

EMBODIMENT IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE (MAY 18-19, 2018)

Conference Report by Kristen Shaw

Embodiment in Science Fiction and Fantasy Interdisciplinary Conference. McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. 18-19 May 2018.

Although Science Fiction and Fantasy of the 1980s and 1990s often focused on employing technology to transcend the perceived limits of the human body, contemporary Speculative Fiction (SF) frequently interrogates and critiques the idealization of disembodiment, focusing, alternatively, on the materiality of bodies, and how distinct experiences of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and disability inform lived experience. The Embodiment in Science Fiction and Fantasy Interdisciplinary Conference, hosted by the English Department of McMaster University from May 18th to 19th, 2018, asked presenters to explore how the experience and representation of bodies in SF informs how we understand human, post-human, and non-human subjects, and their positionality within material and cultural settings.

The conference was attended by more than eighty scholars from across Canada, the United States, the UK, Australia, Egypt, Greece, and Spain. Presenters included academics from a variety of disciplines and career levels, from independent researchers, to graduate students, to professors. A total of twenty-one panels were hosted during the conference, with three panels occurring concurrently during each time slot over the span of the two-day event. Presentations focused on a variety of Science Fiction and Fantasy texts, spanning from mid-century to contemporary literature, television, and film.

The first day of the conference featured panels on the relationship between embodiment and temporality; embodied cognition and critiques of Cartesianism; reproduction, temporality, and feminist ethics in the film *Arrival* (2016); gender, sexuality, and embodiment in SF literature, television, and film; Critical Race Theory; ecology, the nonhuman, and embodiment; two panels on Trauma Studies; a special panel on SF and pedagogy; and the first of three panels dedicated to Disability Studies.

The first panel I attended and moderated was one of two panels which focused on Trauma Studies. Charul Palmer-Patel (Canada) provided a fascinating exploration of the motif of abjection, abject womb-sites, and maternal figures in James Clemens's *Banned and the Banished* (1998-2002) series. In a paper focused on Kristin Cashore's *Bitterblue* (2012), Molly Keran (University of

Michigan, USA) convincingly argued that the novel's representation of rape survivorship aligns with contemporary Feminist and Disability Studies' conceptions of trauma as an ongoing experience rather than an event. Tony Vinci (Ohio University-Chillicothe, USA) explored trauma in *The Magicians* (2009) by Lev Grossman, exploring how the novel depicts the ways that the body becomes posthuman through trauma, and the way that trauma emphasizes the necessity of moving beyond traditional humanist conceptions of subjectivity, sociality, and the body.

The second panel I attended and moderated, entitled "Ecology, Nature, and the Nonhuman," explored SF texts that depict more-than-human and nonhuman embodiment, as well as landscapes as bodies (and bodies as landscapes) that produce new kinds of affects and relations. Garth Sabo (Michigan State University, USA) examined works by Chapell, Twain, and Asimov that depict journeys through the body, and thus represent the body as setting or landscape. These works, Sabo argued, call into question the human body as a self-contained entity, and indicate that embodiment entails a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans and nonhuman actants. Graham J. Murphy (Seneca College, Canada) provided an astute reading of Kathleen Ann Goonan's novel *Queen City Jazz* (1994) and its representation of alliances between human, vegetal, and animal actants. Murphy argued that these representations critique hierarchies of human and nonhuman, and represent a mode of posthumanism that decentres human agency in favour of an assemblage-oriented approach to understanding embodiment and the social. Mason Wales (York University, Canada) proposed the term "putropia" to describe the political aims and aesthetics of post-apocalyptic settings in film, which, Wales argued, frequently explore the state in a state of decomposition (or "putrescence") in order to grapple with shifting ideas about the nation and national identity. Elana Maloul (University of Michigan, USA) examined the representation of space and urban settings in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), exploring the novel's focus on the act of descent and underground or murky spaces to interrogate subjectivity, modernity, and racial politics.

During the midday lunch break on the first day of the conference, Veronica Hollinger, professor emeritus of Trent University and a renowned SF scholar, presented her keynote address, entitled "'Corpo-Reality' and the Non-Human Supplement." This talk provided a thoughtful analysis of corporeality and embodiment in several recently-published novels that explore what it means to be 'in' a body during the Anthropocene era: Paolo Bacigalupi's *Tool of War* (2017), Kameron Hurley's *Stars are Legion* (2017), Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* (2017), and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017). For Hollinger, climate change presents a significant challenge to Cartesianism and calls on humans to reconceive both corpo-reality and the relationship of humans to nonhuman bodies.

Afternoon sessions on the first day included a panel exploring the politics of racial identity in contemporary SF entitled "Critical Race Theory: Necropower, Afro-Pessimism, Afropunk." Diana Brydon (University of Manitoba, Canada) explored necropolitics in the context of Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) and *Who Fears Death* (2010), while Joseph Earl Thomas (University of Notre Dame, USA) provided a fascinating analysis of Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* (2015). Drawing from Afrofuturism and Afro-pessimism, Thomas argued that *Binti* explores the potentialities of coming of age as a Black girl, eschewing conventions of the bildungsroman and the idealism often

attributed to Afrofuturist texts to articulate a more complex conception of Black identity. Isiah Lavender III (Louisiana State University, USA) concluded the panel with an excellent examination of the problematic racial politics of cyberpunk and an exploration of how African-American SF writers have re-deployed cyberpunk conventions to create 'Afropunk': a Black version of cyberpunk that challenges white privilege, and the whiteness of the SFF canon, while using genre fiction to explore the politics of race, community, and embodiment.

The first day of the conference concluded with a social event at the local Staircase Theater, which featured readings of creative fiction and poetry by Petra Koppers, an author, disability culture activist, performance artist, and professor at the University of Michigan, USA; Ann Arbour; as well as Selena Middleton, a Science Fiction author and PhD candidate in the English Department at McMaster University, Canada. These readings were followed by an open mic in which panellists were encouraged to share their work. This event provided a perfect complement to the academic portion of the conference, allowing panellists to share creative work and socialize in an informal setting.

The second day of the conference included panels on cyborgs and cyborg theory; sex work, labour, and cyborgs/robots; aging, health and medical discourses; human and nonhuman metamorphoses; reproduction, motherhood, and pregnancy; embodiment in Science Fiction film; queer and hybrid embodiments; visual and sonic dimensions of embodiment; and two panels focused on disability studies.

The first panel that I attended and moderated on the second day of the conference was entitled "Gender, Sexuality, and Cyborgs." Jennifer Jodell (University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, USA) provided a fascinating exploration of the "cyborg-artist" figure represented in mid-century Science Fiction texts, analysing the frequently conflicted depictions of these characters as both dangerous to the social order and possessing creative agency. Jodell's paper provided an interesting historical context framing the following two papers, which focused on contemporary cyborg figures. Elsa Klingensmith (Oklahoma State University, USA) examined the sexualisation of cyborgs in the films *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049*, providing an excellent close reading of the cyborg Joi in *Blade Runner 2049* that addressed issues of power, agency, and gender. Mark Soderstrom's (SUNY Empire State College, USA) perceptive paper examining several cyborgian figures in Science Fiction texts, and the relationship between the cyborg, feminist movements, and social reproduction, concluded this excellent panel.

The second panel I attended during this day was entitled "Labour, Sex Work and the Cyborg/Robot." Anne Savage (McMaster University, Canada) drew from many real-world examples of contemporary advancements in robotics to examine the sexual and affective role of new 'sex robots' and androids, and the ethical considerations of this shift. Clare Wall (York University, Canada) provided a fascinating analysis of Madeline Ashby's *Machine Dynasty* novels *vN* (2012) and *iD* (2013), arguing that these stories gesture towards a new ethics of relationality and responsibility between humans and robots. David Sweeney's (Glasgow School of Art, UK) paper provided a comparative analysis of the affective and sexual labour conducted by cyborgs in the films *2046* (2004) and *Blade*

Runner 2049 (2017), exploring the ethical and social implications of these representations given parallel contemporary advancements in virtual reality and 'sexbot' technology.

The third and final panel that I attended explored in embodiment in Science Fiction film, with the first two papers focusing on representations of masculinity. David Isaacs (California Baptist University, UK) provided an engaging analysis of Will Smith's body in *I Am Legend* (2007), emphasizing how race and masculinity intersect both on-screen, and in relation to the public's reception of Smith's celebrity persona. Jacob Arun (McMaster University, Canada) examined the wearable technologies in Spiderman's suit in the film *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017), analysing the film's representation of surveillance and military technologies, their impact on the identity and agency of the titular character, and the ethics and effects of these technologies in the context of superhero narratives. To conclude the panel, Débora Madrid-Brito (Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, Spain) provided a compelling analysis of human enhancement in several Spanish Science Fiction films, exploring the use of virtual reality, genetic engineering, cryogenics, and artificial intelligence to engage with transhumanist discourses.

The conference concluded with a keynote speech from Hugo Award-winning author Kameron Hurley (USA) entitled "We are Made of Meat: Imagining an Embodied Future." Employing characteristic humour and thoughtful insight, Hurley critiqued visions of the future that allow us to escape our bodies, arguing alternatively that a disembodied future is not only impossible, but undesirable. Throughout this talk, Hurley foregrounded the importance of embodied experience to our understanding of subjectivity, community, and politics, providing an excellent conclusion to the event.

Due to the success of the event and the quality and diversity of the papers, the conference organizers are currently discussing the possibility of producing an edited collection based on conference proceedings and are in the process of determining publication options. The conference provided an opportunity for researchers at different stages of their careers to share important and cutting-edge scholarship and brought attention to new areas and emerging fields of research in Science Fiction and Fantasy studies. The conference, with its broad assortment of papers and topics, achieved its main goal of bringing together academics from a variety of disciplines to explore issues of embodiment that are still often marginalized in the fields of Science Fiction and Fantasy scholarship.

BIO-NOTE

Kristen Shaw completed her PhD in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, Canada in 2018. Her dissertation, entitled "Space, Assemblage, and the Nonhuman in Speculative Fiction," focused on spatial politics, and how SF inspires new forms of socio-spatial resistance to capitalism. Her current research interests include representations of gender, race, and class in Science Fiction and popular culture.