The fantastic represents a wide and heterogeneous field in literary, cultural, and media studies. Encompassing some of the field’s foremost voices such as Fred Botting and Larissa Lai, as well as exciting new perspectives by junior scholars, this volume offers a mosaic of the fantastic now. The contributions pinpoint and discuss current developments in theory and practice by offering enlightening snapshots of the contemporary Anglophone landscape of research in the fantastic. The authors’ arguments and analyses thus give new impetus to the field’s theoretical and methodological approaches, its textual materials, its main interests, and its crucial findings.

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Introduction

INA BATZKE, ERIC ERBACHER, LINDA HESS, AND CORINNA LENHARDT

“‘Fantastic,’ like its partner ‘fabulous,’ carries unequivocally positive (if imprecise) connotations in common speech. But place it in a literary context and suddenly we have a problem. Suddenly it is something dubious, embarrassing (because presumed extra-canonical). Suddenly we need to justify our interest in it.” (Armitt 1996: 1)

Roughly twenty years after Lucie Armitt’s astute description of the state of research in the literary fantastic as problematic – or even “dubious” or “embarrassing” –, the atmosphere has changed. Scholars researching and writing about the innumerable varieties of the fantastic no longer have to grapple with arguments that dismiss it as escapist pulp-fiction, which cannot and should not be discussed alongside serious literature. Since theoretical debate on the subject was initiated in the second half of the 20th century, largely triggered by the publication of Roger Callois’ Au Coeur du Fantastique (1965) and Tzvetan Todorov’s The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre (1973), research on the fantastic has become a rapidly developing field of scholarship with great international and interdisciplinary relevance. The field’s significance is reflected in numerous scholarly journals, associations, organizations, research projects, and institutions that have focused on and continue to analyze the fantastic. The broad acceptance of fantastic texts as well as fantastic elements in literature, film, music, digital media, and so forth as relevant objects of study is an enormously advantageous development. At the same time, this opening-up of the fantastic to literary, cultural, social, and media studies has created an almost impenetrable thicket of research foci, methods, aims, and findings. To borrow Armitt’s diction: Suddenly the field appears fantastically messy. Suddenly we have a new set of problems.

Within the current breadth and diversity of research, one central question has emerged that seems especially prone to active disagreement: What is the fantas-
tic? While there have been heated debates on how to define and delineate the very subject of research practically ever since the formation of the field, the issue evokes a broader, yet much more interconnected spectrum of answers today than ever before. The traditional polar opposition between narrow, minimalist definitions in the tradition of Todorov and extremely broad, inclusive conceptualizations of the fantastic as any kind of cultural product that juxtaposes an empirically verifiable world to a fantastic alternative is no longer a satisfactory description of the state of research in the fantastic. More recent developments in Cultural and Literary Studies (such as transnational, transcultural, and transmedial approaches) contribute to the field’s growing heterogeneity, revealing clearly how significant a place the fantastic holds in contemporary cultures worldwide. At the same time, this proliferation and diversification of the fantastic necessitates an analytical survey and a taking stock of the most important theoretical and textual developments in the contemporary landscape of research in the fantastic.

*Exploring the Fantastic: Genre, Ideology, and Popular Culture* sets out to address these current developments in Literary, Cultural, and Media Studies. Taken together, the three thematic sections – “Genre,” “Ideology,” and “Popular Culture” – offer an astute snapshot of the contemporary Anglophone landscape of research in the fantastic and provide new stimuli to theoretical and methodological approaches, its textual materials, its main interests, and its crucial findings. With these subsections, the volume aims at a) contributing innovative research to salient discussions about the definitions, traditions, and boundaries of the fantastic, b) emphasizing a central strategic element of fantastic texts, that is, the critique and subversion of normative ideological constructs, and c) showing exemplarily the broad impact of the fantastic on popular cultural media and texts.

The eleven chapters that comprise the three thematic sections in turn reflect and take part in the most current and urgent debates in the field of the fantastic today. In order to pay tribute to the enormous variety of disciplines and voices involved in these debates, we have included articles from authors of all academic ranks and from a great variety of countries. While some of our contributors are internationally renowned scholars, writers, and experts in the field of the Anglophone fantastic, others have just begun their academic careers and, thus, provide not only innovative perspectives on their subject matters but also attest to the field’s continuing vibrancy. Taken together, this volume offers not only an effective stocktaking of the current debates and arguments in the field, but also innovative perspectives, questions, and answers for a truly “fantastic” twenty-first century. In this, “fantastic,” of course, might also translate to “Gothic,” “magic,”
“dystopic,” or “creepy” – variant aspects of the fantastic that are discussed in depth in this volume.

In the first section, “Genre,” four papers engage critically with the key question of how – or whether – the genre of the fantastic can be defined in the twenty-first century. The contributions not only interrogate conventional definitions of the fantastic, its sub-genres, and the fantastic’s relationship to “the real,” but also engage in innovative re-definitions of the larger genre that take contemporary developments into account. The section opens with Daniel Scott’s proposition of a new, grammatical approach to the fantastic that offers a comprehensive definition of fantasy encompassing classic fantasy fiction as well as the works of science fiction and Christian speculative fiction. In “Belief, Potentiality and the Supernatural: Mapping the Fantastic,” Scott frames fantastic genres as conditionals, an innovative approach that proposes nothing less than a new framework for reading fantastic literature. Further, the grammatical approach allows Scott to highlight how other models of thought such as theism and atheism have always been keenly involved in the fantastic, since their narrative stances are accurately reflected in the conditional concepts of fantasy and science fiction. Thus, Scott’s method enriches previous research in the fantastic with a new and broadly applicable theoretical perspective.

In “Fantasy without Fantasy: Politics, Genre, and Media in the Fiction of M. John Harrison,” Fred Botting presents a performative analysis of the works of British science fiction novelist M. John Harrison that invites readers to actively explore the fantastic and to engage with the different facets of “fantasy without fantasy.” Botting takes this phrase, coined by Harrison himself, and – via a reading of Harrison’s short stories – develops it into a performative mode of the fantastic that fosters critical engagement with ideology and politics. Zeroing in on the turn-of-the-millennium short story “Suicide Coast” (1999), Botting carefully delineates the narrative layers, modes, and formal features that shape the story’s own negotiation of commercial fantasy (a mode aiming at complete immersion). Here, he highlights in particular Harrison’s powerful device of the glitch, a formal interruption that irritates the smoothness of commercial fantasy and that tilts the reader’s perception. This tilt then creates, as a flip image of commercial fantasy, “fantasy without fantasy” as a new critical lens for reading the contemporary fantastic.

In the subsequent article, Irina Golovacheva asks provocatively, “Is the Fantastic Really Fantastic?” She introduces the concept of “fantastika” alongside the more established notion of “the fantastic” and, thus equipped, tackles two decisive questions: Firstly, is the fantastic present in any genre of fantastika, and
secondly, does the presence of the fantastic in the text signify that the latter is an exemplar of fantastika? In a close analysis of these two core concepts in utopian literature and the presumable non-fantasticality of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931) and *Island* (1962), she reveals the artificiality of the rigid distinction between such disciplinary genres as scientific writing and fiction on the one hand, and science fiction and utopia on the other.

In the last article of this section, the novelist, poet, and scholar Larissa Lai, too, turns to utopian literature and reflects on how speculative fiction can be social in the 21st century. The implicit paradox in much utopian speculative fiction is that it does its social labor through the contrast between the world it offers and a non-ideal present, and yet seeks to transcend that present, often with an eye to an idealized commons. The question of redress for historical wrongs, however, poses a major problem in relation to that ideal. Lai analyzes speculative texts as “literary experiments” with a utopian edge. Such experiments that provide space for the eruptive potentials in utopian thinking and strive to follow the trail of those potentials, leading us beyond the possibilities of both “the human” and “nature,” towards the possibilities of both extra-human and racialized futures.

The second section, “Ideology,” discusses the fantastic as a literary genre, with particular regard to its societal and cultural implications. With a clear focus on fantastic texts’ critical negotiation of ideology, the four scholars in this section address the question, in what ways fantastic texts reflect, strengthen, or confront cultural ideologies. The specific focus here is on how fantastic texts, on the level of form as well as that of content, participate in questioning normative ideological constructs of nationhood, the environment, the Other, and sexuality.

The section opens with Alfons Gregori’s baseline article, “Crossing Impossible Boundaries? Fantastic Narrative and Ideology.” In his theoretical and conceptual chapter, Gregori starts out by dissecting the genealogy of both various conceptions of (Marxist) ideology as well as of the fantastic as a mode and genre. Building on this enquiry, he argues for a more liberal and flexible approach to ideology that takes the textual and contextual ambiguities and contingencies of ideological elements in a fantastic text into account. The effect of such a reading of fantastic literature, according to Gregori, is to engage the reader’s critical thinking by having to disambiguate not only the fantastic elements but also the potentially shifting ideological meanings of the real and fantastic elements.

In “Questioning Mononormativity: A Future of Fantastic Scholarship in Liminal Identities,” Brandy Eileen Allatt investigates the possibilities of science fiction works to critically examine liminal identities in the fantastic by engaging the concept of mononormativity, which implies the idealization of monogamous
sexual and romantic relationships in Western societies. While this concept has recently gained prominence as subject of inquiry in the social sciences, Allatt transports it to the field of fantastic literature. Analyzing three works of science fiction, namely Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and Vandana Singh’s *Distances* (2008), Allatt illustrates the narratives’ portrayal of relationships outside the societal norm of two-party monogamy. Her particular focus lies on their subtle or overt criticism of this norm, which resonates with cultural debates of the later 20th century as well as contemporary negotiations of identity and sexuality.

Johanna Pundt’s contribution “Organic Fantasy and the Alien Archetype in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*” considers Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor’s contemporary science fiction novel *Lagoon* (2014) and its re-shaping and expansion of established science fiction tropes from a postcolonial perspective. In particular, Pundt examines the author’s use of organic fantasy and the archetype of the alien. She analyzes Okorafor’s writing of alien arrival, not as a doubling of historical invasion by colonizers, but rather as a countering of colonial forces through the use of organic fantasy as a defamiliarization strategy that allows us to “imagine a Nigeria in which the magical and mythological intersect with science” (176). Ultimately, Pundt illustrates the productive synthesis born of postcolonial sci-fi in *Lagoon* that serves to negotiate not so much a distant future but rather to summon the possibilities of a de-colonial Nigerian present.

Michael Giebel’s “Fantastic Struggles: Magical Realism and Superhero Fiction as Manifestations of Cultural Hybridity and Agents of Hegemonic Subversion,” presents an investigation into Dominican-American author Junot Díaz’ writing, particularly his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Giebel illustrates how Díaz gives expression to the cultural experience of the so-called “1.5 generation” by, on the one hand, following the Latin American literary tradition of magical realism, but, on the other hand, interweaving it with a dominant literary mode of the fantastic native to his current cultural context: U.S. America’s superhero fiction.

The third section, “Popular Culture,” further expands the research into the constructions and deconstructions of ideologies, by highlighting the ubiquitous presence of the fantastic in contemporary popular culture. Discussing a variety of media and genres, the section’s three chapters analyze the fantastic and its traces in Anglophone popular culture ranging from the social media phenomenon of “creepypasta” to erotic and romance fiction to Hard SF. Spotlights on fiction, film, television, and Internet memes demonstrate that the fantastic has become a highly effective marketing instrument part and parcel of contemporary main-
stream pop-culture. At the same time, the discussions of these chapters also connect to the earlier sections’ discussions of genre and ideology, highlighting once again the currency as well as wider significance of the fantastic and its theoretical debates in the twenty-first century.

In “There are no Blank Slates: Relations between the Fantastic and the Real,” Sarah Faber argues that the fantastic cannot exist without the real. Based on the assumption that imagination needs references and comparisons to retain meaning and drawing on a variety of pop-cultural narratives, this article explores in how far the fantastic relies on elements of the real world to produce meaningful and relatable experiences for its audience. Fantastic narratives enjoy a comparatively large amount of creative freedom, as they always include elements that contradict our notions of “real” or “realistic.” Yet, as Faber shows using examples from the well-known 19th-century novella Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, H.P. Lovecraft’s writings, and the 2016 Hollywood blockbuster Deadpool, even they rely very much on incorporating familiar aspects from our primary reality.

Atalie Gerhard’s innovative study “Creepypastas: How Counterterrorist Fantasies (Re-)Create Horror Traditions for Today’s Digital Communities” focuses on the pop-cultural significance of “creepypastas” and creates a socio-historical framework for this new genre of communal online horror storytelling vis-à-vis the ideologies fueling the United States’ Wars on Terror. In her analysis of the Internet memes “Slender Man” and “Black Eyed Kids,” Gerhard, thus, is interested in outlining the genre conventions of creepypastas as the digital age’s outstanding contribution to the fantastic literary mode of horror and Gothic writing. Equally central, however, is her focus on understanding the cultural, historical, and social circumstances that contributed to the phenomenon of Internet users collectively weaving legend cycles.

Finally, in “‘All the Better to Eat You With’: The Werewolf in Romance and Erotic Literature,” Alexandra Leonzini turns to the widely popular genres of romance and erotic fiction and focuses on the recent prominence of paranormal creatures, such as werewolves, as romantic protagonists in these texts. Starting her analysis with 19th-century horror fiction before moving to 20th-century films and 21-century romance and erotic literature, Leonzini traces the changes in the construction of the gendered and sexualized body of the figure of the werewolf, arguing that these developments reflect popular cultural tastes and marketing strategies. Particularly in recent years, this has also resulted in the emergence of a large variety of fan fiction that, especially in its erotic explicitness, differs from the publications of established publishing houses catering to the market.
While the eleven articles grouped in the three thematic sections of this volume cannot exhaust the topic, they do create at once an illuminating cross-section and a mosaic of the fantastic now – that is of the fantastic as a genre and as a subject of academic debate in the current moment of the twenty-first century. They show that far from being “dubious,” the fantastic has many significant modes that range from the political, the critical, and the philosophical to the playful, the sensual, and the popular. The included articles thus provide new lenses through which to discern the fantastic as well as new impulses for debate, and they connect core issues of the field that have been present since its scholarly emergence to continuing investigations into its future directions. And this future begins in the here and now.

**Work Cited**