



Worldcon 75 Academic Track
Session 19: Going Beyond in Comics

Sunday 15:00-16:30
Room 209

Chair: **Essi Varis**

Abstract 1:

Essi Varis (University of Jyväskylä, Finland)

Do Mad Stars Dream of Organic Life Forms? How *The Sandman: Overture* Evokes Non-Human Experience

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Interdisciplinary academic discussion has been gripped by an increasing awareness of its incurably anthropocentric perception of the world. Although everyone knows from everyday experience the epistemological impossibility of fully understanding a fellow human being – let alone a bat’s experience of being a bat (Nagel 2010) – it seems ever more restrictive and unethical to not even try.

More or less sincere attempts at imagining the perspectives of various Others have, of course, always been the aim of fictional narratives in different media. In literary studies, some have expressed skepticism towards literature’s possibilities of portraying genuinely non-human experience, but could comics, with their multimodal expressive arsenal, do any better? Due to their stylized, overtly “made” visuality, graphic narratives have rarely been regarded as objective, transparent windows to the real world. Rather, they seem to lend themselves for crafting and presenting strange, “anti-mimetic” experiences and characters (Fehrle 2011). Indeed, the prominence of fantastical genres and medial experimentation in the tradition of Western comics has molded many classic graphic novels into virtual embodiments of the interests expressed by unnatural narratologists. According to unnatural narratology, the greatest virtue of fiction is its ability to go beyond what is real, natural, or human, and thus, to expand the readers’ views of the world (Alber et al. 2013). Arguably, many comics from *Little Nemo* (1905–1926) to *The Sandman* (1989–1996) have strived to do just that: to leave single, conventional ideas of time, space, and humanity behind.

Neil Gaiman recently penned an unexpected prequel for his cult comic. *The Sandman: Overture* (2015) – illustrated by J. H. Williams III and colored by Dave Stewart – recounts the

mysterious astral catastrophe that had left Dream, the god-like protagonist, exhausted and helpless for the opening act of the main series. The human readers might be surprised to find that this fantastical chain of events, which threatens to end the entire universe, does not involve a single human character. Instead, the comics’ narration employs several, mostly visual techniques to suggest perspectives that are, in one way or another, non-human, alien, or estranging. In my presentation, I examine these techniques and their possible effects on the reader by utilizing cognitive comics analysis and notions of unnatural narratology. To what extent does this comic, made by human hands for human readers, succeed in imagining an apocalypse that is neither caused nor prevented by Homo Sapiens? In which ways can anthropocentric narration be circumvented, and how does it, nevertheless, sneak in through the back door?

Essi Varis works as a comics researcher and a PhD candidate in literature at the Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She graduated as Licentiate of Philosophy from the same department in 2013. Her licentiate's thesis suggested a cognitive theory of comic book characters, which she is currently applying to new contexts in her doctoral compilation dissertation *Graphic Human Experiments: Functions and Cognitive Logics of Characters in Comics* (2017). Varis is also a board member of FINFAR, the Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research.

Abstract 2:

Katja Kontturi (University of Jyväskylä, Finland):

The Uncanny (and Fantastic) Disney Comics

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According to literature scholar Tzvetan Todorov, whenever we encounter inexplicable phenomena in our world we tend to see it either as a hallucination or product of our imagination. The other possibility is that the events have occurred, but our reality is controlled by strange, unknown laws. This hesitation, is what Todorov calls *fantastic*, and it should be separated from the more well-known Anglo-Saxon genre of fantasy. If we're to choose whether the events have occurred or not, the phenomenon becomes either uncanny or marvellous. Following Todorov, the fantastic is what stands between these two counterparts.

The aim of this paper, is to study the works of Italian Disney comic artists from the perspective of Todorov's uncanny and fantastic. Italian artists and writers such as Giorgio Cavazzano, Casty and Caterina Mognato (to name but a few), are somewhat specialized making Disney comics with uncanny events. However, their stories tend to end up with the hesitation of both the characters and the reader, of whether the events were only a dream or not.

The target comics of this paper will be "La rivolta delle dedascalie", "Topolino e il surreale viaggio nel destino" and "Paperino in: La storia (in)finita". So far, only the first of these comics have been translated in English as "Night of the Living Text!", so I will be using the Finnish translations as my main source. All of the aforementioned comics, have uncanny events: "La rivolta delle dedascalie" has metalevel narrative when narrator boxes attack the main characters; "Topolino e il surreale viaggio nel destino" includes a dreamy passage into a surreal painting; and "Paperino in: La storia (in)finita" is an adaptation of Michael Ende's classical children's novel *The Neverending Story* (1979). In addition, all of these comics include a hesitation whether the uncanny events were true or not.

I will study these comics from the perspective of Todorov's concepts of uncanny and fantastic, with the help of visual comics analysis developed by Scott McCloud. What is interesting, is how artists use the narrative combination of both the panels and the gutter to tell the uncanny events. There is also an interpretative possibility that the fantastic transforms into actual fantasy. How and why this interpretation becomes possible in the mind of the reader?

Katja Kontturi has a PhD in Contemporary Culture studies in the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her doctoral dissertation dealt with Don Rosa's Disney comics as postmodern fantasy and studied how comics depict fantasy. Kontturi's research interests include speculative fiction, Disney comics, postmodernism and geek culture. She's a member of NNCORE (Nordic Network for Comics Research), PCA Finland and FINFAR. She's also one of the editors of peer reviewed Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art. Kontturi has

published 13 articles, the most recent one being “‘Shades of Conan Doyle! A lost world!’ Fantasy and Intertextuality in Don Rosa’s ‘Escape from Forbidden Valley’” (2015).

Abstract 3:

Oskari Rantala (University of Jyväskylä, Finland):

Estrangement by the Same Panel: Transcending Time and Space in *Watchmen* and *From Hell*

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Comics narrative, comprised of sequential images, has in its employ a number of medium-specific narrative techniques which other media cannot replicate as such. One of them is repeating the same panel several times over the course of the narrative. Panel repetition causes an interesting disruption in the conventional flow of sequential storytelling, connecting events, characters and scenes with those already shown and creating multi-linear or plurivectorial ways of reading. It can be used in intricate ways to produce cognitive estrangement, and, in some works of speculative fiction, it can be considered the central speculative element.

In my paper, I will focus on *Watchmen* (1986–1987) and *From Hell* (1989–1996), two comics written by the the British comics writer Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons and Eddie Campbell, respectively. In both works, panel repetition is utilized to represent the superhuman cognitions of characters with exceptional powers. In *Watchmen*, the quantum-powered superhero Dr. Manhattan experiences everything that has happened (or ever will happen) to him simultaneously, whereas in *From Hell*, the troubled homicidal surgeon Sir William Gull undergoes a series of hallucinations. The culprit behind the brutal Jack the Ripper murders that took place in Victorian London, Gull is able transcend the limits of time and space during the climaxes of his acts of killing and at the moment of his own death, mirroring the experiences of Dr. Manhattan on a number of levels.

It is worthwhile to consider the similarities of these instances of panel repetition. On the other hand, I will also analyze how the effect of estrangement produced by the same narrative trick in different works of graphic narrative differ from one another. Finally, I intend to discuss the portability of this narrative technique: Is it possible to use it in different media for the same effect, or is it so distinctly medium-specific that it does not function outside the comics medium at all?

Oskari Rantala is working on his doctoral thesis in the Department of Art and Culture Studies in the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. In his thesis, he examines medium-specific narrative techniques and medial self-awareness in the comics of Alan Moore. The first of the articles that will comprise Rantala’s doctoral thesis, “Superhuman Cognitions, the Fourth Dimension and Speculative Comics Narrative: Panel Repetition in *Watchmen* and *From Hell*”, will be published in *Fafnir: Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* issue 4/2016.