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## Conference Report: 100 Years of Estrangement at Worldcon 75 in Helsinki, 9–13 August, 2017

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A hundred years since the original publication of Viktor Shklovsky's seminal "Art as Technique" (alternatively known as "Art as Device"), the academic track of the 75<sup>th</sup> World Science Fiction Convention picked Shklovsky's idea of *ostranenie* as its theme. For Shklovsky "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*" (11, emphasis original). In other words, art deautomatizes our habitual perceptions of the world. It manages this through *ostranenie*, defamiliarization or estrangement, which Shklovsky demonstrates with Tolstoy's prolonged description of flogging a horse in which the everyday act is made strange. In science fiction criticism, Darko Suvin uses similar terminology in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) to explain the special nature of science fiction (SF) as fiction of cognitive estrangement where new, science-fictional devices, or *novums*, make it possible to imagine the world differently. In addition to Shklovsky, Suvin was influenced by Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* that disrupts the received ways of observing theater, leading to a distanced and intellectual empathy that was, according to Brecht, necessary to get the audiences to change the world (Brecht and Bentley 130–136).

Worldcon's academic track, *100 Years of Estrangement*, saw these various aspects of estrangement interrogated over the course of five days, 19 sessions, and some 60 papers. The presenters came from all over the world with a pleasing number of PhD candidates and independent scholars among them, while the organizers lauded the quality of the programming for its adherence to the theme of estrangement. In addition to giving my own paper, I was in the communication team for the conference and thus got to follow a good deal of the proceedings.

A fair number of the sessions, like the "Uses of Fantasy (i.e., the World Hobbit Project)," "SF and Gender," and "Environmental Anxieties" gathered delightfully large audiences also from the non-academic con-goers. While most papers focused on science fiction and fantasy (SFF) written in English, sessions like "SF in China" but also papers on Finnish SFF and Soviet children's literature brought a touch of internationalism suitable for the World Science Fiction Convention.

Most presentations centered around close-readings and the analysis of instances of estrangement, but did so over several media from literature to comics and film with a variety of approaches, like posthuman, ethical, and educational, on estrangement in SFF. One of the popular topics was non-human representation. For example, in "The Posthuman" session, Jani Ylönen discussed the cute cyborg killer pets of *We3*, while Clare Wall argued that Margaret Atwood's *Madaddam Trilogy* and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* deconstruct anthropocentrism of human-animal relations. Additionally, totally-not-robots of Redditt, monsters, aliens, and cyborgs were at the heart of "The Poetics and Politics of Posthumanist Estrangement(s) in Speculative Fiction" panel.

While the conference abstracts remain (as of October 2017) at the Worldcon programme website, I would like to highlight two great papers. First, Tiffani Angus's terrific (and funny) "Where Are the Tampons? The Estrangement of Women's Bodies in Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction" that did not really flatter the works she studied in their handling of women as embodied beings in conditions of post-apocalyptic scarcity. While, for example, childbirth can be found in Angus's corpus, they most often happen off-stage without a description available for the reader, sometimes very easily for a setting like a post-apocalyptic wasteland, at others with plain weird results. Overall, Angus argues that SFF cannot get stories right if things like women's bodily experiences are misrepresented. Second, I'll mention Marian Via Rivera-Womack and her "Defamiliarization and the Ecological Sublime in Contemporary Weird Fiction" that connected Brian Catling's *The Vorrh* and Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*. According to her, both are modern weird/gothic texts where an obsession with architecture has been replaced by one with nature. Where in the gothic tradition nature was the domain of the sublime, for Catling and VanderMeer it is made strange through the monstrous and becomes a space with fluid boundaries.

One of the most fruitful discussions to emerge over the course of *100 Years of Estrangement* was around the overall significance of science fiction and fantasy as fiction of estrangement. What is it that works of SFF achieve through their use of estranging techniques? Already on the first day of the conference, Andrew M. Butler raised the question of the subjectivity/universality of estrangement. To highlight this, he recapped his first reading of *Gattaca* during which he experienced estrangement at the invocation of "Detroit Riviera," leading to speculations over the storyworld and its history that could have led to the Detroit area becoming like the French Côte d'Azur. It became clear, however, that the Detroit Riviera refers to a Buick model rather than a science fictional resort. Butler went on to ask whether his experience of estrangement becomes invalid due to this confusion.

Several presenters seemed to veer toward thinking that at least the effect of estrangement in SFF was somewhat universal. For them, estranging fiction has the potential for making the reader see the world in a new light, for offering insight into differing realities and, as a result, for different politics, be they ecological, posthumanist, or less cis-heteronormative, to name just a few possibilities.

What remained unanswered, however, was the degree of power for such fiction. Clearly, science fiction has the potential, especially through techniques of estrangement, to bring readers to the verge of a revelation and possibly action as a result. But the amount of readers to which this applies remains in question as does the probability of the next step – does the increased consciousness of injustices brought on by fiction result in action to resist them? Jo Lindsay Walton was even more skeptical than this, asking in a blog post whether our "deep normative structures" are in fact not interrogated but reinforced by SF works like *We3*, *Oryx & Crake*, or *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* – a selection of examples that are generally understood to be both estranging and "good" SF (Walton 2017). What if even SF that successfully estranges does not dismantle harmful categories?

To me, one of the most intriguing case examples of such questions came from Essi Vatiolo's "Climate Change in a Chromium World. The Power of Estrangement in Ted Chiang's 'Exhalation.'" In Vatiolo's interpretation, Chiang's story manages through estrangement to become a text of climate fiction with potential to re-frame the climate debate without becoming burdened by it, that is, a story that does not merely go through the motions of the debate, but offers a genuinely new take on the whole issue. Significantly, "Exhalation" strives to such a direction, but it does not in fact mention *climate change* as such and does not seem to take part in any real-world discourses around it. While its robotic characters realize that the way they respire is detrimental to the habitability of their world in an irreversible way, the drama is cast not in terms of complex ecosystems but a rather more technical apocalyptic scenario. According to Vatiolo, this has led to a number of critics framing

the central tension of the story in terms of entropic heat death rather than climate change – an interpretation that brings about a different set and scale of questions with regards to the survival of species and the actions one could take to avoid such disasters. Where entropic heat death is not something to fight, climate change certainly is.

Vatilo did note that this subtlety of the text and its estranging techniques makes the issue of climate change easy to either dismiss or miss altogether. This way, Vatilo's take on "Exhalation" brings out both Butler's question of the subjectivity of estrangement and Walton's concern over its politics, while shedding light onto a short story that appears to have been deeply misunderstood despite – or even because – of its craft and mastery of science fictional literary techniques. If even so-called sophisticated readers can miss out on such central messages of an SF story, how can we rely on estranging literature to engage with a variety of readers and hope for it to influence their politics for, say, a sustainable future?

As these questions and their implications show, the study of estrangement is not over and done with. The presentations at *100 Years of Estrangement* hopefully build the foundation for its next steps. After all, Suvin's *Metamorphoses* turns 40 in two years and clearly there is a call for new attempts to theorize the ins and outs of cognitive estrangement and Shklovsky's *ostranenie* with regards to what SFF and the scholarship around it have become in the 21st century. At this hundred-year mark, the ground is more fertile than ever for the next hundred years of studying the strangely imagined.

## Works Cited

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