



Worldcon 75 Academic Track
Session 2: Starting-Points

Wednesday 14:00-15:30
Room 209

Chair: **Merja Polvinen**

Opening of the Academic Track

Merja Polvinen (University of Helsinki, Finland)

<mailto:merja.polvinen@helsinki.fi>

Dr Merja Polvinen is a senior lecturer in English at the University of Helsinki. Her dissertation on chaos theory and literature came out in 2008, and recent articles on cognitive approaches to SF (e.g. China Miéville and Christopher Priest) are out in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* and the recent volumes *The Cognitive Humanities* (Palgrave) and *Cognitive Literary Science* (OUP). She is a former Board member of FINFAR and chair of the organising committee of the Worldcon 75 Academic Track.

Abstract 1:

Tomi Huttunen (University of Helsinki, Finland):

On the Origins of Shklovsky's *Ostranenie* in the Russian Avant-Garde

tomi.huttunen@helsinki.fi

One hundred years ago young Viktor Shklovsky published his article "Art as Technique" (or, "Art as Device") for the first time. The article included his famous notion of *ostranenie*, which has been understood and translated in several different manners ever since. While Shklovsky wrote the article between 1915 and 1916, the original idea and the very beginning of Russian Formalism has been dated a few years earlier, in December 1913, when the 20-year-old Shklovsky gave a lecture "The Place of Futurism in the History of Language" in the artistic cabaret "Stray Dog" in Petrograd. It is obvious that the beginning of Formalism is closely connected with early Russian Futurism. In my paper, I shall discuss this connection and the interpretation of *ostranenie* as Shklovsky's declaration of unpredictability and the manifestation of the unknown language, which the Russian Futurists studied as ZAUM, trans-rational language.

Abstract 2:

Andrew M. Butler (Canterbury Christ Church University, UK):

Conceived in the Detroit Riviera: Some Thoughts on the Cognitive Uncanny

Andrewmbutler42@gmail.com

The Shklovsky-Brecht-Suvin notion of estrangement is of an unsettling that may lead to a political awareness of the state of the world, as represented within a text and the world of which that text is a part. It offers a waking up which is counter to the "sleep" of the worker

who is alienated and estranged in Marxist terms. The parallel notion of the (Freudian) uncanny, coined just two years after *ostranenie*, is another kind of unsettling, that returns the subject to an earlier stage of development, a more primitive state of mind.

The uncanny often occurs in relation to liminal states – the real/false, the living/dead, inside/outside, human/nonhuman – and results in a state of undecideability that challenges the subject's ability to navigate and comprehend the world around them. The certainties of what is real or what is authentically human behaviour dissolve – the binaries are in a sense deconstructed.

One of sf's major thematic tactics is to define what it is to be human by representing the human or to define what is real by representing that which is not authentic, with the result that such categories either narrow or widen. The mental mapping of the definition is akin to the cognitive processes in the Brecht-Suvin notion of cognition. The result is that I argue that sf maybe be seen as demonstrating the cognitive uncanny – a breaking down of definitional and traditional categories that is then resutured by mental powers.

By focusing upon my own apparent misreading of *GATTACA* (Andrew Nichol, 1997), in which the protagonist's confession that he was conceived in the Detroit Riviera led to my imagining of climate change rather than the more mundane car that was being referred to, I hope to offer a cognitive uncanny reading of an sf text. This film works away at the ongoing definition of the human by its exploration of nature/nurture, programming/stimulus, obeying/wilful, and so forth. I hope that my appropriation of the uncanny will offer a model for further analyses.

Andrew M. Butler is the author of *Solar Flares: A Cultural History of Science Fiction in the 1970s* (2011), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2014), "Human Subjects/Alien Objects? Abjection and the Constructions of Race and Racism in *District 9*" in *Alien Imaginations* (2015), "Sleeping/Waking: Politicizing the Sublime in Science Fiction Film Special Effects" in *Endangering Science Fiction Film* (2016), as well as books on Philip K. Dick, Cyberpunk, Terry Pratchett, Postmodernism and Film Studies. He was the coeditor of *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2009) and *Fifty Key Figures in Science Fiction* (2010). He is the non-voting Chair of Judges for the Arthur C. Clarke Award.