

This is not the paper I set out to write, but I think it is better than that paper anyway. Basically, I am here concerned with the history of fantasy, especially with an alternative history of the genre revealed by way of Richard Morgan's engagement with Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword in A Land Fit for Heroes*. The possibilities immanent to Anderson's fantasy, I argue, became less visible after certain events of 1977 but can be found when we read Morgan back through that date to 1954, when both Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Broken Sword* were first published. So I will get to Morgan, but first I want to briefly introduce some concepts and terminology from Franco "Bifo" Berardi and Marx. I will then offer a reading of the history of fantasy focused on three particular years and the meaning of those years to the genre: 1954, 1977, and 2008.

### **Part 1: Semiocapitalism, Subsumption, and Poetry**

I can't belabor this point here, but note that, for Franco "Bifo" Berardi, 1977 marks what he calls a concatenation in the history of capitalism. A great number of events took place that year that served to do two things. First, they helped render invisible those possibilities in the present of which capitalism did not approve. Second, they helped make clear to us that this narrowing of possibility was underway.

This narrowing of possibility is characteristic of what Bifo calls semiocapitalism.

Semiocapitalism refers to a transformation of production, by way of financialization, under which material goods become of secondary, or even of negligible, importance to the accumulation of capital. More important than the goods which formerly indicated value and were referenced by our signs of value (such as the dollar) are abstract bits of self-referential value untethered from any actual material object. Bifo writes, "In this configuration, the production of any kind of goods, whether material or immaterial, can be translated into the combination and recombination of information." The concatenation Bifo calls 1977 makes visible the events within capitalism that effected the transformation he describes. It also, importantly, is the year that this transformation began to become

visible to those living through it by way of certain cultural productions, such as Sid Vicious' cry of "no future."

Bifo's longer engagements with 1977 suggest that, although the year does not involve a punctual, important event in the history of capitalism, it witnesses an onslaught of real, rather than formal, subsumption. This real subsumption has a direct impact on the fantasy genre and I shall return to what this means for fantasy in a moment. First I should say something about what subsumption means in both of its forms. For Marx, writing in a chapter not included in the final version of *Capital: Volume I*, labor is *formally* subsumed by capitalism when the latter incorporates labor in its primitive state, its state prior to its inclusion in capitalism. Thus a cobbler who makes shoes by way of traditional methods for the purpose of exchanging them within a developed capitalist economy has been formally subsumed. Importantly, the formal subsumption of labor by the capitalist is the incorporation of an inherently alien matter, the primitive labor, by someone, the capitalist, who can only serve to *manage* that thing. In other words, primitive labor does not fit within capitalism to the extent that it represents a way of doing things compatible with but not reducible to that mode of production. By contrast, the real subsumption of labor transforms labor into something not simply compatible with capitalism, but into something "natural" to it. This new labor operates under, and is defined by, rules that capital sets rather than under rules the labor sets for itself as if it retained some autonomy. When the cobbler no longer makes shoes, but rather goes to work in a Taylorist factory (or loses her job altogether to automation), then that labor has undergone real subsumption. Bifo, following from Italian autonomism, thinks about the subsumption of production generally and the transformative effects of this subsumption on society more broadly, rather than only in terms of labor power. The real subsumption of production under semiocapitalism comes when forces of production have been subordinated to an abstraction in which everything becomes an endlessly fungible sign without any referent.

When the very forms of production have been dictated by semiocapitalism by way real

subsumption, then the possibilities within the present are rendered impotent and invisible. Under the real subsumption of production and society, we lose our capacity to see the other possibilities immanent to so-called primitive forms of production and the products of those forms. Under real subsumption, the future is reduced to a rote extrapolation from a set of possibilities limited to those of which capitalism approves. The shorthand for all of this is the claim made by the preeminent theorist of neoliberalism, Margaret Thatcher, who tells us that There Is No Alternative.

The possibilities immanent to the present never truly disintegrate, but they do become invisible to us. Poetry, which Bifo generally understands as a form of writing in verse but I understand (based upon his work) to be a form of imagination or invention or creation, renders visible and activates the possibilities in the present occluded by the real subsumption of cultural production by semicapitalism. Fantasy, in this sense, is poetry, but only if we recover what it might have been prior to 1977.

## **Part 2: A History of Fantasy**

1954 marks both the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and that of *The Broken Sword*. Needless to say, the former text has had a great deal more influence on the overall genre and its reception by popular culture. To give you a hint of where I am heading, I will note here that *The Broken Sword* represents something of a road not taken, a possibility within the genre that Tolkien, especially insofar as he was received, tended to render invisible. I will circle back to *that* 1954, but first I want to make clear what 1954 meant for what we now think of fantasy, what it produced, and how that production was really subsumed in 1977.

With regard to *the Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien did not conceive of the trilogy as a fantasy in relation to an extant genre. The mythology upon which the trilogy was based developed in what we might call a primitive fashion, outside of thoughts of capitalist production and outside of thoughts of an exchangeable genre with codes and conventions whose reification affords endless combination and

recombination. Of course, *The Lord of the Rings* would be sold, would in fact become a publishing sensation. However, what was sold was produced according to production methods at odds with those capitalism would come to impose on the genre. I hope we are all familiar enough with the trilogy to intuit what it is in the trilogy that remains at odds with capitalism, namely the coherence of story and the concrete and essential relationships that exist within the trilogy between subject and object or between individual and land. The relationship of the hobbits to the Shire, that of the elves to Lothlorien, that of the fellowship to the quest; the specific necessity of carrying out the quest in just this way; the way in which Sam and Frodo maintain a connection with the tale of Beren and Luthien: all of this bespeaks something that cannot be abstracted. To be sure, the concrete and essential meaning Tolkien desires remain ideal rather than actual, and the politics behind this meaning remain, in a word, problematic at best. Nonetheless, the trilogy's *production* of an experience in which readers might glimpse for a moment such meaning remains incompatible with capitalism, I would argue, even if later fantasies would come to rely on the framework of Tolkien's portal-quest in order to sell an abstracted version of this meaning.

Following the success of the trilogy, which, to be clear, begins the formal subsumption of fantasy, two things happened within the nascent genre. First, other writers began to produce works that followed from and departed from *The Lord of the Rings*, grappling with the conventions it provided—conventions that had yet to be formalized as syntactical structures or generative codes. Among the most significant fantasies published after *The Lord of the Rings* but prior to 1977 are Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), M. John Harrison's *The Pastel City* (1971), and Patricia McKillip's *The Riddle-Master of Hed* (1976). These fantasies sometimes engage with *The Lord of the Rings* in a generic manner, but nonetheless resist it to the extent that they each develop their own logics and concepts. As such, they do not yet represent a real subsumption of fantasy, although they may very well pave the way for this real subsumption.

The second thing that happened following the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* was the recovery and re-publication of primitive fantasies, fantasies very often written prior to 1954 by the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series. Although BAF writers themselves were not in any way diverse (mainly men, entirely of European descent), the collection of texts included in the BAF is diverse to the point of being incoherent from a contemporary point of view. To readers of genre fantasy for whom the genre consists of elves, quests, and dark lords, these texts must appear to be prohibitively strange. As with Tolkien's own production of *The Lord of the Rings*, these texts and their writers could be formally subsumed into capitalism by way of a newly identified and defined genre, but they remained alien to it in terms of how they were produced and the ideas that they expressed.

In 1977 two fantasy series marked the beginning of the real subsumption of fantasy, albeit in very different ways. Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* introduced a new affect to fantasy, unbelief, and thereby called into question the naiveté of Tolkien's characters if not *The Lord of the Rings* itself. Terry Brooks' *Shannara*, by contrast, abstracted the conventions of *The Lord of the Rings* and thus made possible their instrumentalization, their combination and recombination. I will concentrate on Brooks' *Shannara* here, because it more clearly dovetails with my framing to this point.

It's not so much that the *Shannara* books work differently than *The Lord of the Rings*. Rather, they work so much like it that they never feel the need to *produce* the effects for which Tolkien strives. Whenever the characters of these books undertake a quest, they do so because, in fantasy, that's just what you do. Their desires, their relationships with their world, their actions, the threats they discover, the enemies they fight: all are reduced to a strict formula that in no way allows us to imagine anything beyond that formula, a formula that in no way produces story or belonging beyond an abstraction. We know this character will be the hero because he or she is introduced on that beat. This event will inaugurate wrongness or recognition because it happens in the chapter when that's supposed to happen.

All of the parts of the narrative fit together, but they only fit together and never achieve the excess that characterizes Bifo's notion of poetry or fantasy written and published outside of the production logics of semiocapitalism.

For example, the protagonists of *Shannara* are nearly always reluctant to accept the call to action that inaugurates a quest despite clear evidence that a quest is needed. This reluctance is common to the portal-quest form generally. In *Shannara*, however, this skepticism does not serve any generic, or even thematic purpose so much as it embodies another obstacle to be overcome as part of the quest that *inevitably* follows. One might forgive Shea Ohmsford, in 1977's *The Sword of Shannara*, for not immediately trusting the strange and grim man he just met, a strange and grim man who tells him he is heir to the legacy of Elven kings, this after living a relatively safe and idle life in a secluded part of the world. Likewise, one can forgive Brooks for beginning the first published volume in this series with a call to an unlikely hero of this sort. However, nearly every book that follows *The Sword of Shannara* begins in a similar fashion. And there are literally several dozen more of them. We must therefore understand Shea's skepticism as less that of an inexperienced, innocent hero in the making, or even as the foundational move in an epic fantasy sequence. We must understand it as an example of a rote completion of a syntactical structure reified by *The Lord of the Rings* as an essential component of the fantasy genre that, once it is understood and abstracted, never needs to be understood or rethought ever again.

Other fantasy series—such as David Eddings' *Belgariad* and *Mallorean*, Dennis McKiernan's *Iron Tower*, Terry Goodkind's *Sword of Truth*, and Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time*—similarly rely on the syntactical structures offered by *The Lord of the Rings*, often in even more mundane ways than does Brooks. To be clear, this is the real subsumption of fantasy: the incorporation of the genre and the codes according to which it is produced into capitalism in such a way that the genre and its codes are transformed. This transformation narrows the genre to a single possibility, a possibility with a track

record of exchangeability and thus profitability, whose syntax allows for endless combination and recombination of fungible codes and conventions.

In 2008, Richard Morgan rejects Tolkien and the effect Tolkien had on fantasy, explicitly in interviews and implicitly throughout *The Steel Remains*, the first volume of *A Land Fit for Heroes*. *The Steel Remains* begins after the great quest is over. Our heroes have saved the world from the inhuman threat of the Scaled Folk, but discover that this world has no place for them. Society rejects them for their sexualities, for their violence, for everything that made them different—despite all they did to save the world from a truly horrific threat. In fact, the war they fought and won served only to reinforce the power structures that existed before the war. In a move that would make neoliberals and Chicago-school economists jealous, the aftermath of the war gives way to new markets that enrich and empower those who are already rich and powerful. *The Steel Remains* thus makes clear that the sort of return fantasy has traditionally desired is impossible. Things cannot be put right and the claim that they can turns out, in the context of *A Land Fit for Heroes*, to be pure propaganda that always serves the ulterior motive of something very close to capitalist accumulation. The title of Morgan's series, *A Land Fit for Heroes*, questions the sort of essential relationship between subject and land Tolkien describes. Published in 2008, a year when the crisis of semicapitalism became clearest and, perhaps, permanent, Morgan's take on fantasy seems to suggest that the genre can only be a dead end.

HOWEVER, even as he undoes Tolkienism and, I would argue, the sort of abstraction Brooks and others see in the genre, Morgan recovers something of fantasy's invisibilized past, one as yet unsubsumed. This past comes by way of Anderson's *The Broken Sword*, a passage of which serves as the epigraph to *The Steel Remains* and whose influence can be found throughout. *The Broken Sword*, to the extent possible, eschews Tolkien's anthropocentrism. In "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien tells us that "Fairy-stories are made by men not by fairies." In short, Tolkien claims that humans tell such stories because we are fascinated with the immortality possessed by elves. In contrast, fairies would, he

claims, tell human stories about the escape from deathlessness, stories about finitude and the meaning finitude affords. *The Broken Sword* tells just such a story and thus stands in sharp contrast to *The Lord of the Rings*. It begins with the elf-lord Imric's desire for a human child. Skaffloc, the child in question, possesses a mortality that hints at a death of which the elves remain ignorant. This ignorance becomes clear over and over as the elves fail to understand the significance of death for the human. As Imric says, as he witnesses the wars perpetrated by humanity: "And I, who have watched it almost since the land was made, see naught of evil in it, for it helps pass the time." The very conflicts Morgan's heroes fight in order to produce their meaning, Imric views as spectator sport such that might help pass the endless days of immortality.

The broken sword of Anderson's title is a gift given Skaffloc by the gods, a gift that comes with a prophecy of the end of all things. Though the elves fear these gods, they nonetheless cannot imagine the harm this gift might do to the world. Imric for example, scoffs at what he calls the "dim fear of the future" this sword invokes. Of the future the elves have no fear, because the term "future" does not hold for them the implication of change, death, or ends that it does for the human. When the sword is reforged the final movement towards the end of all things begins. Importantly, however, this radical finality is never represented in *The Broken Sword*, which ends simply with the death of the mortal hero. Skaffloc is the protagonist of a human-story as told by elves, who are the only witnesses to these events and thus the implicit tellers of the tale. This story is fascinated by this end, this death, but not because it grants meaning to the life of the human who experienced it. The elves can imagine nothing of the sort. Rather, this death represents a passing moment of change, some small *difference* in the otherwise unbroken (and to the elves unbreakable) self-similarity of immortality.

Along with its violence and generally grim outlook, Morgan takes from *The Broken Sword* this inhuman point of view. In fact, *A Land Fit for Heroes* revels in points of view incompatible with our own. The "unremittingly alien" Scaled Folk, the enemy in the war that precedes the series, possess a



form of reason humanity never comes to understand. One of the two elf-analogs in the series, the *dwenda*, come from a place known as the Ageless Realm, “*where the constraints of time are not felt.*” For this and other reasons they do not understand the world as humans understand it. As one character puts it, “they may not even be sane, not as *we* would understand the concept.” Likewise the Kiriath, the other elder race in *A Land Fit for Heroes*, for all their allegiance to humanity, are not human. When they leave the land, mirroring the elves’ flight from Middle-earth, they leave one member of their race behind because of her part-human ancestry. As a final warning, they tell her: “*You are not human [...]* *Never think, because we cannot take you with us, that you are human.*” The artificial intelligences called created by the Kiriath, called Helmsman, are more inhuman still. According to one of the Kiriath, “*They aren’t like you or me or your mother at all, not even like the spirit of one of us in a bottle or a box.*” Finally, the ancient powers of the Land play games with humanity, but not out of any longing to be them or share their world and lives (as do the elves of *The Broken Sword*), but because of an inhuman banality, because as one of these gods states, “despite all of their age and power, they *have* nothing else.”

By way of conclusion, I argue that these inhuman points of view are precisely what fantasy offers us now. Tolkien, whatever his strengths, remains committed to a human point of view. His humans desire eternity and believe they comprehend what they desire; hence the ease with which the structures he offers have become abstracted—they were human to begin with. Human comprehension, and even human incomprehension, can no longer guide us in a world that always already abstracts human knowledge practices and makes them available to the machine called semicapitalism. We see what happens to fantasy when we instrumentalize the humanistic points of view within fantasy for the purpose of producing more and more fantasy. We get a genre that we can only recognize, but one that never produces anything for us beyond what we already know. Even Tolkien’s elves fail us as immortals because they are too human. They seem to comprehend the human, and value the human in a

manner that humans understand as value. Again, this value can become a fungible sign ripe for combination and recombination, but it can never produce the excess Bifo calls poetry.

What Morgan gives us, by returning to a lost moment in the history of fantasy and showing us what the genre can be if we overcome its determination by Tolkien, is an inhuman point of view that remains inhuman. This is an inhuman point of view that does not comprehend the human, an eternal or immortal point of view that cannot understand finitude and therefore cannot understand history and cannot understand meaning. However, this is not the lack of solution we find in horror. So much horror presents the lack of solution as a final state, but that lack of solution is always *for the human*. The inhuman point of view suggested by Anderson and Morgan is one from which human problems are not problems and are not even comprehensible as problems. It is one that requires and implies an entirely different framework of thought, a framework apart from the knowledge practices we rely upon everyday and which dovetail all too well with what we seek to overcome. *A Land Fit for Heroes* may not be able to guarantee us a new and open future, but it shows us that there are other pasts, if only we can return to them.