



BOOK REVIEW:
*Space(s) of the Fantastic – A 21st Century
Manifesto*

Karl Bell

Punter, David and C. Bruna Mancini, editors. *Space(s) of the Fantastic – A 21st Century Manifesto*. Routledge Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780367681692.

The stated aim of this engaging book is to answer the question: “What is the fantastic?” Yet, as the title indicates, the focus is narrower and more specific than that. Rather than contributing to our understandings of definitions of the fantastic, it foregrounds the value of understanding the mode through contemporary literary geography. However, the collection never adequately explains the reasons for adopting a spatialized lens and the fresh insights that might be gleaned from it, although the various chapters work hard to make a convincing case for such an approach. The contributors, a combination of leading academics and those set to take the field forward in the future, demonstrate a rich variety of ways in which literary geography and the spatial turn can be usefully applied to the function and interpretation of fantastic literature.

The collection opens with a very brief introduction, a two-page think piece that throws out a poetic mix of conventional and novel reflections on the fantastic before shifting straight into the book’s ten chapters. There is no stated rationale behind the structure of the contributions. While they generally move from a focus on the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, certain chapters roam across a broad sweep of time within their relatively limited length. Although a short collection at 157 pages, the chapters cover a fascinating range of texts and topics. Focusing on British, European, and North American authors, the chapters provide an excellent illustration of the range of genres that can be included under the broad umbrella of the fantastic. These range from Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, through

Mary Shelley's post-apocalyptic *Last Man*, Victorian supernatural short fictions, the psychogeographical writings of Arthur Machen and Iain Sinclair, and the disturbing oeuvre of Daphne du Maurier, to more recent fantasy works, such as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, the science fiction of Octavia Butler and Nora K. Jemisin, and the (post-)New Weird works of China Miéville.

David Punter's opening chapter moves deftly from the histories of witchcraft to modern literary treatments of witches by exploring the idea of the witch as an absence, a figure who defies boundaries through shapeshifting and resurgence. While Punter introduces a political dimension to this study of the fantastical, a theme that resonates across a number of subsequent chapters, it falls to C. Bruna Mancini, his co-editor, to bring the book's central concern with spaces of the fantastic into sharper focus. Her chapter on the literary history of London's psychogeography takes us into occult histories, in terms of both the hidden and the magical. Bruna Mancini's brisk tour of key authors, from Thomas de Quincey and Arthur Machen to Iain Sinclair, Will Self, and Peter Ackroyd, demonstrates the ways in which the fantastical and everyday are brought into conjunction. Their liminality destabilizes the meaning of surface appearances so that the city is "endlessly recomposed, rewritten, inscribed on, fantastically reactivated" (34). Subsequent chapters all have something of interest to offer, but they vary greatly in their spatial and temporal scope or focus. This is part of the value of this book, for it sketches out the rich and varied possibilities afforded by spatialized readings of the fantastic.

Patricia Garcia's chapter explores the archetype of the Devil Architect in both folklore and literature. Shrinking the focus to specific constructions, such as cathedrals and bridges, Garcia offers compelling readings of aesthetic, physical, and moral monstrosity within select Devil Architect tales, and the role of the Devil in subverting the world-building purpose of the architect resonates with Punter's subversive witch. This is followed by Matthew Gibson's chapter on the nineteenth-century French author, Charles Nodier. While it outlines Nodier's earlier theorization of the fantastic in his *Du Fantastique en Litterature* (1830), the larger thematic insights latent in Gibson's subsequent analysis of one of Nodier's fictional works, *Trilby*, could have been teased out further.

The next two chapters provide an illustration of the ways in which the book's contributors radically contract or expand their spatial focus. Maria Teresa Chialant's intriguing take on the portrait as a fantastical space is followed by David Sandner's mapping of Mary Shelley's travelogue fictions, *Frankenstein* and *Last Man*. Rather than jarring, this juxtaposition of framed spaces and globetrotting rambles speaks to the collection's exploratory drive, one that seeks to locate and reflect upon the fantastical in all its dimensions, from the micro to the macro.

The following chapter, David Ian Paddy's reflection on the literary geography of Daphne du Maurier's fiction, covers a large number of texts. While this could have resulted in a sketchy overview, it adds weight to Paddy's argument that du Maurier was far more than a romance writer and that the strange, fantastic spaces in her stories expose both the unrealistic fantasy of dreams and the way domestic spaces can be rendered uncanny. Patrick Parrinder similarly draws on a broad range of texts to argue that utopian cities form a mirror world. While Parrinder's chapter draws out more overt political dimensions of the spaces of the fantastic, his interpretation of the mirror as a

fantastic space resonates with Chialant's examination of the portrait. Both represent non-existent spaces that involve reflection and distortion. Following Parrinder's references to mirrors, Lucie Armitt's chapter is similarly about looking. It focuses on portal fantasies that emphasize spatial and temporal disjunction. Comparing Octavia Butler's time-travelling novel, *Kindred* (1979) with China Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009), Armitt convincingly argues for the way the fantastic can be used to explore gendered violence by creating an imaginary space for social critique, which makes us view political and social realities afresh. The collection finishes with a second study of Miéville's work, this time comparing *This Census Taker* (2016) with Nora K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015). Through this comparison, Nicoletta Vallorani studies porous geographies and boundaries, focusing on the hole as a representation of blank and often forbidden space.

At a basic level, this collection reiterates what the spatial turn has long emphasized: space is not merely a container in which plot takes place. Rather, it informs a fundamental interaction between the psychological and physical, the interior and exterior, the fantastic and the mundane. It is both an important perspective from which to read literary texts and a means of interpreting space and place as texts in themselves. The collected chapters succeed in convincingly demonstrating how spatialized readings of the fantastic can offer fresh and intriguing insights into both familiar and lesser-known literary texts. They also illustrate the varied and sophisticated ways in which the fantastic, in its many modes and genres, can inform a rich understanding of space and place.

The book's weaknesses revolve around its misleading subtitle. This is not a manifesto, at least not understood as a stated declaration of views, aims, or intentions. Rather than prescribing a challenge to existing scholarship or asserting an encompassing argument, the contributions demonstrate the value and varied uses of a spatialized understanding of the fantastic. As indicated above, there are resonances between certain chapters. For example, Bruna Mancini and Parrinder make a significant contribution to our understanding of urban fantastical spaces. Others such as Punter, Garcia, Sandner, Paddy, and Armitt demonstrate the political value of the fantastic in articulating social critique, subversion, and alterity. Chialant's, Parrinder's, and Vallorani's chapters are united by their framing tropes of bounded spaces – portraits, mirrors, and holes respectively – as a way of usefully thinking about the multitude of fantastic spaces. However, it is left to the reader to make such connections; these are never explicitly stated by the co-editors.

One is left questioning whether this was a deliberate ploy for approaching the fantastic, a literature defined in this collection by its fluidity and uncertainty, by its magmatic, mutant, and mutinous qualities. In seeking to remain open to this, the book shies away from anything that might be deemed overly rigid, prescriptive, or reductive. Yet, this reader at least, perhaps misled by the subtitle's use of "manifesto," found himself wanting a bolder statement, a little more structure. It does not seem wholly unreasonable to expect something that declares itself a manifesto to place some clear lines in the sand, to state a position. Even a conclusion explaining what the editors felt the assembled contributions amounted to and how it helps advance the literary geography of the fantastic would have sufficed.

In this regard, it is notable that across the collected pieces, scholars of the fantastic are still drawing upon and making constructive use of key

theoretical texts from the mid-to-late twentieth century. The chapters make repeated references to Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopes, Tzvetan Todorov's notion of the fantastic as hesitation between the uncanny and marvellous, and Rosemary Jackson's reading of the fantastical as the literature of subversion. This is echoed in the use of seminal texts on spatial theory from a similar period, including those of Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan. While this can be positively interpreted as a body of theoretical work that has held up over time, it also suggests that it has not been sufficiently challenged by compelling alternative readings of the fantastical or cultural constructions of space in recent decades. This raises the question: what is distinctly "twenty-first century" about this "manifesto"? In terms of spatial theorizing of the fantastic, such a claim largely relies on some authors drawing upon two twenty-first century texts, Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) and Patricia Garcia's *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature: The Architectural Void* (2015). This suggests that scholars are increasingly willing and possibly yearning to venture beyond the approaches of their noted twentieth-century forebearers. Again, the lack of a clearly articulated and coherent position on spatialized understandings of the fantastic and fantastical understandings of space means this is not really the text to fulfill that desire.

If readers are expecting something in the vein of Brian Attebery's recent *Fantasy – How It Works* (2022), they may feel slightly wrongfooted. In attempting to address the fantastic instead of fantasy per se, Punter and Bruna Mancini's book arguably possesses greater ambition, and there is undoubtedly skilled scholarship and insights aplenty here. None of the criticisms above should detract from that. The chapters' rich and varied engagement with fantastic spaces will certainly reward re-reading. The issue is that the collection struggles to amount to more than the sum of its parts. For all its merits, one cannot help but feel that this "manifesto" was a missed opportunity to make a more assertive declaration, one that may have more boldly informed future approaches to the fantastic.

Biography: Dr. Karl Bell is Associate Professor of Cultural and Social History at the University of Portsmouth. Co-director of the university's Centre for Port Cities and Maritime Cultures, he has published widely on the supernatural, magic, and folklore, with particular focus on their relationship to modernity and cultural constructions of space. His publications include *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England, 1780-1914* and *The Legend of Spring-heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Cultures*.