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The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory

In Britain it has been estimated that 10% of all books sold are fantasy. And of that fantasy, 10% is written by Terry Pratchett. So, do the sums: 1% of all books sold in Britain are written by Terry Pratchett. Coo.

Although it is unclear whether, by ‘fantasy’, Butler intends a narrow definition (generic fantasy, i.e., imitation Tolkien heroic or epic fantasy and sword ‘n’ sorcery) or a broad definition (the fantastic genres, i.e., generic fantasy, sf (science fiction), horror, supernatural gothic, magic realism, etc.), such statistics nonetheless make the need for a Marxist theory – or preferably, Marxist theories – of the fantastic self-evident. The last twenty or thirty years have witnessed a remarkable expansion in the study of fantastic texts and genres. Literary studies has embraced the gothic, fairy tales and sf, and screen studies has developed a complex critique of horror and is now beginning

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1 With profound thanks to China Miéville, Kathrina Glitre, Greg Tuck – friends, colleagues, comrades. Thanks also to Historical Materialism’s anonymous readers, and to José B. Monleón for translating a passage from Benito Pérez Galdós’s *The Reason of Unreason* (1915) and thereby providing me with a title.
to come to terms with sf. However, there is a remarkable absence in all this endeavour.

The first major Marxist sf theoretist, Darko Suvin, notoriously described (narrowly-defined) fantasy as ‘just a subliterature of mystification’ and asserted that the ‘[c]ommerical lumping of it into the same category as SF is thus a grave disservice [to sf] and a rampantly socio-pathological phenomenon’. Whether as a consequence of this position or merely consequent to it, fantasy and the fantastic have been relatively neglected in Marxist theory and criticism of literature, film and media. This could be taken as merely concomitant to the critical neglect of fantasy as a distinct genre from other theoretical perspectives, a phenomenon which stems, I suspect, from the fact that definitional problems have made it easier to discuss isolated examples in critical contexts provided by other genres than to produce a theory of fantasy per se. Such theories have, of course, been essayed, and this article will trace the development of the most influential account of fantasy literature, the flaws and limitations of which are exceeded only by the extent of its influence. However, as I will argue, there is rather more at stake for Marxists in such debates than just plugging a gap so as to have a full complement of appropriate genre theories.

In 1926, Trotsky argued that ‘the attempt to declare psychoanalysis incompatible with Marxism and simply turn one’s back on Freudianism is too simple’; during the following half-century, it became increasingly apparent that Marxists had failed to generate an adequate theory of the subject and

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3 Suvin 1979, p. 9. Suvin 2000 revises this argument, although not necessarily very extensively.
4 Other (or particular) genres of the fantastic have fared better. Robin Wood’s Marcuse-inspired work in the 1970s on the American horror movie influenced a generation of horror criticism (see Bould 2002), and for nearly thirty years the journal Science Fiction Studies (where Suvin served for many years in various editorial capacities) has provided a valuable venue for Marxist and critical postmodernist work. Sharply-drawn distinctions between sf, fantasy and horror have long been characteristic of sf criticism. This has often seemed to be more a consequence of the desire to make sf seem more important than other, ‘lesser’ genre fictions than of any particularly necessary distinction between the genres. Such theorising typically follows the logic of commercial categorisation which sees genre as a pigeonhole into which to place particular texts. I am far more sympathetic to the perspective which views genre as a tendency within a text which will almost certainly also contain other generic tendencies. Therefore, for the purposes of this article at least, I can perceive no value in establishing rigid distinctions between, say, fantasy and sf.
5 Trotsky 1973, p. 234.