



Worldcon 75 Academic Track  
**Session 18: Environmental Anxieties**

**Sunday 12:00-13:30**  
**Room 209**

Chair: **Kaisa Kortekallio**

Abstract 1:

**Marian Via Rivera-Womack** (Anglia Ruskin University, UK):

**‘[N]ature has at last escaped from their discipline and their fetters’: *ostranenie* and the ecological sublime in contemporary weird and Gothic fiction.**

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The classical point of departure for what is now known as ecocriticism dates back to the environmental movement of the 1960s, and often frames itself as criticism of a point of rupture in the relations between human culture and the natural world. Alongside this, there also exists an unofficial lineage of ecocriticism dating back as far as Edmund Burke’s critical conceptualising of the sublime in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). This paper will examine this idea of the sublime as that which approaches the endpoint of our capacity to accept and assimilate impressions, and rework it as a way to discover new ways of reading contemporary weird fiction, especially when it is examined through the lens of the concept of *ostranenie* and seen as a variety of ‘making strange’ by its emphasis on the monstrous and excessive. This reading will be supported by Shklovsky’s own use of *ostranenie* in passages from his artistic manifesto *Ход коня* (*A Knight’s Move*, 1923), a lens through which ecological fiction becomes a new setting for gothic sensibilities.

The paper will also look at the complicated relationships established within this eco-gothic by its use of alien and Other environments, and figure this as a precursor to the presentation of the natural world as an altered, yet still recognisable factor, exploring the tradition of wilderness and connecting it to the sublime. Among the books that the paper will address are Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy: Annihilation, Authority and Acceptance*, all 2014) and Brian Catling’s *The Vorrh* (2012) and *The Erstwhile* (2017).

**Marian Via Rivera-Womack** is a graduate of the Clarion Writers Workshop (2014), and the Creative Writing Master’s at the University of Cambridge (2016). Her fiction can be read in *Apex*, *SuperSonic*, *Weird Fiction Review*, and *The Year’s Best Weird Fiction*. Her non-fiction has appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Science-Fiction and Fantasy Network*, and she has written for video-games. Her work as a translator can be read in *The Apex Book of World SF* (vol. 4), or *The Big Book of SF* (ed. Ann & Jeff VanderMeer). She co-runs Ediciones Nevsky/Nevsky Books, a small press specialising in European/Spanish slipstream in translation. She is a PhD candidate at Anglia Ruskin University, working on creative writing and climate change fiction.

Abstract 2:

**Val Nolan** (Aberystwyth University, UK):

**"The cause of the incident was human error": Irish Nuclear Anxiety and Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Bray House***

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A key characteristic of science fiction is its ability to present social concerns in allegorical form via defamiliarization. Read in this fashion, Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's post-apocalyptic novel *The Bray House* (1990) has profound things to say about the environmental anxieties of the Irish Republic in the late 1980s, an era in which the nation often perceived itself to be at the mercy of the British nuclear energy industry.

Set at a time when 'half of Western Europe has vanished,' *The Bray House* depicts the aftermath of a major ecological disaster, a series of British nuclear meltdowns which have rendered Ireland an uninhabitable and radioactive wasteland. Throughout the novel, Ní Dhuibhne utilises estrangement between the near-future setting and the Ireland in which the book was written to construct a critique of contemporaneous energy strategy in the Atlantic Archipelago and to articulate concerns for the impact of environmental abuses on Europe as a whole. Indeed, she not only invites the reader to question 'rapid nuclear expansion' but also encourages them to actively grieve for what may be lost as a result.

Focusing on Ní Dhuibhne's choice of a Northern European archaeological team as her protagonists, this paper will investigate the manner by which *The Bray House* utilises estrangement to portray the effects of rapid, human-driven environmental degradation. It will demonstrate the prescient quality of the novel, particularly in light of the 2011 Japanese nuclear crisis which prompted much European debate over the continent's use of nuclear energy. Framing this will be a brief discussion of *The Bray House* as representative of a wider Irish nuclear nightmare in how it balances unease at immediate social breakdown against the long term consequences for the island.

**Val Nolan** lectures on creative writing and genre fiction at Aberystwyth University in Wales. Publications include 'Flann, Fantasy, and Science Fiction: O'Brien's Surprising Synthesis' in the Flann O'Brien Centenary Issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (2011) and 'Break Free: Understanding, Reimagining, and Reclaiming Stories' in Grant Morrison's *Seven Soldiers of Victory* in the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comic Books* (2014). He was previously a literary critic for the *Irish Examiner*, and his own fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *Cosmos*, the 'Futures' page of *Nature*, *Electric Velocipede*, *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, and elsewhere.

Abstract 3:

**Essi Vatiilo** (University of Tampere, Finland):

**Climate Change in a Chromium World – The Power of Estrangement in Ted Chiang's "Exhalation"**

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In my presentation I will consider Ted Chiang's short story "Exhalation" and how it addresses climate change through a chromium world inhabited by robots. More importantly I will consider how this very strange world helps or hinders addressing the question of climate change; how it affects the presentation and perception of it. "Exhalation" centres around the discovery that the robots are by the mere act of breathing slowly making the atmosphere uninhabitable to them, and the subsequent attempts to halt and to become reconciled with the

inevitable. The story addresses the unintentional destruction of an environment that can support life, the power and limits of knowledge in such circumstances as well as the emotional reactions to the coming apocalypse.

I will argue that whereas a more realistic account of climate change would first have to satisfy the readers' expectations of credibility and probability, a story set in radically different world does not need to worry about these details. As a consequence such a story might in fact be able to say more on the ethical implications of climate change than a more realistic story might be able to. It allows the issue of climate change to sneak up on the reader and allows the reader to consider it separate from but analogous to the real world. While the strange needs to be made familiar to allow for immersion in the narrative and to encourage emotional involvement with the story, estranging the familiar allows the reader the necessary distance to consider climate change without being disturbed by what is real or probable, and how these fit with personal values. Nevertheless, estrangement can still be a double-edged sword: While on the one hand estrangement allows climate change to be viewed from a fresh perspective that has the power to open the readers' eyes, on the other hand talking about argon-breathing robots, non-existent beings in a non-existent world, allows the reader the possibility to dismiss the story as irrelevant to the real world, as 'mere science fiction'.

**Essi Vatio** is a PhD candidate at the University of Tampere. She is writing her dissertation on collective responsibility and artificial intelligence in Anglo-American science fiction, focusing on Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* novels, the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* series (2003-2009) and *Caprica* (2009-2010).