



## *Lectio praecursoria:* Reading Mutant Narratives

*Kaisa Kortekallio*

Kaisa Kortekallio is a post-doctoral scholar in the research consortium Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Narrative and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory (Academy of Finland 2018–2022), at the University of Helsinki. The topics of her peer-reviewed articles include posthuman subjectivity in cyberpunk (2014), estranging first-person narration in Jeff VanderMeer’s and Timothy Morton’s work (2019), and speculative experientiality in Paolo Bacigalupi’s climate fiction (2020).

*Keywords:* reading, embodied mind, ecology, mutant, science fiction literature, posthumanism, cognitive literary studies, environmental humanities

Reading fictional narratives is an activity that involves the body of the reader. As your eyes trace the text of an exciting story, and you imagine the fictional events, your heart might beat faster and your muscles might tense up. This is the body as a physical and physiological object; the body that empirical researchers would focus on. They would observe it from the outside and measure its activity (see, for example, Alber and Strasen; Kuijpers et al.).

This is, however, not the body I wish to discuss here. Rather, I wish to discuss the body that exists in first-person experience: the body that feels the excitement as an urgency to get to the next page, or, when reading horror stories at night, expects monsters to spring up from the dark corners of the room. This is a body that is best studied not through measurement, but by recognising embodied experience as it takes place, by describing it, and by discussing it critically and reflectively. In phenomenology, this aspect of embodiment is usually called the *lived body* (Colombetti and Thompson; Merleau-Ponty; Sheets-Johnstone; Varela et al.).

Crucially, neither the *body-object* nor the *lived body* is perfectly contained within the boundaries of the skin. The body leaks into other bodies and things, shaping them, and other bodies and things enter it all the time. It is *porous*. What we usually call “the environment” does not only *surround* the body, but also constitutes it and meshes with it: bodies eat other bodies, which in turn have taken in chemicals from the air and the soil to build up their own bodies (Alaimo; Neimanis). At the same time, environments are *made by* bodies that just go about their business: digging holes in the ground, constructing cities, or breathing out greenhouse gases (Gilbert; Laland; Nuismer). Such material relations can be generative and pleasurable, but they can also be constraining, violent, and destructive (Alaimo; Haraway; Weik von Mossner).

Lived bodies feel sad in rainy weather, elevated under cathedral ceilings, and glorious on the peaks of mountains (Colombetti and Thompson; Neimanis; Sheets-Johnstone). They also routinely make sense of the world with the help of various things in their environments: hammers and hats, traffic rules and choreographies, the sounds and silences of crickets in the night (Gibson; Merleau-Ponty; Noë; Varela et al.).

Human bodies always involve something *nonhuman*: this makes their condition *more-than-human* (Abram; Neimanis). For me, understanding human bodies as more-than-human is one way of developing ethical relations between humans and nonhuman bodies. Making better sense of the bodily experience of *reading* can be helpful in this slow process of learning (Kortekallio 19–36; 59–76).

In this dissertation, I have explored *what happens to the lived body when we read fictional narratives*. The reading body, or the embodied reader, encounters a complex cultural artefact. That artefact contains cues and codes by which imagined worlds come to exist: narrative elements, techniques, and strategies. In its encounters with fictional narratives, the lived body responds to these cues, generating various feelings, thoughts, and judgements, and impressions of complete fictional worlds and people (Caracciolo; Polvinen; Warhol). Some theories of narrative suggest that the acts of readerly imagination resemble the acts of perceiving and navigating our actual, lived realities. Readerly imagination is assumed to *build on* our experience of the actual world (Fludernik; Caracciolo; Kukkonen).

When I first began this study, I wanted to ask what happens to the lived body when we read about worlds and bodies that do *not* resemble our lived reality. That is, I wanted to explore *science fiction*. In particular, I wanted to explore the ways in which contemporary science fiction depicts bodies and environments that go through radical changes. I wanted to know how those depictions can give rise to bodily feelings, and whether some of those bodily feelings can *not* be traced back to conventional ideas about everyday experience. I thought that such strange feelings might help to loosen up human-centred structures of experience (Kortekallio 1–19).

In the study, I analysed works by three Anglo-American science fiction authors: Greg Bear, Paolo Bacigalupi, and Jeff VanderMeer. All the works – five novels and two short stories in total – have been published during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are widely read, translated into a number of languages, and critically discussed both within science-fiction studies and in other fields of literary studies. Thematically, they all engage with matters of evolution, ecology, and environmental disaster (Kortekallio 9–13).

I wanted to study science fiction because it hangs on a tension. On the one hand, the tradition of science fiction generally adopts a natural-scientific, systemic view that sketches the human in relation to material, ecological, and technological dynamics. On the other hand, it is popular literature that follows a formal tradition of presenting human characters as independent agents who are coherent, fairly rational, and separate from their environments. The environment mostly stays in the background of human action (Aldiss and Wingrove; Carroll; Idema; Pak; Varis).

The fiction that I have analysed here works against this tradition, foregrounding the liveliness and agency of nonhuman beings and places. The tension between human agency and nonhuman influences is realised in the bodies of the central characters. Such fictional bodies can be called *mutant figures*: human or human-like fictional organisms that are or have been radically altered by environmental forces. The term *mutant* draws on the notion of genetic mutation, and thus on evolutionary biology, but the popular figure goes beyond the biological definition (Kortekallio 102–18).

Mutant figures in comics, films, games, and literature accumulate in their bodies pollution, radiotoxicity, biotechnological innovations, and corporate power – that is, many of the environmental threats and challenges that industrialised societies have faced in the last decades. Often, mutant figures are inhuman monsters not fit for societal inclusion, or even for life: just think of the countless and nameless mutants of eighties B-films or contemporary video games such as *BioShock*; or the tragic figure of *Toxic Avenger*. In other cases, mutant figures can display surprising features and exceptional abilities that may help them adapt to their newly changed environments. This is the case with many popular superheroes, and especially with the long-lived *X-Men* franchise. *X-Men* has also helped to establish the mutant as an identifiable, positive figure (Badmington; Kortekallio 102–18).

The material histories and diverse roles of mutant figures mean that they can be considered as corporeal responses to environmental change. They contain both the *risk* of horrifying failure and the *potential* for novel, creative, and viable ways of life. They can be monsters, or they can be superheroes. We can think of *mutation* as both literal and metaphorical: when we say that Spider-Man is sensitive, it means *both* that his senses are exceptionally sharp *and* that you can easily hurt his feelings.

My work also draws on the metaphorical potential of the mutant when I discuss this selection of science fiction as *mutant narratives*. I propose that mutant narratives are initial adaptations to changed cultural environments. They respond to the crisis of human-centred cultures with experimental strategies that are risky, often awkward, and perhaps doomed to fail; yet they also contain the potential for viable new forms (Kortekallio 13–19; 121; 247–54).

Mutant narratives often foreground the body-object: the physiological, biological, and biotechnological aspects of bodies. When they do that, they can also allow their readers to tap into strange and diverse forms of embodied experience. In more technical terms, the narratives can provide readers with unusual forms of *experientiality*. The narrative-theoretical term experientiality refers to the capacity of a narrative to evoke *something like real-life experience*. For example, when you read about Bruce Banner going through his outrageous transformation into the monstrous Hulk, you might have a feeling that your own muscles are rapidly expanding, even bursting out of your clothes. This is

not something you would have direct experience of, yet you can feel something like it (Fludernik; Caracciolo; Kortekallio 59–76).

However, the mere presence of a mutant body-object does not necessarily mean that the science fictional narrative would present readers with radically different experientiality. Consider, for example, the main mutant figure in Greg Bear's *Darwin's Children* (2003): Stella Nova Rafelson. Stella is one of the first children born in the "epidemic" of mutant births that takes over the world in the span of a few years. As a teenager, she can communicate by flashing patterns of freckles on her cheeks, and she can manipulate the feelings of others by secreting various pheromones at will.

In Bear's novel, the features and abilities of Stella's body are described in detail. Yet her *embodied experience* is narrated using the same style and form as the experience of more conventional human characters. Moreover, Stella's passionate insistence that she is "not human" is presented as mere teenage rebellion: the climactic ending of the novel has her return to the arms of her human father, and also to the universal species family of *Homo* (Kortekallio 77–97).

What is so troubling about this humanisation of a mutant figure? Mostly, the implicit commitment it upholds: *that all kinds of bodies and all kinds of experience can be transparently represented through conventional narrative techniques*. This narrative technique denies that there is any technique in narrative. And so, the technique guides readers to imagine the affects and ideas evoked by the narrative as "natural". It also guides them to understand fictional characters as representations of actual people (Kortekallio 95–97).

The philosopher of mind Alva Noë has argued that different bodily practices rehearse different styles of perception: he claims that observing still-life paintings trains us to perceive the world as sets of immobile planes, whereas playing baseball enables a dynamic, task-oriented, and "wild" style of seeing (Noë 51). I suggest that this idea also applies to reading: different kinds of literature train us in different kinds of perception and feeling. In this way, reading participates in the formation of our habitual patterns of engaging with our environments (Kortekallio 96).

So: realist characters feel "realistic" because readers have been culturally familiarised with this mode of representing human life. Often, this mode presents human bodies as separate from their environments. Other kinds of characters, such as mutant figures, can rehearse different perceptions. At the very least, they may help us to *break the routine*.

Whereas *Darwin's Children* encourages readers to identify with the mutant figure and eventually humanise it, Paolo Bacigalupi's short stories "The Fluted Girl" and "The People of Sand and Slag" in *Pump Six and Other Stories*, as well as the novel *The Windup Girl*, disturb such easy routines of reading. Consider the central figures of "The People of Sand and Slag", a story set in an industrial wasteland where all life is either human or human-made. They are introduced to readers as fast-paced, perfectly effective posthumans who, while completing a mission, jump from a flying vehicle and crash to the ground, breaking their bodies – but immediately rise, their self-healing tissues already repairing the damage.

Going along with this stylised action is an exciting ride for the readers. Yet the ride gets increasingly uncomfortable as the story unfolds. It turns out that, on top of being physically indestructible, the posthumans do not feel pain. For this reason, violence comes to them as easily as breathing. As a form of recreation, they

cut off each others' arms and legs – and while *they* feel nothing but amusement, most human-bodied readers are bound to flinch (Kortekallio 136–43).

As they tune into the movements and bodily feelings of the fictional figures of “The People of Sand and Slag”, readers are guided to accept and even admire their bodily styles, but eventually also to *resist* such an easy acceptance. In this way, Bacigalupi’s narrative latches on to the readerly expectation of identifying with fictional figures, and uses it to turn them against the exploitative, extremely human-centred ethos that the posthuman figures embody (Kortekallio 143–47).

In studies of science fiction, it is customary to refer to this kind of defamiliarising dynamic as *cognitive estrangement* (McHale; Suvin; Spiegel). However, the bodily and experiential aspects of cognitive estrangement have remained undertheorised. In this study, I propose the term *embodied estrangement* as a partial response to this lack (Kortekallio 173–97).

In the case of Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach* trilogy, embodied estrangement can develop readerly sensitivities in more-than-human directions. In *Annihilation*, the first book of the trilogy, the narrator enters a strange transitional zone, labeled as Area X, where she inhales unidentified spores that may or may not come from outer space. After her contamination, readers can never be sure what part of the narrator’s thoughts and actions can be attributed to her human persona, and what to the nonhuman agency that has colonised her.

The later parts of the trilogy, *Authority* and *Acceptance*, take this profound uncertainty even further, constructing fictional figures that might seem both completely human and completely nonhuman at the same time. The narratives frame whole organisms as “messages” from Area X, and ask whether humans can read such messages. *The Southern Reach* trilogy thus estranges the act of reading fictional figures by revealing that its human-shaped narrative perspectives are partially – or even completely – constituted by nonhuman forces. *The Southern Reach* also offers readers an experiential position as carriers and conduits for forces outside themselves. As readers are contaminated by the haunting force of the narrative, they might open up to the experience of being contaminated by environmental forces, too (Kortekallio 173–246).

I want to end with an image depicting a paperback copy of *Annihilation* that has been thrown into a ditch. It was taken by the author himself, while he was touring to publicise the book. At the same time, he was still finishing the last book of the trilogy,



[www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2015/01/from-annihilation-to-acceptance-a-writers-surreal-journey/384884/](http://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2015/01/from-annihilation-to-acceptance-a-writers-surreal-journey/384884/)

*Acceptance*. In a moment of frenzy, he drowned the book. And then he decided to take a picture, to post on social media (VanderMeer, “From”).

The image reminds me both of the manic urgency that drives VanderMeer’s creative work and of the material conditions of reading. The soaked paperback is a prime example of a *trans-corporeal body* (cf. Alaimo). It is messy and disheveled, its form ruined by water and dirt. It is rapidly on its way to transgressing the ontological boundary between *book* and *living matter*. I would locate myself, as a reader of *Annihilation*, on a similar boundary: between a *purely human* body and a *more-than-human* body, rapidly becoming the latter.

I think reading fiction should not be thought of as an isolated practice, or as escapism. As a *bodily practice*, it is entangled with other practices: with eating, travel, and interpersonal relationships: with economics, politics, and activism. As part of these tangles, it can participate in the development of cultures that are ecologically viable – not just in terms of structures and models, but on the level of lived experience.

I propose that reading mutant narratives can help us stay with the environmental catastrophe we live in, and *respond* to it.

*Biography*: Kaisa Kortekallio is a post-doctoral scholar in the research consortium Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Narrative and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory (Academy of Finland 2018 - 2022), at the University of Helsinki. The topics of her peer-reviewed articles include posthuman subjectivity in cyberpunk (2014), estranging first-person narration in Jeff VanderMeer’s and Timothy Morton’s work (2019), and speculative experientiality in Paolo Bacigalupi’s climate fiction (2020).

## Works cited

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Language and Perception in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage, 1996.
- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana UP, 2010.
- Alber, Jan, and Sven Strasen. “Empirical Literary Studies: An Introduction.” *Anglistik*, vol. 31, 2020, pp. 5–14, doi:10.33675/ANGL/2020/1/3.
- Aldiss, Brian W., and David Wingrove. *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. House of Stratus, 2001.
- Bacigalupi, Paolo. *Pump Six and Other Stories*. Night Shade Books, 2008.
- . *The Windup Girl*. Night Shade Books, 2009.
- Badmington, Neil. *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within*. Routledge, 2004.
- Bear, Greg. *Darwin’s Children*. Del Rey, 2003.

- Caracciolo, Marco. *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach*. De Gruyter, 2014.
- Carroll, Siobhan. "The Terror and the Terroir: The Ecological Uncanny in New Weird Exploration Narratives." *Paradoxa*, vol. 28, 2016, pp. 67–89.
- Colombetti, Giovanna, and Evan Thompson. "The Feeling Body: Toward an Enactive Approach to Emotion." *Developmental Perspectives on Embodiment and Consciousness*, edited by Willis F. Overton, Ulrich Müller, and Judith L. Newman, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008, pp. 45–68.
- Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. Routledge, 1996.
- Gibson, James Jerome. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- Gilbert, Scott F., Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber. "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals." *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2012, pp. 325–41, doi:10.1086/668166.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Idema, Tom. *Stages of Transmutation: Science Fiction, Biology, and Environmental Posthumanism*. Routledge, 2019.
- Kortekallio, Kaisa. *Reading Mutant Narratives: The Bodily Experientiality of Contemporary Ecological Science Fiction*. 2020. University of Helsinki, PhD dissertation, urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-51-5776-8.
- Kuijpers, Moniek M., Frank Hakemulder, Ed S. Tan, and Miruna Doicaru. "Exploring Absorbing Reading Experiences: Developing and Validating a Self-Report Scale to Measure Story World Absorption." *Scientific Study of Literature*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014, pp. 89–122.
- Kukkonen, Karin. *4E Cognition and Eighteenth-century Fiction: How the Novel Found its Feet*. Oxford UP, 2019.
- Laland, Kevin N., and Gillian R. Brown. "Niche Construction, Human Behavior, and the Adaptive-Lag Hypothesis." *Evolutionary Anthropology*, vol. 15, 2006, pp. 95–104.
- McHale, Brian. "Science Fiction, or, the Most Typical Genre in World Literature." *Genre and Interpretation*, edited by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Tintti Klapuri and Minna Majjala, Helsinki UP, 2010, pp. 11–27.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge, 2002.
- Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

- Noë, Alva. *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015.
- Nuismer, Scott. *Introduction to Coevolutionary Theory*. Macmillan Learning, 2017.
- Pak, Chris. *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction*. Liverpool UP, 2016.
- Polvinen, Merja. "Cognitive Science and the Double Vision of Fiction." *Cognitive Literary Science: Dialogues Between Literature and Cognition*, edited by Michael Burke and Emily T. Troscianko, Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 135–50, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190496869.003.0008.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. *The Primacy of Movement*. 2nd ed., John Benjamins Publishing, 2011.
- Spiegel, Simon. "Things Made Strange: On the Concept of 'Estrangement' in Science Fiction Theory." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 35, 2008, pp. 369–85.
- Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. Yale UP, 1979.
- VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014.
- . *Authority*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014.
- . *Acceptance*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014.
- . "From Annihilation to Acceptance: A Writer's Surreal Journey." *The Atlantic*, 28 Jan. 2015, [www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2015/01/from-annihilation-to-acceptance-a-writers-surreal-journey/384884/](http://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2015/01/from-annihilation-to-acceptance-a-writers-surreal-journey/384884/). Accessed 15 October 2020.
- Varela, Francisco, Evan Thompson, and Elena Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. MIT Press, 1992.
- Varis, Essi. "Alien Overtures: Speculating about Nonhuman Experiences with Comic Book Characters." *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, edited by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis, Routledge, 2019, pp. 79–107.
- Warhol, Robyn. *Having A Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*. Ohio State UP, 2003.
- Weik von Mossner, Alexa. *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*. Ohio State UP, 2017.