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Preface 2015 to Considering the Sense of “Fantasy” or
“Fantastic Fiction”: An Effusion (850 words)

This essay needs little if any updating, since it was written at a time when I had already waxed increasingly skeptical about the politico-epistemological presuppositions dominant in MOSF – as suggested in my preface to “SF: Metaphor, Parable, and Chronotope.” Of course, if one wanted to follow all the twists and turns of commercial publication and late imperialist ideology, its repertory would have to be updated; for example, Stephen King’s sales seem to have by 2006 reached 350 million copies. But such chronicling was never my intent; I was proposing rather a depth critique of what the title indicated: of the sense (meaning, and thus also influence) of a new congeries of literary genres – which then interact most intimately with comics, movies, TV series, and similar, not to mention our understanding of everyday lives. This congeries is reducible to a few paradigms which I analyzed as to their chronotope, agential forces, and other formal elements in relationship to the reader’s expectations and usage. Thus I have changed a handful of minor turns stylistically, but I stand by my stance and analyses of 2001 – so far as they go. But I can imagine two rather different matters of unfinished business which in an ideal world could have been additionally discussed.

First, I assume some important matters of the post-2008 galloping capitalist mass immiseration of huge majorities all over the world would deserve to be brought aboard, such as the exacerbation of militarism¹ and the rise of world-wide violent fascist chauvinism from USA through much of Europe to India as (wrong) responses; the affinities of fascism to fantasy fiction of the mastodontic kind – say the super-epic movies and TV series presenting barbarism as inescapable reality – replete with killings, brutal sex, and magic, are obvious and proudly assumed by them. However, somebody else will have to do this updating.

One of the aspects I found most striking in Fantasy was a loss of the sense of a thick and complex society, a flight from cumulative time to agoraphobic epic spaces – or in Horror the symmetrically obverse claustrophobic spaces – where choices have been simplified to animal survival, a super-ideologized Social Darwinism (indeed much akin to fascist deliria). One could object that its authors are simply responding to the spontaneous views of the unemployed or the precariate who have

psychically strong (but politically sterile) reasons to feel so; yet as Brecht put it, “the stone does not excuse the fallen.” In this kind of popular fiction, I argue in the following essay, there has come about a shift from SF’s appeal to social classes with confidence that something can at present be done about a collective, historical future, to Fantasy’s appeal to social classes who have been cast adrift and lost that confidence, so that they face their own present and future with horror, the war of each against each, and/or a resolve to have a good time before the Deluge.

Thus, second, I acknowledge the legitimate repulsion I feel toward such barbarizing aspects may not give the whole story, for we lack both distance and enough critical work on cognate matters. I shall mention here two arguments. There are important exceptions to the two-dimensional (shall I say Disneyfied? or neo-medieval?) reduction of agents and chronotope in Fantasy; I have discussed the foremost one, Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series in a separate essay,² for what Jameson diagnosed as her “world reduction” is such in order to concentrate on specific human relationships, while in Fantasy it is as a rule there in order to avoid specifics and follow ideology. True, they do not stand for 99% of the genre(s). Yet such important exceptions – I have suggested elsewhere another one could in part be the Bas Lag novels of China Miéville – throw a doubt on the rule, which should perhaps be better articulated. Finally, my supreme quandary here is Kafka, who undoubtedly does not suffer from the indignities I see in most Fantasy. I hope I may have time to pursue this in the years to come: “Mehr Licht!” (More light!), as Goethe is reputed to have said on his deathbed.

NOTES

1 See on this in SF the annual *Fictions* no. 3, special issue on *U.S. Science Fiction and War/Militarism* (Pisa and Roma, 2005), with 10 contributions, including a large bibliography and my overview “Of Starship Troopers and Refuseniks: War and Militarism in U.S. Science Fiction,” of which Part 1 is reprinted in Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction* (Columbia, SC, 2008), and Part 2 in *Extrapolation* 48.1 (2007).

2 “On U.K. Le Guin’s ‘Second Earthsea Trilogy’ and Its Cognitions,” *Extrapolation* 47.3 (Winter 2006). My take on Disneyfication is in “A Tractate on Dystopia 2001,” in my book *Defined by a Hollow: Essays*

on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010. The new investigation on emotion announced in the essay's section 4.4, which has brought to a provisional head my work listed in note 8, is "Emotion, Brecht, Empathy vs. Sympathy," *The Brecht Yearbook* 33 (2008).