



Worldcon 75 Academic Track

**Session 7: The Politics and Poetics of Posthumanist Estrangement(s) in Speculative Fiction**

**Thursday 12:00-13:30**

**Room 209**

Chair: **Aino-Kaisa Koistinen**

The nonhuman and monstrous figures typical to speculative fiction have an effect of estranging the defaults of human experience. This panel discusses SF-nal monsters in the context of posthumanist theory. We examine what roles monstrous figures play in our social and cultural landscapes, how they are made and maintained, and how they might reconfigure established notions of what it means to be human, animal, or machine.

The panel consists of brief presentations by the participants, followed by a panel discussion that maps the intersections of speculative fiction and posthumanist thought.

Abstract 1:

**Aino-Kaisa Koistinen** (University of Jyväskylä, Finland):

**Imagining Others: Aliens, Monsters and Cyborgs as Political Figures**

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In today's cultural landscape, monsters are everywhere. They have invaded our television screen via various television programmes and occupy a significant space in other fictional realms, such as novels, games and comics, as well. If we believe specific sources in the media, they also seem to walk among us, invading our spaces as the threatening immigrants or non-normative sexualities. In her talk, Dr. Aino-Kaisa Koistinen will discuss how monsters are made both in fiction as well as in discussions in (social) media, what kinds of cultural phenomena is this monster-making connected to and what kinds of consequences it may have. What is it in our current cultural atmosphere that seems to be begging for the creation of monsters?

Koistinen follows Donna Haraway's and Rosi Braidotti's ideas on the promises of creating monsters to argue that monsters can be used, and are being used, as political tools that invite us to reconsider our attitudes to "others" - such as nature, non-human animals and human beings considered as "other" to us. In other words, science fiction and fantasy narratives can use estrangement to distance us from our reality, to imagine something strange and unreal, yet also use this strangeness to comment on the world we all live in. However, at the same time, the idea of the "monster" is being used to create fear and hatred towards specific "others" in our cultures. What can we then make of these monster discourses of today and their political and ethical implications?

PhD **Aino-Kaisa Koistinen** is a senior researcher in literature at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests include media culture, transmediality, science fiction, gender/queer studies and feminist posthumanism. She defended her PhD thesis *The Human Question in Science Fiction Television: (Re)Imagining Humanity in Battlestar Galactica, Bionic Woman and V* in contemporary culture studies (University of Jyväskylä, 2015). She is vice chair of *The Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research (FINFAR)*, one

of the editors-in-chief of *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* and one of the organizers of *The Monster Network*.

Abstract 2:

**Kaisa Kortekallio** (University of Helsinki, Finland):

**Alien Animals: New Weird Monsters as Strange Strangers**

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In the marshlands of Jeff VanderMeer's New Weird novel *Annihilation* (2014) the reader encounters boars, dolphins, owls and starfish that are strangely present: they know more than they should, they escape the scientific attention of the biologist-narrator, and they make the whole novel seethe with a terrifying uncertainty: there is always more going on in the shadows than the flashlight of human expeditioners can reveal. Similar portrayals of nonhuman animals are found also in the work of China Miéville and Johanna Sinisalo. All three writers are also known for their vocal engagement in environmental and political discussions, and especially for their criticism of human exceptionalism.

The strategy of cognitive estrangement, and the tropes affiliated with it, play a central role in these New Weird fictions. The introduction of strangely active animals plays against the tradition of presenting nonhuman nature as a background for human activity, or using it a reservoir of symbolic images. The liveliness and presence of New Weird animals usually makes them fit the non-category of *monsters*: creatures that disturb the very practice of categorizing living beings into humans and animals.

This presentation connects the material monsters of New Weird literature to posthumanist ideas about species relations. The concept of *strange stranger*, coined by eco-philosopher Timothy Morton to convey the way nonhumans escape human attempts at epistemological control, develops an estranged ethical position in which unknowability is considered as a ground for interspecies ethics.

MA **Kaisa Kortekallio** is currently working on a doctoral dissertation in the field of literary research. The dissertation examines how relations of selves, bodies and nonhuman life are re-imagined in contemporary English-language speculative fiction and posthumanist philosophy. Kortekallio develops an ecological and enactive approach to fiction, asking how narrative techniques such as viewpoint and character invite readers to enact models of relations and subjectivities. With this work, she hopes to contribute to the development of "ecology after Nature". Kortekallio also teaches courses on contemporary speculative fiction and acts as secretary of board for *The Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research (FINFAR)*.

Abstract 3:

**Juha Raipola** (University of Tampere, Finland):

**Totally not Robots: Partial Humanness as a Source of Laughter**

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In one of the user-created communities of the social news website Reddit, robots have infiltrated our social landscape: in the parody subreddit */r/totallynotrobots/*, people are pretending to be robots attempting to pass themselves as humans. Subscribers of the community will comment in-character, posing themselves as robots trying their hardest to assimilate into human culture and failing miserably. Their mistaken notions about human

social bonding, feelings and the uses of social media are used to comedic effect, eliciting laughter from fellow subscribers. Though partially “human” in their ability to partake in linguistic communication, the robots have real trouble adapting to the social life of the human species.

The SF trope of a laughable alien or robot in human disguise is well established today. But why exactly is it funny to see these nonhuman characters fail in their attempts to act human? Going back to Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter, my presentation examines how the outer boundaries of the human and the non-human are negotiated through the comedic use of such characters. According to Bergson, the comic character manifests “a certain lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence” – rather than adapting to the changing expectations of surrounding reality, the comic butt demonstrates strikingly unconscious, mechanical or self-ignorant behaviour. The general aim of the presentation is to investigate the question of humour and laughter in posthumanist thought.

PhD **Juha Raipola** is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Tampere, Finland. His doctoral thesis (2015) examined the relationship between non-humans, uncertainty and literary narratives in Finnish weird fiction. His current research is focused on the intersections of material ecocriticism and dystopias in Finnish literature.