

Poetry, Postcritique, and the Consistence of Story

Benjamin J. Robertson, University of Colorado, Boulder

benjamin.j.robertson@colorado.edu

Talk outline

- Background on *Here at the end of all things*
- Four definitions: story, consistence, postcritique, poetry
- Two examples of consistence: *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Way of Thorn and Thunder*
- Fantasy, history, story

Quotations (in order of use)

John Clute: “Any narrative which tells or implies a sequence of events, in any order which can be followed by hearers or readers, and which generates a sense that its meaning is conveyed through the actual telling, may be called a Story.”¹

Clute: “Fantasy texts [...] can be characterized as always moving towards the unveiling of an irreducible substratum of Story, an essence sometimes obscure but ultimately omnipresent; the key events of a fantasy text are bound to each other, to the narrative world, and ideally to the tale’s theme in a way that permits endless retellings [...], endless permutations of the narrative’s unbound Motifs, and a sense of ending.”²

Marjorie Levinson: When a “paradigm of knowing,” such as critique, “starts feeling like the form of the real [...] we must ‘work harder not to understand.’”³

Levinson: “Through no fault of their own, our stories of cultural production have become episodes in capitalism’s masterplot: the transformation of matter into value, suffering into meaning, givenness into necessity, nature into culture.”⁴

Rachel Greenwald Smith: The term “tonal intenisty” “indicates the amplification of a general affectivity that relies on externalization rather than internalization”⁵

Franco “Bifo” Berardi:

Desire is monstrous, it is cruel, and noncompliance and nonrecombinability are at the inmost nature of singularity. Singularity cannot be compliant with a finite order of interpretation, but it can be compassionate with the infinite ambiguity of meaning as sensuous understanding. Compassion is sensibility open to the perception of uncountable sensuous beings, the condition for an autonomous becoming-other, beyond the financial freeze, beyond the techno-linguistic conformism that is making social life a desert of meaning.

Poetic language is the insolvency in the field of enunciation: it refuses the exaction of semiotic debt.⁶

JRR Tolkien:

Frodo began to listen.

At first the beauty of the melodies and of the interwoven words in elven-tongues, even though he understood them little, held him in a spell, as soon as he began to attend to them. Almost it seemed that the words took shape, and visions of far lands and bright things that he had never yet imagined opened out before him, and the firelit hall became like a golden mist above the seas of foam that sighed upon the margins of the world. Then the enchantment became more and more dreamlike, until he felt that an endless river of welling gold and silver was flowing over him, too multitudinous for its patterns to be comprehended; it became part of the throbbing air about him, and it drenched and drowned him. swiftly he sank under its shining weight into a deep realm of sleep.⁷

Daniel Heath Justice:

He reaches out with a gnarled grey hand and I pull away, but he keeps singing, and the fire rises in my blood. In life he was one of the Eaters of Old, and he's still dangerous in the Spirit World, but not to me, not now. His blood is my own. The song endures from the ancient days through the lives and deaths of those who hear it, and I'm just one more thread in a woven cord that travels through the Deep Green to the first days of the People. It will endure long after my own flesh has joined the rich soil and stars, but only if I survive now. If I'm lost in this place, I'll be lost forever. That's why he returned. He's come to keep me a part of the wyr-woven pattern. I'm no more special than all those

*who came before and those who will come after me, but each is needed in its time and place for the pattern to endure. And my time is now.*⁸

Justice:

Kinship is thus “potentially ever-expansive and inclusive” as well as being “attentive to a broad constituency” that includes human life, non-human life, and that which has never been alive in relationships that are difficult if not impossible to standardize: “As such, kinship is very much embedded in both a *local* and *localized* matrix of relationship, one that isn’t much suited to distance, large scale, or national policy. Recognition in this context is thus a context—and a community specific response to adaptive and dynamic action—it is *behavior* and *relationship* that are that interwoven measure of acknowledgment, not simply a fixed state of being.”⁹

Fredric Jameson:

I will suggest that within this final horizon the individual text or cultural artifact [...] is here restructured as a field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended. These dynamics—the newly constituted “text” of our third horizon—make up what can be termed *the ideology of form*, that is, the determinate contradictions of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems, which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation.¹⁰

Gilles Deleuze: For Deleuze the close up, as an example of the affection-image, “does not tear its away its object from a set of which it would form a part, but on contrary *it abstracts it from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates*, that is to say it raises itself to the state of Entity.”¹¹

Bibliography for talk, mainly texts cited in *Here at the end of all things*, chapters 3 and 7

- Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*: With a New Preface. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Attebery, Brian. *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski, eds. *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Attebery, Brian. *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- . *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant. London ; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993.
- Berardi, Franco. *And: Phenomenology of the End: Sensibility and Connective Mutation*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015.
- . *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. London ; Brooklyn: Verso, 2017.
- . *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012.
- Bould, Mark, and Michelle Reid, eds. *Parietal Games: Critical Writings by and on M. John Harrison*. London: Science Fiction Foundation, 2005.
- Canavan, Gerry, and Benjamin J. Robertson. "Introduction: Guilty Pleasures: Late Capitalism and Mere Genre." *Extrapolation* 58, no. 2–3 (July 2017): 123–28.
- Citton, Yves. "Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene." *New Literary History* 47, no. 2–3 (2016): 309–29.
- Clute, John, and John Grant. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986.
- . *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*. Translated by Constantin V. Boundas. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991.
- . *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- . *Negotiations: 1972-1990*. Translated by Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Dillon, Grace. “*Miindiwag* and Indigenous Diaspora: Eden Robinson’s and Celu Amberstone’s Forays into ‘Postcolonial’ Science Fiction and Fantasy.” *Extrapolation* 48, no. 2 (January 2007): 219–43.
- Dillon, Grace L., ed. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. “The Blockbuster: Everything Connects, but Not Everything Goes.” In *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*, 11–22. New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001.
- Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Freedman, Carl. “A Note on Marxism and Fantasy.” *Historical Materialism* 10, no. 4 (2002): 261–271.
- Huehls, Mitchum. *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- . “The Post-Theory Theory Novel.” *Contemporary Literature* 56, no. 2 (2015): 280–310.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Justice, Daniel Heath. *Dreyd*. Warton, Ont.: Kegedonce Press, 2007.
- . “Rhetorics of Recognition.” *The Kenyon Review* 32, no. 1 (2010): 236–61.
- Latour, Bruno. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- . “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–248.
- Levinson, Marjorie. “Posthumous Critique.” In *In near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century*, edited by Nicholas B. Dirks, 257–94. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- Mendlesohn, Farah, and Edward James. *A Short History of Fantasy*. London: Middlesex University Press, 2009.
- Smith, Rachel Greenwald. *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Tolkien, JRR. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965.
- . *The Return of the King*. New York: Ballantine, 1965.
- . *The Two Towers: Being the Second Part of The Lord of the Rings*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965.
- . *Tree and Leaf*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1964.
- Vizenor, Gerald Robert. *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*. The Abraham Lincoln Lecture Series. Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1998.
- Vu, Ryan. “Fantasy After Representation: D&D, Game of Thrones, and Postmodern World-Building.” *Extrapolation* 58, no. 2–3 (2017): 274–301.
- Wolfe, Gary K. “Malbolge, or the Ordnance of Genre.” *Conjunctions* 39 (2002): 405–19.
- Young, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*. New York; London: Routledge, 2016.

- 1 John Clute and John Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 899.
- 2 Clute and Grant, 900.
- 3 Marjorie Levinson, "Posthumous Critique," in *In near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 272.
- 4 Levinson, 277.
- 5 Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 12.
- 6 Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 21–22.
- 7 JRR Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), 307.
- 8 Daniel Heath Justice, *Dreyd* (Warton, Ont.: Kegedonce Press, 2007), 84.
- 9 Daniel Heath Justice, "Rhetorics of Recognition," *The Keyond Review* 32, no. 1 (2010): 245.
- 10 Jameson, 98–99.
- 11 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 95–96.