



Worldcon 75 Academic Track
Session 12: SF and Ethics

Friday 17:00-18:30
Room 209

Chair: **Andrew M. Butler**

Abstract 1:

Päivi Vääänen (University of Helsinki, Finland):

New Waves of Estrangement Samuel Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* and *The Ballad of Beta-2*

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"A representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time make it seem unfamiliar," defines Bertolt Brecht his *Verfremdungseffekt* (qtd. in Stableford et al. n.p.) Chatelain and Slusser, on the other hand, characterize estrangement in more narratological terms; for them, "estrangement results from a more or less broad disparity between the world known to the narratee and that of the virtual reader" (175). Both of these angles to estrangement are combined and fascinatingly illustrated in Samuel Delany's early novels *The Ballad of Beta-2* (1964) and *The Einstein Intersection* (1967). This paper aims to compare these two novels, their narrative strategies and complexities, in order to probe the possible differences between an alien narrator (in *Einstein*) and a human one (in *Beta-2*), and to discuss their differences on the level of narrative structures. The comparison turns into a case study of a turning point in the history of science fiction, as whereas *The Ballad of Beta-2* is in many ways a representative of traditional pulp sf, *The Einstein Intersection* clearly belongs to the New Wave of science fiction that emerged in the 1960s.

A central theme of both novels is normativity and difference, and the framework is, on the surface level quite similar: both narrated by a first-person narrator who is trying to interpret a human culture that is his past but the readers' future. However, the representative of the New Wave, *The Einstein Intersection*, proves to be more complex as regards its narrative structures both in theory and practice. As the aliens in *The Einstein Intersection* are doing their best to interpret human mythology and become human, their interpretations of humanity produce estrangement in its Brechtian sense: allowing us to recognize its subject but making it seem unfamiliar. The effect, on the other hand, is to a great extent technically achieved by the "extreme temporal displacement" which Chatelain and Slusser argue to be the characteristic of "extrapolative narratives" like *The Einstein Intersection* where the narrator and narratee are situated in the same distant place or distant future, not providing the "virtual reader" all of the information she would need to make sense of the narrative (172). However, on closer inspection the setting in *The Einstein Intersection* becomes fascinatingly complex regarding estrangement and the narrative structures behind it – the relationship between the narrator, narratee, and the flesh-and-blood reader (or virtual reader) becomes a complex maze of known unknowns and unknown knowns.

This paper concludes that these two novels, which seem almost as two versions of a same story about humans' obsession with normativity and difference, both function beautifully in the generic frame they were produced in and for the audiences they were probably targeted for. Read together, they also clearly illustrate the moment in sf history that

became the New Wave – at least in Delany’s case, multiplying the levels and manifestations of estrangement.

Päivi Väättänen is a doctoral candidate at the University of Helsinki, Finland and she is currently working on her doctoral dissertation on African American science fiction. Her previous publications include an article titled “Opposing Forces and Ethical Judgments in Samuel Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*” and an essay on Sun Ra’s afrofuturism in *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*.

Abstract 2:

Audrey Taylor (Midway University, USA):

Decisions in Anne McCaffrey’s Decisions at Doona

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One of the more interesting, and often ignored, works of Anne McCaffrey is *Decision at Doona*. I argue a fairly straight-forward seeming colonization story is made new both with the advent of an a-typical hero, but also because for much of the book who are aliens, who earth colonists, and who natives is purposefully obtruded.

The story “The Monster” by A.E. Van Voigt (1948) famously switched the viewpoint on who the monster/alien was, and who the human. Like this story, the reader of *Decision at Doona* must pay close attention to novum to understand who is the focalizer for different parts of the text. In doing this the typical colonization narrative is switched, the reader is forced to take a different viewpoint, and as a result they are in sympathy both with the aliens and with the humans of the story. Colonized and colonizer are complicated. In texts like *Doona*, McCaffrey is clearly interested in the politics of colonization, and she overturns the typical colonizer/ colonized perspective to ensure that the reader questions their own innate biases.

As well as this flipped perspective, McCaffrey also presents the reader with an a-typical hero. The hero of *Doona* is a little boy, rambunctious and quizzical, not the grown males often seen as the catalysts of other SF stories. Science Fiction is sometimes called the “western” of space, and this holds weight, but McCaffrey is careful to examine the ramifications of colonization, and tries to get into the mind of the Other, both through a flipped perspective and with an unusual hero. Both allow her to make an old story, new again.

I will use Jessica Langer’s examination of post-colonialism in science fiction as my framework, with explorations into how more typical SF builds sympathy for the colonizer versus the colonized to interrogate how the old format of colonizer versus colonized is overturned in what is otherwise a quite typical SF story.

Audrey Taylor teaches at Midway University in the United States. She has a PhD in fantasy literature from Anglia Ruskin University in England. She has a book forthcoming on world-building and Patricia A. McKillip from McFarland Press, and hopefully will have another in progress soon on Anne McCaffrey for the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series.

Abstract 3:

Jane Anne McLachlan (Independent scholar, Canada):

Balancing Defamiliarization and Estrangement in Science Fiction and Fantasy with Western (Human) Ethical Philosophy

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Science fiction and fantasy novels are rife with ethical questions and moral choices. Yet the protagonists, be they aliens, fantasy beings, or humans living in a distant future or traveling to an equally-distant past, are unfamiliar to the readers, and in many cases they feel estranged from the society they are living in. This presentation will provide a brief overview of Western Ethical Philosophy and demonstrate how authors of speculative fiction integrate the major Western theories into their characters' decision making, thus combining familiar moral premises with unfamiliar and/or estranged characters and settings. Brief references will be made to the works of Robert J. Sawyer, Charles de Lint, David Brin, Suzanne Collins, Sheri S. Tepler, Mary Doria Russell, and Kazuo Ishiguro.

Before becoming a full-time speculative fiction writer, **Jane Ann McLachlan** was a college professor of ethics. She has published two academic textbooks on professional ethics which are used in colleges and universities across Canada: *The Right Choice: Making Ethical Decisions on the Job* and *Ethics In Action: Making Ethical Decisions in Daily Life*.