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Narrating Future Scenarios – Exploring Present Concerns: Genres of Speculative Fiction as Laboratories of Cultural Self-Reflection

Abstract

Have we lost the ability to imagine a future? This dissertation project aims at shedding light on the extent to which genres of speculative fiction lend themselves to the imagination of possible future scenarios and thereby explore present concerns. It will look into the affordances and constraints of speculative fictions with regard to their worldbuilding-strategies and explore in how far the worlds created offer themselves as testing grounds for (new) emerging forms of life as well as the entanglement of the human and nonhuman. I propose that speculative fictions conduct thought experiments: “[They] extrapolate[s] a world more or less systematically, exploring the ramifications (material, social, psychological, metaphysical, and so on) of a few key innovations; [they] build[s] a world to ‘house’ its ‘what if?’” (Brian McHale 2010: 21). The term speculative fiction will here function as an umbrella that subsumes genres such as science fiction and utopian/dystopian fiction (among others). In arguing for an understanding of literature, or in this case speculative fictions, as thought-experiments conducted in a laboratory of the mind, I wish to highlight the constructedness of the very subjective storyworld created, possibly affording or constraining the readers’ view on and experience of this world through a certain form of narration or focalization. However, these subjectively constructed storyworlds have the potential of opening up space for encountering different, new emerging forms of life, of multiplying our understanding of (post)modernity out of which these narratives arose, and thus function as laboratories for cultural self-reflection. In order to prove or illustrate my hypothesis I am going to take a post-classical and eco-narratological approach and focus on what the forms of these fictions afford and constraint.

McHale, Brian. “Science Fiction, or, the Most Typical Genre in World Literature.” *Genre and Interpretation*, edited by Lyytikäinen, Pirjo, et al. Department of Finnish Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies Univ. of Helsinki, 2010. pp. 11-27.