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Unrealism: critical reflections in popular genre

Worldweave

> The fact of the Weird is the fact that the worldweave is ripped and unfinished. Moth-eaten, ill-made. And that through the little tears, from behind the ragged
>
> edges
>
> , things are looking at us. (Miéville 2011, 1115)

Weird fiction is distinguished by its evocations of horror and through its technical differences from other popular genres. Yet it remains, in the generic differences it articulates, connected to other modes of fiction and, in its production of horrifying effects, at odds with familiar realities. The composite "worldweave" serves as a reminder that the web of words, things, feelings, customs and institutions constituting reality is neither as secure nor as unified as practical realism would have it. Weird fiction's horror exposes holes in the representation and fabric of everyday existence: it is neither "holy" nor whole but "hole-y" (Miéville 2011, 1115). Through tears in life's fabric, it imagines further horrors in the object-gaze of "that a-human(ist) totality that once seen can't be unseen" (Noys and Murphy 2016, 200). Horror shreds sense, order and meaning, slashing the threads coordinating self, other, object, reality and reason. The image of the worldweave, moreover, illuminates other generic forms and effects. The uncanny, for instance, as a staple effect of gothic anxieties and fantastic hesitations, registers breaches in the fabric of things: in gothic fiction reality-testing is briefly disarrayed by irruptions of strange energies; in fantasy, tears enable departures from orders of

probability and rationality. While gothic gently recoils, resetting its self against tremors of haunting and hallucination, forms of fantasy find opportunities in the torn fabric, gaps permitting passage to other worlds and dimensions.

“Unrealism”, marked by negativity, interruption and discontinuity, registers tears in the fabric of generic and social realities. Neither a genre in itself nor a genre-specific property, it discloses – amid fictional genres (such as romance, horror or fantasy) considered inimical to protocols of realism and naturalised habits of reality – an insubordinate disposition towards discrete and distinct forms. It acknowledges the interdependence of generic differentiations (including realism) as part of a tense and open system of classification and, further, interferes with cultural constructions of reality. From interrogations of aesthetic hierarchies and evaluations, to disturbances in the patterns of composition, expectation and reception prescribed by genre, unrealism probes the gaps and absences occluded by modes of representation whose power and effect depends upon claims of secure and unified reality. Rereading fantastic fiction as a subversive mode that (contra Todorovian structuralism) engages social and historical reserves, Rosemary Jackson notes how its “unreality” differentially interrogates the security of categories of the real and the unified, nostalgic visions of totalising, moral and hierarchical forms of fantasy (she cites C S Lewis and J R R Tolkien as examples) (1981, 2). Distinguishing differential relations of representation, Jackson’s argument draws on the “negative subjunctivity” with which Joanna Russ elaborates fantasy’s refusal and violation of the rules of reality (1995, 15-26). Inverting negative relations and activating negations in reciprocal differentiations of fiction and reality, the “un” of “unrealism” condenses negativities of generic and cultural subordination and discloses their ungrounded and incomplete structures of articulation. Unrealism’s negations are not, however, resolved in a single political view or unified position. Suspicious of the rules informing composition and expectation, especially those prescribing a single or immersive

perspective, unrealism also eschews occlusions of representational artifice undertaken in the interests of establishing authority on the basis of naturalised reality. Instead, prompting critical, interrogative reading, unrealism employs techniques of reflexivity, juxtaposition, discontinuity and interruption. Describing his use of "portal fantasies", M John Harrison admits a significant departure from standard practice: access to fantasy's "imaginary country" is blocked (Bould 2005, 329). Immersion is interrupted in line with other techniques of discontinuity (Varn and Ragahendra 2016, np). These strategies form part of a wider critique of the "fantasy culture" purveyed by neoliberalism and consumerism (Mathew 2002, np). Fantasy – fictional and real – is interrogated in other modes. The playful narrative juxtapositions of Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992), for example, opposes generic Victorian gothic fantasy (as the gloomy material instantiation and occlusion of commodity culture across a reality of industrial exploitation) to a more sympathetic and historically credible socialist realism. But, via a preliminary frame using a postmodernised discovered manuscript trope, the novel refuses established political opposition in a textual reflection that further entangles and interrogates relations between, and veracities of, fictional and historical discourse. Drawing attention to, rather than occluding, artifices of aesthetic and political representation, the reflexivity of the text invites active critical reading.

Unrealism, then, can be distinguished as a writerly mode of narrative interruption that appears in and across popular forms of fiction often categorised as 'unrealistic'. As reflections on genre in genre fiction, moments of unrealism draw attention to the conventions and expectations through which generic boundaries and differences are maintained. Shifting focus and register from plot to form, moreover, has the effect of unsettling habituated patterns of reading and, beyond a particular text, engendering disturbances that trouble the work of genre criticism and challenge the assumptions securing wider (ideological) delineations of fiction and reality. More than the subordinated antithesis of realism, unrealism, in the

argument that follows, is seen to precipitate a wider interrogation of the framing of and the instability between social, aesthetic and political differentiations of fiction, reality and fantasy: deployments of the prefix in Jacques Rancière's political-aesthetic theory and in Sigmund Freud's notions of the unconscious and the uncanny, disclose an extensive and disarming disruption of the underpinnings of social and subjective senses of 'reality'. Similar disruptions manifest themselves in reflections on genre, fiction and reality in writings by M John Harrison, J G Ballard and China Miéville, offering a space to interrogate the naturalised assumptions of political and social existences suffused by media, commerce, and fantasy. As a mode that challenges unified perspectives, however, unrealism is not tied to pre-established positions: though politically indeterminate, Kazuo Ishiguro's literary dystopia remorselessly disarms any single interpretative framework, whether historical, social or realistic.

Surf Noir

In *Nova Swing* (2006), the second of M John Harrison's *Light* trilogy, there is a curious and resonant reflection on an innocuous scene in a quiet bar. A disenchanted detective, taking time to review his ongoing investigation and smoke a pipe, watches a child play on the sandy floor between cane chairs and tables. The youngster is dressed only in a t-shirt with "SURF NOIR" printed on it. The reference, quite likely alluding to the bar ("Café Surf"), prompts wider speculation:

> Meanings – all incongruous – splashed off this like drops of water, as the dead metaphors trapped inside the live one collided and reverberated endlessly and elastically, taking up new positions relative to one another. SURF NOIR, which is a whole new existence; which is a "world" implied in two words, dispelled in an

> instant; which is foam on the appalling multitextual sea we drift on. "Which is probably", Aschemann noted, "the name of an aftershave". (2006, 27-8)

Collisions of connotation and association situate the detective's speculations in a thoroughly postmodern and poststructuralist frame wherein dehiscence from systems of meaning is seen as reflexive froth and marketing fantasies. Though consonant with other themes of the novel – the unfixing of meaning linked to quantum rewritings of the universe and the epochal rupture of economic and financial deregulation – it is anachronistic: recognisably late twentieth-century reflections occur on a distant planet four hundred years in the future. Protagonist and setting (a non-corporate commercial-criminal zone of sleazy entertainments and biotechnological experimentation echoing the "Sprawl" of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* [1984]) imply a near-future cyber-hardboiled social commentary, even though, in grander SF terms, the planet has been constructed by advanced alien species to observe and exploit a massive singularity. The ring of moved or manufactured planets is nicknamed "the Beach" and the singularity's radiation is described as surf, adding to reflexive density. Simultaneously specific and vague, the references – like the club "Tech Noir" named in James Cameron's 1984 movie *The Terminator* – compose an act of self-en-genre-ing: "Surf Noir" constitutes both a reflection in fiction on genre and names itself anew in generic terms.

The elision of retro-topical consideration of genres and settings and retro-tropical concerns with commercial image-making and simulation draws out the extent of the hyper-realities interrogated in Harrison's fiction: in a context of immersion tanks, sentient tattoos and quantum disruptions, questions of that most moveable of feasts called "reality" recur. In the first book of the trilogy, the career path of two local underworld bosses (the "Cray sisters") is plotted as a move from "digitised art retroporn" to various larger criminal schemes. The former, however, inscribes a thoroughly aesthetic perspective on genres of sexual commodification: the Crays specialised in producing "a surface so realistic it seemed to

defamiliarise the sex act into something machine-like and interesting” (2002, 16). The recollection of the erotic-technological collisions of JG Ballard is not accidental since Harrison worked for *New Worlds* (Latham 2005). But formalist self-awareness reframes that commentary on media-technological visions from the 1970s as a matter of technique combining generic repetition and aesthetic commodification in the remaking of credible and desirable realities.

Reflections on form and genre continue. In *Nova Swing*, one popular source entertainment is found in spectacular boxing tournaments involving magnificent and fabulously real protagonists called “cultivars”. As their name suggests they have little relation to any natural reality. They are feats of genetic engineering designed to realise the most striking combinations of an imaginary bestiary: “the cultivars all strutting about, all tusks and tattoos, their erect cocks the size of horses’, the sudden flash of an eight-inch spur, then something slick and ropey levered out and steaming in the shadows” (2006, 84). Marvels of bioscience, they seem to confirm the teratological horrors predicted in Paul Virilio’s discussions of transgenic arts in *Art and Fear* (2000): the thrill-bound death-risk of extreme sports, callously combined with aesthetic hybridisation and realised by technobiology, produces any artificial and monstrous form just because it can (Virilio 2000, 59-61). With cultivars, though quite as fabulous in their actuality, no horror is registered, nor any of the social indictment associated with gladiatorial scenes like those in China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* (2000) where humans are fatally pitted against crude human-machine hybrids and human-insect beings. Pleasures for the privileged and powerful, they crystallize the inequities and brutal penal technologies that prop up vicious social injustice (Miéville 2000, 207).

Evoking neither moral horror, nor political revulsion, nor, indeed, much wonder, the cultivar fights in *Nova Swing* are underwhelming: “despite their vitality – which streamed out of the air like the life force you would expect of a horse – the fighters were less than real, an in-the-

end pointless looping of their personal dreams into parity with some sort of public idea of what a fighter ought to resemble" (2006, 97). Found wanting because nothing is lacking in these fabulous realisations, their hyperreality is situated in a closed circuit of expectation and actualisation. Perfectly realised, these fabulous forms remain unrealistic because they are too complete: fully capturing reality without realism (or vice versa?), they have nothing of the excess or incompletion that anchors a sense of reality. In generic terms, too, formulaic reiterations only lead to habituation and banality. With cultivars (despite visibly throbbing with vital difference), idea and expectation are too congruent: little unpredictability remains to invigorate a strong enough sense of difference to break the event horizon of sameness: "you can claim, and people do, that every fight is different: but it is a difference that works itself out within sameness, so that when you have seen one fight you have truly seen them all" (2006, 94). A paradox of genre appears: perfect form obliterates the hierarchical or serial differences on which it depends. Reflections on generic form – in texts employing the very same form – are not unusual in popular fiction. Eighteenth-century romances, those of Ann Radcliffe notably, abounded with discussions and examples of the dangers of romance reading, sensitive to both didactic and critical concerns. Interplays of fiction and reality staged within romance fiction, of course, can engender the opposite effect: rather than returning romance to social reality, it can further destabilise distinctions, as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) in which the reading of a supernatural romance in a romance compounds its hallucinatory and disturbing ripples.

Matters become more complicated in contexts where the contours of reality are permeated by multiple and rapidly circulating media platforms. The "consensual hallucination" of cyberspace, for instance, renders borders between fiction, fantasy, reality, realism and ideology increasingly fluid (Gibson 1984, 12). But technological developments of post-war culture had already, as JG Ballard noted in his preface to *Crash* (first drafted for the French

edition of 1974 and rewritten in 1995), instantiated a major shift: the coupling of reason and nightmare accompanying a world of sexual freedoms and sated desire, of new technologies, communications and markets, telescopes a narrative of historical linearity so that the future collapses on the present and reverses priorities:

> We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-emptying of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality. (Ballard 1995, xviii)

Given the extent of reversals, it is possible to draw nostalgic conclusions from Ballard's claim and seek a return to a reality grounded in fewer technological or media supplements. But Ballard's account proposes further reversals: reality is no longer to be sought in an external world (that is already the big fiction) but may be detected in smaller, residual form, in an inner domain of fantasy and imagination, "inside our own heads". Even the diminution and relocation of reality as a private, interior and imaginative space barely distinguished from hallucination or madness becomes problematic in the terms set by his novel: reality is to be invented. To follow the reading advocated by Jean Baudrillard, the novel already fully manifests the instantiation of a hyperhomogenized realm of simulations, thereby transcoding distinctions of fiction and reality within a new frame: "in *Crash*, no more fiction or reality, hyperreality abolishes both" (Baudrillard 1994, 60). Any sense of reality (as in his discussion of Disneyland's relation to "real" America) becomes a by-product of simulation (Baudrillard 1994, 13). The perversely visionary aspect of *Crash* accommodates itself to ecstasies of simulation in an imminent future: the narrator ("James Ballard") reflects on "being killed within this huge accumulation of fictions, finding my body marked with the imprint of a hundred television crime serials" (Ballard 1995, 60). Interchangeable and pervasive, the

films, photos, fictions, screens, celebrities, cars and communication systems, place the novel's cult of techno-erotic visionaries on the cusp of a global media absorption. The focus on the wounds, scars, sexual encounters and crashes that – erotically and ecstatically – irreversibly imprint bodies with technology and reconfigure interpersonal relations and perceptions of lived reality through rejuvenating shocks: crashing is an event of both impact and imminence, an event that has already happened and is still to come, charged with all the intensities of the real as encounter, trauma, shock. The real is less an effect of representation (as banal in its circulations as a traffic jam on the Westway) and more an experience of unpredictable and powerful disruption.

Hyperreality has already become an impoverished trope. A recent account of a speculative novel that is both "realist" and based on an impossible, unreal object (Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, 2000) argues that it does not endorse the "tired postmodern agonies bound up with the figure of simulation" (Hansen 2004, 601). Something more disturbing and more banal occurs: it replays the trappings of material – printed, typographical – reality while engaging with the implications of a fully mediated, digital world, thereby confronting the "epistemological hurdles" and "ontological indifference" that succeeds simulation: mediations, multiple, irreferential, have become "so ubiquitous" as "simply to *be* reality". Such a reality, however, is no longer maintained orthographically, not even residually tied to the recording of an event that has happened: digital mediation, extending Ballard's grand fiction, marks "the wholesale substitution of the productive imagination for the registration of the real – the triumph of fiction over documentation" (Hansen 2004, 610). Reality – in a different mode – remains not as capture, representation, reference or registration of now evacuated external or objective worlds but as "projection": the interplay of mediated, interpretative layers prompts "reality affects". Realism, entwined and evoked in media

interrelations, patterns, recognitions and projection, is more a matter of matching than capture or recapture, of imagination and perspective rather than objective record.

Something of the 'Un'

Reality affects overlay reality effects. Fredric Jameson, indeed, reads the latter in terms of affect and intensity (2013, 36). For Roland Barthes, the "reality effect" is evoked through the "insignificant notation" rendered by details superfluous to overall interpretation: useless, it is their resistance to meaning that serves to "denote what is ordinarily called 'concrete reality'" (Barthes 1986, 142). Sacrifices of meaning close off discursive horizons and anchor a "self-sufficient" reality through effect and absence (invoking a real that has been) or affect and presence (evoking a palpable, immediate feeling). Jacques Rancière elaborates on the function of excess and absence in Barthes' reality effect, extending its application to productions of affective intensity: describing the process as a kind of "fetishism" of the real, Rancière implies that superfluous details shore up a bourgeois and naturalised sense of reality beyond discourse (Rancière 2017, 6). Like the fetish – a fantastic form whose materiality is buoyed only by the density of relations of exchange – effects or affects are prompted by an excess that plugs a gap in a reality that might never have been. An affect or effect of the excess that anchors and limits it, reality in this sense has no point of ultimate stability or unity. Marking a limit (between fiction and reality), it checks movements of signification with non-meaning but, in reintroducing differentiation, it again admits alterity: through reality effects/ affects, the specific negations and wider disturbances associated with "un" can be identified in historical and political forms of discourse. John Frow, echoing Barthes, notes how the citation of specific local detail in historical writing works like the "realist novel's *petit fait vrai*" (Frow 2006, 98).

Politics is also defined by something of the “un”. Discussing questions of national identity in an Australian context, Rancière sets out different senses of “unAustralian” where “un” initially signifies “the fact of being out of place, of not being entitled, of not belonging in one identity” (2007, 559). “UnAustralian” bifurcates as the “construction of another Australian identity” or “a non-identitarian unAustralianness”, distinguishing both counter-identity and marking “a process of dis-identification” (2007, 560). Dis-identification lies at the edge of a common, stably distributed – and carefully policed – order of “identities, functions and competencies”; it discloses a supplementary and ambivalent space, neither identified nor included in partisan order but nonetheless providing a site for politics: it is an “un-space” that is “created inside the space of the police order” (2007, 561). It enables democratic politics since democracy is a form of government based not on the entitlements and competence accorded by class, wealth, knowledge or experience but on a “radical incompetence”, an “un-qualification”, which “gives power to a strange collection of unqualified individuals – or individuals without qualities” (2007, 562). Non-qualification associates democracy with “the people”. In *Dissensus*, it forms a structural “abstract supplement” underlying politics as “the action of supplementary subjects”: those who “have no part”, who are neither counted, recognised, identified or included in the distributed order of parties, are the “surplus subjects” who make politics happen (Rancière 2010, 33; 70). The politics of “un” emerges as the constitutive excess of democracy, a political form not founded on consensus or agreement of parties but on “un-space”, “un-qualification”, on a “part-of-no-part” where exclusion, non-recognition, anonymity and aggregation seem to predominate. As Rancière notes in *Disagreement*, disturbances engendered by these unidentified figures, disturbances that barely but significantly register their existence (still outside order and policed identity), form the basis of politics (1999, 123). A retrospection of an excess necessary to order and identification as well as the dis-identification which sets surplus and supplement in motion as

a political energy outside social, policed order, the role of the "un" is indeed as necessary as it is obscure. Invoking a political excess, unrealism disturbs not only an order of "observable realities" but challenges the authority of realism as that which determines what is possible, what is the "only thing possible" (Rancière 1999, 132).

"Un" also impinges on the subjective dimensions of reality. In psychoanalysis, the prefix signifies negation: the "un" of the "unconscious" marks processes of repression and negation that lie beyond easy attributions of hierarchical opposition and operates as a "token" signalling how the unconscious has little regard for temporality or reality (Freud 1984a, 179). Governed by the homeostatic mechanisms of the pleasure principle, as Freud notes in his essay "Negation", its distance from reality operates as a kind of unrealism – it is "unreal" – which furnishes a sense of psychic autonomy and acknowledges the non-objective aspect of the negations-repressions out of which it is formed (Freud 1984b, 439). "Reality-testing", in psychic life, is not so much the adequation of inner and outer life but the re-finding of an object, of convincing oneself "that it is still there": correspondence is not, it seems, a matter of idea and thing, but of aligning structured and subjective relations of perception, memory and consciousness. Negation is a significant part of the process: it attests not to the positive "contents" of the unconscious as a space filled with dark wishes and seething energies, but to the formative separation by which the unconscious is distinguished in the first place. Jacques Lacan's account of the unconscious locates it amid the traces left by the effects of signification on the subject: negation "is not"; the unconscious is not situated in a structure of opposition, neither black nor white, but "un-black" – inconsistent, nothing, a barely discernible gap induced by the effects of signifying structure (Lacan 2002, 703). As a space that both assembles all the connotations of blackness and refuses them, the Freudian unconscious emerges as an effect of signification and suggests a different conception of the "unreal": "not the imaginary that precedes the subjective realm it conditions, being in direct

contact with the real" (Lacan 2002, 712). Outside symbolisation, the presence and absence attributed to the real is not part of the organised reality of subjects and objects, but the registration of palpable but incomprehensible intrusions, shocks, encounters. As Lacan argues, the uncanny's principal affective register is anxiety, the presence of some Thing that has not been subjected to imaginary or symbolic ordering, something not simply repressed, lacking or absent but incomprehensibly present (2004, 76).

"Un" connotes a complex process of negation beyond the reaches of opposition, inversion, antithesis, and directly bearing on Freud's "The Uncanny". The latter, however, should not be reduced to a simplistic promotion of a romantic and positivistic unconscious or understood as the alternation of signifying oppositions (familiar-strange; homely-hidden) and thus barely distinguishable from the vacillations of "intellectual uncertainty" described by Ernst Jentsch (a reading which Freud vigorously rebuts): "something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny; uncertainty is "quite irrelevant" (1990, 341; 351). In part shaped by the movement from primary to secondary narcissism (following Otto Rank on the double), the uncanny requires the individuation that comes of acculturation (and castration): this introduces a sense of separation and finitude into psychic reality along with the self-regulatory internalised law of superego. It also introduces an element of excess that disarms the apparent seamlessness of the transition. While the reappearance of childish or primitive beliefs (animism, omnipotence of thoughts, ghosts, or premature burial) offer illustrations of uncanny returns, the fear they evoke comes as an effect of repression: it is "a matter of indifference whether what is uncanny was itself originally frightening or whether it carried some *other* affect". Repression transforms every affect into anxiety: fright arises because "something repressed *recurs*" (1990, 363). Troubling distinctions between imagination and reality ("when something we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality") cannot simply be returned to an animist time before the surmounting of

"primitive belief" but relates to the significations of civilised culture where a symbol is able "to take on the full functions of the thing it symbolizes" and thereby allow an "over-accentuation of psychic reality in comparison with material reality" (1990, 337). The uncanny, then, registers the fact that neither words nor things need respect the ordered places given to them and discloses – in repetition and recurrence – a breach that marks both a disturbing negation and undoing of boundaries. *Un*canny indeed.

The uncanny's generic ramifications lead to fairytales (and, by implication, certain types of fantasy) being readily discounted by Freud. As wish-fulfilments, they lack that additional element necessary to evoke uncanny sensations (1990, 368). Comfortably and generically cordoned off, they do not impinge on the reader's sense of reality. Evoking neither hesitation nor even uncertainty, they manifest the simple escapism of wish-fulfilment. Jackson, too, dismisses Victorian fairy fantasies as exhibiting only an attraction to the "'zero' point of indifferentiation and inorganicism", eschewing any of the interrogative or disturbing features crucial to her version of the fantastic (1981, 141). Roger Caillois' *Anthology of the Fantastic* offers a stronger distinction: "fairytale is a marvellous universe opposed to the real world without destroying its coherence. The fantastic, on the contrary, manifests a scandal, a shredding, a bizarre irruption, almost unbearable to the real world" (1966, 8). In contrast, Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic* (1975) links uncanny and fantasy (he calls it the marvellous) in a system that is explicitly structuralist in the manner it isolates genre from social reality: any hesitation prompted by the fantastic remains a generic category. Hence, minimising interactions between imaginary and real modes, it leaves little room for disturbing – and unreal – effects or affects. The strangeness of the uncanny, however, finds a perceptual and formal correlate in "defamiliarisation". Viktor Shklovsky identifies the habitual and hackneyed modes that lead to routine and formulaic presentations and proposes difficult and strange employments of poetic images to disrupt hackneyed and generic

composition. Unfamiliar images and metaphors not only break up aesthetic habits, they serve to refresh the perception of things, developing forms of writing that allow reality to be seen anew (1988, 20). The political implications of defamiliarisation – as alienation effects – shape the "cognitive estrangement" examined in Darko Suvin's (1979) examination of science fiction. They also inform the discontinuities and collisions employed in in Harrison's reworking of generic effects (Harrison 2005a, 151).

Remaining negative and interrogative, unrealism does not resolve in a single theoretical frame. It is the opposite of the habit of "unseeing" dramatized in *The City and the City* (2009). Set in the heterotopia of a divided and doubled city, the neo-noir novel details the linguistic, ethnic, historical and political identities of two dis-similar worlds living apart culturally and materially yet in close geographical proximity – in adjoining neighbourhoods, for instance. Borders overlap: material and imaginary, they sustain no congruent relation: an official city map shades areas of "total", "alter" and "crosshatched" space (Miéville 2009, 56). From Copula Hall one can leave Beszel and enter Ul Qoma by the street from which one exited. A tourist or businessperson in "another country" may walk a road never before visited that "shared the latitude-longitude of their own address" and view architecture that previously remained unseen, even passing an old woman "sitting next to and a whole city away from their own building" (2009, 86). Proximity and almost absolute strangeness: an unthinkable relation of bodies and cultures living in physically, legally and psychologically the same-other space. In the two-cities-as-not-as-one, life is lived, as it were, on different sides of a transparent Mőbius strip. But such is the weight of the unacknowledged co-presence linking cultures and spaces that the disavowal founding their difference assumes an equivalent, ubiquitous and unrelenting force. "Breach" names the horror of transgression and the elaborate legal and repressive agencies that effectively and almost magically enforce the slightest incursion of borders, even the most innocent or accidental. Breach, however, implies

more than external measures of policing and control: self-discipline is expected from an early age, a discipline honed to an automatic level of almost immediate neurological response and perceptual near-blindness. “Unseeing”, no matter how naturalised it has become for the inhabitants of both cities as a kind of ingrained cultural blanking, remains a learned and much practiced act, one charged with memories of censure and apprehensions of stern reprimand. It is not easy to walk through crosshatched areas without seeing half of the buildings one passes by or not seeing many of the bodies moving on the same pavements: “In Beszel, it was a quiet area, but the streets were crowded with those elsewhere. I unsaw them, but it took time to pick past them all” (2009, 31). Unseeing registers the sensation of another presence before an active refusal to take cognizance of their existence is allowed into play. So naturalised is the practice of unseeing that it only becomes apparent in moments when it fails. In the other city, one figure catches glimpses of un-familiar buildings: “not that I saw them – I unsaw carefully, but they registered a little, illicitly” (2009, 54). In official governmental cross-border committees, moreover, seeing those from the other place does not entail a simple lifting of prohibitions. Looking – drawing out the diverse negations involved – becomes stranger still: permitted to acknowledge his counterparts one detective comments that it “was strange not to unsee these people in formal Ul Qoma dress” (2009, 72). “Not to unsee” is odd, marked as doubly negative: perception does not, even with the removal of cultural restraints, revert to a seemingly natural or positive order of vision. Pressures underpinning familiar norms and practices bound up in unseeing (and, of course, seeing) undermine any idea of natural perception. Unseeing after all – in disclosing and denaturing the forces structuring sense – pertains to unrealism, but in inverted (negative) form: where it describes the habituated perceptual procedures aimed at rapidly closing off the registration of something other in the name and interests of carefully policed ideological reality, unrealism’s

interrogation pokes at the fractures of any self-enclosed and naturalised system of perception, disclosing, perhaps, the possibility of something other.

Critical Unrealism

Michael Lőwy's notion of "critical irrealism" emerges – across literary forms and cultural contexts – as a way of interrogating generic and political realities: non-realist – gothic, fairytale, utopian – works of art offer their social critique by neither attempting to represent life as it really is nor by presupposing an objective reality external to subjective and symbolic structures (Lőwy 2007, 193-4). Traversing borders and eschewing the assumed fixity of reality, works of "critical irrealism" can offer an "implicit negative critique" that highlights issues of their historical present. Lőwy, however, ultimately underplays critical irrealism's political significance as "simply a different form of literature and art" (2007, 204-5). The approach need not, however, be restricted to formal interventions. Indeed, the Warwick Research Collective has taken critical irrealism in explicitly political directions to argue that various global literary forms disclose the "combined and uneven" tendencies of economic domination: irrealism, linking imaginary and factual modes, is better equipped to address capitalism's conjunctions of "abstract" and "scarring" interventions in social realities (WRec 2015, 70). Phantasmagorical fictional forms offer more effective renditions of the violent, destabilising or horrifying effects of capital as it instantiates itself – medially, spectrally, globally and unevenly – in ways beyond the grasp of any single or realist frame (74). Critical irrealism attempts to give form to forces that are difficult to grasp, a "spectral mapping" of obscure and abstract formations of global power. In contrast, unrealism aims, less ambitiously perhaps, at stripping away the bases of credulity, disrupting the habits of perception and regulation through which such real phantasms are sustained.

The unrealism of Harrison's fiction refracts politics through generic reflexivity and juxtaposition. The fiction produced from the 1980s tenders direct criticism of the right-wing economic and social transformations that instantiate the fantastically real and horrifying country called "Thatcherland" (Harrison 2005a, 152). Formal strategies of the writing, too, interrogate processes binding particular perceptual coordinates to an increasingly naturalised (from Thatcher to Blair) political fantasy. Realistic modes and effects figure strongly in the critical process. *Climbers* (1991) is a novel attending carefully to the actuality of geographical place and topographies of geological formation: it names familiar northern English towns, villages and roads to enhance its detailed descriptions of crags, moors and types of rock. An element of participatory documentary ethnography informs the depictions of the working-class northern men who spend much of their free time climbing. Aspects of social realism loom large in accounts of declining industrial communities, riven with unemployment and grim small towns with run-down high streets, boarded-up shops, greasy-spoon cafes and shabby public houses. Beauty spots and parking lots are strewn with industrial and consumer waste. Yet, glossy magazine idealisations of climbing readily disdained, there is something of the real that accompanies and transforms the experience of cold, wet and uninspiring climbs: it is not just threats of pain, injury or even risk of death that confer a heightened experience associated with the real, but a feeling of sovereign intensity and meaning lying beyond ordinary reality. Throughout the novel more and less than realist moments interrupt the picture: tales of feral children – escapees from urban school day-trips – are said to be living on the Moors and feeding on stray ramblers and lost boy scouts; speculations on the possibility of double vision in moving InterCity train carriages; reflections on the transformations of reality effected by light. Mundane worlds are unfamiliarised so that other energies and forces can become apparent.

Generic juxtaposition has weirder effects in other stories where reality is fractured by historical, geo-seismic, mystical and political forces. “Running Down” (1975), set amid the rural Lake District beauty of the Langdale Pikes situates a reunion of school acquaintances alongside eruptions of strange telekinetic powers: the ending contrasts an unexplained cataclysm – cliffs collapsing into mountain tarns with an unworldly, phantasmagorical force worthy of Poe – with a not-quite counterfactual history in which social and political unrest provides the conditions for a fascist government in Britain (Harrison 2004, 23-54). Less dramatic, but equally unnerving in its juxtaposition of familiar urban banality and gently underexplored psychological disturbance, is the story “Egnaro” (1981): set in Manchester before the consumer boom of the 1980s had reconstructed back-street bookshops, chop houses and bars, the story details the quietly disturbing effects of a mythical utopia of desire that, when encountered in whispered conversations, advertising, books, hoardings, television, derails any sense of security or anchorage in daily life: “it does not exist: yet it is quite real” (Harrison 2004, 114). Intimations of something else unsettle and confound, leading the story to propose a doubleness to reality that hinges upon a “dead point” in which the mysteries of some other world meet the dull contours of ordinariness. The uneasy interrelation is enacted in other fictions: “The Course of the Heart” (1992) relates the lasting psycho-mystical effects of an arcane ritual undertaken by three college friends. A quest romance is invented to provide emotional consolation for the protagonists discombobulated by a weird paganism echoing Arthur Machen’s stories (some fragments were published in short story form under the title “Great God Pan” [1988]). Otherworldly figures appear in the most mundane places: two grey, larval human shapes writhe together in the small stony backyard of a terraced cottage or intertwine in the screen of a hospital ward’s television tuned to a daytime soap opera (Harrison 2005b, 171). The novella ends in the ecstasy of mystical fullness, with the fire and roses of a visitant “pleroma” played out over the dark, stone houses of a remote

Yorkshire market town. In “Signs of Life” (1997), the vivid bustle and brashness of an entrepreneurial and consumerist London (branded suits, flash cars, expensive restaurants and very dubious but highly lucrative business opportunities) are played out alongside the story of a woman who dreams of flight in an echo of Angela Carter’s feminist magical realism: the metaphor of fulfilling one’s potential, living the dream or achieving one’s ambition is now realised by venture capital, corporate marketing and emerging biotech industries. Her painful, expensive experimental genetic therapies, however, do not really make the grade: though she comes to look like an exotic bird, she remains unable to fly.

Harrison’s science fiction, too, interrogates generic, scientific and ideological formations of reality: the *Light* trilogy combines a space operatic drama of multi-dimensional alien vessels and planet-moving technology with a down-at-heel urban cyberpunk aesthetic of erotic and psycho-technologies, literally immersive media (“twink-tanks”) and sentient tattoos. The expansiveness of one mode and the implosion of another remains calibrated to the changing political realities of their time of production: plots defer to an early twenty-first century in which technoscience and mathematical theory has irrevocably instantiated a quantum reconfiguration of all the components of physical reality; neoliberal economics has deregulated every sphere of human life; and postmodern aesthetics has thrown meanings, identities and values to the cosmic winds. While material existence might have become multiple and meaningless, however, the political consequences of its derealisation remain at issue, a question of unreality as much as reality.

For all the generic juxtapositions of Harrison’s fiction, one mode is placed – through exclusion – under critical scrutiny: fantasy. In an interview with Mark Bould, he cites *Climbers* to illustrate his practice of writing “fantasy without any fantasy in it” and sketches a critique of genres that produce a “constructed world, virtual worlds”. The criticism does not exclude all types of fantasy, only a specific mode. *Climbers* is both “completely real” and “a

complete fantasy world", but it is one in which consequences of writing, position and actions are made evident even as its main protagonists seek something beyond the "ordinary, quotidian sort of life" (Bould 2005, 328). "Fantasy without fantasy" is not therefore a simple privileging of realism, whether generic or social, nor does it assume a reality purged of any fantastic or ideological dimension. It simply refuses any distinction that (as in Todorovian structuralism) differentiates genres without tracking the relations between them and their conditions of production. Fantasies of a cultural and political kind, Harrison notes in the same interview, are interrogated in stories like "Egnaro", concerned at the way human desire is "hijacked by advertising", by consumer fantasies promising and disappointing gratification. Significantly, Harrison employs a familiar trope of fantasy fiction to describe the process: "advertising offers a trip through a portal which is closed the moment you buy the product" (Bould 2005, 330). Life is not of course magically transformed by the purchase, nor is desire satisfied.

Fantasy, both as genre and as a commercial-ideological form, feeds and feeds on a particular type of reality. Redirecting and framing desire according to consumerist imperatives, it both abstracts from and returns to a familiar world, its things circumscribed by the fantastic form of the commodity. Defending the study of fantasy fiction against Marxist suspicions of the anti-historical tendencies of the genre, Miéville neatly observes that, since capitalism is experienced in terms of the fantastic form of the commodity, contemporary reality already "*is a fantasy*" (2002, 42). The fantastic structures articulating desire and reality are not the sole prerogative of fantasy genres. Romance operates in a similar manner. Northrop Frye's discussion of romance (of which fantasy is a subset) as both a "structural core" and a site of "shared allusions" wherein culture affirms and reinforces its origins, identities and myths establishes a fantasy frame which inscribes reality with specific meanings: it gives, so Jameson observes, an ideological form to the world (Jameson 1975, 142). The ideological

implications of fictional fantasy have been tracked in Janice Radway's study of romance reading among twentieth-century US female audiences. It locates popular fiction's articulations of desire, fantasy and reality in a broader ideological frame. In contrast to the stories, romance reading is "fuelled by dissatisfaction and disaffection": rather than "perfect contentment" in which the "incongruence" of domestic experience and patriarchal ideology is resolved in narratives, the position of reading is sustained in a tense and incomplete dialectic of desiring. The imbalance of an actual "longing" generated by marriage's failure to live up to its ideological billing is tapped as a resource: "yearning" – targeted by "vicarious" fictional resolutions – turns the discrepancy between reality and fantasy into market opportunity (Radway 1984, 68). Romance fiction thus turns on desire: exploiting and purging actual discontent, it serves to "recontain" unruly feelings with narrative outlets that are "never", Radway notes, "wholly successful", leaving room for the cycle of desire, dissatisfaction and exploitation to continue. Romances engender "a fantasy that vicariously supplies the pleasure and attention they need" and "staves off the necessity of presenting these needs as demands in the real world" (1984, 217). Like the advertising that co-opts and disarms human desire in Harrison's "Egnaro", the link between generic fantasy and consumerist (fantasy-generating) reality manifests a circuit synchronised to the movements of desire in capitalism: born of real dissatisfaction, desire is given a frame in which it is both source of and bond to a cycle of commodification, both the cause and site of market opportunities and dis-satisfactions. Fantasy and reality; fantasy and realism: a curious doubling marks an overlap of generic and social realities in which fantasy stems from and fills in deficiencies in reality and realism and offers a reassertion of difference wherein fantasy enables a continued stimulation and exploitation of desiring due to the same dissatisfactions of the real.

A-politics?

In upsetting the articulation and containment of human desiring in a single ideological frame and in fracturing naturalised generic structures of presentation and ideologically-habituated modes of perception, unrealism manifests political implications. But, evacuating grounds of unified authority, it is tied to no single political position. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) follows the critical trajectory of unrealism devoid of, it seems, any explicit agenda. Reviewing the novel, Harrison dismisses its generic aspirations and raises significant concerns about its politics. Occupying what he describes as a "pure rhetorical space", he regards its commitment to understatement and clever humanism to be an avoidance of contemporary questions of class division and power (Harrison 2005c, 26). The apolitical space of the novel reflects the apathy of its protagonists. But it also prompts a strong response implying political and not just aesthetic disappointment: Harrison, closing with a focus on the novel's sense of pervasive personal frustration, despair, anger and failure to explode, suggests a powerful, if unstated, political reading.

Never Let Me Go's patterns of negativity and unrealism are deceptive, but they may be all the more effective as a result: while it seems to offer grist to any number of critical readings wanting to mill its narrative affirmatively, the historical unspace on which it establishes itself ultimately disallows any readymade positive interpretation. Raising questions of genre, the novel is variously categorised as SF, dystopian, posthuman, sentimental, gothic, a boarding school tale, a bildungsroman or a realist fiction (see Shaddox; Currie; Byron and Ogstron, Wasson). Amenable to diverse genre readings, the form never quite settles. A novel populated by clones, it has none of the obvious trappings of SF, fantasy or horror. Structurally, it moves back and forth between figures of self and other, human and clone, monster and mechanism, without being able to maintain a single position: readers are "perplexed" and "implicated" (Toker and Cherthoff 2008, 177). With whom, what or where, does the reader identify: with narrating clone or with a barely visible humanity associated

with indifference and monstrous cruelty? Readers are made to "probe the essence and limits of humanity" while the banality of narration juxtaposed with undescribed medical horrors prompts outrage at inhumanity, complicity and political passivity (Martin Puchner, 36; Harrison 2005c, 26; Robbins). Yet any secure position for judgement, critique, and condemnation is undone, as are habituated and humanising patterns of fictional identification (Fluet, 285; Black, 785-6). There is no difference – biologically – between humans and clones. Differences are rendered inconsequential amid familiar settings, language and experiences. The effect, however, is not based on an uncanny vacillation, but in abjection. In the world of the novel only abjection – conjoining superseded nature with super-egoic culture – maintains any affectively direct and unequivocal demarcation: compared to the revulsion of arachnophobia, human attitudes to clones – even in the most sympathetic of settings – register an evident and immediate disgust. Clones, too, recognise the looks that set them apart, even though they do not seem to apprehend fully their significance (that their condition is utterly irrevocable, their plight hopeless from the start). To imagine an alternative future, or even a "deferral" (postponing organ harvesting if a clone couple is in love) is simply window-dressing: some clones enjoy small advantages and distinction, those from Hailsham are shielded from the horrors that, in other facilities, accompany their kind being "reared in deplorable conditions" (Ishiguro 2005, 253-55). Yet Hailsham's pioneering of a "more humane and better way of doing things" is a vain liberal veneer to common industrial-scale practices of rearing the bearers of replacement organs in "vast government homes" (Ishiguro 2005, 260). Taking the medical benefits of enforced, factory-farming and organ harvesting for granted, humans no longer care where the organs come from: they have no wish at all to be reminded that replacement organs (like the meat on today's plates) are excised from a living, feeling, fellow creature. Abjection, in this context, polices economic interests and maintains a general indifference to the exploitation of clones.

Liberal and humane treatment of clones, if it has minimal functional value (they are docile enough from the start), does engender disappointment and, even for carefully cocooned clones, produces a stunning level of misapprehension regarding their own condition. A trip to a small town in search of a "possible" (a genetic match in the human world that fuels clone fantasies of a different existence) provokes – quite late in the novel – the first open, indignant acknowledgement of their actual status: they are "junk", who should be looking – not in offices and galleries for genetic originals – but among a degraded layer of society (prostitutes, beggars, addicts) (Ishiguro 2005, 164). While the assessment of their abject status is broadly correct, it remains too humanised, too much an effect of the institutional values they have internalised: identification with figures of a human underclass misrecognises the economics of class and power involved in cloning. Only a wealthier class could afford to maintain a cloned body of spare parts. Their initial – if misguided – search was in the correct location: a "possible" would indeed be found in an art gallery rather than a back street. Nonetheless, the misrecognition that their actual status lies outside of any human orbit, below even the lowest class of humans, emphasises how their abjection is even more terrible than they can envisage: sampled from the genes of a richer class they are – as manufactured carriers of replacement body parts – even less human than the most abject examples of humanity they can imagine.

The intensity and ubiquity of the abjection underlying the world in which the clones placidly go about their business makes accounting for differentiations of self-other, human-monster more of a problem. While evoking misidentifications and reversals to prompt a negative sense of, and critical debates about, humanity, the novel's world suggests that things are much worse. Humanity, whether embodied or as ideal, is barely in the picture or at stake in the world of the novel: its avatars – and only in the most residual and misapprehended fashion – are the clones themselves. Occasioned by misrecognitions of speech, setting, genre

and history, the reader is set up as a dupe of the novel's unfamiliarising technique and its impossible narration. *Never Let Me Go* is narrated by a clone and addressed to clones: "I don't know what it was like where you were, but at Hailsham…", so "Kathy H." begins (Ishiguro 2005, 3). Her assumption is that her audience is made up of clones, though raised in less salubrious institutions. While a lack of specificity allows misreading (her story could be about growing up in a boarding school, a care home, a juvenile detention centre), unfamiliar technical language ("carer", "guardian", "donor", "donation", "possible") performs a particular estrangement. It prepares the registration of a very different order of existence. As a clone speaking to other clones, Kathy, in the terms of the novel, acknowledges an almost complete exclusion from the human world of hospitals, motorways, service stations, tower blocks, cafés and stores where she works, drives, lives and occasionally shops. Like other clones, she shows little interest in a life outside, sharing the indifference manifested by clones towards the human world: we "didn't think much about our lives beyond" or "how they fitted into the larger world" (Ishiguro 2005, 114). Clone and human existence overlap and yet barely come into contact: the former, though allowed out, remain – apparently willingly – relegated securely to the "shadows" of daily life (2005, 259). Kathy's language also shares the very limited horizons of a clone's existence and lifespan. Oddly self-satisfied, her account is quick to document her professional and material success despite its obvious limitations. The manner in which she speaks, too, registers little emotion: given her situation, she maintains striking equanimity, her speech full of banalities and commonplaces. She reveals "no hidden depth", manifesting a "flatness" of character and language (Puchner, 34-5). Her narrative, spoken in "stilted circumlocutions", encodes "failures to imagine a different reality" (Mullan, 106; 108). Its temporality, too, renders it difficult to locate: the telling of the story positions itself between different stages of narrative recall, not just between an event and its narration but amid various intermediate levels of relation, recollections of acts of

recollection. The overlayering also affects the future as well as the past (Currie, 95-6). Constantly requiring the affirmation of others in the same position, the narrative seems to lose its own grounding, dependent on the memories of others. The sense of shock they feel when they hear that the place that meant so much to them – Hailsham – has closed is no surprise: without the security of this remembered place, the clones are described as a bunch of balloons released from the grip of a clown (Ishiguro 2005, 209). From the start, the solidity of place and memory is unclear: Kathy readily describes her institutionalised childhood to a donor so that he can absorb them as his own, preferable to his actual memories and past (Ishiguro 2005, 3). In the story, the sight, for one human, of a young clone clutching a pillow and miming to a sentimental song called "Never Let Me go", evokes not sympathetic identification but a (selfish, human) mourning for lost future, for the lost possibility of a kinder more humane world.

The narration – a clone speaking to other clones – seems to loosen its own grasp on present, past and future. Its excavation of its own reality is further undermined by the setting: a sparseness of detail and scantiness of description (other than coastal towns, motorways, car-parks, fields, hospitals and care centres), leave room for suggestion and misrecognition: like the "timelessness" of the dating there is little historically locative detail (Currie, 93). The dating, too, is significant: announced as "England, late 1990s", the novel was first published in 2005. Set in the proximate past, the un-familiar world of the novel not only opens up questions of what might be expected in the future (what might happen given widespread use of cloning technologies) but excavates any grounding in historical realism or stable present. A temporal fissure discloses an entirely other past: if the clones are in their thirties, the invisible – or initially non-apparent – social, scientific and political institutions necessary to their production and use have been in place for most of the post-WWII period. The 'now' of the narrative defines itself by means of an impossible 'then', placing any assumption of

actual and accepted cultural-historical knowledge at odds with the narrative's counterfactual tale. In the novel, the practice of cloning for organ donation has been in operation for at least a generation (since the 1970s) and on a national scale: there are "homes" all over the country; an infrastructure of care centres (sometimes in old holiday camps) and support workers; policies have been developed, publically debated and changed over the period according to shifts in political and popular mood and ethical breaches in research (the creation of superhumans); the treatment of clones has been liberalised and hardened according to swings of opinion driven by self-interest, social concern and species fears (Ishiguro 2005, 254-6). While this England looks the same, it is another country, familiar but entirely alien at the same time. No humanity, no history, no common culture: all frames and grounds for reading are dismantled. The narrative's no-time and no-place is compounded by its no-genre: any realism of address, setting and character is imaginary; any science fiction turns into science history; any dystopianism becomes retroactive and any horror is unregistered or disavowed. Unrealism comes to the fore: recognisable patterns empty themselves out in an extensive undermining of pasts, presents, futures; horizons close, leaving no possible position either for narration or reading to secure itself, no anchors, no realities, only an unfamiliarising and blank negation in which projections see themselves flicker and fade. A text of apparent realism and complete unrealism at once, it is also a fiction that may offer an unnerving heritage history of an already-cloned present. But that would be another story.

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