Introduction: The Fantastic in Cultural History: Essays from a growing Interdisciplinary Research Field

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In this volume of *HumaNetten* we invite you to the realm of the fantastic, to a world filled by marvels and wonders; like flying steamships, time travelling devices, and mythological heroes and foes. We also take a trip to the dark side to meet the Bogey man from bygone ages, ghosts that go bump in the night, and monsters which haunt our imagination.

When we hear the word *fantastic* in present time, most of us think about fantastic or speculative fiction. The genre is stupendously popular, and it engages people of all ages around the world. In academic terms, the concept fantastic fiction is generally described as non-mimetic, aesthetic genres like fantasy, science fiction and horror. But this concept is built on a fairly limited understanding of the fantastic, both in space and time, and it has only been in use for 200 years. A long, long time before that, fantastic features were used in the oral tradition of myths, legends, and folk belief. "Many of the genre's most prominent works consist of re-telling and re-conceptualizing classical myths, legends, and folklore" (Höglund and Trenter 2021: 15) These narratives become a part of our collective imaginations and cultural heritage.

Scholars such as Kathryn Hume argue that it was the breakthrough of modernity, in the wake of Enlightenment, that created a dualism between the natural and supernatural (Hume 1984). Therefore, the understanding of myth changed. The author and the reader of fantastic fiction also became more self-conscious. The difference is not the ability to apply skeptical reason to magical motifs and supernatural beliefs; rather, "it is the new awareness of myth as something belonging to others, to the past, to unfallen primitives" (Attebery 2014: 26).

The dualism between natural and supernatural, the real and unreal, is reflected in both the earlier academic research of fantastic fiction as well as in the debate in contemporary media. The discussion of the concept fantastic fiction often centres on its boundaries and fantastic fiction is defined as "something else" than other fictional genres. Fantastic fiction deals only with the imaginative world and therefore differs completely from other genres that deal with the "real world". As a result of this, there exist a common misunderstanding that people use fantastic fiction as pure escapism, as a strategy to escape reality. In more recent research, though, the watertight compartments between the fantastic and the real is called into question (Höglund and Trenter 2021).

For example, Sarah Faber claims that fantastic fiction "[…] depend strongly on elements of the real. [...] In practice, there is no such thing as a blank slate" (Faber in Batzke, Erbacher, Hess and Lenhardt 2018: 235). Contrary to the common belief, the fantastic has an important role to play in our understanding of the realm we call reality (Roas 2018; Faber 2018: 234). Jan Christoph Meister describes the fantastic as an epistemological approach among others and a condition "under which we perceive things and events and acquire knowledge about them" (Meister 2012: 24). In this respect the fantastic does not differ from what is casually referred to as reality. It is a state that offers knowledge about ourselves and the world we live in. Some scholars therefore claim that "[...] the fantasy story world has the capacity to make explicit comments on urgent contemporary problems not despite, but due to its unrealistic and supernatural approaches" (Höglund and Trenter 2021: 12-13)

Fantastic fiction moves its readers to alien worlds. Yet this does not prevent the genre from reflecting and engaging in dialogue with the cultural and social order in which it is created. On the contrary, fantasy has been defined by several researchers as a highly political genre. One of the first scholars that argued that fantastic fiction should be regarded as a political genre is Rosemary Jackson in her iconic work *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981). Jackson claimed that the fantasy genres have a political potential because they construct fictional worlds that are "neither entirely real" and "neither entirely unreal". This position between the real and the unreal has an alienating effect that can make our political reality more visible to us (Jackson 1981).

Jackson emphasised that fantasy literature often portrays a resistance to the dominant social order (Jackson 1981: 3). If we take a look at contemporary fantastic fiction this is very common in narratives where monsters tell their own story. Monsters are often depicted as outsiders or outcasts who questions the dominant ideological structure in culture and gives a voice to marginalized groups in society (Höglund 2011). This does not mean that all fantastic fiction challenges the status quo. It is also common that the genre expresses norms and values that can be read as a defence of and preservation of the social order. It is furthermore typical that works of fantastic fiction contains both a questioning and a defence of the existing social order. Regardless of our interpretations of specific fantastic narratives, one thing is certain "[...] fantastic fiction offers great abilities to mediate political opinions and to annotate on societal orders, it also possesses a unique power to evoke our curiosity and concern for social and cultural issues. It makes us aware of urgent matters, encourages us to seek more knowledge and subsequently to act according to our convictions" (Höglund and Trenter 2021: 13).

The purpose of this interdisciplinary issue of *HumaNetten* is to present some academic approaches to the fantastic that illustrates the blooming research fields of the fantastic defined in its broadest sense, from ancient

times to the present. The contributors highlight how iconic fantastic narratives adapt and reinvent, they describe the complexity in fantastic genres and its ability to deconstruct gender stereotypes, they discuss how the supernatural and paranormal can bee used as pedagogical tools for those who seeks knowledge of the past and our historical, political, and cultural heritage. They also exemplify how mythological characters transforms over time and how folklore and historiography tell stories about the social experience of colonialism.

Despite the contributor's divergence in topics, they share the same conviction: the fantastic plays an important role as a cultural phenomenon. All though the concept has a long history of alien, odd, different, wonderful, unreal, impossible, sometimes strange, and always spectacular expressions it always works in order to help humans to understand, cope with, and learn about the world (Höglund and Trenter 2021: 3; Meister 2012).

This special issue presents the contents in the following order:

In "Beyond the Fantasy of Orcs. Orcish Transformations in Amazon's *The Rings of Power*", Bo Kampmann Walther & Lasse Juel Larsen delve into the intricacies of evil's role in Tolkien's world and its transformative nature, shedding light on how Amazon's *The Rings of Power*, through a reimagination of the Orcs and their moral role in society, contributes to a contemporary reinterpretation of Tolkien's lore. It dives into Tolkien's standpoint on evil and juxtaposes it with Amazon's disruption of it, and from a more theoretical position it discusses the epistemological as well as ontological characteristics of change in conjunction with Tolkien's notion of *phantazein*.

Maria Nilson's contribution "Longing for What Never Was –Steampunk and Nostalgia" focuses on steampunk romance and how we can understand the genre's use of an altered past, a "then" that never was. Nilson argues that we seem to long for the past, but not the past as it was, but rather a modern/different/other version of the past. A past that is different from our present, but still familiar enough so that we feel that we belong in it. But what happens when we imagine a different past, an alternate history in speculative fiction?

In "The Ghost in the Black Box" Jordan White and Martin Lund examine the cultural importance of so-called Boo Boxes. Boo Boxes are small gift boxes, tied shut with ribbon, and said to contain a ghost. Although deceptively simple-looking commodities, this article will argue that Boo Boxes, which are sold in conjunction with the annual ghost-story event, "A Tour of Southern Ghosts," are complex cultural products that tie together a host of historical, political, and cultural negotiations over meaning and memory.

Cecilia Trenter's contribution "Haunted Löfstad Palace: Spectacular Sensations and Educational Aids in the Wake of Castle Ghosts" deals with ghost tourism as exemplified by guided tours on an ostensibly haunted Swedish estate. Her thesis is that paranormal effects can be pedagogical tools

when the past is mediated. Ghost tourism is thus not merely entertainment but concerns the interpretation of cultural heritage.

In the article "Eve Revisited, Reimagined and Redeemed", Britt Johanne Farstad describes how the mythological character Eve features and functions in speculative fiction. She revisits and trace Eve through a few parts of our cultural history. According to the most common religious traditions, Eve was the first woman, and Farstad follows her story from *Genesis,* her recreation in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and further on to her major role in philosopher Hegel's argumentation about the inferiority of women and as the main character in Marianne Fredriksson's *Eva's book* (1980).

In "Negotiating with the Bogey Man: Perceptions of European-Southeast Asian Relations in Lore and Tradition", Hans Hägerdal takes up the theme of Occidentalism, stylized images of the West, in a fantastic context. He focuses on the collective memory of the inception of colonial presence in Southeast Asian societies, as epitomized in lore and historiography. As he demonstrates, the image of the European stranger tends to fall into a set of stereotypes which represent the local societies' effort to make sense of colonial intrusion and domination, often by inserting supernatural or outlandish narrative elements.

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