

Victoria Lipina,

*Doctor of Philological Sciences, Professor,
Head of the Department of Comparative English
and Oriental Philological Studies,
Oles Honchar Dnipro National University
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9089-5159>
Dnipro, Ukraine*

Glib Lipin,

*Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor,
Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Literature,
Oles Honchar Dnipro National University
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2341-548X>
Dnipro, Ukraine*

Theoretical challenges in the study of the fantastic literature

Теоретичні виклики у вивченні фантастичної літератури

Summary. *The article is intended to outline the critical interest in the literature of the fantastic in two ways: by outlining the challenges in a theoretical understanding of its generic specificity in the wider field of literature by exemplifying analytic approaches to the study of the fantastic. Some of them are traditional and connected with the body of SF scholarship, inasmuch they have greatly helped in forming critical opinions. Another way is to highlight not so much a genre of the fantastic, but controversial theses that emerged within a new critical direction concerning the “moments of truth” found in fantastic writings that emerged with New Wave and encouraged the dynamics of critical awakening. It is noticeable that critics of the fantastic move away from the criterion of reality, then return to it again as a saving milestone. The goal of the article is not so much to name any of them as the most correct and comprehensive but to consider some of the many challenges that pertain to the criticism of the fantastic and that are still left unanswered in Western mainstream criticism. Critics, like E. Rabkin, N. Ruddick, H. Bretnor, L. Fiedler, T. Todorov, S. Lem, B. Aldiss, espoused a new vision of the fantastic not only within a historical context and generic variety of the precursors of the fantastic genre as an area of active artistic consciousness but also as a reader’s experience of the fantastic. As the title implies, the article describes how the study of the fantastic elucidates authoritative judgments on challenging issues and the most unexpected solutions, inasmuch since discussions on the definition and designation of genres of fantastic literature can be endless. The variety of emerging modifications of the fantastic is just as limitless. In addition, some new theoretical challenges are visible as a consequence of this*

study. The science-centrism is largely discredited now, and the process of the birth of new fantastic genres is underway in critical assessment.

Key words: *science fiction, fantasy, the fantastic, generic criticism, intergeneric boundaries, structuralism.*

Анотація. *Стаття має на меті окреслити науковий інтерес до літературної фантастики двома способами: шляхом аналізу викликів у теоретичному розумінні її родової специфіки та шляхом вивчення найважливіших проблем в оцінках нових експериментів, які нині є резонансними в британській та американській фантастичній літературі. Деякі з них є традиційними, пов'язаними з науковою фантастикою, оскільки вони значною мірою допомогли у формуванні критичних думок. Інший спосіб полягає в тому, щоб висвітлити не стільки жанри фантастики, скільки суперечливі тези, які виникли в новому критичному напрямі щодо «моментів істини», виявлених у різноманітних фантастичних творах, які виникли разом із Новою хвилею та сприяли динаміці критичного пробудження. Помітно, що критики то відходять від критерію реальності, то знову повертаються до нього як до рятівної віхи. Мета статті полягає не стільки в тому, щоб назвати будь-який із них як найбільш правильний і вичерпний, а в тому, щоб розглянути деякі з багатьох викликів, які стосуються критики фантастичного і які досі залишаються без відповіді в західній мейнстримній критиці. Критики, такі як Е. Рабкін, Н.Руддік, Х.Бретнор, Л.Фідлер, Т.Тодоров, С.Лем, Б. Олдісс, відстоювали нове бачення фантастичного не лише в історичному контексті та родовій різноманітності жанру фантастики як області активної художньої свідомості, але і як читацького досвіду фантастичного. Стаття описує, як дослідження фантастичного висвітлює авторитетні судження про складні питання та найнесподіваніші рішення, оскільки дискусії щодо визначення та позначення жанрів фантастичної літератури можуть бути нескінченними. Крім того, деякі нові теоретичні проблеми є очевидними як наслідок цього дослідження. Зараз наукоцентризм у вивченні наукової фантастики значною мірою дискредитований, а у критичній оцінці йде процес висвітлення нових фантастичних жанрів.*

Ключові слова: *наукова фантастика, фентезі, жанрологія, міжродові межі, структуралізм.*

Introduction. At the end of the 20th century, the contradictory picture emerged in Anglo-American criticism regarding the science fiction boom. On the one hand, there was the enormous popularity of science fiction, the emergence of New Wave science fiction (M. Moorcock, B. Aldiss, J. Ballard, B. Vova, H. Ellison, T. Pynchon, W. Le Guin, etc.), the success of SF magazines (“Extrapolation”, “Algol”, “Vector”), published by science fiction writers, and amateur publications – fanzines. On the other, the polarity in the dynamics of critical awakening in the assessments of science fiction – from denying its significance [12] to equating it with sacred prophecies. The problem was getting more complicated because

the entire huge body of science fiction writings was either studied in isolation from other genres of fantastic literature, or all literature was classified as science fiction. Much problematized is a negative attitude toward science fiction [12].

The objective of the article is to consider some of the many challenges that pertain to the criticism of the fantastic that are still left unanswered in Western mainstream criticism. Ukrainian genre criticism of the fantastic has grown to be one of the prolific academic fields (T. V. Kyrpyta, A. Niamtsu, O. Stuzhuk, O. Kovtun, O. Stuzhuk, Yu. Zaichenko, S. Khorob, Ye. Shkurov, etc.). However, there is still insufficient knowledge of the main trends in the development of foreign science fiction.

It is assumed that advancing a general definition of the fantastic poses immense terminological problems. Scholars are striving to develop a definition that would cover all specific intergeneric manifestations of the fantastic literature. However, the horizons of fiction are vast, and each new work invariably shifts the definitions once worked out. A connoisseur of fantastic literature E. Bleiler notes that even after he compiled what seemed to be the most comprehensive reference book on the fantastic, proposing his universal definition [4], he soon had to doubt the correctness of the proposed theory, since any working definition of the fantastic inevitably makes it possible to fit several thousand very different books under its label.

In the authoritative reference source «A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms» it is attested that the fantastic cannot exist without the notion of a clear dividing line (which the text transgresses) between things possible according to the laws of nature and things supernatural and impossible [10, p. 83].

Much disputation has begun to spring in academic evaluation of the fantastic. Not only critics but also writers tried to solve the problem. R. Silverberg suggests distinguishing the fantastic from that of the sub-literature in which there is all action and no content [25]. Another argument promotes understanding of the fantastic as an unexpected invasion of the inexplicable into the real world [23].

A great number of studies on genre criticism of the fantastic have already been launched. Some books resonate strongly among them: a monograph of the French structuralist T. Todorov [27], numerous monographs of the leading experts in this field, such as E. Rabkin [19], R. Scholes [23], the collective monographs “Anatomy of Wonder” (1976) [2], “Science Fiction: The Other Side of Realism” (1971) [24], “Coordinates” (1983) [9], “Exploring Fantasy Worlds” (1985) [11], “Contrary Modes” (1985) [8], and “Fantastyka i Futurologia” by S. Lem [17] and

others. The main attention is centered on theoretical, poetological problems of the fantastic and generic grouping of this literature. However, it is obvious that more often than not their generalizations, much problematized, are substantially indefensible of the real complexity of the fantastic.

Our goal is to raise some of the many challenges that seem still to be left unanswered when addressing the theoretical as well as historic-literary problems of the fantastic.

Methodology/Methods. Research methodology is theoretically and historically oriented on the study of Anglo-American fantastic literature, its theoretical and critical assessment in the history of mainstream criticism. The methodological backgrounds of contemporary generic criticism as well as Structuralist criticism (T. Todorov) outline academic discussion in the article.

Results and discussion. Critics have found the solution in identifying the fantastic as a broad class of phenomena that have common generic features. The fantastic is considered not a homogeneous genre of literature, but a class with recognizable common features and boundaries, with a center and periphery, thus embracing science fiction, fantasy, horror stories, uncanny, fairy tales, etc. [27]. There has been a main tendency to study science fiction in the context of general problems of defining the fantastic. The desire for a clear division of genres of fantastic literature has given way to the study of differences in genesis, landmarks, and volume.

It is enough to identify the range of issues associated with it to see the difficulty of any definition. Among the many problems, we will highlight only the most important ones related to science fiction, with which the fantastic is often associated. However, some critics are convinced that fantasy is the progenitor of the science fiction genre (“a parent genre of SF” [5, p. 117–137]).

The discussion calls attention to whether the scientific basis of the genre of science fiction is the core of this literature or is only the starting point of the plot [3], whether writers deal with science or the influence of science on man and society [24], what place science occupies in science fiction, whether science fiction is a genre of literature [6] or a “kind” (A. Fowler), how science fiction relates to the genres of “fantasy”, gothic novel [17], romance, how the origin of science fiction is traced in criticism [13].

The main criterion in defining science fiction is the “scientific plan” of the work (“explanatory scientific content”). R. Filmus [13] suggests considering science fiction as a phenomenon, along the perimeter and outside of which there is realistic literature, re-presentational literature, and literature about the supernatural, which does not need any scientific explanation.

The critic stresses the relativity of this criterion, its dependence on historical conditions and the attitude of the reader, and that the definition of “scientific” (fiction) cannot be considered universal and exhaustive in defining the genre of the fantastic. R. Filmus is trying to develop a structural model of the genre, considering it according to its components: theme, structure, modality, and myth. The “mythical” context of the genre includes a division into mythopoetic, mythomorphological, and demythological components of content. “Modality” covers satirical, ironic, naive, and serious modes of presentation. However, no scheme can cover the entire diversity of this literature.

The Structuralist approach, being an emerging theoretical perspective, stimulating and fruitful, though marked by dogmatism (as S. Lem proclaimed [17]), presented possibilities for revolutionizing approaches to the fantastic outside “content-topical” descriptions.

The fantastic is often characterized not only by genre parameters, but also as a “process”, or an “attitude”. The definition proposed by J. Bailey is widespread in science fiction criticism today: “The touchstone for scientific fiction, then, is that it describes an imaginary invention or discovery in the natural sciences [3, p. 11].

The search for an accurate definition of science fiction is associated with an appeal to the history of science fiction literature in general. Critics associate the history of science fiction with the beginning of the twentieth century, and not with the end of the nineteenth century when H. G. Wells' classic science fiction novels were written. Such myopic critical viewpoint cannot but cause surprise.

The period between 1926–1937 is viewed as the period of a heyday of fantastic literature and is referred to as the “Gernsback Era”. This was the period when the “father of science fiction” Hugo Gernsback, an electrical engineer, published his first science fiction novel “Ralph 124 41+: A Romance of the Year 2660” (1911). He launched the magazine “Amazing” Stories” (1926), and writers whose first stories he published include John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Howard Fast, Ursula K. Le Guin, Roger Zelazny, and Thomas M. Disch.

Gernsback created an entire school within the framework of fiction, in which the technical authenticity of the environment was as significant as the artistic authenticity of the character [20, p. 79–117]. During this period, the first masterpieces of science fiction were created: the novels of Stapledon and Huxley, and Tolkien (“The Hobbit, or There and Back Again”, 1937).

Critics associate the main feature of this stage in science fiction with the process of popularizing scientific ideas. A. Rogers calls this period a transition from the old scientific romances to the new style of science

fiction, which culminated in the 40–60s. An artistic feature of science fiction of this period is the development of a realistic method of describing non-realistic plots. Against the background of this literature I. Azimov's style is defined as a grey style of prose [20, p.79]). However, in this deliberate stylistic roughness, seen by critics as a lack of stylistic skill, one can also notice the literary technique of stylization, the recognizable criticism on the clumsiness of technical descriptions.

The problem of the origins and influence of American fiction on world literature is considered in the work of J. Turner [30, p. 79–112]. The critic is trying to comprehend the history of American science fiction in the context of social, aesthetic, and psychological problems of the era. Special consideration is paid to the analysis of the state of science fiction in the post-war period when the sonorous voice of the Hugo era began to weaken.

It should be noted that strong opposition to the technocratic literature of the 1930s appeared not in the USA, but in Britain. The main figure was H. G. Wells who created a spectacular event British prose.

In the course of the ongoing discussion, a new direction in the study of the fantastic has been crystallized. The focus was on a comparative study of national variants of fantastic literature. It has already become commonplace to mark the difference between commercially oriented American science fiction and the recognized high artistic status of British fantastic literature. Recently, this interest in studying the national aspects of the development of science fiction has become increasingly obvious. Besides, a comparison of American and Japanese science fiction can be of no less interest for clarifying the nature of the fantastic worldwide. It can contribute to a more accurate and objective understanding of the extra-national basis of the fantastic common to all literatures and cultures.

Perhaps this affirmation of the specificity of British science fiction was largely facilitated by the classic science fiction epic of the 1930s – Olaf Stapledon's "The Last and First Man": "One thing is certain. Man himself, at the very least, is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accompaniment, its matrix of storms and stars. Man himself in his degree is eternally a beauty in the eternal forms of things. It is very good to have been man" [26, p. 317].

In defining science fiction as a genre, the well-known stereotypes have been overcome. Science fiction is no longer associated exclusively with robots and machines (hardware) or reduced to an encyclopedia of space. This was facilitated by the historical and critical understanding of science fiction as a significant phenomenon that has its masterpieces. Critical interest should be attracted to the important milestones in the development of the genre: the novels "Childhood's End" by A. Clark (1953),

“The Left Hand of Darkness” (1969) by W. Le Guin, and Th. Sturgeon’s “More Than Human” (1953) where the situation of human development is modeled according to the laws of not physical, but mental evolution.

Science fiction is gaining more and more space for itself, going beyond the boundaries of the SF ghetto. Critics observe that science fiction problematic is spiritualized. Instead of the concept of scientism, the artistic ideas on the spiritual meaning of scientific discoveries are pursued. The humanitarian pathos of science fiction is obvious in A. Clark’s novels. He was among the first to reject the Darwinian concept of evolution, showing that humanity is moving into a new era of world unity – World State. “The stars are not for man only to have man grow, under the rule of evolution, into a mind thing that can inhabit the stars, with perfect ease” [7, p. 53]. Thus, the problem of the status of science fiction could not but be considered in terms of the artistic possibilities of this literature. However, some scholars still believe that science fiction is not centered on people, does not have interesting complex characters, and deals predominantly with a critique of society or a scientific experiment, thus denying the right to belong to fiction.

There is an opinion that in science fiction character, as a rule, is conventional and schematic. Major masters of science fiction are criticized for the fact that their characters are flat – two-dimensional [14]. However, it seems that this quality of science fiction is explained not by a lack of talent on the part of the writers, but by the conventions of the fantastic genre itself, the poetics of which is aimed at developing models of the world, and not at delineating individual psychology. Any deviation towards psychological detail can destroy the main principle of the structure of the text.

M. Green, studying the scientific and literary basis of science fiction, believes that it is precisely this property of science fiction that dismayed the talented writers. However, he still finds in this genre not only the inherent contradiction between the conventions of form and the artistic capabilities of the writer but also a hidden artistic potential capable of development.

At one pole of the assessment of science fiction, there is doubt about the literary merits of this form, at the other, there is recognition of its artistic power and capabilities, and that its status is in the part with great literature.

Thus, the analysis of science fiction criticism makes it possible to identify five different approaches to defining and assessing the fantastic.

1. Science fiction is defined as literature that is based on thinking about science and technology [6].

2. Narration is centered on imaginary inventions [3].

3. A class of stories contains situations that are unrealistic today, but which can develop based on discoveries in science (as, for example, in Heinlein's famous novel "The Door to Summer" (1957) [16].

4. The "fantasy" section creates an atmosphere of scientific probability [19]. (Le Guin's novel "Rocannon's World")

5. Search for our human origin (R. Heinlein's novel "Stranger in a Strange Land") [1, p. 31].

These approaches seem to be all about identifying the place of science in the genesis of the science fiction genre. Science and its social, mental, and general cultural impact are at the center of such theoretical reflections. But still, another attitude is visible – an attempt to trace how it is connected with great literature, and with other genres of the fantastic.

Furthermore, the academic awakening of genre criticism of the fantastic is marked by an interest in the origins of fantastic literature, associated with the study of myth, fairy tale, fantasy and "Gothic" novel, as well.

Another challenge is the assessment of the fantastic in terms of values. Scholarly attention focuses on the analysis of the artistic merits. And here the approaches to the problem are very different: from recognizing any text as fantastic, created by the writer's imagination (in fact, neither *Pickwick* nor *Madame Bovary* existed in life), to clarify the "fantastic degree" of the text: «as genres they may be related according to the degree and kind of their use of the fantastic» [19, p. 73].

Suffice it to recall the talking rose in Exupery's "The Little Prince". The fantastic details create the image of the hero's inner and outer world. And this world exists and is perceived completely differently than the fantastic universes of Le Guin, where everything, it seems, can be palpable.

Not only critics, but writers themselves strive to penetrate the artistic nature of fantastic fiction. The most striking example is the reasoning of the master of the fantastic literature J.R.R. Tolkien in the essay "On Fairy Stories". The writer believes that the goal of literature is to create internal fundamental laws ("ground rules"), which he classifies as "subconscious" (possibly by analogy with another term – subcreation – subconscience). The effect of the fantastic is achieved, Tolkien believes [28, p. 55], only as a result of violating this main law of logic, since not every text provides grounds for attributing it as "fantastic." "Creative Fantasy is found upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it" [28, p. 55].

Another critical challenge is to evolve a conceptual apparatus for analyzing the fantastic with an emphasis on the nature of perception. Here a variety of approaches is observed. One of them is to identify the psychological mechanism of the birth of the awareness that everything described is fantasy, but not reality.

E. Rabkin introduces two concepts for the analysis of this phenomenon: “the unexpected” and “the irrelevant” [19, p. 8], examining them in relation to the categories of not-expected, and dis-expected, delving into the semantic differentiation of these conceptual series. The scholar insists that only what is created contrary to our expectations (anti-expected) introduces the reader to the fantastic. E. Rabkin proposes to gradate the degree of the fantastic (rotate by 90 and 180 degrees), distinguishing between the texts “flavored by the fantastic”, and “the fantastic” [19, p. 12]. The scholar defines the main criterion of the fantastic as the presence of this “dis-expected” moment [19, p. 9]. “The implied author behind the text is reminding us today that flowers are preconceived as mute” [19, p. 4]. As soon as the text has made us inclined to think that flowers cannot speak, their conversation will shock us with its fantastic nature.

E. Rabkin continues to differentiate the concepts necessary to comprehend the fantastic, trying to clarify the blurring meanings. He introduces the following group of characteristics: “non-normal, irrelevant”, which in turn is divided into “apparently irrelevant” and “truly irrelevant”.

Despite all the semantic-receptive novelty of this approach, the same focus on two main factors is evident here: reality and the reader’s perception, which, as has already been shown, is characteristic of countless surveys of the fantastic. Moreover, the very artistic nature of fantastic improbability is left unexplained – the semantic shades here are of little help to clarify.

Identifying the main problem of “real world truth”, E. Rabkin seeks to approach it from new positions. He proposes to consider it as the so-called “grapholect” – the projection of the “written voice” coming from a certain time, place, or social group. These “grapholectal signals of the fantastic,” proposed by the scholar by the analogy with the dialectal existence of speech [19, p. 17], should provoke the reader to believe. Thus, the mechanism of perception of the fantastic is reduced to a speech model: the norm (traditional thinking) and deviation from the norm – grapholect, or the fantastic, – activate the process of perception and understanding of this literature. What is important here is that the fantastic is viewed not as something directly opposite to reality, but as a phenomenon directly related to it. This is felt not only in his theories of “gradated” fiction but also in the concept of fiction: “the old world as a new world” [19]. Science fiction is seen as literature that is also capable of expressing “the truth of the human heart.” Much earlier N. Hawthorne also noted this value of the fantastic [15].

However, the study of the nature of the fantastic within the “real – fantastic” scale may endlessly expand the boundaries of research, including myth, fairy tale, satire, science fiction, and fantasy. This displays how the fantastic is associated with different modes of depicting reality.

Another comprehension of the fantastic that is less designated embraces the verisimilar pattern of occurrences or “an unexpected invasion of the inexplicable into the real world” [30]. N. Ruddick, like C. S. Lewis and K. Hume, regards any violation of verisimilitude to be an aesthetic law of fantastic literature, without accepting the concept of “state of doubt” initiated by the resonant structuralist study of T. Todorov. N. Ruddick connects the origins of British science fiction with the era of Darwin’s discovery, and not, as B. Aldiss, with Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein”, and the essence of fantasy he conceives in its ability “to present and consider the fantastic” [20, p. 46].

However, such poetic-theoretical study of the problems of fantastic literature, where theories gave birth from the analyzed literary works, and not as fruits of purely theoretical reasoning, is, regrettably, very rare. Critics, as a rule, do not go further than Tolkien’s articles (“On Fairy Stories”), even though the critical reflections of writers on their art are of undoubted academic interest: they knew far more [16].

It is noticeable that critics of the fantastic either move away from the criterion of reality, or return to it again as a saving milestone. Thus, R. Schmerl believes that if the main law of realistic literature is the rejection of the incredible, then the law of the fantastic is to “dispense with attempts at credibility” and to resort to all sorts of “tricks” and “evasions” [22].

Comparing it to the fairy tale, the scholar emphasizes that the depicted miracles in the fantastic do not create fantasy as a literary genre. In a fairy tale, as in “Alice,” there is no very important “frame” indicating fictionality, the work of active imagination. Tolkien also noticed this trait: the element of sleep is not a simple machinery of beginning and end, but an organic part of actions and transformations [29, p. 38–57]. “Wonder” is interpreted as a central feature of the fantasy genre. Tolkien believed that wonder is “the realization, independent of the conceived mind, of imaginary wonder [29, p. 40].

Conclusions. In the second half of the 20th century, fantastic literature finally acquired the status of fiction and began to be studied in the aspect of problems of great literature.

Criticism of the fantastic confronted two basic theoretical challenges. The first one was of an epistemological and methodological nature. It relates to the way the critic was to approach literary material, to decide if a certain event or phenomenon belongs to reality or imagination. It is therefore the category of the real that has outlined a basis for the definition of the fantastic.

There have been several approaches to the definition and differentiation of genres of fantastic literature. The attention of scholars was focused on the main problem – the problem of imagination and the peculiarities

of perception of the fantastic world. In the works of recent years, the focus of the attention of scholars is on new artistic concepts of reality and consciousness created by W. Le Guin, J. Ballard, H. Ellison, T. Pynchon M. Moorcock, and others. Obviously, in their definitions and interpretations, scholars proceed from the fact that the worlds created in the fantastic are not the elements of the writer's unlimited imagination, but a special model of another world, which has its logic and its laws.

The desire for a clear division of genres of fantastic literature has given way to settle on another challenge – an analysis of points of contact and the study of differences in genesis, landmarks, and aesthetic values.

The article elucidates authoritative judgments on challenging issues in the study of fantastic literature. We wanted not so much to name any of them as the most correct and comprehensive but to analytically highlight “moments of truth” found in a variety of works, as well as consider the controversial theses that encourage further reflection. Besides, some new theoretical challenges are visible as a consequence of this study.

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