

*Subterranean Encounters: Speculative Tension and the Underground Space in
Takano Fumio's "Swan Knight" and Nazlı Eray's "Orpheus"*

Gefan Wang, King's College London, United Kingdom

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Abstract

John L. Hennessey defines speculative fiction as a literary canon that mixes familiarity and radical alterity, utilising unrealistic elements to explore hypothetical scenarios or bring aspects of the reader's world into sharp belief (2024). This paper reads Takano Fumio's *Swan Knight* (2024) and Nazlı Eray's *Orpheus* (2006) as speculative fiction, contending that both works approach underground spaces as sites of enigmatic encounters and cultural exchange, breaking down the boundaries between popular myths and contemporary realities with the aid of speculative tension. *Swan Knight* is an imaginative narrative of the biography of Ludwig II of Bavaria. Addicted to binge-watching television and listening to Wagner, Ludwig II visits a labyrinthine subterranean city beneath Munich, where Wagner's Festspielhaus is located. During his underground adventure, Ludwig confronts Wagner's dubious legacy and the ambiguous boundary between media, myth, and reality. Similarly, Nazlı Eray's *Orpheus* relocates the popular myth to a modern-day Turkish coastal town, where Eurydice searches for Orpheus's house near an ancient archaeological site. Eray's use of the fantastic creates an underground world that connects intertextual references and suggestive details, bridging the mythical realm and Turkey's contemporary social realities. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's cultural hybridity theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, this paper aims to understand the speculative tension surrounding the underground space in the two novels and to bring new insights to the scholarship on the rapidly expanding literary canon.

Keywords: Speculative Fiction, Comparative Literature, Japanese Literature, Turkish Literature, Adaptation Studies

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Speculative Fiction: A Brief Introduction

It can be broadly said that speculative fiction lies in the intersection of science fiction, paraliterature and the 'fantastic'. Speculative fiction ('sf') does not always need to involve scientific or futuristic elements; rather, as John L. Hennessey puts it, sf as a literary canon mixes familiarity and radical alterity, utilising unrealistic elements to explore hypothetical scenarios or bring aspects of the reader's world into sharp belief (2024). According to Gwilym Lucas Eades, the two main aspects that form seminal components of current sf productions are the *weird* and the *ecological*. The *weird* modalities generate 'strange, terrorising, post-sublime senses of worlds askew, operating across and between bounded senses of taken-for-granted categories of literary production' (Eades, 2024). Notable fiction that can be considered as sf include Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Space, is often vital to the narrative economies of speculative fiction. To put it plainly, sf takes readers on journeys through space and time. As Eades asserts, spatiality is a 'quality of spaces that inheres in speculative fictions', and such spatiality often characterises speculative fiction's particular quality of newness (2024). The likes of Hennessey have used the concept *concurrences*, coined by historian Günlog Fur, to understand the subtle structures of power that organise the narratives in speculative fiction, whether through notions of gender, race, coloniality and beyond. The term *concurrences* illuminates the fact that these structures of power become 'most apparent in liminal spaces between cultures or in contacts between societies' and describes 'separate, parallel worlds or cultures that operate according to different internal logics, but come into contact, generating complicated relations of agreement and/or competition' (Hennessey, 2024).

Swan Knight and *Orpheus*: A Comparative Perspective

This paper compares two contemporary and relatively understudied works of sf, Takano Fumio's *Swan Knight* (2024) and Nazlı Eray's *Orpheus* (2006), contending that both works approach underground spaces as sites of enigmatic encounters and cultural exchange, breaking down the boundaries between popular myths and contemporary realities with the aid of speculative tension. *Swan Knight* is an imaginative narrative of the biography of Ludwig II of Bavaria. Addicted to binge-watching television and listening to Wagner, Ludwig II visits a labyrinthine subterranean city beneath Munich, where Wagner's renowned Festspielhaus is located. During his underground adventure, Ludwig confronts Wagner's dubious legacy and the ambiguous boundary between media, myth, and reality. Similarly, Nazlı Eray's *Orpheus* relocates the popular myth to a modern-day Turkish coastal town, where Eurydice searches for Orpheus's house near an ancient archaeological site. Eray's use of the fantastic creates an underground world that connects intertextual references and suggestive details, bridging the mythical realm and Turkey's contemporary social realities. I contend that there are considerable common grounds between *Swan Knight* and *Orpheus*, particularly in the ways the two texts blending cultures from different temporal and geographical realms, employing elements of the "fantastic" and the "weird" to challenge the audience's perception of reality. In addition, in both *Swan Knight* and *Orpheus* the subterranean space is the epicentre of speculative tension, where the unknown and unexpected occur. *Swan Knight* and *Orpheus* bridge popular myths and popular culture, prompting new understandings of familiar tales and relevant social realities.

Theoretical Framework

Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (2006) is a rich volume of essays on cultural hybridity, postcolonialism, postmodernism, race, and civility. *The Location* also poses the concept 'in-between' space, where the 'borderline work of culture' demands an 'encounter with "newness"' that does not belong to the continuum of past and present (2006). Such 'in-between' space renews the past and innovates and disrupts the performance of the present (2006). As Bhabha puts it, the 'past—present' is now part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living (2006).

Another theoretical perspective that I propose is the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope ('time-space'). Bakhtin initially inceptionised in 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics' and 'The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historic Typology of the Novel)'. Bakhtin defines the literary chronotope in the following passage from 'Forms of Time':

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin, 1987)

As chronotope was originally borrowed from Einstein's theory of relativity, it seemed natural for Bakhtin to compare literature to science: 'Literature, as a historical phenomenon, is – like older stages of science – the repository of sedimented designs, of answers given to coercing questions of reason' (Bakhtin, 1987). The literary chronotope, seen as an assessment of narrative genres, contributes to a theoretical tradition that underlines the 'cognitive functionality of literary genres'; fixed poetic and narrative structures should be understood as 'means for storing and conveying forms of human experience and knowledge' (1987).

Swan Knight

Swan Knight reimagines a few historical and mythical characters, which include the renowned 'Swan King'—Ludwig II of Bavaria (1845-1866). Historically, Ludwig II was known for his artistic sensitivity, in particular his obsession with the works by the composer Richard Wagner. Several facts could be taken into consideration to explain the association between Ludwig II and his appellation 'Swan King': he had a profound fascination with swans as he grew up in a castle featured with swan motifs; furthermore, Ludwig II was captivated by the medieval Swan Knight tale circulated in Wagner's *Lohengrin* WWV 75 (1850). Takano relocates the above context in a subterranean, labyrinthine space that secretly exists below the city of Munich. Withdrawn from his tiresome royal duties, Ludwig II becomes addicted to watching Wagner's music-dramas on television and longs to visit his idol Wagner in person. One night, Ludwig II walks into the underground world through the deserted shed of the Linderhof Palace to look for Wagner. The underground world features distinct steampunk iconologies: for instance, Ludwig notes that there are 'clangs and clunks of metal'; 'Fumes mingled with the gloom and the caverns began to resound with din'; 'Tiny rooms and bars were squashed into the tangled labyrinth: a multitude of television screens glowed here and there' (Takano, 2024). These imageries recall canonic Japanese steampunk works such as Miyazaki Hayao's *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) and Tsukamoto Shinya's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989).

Takano's design of the underground Munich not only encapsulates the technological anachronisms characteristic of steampunk, but also delves into deeper cultural and psychological themes. Ludwig II's own time collides with the inception of steampunk in Europe—the popular 'self-presentations of the encounter between technology and the human' (Beard, 2014). David Beard has identified the 'countercultural, counterinstitutional, countercorporate impulse' in such encounter in steampunk (2014). It is also important to know that steampunk is sometimes associated with antimodernism, as many of steampunk works reveal the horrors of machinery that could occur without care and tending (Birmingham, 2014). *Swan Knight* joins the antimodern element of steampunk to the history of *fin-de-siècle* Bavaria: in the beginning of the novella, Ludwig II dreads upon his kingdom's insignificance compared to emerging German Empire, and he resorts to his daydreaming and binge-watching the television to forget the dismal realities (Takano, 2024). Takano's intended manipulation of time and technology, relocating the invention of the likes of television to *fin-de-siècle* Bavaria intensifies the sensational and uncanny elements in the encounter between the human and technology, recalling Bakhtin's emphasis on the 'cyclical everyday time' and the 'saturation of experience' in chronotope.

Takano's mastering of speculative tension also lies in her unique approach to intertextuality in *Swan Knight*. The novella begins with a quote from Wagner's *Lohengrin*: 'You must not unmask me; never ask me whence I came, my rank, or my name!' *Lohengrin* is based upon medieval German romance, particularly notably the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach, and its sequel *Lohengrin*. Wagner's opera tells the love story between Elsa, the late Duke of Brabant's heir, and the mysterious 'Swan Knight' Lohengrin, who is summoned by Elsa to fight in a duel against the scheming Friedrich Telramund. Elsa has previously dreamt of Lohengrin arrive in a boat drawn by a swan. As Lohengrin and Elsa fall in love, the pair decide to get married on one condition: Elsa must never ask Lohengrin's name. In the underworld of *Swan Knight*, the 'Swan King' Ludwig II disrupts the production of a new version of *Lohengrin* and experience a series of surreal encounters: he first sees his own doppelganger singing on television; the king also meets an androgynous knight called Parsifal, who protects Ludwig from danger in the underworld. In Eschenbach's oeuvre, Parsifal is Lohengrin's father; like Lohengrin, Parsifal's story is also transformed into an eponymous music drama by Wagner. All these interconnected intertexts amplify the mythic ambiance of subterranean Munich, intensifying the speculative tension.

Overwhelmed by all the strange encounters in the underworld, Ludwig II feels a 'strong sense of déjà vu' and disorientation. These sentiments are heightened when the king finally meets Wagner in the Festspielhaus deep down in the underworld. Wagner's unnamed servant, who initially greets Ludwig II, challenges the king's perception of fiction of reality: 'We can't begin without first defining reality. If your reality is not clearly defined, meeting Wagner "in reality" might not mean anything to you' (Takano, 2014). A cognitive tension between the aboveground Munich and the underground Munich arises; Takano's vision of the two Munichs might instantly recall Arthur Schopenhauer's seminal work *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*), which identifies a division of the world into two metaphysical aspects (Jacquette, 2005). Nonetheless, I contend that *Swan Knight*'s approach to spatiality, reality and fictiveness could be better understood under the framework of Bakhtin's chronotope, in which the world of "eventness" is not only an 'attribute of consciousness', but a 'real entity endowed with concrete historical meaning'. Hence, while the subterranean Munich initially appears to be a space of fantastic imagination, it is, in fact, vital to the novella's structure of temporal and historical experiences.

Orpheus

Eray's *Orpheus* is comparable to *Swan Knight* in many ways. Like *Swan Knight*, *Orpheus* unfolds in a mysterious subterranean realm, where the boundaries between the underworld and the surface are left deliberately unclear. It is well known that the eponymous myth of Orpheus and Eurydice also takes place in the underworld, namely Hell or the realm of Hades. Orpheus, a famous musician in ancient Greece, follows his dead wife Eurydice to the underworld and persuades Hades and Persephone to let her return, on the condition that during the journey out of hell Orpheus never turn back to look at Eurydice. As they are about to reach the living world, Orpheus looks back at Eurydice, and she vanishes back to the underworld forever. The speculative tension in *Orpheus*, comparable to the one in *Swan Knight*, appears in the fantastic, unexpected encounters that exist beyond our perceived reality.

Eray's version radically overturns the myth. The story is set in a Turkish coastal town on the Mediterranean, whose massive urbanisation is literalised through the arrival of the capital city, Ankara. A sickly and anxious Eurydice arrives in the town looking for the missing Orpheus, who drives a red Alpha Romeo race car and lives in house up in the hills. There are also indications that the town might be Hell, as suggested by repeated descriptions of the overpowering and growing heat in the town and by hints that the path to Orpheus' house might be the way leading to an archeological site, or the underworld (Erol, 2009). Eray's vision of the popular myth also problematises language. This is not only true in the obscure conversations exchanged between Eurydice and other characters, but also in Eurydice's impression of Orpheus' house, which seems to come alive by turning its lights on and off—in Eurydice's words, forming a language that cannot be understood (2009).

Similar to the underground Munich in Takano's *Swan Knight*, the coastal town in *Orpheus* is a product of the author's intended manipulation of historical facts, intertextuality and fantastic imagination. Eurydice receives letters from the statue of Emperor Hadrian, the Roman emperor who once travelled through Anatolia between AD123-124. Here the issue of time and the limits of history are problematised, as while Hadrian claims to 'know everything' in his letters, he only knows historical events up till his own time (2009). The historical developments in Eurydice's present include the ongoing coup in a fictional place called Talza. Critics have read this as a reference to the coup that took place on 12 September 1980 in Turkey, which occurred after conflicts between leftist and rightist factions caused the deaths of more than 600 people in July and August of 1980 (Erol, 2009). Hadrian, along with other characters in the story, challenges the limits of the reader's 'suspension of disbelief' and becomes the 'test cases of fictiveness' (Erol, 2009).

The rich tapestry of historical facts and speculative narratives recall the aforementioned term *concurrences*, which refers to 'disparate spheres of existence and meaning that are interlinked', and the nature and evolution of these power-relations raise 'questions of historical study of context' (Hennessey, 2024). In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha asserts: 'The place of difference and otherness, or the space of the adversarial [...] is never entirely on the outside or implacably oppositional. It is a pressure, a presence, that acts constantly, if unevenly, along the entire boundary of authorization' (Bhabha, 2006). The coastal town in Eray's *Orpheus* is, indeed, a place of difference and otherness; it is also a space of the absurd and the fantastic, where Eurydice visits Orpheus' house on the hill every night and releases her story from the 'frozen and disembodied time' (Erol, 2009).

Conclusions

To summarise, Takano's *Swan Knight* and Eray's *Orpheus*, two texts that I read as canonic speculative fiction, are comparable in the ways that they employ intertextuality, speculative fiction and fantastic elements. *Swan Knight*'s renarrative of the biography of Ludwig II and the myth of the medieval Swan Knight, against the cultural backdrop of steampunk, invents an underground Munich that challenges the limits of our perception of reality, media and imagination. Eray's *Orpheus* also reinvents the popular eponymous myth into a captivating story that takes place in a fast-growing Turkish coastal town. By telling the story from Eurydice's perspective, *Orpheus* prompts the reader to reflect upon the rich possibilities of interpreting mythical narratives. In both stories, the unsettling yet sensational underground space becomes the site of ominous and fantastic encounters between past and present, different cultures, history and imagination.

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Contact email: gefan.wang@kcl.ac.uk