Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction displaces or extends known reality to worlds, beings, and powers alternative to those familiar to individuals in secular, industrialised societies. As such, its genres — fantasy, science fiction, the gothic, etc. — have long engaged esoteric thinkers and practitioners who do the same. The definitions and margins of speculative fiction are, like those of esotericism, fluid and mutative. It retains deep roots in, and significant intertextual dialogue with, earlier cultural forms including folklore, myth, fairy tale, ghost stories, drama, epic poetry, medieval romance, Arthurian legend, and religious texts. However, speculative fiction is also, like the concept of fiction itself, a specifically modern form, an outgrowth of post-Enlightenment distinctions between an empirically sensible and testable reality and concepts and experiences held to be incompatible with this reality. This dichotomy has produced related perceptions of a binary relationship between reality and fiction, and, proceeding from this divide, between realist and speculative fiction. As is often observed, modern esoteric knowledge is defined by a similar process of epistemological and cultural differentiation, its concepts relegated to categories of the unreal, supernatural, spiritual, religious, or superstitious (e.g. Hanegraaff 2012). It is therefore unsurprising that esotericism and speculative fiction have frequently engaged with and characterised each other, with significant ramifications for how both are produced and received in the contemporary period. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this engagement, however, is the tendency of both to challenge the distinctions and dualities which frame their points of reference and define them as unreal. Building on a longstanding relationship between magic and language (Covino 1994, 5–6), a range of contemporary creatives and intellectuals have conjoined esotericism with the fantastic in order to challenge dominant ontologies, insisting on the instability and elasticity of consensus reality.

The landscape of this relationship has massively expanded via twentieth- and twenty-first-century media including film and gaming culture, but this entry will focus on the genres of literary speculative fiction, where the central tropes and narrative conventions found in these contemporary media were first developed, and where

esotericism and the fantastic continue to influentially define each other. This engagement is perhaps most clearly visible in situations where authors use the imaginative and epistemologically free environment of speculative fiction to explore and communicate esoteric theories and experiences. →Philip K. Dick famously projected his paranormal experiences of February and March 1974 (2–3–74) into science fiction novels like *VALIS* (1981) and *Radio Free Albemuth* (1976/1985). James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993) is both a New Age instruction manual and an adventure novel with elements of science fiction and fantasy. Leading contemporary Pagan, →Starhawk, weaves eco-feminism and the modern witchcraft of her Reclaiming movement into science fiction like *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993) and *City of Refuge* (2015).

Yet, it is not immediately evident why speculative fiction should serve this function of esoteric knowledge formation and communication. After all, it is, almost by definition, designed to be untrue, and is widely viewed as lacking seriousness. It is a major arm of "popular" fiction, viewed as "escapist" and "low brow", a mass-produced commodity designed for entertainment rather than the intellectual stimulation of "high" culture (Gelder 2004, 11–34). Even if we were to accept such distinctions, however (and this entry will show that we should not), speculative fiction offers a number of aesthetic and epistemological advantages. As a result of its escapist reputation, knowledge claims presented in speculative fiction are rarely held up to cross-examination or empirical testing. Fiction is thus an amenable environment in which to debate aspects of human knowledge which are untestable and unverifiable by scientific means, yet continue to be upheld by individual claims to experience. Esoteric authors frequently engage with such marginal knowledge; indeed, they tend to doubt the reliability of the empirically defined "real" in the first place. It is thus speculative fiction which provides an environment best suited to the everyday experience of what paranormal investigator Charles Fort called a "hyphenated state of truth-fiction" (2006, 45). Speculative fiction's ability to unproblematically balance serious thought and expression with irony, play, and paradox suits the post-modern esotericism of currents like →Discordianism and →Chaos Magick, which apply fiction to reality to challenge and complexify the ideologies and ontologies of various meta-narratives, truth claims, and social orders. This is, for example, the *modus operandi* of →Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea's *Illuminatus!* trilogy (1975), which blends various esoteric currents with conspiracy theory and science fiction.

However, the most significant reasons for the continued crossover between speculative fiction and esotericism can be found in their shared developmental history. Esotericism has played a crucial role in how genres like the gothic, horror, the weird, science fiction, and fantasy have been defined. At times this has been the result of direct influence; some of the most influential figures in these genres incorporated esoteric beliefs and experiences into their writing, including Edgar Allan Poe, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Arthur Machen. However, many others have embedded either pre-existing genre tropes or popular conceptions of esoteric phenomena into their fiction, with equal creative success. Authors like H. Rider Haggard, Bram Stoker, and H.P. Lovecraft were not significantly invested in occultism, but their fictional adaptations of esoteric knowledge have been major influences on both genre fiction and alternative religion. A reciprocal process of knowledge and image formation has thus taken place, in which speculative fiction reflects esoteric symbols, practices, and ontologies, but also adapts and reshapes them for further adoption by esoteric thinkers and creatives. As a result of this intertextual transmission, older works of speculative fiction remain vitally important in the contemporary context. This includes both works by authors like Poe, Stoker, and Lovecraft, which were influential in their own time and are still widely read today, and texts written by leading esotericists including Aleister Crowley and G.I. Gurdjieff, which, though culturally marginal, continue to shape developments in contemporary esotericism.

As indicated by this lingering influence of older texts, speculative fiction proves amenable to contemporary esoteric authors and readers partly because its genres have been formed in conversation with esotericism from the moment of their emergence. These genres constantly shift and take different forms in different cultural and historical settings. Moreover, individual texts are often hybrids of several genres, perhaps never more so than in the contemporary period. Yet, broad trends in the development of tropes, stylistics, and narrative expectations native to each can be identified. Most importantly for understanding contemporary esotericism and its relationship to speculative fiction, esoteric knowledge has frequently been used to distinguish these genres from each other, and to differentiate speculative and realist fiction in general.

The gothic is usually considered the first to have emerged. Beginning with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), it separated itself from earlier fantastical literary forms by appealing to post-Enlightenment empiricism while still maintaining the

presence of the supernatural. At the hands of influential authors like Poe, Bulwer-Lytton, and Stoker, the gothic and the esoteric have intersected in ways that have centrally defined the way in which the genre unfolds itself to readers. A central point of crossover is an emotional and psychological reaching after terror and incomprehensibility. Thinkers and creatives in both currents tend to open themselves to the potential irruption of supernatural powers and beings into the material world, and investigate the extent of human capacity to engage with these experiences. The result can be an exploration of madness and horror in an encounter with the abyssal or the monstrous (Pasi 2007), but gothic terror is also frequently designed to provoke an encounter with the sublime, influentially defined by Edmund Burke as an overwhelming experience of terror or astonishment which pushes the mind toward transcendence (Burke 1757, 41–53). Thus, the gothic also aims at the "positive epistemology" found in many esoteric systems (Pasi 2007, 64–65), wherein even dangerous or incomprehensible experiences are felt to direct one towards mystical experience or personal gnosis (Nelson 2012, 16–17). Even more widely, the gothic and the esoteric have a shared rootedness in epistemological rejection. The supernatural irruptions of the gothic are held to represent that which Western cultures have sought to expunge or abject in order to maintain an ordered consensus reality. Esoteric figures, concepts, and practices, already rejected by both religious and scientific arbiters of knowledge, are ideal for this purpose.

The genres of speculative fiction feature particular tropes which have acted as mediators which ferry esoteric concepts through time and across cultures. From the earliest gothic novels, esoteric phenomena like the figure of the magus, the image of Satan, and medieval and early modern witchcraft have become instantly recognisable tropes. Further, the gothic has participated in a wide-scale cultural transition in which these once-rejected figures and currents have become more positively viewed in modern times, particularly among esoteric groups (Nelson 2012, 8). These longstanding tropes have been joined by new archetypes formed in dialogue with esotericism. A particularly intriguing example is the common set of images and events which populate the ghost story, which developed in tandem with accounts of spirit visitations and house hauntings gathered by psychical researchers, or featured in publications like W.T. Stead's *Real Ghost Stories* (1897), in which the distinction between the real and the fictional became difficult to decipher for those sympathetic to psychical research (Delgado 2017). In the contemporary period, both the tropes and sensational affect of the gothic continue to

mediate esoteric concepts across a variety of media and into the gothic sub-culture, where the literary genre merges with music, fashion, and politics, all continually in relationship with contemporary esoteric practice and belief (Partridge 2005, 234–35).

The gothic is also of continuing importance to contemporary esotericism because of its formative influence on further genres of speculative fiction. The most closely related are horror and the weird, both of which amplify the unsettled ontologies of the gothic. Very broadly, horror might be said to differentiate itself by bringing the unknown, the supernatural, and the monstrous into the real in a visceral, tactile manner, while the weird performs a similar intrusion on a more subtle, existential plane, creating gothic terror by amplifying incomprehensibility and eeriness. The stories of H.P. Lovecraft have been particularly influential in both. Mediated by fictional and non-fictional sources, Lovecraftian legends like Chthulu and the Necronomicon, a fictional grimoire, continue to be valued by esotericists and fiction writers alike (see →Lovecraftian magic; Nelson 2012, 45–71). His greatest significance, however, may lie in his dedication to developing a literary experience "coeval with the religious feeling", one which delved the murky terrain between realism and "naively inspired idealism" in order to inspire fear, and thereby awe, in the presence of the unknown (Lovecraft 1973, 12–13). The fiction of contemporary authors of the gothic, the weird, and horror, including Clive Barker, Steven King, and Anne Rice, has continued to reproduce this affect (Cowan 2016). Such fiction continues to rely on gothicised esoteric motifs, and also provides experiences of the sacral and supernatural which can be viewed as forms of postmodern religious experience (Nelson 2012).

The gothic outgrowth most significant for the contemporary period is science fiction. The gothic's Romantic response to the intellectual demands of empiricism was to reduce paranormal or supernatural irruptions to material explanations by the end of the tale. Science fiction emerged in the nineteenth century as a post-gothic romance form that copied this formula, but did so from page one. Its authors, editors, readers, and critics have described the genre as different from (and superior to) other forms of speculative fiction because of its rejection of magic and superstition for science and fact (e.g. Wells 1978; Gernsback 1929; Suvin 1979, 47–66). However, the genre should be seen as one which has evolved and automated its demons rather than exorcised them. Throughout its history it has proven fertile ground for authors wishing to explore concepts and questions

endemic to esotericism, including supernatural experiences, occult forces, alternative worlds, superior beings, radical physical and/or mental evolution, and paranormal powers including telepathy, telekinesis, extra sensory perception, divination, and spirit communication. Already in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), seen by many as science fiction's ur-text (e.g. Aldiss and Wingrove 1986, 16–17), hermetic magic and alchemy mix productively with cutting-edge sciences like electricity, animal magnetism, and vitalism. Influential nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century science fiction authors, including Poe, Bulwer-Lytton, Marie Corelli, H.G. Wells, and Ray Bradbury, took up this model. As science fiction continued to gain cultural prominence in the mid-twentieth-century, popular novels like Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953) and Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* (1967) continued the trend. Whether intentionally or not, these authors reflected attempts in occultism and psychical research to scientifically legitimate esoteric and paranormal phenomena, updating antique, medieval, and early modern esotericism for post-Enlightenment intellectual demands.

As a result of this epistemological overlap, esotericism played an important role in executing science fiction's defining narrative strategy, which maintains scientific verisimilitude even while exploring the supernatural, the paranormal, and the impossible (Kripal 2011; Roukema, 2018b; 2020). A number of science fiction's iconic tropes are also the product of esoteric science and religion. The genre's alternate dimensions or higher planes relate closely to occult concepts of the astral plane or spirit realm, and the higher beings which populate both this and other dimensions reflect the ascended masters of Theosophy (Rothstein 2013). Such extra-terrestrials are often gifted with the psychic abilities which esoteric sciences have imagined for evolved or exceptional human beings, a relationship which has created a UFO sub-culture in which a cultural umbilical cord feeds concepts and imagery back and forth between science fiction and ufological religious groups (see →UFOs and esotericism; Reece 2014). Since the 1960s "New Wave" of science fiction, the genre has often used motifs of stellar exploration and travel to explore psychological states sometimes described as "inner space" (Ballard 1962). Contemporary esotericists are likely to find their view of the relationship between internal and external reality in author Gwyneth Jones's description of the science fiction writer as "an inhabitant of the boundary area" between knowledge of the "world out there, our science and its technologies, and the reports we have from the inner world of subjective experience" (1995, 77). Science fiction also continues the quest for the sublime

found in its gothic roots, though with less focus on terror and more on a sense of cosmic awe akin to the mystical transcendence sought in various esoteric practices.

With this combination of shared epistemic motivations and entangled, intertextual origins, it is no surprise to find authors like Dick, Starhawk, and Colin Wilson reinvigorating the esoteric heritage of science fiction to frame questions of religion, metaphysics, and paranormal experience within a skeptical, secular frame. In general, science fiction continues to mediate esoteric concepts and practices. Psychic (or "psi") powers remain an SF mainstay, though in recent decades developments in cyber- and neuro-technology have mechanised these tropes. In texts like Iain M. Banks' *Culture* series and Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy (2013–2015), digitally uploaded consciousness and neural augmentation provide a new technological framework for psychical and magical powers. Science fiction's continuing fascination with unknown forces and energies is on full display in novels like China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), which consciously reproduces a variety of marginal eighteenth- and nineteenth-century physical theories, from animal magnetism to modern alchemy.

Fantasy, another central branch of speculative fiction, is often contrasted with science fiction specifically because of the transparency of its relationship with esotericism (e.g. Jameson 2005, 318). The worlds and physics of fantasy, which includes sword and sorcery novels, quest narratives, many works of children's literature, and "high fantasy" in the vein of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), rely heavily on magical, Pagan, alchemical, and other esoteric currents. This relationship is predicated on a number of shared interests and motivations. Contemporary fantasy shows an abiding fascination with magic of all sorts, drawn from a variety of cultural sources including the Western magical tradition. Indeed, cultural critic Frederic Jameson defines fantasy as "a meditation on magic as such — on its capacities and its existential properties" (66). Fictional examinations of magic by authors like Terry Pratchett or Ursula Le Guin have been influential in contemporary esoteric circles, where they are commonly viewed as containing real insight and inspiration for contemporary magicians and Pagans (Partridge 2004, 140–42).

Fantasy's engagement with magic has a number of facets that are likely to make it attractive to contemporary esotericists. Fantasy authors pay close attention to the "worlding" of their imaginal environments, a characteristic shared with other speculative genres, particularly science fiction. The authorial process of creatively constructing

alternative worlds — and the reader's experience of mentally inhabiting these worlds — can be productively compared to the imaginal processes of meditation, astral travel, and "psychologised" magic found in esoteric groups (see Hanegraaff 2003). Another conjoining factor is an appeal to a lost wisdom or vanishing magic. More than other speculative genres, fantasy connects directly to its roots in folklore, myth, and fairy tale, and thus also remains aligned with contemporary currents like →Wicca and →Paganism, which reinvent or adapt ancient or medieval culture (Baker 2015, 483). The secrecy of many esoteric groups is also reflected in the knowledge guarded by sorcerers and cabals in fantasy novels. As Brian Baker observes, the lure of secret knowledge and the process of its discovery can transform the experience of the fantastic into a veritable rite of initiation for the reader (2015, 483). Indeed, the very incorporation of secret esoteric knowledge into fiction can create a speculative affect, as in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), or Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), neither of which contain the imaginal worlding or supernatural events of speculative fiction, but are associated with it all the same (e.g. Nelson 2012, 30).

This association shows just how amorphous the boundaries of speculative fiction can be. The genres above are not alone in being defined and differentiated by their esoteric content. Occult detective fiction is another intriguing example. The setting and characters of stories written in the mould of A.C. Doyle's famous Sherlock Holmes stories are largely drawn in a realist mode. There is nothing speculative in these stories but the act of speculation itself. In narratives like Dion Fortune's *Secrets of John Taverner* (1926), however, the detective is gifted with psychical powers that enhance their sleuthing abilities; moreover, the solutions to mysteries may be attributed to magical abilities and supernatural forces. These phenomena shift the narrative toward the fantastic, and do so even more prominently in contemporary occult detective narratives like Mark Frost's *The List of Seven* (1994), which intertextually weaves Frost's serious occult interests with the nineteenth-century roots of occult detective fiction. Frost also influentially wrote the occult detective motif into the weird realism of *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991, 2017).

Magic realism is another telling example of esotericism determining genre. Like other speculative fiction, magic realism combines empiricist reality with folkloric imagery and supernatural events. However, where other speculative fiction thrives on the cognitive dissonance of this tension, magic realism presents the supernatural as the ordinary, "admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of

literary realism" (Zamora and Faris 1995, 3). Esoteric knowledge, treated by its theorists and advocates as similarly "normative and normalizing" (ibid.), has proved useful for authors creating this effect, including Brazilian Paulo Coelho, whose "New Age Christianity" and experiences with Thelemic magic (→Thelema) are reflected in magic realist novels like *The Alchemist* (1988) and *The Witch of Portobello* (2006; D'Andrea 2018, 96–105).

Unlike the other genres above, however, magic realism has been defined not so much by epistemological alterity as by non-Western culture and geography. The boundaries between magic realism and other speculative fiction genres are slippery, and include a sense that the former is a "higher" cultural form apart from the lowbrow aesthetics of popular culture. However, another defining characteristic is that it is prominently (though not exclusively) attributed to non-Europeans, particularly African and Latin American writers (Slemon 1995, 407–09). Magic realism, in this sense, is something recognisable and encounterable only by readers with de-magicked perspectives, something attributable to the pre-modern, "primitive" knowledge systems of the (post-)colonial other (Mendlesohn 2008, 110). This construction of magic realism as a separate, foreign genre has important ramifications for the identity and cultural function of esoteric knowledge in the West. As we have seen, speculative fiction deploys similar supernatural mechanisms, events, and concepts to magic realism. However, even with its now-global profile, Western speculative fiction tends to reproduce post-Enlightenment distinctions between natural and supernatural, physical and spiritual. At the same time as esoteric phenomena provide speculative fiction with concepts that enchant, entertain, or even provide forms of modern religious experience, they also help to reaffirm the boundaries of the unreal, the superstitious, and the irrational. In this way, both esotericism and speculative fiction have been major actors in secularising processes in which Western societies have dismissed the magical and paranormal from the real into the fantastic.

However, this rejection, well documented by theorists and historians (e.g. Hanegraaff 2012), also aligns esotericism with the non-European knowledge systems on which magic realism is predicated. Though it is frequently used in speculative fiction to reinforce post-Enlightenment dichotomies, esoteric knowledge also has the potential to erode them. Particularly in recent times, speculative fiction and esotericism have come together to challenge processes of epistemological imperialism, in which post-

Enlightenment currents were assumed to supersede the knowledge and ways of knowing of Indigenous and transplanted African populations. Magic realism produced by members of these groups frequently pursues this purpose, as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), but other speculative genres offer this potential as well. Contemporary Indigenous science fiction writers like Blake Hausman combine science fictional virtual reality tropes with traditional Indigenous dream narratives, thus bringing back to the fore the magical praxis that Western Christian and scientific authorities sought to subjugate (Brown Spiers 2016). Black authors like Nalo Hopkinson, Octavia Butler, and N.K. Jemisin create contemporary speculative fiction within the framework of Afrofuturism, a sub-genre which frequently places magical and supernatural phenomena within the techno-futurist settings of science fiction (Womack 2013, 119–29). These authors are part of an ongoing global expansion of the tropes and aesthetics of Western speculative genres, in a variety of media. As a result of this expansion, speculative fiction has become a primary contemporary forum in which esoteric concepts developed in Western culture can be traded and translated with comparatively similar knowledges all over the world, deepening the "globalization of esotericism" (Hanegraaff 2015; Cf. Asprem 2014).

In addition to translating concepts across cultures, speculative fiction has transported esoteric concepts across time as practices and beliefs are absorbed into the fabric of trope and theme from which authors select material for their stories. In some cases, the ideas and images carried forward have been new inventions, as with Bulwer's etheric "vril" force (see Strube 2013) or Lovecraft's Necronomicon. Partly because it performs this function as a repository of esoteric knowledge, speculative fiction now plays a significant role in shaping religious creativity and behaviour in contemporary secular societies (→Fiction-based esotericism; Partridge 2004, 135–41). This is most visible in contemporary new religious movements in which fandom, spirituality, and metaphysics come together. A well-known example is the →Church of All Worlds, which makes manifest the fictional organisation of the same name in Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961; Cusack 2009). Similar communities have been founded in recent decades, most loosely affiliated and largely online, dedicated to actualising the religious knowledge and experience found in fictional worlds like those of *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars* (Partridge 2004, 137–41; Davidsen 2012). Contemporary →Otherkin culture is also an important aspect of this blurring of fiction and esotericism in real-world

religion. Groups like the House of Khperu and Werewolf Cathedral bring together individuals with fiction-based identities, in this case vampires (→Vampirism) and werewolves respectively, within esoteric environments (Johnston 2016).

Crucially, these post-modern, individualised religious systems are not simply based on fantastic inventions brought into actual religious observance. The fictional concepts which motivate the creation of these contemporary traditions and identities are themselves rooted in a long heritage of literary adaptation and mediation of esotericism. Scholars have attempted to differentiate between esoteric and non-esoteric texts based on the intention of authors or practitioners (e.g. Bogdan 2007, 20), but the diffusion of esotericism into fiction and back out again is better seen as a Möbius strip of transcultural engagement, in which it is often impossible to differentiate between real and fiction-based esotericism. The interaction between esoteric knowledge and speculative fiction has been so frequent and formative that a wide range of tropes, themes, and texts in various media have become active participants in contemporary esotericism. As Christopher Partridge has extensively described, speculative fiction helps de-exoticise and disseminate "→occulture", a "reservoir" of esoteric and Eastern religious concepts which has been made widely accessible by popular culture. Filtered through speculative fiction, once secret and exotic esoteric knowledge has been adapted and defused for mass consumption (Partridge 2004, 84, 119, 138–41).

The implications of this transition are enormous. Speculative fiction has, like Jameson's description of genre in general, "spread out and colonized reality itself" (1997, 249). The impact of fiction-based esotericism seems likely to increase only further as the tropes, themes, and worlds of speculative fiction expand into film, television, cosplay, music, marketing, gaming, and virtual reality. With this growing cultural influence, the way in which moderns distinguish fact from fiction, real from unreal, becomes more deeply affected by the manner in which these distinctions are marked out in science fiction blockbusters and epic fantasy series. Esotericism, as we have seen, has often played a crucial role in both upholding and undermining such epistemic differentiation. Mediated by an array of popular media, contemporary occulture has become an immersive cultural and intellectual dynamo which defines the way in which contemporary individuals establish identity, envision the future, and hypothesise explanations for the unknown and unexplained.

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