Worldcon 75 Academic Track
**Session 11: Text and Materia(lity)**

**Friday 15:00-16:30**
**Room 209**

Chair: **Mikko Mäntyniemi**

Abstract 1:
**Ciarán Kavanagh** (University College Cork, Ireland):
**Binding Unreality: Estrangement and the Reading of SF**
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Darko Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement originates in his 1975 "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," wherein he defines SF as:

> a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment. (375)

Unlike genre definitions which draw on textual structure or plot delimitations, Suvin primarily bases his vision of SF on a cognitive experience imparted to the reader, a subtlety that neither he nor the multitude of critics who have drawn on his work have truly explored. This paper seeks to rectify this by the exploration of cognitive estrangement's *experiential* core, examining how the SF text and SF reader work, in collaboration, toward its generation, and why SF, as a genre, provides it with such fertile ground.

This paper first delineates the wider theory of estrangement, and its particular manifestation in SF critical theory. Utilising reader-response theory, it demonstrates how the SF critic might identify and analyse certain catalysts for estrangement in SF texts, and the interpretive and heuristic paths which they present to particular types of readers. It specifically posits that the fantastic text necessitates an immediate *ontological inscription* – that is, for the reader to progress through the text, the borders of its possible must be established, its reality bounded. This can be related to what Suvin terms the "feedback oscillation," the cognitive and interpretive movement between personal and textual reality which results in an estranged view of both (*Metamorphoses* 71). The reading process is here fed not only by the individual reader's cultural and educational capital, but, critically, their wider knowledge of the genre. Thus the textual reality might be understood not just by analogues in our consensus reality (feudalism transported to space is yet feudalism), but by other unrealities. The experienced reader will, for example, be aware of the possibility of ontological obfuscation – virtual reality, psychoactive visions, alternate universes, alternate timelines, and various other devices of narrative levelling. Even the text which employs no such devices is thereby subject to the need for ontological inscription – unstable until proven otherwise.

In this regard, SF, as a genre, might be understood as working towards the destabilisation of the individual text; locating a text in the SF multiverse necessitates its distinguishing from the infinitely possible. While genre feeds this potential polysemy it also, however, consumes it, providing an experiential buffer between the reader and the nova of the SF world. Literary experience in the worlds of William Gibson will, for example, provide narrative touchstones in further cyberpunk – potentially naturalising their strange newness.

Considering these twinned but oppositional cognitive movements, I argue, therefore, that the SF genre is *ouroboric* – that it is the genre itself which both provides and yet consumes the indeterminacy and impossibility of otherwise indigestible unreality.

**Ciarán Kavanagh** is a PhD researcher in University College Cork, Ireland. His thesis, "Reading Postmodernism: Indeterminacy, Instability and the Changing Role of the Reader," utilises reader-response theory in the analysis of postmodern narratives of particular interpretive complexity. He was the recipient of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences 'Excellence Scholarship', and was awarded the title of 'College Scholar' by the same. His research is currently funded by the Irish Research Council's 'Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship'. He is the winner of the IAAS's WTM Riches Prize (2015), with whom he has also recently published an essay considering the value of trauma theory in criticisms of Slaughterhouse-Five.

Abstract 2:
**Esko Suoranta** (University of Helsinki, Finland):
**Brand Names and Defamiliarization in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge***
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At times, William Gibson and Thomas Pynchon appear to engage in intertextual hat tipping. Critics like Richard Skeates and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney argue that Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) is an important source for Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) while Jason Siegel finds in Gibson's seminal *Neuromancer* (1984) a central intertext for Pynchon's latest novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013).

Mapping a further connection between the two authors, I suggest that these two sets of connections are bridged by a third, namely the one between *Pattern Recognition* and *Bleeding Edge*. Where *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Pattern Recognition* share female sleuth protagonists with gothic motifs and *Bleeding Edge* borrows from *Neuromancer* a vision of cyberspace, *Pattern Recognition* and *Bleeding Edge* are connected through their use of brand names as a technique of defamiliarization.

Both novels are ripe with both real and fictional brands, giving the texts a sense of hyperspecifity when it comes to depicting their respective speculative takes on the Western world in the first years of the 21st century. In his discussion of *Pattern Recognition*, Fredric Jameson calls this feature of name-dropping "post-modern nominalism" and sees it as part of the core conflict of the novel. To give just a few examples, actual brands like Beanie Babies, Tommy Hilfiger, and Michelin coexist alongside the fictional hashslingrz, DeepArcher, and Blue Ant and populate the worlds of the two authors with a multitude of named commercial entities.

The detail, multitude, and centrality of the various brands work both to give a sense of realistic, high-resolution texture to the novels, but more importantly also serve to defamiliarize the perception of the seemingly mimetic storyworlds, creating a lingering Shklovskian "special perception." Further, this technique directs attention to the late capitalist maxims that appear as definitive forces in the two narratives. Gibson's Cayce Pollard is on a quest for authentic meaning, struggling against the nominalizing influences of her surroundings while Pynchon's Maxine Tarnow navigates a world of conspiracies where one of its few legible aspects are its various brands. Both characters appear as expert curators of the utterly branded reality around them, highlighting the lengths to which our contemporary existence is permeated by signifiers of brand identity.

**Esko Suoranta** has an MA in English philology from the University of Helsinki. He currently works on his PhD dissertation Allegories of Late Capitalism: The Future Worlds of Contemporary Anglo-American Fiction, studying the effects of capitalism on the techno-cultural development of humanity in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, J.G. Ballard, William Gibson, and Dave Eggers. He has published on William Gibson's latest novels in the *Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*.


Abstract 3:
**Richard Johnston Jones** (Keele University, UK):
**Making Love to a Broom: Genre Estrangement in Richard Brautigan**
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Richard Brautigan's work intersects the fantastic and the mundane, muddying the waters of generic boundaries and disrupting common perceptions of history. Yet what is the purpose of this playfulness? Fredric Jameson (1981) has argued that our perception of history rests on a fundamental paradox: it is not a text; however, we can only approach it through its textual form. To engage with history is, therefore, to embark in a reconstruction of the materials that shape it. In this sense, Brautigan, to borrow an expression of Ian Bell's (2013), is one of American literature's chief "tinkers," who relishes in the realignment and reconstruction of genres in order to counteract their perceived rigidity. This paper considers the wider political implications of this method, examining the deployment of cognitive estrangement as a means of shifting from a static narrative of late capitalism to a distinctly Utopian register. In order to do this, I look at how talking tigers (*In Watermelon Sugar* [1968]), monster hunting cowboys (*The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western* [1974]), and sombreros causing civil unrest (*Sombrero Fallout: A Japanese Novel* [1976]) not only destabilise genre conventions, but help us to think about the relationship between textual materials in new ways. What we will come to discover is that this intricate and obsessive tinkering opens onto a much larger discourse about how we perceive history and imagine new futures.

**Richard Johnston** is a part-time PhD candidate in American Literature at Keele University, England. He is currently working on his thesis, which examines the role of genre within the work of Philip K. Dick.