



Conference Report: SFRA 2024

Transitions
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Tartu, Estonia

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Spring, too, is a kind of transition. The wind was still chilly but the sun already warm on the second week of May when science fiction researchers from across the planet gathered in Estonia. Their destination: the quaint university town of Tartu, which our ten-strong Finnish delegation soon declared an ideal conference venue due to its beautiful historic buildings and peaceful cobblestone streets that could take an average conference-goer anywhere they might wish with just a few minutes' walk. Those needing a break from the briskly flowing conference discussions could also take a longer stroll – perhaps through the soaring cathedral ruins, across the Devil's Bridge and the Angel's Bridge, or along River Emajõgi.

In stark contrast to the old-timey, small-town charm of Tartu, *SFRA 2024*'s program booklet promised remarkably forward-looking and globally-minded scholarship with theme tracks focusing on environmental SF, co-futurisms, gender and queer SF, as well as societal change. The titles of individual panels – with their many mentions of crises, interventions, alternatives, and the end of capitalism – excited one's researcherly imagination further still.



University of Tartu Art Museum's plaster copy of the torso of the "Barberini Faun" meets Russian playwright Alexander Sukhovo-Kobylin's thoughts on bicycles as quoted in Meelis Friedenthal's keynote lecture.

Indeed, research is not only a business of reason and observation, but also a business of imagination. As the representative of University of Tartu's faculty noted in their welcome speech, from time to time, even biologists need to imagine entire lives of entire animals just by examining their bones or

droppings. This anecdote was likely meant to imply that the members of the Science Fiction Research Association are, in essence, investigating imagination – the very “bones” of all understanding and discovery. Yet, the more straightforward interpretation of the analogy is that in inquiring into works of speculative fiction, we are, in fact, investigating the “droppings” of human imagination – a profane-sounding pursuit on the level of metaphor, perhaps, but not at all in practice! If we think it important to understand what kind of creatures roam our forests, surely it is at least as important to understand what kind of creatures roam our minds.

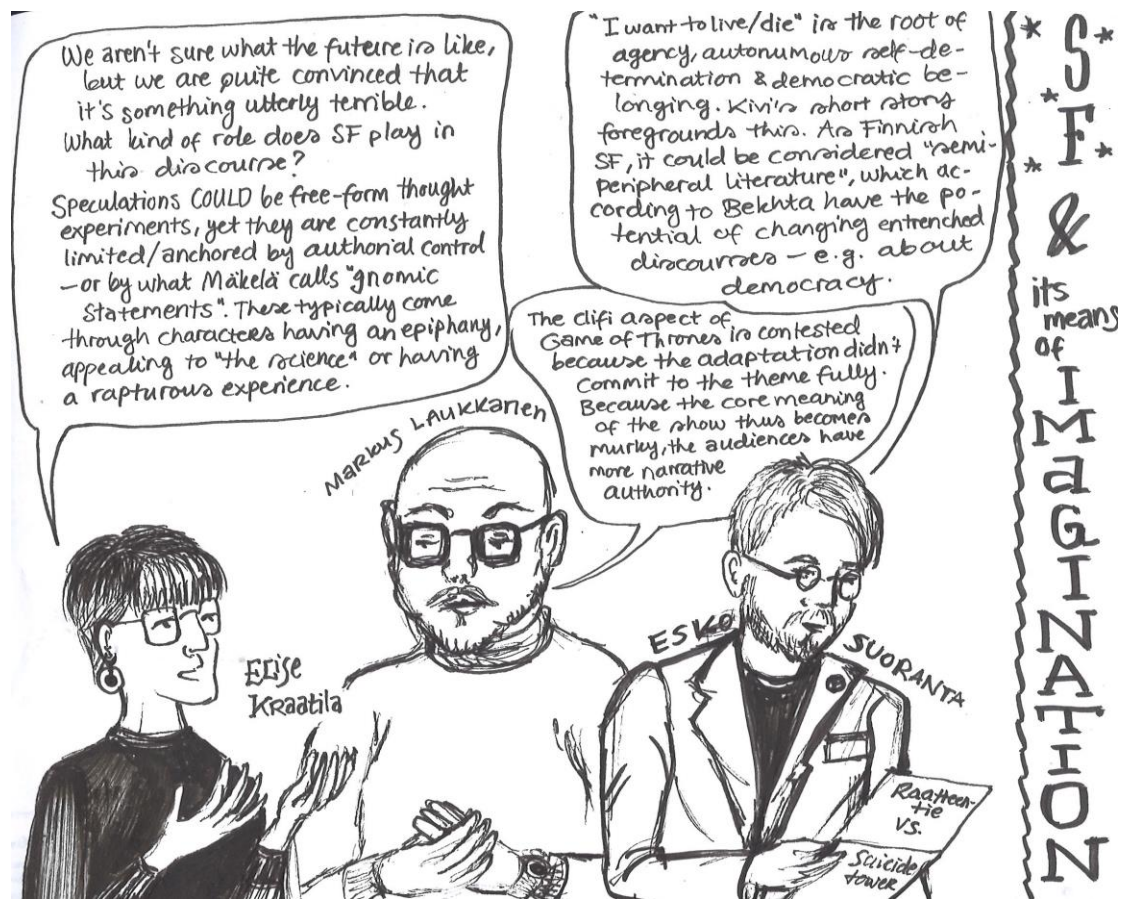
In their opening speech, SFRA’s President Hugh O’Connell went on to quote the famous words of Antonio Gramsci: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.” Monsters, by definition, defy the norms and boundaries on which we base rational thought and everyday routine; thus, they are more easily grasped and penned by the divergent practices of imagination and speculation. An unspoken understanding of this seemed to be shared by most participants across all panels as most presentations I witnessed hinged on the assumption that imaginative fiction can, indeed, provide privileged perspectives into the unpredictability of crises and transitions – and this is why we must discuss them especially, especially now.

Incidentally, “droppings” could also be appropriated as a somewhat disrespectful –but humorous! – term for works that have, for one reason or another, dropped outside of canon. These sorts of nearly forgotten SF stories have thankfully been excavated by, among others, Bogi Takács Perelmutter, whose keynote lecture took the audience on a tour of early queer and trans SF narratives. In addition to tracing the genealogies of various queer SF tropes, the lecture underlined the intertwining of censorship and language politics: while small national languages like Hungarian are vulnerable to state censorship, fiction written in globally spoken languages like English is much more difficult to repress. In spite of this, Takács Perelmutter discovered that the early queer narratives published in Hungary and the USA are surprisingly similar in terms of thematics, which could be explained by the transnational workings of self-censorship and religious pressures.

Questions of religion and imagination were also brought to the forefront in the second keynote speech, delivered by one of Estonia’s most celebrated fiction authors, Meelis Friedenthal. More precisely, Friedenthal argued that religions, imaginative narratives, and dreams share various functions: religions are born out of dreams and storied mythologies, while, conversely, both literature and religion create the kind of social cohesion that enables us to dream collective dreams. This makes religions and speculative fictions the social sites of apocalyptic and utopian imaginaries. Yet, Friedenthal concluded that literature should not be seen simply as “an extension of” or a secular alternative to religions. “Literature should work according to its essence, that is, like a dream” which can “model possible worlds for us,” he argued. After all, what we truly need at the dawn of global crises is not the nostalgic comfort of failing myths and old beliefs, but the ability to imagine something completely new, “a new morning in the world.”

What this “new morning” could or should be like is unfortunately not the kind of question that could be settled within the scope of one literary conference. On the global scale, however, there are well over 50 programs

dedicated to making SF-based interventions to reality, as Marie Roussie's presentation highlighted. These initiatives, such as Making Tomorrow Collective in France, employ interdisciplinary practices from art, design, science, science fiction, economics, and more to generate new visions and confront current policies. Such approaches are exceedingly important because, as the panels on "Speculative Divination" and "SF's Means of Imagination" both stressed, the frameworks of capitalism and the Anthropocene can easily create "false certainties" about the future. When all the news and trends continually and repeatedly point towards existential disaster, imagining other outcomes becomes increasingly difficult. Speculative fiction, on the other hand, can break – and has often broken – these molds: Charlie Toogood's presentation, for instance, suggested examining utopian literature from Victorian England because the futures imagined before the apprehension of the Anthropocene are not limited by the horizons of expectation it now casts.



Notes from the panel "SF and its Means of Imagination."

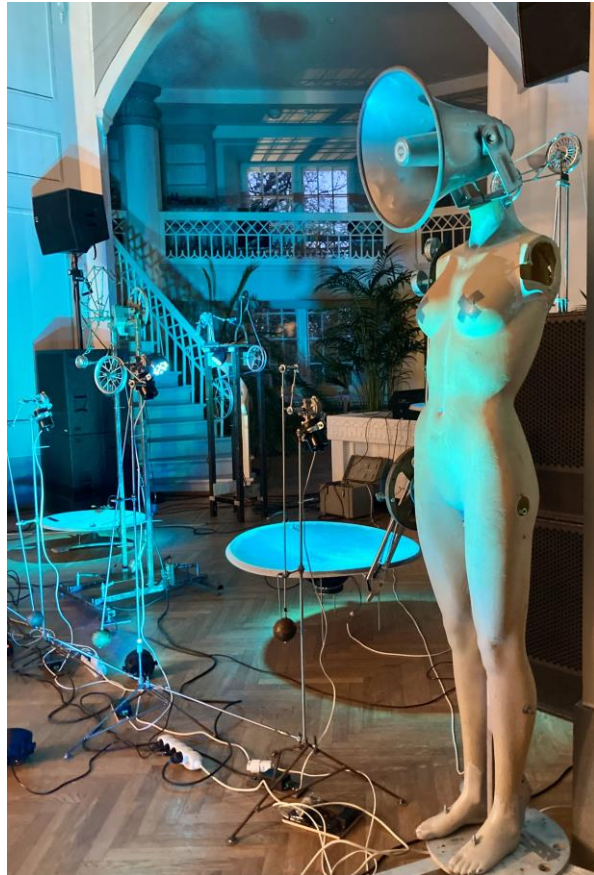
Indeed, some presentations were entirely focused on reframing what SF and speculative thinking are and what kind of roles they could play in our continuously transitioning reality. Jo Walton suggested understanding SF as a form of "boasting" because it is neither "revelatory nor obfusatory," but, rather, a collaborative imaginative project – a dynamic modality between what is true and untrue. In my own presentation, I compared this kind of oscillation

between various domains and possible worlds to the work of mythological trickster figures. In the face of major transitions and radically uncertain futures, the cognitive toolkits of empiric sciences are going to prove inadequate by definition. Hence, the best way to face the unknown is to “think like a trickster” – that is, to conjure and juggle various alternative and parallel speculations as nimbly and cleverly as possible.



Some panels, such as “Breaking Print from Boundaries,” ventured beyond SF literature into other media and materialities.

To the delight of many, *SFRA 2024* also sought to open the participants' minds to new possibilities in other, more experiential ways. From April to May, University of Tartu's art museum housed an exhibition titled "Transforming Literary Spaces," in which artists from many different countries explored by the means of many different art forms how engaging with fiction reconfigures our engagement with places – and vice versa. The curators of the exhibition, Fransesca Arnavas and Mattia Bellini, kindly gave the SFRA delegates a full tour of the exhibition on the first evening of the conference – whereas on the final evening, the conference banquet concluded with a captivatingly strange multimedia performance by the Estonian Posthumanist Hangover group. In a small but beautiful gesture towards a more hopeful future, the all-vegetarian banquet food was inspired by Palestinian dishes. All in all, the local conference team led by Jaak Tomberg deserve much credit for the entire event's exceptionally thoughtful and successful organization. Many Finnish SF researchers are certainly looking for an excuse to cross the gulf and visit Tartu again soon!



The setting for Posthumanist Hangover's performance in the University of Tartu Museum.

Biography: Essi Varis, PhD, has studied narratives across media from various cognitive perspectives since 2013. She is currently working on the final stages of her personal post-doctoral research project titled *Metacognitive Magic Mirrors: How Engaging with Texts and Images Enables and Extends Speculative Thought* (Finnish Cultural Foundation 2020–2025) and serving in the jury of Finland's national comic book award, Sarjakuva-Finlandia. She also served as an editor-in-chief of *Fafnir* in 2021–2023.