

F

Fantasyⁱ

Ayşem Mertⁱⁱ

You live in a world of fantasy.

And so do I –however different our fantasies might be.

Some fantasies stay the same; others change; many are social, shared --through time and space. Fantasy makes worlds up and it lets us be meaningful agents in those worlds. Our experience of all reality is tinted by a multiplicity of fantasies, our realities by definition entangled in the phantasmal.

What I mean by fantasy, here, is not what is often pitted against reality: It is not false, or lacking in truth value. It might even represent reality more honestly than representations that claim the truth, for it indicates deeper, unarticulated and unconscious desires and fears for the individual subject.

What I mean is also different from a social construct: In society, we agree on a set of social institutions; therefore, they function in the ways they do and have power over us. Be as it may, fantasy refers to a deeper entanglement between the real and the psyche. The constant and radical contingency of the social (and identity) is overwhelming for the individual; hence, the phantasmal represents the domain in which the radical contingency of social reality can be concealed. Only some things, and not *every* thing appears to be in flux, which renders reality manageable and gives the individual agency. Fantasies let us live our lives without 'losing it'. Furthermore, they might get us politically involved, instead of becoming totally lost in the constant flux of social change and the apathy emerging in that flux.

More often, fantasies are shared amongst communities, fixing individualities, allowing for social cooperation. Such shared fantasies reveal themselves in imaginaries, ideologies, myths, and utopias, which promise perfect fulfilment, and explain why things are less than perfect.¹ Such shared fantasies are typically successful when they promise deliverance in a few specific steps. In this way, a fantasy can ensure our allegiance to a certain political movement. This is why a wage-labourer can vote for a party with openly neo-liberal economic plans. The concept of fantasmatic overinvestment (i.e. how we become gripped by certain norms and ideas and form our identities around them) is useful in exploring "problems of reform and transformation – whether social, economic, or political."²

There are some fantasmatic operations in western tradition, and contemporary debates in European thought, that could help us use fantasy in exploring shadow places, and their relationship to the rest of the world. For instance, myths and ghosts are fantasmatic operations, that relate to the concept of fantasy I presented above, which functions by "conceal[ing]–evok[ing] the ultimate horror of the real deadlock characterizing the

¹ Stavrakakis, "Passions of identification."

² Glynos, Burity and de Oliveira, "Critical Fantasy Studies," 148.

constitutive incompleteness of the symbolic order.”³ Myths are fantasies in the word’s communal/social/shared sense of the word; they preempt dislocatory political challenges to the hegemonic system, supports its basics premises and makes them feel natural so they cannot be called into question. This is what Barthes refers to when he suggests that myths make us understand something and impose it on us.⁴ The very principle of myth is to transform *history* (an intersubjectively constructed narrative) into *nature*, justifying the inequalities and the domination under which we suffer.⁵ The individual subject can use defense mechanisms such as sublimation and transgression⁶ to deal with these injustices, but the myths provide us with an image of why things are the way they are. Thus, they shield us from total dislocation, a complete unravelling of meaning, by covering up inconsistencies and internal contradictions in institutional or ideological narratives, and “direct[ing] attention away from equally valued but contradictory societal principles.”⁷

What forces our gaze back into the problem (and reminds us of the radical contingency) is the emergence of a ghost: “haunting is an emergent state: the ghost arises, carrying the signs [of repression]. The ghost demands your attention. The present wavers.”⁸ Avery Gordon understands haunting as floating and indicative; it relates to the subconscious and reveals that which is covered up by the fundamental fantasy of the dominant worldview which promises enjoyment, either in small doses, or in a great big deliverance.⁹ Haunting points to the subliminal crack in the otherwise smooth surface that every ideology aims to establish with its beatific/utopian side. In this sense, haunting is the asking of a question –a pressing one, that can no longer be postponed. Every time the question is pushed back to the subconscious the haunting returns as if to discover the same question all over again.

The discursive function of haunting is to undo the work of the myth. Haunting it is the crack in the surface, pointing to whatever the myth is ‘covering up’. While haunting is the emergence of a tumultuous question, myth is the pre-emptive answer provided within the limits of the existing social horizon.

We live in a world of fantasy and we are haunted by shadows, you and I.

Myths of developmentalism sets the shiny, nice places in front of us as goals to be achieved, as the only desirable path for communities, individuals and nation states. “If you haven’t fully developed yet,” it tells us, “it must be because you are still ‘developing’ --on your way to a full-fledged adult society, complete with a high GDP per capita and low infant mortality rates.” Myths of growth, technology, consumerism tell us that “globalization [offers] new opportunities for trade, investment and capital flows and advances in technology, [...] the growth of the world economy, development and the improvement of living standards around the world, [while] there remain serious challenges, including serious financial crises,

³ Glynos, “The grip of ideology,” 202.

⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*.

⁵ cf. de Guevara, *Myth and narrative*.

⁶ Klein, *Envy and gratitude and other works 1946-1963*.

⁷ Yanow, “Silences,” 399.

⁸ Gordon, “Some thoughts,” 3.

⁹ See for instance Fletcher “Beyond the End of the World.” where he shows how neoliberal ideology retains legitimacy through supporting fantasies that give subjects a small taste of joy in the context of an unattainable promise of full enjoyment (*jouissance*). These fantasies draw on mechanisms of denial or repression, by only acknowledging part of reality or half-truths. To escape the strong grasp of fantasy on reality and to be able to address global ecological problems from a more realistic perspective, Fletcher argues we should adopt a depressive position of mourning. For more on this, see Behagel and Mert, “The political nature.”

insecurity, poverty, exclusion and inequality within and among societies.”¹⁰ Goals are set to address these challenges, deadlines and indicators negotiated to achieve the promise of a sustainable global society, in which infinite growth and ecological conservation are simultaneously possible. The fantasmatic logic of ‘sustainable developmentalism’ offers this wholeness-yet-to-come, while the challenges and the policy goals narrated in the UN documents point to the haunting, the crack. These challenges are narrated, not very surprisingly perhaps, as challenges that globalisation didn’t yet have the chance or time to remedy but not as problems it created or deepened. Nevertheless, it shows that even the narratives of the hegemonic order are haunted by the impossibility of developing endlessly without injustices or ecological collapse, which means they can be highlighted, politicised, radicalised, and changed.

The shiny, nice places of the north are persuasive, but they are not the whole story.

Shadow places haunt the modern western world which repetitively tries to solve the ecological crises by further commodifying (inventing new products ranging from hybrid cars to ecosystem services) and further technologizing (postponing their solutions based on the promise of developing new technologies) them. This is precisely what Plumwood calls ‘dematerialization’; “the process of becoming more and more out of touch with the *material conditions (including ecological conditions) that support or enable our lives.*”¹¹ This is why the Shadow Places Network website describes them as “the underside of the capitalist fantasy.”¹² Shadow places point to how unconvincing the proposed solutions are to the ecological crises we live in. However, this is exactly why what Plumwood described the shadows as “places consumers don’t know about, don’t want to know about, [...] don’t ever need to know about or take responsibility for.”¹³

Exploring fantasies of nature would help us understand this inertia. The desire to not know is the desire to not look at something deeply traumatic, troubling, unchangeable for the individual subjects. The way to gain agency is to understand their (our) unarticulated desires and fears. Not knowing becomes impossible when the fantasy that supports this position is revealed. This is why Braidotti¹⁴ notes that fantasies are fundamental to experiences both ‘affirmative/positive’ and ‘reactive/negative’, and can support an ethics of joy, an ontological form of pacifism towards human and non-humans that is required for ecological justice and a posthuman ethics. Different fantasies of various ‘naturecultures’ moreover can imagine different futures, effectively changing ontological stances, epistemological preferences, political imaginaries and social practices.

And not all shadows fall on the south. ... [Flint \(Michigan\)](#), [Tokaimura](#), [Seveso](#), [Love Canal](#), [Fukushima](#), [Three Mile Island](#), [Minamata](#), ... carry dark shadows and powerful ghosts haunting the seemingly perfect north in its midst. The subliminal cracks in our world of (technoscientific capitalist development) fantasy.

¹⁰ JPOI, “Plan of Implementation.”

¹¹ Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 141.

¹² Shadow Places Network, “Manifesto.”

¹³ Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 146.

¹⁴ Braidotti, “Ethics of Joy.”

References

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies* [1957], translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Behagel, Jelle and Ayşem Mert. "The political nature and political fantasies of nature." In "Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Ways Forward." Special Issue, *Journal of Language and Politics* Special Issue (fc. 2021).
- Braidotti, Rosi. "Ethics of Joy." In *Posthuman Glossary*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, 220-24. Bloomsbury Publishing, (2018): 221-225.
- de Guevara, Berit Bliesemann, ed. *Myth and narrative in international politics: Interpretive approaches to the study of IR*. Springer, 2016.
- Fletcher, Robert. "Beyond the End of the World." In *Psychoanalysis and the Global*, Kapoor, Ilan, (ed.) University of Nebraska Press. (2018): 48-69.
- Glynos, Jason. "The grip of ideology: a Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology." *Journal of political ideologies* 6, no. 2 (2001): 191-214.
- Glynos, Jason, and David Howarth. *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*. Routledge, 2007.
- Glynos, Jason, Joanildo Burity and Gustavo Gilson Souza de Oliveira. "Critical Fantasy Studies: neoliberalism, education and identification. An interview with Jason Glynos." *Serie-Estudos* 24, no. 52 (2019): 145-170.
- Gordon, Avery. "Some thoughts on haunting and futurity." *borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011): 1-21.
- Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI). "The Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development," adopted 4th September 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa.
https://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/POIToc.htm
- Klein, Melanie. *Envy and gratitude and other works 1946-1963*. Random House, 2011.
- Plumwood, Val. "Shadow places and the politics of dwelling." *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (2008): 139-50.
- Shadow Places Network, "A Manifesto for Shadow Places." Accessed September 7, 2020.
<https://www.shadowplaces.net/manifesto>.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis. "Passions of identification: discourse, enjoyment, and European identity." In *Discourse theory in European politics*, edited by David Howarth and Jacob Torfing, 68-92. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Yanow, Dvora. "Silences in public policy discourse: Organizational and policy myths." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 2, no. 4 (1992): 399-423.

© 2020 Ayşem Mert

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



ⁱ Mert, Ayşem. “Fantasy.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).

<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

ⁱⁱ Ayşem Mert is Associate Professor of Environmental Politics at the Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Sweden <aysem.mert@statsvet.su.se>