



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Crisis of Representation and Speculative
Mimesis: Rethinking Relations Between
Fiction and Reality in 21st-century Fantasy
Storytelling*

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Kraatila, Elise. *The Crisis of Representation and Speculative Mimesis: Rethinking Relations Between Fiction and Reality in 21st-century Fantasy Storytelling*. Tampere University, 2021. ISBN 978-952-03-2159-8.

What is the speculative use of fantasy – and why is fantasy growing in popularity at the very same moment as ‘the real world’ is understood to be increasingly ungraspable? Those are the major questions underpinning Elise Kraatila’s dissertation on contemporary fantasy storytelling in the ‘post-truth’ age. The dissertation, making contributions to the field of narratology and fantasy studies, asks what the current fantasy boom indicates in Western culture, if and how the speculative mode of fantasy tackles the ongoing crisis of representation, and how the concept of literary mimesis may be reconsidered in relation to fantasy storytelling.

The dissertation consists of two main parts, with the first serving to recontextualize the history of fantasy as a popular sibling genre to postmodernism, of sorts. Kraatila lays out a story of Western literary history and its changing relationship to reality via modernism, postmodernism, and whatever is now emerging – call it post-postmodernism or metamodernism. While she carefully notes that this periodization is a particular story in itself – a critical tool to make sense of these shifting developments rather than the truth writ in stone – her discussion reframes the development of fantasy as a modern genre by arguing that its emergence responds to much the same set of cultural

concerns that gave birth to postmodernism and later to metamodernism. In this rereading of the history of fantasy, she returns to three older major works – *The Lord of the Rings*, *Earthsea*, and *Discworld* – all of which are highly metafictional.

The centrality of metafictional elements returns in the second part, in which Kraatila considers what she calls speculative mimesis as central to understanding fantasy. In doing so, she also examines the challenge and, perhaps, solutions speculative mimesis may offer for the crisis of representation. Here, Kraatila reads Lev Grossman’s *The Magicians* trilogy, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*, N. K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth*, and Joe Abercrombie’s *The Shattered Sea*. These texts are chosen as a diverse and representative sample of modern-day fantasy that points to important current tendencies: “the mainstream prestige the genre is slowly gaining, the increasing generic self-awareness of fantasy works, and the commitment [...] to address burning present-day political and societal issues like global inequality and climate change” (27).

Kraatila’s reading centers on fantasy worldbuilding; in line with other researchers who have examined the narratology of speculative fiction, she considers the speculative fantasy world an imaginary artefact that is obvious in its fictionality and that readers interact with as such. Thus, Kraatila’s research is part of an ongoing attempt to grapple with speculative storytelling beyond a simple estranging or unnatural ‘break with reality,’ and she considers the meaningfulness of these worlds as obvious literary artefacts. As such, the dissertation provides an important contribution to this line of thinking that is specifically focused on fantasy.

In the second part of her dissertation, Kraatila is primarily concerned with how fantasy is read. Here she looks more closely at several important characteristics of fantasy literature: what she here coins as *global-scale perspective-taking*, metafictional aspects of fantasy, and the instrumentality and playfulness of fantasy world creation. Fantasy, according to Kraatila, privileges the global over the close and personal, often deals explicitly with the operations of narrative as a theme, and revels in the artificiality of its constructed worlds. She concludes that

by foregrounding the world-creating side of its mimetic operations, laying bare its own artifice and encouraging the reader to engage in playful freeform speculation, fantasy fiction can show us how to read any kind of fiction as fiction – or how to approach mimesis as a matter of dynamic and creative interpretation, rather than static showing. (326, italics in original)

In short, the creation of fantasy worlds and the metafictional aspects thereof showcase world-building as a critical tool that makes it possible to partake in, shape consensus of, and affect reality. Far from the static mimesis of modernism or the detached deconstruction of postmodernism, fantasy storytelling simultaneously lays bare the constructed nature of world-making and the necessity of its function – in fantasy fiction and beyond.

At this point, however, the dissertation shows a curious lack of engagement with grimdark – in particular the reality claims made by certain texts, authors and fans – despite the close reading of Abercrombie. Kraatila understands the way fantasy can discuss the global-historical at a remove due

to its conspicuous artificiality as central to her analysis. While I agree with this, many fans of fantasy medievalism would not, and they would insist on medieval elements in fantasy as reflective of historical reality for specific political reasons. A discussion of research, such as Helen Young's, on Eurocentrism and colonialism in popular fantasy would, in my opinion, have further developed the argument about how fantasy is read and used today in important ways.

Overall, however, the dissertation makes important contributions to the field of fantasy research by making use of and reworking previous critical engagements with fantasy literature as well as by aligning the narratological analysis with previous research on speculative fiction and its narrative affordances. It is a solid work that showcases the importance of grappling with fantasy in its various forms in the 21st century, and it also sheds light on what makes fantasy so compelling at this particular moment in time.

Biography: Anna Bark Persson is a postdoctoral researcher in English at Umeå University, Sweden. Her research interests include queer perspectives on speculative fiction, masculinity, and queer readings and temporality. She recently defended her thesis on Vikings, embodiment, sexuality, and masculinity in gritty fantasy literature and is currently working on a project about feminist and queer speculative visions of Mars and space exploration.