



Worldcon 75 Academic Track
Session 4: The Posthuman

Wednesday 18:00-19:30

Room 209

Chair: **Esko Suoranta**

Abstract 1:

Beata Gubacsi (University of Liverpool, UK):

Posthumanism and Science Fiction: Estrangement in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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In my paper, I wish to explore how the iconic Science Fiction (SF) narrative, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* utilises the technique of estrangement in order to make the concepts of human and non-human unfamiliar to the reader, and, subsequently, becomes instrumental in discussing posthumanism. Darko Suvin in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* establishes the term cognitive estrangement to defend the term 'Science Fiction', and differentiate it from other genres. Suvin's "factual reporting of the fictional" (374) or cognitive estrangement relies on Shklovsky and Brecht's distancing and defamiliarising techniques but applies them with a significant twist.

While Shklovsky and Brecht see the essence of the process and effect of estrangement in depicting familiar objects and notions as unfamiliar to enhance the audience's critical response, Suvin claims that SF depicts the unfamiliar as if it was real. However, SF seems to take two turns on estrangement. The elements of SF worlds are real, reflecting our perception and knowledge of the world, and they are becoming unfamiliar through the process of re-contextualising them into alternative histories, distant futures, and other universes. Then, the narrative distances the given objects or elements even further by hinting that the already unfamiliar, fictional world is, in fact, real.

Similarly to SF, there is no consensus over the definition of posthumanism. Most scholars in the field agree that posthumanism can be seen either as the critique of humanism, or as the study of the future of humanity. The function of posthumanism, regardless of its approach, is to renew the concepts of human and non-human, and make them be understood as what they could be rather than ought to be. As David Roden suggests in his book, *Posthuman Life*: posthumanism 'is not a normative claim about how the world ought to be but a metaphysical claim about what it could contain' (9). Consequently, posthumanism blurs the conventional ontological and epistemological constraints rendered to humans and the non-humans by making its own genealogy of humanism unfamiliar.

Philip K. Dick manages to depict both Deckard and the androids unfamiliar by dramatizing the relativity of humanist values such as empathy, yet, in this unfamiliarity, there seem to be a deeper understanding of what human and non-human are. Deckard also shows social and psychological estrangement, as he is incapable of establishing and maintaining relationships with humans, while he clearly does so with androids. The distancing effect is applied to represent the androids, as non-humans, in order to dramatize the problems of the humanist conceptualisation of the mind and body dualism. With the analysis of a variety of estrangement techniques in the novel, I wish to demonstrate the applicability and significance of the method in creating SF and posthumanist narratives and response to them.

Beata Gubacsi is a second year PhD candidate at University of Liverpool, working on her thesis, *Literature of Monstrosity: Posthumanism and Authorship*. The project seeks to revisit the humanist notion of authorship in terms of posthumanism through metafictional New Weird texts, focusing on the hybridity they express in their genre, and form of mediation. However, her main interest is posthumanism at the moment, she also works on Science Fiction, ecocriticism and body studies. She has remained an enthusiast of Victorian Literature, which is reflected mainly in her yet unpublished fiction.

Abstract 2:

Clare Wall (York University, Canada):

Posthuman Defamiliarization: Breaking the Human-animal Boundary

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The posthuman in science fiction is often used as a way to question what defines humanity. Clones, androids, and cyborgs all participate in defamiliarization of the “human”, being both materially, and sometimes cognitively unfamiliar, and yet still recognizable as “human-like”. As Sherryl Vint has argued in *Bodies of Tomorrow*, our concept of self and “human” has important consequences for how we relate to the world (6-7). It is also important for the boundaries we draw between “self” and other act as a way of deconstructing anthropocentric definitions of humanity. I argue that defamiliarization plays an important role in contemporary posthuman science fiction by estranging readers from the traditional boundaries they would typically place between human and animal through its inclusion of genetically “hybrid” characters who are othered for their “animal” heritage.

Engaging with the posthuman works of Sherryl Vint and Pramod Nayar, I will focus on two examples of contemporary posthuman science fiction. Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, and Margaret Atwood’s *Madaddam Trilogy*. Lai’s Dora and Miyako clones and her shifting serpent-women characters and Atwood’s inclusion of the hybrid Crakers and the sentient genetically modified pigeons offer examples of posthuman life that while familiar in their emotions, desires, and needs, are strange in their embodied forms and often their thought patterns. The estranging effects of their posthuman characters creates allows for the deconstruction of the anthropocentric distance put between humans and animals.

Building on Donna Haraway’s idea of the cyborg as challenging the boundaries of human, animal, and machine, I argue that contemporary posthumanism has taken her concept of a cybernetic organism a step further to not only blur the division between human and animal, but to use such defamiliarization to reveal the enmeshed set of relations that exist between humans and non-human animals often rejected in anthropocentric narratives. Atwood’s Crakers and pigeons challenge common distinctions given to humans that reinforce Western liberal human superiority and dominance over other species by defamiliarizing notions of “food”, “animal”, and the uniqueness of human sentience. I will especially focus on the Craker, Blackbeard, who becomes the mediator that puts the humans and pigeons into dialogue. Lai similarly presents Evie as a hybrid “clone” who has been disenfranchised as a human due to her animal genetics. Her relationship to her carp “mother” and the narrative’s serpent-like twisting of Miranda’s origin stories through serpent-goddess, human, and scientific experiment estranges readers from expected “clean” binary divisions in Western science.

Additionally Lai’s characters relations to food and animals parallel Atwood’s in the way her text encourages the formation of new identities that are fluid, hybrid, and located not in an exploitative hierarchy where “humans” are on the top, but instead in one where they are

intertwined within a network of relations to other species and the environment. Thus through defamiliarization, Lai and Atwood's posthuman characters create a space within the text that argues for establishing new relations between ourselves and the environment and for recognizing animal others.

Clare Wall is a fourth year PhD student studying contemporary posthumanism at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her thesis focuses on the interrelation between posthumans, their environment and technology. She received her Honours BA in English from York University in 2011 and completed her MA in English from McMaster University in 2012. Clare has previously presented research on posthuman subjects, postcolonial science fiction, contemporary speculative fiction, and the portrayal of gender and otherness in science fiction and fantasy. Her article "Here Be Monsters: Posthuman Adaptation and Subjectivity in Peter Watts' Starfish" appears in the Canadian Fantastic in Focus Anthology.

Abstract 3:

Jani Ylönen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland):

From Cute Pets to Cyborg Killers: Estrangement and Representation in Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *We3*

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Estrangement and technology has walked hand in hand through the history of science fiction. However, it can be argued that the ability of science fiction to create technological scenarios that shock or confound the reader/viewer is becoming more challenged. After all, the role of technology in the Western society and the everyday life of its inhabitants is constantly growing with seemingly little concern expressed about the process. Of course, many discourses that originally made people re-evaluate their lives tend to lose their power after repetition, an effect felt, for example, in the animal rights discussion.

The graphic novel *We3* by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely seeks to cause a feeling of estrangement in the reader by combining animal rights issues and technology in a heartfelt way. By combining deathly technology with pet animals in a package that is both violent and cute, they create juxtaposition that enhances the questions of speciesism and ethics.

In my presentation, I will explore the estrangement caused by the killer robot poochie, kitty, and bunny rabbit, who are created for humanity violent needs, but abandoned and ordered to be terminated as they show too human aspects. I will examine these animals from the context of feminist posthumanism to discuss the issues of anthropocentrism and the call for new ethical considerations present in the theoretical framework.

Furthermore, I will examine the animal characters from the point of view of representation. Do the multiple choices of what the animals' represent from science experiment animals to being counterparts to humanity's future do these characters justice? Alternatively, do they present new opportunities to examine the concept of representation, which has come under heavy critique in the recent times?

Jani Ylönen is a doctoral candidate at the University of Jyväskylä. He is working on his dissertation, which is titled *The Changing Landscapes of Human and Non-Human – Gene Technology, Feminist Posthumanism, and Representation in Contemporary Science Fiction*. He mostly focuses his research on what can be classified as humans, but is fascinated by dogs and dragons in equal measures.