

I call this one 1977: Semiocapitalism and the Real Subsumption of Fantasy.

There are some handouts going around that contain the quotations I will use in this talk, which is in three parts.

Part 1: *Here at the end of all things and the problem of history*

My current book project, *Here at the end of all things: Fantasy after History*, under contract with the Johns Hopkins University Press, seeks to usefully theorize genre fantasy, a task made difficult by strong tendencies within fantasy that, while irreducibly modern themselves, oppose themselves to modernity and modern thought. Science fiction and horror work somewhat differently. We no doubt all know the extent to which science fiction has been accepted by scholars of literature as a worthwhile object of inquiry. Science fiction studies not only dominates the discourse on fantastika generally, but includes numerous subdisciplines devoted to the study of race, gender, sexuality, and more within the larger field. Gothic horror has enjoyed wide consideration by scholars of literature and culture, especially in its nineteenth-century incarnations. More recently, the Weird and New Weird have—in part because of the rise of Object Oriented Ontology, Speculative Realism, and related discourses—achieved a privileged position within literary and cultural studies. Lovecraft criticism has become nearly an industry unto itself, not coincidentally at roughly the same moment the Anthropocene has become something of a cause within the arts and humanities. Fantasy has not enjoyed similar attention, despite its ongoing popularity—popularity demonstrated by both its continued production by generic and mainstream writers alike and the countless television programs and films that fall under its purview.

To me, this imbalance of critical attention, which is both quantitative and qualitative, can be fairly easily explained. In brief, scholars have long understood science fiction to be properly historical and critical. This understanding recommends modern knowledge practices such as historicism and critique as tools by which to study it. Horror, in whatever form, demonstrates to us the futility of human

knowledge in the face of the unknowable and “un-experience-able” spatialities and temporalities of the nonhuman world. It thus fits quite well with contemporary anti-foundationalist or posthumanist discourses. Fantasy, because of its apparent (not to mention real) nostalgia and atavistic celebration of an unfallen and pristine world prior to industrialization, science, and modernity generally remains always uncritical and immature. It can never tell us anything about our historical situation except perhaps as symptom. It can never face the hard truth that humanity is not special, not the center of things.

We can see the differences amongst these three genres by way of how each *tends* to think of and represent history, where “history” refers to a form of knowledge or narrative template by way of which humanity grants itself meaning. For science fiction, history is both problem and solution, that which we seek to overcome and the means by which we overcome it. Thus the grammar of science fiction, which I call paradigm, narrates discovery of the new and the assimilation of the new into the world, an assimilation that transforms the world and forces it to progress, for better or worse. Paradigm ends, ideally, with an arrival in utopia or dystopia, the uncertainty between these possibilities being part and parcel of the open-endedness of historical existence. Horror denies that history even exists. Its narratives are thus self-contradictory insofar as they narrate the fact that no narrative can be truly meaningful. Every narrative, including the narrative called history, is a lie that humanity produces in order to keep from staring into the abyss. The grammar of horror is called disappointment, which first demonstrates that whatever disrupts our attempts to make the world mean has always been there. It has, however, been rendered invisible by way of science and similar techniques, techniques that only show us ourselves and never show us what lies outside of our knowledge practices. Horror ends in aftermath, which is actually “after” nothing but is, rather, simply the acknowledgement that there is only problem with no solution. Fantasy, finally, acknowledges that history *is* but that it is a mistake, a wrongness tantamount to the Fall out of an essentially meaningful existence. This existence is called Story and it is the grammar of fantasy. Story ends, ideally, in return, a radical return to a moment before there was any

problem, any narrative, or any history.

Here at the end of all things thinks through the implications of this articulation of these three genres, which I develop out of the work of John Clute and others. I do not wish to save fantasy, as others have tried, by insisting that it is also historicist or that it also critical. The genre is not better than science fiction at doing science fiction. Rather, I aim to demonstrate how fantasy, by being ahistoricist and a-critical, offers glimpses of another way of thinking. Borrowing vocabulary from Franco “Bifo” Berardi, who will continue to be a presence throughout this talk, fantasy can be *poetic* to the extent that it produces an excess of semantic meaning that cannot be contained by merely syntactical structures. By way of neoliberalism, history, or rather posthistory, has become just such a structure, the endless solution of merely technical problems that in no way produces a world meaningful for humanity. Although I can’t go into this point in any depth, I think that a certain insolvency is desirable under present conditions, a refusal to acknowledge the debt we call the past. This refusal would thus be a short-circuiting of the mechanical way history plays itself out, according to the equations, formulas, and algorithms that describe the financialization of the world. Debt is the capture of the future by the present. Insolvency is the means by which to free the future from its past such that we can begin to see other possibilities here and now. In its most profound moments, fantasy expresses—through magic, through the irreducible and essential relationship of subject to object or individual to land—something that capitalism cannot solve and, for better or worse, suggests something other than capitalism.

So I want to take you through a thread of my argument, a thread that touches upon the ideas I have just summarized. I shall do so by, first, briefly introducing some concepts and terminology from Bifo and Marx and, second, by offering a reading of the history of the genre focused on three particular years and fantasies published in those years: 1954, 1977, and 2008. [**~7 minutes to this point**]

Part 2: Semiocapitalism, Subsumption, and Poetry

1977 is important to the present talk for a number of reasons, not all of which have to do with

genre fantasy directly. Franco “Bifo” Berardi describes 1977 as a threshold moment in the establishment of what he calls “semiocapitalism.” For Bifo, in 1977 “many interesting things happened. In Silicon Valley, Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs created the Apple trademark. In London, Sid Vicious cried ‘No Future.’ In Italian cities, the last proletarian rebellion of the last century and the first precarious rebellion of the new century went on stage.” 1977 lacks the obvious resonance other years possess for a history of capitalism and our resistance to it. 1776, 1789, 1848, 1917, 1945, 1968, 1989, 2001, 2008: each of these signs reference punctual events with far-reaching consequences. 1977 serves less as a marker of such an event than a concatenation, the manifestation of an “and” (the conjunction A-N-D) characterized by the submission to and endless continuation of a syntactical structure that determines the limits of our thought.

This continuation, and the abstract form of this syntactical structure, are characteristic of 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. He 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 thus 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 and David Bowie’s “Heroes,” the former indicating the fact that the future can no longer be new, could no longer be the future, and the latter telling us that the larger than life figure who transcends the rules of the world in order to remake it will no longer be able to save us. Even the hero has been subsumed into capitalism.

All of this suggests that, although the year does not involve a punctual, important event in the

history of capitalism, 1977 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. Here I should pause to explain Marx's concept of subsumption and its deployment by Autonomist Marxism in the 1970s. For Marx, writing in a chapter not included in the final version of *Capital: Volume 1*, 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. Notably, 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 the tradition of 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 semicapitalism 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 semicapitalism by way real subsumption, then the possibilities within the present are rendered impotent and invisible. Under the real subsumption of production and society, we will 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 an extrapolation from a set of possibilities limited to those of which capitalism approves. The shorthand for all of this is the claim allegedly made by Slavoj Žižek and/or Fredric Jameson, namely that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. We can take a second shorthand from the preeminent theorist of neoliberalism, Margaret Thatcher, who tells us that There Is No Alternative.

The possibilities immanent to the present never truly disappear, but they do become invisible to us. For Bifo, possibility is “a content inscribed in the present constitution of the world.” Power, is “selection and enforcement of one possibility among many, and simultaneously it is the exclusion (and invisibilization) of many other possibilities.” Potency is “the subjective energy that deploys the possibilities and actualizes them.” Although power is a potency, it is also the limitation of other potencies. Finally, in the interests of bringing the present discussion to a close, Bifo notes that “The subsumption of language by the semiocapitalist cycle of production effectively freezes the affective potencies of language.” 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 semiocapitalism. Fantasy, in this sense, is poetry, but only if we recover what it might have been prior to 1977. **[just over 14 minutes to this point]**

Part 3: 1954, 1977, 2008: A History of Fantasy

The history of fantasy can be divided in two, pre-1954 and post-1954. In that year, Tolkien published *The Lord of the Rings* and inaugurated the fantasy genre in a manner we still recognize today. What came before *The Lord of the Rings* can and often must be included in any reasonable history of the genre, but 1954 remains the year the genre began in earnest *as a genre* by way of Tolkien’s establishment of structures and conventions that demanded to be taken up or at least consciously resisted by subsequent writers and texts. Foucault would say that *The Lord of the Rings* “stated” the

genre and thus determined what could and could not be said within this generic discourse. To be clear, however, understanding 1954 in this way, pointing at *The Lord of the Rings* as a statement or determinant of fantasy, misses or ignores the weirdness that precedes 1954, manifests in 1954, and, in some cases, continues after 1954 even if it remains invisible to us. This history serves a certain power, one that sells fantasy as a set of fungible codes that are rarely questioned much less innovated. So it is important to note that when we point to 1954 and Tolkien we could instead point to a very different fantasy and therefore an alternative history of the genre that continues to haunt it now. In 1954 Poul Anderson published *The Broken Sword* and drew upon much of the same mythology and folklore *The Lord of the Rings* does, but to very different effect. 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.

Tolkien did not conceive of *The Lord of the Rings* as a fantasy in relation to an extant genre. Some of you no doubt know that he gave a talk, “On Fairy-stories,” in which he outlines the poetics of what would become *The Lord of the Rings* and gives us some terminology, such as “secondary world” and “eucatastrophe,” that continues to be important to the genre and its scholarship. However, *The Lord of the Rings* does not begin as fantasy, or even fairy story. Tolkien developed his mythology initially as a means to animate the two elven languages he invented. The world he invented is the world in which these languages could exist; this world and this language cannot be separated from one another. The long backstory to Middle-earth was in part written prior to Tolkien’s service in the first world war. And, incidentally, it would first be published as *The Silmarillion* in, of course, 1977. My point here is that this mythology 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. (And, as an aside, I am not here sanctifying Tolkien. The politics of the trilogy are extraordinarily problematic and he was not some *artiste* starving because what he had to say was so authentic no one could hear it through the fog of capitalist ideology or some such. I only mean to make clear that what Tolkien did was done without explicit concern for how it might be received by the market and without concern with taking up or embodying a pre-existing set of codes called genre fantasy.)

Following the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, two things happened. 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 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 largely written prior to 1954. This effort was led by the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series, or the BAF, edited by Lin Carter from 1965 to 1974. Carter understood Tolkien to be part of a long tradition of fantasy, a tradition that was far more internally diverse than what fantasy would come to be after Tolkien. The BAF's first five volumes were all by Tolkien. The sixth volume, ER Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*, is where things start to become interesting. *The Worm Ouroboros* was originally published in that watershed year for modernism, 1922. This very strange proto-fantasy was written in a difficult and idiosyncratic pseudo-Middle English. It tells the story of heroes so heroic that, when they achieve the goals of their quest they are so disappointed that they ask a powerful magic user to reset the state of the world to the moment before

the quest began so they can do it all over again. Also included in the BAF were several other texts by Eddison, Mervyn Peake's baffling and baroque Gormenghast trilogy of the 1950s, David Lindsay's 1920 Gnostic science fiction novel *A Voyage to Arcturus* (one of Harold Bloom's very favorite things), William Morris's nineteenth-century utopias, Hope Mirlees' 1926 fairy tale *Lud-in-the-Mist*, and Anderson's *The Broken Sword*. The BAF also included texts even less recognizable as fantasy today, such as weird fictions by Lovecraft, William Hope Hodgson, Clark Ashton Smith, and others. In short, 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.

These events described, I now want to mention one of these expressions, as produced by Tolkien, and then discuss how that expression leads to the real subsumption of fantasy.

Story, the grammar of fantasy, presents a particular difficulty to scholarship insofar as its idealized coherence makes it difficult to demonstrate something about it by way of using a discrete moment within it as an example. In short, story fits together *finally and completely*. Taking it apart does not really work. You have to read the whole thing in order to experience the effect it produces. So as a means into this coherency, I offer a moment in *The Lord of the Rings* when story most clearly emerges for characters. At this moment, these characters are able to see Middle-earth as it was before its fall. Moreover, at this moment we come to understand the radical belonging and coherence enjoyed by those who dwell in this Edenic world. The full effect of this coherence can only be achieved by way of the excess and sensuousness characteristic of poetry, something that cannot be abstracted from the larger whole. It is precisely such abstraction that leads to the real subsumption of fantasy. We can

debate whether any fantasy can achieve the effect just described, but there can be little doubt that Tolkien endeavors to do so. As I shall show, later writers do not so endeavor but instead rely on syntactical structures abstracted from an extant genre and its texts. The rote performance of these structures cannot even suggest the strangeness fantasy presents to modern knowledge practices when it is at its best.

So, near the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the fellowship (minus Gandalf) visits the oldest and most important stronghold of the elves in Middle-earth, Lothlórien. Again, this visit serves to show the fellowship and readers the world prior to its fall, a world that has been lost and cannot be recovered no matter the outcome of the quest to destroy the ring. Winter never comes to Lothlórien and the leaves on its trees do not fall until spring, when they are immediately replaced by new leaves. Lothlórien remains outside of history and outside of the abstract relationships between land and subjectivity produced under that condition, such as those found in Westphalian states and the national narratives such states require.

To mortals who can only witness but never truly inhabit eternity, Lothlórien is unbearable. Gimli puts it this way, as he departs, having learned what eternity is and the beauty thereof:

“Tell me, Legolas, why did I come on this quest? Little did I know where the chief peril lay! Truly Elrond spoke, saying that we could not foresee what we might meet upon our road. Torment in the dark was the danger that I feared, and it did not hold me back. But I would not have come, had I known the danger of light and joy. Now I have taken my worst wound in this parting, even if I were to go this night straight to the Dark Lord.

Alas for Gimli son of Glóin!”

Lothlórien exists beyond the endless change that characterizes human history, change that precludes a final congruence of human meaning and human being in the form of a perfectly meaningful story or an absolute fit between subject and object or people and land. This apparent eternity is apposite those who live there, elves who enjoy a relationship to Lothlórien so fundamental they cannot render it in abstract terms comprehensible to those outside of it. They cannot narrativize or otherwise explain who or what

they are. When asked about their magic, they merely say that they do not know or comprehend the term despite the fact that their entire manner of being is clearly magical to us. The elves fit with Lothlórien in way that no human can fit with her land, a fit that defies any form of abstraction or narration. In the end, *The Lord of the Rings* does not and cannot restore Middle-earth to the state of myth of which Lothlórien and the elves serve as reminders. The Fourth Age, which begins with the destruction of the ring and the departure of the last elves from Middle-earth, shall be human. It shall be an age in which abstract relationships between human being and human meaning only hint at the degree to which such abstractions have come to define existence in the twenty-first century.

The relationship between the elves and Lothlórien defies the form of the conjunction “A-N-D” that characterizes semicapitalism according to Bifo, a connection that involves only abstraction and the neutral execution of a pre-existing code. Semicapitalism produces us as subjects and as objects. Under such conditions, there can be no reference to any material condition below the code, much less an essential relationship with this materiality. By contrast, Lothlórien is what John Clute calls a “land”:

For our purposes a land may be defined as a secondary-world venue whose nature and fate are central to the plot: a land is not a protagonist, but has an analogous role. Some or all of the following will almost certainly be the case: the land may evince Wrongness; it may be subject to Thinning; it may be a Waste Land; it may suffer (or be saved by virtue of) a fundamental Transformation [...]; it can be healed; and it is almost certainly, in some sense, alive.

Lands refuse the logic of the Westphalian state, whose borders represent abstractions imposed by human constructions, abstractions warranted by no nature and possessing no inherent, intrinsic, or essential meaning. Likewise they refuse the logic of so-called “netizenship” or what Deleuze would call “dividuality,” a form of subjectivity more determined by the ephemera of Facebook than it is by a collective national history. A people “belongs” to an abstract state (or *connects* with that state) by way of other human constructions, namely by way of the form of narrative called “history,” which creates

the people *as a people*. A dividual “belongs” to Facebook or Twitter by way of passwords which afford and track movement through the abstract space of the internet. In short, whatever form of belonging we “enjoy” today, that belonging is always subject to combination and recombination to such an extent that we can never be certain where we belong.

In 1977 two fantasy series began to undermine the coherence of story and the radical belonging it produces. Stephen R. Donaldson’s *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* and Terry Brooks’ *Shannara*, although quite different from one another, each contribute to the real subsumption of fantasy. 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* nearly always refuse the call to action that inaugurates a quest despite clear evidence that a quest is needed. Their 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. Thus, while it may seem at first glance that Brooks is creating something new, the incredulity of his characters merely serves to underscore the extent to which the *Shannara* books rely on our knowledge that, because fantasy involves a certain form of narrative

coherence and because characters in it belong to the lands absolutely, that all of this makes sense. Shea Ohmsford, the first Chosen One to emerge within *Shannara*, refuses to accept the call to save the Four Lands from the latest incarnation of the Warlock Lord and instead insists on the virtues of staying out of such conflicts. As he says to Allanon, the series' first Gandalf analog:

“You make it sound like a terrible thing to be left alone. I know enough history—no, I know enough life—to realize that Man’s only hope for survival is to remain apart from the other races, to rebuild everything he has lost over the last two thousand years. Then perhaps he will be smart enough not to lose it a second time. He almost destroyed himself entirely in the Great Wars by his persistent intervention in the affairs of others and his ill-conceived rejection of an isolation policy.”

One might forgive Shea for not immediately trusting a strange and grim man he just met 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.

Indeed, subsequent *Shannara* texts, by way of their commitment to extant generic conventions and structures, exemplify the extent to which fantasy became “non-nutritious” in Brian Attebery’s formulation, or “extruded fantasy product” as it is put in fan culture more broadly. The beginning of *Sword of Shannara*’s sequel, *The Elfstones of Shannara*, offers two examples of the incredulity that initiates the series. In the first case, an elf who has been chosen to protect a sacred tree responds to a charge that he does not believe in what he is doing: “I don’t recall being asked what I believed when I

was Chosen, Lauren.”” Even those who know the past can deny the necessity that *The Lord of the Rings* takes care to produce. Later in *Elfstones*, Allanon seeks out and finds Wil Ohmsford, the grandson of Shea Ohmsford and the next hero who will play an essential role in the salvation of the Four Lands. Wil believes Allanon needs his help. However, Wil’s Uncle Flick (Shea’s brother, who helped defeat the Warlock Lord last time) implores Wil to reject Allanon’s call, despite what he has seen with his own eyes of the supernatural threats to the Four Lands (and despite the fact that the reader already knows, seven chapters into the book, that the threat from the demons is real and, therefore, some hero will inevitably answer it in the next 400 pages). In the final volume of the original trilogy, *The Wishsong of Shannara*, Brin Ohmsford (Wil’s daughter) tells a friend that rumors of a new evil are just that: rumors. “[T]here have been stories like this ever since the Warlock Lord was destroyed and none of them ever contained a word of truth. Why would it be any different this time?”” Brin’s family history tells her that these threats can be real, but she insists that such cannot be the case *now*.

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*—vary the credulity of their protagonists and Chosen Ones. They nonetheless 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. Their societies reject 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. The most prominent new market is for human slaves and the most prominent form of slavery is debt slavery, which is inheritable and thus makes the future of this world always beholden to its past. *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 semiocapitalism 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, one who can do certain mundane things (such as touch iron) that the beings of Fairy cannot. Skaffloc, the mortal child in question, comes of age in Aelfheim, where his strength serves him well. However, his mortality 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. As Imric states, ““I would count it shame to lose the most promising of men because of a dim fear of the future.”” 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.

Skafloc, who calls himself a friend of death in the passage Morgan takes as the epigraph to *The Steel Remains*, possesses something for which the elves might long (and to which they give frequent witness) to break the monotony of their lives.

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. 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 semiocapitalism. We see what happens to fantasy, in the case of Terry Brooks and other Tolkienists, 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. Likewise, 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. It can never produce more than the human, something other than the human, something that flees from the human.

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. This is insolvency, but 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. The fantasy that Morgan hints at is not an anti-history, where history is absent but remembered and felt. It is an ahistory outside of history and the thought it provides altogether. Such a thought is poetic, and remains alien to capitalism in whatever form. *A Land Fit for Heroes* and similar fantasy does not promise to free the future from debt. Rather, it shows us that there are other pasts, if only we can return to them.