



# Notes Towards Gritty Fantasy Medievalism, Temporality, and Worldbuilding

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*Abstract:* This article discusses gritty fantasy, a fantasy subgenre, which was established in the early 2000s and has since gained a lot of traction. In previous research, gritty fantasy has often been understood as a deconstructive form of fantasy that draws on the barbaric Middle Ages and subverts fantasy tropes as a reaction against earlier forms of popular fantasy. I examine, rather, the genre's relation to the medieval and its depictions of power. Drawing on queer temporality and theories on fantasy literature and worldbuilding (Mendlsohn; Roine), I approach gritty fantasy first and foremost as a form of fantasy literature, placing it within the context of speculative fiction and asking what it does as a fantastic literature.

*Keywords:* gritty fantasy, medievalism, queer temporality, speculative fiction

Gritty fantasy, also known as grimdark, emerged as a major turn in popular epic fantasy in the early 2000s. Taking inspiration from works like Glen Cook's *The Black Company* (1984) and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–), gritty fantasy exploded as a new wave of epic fantasy fiction with authors like Joe Abercrombie, R. Scott Bakker, and Richard Morgan. In short, gritty fantasy reacts against earlier forms of mass market, post-Tolkienian fantasy and deconstructs conventional fantasy tropes, such as good vs. evil morality and nostalgic medievalism, often through emphasizing the brutality of the pseudo-medieval fantasy world and the toll it takes on the people living in such “historical” circumstances. Among fans, discussions on what gritty fantasy is, what it means, and its relation to genres of speculative fiction has abounded, but it has received less critical, academic attention. Research has been

primarily focused on the idea of the barbaric medieval and its implications for popular understandings of history (Larrington; Polack; Carroll), race and Eurocentrism in fantasy literature (Young), or the deconstruction of post-Tolkienian fantasy tropes (Sedlmayr; Petzold). These are important contributions, but research on medievalism has tended not to take gritty fantasy into account primarily as fantasy, while research on the deconstruction of fantasy tropes has focused rather narrowly on gritty fantasy's relation to previous fantasy texts. In this article, I want to consider gritty fantasy foremost *as fantasy*, looking not only at the ideas of history it makes use of or how it interacts with certain past works of fantasy, but considering, instead, how we can understand it as an important and popular subset of contemporary speculative fiction. More specifically, I examine gritty fantasy in relation to its representations of power and power structures, arguing that gritty fantasy makes the idea of power meaningful in specific ways.

In the following, I present gritty fantasy in relation to earlier research on fantasy literature, most notably Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) and narratologist Hanna Riikka Roine's work (2016) on the notion of speculative fiction as means of providing a specific literary framework for making sense of the world through the practices of worldbuilding and literalisation of metaphor. My aim is to contribute research to what Steven Erikson has called the "gaping hole in the middle" of fantasy research (Erikson 5; see also Young 3) – that is, epic fantasy – by reading contemporary gritty fantasy through theories of speculative fiction, medievalism, and queer temporality.

## Gritty Fantasy

Gritty fantasy is a subset of what today is often referred to as epic fantasy, which Brian Stableford defines as commercialised fantasy that mimics J.R.R. Tolkien's use of a secondary fantasy world and draws inspiration from the epics: "the primary model of commodified fantasy retains and exemplifies many of the pretensions as well as the narrative formula of the epic .... they gradually build up detailed historical and geographical images of secondary worlds, within which elaborate hero myths are constructed" (Stableford 130–31). Gritty fantasy has generally been understood in terms of its focus on grit, violence, nihilism, and masculinity as well as its deconstructive approach to the mass market form of popular fantasy that followed the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* – a subgenre often referred to as post-Tolkienian fantasy. Examples of well-known authors of the genre include Robert Jordan, David Eddings, Robin Hobb, and Terry Brooks. Adam Roberts defines gritty fantasy as

the standard way of referring to fantasies that turn their backs on the more uplifting, Pre-Raphaelite visions of idealized medievaliana, and instead stress how nasty, brutish, short, and, er, dark life back then 'really' was. [It] has very little to do with actual historical re-imagining and everything to do with a sense that our present world is a cynical, disillusioned ultraviolent place.  
(Roberts 39)

Helen Young understands gritty fantasy as "marked by low-levels of magic, high-levels of violence, in-depth character development, and medievalist

worlds that are ‘if not realistic, at least have pretensions to realism’ in their depictions of rain, blood, and mud” (Young 63). She prefers “gritty” to “grimdark” since she understands grit as fundamental to the subgenre (83). I use “gritty fantasy” to signal that I understand it as a broader shift in popular fantasy heralded by certain authors – such as the aforementioned Abercrombie, Bakker, and Morgan – but not limited to them. Rather, I conceptualise gritty fantasy as a wider trend that gained foothold through the early grimdark authors, but has now been disseminated into a standard, recurring part of contemporary epic fantasy.

The initial wave of gritty fantasy authors was male-dominated and often criticised for being misogynistic and for perpetuating racist and Eurocentric understandings of the medieval (see Young). However, recent noteworthy gritty fantasy works have been feminist, queer and/or postcolonial in theme, and written by authors like Kameron Hurley, Seth Dickinson, R. F. Kuang, and C. L. Clark. These more recent texts have emphasised similar themes of disillusionment, violence, and powerlessness as the earlier examples, but focused instead on female, queer, and non-Eurocentric perspectives as well as the historical oppression of these groups. In this article, however, I am more interested in the similarities between these two waves. I discuss gritty fantasy in a broader sense, but take a closer look at Abercrombie’s *First Law* novels (2006–2021) and Dickinson’s *The Masquerade* (2016–) as examples. I have chosen these texts because they have helped me to elucidate my thoughts on gritty fantasy most clearly. Furthermore, I believe they offer interesting individual case studies of the subgenre while also providing access to its more general patterns.

As we can see from the definitions of gritty fantasy, some of the most central features of the subgenre include a turn away from the post-Tolkienian fantasy as well as a particular relation to the medieval, which entails not only replacing the romantic medieval with the barbaric medieval (cf. Eco), but also in insisting on the “realism” of the latter. In other words, the relationship to the past and the medieval is central, but needs, I argue, to be understood in a more nuanced way than simply as an example of popular history. As Roberts writes, gritty fantasy is not really about the past, but rather about the (disillusioned) now (39). In order to read the temporality of gritty fantasy, I turn to queer perspectives on time and history, or queer temporality.

## Queer Temporality, Medievalism, and Worldbuilding

Queer temporality is a growing field of research that attempts to grapple with and deconstruct normative understandings of time and history. Foundational to the field is Michel Foucault’s genealogical approach, which stresses the construction of history and its relation to the present – in opposition to a view of the past as something given and settled – and challenges the idea of history as progressive and linear. Queer theorists have been particularly interested in this denaturalization of the linearity and supposed progression of Western history as well as in Foucault’s own affective relation to history. Through queer affect theory, scholars like Elizabeth Freeman and Heather Love have moved towards regarding history as an affective endeavour that is just as much about the present as it is about the past, while also queering our relation to history

and the past. Literary historian Carolyn Dinshaw has been interested in precisely the relation between queer temporality and the medieval as well as Foucault's use of the medieval. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault operationalises a distinction between medieval and modern in order to understand and illustrate changes in the operation of power and knowledge over time. In Foucault's writings on sexuality, Dinshaw writes, the medieval functions at once as "a period that produces our modernity, and as a period quite separate and different from our own" (200; cf. Eco). She points to a "utopian ... elegiac ... nostalgic" (200) note in Foucault's use of the medieval and argues that Foucault is "fictioning history" (205) as part of his radical project in the present for the future.

In "Retrophilia and the Desire for the Past", gender scholar Kristina Fjelkestam argues, drawing on queer temporality, that Western culture is obsessed with "touching" or getting close to the past, as evidenced by the current massive interest in historical fiction, the focus on writing forth lost histories (such as queer history or 'herstory'), and discussions about what should be remembered and how (Fjelkestam 10–11). She understands this desire for the past to be not only about history itself, but sees it as something that responds to a desire in the present for a better or different future.

Simply put, gritty fantasy medievalism can be understood in Umberto Eco's terms as a turn from the "Middle Ages of *Romanticism*" to the "Middle Ages as a *barbaric age*" (Eco 69, original italics). Most research on gritty fantasy has focused on this shift, in particular on questions of historical realism and what these barbaric fantasy worlds have to say about contemporary understandings and uses of the Middle Ages (Larrington; Polack; Young; Carroll). Drawing on queer-theoretical approaches to time and history, which instead stress the use of and desire for history in the present, I show that the medievalism of gritty fantasy cannot only be understood as a recourse to the past, but rather as a way of grappling with the present. Gritty fantasy needs to be contextualised as a subgenre of fantasy and speculative fiction, not only as a form of literature that seeks to represent history. To do so, I discuss the medieval in gritty fantasy primarily in terms of worldbuilding and temporality, rather than in terms of uses of history or the medieval. Here, I rely on Roine's understanding of worldbuilding as a central rhetorical practice of speculative fiction.

Roine's argument is grounded in an understanding of worldbuilding as a narratological element that is specific to speculative fiction and distinct from plot. According to her, "speculative fiction, in particular, relies on literalisation of metaphorical expressions" (Roine 18), which means that

The true power of speculative fiction lies not in the invention of a speculative premise or speculative beings, but in the way the abstract premise (or a model of world) is concretised in the framework built for working it through. In this, it is a form of communicating ideas, or bringing new ideas up for discussion. .... I see speculative worldbuilding as a way of turning abstract and general thought experiments (or ideas) into a particular and therefore communicable form. (Roine 16, 19)

Referencing Brian McHale, Roine understands the speculative world as a "scale-model", a world that is set up in certain ways to work through certain

problems, discussions, or ideas. Here, “worldbuilding is a distinct way of putting the user’s imagination at work. From a rhetorical viewpoint, it offers a specific way for emphasising ideas” (Roine 31). Speculative fiction is not a way to construct new information about the real world, but rather, it works to make this information meaningful in specific ways, as related to the specific form of the speculative premise. Like the epic and the fairytale, speculative fiction is more concerned with the static and eternal, rather than the mundane or the everyday. Meaning is conveyed through the construction of a world, rather than, as more commonly in the novel, the subjective experiences of characters (cf. Bakhtin). Roine stresses that she is not “suggesting that speculative fiction would expand our knowledge of the mundane reality as such but rather our meaning-making processes” (Roine 160). In other words, speculative fiction is a particular literary way of conveying meaning through the rhetorical practice of worldbuilding. It is through worldbuilding and the way the narrative and the world interact as much as through the narrative progression and characterization (cf. Mendlesohn 2008) that speculative fiction works through ideas, by the means of literalising the metaphorical. In other words, what I analyse here is how the medieval and temporality, as defined by my queer-theoretical perspective, function in the worldbuilding of gritty fantasy more generally.

## The Mode and Temporality of Gritty Fantasy

In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Mendlesohn categorises four modes of the fantastic, in addition to the fifth category of “The Irregulars”. The modes of portal-quest fantasy and immersive fantasy are the most relevant to epic fantasy and to my discussion here. According to Mendlesohn, these modes have not only narrative but also ideological effects (Mendlesohn 17). The portal-quest and immersive fantasies also have very different temporalities, and thus, different relationships to the medieval.

The portal-quest fantasy is the most classic form of fantasy stories: a character steps through a portal into another world, either between worlds or out into the secondary fantasy world, and goes on a quest to save that world, most commonly by restoring the status quo through vanquishing an evil opponent and reinstalling a rightful sovereign. According to Mendlesohn, time and history are static and unchanging in the portal-quest fantasy – knowledge of the world and its history is “downloaded” to the reader via the protagonist, from sources that admit no variations or alternatives. The future is equally unchanging: the restoration of the world is a return to a status quo found in the past. The world is thus stuck in a loop, or rather, frozen in place completely outside the movement of history (6–16).

The immersive fantasy, on the other hand, “is a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world .... The immersive fantasy must take no quarter: it must assume that the reader is as much part of the world as are those being read about” (59). The immersive fantasy results in a more complex and antagonistic fantasy world where different interpretations of the world may exist at once. Mendlesohn compares it to the worldbuilding of science fiction. Compared to the portal-quest fantasy, it has a different relation to temporality. “Where the portal-quest fantasies emphasized recognition and

healing, the restoration of the grandeur of previous days, the immersive fantasies are overwhelmingly concerned with the entropy of the world” (60–61). Mendlesohn quotes a discussion with critic John Clute who adds, “in an immersive fantasy, what is storyable is not the discovery of the world (in which we are immersed) but its loss” (ibid.). Immersive fantasies are not frozen in time, but like the portal-quest fantasy, they are in some sense oriented towards the past and thus “rarely tell of building, because building is a venture into the unknown. Instead they start with what is and watch it crumble” (113).

While gritty fantasy has elements of the portal-quest fantasy, of characters moving from the well-known into the unknown, it is predominately set in the immersive mode, with its characters firmly immersed in their settings. As in science fiction, the reader has to put the world together with the help of contextual clues, rather than through the “guidebook” narrative of the portal-quest fantasy (cf. Jones 2006). What we see in gritty fantasy is, as Mendlesohn writes, the world as it is known crumbling away. What is noteworthy about this is that in gritty fantasy, the crumbling away of the world is directed *towards* a very specific temporal location. In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. writes of the futuristic temporality of science fiction: “The SF novum trails its future behind it, transforming the reader’s present from just another moment continuous with the past into the prehistory of the future. In that move it also initiates a new past” (81). According to him, science fiction at once constructs a vision of the future and, implicitly, the history of that future – the history which has led to the science-fictional now. Unlike science fiction, fantasy – particularly epic fantasy – has generally had very little temporal continuity with the present. As Mendlesohn shows, the time of the portal-quest fantasy is that of a static once-upon-a-time-temporality that places the unchanging fantasy world outside history. In nihilistic gritty fantasy, however, the world is crumbling away, but this entropy is not, I argue, directed foremost at the loss of a glorious past, which Mendlesohn describes to be typical for the immersive fantasy. Gritty fantasy, rather, constructs a temporality that lies closer to that of science fiction. If a science fictional text “trails its future behind it”, gritty fantasy *anticipates its future* – that is, the present – *before it*, bringing the contrast between the past and the future/present into focus through worldbuilding.

## Gritty Fantasy Worldbuilding

In Abercrombie’s *First Law* novels, the reader starts off in a typical medievalist fantasy world, but during the course of the story, the fantasy world moves towards an industrialist, capitalist society, which is perhaps best illustrated by the cover of the penultimate novel *The Trouble With Peace* (2020). It depicts the pommel of a richly decorated sword against a background of factory chimneys spewing black smoke. While the first novel, *The Blade Itself*, opens with an epigraph from *The Odyssey* – “The blade itself incites to deeds of violence” (*The Blade* 5) – *The Trouble With Peace* instead opens with Nietzsche: “In times of peace, the warlike man attacks himself” (*The Trouble* 1). This marks a clear change from the time of the epic to the time of modernity. The world of gritty fantasy is not crumbling away from a glorious past to which it struggles to return; rather, it is crumbling *towards* the present, irrevocably

progressing towards the horrors of industrial capitalism. This is hardly new for fantasy. Kim Gordon understands what she calls fantastic medievalism precisely as a critique of Western late modernity: many stories of epic fantasy work through the creation of an Edenic, escapist medieval realm where “good and evil are clearly delineated” (Gordon 2). The horrors of industrialism, as opposed to the pastoral idyll of the medieval, goes back to Tolkien and has played a large part in fantasy medievalism since. In gritty fantasy, this “anti-modern’ impetus” (3) plays out on the level of the temporality of worldbuilding, of the realm moving from a “medieval” past towards an irrevocable future. In gritty fantasy, the use of the medieval doesn’t separate the fantasy world from the present. Rather, it is a medievalism where, in the words of Eco, “all the problems of the Western world emerged ... Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate)” (Eco 64). In gritty fantasy, it is also often precisely the economy that becomes not only representative of modernity, but also the main villain in a subgenre where supposedly everyone is a villain.

In *The First Law*, this is best represented by the character of Bayaz, the antagonist of the series. Unlike in post-Tolkienian fantasy, Bayaz is not an evil, dark lord. He is a wizard (an obvious deconstruction of the Gandalf-like figure), a manipulative mastermind that gains control of the world and its power players through his bank, Valiant & Balk, as well as economic and other forms of leverage. For Gerold Sedlmayr, Bayaz represents a shift in the portrayal of power in epic fantasy, which ties in with Abercrombie’s deconstruction of traditional fantasy.

What Bayaz stands for [is] a power that is both invisible – you rarely become aware of the strings around your wrists – and decidedly material. His actions illustrate, to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, “the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of regulatory power” ... the idea of power that the wizard Bayaz incorporates is one that strictly depends on an economics of power that is both beyond traditional moral distinctions and beyond the comprehension of the individual *actant*. (Sedlmayr 172, original italics)

Bayaz is a character that lies beyond the traditional good vs. evil morality of fantasy and represents power not as absolute nor as something that can be found in any individual, but rather, power as regulatory – what Foucault refers to as disciplinary power (*Discipline and Punish*). Where post-Tolkienian fantasy has tended to portray and make meaningful not only the world itself (Mendlesohn) but also power in absolute terms – as embodied in the figure of the king, the noble hero, the mighty magician, or the strong body of the warrior – a different conceptualization of power is central to gritty fantasy.

Rather than understanding the use of the medieval in gritty fantasy as a different sort of medievalism compared to earlier fantasy, I want to emphasise the *contrast between the medieval and the present* as central in the texts and their worldbuilding. In a corollary to how Foucault used the distinction between the medieval and modern to describe the formation of disciplinary power, gritty fantasy enacts the difference between the alterity of the pastness of the medieval and the familiarity of present on the level of worldbuilding. Through its use of a pseudo-medieval world moving towards the future and the contrasting representations of power involved in these two worlds (the absolute

power represented by kingdoms, empires, monarchs, warriors, and heroes *contra* the disciplinary, less visible forms of power represented by Bayaz and the economy), gritty fantasy makes power meaningful in different ways in its worldbuilding. In other words, gritty fantasy works to make different forms of systemic power meaningful in a very particular way. Through the temporality of the fantasy world, the differences between power as absolute and as something enacted directly upon the body *versus* power as disciplinary and something productive is made visible. Following Roine, I understand gritty fantasy worlds as a scale-models that work through and contrast different understandings of power, not foremost as a comment on the historical development of power and subjectivation, but rather, in a way that engages with questions and anxieties regarding agency, self-determination, and sovereignty in the present moment.

## **Deconstructing the Fantasy Hero(ine): Fantasies of Sovereignty**

The overarching theme in Abercrombie's work is the futility of change and the impossibility of agency, which is played out through his deconstruction of the fantasy hero (Sedlmayr; Petzold). Most of his characters are larger-than-life figures (kings, warriors, master swordsmen), but unlike the righteous, triumphant heroes of the post-Tolkienian fantasy, their actions are all ultimately circumscribed by their circumstances – or by Bayaz's manipulation representing the unseen force of disciplinary power (Sedlmayr 172). These themes recur in much of gritty fantasy, not in the least in feminist, queer and postcolonial reworkings of the subgenre. Works like Dickinson's *The Masquerade* (2015–), Kuang's *Poppy War* trilogy (2018–2020), Hurley's *Worldbreaker Saga* (2014–2019), and C. L. Clark's *The Unbroken* (2021) all deal precisely with the question of systemic power and (heroic) agency: a powerful, special protagonist comes up against systems of power they cannot overcome, and being righteous and willing to sacrifice for a cause is not enough to change the world.

This is perhaps most clearly exemplified by *The Masquerade*, where protagonist Baru Cormorant is trying to climb the technocratic ranks of the colonial power Falcrest, in order to topple the empire from within. Throughout the series she agonises over whether she can oppose the very system that has, not only through the violent occupation of her homeland but also through such measures as education, medicine, and trade, created her. By playing Falcrest's game, she seeks to gain enough power to dismantle the empire, which means not only advancing through its oppressive system, but also becoming an agent of it. Elsewhere (Bark Persson) I have argued that *The Masquerade* seems to pose the question of whether a fantasy world and story that is based around absolute rather than disciplinary power can function as fantasy. Particularly salient is the way Baru's moral dilemma paralyses her within the text. Instead, it is through her lover, the duchess and swordswoman, Tain Hu, that Baru is capable of acting. Hu is described as physically strong and a fearsome fighter and leader. Next to the technocrat Baru, who has risen to her position through her exceptional head for numbers, Hu represents the very feudal system of



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absolute power that Falcrest – a power, like Bayaz, of economy and social measures – comes to oppose in the text.

Reading the fantasy heroine, Jane Tolmie argues that her main adventure is patriarchy; that is, the traditional heroine works to overcome patriarchy on her own terms by and for herself. She does not affect change, but rather challenges the patriarchal norms, which dictate that she is good for nothing but childbearing and embroidery, by forcefully choosing her own way, often as a warrior (Tolmie 151, 155). The main struggle for the heroines of Dickinson, Kuang, Hurley, and Clark, by contrast, is not patriarchy opposing them on their path towards empowerment, but rather, the questions of what empowerment means, what it costs, and whether it is even possible to achieve. Whereas older fantasy heroines could fight their way to freedom with a sword, there is seemingly no way out of the constraints of systemic power for Baru and the rest. Power is no longer absolute and, therefore, it becomes impossible to stand outside of it.

Sedlmayr understands *The First Law* to be defined by circularity; there is “no proper development” within the text (Sedlmayr 176). He takes the character Glokta, a disillusioned torturer, as an example, writing that the only thing that changes about him throughout the trilogy is that he gains an even more disillusioned view of “the workings of this kind of world – a thoroughly modern world” (ibid.). Not only do the (anti-)heroes of gritty fantasy fail to triumph over evil, whatever that may be, but the only development they are provided is an insight into the limits of their agency and the hopelessness of bettering the world or even their own circumstances. Furthermore, this lesson is intimately tied to the threatening spectre of modernity. Coming up against the way the world works means understanding the world as changing into the future/present. As I understand it, in these texts, the experience of subjecthood and the invi(nc/s)ibility of power typical of late modernity or neoliberalism are dramatised on the level of temporality and worldbuilding.

In “Cutting Off The King’s Head: The Self-Disciplining Fantasy of Neoliberal Sovereignty”, Peter Bloom argues that neoliberalism, defined here as a change from the traditional rule of the state towards the self-disciplining of subjects in accordance to a “rational” market logic (9), is not a turn away from the idea of sovereignty, but rather, it builds from the affective fantasy of sovereignty. “The appeal of a sovereign fantasy lies in its promise of granting individuals a sense of ‘sovereign’ agency perceived to be lacking in their existence as ‘agency-less’ disciplinary subjects of neoliberalism”, he writes (10). Bloom understands neoliberal subjectivity to be formed in a system where power is decentralised and, thus, both everywhere and nowhere, giving rise to the fantasy of sovereignty. Furthermore, this fantasy is generally represented by charismatic, powerful, “self-made” people, like rich entrepreneurs or strong leaders: “the perceived presence of sovereignty provides a sense of ‘self’ to neoliberalism, personalizing power and allowing it to ‘make sense’ as more than just a heterogeneous collection of regulative norms and social technologies” (18).

Following Roine’s understanding of speculative worldbuilding as a specific rhetorical practice for working through or modelling problems, gritty fantasy worlds offer an interesting take on the fantasy of sovereignty, which is played out in the worldbuilding and through (anti-)heroes. I see these texts as attempts to grapple with the “desire for sovereignty” (Bloom 24), as they focus

on the circumcision of the heroes' agency and ability to act in response to disciplinary forms of power, even if this form of power always has to be embodied in a character to make sense. In *The First Law*, it is embodied through the character of Bayaz and in *The Masquerade* through Baru's mentor and antagonist Itinerant, in addition to which the supposedly dispersed power of the empire's throne is enacted through a powerful cabal of secret agents. Paradoxically, gritty fantasy simultaneously works through the anxieties of being an "agency-less" subject under neoliberalist system while also providing an affective fantasy of sovereignty by embodying neoliberal disciplinary power in distinct figures that can be, if not ultimately defeated, at least made visible and marked as villains.

## Conclusion

Science fiction has long been recognised as a literary tool for grappling with and making sense of late modernity (e.g., Haraway; Jameson), for dealing with the here and now and anticipating how it extends into the future (Csicsery-Ronay Jr.). Fantasy, on the other hand, has mainly been understood in terms of nostalgia, escapism, and backwardness (Miéville). This has been especially true for critical accounts of gritty fantasy medievalism, which is often based on fantasies of a white European past and traditional gender relations (Young; see also Kaufman). It is important to acknowledge that the images of the past presented by gritty fantasy are also used to mobilise racist and sexist imaginaries in the present, by manufacturing dreams of a past where racial homogeneity was the status quo and "men were men and women women". At the same time, gritty fantasy is a popular and widely read subgenre that also seems to readily lend itself to queer, feminist, and post-colonial reworkings, as evidenced by the works of Dickinson, Kuang, Hurley, and Clark.

The appeal of gritty fantasy cannot, in other words, be understood only in terms of reactionary nostalgia, even if this certainly plays a part. I argue that gritty fantasy might also provide specific ways of envisioning and working through the concepts of power and agency, and interrogating the relationship between these concepts in the here and now where power is supposedly nowhere and everywhere. The worldbuilding of gritty fantasy works through the dichotomies of the medieval/the modern, absolute/disciplinary power, and agency/powerlessness. It is also triangulated through the construction of past/present/future where the medieval past represents alterity *as well as* linearity in relation to the present, which, in turn, comes to represent an undesirable future. This temporality is central to understanding these texts – not foremost as a way of popularising history, but as attempts to make sense of historic changes and their relations to the present in particular ways. In this way, gritty fantasy functions as something of a double-edged sword. It offers up affective fantasies of sovereignty through its empowered heroes as well as through incarnating supposedly disseminated, invisible forms of power in specific (villainous) characters, making them reassuringly concrete and possible to oppose. At the same time, it is precisely this literalisation of metaphor (Roine) that also offers the possibility to symbolically and critically conceptualise systemic and disciplinary forms of power in the here and now

where power is increasingly disseminated and difficult to grasp and comprehend.

If science fiction has traditionally supplied a vocabulary for discussing and grappling with phenomena like technological change, futurity and progress, networking and globalism, and the corrosion of supposedly given categories like the natural, the body, the subject, the artificial, and the organic, epic fantasy may in parallel turn to the past, and offer a vocabulary for understanding time and historic change in a neoliberal now, where the future is growing increasingly unstable and undesirable.

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