

Opening Remarks

From a literary historical perspective, it is rather striking that the genre of the fantastic mostly coincides with socio-political crises linked to socio-historical transformations. For example, Jan Potocki's *Le manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* (1794/1804) – one of the first manifestations of the genre – was published only a few years after the outbreak of the French Revolution. The first boom of fantastic texts in France also seems to be marked by social transformations, for the texts of the *Jeunes-France*, such as Théophile Gautier's "La Morte amoureuse" (1836), appear in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1830. A leap across the Atlantic to twentieth-century Argentina reveals that the texts of the so-called 'neo-fantastic'¹, such as Cortázar's "Casa tomada" (1949) or "Las babas del diablo" (1959), also fall into a period characterized by radical social transformation in the wake of the Great Depression and the subsequent rise of *Peronism* as well as the military dictatorships that would follow. Yet, why and how does the genre (re-)emerge in cultural production in very specific historical contexts of crises, even long after its proclaimed death by Tzvetan Todorov?² What are its specific characteristics?

Over the last few decades, an increased production of films and series that manifest fantastic structures can be observed especially in Latin America, France, and the US. A renewed boom of the genre is, hence, apparent in those nations which had already been at the epicenter of the production of fantastic narratives in the 19th and the early 20th century. Some of these productions could be classified, according to Todorov's structuralist definition, as *fantastique pur*: narratives which oscillate between rational, maybe psychological explanations, and supernatural explanations of inexplicable events, provoking a state of continued hesitation in the implicit reader.³ Other productions tend towards Todorov's hybrid forms of the *fantastique-merveilleux* or the

1 Jaime Alazraki: *En busca del unicornio: los cuentos de Julio Cortázar. Elementos para una poética de lo neofantástico*, Madrid 1983.

2 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Indroduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970, p. 175.

3 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 46.

fantastique-étrange.⁴ All of them, however, exhibit a fissure or rupture in the sense of Roger Caillois:

Cependant dans les lois immuables de l'univers quotidien, une fissure s'est produite, minuscule, imperceptible, douteuse, suffisante cependant pour livrer passage à l'effroyable.⁵

In the productions in question, this fissure, we argue, is not only produced on the level of the narrated events. It does, rather, manifest itself on behalf of the semiotic system of language, the components of which are shattered while the story unfolds. In many of these audiovisual narratives, instability and ontological uncertainty arise from a fissure that goes along with an unusual handling of language, image, and/or sound: word and image, for instance, do not refer to each other, or only do so to a limited extent; language proves to be bulky, excessive, or opaque. In several cases, diffuse, confusing sounds (e.g., an unclassifiable hissing or whistling) operate beyond the image and beyond the level of dialogue. Sometimes, the image presents itself as blurred or fuzzy, or tends toward claustrophobic frames that come about through extreme close-ups or other disconcerting montage effects. What is, therefore, especially striking about these productions is that either their fantastic plots or their aesthetics or both, heavily rely on peculiar interrelations of different media channels: sound and image, the written word and spoken language. Sound and image drift apart or do not refer to a coherent semiotic system any more. Signs lose their connotative meaning; written or spoken language may try to reassemble fragmented or lost semantics, but, often, the peculiar aesthetics of image and sound contradict the endeavor of the word.

Now, how is this perceived boom in specific audiovisual fantastic narratives to be read from an analytical perspective which takes cultural criticism into account? What do contemporary fantastic audiovisual narratives or texts suffused with fantastic narrative devices articulate? The crises sound, image, words and language are thrown into here, correspond, in our view, to conflicts and crises on an abstract, collective level. The character of these conflicts is as manifold as the plots deployed in the respective narratives. The implicitly, allegorically conveyed crises, however, can be traced back to the socio-cultural and socio-political level, which was

4 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 49.

5 Roger Caillois: *Anthologie du fantastique*, Paris 1966, p. 10. Translation J.B.: "However, in the immutable laws of the everyday universe, a crack has appeared, tiny, imperceptible, dubious, sufficient however to give way to the appalling."

already at work in the literary fantastic of the 19th and early 20th century.⁶ Latent socio-political anxieties expressed by specific fantastic aesthetics as described above, center around but are not limited to the following: an uneasiness in the face of the falling apart of formerly binding structures, rules and concepts in the social, political or linguistic field, euphoria as well as discomfort given the advancement of artificial intelligence, the experience of economic marginality and precarity, collective guilt, apocalyptic scenarios regarding nature, and the question of stable, instable, hybrid or fluid identities within a globalist world that is, however, still divided along the lines of, for instance, urban regions and a rather isolated countryside.

In Latin America several films by Argentinian director Lucrecia Martel form an exemplary case for this specific fantastic aesthetics, such as e.g. *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008), where blurry, dusty images and an increasingly erratic female protagonist are combined with diffuse, dreamlike fragments of different story bites alluding to spectral images of an unclear family history, adultery, and more collective (post-)colonial guilt. Similarly, *Zama* (2017), set in the 18th century, depicts the dull daily life of a magistrate of the Spanish crown in a remote spot in the South American colonies. On behalf of confusing, often sudden shots like seemingly improper close-ups, diffuse sounds, and disturbing visual elements like a lama suddenly marching through the picture or peculiarly slanted image details, the film is told in a hallucinatory, nightmarish way, blurring the boundaries between ‘reality’ and its beyond. An example of a, on the one hand, openly conveyed, yet, on the other hand, peculiarly hidden and displaced crisis, is the film *Distancia de Rescate* (*Fever Dream*, 2021) – the adaptation of Samantha Schweblin’s homonymous novel (2014). Here, highly ambivalent and polyvalent images as well as a diffuse play with different diegetical levels lead the spectator to hesitate – in the Todorovian sense – between rational and supernatural explanations for the disease of the protagonist’s daughter and other children, revolving rather explicitly around a massive (agricultural) crisis. An example that offers a literal crisis of sound and voice is Natalia Meta’s film *El prófugo* (*The Intruder*, 2020), which was also, however loosely, adapted from a novel. This film is, like many of our examples, a genre hybrid that cannot be

6 In the case of Argentinean fantastic literature, there are, moreover, cases where remarkable parallels to the fragmentation of the linguistic system can already be listed; cf. the article of Julia Brühne in this volume.

categorized just that easily. Here, protagonist Inés, who works as dubbing actress experiences how her voice or, rather, her vocal chords start to live an uncanny life of their own. The unsettling events start after Inés had to witness the traumatic death of her partner. Her vocal chords suddenly produce sounds that do not fit the content of what she is supposed to say and come to be recorded on tape as uncanny companions to her ‘official’ voice.

In France, a somewhat similar *sujet* was staged in 2007, when Atlanté Kavaïté published her film *Écoute les temps – Fissures*. In *Fissures*, sound engineer Charlotte learns that her mother has been murdered in her house on the country side. When she sets up her recording equipment in the house, she realizes that the machines mysteriously record sound fragments from the past that subsequently mingle with the present enabling her to reconstruct the murder piece by piece and exposing the person responsible for it. In 2009, Marina de Van published her first feature-length work, *Ne te retournes pas (Don't Look Back)* – a film evolving, in turn, around the instability and unreliability of sight, memory and the relationship between signifier and signified. A young mother and lately unsuccessful author, Jeanne, notices slight changes in the way her house, for instance the kitchen looks dependent on being recorded on a home video tape or being looked at in the very present. Neither her husband nor her children understand her claims, assuring her that everything is perfectly normal. When Jeanne suddenly starts to notice major differences not only in the visual appearance of her family but also of her very self in the mirror, she goes on a journey to Italy, desperately trying to re-establish the connection between (visual) signifier and signified and to restore a, as it were, always already lost identity. The film ends with the protagonist accepting a rather schizophrenic but at the same time extremely creative doubleness in sight, image and writing as she and her Italian ‘double’ finally start to write a novel together.

Guillaume Nicloux’s Netflix mini-series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) also deals with the problem of identity. Nicloux, however, more or less openly introduces the topic of political identity and impending crises to his work, given that the seemingly trivial love story metaphorically appears to evolve around conflicts at the center of which the energy crisis, the problems of and with the European Union and the *gilet jaune* protests are to be found. On behalf of confusing, unrelated sounds, apparent time travel and communication gone astray, an uneasiness gradually unfolds, which can be read as part of a deeper socio-political allegory. Another

Netflix series from the same year, *Osmosis* (Audrey Fouché, 2019), in turn draws on the topic of torn and doubtable identity, treacherous autonomy and the question of the constitution, consistence, texture, and desire of the (postmodern) subject. Not on behalf of time travel but instead via uncanny mediality – in this case, uncanny digitality – the series, we could state, depicts certain inner crises of a hyper individualistic society that craves to find its perfect double.

However, not only in France but also in francophone nations such as Senegal manifestations of the genre – albeit with a postcolonial twist – can be observed. For example, the feature film *Atlantique* (2019) by the French-Senegalese director Mati Diop initially plays with the hesitation typical for French fantastic narratives. Images and sounds of the Atlantic Ocean transpose the uncertainty of the *histoire* – concerning the faith of a boat of refugees – to an ontological uncertainty of the scenes themselves. The unconventional film borders on the fantastic, offering numerous different interpretations to the viewer. Between (migration) drama, love story, ghosts, class struggle, and mysterious overtones, Diop offers a genre-transgressing, hard to pigeonhole film that pin points to numerous social crises via hybrid aesthetic approaches.

In the United States, one of the masters of the fantastic is doubtlessly film making veteran David Lynch, who – together with Mark Frost – created the famous postmodernist mystery series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91, 2017). *Twin Peaks* is a *mélange* of crime drama and tragicomedy, of true and false love, adultery, and coming-of-age *sujets*, where the fantastic resides precisely in the constant hovering of the *merveilleux* or the supernatural over otherwise rational and psychological explanations. *Twin Peaks* constantly toys with the dissemination and fragmentation of sound, image, and language, thereby repeatedly constructing and deconstructing meaning and exposing the difficult process of making sense of any sign at all. Especially in the last season, the ‘revival’ from 2017, there is an increasing appearance of strange humming and hissing noises the source and origin of which are never actually explained, but which, together with apparently inept images, function as markers of a divested sign system and a crumbling of the symbolic, which is in turn characterized by extreme violence. Yet, *Twin Peaks* is far from being the only fantastic text produced by Lynch. Throughout his entire work – from *Lost Highway* (1997) to *Mullholland Drive* (2001) – he makes use of narrative devices typical of the fantastic genre. Apart from Lynch’s works, there has been an impressive number

of similar productions during the last years, which seem to dwell on the topic of the somewhat cursed or haunted house – or town, respectively – and its allegorical implications for society, the nation. A prominent recent example is *The Watcher* (2022) telling the story of a family of four who buys a house in the suburb they cannot actually afford. Soon, they start getting letters from an enigmatic entity who subtly threatens them and implies he is watching the family day and night. In addition, the neighbors act overtly hostile and seem to excessively enjoy their not quite explicable hatred towards the newcomers. The show includes several mysterious elements, oscillating between the marvelous and the uncanny. Together with sketchy, double-bind communication and contradictory information, they create a puzzling, grotesque, and paranoid atmosphere.

As can be taken from these examples, many of the fantastic contemporary works convey a latent ontological uncertainty, circulating through many different, sometimes connected realms. In addition to thematic features typical for fantastic texts – such as the apparent existence of uncanny, haunting creatures, trouble with a doppelgänger, or other *sujets* evolving around the topic of split identity –, ambiguity and disparities between *histoires* and *discourses* which aim at a problematization of the sign and hence convey a semiotic crisis, seem to be increasingly dominant. One of the major issues that brought this volume to life in the first place, is, hence: how does the contemporary manifestation of a specific – cinematographic – fantastic articulate political and cultural anxieties linked to present crises in globalized societies? These crises may in part already be known to the public, they may already have a place within the official political discourse. Yet, there is something hidden from this discourse; elements strange to it, which remain unspoken, conflicts which tend to be suppressed, dimensions which don't make it into the public realm or the political field, or only make it there in distorted ways, therefore failing in articulating themselves properly. The question hence is: Where are the connections between fantastic *sujets* and sociopolitical upheaval in fantastic or semi-fantastic narratives today? Which latent contemporary anxieties are conveyed here? The articles in this book examine the question of whether and how images, sounds, and dialogues in fantastic films/series - and, sometimes, novels – that have gone off the rails can be interpreted as allegorical counterpart of a contemporary social imaginary which has also gone awry. Examining many of the

examples described above, they ask, for instance, how the *sujets* in question mediate, point to, construct or deconstruct crises in the realms of identity, digitality, or democracy.

In her opening article, before examining *La mujer sin cabeza* and *The Watcher*, **Julia Brühne** asks how and when the cinematic dissociation of word, image, and language in connection to impending political crises may have started. She takes a closer look at two films from the 1970s, which convey in a rather paradoxical way the dissociation of the semiotic systems 'Western' civilization relies on at this point. They can hence be defined as harbingers of what will later be expressed predominantly in the realm of the audiovisual fantastic.

In his discussion of *Osmosis*, **David Klein** explores how the series conveys a media crisis in the face of the overwhelming possibilities of artificial intelligence in a not too far away future. He traces how *Osmosis* draws on the fundamental unsettledness of the postmodern subject, who approaches the AI with a Platonian desire for wholeness, and asks if these desires follow progressive or regressive tendencies.

In his analysis of Guillaume Nicloux's mini-series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019), **Pádraic Wilson** explores the relationship between the series' transnational love story and its genuinely cinematographic fantastic discourse. While the love story allegorically negotiates a French identity in a European context, inexplicable sounds invading otherwise ordinary scenes disturb the efforts by image and language to establish such an identity and ultimately point to the political crisis of a post-democratic deadlock in French society.

Marie Darrieussecq novel *Truismes* (1996) is, next to C. E. Feiling's *El mal menor*, the only literary text to be examined in this miscellany. **Sören Görlich** shows how the novel draws on similar strategies as the discussed filmic texts in order to convey the deeper conflicts of a split, torn, and transgressive identity and of a community which finds itself in fundamental tension, and is revealed in its subtle aggressiveness.

Joaquín Orlando Valenzuela Celis focuses on the construction of alternative identities articulated in *Titane* (2021). Looking back at canonical examples of fantastic literature and recent Hollywood's history, he traces the dominant tropes used in the depiction of bodily alteration, transformation and expansion, beyond the traditionally known as the human experience. Fantastic and *étrangement* narratives are not only expressed through the enigmatic atmospheres imbricated in the way of storytelling, its core, but also by the visual aspect, its aesthetics.

In her article on Just Philippot's feature film *La nuée* (2020), **Gisela Febel** analyses the obsessional relationship between an impoverished female farm owner and an increasingly uncanny, vampire-like swarm of locusts, which ultimately turns out as a self-defeating struggle against multinational capitalism. She illustrates how the film is to be grasped as a pluri-dimensional explosion of societal crises in agricultural France by taking into account the film's eco-critical, anthropological, and psychoanalytical dimensions.

In her contribution, **Karen Struve** explores the question to what extent the structuralist definition of the fantastic, which Todorov elaborated on the basis of hexagonal narratives of the 19th century, needs to be rethought for the analysis of postcolonial films of the Francophonie such as *Atlantique* (2019) by the French-Senegalese director Mati Diop.

In his analysis of the film adaptation *Distancia de rescate* (2021), **Matthias Hausmann** elaborates on the relationship between the film's fantastic structure and crisis narratives in general and thus grasps the contemporary renewed productivity of the genre as a sophisticated strategy to unveil the reductionist and evasive effect of the latter.

In her article, **Sabine Schlickers** examines C. E. Feiling's novel *El mal menor* and Natalia Meta's film adaptation *El prófugo*. In a detailed comparison, she shows how novel and film use different narrative strategies in order to produce, e.g., ambiguity. She argues that the novel creates a 'perturbatory narration' whereas the film works in a different way, producing the fantastic on behalf of a strategy of empuzzlement.

Valentina B. Rosales considers the spectator's position in the fantastic circuit and their role in the reception of narratives of *étrangeté*. For that matter, she focuses on temporality in *Twin Peaks – The Return* as a crucial point of encounter between the process of storytelling and reception. Since temporality is perceived by the viewers from their chronological point of view and the flow of the plot seems to be trapped in a kind of eternal backwardness, it allows the surging of the moment of enigma and ontological insecurity, which opens the narrative to the possibility of a figural interpretation.

Carlos Alberto Rodríguez Gómez (re-)introduces the concept of *delirio narrativo* in order to propose a genuinely Latin American perspective to audio-visual analyses, since the narratives in this part of the world have traditionally opted to surpass the literary sense and explore the full potential of language's semantics. *Delirio narrativo* proves to be a fundamental

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aspect of the strategies of *Twin Peaks*' third season (2017) to construct an alternative reality.

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