

***Fantastika and the Fantastic: Poetics and Pragmatics of Anglo-American
Fantastic Fiction. St.Petersburg: Petropolis, 2013.***

***Irina Golovacheva, PhD, DSc,
Professor of the Department of English
Philology and Translation
St.Petersburg State University***

Summary

Are there any integrating features in the texts representing the images of *the ghostly*, of *the scientific*, of *the fairy*, of *the ideal*, or of *the nightmarish*? Is it logical that the works highlighting these themes should be classified as belonging to the unified field of 'fantastic fiction'? Such issues cannot be tackled without overcoming the terminological chaos that has been characteristic of the theory of the fantastic since its birth. The term *the fantastic* is employed by the majority of critics outside Russia. The initial vagueness of the term results in certain problems. Indeed, it can be applied to a great number of radically different works of fiction. Until recently, it had been used in European and American theory as an umbrella term to identify any fantastic imagery belonging to any period of literary history. Other suggested terms – *fantasy* and *fantastic fiction* – can hardly help make the overall picture clearer. A much more adequate term seems to be *fantastika* (John Clute) which sounds so familiar to the Slav ear. It comprises the whole genre arsenal of the 'fantastic literature': science fiction (including the related genre of utopia), fantasy, gothic horror (or simply 'horror,' according to alternative classification), as well as hybrid genres.

Prof. Irina Golovacheva's book offers a comprehensive approach to *fantastika*. Almost the entire spectrum of *fantastika* is viewed through the lens of *the fantastic*. Still, her argument is not restricted by declaring *fantastika* a specific kind of fiction. *The fantastic* appears to be equally indispensable. Both notions used together allow Golovacheva critic to view *fantastika* as a set of genres of formula stories. But, suspending the discussion of genres, she also employs the term *the fantastic* to define the ways of picturing the strange, the alien, the extreme (the excessive or the deficient), the abnormal, the destructive, the unstable. The latter is treated as a means of representation of the unreal, the radically strange, the extreme (excessive or deficient), the abnormal, and, sometimes, the destructive. Moreover, the term *the fantastic* makes it possible to explore the marginal territories where the fantastic imagery penetrates 'the real' – this is what happens in psychological mimetic fiction. Despite the benefits the term *fantastika* offers, the following questions are poised in the book:

1. Is the fantastic present in any genre of *fantastika*?

2. Does the presence of the fantastic in the text signify that the latter is a sample of *fantastika*?

As the author of the book argues, the pragmatics of *the fantastic* differs radically in gothic horror, fantasy, science fiction and utopia. The taxonomy of the latter two genres is revised.

It is crucial to specify the taxonomy of science fiction since its borders are being increasingly blurred not only by utopia but also by the neighboring genres of horror and fantasy. All presently approved definitions of SF center on two seminal theories, the one by James Gunn, and the other by Darko Suvin. Golovacheva's critical theory mostly concerns the nature of *cognition* in SF and that of *alternativeness* (otherness) of SF worlds. She suggests that Suvin's definition could be improved if *cognition* in SF is specified as being *consistent* or *critical*, if not scientific. Also, it is argued that in many cases SF texts depict the outcome of regress, not only that of progress. Finally, an improved definition of SF is advanced.

Since utopia at large does not employ *the fantastic*, Golovacheva reconsiders its placement in the realm of *fantastika*.

Besides, the book registers the marginal territories where *the fantastic* intrudes into the 'real.' The research of all such phenomena is based on a new approach to both classical texts, written by W. Shakespeare, M. Shelly, N. Hawthorne, E.A. Poe, H. James, R. L. Stevenson, B. Stoker, A. Huxley, I. Asimov, on the one hand, and to the works by minor writers, on the other. There is also a discussion of some of the latest samples of fantasy (St. Meyer) and gothic horror (Gl. Duncan) in a separate section.

Any genre of *fantastika* – be it utopia, gothic horror or science fiction – directs the mind toward an unknown or underexplored reality. The distortions and projections found in the field of *fantastika* reveal its cognitive potential. A set of specific features makes the identification of each genre possible.

Golovacheva's revisionary classification, employing both notions, helps to identify the genre of any fantastic text more precisely, which gives both the critic and the reader a much finer instrument of interpretation.

The multi-disciplinary approach allows the author to illuminate the process of crossing boundaries between literature and science as well as those between fact and fiction.

