FAFNIR – NORDIC JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY RESEARCH
JOURNAL.FINFAR.ORG

On Speculation as a Strategy

Hanna-Riikka Roine

For a long time, fiction has held a place as one of the most important arenas of the possible. The current global situation, defined by the climate crisis as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, radically challenges our ability to imagine what is possible on both personal and societal scales. At the same time, the importance of understanding imagination as a resource for striving towards a better world has, if anything, grown. In this essay, I discuss how to engage with the possible by drawing an analytical distinction between narrative and speculation as strategies in works of fiction. While the cultural power of narrative is widely recognised, I argue that the study of various instrumental attempts of bringing the possible into the present needs to recognise narrative and speculation as complementary.

Speculation and Narrative

Previous accounts of both narrative fiction in general and science fiction in particular have emphasised their close engagement with the possible. For Hanna Meretoja, a crucial dimension of the ethics of storytelling is the fact that "narratives both expand and diminish our *sense of the possible*" (3, emphasis original), and Fredric Jameson, in studying Utopia as a socio-economic subgenre of science fiction, argues that it is not the representation of radical alternatives that would be inherent to utopia as a form; it is "rather simply the imperative to imagine them" (416). While science fiction – and, more broadly, speculative fiction[1] – has indeed been noted to require us to imagine alternatives and expansions, speculation itself has not received much focused attention, remaining ambiguous as a term (see Oziewicz). Furthermore, most studies focusing on our engagement with the possible give narrative the

---

[1] Due to the length of this essay I cannot discuss the genre categories in detail, so suffice it to say that here I am using the term "speculative fiction" to refer to a large category of modern storytelling that more or less systematically makes use of speculation as a strategy.

Copyright © 2020. Authors retain all rights. Content in *Fafnir* is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License (CC BY-NC 3.0): (https://creativecommons .org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/). ISSN 2342-2009. *Fafnir*, vol. 7, iss. 2, 2020, pp. 8–15.

precedence over others: especially after the so-called narrative turn in humanities and social research, it has been widely established as the most fundamental human strategy for making sense of the world. In its temporal, sequential, and selective form, narrative creates order in our seemingly chaotic environment through, for instance, allowing us to "make meaning out of raw experiences … to provide a means for traveling beyond the personal" (Shuman 1). In this purpose, narratives – especially those of personal experience – can be put to various uses both by individuals and in the public sphere, including social media, journalism, and politics, as the Finnish *Dangers of Narrative* project led by Maria Mäkelä has thoroughly demonstrated.[2] The core difference between narrative and speculation, however, reveals why speculation is useful for studying engagement with the possible. In what follows, I look at them primarily as cognitive strategies instead of talking about them, for instance, as types of text, or as completed works of fiction.

Narrative bases its unique capacity for meaning-making on capturing and conveying human experience, as argued by cognitive narratologists. Monika Fludernik has prominently claimed that "there can … be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level" (13), and David Herman's definition of a narrative representation emphasises the way in which an event that disrupts the storyworld becomes meaningful through "the experience of what it is like for a particular individual to live through this disruption" (14).

Speculation, for its part, can exist independently of the articulation of human experience, although typically it collaborates with the forms of storytelling when communicated. Briefly put, it is a cognitive strategy for interpreting information to arrive at possible conclusions within the limits of a certain scenario or premise. Compared with predictions, forecasts, and prophesies, speculation is not about what *will or can reasonably be argued to happen*: it is about what is *possible* (or impossible).

To distinguish the elements of speculation, I propose the following trichotomy: premise, thought experiment, and medium. By *premise* I mean the very starting point that limits and guides what will be seen as possible (or impossible).[3] It may be understood as a model of sorts, which can concern a multitude of situations both individual and universal. In works of fiction, these models often come across as worlds: as Brian McHale puts it, they are "scale-models" of reality that usually are, in some sense, systematically different from the one inhabited by readers. To be effective, though, the models cannot be static structures, but must be dynamically worked through to develop possible consequences of the premise (McHale 21; Roine 47). This working through is what I call *thought experiment*, drawing from earlier SF studies.[4] The concrete

---

[2] For more on the project and its results concerning the various uses of narrative especially in the public sphere, see Mäkelä et al.

[3] The premise can be likened with Darko Suvin's idea of the *novum*, an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment, often summarised in the form of a question beginning with "what if" or "imagine if" (63).

[4] As an example of earlier research, Gwyneth Jones has argued that science fiction should be seen as a form of thought experiment, where "the consequences of some or other nova are worked through" (4). This means that it is the scientific method, the logical working through of a particular premise, not the scientific accuracy, that is important to science fiction (see Roberts 10).

"materials" for carrying this process out constitute the *medium*, such as a novel. In this, a novel is used both as a means of constructing and sharing the thought experiment based on the premise (as provided by the author) and as a means of accessing and making sense of it (as accomplished by the reader).

Understanding speculation as a trichotomy of premise, thought experiment, and medium also helps distinguish between speculation and extrapolation. The latter figures in many of the classic definitions of science fiction, with the aim of distinguishing it from the genre of fantasy, such as in John W. Campbell's claim that to be "science fiction, not fantasy, an honest effort at prophetic extrapolation from the known must be made" (Eschbach 91). In extrapolation, the premise is constructed using "information that is already known" (*Cambridge Dictionary*) or the "facts that you have now and that are valid for one situation and supposing they will be valid for the new one" (*Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*), whereas speculative premises do not need to consist of things that are known or valid for one situation. This is also why speculative fiction is sometimes said to require an "imaginative leap" of its reader (Roine 95).

Speculative premises are not detached from what we know now, however. With this I want to emphasise that speculation is not simply a leap towards the unknown, as it also engages us in an act of producing the possible, or, to paraphrase Jameson, making it imperative that we imagine the alternatives. In reaching towards a realm of infinite possibilities, speculation is constrained by the way in which its effectiveness is based on the creation of a manageable scenario and the process of working toward its possible conclusions. In doing so, speculation often functions as a political and normative device: from the birth of finance capital, such possibility-oriented thinking has been routinely tied to the outcomes of profit and loss (see uncertain commons). Not only does economics hold a privileged position in Western culture as the field for modeling the ways in which we construct our understanding of the future, as noted by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, but the development of market economy and imaginaries of future are closely linked, as sociologist Jens Beckert has argued.

In sum, speculation typically serves the purpose of making various possibilities, desirable and unpleasant alike, accessible – or imaginable – to us. It thus appears as an attempt to both explore and solidify the future. We may call this sort of practice the instrumental mode of speculation – to distinguish it from playful and open-ended daydreams and such. This mode can significantly affect our understanding of the spectrum of the possible, and it is by no means limited to economics, as the alliance between present states of affairs and possibility-oriented imaginaries is most fully realised – or materialised – in speculative fiction.

Emotional Resonance versus the "Organizings" of Stories

When it comes to works of fiction, the instrumental power of speculation, as it requires imagining possibilities and alternatives, is often seen as subordinate to that of narrative: for example, in emphasising that our "struggle against" the climate crisis (a story prompt itself!) is ultimately about stories. The two *Everything Change* anthologies are representative examples of this emphasis, based on the Everything Change Climate Fiction Contest and the larger Imagination and Climate Futures Initiative, housed in the Center for Science and Imagination at the Arizona State University. The editors of the second volume, Angie Dell and Joey Eschrich, argue that both the contest and the initiative “operate on the belief that emotionally resonant stories are the most powerful tool we have” (loc. 114), broadening our experience of reality to encompass other lives, other minds – a view perhaps most influentially promoted by psychologist Keith Oatley. However, the stories’ focus on the experiential can also be a limitation. The emphasis on the “experiences of individual people coping with displacement, terror, loss, ennui, or glimmers of hope” (Dell and Eschrich loc. 114) easily eclipses the premise in limiting and guiding what is presented as possible in a specific fictional scenario. Instead of putting our trust solely in the emotional resonance of stories, we should also consider the premises on which works of fiction, which attempt to make the possible accessible to us, are constructed.

In her 2017 book *Curated Stories*, Sujatha Fernandes urges us to do just that. She traces the process by which development that contributed to “telling one’s story” became linked to discourses of participation, empowerment, and social capital during the late 1990s (31), and is particularly critical of the ways in which many purposefully curated story formulae – such as macro framings and epic narratives – can deny the expression of the experiences of the people using them (165–66). What I find most interesting about Fernandes’s critique of curated stories, though, is her call for “new kinds of organizings” that would open spaces for different kinds of tropes, subjectivities, storylines, and narratives, or “we will be constrained to stories that conform to what is acceptable in the narrow vision of the mainstream” (170). In my view, if we want to create works of fiction that not only resonate with us emotionally, but also have the potential to make us reflect on what is imagined as acceptable and conceivable, we must also consider the “organizings” that give rise to those stories. This is why it is useful to consider speculation as a strategy side by side with narrative.

The Weight of Light, another collection published by the Center for Science and the Imagination, this one in 2018, presents an interesting version of curated storytelling in fiction. It is based on the Solar Futures Narrative Hackathon, where the participants, working in teams, focused on four different scenarios for the future of solar energy in terms of two controlling variables: geography (urban versus rural) and size (large-scale facilities versus a small-scale, decentralised infrastructure). The groups also selected secondary variables to integrate into their work, including elements such as “aesthetics”, “ownership & governance”, and “waste & recycling”. Consequently, each group produced a short story set in the future, a work of visual art illustrating that story, and one or more non-fiction essays. Editors Joey Eschrich and Clark A. Miller lay out the overall premise in the opening text: “What would a world powered entirely by solar energy look like?” (loc. 64). A bit further on they add a narrative prompt to the premise: “what it will be like … to live in the photon societies of the future?” (loc. 64). The more general speculative premise is thus narrowed to focus on the level of human experientiality, and the short stories appear as curated to give form to the possible experiences of living in a “photon society”, to make them more accessible to readers.

The effectiveness of the short stories in *The Weight of Light* is rooted not merely in their emotional resonance, but in our ability to reflect on their making. We are able to, for instance, trace the choices and paths the groups responsible for different scenarios took. This can be a critical reflection, too: although the premise laid out by the editors talks of "a world powered by solar energy", all stories are deeply rooted in the North American context. Still, read as a whole the collection has potential to hand the reader tools to understand the meaning of the premise in drawing the possible to the present, and in showing the importance of different kinds of "organizings" for possibility-oriented imaginaries.

The Present versus the Future

Speculation is not only about opening the future up as a "design space" (loc. 157), as Eschrich and Miller argue in the introduction to *The Weight of Light*. The "organizings" that include creating a premise and working it through concern, to my mind, the present as much as the realm of possible.[5] The instrumental mode of speculation is about what should be done *now* as this mode attempts to solidify the possibilities in order to profit from them. This is rarely the case when it comes to fiction: instead, speculation may help us to reflect upon the ways in which certain general principles outlined by a premise can be concretised. In other words, it can help us to think about the ways in which the "now" may connect with the possible.

In this, speculative fiction can be particularly empowering. In her think-piece arguing for the value of science fiction to young readers, Esther Jones aptly identifies *distance* as a central factor. This means that science fiction often places timely and relevant social, economic, and political issues in settings or times that offer critical distance, which "gives readers an avenue to grapple with complexity and use their imagination to consider different ways of managing social challenges". In my view, this is true for speculative fiction in general, and in addition, critical distance can also simply be achieved because speculative fiction "offers no pretense of being factual or accurate" (Oziewicz). In this sense, the power of using speculation as a strategy while simultaneously making its constructedness[6] clear is not so much about expanding our understanding of the possible, but about what we are doing in the present, both in the sense of concrete acts and acts of meaning-making.

This is also how I understand Ursula K. Le Guin's famous characterisation of science fiction as "thought experiments" whose purpose is "not to predict the future … but to describe reality, the present world". Following Le Guin, this is not about limiting speculative fiction to the "displaced reflection of contemporary reality", as McHale notes critically of Le Guin (23), but about inviting us to consider how these works are made and, especially, the myriad of ways in which the possible and the now can be linked.

---

[5] It is also possible to speculate on the past, as the genre of alternate history clearly shows.

[6] Making the constructedness clear is something that SF scholarship has emphasised for a long time, as summarised by Merja Polvinen in her description of science fiction as a genre that "depends on making fictions out of metaphors – on embedding metaphor in a fictional reality and letting it grow" (67–68); she adds that the "genre not only literalizes metaphors in this way, but also … structures of narrative" (68).

This, consequently, endows speculative fiction with its ability of “allowing us to think of the world *as otherwise as it currently is*” (McHale 23; emphasis original). When scrutinising the premises, we may look at various assumptions underlying them, such as the role and nature of the actors in the scenario. Another interesting thing to look at concerns the culturally defined notions of the realistic and fantastic: which courses of action are deemed credible and which implausible? How do the “impossibilities” that are often seen as the marker of the fantastic as a genre come across as such?

Thus, recognising speculation as a strategy, complementary to that of narrative, offers an efficient tool for a critical examination – and then, perhaps, adjustment and change – of the ways in which speculative fiction can create and maintain our sense of what is possible (or impossible). Speculative fiction can help us to carry out both examination and expansion: it can alert us to the aspects of reality that remain beyond the scope of everyday perception as well as speculative premises that elude our awareness until a work of fiction makes them more accessible to us. These include both the premises that are invisible because we take their assumptions for granted and those that condition our experiences but are not made by us or for us, but by and for (for example) digital cognition. We need to continue exploring the arena opened by works of speculative fiction to try out and expand our imaginations. At the same time, we must investigate how speculative fiction allows us to create a break in the ways in which we imagine possibilities and alternatives, and thus to reflect on them.

> *Biography:* Hanna-Riikka Roine (PhD, literary studies) works as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow funded by the Academy of Finland at the Tampere University and as an affiliated researcher in the consortium *Instrumental Narratives*. Her current research explores the ways in which our entanglement with digital media affects, guides, and shapes our engagement with the possible. Roine has published articles, for instance, on agencies of storytelling in digital environments, on the ways in which narratological inquiry may be extended towards the machines of computational media, and on narrativity of digital RPGs. She has also contributed to the study of the rhetoric of contemporary speculative fiction and worked as the editor-in-chief of *Fafnir – Nordic Journal for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research.*

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. Verso, 2013.

Beckert, Jens. *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*. Harvard UP, 2016.

Dell, Angie, and Joey Eschrich, eds. *Everything Change: An Anthology of Climate Fiction, Volume II*. Kindle ed., Center for Science and the Imagination, 2018.

Eschrich, Joey, and Clark A. Miller, eds. *The Weight of Light: A Collection of Solar Futures*. Kindle ed., Center for Science and the Imagination, 2018.

Eshbach, Lloyd Arthur. *Of Worlds Beyond*. 1947. Fantasy Press, 1964.

Fernandes, Sujatha. *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling*. Oxford UP, 2017.

Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. Routledge, 1996.

Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005.

Jones, Esther. "Science Fiction Builds Mental Resiliency in Young Readers." *The Conversation*, 11 May 2020, www.theconversation.com/science-fiction-builds-mental-resiliency-in-young-readers-135513.

Jones, Gwyneth. *Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction, and Reality*. Liverpool UP, 1999.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Left Hand of Darkness*. 1969. Ace Books, 1976.

McHale, Brian. "Science Fiction, or, the Most Typical Genre in World Literature." *Genre and Interpretation*, edited by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Tintti Klapuri, and Minna Maijala, Helsinki UP, 2010, pp. 11–27

Meretoja, Hanna. *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History and the Possible*. Oxford UP, 2018.

Mäkelä, Maria, Samuli Björninen, Laura Karttunen, Matias Nurminen, Juha Raipola, and Tytti Rantanen. "Dangers of Narrative: A Critical Approach to Narratives of Personal Experience in Contemporary Story Economy." *Narrative*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2021 [forthcoming].

Oatley, Keith. "Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 20, no. 8, 2016, pp. 618–28, doi: 10.1016/j.tics.2016.06.002.

Oziewicz, Marek. "Speculative Fiction." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 29 Mar. 2017, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78.

Polvinen, Merja. "Sense-Making and Wonder: An Enactive Approach to Narrative Form in Speculative Fiction." *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories,* edited by Robyn Warhol and Zara Dinnen, Edinburgh UP, 2018, pp. 67–80.

Roberts, Adam. *Science Fiction*. Routledge, 2000.

Roine, Hanna-Riikka. *Imaginative, Immersive and Interactive Engagement: The Rhetoric of Worldbuilding in Contemporary Speculative Fiction*. 2016. Tampere University, PhD dissertation.

Shuman, Amy. Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy. Illinois UP, 2005.

Suvin, Darko. Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre. Yale UP, 1979.

uncertain commons. *Speculate This!* Duke UP, 2013.