

thoughts on Nigel price's response

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 29 Apr 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1596>

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Jonathan Laidlow — 29 Apr 1999, 16:36

Nigel.

Haven't time to give your comments the thought they deserve just yet, but I do need to clarify my own (and I know I'm right, so there!)

My post was an attempt at a general rebuff to those (like Borski) who try to produce a 'classic realist' interpretation of the Urth cycle where everything coheres and we get a clear picture of everything as if it were a 19th century realist novel. Classic realism is a rather outdated critical concept from the 70s which attempted a rather misguided critique of 19th century novels and attempted to refine the broad idea of 'realism'. Briefly put, Classic realism is texts which attempt in some way to 'capture' the 'essence' of reality in some way, to present an illusion to the reader. Yet texts such as these always in some way undermine themselves. Good example I used in my finals paper - Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Mary Barton' shows at great length the suffering of the industrial poor, yet in a crucial scene where the workers meet the industrialists, the omniscient narrator comments that if only each side could understand the other's position a little, then all could be resolved. They cannot, and tragedy ensues. Gaskell contradicts herself in that despite showing the suffering, she cannot identify the cause of the suffering in any real terms. Of course this is based on a materialist/Marxist reading, and falls down when you consider the market for the book, and the reading audience were all middle class- you don't alienate your readers if you can help it....

Anyway - I object to a 'realist' reading of Wolfe that attempts to decide what kind of android Jonas was, whether the navigator was Kennedy, or whether we can easily locate the position of Christianity in Urth's past. Not because this may not be possible, but that it misses the point. Wolfe surely was not trying to perpetrate 19th century 'illusionism' - to make us enter Sev's world and 'experience it'. The text demands an extra layer of reading beyond the realist level, into the figurative.

Of course Urth has continuity with Earth, but on a fictional level. Let us not make the mistake of viewing this as a viable potential future. Of course Urth has a degree of 'realism'. When Clute calls Wolfe a 'modernist' we must remember that they were dismissing the old school of realist and 19th century novel (however misguided that may be) and attempting to forge a better kind of realism. Joyce's 'Ulysses' is an attempt to truly capture just one day in Dublin, through a literary style that does not rely on attempting to present the illusion of reality, but by reminding us of it. The true connection between Earth and Urth is in its stories - the story of the silver knight on the moon - the story of a saviour - Frankenstein. Remember that Wolfe doesn't just use stories, he uses genres of stories - like the fantastic Dickens stuff in the beginning of 'Shadow'.

Of course Christianity figures in the texts - but whether it lies in Urth's past or future (remember- Wolfe is translating these texts - where did he get them?) does not matter to me. I like your reverse typology idea - its a fantastic way of describing Wolfe's use of Christian theology. I look forward to forcing you to elaborate.

So can fictional worlds not show us valid, important, and 'real' moral choices? Of course they can. I never said that they couldn't. What I object to is the attempt to apply a false version of 'realism' to Wolfe. What critical purpose is achieved by deciding the class of mechanical being Jonas is? Isn't it enough that he is one?

I think what it comes down to is a way of reading that recognises the fictional nature of these texts - we are constantly reminded after all that much of the text is about story-telling - but still acknowledges their power and the importance of what they are saying. Of course there should be internal consistency (the fact that there isn't always is a further reminder of the metafictional nature of the texts) but the way that the whole Urth cycle works is that is not 'realistic' in that Urth could be recreated from these novels, but the stories told map onto stories that we already know, and present an interesting reconfiguration.

And I still couldn't recognise Severian if I met him on the street.

Thats it - I have to leave work right now and go home

I'm sending this to Nigel and cross-posting to URTH - look forward to you all joining in....

Jonathan

Visit Ultan's Library - A Gene Wolfe web resource
<http://members.tripod.co.uk/laidlow/index.htm>
Jonathan Laidlow
University of Birmingham, UK

Peter Stephenson — 30 Apr 1999, 09:20 · follows Jonathan Laidlow

"Jonathan Laidlow" wrote:

Classic realism is a rather outdated critical concept from the 70s which attempted a rather misguided critique of 19th century novels and attempted to refine the broad idea of 'realism'. Briefly put, Classic realism is texts which attempt in some way to 'capture' the 'essence' of reality in some way, to present an illusion to the reader. Yet texts such as these always in some way undermine themselves.

I can't quite agree with this, or what it seems to me to say, though I may be reading too much into it as usual (and I realise how much it blights your career in literary criticism to have anything positive to say about outdated schools of thought :-)). Certainly any novel will fail at some point to represent the real world (indeed, in a not-necessarily-so-trivial sense, by definition). But there are clear distinctions in the intentions of the author. Mrs Gaskell probably thought the world was how she wrote

--- and people like Wilkie Collins tried extremely hard to make the illusion watertight. Surely you can't deny there *is* an attempt to present an illusion of reality to the reader. Wolfe --- apparently, at least --- doesn't do that, and the difference is interesting. (If the point is simply that the illusion can never turn into a true representation of reality, then I agree and I'll shut up and go home.)

The key word is 'attempt': you can make a distinction between authors who try to represent what they think is the real world (ours), and others who build up their own --- and consequently, you can ask where a particular piece of Wolfe's writing falls. It's not a simple division: some authors who attempt to write about the 'real' world deliberately have outlandish characters,

some authors who deal with fantastic universes have more realistic characters, etc., etc. It's worse --- for example, some people believe in alien abductions, so you can have `realistic' books about that. But you can still question the author's intentions at every step, although it may dissolve into farce on some points because the author's world isn't finally self-consistent. This, rather than rejection of `classic realism' (though maybe it's not so different), is what makes me sceptical about some of the more extreme interpretations offered on this list.

Trivial concrete example: in Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon believes in V2's -- the rocket itself is realistic. But the character's names are often nonsense, Tantivy Mucker-Maffick, etc --- they are not realistic. (You can pull even these two examples apart even further.) Between the two, there's much you can't decide on. You can do similar things with, say, Wolfe's Chicago in Free Live Free: giving down-and-outs the bum's rush is realistic, eternally circling aeroplanes (airplanes to the rest of you) sending you back to your former selves aren't. I stress, it's a difficult division and you can't always make it.

So I agree an author is ultimately going to fail to represent `the' world --- how, can be as much a philosophical as a literary matter; and I agree that an author's world, if it is anywhere, is inside their head; but I deny you can suffocate the question of realism completely with a post-modern pillow.

concrake

Peter Stephenson — 21 May 1999, 07:20 · follows Peter Stephenson

I wrote (weeks ago):

"Jonathan Laidlow" wrote:

<controversial statement>

<long reply>

Whoa! sorry about this, our mailer seems to be stuck in another age. Jonathan's had enough stick about this, and anyway his subsequent remarks make it clear I'm not in any serious disagreement at all.

concrake

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