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From the Edge of the Rift

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LOOK ACROSS OUR mediascape and what do you see? Superheroes, fantastic beasts, dystopian futures, ancient magic, time portals, space travel, and a multiverse of other worlds. From the Marvel Cinematic Universe to the transmedial storyworld of *The Witcher*, from the robot dinosaurs of *Horizon Zero Dawn* to the sci-fi suburbias of artist Simon Stålenhag, filmmakers, writers, game designers, and artists show us dreams of forgotten secrets, suggest what might be, and imagine the impossible. The more secular and rationalistic our societies become, the more enamored we seem to be with the fantastic, a term we use here to describe all genres with fantastic elements – science fiction, horror, fantasy, the supernatural, and more across all entertainment media, including film, television, literature, games, comic books, and art. This proliferation of the fantastic raises an urgent question: is it simply a contemporary trend or does this fascination with the impossible represent something more fundamental?

We understand our ability to imagine things that do not exist as a core quality of humanity. From Gilgamesh sending Enkidu into the Underworld to the final flight of Icarus and the adventures of the Monkey King Sun Wukong, people since ancient times have felt the need to soar beyond everyday reality into the realms of the fantastic. In the classic phrasing of the Roman poet Horace, the goal of art is “to instruct and delight”; imagining the impossible can be seen as both a rehearsal for possible scenarios and future designs as well as a means

¹<https://tidsskrift.dk/imaginingtheimpossible/issue/archive>

of aesthetic enjoyment involving the free play of our creative faculties. The gradual acceptance of popular fantastic fiction within the academy should thus be seen not only as a reflection of something new but also as the return of fantastic genres to the spotlight of cultural discussion and investigation.

Fantasy has often been criticized for being “escapist,” but imaginary worlds exist in a complex, productive relationship with our world. When the real and unreal contrast with one another, they may bring the boundaries of the possible into sharper relief. Some genres gain significance from their proximity to our reality; alternate histories explore the root causes of the present, while utopias and dystopias imagine our possible futures. These stories allow audiences to gain new perspectives on very real social issues. Other genres can be seen as charting the outer limits of the human imagination; are there states of being so alien that humans simply cannot conceive of them because our minds are grounded in bodies conditioned by millions of years of terrestrial evolution, or is our ability to imagine infinite and limited only by convention? Even if we do escape, we escape *from* something, turning escapism into an act of protest and fiction into critique. The charge of “escapism” is as meaningless against the fantastic as it would be against a space shuttle; the goal is not to escape our world but to gain a new, more global perspective that would be impossible if we remained grounded.

At the same time, we are keenly aware that fantasy media are created within major global industries. New technologies of production and distribution, such as CGI or streaming, have reshaped creative possibilities. Micro-producers on freely available digital platforms compete with mega-conglomerates for a mass audience continually fragmenting into ever smaller niches. Global distribution systems erode the significance of national boundaries, but fears of Hollywood’s total dominance have been confounded by the unexpected rise of non-English language media, from South Korean film and television to Nordic Noir. What role do fantastic genres play within this media ecosystem? The industrial production of the fantastic demands critical perspectives on the economic, technological, and social structures underpinning it.

Fantastic worlds are not simply a product of capitalist industries, however. Perhaps more so than other genres, fantastic worlds lend themselves to active audience co-creation. From fan fiction to media

tourism to zombie walks, fans work alongside and sometimes against producers to create a fantasy world capable of sustaining multiple intersecting and occasionally contradictory narratives. The growth of digital media has seen an explosion in fan cultures as enthusiasts discuss new developments, share knowledge and fan theories, and create alternative imaginaries. In what ways do fan fictions repair or reimagine perceived flaws in the fantastic universe? How do fans integrate knowledge across various texts to create a coherent overarching narrative? In what circumstances do fans abandon elaborate storyworlds into which they have already invested a great deal of time and creative energy? These and other reception questions demand the development of new, interdisciplinary methods of investigation.

Imagining the Impossible is a forum for critical reflection about fantastic genres in any medium. We define the fantastic, in Daniel Scott's words, as a "general super-genre cluster that encompasses all fiction dealing with non-real, i.e. science fiction, fantasy, alternate history writing, and similar genres" (2018, 19), except we are not simply interested in fiction but in games, art, and other creative forms. We connect aesthetic and cultural theories of the fantastic with the practical means of its design and production across media industries and reception studies that examine the social, cognitive, and affective impact of fantastic narratives and storyworlds.

The fantastic may be seen as offering "an ontological break" (Fowkes 2010, 5) with the natural laws of our universe, a rift in space and time where the impossible becomes possible; from the edge of the rift, then, we salute all those prepared to journey into the rupture and share their stories of the impossible and beyond.

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Issue 1 of *Imagining the Impossible* is a themed issue on the interplay of gender and genre. Christina Bacchilega and Paula Greenhill's "Fairy-Tale Reanimation Wanted for Better Futures" explores how classic fairy tales "open up possibilities for being and acting in the world that are not connected to socially sanctioned paths." These general ideas are explored in more depth in the other articles. Stephanie Green's "Playing at Being a Superhero" explores the limits of power for female action superheroes through a focus on the character of Trish Walker in the TV series *Jessica Jones*. Louise Coopey's article, "Representation,

Otherness and Fantastic Storyworlds” examines the female characters in *Game of Thrones* and argues that the series capitalizes on fantasy’s position outside the conventional order to push back against gendered expectations. In another article on the same series, Sharon Khalifa-Gueta analyzes Daenerys Targaryen in relation to the ancient motif of the woman and the dragon, as seen in Greco-Roman and Early Modern art. Izzie Austin takes us into the future by using queer theory as a lens to examine the cyberpunk genre, with a focus on the videogame *Cloudpunk* and the comic series *Motor Crush*, to show “the characters” inability and/or refusal to fit into the worlds they inhabit and how they must therefore find success outside of accepted channels. All the articles show how the fantastic has been and continues to be used as a vehicle to interrogate established conventions of gender and power. Finally, in the open section, Marco Favaro’s article “Antiheroes in the Rubble” extends the discussion about the limits of power and heroism in fantastic universes through an analysis of the role of antiheroes in dystopian fictions.

We hope you enjoy this thematically connected selection of articles and that you find them a stimulus to imagining new possibilities.

Cited Works

- Fowkes, Katherine A. (2010). *The fantasy film*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell
- Scott, Daniel. (2018). “Belief, Potentiality, and the Supernatural: Mapping the Fantastic.” In: Batzke, I., Erbacher, E.C., Heß, L.M., Lenhardt, C. (eds), *Exploring the Fantastic: Genre, Ideology, and Popular Culture*. Transcript-Verlag.