



Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Estrangement

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Biography: Dr Merja Polvinen is a senior lecturer in English philology and docent in comparative literature at the University of Helsinki. She is a former board member of FINFAR and Chair of the Advisory Board of *Fafnir*, as well as a steering group member in the network Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities. Her dissertation *Reading the Texture of Reality: Chaos Theory, Literature and the Humanist Perspective* came out in 2008, and more recent publications include articles on cognitive approaches to science fiction and self-reflection e.g. in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* and the recent volumes *The Cognitive Humanities* (Palgrave), and *Cognitive Literary Science* (Oxford UP). This August, she is in charge of the Academic Track at Worldcon 75 in Helsinki.

Don't Be a Stranger!

There was a fair amount of vindication in my voice when taking up the issue of science fiction and literary scholarship at an interdisciplinary symposium at the University of York recently. The event had been called together under the theme of "Narrative in Question", and all of us invitees had been asked to query old assumptions about what narrative is and how it functions within culture. The previous evening I had -- yet again -- been faced with some colleagues who tell me they do not ever read SF, and then having to push them into asking themselves why not.

Such conversations most often end with both of us agreeing that there are qualities to SF writing that have, at some point in these scholars' careers, turned them off the genre altogether. These qualities almost always include clunky prose, the two-dimensionality of characters, and thematic set-ups that they find simply uninteresting.

But when I ask them about estrangement or the sense of wonder, my colleagues tend to fall into two groups. First are those that simply find those effects off-putting. But then there are those that have not really given much thought to estrangement at all, but once it is raised as a theoretical question, they want to find out more. And it is those people that save my evening.

At York, I was giving a paper on Catherynne Valente's "Silently and Very Fast", and I was delighted to see how many faces in the audience lit up rather than closed down as I was speaking. Valente is, of course, a writer who could never be accused of creating two-dimensional characters or clunky prose, so my work was made that much easier by the quality text examples I was showing on the slides. But beyond the excellence of this one writer, the thing that caught my audience's interest was the concept of estrangement.

Be Stranger!

Viktor Shklovsky's 1917 essay, "Art as Technique" -- which has also been translated as "Art as Device" -- marked a moment in Russian Formalism where interest in art was about as far from traditional mimetic or realist views as can be. The idea that the purpose of art is not to reflect reality but to make it strange has been a staple of science fiction theory ever since, but along with other varieties of formalism and surrealism, the concept has not fared so well in the world of literary scholarship at large.

But there seems to be a shift happening; at least I can see one happening within my own field of cognitive literary studies. Here, scholars are increasingly turning their attention towards narratives that push our normal human cognition in interesting directions, and it is with this interest that the "out there" narratives of speculative fiction seem to be forming a match.

For a long time, cognitive literary studies was mainly interested in studying the ways in which literature engaged our real-world cognitive systems, for example the ways in which we visualise fictional worlds or empathise with fictional characters. Much less attention was given to the possibilities that fictional narrative offers for making our minds do stuff *other* than what they normally do.

But this is now changing, and along with that increased interest in the ways in which fiction can make our minds do weird things is an opening up both to the concept of estrangement and to the SF genre that is so at home with it.

How Things Got Strange for Me

I started my work towards a PhD in English literature back in 1998, and as I think is the case with many people, an individual piece of literature played a major role in my choosing a research topic. I had written my MA thesis on reactions against poststructuralism in British literature, and one of the works I studied in it was Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. This play thematises chaos theory -- a cluster of mathematical concepts and methods that drew on the essential unpredictability of complex systems, and which caught the popular imagination in the 90s. For my PhD, then, I decided to dig deeper into how and why the chaos boom also took hold in the humanities during that decade. Over the years (I certainly did not hurry with it...) the book became my introduction to the field of literature and science, to how and why artists and humanities' scholars are drawn to things like particle physics and fluid dynamics, and what happens to the concepts of science when they migrate out of their original contexts.

As I was learning about chaos theory, I also ended up dipping in and out of books within fields like philosophy of mind and consciousness studies, and I became aware of work that drew on the cognitive sciences in an attempt to figure out how and why we read fiction. As I also happened to find colleagues in Helsinki who were interested in theories of literary representation, we wrote up a research proposal and won funding for a project titled *Rethinking Mimesis*, where my postdoctoral work involved cognitive approaches to specifically non-mimetic techniques.

All the way through my PhD I did not really tackle SF novels in my research, even though I've always been a fan, and never stopped reading the genre. I do not think this was a particularly conscious choice to avoid any possible stigma related to the study of popular genres, but apart from a few SF books making brief appearances in the PhD, I had not come across SF texts that would have engaged either my first topic (chaos theory) or my second one (cognitive science) on a formal as well as thematic level, and it was *forms* of representation that I was particularly keen on.

But then suitable texts started cropping up, first in my teaching, and then in my research. I wrote one piece on the formal techniques China Miéville uses to estrange our sense of fictional

spaces in *The City & The City*, another on Christopher Priest's playing with illusion-based theories of fiction and stage magic in *The Prestige*, as well as that paper presented at York on Valente, metaphor and theories of enactive cognition, which will be coming out later in 2018. In all these papers I was able to feed my interest in not just the representations offered in SF texts, but in the formal elements through which those representations are made present in readers' experience, and how that experience affects our relationship with everyday reality.

Which leads me back to Shklovsky, the Russian Formalists and the situation today. The cognitive approaches to literature have over the years evolved into ever more complex forms, and have developed methodological tools and concepts that are able to deal with more weirdness than the original, realism-oriented and computational versions that arose from neuroscience and artificial intelligence studies. Along the way, I realised how useful they could be for the study of literary forms that do not aim to reproduce reality for readers, but rather to push us to experience something different. SF and estrangement started looking like more and more useful partners for the cognitive approaches in my attempt to think about fiction and about its role in human lives.

The Biggest and the Strangest

It was a bit of a stroke of luck, then, that when Helsinki won the bidding for the 2017 Worldcon event (www.worldcon75.com), and together with friends and colleagues in FINFAR I was given the job of running the academic programme track at the convention, I realised that this year would be the centenary of Shklovsky's original essay, and that we could draft our Call for Papers around the theme of estrangement in SF. With that CFP we received many more proposals than we could fit within a full programme for the five days, and as I write this in June, the programme is looking very exciting both for anyone interested in the effects of SF, whether scholar or not, and for me personally. So you will see me sitting there in as many sessions as I can and making furious notes for future work!

And it also happens that these Shklovsky-centenary activities will extend beyond SF circles, since colleagues within cognitive literary studies were also taken with the idea, and now at the European Narratology Network's annual conference in September 2017 there will also be a special panel on "Estrangement at 100: Shklovsky and Narratology Today" with papers by myself, Karin Kukkonen (University of Oslo) and Stefan Iversen (Aarhus University): <http://www.enn5.cz/basic-information/introduction>.

So my York experience of finding interest among mainstream scholars towards some of the central forms and effects of SF was not by any means unique, and I have found that SF papers are being very well received in mainstream literary scholarship events. Authors such as Valente and Miéville, or Ted Chiang and Jeff VanderMeer are praised at Oxford and MIT and UC Santa Barbara, and their particular ways of using imagination and language to put their audiences face to face with the strange and the unsettling is being recognised as an interesting new angle into the originally formalist debates about art making the stone stony.