

## ON THE FANTASTIC AND THE URBAN

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Under the streets of London there's a place most people could never even dream of. A city of monsters and saints, murderers and angels, knights in armour and pale girls in black velvet. This is the city of the people who have fallen between the cracks.

Neil Gaiman, *Neverwhere*

The city has long been playing an important role in fiction as the place of memory and archive, of inclusion and exclusion and, above all, as the space where different stories can occur. This monographic section has a special emphasis on the relationship between the fantastic and the urban, which can be understood in many ways. One is to look at the subgenre of Urban Fantasy, broadly and peripherally defined as a work of art that focus its attention on possible and impossible urban worlds. Exploring themes like the coexistence between the real and imagined worlds or the inscription of myths, magic or the supernatural in real cities, these works subvert the codes of reality with increasing complexity presenting alternatives and visions that question identities and representations, and also reflect upon cultural and social values of the nations they personify. This is particularly verifiable in the twenty and twenty-first centuries. Two early examples, which contributed to the popularity of the subgenre, are the novel *Neverwhere* (Neil Gaiman, 1996) and the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), created by Joss Whedon.

However, this monograph, more than being particularly focused on the Urban Fantasy subgenre, also centers its attention on works that establish a

specific relation between the urban experience and the fantastic narrative, the real and the imagined or on works that explore futuristic or historical settings. In this sense, the main objective of this monograph is to offer, in a total of eight essays, an open but specialized approach to the theme of the urban and the fantastic and its many different artistic expressions —literature, cinema, and television, among others— with the purpose of presenting a global and contemporary portrait of the research dedicated to this topic.

Hence, the eight essays in the monograph are organized according to two major creative areas focused on the urban and the fantastic. The first part, which is exclusively dedicated to literature, proposes a journey through time and along various countries (Germany, Argentina, Angola and England). Thus, we open this monographic section with Susana Oliveira's essay on the crystal cities imagined by Paul Scheerbart (1863-1915). In her text, «Paul Scheerbart Kaleidoscopic Fantasies», Oliveira revisits Scheerbart's various writings and creations, with a particular emphasis on *Glass Architecture* (1972) and the novel *The Gray Cloth and Ten Percent White: A Ladies' Novel* (2001) in order to better understand the author's fascination with glass and, above all, with different types of fantastic spaces, including a utopian city made entirely of glass.

It is also within utopia (and dystopia) that we can situate Ana Davis González' text in which she contemplates three novels by the Argentinian writer Leopoldo Marechal. *Adán Buenosayres* (1948), *El Banquete de Severo Arcángelo* (1965) y *Megafón o la Guerra* (1971) are all works of fantastic fiction in which space plays a significant role, as it is used as a metaphor to look into Argentinian society.

The same kind of approach is conducted by Maria Cristina Batalha in her analysis of the novel *O quase fim do mundo* (*Almost the End of the World*), written by the Angolan writer Pepetela in 2008. In the novel, the fictional city of Calpe and its outskirts is the setting for a post-apocalyptic allegory where only a handful of people survive, which allows Pepetela the space to interrogate contemporary society. Rather than utopian, however, this new society is bound by prejudice and so the writer seems to point towards a utopia sentenced to failure from the very beginning.

Still within the literary context two other essays emerge: Arno Meteling's «Gothic London: On the Capital of Urban Fantasy in Neil Gaiman, China Miéville and Peter Ackroyd» and Irina Rata's «Trials and Tribulation Below». Both texts look at London as a major character in works of fiction. In the first case, Meteling's approach to the city is done via three works: Neil Gaiman's novel *Neverwhere* (1996), China Miéville's story «Reports of Certain

Events in London» (2004), and Peter Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* (1985). In this text the author emphasizes the heterotopic alternative spaces created by Gaiman, Miéville and Ackroyd and their symbolic meaning. As his analysis demonstrates the idea that the urban underworld mirrors the city is crucial in the case of fantastic London.

Similarly, Irina Rata's research takes us into Neil Gaiman's «London Below», a fantastic realm that coexists with the real city. The author's close reading of *Neverwhere* underlines the popularity not only of the novel as a paradigm of the Urban Fantasy genre, but also considers the different traits and tropes of this genre. The urban, therefore, is again at the center, as this study takes us into a multilayered city defined by different traditions and symbols.

The second part of this monographic issue moves towards a different direction as it considers three visual creative works: a film, two television series and, finally, a videogame, thus expanding our approach to the study of the fantastic and the urban beyond the move from page to screen.

The opening essay of this second part looks at the city as fantastic setting in *Enemy*, the 2013 mystery/thriller film directed by Dennis Villeneuve and based upon José Saramago's book *The Double* (2002). By considering Villeneuve's particular vision on the city and on its multilayered subjective universe, Luis Finol explores the fantastic narrative of Adam Bell (Jake Gyllenhaal) and its many symbolisms and ambiguities.

The following study, by Irene Raya Bravo and Sergio Cobo-Durán, entitled «Between Portland and Seattle. The Civilized Monster in *Grimm* and *iZombie*», is the result of an attentive observation of contemporary television series, but also of contemporary cities. As both series are located in the urban landscape and show different settings and monsters, the author aims at analyzing in what way characters and environment influence each other and, by doing so, how each television show represents the real city. In this sense, the material provided both by cinema as well as contemporary television is an essential resource that allows us to look into the interrelation between space and the fantastic narrative, as many creations that explore this theme are becoming more and more common and successful.

Finally, we move to the survival horror video game *Silent Hill* where Davide Carnavale looks into the importance of space in creating an uncanny and frightening environment. By positioning space as its central motif, video games are also able to present different alternative worlds and dimensions that, at the same time, reveal their illusory nature, as the author further develops in this study.

The way in which we conclude the monographic issue is also relevant, as it confirms that there are many possibilities of approaching the Urban and the Fantastic. Bearing that in mind, the selected essays presented here point towards a wide variety of approaches, methods and visions, which illustrates how this theme is far from being examined in its entirety. For that reason, the eight essays chosen represent just a glimpse of the innumerable paths of the urban and the fantastic, but still they provide an interesting insight for those who wish to travel within the realms of the (un)real.

