

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

Current Research in Speculative Fiction 2019
(June 6, 2019)

Conference Report by Phoenix Alexander

Volume 4 Issue 1 - *After Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-4-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

CURRENT RESEARCH IN SPECULATIVE FICTION 2019 (JUNE 6, 2019)

Conference Report by Phoenix Alexander

Current Research in Speculative Fiction. Liverpool University, Liverpool, UK, June 6, 2019.

The ninth annual Current Research in Speculative Fiction (CRSF) conference took place on June 6th, 2019, and brought together early-stage scholars and faculty working at the intersections of digital humanities, speculative fiction, Africanfuturism, and physics. The conference took place in its now-established home in the beautiful library of the School of the Arts, and welcomed around forty attendees.

Nicole Devarenne (University of Dundee, UK) was the first keynote speaker of the day. Their talk, titled “Primitives, Liars and Savages: British New Wave Science Fiction and the End of Empire in Africa” commenced proceedings with inspired critical readings of British New Wave authors who used the continent of Africa as a backdrop for their narratives. Invoking Achille Mbembe’s work, Devarenne explained that, typically, when “Africa” was invoked in Science Fiction (SF) by non-African writers, it was usually to comment on something *else*. They eloquently encapsulated the fact that the continent serves as a backdrop for a kind of colonial narcissistic imagination. A particularly startling connection was revealed through Devarenne’s comparing dialogue from a Nigerian character in John Christopher’s *The World in Winter* (1962) with an address from Viscount Malvern in the House of Lords in March, 1959. The comparative analysis illuminated the paranoia of a British colonial administration that frequently resorted to sweeping and gross characterisations of “African” people. Similarly, J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) invokes primordial psycho-geographic landscapes reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Both texts, Devarenne argued, used their “African” settings as metaphysical battlefields devoid of all specificity, presenting sites of internal struggle for the *European* wanderer.

Shifting perspectives (and decades), a morning panel on “Non-Western SF” looked to the contemporary genres of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism and the increasing recognition of genre literature written by people of colour. Fruzsina Pittner’s (University of Dundee, UK) talk “Taking Charge: African Past, African Futurism” was driven by the question: what happens when African and Afrodiasporic authors take charge of their own narrative? Looking at a range of ‘texts’ – covering fiction, illustration, games, and other digital media – Pittner emphasised the fact that there is no one tidy answer, gesturing to the complexity of the issues of representation and inclusion. Lyu Guangzhao’s (University College of London, UK) “The Boom and the Boom: A Comparative Study of Post-1990s British and Chinese Science Fiction” compared ‘booms’ in British and Chinese SF in the twentieth century, focussing on the ways in which shifting political landscapes permitted a more

challenging – and critical – form of SF to emerge. While both presenters offered compelling cross-cultural analyses of contemporary trends in SF, some audience members pointed out that the overarching theme of ‘Non-Western’ genre fiction was too broad a topic to allow for satisfyingly in-depth discussion.

The afternoon panels saw a deeper engagement with contemporary technologies that change our understanding and definition of speculative fiction. Rachel Hill (Goldsmiths, University of London, UK), in a panel on “SF Visualities,” opened their talk (“Saturn, Trembling in the Crystal Lens of the Telescope:” Science Fictional Visualities of Outer Space”) with the provocation: how do we counter reductive, conditioning and predictive deployments of SF visuals? Hill presented and analysed images from the Hubble telescope, revealing how they draw upon visual tropes of Romanticism and the sublime. The artifice of Hubble images has been naturalised; they purportedly present what space ‘actually’ looks like, all lurid vistas and dizzying vertical compositions. Moreover, the aesthetic has permeated other SF ‘texts’ – particularly in the lens-flare style and lurid coloration of *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017). Hill cited Afrofuturist Kodwo Eshun in their reading of such techniques as embodying the concept of “control and prediction”: a narrative strategy that reorients public imaginaries to certain visions of futurity.

The next presenter, Dani Williamson (Independent, Israel), presented alternate modalities of futurity and narrative-breaking aesthetics with their projects “XPlaceSpace” and “Seedwire” – the latter drawing on the “Earthseed” creed from Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) novels. Their research and work as a video artist deals with probable and ideal futures through the lenses of technology, futurism, social connectivity, and borders by focusing on two-dimensional filmic mediums that connect space. Such media, they argued, allow for a communal state of interaction as opposed to the more solitary sensory phenomena enabled by technologies like VR or AR (virtual and augmented reality).

The final presenter on the “SF Visualities” panel was Jaime Babb (University of Dundee, UK) with their analysis of visual representations of hyperspace in comics in their talk “To Blaze Forever in a Blazing World’: Space, Time and Hyperspace in Comics.” Babb, who has a background in mathematical physics, gave a brief historical overview of the concept of “hyperspace,” which emerged from n-dimensional mathematics and refers to conjectured spaces with dimensions beyond height, width, and depth. Albert Einstein’s popularisation of the idea of time as a fourth dimension resulted in “hyperspace” becoming a temporal concept in the public imagination. Babb discussed the problems of presenting hyperdimensions in comic panels, summarising three means of doing so: unravelling them into 3D parts, presenting their 3D cross-section, and projecting them into a third dimension via animation. Closing with similarly divergent depictions of hyperspace in Alan Moore’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier* (2007), Babb concluded by affirming comics as a fascinating laboratory for explorations of hyperspace.

One of the last panels of the day, “SF Productions” saw critical readings of contemporary digital media and comic narratives. Connor Jackson (Edge Hill University, UK) and Monica Guerrasio

(Lancaster University, UK) both analysed female representation in the *Dead Rising* (2006-2017) video game series and independent comics respectively. Jackson's talk, "'I'm tired of low carbs. I'm tired of celery. I'm hungry': Gluttonous Food Consumption in Capcom's *Dead Rising* Series," traced the reaction of the in-game world as players excessively consume its food items, serving as a sharp critique of consumerism and food industries. Guerrasio took us through the deconstruction of gender in mainstream and independent comic books via a genealogy of female representation in four case studies: *The Boys* (2006-2012), *Harrow County* (2015-2018), *Nimona* (2015) and *Pretty Deadly* (2014-2016). Beáta Gubacsi (University of Liverpool, UK), in a slightly different register, turned to video games that move away from encouraging exploitation of natural resources/killing biological life (such as *The Last of Us*, 2013). Instead, Gubacsi presented games that create "emotive" storytelling in their design. Gubacsi cited *Flow* (2006) and *Flower* (2009) as early games that were invested in creating a sensory "flow" or particular user experience. More recent games, such as *Journey* (2012) and *Abzû* (2017), take similarly visual and non-narrative approaches to tell stories in unfamiliar virtual environments, blurring the line between ecology and civilisation. All the papers provided sophisticated analyses of contemporary trends in speculative fiction texts, modelling an interdisciplinary approach in the connections, and contrasts, they drew.

Paul March-Russell (University of Kent, UK) gave the final, keynote lecture of the conference: "On the Threshold of Sexual Difference: Re-Gendering the Eerie in Daisy Johnson's *Fen*." In their analysis, the "eerie" has two modalities: that of the failure of *presence*, whereby we expect something and are instead met with an abyss – and that of the failure of *absence*, whereby we expect nothing but are instead met with residue and excess. *Fen* (2016) not only embodies these dynamics, but allows us to access – as all short stories do, in March-Russell's analysis – a generative state of liminality. Thus, they concluded, short stories should always be read as *fragments*; not liminal in themselves, but producing liminality as one of their generative effects.

Border-crossing and boundary-shifting, then, emerged as the overarching themes of CRSF 2019. We thank all of the presenters and attendees for inspiring new thought with their research, and look forward to next year's conference!

BIONOTE

Phoenix Alexander is the Science Fiction Collections Librarian at the University of Liverpool's Special Collections and Archives division, UK. He recently completed his PhD in the departments of English and African American Studies at Yale University and is a writer as well a scholar of Science Fiction. His work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Black Static*, *Metaphorosis*, and *Science Fiction Studies*.