

C. Bruna Mancini and David Punter, eds., *Space(s) of the Fantastic: A 21st Century Manifesto* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 165 pp., ISBN 978-0-367-68030-5

Reviewed by Lellida Marinelli

*Space(s) of the Fantastic: A 21st Century Manifesto*, edited by Bruna Mancini and David Punter is a collection of essays that could be placed at the disciplinary intersection between studies on the fantastic and the thriving spatial turn, itself an intersection between human geography and literary studies. It fits well within the interdisciplinary discourse and several of the contributions dialogue both with classic studies such as Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1957) and with more recent but indeed significant works such as *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature: The Architectural Void* (2015) by Patricia García, who is also one of the contributors to this volume.

Each chapter presents a different take on using spatiality as an interpretive tool for reading literary texts. As the subtitle of the introduction – “Of Margins, Transgressions, Abnormalities” – suggests, the underlining motifs linking the chapters illustrate how different spaces and non-spaces, alongside the idea that the fantastic itself challenges the idea of reality, represent “threshold[s] between known and unknown” (16).

The aim of the book is to provide readers with an understanding of fantastic literature through the lens of literary geography. As a term, ‘literary geography’ dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a discipline, however, it moves along a spectrum of possibilities and involves different approaches to text. In the introductory volume of the specialised journal *Literary Geographies*, scholar Neil Alexander explains how literary geography for some “is about generating maps from quantitative data as a means of correlating genre with geography or charting the lineaments of a narrative trajectory” (Neal Alexander, “On Literary Geography”, *Literary Geographies*, 1.1 [2015], 3-6). Such is the interesting case of the essay “Rambles in the Fantastic: Digital Mapping Mary Shelley’s *Last Man*” (85-95), where David Sandner argues that both *Frankenstein* and *Last Man* are “‘rambles’, travelbooks in which the main characters trek across real-life landscapes” (85). His contribution is complementary to a map he created with the program VisualEyes5 (see <http://www.viseyes.org/visualeyes/?1967>). The map is a representation of the places Lionel Verny, the main character of Shelley’s *Last Man*, a dystopian novel set between 2073 and 2100, travels to over a span of fifteen years (from 2080 to 2095) and it aims at showing how geography and geopolitics are closely related.

For others, instead, space is a category against which to read certain aspects of the definition of identity. An example is provided by David Punter in “*Magissatopia: The Place of the Witch*” (3-14), an interesting presentation of a typical character and archetype of fantastic literature. David Punter argues that the history of witches is to be read as a history of female abjection and of “communal injustice” (3) on the part of the patriarchal society. But, he continues, there is more: the “question of the witch” (4) is a reminder of the experience all have, of liminal and transient states, which has passed “under the sign of repression” (4). However, as his overview of a variety of texts shows, what Punter defines as *magissatopia*, the space of the witch, is a space the characters need to conjure up for themselves as an extreme solution to create a space of shelter, or to be identified as a place on the

threshold between two continents and the territory of a quest for identity, as in Celia Rees's *Witch Child* (2000).

A further take on the subject is provided by Bruna Mancini's chapter "Spaces of the Fantastic, the Fantastic of Spaces". Referring to Patricia García's *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature: The Architectural Void* (2015), Mancini points to a lack of a "comprehensive model for analysing space in relation to the Fantastic" (17). Of course, literary criticism and comparative literature have focused on space, and Mancini does recall methodologies on space by Bachelard, Foucault and Moretti, and studies on space as an element of narrative by Philippe Hamon and Blanchot, among the others. Nevertheless, according to Mancini, studies on the "'fantastic space' essentially focus on space as a metaphor, not on space as a physical dimension (re)created in the Fantastic texts" (17). Interpretation and metaphor are key aspects of literary expression, and writers, Mancini states, have always had a certain fascination for maps. And as interpretations of space, maps are not neutral – they are the visual and verbal expression of a subjectivity. The interesting connection Mancini makes allows her to introduce the concept and discipline of psychogeography, which some see concerned with the personality of a place, while for others it is a "detailed multilevel examination of select locales that impact upon the writer's own microscopic inner eye" (21). The two texts she analyses, *Lud Heat* by Iain Sinclair (1975) and *Hawksmoor* by Peter Ackroyd (1985), both deal with the mystery that lies behind architect Nicholas Hawksmoor's London churches; and, exploring the city while walking, she argues, is an act of transgression in our contemporary world dominated by speed and fast transportation. (22)

Mystery, myth and uncanny also come forward in Patricia García's "The Literary Motif of the Devil Architect: Where Built Space Meets the Fantastic" (38-53). She aims at showing how, in the biographies of the Devil, space had been reduced to neutral, not significant, setting. A historical-anthropological overview of the origins of the idea of the Devil as an architect in medieval folklore is followed by the analysis of some variations of this motif in several 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century novels and short stories. Taking the move from Todorov's consideration of space as "nothing more than a situational dimension" (40), a container for the unfolding of events over time, García's readings, instead, foreground the notion of space. The Devil creates places unsuitable for human habitation or that have an effect on the characters, as in the interesting example of Doménech's short story "La escalera del Sarto" (1980), where a staircase with absurd features defies the laws of physics, strongly recalling *Relativity* (1953), Escher's famous lithograph. Space, thus, becomes and *is* the diabolic element, having an agency and active role in the *dénouement* of the narration.

According to Todorov's classic definition of the fantastic, one of the conditions is the reader's, but also the character's hesitation "between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described" (Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Press of Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 1973, 33). Such hesitation, alongside "the pleasure of fear, of transgression, of the uncanny to go ahead" (2) to which the editors refer in the introduction, may be identified as a factor which moves the narration forward. As David Ian Paddy shows in "Home Is Where the Dark Is: A Literary Geography of Daphne du Maurier's Disturbing Genres" (96-114), it is possible to re-think spatiality as "occupying a similar location of hesitation between the psychological-imagined and the supernatural-real" (103). Hesitation also comes forward in texts which question genre-belonging such as *The Fifth Season* (2015) by Nora K. Jemisin and *This Census Taker* (2016) by China Miéville, analysed by Nicoletta Vallorani in "Of Borders and (W)holes: Porous

Geographies of the Fantastic in China Miéville and Nora K. Jemisin” (144-157). Vallorani re-reads the concept of borders and border-crossing in the narratives where void is a metaphor and where space is not a place built for protection. A different type of border is the mirror, or, more interestingly, the frame, which, as Maria Teresa Chialant argues in “Border Imagery in Victorian ‘Supernatural’ Short Stories”, is an architectural threshold between the living and the dead, and is for this reason a “perimeter of the fantastic” (76). In the three short stories by Le Fanu, Oliphant and Hardy, she focuses on the physical representation of the individual portrayed in the picture, partly following Deborah Manion’s critical position according to which the exchange of perspectives between viewer and viewed in Victorian fiction is a means to contest issues of power relations in spheres of the human which will only be theorized much later in the twentieth century.

Spatial analysis of literary genres (“Place and Space in the Literary Utopia”, 115-130); reading chronotopes against the grain of Bakhtin’s definitions to show the use of the supernatural to alter characters’ experiences of time and space (“Time and Space in Fantastic Theory and Fiction of Charles Nodier’s *Trilby*”, 54-69); identifying the new perspective and political significance of portal fantasy quest narratives which breach the conventions of time and space (“Seeing Things: Competing Worlds in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and China Miéville’s *The City and the City*”, 131-143); these all enrich the debate on a topic that has been and is still of primary interest.

On the whole, despite the fact that a less specialised reader would have benefited of a more detailed introduction, the remarkable advantage of this edited collection is the way it stimulatingly expands knowledge on the fantastic and on literary geographical studies.