Note to “On the Edge: The Fantastic in Hungarian Literature and Culture”

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Introducing the special issue and the concept behind might as well begin with a brief explanation of the title. It is worth mentioning that the original title, as evidenced by our “call for papers” was “On the Edge: Hungarofuturism.” While we intended to use the term as an alternative for “Hungarian futurisms,” it would have led to ambiguity, due to the term’s association with the 2017 “Hungarofuturist Manifesto”, a satiric response to and parody of contemporary nationalist myth-making. Another pragmatic reason for changing the title was that it simply did not cover the scope of the papers we had received. More importantly, however, “futurism” in Hungarian has different connotations to that of the Anglo-American usage, and here we talk about the satirical reaction to certain nationalistic rhetorics rather than a proper artistic movement. For this reason, we felt we cannot offer relevant parallels to more established or emerging futurisms such as Afro, African and Sinofuturism, among others. The remaining part of the title “On the Edge,” on the one hand, refers to the geopolitical situation of Hungary, and its historical, philosophical and spiritual position as a “border” between Western and Eastern Europe, resulting in a continuous struggle with belonging, and forming a stable identity.

On the other hand, we felt, it also refers to the presence, reception and development of fantastic genres in Hungarian literature and culture: they have been gradually moving from the margins to the very centre of mainstream attention, meaning that they are “on the edge” of a great paradigm shift. The centralization of the fantastic owes greatly to the concentrated efforts of all participants—writers, publishers, fan communities, and audiences in general—within the field. While the 1990s still saw the fantastic as cheap and inferior mass market products, publishing houses, like Agave, Gabó or Könymolyképző, since the early 2000s have devoted increasing time and effort not only to produce good translations and quality editions of international SFF texts, but also to discover and mentor a new generation of Hungarian writers. Fan groups have grown into communities which embrace the complex layered meanings of texts, and especially the online communities have evolved into sites for sharing and communication.

There is a visibly growing interest in not just the fantastic itself but the study of it. In the past few years, major Hungarian literary journals and portals have published special issues dedicated to fantastic genres. Helikon published Posztmodern Gótika [Postmodern Gothic] in 2020, Ildikó Limpár’s’s edited collection Rémesen Népszerű: Szörnyek a populáris kultúrában [Bloody Popular – Monster in Pop Culture] also came out in 2020, and the first issue of Praé’s Spekulatív Fikció [Speculative fiction] series appeared in March 2021. They do not only share several authors—some of whom are also featured in this collection—they also share similar, recurring critical approaches,
namely the hybridisation of genres, the revival of post/apocalyptic and Weird fictions, as well as a focus on ecocriticism and posthumanism, trends which also appear in this special issue.

Considering all this, it is not surprising that the papers presented in this special issue are largely concerned with time, historicity, spatiality and material culture. While the articles, published in two part in the Winter and Spring issues of 2022, can be read in any order, we arranged them in four distinct groups, exploring different areas from the history and historicity of science fiction, Kádár era science fiction, the emerging New/Weird scene of Hungary, to folklore, and the fantastic representations of the country’s capital, Budapest.

The collection starts off with Sándor Szélesi’s “The Hungarian Way of Science Fiction” (translated by Gergely Kamper), an invaluable introduction to the history of science fiction in Hungary, and an overview of the different magazines and fanzines, book publishers, and fan communities that defined the understanding of science fiction in Hungary. This historical context is further established and complicated by Ádám Gerencsér’s “Alternative Histories: A Survey of The Alternate Histories of An Isolated Literary Corpus” and Áron Domokos in “The Fight For Uchronia: Counterfactual Histories in Contemporary Hungarian Short Fiction”. Both texts are concerned with the representations of alternate histories as early, fairly mainstream examples of science fiction/speculative fiction, re-imagining some of the most traumatic events of the 20th century.

These perspectives on historicism, alternative histories and science fiction allow for the exploration of the fantastic originating in the Kádár era, spanning three decades from the 1950s to the 1980s. This coincides with the Golden Age and New Wave of Anglo-American Science Fiction, and sees the beginnings of Hungarian Science Fiction television and film, magazines and anthologies, borrowing from, mocking, and amalgamating the clichés of both Western and the USSR SFF production. Ildikó Limpár in “Undead Culture in the East: The Hungarian Vampire Negotiating the National Past in Comrade Drakulich” demonstrates how the fantastic facilitated political criticism and Daniel Panka in “Lemon Juicers in Space: The Adventures of Pirx (1972-73)” explores the material culture of the Kádar era and how the rhetoric of science fiction is utilised for political satire in times where open political criticism and discourse was not possible. Finally, in “Star Girl on the Time Train: Children’s science fiction by Hungarian women authors in the Kádár era (1956-1989)”, Bogi Takács maps women’s participation in SFF production despite the difficulties they faced, and offers brief portraits of a spectrum of well-known and almost forgotten women who wrote fantastic stories.

The last group of articles focuses on fantasy. Mónika Rusvai’s “Copper, Silver and Gold: Metal Woods Set to a New Purpose in Hungarian Folk Fantasy” provides a great overview and introduction to the history of folk and fairy tales, and explores the “metal woods” motif in Csilla Kleinheinecz’s seminal fantasy trilogy. Éva Vancsó in “The Representation of Otherness in Contemporary Hungarian Urban Fantasy” and András Molnár in “Poetic Justice for the Nonhuman Realm: Anita Moskát’s Irha és bőr as a Tool to Reflect on Public Life” both analyse
Anita Moskát’s most recent novel, signalling how the Hungarian fantastic begins to address entering the Anthropocene through human-animal relationships. Continuing and further complicating the discussion of Weird spatiality, András Fodor in “Amongst you, we are the witnesses of withering: Hungarian New Weird spatial formations in the short fictions of Lilla Erdei, Balázs Farkas, and Attila Veres” provides a great overview of the emergence and emerging literary infrastructure of weird fiction in Hungary.

Finally, in many ways Péter Kristóf Makai’s article “The Austro-Hungarian Melting Pot: The Mythopoetics of Borgovia in The Incredible Adventures of Van Helsing” ties in the different themes we have introduced and seen in the collection from historicism and cultural memory politics to cultural identity, material culture and spatiality.

As the closing section of the collection, we solicited five interviews from prominent authors, editors and scholars—all of whom represent and excel in more than one of these categories—to reflect on their experiences witnessing, documenting and mapping, and changing the meaning and relevance of the fantastic in Hungarian literature and culture. In order to emphasise these unique points of view, we asked largely the same questions regarding the changing fantastic scene in Hungary, the way genres themselves are interpreted differently, and interrogating artistic practices which subvert the Anglo-American SFF traditions.

Margit Sárdi, perhaps one of the first SFF scholars in Hungary and the founder of the Magyar Sciftöténeti Társaság and István “Steve” Szabó founding editor-in-chief of Próza Nostra, a web platform that serves as a hub for critical and creative discussions about the fantastic represent different generations of science fiction fans, scholars and critics, giving insight into the state of the fantastic from the 1980s to the 2020s. Csilla Kleinheincz, author of the Ölomerdő [Lead Forest] trilogy and co-editor of the annual Hungarian SFF anthology series, and Bogi Takács, award-winning SFF author and critic have both contributed tremendously to the reception and shaping of the fantastic discourse in Hungary. In their respective interviews they also talk about their own creative practice, and approaches to writing SFF, as well as their insight into the future of the fantastic in Hungary. Last but not least, we were privileged to interview Theordora Goss, Hungarian-American author of The Strange Case of the Alchemist’s Daughter, European Travel of the Monstrous Gentlewoman, The Sinister Mystery of the Mesmerizing Girl, and ask about inspiration, diaspora and creative practice.

The articles and the interviews themselves are in conversation with each other. The first six papers, focusing on time and historicity and the Kádár era, can be juxtaposed with Margit Sárdi’s insights on unaddressed historical trauma, and how fantastic tropes from vampires to space and time travel can shape them, as well as the socio-political discourse surrounding these traumas. My intuition is that the current burgeoning interest in Weird and Horror genres in Hungary, as noted by all interviews, is a sign of the re-emerging of these traumas, and the need to engage with them, as well as picking up on the current anti-capitalism, posthumanist and ecological re-evaluation of the human-non-human relationships. Perhaps the writer and fan communities whose importance
the interviews noted can shape how these traumas—old and new—can be expressed, processed and discussed. Related to this, Bogi Takács in their interview notes that there is no shortage of inclusive SFF texts in Hungary but there is a visibility problem. An important takeaway for us readers, fans and critics would be to give the necessary attention to these historically marginalised voices.

We believe the collection is timely and topical, and hope the increasing attention will catalyse the further development of fantastic scholarship in Hungary, perhaps even beyond our borders. We also hope that the critical interest will lead to the translation of the wonderful works our authors have covered, and more. Finally, we would like to thank all the contributors for sharing their great scholarship, knowledge and experience, and the SFRA Review’s editorial team for the opportunity and their tremendous work putting everything together for publishing.

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