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A flare of light or 'the great clomping foot of nerdism?': M John Harrison's radical poetics of worldbuilding

Abstract:

Over the last forty years, as Mark JP Wolf argues, worldbuilding has become central to the art of writing science fiction and fantasy books, as market conditions prioritise fictional worlds that are encyclopaedic, extendible, franchisable, consumable and which generate new forms of cultural pleasure. Following early fantasists George MacDonald and JRR Tolkien, much advice focuses on invention, completeness and internal consistency. This paper provides a counterpoint, arguing for the importance of M John Harrison in developing a poetics of scepticism toward worldbuilding, which he calls 'the great clomping foot of nerdism' (Harrison 2007b). The deliberate shifting depiction of his most famous fantasy world Viriconium – the Pastel City – across a sequence of novels and short stories exemplifies how he translates his radical poetics into practice. Focusing on blog posts, articles and internet comment threads in addition to literary works and my own exercises, I explore how Harrison developed a politically oriented approach to 'the world' in relation to the New Wave of the 60s and 70s and the New Weird of the last fifteen years, and I contrast it with contemporary approaches from China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer and Timothy Morton.

Biographical note:

Helen Marshall is a Senior Lecturer of Creative Writing at the University of Queensland. Her first collection of fiction, *Hair Side, Flesh Side*, which won the Sydney J Bounds Award in 2013, emerged from her work as a book historian. Rather than taking the long view of history, her second collection, *Gifts for the One Who Comes After*, negotiated very personal issues of legacy and tradition, creating myth-infused worlds and won the World Fantasy Award and the Shirley Jackson Award in 2015. In 2017 she edited *The Year's Best Weird Fiction* volume 4 and her debut novel *The Migration*, released by Random House Canada and Titan in 2019, was declared one of *The Guardian's* best science fiction books of the year.

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I remember [M John Harrison] in conversation at the Institute for Contemporary Art trying to explain the nature of fantastic fiction to an audience: he described someone standing in a windy lane, looking at *the reflection of the world* in the window of a shop, and seeing, sudden and unexplained, a shower of sparks in the glass. (Gaiman 2005: xii, emphasis added)

Introduction: The reflection of the world

In January 2007 M John Harrison – old-school polemicist and ‘one of the restless fathers of modern [science fiction]’ (Macfarlane 2013) – kicked up an internet storm when he proclaimed the worldbuilding of many of his contemporaries was ‘the great clomping foot of nerdism’ (Harrison 2007b). Controverting the prevailing view in commercial science fiction and fantasy [1], he wrote:

Every moment of a science fiction story must represent the triumph of writing over worldbuilding.

Worldbuilding is dull. Worldbuilding literalises the urge to invent. Worldbuilding gives an unnecessary permission for acts of writing (indeed, for acts of reading). Worldbuilding numbs the reader’s ability to fulfil their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done. (Harrison 2007b)

Commenters on blogs, message boards and Reddit threads reacted with alacrity, some quizzical, others supportive; by and large, a torrent of invective followed. This included *ad hominem* attacks on ‘a midlist author extremely jealous of the popularity and sales of the epic fantasy novelists’ (St-Denis 2007) and criticisms of what was seen as a postmodernist or elitist rejection of traditional genre writing (‘For better or worse, readers without literature degrees *tend to hate this stuff*’ [Bakker 2008, original emphasis]). As far as internet discourse goes, so far, so predictable.

What puzzled some upon further reflection was the fact that Harrison *was* a skilled worldbuilder, immensely so. A casual rifling through the 2005 Bantam reprinting of some of his influential works confirms the status of Viriconium, sometimes known as The Pastel City, his fictional fantasy world. At a surface level little might distinguish Viriconium from the worlds of his contemporaries, as one reviewer pointed out when challenged to read Harrison’s work in the wake of the continuing critical response to his post (Moher 2010). Like George RR Martin’s Westeros or Steven Erikson’s Malazan Empire, Viriconium differs from consensus reality in its history, its geography and its culture, and Harrison had furnished it with richly imagined details: the Artists’ Quarter, the Gabelline Stairs, the Plaza of

Unrealised Time, the Proton Circuit spiralling up to the sunset-coloured towers. But if Harrison appears to be a master worldbuilder himself, how then should we interpret his polemic against worldbuilding?

Over the last forty years worldbuilding has become central to the art of writing science fiction and fantasy books. In his seminal study Mark JP Wolf describes fictional worlds as 'dynamic entities' (Wolf 2012: 3), which he regards as distinct from the narrative processes which create them. For Wolf an imaginary world consists of

the surroundings and places experienced by a fictional character (or which could be experienced by one) that together constitute a unified sense of place which is ontologically different from the actual, material, and so-called "real" world. (Wolf 2012: 377)

Although we can find examples of fictional worlds in early works such as Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) and Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), it was early twentieth century fantasists such as George MacDonald, JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis who first discussed the principles of '[inventing] a little world ... with its own laws' (MacDonald 2004: 65). Rosemary Jackson argues their notion of fantasy literature as 'fulfilling a desire for a "better", more complete, unified reality' (Jackson 1981: 2) has been particularly persuasive in guiding scholarship within fantasy. In the decade following the success of the mass market paperback of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in 1965 and the subsequent growth of the fantasy genre (particularly epic fantasy), authors and editors discussed best practice for worldbuilding in guides such as Lin Carter's *Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Fantasy* (1973), Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1990) and Jeff VanderMeer's *Wonderbook* (2013).

Wolf's detailed study presents worldbuilding as a pleasurable human activity and, increasingly, as a profoundly profitable feature of the media industry. Its centrality to media production has only grown with the franchisable potential of sprawling transmedia worlds such as those of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, which have each spawned complicated canons of work across film, television, video games and novels. In light of this Henry Jenkins argues:

More and more, storytelling has become the art of worldbuilding, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium. The world is bigger than the film, bigger than even the franchise – since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions. As an experienced screenwriter told me, "When I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn't really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can

support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media". (Jenkins 2006: 116)

Later Jenkins noted how the process of worldbuilding encouraged 'an encyclopaedic impulse' which formed the basis for 'a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives' (Jenkins 2007). Many writers have correspondingly laid out the skills they feel necessary to build a realistic, coherent and compelling world. A brief survey of online resources reveals an evolving body of advice regarding geography, geology, economics, linguistics and related subjects. (For a limited selection, see Holling 2001 and Anders 2016.) Good science fiction, these tend to argue, presents 'a fully realised, multidimensional vision, including not only the technological and scientific, but the psychological, cultural, moral, social, and environmental dimensions of future human existence' (Lombardo 2018: 3) and Wolf supports this by suggesting the goals to be pursued by worldbuilders are invention, completeness and internal consistency (Wolf 2012: 33). More recent scholarship has begun to address issues of representation in worldbuilding. Award-winning fantasy writer NK Jemisin, for example, has convincingly argued for the importance of attending to issues of systemic racism, stating that the real world impinges upon the fantastic in her writing: 'For the worldbuilder, all the world is necessary fuel' (Jemisin 2014). She advises new writers to take a sociological approach focused both on the landscape and those who inhabit it (Jemisin 2015). Likewise, Kate Elliott argues that a minimalist approach to worldbuilding can easily perpetuate sexist, racist, and colonialist attitudes because it erodes the details which make specific cultures and their workings distinctive (Elliott 2013). These are important systems-oriented correctives to contemporary worldbuilding and worthy of further study.

Ultimately, though, these sources offer little scepticism of consistency, immersion or realism as desirable features of worldbuilding, making Harrison's remarks particularly noteworthy. Yet in this scepticism Harrison taps into a rich vein of philosophical thought by scholars such as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard who critique media-produced 'hyperrealities', a term referring to 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (Baudrillard 1994: 1), or the simulated realm that appears 'more real than the real' (1). Likewise, Harrison anticipates speculative realists such as Timothy Morton who, developing and complicating the ideas of phenomenologists like Baudrillard, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, rejects 'the world' in and of itself as an 'aesthetic effect based on a blurriness and aesthetic distance' (Morton 2013: 85), an effect that has evaporated in our modern era. Thus, when Morton suggests global warming will bring about 'the end of the world' (2013: 2), he does not mean this in the traditional sense; rather he refers to the end of a certain way of thinking about 'the world' as 'a significant, bounded, horizoning entity' (2013: 87). According to Morton, we should be suspicious of artworks such as *The Lord of the Rings* with their seamless fictional worlds because they present false coherences. It is of interest then the extent to which Harrison and his contemporaries Michael Moorcock and China Miéville locate their own practice in relation to Tolkien, as I shall discuss.

Traces of this scepticism haunt contemporary science fiction writing. Take, for example, the popular science fiction writer Charlie Stross. In a recent blog post he quoted (and disagreed with) Harrison's polemic, reading it either as a wholesale rejection of any attempt to create plausible secondary worlds or, as others have misinterpreted it, a privileging of story over setting. In favour of worldbuilding, he argued:

The implicit construction of an artificial but plausible world is what distinguishes a work of science fiction from any other form of literature. It's an alternative type of underpinning to actually-existing reality, which is generally more substantial (and less plausible – reality is under no compulsion to make sense). Note the emphasis on *implicit*, though. Worldbuilding is like underwear: it needs to be there, but it shouldn't be on display, unless you're performing burlesque. Worldbuilding is the scaffolding that supports the costume to which our attention is directed. Without worldbuilding, the galactic emperor has no underpants to wear with his new suit, and runs the risk of leaving skidmarks on his story. (Stross 2018)

For Stross worldbuilding is all-important to science fiction, the 'scaffolding' that makes it an effective form of storytelling. Yet Stross claims much recent science fiction prefers spectacle over plausibility and, in jettisoning plausibility, these stories lose their ability to critique the conditions of the world (ie late stage capitalism) as we inhabit it. But in placing worldbuilding at the heart of 'good' science fiction, Stross creates a very different crisis for himself; for if, as he says, reality is under no compulsion to make sense, how can art *ever* produce a plausible and coherent yet realistic world? In fact Stross wants the opposite of this sort of messy, inexplicable real-realism. Instead he turns to fiction because 'worldbuilding provides a set of behavioural constraints that make it *easier* to understand the character of my fictional protagonists' (Stross 2018). Therein lies the crux. In essence Stross wants a world more plausible, more understandable, more realistic-than-the-real world – a hyperreality which would allow him to understand humanity better by making visible aspects of our social context which may appear invisible to us. When Stross rejects Harrison he argues instead for worldbuilding as a tool for critique, but the underpinnings of that project are contradictory: extrapolating an explicable future from an inexplicable present. Yet Harrison, I will argue, is more sophisticated than Stross accepts: Harrison's approach recognises the fundamental 'unreality' of 'the real world' and indeed places this recognition at the heart of his writing.

The work of Jenkins (2006), Wolf (2012), and Jim Collins (2017) suggests that market conditions have come to prioritise fictional worlds that are encyclopaedic, extendible, franchisable, consumable and which generate new forms of cultural pleasure. Moving against the grain, this paper argues for Harrison's importance in developing a poetics of scepticism toward worldbuilding. By poetics, I follow Robert Sheppard in seeing the reflective work of a writer as ongoing and elusive, strategic, born from crises, and often appearing in fragmentary forms: the snapshot, the epigraph, the embedded quotation, the scrawl on the back of on

envelope (Sheppard 2003) – to which one might easily add the internet forum, the blog, the Reddit comments section. My approach makes deliberate use of marketing terminology (epic fantasy rather than marvellous adventure, for example) to foreground how publishers and writers both construct and negotiate definitions for their own economic, artistic or political purposes. This ‘conversation’, as Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn argue, is one of the defining features of the fantasy genre (James & Mendlesohn 2012: 2) and, as we will see, had a clear impact on how Harrison shapes and reshapes his own creative practice.

Simplistic readings of his polemic paint a picture of a writer dissatisfied with the prevailing market conditions, but this masks Harrison's deeper – and more provocative – dissatisfaction with the limitations of fiction. The trajectory of my discussion takes the form of a long, non-continuous arc with several creative, pedagogical interludes. The initial exploration focuses upon Harrison's early works and their relationship to epic fantasy and the New Wave especially. This lays the groundwork for my discussion of the invention of the New Weird, a term Harrison coined not to name a thing that already existed, as many have argued, but rather to *create a space* for a thing he wanted: a radical subjectivity that would reframe the workings of science fiction and fantasy with particular respect to its worldbuilding. This attempt ultimately failed, as the New Weird, subject to the very processes of commodification and marketing Harrison urged his fellow writers to resist, rather perversely came to represent the opposite of what it had first pointed to. Threaded through my analysis is an attempt to come to terms with how his radical poetics is embedded in a complex struggle between craft, genre, and market considerations as well as how it uses its own central contradictions as an engine, a mechanism to ‘flare’ the real world into existence (Harrison 1992: 149).

Interlude: An exercise in worldbuilding

In the Middle Ages, the itinerarium was a common form of road map comprising a list of cities and their respective distances from one to the next. Often they recounted the journey to Jerusalem, appropriate for a pilgrimage.

Imagine that you are about to embark on a voyage of your own. What are the names of the cities that you will pass on your journey from your own present location to the fabled city of Viriconium? Be sure to include intervening distances.

Which way to Viriconium? A problem of new worlds and the New Wave

Born in July 1945 M John Harrison cut his teeth in the New Wave of speculative fiction. He published his first short story in 1966 in *Science Fantasy*, after which he relocated to London and met Michael Moorcock, the influential editor of *New Worlds* and an acclaimed fantasy

writer. Two years later in 1968 Harrison became the books editor under Moorcock where he worked with authors like JG Ballard and Brian Aldiss to push science fiction and fantasy in experimental directions. This project had been ongoing for some time and Harrison admits by the time he arrived “‘all the important work had been done’” (Harrison qtd in Varn & Raghavendra 2016). Four years earlier, in 1962, Ballard had published an editorial, ‘Which Way to Inner Space?’, arguing that ‘science fiction must jettison its present narrative forms and plots ... it is *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored’ (Ballard 1962: 117). Nevertheless the work of the New Wave was a significant influence, particularly its mission to bust long-established genre tropes such as the simplistic adventures of ‘Golden Age’ science fiction. An iconoclast at heart, Harrison took to this work with equal parts glee and vitriol. He used this time to ‘identify the illusions central to the genre’ (Harrison 1992: 140). Language was his weapon of choice in puncturing these.

In 1971 he published *The Pastel City*, which took place in a Moorcockian high fantasy world. In a reflective essay he looks back upon this time as one in which he explored how fantasy worlds with their focus on narratives of self-determination existed, for better or worse, as places for action without consequences (Harrison 1992: 140). In this respect his approach aligns with Rosemary Jackson. Extending the work of Tzvetan Todorov, she suggests the use of the term ‘the marvellous’ to indicate narratives in which the reader is transported into a secondary world, a ‘duplicated cosmos’ (Jackson 1981: 42) which is ‘relatively autonomous, relating to the “real” only through metaphorical reflection and never, or rarely, intruding into or interrogating it’ (42). By contrast she uses ‘the fantastic’ to refer to works whose ‘topography, themes and myths’ (42) move toward ‘a realm of non-signification, towards a zero point of non-meaning’ (42). The fantastic opposes the ‘rich, colourful fullness’ (42) of the marvellous universe with ‘relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes, which are less definable as places than as spaces, as white, grey, or shady blanknesses’ (42). Yet Harrison’s work is interesting for the way it seeks to blend the two modes, making use of the colourful, vibrant set-dressing of the traditional high fantasy world yet instilling within it a logic that denies meaning and signification. He furnished *The Pastel City* with a prologue describing the history of the empire of Viriconium. It begins:

Some seventeen notable empires rose in the Middle Period of Earth. These were the Afternoon Cultures. All but one are unimportant to this narrative, and there is little need to speak of them save to say that none of them lasted for less than a millennium, none for more than ten; that each extracted such secrets and obtained such comforts as its nature (and the nature of the universe) enabled it to find; and that each fell back from the universe in confusion, dwindled, and died. (Harrison 2005: 3)

It is of some note that writers frustrated by Harrison’s scepticism of worldbuilding frequently find themselves startled by *The Pastel City*’s overt ‘infodump’ (Moher 2010), a technique often negatively associated with the encyclopaedic tendencies of worldbuilders to over-explain their settings. Yet Harrison’s prologue is subtle, deliberately inhabiting the space of

traditional fantasy only to subvert it. It suggests a scepticism of the amassed knowledge of Afternoon Cultures, which was bounded both by the nature of the universe and the nature of the epistemological constraints of the culture itself. Here we see an early glimpse of Harrison's project: worldbuilding which cannot divorce itself from an awareness of the limitations of 'the world'. Harrison further signals his interest in the gap between experienced 'world' and reality with his identification of his hero, tegeus-Cromis, as a man 'possessed by the essential quality of things than by their names; concerned with the reality of Reality, rather than with the names men gave it' (Harrison 2005: 7). Thus we see in Cromis a character seeking to look beyond 'the world'.

This scepticism of worlds appears in *The Pastel City* but finds a clearer articulation in Harrison's subsequent Viriconium novel *A Storm of Wings* (1980). Here we see the appearance of a cult known as the Sign of the Locust whose early converts maintained,

The world is not as we perceive it ... but infinitely more surprising. We must cultivate a diverse view... We counterfeit the "real" ... by our very forward passage through time, and thus occlude the actual and essential. (Harrison 2005: 126)

These interludes, brief as they are, appear like a voice from beyond the story itself, a crack in the conceptual framework, a leak: the storyworld acknowledging itself for a moment as storyworld. The Viriconium of this novel is not the same as *The Pastel City* though it seems chronologically linked; the geography changes, the nature of the world has shifted. *A Storm of Wings* reiterates the plot of *The Pastel City* in many respects: a group of heroes travel across the landscape in hopes of warding off the threat of invasion. In this case, the invasion comes in the form of enormous insects from the moon who have begun to build their own rival metropolis. They comprehend reality according to their own terms, and Harrison describes their alien *Umwelt* as 'immaculate and ravishing, a philosophy like a single drop of poison at the centre of a curved mirror ... the first infection of the human reality' (Harrison 2005: 225). Here he draws upon Jakob von Uexküll's notion of the *Umwelt*: a perspective of an environment 'built up through our sensory impressions and our actions in it' (Pak 2019: 195). There are limits to this cognitive reconstruction, one of which is the occlusion of rival worldviews – precisely the threat posed by the invaders in *A Storm of Wings*. This book ushered in a phase of exploration in Harrison's writing in which he aimed to subvert the illusions of fantasy 'because to do so might be to reveal – for a fraction of a second, to yourself as much as the reader – the world the fictional illusion denies' (Harrison 1992: 140). As readers we inhabit Viriconium, but Viriconium reminds us it is changeable, malleable, fragile, non-existent; it overlaps and erases; it is an unmappable world, a world which actively resists the project of the mapmaker.

Harrison's early works do not oppose generic fantasy tropes such as the quest, but rather attempt to bend them back upon themselves to reveal their shortcomings in producing the kind of disruptive but emotionally powerful reading experiences he sought. But in

undertaking such a project, even with an ironic eye and a wilful frame of mind, he found himself dissatisfied with the sluggish tools of the genre: 'If you want to speak directly about – or to – what is human in people, it's no good learning sword-talk' (Harrison 1992: 142). A sword only means itself and fails at the level of allegory; it remains a part of the world in which it has been placed and cannot truly puncture the coherence of that world. His subsequent years and final reviews for *New Worlds* grapple with this difficulty, as Rob Latham (2019) discusses. 'Sweet Analytics', Harrison's 1975 capstone as books editor, excoriated fantasy works for creating substitute realities 'so lavish, so detailed and so long that they provide a complete "world" for their audience' (Harrison 1975: 212). He saw these stories as providing 'some more or less easily grasped handle by which to pick up the universe' (Harrison 1975: 212), a sentiment we see echoed in Stross's desire for fiction to make sense of a world that at times appears nonsensical. But Harrison preferred a mode of attack that would destabilise and unsettle, that would reveal the world as incoherent and painful rather than unified and offering the possibility of choice. By the late 1970s, Harrison had turned away from both Moorcock and Ballard; by the mid 80s he had also rejected much of his own early work. One of the major problems of the New Wave, he later recognised, was that by rejecting the escapist elements many science fiction and fantasy readers wanted, its authors were in fact destroying their own commercial appeal: 'sawing through the bough' (Darlington 1983) they were sitting on, so to speak. And as he began to reject the project of the New Wave, he himself faced the same challenge, for his writing deliberately sought to deny its readers the typical pleasures of the genre: escape, solace, coherence and meaning. The result was a new understanding of his own goals and a new paradox. He saw fantasy as a genre in which

we can never escape the world. We cannot stop trying to escape the world... We learn to run away from fantasy and into the world, write fantasies at the heart of which by some twist lies the very thing we fantasise against. (Harrison 1992: 140-141)

His approach again aligns with Jackson's observation that a recurrent feature of the fantastic narrative is the impossible attempt to realise desire, 'to make visible the invisible and to discover absence' (Jackson 1981: 4). The attempt is impossible because fantasy excurses into disorder only from 'a base within the dominant cultural order' (4). For ten years he would explore rejections of fantasy, publishing a 'realist' novel called *Climbers* in 1989. He appeared to turn away from the fantastic and its attempts to interpose a metaphor between reader and subject; yet this was not the case, exactly. Realism too – any form of fiction – seemed fraught by the same issues of representation, the creation of hyperrealities. By the end of the 80s he found within this self-contradiction 'an engine, like all scandals, a source of power' (Harrison 1992: 147). The tendency toward escape was not a problem that could be solved but an energy that could be used. Indeed, his work can best be seen as an attempt to grapple with this central contradiction without abandoning the project of writing as a whole.

Interlude: An exercise in worldbuilding

Imagine that to escape a storm you have just bundled your way into the Café Californium, an outpost and common waypoint in the Artists' Quarter of Uriconium. Instantly you are approached by an old man who offers you good food to keep you happy while the storm passes. What food does he offer you? Of what is it composed? Bring vividly to mind its heat, the balance of its spices, the texture of its components.

Now imagine yourself outside in the street, having never entered (or have you? maybe once, not recently). Briefly, you watch what passes through a window as the rain slicks the glass. Inside the café, you see a traveller brought some exotic, steaming dish. From your vantage point in the street, you cannot help but imagine yourself as the traveller. What does the first bite of food taste like?

The New Weird: Fences, reflections, enclosures

The early 2000s witnessed a revolution of sorts; a revolution not in terms of the overthrowing of the old, but rather a revolution in the technical, linguistic sense: a turning back, a full rotation. The 1990s had seen a 'boom' in British science fiction writing (Butler 2003). At the forefront of these was China Miéville whose Bas Lag series (*Perdido Street Station*, 2000; *The Scar*, 2002c; *Iron Council*, 2004b) brought him a rare mixture of commercial and critical acclaim. The success of *Perdido Street Station* in particular 'both coarsened and broadened' (VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: xi) a set of techniques that had been common to earlier writers including Mervyn Peake and Harrison himself, which included the disruption of traditional worldbuilding in favour of more experimental approaches less insistent upon consistency or closure. The New Wave had dissipated but the New Weird was building, not a literary school or organised movement, but rather a series of tendencies and impulses in a range of writings that echoed and advanced those of the New Wave.

It was just over thirty years since Harrison had begun to trouble the project of epic fantasy with *The Pastel City*; yet epic fantasy had persisted, commercially dominant, in the works of Robert Jordan, Steven Erikson, George RR Martin and others. If anything, it had been bolstered in the early 2000s by the cinematic adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*, which monumentally and spectacularly literalised Tolkien's storyworld. These adaptations were invested not only in the creation (or recreation of Middle Earth), but with a complex marketing machinery which Ernest Mathijs describes:

Underpinning the experience of seeing the films ... was a promotional campaign of behemoth proportions – beginning prior to the opening of *The Fellowship of the Ring* and running through to the extended version of *The Return of the King* – carried through with unflagging commercial zeal. The films were further endorsed by an

almost four-year-long marketing bonanza which resulted in a tidal wave of books, magazines and comics, limited-edition artworks, two-a-penny toys, fast-food tie-ins and a seemingly limitless supply of gewgaws, gimcracks and miscellaneous knick-knackery. (Mathijs 2006: xvii)

No longer was *The Lord of the Rings* a textual phenomenon; it had become a high-value transmedia world proliferated in a range of media whose props, costumes and sets – the literal furniture of the movies – were available to be mimicked, replicated, and visited in a touring exhibition from 2003 to 2007. But there were signs that readers were willing to try something fresh. Miéville had broken through and his world – New Crobuzon, an admixed, hybrid city on the edge of scrub and marshland, part Victorian London, part Cairo and New Orleans – looked nothing like Middle Earth.

In 2003 Harrison posted on the now defunct message board of TTA Press with the words: “‘The New Weird. Who does it? What is it? Is it even anything?’” (Harrison qtd in VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: 317). It was a provocative question. Harrison himself had first used the term to introduce Miéville's novella, *The Tain* (2002); now it seemed was a time to expand upon the space for change Miéville had opened up, to find allies. With this call to arms he launched a heady discussion that rumbled on for close to three months and saw a number of writers attempt to define, clarify, and resist the term. To this date the message board discussions themselves provide a clearest sense of the tenuousness of the moment, its contradictions, a flowing conversation rather than a channelled discussion aimed at setting an agenda (a purpose Harrison rejected on multiple occasions). The writer Steph Swainston was one of the earliest commentators and her response offers the best description of the phenomenon to which Harrison was pointing:

“The New Weird is a kickback against jaded heroic fantasy which has been the only staple for far too long. Instead of stemming from Tolkien, it is influenced by *Gormenghast* and *Viriconium*. It is incredibly eclectic, and takes ideas from any source. It borrows from American Indian and Far Eastern mythology rather than European or Norse traditions, but the main influence is modern culture – street culture – mixing with ancient mythologies. The text isn't experimental, but the creatures are. It is amazingly empathic”. (Swainston qtd in VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: 319)

The New Weird's rejection of Tolkien had its roots in Moorcock's 1978 essay 'Epic Pooh'. There, the architect of the New Wave had criticised Tolkien's claim that *The Lord of the Rings* was 'primarily linguistic in its conceptions, that there were no symbols or allegories' (Moorcock 2008: 6). Moorcock saw in Tolkien a project of worldbuilding which sought to hide its master's Toryish worldview through a notional appearance of realism (linguistic and cultural coherence). Like Swainston, Miéville was deeply suspicious of the 'contagious' nature of Tolkien's tropes and his insistence on consolation as the goal of fantasy:

That is a revolting idea, and one, thankfully, that plenty of fantasists have ignored. From the Surrealists through the pulps – via Mervyn Peake and Mikhael Bulgakov and Stefan Grabinski and Bruno Schulz and Michael Moorcock and M John Harrison and I could go on – the best writers have used the fantastic aesthetic precisely to challenge, to alienate, to subvert and undermine expectations. (Miéville 2002b)

Yet despite his rejection of Tolkien's world, in *Socialist Review*, Miéville praised Tolkien for introducing 'an extraordinary element of rigour to the genre' (Miéville 2002a). For Miéville what was at stake was the very nature of fantasy as a tool for social critique. While New Crobuzon's rhetorical register may have been quite different from Middle Earth, in principle it worked quite similarly as what Mendlesohn describes as a *rationalised fantasy*, one involving a logical or coherent world, which makes sense in its own terms and allows the characters to predict the consequence of their actions on the world (Mendlesohn 2008: 63). Only with rigorous worldbuilding, Miéville argued, could fantasy allow its readers to understand the "'absurdity" of capitalist modernity' (Miéville 2004a: 337). To do so, fantasy needed to create internally coherent structures that its readers would recognise as impossible; this would equip those same readers to confront the self-perpetuating fantasy of capitalism. In this approach we find an echo of Stross's anxiety that reality is under no compunction to make sense, yet where Stross would create an apparently plausible future world to make sense of its inconsistencies, Miéville found in the tension between not-real but believable and real but not-believable a useful way of enlivening readers to the gaps and fissures of the capitalist 'world'. If Miéville's approach to the New Weird might be summed up then, it would not be a rejection of Tolkien's worldbuilding – 'his literalised fantastic of setting' (Miéville 2005) – but rather a rejection of the moralist, abstract logic which structured the building of that world. For Miéville, this was all so much 'aesthetic and thematic furniture' (2005) and his interest with the New Weird was not so much in tearing down the walls as redecorating.

If Miéville looms large in this stage of the discussion, this is because it is his work more than Harrison's that drove the aesthetic of the New Weird. Swainston identified the dominant trait of New Weird books as their details: "'jewel-bright, hallucinatory, carefully described'" (Swainston qtd in VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: 317):

"These details – clothing, behaviour, scales and teeth – are what makes New Weird worlds so much like ours, as recognisable and as well-described. It is visual, and every scene is packed with baroque detail. Nouveau-goths use neon and tinsel as well as black clothes. The New Weird is more multi-spectral than gothic". (Swainston qtd in VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: 317)

Her description of these "'jewel-bright'" details cannot help but suggest Jackson's sense of the marvellous universe with its 'rich, colourful fullness' (Jackson 1981: 42). At the same time it evokes a sense of hoarding, fetishisation, enchantment, those same elements which

made Tolkien's world so ripe for commodification. Rather than the glitter of chainmail, the New Weird preferred the glitter of a mantis or spider, some other mesmerising but horrific creature. Likewise, those who aligned themselves with the New Weird preferred the Gothic to Romance, enjoying both their structural principles (organic, decay, confusion) and their aesthetic (the hybrid, the grungy, the decadent). They found their roots in the shifting, phantasmagorical landscapes of Gormenghast and Viriconium rather than the tidier, romanticised hills of the Cotswolds.

Despite Harrison's scepticism of secondary worlds, attempts to come to some sort of description of the New Weird – a canon, a list of features that would make it recognisable, a coherent body of thought – focused very much on the furniture (the baroque, “jewel-bright” details) of their worlds, with the understanding that the furniture is the most easily replicable stuff, the stuff that makes a new subgenre recognisable. Swainston seems to acknowledge this point when she asked, “Do we have to wait for parodies of Bas-Lag?” (Swainston qtd in VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: 319) and the anthologist Jonathan Strahan echoed it: “If I have an unconscious motive [in resisting the label], it's not to ... live through a decade of people with very little talent dressing their latest trilogy up in new weird drag” (Strahan qtd in VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: 328). There was a tension – sometimes enjoyable, sometimes disruptive – between the furniture of genre fiction (its recognisable elements) and what it might accomplish as a radical new mode. Like Harrison, Miéville wanted to use the tropes of genres he had enjoyed as a child to do more profound work. In his case, the pulps were a source of inspiration (‘monsters and gunfights’ [Miéville 2005]). But in trying to mash pulpy and experimental styles together, even Miéville was willing to admit that the opposing values of these two systems had the potential to erode one another:

Even if it's true that the different values fundamentally work against each other, the attempt to marry them may never succeed, but it might approach success asymptotically. Try again, fail again, fail better. That tension, that process of failing better and better – the very failure, if it's the best kind of failure – might generate interesting effects that a more “successful” – ie aesthetically integrated – work cannot do. (Miéville 2005)

Harrison, of course, had made a similar journey, trying to use the tropes of fantasy for his own ends. But in the 80s, he had come to feel the techniques of popular fiction had an ‘inertia’ (Harrison 1992: 142). So it seems difficult for me to believe that what he was searching for in the New Weird was another set of furniture. In fact, it was the opposite. He was interested in the potential of this form to combine the richness of the marvellous – its vividness, its architecture and attention to detail – with its subversive denial of meaning. Thus we should read Harrison's foray, not as a way of constructing a commercial zone for himself, but rather as a way of deliberately de-commercialising his work and that of his contemporaries, while at the same time claiming it:

“in misreading my opening post ... you underestimate not just the cheerful ironic glee of new-movement-name; you underestimate the amount of agenda involved. If I don't throw my hat in the ring, write preface, do a guest editorial here, write a review in *The Guardian* there, then I'm leaving it to Michael Moorcock or David Hartwell to describe what I (and the British authors I admire) write... The struggle to name is the struggle to own”. (Harrison qtd in VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: 323)

He wanted to claim responsibilities for his ideas, set the stage for an imagined battle over naming to come, and most importantly, to identify a new form of fiction that would be suited for addressing the next decade's turn toward fantasy (and perhaps science fiction) as the substance of life. If in the past the tools of fantasy had felt too sluggish and inert to address human issues, perhaps with the turn of the century and the growth of fantastic new hyperrealities, this was the moment when they would be necessary.

Interlude: An exercise in worldbuilding

Write a brief account of the founding of Vriko.

Write a new version of this for every year of the next decade.

Prepare a short essay examining alternations in chronology and noticeable divergence points.

Marks will be awarded on the basis of originality, seriousness of purpose, and rigour.

What's in a name? The Old Weird, New Weird and AfterWeird

Thus, Harrison's battle for names began; largely, it was lost.

In 2008, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer edited *The New Weird* anthology which boasted a list of names including Miéville, Swainston, Moorcock and Harrison and reprinted an excerpt from the discussion of the TTA message boards. In this anthology, what Harrison had identified as a primarily British phenomenon was widened; connections were made with European writers such as Felix Gilman and Leena Krohn as well as Americans like Michael Cisco and Jeff VanderMeer himself who had contributed to the message board. In a series of short essays by European editors, the New Weird movement, which started as an intellectual provocation, devolved into a flabby marketing category comprising some form of cross-genre experimentation, often with literary techniques (Šust et al 2008: 351-352). Perhaps because of the American influence, the science fiction angle (authors such as Alastair Reynolds) was replaced with a more overt focus on horror, connecting with a separate regrowth of the

Lovecraftian Weird exemplified by American writers such as Laird Barron and John Langan. Three years later in 2011, the (again) American short story writer Scott Nicolay posted his 'Dogme 2011 for Weird Fiction' which demonstrated the substantial shift which had occurred. He banned anthropomorphic monsters, stock figures from noir, post-apocalyptic scenarios, buzzwords from HP Lovecraft, the trappings of steampunk among other furniture apparently considered part of the subgenre. In its place, he suggested the importance of place ('Scout and employ real locations whenever possible' [Nicolay 2011]), atmosphere, and low-lighting ('the tale must suggest more than it describes' [2011]). If Swainston had argued for the New Weird's "'vivacity, vitality, detail'" (Swainston qtd in VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2008: 319), then by 2011 the mantra had become unease, exanimation, and obfuscation. Such gatekeeping seems to run counter to Harrison's resistance to closure and fixed definitions.

Yet clearly something was going on. That same year, Peter Straub edited *Poe's Children: The New Horror*, which named Harrison as a progenitor in combining elements of traditional horror with

the use of deliberate narrative devices, including unreliable narrators, stories-within-stories, metatextual layering of narratives, shifting points of view, self-conscious allusiveness, and often surprising dissonances of tone and style. (Wolfe & Beamer 2011: 152).

This simultaneous 'evaporation' of genres, to use Wolfe's phrase, took place alongside a notable attempt to reconfigure and remarket the liminal space opened up in association with Weird fiction. The next year saw the publication of the landmark anthology *The Weird Compendium* (2012), edited by Jeff and Ann VanderMeer. They expanded the definition of the Weird and traced the movement back to the Lovecraft Circle of Robert E Howard, Fritz Leiber, Clark Ashton Smith, Howard Wandrei, and August Derleth. This marked the importance of a rather different set of furniture. In an essay originally published in 2008 Miéville had described the tentacle as 'the default monstrous appendage of today, [signalling] the epochal shift to a Weird culture' (Miéville 2011); and he was right in not only his critique of modernity but his presentiment of the importance of the imagery. By 2012 the VanderMeers highlighted the tentacle's omnipresence in modern Weird writing. They admitted the influence of Surrealism, Symbolism, Decadent Literature, the New Wave, and the more esoteric strains of the Gothic; found echoes of it in the New Wave works of Moorcock, Ballard and Harrison; and argued for its re-emergence via Miéville who synthesised 'the tentacle horrors of Lovecraft with the intellectual rigor of the New Wave' (VanderMeer & VanderMeer 2012: xx). In 2014 Nicolay pushed for a further realignment by relabelling the convergent strands the 'Weird Renaissance' which he intended to be a label broad enough to capture all of this innovation. By that point the discussions, which had been prompted by a set of British writers experimenting with amalgamations of science fiction and fantasy, had morphed into a largely American-centric resuscitation of Lovecraft, furnished with a suite of anthologies, which would be published over the next several years. These

included *Lovecraft Unbound*, edited by Ellen Datlow (2015); *The Mammoth Book of Original Cthulhu*, edited by Paula Guran (2016); and *Children of Lovecraft*, edited by Ellen Datlow (2016). By the end of 2016 the movement had become a marketing label and Strahan's fears of a generation of 'new weird drag' (now Cthulhu rather than Gormenghast) had been firmly realised.

But the failure of the New Weird as movement, moment and marketing category – or perhaps its rehabilitation as the last in a changed but evidently viable form – hides what the discussion did accomplish. In my mind, the critic Jonathan McCalmont identifies this best in his sophisticated exploration of the TTA message board threads:

What these discussions contain is something far more primal and basic than the emergence of a genre; what they reflect is the troubled birth of a new literary subjectivity... One so raw and unformed that it was not ready to yield the sort of practical outcomes demanded by the wider genre community or the commercial interests attached to it. (McCalmont 2016)

This is vital to our discussion: what Harrison did – or tried to do – with his discussion was open up a space for a new form of writing, not by creating a trendy marketing label but by forging links between otherwise unlike writers who believed the tools for creating literature could be refashioned. McCalmont argues that

a shared response to a shared cultural moment can yield new techniques, new forms, new arguments, and new styles of collective action but before any of these productive outcomes can take place, people need to realise that they are not alone. (McCalmont 2016)

Ultimately, Harrison tried to provoke a rethinking of genre and its necessity. But what did this radical new subjectivity look like? Nearing the end of the TTA message board discussion, author Justina Robson notes:

I think that we've realised that there are two things going on in this discussion – one is the writing of realism-bending fiction and one is the philosophical enquiry about the nature of inner reality and its projection into the outside world. For the writing side, I think we've said all we can say. On the philosophical side I think there's a long way to go. (Robson 2003)

It is this philosophical strand that seems most clearly embedded in Harrison's rejection of worldbuilding as 'the clomping foot of nerdism', a perspective anticipated in the early New Weird discussions.

Thus we circle around from the market conditions and back to the philosophical inquiry – and indeed back to Harrison's 2007 polemic against worldbuilding (2007a). In his subsequent blog posts (2007a and 2007c), which expand and clarify his position, Harrison draws upon Baudrillard to argue that much contemporary worldbuilding with its focus on rationality and order

undercuts the best and most exciting aspects of fantastic fiction, subordinating the uncontrolled, the intuitive and the authentically imaginative to the explicable; and replacing psychological, poetic & emotional logic with the rationality of the fake. (Harrison 2007c)

With their need to project apparent realism, he believed writers such as Tolkien resisted the idea of writing as a game played between writers and readers: they installed a 'secondary creation' and ignored 'the genuine sleight-of-hand pleasures of conjuring in favour of a belief in magic, a kind of non-writing which claims to be rather than to simulate' (Harrison 2007c). Harrison, on the other hand, lived for the game. So far so good, but what does this game look like it? We might see an echo of it in *The Pastel City* whereby the hero tegeus-Cromis, interested in the Reality of things, still demands from a strange visitor his name before they are able to converse (Harrison 2005: 11). We might find another echo in Harrison's provocative labelling of the New Weird as well as his resistance to those trying to attach a clear referent to the label, resulting in the rejection of one set of agendas after another. This strategy seems to admit that although names are not good substitutions for Reality, nevertheless, they allow us to interact.

Where does that leave us in terms of a consideration of practice then? I will briefly sum up three alternatives discussed so far. The first is that of Miéville. As we have seen, Miéville did not reject worldbuilding; in fact, if anything, he believed the radical potential of speculative fiction lay in its power to construct worlds. Miéville saw in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien's attempt to turn his back on 'the truth of post-traumatic Modernity' (Miéville 2005): its collapse as a rational, humane system. In the works of Lovecraft, who Miéville positions as a foil, he saw an awareness of the same collapse:

These different approaches manifest in their fantasies. To put it with unfair crudeness, Tolkien's is the fantasy of a man murmuring to himself "it's alright, it's alright", but not believing it; Lovecraft's of a man shrieking "none of it is alright, nor will it ever be". (Miéville 2005)

For him, then, a fantastic world does not offer escape from capitalist modernity. Fantasy mirrors it, but in so doing it interrogates the relationship between belief and reality. It allows its readers to see worlds as constructed and mediated; the better the world, the more plausibly constructed, the greater the potential for recognition of the complexity and artificiality of capitalist modernity.

The second approach is that of Jeff VanderMeer. In his writing guide *Wonderbook* (2013) he offers what is perhaps the most thoughtful integration of scepticism toward traditional worldbuilding. In addition to the commonplace advice about coherency, consistency, logic and detail, he argues for sufficient mystery and unexplored vistas, consistent inconsistency, multicultural representation, extended, literalised metaphors, multiple operational realities, collective and individual memory, and imperfect comprehension. 'The world' of the story in that sense must be polysemous: 'The places and spaces in which story occurs are not inert or merely backdrops to action – they have energy, motion, and create certain effects depending on your approach' (VanderMeer 2013: 241). Such a practice offers avenues for incorporating a politicised understanding of the way in which a setting might be constructed from multiple overlapping and conflicting worldviews.

The third comes from Timothy Morton whom I have discussed briefly. Morton's work in speculative realism is informed by horror, hauntology and the weird; he argues that as we approach a period of environmental collapse, the end of 'the world' is inevitable. In this sense, 'the world' – which might be read as capitalist modernity, although it surely could not be limited to that – vanishes, and we are left with intimacy:

Because when you look at the stars and imagine life on other planets, you are looking through the spherical glass screen of the atmosphere at objects that appear to be behind that glass screen – for all the developments since Ptolemy, in other worlds, you still imagine that we exist on the inside of some pristine glass sphere. The experience of cosmic wonder is an aesthetic experience, a three-dimensional surround version of looking at a picturesque painting in an art gallery. (Morton 2013: 108-109)

Intimacy for Morton is the sense that global warming and other such hyperobjects are not behind the glass screen; rather it's 'as if the glass screen starts to extrude itself toward you in a highly uncanny, scary way that violates the normal aesthetic propriety' (Morton 2013: 109). As our perception of 'the world' as a mediating element falls away, so too does the self. This intimacy involves 'not a sense of belonging to something bigger' but 'a sense of being close, even too close, to other lifeforms, of having them under one's skin' (113). Intimacy means apprehension without the safety of a 'world' to create a sense of distance.

How does Harrison's position knock up against these? Like Miéville and Morton, Harrison believes 'the world' has already been built up as a hyperreal environment by corporate ads and branding exercises, and thus worldbuilding is an inherently political argument,

made even more urgent as a heavily mediatised world moves from the prosthetic to the virtual, allowing the massively managed and flattered contemporary self to ignore the steady destruction of the actual world on which it depends. (Harrison 2007c).

Harrison's rejection of worldbuilding is not a rejection of the corporatisation of fictional worlds then; it is a deeper rejection of readers believing – and enjoying – built worlds as if they were real. Thus, in his oeuvre Viriconium persisted as a point of return in his writings, a site of further testing and twisting, a space that could be continually overwritten, that *had* to be continually overwritten, suffused with decay, de-gilded and coarsened. The degradation of Viriconium from *The Pastel City* to *A Storm of Wings* and onward was an aesthetic move in itself, an attempt to make the world unliveable, uninhabitable. This was in large part because Harrison recognised the city's charisma, which Fraser astutely argues

must be understood, paradoxically, as a caution against seductive charisma. To navigate this inscape demands not that we resolve its contradictions, but that we embrace them and enter into the spaces between them. (Fraser 2019: 62)

Harrison's penultimate short story 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium' describes this charismatic pull. It is suffused with a sense of loss, of the aborted escape. It echoes Rainer Rilke's description of a man for whom 'in a moment more, "everything will have lost its meaning, and that table and the cup, and the chair to which he clings, all the near and commonplace" things around him, "will have become intelligible, strange" and burdensome' (Rilke qtd in Harrison 2005: 543). This is the vital experience of Viriconium: this undoing of intelligence, the loss of meaning of the objects which would give a life substance. This is a world in which the furniture is losing its ability to generate meaning at all. Harrison's writing no longer provides a route of escape from the real to the fantastical, but a rope leading the reader of the fantastic back toward the real.

But it is a difficult position for a fantasy writer to take. It seems to provoke the reader who comes to the text in search of relief from anxiety; it asks the reader who flees the complexities of the real world to encounter them again. But in doing so, what Harrison argues for is the power of literature to revitalise through a different kind of encounter with intimacy than that of Morton. He says:

We begin by trying out illusions. Once we accept that illusions "blind but do not hold", that we have at our disposal finally only the worldness of the world, then we find some way of "escaping" into that. We learn to love what we longed to run from. We learn to run away from fantasy and into the world, write fantasies at the heart of which by some twist lies the very thing we fantasise against.

This hurts. (Harrison 1992: 141)

If fiction offers an escape, it is not an escape from pain; it is rather the awareness that this pain is the experience of life and that it is the purpose of fiction to reflect its painful contradictions, not to resolve them but to flare them in our minds.

Interlude: An exercise in worldbuilding

Choose seven objects in the same room as you now – yes, any seven objects. Do not be too careful in your consideration of them. There, these are yours to build with. Make a ladder. Make a mirror. Make an argument.

Make Viriconium.

Notes

[1] The terminology for science fiction and fantasy is deeply contested, with diverging and occasionally converging approaches dependent on formal characteristics, market conditions, and others. As the bending of genres and importance of market labels plays a major role in this essay, rather than preferring an umbrella term such as 'speculative fiction' (itself contested), I have instead tried to follow the self-identification and usage of the authors themselves. Consequently, it should be noted there are discrepancies and inconsistencies; while I have not made an effort to resolve these (and indeed feel such a resolution would only undermine Harrison's approach to constructive ambiguity), I have made an effort to provide clarity for the reader at points in which the traditions and practices seem to diverge most noticeably.

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