Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Conference Report: Forming the Future

An Interdisciplinary Conference
September 2–3rd, 2019
Plymouth University, Plymouth, United Kingdom

Laura op de Beke

Who knows what the future will bring? Whether a grim struggle over a dwindling set of resources or a resplendent solarpunk vision of peacefully coexisting sustainable anarcho-communes, the number of imaginable futures seems endless. Or does it? On 2–3 September a number of scholars from fields as diverse as art theory, engineering, literary studies, and video game studies got together to ask not *what* the future may hold, but *how* the concrete particulars of the medium in which the future is couched determine what is imaginable and what is not. The urgency of this question derives from what panellist Theo Evison Reeves (Birmingham School of Art) so powerfully concluded towards the end of the conference: speculative infrastructures have certain dispositions, dispositions that are tied to media history, media production, and of course formal constraints. SF literature might be one such speculative infrastructure, but so are financial speculation, climate modelling, game theory, or indeed any means of anticipating the future. One of the conference's achievements was in helping articulate what the dispositions of these different infrastructures are, thus developing a stronger sense of speculative media literacy.

The conference was kicked off by William H. Bridges (University of Rochester), who argued strongly for the potential of a literary studies of the future, or what he called "New Futurism", which not only asks how literature shapes the future but also what future readers might make of present texts, and how those readers might be addressed. He also argued that literary studies already offers a sophisticated toolkit of terms and concepts with which to analyse temporal movements. In fact, not only do literary scholars regularly attend to temporality in narrative, certain literary genres, like science fiction, practice a strong thematic

 ISSN 2342-2009. *Fafnir*, vol. 6, iss. 2, 2019, pp. 54–56.

engagement with discourses of futurity. The question of just how sophisticated and diverse these discourses are was taken up by a number of other speakers who discussed utopian, dystopian, and climate fiction. For example, Joe Davidson (Cambridge University) distinguished between spatial and temporal utopias, and he argued that temporal utopias are a more recent invention, possibly buying into narratives of progress. However, he offered eloquent readings of William Morris's *News From Nowhere* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* that highlight the way these utopia's frustrate received ideas about historical progress through temporal play – by revisiting past failures (as in Morris) or by locating utopia in a more achronic space (as in Le Guin). Other speakers focused on more culturally specific instances of dystopic writing, either from indigenous authors as handled by Chiara Xausa (University of Bologna) or in European dystopic literature, which is haunted by the historical shadow of fascism and political fragmentation, as discussed by Martin Westlake (London School of Economics).

Notwithstanding the value of literature as a form of the future, it was soon revealed to be merely one speculative infrastructure among many. In his talk, conference organiser David Sergeant (University of Plymouth) offered a tentative but provocative scheme incorporating narrative as well as non-narrative approaches to speculation. On one end of the scale, we find literature's affective – and mostly linear – approaches to the future, which are often centred on and constrained by the perspective of (human) characters; on the other end of the scale, we find the more non-linear, often spatially constructed visions of the future, which, like the "seeing rooms" of NASA's mission control centre, attempt to give a complex, holistic picture of a number of dynamic, radically contingent futures. Importantly, Sergeant argued, novels may feature elements from either side of this spectrum; for example, in moments of exposition or what is sometimes negatively referred to as "info-dumps". Such moments, often found in SF novels, are of marginal importance to the plot, but they satisfy a readerly desire for a more comprehensive understanding of the fictional world in order for that world to then become powerfully animated in the reader's imagination.

Matthew Ingleby (Queen Mary University of London) too picked up on the tension between the novel's diachronic form and its ambition to represent more comprehensively the functions of complex systems like cities. His inquiry, however, pertained to realist fiction, specifically Dickens's multi-plot novel. In moments of crisis the past and future open up for reinvention, and Dickens's novels often feature crises (personal, financial, political etc.) which generate complex revolutions, twists of fate, and remarkably auspicious conclusions. The power of these collective conclusions, in which evil is overthrown by a fortunate, unexpected turn of events involving all of the main characters, overshadows the individual wrapping-up of each single plotline. This collective future remains open, argued Ingleby – unlike in the detective plot (which ends with all mysteries solved and the bad guy in chains) or the soap opera (which never ends at all, stuck on repeat). Dickens' novels thus introduce a sense that after the curtains are drawn, there is still unrealised potential in the fictional world, coaxing the reader to dwell there a little while longer.

The notion of realism proved to be a recurring theme in the conference. In my own presentation I explained that although real-time strategy games like *Anno 2070* are *predisposed* to future-modelling (to harken back to Evison Reeves's notion of disposition), many of them are also in the habit of foreclosing the future given their service as proleptic histories (a term coined by Josh Smickers), thus perpetuating the

logic of capitalist realism, and dismissing alternative economic models as implausible. Similarly, Carla Leanne Washbourne (UCL) lamented the lack of real innovation in the field of urban green planning, which too often passes off urban architecture as sustainable merely by slapping some green on it.

But if traditional narrative's future-telling potential seems limited in its reliance on plot and character, and if real-time video games appear to be complicit in capitalism's foreclosing of the future, where else may we turn for a more radical future tense, one that – like a kaleidoscope – would open up the future instead of narrowing it down? Keynote speaker Amy J. Elias (University of Tennessee) offered us a way out in her talk called "The Temporality of Dialogue", in which she discussed the resurgence of scholarly interest in the dialogical in the wake of Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*. In her paper, which featured some work in progress from her upcoming monograph *Dialogue at the End of the World*, she responds to Bourriaud's claim that grand representations of utopian societies are now a thing of the past, and that contemporary utopian thinking is more humble and seeks to fit into everyday contexts – for example, in interactions with strangers and neighbours. These more modest "micro-utopias" are not representational but concrete instances of praxis. Elias's question was how novels can take part in such a praxis given their representational nature. Her answer lies in their performance of a dialogical mode. Dialogue, according to Elias, confounds capitalism's desire for controlled, predictable time because it insists on improvisation and simultaneity. Dialogics suggests that subjectivity is constructed not in solipsism but through interaction and in response to the Other. Narrative texts that are dialogical, for example Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, which was hailed in a few other presentations as well, offer multiple points of entry, both emotionally and narratively, and they stage ethical dilemmas and questions in a fictional arena that invites the reader to take part, positioning oneself in relation to the other voices in the text, and instigating a kind of readerly praxis.

Though relatively small, the conference was intensive and thoroughly satisfying, taking place over the course of two days: six panels, one roundtable, and 21 speakers. There was enough of a common theoretical framework to support analytically challenging questions and comments. Finally, it was truly remarkable how the different papers spoke to each other so specifically and, surprisingly, even from across disciplines, in a mode that I rush to call dialogical – which means that at least for a moment, we ended up creating a micro-utopia of our very own.

Biography: Laura op de Beke is a PhD fellow at Oslo University. Her work is part of a larger interdisciplinary project called Lifetimes: A Natural History of the Present (temporalities.no). Her contribution looks at how SF video games and novels provide access to different kinds of Anthropocene temporalities like deep time.