



Worldcon 75 Academic Track
Session 9: Rationality, Society and Embodiment

Friday 10:00-11:30
Room 209

Chair: **Sanna Lehtonen**

Abstract 1:

Jari Käkälä (University of Helsinki, Finland):

The Hero with the Invisible Hand: Heinlein's Early Future History Stories

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In his Future History stories (mostly written in 1940s and 1950s), Robert A. Heinlein projects American frontier history and mythology into a narrative of humankind's space future. Heinlein's explicit use of historical and contemporary references invite political readings and give his future history stories a more polemic air than similar narratives by many of his contemporary science fiction authors. However, this political nature of Heinlein's fiction is complicated by his shifts from one political stance to another, sometimes even within one story. Indeed, Heinlein has been called "a literary broker of the problems, alternatives, and solutions that continue to preoccupy American culture,"¹ rather than a systematic philosopher.

However, I argue that even as Heinlein's early stories seem to point to a variety of political directions, many of his characters go through a similar graduation from ironically represented unrealistic notions of (frontier) heroism into a paradoxically unironical self-discovery of masculine individualism. At the same time, the stories are pervaded by notions of social Darwinism and the invisible hand of free markets where individual self-interest produces advancement for the whole society. In Heinlein's stories, this leads to fictional worlds that are ruled by *laissez-faire* economics and meritocracy, but where exceptional individuals can also acquire heroic aura by successfully taking advantage of these societies, and even steering them – at the same time as they may criticize them.

Heinlein himself claimed to only ask questions, and leave it to the readers to discover the answers. However, while the political stances of his characters may vary, one of Heinlein's pre-defined answers seems to be a reliance on the freedom of the exceptional individual. This presentation examines a selection of stories early on in Heinlein's Future History series in order to analyze the way they tie together notions of frontier history, the invisible hand of economic growth, and reliance on antidemocratic individualism. In doing so, I argue, they pave the way for Heinlein's later works which became more fixed in their positions.

Jari Käkälä, PhD, currently teaches at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Helsinki, where he recently completed his doctoral dissertation, *The Cowboy Politics of an Enlightened Future: History, Frontier and Guardianship in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction*. In addition to Asimov's work, his research interests include Golden Age science fiction and the pulp publishing context. He has presented at ICFA and SFRA conferences and published in *Extrapolation* and *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, among other publications.

¹ Kilgore, *Astrofuturism* (Philadelphia, 2003), p. 88.

Abstract 2:

Matthew Masucci (State College of Florida, Venice, USA):

De-Marginalizing Disability in the Fiction of Brian Evenson

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Brian Evenson's fiction has been revered not just for its approach to the uncanny, but also for its unique ability to obfuscate setting and character while still being engaging. In works such as the novel *Last Days* or his novel *Immobility*, the main characters are physically disabled in some way. In *Last Days*, the protagonist is an amputee detective pulled into investigating an intra-cult murder. In *Immobility*, the protagonist must go on a quest across a post-apocalyptic landscape. Here, the main character is paralyzed.

Evenson's disabled characters do not live on the margins; instead, he explores the challenges of physical disability in a dark world.

In an episode of the *Nerdist Podcast*, Robert Kirkman, author of *The Walking Dead* comic series, regretted cutting off Rick Grimes's hand because it made certain aspects of narrative difficult. Simple tasks such as buttoning a shirt or opening a can become narratively slow to portray. This decision bled over to the television series where the CGI effects would be far too expensive to justify losing Rick's hand (Hardwick).

This sentiment regarding disability is what keeps disabled characters relegated to the sidelines. They make narratives difficult; however, this only reinforces the importance of having disabled representation in texts.

What Brian Evenson accomplishes in his novels is to demonstrate that disability is not an impediment to narrative; instead, physical disability creates new solutions to old problems. Representing the physically disabled opens up a dialogue about the effects of disability in daily life.

This paper will examine the ways in which Evenson de-marginalizes the physically disabled in his works by utilizing dynamic characters with physical disabilities as his protagonists.

Matthew Masucci is an Associate Professor of Language and Literature at the State College of Florida. His chapter "Angry Eden: Approaching Plant Entelechy through Plant Horror and Eco-Colonization in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy" has recently appeared in *Dark Nature: Anti-Pastoral Essays in American Literature and Culture*, edited by Richard J. Schneider (2016).

Abstract 3:

Ryan Morrison (Flinders University, Australia):

The Face Is (Not Always) the Mirror of the Mind: The Cognitive Estrangement of Emotional Capability in AI

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The extent of emotional capability of artificial intelligence in science fiction varies greatly and acts as a mirror for the reader reflecting (what is considered to be) human nature.

Depictions run the gamut from 'parahuman' (cognisant of the full spectrum of potential human emotion) to 'allohuman' (lacking any understanding of emotional states, and perhaps lacking any comparable states entirely) (Hall, 2007). Positive reactions to parahuman AI are reinforced because humans relate to and even identify with the AI, while negative reactions to allohuman AI can be understood through the use of abjection (Kristeva, 1982) which

argues that humans respond with revulsion to blurred distinctions between subject and object, self and other. These depictions create a binary that aligns parahuman/allohuman with normal/abnormal. Thus when a feeling/unfeeling AI — the *novum* of the text — interacts with human characters, the presence of strong emotional capability is shown to be positive and any absence of emotional capability is shown to be negative. In these texts, cognitive estrangement is focused on the implications of the existence of AI; however, for cognitive estrangement to function, a normative state is assumed: a ‘zero world’ of ‘empirically verifiable properties’ (Suvin, 1980). Therefore texts that align parahuman/allohuman with normal/abnormal are stating that the zero world — which is meant to reflect our own world — is one in which those who lack strong emotional capability lack value.

I argue that only texts that provide inclusive conceptions and depictions of emotional capability present an accurate mirror of human nature. This paper will demonstrate that the zero world presented by the majority of SF AI texts is predicated on the idea that human emotion is a biological universal. This claim of universality is disrupted by those with variable emotional capability, such as those with flattened affect, or those with alexithymia as a result of conditions like autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Thus for texts relying on a zero world in which a full emotional range is the norm, the mirror that is presented is flawed, functioning as an accurate reflection only for those that categorise flattened affect as being outside human nature. This will be demonstrated through science fiction examples of problematic depictions of emotional range, both human and AI, alongside texts that deviate from this formula and present a more inclusive depiction of human emotion.

Ryan Morrison (BA, MCreatArts) is a postgraduate student at Flinders University in South Australia, and is currently completing a PhD in creative writing. His research is centred on SF depictions of artificial intelligence, interrogating what relationship they have to current and future ethical quandaries posed by real world AI. His creative work will interpret these findings through an SF reimagining of the mythical golem of Prague.