

Genette, G. (1997). *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation.* Cambridge University Press.

Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism.* Routledge.

Jackson, R. (1981). *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Routledge.

Stevenson, Robert L. (1886). *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Longmans, Green & Co.

Todorov, T. (1975). *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. R. Howard (transl.). Cornell University Press. (Originally published in French in 1970)

Westfahl, G. (Ed.) (2005). *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works and Wonders*. Greenwood Press.

Zipes, J. (2012). *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of Fairy Tales*. Princeton University Press.

Fantasy and Power: Liminality, Domination, and Resistance in Elden Ring

Bilal Bouzidi

The twenty-first century heralds the advent of a new conceptualization of the fantastic that touches on the literary and philosophical traditions of an immanently connected rhizome. The beating heart of this omnidirectional movement is the fundamental turn humanity takes toward the digital. This flux toward intermediality may be traced back to the early twentieth century when questions of creativity, experimentation, and bold innovation were the zeitgeist of the literary and artistic imagination. Be it images superimposed atop each other through a verbal economy that favors cognitive fecundity in the tradition of Ezra Pound and his successors or images juxtaposed, edited, and reorganized as per Eisenstein's theory of montage in cinema. The problem of the image, as the new locus of power, becomes central to understanding the human experience at a time when one is bombarded with meaning-laden posters, signs, and movies, both in the private

and public sphere alike (Homer, 1998, p. 8). The visual's psychological and ideological prowess asserted its authority over the creative and the fantastic, succeeding the verbal medium in the latter half of the twentieth century, a time marked with violent colors and graphic imagery.

The video game, a ludic form that emerges from the heart of visual culture, establishes itself "in the place where Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and the information highway intersect" (Gottschalk, 1995, p. 3). Combining the force of the image with the significance of its interactive defining quality and the multiplicity of identities and potential spaces one may therein experience, the video game arguably takes the place of literature in the creation of fantastical narratives. Its popularity among consumers of media has been at an exponential rate for the past decades, without showing any signs of halting. As a means for entertainment, first and foremost, the video game is a product of a cultural and technological turn toward the virtual, comparable in influence to the proliferation of the novel during the Industrial Era, a byproduct of developments in printing technology and the rise of literacy.

The video game template and its modus operandi allow for the investigation of what Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), attempts to deconstruct, namely the insidious impact of humans on the environment and the need for a reconceptualization of justice. Accordingly, this chapter addresses the question of environmental justice in Elden Ring (2022) and the need for a new ethical paradigm that accounts for the Other-Than-Human in the context of the Anthropocene.

Taking into consideration the role the famous writer of fantastic literature, George R. R. Martin, plays in the structuring of the game's lore and story, along with Miyazaki, the marriage of the video game medium and the literary fantastic imagination is further intensified with a collision between an Eastern and a Western tradition of philosophy, mythology, and culture. Relying on the template of the fantastical world of Elden Ring, the chapter studies a post-human ontology within a post-apocalyptic space to establish a new understanding of human agency and subjectivity by decentering Man in favor of a rhizomatic and immanent ecosystem.

The Video Game: Fantasy of Liminality and In-Betweenness

Immersing oneself in the fantastical and imaginary world of a video game represents an opportunity for understanding the palimpsestuous concerns of a meta-modern reality wherein the image and the digital are tangible vectors of power that extend to include socio-psychological mechanisms of indoctrination. In "Can Video Games be Humanities Scholarship?" Coltrain and Ramsay (2019) question assumptions in academia concerning the place of contemporary ludic forms in the exploration of ethical and philosophical questions. Their definition of the video game accounts for both its technical and socio-psychological role in reflecting, developing, and creating at once both identities and systems of values:

> [W]e define video game as an interactively digital work designed to impart a particular experience or set of experiences that are dependent on the player's interactions. Many of these experiences aim to challenge or entertain the player [...] Some games may be more experimental, designed to evoke strong emotions from the players [...] Yet other games may be more functional, balancing or even eschewing emotion in favor of the more practical goals of informing, educating or training their players. (38)

Video games, accordingly, are versatile and flexible. Structurally and practically engineered on the basis of interactivity, they create a back-and-forth motion between the game's producers and the player, the game world and the player's avatar, as well as the player and their avatar.

This versatility and openness create a genuine opportunity for creating a fecund space of intertextual and interpersonal dialogism that is at the heart of scholarly research into the humanities. This is further corroborated by the heightened popularity of video games in the twenty-first century, rising in parallel with the socio-cultural turn toward digital culture. Douglas Eyman (2008) astutely remarks that the gaming industry has great financial importance, which is matched by its ability to create jobs, make trends, and substitute otherwise popular social activities, as is the example with Fortnite, World of Warcraft and League of Legends. He states that "it could be said that computer and video games are where the money is, literally" (Eyman, 2008, p. 244). This importance is matched by cultural visibility, as gaming scenarios are appearing in

television shows and other mainstream media outlets, like *The Last of Us*.[1] In the same vein, the popularity of video games at a time of rapid change and uncertainty is rooted in psychological coping mechanisms, particularly adopted by adolescents but similarly found in adults. According to Przybylski et al. (2012, p. 70), the issue of identity is central to understanding the appeal of the video game medium to players of all ages.

The popularity of video games among teenagers corresponds to an attempt at adopting masculine identities. Games allow children to experiment with various identities: to play as a male, female, wealthy or poor person and the like. According to Przybylski et al, "video games provide a gamut of idealized attributes embodied by ready-made, idealized roles (e.g., a protector of kingdoms in World of Warcraft, a caring parent in The Sims, or a tough gangster in Grand Theft Auto) in highly immersive narratives" (2012, p. 70). Thus, video game players can approximate their idealized selves via the medium of the video game, experiencing the satisfaction that arises from performing acts that would otherwise be prohibited or impossible in real life. For the purpose of this chapter, I would like to forward the aforementioned definition of the video game

---

1   The Last of Us (2013) is a video game published by Sony Computer Entertainment, receiving acclaim according to the review aggregator Metacritic. It sold 12.7 million copies during the first year. The player's avatar, Joel, escorts a teenage girl through a post-apocalyptic United States of America, foregrounding themes of despotism, anarchy and environmental degradation. In 2023, it was adapted into a TV series by HBO. In both the archetype and the adaptation, the issue of gender, sexuality and environmental justice are central.

as an interactive, flexible, and versatile ludic form that is rooted in financial and sociological grounds, extending its branches toward reflecting, developing, and reshaping its players' conception of self. Said premise aligns itself with Elden Ring's structural and practical qualities and attributes at the level of its narrative and pluralistic gameplay experience.

Elden Ring is a Japanese video game released by From-Software in 2022. By 2024, it had reached 23 million copies sold. [2] An open-world Role Playing Game (RPG), it is set in the fantastical world of The Lands Between, a space located in a liminal world outside of life and death, breaking away from the most primal of binaries. The subjectivity and undecidability of truth are some of the characteristics of FromSoftware's games since the launching of their first magnum opus, Demon Souls (2009). The same thematic configuration persists in the Dark Souls trilogy and eventually in Elden Ring, developing at an exponential rate with each new title. In Elden Ring, the realm is ruled by an androgynous authority figure called Queen Marika, whose self is divided between masculinity and femininity, humanity and inhumanity. They are a Numen, a race said to be long-lived but seldom born, that has come to the Lands Between from an indeterminate space elsewhere.

Suspended between different states of being, she is given power by an Eldrich entity dubbed the Greater Will. This power manifests in a Rune, which is called the Elden Ring.

---

2   Elden Ring was awarded game of the year and Game Developers Choice Award for 2023. It ranks second in sales, behind only Pokémon Scarlet/Violet.

The chief symbol of the Greater Will's hegemony is the Erd Tree, which is a large tree that can be seen from anywhere on the map of this immersive and expansive grotesque world. This tree is the locus of power in the world of the Lands Between. The Golden Order, which is the system of rules that Queen Marika has inscribed upon the Elden Ring, is one where death has no place and where all that pertains to the old order or is otherwise aberrant to her vision of order is eliminated. It has so far been revealed that Queen Marika has had two marriages, resulting in the emergence of two Elden Lords: Godfrey, the First Elden Lord, and Radagon, her other half. [3]

From her first marriage, she bore Omen twins, Mohg and Morgot. An Omen is an entity thought to pertain to the old Order. Consequently, the twins were hidden from the public and confined to the sewers beneath the Capital. This marriage also resulted in the birth of Godwyn, a warrior who would defend the capital against Ancient Dragons, another threat that belongs to the old Order. At a time before the fabula, he is killed. This leads to her shattering the Elden Ring before disappearing from the world. Consequently, her remaining children engage in wars among each other to claim the shard of the Ring and claim its powers for themselves.

---

3   Queen Marika is a humanoid aporetic entity secretly comprised of two incarnations, the God of the Lands Between Marika who is ostensibly female and Radagon, who is Elden Lord. Her true identity is hidden for the most part and can only be revealed by acquiring an incantation called The Law of Regression and using it before a statue of Marika which disintegrates into a statue of Radagon.

These children are the progeny of her other half, Radagon, from Rennala, The Queen of the Full Moon, a party previously antagonistic to Marika's campaign. Demi-gods themselves, Ranni, Rykard, and Radahn, are their children. Radagon then leaves Rennala and marries Marika, becoming himself an Elden Lord. They give birth to twins, Miquella and Melania Malenia, who are Empyreans: demi-gods who have the ability to achieve apotheosis and become gods. The war between these demi-gods brings The Order of the world, appropriately dubbed the Golden Order, on its head. In a post-apocalyptic distorted world, the player's avatar is called from death and banishment to cross the fog into the Lands Between, where they must explore the geography of the world and defeat Marika's children to either restore the world to its former state of order, to change it or to burn it asunder. Elden Ring's world is constructed in a manner that emphasizes questions of liminality, in-betweenness, and destruction, all of which serve to render the game-play experience as surreal and yet as familiar as possible.

Elden Ring: Strategies of Saturation, Domination, and Dissemination in the Fantastical World of Elden Ring

The underlying structure of the video game template allows for the dissemination of ideological systems of values through mechanisms that rely on power/knowledge and the distribution of life and space. The illusion of displacement generated by the fantastical elements that are the foundation of the Elden Ring gives the impression that the

Lands Between are antithetical to reality and have no direct connection to one's lived experience as a player. Notwithstanding, one's experience of an immersive open-world RPG such as Elden Ring is speculated to be approximately 130 hours for one single playthrough. Time in Elden Ring is convoluted and does not submit to the logic of causality and, by extension, linear chronology. The cycles of day and night are controlled by the player whenever they rest at a Site of Grace and flow at a different scale than in real life. Players are ultimately absorbed into the game's world for hours at a time, leading to a degree of immersion that impacts their day-to-day life at the level of socialization, emotion, and thought.

In "Beyond Immersion: Absorption, Saturation, and Overflow in the Building of Imaginary Worlds" (2017), Wolf presents a framework that clarifies the process that culminates in the addictive nature of video games. He posits that immersion itself is but the first stage in this process, categorizing it into three types: physical immersion, perceptual immersion, and conceptual immersion. Physical immersion corresponds to one's experiences at a theme park, while perceptual immersion is experienced when one watches a movie or a theater play. Conceptual immersion results from one's experience reading a narrative. Elden Ring generates all three types of immersion due to the medium of the keyboard and mouse combination or the controllers for console players. The visual pleasure that emanates from the spectacular architecture and design of the space of the Lands Between, along with the otherwise grotesquely sexualized characters, ensnares players, distorting their sense of time. Conceptual immersion

germinates in the fragmented fabula of Elden Ring, which is performed through environmental storytelling, item descriptions, and sparse and disparate dialogs with ephemeral and ultimately enigmatic characters (Mulvey, 1975, p. 806)

According to Wolf, "humans have a finite amount of attention or 'psychic energy.' Attention is a way of focusing that limited energy on what matters (2017, p. 205). To ensure absorption occurs, Wolf posits that world-building should combine familiarity and strangeness, which is reminiscent of what Coleridge refers to as 'Organic Unity' (2017, p. 205). Elden Ring provides character histories and geographies characterized by their verisimilitude, and that disrupt identification through their grotesque presentation. For example, upon reaching the Capital City of Lyndell, the player is exposed to a grand city reminiscent of what one would encounter in Rome or Paris. Nevertheless, the corpse of a giant dragon called Gransax is laid in the very middle of the capital. All the windows are barred and sealed off.

Subsequent to absorption is saturation, which is the occupying of the audience's full attention, concentration, and imagination, often with more detail, nuances, and subtilities that can be held in mind all at once" (Wolf, 2017, p. 206). Wolf's framework for understanding the process one undergoes upon immersing themselves in an RPG bears significant implications at the level of ideology when applied to Elden Ring's meaning-laden grotesque vistas. The player's cognitive resources become fully focused on the game world as they try to reconstruct meaning from

their experiences. In the Lands Between, the fragmentary nature of the lore and the disjunction of time and space, and causality by extension, generates fertile grounds for the work of the imagination, including questions on what existed before the Age of the Erd Tree, the cause of the Shattering and what prompted Melania to wage war on Radahn are subject to many theories on the part of the players who continue to develop and immanently expand on the lore of Elden Ring, tracing lines of flight toward heterogenic encounters.

When said information about and from within the world continues to accumulate after saturation, an overflow occurs, which the game designers use to "perpetuate their worlds in the minds of the audience and bring them back for the challenge of trying to contain it all, to make new connections and new conceptualizations that reveal new ways of thinking about a world" (Wolf, 2017, p. 207). Ultimately, this generates an addiction, wherein the player is always compelled to dare the Lands Between repeatedly, chasing traces of meaning and reconstructing the fantastical imaginary system of information that constitutes it.

The question of visuality is deeply intertwined with the issues that arise from a post-modern ontology, wherein ambiguity and uncertainty reign supreme. The paradigmatic shift toward visuality exchanges a system of linguistic signs for one that is inherently fluid and highly adaptable to different forms of use and abuse (Homer, 1998, p. 8). Expanding on this understanding of the nefarious potential of the image, Gottschalk (1995, p. 1) argues that the video game, "based on a logic of stimulation, and of being

associated by many theorists with the shift from a modern to a postmodern society, culture, and consciousness" may culminate in social saturation. Furthermore, it can arguably alter one's cognitive configuration by creating neurological links that extend into networks rooted in an otherwise fantastical system of rules.

Defining the video game as the marriage between television's visuality and the computer's tactile interactivity, Gottschalk advances the concept of 'Videology,' which refers to "the system of interrelated ideological assumptions which organizes video games" (1995, p. 3). According to Fiske, playing video games also produces important semiotic pleasures (1989, pp. 77-93). By allowing players to metaphorically transfer the power of control and meaning from machines and the sphere of work, society, school, and parents to the self, video games create a series of interesting inversions from normal everyday life. Conversely, they may also solidify and concretize the hegemony of dominant cultural and political norms. Chief among the aforementioned ideological assumptions inherent to the concept of 'Videology' is violence. In Elden Ring, most of the animate creatures encountered are monstrous enemies that the player must slay in order to grow in power and discover the world. It is a fundamental condition for a full-player experience wherein "by rewarding violence with more points, credits and play time, Videology also sends clear messages as to what 'pays' and 'works' in the game, and perhaps, also 'out there'" (Gottschalk, 1995, p. 7).

The prominence of violence in the structural configuration of *Elden Ri*ng touches on axiomatic questions of

justice and ethics, as otherwise helpless victims of the powers that be are revealed as such and made into enemies whose death is essential for the player's individual benefit. Whether the simulated fantastical world is from the past, the present, or the future, it is invariably simulated as an electronic slaughterhouse and a 'paranoiac environment" (Gottschalk, 1995, p. 7). This ties in with another assumption of Videology, which is that the other is violent. Indeed, the enemy characters are often depicted as male, muscular, and brown in complexion. While they are usually made silent, they are sometimes allowed the ability to speak, but mostly in a heavily accented manner that emphasizes their difference and marginality. Indeed, they are bare life forms, as per the Foucauldian conceptualization of the other.

Mohg and Morgot's features are made to resemble a grotesque conglomerate of animals with a perverse or ill temper. On the other hand, female or feminine characters are made to be succubus-like beasts or stereotypical damsels in distress, as is the case with Malenia, Blade of Miquella, or Hyetta, the Maiden of the Frenzied Flame. The characters that are ascribed with power and authority, amongst which being the base form of the player's avatar before any tempering occurs, showcase how "the imposition of this theme of the young white male hero who single-handedly defeats countless others articulates and extremizes deep-seated ideological myths of individualistic and violent conquest" (Gottschalk, 1995, p. 8). In Elden Ring, the proportion of male-to-female characters reflects an underlying patriarchal system of values that regards the feminine as a subject. Queen Marika, who is meant to be

the God of the Lands Between, is reduced to a mere statue during the final battle of the game.

Instead of Queen Marika, the player battles against their male alter-ego and husband, Radagon, who rebels against her as she is crucified within the Erd Tree for having shattered the Elden Ring. Her already aporetic self is reduced to a mere stepping stone for the player to achieve their conquest. To select the game's ending and new order that the player wishes to reify, the remains of Marika are either reconstructed or left to turn into dust. Ultimately, what could have been a matriarchal force of power and hegemony is revealed to be a passive vessel and vassal of a male force, a docile body, and a site of production in Foucauldian terms. As the player experiences the game of Elden Ring through both environmental storytelling and character plots, they are tacitly and actively exposed to these ideological assumptions that become a part of their understanding of conquest and victory.

Elden Ring: A Fantasy of Agency, Resistance, and the Machine of War

The story-narrative of Elden Ring showcases the flaws of the anthropocentric system of values that reduces life into bare life, stripping it of its inherent status upon its deviation from the homogeneity of the dominant culture. Such a structure is both actively and passively manifested and questioned in the fantastical, and yet fundamentally reflexive, world of Elden Ring. The Golden Order's hegemony saturates the world of the Lands Between. However,

the interactivity of the video game allows for movement within and throughout parallel structures of power. In "The Rhetoric of Video Games" (2008, p. 120), Ian Bogost introduces the concept of play as one that enables players to go beyond binary structures of the human and the non-human through the creation of possibility worlds where the user can assume whichever identity they would prefer, while also achieving a super-natural status that takes them to the realm of the Other-Than-Human.

Bogost explains the concept of play accordingly:

> [I]nstead of understanding play as a child's activity, or as the means to consume games, or even as the shifting centers of meaning in poststructuralist thought, I suggest [...] a useful abstract definition of the term: 'play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. (2008, p. 120)

Indeed, this is manifested in the character creation screen in the pre-game world, where one can choose their race, their abilities, their class, and their pseudonym. Already beyond the constraints of biology, the player's avatar is outside of time and history. This begs the question of subjectivity and agency in generating a plurality of identities internal and external to the fantastical world of the game. Another paramount quality of the video game template is its self-involving interactive nature, which is best highlighted through how there is focus on a high degree "of first-person discourse that is found in talk about our interactions with them" (Robsen and Meskin, 2016, p. 167). The interactivity of the video game at the level of character

creation, as well as gameplay, allows for the emergence of several egos simultaneously.

The character-creation segment is a template for the heterogenesis of identities that exist in tandem with an equally fluid player ego. Furthermore, according to Stein, FromSoftware supplants the transcendental and universal with a "multiplicity of actually existing subjectivities irreducible to a singular image of thought or mode of being" (Stein, 2023, p. 4). This movement away from the arborescent binary and hierarchical model of good hero and evil villain is achieved through what Stein refers to as Passages of Plurality: "Its Golden Order, the current rule of the Gameworld, is confronted not with a dialectical opposite but with a plurality of alternatives" (Stein, 2023, p. 3). This is manifested through different game mechanics that emphasize individualism, creativity, and independence in the creation of possible identities and experiences. According to the Deleuzian understanding of the interface of ideas and creativity in the genesis of the new, "A concept is a heterogenesis [...] The concept is in a state of survey (survol) in relation to its components endlessly traversing them according to an order without distance." (Deleuze, 1991, p. 20) The avatar-self is made to be the product of the survey and the originator of the survey at once as the player encounters different technical and thematic elements of the world of Elden Ring.

The encounter between the player and the game is a self-perpetuating moment of heterogenesis and becoming. Indeed, the player's stats vary depending on the class that they choose. However, as one accumulates runes,

which are the currency of the Lands Between, one may fully alter their build. Upon the defeat of Rennala, Queen of the Full Moon, players unlock another game mechanic that allows for the repeated restructuring of their avatar's specs, allowing for an immersive and personalized experience of the world. The interplay between initial classes grants players the ability to create new classes, which in turn may generate the possibility for more original and unique classes. Unlike previous FromSoftware titles, such as The Dark Souls Trilogy, Demon Souls, and Bloodborne, where two opposite endings are presented before the player, Elden Ring offers a plurality of different, and yet not necessarily antagonistic endings for the player. In Elden Ring, there are six different endings that depend on the player's choices, emphasizing their agency at once but also limiting it at the same time. In a similar vein, although multiple, the number of possible identities the player may actualize is limited and contextually bound to the Lands Between.

As the title of the chronotopic space of the game implies, it is a space of in-betweenness: the world and its inhabitants are torn between life and death, freedom and oppression, as well as finite and infinite possibilities. Consequently, it is a space akin to the campsite, as per Giorgio Agamben's theorization. In the same vein, the Lands Between as a space lends itself to the tug-of-war between the anthropocentric and the Other-than-Human. Almost all of the forces that are antagonistic to the player's avatar are anthropomorphic. Notwithstanding, they are equally anti-human. After all, the player's avatar itself is a post-human entity, represented as a grotesque body that experiences undeath

or resurrection, clearly delineating it from natural bodies. The question of agency and subjectivity in virtual ludic spaces as post-human loci is tackled in Elden Ring both in its mechanisms and its thematic configuration.

Human agency, as opposed to non-human passivity, is consistent with the environmentalist argument for the redistribution of power and agency for the benefit of the Other-than-Human. The collapse of the Golden Order ushers in the emergence of new powers in conflict with its supposed supremacy and structural hegemony. Nevertheless, demi-gods and grotesque bodies alike remain in a stale-mate as none of them is capable of defeating the other. Indeed, in certain instances, it is the very environment that prevails. According to Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013), the history of anthropocentrism can be traced back to early Western thought, in Protagoras' claim that 'Man is the measure of all things.' However, in the Lands Between, the scale of enemies and structures present, natural or constructed, defies this conceptualization of human centrality. The ontological and epistemological character of the game's geography and geology appeals to the variety of Other-than-Human sentient creatures that claim natural spaces as their own: the Fire Giants, chimeras, and demi-gods. Moreover, the manufactured life forms similarly defy human agency, creating their own languages, cultures, and Order.

Crimes of genocide against and in-between Other-than-Human species are not driven by humanist ideologies but by animal and inherent qualities in these creatures, chief among which being the survival of the lands themselves.

Knowledge is not found in the self but in esoteric experiences with cosmic entities that represent aspects of the World's configuration: the God of Rot, the Greater Will, The Dark Moon, or the Formless Mother. Indeed, there are various Eldrich gods that have the ability to create new divinities and ordering logics for the world. Therefore, the Lands Between lends itself to the post-human set of principles, which deny agency and centrality to Man in favor of an immanent conceptualization of the rhizomatic relationships that govern the world. Indeed, this opens the door for discussions of an anti-human form of environmental justice that allocates agency to the Other-than-Human. One particular space in the game, Caelid, best demonstrates the Lands Between's posthuman qualities.

The space of Caelid in the South-West of the Lands Between bears traces of the conflict between the demi-gods, greatly altering its chronotopic configuration. It greatly illustrates what Agamben refers to when elaborating on Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault's work on the campsite as a site for biopolitical domination. It is also the space where bare life dwells, with the player performing the role of the 'homo sacer.' The Erd Tree is prominent in the skyline of Caelid, a stark reminder of the withering Golden Order. In an interview with *The Edge Magazine* (2022), the game's director, Miyazaki, states that:

> The tree is something that burns an image into your mind, but it also stands out as something that represents the rules and an order of the world [...] The tree is something that's alien, something that's alive [...] something that will eventually wither and die.

The tree is comparable to the Foucauldian panopticon as it towers above the Lands Between in an unnatural stature that can be seen from all parts of the world's map.

The Erd Tree houses the full authority of the Golden Order and the physical body of Queen Marika/Radagon. It is into a space where souls go after death to feed its powers. It is also where undeath occurs, as the body of one of Marika's slayed children spreads its miasmic influence onto its roots. Indeed, Death Root metastases through the Erd Tree, accelerating its demise and changing the ecosystem. Controlling who is born and how they are born is a cornerstone of the world. The Outer-Gods wish to hijack it to solidify their hegemony over the Lands Between and its inhabitants. Indeed, a testament to Agamben's biopolitics, it reduces all under its authority to bare life, that can be disposed of at any moment in time without justification.

The player, a Tarnished, is someone abandoned by the Greater Will. He is banished outside the Lands Between, and his return means his death, over and over again. The Tarnished are also bare life, that cannot be sacrificed to the Erd Tree. While the player is a Homo Sacer, they are also a part of the collective of bare lives that have assumed a resilient and grotesque form that is capable of resisting the hegemony of The Greater Will. This inclusion of exclusion allows for the possibility of rebelling against the dominant order and enacting justice for bare life so that it may rearrange the very order of the world despite the dictum of the anthropomorphic Queen. Thus, the player belongs to a space of bare life forms that are sacred and cursed at once, which is the necessary condition for

change and the driving force for new paradigmatic shifts in the conceptualization of justice.

The space of Caelid is a colonial locus that recalls the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the aftermath of the nuclear bombing at the end of WWII. The multitude of grotesque bodies that inhabit it is a testament to what Christiansen refers to as thanatopolitics (Christiansen, 2014). According to Kathy Hermann in *The Environmental Horror of Elden Ring Crises*, (2023) the space of Caelid is disruptive and uncanny, even within the Lands Between, which are defined by their disjunction from multiple realities. She comments that "the digital horror of post-human worlds has been modeled in various video games [...] Elden Ring seems as though it offers a stunning walk through a post-apocalyptic park__ until you get to Caelid. When the players arrive in the region, it is obvious that something is very wrong" (Hermann, 2023, p. 6). The chronotopic configuration of space in Caelid is estranging at its core. The music turns somber and tense, announcing to the player that Caelid is different from its neighboring area called Limgrave.

The life forms that inhabit the space of Caelid match its esthetic and thematic configuration, being constituted of generally grotesque and unnatural chimeric bodies in the aftermath of the conflict that takes place between the gods. Malenia, Blade of Miquella, and General Radahn, The Star-Scourge, dueled in Caelid. Malenia releases her Scarlet Rot in the area, turning Caelid into a hellish landscape of monstrosities and Radahn into a battle-maddened specter of his old, otherwise proud and glorious, self. No regular vegetation grows in Caelid. The animals

which had previously inhabited the space of Caelid were forced to adapt to the new environment. Assuming beastly forms, the dogs grow in size beyond normal capacity, and the birds morph into carnivorous gigantic monsters. Their survival becomes conditioned by their acquisition of the means to become hostile killing machines to all intruders.

The estranging and grotesque cartography and ecosystem of Caelid ties in with the concept of thanatopolitics, "a response and a resistance to biopolitical power and to the western conception of rational sovereignty with which biopolitics is allied" (Christiansen, 2014, p. 195) Caelid is a campsite that houses those Homo Sacers or those who are in a state of exception. The presence of the denizens of Caelid is toxic, as they carry the sprouts of Malenia's rot. Consequently, none of the demi-gods lend them a hand. The player must defeat what remains of General Radahn to advance in the plot of the game. Indeed, General Radahn is stripped of his agency and sense of self before the scarlet rot, despite the fact that his lore indicates that he displayed human qualities of compassion and kindness despite his supra-human status.

Ultimately, the destruction of the land and its ensuing transformation into a marginalized liminal space for bare life, where Order is suspended ironically is what renders it a space for justice. These new forms of life, endowed with sentience and agency are born out of rot and plot to destroy the Golden Order and replace it with a new one. In submitting to the game's plot, the player colludes with these cyborgs without gender or face in achieving what

Harraway perceives to be the ascension of Malenia into a Goddess of Rot, a new entity that emerges from the very environment to defend it and to champion its will.

Within the logic of resistance and thanatopolitics, the grotesque inhabitants of Caelid are not a manifestation of "nature healing itself" but a new form of life that rejects this anthropocentric ethical stance in favor of an immanent non-linear evolution toward survival. Thus, the liminal campsite-like space of Caelid is a space for rebellion and decentering anthropocentric hegemony for environmental justice to the Other-than-Human. Invariably, this extends to include the totality of the Lands Between as the story progresses, turning it into dialogical and immersive fantasy, akin to the Deleuzian 'Machine of War', which can only serve as the struggle for resistance.

Within Caelid, a rhizomatic structure of rot emerges, not as an antithesis to life, but as the engine that powers it. Nature does not heal, but it transforms into many different forms, and Man follows its lead as merely a part of it. Justice, as would be given to Caelid by the inevitable slaying of Malenia and Radahn, is an anthropocentric form of justice. The justice that the land of Caelid proposes is one where the distorted and grotesque bodies of its denizens are no longer perceived as monstrous but as a forward step toward self-actualization and resistance in an ecosystem of equally damned and equally sentient life. The nature of the world, as presented in Elden Ring, is structurally and thematically omnidirectional, tracing lines of flight in their heterogenesis.

Conclusion

The fantastical world-building and story-telling of Elden Ring lends itself to a discussion that aims at recognizing the place of otherwise marginalized and silenced life forms, otherwise perceived as Lesser-Than-Human. Indeed, the medium of the video game itself fuses the power, authority, and flexibility of the image with the interactivity of the computer (Coltrain & Ramsay, 2019). Fueled by the business interests of producers and the general cultural trends, the video game as a ludic form shapes and is shaped by society and by individual players. The fantastical narrative of Elden Ring is one such narrative that oscillates between the individual and the collective, the familiar and the unfamiliar, and deconstructs binaries in favor of a highly subjective player experience (Stein, 2023). Wolf's (2017) framework of immersion, absorption, saturation, and overflow showcases how the world of Elden Ring manages to capture the player in a cycle of repetitive search for meaning.

The sheer size of the game and the self-generating lore possibilities its fragmentariness allows ensnares the player in a constant negotiation of meaning in a 'becoming' world outside of time and causality that is at the brink of collapse (Stein, 2023). The collaborative byproduct of the marriage between the virtual and the literary, Miyazaki and R. R. Martin, shows the extent to which the interactive and generative qualities of the video game enable it to take the place previously occupied by the verbal medium in literature. Tantamount to the force of visual power as theorized by Mulvey (1975), the pleasure derived from

sights/sites of liminality and fragmentation generates an aporia of return. As the player is compelled to relentlessly return to Elden Ring, they are subjected to the full force of the image and its embedded ideological components (Homer, 1998; Gottschalk, 1995). In *Elden Ring*, this manifests in a dialogical clash between the force of the anthropocentric hegemonic discourse of violence, wherein the human self is granted agency over all other life forms, dubbed as bare life.

The Other-Than-Human expands to include the feminine, the geographical, and the cultural other. The Other assumes grotesque and uncanny forms to ease the player into their elimination. Bare life within the biopolitical state is denied any rights or status. Ultimately, this underlying structure and system of values may infiltrate into the player's re-cognition of the real world by extension. Notwithstanding, the very concept of play allows for dialogism to emerge from within this ostensibly monological discourse (Bogost, 2009). Ultimately, the system of values that she stands for is deconstructed time and time again with each player's playthrough. The player's avatar is comparable to the Homo Sacer whose life cannot be sacrificed to the Erd Tree, which is tantamount to the Order and the seat of power (Christiansen, 2014). In Caelid, nature does not heal. Nature is proudly disfigured and hostile. It is not a site of production but a site of resistance where the grotesque bodies of its inhabitants' revolt against the order (Hermann, 2023). Caelid, a space that is distorted by a conflict that arises from the very heart of the anthropocentric order of power. It is a campsite, where bare life is banished.

References

Agamben, G. (2004). *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bogost, I. (2008). The Rhetoric of Video Games. *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*.

Coltrain, J., & Ramsay, S. (2019). Can Video Games Be Humanities Scholarship? In M. K. Gold & L. F. Klein (Eds.), *Debates in the Digital Humanities* 2019, (pp. 36–45), University of Minnesota.

Christiansen, P. (2014). Thanatogaming: Death, videogames, and the biopolitical state. *Digital Games Research Association Conference*, 8.

Deleuze, G., Guattari., F. (1994) *What Is Philosophy*. Columbia University Press.

Eyman, D. (2008). "Computer Gaming and Technical Communication: An Ecological Framework." *Technical Communication* 55, no. 3: 242–50.

Foucault, M. (2007). "Discipline and Punish." In Duke University Press eBooks, 444–71.

Gottschalk, S. (1995). Videology: Video-Games as Postmodern Sites/ Sights of Ideological Reproduction. *Symbolic Interaction*, *18* (1), 1–18.

Homer, W. I. (1998). "Visual Culture: A New Paradigm." *American Art* 12, no. 1/ 6–9.

Hermann, K. (2023). The Environmental Horror of Elden Ring. *Unwinnable Monthly* 10, no. 3. 1-7.

Mulvey, L. (1975) Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen* 16, no. 3. 6–18.

Przybylski, A. K., Weinstein, N., Murayama, K., Lynch, M. F., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). The Ideal Self at Play: The Appeal of Video Games That Let You Be All You Can Be. *Psychological Science*, *23*(1), 69–76.

Robson, J., & Meskin, A. (2016). Video Games as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *74*(2), 165–177.

Rockwell, G. (2002). Gore Galore: Literary Theory and Computer Games. *Computers and the Humanities*, *36* (3), 345–358.

Stein, E. (2023). Tactile Thematics: Passages of Plurality in FromSoftware's Elden Ring. *Article Tactile Thematics* 2.

Wolf, M. J. P. (2017). Beyond Immersion: Absorption, Saturation, and Overflow in the Building of Imaginary Worlds. In M. Boni (Ed.), *World Building* (pp. 204–214). Amsterdam University Press.

Elden Ring Interviews. *Elden Ring Wiki*. Accessed July 20, 2024.

Dark Souls. Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki. Developed by FromSoftware. Namco Bandai Games, 2011.

Dark Souls II. Directed by Yui Tanimura. Developed by FromSoftware. Namco Bandai Games, 2014.

Dark Souls III. Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki. Developed by FromSoftware. Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2016.

Demon's Souls. Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki. Developed by FromSoftware. Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009.

Bloodborne. Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki. Developed by FromSoftware. Sony Computer Entertainment, 2015.

Elden Ring. Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki. Developed by FromSoftware. Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2022.

Piranesi's Index: Re-enchantment in the Work of Susanna Clarke –

Richard Hasnip

In the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature,* Edward James and Farah Mendelsohn summarise the major theorists of fantasy concluding that the one definition they all share is the belief that where science fiction - explores 'possible worlds,' fantasy depicts the 'impossible' (James & Mendelsohn, 2012, p.1). This chapter will argue that in Susanna Clarke's two major works of fiction, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2004) and *Piranesi* (2020), she does something quite different – introducing the impossible only to lead us to a far greater re-discovery of possibility. My argument will follow a trail of similarities and congruencies, that demonstrate striking thematic coherence in Clarke's work. My analysis will be informed by a moment in *Piranesi* where the author shows her hand revealing some of the thinkers whose work informs her own – the discovery of Piranesi's

Index. This chapter will therefore offer an interpretation of Clarke's work guided by the novels themselves, in dialogue with the thinkers identified in the index.

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell

In her first novel, Clarke introduces the reader to an England that never was. In 1806 when *Strange* begins, magic is a force long dormant in the land – a matter for academic study and eccentric academic study at that. What magic very clearly does not do, at the start of the book, is *work*. Indeed, within the very first pages, we are introduced to an entire society of magicians, who debate and argue about magic but never perform any. The reader is invited to share the curiosity of John Segundus, an aspiring magician, whose question proves to be the catalyst to the whole plot:

> Mr Segundus wished to know...why modern magicians were unable to work the magic they wrote about...he wished to know why there was no more magic done in England. (Clarke, 2005, p. 4)

In truth, Segundus' query is never satisfactorily answered, rather it is rendered moot by the sudden return of magic, initially via the successful conjurations of Mr Norrell and then by Jonathan Strange.

Veronica Schanoes claims that within *Strange* '...magic is equated with research and scholarly knowledge' (Schanoes, 2012, p. 242). Mr Norrell is successful, where the York magicians are not, due to his superior library. He 'hoards' magical knowledge, selfishly seeking to limit

access to it, and it is this specialist learning that allows him to achieve supremacy (Schanoes, 2012, p. 243). Jonathan Strange engages in a different kind of scholarship. He is a practitioner-scholar who gains understanding of magical theory via practice, in contrast with Norrell's theory-centric approach. According to Schanoes, the novel describes the journey of both men towards a kind of 'rapprochement' between their contrasting, but ultimately complementary, practice and theory (2012, p. 244).

This analysis is certainly accurate, up to a point. Initially, superior scholarship leads to superior magical performance. However, to equate the two overstates the case. Despite their magnificent achievements, both titular magicians confess that their magic is nothing compared to that of the golden ('*aureate*') age of English magicians, and in particular that of John Uskglass – the Raven King. Strange sadly contrasts his and Norrell's performance 'with the magic of the *Aureates*' saying:

> They persuaded sycamore and oak woods to join with them against their enemies...made wives and servants for themselves out of flowers... (Clarke, 2005, p. 683).

Despite spending much of the novel decrying the Raven King's influence, even Norrell eventually concedes the superiority of Uskglass's magic, confessing:

> Do you really believe that I have never felt the same... *longing* you feel? ...I tell you there were times when I was young when I would have done anything, endured anything, to find him and throw myself at his feet. (Clarke, 2005, p. 536. [original emphasis])

Crucially, the Aureate magicians performed their feats, not through book learning alone, nor through practical experiment, but with the sympathetic aid of nature, and with servants from Faerie (Clarke, 2005, p. 73). This is an element of magic that quite exceeds any simple equation with scholarship. Fairies are many things within the world of *Strange,* but what they definitely are not, is scholars.

Magic then, appears in the novel in various guises. First, it is a thing of the past, studied but not performed. Then (and this phase comprises the bulk of the novel), it is performed by those with sufficient learning, though even these are nostalgic for the magic of the past. Finally, magic returns to England, and when it does, it is everywhere, and the identification of magic with scholarship no longer holds at all. In this last phase, nature itself seems replete with magic. Thus, untrained girls perform a charm on their younger brothers – a charm taught by the very stones themselves (Clarke, 2005, pp. 890-891). At this final stage, magic is linked not only to nature, but explicitly to meaning:

> *The brown fields were partly flooded; they were strung with chains of chill, grey pools. The pattern of the pools had meaning. The pools had been written on to the fields by the rain...Everything had meaning.* (Clarke, 2005, p. 646. [original emphasis])

This vision of the world as meaning-laden is one to which we will return, for it is central to my argument regarding the significance of Clarke's work. However, before we turn our attention to *Piranesi*, I want to justify my project

of linking the two works by discussing a feature of magic within *Strange* that directly connects with the latter novel.

During the course of his experiments, Jonathan Strange deploys a method of magical travel that utilizes 'the King's Road', describing it in exalted terms:

I wish I could give you an idea of its grandeur!... Of the stone halls that lead off in every direction!... There seemed no end to them. There were canals of still water in stone embankments. The water appeared black in the gloomy light. I saw staircases that rose up so high, I could not see the top of them, and others that descended into utter blackness. (Clarke, 2005, p. 505)

That the King's Road in *Strange* sounds so remarkably like the setting of *Piranesi* might be considered mere coincidence, were it not for one reference that seems to link the novels explicitly. When Jonathan Strange commissions engravings for his book on magic, he employs artists to depict the King's Road. On critiquing these engravings, Strange quibbles that they too much resemble the work of 'Palladio' or 'Piranesi' (Clarke, 2005, p. 698).[1]

---

1   That the reference comes in the form of a criticism should not trouble us unduly. *The Halls of Piranesi* are not described as resembling the work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), rather the eponymous hero of *Piranesi* is given his name, as a joke, by a man who does not appreciate the halls, because it is 'a name to do with labyrinths.' (P, 218)

Piranesi

Where *Strange* begins in a world in which magic has vanished and ends in one where magic is everywhere and nature brims with meaning, *Piranesi* begins with the eponymous hero already living in a meaningful world, where nature prophecies to those who listen (Clarke, 2020*,* pp. 42-43). What Piranesi has forgotten, is how he came to be there.[2]

The reader experiences the enchanted nature of Piranesi's world through his journal entries, initially encountering a dislocating sense of strangeness via both their content and style. For example, the first entry we read, begins like this:

> When the Moon rose in the Third Northern Hall I went to the Ninth Vestibule to witness the joining of three Tides. (Clarke 2020, p. 3).

Not only is the topography unfamiliar to us (Where is the Ninth Vestibule? What are the three Tides?), but Piranesi's prose is confusingly eccentric. It is typified by his capitalisation of common nouns like the 'Moon' or 'Tides' as though they were proper nouns. Looking through the eyes of Piranesi, we thus experience things normally regarded as insensible, treated as though they were Persons, with their own identities and natures.

---

2   The true name and identity of the central character is a theme of the book. For clarity, I will refer to the hero as Piranesi, until I come directly to discuss this question of identity.

This sense of rich particularity is especially pronounced in the statement articulating his personal credo with which he ends this entry: 'The Beauty of the House is immeasurable, its Kindness infinite' (Clarke, 2020, p. 5). That Piranesi experiences the House's Beauty and Kindness separately and distinctly is significant. It is the kind of attention we pay to things that we love. Conversely, one of the first signs that the book's antagonist, 'The Other,' is morally dubious, is his inability to see variety in the world of the Halls. As Piranesi puts it, 'The Other' believes that:

> ...every Hall is exactly the same as every other Hall, except that he calls them 'rooms' and used an epithet meant to denigrate them. (Clarke, 2020, p. 48)

The Magicians

Like *Strange*, *Piranesi* tells of a pair of magicians, however, this time they are the story's antagonists.[3] It is via Piranesi's encounters with these characters that the reader learns more about the curious House of numberless Halls which forms the novel's setting.

The first of these magicians, is Val Ketterley, known as 'The Other' because when the novel begins, he is the only

---

3   Although Ketterley styles himself a scientist, it is clear that what he has studied is occult knowledge and some form of magic, his 'experiments,' are rituals to invoke spiritual forces. Magician therefore seems the correct term. It is also the term used in the two quotations that serve as epigraphs to *Piranesi*, from C.S. Lewis' Magician's Nephew and Laurence Arne-Sayles' fictious interview, in which he describes himself as '…more of a magician than anything else.'

other human that Piranesi encounters. Like Jonathan Strange's quest for the Raven King's magic, Ketterley is exploring the Halls hoping to find knowledge lost to his own world. Just as Norrell and Strange acknowledge the superior power of the 'Aureates', Ketterley believes that people once possessed extraordinary abilities. However, where in *Strange* the decline of magic is never accounted for, Ketterley declares his belief that the people '... abandoned it for the sake of something they called progress' (Clarke, 2020, p. 67).

The second magician is Laurence Arne-Sayles, (dubbed 'the Prophet' by Piranesi). Again, an initial association of Clarke's magicians with scholarship seems apt, as Arne-Sayles proudly declares himself 'the greatest scholar of my generation. Perhaps of any generation' (Clarke, 2020, p. 87). He too first came to the House in search of greater power, believing that magic, having left the quotidian world, resided in its Halls. However, he now thinks otherwise, claiming that though the House was created by 'ideas' flowing from our world, the power itself has gone (Clarke, 2020, p. 89). In this, as we will see below, there is a serious possibility that he is mistaken.

Images and the Albatross

Arne-Sayles praises Piranesi's suggestion that the statues which fill the halls 'represent the Ideas and the Knowledge' that went from our world to form the House (Clarke, 2020, p. 90). In fact, as we will see, this concept extends beyond the statues, for the House is full of symbols. What is striking about the most prominent of these 'represented

ideas,' is the source from which they are drawn - fantasy literature. Take Piranesi's favourite statue, for instance:

> It is the Statue of a Faun...with a head of exuberant curls. He smiles slightly and presses his forefinger to his lips...[Piranesi] dreamt of him once; he was standing in a snowy forest and speaking to a female child. (Clarke, 2020, pp. 15-16)

Piranesi does not understand who the statue represents, but any reader of fantasy will recognise Mister Tumnus from C.S. Lewis' *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, another story about a secondary world, where deep magic is poised to return (Lewis, 1950). If we accept Piranesi's view of the statues as accurate, it is astonishing to discover that a figure drawn from fantasy is important enough to be one of the 'Ideas' that flowed, like magic, from our world to create the House, and Tumnus is not a unique example of this.

The appearance of the albatross is an event so significant that Piranesi uses it in his journals to name the year in which it occurred. He describes the visitation like this:

> I saw a vision! In the dim Air above the grey Waves hung a white, shining cross...It was beautiful but I did not understand it. The next moment brought enlightenment of a sort: it was not a cross at all but something vast and white, which glided rapidly towards me on the Wind. What could it be? It must be a bird...It swept on, coming directly towards me. I spread my arms in answer to its spread wings, as if I were going to embrace it. I spoke out loud. *Welcome! Welcome! Welcome!* (Clarke, 2020, p. 29)

It is hard to read of albatrosses in literature and not think of another, older fantasy, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Coleridge, 1798). Certainly, in this case we can be confident that the allusion is intentional, as close to the writing of her novel, and in strikingly similar terms to Piranesi's 'vision' of the albatross, Clarke provided an endorsement for Malcolm Guite's study of Coleridge - *Mariner*, hailing it as: 'a visionary interpretation of a visionary poem' (Guite, 2017).[4] Again, it is worth noting that in this House in which lost magical knowledge is sought, Clarke gives enormous prominence to two symbols drawn from works of fantasy. We must shortly return to the question of why this may be.

First though, the intertextual link with *The Ancient Mariner* provides helpful insight into another key theme in Clarke's work, that of altered or changed consciousness. As Guite has pointed out, Coleridge prepares the reader for the appearance of the albatross in his poem, by comparing the noises made by the ice on the sea to those half-heard by someone in a swoon (2017, p. 147). By invoking a 'transition from one form of consciousness to another' before the introduction of the albatross, Guite suggests that the poet helps the reader experience the image at two levels, 'the living creature perceived by the waking mind, and the deeper symbol of the dream' (2017, p. 147).

On the other side of this change of consciousness, the Mariner seems to experience the world in a way that we will recognise as characteristic of Piranesi:

---

4   As detailed in a *Church Times* interview (see bibliography) it was also via Guite that Clarke encountered the crucial influence of Owen Barfield which we will discuss below.

> At length did cross an Albatross,
> Thorough the Fog it came;
> And an it were a Christian Soul,
> We hail'd it in God's name. (Coleridge, 1798, lines 61-64)

Here, we have the same curious use of capitalisation. The Mariner grants the Fog the same elevated status as Piranesi gives the Tides and Halls. We have the same generous attribution of personhood, and a similar initial response of welcome to the bird's appearance.

The notion that altered consciousness can provoke deeper perception is a repeated motif in Clarke's novels. Thus, Jonathan Strange deliberately triggers a change in his own consciousness, gaining access to stronger magic, by inducing madness (Clarke, 2005, p. 764). The Mariner is no stranger to madness himself. His perception twists first via this dream-like imagery, then by an act of transgression. His unprovoked cruelty in slaying the albatross, tips him into a sanity-threatening state of life-in-death. Conversely, his recovery begins when he is able to look at a form of life he has previously loathed, in a new light. At first, to the Mariner, the water snakes that surround his ship are merely 'a million...slimy things' (Coleridge, 1798, line 230), vile and undifferentiated as Ketterley's view of the Halls. When his perception changes, he sees beauty and variety, and on being moved by this, he finally loves and blesses them (Clarke, 2020, pp. 271-272). It is at this moment, that the albatross, which has become a symbol of guilt and lost innocence, falls from his neck (Coleridge, 1798, lines 280-283). The Mariner's salvation begins with a final change in consciousness.

So, *Piranesi* clearly stands at a point of intersection between several works of fantasy – most obviously with its own predecessor, *Strange*. Both novels involve a pair of magicians, searching through seemingly endless halls, for a magic that has been lost and is mysteriously connected to meaning. *Piranesi* makes the further connection between this lost meaning and the genre of fantasy. To make sense of this, we must turn to the section of *Piranesi* that gives this chapter its name – the discovery of Piranesi's index.

Piranesi's Index

Although he has forgotten, Piranesi has not always lived in the House, nor has he always been Piranesi. Once, he was Matthew Rose Sorenson, transported to the House from our world by Ketterley. Piranesi first begins to realise that something is amiss via his analysis of his journal, and specifically references in his index to journal numbers and names for which he has no memory of writing, and no frame of reference. Two of these entries are particularly striking. They appear in the index under the heading of 'the Outsider' and they are names familiar to readers of philosophy of a slightly esoteric bent: Colin Wilson and Owen Barfield. That Clarke has chosen to identify these specific thinkers, suggests that they are important for understanding the book itself. Let us take them one at a time.

Colin Wilson

The Outsider (Wilson, 2001) is chiefly a literary examination of a figure that Wilson saw as emblematic of Western mid-twentieth century life – the eponymous Outsider. As the title suggests, the Outsider, although a product of an educated but individualised society, is alienated from that society, seeing 'too much and too deeply' to accept bourgeois life as adequately comprising true or total reality (Wilson, 2001, p. 15). As Wilson puts it:

> The Outsider's case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnameable impulses, yet they keep up a pretence, to themselves, to others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make civilised and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational. (2001, p. 13)

The Outsider's refusal to bow to the compromises of society, is presented by Wilson as being fundamentally correct. Bourgeois life is a shallow pretence that threatens to swamp the individual. However, despite their accurate diagnosis of the problem, Wilson sees the Outsider as typically struggling to find a solution to their unhappiness. The various forms that their attempted resolutions take, are delineated by Wilson into distinct types, the most relevant of these to us being the Criminal and the Visionary.

The Criminal Outsider rejects morality and law as mere social constructs that betray the true vitality of human potential, believing it: 'better to be a great sinner than a bourgeois' (Wilson, 2001, p. 139). These Outsiders recognise

that the 'way' of the Outsider 'lies in extremes' (Wilson, 2001, p. 202) and that neither the law nor common morality may be allowed to stand in the path of human freedom. In *Piranesi*, we see this type embodied by the two magicians, Arne-Sayles typifying the viewpoint with characteristic irony:

> I've never been very interested in what you might call morality, but I drew the line at bringing about the collapse of civilisation. Perhaps that was wrong. I don't know. I do have a rather sentimental streak. (Clarke, 2020, p. 88)

Piranesi's magicians desire knowledge and power, thinking nothing of using others in an instrumentalist manner. However, Wilson makes quite clear that the Criminal Outsider's way is a *cul-de-sac*. As he puts it: the criminal 'is a result of man's misunderstanding of his own potential...[a] distorted reflection of the human face' (Wilson, 1984, p. 670). Indeed, Wilson goes so far as to claim that the 'criminal man' lacks 'real, independent existence...He is a kind of shadow...' (6). *The Ancient Mariner* confirms this, the Mariner misunderstands his freedom, expressing it in an act of extremity, the motiveless slaying of the albatross. In doing so, he travels far beyond the bounds of bourgeois existence, but it is a tragic misstep, leading only to a kind of un-life, as his encounter with the figure of Life-in-Death confirms (Coleridge, 1798, lines 186-190).

So too in *Piranesi*, Arne-Sayles gleefully endorses Piranesi's appellation of 'the other' for Ketterley, scoffing:

> What an excellent name for him! The other. No matter what the situation he is only ever "the other" ...And he knows it. It eats him up...Complete charlatan, of course...All his ideas are second-hand. (Clarke, 2020, p. 87)

Arne-Sayles implies, of course, that he is the original to Ketterley's simulacrum. However, when Piranesi chooses a statue that best encapsulates Arne-Sayles' character, he selects 'a heretical pope seated on a throne' (Clarke, 2020, p. 241), a similarly shadowy image of a man whose immorality parasitically depends upon orthodoxy. As Wilson puts it, evil, although chosen by the Outsider to assert freedom '...is ultimate bondage' (Wilson, 2001, p. 189).

Finding a way that breaks free from the pressure of social conformity without surrendering to this shadowy half-life, proves no easy task either for Wilson's Outsiders, or the cast of Clarke's novels. Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell, though morally far superior to the *Piranesi* magicians, still find themselves trapped in a 'pillar of Darkness' at the novel's close (Clarke, 2005, p. 995). Even Piranesi is only an exception to this rule to a certain extent. In one sense, he is the ultimate Outsider, unaffected by bourgeois attitudes, living a life of extreme poverty and yet utterly content. His is no half-life either, rather he is: 'the Beloved Child of the House' (Clarke, 2020, p. 212) embodying Wilson's description of the successful Outsider who encounters life's fullness with a 'yes' of affirmation (Wilson, 2001, p. 188). However, even this is not true freedom. Piranesi cannot be free because he has been robbed of his choice – sent to the House against his will and ignorant of who he is.

According to Wilson, the Outsider's 'main business is to find his way back to himself' (2001, p. 147). This applies literally to Piranesi. It might also be expanded to imply that Ketterley is correct, that civilisation itself has forgotten something of vital importance. This notion of civilisation having taken a misstep, or suffered some sort of fall, is of course a very old one. What separates Wilson's thought from mere nostalgia is his claim that former knowledge can be recaptured via a change in our perception of reality, and a recognition of our own role in perceiving and shaping reality. This is the solution found by the Visionary Outsider, who discovers via their visions, and the changes of consciousness enabled by those visions, that the world is full of meaning (Lachman, 2016, pp. 38-39). This was also the solution proposed by the second name in Piranesi's Index, Owen Barfield.

Owen Barfield

Although it is tempting to regard the view of the world provided by our consciousness, as 'just the way things are,' Barfield helpfully reminds us that this is not the case. In fact, our familiar world is a 'representation' constructed by our perceiving minds and the evidence of our senses from an 'unrepresented' beyond the appearances (2011, pp. 12-13). Barfield uses the example of a rainbow to illustrate this, pointing out that the rainbow is a phenomenon created by a conjunction of light and water, with the eyes and mind of the perceiver (2011, pp. 10-11). What is obvious in the case of the rainbow is true for everything else. We participate in the reality we experience by constructing what

we see from the appearances. Our societies are thus products of 'collective representations.' Occasionally, as when people of different cultures meet, this becomes apparent via differences in perception. For instance, Ketterley and Piranesi regarding the same object – the House – perceive and experience different realities. This difference of perception stems not from a failure of eyesight, but rather from the fundamentally different types of consciousness of the two observers.

Barfield made a study of these kinds of differences in perception, tracking the evolution of consciousness across history at a societal level, identifying various distinct stages of our 'collective representations.' As we will see, each stage is of relevance to *Piranesi*. The first, is 'original participation,' associated with primitive cultures, which Barfield describes like this:

> The essence of *original* participation is that there stand behind the phenomena, *and on the other side of them from me*, a represented [often a God or Spirit] which is of the same nature as me...it is of the same nature as the perceiving self, inasmuch as it is not mechanical or accidental, but psychic and voluntary. (2011, p. 40, [original emphasis])

This is precisely Piranesi's view of his world. He experiences phenomena and sees beyond them to the infinite kindness and beauty of the House. In original participation, Barfield suggests, people have less sense of themselves as individuals, and a greater sense of continuity between themselves and their environment, hence

Piranesi's perception of himself as 'the beloved child,' defining himself in relation to the House. Piranesi's participatory engagement with his world influences his writing style too, for Barfield remind us that just as 'a noun is a name for anything,' a consciousness at this stage, experiences words ('particularly nouns') far more like things, and things more like beings (2011, p. 93).

In a *Church Times* interview, Clarke describes her attempt within *Piranesi* to evoke Barfield's idea:

> ...one of the things I was trying to do was to describe [original participation] as best as I could. That was a very deliberate effort on my part, that Piranesi should feel like he perfectly belonged in the world in which he found himself, and that the world was benevolent, and that it really cared for him, and he for it. (Church Times, 2022)

However, Piranesi would certainly not regard himself as primitive. On the contrary, his own view is that he is a scientist. His attempted applications of the scientific method imply that at some stage he has been exposed to Barfield's second stage of the evolution of consciousness – the 'withdrawal of participation.'[5] This withdrawal, as the name implies, brought a reduction in the sense of oneness with the world. As Mark Vernon puts it, although it was 'a troubling' period:

---

5   Barfield depicts this withdrawal as a lengthy and multi-faceted process, with key inflection points such as the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution continuing to influence contemporary society.

...with the withdrawal of participation came an asto-
nishing gain. The concentration of inner life that sepa-
ration from outer life brought came hand in hand with
an intensification of the sense of being an individual,
and with that came all manner of possibilities. (Ver-
non, 2019, p. 4)

One of those possibilities is that humans who have begun
to view themselves as separate from their environment
can start to see how things work, and act instrumentally
to alter and improve that environment, optimising it for
human living. This is the viewpoint that is operant behind
science, philosophy and indeed some (though perhaps
not the deepest) forms of magic. However, this withdraw-
al brings with it an additional dark side. Piranesi reflects
on this:

I realised that the search for the Knowledge has en-
couraged us to think of the House as if it were a ridd-
le to be unravelled...and that if ever we discover the
Knowledge, then it will be as if the Value has been
wrested from the House and all that remains will be
mere scenery. (Clarke, 2020, p. 60)

With a withdrawal of participation, the House loses its
personhood and inherent value. This is tragically ironic
for Ketterley. Like many of Clarke's magicians and Wilson's
Outsiders, his withdrawal from an already withdrawn so-
ciety grants him insight, allowing him to feel with Nor-
rell that '*longing*' for something missing. He shares with
Strange a scepticism towards progress and a belief in an
Aureate age. Despite Arne-Sayles' scorn, he is closer to

the truth than his former mentor. He is right to search the House as it *does* contain knowledge, it is thoroughly enchanted. He knows just enough to know where to look, but he lacks the perception to find what he seeks. While he searches for hidden power, he misses the meaning available to participation. Still mired within a withdrawn consciousness, he fails to recognise his relationship with the world as participatory and mistakes his view as 'ultimate' when it can only be a 'representation' (Barfield, 2011, p. 66). Barfield calls this error a kind of 'idolatry' (Barfield, 2011, p. 66), though it is a strange kind of idolatry that makes an idol of the quotidian, and in a house full of meaning and enchantment, insists on seeing merely a 'setting' of rooms covered in 'bird shit' (Clarke, 2020, p. 4). For all his criticism of progress, Ketterley's overvaluation of his own sophistication, renders him deaf and blind to the wonders he seeks and Piranesi's attempts to enlighten him.

What Ketterley requires, is a third stage of consciousness that integrates and synthesises the earlier phases. Barfield calls this 'final participation' (Barfield, 2011, p.155) and it comprises a return to the understanding of consciousness as participative, with the addition of self-knowledge gained from the withdrawal. This resolution, in a finally apprehended meaning, is reminiscent of Wilson's notion of the Visionary Outsider. Though this Outsider begins with a rejection of the imposed cultural order, their rebellion ultimately leads not to anarchy, but an experience of a deeper unity and meaning within the fabric of the world itself. Gary Lachman here describes Wilson's own experience of this restoration:

> … he saw the world *as it really is*, as Blake and the mystics he had been reading about had seen it. The meaning radiating out of everything around him was, to speak philosophically, an "objective datum" …Which meant that the world we usually see is somehow false, or at least a highly edited version of reality… (Lachmann, 2016, pp. 38-39)

It is a journey towards this kind of consciousness that comprises the final part of Piranesi's story.

Self-Discovery, Imagination, and Final Participation

Piranesi is ultimately found and rescued by a police officer with the name of an artist and an angel: Sarah Raphael. Raphael's name suggests another intertextual link, this time with *The Book of Tobit*. Although this connection is speculative, there are striking connections to be drawn. This apocryphal account tells of a righteous man who (like Piranesi) takes great care for the dead (1:18). Tobit is healed by the angel Raphael after suffering the curious fate of being blinded by bird droppings (3:17). Piranesi is not blinded by birds, indeed on more than one occasion they have helped him to see with supernatural clarity (Clarke, 2020, pp. 39-43), but Raphael nevertheless journeys from another world to lead him from Halls explicitly described as 'covered with bird shit' (Clarke, 2020, p. 4) and, like Tobit's angelic healer, she restores him to his family. That Raphael's name evokes both spiritual and artistic associations is significant, as the path to redemption for Piranesi

is found when he learns to connect the day-to-day world, with the world of the House, via an act of imagination with metaphysical implications. However, as following Barfield we ought to expect, first he has to pass through a period of withdrawal and dislocation.

By the end, the hero feels himself to be neither Piranesi nor Matthew Rose Sorensen and, with neither a stable identity nor a place he feels at home, it seems as though he might have been happier never to have been found (Clarke, 2020, p. 243). The key to this changing, lies in the statues. We have already received a clue to this effect. Although Raphael loves the house, she makes an early faux pas with Piranesi. When talking about the statues she refers to them as 'only a representation' of what is a reality in her world, this rankles with Piranesi who rejoins with 'I would argue that the Statue is superior to the thing itself... being perfect, eternal and not subject to decay' (Clarke, 2020, p. 222). So it is, that when he finds himself back in our world, we read:

> I thought that in this new (old) world the statues would be irrelevant. I did not imagine that they would continue to help me. But I was wrong. (Clarke, 2020, p. 241)

At first, they simply orient him, as he compares the people he has known, to the statues that best represent them, using the representations to connect his two worlds and lessen his sense of dissonance. Gradually however, he begins to see that his intuition may have been correct and that the representations provide a superior vision. Upon seeing a neglected-looking old man, with 'broken veins'

and a 'bristly white beard' Piranesi recognises him from a statue and longs to tell him: '*you are a king, noble and good! I have seen it!*' (Clarke, 2020, p. 244). The statues have the truth of it and Piranesi, embodying both Barfield's 'final participation' and Wilson's call for the 'Visionary Outsider,' finally sees our world as shot through and transfigured by the Beauty and the Kindness of the House, that now reside within him (Clarke, 2020, p. 245).

Conclusion – Fantasy and Re-Enchantment

Just as Piranesi discovers his path via representations, Barfield claims that the words of poets, in helping us experience 'appearances' as denoting 'something other' than themselves, can, via imagination, bring their readers towards experiences of transformed consciousness, as the 'idolised' world is converted back into a 'representation' (Barfield, 2011, p. 144).

I have written elsewhere of an astonishing confirmation of the powerful effects of poetic fiction. In an experience strangely congruent with Clarke's fictional creation, I emerged from a performance of *King Lear* to find that, like Piranesi, my own vision had been transformed:

> Afterwards, I could not walk past the homeless man outside the theatre without Lear's face peering at me, without hearing 'hast thou given all to thy … daughters and art thou come to this?' Every beggar was the fallen King of Britain. I looked at humanity 'in a new way.' (Hasnip, 2022)

It is in the interplay between fiction and reality that the most profound implications of Clarke's work reside and where she makes her most original contribution. For where Barfield privileges the words of poets, Clarke has highlighted the vision-transforming possibilities of fantasy, doing so within striking examples of her own art. If Barfield and others are correct, and the collective representations of modern life have hardened into idolatrous visions of the world bereft of meaning, then perhaps we require writers who transcend 'realism' to crack the surface of these idols. In *Strange* and especially in the richly intertextual setting of *Piranesi*, Clarke has persistently depicted worlds where what has been forgotten in the primary world, is remembered in the world of the fantastic.

Perhaps then, in the light of Clarke's work, we should re-evaluate the potential of the genre as displaying not the 'impossible' but rather, forgotten possibilities. For though Clarke wrote the character of Piranesi specifically to depict a state of original participation, her emphasis on fantasy reminds us that the genre is rich in depictions of this kind. This is true even of the narrow range of works we have considered in this chapter: the Aureates of *Strange*, with their allies of trees and flower brides, the Mariner, finding beauty in ocean snakes, and Lucy's meeting with Tumnus, anticipating Narnian nature's joyful relationship with humanity. These worlds might seem 'impossible' but perhaps our encounters with them could lead to our own changes of consciousness. Then, like Piranesi, the House and its Tides might dwell in our own hearts, and the fantastic serve to re-enchant our world.

References

Anon. (2008). Tobit: The Book of Tobit in Codex Sinaiticus, edited and translated by Robert J. Littman. Leiden: Brill.

Barfield, O. (2011). Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry. Oxford: Barfield Press.

Clarke, S. (2005). Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell. London: Bloomsbury.

Clarke, S. (2020). Piranesi. London: Bloomsbury.

Coleridge, S. T., & Wordsworth, W. (2013). Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1802. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Guite, M. (2017). Mariner: A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Hodder & Stoughton.

Guite, M. (2015). "Yearning for a Far-Off Country," in C.S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C.S. Lewis Society, edited by Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan N. Wolfe. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

James, E., & Mendelsohn, F. (2012). "Introduction" in The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendelsohn Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hasnip, R. (2022). "Theatre and Theology: A Place of Encounter", Journal of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity Volume 42, 2022 - Issue 1: Special issue: Pentecostal Art and Aesthetics, 47-57 London: Taylor & Francis.

Lachman, G. (2016). Beyond the Robot: The Life and Work of Colin Wilson. NewYork: TarcherPerigee.

Lewis, C.S. (1950). The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. London: Geoffrey Bles.

Lothian, S. (2020). "Susanna Clarke: Rescued by Faith and Strictly." Church Times, December 11, 2020.

Schanoes, V. (2012). "Historical Fantasy" in The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendelsohn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vernon, M. (2019). A Secret History of Christianity: Jesus the Last Inkling, and the Evolution of Consciousness. Winchester: John Hunt Publishing.

Wilson, C. (1984). A Criminal History of Mankind. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Wilson, C. (2001). The Outsider. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Magic Realism and Emotional Depth in Ken Liu's Short Story *The Paper Menagerie*

Sezen Ismail

Introduction

Ken Liu is a Chinese-American author, translator, and software engineer known for his contributions to speculative fiction. He was born in China in 1976 and then immigrated to the United States with his family at a young age. His fiction often explores themes of culture, history, and technology, bringing together the fantastical and the real to create intense insights into the human experience. Liu is best known for his short story collection, *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*, and his Dandelion Dynasty series, which combines epic fantasy with elements of Chinese history and mythology.

Ken Liu, in the preface of *The Paper Menagerie and Other Short Stories* (2016), asserts his observation of different fictional genres, arguing that:

> I don't pay much attention to the distinction between fantasy and science fiction—or between "genre" and "mainstream" for that matter. For me, all fiction is about prizing the logic of metaphors—which is the logic of narratives in general— over reality, which is irreducibly random and senseless. We spend our entire lives trying to tell stories about ourselves—they're the essence of memory. It is how we make living in this unfeeling, accidental universe tolerable. That we call such a tendency "the narrative fallacy" doesn't mean it doesn't also touch upon some aspect of the truth. (p. 3)

The Paper Menagerie is one of Ken Liu's most celebrated short stories, using magic realism to reflect on deep emotional themes. The story follows Jack, a Chinese-American boy, and his relationship with his mother, who can magically breathe life into origami animals. As Jack grows older, he becomes ashamed of his mother's Chinese heritage and distances himself from her and their cultural traditions. After his mother's death, he discovers a letter that reveals her painful past and infinite love for him, forcing him to reconsider his actions. Liu's fiction has earned him numerous awards, including the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, making him a significant voice in contemporary speculative fiction. His translation work, particularly of Chinese science fiction like Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*, has also brought international attention to the genre.

Ken Liu's short story *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), first published in the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, is a blend of magic realism with dramatic emotional depth, which exemplifies the literary fantastic of the 21st century. The story combines everyday realities with fantastical elements, particularly the magical ability of Jack's mother to bring origami animals to life. This blending of the real and the magical is characteristic of magic realism, where extraordinary phenomena are treated with the same narrative matter-of-factness as ordinary events. With this technique, Liu draws readers into Jack's emotional world while combining fantastical elements to bring out the story's underlying cultural and personal tensions, reflecting Castelli's (2019) observation that Chinese postmodernity represents the disenchantment of history and the tragic consciousness of a haunted fiction, rather than a negotiation of identities in a post-Weberian age. By presenting magic as an integral part of the characters' lives, Liu's short story reflects the genre's ability to capture complex emotional truths and offer a fresh lens on cultural identity.

The narrative also reflects on the painful disconnection that is common among immigrant experiences. Jack increasingly rejects his mother's traditions in his effort to assimilate into American culture. He is embarrassed by her broken English and the magical paper animals, and it is this sense of humiliation that symbolizes his struggle with his heritage. In their 1997 study, Elizabeth J. Mueller et al. argue that immigrants in the US face marginalization, fostering antagonism within ethnic groups and undermining ethnic solidarity, leading to conditions that hinder their

success and create a sense of victimization within their communities. The emotional turning point occurs after Jack's mother dies, leaving behind a letter that reveals her life story and her deep love for Jack despite their strained relationship. This discovery forces Jack to accept the parts of his identity he had rejected, emphasizing the emotional power of magic realism to explore deep familial bonds.

The fantastic literature of the 21st century frequently reflects the complexities of a globalizing world, where cultural identity, the question of belonging, and issues related to emotional disconnection are the focus of our everyday lives. Authors use fiction to examine how migration, technological advancement, and the change of social norms affect individuals and communities, too. The immigrant experience, cross-cultural identity, and the tension between tradition and modernity have become central themes to many narratives. These stories shed light on characters who are caught between different cultures, languages, and histories and, as a result, struggle with fragmented identities. Ainsa Riess (2013) observes that in the past two decades, the growing discourse and shared ideas about identity—its significance, defining traits such as ethnicity, patrimonial objectification, history, rituals, symbols, and customs—and the concept of a "national being" that inhabitants of a territory are expected to identify with have led to what appears to be a productive conceptual crisis within the postmodern and globalized context in which we find ourselves. Contemporary fantastic literature frequently reflects such conceptual crises around identity by exploring the fragmented and hybridized experiences of characters, particularly in immigrant and

postcolonial contexts, offering nuanced insights into the globalized world that we are a part of.

The use of genres like magic realism and the literary fantastic have become particularly effective in capturing these modern emotional and cultural complexities. By blending the ordinary with the extraordinary, writers can explore deeply personal and universal themes in a way that resonates with contemporary audiences. In this context, the fantastical elements act as metaphors for internal struggles, such as the clash between cultural heritage and assimilation or the emotional dissonance of living between worlds. In this regard, stories like Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie* mirror the emotional depth and multilayered nature of life in the 21st century. Magic realism is also used to dig up themes of family dynamics, identity crises, and loss in a world where geographical, cultural, or emotional boundaries are constantly shifting. The 21st-century context of literature thus offers a space to understand these complexities.

Sourit Bhattacharya (2020) observes that magic realism is frequently viewed as a literary form that disrupts the conventional norms of realism. In doing so, it is often seen as representing the diverse political and aesthetic energies of postcolonial nations, thus assuming that magic realism can be associated with postmodernism and postcolonialism, or, more specifically, a postmodernist version of postcolonialism. However, what is less emphasized is that realism itself is central to the concept, and in the South Asian context, literary realism has rarely been rigid or uniform.

Survey of the Fantastic

Since its rise to popularity in the nineteenth century, the genre has undergone significant changes. The fantastic characteristics of this time were influenced by the philosophical and sociocultural contexts in which they were created. The fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and H.P. Lovecraft can be seen as foundational to the fantastic tradition, characterized by elements of the Gothic with typical eerie intrusions into the mundane that often evoke terror. As Lovecraft famously stated, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (2013, p. 1). These narratives predominantly explore themes of horror and the uncanny, taking the readers into a world where the normal world intersects with unsettling and often terrifying explanations for extraordinary events.

The literary fantastic is a genre that blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural, often placing characters in a world where the ordinary coexists with the extraordinary. Unlike traditional fantasy, which typically operates within clearly defined magical systems and worlds, Levi and Armand (1975) review Todorov's definition of the "fantastic" genre, where he emphasizes ambiguity and the presence of unbelievers or supernatural reality, challenging traditional fantasy conventions. This sense of uncertainty and hesitation is a hallmark of the genre, with the fantastic often challenging readers to question what is real. Key elements include a realistic setting, a disruption of that reality by strange or magical occurrences, and a

lack of a clear resolution that leaves the nature of these events open to interpretation.

However, in the 20th century, writers like Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges broke the walls of the fantastic and used it as one of the tools for the inquiry of philosophical or existential aspects. In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka addresses the themes of modernism through surrealism, through an exaggerated form, as Gregor Samsa turns into an insect. Borges, on the other hand, held in his stories that infinity may be transcended, too, but not by means of spatial and temporal motions or transformations, emphasizing the troubled relations between the notions of reality, identity, and time. Magic realism, which developed in Latin American literature in the mid-20th century, introduced a new dimension to the fantastic by bringing together the magical and the mundane. In contrast to traditional fantasy, where the supernatural exists in its own world, magic realism presents magical elements as an intrinsic, unquestioned part of reality. Writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende became central figures in this movement, using magic realism to reflect the complex political and social realities of their time. Brescia (2008, p.12) argues that between 1930 and 1950, two major writers, the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and the Mexican Juan Jose Arreola, actively engaged in a promotion of the fantastic, a reading and writing code that deviated from the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century realist paradigm. Consequently, by embedding magical occurrences in realistic settings, often using the supernatural to reflect complex historical and emotional truths, the genre allowed authors to critique colonialism, repression, and cultural hybridity.

As the literary fantastic evolved, its purpose shifted from merely unsettling readers to exploring profound themes of human experience, culture, and history.

In the 21st century, the fantastic has taken on new forms, reflecting the complexities of a globalized, digital, and politically turbulent world. Contemporary fantastic literature is distinguished by its fusion of genres, blending elements of science fiction, magic realism, horror, and fantasy with literary fiction. The boundary between reality and the fantastic is often porous, with many works challenging readers to reconsider established truths about identity, culture, and perception. Unlike earlier iterations of the fantastic, which relied on a clear division between the normal and the supernatural, modern works often present the fantastic as part of everyday life, blurring distinctions between the real and the imaginary in subtle, psychological ways. Ransom and Grace (2019) point out that the (Canadian) literature of the fantastic offers a bridge metaphor for exploring colonialism, nationalism, race, and gender in a global context, challenging the "two solitudes" concept.

The Paper Menagerie is an example of how 21st-century authors use the literary fantastic to encourage introspection, evoke emotional responses, and engage with the complexities of a globalized world. By integrating the fantastical elements of origami animals into a deeply personal narrative about family, cultural identity, and loss, Liu's short story shows how, in contemporary fantastic literature, the fantastic can be used as an instrument to explore real-world emotional and cultural complexities. As a result,

the story is representative of modern trends in literature, where the fantastic serves to mirror deeper truths about the human experience, particularly in the context of immigration, identity crises, and the bonds between parents and children. One of the characteristic features of contemporary fantastic literature is its focus on social and cultural issues, especially those related to identity, immigration, and technology.

In today's global world, the fantastic is used to explore questions of belonging, alienation, and the fragmentation of identity across cultural and technological landscapes. Stories such as Ken Liu's The *Paper Menagerie* use magic realism to address the tensions between heritage and assimilation and the emotional and psychological burdens of migration. As Zipes (2008, p.2) argues, the role of fantasy in literature and art has shifted over time, paralleling changes in society and culture. Referring to scholars like Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson, who viewed fantasy as unsettling and uncanny, he observes that today's readers engage with fantasy not for shock or excitement but for diversion and spiritual renewal. Adding to that, fantasy serves as a form of resistance and a source of contemplation rather than mere escapism.

Magic Realism in *The Paper Menagerie*

The Paper Menagerie is set in a contemporary Connecticut suburb, where Jack, the son of an immigrant mother who tries to fit in the American society, lives. It begins with the revelation of his mother's unique ability:

> Mom's breath was special. She breathed into her paper animals so that they shared her breath, and thus moved with her life. This was her magic. (p. 27)

This magical aspect contrasts sharply with the realistic setting of Jack's life in America. Jack's mother, who was chosen from a catalogue by his father, embodies the immigrant experience, filled with both hope and hardship. As Jack grows older, he becomes embarrassed by his mother's Chinese heritage and her limited English, leading him to reject both her and the magical origami animals she creates. He reflects on this rejection, stating, "I packed the paper menagerie in a large shoebox and put it under the bed" (p. 33), symbolizing his desire to distance himself from his cultural roots and the magic of his childhood.

The origami animals serve as a powerful metaphor for Jack's relationship with his mother and his heritage. They come to life through her breath, representing the love and connection she tries to maintain with him. However, as Jack embraces his American identity, he begins to see these magical creations as mere "cheap Chinese garbage" (p. 31), as one of his school friends puts it. This moment highlights the painful disconnection Jack feels from his mother and his culture. Also, the origami animals represent the love and care she invests in her son and their shared heritage. His mother's ability to breathe life into the origami animals highlights the intimate bond between mother and child, as well as the magic of their cultural connection. The animals are not merely toys; they embody the essence of Jack's mother and her Chinese heritage. This magical aspect allows the reader to perceive

the depth of Jack's loss when he distances himself from his mother and her culture. The animals' ability to come to life serves as a reminder of the joy and warmth of his childhood, which he later rejects in favor of assimilation into the American culture.

As Jack grows older, he becomes increasingly embarrassed by his heritage and the fantastical elements of his childhood. The paper menagerie, once a source of joy, becomes a symbol of shame and alienation. When Jack hides the animals away, he is not just putting away toys; he is suppressing a part of his identity. The emotional impact of this suppression is profound, as it leads to a rift between him and his mother, who deeply feels the loss of connection. The blending of the real and the magical culminates in Jack's realization of the depth of his mother's love after her death. He discovers a letter she wrote to him, expressing her feelings and the pain of their estrangement:

> Son, I know that you do not like your Chinese eyes, which are my eyes. I know that you do not like your Chinese hair, which is my hair. But can you understand how much joy your very existence brought to me? (p. 42)

Jack's emotional journey is a dramatic exploration of his evolving relationship with his mother and the identity crisis he faces regarding his heritage. In the beginning, when Jack is not sent to school yet, he shares a deep bond with his mother. This early connection highlights the warmth and affection in their relationship, as well as the cultural significance of origami, which serves as a bridge between Jack and his mother's Chinese heritage. As Jack starts

socializing with his school friends and his friends from the neighborhood, he gradually begins to distance himself from his mother and his cultural identity. This shift is marked by his increasing embarrassment about his heritage and his mother's inability to fit into the American suburban lifestyle. Jack's rejection of his mother's language and culture is evident when he shouts, "Speak English!" This moment signifies a painful turning point in their relationship, as Jack prioritizes fitting in with his peers over maintaining his connection with his mother. He feels deep contempt for his heritage, viewing it as something to be ashamed of, saying, "What kind of woman puts herself into a catalog so that she can be bought?" (p. 27), reflecting his internal struggle and the societal pressures he faces as a child of an immigrant mother.

The emotional distance between Jack and his mother deepens as he embraces American culture and rejects the magical aspects of his childhood. He recalls, "I packed the paper menagerie in a large shoebox and put it under the bed" (p. 33), symbolizing his desire to bury his heritage and the love that came with it. This act of packing away the origami animals signifies a rejection of both his mother and the cultural identity she represents. Jack's relationship with his mother becomes strained, and he begins to see her as an outsider in his life, stating:

> Sometimes, when I came home and saw her tiny body busily moving about in the kitchen... it was hard for me to believe that she gave birth to me. We had nothing in common. She might as well be from the Moon. (p. 34)

Tragedy strikes when Jack's mother falls ill, and he is forced to confront the reality of their relationship. In the hospital, as she lies dying, Jack reflects on his feelings of guilt and regret. He recalls her saying, "If I... don't make it, don't be angry" (p. 29), which underscores the weight of their unresolved issues. Jack's internal conflict reaches a climax as he deals with the loss of his mother and the realization of how much he has pushed her away. After her death, he discovers a letter she wrote to him, filled with love and longing, where she expresses her pain over their estrangement.

Ultimately, Jack's emotional journey is one of reconciliation. After his mother's death, he begins to rediscover the magic of the origami animals and the love they represent. In a moment of reflection, he reaches out to Laohu, the paper tiger, and recalls the joy of their childhood together: "Laohu's tail twitched, and he pounced playfully. I laughed, stroking his back." (p. 38) This moment signifies Jack's acceptance of his heritage and the love that transcends their differences. As he reconciles with his past, the magic is restored, and Jack begins to heal from the pain of loss and reconnect with the cultural identity he once rejected. His transformational journey illustrates the complexities of cultural identity, familial love, and the enduring bonds that shape who we are.

The Letter

The discovery of the letter in the story serves as a key moment for Jack, forcing him to reevaluate his relationship with his mother and his cultural identity. The letter,

written in his mother's awkward yet heartfelt handwriting, encapsulates her struggles, sacrifices, and the deep love she holds for him. It is a stark reminder of the bond they shared, which Jack had previously neglected and even rejected. As Jack reads the letter, he is confronted with the reality of his mother's experiences and the pain of their estrangement. The letter reveals how deeply his mother understood his struggles, and it forces Jack to confront the hurt he has caused her by distancing himself from his cultural roots. The emotional tone of the letter is stressed by his mother's reflections on her past and her longing for connection. She expresses,

> But can you understand how much joy your very existence brought to me? And can you understand how it felt when you stopped talking to me and won't let me talk to you in Chinese? (p. 42)

This moment of vulnerability lays bare the emotional toll of their fractured relationship. Jack realizes that his rejection of his mother's language and culture was not just a personal choice but a source of profound pain for her. The letter also serves as a catalyst for Jack's introspection. As he deals with the memories of his mother's origami creations and the magic they once held, he begins to understand the significance of his heritage

Finally, the letter helps Jack to confront and understand the complexities of his identity. The act of rediscovering the letter and the origami animals prompts Jack to embrace his cultural identity, recognizing that it is an integral part of who he is. This journey of reevaluation leads

him to a deeper understanding of his mother's sacrifices and the enduring bond they share, even in her absence. The letter becomes a bridge that reconnects Jack to his heritage, allowing him to honor his mother's memory and the love she left behind.

Loss, Regret, and Reconciliation

The emotional depth of the story resonates with readers as it captures the complexities of familial bonds, the pain of estrangement, and the journey toward understanding and acceptance. This significance is particularly relevant in contemporary fantastic literature, where magical elements often serve to illuminate real-world issues. The theme of loss is movingly illustrated through Jack's relationship with his mother, especially as he reflects on her illness and eventual death. Jack's realization of his mother's sacrifices and the love she poured into the origami animals becomes a source of deep regret. Regret takes over a major part of Jack's journey as he confronts the consequences of his actions.

The emotional depth of *The Paper Menagerie* resonates with readers because it encapsulates universal experiences of familial love, cultural identity, and the longing for connection. Liu's use of magic realism—where the origami animals come to life—serves to amplify these themes, allowing readers to engage with the emotional landscape of the characters in a way that feels both fantastical and deeply relatable. The story's exploration of these themes is significant in contemporary fantastic literature, as it challenges readers

to reflect on their own relationships and cultural identities, ultimately emphasizing the importance of understanding and reconciliation in the face of loss.

Language, Cultural Identity, and Alienation

Another aspect that the fantastic elements intend to highlight is young Jack's struggle with his Chinese identity. Even though he was born in the United States, the mother who brought him up was Chinese, and because of this, Jack's young adulthood was marked by a tension between his strong desire to be accepted as an American boy and his rejection of his mother's race and cultural heritage. As he struggles with his hybrid identity, his sense of alienation becomes more evident. His white American friends have made him aware that he is not like them, which leads him to deeper alienation from his mother, believing that he "look[s] nothing like her" (p. 32). This rejection is an attempt to assimilate, yet it leaves him more disconnected not only from his mother but also from the society that he longs to be part of.

Jack's desire to assimilate is also reflected through his dialogue with his mother. He is frustrated when she speaks to him in Chinese, demanding that she speak English, signifying not only his hostility to her language but also a rejection of his cultural roots. He finds himself in a conflict where he is forced to conform to the expectations of his American neighborhood, which he perceives as more acceptable and desirable. His father's regret that he did not pressure his wife to assimilate, but his insistence that

"Jack needs to fit in" (p. 33) reinforces this stress, suggesting that Jack's identity must be molded to align with American norms.

As Jack grows older, he evidently estranges himself from his mother and her traditions. The act of hiding the origami animals, which were once a source of joy and connection to his mother, reflects his internalized shame and the lengths he goes to fit into a culture that feels foreign to him. He manages to distance himself from his mother, which leads to deep regret and sadness in his adult age. After she dies, he recognizes the pain and loss brought by their estrangement, realizing that "(he) felt (he) was losing everything all over again" (cite). In this moment of epiphany, Jack realizes the depth of his mother's love and the importance of the cultural heritage that he has rejected. The story culminates in Jack's eventual reconciliation with his identity, prompted by the discovery of his mother's letter.

Jack's struggle for acceptance is further portrayed through the role of language as a tool that contributes to the shaping of his identity, which in turn evolves because of the profound impact that communication—or the lack of it—can have on familial relationships and cultural connection. Jack never learned Chinese, which is why he is unable to communicate with his mother in her native tongue. Here, Chinese stands as a significant obstacle that alienates him from his roots and additionally deepens the conflict that is created because of his cultural identity. From a very young age, Jack has been made aware of the differences between his mother's Chinese heritage and his American upbringing, which was partially facilitated by his father

and the school. He refuses to speak Chinese, and this rejection reflects his desire to be accepted into the American culture. Whenever his mother speaks to him in Chinese, he becomes enraged, reflecting his anxiety caused by his maternal heritage and his determination to estrange himself from everything that defines his mother's identity. As much as his insistence on English signifies his desire to fit in, it also reflects a common social pressure to conform to the dominant culture. Jack's refusal to communicate with his mother creates an abyss between them, which further leads to a great sense of alienation because "if Mom spoke to me in Chinese, I refused to answer her" (p. 33), showing how language can become a tool of separation when it is meant to connect.

Jack reflects on a major moment from his childhood when his family moved to a new neighborhood. The women visit their house, and his father welcomes them and apologizes for his wife, Jack's mother, who struggles with English. Jack overhears the neighbors while he reads in the dining room, talking about him and his mother, expressing their discomfort and curiosity about their family. They comment on Jack's appearance, saying he looks "unfinished" (p. 30) and wonder whether he can speak English. When they finally approach Jack, they remark that his name does not sound "Chinesey" (p. 30), further emphasizing his perceived difference. This scene portrays the awkwardness and tension of cultural misunderstanding, as well as the isolation Jack feels in this new environment.

As Langston and Santi (2014) argue, language and identity are inextricably connected, with language used as an

expression of individual identity and identity influenced by social constructs like power. Jack's struggle with language and his identity is further intensified by his mother's own challenges in communicating in English. As Jack points out, "Eventually, she stopped speaking altogether if I was around" (p. 34), indicating that Jack's rejection of her language leads to his mother's withdrawal. This dynamic illustrates the painful consequences of cultural dislocation, where the immigrant parent feels compelled to adapt to their child's world, often at the cost of their own identity and voice. Jack's mother expresses her feelings when she says, "If I say 'love,' I feel here," pointing to her lips, and "If I say 'ai,' I feel here" (p. 33), placing her hand over her heart. This contrast underscores the emotional depth of her native language, which is intertwined with her identity and experiences, further emphasizing Jack's loss as he distances himself from her, reflecting Erik Erikson's (1980) observation of the formation of identity as a consolidation or assimilation of childhood identifications and experiences into a unified sense of self, which is recognized and accepted both by the individual and by society.

The Power of the Fantastic in Storytelling

The fantastical elements in Liu's story resonate with broader themes found in fantastic literature, where magic often serves to illuminate the emotional truths of characters' experiences. For instance, in Gabriel García Márquez's "*One Hundred Years of Solitude*," the magic realism of Macondo reflects the characters' emotional states and cultural histories. Similarly, in *The Paper Menagerie*,

the origami animals act as instruments for Jack's memories and feelings, bridging the gap between his past and present. The magic of the animals allows readers to engage with the emotional weight of Jack's journey, making his eventual reconciliation with his heritage even more expressive.

> Sometimes, the animals got into trouble. Once, the water buffalo jumped into a dish of soy sauce on the table at dinner. (He wanted to wallow, like a real water buffalo.) I picked him out quickly but the capillary action had already pulled the dark liquid high up into his legs. The sauce softened legs would not hold him up, and he collapsed onto the table. I dried him out in the sun, but his legs became crooked after that, and he ran around with a limp. Mom eventually wrapped his legs in saran wrap so that he could wallow to his heart's content (just not in soy sauce). (full p. 28)

Ken Liu blends fantastical elements with rich cultural motifs, such as the soy sauce, to illustrate the emotional and cultural dynamics between Jack and his mother. The paper animals, animated by the mother's magical breath, symbolize the bond between them and reflect Jack's connection to his Chinese heritage. The fantastical ability of these origami creatures to come to life embodies the enchantment of his childhood, where imagination and cultural traditions are seamlessly interwoven.

Each animal carries a deeper cultural and emotional significance. The water buffalo, which becomes soaked in soy sauce, is a traditional symbol in Chinese culture,

representing hard work and endurance. Its weakened legs after the incident can be interpreted as a metaphor for Jack's growing distance from his cultural roots as he struggles to reconcile his Chinese identity with his American upbringing. The buffalo's eventual mending, though imperfect, symbolizes the fragility of cultural identity when it is neglected or altered by outside influences.

The shark, initially made from fragile paper and later replaced with sturdy tinfoil, highlights the tension between tradition and adaptation. Paper, a traditional material for Chinese art (such as origami), is vulnerable to the elements of the real world. Its eventual destruction represents how Jack's cultural heritage, fragile in the face of his attempts to assimilate, is at risk of being lost. The new shark, made of tinfoil, embodies the necessary adaptation to preserve parts of that heritage in a new environment. This suggests that while cultural traditions may need to evolve, they can still survive if care and creativity are applied. The limp, the torn ear, and the dissolving shark all indicate the limitations of the magical creatures—parallels to the challenges of maintaining cultural identity. Jack's mother's efforts to patch up the animals (wrapping the buffalo's legs in Saran wrap and taping the tiger's ear) reflect her attempts to preserve their connection despite the inevitable wear and tear of life. These moments of repair echo the care and resilience needed to maintain familial bonds and cultural ties in a foreign environment.

The origami animals serve as a metaphor for Jack's internal struggles with his identity and his relationship with his mother, highlighting the complexities of the immigrant

experience and the challenges of cultural assimilation. The fantastical elements of the story amplify the conflict, as the once-vibrant paper menagerie becomes a symbol of Jack's internal struggle. Jack hides the animals; by doing so, he is not just putting away his toys; he is suppressing a part of his identity, leading to a profound sense of loss and alienation. The emotional impact of this suppression is further emphasized when he reflects on his mother's pain.

Magic Realism and Broader 21st-Century Trends

In his article "On Differentiating Fantastic Fiction" (1984), Andrzej Zgorzelski draws on the common perception of fantastic literature as merely that which deviates from realism. He argues that this simplistic view fails to recognize the complexities of literary communication and the relationships between the readers and the texts. He further argues that literature is not a mere imitation of reality, *mimesis, but a construction, poiesis,* that creates its own unique paradigms. He also distinguishes between literary and non-literary communication, emphasizing that literary texts carry their own supercodes on linguistic material that lead to a reconstruction of meaning that is different from the recognition of familiar paradigms that are to be found in non-literary texts. This reconstruction allows readers to enter new fictional realities, which are shaped by the implicit agreements between the author and the reader regarding how to interpret the text.

Contemporary literature often employs magic realism as a tool to dig into complex cultural and emotional themes, providing a connection between the ordinary and the extraordinary. In *The Paper Menagerie*, magic realism serves as a metaphor for Jack's struggles with his identity, connection with his Chinese mother, and the cultural heritage that he inherited from her. Through fantasy, Liu explores the emotional challenges of Jack's journey in such a way that it resonates with the readers on a personal level. The magical origami animals are not just playful creations; they carry the love and sacrifice of Jack's mother, who, through her art, tries to keep a connection with her son, despite her struggles with the English language and assimilation into the American culture. This emotional depth is amplified when Jack reflects on the pain he causes his mother by rejecting her culture, illustrating the broader theme of the immigrant experience and the complexities of cultural identity.

Moreover, the fantastical elements in *The Paper Menagerie* invite readers to engage with the narrative on an emotional level. The magic of the origami animals serves as a metaphor for the love and cultural heritage that Jack ultimately struggles to embrace. As readers witness Jack's journey from childhood innocence to adolescent shame and, regret, they are drawn into the emotional landscape of his experiences. The fantastical elements create a sense of nostalgia and longing, allowing readers to reflect on their own relationships with family and culture.

Conclusion

Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie* masterfully intertwines elements of magic realism with a deeply emotional narrative, creating an exploration of identity, cultural heritage, and familial relationships. The story revolves around Jack, a boy of Chinese descent, and his mother, who possesses the magical ability to bring origami animals to life through her breath. This fantastical element serves as a metaphor for the love and cultural connection that Jack struggles to embrace as he grows older. The fantastical elements in Liu's story resonate with broader themes found in fantastic literature, where magic often serves to illuminate the emotional truths of characters' experiences. The origami animals act as artefacts for Jack's memories and feelings, bridging the gap between his past and present. The magic of the animals allows readers to engage with the emotional weight of Jack's journey. Jack's struggles with the complexities of fitting into American society and his experiences of shame and rejection of his mother's culture lead to a painful estrangement. The origami animals symbolize his childhood innocence and the warmth of his mother's love, which he ultimately distances himself from in his pursuit of acceptance. Liu's narrative effectively captures the immigrant experience, illustrating the tension between cultural identity and the desire for assimilation. The emotional depth of the story is amplified by Jack's eventual regret and longing for the connection he lost with his mother, especially after her death. The magic realism in Liu's work not only enhances the narrative but also invites readers to reflect on their own relationships with family and culture, making the story resonate on a universal level.

Ken Liu's short story has made a significant impact on 21st-century literature by highlighting the complexities of the immigrant experience and the intricacies of cultural identity through the lens of magic realism. Liu's ability to blend the fantastical with the emotional allows for a rich exploration of personal and societal issues, setting a precedent for contemporary authors who seek to address similar themes. Liu's contribution is particularly relevant in the context of modern literary trends that emphasize diverse voices and experiences. His work challenges traditional narratives by incorporating elements of Asian culture and folklore, thereby enriching the literary landscape. The emotional resonance of Liu's stories, combined with their fantastical elements, encourages readers to engage with complex themes of belonging, love, and loss, making his work a vital part of contemporary literature.

References

Ainsa, F., & Riess, B. (2013). The Challenges of Posmodernity and Globalization: Multiple or Fragmented Identities?. In *Latin America Writes Back* (pp. 59-78). Routledge.

Bhattacharya, S. (2020). Magic and Realism in South Asia. *Magic realism and Literature*, 198-216.

Brescia, P. (2008, October). A "Superior Magic": Literary Politics and the Rise of the Fantastic in Latin American Fiction. In *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (Vol. 44, No. 4, pp. 379-393). Oxford University Press.

Castelli, A. (2019). The Disenchantment of History and the Tragic Consciousness of Chinese Postmodernity. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3085.

Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle.* W W Norton & Co.

Langston, K., Peti-Stantić, A. (2014). Language and Identity: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework. In: Language Planning and National Identity in Croatia. Palgrave Studies in Minority Languages and Communities. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137390608_2

Lovecraft, H. P. (2013). Supernatural horror in literature. The Palingenesis Project (Wermod and Wermod Publishing Group).

Liu, Ken. (2016). *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*. New York: Saga Press.

Mueller, E., & Mahler, S. (1997). American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins.. *International Migration Review*, 31, 191. https://doi.org/10.2307/2547269.

Ransom, A., & Grace, D. (2019). Introduction: Bridging the Solitudes as a Critical Metaphor. *Studies in Global Science Fiction*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15685-5_1

St. Armand, B. L. (1975). A Superior Abstraction: Todorov on the Fantastic [Review of *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, by T. Todorov & R. Howard]. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, *8*(3), 260–267. https://doi.org/10.2307/1345108

Zipes, J. (2008). Why fantasy matters too much. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *10*(4), 3.

Zgorzelski, A. (1984). On Differentiating Fantastic Fiction: Some Supragenological Distinctions in Literature. *Poetics Today*, *5*(2), 299-307. https://doi:10.2307/1771934

Living in a Fantasy World: Video Game Adaptation of Literary Fantasy in the 21st Century

Laura Iseut Lafrance St-Martin

Introduction

Some cultural critics argue that those who do not engage in playing video games are disregarding the significant narratives of our current society (Götz, 2021, p. 162). While experts did not anticipate this level of societal importance during the early years of computer-based game development, video games are currently the world's most prominent cultural industry (Kerr, 2017, p. 445). Indeed, a large proportion of the population plays video games, and the media is a population that is diverse across all socio-demographic profiles (Statistica, 2024). In this context, looking into trends can help us understand the current forms of aesthetic experiences.

One of the recurrent forms of video game projects is literary adaptations (Ensslin, 2012, p. 57): studios take an already constructed Secondary World[1] (Tolkien, 1947) and transpose it into a game world. Nonetheless, video game adaptations are rarely narrative adaptations (i.e., remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1996) of the story), and those often become commercial failures (Ensslin, 2012, p. 57; Rowsell et al., 2014, p. 47). One of the reasons for that is that video games do not present traditional narratives (chronological sequencing of events); they must have an open structure allowing interactivity, exploration, and emergent narrative (Ryan, 2004; Nitsche, 2008), and game worlds rarely retell literary stories instead, they offer an organized space to explore and to "live" in.

Video game worlds expand the narrative experiences of literature, cinema, and other media through transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006). They allow players to spend more time in a world they love. In this chapter, we propose to examine the specificity of contemporary video games to answer the following question: How do video game adaptations of literary fantasy renegotiate the literary Secondary World to extend the experience? This chapter aims to show how Secondary Worlds exist across and between media. We will show that video game instances of

---

1   The concept of the Secondary World was proposed by Tolkien in order to circumvent the distinction between the real world and the fictional (or imaginary) world, which contributed to the ousting of the Secondary Worlds from reality. Indeed, the Secondary Worlds are here conceived as real insofar as they are supports for real and current experiences. We use capital letters to respect the original spelling of the author of this concept. For more details: (Lafrance St-Martin 2023).

Secondary Worlds have a specific way of becoming meaningful and conveying a message to players, which is a different method for actualizing the fantasy.

To do so, we will begin by showing that Secondary Worlds are a form of art independent of media specificity. We will then explore how game systems (i.e., logical abstraction of variables and their interactions) model the world's inner workings. This system is meaningful: the player's actions affect the game world, which becomes a mental representation of how the Secondary World works. After that, we will analyze a literary fantasy world's adaptations, *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite* (Niantic, 2019) and *Hogwarts Legacy*[2] (Avalanche Software, 2023). We will show how the game systems are an interpretation and remediation of the novel's world and are meaningful. Indeed, this chapter will show that the game system's modelize the world with variables and by defining how they interact with each other. The game's system gives values to actions and interactions, and therefore can create meaning in itself. This system's meaning can also conflict with the story's meaning. This conflict is known as a ludo-narrative dissonance (Hocking, 2007) and draws attention to the ethical concerns of game world design.

---

2   We chose to analyze games within The Wizarding World because they are recent and have generational importance. This is in no way an endorsement of J.K. Rowling's political views and her recent public affiliations with transphobic organizations.

Video Game Narrative Adaptation

In the early years of game studies, the narrative nature of video games was a contentious issue within academia. Indeed, the very (in)famous debate opposing "ludologists" and the "narratologists" raged in the early 2000s as researchers tried to determine how to approach this growing media. While narratologists were using tools from other fields (e.g., literature or cinema studies) to legitimate video games as a research object (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2004), ludologists were showing what makes games unique and that not all games are narrative in nature (Eskelinen, 2001; Juul, 2005; Aarseth, 2001). The debate is no longer going on since researchers understood that both were right and wanted the same thing: show that video games can offer meaningful experiences (Murray, 2005). Nonetheless, these years have shown that video games can uniquely tell stories, making them essential tools for the transmedia storytelling ecosystem.

Transmedia storytelling is part of convergence culture, which combines different media and technologies to tell a story across them (Jenkins, 2006; Rowsell et al., 2014). Video games are only a part of this mediatic ecosystem in which literature, films, music, comics, etc. play a role. Famous examples of transmedia storytelling include Star Wars, The Matrix, The Lord of the Rings, and Marvel (extended universes). Each in their own way, they propose narrative experiences across media and aim to engage their fans in their world. Within this mediatic ecosystem, video games can propose complex, multimodal story worlds that allow players to engage deeply with the

interactive narrative, which gives them a sense of agency. The transformation from literature to gaming enhances the immersive experience by allowing players to interact with and influence the story, giving them an active role (Rowsell et al., 2014). This process is not simple, and ludic adaptation can be risky.

From Linear Stories to Video Games: The Problem With Transmedia Adaptations

Despite possibly being more engaging, video games cannot be a literal translation of other media. Indeed, every adaptation should follow the media's specificities and strengths (Jenkins, 2006). In the case of video games, interactivity defines the media (Aarseth, 2001): there is no game if there is no way to interact with the world and freedom in the choice of action (Bonenfant, 2015). Designers cannot fully determine the game's story in advance; players must be able to change the course of the story (Ryan, 2004; Nitsche, 2008). Even what is called "linear games" (i.e., games where the narrative is a set of events that always happen in the same order, without any optional events), the game affords freedom in various ways to reach those states. For example, video games afford several combat tactics and character personalization, giving players choices. A game without this freedom would be automatic software, rendering the idea of play irrelevant (Suits, 1978).

The crucial role of interactivity in games can create some narrative tensions with the original works. Indeed, there

is a fine line between staying true to the original work and offering a meaningful ludic experience to players (Sanders, 2023). Therefore, transposing the story from one media to a video game might not be a good idea: there is a fundamental difference between "classical" stories and interactive stories (Flanagan, 2017; Wallin, 2007).

Furthermore, games have specific ludic genres (e.g., platformer,[3] puzzle[4], adventure[5], role-playing[6]) and thematic genres (e.g., fantasy or science-fiction). Adapting an existing story into a game means choosing what actions players can do (Sicart, 2008) and what type of representation it will use (e.g., single screen, 2D-scrolling, 3D, open world, top-down camera). Each choice is meaningful and will change the narrative experience. Indeed, there are not only thematic choices to be made, but ludic ones too: "Videogame adaptations frequently take a known genre and work with content from another text, in the process creating a compromise between two different traditions" (Flanagan, 2017, p. 445). Of course, perfect transmedia

---

3   A platformer is a type of video game where the player navigates a character through environments, often by jumping between platforms, avoiding obstacles, and defeating enemies.

4   A puzzle game is a type of video game that challenges players to solve logic, pattern, or strategy-based problems to progress through the game.

5   An adventure game is a genre of video game focused on narrative-driven exploration, problem-solving, and interacting with the environment or characters to advance the story.

6   A role-playing game (often abbreviate as RPG) is a video game genre where players assume the roles of characters in a fictional world, making decisions, completing quests, and developing the characters' abilities and skills through gameplay.

adaptations are impossible: producers and writers modify the story to fit the specificity of the other media. Nonetheless, the interactive nature of video games pushes the difficulty further.

The Secondary World as the Basis for Transmedia Experience

As Jenkins (2004, 2006) proposed, the game world is central to any ludic experience. Since adapting the story seems to create tension about content fidelity, adapting the Secondary World and how it works can be a way to offer a genuine ludic experience in an already-known universe and extend the time people can spend in those Secondary Worlds (Flanagan, 2017).

In his seminal work *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Jenkins affirms that "transmedia storytelling is the art of world making" (p. 21). Within the logic of transmedia storytelling, the Secondary World becomes the centerpiece. It is the home of several stories, each designed to represent a specific part of the world and give a different experience to the public.

Secondary Worlds are vital in transmedia storytelling as they support immersive experiences that engage audiences, allow for expanded narratives across various media, and foster community building among fans. By enabling different perspectives and storylines, these worlds enhance cross-platform synergy, reflect real-world themes, and ensure adaptability and longevity in storytelling, ultimately enriching the overall narrative experience.

Video Game's Secondary World as a Means of Communication

Several building blocks of video games help convey messages and make players think (e.g., dialogues and cutscenes). Nevertheless, the Secondary World in which the game takes place, including the computer system, governs the interactions between the elements of the world. Indeed, "a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world" (Juul, 2011, p. 1). The game system defines the possibilities and how the world reacts to the player.

> In games, the action is structured, but in contrast to other narrative disciplines, it is not performed. Rather, it is deliberately concealed by the mechanical constraints of the game. The motivation thus awakened by games creates an incentive for players to experience the plot individually. In this way, rule-based functionality, interactivity and narrative are merged – and narrative mechanics emerge as a result (Götz, 2021, p. 168).

Narrative and mechanical elements cannot be separated in many cases, as actions, game systems, and traditional storytelling moments (cinematic or linear dialog) all contribute to the narrative as emergent storytelling (Götz, 2021, p.170; Salen & Zimmerman 2004). Indeed, interacting with the game, its world, and its system makes video game narratives unfold. Players embody a character or avatar who must "be" within the rules and boundaries of this world. The players find themselves in an analytical posture and must learn "to be." According to the principles of processual rhetoric, implementing rules is an important resource for the game to "make the players be"

(Bonenfant & Arsenault, 2016).

Therefore, the structures of Secondary Worlds are significant in themselves. The origin of the word "world" refers to this idea. The Latin "mundus" means "that which is arranged," while the Greek root "kosmos" means "that which is put in order." Modern languages, including French and English, use the term "world" more broadly to refer to the set of perceptible elements or reality. However, its etymology emphasizes the manipulations necessary to create a world: it must be arranged or put in order.

In a way, the Secondary World is a modeling, i.e. the creation of a simplified representation of the functioning of a process or a system. The model does not represent the whole of a system (in this case, the world) since this is impossible; rather, it aims to offer an understanding of its general functioning. The model is, therefore, necessarily based on sorting and selecting elements deemed "relevant" or "essential." For example, some games, like the famous *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios, 2008), introduce a two-variable morality system that tracts the moral value of the player's actions. The game world then reacts to the moral alignment of players (e.g., non-player characters, often called NPC, will be willing to help or try to stop them). What does it mean? Introducing such systems in a video game tells players that actions have ethical and social consequences within this world. On the other hand, what does it mean when there is no system of morality? The Secondary World does not include moral consequences, and players do not have to take them into account when deciding what path to take.

In a video game, the Secondary World model is a software system enacting the game's simulation. This system includes many elements, such as rules, objectives, and possible actions. Within the game design field, game mechanics, defined as "methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state" (Sicart, 2008) or simply actions done by players in a particular context, have been central to the understanding of games semiotic structure. Indeed, Mary Flanagan affirms that "[...] a game's mechanic is its message" (2009, p. 185). Brenda Romero's series of provocative board games called *The Mechanic is the Message* (2009) represents this idea. Nonetheless, mechanics alone are not a game's whole meaning: actions are contextualized within the system and more globally in the Secondary World.

The construction of Secondary Worlds and its adaptation is a signifying act for "the construction of a world is, in itself, a political practice. And the construction of a world is not done in a vacuum" (Tremblay, 2023, p. 163). Indeed, the creators' different design choices are crucial to understanding the model at the heart of the game system. The game system is the main way, along with representative elements of known places, objects, or characters, for game designers trying to adapt a literary Secondary World in a transmediatic logic to expand it.

Case Study: Ludic Adaptations of Wizarding World

Over ten video games occur in the Harry Potter world, often called Wizarding World. While some try to retell the stories told in the books and the films, the two most recent ones (*Harry Potter: Wizards Unite* (Niantic, 2019) and *Hogwarts Legacy* (Avalanche Software, 2023)) are not adapting the stories but adapting the world and proposing new stories. In this section, we will look at those examples to show how games enact two layers of meaning: the dynamic story and the game's system. To do so, we will focus our analysis on the relationship with magical beasts, both from a story and a systemic point of view.

Capturing magical beasts can be linked to the *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* book (Rowling, 2001), which later inspired a film series. Indeed, the fictional textbook describes between 75 and 85 magical beasts (depending on editions), and the films show that those creatures are captured and can escape from the captor's suitcase. Both games tried to propose a transmedia narrative experience by expanding an element of the Secondary World that can be effectively linked to well-known game mechanics of combating creatures to capture them, for example, in the Pokemon series (Game Freak, 1996). Nonetheless, the approach taken by those two games is very different and shows how ludic adaptation can be tricky.

Hogwarts' Ludic Adaptations

Wizarding World of Harry Potter includes some well-known elements such as locations (e.g., Hogwarts school and portals to hidden parts of the world), ontological elements (e.g., magic and magical beasts exist, some people are magically gifted, magical abilities are mainly transmitted genetically), and logical elements (e.g., magical capacities need to be worked on to be effective). Adapting a Secondary World to another media means respecting what defines its identity. If those elements are well-represented, players know which Secondary World they are in, and they will use their knowledge of it (often based on other media experience) to understand what is going on in the game and its affordances. Failure to do a meaningful world adaptation will cause frustration and confusion in fan communities.

Harry Potter: Wizards Unite (Niantic, 2019) is a mobile augmented reality[7] game officially closed in January 2022. Players assume the role of a recruit for the Statute of Secrecy Task Force, tasked with investigating a mysterious phenomenon known as the Calamity that causes magical objects, creatures, and characters to appear in the Muggle

---

7   Augmented reality (AR) is a technology that overlays digital information—such as images, sounds, or other data—onto the real world, enhancing the user's perception of their environment. Unlike virtual reality (VR), which creates a completely immersive digital experience, AR integrates digital elements into the user's real-world view, typically through devices like smartphones, tablets, or AR glasses. This interaction allows users to see and interact with virtual objects in their physical surroundings, creating engaging experiences.

world[8]. Players explore real-world locations to collect Foundables (which include magical beasts) and complete challenges. In the game's story, players send magical creatures back to the magical world to preserve the "Muggle" world, but the game does not specify what happens afterward. As the books are imprecise concerning how magical creatures' parts are obtained and how they are generally treated, the game seems to respect the original idea.

While this game did not represent known Secondary World locations due to its augmented-reality nature and introduced new groups (Statute of Secrecy Task Force), the world's inner-working is respected. The division between the magical part of the world and the "Muggle" part is respected. Game mechanics such as dueling, casting spells, and potion brewing are adapted for explicit elements present in the original books. Players are, therefore, in known territory. Despite its lack of success due to COVID-19 and some game design limitations, the game is an excellent example of a world adaptation that expends the Secondary World's experience, merging it with Primary World locations players visit. Within the frame of an urban fantasy such as The Wizarding World, AR technologies are helpful tools to propose new transmedia experiences within a Secondary World.

---

8   In the Wizarding World franchise, the "Muggle world" refers the non-magical world, essentially the everyday, real-world society in which ordinary people live, unaware of the existence of magic or magical creatures. It contrasts with the secretive magical world of witches, wizards, and magical institutions like Hogwarts.

Hogwarts Legacy (Avalanche Software, 2023) is an open-world[9] action role-playing game set in the late 1800s, long before Harry Potter's time. Players assume the role of a custom character in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Throughout the game, players engage in magical combat, complete quests, and make choices that influence their character's development and the game's outcome, all while encountering iconic elements of the Wizarding World. One of the game's main tasks is to fight poachers capturing magical beasts around the school.

Hogwarts Legacy takes a different approach to expanding the Secondary World and proposes new experiences. Rather than taking the Wizarding World into players' everyday lives via AR, it proposes a 3D world to explore freely. Open-world games have a non-linear narrative structure where players roam the Secondary World for little pockets of narrative (Götz, 2021). When arriving in a narrative space, a narrative can unfold, usually using a quest structure, but the players can refuse to engage in those narratives. There are several narrative problems following this approach. First, if players refuse to engage in narrative content, characters stand idle until they come back. Also, the narrative is enclosed in space, waiting for the player to arrive and "use" it, leaving the Secondary World empty and motionless as the NPC returns to an idling state.

---

9   An open-world game is a type of video game that allows players to explore a large, expansive environment freely, rather than following a linear path or set objectives. In open-world games, players can interact with the world at their own pace, undertake various quests, and engage in numerous activities beyond the main storyline.

Nonetheless, open-world games promise hundreds of hours of play and exploration, engaging the players in a freely explorable world.

Hogwarts Legacy also proposes another historical setting to explore. Indeed, the game is set in the 1800s, allowing it to propose a narrative experience that will not contradict or create friction with the official narrative presented in books and films. Historical settings are a common way to expand a Secondary World (e.g., *Knight of the Old Republic* (BioWare Edmonton, 2003), set in the Star Wars universe well before the films, and *Shadows of Mordor* (Monolith Productions, 2014), set after the events of *The Lord of the Rings* in Arda) by exploring its historical depths (Wolf, 2018, p. 46). By adapting the Secondary World and not the narrative, *Hogwarts Legacy* proposed an adaptative gaming experience that does not endanger the official timeline.

While those two games took different approaches to adapting the Wizarding World, they showed that transmedia storytelling and expanding universes is not about porting a story into another media. Instead, it is about understanding the inner workings of the Secondary World and proposing another story using the media's strength. Nonetheless, even when the Secondary World adaptation works, games usually rely on a storyline involving structured quests and pre-made NPC. The narrative told by the game system and the world is not always coherent with the one suggested by the scenario.

Ludonarrative Dissonance and the Autonomous Life of Secondary Worlds

Hogwarts Legacy creates tension between the player's actions and the story told by conventional means such as dialogues and cinematics. Indeed, those two signifying structures have inner contradictions: players must fight poachers roaming the school's land in search of magical creatures while also capturing those creatures to trap and "harvest" them. Within the gaming world, this kind of tension is called ludonarrative dissonance.

First coined by game designer Clint Hocking, ludonarrative dissonance is when there is a powerful disconnect or contradiction "between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story" (2007). Hocking felt it when playing *Bioshock* (2K Boston 2007) as the game asked players to save "Little Sisters" characters and kill them simultaneously. Weirdly, the game story asks players to save them to progress in the narrative, while the game's system encourages players to kill and "harvest" them to increase their power and progress into the game's increasing difficulty. While it might not make the game impossible to finish, the sense of disconnect, this dissonance between the game system and its story, creates an incoherent experience.

Hogwarts Legacy creates a similar experience concerning the fate of magical creatures. The game system is coherent with Harry Potter's Secondary World as the books and film adaptations show creatures' body parts used as ingredients in potions and the wands' making. Logically, someone is harvesting or buying them, but the books remain

imprecise in this process, as we already discussed. The game's story asks players to stop poachers from harvesting magical creatures, and when the player rescues one, the avatar comforts them and imprisons them in school. Nonetheless, the player can later harvest and sell body parts from those same creatures to progress in the game. The player is then doing something like the poachers they are trying to stop: the story and the game's system are at odds.

While it might be an excellent choice to investigate an unknown part of the Secondary World when making a transmedia adaptation, this game proposes a system that contradicts the books' general ethical imprecision about the fate of magical creatures and the game's story. The mechanics of capturing creatures or killing them for resources is widespread in video games, and game designers might have chosen to do so out of habit. Nonetheless, as they are an essential part of the game's experience, it is important to consider what meaning they convey.

In the case of our chapter, the existence of ludonarrative dissonance teaches that the game's system, as the software adaptation of the Secondary World's inner workings, creates meaning. When adapting a literary work to a video game, transforming the Secondary World into an interactive one is usually the best way. Designers must then consider the meaning of the software system they are creating as it is significant and can contradict the story, thus creating friction and incoherence in the semiotic experience and possibly changing the meaning of the Secondary World.

Conclusion

Humans are story animals: we crave stories and immersion into different worlds. Video games are a relatively new way to satisfy this fundamental need. Indeed, the human experience, particularly when it comes to cultural media experiences, frequently moves from one world to another (Tolkien, 1947). Those worlds are often called imaginary or virtual, reducing their impact on people's lives. Nonetheless, those worlds are important and can affect how we relate to our lives.

Experiences are always real (James, 1912, 1907). We are not falsely playing a game or reading a book; those experiences are real, and the emotions created during these experiences are also real. When we cry over the fate of a beloved character or when an event touches us, those are real emotions. Indeed, when our cognitive and affective resources are mostly directed toward a Secondary World, our experiences are real (Lafrance St-Martin, 2023). Therefore, we can say that Secondary Worlds exist, but only as they host real experiences.

When returning to the Primary World, the experiences lived within the Secondary World continue to exist: the experiences of a world are therefore not hermetically sealed within it. Experiences, especially with emotional resonance (Rosa, 2018), can influence and even transform individuals' worldviews (Rosa, 2020; Lafrance St-Martin, 2023). The influence of experiences in a Secondary World is often insidious but fundamental to understanding aesthetic experiences' cultural effects. In other words,

representations matter: they exert a symbolic influence on the way we understand the world around us.

The events occurring in Secondary Worlds are interpreted according to the functioning of this world, which means that the meaning and ethical value between worlds are not always the same. The Secondary World's inner workings will, as represented by the system in the case of video games, distribute ethical values (e.g., the act of "killing" does not always have the same ethical value in fantasy worlds and is rarely the same as in most contemporary cultures). Game designers adapting Secondary Worlds into game systems create an environment in which meaningful experiences will occur, where players can live in a world they already like. Nonetheless, responsibilities come with it: building or adapting a Secondary World is always political as it reimagines the Primary World, and every invention is a way to comment on it.

References

Aarseth, E. (2001). "Computer game studies, year one." Game studies 1 (1): 1–15.

Bolter, J., & Grusin, R.A. (1996). "Remediation." Configurations 4 (3): 311-358. https://doi.org/10.1353/con.1996.0018

Bonenfant, M. (2015). Le libre jeu. Réflexions sur l'appropriation de l'activité ludique. Liber ed. Montréal.

Bonenfant, M, & Dominic A. (2016). "Dire, faire et être par les jeux vidéo." Implications philosophiques.

Ensslin, A. (2012). The Language of Gaming. Bloomsbury

Eskelinen, M. (2001). "Towards computer game studies." Digital creativity 12 (3): 175-183.

Flanagan, K M. (2017). "Videogame Adaptation." In The Oxfrod handbook of adaptation studies, 442-457. Oxford University Press.

Flanagan, M. (2009). Critical Play. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Götz, U. (2021). "On the Evolution of Narrative Mechanics in Open-World Games." Media Studies| Volume 82: 161-176.

Hocking, C. (2007). "Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock: The problem of what the game is about." Well played (blog).

James, W. (1907). Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking. The Project Gutenberg EBook.

James, W. (1912). Essays in Radical Empiricism. En ligne: The Project Gutenberg EBook.

Jenkins, H. (2004). "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." Computer 44 (3): 118-130.

Jenkins, H. (2006). Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York University Press.

Juul, J. (2005). "Games telling stories." Handbook of computer game studies: 219-226.

Juul, J. (2011). Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds. MIT Press.

Kerr, A. (2017). Global games: Production, circulation and policy in the networked era. Routledge.

Lafrance St-Martin, L. I.. (2023). "Une interprétation sémiotique de On Fairy-Stories : la formulation d'un modèle tolkienien du pluri-monde et de l'expérience fictionnelle." Doctorat en sémiologie Doctorat, Études littéraires, Université du Québec à Montréal.

Murray, J. H. (1997). Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace. MIT Press.

Murray, J. H. (2005). "The last word on ludology v narratology in game studies." 2005.

Nitsche, M. (2008). Video game spaces: image, play, and structure in 3D worlds. MIT Press.

Rosa, H. (2018). Résonance. Une sociologie de la relation au monde. Translated by Sasha Zilberfarb and Sarah Raquillet. Paris: La Découverte.

Rosa, H. (2020). Rendre le monde indisponible. Translated by Olivier Mannoni. La Découverte. 2018.

Rowsell, J., Pedersen, I., & Trueman, D. (2014). "Playing as a mutant in a virtual world: understanding overlapping story worlds in popular culture video games." Literacy 48 (1): 47-53. https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12022.

Ryan, M-L. (2004). Narrative across media: The languages of storytelling. U of Nebraska Press.

Salen, K, & Zimmerman, E. (2004). Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. MIT Press.

Sanders, J. (2023). "Playing the Classics: Constructing a Digital Game Adaptation Database." Adaptation 16 (2): 231-239. https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apac019.

Sicart, M. (2008). "Defining game mechanics." Game Studies 8 (2): n.

Statistica. (2024). Video Games - Worldwide. https://www.statista.com/outlook/dmo/digital-media/video-games/worldwide.

Suits, B. (1978). The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia. Broadview Press.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1947). "On Fairy-Stories." In Essays Presented to Charles Williams. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tremblay, K. (2023). Collaborative Worldbuilding for Video Games. CRC Press.

Wallin, M. R. (2007). "Myths, Monsters and Markets: Ethos, Identification, and the Video Game Adaptations of The Lord of the Rings." Game Studies 7 (1). https://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/wallin.

Wolf, M. J.P. (2018). "Narrative Fabric." In Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf, 45–50.

Artistic works

2K Boston. (2007). "Bioshock."

Avalanche Software. (2023). "Hogwarts Legacy."

BioWare Edmonton. (2003). "Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic."

Game Freak. (1996). "Pocket Monsters Red and Green." Nintendo.

Lionhead Studios. (2008). "Fable II."

Monolith Productions. (2014). "Shadows of Mordor."

Niantic. (2019). "Harry Potter: Wizards Unite."

Romero, B. (2009). "The Mechanic is the Message."

Rowling, J.K. (2001). Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them. Bloomsbury.

Themes in the Literary Fantasy of Aleksandar Tešić

Aleksandar Tešić

Fantasy literature has captivated readers for centuries, offering an appealing blend of escapism and deep reflection. At its core, fantasy allows us to step into worlds of limitless reality, where magic, mythical creatures, and supernatural forces reveal insights into our deepest fears, desires, and values. Through the representation of the human experience in surreal narratives, the genre provides a unique platform for exploring eternal themes such as good and evil, power and oppression, and the search for identity and belonging. Furthermore, contemporary fantasy has evolved far from simple allegories and moral tales, embracing nuanced depictions of society and complex social issues, often reflecting the struggles and concerns of the modern world.

In my works, this blend of escapism and social commentary is brought to life through a deep immersion in Serbian

and Slavic folklore. My novels stand out within the fantasy genre, interweaving historical and mythological elements for the first time to create worlds that are as enlightening as they are enthralling. The characters are confronted not only with mythical beasts but also with the often-invisible forces of social hierarchy, ecological exploitation, and the suppression of cultural heritage. Through narratives that highlight themes of resistance and survival, they shed light on issues such as ecological destruction and cultural erasure, reflecting contemporary global challenges through a unique Serbian prism.

At the heart of my storytelling lies the desire to preserve and celebrate the Serbian cultural heritage that inspires me. My series *Kosingas* and the novel *Black Moon Rising* introduce readers to a Serbia that is both mystical and historical, where ancient deities, sacred sites, and local folklore play key roles in the development of the story. Characters like the Kosingas — a guardian on the border between the earthly and the mythological — illustrate how mythological archetypes can become symbols of national identity and moral permanence. By blending Slavic mythology, such as the forest goddess Muma Paduri, with the challenges of contemporary society, these stories provide a fresh approach to fantasy, which not only celebrates Serbian myth but also invites readers into a complex, multi-layered world where tradition and modernity intertwine.

Through my dedication to creating a culturally resonant fantasy world, I strive not only to reintroduce Serbian folklore to contemporary audiences but also to promote

a global narrative that values diversity within the fantasy genre. I believe that my storytelling enriches fantasy literature by offering a unique perspective, challenging the Eurocentric norms of the genre, and introducing readers to characters, creatures, and conflicts deeply rooted in Slavic heritage. In this way, my works embody the power of this genre to preserve cultural identity, awaken the imagination, and inspire reflection on the human condition.

Social and Political Issues

Although fantasy is set in imaginary worlds, it often deals with real-world issues such as inequality, oppression, and power struggles. Many contemporary authors use their environments and characters to explore complex social and political dynamics that reflect contemporary concerns.

My novels vividly explore the theme of social and political repression, reflecting real social hierarchies and inequalities through the prism of speculative environments. In the novel *2084*, the story takes place in the dystopian future of Serbia under the rule of a powerful protectorate, where individual freedoms are stifled and surveillance is omnipresent. The authoritarian regime depicted in the novel reflects contemporary social problems, such as excessive government interference and the invasion of privacy under the pretext of security. Through the character of Vukša Krstajić, who awakens from a coma into this highly controlled society, I explore how personal autonomy and freedom are threatened by a powerful state structure that justifies its strict measures in response to past chaos and

war. This struggle echoes ongoing global debates about the balance between security and personal freedom, raising questions about the ethical limits of surveillance and the true cost of social order.

By contrast, *Black Moon Rising* shifts the attention from government control to corporate power, specifically exploring the consequences of environmental exploitation on local communities and their legacies. The novel introduces the Kings Cross Gold Corporation, a foreign mining company that destroys Serbian landscapes in search of profit. This fictional corporation represents the very real threat of multinational corporations that neglect environmental concerns and the rights of indigenous peoples for economic gain. The locals represented through characters such as Andjelija Kerculj, oppose the corporate machinery that desecrates sacred land, destroys ecosystems, and ignores cultural symbols central to Serbian identity. The actions of the corporation in the novel reflect the fate of real communities facing ecological destruction and displacement due to uncontrolled industrial expansion.

The story goes beyond Serbia's borders, touching on the issue of neo-imperialism, where foreign powers impose their will on local populations, undermining their cultural and spiritual values. The novel explores themes of resistance as locals stand up to the corporation not only to protect their environment but also to preserve their way of life. Through these elements, narratives reveal the cost of exploitation and repression, whether imposed by governments or corporations, prompting readers to reflect on the power structures that shape our world.

Power Structures and Oppression

As mentioned previously, the plot of the novel *2084* is set in the future of Serbia under the rule of the protectorate, in a context where individual freedom is significantly restricted. The protectorate's control over society reflects a world in which totalitarian structures developed to maintain order after a period of chaos caused by a major war and global catastrophe. This political situation raises questions about the cost of stability, surveillance, and control, drawing parallels with contemporary problems of excessive government surveillance and the loss of personal freedoms in exchange for security.

The hierarchical structure in *2084* depicts the dominance of the ruling class, represented by officials such as Colonel Faust and the enigmatic protector Daniel. These characters control the protagonist's body and mind as they try to extract key information from him for their agendas. The protectorate is a rigid system that coerces submission and operates through fear and manipulation, demonstrating a clear power relationship between the elite and the common population. There is an overarching sense of institutional oppression, where even scientific endeavors such as Vukša's rehabilitation are subordinated to the interests of the ruling elite.

In *Black Moon Rising*, previously mentioned, power structures and oppression are central themes that develop through various elements of the narrative. The story describes how the company's machinery violently penetrates Serbia's pristine wilderness, destroying forests, polluting water, and displacing people and animals in search

of gold. This is a clear demonstration of how multinational companies use power without caring about the rights of local residents and the environment, exploiting natural resources for profit.

The apparent disregard for the environmental consequences and concerns of local environmental groups highlights the systemic oppression that powerful organizations can impose. Local protests and activism are portrayed as futile in the face of the force of this corporate machine, reflecting the imbalance of power between the profit-driven entities and the people or nature they exploit.

The presence of British corporate executives, such as Mark Wilton, and their interaction with the local Serbian population can be seen as a form of neo-imperialism. Wilton and his team are not only destroying the local ecosystem, but they are also showing contempt for the local culture and traditions. When they stumble upon an ancient sacred place, instead of honoring it or trying to understand its significance, Wilton orders its destruction. This action reflects a broader motive of colonial attitudes, where foreign powers impose their will on local populations, ignoring their beliefs, heritage, and autonomy.

Dynamic oppression is accentuated by the way local Serb workers and residents, such as Andjelija Kerchulj, are portrayed as subservient to foreign corporate elites. Andjelija's fear of disturbing the holy site contrasts sharply with Wilton's cold indifference, symbolizing the oppressive relationship between powerful foreign actors and marginalized local residents.

Local traditions and folklore, especially those related to the forest and the Lady of the forest, are central to the book. However, these traditions are dismissed by the company's executives as mere superstition. The desecration of a sacred site serves as a metaphor for cultural oppression, where dominant forces suppress or ignore the beliefs and spiritual practices of indigenous peoples.

The fear of supernatural retribution, embodied in the goddess of the forest, represents a cultural and spiritual form of resistance. Although the corporation possesses physical power, there is an intrinsically invisible force that the locals believe cannot be subdued. This reflects the tension between the modern world and ancient beliefs, where old beliefs resist submission by spiritual or mythological means, even when they are oppressed in material terms.

Black Moon Rising skillfully depicts the dynamics of power structures and oppression, especially through the prism of corporate greed, colonial attitudes, and the suppression of local traditions. The novel not only reflects environmental and cultural exploitation but also comments on the class power imbalances that define the relations between foreign directors and local workers. Through this, I explored broader themes of resistance, powerlessness, and the consequences of the exploitation of people and the environment.

Race and Identity

In the novel *2084*, a multicultural context with characters from various global alliances such as the European

Coalition, the Asian Alliance, and the United States introduces racial dynamics within a futuristic world order. There are tensions between these groups, particularly over control of resources such as Rtanj tea, which symbolizes power and dominance. The characters' race and national identity become central to their political interests, reflecting a divided global world, still torn apart by old alliances and struggles for scarce resources.

My novel *Black Moon Rising* explores identity through the presentation of complex characters that shape their surroundings and backgrounds, especially the protagonist, Andjelija, who grew up with foster parents but feels a deep curiosity about her roots. Her journey reflects a deep sense of striving to understand her origins, and the novel explores the influence of tradition and heritage on the formation of personal identity. The depiction of Andjelija's connection to the mythological figure Muma Paduri suggests that her identity is firmly tied to mystical and cultural roots, reflecting her deep roots in the country and its folklore. The novel deals with themes of belonging, origin, and the search for a place in a community.

Gender and Feminism

Gender and feminist themes are central in the novel *Black Moon Rising*, especially through the character of Muma Paduri, the protectress of women who opposes male oppression. In her mythological role, Muma Paduri embodies the strength and autonomy of women, often punishing violent male figures. This role is similar to the Greek

goddess Artemis or the Roman goddess Diana, both of which represent independence and the untamed feminine spirit. Andjelija, as the central character, confronts societal expectations and traditional family roles, balancing her professional ambitions as an archaeologist with her role as a mother and potential romantic partner. The exploration of these themes makes *Black Moon Rising* not only a fantasy novel with rich mythological undertones but also a reflection on contemporary issues of identity and gender dynamics.

A Means of Escape

In an increasingly complex and sometimes stressful world, readers turn to fantasy as a means of escape. Fantasy worlds offer a respite from everyday struggles, allowing readers to indulge in worlds where magic exists and where the usual rules do not apply. This form of escape is not only a way to escape reality but also to find catharsis. The high stakes and clear moral choices present in many fantasy stories offer a form of relief from the ambiguity and complexity of modern life.

In the pages of these imaginative worlds, readers find refuge from the pressures and uncertainties of everyday life, finding solace in environments where magic flourishes, mythical creatures roam, and the ordinary rules of reality cease to apply. There, the impossible becomes possible and the extraordinary common, which is a refreshing departure from the predictability and limitations of the real world. Fantasy allows readers to free themselves from the

weight of routine and surrender to spaces where creativity and wonder reign supreme, unfettered by the boundaries of logic or the known.

However, this escape is not only temporary; it often brings a deep sense of catharsis. Through high-stakes conflicts, epic quests, and a world in which moral choices are usually more clearly defined, readers find a sense of clarity and justice that can be hard to come by in real life. The classic struggle between good and evil, often encountered in fantasy stories, provides a kind of moral relief—a world where justice often prevails and where heroes, though imperfect, pursue noble causes. This structure brings relief from the moral ambiguity and complex ethical dilemmas that characterize modern society, allowing readers to experience a sense of completion that may be lacking in their lives.

In addition, fantasy literature often touches on universal themes and emotional experiences that resonate deeply with readers, from love and loss to courage and sacrifice. By facing fictional challenges alongside beloved characters, readers can find the courage to face their own struggles, drawing strength from the resilience and perseverance displayed in these fantastical environments. Fantasy worlds thus provide not only a means of escape but also a unique opportunity for self-examination as readers explore their values and fears through the prism of enchanted empires.

In this way, fantasy literature serves as a portal and a mirror: a portal to the enchanted worlds of boundless adventure and a mirror that reflects the timeless human

aspirations for justice, heroism, and connection. Through this balance between escapism and catharsis, fantasy offers readers a significant respite from reality, allowing them to return to their lives with new perspectives, courage, and hope.

Cultural Reflection and Mythology

Fantasy often borrows from mythological and folkloric traditions, allowing modern authors to reimagine and retell ancient stories. This can serve as a cultural reflection, where various myths, legends, and religious beliefs are reinterpreted in ways that resonate with contemporary social values or offer new perspectives.

One of the most appealing aspects of the *Kosingas* series lies in the incorporation of Serbian mythology, which adds a rich, authentic layer to the fantasy genre. The series *Kosingas* draws readers into a world full of Serbian folklore, where mythological figures and ancient gods are not only part of the narrative but are central to the cultural and historical identity of the setting itself. By bringing these mythical elements to life, I not only reintroduce Serbian legends to modern readers but also explore deeper themes of heritage, spirituality, and resilience, making *Kosingas* a cultural bridge between the past and the present.

At the heart of the series is the Kosingas, a guardian figure whose duty is to protect the border between the earthly world and the world of mythological forces. The Kosingas is not just a warrior - he is a spiritual protector who is

deeply connected to the country, tradition, and historical struggles of Serbia. This figure reflects the historical role of the patron saint in Serbian culture, resembling real figures such as monks and knights who defended both the country and the faith from invaders. The late professor Sreten Petrović said at one of my promotions that Kosingas Gavrilo reminded him of St. Sava. In doing so, Kosingas pays homage to the legacy of these custodians, embedding them in a fantastic narrative that resonates with national pride and collective memory. It is a symbol of resilience, a figure who opposes both physical and supernatural threats in order to defend Serbian identity and values.

The series introduces readers to mythological creatures and deities from Slavic folklore, each representing specific cultural fears, values, and aspirations. Among these creatures are vampires, a reference to the original Balkan legends of vampires, which differ greatly from modern depictions. Unlike the sophisticated vampires of Western mythology, the vampires in *Kosingas* and *The Curse of Cain* are grotesque, malevolent spirits who embody the fear of death and the unknown—a notion deeply rooted in the rural traditions of the Balkans. Depicting the vampire in its original form not only preserves the authenticity of these ancient stories but also draws on the primal fears that shaped the beliefs and rituals of rural communities in Serbia.

The *Kosingas* series also introduces dragon-like creatures and other mythological creatures unique to Slavic folklore, including dragons and ale (serpentine demons, sg. ala). These creatures are often associated with natural

phenomena, such as storms or droughts, and were believed to have the power to both protect and destroy communities. Dragons are not monsters to be killed but complex entities that symbolize both the destructive and regenerative forces of nature. This depiction reflects the Slavic view of nature as a dual force—one that can nurture and sustain but also wreak havoc if not respected. These mythological figures reintroduce readers to the complex relationship between humanity and nature, a theme that resonates with contemporary environmental issues.

The *Kosingas* series not only preserves these mythological elements but adapts them to explore universal questions of faith, duty, and identity. By connecting Serbian history with mythology, I elevate the role of folklore above mere storytelling; I use it as a tool to explore the cultural psyche and historical resilience of Serbia. Characters like Kosingas Gavrilo embody the ongoing struggle of the Serbian people to preserve their heritage and spiritual identity against external forces. This story serves as an homage to Serbian culture and reminds us of the power of myth to connect past generations to the present, reflecting the enduring value of folklore as a cultural and spiritual guide.

Kosingas creates a rich weave of myth and history that speaks to the power of cultural heritage and the timelessness of mythological themes. Drawing inspiration from Serbian folklore, I not only draw attention to lesser-known cultural narratives but also contribute to the diversity of the fantasy genre, offering readers an insight into the spiritual and historical heart of Serbia. Through these mythological elements, *Kosingas* becomes more

than a fantasy series; it is a journey into the soul of a culture, inviting readers to explore the values, beliefs, and resilience that define Serbian identity.

In the novel *Black Moon Rising*, a significant mythological character is Muma Paduri, the Lady of the Forest, the patron saint of nature who represents both the mystery and the power of the natural world. Muma Paduri embodies the sanctity of the forest and serves as a guardian of the wildlife, punishing those who do not respect or exploit her space. This character is associated with historical and contemporary themes of respect for nature and conservation, echoing the idea that the natural world is not just a resource but a living entity that deserves respect. Muma Paduri emphasizes the spiritual connection of the Serbian people with their land, illustrating how folklore can reflect values that have lasted through generations.

On the other hand, *The Curse of Cain* serves as a complex reflection on the relationship between culture, religion, and myth, focusing on how ancient curses and supernatural beliefs permeate Serbian cultural identity. Set in the 18th century, during the height of vampire hysteria, this trilogy combines historical reality with folkloric elements, creating a narrative that explores the tension between the rationality of the Enlightenment and deep-seated superstitions. The story immerses readers in the fears and beliefs of the time, where an epidemic of vampirism and fear of the undead reflect the anxieties of a society under threat, both from disease and from unprecedented forces lurking in the shadows.

In *The Curse of Cain,* vampirism becomes a symbolic representation of cultural invasion and moral decay. The narrative introduces us to characters like Arnaut Paul, who struggle with their identity and personal demons in the midst of social turmoil. Serbian cultural beliefs about vampires, influenced by Slavic mythology, present them not only as creatures of horror but also as manifestations of curses and sins that transcend generations. This resonates with the theme of Cain's curse, referring to the biblical story of Cain, who, as the first assassin, is cursed with a life of toil and wandering. In the narrative, this curse takes on a Serbian dimension, suggesting that ancestral sins and moral failure can haunt a family or community, reflecting a regional belief in inherited guilt and the influence of ancestry on fate.

The vampire epidemic described in the trilogy is deeply connected to local superstition. Serbian folklore describes vampires, or *vampiri* (original plural), as ghosts or revived corpses that return from the grave, often to torment their own relatives or neighbors. The novel highlights this fear, showing how communities, abandoned by science and reason, resort to ancient rituals for protection. For example, the villagers' belief that certain bodies should be exhumed and stabbed to prevent further deaths reflects a blend of religious and mythological practices that have evolved over the centuries. This reliance on supernatural explanations emphasizes cultural resistance to foreign ideologies, as the community's attachment to folklore allows them to affirm an authentically Serbian view of the world in the face of the influences of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires.

The setting during the actual historical period—the establishment of the Habsburg Quarantine Line along the border with Ottoman territories—further deepens the exploration of Serbian identity in the novel. This quarantine line was established to protect the Habsburg Monarchy from the spread of the plague and symbolized the boundary not only between empires but also between rationality and superstition. In *The Curse of Cain*, however, it also serves as a boundary where the mystical world intertwines with the human realm. Soldiers and officials, such as Dr. Glazer, who come into contact with the infected and the supernatural, find themselves torn between their duty to uphold Enlightenment ideals and their own deep-seated fear of the unknown. This creates a fascinating contrast between scientific knowledge and primal fear, as even educated members of society are drawn into local beliefs that they initially wanted to reject.

The character of the vampire explores the cultural conflicts between Serbian villagers and foreign Habsburg authorities. Characters like a foreign doctor who tries to rationalize and reject the beliefs of the villagers face the limitations of reason in a world ruled by fear and superstition. This theme highlights the cultural gap between Western ideals of rationality and Serbia's reliance on folklore as a means of understanding the world. The novels suggest that attempts by foreign powers to impose order and control on Serbian territories often fail to take into account the cultural depth and historical resilience of local beliefs.

The Curse of Cain is a narrative thread that explores the ancestral burden of sin and the inevitability of revenge. The

protagonists' struggles reflect the idea that curses—whether familial, cultural, or moral—cannot be easily avoided. This is a powerful reflection on Serbian cultural views of fate and morality, where it is believed that an individual's actions have long-lasting consequences. The curse manifests itself not only as a personal burden for individuals like Arnaut Paul but also as a social calamity that engulfs entire communities, suggesting that collective history and unresolved traumas shape the lives of future generations.

The Curse of Cain creates a narrative that blends historical detail with mythological insight, highlighting how deep-seated beliefs can influence human behavior and community responses. The portrayal of vampires as physical threats and symbolic embodiments of unsolved sins and ancestral curses speaks to the enduring relevance of mythology in shaping cultural identity. Immersing readers in the fears and spiritual beliefs of 18th-century Serbia, the novel illustrates how mythology serves not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a way to confront and reflect on complex moral dilemmas.

Subversion of Tropes and Mixing of Genres

Modern fantasy often breaks traditional tropes, pushing the boundaries of earlier works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The authors now experiment with heroism, crime, and the nature of good and evil. In my novels, I show a penchant for changing traditional fantasy tropes, especially the clear distinction between good and evil, which often dominates classic high fantasy. In

Kosingas, while there is an all-out struggle between the forces of light and darkness, the characters are rarely just heroes or villains, thus emphasizing moral ambiguity and shades of gray, where even protectors like Gavrilo question their inner demons and the complexity of their duties.

With this approach, I show a willingness to mix genres, moving between historical fiction, epic fantasy, and dark fantasy. By merging these genres, the traditional format of fantasy is shifted, sometimes challenging expectations of what fantasy should be, setting its stories in a world that feels both historical and mythical.

While fantasy usually works with clear lines between good and evil, in *Black Moon Rising*, I break the conventions of the genre by mixing elements of supernatural horror and psychological thriller into modern fantasy. The scene with the bulldozer desecrating the sacred space and the subsequent supernatural revenge is an example of the story moving from classic fantasy to darker, ambiguous areas, mixing mythological realism with industrial exploitation. The novel reads as a mixture of ecological thriller, mythological epic, and dark fantasy, subverting the typical narratives of the "heroic journey."

Diverse Representation

Contemporary fantasy is becoming increasingly inclusive, opening up space for marginalized voices and undervalued groups. Writers such as Marlon James (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf*) and R.F. Kuang (*The Poppy War*) introduce readers to non-Western mythologies and settings,

offering stories that reflect a wider range of experiences. This enriches the genre, expanding its imaginative horizons beyond Eurocentric medieval settings, including African, Asian, indigenous, and other cultural influences. My work contributes to this inclusiveness by introducing audiences to an uncommon and very specific cultural and geographical context — primarily medieval Serbia and the surrounding Slavic regions. As a result, the characters mainly reflect the population and cultural composition of this region.

In *Black Moon Rising*, the focus is on modern local Serbian environments and myths, which makes the representation geographically and culturally specific, so the diversity is reflected in the presentation of lesser-known European traditions, rather than ethnic or racial diversity. Characters such as Šušković bring elements of local superstition and beliefs related to regional identity, depicting the deep cultural diversity within Serbia itself. The women in the narrative, such as Jovana and the ethereal female spiritual figures, also provide a nuanced, if sometimes objectified, portrayal.

However, by presenting Slavic and Balkan cultures, my novels offer a form of cultural diversity that is relatively underestimated in global fantasy literature. It provides a deeper insight into a rich mythological and historical background that has not been widely explored outside of its region.

Psychological and Philosophical Depth

Today, fantasy delves into deeper psychological and philosophical questions as well. Rather than just telling the story of the struggle between good and evil, many contemporary works explore the nature of existence, free will, and moral ambiguity.

For example, in the novel *2084*, Vukša's amnesia and his awakening introduce narrative psychological complexity. The protagonist's struggle to regain his memory symbolizes a broader human struggle for identity and understanding in a world that has changed drastically. This aspect introduces philosophical questions about the self, memory, and the nature of reality in a highly controlled environment. The Protectorate's focus on manipulating Vukša's mind in order to extract the secret of the Rtanj tea further intensifies ethical dilemmas regarding autonomy and the exploitation of individuals for the benefit of the state.

In *Kosingas*, I often move beyond action and adventure to explore deeper psychological and philosophical themes. The character Gavrilo, for example, is not just a warrior-monk; he is a character who is burdened with existential questions, personal doubts, and the weight of his moral responsibilities. The emotional and psychological complexity of the characters helps to elevate the stories above the simple retelling of folklore or combat narratives by going deeper into the human mind, exploring themes of duty, faith, sacrifice, and the psychological burden of fighting supernatural forces.

In addition, the *Kosingas* trilogy touches on philosophical debates about good and evil, fate, and free will,

challenging the characters to consider their roles in the grand scheme of life and the cosmos. These introspective elements set my works apart from more action-oriented fantasies, providing readers with thoughtful reflections within the mythological drama.

The novel *Black Moon Rising* contains considerable psychological and philosophical depth. Characters like Tom Harmony experience existential fears and personal struggles, especially with the burden of guilt and the consequences of the desecration of nature. Psychological tension builds as the characters face the physical and supernatural consequences of their actions. The philosophical question of human arrogance in the exploitation of nature for profit is central, especially when nature (represented through the Lady of the Forest) takes revenge against such intrusions.

Moral Clarity and Ambiguity

While many readers turn to fantasy because of the clear distinctions between good and evil, modern fantasy increasingly embraces moral ambiguity. Heroes in modern fantasy often face ethical dilemmas that do not have easy answers, and villains are more often portrayed as complex characters with understandable motivations.

One of the key characteristics of my work is the balance between moral clarity and ambiguity. While there is a clear sense of opposing forces — light vs. darkness, order vs. chaos — I avoid morally black-and-white terms. My characters, even those who are meant to be protectors

or heroes, often face moral dilemmas that force them to question their choices and the cost of their duties.

For example, in *Kosingas*, the role of the monk Gavrilo as the protector of the people often leads him to painful decisions, where the boundaries between right and wrong become blurred. This ambiguity invites readers to engage with the ethical dimensions of his journey, making the story more deeply moral. Even villains, like the villains in the story, have complex motivations that go beyond the typical "evil for evil's sake" motif, adding layers of depth to the conflict.

Moral ambiguity is also extensively explored in *Black Moon Rising*. The conflict between modern industry and the sanctity of nature creates a space where the lines between good and evil are blurred. Characters cannot be easily classified as heroes or villains - for example, corporate figures desecrate a sacred place for profit, but their motivations are rooted in real-world pressures and corporate demands. The consequences of their actions, especially supernatural revenge, add layers of moral complexity, as punishment for their actions often seems unavoidable but also disturbingly ambiguous.

Conclusion

Fantasy in contemporary literature continues to be a dynamic and multi-layered genre, capable of engaging readers by offering an escape from reality and a deep reflection on it. As a tool for exploring social issues, it provides diverse representation, challenges traditional narratives,

and offers emotional catharsis. The flexibility of fantasy allows it to adapt to changing cultural and social landscapes, making it one of the most adaptable and influential genres today.

I believe that my novels provide a rich reading adventure, deeply rooted in Serbian and Slavic mythology and history, but with modern philosophical depth. They reflect a fascinating subversion of traditional fantasy tropes, offering psychological complexity and moral ambiguity. The adventurous elements of the stories and the development of my characters attract a wide audience, both young and old.

References

Tešić, A. (2019). 2084. Beograd: Strahor.

Tešić, A. (2016). Kosingas 1: Red zmaja. Beograd: Strahor.

Tešić, A. (2017). Kosingas 2: Bezdanj. Beograd: Strahor.

Tešić, A. (2017). Kosingas 3: Smrtovanje. Beograd: Strahor.

Tešić, A. (2016). Kletva Kainova. Beograd: Strahor.

Tešić, A. (2019). Kletva Kainova 2. Beograd: Strahor.

Tešić, A. (2020). Kletva Kainova 3: Summus deus. Beograd: Strahor.

Tešić, A. (2023). Crni mesec u usponu. Beograd: Strahor.