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“Reconfiguring Human and Non-Human: Texts, Images and Beyond” – A Seminar in Jyväskylä Demonstrates the Growing Interest in Anthropocene

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The relevance of the seminar *Reconfiguring Human and Non-Human: Texts, Images and Beyond*, which was held in Jyväskylä from October 29th to 30th, was demonstrated by the influx of participants. As the chairs of the organizing committee, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis, stated in their opening words, the organizers expected around 20 to 30 participants, but the number of guests quickly rose to 70. During the two-day seminar these guests presented a total of 39 papers ranging from literary studies to games and bioarts. As the chairs summarized, the seminar was to discuss many of the complex issues related to our era, which is called the Anthropocene, such as what is humanity, what is not, and how does dehumanization operate; all topical questions for our times.

Topicality was present from the first paper by one of the keynote speakers, Dr Robert McKay, who gave a thorough reading of Michael Faber’s *Under the Skin*. McKay discussed, among other things, the allegory of the meat industry and its effects presented in the novel and examined the gothic animal politics in it. As the paper’s commentator Kaisa Kortekallio noted, the topic was especially relevant in Finland, as just three days earlier the Finnish investigative television program MOT had shown a video depicting how the meat industry not only dehumanized the animals, but also had a similar effect on the people working in it.

After the key note and a coffee break those guests not presenting a papers themselves had to choose from two parallel sessions, as was to be for the remaining part of the seminar. One of the first sessions discussed the borders of human life with two fairly different topics. The first by Tatiana Novikova discussed the thoughts and discourses connected to when life begins with the focus on foetus, while the second by Marjut Puhakka discussed the definitions of those that have died yet live, the undead, or zombies to be more precise.

After a lunch break the parallel session (Re)Writing Gender and Colonialism hosted presenters from what might be categorized as Anglican tradition with presenters from England, India, Australia, and South-Africa. Once again the session had a topical note as especially Lara Buxbaum’s discussion of xenophobia in South African fiction had parallels with the discourse coursing through Europe, and indeed Finland, due to the current refugee situation.

The next and final parallel session for the day revolved around the possibilities of posthuman literature with analyses and a look into what makes literature posthuman – for example, what kind of new foci and literary subjects it can contain. The session included a rare analysis of Finnish literature in the otherwise internationally inclined seminar as Laura Piippo discussed Jaakko Yli-Juonikas’ confounding *Neuromaani*. After the third session the guests were quite ready for some more informal entertainment in the form of cocktails and dinner.

The second and final day began with the second keynote speech given by Erich Berger, director of The Finnish Bioart Society. Berger introduced the audience both to the interest the

society shares with many of the topics discussed the day before and the similar questions raised by their art, such as how do we perceive nature and what do we recognize as life or as unnatural. The commentator Annika Waenerberg added a historical perspective into how art has approached nature and the unnatural providing, together with Berger, a look into how the relationship has evolved with cultural development. Interesting, if not unique, comparisons included how nature has been placed on a pedestal for political reasons similarly as patriarchy has done to women.

Day two's parallel sessions discussed similar questions as the previous day's, but in a different context, whether more popular or even in application. The first parallel session discussed fantasy races throughout history, from medieval literature to contemporary mass-roleplaying games. The races discussed ranged from fairies, hobbits and dragons to orcs, but all discussed from the viewpoint of the cultural constructions behind the evolution of the races. Mika Lojonen, for example, examined how orcs to this day carry tropes from colonialist literature and, therefore, 19th century race theory.

In the overall fifth session a new Finnish school was born, at least according to chair Essi Varis, when three scholars joined to discuss the limits of narrative agency. The session began with the most theoretical paper by Juha Raipola who discussed narrative agency and matter through the example of an ambuloctus named Alfred, followed by two presentations analysing literature from similar theoretical approaches.

The final session took a step away from literature, art, and theory to analyse the application of posthuman technology. Markus Spöhler discussed cochlear implants which can be used to simulate hearing to the deaf, while Hana Porketová discussed guide dogs and Raune Frankjaer presented an art project concerned with communicating with bamboo sticks reacting to physical stimulus. These finishing touches to the seminar provided interesting insights into how technology is both changing and redefining how we approach human communication and also offers possibilities to communicate beyond the sphere of what is traditionally considered human.

After the final sessions guests were invited to celebrate the dvd release of the documentary *Finno-Ugric Guardian Spirits and Animal Mothers: Pohjola Mythology and Ecological Knowledge* by Kirre Koivunen. However, a part of the participants decided to leave straight after the enlightening seminar. Overall, the event gathered an international crowd comprised of both young scholars looking for their own path amidst the topical questions on definitions of human and non-human, and also seasoned ones who had reconfigured their views throughout their longer careers, but had found themselves drawn to similar topics. The seminar, which was praised for its organization and attention to detail throughout, offered opportunities for these groups to mingle in the hospitable if cold and dark late-November Finland.

Rumours tell that some of the more ambitious organizers are already thinking about a follow-up seminar.