



Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre

Tzvetan Todorov , Richard Howard (Translator) , Robert Scholes (Designed by)

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In *The Fantastic*, Tzvetan Todorov seeks to examine both generic theory and a particular genre, moving back and forth between a poetics of the fantastic itself and a metapoetics or theory of theorizing, even as he suggest that one must, as a critic, move back and forth between theory and history, between idea and fact. His work on the fantastic is indeed about a historical phenomenon that we recognize, about specific works that we may read, but it is also about the use and abuse of generic theory.

As an essay in fictional poetics, *The Fantastic* is consciously structuralist in its approach to the generic subject. Todorov seeks linguistic bases for the structural features he notes in a variety of fantastic texts, including Potocki's *The Sargasso Manuscript*, Nerval's *Aur lia*, Balzac's *The Magic Skin*, the *Arabian Nights*, Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoureux*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and tales by E. T. A. Hoffman, Charles Perrault, Guy de Maupassant, Nicolai Gogol, and Edgar A. Poe.

Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre Details

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From Reader Review Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre for online ebook

Ron says

Todorov's comprehensive report on the definition of fantastic literature wrapped in an exhaustive introduction to structuralist narratology is a classic example of structuralist finickiness producing interesting theory of limited practical use. The concepts he introduces are entertaining exercises in mental athletics: In order to qualify as genuine fantastic literature a text has to be right on the edge between the real and imaginary world. The hint of the supernatural and marvelous has to be believable but never realized, yet the world the reader perceives must be grounded in realism so as to make the incongruity discernible. Like Shroedinger's Cat the fantastic is alive and valid only as long as it remains unknown whether the supernatural element is present or not. Uncertainty and ambiguity are the defining elements of Todorov's concept of the fantastic.

He introduces several different aspects of fantastic literature which he theoretically explores, yet in practice his definition is so restricting as to exclude virtually any potential candidates for the genre, shunting them into adjacent genres like horror, gothic, mystery, literary nonsense, absurdist fiction and surrealism.

Nonetheless, his theory remains influential, not least because of the numerous attempts to discredit and refute it. Reading Todorov's monograph it becomes impossible not to strongly react to his statements, especially considering how uncompromisingly they are worded, provoking an equally adamantly phrased response.

Paulo Vinicius Figueiredo dos Santos says

Eu me sinto mais burro depois de ter lido este livro do Todorov. Eu devia imaginar que a leitura seria arrastada como foi A Conquista da América. O livro me ajudou a pensar em algumas características do estilo fantástico e do maravilhoso na literatura. Mas, de fato, não é uma leitura para qualquer um. Não recomendo para iniciantes.

Erika says

Brevi accenni su ciò che potrete trovare in questo testo molto interessante, che consiglio a tutti di leggere. Prima o poi.

Todorov nasce a Sofia, nel 1939, ed è morto da pochissimo, nel febbraio 2017, a Parigi. Il suo nome è legato allo strutturalismo francese perché lui negli anni '60 si è trasferito a Parigi ed è stato allievo di Roland Barthes. La critica strutturalista si sviluppa in Francia, a Parigi, come nuova critica in opposizione alla critica di stampo storicistico che si praticava nelle Accademie e nelle Università. La critica storicistica si basa sull'analisi dell'opera in rapporto diacronico con i testi che vengono prima e dopo e, soprattutto, anche in rapporto alla vita dell'autore. Todorov definisce il fantastico come genere, attribuendogli delle caratteristiche specifiche, rinvenibili ad una serie di testi anche appartenenti a periodi diversi. Nella premessa, in cui riflette su cosa sia un genere letterario, distingue tra i generi storici, che sono basati sul concetto di diacronia, e i generi teorici, basato sul concetto di sincronia. Todorov, in via preliminare, ci dice che la sua analisi del

fantastico in quanto genere si baserà su tre aspetti principali, che costituiranno la base delle sue ricerche: l'aspetto verbale dell'opera, che riguarda i registri della parola, lo stile, quindi l'enunciato ma che riguarda anche l'enunciazione, cioè legato a colui che emette il messaggio. Dunque l'aspetto verbale a sua volta si divide in due parti: l'analisi dell'enunciato e l'analisi dell'enunciazione. L'altro aspetto è l'aspetto sintattico, cioè le relazioni che intercorrono tra le parti dell'opera nella sua composizione, e come un elemento dell'opera è legato all'altro. Il fantastico, secondo Todorov, occupa il lasso di tempo di questa incertezza. Non appena si è deciso per una delle due opzioni, si entra nel regno di due generi limitrofi: lo strano e il meraviglioso. Quindi il concetto di fantastico si definisce in rapporto ai concetti di reale e di immaginario. Todorov fa anche uno specchietto piuttosto complesso sul rapporto tra il fantastico, il reale e l'immaginario e distingue tra lo strano puro, il fantastico strano, il fantastico meraviglioso e il meraviglioso puro. È questa è la parte più superata della teoria di Todorov e più contestata dai critici successivi. "Nello schema" scrive Todorov subito dopo questa partizione "il fantastico sarebbe rappresentato dalla linea mediana, quella che separa il fantastico strano dal fantastico meraviglioso. Questa linea corrisponde perfettamente alla natura del fantastico, frontiera tra due campi vicini".

Isadora Wagner says

This book came to me highly recommended by a friend of the uncanny, and has truly become one of my most trusted reach-to favorites. You know that ailment that's been bugging you, but you didn't have the name for it and didn't know how a bunch of symptoms were actually related until you went and saw a specialist? Todorov's structuralist breakdown of the marvelous, the fantastic, and the uncanny--with the fantastic mediating in the middle through uncertainty--was the holy grail of aha! moments for me as a reader and writer: so THAT'S WHY E.T.A. Hoffman works here, and King fails there, and why Nabokov's "Wingstroke" remains such an enduring and chilling delight for me. The fantastic's connection to poetry and allegory is discussed through literal and figurative language--a extremely helpful link for me to finally and comfortably say why the mythic, fable and fairy tale (including folklore, religion, and broad swaths of medieval literature) have always also been of great interest. Puts some modern gothic/Southern gothic writers into interesting and illuminating light (F.O'Connor, E.Bowen, C. McCarthy), although not a direct interest of the book. And manages to put mystery into play with John Dickson Carr, Agatha Christie, etc., etc. An extremely helpful and well-informed must-read for any student of non-realist fiction. The reading list alone will keep you busy for a year!

Chris King Elfland's 2nd Cousin says

NOTE: *This review first appeared at [The King of Elfland's 2nd Cousin](#) on January 3rd, 2012. If you enjoy it, you'll find more stuff like it there!*

Happy New Year! Now that the formalities are out of the way, I thought I'd take a few moments to share with you what I did between Christmas and New Year's: In addition to remodeling our library, and turning our dining room into a library annex, I also spent the week slowly and carefully reading Tzvetan Todorov's classic book of genre criticism, appropriately titled *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*.

Of course, I'd read *about* Todorov many times before. I'd even read a couple essays he'd written (I particularly recommend his typology of detective fiction). But I figured that it was best to see for myself

what he had to say. And though in the end I was very satisfied, this book really defied my expectations.

The book's title is misleading. From the adjective-cum-noun "Fantastic" it is a short leap to the modern genre of "fantasy" - and so when I first bought the book, I expected to find a master critic expressing his own Unified Theory of Fantasy, like a Northrop Frye or a Wayne C. Booth for the speculative genre (for two excellent analyses more in this vein, I recommend Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* and Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy*). Instead, Todorov uses a much narrower interpretation of fantasy, placing it on a spectrum between stories where ostensibly supernatural events are explained through rational means (which he calls the "uncanny") and stories where supernatural events are shown to actually be supernatural (which he calls the "marvelous").

To put it another way, Todorov's uncanny stories are Scooby Doo episodes: during the action, the characters and reader experience events which are ostensibly beyond mortal ken (ghosts, monsters, strange worlds, etc.). But by the end of the story, all of the ostensibly supernatural experiences are explained away in a naturalistic and rational fashion, thus erasing the supernatural from the story. It's like Old Man Withers being unmasked by the gang. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Todorov's "marvelous" stories are *Buffy* episodes: during the action, the characters and reader experience events which are beyond mortal ken, but by the end of the story, all of the ostensibly supernatural experiences can only be explained by an acceptance of their supernatural reality. Todorov's "fantastic" genre, however, is the *Twilight Zone*: neither the characters nor the reader is ever really certain whether the supernatural events are to be accepted.

This is a much narrower definition of "the fantastic" than "fantasy" would imply. It excludes almost all secondary world fantasy, and almost all science fiction. Even most wainscot fantasies would fall into Todorov's "marvelous" camp. Which is a shame, because anything beyond his narrowly defined borders gets brushed off as beyond the scope of his analysis.

The first half of *The Fantastic* is an interesting, if dry, exercise in critical philosophy and semantic hair-splitting. He defines what he means by the fantastic, and provides a definite set of criteria for use in its identification. Given my (incorrect) expectations, the book initially frustrated me. I wanted to gleam sweeping insights with applicability across a broad swathe of fantasy titles and sub-genres. Todorov's painstakingly detailed definition of "hesitation" or what I would call ambiguity: the uncertainty felt by the character and the reader as to their implied frame of reference for experiencing the story. According to Todorov, if a story has no ambiguity, then by definition it falls outside the bounds of his fantastic. Now, I love ambiguous stories. But most fantasy, and most science fiction, eschews the degree of ambiguity described by Todorov. Let's face it: there are few *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever* or *There Are Doors* out there.

Yet once Todorov establishes his definitions, he begins to dissect his ambiguous stories in much more painstaking detail, parsing their themes and structures. And here, *The Fantastic* becomes a treasure trove of insight. The conclusions Todorov draws regarding the fantastic are not, in fact, particularly interesting. They may be thought provoking, but they have limited applicability beyond his caged genre, and furthermore I suspect his reliance on the psychoanalytic school of criticism ignores too many other factors. Yet the techniques that Todorov applies, independent of the genre against which they are applied, are quite impressive.

In a very real sense, Todorov draws the treasure map to a very narrow sub-genre. But by doing so, he shows us how to draw such maps for any other genre in existence. I wish that Todorov had taken the trouble to do the same for both his uncanny and marvelous genres. But the process of structural analysis that he applied to his ambiguous stories can just as readily be applied to secondary world fantasy, portal/quest fantasies,

wainscot fantasies, liminal fantasies, intrusion fantasies, and all the rest. And that is why this book remains significant: on the one hand, it adds to our critical toolkit, and by using much-analyzed "classic" texts of the Gothic age, it helps to bring the tools of genre criticism into the "respectable" light of academia.

In that sense, later critics like Farah Mendlesohn or Brian Attebery both benefited from Todorov's work. On the one hand, they apply to a broader body of work the universal techniques that Todorov pioneered. And on the other hand, they benefit from the fact that Todorov dragged ghosts and demons into the light of critical respectability.

All in all, this is a book on criticism well worth reading. But not for its conclusions: more for its methods.

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Mattia Ravasi says

Fun With Genres, a video in which I discuss this book.

One of the finest and clearest works of literary criticism I have ever read. A blueprint suggesting how to approach genres, impossible to ignore whether you agree with Todorov's methodology or not. Also great fun to readers outside academia (!).

Elizabeth says

An analytical view of the fantastic and its contribution to literature as a whole. I find this book delightfully philosophical about my favorite topic: literature. Todorov's theories about defining the fantastic are direct, correct, and applicable. Sometimes I read things on literary analysis, and I wonder why it matters, but, for some reason, I was completely drawn into Todorov's arguments and never once questioned why I couldn't just enjoy a book for what it's worth and move on. He inspired and motivated me to question WHY we have the fantastic, not just what it is.

Mariana says

Bueno, no es secreto que me gusta más la propuesta de Rosemary Jackson, pero Todorov fue el primero, y *Fantasy* no existiría de no ser por él.

(Además, creo que mi preferencia por Jackson tiene bastante que ver con una cuestión temporal.)

(Me faltó la última parte.)

Robert Wood says

Todorov takes on a double task within this text, to both explore the generic structures of the fantastic, and to

challenge previous interpretations of genre, viz. Northrop Frye, in order to develop a structural interpretation of genre and literature. In doing so, he attempts to move away from a static understanding of genre built off of non-literary categories, to produce a dynamic understanding of the structures of literature that builds a vocabulary from its internal dynamics. This itself draws off of a psychoanalytical language, but in a way that differentiates itself from the practice of psychoanalysis. At the same time, he develops an understanding of the fantastic as a literature of hesitation, an intrusion of events that do not obey the natural expectations of the audience, and that are not either fully established as supernatural, which would make the text fall in the category of the marvelous, or given a naturalist explanation, which would make it an uncanny text.

meeners says

i stopped reviewing academic books here a long time ago, for lots of different reasons, but wanted to make a note of this todorov passage just for my own personal amusement:

Further: by the very fact that we must use ordinary language in order to speak of literature, we imply that literature transmits something which could be designated by other means. By if this were true, why should literature exist at all? Its only reason for being is that it says what non-literary language does not and cannot say. Therefore some of the best critics tend to become writers themselves in order to avoid the violence wrought upon literature by non-literature, but it is a hopeless effort. A new literary work has been created, the previous one has not been matched. Literature says what it alone can say. When the critic has said everthing in his power about a literary text, he has still said nothing: for the very existence of literature implies that it cannot be replaced by non-literature.

(note: todorov does go on to talk about the possibilities opened up by the paradoxes of literary signification, so it's not as if he's denying the entire practice of lit-crit en masse, but the line "When the critic has said everthing in his power about a literary text, he has still said nothing" still made me lol, in a kind of desperate hysterical way. potential book blurb found!)

Soren Sondergaard says

A frustrating read. Very few parallels are drawn to the fantastic genre and Todorov's rather simple theory is hidden beneath a mountain of academics. Still - most chapters are very good while a few (like chapter VIII) are almost unreadable.

Ann says

This is one of the classic academic books on the subject. While it focuses on a small slice of the genre of speculative fiction (Todorov defines the fantastic as a kind of hesitation between deciding whether a supernatural event is real or imagined, rather than uncanny where the event turns out to have a "real world" explanation, or the marvelous, where the supernatural event has a supernatural explanation), there are many points about the genre that carry over into the greater category.

He also sets up a lot of the terminology still used when discussing genres. It's one of the foundational books on the subject.

However, it's very dry reading, partly because it's a translation of a translation.

Polly says

It was really easy to read, but I absolutely have no use for Todorov's Definition of the Fantastic.

Liz says

One of the more amazing works on the fantastic in literature, and an excellent entry point into narratological analysis! Thoroughly enjoyable reading.

Ismael Serna says

Es evidente que para leer literatura fantástica no es necesario conocer este libro, sin embargo, su lectura y análisis te encamina a cualquier amante del género del imaginario hacia una estructura profunda del relato fantástico. Un ensayo ameno y completo.
