

Stephen Joyce, Christian Mehrstam,
Per Israelson, Rikke Schubart

Alterity, Inside and Out

Editorial for Imagining the Impossible

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“In everyday usage, the word *object* denotes a solid, visible, tangible, and inanimate thing; the notion of a nonexistent or merely imaginary object must appear as a contradiction in terms” – Winfried Nöth.

DEPICTING the impossible often poses a paradox: How do we imagine something that is not just beyond our experience but beyond our comprehension? The fantastic is replete with attempts to imagine radical alterity. From alien beings who surpass any human conception to uncanny objects containing unnameable powers, the fantastic continually introduces us to the challenge of imagining that which is otherly, something for which we have no words and does not fit neatly into any of our predetermined categories. Like scientists confronting a truly alien substance, we can only poke and prod at such objects in the hope of seeing how they respond rather than being able to grasp their existence in full.

Imaginary beings, from the winged horse Pegasus to the modern zombie, have consistently been a key feature of the fantastic. Noel Carroll, in *A Philosophy of Horror*, argues that monsters horrify us because they are “categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless” (32), and so they combine forms or states that violate our sense of ontologically distinct categories, such as the living dead or the werewolf. Yet the same fusion of categories can also be a source of wonder, such as mermaids or superheroes. In some

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

narratives, the same being can be either wondrous or terrifying, as the dragon is. Some beings that remain incomplete are sources of fascination rather than terror. For example, in Stephen Baxter's *Xeelee Sequence*, the Xeelee are the most advanced species in the universe, a seemingly vanished civilisation so far beyond any other that humans can never grasp the extent of what the Xeelee were or what they accomplished. The monstrous and marvelous are a lot closer than we think. Is there a clear dividing line between the two, or do they both describe possible human responses to the experience of radical alterity?

While imaginary beings can have motivations, psychologies, and cultures that can only be sketched obliquely, imaginary objects have concrete physical characteristics. Fantasy plots often revolve around possession of magical artifacts, such as the rings of power in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or the infinity stones in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In science fiction, a new technological object is often the novum that differentiates the universe from our own, such as the existence of a time travel machine in *Back to the Future* or the alien monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In horror, occult objects are often the source of the uncanny, from "The Monkey's Paw" to *Hellraiser's* configuration puzzle box. Artifacts are frequently plot catalysts (as in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*), totalizing concepts (as in Boye's *Kallockain*) or sentient constructs with a symbiotic or prosthetic relation to the protagonist (Jarvis in *Iron Man*). Studies of the fantastic, however, often subordinate these objects to understanding their influence on characters and the fantastic universe. In light of new intellectual movements such as object-oriented ontology, with its insistence that objects are not defined solely by their relations with humans, perhaps it is time to re-examine fantastic objects in their own right?

Conjuring up the impossible in words is one thing, but what might the fantastic look like in visual media? When imaginary objects gain a tangible reality, we can see their shapes, textures, and colours, and observe the architecture and costumes of other cultures. However, some have argued that giving the fantastic a concrete form is not necessarily of aesthetic benefit. In his famous essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien was sceptical about giving fantasy visual form: "In human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature. In painting, for instance, the visible presentation of the fantastic image is technically too easy; the hand tends to outrun the mind, even to overthrow it.

Silliness or morbidity are frequent results” (1983). And he was even more critical about drama: “Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry but they do not achieve Fantasy” (ibid). This is one of the challenges with films and games, to create and design the impossible so that they enhance subcreation rather than render it trivial or commonplace.

The creative work of art directors and costume designers in audiovisual media plays a crucial role in imagining and developing story-worlds, with their designs often reshaping the narrative by suggesting new possibilities. The worlds of cyber-, steam-, and solarpunk are primarily shaped by design features that initially tend to push the characters and their stories to the background. But as the artifacts and technologies in these genres are also intimately tied to the “punk” element, they create tensions and imbalance, serving as historical pivots. Typically, the characters’ lives and futures end up being shaped by such oppositions. However, when fantastic objects and technology enter the real world, whether through merchandising, design fictions, fan play, or even as inspirations for the future, their story-telling and world-building functions may or may not carry over. In Richard K. Morgan’s *Altered Carbon*, for example, the technological means of extending life is what shapes society with its vertical city landscapes and concentration of wealth; how much of the critical edge in Morgan’s novel remains in a piece of “cortical stack jewelry” bought by a fan of the novel or TV-series? Does the critical potential from fiction survive the transition into our world, and what impact do these designs have on how audiences construct imaginary worlds?

In this issue of *Imagining the Impossible*, we are delighted to introduce a series of essays that tackle these complex questions. Alexander Sell in “Everything and Nothing: The Horror of Meaning in *The Cipher*,” examines Kathe Koja’s strange horror novel that is at once a visceral, psychological horror and a theoretically intriguing dilemma. The novel follows the fascinating and horrific events that transpire after a disc of pure nothingness opens up in the protagonist’s home, consuming the lives of the characters just as it does the plot. This non-object pushes readers to discern its peculiar ontology but yields, as one would expect, nothing. Sell reads *The Cipher* through Martin Heidegger’s equally unorthodox version of the nothing (*das Nichts*), demonstrating how Heideggerian ontological thought can help to illuminate the novel’s strange nothingness, and how Koja’s novel

can help us to see the horror inherent in Heidegger's philosophy. It suggests that horror may be found not in the nihilistic lack of meaning but in our "imprisonment" in meaning.

Kwasu Tembo's "The Fathomless Ocean of Objectivity: An OOO reading of the Solaris Ocean in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*" tackles one of the most fascinating mysterious beings in science fiction: the pseudo-sentient ocean of *Solaris*, which defies every scientific attempt to understand and communicate with it. Tembo's article applies Object-Oriented Ontological (OOO) analysis as a novel way of reconsidering the strange object-being that is the text's central phenomenon. Drawing on phenomenological and ontological philosophy and theory influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Graham Harman, Arthur Stanley Eddington, and Francois Jullien, the article discusses Lem's ocean not so much as the appearance of a type of radical alterity or uncanniness but as a strange presentation of the paradox of alien familiarity in and because of the linguistic, psycho-emotional, and ontological gaps in and between objects and beings.

Rikke Schubart's "Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty': Reflections on Pet and Play in the *Alien* Film Franchise," examines another famous sci-fi creature, but this time through the lens of our relationship with non-human animals. In the first film, *Alien*, this parallel is often suggested through the other non-human creature on board, the cat Jonesy, and these motifs of pet and play then run throughout the franchise in different variations. The pet function is performed by various beings: the cat Jonesy and dog Spike, the Alien, the clone Ripley 8, and the androids David and Walther. Drawing on biocultural theory and play research from anthropology, ethology, and linguistics (Huizinga, Burghardt, Bateson), as well as research in pets from animal studies and philosophy (Melson, Tuan, Fudge), Schubart develops three levels of play to discuss the audience's engagement: immersed play (play₁), shifting in and out of a play frame (play₂), and distanced looking-at-play (play₃). The article reflects on the function of the Alien as, in Lévi-Strauss' term, an animal "good to think with," with the audience using the Alien as a play pivot in a game of pet domestication, domination, and mastery.

Maarit Kalmakurki takes us from thinking about alien beings to alien objects in her detailed study of costume design in the *Avatar* universe. Her article, "Crafted for the Digital World: Digitally Realistic Costumes in CG Feature Films," explores how the development of

computer-generated (CG) effects in live-action films has gradually expanded to the creation of digital characters and costume design, with all aspects of characters and costumes being built digitally in many contemporary films. What new possibilities emerge in the CG-design of fantastic objects and in what ways do these continue to be influenced by real physical attributes and processes? This article explores digital costume design development, with *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* as case studies. Using interviews with the films' costume designer, Deborah L. Scott, and comparative analysis of the costume renderings, alongside physical materials from the design development process and their digital reproductions, the study illuminates how the physical costume fabrication process and motion testing are integrated into designing digital costumes and how designs evolve during their digital creation. The article sheds light on the creative opportunities digital costume design poses and provides important grounding for further research on the wider range of theoretical areas related to digital costume design.

Stefan Ekman and Viktoria Holmqvist develop these questions of costume design through a critical worldbuilding approach. Their article, "World-Building through Garments and Accessories in Dungeons & Dragons Illustrations," examines the role of garments and accessories in the illustrations in *Player's Handbook* (2014) for Dungeons & Dragons (5th edition) and finds that clothes have four conspicuous functions in establishing a world of possibilities: to convey that the world is one of action and magic, to provide a range of cultural and historical alternatives to the traditional pseudo-medieval fantasy world, to communicate what is important about particular groups, and to maintain a difference between female wizards as physical and sexualised and male wizards as people of knowledge and military competence. The visualisation of these fantastic objects thus acts as both suggestion and constraint, guiding the players' imagination into particular paths in a way that may also be read as a limiting of imaginative potential.

Finally in this issue, Audrey Isabel Taylor provides a review of Daniel Ogden's *The Dragon in the West: From Ancient Myth to Modern Legend* (Oxford University Press, 2021), a book that offers a comprehensive history of one of the most iconic fantasy creatures. We hope you enjoy these explorations in imagining alterity and find plenty of food for thought on how we imagine the impossible.

Cited Works

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