Abraham, Ulf. *Fantastik in Literatur und Film. Eine Einführung für Schule und Hochschule.* [*The Fantastic in Literature and Film. An Introduction for Schools and Universities*]. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2012. Paperback, 256 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-3503137152. €19.95.

German-language research on non-mimetic forms (to use a somewhat neutral term) traditionally had a different focus than its Anglophone counterpart. Especially in literary studies, popular genres like science fiction, fantasy, and horror were often treated as escapist trash and thus not worthy of serious study. This may seem rather odd given the fact that the German drama par excellence, Goethe's *Faust*, boasts plenty of "non-realistic" events. There are also the Romantics with protagonists such as the Brothers Grimm or E. T. A. Hoffmann who were very much interested in non-realistic literature. Still, when it comes to the popular non-mimetic genres of the twentieth century, the literary establishment showed a defensive demeanor. The academic situation definitely has improved during the last decades, but science fiction, fantasy, et al. are still an exception in a typical university curriculum. The lack of academic interest may also partly be due to the fact that these genres never were that popular to begin with; while there have always been all kind of pulp publications—the science fiction series *Perry Rhodan* holds a record for being permanently in publication since 1961—German literature neither had a Tolkien nor an Asimov or Heinlein. Even today, translations—mostly from English—constitute a big part of the science fiction and fantasy books being published in German.

The situation is further complicated by the lack of a common theoretical base. The bone of contention is the term "Fantastik" (alternatively also spelled with "ph"). In everyday language, "Fantastik"—or its adjective "fantastisch"—is used as an umbrella term for all non-realistic genres, more or less corresponding to the way it is used by the IAFA. The theoretical discourse on the other hand was heavily influenced by Tzvetan Todorov's famous study *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970). His structuralist model sees the genre's defining factor in the *hesitation* between two opposing explanations for a—maybe only seemingly—supernatural event. Although the English translation of Todorov's book was published in 1975, only three years after the German version, its influence in Anglophone academia was never comparable to the German-speaking world where it dominated the theoretical discussion (this is probably partly due to the different ways French structuralism in general was received in the two academic communities and partly because the vast majority of science fiction and fantasy does not fit Todorov's paradigm).

Definitions and theorizing have always been much more popular in German-speaking research than in Anglo-American academia. A big part of the research into the fantastic of the last 40 years can be summarized as

a "struggle over Todorov" between fervid supporters and opponents of his model, and over the question of *what the fantastic actually is*. While there have been various clever and enlightening additions, modifications and rebuttals to Todorov's concept, this whole branch of research has more or less ground to a halt. Uwe Durst's *Theorie der phantastischen Literatur* (2007), which thoroughly reformulated Todorov's model by cleansing it of all non-structuralist contamination, along with other publications such as my own *THEORETISCH PHANTASTISCH: Eine Einführung in Tzvetan Todorovs Theorie der phantastischen Literatur* [*THEORETICAL FANTASTIC: An Introduction to Tzvetan Todorov's Theory of the Fantastic*] from 2010, there is some vague hope that this discussion may be finally put to rest.

Ulf Abraham's *Fantastic in Literature and Film. An Introduction for Schools and Universities* has to be positioned against this background. Abraham, professor at the University of Bamberg, has written extensively on different varieties of non-realistic literature and has also done considerable research on children's and youth literature as well as on teaching literacy. His new book is primarily addressed to teachers and tries to provide an introduction to the theory, history, motives, reception and the teaching of the fantastic. While his focus is clearly on literature, Abraham also touches other media, mainly film. At the same time, the author tries to counter possible prejudices against the fantastic and shows that the criticism of escapism is misguided since all fantastic stories ultimately are about the world we live in.

This is a lot of ground to cover in only 200 pages of written text (almost 50 pages are used for bibliographies and indexes). Probably too much. An introduction such as this has to manage a delicate balancing act: it needs to discuss much material, but at the same the book must not degenerate into a dry listing of titles and authors. Abraham does not completely succeed here. That the discussions of the various examples often seem superficial is probably an unavoidable ill, the bigger problem is a lack of coherence. As is typical for an introduction, Abraham does not so much develop his own theory of the fantastic but rather summarizes research on its various aspects. There are some recurring motifs like the fantastic as literature dealing with the unfinished aspects ("Unerledigte") of a culture, the frequency of adolescent themes or the high degree of self-reflexivity much fantasy for all ages displays, but there is no thread which holds the book together. Many of Abraham's observations are insightful, but reading the book often felt wearisome. It might be interesting to see how a reader completely unacquainted with fantastic literature responds to Abraham's book, but at least for me, its structure, the succession of chapters and the weighting of topics covered seemed arbitrary at times and I repeatedly wondered whether succeeding paragraphs were actually developing a line of argument or not.

Abraham spends almost 40 pages discussing various theories of the fantas-

tic. Some observations in this chapter are indeed essential. Abraham rightly notes that even so-called realistic literature is never a faithful reproduction of reality but rather a construction following conventions. He also expands on Todorov's notion that the fantastic requires a literal way of reading; the fantastic event must be understood as such and not as a metaphor for something else. Although Abraham's grasp of the theoretical discussion is evident, I have my doubts whether the intended audience really needs such a thorough theoretical walkthrough. Quite likely, the scope of this chapter also reflects the long history of theoretical battles. Still, when it comes to finally defining the fantastic, Abraham seems undecided: though he repeatedly states that his understanding of the fantastic is a wide, all-encompassing one, Todorov's hesitation still holds a special place for him; ultimately, Abraham operates with two conceptions of the fantastic throughout the whole book: a narrow one focusing on the Todorovian clash between two conflicting world orders and a wide one which also includes self-contained secondary worlds like Tolkien's Middle-Earth.

At more than 100 pages, the second chapter is by far the longest, and it's here where the lack of structure is especially striking. Under the title "Cultural Practice of the Literary Fantastic" the historical roots, the relation between the fantastic and modernity, differentiation in styles and media, motifs and different discourses treated by fantastic fiction are covered. Why this is all lumped into one big chapter is not evident; does it, for example, make a lot of sense to discuss the fantastic in other media in a chapter about the literary fantastic?

The last chapter then deals with the teaching of the fantastic. Abraham makes a strong plea for giving this neglected branch of literature more room in class. As an important part of our culture which is very popular among young audiences, it simply cannot be ignored any longer. Also, a lot of fantasy for young readers (e.g. Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* or Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* trilogy) deals "with the activity in which it is realized—the act of *reading*" (207) and is therefore especially apt for teaching literacy.

In general, Abraham is very well informed; but there are some disconcerting lapses, for example the characterization of cyberpunk as "a hybrid of SF and horror" (168) and crediting William Gibson as the creator of the video game *Neuromancer* but not as the author of the groundbreaking novel. Moreover, Abraham believes Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) to be a sequel to Burton's *Batman* from 1989 which is quite simply wrong (169). These curious statements could also be the result of Abraham's occasional awkward phrasing; both passages feel like they haven't been properly proofread.

Altogether, Abraham is more interested in fantasy—*The Neverending Story* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* are repeatedly referred to—and in classical German texts like Franz Kafka's *The Castle* than in SF. The dubious

statement that "the classical utopia is [science fiction's] most important root" (89) seems to confirm this impression. It is also doubtful whether it was wise to include films. Although Abraham insists that movies are not better or worse than novels, but simply different (200), his interpretations don't indicate a very high sensitivity for this medium. For example, Abraham criticizes *Eyes Wide Shut*—whose source, Arthur Schnitzler's *Rhapsody: A Dream Novel* he characterizes as "psychological fantastic" (114)—for its supposed unambiguousness (115), but obviously misses all the subtle cues that the main character's journey might simply be a dream (for instance, just observe the cab Tom Cruise enters throughout the movie).

The final verdict is therefore a mixed one; in its scope and its specific orientation towards teachers Abraham's book is quite unique, but it could have gained a lot from a more careful editing, a more coherent structure and by focusing on fewer aspects.

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