



Lectio Praecursoria
Speculative Mimesis – Beyond Non-
Mimetic Models

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Mimesis is perhaps not a term one would expect to see as the centerpiece of a study that focuses on fantasy storytelling. I certainly did not expect that this classic concept of literary studies would eventually end up in the title of my doctoral dissertation, which at its core is all about literary imagination and speculation. The novel concept that my study introduces, *speculative mimesis* – or the view of literary speculation as a form of mimesis – may indeed seem like a rather odd and unorthodox, even oxymoronic, fit.

That is, of course, because mimesis is commonly understood, as per dictionary definition, to refer to “imitative representation of reality in art” (OED), and is strongly associated with realism as a genre (e. g. Auerbach; see Halliwell 13; Isomaa et al.). Consequently, it is a nearly universally accepted refrain amongst scholarship that fantasy is a *non-mimetic* or even anti-mimetic form of fiction (e. g. Hume; Trebicki 2–4; Richardson 386; Oziewicz; Kortekallio 14). What is meant by this is that fantasy is more concerned with altering what might be called the “consensus reality” (see Hume 20–21) – or our habitual collective perception of what constitutes such reality (cf. Hutcheon 7) – than it is with imitating or representing it.

More broadly speaking, *speculation* or speculativeness – in fantasy and SF alike – is usually understood as a rhetorical impulse or an ontological quality that is directly opposed to the mimetic impulses or qualities of storytelling (e.g. Hume; Oziewicz). Speculative fiction renounces the attempt, often deemed central to the whole project of Western literature, to “represent the world as it is” (see Oziewicz). Instead, it adds and subtracts, it deals in possibilities and impossibilities, it builds scenarios and thought experiments (e.g. Scholes; McHale, “Science Fiction”; Gill 71–72; Roine, *Imaginative* 14). It remakes the world into its own playground, or creates entirely new ones.

Such overtly imaginative qualities are the basis on which fantasy as a popular genre is typically set apart from so-called literary or mainstream fiction. Some have done this derisively, deeming its pursuits escapist (e. g. Jackson 9; Eco 65; Ryan 66; see Hassler-Forest 16). Fantasy authors, scholars, and fans have, of course, been more liable to laud fantasy for those exactly same pursuits: they celebrate its power to operate beyond the everyday mundanity to which more realist kinds of fiction remain shackled (e. g. Scholes; Hume; Attebery, *Stories*; Oziewicz), as well as its resistance to an oppressive, post-Enlightenment “mimetic bias” that is allegedly integral to canonical Western literature at large (e. g. Hume 3; Oziewicz; Kortekallio 13–14; cf. Alber et al. 114).

But does this binary opposition between mimetic and non-mimetic kinds of fiction really hold water? Or rather, is it a theoretical construct that actually helps us understand relations between fiction and reality in a usefully nuanced way – in either fantasy or non-fantasy works? Or does it instead blinker our view of the full complexity of those relations?

How can such a dichotomy account, for example, for the way many actual viewers of HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) interpreted the famous, eminently memetic “Winter is coming” slogan as a dire warning of looming climate change (see DiPaolo 12; Barker et al. 88–116)? How does it serve to explain the readerly yearning for more diverse representation of different people and bodies in fantasy fiction that has been prominently discussed across media in recent years – most recently in the case of Amazon’s new *Wheel of Time* television series (2021)? And how can such a dichotomy help us make sense of the experiences of us 90s kids who, having grown up with Harry Potter, felt on some deeply painful level that J. K. Rowling’s open commitment to transphobic ideology in the summer of 2020 tarnished a very real and important corner of our shared world – a corner we had hitherto considered a safe space?

Some people indeed reckon that since it is fantasy we are talking about, none of such a search for meaning, representation, or safe community should get in the way of nice, immersive adventures and escapist fun. Those people – prominently represented, for example, by the Sad Puppies campaign that sought to disrupt the Hugo Award nominations in the years 2013–2015 (see Oleszczuk; Wilson) – are also frequently and deservedly called out these days for considering such fun a more important function for fantasy stories than the needs of other, often marginalised people to be seen and respected, or to find in fiction some meaningful ways to make sense of the complex and often anxiety-inducing world we share. It does seem that readers these days generally expect fantasy stories to make some kind of contribution to the reality we face in our daily lives, rather than merely offering escapes from or alternatives for it (e. g. Hassler-Forest; DiPaolo; Barker et al.).

Indeed, in the current world situation, where that everyday reality for many looks increasingly more complicated, polarised, unstable, and precarious, pursuing a more nuanced understanding of the manner in which fantasy stories respond to such a reality looks to me like an important line of inquiry. This kind of storytelling is, after all, both more popular and more central to ongoing cultural debates than it has ever been during its modern history. Fantasy can therefore probably be assumed to hold some special significance for 21st-century audiences – and we might speculate, as it were, that this significance

has something to do with fantasy being able to negotiate its own relations with reality in a way that resonates with those audiences.

Those relations, then, are probably not best understood just in terms of fantasy offering its readers “immersive” adventures in imaginary worlds, as much of fantasy scholarship has habitually thought (e.g. Attebery, *Strategies* 42; Wolf 49; cf. Ryan 5; see Roine, *Imaginative*; for critique, see Polvinen, “Enactive Perception”). Neither does the notion of estrangement, building on Darko Suvin’s classic work in SF studies, quite capture the kind of contribution 21st-century fantasy stories can be seen to make towards a better understanding of our reality. Such contribution is, after all, not just about making things seem strange, unsettling audiences, or prompting readers to consider alternatives to how things are (cf. McHale, “Science Fiction”; Suvin 17–18). It is, I find, also about attributing some greater significance to things *as they are*, and of making models by which a strange and fragmentary reality can be made more comprehensible, more familiar. It is about modeling possible ways of giving meaning to the world around us, and possibly helping us change it for the better.

The fantasy author N. K. Jemisin has expressed a similar sentiment rather eloquently, stating, “I look to science fiction and fantasy as the aspirational drive of the Zeitgeist: we creators are the engineers of possibility” (qtd. in Cunningham). In her breakthrough fantasy trilogy *The Broken Earth* (2015–2017), she explores this sort of idea with a protagonist whose driving desire in her life is to “make the world better” (Jemisin 381) – to connect with the planet on which she lives in a meaningful, productive way, with sincere compassion for that planet that goes beyond her own need to survive. In so doing, Jemisin also imagines – or indeed, engineers – possibilities for fantasy fiction to respond to parts of our own reality that are difficult or impossible to represent in art as such (cf. Hume 94; Chu 10–11). Her trilogy turns human relationship with the non-human natural environment into a matter of easily relatable empathy, or rather, overexploitation of natural resources into a critical failure thereof. Jemisin’s work thus evokes hope that a better way might be found – and that fantasy can help us find it.

This power of speculative storytelling to render otherwise irrepresentable or abstract things available for tangible artistic exploration is well-recognised (e.g. Stockwell 196–97; Chu; Rayment 83; McHale, “Speculative Fiction” 318; Polvinen, “Sense-making” 67–68). Fantasy, in particular, addresses the features of our reality that are beyond the mundane and the everyday, that are nebulous or numinous, divine or demonic, or not likely to actualise in any literal sense in the real world. That is, again, precisely why it is so often considered a non- or anti-mimetic form of fiction. It is crucial to note, however, that these features of our reality are indeed just that – nonexistent and intangible, yet still no less real a part of the world as we human beings navigate it (cf. Hume 43; Attebery, *Strategies* 27–28).

The author Terry Pratchett was fond of saying – I am paraphrasing here – that fantasy marks the place in the human nature where the falling angel meets the rising ape. For him, fantasy was a fundamental expression of human spirit, something that drives us to see the world – or rather worlds, plural – around us as much bigger, more complicated, more weird and wondrous and changeable than the immediate, visible, and measurable everyday reality available to our senses or our sciences. This, of course, does not mean that

fantasy needs to be taken literally as a means for glimpsing some divine truth “beyond the walls of the world”, as J.R.R. Tolkien famously has it (153). Rather, what it means is that fantasy – like any good fiction, I would think – goes far beyond representing reality “as it is.” In his own fiction, Pratchett made a point of making a distinction between things that exist and things that are real – they are not one and the same, and a thing does not need to be the former to qualify as the latter. Just because there is not an ounce of justice, duty, or mercy to be found anywhere in the universe does not mean those things are not real.

Fiction in general, I think, concerns itself with such intangible matters – things like experiences, impressions, interpretations, projections, and perspectives. It mediates our reality not as it is but as it seems, as it might be, as it could mean something, or as a perpetually unfinished work in progress – it aspires towards better models for imagining a reality, rather than depictions of a pre-existing one.

Looked at in this way, drawing a mimesis-versus-anti-mimesis dichotomy between fantasy and other, “non-speculative” kinds of fiction does not make much sense. When it comes to fantasy storytelling, I find that its blatantly imaginative qualities actually make it just a particularly effective form of fiction at directing readerly attention towards that world of impressions and interpretations in which fiction generally operates. It highlights that huge, tangled, endlessly variable, and expanding web of different versions of the world that make up the human experience of reality – and means of fiction to respond to that experience. By making its worlds obviously artificial, fantasy puts the spotlight on the creative artifice of any mimetic operations of fiction. It “lays bare”, to borrow Victor Shklovsky’s classic expression (27), how every work of fiction relates to reality as something much more complicated than a mere thing to represent or imitate (cf. McHale, “Science Fiction” and “Speculative Fiction”).

Consider, for example, Kazuo Ishiguro’s first fantasy novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015). It is set in a fantasy version of early medieval Britain where ogres, dragons, and pixies roam the countryside, aging knights of the Round Table are still around, and a mysterious curse of amnesia plagues the land. It is, in essence, a vision of Dark-Ages Britain as it is constructed in Arthurian legends and other forms of popular storytelling, rather than in historical records. As such an obviously artificial model of a time and place, it serves as a literary environment where Ishiguro can explore themes of historical memory and trauma on a collective and conceptual level, without getting tangled up with questions of real-world historical accuracy or political biases. Building a fantasy world, therefore, provides a means for going beyond questions of representation, and towards different, more constructive and complex ways in which fiction can relate to our reality.

It seems to me, on the whole, that the relations, interactions, and intertwinements between what we call fantasy worlds and what we call reality are much more multifaceted and open to interpretation than the idea of fantasy as a non-mimetic form of fiction can capture. Conversely, this interpretive ambiguity would also be just as central a feature to more “realist” forms of artistic mimesis as well. I therefore find that pitting fantasy, or speculative fiction in general, against some alleged “mimetic” norm in Western literature paints rather one-dimensional pictures of both this form of fiction and the literary landscape in which it exists on the whole. The differences between so-

called mimetic and speculative or fantastic sorts of fiction are not a matter of kind, but merely scale and focus.

In conclusion, I do find that the ubiquitous dichotomy constructed between mimesis and anti-mimesis gets in the way of examining relations between fantasy and reality in a nuanced way. Moreover, it also perpetuates a notion of the modern fantasy genre as something that contrasts with the mimetic aspirations of other forms of fiction in its historical context – which leads to a misleading impression that studying fantasy cannot provide us with knowledge about developments in fiction at large.

For example, this dichotomy obscures the fact that the emergence in the latter half of the 20th century of fantasy as the modern genre known today does not in fact coincide with the cultural heyday of realism, but with that of *postmodernism*. This is a period when, it is widely acknowledged, the notion of art being able to represent reality objectively – or indeed, a singular reality being there for art to reflect – was undergoing a major rethink (e.g. Lyotard; McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*; Hutcheon; Jameson). Seen from this perspective, the blatant imaginativeness of fantasy appears to be not a divergence from some alleged “mimetic” norm, but another response to a broader-scale *crisis of representation* in Western literature and culture.

And that crisis is far from over. If the numerous academic and popular articles, op-eds, and hot takes that have been written in the last five or 10 years are to be believed, we 21st-century human beings are “storytelling animals” (e.g. Meretoja 124; Dawson 407) living in a “post-truth” era (e.g. Fuller; Browse et al.; McIntyre). We have, it seems, been trapped into an information-era dystopia of our own making, where a compelling story trumps accurate information every time and everyone lives in their own private universe, reinforced by polarised media outlets and information bubbles that constrain the online side of our lives. And we cannot put this fragmented reality of ours back together, since it is apparently in our very nature to remake the world we share, over and over, with the language we use and the stories we tell (see Meretoja and Davis).

These radical ideas of postmodernist thinkers have now become popularised and normalised, a matter of common lore (also Kraatila). The situation is perhaps further exacerbated by the conspicuously global scale of the collective problems we face in our daily lives – climate change and the ongoing pandemic being the two most obvious examples. The only thing that can be accurately represented about such things in narrative fiction is the impossibility of capturing them in writing (see Walsh; Raipola; Caracciolo).

How, then, can fiction – speculative or otherwise – respond or contribute to such a world in a meaningful way? Where could its cultural importance lie, and how could it help us navigate this reality?

These are questions to which, I think, rethinking the speculative quality of fantasy fiction as a form of mimesis can provide some tentative answers. In its speculatively mimetic response to reality, as I conceptualise it, fantasy builds *theories* about the world – theories that are explicitly offered up as means for modeling a coherent and meaningful reality, to be judged not by their representational accuracy, but by their explanatory power (cf. McHale, *Constructing* 6).

Using this conceptualisation, I find that fantasy storytelling invites us to imagine worlds, and to ask how those worlds work as systems – and in so doing,

it can encourage us to try for a bigger-picture interpretation of the reality around us as well. It can also help us reconcile mindfulness of the idea that our shared reality is a matter of changeable interpretations with the notion that it is still real enough – and even entertain a plurality of different versions of reality as valid. And where our interpretations of reality fail, or are contested by other ones, fantasy can create space where lack of definite answers turns from an anxiety-inducing threat to the integrity of our world into an opportunity for enjoyable imaginative play. As such, it can also bring us face to face with our own interpretive agency in a productive and hopeful way.

I approach the speculative position fantasy storytelling assumes to reality as a response to the impossibility of representing the contemporary world in art, and as a means for confronting the challenges which that impossibility poses for contemporary fiction and its audiences. From this vantage, I find that 21st-century fantasy storytelling can be a powerful instrument for helping us feel at home in this uncertain world. This is not a matter of escapist consolation, but of giving us tools for navigating complexities of the contemporary sense of reality in a skilful and hopeful manner. And that, I believe, may be the most fundamental effect of the mimetic interplay between fiction and reality that today's audiences are looking for.

Biography: Elise Kraatila, PhD, defended her doctoral dissertation, titled *The Crisis of Representation and Speculative Mimesis: Rethinking Relations between Fiction and Reality with 21st-century Fantasy Storytelling*, at Tampere University on 3 December 2021. This essay is a slightly edited version of the lectio praecursoria she gave before the defense. The dissertation has been published in the Tampere University Dissertations series: <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-2160-4>.

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