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The Adventure of Estrangement: Reframing Chaos as Wonder in Works of Science Fiction and Fantasy

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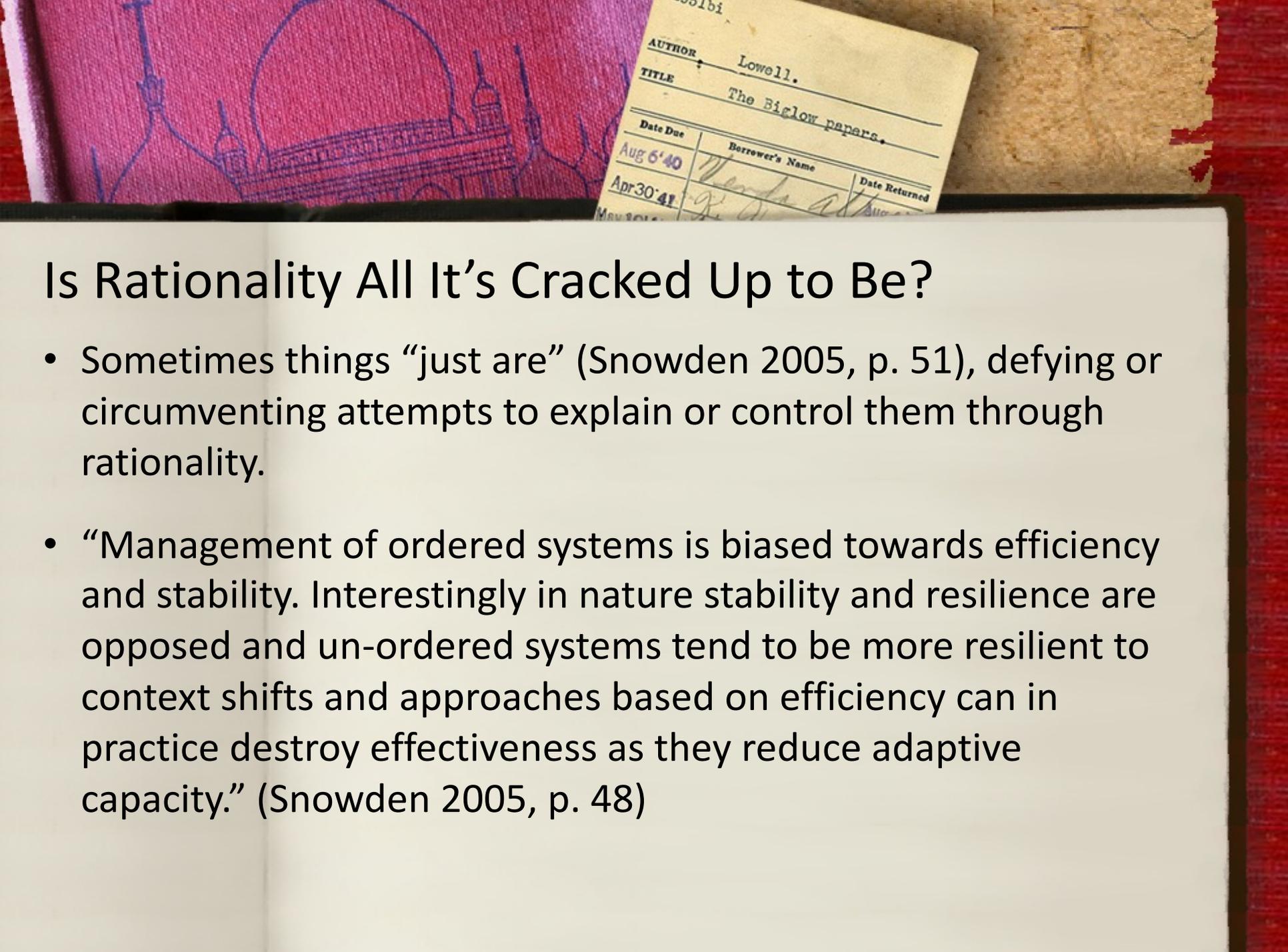
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Human Choice and the “Primacy of Rationality”

All theories of choice have three things in common (Marsh 1979):

- The pre-existence of purpose (that choices have objectives and make sense relative to those objectives)
- The necessity of consistency
- The primacy of rationality: “a procedure for deciding what is correct behavior by relating consequences systematically to objectives” (p. 70)
 - Rejects intuition (decisions made without clearly knowing why)
 - Rejects faith and tradition



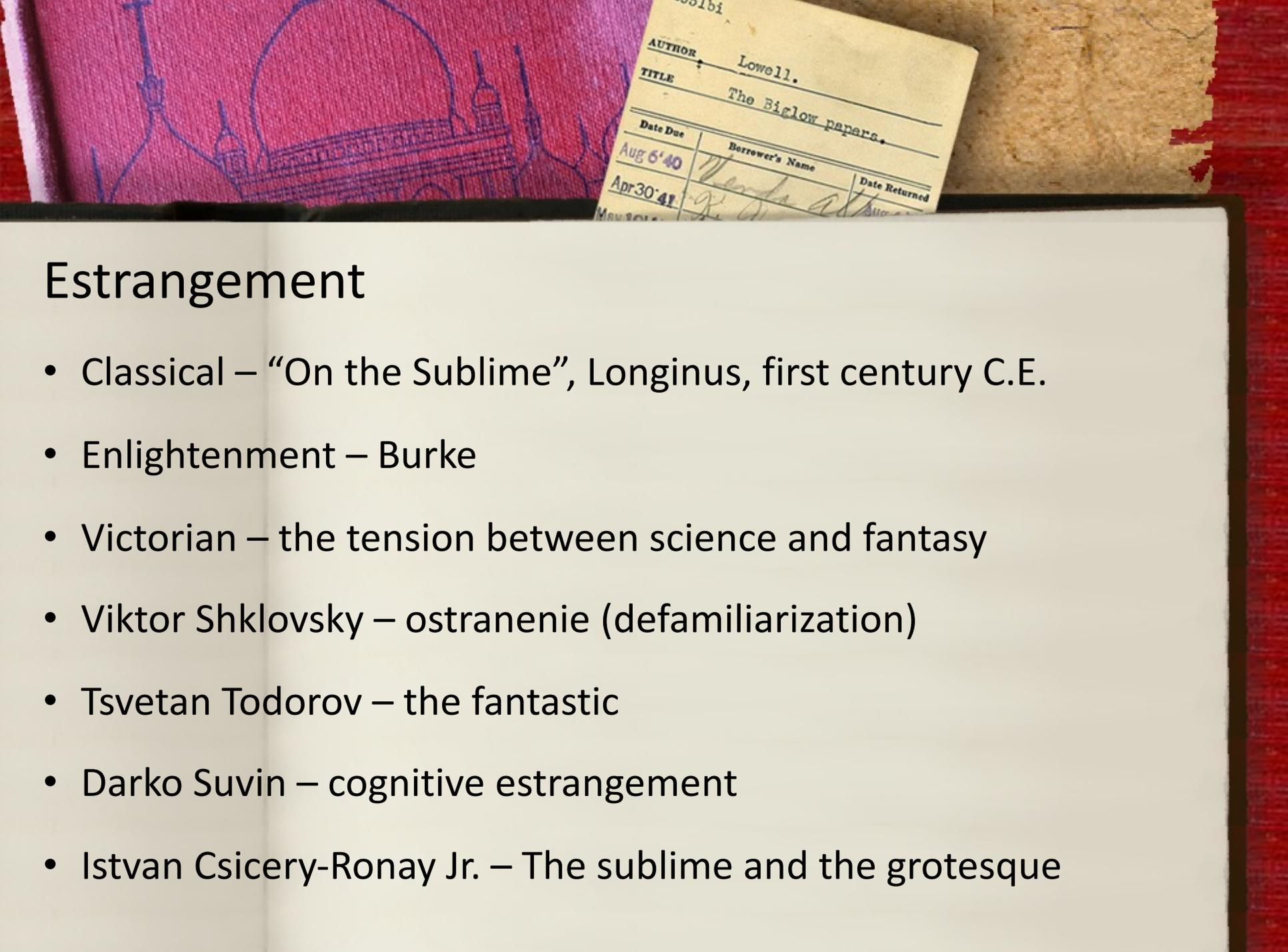
Is Rationality All It's Cracked Up to Be?

- Sometimes things “just are” (Snowden 2005, p. 51), defying or circumventing attempts to explain or control them through rationality.
- “Management of ordered systems is biased towards efficiency and stability. Interestingly in nature stability and resilience are opposed and un-ordered systems tend to be more resilient to context shifts and approaches based on efficiency can in practice destroy effectiveness as they reduce adaptive capacity.” (Snowden 2005, p. 48)



Is Rationality All It's Cracked Up to Be?

- “Individuals [in contemporary American society] who are good at consistent rationality are rewarded early and heavily. We define it as intelligence, and the educational rewards of society are associated strongly with it” Marsh 1979, p. 78.
- Foolishness and playfulness are inherently irrational, but can lead to effective choices (Marsh 1979).
- It's possible to allow choices and meaning to emerge out of chaos.
- But how?



Estrangement

- Classical – “On the Sublime”, Longinus, first century C.E.
- Enlightenment – Burke
- Victorian – the tension between science and fantasy
- Viktor Shklovsky – ostranenie (defamiliarization)
- Tsvetan Todorov – the fantastic
- Darko Suvin – cognitive estrangement
- Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. – The sublime and the grotesque



The Novum

- “The central imaginary novelty in an sf text, the source of the most important distinctions between the world of the tale and the world of the reader” (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, p.47).
- Its specific role is to induce estrangement (wonder, awe, dislocation), thus freeing the mind to permit, and even embrace, new possibilities and impossibilities.
- Its role is not to be wrestled to the ground in a chokehold of rationality until the reader is comfortable again.



The Role of Wonder

- Encountering the novum: attack it or know it?
- Allowing understanding to emerge out of wonder (rather than expecting understanding to *generate* wonder)
- Allowing the constrictions of linear reasoning and the compulsion to “solve” problems to be jettisoned
- Providing a means to allow new things to have their own nature, rather than conform to existing taxonomies



The Role of Wonder

- Challenges thus become encounters, not battles.
- Solutions emerge, rather than being imposed.
- Intuitive and underrepresented perspectives can be valued.
- Humanity becomes more courageous and less contentious (ideally).



How Does Reading (and Writing) Speculative Fiction Help?

- Narratives unfold, meanings emerge
- The sublime and the grotesque are not ruled out
- “What else could be happening here?”
- Making friends with the novum



Recommendations

- Read (and write) science fiction and fantasy reflectively.
- Develop an eagerness for estrangement.
- Look for the novum first, not the solution.
- Allow absurdity.
- Expand mental categories to value both the sublime and the grotesque.
- Keep reading (and writing) science fiction and fantasy!

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Thank you!

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(slides and references available on request)