

Review/Recension

PER ISRAELSON  
**ECOLOGIES OF THE  
IMAGINATION**  
**Theorizing The  
Participatory Aesthetics of  
The Fantastic**

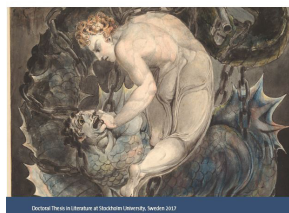
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Ecologies of the Imagination

Theorizing the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic

Per Israelson



Doctoral Thesis in Literature at Stockholm University, Sweden 2017

Per Israelson's doctoral thesis *Ecologies of the Imagination: Theorizing the Participatory Aesthetics of the Fantastic* is an impressive albeit slightly daunting opus. His dissertation has an "iterative and meandering style" (353), but it is one that he found it necessary to adopt in order to demonstrate his case, arguing for a novel approach to the fantastic that goes beyond more conventional epistemological studies. Israelson's approach is decidedly posthuman, non-interpretive and open-ended. It is in the style of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work: anti-hierarchical and rhizomatic; nomadic and de-territorializing.

One therefore has to relax and let his thesis unfold, the connections multiplying as his work gathers momentum. It is also worth saying that it is a very well-constructed thesis, and sumptuously illustrated with over 100 coloured insets. My only criticism would be that many of these are far too small to discern the detail, which often requires the reading of speech bubbles. It is also very clearly written, especially considering that Israelson's first language isn't English, and he wields a huge vocabulary of technical terms in order to capture the subtleties and interconnections of his argument.

The brilliance of its construction begins with the cover illustration featuring Blake's image "Michael Binding Satan". At the level of content, this image shows the impossibility of Michael's task (i.e. containing such an anarchic force); but, at a deeper level, the image also features as a "hypericon"; that is, as an illustration that is self-referential, "destabilizing the levels of framings and borders surrounding the representation" and thereby "breaking free from the context and confinement of surrounding structuring principles" (103-4). It

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therefore functions most appositely as a way of framing Israelson's entire argument, while demonstrating its rhizomatic nature. Beyond that, Blake's image also features in a comic book series that Israelson discusses: Mike Carey and Peter Gross' *The Unwritten* (2009–2015), where Blake's framed painting becomes an intertext, concealing a safe embedded in a wall, the safe itself containing a magical door-knob that allows access to different worlds.

This notion of linkages between things ("assemblages" in Deleuze and Guattari's terms) shows why Israelson speaks about "ecologies of the imagination". The phrase suggests a more immersive and open-ended approach to the way the fantastic operates; it captures a state of becoming in which we too, as active participants, are implicated, and in which, as in this particular instance, Blake's own archive is continually being refreshed and extended – as is explored more fully elsewhere in Israelson's work. This idea of archives being vibrant and unfinished, comes, of course, from Derrida. Israelson therefore likes to speak about things being "operationally ajar" (remember that magic doorknob?), attaining "closure" only temporarily in artefacts that are themselves always in process, dynamic. As Israelson puts it, his is an aesthetics of "ontogenesis", of becoming, in which he as researcher is also immersed, hence his occasional personal appearances in the thesis, whether it be on a visit to the Rockefeller Center building – with its carved Blakean reliefs – or simply relaxing in a sauna.

It is this sense of being always open, ajar, that gives Israelson's work such energy, something that he himself ties to the original experience of ekphrasis; that is, a term that has come to designate the way that the verbal medium depicts visual art, although originally it was a far more powerful term seeking to capture the very physicality of language as something that "corporeally imprints an experience" on us (106).

Israelson's thesis itself consists of three main case histories, though this phrase smacks of the sort of hermeneutic approach that he is keen to distance himself from, preferring a less epistemologically grounded, less interpretive vocabulary. Israelson's approach takes more account of participation and affect. These in-depth studies, then, or "media ecologies", examine J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth, the comic book superhero Miracleman, and the oeuvre of William Blake. But to state this is merely to scratch the surface of what is a formidable range of scholarship.

His study of Blake's work is particularly apposite given the way that this author/artist's work has been compromised by scholarly

editions that have sundered the artwork from the poems, even down to his vibrant chirography being reduced to cold typography. It does seem ironic that the man who wrote "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans" (quoted 275) has had so much of his own particular vision enervated. Fortunately, the digitalization of Blake's works has allowed modern scholars to reconsider his oeuvre – and specifically, to see how it challenges older, humanist conceptions of literature. As Israelson argues, Blake's illuminated words are more appositely seen as assemblages with a distinct materiality: "The creative imagination of Blake's poetic perception functions here as the system-environment hybrid of ecological sympoiesis" (278). Whereas "autopoiesis" suggests that an artist is privately responsible for producing an autonomous artwork, "sympoiesis" recognises that an artist is situated in an ecological context involving history, place, the media available; and in which recipients are similarly located. As Israelson wittily expresses it, the oppositions on which liberal humanism depends (separating out subject and object, a work and its interpretation) are "the very oppositions Blake strives to burn away by the corrosives of his infernal method" (288). Israelson is here referring to the fact that Blake, as an engraver, used acids to etch his copper plates ready for the printing process. To understand Blake then, involves an "interaction with the archive, evincing how spatiality and movement of hand are as important as reading and interpretation" (291).

Israelson introduces various expressions for this more participatory approach to aesthetics, like Jane Bennett's terms "vibrant matter" and "distributed agency", and Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker's phrase "flat ontology". Whitson and Whittaker thereby conceive Blake's archive as "an ontologically democratic network or society made up of everything from the ideas that inspired Blake to the material objects he used in his artwork, the animals and plants he ate, and the individuals who were influenced by his work" (297). Moreover, they argue that contemporary allusions to Blake (as above) are adding to this network, such that he becomes "only one node in an increasingly complex society that continually defines and redefines" his archive (297).

In terms of the more recent intertexts, the comic book series *The Invisibles* (written by Grant Morrison 1994–2000, with various artists), and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000) plus its various offshoots are examined as part of the media ecology of Blake's world. Pullman's work will be of particular interest to children's literature scholars. Following a number of other critics, Israel-

son notes how the initial trilogy ends up closing down the narrative possibilities of *Dust*, reducing it to “the single meaning of reified consciousness” (335). However, Israelson then considers Pullman’s supplementary texts, *Lyra’s Oxford*, *Once Upon a Time in the North*, and *The Collectors* (*The Book of Dust* had yet to be published), showing how they challenge Pullman’s original epic form, and do so in a more performative way, introducing other forms of presentation – “images, texts, games, maps, book design” – and, in *The Collector*, the audiobook format (335). A more Blakean “notion of an ontogenetic perception” is thereby evoked, in which readers are required to participate in Pullman’s evolving ecology.

Israelson’s discussion of Tolkien’s Middle-earth is similar, but far more extensive, showing Israelson’s encyclopedic knowledge of the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* (1983–1996) edited by Christopher Tolkien, let alone all the other intertexts and their media – the films of course, but also games and other ephemera. And, beyond this – in line with Israelson’s use of flat ontology – the way that copyright, editorial practices, parody and philology are other crucial linkages in the shaping of the ecology of Middle-earth as a fantasy world.

This is a work that will obviously have much of interest to researchers in these discrete areas, alongside those with an interest in comic studies. But, beyond that, in its innovative approach to fantasy, it has much that is of more far-reaching theoretical import (and Israelson has an extensive section discussing previous theorists of fantasy/the fantastic, about whom he makes some telling points). I’m sure that Israelson’s work is destined to become more generally known and to influence future scholarship discussing the fantastic – as it should.

David Rudd  
Emeritus Professor  
University of Bolton