

Generic considerations revisited

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 25 Apr 2003

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ArchD'Ikon Zibethicus — 25 Apr 2003, 02:44

Blattid:

... _all_ fiction is set in a parallel world or alternate history.

Precisely!

(Mimetic fiction, pretty much alone among the genres, is ashamed of its fantastic nature and tries to hide it.)

...or is merely ignorant of it...

Nutria:

A difference between a fictive universe that the author intends to correspond to the real world, and a fictive universe that introduces things that are not at present in the real world

I suspect that all literature is the consequence of a process of selection and elimination - at story is told which does not and cannot correspond to any 'real' events which may be their basis.

This, firstly, because 'real' life is distinctly plotless and, frequently, motiveless, and, secondly, because 'real' life cannot be narrated in its - oh, say its 'raw' form - for exactly that reason.

Well, perhaps it can be, but in that eventuality it is liable to wind up like that video I heard of a while back of somebody's drive down a British freeway - the camera is simply pointed fixedly out of the car, and one sees what the camera sees for HOURS.

Like Warhol's film of the Empire State Building - one shot sustained for HOURS - it might have substance as a dadaesque prank, but it is hard to imagine a large audience demanding repeated viewings.

While the texts in question are rich in their coverage of the >characters' subjective lives, they are ultimately object-oriented; >they take place in a universe where the "meaning" of things and events >is the events themselves, and not how they serve to reflect and >comment on the characters' psyches.

This intrigues me. How is this consistent with Severian's realisation of his equivalence with the Conciliator?

Further, when presenting what I, subjectively, regard as plainly miraculous, Wolfe seems to take a special glee in providing an out -- >in giving or hinting at a "scientific," object-oriented explanation >for the events.

But consider the ending of EotNS - Severian becomes one of the creator-figures of the New Urth. I would suggest that there is a mythical (if not) mystical function to the story...although this precise detail may have been a later development...

Asking about the mechanism by which Gregor Samsa is turned into a >giant blattidaean is approximately as valid as asking why Typhon is >such a bastard. You can ask, but the text won't respond.

Intriguing analysis. It clarifies your earlier observations.

his Venusian jungles are not really about Venusian jungles at all (and >in fact frequently get bleshed with South American jungles); they're >about the experience of being in a certain condition that the heat and >wet and danger of the jungle represents.

Indeed, and I'd further suggest that one of the reasons for WSB's achievement as an author is his recognition of the inherently fantastic nature of all literary portrayal, as you have pointed out.

You know, my edition of "Crash" doesn't seem to have that intro. I bought it a loooooong time ago. It must have been added in later (possibly post-Cronenberg?) editions.

It's credited as the introduction to the 1974 French edition. It's been in all the copies I have had since I started lending, losing and duly re-purchasing it in the early 1980s. I find that it's a very interesting manifesto, at least as regards the 'internal apocalypse' period.

I'll add that Ballard is a significant instance of the acceptance of SF concepts by MF literature. I recently read 'Super-Cannes' with enjoyment and interest, and found that (IMO) it really didn't differ too greatly in its premises from the 'hard SF' period. Perhaps the reason it has become accepted as MF is that, as Ballard states, the concepts of MF have now caught up with (or been overwhelmed by?) SF.

Note that even when we talk about Severian's personality we're inclined to talk about objective matters in relation to it: how the Hieros (and others?) manipulate spacetime to shape him, for example. In SF, the psyche itself often becomes an object, and projects itself into the "objective" world of the text via "psi" powers and the like.

Would you include in this perception Severian's destiny as, not merely the Autarch, but the Conciliator? The Claw, after all, is ultimately 'powered' by Severian as the Conciliator - although at the time Severian encounters the Claw as a gem, he is unaware of this...

Then, NINETEEN EIGHTY- FOUR <snip> it isn't really about Winston >Smith; it's about Ingsoc, its primary areas of concern are >socioeconomic.

Unless, perhaps, Orwell intended Smith's initial lack of character as a implicit comment about the socioeconomic nature of Ingsoc. One might say that precisely what troubles Smith is the arrival of an incipient personality where this is forbidden; Orwell obviously read 'We' attentively.

I should have said that Le Guin uses the tools of the SF t-and-d; THE DISPOSSESSED is very much part of that ongoing conversation.

Not to mention being (partly) about the practice of science and having a working scientist as its 'hero'.

THE DREAMS OUR STUFF IS MADE OF

Marked for attention.

Some does. Some doesn't. Romance novels, for example, generally don't. Technothrillers -- what Crichton, really, writes -- generally do.

Oh, I was thinking more of that dreary, obscure and little-selling 'genre' generally known as 'serious fiction'...

I would expect that you'd be most actually _enjoy_ (if you can get >hold of it) the paperback collection variously titled 6 X H or THE >UNPLEASANT PROFESSION OF JONATHAN HOAG.

Actually, at this juncture I should probably confess that my father was a 'Golden Age' adherent; he had 'Astoundings' et al going back to the late 40s, if I recall correctly, as well as hundreds if not thousands of paperbacks by Heinlein, Asimov, 'Doc' Smith, and a multitude of other authors whose names now escape me. I've probably already read 'Jonathan Hoag', but not at an age where I could really profit from it...thanks for the suggestion, which I will pursue...

H'mmm. I don't think that this story could be told, but a story that was pretty similar at the level of plot could be told in a purely fantastic realm, certainly.

I'm sorry - that's a much better way of putting it!

LORD OF THE RINGS and the Arthurian cycle take place in "the mythic past," an ahistorical past whose relation to our present is epistemic rather than ontic, if you follow me.

I think so; the settings of the myth-cycles are ultimately inspecific because the purpose of the myths is to pursue epistemological knowledge about who and why we are, rather than to provide ontological knowledge regarding our creation and purpose for being in the sense which a 'real' religion/religious myth does - needing a specific locale for this purpose...is that it?

This is possible but kind of a "so what?" hypothesis. Since we have no specific differences to point at, they're human enough for purposes of psychological "identification" by the reader.

Oh, indeed...the point was not one of any great significance, but rather a personal conjecture regarding BotNS which I used for illustrative purposes at this point.

One could, however, imagine a SF work which used subtle cumulative 'psychological' detail to implicitly draw a portrait of a character or a society which the attentive reader would gradually understand to be inhuman...

Not just Palm Sunday. Didn't he also see the Crucifixion?

Not sure, must check.

the "humans" aboard the Whorl (and possibly on Urth) have been genetically engineered in a way that makes them more subject to certain kinds of intrusion by dictators --

What a horrifying thought. Fortunately or otherwise, history as well as contemporality proves only too clearly that humans are already all-too-ready to succumb to dictatorial leaders...

H'mmm. Really? I found that in my first reading I was fascinated by object-oriented questions, from the socioeconomics of the Guilds, the Autarch, etc.

To recall my first reading, I am obliged to return in thought to the mid-80s; something I am generally loath to do.

However, on my first reading of SotT I was simply captivated by the story. If I had any analytic notions at all, it would probably have been simply that I was being treated to a major literary event. Analysis came later...

-- regarding which, if I'm not mistaken, Wolfe gives us a >tantalizingly brief appendix,

Indeed; claiming incomplete knowledge in consequence of the frustratingly incomplete archaeological record of the far future.

The point here is that we've been forced to radically revise our definition of what the word "mountain" means in this culture twice.

Mr. Wolfe is one of the most painstaking of stylists, and his use of language is slyly vertiginous in BotNS; another of its treasures which is too often overlooked.

(Why is scientific authenticity opposed to suspension of disbelief?
Scientific authenticity is, rather, a tool in service of suspension of disbelief.)

It is not at all opposed to this purpose; I agree completely. What I was trying to observe is that the initial publicity attempted to categorise SotT with the Gormenghast trilogy, which is avowedly fantastic in that it is a combination of, among many other elements, the Gothick castle in the original Otranto sense, Peake's recalled childhood in China, and a comedy of manners / eccentricities in a very English Dickensian sense.

Gormenghast could not exist as it is portrayed; however, Peake places it in some unspecified location _on Earth_, in that there is a moon which appears to be our own, although the stellar map is inspecific it appears to be our own, the flora and fauna are earthly as far as it is described, etc. Yet, for instance, no other castles exist in the region, or if they do they are never mentioned. Yet Lady Groan's unhappy marriage to Lord Sepulchre implicitly is that of a foreigner of some sort, or at least a different lineage...but from where?

Peake, I would guess, was thinking as a poet and a painter when he wrote 'Titus Groan'; the strength of his achievement is that he succeeds in making us forget about all these improbabilities for the duration of the reading.

The initial bracketing of SotT with the Gormenghast trilogy suggested to me that the publishers, at least, regarded the work as one involving suspension of disbelief in this sense, which is a property more commonly associated with 'fantastic literature' rather than 'SF' per se. (This apart from the other similarities which you have already noted.)

...But I find myself wondering very greatly - partly in consequence of this discussion - whether these categories are of any great use to anyone other than publishers and book-sellers.

I don't recall those comparisons, but it's an interesting pairing.

I could quote it, but my last copy has been out on loan somewhere for about three or four years, now. It was my third or fourth copy, too...(sigh...) Will I ever learn?

This has been a most interesting conversation for me also, and apparently for several others who've jumped in.

Thank you for a stimulating and useful discussion!

->Zx<-

(snip sig)

James Jordan — 25 Apr 2003, 20:36 · follows ArchD'Ikon Zibethicus

Nutria:

A difference between a fictive universe that the author intends to >correspond to the real world, and a fictive universe that introduces >things that are not at present in the real world

From the Archdeacon:

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I'd say so. Art abstracts from life in order to enhance and/or analyze-discuss some aspect of life. True of all art. I think that's what Blattid is getting at with his subjective/objective schema: What is it that is primarily being abstracted from life and being analyzed in some way?

I would ask: What is the aspect of life that is unique to SF that is somehow present in SF works and not in others? It would seem to be speculations of some sort about or involving science and technology that does not presently "exist" in our present world. Such speculations can be merely present and not the main thing, an SF element in what Blattid would put as MF; or they can be the overriding factor, in what Blattid would consider SF.

I don't know if this advances the discussion any. It's fun, though.

Nutria