



Worldcon 75 Academic Track  
**Session 3: Mimesis and Diegesis**

**Wednesday 16:00-17:30**  
**Room 209**

Chair: **Hanna-Riikka Roine**

Abstract 1:

**Bo Pettersson** (University of Helsinki, Finland):

**Thousands of Years of Estrangement: On Riddling and Defamiliarisation as Deep-Seated Literary Techniques**

[bo.pettersson@helsinki.fi](mailto:bo.pettersson@helsinki.fi)

When Viktor Shklovsky coined *ostranienie* (defamiliarisation) as a literary term in 1917, he did so on the basis of a literary technique he had detected in prose fiction and elsewhere in human life. We should celebrate that he did so, not least since it has helped us understand especially science fiction better. But at the same time we might want to look further into literary history for possible instances of estrangement. In fact, some of the most ancient literature is based on various kinds of estrangement. For instance, the first Chinese writing was oracle script deciphering past events or divining future ones and riddles were central in the ancient thought and expression of Indo-European languages, the world's largest language family. Some such riddles are now part of contemporary culture in nonsense and nursery rhymes, such as "Humpty Dumpty".

Even more broadly, as Adam Roberts (2013: 7) puts it, "insofar as riddles involve making familiar objects beautifully strange, describing things in de-familiarising ways, it is at the heart of 'poetry' in the largest sense". Often standing for literature in general before the twentieth century, *poetry* of course etymologically denotes 'making' and *poetics* is the study of that making. In this paper I try to show by way of some examples how literature in its use of various tropes (such as metaphor and metonymy) and techniques (such as substitution and inversion) for millennia has made use of estrangement. Also, in terms of poetics, we should at least go back a century from Shklovsky's paper to Coleridge and P. B. Shelley to find overt definitions of the technique we now call defamiliarisation. My hope is that such historical understanding will also help us appreciate the riddling and defamiliarisation that is so central in much contemporary popular fiction, including science fiction. Ultimately, I argue, estrangement in literature is based on a deep-seated cognitive operation that mirrors the human quest for the meaning of life, the universe and everything.

*Reference:* Roberts, Adam. 2013. *The Riddles of The Hobbit*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Bo Pettersson** is Professor of the Literature of the United States and former Head of English of Department of Modern Languages, University of Helsinki. He has published widely on Anglo-American and other literature in relation to literary, narrative and metaphor theory. His most recent study is *How Literary Worlds Are Shaped. A Comparative Poetics of Literary Imagination* (De Gruyter, 2016).

Abstract 2:

**Simon Spiegel** (University of Zurich, Switzerland):

**“The extraordinary effect of strangeness that marks familiar things seen in a new light”:** Diegetic Estrangement as a Key to a Poetics of Utopian Literature

[simon@simifilm.ch](mailto:simon@simifilm.ch)

In the last chapter of Edward Bellamy’s immensely successful utopian novel *Looking Backward. 2000–1887*, its protagonist Julian West has a horrifying dream: He dreams that he no longer lives in the blessed year 2000 where thanks to a superior – socialist – organisation of society most social ills of the late 19th century are simply unknown. Instead he dreams to wake up again in 1887, the time he originally came from. He is struck by how miserable his world of origin appears to him now that he has seen the wonders of the future. But as he rightly observes, the Boston of 1887 is the way it has always been, rather it is he himself who has turned into someone different. “I knew well that it was I who had changed, and not my contemporaries. I had dreamed of a city whose people fared all alike as children of one family and were one another’s keepers in all things “(Bellamy 182).

This dream sequence – from which West luckily awakes – develops *in nuce* a whole poetics of utopian literature. What the protagonist of *Looking Backward* lives through is exactly what its reader should experience as well: To be transformed by the utopian vision and therefore to see his own world anew – with all its deficiencies and injustices.

Estrangement lies indeed at the core of all utopian literature, but as I will argue in my paper, it is a kind of estrangement which, pace Suvin, works along different lines than Viktor Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*. Whereas *ostranenie* is mainly a formal device, the means by which things are presented, utopian literature typically creates its estranging effects by contrasting seemingly incompatible elements on the level of the story itself. Contrary to Shklovsky’s approach, utopian literature primarily makes use of *diegetic estrangement*.

**Simon Spiegel**, PhD, is research fellow at the Department of Film Studies at the University of Zurich. He is a collaborator in the research project *Alternative Weltentwürfe: Der politisch-aktivistische Dokumentarfilm* funded by Swiss National Science Foundation. Important publications: “Some Thoughts on the Utopian Film”. *Science Fiction Film and Television* [forthcoming]. “Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power. Die Funktion der Sexpositions in GoT”. *Die Welt von Game of Thrones. Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf George R.R. Martins A Song of Ice and Fire*. May, Markus/Baumann, Michael/Baumgartner, Michael et al. (eds.). Bielefeld: transcript 2016, 369–384. “Things Made Strange. On the Concept of ‘Estrangement’ in Science Fiction Theory“. *Science Fiction Studies* 106 (2008): 269–385- *Theoretisch phantastisch: Eine Einführung in Tzvetan Todorovs Theorie der phantastischen Literatur*. Murnau: p.machinery, 2010; *Die Konstitution des Wunderbaren: Zu einer Poetik des Science-Fiction-Films*. Schüren: Marburg, 2007.

Abstract 3:

**David Garfinkle** (MacEwan University, Canada):

**Estrangement: How Theatrical Mimesis Figures in Science Fiction**

[garfinkled@macewan.ca](mailto:garfinkled@macewan.ca)

The paper grounds notions of “mimesis,” often translated as “imitation,” in the Greek classic binary of Aristotle vs Plato. From this ground, the essay reviews a comprehensive range of mimetic models of “estrangement” as born in diverse theatrical movements of European

modernity. Mimetic models of comportment, from Brecht to Adorno and from feminist destabilizations of the subject to Baudrillard's hyper-real, reveal how the figure as mimetic variant can be traced across the 20th century. For Worldcon 75, a diverse range of mimetic modes is considered in relation to figures from the modern and postmodern canon of science fiction film, television, novels and comics. Like most science fiction, the essay proposes a thought experiment for consideration of theatrical representations in space and the future, as modelled by exemplars in popular media. Focused on the figuration of affect in popular science fiction media, this paper is drawn from a longer term research project on the affective use of mimesis and mimetic comportment in twentieth century science fiction film and television. The purpose for bringing the essay to Worldcon is to consider a wide range of theatrical modes of communication in relation to treatments of familiar figures in space who are well-recognized by fans of science fiction. The conference allows for feedback, confirmation and revision to test the efficacy of my notions about estrangement as realized in science fiction, and provides access to a network of affiliated scholars interested in academic publication. Inspired by my life-long passion for science fiction, the paper investigates affective distancing in the theatricalization of space-based figures, human, alien and post-human.

Well-versed in the critical theory, history and aesthetics of theatre and social performance, **Dr. Garfinkle** completed his PhD (University of Washington) with a dissertation on the theatrical communication of emotion in 17th century London. This historical study of how "passions" figured on the early English stage has led to further studies on modernist and contemporary roles of emotion in both quantitative and critical modes of communication research. Garfinkle has published on yoga and vocal performance, on Julie Taymor's theatricalization of cinema, on Adornoan aesthetics, the expressionist theatre, and I have a manuscript on the theatrical communication of emotion nearing publication.