

palgrave▶pivot

BEHIND THE FRONTIERS OF THE REAL

A Definition of the
Fantastic

David Roas



Behind the Frontiers of the Real

David Roas

Behind the Frontiers of the Real

A Definition of the Fantastic

palgrave
macmillan

David Roas
Literary Theory and Comparative Literature
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Barcelona, Spain

Translated by Simon Breden

Translation from the Spanish language edition: *Tras los límites de lo real. Una definición de lo fantástico* by David Roas, © Páginas de Espuma 2011. All Rights Reserved.

ISBN 978-3-319-73732-4 ISBN 978-3-319-73733-1 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73733-1>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017964617

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2018

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: *Détail de la Tour Eiffel* © nemesis2207/Fotolia.co.uk

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Pivot imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Reality	3
	<i>An (Apparently) Stable and Objective Reality</i>	5
	<i>Can There Be Literature of the Fantastic After Quantum Mechanics?</i>	8
	<i>Is Reality Out There? (Postmodern Narrative and The Real)</i>	13
	<i>The Fantastic Facing New Paradigms of Reality</i>	14
3	The Impossible	23
	<i>The Threat of the Impossible</i>	24
	<i>Hybrid Forms: The Christian Marvellous and Magical Realism</i>	27
	<i>The Pseudo-Fantastic and Its Variants</i>	34
	<i>Grotesque Laughter</i>	36
4	Fear	45
	<i>From Fear to Anguish (Brief Psychological Notes)</i>	46
	<i>Fear and the Fantastic</i>	47
	<i>Physical and Metaphysical Fear</i>	53
5	Language	63
	<i>The Realism of the Fantastic</i>	64
	<i>At the Frontiers of Language</i>	74
	<i>Fantastic of Perception / Fantastic of Language</i>	77

6	The Fantastic in Postmodernity	83
	<i>The Case of Kafka</i>	84
	<i>Fantastic Postmodernity</i>	86
	<i>A Sample of New Spanish Writers of the Fantastic</i>	92
7	Conclusions	107
	Bibliography	115
	Index	123



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract The pages that follow offer a proposed definition in which I attempt to meld the various aspects which, in my opinion, determine the function, meaning and effect of the fantastic. This should not, however, be understood as a rejection of the different concepts that are already available to us. My intention here is to interrogate the precedents and definitions, acknowledging my debt to them, in order to arrive at my own theory of the fantastic which conceives of said category as a discourse in constant intertextual relation with that other discourse that is reality, always understood as a cultural construct.

Keywords Fantastic • Reality • Impossible • Language • Fear
• Postmodernity

The pages that follow offer a proposed definition in which I attempt to meld the various aspects which, in my opinion, determine the function, meaning and effect of the fantastic. This should not, however, be understood as a rejection of the different concepts that are already available to us. My intention here is to interrogate the precedents and definitions, acknowledging my debt to them, in order to arrive at my own theory of the fantastic which conceives of said category as a discourse in constant intertextual relation with that other discourse that is reality, always understood as a cultural construct.

In establishing this definition I have selected four central concepts that allow me to chart a fairly clear map of this terrain that we call the fantastic: reality, the impossible, fear and language. These four concepts underscore the fundamental issues and problems that articulate any theoretical reflection on the fantastic: its necessary relationship to an idea of the real (and therefore, of the possible and the impossible), its limits (and the forms that dwell there, such as the marvellous, magical realism, science fiction or the grotesque), its emotional and psychological effects on the receiver and the transgression of language that is undertaken when attempting to express what is, by definition, inexpressible as it is beyond the realms of the conceivable. By examining these concepts, I have explored multiple perspectives that are clearly interrelated: from literary and comparative theory to linguistics, via philosophy, science and cyberculture.

Likewise, the idea of the fantastic that I propose in these pages has more to do with an aesthetic category than with a concept limited to the narrow confines and conventions of a genre. Therefore, if most of the examples raised here are literary or filmic, this concept of the fantastic as an aesthetic category allows for a definition of a multidisciplinary nature which is valid for literature and film as well as theatre, TV series, comics, videogames or any other art form that reflects on the characteristic conflict within the fantastic between the real and the impossible.

The analysis of these four central concepts is complemented by a reflection on the validity and meaning of the fantastic in the postmodern age, explored in Chap. 6 of the book, in which, as a means of corroborating its validity, I also examine the works of some Spanish authors born between 1960 and 1975 in order to establish the poetics of the contemporary fantastic.



CHAPTER 2

Reality

*We have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it resistant, mysterious,
visible, ubiquitous in space and firm in time, but we have allowed
slight, and eternal, bits of the irrational to form part of its architecture
so as to know that it is false.*

Jorge Luis Borges, "Avatars of the tortoise"

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.

Philip K. Dick

Abstract The fantastic is characterised by proposing a conflict between (our idea of) the real and the impossible. For that reason, fantastic fiction has maintained since its origins a constant debate with extratextual reality. To understand the implications of this confrontation between the real and the impossible, this chapter examines what idea of reality we are dealing with, because the fantastic will always depend, by means of contrast, on what we consider as real. For this, it is necessary to make a journey from the beginnings of the fantastic in the nineteenth century, marked by a stable and mechanistic (Newtonian) idea of reality, to the conventional and even arbitrary (but shared) view of the real that postmodernism proposes. This journey also serves to demonstrate the decisive influence that physics, quantum mechanics, philosophy, neurobiology or cyberculture have had in the development of our idea of reality (and fantastic).

Keywords Reality • Impossible • Physics • Postmodernism

A man is paid a visit by a Bible salesman. Amongst the various volumes that he has on offer, there is one that is completely different from all the others: an infinite book. Although in appearance it is normal (it possesses covers, a spine, pages), the various experiments that the protagonist performs on it demonstrate its infinite dimension. Therefore, after examining it, the protagonist concludes: “This is not possible”, to which the Bible salesman, who had already foreseen this reaction (because he is of the same opinion), responds laconically: “It is not possible, but it *is*”.¹ Within the idea of the real that the characters of the story share, the existence of an infinite book is impossible: as the protagonist says, “I felt that it was a nightmarish object, an obscene thing that vilified and corrupted reality”. The problem is that, in spite of it all, the book is still there. An impossible presence that is also imposed on the real readers, whose own idea of reality is questioned. Their own world.

In this scene from his story *El libro de arena* [*The Book of Sand*], Borges masterfully identifies the essence of all fantastic narrative: the problematic confrontation between the real and the impossible. That statement, “It is not possible, but it is”, destroys the convictions of the character and the receiver regarding what may be considered real. Split individuals, simultaneous times and spaces, monsters, ruptures in cause and effect, the fusion of dreaming and waking, the blurring of the frontiers between reality and fiction, impossible objects... the motifs that compose the universe of the fantastic are expressions of a subversive will which, above all, seeks to transgress that homogenising reason that organises our perception of the world and of ourselves.

In the prologue to his book *Cuentos de los días raros* [*Tales of Strange Days*], José María Merino, one of the great masters of the fantastic in Spain, stated that “Faced with the overpowering feeling of the apparent and common normality that this society wishes to impose on us, literature must chronicle the unusual. Because, in our existence, neither from an ontological nor a circumstantial perspective, there is nothing that is not odd. We want to accustom ourselves to the most comfortable of routines to forget that strangeness, that oddness that is the real sign of our condition” (Merino 2004: 9). And the fantastic is a perfect route to reveal this strangeness, to contemplate reality from an unexpected perspective. The fantastic tale replaces familiarity with strangeness, it places us initially in a normal everyday world (our own) which is immediately assaulted by an impossible phenomenon—which is, as such, incomprehensible—that subverts the codes—the certainties—that we have designed to perceive and

understand reality. Ultimately, it destroys our conception of the real and places us in a state of instability and, therefore, in absolute disquiet.

To understand the implications of this confrontation between the real and the impossible, we must first begin by examining what idea of reality we are dealing with, because the fantastic will always depend, by means of contrast, on what we consider as real.

AN (APPARENTLY) STABLE AND OBJECTIVE REALITY

Literature of the fantastic was born into a Newtonian, mechanical universe, conceived as a machine that obeyed the laws of logic and was therefore subject to rational explanation. The Rationalism of the eighteenth century had turned reason into the only means of understanding the world.

Up until this point, three explanations of the real had coexisted without too many problems: science, religion and superstition. Ghosts, miracles, elves and other supernatural phenomena were part of the conception of the real. They were extraordinary, but not impossible.

Although in the sixteenth century the critical development of the scientific mentality had already started to cast doubt on certain magical and superstitious explanations of reality (science arrived to “disenchant” the world), this did not prevent the proliferation of works which—combining science and religion—attempted to demonstrate the genuine existence of a number of manifestations of the supernatural and the extraordinary. Thus, the phenomena compiled in the books of prodigies, miscellanies and treatises on demonology unquestioningly accepted the existence of such phenomena. In spite of significant scientific developments, it could be said that belief in the supernatural continued to dominate until the Age of Enlightenment.

However, in the eighteenth century the relationship with the supernatural changed radically. Reason became the fundamental explanatory paradigm, which translated into a separation of reason and faith; two perspectives that, as previously mentioned, up until that point were integrated with each other, or at the very least were not mutually exclusive. From this point on, in terms of religious matters, the individual would be free to believe or not believe, but in terms of knowledge reason became dominant (although this did not translate into a recognition of atheism), becoming the preponderant discourse determining the models for explaining and representing the world.

Thus, the new paradigm of mechanical philosophy became the essential tool used in order to understand reality:

The universe is conceived as a series of elements whose relationships can be formalized by geometric or mathematical laws just like any other machine; laws that exist in nature because God has so willed it and knowledge of which makes it possible to see the world as a work full of beauty and harmony that speaks to us of the existence of God with no need for any form of Biblical exegesis or revelation. (Fernández 2006: 630)

This rejection of the supernatural also translated into the condemnation of its literary and aesthetic employment. The precepts of the Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century brandished concepts of verisimilitude and mimesis as the fundamental weapons in exiling the presence of the supernatural and the marvellous from literary texts due to their lack of veracity, due to their implausibility. What reason could not explain was impossible and, therefore, a lie which had no place in the narrative of the era which was fundamentally driven towards didacticism and morality. This “realistic” conception of verisimilitude and mimesis in some senses was the trigger for one of the fundamental changes that took place in the aesthetic interests of the eighteenth century: the discovery of society as literary matter. The eighteenth-century novel shifted its purpose of imitation to focus on the reality that surrounded humanity and found the reason for its existence in expressing the everyday.

How could literature of the fantastic arise in such an apparently hostile environment? To respond to this question, we must bear in mind that although the development of rationalism eliminated the belief in the supernatural, this did not lead to the disappearance of the emotion that it produced as the aesthetic embodiment of fear of death and the unknown (a feeling of the supernatural unlike that explored by, for instance, the fairy tale). Madame du Deffand’s famous phrase on the existence of ghosts sums this idea up perfectly: “Do I believe in ghosts? No, but I’m afraid of them.” The emotion of the supernatural, expelled from life, took refuge in literature.

This new aesthetic interest coincided with (and not by chance) the development in a taste for the horrible and the terrible, a new sensibility—the sublime—that took horror as a source of enjoyment and of beauty. Suffice it to recall that in the early years of the eighteenth century, Pseudo-Longino’s *On the Sublime* was disseminated through Boileau’s (who had already translated it in 1674) and Bouhours’ commentaries. The category

of the sublime encompasses the extraordinary, the marvellous and the surprising, that which does not form part of the system established by the neoclassical beauty canons, and translates into a sensation of terror, one of the most elevated passions (as Aristotle had already pointed out). Thus, at the outset of the century, Joseph Addison in *Pleasures of Imagination* (1712) studied the notion of the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque, noting how aesthetic pleasure can also be derived from the disproportionate, the enlarged or the strange. His reflection on the terrifying is illuminating when we consider the possibility of feeling pleasure faced with a terrible object as long as we are certain that we will not be harmed. This idea was later developed by Edmund Burke in his essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759); as Franzini (2000: 121–122) points out, “the absence of ‘real’ danger generates a ‘negative’ pleasure that Burke terms as ‘delight’. The infinite clearly imposes a sublime sensation because it fills the spirit with a ‘delightful horror’: the delight grows, therefore, the greater the ‘panic’ stirred up in the intellect, thus acting directly on the sensibility. A form of ‘phenomenology’ of the negative and the dark is thus formed”. Kant also explored such aspects in his treatise *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764; developed later in his *Critique of Judgment*, 1790). Likewise, during this period various treatises were published which analysed the aesthetics of the horrible and the terrible, such as *On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror* (1773) by Anna Laetitia Aikin and John Aikin or Nathan Drake’s *On Objects of Terror* (1798). This is a clear sign of how at the very heart of the Enlightenment new ideas and aesthetic tastes were being developed that Romanticism would claim as its own: the dreamlike, the visionary, the sentimental, the macabre, the terrifying, the nocturnal...

In its defence of the rational, the Age of Enlightenment had also revealed a dark side of reality and of the self that reason could not explain. This dark side was precisely what gave rise to literature of the fantastic in its first manifestation: the gothic novel that arose in British fiction in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

If for the enlightened only that which could be proven really existed, what went beyond the limits of reason was therefore irrational, illusory, meaningless. The Romantics, without rejecting the conquests of science, postulated that reason, due to its limitations, was not the only instrument that human beings possessed in order to perceive reality. Intuition and imagination could be viable alternatives. After all, the universe was not a machine, but instead something more mysterious and less rational, just like the human mind.