

Finncon 2022 Academic Track – Hope and Resilience

8.-10.7.2022

Kandidaattikeskus, Aalto University, Espoo

Perjantai / Friday

16:00-17:00

Agency and the Self

Aleksi Haukka: Amnesiac Hero and the Resiliency of Self: Existential Semiotic Interpretation of the Representation of Self in *Planescape: Torment*

An amnesiac player character is a practical narrative device for a video game (i.e. a ludic digital cybertext) set in a fictive world. Player character's ignorance allows games to have long explanations about their worlds without interfering with player's "immersion".

But neither has amnesiac ignorance's narrative potential been left undiscovered by video game designers, as is evident in the case of *Planescape: Torment* (1999, lead designer: John Avellone). As Andrenio's naive ignorance of the world and its ways in Baltasar Gracián's didactic novel *El Criticón* (1651–1657), in *Torment* the player character's, the subject's, amnesiac ignorance – with anamnesis as its counterpart – serves as a basis for a story that can properly be called existential. Even if the subject's memories of himself and his actions have disappeared, his self remains. Throughout the course of the story, the effects of his deeds make themselves known, and thus become in a sense real anew.

What does this resiliency of self entail? *Torment's* treatment of this question is in this paper interpreted by means of Eero Tarasti's existential semiotics with its special emphasis on subject and the many ways that subjectivity articulates itself.

Meeria Vesala: "Isn't There Any Hope Left Doctor?": Hope as Action in Albert Camus's *The Plague*

Understood as an intense cognitive and spiritual expectation for a certain outcome in the future, *hope* manifests itself in various ways and forms. It can be a personal desire of an individual or a collective wish for a specific end result on a societal scale. As a philosophical concept, hope is an optimistically positive notion though we can also recognize false hope and hope that is destructive. Stan von Hoofft writes that a place that nurtures positive hope in particular is the hospital where "healthcare workers themselves entertain hopes for their patients" (2014). Also, Alan Mittleman argues that in life "hope is related to reason in the sense of rational assessment of one's situation and rational prediction of one's chances," continuing that "*it is related to action*, in the sense that *hope implies agency* in the pursuit of change" (2009, emphases added). It is this action and agency

that I am most interested in studying in the context of hope – the motivations that hope presupposes and the consequences that it predicts.

In my paper on Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* (1947), I focus on the narrator and protagonist, 35-year-old Dr. Bernard Rieux, and explore how hope translates into action in his work as a doctor in a horrific epidemic that seizes the French-Algerian city of Oran. The novel presents us with sickness, suffering and death yet also with hope that mobilizes Dr. Rieux in his darkest moments. Agency is what gives him relief, strength and a sense of purpose. Camus's novel is a book that many, understandably, will not pick up in 2022 due to its uncanny resemblance to our own time. Emphasizing hope and action over hopelessness and paralysis, my paper also shows what the contemporary reader can learn from this eerie, Kafkaesque narrative that depicts not only a deeply disturbing medical crisis but also the resilience of the people living through it.

17:00-18:00

Fantastic Hope

Bettina Burger: Hope, Despair, and a Fairy's Tales in Gillian Polack's *The Time of Ghosts*

"I write Realist Speculative Fiction, and it's because I'm Jewish. It's the way we were told stories. Fables weren't separate....," explained Jewish Australian author Gillian Polack as part of an online panel discussion with various Jewish Australian speculative fiction writers. Her sentence speaks not only of a cultural storytelling tradition but also the potential of speculative writing – including fantasy – to eke out spaces and representation where there used to be oppression and tragedy. Oppression and tragedy still seem unusually prominent in contemporary Jewish writing and some scholars even claim that “if literature reflects reality, it is undeniable that Australian Jewish literature cannot but reflect tragic realities” (Morera de la Vall 175) – such a claim, however, ignores the realm of speculative fiction, which allows explorations of both the most atrocious tragedy (dystopia) and the utmost happiness (utopia).

Polack's own writing avoids both extremes and depicts hope flourishing in dire circumstances, both speculative and real. Her fantasy novel *The Time of the Ghosts* uses the speculative to explore the struggle of the Jewish diaspora while at the same time showcasing Jewish resilience and hope. Polack introduces the complex character of the Jewish fairy Melusine, who experiences various persecutions throughout the centuries and frequently hides her Jewish cultural background to fit into mainstream Christian culture. The narrative presents Melusine's achronological tales as a history of suffering that wears down Melusine's resilience to the point of her rejection of immortality. However, hope is returned to Melusine both through family and through the hope of passing on tales via the family line, indicating that Jewish survival will always prevail.

Rather than limit its narrative to exploring tragic realities, then, *The Time of the Ghosts* explores myth and fairytale alongside history and personal tragedy within a frame of hope, strength, and the possibility for coexistent futures.

Nicholas Wanberg: Dangers of Racial Tolerance Done Wrong in *Harry Potter*

Speculative fiction has a long history of promoting tolerance as a strategy for overcoming racial tensions. Numerous narratives show individuals from differing backgrounds (often speculative or non-human backgrounds) learning to trust and appreciate one another and beginning that process with an effort at tolerance. However, the *Harry Potter* series draws a gloomier picture of racial tolerance than most through its portrayal of wizard/centaur and wizard/goblin relations. In these cases, attempts to move beyond tolerance worsen the situation, with tolerance poisoning the wells of future cooperation. My presentation situates that pessimism within the liberal pessimism of the 1990's U.K. and discourses about self-segregation and with scholarly discussions about and critiques of racial tolerance. Self-segregation discourse blames failed integration on the unwillingness of subordinated groups to assimilate into the dominant culture. Paralleling this pessimistic outlook, wizards cannot befriend goblins and centaurs because the goblins and centaurs do not want to be friends. At the same time, my presentation contrasts *Harry Potter's* use of racial tolerance with those of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* to formulate a more hopeful interpretation. *Harry Potter* reflects criticisms of racial tolerance strategies in ways that distinguish it from more successful racial tolerance examples in speculative fiction. My presentation highlights these differences, showing how it is possible to read *Harry Potter* less as a bemoaning of the doomed state of contemporary race relations and more as a warning about the dangers of racial tolerance done wrong.

18:00-20:00

The North of the Future, the Future of the North — Speculation Workshop

Malka Older and Hanna Roine run a workshop in which participants speculate about a transformed world. Pre-registration needed. The session on Saturday presents the results to all con-goers!

Lauantai / Saturday

10:00-11:00

Lessons of Hope and Resilience

Laura E. Goodin: The Role of Speculative-Writing Pedagogy in Inspiring Works of Hope and Resilience

A beleaguered and discouraged world is imploring its artists for not just the ideas of hope and resilience, but some sort of guidance on how to implement them in the face of relentless hardship. Speculative fiction in the emerging genre of hopepunk, which stresses characters' use of collaborative decision-making, social action on behalf of the oppressed, and the disruption of political and economic systems that perpetrate and perpetuate such oppression, is one form that such guidance can take. However, many writers – particularly children and young adults – have little to no personal experience of how a hopepunk model can actually operate in practice, and thus may feel baffled when trying to express hopepunk ideas in their work. The creative-writing classroom can provide that model. This paper explores options for teaching and learning that promote collaboration, hear the voices of the often-overlooked, and encourage deeply imaginative writing that can propose new strategies for disrupting oppression and replacing it with compassion. Writers who have experienced for themselves the benefits of a community (in this case, a creative-writing classroom) based on hopepunk-related principles can then, through their work, help readers create such communities for themselves.

Liz MacWirther: Imagining a New Poetics of the Fantastic and Resilient Through a Medieval Dream Vision Poem

C.S. Lewis praised the Middle English dream vision poem *Piers Plowman* by William Langland for its 'exceptional... intellectual' imagination. Langland employed a speculative genre to address poverty and corruption while imagining alternative realities. Contemporary studies show that a person's capacity to engage with reality in the hope of an alternative future is intrinsic to resilience. The theme is explored through a new novel set in late medieval Britain. This creative practice paper reveals the methodology of how award-winning writing skills generated a poetics of resilience through a poesis with the original text.

11:00-12:00

Theorizing Hopeful Fictions

Elise Kraatila: A Fool's Hope? Pragmatic "Metamodern" Optimism in 21st-Century Fantasy

Fantasy storytelling often involves an ethos of, as Gandalf puts it in *The Lord of the Rings*, "a fool's hope" – or hope against hope, with characters that strive to beat seemingly impossible odds to save their world. Simultaneously, contemporary fantasy authors also commonly discuss their craft as "aspirational drive of the Zeitgeist" as N. K. Jemisin puts it (in Cunningham 2018), or a means of reaching towards a better world. This ethos is, I find, remarkably similar to that which is to be

found in numerous recent theories of “metamodernist” cultural moment (e. g. Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010; 2017; Corsa 2018), or storytelling that gropes for new functions of fiction beyond the deconstructionist tendencies of postmodernism. These theories emphasize a sort of willful, deliberate optimism or “pragmatic idealism” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010) about the possibility of a better future – and fiction as a means for us to get there.

My paper draws connections between these expressions of “a fool’s hope” in fantasy storytelling and the metamodernist sentiment as a supposed new cultural paradigm. It thus introduces a theoretical approach to the current prominence of fantasy fiction in Western cultural expressions as part of a wider-scale movement towards willful “optimistic naivety” (Corsa 2018) or deliberate faith in the world-changing possibilities of fiction. Both in fantasy storytelling and theories of metamodernism, as I see it, such deliberate optimism operates in creative tension with a profound sense of artifice and speculation. They involve commitment to an “impossible possibility” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010) that despite its inescapable artifice – or even precisely because of it – fiction can indeed model us ways of saving the world. N. K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became* (2020) and Emmi Itäranta’s *Moonday Letters* (2021) serve as illuminating case studies.

Veera Mäkelä: Of Ravens and Writing Desks: Historical Romance as Speculative Fictions

Hope for a better future connects the speculative genres. As this is also true of popular romance novels, I propose that they also belong in the company of fantasy and science fiction. Because the field of romance is vast, I will focus specifically on historical romance. It may not be crowded with dragons or spaceships – although it *can* be – but such obvious signs of otherworldliness are not the only markers of a text’s fantastic tendency.

This presentation describes shortly my project of examining the connection between historical romance and other speculative genres. We will see that interrogating historical romance through studies in fantasy, science fiction and historical fiction widens our understanding of the affinity between genres. At the same time, it illustrates the futility of gate keeping between categories of fiction and blurs the lines between them.

My argument comes in the form of a four-pronged fork. The first prong is the shared history between the fantasy genre and the romance genre in comedy and Medieval Romances. The second examines the world of particularly Regency romance as a fictional construct rather than historical study. The third prong follows Brian Attebery’s view of fantasy as modal rather than formulaic (1992) with support from the studies of historical fiction and popular romance. Finally, I will show in practise how to use a study of science fiction to read historical romance.

Throughout the presentation, I will use as example the novels of Sarah MacLean, particularly *Never Judge a Lady by Her Cover* (2014). One of the leading voices in historical romance, MacLean’s interconnected novels showcase the worldbuilding and speculative nature of the genre as she creates a fictional underworld for historical London.

12:00-13:00

Responses to Ecological Crises

Yue Zhou: Hope Sits in the Technological Advancements: Exploring Five Liu Cixin's Ecology-Themed Science Fictions

Contemporary Chinese science fictional writing has seriously engaged with human-induced environmental destruction, including global climate emergency, pollution crisis, land degradation, resource depletion, and biodiversity loss. Remarkably, Liu Cixin is distinguished from the popular dystopian narrating style. He images an optimistic future for humanity. This research explores Liu's *Fire in the Earth* (Dihuo, 2000), *Yuanyuan's Bubbles* (Yuanyuan de feizaopao, 2004), *Micro-Age* (Wei jiyuan, 2001), *Moonlight* (Yueye, 2016), and *Earth's Cannon* (Diqui dapao, 2003). It is found that these works believe in the technological fix to the current ecological problems. Future technological advances compensate for adverse human impacts on the Earth. The writer initiates a kind of hope for the notorious Anthropocene. One can say that the ecological agendas have been addressed. Readers are driven by the writer's bold and creative technological imagination.

Nevertheless, although the imaginary technological triumph over ecological problems is inspiring, these works still conform to the anthropocentric or geocentric (Earth-bound) perspective that nature is subject to intelligent human will. Environmental activism is hence compromised. A revised ethics between humankind and the vast and complex realm of nonliving space should be established. To conclude, technology brings hope for future humanity in Liu Cixin's ecology-themed speculative fiction. On the other hand, it exacerbates the human domination and exploitation of Earth's environment.

Elizabeth Oakes: Environmental Embeddedness as a Source of Resilience in Woman-Authored 1960s and 1970s Science Fictions

New Wave science fiction often depicted man and nature at odds. The subgenre's focus on inner space frequently resulted in projection of character-internal feelings of alienation and hopelessness onto the natural world. Contemporaneously, a rising wave of feminist science fiction expressed strength and resilience while imagining a better world for women. At a time when pollution and environmental degradation were peak concerns and climate change was beginning to be recognized, a cross-section of feminist science fiction reimaged environmental embeddedness as an empowering source of fulfillment.

In this study, computational stylistic analysis contrasts six woman-authored novels (Andre Norton's *The X Factor* (1965), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975), Marta Randall's *Islands* (1976), Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* (1978), and Kate Wilhelm's *Juniper Time* (1979)) with a corpus of American science fiction novels published between 1960 and 1979. Although the environmentalism of individual authors has been researched, comparative eco-critical studies are rare compared to focus on themes of gender or feminist utopias and dystopias. This study addresses the gap by uncovering a positive and hopeful language of speculation underlying the theme of environmental embeddedness as a source of resilience and self-realization.

The theme of environmental embeddedness obviates binaries. While elements of both utopia and dystopia may be present, characters engage with the environment on its own terms in a productive struggle that vitiates these elements. Although the novels emphasize the harshness and apparent inimicalness of the environment, the characters do not take an oppositional attitude or experience the environment as an enemy. Thematically, understanding the environment and living closely with it empowers the self in the woman-authored novels in contrast to the corpus generally and its New Wave novels particularly.

13:00-14:00

Conference Keynote

Malka Older: Hope in Uncertainty: Predictive Fictions and Speculative Resistance

14:00-15:00

Apocalypse, Post-Apocalypse, and Possibilities of Hope and Resilience

Joona Koiranen: Selviytymisoppaita tulevaisuuteen – vastarinta ja kulttuurinen resilienssi Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansojen tulevaisuusfiktiossa

Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansojen tutkijat Sidner Larson (2000), Lawrence W. Gross (2002) ja Grace L. Dillon (2012) ovat esittäneet, että Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansoille post-apokalyptinen maailma ei ole vain mahdollinen tulevaisuus, vaan läsnä olevaa nykyisyyttä. Maailmanloppu ei tässä yhteydessä tarkoita vain maapallon tai koko universumin tuhoa, vaan sen hetkisen sivilisaation, yhteiskunnan rakenteiden, lakien ja tapojen tuhoutumista jonkin ulkoisen tapahtuman seurauksena niin, ettei paluuta aiempaan enää ole.

Post-apokalyptinen historiantulkinta näkyy mielenkiintoisella tavalla myös Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansojen tulevaisuusfiktiossa. *Indigenous Futurism* on tieteiskirjallisuuden alagenre, joka tarkastelee tulevaisuutta eri alkuperäiskansojen näkökulmista käsin. Tutkin väitöskirjassani 99 tähän alagenreen lukeutuvaa novellia, joista suuressa osassa näkyy post-apokalyptinen historiantulkinta. Tutkimukseni tavoitteena on selvittää millaisia sosiaalisia representaatioita (Moscovici: *Social Representations*, 1984) maailmanlopusta esiintyy Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansojen tulevaisuusfiktiossa ja millaisia vaikutuksia niillä on alagenren ominaispiirteisiin.

Länsimaisen nykykirjallisuuden maailmanloppua ja post-apokalyptista maailmaa käsittelevät teokset mielletään usein dystooppisiksi, ikään kuin varoituksiksi siitä, mihin saatamme ajautua, jos emme muuta toimintatapojamme. Kritiikin kärki kohdistuu länsimaiseen ihmiseen ja elämäntapaan, meihin itseemme.

Tutkimuksessani näkyy, että myös Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansojen tulevaisuusfiktiossa kritiikin kohteena on yleensä länsimainen elämäntapa. Koska kritiikin kärki ei kuitenkaan kohdistu ”itseän”, vaan ”toiseen”, novellit toimivat varoituskertomusten sijaan ennemminkin vastarintana ja kulttuurista resilienssiä korostavina selviytymiskertomuksina. Monissa novelleissa

toistuu ajatus hyvästä ja kestävästä elämästä – sellaisesta, josta myös länsimaiset yhteiskunnat voisivat ottaa oppia.

Koska Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansat ovat post-apokalyptisen historiantulkinnan mukaisesti jo selviytyneet yhdestä maailmanlopusta, he voivat tehdä niin myös uudelleen. Näin maailmanlopusta tulee mahdollisuus vallanpalautukseen, mikä reaali maailmassamme näyttäytyy epätodennäköisenä vaihtoehtona. Tutkimustulokseni osoittavat, että Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansojen tulevaisuusfiktiossa on toistuvana piirteenä millenaristinen maailmanloppu, jonka jälkeinen post-apokalyptinen maailma on dystooppisen sijaan toiveikas.

Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansojen tulevaisuusnovelleissa toistuvat samantyyppiset arvot: luonnon ja elämän kunnioitus, yhteisön suuri merkitys, kulttuurin resilienssiä vahvistava voima ja ihmisen rooli maapallon hoivaajana ja suojelijana. Novellit esittävät, että näiden arvojen avulla maailmanlopusta on mahdollista selviytyä, oli sen syynä sitten muukalaisinvaasio, ilmastonmuutos, zombiapokalypsi tai kosminen katastrofi. Varoitusten sijaan nämä novellit ovat selviytymisoppaita tulevaisuuteen.

Lucas Mattila: Apocalyptic Hope in Jay Kristoff's *Empire of the Vampire*

At its surface, Jay Kristoff's *Empire of the Vampire* (2021) belongs to the speculative fiction wave of genre mixing, conjuring an interface between grimdark epic fantasy, vampire tales and (post)apocalyptic horror. At such a crossroads, one might presume that a sense of hopelessness would flood the narrative – and indeed it begins with its protagonist, Gabriel de León, imprisoned and humankind subjugated by the titular vampire empire. Yet, as more and more of de León's tale is detailed from his prison, an apocalyptic hope emerges. De León's struggle with addiction, loss of faith and loved ones, and even the shattering of his purpose demonstrates the powerful, patient resilience that can flourish in the wake of personal and global crises. As a speculative text, *Empire of the Vampire* figures resistance with a situated form of hope, like that which Christopher Castiglia highlights, a hope that “retains a trace of material history through the terms of critique while denying, in its ideals of the possible [...] the limits on possibility imposed by truth claims grounded in empirical appeals to material ‘reality’” (6). In other words, it is precisely the resilience that de León maintains which allows him to strike back with hope against the very real problems he faces. The novel thus models a productive, speculative way to figure hope and resilience, one that renegotiates our understandings of fear and crisis as they relate to resilience. Fear and crisis have been understood to share a relationship that can be overcome when fear is re-perceived as crisis (see McManus n.p.) Rather than confirm this constructive re-alignment, *Empire of the Vampire* reverses this argument in its poetics. If crises can be reconfigured and understood as a site of fear, as normalized – only then can hope emerge – even in the apocalypse. (296)

Works referenced:

Castiglia, Christopher. *The Practices of Hope: Literary criticism in Disenchanted Times*. NYU Press, 2017.

McManus, Susan. "Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Affective Agency." *Theory & Event*, vol. 14 no. 4, 2011. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/tae.2011.0060.

15:00-16:00

Questions of Authoring

Tristan Reid: Handling Criticism: Ursula K. Le Guin's Approaches to Gender Problems in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Beyond

This paper examines the ways in which Ursula K. Le Guin responded to criticism from feminist critics that her 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* “did not go far enough” in its portrayal of an ambisexual society, a sort of feminist utopia. In subsequent postscripts to her novel, Le Guin defended her portrayal of gender in the novel, specifically the use of masculine pronouns as a default for the Gethenian race, highlighting utopian elements, such as the absence of war and gender inequality. However, in the 2018 documentary *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin*, she capitulated, admitting that she had been wrong in her portrayal of gender in her novel.

I argue that in a 1995 short story that revisited the world of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, “Coming of Age in Karhide,” Le Guin resolves her “gender problems” by using gender-specific pronouns (as well as invented pronouns) to avoid the gender binary trap she had previously been accused of falling into, she shifts the point of view to a native Gethenian to eliminate the negative mediacy of the male protagonist in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and includes depictions of homosexuality to avoid the reductionist and conservative portrayal of sexuality in her original novel.

The changes that Le Guin made suggest that she was attempting to move *The Left Hand of Darkness* more in line with a utopian vision of sex and gender, reflective both of societal changes in the attitudes toward gender and sexuality, and her own evolution on these issues. That Le Guin did not create an ‘actual utopia’ in the first place is perhaps due to generic issues with utopian fiction, which tends to lack conflict. The conflict she did include perhaps obscured the feminist utopian elements from her critics.

Essi Varis: Obligation to Imagine: How Speculative Fiction Writers Ascribe Political Importance to Their Work

”We have an obligation to imagine. It is easy to pretend that nobody can change anything, that we are in a world in which society is huge and the individual is less than nothing: an atom in a wall, a grain of rice in a rice field. But the truth is, individuals change their world over and over, individuals make the future, and they do it by imagining that things can be different.”

- Neil Gaiman: “Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming”
The Guardian Oct 15, 2013

Imagination is a mysterious beast: difficult to pin down by definitions, numbers, measures or other research tools. Yet, imagination is also an everyday beast: a necessary component in such spontaneous activities as worrying, guessing or daydreaming – as well as such intentional activities as hypothesizing, extrapolating or speculating. One cannot change

anything responsibly, unless one takes time to imagine, in however cursory way, what this new and changed world, reality, society, humanity or possibility might be like. This makes imagining a political act – a first step towards something potentially better.

While researchers are still trying to imagine the best tools for understanding imagination, another group of professional speculators have already investigated it experientially: ever since Samuel Taylor Coleridge, writers have attributed various claims, qualities and potentials to their imaginative work. Meanwhile, visions of ever new dystopic futures continue to loop speculative fictions into political discussions. In my presentation, I analyze how four prominent Anglophonic fantasy and science fiction authors – Ray Bradbury, Neil Gaiman, Ursula Le Guin and Philip Pullman – describe their creative work in their essays. I will discuss both the direct claims they make as well as the metaphorical language they use about the importance of imagination. The aim is to understand the political role these authors ascribe to fiction: are they warning us of future Frankensteins, hopeful for a Brave New World – or just having a laugh while everything burns?

16:00-17:00

The North of the Future, the Future of the North — Speculation Workshop: Open Session

Malka Older and Hanna Roine run a workshop in which participants speculate about a transformed world. Pre-registration required. This session presents the results to all con-goers!

17:00-18:00

The Changing Stories of Chinese Science Fiction

Regina Kanyu Wang: Social Utopian Experiments in Eco-Dystopias: Martian Exploration in Chinese Science Fiction

While China launched its Martian Project, Tianwen (天问), successfully in the recent year 2020, the nation's imagination of immigrating to the red planet began much earlier. In the sequence of works focusing on establishing a future Martian society isolated from the rest part of the human world, Chinese science fiction writers adopt various methods of social and technological experiments to build a utopia in the harsh alien environment. This paper focuses on three stories: Zheng Wenguang's *Descendant of Mars* (1983), Hao Jingfang's *Vagabonds* (2016), and Xia Jia's "The Martian Architect" (2020). In these narratives, the authors use temporal or spatial mis-position to create an autonomous small society perfect for utopian experiments. However, apart from dealing with the sociopolitical aspects, the explorers also have to face the challenges embedded in the unique environment such as the shortage of resources, natural hazards, and the risk of pandemics. The social utopian experiments seem to fall into eco-dystopias. I will provide an ecofeminist read on these works regarding how the marginalized groups among the pioneers – women, teenagers and children, the disabled, non-Han ethnicities, and more – participate in establishing the new society and conquering the ecological threats, and how the authors manage (or not) to envision a diverse

future Martian utopia. I will also seek for the traces of Confucianist, Daoist and Buddhist impact in these stories and examine how they influence the treatment of the marginalized groups.

The paper will draw from theorists like Darko Suvin, Tom Moylan and Jytte Nhanenge. It will also respond to academic works on Chinese science fiction by scholars like Mingwei Song, Hua Li and Wang Yao. While situated mainly in utopian and ecofeminist scholarship, the paper will also try to bring in ancient Chinese philosophies and open a new dimension for analysis on Chinese Futurism.

Mia Chen Ma: Variations of the “Blood-soaked Bun” in Chinese Science Fiction: Medicine, the Womb, and Neohumans

There has never been a time when medical humanity needs to be addressed and studied as much as today. In the Chinese context, the science fictional presentation of medicine dates back to Lu Xun’s 1919 story “Medicine”. In this story, Lu depicts how the bun that was soaked in the revolutionary martyr’s blood has become a publicly accepted cure for tuberculosis. This paper examines how contemporary Chinese SF writers further develop the motif of Lu’s “blood-soaked bun” in addressing the issues of surrogacy, the artificial womb, and children with genetic variants. It will focus on two SF works from Chen Qiufan and Han Song, whose literary styles and preferences for literary themes have often been described as influenced by Lu Xun. By looking into Chen’s “In This Moment, We Are Happy” (2019) and Han’s “Fear of Seeing” (2020), this chapter attempts to discuss how women’s wombs and neohuman children become the new forms of “blood-soaked bun”, being exploited in both the literal and metaphorical sense. Moreover, my analysis also incorporates scholarly discussions of monster theory to analyse how the mixed feeling of being intimidated by “monstrous” children while simultaneously becoming hopeful about their very existence has become an inspiration for Chinese SF writers to ponder the intricacy of medical humanity.

Eero Suoranta: “For Every Lonely Childhood, There is a Doraemon”: Alienation, Generic Hybridity and the Vindication of Optimism in A Que’s “Farewell, Doraemon”

In the face of seemingly insurmountable personal difficulties and systemic injustices, does optimism become merely a naive fantasy, or is it still possible to believe in a better future and in the significance of our own actions? In the 2016 science fiction novella “Farewell, Doraemon” by A Que (b. 1990), this question is examined through the story of an alienated young man grappling with the harsh economic and social realities of rural China, which are exemplified by the tragic life of his childhood friend Tang Lu and contrasted with the cheerful world of the Japanese animation series *Doraemon*. While the fabulous adventures of the series’ eponymous robot cat at first seem far removed from the protagonist and Tang Lu’s own circumstances, as the story unfolds a strange phenomenon found in a local river eventually allows the protagonist to assume the mantle of Doraemon himself and take action to help change their fates.

Drawing on Cara Healey’s theory that “generic hybridity” between Western SF and the critical realism of modern Chinese writers such as Lu Xun (1881–1936) constitutes a key characteristic of contemporary Chinese science fiction, I will examine how “Farewell, Doraemon” uses the critical

realist tropes of the educated narrator returning to his hometown and the long-suffering female character to highlight contemporary social issues and rural China's integration into global capitalism. Moreover, I will illustrate how the novella diverges from the conventions of Chinese realism through its inclusion of a time travel element, allowing the story to explore the possibility of alternative endings to established narratives. I will also argue that in doing so, "Farewell, Doraemon" challenges apathetic and fatalistic attitudes towards the suffering of people from marginalized backgrounds and foregrounds the importance of imagination and kindness in creating positive change in our lives and in our communities.

Alien and AI Others

Grace Borland Sinclair: Grafting Symbiosis: Alien Mothering and Feminist Science

In 1962, the prolific Scottish writer Naomi Mitchison published her first science fiction novel: *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*. Daughter of physician John Scott Haldane (1860-1936), Mitchison's fascination with the world of science was nurtured from childhood. As a young girl she carried out various breeding experiments on mice and guinea pigs with her elder brother J.B.S Haldane (1892-1964), who later became renowned for his work on evolutionary genetics. After a short but impactful experience as a Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurse during WWI, Mitchison became a prominent figure in socialist and feminist circles. She produced both fiction and non-fiction texts, many of which centred radical politics.

In *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, Mitchison tangles the practise of fictioning with her feminist politics and scientific knowledge as she attempts to reconfigure the relationship between scientific subject and object. *Memoirs* follows communications expert Mary (accompanied by a team of fellow cosmic scientists) on various expeditions across the known universe to observe, record and in some cases commune with extra-terrestrial life forms. This paper will explore the ways in which Mitchison posits care, interdependence, and empathy as alternatives to scientific empiricism. These values are fostered primarily through protagonist Mary's experiences of interspecies motherhood, which include an instance of parthenogenetic conception with a Martian colleague and two experimental alien grafts, surgically fused to Mary's inner thigh.

Memoirs acknowledges and interrogates the socially constructed nature of scientific practises and offers a reclamation of subjectivity, rooted in reimagined notions of motherhood and an ethics of care. Her experiences of alien mothering allow protagonist Mary to explore alternatives to binary modes of thought, offering hope in the move towards what scholar Susan Merrill Squier calls 'the feminist vision of an emancipatory science'.

Xiuqi Huang: Humanity and Artificial Intelligence in Hao Jingfang's Short Stories

This paper examines conflicts and coexistence between humanity and artificial intelligence in Chinese science fiction author Hao Jingfang's short stories. Traditionally, science fictions about artificial intelligence oscillate between utopian visions of artificial intelligence taking human civilization to unimaginable heights and eliminating all social problems and dystopian visions of artificial intelligence turning on their creators, enslaving and even annihilating the human race. Hao Jingfang's short story collections *Depth of Solitude* (2016) and *Humanity's Other Shore* (2017) explore a wide range of possible relationships between humanity and artificial intelligence between the two opposite ends of the spectrum of utopia and dystopia, and examine to what extent humans and artificial intelligence could mutually benefit or inflict harm on each other. Hao Jingfang worked as a researcher at the China Development Research Foundation where she studied the impact of artificial intelligence on labour and employment, and much of her science fiction is informed by her

real-life concerns about AI's encroachment on workplaces and private lives and the issues of dehumanization and depersonalization in a world of increasing digitization. Hao Jingfang's stories question in what ways humans can resist losing their essential humanity to roboticization and mechanization in a future of omnipresent and omnipotent AI, and explore the significance of retaining these unique human qualities in humanity's coexistence with artificial intelligence.

11:00-12:00

Exploring Utopia and Dystopia

Jessica Norledge: Imagining a Woman's World

Aligned with dystopian practice more broadly, the feminist dystopia finds its beginnings in early utopian practice, with the feminist utopia being, in itself, a 'site of gendered opposition and resistance to patriarchy' (Teslenko 2003: 19). In challenging society's pre-conceived notions of womanhood, feminist dystopias recontextualise contemporary gender issues, amplifying particular gender biases, prejudices or oppression, so as to paint, in Calvacanti's (2003: 53) terms, 'an exaggerated picture of the existing power relations between the sexes, as if they were placed under a magnifying glass'. This paper aims to re-position that magnifying glass, investigating the evolution of the feminist dystopia and the ethics of feminist dystopianism. Focusing specifically on the conceptualisation of single-sex societies, I explore the representation of women-only dystopian worlds, analysing the ways in which they challenge and reconstruct our experiences of gender in the real world.

Taking a Text-World-Theory perspective (Gavins 2007; Werth 1999) – a cognitive-poetic model of discourse processing – I investigate the imagining of women-only worlds, ranging from Aminder Dhaliwal's (2018) *Woman World* to Christina Dalcher's (2021) *Femlandia*. Building on my own work into the resonant texture of dystopian worlds (Norledge 2022), I bring together Suvin's (1979) notion of 'feedback oscillation' with Lahey's (2019) 'cognitive feedback loop' to propose a nuanced model for conceptualising a 'woman's world'. I consider the ways in which such worlds project or resist hope, and invite emotional and/or immersive responses from the contemporary reader of dystopian fiction.

Keywords

feminist dystopia, cognitive poetics, single-sex societies, dystopian ethics, hope & resistance

Mika Oksanen: An Analysis of the Concept of Utopia and a Defence of Its Application

This talk examines ambiguities in the concept of utopia through conceptual analysis and by examining the history of utopian literature. The introducer of the term "utopia", Thomas More, apparently deliberately left ambivalent how he regarded the hypothetical society described in his work. The word has been used in its widest sense to refer to any fictional society. Nevertheless, the term has come to most often refer to hypothetical societies supposed to be good (according to some system of values). However, this can still be understood in different ways.

Utopias are often held to present ideal, absolutely perfect societies. Because of this utopian speculation has even been argued to be harmful, as it presents an unattainable goal for political activity or supports stagnation. Most of the oldest utopias such as those of Plato and More and Campanella do appear to present a static, totalitarian society supposed to be perfect. However, later works generally recognized as belonging to Utopian literature such as the works of Louis-Sebastien Mercier or Edward Bellamy presented dynamic, progressive societies.

I propose that a utopia is most usefully understood roughly as a hypothetical society that is just significantly better than the presently existing one. Understood in this way utopias present goals we can rationally hope to attain and can help to inspire social or technological progress. I argue that surprisingly many of the improvements suggested in more realistic works of utopian fiction (such as Mercier's *Memoirs*) and theorizing have in fact been realized in actuality (though of course many have not and there has usually been a price to pay).

12:00-13:00

Speculation in Practice

Hanna-Riikka Roine: Speculative Strategies of Finding Resilience in Stories about the Future of Finnish Democracy

From 2018 to 2021, the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra ran “Kansanvallan peruskorjaus” (“Updating Democracy”) project, with the goal to rethink political decision-making and bring new perspectives into the discussion about the future of democracy. In accordance with that goal, the project commissioned ten fiction writers to imagine and play with the idea of Finnish democracy in 2040. The resulting collection of short stories, *2040: Tarinoita demokratian tulevaisuudesta* (*Stories about the future of democracy*) was published in late 2021.

The project leaders stress the importance of commissioning written fiction in comparison with creating more traditional future scenarios, as the latter “seldom genuinely surprise us, strike a chord with us, or inspire us to action.” Such appeal to emotion and experience has been named both the strength and limitation of narrative as a form, while the more speculative engagements with the possible (and impossible) in fiction are often left unexamined. In my presentation, I draw an analytical distinction between the elements of speculation and those of narrative to discuss different strategies the short stories in *Tarinoita demokratian tulevaisuudesta* use to find resilience.

Most of these strategies draw from speculative thinking, most explicitly Emmi Itäranta’s story about a composer learning to listen the voice of the nature and Juhani Karila’s story where the inhabitants of Tampere are replaced with robots. Not all stories making use of speculative strategies fall under the umbrella of speculative fiction, though: for instance, Harry Salmenniemi’s story juxtaposes solemn political assertions about the importance of citizen participation with snapshots of the lives of marginalized people. The collection thus presents an interesting case study for testing the boundary between speculative fiction genre and speculative strategies in written, future-oriented fiction more generally. Finally, it showcases some very Finnish (or Nordic) conceptions about resilience and its possible forms within a democratic society.

Paul Graham Raven: Utopias in the Making: Speculation as Co-Production, and a Praxis of Hope

Over the past few decades, the slow reclamation by the social sciences and humanities of futurity—which, as John Urry (2016) suggested, was their rightful territory prior to its usurpation by the deductive Cold-Warrior logics of the commercial futures industry—has been paralleled by the rehabilitation (or perhaps simply the rediscovery) of the necessity and vitality of utopian thought and theory.

This paper will describe and discuss a bundle of recent projects connected to the Climaginations research collective (<https://www.climaginations.org/>), in which speculative futures are not the object of research, but rather its methodology. Through creative, narrative-driven approaches to the question(s) of futurity—particularly climate futures, but also the inextricably related issues of political, economic and sociotechnical change—these projects have (co-)created stories and encounters that aim to *concretise*, *situate* and *democratise* the civilisational challenges we face. In so doing, they have contributed to the foundations of a research paradigm through which non-expert participants might become subjects of futurity, rather than its objects.

Drawing on theorists such as Levitas (2013), we might say that these methods are thus *utopias in the making*: producing and sharing contested and imperfect visions of the ways we might live in a (climate-)changed world. Drawing on Wegner (2020), we might also say that they are a praxis of hope for participants and researchers alike—which is to say that *utopia's (also) in the making*, that the speculative act of imagining that things might be different (in defiance of the capitalist-realist insistence that There Is No Alternative) has a prefigurative potential related to, but independent of, the utopian narratives produced by the process.

13:00-14:00

Hostile Cosmologies

Thomas Kristjansen: Malevolent Cosmologies and Possibilities of Hope in Dark Fantasy Fiction

While virtually all types of fantasy fiction involve fantastical elements that are in some way dramatic, threatening, or malevolent, the somewhat nebulous subgenre of ‘dark fantasy’ often presents worlds whose fundamental metaphysics and cosmologies are hostile or indifferent to human welfare. Such stories often fall under the ‘grimdark’ neologism. These malevolent worlds pose a distressing question: is hope possible or worthwhile in a world where hope is a literal cosmological and metaphysical dead-end? How do writers of dark fantasy construct stories that stay meaningful to the reader without slipping into existential apathy?

By discussing some landmark dark fantasy works (such as Glen Cook’s *The Black Company* series (1984-2018) and R. Scott Bakker’s *The Second Apocalypse* series (2004-2017)), I will discuss how various stories offer different answers to this question. By precluding the very possibility of cosmic order restored or defended, these stories must rely on other narratological tools and story-content to

generate meaningful responses in fantasy readers. How do these stories interface with, and often challenge, tacit assumptions of morality and ‘Good and Evil’?

I aim to place this discussion within the broader context of how humans imagine and construe meaningful story-worlds that feature supernatural and cosmological content. I discuss how apparently nihilistic or malevolent cosmologies can act not as deterrents to morality, but as spaces for moral reflection and interrogation. These stories of worlds without spiritual reassurance ultimately encourage us not to forsake morality or meaning, but rather to consider them seriously and critically.

Charles Simmons: Cataclysm, Catastrophe, and Hope: Political Action in Michael Swanwick’s *Stations of the Tide*

Cataclysm comes to the planet of Miranda like clockwork: once every two centuries the jubilee tides drown the continents beneath the weight of rising seaboards. This periodic flooding, which to the native biota is “merely a passing and regular event,” has the power to level and thus turn the world out anew; planetary authority does what it can to ensure civilians make it off-planet safely before the tides hit, while Gregorian, the novel’s sinister and chilling antagonist, offers his people a very different way to ascend. This latter option requires what can only be described as a “leap of faith.”

Miranda’s natives are dimorphic. By a magical trick of nature, things – flora and fauna – adapt, mutate, *transform*: a rainbird becomes a sparrowfish, and “haunts,” a semi-intelligent indigen easily mistaken for human, adapt eelish tails and elongated appendages to meet the planet’s winter. According to Gregorian, human beings can achieve much of the same, as such ‘magic’ is only a matter of initiative and daring:

Gregorian kissed the old woman and threw her from the cliff. She fell toward the cold gray water headfirst, twisting. There was a small white splash as she hit, plunging deep beneath the chop. She did not surface. A little distance away, something dark and sleek as an otter broke water, dove, and disappeared. (22)

This transformative episode informs the political backdrop of Swanwick’s novel and constitutes a reflection on the nature of magic itself. Modulating between the two distinct senses of the word, Gregorian is both a *real* magician in the generic sense, and a *real* magician as we commonly recognize them: someone who performs at children’s birthday parties, circuses, and television spectacles[1]. And like all successful magic, Gregorian’s variety dares its audience to believe in the unexpected.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt reminds readers that the most salient political features of human beings is plurality, and the fact that “each of them is capable of new perspectives and new actions.” I propose reading *Stations of the Tide* with Arendt’s account of the human capacity for action in view. Facing a global environmental catastrophe, how does the novel represent the Promethean powers Gregorian urges upon his people? Does action – starting things and setting off trains of events – provide hope for Miranda’s future, or does Swanwick’s vision remain a doomed

one?

[1]: In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson has an extended analysis of the function of Gregorian's magic from which I have borrowed. See pages 68-69.

14:00-15:00

Formal and Metafictional Hope and Resilience

Oskari Rantala: Hopeful and Playful End of the World in Alan Moore's ABC Universe

A major trend in popular comics during the past three decades has been the emergence of dark, revisionist superheroes who problematize established genre expectations and often question heroism itself. The new deconstructed and reimagined superheroes broke into the mainstream culture in 1980s when works such as *Watchmen* (1986-87) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons and *Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller were published to huge success. Since then, the aesthetics of these works has profoundly influenced the superhero genre and moved to other media as well. Today, more realistically depicted violence and sarcastic attitude towards the superhero tradition have become something of a norm.

One interesting narrative project explicitly striving to counter this trend of grim and gritty superheroes was America's Best Comics, a comic book imprint of WildStorm Productions. ABC was founded in 1999 solely for publishing a line of comics written by Alan Moore, the writer of seminal comics such as *Watchmen* and *Swamp Thing*, who had earlier become an icon of the modern wave of dark superhero interpretations. In ABC line, however, his tone is markedly different.

The comics foreground the positive side of superheroism, light-hearted humour and medial and material playfulness. Between 1999 and 2006 Moore wrote several comic book titles such as *Tom Strong*, *Promethea*, *Top Ten* and *Tomorrow Stories* which take place in a unified storyworld or superhero universe. In addition to creating the wide-spanning storyworld, Moore also finally destroyed it in an apocalyptic event in the last issues.

In my paper, I discuss the end of the ABC universe which can be considered hopeful and playful. The narrative is upbeat and at times experiments with complicated narrative strategies. The last issue of *Promethea* is, for example, constructed in such a way that the reader can take apart the comic book and rearrange the pages to form a massive comics surface. The world of the comic is taken apart at the same time as the comic book itself.

Merja Polvinen: The Infinite Kindness of the House: Speculative Environments and Mental Resilience in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*

In *Piranesi* (2020) the titular character lives in a world of halls and statues carved by the waters of ancient wisdom that flow out the human world. Piranesi has learned how to navigate these spaces, to fish in their waters and to love the creatures, both alive and dead, that share the space with him.

My paper examines the relationship between Piranesi and the House as a representation of how the human imagination encounters fictional environments during reading.

Piranesi has adapted in order to better fit the infinite “House” in which he lives. He also shows mental resilience in surviving a traumatic transition out of the House and into ordinary reality, as well as the shock of finding out how he ended up in the House in the first place. I will discuss these experiences in terms of *cognitive affordances*. This concept derives from embodied and ecological cognitive science, and talks about the the action-potentials offered by an environment to a particular cognizer (Gibson 1979; Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014). Thus I will argue that Piranesi’s survival depends on him learning to make manifest affordances in his bizarre environment, and this process also helps him to become resilient to the trauma that follows later on in the story.

Affordances can also help us to talk about literary form, and the ways in which readers’ minds connect with the interface fiction offers (Levine 2015, Cave 2016). Clarke’s speculative narrative invites readers to engage with a new world, but also to access intertextual connections and anthropological theories about occult practices, as well as see the House in metafictional terms as an analogy for the worlds we build in fictions. With the theory of affordances I show how both the fictional environment represented in the novel and the abstract environment offered by its narrative form can be accessed by our reading minds, and how the imaginative action of reading could itself be a source of resilience in a complex world.