

Conspicuous fabrications: speculative fiction as a tool for confronting the post-truth discourse

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It has become an increasingly common suggestion that we are currently living in the ‘post-truth’ world, where compelling storytelling has usurped the place of empirical facts in determining our shared social reality. The impression of reality becoming endlessly mutable by storytelling is bolstered by the idea of narratives as mediators of human experience, developed across humanities and social sciences, becoming part of a popularized post-truth discourse. In this discourse, stories are viewed as tools for constructing the world, and attributed power to create their own truths. I argue that the challenge to meaningful communication posed by this sentiment can be uniquely effectively confronted in speculative storytelling, and especially currently enormously popular fantasy fiction. By creating thought experiments in conspicuously fabricated settings, fantasy stories highlight storytelling as a means for coming to terms with different realities – and provide their audiences with tools for critically examining and challenging the post-truth discourse.

Keywords: speculative fiction, fantasy, Kazuo Ishiguro, post-truth, narrative turn, thought experiment, narratives as tools

Introduction

In this article, I examine contemporary speculative storytelling, and particularly fantasy fiction, as a device for confronting the notion of a post-truth world permeating the current media discourse. Fantasy stories are having a huge moment in the 21st century, as evidenced by the influence and attention that works such as *Game of Thrones* television series, *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy, *Harry Potter* multimedia franchise and video games like *The Witcher* have come to command, to only name a few of the most prominent examples. One reason for that surge in popularity, I believe, is to be found in the ability of fantasy storytelling, through its overt fictionality, to communicate ideas effectively in the current age of the post-truth discourse, where any narrative presented as representative of reality risks contest. By creating conspicuous fabrications – stories that free their audiences from pressures to wonder whether they are believable, because they are obviously not – fantasy acts as a tool for engaging in thought experiments.

Speculative fiction, most commonly understood as an umbrella term for science fiction and fantasy, is usually conceptualized as storytelling which invites its audiences to consider different *what-if* scenarios to encourage them to see the world from a new angle (e. g. Roine, 2016, p. 14). These scenarios, especially in fantasy stories, are blatantly contrary to real-world circumstances: obviously artificial constructions created for the purpose of playing with ideas (see Polvinen, 2018, p. 77). They rely on the flagrant fictionality of these narratives, produced by their inventive worldbuilding (Roine 2016, p. 33). The strange imaginary worlds presented in fantasy emphasize the experimental quality of speculative scenarios, making this form of fiction a vehicle for considering ideas in purpose-built, carefully controlled conditions, alike with philosophical thought experiments (cf. Egan 2016, p. 140).

By crafting these conspicuous fabrications, fantasy becomes an especially effective form of fiction for confronting the impression, oft-repeated in contemporary media discourse, that

our shared reality is produced by storytelling. This impression is, I argue, at the core of the post-truth sentiment, where the humanly accessible world is thought to consist entirely of converging and conflicting narratives. Such a sentiment is further bolstered by the widespread academic interest in the use of narratives across humanities and social sciences during the past couple of decades (Hyvärinen, 2010; Meretoja, 2014; Roussin, 2017) putting emphasis on the notion that storytelling is a fundamentally human way of existing in the world.

My case study, the 2015 fantasy novel *The Buried Giant* by the Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, creates a thought experiment especially topical in the world of post-truth discourse: “what if the world was actually created in storytelling?” Utilizing the narrative conventions of fantasy fiction, Ishiguro’s novel approaches this theme conspicuously as an experimental way of thinking, and therefore gives the reader cognitive tools for confronting the post-truth discourse saturating contemporary media. I suggest that by engaging readers in the process of imagining complex imaginary worlds, fantasy narratives like Ishiguro’s novel can effectively lay bare the narratively constructed nature of reality, and prompt audiences to see their own part in the act of constructing worlds – both fictional and real.

Post-truth discourse as a challenge for fiction

Ever since it was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries’ Word of the Year in the autumn of 2016, prompted by its prominence in Anglophone media discussion around the Brexit referendum and the American presidential election that same year, ‘post-truth’ has become something of a buzzword for contemporary media discourse, along with related concepts ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ (Mair, 2017). Most commonly evoked in the context of political commentary, it is used to conceptualize the trend in populist political rhetoric of appealing to emotional reactions of the public rather than

rational, evidence-based argumentation. It also pops up in lamentations of the alleged gullibility and scientific illiteracy of that same public, choosing to believe whatever demagogue manages to spin the most compelling story for them (Rochlin, 2017, p. 389; Habgood-Coote, 2018, p. 12). In the post-truth world we are currently living in, the argument goes, emotions trump facts, experiences become insight, and everybody feels entitled to their own truths (see Laybats & Tredinnik, 2016, p. 204; Rochlin, 2017, p. 386). As a result, there is an impression of a world of extreme relativism, where everybody lives in their own version of reality, built on narratives that appeal to their personal beliefs – an “alternative epistemic space” (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017, p. 360) reinforced by the information bubbles created by social media (*ibid.* 3p. 61; Laybats & Tredinnik, 2016; Mair, 2017, p. 3).

This is, in a nutshell, the gist of the post-truth discourse permeating contemporary media environments. In this article, I do not take any firm stance about whether that discourse accurately represents the current political climate, or the public perception of the world in general. Whether the bedrock of objective, empirically provable truths forming the basis of our perception of the world is really eroding or already disappeared – or, as some have suggested, never existed in the first place (Habgood-Coote, 2018, p. 10) – is a question outside the scope of this article, and quite probably that of narrative studies. However, this post-truth discourse, by which I mean the ongoing media discussion *about* the so-called post-truth world, is definitively a force at play in contemporary media climate – and therefore, a force that influences, in its part, how the audience comes to see the world. In their attempt to confront the alleged post-truth sentiment in political rhetoric, academics, journalists, bloggers and political commentators easily end up reinforcing the notion of truth these days being endlessly mutable by storytelling. As Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis have aptly put it, it seems that the only way to counter the barrage of misinformation is to tell even better stories (2018, p. 8).

The post-truth discourse employed in contemporary media plays a part in creating the sentiment that every claim has an agenda behind it; that all kinds of con-artists are always out to get us; that there is nothing we can even do about it, because our very identities are based on stories we have been told, stories we tell about ourselves, and stories spoon-fed us by the mass media. The post-truth discourse, no doubt in an honest pursuit of enabling the public to separate reliable information from unreliable, ends up as a byproduct to effect a sense of paranoia, an anxiety-inducing perception of a world where no information outlet can be trusted, and there may not even be any meaningful reality behind the endless storm of conflicting and intermingling stories. One is left with the impression that stories are, after all, everything there is. This impression has led some scholars to conceive post-truth as a bastardized version of academic postmodernism, with its relativism and skepticism trickling down from the academia to the news media and the public discourse (Mair, 2017, p. 4). Following the conceptions of contemporary reality as a simulation created by the mass media, famously expressed by critics of postmodernism such as Fredric Jameson (1991) and Jean Baudrillard (1994), the post-truth world evoked in current media discourse is an extreme version of such a simulation – a web of fabrications effectively replacing any objective reality, making any truth claims seem either naïve, dishonest, or obsolete.

In this impression of a simulation, storytelling is approached as a way of not only organizing but outright constructing our shared social reality, and narratives are attributed a transformative power to shape the world (Meretoja & Davis, 2018, p. 7). In the wake of postmodernism, these world-constructing narratives have become an object of keen interest across humanities and social sciences – the paradigm shift called the narrative turn (Hyvärinen, 2010) – which, subsequently, has served to draw even more attention towards narratives as instruments for various purposes. As Philippe Roussin (2017, p. 385) has noted, the narrative turn has marked a shift of focus from the narrative structure itself to what narratives can be used for. They are considered tools, and extremely versatile tools at that: they are instruments for making sense of history, for

relating with other people, for building personal and collective identities, among other things. The understanding of narratives as tools further reinforces the idea that they can be used, consciously and purposefully, to shape the world. Accordingly, they are promoted as tools for capturing the public interest, for purposes as diverse as political persuasion, advertisement, and science communication. On the other hand, such powerful tools are considered dangerous when abused. As Meretoja and Davis state, the “power of narrative” can “help us become better listeners, readers and citizens, or it can mislead, disturb and corrupt” (2018, p. 2).

As I see it, the post-truth sentiment is best conceived not so much as the trickling down of postmodernist relativism to the public discourse, but as the logic of the narrative turn becoming a part of that discourse. In the popularized version of that logic, employed by popular media and countless self-help publications, narratives are promoted as tools for self-improvement, influencing people and changing the world. By telling a story – and in the age of social media, everybody is supposed to be a storyteller – one gives meaning to the world and participates in the creation of our shared reality. From that notion, it is not a huge leap to conclude that this narratively created social reality is the only world there is, or at least the only one that matters. Narratives become effective as tools for constructing that reality not by their truthfulness, but by their shareability and emotional appeal.

That is one way to tell the origin story of the post-truth world. The term post-truth itself, of course, implies a story: a story of how our outlook to the world *was* based on some generally accepted, true perception of reality in some bygone era, but not anymore. It is a story resembling the age-old master narrative of humanity falling out of grace, moving from a simpler, innocent time of verifiable facts, engaged public and honest politicians to the current mess of rampant misinformation, social media bubbles, alternative facts and gullible idiots. In this story, academics and responsible journalists – as well as all people who fancy themselves critically thinking individuals – are cast as heroes fighting back, questing towards a return to that lost innocence. It is a compelling, if fairly grim,

way of narrativizing the current dystopic state of the world. This story is used as a tool for countering the post-truth sentiment – as one of those “better stories” Meretoja and Davis mention. The trouble is, by creating a narrative of post-truth as a threat to society, these storytellers only end up reinforcing the notion that stories are all there is.

The narratives of a fall from grace, of losing our way, of leaving behind something precious and irreplaceable – those are stories that may induce anxiety, nostalgia, even despair. That, by itself, could be cited as a reason for the current popularity of fantasy storytelling, which is commonly understood to be a genre for troubled times (see Suvin, 2016). In his influential essay ‘On Fairy-Stories’, J. R. R. Tolkien commends fantasy stories as a way of escaping the unbearable prison of modern life (2006, pp. 151–152), and through its long history, this literary tradition has been associated with such escapism – for better or, usually, worse (see Rayment, 2014; Hassler-Forest, 2016). The tendency of fantasy storytelling to create “secondary worlds” removed from real-world circumstances and possibilities has attracted scorn especially from the scholarship of its sister genre, science fiction. Darko Suvin, for example, has stated that while literary escapes from reality may be beneficial for an individual’s wellbeing, they are liable to prove detrimental to society at large, encouraging audiences to turn their back on important political and societal issues – issues that science fiction focuses on (2016, p. 392).

The idea of fantasy stories as means for escaping the world echoes the sentiment that narratives are tools – although in this case, tools for breaking out of reality, rather than shaping it. But what happens to those tools when there is no clear consensus of an objective reality anymore? How could they be repurposed? Fiction as an art form, in general, faces some challenges amidst both the post-truth discourse and the instrumentalization of narratives. The former poses the question of what is the purpose, or even distinction, of fictional stories in a world where everybody can choose their own reality anyway. The latter asks what fiction is good for, urging it to justify its existence. If fictional narratives are considered tools – which, in a world where narratives are attributed power to

shape the world, they can hardly avoid to be – they must have functions. The salient question in this situation is, which uses of these tools are safe and helpful, and which are potentially harmful?

When fictional narratives are analyzed specifically in terms of the narrative turn, like Meretoja has done in her work on the French new novel, the works are typically treated as symptomatic of that turn: the focus is on analyzing how those fictions illustrate the importance of narratives perceived in the world in general (Meretoja, 2014, p. 3). As such, fiction appears as a tool for putting our social reality under a microscope: by examining the symptoms present in fiction, one can diagnose broader cultural conditions. The problem with this symptomatic view of fiction is the same as with the narrative of the post-truth: it reinforces the way of conceiving the world as a product of stories, even while trying to challenge it. If fiction is viewed as symptomatic of the post-truth sentiment, it legitimizes the post-truth discourse.

However, in addition of being symptomatic of changes in our worldview, narrative fiction also functions as a tool for examining those changes critically. This is especially true for fantasy fiction, which, through its overt imaginativeness, can experiment with the very idea of a narratively constructed world without committing to the notion that this idea is an accurate representation of the state of the actual reality. Such an experimental way of thinking about the world is at the core of Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*. The communicative devices of speculative fiction, and especially fantasy, enable the consideration of the world as a product of storytelling in the form of a thought experiment. This tendency to create thought experiments makes fantasy an especially potent tool for both examining and criticizing the contemporary popular understanding of stories and how they construct our shared reality. It is also, I think, an important reason for why even authors not previously known for writing fantasy, like Kazuo Ishiguro, are now turning to it as a way of communicating their ideas. Conceiving stories as tools for playing with ideas has special potential to bypass, illuminate and even challenge the currently ubiquitous discourse of post-truth, as I shall argue in the following sections.

Storytelling in isolation: bypassing the post-truth

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, the author's first fantasy novel, caused quite a stir upon publication, with many interviews conducted during the following year about his venture into what was deemed the territory of authors like Tolkien and George R. R. Martin (see Alter, 2015). The story is set in a version of Early Middle Ages Britain where mythical figures like dragons and Arthurian Knights coexist with historical features and events, such as the Saxon settlement of the island. The land is plagued by mysterious "mist," a curse of amnesia which robs people of their memories, making it impossible to remember their own life-stories or connect with their communities. At the beginning of the story, an elderly couple called Axl and Beatrice embark on a journey to find their long-lost son, and soon end up on a quest, accompanied by a Saxon warrior called Wistan and the old knight Sir Gawain of the Round Table fame, to slay the she-dragon Querig whose breath causes the mist. It is revealed towards the end of the novel that this mist was conjured by the wizard Merlin after Britons, led by King Arthur, committed a mass-slaughter of Saxon settlers. Its purpose was to make those two nations forget their bloody past and be able to live together in harmony. After Wistan slays the dragon, the land is freed of the curse of amnesia, and promptly starts careering towards a bitter war sparked by rediscovered memories of the genocide.

Ishiguro's novel has an obviously fabricated setting, yet tells a story that can be paralleled with various real historical events. Therefore, an obvious interpretative strategy would be to read it as an allegory about coerced cultural forgetting, and building national identities by writing shameful occurrences out of history. Ishiguro himself has stated in an interview for *The New York Times* that the eponymous buried giant in his fantasy novel is a metaphor for collective repression of memory about past atrocities (Alter 2015). He wanted to explore the ideas of memory and trauma on

a collective level, but setting the story in, for example, post-WWII France or contemporary Bosnia, would have made it “seem too narrow and political” (*ibid.*). By making it a fantasy story where the memory of Britons committing a genocide on Saxons is erased from collective consciousness by a magical mist, such traumas can be explored in a general manner, focusing on collective memory and its repression as more abstract ideas (see Rayment, 2014, o. 83; Cameron, 2015, p. 32). Instead of anchoring the narrative to the specifics of any particular nation or geographical region, isolating the story into a fantasy world enables it to be about all of them at once, yet determined by none of them.

The fantasy world as the overtly fabricated, purpose-built context for Ishiguro’s story serves to make the story of collectively repressed trauma universal, enabling the exploration of such repression as an idea. This way of considering phenomena at an abstract level, without the contextual baggage of the real world, is a tool for rhetorical meaning-making in speculative fiction that Ross P. Cameron conceives as an improved form of a philosophical thought experiment (2015, p. 30). According to him, works of fantasy fiction, just like thought experiments typical to analytical philosophy, create scenarios removed from any real-world context, but take this removal to extremes by creating whole purpose-built imaginary worlds to serve as artificial contexts for them (cf. Egan 2016, p. 140). Such recontextualization of ideas is, of course, a device of fiction in general, but in fantasy, the isolation of the thought experiment is made much more prominent by the sheer amount of invention that goes to building fantasy worlds, typically conceptualized as estrangement (Polvinen, 2018, p. 78). The freedom offered by fantasy storytelling to create as weird and extreme a world as one pleases enables authors to highlight features relevant to the thought experiment by exaggerating them and making them more tangible (Cameron, 2015, p. 32). In practice, this often happens by literalizing abstract ideas – a narrative device often considered integral for communication in speculative fiction (Roine, 2016, p. 95; McHale, 2018).

In *The Buried Giant*, the collective amnesia Axl and Beatrice call “the mist” is literally a curse, conjured by a wizard: a speculative scenario so preposterous that real-world considerations

of what is true or possible cease to apply, and the thought experiment becomes thoroughly isolated. The repression of collective trauma, when literalized into a curse, appears as a deliberate and violent act perpetrated against the population. However well-intentioned, the choice to make people forget their own history is a form of oppression, which results in collective loss of identity and sense of community. This is implied in the novel by the characters' inability to connect with each other, and the anxiety resulting from that inability. Isolated from any possible real-world context and exaggerated by making the coerced forgetting literal, Ishiguro's thought experiment creates a universally applicable examination of the power relations, consequences and ethics involved in such coercion.

Isolating the thought experiment into a conspicuously fabricated fantasy world serves to make the communication of ideas through narratives more effective in the climate of post-truth discourse, because it enables the examination of ideas as themselves, with no consideration of the veracity or even plausibility of the depicted scenario. There is no reason to ask whose truth this narrative aims to present, and whether one should trust it – the thought experiment is just presented for consideration, without attempting to sell any truth claims. This grants the reader the opportunity to play with ideas, test them against her understanding of the world, and draw her own conclusion from that experimenting. In the case of Ishiguro's novel, the reader is invited to look at eradication of the past as a form of violence, one available in the real world for those in a position to write history – and from there, perhaps, to view history itself in the context of power relations. By creating conspicuously fabricated stories and scenarios, speculative fiction can set aside the complexity of the real world permeated by post-truth discourse, and communicate ideas past it and despite it (see Huber, 2014, pp. 47–48).

This isolation and recontextualization of ideas is, however, only one rather simple way in which fantasy may offer tools for meaningful communication in the post-truth world. Next, I take a look at the themes of historical knowledge and mythical past in Ishiguro's novel, to illustrate how

it constructs a whole imaginary world which is presented in the novel's ontology to be, quite literally, a product of storytelling. By this feat of fantasy worldbuilding, *The Buried Giant* literalizes the whole idea that our world is indeed built of stories, and thus makes that idea an object for examination. It is in this level of building strange fantasy worlds where the genre's full potential for confronting post-truth discourse lies.

Fabricated history: illuminating the post-truth

What distinguishes speculative thought experiments in fantasy from those in science fiction, the other genre huddling under the umbrella of speculative fiction, is that whereas science fiction creates scenarios that would be possible in the actual world (see McHale, 2018, p. 318; Suvin, 2016), fantasy worlds are built from scratch. Brian McHale has suggested that it is typical for speculative fiction to literalize not only metaphors but also narrative conventions, making it possible to explore ways of literary sensemaking, among them processes of worldbuilding, as part of thought experiments (2018, p. 327). In the case of fantasy fiction, that literalization of worldbuilding involves an alternative reality which the reader imagines into being according to paradigms presented in the story. This sort of imaginary world can be tangible and engaging, yet simultaneously have exceedingly strange ontology based on a logic foreign to real-world natural laws, making the nature of reality itself a subject for thought experiment.

The Buried Giant is an excellent case in point of such an ontological thought experiment. It is set in a period of the history of Britain after the Roman conquerors have already left but the Norman ones are yet to arrive, and the Saxon settlement has just gotten underway – a period commonly referred to as the “Dark Ages” because very little is definitively known about it (see Alter, 2015). Probably partly because of the lack of reliable records, it is also a period in which tales of King

Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table are set, and some of those legendary figures are, as mentioned, also around in the world of Ishiguro's novel. For example, Sir Gawain, best known from the 14th century romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is a major character in the novel. He is, however, presented as a feeble and senile old man, "dressed in rusted chainmail and mounted on a weary steed" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 69). Demoted from a larger-than-life hero in a shining armor to an ancient relic in rusted mail, Sir Gawain represents the age of Arthurian legends fading and being forgotten, having no place in the new world. As a whole, the fantasy Britain of Ishiguro's novel is a vision of a world in transition from mythical era to historical, with some legendary beasts and heroes – like old Gawain and the enfeebled dragon Querig – lingering as the last obsolete remnants of the old world.

This impression of the world changing, its internal logic shifting from that of myths and fairytales to that of historical record, makes the world appear as a product of storytelling – literally. The world is presented as a simulated version of Dark Ages Britain based on mostly legends, full of ogres, pixies and other magical creatures which, it is stated by the narrator, "were then still native to this land" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 3) but are no more. The world is presented as an amalgamation of stories, myths and mostly speculated historical events: a vision of the Middle Ages from the popular imagination, familiar from fantasy epics and fairy tales. Unlike those pseudo-medievalist imaginings, however, the world in Ishiguro's novel is presented conspicuously as a product of intermingling legends, dubious records and speculation, and as such overtly artificial – a product of stories, and changing when the stories constructing it change. The ogres and pixies of that fantasy version of Britain are no longer native to the land because the stories in which that land is created have changed, the legends have been replaced by historical records, and those have no ogres in them anymore.

In the fantasy world of *The Buried Giant*, both myths and history are presented not as modes of telling stories about the past, but actual periods of time: the way past is narrated is conflated with what actually happened in the past. For the purposes of this thought experiment, the past is to be

thought of as literally the sum of different narratives used to construct it. This way, Ishiguro's novel brings into inspection not only historical and mythical narratives as devices for representing the past, but also the very idea that history is built of narratives. It is, in a sense, postmodernist historiography made literal: the past is a construction made up by creating a narrative, and a narratively constructed fabrication is the only version of the past available to contemporary audiences (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 89; Jameson, 1991, p. 18; Berlatsky, 2011, p. 6). Therefore, instead of asking whether the vision of medieval Britain is based on careful perusal of historical records or just made up, the novel presents an obviously made-up world in order to engage with the crucial questions in postmodernist historiography: "who is creating the narratives?" and "who benefits from them?" History is, like all narratives, created for a purpose, with those writing it deliberately choosing what to remember and what to forget (see Berlatsky, 2011, p. 15).

The issue of power inherent in shaping history is explored in *The Buried Giant* through its thought experiment of coerced forgetting as a form of oppression. The connection with the idea of history concretely bringing some things into existence and erasing others is made more explicit towards the end of the novel, with the Saxon warrior Wistan's premonition that in a war to come, the Britons will perish and "country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of your people's time here than a flock or two of sheep wandering the hills untended" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 324). Britons will be written out of history when the new narrative of Anglo-Saxon England is created, becoming creatures of myth along with ogres, pixies and dragons. The new time, the new history of a new nation, has no place for them. This ominous warning draws even more attention to the idea that the world can be shaped by narratives: nations can be built and destroyed, land claimed, its features changed. Wistan's overt evocation of the notion of winners writing history guides the reader to pay further attention to the themes of history and storytelling explored in the novel – and to view it critically, acknowledging the power structures involved in telling stories.

This theme of our impression of the past consisting of stories we tell about it is very topical from the viewpoint of confronting the post-truth discourse. After all, the post-truth is a logical extension of postmodernist historiography: the past is a fabrication crafted from ideologically motivated narratives (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 3), and if the post-truth discourse is to be followed, so is any image of the present. By making the narratively constructed quality of its version of the Middle Ages conspicuous and tangible, Ishiguro's novel illuminates these assumptions underlying the post-truth discourse. The assumptions of narrative power, narratives as instruments for reinventing the world and the impossibility of meaning existing outside narratives are brought under inspection, and the reader is prompted to pay attention to such structures influencing her own thinking. This resembles the approach to fictional narratives as symptomatic of the broader cultural trends I mentioned earlier: fiction is conceived as a tool for revealing structures of thinking underlying our worldview.

However, because the fantasy world as a setting makes the quality of Ishiguro's novel as a thought experiment conspicuous, this illumination of post-truth sentiment is not presented as a commentary of the world we live in, but as speculation on how the world as imagined in the post-truth discourse could be made sense of, *if* such a world did exist. When the post-truth sentiment is illuminated by literalizing it into a conspicuously fabricated, experimental world, that world must be viewed as just an experiment. This way, speculative fantasy fiction can confront the post-truth by telling a story about it – and unlike the public media discourse telling the same story, it does not end up reinforcing the notion that truth has, indeed, become meaningless. This, again, is a purpose to which fiction in general can be put amid the post-truth discourse – but fantasy is particularly effective, for its invitation to the reader to imagine blatantly strange worlds, and then wonder what it would be like to live in such worlds.

This invitation brings me to my final point – that imaginative engagement in constructing these worlds makes the reader pay attention to her own creative processes, and her own

role in imagining different realities. This reflection on narratives as imaginative tools is what, ultimately, makes fantasy storytelling a potent device for not only illustrating and exposing the post-truth sentiment, but also challenging it.

Engaged imagination: challenging the post-truth

Although the fantasy world of Ishiguro's novel is conspicuously fabricated in its internal logic, it is consistent enough for the reader to make sense of. The ideas of storytelling as power, and historical narrative as a tool for oppression, emerge from the fantasy story for the reader to consider, and guide her in the process of imagining the world as a meaningful whole. She ends up with an experimental world she herself imagined into being, a world where many questions pertaining to life in a post-truth world can be addressed. Such speculative questions might include musings on what the world would be like if it was actually a product of narratives, and whether or not such a world bears any resemblance to our actual shared reality. What would people's connections to the world and to each other then look like, and what would it do to the world if those connections were broken? Who would have power in such a world, and how could that power be challenged?

A major motif that guides the reader to consider these implications in Ishiguro's novel is the mist, the mysterious curse of amnesia plaguing the land. This mist, the metaphor used to refer to the curse, is conflated in the story with literal mist: "the past [...] had somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 7). Just like the literal mist obscures the landscape and prevents the characters from seeing very far, the metaphorical mist hides their memories, and both have the same effect: making it hard to assess time and distance, and the characters' position in the world. The story is stuck, both temporally and spatially, in a vaguely defined present, with little apparent causality involved in the succession of events, and for this lack

of information makes little narrative sense. Axl and Beatrice are looking for a son they barely remember, Sir Gawain wanders the moors with no apparent purpose, and no character has very much in the way of personality. The lack of memories results in a lack of purposes, connections, and identities.

The absence of memories, caused by the mist, appears to the reader as absence of stories: the characters' life-stories, stories connecting them with each other, and stories to help them and the reader make sense of the world. These are things lacking from the narration of the novel, but conflated as they are in practice and purpose, memories and stories appear as essentially the same thing in the imaginary world, too. For the want of their stories, the characters cannot make sense of their own lives and who they are – Axl, for example, is struggling to negotiate his identity based on vague fragmented memories of being Beatrice's husband and even more vague memories of being an Arthurian Knight (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 233). They also cannot connect with each other, unable to construct the story of their shared past. On a societal level, Britons and Saxons, albeit at peace with each other, cannot form meaningful communities, due to the lack of shared stories to negotiate their relationship. In a narratively constructed world, then, obscuring people's stories would amount to stealing their identities, loyalties and communal ties – omitting something from history could equate to erasing whole nations from existence.

Moreover, the mist as a metaphor also represents the vagueness of historical knowledge about the Dark Ages, presenting the narratively constructed world of the novel as mostly out of the reach of perception. A world built by narratives, it appears, fades into nothingness immediately outside the reach of those narratives, represented in literal sense by the mist obscuring the landscape. Without stories, the world appears claustrophobic, featureless, and essentially meaningless. By creating a thought experiment about what the narratively constructed world would be like if those narratives were taken away, Ishiguro's novel again illuminates the idea of narratives as tools for seeing the world. By engaging the reader to contemplate on these issues in the process of imagining

the world, it guides her to construct an outlook into the imaginary fantasy world from which it can be made sense of. In this way, it invites the reader to contemplate the fabricated world *as if* the idea of a world that is actually produced by storytelling was plausible.

However, it is essential to note that approaching a fictional narrative as a thought experiment makes the act of imagining the world, making sense of it and attributing meanings to it, also conspicuous as an experiment. It draws attention to the fact that the approach to the world as a product of storytelling is just that – an approach, constructed in the process of working on the thought experiment. Just like the idea of narratives shaping the world is just part of a speculative play of thought in Ishiguro's novel, a way of making sense of its strange world as a meaningful whole, it would be a similarly made-up way of giving meaning to certain trends in real-world contemporary culture. Narratives can be considered tools for building the world, for shaping reality – or they can simply be seen as one possible means for attributing it meaning, and not necessarily an unproblematic one. By realizing these tools are just as artificial as the worlds they are creating, the reader can gain a more critical outlook towards narratives in general, and perhaps wonder if the contemporary world could be thought about in some other way than as a web of self-justifying stories. Moreover, she can see these stories more clearly as versatile tools for understanding the world from different viewpoints, rather than simply as stuff from which the world is made.

This, finally, is where I think lies the full potential of speculative fiction to confront and challenge the idea that we are living in a post-truth world. By virtue of its conspicuous artificiality, the fact that it makes the reader to approach the presented scenario as an imaginary play of thought, contemporary fantasy can expose the act of narrative construction of the world in fine detail, and engage the reader to participate in the experiment without subscribing to the worldview involved in it. This way, contemporary works of fantasy fiction can go beyond representing the much-hyped narratively constructed post-truth world and approach this way of seeing the world critically, as an experimental way of thinking.

This experiment of thinking about the world as a product of storytelling constitutes one way of making sense of the world, of conceptualizing our impression of a shared reality. However, the line to post-truth discourse is crossed when that way of thinking about the world is taken as an explanation of how the world actually works – this is a line between seeing narratives as tools for understanding the world, and seeing them as tools for manipulating reality. By the way of obviously fabricated thought experiments that are conspicuous not just as fiction but as experiments, fantasy stories avoid crossing this line. Novels like *The Buried Giant* can show that narratives are excellent tools for communicating ideas, organizing thoughts, and attributing meaning to the world, without confusing the tools with the end product.

Conclusion

In this article, I have pointed out three ways in which contemporary fantasy fiction works as a particularly effective tool for confronting the post-truth discourse permeating the current media environment. Firstly, on the most basic level, fantasy stories may bypass the post-truth discourse by isolating their thought experiments into conspicuously fabricated worlds, thus enabling meaningful exchange of ideas. Secondly, those conspicuously fabricated worlds themselves can be built to illuminate the post-truth logic of narratively constructed world by making it tangible, which gives the reader a position from which to view the discourse critically. Thirdly, and most radically, fantasy stories can challenge the post-truth discourse by putting stories, in a sense, in their proper place, making narratives out to be about communicating ideas and giving meaning to the world, not about being all there is to it.

By these devices, contemporary speculative fiction can offer respite from the constant barrage of conflicting narratives, and a small rebellion against the discourse of narratives as all-

powerful world-creating forces. A form of fiction celebratory of its own fictionality, fantasy storytelling may also point out the potential of fiction, in general, to create meaningful communication amidst the post-truth discourse. In this sense, this escapist genre has become a tool for making an ultimate escape indeed: out of the cacophony of conflicting narratives of contemporary life, into a semblance of a real world.

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