

Review and Response

Review:

Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: the Theory and History of Subcreation*, NY: Routledge, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-415-63120 (pbk.) 394pp.

I read this book in context of beginning some serious thinking about what we might want to know and understand about audiences for the contemporary tsunami of fantasy literature, films, television and games, and how we might design and conduct such research. It left me feeling in the end informed, pushed forward, but also deeply disappointed.

I want to begin with honest, unqualified praise. Mark Wolf's book is a rich, thoughtful, hugely researched and grounded contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the history and workings (especially in a contemporary, digitally-enhanced and transmedial world) of imaginary worlds. Across seven chapters, Wolf covers the philosophy, history, and narrative organisation of built worlds, and their recurrent and emergent tendency to work across media, and to become complex transmedial worlds subject to the tests and requirements of consistency, completeness, and complex authorship. The book is topped off with an Appendix listing a vast number (getting on for 2,000 items, from the 7th century BC, to 2011) of 'subcreated worlds' which meet his broad criteria. This is all fascinating and at times exhilarating stuff. There are eccentricities of inclusion (is it obviously helpful to group utopias, with Homer Simpson's world, and *Northern Exposure's* Cicely, Alaska?). But still a case is made for treating all such as signs of the same essential human drive to 'see beyond'. And treating things in this way does introduce some intriguing and unusual insights, including even at one point *trompe l'oeuil* paintings for the way they allow us a glimpse of something unreal yet seemingly actual. I spent quite some time looking at the Appendix, tracking the history unfolded there. It seems to summon up an encyclopaedic grasp of the range of such worlds.

Yet I couldn't help noticing occasional gaps. Where are Asterix and Obelix, where is Stephen Donaldson, or Dan Simmons, or K J Parker, or China Mieville, or even where on earth is George R. R. Martin (other than a passing mention of Windhaven)? Part of me felt unfair noticing these kinds of gap. A listing of this kind cannot possibly include everything, and I should be grateful for just how much is in there. Another part of me felt that perhaps there was some privileging going on – that it is certain kinds of subcreation that particularly interest Wolf.

It is precisely here that I want to begin my critique, with that word ‘subcreation’. It was a little bemusing at the beginning of my reading, for my comfortably atheist self to encounter in the Acknowledgements a ‘thanks to God, the creator of all subcreators’. Clearly the word ‘subcreation’ is not innocent of implications (as it wasn’t of course for Tolkien, who originated this use). I don’t mind at all – but it did make me wonder in what ways this religious impulse might inflect the nature of his enquiry. And indeed not only does it bookend the work (returning as an explicit comment in the very last lines of the final chapter), it also runs deep, as we will see – both in its inclusions, absences, and exclusions.

One quite striking feature of the book is its virtual ignoring of previous work on fantasy literature. There is of course a substantial literature on this from within literary studies, beginning with Tzvetan Todorov’s attempt to pronounce a formal distinguishing feature – a proposal that was followed by many revisions, and challenges, but which definitely laid the foundations for many a subsequent theorisation of ‘fantasy’ as a mode of responding to the world. There have been considerable debates over the attempts (initiated by such as Darko Suvin) to draw sharp lines between science fiction and fantasy, on a working principle that the former is superior and cognitively challenging, while the latter is worthy only of dismissal if not worse. There has been substantial work within the field of utopian studies, dealing with at least part of this domain. And more recently, there have been challenges to that SF/fantasy divide, not least the fascinating attempt to reconcile Marxist theory with fantasy, enacted in the pages of *Historical Materialism* in 2002 and thereafter. Wolf does draw on some bits of these studies, for information and evidence. But he is so convinced of the distinctiveness of his approach, that there is virtually no discussion of those previous traditions and how and why his work moves in other directions. If anywhere, his main theoretical port of call is Henry Jenkins’ work on ‘convergence cultures’.

Instead of such a direct critical encounter with existing theories of fantasy, Wolf seems from the beginning to mark them off as simply missing the point. A ‘story’ emerges from the book of what audiences – or at least serious, committed audiences – do with fantasies which those who miss the point don’t get. The account of these runs as a thread across the book, emerging very early. Putting the case for seeing these worlds as essentially unclosed, endlessly expandable, and (of course nowadays) transmedia, he writes of the avalanche of additional ‘excess’ materials which can accompany a narrative:

Audience members and critical approaches that center on narrative, then, may find such excess material to be extraneous, tangential, and unnecessary, while those that consider the story’s world will find their experience enhanced. (pp. 2-3)

The narrative component becomes, here, the *opportunity* for everything that follows, and matters. Now the emphasis is on three things which are never fully achievable, but which are nonetheless permanently sought after: completeness, coherence, and consistency.

Seeking these requires a shift in audience attention from ‘the central storyline to the world in which the story takes place, where multiple storylines can interweave in a web of story’ (p. 8). Where narrative works with a ‘principle of economy’ (don’t put in more than you need to make the characters interesting, and the events comprehensible), world-building works within an ‘encyclopedic impulse’ (p. 8).

Wolf does make these ideas work for him. He builds a theoretical account out of Possible Worlds theory, out of Coleridge’s distinction between Primary and Secondary forms of imagination, and out of Gestalt theory, to propose that this is all part of a general (Formalist) impulse to ‘make strange the familiar by exploring alternatives to the ordinary’ (p. 33) – though he is careful to note that the distances from ordinary to subcreated world vary enormously (Lake Woebegone is much ‘nearer’ than Middle-earth, for instance, with Oz somewhere in between). From here, he begins his real journey into the workings of these worlds. The parts I personally found most compelling were those where he considers the construction of rules in subcreated worlds. He lists and examines four levels at which such worlds can alter the ordinary: *nominal* (not only renaming things, but giving power to the acts of naming); *cultural* (deploying accounts of different social arrangements); *natural* (the introduction of new or variant species); and *ontological* (changing the rules of the universe). (Oddly missing here is the *historical*, but I guess you could argue that it is implied.) But Wolf rightly emphasises that such alterations always require and imply continuity in respect of the things which *don’t* change. We carry with us, unless explicitly told otherwise, the notion that people have to breathe, eat, reproduce, wear clothes, etc. Creatures need light to see. Travel is not instantaneous. Folks die. And so on. The persistence of the ordinary as the undergirding for such exercises in world-creation is important.

But what Wolf builds is a model of the motives of *committed* participants. He takes the example of the nature of the food available on Tattooine in the *Star Wars* universe. After a discussion of what is explicitly known, or can be pretty directly derived, from the films, he writes of those who have sought to build on these – the ‘encyclopedists’:

While casual audience members only interested in following a narrative will not actively piece together such world-data or pursue them in different venues, they can still get a sense of how well a world seems to be fleshed out and revealed, and this may affect reception of the work as a whole. (p. 42)

This opposition between ‘casual’ audiences and others recurs a lot. There follows a long example of the way fans of *Star Wars* have tried to work out the dimensions and design of the Millennium Falcon.

It is clear that this is one way in which certain kinds of ‘fans’ (I use the word carefully, implying as little as possible) engage with favourite story-worlds. But it strikes me that there is an issue in how we characterise the kind of engagement. Wolf’s own terms for this are ‘immersion’, ‘absorption’ and ‘saturation’. He draws on Norman Holland’s work to

suggest that at peak such processes lead people to be so involved in a secondary world that the primary (ordinary) world fades. But his example is an odd one: *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien's huge account of the general history of Middle-earth, its peoples, languages, histories. While I don't doubt that there are people who devote themselves to trying to grasp this as a vast body of knowledge, could it not be said that this is closer to the way people might *study the Bible*? It is a form of studying for learning, as against the kinds of immersion and absorption which accompany the passionate engagement with characters, challenges, dangers – the sorts of engagement which Victor Nell for example explored in his *Lost in a Book* (1988).

This is not Wolf's direction. He argues that incompleteness is a requirement, the basis for our urge to keep trying to complete:

Deliberate gaps, enigmas, and unexplained references help keep a work alive in the imagination of its audience because it is precisely in these areas where audience participation, in the form of speculation, is most encouraged. (p. 60)

Wolf devotes a lot of space, with many fascinating examples, to what we might call the 'formal constitution' of Worlds: the organising blocks which can, and perhaps must, be built to develop a sense of a coherent universe. Some of the language for this is borrowed from circulating, especially fan, discourses: multiverses, retconning, rebooting, prequels, and so on. Some others are offered as new analytic tools: for instance paraquel, interquel, and intraquel to describe different kinds of 'filling-in' of constituted universes. These are interesting – but once again seem to confirm that Wolf's primary interest is in their worldness *per se*, and fans' participation in that. It is, without intending anything derogatory by saying so, essentially a *play*-relationship, an activity done entirely for its own sake. It is all about developing a 'well-designed world' (p. 244) that players can take part in making. Sometimes it even reads like a set of *recommendations* of ways to get involved – as in his listing of five ways in which characters within subcreated worlds might themselves be subcreators (see p. 234).

What feels to me to be missing from the book – and I cannot quite decide if they are just that (missing), or if they are excluded – is much sense of three things. First, there isn't any sense at all of the *politics* of 'fantasy', something which was a hot topic in the 1970-80s (with fantasy being marked off severely from science fiction and adjudged retrograde), and returned in force in 2002 (with an argument for its radical potential) when China Mieville edited that special issue of *Historical Materialism*. The exclusive attention to psychological accounts of the motives for world-building, and the simple ignoring of these broader debates with their implied sociologies of fantasy, means that some questions become unaskable. Maybe the absence of 'history' is not so coincidental... This seems to me to point to the second absence: any substantial consideration of the *themes* within constituted worlds. How for instance do early travellers' tales combine an emergent cosmopolitanism, with treatment of discovered peoples as 'exotic'? How should we view the tendency in so

many early utopias towards monarchical forms of government (at times when democratic movements were often just beginning to show)? How, more parochially, should we think about the transformation of the image of dragons after the 1950s from fearful 'wyrms' to creatures with powers that might transform us as humans? These sorts of *thematic* question find no anchor in Wolf's work. The third thing that seems to me only to be touched on implicitly – but surely is a really important feature of this whole domain – is its incredible *self-consciousness*. Fantasy, science fiction, world-building authors are constantly asking themselves (and each other) why they are doing this. What is the point of it all, and how does that point shape what authors try to do with their particular worlds?

Mind you, Wolf does have a kind of answer to that last point, and it takes us back to the very beginning of the book. Subcreation is to be measured by its relationship with God's creation of us. It is 'a part of human nature that precedes our fallen state' (p. 256). It is (and he quotes Tarkovsky to close his argument) 'the search for God in man'.

I want to reiterate my genuine admiration for the sheer scholarship that this book displays. But I come away frustrated. Anyone who hoped, as I did, that this might provide a platform from which we might know how to explore and understand the range of audience responses to world-building is in for a disappointment. I've argued elsewhere (Barker, 2007) that there are real problems with the literary traditions which sought for some formal discriminating feature to define 'fantasy'. This in the end does the same, but from the opposite end. The only 'true' (as opposed to 'casual') followers of world-building are the new digital participants and creators – and they should hurry back to Church and give thanks for their abilities. Given the contemporary prominence of such built worlds – think just *Harry Potter*, Tolkien on film, *The Hunger Games*, and *Game of Thrones*, to begin with – clarifying how we might actually conceive and carry out some half-way decent audience/reception research in this domain is surely becoming a necessity.

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References:

- Martin Barker, 'Fantasy audiences versus fantasy audiences', in Warren Buckland (ed.), *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, London: Routledge 2009, pp. 286-309.
- Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: the Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Response by Mark Wolf:

First, I must thank Martin for his thorough review of my book, one of the more detailed ones I have seen. As for his disappointment, I, too, wished that I could have covered even more in greater detail, but seeing as the book's reach was quite broad and ambitious (for example, attempting to cover a 3,000-year history in one chapter), I simply was unable to

pursue every question and avenue of interest that I encountered as in-depth as I might have liked. So I had to choose what to include, knowing that some questions would go unanswered, or even unasked; but if this prompts others to ask and answer them, that's fine. I may answer some myself in future work.

As for the Appendix, as I mentioned in the book, it is not exhaustive or complete, which I knew then and of which I have grown even more painfully aware as time goes on; for example, after telling a friend of mine in English Literature about the book, he asked me if I mentioned Spencer's Fairy Land in *The Faerie Queen* (1590). Sadly, I had to tell him no, and that it wasn't even on the list in the Appendix. Does Spencer's poem add something new to the history of imaginary worlds, something that hadn't been done before? No, not really. While doing research I even came across a list someone had compiled of over 2,000 uchronias; I could have easily doubled my list just by including them. As anyone trying to make a comprehensive list knows that, as in world-building, incompleteness is inevitable, so one can only hope that such a list has the majority of relevant entries, or is at least useful, which I think it is.

Likewise with the examples mentioned throughout the book; in almost every case, there were multiple examples that one could choose from for illustrations; as I explained early on, I often chose ones that a large number of people could relate to (hence much Tolkien and Star Wars) and certainly my own taste in worlds had something to do with it as one would expect. And certain types of subcreation do interest me more than others, but isn't that true of everyone?

I find it quite natural that our differences, particularly my Roman Catholicism and the reviewer's atheism, colored both the book and the review. I am also thankful that Martin's reading was as thorough as it was, indeed, even noting the Acknowledgements, which I suppose many readers skip over. I had, in fact, wondered what an atheist might think of the book, so it was with great interest that I read the review. Of course, the simple difference in believing in God or not believing in God (without which one cannot speak of a Creator or Creation, in the *ex nihilo* sense) will result in some very basic differences in world-views and the way one approaches world-building; that seems unavoidable. At any rate, I suppose that we are most aware of the implicit assumptions in a piece of writing when they run counter to our own; something that I have experienced as well. But this is not the main focus of the review, so neither should it be of the response.

More of the review is devoted to the lack of discussion regarding fantasy literature. I have, of course, read Todorov and others on the topic, but in my book fantasy was one element among many discussed, along with science fiction, utopias, uchronias, children's literature, and so on, each of which could have resulted in more than a single book-length discussion. I do not believe that there is any line of demarcation that can be drawn between fantasy and science fiction that will be generally accepted, and whatever line one draws, works can be found which blur the boundaries between them. So the debate surrounding the defining of the two genres was somewhat tangential at best, since it does not change much about what one can say regarding the worlds produced in them, which

share much in common. Likewise, other more specific topics, like the reconciling of Marxist theory with fantasy, were simply outside the purview of the book. I was not dismissing these theories as “missing the point”, they were just about other topics that were not discussed. The same goes for readers; some are content with reading the story but are not much interested in material that does not actively advance the story, whereas others are more interested in the background world in which the story takes place. One type of reader is in no way better than the other, and I did not intend to imply that at any point. I do focus more on the latter, though, because that is what the book is about, the world as an objective of study. Those readers who actively note the details of a world beyond the demands of the story do have a different experience than those who do not; but they are both just different ways of reading with different ends in mind, neither of which is “better” than the other (my use of the word “casual” was not meant as a pejorative).

I do not think the choice of *The Silmarillion* is an odd example of world data saturation, since it is a good example of a work containing more data than most people can hold in their mind all at once. And yes, the way people study it is exactly the way that people study the Bible, which I argue (on page 191) is like an Ur-text for many world-builders. Studying for learning need not be set against the immersion and absorption accompanying the passionate engagement with characters; I would argue that such engagement is one of the main reasons for the “studying for learning” in the first place, when it comes to worlds like Tolkien’s. The two do not always coincide, of course, but they can, and few readers will study a world to learn all its details if they do not find in it any characters they like.

I must disagree with another statement made: nowhere do I argue that “incompleteness is a requirement” in the building of imaginary worlds. I mentioned that Lubomir Doležel pointed out that imaginary worlds are inevitably incomplete; an inevitability is unescapable, so there is no need for it to be a requirement. If anything, authors often struggle to make a world as complete as possible, but no matter how hard they try, or how long they work at it, something will be left out. True, I did mention deliberate gaps resulting in enigmas (like Tom Bombadil and Yoda’s origins) which are inserted so as to become catalysts of speculation, but these can only be employed when a world already has sufficient world data engaged in an illusion of completeness such that there is enough data to form theories which provide explanations for these enigmas. Such enigmas must also be used sparingly; too many, and the audience will lose interest or even feel manipulated.

Finally, there are the three missing things mentioned toward the end of the review. True, other than the section on embedded philosophy within a world, I do not discuss the politics of fantasy as he describes. That was not my intent or purpose, and such a discussion would necessarily have to be a book-length work to do it justice, and that is a different book than the one I set out to write. There are many ways the topic connects to what I have, and versions of the book could have moved in that direction; but it simply was not the direction I was going. The same is true regarding themes. Other than chapter five, which looks at

subcreation as a theme within subcreated worlds, I did not set out to discuss themes, which is a huge topic, and quite a good one for another book-length work. Even the study of individual themes, and the worlds harboring them that appeared over the centuries, could result in entire books; I like his suggestion of dragons and their transformations throughout history. So yes, while I have a few mentions of themes here and there, they do not get the full coverage they deserve; guilty as charged. The last item, regarding self-conscious, I do cover in chapter five, although the discussion is limited to world-builders who appear with stories. The motives behind world-building likewise are something in need of greater exploration, and again, worthy of more extended treatment. There is a God-like quality in the desire to build an entire world, which involves “the search for God in man” as Tarkovsky says, and these are things that I would hope even an atheist could agree with, even if he or she doesn’t believe in God.

Another area that I could have certainly expanded on more, given more room, is the audience’s reception of imaginary worlds; naturally, this is the area of interest for readers of *Participations*, since that is its topic and purpose. While this was only touched upon in the more formalist approach of my book, it is still a topic of interest to me, and one that I am continuing to work on in other writings.

So in closing, I would like to thank Martin for his thoughtful review of my book, even though it may not have been exactly the sort of book he was looking for. And I myself am disappointed that the book could not have three or four times its length, allowing even more topics to be covered. But, as I said earlier, I’m not done writing about imaginary worlds... Thanks also to William Proctor for organizing this issue and for allowing me to respond to Martin’s review and be a part of the conversation.

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