



Worldcon 75 Academic Track  
**Session 15: Structures of Representation**

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

Chair: **Jani Ylönen**

Abstract 1:

**Andy Hageman** (Luther College, USA):

**Pipelines & Rigs, Pylons & Wires: The Strange Infrastructures of China Miéville and Tom McCarthy**

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This talk brings the emerging field of Infrastructural Criticism into the weird worlds of speculative fiction. Elements of infrastructure such as roadways, telco cables, petroleum extraction and delivery systems, water and sewage works, and waste collection and processing are absolutely fundamental to our lives and yet they remain largely invisible when they operate as they should. But when one or more of these breaks down, frustration and anxiety if not outright panic and even violence ensue. Infrastructural Criticism is a practice of attending closely and analytically to the roles functional and dysfunctional infrastructures play in fiction, but so far this work has largely engaged narrative realism. This paper diversifies the critical practice and at the same time introduces a new way of looking at weird, speculative fiction. By combining this narrative category with this critical approach, we get a third alternative to the function/dysfunction binary of realism: the uncanny and revolutionary perspective of infrastructure when it turns deeply strange. In China Miéville's short story "Covehithe," for example, a father and daughter sneak into a security zone to observe oil rigs that were destroyed and have now returned, alive and walking. Similarly, in Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, the fissures of antagonism in New Crobuzon where social change becomes possible are visible very specifically through the city's shipyards, its landfill, the eponymous public transit station, and a core telco cable. Tom McCarthy's recent novel *Satin Island* centers around the estranging impacts of sustained online media coverage of a major oil pipeline leak, and his previous novel *C* offers richly strange sequences of telco line and pylon networks being installed across Egypt in the mid-twentieth century.

One key aim of the talk is to illustrate infrastructural reading of the estranging elements of speculative fiction so that others may explore the approach with all sorts of weird texts. A second key aim of the talk is to claim that strange infrastructure, unlike mere functional/dysfunctional realistic infrastructure, offers unique ways of representing the unrepresentables Capital, Ecology, and their historical entanglements. Rather than simply running smoothly or shutting down, these infrastructures make visible the strange and sophisticated ideological and financial investments people have made in them consciously and unconsciously. The repressed returns, but this estrangement might also inspire us to imagine infrastructure anew and for the common good.

Dr. **Andy Hageman** is Assistant Professor of English at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, USA. He researches intersections of techno-culture and ecology in literature, film, and other media arts, and he has published essays on a wide range of subjects from David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and *Twin Peaks* to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The*

Windup Girl, and Lou Ye's Suzhou River. He's currently co-editing the 2016 issue of *Paradoxa* with the theme "Global Weirding" that brings together scholarship on and/or interviews with Jeff VanderMeer, China Miéville, H.P. Lovecraft, and the Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet.

Abstract 2:

**Hanna-Riikka Roine** (University of Tampere, Finland):

**Sense of an Experiment: Estrangement as a Means of Communicating Ideas**

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The effect of estrangement is often mentioned as a generic marker of speculative fiction along with other effects such as sense of wonder. It is not restricted only to speculative fiction – instead, it is specific to artistic conventions in general. This is what Viktor Shklovsky, the originator of the term estrangement (*ostranenie*), also suggested when he wrote that the technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. In my paper I argue, however, that speculative fiction is unique in the way it makes use of estrangement as a means of communicating ideas.

The key point of my paper is to put forward the concept of speculative worldbuilding in relation to estrangement. Speculative fiction invites us to be in two worlds at the same time – to imagine the world and to be aware of it as a construct. Therefore, as a rhetorical practice, speculative worldbuilding aims to give us a sense of the idea or thought experiment and the elements used in working it through. This is a prerequisite for the ability to extrapolate the relevance of the story to our understanding of and estrangement with our reality.

I suggest that the estrangement is rooted in the user's awareness of the world, both as made and as possibly existing. It does not, thus, simply arise from the double exposure between real (what is) and imagined (what is not), no matter how fantastic or remote the imaginings may be. In other words, the user's process of working the imaginative premise through in a systematic manner slows down the perception of the thought experiment that is being worked through.

In my paper, I analyse the ways the sense of the thought experiment is given in speculative fiction. I focus, for example, on the ways a work of speculative fiction contributes to our awareness of its artistic conventions, and suggest a way of distinguishing between fictional and nonfictional experiments. When it comes to contemporary speculative fiction, it is worth noting that practices such as worldbuilding transcend the medial boundaries – however, the recognition of the importance of particular implementations entails the need for sensitivity with regard to medium-specific affordances and devices.

**Hanna-Riikka Roine** (PhD, literary studies) works as a researcher at the University of Tampere, Finland. Her doctoral dissertation, *Imaginative, Immersive and Interactive Engagements. The Rhetoric of Worldbuilding in Contemporary Speculative Fiction* (2016) pursues speculative worldbuilding as a rhetorical and communicative practice beyond textual fictions to digital, interactive, transmedial, and fan fictions. Roine has also worked as an editor-in-chief of *Fafnir – Nordic Journal for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* and published numerous articles on speculative fiction.

Abstract 3:

**Christina Scholz** (University of Graz, Austria):

**M. John Harrison's Human Aliens and the Psychogeography of the Alien Event Site**  
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Over time, M. John Harrison's literary style has got ever closer to literary fiction while still depicting our world (and possible future iterations) through a science-fictional lens and employing glorified pulp tropes in a way that benefits the story and implied socio-political commentary. His liminal narratives defy clear-cut (sub-)genre definitions – *Light* can be read as Higher Space Opera, *Nova Swing* as post-cyberpunk NEONoir, *Empty Space* as Quantum Weird Gothic Fiction – yet always revolve around human perspectives, human interaction, human emotions.

A recurring topic related to New Wave 'soft' science fiction is the transition away from the notion that alien civilisation is a puzzle to solve and towards the understanding that it is just another culture to interact with, but in the end unreadable, opaque. Moreover, the lines between human and non-human blur as we create our own aliens through extreme body-modification – from the Openers in *The Centauri Device* and the genetic alterations in *Signs of Life* to the customized clone-packages and shadowboys in the *Empty Space* trilogy, where K-ships and their pilots merge to become composite entities, now more machine than human and unable to change back. Additionally (harking back to Philip K. Dick as well as Stanislaw Lem and Tarkovsky), AIs and invasive code 'artefacts' are visually indistinguishable from humans. Machines can identify as human, humans as machines.

In the end, we realize that we cannot gain any information about alien culture. We cannot access the Kefahuchi Tract – we can only gain information about ourselves (cf. Gödel). We find ourselves in a Klein bottle universe in which Outer Space is Inner Space, and walking the alien event site only leads us ever deeper into the labyrinth of our own hopes, fears and desires, in which we keep getting lost on our search for the Heart of Saudade Night – the Strugatskys' wish-fulfilling machine.

**Christina Scholz** is currently writing her PhD thesis on M. John Harrison's *Empty Space* trilogy and teaching Intermediality and British Cultural Studies at the University of Graz, Austria. Her fields of interest include the British New Wave in Science Fiction, the further theorisation of Weird Fiction, Hauntology and the Gothic imagination, and the interrelation of genre fiction and other forms of art. Her Master's thesis, *Thanateros: (De)Konstruktion von männlichen Heldenbildern im Mainstream-Film*, has been published by AV Akademikerverlag in 2012. She has published academic articles in *Alluvium* and on *Infinite Earths*, her short fiction has appeared in several anthologies and online magazines, and she is a regular reviewer for *Strange Horizons*.